

## Italian-Canadian Connections at 33

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In 1985 *Canadian Literature* devoted Issue 106 to “Italian-Canadian Connections.” Since then, the major contribution that Italian-Canadian writers have made to Canadian letters is with the promotion of ethnic minority writing as an integral part of Canadian literature. Italian-Canadian writers publish in English, French, and Italian, a phenomenon that could only happen because of a general acceptance of both the big “M” Multiculturalism of government policies and the small “m” multiculturalism of many ethnic communities across Canada.

One important early element that contributed to the flourishing of Italian-Canadian writing came in 1978 when Antonio D’Alfonso founded Guernica Editions as a trilingual press in Montreal. Over the years, Guernica has published many writers of diverse backgrounds in addition to Italian-Canadian authors using English or French. Guernica also engaged with over fifty Quebec writers and published many in English translation. Shortly after Guernica was created, in 1983, Quebec poet Fulvio Caccia established *Vice Versa*, a trilingual literature and culture magazine, which was published regularly until 1996. Some of the most significant moments in the development of Italian-Canadian writing came in 1991, when Nino Ricci won the Governor General’s Award for English-language fiction for his first novel, *Lives of the Saints*, and in 1994, when

Fulvio Caccia won the Governor General’s Award for French-language poetry with *Agnos*. Further, Mary di Michele won a number of literary awards, including the Arc Confederation Poets Award in 1996.

Since 1985, more than twenty PhD dissertations have been devoted to Italian-Canadian authors. Before Italian-Canadian authors began to achieve some recognition and critical success, they had to overcome many barriers. The first barrier that these young Italian-Canadians had to overcome was the working-class attitude to education. In particular, there was very little support for young women to go to university in the Italian-Canadian communities. The fact that we have an active group of Italian-Canadian women writers such as Mary di Michele, Caterina Edwards, Mary Melfi, Genni Gunn, Marisa De Franceschi, Dòre Michelut, and Gianna Patriarca is a small miracle. The generally lower social-economic level of Italian-Canadian women is reflected in the early work by some of these women writers; see, for example, Patriarca’s *Italian Women and Other Tragedies* (1994) and *Daughters for Sale* (1997), and Mary di Michele’s poem “How To Kill Your Father” in *Bread and Chocolate* (1980).

Related to the question of class was that of the negative social perception of Italians in North America. The negative image of Italians as criminals was epitomized by Mario Puzo’s novel *The Godfather* (1969). The book and the three subsequent film adaptations, *The Godfather I, II, and III*, and later HBO’s popular series *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), were hugely successful. They

helped link Italians with the Mafia in the popular imagination. Such stereotypes affected Italians writing in Canada, since readers and editors seemed to expect Italian-Canadian writers to produce more books about the Mafia. Italian-Canadian writers strongly resisted this expectation and instead focused on realistic depictions of immigrant experiences and family conflicts. In his ten novels, for instance, Frank Paci deliberately wrote against the Mafia image by depicting ordinary heroes who struggled to make a contribution to society. Of the approximately one hundred active Italian-Canadian authors working in Canada over the last three decades, not one has produced a work on organized crime. We could confidently make this claim until May 2015, when Edmonton novelist Caterina Edwards published *The Sicilian Wife*, the story of an Italian woman who escapes her Mafia family by coming to Canada. I wonder if it is possible that Edwards feels confident that, because of the literary achievements of Italian-Canadian writers, we no longer need to worry about the negative effects of the Mafia stigma? Or, perhaps she is strategically capitalizing on the popularity of the the genre in order to subvert stereotypes.

Another barrier for Italian-Canadian writers was the language problem: the divisions amongst them created by writing in three separate languages. Those in Quebec wrote in French, in the rest of Canada in English, and the older generation wrote in Italian. Mirroring the two solitudes, there was very little contact between the Italian writers in Montreal and those in Toronto. Their common Italian background and common immigrant experiences were not enough in themselves to unify them at the beginning. Over time, however, their powerful need to write about these experiences ultimately drew them together. Further, it was helpful that a number of Quebec authors—Antonio D'Alfonso, Lisa Carducci,

Giovanni Costa, Filippo Salvatore, and Marco Micone—were bilingual. Whether they work in English or in French, the influence of the Italian language is often present. Many of these writers are also involved in translation from one language to another as part of their writing. Through this activity they have been able to turn a problem into a creative practice and have presented another positive example to other ethnic minority authors with similar language interference issues (Pivato, “Language Escapes”).

In September 1986, three BC authors, Genni Gunn, C. D. Minni, and Anna Foschi, organized a large conference of Italian-Canadian writers in Vancouver. Writers from across the country came to give papers, panel presentations, and readings in English, French, and Italian. Micone's French play *Gens du silence* (1982) premiered in English as *Voiceless People*. Here a group of writers decided to establish The Association of Italian-Canadian Writers. Since 1986 this trilingual association has been holding biannual conferences in different Canadian cities and producing collections of essays that have critically examined the publications of these authors in the context of Canadian literature (Canton).

Since Issue 106 of *Canadian Literature* was devoted to Italian-Canadian connections, only a few articles on Italian-Canadian authors have appeared in Canadian literary journals, with the exception of a small number of book reviews. In order to assert the existence and the validity of the work by Italian-Canadian authors, I was approached by Antonio D'Alfonso to edit a book of criticism. Guernica Editions brought out an anthology of critical essays, *Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing*, in 1985, the same year as the issue of *Canadian Literature*. The anthology became an important book in the study of ethnic minority writing in Canada. In her study of first-generation Canadian authors originating from Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, and

the Maghreb, *Voices of Exile in Contemporary Canadian Francophone Literature*, for example, F. Elizabeth Dahab cites *Contrasts* as a positive example (34). Similarly, in a 1996 article, George Elliott Clarke cites it as a “a useful model for scholars of other minority or ethnic Canadian communities who seek to affirm and reconceptualize these literatures” (107). The South Asian writers in Toronto also followed these examples. In 1993 *The Toronto South Asian Review* (TSAR) became *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*. The editors, M. G. Vassanji and Nurjehan Aziz, also established the press TSAR Publications in 1985 to promote the work of ethnic minority authors in Canada. In 1996 this South Asian group held a joint writers’ conference in Toronto with Italian-Canadian writers, and dedicated an issue of *The Toronto Review* (vol. 16, no. 3) to Italian-Canadian authors. In 1998, Italian-Canadian writers had a joint conference in Vancouver with authors from the Asian Canadian Writers’ Workshop Society, which publishes the literary arts magazine *Ricepaper*, founded in 1994. From a contemporary vantage point, we can see the significant Italian-Canadian contributions to the coalitional and relational labour of ethnic minority cultural workers in the literary field.

Italian-Canadian writers over the past three decades have tended to write in the realist tradition. Core questions for novelists such as Frank Paci, Marisa De Franceschi, Nino Ricci, Michael Mirolla, Genni Gunn, and Caterina Edwards concern appropriation of voice, dual identity, postcolonial problems in national narratives, translation and language interference, intertextuality, dialogic writing, diaspora writing, life writing, and feminist theory. These writers have had to confront the expectations of postmodern experimentation over conventional realism and a critical appetite to go beyond realism. When French theorist Roland Barthes declared

“The Death of the Author” in 1967, it did not help ethnic minority writers who were just beginning to get some recognition for their work, just finding their voices and reconstructing their lost and fragmented stories. These abstract philosophical pronouncements from Paris indicated little understanding of the trauma of being up-rooted, and the resulting need to re-establish an identity through writing the narrative of the individual and the group. The markers of ethnic identity are the author’s name, family ties, and his or her links to a history, culture, and language.

When Italian-Canadian writers first started publishing novels and short stories, they were dismissed as too autobiographical, too sociological. Italian-Canadian women writers Mary di Michele and Dôre Michelut began to publish in feminist journals and anthologies. Michelut published her seminal and frequently reprinted essay, “Coming to Terms with the Mother Tongue,” in *Tessera* in 1989. Such publications helped to highlight the work of feminist writers and academics and to recognize that their search for identity extended beyond ethnic minority considerations to encompass other outsiders to the mainstream as well (Godard 259). The studies of life writing in all its various forms were particularly useful. Shirley Neuman’s work on the double bind of women’s autobiography had particular resonance with Italian-Canadian writers. Neuman raised questions about how a woman can achieve agency rather than self-silencing in her autobiography. How can she speak to her culture from the margins? Italian-Canadian writers and other ethnic minority writers found themselves in a similar double bind. The immigrant has little access to public discourse. Nevertheless, from the margins they broke their silence and began to find ways to express their agency. Marlene Kadar’s work on the poetics of life writing as a feminist way of reading personal

narratives also helped ethnic writers approach personal narratives about immigrant experiences with renewed critical attention. With the help of feminist theory, Italian-Canadian writers were able to establish relations with many other ethnic minority groups and writers.

I began this reflection by making the claim that the major contribution of Italian-Canadian writers to Canadian letters has been the recognition of ethnic minority writing. The term *ethnic minority writing* was introduced in 1987 by Enoch Padolsky of Carleton University, who used the three words to distinguish ethnic minority authors from ethnic majority Canadians of French or British backgrounds. When Pier Giorgio Di Cicco edited the first anthology of Italian-Canadian poetry, *Roman Candles* (1978), he became a model for other minorities to follow: the poet as editor, translator, promoter. The importance of *Roman Candles* was later highlighted by George Elliott Clarke in his *Directions Home* (2012) when he compares Di Cicco's *Roman Candles* to Harold Head's *Canada in Us Now: The First Anthology of Black Poetry and Prose in Canada* (1976). Another significant publication to come along in the mid-'80s was *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature* (1985), edited by M. G. Vassanji. In 1990, Italian-Canadian critic Linda Hutcheon joined Marion Richmond to co-edit the anthology *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*, which became a popular text in literature and ethnic studies courses across Canada, and included Frank Paci's fiction and a reference to *Contrasts* (229). In 1996 Smaro Kamboureli published the anthology *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature*, which included five Italian-Canadian writers and two references to *Contrasts* (540, 543). Kamboureli expanded the scope of Hutcheon's and Richmond's earlier multicultural anthology with more fiction, poetry, essays, and dramatic scenes.

The general success of *Making a Difference* led to a second revised edition in 2007. Further outstanding examples of edited collections that reflect critical attention to ethnicity and minority literatures in Canada include: *Literary Pluralities* (1998), edited by Christl Verduyn; *Adjacencies: Minority Writing in Canada* (2004), edited by Lianne Moyes, Licia Canton, and Domenic Beneventi; and *Translation Effects: The Shaping of Modern Canadian Culture* (2014), edited by Kathy Mezei, Sherry Simon, and Luise von Flotow.

The study of Canadian letters has changed since the "Italian-Canadian Connections" issue of *Canadian Literature* was published in 1985. We no longer compose reading lists for Canadian courses based on authors with British and French backgrounds. (Why then does Anansi keep reprinting Atwood's *Survival* from 1972?) The publications of Italian-Canadian writers have been a major force in bringing about these changes.<sup>1</sup>

## NOTE

- 1 For more detailed information about Italian-Canadian authors visit Canadian Writers website at Athabasca University (canadian-writers.athabascau.ca). There you will find profiles and bibliographies for Antonio D'Alfonso, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, Mary di Michele, Frank Paci, Nino Ricci, Caterina Edwards, Genni Gunn, Peter Oliva, Gianna Patriarca, Pasquale Verdicchio, Maria Ardizzi, Dôre Michelut, Marco Micone, Fulvio Caccia, Marisa De Franceschi, Lisa Carducci, and many of the ethnic minority authors mentioned above.

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