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# Insider/Outsider. My Immigrant Experience as a Photo Artist

Vincenzo Pietropaolo

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### Article abstract

The question of insider/outsider artist has long been a central concern in my work as a social documentary photographer who practises as a member of the Italian diaspora and, in turn, in the way my work has been received and disseminated by the Other in the context of art criticism and the art gallery establishment. This paper will situate bodies of my photography work that concern immigrant and working-class subcultures in the context of the following theoretical frameworks: the concept of insider/outsider, the autoethnographic approach to narrative, the participant observation qualitative research method, and the relationship between words and images. The relevant bodies of my work highlighted in this paper are the Italian-Canadian immigrant series, including the Good Friday collection, the labour movement/migrant farm workers collection, and the queer-Italian-Canadian project (work in progress).

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# INSIDER/OUTSIDER. MY IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE AS A PHOTO ARTIST

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VINCENZO PIETROPAOLO

*Summary:* The question of insider/outsider artist has long been a central concern in my work as a social documentary photographer who practises as a member of the Italian diaspora and, in turn, in the way my work has been received and disseminated by the Other in the context of art criticism and the art gallery establishment. This paper will situate bodies of my photography work that concern immigrant and working-class subcultures in the context of the following theoretical frameworks: the concept of insider/outsider, the autoethnographic approach to narrative, the participant observation qualitative research method, and the relationship between words and images. The relevant bodies of my work highlighted in this paper are the Italian-Canadian immigrant series, including the Good Friday collection, the labour movement/migrant farm workers collection, and the queer-Italian-Canadian project (work in progress).

## *Writing Immigration History*

In *Ritual: Good Friday in Toronto's Italian Immigrant Community 1969–2016*, my photographic chronicle of the Via Crucis,<sup>1</sup> I observed that “photography is ubiquitous and possesses a fundamental influence on our social behaviour. Therefore, the practice of social documentary photography comes with the burden of social responsibility,”<sup>2</sup> converting photography from a medium of neutral, mechanical representation into a politicized visual medium, and

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<sup>1</sup> The Via Crucis in this context is a procession that takes place annually on Good Friday in the streets of the historic Italian community in Toronto. It features statues and elaborate reenactments of biblical scenes depicting the life and death of Jesus Christ. I photographed this focal point of the community for over five decades, culminating in my book *Ritual: Good Friday Procession*. See Pietropaolo, “Ritual: The Making of a Book” 133–151.

<sup>2</sup> Pietropaolo, “Ritual,” 3.

positioning it out of the fine art constraints of the art gallery establishment and into the world of social activism.

To be a social documentary photographer means to have a commitment. It means the ability to recognize the historical context of the moment witnessed, and conversely, to be accepting of the ensuing political meaning that the act of photographing will produce.<sup>3</sup>

If that context is embedded in the reality of living one's life as an immigrant, or otherwise socially marginalized individual, then photography can offer a means of empowerment, enabling one "to write a history of one's own."<sup>4</sup>

To be an immigrant means to have been born elsewhere – beyond the territorial demarcations of the country in which one is currently living. By virtue of "being different," whether due to exhibiting racial features, having a foreign-sounding name, or speaking a language or practising a religion that is different from that of the dominant society, an immigrant is destined to be an outsider looking in. The challenge of integration is multi-layered and complex, for as psychologist John W. Berry points out, the process of "acculturation involves *mutual accommodation*," which requires a long period of what can be summarized as political actions to adapt social programs to the newcomer's needs.<sup>5</sup> As a "diasporic subject," the immigrant remains in a fluid world in between "overtures," movingly expressed by Marusya Bociurkiw as "something that would either never belong in either or would always long for one or the other."<sup>6</sup> This sense of alienation is often reinforced by the challenges of seemingly contradictory rules and traditions, and is further compounded by stereotypes, expectations, and fears harboured by the host society – the Other – of the immigrant.

The experience of chronicling the Via Crucis annually became a form of personal ritual as a photographer working from the inside of the community. Photography offered me the means to explore the immigrant reality of my community and my own identity from a young age. Influenced by the work of Lewis Hine (1874–1940) – a teacher-turned-photographer who used

<sup>3</sup> Pietropaolo, *Ritual: Good Friday Procession*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Pietropaolo, *Ritual: Good Friday Procession*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Berry, "Immigration, Acculturation and Adaptation," 28.

<sup>6</sup> Bociurkiw, *Feeling Canadian*, 142.

photography to champion the cause of immigrants and fight against child labour in the early part of the twentieth century in the United States, widely acknowledged as the “father of social documentary photography”<sup>7</sup> – I sought to use photography politically by documenting the beauty of the human spirit in my own immigrant community against the backdrop of the social conditions of the day. As Hine declared, “There were two things that I wanted to do. I wanted to show the things that had to be corrected. I wanted to show the things that had to be appreciated.”<sup>8</sup> I adopted his dictum as the basis of my artist’s manifesto and consciously began to use my camera as a tool of art and social activism. Hine left behind traces<sup>9</sup> in the form of photographs which have since attained a foundational role in the writing of the history of Italian immigration in the United States. Without his “traces,” the history of immigration would have suffered a major gap. The immigrants who disembarked at Ellis Island would have remained as abstract data, and we would never have seen the sense of loss, hope, and struggle palpable in the faces of those who stood in front of Hine’s camera.

One image that is particularly emblematic of Hine’s work, and which has also played a determinant role in my formation as photographer, is *Italian Immigrants at Ellis Island – 1905* (fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> The iconic photograph illustrates the photographer’s credo of beauty and change. The photograph reveals that the people looking for lost luggage are Anna Sciacchitano and her children, identifiable by the name that has been written in cursive across the length of the frayed and battered suitcase at the woman’s feet. Bound with twines of

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<sup>7</sup> Sampsell-Willmann, *Lewis Hine*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Capa, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>9</sup> The word “trace” in relation to the nature of photography is attributed to Susan Sontag, who wrote, “A photograph is not only [...] an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask.” See Berger, “Uses of Photography,” 47.

<sup>10</sup> This iconic photograph has been published widely, and copies are in the collections of leading institutions in the United States and elsewhere. According to the annotations by the photographer, the photograph was titled *Italian Immigrants at Ellis Island – 1905*, with a detailed caption attached to the photograph indicating that the family was waiting for lost luggage. It is in the collection of the New York Public Library, and can found online at <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4e77-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>. The Museum of Modern Art included another print of the image in their exhibition “Photographs from the Collection,” in 1958–59, as *Italian Family Looking for Lost Baggage, Ellis Island, New York, 1905*. Interestingly, the museum also has a second version titled *Slavic group, Ellis Island, 1905*. See <https://www.moma.org/artists/2657>.

rope in such a way as to also fashion a handle, the suitcase can be seen as a metaphor of their frayed life, the *miseria* of their *maledetto Sud*<sup>11</sup> from which they were escaping. The middle-aged woman is holding an infant in her arms, while her young son – perhaps ten or eleven years of age – holds his younger sister by the hand while he balances a sack of the family's belongings over his shoulder. Hine was bold and daring: the photograph is frontal, direct, stark, and devoid of any kind of artifice that commonly characterized “artistic” photographs of the period, like “soft-focus” effects used to de-emphasize the realism of camera-made images.<sup>12</sup> Far from romanticizing the plight of the immigrant and her bewildered children who have just disembarked from an arduous ocean voyage in slave-like conditions, the photograph captures the sense of resilience and dignity which accompanies the family in their journey to America. The young boy is resolute and determined. He is wearing an old ship captain's hat, on which an identifying tag has been conveniently attached, as if he were merely another piece of chattel like the trunks and suitcases piled behind him in the cavernous room. Yet he is different: there is an arresting elegance about him. He is composed and calm, his jacket is buttoned neatly, and he is wearing a perfectly knotted tie, as if to proclaim that when you enter the gates of the Promised Land, you shall look nothing but your best. During the few seconds that it takes for Hine to immortalize the family, the boy responds to the photographer and suddenly becomes a man with a child's face, taking his position as the guardian of the family, a stand-in for his missing father. He may look afraid and distrusting of the Other, but he is also supremely comfortable with the responsibilities that he must assume as the eldest male in the family.

The existence of this photograph is a particularly significant example of the importance of writing history with a camera. At first, the identity of family was overlooked by researchers who likely dismissed them as yet another “nameless” group of immigrants – the quintessential outsiders. But in time, the name on the suitcase led to the identification of the entire family, and transformed Anna Sciacchitano and her children, Domenico (infant), Mary, and Paolo, from anonymous human forms into real, living human beings who had travelled to America from Sicily to join their husband and father, Giovanni Gustozzo, in Scranton, Pennsylvania. In a master stroke, Hine not only succeeded in creating an invaluable historical document but he also

<sup>11</sup> From the title of Teti, *Maledetto Sud* [Cursed South].

<sup>12</sup> Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 175.

imbued his “human document”<sup>13</sup> with a personal point of view that exalted the dignity of the immigrant. In so doing, Hine the social activist also became a historian – an interpreter of history. Jason Dyck argues that Hine was in effect writing “photohistory,” a term attributed to historian John Mraz, who defined the term “as the ‘representation of history in photographs.’”<sup>14</sup> Dyck further relies on Mraz’s claim that “One contribution [that] photography can make to historiography is that of personalizing the past: on seeing individual human beings, we remember that it is people who really forge history, as they make something out of what is being made of them”<sup>15</sup> In this way, Hine’s lifetime achievement is elevated beyond the limitations of his status in documentary photography. In the same study, Dyck compares my work favourably with Hine’s work, particularly in *Harvest Pilgrims*, implying that I, too, am a photohistorian. He concludes that whereas Hine had an “empathetic eye Pietropaolo views migrant workers through a compassionate lens [...] and much like Hine, Pietropaolo uses the camera as a ‘research tool’ to uncover the social inequities.”<sup>16</sup>

As the term implies, “documentary” concerns itself with the representation of truth or truths through unadulterated documents like photographs. Speaking of American photography, the historian Michael Carlebach observed that “the new [in the 1930s] photographic methodology called documentary was characterized by a straightforward approach to actual conditions [...] The intention was to record life without artifice.”<sup>17</sup> In my work, I do not alter the content of the image that was “captured” by the camera – not even the most minute detail – “eschew[ing] photographic tricks, gimmicks, and what the British film critic and founder of documentary cinema John Grierson called ‘the shimsham mechanics of the studio.’”<sup>18</sup> If the camera is to be a truthful witness, no form of artifice and alteration can be tolerated; if it were otherwise, the photograph’s political dimension would be compromised.

The power of a documentary photograph lies in its inherent believability, due to the purity of realism that is preserved within the image, a realism that is captured “objectively” by the scientific application of a mechanical

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<sup>13</sup> Hine’s words; see Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 176.

<sup>14</sup> Mraz, “Picturing Mexico’s Past,” 25. Mexican historian and theorist John Mraz is a leading authority on the relationship between photography and the writing of history.

<sup>15</sup> Mraz, “Picturing Mexico’s Past,” 35.

<sup>16</sup> Dyck, “Economic Pilgrimage to Southern Ontario,” 92.

<sup>17</sup> Carlebach, “Documentary and Propaganda,” 11.

<sup>18</sup> Thompson as cited in Carlebach, “Documentary and Propaganda,” 11.

tool – the camera. Experiencing a photograph is both a visceral and emotive experience. The immediacy of such an experience is as startling as it is formative, and becomes the basis of further layers of interpretation. Suffice it to say that the persuasive power of a documentary photograph transforms the medium into a compelling instrument for creating social awareness aimed at effecting social and political change.<sup>19</sup> Carlebach states that “this combination of straightforward still images with political and social argument is the essence of social documentary photography,”<sup>20</sup> corroborating what Hine achieved and what I have also pursued in my own work.

The Vietnamese-American filmmaker and theorist Trinh Minh-ha has written substantially on the concept of “outside in/inside out,” and offers a relevant means of exploring the theoretical nature of my work within a critical discourse of visual art. Though she concerns herself with issues of Western post-colonialist representation of third-world cultures through documentary cinema in her essay “Outside In Inside Out,” her theories are also applicable to the creation of photographic representations by an insider – from *within*. As Minh-ha points out, “to raise the question of representing the Other is, therefore, to reopen endlessly the fundamental issue of ... outsider and insider.”<sup>21</sup> Through my work, I am the insider making representations of my own community to Minh-ha’s concept of “the Other.” It is in this vein that Italian journalist and sociologist Irene Zerbinì, in “The Immigrant Experience Revealed” (2007), discusses my “third eye” as affording me a privileged perspective from the inside, capturing “moments which we would not have been otherwise privileged to see.”<sup>22</sup>

My work as an insider artist is now legitimately regarded as authoritative with respect to the representation of immigrant realities, given that it is collected or exhibited by various institutions.<sup>23</sup> But critical consideration

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<sup>19</sup> The objectivity of documentary photography has been debated for over a century, and it is generally accepted that while the camera is an objective instrument, the choices made in its operation by the photographer are inherently subjective, and as biased as the practitioner’s ideological leanings. The manipulative use of a photograph after its creation, whether deliberate or otherwise, in order to exaggerate or misrepresent the “truth” that it purportedly represents, is entirely a different question.

<sup>20</sup> Carlebach, “Documentary and Propaganda,” 20.

<sup>21</sup> Minh-ha, “Outside In Inside Out,” 65.

<sup>22</sup> Zerbinì, “The Immigrant Experience Revealed,” 21.

<sup>23</sup> This includes the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, which has mounted a ten-year virtual interactive installation of my work in an exhibition called “Human Rights Defenders.”

of certain bodies of my work has been possible when the work confirms the expectations or ideology of the Other, who assumes the role of self-appointed “gatekeeper” and wields significant influence on the “success” of the artist and his/her work. The effect of the gatekeeper’s views is considerable. Even when there is an attempt to “share” it as a means of giving the impression of inclusion, Minh-ha unequivocally points to the fact that it “will be shared only partly, with much caution, and on the condition that the share is *given*, not taken.”<sup>24</sup>

The concept of “power given, not taken,” as theorized by Minh-ha, also corresponds closely to my autoethnographic approach as an insider artist. Writing in *The Gazette* in 2006, Lynn Farrell affirms as much by stating that “as an ‘insider’ [...] Pietropaolo’s work transcends the stereotypes [...] [and] his respect for the people he meets is embodied in this visual homage to their nascent hopes and dreams.”<sup>25</sup> Echoing this feeling of complicity, the critic Suzanne Sherkin observed in 1983, in *Photo Life*, that “[Pietropaolo’s] images, then, are not seen through the eyes of the outsider, but from the point of view of a fellow worker, recording events, faces and *feelings*.”<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the viewer is made to feel at home with the images. “We are allowed to relate easily and comfortably with the [...] construction worker, the baker [...] because the feeling of trust comes through clearly and honestly.”<sup>27</sup> Sherkin further asserts that Pietropaolo is very cautious of his photographic role” as a communicator.<sup>28</sup> If photography is a visual language of communication, then the sense of complicity that can arise out of shared linguistic and cultural background will inevitably heighten the powers of the camera as an expression of activism and solidarity with the people who are photographed. In *Geist*, Mandelbrot observes that *Not Paved With Gold* (2006) is “a brilliant example of photography at its most ‘communicative’: for Pietropaolo, the camera is a tool for touching the world.”<sup>29</sup>

After following hundreds of religious worshippers with my camera on many Good Fridays, it was not difficult to photograph some of the same individuals when they later marched in picket lines in front of factories or at political rallies to protest government policies. The visual parallels were

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<sup>24</sup> Minh-ha, “Outside In Inside Out,” 67.

<sup>25</sup> Farrell, “Working Hard in the ‘Promised Land,’” j.

<sup>26</sup> Sherkin, “Vincenzo Pietropaolo,” 26.

<sup>27</sup> Sherkin, “Vincenzo Pietropaolo,” 26.

<sup>28</sup> Sherkin, “Vincenzo Pietropaolo,” 23.

<sup>29</sup> Mandelbrot, “Touch,” 6.

many. Where one group carried banners in reverence of patron saints (figs. 2–3), the other carried papier-maché effigies of political leaders or posters demanding social justice (figs. 4–5). Where one sought spiritual fulfilment, the other demanded social reforms.

### *Labour Movement/Migrant Farm Workers*

It was at one such labour event that I learned to appreciate the meaning of solidarity as it relates to documentary practice beyond my immediate community. In the fall of 1973, a bitter and violent strike took place at an art-frame manufacturing plant in the city of North York, at the time a suburb of Toronto (fig. 6).<sup>30</sup> I often joined the workers on the picket line, photographing and sharing stories, using my camera as a witness to aid their cause. After some supporters were arrested for trespassing or resisting arrest, I was subpoenaed by the courts to give evidence through my photographs, which proved useful, helping to prove the innocence of one particular worker. This experience cast my role as a documentary practitioner in a decidedly politicizing mode. Much later, I was commissioned to document workers across the country (*Canadians at Work*, 2000) and social protest movements during the right-wing regime of the Mike Harris government in Ontario (1995–2002), leading to the publication of *Celebration of Resistance* (1999), which, as the title implies, makes this photographic work a form of resistance against the “Power.”<sup>31</sup>

I had begun to work outside the sphere of my immediate community by embarking on a long-term documentary project focusing on migrant farm workers (or guest workers) in Canada (1984–2006). Critic Peter Goddard, writing in *The Toronto Star* in an article titled “Out of the Darkness,” opined that I was depicting “courage under duress.”<sup>32</sup> In effect, however, I was attempting to express a sense of solidarity and gratitude to those foreign workers on whom Canadians depend for most of their fresh fruit and vegetables. These photographs were published as *Harvest Pilgrims* (2009), and later exhibited in galleries in Canada and abroad, including the countries of origin of the farm

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<sup>30</sup> The mostly immigrant employees of a small picture-frame factory, the Artistic Woodwork Company, went on strike in September 1973 for the right to form a union. The strike was long, bitter, and violent due to replacement workers (“scabs” in the language of the day) being escorted through the picket line by police to keep the factory operational. The strike became a cause célèbre for left-wing activists in Toronto.

<sup>31</sup> Minha-ha, “Outside In Inside Out,” 67.

<sup>32</sup> Goddard, “Out of the Darkness.”

workers. The collection also has a clear political function as it continues to create awareness of the exploitation of workers from developing countries – a situation that, up to the beginning of the twenty-first century, Canadians had associated almost exclusively as an American or European phenomenon. The significant numbers of foreign seasonal agricultural migrants<sup>33</sup> had not yet become a field of research for academics, and there was little or no interest from Canadian media. My photographs were used by activist organizations, including United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Canada, the union that has been leading the effort to organize migrant workers in the face of legal roadblocks that effectively bar collective bargaining for agricultural workers in Ontario.<sup>34</sup>

In undertaking the *Harvest Pilgrims* project, I became a participant observer as much as I could. Anthropologist Harvey Russell Bernard from the University of Florida states that “participant observation involves going out and staying out, learning a new language [...] and experiencing the lives of the people you are studying as much as you can [...] establishing rapport and knowing how to act so that people go about their business as usual when you show up.”<sup>35</sup> I followed this methodology closely, including taking Spanish conversational classes in order to become conversant in the language of the people whom I was asking to share their lives through my camera. From the farms of southern Canada (fig. 7), I travelled to their home villages in Mexico, Jamaica, and Montserrat (eastern Caribbean) (fig. 8). The irony of me visiting them and living in their homes (or very close by) during the period of research did not escape me: they, who were guests in my country, were now hosting me as their guest in their countries.

The cultural values and religious traditions of the *campesino* community in Mexico in particular were remarkably similar to the values of the *contadino* rural culture in which I was raised,<sup>36</sup> and facilitated my interaction

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<sup>33</sup> In 2008, over 20,000 workers were admitted to Canada under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (Pietropaolo, *Harvest Pilgrims*, 11); by 2019, the numbers had grown to over 72,000 (UFCW and AWA, *Status of Migrant Workers*).

<sup>34</sup> For a full discussion, see Faraday, Fudge, and Tucker, *Constitutional Labour Rights in Canada*.

<sup>35</sup> Bernard, *Research Methods*, 44.

<sup>36</sup> The Mexican *campesino* farm culture in the state of Guanajuato in the period when I photographed (1990s) deeply recalled my childhood experiences growing in the *contadino* farm culture of Calabria. Both were, in essence, systems of subsistence farming embedded in a form of iron-clad servitude to large landowners, with little or no hope for economic

with them as they went about their daily tasks, allowing me to participate in social and church rituals. I was able to immerse myself in their lives rapidly, completely gaining their trust, recording interviews, and taking many photographs. When a local *campesino* queried me repeatedly as to why I was so obsessed with photographing his fellow *paisanos*, after much fumbling for the right words, I finally replied that I was interested in producing a book to show my gratitude, much like a “monument” in words and images that would tell their story. He considered this reply carefully, nodded in approval, and took his place in front of my camera for a portrait. On a later trip, I shared this and many other photographs with the entire village as a way of “giving back.”<sup>37</sup>

### *Queer-Italian-Canadian Experience*

The methodology of working from within the cultural boundaries of a community has recently taken me to a new area of research: the queer-Italian-Canadian experience. Queerness is still a social taboo within immigrant communities generally, including the Italian community, despite the advances and acceptance of queer culture within mainstream Canadian society – culturally, socially, and legislatively. I was moved by Monica Meneghetti, who wrote in *The Globe and Mail* in 2018 that as a “queer and Italian–Canadian [...] coming out was twice as hard.”<sup>38</sup> Soon after, I was invited by Liana Cusmano,<sup>39</sup> a non-binary writer and spoken-word artist, to collaborate as an ally to the LGBTQA2S+ community<sup>40</sup> on a literary-photographic project with the objective of exploring a social phenomenon within the Italian community that has been largely overlooked by researchers, including social scientists and

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improvement, which in turn propelled many from both regions to emigrate. Further, both cultures were heavily Roman Catholic, offering another layer of shared cultural references.

<sup>37</sup> The photographs were greatly appreciated, especially because cameras were scarce or non-existent in the villages that I visited. However, I soon learned that the recipients were also somewhat disappointed: “Las fotografías del Señor Vincenzo salen muy bien. ¡Lástima! Salen solo en blanco y negro!” Author’s translation: “The photographs that Señor Vincenzo takes come out very good. Alas, they only come out in black and white!”

<sup>38</sup> Meneghetti, “I’m Queer and Italian-Canadian.”

<sup>39</sup> Cusmano’s first novel, *Catch and Release* (2022), is a queer coming-of-age story which shows how the young protagonist’s sexual orientation defines her entire life.

<sup>40</sup> Henceforth, the acronym used will be LGBTQ.

artists. The project, “Unveiling the Queer-Italian-Canadian Experience,”<sup>41</sup> is a work in progress.

According to Statistics Canada, there are one million Canadians who identify as members of the LGBTQ community – 2.63% of the total population – with 30% being between the ages of 15 and 24.<sup>42</sup> Italian Canadians are an integral component of Canadian society, and have achieved economic, cultural, and political success. Using figures for the general population, it can be extrapolated that a similar percentage of Canada’s Italian-Canadian population of 1,600,000 – approximately 42,000 people – identify as being members of the LGBTQ community. This is a significant number of persons, many of whom may have found it necessary to deny their queerness to their families and/or relegate their *italianità* to second place as they struggle with their sense of identity. Therefore, the concept of the traditional Italian-Canadian family is being called into question every day. Far from being the centre of family bliss, the traditional dinner table is becoming the scene of painful familial conflict and struggles, as queer family members attempt to gain acceptance and inclusivity.

The absence of an organized queer presence from the Italian-Canadian community reflects a deep level of secrecy, discomfort, and shame. Not surprisingly, queer-Italian-Canadian experience is notably absent from historical Canadian queer narratives, such as the landmark publication *Any Other Way: How Toronto Got Queer* (2017). Italian queerness in Toronto – one of the largest Italian-speaking urban centres outside of Italy – is non-existent in the reading of more than one hundred stories in this anthology.

Unveiling the Queer-Italian-Canadian Experience is an artistic collaboration that brings together a straight, older photographer with a queer, young writer, allowing for an intergenerational and cross-gender approach. These characteristics are crucial to the success of the project, since the objective is to create a body of work that challenges and overcomes barriers of perception

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<sup>41</sup> The project was introduced at the Association of Italian-Canadian Writers conference in Torino, in October 2022. It has received support from the Mariano A. Elia Chair in Italian Canadian Studies at York University with start-up funds, and has also been supported and encouraged by the Iacobucci Centre for Italian Canadian Studies at the University of Toronto, as well as Équipe de recherche en études queer au Québec, Université de Sherbrooke. The first phase of the project will focus on the Italian communities of Montreal and Toronto, with the inaugural exhibition of photographs and texts at the Casa d’Italia in August 2023 in conjunction with Italfest Montreal and Fierté Montréal.

<sup>42</sup> Statistics Canada, “Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population.”

in the wider community; this is not a project “by and for” the queer community. Revealing the struggles faced by queer people will engender greater inclusivity and acceptance. Writer Elio Iannacci (fig. 9) speaks eloquently about the contradictions of the concept of *la bella figura* that is embedded so profoundly in Italian family life. In reference to finding a “safe space” in an art gallery that he frequents, he writes,

[...] the gallery walls and the blank page are one and the same. They invoke potential – when you’re Queer and Italian – often that encouragement to go to that potential [...] to be dramatic, to be epic, to be grander [...] is diffused by the act of saving face and the boring and limiting idea of *figura*. *Figura* replaces that honour with dishonour [...] pride with shame. It creates borders. For Queer people of Italian descent, *La Figura* is such a trap. It’s used to shame your sexuality, your Queerness and dim the creative potency that comes from that. This place is *Figura-free*.<sup>43</sup>

The theoretical basis of this project is inspired in part by the work of British writer and theorist John Berger, who, in *Another Way of Telling* (1982), analyzed the relationship between a photograph and words:

In the relation between a photograph and words, the photograph begs for an interpretation, and the words usually supply it. The photograph, irrefutable as evidence, but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalization, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photograph. Together the two then become very powerful [...] [they] suggest another way of telling.<sup>44</sup>

Echoing Berger’s theories, Carmen Concilio calls this relationship of words and image “photoessayism,” which, she notes, “is perhaps becoming a new, hybrid, interesting genre in our contemporary world. This might be part of a revisionary process that questions the crisis in literature and the

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<sup>43</sup> Letter from Elio Iannacci to Liana Cusmano and Vincenzo Pietropaolo, 23 November 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Berger and Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, 92.

appearance of new genres, such as ‘creative non-fiction.’”<sup>45</sup> In our strongly visual world, this new genre of literature-photography can have infinitely more impact, or, as Concilio writes, more “urgent responses,” than if either component of the new genre were used on its own. The immediacy of the photograph as it is being viewed, compared to the longer period of time required for the absorption of written words (literature), results in a singularly visceral reaction, which will affect the perceptions of both the members of the Italian-Canadian LGBTQ community as well as non-members. It is anticipated that the project will help individuals, especially youth, feel supported and encouraged in their coming-out journey without having to deny their *italianità*.

### ***Conclusion***

As an outsider to the LGBTQ community, the challenge is to be accepted and trusted as an ally. Through the intermediary role of my queer collaborator, and working together with them in all facets of this research, I have gained the trust of a significant number of individuals, who have invited me to photograph them in a “safe” place (fig. 10) or location of their choosing.<sup>46</sup> I have approached this project in the same way that I photographed Italian immigrants and social movements from the 1970s to the 1990s: on the basis that the act of photographing any community is a privilege, not a right. As a diasporic artist, it represents a new frontier in my lifelong documentation of the Italian immigrant experience, and takes me back to my artistic roots when I began to use my camera as a tool for social action in Little Italy. Once again, I find myself at the intersection of insider/outsider artist; however, whereas in the past the challenge was to navigate through divisive or discordant politicized systems, today my insider/outsider status has become a cultural asset, comparable to being at the confluence of two systems, the fruit of a unique harvest whose seeds could only have been sown by a life of living as a hyphenated citizen, but a citizen of more than one country. The immigrant experience – that reality of living “in between” – can be harnessed as a prodigious force for unprecedented challenges to the Other, especially in our increasingly smaller, globalized world.

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<sup>45</sup> Concilio, “South Africa’s New Archives,” 55.

<sup>46</sup> Informed consent is a key component of the project, with any participant having the right to withdraw at any time.

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Fig. 1: Lewis Hine, *Italian Immigrants at Ellis Island, 1905* (1905). The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library, New York.



Fig. 2: Vincenzo Pietropaolo, *Isabella Mazzotta Performs the Role of Veronica, Via Crucis Procession, Toronto* (2015). Courtesy of the author, Toronto.



Fig. 3: Vincenzo Pietropaolo, *Giuseppe Rauti in the Role of Jesus, Via Crucis Procession, Toronto* (2013). Courtesy of the author, Toronto.



Fig. 4: Vincenzo Pietropaolo, *Giuseppe Rauti as a Labour Activist, with a Poster from the 1980s*, Toronto (2015). Published by the Ontario Federation of Labour. Courtesy of the author, Toronto.



Fig. 5: Vincenzo Pietropaolo, *Indigenous Woman with Mohawk Warrior Flag during Political Demonstration in Front of the Ontario Legislative Assembly, Toronto* (1996). Courtesy of the author, Toronto.



Fig. 6: Vincenzo Pietropaolo, *Italian Immigrants, Artistic Woodwork Strike, Toronto* (1973). Courtesy of the author, Toronto.



Fig. 7: Vincenzo Pietropaolo, *Mexican Migrant Farmworkers Sorting Tomatoes*, Leamington, Ontario (2006). Courtesy of the author, Toronto.



Fig. 8: Vincenzo Pietropaolo, *Family of Mexican Migrant Farmworker Who Has Gone to Canada*, Monte Prieto, Gto., Mexico (1996). Courtesy of the author, Toronto.



Fig. 9: Vincenzo Pietropaolo, Elio Iannacci with *"The Theatre of Possibilities"* by Kristin Moran, Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto (2022). Courtesy of the author, Toronto.



Fig. 10: Vincenzo Pietropaolo, *Vee Di Gregorio Walking near Marché Jean-Talon Montreal* (2023). Courtesy of the author, Toronto.