A MULTILAYERED IMAGE OF ITALIAN AMERICANS IN TINA DE ROSA'S 'PAPER FISH'

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Abstract:The purpose of this paper is to analyse how Tina de Rosa's 'Paper Fish' projects 'writing' in the foreground as a successful therapy, meant to enable both the writer and her female protagonists to cope with their circumstances, to avoid being swallowed by, or engulfed altogether in despondency and despair. By the same token, it seems to me that writing's soothing effects reverberate throughout the novel since writing comes across as a genuine 'modus vivendi.'
All the experiences that Tina De Rosa brings to the fore have undoubtedly left an indelible stamp on her impressionistic work.

Keywords: alienation, bildungsroman, cultural heritage, poetic prose

1. Introduction

'*Paper Fish'* foregrounds the concept of *synesthesia* as well as a myriad of emotions and feelings, while action comes second. Apart from this, Tina De Rosa lends her debut novel the uniqueness of an inner world, a profound sense of inhabiting a universe that seems inextricably linked to her suffering and losses as well as to her efforts to fit into mainstream American society.

Furthermore, it strikes me that '*Paper Fish'* makes manifest, beyond any shadow of a doubt, Tina De Rosa's determination to keep alive her Italian cultural heritage, a legacy on behalf of her paternal grandmother, that irreplaceable person whose lively spirit, sharp mind and warm heart guided the writer through the formative years, eventually empowering her to speak for herself.

2. 'Paper Fish', a Lyrical Prose Attempting to Recapture Past Snapshots through Present Memories

Tina De Rosa was born in Chicago. As a child, De Rosa identified primarily with her paternal grandmother, Della, whom she describes as the most influential person in her life. Born in Boscoreale, near Naples, probably in 1888, Della came to the United States when she was about seventeen years old. She died in 1963, when the author was nineteen years old, leaving a void that De Rosa would try to fill through her writing. De Rosa's work thus became a 'home' in which she could take refuge, a site of soothing memories, where even tragedy and ugliness could be incorporated into her life and made the source of magical storytelling.

Set on the West Side of Chicago during the 1940s and 1950s, '*Paper Fish'* is populated not by wise guys or madonnas, but by working–class immigrants whose heroism lies in their quiet, sometimes tragic humanity. In her brilliant telling of the life and ultimate disintegration of three generations in an Italian American family, Tina De Rosa rebuilds this long-lost world with prose that is both breathtaking and profound.

At the centre of the novel is young Carmolina, who is torn between the bonds of the past and the pull of the future–a need for home and a yearning for independence. De Rosa deftly interweaves Carmolina's story with the haunting stories of her family: Old Country

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memories and legends passed on by her devoted grandmother Doria; the courtship tale of her father, a policeman with an artist's soul, and her mother, a lonely waitress; and the painful story of Doriana, her beautiful but silent sister.

While growing up, and as she started writing, De Rosa defined her ethnicity as primarily Italian American. Her paternal grandmother kept alive her *italianità* in the family. Hence, De Rosa was exposed in her daily life to the Italian language and customs, both in her household and in the Little Italy where she grew up.

3. Italian Americans: Entitled to Pursue the American Dream

There are many ironies in Italian history, but none greater perhaps than the phenomenon of Italians leaving Italy so soon after it became a united nation in 1871. The *Risorgimento* (Uprising) originated in the North, and from the beginning it highlighted the differences between the North and the Bourbon-ruled South, the *Mezzogiorno*.

The condition of the southern peasant was perhaps best documented by Booker T. Washington, who remarked after visiting Italy: 'The Negro is not the farthest down. The condition of the coloured farmer in the most backward parts of the Southern States in America, even where he has the least education and the least encouragement, is incomparably better than the condition and opportunities of the agricultural population in Sicily.' A story fabricated by northerners is still told of guffawing northerner soldiers who handed out soap to the southern population, only to see the recipients eat it. (Mangione and Morreale, 1993: xiii – xviii)

Why 80 percent of those Italians who migrated were from the *Mezzogiorno*? To answer this question, we might as well read through the next lines, permeated by southern peasants' melted grief and disillusionment with the NewItalianRepublic and its deceitful unionist dreams: "Wolves have warmed themselves on our fleece and eaten our flesh./We are the generation of sheep/Wolves have sheared us to the bone while we protested only to God./In time of peace we sickened in hospitals or jails/ In time of war we were cannon fodder/We harvested bales of grass, one blade for us, the rest for the wolves./One day a rumor spread – there was a vast and distant land where we could live *meno male*./Some sheep went and returned, transformed, no longer sheep but wolves and they associated with our wolves./'We want to go to that vast and distant country,' we sheep said./'We want to go.'/'There is an ocean to cross,' the wolves said./'We will cross it.'/'And if you are shipwrecked and drowned?'/'It's better to die quickly than suffer a lifetime.'/'There are diseases…'/'No disease can be more horrible than hunger from father to son.'/And the wolves said, 'Sheep, there will be deceivers…'/'You've been deceiving us for centuries.'/'Would you abandon the land of your fathers, your brothers?'/'You who fleece us are not our brothers. The land of our fathers is a slaughterhouse.'/In tatters, in great herds we in pain beyond belief journeyed to the vast and distant land./Some of us did drown./Some of us did die of privation./But for every ten that perished a thousand survived and endured./Better to choke in the ocean than to be strangled by misery./Better to deceive ourselves than be deceived by the wolves./Better to die in our way than to be lower than the beasts."[1]

It is popularly believed that Italy was second only to Germany as a source country for immigrants to the United States after 1820.[2] According to the 2000 U.S. census, 15,723,555 Americans claimed Italian descent. Early areas of Italian concentration were New York, Boston, and Pennsylvania, though the Italian population dispersed widely throughout the country during the 20th century.

[1]Jerre Mangione & Ben Morreale, *La Storia. Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), pp. xix- xx: 'The Song of the Emigrants (*Il Canto Degli Emigranti*)' was first published in New York by Ferdinando Fontana in 1881. Fontana claimed to have found the *Canto* in a German newspaper in1880, and ascribed it to an anonymous author.

[2]John Powell, *Encyclopedia of North American Immigration*, New York: Fact On File, 2005, pp. 156-7

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In addition, we are also offered a glimpse of what adjusting to the American society could entail: "Edward Corsi, arriving at the age of ten with his parents and siblings, was delighted with the hustle and bustle of Manhattan's 'hurrying crowds,' but depressed by the sight of the four 'sordid tenement rooms' in East Harlem that were to be their home. His mother, unable to help contrasting the squalor of their neighbourhood with the serenity and beauty of the Abruzzo countryside, never left the tenement unless it was absolutely necessary. Most of her time was spent sitting at the only outside window in the apartment, staring up at a small patch of sky. The new arrivals were awed by the tall skyscrapers, elevated trains, and enormous bridges, but some of these dark first impressions frightened and dismayed many- especially the women, most of whom were confined to squalid railroad flats. Only the expense of a return journey and the prospect of undergoing the ordeal of steerage a second time prevented them from leaving immediately." (*id.*: 124)

While becoming acquainted with instances of Italian immigrants' life, we can either frown or burst into laughter: "The stories of cultural shock sometimes involved hostile policemen. Julian Miranda learned from his immigrant grandfather that shortly after he had landed in lower Manhattan and managed to get through the gauntlet of 'thieves, crooks, *padroni* and labor contractors,' he was walking down lower Broadway, 'dressed rather well [despite his lack of money] carrying a cane- a real *signore*,' when a policeman, spotting him from across the street, shouted, 'Where did you get that suit, dago?' Nervous after a rough ocean trip, Miranda's grandfather walked across the street and belted him with the cane. 'Grandpa always said he did not understand the word, but he recognized the tone. That is why he left Italy and he did not wish to put up with the same here. He was arrested and a family member was contacted who raised enough money to bribe him out.' " (*id.*: 124-5)

In the same vein, we find out how the myth of American cornucopia melted away upon Italians' arrival and how puzzling the land of promise proved to be to them: "Others, however, were invigorated by New York. Arriving in the city at the age of fifteen, Pascal D'Angelo was startled, then entranced by the spectacle of an elevated train dashing around a curve. 'To my surprise not even one car fell. Nor did the people walking beneath scurry away as it approached.' Minutes later, while riding a trolley, he was distracted by the sight of a father and son moving their mouths in continuous motion 'like cows chewing on cud.' Never having known of chewing gum, he assumed, 'with compassion, that father and son were both afflicted with some nervous disease.' Later, just before he and his immigrant companions reached their destination, he was surprised to note signs at streets with 'Ave., Ave., Ave.,' printed on them. 'How religious a place this must be that expressed its devotion at ever crossing,' he mused, though he could not understand why the word was not followed by 'Maria.' " (*id.*: 125)

Italians in the United States have not been unstudied;[3] no group of immigrants as large and whose origins are relatively recent (four-fifths of the Italian immigrants entered the United States in the twentieth century, particularly during the years 1901 to 1914) could have escaped scrutiny. Yet the study of Italian immigrants and their progeny has only within the last decade or so taken on a systematic and objective form.They had been perceived as a largely intractable group resisting assimilation, or alternatively, as a rapidly assimilating group whose traits (if bothersome) were slowly being eroded as a result of interrelationships with the larger society and as a direct consequence of the beneficent ministrations of American institutions. Of course, these perceptions derived from a complex set of stereotypes which reduced the large Italian American community to an intelligible group identity to which the larger American society could react. Italians were no less immune than other immigrant

[3]Francesco Cordasco, *Italian Americans: Historical and Present Perspectives,* http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=50&sid=85858b60-d18a-42cf-90bf-b5eb18bfe140%40sessionmgr114&hid=106, retrieved December 15, 2017

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groups to stereotyped perceptions. If anything, their large numbers dictated the need for the larger society to perceive Italians in simplistic terms, and the stereotypes were inevitably more harshly and starkly delineated.

Along the same lines, we see how the gap between Italian roots and American horizon grew more substantial each year. To defend such thesis, there is another example of Mangione and Morreale's work, *La Storia. Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*: "One son of immigrant parents who defied tradition by continuing his education at an out-of-town university explained: 'As much as I loved my father and the rest of my family, I had to follow my own bent, even though it meant leaving home and going to another city. In those days it was considered something of a sacrilege for an unmarried son to be leaving his family for any reason. Most of my relatives were shocked, but I had to leave. Apart from wanting a college education, I knew that unless I lived in the American world for a while –that is, the world outside that of my Italian relatives – I might well go through life not really knowing which world I belonged to, feeling like an imposter.' A college education was likely to generate a sense of alienation between the educated offspring and the rest of the family. One young woman who earned a college degree remembered, 'I belonged nowhere. That is the price you pay for growing up in one culture and entering another.' " (*id.*: 226)

The sons and daughters of the first Italian immigrants in the U.S., that is the first Italian American citizens were drifting apart from their parents, sometimes causing too much suffering in a pursuit of asserting their *Americanness* above everything: "The bitterness Americanization could engender is illustrated by the story of an immigrant named Bentolinardo who had worked hard and lived the life of a miser to finance his son's medical education, only to have his son change his name from Bentolinardo to Bentley. When the old man saw his son's gold-lettered shingle for the first time with the name 'Dr. Bentley' on it, he went to pieces. 'He could not read English, but that betrayal he could read.' But then, as the son of another immigrant recalled, 'Like most children we were mindless conformists. More than anything else, we wanted to be regarded as Americans, though we couldn't be sure what they were like. We were constantly worried about making a bad impression on the Americans around us.' " (*id.*: 226-7)

4. Grandmother-Granddaughter Bond, the Path to Forge a True Sense of Belonging

I am inclined to believe that Tina de Rosa's '*Paper Fish'* projects *writing* in the foreground as a successful therapy, meant to enable both the writer and her female protagonists to cope with their circumstances, to avoid being swallowed by, or engulfed altogether in despondency and despair. By the same token, it seems to me that writing's soothing effects reverberate throughout the novel since writing comes across as a genuine *modus vivendi.*

With reference to immigration, it was reasoned that if the field were levelled for all races via assimilation, then only *individual* successes and/or failures would determine an individual's life course. With this intention, a highly charged and deterministic social milieu[4] gave way to an environment supposedly based solely on merit.

[4]Stephen Spencer. *Race and Ethnicity. Culture, Identity and Representation,* New York: Routledge, 2006, p.8: "What is the Other? The simple answer is 'not self'; in other words, an alien subjectivity, a being who exhibits characteristics notably different from our own, whether gender, race, class, custom or behaviour. To a certain extent we are each born into a social system - constantly evolving certainly – but nevertheless a pre-existing moulding influence on our behaviour and outlook and on our understanding of difference. The 'Other' exists as a metaphysical concept rather than as a genuine entity. The Other represents an area of consensus, a way of delineating self, and the shared values of our culture or subculture. We create ideals and typifications and the Other presents us with tests and measures for these ideals. The process of forging an identity at the individual as well as the group level is dependent on interaction with others. So the existence of a group of people–a 'them' rather than an 'us'–can be seen to be important in human society as it affirms qualities and characteristics that a group sees as normal as the rules by which they live."

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Firstly, '*Paper Fish'* dramatizes the author's relationship to her dual heritage. Grandma Doria, whose mind knows 'only Italian', is the wise and benevolent matriarch to whom everyone, including her 'foreign' daughter-in-law Sarah, turns for guidance and comfort. Doria is also the one who tells Carmolina of a distant, mythical Italy, 'the land that got lost across the sea, the land that was hidden on the other side of the world.'

According to Edvige Giunta, 'to fight alienation, De Rosa forges for herself an uncontaminated space, a home where her work becomes possible, where she can put to good use her father's lesson. In a self-conscious manner, De Rosa acknowledges the worker's need to sell her labour; yet she manages to create a space that is, as much as possible, immune from the ill effects of capitalist exploitation. In a quasi-utopian fashion, De Rosa envisions her home as separate from the alienating world of the modern labourer.' (De Rosa, 2003: 126)

The writer's journey towards authorial self-fashioning is a journey that requires negotiation between Italy and America, between the myth of the tightly knit family and the myth of the individual. The emphasis on a self-contained and self-sufficient individual, predominant in mainstream Anglo-American culture, is at odds with the central place of the family in the pre-capitalist, predominantly agrarian culture of late-nineteenth-century Southern Italy. It was this Italian cultural heritage, caught in a time capsule that the immigrants passed on to new generations of Italian Americans.

These new generations were thus torn between the culture of descent, epitomized by the family, and the culture of consent, with its self-sufficient, even ruthless individualism. From this perspective, '*Paper Fish'* develops De Rosa's autobiographical narrative in a fictional text that, while documenting the disappearance of the world of the author's childhood, testifies to the struggle between conflicting cultural values sustained by Italian American women.

Secondly, '*Paper Fish'* represents De Rosa's attempt to 'go home again' and soothe 'the heartache.' An analogy can be drawn between the separation experienced by the immigrant, and the separation from the family that moving into the middle class entails for the working-class person. Like many other working–class writers, De Rosa views the family as a homeland that can be revisited only through writing. The result is a text, whose pieces cohere into a fragmentary narrative reminiscent of the fiction of high modernism. The complex structure aptly portrays–just as it emerges out of–the emotional turmoil that triggered the author's creative process. De Rosa's modernist strategy becomes the means by which she captures her memories and translates them into poetry. Her prose is experimental, highly lyrical.

As Edvige Giunta highlights it, "De Rosa writes poetry that tells stories and creates scenes familiar to the Italian Americans from Chicago. The impressionistic style of '*Paper Fish'* evokes a surreal atmosphere: the writer paints her characters with light, almost unfinished strokes, more concerned with evoking a feeling than completing a portrait. The story of Carmolina BellaCasa, a third-generation Italian American child, unfolds as a series of overlapping layers in which past, present and future interweave in a complex temporal dimension that, disregarding linearity, creates a mythical time. Yet in this mythical time the author inscribes the lives of Carmolina and her family with the scrupulous precision of a realist writer. The eight parts into which the book is divided, including a prelude and an epilogue, fit together like the pieces of a puzzle that keeps undoing itself. De Rosa's pantheistic vision endows everything it comes across with life." (*id.*: 128)

Asked by Gardaphé about the title of her book, De Rosa said that she had chosen it because 'the people in the book were as beautiful and as fragile as a Japanese kite.' De Rosa's exquisite language turns 'broken' English into poetry. '*Paper Fish'* thus confers literary

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dignity upon the speech of those first-generation immigrants who struggled to express themselves in a language that often felt hostile and unconquerable.[5]

'Paper Fish' depicts a world few readers have encountered before in fiction or in the stereotypical film versions of Italian American lives. Chicago's Little Italy constitutes the setting in which Carmolina witnesses the disintegration of her ethnicity. In De Rosa's *bildungsroman,* Carmolina's growth is juxtaposed to the vanishing of the culture that nourishes her. Berrywood Street disappears 'as though it were a picture someone had snapped away': 'The city said the Italian ghetto should go, and before the people could drop their forks next to their plates and say, pardon me, the streets were cleared. The houses of the families with their tongues of rugs sticking out were smashed down, the houses filled with soup pots and quick anger, filled with forks and knives and recipes written in the heads of the women, were struck in their sides with the ball of the wrecking crane and the knives and bedclothes and plaster spilled out.' (*id.*: 120)

The demolition of the Italian ghetto resembles a carnage, and '*Paper Fish'* becomes the means by which the author attempts to rescue the memory of what is inexorably gone. The nostalgia that pervades '*Paper Fish'* never becomes a pathetic longing for the stereotypical tokens of a stultified, one-dimensional Italian American culture. The imaginative and deeply personal story of Carmolina remains rooted in the collective history of Italian immigrants in Chicago. De Rosa's book stands as an elegiac reminiscence drenched with the sounds, colours, and smells of the quotidian life of an Italian American family living in a cold–water flat on the West Side of Chicago in the late 1940s and 1950s.

While the first Italians had arrived in Chicago a century earlier, in the 1850s, from Northern Italy, the largest migration of Southern Italians occurred between 1880 and 1914. The Italian population in Chicago, which never reached the numerical proportions of New York's Italian community, settled in several ethnically diverse *Little Italys* rather than in one large all-Italian neighbourhood.[6]

It is when Carmolina is ostracized for being a 'dago kid' that one recognizes De Rosa's awareness of cultural tensions and feels the full impact of her condemnation of bigotry[7]: "The sound of the skooters hit the street like broken on a plate. Carmolina felt the

[5]Consider what Edward Alsworth Ross wrote in *Century Magazine* in 1914: "Italians rank lowest in adhesion to trade unions, lowest in ability to speak English, lowest in proportion naturalized after ten years' residence, lowest in proportion of children in school, and highest in proportion of children at work. Taking into account the innumerable 'birds of passage' without family or future in this country, it would be safe to say that half, perhaps two thirds of our Italian immigrants are *under* America, not *of* it. Far from being borne along our onward life, they drift round and round in a 'Little Italy' eddy, or lie motionless in some industrial pocket or crevice at the bottom of the national current." Qtd. in *Anti-Italianism. Essays on a Prejudice*, Edited by William J. Connell and Fred Gardaphé, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 109

[6]Salvatore J. LaGumina, 'Prejudice and Discrimination.The Italian American Experience Yesterday and Today,' in William J. Connell and Fred Gardaphe (eds.), *Anti-Italianism. Essays on a Prejudice*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; p. 108: 'It can be averred that historically, virtually every new group that has entered American society has had to endure periods of prejudice and discrimination–usually for two to three generations for most white ethnic groups, while for non-whites it has been an enduring phenomenon. The flow of masses of Italian immigrants began to enter this country in the 1880s, with their numbers peaking in the pre-World War I period and once again in the early 1920s, before it was seriously interrupted by immigration quotas. It resumed after World War II and lasted until the 1970s, when it dwindled to a relative trickle. If we accept the dictionary definition of approximately 30 years before, one generation is succeeded by another, then we can assume that, after making allowance for the latter immigration period, currently Italian Americans are for the most part in the third or fourth generations–surely sufficient time for a waning of discrimination and prejudice.'

[7]*Ibid.*: "It would be helpful to explore and define various terms that are associated with discrimination: bias, bigotry, defamation, discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping. 'Bias' may be defined as having multiple meanings, however, in reference to inter-group relations, 'bias' means 'to have a slant or prejudice in favour or against.' 'Bigotry' involves 'intolerance and prejudice,' while 'defamation' is defined as 'attacking, slandering or injuring by false and malicious statements.' 'Discrimination,' although in and of itself may not necessarily be

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sound through her feet, through her red tennis shoes. Someone touched her on the shoulder; she jumped a little and turned. Three boys stood behind her. They all had blue eyes like ice. […] 'You the dago kid come and dirty up our street?' he said. The smoke from his cigarette made her eyes tear. The apple man glanced at Carmolina out of the side of his eye. Carmolina rubbed at her eyes with her wrist, but the cigarette smoke was too close. She looked up at the light of the streetlamps. Her eyes turned white with street light. They moved into a circle around her. Someone shoved her from behind. She bumped into the fat one. 'You sure look like a dago kid to me,' the one in the blue shirt said." (*id.*: 27)

The very much alive Grandma Doria, for instance, along with her dead but very much living–in-memory husband, Grandpa Dominic, are truly *grand* parents: larger-than-life ancestors whose charisma rules the world in which De Rosa's protagonist, young Carmolina BellaCasa, finds herself growing up. […] But even while the two prepare food for the flesh, the magical Doria is fabricating more crucial nourishment for the imagination, as she tells Carmolina tales of the family's past, 'making the world for her, between her shabby old fingers.' For Grandma, 'was telling Carmolina about Italy, about the land that got lost across the sea, the land that was hidden on the other side of the world. When Grandma said how beautiful Italy was- how it was near blue waters which were always still and how she could watch wooden sailing ships coming so close to her house that one day she jumped on one and sailed away –Carmolina wondered, why did Grandma do that?, but she was glad Grandma did, because otherwise she wouldn't know Grandma, and that would be strange.' (*id.*:15)

The Italy of De Rosa's remarkable *bildungsroman* –'the land that got lost across the sea' – is a land so literally enchanted that it promises always to be 'hidden on the other side of the world,' available only to the powers of imagination that Grandma Doria and her immigrant neighbours and young Carmolina and Tina de Rosa herself ceaselessly turn toward the place, as if they were shipwrecked sailors straining to gaze through a spyglass at a mirage glowing on the horizon. In that primordial country, Carmolina believes, people 'made their lives slowly, measuring out the days like milk or salt,' and Grandma Doria grew to womanhood in a house 'buffed white by the sun' with glasses windows through which 'the glad weather washed.' Doria's father, Pasquale –Carmolina's mythically powerful great-grandfather- was a carpenter who 'hammered and nailed and chiselled the wooden world into place.' Her mother-the Great-Grandma Carmella after whom Carmolina is named –told tales of the 'unborn, the never-seen' as she stirred the soup on her stove. And behind both these ancestral figures 'the black hills' were inhabited by 'spectacular creatures… of dreams and nightmares, squirming out of the people's minds, leaping out of their souls.' (*id.*: 22).

Not surprisingly, Carmolina comes to associate this resonantly distant land with marvellous forebodings and mysterious forbiddings. Grandma Doria tells the child: 'There is a mountain in Italy filled with candles. Some of the candles are tall and white. Some are short and sputter with the blue flame. Each person had his own candle. When he is born, the candle is lit; when the candle goes out, he dies. You can see this mountain, Carmolina, only in your dreams, but God will not let you see your own candle, even in a dream.' (*id.*: 24)

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pejorative given a possible definition as 'distinguishing so as to divide, recognizing differences between, showing partiality,' it is usually used in a derogatory sense when dealing with ethnic groups. 'Prejudice' refers to a 'judgment or opinion formed before facts are made' and accordingly may be favourable; nevertheless, it also is usually used in a biased, unfavourable way. 'Stereotyping' implies 'an unvarying pattern of behaviour when dealing with ethnic groups.' This quick review of terms as they are normally employed in inter-group relations conveys clear attitudes that are demeaning, detrimental, divisive, and disruptive–in a few words, they are derogatory and offensive and indeed can be dangerous. These words are inherently loaded and disruptive catchwords that inflame and abuse by serving to emphasize the harmful and negative. Often offered in verbal contexts, frequently they are acted upon, becoming additionally injurious. Even in the absence of offensive action, these terms have the effect of instilling and reinforcing attitudes in peoples' minds."

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'Paper Fish' is the first novel by an Italian American writer to be set in Chicago's largest Italian working-class neighbourhood known as Taylor Street. De Rosa's style, more impressionistic than realistic, presents working-class portraits of both the Italian American family and the neighbourhood that challenge the stereotypical media portrayals of Italian Americans: "At first glance, '*Paper Fish'*, a novel by Tina De Rosa, does not seem to be a narrative even remotely connected to working-class culture. The powerful and poetic prose, the disjointed narrative structure, its lack of overt politicization of class issues – all invite most educated readers to set the novel on the pedestal of high modernist tradition, which is often seen as antithetical to, if not working-class culture, then certainly to proletarian culture." (Gardaphé, 2004: 75)

In Fred Gardaphé's opinion, "what is truly exciting is that contemporary reviewers are able to see what earlier reviewers were not. Bill Marx, reviewing the novel in the *Boston Globe* (October 17, 1996) tells us that '*Paper Fish'* ": 'is a remarkable memoir of working-class life in Chicago's Little Italy of the 1940s and '50… a slice of life with multicoloured metaphorical layers. The book's disjointed narrative and impressionistic imagery not only undercut familiar sentimental caricatures of immigrants–salt-of-the-earth stereotypes revered by the political left and right- but reject the unholy alliance of realistic description and baby-boomer self-absorption that fuels the current solipsistic rage for confessional fiction and nonfiction. De Rosa realizes that psychological grandstanding leaves no room for beauty or mystery, that style makes the memory.' (Qtd. in Gardaphé, 2004: 75)

A lesson in artistry that De Rosa personally received was from her police officer father, fictionalized as Marco Bellacasa in '*Paper Fish.'* Admitting that writers receive their inheritances unexpectedly, De Rosa has written that 'this man taught his daughters to be an artist… This lesson was nothing that my father said; it was hidden in who he was… His attitude toward work has eventually, slowly become mine.' (De Rosa, 2003:15) Traditionally for Italians, the police officer threatened to take away the authority of the family, imposing laws from outside the bounds of the family home: "Throughout '*Paper Fish'* De Rosa silences the increasingly looming powers of outside authority represented by the police force, the classroom, and the Catholic Church. In doing so, De Rosa lays special claim to the necessity of the family to create and maintain Italian-descended values such as storytelling, family honour, and private justice De Rosa's Little Italy–at least for a time-is self-contained, the spirit of *campanilismo* fully intact and Italian values maintained." (Bona, 2010: 31)

De Rosa highlights the possession of authority of a young woman's identity with help from a female mentor. The uncontested female individual in '*Paper Fish'* is the paternal grandmother, Doria, the matriarch of the Bellacasa family. She is as much the voice of justice (from an Italian worldview) as she is a coercive presence for her daughter-in-law. Grandma Doria is a natural storyteller, and through storytelling, she extends her granddaughter's lineage by connecting her to Neapolitan great-grandparents and to healing memories of the booted country. Such stories save Carmolina emotionally, succoured by her grandmother's allegiance to oral traditions, to stories that explain as they heal.

The novel ends with that image of a disintegrating Little Italy, but Italy will remain inside Carmolina as long as the memory of her grandmother is kept alive.

This experience, the death of place and the inevitable dissolution of an accompanying culture, is recorded by De Rosa, an eyewitness, in a language that she has said was impossible for her ancestors to articulate: 'De Rosa's achievement as a literary artist is the creation of a novel that documents the disintegration of a family and an old Italian neighbourhood, not through realistic narrative, but through an impressionistic and lyrical linguistic meditation. As the community shrinks and trolley tracks disappear, the protagonist, a young Carmolina Bellacasa, grows strong and finds her own image in a mirror that once reflected only her family. This story of life, death, and a young girl's redemption reaches the reader's soul

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through poetic rendering of pictures in a gone world. And even when the working-class world disappears, De Rosa never lets go. The demise of the Italian ghetto becomes a wound that heals through the writing, but remains a scar in the minds of those who remember.' (Gardaphé, 2004: 77)

5. Conclusion

Tina de Rosa's *writing* is imbued with insights into the importance of rescuing one's past and cherishing one's memories.

The writer whose work I have been analysing seems that she has a story worthy of being told. In the same vein, it's worth mentioning the fact that her hyphenated origin is what has particularly propelled her, to a greater or a lesser extent, to gain success in her artistic endeavour.

In essence, by breaking the silence, she has unmistakably struck the balance between the ethnic background and mainstream American society.

Therefore, I strongly believe that Tina De Rosa has proved she is more than able to think outside the box, infusing, therefore, ethnic American literature with fresh perspectives, intriguing points of view, and a masterly performance of English.

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