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The Black Madonna in the Italian American Artistic Imagination

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Abstract

This essay sets out to explore the image of the black Madonna in Italian American artistic and literary expressions, providing thought-provoking examples of how this holy icon of universal motherhood has been persistently associated with the articulation of empowering strategies, with antagonism towards any kind of patriarchal restraints, with the healing of deeply ingrained divisions (of gender, class, ethnicity), and with the celebration of diversity in unity.

Key words: Black Madonna, Italian Americans, Patriarchy, Otherness

Over the centuries, considerable scholarly efforts have been devoted to unravel the mystery that surrounds the image of the black Madonna, whose category “appears to be an unstable one,”¹ as Melanie Rose Landman has underlined, after stating that “there is no definitive explanation for the blackness of black Madonnas.”² Mostly dating back to the Middle Ages, between the Eleventh and the Fourteenth centuries (even though some frescoes, paintings, and even a few sculptures can be ascribed to the first centuries of the Christian Era³), Bizantine-style icons as well as wooden, stone, and metal statues of the black Madonna (with Asian, European or African features) are to be found in 35 countries all over the world, according to a survey carried out by Ean Begg (a former Dominican priest and currently a Jungian analyst), who has compiled a valuable but still incomplete list of more than 450 representations of the dark Virgin with her holy infant, all renowned for their miraculous power.⁴ This rather modest figure is probably underestimated for several reasons: first of all, the elusive definition of what a *black* Madonna really is (her skin colour ranges from pitch black to lighter hues of brown). Moreover, several images have undergone substantial transformations and can no longer be visibly identified as *black*; indeed, when the first or even later attempts at restoration were undertaken, a fair number of pictures and statuettes were not just cleaned: they were literally repainted, *whitened*. Since their complexion seldom reflected the predominant ethnicity of the sites where they were worshipped (mainly in Europe), due to the customary connections between darkness and sin, beauty/purity and the immaculate candour of a virgin,⁵ their peculiar dusky colour was often rejected and denied, conveniently believed to be unintentional, accidentally caused either by the smoke of incense, candles and fires, or by layers of dirt and ashes, or even by the oxidation of some of the pigments used in old paint.⁶ Nevertheless, it should not pass unnoticed that, despite the superficial

1 Melanie Rose Landman, “An Investigation in to the Phenomenon of the Black Madonna” (PhD diss., University of Roehampton, 2012), 7.

2 Ibid.

3 St. Luke, the Evangelist, was credited with painting the oldest and most truthful portraits of Mary, symbolically *darkened* with grief. Compare Monique Scheer, “From Majesty to Mystery: Change in the Meanings of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries.” *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 5 (2002): 1422.

4 Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 3.

5 Black Madonnas have been commonly perceived as *ugly* and imperfect. As Scheer recalls, J.W. Goethe, for example, voiced a sense of “esthetic disappointment” while looking at the “Moorish colour” and the Egyptian and Abyssinian features of some representations of the Mother of God. Scheer, “From Majesty to Mystery,” 1438. Even Karl Marx described black Madonnas as “the most disgraceful portraits of the Mother of God.” H.F. Peters, *Red Jenny. A Life with Karl Marx* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 114.

6 Scheer, “From Majesty to Mystery,” 1418.

changes in their appearance, in popular imagination these church-whitened icons are still revered and almost defiantly referred to as *black* Madonnas.⁷

Numerous black Madonna sanctuaries and pilgrimage sites are located in Italy,⁸ especially in the Southern regions, where the vast majority of immigrants to the US came from. Nostalgia for the cherished homeland of one's ancestors mingled with an unbending devotion to Catholicism may be regarded as two of the most evident and plausible reasons for the surprising interest in Black Madonnas displayed – as it will be shown in this essay – by several Italian American scholars, artists, and writers, through their critical inquiries, creative projects, and fictional as well as non fictional narratives. As Edvige Giunta has highlighted, however, especially Italian American women authors (but also some of their male counterparts) assert in their works “their power to rewrite Catholicism and, blending it with old and new mythologies, employ it as a vehicle for self-exploration and artistic affirmation.”⁹ Remarkably enough, Italian American artists and intellectuals have not been drawn towards the sorrowful, silent, meek and selfless image of the *mater dolorosa*, emulated by so many domestic angels appeared in their ancillary position.¹⁰ Quite the opposite: they seem to have deliberately elected as their collective and individual protective icon an ancient, potent, and enigmatic female figure, whose curious and puzzling colour seems to correspond to the dark complexion of the newcomers from Sicily or Calabria, who exhibited on their faces “a different kind of white than those of the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture,”¹¹ in the words of Fred Gardaphé, and therefore resisted assimilation (or, as one may be tempted to define it, annihilation) into the melting pot.

Given what has been argued to far, this essay sets out to explore the image of the black Madonna in Italian American artistic and literary expressions, providing thought-provoking examples of how this holy icon of universal motherhood has

7 This is the case of the *black* Madonnas of Lucerna, Avellino, Chiaramonte Gulfi and Montenero, to name a few.

8 According to Mary Beth Moser, there are 125 Black Madonnas in Italy but, in her view, the count is constantly rising. Mary Beth Moser, *Honoring Darkness. Exploring the Power of Black Madonnas in Italy* (Vashon Island, Washington: Dea Madre Publishing, 2008), 128.

9 Edvige Giunta, *Writing with an Accent. Contemporary Italian American Women Authors* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 104.

10 Compare the essay by Mary Jo Bona entitled “*Mater Dolorosa No More? Mothers and Writers in the Italian/ American Literary Tradition.*”

11 Fred Gardaphé, *Leaving Little Italy: Essaying Italian American Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 6. The most infamous epithets usually hurled at Italian Americans were WoP (without papers, a reference to the status of illegal immigrant), Dago (a corruption of the Spanish name Diego), and Guinea, “a reference to inhabitants of a coastal area in Western Africa as the ‘Guinea Negro.’” Salvatore J. LaGumina et al., *The Italian American Experience: an Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 319.

been persistently associated with the articulation of empowering strategies, with antagonism towards any kind of patriarchal restraints, with the healing of deeply ingrained divisions (of gender, class, ethnicity), and with the celebration of diversity in unity. Some of the most comprehensive investigations into the history and significance of black Madonnas – carried out (not by chance) by two American scholars of Italian ancestry, namely Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum and her disciple Mary Beth Moser – will provide the necessary information to contextualize and support the analysis of relevant artistic productions and literary texts.

A “womanist/feminist cultural historian,” as she often describes herself,¹² since the beginning of the 1990s, Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum has been actively engaged in researching and uncovering the meaning of black Madonnas, primarily focusing on the Italian scenario. By delving into vernacular traditions (i.e. the history/herstory of subordinated *Others*, of those who have been left out and marginalized), in her pioneering study entitled *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion & Politics in Italy* (1993), she maintains that “Black Madonnas may be considered a metaphor for a memory of the time when the earth was believed to be the body of a woman and all creatures were equal.”¹³ As Chiavola Birnbaum points out, the unusual colour of black Madonnas is actually “the ancient colour of regeneration,”¹⁴ reminiscent of the different shades of brown of the fertile Earth. Besides, it recalls the primordial Dark Mother nurturing all creatures, belonging to a time before history, when communities were classless, and humans were not alienated from one another and from nature.

As Chiavola Birnbaum remarks in her volume, after visiting many sanctuaries in Italy dedicated to the Black Madonna, she realized that most had been built on (or, at least, in the proximity of) heathen temples and holy sites consecrated to primeval Goddesses: among them, the Phoenician Astarte, the Sicilian Ibla, the Egyptian Isis, the Anatolian Cybele, the Roman Ceres or, in Greek mythology, Demeter, one of whose many names was Melaina, the Black One, “in a clue to the origin of black Madonnas.”¹⁵ Hence, in her view, cultural hybridity, dynamism, and syncretism (whose corollary is the “mixing [of] pagan and Christian beliefs”¹⁶) are all attributes inextricably linked with the cult of the black Madonna.

The historian also places a strong emphasis on the powerful nature of this

12 See, for instance, the back cover of her seminal volume entitled *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion & Politics in Italy*.

13 Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 3.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 37.

16 Ibid., 51.

feminine icon of the sacred: a close examination of popular, unofficial prayers and peasant rituals (including those aimed at dispelling the evil eye, *malocchio*) reveals that the black Madonna is widely acknowledged as the most effective figure in providing emotional and physical support, as well as in exorcising evils, fiercely chastising offenders, and redressing wrongs.¹⁷ Furthermore, Chiavola Birnbaum observes that in Italy, the sanctuaries of brown and black Madonnas are unmistakably “located in areas known for religious heresy and characterized by politics of equality and justice,”¹⁸ the latter being “the central value that emerges from studying the earth mother;”¹⁹ “for me,” comments the scholar, “the image of black madonnas [...] counters racism and sexism and connotes nurturance of the ‘other’ in contrast to the violence toward the ‘other’ that has historically characterized established religious and political doctrines.”²⁰ Consequently, the *whitening* of black Madonnas (which implies a profound subversion of their nature) is interpreted by her as a calculated attempt on the part of a patriarchal institution such as the Roman Catholic Church to control and subdue their undermining potential, thus “reduc[ing] the Madonna to a great saint embodying virginity and obedience.”²¹

Following in the steps of her friend and mentor, Mary Beth Moser has offered her valuable contribution to casting light on the mystery of black Madonnas. In her *Honoring Darkness. Exploring the Power of Black Madonnas in Italy* (a volume that combines scholarly erudition and personal recollections), she further investigates the origins of the dark colour of sculptures and portraits,²² by highlighting the possible connection between the black Madonna and the bride featured in the *Song of Songs*, who portrays herself as black but beautiful: “nigra sum sed formosa,”²³ a sentence that is also inscribed on the base of the statue of the black Madonna of Tindari (a small village which is part of the municipality of Patti, in Sicily). Quoting the studies of Margaret Starbird, Moser also notices that the dark-skinned Mother may be identified with Mary Magdalene, “the ‘other’ Mary,”²⁴ while her child could be the fruit of her unrecognized union with Jesus

17 Ibid., 139.

18 Ibid., 33.

19 Ibid., 23.

20 Ibid., 12.

21 Ibid., 40. Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum further deepened her analysis in the second part of her volume entitled *Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers* (San Jose: Authors Choice Press, 2001), 115-248.

22 Moser also mentions the already listed *unintentional* reasons often cited for the dark colour (dirt, paint deterioration, and smoke). Moser, *Honoring Darkness*, 4.

23 Ibid., 5. Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum had also hinted at this bond. Chiavola Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas*, 40-41.

24 Moser, *Honoring Darkness*, 6.

Christ. In the Italian peninsula, the archaic cults of the African Goddess Isis, of the black Goddess Artemis of Ephesus, of Demeter, of Cybele (the Great Mother of the Gods), of Hera, of the Goddess Mefiti (“an Italic divinity who dispelled evil spirits”²⁵), and of the indigenous Vitulia (often assimilated to Hera) somehow all merged with the adoration of the black Madonna. Moser also reminds her readers that the Sumerians worshipped the great Goddess Inanna, known for her dark visage, while Hindus have a deep reverence for dark Kali who, like the black Madonna, is both a creator and a destroyer. Besides being the emblem of “the primordial darkness before light,”²⁶ therefore, the colour black is unquestionably linked with majesty and power: as the scholar emphasizes, in fact, “one of the most notable characteristics about Black Madonnas is their power.”²⁷

The large number of *ex-votos* in fulfillment of vows bears witness to the enormous influence exercised by the dark Mother of God when supplicants appeal for her intercession.²⁸ Some of the miracles listed by Moser, however, reflect the Madonna’s “potentially dangerous power,”²⁹ namely her unusual willingness to punish with great force any form of abuse or violation of her sacred person (as when her very blackness was teased and her authority belittled).³⁰ In time, these stories have been altered and some of the most problematic aspects (especially those concerning the divine Mother’s anger) have been strategically erased: as Moser elucidates, “perhaps, like the alteration of the dark color of the images, the elimination of the details of the stories is a kind of an ‘emotional whitening,’ a gradual removal of the Madonna’s ‘full’ range of power, including those we might consider to be negative.”³¹

Finally, like Chiavola Birnbaum, also Moser devotes ample sections of her volume to what may be termed the *hybrid* nature of the black Madonna (“[she] crosses boundaries of time, geography, ethnicity, class, and religion”³²), and to her

25 Ibid., 18.

26 Ibid., 15.

27 Ibid., 3.

28 As Moser underlines in another essay, “the clear message is that these powerful Madonnas can be called upon in the hour of need. No request is beyond her capacity.” Even though many have been stolen or lost, over ten thousand *ex-votos* are displayed in sanctuaries dedicated to black Madonnas in Italy. Mary Beth Moser, “Blood Relics: Menstrual Roots of Miraculous Black Madonnas in Italy,” *Metaformia: A Journal of Menstruation and Culture* (2005), accessed January 2, 2017, <http://www.metaformia.org/articles/blood-relics/>.

29 Moser, *Honoring Darkness*, 84.

30 For a full list, see pp. 80-82. See also Maria Famà’s poem entitled “The Black Madonna of Tindari,” analyzed in the conclusive part of this essay.

31 Ibid., 79.

32 Ibid., 127.

inclusiveness, her extraordinary capacity to upset hierarchies, to bridge the divides, and to blur cultural borders in the name of equality and justice: “the Black Madonna,” concludes Moser, “has traditionally been worshipped by those who were ‘other’ and not of the dominant culture.”³³

Removed from their motherland, ostracized by the dominant society, often unfairly treated, disempowered, and stigmatized, many Italian American immigrants have frequently resorted to the protection of the black Madonna (a mythical traveler through cultures and identities, just like them) to overcome traumas and heal deep wounds. As Italian American writer Maria Terrone explained, when asked about the importance attached to black Madonnas by the Italian ethnic communities across the US, “instead of the Madonna being on a pedestal, this version is real and approachable.”³⁴ Evidence of popular devotion may be gathered by observing, for instance, the cult of the black Madonna of Tindari in the New York metropolitan area, around Manhattan’s East Thirteenth Street. As Joseph Sciorra has pointed out, on September 8, 1905, a group of Sicilian immigrants from Patti (near Messina) celebrated the first festival in honour of the black Madonna in New York. The following year they commissioned a stucco statue inspired by the famous wooden sculpture, as well as establishing the Pattese Committee for the Most Holy Virgin of Tindari (*Comitato Pattese alla Vergine SS. del Tindari*). The statue was soon offered to the church of the Salesian fathers on the Twelfth Street, but it was unexpectedly declined;³⁵ hence, it was stored in a basement until 1913, when a small storefront chapel was created at 447 East Thirteenth Street.³⁶ The chapel remained in existence until the late 1980s; since most of the original community members had passed away, the committee was dissolved, money was donated to the sanctuary in Tindari, and one of the devotees was entrusted with the statue. Interestingly enough, however, in 2004 a younger generation of Italian Americans, including artists (such as B. Amore and Annie Lanzillotto) and scholars (George Guida and Joseph Sciorra, among others), started a new tradition: every September 8, they meet where the storefront chapel used to be,

33 Ibid. Moser observes that marginalized individuals and groups, such as the *femminielli* (transsexuals), are particularly devoted to her. In her 2007 volume, Małgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, another prominent scholar who has devoted time and efforts to the study the black Madonna, defined her as “the great equalizer,” adding that “before her, gender, race, class, and ethnic origin are not debilitating distinctions but a foundation of strength.” Małgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe, Tradition and Transformation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 11.

34 Maria Terrone, e-mail message to author, December 10, 2016.

35 As reported in Sciorra’s article, “the ecclesiastical authorities did not encourage the yearly street festivals.” Joseph Sciorra, “The Black Madonna of East Thirteenth Street.” *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore* 30, no. 1-2 (2004): 16.

36 It could accommodate up to twelve people.

now a gay bar called Phoenix; they chat, drink beer, dance *pizzica*, celebrate the black Madonna, and discuss current political and social issues. In Joseph Sciorra's words, they are "adopting and transforming the religious and cultural legacy of those early twentieth century immigrants in the service of the ongoing journey in search of self, community, and the divine."³⁷

The same spirit informs the work of Alessandra Belloni, dancer, percussionist, performance artist, and author of a folk opera entitled *Il viaggio della Madonna Nera* (the voyage of the black Madonna), completed in 1991. When Luisa Del Giudice interviewed her, in 1997, the artist highlighted the pivotal role the black Madonna had played in her personal awakening, besides underlining the miraculous power of the universal Mother as a communal healer: "the *fascinating* thing about the Black Madonna [is] that... she has the power to heal even people with serious social problems, drug problems, alcoholism."³⁸ In the same interview, Belloni meaningfully described the black Madonna as a "*contemporary*"³⁹ figure, close to her worshippers and perfectly aware of the evils that affect modern society. It is not surprising, therefore, that the memory of the dark Virgin, as symbolically representing the Earth, is entwined with current ecological concerns in the artist's imagination: "the Madonna, the Great Mother Earth [...] who is ecologically dying... [...] We're destroying it."⁴⁰

From performing to visual arts: Gian Bachero is probably one of the most striking Italian American painters who have dealt with the theme of black Madonnas. Interviewed by Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, he focused on the multicultural, hybrid nature of the Dark Mother, almost perceived as a transnational subject; thus, in his view, the blackness of the Madonna of Tindari is "Indian-Brazilian, Ethiopian, Spanish, Gypsy, Southern European, but yet [she] could be of India."⁴¹

37 Joseph Sciorra, "Black Madonna Chapel and Phoenix Bar," accessed January 2, 2017, <http://www.placematters.net/node/1416>. Joseph Sciorra has also curated the travelling exhibition entitled "Evviva la Madonna Nera!: Italian American Devotion to the Black Madonna," promoted by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute. The exhibit, designed by visual artist B. Amore, consists of three triptychs examining the following themes: "La Madonna Nera in Italy and Europe," "La Madonna Nera in the New World," and "La Madonna Nera Rediscovered." For further information: <http://qc.edu/calandra/evviva-la-madonna-nera-italian-american-devotion-black-madonna>.

38 Luisa Del Giudice, ed., *Oral History, Oral Culture, and Italian Americans* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 236.

39 *Ibid.*, 237.

40 *Ibid.*, 236-237. Every year, Alessandra Belloni leads a pilgrimage to the sacred sites of the black Madonna in Southern Italy, as a sign of devotion to her inspirer. http://www.alessandrabelloni.com/voyage_of_the_black_madonna_tour_in_southern_italy/

41 Chiavola Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas*, 42. One of the most noteworthy paintings by Gian Bachero is entitled *Black Madonna of Italy*.

What is more, “she is Third World but mother of all,”⁴² a daring statement that aims at unsettling stereotypical perceptions, at dismantling the very notions of center and periphery, while investing everyday life with a sacred meaning.

As far as literature is concerned, the three volumes of the series entitled *She is Everywhere! An Anthology of Writing in Womanist/ Feminist Spirituality* (published in 2005, 2009, and 2012) certainly deserve to be mentioned. Celebrating the Divine She in all her manifestations (the black Madonna is just *one* of them), these anthologies feature short stories, poems, excerpts of novels, recollections, critical pieces, illustrations and artwork by women artists across the world, including well-known Italian American authors such as Louisa Calio⁴³ and Marguerite Rigoglioso.⁴⁴ Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum is the editor of the first volume and the co-editor of the second; the third anthology was co-edited by Mary Beth Moser⁴⁵. As Chiavola Birnbaum wrote in her *Note on the Style* for *She's Everywhere, Vol. 1*:

In my view we can be considered *seers and seekers* who remember our oldest mother, a black woman of Africa, as well as look forward to a new world formed by her values. Some of us think of ourselves as *midwives* helping give birth to a new time when justice with compassion, equality, and transformation – like the “*she*” in our title – are everywhere.⁴⁶

One of the most poignant and ground-breaking narratives featuring the black Madonna is probably *No Pictures in My Grave: A Spiritual Journey in Sicily* (1992) by Susan Caperna Lloyd, who is also a filmmaker and a photographer. This memoir chronicles the author’s quest for identity (as both an Italian American and a woman), as well as being a captivating travelogue, a hybrid genre in itself that, according to Valentina Seffer, “bridges documentary narrative and personal experience, the encounter with the Other with the exploration of the self.”⁴⁷

42 Ibid.

43 Louisa Calio is a writer, a multimedia performance artist, and the author of two poetry collections: *In the Eye of Balance* (1978), and *Journey to the Heart Waters* (2014). She has also written an autobiographical novel which has not been published yet: *Lucia Means Light*.

44 Marguerite Rigoglioso has published two acclaimed critical studies: *The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece* (2009), and *Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity* (2010).

45 The second co-editor, Mary Saracino, is the author of a novel entitled *The Singing of Swans* (2006), whose controversial main character, Ibla, worshipped the Black Madonna with fervid devotion.

46 Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, ed., *She is Everywhere! An Anthology of Writing in Womanist/ Feminist Spirituality, Vol. 1* (Bloomington, IN: IUUniverse, 2005), xxii.

47 Valentina Seffer, “Identity on the Threshold: the Myth of Persephone in Italian American Women’s Memoir” (PhD diss., The University of Sydney, 2015), 100. Edvige Giunta has described the volume as “a complicated feminist search in which personal story, myth, and history overlap.” Edvige Giunta, “Persephone’s Daughters.” *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 33 (2004): 770.

Caperna Lloyd first travelled to Italy (the land of her forefathers) in 1983, when she was struck by the Easter Procession of the Mysteries (*Misteri*) in Trapani (Sicily). Her religious and personal pilgrimage allowed her to reconnect with her grandmother Carolina Caperna who, as the author notices in a letter addressed to her, placed on the opening page of her travel account, was “a grieving Madonna and long-suffering mother,”⁴⁸ who even resembled “the Pietà”⁴⁹ the moment her husband died in her arms. As the writer soon realized, however, Carolina Caperna, “an immigrant Madonna surrounded by her *portatori*”⁵⁰ (the male family members, in need of her protection⁵¹), was actually a powerful woman, who had bravely left her country in search for better prospects, just like the Madonna during the Easter Procession, actively striving to restore her happiness by looking for her lost son through the streets of Trapani. As Mary Jo Bona has argued, Caperna Lloyd’s numerous pilgrimages to Sicily have enabled her to “revise the mother dolorosa role written into the script of an Italian woman’s life;”⁵² the patriarchal ideal of womanhood embodied by the submissive and obedient Virgin Mary, is therefore replaced with an icon of self-empowerment: the black Madonna, a new model for the writer.

The narrative opens with a chapter entitled *Processione*. Before moving to Trapani to watch the Mysteries, the author witnesses another procession in the nearby city of Marsala, and she is immediately captivated by the Madonna, so different from the passive and mournful figure she was familiar with, due to her Roman Catholic upbringing: “she was dark and angry. She was powerful and struck me as more like Demeter than Mary.”⁵³ In her effort to foster a more woman-focused society, Caperna Lloyd offers a revolutionary interpretation of Christ, identified by her as Persephone: “after all, one of Persephone’s names, in the early Greek language, meant ‘saviour.’”⁵⁴ Once in Trapani, she finds out that, the *processione* is “not really the

48 Susan Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in My Grave: A Spiritual Journey in Sicily* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992), ix. The book is dedicated to the author’s mother, “in memory of Grandmother Carolina.” *Ibid.*, v.

49 *Ibid.*, ix.

50 *Ibid.*, 9. *Portatori* are carriers of platforms bearing the statues of saints during processions.

51 The book’s title actually refers to an insightful episode in Caperna Lloyd’s life. When her grandmother passed away, her father decided to place a picture of himself and his son in the coffin, so that the blessed soul of his departed mother could continue to nurture the men of the family. After feeling left aside and deserted (she was literally *not* in the picture), the writer eventually realized that she could act as her own protector, being an independent and self-sufficient woman. When her time arrives – as she ironically remarks – she hopes to “rise up and be free,” with no one to care for, with no pictures in her grave. *Ibid.*, ix.

52 Mary Jo Bona, *By the Breath of Their Mouths: Narratives of Resistance in Italian America* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 57.

53 Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in My Grave*, 3.

54 *Ibid.*

story of Christ's death. It is about his Mother, Mary:⁵⁵ in the vernacular version of the biblical events, the Madonna seems to hold a central place, forcefully rejecting her traditional subordinate position. Incidentally, it should not be overlooked that in a variant of this chapter, published one year before (in 1991) as a short story, the Madonna of the procession in Trapani is also depicted as "dark, Moorish-looking;"⁵⁶ in truth, only her mantle is black. Mesmerized by the scene before her, Caperna Lloyd longs to take active part in the *processione*, refusing to play the role of the mere spectator. Being a woman, however, she is denied this privilege which, on the other hand, is easily granted to both her husband and son, on account of their gender. Throughout the subsequent chapters of *No Picture in My Grave* the author undertakes a long journey, meaningfully on her own, which takes her to ancient archeological sites (where the Dark Mother was venerated), and to the sanctuary of the Black Madonna of Tindari, where she finally regains her *potenza*, the power she (like many other women) had progressively lost in a male-dominated world:

Women like my grandmother had a primitive strength in their blood. Were they all, at heart, Amazons ... or Cybeles, Demeters, or Black Madonnas? But in a patriarchy and, especially in Carolina's loss of her roots by coming to America, they had forgotten the real depth of their power. [...] Ultimately, with this Madonna and my journey to Sicily, I seemed to look into the uncharted world of my own soul.

I left the Sanctuary and, with the other pilgrims, felt strengthened.⁵⁷

Caperna Lloyd's memoir follows a circular path and it ends where it had begun, with the *processione*. Only this time the author is given the possibility to re-write her own story with a different conclusion: no longer an observer, she miraculously manages to get invited to carry one of the heavy platforms, thus accomplishing the demanding task with precision, power, and grace, just like the other *portatori*. As she proudly states in the very final page of her volume, "I had become the Goddess I had sought. And it seemed right and proper that she had rejoined the world of men."⁵⁸

Multimedia artist Chickie Farella⁵⁹ has acknowledged both Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum and Susan Caperna Lloyd as essential sources of inspiration for her

55 Ibid., 10.

56 Susan Caperna Lloyd, "No Picture in My Grave: A Woman's Journey in Sicily." *Italian Americana* 9, no. 2 (1991): 250. The short story's title places an even stronger emphasis on gender issues: it is a *woman's* journey, not a *spiritual* one.

57 Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in My Grave*, 140-141.

58 Ibid., 188.

59 I take this opportunity to warmly thank Chickie Farella for allowing me to read her manuscript.

work entitled *Ciao Giulia*, a still unpublished manuscript, even though two long excerpts were released in 1999 and in 2011.⁶⁰ In her opinion, the recurring presence of black Madonnas in Italian American literature (especially in the output of women writers) may be explained by noticing the pivotal connection that binds them with authors who grew up in a patriarchal context, namely a history of *darkness*, *abuse*, and *shame*:

the common thread is usually patriarchal abuse, physically and/or mentally during childhood and/or marital relationships. Adding insult to injury these women including myself have been assuming the blame and responsibility FOR this abuse. [...] For example, I get a nasty beating from a boyfriend...I wake up on the floor with him kneeling over me with his hands cupping his crying face and a nose full of snot saying... "Why do you always make me have to beat you?" [...] Eventually, we will get sick and tired of being sick and tired of the blame and shame for the *darkness*. There is a point when female victims who carry and pass MITOCHONDRIAL ENERGY, have a CHEMICAL MEMORY JOG inducing an AWAKENING in us to take ACTION through our INTUITION.⁶¹

In *Ciao Giulia*, the black Madonna (an emblem of resistance, nurturance, and healing) vigorously helps the protagonists to carve their way out of tragedy.

In the first published excerpt, Carmie and her cousins Jackie and Gina, three Sicilian American women from Chicago, decide to leave for a black Madonna pilgrimage in Sicily, organized by a women's group insightfully called Demetra. They are planning to conclude their journey in Comiso, to attend a march against a nuclear missile plant and domestic violence which, on March 8, 1983, is supposed to gather women from all over the world. In Farella's narrative, devotion to the black Madonna is coupled with both the responsibility for *the safeguard of the planet's* ecological equilibrium (given the correspondence between the Dark Mother and the Earth that has already been observed in previous sections of this essay), and the peaceful battle for women's rights and dignity. Quoting a provocative passage of the story, "*women, like all oppressed peoples, like the slaves, like black people today are in revolt. It is a revolt without bloodshed and without death because we are life.*"⁶² Moreover, the pilgrimage enables every protagonist to come to terms with the personal struggle each of them is going through: Carmie is facing cancer, Jackie is grappling with repressed memories of child abuse, Gina is anxious to break free from an overprotective and stifling home environment.

60 The first one is entitled "Ciao Giulia," the second, "Castration or Transformation? (from *Ciao Giulia*)."

61 Chickie Farella, e-mail message to author, December 11, 2016.

62 Chickie Farella, "Ciao Giulia." *Voices in Italian Americana* 10, no. 1 (1999): 150.

In the second published excerpt, Farella delves into the theme of justified anger, another attribute of the black Madonna. Giulia (a background character in the first story) is raped by Antonio, the man chosen by her father and brother for an arranged marriage. The three Sicilian Americans, therefore, chase after the offender, only to find him inside “the oldest Marian sanctuary in all Italy, Santa Maria Adonai, where Christians hid in the 3rd century to escape persecution;”⁶³ it goes without saying that the ancient shrine, located in Brucoli (near Syracuse), is dedicated to the black Madonna. Pointing a knife at the rapist’s penis (as if she intended to castrate him) right in front of the image of the holy Mother, Jackie seems to perform an alternative, cathartic ritual which, far from coming across as ruthless and blasphemous, is endowed with the miraculous power to transform all the participants (hence the title “Castration or Transformation?”): Antonio, repentant of his crimes, begs for forgiveness, while the three girls (who obviously refrain from indulging in the very violence they want to be rid of) feel purified, relieved, and healed. The story ends with a song, a sort of new choral hymn glorifying active womanhood:

Siamo donne We are women
 Siamo tante We are many
 Siamo stufe We’ve had it
 Tutti quanti!
 Tutti quanti!
 And that means all of us.....all of us!⁶⁴

In his 2006 article on Louisa Ermelino’s *The Black Madonna*, Dennis Barone defined the novel as “a transitional step,” leading the author “from male-centered narrative to a female centered one.”⁶⁵ The heroines of the novel set in New York are, in fact, three Italian American women, Teresa, Magdalena, and Antoinette, three Madonnas with a child (or a step-child, in the case of Madgalena) who, in turn, are profoundly devoted to the dark Mother of God (each of them cherishes either a small statue or a sacred image of the black Virgin Mary).

In her volume, Ermelino looks into the most curious and mysterious qualities of the black Madonna which, as Sigrid Ulrike Claasen has underlined, “appear

63 Chickie Farella, “Castration or Transformation? (from *Ciao Giulia*),” in *Reconstructing Italians in Chicago: Thirty Authors in Search of Their Roots and Branches*, eds. Dominic Candeloro, and Fred Gardaphé (Chicago: Italian Cultural Center at Casa Italia, 2011), 202.

64 *Ibid.*, 208.

65 Dennis Barone, “We’ve always Been Different: Louisa Ermelino’s Spring Street Trilogy and Italian American Women’s Writing,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 48, no. 1 (2006): 25. Ermelino’s debut novel was entitled *Joey Dee Gets Wise* (1991); *The Black Madonna* is her second novel.

in the form of paganism, in particular the superstitious belief of the evil eye.”⁶⁶ But it is not just the folkloristic, almost humorous side of the Italian *malocchio* and *fattura* (incantation) that captivates the writer’s imagination (Antoinette, for instance, firmly believes that Teresa, the mother of sickly Nicky, is always on the verge of casting a spell on her son Jumbo, because he is so healthy and big). What the author really wishes to explore is the possibility to employ vernacular religion as a “safety net”⁶⁷ (borrowing the expression from Theodora Patrona), providing the female characters with the necessary tools to fight for justice and equal opportunities. Hence, Zia Guinetta, one of the Italian protagonists of the story who lives in the village of Castelfondo (in Lucania), successfully uses witchcraft mixed with devotional practices (prayers to the black Madonna of Viggiano) to catch a good husband, Zio Carmelo. This singular combination of orthodoxy and paganism⁶⁸ actually saves her from need and humiliations, meaningfully perpetrated by an official representative of the Roman Catholic Church: “Zia Guinetta had been the housekeeper of a local priest who took her in when she was orphaned as a young child. She had cooked his food and cleaned his house and aborted his babies, until the day she saw Zio Carmelo coming home from the fields.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, another authoritative member of the patriarchal institution (a friar) is held responsible for Magdalena’s mother desertion of her family: he had lured the poverty-stricken woman into sin by showing her his selection of French wines, and “a room where sausage and cheese hung on ropes from the ceiling.”⁷⁰ As the story proceeds, young Magdalena becomes Zia Guinetta’s pupil and disciple, besides turning into the most faithful follower of the black Madonna once settled in the US, as the wife of Amadeo (Zia Guinetta’s Italian American nephew⁷¹).

As Theodora Patrona has emphasized, “the final part of *The Black Madonna* foregrounds the beginning of a new era: intermarriage as a social reality and the dismantling of the ethnic ghetto.”⁷² Jumbo, now grown into a huge but simple-heart-

66 Sigrid Ulrike Claasen, “The Black Madonna Figure as a Source of Female Empowerment in the Works of Four Italian-Canadian Authors” (PhD diss., Université de Sherbrooke, 1997): 18.

67 Theodora D. Patrona, “The West in Italy/ Italy in the West: Italian American Women Writers and the Ethnic Heroine,” in *The West in Asia and Asia in the West: Essays on Transnational Interactions*, eds. Elisabetta Marino, and Tanfer Emin Tunç (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2015), 81.

68 The black Madonna commands her to sacrifice a black goat and to wear a sliver of the animal’s thigh-bone around her neck. Louisa Ermelino, *The Black Madonna* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 114.

69 Ibid., 89-90.

70 Ibid., 131-132.

71 Zia Guinetta had actually pushed her nephew into the marriage with the much younger Magdalena to secure her grip on Amadeo’s American money, thus protecting her own interests.

72 Patrona, “The West in Italy/ Italy in the West,” 85.

ed man, falls in love with Judy, a Jewish girl, a despicable *mazzucriste* (a Christ killer) according to Antoinette and Teresa. The two women hope that Magdalena's "dark power"⁷³ will succeed in breaking their newly-formed union; however, she simply replies that she will "pray to the Black Madonna for Jumbo's happiness."⁷⁴ Ermelino here introduces another distinctive quality of the black Madonna, namely her tremendous ability to create bonds, to unblock channels of communication, to build bridges across the community divides. As a result, the narrative ends with the dawning of a new, multicultural society, incarnated in Jumbo and Judy's child, whose name and identity are both meaningful and fluid: Sol, *Solomon*, for his Jewish relatives, Sal, *Salvatore*, for the Italian side of the family.

The black Madonna is also remarkably present in the works of male writers. A long chapter entitled "The Black Madonna" is included in Tony Ardizzone's 1999 much-praised novel: *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*. "Arguably the most radical"⁷⁵ section of the volume, in Mary Jo Bona's opinion, the chapter is narrated in the first person by Anna Girgenti, the daughter of Luigi, one of Papa Santuzzu's seven children who, one by one, had emigrated to "the marvelous new land [that] was called *La Merica*."⁷⁶

Following her mother's death in childbirth (she had delivered a stillborn child and had passed away a few hours later), Anna shares years of misery with her father, until such time as he decides he can no longer care for an adolescent daughter.⁷⁷ Anna is then sent to an orphanage where, after some time, she experiences visions of the black Madonna, for seven consecutive days. This "dark and beautiful woman"⁷⁸ – "her face as dark as a womb"⁷⁹ – appears to her wearing simple clothes ("a plain brown cloak [...] like any common girl"⁸⁰) to announce the beginning of a new order:

There are three orders to time through which the world must pass before its end [...]. These orders of time correspond to the three faces of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. During the first order of time, she said, the world was created and governed by the Father. During the second, it was redeemed by

73 Ermelino, *The Dark Madonna*, 228.

74 Ibid.

75 Bona, *By the Breath of Their Mouths*, 34.

76 Tony Ardizzone, *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu* (New York: Picador, 1999), 8.

77 He nearly kills her when he mistakes her menstrual blood for a sign of deforation.

78 Ibid., 247.

79 Ibid., 255. Only the first time she appeared with her dark, thick lipped, and curly child.

80 Ibid., 251. Only when the priests are watching she shows herself "wearing her blue robe as well as a gold, multipointed crown." Ibid., 254.

the Son. The world was now entering the cusp of its third and final order, to be perfected and ruled by her.⁸¹

In Ardizzone's narrative, therefore, the black Madonna refuses to be viewed simply as the chosen vessel of redemption: conversely, she takes an active role and proclaims herself part of the holy Trinity: "I am all of these things, all at the same time. Jesù and I are twin souls, and one with God the Father."⁸²

As Christina Marrocco has elucidated, however, "for Catholicism, a monotheistic and patriarchal belief system, the idea of a female deity as creator is profane."⁸³ Anna Girenti's words are, therefore, harshly questioned by the church hierarchy in a lengthy and disconcerting passage that allows Ardizzone to explore issues of gender, ethnicity, and class. Anna's only advocate is, not by chance, a young and "dark priest,"⁸⁴ who tries to defend her from the accusations of blasphemy, heresy, hysteria, delirium, and madness. Thus showing all his contempt for the poor, one of the white-haired priests wonders: "Why would the Holy Mother reveal her most sacred personage to *someone like this?*"⁸⁵ Then, another priest passes a sexist remark, aimed at demeaning the Madonna as a woman: "Mary can hardly be thought of as equal to Jesus since she was born a mere woman."⁸⁶ Finally, the skin-colour of the Virgin Mary is ridiculed and despised in a thoroughly racist and disturbing dialogue:

"The girl further claims that the spirit's face was coloured! She herself called it a Black Madonna!"

"A Coloured Madonna?" the second priest said.

"She'd have us believe the Blessed Virgin was coloured?" the third priest said with a laugh. "A Negro?"⁸⁷

When the dark priest challenges them, by recalling the tradition of black Madonnas in Italy, one of the archbishops sarcastically replies: "I met a local priest who made it his business to uncover statues of this so-called black-faced Madonna and have them repainted white"⁸⁸ or destroyed as "false idols."⁸⁹

81 Ibid., 255.

82 Ibid., 256.

83 Christina Marrocco, "The Evil Eye in Italian American Literature: Magic, Religion, Gender, and Rhetoric" (PhD diss., Northern Illinois University, 2011): 199.

84 Ardizzone, *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*, 257.

85 Ibid., 256. The emphasis is mine.

86 Ibid., 258.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid., 259.

89 Ibid.

In Ardizzone's novel, however, the sincere belief of subaltern people prevails, and a sense of justice (often connected with the icon of the black Madonna) is restored. Eventually, the miraculous *Madonna nera* of the orphanage is acknowledged, at least in popular devotion ("Not even the Pope will be able to paint her face white"⁹⁰). As for Anna Girgenti, she takes the vows and moves to Africa, the mythical land of the Dark Mother of all; as she explains towards the end of the chapter, "more than once I saw the Madonna in the face of the beautiful Eritrean people for whom it was my blessing to care."⁹¹

Sicilian American poet Maria Famà has dedicated two poems to the black Madonna of Tindari, both included in her 2013 collection entitled *Mystics in the Family*. Her interest in the Dark Mother of God was ignited when she was a child:

I grew up with images of the black Madonna of Tindari all around me. In fact, I remember one gift my grandfather gave me when I was a little girl. It was a little night light with the image of the black Madonna of Tindari with her statement written at the bottom NIGRA SUM SED FORMOSA. My maternal grandfather, Pietro Guaetta, when visiting his sister, Antonia, in Sicily, picked this gift out especially for me. This little gift fired my imagination. The black Madonna of Tindari was our powerful protector. [...] As an adult, I learned of other black Madonnas in Italy and other countries who are always advocates for the poor and the abused.⁹²

In the poem entitled "The Black Madonna of Tindari," Famà delves into the subject of xenophobia, by offering an example of how the black Madonna "took gentle/ vengeance"⁹³ on a pilgrim who had dared to mock her dark complexion: "I traveled so far to see someone blacker than me!"⁹⁴ The poem continues with the distressing – albeit only temporary – disappearance of the baby in her arms, miraculously transported to a patch of land in the middle of the sea. In the conclusive words of the poem, "The Black Madonna of Tindari taught/ that racism is a sin."⁹⁵

"I am not White," the second poem, stems from Famà's awareness of her deeper roots, of her intimate connection with the peoples of Africa (as a Sicilian), and with the African American experience (as an Italian American). As she observes,

90 Ibid., 269.

91 Ibid.

92 Maria Famà, e-mail message to author, November 10, 2016.

93 Maria Famà, *Mystics in the Family* (New York: Bordighera Press, 2013), 13.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

Growing up in the USA, one is always part of and surrounded by black culture. From the earliest days of the USA, African American culture has been a powerful influence although black people were enslaved and discriminated against even when freed. Their struggles to gain civil rights in the mid-20th century had a significant influence on Americans, most especially artists, scholars, intellectuals, and those people committed to justice. My grandparents and parents, as immigrants, were horrified to observe the injustice against black people here in their adopted land.⁹⁶

Hence, in her poem Famà remembers how “Sicilians left for other lands/ trying to escape poverty, injustice;”⁹⁷ she recollects the time when they were called “coloured,” and were “lynched in the South.”⁹⁸ She also recalls the sad moment when, marginalized and ashamed of themselves, Italian Americans strived to annihilate their ethnic identity and stayed quiet, standing apart “from those darker sisters and brothers.”⁹⁹ In the very last lines, however, the image of the black Madonna of Tindari, apparently forgotten by the newer generations, reappears as an active and powerful instrument of individual and social reform, as a compelling reminder that we all originated from the same dark womb of Mother Earth. Inspired by this potent icon of justice, equality, nurturance, and healing, the poet can light-heartedly celebrate her hybrid self and proudly state: “I am Sicilian/ I am not white.”

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96 Maria Famà, e-mail message to author, November 10, 2016.

97 Famà, *Mystics in the Family*, 14.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

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Črna madona v italijansko-ameriški umetniški imaginaciji

Študija raziskuje podobo črne madone v italijansko-ameriški umetniški in književni produkciji. Navaja pomenljive primere, kako je bila ta sveta ikona univerzalnega materinstva nenehno povezana z artikulacijo strategij opolnomočenja, z nasprotovanjem vsakršnim patriarhalnim omejitvam.

Ključne besede: črna madona, italijanski Američani, patriarhalnost, Drugost