

# THE TRANSCULTURAL REWRITING OF THE ITALIAN ETHNOSCAPE

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As a product of diasporic migrant experiences, the ever-growing body of Italian-Canadian women's writing is clearly marked by an intrinsic hybridity, which reflects the writers' dual here/there alliances and divided loyalties. Being caught – as Friulian-born poet Dôre Michelut writes – in a «Double Bind» (*Loyalty to the Hunt*: 33), they are set between at least two languages and cultures which forces them to engage in an ongoing process of intercultural negotiation. The cultural and, at times, linguistic hybridization present in these texts, however, does not simply result in the mixing, blending and synthesizing of different elements to ultimately form a culturally faceless and homogenous whole. Instead, it entails a transcultural process of translation, or «bearing across» as Salman Rushdie calls it (*Imaginary Homelands*: 16), wherein cultures generate ever-new forms and make multiple new connections with one another. Their texts thus create a transcultural discursive space wherein hybridization is a two-way process that comprises the converse movements of localization and globalization, since imported Italian cultural elements are indigenized and take on local Canadian features, which are then, in turn, transformed into more global or translocal products.

In light of the cross-cultural negotiation and interactive polylogue among cultures which is foregrounded in numerous texts, this essay explores the transcultural elements in contemporary Italian-Canadian women's writing and analyses how these writers incorporate local elements from their heritage cultures, from the host Canadian culture, and from the mixing of these cultures within the Italian-Canadian context, in order to transcend boundaries, bridge cultures, and open their writing up to broader, more globalized issues. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's concept of global spatial «scapes» (295-310)<sup>1</sup>, I want to

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<sup>1</sup> According to Appadurai modern cultural hybridization can be described in terms of the relationship between the five dimensions of global cultural flow, namely 'ethnoscapes' (the landscape of human migration and diasporas), 'mediascapes' (the flux of symbols),

probe how they re-appropriate their diverse heritage cultures to create overlapping fields of global-local linkages, so as to redefine culture as a hybrid mix of elements from differing contexts and to re-inscribe ethnic identity not merely as symbolic or hyphenated, but as inter-relational and transnationally dynamic. Ultimately, my intent is to argue that Canada's women writers of Italian origin are moving beyond the dualism of being caught between the nostalgic longing for their immigrant culture on one hand, and their Canadian lives on the other. By looking beyond the local dimensions of both realities, they embrace global dimensions which allow them to rewrite the Italian diasporic «ethnoscape» ("Disjuncture...": 297) and reimagine issues of identity and belonging in transnational spaces.

Discussing the cultural politics of globalization, anthropologist Appadurai theorizes the factors responsible for cultural hybridization as five deterritorialized 'scapes' – 'ethnoscapes', 'mediascapes', 'technoscapes', 'financescapes' and 'ideoscapes' – each of which is a fluid and multiple «imagined world... constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread throughout the globe» (296-297). Within these non-fixated, translocal spaces, individuals can claim membership to multiple communities and construct their identities in plural ways. For migrant subjects, belonging to an ethnoscape, i.e., «the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live» (297), thus means re-imagining themselves within a transnational diasporic community, rather than within a single homeland. Here they can stake claims to multiple identities and multiple homes and continually negotiate and rewrite their relation to the nation-states.

The transcultural re-inscription of identity in today's globalized world is, for many women writers of Italian origin, linked with a global endeavour to redefine fixed notions of ethnicity, femininity and belonging. Their widespread engagement with the writing of ethnicity – or «historiographic ethno-fiction» as Janice Kulyk Keefer calls it ("Coming Across Bones": 89) – is both part of the premiere Canadian literary tradition known as 'transcultural writing' and a noteworthy enrichment of the translocal memoryscapes of the Italian diasporic experience, since it admits the female perspective into an otherwise male-centred narrative. Writers from different regions of Italy and with different experiences of immigration are, in fact, equally committed to overcoming the boundaries erected by cultural and linguistic diversity within the Canadian mosaic

'technoscapes' (the movement of technology), 'financescapes' (the movement of capital) and 'ideoscapes' (the flux of ideas). Each 'scape' is a multiple world, which hinges on «deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors» (296).

and to challenging the survival of stereotyped ideals of femininity within many Italian ethnic communities. With their performative cultural productions<sup>2</sup>, they also contribute to promoting a muted understanding of culture, not as a bounded object confined (and/or enshrined) within a single community, but as an ongoing and dynamic process of interaction that crosses and transcends national and ethno-racial borders.

Through their multiple testimonies, Italian-Canadian women writers collectively weave a translocal web of memorial practices that adds significant insights to the Italian ethnoscape. By variously introducing the feminine viewpoint to the immigrant experience, many texts re-instate the central role played by women migrants in both preserving and modernizing their heritage cultures. A recent example is provided by Mary Di Michele's novel, *Tenor of Love* (2005)<sup>3</sup>, where the deployment of the woman-centred narratives of Rina and Dorothy to tell Enrico Caruso's life functions to de-centralize the famous tenor's story and shift the attention toward those of the women in his life. Besides acknowledging the fundamental contribution the Giacchetti sisters gave to Caruso's worldwide success, by helping him develop his singing talent, the novel also draws attention to the female immigrant experience by re-evoking – through the stunning description of Ada and Rina's voyage through the Strait of Magellan – the deadly perils and physical malaise generations of Italian women had to endure during the trans-Atlantic crossings. The two sisters' operatic tour through Chile at the time of the gold rush also sheds light on the consequences involved in setting out alone and transgressively accepting the role of female artist in the late nineteenth century, when success often entailed a condescending to the «importuning ways» of male admirers – a somewhat obligated choice which turned them into «fallen women», as Rina tragically discovers when she gives in to the insisting advances of a suitor and loses both her virginity and her family's and Rico's respect: «It only took a single act in a South American scene for me to be judged by my own family as a Carmen, a gypsy harlot. But I was a fallen woman, at least that made me a free one» (132). At work in Di Michele's novel is a debunking of the archetypal immigrant dream to easily achieve a better life in the new country – an illusory promise which, as Ada and Rina learn, can hinder their process of

<sup>2</sup> I am using the term 'performative' here as it is used in feminist theory to indicate active resistance to exclusion and discrimination. The power of authorship provides a means of survival against social and civil death and accords agency to all those who are denied their rights.

<sup>3</sup> *Tenor of Love* is Di Michele's second novel. Like in most of her poetic production, here she pays homage to her native Italy and its great cultural achievements, without that blind patriotism that can perilously foster fixed nostalgic idealizations. Di Michele was born in Lanciano, Italy and is today one of the most well-known Italian-Canadian female authors.

emancipation by falsely leading them to create idealized visions of the new land as havens for the dis-possessed. Chile for the two sisters, like Canada for many Italians and other ethnic groups, is not a prejudice-free land of equal opportunities, but, at least initially, a space where gender and ethno-racial boundaries are dramatically re-inscribed.

At the same time, through Dorothy's account of her voyage to Naples with the dying Caruso, Di Michele also emphasizes the ethnocentrism and phallocentrism of Italian culture, which enforces hierarchical boundaries between different peoples and the sexes. For the Italians, Dorothy is, in fact, always and foremost the «*Anglo-sassone*» (308), the culturally and physically diverse, the other to keep aloof in spite of the fact that she had married their national idol and mothered his child. As a woman and as a foreigner, Dorothy has no rights or decisional power in Italy, as she sadly discovers when all the decisions related to Caruso's health are systematically made by his somewhat charlatan physician.

Instead of building a mythicized vision of Italy, Di Michele's contribution to the Italian ethnoscape comprises a dialectic engagement with her native culture, which hinges on numerous intertextual references to Italian literature, opera music, customs, laws and religious beliefs. Her subversive play with Dante, for instance, parodies the platonic vision of love, which fostered centuries of false expectations about interpersonal relations built on idealizations of the other and an annihilating sacrificing of the self, especially for women. For Di Michele and other Italian-Canadian women writers, coming to terms with ethnicity and re-appropriating history, thus, necessarily entails a de/constructive re-appropriation of the heritage culture, an ironic speaking back to the patriarchal culture of the homeland which cannot be uncritically idealized and nostalgically mourned, since this would dangerously foster a perpetuation of ethnocentric and gender-biased attitudes even in distant lands.

One of the primary endeavours present in many texts is, indeed, to draw attention to the subjugated role of Italian women both at home and in the new country and the imprisoning effects this had on their own lives and those of their Canadian daughters. In doing so, they seek to expose the faultiness of inscriptions of gender as a transcultural/universal social construction, which perpetuates the erecting of boundaries between self and other even within the same ethno-cultural community. In her first trilogy of poetry, *Italian Women and Other Tragedies* (1994), *Daughters For Sale* (1997) and *Ciao, Baby* (1999), the *ciociara* Gianna Patriarca<sup>4</sup> superbly debases, for instance, the faulty constructions of female identity which viciously imprisoned generations of Italian women in the

<sup>4</sup> Gianna Patriarca was born near Frosinone, Italy and emigrated to Canada in 1960. She has since lived in Toronto where she is part of Canada's biggest Italian immigrant community.

passive and submissive roles of procreators and mothers, of selfless others who dare not speak in the presence of men, who are often brutally beaten by their husbands/fathers if they dare transgress socio-cultural gender-biased expectations and who are constantly compelled to feeling a sense of apologetic shame towards their bodies and life-giving qualities. By addressing these typically feminist concerns, which she acknowledges as part of her North American inheritance, Patriarca, like Mary Di Michele, ironically dissects the male-centred precepts of the Catholic religion, which she attacks as being the origin of Italian women's uneasiness towards their bodies, since it inculcates them with the sense of sinfulness towards their menstrual bleeding and re-enforces the stereotypical view of women as desire-less and immaculate virgin Marys. Mixing her Canadian experience with Germaine Greer and a whole tradition of women's studies to her personal knowledge of the cultural engendering of Italian immigrant culture, the poet sets out to parodically deconstruct representations of women as either saints or devils, denouncing how for Italian daughters this binary often implies, on one hand, the obligation to comply with the roles of young homemakers and surrogate mothers for their siblings, and to repress, on the other, their sexual desires, since their bodies are supposed to be «foreign territories/ never to be looked at/ never to be touched/ ... preserved in plastic like Teresa's couch and chair/ like her giardiniera/ petrified in vinegar/ to last forever/ for some great, sacred feast» (*Italian Women*: 68).

Besides debunking stereotypical images of women as mad, vulgar, licentious whores or complying angelic wives/muses, the angel/demon dichotomy is also re-appropriated by Patriarca to draw attention to the localized drama of southern Italian women amidst the Canadian Anglo-Saxon society, where they inevitably perceive their dark Mediterranean features as somewhat demonic and anti-aesthetic markers of their ethnic difference and exclusion. In poems like 'Contrasti' or 'The Garden', for instance, the poet opposes herself, «the dark rose» (*Ibid.*: 16), to the perfectly fine, white, tall, fair-haired, blue-eyed English-type woman often idealized in artistic representations, sadly acknowledging that her dark, peasant traits are condemned to remain «unphotographed» (*Ibidem*). Yet, while drawing attention to the ethno-racial prejudice Italians had to endure in Canada, she resists perpetuating victim/victimizer dialectics. Instead, she acknowledges that reconciliation with her self-image and heritage culture entails recognition of difference in unbiased terms and an acceptance of her multiple selves which, rather than leaving the poetic persona perennially hyphenated, allow her to acknowledge that being an in-between woman is a uniquely enriching aspect of her identity. In the poem 'Getting Things Right', for example, the poet proudly states:

i am/ therefore i make no apologies/ woman/ italian/ overweight, underweight/ tall, loud/ romantic bore [...]/ i accept the colour of my eyes/ i will not blame my ancestors/ for their darkness/ i will not blame them/ for my hunger for my desire/ to devour the world around me (*Ibid.*: 40).

Patriarca's struggle with the masks of identity continues in the collection *My Etruscan Face* (2007), where reconciliation with her phenotypical and physical features is eloquently completed through the connection she draws with the ancient Etruscans, and where the «woman in narrative» (13) self-consciously pieces together the multifaceted tesserae of her fractured and ever-changing identity, acknowledging her legitimacy as a wife, a mother, a daughter, a teacher, a wop who «learned to duck the blows» (72), a *ciociara* living 'somewhere far' and forever 'condemned' to invent her own history and land (26-27), and as a female poet speaking for her unvoiced people. The positing of a trans-local identity based on multidirectional inter-relational links with her various selves and with her multiple cultural alliances is completed through a dialogic web of references to the Canadian landscape, 'langscape' and literary 'scape' and the parallels she draws with other cultural experiences of submission. Within the fluid translocal spaces her transculturalism discloses for her, the poet renegotiates her hybrid condition and can bridge the *a quo* as well as *ad quem* implications of her ethnicity, joining here and there, past and present and ultimately accepting her place in a cross-cultural society.

As part of a transcultural aesthetics Italian-Canadians share with other migrant writers, this reformulation of identity as instable and ever-fluctuating among multiple and shifting subjectivities prompts a re-imagining of ethnicity which eludes the construction of boundaries both between the ethnic community and other communities and within the primary boundary lines of a single ethnic group. Ethnic identity can no longer be defined in unitary terms or associated with a single homeland, but must be conceived as transnational and inter-relational wherein a bridging of selves and others within the self and a transcending of dualisms is achieved. The idea of home, like that of nation, thus become for many writers a fluctuating, deterritorialized 'ideoscape', an imaginative space that transcends political and geographical confines, a space where history, memory and place co-habit and intermingle, thereby prompting a sense of non-belonging to any place in specific and of co-belonging to multiple spaces. In her creative autobiography, *Finding Rosa: A Mother with Alzheimer's, A Daughter in Search of the Past* (2008), Edmonton-based writer Caterina Edwards, acknowledges, for instance, the impossibility of identifying with a single home and the multifaceted aspects of belonging. The years spent taking care of her sick mother destabilize Edwards' already complicated pluri-national

alignments to Italy, England and Canada<sup>5</sup>, since she unexpectedly discovers that her mother's family was not just from Venice as she had always believed, but that they were also part of the Italian-Istrian community in Lussino (now part of Croatia). Her endeavours to uncover this buried family history lead her on a journey into the troubled historical dynamics of the Balkans in the last century, which dissipate all traditional notions of national belonging and identity and expose both the unstableness and racist and ethnocentric premises of such constructions. Indeed, as she attempts to reconstruct her mother's past through the fragmented memories of Rosa's growing dementia, Edwards comes to realize how experiences of displacement, such as those inflicted by immigration, forced migration, exodus, or loss of memory, create a «porous border between familiar and unfamiliar, neighbour and stranger, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. Between at home and lost» (320), which ultimately generates a sense of unbelonging to any place or any time. Her gradual piecing together of the dramatic vicissitudes suffered by the Istrian-Italians during the World Wars aptly exemplifies how the idea of home is decoupled from the idea of nation-state: as Istria passes under various regimes – the Reign of Italy, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Fascist Rule, the Nazi regime, the Allied Command and the Yugoslav Communist regime – the Istrian population is forced to shift its national affiliations and ethno-cultural and linguistic identification. Ethnophobic fear toward the Italian *Istriani* also led to their forced deportation to internment camps during the First World War, and made them stateless, since even those *Lussignani* who were deported to refugee camps in Caltagirone, Sicily, were considered 'untrustworthy' (216) by their mother country and denied their citizen rights. Home for these stateless citizens as for diasporic subjects is thus «not a particular place that one simply inhabits», as Sara Ahmed writes, «but more than one place [...] a space that expresses the very logic of an interval, the passing through of the subject between apparently fixed moments of departure and arrival» (*Strange Encounters*: 77).

The recognition of multiple homes implies «the possibility of belonging simultaneously, mentally, psychologically and experientially, to a diversity of cultures» (Bromley 7) and posits what Roger Bromley calls «a post-national model of belonging» (4), which entails reconsidering the concept of citizenship

<sup>5</sup> Edwards was born in Wellington (UK) and emigrated to Calgary in the Canadian prairies at the age of eight. Since her father was British and her mother Rosa was Italian-Istrian, she was constantly exposed to both languages and cultures and often visited Italy during her childhood. Her marriage to an Italo-American of Sicilian origin then further enriched her connection to Italy and the southern Italian culture in particular.

in nomadic terms<sup>6</sup>. By establishing connections with her multiple familial alliances – i.e., the Venetian, Istrian, English, Canadian and American – Edwards embraces an idea of citizenship as a «a multi-tier construct» which allows us – as Nira Yuval-Davis writes – «to understand people’s membership in a variety of collectivities at the local, ethnic, national and transnational levels» (“Women...”: 5). The perspective of a transnational, cosmopolitan citizenship is also welcomed by Genni Donati Gunn, a Vancouver-based novelist, short story writer and poet with Italian origins<sup>7</sup> whose fictional and poetic worlds are often populated by rootless migrants ever journeying toward new, unexpected landscapes and emotional terrains. For these international citizens, or «Global Souls» as Iyer calls them (*The Global...*:18), the journey itself in between departure and arrival becomes the home, the familiar space in which to come to terms with belonging and estrangement, with self and other. Identity, for Gunn, is, indeed, necessarily ambiguous, an ongoing transformation, an anonymous wearing and shedding of the different masks our increasingly technological world obliges us to hide behind, which renders us more and more «faceless», as the title of her latest collection of poetry (2007) suggests. Gunn’s efforts to come to terms with her Italian heritage are never an isolated instance, nor are they placed at the core of her work, but are always inserted in a broader, restless urge to situate herself within a global landscape. In the sequence ‘wEstSCAPES’, for example, her childhood memories of Italy and the search for connection with her absent father are echoed in the geography of British Columbia, where the perennial sense of living on the edge of a continent, in continual threat of tipping over and losing balance, becomes evocative of the elusiveness of searching for a fixed identity. One’s sense of self, like memory, continually shifts like the earth’s crust mantle and can only be conceived as in constant mutation and formation. «You are landscape» (14), she states in the poem ‘Like Ruins’ and conjures up a series of images which multiply the connections between the human body and geographical and geological landscapes: rivers are «arteries» (18), mountains «speak stone» (*Ibidem*), water sings, hands are a «fossil highway» (19), the body is the earth, then suddenly flat, «a constellation, a crab in the northern hemisphere» (14). Throughout the collection, recurring severed bodily images, such as the amputated hands in the last sequence (“Hands”), or the faceless woman and the skinless cadavers in the second section (“Faceless”), are also paired up with unsettling images of natural hazards (i.e., earthquakes, tsunamis, rain torrents, landslides, forest fires), which eloquently evoke an

<sup>6</sup> May Joseph defines «nomadic citizenship» as transnationally tied to «informal networks of kinship, migrancy, and displacement» (*Nomadic Identities*: 2).

<sup>7</sup> Gunn was born in Trieste, in 1949. She emigrated to Canada at the age of eleven.

eternal sense of precariousness, of illusory equilibrium. Any attempt to define identity according to precise paradigms, to fixate it within pre-established boundaries is, thus, equally illusory. Instead, the poet suggests that «impersonation is the rule» (De Luca-Saidero 42)<sup>8</sup>. Like chameleons we must accept and embrace constant metamorphosing or, in other words, our hybridity, together with the awareness that our various identities can never add up to build a solid, final sense of who we are, since, as Gunn writes in *Hungers*, «We too are made of sandstone, of the compressed debris of our pasts, which, like salt, is unstable and shifts and buckles and liquefies under pressure» (229).

Gunn's recurring use of landscape as a metaphor for memory, emotions, relations and all that is in movement and change is paradigmatic of her participation in the disrupting of both temporal and spatial boundaries. Like other contemporary writers, she creates multi-layered spatial topographies, where there is a constant interweaving of space and time, of physical reality and memory, of multiple time layers and specific geographic locales, so that physical landscapes are constantly transformed as they fluctuate through the multiple spatial perceptions of the individuals' inner worlds. Space and memory are, thus, limitless, interactive, constantly changing and inter-related 'scapes'. Every journey, every return, whether physical or psychological, to a place, a remembering, «an adjustment, a re-evaluation» (De Luca-Saidero 41), as Gunn says about her relation to Italy, so that it truly becomes a fluid, deterritorialized space, «a place both familiar and strange» (*Ibidem*).

Like a kaleidoscope which produces multiple duplicate images, each of which an ever-new combination of varying colours and patterns, the writing of Italian-Canadian women discloses multidimensional transcultural and transnational perspectives which significantly enrich the Italian ethnoscape. The dialogic process of rewriting their heritage cultures with a spirit of celebratory inter-reference ensures a perpetual crossing of borders between cultures, languages and histories and creates a unique transcultural discursive space which places them at the centre of global cultural politics, where they are active agents of change. Their constant endeavours to translate their hyphenated, plural and hybrid identities into their texts thus explode the restrictions and boundaries implied in the Italian-Canadian label often affixed to their works, and foster interactive polylogues with their communities, with the larger Canadian multicultural context, and with the more globalized world milieu. By staking «claims to their multiple identities, multiple homes and affiliations» (Hua 46), their performative acts of writing contribute, in fact, to redefining

<sup>8</sup> The quotation is taken from an interview with the author.

identity, culture and citizenship in ‘ungendered’ terms<sup>9</sup>, which allows them to counter marginalization within dominant and mainstream discourses. Ultimately, their writing is a fluid, translocal scape which not only incorporates and celebrates difference, but also accords agency to all diasporic subjects and allows them to reclaim ever-new modes of belonging and inclusion.

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<sup>9</sup> Discussing citizenship, Hua points out how it is ‘a deeply gendered concept’ which ‘constructs an identity long presumed to be male’ and thus generates feelings of estrangement and alienation: «although promising enfranchisement and equality, [citizenship practices] sometimes socially exclude certain gendered and racialized individuals and communities as inauthentic citizens, non-citizens, or denizens» (“Homing Desire...”: 46).