Volume 8

Number 1

Spring/Summer 2001

The Italian American Review

A Social Science Journal of the Italian American Experience

The John D. Calandra Italian American Institute
A university Institute under the aegis of
Queens College, The City University of New York

Book Reviews

book. "The invasion goes on..." Granai observed 16 June 1944. He added poignantly, "poor kids—many of them so young." A month later he wrote, "Dearest wife....I am sending the pictures of my detachment in battle dress....I have three Catholics, one Jew, one Agnostic....a Mormon, and one atheist." In July 1944 Granai landed in North Africa. He marveled at the population of "Arabs, Kurds, Negroes, Whites, Browns, Mulattos."

Granai's letters from Italy make up the most interesting reading in the volume. Landing at Naples in August 1944, he participated in the great assault against the German Gothic Line. He openly expressed a deep distaste for Fascism, articulating his anger for the "the sorrow, the heartache, the death and destruction" in Italy. During a furlough, Granai set out to see his family's ancestral village of Massa – Carrara. In February 1945, he urged his American relatives, "Send any clothes, especially baby clothes.... It has been a hard winter for these people."

Readers will appreciate the letters of "Kip" Granai. We are richer for the publication of these letters.

Gary Mormino
University of South Florida

Mattanza: Love and Death in the Sea of Sicily. Theresa Maggio. Cambridge Mass: Perseus, 2000. 263 pp.

Myth and ritual inform every facet of quotidian life in contemporary Sicily, as they did when it was praised as one of the great centers of modern society and culture in centuries past. Even after becoming one of the most conquered lands of the Mediterranean, its steadfast adherence to customs both sacred and profane is perhaps its greatest asset in the face of a rapidly advancing global culture. Modern Sicily boasts all of the convenient trappings of any industrialized European region, minus the highly – glossed sheen: cell phones abound, as do urban fashion, high – profile American brands such as Levi's and Nike, and hip hop music. In its major cities, the inevitable McDonald's franchise caters to Sicilian youth eager to momentarily escape the nagging

reality of being unemployed tomorrow, next month, two years down the line. Yet, despite its continual longing to take its rightful place in the modern world, glimmers of personal triumph and renewed optimism emerge in the face of daunting economic and political adversity that has always plagued this most sacred island.

One of a handful of highly personal accounts of life in Sicily to be published in the United States in recent years. Theresa Maggio's *Mattanza: Love and Death in the Sea of Sicily*, movingly documents a moribund tuna fishing community and its struggle for survival on the island of Favignana. Skillfully weaving together personal narrative, mythology, island folklore, and highly technical descriptions culled from scientific documents, Maggio paints a minutely detailed, intimate portrait of Favignana's ritualistic and erotically charged *mattanza*, the annual tuna slaughter whose roots date back to ninth century Arab Sicily, when Allah was more likely to be invoked before dropping the massive nets into the crystalline sea, than the beloved saints to whom the *tonnaroti* now pray for a bountiful catch. Like the many who came before in search of mystery and myth on the ancient island the Greeks christened Trinacria, Maggio immediately lays bare her primary reason for coming to Favignana to witness fifteen *mattanzas*, some bountiful and some meager. Following a course that seeks concrete evidence in the inextricable relationship between life and death, Maggio pinpoints Favignana as an unwitting example of a time – honored mythology that emerges in all its horror and glory every spring when bluefin tuna head to warmer waters to spawn.

Maggio witnesses her first *mattanza* and immediately beckons her readers to accompany her on a journey of discovery and self – revelation to the heart of the Favignana fishing community and into the personal lives of its inhabitants. Her experience as a science writer stands her in good stead here; every facet of the *mattanza* is described in precise and loving detail, from the complex web of ropes and nets that each Spring will guide the spawning bluefin into the *camera della morte* to the wizened and muscled *tonnaroti* who lower hooked gaffs into the death trap to forever silence their massive prey. Perhaps the greatest challenge the writer faced was gaining acceptance among the proud *Favignanesi* whose contact with the encroaching outside world is viewed with

some suspicion yet must ultimately continue to ensure their economic survival. Maggio is able to gracefully enter into this male – dominated microcosm and befriends even the most suspicious among them because of her purposeful line of questioning that rightfully elevates the *tonnaroti's* work to a sacred dimension not easily understood by outsiders. It is only through her intimate observations in the fishermen's home and work environments over the course of many seasons that we learn what emotions the men experience as they are about to kill a bluefin gasping for breath or what tears they cried in their hearts when forced to leave their beloved island in order to support their families. When the writer confides to one of the *tonnaroti* that some think the *mattanza* a barbaric practice, he retorts, "You tell them that this is what is barbaric; to raise a calf, feed him, and fatten him, make him think you're his friend, then one day you slaughter him. The fish, the tuna, he comes to me and I take him. The beast of the land cries, but the tuna no." The fishermen's raw humanity, as living and breathing individuals who need and feel, give and take explicitly and without apology, dampens the brutality of the *mattanza,* which redeems itself as a life – giving necessity.

The ritualistic customs associated with this centuries – old practice, clearly as vulnerable to the threat of extinction, as the tuna of which the fishing community depends for its livelihood, evoke the most poignant images. Maggio introduces the reader to the evocative prayers and songs—chanted in the Favignanesi dialect before any crucial move is undertaken—that are as integral to the proper dramatic unfolding of a *mattanza* as is the year – round maintenance of boats, nets and anchors. A dramatic moment betraying the *mattanza's* Arabic origins occurs as the *rais* or commander stretches his arms skyward to initiate the process of pulling the tuna – laden nets toward the surface of the water in time the call – and – response litany of the men, "Ai – a – mola, ai – a – mola." Pull, you Moor. Pull.

Maggio eventually becomes the fisherman's mascot and is invited to board the *vascello* from where she would witness "the sacrifice from the altar." As each of the *mattanza* seasons passes and

Gia M. Amella

the tuna are shipped overseas where they command greater profit, she delves deeper into the private lives of the *tonnaroti.* Their chants that were initially full of optimism become more plaintive as the will of the gods collides with the limits of nature and the demands of the marketplace. She deftly recounts how the once prolific schools of bluefin were obliterated by large – scale commercial fishing; overfished waters eventually forced Favignana to close its cannery in 1981 whose smoke stacks huddle like spectres under the ruins of a Norman fortress. Even the demand for freshly killed tuna that will command top dollar in the finest Japanese sushi bars has led the *Favignanesi* to become increasingly alienated from their very livelihood. They no longer anticipated the *mattanza* with the same hopeful energy as they mended nets and tarred wooden boats in the port facing the jagged western coast of mainland. Even after the *tonnaroti* form a cooperative which promises larger stipends, the *rais* harbors no illusions about what the future holds: "The intention was that of transforming the *mattanza* into a tourist event, and we succeeded."

Invitable comparisons can be drawn between Maggio's highly self – reflexive book and others that recount mythical – personal journeys into the heart of Sicily (most notably Mary Taylor Simeti's *On Persephone's Island*). They find themselves caught between the modern world beckoning and warning and their longing to remain comfortably cradled by deeply rooted customs and primordial rhythms gently guided by the changing of the seasons. It is Maggio's female voice that emerges loud and clear here, a gently probing voice, which perhaps helped her gain access to confidential information even native Sicilians, or perhaps even Favignanesi themselves would be hard – pressed to uncover. To the author's detriment, her story may fall too readily into well – trampled territory and be slightly weakened by revealing details of a short – lived relationship with one of the *tonnaroti.* While such an intensely self – revelatory book would naturally allow the audience access to the private moments—whether they are an integral part of the primary narrative or not—Maggio succeeds in recreating an intensely dramatic ritual with a multi – hued palette that carries the reader into the deepest reaches of her ancestral homeland.