

# Love in the Time of Migration

## Lovers' Correspondence between Italy and Canada, 1948-1957

# L'amour au temps de la migration

## Correspondances amoureuses entre l'Italie et le Canada de 1948 à 1957

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### Article abstract

How did a lover's letter help to negotiate physical absence, separation, and migration? How can words of romantic love and yearning contribute to historians' understanding of *amour-passion*, letter-writing, and transnational relationships? And, finally, what do they tell us about ordinary lives and migration experiences? In this article, I argue that love letters written by everyday writers in a context of international migration are extraordinary historical documents. These cultural artefacts offer a plethora of insights on transnational communication, the romantic love that infused such epistolary narratives, the challenges that ordinary lovers faced in their separation, and how letter-writing helped them to negotiate a lover's absence. Letters written by women and men in the context of Italian postwar migration to Canada are employed to illustrate my points.

**LOVE IN THE TIME OF MIGRATION  
LOVERS' CORRESPONDENCE  
BETWEEN ITALY AND CANADA, 1948-1957**

**L'AMOUR AU TEMPS DE LA MIGRATION  
CORRESPONDANCES AMOUREUSES  
ENTRE L'ITALIE ET LE CANADA DE 1948 À 1957**

**Sonia Cancian**

**Abstract / Résumé**

How did a lover's letter help to negotiate physical absence, separation, and migration? How can words of romantic love and yearning contribute to historians' understanding of *amour-passion*, letter-writing, and transnational relationships? And, finally, what do they tell us about ordinary lives and migration experiences? In this article, I argue that love letters written by everyday writers in a context of international migration are extraordinary historical documents. These cultural artefacts offer a plethora of insights on transnational communication, the romantic love that infused such epistolary narratives, the challenges that ordinary lovers faced in their separation, and how letter-writing helped them to negotiate a lover's absence. Letters written by women and men in the context of Italian postwar migration to Canada are employed to illustrate my points.

Comment les lettres d'amour ont-elles permis de surmonter la séparation en contexte migratoire? Comment nos connaissances historiques sur l'immigration et les relations transnationales peuvent-elles être approfondies par l'analyse de ces missives romantiques? Finalement, que nous révèle ce courrier intime sur la vie quotidienne et l'expérience de l'immigration? Dans cet article, nous soutenons que les correspondances amoureuses des gens ordinaires constituent des documents historiques et culturels d'un grand intérêt. Ils offrent une foule d'informations sur la communication transnationale, l'amour romantique, les défis d'une relation à distance et le réconfort que de tels échanges peuvent apporter. Nous nous appuyons pour illustrer nos propos sur des lettres rédigées dans le contexte d'après-guerre de l'immigration italienne au Canada.

**Keywords:** Migration, letters, transnational communication, love relationships.

**Mots clés :** Immigration, échange épistolaire, communication transnationale, relations amoureuses.

*When I have no letter, I feel you could be dead, and it is very sad.  
When I have a letter, I feel you are so living that I become very impatient;  
I want to see you. So, I have never peace, but why should I?  
Love is much better than peace.*

Simone de Beauvoir (1997: 99) to Nelson Algren

## Introduction

HOW DID A LETTER FROM A LOVER help to negotiate physical absence, separation, and, particularly, migration? How can words of romantic love and yearning, such as those illustrated in the epitaph above written by Simone de Beauvoir, contribute to historians' understanding of romantic love, letter-writing, and transnational relationships<sup>1</sup>? And, finally, what does the love letter tell us about migration?

For centuries, the love letter has been a highly prized document in literary studies. Frequently regarded as the *lettres par excellence*, the love letters that have been examined have derived mostly from the archives of professional writers, such as Victor Hugo, Georges Sand, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and other highly educated individuals (Albertine 1992; Jabour 1998; Lyons 1999; Nelson 2004; Sayers 2002)<sup>2</sup>. Renowned for its expressions of romantic love, this epistolary genre offered reflections on intimacy, desires, longings, affective and erotic outreaches and other confidences shared between couples engaged in a relationship of *amour-passion* (Goody 1998) at a distance.

However, historians and other scholars interested in questions of migration have turned to love letters written by everyday or newly literate writers for a conjunctural insight on romantic relationships and human mobility. In fact, less than a handful of studies (Cancian 2010; Thomas and Znaniecki 1918-1920) have examined the love letter as part of the discourses of communication in international migration. While there are a number of reasons why this epistolary genre has not been the focus of research in the burgeoning literature in migration studies, the scarce availability of such documents in public archives and research centres is a compelling one<sup>3</sup>. Yet, love letters written in contexts of migration were preserved, albeit in small numbers<sup>4</sup>. And, once unearthed, they represent a new window onto the human experience of migration, mobility, and separation – a literary genre that is anchored in intimacies, emotions, self-reflections and subjectivities, spurred by the imagination, affections, and state of minds and hearts of individuals whose central purpose was to sustain a romantic relationship across geographic distances.

Love letters written in processes of migration are part of what migration experts call “immigrant letters”, that is, correspondence exchanged by migrants and non-migrants (including families, extended family members, friends, acquaintances, priests and other members of a community) in contexts of mobility and diaspora (Blegen 1955; Elliott, Gerber and Sinke 2006; Erickson 1972; Fitzpatrick 1994; Franzina 1979; Frenette, Martel and Willis 2006; Gerber 2006; Hoerder 1999; Kamphoefner, Helbich and Sommer 1991). Yet, this specific genre of epistolary writing exchanged between lovers (i.e. couples who were in love or in a relationship of romance, courtship, betrothal or marriage) and written in a context of movement requires readings that have as much to do with migration and separation, as with the practice of letter-writing, and *amour-passion*.

In the field of Canadian immigration history, migration experts and other researchers have examined letters, diaries, and journals of migrants (Beattie and Buss 2003; Cancian 2007a et 2007b; Errington 2007; Farhni and Frenette 2008; Frenette, Martel and Willis 2006; Hoerder 1999). However, letters exchanged between lovers have not constituted the focus of analysis. Yet, as literary novels and other works of fiction suggest, lovers too were separated as a result of migration. For instance, in the postwar movement from Italy to Canada following the end of World War II, love letters were exchanged between women and men who had migrated and those who had not. In some cases, letters were written between couples who had known each other since birth in their native towns or cities, in other cases, between couples who had met during holidays or through family members and friends. In others still, declarations of love were exchanged in letters once a couple had agreed to marry, whether by proxy or upon their arrival in Canada<sup>5</sup>.

In this article, I introduce the love letter as part of narratives of migration conceived in the context of Italian postwar migration to Canada. In doing so, I seek to provide answers to the question, what did lovers engaged in a transnational relationship discuss in their letters to each other? Secondly, I look at some of the everyday challenges that lovers experienced in their separation, as represented in their letters. Finally, I examine approaches that the lovers used in their letters to help them negotiate the separation they experienced from each other's absence. In the concluding remarks, I summarize the arguments I developed and identify ways in which love letters advance knowledge about migration, separation, transnational relationships and romantic love. To illustrate my points, I draw from three letter collections which I identified in my fieldwork research in Montreal in 2003 and 2004. Two of the collections (written in 1948 and 1957) are of letters exchanged between lovers residing on one end of the correspondence in Montreal, and on other end, in Venice or Rome. A third collection of letters (1956) entails

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exchanges between a husband and wife writing between Powell River in British Columbia and Arcugnano, in the Italian province of Vicenza in the Veneto region<sup>6</sup>.

### **Italian Migration to Canada and the Immigrant Letter**

When we consider global migration movements, Italian immigration to Canada remains one of the largest movements to have occurred over the twentieth century, with over 500,000 women, men and children settling in Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver and other Canadian cities between 1946 and 1971. Italians began to arrive in Canada well before the postwar period; however, the first phase of a considerable number (involving circa 120,000 Italians – most of whom were men) arrived between 1900 and the First World War. Small streams of families also settled in Canada during this period – mainly moving to Montreal, Toronto and resource towns like Powell River, and giving rise to communities that included the construction of churches, stores, and housing (Ramirez 1984; Scardellato 1985). This wave of migrants created an important infrastructure for the emergence of a community that developed as a result of the larger and more permanent postwar movement. Immediately following the Second World War, the combination of a devastated Italian state, a pre-war presence of Italians in Canada, an economic boom in Canada, and political pressures on the Canadian government to help ease Italy's postwar unemployment, created the conditions for the realization of the largest migration movement between Italy and Canada. Once Italy's former status as enemy alien to Canada was removed, a bulk labor program was established, and the Canadian sponsorship program of 1947 – which benefited over 80 percent of Italians entering Canada in these years – was introduced.

In Italy, as literacy rates gradually increased, the practice of letter-writing became especially important during the First World War, when young men – fathers, brothers, husbands and fiancés – left their homes for the trenches or to emigrate abroad. From the reciprocal need to stay in touch emerged the practice of letter-writing among Italian working-class families (Gibelli 1998).

Historically, before the invention of the telephone and current digital technologies, the immigrant letter was the most popular medium of communication employed by migrants and non-migrants engaged in a context of migration<sup>7</sup>. Letter-writing was particularly useful to working-class families during the mass movements of people from continental Europe, the United

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Kingdom and Asia to the Americas (Baily and Ramella 1988; Blegen 1955; Cancian 2010; De Haan 1998; Erickson 1972; Fitzpatrick 1994; Gerber 2006; Helbich and Kamphoefner 2006; Kamphoefner, Helbich and Sommer 1991; Liu 2006; Miller 1985; Miller, Schrier, Boling *et al.* 2003). For literate and less skilled writers, separation in migration provided an opportunity to stay in touch via pen and paper. Sometimes letter-writing involved obtaining assistance of a more educated letter-writer, such as a priest, teacher, family member or friend, or even a young child attending school.

Lovers who wrote letters usually wrote in solitude, sharing their intimacies, their desires and their dreams to each other. Writing love letters compelled them to unconsciously create worlds of their own. Relationships via correspondence required constant work and diligence. They demanded reflection, time, effort, and a good dose of creative writing. Epistolary relationships of this nature were frequently subject to misunderstandings, sudden unexplainable silences, jealousies, and other tensions that inherently developed over time. They required also immeasurable patience. As Antonietta Petris remarked in a letter to her fiancé, Loris Palma, waiting for a letter necessitated significant effort and self-discipline in keeping frantic thoughts at bay:

It's useless for me to hide my turmoil and my worries; it's been a few days, many, actually, that I don't have news from you, I can't imagine the reason for this silence. It's certain that when these things happen, the most horrible thoughts enter our minds (5 Oct. 1948).

Moreover, writing letters to one's lover resulted in, as anthropologist Jack Goody notes, "important repercussions on people's emotions, not simply expressing already existing feelings but in creating or expanding those sentiments through a process of reflexivity" (1998: 107). And, while reflection helped perhaps to fill a lover's voids of loneliness, paradoxically, it also contributed to intensifying nostalgia. Indeed, letter-writing helped a lover to create a world of his or her own for personal reflection and imagination; however, it also compelled a lover to come to terms with the new realities of his or her relationship – a relationship that was no longer grounded in a face-to-face, sexual relationship, but one that would be limited to a "spiritual" relationship on paper. Penned frequently on wafer-thin paper, love letters of this nature conveyed a myriad of themes, subjects, and dynamics, including emotional swings and impulses that were expressed in distinctive language intonations, formalities, diction, and writing skills. While immigrant letters are known to have been circulated among correspondents and their families, neighbours, and friends, love letters are believed to have been shared more exclusively among its principle correspondents, that is, between the lovers themselves<sup>8</sup>.

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## Methodology

Love letters of ordinary writers are not easily found in public archives. As historian David Gerber writes, much like the confessional letter, correspondence between lovers is generally not representative of immigrant letters. The reality is that we simply cannot know if the rarity of immigrant love letters is the result:

of a collection process that culled the intensely private letters from bodies of saved letters because of embarrassment or concerns about privacy, or of the fact that most immigrants had little to confess and defined themselves mostly in the context of their deeply communal familial relations (Gerber 2006: 78).

For my research, much of the success in identifying love letters of this nature has been anchored in the fieldwork research I led in Montreal in 2003 and 2004. Among friends, families, and the larger Italian community in Montreal, I inquired if letters of their loved ones (and not necessarily of lovers) sent to and from Italy and Canada in the postwar period had been preserved. Once letter collections were identified, I proceeded to reading and digitally archiving the letters that had been loaned to me, and then the required permissions were obtained. To my surprise, over 160 love letters were identified among the letter-collections. These letters were subsequently examined as part of my research on Italian migration to Canada<sup>9</sup>.

## The Letter Collections

### *Antonietta Petris and Loris Palma*

In September 1948, two years following a flurry of letters exchanged between Ampezzo Carnico (a town in the Italian Alps located in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia's province of Udine) and Venice, Antonietta Petris and Loris Palma were faced with an onerous challenge in their relationship. Loris was to remain in Venice, while Antonietta was to immigrate with her mother to Montreal for an indeterminate time. The plan was that Loris would eventually join Antonietta in Montreal once the papers were ready and he was cleared to leave from his military obligations. While their relationship first began in person in August 1946, barely one week after Loris declared his love for Antonietta with a kiss, they were each forced to part ways and stay connected in writing. With the exception of occasional visits, Antonietta remained with her family in Ampezzo Carnico and Loris, with his family in Venice, where they hoped to live once married. Their fate would not direct them to Venice

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but to a city in Canada. Upon arriving in Montreal, Antonietta began to make arrangements in earnest for Loris to join her. Finally, in July 1949, Loris landed in Quebec City where he was reunited with Antonietta, and several months later they were married at the Madonna della Difesa Church (Notre-Dame-de-la-Défense) in Montreal. This letter collection of an engaged couple living an ocean apart provides a striking perspective on the emotional woes and joys of a young couple hoping to remain in love and connected across the thousands of miles that separated them.

### *Giordano Rossini and Ester di Leonardi*

While still in his early twenties, Giordano Rossini lived in Ostia, a small city along the Mediterranean coast just an hour's drive south of Rome. Giordano Rossini and Ester di Leonardi had met and fallen in love in the summer of 1956. In early March 1957, Ester embarked on an ocean-liner with her brothers and sister destined for Halifax. Their aim was to join their older brother who had already settled in Montreal, and to economically improve their lives while residing together as a family again. The preserved ninety-four letters of the collection that Giordano wrote to Ester describe his daily activities, his concerns and preoccupations, his reflections on his loneliness, his dreams, and especially, his longing for Ester. In these tightly written diary-like letters, Giordano discussed his feelings, his hopes and doubts about their relationship, his curiosity about Ester's life in Montreal, and his mood swings – often oscillating in single letters from melancholy to hope, from euphoria to jealousies and sadness. On occasion, he would also describe scenarios that he imagined would take place one day when he and Ester would be together again in Rome. Giordano and Ester were not yet engaged to be married when Ester left Rome; however, Giordano's passionate letters reveal that they intended to marry one day – as soon as Ester would return from Canada in a few years time.

### *Dante del Moro and Sara Franceschetti*

As a married couple, Dante del Moro and Sara Franceschetti had decided that the time had come to explore work opportunities in Canada. In 1955, Dante inquired with his cousin who had settled in British Columbia's pulp and paper mill town of Powell River in the 1920s about possible work and living conditions. Once Dante received his cousin's enthusiastic response, both he and Sara planned for his journey to Powell River and began to prepare for the departure that was to follow for Sara and their two children. In March 1956, Dante del Moro set out on the *Saturnia* ocean-liner taking him to Halifax. At Pier 21 he embarked on the train to Vancouver, where he would catch the ferry

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to Powell River. As he settled into work in the construction and later, the pulp and paper industry, in Italy, Sara worked hard to maintain a normal life for their young children despite the absence of their father. Now that her husband was away, the responsibility of her children, the household, and the fulfilment of the required immigration formalities rested solely on her as she prepared for their permanent move to Canada. Despite their best efforts, Dante and Sara endured over nine months of separation. In their correspondence, of which both sides remain preserved in their family's hands, Sara and Dante wrote avidly to each other offering heartfelt solace, criticism and advice, much-needed encouragement and support, and endearing affection and desire for each other. These letters cast a compelling gaze on the exchanges sustained by a married couple whose letters express the ardent need of each to remain connected in the other's absence (Cancian [forthcoming]).

The letters from these collections are uniquely personal. At the same time, they represent experiences and emotions of many people (both within and outside the parameters of Italian migration to Canada) whom, as lovers, wrote letters to stay in touch across geographic and societal differences. Similarly to other experiences of love and migration, however, they also speak of a genuine desire to reach out, to remain in touch, to compress time and space between them, and to negotiate their own daily realities as migrants and non-migrants. The extent in which these love letters are representative of migrants and non-migrants within Canada, Italy or elsewhere can be more fully identified as other romantic love collections become available to researchers<sup>10</sup>.

### **Transnational Lovers and Their Letters: A Look at What Their Letters Say**

Letters written between lovers in international migration are replete with declarations of *amour-passion*, and yearning, much as they are part of other epistolary romantic exchanges. The letters also speak of demand, need and a determination to overcome a lover's absence:

[...] know that my heart and my thoughts focus on and desire to live only for you and with you only, only one objective gives me strength to bear this sorrow, the hope that one day you will come to this land, a land that smiles only to me –You will come, my dear Loris, you will be here because I want this, without you my life is so empty! (Letter of Antonietta Petris, 28 Sept. 1948).

Numerous letters in the three collections illustrate the writers' subjectivities, their creativities and their agency in enduring the separation. In some cases, the poetic language that referred to the moon and the stars was employed to

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express a lover's *amour-passion* being reached out towards the absent lover in the shared space of the night sky:

Before I close, I want to tell you that I saw our star tonight and it seemed to be saying to me: "Ester sends you many, many kisses and is always thinking of you" to which I answered: "Dearest little star, bring many, many kisses to my Love... Tell her that I will love her for all of my life..." Till tomorrow, my dearest love (Letter to Ester di Leonardi, 19 April 1957).

Emotional dependence between the lovers further imbibed the letters in the collections. In the following excerpt, for instance, Antonietta Petris described her reaction to her fiancé's description of his Christmas holidays away from her:

Afterwards, when I read your letter the second time, I understood everything, and was immediately sorry, deeply sorrowed as I read your expressions that were replete with sadness and melancholy, I didn't expect such a letter. I thought the holidays would bring you a little joy. This was my wish that I have hoped for you and always will. I wanted you to be happy even if you missed me, that you would have the best memories possible of Christmas [...] so that you would not suffer, but that's not the way it was for you (6 Jan. 1949).

As Grassi puts it, the love letter, similarly to the *lettre intime*, illustrates episodes in which

le corps devient présent et l'écriture se place non seulement sous le signe du moi mais aussi de l'excès, de l'expression de la démesure, de l'incessante hyperbole qui transforme je t'aime en je t'adore et joue éperdument avec les mille, mille fois, un million de baisers et de choses tendres (1990: 23).

The affective excess to which literary scholar Marie-Claire Grassi refers to here is, as shown below in an escalating sequence of questions, also part of a transnational lover's discourse:

*Mio caro amore*, here I am again. Writing to you for me is an enormous consolation. Did you receive the letter and postcard that I sent you in Lisbon? I hope so, how are you all? Did you have a good trip? Did you start thinking of your return trip? *Amore mio*, you must come back – so much so, that the other day, I threw a coin for you in the *Fontana di Trevi*. As you can see, I'm always thinking of you. Tell me what you've seen. What you've been doing. Are you enjoying yourself? Write to me, tell me everything. I feel so lonely. I miss you terribly. I cannot live without you, don't leave me!!!! (Letter to Ester di Leonardi, 16 Mar. 1957)

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The notion of time also manifests itself in letters of this nature. Literary specialist Janet Gurkin Altman writes that the temporal polyvalence that is often evoked in letters is crucial to understanding the way messages about events are perceived (1982: 131). Moreover, as Grassi notes: “Abolir le temps et la distance est ici comme entre tous les êtres séparés la première fonction de la lettre, matérialisation éphémère de l’être aimé” (1990: 23-24). Temporal oscillations (fluctuations between the past, present, and future) evoked in lovers’ correspondence coincide with conventions inherent to the notion of “le temps épistolaire”, described by Cécile Dauphin<sup>11</sup>. This fluctuation of time is evidenced also in the letters of Giordano Rossini, for instance:

My dearest future little wife... when you return, we’ll go back to the Coliseum and read again the inscription we left on that distant day in 1956, do you remember? It was raining, and we had walked around the Coliseum 7, 8 times. I was so happy every time I saw you, a strange throb stirred inside of me. It was the emotion, the feeling of sublime happiness that came with seeing you. *Amore mio*, when I think of you now, a sharp pain pierces my heart (4 Apr. 1957).

Much like other immigrant letters, the love letters of these collections also discussed issues of work, living conditions, and plans for a successful outcome of the couples’ migration. In the case of Antonietta Petris, for instance, working in the manufacturing industry entailed exhausting work upon her arrival in Montreal in 1948, as she confided to Loris on October 8 of that year:

Since Tuesday, I’ve been working in this large workshop... I was hoping to continue working happily... to deserve the praises of my department supervisor, a French woman. I wanted to work, I wanted to succeed at it because I felt I was doing something for our future happiness. But I can’t... the work is too demanding for me, and I am not that strong, I had to stay all day continuously sitting at the sewing machine without a minute’s break... I feel discouraged, but what can I do? I was hoping to get used to the deafening noise of the machines, to the onerous work, but I come home every day more tired than ever.

In the months that followed, Antonietta became increasingly satisfied with her work as she wrote in February 1949:

I asked her [her lady boss at the factory] for a raise, so that I now make 6 dollars more per week. I’ll let some time pass, and then ask for another raise. Otherwise, I’ll change jobs. Here, there are lots of jobs available. There is something for everyone (1 Feb. 1949).

Dante del Moro would also eventually find satisfaction in his work and his new income over time – despite the incessant nostalgia for his wife and children – as he wrote to Sara several months following his arrival:

I paid back my debt to Elio in just two months. Plus, I deposited in the bank \$400 for your application, plus a few small expenses for myself, like a smoke, and other odd items of necessity. I'll also tell you something else. If all goes well, I will have found a more comfortable home for us by the water, and it's near my boss's house. It's in a nice quiet location, where there is lots of fresh clean air and sun as it is now. You just need to walk a couple of steps, and you're right on the beach. What do you think of that? (15 August 1956).

By contrast, in Giordano's letters addressed to Ester, other findings emerge. Because only one-side of the correspondence – the letters of Giordano writing in Rome – is available for the analysis, I am unable to examine the descriptions that Ester provided on her life in Montreal. However, what is interesting in his letters is the curiosity and the unease that his queries about her life in Montreal raise:

Finally, yesterday I received your letter of 12-4/57, in which I learn that everything is proceeding normally. There is only one thing that surprises me, and that is, from what you are telling me, you don't work from home, but somewhere else. Where do you work? Can you tell me? Does Maria Luisa work there too? I am so happy to hear that you love me always so much. This is an enormous source of comfort for me. I too love you so so much!! – I wish we were already married!! So that I wouldn't need to worry about losing you (18 Apr. 1957).

### **The Challenges of Distance and Lovers' Attempts to Negotiate Them**

Time and its slow passing is a frequent frustration voiced by the letter-writers in the lovers' correspondence. To cite one of many examples, Sara Franceschetti writes to her husband, Dante, in May 1956: "*Caro*, precisely three months have passed since the day you left. It feels like yesterday and like an eternity." In another letter in which Dante described to Sara his eager anticipation of his family's imminent arrival, he noted:

[...] the wait is now not a question of months, but days. For me, instead, it feels just as long, and to tell you the truth, I have been calm and patient until now. But at this moment, I don't know why, a day feels like a month (12 Sept. 1956).

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Lovers made attempts to negotiate their relationships in their letters to each other (in contrast to the former face-to-face affective and sexual relations they enjoyed prior to their separation), yet they inherently experienced challenges in expressing the depth of their emotions on paper. In the following excerpt, for instance, Giordano writes to Ester of the constraints and frustrations he feels due to her absence:

*Tesoro mio*, I love you, I love you, I love you. These words written on paper do not do justice, they cannot demonstrate their true meaning... when I write to you and say the word “love”, it comes from the depths of my heart, and I say it to you with every breath of my soul!!!! (28 May 1957)

### **Negotiating the Affections of the Heart and the Mind on Paper**

Lovers writing in contexts of international migration constructed metaphorical bridges in their letters to each other. Historian Karen Lystra writes that simply thinking of the lover (1989: 52) and writing about it to one's lover has the effect of creating a special kind of connection across spaces. Many of the letters I analysed illustrate ways in which frequent writing helped reinforce, however briefly, the affective connections between the lovers, while helping them negotiate the absence of the other. For instance, Sara Franceschetti remarks in May 1956 that writing to her husband in Powell River was an important part of her daily existence: “Three days that you don't write to me and I am immediately anxious. The more time passes, the more I write with difficulty, but every day I write to you. Later I'll tear them up... it's a way for me to release my anxiety.”

On the other side of the correspondence in Powell River, Dante del Moro expressed his frustration with his wife Sara on not receiving news from her in several days. In the following excerpt, he describes how the act of letter-writing – instead of waiting – served to appease his worries: “I started writing to you with my thoughts turned to all of you, so that I could calm this angst that continues to wear me down” (22 June 1956). A similar observation is noted in the letters of Antonietta Petris, in which she described the significance of receiving Loris's letters and their consoling effect:

I reread your last two letters. In them I find so much true love, so much affection... so much comfort for me in these words, you cannot imagine. They bring me everything I need to continue to love, to hope (30 Oct. 1948).

Similarly for Giordano, writing to Ester filled him with comfort and reassured him about their relationship. In doing so, the process of writing a

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letter to Ester helped him to negotiate her absence: “I’m taking advantage of a little free time for me to write to you these two lines. If I don’t write to you, I feel terrible” (27 Apr. 1957).

Not only was letter-writing a practice akin to personal presence, as Lystra (1989) suggests, but love letters themselves compelled correspondents to feel the presence of their absent lover through the writing and reception of intimate words – as observed below in a letter from Dante to Sara:

When the children are asleep, and it’s late, and you’re in bed, turn off the light. Turn to one side of the bed. Rest your cheek on the pillow. After a while, you will find that a tender caress will have touched you [...] the touch of the man who has loved you so much and who will love you forever (23 May 1956).

The letters addressed to Ester in Montreal provide a similar example of absence made present from a letter’s narrative. In this case, Giordano wrote: “When I write to you, I feel you close to me. It feels like I’m talking to you, so much so that I would never want to stop writing to you” (7 Apr. 1957).

Yet, maintaining a correspondence was both a blessing and a curse for the lovers separated by migration, a double-edge sword. The letter helped correspondents to feel their lover’s presence (albeit, in a “spiritual” way). At the same time, the letter – a material symbol of the other’s absence – acutely reminded them of their quotidian absence and the loss (of time, emotions, etc.) that resulted from it. In fact, it would not be long following the movement of a correspondent’s gaze from her lover’s letter that the real absence of the lover would be experienced. The love letter – similarly to other letters written in circumstances of distance and separation – is bounded together by the notion of absence and presence<sup>12</sup>.

In international migration, love correspondents exchanged questions and answers, made requests for more frequent letters, and delineated some of the ground rules for *le pacte épistolaire* (Dauphin, Lebrun-Pezzerat and Pouban 1995: 131) they shared. The strategy of asking questions – whether with a pragmatic or sentimental motive was also an attempt to sustain a dialogue and maintain active engagement on the part of the lover. This approach helped to reassure a correspondent that she would not be forgotten. Other indices that allow us to assume that a long-standing correspondence was anticipated by a lover include the request that letters be numbered, or that more details be packed in a letter. An agreement (explicit or implicit) to respect these and other rules of letter-writing, including frequency, materialized in a *pacte épistolaire* between the lovers:

You can't imagine how comforted I am to read your letters and how much happiness they bring to me, for this I ask you, I beg you to write to me, to write to me: once a week punctually, I'll try to do the same so that neither of us needs to suffer... one line, one short letter is all we need... but the flow must be constant, lively and continuous because if one day that disappears, it's all over (Letter of Antonietta Petris, 14 Nov. 1948).

Love letters written in contexts of international migration served many purposes for distant lovers. They reassured lovers of continuity in the relationship. They appeased and yet reinforced pangs of jealousy. They provided a precious place for their creativity where past, present and future dreams could thrive. Letters conceived in the context of migration and separation encouraged lovers to create a world of their own in their writing. Letter-writing compelled lovers to assist and support their distant lovers, while at the same time, to empathize with them, and feel their absence in concrete ways. Conversely, writing letters helped transnational lovers to negotiate and make do in their lovers' absence – which at times involved constructing metaphorical bridges and evoking the moon and the stars as messengers of their love. Ultimately, correspondence between lovers allowed them to stay in touch and to stay the course until their reunion was possible.

### **So, What do Love Letters Have to do With Migration?**

The convergence of *amour-passion*, letter-writing, and migration yields an exciting avenue of research in a range of fields, including migration studies, and the burgeoning literature on the history of emotions, and transnational relationships. In this article, through the use of three letter collections created in the context of Italian postwar migration to Canada, I have presented the love letter and described some of the more prominent themes that are discussed in letters written by three couples separated in the postwar years as a result of international migration. Secondly, I have discussed the challenges that the lovers/writers encountered as they attempted to reconfigure their relationships from a formerly held face-to-face relationship to a romantic love nurtured on paper. Finally, I have discussed ways in which these lovers negotiated distance and separation in their letters to each other.

As I have attempted to show, a reading of love letters conceived by women and men engaged in international migration provides a constellation of insights on human mobility, transnational relationships, romantic love, and the history of emotions. However, further investigations are needed, especially across temporal and geographic spaces, ethnicities, and disciplines. In doing so, more questions will be asked that encourage researchers to explore the complexities,

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“confusion, and muddiness of everyday life, where human sentiments in all their varieties interact” (Ramirez 1999: 999).

What does love have to do with migration? What kind of insights can be culled from immigrant letters other than migrants’ experiences of settlement and acculturation? How do non-migrants fit in the description of “migration experience”? In relation to more contemporary relationships, what can love letters written in the postal age tell us about the emotional impact of separation from a lover? In what ways can a gender analysis contribute to our understanding of lovers in transnational relationships? What was it like for two lovers to be separated for months and months with only a pen and paper to keep them connected? How does that experience of distance and connection compare with today’s transnational relationships which benefit from advanced communication technologies? Digital technology provides correspondence that can instantaneously be responded to. How does this impact the communication between lovers, the *amour-passion* in couples, their experience of time and space, and their memory of each other? These and other questions remain to be explored.

## Concluding Remarks

In the last postal age in which the love letters of Antonietta, Loris, Giordano, Ester, Dante and Sara were written, thousands of other couples also exchanged letters. Without these written conversations and life stories – materialized on yellowed paper and pen-marks – historians and other scholars would have significantly limited access to the emotional and affective trajectories of transnational relationships. As cultural artifacts, the love letters – as I have endeavoured to show – that are preserved today in family and public archives are extremely valuable. Not only have these letters permitted corresponding lovers to return again and again to their epistolary conversations and to their memories of their lovers, they are also proving useful to scholars’ quest to advance knowledge on the confidential worlds of migrant and non-migrant lovers.

### Acknowledgment

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## Notes

1. On the burgeoning literature on transnational relationships, see for instance: Beck-Gernsheim (2007), Constable (2005 and 2003), Hirsch (2003), Kim (2010) and Mahler (2001).
  2. Noteworthy exceptions are Ahearn (2001), French (2003), Hanna (2006) and Lystra (1989).
  3. As a case in point, as David Gerber argues concerning the collections of immigrant letters he analysed for his research: "Immigrants probably wrote love letters, the privacy of which was widely understood to be inviolable, but none of these survives in the archived collections on which this study is based, probably for the reason that they were never intended to be seen by anyone but the addressee" (2006: 107-108).
  4. For a discussion on some of the reasons why the love letter has not been explored in international migration, see Cancian (forthcoming).
  5. See, for instance, the documentary film *Ho fatto il mio coraggio*, directed by Giovanni Principalli (2009).
  6. The letters have been translated as per the original texts. In doing so, I have endeavoured to be faithful to the original texts and punctuation in the letters. To protect the identity of the letter-writers and their families, the names I have used are pseudonyms: Giordano Rossini, Ester di Leonardi, Dante del Moro and Sara Franceschetti. For the Antonietta Petris collection, I have used the writers' real names, as per the wishes of Mrs. Petris.
  7. For the circulation of special occasions or news – such as a birth or death, the telegram was also widely used. Photographs were also exchanged, and often included in envelopes with letters.
  8. On the circulation of immigrant letters, see especially: Cancian (2010), Fitzpatrick (1994), Gerber (2006), Hoerder (1999), and Kamphoefner, Helbich and Sommer (1991).
  9. At the conclusion of my fieldwork research in 2004 in Montreal, over 800 letters were identified, collected and digitally archived for the research, half of which was used in the analysis for my doctoral dissertation, *Transatlantic Correspondents: Kinship, Gender, and Emotions in Postwar Migration Experiences between Italy and Canada, 1946-1971* (Cancian 2007b). The book manuscript of the dissertation followed shortly after. For a more comprehensive discussion on the methodology that I employed in this article, please refer to the book *Families, Lovers, and their Letters: Italian Postwar Migration to Canada* (Cancian 2010).
  10. As historians W. Helbich and W. Kamphoefner (2006) have observed concerning German immigrant letters, there is a huge discrepancy between the number of letters that have been written and the few available numbers that have survived and been archived for the use
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of researchers. Helbich and Kamphoefner and other migration historians have also found that fairly large groups of migrants did not write letters at all (*ibid.*: 29). However, of the collections that have survived, access and preservation remain fundamental issues for their contribution to knowledge.

11. Cécile Dauphin's concept of "le temps épistolaire" encompasses temporal dynamics involved in the waiting, reading, writing practices of a letter. Dauphin writes: "l'écriture épistolaire extériorise, cristallise et accentue la discontinuité de la communication orale en lui conférant une dimension spatiale et temporelle qui permet ainsi de la soumettre à d'éventuelles manipulations. Mais la communication écrite crée aussi son propre rituel dans un cadre temporel codifié. D'abord, l'échange est ponctué par l'attente de la réponse. [...] Cette obligation, qui relève du code de la politesse, traduit en fait un rapport au temps spécifique de la correspondance. Contrairement à la communication orale, l'échange peut être à tout moment interrompu. Il est en tout cas différé, le temps qu'il faut pour transporter la lettre et la réponse [...]. Le rapport au temps s'exprime encore dans le déroulement du cycle annuel avec ses temps forts et récurrents [...] et avec ses temps morts que la lettre doit remplir. [...] Le temps de l'écriture épistolaire tel qu'il est inscrit dans les manuels détermine différents cycles qui s'emboîtent, structurent la vie sociale et affective. Surtout, il implique une disponibilité sans laquelle la communication écrite serait difficile" (1991: 235-236).

12. As Jack Goody notes, it is precisely because of absence that the writing and the reflection and expansion in the writing to a lover is articulated in love poetry and other forms of writing (1998: 122).

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