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Résumé de l'article

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# Locating the Traveller: Genni Gunn and Nostalgia on the Move

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*Abstract:* This paper analyzes the concept of *nostos* through a reading of Italian-Canadian writer Genni Gunn's autobiographical travelogue *Tracks: Journeys in Time and Place* (2013) to show how its narratives of movement contest meanings of home and homecoming. Gunn initiates new ways of thinking about return by taking the migrant traveler as its central figure and envisioning home as a "practice of displacement" (Evelein 21) wherein "home" is not achievable through physical return, but through memory. Specifically, Gunn subverts traditional notions of home by reimagining Italy through her travels to foreign places, which ultimately serve as sites of return to her homeland via cartographies of memory. In Gunn's exploration of nostalgia, her narrative presents her identity as an Italian-Canadian immigrant as no longer defined by national borders, but rather as a condition of movement. Gunn uses the framework of travel to link acts of homemaking and homefinding so that the meaning of *nostos* emerges as a kind of dwelling-in-displacement.

*Keywords:* Nostalgia, migration, diaspora, travel, identity, homeland, Italian-Canadian literature, life-writing, memory, exile

*I am part of all that I have met;  
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough  
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades  
For ever and for ever when I move.*

(Tennyson, *Ulysses* qtd. in Gunn, *Tracks* 104)

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,  
che la diritta via era smarrita.*

*Midway upon the journey of our life  
I found myself within a shadowed forest,  
for the path which led aright had disappeared.*

(Dante, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno* 1, qtd. in Gunn, *Tracks* 149)

*Nostos*, the Greek word meaning homecoming, is a central motif that links ancient heroic myths—Italian and Greek—to contemporary Italian-Canadian writing. Italian-Canadian literary scholar Joseph Pivato introduces readers to the historical and modern prominence of *nostos* and exile as enduring themes and leitmotifs in Italian-Canadian literature,

for "Italians have always been leaving home, trying to return home, or trying to find a new home" (171). The strong sense of nostalgia and exile that imbues the work of ancient heroic myths by, for example, Dante, Virgil, Cavalcanti, and Homer, resonates in the contemporary body of Italian-Canadian writing that is similarly preoccupied with a tension between "the absence of a sense of home" (Pivato 172) and "desire to demarcate home" (Evelein 26). Genni Gunn is one such Italian-Canadian writer who contemplates home and homecoming in her work. Having immigrated to Canada from Italy at the age of seven, and having since then moved houses frequently and travelled extensively, Gunn expresses a migrant sensibility whose imagination is nourished neither by rootlessness nor homesickness, but by the constancy of movement. As Gunn describes, "[i]t's the motion [she] craves, the to-and-fro, taking flight and landing, going to cities or countries, towards new landscapes and emotional terrains, because when one travels, the unknown awaits to be discovered—about one's self, about others, about one's relationship to time and place" (*Tracks* 8). With its privileging of movement and navigation of both home-spaces and foreign spaces, Gunn's autobiographical travel narrative, *Tracks: Journeys in Time and Place* (2013) offers an important intervention into discussions of *nostos*. By positioning her return(s) to Italy—a former home-space—alongside other narratives of travel to unfamiliar places, Gunn refigures traditional conceptions of homecoming. Namely, in equating a return to the supposedly familiar with experiences of the unknown, Gunn highlights the complexities of claiming a "home" and thus of pursuing *nostos*.

As conveyed in *Tracks*, Gunn's encounters with unfamiliar and foreign sites are, in fact, those which grant her access to former home-spaces, allowing her to connect with the familiar and recapture the sensations and memories of the past. Not only does Gunn revisit and recuperate her memories through the exploration of multiple topographies, but she also revises and reforms these memories as she goes. Through her acts of remembering, Gunn avoids reifying mythologies of home as a site that reconciles nostalgic longing and mourning for lost origins. Gunn's travel narrative offers instead a crucial reminder that nostalgia, in structure and function, manifests historically and culturally in different ways, and that nostalgia is not what it used to be—a tale of individual homesickness often leading to a triumphant homecoming and re-establishment of identity. Instead, Gunn remains on the move, perpetually encountering and losing "home" regardless of her physical location.

According to Svetlana Boym, in *The Future of Nostalgia*, "Nostalgia is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (xiii). Gunn, in a sense, substantiates and complicates Boym's claim in that "home," to Gunn, is simultaneously an attractive idea and yet a fleeting and amorphous feeling rather than identifiable location. Nostalgia and the pursuit of *nostos* is the main impetus of *Tracks*, but home, as a singular and static place, has never existed for Gunn, because even her childhood in Italy featured a fragmented family constantly on the move to reconnect with one another. With parents abroad attending to various

professional commitments, Gunn and her sister lived separately with different relatives, reuniting only every few months, until at last the family came to live together in Canada when Gunn was seven. Consequently, with a childhood so inflected with the conditions of migration, travel becomes for Gunn a "practice of displacement" (Evelein 21) that functions to both problematize conventional ideas of home as physical location and prompt questions regarding the relationship between identity and place. To be on the move, to feel displaced and amidst the unknown represents for Gunn both an entry into the familiar, hence a movement toward an experience of home, and yet, at the same time, the impossibility of grasping a home since it is constantly shifting due to the vagaries of memory and time.

Gunn's nostalgia thus casts doubt on the possibility of (and desire for) attaining closure on the past and a return to "home." Gunn, rather, achieves her experiences of *nostos* through travel, movement, and, subsequently, creative expression; these acts allow her to maintain an open-ended relationship with the past and enact what Boym deems a "reflective nostalgia" (*The Future* 49). As Boym describes, reflective nostalgia "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging" (*The Future* xviii). Whereas for Boym, "[r]estorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* (home) and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up memory gaps" (*The Future* 41), a reflective nostalgia "thrives on *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately" (*The Future* xviii). Boym continues with her differentiation of these two nostalgias, stating that "[r]estorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt" (*The Future* xviii). As defined by Boym, "[w]hile restorative nostalgia returns and rebuilds one homeland with paranoiac determination, reflective nostalgia fears return with the same passion. Instead of recreation of lost home, reflective nostalgia can foster the creation of aesthetic individuality" ("Nostalgia" 15). In other words, a reflective nostalgia presumes the past, and its home-spaces, is created, not re-discovered or re-inhabited.

Gunn's specific reflective nostalgia envisions a wider, multiple, and more provisional formulation of home than one would traditionally expect in narratives of *nostos*; "home," in her formulation, is largely a product of the imagination and thus "return" does not necessarily involve a physical re-entry into the geographical homeland. Acts of imagining, of memory, and, subsequently, of creative expression allow Gunn momentary points of access to the Italy of her past, but in her construction, Italy is a contingent and changing location. *Tracks: Journeys in Time and Place* thus, in its championing of movement while valuing roots, explores what it is to achieve *nostos* by, in fact, dwelling in displacement.<sup>1</sup> Constantly moving-through geographical and narrative

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<sup>1</sup> "Dwelling-in-displacement" builds on James Clifford, in his commentary, entitled "Notes on Theory and Travel," in which he describes travel as "a figure for different modes of dwelling and displacement, for trajectories and identities, for storytelling and theorizing in a postcolonial world of global contacts."

space—Gunn never seems to arrive at a static place that assures a sense of belonging and rootedness. But that is not to say she experiences this displacement as exile or that she rejects the idea of an attachment between identity and place. Rather, hers is a figuring of *nostos* that both acknowledges the impossibility of return and paradoxically insists that return can be a perpetual state that is achieved through the conduit of unfamiliar places, producing circumstances of displacement that serve as a source of power and inspiration for creative desire and artistic expression.

We begin our discussion of *Tracks*, then, by considering the ways in which it unsettles the idea of being “at home” from the perspective of the displaced, or in fact, multiply-placed, traveler. As represented by Gunn, immigration has rendered her a perpetual traveller, home becoming aspirational and illusionary, a “magnetic pull” (10), but a “never-ending longing” (10). At the same time, through travel, Gunn is the perpetual immigrant, a desired state that can provoke the creative impulse to make, not just find, a home. Travel and immigration, for Gunn, are alike in their incitement of a confrontation of home, not as a geographical locale, but as a state of being. The Foreword of *Tracks* opens, “When I think of travel, I don’t think of destinations, I think of movement, of assuaging restlessness, of being rootless, as immigrants are, always reaching for that elusive imagined *home*, like trying to catch a mirage on a hot desert highway, the illusion shimmering and enticing” (7, authorial emphasis). Significantly here, the home pursued is not conceived of as a material reality, but rather as an imagined entity. The wished for destination is not merely an “elusive home”; instead, Gunn is aware that what she pursues can only be an imaginary construct, an “elusive imagined *home*” (7), her repeated italicization of “home” itself visually signalling the ephemerality and illusionary nature of this site. Although Gunn returns to the places of her childhood in Italy frequently, such physical encounters do not, in her representation, bring the achievement of *nostos*. Instead, in Gunn’s conception, “home” is more a product of individual and familial memories and myth than a physical site. By extension, a physical site, even one that Gunn may want to deem “home,” cannot be experienced by Gunn as a material reality in the present because its materiality is necessarily overshadowed by perceptions rooted in memory, nostalgia, indefinable longing, and navigations of belonging. When Gunn travels to Italy, her place of birth, Italy cannot be experienced as anything but a mirage, material reality seeming less real than memory and the idea of home itself.

Memory, therefore, becomes a means whereby home can be mediated, where creative intersections between place and identity are initiated. Gunn describes her multiple returns to Italy as “a search” (10), a search for “a return to the echoes of childhood” (10), her wording reflecting an awareness that one returns merely to a representation, to an “echo,” a reverberation and after-effect of the past. Gunn writes, “Each return leads me to a slightly altered place, a *fata morgana* of hill-top towns and cliffs toppling into the sea, of experiences distorted and

magnified, unlike the ones fixed inside the snow-globe of memory" (10). In Gunn's portrayal, the physical space of Italy to which she returns is necessarily an illusion, a ghostly reflection of a mind's "reality" that remains unreachable. This metaphor describing her experience of Italy as a mirage casts Italy symbolically as offering a false hope both of destination and of salvation. By extension, her reference to a form of mirage, *fata morgana*, specifically associated with the Strait of Messina ("Fata Morgana"), which runs between Sicily and Calabria, associates this experience of the illusion of Italy with possible threat; *fata morgana* takes its name from the sorceress of Arthurian legend who is mythologized as creating mirages to lure sailors to their deaths (Kanuckel). According to this metaphor, then, Gunn constructs Italy as an illusionary space, magical and yet one to beware.

Homecoming, in the conventional sense, is endlessly deferred in Gunn's construction because she has no stable home with which to identify. Rather than reinforcing the idea of an originary homeland, Gunn demonstrates the unlocatability of a home-space and the possibility of deterritorialized attachments, in part through her inability to name a specific site in Italy as home. Although she can identify a home for her father—"Udine [...] is the home of my father" (10)—Gunn does not claim a specific site in Italy as "home." She can state that Trieste is "the city of [her] birth" (47) and thus that she is "from the North" (148); she can also specify that she "lived" much of her childhood "in southern Italy in Rutigliano" (10), but to name a city of birth or a space of inhabitation is not to name a home. Instead, to Gunn, "All/none of Italy is home" (10), the slash both binding and dividing<sup>2</sup> the contradictory absolutes of her existence. Because she cannot identify a specific site in Italy as "home," "home" becomes something vast and expansive, unnameable, hence, unlocatable. In Gunn's wording, because her family "never lived together in a house in Italy" (10), the "mythical home" (10) she pursues is a "ghost town" (10); in other words, "home" is envisioned as a space unfettered to a specific building and identity as untethered to homeland. Home expands to be a whole town, but even then not a specific material one; instead it is a mindscape "populate[d]" not with living people, but "with the memories of those who knew [her] then" (10).

Even when Gunn speaks less in the abstract and more in reference to a specific trip to Italy, her conception of home-space grows tellingly more and more vague. During one trip, her aunt's ill-health requires Gunn stay first on a cot in the aunt's living room and then in a hotel, despite the fact that "throughout [Gunn's] life and visits, [she] ha[s] always slept here, in [her] aunt's room, beside her, the two of [them] whispering all night" (146). Gunn describes her arrival at the hotel as provoking a cavernous longing:

<sup>2</sup> This interpretation of the slash borrows from Fred Wah's reading of the hyphen in "Half-Bred Poetics." For Wah, the hyphen when used in the context of racial or cultural identification—for example, Chinese-Canadian—is "that marked (or unmarked) space that both binds and divides" (72).

I sit on the single bed, in the small spartan room, dismayed by how quickly my expectations have been undermined, like karst topography, the cave-in on the inside. I want to return to my aunt's room, to her apartment, to the same old house where I spent my early childhood. I want to return to the same place, to the same memory. I want to return. (147)

Her catalogue of wants is significant in its growing lack of specificity and increasing immateriality. She desires her aunt's room, her apartment, a house, as if her mind's eye is zooming out taking in an increasingly broad territory. She then desires "the same place" and the "the same memory," desires without clear referents and desires that transition between the materiality of place and the immateriality of memory. By the end of this list, she wants merely the action of return; a return to what or to where goes unnamed, if indeed it is even nameable.

In Gunn's depiction, Italy, as geographic locale or nation, is not what drives her desire for return. Her relationship is not with Italy as place or nation; neither offer her a particular sense of identity or belonging. Ultimately for Gunn, her sense of identity is not determined by material place, but instead by people. The connection Gunn feels to Italy is largely dependent upon whether or not she can place her ancestors there. Gunn's search for nostalgia in Italy is less associated with the physical spaces of the nation than it is with the landscape of memory. That is, Italy is home to the extent that it contains the imprints of her history. Italy is, on the one hand, a familiar environment that yields connections between Gunn, her ancestors, and their stories. On the other hand, rather than commemorating the ghosts of her past, Gunn's Italy, much like her Aunt Ida, who ages, becomes frail, and loses her own memory, is a site of unforeseeable change. Gunn describes herself as being "the only one in our family who returns to Italy often, who scavenges the histories of our relatives, like a forensic anthropologist, searching for proof" (59). Proof of what remains unspoken and ambiguous. A forensic anthropologist deals in bones, remnants of the human body; Gunn's simile thus figures her interest in Italy not in terms of Italy as a material environment wherein she spent her youth, but in terms of the people who have inhabited it, and who in death, have subsequently become melded with it.

The poem "The Return" from Gunn's first collection of poetry, 1993's *Mating in Captivity*, offers an image which further illuminates this construction of place as people. This poem, seemingly autobiographical, but in the second-person, describes that "[y]ou have come to replant your feet and / read your name in the marble slabs under which dust gathers your generations one inside the other" (lines 16-18). In this image, her connection is to an ancestry that is materially present within the land; the family name brands this site and through seeing her own name on their gravestones, the speaker's presence in and claim over this place too is marked. This small place belongs to her (even is her) because her family belongs to it. Further, the generations to which she returns are "one inside the other" ambiguously enwombing each other, the image suggesting simultaneously how each generation literally

births a subsequent generation, and conversely how a subsequent generation gives birth to the previous ones by wanting to know and honour the now dead.<sup>3</sup> A forensic anthropologist, Gunn is consistently less interested in re-placing herself in Italy and instead more interested in finding evidence of her family's presence there.

In fact, throughout *Tracks*, Gunn does not represent herself as gaining easy re-entry to Italy as a site of belonging, a theme consistent with Gunn's early negotiations of return. For example, in her early poetry, the physical sites of her youth are constructed as largely inaccessible: her father's home is described as "[l]ying] in the midst of a fault split open by / an earthquake and the clean slice of plane tickets" ("The Return" lines 5-6). In other words, this is ground she can no longer inhabit, and not just because of geographical conditions, but instead because of their having left this home in the first place: the former home-space is split open in part by the "slice of plane tickets" ("The Return" line 6). Similarly, in *Tracks*, Gunn conveys a knowledge of the impossibility of return. Although her great aunts have "kept a wing of the [Pozzecco] house exactly as it had been many years before, when [her] father and mother had lived there for a brief period" (103), when Gunn enters this space, she perceives an abject stasis. It may be "just as your father left it" (104), but Gunn's father, now long dead, cannot return, and to Gunn, it is "alien space," it is "mildewed," and "[w]hen [she] touche[s] the keyboard cover, the left front leg of the piano pulverize[s] in a cloud of sawdust. Termites eating through wood, time through memory" (104). This example functions allegorically to reveal that a home-space is meant to change in one's absence; it cannot be preserved, for to try to freeze time is to hasten a ruins.

Beyond experiencing a sense of displacement in these sites of family, Gunn too constructs herself as feeling a broader sense of unwelcome and lack of belonging in Italy. She relates stories of sexual harassment by "men [who] still considered foreign women or women from northern Italy—identifiable as I am by my fair skin and red hair—to be fair game" (145). She also portrays herself as being yelled at multiple times by a woman "in a dialect [she] do[esn't] understand" (147). Although eventually Gunn realizes that the woman has been welcoming her onto her property so that she can avoid a puddle, Gunn initially hypothesizes that the woman must know she is "from the North" and that therefore she is "cursing [her], and calling [her] who-knows-what names" (148). That both these moments of unwelcome feature Gunn envisioning prejudice based on her northern heritage deconstructs any false assumption that Italy is a unified whole to which one can belong.

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<sup>3</sup> One might also note that this early poem does not figure return as an easy prospect. Although the desire is to "replant your feet" (line 16), the ground is not arable. Instead, "Gingerly you tread the soil, hard-packed / with death and tears of women" (lines 2-3). The soil, and all that it metaphorically contains is figured as a "contagious disease" (line 4) from which "you" seek protection through "your Canadian shoes" (line 3).



In Gunn's representation, there are multiple Italies not all of which promise homecoming.<sup>4</sup>

The structure of *Tracks* even further highlights Gunn's navigation of her relationship with Italy as a home-space. The first story set in Italy that Gunn offers in *Tracks*, chapter five, is, in fact, a story focussed on the experience of dislocation. Instead of extrapolating on the "previous three weeks" when she had been "visiting relatives and doing research" (45), her story of return to family goes unnarrated. The focus of this chapter is instead she and her husband's spur-of-the-moment trip to Stromboli, one of the Aeolian islands, a threateningly volcanic island. In other words, the Italy that she narrates is not a familiar one, but instead a foreign, even menacing one. Although Gunn and her husband have partaken in this trip to Stromboli so as to escape Venice's "crass trail leading tourists like cattle" (45), and thereby also to escape being interpellated as tourists, Gunn's focus in the narrative brings into relief her navigation of self as simultaneously native and foreign. On the first leg of their journey, they "irritate [their] conductor" in various ways: "getting on without giving him our tickets, pulling down the top bunk instead of waiting for him" (45). These actions demonstrate a certain confidence and presumption of belonging that are revealed to be ill-conceived through the conductor's response. In narrating this encounter, Gunn demonstrates her awareness that despite her familiarity, she cannot successfully claim belonging. Her lack of welcome is even further emphasized when they reach Stromboli: their accommodations are a "hovel" complete with a "pile of rubble," "two cots under several inches of dust," no sheets or pillows, a cracked toilet seat, and a "sauntering" scorpion (46-47). As represented by Gunn, despite returning to an Italian space, this experience is not one of homecoming or renewed experience of belonging.

More importantly, however, this first narrative of Italy serves a symbolic purpose in Gunn's broader representation of her complicated relationship with Italy as "home." Her narrative of Stromboli, on the surface, is meant to outline their hike up the volcano and various other details of their trip, but this narrative also functions as a contemplation of what it is to claim a home. In visiting Stromboli, Gunn encounters "locals [who] both revere and fear the mighty power [of the volcano], but would never move" (48). This commitment to one place, particularly a place where "every moment [is] a risk" (46), is noteworthy to Gunn, the lack of mobility of these locals a clear counterpoint to Gunn's own experience of moveable, hence multiplicitous home-spaces. She is

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<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that both these moments when Gunn experiences a sense of displacement are conveyed as part of the narrative wherein Gunn is confronting her aunt's fading mind. Gunn's worry is that without her aunt's memory, her link to herself as a child will disappear. She asks, "How will I remember my small self as the years pass?" (146), a question that subsequently implies that without her aunt, Gunn's ability to place herself in Italy will be lost. In Gunn's portrayal, her link to nation and culture is mediated and resolved through her aunt's knowledge and memory of her.

"rootless, as immigrants are, always reaching for that elusive imagined *home*" (7), but a man of Stromboli merely shrugs and pronounces "'We live here all our lives'" (48) when Gunn asks, "'aren't you afraid that you won't be able to get off the island if a big eruption happens?'" (48). Unlike Gunn, who does not show a particular connection to the physicality of place except insofar as being able to perceive her family in it, in this man's conception, land is something to which to connect; land, for this man, is family: "'[...] the volcano is like a mother and we are the children. We have fear, and we always are watching'" (48).

Even though experiencing Italian spaces brings little sense of homecoming to Gunn, her experience of unfamiliar places, the places of her travels, frequently elicits recollections of her childhood in Italy or other moments in her familial history there. In this way, Gunn demonstrates a tendency to make the unfamiliar familiar through recollection of another time and place and reveals that a homecoming to Italy may be experienced not through physically returning but through memory. Gunn describes herself and her sister as children visiting Hirsch Creek in British Columbia and "imagining [them]selves at Miramar, near Trieste" (17); at the Temples of Old Bagan in the Mandalay Region of Myanmar, Gunn narrates that she and her sister are reminded of Pozzecco, "a small village in the north of Italy, where [their] father's aunts lived and farmed various fields" (86); in Lawa Cave in Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand, Gunn explains that she has been transported through time and place to Grotte di Castellana, a cave in Italy that she visited on a trip to see family and where her uncle reveals the secret of her aunt's impending death. For Gunn, then, a return to the physical sites of her childhood, as previously discussed, may not be fulfilling, or even desirable, but in her narrative, Italy, and the familial heritage it contains, is transportable, becoming the gossamer through which she experiences other places and people. Her ability to connect unfamiliar places to Italy renders the unfamiliar familiar. These other places, thus, serve as conduits for a return to Italy via the cartographies of memory, and consequently, the Italy to which Gunn returns is no longer defined by national borders, but is instead everywhere.

Much as memory is what Gunn carries with her allowing her to manifest Italy in alternate locales, Gunn reveals her mother Verbena, who moves frequently, to be engaged in a similar act of collecting and carrying the past. Gunn interprets her mother's objects as "mementos, the residue of things she preserves, without the things themselves" (155). Her mother brings many things with her house to house: for example, "two red leather stick-back chairs from the Bathurst, N.B. house" (157), a "carved oak mantelpiece" (157) from their Vancouver home, even "shards of a broken red crystal goblet [...] carried house to house for twenty years, because my father had bought it" (155). Each proceeding house becomes an amalgam of all past homes, and the fragments she brings with her are markers of identity and belonging that travel with her. The mother's collection of pottery is particularly symbolic of Gunn's own navigation of Italy's continuing presence in her

life. Gunn describes her mother's pottery collection as something "brought from Italy when she came to Canada in 1960" (155). She explains that "[t]he pottery originates in the Apuglia region of Italy, where all my mother's childhood homes are spread" (155) and continues by asking, "[d]oes she look back through these to her fragmented past?" (155). She finally notes, "[w]e wrap the pottery carefully in tissue before we place them in the FRAGILE boxes" (155). The pottery literally is fragile, but what it represents—the past's, hence Italy's, continuing presence in their lives—is equally tenuous.

Gunn's narrative of her mother's constant movement is ultimately a contemplation of her own. As Gunn acknowledges, she, like her mother, has "displaced [her]self every three or four years" (156), Gunn taking on a legacy of "restlessness" and "need for change" (156). By the end of this chapter, titled "Dis-location," which is the concluding chapter of *Tracks*, Gunn and her mother are one and the same. The last sentences of this text read: "My mother carries all her burdens from place to place. Already her eyes are filled with other skies, her feet tapping, divining, always sure this time, this place, this house... her feet/my feet wanting to map new soils" (158).<sup>5</sup> This fusion of Gunn with her mother suggests that Gunn, like her mother, is not particularly interested in returning physically to her point of origin, but rather looks towards the newness of the next place. Nevertheless, the newness of these sites is not a tabula rasa, but instead a palimpsest of the past. Just as Gunn encounters Italy wherever she travels, her mother carries the past with her from place to place. Through her constant renovation of homes, Gunn's mother re-organizes, rebuilds, and, like her daughter, transforms her everyday reality into an alternate one, inflected with remnants of her past. Note, for instance, Gunn's metaphor of divining. This search for hidden waters reflects an unstated textual return to Gunn's earlier association of memory and water. The epigraph to "Excavations," the final section of *Tracks*, the section in which this chapter about her mother appears, is a passage by Toni Morrison that reads, "All water has perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to

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<sup>5</sup> This depiction of her mother and herself is a revisioning of "Departures," a poem from Gunn's first collection, *Mating in Captivity*, wherein it is her father who is described in similar terms. Gunn, referring to herself in the second person, writes:

you'd feel the impatience of those  
feet [her father's] wanting to map new soils; and his eyes, blue with  
[other skies.

(Later, you knew how he felt, when your own feet followed their tapping. Divining, always divining. Always sure this time, this place, this man, as if all purpose were aimed at one experience which continues to mutate, kaleidoscopic and erratic). (lines 11-16)

That Gunn has adapted this earlier poem about her father and adopted its imagery to describe her mother, and through her, herself, suggests Gunn envisions herself united with her parents in search for what is desired but enduringly unknown.

where it was" (125). As such, even as "her feet/my feet" seek to "map new soils," the mapping of the new involves a search for that water, for that memory that allows return, even as what they are hoping to find remains indefinable. They are "always sure this time, this place, this house..." the ellipsis reflecting a telling uncertainty about of what they are "always sure." What is it that "this time, this place, this house" will manifest—a fulfillment of desire? A unification with the past? A...? The search continues with the object of the search still unnamed, perhaps unnameable.<sup>6</sup>

In their constant movement towards the new, and the past's subsequent re-contextualization, there is a homemaking, rather than a homecoming or home-finding, in which these women engage. To borrow the words of Svetlana Boym, art is a form of "homemaking" ("Nostalgia and its Discontents" 16). Boym explains: "Non-return home in the case of some exiled writers and artists turns into a central artistic drive, a *homemaking* in the text and artwork, as well as a strategy of survival. [...] Inability to return home is both a personal tragedy and an enabling force" ("Nostalgia and its Discontents" 16, emphasis added). Not only is the mother's constant renovation of homes an artistic act in which her past—through her mementos—is re-homed, but also the mother's artistic practice as a mixed media artist is interpreted by Gunn to be a *homemaking* in which "her younger self" (155) seeks entry into the present. Gunn's travel writing too becomes an act through which she can navigate the interplay between the past and the present. As Gunn represents it, travel itself allows her to collect and sharpen her memories of Italy, while travel writing can be the means of metaphorically packing up these memories for the move. In other words, travel writing allows her to reflect on "home," even if it does not enable her to define or find it.

Nevertheless, these acts of homemaking reveal the treacherousness of this pursuit of an unnameable desire. The art by her mother that Gunn reflects upon in *Tracks* is self-portraiture wherein Verbena is faceless, her body reconstructed from its constituent parts. Gunn writes, "she is always broken, limbs askew, face turned to mirrors, to the reflections of her younger self, astonished that the traces of her albescent life have forged these pale concentric circles, this silence" (155).<sup>7</sup> This con-

<sup>6</sup> This search for the unknown recalls Gunn's discussion of her sister's painting *Migration*. That "layers a piece of Fra Carnevale's *The Ideal City*—a Renaissance vision of a better world—with disparate images" (110), namely "[o]n top of the city, a guitar's strings are railway tracks moving into the distance; birds, normally a symbol of freedom, here are imprisoned by clouds; and in the right-hand corner, a person in silhouette stares across the water, as if there were another, better ideal city elsewhere" (110). The tension associated with migrant subjectivity is made apparent by the birds' imprisonment in the clouds, while the person, identity obscured in shadow, looks towards a horizon, as blank and unnameable as the ellipses in Gunn's own expression of desire.

<sup>7</sup> Importantly, Gunn's sister's art also demonstrates a preoccupation with metamorphosis and transition. One such painting that Gunn highlights, *Rupture*,

cluding chapter may turn its attention to a representation of Gunn's mother, but it is through her mother, and through this particular series of her mother's work, that Gunn is contemplating her own navigation of past selves and places and the impact of that navigation. As Gunn admits, "I am trying to understand these renovations of the self, through these paintings where she is most exposed" (154). Most simply, the "renovations of the self" of which Gunn speaks are those of her mother given Verbena's propensity to move frequently, but the "these" of "these renovations" is, in fact, grammatically indefinite and "the self" indeterminate. As a result, just as Gunn's feet merge with her mother's feet in the final sentence of this text, "these renovations of the self" that Gunn contemplates can be equally her own.

Much as Gunn's mother foregrounds questions of female subjectivity, agency, isolation, and displacement in her own art, Gunn's prose style too captures the shifting ground of self. Like the mother's layered and fragmented visual art manifests a portrait of a self in renovation, Gunn's style of prose in *Tracks* becomes its own performance of a shifting self. Her return to Italy through acts of imagination is described as follows:

I return, to the same house, the same garden, a homecoming to family and childhood, although neither exist in the present, the people, long gone, or so altered, memory is all that remains, and this is a dangerous thing, because memory is like the earth—in constant formation, mutation—year to year: stone falls, ice melts in flash floods, heavy rain furrows the paths. And we, too, are mutable as sandstone, made of the compressed debris of our past, which is unstable and shifts and buckles and liquefies under pressure. In travel, I search for unstable ground, the fault lines, the deepest caves that echo my inner journey. (10)

Gunn constructs an aesthetic of perpetual renovation, of accumulation. Just as she indicates that memory is in "constant formation, mutation" so too is her prose, each sentence a shifting ground of building ideas and images brought together with a multitude of commas and "ands."

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depicts "a doll whose legs become two railway tracks" (98) against a backdrop of the Canadian Rockies. Several themes are evident in the description of this painting, but the themes of becoming, in-betweenness, and shifting female subjectivity are most foregrounded. As described by Gunn, the "two railway tracks [are] leading into the distance, separated by water" (98). Furthermore, the face of Gunn's sister Ileana as a child appears "over which is a woman metamorphosing into a tree" (98). Gunn quotes her sister's explanation: "'I was on the brink of puberty when we came to Canada,' she says. 'I'm there, at the crossroad, not quite a woman, not quite a child. And the woman/tree is an allusion to Daphne, who was transformed into a laurel by her father when she asked him to save her from being captured by Apollo. The Rockies are Canada, yet another crossroad from one life to another'" (98). As described by Gunn, Ileana's practice is akin to both Gunn's own and their mother's: Ileana's imagery both reflects a body in pieces and a layering that suggests a self in flux.

Her "we" is not just "mutable as sandstone," period. But the sandstone is, comma, "made of compressed debris," which is not just "unstable," but "is unstable and shifts and buckles and liquefies" (emphasis added). Similarly, to return to earlier examples, "Italy, for [Gunn], is a search: a return to the echoes of childhood—both familiar and foreign" (10); her search is "for a mythical *home*—that ghost town" (10, original italics); her return "leads [her] to a slightly altered place, a *fata morgana* of hilltop towns and cliffs toppling into the sea, of experiences distorted and magnified, unlike the ones fixed inside the snow-globe of memory" (10); and she and her mother's movement is a "feet tapping, divining, always sure this time, this place, this house . . ." (158). Her prose involves a perpetual revision, a persistent reaching to grasp that which remains elusive, as the object of desire shifts in definition and in significance.

Nevertheless, as much as Gunn begins and ends her collection acknowledging her paradoxical longing for yet disbelief in the possibility of "home," one act of homemaking succeeds in alleviating the tension between time and place, or more specifically, between Italy as past and Italy as perpetually present: the making of *crostoli* in her mother's Canadian kitchen. In Gunn's construction, Italy is present to her in the sites of travel through the persistence of memory, as changeable and unstable as memory might be. But through the making of *crostoli*, Italy as "home" becomes more materially present and, hence, locatable, but in Canada, the place to which Gunn does attach the word "home."

As Gunn describes it, Canada is "a name that became synonymous with family and home" (10). She and her sister spent their early childhoods in Italy apart, "travell[ing] to visit each other" (10) and also separated from their parents who remained "in constant movement" (10), often abroad. But once in Canada, the family is reunited. That Gunn values Canada as a site of family, hence of belonging, becomes particularly clear in her early poetry where "You became a family" in Canada almost becomes a refrain, appearing in four poems of the "Departures" series in *Mating in Captivity* (57, 62, 64, 66). Gunn's representation of Canada in both her early poetry and in *Tracks* is, in fact, rather idealized, revealing none of the dislocation and feelings of unbelonging commonly related in narratives of immigration. Gunn's representation in *Tracks* of her immigration to Canada at the age of seven frames it as nothing momentous or disorienting in the least. It is just another "journey" akin to all those prior journeys across Italy. Gunn writes of her immigration to Canada: "This was certainly not the first journey I had taken. Ever since I can remember, my sister and I have travelled to visit each other" (10). In this wording, her emigration is merely another journey, not an uprooting.

In Gunn's depiction, she has not, in fact, left Italy because it travels with her in memory and in body. Canada and Italy may be geographically distant, but Gunn does not demonstrate herself as experiencing these places as divorced from one another. They are instead an amalgam, Canada becoming in Gunn's depiction one more region of Italy. Much as the chapter narrating Gunn's time in Stromboli serves allegor-

ically as a contemplation of what it is to claim a home, a later chapter featuring an episode of family baking functions to showcase Gunn's navigation of her diasporic identity, and namely what it is to navigate one's relationship with multiple home-spaces. In this chapter, Gunn depicts her aunt Ninetta's "first trip to Canada" (127) in July 1992, concentrating especially on a day Gunn spent baking *crostoli* with her aunt and her mother. For Gunn, this baking is infused with cultural and familial meaning, becoming an act of symbiosis that unites them across countries and generations: "Everything we touch turns into narrative: kitchen counters, tablecloths, utensils, water, even the opera—and soon we are deep in memory, recounting stories, as if this act of cooking together has forged a passage to the past. Our small disclosures bridge years and countries and disparate lives" (130).

Even more importantly, through this narrative, Gunn constructs her home in Canada to be a satellite part of Italy itself. According to Gunn, *crostoli* is an Italian "national delicacy" (128) that has a different name and recipe depending upon where you are in Italy "as if to embody the personalities of its inhabitants" (128). Gunn's narrative then focuses specifically on how her mother's recipe and their immediate family's traditions regarding *crostoli* in Canada are distinguishable from that which may be experienced in Italy. As Gunn recounts, "In Italy, these treats are most commonly made and eaten during the fourteen days before Lent" (129), but her mother has refuted this custom stating instead, "'Well, we don't believe in all that nonsense[.] [...] We make *crostoli* whenever we have a festive occasion'" (129). Gunn too shares a list of steps stating, "This is how we make *crostoli*: [...]" (130), but this list is not sufficient; the various ways that this recipe veers from Zia Ninetta's expectations must also be part of the narrative. In this scene, whereas Gunn and her mother share what "we" do and do not do to make *crostoli*—"We don't put eggs in *crostoli*" and "'Of course we are [going to use oil]'" (131), Zia Ninetta adopts a voice of cultural authority, asserting not how she specifically makes *crostoli*, but instead how they *are* made.<sup>8</sup> Insisting that "'They're made with butter'" (131), Zia Ninetta speaks *for* this delicacy as if she has access to a cultural authenticity that Gunn and her mother do not. Nevertheless, as Gunn establishes, *crostoli* in Italy is, in fact, adaptable, and therefore, their adaptation of *crostoli* to suit their own conditions is in line with Italian practices.<sup>9</sup> By extension, then, if *crostoli* changes its name and recipe dependent upon where it is made in Italy and if Gunn's family in

<sup>8</sup> What is also noteworthy about Gunn's depiction is her repeated use of "we." Gunn and her mother may not speak as cultural informants and define what *crostoli* are, but they do speak from a position of belonging; they speak as part of a definable "we," although one "isolated from the rest of the family in Italy" (130).

<sup>9</sup> Ninetta even proves accepting of adaptation in her own recipe; without grappa available, she easily agrees that any of Verbena's options, "'wine [...] and anisette, amaretto and Grand Marnier'" (132), would be useable, "'but the anisette would be best'" (132).

Canada has a distinct recipe and tradition for it, then what Gunn's narrative suggests is that their location in Canada is a part of Italy.

Gunn's view of "home" as ephemeral and multiplicitous is thus confirmed through this narrative of *crostoli*. When the chapter opens, Gunn announces that "[t]he aroma of deep-fried delicacies wafts from the open window of [her] mother's kitchen, [and] releases memories of home" (127). This "home" is the italicized home of her mythologized and imagined Italy, but it is also her "first Canadian home in Kitimat, where a week before Christmas, [her] mother would cover the kitchen counters, dining room table, and two card tables with clean tablecloths and a variety of small implements" (129) and get ready to bake *crostoli*. As much as *crostoli* connects Gunn to her Italian roots, it too connects her to her Canadian roots, and thereby this "home" of which she speaks is both places at once. It is the perpetual route between them.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, when Gunn does betray anxiety about the passing of heritage, it is not a loss of the family's connection to Italy she laments, but a loss of an amalgamated home-space. It is the possibility that the next generation—"the last vestiges of our family in Canada" (135)—will not have the experience of baking "*crostoli* in a hot kitchen with [her] mother" (135) that concerns Gunn. Importantly, it is not a worry that they will not return to Italy that Gunn references. Instead, her worry is tied to the possibility that they will not have this experience of Italy within Canada, and will consequently never experience these places as united in the way Gunn has. Even further, since the moral of Gunn's *crostoli* story is that despite the differences in recipes, her mother and Ninetta cannot tell their *crostoli* apart, Gunn establishes that in her experience, there has been an ease of connection between Italy and Canada. In fact, since Gunn is the one mediating between the women, first, suggesting that they stop arguing over one batch of *crostoli* and both make their own batch, and then, tricking them into learning that the taste of their separate batches is largely indistinguishable, Gunn positions herself as the pivot<sup>11</sup> between Italy and Canada. It is through her that these places are brought together.

Although the tension between time and place, and subsequently, between multiple home-spaces is typically a negative marker of the exilic condition, in Gunn's case, this tension seems to have the opposite effect. Her liminality and movement between cultures, languages, places, etcetera, seem to give her freedom. She is "displaced and happy in this space of desire" (110, emphasis added). Gunn values the distance from the site of Italy as home. For her, memory and cultural practice are

<sup>10</sup> We here draw on Gilroy's differentiation of belonging along the axis of roots and routes from *The Black Atlantic*.

<sup>11</sup> The use of "pivot" is in reference to Fred Wah's construction of the navigation of hybrid identities in terms of a swinging door between two cultural spaces. In *Diamond Grill*, Wah frames his experience of hyphenated identity in terms of the pivoting hinged door between the space in which patrons eat at his family's Chinese restaurant and the space of the food preparation wherein the Chinese culture and language of the kitchen staff dominate.



more important than a physical return. They can be renovated to fit current needs. To this end, Gunn puts forth a self—a sense of being—that is open-ended and transformational. While *Tracks* carries echoes of the traditional frictions between estrangement and belonging, place and identity, home and abroad, past and present, imaginative and real, it is ultimately an immigrant story that expresses nostalgia as an enabling force. In so doing, *Tracks: Journeys in Time and Place* recasts *nostos* in such a way that challenges the notion of home as a singular site, and subsequently disrupts the idea of return as destination, all while retaining the import and value of home in the imagination.

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