

CHANGING LANDSCAPES: BATHTUB MADONNAS IN AN ITALIAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN TRANSITION

Regina Marchi*

Focusing on the material culture of Madonna yard statues erected by Italian Americans in the early and mid 20th century in Boston, Massachusetts, this article examines the social history, geographical translations and evolving meanings of these vernacular media within changing cultural and socio-economic contexts of modernity and globalization.

Paesaggi che cambiano: statue di Madonne nei giardini di una comunità italo-americana in transizione

Focalizzato sull'espressione culturale rappresentata dalle statue di Madonne erette da italo-americani nei loro giardini dall'inizio alla metà del XX secolo a Boston, Massachusetts, il saggio prende in esame la storia sociale, le traduzioni geografiche e l'evoluzione che tali media vernacolari rappresentano all'interno dei mutamenti culturali e socio-economici nel contesto della modernità e della globalizzazione.

Introduction

Punctuating the landscape of narrow streets in East Boston, the largest Italian-American neighborhood in Boston, Massachusetts, one sees 'bathtub Madonnas' – statues of the Virgin Mary made of plaster or concrete and housed in protective alcoves created from old bathtubs, hand-made brick or stone grottoes, or miniature wooden huts. While the term 'bathtub Madonnas' is commonly used to refer to a variety of Madonna yard statues, the name comes from the unusual structures in which many older saint statues are placed: pre-WWII bathtubs that are vertically buried halfway into the ground to form arched shrines around a statue.

Prior research on Madonna yard statues in Italo-American communities has interpreted them as expressions of religious faith and ethnic identity (Sciorra, Inguanti, Manzo, Krase). Orsi has illustrated the importance of the Madonna and her annual street *fiesta* in New York's Italian Harlem as a «media of engagement»

* Rutgers University, USA.

(p.3) that helped Italian immigrants build community and respond to the challenges of modern society. Research on migrants and material culture shows that what migrants carry over into their new lives in unfamiliar territories expresses memories of the past as well as aspirations for mobility and self transformation in the future (Basu & Coleman). This article suggests that while Madonna statues in E. Boston exemplified this in previous decades, today they mean something else.

This essay examines the history, geographical translations and evolving meanings of Italian American Madonna statues within the changing cultural and socio-economic contexts of globalization. Most of the yard statues in E. Boston were erected from the 1940s-1990s, at significant financial expense. Depending on size, they range in price today from US\$100 to \$800 each, but one informant noted that his grandmother purchased her statue in 1950 for \$200 (the equivalent of US\$2.093 in 2018). While previous research has focused on the meanings of these vernacular media within relatively homogeneous Italo-American communities from the 1970s-1990s, this study examines their meanings in a community that is rapidly changing due to new migration patterns, gentrification and transformations in the real estate market. The methodology involved historical research on Madonna yard statuary, interviews with 27 East Bostonians who had publically visible Madonna statues in their yards or patios in 2018¹, photographing 92 statues, and conducting visual analysis of their condition and surroundings.

The Metro Boston area is home to the fourth largest Italian-American population in the US and while tourist books declare Boston's 'Little Italy' to be the North End (an historically Italian but gentrified downtown enclave that is the city's symbolic center of Italian-ness, showcasing Italian eateries and festivals), E. Boston retains the largest number of Italian American residents and the largest number of Italian speakers in the city today². Residences in the North End do not have front yards or front patios, so there has never been a sizeable presence of Madonna statues there.

The Neighborhood

Founded in 1830, E. Boston was first settled by wealthy White Anglo Saxon Protestants (WASPs) who sought to escape the crowds and noise of downtown Boston by moving to this quiet island community (then accessible to the main-

¹ Interviews lasted from 10-60 minutes and were conducted by the author from June 9 to Sept. 13, 2018. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 97.

² According to US Census Bureau 2016 data, about 3.700 people of Italian ancestry live in the North End while more than 6.000 live in E. Boston.

land only by boat). Yet, by the 1880s and 1890s, when E. Boston's waterfront became the region's premier ship building zone and a critical industrial area, the genteel mansions of WASP settlers were replaced with tightly packed double and triple decker homes to house the multitudes of working class immigrants of Scandinavian, Irish and Jewish ancestry who came to E. Boston to work in its shipyards, docks and factories.

In the early 20th century, rural immigrants from Southern Italy arrived to E. Boston by the thousands, attracted to jobs in manufacturing, ship building and construction. With the 1919 opening of the East Boston Immigration Station, the second largest immigration port of entry in the US after Ellis Island, Italians sailed directly from Calabria and Sicily to E. Boston, seeking streets 'paved with gold'. Instead, they found intense ethnic discrimination and limited opportunities for upward mobility. Facing great animosity from Irish, WASP and other established Caucasian populations in the US, southern Italians were treated as racialized others (Connell & Gardaphe; Luconi. "Black dagoes? Italian immigrants' racial status in the USA") and were even lynched in Louisiana and Florida (Luconi, "Tampa's 1910 Lynching"; Rimaneli and Postman).

At this time, most political, economic and social power in Boston rested in the hands of White Anglo Saxon Protestants ("Boston Brahmins") and Irish Americans. The latter group had initially faced intense discrimination upon their mass migration to the US in the mid 1800s, but had become prominent in politics, business, and civil servant jobs by the time the Italians arrived in large numbers³. While many Irish lived in East Boston in the early 20th century, they began relocating to suburbs as the Italians arrived for entered.

Despite their shared religion, Italians were not welcomed in Irish Catholic churches (Orsi, Vecoli). In addition to the racism they faced from being classified by the dominant Anglo society as a non-White race (Barrett & Roediger, Guglielmo & Salerno), Italian Catholics were disdained by both Irish Catholics and WASPs as 'pagan' and 'sacrilegious' because of their statue 'idolatry' (Orsi, Vecoli). Joe, born in 1921, recalled: «In those days, the majority of Boston's police, firemen, teachers and clergy were Irish and they hated the Italians. When my parents moved to East Boston and introduced themselves to the local priest, he told them 'This isn't your church. You can't come here'». Similarly, 97-year old Connie stated: «The Irish treated us Italians terribly», an experience echoed by most older Italian-Americans interviewed for this study. In response, Italians created their own churches and ethnic religious communities (Connell & Pugliese, Orsi, Sciorra).

³ The largest surge of Italian immigrants to the US occurred from 1890-1924, with more than 4 million arriving between 1900 and 1910.

Fleeing extreme poverty in Southern Italy, most Italian immigrants initially rented cramped tenement apartments until they could save enough money to buy their own homes. Since E. Boston was close to downtown Boston yet offered more affordable housing with modest yards, many Italians purchased homes there and set down roots. For these early immigrants, placing a Madonna statue in front of the home was an expression of religious faith and ethnic pride that, intentionally or not, defied anti-Italian bigotry.

By the 1930s, Italians were E. Boston's dominant ethnic group and remained so for most of the 20th century. The neighborhood was characterized by family-run grocerias, pizzerias, Italian ice vendors, bakeries, cafes, and Italo-American clubs such as the Knights of Columbus and Sons of Italy. Neighbors were typically family members and friends who had lived in the same houses for generations, often upstairs, downstairs or next door to each other. However, by the late 1980s, many of E. Boston's first generation Italian immigrants had passed away and their adult children, frustrated by urban decay and failing public schools, sold family homes and moved to the suburbs. This urban flight, common in cities across the US, made E. Boston real estate available at low prices. From the mid 1980s until the early 2000s, new immigrants from Latin America, Southeast Asia and the Middle East arrived to E. Boston in large numbers, comprising more than half the total population by the late 1990s. Yet, a core of Italian Americans remained – elderly residents who did not want to leave their homes, and their children or grandchildren who appreciated the affordability and convenience of intergenerational family life.

Today there remains a population of slightly more than 6,000 Italian-Americans among E. Boston's 46,000 residents; most are the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of earlier Italian residents. Amidst various waves of immigration over the past 35 years and the recent large-scale arrival of affluent young urban professionals, the Italian community has the greatest longevity of any population in E. Boston. Madonna statues attest to the longevity and continuity of this community; some remain extremely well tended while others are cracked and slowly crumbling amidst changing generations and populations.

Ethnic and Religious Identity

The tradition of creating protective shelters to cover outdoor saint statues is common in Italy, but the unique creation of bathtub shrines in the US is believed to have started after World War II, when vastly improved economic conditions allowed working class immigrant homeowners to remodel their bathrooms and install modern showers. The cast iron 'claw foot' tubs (emblem-

atic of the late Victorian era) were heavy and difficult to sell. With the creative ingenuity typical of immigrants, Italians repurposed these tubs into saint's shrines, which became so popular that many who lacked an old tub fashioned their own tub-shaped shrines out of stucco. Others purchased concrete domes, some with scalloped edges, leading to the derisive moniker: 'Mary on the Half Shell'. Folklorist Joseph Sciorra explains: «The alcove replicates the sacred niche in church, and its association with this official repository of the saints has imbued this form with iconic powers» (189).

The popular "grotto" design of these shrines reflects traditional rural Italian aesthetics while the affinity for stone and brickwork can be traced to Italian architecture and the fact that many early Italian immigrants worked as stonecutters and masons in the US (Sciorra, Inguanti). At the same time, individual artistic expression is achieved by creatively combining decorative elements (painting the Madonna's clothing and fingernails or surrounding her with seasonal holiday decorations, i.e. inflatable Halloween pumpkins, plastic Easter bunnies or Christmas ornaments). More elaborate devotional displays can include small statues of kneeling children or angels praying at the Madonna's feet, sometimes accompanied by cement birds, squirrels, donkeys, deer and other rural dwellers such as stable boys or gnomes, all facing the Madonna in a community of faithful admirers.

The horticultural skill of early Italian immigrants, passed down through generations, is apparent in the landscaping around many of the statues, where potted plants, bushes and flowers are cultivated in homage to the Madonna. Trestles may be constructed on which grapevines, ivy, roses, wisteria or plastic flowers form a botanical roof over her. Inguanti has described Italian-American yard shrines as «grafting Italian aesthetic and horticultural customs onto existing American residential models» (Inguanti 89).

Madonna statues, which typically range from two to four feet in height, are usually placed in front yards, front porches or front patios for the public to see⁴. Besides being surrounded by plants, the statues may be adorned with Italian and American flags or strings of electric lights. As 65 year-old Domenic recalled of the Madonna statue in his front yard, which was put there by his grandmother in the early 20th century, «My grandparents always kept her lit at night. When it became sunset, that light *better* be on! It was a ritual, putting the light on every day at dusk and turning it off before we went to bed».

Families with these statues consider the Madonna to be a nurturing, maternal presence who protects and blesses those within as well as passersby. «She

⁴ Only 2 of 92 Madonna yard statues photographed for this study were not visible from the street.

welcomes people and let's you know that everything will be alright and she will always help you», explained 91 year old George, describing a statue he put in front of his house more than 60 years earlier. Tony, whose Madonna was purchased when his family bought their house in 1978, explained: «Italians see her as their mother. She's like your mother looking down on you». When Rosie, age 58, bought her house in 1986, she received her statue as a house-warming gift. «She helps and protects me. I go out there each morning and sit next to her when I feed the dog. I touch her hand and she gives me energy».

Sciorra observed that by displaying religious statues, «Italian-Americans make a public proclamation of faith, announcing from their homes and neighborhoods that they are protected by the powerful saints they venerate» (186). He further noted that Italian-Americans who placed Madonnas in their yards not only beautified their homes with this religious folk art, but also created sacred space within their neighborhoods, expressing their community's ethnic and religious identity (185). As private property, religious yard statues also serve the public, as explained by Tony, age 55: «Sometimes I see people stop and pray as they walk by her. Sometimes they say intentions to her». Lidia, 72, noted: «People sometimes stop on the sidewalk and look at her and pray. She helps them». «Domenic, age 65, recalled: «When I was young, I would always see people pray in front of our house. There were a lot of older Italians around at that time. They would go to church every day and walk by the house and stop and do the sign of the cross and pray. I thought we were something special that all these people would stop in front of our house and pray!».

In addition to expressing religious faith, these statues also affirmed Italian identity. Given that Italians were a disdained minority group when they first arrived in Boston and were heavily criticized by non-Italians for their “idolatry”, placing a Madonna in front of one's home was a statement of cultural affirmation. No other population settling in E. Boston prior to the Italians had this custom. When asked why his Madonna stood in the front rather than the back yard, Sammy, age 70, said: «We wanted her to be prominent». The Madonna had stood in front of his parents' house when Sammy was growing up and had moved with his family when they bought a home around the corner from his childhood residence. When asked why it was important for the statue to be *prominent*, he considered for a few moments before replying:

Because we are proud of being Catholic *and* proud of being Italian. When I was little and when my parents were young, this was more of an Irish neighborhood and we couldn't go to St. Mary's Church [the closest church to his home.] We were told we had to go to St. Lazarus [the 'Italian' parish further away]. Now things have changed and anyone can go to any church. But, I guess, we wanted to make her prominent to show that we were proud of being Catholic *and* Italian.

Affection and Nostalgia

Semioticians Lotman et al. defined culture as «the non-hereditary memory of the community» (313-314) that can only be perceived *ex post facto*. While Madonna statues had strong religious meanings for elderly and middle-aged people interviewed for this study, they had different meanings for younger generations who did not consider themselves religious. For them, these artifacts represented family memories, affection for deceased relatives for whom the statues had been vital, and nostalgia for the past. Rob, age 40, discussed his memories of the cracked and peeling Madonna in his yard:

I grew up in this house, my parents and grandparents lived here. My grandparents always had her looking nice, decorated for all the holidays. There were always beautiful flowers planted around her. For every family event with all the cousins and aunts and uncles, she was always there. For my entire childhood, she was there. Then I moved out and got married and lived elsewhere, until I inherited the house a couple of years ago and moved back. Generations of my family remember her.

For Rob, the Madonna was a reminder of doting grandparents and family festivities. He noted that when his siblings and cousins came to visit after he relocated to the family home, they exclaimed, «Wow, the Madonna is still here!». When a cousin asked if he could have the statue, Rob refused: «I'm not particularly religious, but she's staying here. I designed my entire patio around her!» (Laughing, he pointed to a new brick patio he had just installed, in which the Madonna was prominent). He joked about her being in bad shape but said that his aunt was going to retouch the paint and 'fix her up'. Pointing to several broken cement figurines that used to kneel before the Madonna, he said that he planned to «put everything back the way it used to be».

In his study of Italian-American yard statues in New York in the 1980s, Sciorra observed that new homeowners often maintained Madonna shrines constructed by previous owners. This was true in E. Boston, too, in cases where non-Italian Catholic immigrants had bought homes from Italian Americans in the 1990s or early 2000s and had kept the Madonnas out of respect. Hector, a 33-year old flight attendant originally from Guatemala, stated: «We are Catholic and she is special for us». Elizabeth, from Ghana, felt the same: «We know who she is and we respect her». Hahn, a Vietnamese doctoral student explained: «When I was a child, my parents have small statues of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. We used to pray in front of it. I don't do that anymore. But, if I had the choice to remove it, I would not. It belong to the history of the neighborhood. I think it will be a sacrilege to take out the statue!». Non-Catholic White professionals living in E. Boston also viewed the statues as documentation of

the neighborhood's history, expressing sentiments of admiration, amusement and nostalgia divorced from their own memories (Appadurai 82). This nostalgia for places and periods not personally experienced invokes positive feelings for past worlds as a source of identity or community felt to be lacking in the present (Tannock 454).

Laura, a non-Italian in her mid 30s, discussed the Madonna statue in her yard: «When I moved in, the first thing I did was ask the landlord about her. What she meant and why she was there. I noticed there are a lot of them around here and, for me, I like them because they represent the history of the neighborhood. I'm not Catholic, but I love it». Renee, an artist in her 30s, said: «I grew up in a snobby, rich town where you never saw saint statues. But there is something beautiful about them, the people who put them there and the devotion they had. A lot of the statues are almost forgotten now, but they tell a story». Several long-term residents, like Rob, noted that young urban professionals expressed curiosity about the statues: «New residents of the neighborhood walk by and ask if they can take pictures of it. They ask questions like, «What's *up* with that?» and «Why the *bathtub*?! Some people think it's tacky, but for a lot of people, it represents the history of this place and it touches them».

Madonnas and Home Ownership

Nearly all owners of Madonna statues in E. Boston purchased them or inherited them when they bought their homes. As family heirlooms, the statues moved when families relocated and were passed down from one generation to the next. Homeownership is a dream come true for immigrants and, for many Italians, erecting a Madonna in front of their new home was both an expression of gratitude and a form of protection. George, 91, explains: «I paid \$4,500 for this house in 1956. Buying a house was a big deal in my day. You're lucky if you had a pair of shoes!». He believed the Madonna had brought him good luck ever since: «People told me I might not be able to afford the mortgage or that the house might burn down or get flooded. But here I am still». A strong correlation between home ownership and yard statues was also noted by Sciorra: «Transplanted to America, shrines, chapels, and grottoes are innovatively adapted to the new possibilities offered by home ownership» (188).

However, in the globalized financial market of the 21st century, the meaning of real estate has been transformed, making urban land more valuable than the people on it (Sassen). Sub-prime mortgages in 2001-2007 destroyed 15 million US households and rapidly accelerated speculative investments. Due to

increases in securitization and deregulation, traditionally illiquid⁵ real estate in E. Boston and urban neighborhoods like it has become liquid, with many homes now purchased not for owner occupancy but for profit generation, to be redeveloped into luxury condominiums, sumptuous rental units and upscale retail. Corporate real estate investors are demolishing one, two and three-family homes and replacing them with taller 5- and 6-unit condo buildings. Giant commercial developers have converted empty factories into luxury hotels and condos and are buying up available homes and parcels of land at breakneck speeds, typically outbidding local residents. And, smitten with East Boston's striking waterfront views and close proximity to downtown Boston, thousands of affluent professionals have located to 'Boston East', as real estate marketers have rebranded the neighborhood, disassociating it from its former working class reputation.

Post Great Recession monetary policies are changing the character of E. Boston from a neighborhood populated by long-term families into an area of fashionable but transitional lodging for young professionals, university students and tourists. Lifelong residents are being displaced by exorbitant rents, the conversion of rental units into Airbnbs, and soaring home prices. While houses are commodities, Madonna statues and their accompanying gardens and grottos were a way that residents personalized and de-commodified them to express their identities and community values. These statues expressed a pride of place that helped domesticate the uncertain mobility of migration (Basu & Coleman 324). Today, they signify the history of a neighborhood and the erstwhile reality of urban homeownership among working class people who could set down the types of family and community roots that once enabled these expressions of identity to flourish.

Works Cited

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. 1996.
- Barrett, James and Roediger, David. "How White People Became White". Paula Rothenberg (ed.). *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*. New York: Worth. 2016: 65-70.
- Basu, Paul and Coleman, Simon. "Introduction: Migrant Worlds, Material Cultures". *Mobilities*, 3 (2008), 3: 313-330.
- Connell, William and Pugliese, Stanislaw. *Routledge History of Italian Americans*. New York: Routledge. 2018.

⁵ Assets that cannot easily be sold for cash.

- Guglielmo, Jennifer and Salerno, Salvatore. *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*. New York: Routledge. 2003.
- Inguanti, Joseph. "Landscapes of Order, Landscapes of Memory". Joseph Sciorra (ed.). *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italians American Lives*. New York: Fordham. 2011: 83-106.
- Krase, Jerome. "Italian American Urban Landscapes". *Italian Americana*, 22 (2004), 1: 17-44.
- Lotman, Yuri; Uspensky, Boris and Mihaychuk, George. "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture". *New Literary History*, 9 (1978), 2: 211-232.
- Luconi, Stefano. "Black dagoes? Italian immigrants' racial status in the USA: an ecological view". *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 14 (2016), 3: 188-199.
- . "Tampa's 1910 Lynching: The Italian American Perspective". *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, 88 (2009), 1: 30-53.
- Manzo, Joseph. "Italian American Yard Shrines". *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 4 (1983), 1: 119-125.
- Orsi, Robert. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1950*. NY: Yale University. 2002.
- Rimanelli, Marco and Postman, Sheryl. *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching and US-Italian Relations*. NY: Peter Lang. 1992.
- Sassen, Saskia. "A Savage Sorting of Winners and Losers: Contemporary Versions of Primitive Accumulation". *Globalizations*, 7 (2010), 1: 23-50.
- Sciorra, Joseph. "Yard Shrines and Sidewalk Altars of New York's Italian Americans". *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, 3 (1989): 185-198.
- Tannock, Stuart. "Nostalgia Critique". *Cultural Studies*, 9 (1995), 3: 453-464.
- Vecoli, Rudolph. "Prelates and Peasants: Italian Immigrants and the Catholic Church". *Journal of Social History*, 2 (1969), 3: 217-268.

Online Source

Census Bureau. 2016 data:

https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_16_5YR_B04006&prodType=table (accessed on August 22, 2018).