

2008

Italian Canadian Culture in the New Millennium : Insights from Anthropology

Sam Migliore

Margaret Dorazio-Migliore

Follow this and additional works at: <http://kora.kpu.ca/facultypub>



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Migliore, Sam and Margaret Dorazio-Migliore. "Italian Canadian Culture in the New Millennium : Insights From Anthropology."
Italian Canadiana. 22 (2008) : 97-103. Print.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at KORA: Kwantlen Open Resource Access. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of KORA: Kwantlen Open Resource Access. For more information, please contact kora@kpu.ca.

Italian Canadian Culture in the New Millennium: Insights from Anthropology¹

Sam Migliore and Margaret Dorazio-Migliore

Kwantlen Polytechnic University

When we first heard that the Department of Linguistics and Languages (in association with the Faculty of Humanities) at McMaster University was hosting a conference on *Italian-Canadian Culture in the New Millennium*, we thought it was a wonderful idea and quickly agreed to volunteer a presentation for the conference.² As the date of the event approached, however, we began to fear that the conference would serve to reinforce mistakes from the past by focusing solely or primarily on: (1) prominent individuals, often male, from Italy's distinguished past or, in this case, from the Italian presence in Canada; (2) Italian Canadian achievements in the "high culture" of literature, cinema, and theatre; and (3) the accomplishments of Italian Canadian entrepreneurs. Although these themes are important for an understanding of the Italian Canadian experience, they tend to direct our gaze towards a narrow set of phenomena (and the key individuals associated with these phenomena). These themes do little to help us understand the everyday life experiences of immigrants, and their Canadian-born children. In fact, by concentrating on these themes, we risk trivializing the experiences of the vast majority of Italian Canadians (see also Harney). Fortunately, the organizers and, to a large extent, the conference participants, were open to expanding the discussion to make room for alternative topics and themes.

From our point of view, it is the lives of ordinary people, as lived in locations across Canada, that should receive a prominent place in the

¹ The present article has not been previously published. The case history, in modified form, however, will appear as part of a full length article on *Italians and Aging* for a forthcoming edited book on culture and aging.

² We acknowledge the support of both a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council grant and financial assistance from Kwantlen Polytechnic University in making the research for this paper possible.

study of Italian Canadian culture in the new millennium. This line of enquiry is very much linked to our personal interest in the use of ethnographic research methods to address the interrelationships between *meaning* and people's *everyday life experiences* (see Dorazio-Migliore; Migliore, *Mal'uocchiu*). The focus on lived experience, however, is not something unique to an anthropological perspective. A number of prominent Italian philosophical and literary figures display a similar interest. Giambattista Vico and Vincenzo Consolo, for example, both stress that literature, at its best, maintains a strong link with *lived experience* (Bouchard and Lollini), while Gioia Timpanelli (*Sometimes the Soul*) demonstrates the power of beautifully written prose that is deeply grounded in a people's folk tradition. In *Behind Closed Doors*, a collection of short stories, Maria Messina addresses the plight of Sicilian women during the early part of the 20th century. Her work serves as a challenge to the patriarchal structure of Sicilian society, by focusing explicitly on the lives and sufferings of women—mothers, wives, and children—who remained behind, as many of the men traveled to "La Mèrica." And, as a further example from the McMaster conference itself, Corrado Paina presented a moving, powerful discussion of some of the recent experiences of Romanian migrants in Italy, through the innovative idiom of experimental poetry.

The difficult question becomes: how do we accomplish the goal of understanding the everyday experiences of Italians across Canada? What does it mean to be Italian in Canada, or Italian Canadian, when there are significant differences among people in terms of: (1) whether they were born in Canada or Italy (or in some third location, such as Argentina); (2) what part of Italy they, or their parents, were born in; (3) the length of time they have lived in Canada; (4) where in Canada they reside; (5) gender, age, and socioeconomic differences; (6) religious affiliation, and the degree of commitment to that religion; (7) their Italian-language skills (and degree of acculturation in general); etc. As a solution to this dilemma, we suggest that researchers would benefit from following the lead of Luigi Pirandello and Ludwig Wittgenstein, to embrace the notions of subjectivity, ambiguity, and variability as key components of both research design and interpretation (see Migliore, *Mal'uocchiu* and "From Illness Narratives").

A recurring feature of Pirandello's work is the tension between "life" (or "reality") and "form" (see Tilgher; Caputi). *Reality*, from this point of view, is in a constant state of flux; it is characterized by ambiguity, vagueness, variability, and continual change (Pirandello, *On Humor*, 137; see also *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*). People, however, find this *flux of life* problematic. We thrive on order and consistency. As a result, we tend to construct a series of *forms* – abstractions, concepts, images, generalizations, and so forth—that attempt to trans-

form "what is changeable and fluid" into objectifications that appear to be much more concrete and stable (Pirandello, *On Humor* 140). Through this process, according to Pirandello, people give *meaning* to themselves, others, and their everyday life experiences. Since the *flux of life* is constantly generating change, we must continuously adapt to life's circumstances by constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing our very conception of reality (see Migliore, *Mal'uocchiu*).

Meaning, then, is context dependent; it varies cross-culturally, cross-historically, and cross-situationally. What it means to be Italian in Canada, or Italian Canadian, depends more on what people say and do, than it does on any definition of the concept itself (see Wittgenstein). To bring the discussion back to Pirandello, concepts such as "Italian" or "Italian Canadian" become similar to characters in search of an author (*Six Characters*). Rather than struggle to identify what it means to be "Italian Canadian," we argue that it would be more fruitful to conduct a series of case studies – in various parts of Canada, with people of different backgrounds – to address how individuals experience and give meaning to their reality in specific circumstances.

Constructing a Therapeutic Landscape

With the preceding ideas in mind, our paper now focuses on a specific example, a Roman Catholic prayer group devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The group consists of women primarily, although not exclusively, in the 65 to 85 year age range. Our aim is to provide a glimpse into the group's regular activities, and to address briefly the significance of group participation for people's physical, psychological, social, cultural, as well as spiritual well-being.

Gruppo di Preghiera – An Ethic of Well-Being

Many years ago, in a large urban centre of southern Ontario, the Sisters of the *Nursery School of Mother Mary* organized a prayer group for immigrant women of Italian background.³ As the Sisters became more and more involved in other work they found it difficult to maintain the prayer group. Rather than disband completely, some of the women agreed to meet in private homes to pray and say the rosary.

The current *Gruppo di Preghiera* came into existence in the late 1980s, when Zia Rita began to host the prayer meetings on a regular basis.

³ We have changed the name of the nursery school for purposes of anonymity. To protect the identities of study participants, we also make use of pseudonyms to refer to specific individuals and, in places, we have changed some of the details people described to us.

According to Zia Rita:

Piano, piano. One day after another. We began to get together one day a week, and it is now sixteen years since we formed the group.... We began with five, then six, then ten, and now we are more than forty that come together to pray in this group. And, with the help of God and the Madonna we have been able to accomplish all this.

Although the number of women attending a specific session may vary, the group tends to meet every Tuesday afternoon in Zia Rita's basement-recreation room (where she has a large statue of the Madonna, and many other symbols of both their Roman Catholic faith and their shared Italian background).

Gruppo di Preghiera devotes a great deal of time to prayer; at the same time, however, it serves as an important vehicle for social activity. The daughter of one of the original group members, a woman who recently passed away, provided this account:

I used to take my mother there... They all said the rosary together, and then they had coffee and cake—more of a get together, as well as a prayer group. And, to give... elderly women who looked after their husbands and families a time-out for themselves... And that gave them a time to be together and just enjoy... what they liked to do, like saying the rosary, enjoying the old hymns... and songs that they used to sing in their various regions of Italy. They just enjoyed the afternoon with Rita. And, they looked forward to it. Every Tuesday my mother went, and she looked forward to it. Nothing came in her way to miss this little outing... That was number one priority for Tuesday afternoons.

These weekly sessions provide participants an opportunity to socialize, obtain news about one another (and their respective families), provide support for those in need, and to work together towards achieving common goals. In 2003, for example, group members contributed and collected funds to purchase a beautiful altar cloth for a particular church in southern Italy.

Participants look forward to attending the prayer sessions, in part, because they enjoy each other's company. At the same time, the sessions give them the opportunity to address their spiritual needs, while providing a service for others. Zia Catarina participates in the prayer sessions for the following reasons:

I go because it is good for the soul. You feel lighter when you come out... We pray together...and we became friends... I say the prayers for myself, for my whole family... We pray for our people that passed away, for the people that are sick and in the hospital, for the people who are separated, for the people who need prayer but don't pray, we say the prayers for them.

Zia Rita elaborated on some of these points:

We pray for all the people that have a great need for our prayers. In reality, many people don't have faith, but prayer gives strength. And, with prayer, we can move ahead. It gives us help to increase our faith, and to be more Christian...

Prayer is even stronger than medicine... True miracles can happen... At the moment, we are praying for [a group member's] son [who is gravely ill with cancer]. We pray that he will be saved.... I, myself, am saying a *novena* to Santa Rita...

So, it is very important to pray, to have a great deal of faith... in God. One must never feel discouraged, because with discouragement come many bad things.... Without faith, without prayer, we are finished. There is nothing. The world is in ruin. So we pray a great deal for the world, for all these wars, for all these drugs.... We are children of God, and God wants us to always be faithful, and with faith we will arrive closer to him...

Zia Catarina and Zia Rita believe that prayer is important for both physical and spiritual well-being. Through prayer, they express their faith, seek spiritual assistance for themselves, and ask God, sometimes through the intercession of the Madonna or one of the saints, to assist those in physical and spiritual need. In a sense, they are providing a service to their immediate families, their community, and others around the world. Providing this service allows them to maintain a positive self-image of themselves. They may be in their senior years, but there is power in prayer, and through prayer they can accomplish a great deal for others.

For these women, then, the *Gruppo di Preghiera* serves many purposes. In some respects, we suggest, it constitutes a *therapeutic landscape*. Initially, the concept of a therapeutic landscape was used in geography to refer to how the "physical and built environments, social conditions, and human perceptions combine to produce an atmosphere which is conducive to healing" (Gesler 96). In recent years, some scholars have modified the concept to include the role of both physical and figurative space in discussions of health and well-being (see Gastaldo). The prayer sessions take place in a physical location. Zia Rita's basement-recreation room serves as the physical space where group members engage the spiritual through prayer, in the midst of numerous cultural and religious symbols (ranging from images of God and the Madonna, to symbols of *Italianness* and family life). At the same time, in our view, the group itself serves as a figurative space. A space from which they can interact with one another, pray for loved ones, maintain links with those who have passed away, and provide a service for others. In other

words, these women have constructed a *Gruppo di Preghiera* that helps to promote, and provide a vehicle for the expression of, a sense of well-being among participants. They have accomplished this, in part, by cultivating a sense of belongingness among group members, and by providing each other with a *space* or *place* that stimulates the types of social and spiritual interactions that they associate with a *buona vecchiaia* or "good old age." A *buona vecchiaia* that links them to Italy, their place of birth or ancestral home, and to everyday life experiences and challenges here in Canada.

Conclusion

Our discussion of *Gruppo di Preghiera* is based on an anthropological approach that weaves together various ethnographic methods, with insights from both geography and the philosophical ideas of certain Italian literary figures. This approach allows us to examine both people's *life experiences*, and the *meanings* they attach to these experiences. Although we believe that this is an effective way to gain an understanding of Italian Canadian culture, we recognize that this focus on experience can be accomplished from a variety of perspectives and approaches, and that there are numerous scholars that are currently engaged in this type of research.

At a more general level, however, we believe that any attempt to study "Italian Canadian culture in the new millennium" is likely to encounter serious problems (see also Anselmi), unless researchers embrace the notions of ambiguity, variability, diversity, and continuous change. Any attempt to arrive at an overall Italian Canadian Culture, in our view, will only lead to superficial generalizations that, at best, misrepresent or ignore the everyday life experiences of the vast majority of Italians in Canada. There is no one Italian Canadian Culture, but rather many individual and shared "Italian Canadian" experiences of reality, in different regions and communities across the country. What it means to be Italian Canadian, or Italian in Canada, will vary based on people's experiences in specific locations, at particular moments in time. Our goal should be to try to understand these *moments* both in isolation, and within the wider context of: historical stability and change; the intersections of gender, age, and socioeconomic differences; and, how people link these life experiences to their cultural and ancestral identity.

The *Gruppo di Preghiera* is not made up of prominent males in the Italian community, and it does not engage in the high culture of literature or the arts. These women, however, are an integral part of the Italian experience in Canada. This is precisely the type of group that would be missed or ignored if we do not expand our focus for the study of "Italian Canadian culture in the new millennium."

Works Cited

- Anselmi, William. "Absenting Community, I-Can Institutions – The Wopization of (Historical) Subjectivities as Re(dis)placed Decultured Being." *Italian Canadiana* 20 (2006): 37-56.
- Bouchard, Norma, and Massimo Lollini. "Introduction: Vincenzo Consolo and His Mediterranean Paradigm." *Reading and Writing the Mediterranean: Essays by Vincenzo Consolo*, Eds. Norma Bouchard and Massimo Lollini. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. 3-48.
- Caputi, Anthony Francis. *Pirandello and the Crisis of Modern Consciousness*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1988.
- Dorazio-Migliore, Margaret, Sam Migliore, and Joan M. Anderson. "Crafting a Praxis-Oriented Culture Concept in the Health Disciplines: Conundrums and Possibilities." *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine* 9.3 (2005): 339-360.
- Gastaldo, Denise, G. J. Andrews, and Nazilla Khanlou. "Therapeutic landscapes of the mind: Theorizing some intersections between health geography, health promotion and immigration studies." *Critical Public Health* 14.2 (2004): 157-176.
- Gesler, Wilbert M. "Lourdes: Healing a place of pilgrimage." *Health and Place* 2 (1996): 95-105.
- Harney, Robert F. "Caboto and Other Parentela: The Uses of the Italian-Canadian Past." *Arrangiarsi: The Italian Immigrant Experience in Canada*, Eds. Roberto Perin and Franc Sturino. Montreal: Guernica Editions, 1989. 37-61.
- Messina, Maria. *Behind Closed Doors: Her Father's House and Other Stories of Sicily*. Translated by Elise Magistro. New York: Feminist Press, City University of New York. 2007.
- Migliore, Sam. "From Illness Narratives to Social Commentary: A Pirandellian Approach to 'Nerves'." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 15.1 (2001): 100-125.
- . *Mal'uocchiu: Ambiguity, Evil Eye, and the Language of Distress*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.
- Paina, Corrado. "The Twinning of Toronto Milan: the Sisyphean task (a reading in three sections and in three languages)." Presented at the *Italian-Canadian Culture in the New Millennium* conference, McMaster University, November 3, 2007.
- Pirandello, Luigi. *Six Characters in Search of an Author. Pirandello: Plays*. Translated by Eric Bentley. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998. 65-120.
- . *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*. Boston: Eridanos Press, 1990.
- . *On Humor*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974.
- Tilgher, Adriano. "Life versus form." *Pirandello: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ed. Glauco Cambon. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967. 19-34.
- Timpanelli, Gioia. *Sometimes the Soul: Two Novellas of Sicily*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. 2nd edition. New York: Macmillan, 1958.