

# Bathtub Madonnas as Media in an Italian American Neighborhood in Transition: Migration, Gentrification, and Meaningful Properties

*By Regina Marchi*

*Based on historical research, visual analysis, photographic documentation, and 31 interviews, this article examines Madonna yard shrines constructed by Italian Americans in the 20th century as vernacular media and considers their role in knowledge production, identity representation, and the transmission of history. It discusses the historic meanings and contexts of these shrines, including their emergence during a time of anti-Italian bigotry, while examining their evolving significance within the changing cultural and socioeconomic contexts of globalization. While previous research on religious yard statuary has analyzed them as expressions of faith and cultural identity within homogeneous communities, this article explores their meanings in a neighborhood that is rapidly changing due to new migration, gentrification, and transformations in the urban real estate market.*

Punctuating the landscape of narrow streets and wooden double- and triple-decker homes in East Boston, the largest Italian-American neighborhood in Boston, Massachusetts, one sees front yard statues of the Virgin Mary, colloquially referred to as “Bathtub Madonnas.”<sup>1</sup> Commonly ranging from two to four feet in height, they are made of plaster or concrete, surrounded by protective alcoves created from old bathtubs, handmade brick or stone “grottoes,” or small wooden huts (see Figure 10). The popular grotto design of these Catholic shrines reflects traditional rural Italian aesthetics: The stone and brickwork can be traced to customary Italian architecture styles and the masonry expertise of many Italian immigrants who settled in the United States in the early 20th century (Sciorra, 1989; Inguanti, 2011). Situated within both the private and public domain, Madonna yard statues are private in that they are located on private property and decorated according to the personal dispositions of home owners, yet public in that they are

typically placed in front yards, porches, or patios facing the street for the public to see.

The term “Bathtub Madonna” comes from the unusual structures in which many older Catholic saint statues in Italian American residential neighborhoods are placed: pre-WWII bathtubs that are partially buried vertically into the ground to form arched alcoves around statues (see Figure 1). The tradition of creating protective shelters to cover outdoor saint statues has been common since medieval times in Italy<sup>2</sup> (Belan, 2001), the seat of world Catholicism. The unique creation of bathtub shrines in the United States 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 (emblematic of the late Victorian era) were heavy to move and difficult to sell when bathrooms were remodeled. With the creative ingenuity typical of immigrant groups, Italian Americans repurposed these tubs into



**Figure 1** (Above left) Classic “Bathtub Madonna” enshrined in old tub (photo by Christopher Marchi).

**Figure 2** (Above right) Madonna statue in scalloped “half shell,” hand painted face and hair (photo by Regina Marchi).

saints’ shrines for their yards. These became so popular that many who lacked an old tub created their own tub-shaped shrines out of stucco.

Others purchased concrete domes, some with scalloped edges, to house their Madonnas (see Figure 2), giving rise to the moniker: “Mary on the Half Shell.” Folklorist Joseph Sciorra, who has written extensively on the ways that people express their personal religious faith in material, creative, and often public forms, asserts: “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” (Sciorra, 1989, p. 189).

This study investigates the social history, geographical translations, and meaningful properties of Italian American Madonna yard statues within the changing cultural and socioeconomic contexts of the early 21st century. While most previous research on Italian American Madonna yard shrines, the majority of which was conducted from the 1970s through the 1990s, focused on the meanings of these vernacular media as expressions of ethnic identity and Catholic faith within relatively homogeneous communities, this study reveals that at the same time they have also been important public symbols of homeownership and

long-term investment in a specific geographical place.

Madonna yard statues are referred to here as “vernacular media,” guided by prior scholarship on vernacular religion and Christian material culture. Often contrasted with formal or elite cultural expressions, the term vernacular refers to the “language, expression, or mode of expression occurring among ordinary people,” as well as to “the common building style of a period or place” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).<sup>3</sup> Scholars of religion consider outdoor saint shrines to be a form of “vernacular religion”—or “expressions of religion in everyday life” (Bowman & Valk, 2012; McDannell, 1995; Orsi, 1997; Primiano, 1995). Folklorist Leonard Primiano notes that the mental and material expressions of vernacular religion highlight the power of individuals and communities to create and recreate their own religious meanings (Primiano, 1995, p. 44).

Historian of religion Colleen McDannell refers to Christian material culture in the United States as a “non-written text [that] is also a language of expression of American life and culture” (McDannell, 1995, p. 2). She contends that these “texts” [Christian objects and landscapes] have meaning only when their “human” elements are

deciphered, noting: “It is only through the examination of the historical and present context of material culture that it can be ‘read’” (McDannell, 1995, p. 4). At the same time, she warns against viewing religious objects solely as signs of religious commitment: “Displaying denominational affiliation is only one of several meanings objects may have. The object itself, and the memories and emotions it elicits, may supersede whatever its ‘official’ theological meaning might be” (McDannell, 1995, p. 65).

Sociologist Robert Orsi notes that vernacular religion reflects people’s experiences as they “make and remake themselves endlessly, relentlessly, on constantly shifting grounds and in often brutal economic circumstances” (Orsi, 1997, p. 10). He contends that vernacular religion is “one of—if not *the* primary media—through which this work of making and remaking has proceeded” (Orsi, 1997, p. 10). Elsewhere, Orsi has used the term “media of engagement” to refer to a public Madonna statue (Orsi, 2002, p. 3). Influenced by these understandings of vernacular religion and material culture, this article considers bathtub Madonnas as vernacular media that communicate visually on a number of levels to be discussed.

The term *property* is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2019) as: “(1) a quality or trait belonging to an individual or thing, as well as (2) something owned or possessed, specifically: a piece of real estate.”<sup>4</sup> In this article, bathtub Madonnas are examined both as symbols of property [home ownership] among Italian immigrants and their U.S. descendants and as media for communicating characteristics or “properties” about the families and communities connected to them. In the 2020s, these early and mid-20th-century artifacts have also become repositories of the past that evoke nostalgia and sometimes kitsch in a neighborhood rapidly changing due to new migration patterns, gentrification, and transformations in U.S. urban real estate markets.

Viewing bathtub Madonnas as a form of visual communication located at the intersections of street art and domestic art, this article discusses historic meanings and contexts of these statues, including past constructions of “race” pertaining to Italians and the emergence of Madonna yard statues within this racialized context; it also considers their role in knowledge production and the representation of community identities, beliefs, and history. This research diverges from earlier scholarship in that it discusses the Madonna yard statue not only as a medium of cultural identity and “visual piety” (Morgan,

1998), about which there have been numerous studies, but also as a public manifestation of home ownership. Explicitly connecting religious yard statuary to homeownership, this political economic reading of bathtub Madonnas helps us understand the long-term community-rootedness of these media that materialize only when community residents have the economic ability to buy a home, thereby gaining the autonomy necessary to express themselves publicly on their private property.

## Literature Review

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim notes that religion is eminently social, stating that “religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities” and that, as the “product of collective thought,” these representations are “destined to excite, maintain, or recreate certain mental states” (Durkheim et al., 2001, p. 11). For those within homogeneous populations who erect publicly visible saint statues on their properties, these icons embody *habitus*, a system of thought schemes constituting a world of rules and routines that shape daily practice and help maintain coherent communities (Bourdieu, 1984). Religious statues serve believers in the creation of personal and family narratives that help them understand and reinforce their relationship to their family, their larger community, and their past. The religious image, notes art historian David Morgan, facilitates collective remembrance, standing “as a collective representation of personal relationships or community” (Morgan, 1998, p. 206).

Prior research on Madonna yard statues in Italo-American communities has interpreted them as expressions of individual and collective religious faith and ethnic identity (Sciorra, 1989; Inguanti, 2011; Manzo, 1983; Krase, 2004). 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” (Sciorra, 1989, p. 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 (Sciorra, 1989, 2015). As vernacular media, religious statues are widely understood to “sacralize space . . . to communicate to believers the crucial signifiers of their identity as believers” and to serve as a “concrete expression of a community’s relationship to the divine” (Morgan, 1998, p. 182; Chidester & Linenthal, 1995). As Basu and



Coleman (2008) have noted, these statues also “expressed a pride of place that helped domesticate the uncertain mobility of migration” (p. 324).

Sociologist Robert Orsi has illustrated the importance of the Madonna and her annual street *fiesta* to Italian Americans in New York’s Italian Harlem as a “media of engagement” that helped Italian immigrants in the early 20th century to build community and respond to the challenges of modern urban society, including ethnic discrimination (Orsi, 2002, p. 3). Facing animosity from Irish Americans, White Anglos Saxon Protestants (WASPs), and other established Caucasian populations in the United States, southern Italian immigrants in the early 20th century were treated as racialized others (Connell & Gardaphe, 2010; Luconi, 2016). They were classified by the dominant Anglo society as a non-White race (Barrett & Roediger, 2016; Guglielmo & Salerno, 2003) and were even lynched in the southern states of Louisiana and Florida (Luconi, 2009; Rimanelli & Postman, 1992). In U.S. newspapers, novels, plays, and movies of the early 20th century, Italians, like racialized populations before and after them, were portrayed as violent criminals or as stupid and lazy, while U.S. political cartoons caricatured them as apes and rats (Messina, 2004). Both Irish Catholics and WASPs disdained Italian immigrants and considered them “pagan” and “sacrilegious” because of their “idolatry” in worshipping saint statues (Orsi, 2002; Vecoli, 1969). Thus, despite their shared Catholic religion, Italians were not welcomed in Irish American Catholic churches (Orsi, 2002; Vecoli, 1969). In response, Italian immigrants created their own churches and ethnic religious communities in the United States (Connell & Pugliese, 2018; Orsi, 2002; Sciorra, 1989, 2015).

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, 2008). Homeownership was (and is) the aspirational American Dream, and immigrants arriving to the United States in the early 20th century generated significant demand for owner-occupied housing in inner cities. Italian immigrants considered owning a home to be a prestigious way to show that, after years of hard work, the family had reached a certain level of financial success (Furlan, 2015). But today, a century later, urban migration differs from the past in terms of migrants’ cultural backgrounds, attitudes toward home ownership (such as an increasing preference for renting rather than

owning) (Arnold, 2019), and social and human capital (Ray et al., 2004). In addition, real estate markets in major U.S. cities have experienced major structural changes over the past 20 years, limiting the ability of nonaffluent people to purchase homes in city neighborhoods.

This article examines new meanings of Madonna yard statues today, related to memory and nostalgia for the past—a yearning for a time of slower life rhythms and greater community stability. Seeing memory as a collective rather than individual phenomenon, sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1980) has argued that remembrances are not pure recollections, but “reconstructions of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present” (p. 69). In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens notes that modernity has brought a deterioration of both place-based and kinship-based communities, as family and friends frequently live hundreds or thousands of miles apart (Giddens, 1990). For the shrinking number of people still connected to place-based communities, those places are now fused with global influences in the form of diverse ethnic populations, shops, foods, languages, and media, among other aspects (Giddens, 1990). And with the disjunctures brought on by modernity, there can also emerge a resurgence of and renewed appreciation for traditions, as people seek grounding for the “ontological insecurity” that modernity brings (Giddens, 1990, p. 178).

Arjun Appadurai (1990) argues that in today’s ever-growing technological society, people around the world look wistfully toward the past with nostalgia for a close-knit culture and community they may never have experienced. 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, 1995). Appadurai further notes that “the warp of these stabilities [place-based communities] is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion, as more persons and groups deal with the realities of having to move (Appadurai, 1990, p. 297). Literary theorist and media artist Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as “a sentiment of loss and displacement”—a reaction to modernity that occasions a “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (Boym, 2001, p. xiii). She asserts:

In counterpoint to our fascination with cyberspace and the virtual global village, there is a no less global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a

longing for continuity in a fragmented world. Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals. (Boym, 2001, p. xiv).

Although some residents and visitors feel a sense of nostalgia upon seeing East Boston's Madonna shrines, others view them as amusing forms of kitsch, which McDannell defines as "what one particular group does not appreciate about another group's culture" (McDannell, 1995, p. 165). In discussing religious objects that are ridiculed as kitsch, Jean Pirotte noted: "The kitsch object will fulfill a new pedagogical function by giving an enlightened elite the opportunity to exercise its . . . normative function through it" (McDannell, 1995, p. 165). With all of this in mind, this study illustrates how the meanings and properties of bathtub Madonnas in East Boston have transformed significantly over the past several decades of changing times and social contexts.

## Methods

The methodology for this study included visual analysis, photographic documentation, contextual interviews, and historic research. The Metropolitan Boston area is home to the fourth-largest Italian American population in the United States, and the residential neighborhood of East Boston was selected as the study site because it has the largest number of Italian American residents and the largest number of Italian speakers in the city of Boston.<sup>5</sup> It also has the largest number of Madonna statues of any Boston neighborhood, and no other population living in East Boston prior to the Italians had the custom of placing Madonna statues in publicly visible outdoor domestic spaces. Although tourists and tourism organizations focus on the North End neighborhood as Boston's "Little Italy" (the city's symbolic center of Italianness, showcasing Italian eateries and festivals), this historically Italian neighborhood has become so gentrified over the past two decades that relatively few people of Italian ancestry currently live there. More importantly for this study, the tall brick [former tenement] apartment buildings that comprise the residential housing stock of the North End do not have front yards or front patios, so there has never been a publicly visible presence of Madonna yard statues in this neighborhood.

The research for this study began with conducting a review of the literature on Madonna yard statuary in the United States, as well as on historical Madonna statuary in Italy. Next, the

author walked and drove around East Boston, an area that is 1 mile long and 3 miles wide, taking photos of Madonna yard statues, creating a "Madonna map," and logging the addresses of 92 homes that had publicly visible Madonna statues in street-facing front or side yards. Field notes were taken, noting the condition of the homes, yards, and statues at each address. Formal letters were mailed to 40 homes, explaining the purpose of the research and inviting residents to become interview subjects. In an attempt to reach a cross-section of residents, the PI mailed letters to a variety of single-family, two-family and three-family homes in the neighborhood. Many appeared to be owner-occupied (given the well-kept physical condition of the homes and yards); others appeared *not* to be (given the neglected condition of building facades, yards, and Madonna shrines, as well as the multiple surnames on mailboxes). In the former case, the surnames were usually Italian. In the latter case, mailboxes and doorbells often had four or more different surnames per one apartment—something typically seen when apartments are shared by groups of genealogically unrelated renters such as university students or immigrants. The surnames in such cases were usually not Italian and were frequently Latino, Vietnamese, Middle Eastern, or Anglo, reflecting the changing demographics of the neighborhood since the early 1990s, when the vast majority of surnames on East Boston mailboxes were Italian.

When the formal letters yielded only *one* response, the PI began personally knocking on doors of homes that she had mapped earlier and introducing herself to residents who opened them.<sup>6</sup> In this way, she was eventually able to interview 25 people at their homes and six people via phone for a total of 31 one-on-one interviews. These ranged in length from 10 minutes to an hour each and were conducted from June 9 to September 13, 2018, and during September 2019. Most interview participants were middle-aged or elderly long-term East Boston residents of Italian ancestry, but the sample also included newer East Boston residents, including four Latinx, two Vietnamese, and one Ghanaian immigrant, as well as six non-Italian young urban professionals. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 97 and were asked to share what they knew about the Madonna statue in their yard, particularly regarding when it was placed there, by whom, and why. They were asked to discuss the meaning that the statue had for them (if any) and what meaning they felt the statue communicated to the public. At times, the person at the door would go inside to get an older relative to speak with the PI, or they would provide the phone number of a relative who knew more than they did about the statue.

## Background on the Research Site

The neighborhood of East Boston was founded in 1830 by wealthy White Anglo Saxon Protestants (WASPs) who sought to escape the crowds and noise of downtown Boston by moving to this quiet island (then accessible to mainland Boston exclusively by boat). Yet by the 1880s and 1890s, when East Boston's waterfront became the region's premier clipper ship construction zone and a major industrial area, the genteel single-family mansions of the early WASP settlers were replaced with double- and triple-decker dwellings to house the multitudes of working-class immigrants of Scandinavian, Irish, and Jewish ancestry who came to East Boston to work in its shipyards, docks, factories, and associated shops (Marchi, 2015).

In the early 20th century, rural immigrants from southern Italy began arriving to East Boston by the thousands, attracted to jobs in manufacturing, shipbuilding, and construction. The major reason for leaving Italy was intense poverty combined with a lack of available land for agriculture or homebuilding (Furlan, 2015; Mangione, 1992; Puelo, 2007). The largest surge of Italian immigrants to the United States occurred from 1890 to 1924, with more than 4 million arriving between 1900 and 1910 alone (Wills, 2005). When the East Boston Immigration Station, the second largest U.S. immigration port of entry after Ellis Island, opened in 1919, Italians sailed directly from Calabria and Sicily to East Boston, seeking streets "paved with gold." Instead, they found intense ethnic discrimination and limited opportunities for upward mobility.

At this point in time, most political, economic, and social power in Boston rested in the hands of White Anglo Saxon Protestants ("Boston Brahmins") and Irish Americans. As one interview participant, 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 [Irish] Catholic 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," a perspective echoed by most elderly Italian Americans interviewed for this study. While the Irish also initially faced intense discrimination upon their mass migration to the United States in the mid-1800s, they had become prominent in politics, business, and civil service jobs by the time the Italians arrived in

large numbers. Many Irish had lived in East Boston in the late 19th and early 20th century but began relocating to more affluent suburbs as Italians moved into the neighborhood.

Fleeing extreme poverty in southern Italy, Italian immigrants initially rented cramped tenement apartments in U.S. cities until they could save enough money to buy their own homes. Since East Boston was only a few minutes away from downtown Boston by ferry or subway, yet offered more affordable housing with modest yards where families could grow fruits and vegetables (something many other urban neighborhoods lacked), large numbers of Italian immigrants purchased homes there and set down roots. By the 1930s, Italians were East Boston's dominant ethnic group and remained so for most of the 20th century. The neighborhood was characterized by family-run groceries, 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 homes for generations, often upstairs, downstairs, or next door to each other.

However, by the late 1980s, many of East 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 large cities across the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, caused East Boston's real estate prices to plummet, making the neighborhood attractive to first-time homebuyers and renters from new immigrant groups. From the mid 1980s until the early 2000s, immigrants from Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East arrived in East Boston, comprising more than half the total population by the late 1990s. Like the Italians before them, many of these immigrants first rented and later purchased homes in East Boston. However, a core of Italian Americans remained in the community—elderly residents who did not want to leave their homes, and their adult children or grandchildren who appreciated the neighborhood's proximity to downtown Boston and the affordability and convenience of close-knit intergenerational family life.

Today there remains a population of slightly more than 6,000 Italian Americans among East Boston's 46,000 residents; most are the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of earlier Italian immigrants. Amidst diverse waves of immigration over the past 35 years and the recent large-scale arrival of affluent young urban professionals, East Boston's Italian community





**Figure 3** (Above left) Madonna statue surrounded by real and artificial flowers (photo by Regina Marchi).

**Figure 4** (Above right) Madonna shrine, with angels, decorated for July 4th (photo by Regina Marchi).

has the greatest longevity of any population currently living in the neighborhood. Madonna yard statues attest to this long-term presence in the community; some remain extremely well-tended; others are cracked and slowly crumbling—historical traces of a vanishing world (see Figure 9).

### **Madonna Statues, Home Ownership, and Cultural Pride**

The cost and labor involved in the construction and maintenance of a religious yard shrine is a long-term property investment that is almost never undertaken by renters. Owning a home and a parcel of land around it provided Italian immigrants with a physical space that they could decorate and cultivate—a public space in which to proudly express their home ownership status as well as their cultural and religious identities. Decorating residential properties with bathtub Madonnas was a way to decommodify otherwise impersonal, generic buildings, domesticating and transforming these structures from inert market commodities into heartfelt havens for occupants and the larger community (see Figure 3). While not a focal point of his research, a correlation between home ownership and Italian yard shrines was also mentioned by Sciorra, who wrote:

“Transplanted to America, shrines, chapels, and grottoes are innovatively adapted to the new possibilities offered by home ownership” (Sciorra, 1989, p. 188).

Interview data for this study revealed that Italian American owners of Madonna yard statues almost always acquired them around the time that they bought their homes, usually purchasing them, inheriting them from family, or receiving them as housewarming gifts from close relatives who wanted to bless or protect the owners in their new home. As family heirlooms, these artifacts frequently moved from home to home when families relocated to new houses and could be passed down from one generation to the next. In some cases, Madonna yard statues had “watched” over multiple generations of family members living in a particular home. Connecting Madonna yard shrines to financial success, some middle-aged residents commented that, for their parents’ generation, having a Madonna statue in front of the house was considered “classy” or a “status symbol.”

Older homeowners viewed their Madonna statues simultaneously as celebratory markers of upward mobility, expressions of gratitude to the Virgin Mary, and as forms of domiciliary



**Figure 5** Madonna shrine displaying masonry and horticulture skills (photo by Regina Marchi).

protection. George, 91, explained: “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 that his Madonna statue (Figure 4) 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.” Multiple people recounted receiving the Madonna as a housewarming gift from parents or other relatives. Carmela, 63, explained:

She used to be in front of my house [down the street] when I was growing up. Then my mother gave her to us when we got married and moved to this house. She [the statue] has kept us safe.

According to interview data, most of the Madonna statues in East Boston were erected from the 1940s through the early 1990s, often at significant financial expense to their owners. One middle-aged informant gave an idea of how expensive these statues were in previous decades when he said that his grandmother purchased her yard statue in 1950 for \$200.00 (the equivalent of \$2,125.00 in 2020). Depending on their size, new Madonna yard statues today typically range in price from \$50.00 to \$1,000.00 each, and beyond

the cost, these shrines require an ongoing investment of time and dedication. For rural Italian immigrants and their U.S.-born offspring, the maintenance of yard shrines expressed cultural values of dedication to horticultural beauty and attention to seasonal cycles related to agrarian life. Confirming Inguanti’s observation that Italian American yard shrines “graft Italian aesthetic and horticultural customs onto existing American residential models” (Inguanti, 2011, p. 89), the horticultural skill of early Italian immigrants, passed down through generations, was apparent in the landscaping around many of the statues in owner-occupied homes in East Boston. Potted plants, carefully pruned bushes, and vibrant flowers were often cultivated around the shrines in homage to the Madonna (Figure 5). Wooden or metal trestles were constructed on which grapevines, ivy, roses, wisteria, or plastic flowers formed a botanical roof over the Virgin Mary. At the same time, an owner’s individual artistic expression was communicated by creatively combining decorative elements on and around the statues (i.e., painting the Madonna’s clothing and fingernails or surrounding her with seasonal holiday decorations such as inflatable Halloween pumpkins, plastic Easter bunnies, or Christmas ornaments). More elaborate devotional displays included 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. Besides being surrounded by plants, the statues were frequently adorned with Italian and American flags or strings of white or colored electric mini lights. As 65-year-old Domenic recalled childhood memories of the faded Madonna statue in his front yard, which was put there by his grandmother in the early 20th century, he noted: "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."

And the statues' meanings, at the time, went beyond religious expression. Given that Italians were a disdained and racialized minority group when they first arrived in Boston and were heavily criticized by non-Italians for their "pagan idolatry," placing a Madonna in front of one's home was also, for some, a contestation of anti-Italian bigotry and a proud declaration of Italian ethnic presence in the neighborhood. This was evident in the interview comments of older Italian East Bostonians who mentioned that the shrines were expressions of Italian identity. Some noted this in passing, such as Tommy, a middle-aged man whose Madonna shrine had stood in his front yard for more than 30 years: "She symbolizes Italian culture and our belief in the Lord." Skippy, who was 66 and whose Madonna statue had been in front of his home(s) for most of his life, offered greater detail. The statue had stood in front of his parents' house when he was growing up and moved with him when he and his wife bought a home around the corner from his childhood residence. When asked why his Madonna statue was placed in his *front* yard, rather than the [private] back yard, he replied: "We wanted her to be prominent." When asked why it was important for the statue to be "prominent," he quietly reflected 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 Catholic 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.



**Figure 6** Madonna in wooden shelter cared for by four generations of the same family (photo by Regina Marchi).

### Public and Private: Individual and Community Properties

Although religious yard statues are private property, they were perceived by most owner occupants as also serving the public. Speaking of the Madonna statue in her front yard, Sabina, a homeowner in her mid-60s, said: "Sometimes I see people stop and pray as they walk by her. Sometimes they say intentions to her." Her neighbor Lidia, 72, said this about the Madonna shrine on her own front patio: "People sometimes stop on the sidewalk and look at her and pray. She helps them." Domenic, age 65, whose Madonna yard statue has been in his front yard for four generations (Figure 6), recalled:

When I was a boy, 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!

Interview participants who were practicing Catholics spoke of the Madonna as a nurturing, maternal presence who protected and blessed



**Figure 7** Front porch shrine decorated with Italian cultural symbols and family photos (photo by Regina Marchi).

those living within the homes as well as passersby. “She welcomes people and lets you know that everything will be all right, and she will always help you,” explained 91-year-old George, describing a Madonna statue he put in front of his house more than 60 years earlier. Tony, age 55, who was pruning rose bushes around his Madonna shrine when interviewed, said the statue was purchased by his parents when the family bought the house in 1978. He explained: “Italians see her as their mother. She’s like your mother looking down on you.” When Roxie, age 58, bought her house in 1986, she received her statue as a house-warming gift from her favorite cousin, a priest. Referring to the Madonna, she said:

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. I know she helps others who walk by the house, too.

As these comments indicate, Italian Americans placed Madonna statues in front of their homes not only to protect and beautify their properties but also to create sacred space within the neighborhood. Frequently hand-painted and decorated, these shrines are forms of domestic art that, in addition to venerating the Virgin Mary, sometimes honor the memory of deceased

relatives via photos, military service plaques, inscribed stones, or other mementos. An example of both the do-it-yourself artistry of these shrines and the intentional creation of public sacred space can be seen in Figure 7—a Madonna shrine in front of the home of an elderly Italian immigrant who could be seen on most warm days sitting on a folding chair on his porch. Speaking in Italian, he said that he had purchased the Madonna statue when he bought the house in 1984 and decorated the shrine for each changing season. The Madonna stood in the center of the shrine wearing her customary blue and white robes and protected by a blue and white scalloped tub-shaped alcove. Encased in clear glass to protect it from the elements, the shrine was decorated with strings of colored mini lights; a crucifix lamp; numerous statues of angels, cherubs, and small children; and at the bottom, a small nativity scene of the Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, and the infant Jesus. On one side of the shrine was a strand of woven garlic (long believed by rural Italians to ward off evil), and on both sides were bunches of plastic red electric lights shaped like *cornicelli*—horn-shaped charms resembling chili peppers, traditionally considered by Italians to be good-luck emblems.<sup>7</sup> At the bottom and top of the shrine were photos of the owner’s deceased wife and grandson; the latter framed photo was draped by a silver crucifix chain with Catholic saint medals on it. At the



bottom of the shrine, near the photo of the deceased grandson, were a teddy bear, a stuffed elf, and some Star Wars toys. While the shrine had great personal meaning for the owner and his family, it was also clearly meant to be viewed by the public, who were addressed via a hand-written sign inside the case stating: “Look but don’t touch.” Some Catholic pedestrians (particularly Italians and Latinos) made the sign of the cross when walking by the statue. Other pedestrians stopped to stare thoughtfully at the shrine—its colorful and illuminated nature impossible to ignore, day or night. This Madonna shrine was well known in the neighborhood for being meticulously maintained, and local residents considered it a familiar public landmark.

### Affection, Nostalgia, and History

Semioticians Lotman et al. (1978) have defined culture as “the non-hereditary memory of the community” that can only be perceived *ex post facto* (pp. 313–314). While bathtub Madonnas had strong religious meanings for elderly and middle-aged Italian Americans interviewed for this study, they had very different meanings for younger generations of Italian Americans 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 42, discussed his memories of the cracked and peeling Madonna in his yard (Figure 8):

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 him after he relocated to the old family home, they were surprised and happy to see statue in the yard, exclaiming, “Wow, the Madonna is still here!” When a cousin asked if he could have the weathered old 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 recently installed, in which the Madonna was prominent].



**Figure 8** Deteriorating Bathtub Madonna with broken figurines at feet (photo by Regina Marchi).

He joked about her being in “bad shape” but said his aunt was going to retouch the peeling paint and “fix her up.” Pointing to broken cement figurines of children and squirrels that were lying in pieces on the ground near the feet of the Madonna, he said that he planned to “put everything back the way it used to be.”

Sal, age 53, and a fourth-generation Italian American East Bostonian, also discussed how seeing the neighborhood’s bathtub Madonnas made him remember the past:

Although I personally don’t relate to them as religious shines, I always have a good feeling when I see them. I wouldn’t be willing to pay for and spend time maintaining them, but I feel a kinship and a connection to them—a connection to people who come from my cultural background and also a connection to the community. I feel happy when I see one that is cared for because it represents a kind of cultural continuity. It makes me feel that even though the neighborhood is changing, it isn’t changing too quickly and will hopefully always be a melting pot. Every time I see one, I always wonder whether it will be there in the future.

These comments and others illustrated that although Italian American residents who were practicing Catholics spoke of the Madonna statues in terms of religious faith, blessings, and protection, their fellow Italian American residents who had grown up in the neighborhood but did *not* identify as religious spoke of the statues in terms of “community” and “tradition.” Life-long resident, Frank, age 78, who said he hated the Catholic Church, still expressed respect for the “dedication” that older generations had for the Madonna statues:

They make me think of old Italian grandmothers, gluing seashells on them and sticking up lights. Like the backyard vegetable gardens. Every house around here had one when I was a kid. They’re disappearing as the old people die off... It’s more than just a loss of old people and a loss of shrines or gardens; it’s a loss of a way of life, the commitment and dedication people had.

In his study of Italian American yard statues in New York in the 1980s, Sciorra (1989) observed that new Italian American homebuyers often maintained Madonna shrines constructed on their properties by previous Italian owners, keeping them out of a sense of shared religion and cultural affinity. The present study also found this to be the case in East Boston, but with a novel twist. It found that even when *non-Italian* Catholic immigrants of diverse races or ethnicities had purchased homes from Italian Americans, they kept the Madonna yard statues out of respect for both the Madonna and her historic presence in the place where she stood. Hector, a 33-year-old flight attendant originally from Guatemala (where a majority of the population is Catholic), said that the Madonna in his yard had been there when his family bought the home in the mid-1990s, so they kept her: “We are Catholic too, and she is special for us.” A Salvadoran family who had purchased their home from a 98-year-old Italian immigrant also left the Madonna statue she had put in the front yard some 75 years earlier. Elizabeth, from Ghana (where over 70% of the population is Christian) felt the same: “We know who she is and we respect her.” Renting an apartment in East Boston, a Vietnamese doctoral student who had been raised Catholic but was no longer practicing shared her thoughts regarding the Madonna in front of her house:

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!

Although these ethnically diverse East Boston residents of Catholic upbringing retained and respected the Madonna shrines erected by previous Italian homeowners, White urban professionals who had located to East Boston as renters and were not Italian or Catholic also expressed positive sentiments for the Madonnas. They considered them to be archives of the neighborhood’s history and discussed them with nostalgia for a past that was unconnected to their own personal memories or experiences (Appadurai, 1990). Laura, a flight attendant 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 late 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.

Melissa, 44, an environmental activist who had lived in the neighborhood for five years, said:

I feel the temporal aspect of it—representing a certain time—a time recently past, or passing. I don’t imagine it will be ongoing for much longer. I get kind of sad and nostalgic thinking that this may not be something that continues into the future.

Some long-term homeowners, like Rob, Tony, and Sal, noted that new residents who were young urban professionals often expressed curiosity about the statues, viewing them as a kind of kitsch, which, according to the Oxford Dictionary of U.S. English, refers to “objects considered to be in poor taste because of excessive garishness or sentimentality, but sometimes appreciated in an ironic or knowing way.”<sup>8</sup> Rob explained:

New residents of the neighborhood walk by my house 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.

Renee, quoted earlier, who grew up in “a snobby, rich town,” mentioned that “where I grew up, these would be seen as bad taste or even funny.” Janine, 41, a graphic designer who had grown up in East Boston and lived down the street from Rob noted: “I think [young urban professional] people like them. They see them as interesting cultural relics.”

Interview comments such as “relic,” “almost forgotten,” “passing,” “temporal,” and “history” conveyed feelings of nostalgia. Those who had grown up in the community expressed nostalgia for a way of life they remembered, while newer residents expressed nostalgia for a way of life they did not personally experience but imagined and longed for. The word *dedication* was used by both Italians and non-Italians when discussing bathtub Madonnas, overtly referring to the loving attention with which devotees of the Madonna maintained their shrines. But in a larger sense, they were also recalling the formerly widespread, long-term devotion that urban residents had to a particular home, community, and neighborhood—an investment of time and material resources in a specific geographical *place* that is increasingly rare in today's cities.

## Conclusion

This study found that for Italian immigrants and their children who lived in East Boston in the early and mid-20th century, Madonna yard shrines communicated not only about religious faith and Italian American identity but also served, for some, as a response to historic anti-Italian bigotry. This contestation or assertion of the *right* to be in a place, via homeownership and displaying bathtub Madonnas considered by the dominant culture at the time (Irish, WASPs, or other non-Italians) to be sacrilegious or pagan, has not been widely noted. The interview data also revealed that the statues were a public symbol of homeownership and financial success at a time when many Italian immigrants were striving, with difficulty, to achieve the American Dream. Madonna yard statues signified long-term investment by a family in a home property, as well as investment in the larger community—meanings that have been little discussed in previous scholarly literature on Catholic yard shrines.

By the second decade of the 21st century, as the neighborhood of East Boston has dramatically transformed, bathtub Madonnas have taken on new meanings. For nonreligious Italian

Americans, whose parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents venerated the Madonna, the statues represent memories of family members and past community. For newer immigrant populations coming from Christian backgrounds (the vast majority of new immigrants who have purchased homes in East Boston since the 1980s have been from Latin America, which is predominantly Catholic), the Madonna yard statue is a sacred entity to be respected and allowed to remain in front of the home as a guardian. Meanwhile, for non-Italian urban professionals who are gentrifying the neighborhood, bathtub Madonnas symbolize the history of the community and are often viewed with a sense of nostalgia.<sup>9</sup> Urban professionals newly residing in East Boston frequently note that they were first attracted to the community for its “traditions” and old-fashioned “neighborhood feeling.” Bathtub Madonnas, saint festivals, Italian bakeries and restaurants, and the shrinking community of long-term Italian American residents maintaining these institutions represent some of the “traditions and neighborhood feeling” to which new residents have been drawn. For this new population, bathtub Madonnas are a vestige of imagined community life as it used to be in many U.S. cities when neighborhoods, although sometimes insular and discriminatory toward “outsiders,” were populated by people who set down roots for generations and knew and helped their neighbors.

Others see Madonna statues as kitsch or “campy” throwbacks to an earlier time, worth stopping to photograph in the knowledge that these artifacts may not be around much longer. In recent years, artists, photographers, anthropologists, and others have begun documenting the creativity and quirkiness of Madonna yard shrines via blogs and other online formats in attempts to commemorate and digitally preserve a grassroots medium with an uncertain future.<sup>10</sup> Whether one views these shrines with religious reverence, cultural nostalgia, or as humorous camp depends on one's historic, socioeconomic, and cultural location vis-à-vis the statues and the community. Bathtub Madonnas communicate in ways related not only to the private views of the people who erect them but also to larger community values and norms with meanings and “properties” that change as the community changes. But for how long?

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, 2010). Subprime mortgages in 2001–2007 destroyed 15 million U.S. households and rapidly accelerated speculative investments. Due to increases in



**Figure 9** (Left) Rusting and peeling Madonna with electric lights (photo by Regina Marchi).

**Figure 10** (Above) Front yard Madonna in wooden shelter with waterfalls and stonework (photo by Regina Marchi).

securitization and deregulation, traditionally illiquid<sup>11</sup> real estate in East Boston and urban neighborhoods like it across the United States 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, or upscale retail shops. Corporate real estate investors in East Boston are demolishing one-, two-, and three-family homes and replacing them with taller five- and six-unit condo buildings designed for single people or couples rather than for families. Giant commercial developers have converted East Boston's empty factories into luxury hotels and condos and are buying up available homes and parcels of land at breakneck speed, easily outbidding long-term residents who wish to buy homes in the community. And, smitten with East Boston's spectacular waterfront views and easy subway 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 East Boston from a stable neighborhood populated mostly by long-term families into a transient 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. With their accompanying gardens and grottoes, bathtub Madonnas arose in the community as meaningful properties that helped personalize and decommodify private, residential real estate while also being a medium through which residents publicly communicated their cultural identities, beliefs, and values. Today, East Boston's Madonna yard shrines signify the history and memory of a neighborhood in transition and, with it, the erstwhile possibility of urban homeownership among immigrants and other working-class people who engendered the kind of deep-rooted, stable communities that once enabled these vernacular media to flourish (Figure 9).



## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank her brother, Christopher Marchi, for assisting with photography, and fellow Bostonian, Matt Stahl, PhD, for his helpful feedback during an early discussion of this project.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term *Madonna* is Italian for “My Lady” and is a title of respect for the Virgin Mary, commonly used to refer to statues and other representations of her.

<sup>2</sup> It is also done in various countries in Europe, Latin America, and other areas of the world with large Catholic populations.

<sup>3</sup> Definitions 1 and 3 of the word *vernacular* in the Merriam-Webster’s dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vernacular>

<sup>4</sup> Definitions 1A and 2A of the word *property* in the Merriam-Webster dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/property>

<sup>5</sup> These data relate to the City of Boston and do not include suburbs of Boston with large Italian American populations. According to 2016 U.S. Census Bureau data, more than 6,000 people of Italian ancestry live in East Boston, compared to only 3,700 people of Italian ancestry living in the North End, Boston’s second-largest Italian neighborhood. [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_16\\_5YR\\_B04006&prodType=table](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_16_5YR_B04006&prodType=table)

<sup>6</sup> In most cases, the people who opened the doors were the home owners. In some cases, they were renters. Renters shared their thoughts on the statues with me and sometimes connected me with the homeowners. All statues were erected by past or present homeowners, and the decision to keep them was exclusively the homeowners’.

<sup>7</sup> To ward off evil (and “The Evil Eye”), a *cornicello* (also known as *corneto* or *cornio*) is often worn around the neck as jewelry or hung from doors in homes or from rearview mirrors in cars. Among Italian Americans, they are synonymous with Italian identity.

<sup>8</sup> *Oxford (Lexico) Dictionary of U.S. English*. <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/kitsch>

<sup>9</sup> Although the people I encountered expressed admiration for the Madonna shrines, it should also be noted that over the past two decades many bathtub Madonnas have been and are being removed by new homebuyers, particularly real estate developers.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example: D. Pacini, *Views from the Street: About Virgin Territory*, <https://www.debpacini.net/about-this-project>; the Tumblr site: Bathtub Marys of Somerville, <https://bathtubmarysofsomerville.tumblr.com>; Leo Seigny’s Pinterest page: *Bathtub Mary, Bathtub Madonna*, <https://www.pinterest.com/yngives1/bathtub-mary-bathtub-madonna/>. For news articles on the topic, see D. Armstrong, “Kentucky’s Bathtub Marys,” *SFGate*, <https://www.sfgate.com/travel/article/Kentucky-s-Bathtub-Marys-homespun-lawn-shrines-2310092.php>; or the website of Colorado-

based radio station 99.9 The Point: M. Kendrick, “Weird American Traditions: Bathtub Mary,” <https://999thepoint.com/weird-american-traditions-bathtub-mary/>.

<sup>11</sup> Assets that cannot easily be sold for cash.

Liberalization of the mortgage process has resulted in more frequent resident turnover in urban neighborhoods across the United States (Garriga & Hedlund, 2020; Richardson 2012).

## References

- Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7, 295–310.
- Arnold, C. (October 7, 2019). Renters only: These new homes aren’t for sale. National Public Radio, *All Things Considered*. <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/07/766575007/renters-only-these-new-homes-arent-for-sale>
- Barrett, J., & Roediger, D. (2016). How white people became white. In P. Rothenberg (Ed.), *White privilege: Essential readings on the other side of racism* (pp. 65–70). Worth.
- Basu, P., & Coleman, S. (2008). Introduction: Migrant worlds, material cultures. *Mobilities*, 3(3), 313–330.
- Belan, K. (2001). *Madonnas: From medieval to modern*. Parkstone Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Routledge.
- Bowman, M., & Valk, Ü. (Eds.). (2012). *Vernacular religion in everyday life: Expressions of belief*. Routledge.
- Boym, S. (2001). *The future of nostalgia*. Basic Books.
- Chidester, D., & Linenthal, E. (Eds.). (1995). *American sacred space*. University of Indiana Press.
- Connell, W., & Gardaphe, F. (2010). *Anti-Italianism: Essays on a Prejudice*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Connell, W., & Pugliese, S. (2018). *Routledge history of Italian Americans*. Routledge.
- Durkheim, E., Cosman, C., & Cladis, M. (2001). *The elementary forms of religious life*. Oxford University Press.
- Furlan, R. (2015). History of Italian immigrants’ experience with housing in post WWII Australia. *International Journal of Arts*, 5(1), 8–20.
- Garriga, C., & Hedlund, A. (2020). Mortgage debt, consumption and illiquid housing markets in the Great Recession. *American Economic Review*, 110(6), 1603–1634.
- Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford University Press.
- Guglielmo, J., & Salerno, S. (2003). *Are Italians White? How race is made in America*. Routledge.
- Halbwachs, M. (1980). *Collective memory*. Harper and Row.

- Inguanti, J. (2011). Landscapes of order, landscapes of memory. In J. Sciorra (Ed.), *Italian folk: Vernacular culture in Italian American lives* (pp. 83–106). Fordham.
- Krase, J. (2004). Italian American urban landscapes. *Italian Americana*, 22(1), 17–44.
- Lotman, Y., Uspensky, B., & Mihaychuk, G. (1978). On the semiotic mechanism of culture. *New Literary History*, 9(2), 211–232.
- Luconi, S. (2009). Tampa's 1910 lynching: The Italian American perspective. *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, 88(1), 30–53.
- Luconi, S. (2016). Black dagoes? Italian immigrants' racial status in the USA: An ecological view. *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 14(3), 188–199.
- Mangione, J. (1992). *L'Storia: Five centuries of the Italian American experience*. Harper Collins.
- Manzo, J. T. (1983). Italian American yard shrines. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 4(1), 119–125.
- Marchi, R. 2015. *Legendary locals of East Boston*. Arcadia Press.
- McDannell, C. (1995). *Material Christianity: Religion and popular culture in America*. Yale University Press.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Vernacular. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved February 5, 2021, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vernacular>
- Messina, E. (2004) Psychological perspectives on the stigmatization of Italian Americans in the American media. *The Psychotherapy Patient*, 13(1–2), 87–121.
- Morgan, D. (1998). *Visual piety: A history and theory of popular religious images*. University of California Press.
- Orsi, R. (1997). Everyday miracles: The study of lived religion. In D. Hall (Ed.), *Lived religion in America: Toward a history of practice* (pp. 3–21). Princeton University Press.
- Orsi, R. (2002). *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and community in Italian Harlem 1880–1950*. Yale University Press.
- Primiano, L. (1995). Vernacular religion and the search for method in religious folklife. *Western Folklore*, 54(1), 37–56.
- Puelo, S. (2007). *The Boston Italians*. Beacon Press.
- Ray, B., Papademetriou, D., & Jachimowicz, M. (2004). *Immigrants and homeownership in urban America: An examination of nativity, socioeconomic status and place*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigrants-and-homeownership-urban-america-examination-nativity-socio-economic-status-and>
- Richardson, J. (2012). *The effect of mortgage liberalization on housing patterns in Tampa Bay* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of South Florida.
- Rimanelli, M., & Postman, S. (1992). *The 1891 New Orleans lynching and US-Italian relations*. Peter Lang.
- Sassen, S. (2010). A savage sorting of winners and losers: Contemporary versions of primitive accumulation. *Globalizations*, 7(1), 23–50.
- Sciorra, J. (1989). Yard shrines and sidewalk altars of New York's Italian Americans. *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, 3, 185–198.
- Sciorra, J. (2015). *Built with faith: Italian American imagination and Catholic material culture in New York City*. University of Tennessee Press.
- Tannock, S. (1995). Nostalgia critique. *Cultural Studies*, 9(3), 453–464.
- Vecoli, R. (1969). Prelates and peasants: Italian immigrants and the Catholic Church. *Journal of Social History*, 2(3), 217–268.
- Wills, C. (2005). *Destination America: The people and cultures that created a nation*. DK Publishing.

Regina Marchi, PhD, is an associate professor in Media Studies at Rutgers University. Her research focuses on populations marginalized from mainstream media because of their race, ethnicity, immigration status, class, gender, or age. She is the author of *Day of the Dead in the USA: The Migration and Transformation of a Cultural Phenomenon* (2009) and coauthor of *Young People and The Future of News* (2017). E-mail: [rmarchi@rutgers.edu](mailto:rmarchi@rutgers.edu)