

Introduction



In the beginning there are listeners and the storyteller; in the end there are the stories.

—Gioia Timpanelli, “Stories and Storytelling”

U.S. writers of Italian America give the lie to the idea represented by the code of *omertà*, with its injunction of silence, of keeping family matters and personal secrets private. Writers of Italian America cleverly employ that ancient rule of silence in their stories, refusing as their ancestors before them to comply with authorities represented by church and state. Translating into literature the orally transmitted tales of ancestral migrations to America, these writers tell and retell narratives of diaspora. Their immigrating forbears needn't have unloosed their tongues, for they carried with them to America verbal baggage much heavier than their trunks and valises. Perhaps in nineteenth-century villages Italians could abide a *proverbio* like this: “a buon intenditor poche parole,” literally translated as “for one who understands few words suffice,” wise words for those surrounded by family members to the fourth degree. But from the urban squalor of large industrialized cities to the bleak impoverishment of rural landscapes, Italian immigrants suffered both invisibility because they were not valued and hostility because they were considered an economic threat to native-born American workers. To fend off cultural annihilation, exacerbated by the xenophobia that met the second great migration, Italian immigrants managed to transmit their stories. This verbal act allowed old-world migrants to align themselves not only with their ancestors but also with their children, who inherited tales of wonder and *furtivizia* (cunning).

Children of immigrants, caught between two languages, found creative ways to engage their parents' storytelling traditions with those tales they learned on American streets and in public schools. The literature that has emerged from over a century's worth of publications, from newspapers to novels, has revealed a culture in which verbal communication often exceeded frugal silence. The stories by U.S. writers of Italian America register the stress exerted by larger cultural forces that made few words a liability. Acts of writing ensured Italian Americans of at least two things: that they would not forget an ancestral heritage replete with communal and inclusive storytelling traditions; and that assimilation in America could be deflected by recording and establishing resistant voices in narratives expressive of folk practices and family cultures. Italian Americans continue in the millennium to create plots that resist the homogenizing influences of suburban culture, spurning regulating effects of assimilation in favor of cultural preservation and identification with other minority groups.

The stories produced by Italian Americans are acts of survival. They are also a gesture of homage bestowed on oral traditions that continue to exert literary influence on their works. Through narrative, Italian American storytellers have constructed another space to revise hierarchical discourse, to give voice to those without power to shape perception or invent alternative worlds. A folktale collected and retold by Italo Calvino (in *Italian Folktales*) paradigmatically exemplifies one of the kinds of stories to which Italian American writers have been attracted. In "Catherine, Sly Country Lass," Calvino retells the story of peasant victory over the nobility. Though I mean no disservice by condensing the tale, I offer only the briefest summary here. Catherine, the poor daughter of a farmer, manages through wit and perseverance to pass the outlandish tests devised by the king, who eventually makes her his wife. When she has the temerity to oppose her husband's poor judgment in his court of justice, the king decides to send her back to her father's farm, but tells her she may take the thing she likes most of all with her. At a farewell feast, Catherine gets her husband drunk and the king wakes up in her family's hovel. In a verbal sleight of hand, Catherine tells the king she took him home because she likes him best of all. They reconcile, return to the palace, and live happily ever after. Catherine's voice and judgment thereafter become central to the King's court of justice. As she is wiser than her husband, her acts of justice will predominate (261–266). The story's themes are fundamental to peasant morality: an insistence on equality and justice, despite arbitrary divi-

sion of human beings; the desire to determine one's own fate, despite adversity; and, the belief that liberation can only be achieved, as Calvino relates, "if we liberate other people, for this is the *sine qua non* of one's own liberation" (xix).

From Rosa Cassettari's orally transmitted stories of nineteenth-century Italy to Toni Ardizzone's framed novel *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu* told by another storytelling Rosa published at the end of the twentieth century, voices of community forge a literature through experiences of past oppression. A cursory peak at four narratives spanning the twentieth century reveals a representation of dominated peoples; the sound of their voices become standard cultural practice in resisting oppressions of poverty and silence within the narrative works of Italian America. Marie Hall Ets's *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant*, Jerre Mangione's *Mount Allegro*, Kenny Marotta's "Her Sister," and Tony Ardizzone's *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu* are four such narratives that engage folkloric traditions in order to resist oppressions of class, gender, and ethnicity. These works represent only a small portion of the oeuvre of Italian American writings that incorporate folk wisdom and practice as measures of resistance.

An expert teller of tales, Rosa Cassettari achieves enough fluency in the powerful English tongue to transmit her life stories to Marie Hall Ets, an act of self-authorizing wholly unavailable to her in rural northern Italy. At the same time, Rosa performed her stories in front of Chicago audiences and gained local fame there as a wondrous teller of tales. She managed to turn the practice of verbal expression into a gesture of individuation but more importantly into an activity of community building with other immigrant women. In word and deed, Rosa embodies a folk ethos.

Within his memoir of Sicilian American life in the early twentieth century, second-generation writer Jerre Mangione explores the folk wisdom of his elders by giving them center stage in *Mount Allegro*. The stories they tell comprise the meat of the memoir. Told by the dramatic Uncle Nino, one such tale, a favorite of mine, is plucked from the fields of folklore, featuring the rich and handsome Baron Albertini and the peasant girl, Annichia, to whom he takes a fancy. Demonstrating all the qualities of the wily country lass, Annichia learns from her mother how to turn the tables on the nobility and maintain her self-respect (and her marriage) through cunning and resilience. Mangione humorously manages to couch a scathing commentary on the abuses of the noble class, his yarn spinning reversing the assumption about superiority based on

social class and breeding. The weaver's daughter, Annichia, succeeds quite literally in tying the hands of the upper classes while teaching her husband a valuable lesson about the superiority of the lower classes. She spins a delectable yarn.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, Kenny Marotta and Tony Ardizzone further explore the uses of folk wisdom and individual voices that focus on the persuasive nature of storytelling in the service of assuring gender equality. Both writers employ features of folk practice in an effort to examine how female characters resist patriarchal behavior that would otherwise prevent them from liberating themselves from old-world ideology. Marotta's short story, "Her Sister," recapitulates Calvino's and Mangione's tales, but does so with a focus on feminism that deepens an understanding of how the female Italian protagonist plots her way to America. A tale that turns the Cinderella motif westward, "Her Sister" incorporates fairy-tale features (with a mother-in-law as the evil but furtive stepmother) along with religious customs, including the procession of the local Madonna, to reinforce women's determination to cast off allegiance to rigid caste restrictions. By the means available to her, the female protagonist ensnares her resistant husband, assuring her migration to America.

Giuseppe Pitrè, a Sicilian physician, was an indefatigable assembler of Italian folklore in the nineteenth century and Tony Ardizzone's *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu* might be considered the twentieth-century fictional counterpart of Pitrè's collection. Laden with folklore, Ardizzone liberally sprinkles his multivoiced narrative with songs, rhymes, tests of faith and love, Giufà tales, medieval arguments, beast fables, stories of saints, cross-dressing escapades, and tales of family life in Sicily and America. In his desire to tell stories of nineteenth-century Italy after the Risorgimento, and twentieth-century stories about the lived experiences of Sicilian immigrants, Ardizzone engages the voices of the peasantry. Rosa, the storyteller of the frame and caesurae, weaves the thread and ties the knot as each Santuzzu family member spins his or her yarn. Addressed to a listening audience, and to her grandchildren, Rosa verbally and literally takes readers on a Sicilian pilgrimage:

The rope is *la famigghia*, see? Each of us is a thread, wound up
in it. Before you were born, a rope connected me to you.

One still does, *figghiu miu*.

Stronger than twine or the truest of leather,

Family binds us forever together. (22)

Throughout his novel, Ardizzone engages voices from the subaltern to the scholarly. Demonstrating an abiding respect toward canonical Italian and Anglo literary traditions, Ardizzone fictionalizes Italian American history, making visible *la storia* of an island culture, Sicilia, kicked by the boot of peninsular Italy, whose thieving government made nationalism feel “like just another absentee landlord. . . . Since the beginning of time Sicilia has been dominated by many, conquered by none” (37). Published twenty years after Helen Barolini’s 1979 triptych *Umbertina*, Ardizzone’s *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu* emulates Barolini’s role of the *cantastorie* (folktale singer). Barolini’s song of the Risorgimento spans eighty years, and two centuries and continents. From the socialist shoemaker Domenica Sacca to the goat girl Umbertina, whose status as an outsider in America sadly increases with time, Barolini embraces the vital importance of her actual grandmother’s oral traditions by dedicating her novel to her mother, “the storyteller,” who made the creation of *Umbertina* possible.

What these stories share is the continuous importance of voice—libratory, healing, resistant—within the mouths of ordinary folk whose thoughts and beliefs were neither heard nor respected much in the old or the new worlds. The storytellers briefly mentioned in this introduction value the importance of communal voices that, when read together, offer a compelling understanding of these writers’ artistic focus on Italian America. Their works, like the others I discuss in individual chapters, participate in incorporating vernacular origins and multiple voices that, taken collectively, begin to form an artistic community that we might call Italian America. The maintenance of particular voices—those that focus on justice and faith, for example—into third and fourth generational writing, create a public, literary identity for Italian Americans. Such works continue to focus on the cleverness of a burdened people, whose cultural practices become verbal and behavioral markers that guide and define their lives and those following them. The voices of Italian America become a collectivity of sound, illuminating distinctive communities that offer reflections, for example, on loss and dispersal without succumbing to narratives of nostalgia. The writers regularly rely on voices of community emerging from folk, familial, neighborly, and spiritual sources. While the development of individual voices within these narratives is also demonstrated, writers of Italian America recognize many other determining factors that complicate subjectivity, including influences of region, class, gender, and personal history, to name just a few.

Grounded on the work of many scholars, my analysis aims to be faithful to the generous cross-referencing I have observed also in the primary works, with an especial nod to Tony Ardizzone, who paid handsome homage to all the writers and many of the scholars I reference in my own study. Cultural studies ranging from specific histories of migration and ethnographic interpretations of ethnic enclaves to surveys on broad topics as religion and death illuminate the ways Italian Americans thought and lived, informing my interpretations of how they are represented in narratives. Grounded also on recent theories of autobiography and narrative, the chapters that follow examine how dominated peoples through both oral and written storytelling traditions redefine marginality. Postcolonial and folk discourses have in common emancipative and appropriative uses of voice, and intersect throughout my discussion. David Palumbo-Liu's use of the term "critical multiculturalism" also helps me to examine how the literature of Italian America resists dominant literary and historical expression, creating and inventing alternative meanings and spaces. Profoundly important are also those scholars of Italian American culture who have instrumentally shaped an academic discourse and discipline on Italian America to which I am gratefully indebted.

Chapter 1 relates folklore, storytelling, and the subaltern status of the population through a discussion of the voice of justice that is central to several narratives of Italian America. As such, this chapter lays much of the theoretical and historical groundwork that supports the subsequent chapters. The voices of law and the supposed institutions of justice in the public sphere fail dramatically to support immigrant Italians, thus inviting a careful reinterpretation of Italian American noncompliance with public authorities.

Closely intertwined with the voice of justice is the voice of faith, the topic of chapter 2. The role of Catholicism in relation to folk tradition for Italian Americans remains essential to an understanding of devotional practices considered aberrant to the Catholic hierarchy, especially in America. Women writers in particular have recorded with ambivalence their resistance to an institutionalized Catholicism that defines them as inherently inferior and requires their subordination. From Catholic girl stories to full-length travel narratives such as Susan Carperna Lloyd's *No Pictures in My Grave*, women authors confess plenty about their resistance to formal Catholicism alongside their emphatic attraction to the folk religious beliefs of their ancestors.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine individual authors and how the voices of the storyteller(s) complicate ideas about subjectivity, authorship, and

community. From transcription through publication, Rosa Cassettari's life story is mediated by the hand of Marie Hall Ets, a social worker turned successful children's book author. Rosa's role as an expert storyteller and Marie Hall Ets's recognition of the narrative potential of such an awe-inspiring tale affected its construction, but did not underestimate the vitality of oral cultural features that informed Rosa's voice. A voice that is both libratory and performative, Rosa tells stories with a purpose: to liberate and heal others, including Marie Hall Ets, who was grieving the death of her husband when Rosa first met her.

The novels of Guido D'Agostino are the focus of chapter 4, introducing the voice of land and, in particular, the village ancestor who speaks for the people about establishing a vital relationship in rural America for immigrant Italians. The voice of the village ancestor, pragmatic and liberating, is expressed by various representatives in each of his four novels. The title of D'Agostino's first novel, *Olives on the Apple Tree*, encapsulates the author's artistic vision in its activity of grafting, uniting homeland Italy with American soil. A potent agricultural metaphor, the procedure of grafting unites a detached bud or shoot with a growing plant. For D'Agostino such a metaphor also projects his belief in fruitful transplantation of immigrant Italians through assimilation. Through the voices of his cultural spokesmen, D'Agostino portrays the necessity to assimilate to an idea of America that has as its core the sanctification of nature in the Emersonian sense as a symbol of the divine. Like Willa Cather before him, D'Agostino portrays hardworking immigrants who embrace nature's severity and bounty. Through the voice of nature, D'Agostino manages throughout his works to join Italian rural antecedents with American landscapes. In his farmer's hands, early twentieth-century Greenwich Village never looked so green, and Italian transplants in urban settings also form part of the ongoing dialectic D'Agostino establishes between rural and urban settings.

Linked by their focus on female individuation, chapters 5 and 6 explore in fiction, memoir, and poetry those voices of ancestry, genealogical and literary, to which several writers of Italian America make thematic and stylistic connections. Comparative literary methodology invites cross-cultural conversation, initiating a dialogue in chapter 5 between two historically segregated groups: Italian Americans and African Americans. The vernacular voices heard in the debut novels of Tina De Rosa and Paule Marshall illuminate the folkloric voices of female ancestors, whose storytelling traditions direct the artistic trajectories of young protagonists. Because of the voices of their history-singing guides, these aspiring women

recognize that the language they inherit is not only a refuge, but also a requirement of their collective identities, which they offer as testimonials of their ethnic cultures to American readers.

Chapter 6 extends the conversation discussed in the previous chapter on powerful female precursors, but in the genres of memoir and poetry, examining recognizable links between older and younger generations of writers. Through autobiographical writing, memoirists Louise DeSalvo and Mary Cappello and poets Maria Mazziotti Gillan and Rose Romano give cultural visibility to Italian American histories regarding social justice, cultural loss, and familial conflict. Their voices, at times colloquial and deliberately nonliterary, recall Rosa Cassettari's orally told stories, and allow these women writers to create habitable spaces for their voices to breathe within reconstituted Italian American households.

In the epigraph to this introduction, Gioia Timpanelli explains that in the end there are the stories, which function as gestures of continuity after the storytellers are long gone. The voice of mortality merges with the voice of continuity in chapter 7 as I examine how stories of death are told from the mouths of many Italian American writers, from Garibaldi Lapolla's *The Grand Gennaro* to Carole Maso's *The Art Lover*. Deathbed scenes, widows' lamentations, and textual endings illuminate some of the operative ways in which U.S. writers of Italian America explore bereavement. Writing beyond a conventional belief in a Catholic afterlife, these writers incorporate oral traditions that merge with illness narratives, offering culturally elaborate stories about lessons in survival and moral value.

Continuity also marks the focus of chapter 8 with a discussion of the processes involved in shaping a body of U.S. Italian American writing. In this concluding chapter, the voice of revival is paramount. A case study from the 1930s in particular exemplifies the processes set in place by the academy and by other forces that both increased the value of Italian American writers and also continued to obscure their presence on American literary soil. I then explore the intersection between post-structural methodologies and critical pedagogical theories, which open up Italian American texts to counterreadings that reinstate the value of ethnic realism vis-à-vis experimentalism. Italian American writing, like other ethnic writing, uses linguistic codes that reveal their resistance toward a dominant culture that would keep them quiet. Scholars of Italian America have been largely instrumental in analyzing the ways in which writers have maintained textual and linguistic resistance through stylistic technique and coded language. Through their inventive use

of vernacular expressions, U.S. writers of Italian America continue to express the importance of voice in an effort to preserve the authenticity of their culture, to insist that nothing goes away if we continue to talk our truths.

The voices of Italian America run deeply along my pulse. So in a final introductory comment, I express profound gratitude toward those writers from the past and present, whose narratives made my words possible. My *de profundis* thankfulness is a psalm of joy not sorrow, recognizing the potential of words to liberate, heal, transform, and teach. To the writers of Italian America I dedicate this book.