Recovering Italian Ancestry in the Work of Italian American Poets

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Abstract:

Poems written by Italian American poets included in *Unsettling America*, an anthology of ethnic poetry edited by Maria Mazziotti Gillan and Jennifer Gillan in 1994, focus on a common theme, the sense of otherness felt by these poets when they were young in school and even within their own Italian American families. These poets confess to the psychological abuse they suffered that caused them to hate their Italian selves as well as the Italian language and force them to shed the parts of themselves that other people found offensive. The poems, however, also testify to the poets' awareness of what was lost as these poets embark on a journey of self definition to recover their own Italian identities and the Italian language that they were forced to shed.

Keywords: normative, confessional poetry, otherness, difference, assimilation

In 1994, Maria Mazziotti Gillan and Jennifer Gillan published *Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry*, a truly multicultural collection of poetry that they divided into five parts, "Uprooting," "Performing," "Naming," "Negotiating," and "Re-Envisioning." Throughout the collection, regardless of where they appear, poems written by Italian American poets share one theme in common, the sense of otherness that Italian Americans felt as young people at school where they were marked as "others" by their Italian names and often abused and made to feel different. These poets write about high school teachers who refused to pronounce their names correctly and, in many cases, even punished them for being different. Although they are all adults, far removed from those years spent in high school, these Italian American poets still remember and now confess to the psychological pain that they suffered in the hands of their teachers who basically taught them to hate their names, their looks, their language, everything they were as Italians. Unable to fight back, these young people, little by little, shed pieces of themselves so that others would start seeing them as "American," and one of the things they now admit with regret to giving up is knowledge of the Italian language, an irreplaceable loss. The poems written by Italian American poets and included in *Unsettling America* examine the pain felt by these writers when they were young and attempting to create a

self. These poems confess to the pain the poets suffered in the hands of others, but they also document a journey of self definition and self awareness that has lead them to value and appreciate who they are as Italians in America.

Explaining the difference that she finds in the cocky self assurance of male confessional poets like Lowell and Berryman and the not-so-self-assured "confessions" of female poets like Sexton and Plath, Sandra M. Gilbert, in "'My Name Is Darkness': The Poetry of Self-Definition," claims that the male confessional poet like Lowell or Berryman "observes himself as a representative specimen with a sort of scientific exactitude. Alienated, he's nevertheless an ironic sociologist of his own alienation because he considers his analytic perspective on himself a civilized, normative point of view" (Gilbert 1977, 445). In contrast to this "normative" white, male point of view, the female confessional poet, even though she is also white, "seems to feel no such paradoxical ease with her own anxieties" (Gilbert 1977, 445). Gilbert claims that the white, female confessional poet, "even at her most objective she feels eccentric, not representative; peripheral, not central" (Gilbert 1977, 445). She is not central because "the male confessional poet—Lowell, Berryman, Yeats—writes in the certainty that he is the inheritor of major traditions, the grandson of history" (Gilbert 1977, 446). The female confessional poet does not share the long history of male produced poetry nor the male poets' cocky self-assurance. Instead of writing and thereby confessing with certainty, the female poet "writes in the hope of discovering or defining a self, a certainty, a tradition" (Gilbert 1977, 446). Unlike her self-assured male counterpart, the white, American female confessional poet writes as if she is "striving for self-knowledge" (Gilbert 1977, 446) in order to define a self that is not "normative," not completely understood.

Sandra M. Gilbert's understanding of how the work of white American confessional women poets differs from the work of their male counterparts is useful in understanding the work of both male and female Italian American poets who have recently been writing about the pain they suffered as children in the hands of people who considered them inferior simply because they were Italian. Although these poets may have been white, they were not white enough to be part of the "normative" white group. In "Real Presence," Anthony Lioi explains that "as scholarship in Whiteness Studies has shown, many of the peoples now considered 'white ethnics'—Ashkenazi Jews, southern Italians, the Irish—were not entirely white when they arrived in the United States during the great migrations that ended in 1924" (Lioi 2009, 141). The Italian Americans may have looked white, but the color of their skins did not protect them from the ridicule of other more established Americans. Thus, Italian American poets who suffered discrimination because of their "difference" are now confessing their pain through their poetry. As Sandra M. Gilbert sees white women confessional poets writing "in the hope of discovering or defining a self, a certainty, a tradition" (Gilbert 1977, 446), Italian American poets now write to define their pain and to understand what happened to so many of them during their youth in this country. They were marked as the "Other" and made to suffer the trauma of ridicule not only in the hands of their classmates who were too young to know better

but also in the hands of their teachers, educated adults, who should have known better than to target their students simply because they were different.

Susan J. Brison argues in "Acts of Memory" that "trauma survivors often eventually find ways to reconstruct themselves and carry on with reconfigured lives." However, for people who have suffered the abuse of others, especially during childhood, "working through, or remastering, traumatic memory (in the case of human-inflicted trauma) involves a shift from being the object or medium of someone else's (the perpetrator's) speech (or other expressive behavior) to being the subject of one's own" (Brison 2002, 68). To surpass the trauma inflicted by others, the object of abuse must be able to work through the pain; he/she must evolve so that the pain can be transformed into something better. Regina Barreca argues in *Don't Tell Mama* that "Italian Americans live (and have always lived) a life not inherited, but invented" and that invention of the self has made them "aware of their own process of transformation from citizens of another country to residents of a new land (however long ago the journey was made)" (Barreca 2002, XIX). This process of transformation is evident in the work of Italian-American poets who are now writing to define an Italian-American self, but the process demands that they admit to what happened to them and examine it.

In "Having the Wrong Name for Mr. Wright," Helen Barolini examines the shame of being made to feel wrong. She admits that, even though she was born in the United States, "It was hard to think of myself as American" because "those foreign-type people I saw at weddings or at Christmas, /the ones who talked funny and looked wrong, / —*they* were my relatives" (Barolini 1994, 148). In these lines, Barolini confesses that she feels different from the others around her, as if she is not a real American, and she recognizes the difference in her own relatives who are "not the comely and jolly Americans / of *Saturday Evening Post* covers" (Barolini 1994, 148). People who look like her and her relatives do not appear on the covers of American magazines as symbols of America. For Barolini, marginalization at school keeps her from recognizing herself as an American, a member of the mainstream group. Her sense of being an Other is so severe that, as a student in high school, the poet does not know what to write on the box marked "Nationality" when "at school or at the Y or on camp applications / the forms to be filled always had a blank for / 'Nationality,'" but the poet "never knew what to put down." She admits, "I was born where I went to school and so were my parents, / but I didn't recognize myself as American, / Should I just write 'foreign'?" (Barolini 1994, 148).

Clearly, being born in the United States does not make Helen Barolini feel American, and she has to ask herself how to define her status on the form that she must fill out. The poet's confusion over her sense of self in America is the result of her difference, her being made to feel as if everything that defines her is the wrong thing to be, but Maryfrances Cusumano Wagner, in "Miss Clement's Second Grade," confesses to something more sinister, being the victim of abuse in the hands of her teachers. The speaker in Cusumano Wagner's poem is named Maria, not Marie, which obviously marks her as foreign, and the poet writes that "As Maria shaped vowels, /

she wished to be a Smith," but in this part of the poem she wishes to be a Smith not only so that she could be "white" but also so that the teacher would pay attention to her and she "could hand out crayons / like Evelyn Brown, / have her papers on display" (Cusumano Wagner 1994, 200). The student who looks different from other students in the classroom gets noticed by the teacher only when she makes a mistake, which is why the poet confesses that

> During quiet writing,
> when everyone seemed the same,
> she almost forgot
> the hours locked in the teacher's closet,
> missing how to take two from eight. (Cusumano Wagner 1994, 200)

The speaker in Cusumano Wagner's poem worries about her Italian name, which is not Smith, but the punishment that she receives for making a mistake in Math is severe, an attempt to break the spirit of Italian school kids and force them to submit. Denise Nico Leto also attests to the violence suffered by Italian American children in "For Talking" when she writes about "Angela Di Martini & I talking / Miss Philpot screams at us / to come to the front of the room" and adds that the girls walk to the front of the room "shaking with fear" because they know the teacher will hit "the backs of our hands with a ruler / for talking" (Nico Leto 1994, 164). Richard Gambino notes in *Blood of my Blood* that "second-generation children were forcefully impressed in public schools with the doctrine of assimilation in American ways, a program that made them feel odd and guilty about everything in their own identities from their mannerisms, clothes, and food to their operatic, vowel-filled names" (Gambino 1998, 255). When everything that defines the self comes into question, remaining true to one self becomes very difficult, which is why Barolini wonders if she should write "foreign" to define who she is and also why the speaker in Cusumano Wagner's poem almost avoids mentioning her being locked in the teacher's closet.

Like Helen Barolini, Maria Mazziotti Gillan remembers in "Public School No. 18: Patterson, New Jersey," how "Miss Wilson's eyes, opaque / as blue glass, fix on me" as she states "'We must speak English. / We're in America now.' / I want to say, 'I am American.' / but the evidence is stacked against me" (Mazziotti Gillan 1994, 380-381). The poet looks different from the other children in the classroom, so she does not feel that she is American enough. She admits that

> At home, my words smooth in my mouth,
> I chatter, and am proud. In school,
> I am silent, grope for the right English
> words, fear the Italian word
> will sprout from my mouth like a rose,
> fear the progression of teachers

in their sprigged dresses,
their Anglo-Saxon faces.

Without words, they tell me
to be ashamed.
I am.
I deny the booted country
even from myself,

want to be still
and untouchable
as these women
who teach me to hate myself. (Mazziotti Gillan 1994, 381)

Being constantly targeted as an Other by teachers and other authority figures leaves a mark on this young woman who learns "to deny the booted country" and admits in "Growing Up Italian" that she "read all the magazines that told me / why blondes have more fun," a mistake that leads her to look "for a man / with blond hair and blue eyes / who would fit right in, / and who'd give me blond, blue-eyed children / who would blend right in" (Mazziotti Gillan 1994, 383). Gambino points out in *Blood of My Blood* that, to survive the pressure of being made to feel different, "the children soon became aware of the realistic necessity of being Americans in language, manners, and general modes of behavior," so they made "the soundest possible compromise. They rejected the Italian language and the larger Italian culture" (Gambino 1998, 257). The rejection of Italy is obvious in Robert Viscusi's "Autobiography" where the poet plainly states that "in my house we had an elephant named Italy" (Viscusi 1994, 275) who "kept sitting on chairs and breaking them" and no one knows "what to do with her," but sadly the speaker is "waiting for her to die" (Viscusi 1994, 276). The rambunctious elephant named Italy can neither be controlled nor killed.

In "The Bucket," Rose Romano claims that everything that is wrong with her and her life is the direct result of her Italian ancestry. She attests to many losses and suggests that her being Italian is to blame for them.

It's almost my fault
I didn't get those jobs
or those apartments or
those friends. I could
have changed my name, kept
my mouth shut. I'm light enough.
Not all Italians can say that. (Romano 1994, 326)

Although the color of her skin is light enough to allow her to pass as something other than Italian, she is still haunted by the realization that she is Italian everywhere she goes, and this is not always a good thing in a country where people discriminate against Italians. The speaker in this poem loses her job and possibly even her friends as she is also denied the right to rent apartments simply because her being Italian American makes her different.

In "Having the Wrong Name for Mr. Wright," Helen Barolini attests to the way Mr. Wright focuses on her difference by making a point of mispronouncing her name and the names of other "foreign" students in his classroom. For some reason, Mr. Wright simply cannot pronounce difference, so he repeatedly ignores the student's attempt to teach him how to pronounce her name. The poem opens with the speaker stressing the proper pronunciation,

> "Pietrofesso," I'd repeat to Mr. Wright, the science teacher in
> Junior High
> (or to Miss Fiske, English; Miss Conan, History)
> "P-i-e-t-r-o-f-e-s-s-o," I'd spell out, mortified,
> "Stefana with an f, Pietrofesso,"
> Staff is what they called me, my last name slurring into Peterface-oh.
> Later I was known as Petrify. (Barolini 1994, 147)

Barolini follows up the account of her experience with "What I felt could only be known / by the other wrong names in my class" (Barolini 1994, 148), kids whose foreign sounding names make them the target of ridicule from other kids or indifference by their teachers. These kids are "signaled alien" because of names that Richard Gambino refers to as "operatic, vowel-filled names" (Gambino 1998, 255), but "Mr. Wright grimaced and garbled our names in roll-call" (Barolini 1994, 148) and never apologized for making his students feel as if something about them was wrong.

One of the clearest signs that Italian names create problems for Italians appears in Denise Nico Leto's poem, "The Mary Morelle Show," where she claims that "the pressure to assimilate / performed miraculous mutations" (Leto 1994, 90). The mutations manifest themselves in the many changes expected of Italian Americans. Mary Morelle, a television host, is told that television "makes a big nose / even bigger. / So she got a new one / a little, slightly upturned / less Italian one" (Leto 1994, 91), but the effort to assimilate also forces a different kind of change because "the United States / took their own / Italian names / and spit them out / in shortened versions" as "Giovanni became Jonny became Jon" and "Cavacini became Cacine became Caci (Casey)" or "Alfonsina became Alfy became Al" and "Letinoni became Letino became Leto became Leto (Lido)" (Leto 1994, 90).

> What was Italian became no one
> what was American became everyone.
> To be both was to be someone else.

> Brief, clipped endings
> were survival. (Leto 1994, 90)

To survive, Italian Americans change their names, even their looks, giving up parts of themselves in order to fit in among people who do not even consider them Americans; this process of shedding parts of a culture seems innocuous, painless, but it has clearly left a painful memory for Italian American poets who now remember their discomfort at being made to feel as if they were outsiders in their own country.

In order to fit in, to be considered part of American culture, far too many Italian Americans also gave up their ancestral language. Fred Gardaphé in "We Weren't Always White: Race and Ethnicity in Italian American Literature" points out that, "For Italian Americans, 'making it' has come with a high price tag. It has cost them the language of their ancestors—the main means by which history is preserved and heritage passed on from one generation to the next" (Gardaphé 2002, 187). Giving up the Italian language becomes almost a condition of becoming American, and even those who wanted to keep the Italian language found it difficult because, as Richard Gambino explains in *Blood of My Blood*, when he was in high school in the 1950s, he and other students "bound for college" were "advised to study French" (Gambino 1998, 254). He also laments that he "attended two other high schools, one in Manhattan and one in Nassau County," but "neither offered studies in Italian" (Gambino 1998, 254). Because he was unable to study Italian in school, Gambino knows that he has a "poor degree of literacy" in the Italian language, and he admits that this is "typical of second- and third-generation Italian-Americans. We have not mastered a literate command of the old tongue" (Gambino 1998, 255). Not being allowed to study Italian constitutes a great loss for Italian Americans as they attempt to define themselves because, as Edvige Giunta points out in *Writing with an Accent*, "language is a manifestation of cultural identity" (Giunta 2002, XI).

In "Why I Don't Speak Italian," Arthur L. Clements attests to his own loss of his ancestral language. Even though the poem opens with the line, "God knows, teaching the Renaissance I could use it" (Clements 1994, 82), the poet confesses that he never learned the language of his ancestors when he was a child and adds that

> To visit Rome, Venice, and Florence,
> where I could identify Da Vinci's drawings
> by their left-handed strokes,
> I bought a recorded language course. (Clements 1994, 83)

Although he is accomplished in his field, capable of identifying a painter's work by his stroke, this Italian American college professor must learn the language of his ancestors when he visits Italy, and he admits that he never learned to speak Italian because he was ashamed, but not because he was the subject of abuse or ridicule. Instead he remembers that

My Aunt Clara told childhood stories
about being called *dago* and *guinea*,
hurt by friends' juvenile jokes:
"when Italian tires become flat
dago wop, wop, wop, wop."
Once when I was four,
to console my swarthy aunt I told her
she was almost as beautiful
as a blonde. (Clements 1994, 82)

Telling his aunt that she is "almost as beautiful / as a blonde" suggests that the poet has a very low opinion of his Italian aunt's looks, which mark her as different from the "giant, golden-haired barbarians" whom the poet claims his "dark, civilized / Roman ancestors" (Clements 1994, 83) admired.

"Why I Don't Speak Italian" also testifies to the connection between self-hatred and the rejection of most things that define the poet as Italian, like the Italian language and his aunt's Italian looks. Telling his aunt that she is "almost as beautiful / as a blonde" is a cringe-worthy statement that clearly states what the poet values, and it is not his aunt's dark complexion. Shame also leads Maria Mazziotti Gillan, when she was a child, to wish her Italian father were a different, more "American" looking man. She writes in "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. (Mazziotti Gillan 1994, 379)

However, as an adult, this Italian American poet knows better than to feel shame for her father, and she even develops enough self respect and appreciation for her Italian culture to reclaim her name. The last stanza of this poem testifies to her appreciation of her Italian father, and states

I smile when I think of you.
Listen, America,
this is my father, Arturo;
I am his daughter, Maria.
Do not call me Marie. (Mazziotti Gillan 1994, 380)

The poet recovers her father's Italian name and her own as she also learns to value her father for who he is, an Italian American man who struggled to support his family in America.

As if looking Italian did not make these poets feel different enough, many have also had to contend with the mainstream American delusion that being Italian automatically provides all Italian Americans with a connection to the Mafia. George Anastasia argues in "Sinatra's 'Associations' with the Mob" that even famous Italian Americans like Frank Sinatra were not exempt from the pernicious influence that the alleged connection to the Mafia had on him "just because his name end[ed] in a vowel" (Anastasia 2002, 15). The FBI even investigated Sinatra because he associated with other Italians, men like Charles "Lucky" Luciano, Sam (Momo) Giancana, and Joseph "Joey Fish" Fischetti, who were suspected of criminal activities, but nothing was ever found to connect Sinatra to any crimes. Richard Gambino calls the image of the Mafia "a cross laid across the shoulders of every Italian-American for upwards of a full century" (Gambino 1998, 275), so Italian American poets often deal with this issue in their poems. In "Mafioso," Sandra Mortola Gilbert refers to the "Mafiosi, / bad uncles of the barren / cliffs of Sicily" (Gilbert 1994, 71) and provides as examples

> Frank Costello eating spaghetti in a cell at San Quentin,
> Lucky Luciano mixing up a mess of bullets and
> calling for parmesan cheese,
> Al Capone baking a sawed-off shotgun into a
> huge lasagna—
> are you my uncles, my
> only uncles? (Gilbert 1994, 71)

Gilbert obviously fears the cultural connection that she shares with these notorious American criminals because people outside the Italian American community, specifically the media, tend to associate her with them even if she is not a criminal. She wonders if these men are in fact her "only uncles." Curiously, Sandra Mortola Gilbert publishes under the names Sandra Gilbert or Sandra M. Gilbert, with the offending obviously Italian surname Mortola either left out or reduced to an abbreviation.

In *Blood of my Blood*, Richard Gambino documents the history of the Mafia in the United States and its alleged connection to criminals in Italy. Gambino claims that what the mainstream American media perceived as Italian criminal behavior had its roots in the ancient Italian mistrust of authorities. He explains that even though "crime in the early Little Italies was almost exclusively an affair of Italian criminals against Italian victims," the victims "were loath to go to the police for help" because "in la via vecchia the authorities were oppressors and certainly no source of relief or protection. These immigrants preferred to suffer extortion rather than co-operate with the police or the stranieri" (Gambino 1998, 278). As a result of this secrecy that protected criminals within their own communities, the Italian community becomes suspect in the eyes of the law and the media.

> Italian secrecy based on mistrust of official authorities brought American alarm, in turn bringing American investigation, in turn bringing on more Italian mistrust and fear of outsiders and thus more evidence of secrecy, which in turn caused more alarm and investigation—and so went the cycle. (Gambino 1994, 279)

According to Gambino, by 1906, "*The New York Times* called for a special police force to combat what it termed organized crime among the low-class Italians of New York" (Gambino 1998, 282). By 1909, "the cycle of mutual fear and distrust between Italian immigrants and the larger American community was out of control" which leads to "a confused but incessant and widespread maligning of Italian-Americans that continues to this day" (Gambino 1998, 283). By the time notorious gangsters like Frank Costello in the early 1900s, Lucky Luciano in the early 1930s, and Al Capone from 1925 to 1931 appear, the image of the Italian as criminal was well ingrained in the mainstream American mind, and all Italian Americans had become suspect.

Even though Italian Americans were white, they were still marked as different from the other white Americans. Through the insidious and relentless hateful behavior of people who should have known better, like school teachers, Italian Americans were forced to deny their homeland and were shamed into forgetting their ancestral language. Because their names usually ended in a vowel, Italian Americans were also suspected of committing crimes even if they themselves had no connection whatsoever to the people who were in fact committing those crimes. Italian Americans suffered from guilt by nomenclature, and this caused them undeserved trauma. However, as Susan J. Brison states in *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self*, "it is a curious feature of trauma narratives that, in the right circumstances, narrating a traumatic memory can help to defuse it" (Brison 2002, 71). Writing poetry that allows them to define themselves, Italian American poets are reclaiming their Italian names, learning to value the Italian language, and making peace with their Italian looks as they cultivate a sense of pride in their ancestry in spite of everything they have lost. David Eng and David Kazanjian point out in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* that "as the question 'What is lost?' is posed, it invariably slips into the question 'What remains?' That is, loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained" (Eng and Kazanjian 2003, 2).

For Italian American poets, what remains after much trauma and loss is a rediscovery of their ancestry and an embrace of the Italian language. In "American Sonnets for My Father," Daniela Gioseffi marks the process of recovering what remains by honoring the memory of her "tired immigrant father / full of pride and propriety" (Gioseffi 1994, 160), a man who "worked too hard, an oldest child of too many, / a lame thin boy in ragged knickers" (Gioseffi 1994, 159). Giovanna Capone claims that being "Italian American / means my living habits / are cultural ceremonies, not quirks." She adds,

> my skin color is olive, not "white"
> and the hair spreading down my arms and legs and over

the top of my lip
is a dense garden
cultivated for centuries
by Neapolitan peasants (Gioseffi 1994, 181-182)

Capone is not ashamed of how she looks even if her looks do not fit the Anglo-Saxon standard valued by Arthur Clements. Even the hair growing on her upper lip is now valued as a sign of her ancestry.

The same Arthur L. Clements who looks down on his aunt's Italian looks writes a lovely tribute to his grandfather in "Elegy," where he remembers a "gentle man" who "journeyed past Liberty and the Island / to a dark wine cellar in this new world" (Clements 1994, 274). Clements' grandfather was one of the many Italians who flocked to the United States and brought with them an ancient culture that his grandson is now only discovering. Like Clements, Diane di Prima, in "April Fool Birthday Poem for Grandpa," praises the man who "would love us all, would thunder your anarchist wisdom / at us" (di Prima 1994, 318), and even a more established poet like Lawrence Ferlinghetti writes a poem about "The Old Italians Dying," a poem that in its oddly humorous and sardonic way honors the old Italians who, for years, "have been dying / all over America." Ferlinghetti writes that

For years the old Italians in faded felt hats
have been sunning themselves and dying
You have seen them on the benches
in the park in Washington Square
the old Italians in their black high button shoes
the old men in their old fedoras
with stained hatbands
have been dying and dying
day by day. (Ferlinghetti 1994, 15)

Ferlinghetti's first stanza stresses the significance of what is happening to these men, who are dying, but with them also dies a different way of being. Clements Spahr points out that this poem "depicts the dying sociocultural landscape of San Francisco's Little Italy" as it opens with a "nostalgic commemoration of Italian American everyday life that is disappearing" (Spahr 2015, 176). The old men represent what is disappearing now that they themselves are dying.

Ferlinghetti's "The Old Italians Dying" reads like a love letter to men who are marked by their difference and represent an ancient culture that, as Spahr points out, is beginning to disappear. Unlike the poets who confess their pain and the abuse suffered at the hand of people who dislike them, Ferlinghetti does not confess his own pain at being marked as an Other as he was growing up; instead, he leaves himself out of the poem and focuses on the old Italians. He describes them as

the ones who feed the pigeons
cutting the stale bread
with their thumbs & penknives
the ones with old pocketwatches
the old ones with gnarled hands
and wild eyebrows
the ones with baggy pants
with both belt and suspenders
the grappa drinkers with teeth like corn
the Piemontesi the Genovesi the Siciliani
smelling of garlic & pepperonis (Ferlinghetti 1994, 15-16)

These men were different in the way they dressed and the way they behaved, feeding pigeons even when the city forbade it. They could easily be the grandparents of the Italian American poets whose poems are the focus of this essay. Ferlinghetti however does not focus on the prejudices that the old men encountered when they arrived in America. Instead, he simply describes them to point out what will be lost now that they are dying.

The old men celebrated in Ferlinghetti's poem are stubborn and set in their ways. They did not allow America to influence their thinking. They may have lived in America, but their loyalties remained with Italy, even when they knew that it was dangerous to align themselves with the men whom they admired. Ferlinghetti points out that these men are

the ones who loved Mussolini
the old fascists
the ones who loved Garibaldi
the old anarchists reading *L'Umanità Nova*
the ones who loved Sacco & Vanzetti (Ferlinghetti 1994, 16)

The old Italians aligned themselves with foreign ideologies even when it was dangerous. Clements Spahr points out that the old Italians in Ferlinghetti's poem were part of the Left and "are important reminders that a vital part of America's cultural and political history is disappearing with these old Italians" (Spahr 2015, 176).

The younger poets who are the focus of this essay are very aware that the old Italians are dying. They are aware of what has been lost to them, but their poems also testify that they have embarked on a journey of self-discovery to the core of their Italian ancestry. After many years of feeling that she was inferior to people who were not Italian, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, in "Growing Up Italian," learns to "celebrate / my Italian American self, / rooted in this, my country, where" she claims that

all those black/brown/red/yellow
olive-skinned people

soon will raise their voices
and sing this new anthem:

Here I am
and I'm strong
and my skin is warm in the sun
and my dark hair shines,

and today, I take back my name
and wave it in their faces
like a bright, red flag. (Mazziotti Gillan 1994, 384).

Italian American poets have emerged from years of feeling marked by their difference to appreciate that difference and recover not only their personal histories but also their common language.

In "Shattered Identities and Contested Images," Neil Jamieson claims that "good poetry often succeeds in jiggling our perceptual screens in ways that enable us to see both the past and the present in new and sometimes more useful ways" (Jamieson 1992, 75). This happens because "Those who 'make' history, like the 'makers' of poetry, can juxtapose elements in unfamiliar ways, illuminating previously unperceived dimensions of interconnectedness, deeper patterns of meaning, helping their audience to redescribe themselves and the world in more satisfying and more humane ways" (Jamieson 1992, 75). People who read the poems written by Italian American poets included in *Unsettling America* come face to face with the pain inflicted by prejudice on a group of young people simply because they looked different from mainstream Americans. These poets force their readers to face an unpleasant part of our communal past as they confess their pain and attempt to redefine who they are as Italians in America. This is what Michael Dowdy claims that "poems of embodied agency" do as they "figuratively enact the exchange—and thereby the transformation—of experience with readers" (Dowdy 2007, 36). The work of these Italian American poets transforms their experiences into the communal stories of a group of people who suffered but are now embarked on a journey to self-discovery. Confessing their pain makes possible the journey back to language, culture, and their Italian selves.

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