

Italian Canadiana

Introduction. The Traces We Leave: Italian-Canadian Writings and the New Millennium

Carmen Concilio

Volume 37, Number 1-2, Spring 2023

The Traces We Leave: Italian-Canadian Writings and the New Millennium

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1108361ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v37i1.42101>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0827-6129 (print)

2564-2340 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Concilio, C. (2023). Introduction. The Traces We Leave: Italian-Canadian Writings and the New Millennium. *Italian Canadiana*, 37(1-2), 7–11.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v37i1.42101>

© Carmen Concilio, 2023



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

INTRODUCTION

THE TRACES WE LEAVE: ITALIAN-CANADIAN WRITINGS AND THE NEW MILLENNIUM

CARMEN CONCILIO

University of Torino

The 18th International Conference of the Association of Italian-Canadian Writers (AICW) was held at the Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Modern Cultures of the University of Torino (UniTo), Italy, at the end of September 2022. This community of Italian-Canadian scholars, writers, and artists from across Canada was finally able to meet the community of Italian scholars in Canadian Studies, primarily members of the Italian Association of Canadian Studies (AISC), after two years of restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ The opening presentation was given by Oriana Palusci, president of the Italian Association of Canadian Studies, and saw the participation of Dr. Virginie Lévesque, counselor at the Canadian Embassy in Rome. The morning session of the conference was also attended by students from some of Turin's high schools, who were rather impressed by the variety of topics, genres, and readings offered.

At first sight, what was immediately evident was an atmosphere of ease: the students noticed that “each and every participant was eager to share his/her work, and all the people in the room were united by two things, above all an astonishing degree of humanity and the utter and complete belief in the power which literature can have.”² Thus, in a comfort zone of academic and rigorous – but also humane and warm – intellectual exchange, academic papers were scheduled so as to leave room for readings by creative writers in a continuous contrapuntal dialogue between artistic creativity and scholarly contributions. The present issue includes a selection of the scholarly presentations.

¹ The community of Italian-Canadian writers and the Italian scholars were, however, active during the pandemic and the result of cross-cultural workshops is the volume *Covid19 & Us*.

² See Chirico and Rinaldi, “Student's Report.”

Palusci, a life-long scholar in Canadian Studies and president of the Italian Association of Canadian Studies, opened the conference with a keynote lecture on material culture, namely the migrant's wooden trunk, or *baule*. This symbol reinforces the poetics of objects, particularly the memory of wood, related to immigrants' experiences in Canada. She traced a parallel between wood and relics made in Italy and relocated to Canada – such as trunks and Catholic crosses, and even adaptations and domestications of Pinocchio – using artworks by Giuseppe Penone, who has also exhibited in Canada. Through a Cultural Studies perspective, Palusci retraced, among other things, the Italian presence in Canada during the Second World War and the role of Italians in the creation of the “Galleria” in the AGO in Toronto. In these cases, wood was a relevant emblem of Italianness, which left a visible trace in Italian-Canadian letters and arts.

Angela Buono introduced francophone writers who, in her critical view, adopt and adapt the concept of *transpoétique* – coined by Tunisian-Franco-Ontarian writer Hédi Bouraoui – not only as a theme connected with their stories of migration but also as a structural and stylistic strategy which can be observed in their works. In particular, the concept of wandering and *errance* is what Buono aimed at detecting, as implied in the migrant's journey and mimetically transferred into the writing and rhetoric of authors such as Fulvio Caccia, Lisa Carducci, and Bianca Zagolin.

While attempting to draw attention to Italian-Canadian queer art and writing, Licia Canton analyzed the case study of playwright Steve Galluccio, who creates space for encounters between the LGBTQ+ community and the Italian-Canadian community in his writings and his literary career. Two relevant examples are his script for the film *Mambo Italiano* and his most recent play, *At the Beginning of Time*. Both works frame the experience of queer identity within an Italian heritage and the world of art, writing, and performance. A lens of Queer and Intersectional Studies helped Canton to critically contextualize Galluccio's oeuvres within the Italian-Canadian literary and artistic canon.

Giuliana Colalillo introduced an innovative perspective on gender and age within Migration Studies and sociological research. Colalillo challenged the stereotype according to which migrants are mostly male and, through social science-oriented investigations – namely, one-on-one interviews – she showed the exact role of a generation of Italian women as migrants. She thus updated the image of the Italian-Canadian migrant woman, her role, and her social place, particularly nowadays as a *nonna*, within Canadian society. The

role and position of the Italian woman migrant remains relevant, as shown by the recent publication of ten case studies of women from Emilia-Romagna by Chiara Gius, *Espatriate. Storie di donne italiane emigrate in Canada*, which resonates with Colalillo's own research project.

Carmen Concilio also approached the theme of ageing through an in-depth analysis of the novel by Caterina Edwards, *Finding Rosa*, which recounts the story of an elderly woman losing her memory and of her daughter who is determined to reconstruct the family's past. While the novel was hailed in Canada as a story of Alzheimer's disease, in Italy critical attention fell on the historical drama of the *grande esodo* from the Dalmatian and Julian regions. Therefore, the two souls of the novel – the historical reconstruction of the Istrian question and the evolution of the illness – were objects of inquiry in this contribution. The study availed itself of Border Studies as a methodology, as well as contributions from Ageing Studies, in order to invigorate the two focal points of this exemplary literary work.

The figure of Pietro Corsi was thoroughly examined by Rosina Martucci, who highlighted how his historical volume, namely *Halifax. The Other Door to America* remains a pillar and a milestone in Canadian migration culture, particularly for the Italian-Canadian diaspora. The paradigm of the door to access a new life is symbolized by Halifax and its now-famous Pier 21: a cultural emblem and a topographical landing point, but above all a literary *topos* in the historical and sociological writings of a man who was a polyglot and a cosmopolitan citizen, yet a very Italian writer.

The genre of the short story was the object of inquiry for Lianne Moyes, who focused her critical work on Licia Canton's collection *The Pink House and Other Stories*, where silence becomes not so much a figure of speech but a scheme, a strategy of discontinuity within the narrative flow. This disruption becomes evident particularly in prose works where a trauma is vocalized. These are stories, according to Moyes, that become a study in silence – a silence which becomes audible particularly under the critical influence of literary and trauma studies.

Photography was the focus of the essay by Vincenzo Pietropaolo, who defined himself as an insider/outsider artist in his constant work as documentary photographer – that is, a photo essayist – and as a member of the Italian diaspora. He took a metanarrative approach to assess and evaluate methodological questions, such as the self-aware positioning of the “I” as an insider/outsider, the autoethnographic gaze, the participant as a modifier of the observational field, and the relationship between words and images. In

this contribution, Pietropaolo critically discussed three photographic projects: the Italian-Canadian immigrant series, the labour movement series, and the queer Italian-Canadian project.

In his essay, Joe Pivato discussed the salience of the Second World War in Italian-Canadian literature, almost as if this heritage were a natural continuity with Italian neo-realist cinema. In describing the writers' various attitudes, at times distancing themselves and their looking back to their Italian origins, it becomes evident that it is precisely the memory of war and wartimes that most of them recollect and write about in poetry, novels, and other genres. Interestingly, Pivato also highlighted how difficult it was for Italians to tackle the issue of internment camps in Canada. The Second World War thus occupies a relevant role in early literary output by migrants, as well as in the most recent works of literature and historical chronicles. Pivato offered a scholarly overview of a wide corpus of Italian-Canadian war literature.

As happens with most writers of Italian descent who migrated to Canada, problems of identity, displacement, and trauma are very common literary *topoi*. Genni Gunn's works – according to Deborah Saidero – are no exception. However, Gunn's vast literary production – and experimentation with genres – is rich in occurrences of travel and movement, while also delving into trauma and grief. Writing, then, becomes a sort of therapy used to come to terms with loss, separation, and migration itself.

In dealing with self-translation, Maria Pia Spadafora analyzed the case study of Canton's collection of short stories *The Pink House and Other Stories*. After introducing the tradition of self-translation and Translation Studies in the Canadian cultural context, Spadafora highlighted Canton's self-positioning as a writer of Italian, French, English, and Venetian dialect. Canton's multilingualism surfaces not only in auto-translation but also in the use of a variety of linguistic strategies, similarly reducing the distance between creative author and translator. Spadafora's contribution gives voice to the several written languages of the author within a framework that includes linguistics and translation studies.

A similar study was conducted by Elena Spagnuolo, who also elaborated on the making of self-translation in the case of Dôre Michelut, an Italian-Canadian writer from Friuli. As in the case of Canton, in her writings Michelut hybridizes not only English and Italian but also her dialect. As the author of an essay entitled "Coming to Terms with the Mother Tongue," Michelut makes it evident that self-conscious multilingualism applies to her writing and that translating is hybridized with creative writing itself. Close linguistic

analysis of her works allowed Spagnuolo to debate issues of translation and self-translation, interweaving them with the experience of a woman migrant.

The essays gathered here, then, contribute to widening our awareness and knowledge of Italian-Canadian literary and artistic contemporary productions within an interdisciplinary dialogue and framework. While specific themes, such as migration, identity crisis, displacement, and diaspora, together with psychological trauma, grief, and the unresolved sense of loss are common and to a certain extent inevitable, the variety of genres and techniques discussed and scrutinized here – along with the emergence of new cogent issues such as the LGBTQ+ cause(s) and voice(s), and self-translation as a common self-affirmative creative praxis – are all enriching pieces in what is now a well-established and lively archive. This means that Italian-Canadian literature and art have a special place in the wider context of Canada's varied cultural landscape, thanks to the presence of a community such as the AICW, an organization that many, if not most, embrace and support. The AICW keeps alive a keen interest in things Italian; it maintains lively bilateral relationships between Canada and Italy; it allows the urgency of migration debates never to abate; and encourages scholarly discussions that involve literary criticism, sociology, linguistics, psychology, and photography. These, too, are the stories we live by; these, too, are the traces we leave behind while preparing for the future.

CITED WORKS

Chirico, Arianna, and Maria Costanza Rinaldi. "Student's Report on *The Traces We Leave: Italian-Canadians and Their Works*, 18th Biennial Conference of the Association of Italian-Canadian Writers, Turin, Italy, 28 September – Saturday 1st October 2022." Association of Italian-Canadian Writers website. Online at <https://www.aicwtorino2020.unito.it/press-review>.

Covid19 & Us. Seniors' Letters to the Future. Testi, memory maps, mémoires au temps de la COVID. Torino: Nuova Trauben, 2021. Online at <https://www.2021canadaitalynnovation.unito.it>.