A Portrait of the Artist as a Woman on the Threshold: Patterns of Liminality and Communitas in Giovanna Capone's In My Neighborhood

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ABSTRACT: This contribution carries out a spatial analysis of the short stories and poems collected in Giovanna Capone's *In My Neighborhood* (2014), with a twofold aim: exploring the significance of physical and metaphorical liminalities in the development of Capone's poetics and, on a more theoretical level, outlining an alternative paradigm, based on the concepts of liminality and *communitas*, to read Capone's poetry, as well as other contemporary Italian-American literary texts. I identify four sites of liminality in Capone's work and delve into their relationship with the narrative voice and the role they play in its evolution. This essay reflects on Giovanna Capone's Bildung and her identity as a queer Italian-American author by re-reading the four spaces described in In *My Neighborhood* through the lens of Victor Turner's theory of liminality and Roberto Esposito's notion of communitas. Esposito's development of the concept allows for an alternative interpretation of the community of Italian American queer subjectivities created by Capone in the Southwest. Finally, the connection of such community with Gloria Anzaldúa's formulation of Borderland and '*mestiza* consciousness' is highlighted as a theoretical counternarrative to the identification of the ethnic queer self as a member of a community defined by borders.

KEY WORDS: Liminality; Communitas; Italian American; Turner; Esposito

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In every coming-of-age story, a protagonist struggles to become a truer, more mature version of their self. In this intense process, something precious must be left behind, and what lies ahead is frightening, more often than not; in between, there are ontological questions, the urgency of self-expression, and a throbbing potential. Published in 2014, *In My Neighborhood* comprises 47 poems and two short stories, and it reads as a coming-of-age account of the poet/narrator's quest for personal and political freedom. As Giovanna Capone[1] herself acknowledges in the "Preface" to her book, this collection charts a journey: the journey of the transition from an existential state to another, a map of the thresholds that the protagonist crosses to leave her home, to finally find it again. This contribution embarks on a spatial analysis of the material and symbolical journey that both the poems and the short stories collected in Capone's book trace, with a twofold aim: exploring the significance of physical and metaphorical liminalities in the development of Capone's poetics and, on a more theoretical level, outlining an alternative paradigm, based on the concepts of liminality and *communitas*, to read Capone's work, as well as other contemporary Italian American literary texts.

This essay reflects on Giovanna Capone's *Bildung* and her identity as a queer Italian American author, by re-reading the four spaces that the narrative voice inhabits in *In My Neighborhood* through the lens of Victor W. Turner's theory of liminality and Roberto Esposito's notion of *communitas*. While the idea of liminality originally introduced by Turned is instrumental to analyze transitional states in the narrator's evolution, Esposito's more recent development of the concept of *communitas* allows for an alternative interpretation of the reasons behind the creation of a community of Italian American queer subjectivities. Finally, I investigate the connection of such community with Gloria Anzaldúa's formulation of Borderland and '*mestiza* consciousness' as a potential theoretical counternarrative to the identification of the ethnic queer self as a member of a community defined by borders.

Since the site in which one's *Bildung* takes place is fundamental in shaping the individual self-perception, this is all the more reason to explore and complicate the relationship between the Italianness of Capone's poetic *persona* and her geographical displacement within the US. In fact, in the author's profile section, Capone claims that, although she has been living in California for over twenty years, "she will always be a New York Italian" (*In My Neighborhood*, no page number). Despite her deep connection with New York, in her poem "Vincenzo Salvatore, My Father," her fictional and still closeted self relocates to Texas, in order to join the woman she loves. In the text, Texas therefore represents a border that, when crossed, will mark the protagonist's admission to the adult world, and possibly a new identity. Conversely, her parents

[1] I would like to express my gratitude to Giovanna Capone, whom I had the opportunity to interview before writing this essay, and to Prof. Laura Ruberto, who introduced us. My conversations with Giovanna illuminate my perspective on her work, and have been a source of reflection while working on this essay.

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seem to consider the faraway State as a wilderness, where their estranged daughter will inevitably discard her ethnic identity and become "Other." Eventually, the protagonist, like Capone herself, relocates to California—a third setting where her identity will be once again renegotiated. Texas first, and California afterward, are proffered in Capone's writing as boundaries that separate her from her family, and virtually estrange her from her ethnic cultural background. Instead, I will explore the Southwest as a potential channel for revealing and consolidating the bond between Giovanna Capone's literary *persona* and her family, as well as a space from which she reclaims her Italian belonging with renewed (political) awareness.

LIMINALITY AND *COMMUNITAS* AS INTERPRETIVE MODELS

In this section, I lay out a theoretical path towards the conceptualization of liminality as both an existential condition for Capone (and, possibly, other Italian American writers) and a framework to interpret the evolution of the narrative self in their literary works. I will first explore the concepts of liminality and *communitas* as initially conceptualized by Victor W. Turner, which suggest a reading of Capone's poetic *persona* as an in-between identity who is on a quest to join a *communitas* of kindred individuals. I will subsequently delve into Roberto Esposito's development of the notion of *communitas*, which provides the framework to envisage the specific features of such community, based on parameters redefining the common space in innovative and political terms. Thirdly, I will transpose Esposito's philosophical and political concern to a more specifically literary context, through Anzandúa's theorization of the Borderlands and the new '*mestiza* consciousness,' as a potential literary declination of a borderless 'common,' in which hybridity is not only tolerated but structural. Such existential disposition will be proffered as a potential theoretical endpoint, where the narrator's artistic inclination, her queerness, and her ethnicity are finally reconciled, also thanks to the reconfiguration of a fraught mother-daughter bond.

Since its anthropological inception, the concept of liminality has been employed by literary criticism to explore the symbolic value of transitional spaces in cultural narratives—especially after its liberation from its initial straight-jackets (Thomassen 75); in this perspective, interpreting places of transition in Capone's work through the framework of liminality can illuminate the role they play in the *Bildung* of Capone's fictional voice. Drawing on Arnold Van Gennep's theory of liminality in small-scale societies as a transitional space marking a rite of passage, at the end of the 1960s, the Scottish anthropologist Victor W. Turner extended the concept to large-scale societies, to investigate the transformative implications of liminality on individuals. In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), Turner distinguishes liminality it in two alternative types: "the liminality that characterizes *rituals of status elevation,* in which the ritual subject or novice is being conveyed irreversibly from a lower to a higher position in an institutionalized system of such positions" (167), and a liminality characterizing *rituals of state reversal*, in which subaltern individuals exercise authority

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over their superiors, as in Carnival celebrations. The first type of liminality is foregrounded frequently in Giovanna Capone's work, as it is associated to life crises, existential transitions and rituals of induction: from this angle, Turner's analysis liminal identities undergoing rites of passage will shed light on Capone's poetic *persona* and her physical/metaphorical journey.

Together with the notion of *communitas*, liminality represents an element of what Turner terms 'anti-structure,' namely the ritual, the ideological, and spatial counterpoint to the structure, or the standing social order as we know it. Turner attributes these elements to a cathartic power that is generated pin the interstices of the dominant culture by calling into question the lack of rationale underlying its rules. In this sense, the *communitas* is the alliance of individuals who are "not segmentalized into roles and statuses" (132), who thus relate to each other in instinctually empathic, non-artificial ways. Furthermore, two of the features that, for Turner, characterize the liminal individuals are their status as *tabula rasa*, epitomized in the lack of names and an "absence of marked sexual polarity" (104). Turner saw the nature of this spontaneous community as quintessentially temporary, underlining that it would soon develop a structure itself.

Turner's concept of *communitas* is further complicated by looking at its influential formulation in Roberto Esposito's *Communitas, the Origin and Destiny of a Community* (1998). Esposito understands the reasons that bring and keep human beings together in Hobbesian terms: in his view, communities are formed by the need to find shelter and escape the violence that human beings perpetrate against each other. Tracing the origins of the term *communitas* to its Latin roots, Esposito counter-theorizes the conventional notion of community as a group of persons united by their commonalities, who are willing to *have* something together (namely, property) and thus to enrich their own individual existence. In fact, for Esposito each subject enters the community carrying a gift (*munus*), which constitutes an obligation towards each other, in that every gift implies the necessity to be returned:

> the *munus* that the *communitas* shares isn't a property or a possession *[appartenenza]*. It isn't having, but on the contrary, is a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given, and that therefore will establish a lack. The subjects of community are united by an "obligation," in the sense that we say "I owe *you* something," but not "you owe *me* something." This is what makes them not less than the masters of themselves, and that more precisely expropriates them of their initial property (in part or completely), of the most proper property, namely, their very subjectivity. (6-7)

As well as Turner's, Esposito's community hosts human beings who are in a liminal and thus precarious condition, and whose boundaries are not marked. Therefore, these undefined individuals do not seek the membership of a community in order to finalize the making of their subjectivity; their community is rather "a spasm in the continuity of the subject" (Esposito, *Communitas* 7). In Esposito's *communitas*, the members are hence constantly exposed to Other indefinite identities, in a persistent contact which offers possibilities, yet at the same time is perceived as dangerous. These liminal beings, united by their shared incertitude, have to negotiate their

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existence in a group that is brought and kept together by trauma, at once individual and collective.

With Turner, we have seen individuals who share an existential condition and attempt to create alternative modes of communal life in a temporary, in-between site. With Esposito, instead, we see these individuals come together with a lack (of identity, of security) and a gift (their incertitude and trauma, and the vulnerability of trying to be with each other). However, Esposito also identifies a negative counterpart to his *communitas*, which he calls *immunitas*: the necessity of the *communitas*, as a response to the danger of being together, to protect (in Esposito's biopolitical semantics, to immunize) itself from the 'contagion' that the Other (outside and within) represents. This perspective on a community seems to contain in itself the potential seeds of its own destruction, identifiable in the contradiction between the inclusive *v.* discriminating aspects of the *communitas*—although it must be noted that Esposito has more recently outlined a proposal for *affirmative biopolitics*, which ought to be actualized "by breaking the vise grip between public and private that threatens to crush the common, by seeking instead to expand the space of the common" ("Community, Immunity, Biopolitics" 89). Esposito's plea for the constitution of an area where existential and emotional boundaries are blurred seems to retrospectively resonate with Anzaldúa's description of the Borderlands in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) as a physical and symbolical space where "where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" ("Preface", no page number). Such area is physically associated by Anzaldúa with the U.S. Southwest, but the notion is expanded by her to address "wherever two or more cultures edge each other" ("Preface", no page number), originating what Anzaldúa famously terms as the 'new *mestiza* consciousness,' namely "*una conciencia de mujer*" (77), namely a consciousness overcoming the inner clash between two cultures "by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguities" (79). The tensions initially highlighted by Esposito are consequently accommodated into a communal mode of being which is configured as a further threshold, defined by existential instability and in which the friction related to issues of self-identification in terms of ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender is seen as productive.

A similar approach to investigate complex contact zones (Pratt 1991) of this kind has already been advanced in Italian American Studies, in recent times: the same type of friction seems to be implicitly underpinning Laura Ruberto's recent proposal of the concept of 'edges' (Ruberto 119). A place of contradiction and cultural wealth at once, the *communitas* foregrounded in Capone's work epitomizes the ethnic subject's discomfort, also caused, in Esposito's terms, by the danger of being jettisoned by one, or more, of their original communities; yet, it is in such *communitas* and at its edges that a tremendous potential for transformation is generated, and its "tolerance for ambiguity" is catalyzed in literary form.

The concept of *communitas* I have outlined bears particular relevance if associated with Giovanna Capone's poetry and short stories, given the strong political connotation that it carries. In fact, Capone dedicates *In My Neighborhood* to both her parents and "the brave radicals who came before me and those who will come after

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me" (VI), thus condensing in a single space of articulation her ethnic belonging, her quest for individual self-direction, and her political beliefs. Her dedication suggests that, despite the collision between two cultural traditions that her hyphenated identity implies, some sort of reconciliation is possible between the two defining cultures, also thanks to an explicit affiliation in political terms. In addition to this interweaving of ethnic heritage and political positioning, Capone transposes her queerness in her visual and literary expression: not only does she explore a diverse array of literary genres and artistic media (poetry, short fiction, memoir, filmmaking, painting[2]), but in the preface to her book she hopes that her work will illuminate her readership's sense of identity, helping them connect with and understand their own cultures and people. I contend that the different sites of liminality and the idea of 'neighborhood' that lies at the core of Capone's work are to be interpreted as a psychological threshold, in which are condensed at once her Italian heritage, her identity as a queer woman, and her political engagement in a fluid, dynamic setting fostering personal evolution. Additionally, the 'neighborhood' is conceptualized as the elective site of a '*communitas* on the threshold,' which does not require immunization because of its permeable borders and its inhabitants' hybrid consciousness. In the following pages, the condition of liminality and the formation of community will be investigated through Turner's, Esposito's and Anzaldúa operational categories, as related to the concept of space(s) as milestones in the search for ethnic, political and sexual identity in Capone's work; their function will be explored in its ambivalent and painful aspects, as well as in its potentially transformative ones.

LIMINAL SPACE #1: THE GREYHOUND BUS

The mobility of Capone's homodiegetic voice retraces her journey and stands as quite atypical in Italian American literary production. The narration develops alongside the protagonist's evolution, and is equally shaped by her experiences and the landscapes she explores: from the typically urban East Coast and the New York cityscape to the Californian West, passing through Texas. While the first two settings are depicted in clearly defined ways (New York, with its enclosed, crammed spaces and California, with its somewhat wilder sceneries), Texas is not portrayed in any way in *In My Neighborhood*.[3] Two poems—"Vincenzo Salvatore, My Father" and "At 23, I took a Greyhound Bus"—as well as the short story, "Greyhound Bus," deal with the protagonist's journey to Texas: yet, neither are set there. All the reader knows is that the poetic self decides, against her parents' will, to relocate to Texas to rejoin the girl

[2] Besides *In My Neighborhood*, Capone has in fact published several short stories and poems, and her play *Her Kiss* was performed in San Francisco. Moreover, she is currently writing her first memoir and is working on two documentaries, respectively on the Oakland Colombo Club and female-focused spaces. She is also the co-editor of *Hey Paesan! Writing by Lesbians & Gay Men of Italian Descent*, and *Dispatches from Lesbian America*, an anthology by lesbian writers.

[3] The only literary work that Capone sets in Texas is the short story "Playing With Fire", published in Maria Mazziotti Gillan's *Paterson Literary Review* in 2013.

she secretly loves. The Greyhound bus that takes the poetic/narrative "I" to Texas is the first space that I am going to examine, in its significance as a narrative and symbolical liminal space.

"At 23 I took a Greyhound bus/ Leaving New York and the family I was raised in" (55): Capone's poem, which is a retrospective look at that episode, immediately announces one of the key features of each rite of passage, which is separation (from a familiar space one calls "home"). In fact, Turner posits that the state of liminality implies a withdrawal from the structure of society and a kind of physical isolation that allows for the redefinition of one's identity and societal role. This state "is often accompanied by a parallel passage in space, a geographical movement from one place to another" (*From Ritual to Theatre* 17). The bus the unnamed protagonist boards is hence both a moving space transitioning her from one life stage to another, and a symbolic site of in-betweenness that offers her an occasion to empty herself of her previous individuality—on the bus she is just an individual temporarily encapsulated in the suspension of movement, who is leaving behind her known *communitas*. Significantly, Capone's poetic voice has no name: by losing her nominal connection with her family, she has an opportunity to substantiate her "I" with new semantic resolution.

Texas, on the other hand, is represented as yet another ambivalent threshold: both a doorway to freedom and a point of non-return that her family begs her not to cross. We learn about the reaction to her decision to leave her original *communitas* for Texas both from the poems and from the short story. In "At 23, I took a Greyhound Bus," Capone offers an intense survey of the true and imagined reactions of her family about her departure, and an explanation of the reasons behind her decision. In the poem, she writes, "I picture me / at 23 / parting from the traditions I was raised by. / *Che Vergogna! Malafemmina!*", and also: "Acts of Contrition / are powerful ammunition / against a young gay child / trying to stay alive" (53-54). Therefore, leaving her original status and community to reach a different state where she can come out and explore the full range of her emotions and sexuality is for the poetic voice a matter of life or death; nonetheless, she painfully acknowledges the toll she has to pay in losing her family ties and ethnic belonging, as well as the guilt she feels in leaving without coming out to her parents. Within the breadth of psycho-analysis, Mary Jo Bona has described the consequences that Italian American lesbians have to face when they act upon their desires as a "symbolic killing" (Bona 165-166). In an Espositian perspective, such symbolic killing can be read as an act of immunization that the Italian American community performs to protect itself from the contagion of the deviant "Other"; yet, it is this painful death which opens a space for rebirth in the poet's future. The journey on the Greyhound bus, in this sense, seems to be a moveable setting, staging at once the narrator/poet's former self burial and her regeneration.

More information on the painful departure is provided in "The Greyhound Bus." When the protagonist informs her family about her decision to leave, her mother's reaction is one of outright rejection. The protagonist has to face her mother's screams, her almost physical aggression, and her bitter accusation: "You only care about yourself. You think you're better than the rest of us" (130). The protagonist's mother

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seems trapped in patterns of patriarchal oppression to the extent that she refuses to investigate the factors that underlie her daughter's choice. But the most controversial reaction comes from the protagonist's father, whose conduct epitomizes all the ambiguities, the subtleties, and the symbolic violence of the same patriarchal system that represses the entire family's evolution. In the short story, the protagonist's father, Mario, chooses a different strategy. After blaming his daughter, he asks her why she feels she *has* to go to Texas, which is where her friend belongs, and where she would be a complete outsider instead:

> Mario tries a new angle. "If that girl wantsa go down there, let her go. That's where she's from. Isn't she?". I don't answer. "Well, isn't she?"
> "Yeah, she's from there. Her family lives in Texas. Some of them."
> "Well you ain't from there. You're from here" he says, pointing at the floorboards. "Your family's here. What the hell ya gonna do in goddamn Texas?" (131)

This dialogue takes place on a highway, which serves as another liminal space, with Mario driving his adamant daughter to Port Authority Greyhound Station, and is significant for multiple reasons. Although the protagonist is expecting Mario's tirade during the trip and is aware of his manipulation techniques ("Now, I sit back and brace myself, expecting more from Mario, with less drama and more guilt" [130]), she is nonetheless more vulnerable and emotional towards his approach; perhaps she senses that somehow the reason behind her father's disapproval is not merely his urge to control her, but a feeling of serious apprehension for her. Mario, in fact, seemingly tries to understand the reasons for his daughter's choice, and it may be argued that behind his questioning lies a multilayered kind of anxiety.

A classic father-daughter generational clash is displayed in this scene, with all the typical patterns of an authoritarian father who tries to impose his will on a rebel, tomboy daughter. Yet, Mario somehow senses that his daughter is looking for a place where she can freely express her gender identity and explore her sexuality; therefore, he seems to be unconsciously trying to prevent this from happening. In the dialogue, however, he also seems concerned about something else, namely the possibility that his daughter may go through a modern version of the migration experience. Texas is not just any place: when Mario points out "your family's here," he alludes also to the Italian American community his daughter is leaving behind, which is not as strong in the Southern State as it is in NYC. Without a community to rely on, not only will his daughter lose an ethnic identity she has not even fully explored, but she will be reliving the experience of being alone in a potentially hostile land, pushed only by an undefined desire to succeed and without a safety net, in case she may need it. The fact that Texas is a Southern State is also not irrelevant: Mario seems to be implicitly reinstating echoes of the very Southern Question his family tried to escape by migrating to NYC from Naples area. In his 1997 essay "The Preclusion of Postcolonial Discourse in Southern Italy," Pasquale Verdicchio argues that, although emigration to a richer and more developed country initially appeared as a potential solution to the Southern Question, "the racial positioning of southern Italians in a North American context is problematic, given the slavery paradigm that has fixed a white/black binary

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system of confrontation. Given such a dichotomy, southern Italian expression risks being silenced once again" (206). In such perspective, in advising his daughter against leaving for Texas, Mario seems to be worried precisely about the potential ramifications of the black/white binary system which Verdicchio refers to. Similarly, in her *Claiming a Tradition,* Mary Jo Bona reinforces the idea that the Southern Question successfully crossed the Atlantic Ocean, replicating the same patterns of discrimination and violence it followed in Italy ("Introduction"). Mario seems to be thinking along the same lines, trying somehow to protect his daughter from a backward and potentially harsh reality, which he (albeit wrongfully) considers her unable to confront.

Notwithstanding the fears regarding his daughter's loss of ethnic identity, and the angst due to the awareness of the conditions of Southern Italians in the US, Mario's concerning behavior reveals a quintessentially patriarchal, controlling attitude. His words convey an ambivalent message: when he orders his daughter "Don't let nobody influence you" (131), on the one hand, she receives his command in disbelief, since her parents are the ones trying to influence her decisions, but on the other hand, he seems to be truly fostering his daughter's independence. Indeed, throughout Capone's work, father figures epitomize a double bind, constantly offering conflicting messages that might paralyze their daughters and cause them emotional distress; the young women eventually overcome these emotional deadlocks by choosing to focus on the productive and positive aspect of such conflicting messages, although the echoes of this painful dynamic resonate powerfully in Capone's poems and stories. This dynamic is often associated with mobility and money, veritable gates to independence in North American society.

The most emblematic case is the poem "Vincenzo Salvatore, My Father," in which a father drives his daughter to the local newspaper to get her a job as the first papergirl in their town ("At thirteen, you drove me to *The Daily Argus* / where I signed up for a paper route / in our neighborhood / I was the first girl in town to have such a job / and thrilled to be earning my own money" [53]). Additionally, the father teaches his 16-year-old daughter how to drive, thus encouraging her independence. However, when it comes to his daughter's departure for Texas, Vincenzo creates the most paralyzing double bind. He takes his daughter to the station, all the while trying to convince her not to leave. While openly disapproving of her decision, he suddenly and unexpectedly stuffs some money in her hand: "But when I stepped onto the bus / you put cash in my hand / enough for a three day journey" (54). To which Capone's poetic *persona* remarks: "Without words, you were telling me / You're grown now. Go. / I trust you to find your way / in the world" (54). Vincenzo, Mario and the other fictional fathers in Capone's work overtly try to dissuade their daughters from evolving independently, failing to grant them a perhaps unspeakable approval; at the same time, they entrust them with money, a pass to and a mark of adulthood, which is nonetheless received by a young woman who has bought her bus ticket with *her own* money from part-time jobs and thus does not depend on her father's money anymore. From her Greyhound bus, while watching Mario drive away, the unnamed narrator initiates her journey toward a subsequent life stage, while acknowledging "now I need

to grow in a way they don't understand and can't help me with" ("Greyhound Bus" 132).

LIMINAL SPACE #2: THE SOUTHWEST, OR "MY NEIGHBORHOOD"

Financial independence, self-reliance, and a passionate yearning to move westward: Capone's young protagonist does possess some qualities traditionally regarded as inherently American, which are epitomized in her journey to Texas. Moving westward in search of a freer life, and doing so without the safe harbor of her ethnic community awaiting her, Capone's fictional self is not only reenacting the migrant experience, but she is embodying a frontier experience which is advertised as quintessentially American: she is conquering the unknown, pioneering a social condition, that of Italian American queer woman, alone and independent, in strikingly innovative terms, besides defying the stereotypical trope of Southern Italian women as secluded in their homes and neighborhoods. Her undeclared foremother may be identified in the writer and poet Diane di Prima, who only a few years earlier had similarly defied all kinds of stereotypes associated to the idea of Italian American woman and subsequently left her community for California.

By leaving her family and earning her own money, thus conquering independence through her own means, Capone's poetic *persona* at once escapes patriarchal codifications and enters a liminal state from which she can articulate a political stance. She is underlining the necessity of a radical reconsideration of both the Italian and the American nuclear family models, both of which seem to perceive her as the dangerous (with Esposito, we may say contagious) element threatening their respective stability, for different reasons: in the first case, her sexual orientation; in the second case, her ethnicity. Hence, the young woman is abolishing the archetypical and structural distinction of the family roles in two separate spheres,[4] advocating for the necessity of a more modern and sustainable model. Her move is at once a vital and a political one, marking the first steps in an intimate and at once political initiatory journey, which echoes the personal experience Gloria Anzaldúa's details in *Borderlands/La Frontera*: "to this day I'm not sure where I found the strength to leave the source, the mother, disengage from my family, *mi tierra, mi gente,* and all that picture stood for. I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature, buried under the personality that had been imposed on me" (16).

Nonetheless, neither Anzaldúa nor Capone advocate for a condition of perennial non-belonging as a means to be freely herself, rather she claims an ontological stance that mirrors the *affirmative* instability of her condition. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa describes her Borderland as an "alien" element in which one has to swim and that eventually becomes familiar—an element which is never comfortable, but *home*,

[4] For a more detailed discussion of the 'separate spheres ideology', and of its partial re-discussion, see Catherine N. Davidson, and Jessamyn Hatcher, editors. *No More Separate Spheres! A Next Wave American Studies Reader*. Duke University Press, 2002.

and a setting where can thrive, "being a participant in the further evolution of humankind" ("Preface", no page number). Moreover, Anzaldúa states that a Borderland is a place in which even one's gender identity can be fluid and explored in all its possible inflections. I would argue that the familiar space Capone identifies as *her* neighborhood shares such traits with Anzaldúa's fluid illustration of the Borderland, and as such Capone's neighborhood represent a psychological and ontological threshold in the same way as Anzaldúa's Borderland, in which one's own liminality brings about not only discomfort, but creates the conditions for personal evolution and self-discovery. In this perspective, it is unsurprising that "Part II" of *In My Neighborhood*, which is somewhat 'set' in California, opens with "Uncertainties—for Martha," the first poem addressing love and sex in the book, and that so many of the poems collected in this section address these themes.

In this perspective, the physical place where Giovanna Capone's protagonist can finally, and fluidly, resolve all her assertions of identity, is California: a place in her mind where her New York cultural hub, her Italian heritage, her queerness and her 'typically American' traits can be reconciled and meet in one single 'neighborhood.' Capone heads to California because it is a place, she "had idealized for years" (153); therefore, to her, a promised land for queer culture and greater freedom. Geographically speaking, however, the Central Valley of California, where Capone relocates, bears striking resemblance with the South of Italy from which Capone's family originally came: on the sea, characterized by a milder Mediterranean-like climate and an agriculture-based on products such as tomatoes, almonds, and grapes. After all, she resettles in San Francisco Bay area, which ichnographically activates a connection with the Bay of Naples, both through the toponym and the landscape. Thus, this connection is a landmark in Capone's mind, which is constantly revived thanks to photos and family memories, as well as her own visit to her Italian-based relatives.

LIMINAL SPACE #3: THE POLITICAL KITCHEN, OR A NEW *COMMUNITAS*

Capone's reclaiming of her cultural roots is not only facilitated by the Californian landscape and her identification with her own 'neighborhood'; unsurprisingly, the reappropriation of the "old world food" plays a big role as well. In *Writing with an Accent*, Edvige Giunta claims that

> not only does food provide Italian American women authors with a language and images through which to express the ambivalent relationship they, as women, maintain with the domestic space and material culture, but it also becomes a vehicle by which Italian American women can articulate the complexities of ethnic identity. (*Writing with an Accent* 104)

Although the trope of food has been widely and undeniably recognized as one of the most discussed, perhaps even overemphasized and stereotyped in Italian American studies (Izzo 10), Giunta maintains that in recent years, especially in the works of Nancy Caronia, Giovanna Capone, Louise De Salvo, and Rosette Capotorto,

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"the dinner table becomes a highly politicized site" (Giunta, *Writing with as Accent* 106); furthermore, in their introduction to their anthology *The Milk of Almonds*, Giunta and DeSalvo claim that the discourse concerning food can and should be reconceptualized in an intellectual and political perspective in the writing of Italian American women, articulating a more problematic, but surely innovative counternarrative (*The Milk of Almonds* III). In this perspective, by writing poems and stories that reminisce of the flavors and smells of her family's New York City kitchen, Capone actively recreates the same atmosphere in the closed space of her Californian kitchen, where, through the cooking rituals of her culture, she conjures "[her] parents' nurturing ways" (136-137). She describes this newfound "home" mainly in part I of *In My Neighborhood*, in whose poems she frequently celebrates and evokes the family experiences related to conviviality. However, one detail crucially differs from the place the latter previously held in what she terms as "the family mosaic" ("A Place at the Table" 135). Indeed, in the last stanza of the poem "At 23, I took a Greyhound Bus," the first-person narrator claims, "I can always make a good red sauce / and remind myself / that despite the cost / *I'm the boss /in my kitchen and my life*" (57, italics mine). With this statement, Capone seems to merge her sought-after empowerment with her Italian American heritage, in the elective land that is finally home to a new consciousness of 'Italian in Transition.' This is the definition the poet creates for herself and the Italian American woman she meets at the grocery store in the poem "I Met Her in Front of the Tomato Sauce"; in such text, while grieving for her lost traditions, relatives, and Italian language skills, the poetic self ironically proposes to form a support group with that name: We should get a support group, I thought/ Italians in Transition/ Grief support for the descendants of immigrants/ Italy bleeding out of us every passing year. (68)

A support group is exactly what Giovanna Capone started in 1988. In collaboration with Rose Romano she funded BASIL, Bay Area Sicilian and Italian Lesbians, a social group promoting the language and culture of lesbians of Italian heritage in the Bay Area—a group that somewhat recalls the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s in its organization. The table around which Capone and Romano's guests gather is a safe space for those Italian American lesbians who "have not quite negotiated their seat at the Italian American table" (*Writing with an Accent* 106). The BASIL members thus enter this group, a community in all respects, with their individual, yet shared trauma, which is the *munus* they bring to this newly-formed *communitas*: a trauma that is both a lack of ethnic belonging and a promise, an obligation not to harm or judge the other fellow BASIL members. BASIL, the Bay Area, and California, more at large, become the space where they can explore their increased self-awareness and expose it to the friction of an Other, who is seemingly and potentially not eager to reject them.

In fact, BASIL does not end up getting locked in the secluded space of a kitchen. After a few years, in 1992, the BASIL members organized and marched together with their banners in the San Francisco Pride Parade, where the cheering crowd greeted them while playfully throwing raw pasta at their colorful contingent. The BASIL experience marks a shift in the classic perception and conceptualization of the kitchen as a secluded space for Italian American women. The BASIL kitchen that Capone helps

create is not a segregated space, but rather an additional contact zone in which the individual self of every BASIL member becomes a collective self, and in which this new, 'private' entity blends with its political, public counterpart. In this sense, the liminal consciousnesses who gather in Capone's kitchen form a *communitas*, where the "I" flows quite smoothly to the "you" and the two bonds based on their shared *munus*, heritage and experiences. This kind of *communitas* provides an unstructured or, to a certain degree, anti-structured response to the limitations and the symbolic violence of the patriarchal system that has brought the members together in the first place: "Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of the structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority" (*The Ritual Process* 128).

Nonetheless, it should be noted that, as the liminal setting that it is and unlike traditional *communitas*, the *communitas* revolving around the kitchen does not aim at *taking over* the structure (namely the society, as it is). In Espositian terms, they identify no Other from which they need to be immunized, in that their existence as a community is not funded on some common property, but rather on a common lack. This community simply constitutes an alternative space where the liminal consciousness can freely express itself, assess its relationship with the 'outer' social system and find an opportunity to engage with it proactively, rather than being a victim of its oppressive dynamics; the boundaries that separate this *communitas* from the 'outer' social system are porous thresholds. BASIL members do not attempt to dismantle, and probably not even to disrupt, the entire system, but rather to criticize it productively, by bringing their identities 'out of the kitchen and into the streets.'

LIMINAL SPACE #4: THE LIMINAL PAGE

The last symbolic site of liminality explored in this essay is the written page, where political praxis and New York nostalgia merge with Giovanna Capone's ethnic discomfort and transpose in poetic form. On the written page, the peculiar sense of Italian Americanness that Capone develops in her journey from New York City to California metaphorically bridges these two emotional landscapes and resonates profoundly with her mother's legacy, namely her connection with the written word.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa points out that the instability of the Borderland is "what makes poets write and artists create" (73). Dwelling in a discomfort which is at once fertile ground for artistic expression, the new *mestiza* consciousness finds its articulation in a peculiar stylistic paradigm. Anzaldúa's language in *Borderlands/La Frontera* is a combination of English, Spanish, Tex-Mex, and several dialects, and prose/poetry/academic writing alternate in the book. By providing this example in the context of the USA-Mexico border, this stylistic choice compels the readers to constantly renegotiate their awareness of what language and style themselves represent, in terms of power dynamics and relationships between the margins and the canonic center of knowledge.

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Although her language is not as daring as Anzaldúa's unparalleled poetic voice, Capone experiments as well with code-switching, resorting to Italian and Neapolitan dialect especially when she lends her poetic word to the voices of her ancestors. Their polyphonic presence is announced by the use of italics and it leaves a melancholic trace throughout the poems. Capone also engages in different forms of literary and visual art, ranging from poetry to filmmaking in a cross-pollination of genres that represents her cultural syncretism in figurative and resounding ways. The hybrid conceptual paradigm of the *mestiza* consciousness, characterized by a sense of existential unrest and renewal, involves at once Anzaldúa's and Capone's multi-faceted artistic praxes, and seems to determine a further evolution of liminality, which connects the urgency of self-expression, political stance, ethnic belonging and gender fluidity.

Nonetheless, it is mainly through her poetry that Capone finds her path to the resolution of her inner cultural collision. In the poem "How I Became a Reader," Capone recalls how her parents took her siblings and herself to the library every week, and describes her mother as a "huge book lover"—an image she poetically condenses in verses portraying the mother, Antoinette, as lost in and surrounded by books, whose stories she subsequently shares with her own family.

> When I think of you today
> I remember
> Your round body planted in the living room chair
> disappearing
> into a really good book
>
> I remember the solace it gave you to read
> and the words you shared with us later
> about the world beyond our lives
> the world of presidents and wars
> and politicians full of lies. (44-45)

The page, as portrayed in this poem, shows some key features of the liminal spaces previously described: the inscription in a suspended dimension, the reconnection with the social structure after the acquisition of a new self-awareness, and the creation of a *communitas* where mutual elements of vulnerability are shared. Fundamentally, the poetic voice's mother *disappears* and melts into the book, finding solace from the harsh reality she confronts every day. Moreover, the page confirms its porosity when the mother rejoins with her family, bringing with her the intellectual experience she has gained through her involvement with the page and prompting her children to do the same, not only by being a role model but by physically taking them to the library. I associate the portrayal of this mother to Capone's intimate relationship with books, which is one of the reasons for her job as a public librarian in the Bay Area. Through the pages by which she is daily surrounded, through those she reads and those she writes, Capone forwards her maternal heritage, on her terms and in a place where she can cross it with the other parts of herself that compose her identity. In doing so, she narrativizes the dynamic aptly described by Mary Jo Bona in *The*

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Routledge History of Italian Americans: in her chapter on the mother-daughter bond in Italian American literature, she writes that queer Italian American writers "embrace strong mothers, both biological and literary, which becomes instrumental in supporting writing that reflects a continued desire for women" (700). The liminal page thus becomes the *locus amoenus* in which Capone's desire for women is reconciled to her own desire to articulate her artistic ambitions and cultivate her creativity, through a recovery of her maternal inspiration which holds the value of an intellectual blessing.

CONCLUSION

The mother-daughter bond recalls a well-known trope which has been widely explored in both feminist and Italian American criticism: that of Demeter and Persephone's (Hayes 1994; Giunta, "Persephone's Daughters" 2004; Tomasulo 2020). Liminality features prominently in this myth, in which the young Persephone is able to fluidly move from the Underworld to the Earth, and therefore embodies two dimensions of being in a single entity. The cultural wealth retrievable in such in-between position may be one of the reasons why the figure of Persephone, at once a victim and a defeater of patriarchal power, was adopted by a small lesbian publishing house, Persephone Press, named after the goddess. Organized by a collective of radical feminists, in 1981 Feminist Press published the groundbreaking feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa and now in its fourth edition. In a long essay in this collection, Anzaldúa reflects on the numerous reasons that compel her (a border woman, living and creating art between two cultures) to write. Among such reasons, she includes the need to overcome erasure, the misappropriation and manipulation of her story; but she also identifies the need to

> become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispell the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy […] Finally I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing. (187)

Although Anzaldúa writes from a very distinct position as a queer, Latina feminist of color, and addresses a readership sharing a similar background, her urge to reach an organic self-identification within the fluid and metamorphic space of a liminal existence resonates with Capone's in profound ways. At the same time, the desire to reconnect with one's own ethnic roots and form allegiances in a community is traceable both in Anzaldúa's and in Capone's artistic commitment; such commonalities suggest the crucial importance, for Italian American Studies, to adopt paradigms which can act as bridges to other disciplines and start intellectual exchanges capable of reconfiguring the field of studies.

This intent seems to underlie Capone's Preface to her poetry collection, in which she writes, "my wish for everyone who reads this collection is that it will illuminate

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your own life journey and sense of identity, help you understand your own various cultures and people, give your courage, and most especially hope" (Preface VIII). From her liminal position, Capone can finally appraise the full range of that heritage, disclosing it on a space—that of the page—that connects the depth of her self-awareness to that of the readers, who are in turn encouraged to engage in this dialogic conversation between personal and collective, self and Other, center and margin.

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