The playground in the dead of night; old buildings/ cleared away; I assume the black-top is the same on which I bled! the first kick by an upstart boy; the old nun, the one who'd throw me out, stands/ on the gateway steps,/ chiding my mother, whose bad/ Englishes make mincemeat of my will to live.

— Pier Giorgio di Cicco, “Returning to St. Dominic’s (Toronto, 1957)"

When a person’s language and experience is not reflected in the culture of the society in which s/he lives, her/his identity and values seem confused, transient. This is true for immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, and women. I’ve lived most of my life in Toronto, but I was born in Italy. I immigrated to Canada with my family in 1955. I was six years old, a rather sensitive age to be uprooted. I remember that I became a very unhappy child. Toronto was a different town in the mid-fifties: smaller, stiffer, provincial. My family and I were part of a wave of post-war immigration from Italy, most of them like us, working class people from the South.

Before I learned to speak English I had some rather unpleasant encounters with the citizens of my adopted country. Children can be cruel—that was a cliché even then, as well as a painful reality. When a group of boys threw stones at me and called me a D.P. as I was walking home from school one day, I didn’t know what they meant. D.P., displaced person. The stones, however, communicated more than enough. A girl who lived next door informed me that she couldn’t play with me anymore because her mother said I was Italian. Several other children followed suit. Adults have the power to be even crueler.

At times I found myself a victim of misunderstandings that could happen really to almost any child, but which seemed worse without the words to explain or defend myself. One incident I remember most vividly. Memory plays it back for me like a silent movie shot in black-and-white. The perspective seems odd, the point of view that of a dwarf. I was standing by the entrance to my school, waiting for the daughter of our landlord to walk me home. We lived in a flat that was the second storey of their house. A teacher, a nun dressed formally in black cloth and veil, saw me standing quietly and waiting. For some reason that I didn’t understand at the time, the very sight of me sent her into a rage. She shook me violently. I saw her mouth shape of angry words, but for some reason I remember this as if I were a deaf-mute. The details are dramatic and entirely visual, devoid of her voice or words. This was for me, I am convinced, an entirely pre-English language memory.

I know that I wasn’t able to respond to her accusations. I was a docile and timid child. Her tone, however, I must have understood. It frightened me. She probably believed me to be silent and defiant. She dragged me into her classroom of senior students and strapped me soundly in front of the girls, who looked up idly from their crocheting. My hands were swollen and burning for hours, my face blazing with shame. I discovered later that I had been standing in the wrong spot; the entrance to the school had been declared off-limits for students, announced over the P.A. system that morning. Unfortunately for me I had not understood the new rule and had waited as usual in a corner just inside the building to keep warm.

My family moved and I went to grade one in another school. I was placed at the back of the classroom because, I presume, I didn’t know the language and presented a problem to the teacher. I spent the rest of the year, without any particular instruction, drawing with crayons pictures of bright sunshine and flowers in my notebooks. I’m not sure how I learned anything at all. Was it a secret blessing to be ignored? It was rumoured in the class that I would fail. But I passed or was passed into grade two where Marisa di Michele, pronounced Dee Mee Kehle, became Mary Dee Michelle or Dee Miss Shelley. The teacher who renamed me, “Maria, that’s Mary isn’t it?” for better or for worse, gave me another and invaluable gift. She took the class to the local library and for 5 cents, or half my weekly allowance, I acquired a passport into a world of reading.

Things became relatively easy after I learned to write and speak English fluently. However, I still suffered from an acute sense of otherness because my home language and culture were not reflected at all in my education, nor in my reading, nor in the American dramas of film and television I liked to watch. My intellectual language became English, but at home we spoke Italian. My thinking and feeling in more ways than one were in different tongues. I felt divided and alienated both from the general culture and myself, my home life, throughout much of my childhood and adolescence.

Luckily for me I found a way of resolving this inner conflict. I found my voice as a poet by writing about my Italian roots: my early childhood in Italy, my family and culture in Canada. [Editor’s Note: several of Mary di Michele poems are reprinted in this issue; see ‘Contents’ pages]. In this way I think my intellectually-acquired English language became informed by the Italian that was for me an emotional language (my formal education having been entirely in Canada), containing the intensity of family bonds and primary experience. Another poet, Pier Giorgio di Cicco, helped me com-
I poems, poems about his family and their
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Romance),
of recognition." not only did I experience
the feeling of having read authentic work, but
I also felt that prickle at the back of
the skull that was Emily Dickinson's test for
true poetry. But, perhaps more importantly
for me then, I experienced a "shock of
recognition." Di Cicco's writing,
which reflected my own experience in
many ways, seemed to give it both valid-
ity and perspective. Yes, and more, a kind
of transcendence over my personal al-
ienation and emotional exile.

There is a French philosophical term,
originating in the writing of Jean-Paul
Sartre, "l'imaginaire." "L'imaginaire" as
I understand it, is cultural reality, that is
the world or society as it is represented in
a novel or play or photograph or TV
program or painting (any imaginative
construct) — what we understand life
in to be through our arts. What Canada's recent
immigrant writers are doing is expanding the
tradition of "survival" to include a
tradition of "the journey."

The multicultural debate gives me a bit
of a headache; it is such a loaded debate.
Yet I know that if you write exclusively
about the lives of immigrants, you keep
yourself marginal to Canadian culture. In
a similar way, women who confine them-
expressing as which is predomi-
antly and traditionally feminine find
themselves in a female ghetto.

Why is it a ghetto when we refer to
women's writing? Although it seems a
natural enough term to refer to the situ-
ation of ethnic writers, it seems extreme
when referring to 52% of the population.
It is not extreme. Invited to a reception for
the Prime Minister of Bermuda at
Queen's Park, I felt literally lost among
the extraterrestrials looming above me in
the Prime Minister's office. My presence seemed unnatural, as
if I had stumbled into the men's wash-
room by mistake, as exclusively gender-
determined as that.

In some cultures women are required to
wear the veil; in our culture there are some
who call themselves REAL WOMEN and
require that we wear the apron. This may
mean to isolate in. To a writer it means to
deny dialogue with what is defined by
power or hierarchy as the culture of a
society, defined by power and not by
composition. A ghetto is not entirely bad
— after all, it is also a community, a
support group, and when it functions as
such it sometimes produces enough
strong voices that the larger culture hears
them. Sometimes it is a sympathetic and
liberal larger culture who will protect and
declare its existence and its vitality — like
Dr. Seuss' elephant in Horton Hears a
Who. Under more rigid conditions the
ethnic writer, the female writer, is judged
to be marginal. How? By according inter-
est in their writing purely in sociological
rather than literary terms. Or political
ones, when multiculturalism exists as an
official policy and bureaucracy but does not participate in mainstream culture.

Women writers are working in or
against a tradition of literature that is
historically primarily male in content, in
experience. Literary women weaned on
words find to their surprise that they have
been identifying as human a tradition of
literature written by men, a tradition that
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