

Negotiating *Bella Figura*: Inside the Childhood Homes of Six Second-Generation Italian-
Canadian Women in Montreal

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ABSTRACT

Negotiating *Bella Figura*: Inside the Childhood Homes of Six Second-Generation Italian-Canadian Women in Montreal

Lisa Massa

My thesis seeks to explore the spatial experiences of second-generation Italian-Canadian women in Montreal in their childhood homes during the 1970s and 1980s to learn about the gendered domestic environments during their childhood and coming-of-age. By conducting photo-elicitation oral history interviews with six second-generation Italian-Canadian women, I seek to explore the spatial layout and material culture of the homes they grew up in and how the home was a space of interaction and negotiation of two cultures. My thesis argues that *bella figura* is an underlying ideal that contributes to the gendered facets of these homes, an Italian ideal that prioritizes one's image in the public eye as it relates to decorum. Focusing on the untouchable upstairs living room as a case study, I argue that this space exemplifies this ideal not only through its spatial qualities and material culture but through its maintenance. This thesis explores how maintenance is gender-coded and historically belongs to the separate sphere of the domestic and, therefore, a woman's responsibility. I explore an intergenerational tension felt by these women in relation to keeping up with these stereotypes and the gendered ideal of *bella figura* through their perspective of dual cultural identities. I also seek how acculturation and age affect divergent experiences within my sample and how *bella figura* has lasting impacts on these women as they matured and had families of their own.

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INTRODUCTION

My mother, Giuseppina Chiara, often shares stories about growing up in Saint-Leonard, a borough on the northeast side of Montreal, Quebec. Her stories often focus on her upbringing, her friends and family, and Italian culture and traditions. What is fascinating to me about how my mother speaks about her childhood is the prominence of Italian cultural ideals and how she would negotiate her bicultural identity: Italian and Canadian. When I look at old photographs of my mom's home, I see how transnational migration influences the interior of the home. Moreover, I see my mom in between two cultures, and I wonder if this is an isolated experience or if other second-generation Italian-Canadian women have experienced this as well.

My thesis pulls inspiration from my mother's interactions with me about her childhood. She expresses to me often how lucky I am to have grown up in conditions where looking presentable is not as important, where gender roles are not static or expected, and individuality is admirable. Conversations between my mom and I have led me to my research question: how might oral history, spatial and material culture analysis be implemented to better understand the gendered domestic environments of second-generation Italian-Canadian women? By conducting photo-elicitation oral history interviews with second-generation Italian-Canadian women in Montreal that focus on the spatial organization and material culture of their childhood homes, my thesis argues that *bella figura* is an underlying ideal that contributes to the gendered facets of these homes.

Bella figura is a driving force behind the gendered facets of the kind of Italian-Canadian home that my mother grew up in. I argue that this ideal influenced the spatial organization of the house, its material culture, and dictated who the primary custodians of those spaces were. My thesis seeks to explore the childhood and coming-of-age experiences of second-generation Italian-Canadian women in Montreal during the 1970s and 1980s to learn about the gendered domestic environments within their childhood homes. By listening to the experiences of second-generation Italian-Canadian women and by examining the spatial layout and material culture of the homes they grew up in, I seek to understand how the home was a space of interaction and negotiation between two cultures.

The term “coming-of-age” is defined as when a person legally becomes an adult and is old enough to vote or the time when someone matures emotionally.¹ My thesis explores my participants’ experiences that span childhood, adolescence, and coming-of-age because I did not want to limit my participants’ scope of memory to any age. To learn more about their experience in their childhood homes, I conducted photo-elicitation interviews with six second-generation Italian-Canadian women who were in or approaching their adolescence in the 1970s and 1980s in Montreal.² Statistics Canada defines the term “second-generation” as a Canadian-born individual of at least one parent born outside of Canada,³ which is the criteria I have chosen for my research. I selected participants I knew were second-generation Italian-Canadian. I knew four participants personally and met two through my supervisor, Dr. Cynthia Hammond.

On separate occasions, I interviewed sisters Giuseppina Chiara and Maria-Rosa Chiara, who grew up in Saint-Leonard, a Montreal borough where many Italian immigrants settled.⁴ Angela, an alias, also grew up in Saint-Leonard. Francesca, who also chose an alias, grew up and still lives in a duplex located in LaSalle, on the other side of the island of Montreal. Close to LaSalle is Ville-Émard, the neighbourhood where Joyce Pillarella grew up. Ville-Émard is another borough with a large Italian presence. Finally, I interviewed Chiara D’Alessio, who spent her teenage years in Saint-Laurent (See Figure 1 for map). I split my interviewees into two groups based on the similarity of their experiences. The Chiara sisters, Angela and Francesca shared similar upbringings; my analysis of their interviews and photographs make up the bulk of my thesis. Their stories relate their gendered experiences in the home to their parents’ imposition of *bella figura*, which led to intergenerational tensions, especially concerning domestic labour. Pillarella and D’Alessio also experienced the effects of *bella figura* but generally had a different upbringing due to factors that relate to age, education, and acculturation.

Oral history’s focus on storytelling inspired me to choose interviews as my research method, while my participants’ photographs helped to evoke their memory. Alexander Freund

¹ Cambridge Dictionary, “Coming of age,” accessed November 29, 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/coming-of-age>.

² In March 2020, the Government of Quebec advised its citizens to suspend in-person contact to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic hindered my ability to conduct in-person interviews, and I opted instead to conduct the interviews via Zoom during September and October 2020.

³ “Classification of Generation Status,” *Statistics Canada*, last modified September 30, 2021, <https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3VD.pl?Function=getVD&TVD=117200&CVD=117200&CLV=0&MLV=1&D=1>.

⁴ Robert A. Murdie, “Diversity and Concentration in Canadian Immigration: Trends in Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver, 1971–2006,” *Centre for Urban and Community Studies* 42 (2008): 10.

and Alistair Thomson's edited collection, *Oral History and Photography*, seek to remedy a gap between oral history and photography by "encouraging oral historians to consider a variety of methodological strategies, critical approaches, and interpretative frameworks for working with photographs."⁵ In the first part of their book, "Remembering with Images," the authors compile essays that focus on memory and remembering with the help of images.⁶ This is where I discovered Janis Wilton's essay, "Imaging Family Memories: My Mum, Her Photographs, Our Memories,"⁷ and became interested in the potential of photographs in oral history interviews. This text argues that photographs shape and generate family memories and stories.⁸ The connection between family stories and family photographs is the central theme of Wilton's piece; during her interviews with her mother, she used photographs to trigger her mother's memory about her family background, childhood, and adolescence.⁹ Wilton's project inspired me to ask my participants to share photographs of their childhood home during our interviews because of the way that photographs can elicit memory.

Asking my participants to find and share photographs with me was a request based on the goal of sharing authority¹⁰ in the interview space. My interviewees sifted through their visual collections, choosing the photographs they wanted to share with me that they felt best represented their childhood home. The act of sifting through a collection of family photographs is an intimate experience that can bring memories to the surface. Martha Langford argues that the family album functions as a pictorial memory aid for retelling stories.¹¹ Daniela Torre and Joseph Murphy explain that photographs can offer a powerful starting point to talk about personal narratives within the interview space.¹² Building on this, anthropologists John Collier and Malcolm Collier state, "photographs sharpen the memory and give the interview an

⁵ Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson, "Introduction," in *Oral History and Photography*, ed. Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 19.

⁶ Freund and Thomson, "Introduction," 13.

⁷ Janis Wilton, "Imaging Family Memories: My Mum, Her Photographs, Our Memories," in *Oral History and Photography*, ed. Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 61-2.

⁸ Wilton, "Imaging Family Memories," 61-76.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 61-2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹¹ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), xx.

¹² Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 5.

¹³ Daniela Torre and Joseph Murphy, "A Different Lens: Using Photo-Elicitation Interviews in Education Research," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 23, no. 111 (2015): 11.

immediate character of realistic reconstruction [...] the projective opportunity of the photographs offers a gratifying sense of self-expression as the informant is able to explain and identify content and educate the interviewer with [their] wisdom.”¹³ By asking my participants to share visual media with me, my goal was to generate memory and to learn from their remembered and lived experiences.

Oral history interviews with second-generation Italian-Canadian women are important to do because research on the coming-of-age experiences of this group is scant. Italian diasporic scholar Domenico Servello states, “the current historiography concerning young Italian-Canadians is inadequate. The hardships and achievements of the first-generation obscure the experiences of their children.”¹⁴ Through my research, I have found that second-generation Italian-Canadian women faced hardship navigating their bicultural Italian and Canadian identities and lived out this duality in their childhood homes. Two sources that focus on the experiences of second-generation Italians in Canada are Elena Piezzo’s thesis, “The Crucible of Culture: Ethnicity and the Second Generation Italian-Canadian Woman in Toronto,”¹⁵ and Lisa Bonato’s thesis, “Mothers and Daughters in Italian-Canadian Women’s Narratives.”¹⁶ Piezzo’s thesis examines the ethnic identity of second-generation Italian-Canadian women through “an informal sample of oral interviews and observations.”¹⁷ Her third chapter, “The Italian Mother,” offers crucial insight into how events that shaped Italian parents’ lives (specifically mothers) affected their decisions regarding their children.¹⁸ Piezzo’s final chapter, “The ‘Typical’ Italian-Canadian Woman and Man,” details what it means to *be* Italian¹⁹ and the conflict young Italian-Canadian women face between family and outer society.²⁰ Bonato’s thesis explores the Italian-Canadian mother/daughter relationship by looking at the narratives of four Italian-Canadian

¹³ John Collier and Malcolm Collier, *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1986): 106.

¹⁴ Domenico Servello, “‘Manage, Negotiate, and Challenge Identities:’ Young Italian-Canadian Identities from the *Eyetalian* Perspective,” *Quaderni d’italianistica* 33, no. 1 (2012): 87.

¹⁵ Elena Piezzo, “The Crucible of Culture: Ethnicity and the Second Generation Italian-Canadian Woman in Toronto” (Master’s thesis, University of Toronto, 1997), 1-154.

¹⁶ Lisa Bonato, “Mothers and Daughters in Italian-Canadian Women’s Narratives” (Master’s thesis, University of Alberta, 1994), 1-114.

¹⁷ Piezzo, “Crucible of Culture,” 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

writers,²¹ exploring themes of language, culture, gender, ethnicity and class.²² Piezzo and Bonato's theses helped inform my methodology on learning about second-generation ethnicity and identity and what kinds of questions I would ask during my interviews to gain insight into their experiences. Furthermore, their theses helped me determine where my thesis fits in current Italian-Canadian literature. Exploring how second-generation Italian-Canadian daughters related to their mothers as they came of age in Montreal is a theme in my thesis, but unlike Piezzo and Bonato, I deliberately use oral history and photography as a method to learn about second-generation Italian-Canadian women's experiences.

Looking at the photographs my participants shared with me and listening to their oral histories made me reflect on how Italian and Canadian cultural identities are manifested and balanced in the home. In their essay, "Tangible transnational links in the houses of Italian immigrants in Melbourne," Iris Levin and Ruth Fincher make connections between Italian-Australian migrants' homes in Italy and Australia. Their goal is to uncover the similarities, differences, and thought processes behind the sense of belonging Italian immigrants have to both their homes in Italy and Australia.²³ Their findings suggest that Italian immigrants living in Melbourne could maintain connections with their former homes in Italy, in their new homes in Australia, by prioritizing domestic spatial elements such as open layout plans, kitchens, and specific building materials.²⁴ Although the authors conducted this study with first-generation Italian-Australians, my interviewees prove that some Italian-Canadian homes in Montreal have similar domestic and spatial qualities. The second generation is an important source in that these individuals, from their bicultural perspective, can provide a different view on the manifestation of "Italian-ness" in the home.

The framework that supports my thesis is literature that challenges gender performance and gender roles, specifically as these performances and roles relate to the notion of respectability or *bella figura*. As I explain in Chapter One, *bella figura* is essentially a performance that seeks to guarantee public moral acceptance. I focus on this elusive term, drawing from Gloria Nardini's *Che Bella Figura! The Power of Performance in an Italian*

²¹ Bonato, "Mothers and Daughters," 1.

²² Ibid. 2-3.

²³ Iris Levin and Ruth Fincher, "Tangible transnational links in the houses of Italian immigrants in Melbourne," *Global Networks* 10, no. 3 (July 2010): 401.

²⁴ Levin and Fincher, "Tangible transnational links," 419.

Ladies' Club in Chicago.²⁵ Nardini's research outlines the expression of *bella figura* and how it needs to be understood through feminism, respectability, and gender performativity.²⁶ Judith Butler's book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*,²⁷ helps me develop the link between gender and *bella figura* in my participants' home environments. In addition, I look to ideas about what women gain and lose as they perform social constructs of gender, specifically through Moira Gatens' analysis of existentialist feminism.²⁸

My thesis focuses on the manifestation of *bella figura* in the home, mainly through the organization of space and the home's material culture. My mother often talks about the upstairs living room, a space she refers to as a "museum."²⁹ She refers to the family living room as a museum because it was a furnished space with decorative elements that did not serve as a space of intimate gathering. Instead, the upstairs living room contains furniture and objects whose purpose was to be kept neat, presentable, and clean for those moments when esteemed guests might come to the house.³⁰ This formal room was an untouchable space, in stark contrast to the informal basement living room where the family spent most of their time. In "Two Stoves, Two Refrigerators, *Due Cucine*: The Italian Immigrant Home with Two Kitchens,"³¹ and "The Italian Immigrant Basement Kitchen in North America,"³² Lara Pascali investigates the built environment of Italian immigrants in Canada, focusing on the double-kitchen phenomenon,³³ a spatial layout found in many Italian immigrant homes in Montreal, Toronto, and New York.³⁴ I seek to build on Pascali's research, and understand second-generation perspectives on such spaces, positioning my interviewees as bicultural experts who can provide a unique and critical perspective on the upstairs living room. I also delve into the material culture in these formal

²⁵ Gloria Nardini, *Che Bella Figura! The Power of Performance in an Italian Ladies' Club in Chicago*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999).

²⁶ Nardini, *Che Bella Figura!*, 1.

²⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

²⁸ Moira Gatens, "Woman as the Other," in *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Polity Press and Indiana University Press, 1991), 48.

²⁹ Giuseppina Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 30, 2019, audio recording.

³⁰ Maria-Rosa Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 9, 2020, audio recording.

³¹ Lara Pascali, "Two Stoves, Two Refrigerators, *Due Cucine*: The Italian Immigrant Home with Two Kitchens" (M. Arch. Project Report, McGill University, 2004), 4.

³² Lara Pascali, "The Italian Immigrant Basement Kitchen in North America," in *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian-American Lives*, ed. Joseph Sciorra (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 49.

³³ Pascali, "Italian Immigrant Basement Kitchen," 49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

spaces and how “special objects” contributed to gendered divisions within Italian-Canadian domestic environments in Montreal, which I discuss in Chapter Two.

Gendered domestic labour is a central theme in my research, and my thesis builds on the framework of gender performativity to explore this form of work. Women have taken on (or been forced to take on) the role of maintaining and cleaning the home because of the long association of women with the private sphere,³⁵ an association that has been analyzed and challenged by numerous feminist scholars and artists of the mid to late twentieth century. In the prologue to Jane Rendell et al.’s *Gender, Space, and Architecture*, Leslie Kanes Weisman states:

From early childhood women have been taught to assume the role of “homemaker,” “housekeeper,” and “housewife.” The home, long considered women’s special domain, reinforces sex-role stereotypes and subtly perpetuates traditional views of family [...] she is attached to spaces of service. She is a hostess in the living room, a cook in the kitchen, a mother in the children’s room, a lover in the bedroom, a chauffeur in the garage. The house is a spatial and temporal metaphor for conventional role playing.³⁶

Weisman explains that traditional cultural roles persist in the design and use of domestic architecture as women continue to be identified with the home. Women are traditionally seen to be nurturing, cooperative, subjective, and emotional, while men are assumed to be objective, impersonal, competitive, rational, and focused on ‘meaningful’ work out in the public world.³⁷ Gendered stereotypes about separate spheres have been present in Western thought since ancient Greece,³⁸ but the modern ideology of separate spheres emerged during the Industrial Revolution. In her book, *Architecture in the Family Way: Doctors, Houses, and Women, 1870-1900*, Annmarie Adams uses alternative sources beyond the scope of architectural studies to observe the role nonarchitects played to construct the view of the Victorian built environment.³⁹ Adams draws attention to the role the Industrial Revolution played in dividing the interior from the exterior, the former considered female and the latter considered male.⁴⁰ The author examines

³⁵ Juliet Kinchin, “Interiors: Nineteenth-Century Essays on the ‘Masculine’ and the ‘Feminine’ Room,” in *The Gendered Object*, ed. Pat Kirkham (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 12.

³⁶ Leslie Kanes Weisman, “‘Womens’ Environmental Rights: A Manifesto’,” in *Gender, Space, and Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, ed. by Jane Rendell et al. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2.

³⁷ Weisman, “‘Womens’ Environmental Rights’,” 2.

³⁸ Amanda Vickery, “Golden age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History,” *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (1993): 383; 411.

³⁹ Annmarie Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way: Doctors, Houses, and Women, 1870-1900*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens; University Press, 1996, 5.

⁴⁰ Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way*, 75.

how health reform in the late-nineteenth century⁴¹ positioned women as health regulators of the home, becoming “the physician’s most trusted allies in the domestic health movement as the chief ‘inspectors’ of domestic architecture.”⁴² However, as Adams points out, this responsibility meant that women were often blamed if a family member became ill.⁴³ In their book, *Making Space: Women and the Manmade Environment*, Matrix, a feminist architectural collective, opens their book by stating, “behind every woman is the image of the ‘ideal home.’ The ideology of domesticity, which describes how things *ought* to be and *ought* to look, will always affect what we do even when we are reacting against it.”⁴⁴ Women’s deep-seated links to the domestic built environment demand scrutiny, especially when its image is in our control.

Womanhouse (1972) was a feminist art installation that exaggerated and critiqued women’s social roles.⁴⁵ Organized by artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, 21 women transformed a 17-room abandoned mansion, where individual artworks and performances sought to shed light on women’s domestic experiences, especially gendered domestic labour. Christine Rush’s *Scrubbing* (Figure 2) and Sandra Orgel’s *Ironing* (Figure 3) were examples of performances of what Mierle Laderman Ukeles calls maintenance art,⁴⁶ exploring repetitive and mundane domestic duties. In *Scrubbing*, Rush is seen on her knees on the mansion’s living room floor, scrubbing a spot endlessly. Similarly, in *Ironing*, Orgel is pictured behind an ironing board, seemingly ironing the same bedsheet repeatedly. These two artworks encourage a critical conversation about maintenance work that feminist performance artist Ukeles puts forth in her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!*, three years before the opening of *Womanhouse*. Ukeles’ manifesto was an exhibition proposal for *Care*, which included interviews with maintenance workers and a series of performances in which Ukeles took on the role of a maintenance worker.⁴⁷ Ukeles’ work that explores the connection between museum maintenance and domestic labour inspired me to think about the connection Giuseppina Chiara makes about the Italian-Canadian upstairs living room being a museum and the maintenance that it requires. In Chapter

⁴¹ Instigated by the International Health Exhibition held in London in 1884.

⁴² Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way*, 8.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Matrix, *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press Limited, 1984), 1.

⁴⁵ Miriam Schapiro, “Recalling Womanhouse,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 15, no. ½ (1987): 28-9.

⁴⁶ Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!: Proposal for an Exhibition* (Connecticut: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 1969), 1-4.

⁴⁷ Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969*, 3.

Three, I explore gendered domestic labour in the home and its relation to *bella figura*. In addition, Chapter Three considers how the desire to achieve *bella figura* resulted in tensions or “cultural rifts,”⁴⁸ as Angela puts it, between first- and second-generation Italian-Canadian women living in Montreal in the 1970s and 1980s.

Chapter Four of my thesis addresses the acculturation of Italian immigrants in Montreal. According to psychologist John W. Berry,⁴⁹ acculturation is defined as “the process of cultural and psychological change that follows intercultural contact.”⁵⁰ The cultural changes that immigrants experience throughout acculturation include changes to their customs, cultural identity, social behaviour towards other groups and can lead to core psychological changes such as one’s wellbeing and social skills.⁵¹ It would be reductive to claim that the experiences of second-generation Italian-Canadian women are all the same. My thesis seeks instead to embrace divergent experiences while simultaneously honouring shared experiences. Kristina Llewellyn’s essay, “Productive Tensions: Feminist Readings of Women Teachers’ Oral Histories,” explores two approaches to feminist oral history that each provides advantages and disadvantages. The first derives from post-structuralist feminism, which is attentive to women’s individual narratives, understood through the primacy of language.⁵² The second is materialist feminism, which emphasizes efforts to understand women’s experiences as a group through patriarchal social patterns.⁵³ Using interviews she conducted with Canadian women teachers in post-Second World War schools, Llewellyn argues that productive tensions between post-structuralism and materialism benefit the analysis of oral histories.⁵⁴ With Llewellyn’s insights in mind, I dedicate part of Chapter Four to elaborate on Pillarella and D’Alessio’s experiences which differ from the other four women I interviewed for this thesis, especially concerning the home’s spatial organization and its material culture. These differences are due to several factors concerning the

⁴⁸ Angela, interview with Lisa Massa, October 2, 2020, audio recording.

⁴⁹ John W. Berry is a psychologist whose research focuses on cross-cultural and intercultural psychology through qualitative and quantitative methods. See “About,” John W. Berry, ResearchGate, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/John-Berry-8>.

⁵⁰ John W. Berry, Jean S. Phinney, David L. Sam and Paul Vedder, “Immigrant Youth: Acculturation, Identity, and Adaptation,” *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 55, no. 3 (2006): 305.

⁵¹ Colleen Ward, Stephen Bochner and Aorian Furnham, “Social Identification Theories,” in *The Psychology of Culture Shock*, ed. Colleen Ward, Stephen Bochner and Aorian Furnham (Hove: Routledge, 2001), 120.

⁵² Kristina Llewellyn, “Productive Tensions: Feminist Readings of Women Teachers’ Oral Histories,” in *The Canadian Oral History Reader*, ed. Kristina R. Llewellyn, Alexander Freund, and Nolan Reilly (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 142.

⁵³ Llewellyn, “Productive Tensions,” 142.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

acculturation of their parents, which subsequently affected their children's experiences as well. I conclude Chapter Four by acknowledging the lasting impact of *bella figura* on second-generation Italian-Canadians living in Montreal today.

CHAPTER ONE

What is *bella figura*?

Central to understanding Italian-Canadian life is the notion of *bella figura*. In English, *bella figura* means “to make a beautiful figure” or “to make a good face.”¹ It sums up an enigmatic Italian social standard that emphasizes a person’s external appearance and public actions as a source of judgment. The achievement of *bella figura* is elusive, and discussion of it borders on taboo; Italians imply it through personal standards and behaviour as unwritten social rules.² The ambiguity surrounding the term could be the reason why scholarly accounts are few. In one important source, Gloria Nardini’s book, *Che Bella Figura! The Power of Performance in an Italian Ladies’ Club in Chicago*, the author defines *bella figura* as:

a central metaphor of Italian life, admittedly an extremely complicated one. It is a construct that refers to face, looking good, putting on the dog, style, appearance, flair, showing off, ornamentation, etiquette, keeping up with the Joneses, image, illusion, esteem, social status, reputation—in short, self-representation and identity, performance and display (...) as a cultural code it is deeply embedded as one of the primary arbiters of Italian social mores, so deeply embedded that natives are frequently unaware (consciously at least) of conforming to it. But understanding Italian life is impossible without understanding the intensity with which one must *fare bella figura*.³

To make *bella figura* is of primary importance in Italian daily life and has been since ancient Rome.⁴ In contrast, a *brutta figura* (“bad figure”), is to be avoided at all costs.⁵ Essentially, *bella figura* is a performance whereby Italians “speak, gesture, act, live with a performance that is second nature.”⁶ Performing this ideal leads to obstacles for women’s agency in particular; it is useful, therefore, to look outside Italian culture to understand how performing *bella figura* can limit women’s autonomy and individuality.

Maira Gatens charts the connections between philosophy and feminism since the eighteenth century in her book, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and*

¹ Nardini, *Che Bella Figura!*, 5; John L. Allen Jr., *All the Pope’s Men: The Inside Story of How the Vatican Really Thinks* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 139; Beppe Severgnini, *La Bella Figura: A Field Guide to the Italian Mind* (New York: Broadway Press, 2006), 6.

² Nardini, *Che Bella Figura!*, 8; Giovanna P. Del Negro, *The Passeggiata and Popular Culture in an Italian Town: Folklore and the Performance of Modernity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 131.

³ Nardini, *Che Bella Figura!*, 7.

⁴ John Julius Norwich, “Introduction: A Traveller in Italy,” *History, Art and the Genius of a People: The Italians*, ed. John Julius Norwich (New York: Harris N. Abrams, 1983), 28.

⁵ Norwich, “Introduction,” 28.

⁶ Nardini, *Che Bella Figura!*, 33.

Equality.⁷ In her chapter, “Women as the Other,” Gatens considers Jean-Paul Sartre’s writing on existentialism and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* to consider the relation between existentialist philosophy and feminism. Phenomenological existentialism attempts to deconstruct the dualisms of mind and body, nature and culture, pulling apart traditional human ontology.⁸ According to Sartre, humans are not reducible to their brute existence like non-human animals and this fact condemns us to a constant remaking of ourselves throughout our existence.⁹ We do not rely on history or biology to make something out of ourselves and our lives, but we rely on our free acts. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre asserts that humans have two options of being. The first is to live authentically, accept nothingness,¹⁰ and live with this anguish. The second is to live in denial of our freedom, our transcendence, and put themselves in bad faith, “acting as if something other than their own free choice determines their being.”¹¹ De Beauvoir further articulates this idea of bad faith, asking who shapes women’s decisions about their personhood. Specifically, she identifies oppressive factors that limit women’s ability to act freely. In other words, women enter into “bad faith” when they accept that their only possibilities for being are motherhood, marriage, and dependence on a man, even if this acceptance does not arise wholly from their own free will.¹² For me, the term “bad faith” evokes the idea of performing *bella figura* because, by presenting herself in an idealized way, a woman inevitably limits how much she reveals or becomes her authentic self¹³ – valuing others’ judgment to the extent that it

⁷ Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

⁸ Gatens, “Woman as the Other,” 48-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰ “Nothingness does not itself have Being, yet it is supported by Being. It comes into the world by the For-itself and is the recoil from fullness of self-contained Being which allows consciousness to exist as such.” See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 804.

¹¹ Gatens, “Woman as the Other,” 49.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Erving Goffman explores the idea of being/performing one’s authentic self when in the presence of others in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman considers how people tend to want to make a good impression when in front of others (Goffman, 2) and use their unconscious or conscious actions to influence these perceptions through performance and “impression management” (Goffman 3, 132). Goffman states, “the ‘true’ or ‘real’ attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through [their] avowals or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behaviour” (Goffman, 1-2). He quotes De Beauvoir, who illustrates how accidents such as wine spilling on a women’s dress or a cigarette burning a hole in the fabric (De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 656) takes the actor away from their performance, as these impromptu incidents reveal “a single look, a naked unsocialized look, a look of concentration, a look of one who is privately engaged in a difficult, treacherous task” (Goffman, 150-1). While these accidents might show the audience a glimpse of one’s “true” or “real” reactions, the “real” self is entangled in the performance of the self, its roles, and routines. Goffman quotes Robert Ezra Park, who states: “It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously,

controls aspects of one's life (no matter how minute or significant) limits oneself in terms of free action or choice. Therefore, in negotiating their place in society through performing *bella figura*, Italian women restrict their autonomy and individuality as beings, opting for the performance of respectability over living freely.

Choosing to perform *bella figura* can be, however, a strategy for women to gain access into otherwise impenetrable areas of society. Emanuela Guano's essay, "Respectable Ladies and Uncouth Men: The Performative Politics of Class and Gender in the Public Realm of an Italian City," sheds light on how women use *bella figura* to negotiate their place in the male-dominant public sphere of Italian streets.¹⁴ For example, a "respectable" woman performing *bella figura* will dress in a feminine way when in public, wearing high quality and expensive clothing, and following the rules of etiquette to ensure that she does not appear crude to the general public (and thus ultimately be dismissed as *brutta figura*).¹⁵ It is true that women who seek to achieve *bella figura* do have agency to the extent that they can, if the performance is successful, claim a space in their society. But for a woman to negotiate this space, she must follow the rules of *bella figura*, even if this performance challenges her identity.

In their book, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler questions the binary categories that support gender hierarchy and asks if being female is a natural fact or a cultural performance.¹⁶ Butler's essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," examines how gender identity is a social performance demanded by society.¹⁷ Butler uncovers how the construction of gender occurs through corporeal or bodily acts and questions what kinds of cultural transformations can be made possible through these acts.¹⁸ They aim to understand the female body as an entity that exists beyond its cultural representation as dictated through history but through acts and routines, similar to the ideas presented by Sartre and de Beauvoir in Gatens' analysis. Butler argues that cultural codes are not passively scripted on the body. Still, the gendered body acts within a "culturally restricted corporeal space" that follows

playing a role ... It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves" (Robert Ezra Park, *Race and Culture*, Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1950, 249-50). See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1956).

¹⁴ Emanuela Guano, "Respectable Ladies and Uncouth Men: The Performative Politics of Class and Gender in the Public Realm of an Italian City," *Journal of American Folklore* 120, no. 475 (2007): 48.

¹⁵ Guano, "Respectable Ladies and Uncouth Men," 51-2; Del Negro, *The Passeggiata*, 131.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxviii.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (Dec. 1988): 520.

¹⁸ Butler, "Performative Acts," 521.

existing directives.¹⁹ In other words, the gendered body is one that performs its gender through everyday routines and rituals, and performativity is not a singular act.²⁰ In connection to *bella figura*, this means that women animate their social circles with their “feminine charms and pleasing appearance,”²¹ using their appearance and demeanour as tools to elevate themselves as objects of vision, desire and admiration in patriarchal Italian society.²²

Butler considers the masquerade, responding to Jacques Lacan’s semiotics of the Phallus. They analyze the act of “being” the Phallus and “having” the Phallus as a representation of a masculine subject and of paternal law.²³ Women are “being for” the Phallus because they maintain the power to never actually “be” the Phallus itself. In other words, women maintain the power to construct the Phallus’ masculine subject. Women also have the power to diminish the illusion because of this power.²⁴ However, according to Lacan, women can “appear” as the Phallus through masquerade.²⁵ Butler quotes Luce Irigaray on this idea, who states, “the masquerade . . . is what women do . . . in order to participate in man’s desire, but at the cost of giving up their own.”²⁶ *Bella figura* operates in the same way in Italian daily life as the masquerade because it challenges one’s identity to accommodate a desire to be accepted by the public.

Performing gender and partaking in masquerade means that women are able to negotiate their place in Italian society, at times in denial of their own desires. *Bella figura* is a performance of socially-constructed notions of gender and is more often women’s responsibility to fulfill. Giovanna Del Negro states, “women, in particular, are held accountable for a performance of respectability that requires a careful orchestration of looks and demeanour, visibility and modesty,”²⁷ reinforcing that both physical appearance and decorum work in conjunction to perform this term correctly. Supporting this practice of orchestrating one’s appearance, Giuseppina Chiara shared with me that in her childhood home it was essential to have both the “everyday” garments and the “good” garments.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.

²¹ Del Negro, *The Passeggiata*, 127.

²² Ibid.

²³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 58.

²⁴ Ibid., 58-9.

²⁵ Ibid., 59.

²⁶ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One (Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un)*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 133-34; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 60.

²⁷ Del Negro, *The Passeggiata*, 127.

A lot of the Italian community is about [what] the people are going to say. So you had to have that thing for that special occasion. Like it was for household goods, it also for clothes. So, I'll give you an example. Socks. You had your socks that you wore every day that maybe weren't their best or they were used. But then you always had the new socks in your drawer. So you had your everyday clothes that you wore around the house that were okay, but they weren't brand new. Tablecloths, the same thing.²⁸

When I asked Chiara what would be considered a special occasion, she responded that special occasions were when guests visited the house for the first time or if someone recently got engaged and the family was meeting their future in-laws for the first time.²⁹ Separating the “special” clothes and household items from the “everyday” ones was a practice motivated by the Italian conventional that looking refined in front of new guests would ensure a good impression.

Furthermore, Chiara, her two sisters and her mother were responsible for clothing her father in an “appropriate” or respectable way. Men had to abide by the rules of *bella figura*, Chiara explained, but the responsibility for living up to these rules fell squarely on the shoulders of the women of the household.

My father didn't even know where his clothes were. The man of the house was, like, taken care of, especially because we were three women, four women with my mother. It was like, “go get your father his underwear, his undershirt and his socks because he's going to take a shower.” My mom would lay out his clothes.³⁰

This routine that Chiara shared with me shows that Italian women must not only think of performing respectability outside of the home,³¹ but also inside. This observation resonates with the work of Italian-Canadian scholar Elena Anna Spagnuolo, who also notes that the concept of performing *bella figura* and being seen in a good light weighs heavily on women,³² particularly in domestic environments. Spagnuolo shares an allegory from Italian-Montrealer fiction writer Licia Canton's short story compilation, *Almond Wine and Fertility (Vino alla mandoria e fertilità)*³³ that reinforces the gender dynamics within the home. This allegory describes a predicament in which a woman does not properly iron her husband's dress shirt. It is suggested in the anecdote that the proper way of ironing a man's dress shirt begins with the sleeves,

²⁸ Giuseppina Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 30, 2019, audio recording.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Del Negro, *The Passeggiata*, 124-27.

³² Elena Anna Spagnuolo, “Italian Mothers and Daughters: Using Language to Negotiate the Politics of Gender,” *Genealogy* 3, no. 24 (2019): 14.

³³ Licia Canton, *Almond Wine and Fertility (Vino alla mandoria e fertilità)* (Toronto: Longbridge Books, 2008).

followed by the shirt's back, and finally the front.³⁴ The logic is rooted in the need to maintain one's image in the face of others; the strategy of ironing the front of the shirt last is tied to the fact that it is the first side that others will see, so the front of the shirt needs to be freshly ironed. If others see that the shirt is inadequately ironed, neither the man wearing it nor the woman who ironed it has achieved *bella figura*.³⁵ Significantly, the responsibility of ironing the man's dress shirt lies entirely with the woman. To perform *bella figura* correctly is thus inextricably linked to women's bodies and actions. If women do not have a high standard for their own and their family's appearances, they cannot achieve *bella figura*. And if they do not achieve *bella figura*, they are not proper women. The routines and rituals that culturally restrict women to such gender practices as *bella figura* tie directly to the concept of gender performance in Butler's work.

The importance of *bella figura* seeps into the lives of the Italian diaspora in Canada. Nardini argues, “[*bella figura*] is reflected in their viewpoint, their language, their art and civic life, the whole of their culture; and it carries over as they encounter other cultures and/or blend into them.”³⁶ First-generation Italian immigrants expect their daughters to perform *bella figura*, which most of my participants freely discussed. Pillarella told me that “everything was about *bella figura*,”³⁷ expressing how *bella figura* was an idea that heavily affected her home environment. Pillarella explained that her parents' way of receiving guests, the house's tidiness, and physical appearance worked together to achieve this ideal.³⁸ She recalls that her parents faced more challenges when she was going through her experimental and rebellious teenage years.³⁹ In our interview, Angela explained that the first generation expected their daughters to raise families and stay within the home.⁴⁰ Conversely, they expected their boys to be more like leaders.⁴¹ *Bella figura* meant that pursuing higher education was not an easy option for Angela. She faced resistance when she told her parents about her dreams outside the expected bonds of marriage. Francesca, who grew up around many male figures without any sisters or female cousins, said that being a girl meant she lived by much stricter rules.⁴² For example, leaving

³⁴ Canton, *Almond Wine and Fertility*, 71.

³⁵ Spagnuolo, “Italian Mothers and Daughters,” 14.

³⁶ Nardini, *Che Bella Figura!*, 33.

³⁷ Joyce Pillarella, interview with Lisa Massa, September 17, 2020, audio recording.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Angela, interview with Lisa Massa, October 2, 2020, audio recording.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Francesca, interview with Lisa Massa, October 21, 2020, audio recording.

home to go to friends' houses and having sleepovers with girlfriends was forbidden unless the sleepovers were at her house.⁴³ On the topic of *bella figura*, she stated that her mother would advise her that when she was to go to someone's house, she would not ask for food or water and only accept either when they were offered.⁴⁴ The act of only taking when offered was a sign of elegance and daintiness; it demonstrated respectfulness and etiquette. In general, my participants expressed how being a girl was much harder than being a boy, because of *bella figura*.

Bella figura is the underlying ideal that explains why some first-generation immigrants implemented the doubling of household goods and garments, as in Chiara's childhood home. The home, specifically the upstairs living room, is a space that typifies this ideal, as it is a space where the public and private converge.⁴⁵ In what follows, I examine how *bella figura* manifested in the homes of my participants. I will be looking at the living room in the Italian-Canadian home and the objects within it that help define this space. By analyzing the domestic environment and material culture of the formal living room in Italian-Canadian homes in Montreal, I aim to uncover how my participants experienced the gendered facets of their childhood spaces.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Annemarie Money, "Material Culture and the Living Room: The Appropriation and Use of Goods in Everyday Life," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7, no. 3 (2007): 358.

CHAPTER TWO

The Untouchable Upstairs Living Room

Gendered ideals infiltrate some Italian-Canadian homes through the designation of two living rooms: a special, untouchable, and formal upstairs living room, and the informal basement living quarters. To understand the double-living room phenomenon, it is first necessary to explore the existing literature on the double-kitchen phenomenon in Italian-Canadian homes, to which my own analysis is indebted. In her essay, “Two Stoves, Two Refrigerators, *Due Cucine*: The Italian Immigrant Home with Two Kitchens,” Lara Pascali provides detailed descriptions of the kitchens of her participants, who are Italian-Canadians living in northeastern Canada. She analyzes the psychology and culture behind the double-kitchen phenomenon commonly found in Italian-Canadian domestic environments by conducting ethnographies in her interviewees’ homes. The double-kitchen phenomenon is an unusual spatial organization of the Italian-Canadian home in which the house’s design includes two kitchens: one on the main floor and one in the basement.¹ While some cultures might have a double kitchen for religious dietary practices or laws,² Italian immigrants did not invent the double kitchen phenomenon for religious or dietary reasons. The upstairs kitchen is a pristine or “clean” space that the mothers and daughters hardly used for cooking but instead served to display new appliances and objects, as observed in Pascali’s photograph of one of her participant’s upstairs kitchen (Figure 4). Typically designed with marble countertops, ceramic backsplashes, and oak cabinets,³ the upstairs kitchen serves an aesthetic purpose rather than a practical one. As Pascali states, “[it is] a showroom that is virtually unused except for receiving the occasional special or unfamiliar guest.”⁴ Not all guests would be welcome in the upstairs kitchen; only special individuals, those outside the homeowner’s usual social circles, would receive an invitation to the upstairs kitchen.

Pascali observes that this kind of Italian-Canadian home can provide insight into aspects of the Italian immigrant experience in Canada, especially socio-cultural values, traditions, and

¹ Pascali, “Two Stoves, Two Refrigerators, *Due Cucine*,” 4.

² It should be noted that the inclusion of two kitchens in the home is not foreign to some cultures that observe dietary laws. For example, Jews who are observant of *kashrut* may renovate their homes to include a kosher kitchen to cook kosher foods. In some instances, a Passover kitchen might be added to the house only for use before and during Passover. See Joseph Giovannini and New York Times News Service, “Double Kitchen Helps Family Keep Faithful to Jewish Dietary Law, *Chicago Tribune*, published July 6, 1986, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1986-07-06-8602180224-story.html>.

³ Pascali, “Two Stoves, Two Refrigerators, *Due Cucine*,” 17-8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

women's experiences.⁵ She mentions how *bella figura* plays a role in the ways that the first generation organized the spaces in the home. She follows Nardini's definition of *bella figura* with,

fare bella figura most likely also plays a role in the aesthetic importance of maintaining a beautiful upstairs. The desire to show our possessions, and by extension, our selves, in the best possible manner is a common one, as the history of the formal dining room and parlour indicate.⁶

Pascali's research focuses on the double-kitchen phenomenon but supplies a short analysis of how Italian immigrants practice this spatial phenomenon in the living rooms as well. I build on Pascali's research by analyzing examples of the upstairs Italian-Canadian living room as understood through the perspectives of my Montreal-based participants. In focusing on material culture, I aim to uncover the manifestation of *bella figura* in the function and decoration of these living rooms.

According to the 2016 Canadian census, nearly 279 795 Italian immigrants live on the island of Montreal,⁷ prominently in but not limited to the boroughs of Saint-Leonard, Ville-Émard, and LaSalle. Duplex, triplex, four-plex and five-plex homes are widespread in these neighbourhoods. Generally, Italian homeowners live in the main unit of these "plexes," which generally means the first or ground floor and basement, and rent out the other unit(s) located either above or to the side⁸ as a means of earning additional income.⁹ This is the case for the Chiara sisters' childhood home, which is located near the railway that separates Montreal North from Saint-Leonard. Their home was the main unit in a triplex located near Boulevard Couture. The house had two entrances, one that led to the basement from the downward-sloping driveway, and one that led to the upstairs hall (Figure 5). The home's basement was a modified studio apartment that included a general living/dining area and a half bathroom, kitchen, full garage, and a *cantina*¹⁰ to store canned goods, wine, cheese, and to hang sausage. When coming in through the upstairs entrance, one first encountered the marble-floored foyer that led into the

⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁶ Ibid., 57-8.

⁷ Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity Highlight Tables, "Ethnic Origin, both sexes, age (total), Montréal, 2016 Census – 25% Sample data," *Statistics Canada*, last modified November 1, 2017, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/hlt-fst/imm/Table.cfm?Lang=E&T=32&Geo=462>.

⁸ Pascali, "The Italian Immigrant Basement Kitchen," 51.

⁹ Angela, interview with Lisa Massa, October 2, 2020, audio recording.

¹⁰ A *cantina* is the Italian word for "cellar."

five-and-a-half apartment. There was a kitchen, a bathroom, and an enclosed staircase leading to the basement. Immediately to the left, when entering their home from the upstairs entrance, was the formal living room.

As mentioned above, Giuseppina Chiara expressed how the upstairs living room in her childhood home was a “museum,”¹¹ an untouchable space. She told me that her parents did not allow her to use this area of the home to relax or do schoolwork and that the intention of the upstairs living room was to receive esteemed guests and to take photographs on special occasions. Figure 6 demonstrates this formality, showing Chiara in her high school graduation gown and cap, standing in the middle of her family’s upstairs living room. When I asked Chiara’s sister, Maria-Rosa Chiara, about this living room and the upstairs of her childhood home in general, she answered, “[the living room] was a nice big room, but nobody used it. Even if you wanted to use it, it was so uncomfortable. So we never really used it. [...] everything always had to be in order just in case people would pop in.”¹² Maria-Rosa Chiara’s comment reinforces the impalpability of the upstairs living room.

Having an untouchable living room at the front of the home is not unique to Italian-Canadian homes. In their essay, “‘The More We Are Together’: Domestic Space, Gender and Privacy,” Ruth Madigan and Moira Munro state that in the nineteenth century, “working-class terraced houses typically maintained a front room or parlour which was kept ‘for best’ and hardly ever used.”¹³ In nineteenth-century Canada, the parlour’s identification as a formal room was not entirely obvious. Peter Ward suggests that some owners saved the living room for special occasions, whereas others did not.¹⁴ The idea of maintaining a hardly-used living room in the front of the house may have resonance with the human psyche, as Yi-Fu Tuan suggests: “the living room is the ego, the public and the social self.”¹⁵ The living room, in this sense, could be seen to link interior to exterior, becoming a “transactional space” between public and private.¹⁶ In most of my participants’ childhood homes, the living room served to express the family’s

¹¹ Giuseppina Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 30, 2019, audio recording.

¹² Maria-Rosa Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 9, 2020, audio recording.

¹³ Ruth Madigan and Moira Munro, “‘The More We Are Together’: Domestic Space, Gender and Privacy,” in *Ideal Homes*, ed. Tony Chapman and Jenny Hockey (London: Routledge, 1999), 63.

¹⁴ Peter Ward, *A History of Domestic Space: Privacy and the Canadian Home* (Vancouver and Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 1999), 62.

¹⁵ Yi-Fu Tuan quoted in Ward, *A History of Domestic Space: Privacy and the Canadian Home*, 135.

¹⁶ Money, “Material Culture and the Living Room,” 357-8; Ward, *A History of Domestic Space: Privacy and the Canadian Home*, 60.

respectability and a platform where their practice of *bella figura* could be made visible to outsiders.

By referring to her family's upstairs living room as a "museum," Giuseppina Chiara bridges the idea of the living room as a place of ritual. Carol Duncan's book *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, examines the spatial experience that museums create by taking visitors away from daily life. For Duncan, museums are ritual spaces. She sees the art museum not solely in terms of the objects they house nor their architectural design. Rather, she is interested in "the totality of the museum as a stage setting that prompts visitors to enact a performance of some kind."¹⁷ She explores how the museum setting, lighting, and hushed interior urge its visitors to perform reverence, as if they were in a place of worship.¹⁸ Similarly, the upstairs living room in certain Italian-Canadian homes encourages visitors to perform primly because of its furniture, decor and because of the general understanding that the upstairs living room is a sacred space. Francesca recalled that navigating *bella figura* in her Italian peers' homes was commonplace, but in non-Italians' homes, these expectations did not exist:

I was used to it because a lot of my friends were of Italian descent, second generation like I am. I was used to the fact that there was always that separation in a lot of the homes. So to me, it was common. Then when I would go to my friends' houses that were [non-Italian], it wasn't the same thing.¹⁹

Francesca recounts how her first childhood home was a small house located about five minutes away from her second childhood home, in LaSalle (Figure 7). This home, where Francesca spent the first ten years of her life, was too small to have an untouchable upstairs living room.²⁰ Instead, the parents organized the home with functional spaces, sacrificing no rooms for display. After her family moved into their second home, also in LaSalle, there was enough space to accommodate an upstairs kitchen and an upstairs living room. Most of Francesca's childhood memories are emplaced in this second home, a triplex with two entrances. The family entered through the downstairs door, next to the garage, which led to the basement kitchen where women prepared meals and where the immediate family would gather to eat. A hall led to the basement's

¹⁷ Carol Duncan, "Introduction," in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, ed. Carol Duncan (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1-2.

¹⁸ Carol Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual," in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, ed. Carol Duncan (New York: Routledge, 1995), 20.

¹⁹ Francesca interview with Lisa Massa, October 21, 2020, audio recording.

²⁰ Ibid.

main living area, where the family would set up a large table to accommodate gatherings on special occasions or holidays. At the back of this living area was a cantina. Upstairs, there was a dining room, living room, and the two bedrooms, a kitchen towards the back of the house and a sunroom. Francesca notes that the first floor was unused apart from the bedrooms. Her parents kept the upstairs kitchen and living room pristine.²¹

For Francesca, these formal spaces reflected how hard her parents had worked for their home and possessions.²² She recalls that preservation was her parents' motivation for not using the formal, upstairs spaces within the family home. The expensive living room furniture could last much longer if unused. Their efforts were especially evident in the furniture set. In the case of her first home, where the family used every space and its furniture, these rules still applied. The couch, for example, was covered in protective plastic. In Figure 8, Francesca sits on this plastic-covered couch in the upstairs living room, holding her doll, and smiling as someone takes her photograph. "When they came [to Canada]," she recalls, "[my parents] had absolutely nothing to their name, so the items that they acquired [were] very precious to them. [They] meant a lot to them." Francesca goes on to say that the main reason why Italian families who settled in this neighbourhood felt the need to follow the rules of *bella figura* had to do with "the suffering that they had when they came here [which made them] more attached to their objects [and] things in the house."²³ The suffering to which Francesca refers has to do with her parents emigrating from Italy with very minimal belongings and money, not knowing much English or French, in addition to experiencing racism in a new country.²⁴ Covering the couch in plastic reinforced the untouchable quality of the upstairs living room, but it also indicated that Francesca's parents regarded the couch as a hard-won precious object.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Despite Italy joining the Allies in 1943, many Italians (especially Southern Italians) faced prejudice when settling in Canada after the Second World War due to their association with an enemy state. Additionally, Italians faced racism due to immigration policies in Canada at the time that associated hotter climates with cultural backwardness, in addition to not speaking English or French. Italians were generally less desirable than British, white American, and northern European immigrant workers for these reasons. See Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 22; Franca Iacovetta, "Ordering in Bulk: Canada's Postwar Immigration Policy and the Recruitment of Contract Workers from Italy," *Journal of American Ethnic Study* 11, no.1 (1991): 52-3; Chiara Montpetit, "Connected by a Thread: Stories of Migration and Labour in Sara Angelucci's *Piece Work*" (Master's thesis, Concordia University, 2020), 21.

Francesca believes that her parents embraced the idea of having one living room for aesthetic purposes in their second home to show that they had succeeded in their new country: “in their [home] country, they didn’t have two kitchens and two living rooms.”²⁵ Moreover, they did not have the means to fully furnish a second living room. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton observe the connection between objects representing relationships and social ties in their book *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*.²⁶ This ethnographic study focuses on objects in the home that their participants identified as “special.”²⁷ Examining the constitutive role that possessions play in people’s definitions of themselves,²⁸ the authors observe that people use objects as a means to display their financial status.²⁹ In Francesca’s home, objects, especially those on display in the upstairs living room, were used to show the public that the family had worked hard for their earnings and had succeeded in making a life in Canada.³⁰ Some of Pascali’s research subjects, second-generation Italian-Canadians, linked consumption and socio-economic status in their assessment of why their parents desired these sorts of rooms.³¹ Second-generation interviewees in my and Pascali’s research explain that it was their parents’ dream to have these curated showrooms to express their status to outsiders.³²

Duncan examines the eighteenth-century model of the art museum as a place intended for the contemplation of art objects. The author states that the practice of placing objects in settings intended to enhance contemplation emerged from a modern European way of thinking.³³ The Italian-Canadian upstairs living room functioned similarly. For instance, Giuseppina Chiara shared an image with me of what she calls the “Louis XV couch,”³⁴ an ornate couch made of both upholstery and wood (Figure 9).³⁵ The “Louis XV couch” reinforced the untouchable and

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

²⁷ Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things*, x.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 29.

³⁰ Francesca, interview with Lisa Massa, October 21, 2020, audio recording.

³¹ Pascali, “Two Stoves, Two Refrigerators, *Due Cucine*,” 56.

³² Ibid., 56-7.

³³ Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual,” 13.

³⁴ Giuseppina Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 12, 2020, audio recording.

³⁵ The name of the couch refers to Louis XV of France, who reigned from 1715 until his death in 1774, and who infamously led France to its economic downfall, leading to the French Revolution of 1789. The Encyclopaedia Britannica characterizes Louis XV-style furniture by its curvilinear forms, ornateness, floral, leaf-like motifs, and exceptional detail. See The Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Louis XV style,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified December 2, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Louis-XV-style>.

unlived-in qualities of the upstairs living room because it was never used as a couch for relaxing. Both sisters noted in their interviews that this couch was uncomfortable and that it was a couch meant for staging photographs, a platform upon which etiquette and respectability could be demonstrated when entertaining guests.³⁶ For example, in Figure 10, the Chiara family sits rigidly and formally, as if there were no backrest on the couch at all. Another example of displayed art objects in the living room are Capodimonte,³⁷ which are small-scale porcelains sold in Italian shops in Montreal, such as Maison Lipari and Berchicci. The manufacturers made detailed, colourful, and sometimes gilded porcelains, usually representing a mythological scene or figure. Often manufacturers made the porcelains mimic a floral arrangement, like the one in Francesca's childhood home (Figure 11), or they could serve as the decorative base to a lamp, like the one in Chiara's childhood home (Figure 12). Homeowners placed these objects on coffee tables and end tables so that guests could appreciate their intricate detail, such as the lamp's placement in Figure 12. Angela expressed how the Capodimonte in her childhood home helped to transform the space into an Italian villa,³⁸ alluding to how objects helped to define the space as an "Italian" one. The Capodimonte in some of my participants' upstairs living rooms represent how some *bella figura* practices were akin to "keeping up with the Joneses."³⁹ In other words, trends formed in the Italian-Canadian community in Montreal inform the acceptable way of decorating one's living room in that community. Francesca expressed that while she would not display Capodimonte in her home today, since she considers herself clumsy, she nonetheless sees these objects as unique to Italian-Canadian material culture; for her, they signify Italian pride and heritage.⁴⁰

Pascali's report on Italian immigrant kitchens contrasts the basement kitchen with the upstairs kitchen. The upstairs kitchen is an untouchable and clean space, and the downstairs

³⁶ Giuseppina Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 30, 2019, audio recording; Maria-Rosa Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 9, 2020, audio recording.

³⁷ The Capodimonte Porcelain Factory Capodimonte manufactured the first Capodimonte, located in the Palazzo of Capodimonte by Charles III of Naples, in Naples, Italy. Established in 1743, the factory produced soft-paste porcelain objects that were white, lustrously glazed, and tinted with a hint of colour, as observed in a piece titled *Fisherman and companion* (See Figure 13). Typically, porcelain made at the Capodimonte Porcelain Factory did not depict mythological scenes and were not as colourful as the porcelain at other factories. But these porcelain figurines inspired the vibrant, gilded, twentieth-century style seen in the childhood homes of my participants. See The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Capodimonte porcelain," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified February 26, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Capodimonte-porcelain>.

³⁸ Angela, interview with Lisa Massa, October 2, 2020, audio recording.

³⁹ Nardini, *Che Bella Figura!*, 7.

⁴⁰ Francesca, interview with Lisa Massa, October 21, 2020, audio recording.

kitchen is a messy and, she argues, liberating space.⁴¹ The family used the basement kitchen for daily meal preparation, hosting close family and friends and mass food productions like sausage-making and making tomato purée for pasta sauce. Pillarella shared a photograph of her father in her family’s basement kitchen, standing next to a table full of *taralli*, a breadstick-like Italian snack (Figure 14). The downstairs living room is also a relaxed space like the downstairs kitchen. In our interview, Maria-Rosa Chiara remembered “getting in [the house] from the basement, staying in the basement, going to the bathroom in the basement, eating in the basement. We were rarely upstairs, just to sleep.”⁴² She remembered that staying in her bedroom for long periods of time was forbidden because the bed linens could not have creases in case someone would visit and pass by the rooms.⁴³ Such rules reinforced the basement as the place of leisure for the family while simultaneously denying family members their privacy. Some of my participants remember their family gathering to watch television, unwind, have parties, and informal get-togethers. Angela shared a photograph of her basement living and dining area where her family would host parties. Her family’s basement had a bar, making the environment feel even more like a space of conviviality, togetherness, and celebration (Figure 15). Similarly, Giuseppina Chiara shared a photograph of her sixteenth birthday party, which took place in her family’s basement living room (Figure 16). This photograph shows the basement living area as a liberating and free space where friends and family could move easily between the kitchen and dining areas. As a converted studio apartment, the open plan has no walls separating the living room, dining room, and kitchen.

My interviewees concurred that the basement was where the closest members of the family would convene after a day at school, in the case of the children, and after a day at work, in the case of the parents. Daughters would help start dinner, as they usually came home earlier than their mothers. According to Giuseppina Chiara and Maria-Rosa Chiara, this might mean heating up a meal that their mother had prepared that morning.⁴⁴ The labour needed to keep the basement clean was the responsibility of women and girls in the Italian-Canadian homes that my interviewees recall. But, in contrast to the formal living room upstairs, the entire family made use

⁴¹ Pascali, “Two Stoves, Two Refrigerators, *Due Cucine*,” 64-5.

⁴² Maria-Rosa Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 9, 2020, audio recording.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Giuseppina Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 30, 2019, audio recording; Maria-Rosa Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 9, 2020, audio recording.

of and enjoyed this informal space. This begs the question of who was responsible for the maintenance of this decorative and museum-like space?

CHAPTER THREE

Intergenerational Tensions Through Gendered Domestic Labour

The upstairs living room in the childhood homes of the second-generation Italian-Canadian women I have interviewed required maintenance in the form of cleaning. Staging an untouchable upstairs living room with precious objects was a luxury to some first-generation Italian-Canadians in Montreal.¹ First-generation mothers who settled in Canada sought to keep this symbolic space clean and maintain its contents in pristine condition.² Pascali explains, “the importance of keeping an upstairs [room] clean may also be a way of “fare bella figura” and of protecting oneself from the scrutiny of others.”³ Anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests that cleaning is a way of “placing boundaries, [and] making visible statements about the home we are intending to create out of the material house.”⁴ Cleaning the upstairs living room was a way to instill order and control over the space. It was a means, in Pascali’s words, to create “personal statements about ourselves through the home [...] Cleaning thus contributes to our personal sense of well-being and is bound up in notions of self-identity.”⁵ In this way, a clean home means to have a proper home.

Before conducting my interviews, I assumed that first-generation homeowners were the primary caretakers of the upstairs living room. However, those women worked long hours inside and outside the home to care for their families. In her research on mid-century southern Italian immigrants in Toronto, Franca Iacovetta states that the percentage of married women in the Canadian workforce increased from 12.7% in 1941 to 50% in 1961, and Italian immigrant women were figured prominently in these statistics.⁶ In 1961, 6.5% of Toronto’s women workforce were Italian immigrants, primarily employed in factories.⁷ Chiara Montpetit notes that after the internment of their husbands during the Second World War, many Italian immigrant women in Canada worked in the textile industry to support their families.⁸ After the war and into

¹ Pascali, “Two Stoves, Two Refrigerators, *Due Cucine*,” 72-3.

² *Ibid.*, 70.

³ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002), 85.

⁵ Pascali, “Two Stoves, Two Refrigerators, *Due Cucine*,” 68.

⁶ Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, 92.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Chiara Montpetit, “Connected by a Thread: Stories of Migration and Labour in Sara Angelucci’s *Piece Work*” (Master’s thesis, Concordia University, 2020), 20-1.

the 1950s, Canadian government officials recruited Italian men in “bulk”⁹ to work in mines, farms, fields and factories, while the women worked as domestic servants and eventually worked in the garment industry.¹⁰ Many first-generation Italian-Canadian immigrant women worked hard to provide for their families through both paid and unpaid labour.¹¹ As such, and in keeping with the strongly gendered associations of women and housework, they relied on their second-generation daughters to undertake domestic duties.

Lisa Bonato’s MA thesis focuses on the relationship between Italian-Canadian mothers and daughters through what she calls the “mother/daughter discourse” or “maternal discourse” (terms initially coined by American feminist theorist, Marianne Hirsch¹²). Bonato interprets the literature of four Italian-Canadian women authors who write about the Italian-Canadian mother/daughter relationship, investigating topics like language, ethnicity, identity, gender, and class.¹³ In her first chapter, “Double Jeopardy: The Outcast Daughter,” Bonato calls attention to the conflicting gender and cultural paradigms between first-generation Italian-Canadian mothers and their daughters through the observations of Italian-Canadian writer, Genni Donati Gunn:

Most first-generation immigrant women, although in Canada, continued to enforce upon their daughters the same rules and roles given to them by their mothers, while, at the same time, they desired a better life for their daughters, one filled with the opportunities they never had. Second-generation Italian women have grown up in this dual environment, oppressed from inside and outside.¹⁴

The link between women and the domestic sphere makes it seem as if mothers exclusively were imposing these rules and roles onto their daughters. In the case of some of my interviewees, they felt that neither solely their mother or their father imposed gender roles, and that it was just the way that the home environment was. *Bella figura* is a social construct that affects everyone involved. As such, daughters felt pressure from their parents and Italian(-Canadian) society in

⁹ Canadian government officials referred to the mass immigration of Italians after the war as “bulk orders.” See Franco Iacovetta, “Ordering in Bulk: Canada’s Postwar Immigration Policy and the Recruitment of Contract Workers from Italy,” *Journal of American Ethnic Study* 11, no.1 (1991): 50-80.

¹⁰ Iacovetta, “Ordering in Bulk,” 57-8; Montpetit, “Connected by a Thread,” 21-2.

¹¹ Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, 92.

¹² Marianne Hirsch, “Feminist Discourse/Maternal Discourse,” in *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, (Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, 1989), 162-200; Bonato, “Mothers and Daughters,” 2.

¹³ Bonato, “Mothers and Daughters,” 1.

¹⁴ Genni Donati Gunn, “Avoiding the Stereotypes,” in *Writers in Transition: The Proceedings of the First National Conference of Italian-Canadian Writers*, ed. Anna Foschi Ciampolini and C. Dino Minni (Canada: Guernica, 1990), 143.

general to adhere to the ideal.¹⁵ But for the second generation, the pressure to appear presentable and perform this principle was taxing and challenged their autonomy and independence. Some second-generation Italian-Canadian women did not believe that preserving the “museum” was as crucial as their Italian-born parents did.¹⁶ As such, the space became a site of tension between first-generation parents and second-generation daughters.

In what follows, I examine how maintaining the upstairs living room’s environment produced tensions among the generations and how *bella figura* is in play. Some of my interviewees’ experiences reveal that the museum-like upstairs living room was experienced as a place of oppression because they had to abide by this gendered ideal. I examine how keeping the upstairs living room immaculate helped acquaint the second generation with its spatial qualities and its function in achieving *bella figura*. Such spatial awareness shows how cleaning and domestic labour were related to performing *bella figura* and gender roles. But in this section, I also show how the upstairs living room and its association with *bella figura* through maintenance and cleaning can reveal gender oppression *outside* the home. My goal here is to explore how interiors can affect the world beyond the home, and how tensions arose as the second generation grew up in the 1970s and 1980s Montreal. I argue that this intergenerational tension is tied to the qualitative difference in how each generation values the importance of making a good impression to outsiders, or *fare bella figura*. This starts in the upkeep of the upstairs living room.

Mothers expected their second-generation daughters to do housework such as dusting, vacuuming, and mopping, bestowing upon them a unique role that made them the custodians of this spatial typology. Giuseppina Chiara recalls that she was responsible for cleaning the museum-like upstairs living room. She was responsible for dusting the ornate objects and

¹⁵ Pressure to adhere to *bella figura* also comes from the influence of the Catholic Church. In his book, *All the Pope’s Men*, Vatican watcher John L. Allen Jr. states that *bella figura* is a crucial component of Italian culture and is “undeniably influential in Vatican psychology” (Allen, 140). Allen provides examples of how the Vatican supports *bella figura*. Some examples include preferring to deal with scandal in private (Allen, 140-41); refraining from criticizing someone’s work or incompetence (Allen, 141-2); maintaining strict formality in working relationships (Allen, 144) and the overall fact that “if there’s a choice between doing something quickly and doing it beautifully, beauty is going to beat speed every time” (Allen, 143). To the Church, maintaining a good image to the public can override the need to make substantial change, or, as Allen states, “at [*bella figura*’s] worst, it becomes an excuse for not confronting inner rot as long as the surface looks good” (Allen, 139). As Adam DeVille highlights, the Church is more concerned with “preserving its *figura* than anything else” and will not admit to past mistakes at the risk of losing its good, Holy, and beautiful image (DeVile, 103). As such, it is not too far of a stretch to state that church’s teachings imposed *bella figura* onto its congregants. See John L. Allen Jr., *All the Pope’s Men: The Inside Story of How the Vatican Really Thinks* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 138-47; Adam DeVille, “Kenosis Vs. *La Bella Figura*,” *The Canadian Journal of Orthodox Christianity* 2, no. 3 (2007): 94-106.

¹⁶ Pascali, “Two Stoves, Two Refrigerators, *Due Cucine*,” 82-3.

furniture in the living room, applying lemon oil to the wooden parts of the couches and cleaning the voluminous curtains that hung from the ceiling and draped over the living room windows.¹⁷ Similarly, Angela stated that girls were usually responsible for the chores around the house, something she said is not observed as much today.¹⁸ In his text, “The Acculturation of Italian Immigrant Girls in Canada,” Kurt Danziger argues that “Italian immigrant girls in Canada are exposed to a higher level of role specialization than non-immigrant girls,”¹⁹ delving into the ways that their immigrant parents limited their autonomy in their own decisions and maintained high expectations for their daughters to be involved in household duties.²⁰ By cleaning the untouchable upstairs living room, second-generation Italian-Canadian girls did in fact touch this space, and in so doing became acquainted with their roles as unpaid custodians charged with attaining *bella figura*.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969! Proposal for an exhibition “CARE”* challenges women’s role as unpaid domestic labourers. In her manifesto, Ukeles determines two kinds of labour. The first is development, through which Ukeles builds upon modernist ideals of progression, change, and creation. The second is maintenance, such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, child-rearing, and so forth. Ukeles suggests that development depends on maintenance because maintenance allows our societies to keep moving forward.²¹ In Section C of her manifesto, she states: “Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time. The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages, housewives = no pay.”²² Asserting herself as a maintenance artist and challenging the perception of maintenance workers, Ukeles carried out her *Maintenance Art Performances* at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut in 1973. Some of her performances included scrubbing the museum floors, mopping the exterior plaza of the museum to create “floor paintings,” as observed in Figure 17, cleaning the display cases and vitrines, making “dust paintings,” and using the museum guard’s keys to unlock and lock galleries and offices in the museum.²³ These performances seek to make the viewer reconsider the value of

¹⁷ Giuseppina Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 30, 2019, audio recording.

¹⁸ Angela, interview with Lisa Massa, October 2, 2020, audio recording.

¹⁹ Kurt Danziger, “The Acculturation of Italian Immigrant Girls in Canada,” *International Journal of Psychology* 9, no. 2 (1974): 129.

²⁰ Danziger, “Acculturation of Italian Immigrant Girls,” 130.

²¹ Helen Molesworth “House Work and Art Work,” *October* 92 (2000): 78.

²² Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!*, 2.

²³ Molesworth, “House Work,” 78-9.

maintenance workers; those who care for a given space are also those who know it best. This insight means that maintenance workers are sources of valuable information about that space, including its function, spatial qualities, the objects within, and who the room is for. Yet, museum maintenance workers and domestic workers are minimally remunerated or not remunerated at all.

The second-generation Italian-Canadian women I interviewed told me that cleaning felt oppressive because boys did not share this work, and it required them to stay in the domestic sphere. Achieving *bella figura* depended both on a clean and tidy upstairs living room and on girls alone undertaking the labour, acting as custodians, and performing a stereotypical gender role. In their essay, “A Woman’s Place?,” Doreen Massey and Linda McDowell explore how the spread of capitalist relations of productions in nineteenth-century Britain affected women and men in the workplace, looking to four areas in the UK as case studies.²⁴ Massey and McDowell provide context on separate spheres,²⁵ labour, and gender in the nineteenth century, giving me a point of departure to explore gender roles and the insistence on girls performing domestic labour rather than boys. The authors explain that in colliery villages during the Victorian era, the lives of men and women were separate: men were the breadwinners, usually working in mines, and women were the domestic labourers, which included cleaning the home, preparing hot meals, and heating the water to wash their husband’s filthy mining clothes and their bodies.²⁶ Men risked their lives daily and established male solidarity because of these shared risks, and even more so, attributed the manual labour involved in mining to “masculinity and virility.”²⁷ In addition to their inability to vote, women were excluded from the world of men’s work, hampering their access to social and public life,²⁸ and binding them even more to the home.

The nineteenth century helped shape the gender stereotypes that women face today regarding the home and to domestic labour. The 1972 feminist art installation *Womanhouse* considered these gender stereotypes through mixed media and performance art. In their segment of *Maintenance* performances, Rush and Orgel (Figure 2 and 3) enacted the repetitive motions of

²⁴ Doreen Massey and Linda McDowell, “A Woman’s Place?,” in *Space, Place, and Gender*, ed. by Doreen Massey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 191-92.

²⁵ The term “separate spheres” refers to the domestic sphere, a historically female space of the home, and the public sphere, the male-dominated space of everyday and working life. See: Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way*, 75; Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, “Introduction,” *Women, Culture, and Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 8; Peggy R. Sanday, “Female Status in the Public Domain,” in *Women, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 190.

²⁶ Massey and McDowell, “A Woman’s Place?,” 193-4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

scrubbing the floor and ironing sheets in a monotonous way. These isolated performances were meant to highlight how housework plays a role in the construction of gender roles.²⁹ In 1972 Miriam Schapiro explained that home is a space that women have been identified with for centuries, the place where women worked to please others.³⁰ *Womanhouse* revealed the patriarchal expectations of women's duties in the domestic sphere and worked towards reclaiming this space as their own.³¹ Seeing *Womanhouse* as an experiment in biology and social roles,³² artist and historian Pat Mainardi specifies that housework is a political issue that women are conditioned to believe to be part of their identity.³³ While it is true that women acquire spatial knowledge about domestic spaces through maintenance, it is crucial to remember that this unwaged responsibility was enforced by their parents and patriarchal society, much like *bella figura*.

Stereotypical gender roles play a vital role in satisfying *bella figura*. Existing patriarchal structures within some homes led to the gendering of labour, which was a cause for tension between some first- and second-generation Italian Canadians I interviewed. Citing her own interview with an Italian-Canadian man, Elena Piezzo illustrates how he perceives doing household chores and his fear of being seen by members of the community: "What if it ever got out. Or someone came over when I was cleaning a toilet. I could never live it down. I'm not saying that I won't help around the house, but I will do other things."³⁴ This statement echoes a common perception that cleaning is emasculating and, therefore, should remain a woman's responsibility. Giuseppina Chiara, who has no brothers, told me that her father usually did not help with chores or cooking. Household duties were so heavily placed upon and associated with women that not even the simplest domestic tasks could be asked of men. Chiara recalled that:

My dad never, never cooked. My dad never dried the dishes, my dad never participated in anything having to do with cleaning the house, cooking ... all those things ... laundry, none of that. The man of the house was, like, taken care of. He would just sit at the head of the table. He was the first one served. It was just the way it was. We served him, he sat at the table, and he got up when dinner was over. He went on the couch, and he opened the TV or took a nap, and we took care of the dishes and everything. The only time I saw

²⁹ Temma Balducci, "Revisiting "Womanhouse": Welcome to the (Deconstructed) "Dollhouse"," *Woman's Art Journal* 27, no. 2 (2006): 20.

³⁰ Miriam Schapiro, "The Education of Women as Artists: Project Womanhouse." *Art Journal* 31, no. 3 (1972): 268.

³¹ Schapiro, "Project Womanhouse," 168; Balducci, "Revisiting "Womanhouse," 20.

³² Arlene Raven, "Womanhouse," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Judith K. Brodsky (New York: H.N. Abrams: 1994), 51.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Piezzo, "Crucible of Culture," 120.

my dad actually dry dishes or drying a cup was when he was retired and home with my mom and I would go visit, and I would say, “wow, daddy, you’re drying dishes,” like it was such a weird thing.³⁵

What is fascinating to me about Chiara’s account of gendered domestic labour is that neither exclusively her mother nor her father instilled this routine. Chiara said that it was just the way it was, and “to this day, my mom still thinks that way. Because if she comes to my house and my husband gets up to start doing dishes, she’s all uncomfortable. She has to go there and help him because he shouldn’t be doing that.”³⁶ Chiara believes that men should be doing their share of responsibilities around the house, regardless of how it makes her or her family look, and this is a source of tension between her and her parents.

For some women, conflicts arose between themselves and their parents during adolescence, a time when they wanted to explore their independence. Under the strictures of stereotypical gender roles, women did not experience the same kind of independence as their male counterparts did. Pillarella explained that,

I didn’t want to be Italian. I was a hypocrite because I enjoyed a lot of things that were Italian. And I was definitely being groomed to be Italian. I just wanted to be Canadian because I wanted to disassociate myself from like the *paisan*³⁷ thing, the Old World mentality, and the gender roles. I hated, hated, hated the gender roles. Because especially growing up, the boys could do anything, and I couldn’t [...] To get out of the house, I used to hang out at the park or in the lanes [...] and then at a certain age my father would come looking for me. I was so angry when he got a car, because then he could come looking for me with the car. So I had to devise a plan at the park to where I would [seek] the one-lane streets so I could knock him off. It was awful.³⁸

When she was younger, around nine or ten years old, Pillarella’s parents let her roam around the city by herself and allowed her to take the bus to go downtown. But this changed once she reached adolescence. Then, her parents’ protectiveness made her find ways to ensure she did not get caught doing normal teenage activities like going to the park. Angela shared a similar experience: “I wasn’t allowed to date boys, so a lot of us were reverting to lying to our parents. But for the littlest reasons. Just to go to a park to meet a guy. I think we all navigated through

³⁵ Giuseppina Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 30, 2019, audio recording.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Paisan* is an informal Italian word to describe a fellow countryman or someone from the same village in Italy. Variations are also used among Spanish speakers.

³⁸ Joyce Pillarella, interview with Lisa Massa, September 17, 2020, audio recording.

these rules in a very, very similar way by kind of developing this white lie approach.”³⁹ Angela expressed that she believes these rules were a symptom of her parents trying to control the family’s image and to conserve an image of her and her sisters as angels. But it came at a cost:

My parents were very protective, overly protective, when we were growing up. To a point where it caused a kind of cultural rift, or a cultural gap, a massive cultural gap, between the restrictions that I was being imposed upon, that me and my sisters were being imposed upon and people in my generation.⁴⁰

Angela expressed how this gap between her and her parents grew out of a lack of understanding between what was important to her as an adolescent (that is, freedom and independence), and what was important to them, which was image.

Tensions arose between generations of women in some households because of the extent to which each group valued *bella figura*. Perhaps the relative importance of this ideal is tied to the acculturation of each demographic. Piezzo explores ethnicity and acculturation among second-generation Italian-Canadian women.⁴¹ She finds that, for the second generation, “immigration meant reconciling the duality of cultures in which they were raised,”⁴² distinguishing the experience of immigrant women from men as a struggle for social power.⁴³ The second generation negotiated their bicultural identity every day as they grew up with their Italian immigrant parents. Angela describes this negotiation in spatial terms:

Because [being] Québécoise/Canadian [...] you didn’t know which one [culture] you had to abide by. So, you learned very early on that when you came inside the house, you were Italian, so you would put your Italian hat on, and when you went outside, you took off the Italian hat. You didn’t know what you really were.⁴⁴

Angela told me that she understood her coming-of-age experience as existing in two worlds. The first was the “Québécoise/Canadian” one, which she performed outside the house among friends. The second was the “Italian” one, which she performed inside her home. Her experience communicates the agility needed to navigate dual identities. The second-generation’s bicultural identity helps explain why there were misunderstandings among the generations. The first-generation sought the fulfillment of *bella figura* to find acceptance in a new and challenging

³⁹ Angela, interview with Lisa Massa, October 2, 2020, audio recording.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Piezzo, “Crucible of Culture,” 1.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Angela, interview with Lisa Massa, October 2, 2020, audio recording.

setting. But the second-generation saw this ideal as outdated and laden with oppressive gender roles and stereotypes.

Maintaining and cleaning the upstairs living room for the sake of conforming to an ideal that satisfied their parents' generation led to contentions that extended outside of the home and into the professional lives of the second-generation. During our interview, Angela told me that her parents enforced gender roles for her and her three sisters beyond the private realm, into the public. Her father disapproved of post-secondary education for girls. The role he expected his daughter to take up was that of a homemaker.

By the time I was seventeen and finished high school, my father forced me and my sisters to get a job. He told us, "You don't need school. Why do you have to go to school for? You're just going to have babies and take care of babies." And so, we were required not to undergo university. I am the only one in my family who has a bachelor's degree.⁴⁵

Angela's anecdote is an example of the subordination of second-generation Italian-Canadian girls by their parents. Angela told me that her parents were opposed to their daughters attending university was because it would narrow their options for potential spouses.⁴⁶

In their work as custodians of the upstairs living rooms, my interviewees became acquainted with the function of this space and the ideals it reproduced. Cleaning was part of the spatial agency of Italian-Canadian women, given that they had the power to uphold the family's public image. However, they did not choose this authority; instead, it was imposed, and thus the agency in question is complicated and inseparable from their parents' expectation that girls would submit to normative gender roles. The resulting tension between first and second generation Italian-Canadians, in my interview group, is closely tied to each group's sense of the importance and meaning of *bella figura*. The second-generation Italian-Canadian women I interviewed were keenly aware of how to navigate their personas and actions inside the home, appeasing their parents, and how to fit in with their peers outside the home.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Angela, interview with Lisa Massa, October 2, 2020, audio recording.

⁴⁶ Ibid.; Piezzo, "Crucible of Culture," 105.

⁴⁷ Angela, interview with Lisa Massa, October 2, 2020, audio recording.

CHAPTER FOUR

Divergent Experiences and Lasting Impacts

To claim that all second-generation Italian-Canadian women in Montreal felt the same kinds of tensions with their Italian-born parents as described in the previous chapter would be inaccurate. Many factors contribute to how a member of the second generation might experience the intersection of gender and culture in their childhood homes. But the only way to access such experience is through the lived memory of those who grew up in such homes. Oral history is a qualitative method of research that seeks to understand individual lives and broader social phenomena,¹ putting narration and storytelling at the forefront. Kristina Llewellyn argues that analyzing oral histories through the productive tensions of post-structuralist feminism and materialist feminism provides a framework for “good” feminist oral history, one that effectively voices women’s stories to unsettle oppression.² Llewellyn’s approach is helpful as I consider Pillarella and D’Alessio’s experiences, which are different than those of my other participants. Using a post-structuralist model, I acknowledge the benefit of analyzing women’s individual experiences.³ Yet, on the other hand, I recognize the power of solidarity when speaking about gendered experiences.⁴ In what follows, I give space to the individual experiences of my participants while attempting to tie them into a larger commentary about second-generation Italian-Canadian women’s experiences.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, I will begin by acknowledging the childhood and adolescent recollections of Pillarella and D’Alessio, who grew up in interiors that were different from my four other interviewees’ childhood homes. Rather than focusing on their homes’ material culture and spatial organization, during our interviews, Pillarella and D’Alessio instead spoke about spatial practices that brought them closer to their Italian heritage later in adulthood. I share these stories, and then segue into the lasting impacts of growing up in an Italian-Canadian household in Montreal and its influence on these women as adults today.

D’Alessio showed me a photograph of the outside of her detached childhood home in Saint-Laurent; a large, contemporary cottage with a sloped roof and two round-headed windows

¹ Shulamit Reinharz, “Feminist Oral History,” in *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, ed. Shulamit Reinharz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 132-33.

² Llewellyn, “Productive Tensions,” 153.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

(Figure 18). One of the first questions I asked D'Alessio during our interview was about the spatial layout of her childhood home and how her parents decorated it. She distinguished it from the homes of my other interviewees by stating:

I'm not going to say that our home was very traditional [because] a lot of the traditional, you know, when I think of my aunts and uncles, they had the sofas with the plastic covers over them, and that was the special living rooms. The two kitchens and two living rooms. But my mother didn't have that. My mother was a little bit more modern, I think. She didn't believe in that. She believed that "I have a kitchen; I'm going to use my kitchen. I have a sofa; I'm going to use my sofa." So, we didn't grow up much [with] that two-kitchen thing.⁵

D'Alessio's mother's rejection of having double kitchens and double living rooms was an excellent point of departure to ask about what makes the difference between Italian homeowners wanting to organize space in their respective ways and how this affects the childhood and adolescent experiences of the second generation. I became interested to know about other spatial organization, routines, or rules in D'Alessio's childhood home that differed from my other participants. When I asked D'Alessio about her favourite room in her childhood home to learn about her connection to the home, she responded:

My favourite room I would say would be my bedroom. Because my bedroom is where I had peace and quiet. The rest was there, like [in] the living room I would watch TV and the kitchen would be there to eat, but I think my bedroom because that's where I could go, and it was like my sanctuary.⁶

Given that the Chiara sisters weren't even allowed to enter their bedrooms after making their beds, this affection that D'Alessio has for her childhood bedroom and its decoration reinforced the difference between how she and my other interviewees experienced their respective childhood homes. I followed up D'Alessio's response by asking her to describe her bedroom as she remembered it:

It was very simple. I'm a simple person. Very, like, minimalist. It had two twin beds, because [I shared the room with] my sister. We shared a closet [and] we had a dresser. We were both the same, we were very minimalist. And it wasn't because my mother told us to be neat, we were just like that.⁷

⁵ Chiara D'Alessio, interview with Lisa Massa, October 22, 2020, audio recording.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

D'Alessio shared a photograph with me of her childhood bedroom that complimented the description she gave (Figure 19). This photograph shows D'Alessio standing by her dresser, a sleek, six-drawer piece, looking into a mirror. D'Alessio is wearing her First Communion attire, consisting of a white satin shirt and pants, white leather shoes, and a white veil. Usually, girls in the 1950s to the 1970s receiving their First Communion wore white dresses,⁸ but D'Alessio wore pants. D'Alessio wearing pants instead of a white dress demonstrates that she had the freedom to express herself as she pleased, not conforming to the expectation of wearing a dress to her First Communion. Some of my other interviewees might not have had this choice.

Pillarella explained to me that her parents furnished their living room with mid-century modern furniture pieces, which she said were futuristic and unheard of in the Italian community when she was a child. The house did not have Capodimonte or ornate furniture, nor did it have family photographs on the wall or religious iconography. The home had lots of books on display, and its interior design was airy and minimal with white walls, clean lines, hardwood furniture, and simple solid patterns.⁹ Pillarella shared a photograph with me that demonstrates the minimalistic style of her childhood living room (Figure 20). In this photograph, her father is sitting on the couch in the living room with his feet up on the table, an action that would never have happened in the Chiara upstairs living room. The couch does not have a plastic cover like Francesca's, signifying that it is not an object to preserve, but a practical piece for daily use.

Acculturation is a factor that can contribute significantly to the way that some first-generation Italian-Canadians divided and decorated space and how they might have enforced gender roles and norms in the home. Through my interviews, I learned that D'Alessio and Pillarella's parents had arrived in Canada either as adults or with an education, factors which influenced their acculturation into Canadian society. According to Portes and Rumbaut, child migrants are more likely to navigate their host country's practices, values and identities more fluidly and with greater ease than adults.¹⁰ The authors refer to people who migrate as young children as the "1.5 generation" because they are more similar to the second generation in their ability to adapt to their host country's practices, cultural identities, and language, but are still

⁸ Anthea Jarvis, "The Dress Must Be White, and Perfectly Plain and Simple: Confirmation and First Communion Dress, 1850–2000," *Costume* 41, no. 1 (2007): 95.

⁹ Joyce Pillarella, interview with Lisa Massa, September 17, 2020, audio recording.

¹⁰ Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, "Studying the New Second Generation: The Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study," in *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, ed. Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 24.

landed immigrants like their first-generation parents.¹¹ Since child immigrants might not remember life in their birth country, they are more malleable and receptive to their host country, unlike adult immigrants, who might resist or struggle to adopt the practices, values, identities, and culture of the receiving country.¹²

Another reason why acculturation might be easier is the level of the parents' education on arrival in Canada. Kessler and Milligan examine the influence of cultural norms on work and fertility decisions of second-generation women immigrants in Canada.¹³ Their findings suggest that education plays a significant role in the decisions that immigrant women make concerning work and childrearing: “[those] with higher education are found to have skills that assimilate to the native-born more quickly, while lower-educated women can get stuck in low-status jobs.”¹⁴ The level of education acquired correlates to how easily immigrants can acculturate in their host country, usually occupying higher-level jobs because of their skillset.

Pillarella's mother was an educator by day and a language teacher by night.¹⁵ Pillarella recalled that her mother would transform the home's basement into a classroom to give lessons and tutor students in math or English. And, because her mother spoke English fluently and completed higher education, she would assist other newly-immigrated Italians in the community by providing translations of legal documents and advice on income tax and registration processes in the community.¹⁶ Pillarella said that the traffic of people in and out of the home considerably informed the home's interior, as the house transformed each day to accommodate visitors. She gave the example of a solid wood desk (Figure 21), which served multiple purposes. The desk is where Pillarella would do her homework or make phone calls as a young girl, but it was also a space that transformed into “an office for Ville-Émard,”¹⁷ as Pillarella explained. The desk was where her mother would meet with people to help provide the information they requested. Pillarella notes the photographs on the desk under the glass as the only family photographs

¹¹ Portes and Rumbaut, “Studying the New Second Generation,” 24.

¹² Seth J. Schwartz, Jennifer B. Unger, Byron L. Zamboanga, and José Szapocznik, “Rethinking the Concept of Acculturation: Implications for Theory and Research,” *American Psychologist* 65, no. 4 (2010): 242.

¹³ Anke S. Kessler and Kevin Milligan, “Acculturation, Education, and Gender Roles: Evidence from Canada,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 73, no. 2 (2021): i.

¹⁴ Alicia Adserà and Ana Ferrer, “Occupational Skills and Labour Market Progression of Married Immigrant Women in Canada.” *Labour Economics* 39 (2016): 89; Kessler and Milligan, “Acculturation, Education, and Gender Roles,” 512.

¹⁵ Joyce Pillarella, interview with Lisa Massa, September 17, 2020, audio recording.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

displayed in the home. It was a discrete way to show guests photographs of the family as they waited for her mother's assistance.¹⁸

Pillarella's mother would go on to obtain another post-secondary degree in Canada and, in addition to teaching at home, taught high school during the day. She would also serve as the director of PICAI (*Patronato Italo Canadese per l'Assistenza agli Immigrati*), a non-profit organization founded in 1969 whose initial mission¹⁹ was to help Italian immigrants ease their economic, social, and cultural integration.²⁰ Because of the many demands on her mother as a result of her education and career, Pillarella explained, her father often would help around the home:

My mother never cleaned, and she never ironed. My father did all the cleaning. He did all the ironing. He would clean the boots. Anything having to do with cleanliness he did. He [took care of] the garden, the backyard, the barbecue [...] The only thing that my mom had to do in the house was cook the food because my father did not cook. So I grew up in a house where the housework as divided. The onus was not on my mom.²¹

Unlike the Chiara sisters' home environment, where only women contributed to household labour, the Pillarella home divided the chores. The family furnished and organized the house to accommodate her mother's commitments to the Italian community.

Many of D'Alessio's and Pillarella's stories expressed appreciation for their parents. In fact, I can say with confidence that all my participants appreciated their parents despite the tensions described in the intergenerational, bicultural domestic interior. The impact of the spatial dynamics in their childhood homes can be seen today in my participants' adult homes, ranging from the division and use of domestic space to interior design and decorative choices. For some of my interviewees, the impact of coming-of-age in an Italian-Canadian home manifests not in space so much as in practices and routines. In what follows, I examine these lasting impacts to unveil how these women have appropriated or rejected the gendered spatial practices inherent to their cultural upbringing.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Since 1971, PICAI has offered Italian language courses, which continues to be the school's mission today.

²⁰ "Storia & Mission," Chi Siamo, *PICAI Scuola di Lingua Italiana*, accessed November 30, 2021, <https://picai.org/storia-e-mission/>.

²¹ Joyce Pillarella, interview with Lisa Massa, September 17, 2020, audio recording.

In our virtual interview, Pillarella showed me jars of *passata*²² that were sitting on her kitchen table. Pillarella and I shared a laugh as she told me that partaking in these traditions such as making *passata* makes her feel like a “cicoria lady,” referring to first-generation Italian women who forage for chicory along roadsides in their neighbourhoods.²³ This comment allowed me to reflect on the notion that each generation eventually becomes a version of the previous generation. More specifically, that women often become a version of their mothers.

In her second chapter, Bonato explores literature about fertility to address the irony at work when second-generation daughters become mothers.²⁴ She states, “[Despite] their ambivalence towards their own mothers, the daughters ironically find that in becoming a mother, themselves, they are able to come to terms with their split identity.”²⁵ From a linguistic perspective, Spagnuolo focuses on the mother/daughter relationship as it relates to migration, gender roles, and femininity.²⁶ Spagnuolo compares the mother/daughter relationship as a “play of mirrors,”²⁷ observing that a daughter’s first role model, for the performance of femininity, is her mother. In the case of Italian-Canadian women, ideas of femininity become nuanced through family histories of migration.

Migration disrupts the grounding of the daughter in the mother, forcing the former to “translate” her identity, that is, to redefine her subjectivity, rethinking and rewriting notions and models of femininity which are socially, culturally, geographically, and linguistically embedded. In the specific case of the Italian mothers and Italian-Canadian daughters in the present paper, reframing femininity means to challenge patriarchal and chauvinist discourses.²⁸

Bonato and Spagnuolo’s texts investigate the relationship between Italian-Canadian mothers and daughters through questions of identity, femininity, and gender roles. Both mothers and daughters challenge the patriarchal framework that supports *bella figura*. However, where the former use it to gain access into the masculine world,²⁹ the latter seek to dismantle it. While

²² *Passata* is the foundation of any tomato-based pasta sauce and a staple in Italian kitchens. Making *passata* is a process that involves boiling and pureeing tomatoes before preserving them in hot jars.

²³ *Cicoria*, or “chicory,” is an edible plant that commonly grows in urban spaces such as on medians, parks, and alongside roads and highways.

²⁴ Bonato, “Italian Mothers and Daughters,” 68.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Spagnuolo, “Italian Mothers and Italian-Canadian Daughters,” 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁹ Guano, “Respectable Ladies and Uncouth Men,” 50.

daughters might mirror some of their mothers' spatial practices, their motivations are entirely different.

For some second-generation Italian-Canadian women, the spatial organization of their childhood homes influenced their home-buying decisions. Today, Maria-Rosa Chiara lives with her family in a single-family, two-storey cottage in Laval, Quebec, a suburb north of Montreal. Chiara's spacious home includes: a furnished basement; a dining room, living room, kitchen, dinette, powder room and main entrance on the first level; and three bedrooms and a full bathroom on the second level. The layout of the first and second levels of her cottage is reminiscent of her childhood home in Saint-Leonard, where the bedrooms were upstairs, and the main living space was located on the lower levels of the house. Chiara told me that having the bedrooms upstairs works better for her and her family because the smell of cooking does not linger into the bedrooms as it did when she previously lived in a one-story bungalow just after marrying her husband.³⁰ She recalls that her bedroom upstairs in her childhood home was free of the smell of food that might make its way from a nearby kitchen on the same level. This memory of her childhood home has made its way into the reality of her own home today, suggesting that the spatial organization of this childhood home had an influence on her spatial decisions, as an adult, in her home today. The importance Chiara places on the bedrooms being upstairs, like in her childhood home is not, however, part of a search for *bella figura*. Chiara allows her adolescent children to be in their bedrooms at any time, unconcerned about what people will say about it.

For other women, the material culture of their childhood home influenced how they relate to their heritage, matrilineage, and marital role. Angela reflected on her relationship with her mother and the material culture of her childhood home by describing a thick, high-quality, Italian-made wool blanket from her childhood:

When I got married, my mother imported another one from Italy just because it was so important [to] her. [It was] something so valuable [to] her to give me something that I could cherish like she cherished it in our family [...] you don't understand what is happening at the time because you're young. You think to yourself, "why is she giving me this old blanket for?" but you realize the gesture later when you're older and you realize what they're giving you. They're giving you a piece of heritage.³¹

³⁰ Maria-Rosa Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 9, 2020, audio recording.

³¹ Angela, interview with Lisa Massa, October 2, 2020, audio recording.

In Angela's case, a wool blanket is an object carried from childhood to adulthood that signifies the changing nature of the parent-child bond. Giuseppina Chiara shared a similar sentiment about heirloom linens in her possession (Figure 22).³² Women in her mother's village in Sicily had hand-embroidered these linens as part of Chiara's mother's trousseau, using a technique known as *sfilato siciliano*. Chiara's mother then gave these linens to Chiara as a wedding gift, passing down a piece of Italian heritage to celebrate her becoming a wife and having her own family and home.

Second-generation daughters becoming wives and mothers themselves is an enlightening progression that comes full circle. The tensions they faced in their childhood homes do not vanish. Yet, the way their parents organized space in the home influenced Maria-Rosa Chiara's decisions about what house to buy, despite the difference in motivation for the layout. Some of my participants hold onto objects from their parents or their childhood homes as keepsakes to remember their heritage and traditions, as is the case with Angela and Giuseppina Chiara. For others, like Pillarella and Francesca, objects and photographs function as mementos of their late parents and of their cultural heritage.³³ The childhood homes of second-generation Italian-Canadian women had lasting impacts on their spatial and material decisions as adults.

³² Giuseppina Chiara, interview with Lisa Massa, October 30, 2019, audio recording.

³³ Joyce Pillarella, interview with Lisa Massa, September 17, 2020, audio recording; Francesca interview with Lisa Massa, October 21, 2020, audio recording.

CONCLUSION

Interviewing six second-generation Italian-Canadian women from Montreal made me realize that my mother was not alone in her sentiments about her coming-of-age spatial experience. The group of women I interviewed had valuable insights that tell another story about the Italian diaspora in Montreal, a perspective often forgotten because of their status as second-generation immigrants.¹ Their stories acquainted me with the ideal of *bella figura*, an Italian social convention that deals with decorum and etiquette, which helped Italian-Canadian immigrants to manage social expectations and create domestic interiors that they felt conveyed status and success. At the same time, my interviewees' stories made clear the ways that *bella figura* also resulted in or aggravated existing, oppressive gender inequities within the domestic interior of the immigrant Italian-Canadian home.

In Chapter One, I set out to define the elusive notion of *bella figura* as a foundation for understanding how this ideal infiltrated the domestic interiors of my interviewees' childhood homes. Using theories of gender performance, especially those of Judith Butler, I deepened the definition of *bella figura* by exploring it in relation to the space of the museum. Using Moira Gatens' analysis of Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism, I brought forth the idea of women acting in "bad faith." The term "bad faith" relates to the idea of performing *bella figura* in that a woman seeking to present herself in an idealized way limits how much she can access and transcend her authenticity.² De Beauvoir's concept of individuality³ is an idea Erving Goffman nuances in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. He states that people perform in front of others to manage their impression using various techniques like performative actions.⁴ Goffman draws attention to the fact that performers often believe in the act they put on in front of others and the performer mistakes their performance for their authentic self.⁵ His theory intertwines performance and the "true" or "real" self of the individual. Building on this, Goffman states that the traditions of one's culture, their social status, and their societal role (e.g., gender role) subconsciously or consciously influence their actions in front of others.⁶ Butler's

¹ Servello, "Manage, Negotiate, and Challenge Identities," 87.

² Gatens, "Woman as the Other," 49-50.

³ Gatens, "Woman as the Other," 54.

⁴ Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

theory about gender performance shores up Goffman's view on the factors that influence one's actions. Butler considers Luce Irigaray's theory of the masquerade as a performance women take on to participate in the masculine realm, at the risk of giving up their own desires,⁷ a performance influenced by her societal role as a woman in a male-dominated environment. *Bella figura* echoes this strategy, compromising women's identities and pressuring them to perform according to Italian cultural expectations. Overall, I situate *bella figura* as a performance of gender that includes space, both public and private, which led me to the preoccupations of Chapter Two.

The Italian-Canadian domestic interior in certain Montreal houses was shot through with *bella figura* in how their parents organized space, and how they curated material objects within those spaces. Chapter Two sought to deepen my analysis of this performative cultural code, showing it to be a gendered practice, yet one in which first-generation women exercised a kind of agency by insisting on *bella figura* in the home's practices, spaces, and material culture. Chapter Two unpacked the spatial experience of such childhood homes through the living memories of the second-generation Italian-Canadian women I interviewed.

Building on earlier research conducted by Lara Pascali, my thesis focused on the double living room phenomenon, a home design layout that mirrored the double-kitchen phenomenon that Pascali states was common in Italian immigrant homes in Montreal, Toronto, and New York.⁸ My oral history interviews helped me determine how the female children of Italian immigrants view the untouchable upstairs living room, and how the first generation curates special items in the space, rendering the decorative function of the furniture very reminiscent of the status of the art object in a museum.⁹

Focusing on the domestic interior through the perspectives of second-generation Italian-Canadian women provided unique insight into the gendered facets of the immigrant Italian home in Montreal. This demographic had to balance the demands of the Italian world within the home with the Canadian world outside the house,¹⁰ which made them critical of their parents' ideals. This led to conflicts as second-generation girls came of age and questioned their parents' faith in *bella figura*. These contentions led to pressure that manifested most strongly in the

⁷ Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 133-34; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 60.

⁸ Pascali, "Italian Immigrant Basement Kitchen," 51.

⁹ Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual," 13.

¹⁰ Angela, interview with Lisa Massa, October 2, 2020, audio recording.

maintenance work associated with the untouchable upstairs living room, a topic I discussed in Chapter Three. Using examples from feminist artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the 21 artists behind *Womanhouse*, I made connections between the 1970s and 1980s feminist performance art about domestic labour and gendered labour as practiced in certain Italian-Canadian homes in Montreal. Gender roles, stereotypes, and inequality are issues dissected in my thesis, supported by Butler's arguments about gender performance.

Some of my participants had different experiences than others. Llewellyn's work on the productive tensions between post-structuralist and materialist feminism provided me with a practical framework to discuss the divergent experiences of my participants, which are the subject of Chapter Four. The dynamics of acculturation explain why some of my participants have different memories of their childhood homes. Using sources from authors who ponder immigrants' different experiences adjusting to their host country, I argue that age and education are significant factors that affect the acculturation of a selected few of my interviewees' parents, and that this, in turn, affects the spatial environments produced. Chapter Four also considered how my interviewees' mothers and their upbringing influenced and affected the second generation later in life.

The memories and experiences that are the foundation of this thesis represent only a small number of second-generation Italian-Canadian women in Montreal. While there is much more to learn about the domestic interiors of immigrant communities in Montreal, this thesis has demonstrated that asking Italian-Canadian women about their spatial experiences can reveal many insightful stories and reflections that involve the spatial organization and material culture in the immigrant home and how these relate to themes of gender, separate spheres, domestic labour, acculturation, marriage, and maternity. This thesis has demonstrated how six second-generation Italian-Canadian women have navigated through their childhood homes under gendered ideals that, in some cases, restrained their independence as they grew up.

FIGURES

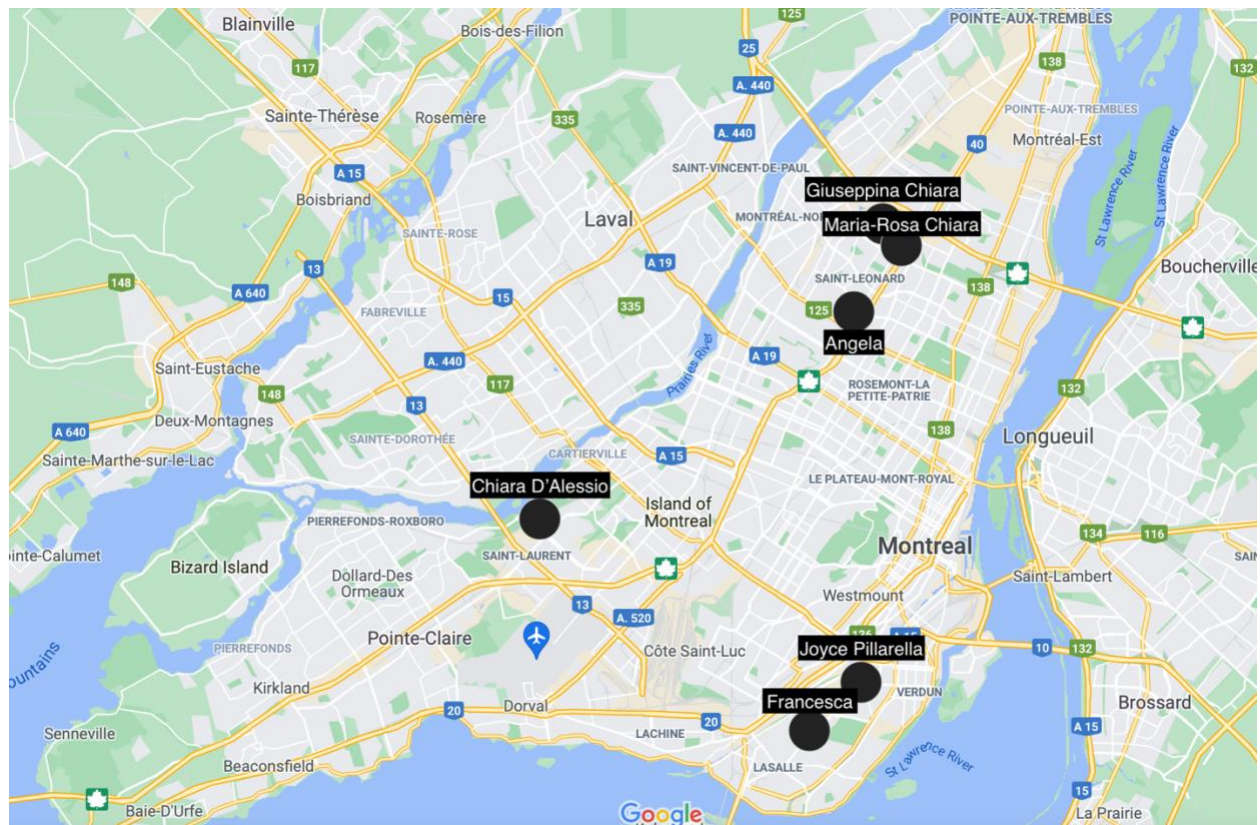


Figure 1 Google Maps, *Map of Montreal indicating the approximate locations of my participants' childhood homes*, digital image. Last modified January 5, 2022. Source: Google (annotated by the author).



Figure 2 Christine Rush, *Scrubbing*, Polaroid. Los Angeles, California. 1972. Source: Susana Solís-Zolis, “Womanhouse: Intimacy, Identity and Domesticity,” https://idus.us.es/bitstream/handle/11441/107406/Susana_Zara.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.



Figure 3 Sandra Orgel, *Ironing*, Polaroid. Los Angeles, California, 1972. Source: *ArtReview*, <https://artreview.com/ar-april-2018-feature-womanhouse/>.



Figure 4 Lara Pascali, *First floor kitchen in the Navarra house*, digital image. Brooklyn, New York. 2006. Source: Lara Pascali, "Two Stoves, Two Refrigerators: *Due Cucine*: The Italian Immigrant Home with Two Kitchens," *Gender, Place and Culture* 13, no. 6 (December 2006): 690.



Figure 5 Carmelo Chiara, *Exterior of the Chiara family home. Entrance leading to the upstairs (pictured) and downstairs (not pictured)*, Polaroid. Saint-Leonard, Quebec. c.1984-85. Image courtesy of Maria-Rosa Chiara.



Figure 6 Carmelo Chiara, *Giuseppina Chiara's* high school graduation day. Photo taken in the upstairs living room of the Chiara home, Polaroid. Saint-Leonard, Quebec. 1981. Image courtesy of Giuseppina Chiara.



Figure 7 Unknown (family member of Francesca's), *Francesca's first home in LaSalle, Quebec. Francesca (center), her mother (right), and her grandmother (left), Polaroid. LaSalle, Quebec. 1976.* Image courtesy of Francesca.



Figure 8 Unknown (family member of Francesca's), *Francesca seated on plastic-covered couch in her childhood home's upstairs living room, Polaroid. LaSalle, Quebec. 1975. Image courtesy of Francesca.*



Figure 9 Carmelo Chiara, *Giuseppina Chiara* (right) and her late sister (left) posed next to the *Louis XV* couch in the upstairs living room of the Chiara home, Polaroid. Saint-Leonard, Quebec. c. 1978-79. Image courtesy of Giuseppina Chiara.



Figure 10 Maria-Rosa Chiara, *Chiara family seated on the Louis XV couch*, Polaroid. Saint-Leonard, Quebec. c. 1978-79. Image courtesy of Giuseppina Chiara.



Figure 11 Francesca, *Capodimonte in Francesca's childhood home*, digital image. LaSalle, Quebec. 2020. Image courtesy of Francesca.



Figure 12 Maria-Rosa Chiara, Chiara family seated on the Louis-XV couch. Capodimonte on coffee table and Capodimonte lamp base on end table in the Chiara home, Polaroid. Saint-Leonard, Quebec. c.1978-79. Image courtesy of Giuseppina Chiara.



Figure 13 Capodimonte Porcelain Factory, *Fisherman and companion*, soft-paste porcelain. Naples, Italy, c. 1755-59. Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/207334>.



Figure 14 Unknown (Pillarella family member), *The basement in Pillarella family home. The basement table is being used for mass food production like taralli, pictured here. Note the white walls and bookshelves, Polaroid.* Ville-Émard, Quebec. c. 1998. Image courtesy of Joyce Pillarella.



Figure 15 Unknown (family member of Angela's), *A party being held in the basement of Angela's childhood home. Depicts the typical use of Italian-Canadian basements, Polaroid. Saint-Leonard, Quebec. 1978. Image courtesy of Angela.*



Figure 16 Unknown (Chiara family member or friend), *Giuseppina Chiara's sixteenth birthday party held in the basement of the Chiara family home, Polaroid. Saint-Leonard, Quebec. 1979.* Image courtesy of Giuseppina Chiara.

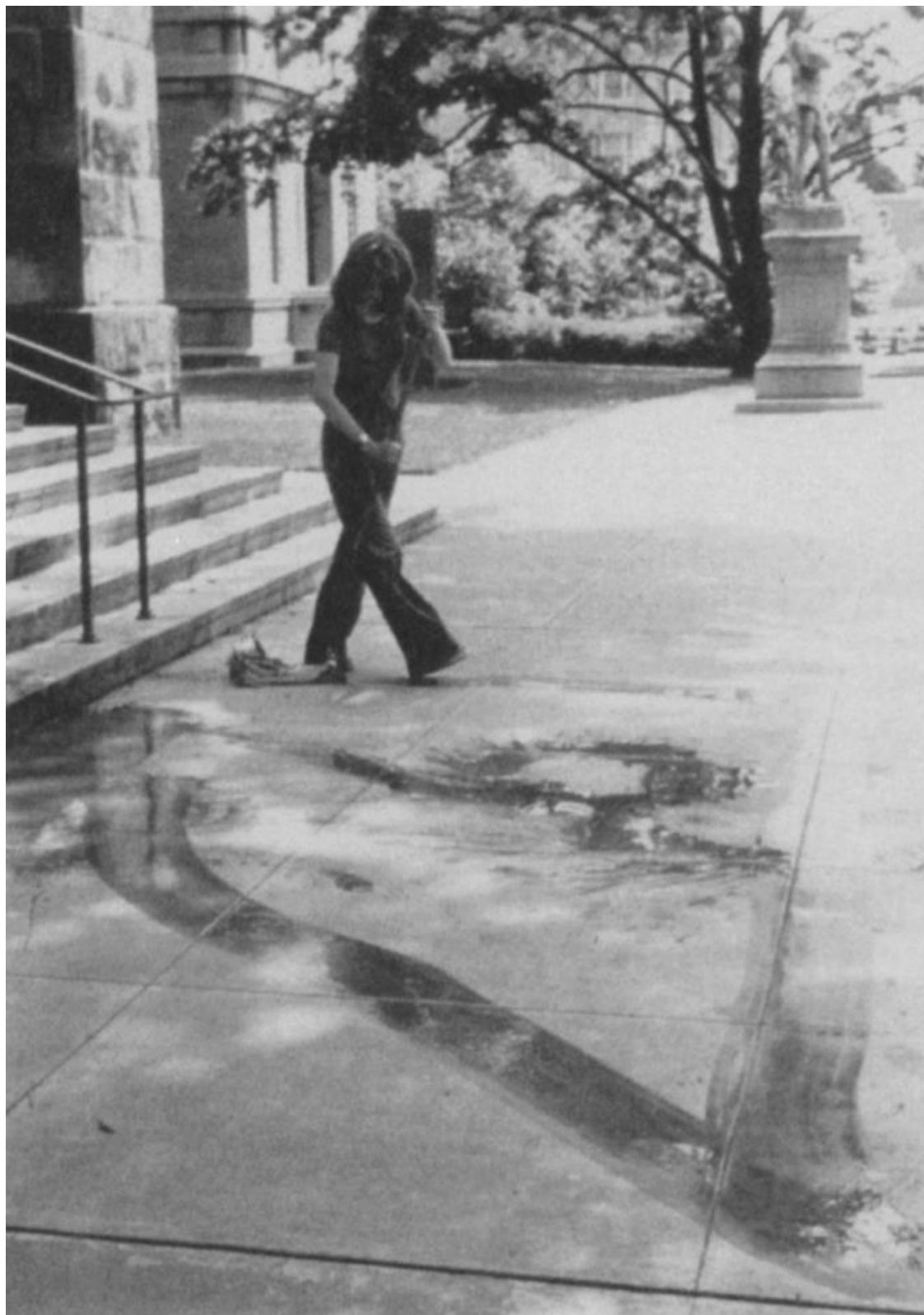


Figure 17 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Outside*, Polaroid. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut. 1973. Source: Helen Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," *October* 92 (2000): 77.



Figure 18 Chiara D'Alessio, *The exterior of D'Alessio's childhood home*, digital image. Saint-Laurent, Quebec. 2019. Image courtesy of Chiara D'Alessio.



Figure 19 Unknown (D'Alessio family member), *Chiara D'Alessio in her childhood bedroom*, Polaroid. Saint-Laurent, Quebec. 1970. Image courtesy of Chiara D'Alessio.



Figure 20 Unknown (Pillarella family member), *Joyce Pillarella's father sitting on the Senator couch in the living room*, Polaroid. Ville-Émard, Quebec. c. 1998. Image courtesy of Joyce Pillarella.



Figure 21 Unknown (Pillarella family member), *Joyce Pillarella standing next to the desk used by her mother to help Italian immigrants with legal documents. Located upstairs in Pillarella's childhood home. Polaroid. Ville-Émard, Quebec. Nd. Image courtesy of Joyce Pillarella.*



Figure 22 Lisa Massa, *Sfilato siciliano*. Linens given to Giuseppina by her mother when she married her husband in 1987. Yellow tissue paper is placed under the linen to show the detailed embroidery, digital image. Laval, Quebec. 2020. Image taken by the author.

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