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Résumé de l'article

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# Multicultural Little Italy: A Literary Comparison of Canadian and US Urban Enclaves

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*Abstract:* Drawing on Paul Moses' *An Unlikely Union: The Love-Hate Story of New York's Irish and Italians* (2015), this article explores the history and literary reflection of multicultural cities. Particularly, Louisa Ermelino's novel *The Sisters Mallone* (2002) challenges accepted views of certain urban enclaves as ghettos. This assumption obscures cross-cultural relations and renders superficial the term multicultural as only a mosaic of discrete cultures living together. In this respect, a comparison to official multiculturalism in Canada discusses the complex nature of identity and belonging. A unique case study is Quebec, as is reflected in the position of the trilingual writer and the affiliation to world literature. This article is divided into two parts. Firstly, it analyzes a literary text that looks at US ethnic relations beyond conflict and segregation. The second part, using Italian/Canadian literary history, reflects on Canada as a multicultural country characterized by cultural diversity yet where cultural difference entails unequal power relationships such as regarding migrants and migrant literature.

*Keywords:* multiculturalism, Little Italy, ethnic relations, urban enclave, literature

## US Multicultural Milieus: A Reconsideration through Youth and Gender

In "Members of Many Gangs: Childhood and Ethno-Racial Identity on the Streets of Twentieth Century Urban America," Mark Wild engages with a scholarly gap in relation to a very common supposition regarding immigrant and ethnic relations among youth in the United States, that of conflict, violence and segregation. In other words, gangs are generally assumed to be ethnically constituted and charged with racial tension. Wild also notes that historiography has generally studied coalitions and collaboration across ethno-racial boundaries only in certain age ranges and activities such as labour struggle and leadership:

> They [historians] have lagged behind other disciplines, however, in examining the multiethnic context in which children, particularly immigrants and African Americans, developed their own ethno-racial identities. (Wild 100)

Wild offers, therefore, an intercultural examination of youth culture, notably how this mutual influence manifested in the settings of the streets and playgrounds. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, as many people lived in congested and contiguous urban industrial centres due to job opportunities as well as because of other racial covenants to rent in certain areas, intercultural contact was common. While this fact did not necessarily mean the absence of discrimination among minorities and there was racism alongside inter-racial friendship, ethno-racial animosity was especially higher in adult relations than in children. This is proved by reformers' concerns at the time with the pervasive effects of what they called "unsupervised play" in the streets (Wild 102). They disliked "mixed ethnic public spaces" on the grounds of the moral as well as physical worries of safety, and also due to the threat of a potential disrespect of law (104). Preoccupation with "street training," "gang activity," and "in particular the specter of ethno-racial amalgamation" was such that intervention was necessary; to the point that the Playground Movement of the 1960s attempted to divert such social organizations into more proper forms, appropriately conceived as counteracting "crucibles of citizenship" (104-106).

To this day, bad relations between Italian/Americans and African Americans remain a cliché, while the complicated racial identity or history of the former is overlooked since Italian/Americans and particularly Southern Italians were not always (that) white (Guglielmo and Salerno). Because of their treatment of African/Americans, Italian /Americans are commonly accused of having resorted to the same racist prejudice they themselves once endured. In "Italian Doo-Wop: Sense of Place, Politics of Style, and Racial Crossovers in Postwar New York City," Simone Cinotto references one classic filmic representation (Spike Lee's 1989 *Do the Right Thing*) about hatred and racial tensions between Italian Americans and African Americans. He points out how Italian American youth resorted not only to violence but also to culture to "mark the place as 'Italian' in a clear racial hierarchy" (Cinotto 176). Cinotto analyzes how Italian American youth both negotiated and crossed the racial line through the adoption of African American style and music.[1] In doing so, these vocal groups not only created, marked and defended "their place," but also took pride in being mistaken for black artists at venues such as the Apollo Theater and, more importantly, grasped both their own contemporary and past place in the racial hierarchy (12).

In other words, ethno-racial relations are often too simplistically conceived as an inability of racial or cultural conviviality without taking into account the history of race in the United States. Racial discourse

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[1] I am following Anthony J. Tamburri's (1991) cautions on the ideological charge of the hyphen and using instead his proposed slash when 'Italian American' is employed as an adjective. The same political choice applies in similar circumstances, e.g. African/American people or Italian/Canadian literature.

affects all immigrants and is subject to change in order to fit certain interests or political aims, as is manifested through the racialization of every newcomer, who is pitted against the more desirable behaviour and gender and cultural forms of other groups (Handlin; Carnevale). Thus, discrimination also applied to Irish migrants in the early twentieth century, who also turned into perpetrators of racism against African Americans (Richards). Equally, the reputation of bad relations between the Irish and Italians is also a classic of race relations in the US (Moses).

This is the context of Louisa Ermelino's novel *The Sisters Mallone* (2002), about three 'tough' Italian sisters in the Irish enclave infamously known as Hell's Kitchen. The text represents a more complex rendering of ethno-racial relations than previously described. Notably, it additionally challenges a key concept of early sociology. The School of Chicago used the term "social worlds" to describe immigrant groups with presumed urban and social settings "isolated and protected from external influences" (Lutters and Ackerman 5). Another cornerstone of sociology, as well as the popular imaginary, is that of the ghetto, a notion or connotation which is often misused or partially misunderstood. For instance, in "The Ethnic Ghetto in the United States, Past and Present," David Ward argues that structural factors such as racial or ethnic division in the labour market are decisive against "material advancement" rather than "the environmental disabilities and social isolation of the ghetto" (257).

*The Sisters Mallone* displays an Italian/American family which, desiring to escape the narrowness of Little Italy, feels very much at home in an Irish neighbourhood where they even try to pass as Irish. At his arrival to New York in the early twentieth century, the immigrant grandfather, surrounded by the Irish and trying to fit in, changed his surname from Malloni to Mallone. Since then, we are told, nobody has suspected the 'true' identity of the family, thus showing the porousness of geographical boundaries and ethnic identities and affiliation. Further examples of cross-cultural movements are represented by the grandmother, Anona, who constantly celebrates the gender liberation enjoyed in that contiguous space, in opposition to their former lives in Little Italy. Her granddaughters, the three sisters, have retained the gangster ways, but with a female dimension of power that they reverse from its male prerogative.

With this literary choice that revolves around interethnic relations, Ermelino departs from the common depiction in Italian/American fiction. The settings generally focus on the self-contained world of Little Italy, turning into spaces which function as "claustrophobic traps" (Gardaphé 112). This is epitomized in her earlier two novels, *Joey Dee Gets Wise* (1991) and *The Black Madonna* (2002). On interviewing the author, she further explained this difference.[2] She was asked how the idea of Hell's Kitchen as a setting for *The Sisters Mallone* came to her

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2 I interviewed the author during a research stay in New York City in the fall of 2015.

mind, and whether it was a more proper choice to depict female characters' agency, as it was implied in the novel. The grandmother Anona rejoices in her granddaughters' greater freedom, adding that "Whatta you expect? They grew up with the Irish" (*The Sisters Mallone* 15). Ermelino answered "definitely yes," backing the novel's message with the statement that "Irish women were not that passive," allowing the Italian sisters the opportunity to socialize differently (personal interview). The choice of setting was also motivated by her husband's family, who were Italian but had lived in Hell's Kitchen out of greater job opportunities for men there.

The gender dimension offers a different perspective to traditional accounts or perceptions of interethnic relations. The main relation between the Irish and Italians has been historically and popularly documented in terms of religious and work antagonism. This is especially shown by what the press called at the time the "race wars," which described the Italian and Irish clashes for religious rivalry as well as for jobs (Moses 56). Religion was certainly powerful evidence of interethnic animosity since the Irish Catholic Church mocked and diminished Italian faith. Because their religion was relegated to a pagan status, Italians were forced to practice their faith in separate services at the churches' basements (Orsi). This assumption of rivalry resonates in the world of the novel itself through the repeated concern about how to live among different ethnics, as the family were warned that they "could never make it" in a street which was "all Irish" (Ermelino, *The Sisters Mallone* 88). Nonetheless, the text significantly departs from the agreed frame of peaceful relations and cohabitation through intermarriage. If after the Second World War, intermarriage allowed to a certain extent to finally bury the hatchet (Moses), the novel discards this option in that the sisters remain independent and free of any men. This choice could also be explained from a feminist perspective, given that it is quite common for women to abandon both their autonomy and ethnicity when they marry (Hutcheon, "Cryptoethnicity").[3]

**Canadian Multiculturalism: Literary Spaces and the Ethnic Identity of the Trilingual Writer**

Despite language and even place of birth (Canada, Italy or from the United States), Italian/Canadian literature is typically identified as a distinct body of literature or tradition in light of thematic similarities, critical as well as scholarly or academic assessment and consideration, among others (Pivato "A History"). Being the official languages of the

[3] See Tina de Rosa's *Paper Fish* (1980) for an illustration of how the patriarchal tradition of marriage is particularly pressing for ethnic women. Carmolina's mother, Sarah, is a Lithuanian forced to leave behind her ethnic heritage when marrying Italian Marco. This is dramatized in the culinary tasks and rituals Sarah, as a woman, is forced to perform, where all the food she prepares is only reflective of Italian cultural identity.

nation and its literature French and English, the writing in Italian poses several doubts as to its place in Canadian Literature. Sometimes language and birthplace also play a role as to affiliation and recognition. For instance, in Quebec, writer Marco Micone who publishes in French is considered part of Quebecois tradition, while Haitians who were not born there do not generally feel as such (Pivato "The Theatre"). More generally, there has always been the question by Italian/Canadian writers whether an ethnic identity and literature is possible in three languages (Pivato "Twenty Years"). The question of language is essential, as is revealed by the first definition given to ethnic writing based on its being published in unofficial languages, until Joseph Pivato denounced its restrictive character, which failed to consider the translational character of Italian/Canadian writing and left it in an artistic limbo (Seccia 74).

In his essay "Problems for the Italian-Canadian Writer and Critic: A Discussion in Three Parts," Pivato opens the conversation with a bold statement: "Multiculturalism is an invention of the 1970s." (n.p.) He goes on to explain that "Even after Multiculturalism became official government policy there was still pressure on newcomers to blend in with the majority culture." (n.p.) Pivato continues mentioning how he felt constrained to publish his first paper about Italian/Canadian writers (in 1982) in a social science journal due to the "repeated rejection in the Canadian literary establishment," a resistance many other writers and critics also encountered (n.p.).

Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, the first to realize the existence of an Italian/Canadian literary tradition, argues that the main reason is the unexpected "isolationism" in Canada. This is an effect of a failed multiculturalism, a policy which is working in practice against ethnic writers:

> In searching for contributors [for the 1978 anthology *Roman Candles*], I found isolated gestures by isolated poets, isolated mainly by the condition of nationalism prevalent in Canada in the last ten years. However pluralistic the landscape seemed to be to sociologists, the sheer force of Canadianism had been enough to intimidate all but the older 'unofficial-language' writers. ("Preface" 9)

Even as far as 1986, for the first Italian/Canadian writers' conference held in Vancouver, the theme was "Writers in Transition," where "Transition is a euphemism for assimilation" (Pivato "Problems for the Italian-Canadian Writers").

Pivato has analyzed Marco Micone's literary engagement with dual identities and the invisibility of the Italian immigrant experience in Canada, particularly in French Quebec and in light of nationalistic aspirations, as "The political conflicts in Canada between the English and the French have resulted in the marginalization of Italians and other immigrant groups" (n.p.). Their invisibility is highlighted by their marginality in the Quebec debate. This is a situation Micone confronts by resorting to the polyphony of voices and perspectives through hybrid language and dialogic expression. In addition, Micone also inserts the migrant voice in the Quebec debate, de-centralising anglophone visibility and opening another 'minor' space otherwise com-

pletely absent. This absence is particularly proved by the surprise in the 1995 referendum that the ethnic vote could be decisive and therefore a political force.

Hence, while Canada champions multiculturalism, it does not mean belonging is clear-cut. There exists the complexity of cultural location, which has a substantial impact on writing, resulting in the paradigmatic figure of the trilingual writer, such as Québecois Antonio D'Alfonso, publishing or creating in different languages. More generally, complex identity formations are expressed in language shifts and schizophrenia, or what Pivato has called the "linguistic dysfunction of the immigrant condition" (Pivato "Five-Fold Translation").

The label of a transcultural Italian/Canadian writer is often used or preferred as many engage in self-translation in both a metaphorical and literal sense: either as a way to reach Canadian audiences and even the Italian literary tradition, or as a consequence of being shaped or raised by the language debate in the context of Quebec. Following Maria Cristina Seccia, these "authors' cultural identity is duplicated in their different languages, each of which discloses a particular side of their transcultural identity" (52). Besides, the Italian/Canadian writer is at the same time characterized by a strong sense of community since the emergence of a distinct ethnic literary tradition despite geographical distance and language affiliations. Di Cicco's 1978 anthology *Roman Candles* is generally acknowledged to put an end to writers' isolation and making them aware of their collective writing. As a consequence, it is affirmed that Italian/Canadian literature displays the biographical element as a characteristic trait emerging from past marginalization. This is not simply an opportunity to explore and negotiate their cultural identity, which is typical for instance of the first and second generations as a result of strong prejudice in the 1950s. Neither is only a quest for identity and authority regained, which migrant writing usually pursues in its choice of the first-person narrative (Pivato "Representation of Ethnicity"). It is also a question of responsibility towards their migrant and diasporic community, which were previously "voiceless" in Canadian society and literary canon (Seccia 53). For instance, Seccia reports on Caterina Edwards' sense of "duty" of the minority writer (57). She

> is the author not only of literary works characterized by clear references to her own migrant experience but also of a number of essays offering theoretical and critical insights on autobiography [...] The writer stressed the importance of the community when she explained that she wrote her play *Homeground* 'to give voice to that first generation of immigrants from their point of view'. (Seccia 57)

Yet, there are also authors who do resent labelling as they feel corseted to write for or being taken as representative of an ethnic community. While the autobiographical and ethnic experience may be present, such as in Nino Ricci, they are concerned with common "side

effects" of an exclusion in the larger national literary realm and with duties to Canadian multicultural policies, which for many has supposed an unwelcomed dichotomy between citizens of French and British ancestry and non-native Canadians (Seccia 60-61). Italian/Canadian writers who represent a critical stand of multiculturalism have added a variety of other reasons such as unveiling a "colonial attitude" (Verdicchio 108) or being a "palliative convenient myth" (Ricci 132). Multiculturalism ultimately implied homogenizing cultural differences within Italian/Canadian writing due to the need to conform to certain stable notions of ethnicity and narrative expectations.

In this respect, Pasquale Verdicchio is one of the strongest critics of the autobiographical genre and of viewing writers as "representatives of their cultural communities" (Seccia 71). He accuses multicultural policies of forcing a thematic insistence on the part of writers to reflect the migrant experience, leading to an overemphasized focus on *italianità* or a constructed ideal of being Italian, which is at odds with history as well as with the affirmation of a hybrid and transcultural identity and with the heterogeneity within a community. While autobiography is, to a certain extent, responsible for the mentioned marginalization in Canadian letters, it is not to be openly rejected based on the critical reception nor necessarily incompatible with the affirmation of transcultural identities. As Pivato has argued ("Representation of Ethnicity"), the charges to literary realism are often ideologically motivated and constitute instead a strategy which allows writers to liberate themselves from the determinism of biology and history. On the one hand, a critical assessment may follow Western standards, assuming a centred subject that the ethnic person may not be able to do away with it in the first place, if he/she has been marginalized, before ensuing fragmentation and postmodern choices. Very often, such praise of the postmodern and innovation is a prerogative of the centred subject. On the other hand, Pivato is critical of the celebrated decentred-ness and fragmentation of identity, which migrant writers may need to (re)construct first "from the chaos of fragmented oral histories" ("Representation of Ethnicity" 64). As Linda Hutcheon also affirms, one of the aspects that postmodern critique sometimes misses is the need for many people (minorities and women) to develop "distinct political agendas and often a theory of agency," rather than be content with deconstructing existing paradigms ("Circling the Downspout" 130). Here autobiography emerges as a tool not to replicate an assigned discourse but to negotiate cultural identity and contest Canadian establishment regarding what it means to be ethnic (Seccia 71-72).

These different views may all be collected in the same debates critic Amaryll Chanady discusses in "The construction of Minority Subjectivities at the End of the Twentieth Century," which includes special reference to the Canadian context and its distinctive multiculturalism. In recent years, the literary debate in Canadian letters seems to have had a preference for the peripheries, that is, minority writing is becoming popular, partly as a result of the issues with identity in a multicultural

nation. Minority literature continues to be a topic of debate and a representative for definitions based on unstable categories. Firstly, Chanady explains how criticism of national ideology was subsequently redirected at minority identity politics for being just as exclusive, as we have seen. At the same time, however, deconstruction of identity was equally resented for being perceived as counteracting empowerment, also illustrated in Pivato's concerns. Next, paradigms of hybridity have not necessarily implied the valorization of different subjectivities as there have often existed "internal Others" within those new definitions of identity (Chanady 22). Finally, if greater visibility to literature by authors considered as ethnic is conceded as an effect of Canadian multiculturalism, outside the academia, there is an emphasis on the problematics of homogenization as perceived by authors themselves. Apart from the Italian/Canadian cases already shown, this is a complaint found in Caribbean literature. Trinidad writers, for instance, have resented the artificiality, marginalization or even segregation by being assigned such monolithic identification as the Third World category, which both diminishes the expression of difference within communities and distances interactions with other groups (25-26).

On a similar note, Italian/American critics have faced the main shortcomings to identity politics such as the possibility of being confined to a literary ghetto, resembling previous conceptions of their urban history in the US. In the assessment of the call for an identity politics and of reclaiming representation in the 1960s through the 1990s, it is felt that such recovery has enabled awareness: "only now can we look and recognize the existence of a tradition of Italian/American writing within American literature" (Tamburri et al. 9). Yet, literary critics have also weighed the limits of ethnic affirmation, as is proved by the charges of forming a literary ghetto or by being frequently "relegated to the side streets of American Literature" (8). There is the concern that the telling of immigrant and Italian/American history may suppose certain constraints upon literary merit. As writer and critic Helen Barolini declared in an interview as an explanation for the critical neglect of some writers, it is the "experiential burden that denotes both our richness and our burden" (qtd. in Tamburri et al. 9). In a more personal level, she "recalls being stunned into silence" by biased perceptions that inquired of her work, not on critical terms, but on "why [she] always wrote about [alienated] Italians" (Barolini 21-22). As a case in point, the author is well-known for having moved her stance from paladin of Italian/American identity to "a one hundred per cent American writer" (Ganeri 77).

The debate about multiculturalism and definitions of ethnicity (as of any other category) remain difficult, therefore, since these 'problems' are constitutive, interdependent processes of identity discourses and practices. As Chanady best summarizes: "The symbolic construction of groups considered as Other has frequently been criticized not only by opponents of official multiculturalism in Canada who argue that ethnic labelling contributes to ghettoization but also by cultural critics [...]

who denounce all forms of classification (especially those based on ethnicity and race) as exclusionary" (25). A preferred solution is the concept of "strategic alliances" (25), which recognizes the need for social categories of identity (to create communities and enable resistance), but does not necessarily depend on stable and therefore constringent definitions and identifications.

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