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Article abstract

Finding Rosa (2008) is a quest for the documentation that might prove the true identity, provenance, and date of birth of Caterina's mother, Rosa. Diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, Rosa is slowly losing her mind and memory; therefore, it becomes even more urgent to know the truth about her early life in Istria. Istria's international, complex history is unravelled in the novel, while a story of migration from that former Italian territory – first to England and finally to Canada – grows into a historical drama of forced removals, refugee camps, and diaspora for the majority of Italian Istrians, forced to abandon their abodes by the pressure of Tito's Yugoslavia in 1947, the year of the so-called "Great exodus." On the one hand, Ageing and Alzheimer's Studies can help us understand Rosa's medical condition, as well as the condition of Caterina in the role of caregiver, within the structure and drama of a memoir and a Familienroman; on the other hand, Historical and Border Studies are the methodological frameworks with which to look at Istria in this revealing historical novel.

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ALZHEIMER'S, MEMORY, MIGRATION FROM ISTRIA: CATERINA EDWARDS'S *FINDING ROSA*

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Summary: *Finding Rosa* (2008) is a quest for the documentation that might prove the true identity, provenance, and date of birth of Caterina's mother, Rosa. Diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, Rosa is slowly losing her mind and memory; therefore, it becomes even more urgent to know the truth about her early life in Istria. Istria's international, complex history is unravelled in the novel, while a story of migration from that former Italian territory – first to England and finally to Canada – grows into a historical drama of forced removals, refugee camps, and diaspora for the majority of Italian Istrians, forced to abandon their abodes by the pressure of Tito's Yugoslavia in 1947, the year of the so-called "Great exodus." On the one hand, Ageing and Alzheimer's Studies can help us understand Rosa's medical condition, as well as the condition of Caterina in the role of caregiver, within the structure and drama of a memoir and a *Familienroman*; on the other hand, Historical and Border Studies are the methodological frameworks with which to look at Istria in this revealing historical novel.

Istria of Her Mind

In Canada, Caterina Edwards's novel *Finding Rosa: A Mother with Alzheimer's, a Daughter in Search of the Past*, a non-fictional prose dedicated to her mother who died of Alzheimer's disease, has been acclaimed and advertised with emphasis on its being a narrative about ageing and Alzheimer's disease.¹ This is certainly a relevant topic in the North American continent, and it has been a highly debated topic in Canada in the last few decades, judging from the groundbreaking critical volume by Marlene Goldman, *Forgotten: Narratives of Age-Related Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease in Canada*.

¹ For more on Edwards's writing, see <https://www.caterinaedwards.com/books>.

In Italy, the reception of the novel provides a different focus, emphasizing its being a historical novel about Istria and the Italian Istrians' forced diaspora around 1947.² Moreover, Enrico Miletto writes in his historical essay that more than 28,000 people, for instance, abandoned the city of Pola, almost the entire Italian population there, after the Paris Treaty in 1947 that assigned the city to Yugoslavia. The Julian and Dalmatian diaspora, however, saw 90% of the Italian population abandon their lands. The London Memorandum of 1954 produced a further wave of migration that also included the B Area around Trieste between 1953 and 1956.³

Similarly, Pamela Ballinger writes that "the rearrangement of the political borders after the Second World War provoked the Istrian exodus (*l'esodo istriano*), entailing the migration of between 200,000 and 300,000 ethnic Italians (as well as Slovenes and Croats)."⁴ Finally, Edwards confirms: "And in this area, *l'esodo*, the great exile, was in full flood: two-thirds of the population of Zone B left in 1953 and 1954."⁵

Thus, this double discourse determines the extreme interest the novel arouses in both readers and critics on the European side of the Atlantic, with both topics being well balanced in the novel and deserving of equal attention. The narrative about the insurgence, diagnosis, and degeneration of Alzheimer's disease might be approached through Ageing Studies, whereas the historical reconstruction of mass movements from Istria might be approached within the framework of Historical/Border Studies. The aim of this contribution is to balance the two critical approaches in the analysis of a rich and multi-layered memoir and *Familienroman*, where a mother and a daughter share and sieve their different memories.

The *trait-d'union* between the two major topics is indeed memory: the personal, familiar, and collective memory Rosa (the mother) risks losing, and the history of the once-Italian Istria that Caterina (the daughter) wants to retrieve, against what she calls, quite suggestively and metaphorically, "the foiba of forgetfulness." (76) "The death of an old man or woman is the destruction of a library" (265) – this line resounds eerily in times of COVID-19. A whole generation of elderly people in Italy – as well as elsewhere – has been lost, together with memories of the Second World War.

² Miletto, "Una nota storica."

³ Miletto, *Gli italiani di Tito*, 9–10.

⁴ Ballinger, *History in Exile*, 1.

⁵ Edwards, *Finding Rosa*, 53. Future references to this work will be provided parenthetically.

It must be said that in Italy – when Edwards was writing her novel – Istria and its history were under oblivion. Only on 10 February 2005 was a special day of official celebrations in memory of that past history inaugurated: the National Memorial Day of Exiles and Foibe.⁶ This was meant to celebrate the memory of the tragedy that befell Italians and the victims of the foibe, of the Istrians', Dalmatians', and Fiumans' exodus from their lands after the Second World War, and of the complex destiny of the Italian Oriental border.⁷

Meanwhile, the Regional Institute for the Istrian-Dalmatian and Fiuman Culture (IRCI) contributed by creating both a dematerialized, memorial web archive⁸ of texts, audios, videos, and photographs and, most importantly, a material archive. This material archive became available with the inauguration in 2015 of the Civic Museum of Istrian-Fiuman and Dalmatian Civilization in Trieste, which exhibits mostly the household goods, pieces of furniture, and objects that the diaspora left behind in the famous "Magazzino 18," a storehouse at Trieste's port. Magazzino 18 in Trieste, Italy, is the counterpart of Pier 21 at Halifax, Canada. It is a place and a symbol: while Pier 21 was a point of arrival, Magazzino 18 should have been a point of transit, but it has remained as a memento of a fugitive people. "Magazzino 18" is now also the title of a song in a theatrical performance by Simone Cristicchi.⁹ This shows that Caterina Edwards's publication added a timely *tessera* to a puzzle that Italian cultural politics was then revising.

The Mother's Landscape/Mindscape

It might happen that an elderly person is the only repository and treasurer of places that no longer exist on world maps. That was the case of Rosa, Caterina's mother in Canada. Had she died, all that history would have vanished with her. Once again, "the death of an old man or woman is the destruction

⁶ Wastl-Walter, *The Routledge Research Companion*, 80. This was enacted into Law n. 92, 30 March 2004, by which the Italian Parliament decreed – voting across the aisles, and with just few exceptions – to celebrate the National Day of Remembering (Giorno del Ricordo) in order to preserve and renew, so the legislator claimed, "the memory of the tragedy of Italians and of all victims of the *foibe*, the exodus of Istrians, Fiumans, and Julians from their lands after the Second World War, and the more complex situation of the oriental border"; Miletto, *Gli italiani di Tito*, 11, my translation.

⁷ Miletto, *Novecento di confine*, 7.

⁸ See the IRCI website at <http://www.irci.it/irci/index.php/it/>.

⁹ "Simone Cristicchi Magazzino 18."

of a library.” This is a recurrent refrain in the memoir by Edwards. Elderly people carry those landscapes in their minds’ eyes, in their memories of land crossed, soil that bears a special smell, colours and sounds typical of a local culture, and familiar habits – also, a peopled landscape, resounding with a specific language, dialect, or idiolect. It might happen that those mindscapes are theirs only, and once those people die, their landscapes are lost forever.

The European Landscape Convention (2000) claims that “the landscape contributes to the wellbeing of the individual and to the strengthening of European identity.” This is true also in relation to language – both the literary language of a specific landscape and the local vernacular(s). This is exactly what Rosa missed and lost: the psychological well-being that derives from a dear and stable landscape, one in which an individual might die and be buried.¹⁰ But all this was denied to Rosa and to her family, who had to migrate and move to Italy from Istria very early in her life. She lost a landscape, among other things, and with it her own language – because Rosa is a woman whose geography was disturbed by history, by wars waged about territorial disputes, and by the violent imposition of new national borders. The contested border that gave way to what is known as “irredentism” during the First World War became pivotal and more dramatic around 1947. The term “Istria” itself became hateful, stigmatized, a term which stands for ethnic cleansing, forced removals, violent diaspora, and unchosen forced migration, but also serves as a symbol of resilience for those who stayed.¹¹

At the Bologna train station in 1947, the refugees were denied water; in Southern Italy, food relief. In Ancona and Venice, the exiles were greeted with the slogans *Fuori i criminali fascisti*, away with the criminal Fascists. (285)

Finding Rosa is a memoir, and at the same time it is an autobiographical narrative by a daughter turning into a caregiver for her ageing mother. It is written in an elegiac tone: “to lament, contextualize and possibly grant larger and lasting meaning to a person [...] who has passed away.”¹² Dealing with Alzheimer’s disease, the narrative wanders along another border: that between sanity and insanity.

¹⁰ Lingiardi, *Mindscales*, 20.

¹¹ Ballinger, *History in Exile*.

¹² Goldman, *Forgotten*, 9.

Caterina, the narrating “I” of the memoir, opens her narration from the moment of her mother’s death, then retrospectively describes her mother’s slow transformations due to Alzheimer’s disease; proportionally, the more her mother withers and becomes reticent, the more Caterina’s interest in her mother’s past, back in Istria, grows. In traditional cultures, all over the world, elderly people are cherished, respected, and held dear, sometimes for their wise and ancient knowledge and sometimes because of their more fragile status.

The Italian psychoanalyst Vittorio Lingiardi binds the landscape and the mother in a fascinating way. Thus, it is not surprising that Caterina so stubbornly wants to recuperate the landscape of Lussino together with her mother’s identity. Both philosophers and psychologists claim that a baby absorbs the beauty of the mother, which is the beauty of the world, and of the objects in the world.¹³ Caterina had indeed absorbed the beauty of the Istrian landscape through her mother and through various visits to the place. This is her maternal side of the story:

In the 1970s, I’d been intoxicated by the babel of languages and peoples, by the atmosphere of indulgence, sun, sea, and sex – a German youth picking up an Italian girl, a French couple rutting in the park, hippies smoking dope and camping on the beach. I was a girl, staying with relatives, watched over, protected. I remembered that visit as enchanted, transforming. (51)

When I was four, on my first visit with my mother, Zia Cecilia still had the house that would be taken from her, along with her paintings and antiques and most of her land and money. My earliest memories are of that house and that visit [...] a many-roomed house with high ceilings and soft, lush carpets, a sea both turquoise blue and transparent, of a dolphin arching from that sea through the pastel sky and splashing down close, so close as I sat in a child-sized canoe alone and unafraid. (52)

In order to comment on the above quotations, it might be said that Istria was not so much a space, but a place. “Central to these understandings are interwoven images of both nature and culture: land and sea, churches and cemeteries. Ultimately, it is the sea – its beauty, as well as its association with

¹³ Lingiardi, *Mindscaapes*, 26–27.

coastal cities and ‘civilization’ – that *esuli* and *rimasti* alike recall with both affection and sadness.”¹⁴

In Canada, while those sweet memories were fading away, if not totally denied by Rosa, Caterina discusses with her own family – her husband and her two daughters – the various options at hand: whether to take the old woman to a nursing home, or to host her in their own house. Caterina feels it to be her duty as a daughter to take care of her mum – her husband did the same for his ageing and dying father – a choice less common in North America than elsewhere in the world: “I didn’t know any other family that had an older generation living with them. Old people lived either in ‘homes’ or on their own, often on the other side of Canada or in a different country completely.” (156) Pat Thane confirms that “family support has long been an important element in the economy of survival (emotional and material) of old people.”¹⁵ This is further confirmed in Sociological and Historical Studies, which highlight how elderly people are taken care of within the family: “They gave up the older people to institutions only when they needed care beyond the capacity of the family.”¹⁶ Edwards writes about a widely shared experience:

Throughout history women had combined the care of older people with both paid work and heavier domestic work, with larger families and less convenient homes [...] married women went to care for elderly relatives and keep them in the community, despite the demands of their immediate families and of paid work, as they always had.¹⁷

Edwards illustrates very clearly the difficulties in dedicating herself to her mother, to her own family, a husband and two young daughters, and to her job, with psychological and even physical psychosomatic consequences for her and her family members.

In Italy as in Canada, the extended family is in eclipse, and a growing percentage of mothers and fathers are being placed in nursing homes. Still, among Italians and Italian Canadians, the idea that you should take care of – and be close to – your aged

¹⁴ Ballinger, *History in Exile*, 3.

¹⁵ Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 435.

¹⁶ Johnson and Thane, *Old Age from Antiquity*, 201.

¹⁷ Johnson and Thane, *Old Age from Antiquity*, 201.

parents persists. It is your duty to look after them as long as you can, particularly if you are a daughter. (93)

As often happens, Caterina has to renew her house in order to be able to host her mother in a bedroom with an en suite bathroom. She has produced evidence of what it means to take care of an Alzheimer's disease patient in the wake of what I would suggest is a new genre in Canadian literature: Alzheimer's narratives, such as Alice Munro's famous short story *The Bear Came over the Mountain*,¹⁸ Sarah Leavitt's graphic novel *Tangles: A Story of Alzheimer's, My Mother and Me* (among others),¹⁹ and, above all, the outstanding and exhaustive study by Canadian scholar Marlene Goldman dedicated to the genre.²⁰ Yet Edwards manages to move away from a simple chronicle of gerontology narrative on ageing and caregiving in order to create a much richer text, in what soon becomes a compelling historical novel.

Alzheimer's disease is a no man's land, a contact zone, where contacts become less and less frequent ("synaptic loss"²¹), loose, vague, hardly reminisced, impossible. Rosa lives in this borderless space. A dilemma is presented in *Finding Rosa*. Rosa's story starts with a mistake in the birthdate on her passport. Confronted by her daughter's outraged questions about her lies, Rosa answers that "The passport is wrong [...] Two world wars [...] Documents were destroyed [...] Tito wanted to obliterate the presence of Italians. Pretend they were never there. Archives were burned." (33)

Caterina is sceptical. She was born in England and grew up in Canada – around 1963, when the Beatles became pop idols, so the novel's timeline goes. She neither believes nor understands how a passport may be wrong – until the mid-1990s, when she hears on the radio a report from the war in Bosnia, where Serb soldiers shot, captured, and drove out the Muslim and Croat inhabitants of a small village, then invaded the town hall and destroyed all signs that those people had ever lived there. They burned birth, marriage, and death records. Years later, in a novel entitled *La foiba grande*, Carlo Sgorlon describes a similar cleansing of people and registers in a village at the end of the Great War. But that, too, was fiction after all.

¹⁸ Concilio, "'The Mark on the Floor,'" 103–126.

¹⁹ Concilio, "Sarah Leavitt's Wordimaging. Alzheimer's in a Canadian Graphic Novel," 223–238.

²⁰ Goldman, *Forgotten*. See also, Goldman, "Re-imagining Dementia in the Fourth Age," 110–127.

²¹ Goldman, *Forgotten*, 14.

The passport was as I remembered it. Rosa Pia Edwards née Pagan, born August 30, 1910 in Lussingrande, Italy [...] My mother was not born in Italy. In 1910, the island of Lussino was in K nstenland, a province of Austria. It wasn't ruled by Italy until after the Treaty of Rapallo in 1920. So was it a typo? Had she actually been born in 1920 as she sometimes claimed? Impossible. Nor was Lussino in Italy when the passport was granted in 1989. (34)

Rosa was born in a contested geographical area. She was born on one side of a border that disappeared in the turn of two world wars. Thus, when Alzheimer's disease came to claim her memory, that land was already lost in oblivion. Istria no longer existed.

Former Istrians were not allowed to return for a holiday until 1970 [...] The Titini (Tito's men) did not only, or even primarily, target former Fascists. According to the exiles I interviewed in Canada, there was no pattern [...] The victims were either shot and cast into the foibe, the natural karst caves and bottomless ravines that dot the Istrian landscape, or thrown into the foibe alive, often manacled to a corpse, which is why the word foibe has come to stand for all the violence and suffering of that time in Istria [...] The exiles may have considered themselves Italian, and the Yugoslavs may have considered them Italian, but the Italian Government and the Italian people did not. They were not welcomed but spat upon and ostracized. (55)

Istrians were forcibly removed to refugee camps in Italy, after which many of them migrated to Australia, Argentina, the United States, and Canada.²² Caterina is the daughter of such an Istrian diasporic mother. Even though she visited Lussingrande once in 1953 and then in the 1970s for short summer holidays, she did not develop an interest in the place's history until her mother was affected by Alzheimer's disease and was no longer able to provide answers.

Scholars in Border Studies claim that border making displaced old ways of belonging for everyone. These displacements need not be external or visible to the eye but may also be internal ones that reconstitute individual

²² Miletto, *Novecento di confine*, 207.

subjectivities. Scholars of displacement have documented how those who experience the creation and imposition of new borders frequently express an interior sense of displacement, the sense of being “strangers in our own home.”²³

Wanting to go back home is a wish and a symptom in Alzheimer's patients. Caterina knows that all too well: “I want to go home,” her mother repeats incessantly (316).

Which home? The one of her infancy in Lussino, Istria, or the various apartments she had moved in and out of in Canada? The repeated request to be taken home is considered a symptom of the second stage of Alzheimer's. It's connected to the loss of an essential body sense – that of direction, of orientation [...] Those suffering from Alzheimer's often wander. They do not “get lost.” They are lost permanently. And since everything around them is unrecognizable, they search for a place of certainty and familiarity that they (and we) call home. (318)

From Istria we learn that in Europe, too, the borders between nations are shadowy, unable to monopolize the social relations between the people on either side: “The Italian Nationalists and the Istrian exiles organized alternative ceremonies commemorating the victims of the ‘Foibe massacres’ and denouncing the Italo-Yugoslav Peace Treaty of 1947, which gave most of Istria to Yugoslavia.”²⁴

Istria's history is characterized by subsequent waves of violent expulsions and shifting borders. In 1915, during the First World War, Istrians were deported to Italy, under Austrian orders, to a refugee camp in Sicily. This is what happened to Rosa's family when she was five years old: “The Italian citizens of Losinj had been sent back to Italy and had ended up in a camp in Caltagirone, near Catania.” (216) A witness who joined the Istrianet Blog and Chat – kept alive by diasporic Istrians from all over the world – explains that history reproduced itself as if in a mirror:

²³ Wilson and Donnan, *A Companion to Border Studies*, 394.

²⁴ Ballinger, *History in Exile*, 97–101; Wastl-Walter, *The Routledge Research Companion*, 80. See also Ballinger, *History in Exile*, 97–101.

“In Istria, one historical event often echoes another – with slight variations.” (216)

“Our house had been full of everything. When we came back from the camp, there was nothing left. They took everything but the walls.” (215)

And then after the Second World War, again everything was seized: “The Yugoslav soldiers took our savings, our gold coins. This time they took the walls, too.” (215)

The Italians viewed the annexation of the Alto Adige and Istria as a culmination of the unification of the nation that began in 1860 [...] Italian troops were in Istria, including Lussino, at the end of the war, but the territory was not ceded to Italy until the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo by Italy and Yugoslavia in November 1920. (220)

Istria then fell under fascist rule. Croatians and Slovenian Istrians lost their schools, jobs, and institutions. Yet Istria was a very complex reality, a proof that borders are blurred and hybrid places; although politicians and ideologues speak of Istria as being either Italian or Croatian, historically the region has also been home to people who identified as Austrians, Romanians, or Serbs.

“Many declared themselves Italian one day, Slavic the next, according to the benefits accorded them,” Petacco writes in *A Tragedy Revealed*. Under the Austrians, it was better to be Croatian or Slovenian; under the Italians in 1941, a greater percentage declared themselves Italian. Sometimes the shifts in ethnicity are mysterious. The population of Veli Losinj did not change much between 1900 and 1910, increasing by 50 to 1,992. Yet, in 1900, 60 percent of the inhabitants (or 1,174 inhabitants) claimed to be Croatian, and 24 percent (or 473) Italian, whereas in 1910, only 36 percent said Croatian and 43 percent Italian. (263)

Istrians had to flee, went into exile, leaving behind all their properties. Their presence had been erased from cemeteries, from

registers and official papers, and they had to choose alternative ethnic belonging for mere survival: I see this fluidity of identity not simply as opportunistic but as reflective of the multicultural and multiethnic nature of families in the old Istria. If you had an Austrian father and an Italian mother, did you have to choose one ethnicity over the other? Was identity necessarily singular? (263)

This begins as a report of ageing and caregiving, for the co-protagonist is an aged woman on the verge of losing her mind because of Alzheimer's disease. She is taken care of within an extended family, with all the practical difficulties involved in such cases. But soon the narrative turns into a historical novel or (post)memory novel, born out of silenced, traumatic facts. It took Caterina years to reconstruct the history of Istria and of her own mother's family. Caterina had to pursue a long and strenuous research journey in church and municipal archives, interrogating the internet and a few diasporic witnesses over eight years. This also involved many journeys to Italy to interview relatives and friends, the so-called "*Rimasti*."

Why such a long silence? As if those intertwined events, the foibe and the exodus from Istria, had never happened, as if any acknowledgement, any discussion, were taboo. A half century of silence [...] But why the silence in Yugoslavia and, more significantly, in Italy, where everything is debated? (282)

Most of all, the narrative is mobilized by silence and oblivion, by the mystery and the shame that surround those traumatic historical events.

The massacres – revenge killings committed by the Yugoslav Partisans, when they entered the region in 1945 and targeted against fascist collaborators, political enemies, and “unwanted elements” – were not a subject of public debate for decades.²⁵

Conclusions: Memory's Language

The novel thus attempts to restore a “lost library,” for as the Arab proverb says, “The death of an old man or woman is the destruction of a library.”

²⁵ Wastl-Walter, *The Routledge Research Companion*, 81.

This library also has its own language. When Caterina stubbornly starts to research her mother's roots, travelling to Lussingrande (now Losinj) with her husband, off season, in order to retrace her mother's past, she immediately falls back into her mother's dialect:

[Marco would] point out that I was declining "to be" or "to have" incorrectly or that a word I was using did not exist [...] The first words that come to me, the grammatical constructions that feel right to me, are the ones I learned from my mother, before I began to speak English. I will fall into not broken Italian but correct Istro-Veneto. (50)

Rosa, Caterina's mother, never felt at home, being a migrant all her life, unwelcome in Italy after leaving Istria, lonely when in England with her husband's family, and a foreigner in Western Canada. Still fluent in the Istro-Veneto dialect – a variation of the Venetian dialect, sometimes even hybridized with Croatian²⁶ – she has never managed nor wanted to master English properly. Her daughter acts as a translator with doctors and nurses who have to diagnose the insurgence of Alzheimer's disease. One of the most moving passages in the novel is a meeting between two elderly Istrian women in an Edmonton hospital. Caterina accompanies Rosa to a gerontology clinic, and while waiting, she hears on the other side of the cubicle two women, another old mother and another middle-aged daughter, speaking Slovenian. She also perceives the nurse's evident disapproval:

"Your mother doesn't speak English?" A hint of disapproval in the tone. "She speaks Slovenian, Italian, and French." Aha, I thought, Istriani [...] They were indeed Istriani, from a village across the Slovenian border from Gorizia. They had left in the early fifties, during the time of the great migration. They'd travelled through several refugee camps, lived for over ten years in Belgium, and finally came to Canada [...] My mother is a Lussignana, I said. Didn't grow up there but went back a lot – summers.

"Bring her in," the daughter said. "They'll talk." The two older women looked each other over. Mjriana spoke first. "I went to Lussino on vacation once." She used the Venetian dialect. Mum's face cleared; she connected, and they began chatting away [...]

²⁶ Miletto, *Novecento di confine*, 23.

Mirjana took both her hands and began to sing: *Ancora un litro de quel bon* (Another liter of the good wine). Mum joined in on the repeating line. (196)

Paradoxically, the two old women are there to be diagnosed in terms of their cognitive loss and memory impairment, but what they have lost is a borderless motherland, unmeasurable. Istria was inhabited by a multicultural society (what Ballinger calls “hybrid and borderland identities,” with use of the dialect as “cultural intermixture”²⁷): Italians, Austrians, Slovenians, Croats, Romanians, and Hungarians lived in that contact zone. There were of course intermarriages, and thus ethnic cleansing and separatism were quite hard to achieve. The luckiest managed to change their names, Italianizing or Slavicizing their surnames, according to the new rulers. Most people had to leave, particularly in the “Great exodus” after the Second World War, when Italian Istrians were expropriated and expatriated. But some stayed there: *I Rimasti* they are called, or “emplaced,” as opposed to those “displaced.”²⁸

Rosa's linguistic competence is much more complicated, and her rejection of English is definitely radical:

If she had been at school in the early twenties, as she once claimed, she would have learned to speak proper Italian [...] But Mum only spoke a combination of Istro-Venetian and Venetian. (When I was growing up in Calgary, I remember a British friend of my father often suggested that Mum take a course in the English language. Mum rejected the very idea. And when a friend brought over a book of basic English grammar, Mum waited until the woman left, then threw it into the garbage). (243)

All this brings Rosa to develop a very personal idiolect:

Lui combackerà – she'd say. (He'll come back.) Osbondo (husband), frendyboy (boyfriend), tereebble (terrible). To explain that she'd been working hard, she'd say, working come un mus [...] For Mum, words were an outlet, an expression of momentary impulses, of passing emotions. (249)

²⁷ Ballinger, *History in Exile*, 2 and 25, respectively.

²⁸ Wilson and Donnan, *A Companion to Border Studies*, 393.

“Working come un mus” means “working like a mule or a donkey.” It is an interesting cultural shift from an Italian idiomatic sentence, *lavorare come un mulo o come un asino*, to an adaptation to Canadian, local fauna: the moose, although mispronounced. The multiculturalism of which this hybrid language is testimony was also typical of Istria, a geography defeated by a history of failure and burial of multiculturalism. Rosa’s Alzheimer’s disease allowed Edwards to explore Istrian heritage as an example of transnational memory.

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