Transforming Womanhood in Louisa Ermelino’s *The Sisters Mallone*

Rose De Angelis, Marist College

Most Italians thought of themselves, and some still do, in terms of provincial identities. In America, they tended to settle in large Italian colonies, duplicating the customs and traditions of their particular Italian town or village (Mangione and Morreale 130).¹ So it was not unusual for people from one particular town or village to be housed in one tenement or on one block. Family and their village of origin were crucially important. Everything in their lives was based on one or the other, for those were the things that provided safety and security. Home and family were the only respites available to the immigrant working class in America. In Louisa Ermelino’s *The Sisters Mallone*, the neighborhood is an extension of what bell hooks calls “homeplace” and has the same “subversive value” (47). The neighborhood expands the domestic space and underscores the tenuous line between public and private, masculine and feminine. In the novel, the Italian-American neighborhoods of New York’s lower East Side and Hell’s Kitchen serve as “sanctuary and trap” for men and women (Barone 20); however, the neighborhood is more sanctuary for women and trap for men.² As Fred L. Gardaphé writes, Ermelino “explore[s] and explain[s] the places where power lies in Italian-American culture—with the mothers” (110). Her female characters incrementally propel the traditional power of the domestic space into the public arena, while the male characters become more and more bound by womanhood and the neighborhood. In *The Sisters Mallone: Una Storia di Famiglia* (2002), Ermelino maps the male and female interactions that occur inside the home and outside it. Both the homeplace and the neighborhood serve as sites of resistance to the social and cultural imperatives of American society that help the Mallones transform their own identities and those of their male counterparts.
Louisa Ermelino’s third novel *The Sisters Mallone: Una Storia di Famiglia* is a non-linear tale, which spans more than two decades, 1929-1953. In it, Ermelino tells the story of Anona, a first-generation matriarch, who, after the Influenza Epidemic of 1918 decimates her family, finds herself raising three granddaughters alone. Elements of Ermelino’s previous female protagonists appear in the sexually liberated Mallone sisters: Mary, Helen, and Gracie, whose lust for power and independence outside the home has been nurtured in the homeplace by Anona who lives in Hell’s Kitchen, a predominately Irish area, where her now dead husband, whose blue eyes and white skin fooled the Irish who controlled the docks, had settled his family after changing his name from Malloni to Mallone so that he could get a job and support them. Anona remains in the Irish community even after the epidemic claims the life of all the men in her family—and her daughter—so that she can escape the censorious gaze of her Italian compatriots and free herself of their surveillance: The Italians “would have embraced her in her misery and loss. . . . But they also would have judged her and tracked her every move” (Ermelino 143). She enjoys her status as an outsider; it frees her from the constraints and restrictions of the Italian neighborhood; yet she accesses that very same Italian neighborhood when she needs to resolve the problem of Mary’s pregnancy; she dictates to the neighborhood—both neighborhoods—not the other way around. In fact, all of the Mallone women revel in their difference; none is circumscribed by it; and if as bell hooks writes, “houses belonged to women, were their special domain,” then the Mallone women extend that dominion to their neighborhoods, both the Irish and the Italian neighborhoods, into which and from which they travel “as mistresses of their own destinies” (41; Barone 72).

Anona makes food and the kitchen table the focus around which she centers, manages, and controls the three granddaughters she must raise by herself; food and the kitchen table are the hub of family life. Seated at the table—or near it, Anona conducts business and presides over the lives of her granddaughters. Anona creates “a safe place” where the girls have “the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture [their] spirits” (hooks 42). “Anona never stopped telling them that they always had a place to come home to, man or no man. They should never
forget that they could always come right back to her. . . . She’d always be right here, waiting in the woods, like a wolf, like the Mother of Rome” (Ermelino 54). At Anona’s kitchen table, “bread and coffee with hot milk,” a cup of espresso, a glass of anisette, a bottle of whiskey, or “olive paste on bread” fuel the discussions and aid in the resolutions of Mary’s pregnancy, Gracie’s husband, and Doreen’s kidnapping (Ermelino 68, 119); and it is as timeless as the neighborhood. Time stopped there, and Anona and her granddaughters were as they always were; and in that timelessness, they could resolve seemingly any problem: “It would all work out in the end. They would make sure of it” (Ermelino 101). Anona’s table is the site of learned resistance, a “community of resistance,” for the Mallone sisters return there to refuel and regroup, to renew and recover themselves, so that they can get what they want, when they want it, and from whom they want it (hooks 47).

The novel begins in medias res—with Frankie Merelli’s wake, where a funeral is more spectacle than solemn occasion, more send-off than memorial, at least for the Mallones. Frankie is waked on Sullivan Street through the neighborhood in which he was born, raised, and lived with Gracie. Here, the women of the neighborhood “form the book’s Greek chorus and serve as the community’s conscience” (Gardaphé 123). While “sensitive in the face of someone else’s pain,” feeling compassion for the young widow, the neighborhood women are relieved that “the malocchio had found a place to rest away from them and theirs” (Ermelino 12). Frankie, the husband of the most traditional of the three sisters, Gracie, has met an untimely end, one which both Helen and Mary agree he richly deserved, and the community gathers to pay its respects. The Mallone women break with tradition and do not walk to the funeral home; rather they arrive from their own Irish neighborhood, a neighborhood that has given them the opportunity to expand upon the freedoms that Anona has granted them and cultivated in the homeplace.
Anona acts on her potential since she is free of male surveillance at home and in the neighborhood. She is the author of her own story; no one writes it for her, and she nurtures that female sovereignty in all three granddaughters. Anona challenges the cultural standards of the way women are supposed to behave by asserting her power, physically if necessary—like when she waited until her husband had fallen asleep and “took the broom handle . . . Pow! Right on the head,” retribution for having raised his hands to her (Ermelino 54). Her rebellion inside and outside the home, such as frequenting Hanley’s Bar, becomes a bedtime story and a cautionary tale for her granddaughters and sets the precedent for their private and public disregard of male authority. Mary and Helen build upon Anona’s example and cross the traditional boundaries of house and neighborhood, suggesting flexible and refashionable boundaries. Even Gracie, who is the most traditional of the three, never feels intimidated by her husband or restricted by the cultural mandates of her home and Italian neighborhood, transitioning among her roles as sister, wife, and mother without the usual constraints and concomitant guilt.

The Mallone sisters represent the more radical version of female empowerment. Anona and her three granddaughters reflect a vision of female identity in an America free of the cultural constraints of the Old World notions of home, family, and neighborhood. These protagonists redraft the images of capo famiglia, mater dolorsa, and the feminine ideal, literally and figuratively. Anona becomes the capo famiglia—de jure and de facto—even though Mary and Gracie have husbands who would have traditionally served in that capacity. Both Frankie and Nick defer to Anona who “enact[s] typical masculine behavior,” what Fred Gardaphé calls “performing masculinity” (125). When Gracie returns to the homeplace, suspecting Frankie of cheating, Anona’s response is to “cut off his cazzo,” to castrate him, to “unman” him literally, and she refuses to let him in, saying, “‘You get outta here. . . . Go away. And don’t come
back,’” when he comes to get his wife and son (Ermelino 40, 91). Anona has established her power in the homeplace and outside it. When the Irish neighbors gossip, she “sneered at their faces” and “would close and bolt the door” if they tried to invite themselves in (Ermelino 80). Moreover, even though Mary’s husband Nick Andersen, a one-time gangster, saves a young Helen from Social Services and them from poverty, Anona “never give[s him] a fair shake”; she insists that they “can take care of [themselves]” and never admits that Nick has been good to her and her granddaughters (Ermelino 221). Anona relies on and values family loyalty and her own agency, and, of course, that of St. Rita, “the plaster saint she had carried with her from Bocca al Lupo” (Ermelino 57).

Like many first-generation Italian immigrants, Anona is a Christian-pagan, believing that religious figures are agents of counsel, vehicles for healing and punishing; Anona believes that the malocchio (the evil eye) can inflict harm and that her prayers to St. Rita can entice the saint to work on her behalf against the evil eye—even if it means doing harm. Gracie asks her, ‘‘How can you ask a saint to do [terrible things]?’’ (Ermelino 67). Anona answers Gracie’s rational question with part mysticism and part pragmatism: ‘‘Why not? If it’s your saint, and you ask her, she should do it, no? If you’re good to the saint and you want a little favor, you should get it, no?’’ (Ermelino 67). The relationship with the saint is a personal one; and Anona never expects something for nothing, believing that giving thanks must come in some form of retribution—ergo, her devotional candles and St. Rita’s “robes of silk and a cape trimmed in mink” (Ermelino 80). Anona’s religious encounters come across as personal consultations more than spiritual invocations, business transactions more than deferential supplications. Therefore, it is not surprising that when she thinks herself abandoned by St. Rita, her pleas unanswered, she responds with the vehemence of one betrayed by a physical presence not a spiritual one. When
Helen is taken away, Anona tells St. Rita: “‘Send her back . . . or things will never be the same between us’” (Ermelino 65).

The mixing of contraries continues when Old World concerns encounter New World dilemmas such as Mary’s pregnancy and Frankie’s philandering. For Anona and her granddaughters, the neighborhood serves as a signifier of difference between the Italian and the Irish. Hell’s Kitchen had provided Anona with the “pleasure of a drink at Hanley’s at the end of the day,” “the satisfaction of having the cleanest house,” the possibility of raising “her girls to think for themselves,” and freedom from the critical eye of her own people (Ermelino 143). However, when Mary finds herself pregnant after Nick’s disappearance, Anona returns to the Italian neighborhood on Mulberry Street to secure the honor of her family, procuring a husband for Mary (she offers Signora Ciarello, Pasquale’s aunt, a monetary dowry) and a name for her grandson. When Gracie asks her how she is going to help Mary, Anona answers, “‘We’re Italians. . . . [W]e take care of each other’” (Ermelino 155). As Donald Tricarico writes, “[N]eighborhood families effected a solidarity based on the respect exchanged on the occasion of life-crisis. . . . The ethnic neighborhood and its communal familism furnished a supportive milieu,” which is evident in Anona’s success in solving Mary’s problem (321-322). Anona blurs the boundaries between the two neighborhoods, extends the power she wields in the homeplace to the outside community, and models behavior for her granddaughters to follow. She makes both neighborhoods her own; she owns them; they do not own her.

Anona performs the same modeling, utilizing an “offensive strategy,” when advising the girls about what to do to keep a man in check (Gardaphé 127). “Anona would tell [them] over and over. . . . ‘You gotta make them know what they can do and what they can’t. You gotta let them know right from the start’” (Ermelino 54-44). She is not taken aback by Frankie’s
philandering. Her opinion of Frankie was set when Gracie first brought him home to meet her family: “I smell a rat... Too good-looking... like a girl. No good... and how’d he pay for that suit? He don’t even have a job.... And I bet he’s jealous, right? ... The sure signs, cara mia, of a cheater” (Ermelino 22-23). It is not surprising then that she suggests castration when Gracie suspects Frankie of cheating, provides the safe house for Frankie’s paramour Doreen after Helen and Mary kidnap her, and turns a deaf ear to the girls’ plans to deal permanently with Frankie’s philandering, saying “I don’t wanna know. And keep it down because I don’t wanna hear neither,” only after answering Mary’s question about whether Frankie “deserves whatever he gets,” with a definitive and emphatic “Certo!” (Ermelino 250-251). The pictorial motto of the three wise monkeys—see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil—rules Anona’s kitchen and her neighborhood. Anona feigns ignorance of what goes on at her kitchen table, as the girls cook up their plan to deal with Frankie and use the skills they have learned from living in their Irish neighborhood and their Italian homeplace to execute it as retribution for his betrayal of their sister. Since Frankie’s demise happens on the job, Gracie, like Helen, will get an insurance settlement that will enable her to live independently in a neighborhood of her own choosing where she can author her own story. With no husband and financial independence, Gracie can finally see if “[t]here was more out there, ... more than she [had been] getting” (Ermelino 185).

The last chapter of the novel includes scenes at two kitchen tables, one at Gracie’s and the final one at Anona’s. At Frankie’s funeral mass, his friend Dibby gives Gracie a key he had found in Frankie’s pocket; the key, Gracie later discovers with the help of Vincent Violotti, a neighborhood lawyer, opens a safe deposit box. After removing the contents of the box, Gracie returns to her home with a purse full of money, the ill-gotten riches Frankie had finagled from his job on the docks and had stashed away. At home, she finds her sisters with more money for
her; she empties the bag in a large pile on the table, and together, sipping cups of espresso with sambuca, the sisters contemplate what Gracie is going to do next. But Gracie rules this homeplace, and while her first instinct is to stay in the neighborhood where she would be under the scrutiny of her mother-in-law and the other Italian women, she catches herself and follows Anona’s example. She decides to move to Fourth Street outside the box “she had locked herself into” after marrying Frankie “where no one would have known where she came from” (Ermelino 128-129). Just as she predicted, “Miracles happened every day” (Ermelino 129).

The novel ends at Anona’s kitchen table, her homeplace, where Mary and Helen contemplate a trip to Paris, taking Anona with them, after Nick tells them that the cops and the mob would like to question the “two little guys, the greaser brothers” who were at the scene just before Frankie fell into the water (Ermelino 258). Under the watchful eye of St. Rita, the Mallone women recover, regroup, and renew themselves as they move on to another neighborhood, albeit far away; the sense of belonging travels with the women wherever they go. For the Mallone women, the neighborhood, any neighborhood, is an extension of their homeplace, and the homeplace is where women are sovereign. In *The Sisters Mallone*, the women incrementally establish a sense of self for themselves as they acquire more agency to travel in and out of the neighborhood, making homeplace and neighborhood the site of resistance and consequently transforming womanhood.
Endnotes

1 This paper is part of a longer article on the novels of Louisa Ermelino that was published in Italian Americana 30.2 (2012).

2 See Dennis Barone’s article for more commentary on the way male characters seem constricted by the neighborhood in Ermelino’s novels. In discussing Ermelino and Italian-American women’s writing, Barone looks at the neighborhood as a boundary to cross; those characters who do so are able to reconstruct themselves in a way that gives them more agency.

3 Hell’s Kitchen, located between 34th and 59th Streets, from 8th Avenue to the Hudson River, was once one of the most notorious areas in New York City. First settled by Irish and Germans, the neighborhood housed these and other immigrant populations in rows of tenements among factories, warehouses, slaughterhouses, and the docks. Today, the area is the site of ongoing development and an “up and coming district of the city” with “restaurants and bars on 9th Avenue [giving] the locale a similar vibe to the [more affluent neighborhoods in] the East Village and the Upper West Side.” In recent years, there has been a push to rename the area Clinton to distance itself from the stigma of its past, but residents and New Yorkers still refer to it as Hell’s Kitchen (Smith).

4 As Fred Gardaphé notes, St. Rita’s “domain of responsibility embraces . . . difficult marriages, . . . impossible causes, . . . parenthood, . . . [and] widows,” all appropriate venues for the Mallone women (123). What is interesting about the origins of the statue—the fictional Bocca al Lupo—is that Ermelino is playing with the Italian phrase in bocca al lupo, which is a way to wish someone “good luck” or more idiomatically to “break a leg.” Therefore, both St. Rita and Anona originate from a place of good luck.
Works Cited

Barone, Dennis. “‘We’ve Always Been Different’: Louisa Ermelino’s Spring Street Trilogy and Italian American Women’s Writing.” *Critique* 48.1 (Fall 2006): 19-30.


