

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: NEGOTIATING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Nino Ricci*

The writer details his whole career of questioning himself on his mixed identity. He is Canadian born but his parents are from Molise. He explains why he chose that region for his first novel *Lives of the Saints*.

Tra l'incudine e il martello: negoziare l'identità culturale nell'età digitale

Lo scrittore ripercorre le tappe del suo percorso letterario interrogandosi sulla propria identità mista di discendente di molisani nato in Canada. Indaga le ragioni della scelta dell'ambientazione molisana del primo romanzo *Lives of the Saints* e mostra come le opere nascano dall'incontro tra immaginari e identità diverse.

The writer Joseph Boyden

Some of you may have followed the recent controversy in Canada surrounding the work of the writer Joseph Boyden. Set primarily among Canada's indigenous communities, Boyden's work has had both national and international success, with several major prizes to its credit, including the prestigious Giller Prize, and with a recent film adaptation of his novel *Through Black Spruce*. About two years ago, however, questions began to arise about whether Boyden had misrepresented his own indigenous roots and if this was another case of a non-indigenous writer hoarding precious resources and attention that might have gone instead to more legitimate representatives of indigenous culture.

I'm not going to go into the fine points of this debate, nor am I even going to offer a position on Boyden's case. I think the position that most writers in Canada took on the issue when it arose was that they were glad, in that moment, not to be Joseph Boyden. I suspect, though, that there were also a lot of us who suddenly started wondering about our own cultural credentials, and whether there were lines we had crossed that one day might have us showing

* Scrittore, Toronto.

up as the villains in some viral twitter feed. And that question has continued to haunt me, for the truth is that there is hardly a moment when I am writing when I don't feel like a trespasser, trying to chart territory over which I can prove no legitimate claim.

A lot of the Boyden debate has turned on the question of whether he has any genetic basis for being classed as an indigenous writer. In my own case, I can proclaim my credentials right up front. A few years ago, I sent some of my genetic material to *23andMe*, a service that, in addition to letting you know what biological time bombs are likely to end your life before you're sixty, also gives you a pie-chart of your ethnic heritage. As it turns out, I am 84% pure Italian and 8% broadly southern European, with a bit of Balkan filling out most of the rest and only a paltry 3½% Middle Eastern that is the least bit exotic or surprising. I need have little fear then, at least on biological grounds, that someone is going to call me out one day for having come on the Italian content in my writing dishonestly. And yet it is one of the ironies of my writing life that when I first started out as a writer, the last thing I wanted to write about was my Italian roots.

In part my resistance grew out of the justified fear of being ghettoized as a writer. This was at a time when a great deal of lip service was being paid in Canada to the official policy of multiculturalism but when its practical manifestations were mostly in ethnic folk festivals and the like that ended up reinforcing ethnic stereotypes rather than challenging them. In the literary world, the label of ethnic meant being consigned to a little corner of a territory that was itself already heavily ghettoized, namely Canadian literature as a whole, which at the time, for instance, was not even included in the general fiction section in Canadian bookstores but was relegated to a special shelf called 'Canadiana', where it mostly languished unread. The spectre of such double ghettoization had meant that before I started my first novel most of my work had consisted of short stories set in a cultural void, with characters with names like Alex and Mary that betrayed no sign of any immigrant origin.

The question of authority

Another part of my resistance, though, had exactly to do with the question of authority. The truth was that I didn't quite know what it meant to be Italian, or to be Italian Canadian. My literary training, for instance, had been almost entirely in British literature—from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, as the saying went—with hardly an Italian author in the lot. And even my upbringing did not seem to conform to the common image of what Italian family life was supposed

to be like. Italian families were close, everyone said; Italian families were affectionate. Yet in my own family the only physical contact that ever occurred was in the occasional backhand to the head or worse, and the only closeness in our being crammed three to a bed and twelve or more to a household with only a single bathroom. By the time I was in my teens all I felt toward my family was a profound alienation, and by the time I was in my 20s I felt more at home in Toronto's Chinatown, say, than in the hermetic coffee bars of its Little Italy.

What did I know, then, about being Italian? All I really knew was my own family, which was clearly a freakish anomaly. And I knew even less about being Canadian, having been raised, in the agricultural border town where I grew up, on a steady diet of American news and American sitcoms and American westerns, so that even a trip into town to buy groceries was like visiting a foreign country.

That I ended up writing a trilogy about the Italian immigrant experience as my first foray into real writing came about seemingly almost by fluke. The original inspiration for it, in fact, was a piece of erotica I had considered writing as an undergrad to earn some quick cash about an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister. I never wrote that piece but for some reason the idea stayed with me, and when the time came to start a novel I began to wonder if the idea might form the basis for one. To moderate the incest element and add credibility I thought of making the siblings only half-siblings, and of making the sister the product of an affair. That got me wondering how much I actually knew about adultery, however, given that it wasn't very common, at least as far as I'd been told, in the rather tight-knit Italian community I'd grown up in.

Lives of the Saints

Then I remembered one of the few Italian books I *had* actually read, Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, his memoir of his exile to southern Italy during the time of the Fascists. Levi had noted that in one of the towns he stayed in adultery and illegitimacy had indeed become quite common because women were often separated from their husbands for years while the husbands worked overseas. From that recollection, the story line of what would become my first novel, *Lives of the Saints*, began to unfold in my head in an almost seamless spool. Suddenly, from a story I had initially imagined as set in contemporary Canada in the same kind of cultural void as my earlier short stories, I now found myself in a southern Italian village in the year 1960, with a mother who hadn't even been part of the original idea. As I started writing about her she slowly began to take over the story entirely, until she had managed to relegate the brother-and-sister story to the third volume of what eventually became a trilogy.

Much later, probably long after I'd finished the entire trilogy, I was able to understand that part of what drove me to start my story in Italy was the hope of finding a way to understand my own cultural background outside the narrowing lens of the marginalized ethnicity through which it was always seen in Canada. By beginning in Italy, where my characters didn't have to think of themselves as part of an ethnic minority, I was in some sense left free to leave their Italian-ness out of the picture and to depict them merely as fully human, with all the diversity and possibility that implied. At the time of writing, though, I inevitably came up against the usual crisis of authority, since by that point in my life I hadn't spent more than a matter of weeks in the sort of Italian village I was writing about. It may have been that the story of the village took on bigger dimensions than I'd initially intended precisely because I was anxious to explore the world of it fully enough to feel confident writing about it.

As it turned out I had more resources at my disposal than I had imagined: through research and family stories; through a project I'd been involved in collecting the oral histories of Italian immigrants; through a particularly crucial trip my family had made to my parents' home villages when I was twelve. And through sources that might not have been obvious but that did a great deal to help fill in shades of nuance. After university, for instance, I had spent two years teaching in a community in Nigeria, where the rapid move from pre-modern to modern culture and the syncretic mix of Christian and pre-Christian belief gave me some important insights into the culture of a southern Italian village in the early 1960s.

And yet even when *Lives of the Saints* came out and began to do well, not only in Canada but abroad, that first unease never really left me. I still vividly remember speaking at an event in my parents' home region when the book was published in Italy and gazing out at the faces of my uncles and aunts and cousins in the audience and suddenly wondering at the arrogance of what I had done. These were people who knew these villages and this culture deep in their bones, whose history there went back millennia, and all I had as credentials was my book learning and my few weeks of casual visits. And even to this day I find it hard to know how much I got right. Certainly, the book was popular, but while occasionally books are popular because they have managed to strike a chord of truth, much more frequently they are popular because they have merely confirmed people in their mistaken assumptions and prejudices.

One thing is certain: I would not attempt that same novel today, if only because I lack the innocence that let me dare to attempt it as a callow 25-year-old. Age has a way of making you aware of the depth of your own ignorance. Ironically, though, that first novel started me on a voyage of discovery and learning about my cultural roots that has continued to this day, so that if I *were* to at-

tempt to it now I would bring to the job a much wider range of understanding and knowledge than I had then. While the ancient Samnites, for instance, make a brief appearance in *Lives of the Saints*, it was only in later years that I came to any real awareness of their culture and history and of their eventual conquest and assimilation under the Romans. That awareness has deeply enriched my understanding of my parents' home region and indeed of the marginalization and neglect that has marked the whole history of southern Italy.

After I'd written *Lives of the Saints* but before it was actually published I spent a year living and studying in Florence as part of that rediscovery of roots, with the notion of exploring whether Italy could be a place where I might end up settling. The truth was that I had never felt truly at home in Canada, and that despite my ambivalent relationship to my Italian heritage growing up, whenever I was in Italy itself some usually dormant corner of my soul seemed to awaken and sing. And so, I came to immerse myself in the waters of the Arno, as Manzoni put it, to see if I might remake myself as an Italian.

A terrone

By the end of my year in Florence I had reached such a point of fluency that the casual observer usually had no inkling that I was not an Italian born and bred. I remember being in Tarquinia near the end of my stay and stopping in at a restaurant to ask for directions from the woman running it, who turned out to be a Florentine.

«Ah, you're from Florence!» she said, clearly excited, in her exile there in the wilds of Lazio, to be running into what she took for a fellow Florentine. «I recognize the accent!».

This ought to have been a proud moment for me. To all appearances I had managed the purification I had hoped for, no longer simply the mongrel immigrant. But as it happened I felt like the purest charlatan, terrified that as soon as I opened my mouth again she would see her mistake and I would be cast out.

In fact, from the moment my Italian had become good enough for me to pass as a native this had been my constant fear, that some quirk of language or missed cultural cue would suddenly expose me. That indeed had happened on many occasions, usually when I asked some question about a matter that a native would have taken utterly for granted, say, why you never put parmesan cheese on seafood pasta. Then the truth would come out and I would have to own up to my impure past, and people who a moment before had been speaking to me as I was a perfectly normal human being would suddenly raise their voices and slow their speech and simplify their vocabulary and concepts under

the assumption that as an outsider, I would never be capable of grasping the subtlety and nuance of what it meant to be Italian.

In Florence, if course, the problem was compounded by my being doubly marginalized, not only an immigrant but a *terrone*, a *meridionale*, and therefore part of that different country which most Florentines back then would have happily seen vanish into the Mediterranean without a trace. In the end, partly because of the discomfort of living this kind of double life, though also because I couldn't find a job, I decided to return to Canada. That was perhaps the first time I actually felt relieved at being back there. It might be true that I felt just as a much the mongrel outsider in Canada as anywhere else, but at least there I shared that condition with a substantial number of my compatriots.

The further irony in all of this, of course, is that many of these cultural bits of myself that I had supposedly been reclaiming over the years in the effort to boost my sense of authority had very little to do with the culture I was actually born into through my parents. In learning Dante's Italian in Florence, for instance, I ended up losing a good deal of the dialect I grew up speaking as a child, with the result that when I spoke to my mother afterwards, who in her several decades in Canada had picked up only a smattering of English, I could feel her tensing up at an Italian that in her own experience in Italy would have been associated mainly with an officialdom and aristocracy that looked down on her. In this sense the Italian-ness I ended up putting together for myself was much less a recovery of lost roots than the discovery of entirely new territory, a discovery which my parents' origins here provided the passport for but which was in no sense a heritage they themselves ever laid any claim to. Which is merely to say, I suppose, that what most of us think of as identity is less about any foundational elements that are bequeathed to us than about the opportunities offered to us and the choices we make in the face of them, through which we are constantly fashioning and refashioning the identities that suit us.

New Identities

No one knows this better than immigrants. A number of years ago I attended the first international congress of the Italian diaspora in Rome organized by Italy's Department of Foreign Affairs, in its attempt to begin to come to terms with a diaspora that by then had come to exceed the number of Italians actually living within Italy's borders. It was a strange event. On the one hand were representatives of diaspora culture from around the world who had come to share the new and inventive forms of culture they had come to create as a result of their immigrant experience. On the other hand were the Italian moderators

who almost to a one insisted instead on the need for downloading so-called ‘real’ Italian culture to immigrant groups through heritage language programs and organs like the Italian Cultural Institute, in an almost pigheaded refusal to recognize the cultural achievements that immigrants had managed quite on their own. This is a mistake people often make about immigrants, that their primary objective and need is somehow to preserve their home culture. Whereas in truth from the instant immigrants arrive in a new country the real struggle is to create new forms that will allow them to negotiate new conditions – in essence, therefore, to create new identities, using what they bring with them only as a guide for confronting new opportunities. One of the reasons immigrants tend to thrive when they arrive in countries that have truly welcomed them is precisely because of that creative force they bring to their lives there, imagining possibilities that those who have always taken the status quo for granted are unable to see. This immigrant *bricoleur* approach to culture is certainly one that has served me well as a writer, and one indeed that in the past few generations has produced some of the world’s most innovative and respected artists across every field.

We live in a time of strange polarities. On the one hand, the erosion of the real by the virtual, and the proliferation of simulacra that make the concept of the real seem incredibly old-fashioned and quaint; on the other, a craving for authenticity and an increasing distrust of the fictional, as seen in the proliferation of memoir and reality TV and films based on true stories or even in the popularity of such forms as the so-called ‘autobiographical novels’ of Karl Ove Knausgaard, or, closer to home, of Elena Ferrante. On the one hand, a proliferation of avenues for dissent that offers the possibility of a truly radical democratization; on the other a globalization that has produced a level of conformity and crowd-think previously unimagined. On the one hand, a seemingly endless range of choices for how we will construct our own identities, and on the other a resurgence of narrow ethnic identification reminiscent of the ethnic nationalism that brought us the worst horrors of the 20th century. In the face of such resurgence, the notion of cultural authority often smacks of the jackboot and makes me grateful for the unease I continue to feel over laying any claim to it.

Testament

Somehow, however, Italian-ness invariably ends up creeping into all of my work. Even in my novel *Testament*, a fictional retelling of the life Jesus, and which arguably might have arisen from that 3 ½ % of me that is Middle Eastern, I found a back door through which to slip in an Italian motif, making Jesus the bastard son of a Roman soldier, and so turning him into the Italian I always

thought he was as a child. Italians are never the whole story for me, but they are often what Alice Munro, in her essay “What is Real”, calls the «starter dough» (364), that bit of sufficiently familiar material that gives me the confidence to let my imagination wander free. For that, too, I am grateful, for in the end the authority of writers can only come from wherever they can beg, borrow or steal it, and creation can only happen if they are willing to take the risk of getting things wrong, balancing that danger against the possibility of charting territory that might otherwise have gone unexplored.

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