Domesticating the Diaspora: Memory and the Life of Sister Katie

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Domesticating the Diaspora

REMEMBERING THE LIFE OF KATIE DEORRE

Caroline Waldron Merithew

There are three shrines in Illinois to heroes of the working class: one for the legendary Mother Jones; one for the Virden martyrs, who died for coal mining unionism, and whose memory is kept alive by labor organizers around the world; and one for Catherine (Katie) Bianco DeRorre. Katie’s monument, unlike the others, draws few visitors today. But when it was dedicated in 1961, men and women—on the floor of the U.S. Congress, in the neighborhood where Katie grew up, at American universities, in union halls, on the streets of New York City, and in Milan—took notice and honored the woman who had become the “conscience” of “industrial wars.”

Who was Katie DeRorre? And how did she slip from the celebrated to the forgotten? My interpretation of these questions is consciously microhistorical. As Martha Hodes has shown, relations of power “can best be illustrated by exploring the experiences of particular historical actors in particular geographical settings.” Where historical actors and settings begin and end, however, can be complex—especially when we consider the realities of the majority of immigrants who move transnationally and leave scant records about their lives.

My answers to questions about Katie also challenge an array of historiographical assumptions about gender, the second generation of immigrants, memory, and the divergence of immigration, labor, and women’s history. In his work on the African American diaspora, Earl Lewis argues for understanding multipositionality as something more than identity shifting or privileging (e.g., race over class, gender over religion). “It is the interactive construction of identity—as child, lover, spouse, and so on—that requires fuller explication,” Lewis contends. A transnational immigrant’s identity can move through large and small geographic spaces as well as take up the minds and hearts of men and women who make (or witness) global crossings. While the word “transnationalism” has been used to signify an array of meanings, my principle concern in this essay is to explore the term in a way that brings together Lewis’s notion of the interactivity of public and private with what Donna Gabaccia and Loretta Baldassar conceptualize in this volume as the “diasporic private sphere.”

Memories of Katie come from those who knew her and, less often, from her own words. Each tells somewhat different stories, but together they reveal how arbitrary
sociopolitical lines do not confine people’s movements or experiences, and how individuals, communities, and social movements transcend global space. With some few exceptions, historical discussions of transnationalism have concentrated on either side of the 1924 and 1965 Immigration Acts. This periodization has meant that the identities of the 1.5- and second-generation children who came of age between the Depression and the early cold war—a fundamental period for the immigrant story—have been missed. The strength of Italian immigrants’ transnationalism in its everyday form extended into the second generation, the members of which were raised in the post-Johnson Reed era, came of age during World War II, and defined their legacy during the early cold war. Memories of Katie DeRorre and her home were etched into people’s minds and shared by them precisely at this time. This chapter begins with a conventional biography of Katie’s life, which draws on both memories and her own scant writings and contextualizes the persistently transnational identity of a first-generation female immigrant. The second group of memories highlights how cold war-era descriptions of Katie’s home worked to domesticate transnationalism. The final section demonstrates how discourses of internationalism shifted from a political to a cultural form before and after World War II, hiding the transnational dimensions of immigrant life.

Memory, Biography, and Subjectivity

In July 1961, Giuseppe Prezzolini (an Italian journalist who had supported Mussolini’s rise to power) devoted much of his regular column in Il Borghese to Katie’s memory. Prezzolini acknowledged DeRorre’s American roots—she had arrived in the United States at the age of eight—but he highlighted her Italianess. To think about how Katie lived her life was to be reminded of one of the great moments in Italian history: the “time when Italian socialism was in its pink phase, the epoch of Prampolini and Mazzareni.” These men “believed they could conquer the world with good,” Prezzolini wrote. Katie’s gravestone, which was engraved with the words “Good Samaritan of the Coalfields” and with images of a miner and child, also reminded Prezzolini of the ancient Mediterranean heritage they shared. Katie’s tomb, he reflected, was like those of the “first Christians in the Roman catacombs.”

Prezzolini was not unique in “transnationalizing” the memory of Katie DeRorre. Gerry Allard, a French immigrant, socialist, and newspaper editor, also made connections between Italian and American pasts in Illinois’ Collinsville Herald. “Two elements” shaped Katie’s “character and actions,” he argued—first, Italy’s Piedmont region, and second, her mining father. “The Turinos,” he wrote, were “progressive” and “socially minded.” In their villages, the “teachings of Cavour, Mazzini, Garibaldi, and Modigliani took deep root.” For readers better versed in American Civ. than Italian history, Allard helpfully explained, “These Italian thinkers and leaders are to Italy what Jefferson, Lincoln, Tom Paine, and Gene Debs are to America. That part of the world is now one of the bulwarks of democracy.”

Jack Battuello, a coal miner and anarchist, remembered a different side of DeRorre. Before post–World War II Italy was remade, as Allard suggested, Katie had created a type of domestic democratic “state” of her own. “Katie’s home was her cathedral,” Battuello reminisced. “Through it passed people from all
Remembering the Life of Katie DeRorre

walks of life. They came; the atheist and the pious; the progressive and the conservative; the radical and the reactionary; the white man and the black man. None was shunned. None was turned away. None was segregated. They sat at her table and supped, and they left forever touched by her graciousness and nobility. Such praise songs for Katie were repeated by others, too, including Frank Zeidler, the longtime socialist mayor of Milwaukee, and Roger Baldwin, the founder of the ACLU.

That these men—with markedly different politics, class backgrounds, cultural bearings, and standings in the world—would describe an immigrant homemaker in such international terms, especially at that moment in the twentieth century when immigration had fallen to its nadir, is puzzling unless we invest in deciphering biography, memory, and the material reality of an immigrant life. This biographical section focuses on that project.

Catherine Bianco was one of the thousands of poor Italians who immigrated to the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She experienced the same type of emotional and physical hardship that many of her working-class female contemporaries did—she chaffed against “Old World” parents, she married in her teens, she gave birth and tried unsuccessfully to prevent one of her children from dying young, she found her political voice by picketing on the streets before she voted at the polls, and she fought for a pluralist American dream in which the rights of the underclass would be recognized regardless of race, class, religion, or national origin. 

Katie was born in the village of Canischio in the province of Turin in 1895. At the age of eight, she immigrated with her grandmother and sister to DuQuoin, in the southern part of Illinois. Her mother and father had moved six years earlier to the small mining town in an area known as “Little Egypt.” Their personal story reflected the larger demographic contours of this Italian region’s diaspora as well as the industrial pull that brought immigrants to the United States. As Donna Gabaccia has shown, the “Europeanized north of Italy actually had lower rates of female migration. . . . than most of the supposedly patriarchal south.” Until 1900, when new techniques were developed to efficiently extract coal, “Little Egypt” was agricultural and populated by farmers from the southern United States and Germany. In the next decade, new immigrants from Italy, Poland, Lithuania, Russia, and Hungary arrived. After World War I, mining companies recruited African American men to work in the pits. Both her Italian upbringing and the changing demographics of the region shaped DeRorre’s activism in later years.

Katie’s childhood was trying. Like most mining households, the Bianco family was often in dire economic need, even though they were what a local newspaper called “one of the most highly respected Italian families in the city.” According to Katie’s daughter, Catherine “Babe” Mans, Katie’s emotionally abusive mother (Babe’s grandmother) compounded the hardships of poverty. Though it is unclear what led to the abuse, we do know that Katie dealt with the trauma as many recovering victims do—by bearing witness, which the 1970s oral history that she undertook with her daughter Babe suggests. Babe’s recollections in that interview encompass two layers of memory, which help to sketch out the way Katie coped with and constructed meaning in her life. The first layer is the testimony of Katie, told to Babe as a child. The second is Babe’s own memories of her mother. In both cases, the narrative articulation follows a pattern that
sociopolitical lines do not confine people's movements or experiences, and how individuals, communities, and social movements transcend global space. With some few exceptions, historical discussions of transnationalism have concentrated on either side of the 1924 and 1965 Immigration Acts. This periodization has meant that the identities of the 1.5- and second-generation children who came of age between the Depression and the early Cold War—a fundamental period for the immigrant story—have been missed. The strength of Italian immigrants' transnationalism in its everyday form extended into the second generation, the members of which were raised in the post-Johnson Reed era, came of age during World War II, and defined their legacy during the early Cold War. Memories of Katie DeRorre and her home were etched into people's minds and shared by them precisely at this time. This chapter begins with a conventional biography of Katie's life, which draws on both memories and her own scant writings and contextualizes the persistently transnational identity of a 1.5-generation female immigrant. The second group of memories highlights how Cold War-era descriptions of Katie's home worked to domesticate transnationalism. The final section demonstrates how discourses of internationalism shifted from a political to a cultural form before and after World War II, hiding the transnational dimensions of immigrant life.

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walks of life. They came; the atheist and the pious; the progressive and the conservative; the radical and the reactionary; the white man and the black man. None was shunned. None was turned away. None was segregated. They sat at her table and supped, and they left forever touched by her graciousness and nobility.\textsuperscript{710} Such praise songs for Katie were repeated by others, too, including Frank Zeidler, the longtime socialist mayor of Milwaukee, and Roger Baldwin, the founder of the ACLU.

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Katie was born in the village of Canischio in the province of Turin in 1895. At the age of eight, she immigrated with her grandmother and sister to DuQuoin, in the southern part of Illinois.\textsuperscript{12} Her mother and father had moved six years earlier to the small mining town in an area known as “Little Egypt.” Their personal story reflected the larger demographic contours of this Italian region’s diaspora as well as the industrial pull that brought immigrants to the United States. As Donna Gabaccia has shown, the “Europeanized north of Italy actually had lower rates of female migration . . . than most of the supposedly patriarchal south.”\textsuperscript{13} Until 1900, when new techniques were developed to efficiently extract coal, “Little Egypt” was agricultural and populated by farmers from the southern United States and Germany. In the next decade, new immigrants from Italy, Poland, Lithuania, Russia, and Hungary arrived.\textsuperscript{14} After World War I, mining companies recruited African American men to work in the pits. Both her Italian upbringing and the changing demographics of the region shaped DeRorre’s activism in later years.

Katie’s childhood was trying. Like most mining households, the Bianco family was often in dire economic need, even though they were what a local newspaper called “one of the most highly respected Italian families in the city.”\textsuperscript{15} According to Katie’s daughter, Catherine “Babe” Mans, Katie's emotionally abusive mother (Babe's grandmother) compounded the hardships of poverty. Though it is unclear what led to the abuse, we do know that Katie dealt with the trauma as many recovering victims do—by bearing witness, which the 1970s oral history that she undertook with her daughter Babe suggests. Babe’s recollections in that interview encompass two layers of memory, which help to sketch out the way Katie coped with and constructed meaning in her life. The first layer is the testimony of Katie, told to Babe as a child. The second is Babe's own memories of her mother. In both cases, the narrative articulation follows a pattern that
explains how Katie overcame childhood hardship and worked as an adult to avoid repeating it. In Babe’s remembrances, there are three elements in many of Katie’s stories: hardship and female labor, lack of recognition for this labor, and the presence of loving kin member who recognized the unjust treatment. For example, Babe told stories of how Katie and her sisters took care of the family’s boarders. They did the heavy work” of household chores while “the boys . . . got all the privileges,” Babe remembered. Despite the fact that the girls milked the cows, washed, and baked every day for the houseful of men, they were not given much in return. The sisters had to wait for the boarders to finish before they could have their supper. “And if there was nothing left, why, they would get a piece of bread.” Katie’s grandmother (Babe’s great-grandmother), who lived with the Biancos, tried to ease the strain on her granddaughter. The disagreements between generations of women must have given Katie hope of escape. And these were the recollections about which Babe remembered her mother telling vivid stories. Babe said: “My great-grandmother had many an argument with my grandmother because she didn’t let the girls eat along with the boys.” Katie’s grandmother “would go sneak some crackers or a piece of bread or a piece of cheese [to] . . . my mother because she was crying.” As an adult, Katie separated her nuclear family from her extended kin, as Babe’s memory indicates. “I can’t say too much about my grandmother,” Babe said. “That was the only house that we never went to.” Katie’s distancing of her childhood family from the family she created was a product of her 1.5-generation position. Language and cultural skills (acquired in the United States) made it possible to reject certain ethnic kin while still embracing Italianness.

On Saturday, 15 May 1915, Katie’s wedding made front page news in the town of DuQuoin. Katie married Joseph DeRorre in the parish of Sacred Heart at seven in the morning. Katie’s sister Angeline Casaretta was her bridesmaid, and Joe’s brother, John, stood up as the best man. Eight years her senior, Joe had been in the United States since childhood, migrating from the province of Belluno, Italy, to southern Illinois at the turn of the century. Like his father, Joseph was a coal miner. There is no evidence of how Joe and Katie met or about their courtship. Unlike many new immigrant couples, Katie and Joe immediately moved into their own home—the house on Walnut Street later remembered so fondly by visitors. Like many mothers, Katie told her children about her wedding day. Babe’s memory suggests that even on that special occasion, Katie felt oppressed by the family matriarchy. Babe remembered her mother’s story. “The day she was married, she had to go make sure that she milked the cows before she went to church.” Katie and Joe began a family immediately. They had three children—Felix was born in 1916, Antoinette in 1918, and Catherine in 1921. In 1931, Antoinette died.

According to Babe, the death of her sister changed her mother. Katie’s world, her emotional well-being, and her frame of reference were altered. The loss of Antoinette opened up relationships with family members and friends but closed off institutional links that connected her to an immigrant past. Like many northern Italians, the DeRorres had a tenacious relationship with the Catholic Church. Though they were married in the church, religion was not a central component of their lives. Their marriage and their children’s baptisms may have been their last acts of devotion. When Katie requested a funeral mass for Antoinette and a place to bury her in the Catholic cemetery, the local
priest said no. There is conflicting information about how and why this happened. Babe's memory was that she and her siblings had not been baptized. Their baptismal records, however, are still at Sacred Heart Catholic Church. It is possible that a rift had developed between the DeRorres and the church or that another family member (Katie's mother, perhaps) took the babies to be blessed. Regardless, Babe remembered that Katie never had anything else to do with Roman Catholicism after Antoinette's death, and others corroborate this claim.

The cutting off of those religious ties—ties that were for so many Italian women important because the church provided a public space of activity outside the home that did not challenge the sacred role of women that was the key to the ideology of the private sphere—did not reflect a retreat for Katie into traditional domesticity. Katie did not grieve the loss of her daughter in a vacuum. Nor did she experience the sexism, racism, and class oppression against which she struggled in isolation. Her life was filled with family and friends she loved, as well as allies and enemies, to whom she responded. Raised in a home where authoritarianism and poverty were inescapable, she learned much about the dual oppressions of sex and class. She strove not to repeat them. The death of their daughter brought husband and wife closer together. Moreover, the DeRorres seemed to have eschewed some of the trappings of matrimonial patriarchy. The spirit of the DeRorre home had always been different from that of the Bianco household of Katie's childhood. The couple understood each other's strengths and, after the death of their daughter, needs as well. They both joined and supported a dual union struggle between the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and the Progressive Miners of America (PMA), which began the year Antoinette passed away. But with young children at home, they needed to make practical choices. Only one parent (at a time) could do the organizing, attend the meetings, and walk the pickets. Katie and Joe decided together that Katie would be the one. Babe offered an explanation. Her father believed in the labor movement, and, I mean, he, he had no reservations about my mother being so active. He knew that this was an escape to her grief, and he was glad that she was active. But he stayed at home with us kids, and . . . oh, occasionally he would go, but Mom would go. . . . Mom was always gone, so somebody had to be home. But no, he was the quiet one of the family. Katie became homemaker and union activist while Joe was a coal miner and husband. Friends commented on the way Joe and Katie balanced union activism and family life. Thyr Edwards, an African American student at Brookwood Labor College who came to Illinois to help the Progressives, recalled the first time she visited the DeRorres' home. "Katie was out. . . . Her husband told us Katie is always out now, busy with the Movement. 'She can express herself better than I can so I'm glad to have her go.'" While waiting for his wife's return, Joe made supper for the guests. Katie and Joe had a loving and respectful relationship that challenged gender roles and was a comfort to her.

Katie also took in boarders. Starting in 1923 and continuing for over three decades, an Italian immigrant named Charlie Rovoletti was Katie's boarder. Born in 1896, he had migrated from Italy in 1912. Rovoletti was a "well-read" immigrant intellectual and "a self-taught scholar" who was "very interested in the labor movement and took an active part in it." Daughter Babe remembered that "after my sister died in 1931, my
mother took it so hard that when the miners’ struggle started, and Charlie being home... my mother got interested in it... That was one of her escapes from her sorrow. And that’s how she got so involved” in organizing and community work. Charlie, Joe, and Katie were all close. The two men mined together for most of their adult lives. They shared a home, and it is clear that they both loved and respected Katie. The daughter of a friend of the family who spent a lot of time at the DeRorre home remembered Charlie as a brother rather than as a boarder. Though we can only speculate about the details of each one of their relationships, fragments of letters refer to special connections and demonstrate a great closeness between them.

Katie’s involvement in the labor movement was not only driven by immediate personal tragedy. One of her first acts of organizing was both quintessentially feminine and reflective of her industrial feminist ideology—an ideology that Annelise Orleck has described as “deeply imbued with class consciousness and a vivid understanding of the harsh realities of industrial labor.” In March 1933 DeRorre and her activist “sisters” in DuQuoin opened a “lunch kitchen” for hungry children, and within weeks they were serving 100 to 150 children per day. Katie opened her doors to all despite the fact that the community was divided between the dueling unions (and Katie was on the board of the PMA’s Women’s Auxiliary). “A hungry child is a hungry child to us... whether its father is Progressive or hasn’t any more sense than to pay big dues to keep [UMWA president] John Lewis’ family in luxury,” Katie told a crowd at a rally in Belleville, Illinois. In a report to the Progressive Miner, the DuQuoin women reinforced their lunch kitchen commitments: “No discriminations are made by the Auxiliary... No matter whether they are American or foreign, negro or white, children of P.M. of A. miners or U.M.W. men, they are treated alike.” While it is likely that her abhorrence for racial discrimination was formulated before the PMA’s organization, Katie’s work with the Progressives gave her a means to work against the racial status quo in her southern Illinois community by welcoming both African American and white men and women into the new union. That’s what many of Katie’s female friends remembered most about her, and the issue that divided her from many of her new immigrant cohort.

The dual union battle was a violent one, and as it grew bloodier in the mid-1930s, Katie expanded her work without completely leaving behind the Women’s Auxiliary. She joined the Illinois Workers Alliance and helped to organize the unemployed. “I am proud to have been a founder of the Auxiliary, although I devote most of my time in behalf of the unemployed,” she wrote in 1936. For the rest of the Depression, Katie picketed city officials for bread, justice, and better pay for WPA workers. She also demanded relief for victims when the Mississippi River flooded in the spring of 1936. The flood was an environmental catastrophe for communities already reeling from economic disaster. In one of her few published writings, Katie called for “conservation of America’s vast natural resources.”

Katie was nevertheless shy about public speaking and even about writing. She preferred to communicate through action and “outside the sight of vast audiences.” She spoke to friends and allies privately, and they, in turn, spoke publicly for her. Her good friend Agnes Burns Wieck, whom Katie met while organizing in Illinois, could turn a phrase well—as one man remembered, if Agnes wanted “to say a fighting four-letter word, she says a fighting four-letter word. ‘[J]ust like that,’” Katie could not. But Agnes
was relentless in her effort to push Katie into public eye. In 1935, Wieck (by then in New York) received letters from two mutual friends in Illinois. The letters filled her in on local news and gossip and shared her friends’ thoughts on politics and their anxiousness about surviving another year of the Depression. Each also told Agnes about how Katie was doing. “She made a splendid talk,” wrote one. “Much improved in her speech. I commented [to] her on it. Yes if we had a few more like Katy we would get along fine.” Echoing this thought, the other wrote, “Katie sure is working hard. . . . Now she sure looks fine too.”

Despite others’ positive assessments, speaking and even writing for an audience made DeRorre nervous. We get a glimpse of her anxiety through letters that Agnes and Katie exchanged. Katie ended one missive abruptly: “Well, I must quit as I am so nervous for I had the story to write so Babe could type it.” There were even times when Katie could not muster the necessary commitment to write a letter (even to a close friend). “Received your several cards . . . but there’s no other excuse as not answering them but just being too nervous to write.” Katie explained that she had been “so upset for the last two months that I had never sat down to write.” In another letter, Katie wrote in a postscript, “Excuse mistakes as I have several things on my mind.” Katie apologized for “bad writing as it is written in bed and can’t do much.” In one instance, she asked Agnes to write a newspaper article that she had been asked to compose. “I wonder if you could draw it up providing your health and time approves it.” Katie's mediation skills were a political reflection of the ways she reconciled her public roles that she lived and her embodiment of multiple identities. She may have observed these powers in early life from her grandmother, who fed her “under the table.” It was obvious from her friends’ and families’ memories that she had a talent for making people feel welcome and bringing them together. She “not only excelled in the women’s world, but was equally at home with the problems of the men,” Jack Battuello said. She was part of the Italian community but felt comfortable as an intermediary between immigrant and native-born Americans. In a place where racial tension was severe, she promoted “social mixing” despite the fact that this would be “offensive to certain people” within the union.

If Katie had so much anxiety about writing and speaking, what caused her to continue her work in public? Why not instead retreat to a more maternal domestic sphere?
“It’s mighty hard for the poor worker to forgive and forget,” Katie told Agnes in 1937. At that moment, DeRorre was exasperated by something a WPA administrator had told young men who had been shortchanged by their paychecks. The determination not “to forgive and forget” explains DeRorre’s life choices and public activism. She was angered by injustice, and she was stunned when others did not see or work to change oppression. “The people here are just as other places,” she told Agnes. “The left wing scares them and those that don’t believe can’t say nothing.” She kept working at it, despite her questioning. “I wonder if these people will ever wake up.

Katie’s vision of the world included male and female activists and a liberationist domesticity in which male and female tasks were not separated by biology. Katie even found cross-dressing a means of justice. Babe recalled that her mother—who had a car and so often drove her friends to union meetings through unfriendly territory—wore men’s clothing to escape notice. Just as Katie slipped between traditionally masculine and feminine roles in her working-class community, she did so between her Italian and American communities as well. DeRorre’s 1.5-generation transnationalism was fluid. Katie’s subjectivity (the ways in which her perceptions and experiences shaped her worldview) came out in her letters to Agnes, a woman of German and Irish roots. Katie mediated ethnicity as she did politics. By 1937, the majority of the Italians in DuQuoin had dropped out of the PMA’s Women’s Auxiliary. These women were her ethnic and political kin, yet Katie would not follow as they exited. “They think I too should leave such an outfit for it is only a disgrace to me,” she told Agnes, “but I look at [sic] a different point of view as I have always done before, we have an obligation to try to fulfill.” Not only did she remain in the PMA, but she also joined the Alpina Dogali Society Auxiliary. Babe and Katie wrote the bylaws for this organization. “Peace on Earth” was their password.

The documentary evidence on DeRorre’s life falters with World War II. We know only that Katie worked for her local rationing board and was still hosting meetings of the Auxiliary in her home in the 1950s. In the postwar years, the Auxiliary raised money to help members who were in need or had lost loved ones. It used its treasury to send the children of coal miners to Washington, D.C. Though Auxiliary meetings often started with the Pledge of Allegiance and the Lord’s Prayer, elements of Depression-era working-class Progressivism lingered. In 1957, for example, Katie supported a resolution lambasting the Taft-Hartley Act. The Auxiliary promised to use political force, and the women pledged to vote only for candidates who went on record against this anti-labor legislation.

In 1959, Katie was diagnosed with cancer. She passed away in January 1960. Union members, politicians, friends, and DeRorre’s large “famiglia piemontese” came together to memorialize their friend and comrade. Regardless of their background or standing, “All remembered this woman as one who gave comfort.” And they began to collect the money to erect a monument to her—“the third shrine the miners of Illinois have erected to their members.” Many of those at the funeral had recently been together to celebrate Katie’s life in another way.

Sister Katie Day, 1956

On 3 June 1956, family and friends in Springfield, Illinois, paid tribute to sixty-year-old Katie DeRorre by declaring it Sister Katie Day and naming her the “Good Samaritan of
the coalfields.” Celebrants heard speeches by Milwaukee’s socialist mayor, Frank Zeidler, and newspaper editor Gerry Allard and enjoyed a picnic lunch at the VFW hall. The organizing committee had solicited cards, letters, and photos beforehand—“a review of our younger days”—and pasted them in a red leather “souvenir book” to present to Katie at the festivities. Celebrating an individual woman’s life in this way was a strategic choice. By 1956, radicals in the coalfields of southern Illinois had had time to regroup and redefine themselves. Taft-Hartley’s restrictions on unions were almost a decade old; McCarthy was dead; the cold war was changing. In February of that year, Nikita Khrushchev had delivered his Secret Speech, which was leaked to the West. Allard and his wife, Irene, expressed their hope about all these changes. In their card to Katie, they wrote: “It would seem that this [Progressive] group lost practically all the battles but they may yet win the war.” The organizers assembled a political event intended for the public around a single person, her life, and the personal loyalty many felt toward her. They chose Katie because her “heroic spirit . . . exemplified the career of thousands of others” but also because, as Tillie and Jack Battuello put it, “We think Katy is just perfect.” University of Chicago economics professor Maynard Krueger also emphasized the importance of this woman: “You may not know it,” he told DeRorre, “but whenever as many as three . . . ex-miners in Chicago get together to chew over old times the name and the deeds of Katie DeRorre are sure to come into conversation.”

The party-throwers had rehearsed all this beforehand, of course. But Katie played her part impromptu. She cried when presented with flowers, a watch, memorabilia, and the scrapbook. She “wondered why” all this fuss was made for a “common housewife,” as the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported.

Sister Katie Day embodied the collective memory of a transnational Left. This memory was narrated as a feminization of the struggle that both revealed and masked the role that women like Katie DeRorre (and their homes) had played in the uprisings of the 1930s. John Bodnar understands immigrant memory as a marker of both past and present. He writes that people “inevitably recall the past in ways that best serve their purpose in present time, and they erase or revise facts and interpretations that they consider antithetical.” The crowd of Progressives “with Italian, French, German, Scotch, and English names” who gathered for Sister Katie Day were honoring, remembering, and rewriting the history of a quarter of a century at a moment when the Left, though decimated, realized it had survived the cold war. But it was emerging cautiously with the celebration of an individual life, and a female one at that.

To call DeRorre a “Good Samaritan” was itself a sign of cautious times. During the struggles of the 1930s—in which Katie had been deeply involved—she was most often referred to as “Sister,” not a “Samaritan.” By the 1950s, “Sister,” with its associations with subversion and communism, may have seemed too provocative a term. “Good Samaritan,” on the other hand, both depoliticized and repoliticized DeRorre. A Good Samaritan often did religious work. And while this allusion scarcely reflected Katie’s hostile relationship to institutional religion, comrades claimed that her deeds were done in the true spirit of a Christian ethic. “Among her intimates, she often expressed perplexity at the immense division which exists among the religious denominations, and their failure to practice in the way of their doctrinal teachings,” Battuello remembered. The mayor of the city even read from Proverbs about the virtuous woman.
Others linked Katie to Mary and Joseph: "A Mississippi poet wrote that Southern Illinois . . . had never produced a Joseph, alluding to Joseph leading Mary to Bethlehem. That is true but it produced a Katie." The soup kitchen work DeRorre did was also called saintly. She had helped to feed children regardless of their race, creed, or national origin or their parents' union affiliation in a way that would be familiar to "Jesus in Israel and St. Francis in Romany," reported the Collinsville Herald. In his card, ACLU leader Roger Baldwin waxed eloquent about Katie: "If courage is the essence of freedom . . . and if compassion for your fellow men is the virtue which makes life meaningful, yours is blessed beyond most."

During the cold war, "Good Samaritan" had become an expansive label for America in light of its new internationalism and imperialism. Diplomatic historian Emily Rosenberg has written insightfully that multiple components of Henry Luce's "American Century" had reinvigorated an international outlook, including the belief that the United States was "becoming the Good Samaritan to the entire world in times of hunger and need." Calling DeRorre a Good Samaritan allowed 1950s rhetoric and used it as they emerged from the Red Scare of the immediate postwar years.

The memories pasted in the scrapbook and read aloud at the party combined a sense of immigrant identity, the role that women played in the radical movements of the past, and American patriotic ideals about the present. Attorney L. P. Harris had mined coal with Katie's father, Felix Bianco. Harris's card to DeRorre paid "my deepest respects and fondest and best wishes to that girl who deserved the respect and esteem of the coal miners of Illinois." Harris wrote the note as much for Katie as for the audience and the public, who, he knew, would hear about the event through media reports. He found it important to emphasize both Italian heritage and American values. Katie's "father was a fine Italian immigrant to this country," Harris remembered, "a conscientious hard worker. . . . And no immigrant from any country was ever more deserving [of] the respect of the American people than was Felix Bianco." In particular, Baldwin echoed the sentiment of assimilation: "I have cherished the memory of you as one of the rare pioneers . . . in the good fight for our American freedoms." In May 1956, when Representative Melvin Price entered Sister Katie Day in the Congressional Record, he noted, "Mr. Speaker . . . Mrs. Catherine DeRorre . . . wife of an immigrant and daughter of immigrant parents . . . is a legend." He reminded others on the House floor that day that miners were a "special breed." "In every nation of the western world, even in the nations behind the Iron Curtain, miners have been in the forefront of every struggle for social justice. The men have not maintained their spirit without help and encouragement of women." Master of ceremonies Zeidler described Katie as exemplifying the American work ethic. He told the group that "‘Sister Katie’ . . . is a symbol of the pioneer woman of the industrial age. . . . She is ‘one of the least of these, my brethren,’ who along with inventors and builders and statesmen, bring the changes that make a kinder, fairer world." The committee also spelled out its hopes. They were "proud to have participated in such an affair. . . . May our children and our children’s children build a better world!" John and Betty Williams felt that remembering Katie
was about both past and present. They wrote, “How wonderful it is . . . to have a friend who remembers—and who’s not too busy to sit and speak of the past, and plan the future, and make him feel again that he is part of the things he loved so much.”

Though most of the Progressives (well versed in organizing tactics and the art of persuasion) wrote a single narrative for the times in which they lived, some of her comrades interpreted Katie in different ways, even in 1956. DeRorre’s friend Craig Easton from Andover, Massachusetts, told a story that stood apart from the new vision of cold war internationalism and Americanization. “Just a few lines to salute you in this, your day,” Easton wrote. “You stood up and was [sic] counted in the never ending battle to eke out just a nice bit more from our Oppressors. I am proud to have been associated with you and the others of the left wing[,] the best group in the USA. Persons who knew what Nationalism is and was. They thought along International lines.”

The celebration for Katie allowed friends and family to fortify the memories of their political heyday. These memories also reflected a reevaluation of women’s labor in the movement. The planning committee that conceived of Sister Katie Day was all male (“Gerry and the rest of the boys,” according to Krueger). These men had imbibed some of the cold war rhetoric, which, according to Elaine Tyler May, connected “ideology and the domestic revival” in the 1950s. Women like Katie, “who throughout the turbulent lives of the miners, have stood by their side, have kept the faith, women who have kept the hearth of home warm and secure, held the brood together, and fed and clothed and nursed and bedded and schooled the children, and when the going was tough, real tough, they were to take the battle lines to uphold the right of the men to work not as vassals but as freemen.” As they recalled the roles their wives, mothers, and daughters had played in their lives, they glorified women in the past. But their praise songs did something more. Scholar Chiou-Ling Yeh has traced the feminization of Chinese New Year celebrations in the 1950s. Just as Chinese American men highlighted female subjectivity in this festival, Katie’s male comrades chose to emphasize the domestic realm of their movements at the same time.

Katie at Home

A month after Sister Katie Day, the East St. Louis Journal featured DeRorre in a story titled “Mostaccioli Her Specialty.” With a photo of Katie in her kitchen, the article framed her life in domestic terms as part of a diasporic private sphere in three ways.

First, the article’s telling of Katie’s past feminized the labor movement by highlighting the role of women in the miners’ struggle. Standing in her kitchen, DeRorre recalled the fight between the United Mine Workers and the Progressive Miners of America. “There were things that had to be done, so I helped do them,” she said. Katie hinted at women’s importance: “Someone had to get things started—things couldn’t go on as they had been.”

Second, the story focused on her home as the site of her politics. Some of Katie’s recipes were included in the article, which seemed at first to downplay Katie’s radicalism. But perhaps Katie herself intentionally highlighted the recipes. Read another way, the recipes actually show the domestication of the radical diaspora. Was Katie asked by the reporter to give recipes? Or did Katie include them as a means of underscoring how
important her home had been in feeding her politics? Either way, the journalist echoed 
the words of Representative Price in the Congressional Record, noting, "Her home was 
always a haven for the afflicted."69

Finally, the piece drew attention to the transnational links that Katie continued to 
have with Italy. Mostaccioli, "her most popular dish," was served to the PMA Women's 
Auxiliary's Executive Board "in her home." She did not prepare bagna calda (a hot dip 
made with anchovies, garlic, and olive oil) for the board, but that too was an important 
component of her cooking. "Now that's a Dish!" Katie laughed, and the journalist re­
ported further that "Mrs. DeRorre said that one must acquire a taste for this dish, but 
one may be assured that almost all Italian families serve it at least once a year." Cooking 
Italian meals for her guests and writing letters to her husband's family in Italy (because 
she was the one who knew how to write in Italian) was the way Katie, like other 1.5 
transnationals, maintained links in the diaspora.70

In his perceptive equation of American identity with cultural ownership, David 
Roediger uses the image of "white houses" to unravel the complicated racial assimila­
tion of the second generation.71 Immigrant homes—boardinghouses, single-family 
dwellings, apartment flats, company shacks—were the nexus of family life and intimate 
relationships, and the place where ideas about America and the world were formed and 
rejected. Katie DeRorre had made her home a center of working-class community. It 
was in this setting where she wrote letters to kin in Italy, where she held meetings for 
the Women's Auxiliaries of the Progressive Miners (which welcomed African Ameri­
cans) and the Alpina Dogali Society (which required all members to be Caucasian), 
where she fed people, and where she fashioned her American identity as a self-pro­
claimed left winger.72 Relatives and friends who visited found refuge, political activism, 
and love. They, along with Katie, made the domestic into a political site, albeit in com­
plicated and contradictory ways.

Katie chose not to separate domesticity and activism, and that is what many high­
lighted when remembering her. By the 1950s, the shifting public and private spheres 
that May views as part of middle-class life were emerging in working-class communities 
as well. In neither case was the 1950s home, with all its security, a reproduction of the 
Victorian private sphere. Memories of Katie's home paint a picture of a kind of third 
sphere that was physical and psychic. The roots of this third sphere were planted during 
the Great Depression, when the unemployed could not always meet or organize on the 
shop floor but had to do so in living rooms and at public park 
benches that too often doubled as public domicile for the poorest.

Descriptions of Katie's home provided opportunities to link personal and political 
reflections. In the card that Agnes Burns Wieck sent in 1956, she wrote: "As I greet you 
on this gala day, my thoughts go back to the time when first we met—almost a quarter 
of a century ago. Late at night, but it was never too late for a special supper in Katie's 
Kitchen in DuQuoin." She continued, "Do you remember how your house used to over­
flow with women fleeing violence from meetings where they were denied their civil 
liberties? Like refugees we came. The little house on Walnut Street was transformed 
into a mansion of hospitality."73 From the mid-nineteenth century through the 1950s, 
the home was seen as a refuge—a place to escape from the world. But Katie's home 
was not simply an escape. It was also an alternative. Thyra Edwards told Wieck in a
letter that "the recollection of 'Sister Katie' conjured up the most thrilling experience in my life. I always have a feeling of deep gratitude to you and Tom Tippett for making it possible." Agnes explained the meaning of the thrill in her greeting card to Katie and the partygoers.

Do you remember the night I arrived with a Negro woman to help win the wives of our colored brothers? I hadn't asked you, and it could have proved disastrous. Somehow we all knew that Sister Katie was ever ready to go beyond the call of duty . . . . Soon you were visiting the DuQuoin schools, colored and white, to welcome every child who wished it, to a hot lunch those cold winter days. I can still see that ramshackle house your Auxiliary made into a soup Kitchen. To me it was like a shrine. For a little while, in labor's history, white and colored families shared true equality.

In a newspaper article, Edwards remembered the food and solidarity of the DeRorre house too. "Katie's dining room was crowded with Negro miners and we talked P.M.A. as we lunched [on] French endive salad, Italian spaghetti, dolci paste and pickled wild mushrooms." Later on, "Katie's front parlor was full past capacity, with the wives of Negro Miners. And over cups of Katie's steaming coffee we talked Woman's Auxiliary." In her role as an activist, DeRorre served as an example. She made her home a union hall that became part of the struggle for interethnic and interracial working-class justice, and she hoped others would follow her lead. For Battuello, who described the DeRorre house as a "cathedral," "her world" was a place where "there could be neither surplus [n]or surcease as long as there was one hungry child or one exploited miner.

People experienced an alternative possibility to capitalist patriarchal authoritarianism in Katie's home that started with relationships between family members. In Katie's domestic world, the maternal was not necessarily the core. And motherhood was not sanctified (as in earlier generations' cult of domesticity and maternalism). What made good mothers was the same thing that made good workers—not biology but fairness. DeRorre believed that women should not focus on penny-pinching to help their households but rather "better their conditions to fight for more relief and a higher budget, not to pinch them down to show how far the dollar can be extend[ed]. The point is to point out the necessities of life in the growing children, pregnancy and nursing mothers." To be sure, DeRorre was conscious of her role as a homemaker. But she was also a radical, and the work she performed in the third sphere bridged the private and public spaces that structured coal towns around family life and industry. In "Mostaccioli Her Specialty," she was adamant that the special relationships of her family had helped her define who she was and how she acted. "Family life has not been neglected," the East St. Louis Journal told its readers. "It is with deep pride, that she tells that it was the children and her husband who made possible her service to others." Norman Thomas, associate editor of the Nation, shared DeRorre's viewpoint, noting, "I shall never forget the night I spent at your house and the extraordinary impression that you and your family made on me."

Katie consciously rejected the model of the authoritarian family while at the same time retaining her Italian identity and ties. That embrace of Italian identity pushed her to refine her racial, gender, and class identities.
Conclusion

The identity of transnationals such as Katie DeRorre might be described as slippery. Their lives encompass the territoriality of immigration and the emotional ties of immigrant homes. They slip in and out of identities, highlighting and hiding different pieces of themselves at different moments and in different places. In the 1930s, the immigrant Left openly expressed the “culture of unity” at the workplace, making internationalist commitments part of an American identity. By the 1950s, their children relied on a domesticated version of their parents’ diasporic community. The domestication of the diaspora highlighted a feminized radicalism in which the home, rather than the workplace, was at the forefront. Katie (and the memory of her) became an embodiment of that domesticated diaspora.

Despite the fact that historians have failed to find her—no scholarly work mentions her existence—DeRorre is significant. Her life underscores how women have brought the public, private, and international worlds together in their homes, communities, and identities. The circumstances of DeRorre’s migration and settlement offer an alternative narrative to the dominant urban immigration histories, which tend to ignore the realities of rural industrial settings and the middle years of the twentieth century. Katie’s life also allows us to piece together how Italian radicals continued their work in the interwar period by melding Italian networks with expanding racially and ideologically diverse communities; by accommodating the increasingly restrictionist, conservative, and nationalist tenor of the cold war years; and by making the home a place where politics could live even in hostile times.

While the shrines to Mother Jones and the Virden martyrs are well-known sites, the one for Katie DeRorre has remained unknown even to labor historians. DeRorre cared about such shrines, and we should too. Pat Ansboury, a union “brother,” remembered that on one occasion Katie (who did not have a phone in her home) came to his house at five o’clock in the morning, accompanied by her children in a car full of flowers. DeRorre invited Ansboury “on a trip to the graves of our brothers in southern Illinois who gave their lives for the cause of the Progressive Miners of America.” Ansboury wrote, “It was a sad occasion, indeed. At each grave Katie laid a beautiful spray of red and pink roses. . . . Katie read the union obituary as she placed the flowers on the graves. . . . As Katie looked back when we were leaving she said: ‘Good bye, our heroes. We will never forget.’”82