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IN PERSON; Telling Her Story in Italian-American

By **MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO**

IN an Italian-accented voice that is no less friendly than it is forthright, Edvige Giunta has much to talk about.

There's Ms. Giunta's popular memoir-writing workshop at New Jersey City University, where she is an assistant professor of English; the book of literary criticism on contemporary Italian-American female writers she is completing for St. Martin's Press; the recent symposium she helped organize through the Collective of Italian-American Women, which she co-founded; and the anthology of creative writing by Italian-American women on food, for which the Feminist Press at the City University of New York recently commissioned her to be co-editor.

There is also her idea for a book tying together the experiences of Sicilian women in Sicily and America, which she has tentatively titled "Persephone's Daughters"; the challenges of teaching Italian to her 11-year-old daughter, Emily, and 10-month-old son, Matteo; and her new home and fledgling garden in Teaneck. No wonder she does not watch much television.

Yet, she recalled that the one question asked of her when she recently saw a former colleague at Union College in Schenectady, N.Y., was "whether or not I've been watching 'The Sopranos.' "

Sitting in the oddly quiet N.J.C.U. campus cafeteria here the day after commencement last month, Ms. Giunta (pronounced JUNE-tah) related another telling incident: Once, when she asked a bookstore clerk to direct her to the section on Italian-American female writers, she was taken to the cookbook section.

"It seems that many people still have no qualms whatsoever in portraying Italian-Americans stereotypically," she said. "Sometimes the stereotypes are very close to life. I'm not reluctant to talk about the Mafia in Sicily. I'm not reluctant to talk about the passion Italians have for food. What I resist are the very reductive, monolithic, one-sided, noncomplex, nonsophisticated images of a group that is incredibly diverse."

Born and raised in Sicily, whose history bears the imprints of myriad civilizations, Ms. Giunta, who turns 41 this month, relishes the diversity of New Jersey City University. Although she has lived in Florida, Long Island, and upstate New York since leaving Italy in 1984, New Jersey is the first place where she truly feels at home. Like Sicily, she explained, "New Jersey is a state that gets a lot of cultural mistreatment."

Correcting cultural misconceptions -- whether they're about Italian-Americans, other ethnic groups, urban students, or an entire American state or Italian region -- is central to her work. "People are looking to move away from simplistic views and representations and reclaim the complexity of their culture, looking to talk about their culture and themselves on their own terms, and to talk about many issues that

have remained unspoken," she said.

During the Collective of Italian American Women symposium last month, panels, readings, and performances concerning such issues as gender politics, sexuality, social resistance and the craft of writing drew more than 150 people to the auditorium of Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimo at New York University. Anna Mancini, a 32-year-old student originally from Italy who played the violin during the conference, said she felt the event served "as a bridge to connect two cultures."

"I'm not a cultural separatist," said Ms. Giunta. "I don't want to create 'Italian-American land.' "

Her work with the collective dovetails with her memoir-writing program, which she has taught since 1996 and which will include an advanced class next spring. Memoir, she said, "is a great genre" for students in an urban, working-class institution like N.J.C.U. "It's very democratic," she continued. "Everyone has a life; everyone has memories of that life." Committing those memories to paper, she believes, instills the authors with self-confidence and self-respect, helping them to understand and appreciate not only themselves, but those around them. "Through memoir, storytelling becomes history-telling -- the telling of histories that have rarely been written or heard," she noted in a recent issue of "Transformations," a publication of Ramapo College in Mahwah.

Ms. Giunta's own history begins in the town of Gela, which she describes as "provincial even though it has a large population." She is the second of four children born to Vincenzo Giunta, a high school history and philosophy teacher, and his wife, Cettina, who taught elementary school.

"My parents, in many ways, were ahead of their times and their place," she said. "My mother always said, 'First you get your degree and your job, and then you get married.' " Her older sister, Ortensia, is a doctor and mother of three in Rome; her brother, Diego, is a law student at the University of Catania; her other sister, Claudia, is a lawyer with the International Monetary Fund in Washington.

She followed the route of the modern immigrant, going not from farm to factory, but from being a university student to a university professor. Having obtained her laurea, or degree, in foreign languages and literatures from the University of Catania in 1983, she went to the University of Miami to pursue graduate studies in English, concentrating on the works of James Joyce. She expected to return to Italy, but didn't, except for an occasional visit. Today she is a citizen of both Italy and the United States.

In 1987 she earned her master's degree and married David Cutts, a British graduate student whom she'd met in Miami. In 1991, two years after their daughter, Emily, was born, Ms. Giunta received her Ph.D., and the family moved to New York. She separated from her husband in 1992, and the marriage ended in divorce.

In 1998, Ms. Giunta married Josh Fausty, a former Union College student of hers who is now a doctoral candidate and teaches English literature and composition at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. Despite being in favor of abortion rights, she considers herself "culturally Catholic"; he is Jewish.

Although Italian is Ms. Giunta's native tongue, she finds she can write poetry and memoir only in English. "It's baffling," she said. "Living in another language and in another culture offers you a kind of intellectual and creative freedom that sometimes living in your culture doesn't. Perhaps I need to maintain that foreignness in order to be able to have access to my writing side."

She first became drawn to the work of Italian-American writers after teaching a course on Italian-American and Italian cinema at Union College. "Once I started writing creatively in English," she said,

"I really felt I became Italian-American because I had found a different kind of voice I had never had before."

Explaining her focus on Italian-American women, she said: "We have to pick our fights. I wanted to get something done. Also, I like the work. I'm not a martyr. I'm not going to plunge into something that I don't love professionally and not going to enjoy. I love the literature. The literature spoke to me personally. These were my sisters, my mothers, my cousins, my aunts in a number of ways. This is a literature that needs to be written about. So it allowed me to pursue my feminist activism in a way I know how to do, because I am a literary critic."

In 1995, while serving on a research advisory committee for the Calandra Institute at CUNY, which provides support services to Italian-American students in the CUNY system, Ms. Giunta organized a program on female Italian-American writers with Elizabeth G. Messina, an assistant psychologist at Fordham University at Lincoln Center and a psychotherapist in private practice in Manhattan. In 1998, they founded the Collective of Italian American Women, which organizes lectures, readings and other cultural events.

"The cultural work of the collective has been important because it puts alternatives out there," said Ms. Giunta.

Ms. Messina added: "Our history has been obscured by its exclusion from the American educational canon." Within the past five years, Ms. Giunta has made inroads into that canon not only through her own work but also by helping to revive the fortunes of two critically acclaimed novels by Italian-American women that had gone out of print: "Paper Fish" by Tina DeRosa and "Umbertina" by Helen Barolini. Both works have found a wide audience, according to Jean Casella, editorial director of the Feminist Press, which has republished them, with afterwords by Ms. Giunta.

"She's really quite brilliant," said Ms. Casella. "When we are hiring scholars to write afterwords, we always send one of Edi's as a model. She has an incredible amount of energy, and it's in the right spirit. Academia has a lot of competitive individuals trying to advance themselves. Edi really has the idea of community and bringing people together and doing work collaboratively that makes people excited and makes them feel part of something."

Students are equally effusive.

"Some professors just brush you off; she's dedicated," said Jamie Richardson of Kearny, who studied memoir writing with Professor Giunta. "I thought she was a student herself with her book bag, always scurrying across campus."

During last month's symposium, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, director of the Poetry Center at Passaic Community College, read selections of her work that dealt with the alienation she suffered as an Italian-American child growing up in Paterson. Afterward, she observed, "If we don't tell our own stories, other people will tell them for us."

Edvige Giunta has no time to watch "The Sopranos" because she is too busy telling her own story, even as she encourages and enables others to tell theirs.

Photo: Edvige Giunta, an assistant professor of English at New Jersey City University, says New Jersey "gets a lot of cultural mistreatment." (Thomas Dallal for The New York Times)