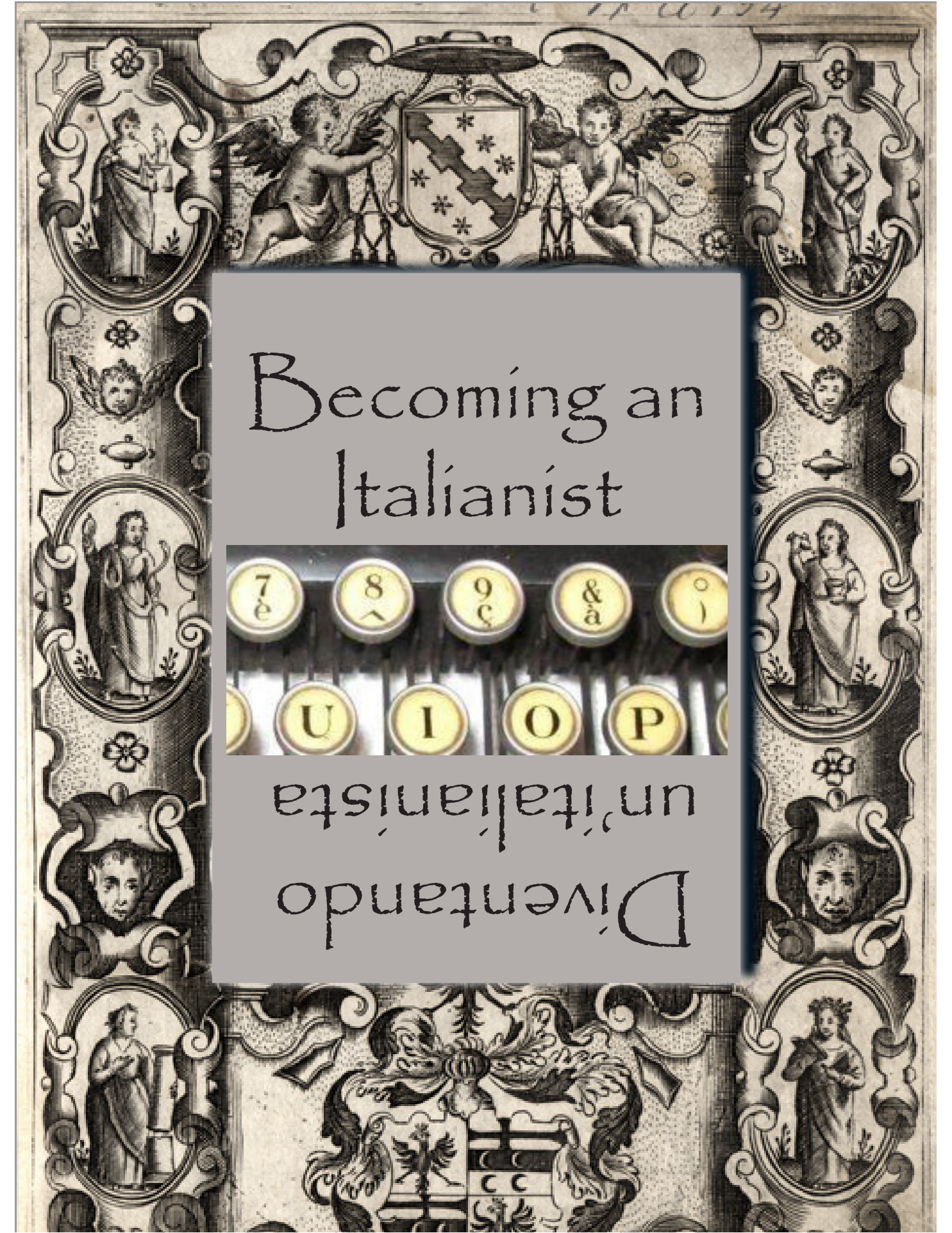




Becoming an Italianist



Diventando
un'italianista



he doctor who delivered her asked the joyously tearful mother, “What is your child’s name?”

To which she responded as she cradled her daughter for the first time outside the womb, “No matter, ask her father.”

And so the doctor exited the delivery room towards the waiting room, where the baby’s father anxiously waited with two of his brothers, his sister-in-law, one of his sisters, and of course his own mother. A veritable chorus of family members to welcome the child into the linguistic milieu even before the *choral* stage ended. Out of the *chora* and into the chorus...

“Congratulations, you have a girl! Your wife wants to know her name.”

The happy father responded, “Her name is Christina.” The new object of everyone’s affection became also a subject that birth-day, her personhood rendered manifest, her self objectified in the script of a birth certificate, that document necessary to prove your existence within a civilization.

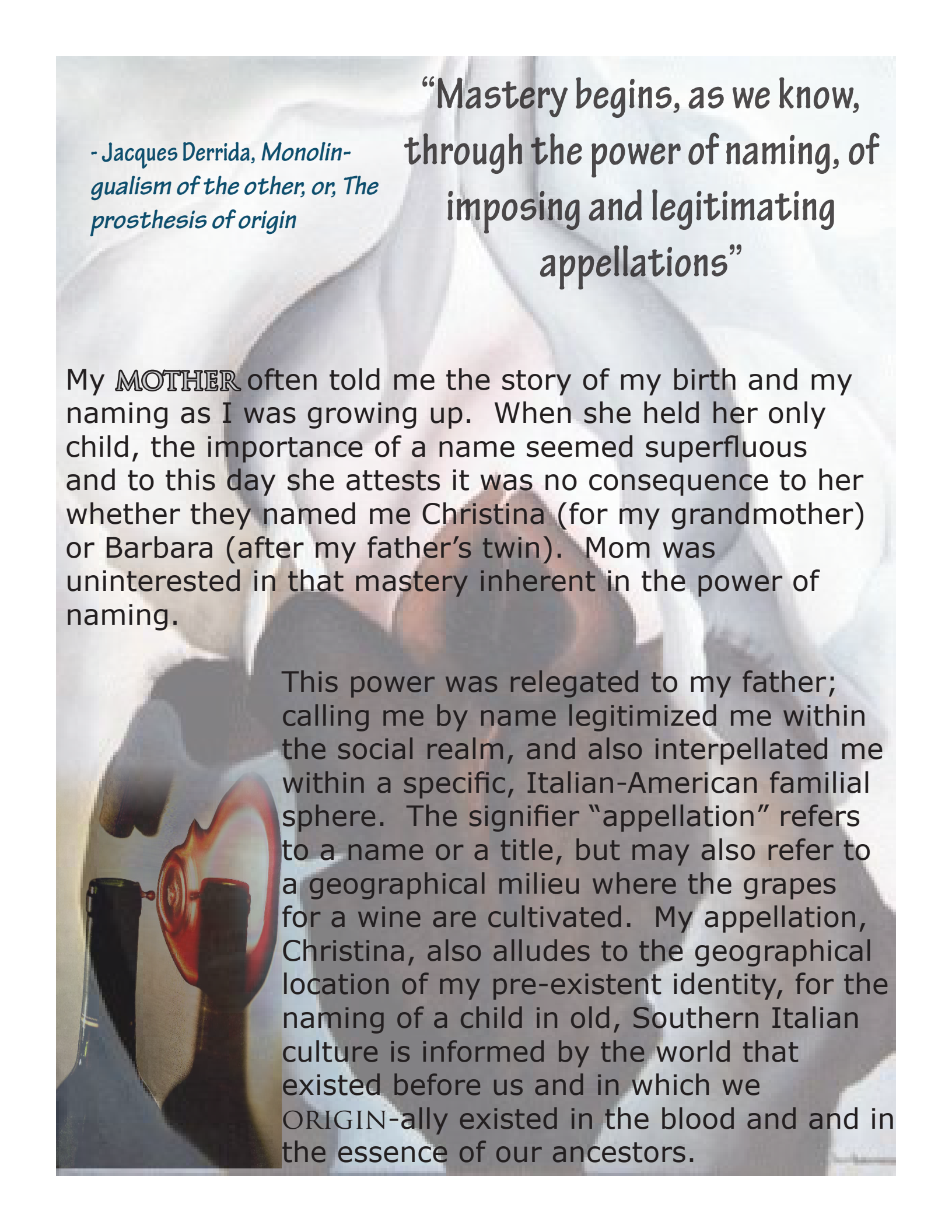
C(H)RISTINA

PETRAGLIA

And so the new subject became subject to Logos, baptized into the symbolic order prior to her language acquisition, yet also initiated into the familial order - of mothers, fathers, grandmothers, relatives - that existed before her.

Left Foot Print

0 (None) (Number) age



- Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the other, or, The prosthesis of origin*

“Mastery begins, as we know, through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations”

My MOTHER often told me the story of my birth and my naming as I was growing up. When she held her only child, the importance of a name seemed superfluous and to this day she attests it was no consequence to her whether they named me Christina (for my grandmother) or Barbara (after my father’s twin). Mom was uninterested in that mastery inherent in the power of naming.

This power was relegated to my father; calling me by name legitimized me within the social realm, and also interpellated me within a specific, Italian-American familial sphere. The signifier “appellation” refers to a name or a title, but may also refer to a geographical milieu where the grapes for a wine are cultivated. My appellation, Christina, also alludes to the geographical location of my pre-existent identity, for the naming of a child in old, Southern Italian culture is informed by the world that existed before us and in which we ORIGIN-ally existed in the blood and in the essence of our ancestors.

The father interpellates...

...yet my name also came from a maternal source, for I share it with my grandmother. Within that name there commingles both the masculine and the feminine insofar as a name inscribed in letters, in the written word, appertains to the masculine milieu of language, yet the feminine also resides there, for it is inherent in the nomenclature that marks the female. The name is passed from my grandmother through my father and unto me. From an ontological standpoint, my genesis as an Italian-American (2nd generation born in the States) is mediated through the paternal, with its roots in the Italian identities of his parents. Just as we are born into language so we are born into a family that predates us.



Cristina and Carmelo - Grandma and Grandpa

PATERNAL PROBLEMATIC, PROBLEMATIC FOR TWO REASONS (LET'S NOT EVEN CONSIDER THE LAST NAME, "PETRAGLIA" BECAUSE ALL LAST NAMES INEVITABLY COME FROM OUR FATHERS).

1. WHAT HAPPENS TO THE FEMININE? AM I IN A COMPLETELY OPPRESSIVE MASCULINE DISCOURSE?

ANSWER: YES. HISTORY, NAMES, LANGUAGE, SOCIETY, THE WORLD ARE ALL DEFINED AND CIRCUMSCRIBED BY A MASCULINE DISCOURSE INVOLVING LOGOS, SO IT'S INEVITABLE THAT I AM TIED TO IT.

2. WHAT ABOUT MY MOTHER, WHOSE HERITAGE IS NOT ITALIAN? I'VE SEEN T-SHIRTS THAT READ "IBM: ITALIAN BY MARRIAGE" SO YOU COULD SAY SHE ADOPTED THE HABITS AND TRADITIONS THAT PREVAILED IN HER HUSBAND'S FAMILY (HER FEMINIST, EXISTENTIAL ISSUE, NOT MINE). OR, YOU COULD ATTRIBUTE THIS LACK OF IDENTIFICATION WITH THE IRISH AS A RESULT OF THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THE ORIGIN-AL IRISH IMMIGRANTS COME HUNDREDS OF YEARS BEFORE THE ITALIANS WHO HAD ALREADY ASSIMILATED INTO AMERICAN CULTURE AND LOST THEIR SENSE OF THE MOTHER LAND. OR, YOU COULD ALSO SAY THAT MY MOTHER'S FAMILY NEVER LIVED CLOSE TO EACH OTHER, WERE REMOVED FROM EACH OTHER'S LIVES ONCE THEY LEFT THE NEST — MORE DISTANCE. IN AN ITALIAN FAMILY, YOU NEVER LEAVE THE NEST. EVEN ACROSS THE COUNTRY OR IN ANOTHER COUNTRY, EVERYONE STILL MANAGES TO KNOW YOUR BUSINESS.

AT ANY RATE, THERE WERE NO TRADITIONS OR CULTURAL MARKERS IN MY MOTHER'S FAMILY; BOTH HER PARENTS DIED WHEN I WAS A BABY SO NO OLD AND WISE MATRIARCH OR PATRIARCH. UNLIKE MY PATERNAL GRANDMOTHER WHO WAS BOTH MATER AND PATER FAMILIAS, A FORMIDABLE WOMAN WHO LOST HER HUSBAND WHEN HER YOUNGEST OF SEVEN CHILDREN WAS ONLY A YEAR OLD. LIKE BARTHES, OEDIPAL FRUSTRATION FOR DAD BECAUSE THERE WAS NO FATHER TO KILL. (NO, FREUD. ELECTRA MAY HAVE HATED CLYTEMNESTRA, BUT I DON'T HATE MY MOM.) THIS TAKES US BACK TO QUESTION 1. CAUGHT IN THE GENERAL MASCULINE DISCOURSE INHERENT AT ALL LEVELS OF SOCIETY — YES.

OPPRESSED BY PATRIARCHAL FORCES WITHIN THE FAMILIAL STRUCTURE — NO. CIRCUMSCRIBED BY THE MASCULINE DISCOURSE OF LANGUAGE — NO DOUBT. CAN WE CHANGE OUR NATIVE LANGUAGE? NO. CAN WE APPROPRIATE IT FOR INTELLECTUAL GROWTH? OF COURSE. CAN WE GO TOWARDS THE "LANGUAGE" OF OUR ANCESTORS? MAYBE.



Her mother loquacious and affectionate.

Her father less so. He brought her into language and likewise brought her into literature. She remembers him reading stories from *The Little World of Don Camillo* to her each night before bed (aged 6 or 7). He introduced her to *Silas Marner* and he instilled *Great Expectations* in his daughter. She read *Wuthering Heights* and they watched (and taped on VHS) the 1992 film adaptation with Juliette Binoche and Ralph Fiennes. It was the English language, her father tongue that piqued her literary interests and therefore did not oppress her.



Yet there was always already a latent mother tongue that emerged during those endless, childhood evenings, mornings, and afternoons (measured out with espresso spoons) amidst her large, extended family at the grand-mother's house in Bloomfield.

That latent mother tongue exists in those things inexpressible or inexplicable in written words, *da-sein, authentic*: the *profumo* of a stewing pot of sauce, the haze of after-dinner cigarette smoke around the table, old world traditions – the Seven Fishes on Christmas Eve, *la frittata alla ricotta* on Easter Saturday, the crumble of *anginetti* (love knot cookies), the sweetness of *le sfogliatelle*, storytelling in which ancestors emerge posthumously and make you laugh or weep.

ORAL.

VISCERAL.



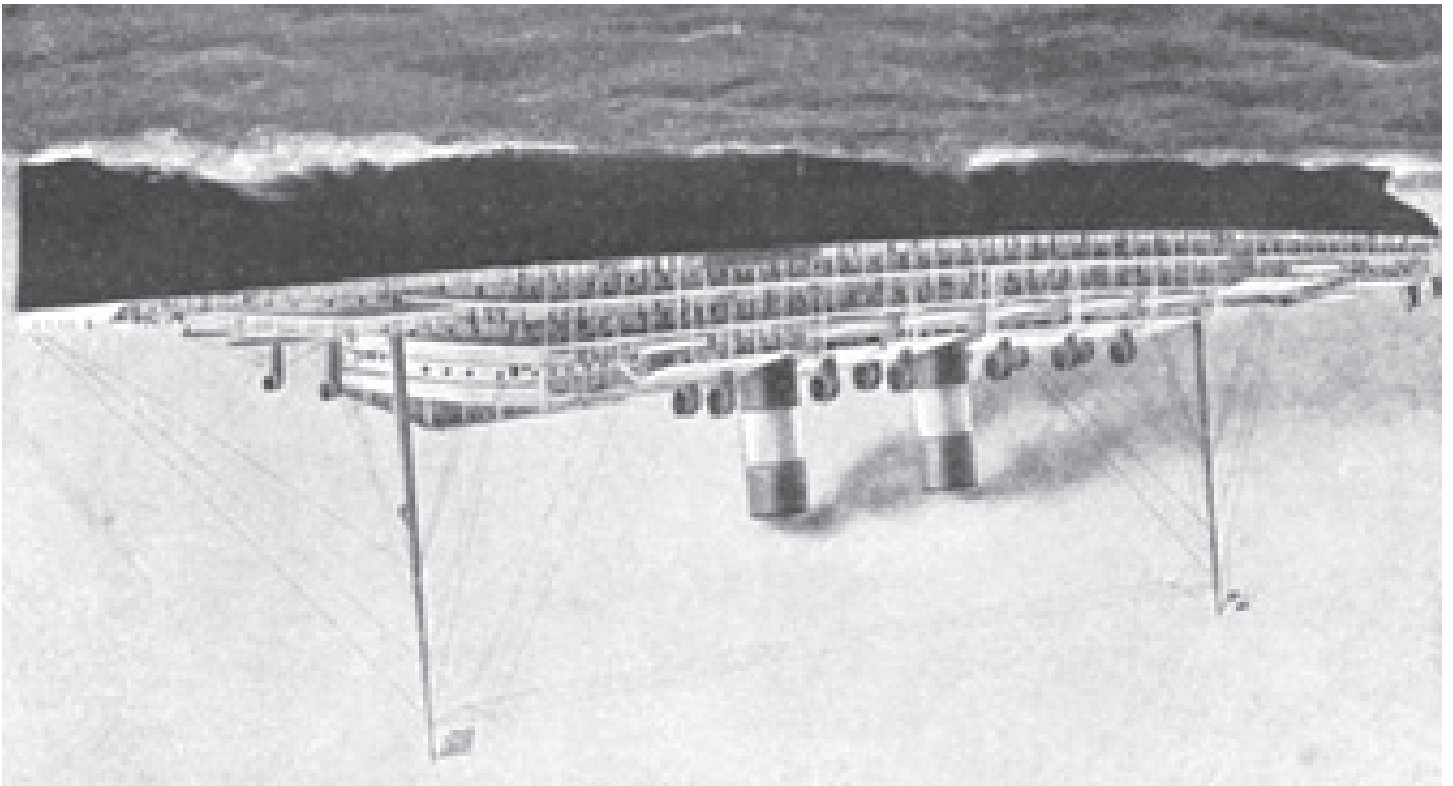
MONTALTO UFFUGO,
THE GRAND MOTHER LAND



GUSTATORY

OLFACTORY





And that maternal, unwritten and unofficial language, *calabrese* (a southern Italian dialect) that the granddaughter will never learn. Oneiric images of Granny Rose and her daughter Christina speaking *calabrese* as Tina and her cousin hide under the dining table.

Christina (87 years old)
and her namesake (30 years old)
share espresso brewed
on the electric stove
in Granny Rose's *mocha*
(= stovetop espresso pot).
“I’ll leave it to you in my will,” she tells her.





This family that exists before you, before you become a subject, this family that initiates you into the subjective and that also informs the development of the social I. The family as the first social institution that circumscribes you, that can oppress or ex-press you. Let us revert to some old pictures, back to the unproductive life as Barthes calls it, but why is it unproductive? Unproductive for him because it precedes his intellectual production or material output, before his thoughts are made manifest in print, before the self becomes irrevocably mediated in words. So unproductive in the materialistic sense, yet inescapably productive in the formation of identity, for in those pre-intellectual or pre-academy years, we produce ourselves (or perhaps our selves are produced). The figures that surround us – the nurturing mother, the paternal pedagogue, grand-mother matriarch – remain with us, massaging us, shaping us, becoming inextricably present even in their absence.

REGISTRATION CARD—(Men born on or after April 28, 1877 and on or before February 16, 1897)

SERIAL NUMBER	NAME (Print)	ORDER NUMBER
U 942	Frank Chianelli	
	(First) (Middle) (Last)	

2. PLACE OF RESIDENCE (Print)
 6460 Frankstown Ave. Pittsburgh Alle. Pa.
 (Number and street) (Town, township, village, or city) (County) (State)

[THE PLACE OF RESIDENCE GIVEN ON THE LINE ABOVE WILL DETERMINE LOCAL BOARD JURISDICTION; LINE 2 OF REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE WILL BE IDENTICAL]

3. MAILING ADDRESS
 Same.
 (Mailing address if other than place indicated on line 2. If same insert word same)

4. TELEPHONE	5. AGE IN YEARS	6. PLACE OF BIRTH
Em. 1836	45	Cosenza
(Exchange) (Number)	DATE OF BIRTH	(Town or county)
	Feb. 16 1897	Italy
	(Mo.) (Day) (Yr.)	(State or country)

7. NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS
 Mr. Louis Caputo, 129 Finley St. Pittsburgh, Pa.

8. EMPLOYER'S NAME AND ADDRESS
 Self - Upholstering

9. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS
 6460 Frankstown St. Pittsburgh Alle. Pa.
 (Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)

I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.
Grandma's Father
 D. S. S. Form 1 (Revised 4-1-42) (over) 16-21630-2 Frank Chianelli (Registrant's signature)

*What hinges on a name?
“What’s in a name?” asked Juliet.
Well, for her and Romeo a lot was
in a name. Their names constructed
them and de-constructed them.*

The importance of naming in southern Italian culture usually emerges with the male descendents, but female descendants may also receive a name charged with significance within the historical microcosm of the family sphere. A man’s son is named after his grandfather: Carmelo’s first son is named Luigi because Carmelo’s father was Luigi.

What happens to this tradition when confronted with the prejudices of turn of the century America, when the melting pot americanized everyone before diversity and cultural studies were mainstream?

Luigi becomes “Louis” and Carmelo, ridiculed for his name sounding like “caramel” changes it to escape the torment of difference (and difference).

“What about Christina?” *Cristina becomes Christina. While growing up in the States, she added the “h” for an American effect both in speech and in orthography, and so her granddaughter inherits that “h” and a liminal identity. Baby Christina, whose birth inaugurated this text, receives that “h” that calls for the English pronunciation, the hard plosive sound that occurs when an American pronounces her name, as compared to the Italian pronunciation of Cristina, in which a slight trill mediates the plosive.*

The name transforms just as the woman becomes no longer always already Italian. From Italian to American but still Italian.

Her granddaughter > In a type of AUT-AUT > neither Italian nor American,

Christina goes to Italy.

- “Di dove sei?”
- “*Sono americana*”.

Christina lives in the States.

- “What are you?”
- “*I am Italian*”.

WHAT AM I?



Neither Italian nor American >
but both >

ITALIAN-AMERICAN... ...ITALO-AMERICANA

...Italian-American and all hinges on that “h” that confounds and on that hyphen that divides and unites. It is in this hyphen, this limbo, where she exists, floating first between cultural and then between linguistic identities.

...matriarchal family > back to the body of the grandmother, whose first language was not Standard Italian. Her mother spoke her mother tongue – *calabrese* – which can never be reached by me but merely moved towards. The Italian language, which I learned by studying and living in Italy (not from my family) remains like all other established languages masculine-ly constructed. Really. Ask Pietro Bembo, who in the 16th century laid out the ground rules for what we speak today as Standard Italian; he wrote *Prose della volgar lingua* insisting that the common Italian language should be that of the Three Crowns: Dante, Boccaccio, e Petrarca. So not only is the Italian language theoretically masculine, it was historically codified by an intellectual and is based on the literature of male writers. I am stuck in the masculine, constructed, and essentially created language and must experience the madre-patria origin in smells, sounds, childhood memories, traditions/customs, old photographs, orally transmitted stories some non-codified, unwritten dialect words, – those things that escape the mediation of Logos, floating polyphonically in the realm of Eros.

“I have but one language –

yet that language is not mine” – Derrida

As she floats between two languages, and multiple identities, she grows towards, not into her roots, unable to reach that absolute grand-maternal language that Granny Rose and Cristina spoke. Only getting closer to it through the Italian language, never absolutely possessing it. Sensing it, experiencing it, re-membering it.



C(H)RISTINA

The “h” can’t be removed, for it marks you as American, as conspicuous as the girl in Ruth Orkin’s *An American Girl in Italy* (which hangs large in your study), yet those letters surrounding it and the surname following it indicates an ITALIAN-NESS.

Now, let’s complicate things even further; you are also an *Italianista*, or supposedly you are becoming one. You go to grad school and you end up studying questions of identity and dabbling in neuroses (both your own and those of novelistic characters – but that would be another story)...

Are you creating your own meaning for an authentic existence?

All these layers of the self: American, Italian, Italian-American, Calabrian, Italianist, daughter, granddaughter, subject, object, woman, etc.

Your personal narrative, your identity text resembles an onion?