

Italian Canadiana

A Cross-cultural, Trans-generational Portrait of Italian-Canadians in Adriana Monti's Two Short Films

Anna Foschi Ciampolini

Volume 34, 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087318ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v34i0.37476>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0827-6129 (imprimé)
2564-2340 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Foschi Ciampolini, A. (2020). A Cross-cultural, Trans-generational Portrait of Italian-Canadians in Adriana Monti's Two Short Films. *Italian Canadiana*, 34, 167–174. <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v34i0.37476>

Résumé de l'article

Adriana Monti is an Italian-Canadian independent producer, feminist filmmaker and author. She started her career in Italy in the late 1970s by developing a collaborative and experimental style that allowed the women object of her research to take an active and creative role in her films. This interview centers around her two recent documentaries. Family 001 and Family 005 are two shorts exploring the lives of several influential Torontonians and Montrealers of Italian origin through a series of informal interviews with women, men and members of the same family from diverse age groups. This brings a captivating and often touching perspective of the Italian-Canadian immigrant experience. In the course of this interview, Monti explores the deeper issues of identity, integration, acculturation, shifting gender roles, generational lifestyles and career choices. She also talks about the influence/interference of government in people's lives and in respect to creativity and cultural life.

A Cross-cultural, Trans-generational Portrait of Italian-Canadians in Adriana Monti's Two Short Films

Anna Foschi Ciampolini

Abstract: Adriana Monti is an Italian-Canadian independent producer, feminist filmmaker and author. She started her career in Italy in the late 1970s by developing a collaborative and experimental style that allowed the women object of her research to take an active and creative role in her films. This interview centers around her two recent documentaries. *Family 001* and *Family 005* are two shorts exploring the lives of several influential Torontonians and Montrealers of Italian origin through a series of informal interviews with women, men and members of the same family from diverse age groups. This brings a captivating and often touching perspective of the Italian-Canadian immigrant experience. In the course of this interview, Monti explores the deeper issues of identity, integration, acculturation, shifting gender roles, generational lifestyles and career choices. She also talks about the influence/interference of government in people's lives and in respect to creativity and cultural life.

Keywords: Documentary, Italian, Immigrant, Generational, Women, Integration, Acculturation

Two short films, *Family 001* and *Family 005*, produced and directed by Adriana Monti were shown during the 16th AICW Biennial Conference titled Italian-Canadian Literature: *Departures, Journeys, Destinations*, held in Padula, Italy in 2016. The shorts explore the lives of several influential Torontonians and Montrealers of Italian origin. About twenty-two minutes long, they are part of five episodes produced in 2015 for OMNI Television, the Rogers Media-owned television system and specialty channel that currently consists of all six of Canada's conventional multicultural television stations located in four Canadian Provinces. The documentaries feature a series of informal interviews with women, men and members of the same family from diverse age groups. By using an unstructured interview format, Monti's team allows interviewees to freely share their recollections of personal and family lore and to include details highlighting aspects of their personality, their values and their commitment to social causes. This offers a captivating and often touching perspective of the Italian-Canadian immigrant experi-

ence. However, the conversations center on the deeper issues of identity, integration, acculturation, shifting gender roles, generational lifestyles and career choices. In the *Family 005* episode, Prof. Marcel (Marcello) Danesi of the University of Toronto and Donna (Domenica Maria) Ciccolini, who both immigrated to Canada at a very young age, speak about their decision of anglicizing their first names to better fit in or avoid the classmates' teasing. For many Italian-Canadians the name change issue, still very current among Canada's many ethnic communities, became part of the gradual building of their own new, composite identity which encompassed cultural, linguistic and family values from their Italian roots but also embraced values and views of the host culture, like the belief about "giving back to society" through volunteer work and social activism. Sam (Salvatore) Ciccolini, the patriarch of a family that is active in the field of charity and promotion of youth sports, was awarded, among other honours, the Order of Canada and the Order of Ontario for his charity work. Ciccolini and his wife Donna started the Cristina Ciccolini Bone Marrow Foundation and are involved in countless community initiatives. Mary Alberti is a tireless advocate and fund-raiser for the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario. They tell Monti's team how they learned the importance of honesty and hard work from their parents. They recall growing up in a tight-knit family where gender roles were clearly defined yet respectful of each family member's unique contribution, and how this later enabled them to negotiate a choice between personal and career life, like Rita Ciccolini, who after teaching for a few years, decided to stay home and take care of her children.

Some women in *Episode 005* show mixed feelings about the gender role division in the household and the traditional family's expectations towards their daughters. Donna Ciccolini says that in her family the girls were taking up the household chores and that did not bother her back then, but in retrospect, it bothers her now. Professor and author Mary Di Michele, of Concordia University, says that as a youth she looked at her extended family, saw what was happening to the women and told herself, "I don't want that."

In the older generation of immigrants, language was an important bridge between parents and peers' culture since the youngsters spoke Italian or an Italian dialect at home and English at school. Bilingualism and multilingualism made them aware of their heritage and the richer culture they possessed, but still carried a connotation of "otherness." The third generation of Italian-Canadians, like Decio, Liana and Dario Cusmano, the bright, articulated, career-oriented children of the Montreal-based Cusmano Canton family of authors and publishers featured in *Episode 1*, consider the Italian language an integral part of their identity. Liana Cusmano, author, filmmaker and avid soccer player, states that she could not call herself Italian-Canadian without being able to speak Italian. She adds, "It gives me a sense of identity." While earlier generations of immigrants still faced a sense of duality and uncertainty about their "belonging," their Canadian-born offspring

have moved beyond, recognizing and honouring their roots and feeling at ease between two worlds.

Adriana Monti started her career in Italy in the late 1970s as an independent producer, feminist filmmaker and author. She developed a collaborative style that allowed the women object of her research to take an active and creative role in her films. She now lives in Toronto, where she runs her own company A&Z Media Ltd. Monti accepted to answer some questions about her life and views in the following interview.

Anna Foschi Ciampolini: *You moved to Canada in 1996. Would you talk about some of the reasons that motivated you to come to this country?*

Adriana Monti: I needed to learn English, I couldn't do it while I was in Italy. I felt out of date and isolated in Italy without the English language. Then, Berlusconi¹ got elected to Parliament and there were no chances for an independent feminist producer and filmmaker, with no political party membership, not sexually available, with no family support, to survive or get a good job. I felt that I was wasting my time there. I left thinking I would go back after I had mastered English, but Berlusconi was still in power and the economy of Italy was getting worse. In Toronto, I had a good job, dear new friends, and a wonderful garden, which I had never had in Italy. I felt so well here.

One day, at OMNI Television, an Italian-Canadian journalist and me, while chatting during a break, looked at each other and said, "Can you believe we are here working on television without having to have sex with anyone?" The answer for both of us was Wow. We had both immigrated to Canada after working in the entertainment and publishing industry in Italy. Over there, I was offered to produce movies by very shady producers. The money was coming from unreliable sources. I was not ready for that. I grew up with very strict ethical values.

Foschi: *How was your experience with the Canadian film and television industry and with the local Italian-Canadian community?*

Monti: When I arrived in Canada, I mingled mostly with artists and musicians. They were mainly white Anglophones, not Italian-Canadians. My first jobs were with Canadian and American friends. I needed to practice the new language, so I didn't seek out the Italian-Canadian community. Then, when my English got better, I started to volunteer at OMNI. There, I went back to speaking Italian. My friend Ruth Budd,² a Canadian musician

¹ Silvio Berlusconi, former Prime Minister of Italy, who served as P.M. in four government terms.

² Ruth June Budd (born June 20, 1924) is a Canadian bassist. She became Canada's first professional female bassist when she joined the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in 1947.

gave me the first story to work on for OMNI. It was titled *Antonio (Tony)*. Antonio was a flautist who left a job as a miner to become the first flautist of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. While I was working as a story producer and reporter at OMNI, I began to learn about the Italian community. Soon, I started making connections with new Italian-Canadian friends. My producers felt it was a good idea to tell the stories of lesser-known people. I was portraying the community, women and men, in the classical minimalist storytelling style—not striking or sensational stories, but interesting life stories told by smart, bright immigrants who managed to raise families while working successfully, and also volunteering to help new immigrants and the community. I was so glad that I had decided to embrace the experience of immigrants. It was such an enriching experience for me. However, I have always perceived myself as an expatriate, not an immigrant. I think it has to do with the fact that I am part of a new generation. I explained this clearly in the documentary I made in 2010 for OMNI, about three generations of Italian-Canadian women: *Three Women: Adapting Lives, Adopting Lines*.

Foschi: *How did the two short films project come together?*

Monti: After I produced the documentary for OMNI, *Three Women*, now on Vimeo, Paritosh Mehta³ asked me again to produce a series for OMNI in 2014. I was interested in the intergenerational relationships, so I proposed the *family* subject. I was looking at blood-related families, and at the *famiglia allargata*, the extended family, so that *family* is seen also as a widespread warm feeling that goes beyond the actual family core.

The project consisted of five episodes: a) *Cusmano*, the intellectual family, b) *Fuoco*, the intellectual and agricultural family, c) *The Extended Family*, two families portrayed while working for seniors, d) *The Mothers*, women who dedicated their lives to helping the community, e) *The Philanthropists*.

Foschi: *What motivated you to work on the two films?*

Monti: The Cusmano Family has a very interesting history. The grandparents moved to Canada, the children went to university and they became the “Intellectuals” who are refuting the Italian-Canadian stereotypes about working in the food industry. Using media and books instead, they dug into Italian-Canadian communities to find interesting stories and people. They opened discussions about the identity of the community, underlining the changes that were happening around them: new waves of immigrants, new ways to perceive Italian culture. Their children are

³ Paritosh Mehta, former Director, Independent Productions, OMNI Television.

choosing different careers, but they still have a good relationship with parents and grandparents. They are a good example of tolerance and resilience. Philanthropy is not very common among Italian-Canadians, especially if the money goes outside of their community, so I wanted to show how the extended family will help to improve the peaceful life in our country, and the end of marginalization.

Foschi: *What were the main themes in your work with the Italian-Canadian families featured in the short films?*

Monti: Italians are usually tolerant and generous, and I wanted to underline that. They are tolerant inside their family and outside with the "Others." They have an open mind, as they explore and learn about "Others." These shorts are against separatism, which is a limitation for communities that don't look outside of their boundaries. It is important to preserve the original roots and language, but it is also important to be open to knowing that there is more outside the Italian-Canadian community. All five episodes show that in different ways.

Foschi: *Did you feel an emotional connection with their lives and stories?*

Monti: I felt very connected with all of them. I tend to reproduce what I know. I was looking for a farming family because, as a child, I spent my summers with my grandparents who were farmers in a town close to Venice. Licia Canton's family is from Veneto and some of the Fuoco family members are farmers. I work with Leo and Maria in the same seniors' residence and seniors appreciate that Leo and Maria bring the Italian warm feelings to them. I work in the same senior facility in a different position. I run programs, the Art Gallery, and I am one of the Assistant Coordinators. With Mary Alberti, I sat on the Board of the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario, and I know how hard it is to find philanthropists for mental health associations. I knew that the Ciccolini Family and Marcel Danesi are great philanthropists donating funds to health institutions. I am an intellectual, a feminist, with farmers' roots, always involved in social struggles. I am a philanthropist too. I give regular donations to environmental and medical charity associations.

Foschi: *Women were always a pivotal presence in the Italian-Canadian family. How has their role evolved over the generations?*

Monti: Behind a strong resilient woman there is always a strong female figure, could be a mother, or a grandmother, or a mentor. Women who faced racism, discrimination, marginalization after immigrating to a new country, always build up a strong personality to bring up happy children and protect them. Migration is a very important experience I faced myself. It is not easy. You deal with

your ego daily, with your self-confidence and your insecurity, your weaknesses and your strengths. You learn how to use it to survive and to get enjoyment instead of suffering because of the changes you had to go through. I met many women who never adapted to their new condition. I was suffering with them during the interviews, but I could not do anything to help them. No one can. I portrayed them at OMNI, but they were not featured in the series *Famiglia 001*, because the chosen topics were different than those in their personal experiences. It seems that three generations are held together if there is a strong woman behind them. I wanted to see how the relationship between women and men were changing with new generations. The career choice has changed radically among them, but not the way they pursue their goals. Generational changes may not be evident in every episode, but you can see how strong the Cusmano family's women are, even in their different roles. They hold the family together and they hand down ethical values to their children as well as traditions and family culture.

Foschi: *How is the project connected with the inspiration and social motives behind your previous work?*

Monti: Having been part of the beginning of the 1970s feminist movement in Italy, I have always looked at the female way of life, paying attention to ethical values. I made many documentaries, advertisements, movies, and shorts, but the projects I care most about are those that focus on women. *Three Women* was done because there weren't many documentaries about Italian-Canadian women. Filmmakers, mostly men, were focusing on male issues. And if women directors were portraying other women, their topics were always revolving around food. But I was tired of that. I did not see myself and the other Italian-Canadian women of that generation whom I had met, in that stereotyped Media image. So, I decided to explore the diverse ideas and motivations linked to the migrations before and after WWII, and also at the end of the past millennium. Strangely, the Italian-Canadian community did not like the documentary. They did not support me. I assumed it was because of the sexual content on the third episode featuring Elena Basile, a Professor at the University of Toronto and York University. Elena moved to Canada because she was openly lesbian, but in Canada she discovered to be bi-sexual. The end of my documentary features Elena being pregnant and living with her male partner.

Feminism in Italy was intergenerational, and most of my documentaries focus on Time: the past, the present, and the future. My documentary, *Three Women*, focused primarily on adaptation. Adaptation is also a sub-theme of the "Family" series. All of the people interviewed adapted successfully to their new condition as immigrants. Integration without denying their own roots is

another sub-theme of the series. Changes in life are signs of vitality and intelligence. Feminism in the '70s brought together women from different generations and social classes, so maybe for these reasons all my documentaries about women look at generations. I've never thought about that before.

Foschi: *Will you continue to explore themes relevant to the Italian-Canadian community in the future?*

Monti: I have two projects, one is a one-hour documentary about the Residence for Seniors where I work. There is only one Italian-Canadian there. She was one of the first feminists and left Italy when she was very young. All the other residents are Anglophones and white. No other members from the Italian community are involved.

The other project is a complicated one, and it might have one Italian-Canadian involved, not a woman, this time... too early to talk about it. I have changed a lot. Even though I am still proud of being a snobby Milanese attached to my roots, I am also a Canadian activist. I fought for Women and Native rights. Being a woman of my generation, I know what does it mean to be marginalized, I know what it means not to be heard and to be powerless, so I am still a 'knight,' who fights for ethical values, human rights, and ecological issues.

Foschi: *What other issues could interest you?*

Monti: Music. I am a solo vocalist, and a member of "The Elements Choir." I am studying Taiko—Japanese Drumming. I am back to painting and curating art exhibitions, ecology. Studying Oral Native Traditions, and Native Science and Western Science at the University of Toronto, multiplied my questions about Human Rights and human relations with nature. I am interested in Autobiographical Archives. I founded the Academy and Autobiographical Archives to collect microhistory, history from the bottom up. I don't have much time to work on that right now, but I am working with seniors, on writing their own memories, which is one of the purposes of the Archive. I facilitate regular workshops for the seniors, but I will start a regular workshop for the Academy of Autobiography Archives soon. Microhistory that could be linked to oral history and ecology are my main political interests right now. Art is linked to that too, but music is just for pleasure. The domestic violence documentary on Vimeo⁴ was a motivating experience, but that topic needs much more time and dedication. I don't have the time and energy for that now. It is a

⁴ *What is Love?* is a 2016 documentary film by Adriana Monti, produced by A&Z Media and Cornerstone Family Violence Prevention Centre.

challenging, complex topic and is becoming more relevant now because of the #MeToo movement. Where is the limit between consenting and not consenting to sexual activity? I think that femininity and masculinity need a new definition and people need to rethink what these two words mean now, after 2017.