

**From Wastelands to Homelands: Travelling Maria Mazziotti Gillan's  
'Open Road' and Signifying Resistance in *When the Stars Were Still  
Visible***

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**Abstract**

Maria Mazziotti Gillan is probably one of the most famous and thought-provoking contemporary artists of Italian descent. She is the author of numerous poetry books and has recently started a parallel career as a painter. By focusing on her most recent poetry collection entitled *When the Stars Were Still Visible* (2021), this essay sets out to explore the strategies she has articulated to heal her individual and collective wounds (as an Italian American), while resisting the annihilation of her cultural background. Throughout her life, she has been compelled to cross several emotional wastelands, eventually managing to carve her own path to multiple places (both physical and imaginary) she could call "home".

**Keywords:** *Homeland, Italian Americans, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Resistance, Wasteland, When the Stars Were Still Visible.*

**1. Maria Mazziotti Gillan: Writing as an Empowering Tool**

Born in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1940, to parents coming from the Salerno area, Maria Mazziotti Gillan is one of the most acclaimed contemporary artists of Italian descent. She has penned twenty poetry volumes, co-authored three anthologies featuring poets from different backgrounds,<sup>1</sup> and she credits Diane Di Prima with encouraging her to

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<sup>1</sup> Together with her daughter Jennifer, she has edited three multi-cultural anthologies: *Identity Lessons* (1999), *Growing up Ethnic in America: Contemporary Fiction About Learning*

start a parallel career as a painter, thus developing a mixed media technique combining watercolor, pencil, and collage. She is professor emerita of English and creative writing at Binghamton University-SUNY, as well as the founder of the Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College in Paterson, and the editor of *Paterson Literary Review*.

By focusing on her most recent collection of poems, entitled *When the Stars Were Still Visible* (2021), this essay sets out to investigate the strategies she has articulated to effectively cross both the emotional wastelands of her childhood and youth (i.e., her sense of estrangement and inadequacy, as the daughter of immigrants), and the human wastelands of illness, aging, and loss. As will be shown, in order to resist trauma, the poet first of all acknowledges and delves into the condition of fragmentation and disconnectedness she, like many other Italian Americans, had to grapple with. Then, she undermines its upsetting and destabilizing potential when she embraces vulnerability, while uncovering the unexpected beauty and possibilities of life even in its most tragic moments. By re-membering experiences, instead of hiding or suppressing them, by choosing wisely *how* to remember and *what* to focus on, Maria Mazziotti Gillan succeeds in healing individual and collective wounds, thus turning wastelands into homelands.

Before proceeding with the analysis of some of her poems, a few preliminary remarks on Mazziotti Gillan's conception of writing as a powerful therapeutic tool will prove useful to cast light on her work. In her 2013 handbook entitled *Writing Poetry to Save Your Life*, she highlighted the necessity to connect with the innermost part of ourselves, with the repository of stories that lay buried within all of us, in a place she calls the *cave*. To achieve this goal, one must get rid of "the critic in [our] head, that voice that tells [us] what is wrong with

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*to Be American* (1999), and *Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry* (2008). Maria Mazziotti Gillan and Jennifer Gillan also released another volume in 2003, focused on Italian American writers: *Italian American Writers on New Jersey: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose*.

everything [we] do, that voice that makes [us] doubt [ourselves]" (Mazziotti Gillan 2013: 16), physically identified with a crow, sitting on anybody's shoulder. Mazziotti Gillan had already employed the same metaphor in a 1995 poem, "The Crow,"<sup>2</sup> to voice the "deeply internalized and complicated self-deprecation" (Giunta 2002: 25) – borrowing Edwige Giunta's words – shared by many Italian Americans, which prompted them to remain silent and, possibly, invisible. In her handbook, however, her perspective is broader: the poet positions herself as a mentor to all her readers (regardless of their ethnicity, gender, or age), eager to replace the insidious and curtailing influence of the ominous bird with her own empowering message.<sup>3</sup> As she clarifies, in fact, once one acquires the courage to shape overwhelming memories and distressing feelings into a poem, once language is used to contain previously inarticulate pain and repressed contents, the emotional consequences of trauma can be finally processed and overcome.

## 2. *When the Stars Were Still Visible: A Close Reading*

The initial poem, which lends its title to the collection, is centered on the act of remembering, even though, as the poet maintains,

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<sup>2</sup> These are among the most poignant lines: "you aren't really very much/ you guinea, you wop" (Mazziotti Gillan 1995: 68). *Guinea* and *wop* (without papers) were among the numerous derogatory and offensive terms used to identify American people of Italian descent. As Anthony Tamburri has elucidated, the use of such stereotypical labels was "rampant at the end of the nineteenth century and through the first half of the twentieth century for sure" (Tamburri 2014: 112).

<sup>3</sup> "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*" (Mazziotti Gillan 2013: 22-23). For further information on the volume, see Elisabetta Marino (2018): "Writing Poetry to Save Your Life: Maria Mazziotti Gillan the Poet, the Healer," in Vellucci, Sabrina and Carla Francellini (2018): *Re-mapping Italian America: Places, Cultures, Identities*, New York: Bordighera Press, pp. 154-165.

"memory is like the fragments of a puzzle" (Mazziotti Gillan 2021: 1), difficult to compose into a single, organic image. This concept is further illustrated a few lines later, when fleeting recollections are equated to "bits of color in a kaleidoscope,/ and so impossible to explain" (1). A general feeling of secrecy and suspension dominates the second poem, "The Children of Immigrants," where Maria Mazziotti Gillan finally pieces together the harrowing story of her paternal grandmother, deserted by her husband, back in Italy, when she was barely twenty-four. The poet herself had gathered the details of her vicissitudes only late in her life since, as she observes, "children of immigrants pick up bits and pieces/ over the years to create a picture" (3). Her intention to search for her family's past, thus overcoming the selective amnesia that had affected so many Italian immigrants, is coupled with her resolution to eventually expose and face her inbred sense of shame. Many poems of the collection explore this paralyzing feeling ignited by the awareness of one's difference, which is most obvious at school where, with her hand-me-down clothes, her dark hair and complexion, she was never going to be among the most admired and glamorous girls. In "I Was the Good Girl," the poet describes her "thin skin/ easily wounded by cruelty or shame" (20), as well as the survival strategy she had developed for herself, namely being "quiet enough [...so that] no one would notice [she] was there" (20), just like a little hunted animal. In "In Grammar School" the gulf that separates her from her schoolmates looks so wide that they simply forget to collect her to go to a party: "so invisible was I, so unimportant,/ that the others didn't even know/ they had left me behind" (22). In the pictures of those years, her "head [is] always bent, [her] shoulders hunched" (31). Even her first sexual explorations are triggered by the urge to "be part of the crowd" (25), as Mazziotti Gillan confesses, when depicting her "Eighth Grade Kiss," which had stirred no emotion in her. The night she lost her virginity, the excitement and fulfilment she had concocted in her imagination are superseded by feelings of guilt and shame, "like a scarf wrapped around [her] neck" (35).

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While excavating these distressing memories to release the anguish and pain associated with them, Mazziotti Gillan also takes the opportunity to debunk the American myth of unbounded happiness and opportunities, so many immigrants cherished. "The popular girls in the Seventh Grade" of the eponymous poem, "the Ritz Girls" (23) who seemed to be destined to "magical lives" (24), grow into ordinary, overweight wives, or simple workers; one of them even ends up in hospital, before getting divorced, because of her abusive husband. The US as a wasteland of violence is featured in another poem, "The Boys I Loved, the Boys Who Loved Me," where the blond, blue-eyed boy she falls for in seventh grade is daily beaten by his perpetually drunk father with "a razor strap" (26).

The transition from wastelands of alienation and despair to a newly discovered idea of homeland does not occur at any precise moment in the volume. Since Maria Mazziotti Gillan aims at healing traumas, thus avoiding social fragmentation and cultural seclusion, no partition may be present in *When the Stars Were Still Visible*: only open roads. Hence, the poems that tend to look at the experience of immigration and displacement from a different, more constructive angle are actually interspersed in the collection. In "Carrying Their Hometowns to Paterson," the new families settling in Paterson's Little Italy are far from uprooted; conversely, their arrival is portrayed as a grafting procedure:

these new immigrants  
carried their hometowns to Paterson,  
carrying their dialects and mores  
and the pungent cheeses their relatives sent to them  
so they'd have a piece of home  
to remind them of the past. (5)

Feelings of loneliness, disorientation, and isolation are compensated for by the warmth and the welcoming hospitality of the

poet's mother, as in the poem entitled "Growing Up in My Mother's House":

Even though there was barely enough money  
for food for us, my mother found a way to stretch it,  
ways to include everyone who came by,  
"Pull up a chair," she'd say,  
and another person would join us,  
the family large and elastic  
and always ready to include one more. (8)

Even poverty may be celebrated, if contextualized within the frame of true parental affection; in "Even after all these years," the poet affirms that the simple plate of spaghetti her mother used to cook three times a week, as she could not afford to buy anything more expensive, "still fills some hollow place inside [her]" (104): "a plate of spaghetti makes me feel/ my mother's presence, soothing/ and beckoning me home" (104). In "Love Song to HO Cream Farina," she recalls the time when her father had undergone surgery to remove a tumour and could not work for a long time; her mother's "streaming bowl of farina" (48) – what the family fed on for almost one year, managing to survive on the meagre savings accumulated over time – turns into the objective correlative of her love.

Health conditions connected with aging also play an important part in the poetry collection. Nonetheless, instead of observing her own aching and precarious body as a wasteland, amidst feelings of despair, hopelessness, and concern, the poet still shows gratitude, as her brother, who is a doctor, strives to provide the best and least invasive treatment for her. Likewise, when she falls down and her face looks "battle-scarred" (74), her son, a lawyer whom she had previously thought incapable of understanding her, quotes Dylan Thomas's lines to prevent her from lapsing into depression:

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Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light. (74-75)

Even the land of the dead becomes a homeland when the boundary between the living and the deceased is blurred. In “Ghost Voices,” for example, she perceives the tangible presence of all those who have already left her: her mother, her sister, her husband, while in “Apparitions” their “ghost arms” (96) encircle her, when they pay a visit, with their bodies “made of smoke” (96). Maria Mazziotti Gillan never denies the child she used to be (the little girl that was ashamed of her looks and yearned to belong), nor does she wish to emancipate herself from her; on the contrary, she unreservedly embraces her fragility and contradictions. Indeed, in a poem written while in Calabria, “What does the Child Inside Me Still Want,” Maria seemingly annihilates the barriers of time and space, by acknowledging that all the toys, the fancy clothes, the opportunities she had given to her own children, were also meant to compensate for what she herself could not have<sup>4</sup>.

### Conclusion: A New Dawn

Some of the poems in the concluding pages of *When the Stars Were Still Visible* are devoted to the poet’s sojourn in Calabria where, in 2019, she took part in a workshop of creative writing, focused on cultural heritage and memory.<sup>5</sup> The very last lines of the very last poem of the collection, “Celebration in Albidona,” provide the most appropriate conclusion to this essay. Albidona is a village, whose name recalls a “golden dawn,” the moment when the stars are still visible in the sky,

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<sup>4</sup> “Is that why so many things/ I worked so hard to give my children – the private schools/ and slumber parties and summer camps and good clothes –/ are really for the child/ with her hand-me-down clothes and her cotton underpants for Christmas presents” (103).

<sup>5</sup> Together with Margherita Ganeri, she has edited a volume collecting the poetical pieces of all participants: *Celebrating Calabria: Writing Heritage and Memory* (2020).

even though a brand-new day is about to break. In this truly Whitmanesque song, Maria celebrates the outcome of her resistance, the principle of connection, the mutual grafting of cultures, and, finally, the presence of multiple homelands one may feel comfortable in:

I realize how much of Italy my mother had brought with her to  
Paterson  
How familiar the Calabrian town is,  
And though I have never seen them before,  
These people are my people. (111)

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## From Wastelands to Homelands...

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**research interests:** British Romantic Writers (especially Mary and P.B. Shelley), Indian Diasporic Women Writers, Partition Literature, Postcolonial Writers, Italian American Literature, Travel Literature.

### **Selected publications:**

- (2022): "Two Counter-Narratives of Global Terrorism: Sunjeev Sahota's *Ours Are the Streets* and Tabish Khair's *Just Another Jihadi Jane*", in *Postcolonial Text*, Volume 17, Issues 2-3, pp. 1-16.
- (2022): "Il respiro ritrovato: la poesia di Emily Dickinson e la ritraduzione necessaria", in *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny*, Issue 2, pp. 198-210.
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