cultural depth that permeates this mask's diabolical comic art. Migliaccio's scathing self-irony remains unsurpassed, linguistically and conceptually. And there were other, more occasional, instances: the rough-and-tumble fight of cop Fiaschetti against the *goodfellas*, fought with the weapons of irony. He defused and ridiculed Sopranos and sopranology before the fact – enough for a seat at the Pantheon; and there was Carlo Tresca spitting against capitalism and military intervention, a radical enemy of prevailing, eternal sanctimony.

No gods and no masters. And yet, in some unacknowledged, tense way, around those and other voices the first communities of immigrants from Italy managed to express their divisions, contradictions, and their unremitting vitality. That literature, and its exponents, functioned as a public forum. They were the mouthpiece of a people. I have the impression that we've lost this collective, almost physical dimension.

I can't see all this as a lesson or as anything "empowering," but those writers used their language to the brim, they filled their time and helped their contemporaries experience a respite – which, I think, was the most harmony anyone could wrest under the circumstances. Unwitting canon-makers for their cushioned great-grandchildren, if you wish, delivering messages difficult to fully grasp, written as they were in another language. And here's an obvious but necessary rediscovery: the roots of the canon grow obliquely and point toward the stratified and complex Italian tradition. The canon works canonically, and its origins are also in some way self-reflective. So much for the illiteracy of the first generation. No people is ever without a culture.

Edvige Giunta

Memoir and the Italian-American Canon

The politics of recognition and the related discussion regarding the marginality of the field still permeate much of Italian-American scholarship. The ongoing concern to overcome the position of "emerging" literature makes the question of an emerging Italian-American canon fraught with complexity. We cannot

ignore the resistance in academia, often coming from writers and scholars of Italian descent, to recognize anything of lasting or "universal" value in Italian-American literature. Thus the anti-intellectual stigma against Italian Americans remains pervasive. The reasons for such resistance continue to constrain the scope of scholarly discussions in the field.

The memoir has most directly and powerfully addressed this resistance to the notion of the Italian-American literary figure. Memoir, unlike autobiography, is not about individual emergence, about the self retracing the steps that led to its present socially and culturally recognized success; it's not a narrative that outlines the journey of the self-in-the-making, a self invested in its separateness and individuation from the community of its origins. Memoir seeks to understand the ties between the self and its community. The contemporary memoir, in its most original and characteristic manifestation, theorizes a notion of the self less individualistic than the self of autobiography, a self more critically and ambivalently rooted in the lives of the community the writer inhabits or has left behind. Janet Zandy describes the breaking from working class origins as a form of self-denial and self-destruction: the move into the middle class can provoke a devastating cultural and social amnesia. Indeed, when writers from working-class and immigrant backgrounds embark on a journey in which the making of the self is equated with emancipation from and even renunciation of origins and community, they risk artistic suicide.

A number of contemporary Italian-American writers have turned to the memoir, a genre with its own problematic canonical status, to explore the relationship between the self and the community. The publication of Louise DeSalvo's groundbreaking memoir *Vertigo* in 1996 (almost ten years after the publication of Helen Barolini's *The Dream Book*) has been followed by a wealth of memoirs, especially by women writers, which collectively constitute a coherent body of work. This body of work speaks to the experience of being Italian American *and* fashioning oneself as a literary persona in a culture that continues to be partial to the trope of Italian Americans as anti-intellectual. A number of writers have written memoirs that should be regarded as constituting an emerging Italian-American canon. They include, among others, Mary Cappello, Maria Laurino, Kym Ragusa, Carole Maso, Diane di Prima, Susanne Antonetta, Danielle Trussoni, Carl Capotorto, and Joanna Herman. These writers have incorporated into their narratives – of family, sexuality, illness,

war, politics, literary movements, transforming neighborhoods, environmental violence – a sense of themselves as both the subjects of their narratives and the Italian-American artists shaping those narratives.

We can benefit from teaching memoir – the practice and craft of memoir – in our classrooms, where the next generation of Italian-American writers is emerging. As a pedagogical genre, the memoir involves learning and teaching to read the scattered traces of memory and to craft them into narratives. These narratives do not erase borders and separations; they are not preoccupied with filling or concealing the gaps between jagged pieces; they flaunt what Mary Cappello calls the "awkward." The process underscoring the development of these narratives is integrated into the narrative of memoir itself and can lead to radical political awareness and literary inventiveness.

The realization of the constructedness of memory work represents a key moment in the encounter between subjectivity and collectivity. Such a realization proves especially useful when teaching immigrant and working-class students (including many Italian-American students, whose life narratives defy the myth of a seamless Italian-American cultural integration and success). These young writers come to understand – through writing – the rigid social narratives that impede the complex revelations to which memory work can lead. For my Italian-American student writers, to move outside stale narratives of family, immigration, work, education, power, success, Italy and America, can prove a challenge, one that most of them welcome once they learn, through memoir writing, to disengage from the story they thought they wanted to write. Once they let go of the learned impulse to think of their story as being *about* a well-understood event waiting to be told and contained in a pre-determined form, they begin to write stories that explore in a nuanced and authentic manner the relationship with their communities: this relationship, while full of conflicts and contradictions, is vital to the survival and the making of a self that has political, ethical, and literary coherence.