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Article abstract

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THE MEMORY OF WOOD: ITALIAN PAST, CANADIAN EXPERIENCES

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Summary: In this essay, I try to connect Italian migration and life in Canada through the memory of wood, taking as case studies wooden relics made in Italy and relocated to a country known for its immense forests, as well as wooden artifacts made in Canada by the Italian newcomers. After briefly introducing some general observations on the Italian-Canadian community, employing a Cultural Studies approach, I deal with different experiences undergone by Italians, both as new citizens and, as in the case of Giuseppe Penone, as artists working in Canada. Ranging from unfair treatment during the Second World War to the creation of the Galleria Italia in the AGO in Toronto, wood is a relevant keynote in the construction of a hybridized Italian-Canadian culture. Specific wooden objects, such as trunks and Catholic crosses, are taken into account with reference to a thriving Italian-Canadian literary milieu. In conclusion, I demonstrate that Italian popular culture has also left a trace in the Canadian experience.

Un alfabeto di alberi?

Una scrittura con lettere di bosco?¹

Introduction

The Italian experience in Canada was never translated into a unified homogeneous “way of life.” Family and local ties, dialects and daily practices, tended to divide Italians into self-contained communities: *abruzzesi, friulani, napoletani, calabresi*. I mentioned those groups because they are the ones I was in touch with, to which I belonged, when I lived in Canada many years ago as a child in an immigrant Abruzzese family. They were linguistically quite different, although most of them felt the same deep love for the nation of their origins and youth. Day after day, my grandmother’s Calabrese second husband would repeatedly listen to the record of the popular song “Mamma” sung by Beniamino Gigli (“Mamma son tanto felice / Perché ritorno da te”).

¹ Penone, *Scritti*, 186.

Fascism tried to define Italian Canadians (or rather the Italians living in Canada) as an exiled national group, in the name of a long, largely artificial tradition going back to Rome and the Roman Empire, one that was later on reinforced by their shared Catholic faith. I would immediately like to add to this historical reference, as a cherished common ground, the rural origins of most of the Italian immigrants to Canada, nurturing the idealized vision of a country fully merged with the landscape of ploughed fields and rude peasantry, the *Italia contadina*, celebrated by the fascist patriarchal authority, after the Liberazione by the Repubblica italiana, mainly through the political leadership of the DC, the Christian Democratic Party (although the left-wing parties in Italy were not so hostile to such an ideological construction).

As Italy in the 1950s was moving towards a stormy and uneven process of industrialization, especially in the north, in both the native country and in Canada, the unifying rural myths turned out to be more and more a legend of the past, fuelled by nostalgia and dreams of an impossible homecoming. While Canada increasingly became the homeland for new generations whose grandparents and parents still considered themselves truly Italian, the memories of the ancient rural cradle did enter the region of a spiritual state of mind, inspiring a fond remembrance of objects left behind or affectionately preserved during the journey across the Atlantic. We are fully aware that Canada is a country looking towards the future, even towards a utopian interpretation of its world status. Yet, sometimes, the shadows of the past still haunt its bright perspectives of growth, not to mention the long-standing question of the Indigenous people and the residential schools.

The journey I would like to take in this essay is based on the implications of the memory of wood – the substance of which trees are made, as well as trees collectively, that is a forest – and the objects made from it, connecting the Italy of the immigrants to their Canadian abodes through a Cultural Studies approach, selecting examples from literature, culture, and the arts, bearing in mind the link between the chosen texts and different waves of the Italian diaspora and, consequently, to the emergence and achievement of the Italian communities in Canada.

Wood: Italians Are Enemy Aliens

Today, Italians in Canada are not even considered a minority group, as they are fully integrated into the Canadian milieu and establishment. What should we make of a past apparently useless and enfeebled by clichés and widespread

attitudes of friendly recognition? After all, Italians in Canada are fully-fledged Canadians. Their family names – a trait which recalls their ethnic origin – are relevant in every social and cultural context. They are so relevant, as a matter of fact, that the Justin Trudeau government did not feel obliged to explicitly acknowledge the Italian-Canadian contribution to the present political Olympus when the Canadian prime minister singled out visible minorities in the selection of his top ministers. The fact that in 2008 the Community Historical Recognition Program (CHRP) introduced by the Government of Canada through the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration has subsidized a certain number of research projects on the imprisonment of different foreign communities during the war – Italians, Japanese, and Germans – is a reminder that Canada is today a very different country, fully unencumbered by the old Imperial British mould.

Thus, as far as the Italian community is concerned, a new consciousness of the hard times besetting the Italians in Canada has recently focused on the dramatic experience of Italian individuals (and their families) considered as “enemy aliens” during the Second World War. Male Canadian citizens of Italian descent, together with Italians living in Canada, were forcibly interned without any previous knowledge of their new abode.² When the Second World War broke out in Europe in September 1939, Canada immediately engaged in wartime emergency measures. A total of 31,000 Italian Canadians were designated as “enemy aliens,” and about 600 were arrested and relocated into at least three camps across Canada. “Registered, photographed, fingerprinted, they were stripped of their civil rights.”³ Among the autobiographical works witnessing the Italian predicament, I would like to mention Mario Duliani’s *La ville sans femmes*, written in 1945 and translated into English by Antonino Mazza as *The City Without Women* (1994).⁴ In his “fictionalised chronicle,” or “documentary novel” (*reportages romancés*), as Duliani calls it in his introduction to the book, based on his internment during the Second World War in two camps for forty months from June 1940 until October 1943, the Italian

² See, among others, Iacovetta, Perin, and Principe, eds., *Enemies Within*, and Bruti Liberati, *Il Canada, l’Italia e il fascismo*.

³ Mazza, “The War on the Home Front,” xi.

⁴ Duliani self-translated his book as *Città senza donne* in 1946. See Fusco, “Le migrazioni linguistiche,” 2011. Mazza used both the original French version and the Italian one for his translation into English. He also included a chapter called “The Italian Americans” (Gli Italiani d’America), which had appeared only in the Italian edition.

journalist and dramatist based in Montreal⁵ scrutinizes the daily life of the war prisoners, collecting vital observations and impressions. The narrator, imprisoned in Camp Petawawa, Ontario, describes it as follows: “Flanking a tiny lake in verdant surroundings, our City rises as an oasis in the middle of a dense forest that stretches all around us as far as the eye can see. Twelve wooden barracks [...] make up what could be called the primary ‘real estate’ of our city.”⁶

Hidden among the thick Northern Ontario forests, the “city” prison, literally embraced by trees, keeps the internees in “wooden barracks.” Some of them work in the forest, escorted by armed guards, cutting and collecting wood, but, as one of the Italians complains, they are not toiling for their families, some of whom are maybe in economic distress in the very country they fled to in order to better their condition:

Work is never noble, unless it is for the well-being of all humankind, unless it establishes solidarity among ourselves for the general good. At first glance, therefore, it might appear that chopping wood in our City is a useful activity, because it indeed does serve to cook the grub for ourselves and our companions. But there are those who have a right to say: “Very well then, I’ll chop wood for everyone’s benefit here, but while I’m chopping wood in prison who will chop the wood to cook the soup for my children and for my wife?”⁷

⁵ Duliani arrived in Canada only in 1936, but the fact that he had been living in France for many years made him a suspect (see Mazza, “The War on the Home Front”).

⁶ Duliani, *The City Without Women*, 16. “Adossé à un petit lac aux contours verdoyants, le camp ouvre une vaste éclaircie dans la forêt qui s’étend à perte de vue tout autour. Douze grandes baraques en bois [...] forment ce qu’on pourrait appeler les ‘principaux immeubles de la ville’” (Duliani, *La ville sans femmes*, 23).

⁷ Duliani, *The City Without Women*, 21. “Le travail, vois-tu, n’est vraiment noble que lorsqu’il établit la solidarité humaine qui existe entre l’effort individuel et le bien-être collectif. À ce point de vue, couper du bois, ici, pour notre petite ville, c’est excellent, puisque ce bois sert à faire cuire le fricot pour soi-même et pour les copains. Mais il en est qui dissent: “Tout cela est très bien, seulement, pendant que je coupe ce bois-ci, qui coupera – façon de parler – le bois destiné à faire cuire la soupe de ma femme et de mes enfants?”” (Duliani, *La ville sans femmes*, 32).

Among the many activities the internees keep themselves busy with, there is woodworking, that is putting into practice the skills inherited from their Italian ancestors:

They saw, they hammer, and break and scrape the wood with iron tools with a screeching that would set the nerves of a saint on edge. Because from the outset of our internment many artisans, joined by numerous amateurs who have made good progress in the art, started to make souvenirs – diverse objects made with fine woods which are easy to find here.⁸

At a certain point in the events, the narrator relates a moving episode in which he finds a love letter, stuck against the roots of an ancient tree, as if it were grown out of the arboreal body:

Today I took a walk near barrack number 10 to gaze at the lake that is beginning to lose its undulating crown of greenery, and I spotted a sheet of writing paper that the wind had blown into the cleft of an enormous tree root. I picked it up. It was a letter. I read it; it had no signature, no name or address. Yet I don't doubt that it was written by my friend the young newlywed.⁹

The Canadian forest has shaped the garrison life so much so that among the many artefacts hoarded during the long months, some of the internees take with them pieces of wood, tokens of adaptation, or rather a reminder that for the Italian immigrants in the 1940s, Canada had become a dystopian land.

⁸ Duliani, *The City Without Women*, 86. "Avec la lime, la scie, le marteau, et raclent avec des instruments pointus le bois et le fer en produisant des crissements à faire sursauter les nerfs. Car depuis le début de notre internement beaucoup d'artisans, auxquels se sont joints beaucoup d'amateurs qui ont vite fait des progrès, se sont mis à fabriquer des 'souvenirs,' objets divers façonnés surtout dans le bois, qui est à la portée de la main ici" (Duliani, *La ville sans femmes*, 162).

⁹ Duliani, *The City Without Women*, 65. "Aujourd'hui, je me promenais du côté de la baraque 10, en bordure du lac qui commence à perdre son ondoyante couronne verte, lorsque mon renard fut attiré par un papier blanc que le vent avait poussé dans l'encoignure d'une grosse racine d'arbre. Je le ramassai, C'était une lettre. Je l'ai lue... Elle ne portait aucun nom et aucune adresse. Mais elle me parut écrite par mon copain le 'jeune marié'" (Duliani, *La ville sans femmes*, 122).

Let us now shift from Dulian's autobiography to the Montreal stage in Vittorio Rossi's *Paradise by the River. The Story of Petawawa. An Historical Drama in Three Acts*, opening the Centaur Theatre Company's new season in 1998.¹⁰

Stage: the remote Petawawa Interment camp, surrounded by a deep forest.

Actors: the Italians, prisoners suspected of being fascists, and the Canadian officers.

The prisoners are warned immediately by the harsh voice of Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Lucerne, the chief warden: "You are surrounded by over two hundred miles of deep, dark forest. To the north is the Ottawa River. You have no way of escaping. If you try, you will be shot on sight."¹¹ Ironically, at the beginning, the prisoners, who live in precarious wooden huts, are employed to cut down trees to store as fuel for the rigid winter weather. Rossi deploys the injustice and the prejudices nurtured against Italians during the war, the majority of them Canadian citizens, and questions the idea of Canada as a utopian new land, which is at the root of the immigrants' imagination. This is a utopia gone bad. Despicable historical episodes are finally unearthed and surface on a map which is still largely unknown. The following is a quote from the dialogue between Sergeant Dunnison and the self-proclaimed fascist internee Calo Calabrese:

When the Italians were arrested in Toronto, they held us for a time at the Canadian National Exhibition Grounds. They displaced us like cattle. People who were our friends – ate our pasta, wore our clothes and shoes, came to gather. They spat on us. They threw things at us. I thought this was a decent country. Is there not an assumption of innocence before being found guilty in your justice system? Why then did they parade us through the streets of Toronto? Why? Shit was thrown on me. It was washed away with piss.¹²

Canadian soldiers and Italian prisoners reach a compromise through the eternal language of music. Calo is a musician, and what the prisoners are

¹⁰ Vittorio Rossi, born in Montreal from Italian parents, is a playwright, actor, screenwriter, and director.

¹¹ Rossi, *Paradise by the River*, 53.

¹² Rossi, *Paradise by the River*, 109.

first required to play is Vivaldi's "Concerto for Mandolins." Mandolins and violins, by the way, are made of wood – in Italy.

One further object in my cultural approach to wood in Rossi's *Paradise by the River* must be added: instead of sending the Italian prisoners food, clothes, and money to help out with their difficulties, "the Italian Embassy sends us pencils" and "[m]ore pencils" to Canadian citizens of Italian descent imprisoned because of their Italian heritage in a land of woods. Paradoxically, in this journey of Italian Canadians and the memory of wood, we should remember that the RCMP planted a tree on the grounds of the Canadian Police College in Ottawa (18 September 2018) to express their regret for their crucial role in arresting hundreds of Italian Canadians during the Second World War.¹³

Notwithstanding the traumatic events involving the Italian community in Canada, Canadian citizens of Italian origin stood up and worked hard, and migration from Italy flourished in the 1950s and 1960s.

It was on 27 May 2021 that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau delivered a formal apology to Italian Canadians:

I rise in this House today to issue an official apology on behalf of the Government of Canada for the internment of Italian-Canadians during the Second World War [...].

To the tens of thousands of innocent Italian-Canadians who were labelled enemy aliens, to the children and grandchildren who have carried a past generation's shame and hurt and to their community – a community that has given so much to our country – we are sorry.¹⁴

Wood: The "Italian Trunk"

The Italian-Canadian poet Gianna Patriarca¹⁵ subtly describes what the process meant for the Italians who crossed the Atlantic in the 1950s and 1960s, as

¹³ See "RCMP Plant Tree to Remember."

¹⁴ See <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/speeches/2021/05/27/prime-ministers-remarks-delivering-official-apology-internment-italian>, According to historian Roberto Perin, a blanket apology was hiding the fact that "in the 1930s and '40s, approximately 3,000 Canadians were card-carrying members of the Italian fascist party"; Stefanovich, "Trudeau apologizes".

¹⁵ Born in Ceprano, Frosinone, she emigrated to Toronto when she was ten in 1960, with her mother, to join her father who was already living in Toronto.

well as the few memorable objects they took with them and the dear people they left behind:

i will take with me
 my grandfather's watch
 on the silver chain
 the carved wooden handle
 of his bent cane
 these things
 i will honour
 in a special place
 in my new home
 these things will remind me
 of who i am
 and where i came from¹⁶

In "What My Arms Can Carry," among the memory relics listed by Patriarca that she will preserve as markers of her Italian identity, we find her grandfather's "carved wooden handle of his bent cane," an artefact made of wood, probably engraved by himself, a memento from the past, from the Italian home from which she has been ripped away. The cane of the aging parent who remained behind, reminding the narrative I/eye of what was and is no more, is a metonymy of the old world and of its resilience.

In "Returning," to quote from another poem by Patriarca, she emphasizes, "We came with heavy trunks."¹⁷ She is referring here to *bauli*, generally wooden trunks, like the ones showcased in the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 in Halifax. Today, together with the material trunks piled up in the museum, together with heaps of suitcases, we can check "The Italian Trunk," a digital trunk full of stories and photographs of the arrival and of the old country.¹⁸ Oral storytelling by Italian immigrants willing to narrate their personal adventure to the new land leaves unforgettable traces of facts and emotions stored for future generations. The trunk full of memories is not selected by chance, underlining the intrinsic symbolic meaning attached to this relic of the past from home.

¹⁶ Patriarca, "What My Arms Can Carry," 11.

¹⁷ Patriarca, "Returning," 21.

¹⁸ Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, "The Italian Trunk." This is one of the three Culture Trunks present online on the museum's website.

A wooden trunk: a treasure of the past, of a family past in Italy, transplanted inside a Canadian house. In *La poetique de l'espace*, Gaston Bachelard writes about the "chest." I will use his reference to the chest, transferring it to the trunk, which, in this context, embodies the chest/trunk of the poor immigrant. Indeed, the trunk is an object that owns its own memory and its own meaning due to the narratives it has witnessed. Besides, the trunk is emblematically a space of mystery, and a womb, somewhere to hide one's treasures. If the trunk is locked, it fosters secrecy – it is inscrutable, it conceals a crystallized intimate world. In it we can find unforgettable things for the trunk owner, unforgettable also for those to whom we will bequeath our treasures. The past, the present, and the future are compressed: the trunk thus becomes the memory of the immemorial.

This is true even more so for the wooden trunks of Italian immigrants to Canada, containing relics and memories of a past in what is going to become a faraway country, sealing off a world which is not there anymore, but can be opened up, searched through, or emptied of its contents from the past. "Wooden trunks" are carefully made by "the village carpenters" for "the mainly one-way departures" from the village of Valle del Sole in Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*¹⁹ and almost ritually packed for the long crossing. It is not so for the "scandalous" Cristina Innocente and her child Vittorio leaving Valle del Sole for Canada in the early 1960s, where the process of collecting or discarding the past is brusquely sped up, summed up, in the preparation of a hasty trunk, as well as a rapid packing: "But my mother and I, it seemed, were being ripped untimely from our womb, without gestation: our own trunk was built in a day, and packed in a matter of hours."²⁰ The womb, that is the motherland, paradoxically echoes Cristina's "immoral" pregnancy (not due to her husband, far off in Canada), brought about by her meeting with a despised stranger, a German soldier fighting in the Second World War at the beginning of the novel. Once in Naples, the big trunk is hoisted on top of an old economy car, a symbol of the Italian technological work in painful progress built by FIAT, a car which can barely carry such a heavy and precious burden:

¹⁹ Ricci, *Lives of the Saints*, 161. Valle del Sole is an invented name, but it is based on Villacanale in Molise, where Ricci's parents lived.

²⁰ Ricci, *Lives of the Saints*, 164.

The two men dragged our trunk from a storage room behind the hotel counter, carrying it out into the street and lifting it onto the roof of a battered Cinquecento, where they secured it with ropes passed through the car's open windows.²¹

Ricci emphasizes this awkward image of Cristina's trunk, as if Italy, with its moral conventions and prejudices, were unable to contain her untamed spirit.

In Frank Paci's contemporary novel *Black Madonna* (1982), sealed with a lock is Assunta Barone's trunk, a wooden trunk that crossed the Atlantic with her to Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. "Assunta called it a *bavulo* in dialect. According to her it contained her only possessions when she crossed the ocean."²² When Joey, the son and narrating voice, and his sister Marie were young, their mother

used to tell them of the tradition in Novilara, her village home in Marche, of passing the *bavulo* from mother to daughter when the daughter married or the mother died. It had gone through a couple of generations already, with the original brass handles and most of the original wood still intact.²³

Assunta, who refuses to adapt to the Canadian way of life, keeps her trunk well locked, confirming her need for secrecy. Marie, who hates her mother's attachment to the old world, is convinced the trunk belongs to her, even if it is located in her mother's bedroom, and desperately looks for the key. Thus, the conflicting relationship between mother and daughter is embodied by the locked trunk, full of secrets from a past faraway in time and space. Marie will open it only after her mother's death and discover it contains a dowry, traditionally passed down to the daughter when she gets married. Paci imagines an intriguing function for this specific *baule*: Marie understands her mother better after she sifts through its contents, but then decides that the *baule* must be shipped back to Italy. It will be given as a wedding present to Marie's cousin Marisa, the daughter of Assunta's sister. As Eveljn Ferraro points out, "she reinserts the trunk into a cultural circuit whereby, as opposed to Canada,

²¹ Ricci, *Lives of the Saints*, 188.

²² Paci, *Black Madonna*, 10. Paci was born in Pesaro, Marche. He emigrated to Canada with his mother to join his father who was living in Sault Ste. Marie.

²³ Paci, *Black Madonna*, 10.

passing down this object from mother to daughter is a signifying practice.”²⁴ Yet that *baule* has been to Canada and back, keeping alive, together with Asunta’s new identity, the past, a gendered past, in the new world.

Wood: Italian Art and Rites

Twenty-first-century Italy and Canada live in a new historical period, marching towards the future. Yet the strength and depth of certain links joining Italy and Canada should also be measured by the creative power embedded in ancient myths, legends, and rituals. It is maybe high time to point out that the web of memories and rites marked by excruciating nostalgia and the vaguest dreams of homecoming²⁵ still generate new meanings and patterns, when such a cultural construct shifts from a psychological and social sphere to the world of imagination and art.

It is at this point that I would like to briefly consider the contribution of the Italian artist Giuseppe Penone, associated with the “Arte povera” movement, to the wing of the recently redesigned Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. The AGO reopened, after Toronto-born Frank Gehry’s reshaping of the building, with Penone’s exhibition, *The Hidden Life Within* (2 October 2011–6 February 2012).²⁶ Gehry connected “the city and the Gallery in provocative ways including dramatic sculptural staircases, the warmth of Douglas fir, and the extensive use of glass which infuses the galleries with natural light.”²⁷ The contemporary Italian artist from Garesio, a village in Piemonte (Italy), known for his large-scale sculptures of trees and wooden installations, inaugurated the new pavilion called *Galleria Italia*, demarcated by the massive glass and wood facade that runs along Dundas Street West, soon to become the defining feature of the museum.

Galleria Italia was named after a huge donation to the AGO – “a \$10 million gift from twenty prominent families in Toronto’s Italian community,” to which other contributions were added. The space in question is the long, majestic walk along the front of the building, dominated by arching timber beams and Douglas firs, where floor-to-ceiling windows seem to frame downtown Toronto as if it were artwork. It is worth quoting the words on the

²⁴ Ferraro, “Space and Relic,” 189.

²⁵ I have written elsewhere on cemeteries and the Italian tombs in Toronto; see Palusci, “A Winter Longer than a Lifetime.”

²⁶ On Penone and his artworks, see his website: <https://giuseppepenone.com/it>.

²⁷ “Frank Gehry in Conversation.”

“original” Galleria Italia plaque, which underscores one of the ways in which past and present are joined together in the new millennium:

To honour the courage, enterprise and community spirit of generations of Italian immigrants to Canada, twenty-six leading families from the Italian-Canadian community have come together in an unprecedented way to support the AGO with the naming of this sculpture promenade – Galleria Italia. The soaring timbers and expansive space of Galleria Italia stand as a legacy to those forefathers and their love for their adopted country.

As the exhibition curators state, Penone “has carved out the wood to reveal its past, showing the tree that grew inside so that it may ‘live’ in the present.”²⁸ In a symbolic way, this statement faithfully embodies what Canadians of Italian origin have been striving to conquer in the new world.

Penone’s powerful exhibition did define, through his great wooden sculptures, how natural forms and aesthetic productions live in a dynamic relationship, but it also recontextualizes wood as a primeval – and, today, also ecological – matter, symbolically and concretely embracing the old rural community of Italy and the Canadian sensibility in which the natural world and the urban scene must find a balancing point.²⁹

On another level, a balance between the natural world and the old religious faith is to be found in the wooden Catholic cross many Italian immigrants took with them, to be hung on a Canadian wall. My example here takes us to a religious ritual alien to Anglo-Canadians. On Good Friday, St. Francis of Assisi Church in Toronto holds an annual procession commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Starting from the surrounding area of St. Francis of Assisi Church (Mansfield Avenue/Grace Street), it makes its way through the Little Italy neighbourhood in Toronto, attracting crowds of participants, floats, and bands. Because of COVID-19, it was cancelled three years in a row. Roman soldiers on horses open the Toronto event, featuring a number of statues, and over 200 costumed volunteers dressed as religious figures. The heart of the celebration is the carrying of the cross. Giuseppe Rauti, a devoted worshipper, nicknamed “Joe Jesus” and born in Calabria, has been playing

²⁸ “Giuseppe Penone: The Hidden Life Within.”

²⁹ The Galleria Italia at the AGO without Penone’s wooden structures looks bare. The plaque is still there. Visitors can now buy an espresso in the Galleria.

the role of Jesus for fifty years. He has been interpreting Jesus' passion by carrying a thick and heavy wooden cross, twice his height, surrounded by Roman soldiers in the streets of an ever-changing Torontonion Little Italy on College Street. During the Good Friday processions held in Italy, it was custom to kiss the cross – a piece of wood on which the son of God was crucified.

The Italian-born, Canadian-based photographer Vincenzo Pietropaolo, in his book *Ritual*, has gathered 150 photos "that capture the drama and devotion of Toronto's Good Friday Procession." The event began in 1962, at St. Agnes Church, as a tiny parade, and then moved to St. Francis of Assisi in the late 1960s. Here, as in other photographic works, Pietropaolo subtly engages in rendering the ways in which the Italian community has changed in time.

Wood becomes a sort of mediator, which in some ways has the power of uniting different communities, such as the Italian and the Canadian ones, or linking different historical episodes. I am thinking of Penone's 2017 exhibition at the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana at EUR in Rome, a complex discourse on the reinterpretation of the past. Mussolini selected the area of EUR – the unlucky Esposizione Universale di Roma – as the site of the 1942 World's Fair in order to celebrate twenty years of fascism. The huge white building south of the EUR centre, replete with gigantic heroic male marble statues, the ultimate fascist rhetoric of triumphant virility, is morphed by Penone into a most delicate, yet resilient substance: wood. With the change of ideology, the wooden tree in front of the monumental historical building underlines the fragility of any masculine master narrative, destroyed by the war and by the fall of the regime. Penone's wooden structures, stretching out to reach the sky, are juxtaposed with the solemn marble statues of an idealized, yet utterly false, mythical worldview. Penone's artworks are sophisticated attempts at cultural meditation, at the same time leading us to the awareness that it is not easy to reinvent the clash and blending together of different worlds.

While at the AGO, we can also visit the paintings of the old masters, which enhance the artistic past in all its glory; wood leads back to a substance pertaining to everyday life and to the physical, but also spiritual, essence of the forest. Leaving the Galleria Italia, now empty, we open a door and enter another room, another wonderful space of mediation and meditation: here Emily Carr's rainforest comes to life and the wooden totem poles, painted by the great Canadian modernist artist, peer at us, ironical reminders that other Canadas exist, and claim our attention.

The Gehry structure overarching the Galleria Italia is a sort of wooden vessel, which guides us back to the ships of the immigrants, to the perils of the journey. Seen from the outside, the powerful wooden shape reminds the passer-by of the hull of an ancient ship crossing Canada's rivers – and the Atlantic.

Wood: A Colonial Pinocchio

My next example reinforces the power of wood and of the transnational values it embodies:

Once upon a time –

“A king!” my young readers will say immediately.

No, children, you are wrong. Once upon a time there was a piece of wood. It was not a fancy piece of wood, but just a simple piece of wood, one of those logs that are put in stoves and on the fireplace in winter to light up the fire and warm up the room.³⁰

Carlo Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio: storia di un burattino* was first serialized in the weekly *Il Giornale per i bambini*, a supplement of *Il Fanfulla della domenica*, between July 1881 and January 1883, and in one volume in 1883. It is one of the most translated books in the world. It is not by chance that in Canada there has been a number of theatre productions of *Pinocchio*; suffice it to say that the *burattino di legno* has been staged in 2017, thanks to the new interpretation by the National Ballet of Canada, directed by Will Tuckett.³¹ The interesting point is that *Pinocchio* is rewritten not only through ballet and music but also through a Canadian perspective: we find, as Sebastiano Bazzichetto emphasizes, “raccoons and beavers, a red lobster pub and even a Canadian guard (affectionally called ‘Mountie’) to substitute

³⁰ My translation. “— C'era una volta....

— Un re! — diranno subito i miei piccoli lettori.

— No, ragazzi, avete sbagliato. C'era una volta un pezzo di legno.

Non era un legno di lusso, ma un semplice pezzo da catasta, di quelli che d'inverno si mettono nelle stufe e nei caminetti per accendere il fuoco e per riscaldare le stanze”; Collodi, *Le avventure di Pinocchio*, 2.

³¹ The National Ballet of Canada production in question was staged at the Four Seasons Centre in Toronto in 2017.

the very Italian carabinieri of the original.”³² Another reviewer laments “the often gratuitous, almost moronic intrusions of Canadiana – lumberjacks in red plaid, tourists sporting maple-leaf T-shirts, a Mountie in red serge and a Sam Steele Stetson, and a selection of Canadian-associated fauna.”³³

Indeed, it is true that the “Pinocchio story that most people know is very different from the one that Carlo Collodi originally wrote.”³⁴ Yet the dominant aspect of Collodi’s work is that the *burattino* is carved by his loving father out of a chunk of wood.

What I would like to do, in the era of Walt Disney productions, with a new remake on the screen, is to go back to Italy and show Pinocchio, not through the illustrations of the first printed book version by Enrico Mazzanti, but through the first moving images, in which Pinocchio comes literally to life. The first Pinocchio film adaptation was by Italian director Giulio Antamoro in 1911. Born in Rome in 1877, Antamoro started as a filmmaker at the Rome CINES *stabilimenti*. In a 2014 article, Luca Mazzei speaks of “the Italian made of wood” (*l’italiano di legno*) while acutely analyzing Antamoro’s film.³⁵

A brief parenthesis to give due relevance to what I will be focusing on: In 1910, film studios in Italy started producing their own western films, a genre which proved congenial to Italian directors. Thus, in his *Pinocchio*, Antamoro added an extra scene, set in the far West, where “the wooden puppet and Geppetto are kidnapped and almost cannibalized by a group of Indians.”³⁶ After a series of adventures, they are saved by a troop of soldiers. As Mazzei underlines,³⁷ the scene is set on the border with Canada, and all the Natives are wearing Lakota-style full-feathered regalia. Worthy of note is that the so-called Canadian soldiers that rescue the 1910 Pinocchio are not wearing the red Mounties outfit but the colonial uniform of the Italian army in Libya, whose invasion had begun earlier that year. While the North

³² “procioni lavatori e castori, un pub dell’aragosta rossa e persino una guardia canadese (affettuosamente chiamata ‘Mountie’) a sostituire gli italianissimi carabinieri dell’originale”; Bazzichetto, “Pinocchio...in punta di piedi.”

³³ Crabb, “Review. National Ballet of Canada. Pinocchio.”

³⁴ Acocella, “The Transformations of Pinocchio.”

³⁵ Mazzei, “L’italiano di legno (o le straordinarie avventure di un burattino chiamato Pinocchio nel primo cinema italiano).” See also Mazzei, “L’italiano di legno nello specchio di Hollywood.”

³⁶ Magrin Haas, “Silent Westerns,” 169.

³⁷ Mazzei, “L’italiano di legno (o le straordinaire...)” See also Magrin Haas, “Silent Westerns.”

American inhabitants are duplicates of the North Africans, the heroic colonial troops save Pinocchio, a prototype of an Italian boy in the making, from barbarity. Leaving aside the clear colonialist propaganda message, one wonders whether Antamoro imbued his Pinocchio, the long-nosed liar, with a sense of alienation, reminding the audience of the immigrants' arrival in a strange new land. Pinocchio, among the Natives and pseudo-Mounties – Pinocchio, over 100 years in the future, in the Canadian ballet, among the Mounties and raccoons and beavers!

Let us return to the Italian masterpiece: Collodi's Pinocchio, as we know, is persuaded by his pal Lucignolo to reach the fabulous Città dei balocchi, like an Italian immigrant dreaming of another world, where poverty is substituted by happiness and a joyful life. Something similar is suggested in "Casetta in Canada," the song presented at the Sanremo Festival in 1957, sung by Gino Latilla and Carla Boni, written by Mario Panzeri and Vittorio Mascheroni. This very popular song mentions, as the title states, a small, pretty house in Canada, certainly a wooden hut, in which to start a better life. The *casetta* is burned down and reconstructed, more than once. (All children in Canada know what a fire drill is.)

He had a little house in Canada,
with ponds, small fish, and lots of lilac flowers
and all the girls that passed by there
said: "How beautiful the little house in Canada!"

But one day, out of spite, Pinco Panco set it on fire
and the poor man was left without a house.
"So what did he do?" – You will all ask,
but this is the surprise I'll tell you in secret:

He built another little house in Canada,
with ponds, small fish, and lots of lilac flowers
and all the girls that passed by there
said: "How beautiful the little house in Canada!"³⁸

³⁸ My translation. "Aveva una casetta piccolina in Canada / Con vasche, pesciolini e tanti fiori di lillà / E tutte le ragazze che passavano di là / Dicevano: 'Che bella la casetta in Canada!' // Ma un giorno, per dispetto, Pinco Panco l'incendiò / A piedi poveretto senza casa lui restò / 'Allora cosa fece?' Voi tutti chiederete / Ma questa è la sorpresa che in segreto vi dirò. // Lui fece un'altra casa piccolina in Canada / Con vasche, pesciolini e

To conclude, maybe the song was also inspired by the experience of the Italian war brides, the young Italian women who married the Canadian soldiers fighting in our country against the German army and its fascist allies during the Second World War. Graziella Fabietti was one of them, who, just after the war, left Cetona, a village in the beautiful Tuscany countryside, to live in freezing Edmonton, Alberta, with her Canadian farmer husband. I often go to Cetona for personal reasons and visit the Cetona cemetery where many members of the Fabietti family are buried – not Graziella, now belonging forever to the Canadian land.

Her wooden trunk would tell us many stories.

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tanti fiori di lillà / E tutte le ragazze che passavano di là / Dicevano: "Che bella la casetta in Canada!"; Panzeri/Mascheroni, "Casetta in Canada".

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