

## Italian Canadiana

### Introduction

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Italianità among the Italian Diasporic Community in Canada and the United States in the Twentieth Century

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# INTRODUCTION

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This special issue of *Italian Canadiana* is devoted to the idea of *italianità* in the Italian diaspora of North America since the nineteenth century. In the struggle to adapt to a new country, immigrants found comfort in maintaining their Italian identity. This was made difficult by “melting pot” pressures in the United States and in Canada before the latter adopted an official policy of multiculturalism in the early 1970s. *Italianità* was further complicated by regional differences. The preponderance of immigrants from Southern Italy, a region that had never been fully integrated into the Italian national project inherited from the Risorgimento, further added to the complexity of a fixed Italian identity. In both the United States and Canada, *italianità* was further challenged by generational shifts as the first generation of Italian immigrants saw their children absorbed into the host culture. Meanwhile, popular culture in North America often relegated Italian identity to colourful accents, gangster films, and Americanized Italian food.

The danger of trivializing Italian identity was recognized by the Fiuman poet, activist, and journalist Gianni Angelo Grohovaz in a 1974 interview he gave to *Il Tevere*, an Italian Canadian newspaper. Recently appointed by the Canadian government to help curate the new Ethnic Archives, Grohovaz emphasized the importance of stressing what he called the right elements of *italianità*. Grohovaz insisted that Italians could contribute ideas to Canada and be more than just construction workers.<sup>1</sup> To convince Canadians of the value that Italian immigrants offered to Canada, Italians had to know what they could contribute. In other words, they had to express a positive idea of Italianness that challenged concurrent stereotypes. For Italians to be taken seriously by Canadians, they needed to be educated without being assimilated

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<sup>1</sup> “D’altro canto dovremmo anche indirizzare il nostro discorso (in lingua inglese) ai nostri ospiti, per dimostrare loro che non siamo solo costruttori di case, strade e fognature, ma siamo anche noi parte viva della nazione, con idee ben definite e soprattutto che siamo in grado di dare al Canada molto di più di quanto il Canada è preparato a ricevere da noi.” Serafini, “Gianni Grohovaz,” 1. Here and henceforth all translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

into an Anglo culture.<sup>2</sup> For Grohovaz, this meant promoting an Italian identity that transcended folklore, which he called culture's lowest common denominator. This task was left to the ethnic press; they were responsible for not only *informing* Italians but also *forming* them as Italians and Canadians.

In the opening article in this issue, Konrad Eisenbichler demonstrates that Grohovaz's seemingly straightforward assertion of *italianità* was, in fact, complex due to his exiled status, which was different from the more typical economic immigrant. Unlike most Italian immigrants, Grohovaz did not have the luxury of returning to his native city of Fiume since it was now part of Communist Yugoslavia. His was an Italianness that attempted to transcend local and regional differences in favour of a patriotic identity, found in his organizing of the Italian Memorial Day ceremonies that were held every year on 4 November in commemoration of the Italian victory over the Austro-Hungarians in 1918.<sup>3</sup> Grohovaz's idea of *italianità* was grounded in the Italian Risorgimento of the nineteenth century and the Irredentism of the early twentieth century. This was expressed through his activism for the return of his native Fiume to Italy, a position that often saw him accused of being fascist.

Despite Grohovaz's work for the Italian community in Toronto, he did express an appreciation for regional identities, as seen in his broadcasts for CHIN Radio in the early 1980s.<sup>4</sup> His *italianità* did not preclude him from openly criticizing Italians, especially those in the business community, for not promoting the interests of the broader community. Eisenbichler includes an angry poem written by Grohovaz after Italy conceded Fiume to Yugoslavia in 1975. His consolation was to discover that Canada was what Fiume once was, a place where diverse cultures could live in harmony.

Grohovaz's complex sense of Italian identity reflects the fluid, contested, and changeable nature of *italianità* in North America. The articles in this special issue show the various modes of expressing Italian identity in the North American context. These modes were shaped by the tripartite scheme of the immigrant experience: departure, transit, and arrival. Point of origin and destination shaped what *italianità* was and how it was lived.

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<sup>2</sup> "È il popolo che deve superare la crisi della mediocrità, e noi giornalisti abbiamo questo arduo compito. Una volta educate le masse (ed è un processo lungo), avremo una società disciplinata e condizionata alle esigenze di tempo e di luogo. Senza inglesizzarla. Allora, e solo allora non potranno cercare di ignorarci." Serafini, "Gianni Grohovaz," 12.

<sup>3</sup> See Baxa, "La Festa."

<sup>4</sup> See Grohovaz, ... *e con rispetto parlando*.

The different contexts of Canada and the United States, not to mention the different circumstances of emigration and the reasons for leaving, all played a part in how that identity was felt and how it changed according to time and place. The multilinguistic reality of Montreal contrasted with the “melting pot” expectations of New York City. At the same time, Toronto’s staunchly Anglo-Saxon environment clashed with the openness of Barre, Vermont. One of the common themes in these essays is the heterogenous and liminal nature of Italian identity as experienced by immigrants.

Liminality informs the second article in this collection, Marta Averna’s study of Italian transatlantic liners after the Second World War. The idea of Italy itself needed reconstructing after the disastrous experience of fascism and the war. The ocean liners carrying Italians to and from North America proved indispensable for recasting *italianità*. Well-known Italian artists and architects were used to “redesign and renew” Italianness in the interior spaces of these ships. The liners brought with them artifacts from Italian industry that came to represent Italian identity to a North American audience. Brought by immigrants for comfort, the significance of these objects shifted meaning once they encountered the American context; for Americans, they represented a synthesis between art and industry that characterized Italianness. According to Averna, this “imagined and fluid” identity came to represent *italianità* in Canada and the United States.

Any sense of Italian identity carried over by immigrants had to account for the long shadow of the fascist past. Ylenia De Luca’s article demonstrates how Mussolini’s regime impacted Italian identity among Italian immigrants in the United States. To show that Italy had been transformed under fascism, Mussolini started a propaganda campaign among Italian immigrants in the United States. The new Italy was a country that immigrants could be proud of, and thus resist the assimilationist policies of the American government. De Luca argues that this policy found a warm response among those Italian immigrants who resented living in ethnic enclaves surrounded by Anglo-Saxon prejudice. Removed from these surroundings, returning Italians could gaze at the achievements of the regime and even send their children to holiday camps in Italy. De Luca demonstrates that key members of the immigrant communities, like Roman Catholic priests, were often mobilized by the regime to carry out this propaganda effort. However, De Luca argues that these efforts at spreading *italianità* were ultimately of limited value for fascism since they were more sentimental than ideological. The failure of these initiatives was

clearly seen during the Second World War when Italian immigrants fought for the United States against Italy.

The dynamics of time and place in shaping *italianità* are the subject of Barbara Turchetta and Caterina Ferrini's linguistic co-authored analysis of storefront signs in the Little Italies of Boston, New York, and Toronto. A study of the "linguistic landscape" created by these commercial sites demonstrates how shifting demographics in these enclaves impacted Italianness. Although the original immigrants (Heritage Generation) have long since moved on, the Italian character of these spaces has remained, even when there are few Italians left there. The intersection of economics and identity has determined that a "Made in Italy" style remains in these neighbourhoods via the children of immigrants (Generation 0), and the non-Italians who now run the businesses. Italian identity has become a commercial product that no longer has anything to do with the immigrants who brought it over. It is now a style promoted even by non-Italians.

Turchetta and Ferrini's linguistic methods inform Margherita Di Salvo's study of Italian restaurants in Toronto's Little Italy. The Heritage Generation opened a space for *italianità* along Toronto's College Street where none previously existed. Restaurants and ice cream parlours were the means for re-creating sociability networks from the Old Country. Over time, as this generation of Italians began moving northwards to new enclaves in North York and Woodbridge, Italian identity remained on College Street despite the influx of new, non-Italian immigrants into the neighbourhood. The consequence of this was the loss of Heritage *italianità* and its dispersal to other parts of the city, where it was left for the children of immigrants to continue it. While "Italian Style" was continued in the restaurants of Little Italy, the Heritage identity was now transferred to institutions like the Columbus Centre and its retirement home.

The impact of the host country on shaping Italian identity is at the centre of Fabio Scetti's study of the Italian language among Montreal's immigrant community. According to Scetti, in Montreal, in contrast to Toronto, language is central to Italianness. This is due to the language question in Quebec and the emphasis on language as a vehicle for expressing ethnic identity. In Montreal, a confluence among Italian, French, and English has created a process of code switching and slippage that, in turn, has fomented tension between a "pure" and "distorted" Italian. According to Scetti, this focus on language has been both a blessing and a curse for Montreal's Italian community. On the one hand, language has become a symbol of Italian pride expressed by those

who do not even speak the language but are of Italian ancestry. On the other hand, language has become a “weak indicator” of national identity and often requires some ideological ballast to maintain it.

The weakness of language as an ethnic marker is evident in Marinel Mandres’ study of those Italians interned by the Canadian government during the First World War. Mandres demonstrates how a subset of ethnic Italians were considered enemy aliens, even though Italy was on the side of Canada during the war. The fact that they came from the Austro-Hungarian Empire made them suspect. For the Canadian government, it was citizenship and not ethnicity that mattered in this case. This mirrors Gianni Angelo Grohovaz’s struggle after the Second World War to be considered Italian and not Yugoslavian by the Canadian government.<sup>5</sup> The difficulties faced by Italians who came from different countries are an example of how national identity is defined by host governments. In this case, the Italians from Dalmatia and Istria were not considered Italian by Canadian immigration authorities but Yugoslavs despite their Italian language and culture. What is, and what is not, Italian is in the hands of external agents.

In a context where non-Italians have the power to define *italianità*, it became important for Italians to lay down markers of their identity. This is especially the case with the sculptors and stonemasons who immigrated to Barre, Vermont, in the early twentieth century. This group of specialized workers is the subject of Alessia Martini’s article, which demonstrates the importance of immigrants who leave behind physical traces of their identity in a specific site. In this case, the sites were a Labor Hall constructed entirely by Italian workers and a cemetery with impressive funerary monuments that illustrated the achievements of these immigrants. In Barre, Italians were community builders, something that is attested in the many streets with Italian names. Unlike most Italian immigrants, this group came to America on invitation to instruct local workers in the art of carving in marble and granite. Their *italianità* was expressed through “quiet individuals” devoted to “hard work” that left a legacy of beauty and enrichment in that corner of New England. They also left a legacy of leftist political activism through their socialist and anarchist beliefs.

Markers of Italian identity could also be found in the literary legacy of Montreal’s Italian Canadian community. Maura Felice’s study of two Italian poets in Canada demonstrates that, in contrast to the marble and granite

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<sup>5</sup> Eisenbichler, “The Complex *Italianità* of Gianni Angelo Grohovaz.”

of Barre, the literature of Montreal's Italian literary renaissance of the 1980s provided a "fluid" and "liquid" notion of Italian identity. The work of Antonio D'Alfonso and Filippo Salvatore present an *italianità* that is devoid of territoriality. Their villages of origin in Abruzzo and Molise become confused with Montreal to the point where geographical specificity loses all meaning. Instead, natural geography takes over and elements like water become the dominant metaphor for a cultural identity that "dissolves" into liquid. As such, identity can be carried away by water in any number of directions. According to Felice, "the desire to 'work, build, visit, and describe' toward a new identity, a new symbolic city, begins with dissolution."<sup>6</sup> The immigrant experience opens a "third space" where Italian identity can be expressed as something in constant flux that is defined neither by point of origin, nor destination.

This collection of articles demonstrates that whatever Italian identity is, it is ultimately a process shaped by many factors in time and space. So the complex *italianità* reflected in the work of Gianni Angelo Grohovaz, while a product of his status as an exile, was hardly unique. For the immigrant and exile, Italian identity becomes mixed with the host culture. Fiume is Canada, Guglionesi is Montreal, and Little Italies are multicultural. The shadow of fascism, the reality of displacement, and the pressures exerted by host cultures, make Italian identity something that is widely negotiated, contested, and appropriated.

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<sup>6</sup> Felice, "L'italianité liquide," 237.

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