

WOMEN, GENDER, AND TRANSNATIONAL LIVES: ITALIAN WORKERS OF THE WORLD

Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta, Eds.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.

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Scholarly writings on transnationalism, transmigration, and diasporic experience currently proliferate the literature on migration in the contemporary context. Both theoretically and substantively, such discussions have made a valuable contribution to our understanding of the movement of people within global communities. Notably, this growing and fashionable literature considers the implications of sophisticated information technology for the meaning of time and space in our lives. The recent debates have focused on the ease and speed of communication across the globe, the maintenance of transnational ties irrespective of geographic boundaries, cross-border movements (and exploitation) of labour, and reconstructed notions of home, national ties, citizenship, and nation-state. Importantly, the research on transnationalism has also generated thoughtful analyses of political resistance "from below."

Without questioning the significance of this relatively new body of literature, it is important that we not lose sight of earlier studies of transnational movement. The recent research, in other words, needs to be considered in relation to existing analyses of labour migration and immigration, and must be attentive to historic forms, and patterns of migration, as well as the experiences of past migrants themselves. After

all, cross-border migration is not a new phenomenon. Furthermore, it is imperative that, educated in the discourse of transnationalism, we not abandon the long-established concepts of gender, ethnicity, and social class. Gendered analyses, in particular, have been critical in highlighting the need to think about cross-border movement and transnational politics in relation to paid and unpaid labour, the domestic division of labour, domestic relations, family life, sexuality, and intimate relationships.

A sensitivity to historically-specific experiences of migration, as well as a recognition of the continued significance of ethnicity, gender, and class to the analysis of such experience, make Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta's collection of essays, *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World*, well worth reading. This book offers rich historical detail, and nuanced explorations into the lives of Italian women in their world-wide migration over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book is based on thirteen essays (divided into four parts): women who wait and work, female immigrants at work, female activists, and a final section on female identity.

Importantly, this collection brings gender front and centre to research on labour migration. As the editors note, gender is central to the study of transnational patterns and experience. Though international labour migration in the present period is relatively gender-balanced, those Gabaccia and Iacovetta set out to explore were strongly male-dominated. In their preface they explain, "[w]e wanted to view the global social networks created by massive male emigration from Italy through female eyes." While the starting point is Italy, *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives* moves us across the globe to Canada, Belgium, the United States, Argentina, and Australia.

In focussing on gender, and at the same time taking a woman-centred

approach, *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives* broadens our understanding of the "transnational subject" and the construction of Italian women. This is done in various ways. The women who fill the pages of this collection force us to challenge longstanding (patriarchal, ethnocentric, class-biased) stereotypes of Italian immigrant women as passive and economically and politically dependent. We read about female agency in paid and unpaid work, women's resistance, activism, and even radicalism and militancy. Furthermore, the book reminds us that though husbands and sons may have departed from Italy without their wives, daughters, and female offspring, transoceanic migration involved all family members, changing the lives both of those who migrated and of those who stayed behind. In the absence of men, as emigrant's wives, women had to redefine their relationship to the nation, to government bureaucracy, and to work. Whether in Italy or as migrants themselves in other parts of the world, women's location within families (their responsibilities and intimate ties and loyalties) furthermore had implications for their relationship to production and consumption, political action, and citizenship. And in the context of global movement and politics (notably, fascism), women struggled to forge new identities which were at the same time, merging and contradictory.

Unfettered by academic jargon and inaccessible abstractions that plague much of the scholarly literature, this collection of essays make an important contribution to the discussion of transnational movement. It is based on solid scholarship from two well-respected and seasoned historians.