

*‘Dai che mi vesto da puttana!’*  
**Cultural Representations of Prostitution in  
Italy, 1955-1990**

Thesis submitted for the degree of  
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by

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This thesis considers the mediation of the symbolic representation of the (female street) prostitute by the media in the second half of the twentieth century in Italy. The reality of 'being', 'acting' or 'working' as a prostitute during this complex period between the Italian economic boom, the emergence of worker, student and feminist movements, and the transformation of the Italian sex trade in the late 1980s, has undergone a series of cultural and strategic misrepresentations. The unexpected emergence of a small, unusually well-organized and self-conscious group of prostitutes opened a critical front: questioning and unsettling established representational narratives on paid sex, and breaking the loud silence of Italian feminism on prostitution.

This research provides new insight into what these narratives - produced both by prostitutes themselves and by others - simultaneously reveal and conceal: prostitutes and violence against them, masculinity and gender identities. The historical silence of prostitutes, the gaps and precisely what is omitted from the documents require multiple and simultaneous levels of investigation and interpretation framed within an interdisciplinary approach. History, cultural studies, gender and feminist film studies are brought together, allowing the investigation of a range of sources, such as fiction, feminist writings, autobiographies, films, alongside Government Acts, newspaper articles, oral and archival documents. Most of the chosen texts and films have not been previously studied in any depth; their analysis contributes to identify the cultural strategies used to deal with, defer or 'resolve' social anxiety towards, and within, gender and gender relationships. This thesis investigates the relationship between feminism and prostitution and provides an understanding of the way that prostitutes have found a public voice, while it reveals the subversive connotation implied in the act of prostitution as 'performed', and thus reinterpreted, by prostitute activists.