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# Italian items in domestic spaces

## Representing Italianness through objects in the fiction of Helen Barolini and Chiara Barzini

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In their migration, people carry objects with them, and relocate them through physical spaces and across cultural boundaries. Handed down through generations, these objects become signs of ethnicity beyond their appearance and purpose. Examining the variety of the literary representations of objects and their subsequent translation contributes to the analysis of how material culture migrates within distant cultural systems and from one language to another. This essay focuses on domestic objects depicted by two Italian authors writing about the experience of a migrant coming-of-age in the United States: Helen Barolini and Chiara Barzini. Using diverse multilingual and (self-)translation strategies, they highlight through cultural translation the difficulties of bridging their Italian and American selfhood within an Italian household relocated abroad. In doing so, their relationship with objects underlines how their diasporic experience is entangled with their achievement of self-confidence and independence as women within the context of the Italian diaspora.

**Keywords:** literary objects, Italian signs, domestic spaces, Italian diaspora, Italian American woman writing, cultural translation

### Introduction: Seeking the Italian diasporic self within the house

In their experience of migration, people carry with them objects that are also relocated from one context to another, not only through physical spaces but also across boundaries of literary and artistic representation. Handed down through generations, these items become signs of ethnicity, often beyond their appearance and purpose. Investigating various literary representations of objects and their translation shows how material culture migrates within distant cultural systems and from one language to another (Bachmann-Medick 2009). Over the last several years,

objects have come under investigation in the Italian studies context, at the intersection of the transnational and translational turn (Burdett, Havelly, and Polezzi 2020). While there is now extensive scholarship investigating material culture in the context of migration (Basu and Coleman 2008; Wang 2016) and across languages (Aronin and O Laoire 2013; Ros i Solé 2020), objects of material culture have achieved visibility in Italian studies (Daniels, O'Connor and Tycz 2020) in work focusing on the transcultural aspects of the transnational turn (Burdett, Polezzi, and Spadaro 2020) and with reference to women's domestic work (Sciorra and Giunta 2014).

In relation to the theme of this special issue, my analysis identifies objects represented in literature as catalysts for translation, a topic that remains largely unexplored in the study of Italian migration. Although literary objects have been investigated in their capacity to translate memories and cultural processes through linguistic acts, only a few studies have explored the possibility that literary objects, migrating through texts and languages, can carry traces related to a specific cultural identity in their circulation across boundaries (Bartoloni 2016; Redstone 2020; Wilson 2007, 2020). What is missing, however, is an investigation of the deep symbolism held by objects in migration and of the more intricate symbolic texture those objects acquire when translated – physically and textually – into other cultures. In this situation, my analysis explores the multiplicity of possibilities offered by cultural translation (Bhabha 1994; Wolf 2012) to integrate interlingual translation in the process of defining how such objects become signs of ethnicity (Gardaphé 1996).

At the convergence of these research trajectories, I investigate the work of authors Helen Barolini and Chiara Barzini as constituting two ends of a translanguaging dialogue on the hybridization of Italian and American culture and identity through the representation of objects in domestic spaces. Their work stands out within the wider literary context of the Italian diaspora, which includes a large number of translanguaging women writers of Italian origin who have spent a significant period of time in both Italy and anglophone countries.<sup>1</sup> In their narratives, the perception of household objects reveals an intersectional concern, symbolizing their relationship with a space in which women have been confined for centuries. My analysis focuses specifically on Barolini's *Umbertina* ([1979]) and

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1. My initial survey included a larger group of Italian diasporic writers who engaged in translanguaging writing, in accordance with the trajectory of the research project *TransIT – Many Diasporas from One Transnational Italy*, funded by the EU under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 892584, to whom I aim to dedicate further analysis outside and/or alongside the translational context, such as the Italian Canadian Mary di Michele, the UK-based Viola Di Grado and Livia Franchini, and Claudia Durastanti who has worked between Italy, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Barzini's *Things that Happened Before Earthquake* (2017), two novels presenting radically different examples of Italian migration to the United States experienced by authors who are from different generations and who have had unique experiences of migration. The books themselves also followed distinct trajectories. Written by an Italian American New York-based academic, *Umbertina* was acknowledged by scholars as the first classic of Italian American woman's literature; however, it had a limited circulation outside of academia. More recently published, *Things that Happened before the Earthquake* rapidly became a best-seller in the United States but has yet to inspire scholarly interest, perhaps for having been associated with the derogative label of "Chick Lit," as also happened with the work of underappreciated writers, such as Adriana Trigiani (Donato 2021). Placing recent works addressing marginalized authors of the Italian diaspora and their translanguaging strategies into dialogue (Baldo 2019; Ciribuco 2019), a translational analysis encourages a focus on Barzini's sophisticated process of defamiliarization of the most recurrent topics of the Italian American experience and on how this enabled Barzini to tell the story of the empowerment of a young Italian woman in the United States. Despite differences in reception, both novels discuss diasporic female individuals exploring their selfhood, offering examples of what could be described as an "ethnic Bildungsroman" (Donato 2021). One can therefore recognize the path of Italian American female authorship that was introduced by Barolini, in which Barzini features as one of the most recent, and most interesting examples. Both writers recount their difficulties in finding a balance between their Italian and American cultural backgrounds, alongside their long struggle for recognition as writers against "a literary establishment unable to conceive of a novel dealing with women's experience or Italian American experience as worthy of serious critical attention" (Giunta 1999: 427).

Both novels are written in English but include a significant number of Italian words and phrases. From a translational perspective, it is worth noting that Barzini self-translated her novel into Italian in collaboration with Italian writer Francesco Pacifico. The translation was published under the title *Terremoto* (2017) a few months after the American edition. Conversely, *Umbertina*, translated by the author's daughter, Susan Barolini, and Giovanni Maccari, appeared in Italian in 2001 (see Ganeri 2015). My primary aim is to investigate the bilingual practices used by those writers to portray their Italianness in the Anglophone text, especially in relation to cases of codeswitching and (in Barzini's case) self-translation concerning the representation of objects. My goal is to highlight the power held by objects to signify a cultural affiliation beyond language boundaries.

In my analysis, I follow two different strategies. In the section devoted to *Umbertina*, I analyze Barolini's use of codeswitching and specifically how the mention of a specific object in Italian and English underscores this item's role

as a signifier of ethnicity. Barolini's use of codeswitching in the texts resonates with the pattern recurring in the first wave of Italian migration as part of the so called "great migration" (1870s–1924): from acclimation to assimilation and then rediscovery of ethnic heritage, from first to fourth generation migrants (Sollors 1987). Conversely, in the section devoted to Barzini, I compare the American and the Italian editions of *Things that Happened before the Earthquake* to stress how the author expanded her translation strategy to exercise control over the book's reception among two different audiences, which is ultimately an expression of her problematic sense of belonging to both Italian and American culture. In this sense, Barzini's case embodies the more complex story of postwar migration (Ruberto and Sciorra 2017), which can only be understood through the rhizomatic juxtaposition of a multiplicity of experiences. Therefore, while both texts use domestic objects to identify the house as an Italian place, in which two young women carry out the exploration of their selfhood, the different linguistic strategies employed underscore different generational approaches to migration.

### **Objects as vehicles of belonging or not belonging: From American houses to Italian homes**

When reflecting on translation and migration, Loredana Polezzi (2012) points out that the contiguity of translation and migration is determined by the fact that both terms mark boundaries defining our identity, encountering each other on the "terrain" where we find "shared understandings and operative formulations of notions of identity, community and home, as well as of the way these relate to institutions and apparatuses" (346). In relation to my examination, Polezzi's (2012: 346) argument serves to highlight "the increasingly metaphorical way in which the word 'translation' and, to a certain extent, the word 'migration' are being used." Objects in a text are primarily signs, which often work symbolically and metaphorically to signify cultural elements. The translation of those signs across linguistic and cultural borders therefore entails an exploration of identity and "a reification of alterity" (347).

In my essay, I investigate how the representation of objects turns a foreign house into an Italian home by placing linguistic signs in a material dialogue with reality. In this endeavor, the Paolo Bartoloni's (2016) research on the transnational relevance of objects can be combined with Jan Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson's reflection on bilingualism and self-translation (2007) on the ground of Freudian psychoanalysis. While Bartoloni builds on work ranging from Francesco Orlando's seminal study on the topic (1993) to Massimo Recalcati's (2007) more recent Lacanian perspective to explore the symbolic power of objects, Hokenson

and Munson address the role played by bilingualism, translation, and self-translation in the perception of subjectivity by referring to Lacan's linguistic meditation on the Freudian model of split subjects (2007: 148–150). Both the analysis of (self)translation and the exploration of the role of objects in constructing a sense of belonging need therefore to consider theories of subjectivity that postulate a reality in which monolingual, monocultural subjects cannot be taken as the standard (Wilson 2012). Resonating in James Clifford's idea of a "fallacy" related to the presumption that "culture (singular) equals language (singular)" (1997: 22), this aspect points out once again that the representation of the experience of migration cannot be limited to interlingual translation but needs to be integrated into a wider redefinition of translation in a cultural sense.

If identity is to be conceived as a "series of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that cohere into a personality or social being," while "subjectivity denotes reflection about identity, that is, self-consciousness" (Hokenson and Munson 2007: 149), then bilingualism underscores that this meditation on identity can be addressed in more than one language, and that linguistic habits can provide different perceptions of the same cultural identity, just as different cultural habits can point out different perceptions of the same linguistic identity (Wolf 2012). As my analysis will highlight, both Barolini's and Barzini's bilingual strategies can be read as an attempt to contain the entirety of their diasporic identity and translingual subjectivity as well as negotiate their different linguistic and cultural identities (Kellman 2000).

From a translation perspective, Bartoloni's meditation on the ability of objects to become "vehicles of humans' meanings" acquires a fuller meaning, pointing out objects' capacity to be "active partners of meaningful engagements," and recognizing them as "necessary appendices to the interpretation of cultural phenomena" (2016: 2). Bartoloni's point that objects are placed "at the threshold between matter and fantasy, and between the spheres of the virtual and the real" (2016: 6) may be used to highlight how, from a Lacanian perspective, objects make evident the tension between the author's imaginary perception of items and their symbolic meaning within a particular language. From this position, they "interact in the contextual landscape of Italy, understood as a geographical location, a cultural paradigm, and an imagined and remembered space" (Bartoloni 2016: 6), where the objects' potential to signify Italy resides. This also echoes the idea of "imagined Italies" circulating worldwide through the cultural images projected from the country (Dickie 1996).

This tension between the tangibility of objects and their symbolic meaning appears evident in Barolini, who focuses on a few items from Calabria to stress the opposition between Italian tradition and the future assimilation represented by American society. Conversely, Barzini stresses the unfamiliarity of objects that

she addresses as exemplifying an American view of modernity and domesticity. Her ideological standpoint is, however, ultimately aligned with Barolini. As will become apparent in the analysis, the insistence on domestic objects is an inter-generational point of contact between the two writers beyond their radically different narrative and translation strategies.

The connections between objects and their linguistic equivalents offer a whole variety of possibilities; in fact, objects do not always travel through space by translation, nor can the way of translating them be limited to a standard one-way trajectory. Rather, translation should be reappraised as “a creative and productive process in its own right” (Polezzi 2020: 22). In this way, objects make apparent new modes of performing Italian culture that make the linguistic borders of Italian slippery and unstable. All writers attempting to represent *italianità* (a term that is often translated as *Italianness*) in their narratives of migration contribute something new to a mosaic that is constantly under construction. Anthony J. Tamburri, for example, highlighted that “the notion of *italianità* is indeed a term expressive of many notions, ideas, feelings and sentiments,” which can be expressed by “language, food, a way of determining life values, a familial structure, a sense of religion; it can be all of those, as it can certainly be much more” (1991: 21). In this light, a clear-cut definition of Italianness is sometimes hard to provide outside the contexts of family and food. In this context, Tamburri identifies signs/interpretants that have acquired the status of “comforting nouns” (2003: 149), among which he points out examples such as “pizza” and “nonna,” capable of acting as immediate signifiers of Italianness (149). Nonetheless, even those items widely recognized as “Italian/American signs *par excellence*” (149) can point out that “ethnicity is not a fixed essence passed down from one generation to the next” (Tamburri 1991: 20) but rather “something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual” (Fischer 1986: 195), as I will further demonstrate in the case of Barolini and Barzini. Hence, Italian culture and identity need to be investigated as something which is constantly in movement and cannot be taken as fixed in time and space (Burdett and Polezzi 2020).

The moment things become objects with a definite symbolic meaning, they convey specific messages, which can be reconceptualized through a process of translation without necessarily implying a shift from one language to another. We can identify as examples of cultural translation objects that universally signify cultural affiliation across languages. Among the several words for a coffee machine, “moka” identifies a distinctive type of domestic coffee machine invented in 1933 by Alfonso Bialetti to prepare the type of coffee that is most commonly consumed in Italy, which is known as “espresso” in the English-speaking world. Noting the presence of a coffee maker in a house implies that its inhabitants regularly consume caffeinated drinks; including the presence of a “moka pot” in a descriptive

or narrative text denotes Italianness. Such items mark a kitchen as an Italian space. Other objects retain the power to signify Italianness in another language without needing interlingual translation, as in the case of internationally renowned Italian foods such as pizza or spaghetti, which are identified in most languages by their Italian names. These objects allow a dialogue between different experiences of Italian migration beyond the linguistic contexts where they can be found, turning into signs of belonging or non-belonging and expressing transnational comforts and discomforts.

Writers of Italian descent living abroad have often highlighted their bond with the distant homeland through the representation of domestic spaces and of objects that, found in Italian houses in the United States, fill the linguistic gap between “house” and “home” (in the Italian language both terms are translated as “casa”). In a landmark text of Italian American studies, Robert Viscusi (2006) underlines how Italian American writers have represented their attachment to their houses through objects. He theorized that objects replaced the presence of *lares* and *penates*, the “household gods” of ancient Rome (2006: 60), in the Italian house abroad, delimiting the private sphere from the outside world. Objects signifying Italianness are most often found in the kitchen, contributing to the idea of cooking as an activity that Italians carry out with almost religious devotion.

This is one of the most recurrent ways objects in a house become Italian signs, according to Fred Gardaphé’s “model for entering into an Italian American discourse through the reading of Italian signs it contains” (1996: 21). My analysis builds on this, expanding the model to explore its translational potential. According to Gardaphé, all places where the Italian family reunites become Italian homes (see also Gardaphé 2016). Within those premises, the ability of the Italian house to establish a boundary between the inside and outside of people’s new lives in the United States was investigated by Pasquale Verdicchio, who pointed out that the house often becomes a smaller world within which immigrant identities have been confined; while officially accepted in other contexts through a rhetoric of cultural diversity, in reality they were not ([1997] 2016: 138).

Crucial to the process of the identification of a house as an Italian home, objects are the primary way for Italians to mark the spaces where their families gather. These objects reconnect individuals to their homeland through the history of their family. Handed down from generation to generation, they draw a line connecting family members across different parts of the world. Investigating the literary representations of the objects that identify Italian space shows how material culture migrates within distant cultural systems and from one language to another. Through the ways they name objects, migrant writers often make transnational discourse a translational concern (Polezzi 2020: 25). Jennifer Burns’ analysis of the representations of objects in the construction of a transnational subjecthood



(2018, 2020) builds on the “home-making” power of objects. Burns states that “not only the objects themselves, but the ways in which the participants presented and handled them, exposed powerfully the capacity of the objects to materialize connections and, at substantial distance, to signify immediately as ‘things from home’” (2020: 183).

One last point concerns the ability of domestic object to represent the specific experience of women, as evident in the traditional connection between the house and women (Bona 1999; Gabaccia 2000; Barolini 1997). Objects may signify migrant women’s struggle against domestic abuse and highlight a perception of Italianness opposed to the traditional patriarchal culture, paving the way for an awakening of a transnational selfhood among Italian women (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002) which grows generation after generation in migration, from Barolini to Barzini, from Italy to the United States.

### **Artifacts crossing the bilingual ocean in *Umbertina*: When “coperta” turns into a bedspread**

Helen Barolini has addressed the theme of women in migration in her scholarly work and in her creative writing, having published essays devoted to the experience of Italian American womanhood (1997) and the first anthology of Italian American women writers (1985) alongside her first and most ambitious fictional work *Umbertina*. Born Helen Frances Mollica in 1925 in Syracuse, New York, she traveled across the Atlantic in the opposite direction to her grandparents and moved to Italy as an American citizen to complete her studies. She resided for several years in Florence, where she met and married Italian writer Antonio Barolini, and later returned to New York. The plot of Barolini’s *Umbertina* spans four generations of an Italian family originating with the Calabrese-born emigrant Umbertina in the late nineteenth century to her contemporary namesake, her American-born great-granddaughter who goes by Tina.

*Umbertina* has been described as the first classic of Italian American women’s literature (Gardaphé 1996; Tamburri 1998; Bona 1999; Ganeri 2015). According to Gardaphé, as a representative of the “third generation” of Italian Americans assimilated into mainstream American culture through education and emancipation from Italian family traditions, Barolini approaches the narrative of the Italian diaspora as a way of “recovering and/or reinventing ethnicity” (1996: 23). The description of the figure of the great-grandmother is crucial to Tina’s process of recovering her Italian heritage and completing the exploration of her diasporic self. In Gardaphé’s framework, *Umbertina* figures as one of the “models that enable their protagonists to gain a sense of identity as both ethnic Americans and

women" (1996:118). Hence, *Umbertina* is a novel of self-discovery following the evolution of Italian womanhood in the US. Crucial to my interpretation, Gardaphé's argument highlights how "often the symbols take shape in the re-creation of the old country" (120), turning "ethnicity" into "symbolic ethnicity" (118).

Mary Jo Bona points out two objects embodying the "price tag" paid by *Umbertina* to achieve success in the United States (1999:133). The first artifact that *Umbertina* brings from Italy is a heart-shaped box made of tin, used to store her knitting needles, underscoring the item's symbolic relation to women's domestic work. Handed down to her great-granddaughter Tina, this item also symbolizes an ongoing communication between generations through Italian artisanry. Originally given to *Umbertina* by her first love, Giosué, who could not marry her on account of his impoverished condition, the tin box is not necessarily a culture-specific Calabrian artifact, but it comes to represent the protagonists' lives of poverty in their home village of Castagna. The second item highlighted by Bona is a bedspread made by hand for *Umbertina*'s wedding by Nelda, an old woman from the village, which *Umbertina* subsequently sells after her arrival in New York City. The fact that this item is referred to in the novel in both Italian and English lends it greater symbolic significance insofar as every other item in the novel is identified in just one language.

Barolini's bilingualism emerges through the recurrent use of codeswitching in the novel, as in the book's prologue, when *Umbertina*'s niece Marguerite mixes Italian and English to ask her Italian therapist, "*Va bene*, Thursday at five?" (Barolini 1999:3). Codeswitching not only reproduces a typical feature of spoken conversation in Italian American English but also highlights the author's translingual identity (Kellman 2000). This narrative device can be found in early examples of Italian American fiction which are part of the canon of early-twentieth-century ethnic American literature, such as the works of John Fante and Jerre Mangione; as well as contemporary authors such as Tony Ardizzone and Don DeLillo.

Barolini's bilingualism becomes particularly relevant in relation to the "*coperta matrimoniale*"—a matrimonial bedspread—referred to both in English and Italian. This domestic item belongs to a renowned tradition of Southern Italian handicraft and can still be found in houses in Southern Italian villages. The bedspread is mentioned as a "*coperta matrimoniale*" in the novel when it appears for the first time, underscoring its Italianness. It is subsequently mentioned in English, identified by *Umbertina*'s great-granddaughter as part of a collection of objects belonging to Italian emigrants at the Ellis Island Museum of Immigration:

I want a *coperta matrimoniale* for the wedding bed,” Umbertina said, “such as I have seen hanging from balconies in Soveria Mannelli on Corpus Christi day.

(Barolini 1999: 44)

Tina stood entranced at the spectacle of a magnificent bright-hued gloriously woven bedspread that bore the motifs of Calabrian design she had seen repeated in modern-day spreads during her trip through her ancestral region.

(Barolini 1999: 407)

The translation of the item into English marks a shift in its role as an icon of an Italian past. At this stage, it is an Italian artifact in an American museum, a place where artifacts are translated for a new audience. Moreover, given that the bedspread is the only item referred to in both languages, the shift from Italian to English underscores the assimilation of Umbertina. Her process of Americanization is completed when she separates from the object: while remaining an Italian sign, the object no longer belongs to her; it is part of her heritage to be rediscovered (in English) by Tina.

Both the tin box and the bedspread signify Umbertina’s sacrifice in her pursuit of wealth; the latter item, marked by its bilingual treatment in the novel, emphasizes the sacrifice of her Italian heritage, which is now exhibited in a migration museum. The exhibition of this item is recognized as an Italian sign by a wide community of people sharing Italian heritage while speaking a variety of different idioms. In fact, Tina recognizes it immediately as a traditional Italian artifact that she saw in Castagna. Symbolizing Umbertina’s wedding, the “*coperta*” connects Umbertina to the family she later builds, which does not happen in the case of the tin box, because it was not crafted to seal a marital union. When Tina finds the bedspread in the museum, she reconnects to a century of family history and to the experience of other Italian families that migrated to the United States and turned their houses into Italian spaces through the collection and display of works of Italian artisanry. From another standpoint, the translational analysis of the artifact’s representation invites a literary investigation of Italian handicrafts, which is one of the most prominent topics in studies of the material culture of Italian migrants (Sciorra and Giunta 2014). It also underscores Barolini’s interpretation of handicraft as an aspect of Italian women’s culture (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002) and contributes to *Umbertina*’s status as a milestone of Italian American women’s writing.

Another category of objects used in *Umbertina* to symbolically reconnect their family line through a rite of passage is plants. Italia Vanni (2020) has explored the role of plants in the transcultural Italian garden; translated into literature, herbs in particular have acquired a deep symbolic value. At the end of *Umbertina*, for example, Tina plants rosemary in the garden of her partner’s family house in Wellfleet,

Massachusetts (Barolini 1999: 424). In Umbertina's family, rosemary is considered a sign of women's empowerment. Nelda, the same woman who made the bedspread, tells Umbertina an ancient proverb stating that wherever rosemary grows, "the women of that house are its strength" (Barolini 1999: 423). In this way, the presence of an herb typically used in Italian cuisine transforms the garden of the house into an Italian space, which physically establishes a boundary between the inside and the outside of the family home and of the Italian environment. Additionally, rosemary signifies a wealthy Italian kitchen: it is used as a condiment for meat, which in the impoverished Southern Italy of the late nineteenth century was considered a prerogative of wealthier classes or reserved for special occasions. Through rosemary Barolini signifies the continuity and change in her Italian heritage, which stretches from working class first-generation migrants to the wealthier generations that follow. From woman to woman, through subsequent flows of migration, these objects confirm Barolini's description of emigration as a "metaphor of all women's journey to be reborn to themselves" (1999: v).

Planting Italian herbs and vegetables in the garden does not only make the house visibly Italian. Appealing to the senses of smell and taste, they involve two more ways of signifying Italianness that are immediately recognizable (even more so than language, because one does not need to understand Italian to identify them as Italian signs). This is another example of Barolini's ability to make those objects tangible within the text. Mentioning these diverse items, only one of which is translated from Italian into English, highlights the ability of objects in *Umbertina* to delineate the feminine sphere of the Italian experience of migration and to build inter-generational continuity from woman to woman within those spaces.

### **To self-translate or not to self-translate: Uncanny items in Barzini's American kitchen**

Born in 1979 in Rome, where she currently lives, Barzini built her protagonist Eugenia's story by fictionalizing part of her own coming-of-age in Los Angeles, where she moved with her family at the age of fifteen. In the narrative, Eugenia experiences the discomfort of migrating from Rome to a hostile Los Angeles during one of the most tense periods in the city's history—the riots following the murder of African American man Rodney King by the police—overlapping with her turmoil as a teenager carrying out her own pursuit of identity and independence from her family. Barzini's family history is marked by a line of illustrious Italians migrating across the ocean, including her great-grandfather Luigi Barzini Sr., director of the Italian-language American newspaper *Corriere D'America*;

her grandfather, Luigi Barzini, Jr., author of the popular book *The Italians*; and Andrea Barzini, a successful filmmaker in Italy during the 1990s. Like her protagonist Eugenia, Barzini lived in the San Fernando Valley as her father sought success in Hollywood; her parents eventually decided to return to Italy, but Barzini did not accompany them; she completed her education in the US.

Unlike Barolini's novel, Barzini's reboots a first-generation narrative of the Italian experience in the United States by challenging the tropes associated with it; at the same time, she challenges a white upper-middle-class ideal of California through Eugenia's experience of multicultural Los Angeles. Finding herself at the intersection between continents and cultures, Barzini interrogates the American experience from the position of a cultural mediator, like other Italian American writers of the past, such as Mangione and Rimanelli (Polezzi 2015), as well as her own grandfather and great-grandfather. The role of cultural mediator has granted her a double literary citizenship, being recognized as a novelist in the United States and mainly as a rom-com screenwriter in Italy, for blockbusters such as *Sorry if I Love You* (2008) and *Sorry if I Want to Marry You* (2010).

While the two authors appear diametrically opposed in their treatment of their Italian heritage, many aspects of Barolini's experience are echoed in the younger Barzini; moreover, both present narratives of a young lady exploring her selfhood and emerging as a self-confident and independent woman. Likewise, both authors mastered Italian and English as bilingual speakers living suspended between two different countries—Barolini is a native English speaker who learned Italian as a foreign language while Barzini followed the opposite path. From this different perspective, Barzini may be taken as a counterpoint to Barolini insofar as she undermines or demystifies some of the most widely recognized cultural symbols of the Italian diaspora: Italian food, the grandmother figure, and the cult of the Madonna.

That being said, Barzini's writing also focuses on objects and their symbolic power. As she translates American food objects into Italian, she highlights their distance from her Italian audience even more than in the English-language version. The author uses object-focused imagery to show Eugenia's initial estrangement from her new American house on her arrival. Estrangement increasingly turns into familiarity alongside assimilation, which she achieves by adopting models of youth subcultures developed in Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s, such as the "Valley Girl." And so, despite their differences, both writers paint alternative portraits of the Italian woman in migration that stress female empowerment.

Barzini's narrative questions family roles. In particular, she undermines the role of the "nonna," traditionally depicted as a mythical figure holding secrets and symbols from the family past and from the home country (Tamburri 1991),

which is at the core of Barolini's process of recovering her Italian heritage. Eugenia's grandmother Celeste, who moves with the family to Los Angeles, is introduced in the first page of the book through the description of a weird ritual of kissing or "making out" shared with her nephew in her childhood which undermines the traditional representation of the Italian grandmother from the beginning. In terms of codeswitching in Barzini's novel, Italian words are typically spoken by Celeste, who embodies the Italian voice. In relation to the relocation of the family to Los Angeles, she comments, "*Poveri ragazzi*" (2017a:7), which means "poor kids." In other cases, Italian phrases point to the disconnection of the family from the American context: "'Visto, Serena?' my grandmother sniffed. 'Marida was right. Whenever you told her you wanted to move out here, she always said it was the worst place to raise a family.'" (9) Equally disruptive of the 'Grandmother myth' is Barzini's portrayal of Eugenia's paternal grandmother, Marida, who recurs as a ghostly presence in the text, having died shortly before the family's journey to America, after discouraging their relocation to the United States. Her ashes were smuggled into California by the family, making her both physically part of the trip and not. Both grandmothers confirm Gardaphé's statement (1992) about an American *house* unable to become an Italian *home* for missing the requirements of Italian family life. The most significant item the family brings with them to California, if compared with *Umbertina*, is the funerary urn containing Marida's ashes—which connects to Bartoloni's (2016) argument that personal objects become Italian signs through a personal connection with their owner's family history.

From a translational viewpoint, Barzini presents a more articulated self-translation strategy than Barolini, which is particularly significant if explored by comparing translation choices made in the Italian edition of the book. These are especially evident when Barzini focuses on objects signifying the cultural distance between the Italian characters and the American houses they inhabit. In a broader sense, the two editions of the text differ in terms of style, which may reflect an awareness of the different audiences for the English and the Italian editions. The Italian translation sometimes differs considerably from the English original, adding, or removing details, without following a consistent strategy, which may reveal Barzini's and Pacifico's intention of acting as cultural mediators between the American and Italian audiences. I find particularly relevant Barzini's attention to an object that Eugenia "had never seen in Italy, something we did not know could exist" (2017a, 10), "un oggetto che non avevamo mai visto in Italia né avremmo mai immaginato esistesse" (2017b, 18). The object is a "garbage disposal" (2017a, 10), in Italian "tritarifiuti" (2017b, 18). Eugenia is fascinated by the possibility that somebody can handle food and its disposal in a way that is so unfamiliar from an Italian perspective. It underscores the foreignness of the American

kitchen while emphasizing the amazement inspired by the existence of a kitchen object that they had never before seen. Furthermore, this device does not make food, but decomposes food and transforms it into garbage. The uncanny presence of the “tritarifiuti” defines the kitchen as an alien place in which Italianness cannot exist. Later in the novel, Eugenia travels to a small island in Sicily where in the Italian translation she repeats the word “tritarifiuti californiano” (2017b: 126) while in the English it was described as a “Californian sinkerator” (2017a: 108). By contrast, the island is depicted as a place lost in time, with neither electricity nor running water, where no “garbage disposal” could operate, creating an image of Sicily as a haven outside modern capitalist society. While highlighting the distance between the house and the family, such elements also contribute to the distance between Eugenia and her family. In fact, Eugenia is the first to call their place in Los Angeles “home” (9), despite the presence of items making the place hostile to her family. The distinction (house/home) is lost in the Italian translation, which translates both as “casa.”

Barzini’s revisionist take on the traditional representation of Italian culture proceeds by defamiliarizing the kitchen as an Italian space through the description of the most common cultural item associated with Italianness, which Barzini engages even more deeply than Barolini: food. The scholarship investigating the literary and cultural representation of food in translation is extensive in this field (see, for example, Garzone 2017; Berardi, Calamita, and de Feo 2020; Ciribuco 2020). Nonetheless, *Earthquake* stands out for Barzini’s original treatment, invoking food to stress the uncanny rather than the familiar. For example, she mentions a food metaphor in the opening of her book to destabilize—literally, defamiliarize—the traditional grandmother figure as keeper of the kitchen and divinity of Italian cuisine. In the original English, when Celeste kisses Eugenia, the grandmother’s tongue is described as a “soggy dumpling” (Barzini 2017a: 3), which in Italian is translated as a more specific “raviolo” (2017b: 11). Subsequently, a “cannoli pastry” (6) appears in both the texts, more accurately mentioned as “cannolo” in the Italian translation, to metaphorically describe lice-infested dreadlocks belonging to a schoolmate of Eugenia’s in Rome.

From the English to the Italian text, Barzini and Pacifico tend to be more explicit in their description of Italian foods. Nonetheless the sense of awkwardness highlighted by her use of “ravioli/raviolo” and “cannoli/cannolo” remains. The representation of American food follows an analogous process, in which “soggy cream-cheese sandwiches” (2017a: 4) are translated as “panini mollicci con il Philadelphia” (2017b: 12), referencing the most popular brand of this type of cheese in Italy to make it as familiar as in the United States. By following the same logic, a generic “canned meat” (2017a: 4) labeled as “Italian spam” (4) is replaced in the Italian version by the popular Italian brand “Manzotin” (2017b: 12). Those

food items—ravioli, Philadelphia, Manzo-tin—are recognizable as products typically consumed by the Italian family, which are easy to find in an Italian kitchen, just as cream cheese immediately evokes an American one. As a translingual writer, Barzini self-translates items from one language to another, choosing more generic equivalents that would work in English, while preferring Italian brand names in the Italian version. Through this approach, Barzini provides the Italian audience with a more accurate reference that intensifies, by contrast, the feeling of defamiliarization in a foreign country.

Furthermore, in a subsequent scene at the airport, when Eugenia returns to Los Angeles from her holidays in Italy, the Italian cold meats and cheeses contained in large quantities in Eugenia's suitcase are mentioned using Italian words in the English edition, without transcriptions in *italics* or English translation: "prosciutto, mortadella, pecorino, parmigiano reggiano, pizza bianca [...] salami, caciocavallo cheese" (2017a: 145). They are reported almost identically in the Italian translation: "prosciutti, mortadelle, pecorino, Parmigiano Reggiano, pizza bianca [...], salami e una forma enorme di caciocavallo" (2017b: 168). Italian passengers mock Eugenia for her decision to smuggle foods that makes her immediately identifiable as Italian.

Another motif connecting Barzini's and Barolini's narratives is the garden as a distinct site of Italianness. In the Italian translation of Barzini's novel, the "backyard" (2017a: 16) of the house is immediately turned into a garden: "un albero di limoni in giardino" (2017b: 18). In this space defined culturally as an Italian "giardino" by the presence of the lemon tree, we find the urn containing Marida's ashes. Despite the different words used in English and Italian, the American backyard becomes an Italian garden by virtue of hosting Marida's ashes and the lemon tree. They are placed outside the American house, in the backyard of their Californian dream. Conversely, the uncanny presence of the "tritarifuti" defines the kitchen as an alien place where Italianness cannot survive, confining the Italian space to the limited area located between the inside of the American house and the outside of the American city. This narrow space persists as a small portion of Italianness in a family keen on becoming Hollywood Americans, even after Eugenia's grandmother returns to Italy.

### Conclusion: Being objective through objects?

In my analysis, I investigated three categories of domestic objects that in different ways define an Italian space: artifacts, foods, and plants. Translated interlingually or culturally, those items embody Italianness as it circulates between Italy and the US in the lives of Italian migrant families. The two women writers I analyzed



fictionalize their own experiences as Italian women within the context of a worldwide Italian diaspora. The use of interlinguistic and cultural translation identify specific objects as signs of ethnicity that challenge the traditional meanings imposed on them by patriarchal Italian culture. Placed in the kitchen or within the house, spaces traditionally associated with Italian womanhood, those objects speak for their owners across decades of silence.

Alongside a transnational approach that traces the circulation of these objects, a translational approach highlights reciprocal influences, exchanges, and encounters within and across cultures. The translational strategy used by Barolini in her representation of objects contributed to the recognition of *Umbertina* as a feminist classic of Italian American literature. The intersectional connections between gender and ethnicity first explored by Barolini resonate today in bestselling Italian American authors such as Trigiani (Donato 2021). Both Trigiani and Barzini would have struggled to find their place in American literature (much like other women writers of Italian heritage in Canadian or in the British literatures), if Barolini had not first guided the rethinking of Italian American literary tradition through her engagement as a writer and a scholar. In Barolini's work, the representation of a single object played an important role in symbolizing the entire history of migration of an Italian family.

Whether intentionally seeking a dialogue with Barolini or not, Barzini follows in her footsteps. Through objects, both Barolini and Barzini reconnect by speaking an alternative Italian language, one that Italian women have built from generation to generation to represent their silent fight against the patriarchal system of traditional Italian culture, creating a transnational and intersectional discourse connecting Italian women worldwide through their experience of migration, against a representation of Italian culture that often rests on its patriarchal tradition and which is often confirmed by the canon of Italian literature.

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