

Italian Canadian Cultural Politics: The Contradictions of Representation

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From absent to invisible

The status and situation of Italian Canadians could be said to be representative of the general trends of North American cultural politics. The reason I quickly reference my introductory statement to a North American context is that, after 12 years in the U.S., I have seen the pedagogical value of Canadian pluriculturalism be diminished as it is influenced by the more polarized but undeniably impressive American situation. South of the border we find a diversity of movement toward the emphasis of cultural heterogeneity and an increase in the political presence and cultural emergence of ethnically and racially different groups. An overview of this diversified field of interaction makes it increasingly apparent that Italians in the United States have accepted for too long a complacent position away from the troubled front-lines of mainstream/margins struggles. Current attempts at producing an Italian American consciousness and reality withstanding, it may in fact be too late to rescue an Italian American identity that is not plagued by *menefreghismo*.

Italians in Canada, as with the Canadian multicultural landscape in general, have always had at their disposal a more balanced, at least on the surface, approach to the issues that surround questions of language, national background, ethnicity, race and citizenship. And yet, today, Italian Canadians find themselves much closer to the situation of their American cousins, in terms of cultural presence and voice, than to the many other groups that move within Canadian politics. In other words, Italian Canadians are slowly but surely becoming invisible and silent.

As the current president of the Association of Italian Canadian Writers this essay emerges from reflections based on my activities within that association. Fourteen years after Italian Canadian writers met in Rome, Italy, we can list an impressive roster of publications: novels, poetry, non-fiction, scholarly studies and essays. And yet, it appears that we have hardly made progress since the foundation of the Association in Vancouver, in 1986. This apparent inertia is the result of a number of different coinciding factors: changes in aspects of institutionalized multiculturalism, the influence of US ethnic and minority studies, and the commodification of ethnicity and race, to name three.

In the first instance, changes in the designations of multiculturalism, the institutionalization of visible and invisible as categories of ethnicity, have served to the detriment of both. The divisiveness of such designations should be more than apparent, yet we have come to accept them uncritically. Why? Because they play on the very fears that nevertheless keep us tied to the institution of officially sanctioned multiculturalism. These shifts in categories are double edged. On the one hand they offer support to those who view

themselves, or are viewed, as minorities; on the other hand they hold out the promise of mainstreaming. What else can «invisible minority» mean but that we who fall under that designation are on our way to officiality, to mainstream? Those who remain in the «visible» grouping are given secondary status until they can whitewash themselves as well. For the time being they too view «invisible minorities» not as minorities at all, but as mainstream.

The reality of it all is that reconstitution of these designations slowly but surely work to disappear ethnicity, difference, and diversity and groups such as the Italian Canadians risk being erased by these policies. Even, as some would suggest, if we put our hope on the rapidly changing demographics to give us the numbers to sway official policies, in my pessimism I tend to see the hope in demographics as a losing proposition in a losing race with the deception of assimilation. Why the pessimism? Because as we await our turn at the voting booth we have turned our backs to the potentially constructive alliances that could emerge across ethnicities and race to provide us with a demographic presence immediately. While things as they are might more accurately represent the general multicultural horizon, I believe that the current situation instates an artificial disarticulation of alliances and creates in its stead a competitive and potentially confrontational environment. This, in addition to the disappearance of certain cultural groups (a positive outcome in the opinion of those who ridiculously long to be «simply Canadian») and the construction of skin pigmentation as a cultural determinant. Oddly enough, the latter, in manifestations such as «the melanin school» re-establish positivist anthropological categories as acceptable commonplaces on both sides of the political spectrum.

This takes us directly into the second point and the influence of US paradigms on the more complex but less confident Canadian model. Working along the current Canadian lines of visible/invisible has made the dominant US dichotomy of black/white infinitely influential. While the binary US model is necessary to a certain extent given the historical fact of slavery and its extant influence, it must be recognized that it has been instrumental in obliterating a greater diversity. Ethnic studies departments, such as the one at my university, are mostly understood to mean African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American. As the only recognized «ethnicities,» these are the categories that appear on school registration forms, on employment applications, on social security forms. These, and the other ethnic category of White, are an example of the commodification of race and ethnicity at the political level. White as an ethnic category is an absorptive construct that signifies cultural obliteration and has little to do with race or ethnicity. It merely implies an acceptance of assimilation and a willingness to take on the cultural dictates of officialdom.

The general tendencies of my research are in the exploration of what might have precipitated Italian North Americans' non-reaction to being disappeared, in their inaction at the forgetting and undoing of their history. Many have chosen to resolve this by seeking refuge within an odd sort of non-descript nationalism that goes by the name of *italianità*. This term of cultural essentialism is mired in a static mode of cultural alienation and historical illusion. Most Italian Canadian literary anthologies continue to limit themselves to self-representations in terms of this *italianità* filtered through a purely «immigrant» or «ethnographic» key, all written in forms and genres that mirror official or canonical ones, and show little sense of challenging the norms that define the exclusive category of

«mainstream.» The effect is a diminishment of what may be truly different in ethnic/minority culture. For this reason purely conventional narrative forms of reminiscence are of little interest to me. Having the courage to delve into the mechanics behind how things have come to be marks the emergence of hybridity, the situation in which, in Marshall McLuhan's terms, «new form is born.» (McLuhan, 63) There are myriad new forms active and possible in hybridity that require different reading strategies, ones that do not easily fall into expected thematics, yet these works receive little if any attention. Mary Melfi and Fulvio Caccia, for example, are among the most important and least analyzed writers we have. The reasons for this may be that hybridity is a discontinuous condition and that, in its disruption of official «rules of recognition,» it defines a moment of uncertainty that is at best uncomfortable for those who relegate minority cultures to a precarious perch between a rock and a hard place. We might, however, also consider that this inattention may simply be related to the fact that thematic criticism of minority cultures is an industry which, as it is sponsored by institutionalized multiculturalism, stands to lose its subsidized existence.

Resisting nationalisms

The warnings and speculations that are offered over and over regarding the disappearance of minority writing, mostly by the adherents to New Criticism, have, oddly enough, been framed in terms of assimilation. It has become a deceptive standard belief that minority writers who move beyond theme-guided poetics that mark their immigrant and/or minority status, are expressing their desire to assimilate. Quite the contrary, the maintainment of both critical attention and creative energies at a level of thematic referents and experience, while appearing to provide a documentation of minority life, become supportive of a divisive and oppressive cultural politics. These trends, supposedly championing minority expression, end up in serving to easily diminish and dismiss important minority and ethnic writing. By simultaneously representing minority culture as a developmental stage, these attitudes ensure its demise by valorizing stagnant and repetitive modes. That this work is also written in forms prescribed by official culture further diminishes their power in the constant comparison that is drawn between it and canonical standards, standards that emerge out of completely different and incomparable situations, thereby ensuring for the minority products an inferior and secondary status. As such, this game detracts all of minority culture's legitimacy and works to diminish its political, social and cultural influence. The emphasis of a sub-nationalism (*italianità*), beyond the dichotomy of Canadian nationalism, supports the diminishment of Italian Canadian culture through the imposition of nationalist cultural and linguistic guidelines. *Italianità* is a bankrupt proposition because it is from its inception a distinction of categories that denies cross-cultural influence and dialogue and emphasizes standardization and homogeneification. A discontinuous, hybrid, post-emigrant approach is more conscious of its history, less compartmentalized and admittedly multifaceted. Its success rests in the willingness to activate an awareness and faith in one's beginnings that will carry beyond nationalisms toward a comparative diasporic studies.

The achievement of a point at which Italians outside of Italy might begin to assess and engage a comparative discourse, such as I have hinted at above, means coming to terms with

one's history. We must face the fact that the terms by which Italians throughout their history in North America have been judged are ones that were established in Italy itself. The racialized history of North/South relations in Italy becomes a useful instrument in the denial of rhetorics of disappearance and further denies the detraction of culture and the absorption initiated by that detraction. Finally, it objects to the steadily advancing and progressive diminishment of cultural diversity that institutional multiculturalism requires. The reasons as to why we must return over and over to our past history are that, first of all, we have as yet to utilize its lessons, and, secondly, because still today we are faced with the terms of its effects.

The nineteenth century attitudes of positivist theorists of «race,» who were busy considering the position of Southern Italy in the context of the Italian nation, helped establish the ground upon which Southern inferiority became an unquestioned scientific «fact» (Teti, 112). Alfredo Niceforo's emphasis of the anthropological proximity between Italian Northerners and the Germans and the English, in contrast to their distance in a similar manner to Southern Italians, coupled with cultural and social variants, lead to his suggestion for the governance of these two Italies, North and South, through two radically different systems. The proposed establishment of two Italies, the North as a democracy and the South under a dictatorship, to account for two races, two psychologies, two geographies, was all meant to justify divisive and differential treatment of the population and the imposition of the dictates of the component (the North) on the inferior one (the South) (Teti, 79). The reason that I stress these beliefs and quote them as I have in other writings, is that these are the attitudes that followed Italians when they emigrated to the U.S., Canada and most elsewhere. These have been the terms of the internal dynamics of Italian Communities abroad, as well as the terms of others' definition of the Italians upon their encounter. And, though we may notice many Italian names within the rolls of Canadian government at the local, provincial and federal levels, names such as Caccia and Nunziata, we must finally ask what the impact of these names has been within a larger conscious rendering of an Italian cultural political in Canada.

Historically, the tendency for immigrant generations to deny their past has been tied to the marginalizing effect of difference. In general, this means a move toward ethnic and racial, as well as political legitimacy, as defined by «whiteness.» By this equation, «white» has developed as an alternative term for «nationalism.» «Whiteness» is the line of defense and battle cry of those who find no justification for their exclusionary politics but who have cynically detected the unease that most people feel at being categorized outside of the mainstream. Whether it is an attack on the rights of both legal and illegal immigrants in the United States, or placing of the blame for the failure of the Quebecois separatist cause on the backs of immigrants, or the separatist/racist rhetoric of Bossi and his state of Padania, for whom the ideal citizen is «white and catholic,» it would appear that nationalism and whiteness have become undeniable synonymous in political, social, and cultural terms.

As such, in the North American political field, Italians occupy an uneasy but potentially interesting and useful middleground whose effects in undermining «whiteness» could be explosive. Italian Canadians have yet to exploit such a rich position and continue to be caught in the contrasting desires that, on the one hand, lead one at all costs to a conscious disassociation with what official culture deems inferior and, on the other, to an undeniably

inherent sense of difference and an attachment to one's culture.

While some may read in these statements a threatening conflation of ethnicity and race, they are not meant to be a dismissal of either one or the other. Rather, it is the acknowledgment that these are plastic categories that flow in and out of each other and that hold different meanings in different places and situations. Race, face and place are tightly bound elements that influence each other to various degrees in time and space. We are the irrevocable products of their interactions and their interpretation. This is part and parcel of a postmigrant condition that values diversity and community-based individualism, and despises the extreme political and ideological act of disappearance that has been fostered upon us and in which we have become participants.

The last decade or so has seen an increase in the political and cultural consciousness of Italian Canadians. Possibly, this may be a result of a new-found confidence stemming from a recognition of one's own cultural products. Undoubtedly, in the US it is a result of the ground breaking work of other so-called ethnic or minority writers, Black, Chicano, Native American, etc., but in Canada, while Italian Canadians have been at the forefront of this cultural production, they have lagged behind considerably in articulating a corresponding politics. The last few years have seen the publication of a variety of critical works that address issues specific to the Italian experience abroad and generally applicable to being an ethnic minority in Canada: Joseph Pivato's *Echos*, Antonio D'Alfonso *In Italics*, Francesco Loriggio's *Social Pluralism*. Yet, even within all this apparent progress in assessing the positions of expatriate cultures within the Canadian landscape, I do not consider it an exaggeration to state that beyond these few books, the majority of the work of Italian Canadians is rooted in a misguided nostalgia. Not a re-envisioning or re-telling of the immigrant experience as lived mostly by our parents and grandparents, which would indeed be a valuable point of reference if historicized and related to the root causes and effects of emigration. Very little work goes beyond that experience to analyze the conditions in which successive generations have come to exist. For all its importance, the immigrant experience is but one part of the inventory to be compiled by Italians abroad. We must recognize and emphasize the lives of those who came before us, document and preserve their stories, but we must also delve into the realities that created those individuals and the ones that resulted from their experiences which, in turn, have gone to create the basis for our own existence as non-immigrants.

The edges of inhabitation are distinct.
Morning light barely reaches through the curtains.
The wound of description fits every shade of expression.
A hundred, two hundred
a thousand more and more
accompanied by music distant
and faint sainthood makes sense.
A woman catches a rabbit and then lets it free.
A man looks for her along both sides of the path.
Grass grows hip-high and golden.

Stopping to consider the scene he remembers
that it is somewhere else. She is no longer
waving. He no longer sees her.
A glass of water on the night table.
Slippers by the bed side.
A dog in the courtyard.
A man alone and a woman waiting.

We inhabit the foreign, we are the foreign. However, this exciting proposition is undermined by Italian Canadians' move into invisibility («invisible minority»), both as a result of multiculturalist legislation and as a function of a residual mythology of Italian nationalism. The latter seems to gather strength in direct relationship to the strengthening of the former. Oddly enough, the more Italians come to think of themselves as assimilated, the more (Italian) nationalist they become. We paradoxically stand in awe of a supposed Italian culture of origin, a culture that by its own terms defined us as superfluous and foreign. I would suggest that, at this point in history, what requires our attention are the conditions by which the line defining «home» and «abroad» has come to be erased, and the continuing effects of cultural belittlement that cause so many of us to attempt a reintegration into an exclusionary concept and ideology, *italianità*.

Italian unification, the creation of the Nation state and a way through which to achieve an Italian national identity, meant the elimination of those deemed to be «non-Italian.» Emigration was the product of this process. Beyond it, the twenty year reign of Fascism also foregrounded a cultural homogeneity that was instituted under the term *italianità*. How, then, could such an obviously prejudiced and weighty term be taken as a term of identification by Italians abroad? The role of every Italian writer outside of Italy who is ready to acknowledge that our history has yet to be written, and that terms of nationalism such as *italianità* only serve to delay its emergence, is to destroy any notion of Italian culture and history that denies the presence and influence of Italian emigration and its extensive extra-national polis.

Identity politics holds a major position in the Canadian cultural landscape. Writers such as Neil Bissoondath and Nino Ricci have achieved prominent positions within this context. I bring up their names only to emphasize that my denial of Italian nationalism does not correspond to Bissoondath's attack on ethnicity or Ricci's cynical abuse of Italian emigrant history in his recently completed novelistic trilogy. Their critiques remain superficial and self-serving devices that are only meant to raise them as individuals above what they appear to view as the dung-heap of immigrant and ethnic cultures. Critics of ethnicity fail to recognize that ethnic discourse does not seek to occupy a space (either past or present) but represents discourses that cross other discourses, that mediate and are mediated in their position vis-à-vis others. Ethnicity is not merely content but a full-fledged economy in which content is continuous with form, language, modes and systems of production and dissemination (which of course means diaspora and expands the current restricted ground upon which that term is engaged).

Assimilation, invisibility, and the language of disappearance

Since for Italians language has always been a term of culture and social distinction, as the «la questione della lingua» intimates, it is not unusual that this same *questione* would arise to challenge Italians outside of Italy. Language is the skin of culture. Language is the assumed difference. In an extra-national context, language is part of the terminology of ethnicity that often becomes lost or circumvented by more current terms of distinction as dictated by each particular situation that generates them. Canada, with its French and English bilingual policies as the defining paradigms, is a society extremely conscious of the value of language as a political tool.

We know that the Italian linguistic landscape has long been rather diversified and heterogeneous. The value and resilience of the so-called dialects, that crowd within the relatively small geographical space, that in Italy has only recently been challenged by cross-fertilization with standard Italian. In contrast to this, Italians in North America have always referred to their languages (dialects) as Italian. This false self-representation created for many years the impression of a culturally and politically cohesive community bound by a common language and heritage. It came as quite a surprise and disappointment to some when recent Statistics Canada reports showed that Italian had fallen in the national standings of prominence: Chinese has overcome Italian as the second most spoken language in Toronto, and the third in Canada.

Already, a couple of years ago, Antonio D'Alfonso responded to the 1996 *Statistics Canada* report that placed Italian Canadians among the most affluent groups in the population. Quite rightly, in «Stats describe complacency of Canadians born in Italy: Writer says community's culture is poor» (*Tandem*, August 10, 1996, 2-3). D'Alfonso asks pressing and disturbing questions of the community: So, we have money? But what has this done for us? «The fact that Italians have money does not mean that they are any better off than recent immigrants. Quite the contrary, I tend to believe that the new immigrants, in many cases, have acquired through intelligent cooperation, more rights than has the established Italian community. [...] The only lesson I learned from StatsCan is how complacent we Italians in Canada truly are. Let's never forget: The only future our children will know is what Italian Canadians leave behind in books, music and art. And that comes from education and schooling and serious community and cultural life.» (D'Alfonso, 1996, 2)

What is at the bottom of this lack of commitment to community among Italian Canadians? I believe that the answer must in some way be sought out through Italians' relationship with language. The new set of statistics that describe Canada's linguistic competition provoked yet another response, this time by *Eyetalian* editor John Montesano. Given space in the «Opinion» page of «The Toronto Sun^a, the newspaper that first published the statistics regarding the decline of Italian as a language in Canada, Montesano attempts to give a background to this development in a piece entitled «Dialects explain drop in spoken Italian.» Montesano tells «Sun» readers that the reason Italian has dropped in the standings is due to the fact that today more people speak their dialect rather than Italian. This would be a fine opinion to state in support of the trend, since it shows that linguistic diversity is alive and well, if only it were true. Montesano informs his readers that an anti-dialect prejudice existed

and persists, yet fails to mention that the Italian linguistic landscape has never been homogeneous in the way that he presents it. He states that it was up to «the post-World War II group [of emigrants] that was entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining the language in this new country,» and tells us that he «attended Italian language courses for years in grade school.» Tullio De Mauro and others have consistently shown that Italian as a lived language failed to filter through to upward of 75% of the Italian population until well into the 1970s. So, how can we expect «post-World War II» immigrants to have «maintained» a language that for all effects and purposes was foreign to them. What matter that Ontario offered course in Italian for its grade school students if, as Montesano himself seems to report, it was nothing more than another foreign language; and not one as useful as English or French in the new country.

To give the predominance of dialects as a reason for the decline of Italian is to misrepresent Italian immigrants historically and culturally. Italian immigrants to Canada had their dialects as primary languages. Their levels of formal education and their regional ties back home dictated the access they were given to legitimate representation within Italian communities abroad. This is indicative of a cultural conditioning that has relegated dialects to a minor position. To speak dialect outside of one's own group has come to signify a lack of education and a lower intellectual standard. That many immigrants should declare themselves as Italian speakers in census studies merely reflects pressures to assimilate into an Italian national image as much as their need to feel a part of a larger community. Ironically, these very same trends were ones that in fact denied a sense of community in material terms, a community from which might emerge a viable political element.

In the end, Montesano's analysis of the situation, while apparently valorizing the inherent linguistic diversity of the Italian Canadian community, ends up by missing the opportunity to comment on the «questione della lingua» as it continues to be problematic for Italians outside of Italy. His argument offers a series of excuses for Italians' lack of political and cultural congruity, rather than risk a wider ranging critique. His editorial manifests a common trait among Italian Canadians, in particular those who hold at their disposal means of communication and media, which is either the lack of a critical imagination or will and a rather paternalistic attitude in the protection of a perceived readership.

I would like at this point to close with a passage from James Baldwin that I have quoted elsewhere: «To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger.» (23) For us Italian Canadians, and I would extend this to Italian Americans, however we may be defined from outside or within, ethnic and/or minority, visible and invisible cultural activists, Baldwin's statement cuts to the bone of the issue. We must challenge the norms that define both the danger of interaction and the foreign as dangerous. If we take on this challenge, our commitment will reach its full effect and provide a workable and viable alternative to official nationalist myths such as *italianità* and undo the parallel structures of prescriptive multiculturalism, both of which work toward assimilation, disappearance and the silencing of alternative political and cultural voices.

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