"PRIMITIVE VILLAGERS AND UNEDUCATED GIRLS:"

CANADA RECRUITS DOMESTICS FROM ITALY, 1951-52*

Franca Iacovetta

En novembre, 1951, le gouvernement canadien a approuvé une commande "en gros" de cinq cent domestiques italiennes pour satisfaire à la demande pour des bonnes immigrantes. Le projet fut terminé abruptement quelques mois plus tard à cause de la dissatisfaction exprimée par leurs employeurs et par les charges de placement. Dans son examination du plan pour obtenir des domestiques italiennes, Franca Iacovetta soutient que des suppositions racistes, sexistes et de classe soulignant la manière par laquelle le gouvernement a traité le plan, et la réaction des maîtresses canadiennes envers leurs domestiques italiennes. Ces préjugés furent accentués par les activités des femmes italiennes qui ont souvent manipulé le plan pour leurs besoins.

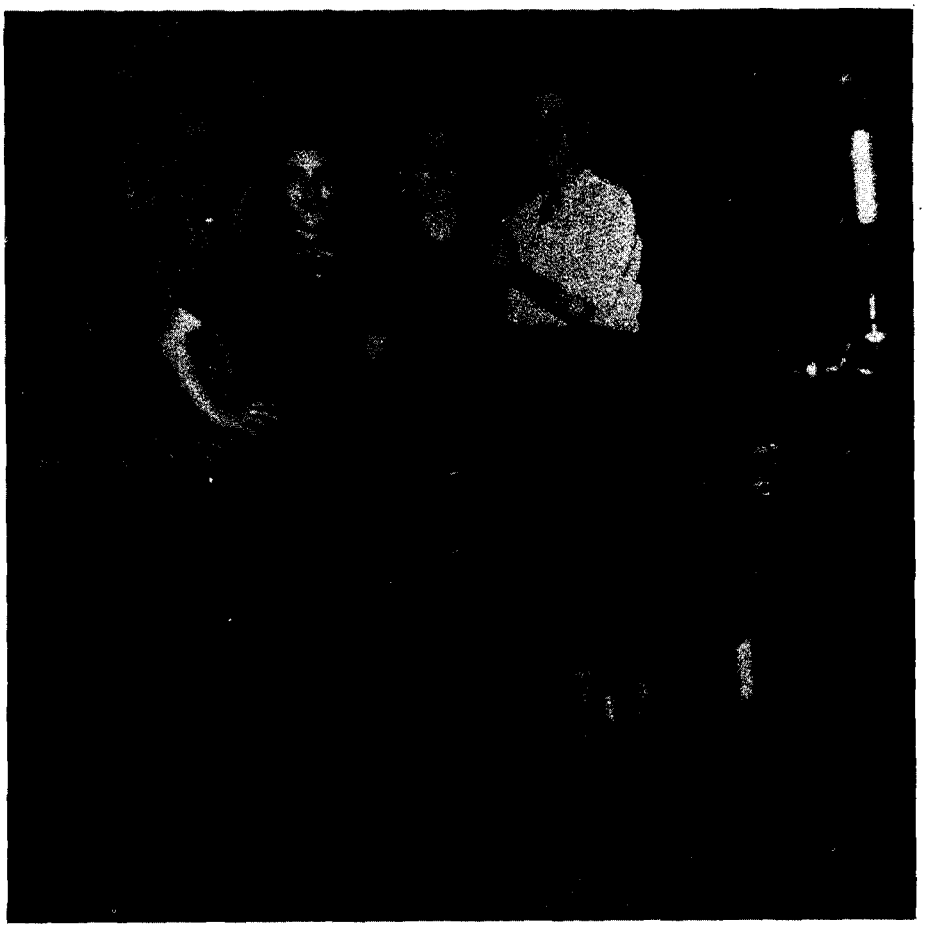
In the winter of 1951 Canada began recruiting domestics from Italy. When earlier attempts to secure domestics from Britain and northwestern Europe had failed to meet a continuing high demand for immigrant maids, the Canadian government approved a "bulk order" of 500 Italian domestics in November. However, by April 1952, when only 357 women had arrived, the scheme was abruptly terminated. Commenting on the first one hundred women to arrive under the scheme in Montreal in December, Edith Cornell, the employment officer overseeing their placement in Canadian homes, described the women as "primitive villagers" who "have never been away from home before . . . had 3 or 4 years schooling," "came from poor families and expressed concern over the money owed at home for their passage."[1] Cornell's unfavourable response was typical of the reception Italian domestics received at the hands of employers and placement officers who complained about the women's "language deficiencies," their lack of "appropriate" standards of cleanliness, and their unfamiliarity with Canadian housekeeping methods. Also unappealing was the feistiness exhibited by the women, who either complained about their placements and demanded transfers, or simply abandoned their service for relatives and jobs in the city. Indeed, for those women who did arrrive, the scheme provided an opportunity to enter Canada to join relatives already here, to send much needed remittances home, and to sponsor the entry of family members still in Italy.

This short essay examines the Italian domestic scheme. It argues that racist and sexist assumptions underlined the government's handling of the scheme, while the responses of Canadian mistresses towards their Italian maids were shaped not only by class biases but by racist assumptions regarding the natural inferiority of southern Europeans. In turn, Canadian biases were heightened by the activities of the women who displayed a strong determination to manipulate the scheme for their own purposes. The scheme sheds light on ethnic and class relations in Canada and on the strategies pursued by working immigrant women who sought to exercise some choice over how they might live their lives in the host society.[2]

Canada's recruitment of Italians during the 1950s reveals how labour priorities shaped Canada's approach to Italian immigrants. Initially hesitant to admit numerous Italians, especially peasants from poverty-stricken and over-populated southern regions, after 1949 Canada turned to Italy as a source of cheap foreign labour to help fill acute post-war labour shortages in agriculture, mining, railway repair and construction. International factors, such as the Marshall Plan and Canada's new partnership with Italy within NATO, also played a role in convincing Canada to help alleviate Italy's post-war economic troubles by accepting a portion of its surplus population. As South European Catholics, however, Italians continued to be considered far less desirable immigrants than were British, American and northwestern Europeans. Opposition to Italians, which was often based on racist notions equating hot climates with darker populations, smaller builds, cultural backwardness and undemocratic traditions, came from government, religious and social organizations. An Anglican Church pamphlet, for instance, depicted southern Europeans as "amenable to the fallacies of dictatorship, less versed in the . . . art of democratic government," and better suited to the hot climate and "fragile" politics of Latin America. Federal immigration officials emphasized the inferiority of Southern Italians, whom they depicted as backward and slovenly from years of living in poverty.[3] Their presence in Canada was tolerated, however, precisely because their labour was required. Canadian employers, who included the two national railways, mine owners and farmers, had relatively little difficulty convincing the government to permit Italian workers into the country because both parties agreed that Italians, long associated with performing heavy manual labour at low cost, could be put to good use.[4]

Based on a model of recruitment that had been developed for selecting workers from the displaced persons camps, "bulk orders" refer to government-sponsored labour recruitment schemes that allowed employers in Canada to submit "orders" for immigrant workers. Workers signed an "undertaking" obliging them to remain in their assigned placement for one year. In this case, the local offices of the Italian Ministry of Labour, which were located in numerous towns and villages in the Italian countryside, carried out the initial pre-selection of candidates. They were then presented to a Canadian Department of Labour officer for final selection before being passed on for "processing" by immigration officers. Canada actively recruited several thousand Italian workers in this fashion, most of them during the early 1950s.

Most bulk orders from Italy involved men; the major exception was the domestic scheme of 1951-52. Southern Italian women generally entered Canada under sponsorship regulations which allowed them and their children to join the male head of the household who had pre-



ceeded the family; they were considered to be the man's "dependents," to be merely part of the "cultural baggage" of the genuine, male immigrant. By contrast, Italian domestics were being recruited as "workers" who were expected to enter the labour force full-time and thereby contribute directly to the post-war Canadian economy. This did not lead officers to take an enlightened position on these women. After all, they were being recruited for the lowest paid and most heavily ghettoized type of female labour. It was also a job normally performed by immigrant women. Moreover, drawing upon notions of ethnic hierarchies, the decision to recruit Italians arose only as a result of mounting fears that insufficient numbers of domestics were arriving from places such as Britain, Germany, Holland and Sweden – the so-called "more preferred countries" – which traditionally produced Canada's "white" immigrants. Also, the numbers of "suitable DP" domestics, who included nominally "more desireable" Baltic women (such as Latvians and Lithuanians) had begun to decline after 1949. An explicit preference for Northern Italian women was also made a priority, for officers feared that Southeners, most anxious to escape the acute poverty of the post-war South, might otherwise dominate the movement.[5]

Such ethnic biases worked in tandem with paternalism. Because young "girls" were involved, Canadian officials, with Italy's approval, appointed female chaperones and introduced special precautions such as housing the women in convents. As immigrants from a "non-preferred" country, however, they would be offered lower wages than were domestics from the ethnically "preferred" countries, suggesting that paternalism and racism are not mutually exclusive categories.

Discussion regarding the scheme first began in spring 1949, when Ottawa instructed the International Labour Office (ILO) to make discreet enquiries regarding "the possibility of Italian girls going to work in Canadian households." The ILO report, which stressed the relative scarcity in Italy of trained and experienced "city" domestics in hotels and other institutions, was largely ignored by Department of Labour officials, who were prepared to experiment with "greenhorns" – young inexperienced farm women. Even Canadian ILO Director, V.C. Phelen, disagreed with the report. "My view," he informed Deputy Minister of Labour Arthur MacNamara, "is that in the country and small villages the appeal of coming to Canada would be strong . . . . " While these farm girls "would be inexperienced at domestic work for wages" they could no doubt learn just as the "DP" domestics had done. Moreover, at least initially, they could be paid less.[6]

Although MacNamara thought the plan a good one, Canada did not act on the matter for almost a year, primarily for two reasons. The first concerned travel costs. Even though Italian funding had not been requested for other bulk orders, Canadian officials had tried to persuade the Italian authorities to advance the ocean fares. Moreover, senior Immigration bureaucrats, including Deputy Minister Fortier, were not prepared to accept Italian domestics until "better" alternatives had been temporarily exhausted. As MacNamara wrote to Ontario Premier Mitchell Hepburn, "My own view is that we could do with some Italian girls as domestics," but "there is a very definite view amongst Immigration officials that immigration from Italy is not desirable."[7]

While the Italian matter was dropped, Canada embarked in the spring of 1950 upon an up-graded publicity campaign to attract domestics and domestic workers from Britain and northwestern Europe. Applicants were to be between 18 and 40 years of age, single, divorced, or widowed women with no children. General maids with a working knowledge of English or French were considered the most desireable.[8] Terms of employment included monthly wages ranging from $45-$75 plus room and board, and vague promises about free evenings and every week-end off. Despite the additional effort, overseas immigration posts in Switzerland, Norway, Finland, Ireland, and other places soon recorded very disappointing results, with the exception of Germany and, to a lesser extent, Holland. In fact, Canada did approve an order of 600 German domestics who were also eligible to apply for no-interest travel loans made available by the Canadian government under the Assisted Passage Loan Scheme introduced in October 1950. Responding to the generally poor results of the campaign, Canada also sought to recruit more domestics by turning to "less preferred" countries such as Greece and Italy.

In November 1950, Canada approved the order of 500 Italian domestics. Local Italian labour offices were to advertise

Canada's "urgent request" and send pre-selected candidates to Rome. While Canada provided assurances that social and religious organizations such as the St. Jean Baptiste Society and Catholic parishes "would undertake to give spiritual and moral assistance" to the women, Italian women were offered lower wages – $35 minimum – and "assisted passage" was not initially extended to Italy.[9]

Early results were not promising. This surprised officials such as J.L. Anfossi, Officer-in-Charge at Rome, who had expected a flood of applicants. "It is an odd fact," he wrote, "that of the thousands of persons in (Italy) desirous of emigrating we receive no requests from unattached women." He attributed this to women's lack of freedom and the high proportion of young women who were married or engaged. Even poor parents were not permitting their daughters to apply, it seemed, because "of the reluctance of religious orders who do not approve of their leaving families for reasons other than marriage."[10]

What Anfossi failed to mention, however, was the fact that high transportation costs combined with the low wages advertised *also* served to lessen the appeal of the Canadian offer. After all, hundreds of young unmarried women were already entering Canada as domestics but as nominated cases; that is, they had been individually "sponsored" by employers who had agreed to provide assured employment. While some of these employers were actually distant kin or co-villagers, many were strangers who had been contacted by the woman's relatives in Canada.[11] Obviously, these families were prepared to defy clerical disapproval. Emphasing family priorities, an Italian Ministry of Labour report (dated July 1951) argued that without assisted passage, candidates might have to take out high interest loans with Italian agencies and that they would have to devote most of their monthly wages towards repaying the loans. This meant that only "a paltry 5000 lire" could be sent home each month. An additional reason for the women's reluctance is that they erroneously assumed that they would be placed in rural homes. Thus, women's oppression in Italy, which was certainly real enough, was not a sufficient explanation for the slow response to the scheme.[12]

After a long debate, during which Canada rejected proposals to permit married women of men already in Canada to enter as domestics, Canadian officials, responding to increasing demands for domestics at home, finally agreed in mid-August to extend assisted passage to Italians. They also increased the minimum wage level to $35-$45. Selection officers were advised to inform the women where they were likely to be placed. This willingness to make concessions also reflected the fears of officials who were especially sensitive to criticism that might be voiced by religious and political leaders, not to mention parents, should anything "untoward" happen to the "girls" involved. Over-dramatizing the problem, Anfossi advised placement officers to endeavor "to place these girls as promised since I forsee that the Italian authorities and the girls' families will follow their destinations closely as will the Communist Party whose war cry of 'white slavery' will be heard as soon as a girl goes astray or shows disatisfaction." Anfossi's reaction reflected the seriousness with which Canada, like her Western allies, treated the popularity of the Italian Communist Party during the Cold War. Indeed, by helping Italy to achieve economic recovery by accepting numerous immigrants, Canadian officials hoped to play a role in discrediting Communist support, which, they believed, was linked to the economic depression currently prevailing in post-war Italy.[13]

Canada's decision regarding assisted passage gave the movement the boost it needed. By late August, 240 women had been processed at Rome and another 300 were being presented for selection in early September. In anticipation of their arrival, the assistance of various priests and immigrant and religious organizations in Montreal had been secured to help with housing, chaperoning and interpreting. The first women who arrived in Montreal, for instance, boarded at an east-end Franciscan convent which also ran a day nursery and a "working girl's institute" and at the new Mount Providence convent in the west end. It was hoped that the presence of priests and nuns would also pacify the women, who were to be placed in cities in Quebec, Ontario and the West, with the highest proportion destined for Montreal and Toronto.

Actually, the first sailing to include domestics – the S.S. Fair Sea which sailed on 26 November – carried only three women, all of whom were trained nurses' aides in their late twenties from Agnano, near Naples, and bound for Toronto hospitals. Following the first large group to arrive in December, smaller groups of untrained workers continued to arrive, so that by early January over 200 women had arrived. Some had had to take out loans at home when Canada temporarily suspended assisted passage at the end of December. But by late January, a rash of complaints voiced by employers and placement officers regarding the "unsuitability" of Italian domestics, combined with a decline in the demand for domestics in winter, led to the decision to postpone the movement until the following spring. When the resumption of the movement evoked similar responses, the order was cancelled in April 1952, even though over a hundred approved women were awaiting sailing departure times in Italy.[14]

Why was the scheme cancelled? Not surprisingly, Canadian officials focussed on the supposed "poor quality" of Southern Italian greenhorns. In mid-January 1952, an overseas selection officer blamed the "extraordinarly high" rejection rate of Italian candidates on the preponderance of Southerners, who were, she claimed, "generally speaking very poor material. Their standard of education is very low, coming from farm homes where they claimed to have worked only in the fields, (most of them look it!)." She even suggested that they be placed in farm homes or as cooks and cleaning ladies in public institutions where "less demanding attention" was paid to the "quality" of cleaning and food![15] Placement officers emphasized how difficult it had been to place the women during winter, particularly since Canadian employers had become "more choosy," insisting upon domestics from "more preferred countries" such as Britain and Germany or "DPs." A Toronto officer reported that by late December 1951 she had already "exhausted her list of employers willing to take inexperienced help who do not speak English or French." The limited appeal of Italians was compounded by the women's insistence on being placed in Catholic homes.[16]

Reiterating ethnocentric and class biases, Labour officers sympathized with employers who viewed Italian domestics as poor country girls ignorant of North American middle-class standards of personal hygiene and cleanliness. A typical complaint came from an Ottawa employer who wanted to replace her Italian maid because "she was not clean about her person and has several men friends who call, against Mrs. [L's] wishes, each

time she goes out." Along with her sister, who had been transferred out of a private home for "impertinent behaviour," the woman was relocated as a cleaning lady/cook with the Sisters of St Marie convent in Ottawa.[17] Various reports contrasted Italian housekeeping methods with those of northern European women, who were perceived as better equipped to be maids by virtue of their cleaner appearance and their reputation for domestic service in Canada. Italian women were said to suffer from their lack of education and impoverished backgrounds. As one officer put it, "I do not consider the Italian girls have the requisite basic knowledge or qualifications for training in the average Canadian home," adding that "their lack of English, together with their only experience in comparitively primitive conditions in Italy, would not justify their placement as domestics." Others considered Italians naturally less adept than other foreigners at learning English; one report noted uncritically that "employers state they find the Italian language a greater barrier than German."[18]

Although Italians certainly were not well versed in Canadian housekeeping methods, the difficulties surrounding the scheme were probably exaggerated. At least one senior-ranking Labour official attributed the placement problems more to the economic downswing and consequent decline in demand for domestics during wintertime, and on the "newness" of the scheme, rather than on "any serious deficiencies among the girls." "After all," he added, "Italy has been the main source of supply of domestics for Switzerland and France and some other European countries for a very long time." Even placement officers had to admit that most of the women had been placed without that much difficulty.[19]

What most irritated employers and officers alike were the acts of "defiance" committed by domestics who complained about their placements, demanded job transfers, and even abandoned their jobs in order to join family members in Canada or to secure better paying factory jobs. On 8 January 1952 a Toronto office reported that it had cancelled 5 out of 15 placements during the previous week because the Italians had refused to accept them. On 30 April 1952, Cornell reported that out of 130 women placed in Montreal during the past four months, 78 transfers within domestic employment and 68 transfers out of service had been recorded. Many of the latter had been helped by male friends

and relatives, even local priests, to find jobs in the city's garment industry.[20]

The apparently cavalier approach towards the undertaking offended the sensibilities of Canadian employers and officials who had expected young Italian women to act submissively and obediently. Officers were annoyed with interviewees who unabashedly stated their preferences or disapproved of placements. They were angered by more overt displays of defiance. One domestic left her employment in a private Ottawa home within a week of her placement and she had not reported to the local Labour office as regulations required. It was later discovered, through her sister, that a local Italian priest had secured the woman a job as a seamstress. Two sisters who had been placed in homes on Hillhurst Boulevard and Cortleigh Boulevard in fashionable North Toronto, had left their jobs after two days and visited friends in Welland, Ontario. They returned to the Toronto Labour office in the company of a male *paesano* (co-villager) to request a job transfer to Welland. As in the other cases, their requests were honoured.[21] To do otherwise would have resulted in these women abandoning domestic service altogether.

These examples show that Italian women, far from being passive or ignorant, were acting out their personal and family strategies for immigrating to Canada. Although Canada recruited them as single female immigrants whose non-marital and youthful status presupposed their remaining in domestic service for a while, Italian domestics were actually links in the complex chain of family and kinship migration that characterized postwar Italian immigration to Canada. Italian domestics, many of whom were recruited along with sisters or cousins, already had relatives or co-villagers residing in Canada whom they hoped to rejoin. Others expected eventually to sponsor parents or siblings. Meantime, they sent home portions of their paychecks. Even though women who came as nominated cases were more likely to remain in service for the stipulated period, some of them also abandoned their jobs. Since it was common knowledge among Italians that the one-year undertaking was not strictly enforced, women did not worry about leaving placements, especially when relatives and priests helped them find jobs elsewhere.

Given the choice, they preferred the higher wages and greater freedom of factory work and the chance to live with relatives to the isolation and long working days of live-in service. Oral testimonies of Italian women indicate that live-in service was the least desirable kind of job, chiefly because it cut off women from their families, paid low wages and left workers vulnerable to the capriciousness of their mistresses.[22] Women who resented overbearing employers and the isolation of the workplace, or who felt alienated by the modern appliances and unfamiliar foods of Canadian households – many of their own relatives in Canada were living in flats without fridges or washing machines –found day jobs which permitted them to live with their family or kin far more appealing, if not necessarily more "liberating."

These actions, of course, served to reinforce the prejudices of Canadian officials who looked upon Italian immigrants with suspicion and who considered Italian women fundamentally ill-suited for private service. It led Simons to conclude, for example, that "while we know there is an urgent demand for domestic workers . . . it is a question whether or not these Italian women will contribute a great deal to our economy."[23] The domestic scheme had been conceived as a stop-gap measure to deal with a temporary but serious supply shortage, and officials clearly

looked upon the group movement of single females as particularly burdensome. A pattern long endemic to the "servant problem" in Canada, the antagonsitic tensions between Canadian employers and their immigrant maids, pitched women of different class and ethnic backgrounds against each other. Middle-class women not only shared the prevailing racist assumptions of the day, they also actively engaged in perpetuating the stereotypes. The apparent insensitivity of their employers made it easier for Italian women to treat their placement in an instrumentalist fashion and to abandon the position as soon as they found other employment. The scheme's "failure" sheds light on the strategies pursued by Italian women who, along with their fathers and brothers, exploited whatever limited opportunities existed in order to escape the poverty of Southern Italy for a better life in Canada.

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[1]Public Archives of Canada (PAC), Department of Labour Records (RG27) v290 f1-26-52-4 Cornell to H.L. Tosland, 19 Dec. 1951.

[2]Canadian feminist historians have not fully explored class and race relations between Canadian mistresses and their immigrant domestics. See Helen Lensky, "A 'Servant Problem' or a 'Servant-Mistress Problem'?," in *Atlantis*, 7:1, 3-11; Varpu Lindstrom-Best, "'I Won't be a Slave' – Finnish Domestics in Canada, 1900-30," in *Looking Into my Sisters' Eyes: An Exploration in Women's History*, ed. Jean Burnet, (Toronto, 1986).

[3]Public Archives of Ontario (PAO), Ontario Immigration Branch, Box 1, f1948-9-50 Bulletin Council for Social Service No. 104, Church of England of Canada, 15 Oct. 1941, 15-19; PAC Immigration Records (RG76) v131 f28885 Laval Fortier to A/Commissioner Overseas Immigration, 29 Mar. 1950.

[4]PAC RG76 v651 fB29300 "Immigration-A Vital Problem Facing Canadians," 22 Feb. 1947; *Ibid.*, v130 f28885 J.F. Manion Report, 19 Mar. 1949.

[5]Most "bulk orders" were accompanied by a quota of 70% Northerners and 30% Southeners, though they ultimately failed to prevent Southeners from dominating the group movements and, later, the sponsorship movement.

[6]RG27 v290 f1-26-52-5 A. MacNamara to Leslie Chance, 8 Aug. 1949; D.C. Tait, ILO, to Phelan, 20 Apr. 1949; Phelan to MacNamara, 26 Apr. 1949.

[7]*Ibid.*, MacNamara to Hepburn, 28 Sept. 1949.

[8]Employment offices commented on the growing requests for British and northwestern Europeans. Quebec Superior Court Judge Wilfrid Lazure wrote: "I am anxious to engage the services of a woman . . . particularly if she is coming from Western European countries, that is France, Belgium, Holland or Switzerland," Lazure to S. Boily, 22 June 1950. He received a Swiss domestic.

[9]*Ibid.*, J.B. Potvin to A/Superintendent European Emigration, 26 Sept. 1950; MacNamara to Fortier, 20 Oct. 1950.

[10]*Ibid.*, Anfossi to Smith, 18 Nov. 1951; Anfossi to Smith, 4 June 1951.

[11]Over 2,5000 domestics arrived under employer-nominated terms during 1949-52, over half of whom came in 1952 (my calculations). Immigration Branch *Annual Reports* 1947-53.

[12]RG 27 v290 f1-26-52 "Report on Canada-Recruiting of Domestics," 24 July 1951; E.L. Laberge, ILO, to MacNamara, 9 July 1951.

[13]Anfossi to Director Immigration, 4 June 1951; Fortier to A.H. Brown, 13 June 1951; RG76 Access No. 83-84 v349 f5195-1-575 External Affairs to Immigration Mar. 1955.

[14]*Ibid.*, F.M. Hereford to MacNamara, 24 Nov. 1951; Dawson to Tosland, 18 Dec. 1951; Dawson to Tosland, 8 Jan. 1952; Fortier to MacNamara, 18 Jan. 1952; MacNamara to Fortier, 12 April 1952.

[15]L.G. Simons to Lamarre, 11 Jan. 1952.

[16]J.F. Dwyer to Toronto Office, 5 Feb. 1952; Cornell to Tosland, 19 Dec. 1951; Ottawa Labour Survey, Jan. 1952; P. Gravely, 12 Dec. 1951 in V. Coyne to MacNamara, 8 Jan. 1952; McGuire to MacNamara, 15 Jan. 1952.

[17]*Ibid.*, Dwyer quoting Gravely to Miss Irvine, 9 Jan. 1952; Gertrude Dunham to Dwyer, 9 Jan. 1952.

[18]*Ibid.*, Hamilton to MacNamara, 12 Jan. 1952; J.F. Kristjansson (Winn) to Dawson, 16 Jan. 1952.

[19]*Ibid.*, Dawson to MacNamara, 15 Jan. 1952; Coyle to MacNamara, 8 Jan. 1952; Cornell to MacNamara, 15 Jan. 1952.

[20]Gravely in Coyne to MacNamara, 8 Jan. 1952; Dwyer to Irvine, 8 Jan. 1952; Cornell to Tosland, 30 Apr. 1952; Dunham to Hamilton, 9 Jan. 1952.

[21]*Ibid.*, Dunham to Hamilton, 9 Jan. 1952; Gravely to F. Pratt, 8 Jan. 1952; Dwyer to Irvine, 8 Jan. 1952.

[22]Interview with Vincenza Cerulli and Maria Lombardi.

[23]*Ibid.*, Simons to MacNamara, 11 Jan. 1952.

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The first snow slivers branches
that outside jut wooden as
darkness. Your absence scaffolds
these thin reposits of light on the
tree's constancy. Now the view
from my window, ligniform with
balance, reminds me that
waiting is a performed structure.
My body is self-dismissive,
sensing cold. The tree, attending
to time, compares itself to
multiple shadows of branches
which drift onto the room's
white surfaces, sufficient as
privacy, or patience.

10 November

Margaret Christakos
Montreal, Quebec