

Italian feminisms and the challenges of ethnic diversity

An alliance of women. Immigration and the politics of race

Heather Merrill; University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2006, 272p, ISBN 0-8166-4158-7 \$25.00 (Pbk)

Immigrant women and feminism in Italy

Wendy Pojmann; Ashgate, Aldershot, 2006, 196p, ISBN 0-7546-4674-2 £50.00 (Hbk)

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Questions of 'race' and ethnic diversity have impacted on European women's movements to varying degrees and in varied ways. Among other factors, these differences can be explained by the characteristics of local migration and by the local and national political context in which different organizations have functioned. In the 1970s and 1980s, black feminists in the UK challenged the British feminist movement to engage constructively with racism (Amos and Parmar, 1984). In France, more recently, a 2004 law prohibiting the wearing of the 'veil' in schools by French Muslim girls deeply divided French feminists and highlighted disagreements between women over secularism, Islam and racism (*Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, 2006). Much less is known about this type of dialogue in the Italian case in part because immigration to Italy began at a later stage to many other European countries. As Giovanna Fiume's (2005: 208) description of Italian women's history makes clear, when as one of three Italian feminists she travelled to the United Kingdom in the late 1970s to make links with British feminists, one of the main differences identified between British and Italian feminisms was 'above all, the class-race nexus then had little or no relevance to the Italian situation'. The two books under review here, both published in 2006, are therefore a welcome contribution to the international scholarly literature in this field as they discuss in depth how immigration is transforming the nature of women's activism within Italy.

The books share certain broad similarities. Firstly, both are written from the 'outsider' perspective of North American academics. They also share broadly

similar objectives. In the case of Merrill, to explore 'growing heterogeneity in Europe and the spatial politics of race and gender' (p. xiv), and in the case of Pojmann, to understand 'the impact of immigrant women on established western feminist practice' (p. 3) and 'to examine in particular the role of gender in the formation of associations of migrant women' (p. 7). Both authors additionally pay detailed attention to the specific history of Italian women's and feminist associations. However, they adopt two quite different methodological approaches to conduct their respective studies. As an anthropologist, Merrill provides a rich and detailed study of a specific local situation (Turin). Conversely, Pojmann adopts an interdisciplinary perspective rooted in the discipline of History and aims to offer a much broader perspective covering the local, national and international context. The books also diverge in the time periods they examine. The bulk of Merrill's work was conducted in the early 1990s, while Pojmann completed her fieldwork in 2004 and 2005. Read together then, the books have the potential to provide critical insight into the impact that migrant women have had on women's activism in Italy over a 15-year period.

Merrill's focus is an ethnographic study of the Alma Mater women's organization in Turin. She tells an interesting story about the actual formation of Alma Mater and its origins in the African women's association AIDA in the early 1990s. AIDA envisaged the creation of a space for migrant women that would contest racism, teach the local Turinese about cultural diversity and facilitate migrant women's employment in spheres beyond domestic work. At the same time, some Italian feminists in Turin, linked to the organization *Donne in sviluppo*, were keen to organize initiatives and build alliances with migrant women. As Merrill points out, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw a proliferation of associations linked to the phenomenon of migration in Italy and thus political and feminist support for the Alma Mater project allowed a number of different groups and political parties to fulfil their own political objectives and strategies. However, the significant funding available for the Alma Mater project could not be allocated to AIDA because of a legal loop-hole and this meant that from the beginning they were forced into a form of financial tutelage by a more established Italian feminist association. Alongside migrant women then, the first executive body of Alma Mater included Italian women from feminist organizations *Donne in Sviluppo* and *Produrre e Riprodurre*.

Merrill carefully describes the organization of Alma Mater, which finally opened in 1993 in an old school building from which the organization derives its name. Various groups were active within the building and a range of economic, social and cultural activities took place there. She engages in a long discussion on the use of cultural mediators, generally employed to mediate between migrants and Italian state institutions. Merrill describes how this practice was envisaged by women within Alma Mater as a means of giving recognition to migrant women's knowledge and expertise. Although Italian feminists within Alma Mater supported

the use of cultural mediators, here was an example of how the different histories and circumstances of migrant women and Italian feminists diverged. Migrant women, not all of whom were comfortable with the term feminism, generally sought formal recognition and a legitimate space within the Italian public sector whereas the practice of Italian feminisms has been to oppose co-optation into state structures.

To frame the activities of Alma Mater, Merrill details the development of racist and anti-racist politics in relation to the San Salvario area of Turin. She makes some rather extravagant claims about Turin, claiming, for example, that 'Perhaps only through the image of Turin could political arguments about immigration truly reach into the hearts of the Italians throughout the country' (p. 79). One of the reasons, in her view, is because Turin was the only Northern Italian city that had remained relatively culturally homogenous. This seems a rather odd assertion to make particularly given the massive internal migration to the city in the post-war period which Merrill herself later argues was a key historical moment structuring racialized conflicts in Turin. At times, where her discussions on the local political context could provide illuminative material, Merrill gives tantalizingly little detail. For example, the left-wing party's (*Partito Democratico della Sinistra*) participation in an anti-immigrant demonstration in San Salvario, along with parties on the political right, is discussed in relation to the national level rather than offering a detailed analysis of the local level. In addition, Merrill could have made a much stronger link between this general local political mobilization and women's mobilization. We do not know, for example, whether Alma Mater members were involved in the events in San Salvario. References to Italian women's social situation suggest that there was more to explore here. For example, Merrill notes the high number of unemployed people living in San Salvario, many of whom were unskilled women over the age of thirty. A discussion of the implications of this for 'an alliance of women', and whether this has had any impact on Italian women's local organizing 'for' or 'against' immigration, would have informed the overall argument of her book.

Pojmann's monograph is centrally concerned with different typologies of women's associations. She deals with Italian women's associations, migrant women's associations, multicultural women's associations – which she defines as those comprised of migrant and native women – and international women's associations. Pojmann identifies similar reasons for the development of Italian and migrant women's associations, which she attributes to the inability of broader organizations such as political parties or mixed-sex migrant or extra-parliamentary groups to incorporate difference into their strategy and practice. Her work is particularly useful in providing an overview of the range of women's associations currently active in Italy, the reasons for their development and their principal objectives. She also effectively demonstrates how migrant women can bypass some of the obstacles they face at local level by developing networks with

European women lobbyists, the European Union and international non-governmental organizations.

Nonetheless, the impression is that Pojmann set herself too ambitious a task to cover even a selected number of groups in any depth and so her discussion frequently reads like a descriptive survey and is only occasionally punctuated by an analysis of the feasibility of objectives or the success or failure of strategies to meet these objectives. This somewhat descriptive approach to documenting migrant women's self-organizing also has a tendency to eclipse these women's active engagement with other political organizations and movements. Thus, in discussing the Cape Verdean women's association *OMCVI*, Pojmann could have factored in how the high level of transnational organizing that Cape Verdeans in Europe typically engage in impacts on their political activism within Italy. Similarly, with respect to Eritrean women's activism, she does not consider events such as Eritrean women's involvement in the occupation of houses in the 1970s in Milan, indicative of well-established links with the Italian political groups that organized them. She provides a rather brief treatment of the Association of Muslim women in Italy (*ADMI*). Given that it was formed after 9/11, it would have been interesting to note whether and how the new international political context has shaped its strategy and activities, particularly as Pojmann herself notes that this organization has a high media profile in Italy.

Two Rome-based groups *No.Di* and *Candelaria* are offered as examples of multi-ethnic women's associations. The former is composed of migrant women from a range of ethnic backgrounds while the latter developed among South American women. From a methodological perspective, Pojmann does not claim to present a comprehensive overview of associations; rather organizations are selected on the basis of available documentation and access to membership. However, sometimes this approach gives the impression of a random dimension to the associations under discussion. In regard to multi-ethnic associations, for example, we are not told the extent to which these exist outside Rome and notwithstanding her focus on the Roman context for this category of association, she makes no mention of the Association of African Immigrant Women (*ADIA*) despite citing a representative from this organization in relation to a separate matter in another part of the book. An explicit objective of this association, established in Rome in 1991 was to 'sensitise public opinion, in general, and Italian women's organisations in particular, about the situation of migrant women' (my emphasis) (*ADIA*, Art. 4). Such an objective is instructive about the nature of the interaction between migrant and Italian women's organizations in Rome in the early 1990s and might have been usefully explored with the founders of this association or through alternative documentation.

Nevertheless, the associations that Pojmann sees as marking groundbreaking change for Italian feminisms are the women's associations founded by both migrant and Italian women. The organizations she discusses are the *Alma Mater*

organization in Turin, *Trame di Terra* in Imola, *Associazione Nosotras* and *Punto di Partenza in Florence* and IRIDE in Siena. (The South of Italy is invisible in these discussions, with no clarification provided.) Inspired by the 1995 international women's conference in Beijing, we learn of the significance of a conference organized by Italian and migrant women in Turin in 1996, attended by six hundred women, which ultimately led to the formation of many such local associations. As well as describing the activities of these associations, Pojmann also discusses some of the conflicts that have arisen within them. For example, migrant women have understandably not been happy when placed under different forms of political or administrative tutelage, as discussed above in relation to Alma Mater and as occurred in relation to *Punto di Partenza*, when the region funding the project appointed an Italian representative from the Equal Opportunity Commission to act as overall co-ordinator.

It is perhaps significant, that both Milan and Rome, historic arenas of Italian feminisms, are identified as cities where 'native-migrant' cooperation has been less feasible. Pojmann argues that exchanges between migrant and native women are scarce in Milan, citing the prominent activist Ainom Maricos, originally from Eritrea, who pinpoints a difficulty among women on the left to view migrants as subjects or protagonists. In Rome too, despite the migrant women's association *Candelaria* being housed in an Italian feminist structure, communication between the Roman feminists and the women from *Candelaria* is described as limited. Pojmann concludes that effective strategies for cooperation between migrant and Italian women are more difficult in big cities and have yet to be developed in Milan and Rome. Nevertheless, it would have been interesting to know the fate of the 'native-migrant' associations which did exist in Rome, such as *Donne senza frontiere* or *Libere Insieme*, both established in 1991 (Andall, 2000). Fore-runners of their time, an account of why they apparently ultimately failed would be as useful a contribution to understanding how such associations can be successful as is the information provided on current and active ones.

One major difference in focus of the two authors concerns the issue of work. Labour is a key dimension of Merrill's book, with considerable attention paid to industrial restructuring and migration to Turin. At times, the Italian workers she discusses are rather gender neutral and we are not given a real sense of what the labour market situation is like for Italian women. This could have aided understanding of what obstacles migrant women are also likely to face in seeking to penetrate new employment sectors. Conversely, in her effort to offer an alternative image of migrant women, Pojmann explicitly seeks to underplay the significance of either domestic work or sex work in her analyses. In my view, a more explicit evaluation of how the paid domestic work of migrant women affects the practice of multicultural women's associations could have been revealing. To evade this subject in effect negates a dimension of migrant women's relationships with Italian women more generally and which cannot be totally

written out of their political relationships. Merrill, for example, shows how who would actually do the cleaning developed into a conflictual issue within Alma Mater. Despite those members with the most formal schooling beginning to clean 'many migrant members continued to complain... that Alma Mater's Italian administrators wished only to maintain the position of migrant women as third world "servants" to Europeans' (p. 39), demonstrating deep sensitivity over this subject for some migrant women. Downplaying the organization of domestic work in Italy equally obscures the practical difficulty that migrant women working as paid domestic workers encounter in their efforts to be politically engaged.

The decision not to foreground domestic work is undermined by the very objectives and strategies of many of the women's associations that Pojmann discusses. *Candelaria's* input to a report on women's situation points to a 'cement ceiling' that 'keeps educated, experienced women from entering jobs other than as house cleaners or home assistants' (p. 156) and the organization has worked 'to enable migrant women to move beyond domestic work' (p. 108). The Eastern European Women's Association *Lipa* found that Eastern European women are 'desperate to move away from domestic work' (p. 104) and it works against the underemployment of highly qualified Eastern European women. For *Alma Mater* too, a key objective was to help migrants move out of domestic work. Revealingly, while the Filipino Women's Council has both empowerment and career advancement as key agenda items, it also works to challenge Filipino women's 'pervasive preference to stay in a field defined as safe and secure for Filipino women and in which their labor commands higher fees' (p. 104).

The issue of sex work is given the briefest of treatments by Pojmann. Surprisingly, she does not engage with the recent feminist literature on this topic that relates specifically to female migration and where quite divergent views exist. A different approach might have led Pojmann to discover either small feminist groups that are heavily critical of the trafficking debate in migration discourse and believe that sex work should be de-stigmatized, to migrant women's associations attempting to work on the issue of sex work or indeed to some Catholic organizations which seek to 'rescue' migrant sex workers and place them 'safely' within Italian homes as domestic workers.

While Merrill is comfortable discussing both the gender and immigration dimensions of Alma Mater, Pojmann displays much greater ease when discussing feminism than when discussing immigration. At times, this weakens her analysis of how women's organizations in Italy have been affected by immigration. She echoes the debatable explanation that Italy's diverse migrant population is a result of Italy's weak colonial history and does not cite the migration literature on the acceleration and globalization of contemporary migrations which could not only account for this diversity more adequately, but could also help to explain the diverse political objectives of different women's associations. Some of her assertions are simply out of date or incorrect. To argue that immigration in

Italy is viewed as that of the young single male is increasingly difficult to maintain in the twenty-first century, in part because more and more Italian families are using lone female migrants to care for elderly relatives. Pojmann also implies that there was no provision for an immigration amnesty in 1998 when in fact a decree law announcing an amnesty led to the regularization of over 200,000 undocumented migrants. Immigration facts such as these are important to document correctly as the repeated Italian immigration amnesties are a relevant feature of the immigration political context within which migrant women have had to operate. Indeed, as Pojmann herself documents in relation to the activities of the *Punto di Partenza* organization, the reason that support for a discussion group 'to discuss the relationship between natives and migrants' (p. 124) was minimal was in part because participants preferred to attend a discussion group on the implications of a recently introduced immigration law.

The question of generation is an understated aspect of both books but the discussion of Italian women's post-war organizing in large organizations such as the left-wing *Unione Donne Italiane* (UDI) or the Catholic *Centro Italiano Femminile* (CIF) and later in the new feminist groups of the 1970s can be read in part through a generational lens. Pojmann offers a national perspective on Italian women's associations, although in grouping together organizations such as CIF and UDI, she diminishes the ideological differences that existed between these organizations, preferring to focus on their similarities to demonstrate that women's organizations had similar goals. Merrill demonstrates how Turin feminism was highly conditioned by the 'workerist' ideology that pervaded Turin politics and identifies the organization *Produrre e Riprodurre*, formed in 1983, as the organization which had 'the most direct genealogical link to Alma Mater' (p. 142). While Merrill's discussion of the UDI needed significant updating (petering out even before a discussion of a key turning point in the organization's history in 1982), Pojmann offers a much more useful and up-to-date discussion of these two large women's organizations and, critically, addresses how they have sought to engage with the issue of immigration. She glosses over what one imagines is a key shift in the UDI's perception of itself, stating that the UDI's change of name from '*Unione Donne Italiane* (Union of Italian Women) to *Unione Donne in Italia* (Union of Women in Italy) certainly reflects a new consideration of women who reside in Italy but might not be citizens of Italy or ethnic Italians' (p. 69). Disappointingly, we are not told when this name change occurred, what degree of consensus there was for this change within the organization, nor indeed what political weight UDI has in contemporary women's politics in Italy.

Pojmann's discussion of how Italian women's cultural centres have sought to engage with migrant women is very original. The conclusions she draws are that there is a greater need to connect women to political strategies in Italy and she suggests that Italian feminist strategies such as *affidamento* or entrustment could be useful. Given that even some Italian feminists found this practice too

essentialist and elitist, it is not immediately obvious how this might work in relation to migrant women, particularly, given the sensitive issues of tutelage that are described in the book. In fact, one migrant activist from *Candelaria* complained that most Italian feminists she encountered were 'willing to give and to teach not to listen or to receive' (p. 129).

The question of generation is increasingly pertinent to understanding the nature of women's activism in Italy. Pojmann pays virtually no explicit attention to generational issues although she does note that a younger generation of Italian feminists are more 'aware of class and ethnicity in discussions of women's rights and gender roles' (p. 160). Merrill, on the other hand, reaches rather different conclusions on the question of generation. Informed by several feminists in Turin that 'they thought feminism in Turin was as dead as it was in Italy at large' (p. 148) she draws some surprising conclusions regarding the reproduction of local political culture in Turin, arguing that 'the passage of political knowledge from one generation to the next...is, in fact, taking place in Turin, but more in relation to a newcomer population than to a younger generation of Italians' (p. 153). It seems that the older generation of Turin feminists, active in trade unions and New Left organizations see themselves as having more in common with immigrants than with many younger Italians' (p. 154). This position seems to contradict the experiences of associations such as *Punto di Partenza* in Florence where it is precisely the material differences between older Italian feminists and migrant women, in terms of their economic situation, precarious right of abode in Italy or citizenship status, which can act as a barrier for meaningful collaboration.

Generational differences and alignments are thus likely to continue to shape the development of Italian feminisms seeking to incorporate ethnic difference. In relation to the study of migrant women's associations, there is certainly a need to move away from the 'migrant leader' perspective, used liberally by Pojmann, in the oral history methodology utilized to document the activism of first generation migrant women. This not only runs counter to the anti-hierarchical trend in the history of Italian feminisms but it tends to stifle the expression of diverse viewpoints within migrant women's associations and has left the responsibility of representation on the shoulders of the same group of women since at least the 1980s. Paradoxically, although Merrill employed a richer methodology, migrant women's voices are still fairly absent in her book.

The extent of ethnic diversity in Italy may also have some bearing on what issues may bring diverse groups of women into collaboration or conflict with each other. In order for the multicultural associations Pojmann describes to be successful, they will need to address explicitly thorny issues like racism, power and hierarchy as well as issues that are not solely focussed on migration. Common issues will need to be identified around which women can mobilize in a way that takes into account the impact of ethnic difference or a migrant status.

In the future, the different forms of activism and priorities of third-wave Italian feminists – unexplored in these books – may intersect in new ways with the political and social issues being articulated by both women migrants and by G2 (second generation) women. Furthermore, the time is coming where to contrast 'native' and 'migrant' will become redundant terminology when the implied 'migrant' subjects are young African or Arab Italian women born in Italy and where different groups of women are able to speak and have dialogue with each other from a more structurally equal position and using a common language.

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