

Reclaiming the Subject: Italian American Women Self-Defined

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Introduction

In the last twenty years there have been a number of historical and sociocultural studies of Italian Americans. Few, however, have seriously addressed the female experience in the Italian American culture.¹ Indeed, Italian American literature is so deeply immersed in a masculinist view of the Italian American culture that a female *corrective* to this asymmetry is not enough. Upon critically reviewing the literature, the necessity for a *feminist* perspective becomes obvious. Consequently, the purpose of this article is two-fold: 1) to expose some of the mythology which surrounds the image of Italian American women; and 2) to suggest a feminist framework within which future studies of Italian American women may take place.

Traditional ethnic studies scholarship has tended to ignore or dismiss recent feminist contributions to social science methodology and content areas. When feminist criticism is leveled at an area of study which has remained, for the most part, unaffected by feminist scholarship, the question of "objectivity" is often raised. "Is your point of view empirically supported or is your point of view simply reflective of a self-interested ideology?" The tone of this question implies that traditional literature, that to which the feminist scholar feels compelled to reply, *is* objective and lies somehow outside the rubric of ideology. It is this claim that the feminist scholar must first address.

To the charge of "bias," one can only reply that we are all, in some sense, biased; i.e., we are subjectively confined to a perspective defined by that which we know to be true. Thus, we must learn to identify our biases. These perspectives only become dangerous when they remain unacknowledged. To an Italian American feminist, the unacknowledged biases of authors of Italian American literature and researchers who study the Italian American family can be profoundly suffocating. As traditional biases move from a subterranean existence to articulation,

and as research methodologies are chosen on the basis of their ability to reduce the tendency toward objectification, the real life experiences and needs of Italian American women will begin to emerge.

Traditional Literature: A Selected Review

Beyond the routinely unconscious acceptance of a male-defined reality, we find within much of the literature on Italian Americans a more deliberate defense of the role of women within the Italian American family. This defense often rests on the old separate-but-equal argument; woman is the heart, man is the head of the family—both parts being played by equally vital and powerful members of that family. A description of the social history of the Italian immigrant family included in Mindel and Habenstein's anthology, *Ethnic Families in America* (1976), even suggests that “. . . the patriarchal image of the [Italian] family is . . . misleading since the major kinship ties were with the maternal relatives.”² As the singular proof of this quasi-matriarchal arrangement, the reader learns that in Italy, upon the death of the husband, the widow's family traditionally assumes responsibility for the woman and her children. Can we really equate the assumption of responsibility by the widow's family for the welfare of a woman and her children during a time of acute crisis with the assumption of ultimate familial authority daily expressed in the person of the husband, that is, the patriarch of the family?

In reality, sex-typed behavior which has devolved from the *Mezzogiorno* (southern Italy) to contemporary Italian American families has been strictly, patriarchally defined. Convention dictates that from the time an Italian girl reaches the age of seven, she is trained to care for the household of her father which serves, in turn, as preparation for the care of her husband's household. The death of her husband tends to sever kinship ties to his family. She is then expected to join either a grown son to care for his household or return to her family of origin if her son has not reached adulthood. Where in this scenario of possibilities do we find evidence of a misleading patriarchal image?

When the socialization of male and female children in the Italian American culture is examined at all, the differences are relativistically, uncritically presented. More often than not, the authors suggest that differential sex role expectations are simply reminiscent of *la via vecchia*—the old way. Because the distinct definitions and separation of sex roles are part of the cultural tradition, they remain somehow immune to critical analysis.

In *Blood of My Blood* (1974), Richard Gambino's discussions of family roles and “the ideal of womanliness” represent, perhaps, the clearest

encounter one can have in Italian American literature with the romanticization of the Italian American woman. Referring to the sex role expectations that Italian American women have inherited from the old world, Gambino explains that a woman who is not safely secured within the domestic sphere either as daughter, wife or mother becomes “truly a base, unfortunate creature” in the eyes of others.³ Without the ideal woman as the heart of the family, he continues, there would be no family, and without the family, “critical to life, civilization and culture, life would be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” Therefore, Gambino concludes, the “. . . family’s ultimate aim for a girl was to see her . . . settled and competent in her role as a woman.”⁴ Italian American girls have, by and large, inherited these old world expectations.

Much of Richard Gambino’s portrayal of the female role in the Italian American family appears to be phenomenologically true. But when he leaves the realm of pure description by, for example, claiming that motherhood constitutes a revered place in the culture and a fulfilling role for women, he is, perhaps, caught in his own subjective web of nostalgia and romance. Had Gambino interviewed Italian American daughters, wives and mothers, a different, more accurate image of the female role might have emerged. Having failed to directly inquire of Italian American women what our needs, desires, hopes and fears depend upon, he simply Italianizes the patriarchal myth of the proper female role. It is assumed that because Italian American women often do assume the prescribed female role within the family, that it is a natural, satisfying and sacrosanct relationship.

Indeed, few oral histories of Italian American women have been documented. Mary Sansone’s story represents one of the earliest accounts. In her discussion of marriage and motherhood, she stands as a living contradiction to the romantic ideal of the Italian American woman.

Being married was very difficult for me to get used to. I’m going to be very honest. When I think back to all the nights that I cried . . . And I would never say anything to anybody. I always looked like I was happy and gay. It was very difficult for me because I was outgoing, you know, and all of a sudden I found myself confined to a house, a husband, and then children . . . So it was kind of rough.⁵

How would Mary Sansone feel about Richard Gambino’s assertion that the man is the head and the woman is the heart or the center of the Italian American family? He claims that these relationships were transported from nineteenth century southern Italy where “power usually flowed from the family.” Even if this were true, the fact remains that in the United States, where power depends upon economic and political success in the public domain, the woman who resides at the domestic “center” frequently becomes the woman as wage laborer, housekeeper, babysitter,

tutor, laundress, gardener, chauffeur and cook. It is possible that only those who have failed to experience the reality to which Mary Sansone testifies can perpetuate the myth of separate-but-equal spheres for men and women in the Italian American household.

Herbert Gans's *The Urban Villagers* (1962) represents one of the classic sociological studies of Italian Americans. Although he does not romanticize women's place in the domestic sphere, his work is so heavily weighted with information about Italian American males that women are, for the most part, excluded from a description of the culture. The omission of the Italian American female experience is particularly unfortunate in this case. Gans's research method of participant-observation might have provided us with valuable information about the female role in the Italian American family and community.⁶

For seven months Gans lived in an Italian American community in Boston where he studied the effects of an urban renewal and relocation project on the local residents. While living in the neighborhood in question, Herbert Gans and his wife became acquainted with their neighbors and, as guests in their homes, had an unusual opportunity to observe the activities in the female sphere. As an observer of social life in Boston's West End (in which fully half the residents were women), it is difficult to imagine how an earnest sociologist could have failed to observe, at least informally, the activities of women. Gans makes a serious mistake with this omission, for he claims to have studied a whole population from which he drew conclusions about an Italian American community of men and women. The absence of any significant information on women, then, throws his entire study into question.

The Italian American Woman: Her Own Voice

The masculinist bias illustrated in works like those produced by Richard Gambino and Herbert Gans has inspired more recent gender-balanced contributions to Italian American studies. *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America* (1978) is a collection of essays which self-consciously addresses the unique experiences of Italian American and Italian Canadian women.⁷ Two presuppositions run through the articles: that Italian immigrants to North America and their descendents require special attention as a group, and that women as a group also deserve to be viewed as separate from the male-dominated whole. Thus, a collection of essays was born which addresses itself to a twice-focused group—Italian American/Canadian women.

Why is it, then, that mistakes found in the mainstream, traditional literature repeat themselves? The fault does not lie with the individual authors, but rather with the ubiquitous nature of patriarchal reality and

its influence on our research methodologies. Without a critical awareness of the broader context within which women's lives take shape—a patriarchal context—the conceptual framework upon which to analyze women's lives becomes weak. Again, the Italian American woman is placed at the “center” of the culture, she is imbued with maternal “power” portrayed to correspond to the power of men. Yet, as has been pointed out again and again in feminist theory, any power experienced by women is primarily experienced in the domestic sphere which itself is governed by the laws and principles of the public domain.⁸ Granted, Italian American women have had to be creative and strong. And it is important to remember that most immigrant and working class women have also possessed this creative strength; but endurance—for that is what it boils down to— does not imply power within a context which demands that women endure a social arrangement which is, by definition, an unequal one.

The essays contained in this collection are nevertheless important contributions to our understanding of Italian American women. The research which they represent remains qualitatively more accurate than that which is contained in the traditional, mainstream literature on Italian Americans if only because special efforts were made to consult women as reservoirs of cultural information.

Recently there have appeared works on Italian American women which adhere more closely to a feminist method and content. For example, Jean Scarpaci concentrates on methodological questions in her article, “La Contadina, The Plaything of the Middle Class Woman Historian.”⁹ She does well to remind the feminist historian that, although women may be studied as a distinct social group, women's history must also be studied in relation to male history.

Mirian Cohen, in her study of the educational and occupational experiences of Italian American women, “Italian Women in New York City, 1900-1950: Work and School,” seems to follow Scarpaci's methodological prescription.¹⁰ To isolate, for instance, the occupational and educational histories of Italian American women from the parallel experiences of Italian American men would be misleading. In her investigation of the large numbers of second and third-generation Italian American women entering the work force for the first time, Cohen hints at the importance of sociohistorical contextualization by referring to an expanding white collar sector of the economy and its effect on women.

Virginia Yans-McLaughlin's *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930* (1977) comes closer to a feminist examination of the Italian American family. One reason for this

emphasis may be traced to her methods of research. Breaking out of the purely quantitative methods of research which tend to dominate social science and historical research, while at the same time avoiding Richard Gambino's impressionistic, narrative style, Yans-McLaughlin makes use of both qualitative and quantitative methods of research. This break with traditional modes of research is intentional. The author states:

The inadequacy of quantitative evidence alone . . . will become apparent at several critical points in this book. The form and availability of statistical evidence determine the questions posed, and narrow the historian's visions. It is not enough to know that Italian families experienced low rates of dissolution or illegitimacy, high population turnover, and significant male unemployment. By themselves, these facts give us a one-dimensional view of Italian immigrant life. I hope that even though this book views Italians from only one perspective—through the lens of their family experience—it provides a less myopic view. The use of both qualitative and quantitative evidence permits an understanding of the subtle ways in which family, culture and class interact and adapt, suggesting a wholeness of experience their one-dimensional quantification cannot describe.¹¹

The creation of a composite picture of Italian American life—one which does not ignore gender-specific evidence—is the most obvious, positive outcome of Yans-McLaughlin's multi-faceted method. Her scholarly dedication to uncovering inaccessible, perhaps unpopular, themes makes her contributions vital to the body of Italian American literature.

Helen Barolini's *Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women* (1985) truly distinguishes itself among the available works on Italian American women. By identifying the culture of silence traditionally inhabited by Italian American women and placing it within the concentrically larger contexts of the Italian American culture and patriarchal society, Barolini begins to do justice to the layers of Italian American female experience. Her collection of writings by Italian American women represents a chorus of voices, formerly muffled. While her lengthy introduction explicates "the historical and social context of silence," Barolini allows the individual authors to speak for themselves, to at last become audible.¹²

Looking at the extant literature which provides glimpses into the Italian American culture, the researcher begins to piece together a larger picture within which a description of Italian American women might take place. Authors working from a traditional perspective fail to place the Italian American family in a nexus of social relations which itself sharply follows along the lines of those who possess power and those who are powerless—a relationship referred to by Adrienne Rich as "the essential dichotomy."¹³ In this context it becomes a gratuitous exercise to suggest that Italian American women hold positions of power within the family structure. Not only is this a spurious description of the Italian American woman's position in the family, once she steps outside of the

household, she is quite literally at the mercy of a patriarchal power structure which exercises free reign in the public domain.

Recommendations for Future Research

To create a feminist reinterpretation of the role of Italian American women, then, requires the identification and critical assessment of the following misconceptions which pervade the literature:

1. **Men and women inhabit separate-but-equal-spheres.** This is often expressed in the phrase, “woman is the heart, man is the head” of the Italian American family. No conceptual framework is used to illuminate the relationship between the public and domestic domains.

2. **The role of women in the Italian American family is a “sacred” one.** In reality, the fundamental distinctions in sex role socialization within Italian American families subordinates the position of females.

3. **Without a firm association with the family, Italian American men and women are reduced to the same depressed status in the culture.** In truth, the Italian American man can separate himself from the traditional family structure and still retain his identity and self-esteem as a productive member of society in the public domain. Italian American women, on the other hand, experience profound alienation from Italian American culture in the absence of family life—traditionally their *raison d’etre*.¹⁴

4. **The Italian American woman becomes somehow inauthentic once she steps outside of the rigidly prescribed gender role expectations of the Italian American culture.** Indeed, movement away from patriarchal sex roles may constitute the first step toward truly authentic being for Italian American women.

5. **Research conclusions may be reached regarding Italian American communities while failing to look at those aspects of community life in which women are active.** Such one-sided reporting is simply a description of the male domain as it is expressed in the Italian American community; it does not represent the life of a community as a whole.

6. **Analyses of the family may take place in isolation from a critical analysis of the larger social context.** Conventional social science and historical research repeatedly participate in what has been referred to in feminist theory as “context stripping.”¹⁵ As a result, myths surrounding family interrelationships and the family’s relationship to larger society abound.

7. **Conventional research methodologies are adequate when unconventional content areas are to be examined.** As the lives of

women become legitimate foci for scholarly research, new methodologies may be necessary. Work exemplified by such scholars as Scarpaci, Cohen, Yans-McLaughlin, Caroli and Barolini hints at some possible approaches to research on Italian American women.

Once we identify and evaluate the above misconceptions within traditional portrayals of the Italian American culture we are left with a need for an accurate picture of the real, everyday activities and perceptions of Italian American women, both inside and outside the family structure. It is at this point that the research project may require a movement toward becoming a collaborative interaction between researcher and consultant.

As scholars in the fields of ethnic and women's studies, it is vital that we reduce the tendency to regard the people we are studying as *objects* of study, as simple repositories of information. Perhaps first and foremost, research on Italian American women should initiate dialogue among Italian American women themselves. Not only have the life histories of Italian American women been kept from the larger population, but Italian American women are often isolated from each other. As women, we must begin to name, in our own language, the world in which we live.

As women, we inhabit our world with a double consciousness. We are in and of our society but in important ways also not "of" it. We see and think in the terms of our culture . . . Yet we have always another consciousness, another potential language within us . . . We are the instruments of observation and understanding; we are the namers and interpreters of our lives.¹⁶

It is this other consciousness, the voice of the subject, which must surface in any future study of Italian American women. We must "hear each other into speech" so that emancipatory options may be explored, not only by Italian American women, but by every woman wishing to critically question her place in family and community life.¹⁷

Notes

¹Notable exceptions include Betty Boyd Caroli, et al., eds. *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America*. (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1978) and Helen Barolini, ed. *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women*. (New York: Schocken, 1985).

²Francis Femminella and Jill Quadagno. "The Italian American Family." *Ethnic Families in America*. C. Mindel and R.W. Habenstein, eds. (New York: Elsevier, 1976) 65.

³Richard Gambino. *Blood of My Blood*. (New York: Anchor, 1974) 163.

⁴*Ibid.*, 165.

⁵Mary Sansone cited in *Nobody Speaks for Me: Self-Portraits of American Working Class Women*. Nancy Seifer, ed. (New York: Simon Schuster, 1976) 59.

⁶Herbert Gans. *The Urban Villagers*. (New York: Free Press, 1962).

⁷Betty Boyd Caroli, et al., eds. *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America*. (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1978).

⁸See, for example, Michelle Z. Rosaldo. "Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview." *Woman, Culture and Society*. M.A. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, eds. (Palo Alto: Stanford Univ. Press, 1974).

⁹Jean Scarpaci. "La Contadina, The Plaything of the Middle Class Woman Historian." (unpublished manuscript)

¹⁰Miriam Cohen. "Italian Women in New York City, 1900-1950: Work and School." *Class, Sex and the Woman Worker*. M. Cantor and B. Laurie, eds. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977).

¹¹Virginia Yans-McLaughlin. *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977) 21.

¹²Helen Barolini, ed. *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women*. (New York: Schocken, 1985).

¹³Adrienne Rich. *Of Woman Born*. (New York: Bantam, 1976) 48.

¹⁴Evidence surfaced in my dissertation research supporting this claim. See Chris Ruggiero, "Feminist Identity Formation and Ethnicity: Dislocation among Hispanic American, Italian American and White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Women" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Mexico, 1984).

¹⁵Renate Duelli Klein. "How To Do What We Want To Do: Thoughts about Feminist Methodology." *Theories of Women's Studies*. G. Bowles and R. Duelli Klein, eds. (London: Rutledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) 91.

¹⁶Barbara Dubois. "Passionate Scholarship: Notes on Values, Knowing and Method in Feminist Social Science." *Theories of Women's Studies*. G. Bowles and R. Duelli Klein, eds. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) 111, 112.

¹⁷Nelle Morton cited in Adrienne Rich. *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*. (New York: Norton, 1979) 185.

Critique

Ruggiero's stated purpose is ". . . to expose . . . the mythology which surrounds the image of Italian American women . . ." through studies of Italian American women and the Italian American family in a "feminist framework." These new studies would offer "feminist method and content" and new, unconventional methodologies would provide a "female corrective" to the "masculinist bias [found in] traditional ethnic studies scholarship." Ruggiero's motives are laudable, but she fails to clarify either the "masculinist," "sex-typed" view point she criticizes or the new "feminist" methodology she advocates. A "selected review" of "traditional literature" she offers by way of explanation becomes a rostrum for condemnation of the "masculinist" motives, methods, and conclusions in the works considered (by R. Gambino, H. Gans, B. B. Caroli, C. Mindel and R. W. Habenstein, and others).

The "more accurate image of the female role" she would have them portray is undefined. Undefined also is the requisite "qualitative" research as basis for the methodology she advocates. Acknowledging that "we must learn to identify our biases," Ruggiero fails to offer the means by which "feminist" scholarship can avoid committing the same signs of bias and narcissism as the "masculinist" authors cited. Evidence and examples offered in support of her position are presented as