Carrying the Voices into the Future

Mary Jo Bona

In Maria Mazziotti Gillan's poem, "The Crow," the Italian/American woman is represented as driven by the haunting ancestral voices of her past: "In our ears/a voice/connected to us like a cord,/whispers/you aren't really very much/you guinea, you wop,/so we struggle/to blot out the sound of the crow/who sits on our shoulder and laughs,/blot out the voice/that belittles all we do,/and drives us to be best./'My daughter,/she's ugly, but smart.'" While the depiction seems chilling, calling up fears of childhood, the images later in the poem present an Italian/American woman, who is both a mother and a poet, involved doubly in creation.

The burden of such roles is immense and certainly not unique to the Italian/American woman's experience. However, only recently have women from this Euro-American ethnic group been anthologized and critiqued specifically for literary achievements which require their attention to matters apart from their traditional domain—the home—the sanctuary for la famiglia. The

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writers collected in the anthology *The Voices We Carry* (Montréal: Guernica Press, 1994) all acknowledge implicitly the dual and conflicting roles involved in being a daughter of Italian/Sicilian ancestors and the writer who breaks away from the traditions imposed by the code of *omertà* (silence) in order to write the family’s secrets and to grieve for the death of first-generation Italians, the majority of whom immigrated to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹

In *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of Italian-Americans*, Richard Gambino relates a humorous family anecdote written by Mario Puzo: after he had contracted with Paramount Pictures for a large sum of money to screen-write his famous novel, *The Godfather*, Puzo told his Neapolitan mother of the good news, to which she responded, “Don’t tell nobody.” This story epitomizes the tendency toward secrecy in the Southern Italian mentality, a tendency stemming from the need to shelter the family from others’ envy and to protect the family’s honor; indeed, the family struggled to maintain financial stability in the midst of natural disasters, and severe economic and political conditions in the *Mezzogiorno*, areas south and east of Rome (Gambino 1974: 152, 150).

Public schooling and new urban environments in America gradually re-defined the concept of *la famiglia*² held by transplanted Italians, yet the tradition of silence persisted in a land of *stranieri* and in a place that did not readily welcome “swarthy”-faced immigrants. Despite economic hardship and painful adjustments, Italians in America began writing their stories, often beginning with what they knew best—the family and the transatlantic crossing, both of which we see in an excerpt from Daniela Gioseffi’s *Americans: One Minute to Midnight*, an intergenerational novel in which father and daughter share the narration.

Immigrant fiction and autobiography were primarily written by Italian male immigrants in the early decades of the twentieth century.³ Traditionally less educated than men, women were expected to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers.⁴ As second- and third-generation Italian/Americans furthered their education, they inherited a legacy of conflicting prescriptions from their immigrant parents, demands that were literally irreconcilable: “‘Get an education, but don’t change’”; “‘go out into the larger world but don’t become part of it’”; “‘grow, but remain within the image of the ‘house-plant’ Sicilian girl’” (Gambino 1974: 36). As third-generation Italian/American writer Tina de Rosa puts it,
we leave the closely knit Italian/American culture which, "regardless of our education, expects us still to be more or less like them, which still expects us to get married and have babies." What this culture did not expect was for Italian/American women to be married with children and write. Writing the family's secrets may very well border on treason, but Italian/American women write out of a fierce sense of loyalty and passion for the family even when they critique it as Susan Leonardi does in her story "Bernie Becomes a Nun" and Dorothy Bryant in an excerpt from her novel, The Test.

The secrets that we are privy to parallel those of other cultural groups in America, especially Asians and Hispanics, who have made a recent move into a country (America) less amenable to difference than originally thought. It is truly no secret that life for ethnic groups in America has been equated to a Dantesque hell; that alongside the usual hardships of poverty and hunger come serious and debilitating mental illnesses that arise in America and cannot be cured there; that the family, however much loved and passionately honored by men, is often unrelentingly painful for women. Just as the mother in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior tells her daughter "you must not tell anyone . . . what I am about to tell you," the mothers in the Italian/American women's tradition give their daughters an example to emulate from their own lives of hard work and dedication, but to emulate with the added gift of autonomy, buttressed by education and financial security. Several of the authors' works such as Anne Paolucci's "Buried Treasure" (from her book, Sepia Tones) and Lynn Vannucci's "Humphrey Bogart is Dead" and "An Accidental Murder" (from her unpublished book, Driving) in fact reconstruct the complicated and often agonized lives of their parents and grandparents in order to celebrate their ancestors' hard-won success and to negotiate their own positions as second- and third-generation Italian/American women writers. Thus, although the imposition of omertà pervades the Italian/American woman writer's psyche, she must write through the silence in order to overcome the cultural inhibitions placed on her by the family. Like Asian/American and African/American women writers, then, Italian/American women writers start out from what they know—the family—and tell the secrets in order to, as King-Kok Cheung writes, "defend themselves with words; . . . discover their potential—sound themselves out—through articulation."

In their grieving for the death of the first-generation Italians,
several of the writers echo what Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote in his by-now famous poem, "The Old Italians Dying": "For years the old Italians have been dying/all over America/... The old men are waiting for it to be finished/for their glorious sentence on earth/to be finished." Later in the poem, Ferlinghetti describes the widows, invariably outliving the old men, "still the matriarchs," reinforcing the strength and determination traditionally attributed to Italian women in America. Although works such as Mary Bush's "Planting" and Rachel Guido de Vries's *The Lost Era of Frank Sinatra* value the strength of their grandmothers and mothers, they steer away from romanticizing the figure of the mother as perpetually dolorous, essentially good, and/or always responsible and attentive.

The image of the suffering madonna in Italian/American fiction persuasively appears in Pietro di Donato's characterization of the appropriately named mother, Annunziata, in his autobiographical novel, *Christ in Concrete* (1939). The figure of the suffering mother, indeed, is rooted in the tradition of marianism in Italy. Ann Cornelisen justifiably makes a connection between the Southern Italian mother and the Madonna, both "all-forgiving, [and] all-protecting," but she reminds us that, though Italian mothers aim to fulfill this role, "they seldom carry the weight of total responsibility." The writers in *The Voices We Carry* for the most part are writing out of a tradition of American realism, that is, they are concerned to depict the mother irrevocably as part of a social order, influenced just as much by class and regional background as by memories of Italian ancestry. Aware perhaps of the tendency to essentialize the Italian/American woman's experience as mother and wife, Italian/American women writers have often compelled us to view the mother and the family through the lens of poverty, loss, and confusion. Out of such pain, characters are witness to their own capacity for vision, as the sister, Angie-Lyn, experiences in Phyllis Capello's story "An Angel, By and By."

Other themes also exist in the fourteen stories anthologized in *The Voices We Carry*. Laura Marello's novella, *Claiming Kin*, takes account of the long-term effects of transplantation on third- and fourth-generation Italian/American men and women; Adria Bernardi's "A Slight Blow to the Cheek" focuses on the influence of Catholicism on Italians in America; writers such as Mary Bush, Dodici Azpadu, Susan Leonardi, and Dorothy Bryant all discuss in varying ways the psychological suffering of characters, whose specific illnesses symbolize their despair. All is not elegiac in
these stories, however. Diana Cavallo and Janet Capone, each in very different ways, celebrates Italian/American experience, Cavallo by incorporating family rituals such as “water-gathering” in an excerpt from her novel, *Juniper Street Sketches,* and Capone by using humor to enliven the experience of working-class Catholic Italians in the Bronx in “Holy Ghosts,” a chapter from her novel-in-progress, *The Franny Stories.*

Several of the fourteen writers in *The Voices We Carry* follow in the tradition of earlier Italian/American writers such as Mari Tomasi and Marion Benasutti in their allegiance to and celebration of Italian culture, including music, food, and love—a rather Italianized version of Shakespeare’s romantic comedies! The writers often incorporate descriptions of feasts, holidays, and saint’s days, including recipes specific to their regional traditions, as Yannucci and Capone do in their culinary descriptions of holiday meals. Because food symbolizes life and communality, third-generation writers choose to inculcate a feeling of *italianità* through feasting and thus revitalize their connection to their immigrant ancestors, many of whom maintained their ethnicity by eating well. What remains problematic and altogether complicated with regard to the food motif in some of these stories is the hard fact that bad things can and do happen in the kitchen. If we consider the tragic ending of Vannucci’s “An Accidental Murder,” in the context of the place where the murder occurs (the kitchen), we begin to realize that *la cucina* is not a fundamentally safe haven for Italian/American women. They must get out of the kitchen in order to revitalize, protect, and redefine their identities.

Carrying on Italian traditions is also staunchly maintained by the belief in owning land; the phrase *terra firma,* Gambino reminds us, is a synonym for security (1974: 128). Despite the often unhappy if not cruel environment in the home, the majority of Italian/American writers believe the home to be the site of power and protection. In the novel, *The Test,* Dorothy Bryant’s protagonist explicitly makes a connection between her need for security and her ethnicity: “I confessed my ineradicable immigrant psychology, the necessity to own something tangible, a piece of the land, something real ‘for my old age.’” In the Italian/American mentality, then, owning land is like owning a piece of the past: it is not only economically important, but it is emotionally necessary for a feeling of power, security, and longevity. Nonetheless, Bryant’s middle-aged protagonist is painfully aware that her relationship to her father’s house is com-
plex and unresolved. His home, his terra firma, is also the place for the protagonist to stay the same, to suffocate, to remember, all too poignantly, the vital lies that have sustained the family.

The Italian/American woman writer remains committed to exploring the emotional nuances attached to culinary traditions and the home environment. As folklorist and writer Rose Grieco says of the fig tree, “it is a thing of the heart,” like wine-making and water-gathering; it can only be taught in and by the family, however painful the lessons learned therein. Carrying a fig tree from the old country to transplant and tend in the new world garden as the characters do in Cavallo’s and Bush’s stories, is an act of love and a commitment to integrating Italian and American customs.

Thus the writers in The Voices We Carry often adhere to the traditions that their biological and/or literary ancestors valued: a desire to write about the family in order to secure its importance to the Italian/American identity, aware of the disapproval, if not misunderstanding, of family members; a need to recall the first-generation immigrants, who courageously immigrated to another world and left a legacy of commitment to hard work and responsibility to their forbears; and a desire to celebrate and to challenge the familial traditions symbolized by two central locations: la cucina and il giardino: the kitchen and the garden, places where celebrations occur, conversations ensue, and unresolved conflict remains.

Perhaps because a majority of the fourteen writers in this collection are distanced from the original journey and the workaday lives of their ancestors, their writing also diverges from and expands on their Italian ethnicity in two apparent ways: in their negotiation with the old country, and in their desire to move “beyond ethnicity,” a phrase that will be defined more fully below. Often, for first- and second-generation Italian/Americans, the vision of the old country is as flawless as a landscape painting, unchanged by time. Uninterested in realistic depictions of the home village, the aged father-in-law in Anne Paolucci’s “Buried Treasure” paints Italian village scenes copied from a snapshot taken fifty years earlier. His past, like the pasts of many first-generation Italian/Americans, is perfected in memory and the homeland itself is recalled as a paradise lost.

In contrast to nineteenth-century American literary artists, who often characterized Italy as decadent, malevolent, and unhealthy, Italian/American writers have often reversed this
trend by depicting Italy as the land of milk and honey, America as *maladetta*, the accursed land that swallows up unsuspecting peasants.\textsuperscript{14} Recently, however, many third-generation Italian/Americans have themselves returned to their home villages and are no longer solely dependent on stories from their parents, who offer them a mediated vision of the homeland, marred by the faulty memories of their own parents. Lisa Ruffolo's work is a case in point. Her story, "Southern Italy," offers a grim interpretation of the region; the female protagonist, who, in typically American style, renames herself Black Capri, leaves Palermo with a vision of apocalypse in mind, not of paradise. What we see from writers such as Lisa Ruffolo, Laura Marello, and Dodici Azpadu is a necessarily different relationship with Italy and Sicily, perhaps less static and nostalgic, but still passionately rooted to a land as diverse and confused as America, or, as Azpadu puts it in "Desert Ruins," a land that is "a miracle as fragile as . . . breath." As more and more Italian-descended Americans return to Italy and write about their journeys, we will see how they negotiate their dual identities as Italian/Americans and how they incorporate the "old country" in their recent narratives.\textsuperscript{15}

A second way that these writers reconceptualize their ancestors' national origins is through a desire to move beyond ethnicity, to use Werner Sollors' term; this is the yearning to discover other forms of "contrastive terminology" besides ethnicity in order to celebrate otherness and to discern how other forms of marginalization—for example, racial, sexual orientation, and religious life, intersect with Italian/American identity.\textsuperscript{16} Mary Bush and Daniela Gioseffi write about relationships between Italian/Americans and African/Americans, reinforcing the history of oppression from which both groups suffered, but always cognizant of the pervasive disease of white racism in the United States and its qualitatively harsher discrimination on black Americans. Moreover, many Italian and Sicilian lesbians have reclaimed their ethnic heritage, thus breaking another silence imposed by the traditionally Italian injunction to be quiet and to tell nobody. For example, Rachel Guido de Vries's lesbian protagonist, Jude, is beaten and rejected by her father, but she expresses the ongoing importance of *la famiglia* in her relationship to her spiritual *comare*, in her devotion to feasting and ritual, and in her celebration of *italianità* with her partner. By reclaiming familial culture and culinary traditions, lesbian Italian/Americans express
their desire to survive and flourish emotionally, as their foremothers did before them. 17

Perhaps religious life and Italian Catholicism are the least understood or analyzed in Italian/American literature, but Susan Leonardi, Adria Bernardi, and Janet Capone all focus on the influence of American Catholicism on Italian/Americans, who are traditionally less dogmatic than other ethnic groups, but very much influenced by Irish/American Catholicism. As Bernadette Frances Palermo struggles to accept the economic and cultural reasons for her "choosing" to become a nun, she recognizes the ineluctable pull of her working-class roots and her own sexual confusion, both of which highly determine her choice to enter religious life ("Bernie Becomes a Nun"). To understand the complexity of the Italian/American's relationship to the Catholic church, factors such as Mezzogiorno values, differences in gender perceptions, and Irish/American Catholicism must be taken into account. 18

Recent anthologies and journals are increasingly taking into account the voices of Italian/American writers. It is trailblazing efforts such as Helen Barolini's that make The Voices We Carry possible. Barolini's The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women (New York: Schocken Books, 1985) introduces the voices of fifty-six Italian/American women writers. It is the first thoroughgoing compendium of its kind, one that includes five genres: memoirs, nonfiction, fiction, drama, and poetry. From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 1991) edited by Anthony Tamburri, Paolo Giordano, and Fred Gardaphé, includes both critical and creative writings, and thus offers an analytical apparatus with which to read the fiction and poetry. Two journals devoted to disseminating information on Italian/American writers and publishing new works are Italian Americana, edited by Carol Bonomo Albright (University of Rhode Island) and VIA, Voices in Italian Americana, edited by Anthony Tamburri et al. (Purdue University).

The Voices We Carry continues the ongoing conversation about Italian/American experience, focussing on one genre, fiction, and on four thematic areas: part one, "The Recreation of Historical Lives," introduces the first-generation pioneers, who courageously attempted to make America their home, despite overwhelming odds. Though hardship persists well into the second generation, Italian-descended people in America have embraced the American ideals of upward mobility and a commit-
ment to a better future. If their commitment to prosperity becomes solely future-oriented, then there is less incentive to maintain “ethnic concern with parentage and origin.” The immigrant Italian/Americans in this collection are primarily characterized as refusing to relinquish their love for their ancestry and for the old land. The reenactment of feasting and religious rituals is central to maintaining ethnic continuity. Throughout *The Voices We Carry*, the writers recreate the past and in doing so reinforce the importance of memory for the continuation of ethnic identity. Perhaps one of the most persistent and overriding themes in American literary history is the emphasis on the value of memory, from the first-generation Puritans, who lamented the diminishing of their city upon a hill to the twentieth-century Gatsby, who tragically attempts to reinvigorate his dream of fulfillment. The Italian/American writers in this collection equally value the uses of memory and recognize the importance that women’s memories have in formulating and sustaining ethnic identity.

“The Intersection between America and *l’Italia*,” part two of this anthology, represents the third generation’s response to Italy and Sicily, reinforcing an ongoing connection with the ancestral homeland. Though they may try to relinquish their connection to the home country, it remains as strong and irresistible as the ties of kinship, as Marello makes clear in *Claiming Kin*. The third section, “La famiglia in America,” focuses on the influence of class, religious and regional background as it intersects with the characters’ identity as Italian/Americans. It also reinforces a distinctly Italian/American definition of family, one that focuses on an identity that is derived from affiliation with the family, not from separation and autonomy, traditionally Anglo/American measures of maturity. While the writers may very well embrace familial affiliation, they also critique it, realizing the added complication of being a woman in an Italian/American household. The fourth and final section, “The End of a Generation,” literally says goodbye to first-generation immigrants. The use of generational imagery helps explain the mournful tone in these stories, but invoking generations, Sollors reminds us, is as old as the Puritans and “has provided a mental map for newcomers and their descendants” (1986: 211). Each of the writers must discover if not create the appropriate perspective by which to understand her particular generation as it relates to those that have gone before. In Vannucci’s chapters from *Driving*, the female protagonist, Lucia, loses both of her grandparents within the span of
hours. As a result, she must learn how to rediscover the power of survival within herself—she must learn how to drive into the future, as the title suggests, deriving her newfound power from her forbears.20

The writers presented in The Voices We Carry have all been engaged in writing projects that move well beyond the scope of Italian/American ethnicity. They are as diverse as their regional backgrounds—from upstate New York to Albuquerque, New Mexico—and their original homeland provenance—from Northern Italian villages near Turin to the Kalso, an Arab ghetto in Palermo. As wide-ranging as these writers are, their decision to focus on Italian/American identity in the 1990s reinforces the irresistible nature of ethnicity as a source and subject of American literary writing. Moreover, evaluating these stories compels a recognition of the ways in which these writers have re-created their ethnicity to accommodate the changing needs of women. Whether these writers and their protagonists are celibate, married, divorced, or lesbian, their stories emphasize a desire for intimacy within a newly defined family, one that values women’s strength and independence outside the strict confines of la casa. Thus placing these writers in a collection that defines their aims more narrowly—as Italian/American women writers—seeks out commonality and affirmation—like-sounding voices—in an attempt to reinforce the resilience of cultural traditions and the writers’ desire to articulate, with eloquence and narrative skill, the experiences of Italian/Americans from the beginning of the century to the present.

In a lecture entitled “Strategies of Oppositional Discourse: Watershed,” Gayatri Spivak warns against ethnic Americans solely defining themselves as oppositional discourse, that is, as we against them, for example, as Italian/Americans against Anglo/Americans. Spivak contends that the idea that we are the other of the Anglo/American, or the “dominant” culture, is not useful. As in the earlier anthologies, the Italian/American women writers in The Voices We Carry do not write defensively or narrowly about their ethnicity. In fact, the writers are less concerned to detail the processes of Americanization (which requires, to a large extent, abandoning immigrant ties and embracing Anglo values) than they are to exploring the development of an ethnic selfhood, one that the characters in these stories highly value. These writers validate the diversity of their cultural origins because they know, as Spivak attests, that ethnicity strikes at the heart of identity.21
These writers know that finding and maintaining a sense of continuity with one's ancestral heritage, as anthropologists De Vos and Romanucci-Ross put it, offers them, "to some degree the personal and social meaning of human existence." Throughout the collection, the writers are painfully aware that to be without ethnicity, without a sense of continuity, is to be "faced with one's own death" (1982: 364). As in the Mazziotti-Gillan poem that began this essay, the writers may very well hear the voices of the old ones relentlessly cawing like crows, but they have listened well enough to hear and write about the song that has been muted by struggle and pain. Thus, *The Voices We Carry* brings together writers on the basis of their concern about Italian/American ethnicity. Like archaeologists, Italian/American women are digging up their cultural origins in order to "rediscover place" and carry their unique voices into the future.\(^2\)

1. Northern Italians were among the first to emigrate from Italy to America. Of the 47,000 Italians who arrived on American shores in 1861, most were from the North. After 1880, primarily Southern Italian peasants immigrated to the United States. Of the 2,300,000 immigrants who arrived from Italy between the years 1899-1910, only 400,000 were from the Northern provinces. At least 85 per cent of all Italians who emigrated to the United States were from the *Mezzogiorno*, areas south and east of Rome. See Rudolph Vecoli, Foreword to *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant*, ed. Marie Hall Ets (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1970): ix, and Richard Gambino, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of Italian-Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1974): 113, 3.

2. Historian Donna Gabaccia defines *la famiglia* as "the immigrant network of close and extended kin living in several neighboring households." Gabaccia diverges from other historians who understand *la famiglia* to be "new-world expressions of Old-world traditions" and instead suggests that the concept of the family "appears instead to have emerged during migration to and life in a new urban environment," though its cultural origin is in Sicily. See *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change among Italian Immigrants, 1830-1930* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984): xv, xvi, 115.


4. Statistics indicate, however, that illiteracy rates were high for both male and female Italian immigrants: "In 1901, a time when the total illiteracy of Italy was 38.30 per cent, 62 per cent of the Southern Italian men landing at Ellis Island
were totally lacking the ability to read and write ‘any recognized language or dialect,’ as the record puts it, and 74 per cent of the women were illiterate” (Gambino 1974: 78-79). Access to education and different expectations for boys and girls also account for women’s later literary development.


7. In her introduction to The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women (New York: Schocken , 1985), Helen Barolini exposes the lie in releases from the Sons of Italy and the Agnelli report, who “count on the self-sacrifice of women to support [the family] unilaterally.” Defining the family as the most important institution, the Sons of Italy place the mother at the center of the home, “providing warmth, love, and devotion.” The literature and oral histories of Italian/American women often provide a radically different view: “home life was never as solid and satisfying as the men said it was; it was what it was for historic and social reasons that are now surpassed” (15, 14). For an example of a recent oral history of Italian/American women that exposes the ambivalence of the female experience, see Voices of the Daughters, eds. Connie A. Maglione and Carmen Anthony Fiore (Princeton, NJ: Townhouse Publishing, 1989).


The same attitude toward silence and creativity can be seen in the Italian/American women’s tradition.


12. For a splendid book that celebrates the connection between feasting and ritual, see Helen Barolini’s Festa: Recipes and Recollections of Italian Holidays (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988).


14. Perhaps the quintessential story that depicts American innocence being destroyed by Italian experience is Henry James’s Daisy Miller. Although Italy is embraced as the intellectual and moral epicenter for young American writers, it is concomitantly treated as symbolic of the decadence of the European world. For a thorough examination of American writers in Italy, see Nathalia Wright’s American Novelists in Italy: The Discoverers—Allston to James (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 1965). In contrast, Italian/American writers often regard America as the place of suffering and death, Italy as the place to rediscover health. The term maladetta as applied to the United States is used by the transplanted grandmother in Marion Benasutti’s No Steady Job for Papa.
15. For recent literary works by Italian/Americans who have returned to the homeland, see Justin Vitiello’s, “Sicily Within,” *Arba Sicula* (Supplement IV), 1992, and Susan Caperna Lloyd’s *No Pictures in My Grave: A Spiritual Journey in Sicily* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992).


17. Recent publications that focus on the intersection between Italian/American and lesbian identity are Rose Romano’s chapbook of poems, *Vendetta* (San Francisco: malafemmina press, 1990) and the forty-first issue of *Sinister Wisdom*, “il viaggio delle donne” (Summer/Fall 1990).


