



ITALIAN AND ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

Natalia Ginzburg's Global Legacies

Edited by
Stiliana Milkova Rousseva
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Global Ginzburg— Reading Natalia Ginzburg in the Twenty-First Century

Stiliana Milkova Rousseva and Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski

INTRODUCTION

The Italian author Natalia Ginzburg's presence in the Anglophone world is well established in the twenty-first century. While the first English translation of Ginzburg's most famous work, *Lessico familiare*, followed the French and German ones, there are now three English translations, a rarity for any modern Italian work: *Family Sayings* (by D.M. Low, Ginzburg, 1967), *The Things We Used to Say* (by Judith Woolf, Ginzburg, 1997), and *Family Lexicon* (by Jenny McPhee, Ginzburg, 2017). Her collected stories, novellas, novels, plays, and numerous essays are also available for English readers,

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some of them in more than one translation. Rachel Cusk, Sally Rooney, and Colm Tóibín have provided introductions for recent editions of her works, which include Minna Zallman Proctor's translation of *Happiness, As Such* (2019b), Gini Alhadeff's new translation of *The Road to the City* (2023), the reprinted editions of *Voices in the Evening* (2019c), *Valentino and Sagittarius* (2020), *Family and Borghesia* (2021a), and *The Dry Heart* (2019a and 2021c). In 2021, the online journal *Reading in Translation* marked the 30th anniversary of Ginzburg's death by publishing a special issue, "Reading Natalia Ginzburg," featuring 15 critical essays, interviews, and first-English translations all commissioned for the occasion (Milkova, 2021b).

Ginzburg (1916–1991) is known for recounting History—fascism and the racial laws, the Second World War, exile, and Italy's post-war struggles—through the perspectives of marginalized characters and individual family histories. Her life and work spanned almost the entire twentieth century and she was a significant figure in the Italian literary world. In addition to working at the foundational publishing house Einaudi, she had friendships and exchanges with many of the most important authors of the twentieth century, including Giorgio Bassani, Italo Calvino, Alba de Cespedes, Primo Levi, Elsa Morante, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Cesare Pavese. Critics have used Calvino and Pasolini to map Italy's intellectual landscape, which shifts once Ginzburg is also brought into these discussions. The authors of this volume repeatedly highlight Ginzburg's anti-ideological stances, which are accompanied by her investigations of major issues of her time, such as fascism, terrorism, communism, socialism, changing media, abortion, divorce, adoption, women's rights, and gender roles. The recent translations of many more Italian women authors, such as Marta Barone, Marina Jarre, Lalla Romano, Goliarda Sapienza, and Nadia Terranova provide Anglophone readers with a chance to situate Ginzburg's crucial contributions to gender discourses in Italian contexts.

While some of the notable attention Ginzburg has garnered in recent years is due to the popularity of contemporary Italian writer Elena Ferrante, with whom she has been linked (Caserta, 2019; Milkova, 2021a), Ginzburg's writing also addresses questions relevant today, in our post-pandemic world, from the traumatic experiences of war and violence to questions about gender and identity. Her "poetics of the real" (Wehling-Giorgi, 2021) construct a world of objects and domestic spaces, of moral dilemmas and human behaviors, of quotidian routines and ordinary lives which in its totality possesses a universal, timeless resonance. The increased visibility of Ginzburg's translated works and renewed engagement with

her literary production speak to the “traumatic realism” (Foster, 1996) of our own historical moment as we look for modes of resistance and survival. Ginzburg’s works, generated in part from the traumatic events that marked her own life, narrate in turn the minor and major hardships of human existence. Much of Ginzburg’s early life was marked by the advent of fascism in 1922 and her Turinese family’s anti-fascist investments. In 1938, the year the racial laws were introduced, Natalia Levi married Leone Ginzburg, an anti-fascist Jewish intellectual from Odessa and one of the founders of the Einaudi publishing house. She followed him in internal exile in the Abruzzi region where she wrote her first longer work, *The Road to the City* (*La strada che va in città*, 1942), and began translating Proust. Leone Ginzburg was captured, tortured, and died in prison in 1944, leaving Natalia Ginzburg with three small children. In 1950, Ginzburg married Gabriele Baldini (1919–1969) and they had two children, a son who died at one and a disabled daughter (born 1954), whom Ginzburg cared for until her own death in 1991.¹

Despite the significant public appreciation for Ginzburg’s works in translation, her presence in Anglophone literary criticism in the twenty-first century is less remarkable. Domenico Scarpa has pointed out that Ginzburg is not as admired by critics as she is by general readers because her texts do not lend themselves easily to theoretical approaches (Ginzburg, 2016, 264). There are already more Anglophone books dedicated to analyzing Ferrante than there are to Ginzburg. The scholarship on Ginzburg in English amounts to a few monographs or volumes (Bullock, 1991; Jeannet & Katz, 2000; Picarazzi, 2002; Castronuovo, 2010) and a couple of dozen articles or reviews of Ginzburg’s *oeuvre* along with single chapters and sections in scholarly books (Wood, 1995; Amoia, 1996; Simborowski, 2003; Parussa, 2008; Coburn, 2013; Fanning, 2017). Biographical and historical-political readings that revolve around Ginzburg’s major texts are the norm.

Eric Gudas has called attention to the constant “reintroduction” of Ginzburg to English-speaking audiences: “We are stuck in a loop of ‘reintroducing Natalia Ginzburg’” (2021). This volume does not serve as a reintroduction, but brings together new, interdisciplinary approaches to Ginzburg and makes available in English important Italian research.

¹Sandra Petrigani’s recent biography of Natalia Ginzburg, *La corsara* (2018), is a well-researched, engaging, and informative text that narrates and maps Ginzburg’s life through Petrigani’s own perspective as a woman writer while also providing remarkable insight into Ginzburg’s works.

Bridging Anglophone and Italian scholarship from around the world, *Natalia Ginzburg's Global Legacies* places Ginzburg's works in major critical discourses in order to mobilize further lines of inquiry: translation practices, world literature, and transnational studies (section “[World Literature and World Making](#)”); gender-fluid identity, queer studies, speech act theory, intersectional feminism, and media studies (section “[Female Bodies, Voices, and Gazes](#)”); trauma studies, topography, novel studies, essay studies, and Jewish identity (section “[Identity, Topography, and Forms](#)”). This variety exemplifies how Ginzburg's texts can generate and sustain a range of theoretical lenses and approaches.

WORLD LITERATURE AND WORLD MAKING

The first section, “[World Literature and World Making](#),” interprets Ginzburg's works through their international publication histories. Each chapter in this opening section both places Ginzburg's works in the real world of publishing and analyzes the meaning of the literary worlds Ginzburg has created, engaging theories that bring these two strands together, including the translation pact, World Literature, and transnational circulation. Teresa Franco focuses on translations into English, Silvia Caserta on the 2016 edition of Ginzburg's earlier works (*Un'assenza*, assembled and edited by Domenico Scarpa), and Cecilia Schwartz on Ginzburg's translations into Swedish. Schwartz's chapter indicates how these authors' approaches could be expanded to cover many more linguistic and national traditions. This volume focuses especially on English, not only because it is the language of the readers, but also because of Ginzburg's multiple relationships to Anglophone literature and film. Crediting in large part her work on American literature for Einaudi, including the press's translations of Ernest Hemingway and Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology*, Gini Alhadeff has called attention to the English influence on Ginzburg's distinctive prose (Ziolkowski, 2023).

Ginzburg contributed to the circulation of world literature through her evaluations of works for Einaudi and as a translator, from English, with Ivy Compton-Burnett, and French, with Marcel Proust, Gustave Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, and the American-Israeli author Saul Friedländer. Ginzburg's global legacies stem from her influence as editor and translator in her own time as well as her *oeuvre's* international readership today. A range of contemporary writers draw attention to Ginzburg as an inspiring author, including Rachel Cusk, Vivian Gornick, Elena Ferrante, Jhumpa

Lahiri, Sigrid Nunez, Sally Rooney, Colm Tóibín, and Nadia Terranova. Ginzburg's preface to *Family Lexicon*, which proposes that "Even though the story is real, I think one should read it as if it were a novel" (Ginzburg, 2017, 3),² is a touchstone for authors who experiment with literary form (such as the novel-memoir or autobiographical novel or hybrid novel) and expressing truth. Ginzburg's *Family Lexicon* at once anticipates and enacts a form of what critics refer to as "autofiction" (perhaps one of the most global genres today) while also creating a polyphonic text capturing multiple voices and perspectives.

Teresa Franco's chapter, "Publishing Natalia Ginzburg in the Anglophone World," analyzes and outlines Ginzburg's reception history in English. Through archival research, she shows how the early concerns with Ginzburg's at times unplaceable genre of memoir-novel now prove a rich site of attention and inspirations for the writers who introduce and translate Ginzburg, including Jenny McPhee, Minna Zallman Proctor, Sally Rooney, and Colm Tóibín. Franco focuses on the paratexts of the three English translations of *Family Lexicon*, highlighting both the developments in Ginzburg's appreciation and the development of the "translation pact" (Alvstad, 2014) of Italian fiction in English from the 1960s to today.

Silvia Caserta's chapter argues for the strong world-making power of Ginzburg's short stories, a form that is often left out of considerations of World Literature and, those written by women, out of the canon of Italian literature. Exploring the historical context and timelessness of Ginzburg's short stories, Caserta maps the modernity, relationships, and narrative techniques of the fictional works included in *Un'assenza: Racconti, memorie, cronache*. Caserta's analysis establishes that Ginzburg's short stories show the potentiality of narrative gaps in creating the possibility of alternative worlds beyond the constraints of the written page, in an act of world-making that should prompt their inclusion in theoretical discussions of world literature.

Cecilia Schwartz's "Born Untranslatable? On the Translation, Reception, and Transnational Circulation of Ginzburg's *Family Lexicon*" contrasts the translations in Swedish with those in English, outlining the cultural contexts that guide Ginzburg's translations, especially *Family Lexicon*. Starting with historical developments, including Holocaust memory and knowledge in Sweden, Schwartz then moves to careful analyses of

²"Benché tratto dalla realtà, penso che si debba leggerlo come se fosse un romanzo" (Ginzburg, 1999/1963, 1).

translation choices and what they reveal about both Ginzburg's work and the state of translation in global systems that are increasingly influenced by Anglophone practices. Examining one case of Ginzburg's global circulation, her translation history in Sweden shows how Ginzburg's reception was also influenced by Swedish views of Italian literature and historical developments in Sweden, including the vocabulary used to discuss race.

FEMALE BODIES, VOICES, AND GAZES

The second section, "[Female Bodies, Voices, and Gazes](#)," examines Ginzburg's subjects whose bodies become sites of resistance against the patriarchal norms that govern the gendered expectations of society (Faleschini Lerner), that subsume the female authorial voice (Todesco), that regulate heteronormative relations (Ferrara), or that dominate the cinematic gaze (Rizzarelli). These authors frequently measure what Ginzburg says about feminism and women with what her female narrators reveal, showing how the feminist moves of many of Ginzburg's texts deserve revisiting in light of current discourses. This section also highlights the intermediality of Ginzburg's wide-ranging productions, with Todesco's focus on the corporeal vocality of Ginzburg's radio interviews and writings and Rizzarelli's exploration of Ginzburg as viewer and critic of films.

Giovanna Faleschini Lerner's "Women's Bodies in Natalia Ginzburg's Fictions" proposes that by centering women's bodies, Ginzburg returns to her female characters the substance that is denied to them by men's indifferent gazes. Situating her analysis within the feminist coordinates of work by Simone de Beauvoir, Rosi Braidotti, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, and Toril Moi, Faleschini Lerner investigates the female characters' bodies across Ginzburg's fiction as sites of contestation and resistance against the gendered expectations of family and society. Ultimately, this chapter contends that Ginzburg's poetics, grounded in the materiality of quotidian life and embodied experiences, offer a powerful critique of patriarchal institutions thereby laying the foundation of women's liberation.

Starting with a description of Ginzburg's childhood, Serena Todesco's "The Female Voice as a Form of Resistance: Natalia Ginzburg's Speech Acts" shows how writing became Ginzburg's first form of voicing her own self. In an analysis of the connections between Ginzburg's poetics and personal lexicon, Todesco explores Ginzburg's corporeal vocality in inter-

views and constructions of authorial voice in *Family Lexicon*, *All Our Yesterdays*, and *Voices in the Evening*. By examining a selection of Ginzburg's "speech acts," Todesco proposes a phenomenology of Ginzburg's voice that exceeds the aesthetic dimension, arguing that Ginzburg's voice is a form of engaged resistance against oppression that traditionally leads to silence.

Enrica Maria Ferrara's "From Closet to Absence: Queering Family Roles and Gender Norms in Natalia Ginzburg's *Valentino* and *Happiness, As Such*" argues that Ginzburg's literature provides an example of intersectional feminism *avant la lettre*. She shows how Ginzburg's literature challenges the disturbing legacy of fascist essentialist politics that had banned all homosexual behavior as deviant and explores a concept of a gender-fluid identity going against the grain of the strictly heteronormative mindset that dominated society in post-war Italy. By tracing the evolution of Ginzburg's representation of queer identities from the 1950s to the 1970s, this chapter proposes that Ginzburg avoids the dualistic and monological tenets of phallogentrism, offering instead a site of resistance to conventional categories.

Maria Rizzarelli's "When a film is good, I remember it': Natalia Ginzburg at the Movies" addresses Ginzburg's film criticism, showing that cinema represented a consistent interest of Ginzburg's, from childhood through adulthood. For Ginzburg, cinema was the aesthetic landscape that most resembled literature. Rizzarelli provides both an overview and analysis of Ginzburg as spectator, emphasizing the radical originality of Ginzburg's cinematographic criticism, establishing the consistency of the profile of the spectator that takes shape across Ginzburg's autobiographical writings, fiction, and movie reviews. Ginzburg's representations and criticism of the cinema make space for multiple gazes on the big screen and deconstruct a monolithic idea of a falsely neutral subject. As this chapter argues, her film reviews elevate memory as an essential criterion for judging the aesthetic value of a movie and evaluate film through hermeneutic subjectivity.

IDENTITY, TOPOGRAPHY, AND FORMS

By putting Natalia Ginzburg in conversation with other significant authors, the third section, "[Identity, Topography, and Forms](#)," explores key elements of her identity and literary genres: Cesare Pavese and Turin's topography (Milkova Rousseva); Elsa Morante and the archetypal family novel

(Lucamante); Elena Ferrante, Jhumpa Lahiri, Zadie Smith, and the essay form (Ziolkowski); Primo Levi, Alberto Moravia, and Jewish identity (Scarpa). Through comparisons of these key writers and Ginzburg, this section's chapters offer diachronic and synchronic approaches to Ginzburg's varied forms. Milkova Rousseva illustrates the development of the urban topographies of trauma, loss, and grief in Ginzburg's early narrative works. Lucamante argues for understanding Ginzburg's *Family Lexicon* as an archetype of the family novel, one in which the family unit is formulated through a lexical system in which ancestors matter as much as descendants. Ziolkowski investigates the consistencies of the negations of power and categories throughout Ginzburg's essays. Scarpa shows the development of Ginzburg's relationship to her Jewish identity in an analysis of the diverse potential approaches (autobiographical, reflective, and political) to her important essay "The Jews," from 1972.

Stiliana Milkova Rousseva's "Topographies of Trauma, Loss, and Mourning in Natalia Ginzburg's Early Works" reads the spatial stories narrated by Ginzburg's first-person female narrators in her novellas *The Road to the City*, *The Dry Heart*, *Valentino*, *Sagittarius*, and *Voices in the Evening*. This chapter uses Ginzburg's essayistic obituary of Cesare Pavese, "Portrait of a Friend," to chart the coordinates of Ginzburg's urban imaginary grounded in Turin's topography and mapping a traumatic interior landscape. Milkova Rousseva investigates the cityscapes that provide insights into the protagonists' traumas and repressed desires in the five novellas. The chapter posits that Ginzburg's topography of trauma, loss, and mourning gives visible form to the interior lives of her marginalized female narrators, conferring to them a new centrality as the cartographers and storytellers of urban life.

Milkova Rousseva's analysis points to an important outcome of the renewed interest in Ginzburg's writing in the twenty-first century. Thanks in part to Ginzburg's representation of urban topography narrated and negotiated by women, the literary topographies of Turin have become more visible as written by women authors. Critical and historical work on Turin has focused predominantly on male authors, including Italo Calvino (with "Smog"), Primo Levi, and Cesare Pavese. Recently, new editions and first-time translations of Marina Jarre, the publication of Marta Barone's works, and their subsequent translations in English, have positioned women writers and women narrators as walking subjects who repossess the urban space traditionally associated with male and patriarchal power (Ferrara, 2022).

Stefania Lucamante’s “Narrative Modes in Elsa Morante and Natalia Ginzburg’s Family Novels” compares the family novels of two great modern Italian authors, Elsa Morante and Natalia Ginzburg, who were friends and whose works prompted reconsiderations of what the novel as form can accomplish. Focusing on two key texts for the history and evolution of the Italian novel, Morante’s *Lies and Sorcery* (1948) and Ginzburg’s *Family Lexicon*, Lucamante investigates their diverse expressive modalities in order to show how both authors’ stylistic and thematic particularities expose a split in the conception of the family story while providing two key archetypes for the contemporary family novel.

Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski’s “Neither Rich, Nor Poor, Neither Jewish, Nor Catholic: The Legacies of Natalia Ginzburg’s Negations” focuses first on how Ginzburg employs her “né” (neither/nor) to repudiate fixed categories and authority throughout her essays, which represent a continuity in her career, from the 1940s to her death (Ginzburg, 2003 and 2015b). The chapter then explores how Ginzburg’s essayistic uncertainties reverberate throughout essays by the contemporary authors Elena Ferrante, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Zadie Smith, who similarly use this evasive form to think through new models of being beyond conventional categories of class, gender, religion, nationality, race, and even language. Their essays are part of a process, which includes doubts and change, that contrasts with ideas of perfection, winning, and exclusive belonging.

While Ginzburg’s use of “né” (neither/nor) is particularly prominent in her essays, negations that open imaginative spaces are developed throughout her work. Often building on contradictions, Ginzburg’s theater, for instance, creates suggestive spaces by focusing on gaps in understanding, between characters and even in terms of one individual character’s contradictions, leaving the reader with unresolved, contrasting tensions. Many of the themes and approaches discussed in the volume could also be considered in terms of Ginzburg’s significant theatrical work, which is not, however, a focus of this volume. The explorations of topography, voice, identity, translation, world-making, and other interpretative approaches in *Natalia Ginzburg’s Global Legacies* could be expanded to include even more of the author’s works, which also include criticism, essays, short stories, novellas, novels, memoir, and interviews and whose boundaries (memoir-novel, short story-essay, short story-novel) are not always clear. This volume calls attention to interdisciplinary connections in Ginzburg’s works in part to open doors to further scholarly study.

The volume concludes with a chapter by Domenico Scarpa, the scholar who has been the primary person responsible for reissuing, editing, and commenting on the recent editions of Ginzburg's works in Italian. His editions, which encompass works that had not been published together previously (*Un'assenza*), are foundational for her current Italian reception. Scarpa's "Natalia Ginzburg's Essay 'The Jews' and Its Trials" analyzes Ginzburg's essay "The Jews," written after the murder of the Israeli hostages at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. Scarpa shows how Ginzburg's essay can be read in terms of her autobiographical writing, reflective pieces, and political essays. His chapter both marks an important contribution to the debates about Ginzburg's Jewishness (in English see for instance Hughes, 1996, Nocentini, 2000, Parussa, 2008, Castronuovo, 2010, Cangiano, 2019, Ziolkowski, 2022) and emphasizes the significance of considering each of her essays on its own terms. This volume draws attention to Ginzburg's works that are not yet available in English and are worth the attention of publishers: a number of Ginzburg's essays, which have been a site of renewed interest in this century, and most of Ginzburg's substantial body of film criticism, analyzed by Rizzarelli, have not been translated into English.

Scarpa's conclusion includes a reflection from Carlo Ginzburg, a famous historian and Natalia Ginzburg's son, suggesting that Natalia Ginzburg's intellectual legacy is familial as well as authorial. Her granddaughter Lisa Ginzburg is also a writer, whose work could be put in conversation with Natalia Ginzburg's. These family strains relate to Ginzburg's own writing practices. As several of the contributors discuss (Milkova Rousseva, Todesco, Ziolkowski), Ginzburg first tried to write "like a man" (2003, 49), but embraced writing from a female position after having children, providing "an unassumingly powerful alternative to the omniscient, male-authored account of historical events" (Wehling-Giorgi, 2021). *Family Lexicon* was the work she described as writing in the greatest state of freedom (2017, 3). Ginzburg's concept of a "family lexicon" expands well beyond the work bearing this title. Scarpa observes how the film director and actor Nanni Moretti finds in Natalia Ginzburg a shared family lexicon, a common concern with representing the plights of modern society (Scarpa, 2023), revealed in Morretti's debut as theater director with Ginzburg's two comedies "Dialogue" (*Dialogo*, 1970) and "Strawberries and Cream" (*Fragole e panna*, 1966), performed together under the title *Diari d'amore* or *Love Diaries* at Turin's Teatro Stabile in 2023. Morretti's

theatrical rendition demonstrates the notable afterlives of Ginzburg’s works for authors, directors, and artists.

The frequent retranslation of *Family Lexicon* suggests the beauty and power of Ginzburg’s writing. Her style is often matter-of-fact and straight-forward, building up meaning through strategic repetition that can be hard to render in English without risking “ennoblement” (Berman, 2012). The title of her play *Ti ho sposato per allegria*, which can be translated as *I Married you for Fun*, as Luciano Salce’s film adaptation has been translated; *I Married You for Happiness*, as Jane House has translated it (Ginzburg, 2015a); or *I Married You to Cheer Myself Up*, as Wendell Ricketts has translated it (Ginzburg, 2008), indicates the nuanced simplicity of Ginzburg’s language that prompts revisiting the translation choices. The title of her novella *Le voci della sera*, *Voices in the Evening*, evokes the polyphonic presence of voices in and of the evening. The phrase “burying one’s thoughts” she uses in *Voices in the Evening* and elsewhere to imply that a character has repressed his or her true feelings is as complex as straight-forward. Lynne Sharon Schwartz’s *A Place to Live*, a translation of several of Ginzburg’s important essays, also suggests the disarmingly simple appeal of Ginzburg’s language, in all her genres. Several of this volume’s chapters analyze the importance of Ginzburg’s language and what is not necessarily clear from her English editions (see, for instance, Ferrara on “un grand’uomo,” Milkova Rousseva on “intreccio,” Todesco on “malagrazie”). This volume is accessible to readers without any Italian (the bibliography below provides her best-known translations in English) and, at the same time, calls attention to the linguistic nuance of Ginzburg’s Italian. *Natalia Ginzburg’s Global Legacies* encompasses multiple approaches and readings while, like Ginzburg’s own writing, keeping them within reach, rooted in a recognizable and reliable reality—literature, translation, and the world; the body, the voice, and the gaze; urban spaces, novelistic forms, and expressions of identity.

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