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Katharina Logan

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Résumé de l'article

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A DIFFICULT EQUATION: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN THE POETRY OF DIEGO BASTIANUTTI

KATHARINA LOGAN
University of Toronto

Summary: Diego Bastianutti's poetry is part of a cathartic process of coming to terms with his exile from Fiume during the Julian-Dalmatian exodus immediately following the Second World War. This article analyzes Bastianutti's poetry, focusing on his process of coming to terms with his exile and his multi-layered cultural identity. His self-identification as *mestizo*, a Spanish term usually used to describe someone of mixed Spanish and Indigenous descent, and then as an *antevasin*, a Sanskrit term for a border-dweller, emerge as solutions to, or rationalizations for, the problem of the pain Bastianutti wrestles with as a result of his exile, displacement, and emigration.¹

Keywords: identity, mestizo, exile, displacement, diaspora, Italian-Canadian literature, Fiuman literature, Julian-Dalmatian literature

Introduction

Born in Fiume, Italy, in 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, Diego Bastianutti is part of the Julian-Dalmatian exodus from Istria, Fiume, and Dalmatia during and immediately following the war.² In 1947, soon after Fiume, Italy, became Rijeka, Yugoslavia, Bastianutti and his family officially opted to remain Italian (rather than automatically become Yugoslavian) and were thus obliged to leave the city and move to Italy, where they were first housed in a refugee camp in Trieste and then settled in Ruta di Camogli, on the Ligurian coast. In 1952, realizing there was no future for the family in Italy and that Italy was slow to recognize the family as Italians, his

¹ I would like to thank Konrad Eisenbichler for introducing me to the work of Diego Bastianutti and for his assistance and advice throughout the preparation of this article.

² On the exodus of the Julian-Dalmatian population from Istria, Fiume, and Dalmatia, see Rocchi, *L'esodo dei 350 mila giuliani*. For a brief overview in English, see Eisenbichler, *Forgotten Italians*, 3–15. See also Petacco, *A Tragedy Revealed*.

parents decided to emigrate with their two children, Diego and Silvana,³ to the United States on provisional papers issued to them by the International Refugee Organization (IRO). Bastianutti's recollection of his family's time as refugees in Italy points to the vexing question of identity:

The question of our Italian citizenship was another matter: although we had opted for Italy, the Italian government claimed for years that until it received from Yugoslavia the documents of our option it could not recognize our Italian citizenship. Many years later this assertion proved to be false as Italy had received the documentation in 1948. For many, and especially for those who spent years and years in Refugee Camps, these were difficult times.⁴

In 1951, realizing that their situation in Italy was untenable and Italian bureaucracy insurmountable, Bastianutti's parents decided to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the International Refugee Organization and emigrate to the United States as "displaced persons," that is, as stateless individuals sponsored by, and with papers from, the IRO. After a few weeks' stay at the Bagnoli refugee camp in Naples "to undergo medical and political examinations,"⁵ the family travelled to Bremerhaven, Germany, where they boarded the Liberty ship *General Sturgis* that would take them, after a fifteen-day crossing of the Atlantic in a freezing January of 1952, to New Orleans.⁶ When they arrived in the United States, "destined for Milwaukee, Wisconsin,"⁷ Bastianutti was about to turn thirteen. He laments the lack of a "normal adolescence,"⁸ describing this timing as crucial to the compounding of his difficulties in finding a sense of belonging because he was "just at the age when one begins to forge his own identity, and so I missed those adolescent

³ For a review of Silvana Bastianutti Kukulian's own exile story, see Lonzari, "Silvana Bastianutti Kukulian."

⁴ Bastianutti, *Finding My Shadow*, 28. On the difficulties refugees had in having their Italian citizenship recognized by Italy, see also Rocchi, *L'esodo dei 350 mila giuliani*, and Ballinger, "Borders of the Nation."

⁵ Bastianutti, *Finding My Shadow*, 29. On life for Julian-Dalmatian refugees at the Bagnoli refugee camp, see Ghersi, "IRO Refugee Camp."

⁶ Bastianutti, *La barca in secco*, 5; Bastianutti, *Finding My Shadow*, 29.

⁷ Bastianutti, *Finding My Shadow*, 29.

⁸ Bastianutti, *La barca in secco*, 6.

friendships, that can be as intense as a love affair, and more lasting.”⁹ The other striking aspect of the experience of being uprooted for the second time that Bastianutti describes is the “sense of incomprehension and isolation”¹⁰ brought about by his entry into this new and foreign reality. He explains that this reaction to his arrival in the United States stems from the absence of personal memory needed to form his identity, an absence brought about by his double exile:

Per me personalmente tutti questi elementi di disagio sono riconducibili al trauma iniziale dello sradicamento da Fiume prima e dall’Italia dopo, alla depersonalizzazione che derivava da una storia-esilio ripetuta ben due volte, e alla conseguente perdita di una memoria personale. In effetti, dei cinque anni trascorsi in Liguria non sono più riuscito a ricordare una sola faccia, un solo nome dei miei compagni di scuola, un solo professore. Tutti cancellati. Ricordo solo il mio bosco dove mi rifugiavo e il mio amato mare. Dal preciso momento in cui lasciai l’Italia alla volta degli Stati Uniti, io diventai solo un D.P. (Displaced Person), un apolide senza memoria e senza identità [...] Una volta privato dell’elemento consolidante ed equilibratore della memoria, la mia identità non ebbe modo di formarsi normalmente nell’età adolescenziale in cui mi trovai al momento del mio approdo negli Stati Uniti nel 1952.

(For me personally, all these elements of discomfort can be traced back to the initial trauma of being uprooted first from Fiume and then from Italy, to the depersonalization that resulted from a history of exile repeated twice, and the consequent loss of a personal memory. In fact, I was no longer able to remember a single face from the five years I spent in Liguria, a single name of my schoolmates, a single professor. All erased. I remember only my forest where I took refuge and my beloved sea. From the precise moment I left Italy for the United States, I became just a D.P., a stateless person with no memory and no identity [...] Once deprived of the consolidating and balancing element of memory,

⁹ Zampieri Pan, “Interview.”

¹⁰ Bastianutti, “La mia Fiumanità,” 11.

my identity had no way to form normally in the adolescent age in which I found myself when I arrived in the United States in 1952.)¹¹

On his arrival in the United States, Bastianutti was struck by a powerful first impression. As the ship sailed up the Mississippi, a member of the crew “sniggered” as he threw on deck discarded apples and oranges for the children of the immigrants on board to gather from the floor, while African-American children swimming in the muddy waters of the river tried to gather the scraps of food thrown overboard. Bastianutti recalls this troubling first impression in the opening poem of *La barca in secco*, pointing to the “difficult equation” such scenes elicit in his mind:

Difficile equazione

Invano si fa schermo l’occhio
da scene ancor vive

Invano cerco l’equazione
tra dignità e bisogno
nel marinaio che gode
veder esuli figli come sorci
per terra buttarsi
a cogliere arance e mele

Mentre di negri brulica
l’acqua fangosa del Mississippi
sulla scia di scarti
del “Generale Sturgis”
– Liberty ship –
che porta il suo carico
nel cuore d’America
avvolto in un sommosso
“Va pensiero ...”¹²

¹¹ Bastianutti, “La mia Fiumanità,” 9. Here and elsewhere, all translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

¹² Bastianutti, *La barca in secco*, 11. Bastianutti self-translated the poem, retitled it “Liberty Ship,” and published it in his collection *The Bloody Thorn*, 105. He subsequently

(In vain do I recoil from scenes / still vivid in my mind's eye / In vain I seek the equation / between dignity and hunger / as a sailor sniggers / at exiled children like mice / grabbing oranges and apples / he's strewn on the floor / While blacks swarm in / the muddy Mississippi waters / in the wake of General Sturgis / left-overs / the Liberty Ship / ferrying its cargo / into the heart of America / shrouded in a murmured / "Va pensiero ...")¹³

Although this first glimpse of life in the New World was disturbing for Bastianutti at the vulnerable age of twelve, he soon adapted to his new surroundings and to American culture. Growing up in Milwaukee, he "almost totally transformed, at least externally, into an 'all-American young man,'" ¹⁴ studying international finance at the University of Milwaukee. When, however, he returned to Italy in 1960 as a tourist, he was catapulted into an emotional state of pain and anguish. Now a young man of twenty-one, Bastianutti became acutely aware that he lacked a cultural identity, a homeland, and, most of all, an adolescence connected to his place of origin. The all-American image of himself that he had built over the previous eight years came apart:

It was as if a psychological dam broke, as if I had found myself again, as if I had taken off all the masks I had painfully created and donned to survive in America. All of a sudden, the enormity of the tragic double exile fell upon me, the anger at having had my roots cut off, at not having been able to have a normal adolescence, at having had to learn to live another life without ever having even known the first one, the one of my birth.¹⁵

Upon his return to the United States, Bastianutti once again tried to amalgamate himself into the local American society; in the interview he granted to Henry Veggian, he notes,

I must confess that from the moment I married in 1962, I became quite detached from anything related to my homeland or even to

retranslated and republished it in his *Finding My Shadow*, 29.

¹³ Bastianutti, *Finding My Shadow*, 29.

¹⁴ Bastianutti, *Finding My Shadow*, 32.

¹⁵ Bastianutti, *Finding My Shadow*, 32–33.

Italy. I was busy trying to survive with my family. I seemed to live in a suspended middle world, between the Anglo-Saxon society and the Spanish world of my courses, colleagues, and friends.¹⁶

But the dam had cracks and eventually Bastianutti abandoned his career in finance and, in an effort to discover his roots and recapture his lost identity, turned his sights on a career in languages, eventually obtaining a PhD in Spanish and Italian Literature from the University of Toronto and, in 1970, accepting a position as professor of Spanish and Italian at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. In 1977, he also accepted the position of Honorary Vice Consul of Italy, serving and assisting the Italian community in Kingston and Eastern Ontario for the next eighteen years (until 1995).¹⁷ Ironically, though he was the official representative of the Republic of Italy in Kingston, Bastianutti had difficulties regaining his own Italian citizenship. As he recalls,

Many years later, when Italians abroad were given the chance to regain their citizenship, I, Vice-Consul of Italy, applied for it, but was denied it for a second time on the grounds that I was Croatian. The bitterness of such an injustice by an inept and ill-informed bureaucracy led to my resignation in 1995 as Honorary Vice-Consul of Italy.¹⁸

In 1997, having retired from the university the previous year, Bastianutti and his second wife, Giusy Oddo, moved to Cefalù, Sicily.¹⁹ Giusy's support proved to be fundamental in Bastianutti's coming to terms with his internal struggles, something he readily acknowledges in his autobiography:

It was my second wife Giusy who rewound the clock that marked my true time and thrust me towards a new life [...] It was Giusy, my second wife, who helped me understand that there would be

¹⁶ Veggian, "The Poetry of Exile," 214.

¹⁷ Bastianutti details much of his work as Honorary Vice Consul in his *Finding My Shadow*, 16, 34, et passim.

¹⁸ Bastianutti, *Finding My Shadow*, 16. The first time Bastianutti was denied his Italian citizenship was when the family were refugees in Italy; Bastianutti, *Finding My Shadow*, 28.

¹⁹ Bastianutti met Giusy Oddo, a professor of Italian at the University of British Columbia, in the late 1980s; Bastianutti, *Finding My Shadow*, 24.

no risk in ripping off my old mask, and it was my verses that were the first manifestation of certain feelings, certain impulses and secret passions that had been suppressed for so long.²⁰

The long-term effects of the sojourn in Sicily and Giusy's support are evident in the difference in sentiments one sees between Bastianutti's first two collections of poetry, *Il punto caduto* (1993) and *La barca in secco* (1995), and his third one, *Per un pugno di terra* (2003), published after his return to Canada, as well as all his subsequent collections.

Il punto caduto (1993)

Bastianutti's first collection of poetry, *Il punto caduto*, finds him beginning to work through the feelings of loss and anguish that had plagued him since childhood. His departure from his hometown, Fiume, and then his homeland, Italy, coupled with his integration into a new country and culture, coincided with the adolescent phase of the development of self-awareness, a phase that, he feels, he was never given the chance to work through. As a result, the adult Bastianutti found himself mourning his lost adolescence. With *Il punto caduto*, this anguish spills into his poetry.

The poem that gives its title to the collection uses the image of a dropped stitch to express the feeling that some fundamental building block, some important step in development, was missed along the way and so the final product is flawed, ready to become unravelled.

Il punto caduto

Se capii non ricordo
se pensai nemmeno,
solo so che anch'io volli
alla vita partecipare.

Queste le regole mi dissero,
questa la matrice,
seguile e sarai felice.

²⁰ Bastianutti, *Finding My Shadow*, 13.

Anch'io fatto avrei
la mia maglia
e mi misi a sferruzzare

Punto su punto
fila su fila
mai tolsi gli occhi.

Venne il giorno
che nella maglia mia
mi avvolsi.

Ma vedi caso,
tutta si sfilò,
ché chissà come
chissà quando
un punto cadde.

(If I understood I don't remember / nor if I thought, / I only know that I too wanted / to take part in life. // These are the rules they told me / this is the pattern, / follow it and you'll be happy. // I too would / have knitted my sweater / and I started to knit away. // Stitch by stitch / line by line / I never took my eyes off. // The day came / when in my sweater / I wrapped myself. // But look! / it completely unraveled, / because, who knows how / who knows when / a stitch had dropped.)²¹

There is a profound sense of loss in this poem, of sadness and despair. The image of the dropped stitch begs a series of questions: When did the stitch drop? How? Where? The lines "chissà quando, / chissà come" imply that the answer is a generic "who knows?" Bastianutti does not yet have an answer.

In this collection, there is very little suggestion that Bastianutti will ever emerge from his anguish. It is almost as though he has resigned himself to never being at peace with himself or the world around him, as though the trauma of his departure first from Fiume and then from Italy obscures his ability to gain perspective and feel positive about the future.

²¹ Bastianutti, *Il punto caduto*, 63. Translation by Konrad Eisenbichler, as it appears in Gerbaz Giuliano, "Land, Sea, and the Search for Oneself," 190–191.

The collection, however, does also contain the idea that writing will prove cathartic and will allow the poet to find peace and gain some clarity. This hope emerges in the love poems composed for his wife, Giusy.

Il tuo profumo

Come fiori nel suo grembo
giunge l'alba
a raccogliere le stelle

Apro gli occhi
al tuo profumo
di donna e calda
s'allunga la carezza
fra le pieghe
della mia anima.

(Your perfume // Like flowers in its lap / dawn arrives / to gather
up the stars // I open my eyes / at your perfume / of woman and
warm / the caress stretches / between the folds / of my soul.)²²

The love and support of a partner in life enters into the “difficult equation” and helps the troubled poet move forward.

La barca in secco (1995)

With his second collection, *La barca in secco*, Bastianutti gives himself permission to write about his feelings. The floodgates have opened and another volume of poetry arrives. Although these first two works are published only two years apart, it is clear that Bastianutti has left the emotional place he inhabited during the writing of *Il punto caduto*. He is still in pain, suffering from the after-effects of that long-ago trauma, but is better equipped at expressing how he feels about it, more confident. This is evident in the inclusion of a brief author's note as an introduction to the collection (pp. 5–7) and an extensive critical essay by Sergio Maria Gilardino of McGill University as its post-script (pp. 83–108).

²² Bastianutti, *Il punto caduto*, 49.

Bastianutti is now aware of the importance of expressing his feelings about his childhood upheavals and confident in the legitimacy of his writing as a standalone work. He has not yet reached the point of relinquishing the pain of his displacements but realizes it must be expressed.

The introductory note is fairly constrained, but revealing. Already in the first paragraph, Bastianutti connects the anguish he experiences with his sense of a lost adolescence:

Per me, che dovetti abbandonare la mia città di Fiume non ancora adulto e temprato, c'è una particolari amarezza che si aggiunge a quella dell'esilio: quella dell'innocenza che è stata sottratta alla mia infanzia, per aver sofferto dolori di vita già adulta, prima di aver potuto conoscere una breve stagione di spensierata adolescenza; quella di esser cresciuto fra le macerie di un mondo che non conobbi se non attraverso i ricordi dei miei genitori.

(Having had to leave my city of Fiume not yet an adult and toughened up, I feel a particular bitterness that is added to that of exile: the bitterness of the innocence that was taken from my childhood, of having suffered the pains of adult life before I was able to know a brief season of carefree adolescence; of having grown up in the rubble of a world that I did not know except through the memories of my parents.)²³

Bastianutti then explains how he still longs to be back in a place that exists only in history and in his memory:

Siamo come una vecchia fotografia che va man mano sbiadendosi. Noi dunque agogniamo una storia perduta e scordata dal mondo; noi vogliamo trascendere noi stessi per rimanere parte della storia; e la storia altro non è che desiderio di fissare nel ricordo, un grido rinchiuso nella pietra che chiede di essere liberato, riconosciuto. In questo mio atto io vivo la mia quinta stagione.

(We are like an old photograph that is gradually fading. We therefore yearn for a lost history forgotten by the world; we want

²³ Bastianutti, *La barca in secco*, 5.

to transcend ourselves in order to remain part of history; and history is nothing more than a desire to fix [something] in memory, a cry locked in stone asking to be released, acknowledged. In this act of mine I live my fifth season.)²⁴

Bastianutti goes on to talk about his dual identity as a Fiuman exile and his need to rediscover his Italian soul. He feels a strong sense of who he could have been and, through memory and storytelling, strives to capture that identity. For Bastianutti, *La barca in secco* constitutes a moment of nostalgia as he recalls his past with melancholy, mourning the loss of an identity that never was, desperately searching for the missing pieces of himself. He concludes his introduction with an explanation of his reasons for writing:

Da ogni lettura, da ogni conversazione, da ogni verso che scrivo, spero di trovare più che una conferma di ciò che già so o intuisco, spero di trovare ciò che sento mancare in me, qualcosa di mai avuto e che avrei dovuto avere dall'infanzia. Un vuoto che mi tortura. Un vuoto lasciato da una vita quasi non vissuta da me, ma solo recitata.

(In every reading, every conversation, every verse I write, I hope to find more than just a confirmation of what I already know or sense, I hope to find what I feel is missing in me, something I never had and should have had from childhood. An emptiness that tortures me. An emptiness left by a life almost not lived by me, but only acted out.)²⁵

There is a sense that Bastianutti is searching for something he knows cannot exist in the way he wants it to, as though he knows that the passing of time coupled with his physical displacement from Fiume prevents any possible return to repair the damage done. With this collection, Bastianutti is trying to fill a void left by what he sees as a lack of his being present in his own life, by his simply going through the motions of living.

The poems thus reflect this sense of loss and bitterness. The collection opens with “Difficile equazione” (cited above), a poem that draws a parallel

²⁴ Bastianutti, *La barca in secco*, 5.

²⁵ Bastianutti, *La barca in secco*, 7.

between immigrant white children from Europe and Black African children in the United States, all fumbling for discarded food, and then ends with a reference to the chorus of the Hebrew slaves from Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Nabucco* – a set of images that underscores the sense of destitution the displaced, homeless poet feels as he acknowledges the shared humanity, and needs, of exiles, be they Italian, Black, or Jewish.

The final poem reinforces this sense of exile through the image of a boat out of water but ends with an optimistic assertion of better days to come as the boat is being prepared for its next launch.

La barca in secco

Come l'oggi da tanti miei ieri
 stento a indovinare
 nell'opaco grigiore di questo giorno
 il mare dal cielo all'orizzonte
 [...]
 Già spazzano la bruma i freschi venti
 e rinvigorito il sangue cancella la fatica
 di raschiar la chiglia per il prossimo varo,
 di angosce e affanni mi tolgo il sudario
 e nuova vela mi cucio addosso
 di liete mire di sogni e di speranze
 non più lontane
 verso un orizzonte
 che s'allarga e s'avvicina
 sempre più a me.

(The boat on shore. // Like the today of my many yesterdays / I struggle to distinguish / in the dull greyness of this day / the sea from the sky at the horizon / [...] Already the fresh winds sweep the mist away / and [my] invigorated blood cancels [my] tiredness / from scraping the keel for the coming launch, / I take off my shroud of anguishes and distress / and I sew on myself a new sail / of happy goals, of dreams, and hopes / no longer distant / towards a horizon / that widens and draws always / nearer to me.)²⁶

²⁶ Bastianutti, *La barca in secco*, 80–81.

Memory and nostalgia dominate the collection; there is not yet any hint of coming to terms with a new cultural identity as we find in his later works. Although *La barca in secco* distances itself from the place of pure pain and anguish that was dominant in *Il punto caduto*, Bastianutti still remains consumed by the sense that he has been deprived of his youth and a homeland.

Per un pugno di terra/For a Fistful of Soil (2006)

With his third collection, the bilingual *Per un pugno di terra/For a Fistful of Soil*, Bastianutti leaves behind the internalizing of his feelings and finally reaches a point of peace. There is still, however, a great sense of loss in the book.

In the introduction, Bastianutti admits to having worked through a process of acceptance and having found peace with his status as an exile. His use of a passage from Mark Helprin as the epigraph to the introduction signals the point where Bastianutti has arrived:

Perhaps things are most beautiful when they are not quite real; when you look upon a scene as an outsider, and come to possess it in its entirety and forever; when you live the present with the lucidity and feeling of memory; when for want of connection, the world deepens and becomes art.²⁷

Because of his forced departure from Fiume at an impressionable age, Bastianutti continues to experience a sense of loss, but is now willing to accept that some good may have come out of it because it has allowed him to create something worthwhile: his poetry and his artworks.

Eleven years have passed since his previous collection, *La barca in secco*, and Bastianutti has spent formative time in Sicily in the company of his supportive wife. He has now returned to Canada, this time to Burnaby, BC. His return represents an acceptance of his identity, that is, of his being an Italian who, this time, leaves Italy voluntarily and can therefore feel a sense of peace about this decision. The collection's bilingualism is also telling; Bastianutti has accepted that his adopted language, English, can express, alongside his native Italian, his feelings about his lost identity and perhaps even illustrate his shift towards a Canadian multicultural identity.

²⁷ Helprin, *Ellis Island and Other Stories*, as cited in Bastianutti, *Per un pugno di terra*, 4.

The fistful of soil mentioned in the title of the collection refers to the handful of soil from Fiume that, on his departure from the city as a twelve-year-old, Bastianutti gathered up and saved in a small sack. He kept it as a souvenir of his city, as a way of literally clinging to his homeland, until he returned to Italy with his wife, Giusy, in 1997. In Sicily, he was finally able to let go of this physical connection with his city and, in a significant gesture, let his native soil literally run through his fingers and return to the earth.²⁸

The difference between his first two works and *Per un pugno di terra* is significant. In the decade that separates these works, Bastianutti has undergone an important change in perspective. He is no longer dominated by melancholic nostalgia for a city, Fiume, that no longer exists (at least, not as he remembers it). Now, he has returned to Canada and he is looking to the future. The poems are organized in four aspirational, positive rubrics: *Ter-ramara* (Bitter-earth), *Non più solo* (No longer alone), *Il complesso di Anteo* (The Antaeus complex), and *Senza più confini* (With no borders any more).

Bastianutti includes a bold and heartfelt foreword where he explains his desire to depart from constant reminiscence and embrace his future.

I have also begun to understand that I don't want to be a slave to an obsessive memory of my past, to a narcissistic memory that would end up oppressing me. I have understood that I cannot and I must not wear it as an eternal present, or worse yet as a self-serving mantle to show off only on certain occasions. The book of my past has in effect already been written and closed. I now live in the present, seeing the future coming up fast in the rear-view mirror.²⁹

The idea of seeing the future in the rear-view mirror evokes a sense of caution around Bastianutti's new-found desire to embrace his future instead of dwelling on the past. Although he is looking ahead, he sees only

²⁸ Bastianutti's gathering and keeping as a keepsake a handful of his city's soil is not unique; his fellow Fiuman-Canadian poet Gianni Angelo Grohovaz (1926–1988) did the same, but in the latter's case that soil was not returned to Italy; it was, instead, placed in vial and incorporated, as sacred relic, into the monument to the Alpini that Grohovaz was instrumental in having erected in the garden of the Columbus Centre in Toronto, next to the Villa Colombo Home for the Aged. See Grohovaz, *Per ricordare*, 2; Eisenbichler, "Before the World Collapsed," 119.

²⁹ Bastianutti, *Per un pugno di terra*, [15].

part of what is to come, somewhat reluctant to face it head-on. He is ready to relinquish his pain, heal from his nostalgia, and separate himself from the memories that had previously dominated him.

The poetry expresses eloquently just how far Bastianutti has come since his anguished first two collections. He has found his identity. The memories are no longer filled with anguish but instead contain an understanding of his situation and a sense of acceptance. The poem “Classe del ’39” (“The Class of ’39”) is a good example of this:

Non aver odiato né amato
 il mondo in cui nacqui
non aver potuto lottare
 né per cambiarlo
 né per difenderlo

 ma aver capito
che la mia primavera nasceva
 dalle nevi di cinque inverni
che l’innocenza mia si riscattava
 con l’amnesia di cinque anni
 che con le macerie
avevano spazzato via
 anche un passato
che era fiorito in me
senza mai dar frutto.

(Too young to have hated or loved / the world which saw me
born / too young to have fought / to change it / or to defend
it // but to have understood / that my spring was born / from
the snows five winters long / and that my innocence was re-
deemed / by a five-year long amnesia / that with the rubble / had
swept as well / a past away / that had bloomed in me / yet bore
no fruit.)³⁰

³⁰ Bastianutti, *Per un pugno di terra*, 28–29. Translation by Bastianutti. The English version of the poem was republished, with minor variances, in *The Bloody Thorn*, 104. The phrase “class of ’39” refers to Bastianutti’s year of birth, 1939.

Similarly, “Qui/là” (“Here/there”) is a concise expression of his desire to move on from the old “monotony” to a new “sweet reminiscence.”³¹

Despite his significant departure from the place of sorrow that grounded his first works, the slightest sense that Bastianutti has not yet fully grasped his peace lingers on. Though conscious that wallowing in the memories of trauma is not serving him, Bastianutti is also aware that he is still in the process of emerging from that place. *Per un pugno di terra* is thus a paradox in some respects, or a contradiction: although he needs to abandon it, memory is still all he has to hold onto, his only precious link to a homeland that is forever lost, and with it, a cultural identity never fully established. At some level, Bastianutti feels he can never relinquish this deeply embedded memory completely. It haunts him, possesses him, dominates and consumes him. However, by sharing these memories with his life-partner, Giusy, who did not experience what he did, Bastianutti is able to compartmentalize his painful memories and finally be free of their grasp. In tandem with this new approach, his poems to and about Giusy thus become even more passionate and his gratitude to her that much more evident.

The most significant development, however, in *Per un pugno di terra* is Bastianutti’s realization that he is *meticcio* (*mestizo*). The word *meticcio/mestizo* is of Spanish origin and was originally used to refer to people of mixed European and Native-American descent. Bastianutti uses it to indicate that he perceives himself as someone of mixed blood and culture not only because his native city, Fiume, was a multicultural, multilingual, multinational place home to a multiethnic population³² but also because his uprooting from that city and subsequent emigration overseas into a new and very different cultural world have led to his own anomalous identity, his own way of being *meticcio/mestizo*, so much so that this has now become an integral part of who he is. As Bastianutti pointed out in a 2010 interview,

I used the word *mestizo* in a broad sense. Only by welcoming the diversities the world offers us can we enrich our society. But to accept does not mean to tolerate, to allow another culture to exist within our own on condition that it be well-circumscribed, kept within the boundaries set by the majority. To accept means to

³¹ Bastianutti, *Per un pugno di terra*, 124–125. Translation by Bastianutti.

³² On the multicultural nature of Fiume, see Reill, *The Fiume Crisis*.

absorb, be it the language, the food, the music, or the philosophy of life.³³

In the poem “Meticcio,” significantly subtitled “Fiume-Toronto-Cefalù-Vancouver,” Bastianutti retraces the steps and places in his life, from childhood to the present, and concludes the following:

Con la pace in tasca
la luna e il sole mi sorridono per ogni dove
e ormai faccio parte del futuro
per quel che sono:
un meticcio.

(With a pocketful of peace / the moon and the sun will smile / upon me in any land now / and I’m part of the future / because of what I am: / a mestizo.)³⁴

Bastianutti has finally discovered that this mixture of cultures he has inherited and acquired is part of who he now is, and he is willing to accept it, to make peace with himself.

Per un pugno di terra shows Bastianutti beginning the final process of coming to terms with cultural fracture and accepting the reality of a mixed cultural identity. He acknowledges his difficulties in making peace with his departure from Fiume and in his struggle to be culturally at ease. His affirmation that he no longer wishes to live in the past is a bold statement, but it is also a statement of intent, not of fact. Still, the process is cathartic and therapeutic. Bastianutti thus ends his foreword as follows: “I have discovered that my homeland, my roots are far wider than the walls of a city or a country. My wounds are healing among people no longer foreign.”³⁵

The Bloody Thorn (2014)

Bastianutti’s healing process reaches a resolution and achieves a sense of completion in *The Bloody Thorn*, a collection of both new and previously

³³ See Zampieri Pan, “Interview.”

³⁴ Bastianutti, *Per un pugno di terra*, 225, 227. Translation by Bastianutti.

³⁵ Bastianutti, *Per un pugno di terra*, [16].

published poetry (now translated into English). The theme of a mixed cultural identity continues to be present, with the poet now identified and, one assumes, self-identifying himself as an *antevasin*. In her introduction to the collection, Giusy Oddo explains that *antevasin*

in Sanskrit refers to a border-dweller, that is a man in between two countries, and without a homeland, with whom Bastianutti identifies. And it means as well “a scholar who lives in the sight of two worlds, but is looking towards the unknown,” which is an appropriate definition for Diego Bastianutti, a scholar who is enriched by the perspectives and the culture of two worlds, and always open towards new horizons.³⁶

Despite the progress Bastianutti has made towards reaching a place of peace in rationalizing his loss of identity – or rather, the opportunity to discover his identity – the suspicion that he has not quite come to terms with this is ever-present in this fourth collection, *The Bloody Thorn*, that once again pulls all those painful memories back to the surface. The sense of control is there; Bastianutti has his solution to the pain of his losses of the past, but it gives him only temporary relief from the torment of exile as it manifests itself in the present. There is a sense that *The Bloody Thorn* is not so much an anguished wallowing in memories of past injustices, but more of a commentary on present social issues coupled with the remains of those memories. Bastianutti clearly has something further to say and it goes far beyond rationalizing the trauma of his own displacement and associated internal anguish. Although Bastianutti’s arrival at the notion of his identity as *mestizo* casts a mantle of calm and resolution over him, *The Bloody Thorn* reveals that this was short-lived, or rather that another layer of pain has now been revealed.

The poem “The Doubt” reveals that those memories still plague Bastianutti. “I once thought I was Italian,”³⁷ he writes, suggesting that he does not consider himself Italian any longer. This refers back to Bastianutti’s introduction to *La barca in secco*, where he effectively refers to himself as Italian: “Da allora ho disperatamente tentato di recuperare la mia storia, la

³⁶ Bastianutti, *The Bloody Thorn*, xii–xiii. The term *antevasin* is used as the title of the third section of poems in the collection.

³⁷ Bastianutti, *The Bloody Thorn*, 111.

mia essenza, la mia anima non solo di giuliano ma di italiano” (“Since then I have been desperately trying to recover my history, my essence, my soul not only as a Julian but as an Italian”).³⁸ This is a subtle but important connection in terms of gaining a perspective on just how far the poet has come since the publication of his first works. In “The Doubt,” he resolves not to concern himself with labels of culture or identity anymore and confidently concludes that “Now I’ve simply chosen / with no more doubts / to be a man.”³⁹

Bastianutti does not, however, shed his *mestizo* identity nor cease his search for his own self. As Oddo concludes in her introduction,

The poet will never be able to answer the many existential questions he faces, but the hope still endures that around the corner he may find one day what will give meaning to it all, “... *a sudden intuition / that will swell the sense / of my existence*” (After All).⁴⁰

There is a sense that *The Bloody Thorn* is, for the most part, a revisiting of old ideas, a rearrangement of previous conclusions in order to clarify Bastianutti’s arrival at the greatest possible level of contentment with his past. His transition from being a *mestizo*, as he called himself in the previous collection, to being an *antevasin*, as his wife labels him in the current one, does not represent a significant shift because similar themes of memory and exile persist. There is something of a maturity in *The Bloody Thorn*, a sense that time has elapsed and that the shift in the poet’s view is the result of the security and wisdom that has come with age. The section of poetry that opens the collection, about other problems in today’s world, hints at the possibility that Bastianutti may have been able to release his anguish over his exile enough to allow other issues to take precedence. This is a healthy transition that leaves us with a sense that, as an *antevasin*, Bastianutti has reached some point of peace. This is not, however, a replacement for *mestizo*, because both *mestizo* and *antevasin* are seen as variations on a theme, essentially one and the same. The *antevasin* has come to terms with his exile identity and the recognition that his memory of home will only ever be just that: a memory.

Having come to see himself as a *mestizo* and an *antevasin*, Bastianutti is now firmly rooted in his dual (even multiple) cultural identities, his maturity

³⁸ Bastianutti, *La barca in secco*, 6.

³⁹ Bastianutti, *The Bloody Thorn*, 112.

⁴⁰ Bastianutti, *The Bloody Thorn*, xiv.

granting him the wisdom and the vision to encompass a much wider view of himself and his place in the world.

Lost in Transit (2018)

Bastianutti's fifth collection of poetry, *Lost in Transit*, continues to follow the broader theme that runs through all his poetry: that of the poet's exile and search for his identity, which is the subject of the third of three sections in this well-balanced collection. The first section, entitled "Shipwrecks," provides Bastianutti's views on social issues both generally and with a focus on Vancouver; the second, "Love after Dusk," consists of poems for and about love; the third, "The Antevasin," sees Bastianutti as the protagonist.

The approach in this collection is by far the most measured of all Bastianutti's collections. He is now able to separate himself from that vulnerable adolescent who was twice thrust roughly into a new environment and found himself without roots for so long. There is a sense that he finally has compassion for himself, as he addresses his younger self from a place of wisdom and resolution, his memories no longer tormenting him but worthy, nonetheless, of being documented. He begins the third section with "To Myself," eight short lines that express a feeling of peace "to a younger me / the me I left back then and there / the me I've always loved."⁴¹ This observation applies to the entire collection, which essentially continues from the point of departure set in *The Bloody Thorn*: Fiume will remain only a memory, but without that fourth collection's air of disappointment at that realization. Many of the poems focus not on the past but on the passing of time and the progress Bastianutti has made towards living in the moment, finally able to relinquish some of the trauma of his uprooting and move beyond his lost youth, missing memories, and fragmented identity. The version of Bastianutti on display in this collection sees him reconciled to being an *antevasin*, satisfied with that definition of his identity, accepting of this method of compartmentalizing his lost roots, having "learned to savor futures / mediated by a past not yet spoiled / by a present and thus conjugate my time."⁴²

The collection concludes with a small fourth section entitled "Scattered Verses," in which the poet places four poems that do not seem to fit within the themes of the other three sections. These poems confirm that Bastianutti has

⁴¹ Bastianutti, *Lost in Transit*, 70.

⁴² Bastianutti, *Lost in Transit*, 83.

now progressed to the point that he is able to set aside the pain of his trauma and dedicate time to the exploration of other ideas.

The Lotus Eaters. I mangiatori di loto (2019)

Bastianutti's sixth and most recent collection of poetry, *The Lotus Eaters/I mangiatori di loto*, echoes his third, both in its bilingual structure and with the inclusion of a preface by the author. What sets it apart from the other five collections is its subject matter. As Bastianutti explains in the preface, with this collection he aimed to shine a light on the plight of the homeless and displaced, and on the issue of urban poverty, something he witnesses regularly in Vancouver. In this collection, he also seeks to "tell a story ignored for so many years, a story of the indigenous people, the First Nations people, who comprise 30% of the DTES [Vancouver's Downtown Eastside] community,"⁴³ an area colloquially known as "the four blocks of hell."⁴⁴ The eaters of lotus flowers, or the "Lotophagi," as Bastianutti explains, refer to those who consume "the mythical flower (Ziziphus lotus) that gave oblivion to Ulysses."⁴⁵ Bastianutti describes the addicts of the DTES as lotus eaters because they seek to forget, to render themselves unconscious and thus escape their terrible existence. In his collection, Bastianutti expresses true empathy and compassion for these human beings who have ended up, often through no fault of their own, in this "hell."

I descended into their "hell" to give some form of help to people I considered different, damaged, "the enemy," and I came out with the realization that I was the "enemy." I, like so many others, had raised a wall between me and them. But in fact, we are not that much different. I too have my scars, damaged as I have been by the tragic circumstances of my life. The only difference is that I was luckier. In the end we are all brothers in our suffering.⁴⁶

Bastianutti's decision to publish this collection in both English and Italian is one of the most striking aspects of this collection. Although he does not

⁴³ Bastianutti, *The Lotus Eaters*, 14.

⁴⁴ Bastianutti, *The Lotus Eaters*, 12.

⁴⁵ Bastianutti, *The Lotus Eaters*, 14.

⁴⁶ Bastianutti, *The Lotus Eaters*, 16.

explicitly state his reasoning for this, it may be that through Italian he is able to connect more closely with the reasons for these lost souls' despair, using the language of his youth as his link to who he was when he too experienced the trauma that led to his suffering, which he shares with these people. This is evident in his choice of translations, such as in the poem "I've seen," which is translated as "Credo" (I believe) in Italian.⁴⁷ There is a powerful mixture of humility and pride in the way Bastianutti discusses the often shocking and challenging imagery in this collection, something that could be done only in the form of poetry, and only by someone who has known displacement and pain.

Conclusion

With this last collection, Bastianutti has found and fixed the dropped stitch that unravelled his carefully constructed identity as an all-American boy; resolved the difficult equation that first confronted him on his arrival in the United States; let the fistful of soil he had so carefully conserved return to the Earth; bandaged the wound from the bloody thorn of his past; lost the vulnerable adolescent who transited to a new world; eaten the flower of forgetfulness; and joined in empathy and compassion with the suffering humanity of his new city and home. The poet of the personal has become the poet of the marginalized, those of whom he, as a *mestizo* and an *antevasin*, is part.

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