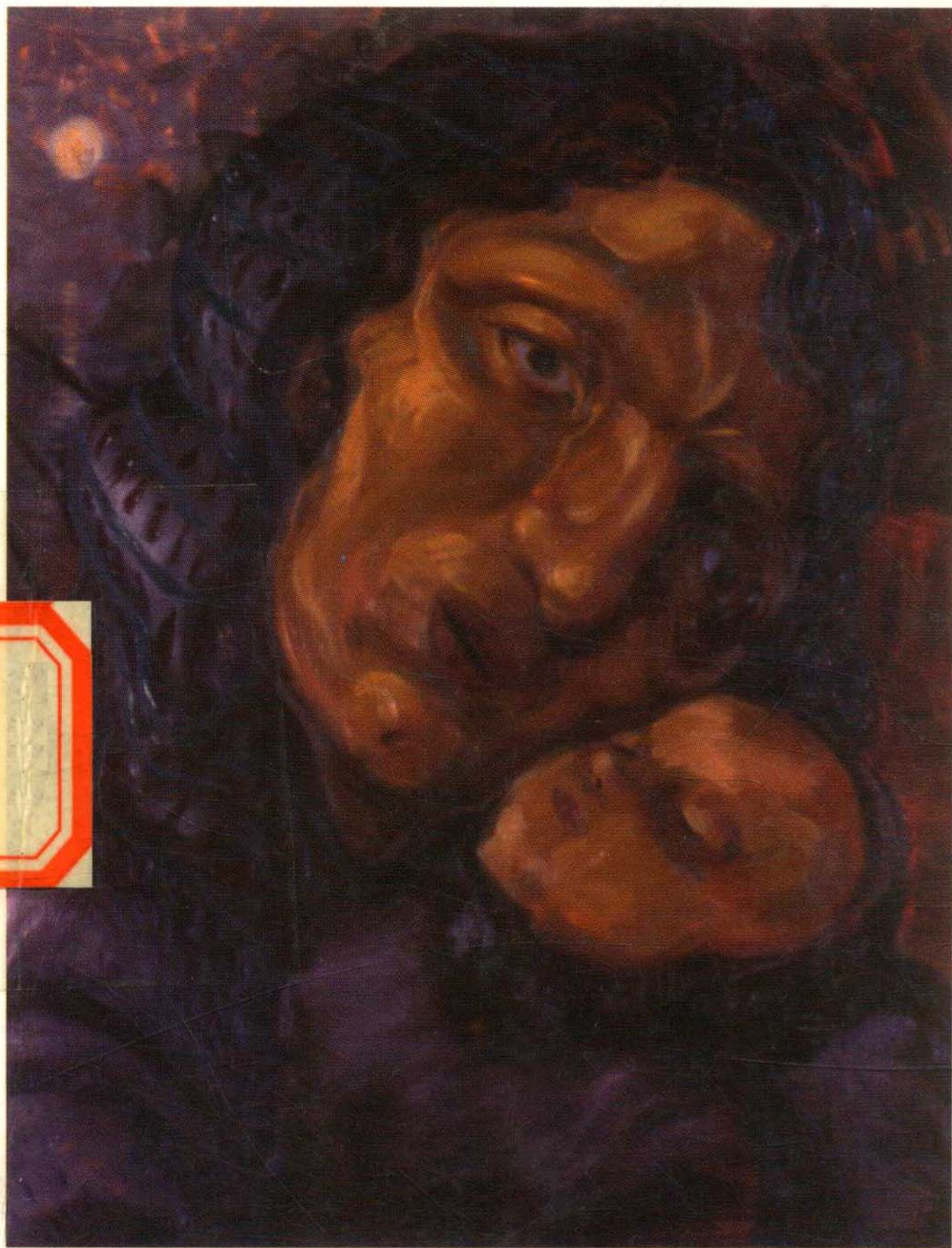


Giovanna Del Negro

Looking Through My
Mother's Eyes



GIOVANNA DEL NEGRO

LOOKING THROUGH MY
MOTHER'S EYES

LIFE STORIES OF NINE ITALIAN IMMIGRANT
WOMEN IN CANADA

GUERNICA

TORONTO • BUFFALO • CHICAGO • LANCASTER (U.K.)

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NOTE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In the years since the first publication of this book much has changed for Italian immigrants in Canada. A sizable minority of Italian immigrants and their children have returned to Italy, and some of the items of folklore discussed in these pages have begun to circulate less frequently in the oral tradition. A number of the women who participated in this study (including Gino Lorenzo and Francesca Mancini) have died. While there have been positive changes in the gender roles of Italian ethnic women in Canada, many of the cultural and gender dynamics I have outlined here still play out in the experiences of women. I believe this book not only documents an important moment in the social history of ethnic Canada, but that it illustrates some of the complex ways in which folklore and gender become intertwined in women's lives.

I dedicate this second printing of the book to all of the women who generously shared their time with me and have since passed away.

G.D.N.
February, 2003

SCENES FROM THE KITCHEN

An Autobiographical Note

As a young child I was fascinated with the parade of characters who came to life around the kitchen table during my relatives' ritual Sunday visits. Although the male presence was not absent from these occasions, women often dominated them. Since it was customary to greet relatives and sit with them at the table, I frequently became a captive audience, hearing an assortment of stories ranging from family lore to gossip. At first I resented having to sit through what I thought was useless banter, but I later learned to appreciate the skillful storytelling and animated interactions of these sessions.

In the span of several hours, over coffee, amaretto cookies and liqueur, the kitchen was transformed into a dramatic stage where issues of motherhood, work, immigration and marriage were examined through stories. The simple act of talking revealed a complex tapestry of meanings.

It was in this context that I became familiar with the expressive style of speech and performance that women in my community used. The classic stories usually involved either unmarried village girls who defied authority and accomplished their goals through cleverness, or savvy older women who used their sharp tongues to their best advantage.

The dialogue was sometimes peppered with obscene language, bawdy repartee and ritual insults which became more and more absurd as the conversation unfolded.

Today my fascination with Italian immigrant women's folklore stems from the fact that the women who told these stories were, by definition, the respectable tradition bearers of the community. They were not by any means self-proclaimed feminists or self-conscious innovators. Yet the symbolic personae that emerged during such events seemed to clash with their established roles. It is with these women in mind that I wrote this book. These women's voices, images and characters people my imagination and tug at my memory. This book, in some small way, pays homage to the legacy that Italian immigrant women have left to the younger generation of Italian-Canadian women like myself. To them, the women whose lives I describe in this study and my parents, Anna and Giovanni Del Negro, I dedicate this book.

I am deeply indebted to the women who took time to share their life stories with me. Their contributions are invaluable to furthering the knowledge of the experiences of immigrant women. Many thanks go to the coordinator of Centro Donne, Linda Azzuolo, who provided assistance and advice regarding potential candidates for interviewing. I am also grateful to Paul J. Perry for the photographs which complement this research.

This book is largely based on my thesis, *Life Stories of Italian-Canadian Women*, which I wrote

in 1989 at Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of my Masters degree in Popular Culture. I greatly appreciate the direction, criticism and insight provided by my committee members Marilyn Motz and Jack Santino. Gratitude is also expressed to Karen Gould. During my studies at Indiana University's Folklore Institute, Professor Sandra Dolby's direction has been of key importance. Her scholarship and confidence greatly encouraged my intellectual development as a Ph.D. student. My conversations with professors Richard Bauman, John Bodnar, Henry Glassie and John Johnson have also been invigorating and enlightening.

Special thanks to my husband, Harris M. Berger, whose kind support, editorial comments and assistance made this task less daunting. I am extremely lucky to have a sharp critical thinker as a colleague and partner. I would also like to extend my thanks to anthropology professor Donna Coppola-Budani at the University of Delaware for her insightful comments and suggestions. Our conversations energized me at the moments I needed it most. I would also like to thank Amanda Cicarelli, Franca Iacovetta, Jennifer Livesay and Paolo Villa with their help on an earlier draft. I am also indebted to my friends Emilia, Francesca, Maria and Theresa for their unwavering encouragement and friendship. Our shared backgrounds and frequent conversations provide the critical ground for this book. I am grateful to Ur and Mano for their cheer and good humor. Their charm and wit lifted my spirits.

Lastly, I want to express special thanks to my

editor, Antonio D'Alfonso, for his comments and support in bringing this project to fruition.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This collection of life stories from nine Italian-Canadian women explores the highly neglected topic of women's activities and folklore. In daily life, popular culture and academic writing, men's experiences and ideas are taken as the norm and women are pushed to the margins or made invisible.¹ In these life stories, the immigrant woman takes center stage. No longer an adjunct to the male experience,² these "women of the shadows"³ emerge from their silence to speak in their own voices about their hopes, dreams and struggles.

Because everyday life is the raw material from which people create knowledge, we stand to gain new understandings and new visions of social life by turning our attention to the life stories of these nine women. Most importantly, these women's lives clearly show how knowledge and meaning grow out of everyday experience as much as they arise from the ivory towers of academia.

This study focuses on the life experiences of nine Italian women who immigrated to Montreal, Quebec. The youngest in the group is forty-three while

the eldest is eighty-five. Most of the women received little formal schooling, except for learning to sew (*il mestiere*). They joined spouses or came to Canada with family members during the latter part of the 1950s or 1960s. Some were married and had families, while others came as single women and later married Italian men from their neighborhoods. Fleeing harsh living conditions (*la miseria*⁴), these women, like countless other Italians, left their homeland seeking a better way of life.

In telling their life stories the women that I spoke with expressed resentment and ambivalence toward the repressive cultural values and practices that limited and sometimes dictated their choice of husbands and activities. In framing and reframing their life experiences as women, mothers and workers, they simultaneously affirmed and challenged patriarchal beliefs.

A social commentary and introspective dialogue about being female in a male-dominated society, the narratives also speak of the ways in which women subverted their socially prescribed roles by engaging in taboo behavior among themselves at home or at work in the predominantly gender-segregated environment of the textile factory. Above all, we see how women stretched the boundaries of their culture, finding ways of criticizing the status quo without openly calling into question the fundamental values of their society.

The first chapter provides a review of academic research in several fields. Feminist scholarship is explored, and an outline of traditional Italian soci-

ety is presented; the chapter also discusses contemporary approaches to the study of the life story and the personal narrative. The second chapter consists of summaries and interpretations of the women's life stories interspersed with brief descriptions of the settings in which the interviews took place. The last chapter begins by examining the women's life stories, with particular attention to their discussion of the repressive practice of forced seclusion. The chapter ends by revealing how the women creatively responded to such cultural constraints through songs, lullabies, riddles and trickster tales.

While the life stories of Stefania Annibale, Filomena Azzuolo, Giuseppina Barbuci, Antonietta De Fronzo, Anna Del Negro (my mother), Genovetta Della Zazzera, Graziella Di Corpo, Gina Lorenzo and Francesca Mancini together make up a complex text capable of many readings,⁵ I hope that their words offer insights into how subordinate groups have developed, and continue to develop, creative survival strategies for coping with repressive social conditions.

Previous Explorations

Four scholarly literatures have shaped my thinking about Italian-Canadian women and their life stories. For the graduate student, a review of this kind helps him/her to situate research interests within a broader academic setting; it provides the opportunity to stand on the shoulders of academic foremothers and forefathers and pay tribute to their achieve-