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INTRODUCTION

In 2018, during my Erasmus+ placement at the University of Leeds, I started to collaborate with Claudio Staiti, Ph.D. student in Contemporary History at the University of Messina, when he asked me to revise his translation of an autobiography written by Vincenzo D'Aquila, an Italian American man, who returned to Italy during the First World War and fought in the trenches to defend his country of birth. *Bodyguard Unseen: A True Autobiography* is a largely forgotten work, but it is now being studied by historians because of its unprecedented historical significance. D'Aquila's experience represents, in a certain sense, a reverse migration process that saw an Italian immigrant, who was already an American citizen, collect his war testimony in autobiographical form and in English. Working on this project led me to wonder if an Italian American literature actually existed. I was certainly aware of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* and the successful trilogy of movies that were based on the novel, but I did not have any knowledge of the rich literary tradition that originated from the encounter of Italian and American cultures. Moreover, having been always passionate about literature written by women, I wanted to know if there was an Italian American female literary tradition. This dissertation therefore originated from the desire to find an answer to the questions that I posed myself in Leeds.

Although little known in Italy, Italian American authors have produced a copiousness of works and have focused on many interesting themes and topics of investigation, such as identity and Italianness as experienced in an American environment. The first pieces of Italian American literature can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century and the tradition that originated from these first works continues to the present day, encompassing therefore almost 150 years of activity. As a result, this literature, among other American ethnic literatures such as those produced by African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans, has been treated as a subject in its own right in the United States and its teaching is now making its way in several American colleges. However, it has to be said that these authors have yet to be fully recognized as a part of the larger American literary canon mainly because the circulation of their works was almost always difficult and, as a result, these works have

remained out of print for many years. Surprisingly, the study of Italian American literature written by women has been approached only recently. In fact, for a long time, Italian American women, immersed in a strongly patriarchal culture, were raised in an environment that restricted their roles to the care of home and family, and discouraged cultural ambitions. In the 1960s, thanks to the feminist movement, Italian American women could finally come out of their isolation and establish themselves as authors. For Italian American women writers felt it was their duty, to recover and save from oblivion the works of other female authors who came before them. From their research, it emerged that there were Italian American women who wrote and published books before the 1960s, in spite of their community's patriarchal culture, but their works had had difficult publication histories and little circulation. The recovery work of Helen Barolini in *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writing by Italian American Women* (1985) was therefore seminal because it gave voice to many forgotten authors. Up to the present day, Italian American women writers have continued to produce interesting works, incorporating the themes of identity and ethnicity in their writings in audacious and innovative ways.

This work deals with four Italian American women writers who have surely significantly contributed to American literature. They are Helen Barolini, Tina De Rosa, Carole Maso, and Mary Cappello. All of them wrote about Italian American culture as experienced from a distinct female perspective. Barolini, De Rosa, and Maso mainly wrote novels, and Cappello, instead, focused on writing experimental essays and memoirs. I analyze Barolini's multigenerational saga *Umbertina* (1979), De Rosa's creative novel *Paper Fish* (1980), Maso's experimental novel *Ava* (1993), and Cappello's unusual memoir *Night Bloom: An Italian-American Life* (1998). All these works explore the conflictual interplay of gender and ethnic identity. Their main characters include strong women who have been shaped and influenced by the feminist movement, and, in the case of Maso and Cappello, also by queer theories. In addition, these works also explore the importance of reestablishing a meaningful relationship with one's family past and ancestors, although most of the times it is difficult and painful.

Umbertina was the first Italian American novel written by a woman to explicitly deal with the intertwining themes of gender and ethnic identity. The novel, set between Italy and the United States, chronicles the lives of three generations of women belonging to the same family, in a period of time that spans from the end of the nineteenth century to

late twentieth century. Tina, the great-granddaughter of the title character Umbertina, after solving her inner conflicts regarding her ethnicity, will be able to embody a positive example for her Italian American female descendants by finding a balance between her Italian and American origins.

Paper Fish shifts away from a traditional linear form in order to achieve a more personal style. Thematically, the novel centers on the investigation of Italian American identity from a female perspective. By exploring her memories and imagination, De Rosa recreates a meaningful relationship between grandmother and granddaughter. It is clear from the text that Grandma Doria's legacy of stories and Italian traditions will be a great asset in the future life of Carmolina, the main protagonist.

In *Ava* and *Night Bloom: An Italian-American Life*, Maso and Cappello, using new themes and styles, seek to challenge the taboo of homosexuality in traditional Italian American culture. *Ava* does not strictly deal with Italian American issues, but it is interesting to see how the experience of Italy has had an impact on the protagonist's life, a Jewish American woman who is dying of a rare blood disease. In *Night Bloom*, instead, Cappello tries to reconcile her Italian American identity with her sexual orientation. In order to reach her goal, the author decides to carefully analyze her family's history and surprisingly finds many similarities in the life experiences of her maternal grandfather and mother.

Before dealing with these four works, I felt that it would be useful to briefly focus on the history of Italian Americans and to give an overview of Italian American literature in general. The first chapter briefly recalls the history and experience of Italian Americans as a group in a period that goes from the late nineteenth century until today. The history of Italian Americans, one of the largest ethnic groups in the United States, is unique and it is necessary to analyze how the peculiar position of women within this community has changed through the years. The second chapter focuses on the concept of Italian American literature and offers a brief overview of the most important works, authors, and themes. This chapter also deals with how Italian American Studies was created and established in the United States and how this subject is slowly spreading in Italy.

The following chapters are devoted to *Umbertina*, *Paper Fish*, *Ava*, and *Night Bloom*, presented chronologically according to the date of publication. I dedicated single chapters to *Umbertina* and *Paper Fish*, but I decided to group *Ava* and *Night Bloom*

together because of the recurring themes and the peculiarity of Maso's and Cappello's writing styles. My analysis, more thematic than formal, underlines the importance of the theme of identity for Italian American women. In addition, it was interesting to see how all these authors use the Italian language in their writing in order to produce a text that mirrors their transcultural experience. We go from an important use of Italian expressions and dialogue in *Umbertina*, to an almost invented language in *Paper Fish* in order to privilege the author's childhood memories, and we finally arrive to more rare occurrences of Italian, although of high literary value, in Maso and Cappello.

The study of these works was incredibly enriching for me because it made me discover and appreciate a fascinating and little-known literary tradition. While carrying out my research, I was very surprised when I learned that these authors have had so little circulation in Italy. In fact, out of these four works, only *Umbertina* and *Paper Fish* have been translated into Italian. I hope that in a near future Italian American Studies will be taken into deeper consideration by Italian scholars because it is an interdisciplinary subject that truly represents an unprecedented *summa* of both Italian and American Studies. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of references to Italian literature, including quotations of authors and poets such as Dante, Manzoni, and Pirandello, that were present in the texts of the four authors I analyzed. Therefore, these authors are not just representatives of a literary tradition per se, but they can also be considered good ambassadors for Italian literature abroad because, by writing in English, their audience is certainly larger.

For Italian American women, it has not been easy to acquire a personal "voice," because self-expression and independence were concepts that were foreign in their patriarchal culture. In addition, as daughters of immigrants, they went through the normal processes of Americanization and assimilation, which moved them away from feeling proud of their origins. However, their granddaughters in particular have proved that they wanted something different from life. They embraced feminist theories, and established themselves both as successful working women and women of culture. In their works, Barolini, De Rosa, Maso, and Cappello demonstrate that it is possible to reconcile Italian and American cultures in a positive way. Their female heroes, living between tradition and innovation, construct an identity for themselves that retains only the positive aspects

of both cultures. For them, this is always the outcome of an ongoing process of self-discovery and self-acceptance.

CHAPTER I

The Italian American Experience

This first chapter wants to offer the reader a brief historical outline concerning the experience of Italian Americans in a period that goes from the late nineteenth century until today. Only by understanding the complex framework of Italian immigration to the United States from a historical, political, and sociological point of view, it is possible to fully grasp what happened when the Italian and American worlds came together and Italian immigrants became Italian Americans. For them, Americanization meant a sort of self-analysis that finally made them appreciate the best aspects of both cultures. Only by becoming bicultural, the descendants of Italian immigrants were eventually able to successfully find their places in the American mainstream.

Two specific historical events, the 1891 lynching of eleven Italian Americans in New Orleans and the Sacco and Vanzetti case, are also analyzed to provide examples of recently reexamined Italian American history. These events address issues that are not usually taken too much into account when dealing with Italian Americans: the entanglement of Italian Americans in American racial issues and the Italian tradition of political radicalism.

The final two parts of the chapter explore the concept of identity and the history of Italian women who immigrated to the United States, focusing especially on the changes and evolutions in their existences and cultures that were provoked by a close contact with American society. Particular attention is devoted to the first steps towards independence accomplished by the daughters of immigrants.

1.1 Italian Immigration to the United States (1880-1920)

In 2004, the U.S. Census Bureau revealed that 5.6% Americans, almost six million of the entire population, had declared having Italian roots in the 2000 census questionnaire (Brittingham and De La Cruz 2004: 3). However, Italian Americans include only a small number of people who were actually born in Italy, as most Italian Americans today are the descendants of the five million Italians who arrived in the United States

between 1880 and 1920 (Gabaccia 2010: 33). During an unprecedented wave of Southern and Eastern European migration to the United States, Italians left their country aiming at personal improvement and seeking opportunities denied by their homeland.

Even though generalization should be avoided, it is possible to identify some general aspects of Italian migration. Most of the Italians who left for the United States did not consider themselves Italian citizens, since “their cultural identities were tied to the villages and towns from which they came” (Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 5). Despite the Risorgimento movement culminated with the unification of Italy in 1861, the cultural and economic separation among the different regions of Italy continued and the annexation of the South resulted in an easier exploitation of its resources from Northerners. Italy, the newborn nation of Europe, was affected by a strong social and political fragmentation, which directly impacted on the Italians who would emigrate to the United States (Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 5). Southern masses quickly realized that the tremendous effort to unify Italy was to benefit them much less than they had been led to believe. Northern and Southern landowners began working together and further aggravated the problems that had arisen during the Bourbon rule of the South.

As a consequence, most Italian migrants came from the South. Southern Italy was essentially a peasant society marked by intolerable living conditions. Peasants had to face poverty, ignorance, and oppression on a daily basis. The agrarian crisis that hit Europe in 1880, environmental disasters, the scarcity of water, and the brutality of a still feudal agricultural economy, caused a dramatic rise in migration from the Italian South (Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 5). Immigrants from Italy were therefore mostly illiterate peasants, predominantly men, looking, at least at the beginning, for temporary employment. As historian Donna R. Gabaccia points out, they were far from the image of Italy that many Americans cherished:

Although artisans, skilled masons, petty entrepreneurs, and even some professionals numbered among them, poorer immigrants exemplified the vast and worldwide population movement that has rightfully been called the proletarian mass migrations. Whether Southern Italians (the majority of migrants) or rural Northern Italians, few spoke the language of Dante. Ambitious, hardworking and shrewd, the mass migrants introduced Americans to an Italy that few tourists or intellectuals had ever encountered. (Gabaccia 2010: 34)

On their part, Italian immigrants had a mythicized, almost magical, idea of the American continent. For them, it was the mythical solution to their problems, the only

alternative to poverty and desolation. As renowned Italian American scholar Fred L. Gardaphé observes:

To the Italian immigrant America first existed as a metaphor and there was virtually no distinction between North and South America. America meant going west across the ocean where work was available. One needed to compare the American experience to what a fellow Italian could understand. So those who had been to America and returned to their native homelands necessarily used metaphors when relating their experiences to their *paesani*. Far too often exaggerated accounts of their successes and failures were created so that through story the myth of America was created and through metaphor the myth was communicated. (Gardaphé 2012: 14)

As more and more male Italian immigrants called over their wives and Italian tenements grew, and were renamed Little Italies by Americans, fears of “racial suicide” developed among Americans (Gabaccia 2010: 34). At the turn of the twentieth century, scientists became obsessed with infertility. As a result, President Theodore Roosevelt became concerned with the declining birthrate among white Anglo-Saxons. In 1903, he warned that immigrants and minorities were too fertile and exhorted middle-class whites to avoid committing a “race suicide.” Longtime Americans were also troubled by the dissimilarity of the latest waves of migrants from earlier newcomers arriving from Northern Europe and decided that the newest immigrants were not like them. Scientific racism, such as the works and theories of Cesare Lombroso¹, could therefore provide a biological explanation to their differences (Gabaccia 2010: 35). Retracting the myth of a homogeneous Italic race, Lombroso believed that there were two types of Italians: Northern Italians were of Nordic origins while Southern Italians were to be considered of African descent. Consequently, Southern Italians together with immigrants of other nationalities considered as inferior started to be considered a danger for the survival of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) race because, according to many scientists, they would inevitably bring about miscegenation and, as a consequence, the end of the pure white race. As a result, as Gabaccia points out, “federal agents at Ellis Island began counting Northern and Southern Italians as two distinct races in 1899” (2010: 35). Subsequently, American authorities, in order to shape the future generations of American citizens, restricted the immigration of Southern and Eastern Europeans by fixing

¹ Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) was an Italian criminologist and physician, founder of the Italian School of Positivist Criminology. His theory of anthropological criminology stated that criminality was inherited, and that someone “born criminal” could be identified by physical defects.

immigration quotas based on nationality², even though family reunifications were still allowed.

While American nativists were working to exclude the “uncivilized” Italian immigrants from certain social and working paths, Italians were busy establishing the new cultures of everyday life in the United States. Since most Italian neighborhoods were multiregional, Little Italies functioned as melting pots. By the 1920s and 1930s, new linguistic pidgins mixed Italian regional languages with American expressions and vocabulary. In addition, culinary traditions, religious devotions, and family customs of even very diverse regions of Italy began to blend. As Gabaccia points out, “the result was a new folk culture that seemed Italian (especially to Americans) but was also made in America” (2010: 35). However, only few Americans had the curiosity to explore the folk cultures of Little Italy. American commentators, instead, simply focused on their first impressions:

Americans viewed Little Italy as distressingly dirty and noisy but also colorful: men, women, and children alike participated in a bustling street life that included street play, marketing and casual socializing. [...] Like other racializations, Americans’ association of Little Italy with dirt, public street life, food, noise, and large swarms of children mixed pleasure and attraction with fear. American intellectuals³ were hard-pressed to reconcile cultural stereotypes of Italy emerging from tours to Roman ruins, Renaissance art museums, or Catholic cathedrals or from visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art or to occasional opera performances with the folk culture of Little Italy. Beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, Americans instead focused negative attention on the Black Hand⁴ criminal gangs in Little Italies that extorted money from local businessmen with threats of violence. Fears of Italian-speaking anarchist bomb throwers soon blended with popular newspaper (and later filmed) images of Mafia plotters and of passionate but also knife-wielding and vengeful husbands and gamblers – similar to the images that had emerged from the pens of Italy’s positivist scientists. (Gabaccia 2010: 36-37)

It should be noted that Italian immigrants living in Little Italies were in vulnerable positions. Their lack of education and knowledge of the English language made them unable to understand the basic elements of American culture. Leaving all the crime-related problems that surely existed in Little Italies aside, these ethnic enclaves offered mutual support and effective instruments to face all these difficulties.

² After the Immigration Act of 1924 – the Johnson-Reed Act – immigration was limited to 150,000 a year, and each country was allotted a certain quota. The Italian quota was set at fewer than 4,000. (Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 13)

³ Among them we can mention the famous social documentary photographer Jacob Riis.

⁴ The Black Hand (*Mano Nera* in Italian) was an Italian American extortion racket, not a criminal organization as such, though gangsters of the Mafia practiced it.

1.2 The Lynchings in New Orleans (1891)

On March 14 1891, in New Orleans, Louisiana, eleven Italian Americans were lynched for the alleged murder of police chief David Hennessy. This event is remembered as one of the largest mass lynchings in American history. The lynchings were carried out by the White League⁵ “on the grounds of Italian Americans’ *innate* criminality’ rather than on any actual evidence” (Jacobson, quoted in Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 9). The dead bodies were displayed outside the prison and hung on lampposts.

In the racial discourse in which this event was “comprehended and narrated,” the lynchings were used as evidence of the eleven men’s guilt and were accorded immediate approval by the popular press (Jacobson, quoted in Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 9). In the popular press, the criminality of a small percentage of Italians was generalized to the whole community. Through this process, Italians started to be considered as violent lower-class criminals, and an invented ethnicity began to take shape (Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 9). When analyzing this historical event, there are other issues to consider. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Italian immigrants had begun working on the Southern plantations along the sides of African Americans. Since Italians fraternized with local African Americans and even intermarried, many historians believe that such racial violations “may have gotten the eleven Sicilian men lynched in New Orleans” (Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 10).

Historian David R. Roediger argues that “the racial categorization and consciousness of race among new immigrants” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were “dauntingly complicated” (Roediger, quoted in Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 10). At that time, racial categorizations intermingled biological and cultural attributes, “almost anything, from brain size to the capacity to sweat, to where one lived and what one ate, could become an index of one’s inferior status” (Roediger, quoted in Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 10). Roediger further affirms that the lynchings were justified on the basis of Lombrosian theories on Southern Italians’ “biology and habits” that had long speculated on their “low, receding foreheads, repulsive countenances and

⁵ The White League, a Reconstruction era version of the Ku Klux Klan, was an American white paramilitary organization started in 1874 to intimidate freedmen from voting and politically organizing.

slovenly attire” (Roediger, quoted in Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 10). The New Orleans lynchings underline the vehemence and mutability of American racism exactly during the period when Italians were first entering the country in massive numbers.

Conventional American history and the desire to assimilate encouraged a historical amnesia on this event even among Italian Americans themselves. A seminal work that shed new light on the case is *Vendetta: The True Story of the Largest Lynching in U.S. History* (1977) by Italian American scholar Richard Gambino, which also became the subject of the 1999 HBO movie *Vendetta*, starring Christopher Walken. The recovery of the memory of this shameful moment in history permitted a reexamination of the lynchings and their implications in many other contexts. Interestingly, this is an event that can be juxtaposed to more contemporary, sometimes personal memories, and to the experience of other ethnic groups, particularly African Americans (Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 10).

1.3 The Sacco and Vanzetti Case (1920-1927)

In 1920, two Italian anarchists without any previous criminal record, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were convicted of murdering a guard and a paymaster during an armed robbery at the Slater and Morrill Shoe Company in Braintree, Massachusetts. In the aftermath of the First World War, the United States was experiencing its first “Red Scare.” Radicals, especially those foreign or foreign-born, were being hunted, or deported by the U.S. attorney general A. Mitchell Palmer (LaGumina et al. 2003: 562). The trial and the subsequent execution of the two Italians in 1927 occurred in a climate of great tension in which Sacco and Vanzetti themselves became symbols of alleged social injustice but also the epitome of foreign danger that immigrants represented (Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 14). In recent years, historians have reexamined the Sacco and Vanzetti case and connected it with a broader understanding of the social and political atmosphere of the 1920s (Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 14). A seminal work in this recent process of rehabilitation is *Representing Sacco and Vanzetti* (2005) edited by Jerome A. Delamater and Mary Ann Trasciatti. The collection of essays mainly addresses

the legacy and the meaning of the Sacco and Vanzetti case by analyzing it from a variety of perspectives giving special importance to its representation on the media of the time.

When approaching the Sacco and Vanzetti case, Italian American scholars Mangione and Morreale affirm: “what is significant for the history of Italian Americans is not so much whether the men were guilty, but what the case tells us of the relationship that existed between those early immigrants and the rest of America” (1992: 299). The Sacco and Vanzetti case was a watershed event for Italian immigrants and their children. Significantly, it was exactly during this period that many young Italian immigrants turned their energies to crime rather than honest work or politics as a way out of the tenements (Mangione and Morreale 1992: 299). The trial saw two immigrants against all those of power and authority who felt resentful and threatened by two foreigners who were as intellectually and socially aware as most educated Americans (Mangione and Morreale 1992: 299).

Italian immigrants had been actively involved in socialist and anarchist circles since the early 1900s (Cannistraro and Meyer, quoted in Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 14). Thanks to the bad publicity and reputation that came from this event, the fact that Italian Americans had fought for workers’ rights and social justice in the early part of the century was forgotten while they became too often identified with criminality, racism, and bigotry (Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 14). In 1977, on the fiftieth anniversary of their executions, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis issued a proclamation “that any stigma and disgrace should be forever removed from the names of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti” (Dukakis, quoted in LaGumina et al. 2003: 563). Governor Dukakis’s statement neither pardoned Sacco and Vanzetti, because that would have implied that they were guilty, nor did it assert their innocence. Since no official position was taken, the proclamation actually ignited more flames of debate, especially among Italian Americans. Dukakis later expressed regret only for not reaching out to the families of the victims of the crime.

1.4 Weak Acceptance and Subsequent Alienation (1924-1945)

Throughout the 1920s, Italian immigrants began to see some sort of stabilization in their lives in the United States. Generally speaking, their lifestyles improved mainly

because many Italians were able to start businesses that offered services and typical products to Italian themselves; these businesses rapidly proved successful. In addition, children of Italian descent began attending American schools instead of working to support their families. The 1930s continued to be a time of relative economic, social, and cultural prosperity for Italian communities in the United States. In the 1930s, Italians were also beginning to succeed in other areas. Actor Rudolph Valentino and film directors Frank Borzage and Frank Capra acquired fame in Hollywood. In the political sphere, the mayors of both San Francisco (Angelo Joseph Rossi) and New York (Fiorello H. La Guardia) were Italian American. Italian Americans also gained significant recognition in sports, especially in baseball⁶, a typically American sport (Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 16).

Things rapidly began to change with the beginning of World War II, as because of Italy's membership in the Axis alliance. As a result, Italians in the United States began to be seen as suspects. However, some historians point out that the war also marked a time of great inclusiveness for Italian minorities mainly because many Italian American men proclaimed their American nationalism through high rates of military enrollment, even when the United States went to war against Italy (Gabaccia 2010: 40). During the war, 600,000 Italian immigrants were declared enemy aliens, just like Japanese Americans, and were subject to discriminatory treatment (Di Stasi, quoted in Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 16). 1,500 people, who were for the most part involved in teaching Italian and radio broadcasting, were arrested and put into internment camps (Carnevale, quoted in Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 16). The imperative not to speak "the enemy's language" resulted for many children of immigrants and their descendants into a desire to assimilate into the American mainstream through the silencing of their origins and the loss of their mother tongue (Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 17).

1.5 Italian Americans in a Globalized World (1945-Today)

After the end of World War II, Italian Americans became more and more assimilated into mainstream American society. Generally speaking, mass migrations to the United

⁶ Joe DiMaggio, Babe Pinelli and Ernie Lombardi to name a few.

States diminished throughout the twentieth century, and, as a consequence, nationality-based immigration quotas were finally abolished in 1963. Education levels, especially among women, gradually rose to the American norm, but Italian Americans were still new to middle-class life (Gabaccia 2010: 41). As they joined the middle class, Italian Americans began contributing more widely to American cultural and literary production.

Surprisingly, in the 1970s, American intellectuals detected a strong and prideful sense of white ethnicity among the descendants of Eastern and Southern European immigrants. This was perceived more as a backlash against the increasing claims to equality by African Americans than as claims to legitimacy in a multicultural America (Gabaccia 2010: 41). Many Italian American voters moved into the Republican Party to vote for conservative candidates such as Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan (Gabaccia 2010: 41). In the 1970s and 1980s, even those who proudly embraced their Italian origins could rarely speak Italian nor expressed any interest in learning the language. Though in 1992 the Italian citizenship legislation conferred the right to vote to third-generation Italian Americans, interestingly not many Italian Americans claimed it (Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2010: 19).

Today, the concept of belonging to the Italian American community is very personal and directly linked to the way in which a person has been brought up. Gabaccia describes the way in which Italian Americans today relate to their identity as follows:

For many Italian Americans today, the most important sense of connection to an Italian past is to some of the same forms of Italian culture that attracted America's middle-class culture seekers in the nineteenth century – classical Rome, the Renaissance, the Baroque Catholic Counter-Reformation. Whether such historical identifications can erase the millions of family histories rooted in Italy's rural and peasant poverty in the proletarian strivings of the mass migrants, in the mid-century battles of fascists and antifascists, or in the acquisition of whiteness and mainstream middle-class status is a question to be answered only in the twenty-first century. (Gabaccia 2010: 42)

Throughout Italian American history, much has been gained in economic well-being and opportunities for better possibilities. Nevertheless, Italian Americans still hold a longing for the home left behind, Italy. Curiously, there is no word for home in Italian. There is *casa* (house), but no specific word as in English. However, in American history and literature the longing for home looms large. Undoubtedly, Italian Americans, bound together by commonalities of language, environment, and heredity, have by now found and accepted the United States as their new home, a country that through a sometimes

troubled history has surely offered a valid alternative to their “lost” homeland (Mangione and Morreale 1992: 461-462).

1.6 Immigration and the Creation of an Italian American Identity

Let us now focus on how the concept of Italian American identity is directly linked to immigration and how it has changed through the different generations. In 1938, American historian Marcus Lee Hansen (1892-1938) published a famous essay entitled “The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant” where he developed the principle of third-generation interest. This theory, later known as Hansen’s Law, argues that first- and second-generation migrants are eager to assimilate to the cultural and social norms of the United States in order to overcome discrimination. The third-generation, however, more secure in its American identity, claims back its heritage and rediscovers its roots: “what the child wishes to forget, the grandchild wishes to remember” (Hansen 1938: 9).

Hansen starts his study by exploring the difficulties faced by the second generation, a generation that does not yet have a secure position in American society. The sons and daughters of immigrants are in an uncomfortable position; they are subjected to “the criticism and taunts of the native Americans and to the criticism and taunts of their elders as well” (Hansen 1938: 6). The second generation experiences a “strange dualism” (Hansen 1938: 7) because they feel that they do not fully belong to one culture, but, instead, partially belong to two.

However, “after the second generation comes the third and with the third appears a new force and a new opportunity which, if recognized in time, can not only do a good job of salvaging, but probably can accomplish more than either the first or second generations could have ever achieved” (1938: 9). After having found economic success and social integration, the third generation is more likely to rediscover their roots in order to assert their difference from mainstream American culture. In order to resume contact with their ancestry, third generation Italian Americans in particular turn to the people who still value their Italian identity: the grandparents. The contact with the grandparent can be real, if he/she is still alive, or even metaphorical. Therefore, the figure of the grandparent becomes almost mythicized and a constant reference to a world that does not exist anymore. More specifically, the figure of the Italian American grandmother, as we will

see, has been an immense source of inspiration for many Italian American women writers. Italian American novelist and poet Helen Barolini affirms that “one of the richest mines of the Italian American imagination is the grandparent – mythical, real, imagined, idealized, venerated, or feared. The grandparent embodies the whole tribe, the whole heritage for that – in overwhelmingly the most cases – is as far as a present-day Italian American can trace his or her descent” (2000: 100).

Through their interaction with their family’s past, third-generation Italian Americans can create a positive identity for themselves. This proves the fluidity that the concept of Italian American identity possesses today. Barolini believes that Italian American women, especially those who write, “will create our own identities, our own stories. We will be our own recorders of what we feel, of how we restructure tradition and the tensions between generations, between the sexes” (Barolini, quoted in Mannino 2000: 42). Gardaphé further adds that third-generation Italian Americans importantly “take on a mythic function both in documenting the immigrant past and in creating explanations of the cultural differences that were attributed to Americans of Italian descent” (196b: 120).

1.7 Italian American Women: Between Silence and Affirmation

Helen Barolini begins her introduction to her groundbreaking anthology on Italian American female writers, *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writing by Italian American Women*, posing the following questions to the reader:

A question to ask rather than why Italian American women were silent so long, is what were the conditions that impeded the act of writing? What were their lives as they were transplanted to one culture to another? (Barolini 2000: 3)

There are countless reasons why, for many Italian women transplanted in the United States, the new American environment rapidly became devastating and kept having devastating effects on the existences of many generations of women.

During the migration process, independent female migration was usually discouraged because women were not supposed to live an independent life. Italian women usually followed their husbands or fathers. In fact, they were an integral part of the family institution and there was no way they could embody a different role than their secularized position as daughters and mothers. In addition, another strong deterrent to emancipation

was the total lack of education and basic knowledge of the English language. In this situation, uneducated Italian women were strongly bonded to their traditional and subjugated role, which was usually accepted as the primary purpose of their existences.

Italian women were immersed in a patriarchal society since very early childhood. In a woman's upbringing, sexuality was never mentioned. As Mangione and Morreale point out, "the woman came to marriage worshipped as a virgin and yet feared for her sexual powers" (1992: 234). Women were not regarded as human beings who might have some desires, but as creatures that had to respect old-fashioned ideals of femininity and the strong rules of Catholicism. Worshipped and dominated at the same time, Italian American women lived in conditions of great isolation, constantly relying on male figures. In short, Italian American women had to totally deny their individuality in the name of family. In addition, even in America, education for Italian women remained a taboo for a very long time. For a woman, being educated meant challenging *l'ordine della famiglia*, "the unwritten, but uncompromising code of duties and responsibilities to the family" (Gambino, quoted in Bona 1999a: 63).

The ideal family in the Italian American community presented two structures. There was the nuclear family, the family of procreation, and the extended family, which included relatives to the third and fourth degrees. As Mangione and Morreale observe, "though closely allied, the extended family seldom functioned collectively" (1992: 232). The nuclear family, on the other hand, operated as a single unit on the principle of all for one and one for all (Mangione and Morreale 1992: 232). The patriarchal structure of the nuclear family was considered as holy and unchangeable: the father was the *pater familias*⁷ who demanded total respect for his authority and complete obedience. The mother, the symbol of submission *par excellence*, was totally dependent on her husband. She had to be faithful and humble; her main goal in life was to produce children. The daughters followed the condition of their mother and were completely subservient to the choices made by their father. The sons also had to be obedient and respectful, but, because of their masculinity and the fact that they were the heirs of the family name, were taken into greater account by their father concerning matters of education and possibilities for their future.

⁷ Latin for "father of the family" or the "owner of the family estate."

Nevertheless, it should be noted that, despite the great limitations imposed by their families, thousands of Italian American women augmented family income by entering sweatshops in the garment industry, working in factories, cellars, and attics. They displaced other workers by accepting lower wages. In 1910, Italian women represented 36 percent of female labor in New York City. Additionally, in 35 percent of Italian homes, the wives took in boarders to implement the family income. Therefore, it is easily affirmable that Italian immigrant women successfully assumed multiple roles as strong maternal figures, managers of the home and family, and wage earners (LaGumina et al. 2003: 689).

For women, things began to change in a more positive way when the children of immigrants finally entered the American educational system, which allowed them to rapidly become aware of the contrasts between their parents' culture and American society. The broadening of their perspective contributed to a questioning of their identities. By wanting to establish themselves as independent human beings, second- and third-generation Italian American women realized that it was difficult to reconcile Italian traditions with American innovation and sometimes decided to renounce to their ethnic identity in order to get rid of the burdens of the past and better assimilate to the American mainstream. In 1980, Italian American journalist Barbara Grizzuti Harrison spoke about the difficulty of being an Italian American woman:

I think of the strength of Italian women, of strength perverted and strength preserved. And I am painfully confused. I want all these people to love me, to comprehend me; I want none of them to constrain or confine me. And I know that what I want is impossible. (Grizzuti Harrison, quoted in Barolini 2000: 14)

Today, Italian American women have challenged the opposing barriers of tradition and family. Even more importantly, they have achieved high levels of education and economic independence. Therefore, they have successfully found their place in American society. After having achieved these certainties, some third-generation Italian American women have started to question their identity and felt the need to recover their bicultural identity. Helen Barolini has long investigated what it means to be bicultural. The following are some of her conclusions:

No matter how out of place in the culture one might feel as a disaffected American, sooner or later there comes to the expatriate – even James Baldwin! – the inevitable realization that the language and the culture of birth constitute the homeland after all. [...] Was I American or Italian? My name certainly had a foreign sound, but there was no doubt that I had been born in the state of New York,

and my parents, too. Though the records said I was American, from the start my soul wasn't persuaded. [...] In Italy I was American, but here in the States I never was sure. [...] In my own question of Identity I think of Nobel laureate poet and immigrant Czeslaw Milosz who said for all of us: Language is the Homeland. I cannot ever doubt what I feel so deeply – that I was formed in the English language and its literature and that is my homeland. (Barolini 1999b: 107-113)

Having been born in the United States and having being raised with English as her mother tongue, Barolini has reflected on identity for most of her adult life and now identifies herself mainly as American. However, she never distances herself from her life path that has seen her reconcile with her Italian side. The vicissitudes of her life have also seen her marrying an Italian man, the famous author Antonio Barolini, and moving to Italy for a long time until her husband's unexpected death in 1971. This is reflected in her position as an author. Barolini finds herself in the unique position of being able to use the dichotomy of her two cultures as the crucible for artistic production (2000: 53). Barolini firmly believes that Italian American women writers should not be relegated to a "separatist ethnic drawer in the bureau of American literature," but they should be identified "as an important source of American writing that has been overlooked" (2000: 54). Once the missing pieces have been fitted in American literature, the emphasis on ethnicity will be transcended and Italian American women writers will be simply seen as American authors (Barolini 2000: 54).

Throughout their existences in the United States, Italian women went through transformation, adjustment, and assimilation. These processes, far from being simple, have been painful and full of contradictions. What unites Italian American women today is that they all derive "from common cultural context and tradition" (Barolini 2000: 54) As Barolini points out, "it is important to see them whole and to hear in the cadence of their voices the echo of the larger group" (Barolini 2000: 54). However, transcending their ethnicity, Italian American women are first and foremost American citizens in their own right.

CHAPTER II

An Overview of Italian American Literature

On March 14, 1993, an essay entitled “Where are the Italian-American Novelists?” by Italian American journalist and writer Gay Talese appeared on *The New York Times Book Review*. Talese’s bold statement posed a question that had never been asked before to such a broad audience. In the article, Talese asserted that, during his formative years at university, he was not able to discover any noteworthy Italian American novelist:

Unable to find contemporary novels by Italian-American authors in the university bookshop or the library, I was drawn to writers who were Irish American or Jewish. [...] Why was this? How was it possible that of the estimated 20 million Americans with Italian roots, [...] this group was so under-represented in the ranks of well-known creative American writers? Were there no Italian-American Arthur Millers and Saul Bellows, James Baldwins and Toni Morrisons, Mary McCarthys and Mary Gordons, writing about their ethnic experiences? (Talese 1994: 466-467)

Italian Americans turned to their own publications for a forum, and a number of responses appeared in the Fall 1993 and Spring 1994 issues of *Italian Americana*⁸. Talese’s question has led many American literary critics and Italian American scholars to approach research projects on the place of the novel in Italian American culture, the place of the Italian American novelist in American culture, and to provide answers to Talese’s questions (Gardaphé 1999: 165).

When the article was published, Talese was probably unaware of an important tradition of Italian American studies that had begun almost fifty years earlier and was being consolidated in the early 1990s. In 1949, Olga Peragallo’s pioneering work on Italian American fiction was published posthumously under the title of *Italian-American Authors and Their Contributions to American Literature*. Not long after, Rose Basile Green began to work on her dissertation, which would later become one of the most important studies on Italian American literature. Published in 1974 as *The Italian-American Novel: A Document of the Interaction of Two Cultures*, Basile Green’s book became an invaluable guide for future scholars.

⁸ *Italian Americana* is one of the first academic journals that published studies on various aspects of the Italian American experience. It was established in 1974 by Richard Gambino, Ernest Falbo, and Bruno Arcudi.

Nevertheless, a homogenous field of Italian American studies was formed only when scholarly publications began to form a critical mass, capable of embodying the self-representative and self-reflexive moment of a community that is recognized in the first place through its own culture, never having had a real movement for civil rights (Izzo 2017: 9-10). One of the crucial functions of Italian American studies became the recovery, reconstruction, publication, and interpretation of the large corpora of previously forgotten authors. In this activity, the contribution of historiography, ethnography, oral history and folklore studies was fundamental (Izzo 2017: 10)⁹. In addition, academic journals covering Italian American literature and culture were finally established by important institutions: *Italian Americana* (1974), *VIA: Voices in Italian Americana* (1990), and *Italian American Review* (2011).

In the late 1990s, two influential studies appeared: *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative* (1996) by Fred L. Gardaphé and *Claiming a Tradition: Italian American Women Writers* (1999) by Mary Jo Bona. These two books resumed the work of earlier literary critics and historians such as Helen Barolini and advocated the existence and importance of Italian American women writers.

Gardaphé's groundbreaking contribution is the inclusion of Italian American literature in the new American studies of the 1990s (Izzo 2017: 12). In his book, Gardaphé introduces the concept of "Italian signs" as the qualities associated with Italian culture that arrived in the United States with the immigrants and emerge in different ways in Italian American literary production. Therefore, he proposes a periodization of Italian American literature based on the different modalities of the relationship between "Italian signs" and "American roads." The first period of Italian American literature, defined as "the poetic mode," includes autobiographical works based on oral tradition of the early twentieth century (Rosa Cavalleri, Pascal D'Angelo, and Constantine Panunzio). The "mythic mode" follows right after and includes dominant figures that almost became heroes, i.e. the Godfather. The authors analyzed are John Fante, Pietro di Donato, Jerre

⁹ In particular, only to mention the seminal titles: *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930* (1984), *Militants and Migrants: Rural Sicilians Become American Workers* (1988), and *Italy's Many Diasporas* (2013) by Donna R. Gabaccia; *From Paesani to White Ethnics: The Italian Experience in Philadelphia* (2001), and *The Italian-American Vote in Providence, Rhode Island, 1916-1948* (2004) by Stefano Luconi; *The Italian American Table: Food, Family, and Community in New York City* (2013) by Simone Cinotto; *Oral History, Oral Culture, and Italian Americans* (2009) by Luisa Del Giudice.

Mangione, Mario Puzo, Gay Talese, and Giose Rimanelli. In the “mythic mode” importance is also given to the figure of the grandmother, a key figure in self-reflexive recreation of a past whose distance is only recoverable through the fiction of the most important Italian American women writers of the 1980s and 1990s (Helen Barolini, Tina De Rosa, and Carole Maso). The final phase is the “philosophic mode” and includes postmodern works of writers such as Don DeLillo and Gilbert Sorrentino, whose “Italian signs” are consciously or unconsciously disseminated through their texts, since *italianità*¹⁰ is no longer the explicit subject of their novels (Izzo 2017: 12).

Likewise, Bona’s study of Italian American women writers is also of considerable importance. In her book, Bona reconstructs the literary history and examines the narrative techniques of eight Italian American novels written by women from 1949 to 1988 (Mari Tomasi, Marion Benasutti, Octavia Waldo, Josephine Gattuso Hendin, Diana Cavallo, Dorothy Bryant, Helen Barolini, and Tina De Rosa). Closing with a discussion on more contemporary Italian American women writers, Bona examines such topics as sexual identity when entangled with cultural identity and the inclusion of *italianità* when Italian American identity is not central to the story. In the 1980s and 1990s, Italian American women writers, she concludes, continue to focus on the interplay between cultural identity and women’s development.

In the early 2000s, new and interesting studies, entirely or mainly focused on Italian American women writers, continued to appear: *By the Breath of Their Mouths: Narratives of Resistance in Italian America* (2010) also by Mary Jo Bona, *Revisionary Identities: Strategies of Empowerment in the Writings of Italian/American Women* (2000) by Mary Ann Vigilante Mannino, and *Writing with an Accent: Contemporary Italian American Women Authors* (2002) by Edvige Giunta, to name a few.

Surprisingly, the study of Italian American literature is still marginalized in the Italian university system. In 2001, the publication of the first volume of the anthology *Italoamericana: Storia e letteratura degli italiani negli Stati Uniti* (later published in English as *Italoamericana: The Literature of the Great Migration*) edited by renowned literary critic Francesco Durante introduced Italian American literature that was largely

¹⁰ *Italianità* n.: Italianness. Within the history of Italy, the term emerged as part of Italian national awareness during the *Risorgimento* (the movement for Italian unification). Throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, it was a key term in the forging of a positive political and cultural identity. The term is currently used in Italian American studies as a terminological instrument with which to define and to locate – to recover – Italian American identity. (D’Acerno 1999: 730)

unknown to the larger public. The first volume covers the earliest period of Italian American literary activity (1776-1880). The second volume, published in 2005, focuses on the literature of the great migration and life in Little Italies. In his seminal work, Durante adopts a comparative approach that expands the canon beyond literary parameters. In doing so, he avoids an exclusive, aesthetic standard, which has often relegated these texts to the sphere of social and historical commentaries (Pietralunga 2010: 72). Durante also edited *Figli di due mondi* (2002) the first Italian anthology of Italian American writers of the 1930s and 1940s. In 2005, Caterina Romeo published *Narrative tra due sponde: Memoir di italiane d'America*, the first Italian book-length study of the literature of Italian American women. Romeo explains how Italian American women writers prefer to focus on collective as opposed to individual memory in their works. According to Romeo, a key element in Italian American female literature is the complicated relationship that women entertain with their families and with the patriarchal community to which they belong (Pietralunga 2010: 76). There has also been an increasing interest in Italian American novelists by some Italian commercial presses, whose titles are not merely restricted to best-selling authors like Don DeLillo. Some of the authors who have been translated into Italian include John Fante, Pascal D'Angelo, Joe Pagano, Pietro di Donato, Arturo Giovannitti, Joseph Tusiani, Sister Blandina Segale, Rosa Cavalleri, Helen Barolini, and Tina De Rosa. From an academic point of view, the *Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord-Americani* (AISNA) has played an important role in bringing awareness of Italian American studies to Italian universities. In 2014, the University of Calabria has signed an important agreement with The City University of New York for student and faculty exchange, and teaching and research collaboration. In addition, in 2015, the *Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi ItaloAmericani* (Interdepartmental Center of Italian American Studies) was established at the University of Macerata. The CISIA quickly affirmed itself as an important source of investigation of relations and exchanges between Italy, the United States and the other countries of the American continent. Concerning the status of Italian American studies in Italy, in the proceedings of a conference on Italian emigration sponsored by the journal *Altreitalie*, Migration Literature scholar Maddalena Tirabassi mentions the positive progress that Italian American studies has made in Italy in recent years. However, she also points out that caution should be taken when approaching this particular subject. Since emigration

studies in general is becoming an extremely popular field of research, Tirabassi believes that scholars have to maintain a high level of rigor so that their work will not become merely fashionable but will be the means by which genuine growth of the discipline can occur (Tirabassi, quoted in Pietralunga 2010: 78). Therefore, to conclude, according to Italian American scholar Mark Pietralunga, Italian American studies in Italy needs to “remain receptive to developing critical concepts of ethnic identity, displacement, and diaspora, and the question of emigration needs to speak to the collective history of the [Italian] nation” (2010: 78).

Thanks to the long and consolidated tradition of scholarship on Italian American literature in the United States, we can now more easily identify the authors who had a significant impact on both Italian American and American cultures. This chapter provides an overview of those authors who, while having achieved relative success as writers, have yet to be fully recognized by the larger American literary canon. Particular attention is devoted to Italian American women writers who have been very often “silenced” by several factors and have started to be recognized as important pillars of Italian American literature only recently.

2.1 Early Practitioners: Luigi Donato Ventura, Bernardino Ciambelli, Constantine Panunzio, and Pascal D’Angelo

Luigi Donato Ventura (1845-1912) and Bernardino Ciambelli (1862-1931) are possibly the earliest Italian American fiction writers. Their works explore themes such as the sufferings caused by migration and the difficulties of adjustment experienced by immigrants and their children. Paving the way for writers of the future generations, Ventura and Ciambelli introduce and develop “a theme that has become an archetype in Italian American fiction: the recurring conflict with institutional authorities, in particular the police and the judicial system” (Bona 2010a: 88).

Ventura’s novella *Peppino*, published in 1886 in a collection entitled *Misfits and Remnants*, was the first attested work of what would be later referred to as Italian American literature (Lentricchia, quoted in De Marco 2016: 695). Unlike most Italian immigrants, Ventura was a professor who came from a bourgeois family and was eventually given chairs in Italian at Sauveur Summer College of Modern Languages (Vermont), Boston University, and Stanford University. *Peppino* recounts the life of a

twelve-year-old child laborer from Abruzzo in the ethnic ghetto of Mulberry Street and deals with the situation of early immigrants. By giving a father figure to the young protagonist, Ventura creates an early version of the father-son plot that will later become an archetype in the Italian American literature to follow (Bona 2010a: 88). *Peppino* reads as an *apologia* of the new immigrants as hard-working and, at the same time, good people (Lentricchia, quoted in De Marco 2016: 695). Concerning the narrator, as literary scholar Mary Jo Bona points out, it can indeed function as a cultural mediator:

As folksy in voice as Washington Irving and as precise in sociological details as the urban photographer and social worker Jacob Riis, the narrator of *Peppino* functions as a cultural mediator who sympathetically represents the ordeals of impoverished immigrant children. Throughout successive conflicts for both the narrator (a penniless journalist) and Peppino (who is eventually run over by a peddler's cart), Ventura portrays the Italian colony as a multiethnic space and urban life as a nightmare for new immigrants, especially those bereft of paternal protection. (Bona 2010a: 88-89)

Displaying a journalistic style of reportage, Ciambelli's works, written in Italian and published in the Italian colonial newspapers of the period, include many popular mystery stories (De Marco 2016: 696). Ciambelli moved from the province of Lucca to the United States in 1888 and immediately began to collaborate with the major Italian American newspapers of the time: *Cristoforo Colombo*, *Il Telegrafo*, *La Voce del Popolo*, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, *L'Italia* (Chicago), *L'Unione* (Pueblo, Colorado), *Roma* (Denver), and *Corriere d'America*. Modelled on the European genre of the *feuilleton*, Ciambelli's works used local crime stories to create fictional events and characters set in Italian tenements. His very own focus on the punitive characteristics of the American police force and judiciary system allows him to examine with great melodrama the machinations of Italians, Americans, policemen, detectives, and a host of other characters. By exploring the physical and social problems of urban America, Ciambelli surely offers an interesting vision of late-nineteenth-century metropolitan malaise (Bona 2010a: 89). Therefore, serialized fiction played an important role in the development of an Italian American canon because it attempted to produce a "self-representation and self-definition of an Italian American community that was struggling against prevailing stereotypes in the process of negotiating its ethnic identity" (Cacioppo, quoted in De Marco 2016: 696).

Another genre explored very early by Italian immigrants is the autobiography. The earliest Italian American autobiographies were written by Constantine Panunzio (1884-1964) and Pascal D'Angelo (1894-1932). Panunzio's *The Soul of an Immigrant* (1921) contains two stories of conversion that both relate to his Americanization. The first is his

conversion to Protestantism, the second to American citizenship. His use of English provides the authenticating evidence that he has understood and accepted “the genius of the Anglo-Saxon mind and character of the soul of America” (LaGumina et al. 2003: 47). D’Angelo’s *Son of Italy* (1924) tells the story of the author’s rise from poor immigrant to accepted poet through his winning of a national poetry contest and can be read as a version of the American success story. Generally speaking, immigrant autobiographies published in this period document a remaking of the Italian self into an American one (LaGumina et al. 2003: 46). In these works, sources of an autobiographical tradition that contrasts Italian culture, creating a tension that drives the narrative, can also be found. This tension is found in the overriding theme of these immigrant narratives, a flight to a better world or a promised land, a theme found in many immigrant autobiographies but also slave narratives (LaGumina et al. 2003: 46).

2.2 Italian American Realists: Pietro di Donato and John Fante

The struggles of assimilation and the difficulties arising from mediating between the Italian and American cultures deeply influenced the works of second-generation Italian American writers Pietro di Donato (1911-1992) and John Fante (1909-1983), which also included some criticism of American ever-growing capitalism, U.S. founding myths, and Catholicism. The second generation of Italian American writers moved from autobiography to autobiographical fiction, giving rise to the heroic model immigrant (Gardaphé 1996b: 55). Italian American autobiographical fiction of the 1930s and 1940s was written by authors who migrated to the United States as children or were born shortly after their parents came to America. That is exactly why, according to Italian American scholar Robert Viscusi, they developed a conflictual relationship with Italy whereby, on the one hand, they rejected it by assimilating into mainstream American culture; on the other hand, they preserved its rituals and language in the attempt to construct their houses, the *casa* as symbol of stability and permanence of an Italian way in America (Viscusi, quoted in De Marco 2016: 696).

The first and most famous work of Italian American literature of this time is Pietro di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete*. It all began when one of di Donato’s short stories, “Christ in Concrete,” that took inspiration from the real events of the early death of his father in a construction accident, was published in *Esquire* magazine in March 1937 and reprinted

in Edward O'Brien's *Best Short Stories of 1938*. The story grew into a novel of the same title that was published in 1939. *Christ in Concrete* enjoyed considerable literary success and was even chosen over John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* as the main selection of the Book of the Month Club. The novel stands as an allegory of an Italian immigrant who dies a symbolic death almost to be reborn as a divine-like figure (Viscusi, quoted in De Marco 2016: 696). Throughout the narration, we are confronted with Geremio, a construction worker, who falls from a scaffold into a pool of concrete on Good Friday dying terribly; his body will not be recovered until Easter Sunday. The figure of Geremio epitomizes the Christ-like figure of the poor immigrant who fights for recognition against the ruling classes (Viscusi, quoted in De Marco 2016: 697). Concerning di Donato's criticism of Catholicism, Gardaphé points out that his criticism is more radical than previously portrayed:

By directing his characters' rage at the employers who exploit immigrant laborers, Pietro di Donato argues for solidarity among American workers and requires that they look to one another to solve their problems. Just as it is the Italian community through the extended family that keeps Geremio's family together, it is the extended family of the workers that must watch out – and help – its own. Di Donato's revision of Christ points to the failure of American Catholicism to support the immigrants' struggle. He reveals Catholicism as a force that controls and subdues the immigrants' reaction to the injustices of the capitalist system that exploits as it maims and kills the Italian immigrant. His deconstruction and remaking of the Christian myth forces us to reread his masterpiece as more revolutionary than it has been portrayed by past critics. Di Donato's rewriting of the myth of Christ, while leading him away from organized Roman Catholicism, leads him toward the pagan. (Gardaphé 1999: 169-170)

Christ in Concrete is also a seminal work in terms of its use of Italian and English. In the attempt to give a poetic voice to a forgotten semiliterate ethnic group, di Donato employs a specific vernacular English that simulates the dialectal languages of Italian immigrants (Bona 2010a: 89-90). This almost resembles a phenomenon related to religion formally known as *heteroglossolalia*¹¹ and, according to Viscusi, the word can be used to describe di Donato's original use of language as a tool for representing the efforts of Italians "bargaining for their lives in the English language" (Viscusi, quoted in De Marco 2016: 697).

¹¹ Glossolalia (Gk., *glossa*, 'tongue', + *lalia*, 'speaking'). 'Speaking in tongues', the phenomenon, common in many religions, of a person speaking in words or word-like sounds which form a language unknown to the speaker. Related phenomena are *xenoglossolalia*, speaking in a foreign language unknown to the speaker but known to the hearer; and *heteroglossolalia*, speaking in a language known to the speaker which the hearer hears in his/her own language. (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*)

Second-generation Italian American writers also tried to map the emotional emptiness that, in their eyes, characterized the United States. Italian immigrants went to America hoping to start a new and fruitful life, however they found themselves confronting solitude and alienation. Such is the case with the works of John Fante and especially the four novels that include Arturo Bandini¹² as their main protagonist. In his *Saga*, Fante narrates the “development of the social and aesthetic consciousness of a child of Italian immigrants and the contribution of this consciousness to the child’s fantasy of assimilation into American mainstream” (Gardaphé 1996b: 58). Throughout the four novels, the reader follows Bandini, a young Italian Catholic, whose main desire is to move to California with the intent of escaping his ethnicity and family by becoming a writer. *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, the first book in the *Saga*, primarily deals with Bandini’s parents and their struggles to settle in a foreign world, but more importantly it sets up the theme of assimilation. Here, like di Donato, Fante also examines the tension between a devout Catholic mother, whose Catholicism is rejected by Bandini, and a philandering father, whose poverty overshadows his artisanship (Bona 2010a: 90). In *Ask the Dust*, Bandini abandons his Italian American home and arrives in California. Here, he is constantly faced with immigrants of other ethnicities, such as Camilla Lopez, the Mexican waitress with whom he falls in love and whose Americanness he constantly denies. Bandini’s assimilation to mainstream American culture involves denying other children of immigrants their status as Americans in order to fight back the idea that he may never be an American himself (Gardaphé 1996b: 59). Therefore, Fante’s main concerns are the complicated and sometimes conflictual relationships between Italian Americans and other ethnicities, and the disillusionment coming after realizing that the American Dream fails the immigrant. *Full of Life* finds Bandini married to Joyce, a non-Italian American. Joyce is expecting their first child. Through Joyce and her relationship with his father, Bandini finally reconciles with his Italian ethnicity. In *Dreams from Bunker Hill*, Fante returns to Bandini’s times in California as he tries to make his way to Hollywood. Fante’s first novel, *The Road to Los Angeles*, after being rejected by Alfred A. Knopf in the 1930s, was finally published two years after the author’s death. In the novel, Fante uses Bandini’s

¹² *The Saga of Arturo Bandini* comprises the following four novels arranged in terms of narrative sequence: *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938), *Ask the Dust* (1939), *Full of Life* (1952), and *Dreams from Bunker Hill* (1982). However, Arturo Bandini was first introduced in *The Road to Los Angeles*, Fante’s first novel which, although completed in 1936, was published posthumously in 1985 by Black Sparrow Press, which lists it as part of the *Saga*.

identity as a writer to single him out from the working class, a constant reminder of the past he is trying to escape. Fante thus formulates the myth of the alienated artist as a hero in a society that has no need for the outcome of his work (Gardaphé 1999: 173).

According to Gardaphé, Fante's main contribution to Italian American literature is his representation of assimilation as a way of achieving the American Dream (1999: 174). The American Dream can only be achieved through "making America" as a citizen but also as an artist. Throughout the Italian American experience, the American Dream brought the children of Italian immigrants away from their Italian heritage through materialism, towards full membership in American culture (Gardaphé 1999: 174). Fante created his own version of assimilation with his representation of the Italian American family in *The Saga of Arturo Bandini*, especially through the characters' attempts to achieve the American Dream with dignity.

2.3 The Success of Italian American Mafia Gangster Stories: Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*

First appearing in newspapers and newsreels of the 1920s, the gangster figure we know today as typically associated with Italian American culture is surely a mix of fact and fiction. Even before the word mafia entered American everyday vocabulary, the gangster, typically represented by a male figure, began to be understood as a symbol of an urban bad guy who worked with a band of criminals. America's fascination with gangsters emerged in response to the evolution of corporate capitalism in the early twentieth century (Gardaphé 2010: 110). Even though criminal gangs had long operated in American cities, Prohibition and the Great Depression in the 1930s provided opportunities for individual crime leaders to emerge. In fact, it was during this period that the exploits of gangsters such as Al Capone, Baby Face Nelson, Pretty Boy Floyd, and John Dillinger became national news. Americans immediately became fascinated with the gangster, whose stylish cars and stylish clothes yet humble origins defied the boundaries that divided social classes (Gardaphé 2010: 110).

These fascinating characters began to appear in Hollywood movies during the late 1920s and early 1930s. These films often portrayed gangsters as "degenerate and overly feminized men losing their independence in the new capitalist society," while later films

“recast them as men who wielded power through sexuality and guns” (Gardaphé 2010: 110-111). Movies such as *Little Caesar* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932) created a long-lasting association in popular culture between the gangster and particular ethnic groups, including Jewish, Irish, African American, Asian, but especially Italian Americans. These visual images of masculinity associated to these specific ethnicities created many stereotypes and marginalized people belonging to these groups even more. This marginalization was amplified in the 1950s through the 1970s when the word mafia¹³ was increasingly used to refer to the Italian presence in organized crime. Since the 1960s, the mafia gangster in literature, film, and theater has been often the product of Italian Americans themselves. In their hands, the Italian American mafia gangster has become a cultural figure of mythic proportions. The word mafia might have been put into the minds of Americans thanks to the news media and more specifically the televised Kefauver hearings¹⁴, but it would not be until the publication of Mario Puzo’s novel *The Godfather* in 1969 that the mafia entered “their hearts and souls” (Gardaphé 2010: 111).

Before achieving instant fame thanks to the enormous success of *The Godfather*, Mario Puzo (1920-1999) had published two novels that were well received by critics but virtually ignored by the public. *The Dark Arena* (1955) explores life in post-war Germany through the eyes of Walter Mosca, an American World War II veteran. *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1965), considered by many critics Puzo’s finest work, narrates the growth of an immigrant family as it struggles to rise above the poverty of Hell’s Kitchen in New York. In 1965, an editor of the Putnam publishing house offered Puzo a \$5,000 advance for a

¹³ *Mafia/mafia* n. (Sicilian dialect, etymology obscure, but its archeological derivation is customarily attributed to the Arabic terms *mahyas*, “braggart,” and *marfud*, “rejected”; its more immediate derivation is from the adjective *mafioso*, a word used in the Sicilian dialect of the 1860s to denote: “beauty, graciousness, excellence of its kind”): In current Italian journalistic usage, *Mafia*, with a capital “M,” refers to the Sicilian underworld organization and its American counterpart; *la mafia*, with a small “m,” refers to organized crime in general, and thus includes the Neapolitan *Camorra* and the Calabrian *Ndrangheta*. (D’Acierno 1999: 735)

¹⁴ The United States Senate Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce was a special committee which existed from 1950 to 1951 and which investigated organized crime. The committee became popularly known as the Kefauver Committee because of its chairman, Senator Estes Kefauver. The Kefauver Committee held hearings in 14 major cities across the United States, more than 600 witnesses testified. Many of the committee’s hearings were televised live on national television to large audiences, providing many Americans with their first glimpse of organized crime’s influence in the United States. Many of the Kefauver Committee’s hearings were aimed at proving that transplanted members of the Sicilian mafia controlled a vast organized crime conspiracy in the United States, but the committee never came close to justifying such a claim. Rather, the committee uncovered extensive evidence that people of all nationalities, ethnicities, and even religions operated locally controlled, loosely organized crime syndicates at the local level. (“United States Senate Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce”)

book about the Italian underworld. Disappointed with his lack of commercial success, Puzo too fell prey to an “offer that could not be refused,” as Don Vito Corleone says several times in the novel.

In *The Godfather*, mafia is seen as a natural force coming from Don Vito Corleone’s Sicilian world, a world which he attempts to recreate in his new home in the United States. As Gardaphé points out, Corleone epitomizes the man whose destiny is predetermined and who is invested by the community with authority and almost divine powers. Corleone’s main preoccupation is the preservation of *la famiglia*, the family, and he does so by recreating the feudal-like order of the Old World in the new one (Gardaphé 1996b: 94). Within the Italian American community, Corleone and his family are depicted as the “good guys” and the American institutions of law and business are set up as the “bad guys” (Gardaphé 2010: 112). As Gardaphé further observes:

In this novel Puzo presents the hypothesis which in effect is the real Italian American dream: what if America assimilated to our ways? The world that Don Vito Corleone replicates in America is built on the solid foundations of a centuries-old social order in which fate or destiny, more often than not through birth, determined the life an individual would lead. In the feudal-like system of Sicily and Southern Italy, the peasant could not hope to aspire to a better life by challenging the forces that controlled his life. The result of this would be that attention was focused on what *could* be controlled – the family unit. This is the reason so many emigrated to other lands. The world to which so many immigrants came was one built on the myth that through freedom each person could become whatever they wanted if they worked hard enough. (Gardaphé 2010: 112)

Interestingly, the American Puritanical work ethic did not require that the family stick together and often led to the dissolution of the nuclear family. Nonetheless, Corleone’s Old-World work ethic requires that the family stick together to succeed, and every attempt by an individual to leave it threatens the subsistence of the entire family. Moreover, for a family to survive with its Old-World values intact in the New World, “it must work against assimilation and strive to have its surrounding environment conform to their way of life” (Gardaphé 2010: 112). Hence, the main conflict of the novel is how to keep the family together in a country that has lost its dependence on the family for survival.

The effect of *The Godfather*, and especially the trilogy of movies (1972-1990) based on the novel and directed by Italian American director Francis Ford Coppola, was sensational; it has surely done more to create a worldwide imagery of the Italian American experience than any work of fiction or nonfiction prior to or since its publication. It was the first novel that Italian Americans as a group reacted to either positively or negatively.

Even though this book was mostly based on fictional events, it created an identity crisis for Italian Americans throughout the United States. Though literary scholars may forever debate on the validity of Puzo's work, it cannot be denied that he is a novelist "who has left a permanent imprint on the American cultural scene through his representation of *italianità* and his creation of a mythic filter through which Italian American culture would be read" (Gardaphé 1999: 179).

2.4 Italian American Postmodernists: Don DeLillo and Tony Ardizzone

Since the 1970s, a renaissance in Italian American literature has produced a copiousness of work. Deeply influenced by postmodernism and postmodernist theories, many authors also return to themes relevant to earlier works such as Italian codes of behavior, Little Italy settings, generational conflict, and an implicit and explicit critique of American institutions (Bona 2010a: 93). As Italian American culture continues to be source and subject of American literature, "these writers increasingly write out of several contexts, ethnicity serving only as a strand, sometimes a mere filament, within the complex weaving of a narrative" (Bona 2010a: 94). Two prolific writers of distinctive innovative works are Don DeLillo (1936-) and Tony Ardizzone (1949-). DeLillo and Ardizzone are two contemporary writers of Italian American descent who "can be read as either extending or escaping from Italian American literary tradition" (Gardaphé 1996b: 154). One reason DeLillo and Ardizzone have not been read as proponents of an Italian American literary tradition is that their works do not incorporate themes and subjects that are strictly Italian American; their primary goal is to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. However, some signs of their ethnicity exist beneath the surface. According to Gardaphé, "analyzing the function of the Italian signs found in the works of these (in)visible ethnics and reading their narratives through these Italian signs can enhance the contributions they have made to American literature" (1996b: 154). These authors may have suppressed dominant ethnic traits in an attempt to transcend ethnicity, but their works contain signs of *italianità* that "can be connected to an underlying philosophy which is informed by their ethnicity" (Gardaphé 1996b: 155).

Don DeLillo is one of the most successful and praised authors of Italian American background. As an author, he has always addressed a wider American audience than his

originary Italian American community, as he experiments with a style able to confront the American mainstream on national themes that have little to do with the romanticization of his ethnic roots. DeLillo himself has never been tempted to anglicize his name, as other authors of immigrant descent have done in the attempt to secure recognition and facilitate their access to the most exclusive, but also mainstream, intellectual circles (Daniele 2010: 111). Far from the vulnerable immigrant type who “must cast off the European skin, never to resume it” and prove ready, whatever their feelings, to cling to the prejudices of this country” (Sollors, quoted in Daniele 2010: 112), DeLillo looks quite at ease with the dimension of an author who rejects the hyphenated definition of Italian American writer, maintaining the critical stance of other Bronx native writers of his generation, namely, E. L. Doctorow and Grace Paley, who assumed the imperfect status of a partial integration to elaborate on the mysteries of America (Daniele 2010: 112).

It goes without saying that DeLillo’s intention to confront a broader American field does not prevent him from including some interesting characters of Italian descent in some of his novels. His monumental *Underworld* (1997), set in late-twentieth-century America, incorporates many intertwined themes including interesting elements of *italianità*. As Gardaphé points out, “for DeLillo, ethnicity and loyalty to it represent the maintenance of an autonomous selfhood; to maintain a strong ethnicity is to remain in the ghetto, on the margins of society” (1999: 182). In *Underworld*, through the perspective of the protagonist Nick Costanza Shay, the author analyses the changing of the United States from an inward-looking country to a worldwide superpower, skillfully paralleling Nick’s journey from the Bronx Italian ghetto to the rich suburbs of Arizona. In the novel, DeLillo embraces “the multicultural dimensions of America and employs multiple perspectives to examine the effects of ethnic heritage on a country buoyed and threatened by nuclear power” (Bona 2010a: 95). Like many other Italian American writers, DeLillo also introduces in his works intellectually prominent figures of Italian heritage, who function “both as a necessary recursion to Italian American cultural codes and [as] a community leader” (Bona 2010a: 95). In *Underworld*, this is the case with Albert Bronzini, Klara’s ex-husband and Matty’s former chess instructor. Bronzini offers a vision, however nostalgic and atavistic in the cyberspace of postmodern culture, of a

mentor for confused young people and a positive model of patriarchal comfort (Bona 2010a: 95).

In much of his writing, DeLillo also focuses on the breakdown of family and the consequent cultural fragmentation that forces people to forge new mainstream identities. According to Gardaphé, “without the family the Italian American is able to become a cultural chameleon, affiliating with whatever he or she chooses” (1999: 183). In terms of Italian American culture, DeLillo’s work suggests the decline of a distinct *italianità* “that has assimilated into the larger American culture that is in decay; it is a culture that leads nearly all of his protagonists to search for a better life in the margins of society” (Gardaphé 1999: 183). As Gardaphé further affirms, “strategically DeLillo avoids breaking a personal and ancestral *omertà* by employing the narrative strategy of speaking through the persona of the Other, by creating a masquerade in which his ethnicity can enter the mainstream without detection” (1999: 184)¹⁵. Although DeLillo has successfully avoided being identified as an “ethnic writer,” his work certainly extends the literary tradition of Italian Americans into a postmodern world.

One of most successful of today’s Italian American writers is Tony Ardizzone. In 1986, Ardizzone published his second novel, *Heart of the Order*, establishing *italianità* as a major theme throughout what is undoubtedly an American work. In the novel, Danilo Bacigalupo, son of Italian immigrants and brother of many, grows up in Chicago’s North Side. In a game of baseball, Bacigalupo hits a line drive that changes his life. Through a combination of realism and surrealism, Ardizzone displays an unprecedented sophistication and stylistic experimentation. By combining the story of an Italian American with America’s favorite pastime, baseball, Ardizzone transcended the realistic, parochial world of Little Italies and “established a work that speaks to all of America and yet carries with it the religious and cultural peculiarities of *italianità*” (Gardaphé 1999: 186). In the subsequent *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu* (1999), Ardizzone reimagines through the voices of twelve speakers the difficult journey from Sicily to America during

¹⁵ *Omertà* (Sicilian and Southern Italian) n.: silence, the ancient code of silence observed by the Sicilian and Southern Italian subculture as part of its non-compliance with public authorities; the rule of silence observed by individual *Mafiosi*; the conspiratorial code of silence and secrecy maintained by members of the criminal underworld as a means of protecting each other when confronted by legal authorities. In contemporary Italian American studies, the term is used both positively as the expression of a style of subcultural resistance to authority or negatively as a kind of self-censorship and self-distancing that imposes a secret around the inner life of Italian Americans. (D’Acerno 1999: 743)

the great migration. At the heart of these stories, set in Sicily and the United States, is a belief in a cultural community whose “familial rules support an anticlerical and antigovernmental ethos” (Bona 2010a: 94). Through impeccable timing and sometimes coarse humor, Ardizzone realizes that the garden of the New World of America lacks many things. Communal family identity and justice for ethnic minorities allow Ardizzone “to praise the cultural elements of Italian identity in its religion, cuisine, language, and storytelling” (Bona 2010a: 94). However, even though in Ardizzone’s novels there are many issues strictly related to *italianità*, it should not be forgotten that his main aim is to address an interethnic audience. Ardizzone does not see himself as an ethnic writer; he is firmly convinced that his work can be considered universal.

When confronted with American multiculturalism and multiplicity, ethnic characters have to conceive ways to understand themselves. For Italian Americans everything began in the nineteenth century when they first came to the New World in large numbers and learnt how to communicate with other immigrants. Through the dexterity of experimentation, Italian American writers continue to analyze the meanings of seminal concepts such as identity, ethnicity, and literary writing “as they negotiate ethnic codes with radical but deeply human creativity” (Bona 2010a: 96).

2.5 Previously Unheard Voices: Italian American Women Writers

As we saw in the previous chapter, Italian American women were “silenced” by numerous factors, including conflictual relationships with the patriarchal cultures of their families. Furthermore, Italian American women did not come from a tradition that considered valuable for them to narrate their lives “as documents of instruction for future generations” (Barolini 2000: 5). They came from a male-dominated world where their role was immutably restricted to home and family. Italian American women did not acquire “the nascent writer’s tools of education, confidence of language, the leisure to read, and the privacy for reflection” until later generations (Barolini 2000: 5). In fact, it is no coincidence that when you do not read, you do not write (Barolini 2000: 5).

No other critic of Italian American women’s culture has offered more insight into Italian American women’s literary cohesion than has Helen Barolini (Bona 2012: 91). Barolini’s groundbreaking contribution to Italian American literary scholarship came

with the publication of *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writing by Italian American Women* in 1985. This work was the first in-depth anthology solely dedicated to Italian American women writers. Placing Italian American women writers on the map for the first time in American literary history, Barolini explores the historical and social foundations of Italian American cultural life and the literary hegemonies and oversights of the American publishing world (Bona 2012: 91). Barolini's anthology features the writings of fifty-six women, including five separate genres (memoirs, non-fiction, fiction, drama, and poetry), which deeply analyze the impact of class and gender on women's lives. Describing her anthology as a literary manifesto, Barolini asserts that:

The Italian American writer exists, and her experience is documented in a long literary record; if that voice seemed silent to the larger culture, it is because no critic or teacher amplified it. If the authors seemed women of the shadows, it was because the spotlight of attention never reached them. (Barolini 1999a: 193-194)

As a result of Barolini's seminal work, scholarly publications on Italian American women writers have increased. In the 1990s, two more anthologies appeared, *From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana* (1991) edited by Anthony Julian Tamburri, Paolo Giordano, and Fred L. Gardaphé (that included both male and female writers), and *The Voices We Carry: Recent Italian American Women's Fiction* (1994) edited by Mary Jo Bona. Barolini's update of *The Dream Book* came in 2000. The revised edition records the literary achievements of Italian American women writers throughout the 1990s. All these works continue "to showcase the contributions of Italian American writers, [and reveal themselves to be] aware of the absolute necessity of advocacy in keeping these voices audible and viable" (LaGumina et al. 2003: 694).

Sister Blandina Segale (1850-1941), Frances Winwar (1900-1985), and Rosa Cavalleri (1866-1943) can be considered the earliest Italian American women writers (LaGumina et al. 2003: 695). As we have seen, in the early years of the twentieth century, some Italian American men had begun to write and publish books, but "for the women it was to be a much longer, harder, and later development" (Barolini 2000: 7). Segale, Winwar, and Cavalleri stand out as exceptions. These three women emerge as beacons "rendering even deeper the dark void around them" (Barolini 2000: 7).

Sister Blandina was born Rosa Maria Segale in a village near Genoa, Italy, and arrived in the United States as a young girl, settling with her family in Cincinnati. Aware of the importance of educating her daughters, Segale's mother, Giovanna, hired an

English teacher, preparing them for further educational training at the Catholic grammar school (LaGumina et al. 2003: 695). At age sixteen, Segale entered the order of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. Because she chose the vocation of a nun, Sister Blandina was liberated “from the constraints placed on Italian women of her generation: marriage and motherhood” (LaGumina et al. 2003: 695). For twenty-one years, Sister Blandina lived in the Southwest (Trinidad in the Colorado Territory, Santa Fe, and Albuquerque) doing missionary work, establishing schools and hospitals, and working among Native Americans. The journal she kept consisted of letters to her sister Maria Maddalena (Sister Justina), also a nun. The journal was eventually published in installments in a Catholic magazine, receiving attention for its historical value. It was then published in book form in 1932 as *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail*. The book reveals “the strength of a woman emboldened by her desire to help others” (LaGumina et al. 2003: 695). Sister Blandina comes out as an author passionate about setting the scene, employing dialogue, and describing the kinds of people she encounters, especially the typical cowboy. *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail* is undoubtedly an important contribution to the literature of the West, “including the travel narrative, accounts of female pioneering in the West, and the influence of Catholicism in the American West” (LaGumina et al. 2003: 695). Even though Sister Blandina did not consider herself a writer, her contribution to American literature comprises “both an Italian and a Catholic ethos, elements that are prevalent in the Italian American novel” (LaGumina et al. 2003: 695).

Frances Winwar was born Francesca Vinciguerra in Taormina, Sicily. She arrived in the United States as a child with her family and soon became fluent in English. When she was eighteen, Vinciguerra began working as a book reviewer, but she eventually gained a reputation as a novelist and biographer. Upon the advice of her editor she reluctantly agreed to anglicize her name to Frances Winwar, a literal translation of her name and surname, for her first novel *The Ardent Flame* (1927). She never forgot her beloved Sicily which was memorialized in *Pagan Interval* (1929), a novel set on the Mediterranean island of Ennios (LaGumina et al. 2003: 695). Winwar shows “keen interest in things Italian, evidenced by her Italian settings and subjects” (LaGumina et al. 2003: 695). She later settled into a career of writing psychological biographies, specializing in the great English literary figures of the nineteenth century, and won the important Atlantic Prize for nonfiction in 1933 (Barolini 2000: 113).

Rosa Cavalleri was born in a small village in the region of Lombardy. She was forced to work in silk factories since childhood, and arrived in the United States in 1884. Though she never learnt to read and write in Italian or English, Cavalleri gained fame as a storyteller. Narrating her story to friend and social worker Mary Hall Ets, Cavalleri recalls meticulous details of her life in *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant* (1970). Interestingly, while analyzing Cavalleri's memoir, Bona maintains that

Rosa's story depicts the epic saga of immigration and shares similar themes with many Italian American novels: the journey to America and the attendant difficulties of leaving the homeland and adapting to American ways; a strong and abiding belief in the efficacy of the Madonna, a figure of enormous strength for all believers, not only the peasant class; a determination to survive insurmountable odds – poverty, prejudice, lack of education – with resiliency and force of character; and, finally, a belief in America as a promised land, despite ceaseless struggle and privation. (LaGumina et al. 2003: 696)

Moving to fiction writers, Italian American women have intensely written novels about family. Raised in an American milieu and with a strong emphasis on independence and individualism, the daughters of immigrants often felt confused by the two contradictory systems of values. Nevertheless, Italian American women novelists chose the family as one of their main subjects, “concomitantly breaking the silence and commemorating their cultural heritage” (LaGumina et al. 2003: 696). Mari Tomasi (1907-1965) and Marion Benasutti (1908-1992) wrote novels that share features of what may be called the immigrant saga (LaGumina et al. 2003: 696). These writers view immigration and subsequent assimilation positively and optimistically; they also both tend to deemphasize the negative occurrences of prejudice and restriction associated with everyday life in the United States. Tomasi and Benasutti share several structural and thematic characteristics that will be expanded by the next generation of writers such as De Rosa and Barolini. They also share common origins from Northern Italy that are reflected in their writings. However, as Bona points out, they sometimes feel different from most immigrants exactly because they come from Northern Italy:

Writing about emigration from Northern Italy, the authors unfortunately succumb to spurious distinctions between the North and the South, reinforced by the Northern Italian government and immigration authorities in America. Though they claim a Northern Italian origination, the character in [their] novels are subject to derogatory ethnic nomenclatures, forcing them to reconsider their positions as Italians in America and as ethnic Americans. (LaGumina et al. 2003: 696-697)

Mari Tomasi's second novel *Like Lesser Gods* (1949) insistently deals with “the development of a first- and second-generation Italian American family, whose

assimilation into American society is aided and enriched by the development of a godparent figure” (LaGumina et al. 2003: 697). *Like Lesser Gods* was the first major novel written by an Italian American woman; it received fine reviews, including one in *The New York Times*. Marion Benasutti’s *No Steady Job for Papa* (1966) also obtained enthusiastic reviews and provided a breakthrough in authorship for an Italian American woman. In her novel, Benasutti deliberately emphasizes that the strength of the family belongs to its most strong-willed and determined achiever: the mother. The immigrant mother is celebrated because, through her resourcefulness and determination, she helps her family achieve emotional and financial stability in the new country (LaGumina et al. 2003: 697).

For the next generations of Italian American women novelists, including writers such as Helen Barolini (1925-), Dorothy Bryant (1930-2017), Tina De Rosa (1944-2007), Carole Maso (1956-), and Mary Cappello (1961-), family remains central to the characters’ sense of identity, but with important distinctions.

Helen Barolini’s multigenerational novel *Umbertina* (1979) deals with four generations of women belonging to the same family, spanning from 1860 through approximately 1975. What makes this novel pivotal is its ability to embrace the traditional subject (family) and the traditional form (the immigrant saga) and “endow them with a distinctively feminist perspective, without being anachronistic or polemical” (LaGumina et al. 2003: 698). Like *Umbertina*, also Tina De Rosa’s *Paper Fish* (1980) reconstructs the essential relationship between grandmother and granddaughter. Writing from a third-generation perspective, Barolini and De Rosa suggest that granddaughters receive life-sustaining legacies from their ancestors. As Bona further adds:

From grandmothers, girl characters are given the cultural heritage through stories, rituals, and symbols. Able to retrieve the past through their grandmothers and invent a viable ethnic identity for themselves, the granddaughters (the great-granddaughter in *Umbertina*) enter adulthood with a fuller understanding of cultural identity and the language to maintain and nurture that identity. (LaGumina et al. 2003: 698)

While upon first reading, it may seem as though, with *Miss Giardino* (1976), Dorothy Bryant (née Calveti) has disregarded the Italian American family in favor of exploring individual development, her third novel is fundamentally concerned with the family’s impact on a person’s formation. *Miss Giardino* focuses on the retired English teacher Anna Giardino, the youngest daughter of Northern Italian immigrants, whose American

dreams were destroyed by unethical corporate practices. Bryant anticipates the narratives written in the 1990s with her emphasis on a kind of submerged or covert ethnicity (LaGumina et al. 2003: 698). It should be noted that coming to terms with a problematic family and the reconciliation with oneself as Italian American are also central issues in *Umbertina* and in *Paper Fish*.

The issue of gender is also central in these novels. Italian American women authors have been doubly marginalized because they belonged to a deeply patriarchal society that did not understand the importance of education and their works were labeled as ethnic. In the Italian American community, culture was regarded with distrust because it was considered as a means of assimilation to the American mainstream. This is why, as we have seen, many Italian Americans, if they were able to become published authors, decided to put their ethnicity aside in order to succeed. As Gardaphé points out, “the earliest Italian Americans who became intellectuals, more often than not, adopted a model in which alienation from one’s birth community, and often one’s birth class, was a requirement for acceptance into the club” (2003b: 266). This is also why many Italian American women, such as Barolini and De Rosa, did not find any Italian American literary model with which to identify. In order to write their novels, the only thing that they could do was to rely on their childhood memories and conduct research on the Italian community in the United States. In *Umbertina* and *Paper Fish*, the question of gender is therefore linked to the concept of Italian American identity. In fact, in the plot of each of these two texts, the female protagonists find themselves struggling against traditions set by their Italian heritage, experience rejection from mainstream American culture, and, at the end, understand the importance of tailoring their own independent identity.

More recently, Carole Maso and Mary Cappello began to skillfully explore multidimensionality in their novels, incorporating the issue of lesbianism into their narratives that, most of the times, also deal with the Italian American family. Therefore, through their works, Maso and Cappello start to challenge the unacceptable taboo of homosexuality in the traditional Italian American society. As a consequence, their novels are mainly centered on the marginal character, the lesbian, the HIV and cancer victim, the poet struggling with mental illness, the woman dying of a rare blood disease. Maso and Cappello both experiment with multiple and interacting layers of plot and characters, and play with poetic, musical, and innovative language (LaGumina et al. 2003: 699).

Throughout the 1990s until today, Italian American women writers have continued to produce many interesting literary works, incorporating issues of identity and ethnicity in daring and innovative ways. Thanks to the recent developments in Italian American scholarship, it is now clear that Italian American women writers have significantly contributed to American literature. However, although many achievements in recognition have been obtained, these writers still deserve serious attention and advocacy, ensuring that their works will stay in print and therefore remain accessible to future readers, scholars, and writers (LaGumina et al. 2003: 701).

CHAPTER III

Journey in Search of the Self: Helen Barolini's *Umbertina*

Helen Frances Barolini (née Mollica) is a novelist, poet, short-story writer, essayist, translator, editor, and spokesperson for Italian American women writers. She was born in 1925, in Syracuse, New York, to second-generation Italian American parents. Although her grandparents were Italian immigrants, Barolini spoke no Italian until she hired a tutor to start teaching her the language. She graduated magna cum laude from Syracuse University in 1947 with a major in English, received a *diploma di profitto* from the University of Florence in 1950, and earned a Master's Degree in Library Science from Columbia University in 1959.

After graduating from Syracuse, Barolini traveled to Italy, studying in Perugia and writing articles for the *Syracuse Herald-Journal*. It was there that she met and married the Italian writer Antonio Barolini. The couple had three daughters (Teodolinda, Susanna, and Nicoletta) and lived in Italy for several years before moving to New York. After her husband's death in 1971, she moved permanently to the United States and nowadays lives in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York.

For many years, Barolini was engaged in translating her husband's books into English. After receiving a National Endowment of the Arts grant for fiction writing, she completed her first novel *Umbertina* (1979), for which she won the Americans of Italian Heritage award for literature in 1984 and the *Premio Acerbi*, an Italian literary prize, in 2008. It has been widely argued that *Umbertina* is the first Italian American novel written by a woman to deal explicitly with the intertwining themes of gender and ethnic identity. Strongly autobiographical, *Umbertina* traces the lives of three generations of Italian American women, from the immigrant experience of the title character Umbertina to the late twentieth-century life of her great-granddaughter Tina. Barolini got the inspiration for the book in the 1960s when her mother was cleaning the house and came upon the tin heart¹⁶ that Barolini's grandmother had brought to the United States from Calabria.

¹⁶ Barolini's own tin heart is featured on the cover of the first Seaview edition of *Umbertina*. Interestingly, in 2010, during a conference at the *Casa Italiana* of Middlebury College (Vermont), in which Barolini showed her beloved tin heart to the audience, Professor Antonio Vitti noticed that the artifact is not actually a tin heart. It is, instead, a metal leaf attached to a tiny stick, a typical Southern Italian good luck charm

However, it took her many years before she actually started writing it. Her diary entry from February 25, 1965, recalls the recovery of the tin heart:

My parents were here, and Mother brought Grandma's knitting needle over: a crude piece of tin shaped like a heart with a hammered-on border design and a piece of black yarn through it to tie around the waist. I can imagine the goat girls herding their flocks on the rocks of Calabria wearing such a holder to keep the needles steady as they knit and watch the herd. And now for the first time I am touched by these rude, poor, unintelligible forefathers. There was an epic in American life, and it should be written, for they who lived it kept no diaries. But we descendants can write and tell, and it's time now before the last of them die out. I am sure their story is unique, and now that Mario Puzo's book [*The Fortunate Pilgrim*] has raised their theme, why not other books? The blacks, the Jews, the Irish all have their spokesmen, why not the Italians? (Von Huene Greenberg and Barolini 1993: 91)

Before writing *Umbertina*, Barolini had previously completed another book called *The Last Abstraction*, a contemporary novel set in Rome where Marguerite was one of the protagonists. As a consequence, when approaching the first draft of *Umbertina*, the author had initially planned to include only the story of the great-grandmother and of the great-granddaughter in the novel. Following the suggestion of her publisher, Barolini later incorporated *The Last Abstraction* in *Umbertina*, by making it the middle section of the novel. In order to make her story as authentic as possible, Barolini conducted several oral history interviews with people from the Italian American community, consulted many historical sources, and personally visited the places in Italy that are described in the novel. After its first publication by Seaview Books in 1979, the book quickly went out of print. It was later rediscovered and republished by the Feminist Press¹⁷ in 1999, with an Afterword by Edvige Giunta. The focus on the subject of gender linked to the American experience ensured a wider audience and a greater critical attention. An Italian-language edition was published by *Avagliano* in 2001.

Barolini's other novels include *Love in the Middle Ages* (1986), *Crossing the Alps* (2010), and *Visits* (2016). *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women* (1985), received the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation and the Susan Koppelman Award from the American Culture Association. The essay collection *Chiaroscuro: Essays of Identity* (1997) comprises both personal and

which can be found in many museums of emigration. Barolini realized that she had always looked at it upside down and was very amused by this discovery. (Ganeri 2015: 67)

¹⁷ The Feminist Press at the City University of New York is an independent nonprofit literary publisher that promotes freedom of expression and social justice. It publishes writing by people who share an activist spirit and a belief in choice and equality. Founded in 1970, the Press began by rescuing "lost" works, and established its publishing program with books by American writers of diverse ethnic and class backgrounds.

critical writings of Barolini's highlighting her skills as an essayist and scholar. To further demonstrate how broad her writing scope is, Barolini has also written *Festa: Recipes and Recollections of Italian Holidays* (1988), a cookbook complemented by cultural histories, photographs, subtexts, and biographical anecdotes.

This third chapter provides an extended analysis of Barolini's first novel *Umbertina* and devotes single sections to each of the three main female characters in the novel (Umbertina, Marguerite, and Tina). Importance is also given to the novel's motifs, structure, and Barolini's particular use of the Italian language.

3.1 Structure and Language in *Umbertina*

After a more careful analysis, the structure of *Umbertina* reveals itself more complex than it initially appears. Although the novel is divided chronologically in three sections, each one focusing on a particular generation (Umbertina, Marguerite, and Tina), there is an easily noticeable exception to this rule: the Prologue. Instead of starting with Umbertina's section, Barolini decides to introduce Marguerite, Umbertina's granddaughter, first, and subsequently to go back in time to Umbertina's story. The Prologue, taking place in 1969, is a seminal part of the novel because it foreshadows Marguerite's issues and doubts concerning her identity by placing her, and therefore Barolini's own generation, at the center of the novel.

Umbertina is a lively text full of literary, cinematographic, and musical quotations that allude to the English-speaking world in which Marguerite and Tina both grow up. Examples include the poem "An Old Atheist Pauses by the Sea" by contemporary Irish poet Thomas Kinsella, the Shirley Temple and Charlie Chan series of films, and the song "Eleanor Rigby" by the Beatles. As we will see, some of these cultural references, especially Hollywood movies, hide a critique to American society and its popular culture.

Let us move to Barolini's very own use of language. Almost every page of *Umbertina* contains some words in standard Italian, Calabrian or Roman dialects in cursive that are always well incorporated into the English text. These words sometimes include Italian proverbs and idioms that are sometimes translated into English and sometimes left in Italian: "*faccia tosta*" (139), *essere senza sale* and *essere senza spina dorsale* "without salt or backbone" (51). However, it has to be said that where possible

Barolini constructs sentences so that non-Italian speakers can infer the meaning of Italian words from the context. It is important to note that Barolini's use of Italian needs to be distinguished from simple code-switching¹⁸. It can include instances of code-switching but it is definitely more than a mere mix of English and Italian. When approaching the use of Italian in *Umbertina*, Italian American scholar Ewa Bakun proposes to follow Robert Viscusi's description of language in Italian American fiction presented in the essay "*De Vulgari Eloquentia: Ordinary Eloquence in Italian America*" (2004: 110). As Viscusi points out, in Italian American fiction there is a constant negotiation between Italian and English (2012: 43). In fact, Italian American writers are always seeking "an English that will somehow comprehend and welcome the language of many forbearers in Italy" (Viscusi 2012: 40). In *Umbertina* the inclusion of Italian plays a different role at different points in the novel (Bakun 2004: 109).

In Part One, Italian words are mainly used by Umbertina and her husband Serafino in order to remember the "Old World" that they sometimes painfully miss. Following Viscusi's suggestions on language, this is the part of the novel in which Italian is used in a "liturgical mode," "invoking and celebrating the power of a mythical Italy" (2012: 43). Here, Italian is also a sign of belonging to the community; the word *paesano*, for example, is used to refer to other members of the Italian community in the United States. In addition, in Part One, words in standard Italian are sometimes reported with the wrong spelling mainly to show that Umbertina and Serafino, who did not go to school and always speak Calabrian dialect among themselves, have some difficulties mastering standard Italian; this is the case, for example, with the word "*imbecile*" (126, 145) reported twice with the wrong spelling. However, it has to be said that standard Italian was a relatively new thing when the Longobardis left Italy. Thus, Barolini, even through such small details, demonstrates once more the accuracy of her historical research. Once Umbertina and her family arrive to New York, Italian American neologisms in Italian that are, most of the times, literal translations from English also appear. New York is referred by the Italian immigrants as "Nuova York" but also as "Nuova Yorcka" (39). Umbertina struggles to open a *groceria*, a grocery store. Interestingly, concerning the etymology of this word,

¹⁸ In linguistics, code-switching occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages, or language varieties, in the context of a single conversation.

linguists have actually found that the now traditional Italian American *groceria* is actually a linguistic loan from the Latin American Spanish word *grocería*.

Italian vocabulary is also employed in Part Two and Part Three. This is where instances of code-switching appear. Tina and Weezy, Marguerite's daughters, having grown up bilingual, go from English to Italian without noticing it. Italian is also used to describe places, foods and objects that can only be defined with Italian words (*trattoria, tavola calda, sali e tabacchi, caffè-latte*). It is also constantly used in terms of endearment (*papà, amore, amore mio, tesoro, ti voglio tanto bene*).

Viscusi maintains that there is also a “diplomatic role” that the Italian language can play in Italian American fiction (2012: 53). This role formalizes each of the Italian and American components out of the need that each has to reply to the other, so that the character of this language is diplomatic (Viscusi 2012: 53). This evolution of register can exert “a pressure on the idiomatic English of the narrator, moving it upward in tone, so that it treats even minor details with poetic precision in language” (2012: 55). Therefore, in *Umbertina*, some of the diplomatic uses of Italian appear in Part Three when Tina quotes Dante and Alessandro Manzoni and her quotations in Italian are incorporated in her English speech: “*Era già l’ora che volge il disio / ai navicanti e ’ntenerisce il core*”¹⁹ (348), ““*Questo matrimonio non ci sarà.*” [Tina] looked up at Weezy and said, ‘That’s the line from *I Promessi Sposi.*” (311). According to Viscusi, the “diplomatic role” is the highest level to which language in Italian American fiction should aspire (2012: 53).

In *Umbertina*, Barolini succeeds in the challenge of combining both the “liturgical” and “diplomatic” roles of English and Italian. The simple occurrences of Italian in *Umbertina*’s section are a point of departure that progresses into a more complex use of Italian that mirrors the sense of incompleteness of Marguerite and Tina derived from partially belonging to two cultures.

3.2 Part One (1860-1940): Umbertina, the Strong-Willed Matriarch

Part One begins with a description of Umbertina’s humble origins as a goat girl in the village of Castagna in the Southern region of Calabria. Barolini immediately plunges

¹⁹ Dante’s *Purgatory*, Canto VIII.

her reader into the difficult political and social situation of post-*Risorgimento* Southern Italy. Umbertina was born exactly in 1860, the year when “the great Garibaldi had crossed over from Sicily, and right there, at Soveria Mannelli, routed the Bourbon troops of the king of Naples in the name of the king of Italy” (28). The year after, in 1861, the Kingdom of Italy was officially created with Victor Emmanuel II of Savoy as King. Therefore, “it was a new thing to be Italian” (28). For the poor peasants, being Italian brings more troubles than benefits; the taxation constantly increases making them sink into even deeper poverty. The new ruling class is described as the *ladro governo* (damned government). Here, Barolini demonstrates a very accurate knowledge of Italian history because the problems of Southern Italy are described in a plausible way. The land is barren and not suitable for agriculture. As a result, many desperate Southern Italians have already started to emigrate to the New World, which becomes an almost Promised Land.

Umbertina grows up in this difficult environment and loses her mother very early. From a very young age, she demonstrates her strong character by trying to challenge the patriarchal structure of Southern Italian society (Pipino 2000: 99). However, being the only woman in her family, she quickly understands that her father and brother have the last word in every matter. In such a male-dominated society, it does not matter if the woman is smarter than the man because women are not entitled to publicly express their opinions. One day, at the marketplace, Umbertina dares to contradict her brother:

The change in things had come in her sixteenth year. It was the day, returning from the market, when she had words with her brother Peppino.
“It’s not your part to interfere in the bargaining,” he had scolded, trying to intimidate, though he was younger. “When I set terms for the sale of the goats that’s what it is. I am the man.”
She had looked at him with the scorn she never concealed from him. She infuriated Peppino by being more clever than he was. And she didn’t care. (30)

In this scene, Peppino’s reproach is not the result of a solid argument. He is scolding her only because he knows that men are always right, but, in this case, Umbertina, a woman, was certainly right. Peppino forgot that the black goat was pregnant and he was selling it for a lower price. Umbertina steps in the transaction just to prevent her brother from making a mistake. Coming back from the market, she boldly reacts to her brother’s accusations by saying, “Go on by yourself and tell yourself what a man you are” (31). She is not afraid of the consequences of her words and decides to leave Peppino, and stop by the stream to wash herself. Therefore, from the very beginning, Umbertina

demonstrates her strength through little demonstrations of courage and challenge to her male-dominated environment.

Aged sixteen, according to Southern Italian customs, Umbertina should think about getting married. Cristina Muzzi, another young woman from the village, is already married and pregnant with her first child. Muzzi is not beautiful or clever, but she is already on another level of Calabrian society because, by expecting child at a young age, she has already fulfilled her matrimonial obligations. Umbertina is attracted to Giosuè, a poor charcoal maker. Umbertina's and Giosuè's paths have crossed several times up in the hills; she was working with her goats and he was crossing the hills with the other charcoal makers. However, the customs allowed that they only said "Good-day" to each other. One day, going against the rules, Giosuè gifts Umbertina a tin heart he made especially for her. From now on, the tin heart, that according to Barolini stands for the unforeseen, will be one of the most powerful symbols in the narration; it will be one of the few material possessions Umbertina will bring to the United States and also the only artifact concerning the Longobardi family's Italian past that will survive until Tina's generation.

Back at home, Umbertina has to follow her father's will and accept Serafino Longobardi's hand in marriage. Longobardi, called *il normanno* by the villagers because of his alleged descendance from the Normans who invaded and settled Calabria in the Middle Ages, had gone to the United States, saved some money, and returned to Italy in order to settle down. Compared to other men in the village, Longobardi is considered wealthy and, therefore, a good match for young Umbertina. Giosuè, in comparison, is poor and has to join the army very soon. Unable to marry the man she likes, the young girl has a moment of discomfort because she realizes that she lives in a male-dominated society where her wishes do not count: "She resented what she understood [...] that her wishes counted not at all. That she was bound by men's notions of what women should be. [...] In her world, she began to see, a woman could not afford the displeasure of any men" (34). Therefore, Umbertina decides that "she should not think further of Giosuè" (35) and accepts Longobardi's marriage proposal.

In view of the marriage, Umbertina commissions her *coperta matrimoniale*²⁰, a traditional bedspread woven in typical Calabrian style, to Nelda, the priest's housekeeper. The bedspread was the one thing she would bring to her new home and "she wanted it beautiful and strong, to last forever" (44). The narrator carefully describes the beauty of the embroidery and weaving: "It was to be the traditional design of the countryside: brightly colored yarn embroidered in bunches of grapes, fig leaves, twining ivy, flowers, and the stylized hearts on the bright yellow-orange ground of thick homespun" (44). Once married, the bedspread becomes a source of great pride for Umbertina and a source of envy for the other girls of Castagna who find themselves daydreaming of a *coperta* as beautiful as Umbertina's. Bedspreads also imply a certain status; they are proudly hung out of the windows and from the balconies in honor of the procession on the feast day of Corpus Christi in order to show everyone the importance of each house. As we will see later on, the bedspread will become one of the most important symbols of the novel and a strong allegory connected to the history of emigration and the possibility to improve one's existence.

Shortly after his marriage, Serafino Longobardi is reminded of the reasons that inspired him to leave in the first place: poverty and the *ladro governo*. In fact, the land he can buy with his small savings is unsuitable for agriculture and the *padroni* (large landowners) demand for too much interest for the loans for farm animals and seeds. Umbertina slowly convinces her husband to leave for the United States to look for better opportunities. Serafino slowly and reluctantly agrees to leave: "Italy doesn't wasn't us – it makes us bandits or beggars in our own country. It pretends to give us land in exchange for our money and work, then it takes it back with taxes and interest while the rich are exempt" (47). Serafino's sad words demonstrate the difficult situation of post-unification Italy. Rich people are getting richer and richer, while the poor are struggling to survive. This is why the last resort for many, especially in the South, is to emigrate to the United States. Interestingly, the decision to emigrate comes from Umbertina who is temperamentally stronger than her more mature husband. By deciding to leave Calabria, Umbertina becomes the leader of her own family; she is also hopeful for an economic improvement once arrived to America. It should be noted that also Umbertina has her

²⁰ There is no known bedspread in Barolini's family history, but she still has a few items from her grandmother's dowry, which inspired her later descriptions of Umbertina's daughters' trousseaus. (Giunta 1998: 446)

own mythical image of the American Dream, “For her the New World they spoke of as a kind of paradise would be a place where everyone had such [bed]spreads and enough to eat each day” (33).

Once arrived to New York City, Umbertina quickly realizes that Italian immigrants are relegated to different Little Italies organized according to their Italian regions of origin:

When they crossed Prince Street the man in the bowler hat gestured around him and said, “Sicilians. The street of Sicilians.” At Mulberry Street he said scornfully, “This is the street of the *napoletani*, a bad street – full of thieves and bandits.”

Thus Umbertina learned that she was in America but living in a little Italy, in streets filled with Italians arranged according to where they had come from in the old country. The children were whimpering with fatigue by the time they reached the end of Mott Street where the Calabrians lived. (61)

Marginalized in Little Italies, Italian immigrants have to face hardships that are similar to those in Italy. Umbertina and her family find themselves living in the tenements, in “an attic room under the roof, stifling hot, with a dormer window that let in what little light and air could filter between the taller buildings all around them” (63). The young woman, who wanted to leave the most, finds herself missing Castagna and the beautiful nature that surrounds it. In Mott Street, she witnesses the same injustices that she could not stand in Calabria. Here the *padroni* are cruel factory owners who exploit the immigrants making them work in poor conditions and paying them miserably but also other Italians who take advantage of their own countrymen. For immigrant women the situation is even harder, “‘It’s worse for a woman,’ said the washerwoman. ‘It takes a woman three days in a sweatshop – if she’s lucky and not fined – to get what a man does in one day.’” (65). Another lesson that Umbertina quickly internalizes is that in the United States the key to success is to become an entrepreneur and open a successful business, “if there was one thing she was learning about American life, it was the need to be her own boss” (65). In order to fulfil this desire, Umbertina decides to leave New York as soon as possible and move to the countryside where she and Serafino could have their own house and find more opportunities.

While saving money in order to leave New York, Umbertina comes in contact with Northern Italian social worker Anna Giordani, “a middle-aged spinster who was devoting her life to work among the new Italian immigrants, the Southerners, who were as removed from her experience as the Negroes of New York were from the whites” (66). Giordani has converted into Protestantism and tries to help the immigrants but feels superior at the

same time. She believes that there are different types of Italians, according to their region of origin:

The Sicilians were ornately, elaborately civil, but hotheaded; the Neapolitans vain and sly; the Romans overbearing; and those of the North, her own kind stolid and dull. But of them all, the Calabrians were the most given to nursing long grudges against wrongs. (78)

These distinctions show how fragmented Italy was even after its unification. Even abroad, Italians do not consider themselves as one people but as different persons belonging to different regional customs and identities. For Giordani, characteristically and physically different from Southern Italian immigrants, it is easier to assimilate to the mainstream idea of American. Southern Italian immigrants, instead, unable to quickly assimilate, are doubly marginalized, both by American citizens and Northern Italian immigrants.

Giordani, knowing that Umbertina wants to leave New York, convinces the young woman to sell her *coperta*, the only material possession she was able to bring from Italy besides Giosuè's tin heart, in order to make money. For Giordani the bedspread is just a representation of peasant folklore; she is unable to understand the importance that this precious linen has for Umbertina and her culture of origin. Later on, Umbertina tries to buy her *coperta* back and does not succeed. This leads her to another moment of discomfort: "This is a country without heart. [...] Only buying and selling is understood here" (78).

Umbertina and Serafino manage to save enough money to relocate to upstate Cato, New York. Subsequently, Barolini recounts the economic rise of the Longobardi family in great detail; everything happening thanks to Umbertina's efforts. Indeed, their financial success is driven by Umbertina's great business sense and desire for improvement. Umbertina begins to contribute financially to the family selling *panini* to Serafino's colleagues in the railroad yards. Umbertina "worked hard, she made money, and she was quick to see that the profits would be even greater if she had her own store of provisions instead of going out to buy them" (95). Therefore, she and Serafino initially open a *spaccio*. The business is successful and in only two summers, they manage to expand the *spaccio* into the Longobardi grocery store. Umbertina works relentlessly, while continuing to care for her seven children. The success of the Longobardi grocery store also allows Serafino to leave his job at the railroad to help his wife with the business.

Having found economic stability, Serafino and Umbertina are able to send their children to school. However, they do not choose a public school but a parochial school instead. They are reproached for this decision by Domenico Saccà, a socialist who has left Italy because of his political beliefs and is very sensitive to the poverty of immigrants. He firmly criticizes Umbertina and Serafino's choice with a solid argument: "Did they want to increase the power of the Church over them so they'd never be free, he asked. Didn't they realize that finally they had free, open schools paid for out of their property taxes – not like Castagna, where they paid taxes and got nothing back" (97-98). Umbertina and Serafino's reply demonstrates that Saccà's is indeed right: "'Father Di Simeone is our friend; we can't go against him,' For who knows, they thought, when we'll need such friend." (98). In this scene, Barolini shows the power that the Roman Catholic Church, perceived as a benevolent and helpful force, continued to exercise on Italian immigrants for many years after their first arrival to the United States.

Concerning the concept of education for Italian immigrants, there is another scene that is worth quoting: Umbertina's conversation with Sister Carmela, a nun who teaches at the parochial school. Sister Carmela believes that the children of Italian immigrants should learn to speak standard Italian, as opposed to the various dialects they speak at home: "'Now I can teach proper Italian to these children who speak only dialect. [...] It is the cultural heritage of these children to know their mother tongue'" (93). Umbertina's reaction reveals her position on language and culture in general:

Oh, no, Sister, not Italian! It is American our children need. They have to go out and earn their living in America and they have to read and write for us who have no learning. Leave the Italian to us at home, and teach them the language of how to do business in this country. [...] The culture will come after we make a living, God willing." (93)

For Umbertina, who is pragmatic and straightforward, the fact that her children learn standard Italian has no practical use in the United States. This idea, shared by many immigrants, led to a quick loss of the native language for the children of immigrants. Umbertina's position on culture was also shared by many immigrants. As we have seen, Italian immigrants did not value culture simply because it was a luxury they could not afford. This is something that changes in later generations. In fact, Umbertina's female descendants, especially Marguerite and Tina, will revalue the importance of education and will be portrayed as women of great culture.

Let us go back to the Longobardis' entrepreneurial success. Umbertina achieves everything by herself and thanks to her hopeful attitude. By embodying the role of the family leader, she also acts on behalf of her husband Serafino. Italian American scholar Mary Ann Vigilante Mannino points out that Barolini, by representing Umbertina as a strong woman, reverses the expected male-female roles in her representation of the relationship between wife and husband (2000: 143). The attitude of Serafino towards his wife is always positive; he appreciates the fact that she works hard for the welfare of the family and recognizes that she is more intelligent than him.

However, it should be noted that Umbertina's business bears the name of her husband and only mentions her three male children (S. Longobardi & Sons). Her four daughters are expected to contribute to the family business, but, once married, they are expected to step back and become simple housewives caring for their children. The relationship Umbertina has with her daughters is not an easy one. She loves them, but, since they grew up in a more privileged environment, she does not consider them as strong and gifted as she is. She often finds herself reminiscing about her *coperta* with them and plans to spoil them with high-quality linens, something that they probably do not care about:

Umbertina often told her daughters the story of her dowry bedspread and its loss during the hard times in New York; and she had told them that the bed-linen and spreads she provided must remain with them and then be passed on to their own daughters. [...] The business she had built up and the property she had worked to acquire would be for her sons, but her daughters would get the finest *biancheria* possible. (133)

It may seem strange that a strong woman like Umbertina does not try to question the rules of Italian patriarchy when it comes to her relationship with her daughters. The narrator, however, highlights that it is precisely because she is a precursor that she is not completely able to defy all the conventions of Southern Italian society. Nevertheless, by behaving like this, she ignores the psychological and emotional needs of her daughters, who are growing up in a completely different environment than the one in which she grew up:

Umbertina's belief may [...] be rooted in the conviction that her daughters will never be faced with economic struggle in America, a stance which ignores their need (and forgets her own need) for emotional and psychological strength and independence. Most important, however, is the recognition by Barolini (and the reader) that although Umbertina has frequently defied the conventions of a "right and ordered world," she is unable to reject them outright. (Pipino 2000: 102)

After Serafino's death, the sons take over the business and the daughters get married and leave home. Umbertina suddenly finds herself alone and the only role she can assume is the one of the typical Italian grandmother. Always dressed in black and unable to communicate with her grandchildren, she feels lost as she asks herself "who could she tell her story to" (145). Still, family gatherings are described as some nice moments for every member of Umbertina's big family:

[T]he Longobardi Thanksgiving took place in the summer in a meadow where all the family gathered around the head of the family, Umbertina, and offered her their services, goods, and children – all that food, those cars, the well-dressed young people who, like Jake's older sons, went to college to become businessmen. (142)

The annual picnic at Lake Petulia, described by the narrator as an Italian American Thanksgiving, is Umbertina's favorite time of the year, even more than Christmas or Easter. These events represent the only moments when she can still embody the role of the family leader. Interestingly, looking at her children and grandchildren, she experiences feelings of bitterness and contentment at the same time.

In 1940, as she lays dying, Umbertina, aged eighty, has visions of her long-gone *coperta* and craves for water from the stream of Castagna. Interestingly, she dies exactly after having uttered the word "Castagna." Umbertina is survived by seven living children and twenty-seven grandchildren, one of which, Marguerite, will be the focus of the next part of the novel.

Barolini devotes small space to the story of Carla, Umbertina's youngest daughter and Marguerite's mother; her story is actually incorporated into the last part of Umbertina's. This decision in constructing the novel was based on Barolini's conviction that second-generation Italian Americans are less interesting because they accepted American values without criticism:

That second generation is not as interesting to me because they were so into Americanizing. And they have a *less* interesting life because they have no struggle. They simply are materially well off. Where is the drama in that life? Where is the tension? So yes, there may be some, and maybe someday I'll go back and work with that material, but for the moment it doesn't interest me. (Von Huene Greenberg and Barolini 1993: 95)

Carla is portrayed as living in a dream world, taking the representations of romantic love offered by Hollywood films as true: "For Carla, love was a Gloria Swanson movie" (138). She shows ambitions of going to college, but is forced to leave high school and work in the family business:

“But I want to finish high school ... I want to go to college,” Carla told [her brother Jake].
“Listen, Carla, we’ll give you whatever you want. You can open charge accounts at all the stores downtown: Marvin Miller’s, Grant’s Bookstore – everywhere. You can have that whole set of Dickens you wanted; you help us out and you won’t regret it.”
It was Umbertina who made the decision. “You help your brothers,” Umbertina told her. “We’re living in Jake’s house and he’s head of the family now. And don’t talk foolishness about college. No daughter of mine is going off to sleep out of town under strange roofs. Girls should be married.” (135)

Here, Umbertina is, once again, unable to listen to her daughter’s wishes. She uses her strength to instill her traditional vision of the world to Carla. For Umbertina there is not even place for discussion; if she thinks that women should not to go to college, that is end of the matter. Jake, Carla’s brother, instead, tries to convince her by promising her material things. Faced with so much insistence, Carla can only submissively accept her family’s will.

Later on, Carla becomes involved with two suitors. Stanos Saxenian, an ambitious law student, who gets rejected in favor of Sam Scalzo, a man who has made good money without having finished school. The marriage with Scalzo puts an end to her positive expectations for the future. Disillusioned and unhappy, Carla finds no purpose in life, except looking after her children Sammy, Marguerite, and Steve.

3.3 Prologue and Part Two (1927-1973): Marguerite, a Woman Divided between Two Conflicting Identities

As we have already seen, Marguerite’s story begins in the Prologue that takes place in 1969. Marguerite, Carla’s daughter, is now living in Italy and is contemplating to divorce from her husband Alberto Morosini, a famous Italian poet, with whom she has been married for eighteen years and had two daughters, Tina and Weezy. In order to make a decision on this matter, she turns to a psychiatrist, Dr. Verdile, to whom she asks for advice on what to do: “Tell me something – am I right to go ahead with this divorce?” (3). For the subsequent development of the plot, this is a very significant question. According to Mannino, it places Marguerite in the category of educated middle-class American women, who, in the 1960s, were finding their marriages unsatisfactory; in addition, it shows Marguerite’s approach to life (2000: 131). In this as in many other situations, she turns to men in order to be guided and helped. By questioning her position as wife, Marguerite is trying to find a way out from a role that she does not want to cover anymore. She is, however, limited in so many ways by that role, that she asks a man, an

integral part of the system that oppresses her, what she should do to acquire agency (Mannino 2000: 131). Being a medical expert, Dr. Verdile does not answer Marguerite's question. Instead, he advises her to investigate the reasons that brought her to him, starting from exploring her relationship with her grandmother Umbertina.

The time of the novel then goes back to 1876, when Umbertina, aged sixteen, is a goat girl in the hills of Castagna. In Part One, there is very little mention of Marguerite, mainly because she was very young and had little interaction with her grandmother. Umbertina died when Marguerite was thirteen, and they did not even share a common language since Umbertina only spoke Calabrian dialect and her granddaughter only English.

Part Two begins when Marguerite is sixteen and living with her wealthy parents in Gloversville, New York. Marguerite, embodying Barolini's own generation, is both literally and figuratively at the center of the novel. Even though her upbringing happens in a situation of economic security, Marguerite is deeply dissatisfied with the cold and superficial environment in which she grows up. The triviality of her parents is well-portrayed by the narrator through the accurate description of the Scalzos' mansion in Gloversville:

It was, in fact, Carla's idea of Home at last: There was a sweeping staircase down to the hall, a paneled study where the Harvard Classics were displayed, a glassed-in flagstone sunporch, a breakfast room, a fireplace downstairs and another in the master bedroom, a rock garden, a goldfish pond, and a two-car garage.

It was a home in which they never lit fires in the fireplaces. It began to strike Marguerite that in her family all of them, including herself, were as unlit and unnatural as the clean white birch logs neatly arranged on the brass andirons of fireplaces that served no purpose. Fires of understanding and affection never glowed in that household, throwing off either light and warmth or those shadows of conflict and passion that come from deep involvement. They didn't touch. But separately they were all susceptible to the sudden combustions of rage and crisis. (153)

The accumulation of rooms depicted by Barolini makes the reader aware that Marguerite has grown up in a cold and detached place; a house without love, where material things replaced feelings. The placement of the Harvard classics demonstrates that Carla and Sam do not value culture; having a complete set of classics serves only to show off their wealth to people who visit their house. The members of the Scalzo family are unable to positively share their lives, they only individually exist inside the same walls.

Through the Scalzos' attachment to material things and business success, Barolini shows the importance of the relationship between family and American capitalism in second generation Italian Americans. According to Italian American scholar Mary

Frances Pipino, in Marguerite's section, the concept of what it means to be American, directly linked in the immigrant mind to economic success, has altered the Italian ideal of family; though still at the center of one's life, family and filial duty assume a strongly capitalist spirit (2000: 105). Barolini cleverly acknowledges this relationship in the following passage:

There it was – family talk was always in words of commercial transaction. Children *owed* parents respect; children *paid back* what was done for them by studying hard and leading good lives; children had to *capitalize* on their talents; doing so bore dividends in life; if you didn't go around with certain people because there was no *profit* in it. The family motto could have been "Money Talks." (154)

Here, we can see how Umbertina's initial observation about life in the United States being a country without a heart where everything is measured in terms of buying and selling (78), has become reality in the family of her own descendants. However, it should be noted that for Barolini it will be one of the roles of Tina's generation to subvert this idea of linking offspring and business, and go back to a more traditional and positive concept of family.

Barolini also underlines that Hollywood films play a pivotal role in Marguerite's upbringing, just like with her mother before her. Marguerite, like many young women of her generation, tends to think that what happens on screen will also happen in real life.

And every Saturday afternoon, rain or shine, they went down the street a few blocks to the Schiller movie house. They saw the Charlie Chan detective films; they saw Shirley Temple, Tarzan, and Fred Astaire with Ginger Rogers. They even went to see the mushy love stories that starred Ann Harding or Kay Francis or Anita Louise. [...] Deleterious and addicting as narcotic, those Saturday-afternoon films in the shabby theater seeped their culture into Sammy and Marguerite, into Tony and Vic Vitale, imprinting indelibly on their minds the look and feel of American life. They believed what the movies showed them: Real American lives were effortlessly happy ones. (151)

Here, Barolini openly criticizes American popular culture of the 1940s. In fact, the actors and actresses quoted starred exactly in the same movies that the author herself may have seen as a child. As expressed in the quotation, these works of fiction gave falsified representations of American life and conveyed the message that in the United States everything was easy to achieve. In addition, the representation of ethnic minorities was very rare and, when it happened, it happened in a stereotypical way (like in the case of the Charlie Chan series where the main character was always played by a non-Asian actor). All these films, especially the romantic ones, have a tremendous appeal on Marguerite who will find herself competing with such works of fiction in her adult life.

Still a child, Marguerite also learns that, in order to distance themselves from the stereotypes associated to Italian immigrants, her parents have decided to consider themselves fully Americans and do not value their Italian heritage:

Marguerite learned that it was not nice to look too Italian and to speak bad English the way Uncle Nunzio did. Italians were not a serious people, her father would say – look at Jimmy Durante and Al Capone; Sacco and Vanzetti. Italians were buffoons, anarchists and gangsters, womanizers. “What are we Dad, aren’t we Italian?” she would ask. “We’re Americans,” he’d say firmly, making her wonder about all the people in the shadows who came before him. (150)

By growing up in such a complex environment, Marguerite experiences frustration and is unable to give herself a goal in life or a dream to pursue. Her dissatisfaction is reported in a diary entry from her college years that is later recovered, after her tragic death, by her daughters Tina and Weezy:

“Tina, did you know Mom had all these diaries?”
“When *papà* said to go through her things, I don’t think he meant those. I bet he doesn’t know about them.”
“Tina, this is when she’s in college: *All these snooty, shining girls! They know who they are and where they’re from and where they’re going. One of them is descended from Thomas Edison. I’m the only Italian name here. They’re all saying they’re going to be writers or doctors or go into Foreign Service. Whoever told me I could do any of that?*”
“Poor Mom,” said Tina, “her parents never let her think she could be anybody.” (309-310)

Feeling like an outsider and tormented by the deep divisions between her Italian and American heritages, Marguerite cannot help but try to rebel against her detached and cold parents. Therefore, Marguerite’s short marriage with Lennart Norenson, her affair with Gillo Gatti, and her marriage to Italian poet Alberto Morosini can be interpreted as attempts to find emotional, intellectual, and spiritual fulfillment through men (Pipino 2000: 105). Especially after having married Morosini and, as a consequence, having relocated in Italy, Marguerite positively feels she will be able to solve some of her uncertainties in life. Morosini is also very hopeful about starting a new life with Marguerite and promises her: “We will live a life of art together. You are a creative person with much to express” (177).

The relationship with Alberto, from which two daughters are born, leads Marguerite to great unhappiness. Marguerite believes that the major problem in her marriage is that she does not love Morosini in a romantic way. Therefore, by lacking this essential emotional connection, she feels disconnected from her husband. Another central issue of the marriage is that Marguerite does not have her own job, but she has to constantly help her husband by translating his poetry from Italian into English; this process secures for

him an audience in the United States and enhances his reputation in Italy. As a result, Marguerite believes that her marriage to Alberto has deprived her of the opportunity to make her own choices because she interprets the Anglo-American role of wife she witnessed growing up in her own family and in Hollywood movies: as one of support only (Mannino 2000: 135-136). After eighteen years of marriage, the only solutions Marguerite is able to find are divorcing Alberto and trying to start a new life forty. However, before making a decision on her own, she decides to consult a psychiatrist.

During her sessions with Dr. Verdile, Marguerite slowly realizes that many of her insecurities derive from being an Italian American woman. As an Italian American, Marguerite should be advantaged for the opportunity of seeing things from both points of view. However, for her, both perspectives are unsatisfactory: “She was part of the permanently dispossessed. She couldn’t belong completely in the States anymore and never belonged completely in Europe” (212).

Thanks to Dr. Verdile, Marguerite finds herself thinking about her grandmother Umbertina and the strength she demonstrated throughout her adventurous life. This leads her to invoke her deceased grandmother: “Oh, Grandma Longobardi, give me your guts!” (7). For Marguerite, and for Barolini as well, “the illiterate immigrant woman represents a unified, directed self that the Italian American is lacking” (Mannino 2000: 137). Following her psychiatrist’s suggestions, Marguerite understands the importance of finding her family’s roots and promises herself to find time to visit Umbertina’s birthplace, the Calabrian village of Castagna. However, as we will see, Marguerite will never be able to travel to Calabria.

Eventually, Marguerite obtains legal separation from Alberto and moves to Florence. Her time in Florence is initially experienced in a positive way. The narrator compares her to a new Isabel Archer, protagonist of *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James. However, she immediately starts thinking that she cannot succeed alone. As the narrator points out, “self-assurance in others was magnetic to Marguerite” (214). Therefore, she turns once more to a man hoping that he will be able to solve her problems. She starts having an intimate but non-sexual relationship with Reverend Richard Wareham, an American Episcopal minister. However, she concludes that a non-sexual relationship would never satisfy her and suddenly decides to return to Alberto in Rome.

Back in Rome, Marguerite, dissatisfied with her life once more, starts to have a relationship with Massimo Bontelli, an aspiring poet. Marguerite finds herself reliving the same role she played with Morosini: she translates Massimo's poems into English and recommends him for the *Strega* Prize, one of the most prestigious literary awards in Italy. Since Massimo expresses interest in her photographs, she begins to take a more serious interest in photography. In this regard, Mannino rightly maintains that Marguerite cannot be interested in her own activities unless they are sanctioned and encouraged by a man (2000: 139). Later on, it turns out that Massimo, with whom Marguerite is now deeply in love, is only interested in an adulterous relationship. At forty-five, Marguerite finds herself pregnant with Massimo's child. With none of her problems solved, she dies in a car crash coming back from her summer house in Ancona. The reader does not get to know if, before dying, she confronted Massimo with the pregnancy. In addition, Barolini intentionally decides to leave the interpretation of Marguerite's death obscure because it is not clear whether the car crash was an accident or a deliberate suicide:

Barolini: [...] So what end Marguerite comes to is deliberately left rather vague because I didn't want to spell it out. Let people think about it. It doesn't matter really. But if she had committed suicide, then people would have seen her as a failure. So I did not want it to be that clear. I know it's mentioned. Is it in the novel, or have people said that to me?

Interviewer: One of the daughters, I think, says, "She wanted to kill herself."

Barolini: Or, "she might have," or something. But the husband says, "What was she doing driving on a wet road? And she always drove too fast anyway." So it could also have been an accident. And I think the people in Gloversville take it as an accident. In fact, it is deliberately not clear. (Von Huene Greenberg and Barolini 1993: 97)

Marguerite's sudden death mimics her unsettled life. Throughout the narration she is represented as an insecure woman who relies on men in order to find some relief from her uncertainties. However, as Mannino points out, Barolini does not claim that her lack of agency is the effect of her ancestry, nor that is the effect of her positioning in relation to a universal patriarchy (2000: 139). Rather, she claims that Marguerite has been conditioned by Hollywood movies, America popular culture, and her parents who were eager to become fully American; all of this has led her to believe that ideal women are passive, supportive, and almost decorative (Mannino 2000: 139). However, it has to be said that Barolini does not see her as a complete failure: "Marguerite is not unsuccessful. No. I see her as a searcher. Yes, she dies, but for purposes of the novel I wanted that ending of Marguerite so that Tina could come out" (Von Huene Greenberg and Barolini 1993: 94).

3.4 Part Three (1950-): Tina and the Acceptance of Her Italian American Identity

The third central character of the novel is Tina, Alberto and Marguerite's eldest daughter, who, for Barolini, can be considered a good representative of Italian American women of the future. Throughout the development of Part Three we witness Tina's growth from an insecure young woman, whose Italian and American identities are in conflict, to a respected Italian American woman who easily balances her Italian and American origins. Tina is able to accept both the cultural and economic opportunities offered to American women by both American capitalism and the feminist revolution (Mannino 2000: 146). Interestingly, Barolini herself revealed that feminist issues are important in the text: "I wouldn't even call [*Umbertina*] only a feminist novel, but I do think it pertains to more than just ethnic issues" (Von Huene Greenberg and Barolini 1993: 97). As a matter of fact, as we will see, Tina's section contains many ideas derived from the feminist movement, and especially second-wave feminism²¹. Tina successfully earns her Doctorate at Columbia University in Italian Literature and Classics, specializing in Italian Renaissance Literature and, especially, in Dante Studies²². After having fulfilled her desires concerning her education, Tina is finally able to marry Jason Jowers, the man she loves, and lead a happy life.

Right at the beginning of Part Three, in 1973, we find Tina attending Columbia University as a graduate student and living with her boyfriend Jim Frank "Duke" Dukane, who has left Harvard. Because she grew up in Rome and lived in the United States only during her college years, Tina finds herself constantly criticizing the American way of life, but, at the same time, she certainly appreciates some parts of it: she "hated America and [was] seduced by it" (292). She enjoys the dynamism and opportunities offered by New York City, as opposed to the quietness and stillness of Rome:

Rome is too old, she thought; nothing matters anymore. In New York everything does.

²¹ Second-wave feminism began in the early 1960s in the United States and lasted through the early 1980s. This period of feminist activity dealt with a wide range of issues, such as sexuality, family, reproductive rights, and legal inequalities. It also drew attention to domestic violence and changes in custody and divorce law.

²² Interestingly, Barolini's own first daughter, Teodolinda Barolini (born in 1951), has become one of the world's most renowned Dante scholars; she is currently the Lorenzo da Ponte Professor of Italian at Columbia University.

In New York she felt the competitiveness throbbing in the air and became frenetic because of so much going on, because of the sense of space to fill. In Rome she was squelched by the sense of time: Everything had already been thought and done – it was time to rest and savor. (300)

The quoted passage demonstrates that Tina is well-aware that in New York she can become “someone” by herself. In Italy, she would be only perceived as Alberto Morosini’s daughter. It would be certainly easier to achieve something, but it would never satisfy her.

The huge differences between the two countries are also reflected in Tina’s concept of identity. She confesses her position of ambivalence in not being completely Italian or American to her friend Missy, an American girl who grew up in Rome:

I’m too involved in wanting things. I’m too split. What does coming back to Rome each vacation mean to you? Only the pleasure of being here because your father’s at the Academy. You know who you are, Americans living in Rome as long as his work is here, and after that, back to the States to your house in Connecticut. I’ve never understood where I belong. It tears my whole life apart each time – I mean I go through this absolute trauma of trying to decide here or there: Italian like my father or American like poor Mom. (298)

Tina finds herself envying Missy because, even though she grew up in Rome as she did, she has a place that she can call home in the United States. Tina, instead, does not know where she belongs. Early on, the reader also learns that Tina looks down on Italian Americans who do not speak Italian at all and go back to Italy to rediscover their roots. In a conversation with Jason Jowers, a WASP childhood friend who also grew up in Rome, she claims that she does not absolutely consider herself as an Italian American and feels like two separate people:

“I’m two different people, Jason. The Italian part, when I get back to Rome, likes civilized comforts: eating well, having Giovanna go out and do the shopping and prepare the *caffè-latte* for me each morning while I sleep late. Here I like to get all dressed up and go shopping or have Mauro cut my hair. I dress in blankets and clogs when I’m in the States and sometimes don’t comb my hair for days. I drive my grandmother in Gloversville crazy when I go see her because she says I’m a hippie. But in Rome I’m purely a sybarite.” (323)

At twenty-three, Tina feels incomplete because her young age prevents her from seeing the advantages of belonging to two different cultures. Here, it seems that the only things she appreciates about Italy are the material benefits that derive from her privileged position of being the daughter of a successful author. However, it should be noted that she later rediscovers an attachment to Italy when it comes to choosing the major for her Ph.D. The fact that she pursues a career in Italian Studies is cruelly criticized by her maternal grandparents:

“Gramp,” she said patiently, “I’m getting a Ph.D. in Italian. I want to be a scholar.”
“But why Italian?” he said in real consternation. [...] “I don’t understand this infatuation with Italy!”
[...] “Where will that get you? Italy has no future. What has Italy ever done for the world?”
“Civilization, Gramp.” She thought with sad resignation of this useless old argument, and of how, paradoxically, non-Italians, like the Jowers family were so Italophile. What was wrong with the immigrants’ children that left them so distrustful of their *italianità*? (397)

Tina is aware that for the children of immigrants it has been difficult growing up in an environment full of stereotypes and suspicion towards them. However, she cannot accept her grandparents’ distrust of culture. For Carla and Sam, studying can be considered valuable only if it leads to tangible results, like quickly improving someone’s economical position. On the contrary, Tina wants to become a scholar because she feels the vocation to do so. The fact that Tina is able to pursue her studies as she wants reveals that she has career choices available for her that her mother, for example, did not have. These choices arose in large part from the sexual revolution of the 1960s and second-wave feminism (Pipino 2000: 109). Throughout the narration, Tina is described as very passionate about what she does, but never as a naïve person. Tina is well-aware that Academia, also in the United States, is a male-dominated environment:

[...] I know what I want – to be a scholar who teaches for a living, not a teacher who passively absorbs other people’s culture. Of course it pisses me off that I have to sell myself to the Department as a good investment before they’ll give me a fellowship! They hesitate with women ’cause they’re scared we’ll quit and get married, as if a woman’s education didn’t become as integral a part of her life as a man’s ... as if a woman couldn’t marry and have her career, too! That’s the unfair part – but that’s real and I’ve got to live with it and live around it and not let it get me down or take my sights away from what’s really important.” (320)

Early on in the narration, Barolini also underlines the conflict Tina has with her younger sister. Described as a less tormented person, Weezy has embraced radical feminism and, not interested in studying, has done many jobs in the social sphere: “she had worked as apprentice to a bookbinder, as a dishwasher in London, as a grape picker at harvest time in the Marche, and had been a cook in a summer camp for mentally defective youngsters” (308). Through the conflict between Tina and Weezy, Barolini highlights that what matters is that women belonging to their generation are finally able to freely choose the activity that best fulfils their needs (Pipino 2000: 110).

Let us go back to Tina’s relationship with Duke. After being initially attracted to him, Tina realizes that his lack of ambition is badly influencing her and decides to put an end to their relationship even though she suspects that she is pregnant. As soon as she becomes aware of her mother’s death, Tina leaves for Italy without telling Duke about

the pregnancy. After discovering that also her mother was pregnant at the time of her death in the final entry of her diary, Tina discusses her pregnancy with Weezy and decides to have an abortion. That Tina can decide to have an abortion, and is able to act on that decision, marks an important departure from Marguerite's story (Pipino 2000: 111). The abortion, which takes place in Italy where abortion was still illegal²³, is "awful" and "humiliating" (347). Barolini describes the pain of abortion in every crude detail and Tina's feelings are explored before, during, and after the operation. When Tina returns home, she and Weezy both reflect on the repercussions on the lack of legislation on this pungent issue: "I'm one of the lucky ones who had the money. The women who get it done on a kitchen table with knitting needles aren't so lucky.' 'When we [feminists] change things it won't be like this anymore, Tina.' 'Change things, Weezy, change them'" (347). By clearly detailing how the woman pays when abortion is an illegal activity, Barolini's novel argues for the continuation of abortion rights in the United States and for the freedom of choice to be permitted in Italy (Mannino 2000: 148).

After this painful experience, Tina, while looking through her mother's things, finds Umbertina's tin heart and decides to rediscover her roots by travelling to the Calabrian village of Castagna in order to find her ancestor, "[her] namesake, [...] a strong woman who had direction in her life" (306). After Jason recounts her the story of a ship, the *Castagna*, in his own family history, Tina initially decides to include him in the trip. However, she soon recognizes her mistake and leaves him halfway through the journey. Once in Castagna, Tina discovers a secluded village, still in a situation of great poverty, whose inhabitants refuse to get in touch with her. The only person who speaks with her is the village priest who recognizes her great-grandmother's name and adds: "[the immigrants] never come back. They left because of *miseria* and they forget the others still here in *miseria*" (386). After the conversation with the priest, Tina feels guilty and responsible for the fact that her great-grandparents never tried to reach out for the people they left behind in Italy. The whole experience reveals itself disappointing and sad for Tina who leaves Castagna knowing that even though she "had physically located the where of Umbertina, the secret of why she was lost and Umbertina directed still eluded her" (387).

²³ In 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion nationwide. In Italy, instead, abortion became legal in 1978 with the introduction of Law n. 194.

Back in New York, one day, Tina finds herself visiting the Ellis Island Museum of Immigration where a special exhibition entitled “Anna Giordani Collection” is being held. Here, Umbertina’s long-lost *coperta matrimoniale* is proudly displayed:

“Origin: Calabria. Owner unknown. Acquired by Anna Giordani in 1886.” [...] “Calabria – that’s where my grandmother’s people were from. In fact, I’m named for the immigrant named Umbertina. She should have brought such a spread with her – isn’t it gorgeous! Then it would have been passed to me, maybe.” Tina stood before the glass drinking in the beauty and warmth of the old spread. Its color irradiated her spirit; the woven designs of grapes and tendrils and fig leaves and flowers and spreading acanthus spoke to her of Italy and the past and keeping it all together for the future. It was as if her old ancestor, the Umbertina she had fruitlessly sought in Castagna, had suddenly become manifest in the New World and spoken to her” (407-408)

It is certainly outstanding that the bond between Umbertina and Tina, two women so distant in time, gets reestablished by such a traditional work of art. This is a turning point in the novel because Tina, by observing and absorbing the beauty of the *coperta*, is finally able to accept her Italian American identity. As Barolini herself pointed out during an interview:

[The *coperta*] speaks to her, and it speaks to her of conserving what is best in her Italian tradition, but it speaks to her in the new world; and that’s very significant. She doesn’t find Umbertina in the Old World; she gets the message in the New World, because she is of the New World, and what it’s saying is, “keep it all together, here, where you are, instead of like Marguerite, sort of going off and coming back and going off again. Keep it together, the dream of the new world. You are of that world.” (Von Huene Greenberg and Barolini 1993: 104).

Despite being sold by Umbertina, Barolini cleverly makes the *coperta matrimoniale*, the Southern Italian symbol of domestic femininity and of the transition from virginity into motherhood (Ganeri 2015: 69), become a universal symbology easily available to all people of every ethnic heritage who visit the museum every day. It is also very significant that Tina acknowledges her own transnational identity, an identity that defies the boundaries of a given country, in the United States. Tina first visits Castagna because she hopes to find something there and she expects to almost have a revelation from her ancestor. None of this happens and she leaves Calabria disillusioned. When this revelation finally arrives, Tina is in New York on her own and is unaware that Umbertina is, in a way, speaking to her. By observing and understanding the message that the *coperta* has for her, Tina is able to complete her own quest for growth and change. According to Pipino, another significance of the *coperta* is that its sale represented the moment when Umbertina recognized the importance of not sentimentalizing the past for its own sake, and for committing oneself to a place in the world, despite sacrifices and pain – a lesson

that Tina, after her various personal vicissitudes and the achievement of a certain maturity, is finally able to accept (2000: 113).

Some time later, Tina meets Jason by chance and, having developed her own personality and identity without the help of a man, she can finally agree to marry him. However, thanks to the feminist movement that has been in the forefront of redefining marriage so that women who wish to have careers can still marry, Tina can design a marriage with flexible gender roles and with the necessary flexibility to let her pursue her career (Mannino 2000: 152). Before her Thanksgiving wedding in Jason's ancestral home in Cape Cod, Tina decides to plant rosemary in the Jowers' garden:

“Why rosemary? For remembrance?”

“Well, yes,” she laughed, “maybe that, too, but actually for old Umbertina. It's the family women's quaquaversal plant – wherever one of Umbertina's clan descends, there will also be rosemary planted, for where it grows, the women of the house are its strength.” [...] “I'm planting rosemary here because our lives will soon be merging and here's where our roots will be.” [...] “The rosemary stays here to get rooted and the tin heart comes with me wherever I am. Just to remind me of the *imprevedibile* in life.” [...]

[Tina] had done her planting and a sense of well-being pervaded her. Her place was marked; all the positioning to come, between her and Jason, would have this as focus. (423-424)

After having gone back to Umbertina's world and having understood it, Tina is ready to settle down and chooses the plant of rosemary as a remindful symbol of her identity as an Italian American woman. The rosemary, a traditional Italian plant, in this case, gets planted in the United States and more specifically in the place that Tina can finally positively call home. Umbertina's tin heart, however, being small and the only material object that has survived in the whole novel, will be the constant reminder of her ethnicity. Interestingly, Tina is not afraid that her children will belong to two different cultures, as she now amusingly observes with Jason: “Well, I guess we'll just hyphenate the kids” (423).

CHAPTER IV

A Legacy of Memories and Imagination: Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish*

Antoinette “Tina” De Rosa was an Italian American novelist, poet, and short story writer. She also published creative nonfiction. De Rosa was born in Chicago in 1944, one of the two children of Anthony De Rosa, a police officer, and Sophie (née Norkus) De Rosa. She grew up in Chicago’s Little Italy neighborhood, and, still a child, decided to become a writer. When she was 17, she and her family were displaced because of urban renewal plans. Over the next four years, she lost her father and her paternal grandmother, an Italian immigrant. It was after these painful experiences that she decided to channel her feelings of grief and loss into her writing. De Rosa earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Sociology from Mundelein College of Loyola in 1966, and a Master’s Degree in English from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1977.

She struggled for eight years before completing her autobiographical novel, *Paper Fish*. Assisted by grants from the Illinois Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, the novel was first published by Wine Press in 1980, and was nominated for the Carl Sandburg Award. Like Barolini’s *Umbertina*, after its first publication the book quickly went out of print. The text was later rediscovered and republished by the Feminist Press in 1996, with a Foreword by Sandra Mortola Gilbert and an Afterword by Edvige Giunta. An Italian-language edition, *Pesci di carta*, was published in 2007 by *Nutrimenti*. Unlike Barolini, in an interview De Rosa affirmed that she did not do any research for the book in order to privilege her memories (Gardaphé 1997: 78). For her, Italy was always an imaginary country: “I still haven’t been there. I could always imagine Italy because I heard so many stories from my grandmother and from the people in the old neighborhood. There is a section in the novel that deals with my great-grandparents, about whom I know nothing. I imagined my grandparents in Italy” (De Rosa, quoted in Gardaphé 1997: 78).

De Rosa subsequently published two volumes of poetry and a biography of Bishop John Baptist Scalabrini (*Bishop John Baptist Scalabrini, Father to the Migrants*, 1987), and wrote at least one more novel, which has not yet been published. In 1995 she won the Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers’ Award. She earned her living at various jobs in the

Chicago area, including editor for *Encyclopedia Britannica*'s Film Division, staff writer for *Sphere* magazine, communications director at the Urban Transportation Center of University of Illinois at Chicago, and administrative assistant and editor for biomedical researchers. She passed away in 2007, aged 62.

This chapter focuses on some of the most important themes in the novel. Given the non-linear nature of the text, De Rosa's one-of-a-kind style is taken into consideration in order to emphasize the exceptionality of the novel if compared to other works in Italian American fiction. Moreover, the relationship between Carmolina and Grandma Doria is carefully analyzed because, exactly through this relationship, the young protagonist comes to an important realization on her independence as a woman without renouncing to her ethnic origins. The last section, instead, focuses on the importance of memories and imagination in De Rosa's novel. As we will see, these two interconnected themes are explored by the author in different scenes through the use of the mirror metaphor.

4.1 Structure and Language in *Paper Fish*

Paper Fish recounts the vicissitudes of the BellaCasa family, second-generation Italian Americans living in Chicago's Little Italy towards the end of the 1940s. The structure of the novel avoids linearity in order to privilege the time of memories; this creates a unique and very personal style. The work is divided into six parts, with a Prelude and an Epilogue which precede and end the narration. The Prelude is told from the voice of the BellaCasas' second daughter Carmolina, who has not yet been born. The focus then shifts to third person narration in Part One: The Memory, a chapter which recalls the marriage and lives of Marco and Sarah BellaCasa, parents of two daughters, Doriana and Carmolina. The chapter also narrates the childhood memories of the paternal grandmother Doria, who lives next to Sarah and Marco's house. In Part Two: Summer, 1949 – Late July, eight-year-old Carmolina has run away from home and everyone in the neighborhood is involved in her search. Part Three: The Family describes in detail Grandma Doria's marriage to Dominic and Marco's marriage to Sarah, a Lithuanian American who had to cut off all ties with her family of origin in order to integrate in Marco's household. The episode of the fire that burns down the BellaCasas' house, forcing Sarah, pregnant with Doriana, to jump off the bedroom window, is also recounted.

Part Four: Summer, 1949 – Early June details the lives of Italian American people living in Chicago’s Little Italy. A discussion between Sarah and Marco on Doriana’s illness leads to the idea of institutionalizing her. Carmolina, thinking that what might happen to Doriana might also happen to herself, decides to run away from home. Part Five: Summer, 1949 – Late July mainly focuses on Carmolina’s escape. She ends up in an unfamiliar neighborhood, unfriendly to immigrants. In the meantime, Doriana, feeling her sister’s absence, suffers from a high fever. When located and taken back by the police, Carmolina has high fever just like Doriana. Part Six: Summer 1958 moves ahead of nine years and ends with a symbolic scene between the dying Doria and Carmolina dressed as a bride. In the Epilogue, Berrywood Street is being destroyed because of an unfair decision of the City Council and Carmolina has a dreamy vision that reunites her with her dead grandmother.

The short summary above shows how, according to Bona, De Rosa’s particular style represents a pivotal point in Italian American women’s writing because, by abandoning the linear narrative structure of earlier novels, it creatively adopts modernist strategies of non-chronology, interior monologue, and shifting perspectives (1987: 91). Bona further adds that thanks to her style, De Rosa’s storytelling transforms fairly traditional themes in Italian American women’s writing (the female character’s growth into adulthood) “into an innovative text which affirms that the topic of Italian ethnicity is equally conducive to modern literary strategies as other ethnic texts have” (1987: 96). Interestingly, De Rosa herself was very surprised when critics first defined her work as modernist: “When people called it High Modern, I laughed. It was a style that came naturally. To me, *Paper Fish* is a long poem that tells a story” (Meyer and De Rosa 1999: 59). It is, however, thanks to critics and scholars that De Rosa’s multidimensional narrative has become a classic of Italian American literature.

Let us now focus on De Rosa’s use of language. The whole novel contains many Italian words, albeit less if compared to *Umbertina*, that are left untranslated. These words are easy to understand even for those who do not speak Italian because they mainly include terms of endearment and greetings (“*bambina*,” “Carmolina *mia*,” “*Buon Giorno*”). If we resume Robert Viscusi’s theories on language in Italian American fiction, we quickly realize that De Rosa only uses Italian in a “liturgical mode,” namely as a reference to an Italy perceived as distant and mythical (2012: 43). Here, the negotiation

between English and Italian is not constant because English surely takes the upper hand. In addition, the fact that De Rosa has not done research on the Italian American community in order to write the novel means that the Italian she used was mainly based on her memories. Therefore, there are some inaccuracies in the use of Italian which, however, may have been adopted by the author on purpose. Carmolina, the name of the protagonist, recalls the more common Carmelina, the diminutive of the Italian name Carmela. Later on in the novel, we learn that Carmolina was named after her great-grandmother Carmella, which is probably a misspelling of the name Carmela. Unlike *Umbertina*, Italian idioms and proverbs are not employed by De Rosa. When referring to Carmolina, Grandma Doria employs the Italian-sounding expression “*faccia bella*” (54, 91, 98, 114) four times in the novel, while “*faccia buffone*” (98) only occurs once. These two small phrases are probably literally translated from English and, as a result, do not make much sense in Italian. Leaving these considerations aside, De Rosa’s prose is highly poetic and symbolic, and Italian is probably only employed in order to evoke suggestive images in the universal reader who may not be familiar with the Italian American experience.

4.2 Grandma Doria: A Legacy through Storytelling

In *Paper Fish*, Grandma Doria is certainly the character with whom young Carmolina BellaCasa has the closest relationship. Having moved to the United States at a young age, Doria, now a lively old woman, has not had an easy life and often finds herself longing for her homeland. Her feelings of nostalgia for Italy often turn into symbolic and poetic stories that are recounted to her granddaughter. Carmolina, thanks to her grandmother’s stories and the moments in which they prepare Italian dishes together, develops a strong interest for her Italian heritage. In addition, since Carmolina’s mother Sarah is of Lithuanian heritage and her father Marco is too involved in his job as police officer, Doria is the only family member who is positively able to transmit Italian traditions to her young granddaughter.

It is often remarked by the narrator that Doria does not feel at home in the United States. After having lived there for many years, it can be inferred from the text that Doria does not yet master the English language, a language that continues to sound foreign to

her even though her children, like the offspring of most immigrants, have grown up as bilingual. Doria tries, however, to improve her understanding of English by constantly listening to the radio that her children have given to her:

In Grandma Doria's kitchen was an old steel radio; the knobs were oversized and moved the needle easily from station to station. Her children gave it to her to keep her company. She talked to it. Confused by its English, she told it in Italian to make some sense or shut up, but she loved it. Standing by the sink in her light cotton housedress, she [...] listened to the announcer's voice coming out from the steel box, and gently wiped the radio clean. His English words and the English words of her children mingled in her morning mind. It was information, information about the world outside her kitchen. In her mind she felt the soft pressure of Dominic's voice, the heavy Italian coming slowly out from under his thick mustache, telling her the plans for her, for his children, now that life was settled in America. (42-43)

Doria, unable to understand and appreciate technology, speaks to the radio in Italian even though she knows that she will not get any answer. The device represents a diversion from the monotony and solitude of her everyday life. The passage also underlines how immigrants were scared but, at the same time, fascinated by English and its sounds. Here, the English sounds of the radio create a connection point in Doria's mind that makes her reconnect with her long-gone husband Dominic. In fact, Doria's husband seems to be still alive for the old woman because, through her memories, she often finds herself reliving or reenacting conversations she had with Dominic. Her memories do not function in chronological order and move quickly from her childhood in Italy to the difficulties encountered in the United States in order to open a grocery store. Moreover, mixing and maybe confusing the past with the present, she suddenly returns to reality almost without noticing it: "The music on the radio changed itself into English. Doria switched it off" (45).

Let us go back to the relationship between Carmolina and her grandmother. For Carmolina, the moments spent with her grandmother are incredibly formative because she is able to ask questions about Italy and understand her family's past. However, it should be noted that in Doria's memories, Italy is perceived as a mythical and romantic country which is poetically described in her stories as "the land that got lost across the sea, the land that was hidden on the other side of the world" (15). Carmolina wonders for a long time why her grandmother had to leave a country as beautiful as Italy:

When Grandma said how beautiful Italy was – how it was near blue waters which were always still and how she could watch wooden sailing ships coming so close to her house that one day she jumped on one and sailed away – Carmolina wondered, why did Grandma do that?, but she was glad Grandma did, because otherwise she wouldn't know Grandma, and that would be strange. (15)

It is clear that Doria and her husband left Italy and went to the United States in order to improve their existences. Therefore, the stories that Doria narrates to her granddaughter intentionally hide the hardships of life in Southern Italy, leaving space for suggestive and mythical images of her homeland. Carmolina, unable to give an answer as to why her grandmother left Italy, is aware that leaving the country was a painful experience. Later on, the narrator reports Carmolina's belief that, by crossing the ocean, Doria's eyes turned blue: "Grandma had no question in her eyes, because they were blue. Carmolina knew that Grandma was the only one in the family with blue eyes because she crossed the ocean to get to America. It took her so many weeks to cross the water, it turned her eyes blue" (98). By adopting the child's point of view, De Rosa underlines that leaving their homeland, whatever the reasons may be, always leaves an indelible mark, visible or not, on immigrants.

Thanks to Grandma Doria's stories about Italy, Carmolina is able to use her imagination and envisage a country that is wild, ancient and mythical at the same time. She also becomes acquainted with the family members who were left behind in Italy when her grandparents came to the United States. Carmolina begins to appreciate these people, whom she has never obviously never met, but are important parts of her Italian heritage. This is the case with Pasquale and Carmella, Doria's parents and therefore Carmolina's great-grandparents. Pasquale was a hard-worker carpenter who "hammered and nailed and chiseled the wooden world into place" (21). Pasquale's wife Carmella, after whom Carmolina is named, was a great storyteller just like her daughter will be in old age. Sabatina, Doria's sister, is described as a beautiful young woman and, as a child, she was kidnapped by the gypsies. In the present time, the narrator underlines that Sabatina has died (it is not clear when and how) and that Doria misses her sister a lot. These characters that mainly belong to Doria's past, a past experienced with nostalgia and sadness, become points of reference in Carmolina's present.

Doria's birthplace is not widely described by the narrator. We get to know that it is a very old village near Naples surrounded by the hills. In this mysterious and almost magical place, the black hills were inhabited by "spectacular creatures, with creatures of myth, of legend, of dreams and nightmares, squirming out of the people's minds, leaping out of their souls" (22). As a consequence, Carmolina begins to associate her own

understanding of Italy exclusively with her grandmother's mythical stories, which sometimes also offer lessons on life. In a scene, Grandma Doria tells the young girl:

There is a mountain in Italy filled with candles. Some of the candles are tall and white. Some are short and sputter with the blue flame. Each person has his own candle. When he is born, the candle is lit; when the candle goes out, he dies. You can see this mountain, Carmolina, only in your dreams, but God will not let you see your own candle, even in a dream. If there is a mistake, and you see your own candle, you will die. This is how people die in their sleep. (24)

The fluidity of the language in this passage exemplifies De Rosa's style: her prose is dense, musical, and evocative of surrealistic images and sounds (Giunta 1996: 132). Doria's tales, blending Italian folklore and Catholic beliefs, offer quick teachings on life. However, according to Giunta, all of Doria's stories, and especially this one about the mountain of candles, draw upon a mythology rooted in the storytelling of Italian peasants who, "while timorous of God and intimidated into subjection by a Church complicitous with the landlord, were undaunted in their transformations of Christian dogmas" (1996: 130). This humanizing of religion, a recognition of the divine in the human, is creatively incorporated into the domestic rituals of the BellaCasa family (Giunta 1996: 131).

Even though it is said that the gypsies kidnapped her sister Sabatina, Doria is immensely fascinated by them. One of her childhood dreams was to run away and join them in the circus in order to become an elephant trainer. Doria was above all fascinated by the majesty of the clothes worn by circus performers: "The people in the circus dressed in clothes like jewels" (21). In the present time, Doria sometimes narrates stories about gypsies to Carmolina. Doria especially admires their strength and bravery: "Gypsies are brave. They are brave strong people" (79). These qualities will be particularly useful to Carmolina, especially in the part when she runs away from home. In addition, as we will see, the symbology of the circus will also be used in the final scene of the novel. Grandmother and granddaughter will find themselves conversing about a trick performed by a clown during a show.

The relationship Doria entertains with her other granddaughter Doriana, Carmolina's older sister, is very different. Doriana, named after her grandmother, was born with a mental handicap and is not able to speak. Throughout the novel, the reader understands that the whole family, unable to accept Doriana's illness, suffers a lot and, even though the young girl is very loved, they are incapable to provide adequate care for her. The character of Doriana is based on De Rosa's real-life sister of whom she took care during

her entire adult life. De Rosa saw the concept of family, understood as the relationship between Carmolina and Doriana, as the center of the novel: “That’s what the book is about. Family. I worked for years to make my sister feel accepted and loved, be glad that she was born, even though she is handicapped. [...] That’s family. See what I’m saying? That’s the Italian-American family” (Meyer and De Rosa 1999: 74). The character of Carmolina, evidently based on De Rosa herself, is the only member of the BellaCasa family who is able to have a serene relationship with Doriana. Mimicking the relationship with her grandmother, Carmolina likes telling stories to her sister. However, she also wonders why her sister is ill. In order to give some sort of explanation, Grandma Doria turns once more to storytelling and uses the poetic dichotomy of home and forest to give a reason for Doriana’s problems:

“Where is the forest, Grandma?”

“Behind her eyes,” Grandma whispered. She turned to Carmolina.

“Doriana, she have a beautiful face, no?”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“Her face, why you think it is so beautiful?”

Something squeezed tight inside Carmolina. It was made of glass; it could break.

“I don’t know Grandma. Why?”

“Her face, she is so beautiful,” Grandma swiped the tears, she was angry at them, “because Doriana fight so hard to come home. She look out her eyes every day and try to come home. When you fight to come home, you beautiful.” (100)

Concerning this passage, Giunta points out that, through Doria’s character, De Rosa’s exquisite language turns broken English into poetry. Legitimizing orality, *Paper Fish* thus confers “literary dignity upon the speech of those first-generation immigrants who struggled to express themselves in a language that often felt hostile and unconquerable” (1996: 132).

In another scene, the reader is made aware that Grandma Doria holds “the city” (64), and probably the whole country, responsible for Doriana’s handicap. However, Doria is convinced that in Italy Doriana’s situation would be different because, thanks to the different and beneficial environment, she would certainly be able to get better:

In Italy little Doriana would run in green fields under the healthy sun, would play in the white sunlight, would reach up and receive from the hands of the sky, from the blessed guardian angels, her own healthy mind, glory be to God, her own words which would help her make the right sounds, to speak to the open eyes of Sarah and Marco what was on her mind. (64)

The American city, instead, is “like a spider sucking the blood of the wonderful child,” and Doriana “bled out her brains, her smiles, her own words into the empty grey light of

the city and there was nothing to feed her” (64). “Like a giant” (40), the city destroys the little family; the buildings are described as “bones crushing against little Doriana” (64). Through the use of body imagery, De Rosa represents the city as a monster driven by a powerful and unstoppable force that is able to devour Doriana, and reduce the BellaCasa family to “little pieces” (63). If the city crushes the immigrants like a giant, De Rosa defies its destructive power and is able to put the little pieces back together through the redemptive force of her vision and language (Giunta 1996: 134).

Throughout the narration, the character of Doria is juxtaposed to the one of Carmolina’s mother Sarah. As we have previously seen, Sarah is of Lithuanian heritage, but, after marrying Marco, the narrator highlights multiple times that she is trying to get used to Italian customs and is no longer in touch with her family of origin. De Rosa’s own mother was of Lithuanian origin, but, as she affirmed in various interviews, her identity was shaped more by her Italian side because she was never in contact with her Lithuanian family and was never interested in discovering more on this aspect of her identity.

Marco and Sarah met at her parents’ restaurant in the Lithuanian neighborhood. One year later, while sitting in his blue sedan, he asked her to marry him. Despite the opposition of both families, Sarah accepts Marco’s marriage proposal. For Sarah’s parents, to give their blessing to the marriage of their daughter to an Italian American is very difficult because they are well aware that this union will lead to a severing of her roots and a loss of contacts with them and her whole community. In a scene set just before the wedding, we find Sarah getting ready in front of a mirror while her mother observes her from behind. Sarah’s mother is sitting on the bed and watches her daughter’s small body in the mirror “held in tight and lovely now by white satin; her body changed under the satin; became fuller, stronger in the world” (45). It is clear that Sarah expects her mother to tell her that she looks beautiful. However, the mother is unable to conceal her feelings of sadness and only says: “You look like a bride” (46). The silence of Sarah’s mother seems to foreshadow the adjustment problems that her daughter will experience once married into an Italian American family.

Although Sarah and Marco love each other, their marriage does not start under the best auspices. At the beginning of Part Three, we find a newlywed Sarah who is already missing her home and community:

Sarah did not find it easy, at first, living with the old mother and three sisters and brother. The house was set on a corner in the Italian neighborhood on the other side of the city from where her own family lived, from where her mother spoke Lithuanian over the sweet blue bed sheets and the crocuses of her neighbors who laughed and responded in Lithuanian. That to Sarah had been a small backyard world, where her father owned a restaurant and her mother cooked meals for strangers in large metal pots, washed the strangers' dirty dishes and she, dressed in white, took orders and served them on Buffalo china. [...] Now she had left behind her the small white houses of the south side of the city, the picket fences between the yards; the guttural and minced Lithuanian in the throats of her family, her neighbors, was stilled. (48-49)

By marrying into the Italian American culture, Sarah basically moved from one ethnic enclave to another; Little Italy is, however, completely unknown to her. Her new culture requires her to renounce to everything she knew growing up, including her native language. In fact, it is exactly the sounds of the Lithuanian language that she finds herself missing the most. Her parents and her whole community, who go on with their lives in the Lithuanian neighborhood, are now silenced and relegated to mere memories. As a result, after entering in the BellaCasa family, she has troubles adjusting to different customs and has to learn a new language in order to communicate with her mother-in-law. Marco is very patient in teaching her Italian, but she perceives it as an imposition. Even in the following years, Sarah will always feel uncomfortable when forced to speak Italian.

At the end of the novel, there is another occurrence in which one of the characters, Carmolina in this case, is dressed as a bride. Grandma Doria, aware that she is going to die soon, desires to see her granddaughter dressed in a wedding gown in order to envision how she will look on her actual wedding day. Doria's children satisfy her desire and arrange everything in great detail. On the established day, Doria spends a large amount of time getting ready in front of the mirror for what looks like a wedding ceremony. Subsequently, in a scene that takes place outside, Doria's children have to carry her on a chair because her feet are sore. The Italian neighborhood actively participates in what is described by the narrator as an almost religious procession. In the meantime, Carmolina is inside her parents' home, already dressed in white and looking at herself in the mirror: "She was young and beautiful and dressed in white, in the gown of a bride, but she was not a bride" (110). In the room, there is also Dorian sitting next to her sister. The reader also gets to know that specifically for this occasion Carmolina has received a very precious family heirloom, a cameo ring that has belonged to her family for many generations:

She opened the white satin purse, slipped the ring out. It was a cameo ring, it had belonged to Great-Grandma Carmella and her great-great-grandma. Some of the names were lost. The filigree was worn thin. Carmolina slipped the ring out of the purse, looked at the finely carved profile of the woman. She kissed the ring, dropped it back into the purse, locked its small golden lock. (111)

Just like the tin heart in *Umbertina*, the finely finished ring stands as a material reference to her Italian heritage. Carmolina, aware of its importance, jealously treasures it inside her purse. Other symbols of Carmolina's Italian past given to her on this occasion are three coins that Doria kept in a blue velvet box. According to Bona, the coins symbolize Carmolina's journey into a future without the actual presence of her grandmother (1987: 103). Even though it is not specified by the narrator, this ring and the coins are probably some of the few material things that Doria was able to bring to the United States when she left Italy.

When Doria finally arrives at Carmolina's room, she sees "not one but two brides in white dresses with heavy dark hair and heavy dark eyes" (114) because of the reflection in the mirror. Immediately, Doria feels extremely happy and proud of her granddaughter: "her fat blue arms shook in the still space between them, her old mouth repeated, repeated in Italian, that Carmolina is beautiful, was beautiful" (114). Then, the two characters start to converse in front of the mirror:

"Grandma?" Carmolina whispered.
She stood before the mirror; the mirror's face shined like a white jewel around her.
"Carmolina *mia*," Grandma said from her place in the chair. "*Bambina*," she said softly. "Now it you turn. You keep the fire inside you."
Carmolina looked into the mirror's silver face. It gave back to her her own face. (116)

Grandma Doria is urging her granddaughter to accept the fact that she is dying. Carmolina, initially unable to accept it, listens carefully to the words of her grandmother. For Carmolina, to keep the fire inside herself means to achieve her independence without sacrificing her Italian origins. Once Carmolina has understood her grandmother's message, the mirror finally returns a clear image of herself.

It has been argued that this is one of the most important scenes of the novel. Bona affirms that De Rosa is able to rework the traditional value of a marriage ceremony by redefining its meaning from an ethnic and feminine perspective, and reinforcing the vital connection between generations (1987: 102). Gardaphé further adds that "De Rosa's presentation of this scene signifies a defiance of the Italian tradition. Carmolina achieves her adult identity not by attaching herself to a man, but by taking it from her grandmother, who acknowledges it through the blessing she gives her granddaughter" (1996b: 137). In

an interview with Lisa Meyer, De Rosa highlighted that the whole scene is about Carmolina achieving her independence:

She's marrying her future. She knows that her life will not be traditional. She's not necessarily going to have a man at her side. And when Grandma Doria gives Carmolina those three little coins that she used the first time to run away, the grandmother is telling her to run away. [...] Carmolina knows that eventually she is going to have to come back and set her sister free. She can't leave her. But she has to leave – as the way you would put it – the narrative. She has to leave the family and that world, and find a way to come back and set her sister free. (Meyer and De Rosa 1999: 75)

Thanks to the independence gained through her grandmother's teachings, Carmolina will be able to pursue opportunities that are not normally reserved to Italian American women. However, she will not leave her family forever; she will have to go back at least to rescue her beloved sister. This is strongly autobiographical if we think that once De Rosa became an adult, she had to fight with her family in order to provide adequate care for her own sister. It is also important to underline that Carmolina will certainly keep the fire inside her; hence, she will not forget the importance of having roots and will treasure her heritage. Just like Tina in *Umbertina*, Carmolina represents the Italian American woman of the future; a woman who, through a troubled life path, is able to accept her partial belonging to two cultures and easily balances her Italian and American origins.

4.3 A Novel of Memories and Imagination

In the previously quoted interview, De Rosa affirmed that she mainly saw *Paper Fish* as a collection of memories and imagination (Meyer and De Rosa 1999: 73). In order to create her “collage of surrealistic images and concrete descriptions of everyday life” (Meyer and De Rosa 1999: 73) based on memories and imagination, and to make her style more personal and contemporary, De Rosa experimented with literary devices such as flashbacks, flashforwards, shifting perspectives, interior monologue, and stream of consciousness. As a result, the events in the novel are never recounted in chronological order so much as to seem sometimes disjointed. This is why, when approaching the text, Bona recommends to the reader to pay close attention and “view *Paper Fish* much like a palimpsest, a multilayered text in which all the events are revived and transformed by the characters' memories, each memory to be read vis-a-vis the memory before, the memory after, and the memory within the memory itself” (1987: 93). Bona also believes

that the metaphor of the mirror, employed by the author in different scenes of the novel, is worth analyzing because it is precisely the instrument through which De Rosa's childhood memories can be linked to the characters' imagination (especially Carmolina's and Doria's).

Early on in the novel, Carmolina creates a riddle for her parents that can only be decoded through the use of a mirror:

On Sunday afternoon, after Mass, Carmolina came back from the bakery with the fresh loaf still hot. [...] [Carmolina] wrote something on the white paper bag. No one could read it. You have to use a mirror, she told them, and when they read the message, This bread brought to you courtesy of Carmolina BellaCasa, their smiles were uneasy, and Carmolina told them the story of Leonardo which she had read in a book. (28)

In this scene, that could well be based on one of De Rosa's childhood memories, Carmolina's parents feel uncomfortable because they are unable to understand their daughter's fervid imagination. After reading about Leonardo da Vinci, Carmolina decides to write backwards and, by doing it, Carmolina plays with language expressing her creativity. The fact that her parents do not understand her reveals that the environment in which she is growing up, because of the difficulties linked to Doriana's illness, leaves no space to imagination and creativity. However, as we have seen, the relationship with Grandma Doria will allow the young girl to recover the family memories about Italy and will teach her how to use her imagination creatively through storytelling. Moreover, the fact that a young girl is interested in da Vinci demonstrates her intellectual curiosity, something that was not common for the daughters of immigrants for multiple reasons. Carmolina's parents are probably unable to decipher their daughter's message also because they are not very familiar with the written word. In addition, Marco and Sarah seem to believe that Carmolina's intelligence may be in some way related to Doriana's disability: "Too bright. The littlest one was too bright. She had stolen the brains of her sister" (29). Thus, according to Bona, the metaphor of the mirror "paradoxically clarifies Carmolina's reality: she writes herself in reverse both as a protection and as an elucidation of the self" (1987: 98).

At the beginning of Part Two, the reader learns for the first time that Carmolina has run away from home (this storyline will be further expanded in Part Four). Everyone in the Italian neighborhood is involved in her search. Marco, preoccupied and scared, takes his car and starts looking for his daughter. He sees some children playing with water

coming out of a hydrant and believes that Carmolina is also among them. The young girl seems to be speaking to him, but he is unable to understand her words:

Behind him a fire hydrant cleared its vigorous throat of water, emptied it into the street. Half-naked, a handful of children [...] played in the water. A small boy in a wet t-shirt shoved a board against the open mouth of the hydrant; the water sprayed out in a clean white arc across the street. Marco blinked. In the spray was the small form of his daughter, laughing, dripping in her dress, waving at him from behind her dark eyes. She was talking backwards to him in the mirror, he could not understand the words, she was talking backwards and laughing because he could not understand. He blinked again, cursed the blue ghost, asked God to forgive all curses, cursed again. (29-30)

The fact that in Marco's mirage Carmolina speaks backwards makes the reader aware that he is not able to understand and appreciate the talents of his daughter. The talents of Carmolina make him feel uncomfortable because she can freely use her imagination, something that has probably been denied to him since he had to contribute to the family economy by working in the grocery shop of his parents from an early age. However, the fact that Marco was able to become policeman and married a woman who does not belong to the Italian American community surely demonstrates his willingness to get away from his family's wishes about his future. Nevertheless, Marco, belonging to the second-generation, cannot completely reverse the situation because family ties, especially with his mother, are still too strong. After his daughter has run away, he finally understands that his behavior towards Carmolina is wrong. As a result, he feels guilty and does everything he can in order to bring his daughter back home. Once Carmolina is found, he changes his attitude towards her and becomes more protective: "You are never going to leave us again" (107). Yet, Carmolina harshly replies: "When I grow up, she said, I'm going to go away forever" (107). As we have seen, De Rosa was sure that Carmolina's response should not be perceived as a final decision because, even in adulthood, her attachment to her sister would have surely prevented her from abandoning her family.

Another important moment of the novel that reworks De Rosa's childhood memories with imagination is the previously quoted scene where Carmolina, dressed as a bride, converses with her grandmother in front of a mirror. Here, according to Bona, "De Rosa employs the mirror metaphor to emphasize the similarities between both women" (1987: 102), who talk in front of the mirror in Carmolina's room. The mirror described as "soundless" (111) initially returns a blurred image of Carmolina because she seems unable to accept a future without her grandmother. However, after her grandmother urges her to put death into perspective, Carmolina understands that she will be able to achieve

her independence without sacrificing her Italian origins, thus keeping her grandmother alive through memory. After this important realization, the mirror finally returns a clear image of the young girl. The fact that only Carmolina's face is reflected in the mirror "(without the shadow of Doriana or the reflection of her grandmother, who had stood next to her) reinforces Carmolina's acceptance of death and her role as a young, ethnic, American woman who will keep the fire inside of her, however difficult and demanding that may be for her" (Bona 1987: 103).

Another strongly autobiographical moment masterfully reworked through De Rosa's imagination is the Epilogue of the novel, which depicts the demolition of a large part of Chicago's Little Italy²⁴. The description of the demolition emphasizes the injustice and the violence with which the operation is performed:

The city said the Italian ghetto should go, and before the people could drop their forks next to their plates and say, pardon me?, the streets were cleared. The houses of the families with their tongues of rugs sticking out were smashed down, the houses filled with soup pots and quick anger, filled with forks and knives and recipes written in the heads of the women, were struck in their sides with the ball of the wrecking crane and the knives and bedclothes and plaster spilled out. The women laughed and waved to each other, they raised their hands in the early sun and called out to one another sleepily, and the hands and the women and the rugs fell through the air, the toys and the voices landed on the ground. (121)

Although a large part of the neighborhood is materially destroyed, the narrator knows that the memories of the former inhabitants will keep it alive in some way. Likewise, as we have seen, memory will also keep alive Grandma Doria and her stories about Italy. It should be noted that in the narration it is not clear when Grandma Doria dies. However, the final moments of the novel, which seem to happen after Doria's death, look like a dreamy vision that reunites grandmother and granddaughter. The scene takes place in a circus and finds Carmolina seated next to her grandmother; the two women are watching a clown sweeping a spotlight away:

Carmolina, Grandma whispers, you hear the magician? He still there?
He's there, Grandma.
Faccia bella, Grandma says.
The clown sweeps the light away.
The music stops.
It's only a trick, Grandma, Carmolina says. Don't let it fool you. (121)

²⁴ In the late 1950s, the construction of the Eisenhower Expressway and the University of Illinois at Chicago Medical district led to the destruction of over 800 homes and 200 businesses in Chicago's Little Italy. Thousands of people, including De Rosa's family, were displaced and the community was forever changed.

The poetry of the whole scene demonstrates that for Carmolina life does not really disappear; it lives on forever in our memories. De Rosa pointed out that she used the word “trick” because Carmolina is comforting her dead grandmother “by saying, in a sense, ‘Don’t be afraid. You are not alone. It’s only a trick. Don’t let it fool you.’ [...] Death has not separated them. *Paper Fish* is about the incredible bonding when love occurs” (Meyer and De Rosa 1999: 62).

Gardaphé interestingly points out that, when approaching Italian American writers, “the value of the writer to a culture is that she can create illusion out of reality and reality out of illusion, both of which affect human memory” (1996b: 139). By writing *Paper Fish*, De Rosa was successfully able to rework her memories through imagination and created a literary work that was able to speak to both her cultures, both the American and the Italian ones. In an interview with Gardaphé, De Rosa affirmed, “Our grandparents and parents were bound to survival; we, on the other hand, have become freer to use our own talents and to rescue the talents of those who came before us. Because we have passed through more time, we have a perspective that gives us the ability to look back and to judge their experiences as treasures we cannot throw out” (1985: 4). De Rosa herself recovered the story of her ancestors through the interaction with her grandmother: “Because I grew up with such a rich heritage I can see how myth and reality in your imagination become so confused. [...] You’re growing up with an entire mythology. Your grandparents carry that mythology with them and try to pass it on so that it becomes a part of you” (Gardaphé 1985: 4). For many Italian Americans who do not have direct knowledge of the country of their ancestors, Italy has always been an imaginary and mythic country. De Rosa used the images that came from her relatives’ recollections as the basis for the *italianità* of the novel, an *italianità* that does not come from research, travel, or reading, but from memory and imagination that, as she asserted, “is as fragile and as beautiful as one of those Japanese paper fishes” (Gardaphé 1985: 4).

CHAPTER V

Changing Perspectives: Carole Maso's *Ava* and Mary Cappello's *Night Bloom: An Italian-American Life*

In the 1990s, there was an important shift in Italian American fiction written by women. Generally speaking, female authors moved away from writing about the immigrant experience as their main topic of investigation, and approached new themes and writing styles. This provoked, in some cases, a distancing from strictly Italian American issues. However, even when *italianità* is not a central theme in the narration, “Italian signs have not yet disappeared altogether” (Gardaphé 1996b: 193) from the works of these authors. Having achieved their own recognition as writers, these women “neither cast off cultural background as a provocative area of literary treatment nor solely utilize the story of Italian America as the means to explore the development of the self” (Bona 1999b: 165).

For example, Carole Maso and Mary Cappello have importantly incorporated issues of lesbianism in their literary works, which are central themes in contemporary women’s writing but still taboo in Italian American culture. Even today, Italian American women are still expected by their families to have heterosexual marriages. Therefore, in a culture as traditional as that of Italian Americans, coming out as gay or lesbian very often means finding many obstacles that primarily arise from the family institution. In fact, especially for women, “deviations from prescribed behavior have the potential to isolate a person from the family” (Bona 1999b: 165). In addition, Italian American women who are separated from their families of origin also “risk further isolation from the community because of their unacceptable behavior according to the standards of *la famiglia*” (Bona 1999b: 165). In an interview, Cappello affirmed that she initially saw her sexual orientation as something that could not coexist with her Italian American identity:

[T]hat to be a lesbian Italian-American somehow is a contradiction in terms or, that somehow there would assumptions like that if I were to reveal my lesbianism that would cancel out my Italian-American identity. (Cappello 1997: 73)

After difficult paths of reconciliation with their own identities, Maso and Cappello understood that it was possible to be lesbian and Italian American at the same time.

However, it should be noted that in their works, they decided to shift away from traditional representations of ethnicity and the family institution. Moreover, even though their narratives are not to be placed in traditional immigrant plots, their works echo earlier writing as they too are modified by culturally specific traditions (Bona 2018: 187). In addition to challenging the traditional essence of the Italian American family, Maso and Cappello “also wage an ongoing critique of normative heterosexuality and its attendant patriarchal practices” (Bona 2018: 187). Through highly experimental narrative techniques and embracing theories of second- and third-wave feminism²⁵, both Maso and Cappello want to create an unprecedented narrative space where they can get away from traditional definitions of the family. Their experimental texts also include implicit and explicit critiques to American culture under late capitalism (Bona 2018: 189). By establishing primary relationship with women, Maso and Cappello intensify the magical bond they share with their literary female forbearers and importantly reimagine the figure and the position of the female artist (Bona 2018: 189-190).

Carole Maso was born in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1956, and grew up in New York. Her father was a jazz musician and her mother worked as a nurse in emergency medicine. Her father’s mother immigrated to the United States from Sicily, and her father’s father was from Genoa. Maso received her Bachelor’s Degree in English from Vassar College in 1977. During her senior year at Vassar, she submitted a collection of prose poems as her senior honors thesis. It is at this point that she decided that she wanted to become a writer. She spent the following nine years writing, while alternately working as a waitress, model, and fencing instructor. Since 1995, she has been a professor of Literary Arts at Brown University. Her first published novel was *Ghost Dance*, which appeared in 1986. Her other novels include *The Art Lover* (1990), *Ava* (1993), *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat* (1994), *Defiance* (1998), and *Mother & Child* (2012). *The Bay of Angels*, a forthcoming sequel to *Ava*, incorporates various narrative types such as essay, memoir, prose poems, and even graphics, and is the result of more than fifteen years of work.

Ava chronicles the last day on earth of Ava Klein, a Jewish American professor of Comparative Literature. From her deathbed, visions and memories of her past drift in and out of Ava’s consciousness. Having travelled all over the world and having had an Italian

²⁵ Third-wave feminism is generally marked as beginning in the early 1990s and continuing to the present. Third-wave feminists embrace individualism and diversity and seek to redefine what it means to be a feminist.

husband, the experience of Italy greatly affects the protagonist. *Ava* represents a daring step into new narrative forms and shows Maso's cleverness as a writer. The novel, composed by fragments and recollections, lacks a traditional structure with a coherent plot and "requires the reader to construct a story out of the silences that constantly interrupt [Ava's] voice" (Gardaphé 1999: 188). The result is that *Ava*, "no matter how many times it is read, is able to generate new connections that create new meanings" (Gardaphé 1999: 188).

Mary Cappello was born in Darby, Pennsylvania, in 1961. She received her Bachelor's Degree from Dickinson College, and her Master's Degree and Ph.D. from the State University of New York at Buffalo with a specialization in nineteenth-century American Literary and Cultural Studies, also focusing on Medical Humanities. In the mid-1990s, she began creating experimental prose pieces, which now might be categorized as creative nonfiction and lyric essay. She subsequently published five books of literary nonfiction including *Night Bloom: An Italian-American Life* (1998), *Awkward: A Detour* (2007), *Called Back: My Reply to Cancer, My Return to Life* (2009), *Swallow: Foreign Bodies, Their Ingestion, Inspiration, and the Curious Doctor Who Extracted Them* (2011), and *Life Breaks In: A Mood Almanack* (2016). She is a professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Rhode Island.

Cappello's *Night Bloom: An Italian-American Life* is an episodic memoir of growing up Italian American in a small town close to Philadelphia in the 1960s and in the early 1970s. In the text, Cappello's childhood memories are intertwined with journal entries by her maternal grandfather, a cobbler originally from Southern Italy, and with her mother's beautiful poetry and letters. The result is a "remarkable pastiche of folklore, family gossip, literary allusions, gardening advice, and personal correspondence suggest[ing] a postmodern sensibility, that is, an understanding that identity is not singular or stable" (Gillan 2001: 259). As a consequence, Cappello's fascinating multigenerational narrative "reflects an acceptance of the indeterminacy of identity, a recognition that the search for knowledge of the self is ongoing because the strands of identity can never be separated or neatly tied together" (Gillan 2001: 259).

This final chapter explores the intertwined themes of identity, *italianità*, and lesbianism in Carole Maso's novel *Ava* and Mary Cappello's memoir *Night Bloom: An Italian-American Life*.

5.1.1 Structure and Language in *Ava*

Because of its formal disruption and lack of linearity, at first glance, Carole Maso's *Ava* may seem like a meaningless set of sentences. However, after reading the book in its entirety, the reader realizes that *Ava* is indeed ordered and organized; it only relies on a different system of meaning and logic. In every page, there are groups of one or two lines, sometimes even three or four, and then a blank space before the next set of sentences appears. This structure mimics what is happening in *Ava*'s mind on her last day on earth; her memories flow freely and without apparent order. As a result, the sentences on one page may also refer to something that has come before or will come afterwards. The voice of the story is mainly that of *Ava*, but very often words pronounced by other characters, stories, and literary quotations are also flowing on *Ava*'s mind. In an essay, Carole Maso affirms that it is not clear to her how she achieved this particular structure:

Ava is a living text. One that trembles and shudders. It is filled with ephemeral thoughts, incomplete gestures, revisions, recurrences, and repetitions – precious disappearing things. [...] No other book eludes me like *Ava*. [...] It is a book in perpetual state of becoming. [...] It can be never finished. [...] I do not pretend to understand how disparate sentences and sentence fragments that allow in a large field of voices and subjects, linked to each other quite often by mismatched syntax and surrounded by space for 265 pages, can yield new sorts of meanings and wholeness. I do not completely understand how such fragile, tenuous mortal connections can suggest a kind of forever. (Maso 2000: 64-65)

Literature scholar Monica Berlin believes that in a certain sense *Ava* is more than a novel. Berlin defines the book as a work of lyric proportions: “written and unwritten, done and undone, created, dispersed, and re-created” (Berlin 2). The uniqueness of Maso's work reside in the incorporation of elements of both fiction and poetry. Exploring the last day of *Ava*'s life, Maso “neither neglects the position of the novel nor negates the essence of poetry” (Berlin 4). *Ava* redefines the boundaries between literary genres, but it surely stands as a genre of its own.

Since the main protagonist is a professor of Comparative Literature, *Ava*'s text is full of literary and cultural quotations. There is a section at the end of the novel called Sources that clarifies and assigns a name to most of the “voices” that are flowing in *Ava*'s mind. The artists who influenced *Ava* Klein are related to various disciplines, including literature, music, and cinema, and belong to different historical periods and nationalities (even though they are mainly modern and contemporary American, British, French, Italian, German, and Spanish writers, musicians, and movie directors). Among *Ava*'s

favorite artists, the most prominent and most recurrent in the novel are Sappho, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Vladimir Nabokov, Wallace Stevens, Alfred Hitchcock, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig, Nathalie Sarraute, Danilo Kiš, Paul Celan, Pablo Neruda, Federico García Lorca, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. According to many commentators, Maso's use of French feminist authors is particularly significant. Hélène Cixous (1937-) is the author who comes to Ava's mind the most. Maso's quotations of Cixous come from a seminal book written in English, entitled *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (1984), where Verena Andermatt Conley interviewed Cixous on her work and theory. According to Italian American scholar Roseanne Giannini Quinn, the most important concept that Maso takes from Cixous is the idea of *écriture féminine*²⁶, or female writing (2001: 98):

A feminine text.

[...]

The ideal, or the dream, would be to arrive at a language that heals as much as it separates. Could one imagine a language sufficiently transparent, sufficiently supple, intense, faithful so that there would be reparation and not only separation? (163)

However, Giannini Quinn further adds that in *Ava*, Maso is not only confirming Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine*, but she is also doing more. In her sampling and refashioning, in her variations of Cixous' theories, Maso is creating the music, the language, not just of women's writing but of her own particular take on the novel genre (Giannini Quinn 2001: 99).

Let us move on to Maso's use of language. Since Ava Klein is not of Italian heritage, the occurrences of Italian words are more limited if compared to the other novels we have discussed so far. However, given the fact that Ava spent many years in Italy, Italian appears sometimes in order to make the text more suggestive of her familiarity with the language and culture. The expressions left in Italian untranslated are easy to understand because they mainly include terms of endearment and names of food ("*Bellissima*," "*pollo alla diavola*," "a little *prosciutto di Parma*"). There is also one instance in which Ava's

²⁶ Hélène Cixous envisages *écriture féminine* as a form of writing that would reside or take place in the realm of the real, rather than the symbolic. In psychoanalytic terms it therefore takes the form of the expression of the inexpressible and can only be arrived at via experimentation and play. ("*Écriture Féminine*")

memories automatically switch to Italian, without her noticing it, and then go back to English: “*Tutto è finito* – A line of men surrendering in desert. I feel you owe us an explanation” (166). It should be noted that since Ava also lived in France for a while, French also appears sometimes, but less often than Italian.

If we resume once more Robert Viscusi’s theories on language in Italian American fiction, it can be affirmed that Maso uses language in a “liturgical” mode but also in a “diplomatic” mode. Italian is used in a “liturgical” mode when Ava’s memories flow and go back to her time in Italy in order to explore her relationship with her husband Francesco. However, Maso succeeds in using language also in a “diplomatic” way. Maso’s language is moved upward in tone thanks to the countless literary and cinematic quotations that refer to Italian culture as a whole. At one point, a line translated into English from Michelangelo Antonioni’s movie *L’avventura* (1960) is reported in Ava’s thoughts: “When you and I came here twelve years ago, you were already giving geography lessons” (73). In addition, the titles of Federico Fellini’s movies are repeated many times (*La dolce vita*, *La strada*, *8½*). Other Italian authors that are largely quoted include Cesare Pavese and Italo Calvino. By achieving the highest level of language in Italian American fiction according to Viscusi’s theories, Maso manages to create a prose that can be simple, evocative, and poetic and the same time.

5.1.2 Strands of *Italianità* in *Ava*

Even though the main character and settings of the novel are not strictly Italian American, this work surely contains many suggestions that refer to the idea of *italianità* experienced from an American perspective. Throughout the narration, the reader understands that Italy has had a tremendous impact on Ava Klein’s life. She has visited and lived in the country, starting from a very young age, and the first of her three husbands, Francesco Guillini²⁷, is a filmmaker from Italy. Giannini Quinn interestingly reads *Ava* as Maso’s reclamation of a lost Italian cultural legacy:

I understand Carole Maso’s work as a reclamation of a lost Italian cultural legacy where an essential component of *italianità* is that it encompasses and is intertwined with the recovering of a woman-

²⁷ The name Francesco Guillini is very reminiscent of Federico Fellini, the famous Italian film director who is also quoted in several passages.

centered culture which has suffered complex modes of destruction and erasure. (Giannini Quinn 2001: 94)

Giannini Quinn further adds that, in the novel, Ava herself seems to create the spaces where Italian and American can come together through longing, juxtaposition, expatriation, and imagined scenarios (2001: 94). These spaces often predominantly include female characters and show Maso's interest in feminist theories.

Let us now focus on the most important Italian character in the novel: Francesco, Ava's first husband. It is significant that Ava, lying on her deathbed, has lively memories of her life in Italy and her relationship with Francesco because this shows the impact that *italianità* has had in her existence. It can be inferred from the text that Ava and Francesco met in Rome while she was studying Comparative Literature for her Master's Degree and he was trying to adapt Dante's *Inferno* into a motion picture:

It was in Rome. I was twenty, and you were forty, almost. You were making a film of the *Inferno*. I laughed imagining the task. I was a graduate student. A student of comparative literature. I held your giant hand. You pressed me against a broken wall in the furnace called August. I kissed you. Or you kissed me. (12)

For Francesco, Ava, capable of appreciating and criticizing his work at the same time, immediately becomes a sort of Beatrice: "He called me Beatrice. A forehead so white. The color of pearl" (35). The two get along well together and Francesco rapidly starts to think that he wants to marry her. Towards the end of the book, Ava recalls when Francesco asked for her hand in marriage on a beach near Venice:

He bounded up the sea-soaked steps, carrying oysters, clams, sea urchins, crayfish, mussels, lobster. The fruits of the sea, he said in English. The jewels of the sea, and laid them at my feet. Twelve fish. It was Christmas Eve day. That night we ate twelve fish. [...] He knelt at my feet. [...] Will you marry me? Will you marry me? Will you marry me?

I will. (243)

Despite the good promises, their marriage does not last because they are unable to be faithful to one another. In addition, Ava believes that her intelligence diminished her beauty and desirability in the eyes of her husband: "Did my intelligence diminish my beauty in your eyes – my desirability?" (72). Despite their divorce, the two remain friends and Francesco even goes to see Ava who is back in the United States.

At the end of her life, Ava would like to have Francesco at her side: "If not you, Francesco, then who? To take my hand. To say no more. To pull the infamous plug, if necessary?" (242). Ava, thinking she sees her ex-husband in the hospital room, starts

conversing with him. Francesco proposes to her once again: “Marry me once more, Ava Klein” (242). Instead of answering to Francesco’s proposal, Ava interestingly asks him if she will go to heaven: “Ava Klein goes to heaven?” (106). American literature scholar Karen Lee Osborne points out that Ava, a Jew, wants Francesco to console her with a Catholic idea of heaven (20). This is particularly interesting because for Jews the primary concern is not with preparing for heaven but with celebrating life (Osborne 20). Here, Maso probably wants to emphasize that Ava’s proximity to the Italian world has changed her perspective also on religion.

The influence of Italy is also present in some stories that are reported in the novel and do not see Ava as the main protagonist. As Giannini Quinn points out, Carole Maso also “give[s] voice to [other] women’s histories as well as their silences as she reveals the complex ways in which women have had to resist obliteration” (2001: 102). In one of these stories, the immense influence of grandmothers on granddaughters, a typical Italian American theme, is explored:

A painter shows slides of her work. [...] In each painting she shows where her grandmother is. That shadow there – it’s my grandma’s shadow.

But one day my painting teacher said to me that I was putting my grandma into too many paintings. Next slide: A landscape. There is where my grandmother used to be. A cityscape. See up there. A seascape. Hi Grandma! A desert. The surface of the moon.

Above ground my mother hung wash.

Restoring all the buildings of Italy, Italians find this and that at every layer an angel, a lion with wings, the Madonna, and leave it all, incapable of letting anything go. (107)

The painting teacher sees the presence of the grandmother in the woman’s paintings negatively. However, it is clear from the quote that the figure of the grandmother is too important for the woman and her presence in the paintings will not disappear. For Giannini Quinn, this is a good example of “how the third-generation woman artist or writer may find it important in her work to reach back to the first-generation grandmother figure despite the message that this type of recovery process is not at all what is supposed to be included in the pantheon of great works” (2001: 103). The next image evoked in the quoted passage is the figure of the mother, who represents the second generation and is doing housework for the family’s welfare. The next group of lines interestingly talks about the relationship between restoration and the Italian people. Italians are unable of letting anything go because everything in Italy refers to a glorious past that no longer

exists. This passage shows how Maso, herself a third-generation Italian American woman, brings *italianità* to the text without an Italian American heroine.

In the novel, Ava Klein experiences Italian culture from her Jewish American perspective²⁸ and embraces Italy as one of her adoptive countries: “You have Italy in your soul, Ava Klein, Francesco said on the night he proposed” (38). According to Giannini Quinn, Ava’s “gravitation towards Italy and Italian culture functions as a kind of replacement for the personal and cultural decimation she has witnessed as the daughter and niece of Holocaust victims” (2001: 104).

On her last day on earth, Ava also finds herself reminiscing about some of her female friends. When Ava was in Rome, she met a woman called Maria Regina with whom it seems that there could have been more than a friendship. However, Ava regrets not having had the courage of confessing her feelings to her:

The beautiful woman I could not keep my eyes off of, waltzes into the kitchen, taking the lid from the pot and says, I’m ravishing.

[...]

That was Rome in Maria Regina’s kitchen, long ago.

The beautiful and hungry woman. The steam rising from the spaghetti water.

Why was it I hesitated? (80)

Ava hesitated because she was scared of the consequences. It is remarked in the narration that this choice has led her to unhappiness and dissatisfaction. According to Giannini Quinn, when Ava does not respond to Maria Regina’s compliments, she “misses the opportunity to express the fullness of her sexual self (and culturally Italian self) with this woman, for it is Maria Regina who offers her the promise of lesbian sexuality intertwined with Italy’s food, sustenance, passion” (2001: 105). Therefore, it is no coincidence that the sadness caused by the repression of Ava’s feelings for Maria Regina manifests itself on the woman’s last day on earth. A reference to Maria Regina’s advances will be the last sentence of the text:

²⁸ It is not unusual for non-Jewish Italian American novelists to use Jewish characters. As Gardaphé states, “Italian American writers have a tendency to use Jews when they don’t use Italian American characters. DeLillo is one example, but there are many others. I think they see them as more ‘writeable’/readable in terms of American literary tradition and culture” (Gardaphé, quoted in Giannini Quinn 2001: 111).

Come quickly–
You can't believe,
A throbbing. A certain pulsing.
You are ravishing. (265)

Berlin points out that, throughout the novel, Ava constantly relies on the power of sexuality to turn her fate (6). The role of the sexual in the novel “allows Ava Klein constantly to reinvent herself through its fragmented form, thus enabling a complete abandonment of the ideal sexual relationship” (Berlin 6). Ava’s attraction for Maria Regina, that could have been transformed into an ideal relationship, remains something unfinished and unresolved. As she lays dying, Ava hopes that the next generation of women will not be discriminated for their life choices and sexual orientation. Her last words addressed once more to Maria Regina demonstrate the huge impact that *italianità* and feminism have had on her life.

5.2.1 Structure and Language in *Night Bloom: An Italian-American Life*

Night Bloom stems from a series of previously published essays that were later expanded and collected in the form of memoir. The book is composed by three parts made up of twelve chapters, with a Prologue and Epilogue which frame the narration. Unlike most memoirs, the narration does not happen in a linear and chronologic order; the events are organized on a thematic level taking up the themes and issues introduced by titles of the chapters. For this reason, one could read the book not necessarily in sequence and still grasp most of the messages conveyed by Cappello.

According to Bona, Cappello’s memoir should be regarded as an anticonfessional piece of fiction (2010b: 153). Resuming the work of predecessors like Dodici Azpadu (1945-) and Rachel Guido DeVries (1947-), Cappello refuses to write a typical coming-out story that solely focuses on sexual identity (Bona 2010b: 153). Rather, she merges unpublished and singular sources (her grandfather’s diaries and her mother’s letters and poetry), creating unity between different literary genres. Employing third-generation feminism and queer theory, Cappello’s memoir singularly constructs sexuality along the

lines of family genealogy, identifying lesbianism within family personalities, modeling its development on the unconventional habits of mind and heart (Bona 2010b: 153).

Let us move on to Cappello's use of language. Like Maso, it can be affirmed that Cappello uses language both in "liturgical" and "diplomatic" modes. It should be said that compared to the other works analyzed here, *Night Bloom* contains less occurrences of Italian despite the Italian American setting. Italian is used in a "liturgical" way exclusively in some instances in which terms of endearment are involved. Moreover, Italian is surely used in a "diplomatic" way when the diaries belonging to Cappello's grandfather, John Petracca, are extensively quoted. These diaries, even though they were originally written in Italian, appear in the memoir translated in order to be available for a wider audience. Since Cappello does not speak Italian fluently, the people who helped her translating the journals, including Edvige Giunta, are thanked in the Acknowledgements section. There is, however, a notable exception, at pages 46-47, where an entry from Petracca's diary is reported in both the original Italian and in English translation. These two pages surely contain the largest chunk of text in Italian in all of the works we have analyzed. In addition, throughout the narration, Petracca proves himself capable of quoting Dante and Pirandello, defying and overcoming the stereotype of the unlettered immigrant:

I have been offered a job in a breadwagon. I guess I'll take it. 24 years here is more than enough. I must try life anew. This reminds me of Dante: "Per navigar miglior acque alza le veli, ormai la navicella del mio ingenio, che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele!"²⁹ [To sail on better waters the little ship of my intellect now raises its sails, leaving behind it such cruel sea!] (32)

"Pirandello was right in saying: and I quote, 'In life every man wears a mask.' The mask, however, is like the cross: no matter how light it may be, its weight in the end is unbearable." (119-120)

Petracca's diaries have the power to combine both the "liturgical" and "diplomatic" roles of language. Still, they are even capable of doing more; they are able to give dignity to poor immigrants and make John Petracca, an author in his own right, emerge from the oblivion of history.

²⁹ Dante's *Purgatory*, Canto I.

5.2.2 Lesbianism and Italian American Identity in *Night Bloom: An Italian-American Life*

In her memoir, Cappello masterfully intertwines the theme of lesbianism with that of Italian American identity. By placing her family stories and experiences next to hers, she decenters authorial control and destabilizes hierarchical notions of selfhood over family (Bona 2018: 197). In order to link her ancestor's experiences to hers, Cappello incorporates in the narration some of her grandfather's journal entries and the beautiful poetry and letters of her mother Rosemary Cappello. Therefore, in the book, the voices of grandfather, mother, and daughter come together and reveal the thoughts of three generations of writers. Throughout the memoir, we come to understand that Cappello refuses fixed definitions of ethnicity and sexuality, and importantly places her sexual orientation in the Italian American context in which she grew up:

“What are you thinking?” “What are you feeling?” “Give, give it, give it to us, give it up.” “When did you know you were gay?” “How did this happen?” “Why?” My Italian American family's questions are the same as anyone else's, though perhaps they are asked with more volume and insistence. But I have nothing to give up. I have no secret. I have nothing to confess. Only the glorious and painful models that I studied, and loved, and imitated. What I was given is what have to give. Lesbianism was bequeathed me – it was my Italian American family's, nearly silenced, resistance. However well I try to place it, “my lesbianism” insists on returning to the unarticulated space between my maternal and paternal legacies. Rather than having emerged, in true Oedipal fashion, out of an identification with one parent and disavowal of the other, my willingness to inhabit a space of transgressive pleasure found its impetus in the unresolved area of desire/lack that was the space between Anglo ideas and Italian realities. In “becoming queer,” I was becoming what my Italian American forbearers denied about themselves even as they provided the example. In becoming queer, I see myself as having made something out of an Italian American fabric, the Italian American weavers of which were too ready and willing to discard. (180-181)

By relating her sexual orientation to her family, Cappello is not only strengthening the relationship between generations but she also exploring what it means to be an unconventional family member in an ethnic group that is very attached to its traditions. According to sociologist Anne-Marie Fortier, here Cappello is “suggesting that the diasporic home is already queer because it is always somehow located in a space of betweenness: that it is a site of struggle with multiple injunctions of being and ‘fitting in’ that come from ‘here’ and ‘there’” (2003: 7).

It may seem that being Italian American and lesbian may be two incompatible concepts, and that the abandonment of one's own ethnic identity may be the natural result of feeling like an outsider within one's own birth community. However, Cappello creates a context in which ethnicity and sexuality are articulated through other conditions, such

as religion and class (Fortier 2003: 8). Therefore, Cappello chooses not to consider her sexual orientation as part of her ethnic identity; the two things are perceived as separate and can coexist in the same person. Italian American culture is indeed patriarchal and heterosexual, but, according to Cappello, it has become even more uptight after some stereotyped representations appeared in American popular culture, including Hollywood films. By writing her memoir, Cappello “thus reveals the intricate web of connections between ethnicity and homophobia, and suggests that queer is a U.S. construct that keeps the non-conforming Italian immigrant at a distance, ‘out of place’” (Fortier 2003: 8):

Now I try to understand the pathological sense of loss (in the form of depression) and fear (in the form of phobia) that characterizes my ethnic heritage. [...] I can locate the source of disjunction in the immigrant status, the initial anomie of being out of place; but that sense of separation may have only expanded in proportion to my grandfather’s un-macho ways and my mother’s unladylike tendency to tell it like it is – this is in the light of the patriarchal history of Mediterranean culture aided and abetted by the misogynist spirituality of the Catholic church. (73)

Let us now move on to how the stories of Cappello’s grandfather and mother are reported in the memoir. John Petracca is introduced in Part One; a cobbler by trade, he arrived in the United States from Southern Italy in 1916, and, after the Great Depression, suffered from poverty throughout his whole adult life. One of the first entries from his diaries, dated February 1941, is reported in full in both the original Italian and the translated English version. Here, Petracca is desperate because his daughter Francesca has a very severe toothache and he cannot afford any treatment. He turns to God and Jesus in order to seek comfort:

Veder questa mia famiglia così in bisogno ed io, legato al lastrico della tortura, impotente di procurare ciò che è di assoluto bisogno, dispero! O mio buon Gesù, abbia pietà di me, di questa mia famiglia, di coloro che sono la cagione dei nostri mali, e di tutta l’umanità! Perdono, perdono mio Dio!

[...]

To see my family in such dire need and me, tied to the star of torture, impotent to procure what is of absolute need makes me despair. My beautiful Jesus have pity on me, on my family, on those that are the cause of our pain, and on all of humanity! Pardon, pardon my God! (46)

John’s decision to forgive pacifies him in both good and bad senses of the word, but, more importantly, it prevents him from turning the rage derived from his problems into violence (34). Reading this passage causes a great deal of sadness in Cappello and, as a result, she suddenly finds herself crying. The tears, however, allow her to acquire an unexpected strength and awareness: “The tears enabled me to see more clearly a number of things, not least of which was a sense that I had carried through the years a portion [...] of my

grandfather's [pain]. What had been a vague and powerful sensation now met some relief and release" (44). By absorbing her grandfather's ethos and aesthetic activity of journal writing, Cappello is able to redeem her immigrant ancestors, but also the children belonging to the second generation, which is specifically embodied in the text by Cappello's mother Rosemary.

Cappello's relationship with her mother is surely not an easy one. As we learn throughout the book, Rosemary, an artist herself, has suffered from agoraphobia and depression for many years, and, at one point, she has even come to have suicidal thoughts. Rosemary's dissatisfaction with her life and the impact of her childhood poverty emerge in a poem dating back to 1971:

I wonder / What the pigeons / Are eating
Their heads bob / Towards earth / And back / Obviously teasing / Something / Out of it
But what?
Not worms / Who have bored / Deep / To survive / The time
Maybe / The pigeons / Are finding / Autumn-discarded / Seeds
Or maybe / They are / Merely / Moistening / Their throats / With ice
Or maybe/ They are nibbling / Dirt / Practicing / Eating / While there is / No food (49-50)

When her daughter is in college, Rosemary importantly decides to make a change to her life and challenges the patriarchal structure of Italian American culture by divorcing from her violent husband and enrolling at university. In a phone call to her daughter, Rosemary announces her decision to live: "She explained how for years she'd kept a bottle of pills on her desk that she would consider overdosing herself with, but that today she had washed the pills down the drain. She'd chosen life now, and the pills could no longer maintain their symbolic power" (122). In the book, Cappello comes to the conclusion that her mother's unhappiness was mainly caused by the sufferings from poverty during her childhood and, therefore, she highly values the breakthrough that her mother decides to give to her life in late adulthood.

Through her exploration of the first and second generations, Cappello places her dysfunctional and unconventional Italian American family within the wider context of constructed American stereotypes of Italian American families. The author sees the United States as "a place of disjunction, of un-belonging, of struggles for

assimilation/integration, thus a space that already harbors desires for hominess” (Fortier 2003: 8). Cappello’s questioning of American society “opens onto the wider socio-historical and discursive contexts that allows us to consider the ways in which ideas of ‘home’ are deeply embedded with ideas of family, gender roles, and compulsory heterosexuality, which in turn are defined in terms of ethnic difference” (Fortier 2003: 9). As a consequence, Cappello’s identity is a product of her memories and her personal understanding of those memories. For the author, being an Italian American lesbian does not require a distancing from her ethnic identity because her understanding of Italian Americanness is exclusively embodied by her family, which is itself already unconventional and within which she can be accepted without particular problems.

It is only in the Epilogue of the memoir, entitled “Flower Rituals across Fences and Generations: The Night-Blooming Cereus,”³⁰ that an explanation to the title of the book is finally offered. After a quote from an article on the *Selenicereus grandiflorus* from *The New York Times*, the section begins with a journal entry from John’s diaries:

June 23, 1943. It is hot and clear. We are all set out in the yard looking at my cereus plant that its bud is showing signs to open. We have been waiting for the blooming for many weeks. Thanks God, now we can admire this remarkable flower. It is now about 12" long and very pretty. It is eight o'clock and is beginning really to open. Here are a lot of our neighbors lovers of flowers to see this remarkable flower. Nine thirty and it is fully opened. It is a gorgeous flower. We are all pleased and astounded. Nature really can work and bring out fancy marvels. It is dark now but we still, regardless of the black-out, are nearby it. The black-out is over and the flash light are showering it. (242-243)

The blossoming of the flower becomes a ritual, celebrated in the middle of the night, that is able to bring family and friends together. Even though they were tormented by poverty, Cappello’s grandparents and their children, including Rosemary, were able to find beauty in the simplicity of a flower that blooms only once a year. This is very often the case with immigrants, who not only learn to look for beauty in simple things, but, more importantly, draw continuous inspiration from everyday life (Romeo 2005: 167). As we have seen, this concept also applies to Italian American fiction written by women; see, for example, the *coperta matrimoniale* in *Umbertina* and Grandma Doria’s evocative stories about Italy in *Paper Fish*. In the last few sentences of the book, Cappello underlines that the importance of the ritual is strongly linked to its symbolic meaning:

³⁰ Night-blooming cereus is the common name referring to a large number of flowering ceroid cacti that bloom at night. The flowers are short lived, and some of these species, such as *Selenicereus grandiflorus*, bloom only once a year, for a single night. (“Night-Blooming Cereus”)

The Night-Blooming Cereus must be a family plant because nobody else needs to put up with it in quite the way that I do. To love this plant, you might have to have memories or your mother rousing you from sleep to something even better than your dreams. You must have to have grown up in a hopeless neighborhood where nothing was meant to bloom.

Every year, [my partner] Jen and I say that this year we will stay up long enough to watch the flower's final drama. We have watched it open, but what stages must it pass rapidly through, and beautifully, even as it dies? Every year, we miss its calling, the secret of its life; we let it drug us and then we sleep through its nodding bow, its star turned downward. Maybe someday, my mother, who I am sure has seen the beloved flower die, will tell me what it looks like; or, better, someday, I will have the strength to watch. (259)

Cappello's final remarks show the importance of traditions in the interaction between generations. In *Night Bloom*, despite the mutual difficulties, mother and daughter manage to stay together and accept their respective differences. According to Bona, the artistry of Rosemary Cappello consecrated through the ritual of the night-blooming cereus plant becomes an act of communion with her daughter, replacing old-world fatalistic fears with energetic observation (2018: 198). Moreover, it is highly significant for Italian American discourse that, through the work of a third-generation daughter, grandfather and mother, belonging respectively to the first and second generations, are finally able to become artists in their own right.

CONCLUSION

By becoming writers, Barolini, De Rosa, Maso, and Cappello defied the traditionalist position of women in their patriarchal culture and, in addition to that, they interestingly decided to write about their culture from their own female perspective, questioning accepted definition of Italianness. Their works are neither a celebration nor an accusation of Italian American culture. They are simply long-awaited opportunities to narrate a different story and experiment with fiction. Like their works' protagonists, these female writers are aware that neither the American nor the Italian worlds are perfect. This is why they live in a midway position that makes it possible for them to appreciate the positive aspects of both cultures and discard those they do not agree with. Therefore, their point of view is probably more impartial and complete, and certainly worth analyzing.

The female characters represented in these works are all strong young women who have to face important challenges in their lives (male chauvinism, patriarchy, illness, and poverty), but who manage, or at least try, to overcome their difficulties without the help of a man. However, it has to be said that their struggles are not certainly restricted to the Italian American community. Every reader, regardless of his or her ethnicity, can appreciate the strength, self-determination, and independence of these characters. As a consequence, these works can be read and appreciated by a universal audience.

Furthermore, these characters, instead of being haunted by the ghosts of the past, importantly reestablish a meaningful relationship, concrete or metaphorical, with their female ancestors. As we have seen, the figure of the immigrant grandmother in particular has a strong ascendant on third-generation granddaughters. For them, the grandmother represents Italian culture and tradition as whole and she is, most of the times, the earliest source of information available regarding the family's past.

The figure of the grandmother, who embodies a world that does not exist anymore, is only a starting point in the characters' investigation regarding their identity. They understand that it is important to recover their past, but they also realize that they will have to live in the present. For this reason, they have to solve their inner conflicts regarding their ethnicity by themselves. In this process, feminist theories have a huge impact on some of the characters (Weezy Morosini, Ava Klein, and Mary Cappello)

because they give them the theoretical means to find a solution to their problems. For other characters such as Tina Morosini, the greatest instrument to investigate about oneself is culture. For Tina, culture offers a way out of many of her problems because she considers it a great asset that no one can take away from her.

For Cappello things are a little bit more problematic because, immediately after having discovered why she feels different, she sets out on the difficult mission of finding a way to reconcile her sexual orientation with her Italian American heritage and identity. As we have seen, she will succeed in her challenge. In fact, she will be able to find support and strength from the rediscovery of her family history and by establishing a meaningful relationship with her mother.

To conclude, Italian American women writers could feel doubly marginalized because of their gender and their ethnicity. However, in their works, we never perceive resignation or subjection. They are aware that by writing they are already defying marginalization and oppression through creativity and self-expression. For this reason, Barolini, De Rosa, Maso, and Cappello are good representatives not only of Italian American literature, but also of universal women's writing.

SUMMARY IN ITALIAN

Oggetto di questa tesi è l'analisi di quattro testi scritti da quattro autrici italo americane. Queste sono Helen Barolini, Tina De Rosa, Carole Maso e Mary Cappello. Tutte hanno scritto della cultura italo americana vista da una prospettiva femminile. Barolini, De Rosa e Maso hanno pubblicato principalmente romanzi, mentre Cappello si è focalizzata sulla scrittura autobiografica di memoir. Analizzerò *Umbertina* (1979), la saga multigenerazionale di Barolini, il romanzo creativo *Paper Fish* (1980) di De Rosa, il romanzo sperimentale *Ava* (1993) di Maso e il suggestivo memoir *Night Bloom: An Italian-American Life* (1998) di Cappello. Queste opere esplorano il concetto dell'identità italo americana. I personaggi principali sono tutte figure femminili forti che sono state ispirate dal movimento femminista e, nel caso dei lavori di Maso e Cappello, dalle teorie queer. Inoltre, questi lavori esplorano l'importanza di ristabilire una relazione significativa con il passato della propria famiglia e dei propri antenati, anche se per i discendenti degli immigrati la maggior parte delle volte è difficile e doloroso.

Umbertina fu il primo romanzo italo americano scritto da una donna ad occuparsi dei temi intrecciati del gender e dell'identità etnica. L'opera, ambientata tra Italia e Stati Uniti, racconta le vite di tre generazioni di donne appartenenti alla stessa famiglia, in un periodo di tempo che va dalla fine del diciannovesimo secolo agli anni Settanta del Novecento. Tina, la bisnipote di *Umbertina*, dopo aver risolto i suoi conflitti interiori relativi alla sua etnia, sarà in grado di incarnare un esempio positivo per le donne italo americane del futuro, trovando un equilibrio tra la sua origine italiana e quella americana.

Paper Fish abbandona una forma narrativa lineare per privilegiare lo stile personale di De Rosa. Tematicamente, il romanzo esplora ancora il concetto di identità italo americana. Analizzando i suoi ricordi e lasciando spazio alla sua immaginazione, De Rosa ricrea un rapporto ideale tra nonna e nipote. È, infatti, chiaro dal testo che l'eredità di storie e tradizioni italiane di nonna Doria sarà una grande risorsa nella vita futura di Carmolina, la protagonista.

In *Ava* e *Night Bloom: An Italian-American Life*, Maso e Cappello, usando nuove tematiche e stili, cercano di sfidare il tabù dell'omosessualità nella cultura italo americana fortemente tradizionalista. *Ava* non si occupa di tematiche strettamente italo americane,

ma è sicuramente interessante vedere come l'esperienza dell'Italia abbia influenzato la vita della protagonista, una donna ebrea americana che sta morendo di una rara malattia del sangue. In *Night Bloom*, invece, Cappello cerca di riconciliare la sua identità italo americana con il suo orientamento sessuale. Per far questo, decide di analizzare attentamente la storia della sua famiglia e, sorprendentemente, trova molte somiglianze nelle esperienze di vita di suo nonno materno e di sua madre.

Lo studio di queste opere mi ha arricchito personalmente in quanto mi ha fatto scoprire e apprezzare una tradizione letteraria affascinante ma poco conosciuta, soprattutto in Italia. Sono stato positivamente sorpreso dalla quantità di riferimenti alla letteratura italiana nei testi delle quattro autrici analizzate; questi includono citazioni di autori e poeti del calibro di Dante, Manzoni e Pirandello. Queste autrici, quindi, non sono solo rappresentanti di una tradizione letteraria a sé, ma possono essere anche considerate ambasciatrici della letteratura italiana all'estero perché scrivendo in inglese il loro pubblico è sicuramente più vasto. Spero, quindi, che in un futuro prossimo gli Italian American Studies vengano presi in maggior considerazione dagli studiosi italiani in quanto materia interdisciplinare che rappresenta un'inedita summa tra l'italianistica e gli American Studies.

Barolini, De Rosa, Maso e Cappello dimostrano che è possibile riconciliare la cultura italiana e americana in maniera positiva. Le loro eroine, vivendo tra tradizione e innovazione creano una propria identità che conserva solo gli aspetti positivi di entrambe le culture. Per loro, questo è sempre il risultato di un processo, continuamente in corso, di auto accettazione e di un viaggio alla scoperta di loro stesse.

Letteratura italo americana e Italian American Studies

Il 14 marzo 1993, un saggio intitolato "Where are the Italian-American Novelists?" del giornalista e scrittore italo americano Gay Talese apparve su *The New York Times Book Review*. L'audace affermazione di Talese pose un quesito che non era mai stato considerato da un pubblico così ampio. Nell'articolo l'autore affermava che, durante i suoi anni formativi all'università, non era mai venuto a contatto con nessun scrittore italo americano degno di nota:

Incapace di trovare romanzi contemporanei scritti da autori italo americani nella libreria e biblioteca dell'università, sono stato attirato da autori che erano irlandesi americani o ebrei. [...] Perché? Com'era possibile che in più di venti milioni di americani di origine italiana [...], questo gruppo fosse così sottorappresentato tra gli scrittori americani riconosciuti dalla critica e dal pubblico? Non c'era nessuna versione italo americana di Arthur Miller, Saul Bellows, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Mary McCarthy e Mary Gordon, che scriveva delle proprie esperienze etniche? (Talese 1994: 466-46, mia traduzione)

Di conseguenza gli italo americani utilizzarono le proprie pubblicazioni per rispondere alle provocazioni di Talese. Alcune risposte apparvero nell'autunno 1993 e in primavera 1994 sulla rivista accademica *Italian Americana*. Inoltre, critici letterari americani e studiosi di questioni italo americane decisero di avviare progetti di ricerca sulla condizione e l'importanza del romanzo e degli autori nella cultura italo americana (Gardaphé 1999: 165).

Quando l'articolo venne pubblicato, Talese non era probabilmente a conoscenza di un'importante tradizione negli studi italo americani che era iniziata almeno cinquant'anni prima e che si andava consolidando nei primi anni Novanta. Nel 1949, il lavoro pionieristico di Olga Peragallo venne pubblicato postumo con il titolo di *Italian-American Authors and Their Contributions to American Literature*. Non molto tempo dopo, Rose Basile Green iniziò a lavorare alla sua tesi universitaria che più tardi diventò uno degli studi più importanti sulla letteratura italo americana. Pubblicata nel 1974 con il titolo *The Italian-American Novel: A Document of the Interaction of Two Cultures*, diventerà una guida inestimabile per i futuri studiosi.

Alla fine degli anni Novanta, vennero pubblicati due studi molto importanti: *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative*³¹ (1996) di Fred L. Gardaphé e *Claiming a Tradition: Italian American Women Writers* (1999) di Mary Jo Bona. Questi due libri, riprendendo il lavoro di precedenti critici letterari e storici come Helen Barolini e Donna Gabaccia, sottolinearono l'esistenza e l'importanza di una letteratura italo americana femminile creando una tradizione di studi continuata fino ad oggi (si vedano le opere di Mary Ann Vigilante Mannino e Edvige Giunta).

Sorprendentemente, lo studio della letteratura italo americana è ancora marginalizzato nel sistema universitario italiano. Nel 2001 e nel 2005, la pubblicazione del primo e del secondo volume dell'antologia *Italoamericana: Storia e letteratura degli italiani negli Stati Uniti*, curata dal rinomato critico letterario Francesco Durante, ha

³¹ Traduzione italiana: *Segni italiani, strade americane: l'evoluzione della letteratura italiana americana* (Franco Cesati Editore).

introdotta opere e autori sconosciuti alla maggior parte del pubblico. Nel 2005, Caterina Romeo ha pubblicato *Narrative tra due sponde: Memoir di italiane d'America*, il primo studio in Italia interamente dedicato alla letteratura italo americana femminile. Inoltre, recentemente alcune case editrici di rilievo hanno iniziato a pubblicare traduzioni in italiano di opere di autori come John Fante, Pietro di Donato, Pascal D'Angelo, Joseph Tusiani, Suor Blandina Segale, Rosa Cavalleri, Helen Barolini e Tina De Rosa.

Grazie a un'ormai consolidata tradizione di studi sulla letteratura italo americana negli Stati Uniti, si possono facilmente identificare gli autori che hanno avuto un impatto significativo sia sulla cultura italo americana sia su quella americana più in generale. Va detto però che molti di questi autori devono ancora entrare nel più ampio canone della letteratura americana.

Voci precedentemente ignorate: le scrittrici italo americane

Per un lungo periodo, le donne italo americane sono state spesso “messe a tacere” da diversi fattori tra i quali i rapporti conflittuali con le culture patriarcali delle loro famiglie; inoltre, esse venivano da una tradizione che non le incoraggiava a raccontare le loro vite per istruire le future generazioni (Barolini 2000: 5). Queste donne venivano da un mondo dominato dagli uomini, dove il loro ruolo era ristretto immutabilmente a casa e famiglia. Esse non acquisirono confidenza nella lingua inglese e non ebbero accesso al sistema educativo fino alle recenti generazioni; ciò comportò l'impossibilità di dedicare tempo ad attività importanti come la lettura e la riflessione introspettiva. Infatti, non ci si deve sorprendere del fatto che se non si legge, non si scrive (Barolini 2000: 5).

Nessun critico della cultura femminile italo americana ha offerto maggior contributo di Helen Barolini. Il suo maggior apporto arrivò con la pubblicazione di *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writing by Italian American Women* nel 1985. Questo lavoro è la prima antologia completamente dedicata a scrittrici italo americane, che include gli scritti di cinquantasei donne raggruppate in cinque generi letterari diversi (autobiografia, saggistica, narrativa, teatro e poesia) e che analizza l'impatto della classe e del genere nella vita delle donne. Descrivendo l'antologia come il suo manifesto letterario, Barolini afferma che:

La scrittrice italo americana esiste e la sua esperienza è documentata in una lunga tradizione letteraria. Se la sua voce resta silenziosa nella cultura dominante è perché nessun critico o studioso l'ha amplificata. Se queste autrici sembrano donne delle ombre, è stato perché non sono mai state raggiunte dai riflettori della notorietà. (Barolini 1999: 193-194, mia traduzione)

Suor Blandina Segale (1850-1941), Frances Winwar (1900-1985) e Rosa Cavallieri (1866-1943) possono essere considerate le prime scrittrici italo americane.

Suor Blandina nacque con il nome di Rosa Maria Segale in un villaggio vicino a Genova e arrivò negli Stati Uniti da bambina, stabilendosi con la sua famiglia a Cincinnati. Educata in scuole cattoliche, all'età di sedici anni entrò nell'ordine della Sorelle della Carità di Cincinnati. Seguendo la sua vocazione, Segale riuscì a liberarsi dalle limitazioni poste alle donne italo americane della sua generazione: il matrimonio e la maternità (LaGumina et al. 2003: 695). Per ventun anni, Suor Blandina visse nel Southwest degli Stati Uniti come missionaria, fondando scuole ed ospedali e lavorando con i nativi americani. In questi anni scrisse un diario raccogliendo le lettere inviate alla sorella Maria Maddalena, anch'essa suora. Il diario venne successivamente pubblicato a puntate su una rivista cattolica, ricevendo attenzione per il suo valore storico. Venne, poi, pubblicato sotto forma di libro nel 1932 con il titolo di *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail*³². L'opera rivela la forza di una donna mossa dal desiderio di aiutare gli altri. Come autrice Suor Blandina si rileva talentuosa nel descrivere le ambientazioni e le diverse persone incontrate, specialmente la figura del tipico cowboy. Il diario è un importante contributo alla letteratura del West, includendo anche storie di donne pioniere e senza mai tralasciare l'influenza del Cattolicesimo. Anche se Segale non si considerava una scrittrice, il suo apporto alla letteratura americana comprende un ethos sia italiano che cattolico, elementi che saranno prevalenti nel romanzo italo americano (LaGumina et al. 2003: 695).

Frances Winwar (Francesca Vinciguerra) nacque a Taormina e si trasferì da bambina negli Stati Uniti. A diciott'anni iniziò a lavorare nell'ambito delle recensioni letterarie ma si guadagnò successivamente una reputazione come scrittrice biografa. Nel 1927, quando il suo primo romanzo venne pubblicato, accettò con riluttanza la proposta del suo editore di anglicizzare, attraverso una traduzione letterale, il suo nome e cognome. Non dimenticò mai la sua amata Sicilia che fu ricordata in *Pagan Interval* (1929), un romanzo ambientato nella fittizia isola di Ennios nel Mediterraneo. Winwar dimostra un vivo interesse per tutto ciò che è italiano e questo si evince dalle sue ambientazioni e dai suoi personaggi

³² Traduzione italiana: *Suor Blandina, una suora italiana nel West* (Neri Pozza Editore).

(LaGumina et al. 2003: 695). L'autrice si specializzò poi nella scrittura di biografie di famosi scrittori britannici del diciannovesimo secolo e vinse il prestigioso Atlantic Prize per la saggistica nel 1933.

Rosa Cavalleri nacque in un paesino lombardo dove fin da piccola lavorò nelle fabbriche di seta e arrivò negli Stati Uniti nel 1884. Anche se non imparò mai a leggere e a scrivere, sia in italiano che in inglese, Cavalleri acquisì fama di narratrice raccontando meticolosamente ogni dettaglio della sua vita alla sua amica Mary Hall Ets. Quest'ultima ne raccolse le memorie in *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant*³³ (1970). Bona suggerisce che la biografia di Cavalleri condivide molti temi con altri romanzi italo americani: il viaggio verso un nuovo continente, le difficoltà nel lasciare la patria e nell'adattarsi agli usi e costumi americani, una forte fede cattolica e la visione dell'America come una terra promessa (LaGumina et al. 2003: 696).

Spostandoci alle autrici di narrativa, le donne italo americane hanno scritto intensamente sul tema della famiglia. Cresciute in un paese che enfatizzava l'indipendenza e l'individualismo, le figlie degli immigrati si sentivano confuse da valori che spesso si contraddicevano. Ciò nonostante, il porre la famiglia al centro dei propri romanzi, portò questa generazione di scrittrici a rompere il silenzio che le avvolgeva come donne e, allo stesso tempo, celebrare il proprio patrimonio etnico (LaGumina et al. 2003: 696). Mari Tomasi (1907-1965) e Marion Benasutti (1908-1992) scrissero romanzi che condividono caratteristiche comuni a quella che potrebbe essere definita *immigrant saga* (LaGumina et al. 2003: 696). Queste caratteristiche saranno poi riprese e ampliate dalla successiva generazione come De Rosa e Barolini.

Like Lesser Gods (1949) di Mari Tomasi si occupa insistentemente delle vicende di una famiglia italo americana, la cui assimilazione è accelerata dalla presenza di una figura di "padrino" (LaGumina et al. 2003: 697). Il romanzo ottenne buone critiche, anche dal *New York Times*. Anche *No Steady Job for Papa* (1966) di Marion Benasutti ottenne ottime recensioni. Nel romanzo, l'autrice sottolinea che la figura della madre rappresenta la vera forza della famiglia. La madre immigrata viene celebrata perché attraverso la sua determinazione la sua famiglia raggiunge stabilità economica ed emotiva nel nuovo paese (LaGumina et al. 2003: 697).

³³ Traduzione italiana: *Rosa, vita di una emigrante italiana* (Ecoistituto della Valle del Ticino).

Per la successiva generazione, che include scrittrici come Helen Barolini (1925-), Tina De Rosa (1944-2007), Carole Maso (1956-) e Mary Cappello (1961-), la famiglia rimane uno dei temi centrali per l'identità dei personaggi ma con importanti distinzioni.

Il romanzo multigenerazionale *Umbertina*³⁴ (1979) di Helen Barolini narra le vicende di quattro generazioni di donne appartenenti alla stessa famiglia, coprendo il periodo storico che va dal 1860 al 1975 circa. Quello che rende questo libro una lettura essenziale è la sua capacità di prendere un soggetto (la famiglia) e un genere (la *immigrant saga*) tradizionali e rielaborarli attraverso una prospettiva femminista senza essere anacronistico o polemico (LaGumina et al. 2003: 698). Come *Umbertina*, anche *Paper Fish*³⁵ (1980) di Tina De Rosa ricostruisce un rapporto quasi mitico tra nonna e nipote. Scrivendo da una prospettiva di terza generazione, Barolini e De Rosa suggeriscono che le nipoti ricevono eredità dai propri antenati che le sostengono per tutta la vita. In queste opere anche il tema del genere è centrale in quanto De Rosa e Barolini riscrivono abilmente la storia delle donne italo americane ponendo in risalto figure femminili forti e realistiche. Inoltre, queste donne, attraverso il proprio tormentato percorso di vita, riescono a venire a patti con loro stesse e ad accettare la propria identità italo americana, qualcosa che per definizione non è completa, né totalmente italiana, né interamente americana.

Più recentemente, Carole Maso e Mary Cappello hanno esplorato la multidimensionalità stilistica nei loro romanzi, incorporando tematiche omosessuali nei loro lavori che, molto spesso, si occupano della famiglia italo americana ancora tradizionalista, sfidandone quindi i tabù. Di conseguenza, le loro opere si concentrano anche su altri tipi di emarginati sociali: gli ammalati di AIDS, di cancro e quelli psichici. Maso e Cappello sperimentano molto sul versante stilistico, sia per quanto riguarda la trama, sia per l'utilizzo innovativo della lingua.

Dagli anni Novanta fino ad oggi, le scrittrici italo americane hanno continuato a produrre interessanti opere, includendo tematiche relative all'identità e all'etnia in modi innovativi e audaci. Inoltre, grazie ai recenti sviluppi della critica italo americana, è ormai chiaro il contributo alla letteratura americana in generale delle scrittrici analizzate, non più relegate ad un genere prettamente etnico. Queste autrici, quindi, meritano seria

³⁴ Traduzione italiana: *Umbertina* (Avagliano Editore).

³⁵ Traduzione italiana: *Pesci di carta* (Nutrimenti Edizioni).

considerazione e sostegno soprattutto nell'assicurare che le loro opere rimangano in stampa e, quindi, accessibili ai futuri lettori, studiosi e scrittori. In ambito italiano, invece, molto deve essere ancora fatto dal momento che le traduzioni e la circolazione di questi libri è ancora marginale e meramente accademica.

Viaggio alla ricerca di sé: *Umbertina* di Helen Barolini

La struttura di *Umbertina* è ripartita cronologicamente in tre sezioni, ognuna delle quali è dedicata ad una particolare generazione (Umbertina, Marguerite e Tina). Il prologo ambientato a Roma nel 1969, però, introduce la figura di Marguerite, la nipote di Umbertina. Partendo da alcune osservazioni di Marguerite durante un colloquio con il suo psichiatra, il tempo del racconto torna alla fine dell'Ottocento e il narratore inizia a raccontare le vicende di Umbertina. Una peculiarità del romanzo è sicuramente quella dell'uso di espressioni e proverbi italiani, evidenziati in corsivo, e ben incorporati nel testo in inglese. Queste parole sono in italiano standard, dialetto calabrese e romano. Inoltre, l'italiano viene anche utilizzato per riportare citazioni tratte dalle opere di Dante e Manzoni.

Nella prima parte dedicata ad Umbertina, ambientata inizialmente in una Calabria post risorgimentale, Barolini si focalizza sulle condizioni di estrema povertà che inducono inevitabilmente all'emigrazione. Umbertina viene rappresentata come una ragazza forte che nel suo piccolo cerca di sfidare il maschilismo della tradizionale società meridionale. Il matrimonio con Serafino Longobardi, un uomo buono ma debole di carattere, le darà la possibilità di acquisire una maggiore autonomia e di prendere la decisione di emigrare negli Stati Uniti. Arrivata a New York Umbertina si rende conto che gli immigrati italiani sono marginalizzati, costretti a vivere in condizioni pietose e sfruttati dai loro stessi connazionali. Per questo prende la decisione di lasciare New York il prima possibile e di trasferirsi in campagna. Dopo una serie di vicissitudini, che vedranno Umbertina vendere addirittura l'unico pezzo del suo corredo: la coperta matrimoniale, la famiglia riesce a raggiungere una certa agiatezza economica e a controllare un'azienda di successo. Il rapporto che Umbertina intrattiene con le sue quattro figlie non è certamente facile. Cresciute in un ambiente privilegiato, la madre non le considera abbastanza intelligenti e caratterialmente forti come lei. Vengono tutte viziate con cose materiali ma trascurate dal

punto di vista affettivo. Per esempio a Carla viene impedito di finire il liceo e di andare all'università per lavorare nell'azienda di famiglia. Non appena tutti i figli si sposano e lasciano casa, Umbertina riconosce che il controllo che ha esercitato sulle loro vite e sull'azienda di famiglia è qualcosa di effimero. Vedendo i suoi nipoti così americanizzati e incapaci di parlare italiano correntemente, la donna si sente triste e responsabile.

La seconda parte del romanzo racconta la storia di Marguerite Scalzo, figlia di Carla e nipote di Umbertina. La ragazza cresce in una famiglia attenta solo ai beni materiali e ai modi per accrescere la propria ricchezza. Inoltre, per distanziarsi dagli stereotipi associati agli immigrati italiani, i suoi genitori si considerano interamente americani. Vivendo in ambiente tale, Marguerite si sente insoddisfatta ed è incapace di trovare un obiettivo nella vita. Studia al college, viaggia molto e con un divorzio alle spalle, sposa Alberto Morosini, un famoso poeta italiano stabilendosi in Italia. Questa relazione, dalla quale nascono due figlie (Tina e Weezy), la porta ad essere molto infelice. Si sente lontana dal marito e incapace di amarlo romanticamente. Inoltre, lei non ha un vero e proprio lavoro ma aiuta costantemente il marito traducendo le sue poesie dall'italiano all'inglese, assicurandogli un pubblico negli Stati Uniti e aumentando la sua reputazione in Italia. Dopo diciotto anni di matrimonio l'unica soluzione che ritiene possibile è quella di separarsi ed iniziare buona nuova vita a quarant'anni; però, prima di prendere una decisione definitiva autonomamente, decide di rivolgersi ad uno psichiatra. Durante le sessioni con il Dottor Verdile, Marguerite realizza che molte delle sue insicurezze derivano dal fatto di essere una donna italo americana. Essendo italo americana, lei si dovrebbe sentire avvantaggiata nell'aver l'opportunità di vedere le cose da entrambi i punti di vista, ma per la donna entrambi sono insoddisfacenti. Seguendo i suggerimenti dello psichiatra, Marguerite capisce l'importanza di riscoprire le radici della sua famiglia e si ripromette di visitare il villaggio calabrese di Castagna, luogo di nascita della nonna Umbertina. Dopo una temporanea separazione da Morosini e una breve permanenza a Firenze, lei decide di tornare dal marito a Roma. Qui inizia, però, una relazione con Massimo Bontelli, un aspirante poeta che essenzialmente la sfrutta per la notorietà del marito. A quarantacinque anni scopre di essere incinta del figlio del suo amante e muore in un incidente stradale in circostanze misteriose. Barolini ha affermato che ha intenzionalmente lasciato l'interpretazione della morte di Marguerite al lettore, creando il dubbio fra suicidio e fatalità. La morte della donna, quindi, imita la sua vita instabile, ha

sempre avuto bisogno dell'approvazione di figure maschili per tentare di risolvere le sue incertezze e i suoi problemi ed è stata fortemente condizionata dalle rappresentazioni d'amore hollywoodiane. Tutto questo le ha fatto credere che la donna ideale è passiva, di supporto al marito e, quindi, quasi decorativa. Barolini non la vede, però, come un fallimento completo, la ritiene una donna alla ricerca di sé stessa e conclude la storia con la sua morte per far emergere la figura della figlia Tina nella sezione successiva.

Tina Morosini, la figlia maggiore di Marguerite e Alberto, è dunque la protagonista della parte finale del romanzo e per Barolini può essere considerata una buona rappresentante della donna italo americana del futuro. Questa parte contiene molte idee riprese dal movimento femminista e, in particolare, dal femminismo di seconda ondata. La narrazione inizia con Tina che sta svolgendo un dottorato di ricerca in letteratura italiana presso la Columbia University. Dal momento che è cresciuta a Roma e sta vivendo negli Stati Uniti per la prima volta, la ragazza critica costantemente il modo di vivere americano ma allo stesso tempo ne apprezza alcuni aspetti. La differenza fra i due paesi è riflessa anche nel concetto di identità per Tina. Lei non si considera italo americana ma due persone distinte, italiana quando è in Italia, americana quando è negli Stati Uniti. La possibilità di avere una carriera accademica è sicuramente una conquista sociale in un mondo ancora prettamente maschilista, ma allo stesso tempo è una scelta criticata dalla famiglia materna in quanto ritenuta non adeguatamente remunerativa. Non appena viene a conoscenza della morte della madre, Tina parte per l'Italia e lascia il suo fidanzato nonostante sospetti di essere incinta. Dopo aver appreso dal diario della madre che anche lei aspettava un bambino, Tina discute della sua gravidanza con la sorella Weezy, una femminista radicale, e decide di abortire in Italia, dove questa pratica è ancora illegale nel 1973. Barolini descrive le conseguenze emotive dell'aborto e l'importanza di legalizzarlo per evitare che venga svolto in condizioni pericolose e precarie. Dopo questa dolorosa esperienza, Tina decide di riscoprire le sue origini e di recarsi, quindi, nel villaggio di Castagna. Arrivata in Calabria trova una situazione di grande povertà e gli abitanti del villaggio si rifiutano di parlarle, in quanto vedono in lei l'erede dell'emigrato che ha volontariamente reciso i rapporti con il passato. Tornata a New York, Tina si ritrova a visitare una mostra al museo dell'immigrazione di Ellis Island dove è esposta un'antica coperta matrimoniale calabrese. Osservando la semplice bellezza della coperta e senza sapere che in realtà apparteneva ad Umbertina, Tina è finalmente in grado di

accettare la sua identità italo americana. Quindi, attraverso questo manufatto viene figurativamente ristabilito il legame tra bisnonna e bisnipote. Terminato il dottorato e avendo sviluppato la sua personale identità senza l'aiuto di un uomo, Tina accetta la proposta di matrimonio di Jason Jowers, un *WASP* (Bianco Anglo-Sassone Protestante) amico d'infanzia. Dopo il matrimonio celebrato il giorno del Ringraziamento in un contesto tipicamente americano rappresentato dalla casa dei suoceri, Tina decide di piantare del rosmarino, una pianta tipicamente italiana, nel giardino dei Jowers. La donna ha trovato finalmente un luogo che può chiamare casa.

Un'eredità di ricordi e immaginazione: *Paper Fish* di Tina De Rosa

Paper Fish racconta le vicissitudini della famiglia BellaCasa, italo americani di seconda generazione, nella Little Italy di Chicago sul finire degli anni Quaranta. La narrazione non è organizzata in modo lineare per privilegiare i ricordi di infanzia dell'autrice. L'innovativo stile di De Rosa rappresenta un momento cruciale nella scrittura femminile italo americana, in quanto adotta strategie moderniste come il monologo interiore, i punti di vista alternati e l'esposizione dei fatti in maniera non strettamente cronologica (Bona 1987: 91). All'interno del racconto, De Rosa talvolta utilizza parole ed espressioni in lingua italiana, sebbene in misura minore rispetto ad *Umbertina*. Queste sono di facile comprensione anche per il lettore che non conosce l'italiano perché includono principalmente formule di saluto e termini affettuosi. Inoltre, il fatto che De Rosa non abbia condotto nessuna ricerca sulla comunità italo americana per privilegiare i suoi ricordi d'infanzia, ha prodotto delle incongruenze nell'uso dell'italiano. Ad esempio, il nome della protagonista Carmolina ricorda il più comune Carmelina, diminutivo di Carmela. Questa ipotesi è avvalorata dal fatto che si verrà poi a sapere che la ragazza porta il nome della bisnonna Carmella (probabilmente un errore di ortografia). La prosa dell'autrice è, comunque, altamente poetica e simbolica e queste imprecisioni linguistiche non ne inficiano il valore.

In *Paper Fish*, nonna Doria è certamente il personaggio con la quale la giovane Carmolina BellaCasa ha il rapporto più stretto. Dopo essersi trasferita negli Stati Uniti in giovane età, Doria, ormai anziana ma arzilla, non ha avuto una vita facile e spesso si ritrova a ricordare con malinconia la sua patria. I suoi sentimenti di nostalgia per l'Italia

spesso sfociano in racconti simbolici e poetici che vengono narrati alla nipotina. Carmolina, grazie alle storie della nonna e ai momenti passati a cucinare insieme piatti tipici, sviluppa un forte interesse per le sue origini italiane. Inoltre, poiché sua madre Sarah è di origine lituana e suo padre Marco è troppo impegnato nel suo lavoro di poliziotto, Doria è l'unico membro della famiglia che è positivamente in grado di trasmettere le tradizioni italiane alla giovane nipote. Tuttavia, va notato che nei ricordi e nelle storie di Doria, l'Italia viene rappresentata come un paese mitico e romantico, molto lontano dalla realtà. Pertanto, le storie di Doria nascondono intenzionalmente le difficoltà e le avversità della vita nel sud Italia, lasciando spazio a immagini suggestive e mitiche. Grazie a questi racconti, Carmolina inizia anche a conoscere le vicende dei membri della famiglia rimasti in Italia che diventano punti di riferimento nel suo presente.

Il luogo di nascita di Doria non è ampiamente descritto dal narratore. Sappiamo che si tratta di un antico paesino vicino Napoli, circondato da colline. Di conseguenza, Carmolina si ritrova ad associare l'Italia esclusivamente alle storie della nonna. Questi racconti contengono spesso anche lezioni di vita e hanno talvolta come personaggi gli zingari. Uno dei sogni di Doria quando era bambina era quello di unirsi a loro in un circo e diventare un'addestratrice di elefanti. Degli zingari Doria apprezza soprattutto il coraggio e la forza. Queste qualità saranno particolarmente utili a Carmolina, specialmente durante la sua fuga da casa. Inoltre, la simbologia del circo verrà utilizzata anche nella scena finale del romanzo; troveremo nonna e nipote intente a conversare sul trucco di un clown durante uno spettacolo circense.

Verso la fine del romanzo Doria, consapevole di essere in procinto di morire e di non poter partecipare al matrimonio della nipote Carmolina, desidera comunque vederla vestita da sposa. I figli decidono di accontentarla e i preparativi e lo svolgimento di questa "cerimonia" coinvolge tutto il quartiere. La vista della nipote in abito bianco provoca un'immensa felicità alla nonna. Per De Rosa la scena rappresenta il raggiungimento dell'indipendenza di Carmolina perché è qui che capisce veramente l'importanza delle sue radici.

Il rapporto che Doria intrattiene con Doriana, la sorella maggiore di Carmolina, è molto diverso. Doriana, che eredita il nome dalla nonna, ha un handicap mentale e non è in grado di parlare. Nel romanzo, il narratore sottolinea che i BellaCasa, incapaci di accettare la malattia di Doriana, soffrono molto e, anche se la ragazza è molto amata, non

sono in grado di fornirle un'assistenza adeguata. Il personaggio di Doriana è basato sulla vera sorella di De Rosa, della quale si è occupata durante tutta la sua vita adulta. De Rosa vede il concetto di famiglia, intesa come relazione tra Carmolina e Doriana, come il tema centrale del romanzo. Il personaggio di Carmolina, evidentemente basato sulla stessa De Rosa, è quindi l'unico membro della famiglia che è in grado di avere una relazione serena con Doriana.

Diverse esperienze di italianità: *Ava* di Carole Maso

Vista la mancanza di linearità e la struttura unica, ad una prima occhiata il romanzo di Maso potrebbe sembrare un insieme di frasi senza senso. In realtà, dopo averlo letto nella sua interezza si realizza che il libro è, invece, ben organizzato; si basa solo su un diverso sistema di significato e logica. In ogni pagina ci sono gruppi di una o due frasi, a volte anche tre o quattro, intervallati da uno spazio vuoto. Questa struttura vuole simulare i pensieri della protagonista Ava Klein, donna ebrea americana gravemente ammalata, nel suo ultimo giorno sulla terra. I ricordi della donna non sono sequenziali e, quindi, per ricostruirli è necessario far riferimento a punti diversi del racconto che possono essere antecedenti o successivi. Essendo la protagonista una professoressa di letteratura comparata, il testo è ricco di citazioni letterarie, musicali e cinematografiche che vengono chiarite in una sezione a parte dedicata alle fonti. Inoltre, compaiono spesso parole ed espressioni in italiano e francese dal momento che la donna ha vissuto in entrambi i paesi.

Anche se la protagonista e l'ambientazione del libro non sono strettamente italo americani, *Ava* contiene sicuramente molti riferimenti all'idea di italianità vissuta da una prospettiva americana. Attraverso la narrazione si può evincere l'impatto positivo che l'Italia ha avuto sull'esistenza di Ava; fin da giovane ha conosciuto ed apprezzato il paese e il primo dei suoi tre mariti, Francesco Guillini (chiaro rimando a Federico Fellini) è un regista romano. Inoltre, ci sono vari spunti e rimandi alle esperienze che la protagonista ha avuto in Italia che includono aneddoti sull'importanza della famiglia e della religione, e la particolare amicizia con una donna italiana di nome Maria Regina.

Omosessualità e identità italo americana: *Night Bloom: An Italian-American Life* di Mary Cappello

Night Bloom nasce da una serie di saggi precedentemente pubblicati, poi raccolti e ampliati sotto forma di memoir. Anche qui la narrazione non è cronologica ma si basa prevalentemente su riflessioni introdotte dai titoli dei vari capitoli. Cappello non scrive una tipica *coming-out story* che si concentra solamente sull'identità sessuale (Bona 2010b: 153), ma unisce fonti inedite e singolari (i diari di suo nonno e le lettere e le poesie di sua madre) creando unità tra diversi generi letterari. Rispetto alle altre opere analizzate, compaiono sicuramente meno espressioni lasciate in italiano. Questo perché i diari del nonno di Cappello, John Petracca, sono stati tradotti in inglese da alcuni amici dell'autrice, inclusa la studiosa Edvige Giunta, per renderli più accessibili al pubblico americano. Petracca, in grado di citare Dante e Pirandello, sfida e supera lo stereotipo dell'immigrato ignorante.

Nel memoir, le voci di nonno, madre e figlia si uniscono e rivelano i pensieri di tre generazioni di scrittori. Cappello rifiuta definizioni statiche di etnia e sessualità e situa il suo orientamento sessuale nel contesto italo americano nel quale è cresciuta. La sua famiglia, già diversa da quella tradizionale italo americana, è in grado di accettare, infatti, il suo essere lesbica senza particolari problemi.

Analizzando la storia della sua famiglia, provata dalle difficoltà dell'esperienza migratoria, l'insegnamento più importante che Cappello ne trae è quello di vedere il bello nelle cose semplici. Questo viene incarnato da un rituale specifico proprio alla sua famiglia che si è tramandato per tre generazioni: osservare lo sbocciare di un fiore, il *night-blooming cereus* (da qui il titolo dell'opera), che avviene di notte solo una volta l'anno.

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