

WOMEN WRITING RESISTANCE

Teaching Italian Immigrant Women's Radical Political Testimonies

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"These women were not just ahead of their time, they were ahead of ours," a student says as we begin class discussion. "I never even thought feminism was like this back then. I mean, these women were talking about *inner transformation* as fundamental to revolutionary change." Sitting in a circle, in the elite women's liberal arts college in the Northeast where I teach, we settle in for our discussion on the writing of women whose lives unfolded far from these ivy-covered buildings, one hundred years ago. We have read a set of essays that were produced by working-class Italian immigrant women anarchists from the early twentieth century. Most had little formal education, few economic resources, and worked in New Jersey's silk mills or New York City's garment sweatshops. Until recently, these writings were buried in archives. Yet, their words remain with us because in their day they were published in the Italian-language anarchist press. Together, these essays provide a doorway into early twentieth-century feminism as it was imagined by women on the margins.

I assign this material in my course, "Women Writing Resistance," which is designed for students to study nineteenth- and twentieth-century US history from the perspective of women cultural workers. We study how women have creatively unmasked power relations in their confrontations with colonialism, racism, patriarchy, war, and capitalism, to envision and enact alternative ways of being. Our focus is on women's writing—including speeches, journalism, letters, and memoir—in connection with other forms of creative expression, such as music, spoken word, storytelling, visual art, dance, theater, performance art, and political action.

My goals are to provide a space for students to think critically about the production of knowledge, to rethink what constitutes history, and to consider how/why women's representations of their lives change over time. Students learn from these primary sources how women experienced and shaped the defining events of the past, and how both scholars and artists today make meaning of and shape our understanding of that history. They also recognize the power of cultural work and see writing as a tool not only for self-discovery but for radical social change. For young people today, coming of age in a time of war, women's testimonial writing provides tools for living in deeply challenging and disturbing times. As students struggle to understand the motivations, rationalizations, and consequences of American empire-building in the twenty-first century, women's cultural

work helps them to consider the human costs of US expansionism. Most students do not know this history, and the way, as historian Matthew Jacobson has written, “the modern state was built, and modern nationalism generated, in close relation to the imperialist project” (263). Women’s cultural work makes this history visible. It helps students to make connections, for example, between US wars against American Indian nations in the nineteenth century, or the US war in the Philippines in the early twentieth century, and the wars in Central America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East in the latter part of the twentieth century. Moreover, they are able to assess the collateral damage of US ascendancy to global power.

This essay explores the pedagogical practices I have developed in one section of this course, the two weeks we spend studying Italian immigrant women’s radical political writing. This collection of writing was produced by women who were self-identified anarchists and activists within local grassroots revolutionary working-class movements. They were among the twenty-six million migrants who left Italy between 1870 and 1970, in search of work, and to escape poverty and government repression in Italy. They were mothers, grandmothers, factory workers, performance artists (they wrote and performed short plays and skits), and labor organizers. They were also organic intellectuals in the manner that Antonio Gramsci has explained: they were self-educated working-class activists whose politics were shaped by the needs of their communities and their desire to dismantle oppressive systems of power. Their writing elucidated their own personal struggles, but also made visible the kinds of challenges that most Italian immigrant women faced as low wage, menial factory workers who endured dangerous working conditions and inhumane treatment in the garment and textile trades. While only a minority of Italian immigrants in the United States were radicals, their influence was large. They established visible and alternative cultural and political spaces within every immigrant settlement; and they were the only formal organizations that successfully mobilized the masses of Italian immigrant workers before the First World War. Within this radical culture, Italian women created spaces for their own self-expression, producing a body of written work that reflected their dreams, struggles, and world views.

In this course, I use a multidisciplinary approach to illuminate both the larger structural world that shaped women’s lives, and the local communities that gave rise to their expressive cultures. As a historian specializing in race and ethnic relations, labor and working-class studies, im/migration and women’s history, I teach classes that attract a relatively diverse group of students. The two times I have taught this class, a disproportionate number of students from working-class and lower middle-class backgrounds enrolled. In addition, many students in the course identified as queer, including several transgender, and gender-queer students. Thus, most were interested in studying class inequality *and* in thinking and living beyond the gender binary. The students were also overwhelmingly white, which reflects the demographics of the college, though my classes on im/migra-

tion, post-colonialism, and critical race theory have attracted more diverse groups. While the class is centered on the histories of women of color, students tend to assume that courses on “women” mean “white women,” due to their experiences of whiteness as the normative center in women’s history, women’s studies, and feminism more generally. Most of the students had some background in women’s and gender studies, and they typically shared an interest in social activism and a love for writing and art. For many, however, this was their first college-level history course, thus giving me the opportunity to introduce a new group of students to US history.

The writing of Italian immigrant women anarchists comes in the ninth and tenth weeks of class, just after the mid-point of the semester. By then, students have become more comfortable speaking with one another, and the major theoretical tools for the class have been established. I accomplish this by beginning the course with a discussion about the writing process. We read several essays from Jocelyn Burrell’s anthology *Word: On Being a [Woman] Writer* (2000), including Judith Ortiz Cofer’s “The Woman Who Slept With One Eye Open,” which students always find particularly compelling. Cofer explores two *cuentos*/stories she learned from the women in her family in Puerto Rico, and the lessons they hold for the woman artist. Both stories ask students to consider what it means to confront the inner “assassin”—the aspect of the self that is, as Cofer writes, the “destroyer of ambition” and “killer of dreams” (80). The students thus begin to see themselves as creative beings rather than passive consumers of information. They also become aware of the internalization of oppression and the various barriers to creative expression.

So we begin here, thinking about what it means for women to write, and the ways in which writing can be an act of resistance. The first two writing assignments build from this reading. I ask students to write a short one-to-two page essay in response to a single question: What are the most significant factors that have shaped who you are? In posing the question, I offer a little guidance and I ask them to think about the ways in which their families, communities, neighborhoods, friends, etc., have impacted who they are; I also ask them to consider how class, sexuality, race, gender, ethnicity, and religion have shaped their experiences. Later, after reading their essays, I choose an anonymous excerpt from each, compile them into a single handout, and distribute copies to the class. In this way, they are able to read each other’s words, and see points of connection and divergence. Students often comment that this exercise helps them to develop a sense of community early on in the class. In fact, the second time I taught this class, two students asked if I would do this again, as they had heard about it from students who had taken the class previously.

The anonymity was crucial. Students appreciated the chance to reflect on the factors that shape their perspectives and to read each other’s writing in a non-competitive manner. Among other things, the excerpts make visible (to others, to the self) the usually hidden ways that systemic inequality informs one’s life. Since this college has begun prioritizing the recruit-

ment of first-generation college students, who have comprised close to one-fifth of the incoming class for the past several years, the culture of the institution is in a process of change. Increasingly, there is a critical mass of students from working-class and lower middle-class families in my courses—enough for students to see that they are not alone in making this monumental transition, in experiencing complicated feelings of alienation, frustration, and anger, and in their commitment to make the most of this academic opportunity.

After the students have a chance to read the excerpts, we discuss their content together, and reflect on the themes that have emerged. We also discuss the writing process, so students can consider the challenges they face in expressing themselves. Most importantly, this exercise helps students to become more generous with one another, more willing to listen and engage each other. This is an especially significant issue in this highly competitive educational setting where students often choose to disengage from one another if the material or the discussion becomes challenging. For many, the classroom is an intensely intimidating space. This reflects several factors, including the prestige of the college and the fact that, at a small residential campus, students must face each other regularly and are accountable to each other in ways that differ from commuter campuses. My goal has therefore been to create a pedagogical space that encourages students to work with one another, despite differences, points of contention, and their fear of not being smart enough. The exercise also helps students to become aware of the assumptions they bring to their studies, and to consider possibilities and experiences that are beyond their lived realities.

I then have students connect with the women in their own pasts, their ancestors. After reading essays on transforming ancestral memory through writing by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, the students write in class, responding to the following prompt: how have the women in your family and/or community influenced you? I ask them to identify several key characters, people whom they have known and/or those whom they have never met. After they write for five to ten minutes, I ask them to choose one of the characters that emerged and write in the first person, from their perspective, so they can tell a story. Students develop this for another five to ten minutes, and then continue outside of class on their own. Generally, I do not ask students to submit this work. Rather, we talk about the exercise in class and they have the option of exploring the themes that emerge from their stories in a final paper. In this way, they are able to write just for themselves, to develop their ideas without the self-censorship that comes from having to show the results to someone. One student wrote from the perspective of her grandfather who migrated to the US from China in the 1920s, and then chose to research relationships between Chinese immigrant women and men during the exclusion era. Another connected to the voice of her mother, a white factory worker in West Virginia, and wrote a final paper analyzing representations of working-class women in Appalachia from the 1920s to the 1980s, including women's self-representations. For

the students who do not follow this route, the exercise provides a hands-on way to develop the tools they will continue to hone throughout the semester: they connect to their own histories, gain a deeper understanding of how the past has shaped their lives, and consider how they have acquired knowledge from their own ancestors.

By the time we read Italian immigrant women's writings, the class has not only engaged in this kind of exploratory, creative writing, they have also produced several one-to-two page essays that analyze the course texts. Each week they read both secondary and primary sources: essays by scholars which orient them to the particular historical time period (providing both content and theoretical tools), alongside women's cultural work from a particular time period. We also explore how contemporary artists and writers incorporate these histories into their work, and contribute their own understanding. For example, in the section on slavery, they read Stephanie Camp's monograph, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (2004) as well as enslaved women's own narratives, and watch the film *I Is a Long Memored Woman* (1990), which chronicles the history of slavery from the perspective of the descendants of slaves in the Caribbean through monologue, poetry, dance, and song. My intention in assigning such an eclectic group of materials is for students to analyze how memory and history are intertwined, how they are produced not only by scholars, but by artists, writers, performers, musicians, and others, often in dialogue with one another.

Students read the writing by Italian immigrant women in the second section of the course, which explores working-class immigrant women's cultural work within the radical social movements of the turn of the century (the first section explores the impact of slavery and colonialism on women's resistance in the nineteenth century). We begin the second section with material documenting Chinese, Puerto Rican, and Mexican immigrant women's writing within the transnational feminist, anti-colonial, and labor movements at the turn of the last century. This writing takes us into the histories of women's diasporic political cultures of San Francisco, Tampa, Puerto Rico, and along the Mexico/Texas border.¹ The writing by Italian women anarchists in New York and New Jersey is another layer of this history.

By the time students delve into this literature, they have learned how systems of power are not only shifting but that women are positioned within racialized processes of nation- and empire-building in vastly different ways. Chinese immigrant women were formally denied US citizenship and barred from entering the United States, while Puerto Rican and Mexican women were marginally included as colonial subjects. By attending to the structural processes that shape patterns of migration, settlement, labor, and politics, students learn that Latina/o and Asian American subjectivity has been shaped by contradiction: while they reside in and contribute their labor to the US nation-state, they are marked as perpetually foreign, "alien," and unassimilable.² This history also helps students to understand how cit-

1 Scholarship on this history includes Hewitt (2001), Lomas (2003), Pérez (1999), Ruiz (1987), Sánchez-Gonzalez (2001), Yung (1990, 1999), and Zamora (1983).

2 To illuminate this history I also incorporate Lowe (1997), Kang (2002), and Briggs (2002).

izenship in the United States has been conflated with whiteness. Through the primary documents, they then learn how women struggle with and contest the implications of these dynamics in their lives.

We engage the study of Italian immigrant women's radical writing through this understanding of subjectivity. This choice reflects my own pedagogical commitment to deconstructing the mythic "up-by-the-bootstraps" European immigrant that has become iconic in classic history texts and the mass media, and used as the yard-stick by which to measure and demonize more recent immigrants to the United States. Not only does this highly individualistic narrative tend to erase women (or positions them purely as appendages to men), it also elides the power relations that give rise to and shape patterns of migration, labor, settlement, and adjustment. In addition, a great deal of women's cultural work was intended to refute the ideologies and structures that naturalized domination and exploitation.

I begin the lesson with some classic photographs of Italian immigrant women—such as those of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine—so that students can analyze some of the representations that were popular at the time and which continue to inform our collective memory of this past. In this way, they meet the "garment worker" and "factory girl" of the early twentieth century. They see her depicted as the hardy peasant, balancing huge bundles of clothing on her head, seated before a sewing machine or loom, or holding an infant in her arms amidst the chaos and filth of the modern metropolis. Her face is often obscured either by her focused concentration on the work at hand or by her heavy load. In the past, I have given each student a photocopy of a quintessential photograph and had them write one page out of class on their impressions, so they can interpret the document on their own first. I have also asked students to write in class with the photograph projected on a screen, to give them a chance to reflect on the image before our discussion. Either way, these photos help us to answer a series of questions that we take up together in discussion: how is she portrayed? Why might this be? What is highlighted and what is obscured? Thus, we explore how these images construct a particular persona, one that women's own testimonial writing will then interrupt.

In our discussion of Lewis Hine's photograph, "Italian immigrant, East Side, New York City, 1910" for example, students usually comment on the woman's strength, dexterity, her ability to carry and balance such a heavy load, and the overall filth of her clothes and the setting. Most also note that her face is obscured, and some notice that her hand is balled into a fist. We then discuss their impressions and consider why this emphasis on Italian immigrant women's hard work, poverty, and dirtiness resonated for middle-class audiences that consumed these images en masse, in newspapers, magazines, and journals, among other spaces. Through the conversations, students come to realize how such images served a powerful political and economic purpose: they assured Americans audiences that such women were not only uniquely suited for such work, but of their own relative freedom from such indignities. They also

enabled a wide range of actors—including progressive reformers, middle-class feminists, and labor leaders—to position themselves as the saviors and civilizers of such women, thereby absolving themselves of any role in their exploitation.³

3 I assign the Introduction and first chapter of Newman (1999) here for historical background and analytical tools.

I also assign several readings so that students can further identify the particular location of Italian women within the United States at this time. They read essays from *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives* (2002), an anthology of essays on women in Italy's many diasporas, edited by Franca Iacovetta and Donna Gabaccia; selections from Thomas A. Guglielmo's *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (2003) and the anthology *Are Italians White? How Race Is Made in America* (2003); they also read essays by Matthew Frye Jacobson and David Roediger. Together, these materials illustrate that southern Italian women were recruited by manufacturing firms to come to New York City for low-wage labor in the burgeoning industrial capitalist economy. They were classified as "white" by the US federal government and were therefore permitted to enter, reside, and become citizens in the United States. In addition, this meant that their families could represent themselves in a court of law, vote, and own property. They were not subjected to systematic racialized segregation at the levels experienced by African Americans, American Indians, or Latin American and Asian immigrants. Students also learn that many Americans perceived southern Italians as racially suspect and biologically inferior to northern and western European Americans. Identifying the complex way Italian women entered the US economic and racial order as racially inferior whites is essential to understanding their cultures of resistance.

We then turn to the essays, manifestos, testimonies, and letters produced by Italian immigrant women between 1897 and 1907. The writing is all in Italian, so I have translated several essays for students, two of which have been reprinted in the anthology *Italian American Writers on New Jersey: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose* (2003).⁴ The essays are typically short, often only a few paragraphs in length, and usually begin with a dramatic call to action: "*Alle donne, emancipiamoci!*" (To the women, let's emancipate ourselves!) or "*Alle mie sorelle proletarie*" (To my proletarian sisters). Hundreds of women's essays survive because they were published in two anarchist newspapers from Paterson, New Jersey and New York City, two centers of Italian immigrant radicalism in the United States.

4 I am now in the process of republishing a collection of these essays together in a book, *My Rebellious Heart: Italian Immigrant Women's Anarchist Feminist Prose in New York City's Radical Subculture, 1890-1930*.

I give students a dozen or so essays in both their original form and in translation, and pose several questions in advance to help them analyze the documents before class. First, I ask them to analyze the physical nature of the sources. Since the original writings are in Italian, the students become aware of the necessity of being familiar with languages other than English in order to research US immigration history. Second, I ask them to identify the purpose of each essay. What was the author's message or argument? What was she trying to convey? Is the message explicit? Are there implicit messages as well? Third, I ask them to consider how the author chooses to convey their message. What methods does she use? What does this

tell us about the author? Who is her intended audience? What does a careful reading of the text tell us? Finally, I ask them to write a few paragraphs in which they describe their sense of this political culture given what they have read in these sources. We discuss their responses in class. Students usually comment on the urgency in the writing and the authors' ability to put into words the kinds of changes they wanted to manifest. They also note how the documents present history in a more subtle and personal way than secondary texts, requiring that they analyze the material for themselves. I find that students are generally excited to think about history not as a series of dates and events to be forced into their memories and regurgitated onto an exam, but as interpretive and subjective, and therefore fraught with issues of power.

In their responses, students usually focus on the feminism expressed in these documents, especially the authors' sense that revolutionary activism required the transformation of the self as well as the larger world. This often strikes students as particularly advanced, as does the authors' critique of imperialism. They often note their surprise at the ways these writers connected local conditions to global processes of capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism, and their uses of the rhetoric of American nationalism to expose how "liberty" and "freedom" were elusive for many in the United States. I ask them to think about why they are surprised and what this might reveal. In our discussion, we consider again Matthew Jacobson's argument in *Barbarian Virtues* (2000), which they have read the week before, concerning the "public amnesia" of turn-of-the-century empire-building in the United States (263).

We piece together a preliminary, working definition of anarchism, based on the primary documents they have read. From these materials, they see that anarchism was a contested ideology, but that anarchists generally united in their belief that the government, the church, and private property were harmful because they required that people live under a system of inequality and surrender their own power. As the Neapolitan anarcho-syndicalist theorist and activist Errico Malatesta explained in his widely popular treatise, *L'Anarchia* (1891), anarchists sought "the destruction of all political order based on authority, and the creation of a society of free and equal members based on a harmony of interests and the voluntary participation of everybody in carrying out social responsibilities" (33). Anarchists generally believed that no one was free until all were free. Moreover, revolution was not something they waited for. To them, it was the daily act of bringing about the world they envisioned.

We then explore more fully the transnational and multi-ethnic world of New York City's early twentieth-century radical subculture, which gave rise to these essays. By situating the documents within their historical context, students can see the communities that made such activism and critiques possible. To do this, I typically assign an essay or two from several major anthologies on Italian immigrant radicalism, including those by Philip Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer, Gabaccia and Iacovetta, and Gabaccia and

Fraser Ottanelli. In addition, I have students revisit women's cultural work from earlier in the semester—material produced by other im/migrant women who participated in this radical subculture, such as Luisa Capetillo, Jovita Idar, Sara Estela Ramírez, Lucy Parsons, and Emma Goldman. By looking at this writing together, students come to see how this was a movement that crossed many borders. For example, with the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, Italian anarchists in the United States stayed in close contact with the mostly peasant and anarchist revolutionary leaders in Mexico through weekly correspondence and reports in the independent anarchist newspapers. In addition, the groups that published and circulated these papers—the radical subculture of which these women authors were a part—were highly multi-ethnic. The secondary sources reveal how in Brooklyn, a group of Sicilian anarchists who labored as shoemakers and garment workers, built coalitions with their Cuban, Spanish, Puerto Rican, and Russian neighbors in their *circolo* (circle) Club Avanti; and in Paterson, textile workers from northern Italy routinely held meetings and organized multi-ethnic benefits with their French, German, Dutch, and Spanish anarchist neighbors in *Il Gruppo Diritto all'Esistenza* (The Right to an Existence Group), which consisted of at least one hundred members, including many of the women writers whose essays they read. Through these readings, students learn that Italian immigrant women radicals wrote their treatises with a large audience in mind. Their writing was translated into Spanish, French, German, and other languages, and circulated, through the radical press, in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, England, Spain, France, and Italy.

I also bring more photographs to class, so students can see how different documents offer competing stories and raise further questions about this history. One photograph of the Italian anarchists in Paterson always gets a laugh since students do not expect to see a group of folks in their fifties and sixties stirring up revolution. I also bring photographs of women's mutual aid societies from Tampa (Florida), San Antonio (Texas), Brownsville (Texas), Paterson (New Jersey), New York, Richmond (Virginia), and other locales, as well as documents (photographs and oral histories) from the radical subcultures and labor struggles in these cities, in which these women writers participated.⁵ Taken together, these sources depict working-class women in ways that contrast sharply with the Hine and Riis photos. Here they see women workers who are actively involved in political struggle, speaking at rallies, having fun at May Day picnics or at the beach with their families, trying on the latest fashions, building community, and managing cooperative newspapers, libraries, bookstores, and other stores.

I then ask students to go back and revise their original analysis of the political culture, which they first derived only from their initial reading of the women's writing. At this point, we discuss how their narratives have changed over time. Having constructed a sense of this history together, in dialogue with one another, over several class periods, the students see how their own perspectives and subjectivities shaped their interpretations. They

5 Some of these materials are referenced or can be found in Avrich (1995, 1991), Zamora (1983), Hewitt (2001), Mormino and Pozzetta (1987), Barkley Brown (1990), Mirabal (2001), Sánchez-Korrol (1983), Vega (1984), Golin (1988), Ewen (1985).



MAY DAY CELEBRATION AT HALEDON, NJ, CA. 1915.
COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN LABOR MUSEUM/BOTTO HOUSE NATIONAL LANDMARK.

also see how our collaborative process impacted their understanding of this history. By analyzing these materials together, as a network of documents, students learn how history is a collage involving multiple, overlapping voices and competing perspectives, some of which have been granted more authority than others. They see as well that transnational feminism, interracial solidarity, and labor radicalism have a history.

To help unravel the question of why this history has been submerged, we explore how these activists were criminalized and stigmatized in their time. I do this in multiple ways, including popular and official depictions of anarchists from such texts as Salvatore LaGumina's *WOP: A Documentary of Anti-Italian Discrimination in the United States* (1973). The students thus come to see how Italians were racialized through an imagery and discourse of othering that hinged on notions of their inherent criminality. They learn, for example, that those newspapers which published the most essays by Italian immigrant women anarchists were targeted for censorship by the US federal government during the Red Scare of the First World War, in large part because of their bold stance against white supremacy and racist violence (Salerno, 2003). This helps students to understand how the widespread suppression of civil liberties during and after the war was motivated, in part, by fear on the part of the federal government and business corporations of the types of alliances that were developing among working-class people across the lines of race and ethnicity.⁶

This literature disrupts another common misconception about women's political cultures: that feminism developed in two "waves"—suffrage and women's liberation. Students learn that women who were

⁶ See also Kornweibel (1998).

not middle-class or Anglo articulated feminisms in ways that challenged racism, capitalism, and patriarchy as interconnected systems, and that they did so in periods of supposed feminist decline or stagnancy. In addition, this testimonial writing also leads students to explore how activism in the early twentieth century informed later periods of political struggle, during the Great Depression, the Second World War, the modern civil rights and freedom movements, the Women's Liberation Movement, and beyond. Since much of the scholarly writing on Italian immigrant women during the 1980s and 1990s advanced an image of them as uninterested in politics and without a vision of radical social change, these primary documents force students to ask why this stereotype has persisted. Moreover, students often remark that this first generation of immigrant women activists was, in many ways, more radical, more subversive, than later generations. In all of these ways, these documents challenge progressivist notions of American history: that over time each generation is more cosmopolitan, more open-minded, more involved in the political life of their community than the last. These documents thus require that students deconstruct popular notions of immigrant women as "backward" compared to their more Americanized daughters.

Sincere political and analytical engagement with the ideas of working-class women is only just beginning within academic settings. Token inclusion or complete disregard of these texts has maintained their marginal status. By letting these texts inform how we imagine knowledge, activism, community, and the classroom itself, we can begin to learn from transnational, radical, working-class feminist practices. Indeed, these documents teach us how revolution is a daily practice, materialized through relationships, collaborative creative work, and political struggle. As Arundhati Roy writes, in reference to the contemporary global rise of militarism and violence, "Our strategy should be not only to confront Empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness—and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe" (118).

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