ABSTRACT

FINDING VOICES: ITALIAN AMERICAN FEMALE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by Marta Piroli

The central point of this thesis is the recognition and exploration of the tradition of female Italian American autobiography, focusing on the choice of some Italian American writers to camouflage their Italian background and change their name. The thesis consists of four chapters. The first chapter explores a brief history of Italian migration in America during the nineteenth century. The second part of this chapter provides a literary discussion about the most important autobiographical theories over the twentieth century, focusing on the female self. The second chapter explores the role of Italian woman in Italian culture, and the first steps of emancipation of the children of the Italian immigrants. The third chapter will offer an approach to autobiography as a genre for expressing one’s self. The final chapter provides an analysis of significant Italian American women writers and their personal search for identity.
FINDING VOICES:
ITALIAN AMERICAN FEMALE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A Thesis

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CHAPTER I: ITALIAN IMMIGRATION, AN OVERVIEW

On March 14, 1993, the New York Times Book Review published on the front page Gay Talese’s article “Where Are The Italian American Novelists?”. This article brought attention to the possibilities that there could be a distinct Italian American literary tradition, the study of which has been neglected and dismissed. Within this tradition, Italian American women expressed their life stories, but narrow cultural definitions of women’s roles made their writing marginal. The central point of this thesis is the recognition and exploration of the tradition of female Italian American autobiography, focusing on the choice, or necessity, of some Italian American writers to camouflage their Italian backgrounds and, in some instances, to change their names.

In spite of a former lack of acknowledgement of the value of women’s autobiography in Italian American literature, the Italian American woman writer, suspended between two worlds very different from each other, has been caught in the bind of defining herself and finding her place and role, and establishing a balance between her Italian past and American present. Coming from an Italian society characterized by poverty and deprivation, and a total denial of personal freedom, many Italian American women writers used autobiography as a means of exploring self expression in writing. As pointed out by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in Women, Autobiography, Theory–A Reader, the practice of constructing an autobiography is a very effective tool for documenting one’s own life experiences, and understanding one’s own identity. In particular, Italian American women writers used this literary strategy to unite the different pieces and parts of their bicultural life into a balanced self. The real and significant literary contribution of Italian culture to American literature came from the children of the first immigrants, in their need to establish their identities suspended between two worlds, and to recover their tradition.

In this first chapter I explore a brief history of Italian migration in America in a period covering the years 1875 – 1915. This historical excursus will be helpful in giving a temporal and sociological placement of Italian migration in the United
States and in understanding the contact between Italian and American worlds. The second part of the first chapter provides a literary review of some of the most important autobiographical theories that focus on the female self. The second chapter will explore Italian life in America during the twentieth century. Particular attention is devoted to the role of the Italian woman in Italian culture but also to the first steps of emancipation and independence of the children of the immigrants. The third chapter will offer a theoretical approach to autobiography as a privileged genre for expressing one’s self, and a discussion about the consolidation and acknowledgement of the Italian American female tradition. The fourth chapter provides a concrete analysis of Italian American autobiographies and the personal search for identity.

**Italian Migration in America**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau\(^1\) in 2000 almost sixteen million Americans declared Italian roots. This significant fact is due to the migration of six million Italian people from Italy to America between 1815 and 1915. The migration of Italians from their villages in Italy, more than a century ago, has no parallel in history. Out of a population of fourteen million southern Italians, an estimated five million left by the outbreak of World War I, in the largest exodus of a single ethnic group to the United States. Most of the immigrants came to the United States during "the great migration,"\(^2\) between 1880 and 1922, in search of opportunity and personal improvement denied in their homeland. During the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, the Italian immigration had its peak: three and a half million Italian people arrived in the U.S. Obviously any generalization about Italian immigrants can give only a superficial description and idea of this complex social phenomenon, but it is possible to outline some general aspects and features of the Italian migration. Andrew Rolle, in *The Italian Americans–Troubled Roots*\(^3\), and

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2. According to the Immigration History Research Center directed by Rudolph Vecoli, the migration of Italian people in the United States between the nineteenth and twentieth century has this name in consideration of the massive and extraordinary number of people forming the migrating wave, approximately six million Italian people.
Rudolph J. Vecoli, in *Storia dell’Emigrazione Italiana*⁴ (*History of the Italian Immigration*), depicted southern Italy as a peasant society characterized by intolerable conditions, a narrow and rigid culture where people, in the attempt to build their lives and aspirations, were forced to struggle with poverty, ignorance, oppression, insecurity and lack of opportunity. Social, political and economic depression was crystallized in a system administered by the leading class—the aristocracy—who blocked progress because they were too scared by the prospect of change and loss of privileges. Farmers were used working their entire lives for absentee and incompetent landlords not interested in the progress and modernization of their estates. Illiteracy, poverty, famine, the vastness of *latifondo*—the typical southern estate of the aristocracy—the inclemency of the natural elements and malaria were a strident contrast with the glory of the Renaissance or what was conveniently called Italian culture. In fact, what is traditionally and commonly linked to Italian culture is not always an exact representation of the lives of many Italian people. Unfortunately lack of education and of decent living conditions were the reality that urged a consistent part of the Italian population to migrate to the United States. Andrew Rolle points out that many negative elements produced an inevitable distrust in the social system, and the consequent necessity to escape from it “Disease, hunger, epidemics, and political corruption had darkened the life of too many young peasants. Their exploitation by absentee landlords and avaricious merchants produced a wage system that was scandalous, even by European standard.”⁵

The majority of the Italian immigrants looked at the American shores as a mythical and magnificent alternative to despair and poverty, and in Italy, more than in other European countries, this myth stood out over the rest.

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

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⁵ Andrew Rolle, *The Italian Americans – Troubled Roots*, p. 3.
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.

In 1907 one out of four immigrants to the United States came from Italy. Most of them were single young men (about eighty men for every twenty women), without education, coming from the most poor Italian regions like Campania, Calabria, Sicilia, Abruzzi, and Molise, with the idea of staying abroad only for a short period of time, pursuing the hope of improving their lives through earnings and then going back to Italy. Most of these immigrants were farmers without training in any other field who faced the diversity of the American society of the twentieth century, with great opportunities but also contradictions. American society was based on mobility and an industrial economy completely different from the agricultural background belonging to Italian culture.

Italian immigrants were in a difficult position: their lack of education and knowledge of the language, both English and more often than not also Italian, because they spoke only their regional dialect, and their incapability of understanding the basic elements of American society made them weak and vulnerable. In order to face all these difficulties with mutual support, they lived close to one another in that informal institution called “Little Italy”, a kind of powerful net of settlements, areas and districts inside a city. In this part of the city it was possible to live with the comfort and understanding of people coming from the

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6. “Paesani” means fellow-countrymen of the same village, but in the Italian context it meant more than sharing a geographical place of living, it meant to be part of an extended family.
8. According to Rudolph J. Vecoli, in Storia dell’Emigrazione Italiana, many typical aspects of Italian immigration in the U.S.–lack of interest in learning and speaking English, denying being part
same land and facing the same adversities. As considered by Joseph Velikonja, the community identity was based on being part of a group: “The society as a whole is recognizing the value of grouping, and as such views the survival of the ethnic community […] The ‘Little Italies’ are becoming in this sense tested cases of complex adaptive system with confirmed identity and firmly established functional network within the American urban scene.”

According to Vecoli, a relevant social change occurred in the migrating process: after World War I migration involved not only single males, but entire families started to move and migrate together, coming again in large numbers from southern Italy’s Mezzogiorno regions, Calabria, Campania and Sicily. In consequence of the massive wave of immigrants during the nineteenth century, American immigration authorities felt the need to more strictly regulate immigration policies. The government was concerned about the protection of the country and its citizens from the exorbitant number of immigrants of other ethnicities. Different ethnicities migrating into the United States were considered a danger for the survival of the Anglo-Saxon race, because their foreignness implied a contamination of the pure white race. In particular, the contamination of the white race was considered more than a possibility but a fact, because of the immigrants’ capacity for producing citizens for the American nation. In fact children born in America are U.S. citizens regardless their parents’ naturalization. This fact brought attention to the consideration that, inevitably, a portion of future American citizens would have been of foreign origin, with American citizenship but without any connection with the Anglo-Saxon race. This is the reason why American authorities, through a severe regulation of immigration policies, attempted to shape the future generations of American citizens. Consequently American immigration policies admitted

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immigrants according to a precise model: white race, heterosexual, patriarchal and strictly based on a division of gender/sexual roles\textsuperscript{10}.

As a result, the United States restricted the immigration of southern and eastern Europeans, fixing a national quota, even if a reunion of members of immigrant families was allowed. Immigration policies and family reunification policies strongly affected the role of the female immigrant, who was not only subjected to the restrictions of immigration policies but had also the burden of being considered a public charge, useless without a man. Family reunification policies, like the Page Act of 1875, which denied Asian prostitutes admission to the country, excluded a class of women expressing a different sexuality, or who were not directly linked to a patriarchal framework. Independent female migration was regarded as a moral issue by American authorities, because a woman was not supposed to live an independent life, unless involved in immoral activities such as prostitution. Prostitutes were the first group of immigrants to be excluded from admission to the country. Consequently women were allowed to enter the country only if they were married. This practice reinforced immigrant women’s subordination and denied them the full and independent status of human being.\textsuperscript{11}

In the migration process Italian women usually followed their husbands or fathers, whom they were traditionally obliged to obey, and for whom they were expected to keep house. Life for an immigrant Italian woman was “a bounded network of other Italian immigrant women hemmed in by the linguistic and cultural walls of the Italian ghetto. Restricted by tradition from having any contact with men other than her husband, she was almost completely confined to social contacts with other neighborhood women. Not only were these neighborhoods all Italian, many of them came from the same village.”\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Eithne Luibhéid, \textit{Entry Denied–Controlling Sexuality at the Border} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2002.

\textsuperscript{11} Beginning in 1882, admission to the country was denied to people considered “public charges”. Also this additional limitation penalized women traveling alone or who were pregnant, because they were considered not able to provide for and support themselves, and thus, potentially became a public charge.

As pointed out by many scholars of Italian migration in the United States, such as Vecoli, Rolle and Rose Basile Green, starting in the 1920’s Italian immigrants knew a more consistent stabilization of their lives in America. Many of them were able to start their own businesses and had access to a more comfortable life-style. Children were allowed to attend American schools instead of working and providing an additional income for the family’s survival. In spite of the community’s extreme protection of Italian families and practice of keeping their children isolated from American society, children of the first Italian immigrants started to move away from the communities in which they were reared. New experiences, new friends, more opportunities to be educated, greater contacts with the American society and promise of freedom and opportunities made possible the change in their life style, the change of the role of women and defection from the old traditions. Leaving the narrow boundaries of their “Little Italies” Italian people knew a “second migration” made up of changed perspectives and opening toward the American society to which they necessarily belonged.

This “second migration” is a metaphorical wandering Italian American children began in order to find their places as bicultural in American society. They felt the necessity to be settled as members of a community from which they were excluded as foreign. Being part of the American community meant being able to leave Italian families and embrace a new life. This was an internal migration that led them to assimilation and to the process of “Americanization”. They were ready to become Italian Americans.

Assimilation is a multiple–faceted process by which one group of people diffuses its characteristics into those of another in an interaction of culture. The process may be difficult, often painful, sometimes tragic. For the Italian immigrants, assimilation was both a necessity for functioning and a factor of survival. They had to assimilate; they had no alternative, if they were to remain in the country. Everywhere they settled, they found it imperative to make changes to implement their adjustment. The several areas of
immigrant assimilation include the economic, the educational, the religious, the social, the political, and the cultural. At first, the most important area was the economic one, since it constituted the main reason for the immigrants’ coming; but the other areas eventually became significant.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Claiming an Italian American Tradition}

The initial lack of an Italian American literary tradition could have been due to many reasons: the lack of education of the first Italian immigrants, the lack of interest from the publishing industry in Italian or Italian American narratives and, for Italian American female writers, the limitation of being a woman in a patriarchal social structure. In consideration of the poor and hard conditions of life of the first Italian immigrants, it is evident that Italian immigrants didn’t prioritize the transmission of their heritage. They moved to the new world with the idea of working, with the hope of survival and improving their lives. They had little time to be concerned with preserving their culture in writing. In fact the most relevant literary contribution of Italian culture to American literature came many years later, from the children of the first immigrants. They felt the need to recover their tradition, to establish their identity and community through their literature, in a process made possible by the contact with American culture. Unfortunately the publishing industry was interested in a kind of literature linked to the field of American studies with literature that was properly American. There was no place and space for Italian American issues.

The writing of autobiographies had its origin in the importance of expressing one’s self, but the expression of one’s self was a difficult and painful process. In fact for many Italian American women writers this generated a conflict partly because of their bicultural origin. Being bicultural meant not belonging clearly and distinctly to only one ethnic group. It meant instead to be suspended between different values and ideals, and trying to live according to both parts. Many Italian American women

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Rose Basile Green, The Italian American Novel} (Cranbury: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1974), 38.
tried to establish their identities by sacrificing their Italian part. They tried to let only their American selves live in a society that denied ethnic diversities. Some did so by changing their names, the first and most immediate sign of Italian ethnicity.

The usual tradition of adopting one’s husband’s surname was used by many Italian American women writers as an attempt to erase their ethnicity. Marrying an American man (instead of an Italian man) became an act of independence and a possibility to change one’s status. In marrying an American man, Italian American women writers anglicized their names and camouflaged their origins. The change of one’s own name represents the need to be another person, to forget one’s own past and start a new life with a different self.

One Italian American woman writer to change her name for professional purposes was Francesca Vinciguerra, who became Frances Winwar during the 1930’s in order to publish her first novel. Her publisher recognized her talent as a writer, but he was not willing to recognize her Italian ethnicity and imposed the change of her name as a condition to the publication of the novel.

Poet and writer Maria Mazziotti changed her name first from Maria to Marie, and when she got married she became Marie Gillan. She described her feelings in changing her name when she married an educated American man with educated parents: “marrying into that family, I thought I was being transformed, lifting up and away from my own Italian self. My husband seemed to be everything I was not. In marrying him, I could deny my past and forget my name with all its awkward points zs and ts. With my new name, I thought I could forget that my parents couldn’t speak English correctly and were poor.”  

Writer and professor Marianna De Marco Torgovnick, writer Rachel Guido De Vries or scholar and writer Sandra Mortola Gilbert have also followed the same path of Italian self-denial. In Mortola’s words it is evident the awareness of the illusion in changing identity through the change of the name. “I am really Sandra Mortola Gilbert, and my mother’s name was Caruso, so I always felt oddly falsified

14 Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Shame and Silence in My Work, in Breaking Open: Reflections on Italian American Women’s Writing, ed. Mary Ann Mannino and Justin Vitiello (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2003), 158.
with this waspish-sounding American name, which I adopted as a twenty-years old bride who had never considered the implications of her actions.”

Adopting husbands’ surnames was not the only possible way Italian American women writers erased their Italian self. For example poet Kathryn Telesco chose to change her name into Kathy Freeperson without being married, as an act of independence. “Freeperson” is probably one of the most significant choices of names, as a reflection of her rebirth as an individual, independent person.

Conformity to American society was a necessity both for women and for men, but in different ways. As pointed out by Rolle men changed their names also, but their personal identity was not a matter of debate. They were rather interested in the survival of their businesses because they dealt with an American economic society that was not willing to trade with foreign people. Two contemporary Italian American novelists have explored the male conformity to the American society through the change of the names of two main characters of theirs. Lucas Longo in Family on Vendetta Street depicted an Italian American doctor who changes his last name from Bentolinardo to Bentley when he receives his medical degree, without any inner conflict or any care for the terrible pain of his father in front of his action. The second one, Evan Hunter but born Salvatore Lombino, first experienced the change of his name himself, and then, in his novel Streets of Gold, explored the transformation of Ignazio di Palermo into Dwight Jamison and his attempts, destined to failure, to become a successful self-made man.

**Claiming a Theoretical Tradition: Ego Psychology**

Autobiography is an extremely difficult genre to define. It focuses on the exploration of one’s selected life experiences, and in spite of the fact that “the ‘self’ is said to be elusive, ‘identity’ changeable, and ‘life’ incomprehensible,” the presence of personal narratives witnesses an ardent desire to reflect upon one’s experiences and to communicate one’s truths. The experience of women’s life

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writing and female autobiography have their origin in the need to explore and to know one’s self.

Women’s autobiographical writing has not always been taken seriously by an essentially male criticism that restricted its interests to the lives of great men, considered more complex appropriate and for the literary canon. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in their Introduction to Women, Autobiography, Theory–A Reader, remind us that female autobiography has always required a theoretical approach to the field which could rewrite history from a feminine perspective, identify female writing and establish a tradition. In spite of the fact that women have written autobiographies, the criticism of women’s autobiography as a literary genre is relatively recent.

Women’s lives have been traditionally and strongly embedded in patriarchy and social organizations dominated by men, not only families but also political institutions. Theorists Nancy K. Miller and Domna C. Stanton argued that theorizing women’s autobiography should not simply mean considering the dominant tradition from a female point of view, but mapping “women’s dialectical negotiations with a history of their own representation as idealized or invisible.”\(^{18}\) Miller called for a “gendered reading of genre” with a critique of the exclusive maleness of humankind in the literary canon, while Stanton positioned herself from an external perspective of the literary world (like Virginia Woolf’s narrator in A Room of One’s Own) and even proposed a new name–autogynography–for women’s autobiography as genre, independent of the male tradition.

One of the most important theoretical collections of British and American women’s autobiographies, Journey: Autobiographical Writing by Women, edited by Mary G. Mason and Carol Hurd Green, was published in 1979, with a significant introduction by Mary Mason. Mason points out the essential fact that the self-discovery of female identity is based on the recognition of a significant “other”, with which the self is continuously connected. The recognition of the existence and relevance of a “significant other” is extremely important for the development of a
female identity, because female self is particularly connected to other people’s lives. Linked to Mason’s theory was another anthology of essays, *Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (1980), edited by Estelle Jelinek, who reconsidered the connection between the female self and others pointed out by Mary Mason. In particular this work distinguished between male and female autobiographies according to the psychological and social roles of men and women. Jelinek’s theory was based on the influential work of the psychologist Nancy Chodorow, who in her work *The Reproduction of Mothering* postulated two different psychological developments of the male and female ego, according to the relationship between the mother and her boy and girl children. According to Chodorow, boy children learn to separate themselves from their mother during the Oedipal phase in a process of identification with the father. During this process a boy defines himself with that “which is not feminine or involved with women […] by repressing whatever he thinks to be feminine inside himself, and, importantly, by denigrating and devaluing whatever he considers to be feminine in the outside world.” On the other hand, girl children do not have to resist identification with the mother, and that’s the reason why they do not develop any sense of difference from the maternal figure. Consequently “feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection with other people more than a masculine personality does. That is, in psychoanalytic terms, women are less individuated than men and have more flexible ego boundaries.” Susan Stanford Friedman, in “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” also utilized Chodorow’s theory for focusing on the relevance of female community in women’s self-definition: “A woman’s autobiographical self often does not oppose herself to all others, does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the

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community.” This concept is particularly applicable to Italian American women whose life choices have been so often dictated and shaped according to the well-being of the family and community, instead of that of the individual.

The Language of The Subject

Psychoanalysis has been an essential approach for a set of French theorists, representing “French feminism” in the early eighties, that looked at the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in order to explore the particular process of the little girl’s learning of language, and the connection with the woman’s relationship with the symbolic order of words. Lacan explored the way the child learns language in order to be part of the society in which it lives. Lacanian language, that he called “The Law of the Father,” has a patriarchal structure because it is based on the patriarchal structure of society. Lacan started from Freud’s theory. According to Freud, the child, during the first months of its life, does not have a specific and gendered sexual object. Moreover the child has no notion of separation between subject and object. It is through the learning of language that the child begins to see itself as a subject in a system made of contacts and relationships (male/female, father/mother/daughter and so on). The child’s learning of language is a process made of inputs from society and its notions of concepts such as religion, family, law or ethics. According to this theory, the child learns from the beginning of its life that the correct vision of society is a scheme ruled by a male authority, with a male subject and a female object. In the Italian language a proverb says “parole femmine, fatti maschi,” that is “words are feminine, deeds are masculine.” According to this Italian proverb, words, traditionally considered volatile, frivolous and useless, are left to women, while men are involved with action, with what is important, concrete and real. It is interesting to consider that in spite of this gendered definition of words and the fact that the child has its first approach to language through the mother, through female mediation, the consideration of language has still an element of male

domination. Maybe the reason for this consideration is due to the fact that language is the tool of expression of male social structure.

Lacan’s rereading of Freud had great relevance for the interpretation of women’s autobiography. It provided a new concept of female subjectivity in the patriarchal structure through a new relationship between the subject and language. This means that the language proposed by the patriarchal tradition (the Lacanian “Law of the Father”)–a language with a masculine subject and a feminine object–is no longer the only one valid and acceptable. For example for Julia Kristeva, the revolution of the language is more than an abstract image, but a real opening in the closed and male social system. Lacan’s theory was revolutionary because it made possible to question the validity of the patriarchal social structure accepted as the only one possible. In fact, the French theorists utilized Lacan’s theory for formulating their own theories about women’s autobiography. They postulated the creation of new possibilities in language, alternative to the patriarchal models of the “Law of the Father” and to the traditional literary definitions of autobiography. These new possibilities consisted in making space for forms of expressions as parts of a language finally able to give expression and articulation to women’s differences and desires.

**Contextualizing the Subject**

Concurrently, another kind of theorist–materialist historians–argued that subjectivist psychoanalysis did not take into account a very important aspect of the autobiographical subject: its historical specificity. In particular they accused theorists of not posing the subject in it, but on the contrary, of isolating the subject from its context and making it incapable of change. The consequences and contributions of this theoretical approach to the historical context of the subject must be seen in the contextualization of women’s autobiographies, and in the search for their historical and cultural specificity through which women become speaking subjects. A historical contextualization is particularly significant in analyzing Italian American autobiography because Italian American women writer’s lives were affected by their social and cultural environment. Leigh Gilmore, in
“Autobiographics,” pointed out the bond between the activity of writing an autobiography and the changing philosophies of the self and of history: “An exploration of a text’s autobiographics allows us to recognize that the I is multiply coded in a range of discourses: it is the site of multiple solicitations, multiple markings of ‘identity’, multiple figurations of agency.”22 The Italian American I can be also considered multiply coded, in its changes and different definitions through time: from female I exclusively devoted to family and duties as wife and mother to female I aware of her worth as human being. Felicity A. Nussbaum, in “The Politics of Subjectivity” in *Women, Autobiography, Theory–A Reader*, also recognized the necessity of considering the historical circumstances in which the self lives. The consciousness of the meaning of social circumstances is the origin of a subject historically situated and aware of not being isolated but a product of its cultural and social environment.

**Multiple Subjects: Race and Ethnicity**

Race and ethnicity are aspects of diversity particularly significant for Italian immigrant women. In fact they were considered more vulnerable subjects because they belonged to two disfavored groups, women and minorities. The acceptance and recognition of multiple subjects, within various ethnicities and races, implies that there is not a unique concept of subjectivity—Western, white and middle class—but that there are alternatives to this model. These alternatives make possible a shift from an uncritical understanding and acceptance of a single model of autobiographical self to the recognition of more diversities.

Shirley Geok–Lin Lim argued a marginality not only for a specific racial group, but she argued a common destiny that women share everywhere because of their being female. A definition of the female self has always been marked by the male other, which usually has imposed on the female “weakness, marginality, inferiority, and absence of being […] Colonial and post–colonial women have suffered a double colonization, alienated from the free exercise of their power by a

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foreign race and also by a native patriarchal society.” This is what happened to Italian immigrant women. They were penalized and excluded from social life by the host country and, at the same time, they were victims of a hierarchy inside their families which made them subordinate and passive. Italian women were excluded from education, intellectual activities like reading and writing, and any job opportunities outside the domestic boundaries. Women so repressed in their familiar environment found no place in the dynamic and active American society. They were the symbol of an archaic world, judged as useless and as incapable of living autonomously.

Scholars argued that autobiographical writing gives expression to silenced voices, and they investigated an alternative to the self in the canon of predominantly white women. Nellie Y. McKay, in “The Narrative of Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women’s Autobiography,” suggested a different perspective of reading autobiographies of African American women. They must be read in their specific and historical context of gender and race, because the self of African American women is different from the self of African American men, but also from the self of middle–class, white women. African American women lived exclusion and marginalization not only by virtue of their female birth but also because of their race. That is the reason why the reconstruction of their selves through their experiences, and their need to survive in a racially oppressive world is particularly strong and necessary for asserting their right to express themselves. African American autobiography, through the metaphor of “black words printed on white pages,” taught them to use the language of the oppressor. Such a metaphor symbolizes that this time the language of the oppressor is not a tool for silencing minorities or defining them according to other canons, it is instead the proof of the active part minorities had learned to have. Mastering the language of the “oppressor” is a way of defining themselves, it is a challenge to the cultural hegemony using the same tools of expression. African American literature has learned to dominate the “white space of the white page” with its own language, its own mark made of “black

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words.” African American women authors have learned to give expression to their search for political and psychological freedom not only for black people but also for all racial groups. This same theory can be applied to Italian American women. They have learned as well to use the English language to express their marginality and their feelings about being Italian Americans. In this way the language has become a means used to let American readers know about Italian American writers and what it means to be bicultural, without being silenced anymore.

Conclusion

As Smith and Watson remind us in their Introduction, a wide and in-progress set of narrative projects have given theorists of women’s autobiography a special place in practices and critiques of the texts of women’s lives, and have generated and experimented with new forms and definitions of the self and its collectivity, with their shifting boundaries of product and producer at the same time. These autobiographical occasions of rereading and interpreting different possibilities refuse any superficial definition of autobiography, but each of them gives their contribution in the development and enrichment of the genre: “Remembering was part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, ‘the bits and pieces of my heart’ that the narrative made whole again.”

CHAPTER II: ITALIAN LIFE IN AMERICA

This chapter explores the life of the Italian people who immigrated to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the changes and evolution of the image of the Italian woman in contact with American society. Specifically, the analysis of the role of the Italian woman, transplanted in the United States, makes it possible to answer Helen Barolini’s inquiry, “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?”

Of an approximate fifteen million Italian emigrants who left Italy between 1875 and 1915, the bulk of whom arrived in New York City, little more than 10% at first were women. After 1887 the percentage of women began slowly to increase. In the process of emigration to the new land, the Italian woman moved not as an individual and independent human being looking for a better life, but as a part of a family—a wife, daughter or sister—without a concept or possibility of a life outside the family institution. A hindrance toward a possible female emancipation was the total lack of education, even of the basic knowledge of the English language, that made it impossible for an immigrant Italian woman to search for a job outside the narrow walls of her home. In this situation an uneducated Italian woman was hopelessly bonded to her traditional role, which she accepted, inevitably, as the primary purpose of her life.

Italian woman came from a strictly patriarchal and narrow world in which she found her place only as dependant upon a male—her father, brother, husband and later if widowed, her sons—and in which she had the source and end of her being, the means by which her worth was measured: “From birth her duties and responsibilities as a future wife and mother had been so impressed upon her, that she obeyed almost instinctively the centuries–old rules of proper female behavior.”

led to believe that they could integrate and be a part of a society if they used their resources for others but not for themselves. They developed the sense that “their lives should be guided by the constant need to attune themselves to the wishes, desires, and needs of others.”

Even the sexual aspect of woman’s life was regarded as non-existent. Doris Weatherford in her study *Foreign and Female–Immigrant Women in America 1840–1930*, provided a series of detailed examples of what was the life of Italian women in the Italian culture of the time. She analyzed also the problematic sexual being of Italian women. Italian daughters learnt nothing about sexuality from their mothers, they were totally ignorant about sexual relationships and pregnancy before (and sometimes even after) marriage. They learned to live their sexuality and everything linked to physical things as a sin, because their closest association was with the Holy Mother Mary. They were regarded not as human women with desires, but as a female ideal, a Madonna isolated, symbolizing the sacrifice of the woman and the total denial of her individuality in the name of the family and the community. Also Andrew Rolle agrees with the Weatherford’s analysis in *The Italian Americans-Troubled Roots*.

Women, remindful of Christ’s virgin birth, are to be both worshipped and dominated. The Madonna had been a mother but scarcely a wife. Accordingly, the Italian woman has historically reduced the power and importance of sexuality by accepting a *mater dolorosa* role. Repudiation of erotic impulses has led women toward lives spent waiting upon men, including their sons. Some wives iron shirts, shine shoes, clean, mend, and cook almost constantly. In all this work they seem to be both exalted and demeaned.

A woman in the Italian culture did not have the right to an education. She couldn’t express herself in any intellectual ways because an independent woman in the Italian society was regarded as a dishonor to the family. To be independent

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meant to live for oneself before living for the others, to be an individual whose first priority was not the family. That was not acceptable for a woman because she was expected to recognize the importance of the family and the necessity of a man in her life. This was the way an Italian woman had to live her life, in order to be regarded as socially acceptable and not a dishonor to her family. The price she had to pay was the “denial of aspirations, denial of any possibility of change, denial of education to children as being futile, denial of interest in anything beyond one’s home walls, denial of goals as being unreachable and therefore an emotional drain and psychological impairment.”

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The pattern of roles within the Italian family, l’ordine della famiglia—“the unwritten, but uncompromising codes of duties and responsibilities to the family”7—found its strict definition in following the sanctity and immutability of this private institution: the father, the true pater familias, was the patriarch who claimed complete obedience and total respect for his authority. The mother, the symbol of the “Madonna wife”, was a figure totally dependant on her husband, measured through her humility, fidelity and acceptance of all the burdens like self-denial, familiar violence, constant pregnancies, impossibilities of making her choices, she had to bear. The daughters followed the example of the mother. They were humble and without any right to express themselves in any way, completely devoted to a fate chosen by the male authority. The sons were the heirs of the family name, totally obedient to the father and respectful for the mother.

The Italian women contributed to the maintenance of this order with their serietà (seriousness), self-sacrifice, and cultural and economic impoverishment dictated by their sense of “fatalism.” In particular, the concept of fatalism, of willingness to accept and resign oneself to adversities, was particularly embedded in Italian mentality, because it was seen as an indispensable key for survival to situations of extreme poverty and oppression. The only way to give explanation to the pain and deprivation Italian people were forced to bear was the belief in a superior force beyond human control, able to determinate people’s lives in an

unchangeable way, and without any possible human intervention. The “superior force” was intended as a mixture of several beliefs: God, religious fear in front of His will, acceptance also of negative accidents as demonstration of religious faith. The religious necessity to accept one’s own life without attempts to change it forced Italian women to move to another land where most of them spent their life in regret and pain, as Valentine Rossilli Winsey’s interviews revealed: “I didn’t want to marry…I was only thirteen when I came. After three months I got married…I got white hair when I was twenty-six. My life was finished, I would never have come here. I would never have made this life.”

Italy is a nation of families, not of individuals. In the South especially, the family is the social structure and neither the Church nor the state has ever successfully challenged its supremacy. The family demands the southern Italian’s first loyalty and this extended network of kinship provided a pattern of social and moral obligations which had more permanence than religion and more legitimacy than law. In Sicily, the law was viewed with suspicion and disdain because it was so often imposed by an alien government. Breaking the laws of the state is not a great matter, just don’t break the law of the family.

Women lived constantly in the shadow of the family and of a male figure. The image of being the center of the family and transmitter of its traditions represented a sort of curse for the woman eager to tell her private story, but not allowed to do it. The necessity of not being recognized as single and specific individual separated from the community denied any form of personal expression, individual revelation, confrontation and critical conflict.

The contact between this traditional Italian world, made up of religion and superstition, and the new, young American culture and society was full of

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difficulties and contradictions. As reported by Jerre Mangione,\textsuperscript{10} Italian immigrants were considered intruders in the new land, in some parts of the South they were even not regarded as “white” race, and Italian children were forbidden to attend white schools. Mangione narrated also that his father regarded American customs too different from the Italian vision for being able to be understood.

For my father and for many other Sicilian immigrant parents the American world was fraught with alien mores that offended them and corrupted their children. They were appalled, for example, that American boys and girls were permitted to date without having a chaperone along. In Sicily this would have been unthinkable. My relatives were also shocked to learn that American sons and daughters could become engaged and marry without obtaining permission from their parents. Such customs were antithetical to their own, and, in their view, invariably destroyed the sanctity of the family and the authority of the father.\textsuperscript{11}

Even education was considered with suspicion, especially because it came from American schools and institutions. Women were not educated before they migrated because there was no reason for doing so. Education was in contrast with their only role of wife: learning, reading, thinking were not only unproductive but they gave children new and strange ideas, made them different from the parents, created change and threads instead of cohesion and closure inside the narrow ambit of the family.

The key fact of the connection between the Italian and American worlds is that no effective and total isolation between two cultures living together is really possible: “America’s demanding culture made it hard to create a personal island in its midst. […] Immigrants and natives alike were expected to scatter pieces of themselves, figuratively, over the American landscape, to surrender personal values

\textsuperscript{10} Jerre Mangione, On Being a Sicilian American, in Studies in Italian American Social History, 41.

\textsuperscript{11} Jerre Mangione, 44.
and attitudes to a greater whole. Retreat into the past, except by memory, was impossible.\textsuperscript{12} The inevitable fusion between the two cultures was slow but possible, through the new generations of Italian people born in the new land. Second generation Italians were obviously and inevitably in contact with American people. They were in contact at the same time with two cultures with considerable differences in many categories of social convention: language and communication, eating and drinking, recreation, family structure, economic and social life, religion and superstition. Consequently the children of the immigrants were socialized under a dual cultural pressure: their actions were molded both by the Italians and by the Americans. What the children of the immigrants learned from school, and from their multiple contacts with American values, was completely opposite to the fatalistic vision of the world belonging to the Italian world. Family, perpetuation of old traditions, humility, acceptance of one’s unchangeable role in life contrasted with freedom, free enterprise, free will, individual success and capacity to change.

The new thoughts of the American life style and culture had their center in the individual, in the independence of life, in self-sufficiency over family’s ties. The children of the immigrants were immersed in a completely new culture giving inevitably a sense of estrangement and displacement: material achievement, wealth, success, competitiveness, were the basic and essential points of an American individualism in contrast with the Catholic principles of humility, acceptance without an external show of material prosperity. America was the new land committed to innovation and change, without obsession for perpetuating old traditions. American faith in human reason and progress was the antithesis to feudal worldview, typically symbolized by the southern Italian social system: blind loyalty, blind faith and blind force belonging to a sacred and inviolable word. Conformity to both cultures was not possible, although a compromise was possible to a certain extent, an individual could not conform an entire life to the standards of two different cultures. “The individual is unable to act at one time in accordance with one culture and at another time in accordance with the other; in each particular

\textsuperscript{12} Andrew Rolle, \textit{The American Italians, Psychological and Social Adjustment}, in \textit{Studies in Italian American Social History}, 106.
respect, he must on the whole behave in conformity with a single one of two incompatible patterns.”

Children became aware of the discrepancies between their parents’ culture and the American one because American schooling offered them American models.

The immigrant parents had no identity conflicts: refusing integration with the American society, they maintained their individuality. Unfortunately they failed to understand the conflict and dilemma of their American born children, who constantly lived in two opposite dimensions, in what Andrew Rolle defined as “role–confusion,” with the consequent pain and conflict of identity of being a stranger in two lands.

No one can live permanently between two cultures. The older generation of immigrants, who believed in a melting pot, had really projected a wish that fusion might be possible. Instead, the boiling together in a cauldron of so many nationalities produced a so growing demand that ethnics crawl out of the pot, indeed, out of the confines of ‘foreign’ family life. The second generation provided an emotional bridge over which the dissolution of old ties could proceed.14

The change of perspective was striking and shocking: Italians becoming Italian Americans were forced to question their real identities and their inner selves. “How to become a ‘modern American’ and condemn the old country’s traditions of blood feud and vengeance? How to downplay its emphasis on virginal chastity and maternal sacrifice? How to comprehend its tendency to liberate all of the primordial forms of human identity, including ‘woman’ and ‘mother,’ from their embedment and enslavement in outmoded tradition?”15 Daughters of second and third generation Italian Americans felt that preservation of tradition came at a high price. They wanted to establish their selves and they wanted to free themselves from

patterns of the past. This was a difficult path because their past was undeniably part of their lives. Barbara Grizzuti Harrison stated the dilemma: “I think of the strength of Italian women. 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.”

Italian American immigrant autobiographies witnessed the union between the American self and the Italian self, in their need to be accepted as American, but also in their need to recover a connection with their Italian origin. Italian American writers wrote autobiographies in order to know themselves, their differences from American society and finally to accept those differences. Georges Gusdorf notes that the cultural precondition of autobiography is a concept of individualism and awareness of the singularity of each life, but at the same time also the role and importance of collectivity and community must be considered: “no one is rightful possessor of his life or his death; lives are so thoroughly entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere.” The Italian American writer, through self-reflection, had a double plot to explore: her personal individuality, made of her private story, and her connection with the community in which she was involved and related.

No matter how out of place in the culture one might feel as a disaffected American, sooner or later there comes to the expatriate the inevitable realization that the language and the culture of birth constitute the homeland after all. [...] Was I American or Italian? My name had certainly 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.

The act of autobiographical writing is a powerful tool for establishing a link between private and public, one’s own self and the surrounding society: nuclear family, extended family, the neighborhood, and the society outside the neighborhood. The creation and definition of one’s own identity is always a difficult and painful process. It was for Italian American writers, and it was even more difficult for Italian American women writers.

Women had never been authorized to write their own lives by their families and social custom. Even an educated woman was not able to overcome the cultural limits and impositions of not writing about personal and private relationships and other aspects of her life. In southern Italy there was a strong distrust in written words. An Italian proverb says pensa molto, parla poco, e scrivi meno, “think much, speak little and write even less.” Families usually did not encourage children to study. Education was dangerous according to another Italian proverb—fesso è chi fa i figli meglio di lui—that it is possible to translated as “stupid and contemptible is the person who makes his children better than himself.” In spite of the lack of significance for culture and education, Italian American writers realized that the stories belonging to their tradition and to their real lives, were the key for the self—recovery and self—definition.

Italian American women did not come from a tradition that considered it valuable for them to narrate their lives as documents of instruction for future generation. […] They came from a male–dominant world where their ancillary role was rigidly, immutably restricted to home and family. They came as helpmates to their men, as mothers of their children, as bearers and tenders of the old culture. […] Though they brought native strengths—sharp wits, tenaciousness, family loyalty, patience and courage, which are skills for survival—they did not acquire until generations later the nascent writer’s tools of education, confidence of language, the leisure to read, and the privacy for reflection.
Writing about one’s personal life means showing other people how we really are, our strengths but also our weaknesses. The autobiographical process makes the autobiographer vulnerable, noticed, exposed to public view’s opinion. These aspects are in sharp contrast to the peasant Italian mentality. “Don’t step out of line and be noticed, don’t be the envy of others, don’t attract the jealous fate who will punish success.”

Italian American people are usually wrapped in the family code of silence—*omertà*—and consequently they are commonly considered in their impossibility of communication and narration.

Common opinion was that “Italian Americans don’t read, aren’t interested in education, don’t buy books: Italian Americans really can’t be writers because they’re still Old World villagers, unprepared to endure the solitude which writing requires.” If this was true in the past, during the first decades of Italian immigration to the United States, it is possible to argue and show that Italian American women are not categorically trapped in a timeless peasant mentality, and their former condition was not an immutable mark of her life. According to psychologist and writer Jean Baker Miller, “growth is one of the-perhaps the-most important, most exciting qualities of being human.” It is the essence of life in its impulse to move on. Growth means development, change, discovery, intellectual activity and creativity. The need for authenticity, creativity, personal growth and above all the universal need for autonomy found a fertile ground in the American land. Italian American women started to challenge all the restrictive barriers posed by family and tradition. The old bonds didn’t disappear but they loosen. They made possible the change. In time Italian American women have reached education and economic independence. This means that it has been possible for them to establish

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21. *Omertà*, the code of silence, is generated out of a perceived need to protect the family from outsider who are capable of using information to harm the family’s reputation, and thus their standing in the community. Southern Italian culture is replete with aphorisms and *proverbi* (proverbs) that advise against revealing information that can be used against the self or the family. *A chi dici il tuo segreto, doni la tua libertà* (to whom you tell your secret, you give your freedom); *Di il fatto tuo, e lascia fare il fatto tuo* (tell everyone your business and the devil will do it); *Odi, vedi e taci se vuoi vivere in pace* (listen, watch and keep quiet if you wish to live in peace). Fred Gardaphe, *Italian American Autobiography*, in *The Italian American Heritage*, 293.
their position inside the American society. As soon as they reached their goal, that is to be part of the American social and political institutions, they started to question about their real identity that was not American but Italian American. Consequently they started to feel the need to rejoin with their bicultural identity through a literary expression of themselves. In consideration of the valuable works of the female Italian American tradition, it is possible to argue not only that an Italian American woman can be a writer, but also that any exploration of Italian American literary tradition without consideration for the female writing, would be inevitably incomplete.

Writer Helen Barolini also expressed her personal conflict and dilemma of being bicultural in the American society. The difficulty lies not only in being bicultural but also in being female of foreign background.

Responding first to an internal directive, I had to find not only geographic Italy, the land of my immigrant parents, but also what the idea of Italy meant to my sense of identity, to my feelings of myself. What did it mean to be American of Italian background? Why did I feel not quite American? And to make it more complicated, how did the circumstance of my being female of Italian American background affect me as a writer? Unraveling that conundrum awoke in me an awareness of how Italian Americans have seldom received recognition as literary authors and the toll this has taken on the writing. Innocently, once, I thought of writing as a pure act, untethered to anything but language and story, certainly not to gender or ancestry. But one writes from one’s skin, and I, too, write from who I am, not from abstraction. That’s no longer a matter of unkind fate, it’s a fact and a choice. In writing I re-create my world and give myself my history. And who I am, I found, is almost a hyperbole for all women who write, for the condition is intensified through the Italian American experience: the tension between family and self is

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greater; the pull of tradition more present; the fear of autonomy and
distance more harrowing; the neglect and disparagement by the
outside more real.24

Writing is a strategy for self-definition: the writer can build her story and
understand herself through the written words. Maria Kotsaftis’ “Female Odyssey”25
portrayed the literal and emotional wandering Italian American women have
experimented, searching for their identity during their personal journey through their
life. It is relevant to note Kotsaftis’ significant choice of words. “Odyssey” is a clear
reference to the mythological journey of Ulysses during his going back home after
the Trojan war. Ulysses is a hero eager for knowledge, while his wife Penelope
waits for him. This time the wandering is a female one. Italian American women are
not anymore passive subjects living in men’s shadow, but they are finally active
subject during the exploration of their lives.

The first Italian immigrants started the “adventure” of migrating toward a new
world in a physical sense. The challenge for Italian American writers is to move
again, to leave the old villages in a figurative sense, but with no less difficulty or
pain than the physical leaving of the Italian land of their parents, and start a new
migration, a new journey in order to find themselves: “I turned to literature in an
effort to explain to myself what troubled me, and I found that turning dilemma and
tension into writing gave me the ability to read my story, to know what had formerly
been illegible. […] With self–birth, I believe, comes literary birth.”26 Change has
been possible, or better yet, transformation, adjustment and assimilation have
occurred. It has not been a simple process, but a difficult, painful one, full of
contradictions, especially for women. Their vulnerable position in the ancient
peasant Italian society itself made it more problematic to search for their place in a
new society with new priorities and ideals. Their need to construct their

25 Maria Kotsaftis, Female Odyssey, in Adjusting Sites–New Essays in Italian American Studies, ed.
William Boelhower and Rocco Pallone (Stony Brook: State University of New York, 1999).
26 Helen Barolini, Quest for Identity Self, in Adjusting Sites, 266.
individuality brought a need to heal their past, so they could claim for a recovered life.
CHAPTER III: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS EXPLORATION OF THE SELF

The Traditional Canon of Autobiography

According to James Olney\(^1\) in *Autobiography And The Cultural Movement*, the definition of autobiography is not a simple question because, in spite of the fact that this literary genre could be superficially regarded as one of the simplest and most common, it is so dense of implications that it is rather one of the most difficult to catch in its essence. In fact, the subject of autobiography, the self, is able to produce more questions and doubts than answers and certainties.

George Gusdorf\(^2\) in *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography* provides a definition and explanation of autobiography as a genre that writers have chosen and still choose as a way for “reassembling the scattered elements of a destiny that had been worth the trouble of living.”\(^3\) In this way autobiography becomes the means for a “personal justification, […] not revolution but reconciliation.”\(^4\) In spite of the fact that this famous essay provides a thoughtful and sensible explanation of what autobiography is, it is also true that its focus is entirely devoted to a unique, rigorous and standard type of autobiography: male, white, Western and middle class. This exclusive consideration for an autobiography with such restricted elements implies the acknowledgement of only one kind of pattern and canon of autobiography. In fact if Gusdorf considered autobiography as a solid and established literary genre, its genesis and history are recognizable in a series of exclusively male works, like St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Goethe’s *Dichtung und Warheit*, or Newman’s *Apologia*. According to this consideration Gusdorf implied that autobiography has been one of the favorite ways of the great men of the past for transmitting the memories of their lives.

Men of the past celebrated themselves for living in future men’s memory because of their desire to be remembered as “responsible agent: gatherer of men, of lands, of power, makers of kingdoms or of empires, inventor of laws or of

\(^2\) Georges Gusdorf, 29.
\(^3\) George Gusdorf, 39.
wisdom,” all activities and intellectual abilities women were traditionally excluded from because they were female. Autobiography became possible only in this perception of having a part in history, instead of being a tool of expression of a private and personal development. “The man who takes the trouble to tell of himself knows that the present differs from the past and that it will not be repeated in the future. […] He believes it a useful and valuable thing to fix his own image so that he can be certain it will not disappear like all things in this world.” In Gusdorf’s opinion, the transmission of one’s life in autobiographies is typical of men with a great perception of themselves, because they mark history with their contribution, and bring—or impose—their contribution to other people not belonging to their same culture. “Autobiography expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures.” At the same time Gusdorf himself admits an exception to this idea. Autobiography is not an exclusive field for great men and their great historical deeds, but it is possible to bring attention also to inner conflicts inside oneself in one’s self-consciousness. This opening means the recognition of the value of the self as central issue of autobiography, but it is still a recognition limited to an exclusive male self, without recognition for women and minorities of their capacity, not only to mark history but also to investigate, explore and narrate their selves.

James Olney marked 1956, the year of publication of Gusdorf’s essay *Conditions And Limits of Autobiography*, the starting point of theoretical and critical literature about autobiography, with the recognition that “women writers have not always been given due consideration as makers of literature.” Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their *Introduction to Women, Autobiography, Theory–A Reader*, remind us that one of the first and most significant American collections of female autobiography theories in the United States was published only in 1979 with

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5. George Gusdorf, 31.
Journey: Autobiographical Writing by Women, edited by Mary G. Mason and Carol Hurd Green, more than twenty years after the publication of Gusdorf’s essay.

According to Paul Lauter in Canon and Context, the traditional canon is created and elaborated by the leading cultural class—professors, editors, critics and publishers—who decide what is worthy, publishable and available. In this way canon becomes a form of power and the question of canon a cultural battle.

By ‘canon’ I mean the set of literary works, the grouping of significant philosophical, political, and religious texts, the particular accounts of history generally accorded cultural weight within a society. How one defines a cultural canon obviously shapes collegiate curricula and research priorities, but it also helps determine precisely whose experiences and ideas become central to academy study.9

Theorist Robert Viscusi argued that the construction of a specific group’s literary canon occurs when “a people begins to possess its own charter myth—when a people begins, that is, to inquire into the sources of its own historical identity.”10 Applying Viscusi’s concept to Italian American literature, Anthony Tamburri encouraged Italian American writers to explore their cultural “hybridism,”11 and define their cultural identity and specificity. This has been a not immediate exploration because of the many difficulties in achieving a recognition for male and female Italian American writers. Their exclusion from the American canon has been due to the lack of interest in Italian American literature by critics, publishers, reviewers. For a long time the dominant canon did not consider the literary works of women and minority groups, but this condition has changed in recent years, thanks to a process in which such minority groups have learned to recognize their value and identity.

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Female Autobiography

Autobiography has been used by women writers to make possible the development and the expression of the self. “Not only feminism but also literary and cultural theory have felt the impact of women’s autobiography as a previously unacknowledged mode of making visible former invisible subject.”\(^{12}\) The invisibility of the subject doesn’t mean a non–existence of the individual, but it implies the need of the subject to be expressed, explored, known and told. Through the act of writing the autobiographical I acquires a self–awareness because the translation into words offers a visible representation of the subjectivity. The consciousness of the self is not immediate and its representation is not a linear unity but it depicts a constantly developing subjectivity. Felicity Nussbaum, in “The Politics of Subjectivity,” suggested that the bios of an autobiography is what the I make of it in a progress of stages during time. There is never a complete bios, a defined self, but a progressive sequence of a developing self, caught by the act of writing. The person develops different stages of the self, the past I is different from the present I, and the present I is the result of the past I’s development during its lifetime. Nussbaum\(^ {13}\) in describing the autobiographical subject, proposed an interesting distinction between the I who speaks and the I who is spoken. The I who writes/speaks is different from the I who is written/spoken about. The subject, the first person narrative–the present I–has an object of investigation–the past I–in a time further divided into different moments, the present moment of the narration and the past. Consequently, the I become a “split subject” whose parts are in connection through experience, translated into language and writing. The “split subject” could not imply only the separation between a present and past self in two distinct moments. The evolutions and transformations of the self are so multiple and unpredictable during lifetime that it is possible to argue the existence of multiple splits of the same subject in different circumstances. For Italian American writers the “split subject,” the separation between different stages and evolutions of the self,

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\(^{11}\) Anthony Julian Tamburri, A Semiotic of Ethnicity: In (Re)cognition of The Italian American Writer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 129.

\(^{12}\) Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Introduction, 5.

\(^{13}\) Felicity Nussbaum, The Politics of Subjectivity, in Women, Autobiography, Theory–A Reader, 160.
is essential because their condition of being bicultural and suspended between two worlds have made their lives particularly fragmented. Italian American writers, both female and male, share the conflict of living a fragmented self, and they both express their ambiguities in their autobiographies.

Generally speaking, it is possible to recognize some differences between male and female autobiographies and apply them to Italian American male and female autobiographies. In consideration of their psychological differences, without establishing any hierarchy, male and female autobiographies differ in their consideration of the self in its connection with significant others. What differs in male and female autobiographies is the degree of involvement of the self with significant others, that is how the male and female selves shape their lives in consideration for other people, and how these aspects are reflected into the narration. Society in general and more specifically family, friends, school or profession, offer occasions of contact with other people. This contact is so essential in a human being’s life that it shapes individual personality in a deep way. This consideration can be applicable both to male and female autobiographies, but what changes is the degree and the extent of such involvement with a significant “Other.” According to Mary Mason it is possible to distinguish a paradigm self–other for life-writing properly belonging to women. Mason, in *The Other Voice: Autobiography of Women Writers*, argued that the two typical autobiographical patterns established by two male autobiographer–Augustine and Rousseau–are found nowhere in women’s autobiographies. In Augustine’s *Confessions* the self is the center and main character of the personal battle between opposed forces (spirit and flesh), and the victory of one force over the other completes the portray of the self that seems to live exclusively for himself. Likewise, also Rousseau’s *Confessions* presented a self completely devoted to himself, caught in the act of his self-discovery, and characters and facts are functional aspects of the author’s evolving self-awareness. According to Mason, these male structures do not fit female autobiography principally because the female self is not concentrated exclusively on itself, but it develops a strong consciousness of the presence of others as part of its subjectivity.
The self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other’. This recognition of another consciousness—and I emphasize recognition than deference – this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems to enable women to write openly about themselves.14

Priority of the female self is the recognition of one’s own subjectivity, like the male self, but also the recognition of an equal relationship between the two parts, the “I” and “we,” in which the self is not in a condition of deference or subordination to the collectivity, but in a condition of being part and equalitarian component.

**Italian American Female Tradition**

In *Broken Images, Broken Lives* scholar Mary Jo Bona makes a very important remark about Italian American women, an observation that brought attention to the lack of presence of the Italian American female tradition in the American literary canon, “Italian American women writers have explored the vital connection between being a woman and being ethnic in a world (America) which traditionally has valued neither.”15 Louise De Salvo also, professor of English and Creative Writing and an esteemed Virginia Woolf scholar, in writing about her short memoir *A Portrait of the Puttana as a Middle-Aged Woolf Scholar* not only talked about her first approach and confrontation with autobiographical questions, but she also pointed out the lack of knowledge of models in Italian American female autobiography at the time of writing and publication of her autobiographical essay, in 1984.

In writing *Puttana* I have had no models. As I write, there are, to my knowledge, no memories written by Italian American women

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about their lives that can help me. That I know of no such works does not strike me, at the time, as unusual. That I have not read a single work written by an Italian American writer in high school college, or graduate school does not strike me, at the time, as unusual.  

The recognition of the lack of presence of Italian American literature from the traditional American canon caught the attention of few scholars who established the basis of the Italian American tradition. The first survey of Italian American literary works was a bibliography compiled by Olga Peragallo—Italian American Authors—and published in 1949. Peragallo’s bibliography included fifty-nine authors, eleven of them were women and only two of these women are famous today: Frances Winwar and Mari Tomasi. Later the first attempt to organize a systematic study of Italian American literature was due to the work of Rose Basile Green who explored the Italian American tradition in her dissertation in 1962, published under the title The Italian American Novel: A Document of The Interaction of Two Cultures in 1974. Basile Green’s work was the first attempt to examine the contribution of Italian American writers to American culture. It is regarded as one of the best compendia of Italian American literature, even if in her examination of over sixty novelists, only four of them were women. Basile Green includes in her work both autobiographies and novels “because the immigrants used both forms to relate their experiences, one form often being indistinguishable from the other.” However, she admits the privilege to a broader inclusion of novels over autobiographies. First of all, Basile Green’s analysis focuses on Italian American novels, but her approach is in consideration of Italian American autobiographies as works “out of which the fiction grew and then developed to broader cultural concepts.”

16. Louise De Salvo, Breaking the Jar/Mending the Jar, in Breaking Open: Reflection on Italian American Women’s Writing, 246.
18. Rosa Basile Green, 22.
19. Rosa Basile Green, 22.
Basile Green’s work had great influence on Helen Barolini, novelist, essayist and critic with Italian origins that strongly believes in the essential role of creating and reading literature in self-development. “Literature gives us ourselves.”\textsuperscript{20} As pointed out by Fred Gardaphe, Barolini wanted to continue Peragallo’s and Basile Green’s work and complete the missing part of their study dealing with Italian American female contributions. “Barolini’s search for self through her own writing, and the creation of her American identity through the creation of literature, once established, enabled her to go in search of her sister authors.”\textsuperscript{21} The result of this search is an anthology of more than fifty Italian American women writers, \textit{The Dream Book-An Anthology of Writings By Italian American Women}, published in its first edition in 1985 and with a significant \textit{Introduction} written by Barolini herself, considered the “manifesto” of the Italian American female literature. Barolini showed not only that Italian women can be writers, but also that they can produce a literary tradition.

Placing Italian American women writers on the map for the first time in American literary history, Barolini explodes the silence of these writers by exploring the historical and social underpinnings of Italian cultural life and the literary hegemonies and oversights of the American publishing world. Describing her anthology of fifty-six Italian American women writers as her ‘literary manifesto’, Barolini intended to establish ‘once and for all, that we exist, we are writers, we are part of the national literature.’\textsuperscript{22}

A year after the publication of \textit{The Dream Book}, Barolini published an autobiographical essay under the title \textit{Becoming a Literary Person Out of Context}, in which she declared that Italian American women writers were not aware of their own literary canon. For Barolini becoming a writer required becoming also a critic at the same time and put together Italian American women writers’ unheard voices.

\textsuperscript{20} Helen Barolini, \textit{The Dream Book}, 51.
\textsuperscript{21} Fred Gardaphe, \textit{The Double Burden of Italian American Women Writers}, in \textit{Breaking Open}, 269.
“If books did not tell me who I was, I would write those that did.”23 The publication of *The Dream Book* was a starting point and a call for many other Italian American women writers silenced about their origins. Shortly after the publication of *The Dream Book*, Rose Romano, a poet and an editor wrote about being Italian American. Her former success as writer had made her part of the American literary field. When she decided to write about her being bicultural nobody wanted to publish her work anymore. As answer to this attitude she started her own magazine *La Bella Figura* (The Good Behavior), a literary journal devoted to the writing of Italian American women writers. Other Italian American women writers joined the process of discovering themselves. Marianna De Marco Torgovnick, a scholar and critic, documented her assimilation in a series of autobiographical essays *Crossing Ocean Parkway: Rereading By An Italian American Daughter*: “It is the story of assimilation—one that Italian Americans of my generation are uniquely prepared to tell, and that females need to tell most of all.”24 Also Italian American women writers who had modified their ethnic identity with another name started to realize that their Italian name could be important, and they could be important as well. “In 1985, when Helen Barolini’s *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writing By Italian American Women* came out, I saw my name, Maria Mazziotti Gillan spelled out above my poem and saw it in a *New York Times Review* where they quoted from it. I was, for the first time, incredibly proud of that name and all the lineage it embodied.”25 Also poet and writer Rachel Guido De Vries described the same feelings of rejoining a missing female family.

When I read and reviewed *The Dream Book*, I wept. I felt I was meeting my lost family, a family of women. [...] It was the words of Fran Claro to her mother, again in *The Dream Book*, that moved me to action: “After all these years,” Fran Claro tells her mother, “she was ready to be Italian.” So was I. It was then that I

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claimed the name of Rachel Guido, the long-gone and original storyteller. To reveal my name meant revealing myself. In that decision, the weeping was joined by power and joy and lustiness. Until the voices came, I was alone. Now, I have a “name of my own,” a voice of my own, and a community of voices, where I can speak, and where I listen.  

Mary Jo Bona, author of the first book-length critical study of Italian American women writers—Claiming A Tradition: Italian American Women Writers—suggested that it is still necessary to work hard for developing an established tradition of Italian American female literature that can represent their experiences and that could be widely recognized. In the years following the publication of her essay in 1984, Louise De Salvo recognized the essential role of Italian American women writers in letting the American audience know about their lives, and how reading other Italian American women writers is a source of inspiration in continuing to write about one’s own Italian American self. “Works of art are not for single growths, Virginia Woolf stated. They emerge within a tradition. Knowing that there is a growing, sturdy tradition of Italian American women writers helps an emerging writer learn from the past, garner support from pioneers, and move on.”

Mary Ann Mannino in writing her Introduction to Breaking Open reminds us of the importance for Italian American women writers to capture their common thoughts into writing. “In this book, I now have a family of sisters whose lives are similar to mine in that each of us has been encouraged to go far but never leave home. […] Herein lies the challenge: How does one go far without leaving home? How does one become part of America without leaving Italy? Perhaps by making a space for a balance. Perhaps by writing a literature that accurately portrays lives enriched by a fusion of cultures.”

26. Rachel Guido De Vries, Until The Voices Came, in Breaking Open, 89-90.
28. Louise De Salvo, p. 64.
Fred Gardaphe considered that Italian American culture has found only recently its place in America’s cultural and educational institution. He remarked in *The Double Burden of Italian American Women Writers* that it has been a long and painful path, both for male and female, but more challenge for women than for men, because Italian American women writers struggled against the constraints placed on them from inside and outside their ethnic culture, “The Italian Americans who have found their way into those institutions have had to leave their ethnic identities at the door when they entered. This pattern applies to male and female intellectuals, but it is women intellectuals who have challenged it more often then the men.”

The code of silence—omertà—forbade the revelation of personal facts to strangers, and this was particularly applicable to women, guardians of family relationships and traditions. Writing autobiographies became an act of independence in a continuous clash between “authority and freedom, silence and speech, loyalty to family and the craving for escape from its confines.” The coexistence between “I” and “we,” between individuality and collectivity, is possible but it hasn’t always been immediate, especially in Italian American tradition where the strength of the collectivity was for so long perpetuated at the expense of the self. The connection and also the contrast between the “I” and “we” in Italian American autobiography is extremely important and relevant, because this is a relationship made of search for independence and freedom and need to be part of a collective memory. The need to be a distinguishable part of the whole in the Italian tradition has been to a certain extent a common path both for daughters and for sons.

Jerre Mangione, one of the best known contemporary Italian American writers, described his confusion in the development of his real identity.

As a young child constantly surrounded by Sicilian relatives, the public image of the Sicilians did not concern me much. A far greater worry was the question of who I was. It was a confusion I

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shared with my brothers and my sisters. Were we Americans or were we Sicilian? [...] I was finally permitted to play with the other children on the street. [...] Their loudest sneers were directed against my baptismal name of Gerlando, which they reduced to Jerry as soon as they had decided to accept me in their group. Out of such action came the awareness that I, like many other children of immigrants, was doomed to live a double life, the one I lead at home with my Sicilian parents and relatives, and the other that took place in the street and at school.32

Since that day Gerlando Mangione became Jerre Mangione, and his name is still Jerre, the name that other people chose for him and that he accepted in order to be part of the group. The change of his name is not considered by him a kind of betrayal of his family, or an additional questioning about possible multiple identities. His process of separation from his parents is without conflicts with his family and his supposed duties toward tradition, his path consisted in the consideration of the necessity to free himself from the bondage of the family, in order to have a sense of his real identity.

Some of us escaped that fate by our decision to explore the world beyond that of our immigrant parents. I initiated my own explorations by going to a university in another city, not out of any lack of love for my relatives but simply because I suspected that as long as I remained among them, I would never have a clear sense of my own identity. Only after I had been separated from them for a number of years did I begin to see them objectively and to appreciate their great wisdom. […] While I could never go home, again, except for visits, my association with my relatives gave me a root feeling, a sense of the past that I needed in order to cope with the present.33

32 Jerre Mangione, 44.
33 Jerre Mangione, 44.
What is difficult and painful for Italian American sons is even more difficult and painful for Italian American daughters. This doesn’t mean that the male path was less painful, but less complex. The female conflict was originated by their being part of a cultural system which demanded from women the perpetuation of traditions, at the expense of their evolution as human beings. The price men had to pay was their separation from their families which led them toward their self-awareness. The price women had to pay involved a sense of guilt in disappointing parents’ expectations, social disapproval, betrayal of traditions such as the roles of mother and wife to transmit, roles that traditionally keep women out of public view. This is the reason why the “split of the subject” is so strong in Italian American female autobiography.

Maria Mazziotti Gillan’s work is full of the confrontation between her past I, her younger self depicted in its desperation and silence of a school girl eager to deny her Italian identity in an American world, and her present I, finally ready to accept her Italian American self. In her poem “Arturo”34 Maria Mazziotti speaks to her father because she wants to explain why “her young self” denied her real Italian self and family. Her self, “that fool,” was probably wrong but it needed desperately to belong to a world from which it felt to be excluded.

“Arturo”
I told everyone
your name was Arthur,
tried to turn you
into the imaginary father
in the three-piece suit
that I wanted instead of my own.
I changed my name to Marie,
hoping no one would notice
my face with its dark Italian eyes.

Arturo, I send you this message
from my younger self, that fool
who needed to deny
the words
(Wop! Guinea! Greaseball!)
slung like curved spears,
the anguish of sandwiches
made from spinach and oil;
the roasted peppers on homemade bread,
the rice pie of Easter.

Today I watch you,
clean as a cherub,
your ruddy face shining,
closed by your growing deafness
in a world where my words cannot touch you.
[…]
I smile when I think of you.
Listen, America,
this is my father, Arturo,
and I am his daughter, Maria.
do not call me Marie.

In Maria Mazziotti’s poem her shame for her identity and the illusory change of her identity was an act of her past self, before being able to develop an authentic sense of herself. “In my poem ‘Growing Up Italian,’ I give voice to that period of self-denial, and I also mark a turning point in my own life, the point at which I decided to take back my own name.”\textsuperscript{35} The flexibility of the name, as proposed by Leigh Gilmore,\textsuperscript{36} is a way of emphasizing the subject, as an experiment for multiple and

\textsuperscript{35} Maria Mazziotti Gillan, \textit{Shame and Silence in My Work}, 158–159.
\textsuperscript{36} Leigh Gilmore, \textit{Autobiographics}, 183.
changeable identities. If it is true that identity is not a fixed entity, for many Italian American women writers the change of their names has been a painful experiment for denying themselves and their cultural background. Italian American women writers’ distancing from their Italian part was an attempt to construct and privilege their American self, in order to search for a completeness of the self through a not fragmented ethnic identity. According to Helen Barolini the very crucial point of Italian American women writers is their being suspended between two cultures and the conflict generated from not being able to belong and be part of just one group. She compared herself with her husband Antonio Barolini, and his identity.

His name did not marginalize him or make him prone to labels; he was supremely at ease with the fact of his calling as a literary person without having to question his right to be, or rather he was odd to be. Italian literature was his unquestioned patrimony; and when he practiced it, he was automatically part of it. I began to see that American literature was not automatically mine, at best, perhaps, I could belong to a subgroup, as in being picked for a second-best sorority because of my background.37

The conflict and the possible resolution of the conflict are main issues of Italian American female autobiographies. Louise De Salvo thinks of the autobiographical writing as a constant process of breaking and mending the several and different pieces of her life. “My entire writing life (indeed my entire adult life) has been a series of breakings and mendings, a shattering of the writing self that was a repairing, through writing, of something in my life that needed fixing.”38 De Salvo describes the act of writing using an image she found in Italian novelist and playwright Luigi Pirandello’s La Giara (The Jar). In that work, a pottery mender enters a broken olive oil jar to glue together some broken pieces, only to discover at the end of his mending, that to get out he must break the jar and start the work again.

37 Helen Barolini, Difference, Identity and Saint Augustine, in Breaking Open, 34.
38 Louise De Salvo, 70.
Also the act of writing has the same power of breaking and mending. Though in Pirandello’s work the jar is smashed into irreparable pieces, De Salvo has changed this metaphor and has given the writer and herself the possibility of breaking and mending one’s own life again and again. “Breaking the jar. Mending the jar. Then breaking the jar and mending it again. That’s what I do. That’s what I will continue to do until my writing days are over.”

39 Louise De Salvo, 71.
CHAPTER IV: “I HAVE FOUND MY VOICE”

It has taken a long time for the American literary establishment to recognize the worth and talent of Italian American female writers. This long process of acceptance as bicultural came in a complex and not immediate way, not only from the American literary establishment, but also from Italian American women writers themselves who, at first, did not value their bicultural identity. In fact for a long time their attempts to conform to the American society made them try to erase their Italian selves, at the expense of their bicultural identity of Italian and American. As proved by the review of some significant Italian women that we can consider some of the foremothers of the Italian American female literary tradition–Blandina Segale, Grazia Deledda, Rosa Cassettari and Francesca Vinciguerra–their lives have a common path in spite of their diversities. They represent the fight to express themselves, to speak and be heard as individuals, but also as part of a silenced female ethnic group. Blandina Segale is the earliest woman writer of the Italian American female tradition, a nun of the Sisters of Charity who devoted her life to others. Grazia Deledda is the only Italian woman of this group. She never migrated to the United States. In spite of the fact that Deledda was “only” Italian and not bicultural, she is an extraordinary example of female strength and will to give expression to her voice as writer, against the repressive condition of Italian women at that time. Another writer, Rosa Cassettari, was able to tell her personal story of Italian immigration to a foreign country. As will be discussed later, she managed to do this in spite of her lack of education both in English and in Italian. What is remarkable in her story is her will and determination to narrate her life, stronger than fears and superstitions of the Italian peasant culture where she came from. In doing so she was able to represent the silenced majority of Italian women who, like her, migrated to the United States and lived a life other people chose for them. Lastly, Francesca Vinciguerra represents the success of an extremely talented Italian American woman who accomplished this task at the cost of masking her Italian self.

Obviously these women are not the only ones to belong to the Italian American female literary tradition, but they are significant and important because
they represent aspects of the tradition common to all other Italian American women writers. In spite of living in a society that did not value their being female and of a different ethnicity (except for Deledda) their audacity, strong will, determination and faith in themselves helped them find their place, identity and a voice of their own.

**Blandina Segale (1850 – 1941)**

Sister Blandina Segale\(^1\) was born Rosa Maria Segale in 1850 in the Northern Italian village of Cicagna, about fifteen miles from Genoa, in the region of Liguria. Her mother, Giovanna Malatesta, belonged to a noble family with an ancient and historical tradition, while her father, Francesco Segale, was the owner of two well-cultivated orchards. When Rosa Maria was four years old, the Segales migrated to the United States because of the difficult political situation in Italy, troubled by revolutions. They chose Cincinnati, Ohio because a few Italian people from Genoa had already moved there and because it was told to Rosa Maria’s mother that Cincinnati was built upon seven hills, similar to the hilly landscape around their Italian village of Cicagna.

The Segales encountered many difficulties at the beginning of their stay in America: loneliness, language problems, poverty. In spite of these problems Giovanna hired an English teacher for her children in order to guarantee them a better integration into American society. In the following years Rosa Maria grew up with a religious education. She attended school supervised by the Notre Dame Sisters, the Sisters of Mercy and the religious Hughes Intermediate School in Cincinnati. When Rosa Maria finished grammar school, she was allowed to attend Mt. St. Vincent Academy, a school lead by the Sisters of Charity in Cincinnati. Here Rosa Maria observed the many works of charity among poor, sick people and orphans, and it became her desire to join the order of the Sisters of Charity in order to make her contribution to charity. Rosa Maria always showed a great faith, but it is likely to think that her “religious robe” gave her the possibility to be as socially

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active as she was, instead of being a mother and a wife as a woman was supposed to be at the time.

In 1866, at the age of sixteen, Rosa Maria entered the order of the Sisters of Charity in Cincinnati and she changed her name to Sister Blandina. In the Catholic Church the change of one’s name was a common practice required for women (but not for men). The change of the name implied leaving the human part of one’s life and embracing a more spiritual life, usually under the protection of the saint whose name was chosen as one’s own. Also her younger sister, Maria Maddalena, refused several marriage proposals and joined the same order. She changed her name from Maria Maddalena to Sister Justina. In 1872 Sister Blandina was sent on an educational and charitable mission to the Colorado and New Mexico territories. She lived there for twenty-one years, teaching Indians, Mexicans, Catholics and non-Catholics and building schools and even a hospital. She made regular visits to jails, helping all who came to her regardless of race or social status. She became a social activist and had an important part in the ending of the lynch law. This was a very brutal, primitive but common practice in those territories. It consisted in the punishment of people suspected of crimes without a regular process of law. It was the application of an “unwritten law,” a code made by the stronger and more savage people against the weaker ones.

During her many years in the West, Sister Blandina kept a daily diary written in the form of letters to her Sister Justinia. Sister Blandina had no idea that one day her diary would be published. It was published for the first time when United States officials of New Mexico, Governor and Secretary of State with the Archbishop of Santa Fe, learned of its existence. They requested the diary because of its historical importance. Sister Blandina’s diary was published in book form in 1932 under the title *At The End of The Santa Fe Trail*. Her diary made her the earliest known author among Italian American women writers and, at the same time, it offers a portrait of an exceptional woman. Her journal leaves no doubt about her independence, adaptiveness, faith and bravery. Her narration is devoted exclusively

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to her experiences in the West: Trinidad (Colorado), Santa Fe and Albuquerque (New Mexico).

This autobiography is the work of a nun, not of an “ordinary” woman. Sister Blandina, as nun, made a choice in life. She decided to leave her “self” made of flesh and blood and be a spiritual self, a means of God’s will. In changing her name from Rosa Maria to Blandina, she embraced a different life lived not anymore for herself but for her faith in God. This is why the narrative is focused on her missionary activity and not to the exploration of her private life. Her private life has become the public life of the nun she chose to be. Is it really possible to forget to be just a human being with human feelings? Can it really be possible a complete “sacrifice” of the private self (Rosa Maria) over the public self (Sister Blandina)? It is difficult to accept this, because a human being can decide to live in the name of spirituality but it will always remain first of all a human being, with human feelings and emotions. Sister Blandina herself seems to admit the coexistence of her two selves—Blandina and Rosa Maria—in her Introduction to the book. “Into the keeping of this journal of my life in the Southwest, there never entered the thought of its publication. The reward for the work involved was to come if Sister Blandina and myself would meet and read it together.” Blandina wrote these lines in the Original Author’s Note when the book was published in its first edition in 1932, when she was eighty-two years old. Almost at the end of her life Blandina seems to see her reward in the reunion between her human and spiritual self, in a completeness of her individuality. This means that the human self was not entirely sacrificed, and at the end of her life as nun, Blandina was finally ready to rejoin herself with Rosa Maria.

In 1892 Blandina was relieved of her public duty as teacher in Trinidad, in the very school she helped build, because she refused to discard the religious dress as imposed by the local authorities. They required her to dress not with her religious clothes but with ordinary clothes. Sister Blandina’s words to the Chairman during a meeting with the School Board regarding the change of her dress is an explicit example of her strength. “I looked steadily at the Chairman and replied: ‘the constitution of the United States gives me the same privilege to wear this mode of
dress as it gave you to wear your trousers.”⁵ In 1894 Sister Blandina was recalled to Ohio where she founded with Sister Justina the first organized Italian Welfare Center in the United States. She worked there, helping Italian immigrants for thirty-five years, but always remembered her time in the West as the most precious. Her last words in her journal are devoted to her feelings about leaving: “Adios, Trinidad, of heart-pains and consolations.”⁶

An analysis of Sister Blandina’s feelings about leaving the West and about the years following her departure is speculative because her autobiography stops with the end of her mission in those territories. Why does Sister Blandina end her autobiography when she left the West? Why does she not write about her other missionary work in Cincinnati helping Italian immigrants? Surely Blandina loved coming back to Cincinnati, reuniting with her biological sister and all the others. The essential reason can be probably attributed to the fact that in the West Blandina was not only part of the history of those troubled territories, but she made history. A woman, an Italian immigrant became a powerful and charismatic character in the West at that time. She helped build schools and hospitals. She taught reading and writing to the population. She was brave enough to travel alone in such dangerous places. She even faced the outlaw “Billy the Kid” who wanted to kill the two physicians of Trinidad. She demanded safety for them and not only succeeded in doing it, but she inspired confidence and respect in such a dangerous man. She was able to do what was unthinkable for a woman, and sometimes even for a man, at the time. Blandina lived in the West for a long time, devoting to those territories and their population the years of her youth and her resources. What were her feelings when she was called back to Ohio? Blandina was not supposed to show her feelings, especially her feelings of pride for having done so many good things, because pride is in contrast with the humble attitude toward life required by Catholic religion. Probably her undeniable human part made her feel as if an essential, vigorous and beautiful chapter of her life was closed forever.

⁴ Blandina Segale, 1.
⁵ Blandina Segale, 281.
Grazia Deledda (1871 – 1936)

Grazia Deledda was born in Nuoro, Sardinia, in 1871. Sardinia was, and to a certain extent still is, a difficult and harsh land—a primitive area of bandits and kidnappings. As described and analyzed by Janice M. Kozma in Grazia Deledda’s Eternal Adolescents, it is possible to have a complete portrait of Deledda and her family thanks to her autobiographical novel, Cosima, a collection of memories of the writer narrating in third person and looking back at her past through the eyes of the present. When the story begins Cosima—Deledda’s middle name—is a little girl waiting for the birth of a new brother or sister, and through the narration of her daily and ordinary life the author describes her personality, strong will and determination in her wish to become a writer. The reason she chose to write an autobiographical novel in third person, instead of first person, is because of Deledda’s awareness of exposing her “self” to the public. The cultural background of her family, in its condemnation of writing about oneself as unacceptable for a woman, could have affected Deledda’s choice of the third person which functioned as a mediation for the writer. It is in fact significant to note that at the end of Deledda’s career she was finally able to write in first person several works. This is an example of the development of her self-consciousness and her freedom from the peasant Sardinian mentality.

Grazia Deledda was the fourth of seven children. Her father was a landowner and a property manager. Her mother was emotionally distant from family life and suffered from episodes of depression. Deledda gives a description of her mother in Cosima, a description that expresses not only Deledda’s mother’s fragile personality but also the pain of being woman in a world like hers.

She was still young, pretty, shapely, even if rather short; but at times she seemed old, bent, tired. […] Perhaps the mystery of her sadness came from the fact that she had married without love to a man of twenty years older. […] And she wasn’t able to get any

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outside the domestic circle: unable because of inborn sense of duty, superstition and prejudice, or perhaps also because of the absolute lack of opportunity.\(^9\)

Deledda had only three years of elementary school. As pointed out by Janice Kozma, at the time of Deledda’s birth illiteracy in Sardinia was the highest in Italy, and the Italian rate of illiteracy was one of the highest in Western Europe, but the capacity to learn to read was a privilege of a small elite. In upper-class families, like Deledda’s, female education was customarily completed after three years of elementary school. It was usually different for boys. Santus, Deledda’s brother, was sent to Cagliari and there he attended high school with the prospect of becoming a doctor. Deledda describes in *Cosima* his coming back home during vacation with his smell of book and culture. “When he came home during vacations he brought a new breath of life to the home. He brought books and presents and he was dressed simply but elegant.”\(^10\) Most of the lower class families considered education as a waste of time, both for girls and boys. Education had nothing to do with the role of wife and mother reserved for a girl, while sons lived isolated in the mountains many months of the year, shepherding cattle.

Deledda was extremely talented and gifted, especially for writing. In fact she continued to educate herself after having finished elementary school. She studied Italian as a foreign language because she spoke only the Sardinian dialect. Her two brothers sent for Italian magazines from the continent so she could have always something to read. In these magazines Deledda discovered short stories published on the last pages, and from that came the idea of sending one of her stories—*Sangue Sardo* (Sardinian Blood)—with a biographical sketch of herself and her life in Sardinia for publication. Her story was accepted that year, in 1888, by the Roman magazine *L’Ultima Moda* (The Latest Fashion). At the time she was only seventeen years old. Her feelings as a result of her first published story are described in first person in an autobiographical story *I Primi Passi* (The First Steps). This story is part

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\(^9\) Grazia Deledda, 29.

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of a collection of short stories, *La Vigna Sul Mare* (The Vineyard On The Sea) that Deledda published in 1932, almost at the end of her career and life (she was sixty-one at the time of the publication and she died four years later). A few stories of this collection have an autobiographical content like *I Primi Passi*, which are narrated in first person. The choice of the first person is significant and was probably due to the fact that Deledda, at that point of her career and life, no longer felt the necessity of protecting her self.

It seemed like a dream to me: and my name in print, for the first time gave me the feeling of a hallucination. I stared at it for a long time: the letters got bigger, black, alive, alarming. Was that person really me? No, it was not me, the little, secret, almost mysterious writer: yes, that name was the echo of mine, that answered from a far away distance, beyond the mountains, beyond the sea as yet unknown to me: it answered to the cry of my very essence yearning to expand into that immensity. Still today my name in print produces in me a reflection of that first impression.11

In spite of the excitement and pride of being a writer, in *Cosima* Deledda explores the perception of the vulnerability of the writer, especially of the female writer. “Her name at the top, over the title, made her feel almost too exposed to the reader’s curiosity.”12 Her perception found a powerful and dramatic proof in the reaction of her family and of her primitive village, that did not value the enrichment coming from culture and literature.

In town the news that her name had appeared in print under two columns of naively dialectical prose–and even more dangerous, speaking of risqué adventures–aroused a unanimous and merciless

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10 Grazia Deledda, 35.
11 Janice M. Kozma, 29.
12 Grazia Deledda, 80.
condemnation. […] Even Andrea\textsuperscript{13} was shaken. His dreams of Cosima’s future were veiled with vague fears. At any rate he advised his sister not to write any more love stories, especially because at her age, with her lack of experience on the subject—besides making her seem like a precocious and already corrupted girl—the stories couldn’t be at all realistic. […] Not only the sour aunts and the sensible people of the town, and the women who didn’t know how to read but considered novels forbidden books, but everyone else turned against the girl. It was a pyre of maliciousness, of scandalous suppositions, of prophecies of licentiousness.\textsuperscript{14}

Deledda declared once that she was so harshly stricken by this attitude that every time she read her name printed at the end of an article or on the cover of a book, she felt a sense of sorrow and pain. Probably it was this sense of pain, sorrow and shame that led her to write her autobiography through the expedient of a novel in third person. Cosima is a filter, a protection, another person with another name (but still the middle-name of Deledda herself) mirroring Deledda’s life. Cosima, in spite of the fact that she represents Deledda’s self, is a mask, not a direct representation of the autobiographer but a mediated one.

Deledda’s determination in trying to be a writer was the origin of her desire to escape the blind Sardinian world and move to Rome. “Rome was her goal. She felt it. She still didn’t know how she would manage to go there. There was no hope, no probability, no illusion of a marriage that would take her there, and yet she felt she would go there.”\textsuperscript{15} Deledda wanted to escape the binding conformity of her land, but curiously she managed to do it through another form of conformity, a marriage with a man allowed by the social custom to take her somewhere else.\textsuperscript{16} Her dream became reality. In 1899 Deledda was allowed to accept an invitation from one of her

\textsuperscript{13} Deledda’s brother.
\textsuperscript{14} Grazia Deledda, 80–81.
\textsuperscript{15} Grazia Deledda, 64.
\textsuperscript{16} The necessity of escaping one’s original world through the conformity of the marriage is a common path in many Italian American women writers, like poet Maria Mazziotti Gillan, scholar Marianna De Marco Torgovnick or writer Rachel Guido De Vries.
readers to visit Cagliari, a Sardinian big city in the South of the island. In spite of the strong objection of her family and with the absolute condition that she be escorted by her brother, she was finally able to leave Nuoro for the first time in her life. In Cagliari Deledda met Palmiro Madesani and they married only six weeks later. They moved to Rome where they started their family and had two children. Deledda continued to be a writer but also a devoted wife and mother. In spite of her desire to leave Sardinia and all the despise she had received there, Deledda never forgot the attachment to her land that is present in almost all her works even though her last trip to Sardinia was in 1911.

When she was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1926, the Italian literary critics vehemently opposed the choice of giving such a prestigious prize to a so-called “provincial housewife.” As reported by Italian scholar Neria De Giovanni in Grazia Deledda,17 her town people too, instead of showing pride for such an extraordinary event, simply dismissed her as “atypical”, as a person not belonging to their world and consequently impossible to understand. Deledda died on August 1936, at the age of sixty-five, and a month later of that same year Cosima was published. “She decided not to wait anymore for something to come to her from the outside, from the turbulent world of men; but everything from within herself, from the mystery of her inner self.”18

Rosa Cassettari (1866 – 1943)

According to the autobiography of Rosa Cassettari herself, Rosa-The Life of An Italian Immigrant19, she was born in 1866 in the Italian village of Bugiarno, near Milan. She was brought up by a foster mother–Mamma Lena–and made to work in a silk factory from childhood. At the age of fourteen she was forced to marry an older, brutal and violent man. After his marriage with Rosa he migrated to Missouri by himself first, and later he ordered Rosa to migrate too.

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18. Grazia Deledda, 100.
Rosa Cassettari was not the actual writer of her own life. The writer of this work, Marie Hall Ets, was a social worker. She became a close friend of Rosa’s who met her in 1918 at the Chicago Commons Settlement House. The fact that Rosa was not the writer of her own autobiography makes this an unusual work, what scholar Mary Jo Bona defines as an “uncanonical classic.” Rosa’s being “uncanonical” is due to the problematic structure of the text, an oral autobiography narrated by Rosa and transcripted and mediated by another person, Ets, who has written it in first person. The need of a mediation in telling this story can have multiple meanings: 1) it could be the consequence of Rosa’s lack of education in both English and Italian for expressing her story in written words, 2) it can be an intentional way for reaching a broader audience of American readers, more willing to read a work produced by an American writer instead of one by an immigrant woman. This reinforces, in this way, the idea of the inadequacy of immigrants, or it can be seen as a kind of “missionary” attitude of the social worker in her attempt to narrate the story of a member of a minority immigrant group. Marie’s mediation implies not only a simple transcription of Rosa’s words, it represents an adaptation of many memories of the lifetime of a person into a developed story with a narrative structure. Marie recognized the human and historical value of Rosa’s material, and her mediation was the necessary means, because without it it would have not been possible to transform Rosa’s material into a valuable literary and historically relevant document.

We know from the *Introduction* written in first person by Ets, with an account of her friendship with Rosa, that the idea of collecting Rosa’s memories developed from Rosa’s ability and passion to tell stories about her childhood in Italy. Ets had published a story in 1927 and Rosa wanted to help her to publish other books with her own narration about Italy, so Ets started to collect memories of Rosa’s life. According to Ets’ account in her *Introduction* to the book, the first version of the text was written with words in heavy Italian dialect, just as Rosa used them. Later Ets was forced to change them because she realized that the text was too difficult to read and follow for the American audience to whom the book was addressed. The second version, in its attempt to preserve the original spirit, has a
more simplified and understandable language for an English speaking audience. Before this the narration of Rosa’s life remained unpublished and stored at the Immigration History Research Center at the university of Minnesota until 1970. That year Rudolph Vecoli, director of the Immigrant History Research Center, complained about the paucity of historical sources regarding the experience of the silent majority of Italian immigrants and decided to “bring back to life” Rosa’s documents. Vecoli’s initial sponsorship of Rosa’s autobiography helped to place this work at the center of historical attention, and it was the starting point for its entering the Italian American literary tradition. Later in 1999, Rosa was reprinted in the Wisconsin Studies in Autobiographies Series, and it was supported by Vecoli’s Foreword and by an introductory note written by Helen Barolini. Helen Barolini’s acceptance and inclusion of Rosa in The Dream Book in 1985 completed the recognition of this work as fundamental part of the Italian American literary tradition.

Rosa’s autobiography describes her personal growth as a simple girl psychologically dependent on her foster mother-Mamma Lena-until her marriage, and then dependent on her husband Santino. Then she moves to describe herself as a woman able to subtract herself from ignorance and cultural deprivation, and leaving her husband to start a new life with another man. This change did not occur in one day, it was a process made of steps and daily conquests toward a complete self-awareness as an independent human being. At the end of Rosa’s narration, Rosa expresses her awareness of being equal to other people. “Now I speak English good like an American I could go anywhere–where millionaires go and high people. I would look the high people in the face and ask them what questions I’d like to know. I wouldn’t be afraid now–not of anybody. […] They wouldn’t dare hurt me now I come from America. Me, that’s why I love America. That’s what I learned in America: not to be afraid.”

Rosa came to the United States in 1884, one of the years of peak Italian immigration during the nineteenth century. The autobiography traces Rosa’s life in an Italian peasant village, and later in America. She endured a life full of hardships:
a marriage with an abusive and violent man at sixteen, a forced migration to a Missouri mining town, unassisted births of several children and even her husband’s attempt to force her into the business of prostitution.

It is important to point out how Ets’ mediation worked in showing Rosa’s transformation and emancipation, from the beginning of the narration. Marie Hall Ets’ description gives readers the idea of Rosa as not only a “product” but also a victim of her cultural background. When Rosa fell in love with an Italian man before her first marriage who asked her to be his wife, Rosa’s foster mother, Mamma Lena, denied the union because she had in her mind a marriage made not of love, but of domination and female subordination. According to Mamma Lena’s ignorance and superstition a marriage can not be based on love, because a husband in love with his wife is not able to be as strict and rigorous as he should be toward his wife. Mamma Lena’s words are a representation of such a peasant and narrow mentality made. “Rosa is big for her age and too pretty. It’s better if she’s married and safe. […] And Rosa is stubborn and willful—said Mamma Lena—she needs someone older to control her. You love her too much—you would let her have her own way. […] I could not let you marry one of those boys who like you so much. They would let you have your own way. You need someone to control you. You need an older man who make you meek and save you for heaven in the end.”

According to Rosa’s foster mother, Rosa needs a man able to dominate and repress her as a husband should do. “Other nights when Santino was drunk and beating me Mamma Lena had sat up in her bed and watched, but she had said nothing.” The condition of living in ignorance did not imply only a lack of cultural education, but it was a condition extended to all ambits of life, like female sexuality. For example pregnancies were numerous and usually a forbidden topic for girls to discuss. The dramatic consequence of such limitation was the fact that more often than not girls had no knowledge of how children were born. Rosa herself experienced this situation during her first and second pregnancies.

One day I felt kicking inside of me and I knew it was a baby. How that baby got in there I couldn’t understand. But the thing that worried me most was how it was going to get out! A baby couldn’t make a hole and come out like the moth in a cocoon. Probably the doctor would have to cut me. I didn’t want to ask Mamma Lena, but what was I going to do? That baby was kicking to get out—I would have to ask someone. So I told her. ‘Well,’ said Mamma Lena, ‘You’ll have to pray the Madonna. If you pray the Madonna with all your heart maybe the Madonna will make a miracle for you and let the baby come out without the doctor cutting you.’

When Rosa has to migrate, she doesn’t want to leave, but she is once again forced by Mamma Lena’s impositions: “You must go. However bad that man is, he is your husband—he has the right to command you. You must go. […] Mamma Lena said I must go. There was nothing I could do.” Rosa is forced even to do more. Mamma Lena requires Rosa not to bring with her in America her first child Francesco, but not because of a concern for a small child doing so long and tiring travel, but because she does not want to feel lonely living by herself, after Rosa’s departure.

American immigration policies provided and shaped a common vision of Italian immigrant women as useless and potentially a public charge for the nation. A specific event during Rosa’s arrival in the United Stated offers an example of the general attitude of American officials toward immigrants. She had with her two bottles of simple olive oil but the first idea of the official was that they were poisonous, as if the American nation was in constant danger of being damaged by the contamination of immigrant people. ‘Oh, so those bottles belonged to her? Well ask her’, he said to the interpreter, ‘ask her what stuff was? Was it poison?’ When Pep told him he said, ‘Well tell her her bottles are in the bottom of the ocean! Tell
her that’s what she gets for bringing such nasty stuff into America! It made us all sick!”

In America Rosa also lived with pain and deprivation, but something is different for her in the new land. Rosa finds herself free from Mamma Lena’s presence and impositions, and this represents the beginning, the first step toward emancipation and self-discovery. Once again it is Ets’ mediation that makes it possible for the reader to understand Rosa’s development and transformation. Once Rosa’s arrival in America, Hall Ets’ shows the reader a Rosa completely different from the submissive woman she was in Italy. Rosa’s consideration for herself changes little by little. At the beginning of her stay in America, she is so repressed as woman and human being that she is even surprised by the fact that her husband’s boss speaks to her in spite of her poverty: “He talked to us poor like we were equal and taught us the things we must know. That was how it was in America.” The narration focuses on Rosa’s emancipation, in her capacity to learn to talk to a man without being afraid of not being respectable because of the supposed male superiority.

The contrast and the change are particularly evident during Rosa’s visit back to her village in Italy. She went back because when she moved she left with her foster mother her first child Francesco, and now she wants to bring him to the United States with her. During Rosa’s visit Mamma Lena tries to convince Rosa to leave her second child Domenico in Italy and to bring only Francesco in the United States. Mamma Lena suddenly realizes that Rosa is no longer the girl she used to manipulate (even if Mamma Lena thinks she is doing the best for her) according to her superstitious principles and ideas.

Rosa–she said one day when she was holding him–when you go back to America with Francesco you can leave Domenico with me. He’s younger. I can take care of him better. No!–I said–No! Mamma Lena didn’t say anything – she didn’t even scold. Before I went to

America I would have been afraid to say no. […] and when at last Mamma Lena spoke she was not like Mamma Lena at all. She was just like any other old woman who was alone and sad. ‘I wish you could stay a little longer with that new baby, Rosa’ she said. ‘But you must do what you think best’.

Several months later, after Rosa came back to America with her two children, she finally found the strength and bravery to leave her husband. This was an act that she could not have done in Italy because she was too afraid of the consequences of being considered deviant. After an episode in which Rosa’s husband brings her in front of a judge for the custody of their children, accusing her of immorality, we don’t know anything else about Santino. The many omissions about Rosa’s husband during the story are an intentional step wanted by Rosa herself. She reminds readers more than once how the thought of him and the way he treated her were so unbearable that she did not want him to be part of her story. “I have to leave that man out of this story. The things he did to me are too bad to tell! I leave him out, that’s all!”

Rosa moved to Chicago and remarried a good man she had met in the mining town in Missouri. Rosa finally had a second marriage of love and several other children. There is no social elevation for Rosa, she remained always a cleaning-woman troubled by poverty and difficulties of life, she did not loose some nice and innocent religious principles from her childhood in Italy. Ets reports in her Introduction that Rosa was still used to wear a neckerchief pinned with a safety pin because when Rosa was a girl in Italy it was a sin to expose a naked neck. After that what she gained is a new self-awareness and the chance to give voice not only to herself but also to all the other immigrant women who had never had the possibility to tell their stories.

The autobiography closes with Rosa living in the Settlement Common House together with the people working there who she considers her second family. Widowed and with grown-up children, Rosa thinks about her life. “I have it like

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heaven now. No man to scold me and make me do this and stop me to do that. I have it like heaven–I’m my own boss. The peace I’ve got now, it pays me for all the trouble I had in my life. They wouldn’t dare to hurt me now I come from America. Me. That’s why I love America. That’s what I learned in America: not to be afraid.”

**Francesca Vinciguerra (1908 – 1985)**

Helen Barolini included Francesca Vinciguerra in her anthology of Italian American women writers *The Dream Book*. In doing it Barolini affirmed the Italian origin of this author who spent most of her life denying her real Italian background. Vinciguerra herself created a silence around her bicultural ethnicity not only through the change of her first and last name, but also through the omission of any information about her biographical facts. In writing the *Preface* to her work *Oscar Wilde and The Yellow Nineties* she did not sign the page with her name, but just with the first letters of her first and last anglicized name Frances Winwar “F.W.” Barolini broke the silence about Vinciguerra’s bicultural ethnicity, also providing some information about her personal life.

Frances Winwar was born Francesca Vinciguerra in Taormina, Sicily, in 1908. She moved into the United States with her family at a young age. She had educated parents and especially her father placed great importance to her education. She started to publish her first poems in Max Eastman’s *The Masses* when she was only eighteen. Later the literary editor of the *New York World*, Lawrence Stallings, hired her as book reviewer. In this way she had the chance of entering the literary business. Winwar was very talented and her first novel *The Ardent Flame* was published in 1927. Helen Barolini in *The Dream Book* narrated that the publisher posed a condition on the publication of the novel-that is she had to change her name. According to the publisher, “Francesca Vinciguerra” had a too strong and evident connection with an Italian ethnicity too foreign for being interesting to an American

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29 Marie Hall Ets, 253.

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audience. Accordingly, Vinciguerra anglicized her name, that she translated exactly from Italian to American (Francesca = Frances, vincere = win, guerra = war).

It is reported that in those years she was working on an autobiographical novel and that she destroyed it after the change of her name into Frances Winwar. She probably needed to distance herself from her former identity belonging to Francesca Vinciguerra. She had to sacrifice her former identity in the name of a literary canon offering no space for Italian ethnicity, and turn completely to the new self she chose to be. Since then she concentrated her work on historical novels and biographies of literary figures, specializing in the great English authors of the nineteenth century like Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, Georges Sand. In the choice of her subjects also it is evident that she wants to distance herself from the Italian American context. It is said\(^2\) that she even attempted to persuade professor and writer Joseph Tusiani to stay away from strictly Italian American environments and to write in English, in order to be more accepted and known by the American audience.

Most likely the lack of personal information was due to the fact that Frances Winwar was not her private and personal self, but only the mask she decided to wear when she gave up her real self, belonging to Francesca Vinciguerra. Francesca Vinciguerra was known for a long time by the American literary establishment exclusively as the American writer Frances Winwar and her Italian origin was ignored. Helen Barolini reported in the *Introduction* to *The Dream Book* that Winwar’s non-identification as an Italian American was significantly reflected in the remarks of a curator (whose name is not mentioned) of a large collection of books and manuscripts by American women. “Asked if any Italian American women were represented, she said, ‘No, this collection represents *la crème de la crème*. For instance, if Christina Rossetti were American, not English, she’d be here.’ Then, asked about Frances Winwar, she said, ‘oh, yes, of course she’s included, but I never thought of her as Italian.’\(^3\) This is a significant example of historical and social context of literary silence that involved Italian American women for a long time.

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\(^2\) Joseph Tusiani, *Biography* (University of Lecce, Italy).

This is the reason why Vinciguerra is so important and significant in this analysis. She is an example of the reception and consideration for Italian American female writers in their attempt to enter the American literary world. She represents the price to pay, the necessity to shape one’s own bicultural identity according to the dominant tradition of the leading culture.

**Crypto – ethnicity**

Fred Gardaphe in *The Double Burden of Italian American Women Writers* reported that during the annual convention of Modern Language Association (MLA) in 1995, a forum about ethnicity was held. One of the panelists at that forum was post-modern scholar Linda Hutcheon who, in her talk entitled “crypto-ethnicity,” pointed out the fact that a consistent number of relevant scholars in American literary studies were women whose real ethnicity had been hidden during their careers. Hutcheon noted the fact that scholars like Sandra M. Gilbert, writer and then president of the Association, scholars and writers Marianna De Marco Torgovnick or Cathy N. Davidson, and Hutcheon herself have an Italian background hidden by their adoption of their husbands’ surnames. Moreover Hutcheon pointed out the fact that, significantly, such scholars have established their careers in the field of American/English studies. “We, like most of you, teach and study in academic departments structured along the lines of dominant linguistic traditions which intimate connections to the nineteenth-century politics of nation-building.”

Hutcheon’s new word “crypto-ethnicity” was a way of defining a “silenced marker of Italian heritage,” that can be hidden and silenced, but not completely erased.

According to William Boelhower, in *Immigrant Autobiography in The United States: Four Versions of The Italian American Self*, crypto-ethnicity is a very powerful component of Italian American female search for one’s own identity, because names are the first sign of ethnicity, origin and background. This means that there is an implicit and immediate identity in a surname of a social and ethnic subject. From childhood Italian American children have learned to measure their

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lives against a series of American models imposed by friends, school, education and society. These comparisons were often painful because they caused Italian American children to see themselves as different, foreign, not part of the American society. This condition of estrangement affected the way many Italian American children considered, judged and esteemed themselves, their bodies and appearance, their culture and their families. “Like most children, we were mindless conformists. More than anything else, we wanted to be regarded as Americans.”

The comparison between Italian and American cultures and the fact of living in the American world surrounded by American ideals, originated in Italian American children feelings of shame and low-esteem, and a desire to erase their Italian part in order to be finally part of the American group.

That is why the issue of naming has been so important to Italian American women writers who, in adopting their husbands’ surnames, surrendered the most immediate sign of their ethnic identification. Also according to Helen Barolini, in *Difference, Ethnicity, and Saint Augustine*, names are so powerful signals of distinction and difference that they were the first source of prejudice in the American literary world. “An Italian American surnames sets up, I am still learning, barriers of prejudice in those circles of American literature that are hard to penetrate under the best of circumstances. Our names are an immediate signal of difference.”

Dorothy Bryant, novelist and author of *Miss Giardino*, wrote to Barolini while she was compiling *The Dream Book*.

Calvetti is my maiden name, and the childhood of Miss Giardino is my mother’s childhood: I had another Italian name (Ungaretti in a first marriage) after that one. Under neither of those names was I accepted as an artist. I wonder if one of the reasons so many Latin women’s “identity” is veiled by a WASP name is the necessity of escaping from
everything else that may be imposed upon a woman along with that Italian name.\textsuperscript{38}

Barolini herself pointed out that many Italian American women writers had often a fragmented identity. “As the poet Rose Romano argues, because Italian Americans can hide by camouflaging—or even rejecting—their ethnic identity, they can assimilate into the mainstream, but at the cost of losing cultural identity and internalizing self-hatred.”\textsuperscript{39} The solution of the conflict is in the pursuit and realization of what Tamburri defines as “hyphenation.” That is the contact and the fusion between Italian and American cultures in a balanced connection of Italian–American identity. The realization of the hyphenation has been a difficult, painful and long process. For many Italian American women writers this process consisted by their attempt to erase their Italian self and later by their reconciliation with the Italian part denied before. “I like to say that 1974 is the year Rachel Guido De Vries was born, although it took me until 1985, when I read and reviewed \textit{The Dream Book}, to claim my Italian self with my name.”\textsuperscript{40}

Maria Laurino, an Italian American journalist and writer, in her autobiographical essay \textit{Discovering a Voice of One’s Own}, remembers a question that former Governor of New York City, Mario Cuomo, asked her during an interview. “Were you always an Italian? The Governor asked. At the time, I shook my head ‘no’. ‘I know all about ethnic self-hate,’ Cuomo responded. […] Being Italian meant overcoming the hurt of ethnic slurs and the urge to hide your ancestry. […] I’ve always been an American—an American who grew up in New Jersey—hoping that the Italian part would quietly disappear. But today I would need to modify my response again. […] The answer to the Governor’s question is that I had not always been an Italian American, but I am one now.”\textsuperscript{41}

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\textsuperscript{38} Helen Barolini, \textit{Difference, Identity and Saint Augustine}, 34.  \\
\textsuperscript{39} Edvige Giunta, \textit{Speaking Through Silences}, in \textit{Breaking Open}, 280.  \\
\textsuperscript{40} Rachel Guido De Vries, \textit{Until The Voices Came}, in \textit{Breaking Open}, 86.  \\
\textsuperscript{41} Maria Laurino, \textit{Discovering a Voice of One’s Own}, in \textit{Adjusting Sites}, 288.  \\
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Maria Mazziotti Gillan

Maria Mazziotti Gillan is an extraordinarily active poet. In spite of the consideration that prose could be the best form of expression for autobiography, because of the complex and detailed matters to narrate, it is important to argue that poetry can also offer an expression of the self. Maria Mazziotti Gillan is a demonstration of this argument. She is author of seven books of poetry and two of them—Where I Come From and Taking Back My Name—are entirely devoted to an autobiographical synthesis of the Italian American dilemma of the female quest in search for one’s own identity. One of the latest collections of poems—Things My Mother Told Me—establishes a connection with her Italian past embodied by the image of her mother. Mazziotti is presently working on her memoir My Mother’s Stoop, where again the reference to her mother makes it significant a strong relation with her past.

She touches the issue of identity and of being bicultural in contrast with the dominant culture. Italian American identity is strong and powerful in her work, and an element essential in order to find her balance between past and present, that her efforts in literature has been so often devoted to this issue. Her personal work in poetry is not her only effort in promoting the issue of bicultural identity. She is active also in works of diffusion of multicultural anthologies of foreign writers and poets living in the United States, dealing with their personal conflict of identity. She is co-editor with her daughter Jennifer Gillan of three acclaimed multicultural anthologies, Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry, Identity Lessons: Contemporary Writing About Learning to Be American and Growing Up Ethnic In America. This last anthology is significantly dedicated to a few teachers “who taught us to believe in ourselves.”42 All of them collect many works of poets of several ethnicities who reflect about their learning to be not only different in America, but also to accept their diversity in America.

Maria Mazziotti Gillan: Where I Come From

Maria Mazziotti’s process of recollecting her Italian self in a balance with her American part is witnessed in her collection of autobiographical poems *Where I come From*\(^{43}\), in which she captures many memories of her past. In this collection of poems Mazziotti’s work is deeply connected with her life, a mirroring of one into the other combined with a mixture of contrasting feelings: shame and silence, incapability to speak and found voices, lost memories made vivid again through narration, as if her self could be really “split” in multiple and different subjects. First, the little school girl ashamed of growing up Italian American with Italian parents has her form of expression in her silence and her attempts to hide, and even erase, her Italian self. Later, when she changes into a grown-up woman and has experimented the self-denial, she understands that she needs to face and accept her past and take back her Italian part. The title itself of the collection—*Where I Come From*—is a significant reference to the origins and to the need to start her journey where everything began, at home in the ghetto street of Paterson, New Jersey with her family, the ripe tomatoes and the vegetables of the garden, and the smell of the espresso coffee of her mother. In the *Afterwords* to this collection written by Diane Di Prima, an Italian American poet and writer, Mazziotti’s poems are described as “at once journey home to ourselves, our ancestral customs and beliefs, and outward, to whatever possibilities await us. […] It is a journey backwards and forwards at once.”\(^{44}\)

We know from Helen Barolini’s *The Dream Book* that Maria Mazziotti was born American in American land from Italian parents immigrated in the new world. Before Mazziotti went to school her home was her world, made of Italian people and of southern Italian dialect as language.

When I was a little girl,
I thought everyone was Italian,
and that was good. We visited

\(^{44}\) Maria Mazziotti Gillan, *Where I Come From*, 117.
our aunts and uncles, 
and they visited us. 
The Italian language smooth 
and sweet in my mouth. 45

The protection of Mazziotti’s Italian home was only limited to her place because as she herself remembers “as soon as I stepped outside the old brown doors, I was in America, and I soon learned that I had to speak English in school and on the streets.” 46 School was the first impact with the American world and it brought to Maria the revelation to be different from all other American children and to speak a different language.

Miss Wilson’s eyes, opaque 
as blue glass, fix on me: 
“We must speak English. 
We’re in America now.”
I want to say, “I am American,”
but the evidence is stacked against me. 47

The intimidation from the teachers who wanted her to change and forget what she has always been caused in Mazziotti’s self the origin of her shame and hate for what had made her so different, rejected and not part of the group. The shame in growing up Italian American was the cause of Mazziotti’s silence, inability to speak, to search for words and express her pain, her sense of outsiderness and invisibility when she is among American people.

At home, my words smooth in my mouth, 
I chatter and am proud. In school, 
I am silent, grope for the right English

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45 Growing Up Italian, in Where I Come From, 54. 
46 Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Shame and Silence in My Work, 153.
words, fear the Italian word
will sprout from my mouth like a rose.\textsuperscript{48}

The lessons American teachers gave Maria shaped her consideration for her self as something wrong and not able to fit with the other people, a self that had to be changed.

Without words, they tell me
to be ashamed.
I am.
I deny that booted country
even from myself,
want to be still
and untouchable
as these women
who teach me to hate myself.\textsuperscript{49}

To be silent becomes Mazziotti’s way of hiding herself, not calling attention, a way to shape her identity and self-image in constant shame. In her poem “Learning Silence” she explains the way she internalized this lesson.

By the time I am in first grade, I know enough
to be frightened, to keep my hands folded
on my desk and try to be quiet ‘as a mouse’.
I am nervous most of the time, feel sick to my stomach.
I am afraid to raise my hand, afraid
to ask for the bathroom pass, afraid
of the bigger children, but most of all,
afraid of Miss Barton who does not like me.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{47} Public School N. 18 Paterson, New Jersey, in Where I Come From, 12.
\textsuperscript{48} Public School N. 18 Paterson, New Jersey, 12.
Maria feels shame for herself and in contrast she develops admiration for the supposed perfect American world of her “Dick and Jane” school books. They open a world totally different from her Italian one and that will never belong to her. “Those books told me that I was all wrong and that I didn’t fit in to the world I wanted to inhabit. I think when I started to read those books and look at the pictures, I began my journey toward trying to erase what I was—a working-class Italian American.”

In Mazziotti’s imagination occurred an association of her Italian self with everything that was poor and unwanted, even her appearance became in her mind a sign of negative identification to erase.

If some magic could transform me,
make me blonde and cute, instead of sad
and serious and scared with my sausages curls
my huge, terrified eyes,
my long nose, my dark, olive-toned skin,
the harsh cheap cotton of my clothes.\(^{52}\)

Also her passion and interest in reading and poetry offers her an attempt to erase her Italian background in her choice to read only English literary tradition, neglecting her Italian cultural patrimony. In her first steps as poet she imitated other poets’ style because she did not want to admit her own, because she wasn’t still ready to have one as individuality. “I wanted to be Keats or Shelley or Amy Lowell; it took me a long time to realize that this yearning was part of my attempt to erase myself. I did everything I could to transform myself into a real American.”\(^{53}\) She changed her way of dressing, her make up, the way she combed her hair. She changed everything she could superficially, on the appearance, but inside she was still the young girl shy and ashamed, still not able to speak English because still not

\(^{49}\) *Public School N. 18 Paterson, New Jersey*, 12-13.

\(^{50}\) *Learning Silence*, in *Shame and Silence in My Work*, 156.


\(^{52}\) *Learning Silence*, 155.
strong enough to know and be just herself. Mazziotti decided to change more, the first sign of her Italian identity: her name. She changed her first name from Maria to Marie and when she got married she started to use only her American husband’s last name.

When I married, I chose a man with blond hair and blue eyes, a handsome man who lived in a white colonial house in an upper-middle-class town. His parents went to college and his father was an executive with a shipping company. […] Marrying into that family, I thought I was being transformed, lifting up and away from my own Italian self. My husband seemed to be everything I was not. In marrying him, I could deny my past and forget my name.54

Maria Mazziotti chose to become Marie Gillan. The change of her name represents a phase, a stage through which she thought to have hidden and erased her Italian self, and let only her American self live outside, in the American world. Mazziotti’s will to erase her Italian self was only a part, a stage of her self-development that was followed by the recovering and acceptance of what she had wanted desperately to change for so long. Something happened in Maria’s life, and in many other Italian American women writers.

The change occurred in 1985, a crucial year for Italian American female literary tradition, because Helen Barolini’s The Dream Book–An Anthology of Writing by Italian American Women was published. The Dream Book was more than an anthology, it was the proof of the existence and the literary talent of Italian American women writers. Among them, a few poems of Marie Gillan were published under her complete Italian name, Maria Mazziotti Gillan. Maria remembers how reading her Italian American name printed on such a famous work was like an epiphany for her. Her Italian name, the first and most evident sign of her ethnicity, of her being Italian, was public to the American audience. For the first

53. Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Shame and Silence in My Work, 158.
54. Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Shame and Silence in My Work, 158.
time Mazziotti was proud of her name and what that name carried with it: her Italian origin. “I saw my name, Maria Mazziotti Gillan spelled, out above my poem and saw it in a *New York Times* review where they quoted from it. I was, for the first time, incredibly proud of that name and all the lineage that it embodied. [...] In that moment the idea of taking back my maiden name surfaced.”

With the acknowledgement of her self came also the end of her shame, the breaking of the silence and the capacity to speak.

Till one day, I guess I was 40 by then,
I woke up cursing
all those who taught me
to hate my dark, foreign self,
and I said ‘Here I am –
with my olive-toned skin
and my Italian parents,
and my old poverty,
real as a scar on my forehead’,
and all the toys we couldn’t buy
and all the words I didn’t say,
all the downcast eyes
and folded hands
and remarks I didn’t make
rise up in me and explode.
onto papers like firecrackers
like meteors
and I celebrated my Italian American self.
[...] And today, I take back my name.\(^{56}\)


\(^{56}\) *Growing Up Italian*, 56.
Maria’s determination in taking back her name implies a confrontation and reconciliation with what her name represents, that is her past. “All my people from my past come to sit with me tonight in my bright suburban kitchen. [...] How they crowd in on me tonight. How rich I was, though I didn’t know it then.” Mazziotti started to realize that she wanted to deny her Italian self because she wanted desperately to be accepted, and she was willing to sacrifice her Italian self for other people’s approval and acceptance. She started to write about what she had always denied, her being Italian American, with the new awareness of being worthy to be told and heard.

At an early age, I know that how others marked me was significant. I remember in grammar school two teachers standing in front of the room and saying, ‘Look at her. She’s such a scared little rabbit. I bet her father bet her!’ At the time, I was just humiliated by their words. When I became a writer, I knew that I could use words to reshape the way others saw my family because I had the power to tell our side of the story.

Maria started to write about her self, her family, her origin, about where she really comes from. In Where I come From she recollects and describes her emotions and memories, she gives order to her feelings and understands herself, starting a process of healing and self-discovery. She has been silent for too long, it is time to learn to speak, and not only because now she is strong enough for doing it, but also because there is someone finally willing to listen.

My anger spits venomous from my mouth: I am proud of my mother, dressed all in black,

57. Stereopticon, in Where I Come From, 32.
58. Maria Mazziotti Gillian, Shame and Silence in My Work, 163.
proud of my father
with his broken tongue,
proud of the laughter
and noise of our house.
Remember me Ladies?
the silent one?
I have found my voice.⁵⁹

The changes in Maria’s life represent the multiple developments of her self. In her poem “Heritage” she acknowledges the fact that her self is made of different pieces, and these pieces are the people of her life.

I’m like those Russian peasant dolls
made of lacquered wood where the larger dolls open
to reveal smaller dolls, until finally
the smallest doll of all stands, unseamed and solid.
When you open me up: my mother, her mother
my daughter, my son’s daughter. It could go on for ever,
the way I carry them inside me.
Only their voices emerge, and when
I speak to my daughter,
I hear their words tangled in my own.
Ma, when you died, I thought I’d lost you for ever,
[...] but when I open myself
you are still there inside me
and I am safe.⁶⁰

It is significant to notice that Maria’s self is embedded by other significant selves, but all female ones. Female connections represent the origins, home, protection,

⁵⁹. Public School N. 18 Paterson, New Jersey, 12.
⁶⁰. Heritage, in Where I Come From, 112.
comfort of the family, while the male part, Maria’s father first of all and her son, represents a more complex and difficult relationship. Maria’s mother, with her stories about Maria’s great-grandmother and grandmother, her garden with ripe tomatoes, peppers, lettuce and eggplants, form a familiar tradition, exclusively female, that still continues in Maria’s daughter Jennifer.

I remember my mother as she lay dying,
how she said of my daughter, ‘that Jennifer,
she’s all the treasure you’ll ever need.’

Men are distant, sometimes absent, not only physically but also emotionally. While Maria’s husband unfortunately became slowly absent because of an early manifestation of Parkinson’s disease, her difficult relationship with a male individual has a common path first with her father and later with her son. In her poem “Papa, Where Are You” Maria questions the absence of her father from the domestic scene. While Maria’s mother was always present at home, her father needed to work outside and provide for the family.

In pictures of myself when I was growing up
I cannot find you. I search through a catalog
of memories, old pictures, frayed and yellowed.
You are not there. Papa, where are you
while mama kept our kitchen warm.

Mazziotti’s father is the symbol of the Italian self Maria wanted to deny, with his broken English, his unstable jobs, the one who did not permit Maria’s mother to attend night school and learn to read English. He is the father Maria pretended not to see while he was waiting for the bus late in the evening in an empty street corner,

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the father she was ashamed to introduce to her friends because of his being an Italian immigrant man that needed to be changed too.

I told everyone
your name was Arthur,
tried to turn you
into the imaginary father
in the three-piece suit
that I wanted instead of my own.\textsuperscript{63}

Maria changed not only her name but also her father’s, the person who gave her that Italian name. In changing her father’s name Maria wants to erase her very deep ethnic origin. Pretending to have a different father, not Italian but American, middle-class and speaking English, Maria makes possible a more radical and complete transformation in front of American society because Maria’s father, among the family members, is the most exposed to the outside world, he is the first image of the Mazziotti family. Maria, in talking about her attitude toward her father during the years of her youth, speaks about her “betrayal” toward him, because she did not understand that man who was poor, an immigrant and working-class, but above all her father.

How I betrayed you,
over and over, ashamed of your broken tongue,
how I laughed, savage and innocent,
at your mutilations. […]
I was sixteen when you called one night from your work.
I called you ‘dear,’
loving you in that moment
past all the barriers of the heart.
You called again every night for a week.
I never said it again.
I wish I could say it now.
Dear, my Dear,
with your twisted tongue,
I did not understand you
dragging your burden of love.\(^{64}\)

Probably it has been Maria’s son’s rejection of a relationship with his mother to urge Maria to explain to her father the reasons behind her refusal of him and to ask for forgiveness. In her poem “Betrayals,” the plural form of the title implies not only Maria’s betrayal of her father, but also Maria’s son’s betrayal of her.

Today, my son shouts,
‘don’t tell anyone you are my mother,’
hunching down in the car
so the other boys won’t see us together.
Daddy, are you laughing?
Oh, how things turn full circle.
My own words coming back
to slap my face.\(^{65}\)

The awareness of being denied by her own child makes her realize that her development as individual has been, for many years, at the expense not only of her Italian self but also of her emotional connection with her father. Maria is finally able to speak and pronounce aloud her own Italian name, but the realization of her self cannot be separated from the conciliation with her father.

Papa,
silk worker,

\(^{63}\) Arturo, in Where I Come From, 50.
\(^{64}\) Betrayals, in Where I Come From, 7-8.
janitor,
night watchman,
imigrant Italian,
I honor the years you spent in menial work
while your mind, so quick and sharp,
longed to escape,
honor the times you got out of bed
after sleeping only an hour,
to take me to school or pick me up;
the warm bakery rolls you bought for me
on the way home from the night shift. […]
Papa,
dragging your dead leg
through the factories of Paterson,
I am outside the house now,
shouting your name.66

Silence is no longer Maria’s language.

Listen, America,
this is my father, Arturo,
and I am his daughter, Maria.
Do not call me Marie.67

65 Betrayals, in Where I Come From, 7.
66 Daddy, We Called You, in Shame and Silence in My Work, 174.
67 Arturo, 51.


