1. Maria Mazziotti Gillan: The Woman behind the Artist

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I first encountered Maria Mazziotti Gillan in Cleveland, in November 1997, during the annual conference of the American Italian Historical Association (now called the Italian American Studies Association). The event, attracting experts and researchers from around the world (both prominent and budding, like I was at that time), was hosted in an elegantly furnished hotel, where all the participants were also staying. After the fruitful academic sessions held during the day, poetry readings and discussions were organised in the evenings, to further enhance the group experience while fostering intellectual exchanges. I remember distinctly the location where those gatherings took place: a spacious, softly lit attic; its transparent ceiling gave us the impression of being enveloped by a profusion of snowflakes gently falling in the dark of night. In this evocative context, a woman in her late fifties with dark, curly hair and glasses walked confidently toward the podium: she began to read the most poignant lines in a deep, vibrant, and mesmerising voice that made her appear larger than life. She seemed to address each of us, personally; her words resonated with everyone, and emotions in the audience escalated only to melt in a warm and resounding round of applause when her talk ended and the spell was broken. On that occasion,

I bought all her books on display and timidly approached her, asking her to write a dedication on one of her latest poetry collections: *Where I Come From* (1995). She did, smiling contagiously, mirroring my enthusiasm for her work and displaying genuine curiosity for my research. That was just the beginning of a long-lasting friendship and fertile collaboration which I count among the many blessings of my life. In the present essay, I will attempt to outline and follow Maria's path, emphasising how writing and creating for her (and, by extension, for her readership) has served as a cure, as a formidable source of support, throughout the challenges of life.

Before becoming the inspiring artist, the founder and executive director of the Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College in Paterson, New Jersey, the founding editor of the *Paterson Literary Review*, a professor of creative writing, and the kind and compassionate human being she now is, Maria had to endure the same ordeals that characterised the life of second-generation immigrants longing to attain the American dream. When she was growing up in Paterson in the 1940s and 1950s, stereotypes regarding Italian Americans were still dangerously widespread, rooted in texts such as *The Passing of the Great Race: Or, The Racial Basis of European History* (1916) by Madison Grant. In this popular volume, the alleged inferiority of Mediterranean peoples was maintained, as well as the depiction of Southern Italians as a "mongrel race of slaves,"[1] as Joseph Cosco has explained, whose whiteness was also

1 Cosco, 2003: 174.

questioned, given their physical and cultural proximity to Africa. When they first emigrated to "La Merica" – the name by which the Promised Land beyond the Atlantic was commonly known – the Italians did not intend to put down roots. As Fred Gardaphé observes, they were "birds of passage,"[2] longing to go back to their origins once they had accumulated enough wealth to be shared with relatives and friends. Most of the time, however, the long-coveted return turned into a mirage: the menial jobs they were assigned did not allow them to save sufficient money for a third-class ticket back to the peninsula.

Hence, Little Italies began to develop in large cities such as New York and Chicago, where Italian immigrants struggled to recreate the familiar environment they had left behind. In these cultural enclaves, the official language was the regional variant of Italian spoken at the time the various groups had decided to venture abroad. Although English was largely ignored by the initial settlers, the younger generations, those who had been born and bred in the US, had to learn both linguistic codes to be able to connect and interact with their elder compatriots as well as mainstream Americans, when they ventured outside their protective – albeit isolating – cocoon. These ethnic niches soon turned into liminal spaces or ghettoes, while new derogatory epithets – "wop," "dago," "Guinea," to name a few – began to single out Americans of Italian descent. According to Donald Tricarico, "wop" meant "without papers" or "without a passport" (to highlight the illegal status of foreign

2 Gardaphé, 1996: 208.

subjects)[3] or was derived from the Neapolitan *guappo* (thug, ruffian). The etymology of dago is uncertain: Eric Martone argues that it is a derivative of "Diego," a common name for Spaniards and Italians alike, as if Latin minorities could be unceremoniously lumped together and merged into a single alien identity;[4] it may also stem from "dagger," since "hot-blooded" Italians, from the time of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Washington Irving,[5] were regarded as prone to settling matters in a brutal way, rather than engaging in dialogue. A "popular belief," continues Martone, "is that the term came to be applied to Italian American immigrants because many were paid as the 'day goes' like contemporary day laborers."[6] As for Guinea, in the opinion of Jack Polidoro (an Italian American author of fiction), it underlines the connection between Italians and other "dark-skinned peoples,"[7] but it may also allude to their willingness to work for "'one British pound and a shilling' – a British guinea, a trivial amount."[8] During WWII the situation worsened dramatically: those who had not acquired American citizenship were viewed as enemy aliens, as a potential threat to the stability and welfare of the nation. Their *storia segreta* (hidden history/story), the way Lawrence DiStasi has

3 Tricarico, 2000: 319.
4 Martone, 2017: 12.
5 See, for example, the countless Italian villains featured in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860) or the infamous and devious Italian *banditti* in Irving's *Tales of a Traveller* (1824).
6 Ibid.
7 Polidoro, 2008: 30.
8 Ibid.

termed it,[9] even involving temporary relocation in concentration camps, is one of the most shameful pages of American history. It is not surprising, therefore, that traumatic "postmemories" – borrowing the expression coined by Marianne Hirsch in her studies on the Holocaust[10] – have been haunting subsequent generations of Italian Americans, especially the second, triggering a sort of voluntary amnesia of one's collective past, grounded in "a deeply internalized and complicated self-deprecation."[11]

Maria Mazziotti Gillan also came from a working-class background which, while initially increasing her disadvantages, thus encumbering her personal pursuit of happiness, it also enabled her to strengthen her resilience by articulating survival strategies that revolved around books and literature. As she recalls,

> Books were very important to me, and I read assiduously: they could pull me into their worlds and lift me out of my ordinary life. At primary school, I fell in love with the sound of the English language as pronounced by my teachers. It was music to me, just as Italian had

9 DiStasi's research efforts were channelled into a groundbreaking publication, connected with an itinerant exhibition. As DiStasi has pointed out, "even today, some in the Italian American community feel that the story should not be publicized, but rather forgotten, because they consider it a blot on their history." The fear of *brutta figura* (cutting a poor figure) has often prevented them from claiming their rights (DiStasi, 2001: 27).

10 The word "postmemory" identifies "the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (Hirsch, 1997: 22).

11 Giunta, 2002: 25.

> always been at home. At that stage, I think it dawned on me that the only way to transcend the boundaries of poverty was through books and language. I began writing poetry. It was around the age of 13, however, when a cousin took me to the theatre in New York, that I experienced a kind of epiphany. As the stage lights came on and I heard the music and the words, I knew this could be my way out. From that moment onward, I understood that I was going to be a poet, even though it was an unusual ambition for a child.[12]

In her search for an authorial voice, however, Maria at first relied on the imitation of "established literary figures whose words captivated [her]";[13] Amy Lowell, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley became the models she strove to adapt to, until, in her forties, she realised that "this yearning was part of [her] attempt to erase [her]self."[14] The rejection of her too visible and burdensome Italianness also entailed the domestication of her physical appearance: as well as making up stories so as not to invite any of her schoolmates home (otherwise her family's difference would not have passed unnoticed), she sought unsuccessfully to tame her unruly ringlets and used cosmetics that would lighten her dark skin and cover the black rings underneath her eyes. She even went so far as to undergo surgery to Americanise her facial features: "I eventually went to a plastic surgeon to have my big Italian nose altered to look smaller, less ob-

12 Gillan, 2025.
13 Gillan, 2003: 158.
14 Ibid.

trusive, less foreign. Still I could not stop being shy around anyone who was not Italian."[15]

This very spectrum of feelings, ranging from awkwardness and frustration to guilt, remorse, and unconditional love, is manifest in *Where I Come From*, a collection of poems composed between 1980 and 1995, whose arrangement eschews mere chronology. As Diane di Prima wrote in her "Afterword," the anthology "is at once a journey home to ourselves, our ancestral customs and beliefs, and outward, to whatever possibilities await us in this ravaged global village."[16] Many texts are devoted to the shame Maria felt as the daughter of a blue-collar worker, ostensibly incapable of adjusting to the new context and, therefore, suspended in a vacuum of place and time. In the opening poem, "Betrayals," she confesses the disgust she once felt toward him, embarrassed at his "broken tongue"[17] and his humble occupation. This reflection on the uneasiness she grappled with as a teenager continues in "Arturo," where she compares her youthful days of yearning to fit in with her present, when, finally, her father's and her own Italianness are no longer perceived as an oddity to be prudently concealed. Her initial cultural denial and futile effort to manipulate a grim and disappointing reality are vividly captured in the opening lines of the poem:

15 Ibid.

16 Di Prima, 1995: 117. Maria credits Diane di Prima, alongside Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Laura Boss, for acting as empowering sources of inspiration (Gillan, 2025).

17 Gillan, 1995: 7.

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.

Nonetheless, in the closing lines, she proudly takes centre stage, reclaiming her heritage as an added value and an essential part of herself:

Listen, America.
This is my father, Arturo,
And I am his daughter, Maria.
Do not call me Marie.

The harrowing shift in little Maria's behaviour, depending on whether she was inside or outside the invisible boundaries of her ethnic enclave, coupled with her teachers' lack of sympathy and cultural sensitivity, is explored in one of her most moving and celebrated poems, "Public School No. 18, Paterson, New Jersey." Miss Wilson, whose eyes are emblematically "opaque / as blue glass,"[18] is firmly persuaded that the Italian child in her class is not fully proficient in English, only because she appears conspicuous, with her mass of curly hair that, in the woman's

18 Ibid.: 12. In "Talismans," vicious Miss Elmer, who smells "dusty / as though she had been left / too long in a closet," is ready to punish with a ruler any child who does not conform (ibid.: 42).

prejudiced view, must necessarily be lice-ridden. Maria's words, "smooth in [her] mouth"[19] when at home, turn into a chilling silence at school, "for fear the Italian word / will sprout from [her] mouth like a rose."[20] The mortifying attitude of tutors and educators who, without a word, teach her to "hate [her]self,"[21] is replicated at university, when the psychology professor tells her she reminds him of a mafia boss he has seen on the cover of *Time* magazine. The poem ends in anger, which "spits / venomous"[22] from her mouth: self-annihilation and self-imposed mutism are replaced with agency and the recovery of a loud, clear voice, the same that can also be detected in the final section of another coming-of-age poem: "Growing up Italian." This poetic composition further investigates Maria's trying time at kindergarten, when "English words fell on [her] / thick and sharp as hail,"[23] prompting a defensive retreat into herself. Her underprivileged position as a child of emigrants is acknowledged as a seemingly irreparable liability:

> It did not take me long to learn
> That dark-skinned people were greasy
> And dirty. Poor children were even dirtier.
> To be dark-skinned and poor was to be dirtiest of all.[24]

Accordingly, after hoping for a "miracle"[25] that could turn her into the blond, blue-eyed girl she wished to be,

19 Ibid.: 12.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.: 13.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.: 54.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.: 55.

Maria decides to seek a suitable partner who, at least, could grant their offspring the possibility of passing for white Americans without being ostracised. Denis Gillan, the love of her life and the subject of countless lines:

> So I looked for a man
> With blond hair and blue eyes
> Who would blend right in
> And who'd give me blond, blue-eyed children
> Who would blend right in
> And a name that would blend right in
> And I would be melted down
> To a shape and a color
> That would blend right in.[26]

Maria's meek and unassuming attitude, however, is soon replaced by a resolute affirmation of her roots which are celebrated in a truly Whitmanesque way, embracing not just her own origin, but vindicating the rights of every vulnerable community that has ever felt marginalised and forlorn in the Land of Opportunity:

> I woke up cursing,
> All those who taught me
> To hate my dark, foreign self,
>
> And I said, "Here I am –
> With my olive-toned skin,
> And my Italian parents,
> And my old poverty,
> Real as a scar on my forehead," […]

26 Ibid.: 55-56.

And I celebrate
My Italian American self,
Rooted in this, my country, where
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.[27]

Maria's openness to other cultural groups (as well as her readiness to build bridges while dismantling partitions) is also evident in her tireless work as an editor, in productive partnership with her daughter and fellow scholar Jennifer Gillan. *Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry* (1994), their first collaborative endeavour, attempts to "re-envision American identity,"[28] demonstrating that "skin color, language, ethnicity, and religion"[29] cannot measure one's Americanness. In *Identity Lessons: Contemporary Writing about Learning to Be American* (1999), poems and short pieces reflecting America's

27 Ibid.: 56-57.

28 Gillan, 1994: xx. The book is dedicated to Maria's mother, Angelina Schiavo Mazziotti (1913-1991), "Soothsayer, healer, tale-teller" (ibid.: v).

29 Ibid.

multistranded texture are gathered. As Jennifer elucidates in the "Introduction," this anthology – meaningfully dedicated to "Teachers who taught us to believe in ourselves"[30] – "is about learning to see difference as a positive and enriching aspect of American life."[31] The research scope is widened and deepened in *Growing up Ethnic in America: Contemporary Fiction about Learning to Be American* (1999), where shorter and longer narratives are engaged in a dialogue across ethnic lines, to ensure that "the next generation of children can grow up secure in the knowledge that there are many shades and shapes of American faces, many ways to be American."[32]

Maria's Italianness does not represent her only source of strength and encouragement, nor does it alone provide her with intellectual and emotional nourishment; indeed, the "long line of women" that is nested inside her, as if she were a "Russian peasant dol[l]"[33] – the way she depicts herself in the poem entitled "Heritage" – has taught her "to laugh [her] deep belly laugh and grab the world / in [her] arms and squeeze the sweetness out."[34] These lines come from "Learning How to Love Myself," a text that I often discuss in class when delving into Italian American literature. My students generally relate to it profoundly, as it portrays

30 Gillan and Gillan, 1999b: v.

31 Gillan, 1994: xiii.

32 Gillan, 1999: ix. The book is dedicated to Arturo Mazziotti (1906-1998), in loving memory.

33 In the same poem, she thus remarks: "When you open me up: my mother, her mother / my daughter, my son's daughter. It could go on for ever / the way I carry them inside me" (Gillan, 1995: 112).

34 Gillan, 2004: 141.

Maria's journey toward bodily self-acceptance, an arduous – albeit necessary – undertaking for any person. At last, "the slender grace / of a long body, tall and supple as marsh grass"[35] – her unapproachable, iconic ideal as a teenager – is gladly swapped for her "dark black and electric"[36] hair, "short / sturdy legs,"[37] and a "thick, […] peasant body"[38] endowed with incredible energy that carries her "along, unstoppable into [her] life."[39] For my students (and for me, as well), Maria has become a mentor, someone to look up to in times of dire straits, offering guidance, advice, and consolation.[40]

When *The Silence in an Empty House* was released in 2013, I had just lost my mother to a devastating illness. A few weeks after her untimely demise, I read Maria's collection, which is dedicated to Denis, her husband of 46 years, who had also passed away after suffering from Parkinson's disease for 25 years. Her simple yet moving lines succeeded in perfectly capturing what I myself was feeling: horror, anger, despair, and utter desolation. By empathising with her pain, I found the possibility to confront my own. In Denis's helpless and devastated body, in his piercing agony and impaired abilities – to the extent that, in the poems, he

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 In a recent personal communication, Maria recalled an occasion at Rome airport, some years ago, when one of my students working there recognised her, shouted, "You are Maria Mazziotti Gillan!" and threw her arms around her. "It was a wonderful moment," the artist said (Gillan, 2025).

is often equated with a child[41] – I saw my mother's defencelessness. Maria's lines have a universal resonance, reflecting the idea that we are all interconnected, members of a large family that includes human and non-human animals.[42] In "Watching the Bridge Collapse," for example, Maria parallels the terror and disbelief of those involved in the collapse of a bridge in Minnesota with her own dread and incredulity upon her husband's diagnosis (a reaction that mirrors what anyone might feel when hopes and aspirations are unexpectedly shattered):

> Sometimes I think all our lives
> Are like that. We really believe we are safe,
> The roads we travel built to last, and are shocked
> No matter how many times it happens,
> When the ground falls away.[43]

Her exploration of sorrow, however, cannot be separated from the coping strategies she generously offers her readers. In "There Is No Way to Begin," the comforting memory of a poetry reading provides her with unexpected respite: "After the first poem, the second, the cloud / Thick as a woollen muffler that covered me, lifted."[44] Once again, writing, reading, and exchanging thoughts and ideas reveal their therapeutic qualities.

41 See, for example, the poems "How My Husband Escapes" and "How Do We Ask for Forgiveness" (Gillan, 2013a: 37 and 49, respectively).

42 In "Watching the Pelican Die," her husband's suffering echoes the misery of the bird covered in oil, "its mouth wide open, / a picture of torment and despair" (ibid.: 51).

43 Ibid.: 27.

44 Ibid.: 44.

It is no coincidence, perhaps, that in 2013 Maria also published a handbook entitled *Writing Poetry to Save Your Life*, focused on the writing process and aimed at enabling readers to compose meaningful poems "that reach across the barriers of age, ethnicity, gender, social class to connect with all that is human inside us."[45] Acting as a supportive advisor, Maria is convinced that we all have significant stories to tell: storytelling allows us to endow grief and trauma with a physical body of words distinct from our own, thereby granting us the possibility to let them go. What prevents us from sharing our tales and accounts is an ominous bird, the crow, which symbolically represents the insidious internal dialogue that leads to self-sabotage. In "The Crow," a poem included in *Where I Come From*, Maria had already mentioned the undermining whispers in our head – "you aren't really very much / you guinea, you wop"[46] – and the struggle "to blot out the sound of the crow / who sits on our shoulder and laughs."[47] The disheartened ending of that text – "we'll never escape / The voices we carry within us"[48] – is thoroughly subverted in *Writing Poetry to Save Your Life*. The artist's affectionate and powerful words of encouragement, in fact, become louder than any self-deprecating inner talk: "I want you to hear my voice in your head, when you begin to doubt what you're doing, when you're writing your life and your stories into your work: *believe in yourself*."[49]

45 Gillan, 2013b: 7.
46 Gillan, 1995: 68.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.: 69.
49 Gillan, 2013b: 22-23.

In a recent interview, Maria has credited Diane di Prima with prompting her to take up painting, experimenting with collage and watercolour techniques.[50] In Maria's words,

> Painting and visual art have become very important to me. Actually, painting engages a different side of my brain, a part that shapes the way I see the world, much like poetry does. Both are ways for me to understand, accept, and express my creative self, whether through visual art or verse. All my work is an attempt to build a bridge between myself and the world. I have loved creating paintings, exhibiting them, and seeing many of them find homes, knowing they are going out into the world, just as poetry does.[51]

She has also repeatedly returned to Italy: in 2014, the poet was warmly welcomed in San Mauro Cilento, her parents' hometown. She has become a consistent presence in the writing seminars primarily organised by Italian Diaspora Studies, a research centre founded by Margherita Ganeri, in partnership with the Department of Humanities of the University of Calabria. The 2019 workshop resulted in a seminal anthology, *Celebrating Calabria: Writing Heritage and Memory* (2020), which also features fresh poems by Maria. Once more, the healing properties of writing challenge and defeat the cruel logic of time, with its mutual exclusion between past and present, consenting the

50 See Umansky, 2024.

51 Gillan, 2025. Her virtual art gallery is accessible online at https://www.mariamazziottigillan.com/12x12gallery/9z4dm3s59pxaccn6lfik9qf-2541zli.