Transforming Womanhood in Louisa Ermelino's The Sisters Mallone

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Location
Panel 01: Basil 118

Start Date
26-10-2012 3:30 PM

End Date
26-10-2012 5:00 PM

Description
Most Italians thought of themselves, and some still do, in terms of provincial identities. In America, they tended to settle in large Italian colonies, duplicating the customs and traditions of their particular Italian town or village (Mangione and Morreale 130). So it was not unusual for people from one particular town or village to be housed in one tenement or on one block. Family and their village of origin were very important. Everything in their lives was based on one or the other, for those were the things that provided safety and security. Home and family were the only respites available to the immigrant working class in America. In Louisa Ermelino's The Sisters Mallone, the neighborhood is an extension of what bell hooks calls “homeplace” and has the same “subversive value” (47). The neighborhood expands the domestic space and underscores the tenuous line between public and private, masculine and feminine. In the novel, the Italian-American neighborhoods of New York's lower East Side and Hell's Kitchen serve as “sanctuary and trap” for men and women (Barone 20); however, the neighborhood is more sanctuary for women and trap for men. As Fred L. Gardaphé writes, Ermelino “explore[s] and explain[s] the places where power lies in Italian-American culture— with the mothers” (110). Her female characters incrementally propel the traditional power of the domestic space into the public arena, while the male characters become more and more bound by womanhood and the neighborhood. In The Sisters Mallone: Una Storia di Famiglia (2002), Ermelino maps the male and female interactions that occur inside the home and outside it. Both the homeplace and the neighborhood serve as sites of resistance to the social and cultural imperatives of American society that help the Mallones transform their own identities and those of their male counterparts.