

The Italian American Family
between Past and Present:
The Place I Call Home (2012)
by Maria Mazziotti Gillan,
and *Mystics in the Family* (2013)
by Maria Famà

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The creative output of prominent Italian American writers such as Maria Mazziotti Gillan and Maria Famà has long been characterized by the inevitable presence of parents, grandparents, siblings and relatives, by a “fierce loyalty to *la famiglia*” (26), in the words of Mary Jo Bona, and, above all, by what Mary Ann Vigilante Mannino describes as “a powerful connection between generations of women that does not end with any individual’s death” (130). As Lina Unali has elucidated, however, far from merely signifying the authors’ retreat into the sheltered—albeit isolated—realm of affectivity, their flaunted “cult for the family bond” (74) has often been expressed in a provocative and confrontational stance, a firm intention to resist the alluring pressure of assimilation, thus undermining the annihilating potential of the melting-pot. The seemingly unsolvable tensions between past and present, between the cherished memories of one’s land of origin and the American way of life have been among the most recurrent topics in Italian American poetry, as well as the dilemmas especially second generation immigrants had to contend with, leading—in the words of Edvige Giunta—to “a deeply internalized and complicated self-deprecation” (25), to a mortified silence which only writing “as a source of personal and social healing” (Giunta 134) could eventually break. The fear of being stigmatized, the feeling of not belonging, and the urge to fit in have been frequently chronicled in several collections by the two above-mentioned female poets. Moreover, Catholicism (often imbued with

folklore elements and superstitions), Italian food and the rituals surrounding its preparation and consumption may be regarded as staples of most of their literary production, as powerful markers of identity.

This paper sets out to demonstrate that, contrary to what has been conventionally assumed, the notion of family in the most recent works by Maria Mazziotti Gillan and Maria Famà has undergone a subtle but noteworthy transformation, shifting from being a cluster of blood ties, a tightly knit network of mutually protective relations, to a much broader concept, that expands to embrace humankind. As Søren Askegaard and Dannie Kjeldgaard have emphasized, by delving into the conception of the “cosmopolitan self” (336), Mazziotti Gillan’s and Famà’s new idea of family may be viewed as global “in the sense that its cultural orientation is not confined to a particular socio-historical, national and/or ethnic context, but consciously searching an openness toward the multiculturalism of the contemporary global society” (336). As will be demonstrated, therefore, even if the poems of the two writers persistently draw on personal recollections, they are never confined only to the Italian American experience. They no longer aim at overcoming the traumas of displacement, shame, and discrimination but rather deal with issues every reader can relate to, regardless of his/her background; they build bridges across the wider community; they encourage sympathy and understanding among people; they expose social problems, and provide successful tools to heal collective wounds and empower oneself. The first part of this essay will deal with Maria Mazziotti Gillan’s latest anthology, *The Place I Call Home* (2012), also making reference to her handbook for aspiring authors, *Writing Poetry to Save your Life* (2013). In the final section of this paper, Maria Famà’s *Mystics in the Family* (2013) will be the object of investigation.

In a letter dated September, 8th 2013, when asked about the latest developments of her artistic discourse, Maria Mazziotti Gillan replied as follows:

I think my grief over my husband’s death and the deaths of my mother, father, sister, best friends, opened out into my grief for the world and what we’ve done to the environment and to people, my grief over the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, and what appear to me to be our unending wars.

My poems always incorporate the personal narrative, but my work seems to be weaving the personal with my concern for the larger world.

Her strong sense of responsibility and her profound commitment to the well-being of society are evident in the poem entitled “First Son,” where the writer acknowledges that she and her son John (a medical doctor) are very much alike, despite the different fields they operate in: “he wants to be able to fix the world, just as I do” (Mazziotti Gillan, *The Place I Call Home* 43). Her ethical mission is reiterated in “When I Speak Sometimes,” where she compares her mother’s total devotion to her children, her forceful way of dispensing advice and words of wisdom to her beloved offspring, to her own wider aspiration to contribute, with her poems, to a better future for the human family: “I can’t resist taking care / of

the world” (69). Accordingly, *the place* Maria Mazziotti Gillan calls *home* (to quote the title of her volume) necessarily goes beyond geography, since it cannot be pinpointed on any map; it is neither Italy, nor America, nor Paterson’s Little Italy, that pale imitation of an imaginary homeland where immigrants often lead a suspended life, trying to recreate the well-known environment they left behind in their mother-country. Thus by refusing to take sides or to write from any privileged point of observation, *home* is identified with interpersonal relationships, with a core of affection within the heart, with her mother’s “warm arms” that, as the author remarks in the poem called “Little General,” are actually the only “place / [she] call[s] home” (37).

Unlike her previous collections, where she recalled the pain she herself suffered as an ostracized child, and the abuse she had to endure on the part of insensitive teachers and bullying schoolmates,¹ in her latest artistic endeavour, instead, Maria strives to write from her detractors’ perspective. As she tries to uncover the underlying reasons for their misbehaviour, she manages to reach an understanding of human beings that is capable of converting enemies into friends, outcasts into kinfolk. Hence, in “So Much That is not Right with the World” (a poignant poem with a thought-provoking title), little, obnoxious Delores, who “pushed / [her] and screamed, her face ferocious and untamed” (30), is treated with compassion by the writer, aware of the child’s own burden of grief: “she was a girl who was always twanging / with anger, her mother dead less than six months, / her father remarried to a woman she hated” (30). Misery, wretchedness, and an overwhelming sense of guilt are effectively turned into universal bonds, into connections stronger than blood, ethnicity, age, social class, or gender. Readers readily participate in the affliction of the unnamed protagonist of “In My Dream, the Light,” a friend of the poet’s who, given the rapid worsening of her physical condition, longs to be reassured “she will survive / and be cancer-free” (64). A soothing sensation of relief, of self-acceptance and reconciliation with one’s innermost thoughts is perceived while listening to Maria’s courageous apology to her husband, affected by Parkinson’s disease, “for the way [she] ran away / from everything [she] could not face about the illness / that crucified [him]” (66), as she unreservedly confesses in the poem entitled “A Man Stands over My Bed.”

Even the theme of *betrayal* is revisited and reinterpreted by the author, after first exploring it in *Where I Come from*, her 1995 anthology. While in the writer’s past production the idea of disloyalty was inextricably linked with the uneasiness of Americanized teenagers about their embarrassing parents (in “Betrayals” she disowned her father Arturo, “ashamed of [his] broken tongue” and his menial jobs [Mazziotti Gillan, *Where I Come from* 7]), in *The Place I Call Home* it refers to a husband’s despicable desertion of his wife, an incident that sadly brings people together beyond the boundaries of the Italian American experience. The

¹ Compare, for example, the following poems included in her 1995 collection entitled *Where I Come From*: “Public School No. 18 Paterson, New Jersey” (12-13), “Talismans” (42), “Growing up Italian” (54-57).

devastating breach of trust on the part of the husband which actually upset the life of Jennifer Gillan (the poet's daughter), is compared to the nuclear tragedy of Fukushima, to a deviant violation of nature's perfect balance. "My daughter has been touched by the radiation / of her husband's betrayal," as Maria Mazziotti Gillan underlines in "In Japan, the Earthquake," "She is only one person, / and though she is mine, I know that the world is full / of destruction" (77). Indeed, the artist's concern for the wider human family prompts her to further expand her horizons, by mentioning both the riots in Cairo (as well as the feelings of imbalance and bewilderment they generated), and the cholera epidemics in Rwanda, where people still drink water from polluted wells. Even in these cases, however, far from giving rise to dejection and discontent, the writer aims at empowering her readers, by reminding them that the security, the prosperity, the privileges that they benefit from them daily, should not to be taken for granted but welcomed with gratitude, like extraordinary gifts, as suggested in the poem entitled "Forgetting to Give Thanks," where the immigrants' struggles are hinted at, in order to underline how harsh life can be: "We forget how much of the world does not have / what we have and even I forget, I who grew up in an apartment heated by a coal stove" (62).

Gratitude is not the only key to enhancing one's life: a fair number of poems in the collection are devoted to the task of finding one's own voice, by hushing what Maria defines as the "crow" inside our head (71). This metaphor had already been used in her 1995 poem entitled "The Crow," where the author recalled the irritating, internalized whisper—"you are not really very much, you guinea, you wop" (Mazziotti Gillan, *Where I Come From* 68)—that, as a young girl, caused her to remain shamefully silent. In *The Place I Call Home* readers are struck by the realization that, in truth, everyone has to face the same ordeal commonly suffered by immigrants: we all have to cope with our individual crow, with "the critic in [our] head, that voice that tells [us] what is wrong with everything [we] do, that voice that makes [us] doubt [ourselves]" as she elucidates in *Writing Poetry to Save Your Life* (16), where this theory is clearly expounded. It is not surprising, therefore, that many poems in the anthology are focused on writing as a liberating act, as well as being dedicated to her poetry students, highlighting their courageous efforts to lay bare their scars and "put down [their] sorrow / like a basket full of stone"² (*The Place I Call Home* 79). While in her first volumes the author had tried to persuade all Italian Americans to stop their passive brooding, and had encouraged them to untie their knots of woe, the invitation is now extended to the wider community in the inspiring words of her creative writing handbook, "you can transform your life by telling your own story. . . . Seize your power" (*Writing Poetry to Save Your Life* 81).

The notion of the Italian American family has also dramatically changed in *Mystics in the Family*, Maria Famà's latest poetry collection following *Looking for*

² This poem is entitled "Here in this Gray Room."

Cover (2007), a book where poems such as “Nonna Mattia,” “Pasta e Piselli: Lunch-time Memories,” and “Comari” were clear indicators of the prominent meaning she attached to her personal and communal roots at that stage of her artistic career. As Maria convincingly remarked in a letter dated September, 9th 2013, when I asked her about the subject of this essay and the issue of belonging,

I believe it is hard for immigrants and the children of immigrants to feel at home completely in either Italy or America. Yet, if one thinks of oneself as part of the whole world, as part of the whole universe, differences slowly melt away. The pain of being different, of being isolated, can be somewhat eased.

Consequently, the strategy employed by Maria Famà to mould her new ideal of a global family relies on the recovery of a collective spirituality, on the awareness that “life is open / that life is more” (*Mystics in the Family* 10), as she observes at the end of the poem of the same title, stimulating her readers to pierce the surface of different phenomena and find unexpected connections. As she wrote in the above-mentioned letter,

spirituality is at the core of all human beings. It is not about organized religion, although all religions try to address this yearning toward the force of the universe. I try to use my poetry to speak of oneness, of universality. In *Mystics in the Family*, I tried to celebrate spirituality as a transcendent human theme running through all cultures. We are all related, even though hierarchical thinking dominates the human species.

Catholicism, one of the most frequent common denominators of Italian American communities, is therefore revisited in this light, and infused with primeval elements, shared by the whole of humankind, since they date back to a time before the beginning of history, with its harsh corollaries of wars, separations, and asymmetrical relationships. Hence, the Black Madonna of Tindari (to whom one of the poems is dedicated) can be viewed as the mirror image of the African Dark Mother, the creative, nurturing and regenerative principle for prehistoric people, in whose challenging figure, as Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum points out, “there was no division between feminine and masculine. She was beloved by women and men, young and old, and all social classes” (21). Far from being a mere object of devotion, the Black Madonna becomes an active instrument of social reform, more influential than any sociologist or politician: to the pilgrim who mocked the color of her skin, she reacted by making her child vanish for a short time; as Maria Famà reiterates, “the Black Madonna of Tindari taught / that racism is a sin” (*Mystics in the Family* 13). Another figure commonly associated with Italy and the Catholic religion that is transformed by the writer into a universal icon of empowerment is Saint Rita, whose celebrations are recalled in the poem entitled “The Feast of Saint Rita.” Her statue is symbolically carried in procession by “men and women of European, African, Asian, and Mexican descent” (17)—all the threads composing the complex fabric of America—who jointly pay tribute

to “a woman who believed nothing is impossible” (17). Rita Lotti Mancini, introduced with more—and less—everyday qualities as a herbalist, a healer, a wife, a widow, a mother, and a nun who received the stigmata, becomes an emblem of everyone’s potential: “Rita is the best of us within us / because Saint Rita channels the force of the universe / which binds us all in love” (18).

To conclude, as has been observed, both Maria Mazziotti Gillan and Maria Famà have recently developed a new concept of an all-encompassing human family by cancelling boundaries and partitions. Nevertheless, in so-doing, they have not forgotten where they came from nor the lessons of generosity and mutual respect they learned from their families. “Saluta cu cappeddu chi hai,” Maria Famà’s grandfather used to say,

Tip the hat you got
If you are poor
If you are rich
It does not matter
Respect yourself
Respect the others
Do your best with what you got
Saluta cu cappeddu chi hai
Tip the hat you got. (*Mystics in the Family* 54)

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