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Université de Montréal

Deconstructing the Italian Canadian Subject:
Reconsiderations of Identity Construction in the Writing of Antonio D'Alfonso,
Fulvio Caccia and Mary di Michele
par
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Mémoire présenté à la Faculté des études supérieures
en vue de l'obtention du grade de
Maître en arts (M.A.)
en littérature comparée
août, 2000

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Université de Montréal
Faculté des études supérieures

Ce mémoire intitulé:

Deconstructing the Italian Canadian Subject: Reconsiderations of Identity Construction
in the Writing of Antonio D'Alfonso, Fulvio Caccia and Mary di Michele

présenté par:

Nancy Giacomini

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Mémoire accepté le : 31 octobre 2000

Abstract

This thesis examines the changing vision of Italian Canadian identity as it is depicted in the writing of three authors living and writing in Canada: Antonio D'Alfonso, Fulvio Caccia and Mary di Michele. In it I explore the specific strategies used by each author to deconstruct the traditional notion of this minority ethnic identity. The established version of Italian Canadian identity, in Italian Canadian writing, was previously centered on recording the effects of the voyage of immigration and on describing the subsequent period of adjustment. It also focused on delineating the specific ways in which this minority ethnic group differed from French and English Canadian culture. These three authors, however, outline several modes of viewing identity using hybridity, multiplicity and fluidity. Moreover, the baroque, the journey, the body and gender are all themes explored by them in order that the definition of Italian Canadian identity be changed from a static immigrant state to an everchanging and layered reality that better reflects the rapidly evolving character of their existence. My analysis should broaden the scope of the critical work surrounding Italian Canadian writing by deconstructing the instituted rendering of Italian Canadian identity which emphasizes the mingling of Italian and Canadian culture and neglects other aspects of this identity construction.

Résumé

Ce mémoire traite la vision changeante de l'identité italo-canadien(ne) dans les œuvres de Antonio D'Alfonso, Fulvio Caccia et Mary di Michele. J'examine les stratégies utilisées par chacun pour déconstruire la notion traditionnelle de ce qui constitue cette identité ethnique minoritaire. Auparavant, l'écriture italo-canadienne se concentrait sur le rendement de cette identité à travers la lentille de l'immigration. Elle décrivait surtout l'ajustement et les sentiments de nostalgie qui suivait cet événement décrit presque uniquement comme une rupture. Ces trois auteurs qui demeurent et écrivent au Canada, par contre, exemplifient la complexification de la notion de l'identité italo-canadienne puis qu'ils la décrivent, non pas en se concentrant seulement que sur les faits du passé et de leurs impacts, mais en se penchant sur la description de leur présent. Ils énoncent en cela une identité qui s'avère dynamique, cinétique et en déplacement.

Antonio D'Alfonso interroge plusieurs thèmes dans ses œuvres. Il explore le concept du baroque et l'utilise comme un système de référence puisque les spirales rappellent le mouvement inné de son identité. Il interroge aussi l'espace qu'il occupe 'entre' deux, trois et même quatre cultures. L'hybridité apparaît comme étant une idée importante puis qu'elle conceptualise la possibilité d'être fonctionnel *et* multiple. Antonio D'Alfonso valorise cette notion, qui a souvent été désapprouvée, et adopte l'idée de l'identité 'cumulative' puisqu'il met en évidence les diverses strates de son identité en caractérisant ses différences comme positives.

L'idée du baroque et de sa pertinence apparaît dans l'œuvre de Fulvio Caccia également. Il se concentre, par ailleurs, sur le thème du voyage et de l'identité italo-canadien(ne) qui se découvre à travers l'odyssée. En outre, il examine l'importance de la géographie et le voyage à travers celle-ci, dans la construction d'un soi-même. Son approche se penche sur l'idée de transculture, établie par Fernando Ortiz, et cette théorie imprègne la poésie et la prose de Caccia qui représente l'identité italo-canadien(ne) en transformation.

Mary di Michele, comme D'Alfonso et Caccia, considère l'identité italo-canadien(ne) comme étant cinétique, mais elle met l'accent sur la perspective féminine.

Elle évoque un point de vue souvent oublié et elle propose l'inclusion de celui-ci et de l'importance du corps-vécu à l'égard d'une conception de l'identité souvent masculinisée.

Ces trois écrivains changent la conception de cette communauté en incluant leurs expériences souvent multiples au cœur de l'identité italo-canadien(ne) qui est déjà plus ou moins répandue. Par conséquent, ils mettent en question la rigidité de celle-ci et proposent une identité en mouvement qui inclut plus fortement les perspectives "autres".

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To

my parents

Patrizia

Nicola

and my friends

for helping me find my voice

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my thesis director, Amaryll Chanady, for her patient encouragement and guidance.

I am also indebted to several other people: my family for their abiding support; Nicola Martino for his constant interest, insightful help and especially his humour; Sara Germanotta for her eagle eyes and Josie Salvaggio for always knowing this would be written.

Many thanks go to all those that gave me real-life examples of Italian Canadian identity in motion.

Introduction

Communications possibilities are expanding ever more quickly, people and goods are increasingly in transit and, with the coming of internet time, even our conception of the flow of our lives is being modified by technology and the rapid pace at which Western society is evolving. Meanwhile, the concept of the 'nation-state' as a homogenous unifying cultural force has been, and continues to be, questioned and re-evaluated. Sherry Simon in "Espaces incertains de la culture," published in *Fictions de L'identitaire au Québec*, states that today, "c'est la surabondance des images et des discours qui frappe" (19) and that because of this copiousness the "paysages surchargés de signes ne renvoient plus à des ensembles culturels identifiables" (19). Simon usefully assesses modern Occidental society by stating that "l'idéal d'une culture nationale monolithique se révèle de plus en plus difficile à actualiser" (17) since the heterogeneity "accrue des populations et l'éparpillement de leurs allégeances portent un défi aux images et mythes de la spécificité de la culture nationale" (17). This is especially the case in Canada where the nation is the product of multiple, and relatively recent, waves of immigration and settlement.

The nation-state is in transformation and the subject living within this structure is also being re-evaluated, as Dawson Thompson in "Technologies of Ethnicity" (*Writing Ethnicity: Cross-Cultural Consciousness in Canadian and Québécois Literature*) asserts: "Within the nation, by the nation, and against the nation, the subject is constantly being rewritten" (55). The subject living within the changing nation and within a mutable/mutating culture also changes the way she sees herself within that context. Simplicity thus gives way to complexity and what was once considered static is now decidedly considered to be in a perpetual state of transformation. Both Thompson and Winfried Siemerling in the introduction to *Writing Ethnicity*, rightly point out that the reassessment of the notions of nation and

culture have contributed to the re-examination of the intricacies of ethnic identity and ethnicity in general.

Probing the questions of both ethnic identity and the nation in *In Italics*, Antonio D'Alfonso connects the nation-state's demise to an increasing enfranchisement of ethnicity. He expresses his disenchantment with the model of the nation-state, and as he calls for its deconstruction, he turns to the idea of ethnicity to find a structuring element to replace it. He considers the nation a hindrance to the freedom that an abstract cultural state would provide (184) and imagines a "pluricultural" model of organization across geo-political lines. While somewhat utopian, what is of interest for my purposes here is that this idea surges out of a re-consideration of ethnic identity and culture that is not bound by political lines and a single geographical entity. It is a vision of identity that concentrates on the active process of the production of meaning. Cultural identification is no longer simply a reassuring blanket of immediate signification—especially not for the subjects of immigrant heritage. Our scope in the face of this kaleidoscope of changing and modifiable images is, therefore, to record and trace the reaction to this heterogeneity.

In this thesis I propose to explore the changing nature of Italian Canadian identity as writers re-view their ethnicity in an ever re-evaluated Canadian context. Traditionally, Italian Canadian identity was seen as comprised of two halves—an old Italian half and a newer Canadian half. Apart from this distinguishing fact, Italian Canadians were portrayed as a homogenous grouping of immigrants with similar interests and goals as newcomers to Canada's socio-economic and artistic landscape. The main preoccupation of writers was with the trauma of displacement and the ensuing adjustment. While this portrayal was necessary and useful because it brought to the fore issues affecting one of the largest ethnic communities in Canada, the recent accent on the transformation of the nation and the notion of culture has also engendered a fluid portrayal of Italian Canadian identity. Writers such as Pasquale Verdicchio, Marino Tuzi and C. D. Minni have proposed a reconceptualization of this identity to include these mutations. Concentrating on its complexity, Verdicchio in *Devils in Paradise*, recognizes the community's difficulty in rendering to itself and

others both a sense of unity as well as its heterogeneity. He cites the *Association of Italian-Canadian Writers* as an example of a group that paradoxically “effectively differentiat[es] itself from a mainstream Canadian context and an officially sanctioned minority identity, [but that also] . . . betrays an idealistic relationship to Italian culture” by making it seem to be a homogenous grouping (104-105). With the proliferation of regional and village associations harking back to specific origins, individual adherence to a monolithic Italian Canadian reality is further disputable.¹ In *Power of Allegiances*, Tuzi emphasizes the heterogeneous nature of the Italian Canadian community by underlining the regional differences between Italians—between those from the northern industrialized Italy and those from the southern mostly agricultural regions—which have affected the cultural reality of the community in Canada. Minni, in “Options for Tomorrow” (*Writers in Transition*), concentrates on the community as a whole and calls for a re-evaluation of the portrayal of the Italian Canadian subject as he transforms himself in time and space in a Canadian context:

Our ethnic group is different now than it was in 1950; we have become a distinct hybrid culture, changed by economic prosperity, separation from the mother culture, and contact with infidels; and our literature should begin to reflect this changed reality. Instead of writing about Vincenzo, the bricklayer, who in 1956 wondered if he should be laying bricks in Canada or Italy, whose wife worked in a factory, and whose kids went to school with a latch key around their neck, we can write about Vincenzo, 1986, who owns a small construction company, whose son is a doctor, whose daughter is in college, and who worries if he can stay in business during hard economic times while having a lunch of *melanzane* and sausage (201).

¹ Regional differences are still very much alive today in Italy, and although such Italian political concerns do not directly affect Italian Canadian identity directly, the presence of several different regional associations in Canada such as the Fogolar Furlan, the La Veneta, Associazione di Basilicata, the Associazione di Basilucania, the Associazione Casacalenda, the Associazione di Frosinone, Tricarnia to name but a few—funded separately by each regional government in Italy—underline the still very real divisions which have crossed the ocean and which play out in North America in unique ways. Interestingly, moreover, the Associazione di Frosinone and Casacalenda along with numerous other associations, are not organizations that group together Italian Canadians from the same region but from the same *village* since entire towns were almost emptied during the height of emigration. For the region of Molise, for example, there is not an association per se but a confederation of these village organizations—Confederazione delle associazioni molisane.

Recent writing by Italian Canadians mirrors the evolution of the community described by Minni and other critics by moving away from nostalgic rememberings of the past and its failed possibilities. Winfried Siemerling also touches upon this transformation of ethnicity's representation in Canadian writing. He cites Michael Ondaatje as an example and states that ethnicity in his work "becomes a function not of return but of reinvention, not of recuperating a single self but of maintaining a series of selves in transit" (22). This is the spirit with which the authors I will treat incorporate their ethnicity in their writing. They challenge the "narcissistic maintenance of one's own dream of unity" (Siemerling 22) and reject the desire to exoticize and maintain a static sense of identity.

In the following pages, I intend to explore the writing of three authors living and working in Canada whose work illustrates the complexification of the portrayals of Italian Canadian identity. Their writing depicts the conglomerate reality of Italian Canadian identity, but not by describing the mixture of *Canadian-ness* and *Italian-ness* per se. Rather, they offer a broader vision because, they implicitly accept their mixed influences and use that as a point of departure. Instead of concentrating on the history of the voyage to Canada and departure from their native Italian regions—which is an important element of their background—they focus on the colourful development of Italian Canadian identity in Canada now. Under the scrutinizing microscope of these recent works, Italian Canadian identity is deconstructed and rebuilt so that it can include the fundamental realities that affect it in this age of rapid change.

The examination of the three authors that I propose offers not a hedonistic celebration of "le mélange" (Simon 23) feared by several critics but, instead, suggests a more realistic characterization of the interplay of cultures at work in Italian Canadian identity. I will examine the ways in which Antonio D'Alfonso, Fulvio Caccia and Mary di Michele depict Italian Canadian identity and how they differ from earlier authors who concentrated mostly on a thematic rendering of immigrant

life and its trials and tribulations. I will also show how the dynamism depicted in their writing challenges static notions of immigrant identity.

Antonio D'Alfonso—who writes mostly in prose—as well as Fulvio Caccia—who writes mostly in verse—depict a hybrid and multifarious Italian Canadian identity by drawing upon mythology and the concepts of the neo-baroque and baroque. D'Alfonso sees the multiple nature of reality for Italian Canadians in a positive light and embraces his liminal cultural state—he is both Italian and Canadian, Molisano and Abbruzzese, English and French Canadian. He, as well as Caccia, also depict their minority-ethnic vision as a positive attribute. Rather than consider their 'difference' an obstacle they embrace its possibilities potential. In an open-ended question, Simon asks in her article "Espaces incertains de la culture" whether we will, in our search to understand "l'espace culturel," privilege the center or expose the reality of the margins? (25). In an indirect response to her question, D'Alfonso and Caccia mirror Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's conception of minoritarian culture in "Qu'est ce qu'une littérature mineure?"² and concentrate on the possibilities afforded Italian Canadians as they occupy a minority position amid a predominantly English and French Canadian landscape.³

Fulvio Caccia, however, not only embraces multiplicity and his minority-ethnic status by describing its possibilities as D'Alfonso does, but he also underlines the fluidity and transient-ness of this identity. He applies Fernando Ortiz's idea of transculture to an Italian Canadian conception of self. In Caccia's writing the main characters mirror the scenery, the situation, the objects surrounding them. The whole of the world—as in *Akno*s—takes on the persona of an Italian Canadian or minority ethnic subject and embodies its characteristics. It too is transient, spiraling, multiple as well as functional and aggregate.

² From *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*.

³ Interestingly, Pasquale Verdicchio also cites the importance of Deleuze and Guattari's conception of minority literature in *Devils in Paradise* where he summarizes the major elements of "minor literature" by drawing from *Kafka* and supplying examples from Canadian society (11).

Sherry Simon points out that “[s]eul un renversement de la hiérarchie des positionnements discursifs (plutôt que le changement des termes du discours lui-même) peut offrir la promesse d’un changement réel” (25). With the desire for change in mind, Caccia destabilizes the reader throughout his work in an attempt to redress the discursive positioning of minority ethnic writing and identities. He does so in a drastic way, subverting the reader’s expectations of a thematic anchoring in Italian Canadian culture, and in so doing initiates the fundamental changes described by Simon. The ensuing almost fantasy-like nature of his work makes the reader look more closely at the elements at play in this many-sided cultural arena because they are exposed as created and modifiable. Caccia’s “renversement” of social norms and quotidian assumptions also brings the reader a better understanding of the rupture of immigration because through them she experiences some of the profound uncertainty associated with such an uprooting.⁴ The old rules are shown to no longer apply and in Caccia’s poetry and short stories the accepted vision of Italian Canadian reality is fundamentally questioned, as it is in the work of D’Alfonso and di Michele.

In particular, Mary di Michele examines the hybrid multiplicity of Italian Canadian identity like D’Alfonso, as well as the idea of culture in transit, like Caccia, but she pays particular attention to the effects of gender on Italian Canadian identity. Di Michele often draws from feminist discourse and in so doing marries issues of Italian Canadian identity to those of gender identity. As Simon points out, often feminism had “un rôle heuristique essentiel: [puisqu’] il a ouvert la voie à l’exploration historique et conceptuelle de la différence de tout ordre” (Simon 18). Desiring to express the distinctness of her vision, di Michele joins her particular vision as a woman to her particular vision as an Italian Canadian and embraces the openness that feminism espouses. She concentrates, chiefly, on including the body, valorizing female relationships and examining female subordination as it occurs within the context of Italian Canadian culture.

⁴ When using the third person singular pronoun in general statements referring to the reader, I will, for the most part, be using the feminine *she*.

In order to redress what Charles Taylor in *Politics of Recognition* calls “misrecognition” (75), writers such as D’Alfonso, Caccia and di Michele depict in their writing a reality that better represents their visions of themselves. Rather than a static and nostalgic look toward the past, they illustrate a dynamic, kinetic and shifting view of Italian Canadian identity that concentrates on deciphering the present in order to move into the future.

Chapter 1

The Valorization of the “Road Between” in Antonio D’Alfonso’s Writing

Throughout his writing, Antonio D’Alfonso is concerned with the “process of becoming” (D’Alfonso “The Road Between: Essentialism” *Contrasts*) and is, as Amaryll Chanady points out in “From Difference to Exclusion: Multiculturalism and Postcolonialism,” “hardly alone in claiming that he can acquire a cumulative identity” (421). His poem “Babel” (*The Other Shore* 57) perfectly exemplifies the minority ethnic individual’s desire to integrate the diverse sides of the self without erasing the evidence that there are, indeed, different strata to his identity. In this somewhat autobiographical poem, D’Alfonso showcases the layers of the narrative voice:

“Babel”

Nativo di Montreal

élevé comme Québécois

forced to learn the tongue of power

viví in México como alternativa

figlio del sole e della campagna

par les franc-parleurs aimé

finding thousands like me suffering

me casé y divorcié en tierra fria

nipote de Guglionesi

parlant politique malgré moi

steemed in the school of Old Aquinas

queriendo luchar con mis amigos latinos

Dio where shall I be demain

(trop vif) qué puedo saber yo

spero che la terra be mine

This poem displays the layers that make up the Italian Canadian identity being outlined by D'Alfonso. It is like a sedimentary rock formation that draws its uniqueness and strength from the strata that it innately showcases. Moreover, because "Babel" features the juxtaposition of languages and cultures in an overt way, it also underlines D'Alfonso's adoption of the term 'baroque'. He appropriates this classification and applies it to his poetics since, like the baroque and neo-baroque, it also relies on the rich layering of textures, motifs, and meanings.⁵ It is in baroque art's juxtaposition of diverse elements that it differentiates itself from, as Austin Warren explains in "Baroque Art and the Emblem," "[t]he repose and symmetry of [t]he Renaissance." Giving way to "agitation, aspiration, ambition, [and] an intense striving to transcend the limits of each genre" (Warren 1078) baroque expression showcases the 'layers' of influences that it comprises, often through "violent contrasts and antitheses" (René Wellek 76). Consequently, exploring Antonio D'Alfonso's application of the term 'baroque' to his writing and to the writing of other Italian Canadian authors proves useful because it focuses the reader on the central issues of his poetics of multiplicity, cumulative identity and transformation. As baroque expression stretches the boundaries of classification, so too does D'Alfonso try to go beyond perceived limits of locution—his work expands the Italian Canadian canon and encourages critical expression, which in turn, also challenges traditional notions of minority ethnic expression in Canada.

The nucleus of much of D'Alfonso's work is an examination and representation of contestatory change within the Italian Canadian community as its individuals interact with the majority ethnics in the center and other minority ethnic groups on the periphery.⁶ My purpose here is to examine D'Alfonso's unique

⁵ For my purposes here, I will not be differentiating between the historical baroque and the new-baroque or neo-baroque since such concerns are of an ongoing debatable nature that would undoubtedly require more space to explain than I have here.

⁶ I use the term 'minority ethnic literature,' coined by Enoch Padolsky, as opposed to simply 'ethnic literature,' because, as he states in the abstract to his article "Cultural Diversity and Canadian Literature: A Pluralistic Approach to Majority and Minority Writing in Canada":

strategies of representation of Italian Canadian identity in his creative and critical writing. In this context I shall examine: firstly, his use of the baroque to underscore the kinetic nature of Italian Canadian selfhood; secondly, his figuration of the duality within a single consciousness and his development of hybridity, and thirdly, his elaboration of a ‘cumulative’ identitarian strategy. Such elaborations offer a stimulating opportunity to further what is accepted as part of the traditional Italian Canadian canon as writers such as Joseph Pivato and Frank Paci have established it. While fixed stereotypes needed to be established—in order to assert the difference between this minority culture and French and English Canadian society—it is useful to move beyond the fixing of images and in turn complexify portrayals by centering on fluidity. Through his writing, D’Alfonso reconfigures Italian Canadian identity and suggests alternatives to existing modes of identity formulation and identification.

By bringing the concept of the baroque into his writing he underscores his desire to dilate what is understood as Italian Canadian identity by changing how it is represented in literature. In *The Other Shore*—a unique collection of poetry, pictures and prose—he describes the baroque as “exuberance, ranting against the establishment, the harmonies of beauty and never-ending fashions” (sic. 150). Moreover, in the section of this oeuvre entitled “Nuovo Barocco”, he also quotes Marshal McLuhan’s *Through the Vanishing Point* and highlights what exactly it is about the Baroque that clarifies his conception of Italian Canadian identity: ““Baroque art and poetry sought to unify disparate facets and experiences by directing attention to the moment of change”” (150). Thus, with the importance being placed on the transformation of different elements as they collide and come together, D’Alfonso formulates his cultural group’s identity in a way that avoids stagnation and stereotyping because the emphasis is on modification and growth.

the critical vocabulary most commonly used in Canadian literary criticism— ‘mainstream’ and ‘ethnic’—should be replaced by ‘ethnic majority’ and ‘ethnic minority,’ terms which imply a more balanced and comprehensive framework for Canadian literature and which can be meaningfully related to the historical, cultural and social realities of Canadian society (111).

Elsewhere, such as in his novel *Avril ou l'anti-passion*, he describes his protagonist, young Fabrizio, going beyond the family home at the age of five to enter the worlds inhabited by his friends (50) and then states: “Ça sert à quoi de répéter *ad vitam aeternam* les mêmes gestes, les mêmes idées?... Je veux changer” (28). He further highlights his desire to avoid stagnation in his collection of poetry/prose *L'apostrophe qui me scinde* in which he points out that “[c]e qui compte . . . [c'est] le refus de durcir comme un fossile” (20). This sentiment, and others similar to it, recur in D'Alfonso's work and become like *leit-motifs* that run through his corpus highlighting his representation of Italian Canadian identity as vibrant and multifaceted.

The baroque underscores for D'Alfonso both his concerns with motion and his regard for alteration because it captures the moment when the movement engenders change. His interest in the moment of coming together, of the clashing and meeting of manifold identities, is underlined, therefore, by what is understood as ‘baroque’; a term both contested and controversial. The fact that this appellation itself is difficultly defined highlights the mutable state of the Italian Canadian identity that D'Alfonso describes.

By using the term baroque to refer to minority ethnic literary and Italian Canadian cultural production, he is intermingling two sets of ideas that would not necessarily be otherwise joined. This infusion of diversified terminology allows for an attenuated debate and distends the parameters of Italian Canadian literature beyond the immediate physical impact of immigration and integration. Exploring the baroque's history and applying its multifaceted and often contradictory definitions to minority ethnic writing informs our understanding of Italian Canadian identity in telling ways. As the term baroque was once used to describe irregular and strange shapes by neo-classicists in the eighteenth century it was also used by Heinrich Wölfflin, in 1881, to designate a specific period in the history of art. Wölfflin further concluded, however, that ‘baroque’ could also be used as a meta-historical term that could be applied as an abstract concept to other situations that displayed characteristics similar to that of the art in question. Using it to categorize Italian

literature, he suggests in *Renaissance und Barock* (1888), as René Wellek points out in “The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship”, that “the contrast between Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (1516) and Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* (1584) could be compared to the distinction between Renaissance and baroque” (73). With the fact that historical baroque art was created at a time when migration and expansion were central concerns—with the sixteenth and seventeenth century exploration of the New World—the parallels that can be drawn between that time of great change and ours adds a further dimension to the applicability of baroque to Italian Canadian identity formulation in Canadian literature.

An article in Garzanti’s *La Nuova Enciclopedia della Letteratura* points out that the socio-political transformations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had at least two effects on the artists and art that was created. These effects, according to D’Alfonso’s analysis, can be found in the writing of Italian Canadian authors (Garzanti 88-91). Firstly, the changes moved the artists to represent reality with great detail in all its vile morbidity. Secondly, the changing times influenced the artists to depict the insecurity and precariousness they felt with the shattering of their illusion that man was at the center of the universe. In dealing with the fact that they could no longer dominate clearly outlined spaces, their art—which was later called baroque—demonstrated a transgressive and exuberant quality. Without drawing explicit lines between baroque expression of the sixteenth and seventeenth century and D’Alfonso’s writing, one can safely conclude that his use of detail and his sensitivity to the changes in the world around and within him, which result in a transgressive expression of identity, are strategies of representation that have been attributed to baroque art.

D’Alfonso’s concentration on the contemptible, albeit realistic, details of the characters’ lives in his novel *Avril ou l’anti-passion* parallels baroque art’s interest in the minute. Using an epistolary format—and the familiar trope of the found “boîte de chocolats [plein de] . . . lettres” (21)—D’Alfonso describes the adventures of the narrator’s parents; that is, Guido’s life during his military service and Lina’s trip

across the Atlantic.⁷ The precise detail of these descriptions draws the reader into the protagonists' situation and renders extremely specific the events at hand. Rather than offer a story that can serve as a parable of immigration for all Italian Canadians, as other writers have done, D'Alfonso is moving away from that tendency. He writes viscerally, using what Pierre Nepveu, in his article "La Passion du retour," calls "[le] langage des corps et des matières" and "[un] discours habité par l'eros, [et] travaillé par le désir et la distance" (113). His novel, although it does describe the emigrant/immigrant experience and its "élan sentimental qui caractérise le désir de retour [et qui] . . . capt[e] ce qu'il a de physique dans toute migration" (Nepveu 113), is less easily transferred to all situations and all cases of migration because of the precision of the details he includes.⁸ His attention to particularity precludes stereotyping and by the same token the detailing also underscores the complexity of the characters'/narrators' lived experiences. The details are important elements in his representation of a multi-dimensional subject position because this baroque quality renders the traditional flat image of Italian Canadian identity obsolete.

D'Alfonso's application of the baroque to Italian Canadian identity becomes clearer if we define "baroque in more general terms of a philosophy or a world view or even a merely emotional attitude toward the world" (Wellek 105).⁹ As baroque artists such as Caravaggio expressed in their work the desire to showcase the changes they saw and felt around and within themselves, D'Alfonso draws from the

⁷ I will be citing *Avril ou l'anti-passion*, because this novel appeared before its English version, despite the fact that it could be considered a 'translation'. D'Alfonso states in *In Italics* that he "consciously chose to publish *Fabrizio's Passion* in French first (I had to translate from the English into French, and not the other way round)" (sic. 249). Since one version differs from the other in style and sometimes content, I will cite from the first published work.

⁸ For example, Guido writes about his longing for Lina and juxtaposes that to the description of the other soldiers' escapades: "[t]u me manques, Lina . . . tes seins, ta sueur, ton jus" (28), "un gars a baisé une fille dans les chiottes de la *Trattoria del Nord* [et ce] . . . matin, son pénis crachait le pus" (29). Lina's letters, on the other hand, describe both the beauty and exhilaration of the trip to North America and the reality of living on board: "[l]'étage du bas est aménagé de manière a rendre malade le plus sain des hommes . . . [les] odeurs d'urine, d'excrément et de vomi ne nous lâchent pas . . . nous avons hâte de sentir à nouveau . . . les rayons du soleil" (39).

⁹ In order to avoid an analysis of all of the baroque's complexities, for it is not the central focus of this essay, a freer interpretation of its meaning is adopted.

transformations he undergoes/went to enunciate the complexity of his lived experiences. The layers of detail in the novel, such as D'Alfonso's use of point-of view, mirror the sumptuousness of baroque detailing. This interest in the profusion of layers is also mirrored in Mary di Michele's poetry, where, in poems like "La Benvenuta" (*Debriefing the Rose*) the narrator notices the "cities built on cities in each word. There are cities/archaeological in each note, in each compound" (l. 18-19).

D'Alfonso's application of the baroque to Italian Canadian expression is interesting because it provides a different way of examining minority ethnic writing. He imbues it with the complexity of the baroque as well as investing it with a historical significance in terms of art history—without denying this writing's importance for socio-political history. Although Italian Canadian literature is not dependent upon such historical parallels for its significance to be appreciated, such correlations and analogies broaden the scope of research surrounding this writing. No longer is it limited to the realms of multicultural theory but, through D'Alfonso's writing, it is now being offered a part in a neo-baroque discussion. The term baroque and the art that it designates is as multifaceted as are the individuals of immigrant heritage that D'Alfonso describes.

He draws upon the incongruities and ironies lived by Italian Canadians to illustrate the multidimensional, multi-tiered nature of all lived experience. Beyond the hardships described in his novel are people who can appreciate all of everyday life. In attempting to represent accurately all aspects of this, D'Alfonso explodes parameters of traditional Italian Canadian expression that left out some of these individual and personal complexities. He concentrates on the emotions and feelings, the cogged wheels of these characters' internal clockwork, and not necessarily on sketching a coherent situation which would diminish the fragmented nature of this experience.

While reading *Avril ou l'anti-passion* the reader is aware of the fact that this seeks to exhibit what is hidden, the innermost workings of a mind and personality

which can never truly be excavated and understood. Applying the baroque to this tendency to attempt to express the inexpressible, René Wellek, citing the theorist Leo Spitzer footnote here, quote Spitzer only, explains that “the baroque artist ‘says something with full consciousness that one cannot actually say it,’” and that he “‘knows all the difficulty of translation from intention to expression, the whole insufficiency of linguistic expression’” (110-111). D’Alfonso tries to represent the unrepresentable—capturing the sublime, the grotesque and the transcendental—through the elevation of the mundane to the realm of the symbolic.

Connecting the baroque to this desire to underscore the mixture, to see the singular differently, he states in *The Other Shore* that “[t]he Baroque . . . does not contradict essentialism, it is another way of understanding essence” (152). If we understand essence to mean that which constitutes an individual, such a discourse’s efficacy could be “questionable”, as Dawson Thompson points out in “Technologies of Ethnicity”. While such a strategy “has a tendency to fragment and isolate communities” (Thompson 52), “[e]ven theorists who have rejected the idea of an essence [such as Gayatri Spivak],” points out Thompson, “sometimes find it necessary to make a strategic use of identity [with an essence that] is [nonetheless] always open to affirmative deconstruction” (53). D’Alfonso’s use of the baroque underscores his desire to “catch . . . [this] essence” (*The Other Shore* 152) of Italian Canadian identity which is the result of a ‘mingling’ of realities and “which seems more and more fleeting” (152) because of assimilation, ambivalence, apathy and confusion.¹⁰ It is with the acknowledgement of these facts, and of the tangled nature of minority ethnic identity, that he depicts an identity that is varied.

Centered around the ‘changes,’ existential, epistemological and socio-political that are brought into focus by an immigrant heritage, D’Alfonso’s writing differs with respect to other earlier Italian Canadian authors who wrote to describe and fix this formerly voiceless minority ethnic subjectivity. Through the term baroque, he invites

¹⁰ Since throughout this thesis I will be shifting between several of D’Alfonso’s works and I will include the title of the book cited within the parenthetical documentation when it may seem unclear to which oeuvre I am referring.

the reader to envision the Italian Canadian identity as an identity in movement. Although he does still characterize Italian Canadian culture in traditional terms, for example by designating the kitchen in his novel as “le cœur de la famille, la pièce maîtresse du foyer italien” (46), he also indicates that it often serves parallel and dual functions that are often contradictory as well as simultaneous—“[c’était] lieu du repas, du dialogue, de la discordance aussi, la partie sacrée de la maison où tout se clarifie, tout s’effondre” (46). He points out the mixing of diverse elements and focuses on their ability to shift from one function to another. It is in the recognition of the power of this mingling that D’Alfonso’s writing changes the way we write and think about Italian Canadian identity.

The essence, then, is multiple. He writes in *L’apostrophe qui me scinde*, that the contradictions that he lives with “[font] partie intégrante[s] de [son] être[—il est] [c]onstamment tir[é] d’un pôle à l’autre” (23). The contradictions he lives with afford movement because although they render his identity construction more complex they also force him to move from one side to the other in a constant dance to find where he resides. D’Alfonso’s depiction of Italian Canadian identity as a self in motion is accentuated by his invocation of the baroque. He states in *Panick Love* that the “baroque movement set on going beyond the straight line and circle . . . [t]o seize the perspective of a spiral” (19) is an expression of the contradictions that inhabit his understanding of himself.¹¹

The landscape he paints is one of “mixed extremes” (*The Other Shore* 77) but also of movement since the spiral, as opposed to the circle and line, is in constant movement, re-adjustment and re-alignment. While the ‘circle’ represents for D’Alfonso “vicious . . . fixation” (*Panick Love* 10), and the ‘line’ is fixed rigidity, the spiral and the spring are images that bring activity to the identity he describes. The spiral is springing with brimming energy waiting to be unleashed and, because it

¹¹ The passage about the baroque and the spiral first appeared in D’Alfonso’s ‘prose poem’ *Panick Love* in 1992. In its translated form, it appeared later in *L’apostrophe qui me scinde* (1998) and here I have chosen to quote from the English version.

cannot be still, its image renders more accurately for D'Alfonso the shifting of allegiances and points of view within a minority ethnic individual.

He opts for an image that is kinetic in nature and in so doing, he chooses what Thompson calls a "performance of ethnicity" that "refram[es] . . . the traditional view of ethnicity as a static component of identity" (Thompson 51). She explains in "Technologies of Ethnicity" that, as Marlene Nourbese Philip and other minority ethnic writers have found, some artists portray an identity and a memory in movement rather than a kind of art that corresponds to nostalgic memory and tradition for tradition's sake (59). While D'Alfonso does depict traditional Italian Canadian customs in his writing, he does so only to situate his expression of "a subversive memory" (59). This memory does not attempt to preserve, but rather—as Thompson explains quoting Nourbese Philip—acts as "the impetus for artists' attempts' 'to build on what their individual cultures have passed on to them, in the possibility of creating something new' (116-117)" (Thompson 59). Memory is no longer a "storage place, focused on the past," nor does it provide "coherence and continuity to a subject's identity," (Thompson 59). It is for an artist focused on movement and on the formulation of kinetic identity, as is D'Alfonso, a chance to explore and change what is already known and re-direct that knowledge toward the future. The baroque spiral can be imagined to be springing constantly from what was, to what is to what could be. Italian Canadian identity, therefore, is the result of this movement of "the conglomeration of spirals that at times overlap" (*Panick Love* 19). This constant activity is what brings energy to the selfhood described by D'Alfonso in his writing.

While movement and energy are inherent in the image of the spiral, it is also important to examine the moments between one action and another, the moments between Italian-ness and Canadian-ness. The duality/multiplicity depicted by D'Alfonso surges out of a state of liminality and it is this 'in between' state that is the basis for D'Alfonso's descriptions of plurality in motion. At the inception of the plurality of the Italian Canadian identity that he portrays is the threshold state of the emigrants who left their Italian regions to come to North America. He writes in *Avril*

ou l'*anti-passion* that “[s]euls leurs yeux parlent . . . [quand i]ls regardent là ou ils ne sont pas” and where they will never be again. They are in an instant “entre la vie ancienne et la vie nouvelle” (*Avril ou l'anti-passion* 137). D’Alfonso, both in his novel and his other work, describes what has happened to that couple, and their children, on the threshold of emigration and then on the margins of their adopted society¹².

The Italian Canadian subject, as described by D’Alfonso, is “[n]i chair ni terre, éthérée,” and is chameleon-like. She enters “en tous sans jamais [s]’installer” (26) since choosing one place to inhabit would mean giving up another. The possibility of fully inhabiting one place and taking part in a single reality is denied the Italian Canadian. In *The Other Shore*, in a ‘poem’ dedicated to Mary di Michele, D’Alfonso states that there is a “[p]erversity about being from nowhere” (131), and therefore fitting—paradoxically—everywhere. Such a state, while it allows for anything and excludes nothing, does not offer easily obtained stability.

This liminal status transgresses normative modes of existence and brings about the possibility to go beyond the status quo because of the flexibility it gives rise to. If having a minority ethnic identity is like “balancing in midair like a direction sign loose at its hinges” (D’Alfonso 132) then all directions are feasible despite the sense of in-between-ness D’Alfonso describes pertinently as “[b]etween marriage and divorce, between marriage and solitude . . . [b]etween the yes and the no, between the possible and the indecision” (77). This in-between-ness appears in much of Italian Canadian writing as the authors themselves negotiate a space between the “two solitudes” of French and English Canada and, more importantly, “straddle the frontier between two cultures” (Pivato *Echo* 196).

Giuseppe Ricci, one of the “first voices” of Italian Canadian literature, writes:

Volevo essere cittadino canadese per avere più diritti e partecipare in tutte le attività di questo grande paese. . . . Pur avendo questo desiderio, non avevo cambiato nulla delle abitudini italiane: come

¹² Since much of Italian Canadian writing is somewhat, if not explicitly, autobiographical, in writing about their work the lines between author and narrative voice, protagonist and writer, are frequently blurred.

tradizioni, valori morali e materiali e più di ogni altra cosa come mangiare all'italiana. L'Italia era sempre la mia madre patria.¹³

The ambivalent relationship with citizenship, brought out in this passage, highlights the double quality of the Italian Canadian immigrant experience. Manifest in this work is the subject's feeling of simultaneously wanting to be Canadian, in order to partake of the nation he is now living in, while at the same time, in his daily life, remaining true to the culture he left behind, despite the fact that it has probably changed considerably since his departure.

In *The Other Shore* D'Alfonso draws a sense of power from this threshold existence. The identity he delineates is one that “need[s] to stand on edge like a nervous trapeze artist . . . to feel dizzy, [and] sense the uncertainty of feelings and ideas” (emphasis mine 15). This liminality is so much a part of his construction of self that he admits to its necessity. It brings a unique creativity because it provides a different vantagepoint from which to view the Canadian landscape.

What is described is a marginal identity—“the limbo of happy people” (*The Other Shore* 77)—that sees the positive possibilities of being on the periphery while not discounting the difficulty of living in that position. The selfhood he describes, although in a tenuous position, is also characterized as being in a privileged location where liminality brings the power to choose. D'Alfonso portrays the Italian Canadian position with a telling image. He writes: “I want to be between the executioner's whip and the victim's back, between the strength of the arm and the vulnerability of the waiting skin” (15). He is neither the “executioner” which holds the ‘guilty’ position of power—nor the “victim”—who is helpless. In that small space, at the locus of the transformation and in the moment right before the change, he sees the greatest possibilities and perhaps the most comfort.

¹³ The translation of his work is included in the anthology from which it is taken, *Italian Canadian Voices* (40). I have preferred to quote from the original and footnote the translation: “I wanted to become a Canadian citizen so that I would be entitled to all the rights under the law and to full participate in the life of this great land... Even though I wanted to become a citizen I hadn't changed any of my Italian ways, neither my traditions, or my moral or material values. Above all, I continued eating ‘all'italiana.’ Italy would always be my mother country” (41).

The violent nature of D'Alfonso's image emphasizes the asperity of the subject's condition but at the same time shocks the reader because of its contrast to the familiar and conventional expression of Italian Canadian subjectivity. Here, rather than denounce his cultural space because it is in-between he sees it as a possible escape, for in his imagery, he situates himself neither as aggressor nor as aggressed. D'Alfonso refers to the capacity to move beyond the discomfort of being in a precarious cultural position—surrounded by difficult realities on either side—and *choose* to take up the position of liminality by stating that he “wants to” (*The Other Shore* 15) be neither one nor the other. Moreover, by embracing the status he holds, he is also escaping the inertness that comes from resignation. In the ‘poem’ “Per Pier Giorgio Di Cicco,” he affirms that he is “balancing from one position to another” (139) while still being in constant movement—“[o]utside I see only the blur of the passing landscape, lights shining in the horizon” (139). Even though in the same section he expresses his ambivalence at being a cultural tight-rope walker—he writes of wanting to “burn [his] plane ticket [to Canada] in the [p]iazza” (139)—the fact that he *is* auspiciously existing in duality—“balancing”—forces him to question his proposed rejection of this state. He does not burn the ticket in the ‘poem’, and so the reader concludes, as does the narrator, that he is successfully managing his dual identity. After asking himself—and perhaps well-known Italian Canadian poet Pier Giorgio Di Cicco—“How many pages are needed to contain the immobile moment between confusion and taking a decision?” (*sic.* 140-141), he decides that he can and wants to continue trying to write the pages that will explain to himself and others what his identity is about (141)¹⁴. Ultimately, although he teeters on the edge and wrestles with his conflictual identity, he concludes that this state *is* what constitutes his identity. With this acceptance, he can analyze the possibilities this affords—among them, changeability, duality and multiplicity.

D'Alfonso underscores the importance of transformation—the mutability of a personality in accordance with changes in environment. “I am ice,” he writes, “I thaw

¹⁴ D'Alfonso expresses this last sentiment in Italian “io pure lo poso lo voglio” (141).

with time. With heat. And become what I originally was” (*The Other Shore* 26). While stating that he could re-instate his older self with the right conditions—perhaps with the heat of the central Italian sun—, he also implies that he could, conversely, once again become ice should he come in contact with the cold—a frigid Canadian winter. Italian Canadian identity is characterized as adaptable by D’Alfonso who stresses, in “Camaleonte”, that he is not a phoenix destined “to burn after living [his] existence” or “become another” (*The Other Shore* 73). “I engage myself to be the one I am” (73), he writes, both in the “*here*, [and] the *there*” (emphasis his 73) by concentrating on multiplicity and not on death and re-birth nor on forgetting and becoming new.

Fulvio Caccia, however,—as D’Alfonso points out in *In Italics*—does “[use] the image of the phoenix which rises in the morning from its ashes” (31). Caccia’s understanding is that the “present must end in death for the future to come to life” (31) and that hence, an Italian Canadian reality can exist only when one or the other aspects of this identity loses the race with time and ceases to be as important as the other. His interest is in the idea of “transculture,” which acknowledges a culture’s transitory state from thing to another, and is something that I will deal with more fully later on. D’Alfonso, on the other hand, theorizes a space where duality can exist in one person, where one facet of an identity need not be sacrificed in favour of another: “Je suis de deux nations,” he explains in an article published in *Vice Versa* 2.3 (1985). While he is “duel” and “de deux imaginaires”(21) he also does not apologize for not fitting into one category or another: “Je n’ai pas besoin de diluer mon vin pour plaire à celui e à celle qui n’aime pas le vin. Je leur offre mon vin et une bouteille d’eau” (21). Moreover, he does not deny the possibility of switching back and forth between two or three perceptions of reality. He contemplates this prospect by describing himself, in an essay anthologized in his collection of critical writing *In Italics*, as “Abbruzzese/Molisano/Canadian/Québécois/Italian/European/North American” (187). This notion is in opposition both to the American configuration of the melting pot, where old identities are discarded, as well as to the Canadian mosaic, which

portrays a somewhat rigid and fixed version of ethnic identity. Despite a relatively idealistic desire to make dual identity feasible and even desirable, D'Alfonso nonetheless grounds himself in the realistic. When choosing to identify with a creature, he prefers the realistic “*living and sly chameleon*” to the imaginative mythical “*non-existent phoenix*” (emphasis mine 73).

Bill Schermbrucker's short story “Chameleon,” included in Smaro Kamboureli's *Making a Difference* and originally published as *Chameleon and Other Stories* (1983), also highlights the chameleon's pertinence as a figure representing minority ethnic identities in Canada. His story offers the chameleon as a way into the world of a young individual's probing of his environment. The author follows a young boy's encounters and fascination with chameleons as he is growing up and later when he is teaching in Nairobi. While the protagonist tries to situate himself within the world that surrounds him, the chameleon becomes a symbol of what is ‘different’ and misunderstood. Being on the periphery himself, the protagonist realizes that he can accept his situation and, as D'Alfonso also points out, draw power from this difference. The time spent contemplating the chameleon—whose way of life is natural for all of his species—normalized a unique situation and avoided making the ‘difference’ a handicap. D'Alfonso's inclusion of this reptile also underlines the fact that duality, while unconventional for some, is a way of life for others.

The descriptions of the chameleon in Schermbrucker's story offer the reader the opportunity to appreciate the complexity of this creature whose eyes can see in two different directions at once and whose changing colour allows him to blend in perfectly with things around him. Since he has a ‘problem’ with his eyesight which renders his vision similar to that of the reptile's, the protagonist is “interested to know all the workings of chameleons”. The author's descriptions of the unique functionings of both this young man's eyes and the chameleon's vision are reminiscent of D'Alfonso's portrayals of an Italian Canadian subject that can “look in different directions” at the same time (Schermbrucker 149). Mary di Michele in an interview with Ken Norris (*ECW* 1991) also points out how her “trouble with [her]

vision as an adolescent: double vision" (3), affects her understanding of how she experiences the world. From that episode she found that the experience of seeing, and vision, "seems . . . a natural metaphor or analogy for the process of understanding or learning [that she has] undergone" (3) as a minority ethnic woman. The chameleon, a creature able to be simultaneously many colors as well as see in different directions, is a living example of duality in fruitful action and underscores the importance of perspective.

Antonio D'Alfonso has invoked the figure of the chameleon to express the "power of adaptation that will permit us [minority ethnic authors] to accomplish the enormous task we have set ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, that is, the welding of cultures" (32 "The Road Between" *In Italics*). Changing from one colour to another as the chameleon, and from one culture to another as Italian Canadians, implies being able to live with two or more realities at the same time. Rather than concentrate on describing the subject's 'journey' from one cultural reality to another, by adopting transcultural theory as a model as does Fulvio Caccia, D'Alfonso concentrates his efforts on outlining another possibility. For him, living as an Italian Canadian implies an inherent duality that exists within the individual. It means the acceptance of duality and the founding of a culture that is based on this cultural mixture. Hence, his development of the idea of an *Italic* experience—that is, being Italian outside Italy. Other Italian Canadian authors outline this duality differently. Instead of exploring the code-switching that takes place in a single person, they imagine another 'person' into existence. Their writing examines the juggling of two or more cultures by concretely exploring each of these possibilities separately.

With authors such as C. D. Minni and Nino Ricci the figure of the double arises and serves to reconcile the fragmented sense of identity expressed by earlier writers such as Giuseppe Ricci and later poets. Throughout his trilogy, Nino Ricci offers several instances of doubling; for example, the protagonist's sister in *In a Glass House* goes to live with her friend's family and the two girls—Rita and Elena—are characterized as almost twin-like in *Where She has Gone*. Here Elena represents the 'purely Canadian' self that Rita cannot incarnate. In the short story

“Details from the Canadian Mosaic” Minni explicitly posits a double identity for the main character in his short story. Here, Mario becomes Mike when he enters the schoolyard—the only “suitable translation” he could find for his name—but remains Mario at home. While in D’Alfonso’s conception of Italian Canadian identity the two would have overlapped and influenced one another, bringing Mike and Mario to exist simultaneously, keeps Minni’s characters’ ‘selves’ separate.

Furthermore, in his short story “Roots,” Minni includes a doubling that exists across time and space. The protagonist’s double exists in his imagination and is an alternate manifestation of his identity. The person that he is and the man he could have become meet in his mind. This is clearly dramatized at the end of the story, when while playing bocce with a man who also emigrated and returned for a visit to Villa, their home town, Berto Donati realizes that he is bowling “on the lawns with the tourists” (74) and no longer belongs to the village.

In an attempt to reconcile who he has become and who he was, he imagines what his life would have been like had he not left southern Italy: becoming a carpenter like his father, marrying a girl like his first love, and being “a man of Villa—sunburned, strong, dominant” (74). Ultimately, however, the protagonist prefers to live as he does, with a multiplicity of selves and with a sensibility that is different; he concedes that the life of a man in Villa is “[n]ot bad at all,” but it is not him (74). Berto accepts his dual identity and appreciates the uniqueness of his experiences, embracing them as positive but, nonetheless, Minni portrays the doubleness of his reality by separating one side from the other and analyzing both separately.

Similarly, in Nino Ricci’s novel *Where She Has Gone*, the protagonist sees— from across the street—his Roman cousin who “looked like [his] double,” causing him an instant’s sense that he was staring into a mirror (173). Seeing this Romanized version of himself elicits in Vittorio the desire to bemuse “all the trappings of this different destiny [he] might have had if a single decision had never been made, if [his] father had never packed his bags, and set out” (173). As Berto Donati in “Roots,” Vittorio imagines what he might have become: someone who “worked in a

restaurant . . . , attended the university perhaps and lived in some cool, dingy, marble-floored flat . . . [, someone who] had friends who came by on motor-scooters” (173).

He longs for what he thinks would have been a more comforting life. He muses: “I would simply have been at home, in my element, would have looked up into the street from time to time as I waited tables on weekends for my father and thought, This is my kingdom, where I belong” (173). Vittorio wishes he could have what he thinks his Italian double has—the assurance that where he is, is where he is supposed to be and the confidence that comes with knowing that his life is his and was meant for him. It is this sense of belonging that Vittorio lacks and that he thinks he can find in the images of what could have been. His Roman cousin becomes for him a physical projection of who he thought he might have become. Seeing the “shorter, . . . trimmer, more elegant” (173) version of himself carrying his body with an air of command and lax assuredness—in a manner that was “distinctly Italian”—prompts him to think of the first departure from Italy as the beginning of a “slow disintegration” (173).

In his article “Options for Tomorrow: Reflecting Today’s Ethnic Reality” published in *Writers in Transition*, Minni differentiates between writing “about duality” and “writing from duality” (199). He problematizes the feasibility of the dramatization of the double as a solution. According to him, the direction that writers should be taking is a move toward writing *from* duality. This entails an acceptance of the different manifestations of the self rather than a simple representation of this fragmentation. It is a step, implies Minni, toward a more integrated vision of the Italian Canadian subject. A step that writers such as D’Alfonso have taken. Rather than recurring images of characters with a fragmented and double life, Pasquale Verdicchio suggests in *Devils in Paradise: Writings on Post-Emigrant Cultures*, that a “search for coherence” can be found by grounding a connection to the past in “an ethic workable for the future” (24) and not in nostalgic reverie or a desire to re-create what never was.

The longing and nostalgic thoughts of Ricci’s protagonist Vittorio, however, are also accompanied by a closer inspection of the situation—a perhaps more

realistic view of the scene before him. Vittorio ultimately realizes that the life he was imagining does not exist for him and that it does not take shape for his Roman cousin either: “he too had had his own different fights, his lost opportunities, his sense of what he’d been denied” (174). As he now thinks longingly of an Italian life, his cousin probably wonders about America and the possibilities that emigrating could have held for him. Vittorio recognizes that in the end it is not Italy that he craves, but the innocence of someone who can still imagine a better, more perfect place across the ocean. He feels as though all his illusions have been shattered—as though all is lost: both the possibilities of finding a better life in North America and the homeland culture as well. Vittorio walks away from his uncle’s restaurant understanding that his sense of exile, of not really belonging anywhere, is a condition that will not be remedied by simply being in his country of birth. It is something he will have to reconcile within himself and so he rents a car to seek out his village Valle del Sole.

While authors such as Frank Paci¹⁵ tell of the confusion and frustration brought about because of a dual existence—“But I’m the one who doesn’t know whether she’s Italian or Canadian”—others such as Minni and Ricci, in an attempt to reconcile their dual nature, write about the double explicitly. Both Berto Donati in “Roots” and Vittorio in Ricci’s novel come to the realization that peace with their exiled state must be sought by looking into the self; that is, cultivating a consciously future-oriented vision as well as fostering a coherence that comes from a meaningful connection to the past. In contrast, Antonio D’Alfonso, rather than writing about the process which brought him to the same realization, delineates what an Italian Canadian identity struggles with and triumphs over once this dual nature is accepted. He expresses this duplicity as it exists within the same individual and he asserts it as such. Instead of projecting the other side of his identity out into the ‘created’ world of his writing—imagining a double into existence—he depicts a subjectivity that has assimilated the fact that it is “balancing” a two, three, or four fold faceted subjectivity.

¹⁵ This is evident in his early novel *The Italians* (1978).

“Two passports,” he explains, “Two persons in one” (*The Other Shore* 132). D’Alfonso admits that others express discomfort at the prospect of living “like a portrait by Picasso” (*The Other Shore* 132). These voices from the outside appear in the ‘poem’ “Roma”, telling the speaker that they “wouldn’t want to be in [his] shoes”. They force him to question his position and to evaluate what about it he values. The speaker wonders about “Who to speak to? What part to boast about?” and because his allegiances are multiple his selfhood is depicted as stuck in the middle—he doesn’t “know who to kiss first” (132), his Italian/Abbruzzese-Molisano side or his Canadian/Québécois side.

In answer to the probing of others, D’Alfonso concedes that he values this ambivalence in his identity. He allows it, therefore, to feed his literary production—where he examines the subtleties of his multiple identity—rather than have it hamper his ability to express himself clearly. While he rejects hybridity in “Je suis duel,” stating that “je suis une identité impure, mais pas un hybride” (21), he does explore the quintessential figure of the visible hybrid in *L’apostrophe qui me scinde* where the mythological partygoer, the Satyr, is described as “cheval, chèvre ou homme” (53). He is all three at once and yet paradoxically none of them. He portrays a being whose hybridity is not yet invisible, as the mule’s, but who has nonetheless integrated his selves into one body. D’Alfonso, however, also enumerates the Satyr’s parts and underlines the visibility of his hybridity—“Ce cheval au corps olive a des pieds de chèvre” (53). The poem seems to suggest that in spite of a definite wholeness and unity it is because of the lack of seamless multiplicity that “[l]a bête cornue boitille” (53). In his descriptions, D’Alfonso is showcasing his ambivalence toward this creature; he is both functionally hybrid and at the same time portrayed as somehow flawed. It is through this weakness, perhaps, that D’Alfonso brings human characteristics to the mythological being and brings him closer to the often difficult human experience of hybridity; in so doing D’Alfonso, while consciously valorizing multiplicity also does not deny the less positive aspects to this identity construction. He is imperfect, and more of a human in his confused self-centered interactions, than an ethereal beast.

Further bringing the hybrid identity of the satyr closer to a human twenty-first century reality, the 'poem' "Le Satyre" is set in a future that closely resembles our present. It is not the Satyr's original pastoral setting at all—surrounding him are "théorbes électriques" and not ancient lutes. The creature's daughter, "sa fille unique" (53), is among tree, water and mountain nymphs that are cascading across the landscape and "dégringolent jusqu'aux galaxies violentes" (54). The nymphs assail the landscape and as they run wild toward "leur nef râblée [dans le ciel]" (54) he notices nothing and looks to his "nombril où pullule le repentir" (54). Despite the ambivalent characterization of the Satyr, at once mythologically powerful and decadently impotent, his presence in D'Alfonso's most recent collection of poetry, as well as his appearance in the painting on the cover of D'Alfonso's prose poem *Panick Love*, underlines his re-evaluation of hybridity as both workable, complex and inevitable in this modern era of transfers and exchanges. Interestingly, di Michele in "Stone Dreams" (*Debriefing the Rose*) also explores the "satyr" (l. 1) but rather than portray him as the hybrid reality of the present and future, she sees him as a vestige of the past: "ourselves at another age" (l. 26). The "stone" creature she is observing is "fading" and "absent" (l. 24) even though his physical presence reminds her of the "Bacchus we worship" (l. 14) in order to "let consciousness/go" (l. 12-13).

For D'Alfonso, however, because the Satyr is of antiquity he imbues D'Alfonso's construction of his Italian Canadian identity with the "Antiquité" (53) of mythology. In this way, he gives this idea of a multiple, hybrid self a sense of long-standing history. With displacement and migration comes a lost sense of continuity and historical foundation and so his association of hybridity to a time before time—the realm of myth—asserts a desire to find antecedents. D'Alfonso is not alone in wanting to anchor his poetics and his construction of identity to what came before. In fact, Joseph Pivato states that minority ethnics "are people who have a past that is not recognized by the institutions of history" and that "in effect, they have no history" (*Echo* 55). Through their writing Italian Canadian authors search for this 'lost' history and continuity by representing it in different ways. In *Panick Love*, for instance, D'Alfonso imagines history to be a constant concern and explains that

beside him “at [his] side” and holding him “by the arm” are the “[s]hadows from antiquity” (7).

Francesco Loriggio points out that most minority ethnic writing “historicizes the aesthetic [and brings] . . . the literary back into the historical” (34), and vice versa, by “bringing to bear . . . the fore-knowledge arising from the world of group relations” (30). Most Italian Canadian writers—including D’Alfonso—do this thematically through a representation of the immigrant experience. With his invocation of the baroque and his use of the Satyr, however, D’Alfonso is also harking back to something that goes beyond his family’s migration. In his writing is manifest an interest in connecting the events that led him to a multiple identity—migration, immigration and experience of difference—to cultures and histories that came before either Canada or Italy. For D’Alfonso, history as a concept is also not limited to describing what has come before, as he explains in *The Other Shore*. The past, he points out, “is not a house I have left behind. It is not behind me I will find my origin. Origins are all around me like skin, inside me like the pigment of my skin” (sic. 115). It is something he has to explore within himself and, as with much of D’Alfonso’s writing, the personal exploration of one’s own identity and ethnicity provides the basis of analysis for ethnic identity construction in general.

D’Alfonso populates his writing with figures such as that of the Satyr and the chameleon as a strategy of illustrating the dual and changing identity he finds himself living with. They concretize his experiences as an Italian Canadian and render visual what is often subtly implicit. The chameleon portrays the changing nature of this identity and the Satyr underlines its hybridity. They symbolize for D’Alfonso the complexity and multi-dimensionality of Italian Canadian identity.

While the Satyr underscores D’Alfonso’s interest in examining the different parts of Italian Canadian ethnicity because his layers of identity are immediately visible, the Satyr’s ‘wholeness,’ on the other hand—as one body operating with many different parts—highlights D’Alfonso’s interest in cohesion. While the juxtaposition of diverse elements is imminent in his writing—“Truth discovered in lies? Beauty in ugliness . . . A passing into presence. Naivety unfolding its genius” (*The Other Shore*

123)—he also insists on a desire for connection. “Je veux être la colle qui adhère à tout,” he states, “[celle] qui retient les contraires ensemble. Le fil et l’aiguille entre tes doigts” (*L’apostrophe qui me scinde* 18).

Striving for solidity and a consolidation of the diverse aspects of the Italian Canadian identity so that they do not fray at the edges, he writes: “Je ne me limite pas à mon sang, ni à ma langue, ni à un drapeau. En cette fin de l’État-nation, je suis un roc qu’aucune vague n’effritera” (*Avril ou l’anti-passion* 149). Even when theorizing writing itself he concentrates on connection when enumerating the different parts of poetic expression as he sees them—that is, “le poétique, le poème et la poésie” (68). “Trois termes,” he underscores, that are “indissociables les uns des autres” (68). The accent is on synthesis and coming together of several influences rather than on the separation of different parts.

Furthermore, while describing the writer himself, D’Alfonso insists on the fact that an ‘essential’ poet is “une personne de la synthèse” (*L’apostrophe qui me scinde* 73). This poet takes on a prophetic function in the section of *L’apostrophe qui me scinde* entitled “S’écrire et décrire” (67-74). He ends his oeuvre with these thoughts on writing and highlights the poet’s role as a ‘synthesizer.’ For D’Alfonso, he is the person who breathes life into “tous les poèmes écrits ou à écrire” (74). Highlighting the importance of synthesis he describes the primary function of this primordial figure that “doit à la fois souder ce qui semble vouloir s’écrouler et laisser passer la tradition” (73). The poet “est conscient qu’il vit entre deux mondes” (73) and he brings them together in his writing, as an alchemist, in just the right proportions so that something new can be created. Amalgamation is important in so far as it fosters further understanding of what was—“[i]l ne sert à rien de traduire la confusion”—and offers a fresh interpretation—“le but . . . [est] d’offrir une autre lecture” (73-74).

Moreover, although synthesis and connection are further fostered in passages such as the following, it is not the only goal: “If only je pouvais scriverti così semplicemente, mit nada de demasiado, sans ce body dismembered par les entêtées bien ancrés dans leur terre,” (*L’apostrophe qui me scinde* 18). It is through the

representation of Italian Canadian identity as multiple that D'Alfonso surmounts the disjuncture that came about because of emigration. Languages in "Milles années" are welded together in a sentence where each word represents a different cultural lexicon and is highlighted and valorized because of its difference. The strata of this identity are magnified through the poet's use of language and it is the accumulation of layers that are shown to make the whole workable. The speaker is figuratively "dismembered" in the above passage and what is emphasized is the individual's status as someone who is composed of many different elements. His fluid representation of language mirrors the reality of Italian Canadians, especially those living in Québec, who use four languages in a single sentence. It is as if they were speaking a language created for their specific cultural reality and it is this language that D'Alfonso appropriates and uses to underscore the particularity of Italian Canadian identity. He is calling for an emancipation and valorization of multiplicity by showing that he can express himself clearly in a mixed language.

Connecting this poem's perspective to D'Alfonso's understanding of language, he explains in *The Other Shore* that to accept himself as an Italian Canadian was to accept "the odour of [his] language" (111), its difference and its multiplicity. He was "[t]oo often ashamed for being someone who st[ood] out from the crowd" and now he accepts what he is and expresses himself "in the manner best attuned to the way [his] own flesh and bones express themselves" (111)—that is, with all the languages and cultures that have fed his body. He underscores, like di Michele in her poetry the visceral energy and power of the body as a filter and point of convergence¹⁶. While synthesis is valorized in his writing, in poems such as "Babel" the multiplicity that is his reality is more importantly emphasized. There, the four languages that are used intermingle and constitute the power of the poem. As they meet and influence each other, their "agglomeration," as Pasquale Verdicchio notes, "acquires a choric function" (*Devils in Paradise* 31). This multiplicity of voices in the author's lived reality, Verdicchio asserts, "accompanies or glosses the silence that

¹⁶ This is further developed in Chapter 3.

emerges from the tension produced by [the languages'] juxtaposition" (31). Working with this silence brings about a narration based on multiplicity.

Another Italian Canadian author, Alexandre Amprimoz, also examines this possibility. He outlines the complexity of his linguistic background, how it is tied to culture, and the tension that surges out it:

My syllables are not the same without espresso:

I live in Windsor

and pose as a frenchman,

the accent is Celtic,

the 'ths' are perfect . . .

the heartbeat, Roman (a. 1979).

Amprimoz illustrates the profound effect of language on the conception of self as a cultural being. Verdicchio also points out that "[c]ultural interplay is directly related to language," and so the presence of Italian in the English writings of authors, such as D'Alfonso, di Michele and Nino Ricci is akin to Marshall McLuhan's definition of, as we have discussed, the baroque moment of change. When Mary di Michele includes an Italian word in her poetry, which she says acts as a stone dropped into the flow of English, she is seeking to unify disparate facets and experiences. As baroque art and poetry direct attention to the moment of change, so too is her inclusion of Italian—and D'Alfonso's inclusion of several languages—a way of emphasizing the cultures' meeting point—the juncture where they touch and mingle. In this way not only is identity represented as kinetic through the notion of baroque art, but language use is also seen as mobile and in flux.

The plurality of languages and perspectives in D'Alfonso's work is found in the writing of other minority ethnic authors as well. For example, in Hiromi Goto's novel—*Chorus of Mushrooms*—about a young Japanese Canadian girl's relationship with her grandmother, the languages and shifting points of view render the novel choric in nature. All languages and narrative voices are present at all times, and as the novel unfolds, the reader does not know which one to expect next. Similarly, D'Alfonso also writes of wanting the diversity of his influences to be expressed in

who he is as well as in what he writes—“Je veux que les histoires qui m’ont fait me racontent et racontent aussi les peuples qui me traversent” (*L’apostrophe qui me scinde* 9). His writing is as Goto’s novel in that they both portray an identity formulation that relies on the voices of family, the past and the present for its cohesion. Each of his influences is explicitly noted so that places, such as D’Alfonso’s hometown of Guglionese, become like protagonists in the lives of his characters.

In addition, as a chorus of ‘people’ and cultures speak to and influence the protagonists in Goto and D’Alfonso’s novels, their main characters also listen in several languages—Japanese and Italian/French/Guglionese dialect/Spanish, respectively. Underscoring the complexity of his dialect alone, D’Alfonso lists its influences as “Frentani, Latin, French, Slav, German, Turkish, Arab” (*The Other Shore* 59). His mother tongue is itself a cumulative language. For D’Alfonso and other minority ethnic authors, a cumulative identity is seen as not only a possible outlet for diverse influences but also as a means to understand their reality. They draw strength and vigour from this way of seeing the world, and as a musical chorus, they valorize the multiplicity of their utterance rather than choosing to filter it down to a single voice.

The Canadian Edition of the *Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language* defines multiple as “having many parts, sections or components” but it likewise defines this word’s usage in electrical terms, explaining that multiple also means “having several parallel conductors” (656). Although this notion of parallel conductors is meant for the world of wires and electrical currents the idea behind it is also applicable to the exploration of minority ethnic identity. As several conductors can feed a singular circuit, so too can one individual be influenced by a multitude of places that run parallel to each other. This image underscores what D’Alfonso describes in his writing. An aggregated individual, as he points out, does not need to deny his multiplicity but can express it and draw power from the varied nature of these ‘conductors.’ What D’Alfonso offers is a transformation, from

confusion and disjunction, to multiplicity and heterogeneity—a moving manifold understanding of migrant identity.

Adopting a cumulative identity is presented as a possible solution to the fragmented sense of doubleness felt by many writers. In adopting protean identities and a fluid sense of allegiance, the Italian Canadian writer illustrates his multilayered personality and multifaceted view of the self. Including images of the homeland with a present-day Canadian experience—as in *Avril ou l'anti-passion*—, as well as mingling several languages and dialects together—as in “Babel”—, offers a model of identity that alleviates some of the tensions associated with an attachment to the past. It does this because it provides an open space for a multitude of layers to co-exist in a cohesive whole, in one person, all at the same time. To adopt a cumulative identity is to take on an inclusive, rather than exclusive, point of view with respect to the relationship between the ‘new’ and the ‘old;’ it is an acknowledgement of the struggle and a move beyond it. In his article “Immigrant Culture: The Identity of the Voiceless People,” Marco Micone expresses the sentiment that to mature meant for him to come to terms with this exile and accept all the parts of his identity—preferring neither one nor the other. He writes:

As a child, I thought the rest of the world was like my village. As an adolescent—and an immigrant, not by my own choice—I wanted Montreal to be like my village. Now I am an adult, and both the city and the village are a part of me. (151)

How then does this understanding of oneself—as being two things at once and being in two places at once—translate into everyday cultural expression? Exploring the complexity of this reality and its layered nature, D’Alfonso explains in *L’apostrophe qui me scinde* that he is neither “de la tradition britannique” nor of the “[tradition] canadien[ne]” (10). He states that he is “un écrivain italice de l’Amérique du Nord” (10) and in so doing adopts a cumulative and fluid notion of his identity. Described as someone who struggles with his multiplicity, an Italic writer

also accepts it as part of himself.¹⁷ He is an Italian outside Italy who lives Italian culture in a North American space and, therefore, lives a “pluricultural ethos” (*In Italics* 143).

Further analyzing the possibilities afforded Italian Canadians, D’Alfonso has his characters live out in his novel what he theorizes in *In Italics* about cumulative and multiple identity formulation. Fabrizio, the protagonist of *Avril ou l’anti-passion*, grapples with his identity and during the writing, production and direction of the film “Antigone” comes across the difficult task of deciding how to represent on screen characters that are “ni d’origine anglaise, ni d’origine française” (157). He asks himself who he is, “Moi, Québécois, dois-je me dire Italien? Moi, Italien, dois-je me dire Québécois?” (157-158). During this process he realizes his identity is the result of an accumulation of allegiances, and that since he is neither fully Italian nor fully Québécois but can identify with the two, he is both. Adopting Montreal as the place that allows this multiplicity to exist in him, he explains that “[cette ville] me permet d’être trois personnes en un seule” (180). “Enfant tripartite,” he writes “j’aligne mes trois visions différentes sur la même ville” and in the same person (180).

Ultimately the simultaneous use of several languages, as in *Babel*, and the repetition of passages in two languages in a single poem as in “Milles années”, symbolize the multifarious nature of the Italian Canadian or Italic experience. Without forgetting the difficulties associated with this reality—“I can speak and write in three languages but badly. I need a dictionary for all three of them” (*Enigmatico* NFB film)—D’Alfonso chooses to represent it with pride and wants to include it among the other possible modes of identity construction that Canada offers—French Canadian, Quebecois, Native, English Canadian, Canadian, East Coaster, West Coaster, Newfoundlander etc.

¹⁷ In *In Italics*, Antonio D’Alfonso describes the *Italic* experience as a notion that includes all peoples of Italian heritage, be it inside or outside Italy. The Italic writer as someone who participates in this community by writing about this unique view of the world that is affected by the Italian language and civilization.

Essentially, D'Alfonso's writing offers modes of identity construction that concentrate on the establishment of movement and fluidity. While he acknowledges the suffering and expresses what Pierre Nepveu calls the state of bathing "infiniment dans son mal du pays" (105), Antonio D'Alfonso also calls upon Guy Scarpetta and Omar Calabrese to consider the notion of the baroque as a means to describe "contemporary realities" (*The Other Shore* 40). The essence of life and identity for D'Alfonso is "[n]ever being at a standstill" (40) and as he focuses on the kinetic nature of an identity with dual allegiances and a multitude of cultural and linguistic influences, he finds a useful strategy of identity conception in the idea of cumulative and fluid identity.

Chapter 2

A Transcultural Journey: the Fluidity of Italian Canadian Identity in the Writing of Fulvio Caccia

Fulvio Caccia, like Antonio D'Alfonso, concentrates on the kinetic nature of identity and re-thinks Italian Canadian identity by writing about the experience of this cultural group as a minority ethnic community in Canada. In form as well as in content Caccia concentrates on the multifarious and manifold reality of living in an undefined cultural and social space. Caccia focuses on creating a world in his creative writing that steeps the reader in the mind-set of an individual working through what Pasquale Verdicchio in *Devils in Paradise* calls “[an] [i]nvoluntary estrangement from one’s place of [origin that is] . . . akin to existence under colonial circumstances [and that engenders] . . . the deferral of cultural enunciation for the émigré” (7). In his work Caccia redresses this deferral and unpacks Italian Canadian identity construction by complexifying facile homogeneous models of representation. Lamberto Tassinari, in an interview with Caccia published in *Sous le signe du Phénix*, describes immigration as “une expérience traumatisante et difficile[,]” but he goes on to point out that “sa réalité donne l’opportunité à l’immigrant de se voir comme autre [et] . . . [c]ette situation de faiblesse peut être [par la suite] retournée en *force*; condition préalable à toute inventivité” (emphasis mine 305). Adding another dimension to D’Alfonso’s conception of a fluid multiple identity construction, Caccia turns the reality described by Tassinari into an advantage by depicting the fluid movement of a *transcultural* state. Through the adoption of the notion of ‘transculturalism’ Caccia, as D’Alfonso, underscores the fluid nature of Italian Canadian immigrant identity. His emphasis on a transcultural condition, however, is not only a concentration on fluidity but an emphasis on an always-deferred destination. The Italian Canadian identity he describes is one that adopts a present based view of Italian Canadian culture and it also recognizes its status as an

incarnation of this minority ethnic identity that will eventually change. Caccia's assessment and depiction of Italian Canadian identity is self-reflexive and recognisant of the fact that it is only valid for the time when it was written because it also underscores the moving and fluid character of this peripheral identity construction.

In "The Road Between" Antonio D'Alfonso emphasizes their differing views despite a close collaboration. He explains that during their work together the difference in their focus was evident: "Fulvio is engrossed with the concept of transculturalism, whereas I want to bridge the individual writer's stylistic obsessions and see if there exists nonetheless an unexpressed common denominator among them all" (38 *In Italics*). Both envision a spiraling, moving, Italian Canadian reality, but Caccia focuses on rendering "la traversée d'une seule culture en même temps que son dépassement" (Tassinari 299). He envisions in his work Italian Canadian identity without constant and specific reference to its emigrant history. His writing breaks down the notion of a static immigrant state by representing Italian Canadian culture as an evolving one that need not refer constantly and nostalgically back to a country of origin. Caccia's oeuvre shows that this minority ethnic identity can be defined by its movement and by its concentration on the journey.

My intention here is to examine the particular elements used to delineate Italian Canadian identity which Caccia's oeuvre has in common with that of Antonio D'Alfonso. Elements such as the baroque as an idea applicable to minority ethnic writing, vertigo and the desire to be 'in between' and on 'the edge,' as well as the representation of multiplicity are evident. Most importantly, however, I will explore the interests unique to Caccia's work and how the consideration of these particular factors further transform what is understood as Italian Canadian. Some points that I will focus on are: the importance of place and geographical features of the landscape; the recurring motif of the 'journey;' and his application of the theory of transculture.

Dominique Schnapper, quoted by Françoise Lionnet in *Postcolonial Representations*, explains cultural interplay and cultural identity in a way that best reflects Fulvio Caccia's representation of Italian Canadian identity. She states that

all culture, . . . far from being a given, is the result of continual negotiation through which, like a horizon, an identity is affirmed

which can only be defined as an ongoing creation. . . . Through these constant negotiations . . . culture forms a system (in the loose sense of the term); it constitutes a construction or dynamic which must be analyzed in terms of cultural reinterpretations (78-79).¹⁸

Like Schnapper, Caccia concentrates on the travails of a cultural identity as it is being formed. His writing highlights a minority culture's endeavour to establish its own defined social space by re-arranging and re-interpreting customs, language and interpersonal interactions, among other things. He introduces the reader to the network of interpretations and negotiations that constitute his characters' everyday lives and, in turn, re-creates and elucidates the socio-cultural and personal struggles of a minority ethnic identity *en devenir*.

Caccia and D'Alfonso—long-time collaborators who in 1983 edited *Quêtes*, a collection of ["t]extes d'auteurs italo-québécois"—both adopt the concepts of the baroque and neo-baroque to outline the reality that they wish to depict¹⁹. Like D'Alfonso, Caccia invokes the term directly throughout his writing and especially in his short stories and critical work. In "1987," one of eleven short stories published as a collection entitled *Golden Eighties*, one of Caccia's characters is described as having a "baroque" personality (93) and in "1979" a situation is described as "évoquant les lois baroques de l'astrophysique" (18). He also often invokes the baroque spiral and circle, and writes, in "1979" about "[I]'itinéraire" that "prenait la forme d'une curieuse spirale" (16). In addition, he states in "1986" that the protagonist felt as if he were in the "centre d'une spirale de plumes" (85) as he was standing on a rooftop surrounded by pigeons. In *Aknos*, furthermore, he describes the

¹⁸ Lionnet quotes from Schnapper's article "Modernité et acculturations" published in *Communications* 43 (1986), p. 151.

¹⁹ As I have already noted in the previous chapter, when I use the terms 'baroque' and 'neo-baroque,' I intend the general characteristics of the sixteenth and seventeenth century style of visual art and its application to literature. I do not wish to enter into the debate concerning these terms and intend only to underscore that those very 'debates' serve the Italian Canadian writers' use since, as I have mentioned, they are contested terminologies that give these authors room in which to place themselves. Furthermore, I will be using the terms 'baroque' and 'neo-baroque' almost interchangeably since the authors themselves do not make a clear distinction either. See chapter 1 for a more complete explication of D'Alfonso's interest in the concept of the baroque and how it applies to Italian Canadian identity.

“spirales affolantes et muettes” that the cormorants were tracing in the sky (p.49).²⁰ Along with the spiral, the theme of circularity also becomes somewhat of a leitmotif throughout his writing and is most evident in *Golden Eighties*. In this collection, the same names are used for different characters, where journeys end at their beginning, where mystery characters appear to open and close a story and where the past becomes the present. Moreover, the organization of the sections of his most recent collection of poetry *Lilas* is also somewhat circular: “Lilas”, “Métro”, “Isole”, “Métro”, “Lila”. Although the ‘circle’ itself is imperfect—with the difference in the first and last sections’ titles—the evident circularity underscores Caccia’s use of this element, also associated with the baroque, to underscore the cyclical nature of life and the human desire—and especially immigrant longing—to return. The circle and the return, however, are shown to be flawed and never perfectly accomplishable. Caccia’s desire to showcase the human and thereby inherently imperfect nature of reality is demonstrated, in this case, through his interpretation of the circle. The baroque for Caccia, as well as D’Alfonso, serves as a font of inspiration and a point of reference for the imagery he employs throughout his writing.

The prolific use in his stories of the baroque elements described above has a ‘dizzying’ effect on the reader and provides a written landscape that mirrors the multiplicity and movement inherent in baroque visual art. Importantly for my purposes here, moreover, it also reflects the many-sided nature of first, second and third generation immigrant self-conception—an idea of selfhood that must balance between several worlds without a safety net. While the appellation of baroque itself serves to conjure up a certain style—and therefore the elements that characterize it—it also serves to organize these elements under one heading, thus proving that a single, fairly stable ‘category,’ can have fluidity and movement as its core characteristic and at its very center. Associating Italian Canadian identity with it,

²⁰ When referring to *Aknos*, the collection of four books of Caccia’s poetry—two previously published and two unpublished—I will be referring to the newly published sections entitled “Aknos” and “Annapurna.” When referring to *Scirocco* and *Irpinia* I will quote from the original publications as separate volumes and not their reproduction in *Aknos*. Furthermore, to avoid interrupting the flow of the text I will only include page numbers when quoting from *Aknos* and I will not include the title of the section in which the quote is found.

therefore, underlines the possibility for this identity construction to also benefit from instability and movement without losing a sense of continuity and structure.

What is most interesting in Caccia's writing is his unique deployment of baroque characteristics. The abstraction that takes place in his work shows the baroque to be a starting point or structural aid that happens to showcase the same elements that appear in Italian Canadian selfhood as understood and depicted by Caccia. In his writing he shows these components in different lights, twisting and turning them and using them in various ways to prove a point and highlight a particular aspect of this minority group's reality. For example, in "1979" he copiously uses the motif of the collage or pastiche in the meshing together of several moments in time, newspaper clippings and cities around the world. This, along with the turns and twists of the narration, make this short story into a spiraling baroque universe where everything is in movement and the protagonist must wrestle with a reality in which he cannot take anything for granted. Mirroring the uprooting felt by immigrants when arriving in a place with different customs, ways of life and rhythms, in this universe all must be re-examined and questioned.

Contrary to D'Alfonso, who explicitly thematizes the baroque and his conception of it, Caccia prefers to emphasize the characteristics of the baroque themselves, as he sees them, and use these characteristics—repetition, luscious description, details, spirals, circles etc.—to describe Italian Canadian identity. He places his characters/speakers squarely in a baroque universe with spirals and twists and repetitive details that overwhelm the mind and body. He showcases for the reader an Italian Canadian identity, portrayed as a minority ethnic identity, by creating a universe that through its baroque elements brings out the fluid and ever-changing quality of Italian Canadian selfhood.

His concentration on the people of the margins mirrors D'Alfonso's concern with the marginalized as well as Pasquale Verdicchio's interest in "minor" culture—a term "borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari's essay *Kafka*" (*Devils in Paradise* 11). Like D'Alfonso, Caccia valorizes the peripheral position that he too occupies as an Italian Canadian who writes in French. In a section entitled "Métro," in *Lilas*, he

concentrates not on the travelers rushing to and from work, but instead describes the marginal characters of the Parisian subway system like the panhandlers and les “ombres enturbannées/sans visage, sans parole, sans espoirs . . . [n]omades” (l. 8-11, p. 57)²¹—he gives voice to the voiceless and valorizes their position. Caccia highlights, therefore, the creative and revolutionary potential of minority groups within society by underscoring their unique perspective and particular vantage point which, in turn, allows them to see the norm through different, and potentially ‘corrective’, eyes. Likewise, Tassinari points out in *Sous le signe du Phénix*, that those who are not in the center provide “les conditions optimales pour une réinterprétation inédite de la culture au moment où nous traversons une crise des sociétés monolithiques” (298-299). He sees, as does Caccia, “un ressort utopique” in the idea of transculture and states that it can bring about a fundamental questioning of “la base traditionnelle de la société . . . [parce que] [d]ans le projet transculturel,” he points out, “il y a cette charge subversive qui est le ferment de toute transformation” (304).²²

The short story “1988” illustrates Caccia’s desire to depict the plight of the marginalized in all its forms. It is a story reminiscent of the biblical David and Goliath and is a parable-like tale about the small being harassed and ignored by the big, and then, being forced to fight back. In it, the protagonist is assailed by an alarm going off in his neighbourhood which is preventing him from sleeping—a “sirène” which no one else *seems* to hear: “ils ne pouvaient pas ne pas l’entendre,” states the narrator incredulously (127 emphasis his). As a symbol of a cultural malaise felt by some but not all—“l’apathie du voisinage” (126-127)—, the deafening sound of the alarm—which no one will help him with—arrests his life—along with a plethora of other factors of which the sound is a reminder—and prevents him from moving

²¹ As Caccia rarely entitles his poems, when quoting from a poem, I will refer mostly to pages from the collection in which the poem appears and occasionally to line numbers.

²² I will explore the notion of transculture more fully below.

forward. The incessant nature of the intrusion moves him to find its source on his own since the authorities are of no use.

He finally manages to find the ‘black box’ that is causing the problem—hidden in an enormous gas station neon sign²³—and he hits it with a pipe “encore et encore” (129) until it stops. The source is unnamed; it is a “boîte métallique noire de trente centimètres de longueur” (128). It can be interpreted in several ways; it could be society’s invisible center finally made visible, it could also represent the varied societal forces that marginalize those that are different while those in the centre are oblivious to its effects. The fact that it remains unspecified in the story allows the reader to interpret this “boîte” for herself and underlines Caccia’s desire to represent fluidity and openness in his work.

For the protagonist, Jonathan, however, the black box personifies the incessant sound which is a reminder of the inner calm he cannot seem to find in his life—with his work, his finances, his wife, his infant daughter. His fervour in destroying the ‘source’ of his unhappiness stems from the fact that with the short reprieve he enjoyed, just before the blaring started its nightly ritual once again, came the dream that “l’époque ancienne, avant qu’il ne vienne dans ce pays, allait resurgir” (128). As with Nino Ricci’s protagonist in *Where She has Gone*, what he is longing for is the innocence he had before the rupture of emigration.

In attempting to silence the alarm he is also trying to recover the peace that he longs for—spiritual, cultural and auditory peace. The reader sympathizes with this young family man who, although troubled, is after some serenity and finds it only by risking and losing his life to end a harassing “sirène.”²⁴ Unlike Goliath, his aggressor

²³ The disdain for the noise extends to the gas station that is described as a symbol of faceless capitalist power:

“C’était un bâtiment aux lignes arrondies comme on en construisait à la chaîne au cours des années 50. Les murs conservaient encore leur revêtement d’émail blanc . . . [et a]u-dessus, flambaient les néons de la firme multinationale symbolisée par le logo presque triangulaire des pompes” (126).

²⁴ Although at the end of the story the narrator/protagonist does not explicitly die, we can assume that this is his fate since he is bleeding profusely from a gunshot wound inflicted by the police at the scene of his ‘crime.’

was not simply the one ‘box of noise’ because, in the universe Caccia sets up, the adversaries are multiple and multifaceted as well. In vanquishing it Jonathan nevertheless had to contend with the authorities, who were not following his rules of battle and who ultimately won out, and he still also had to struggle with himself. Caccia seems to suggest that his only way out would have been to search inside himself for the peace he desired or follow society’s rules complacently. The ‘noise’ symbolizes the noise inside his mind and while Jonathan did not take the latter option outlined by Caccia, neither was the former taken and his struggle inevitably ended with the end of his life.

The multiplicity that Caccia depicts in stories like this one is unlike D’Alfonso’s in that it pertains not solely to one person, but more often than not, permeates the landscape, the antagonists, the secondary characters and the intrigue. In “1984” the “conversation se déroule en plusieurs langues” (59) and the story is described as “[un] casse-tête” (80). Moreover, in *Lilas*, the Sunday marketplace is a ritual that is “[une] fête universelle/des quatres saisons retrouvées: raisins, pommes, mandarins, melon” (1.1-9, p. 69). In addition, this multiplicity is seen as something positive and is encouraged since the narrator notices with pleasure that the conversation in “1984” “se déroul[e] . . . sans qu’aucun s’en trouvât gêné” (59) and the marketplace is described as a “corne d’abondance” (69).

In his collection of poetry *Aknos*, Caccia intermingles his search for the understanding of multiplicity with his depiction of the ‘journey.’ It is a journey whose outcome is the examination of a minority ethnic identity based on multiplicity. His tale is of Aknos, a Homeric-like hero, whose adventures in the delta, dunes and with the storms brings him to better understand himself and what he was searching for. His revelations about journeying through himself and toward something unknown bring the reader to better grasp what the search for an evolving Italian Canadian self-hood entails. In his interpretation of travel and discovery of unknown places, Caccia is re-inscribing the idea of the ‘journey’ with positive, even redeeming qualities in the context of a community that associated travel with dire necessity, hardship and immigration. Despite the difficulty highlighted at the final stages of Aknos’ quest

where he is “muet dans ce désordre d’images disloquées” (66)²⁵ he nonetheless is described as having his luck located at the core of his “désarroi” (45). Accordingly, at the completion of the second leg of his journey the “bourrasque” tells Aknos that his confusion “est [s]a fortune” (45) and at the end of the poem—after having gone through the trails of coming to terms with his landscape—he accepts his situation and embraces it and the land he was working with and against: “Il étroit le continent” (82). With this understanding of hardship being something that can become positive for the individual if she chooses to embrace its possibilities, Caccia is further reiterating his conception of the ‘journey’ as a model for the understanding of one’s life. It is a way of seeing the living of a life where problems become adventures, obstacles become new vistas to explore, and movement and mobility are encouraged because situations change at a rapid pace. Rather than concentrate on searching for some stability amid the several influences on his identity, Caccia depicts a world where stability is not possible and where this very movement is embraced as life giving and nourishing even though it is at times trying and requires energy to maintain. Each aspect of Aknos’ journey, then, is a characteristic of the identity that Caccia is describing. Through Aknos Caccia is reformulating the notion of the journey in the depiction of Italian Canadian identity. The trans-Atlantic voyage is no longer solely a rupture, nor is it the only defining moment in one’s personal or family history. It is, instead, a part of a life long ‘journey’ that contains several such moments of extreme material and emotional change. Unlike other representations of Italian Canadian identity that begin with the premise that there are two static selfhoods separated by the journey of emigration, Caccia starts with the assumption that life is a ‘voyage’ and imbues his narrative, as well as his conception of this identity, with the positive nature of fluidity and change—both of which are inherent in travel.

Caccia valorizes the inner journey undertaken by his hero Aknos—who finds himself on a circular and baroque-like journey when he realizes that he is back at

²⁵ This quote is found in the final section of *Aknos* entitled “Poème de la patience.”

“l’origine du voyage” (56) halfway through his adventure. While he traverses the geography of the landscape he travels across, he maps his own inner world. The inner and outer journeys are portrayed as parallel and often overlapping. The reader is never quite sure whether the landscape is real or in Aknos’ imagination; especially, since this long poem is broken up several times by instances of twentieth century reality and situations: “La neige à Montréal est un château/‘Interdit de stationner’ indique la pancarte” (13). The land’s hills, valleys and waterways provide a complex panorama that ultimately are both backdrop and instigator for Aknos’ movement through himself. Not only are movement and fluidity depicted as part of life, and the search for them valorized as the work of a hero, they are also the root to understanding the self. The land brings him closer to who he is and is described as part of him; in fact, it traverses him. From the outset of his exploration his close relationship to the land seems almost inevitable:

Son nom possède la dureté du vent
 dans la pierre Son cri malgré l’entaille
 est antérieur au chant
 Le voilà debout dans la sécheresse
 son nom aboie Aknos
 Le ciel est Aknos
 Le sable chante son nom
 Même les eaux profèrent l’injonction
 Le delta est nu traversé de murmures (21).

This visceral attachment to the land, and reciprocal almost symbiotic relationship with it, is also present in Italian peasant culture from which the majority of Italian Canadians are descended. Reflecting this reality, Caccia in this long epic-like poem concentrates on the significance of the landscape—the one left behind and the one found—in the understanding and formation of Italian Canadian identity.²⁶ Moreover, Caccia explains in the introduction to *Sous le signe du Phénix*, that “le

²⁶ The description of southern Italian peasant culture was inspired by Nicola Martino, *Albino Pierro*. (Montreal: Diss. McGill University, 1996) 57-76.

territoire est le fondement de l'ethnicité. C'est par lui et à travers lui que l'ethnicité puise sa raison d'être, son appartenance, son axe de gravité, mais également sa terrible [possible] inertie" (11).²⁷ In *Aknos* he gives the land its due importance but he also transforms its meaning for ethnicity, and minority-ethnic ethnicity alike, by connecting it not to stagnation but to movement. As the ethnic identity in question is portrayed as being in constant movement, the land from which it gets its inspiration is also active. In this way, Caccia connects this identity construction to the landscape, which he depicts by describing its elements—all of which are alive with possibilities, independent and not immobile with the weight of a defined scenery.

As the other natural elements, the "bourrasque" appears occasionally throughout the poem and acts as a force to both guide and spur this 'Ulysses' on. Although it is a constant presence, it only speaks to him directly at the end of the second section where the voice of the 'storm' mirrors the voices of the Old Testament God and Greek gods, offering advice from the heavens. The authority of the voice, and the advice it offers, is amplified with the nature of its appearance but the words could have equally come from Aknos himself. With Aknos' realization in the end, Caccia suggests that the protagonist knew the truth about his journey all along and that the voice of the storm might well have been his inner voice. This possibility is further underlined when "[l]a force d'Aknos" is described as "musique ample comme la chaussure de Dieu" (22). In other words, like both D'Alfonso and Mary di Michele, as I will discuss in the next chapter, Caccia questions the supremacy of the institutional God and privileges personal awareness over the unconscious following of dogmas. By comparing Aknos' strength to that of "Dieu" and by using the traditional 'form' taken by the classical Judeo-Christian God to vehicle Aknos' own unconscious understanding, Caccia questions the transcendent nature of institutional power over personal understanding. He underscores the

²⁷ Like D'Alfonso, Caccia is concerned with stagnation. He concentrates on movement and on attaching this quality to those things that normally would not be attributed with this characteristic—such as the land which although geologically unstable is considered somewhat immobile.

importance of inner development by underlining Aknos' journey within and, like D'Alfonso, highlights the importance of the unconscious and calls for the bringing to the fore of what is understood viscerally.

Such faith in personal strength and development, as shown in Caccia's depiction of Aknos, D'Alfonso's insistence on "conscious identity" (*In Italics* 41) and di Michele's criticisms of oppressive constructs (such as patriarchy), show the Italian Canadian desire to oppose two things. Firstly, in preferring the personal over the institutional they are showcasing their mistrust for centuries-old social constructions left behind in Italy and, secondly, they are underscoring their suspicion of the newer but re-created versions of the same ways of life in the Italian Canadian community. All three authors, as I will further establish in the following chapter, seize the opportunity to go beyond what is established, preferring to start anew with themselves—the personal—and then, subsequently, change what is understood as Italian Canadian in Canada. They do so by distancing their conception of it from both Italian and Canadian institutions that have left them on the margins of both cultures.

Caccia specifically describes the process of self-discovery of "fils et filles d'immigrants" by comparing their inner travails to the self-understanding of "le jeune québécois" (Introd. *Sous le signe du Phénix* 14). While the latter "est plongé dès son enfance, dans sa culture et sa langue" and believes in it with assurance "sans qu'il y ait hiatus, brisures ou interruption" (14), the former "procède un peu par le retournement sur soi" (14). This journey into the self, as I have mentioned, is illustrated in *Aknos*. As a means of marking Aknos' expedition as a personal endeavour toward self-discovery, the landscape's elements act on his adventure and become as important in the narrative as the hero himself. Personified in a manner similar to that of the "bourrasque," each geological element provides Aknos with an opportunity to probe a particular part of himself.

The most important geological formation in the poem is the delta which recurs often and of which the other elements—sand and water—are a part. From the very beginning the delta is the central force behind Aknos's journey; he is even described as being the delta itself for he has the scars to prove that he too is at a

crossroads: “Aknos est le delta Il en a les stigmates” (67). The richness of his adventure is further enhanced because of its symbolism. The fertile soil of a real-life delta provides life and sustenance for those around it, and it also exemplifies the significant nature of moments of transition in geography and in life. Recalling the cradle of civilization’s dependence on it, Caccia’s use of the delta as image and symbol harks back to the Egyptians and also echoes into the future because he applies it to the identity constructions of a minority ethnic community in transformation. The delta’s import as a symbol in Caccia’s poem can be found on many levels, one of which is the fact that it is named for the Greek letter delta because of its often triangular shape.²⁸ It is a shape that mirrors the triangulation of the three cultures that Caccia, as an Italian Canadian in Quebec, must contend with. With the use of this image, Caccia seems to suggest that as the delta—and the other elements of erosion that comprise it such as wind, water and sand—transforms the land by forming some of the most beautifully impressive geographical formations, so too do identities that transform themselves and in turn transform what is around them become all the more interesting and innovative. It is in that transformation, potentially seen as negative and eroding, that Caccia recognizes both the difficulty, but also, more importantly, the enriching results brought about by a mingling of substances and cultures. His interest in placing his protagonist at the center of the point of transformation—like D’Alfonso—leads the reader to acknowledge the (never-ending) process of change and renewal and not only the end result.

Aknos represents the minority ethnic individual standing amid the forces of social and individual change. He explores the nooks and crannies of the delta—a symbol of the point of change and convergence—in order to better understand its power and in turn himself. Furthermore, in a *Wizard of Oz*-like moment at the end of the account, Aknos realizes that as he was striving to understand the delta in order that he could be free of its confusing waters, he had been free all along. The power to be released from the confusion was inside him. The somewhat utopian outcome of

²⁸ “Delta,” *The World Book Encyclopedia*, 1991 edition.

his long poem underlines Caccia's faith in personal capability and the misgivings he expresses about potentially homogenizing social structures.

The last lines of the poem belong to Aknos, as he reminds himself of "la prophétie de la pierre gravée" (81) and relates it in a tone very similar to that of "la bourrasque." He remembers the words:

‘Aknos fils d’Aknos ne crains plus
la bourrasque des songes
le hululement du vent
.....
Tu peux aller Tu es libre Tu as toujours été libre
Ce continent est le tien (81).

The story comes full circle and the reader along with Aknos realizes that the freedom he was searching for was not somewhere else but within the multiplicity of the delta itself. Embracing the transformation and the process, with its "labyrinthe[s]" (14) and the "soeurs jumelles" of "la peur [et] l’anxiété" (22) hidden in its folds and "déboîtées" (22) by Aknos' exploration, Caccia underscores the importance of acceptance. He figures this acceptance as resulting from an understanding through 'conscious identity construction.'²⁹

As Aknos' journey is emblematic of a journey through the self and especially through the psyche, it is also the expression of a desire to connect with and explore beyond the 'surface' and look at the 'depths' and the history of an identity's influences: "ce n'est pas la surface qui t'importe/mais l'autre côté" (50). He searches "dans les ruines" and asks: "[e]st-ce à cela que conduit le secret?" (42). As in "1988," what he is searching for is a something that is unknown to all. While in "1988" it was located in a black box, in *Aknos* Caccia's protagonist is searching for "le rivage" (42). He is pursuing the 'other side' and consequently, is hunting for what it symbolizes. It represents, among other things, the mythical 'other' place that Italy now represents. It is the unattainable 'mythical' place which will bring him back to

²⁹ This is an idea equally explored and theorized by D'Alfonso in his collection of essays *In Italics* where he writes about conscious ethnic identity.

the innocence of a time when questioning his identity was not an incessant necessity. On the other hand, however, not only is the 'other shore' reminiscent of the 'mythical' homeland left behind—an idea also explored in D'Alfonso's *The Other Shore*—but it is also a reference to a possible end of the journey. The search for "l'autre côté" (*Agnos* 50) is the desire to bring the excursion to a conclusion. Agnos is exploring a landscape as a symbol of the Italian Canadian struggle and journey to form an identity. His concentration on the other shore and his realization that he cannot attain it—neither the land left behind, nor the conclusion to his journey through himself—inevitably places an emphasis on the journey itself. The *movement* is what Caccia emphasizes even though the protagonist of "Agnos," and the speaker of a poem in *Lilas*, would like to reach "l'autre rive" (*Lilas* 36). It is the "labyrinth" of "[l]a nature humaine" (*Golden Eighties* 131) that is valorized and the investigation into the psyche that is emphasized. The identification of a possible destination, as well as the realization that the journey is just as important, underlines further Caccia's interest in the notion of transculture which privileges both the idea of an identity in *transit* and its movement *toward* another possible incarnation of an identity.

Themes of self-development and identity formation are also elaborated in other Italian Canadian writing, such as in Marco Micone's second published play *Addolorata*. The emphasis in his work, however, is less on inner struggle and more on the factors at work that bring this struggle about. Micone stresses the concrete situations that *Addolorata* must deal with; for example, school and home (scene 9), the endless line-ups of hypocritical women at the funeral home (scene 10). Continually assailed by other people's expectations, she tries to be true to her own desires and ambitions. Micone describes the pressures that invade his protagonist by having her recount her struggles with antiquated obligations of femininity in a triangulated cultural space. Fulvio Caccia, on the contrary, does not necessarily take the route of a realistic recounting. Rather, he places the reader in a narrative maze that mirrors the labyrinthine route toward self-comprehension taken by the minority

ethnic identity he explores. His writing, in other words, mimics what is going on inside the mind of the Italian Canadian subject he is depicting. While other Italian Canadian writing is more concerned with the concrete ‘here’ and ‘there’ and the dynamics at work in a community trying to find its place in-between two cultural realities, Caccia is more interested in the possibilities of that in-between space. He bathes his reader in that “labyrinthe” (*Golden Eighties* 131) and explores that “entre sol” (*Lilas* 66) in order to understand the identity that is formed within it. Preferring to portray the movement of the protagonists within the web of their psyche rather than the entanglements themselves, Caccia elucidates the inner intricacies involved in living between several cultures and having the reader *feel* that confusion and motion. While it is necessary to explicitly depict the factors that influence subjects like Addolorata—family, village, home country, new country, *paesani*, school, friends, community, city, history—it is also important in writing such as Caccia’s to step beyond the explicit portrayal of such factors and explore the psychic effects on an individual living with them.

It is this exploratory spirit of the space between Italian-ness and Canadian-ness that emphasizes in Caccia’s writing the idea of the Italian Canadian identity as an identity in motion. Connecting this immigrant identity’s mobility of spirit to modernity, Caccia’s character François, describes in “1987” (*Golden Eighties*) the ‘inner’ mobility of contemporary humanity which differentiates itself from the strictly physical movement of immigration that characterized, and still characterizes, much of this century. Caccia, through his character, portrays a move toward inner movement once the outer activity is completed—in, for example, second and third generation Canadians. Immobility is described in “1987” as:

un nouvel attribut de l’homme moderne en apparence si voyageur. Cette fin de siècle fortement imprégnée de technologie et informatisée réactualiserait *l’Odyssée* d’Homère en l’intériorisant. Le moderne Ulysse verrait se déployer autour de lui un nouveau monde d’images à topograhier (95).

The reading of Fulvio Caccia’s poetry and short stories does, indeed, mimic a Homeric odyssey with its twists and turns. While Caccia concentrates on the

individual interior journey, it is important to point out that he also roots it in an *actual* physical displacement. This uprooting colours the depiction of the New World and the Italian Canadian identity he writes about. In other words, while Caccia creates a world of images that destabilize the reader and that need to be deciphered, he also still includes physical movement and the struggle of leaving a familiar place for a new one. This is most evident in “1989” where a young Italian Canadian girl tries to understand her family’s history after her family calls upon the aid of a psychologist because she refused to eat spaghetti. In the identities depicted by Caccia there is at once a new physical landscape and a new ‘inner’ world because the reality is such that immigrants must reconcile their new surroundings to their own self-understanding.

This doubled movement is one that Caccia sustains throughout his writing. He brings to his work the myriad of emotions and impressions felt by a displaced subject living on the periphery of a new society. Unlike Filippo Salvatore who often concentrates on the effects of dislocation in his collection of poetry *Tufo e gramigna*³⁰, Caccia, rather than lament the voyage of immigration that brought this situation about, balances the plethora of re-negotiations by including the image of ‘emptiness.’

He makes instability a part of Italian Canadian identity construction whereas for other writers the uncertainty of living between two, and sometimes three cultures, is not only negative but crippling—such as in Frank Paci’s *Black Madonna*. In “1982,” Caccia’s protagonist Jonathan “continua de monter” because “[l]idée d’être ainsi suspendu dans le vide ne lui déplaisait pas. Il aimait cette sensation de danger, d’inattendu” (48). By depicting liminality, Caccia as well as D’Alfonso as I have previously shown, are seeking what is familiar to them as individuals living in an uncertain cultural space. What is intriguing is the acceptance and even pleasure with which they consider this experience because it shows this uncertainty as, not only a reality, but as a desired state of heightened awareness. As a “[f]unambule” (*Lilas* 56)

³⁰ This collection of poetry was translated into *Suns of Darkness* (1980).

living with the “abîme” (56), the applause is not always forthcoming, especially in performances of a private and interiorized nature such as those depicted by Caccia, but the reason for the act is centered around the sensation of being everywhere and seeing everything at once. Neither belonging to one culture nor to another, the Italian Canadian identity that Caccia is considering is one that thrives on the possibilities of feeling the “vide” (*Scirocco* 16). Entitling the first section of *Scirocco* “Le Voyage Blanc” he further highlights the blankness, the nothingness and the emptiness which is desired precisely because of its virgin whiteness. In contrast to the bustling multiplicity of the Italian Canadian identity he illustrates, this ‘whiteness’ and the emptiness his characters seek out serve to balance the constant motion he underscores throughout. Indeed, the coveted ‘other shore’ is present only across the abyss and the movement to reach it is continuous and never-ending.

The sensation of vertigo depicted throughout *Golden Eighties* is further emblematic of the “kaleidoscope”-like feeling that comes with living in an equivocal cultural space and underlines the maze-like universe Caccia delineates throughout his poetry and prose. Ambivalence in the face of this balancing act, however, is ever present. In “1982” the vertigo that continually comes back to unbalance Jonathan almost causes him to fall off a steep ledge while in search of his companion. This prompts a desire to change his lifestyle but also conversely forces him to realize that it is in part because of this feeling of “vertige” (45) that he does what he does: “Il se demandait parfois pourquoi il la suivait de la sorte. C’était peut-être à cause du vertige qu’elle suscitait en lui” (40). Simultaneously hindering and pushing him along, the sensation of vertigo—or feeling on the edge and in mid-air—plays an important role Caccia’s characters.

Interestingly, in order to further explain this attraction for an undefined space, Caccia explores the notion of *italianità* which, on the contrary, seeks to *define* what constitutes Italian culture and that tries to unite under one heading all individuals that have Italian culture in their background.³¹ In the introduction to *Sous le signe du*

³¹ *Italianità* can be roughly defined as a category that includes Italian culture and people beyond and within Italian political borders. It is considered to be a term that designates the ‘spirit’ of Italian culture.

Phénix, he explains that Italian Canadian identity is a part of “l’italianité” (15) and that while it attempts to unite all Italians regardless of geography, this notion is also marked by interjacency. He connects the idea of ‘Italian-ness’ with his concentration on the in-between space occupied by Italian Canadians by stating that “l’italianité” is itself the cross-roads of several opposite things: “Elle se situe en deçà et au-delà de la culture et de l’histoire, même si elle est modelée par celle-ci. L’italianité serait donc à la fois l’âme et l’esprit du peuple italien, le passé et l’avenir. Entre ces deux pôles navigue le corps en devenir, le corps, c’est-à-dire le peuple” (15). He highlights the fact that the individuals that fit under this heading of Italian-ness are still nonetheless at the crossroads of several influencing factors. In this way, a defined and static label is shown to be insufficient and, therefore, his conception of “l’italianité” necessarily must include fluidity if it is to include Italian Canadian identity. By embracing the multiplicity that the term *italianità* implies, he describes Italian Canadian identity, then, not in terms of a lament of what could have been nor as a stopover before assimilation, but as a conception of self that navigates between several cultural spaces. Now here, now there, it is Canadian and Italian, English, French, Friulano, Sicilian, Lucano, Florentine, Molisano, etc. all at once. In that uncertainty and through the depiction of the feeling that it brings—that is, vertigo and instability—Caccia sees and depicts its richness.

Similarly, Fernando Ortiz, in *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, coined the term “transculturation” (98) to “express the highly varied phenomena that have come about in Cuba as a result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture that” characterize Cuban society (98). Caccia cites Ortiz as an influence directly in “1989” when the narrator explains that he is the director of the “Centre de recherche en comportement transculturel de l’Institut Fernando Ortiz” (132). Moreover, for Caccia, the theory of transculture and the fundamental idea of movement and change within an ethnic identity hold an important place in his work. He is explicit in stating in the introduction to *Sous le signe du Phénix* that “[I]e sens

Although the debate surrounding this idea—both in Italy and North America—is richly documented and interesting in its complexities, I will limit myself to exploring Fulvio Caccia’s conception of it.

de la transformation actuelle de la culture et de l'imaginaire de cette génération [second generation of Italian Canadians] ne peut être pleinement capté dans sa dynamique sans un nouveau modèle interprétatif: la transculture" (19-20). By contesting, as Ortiz, the terms "acculturation" (Ortiz 102) and assimilation, Caccia underlines the minority ethnic's position as an identity that stands "in relation" (Lionnet 11).³²

He is interested in disputing cultural displacement through immigration as a passive activity. As Lionnet contends, the move from one place to another forces the individual to relate creatively to the "past and the present" and unearth the possibilities of being in between the two (11). It is this creative impulse and potential for positive change that Caccia emphasizes in his representation of Italian Canadian selfhood. As Ortiz explains, "all peoples' historical evolution has always meant a *vital* change from one culture to another" (emphasis mine 99), so too do writers such as Caccia, D'Alfonso and di Michele—as I will later show—focus on the vitality of the mixtures that constitute Italian Canadian identity rather than on the trauma of the passage from one world to another. In order to understand the "evolution of the Cuban folk . . . in the economic[,] . . . institutional, legal, ethical, religious, artistic, linguistic, psychological, sexual, or other aspects of its life[,]" Ortiz found recourse in the term transculturation which emphasizes the richness of the evolution of a people and not the loss of one culture in favour of the adoption of another. It highlights the dialogue between cultures and, for Caccia as well, emphasizes the fact that much like human creation, two cultures come together to form a third that resembles the originary two but is nonetheless neither one.³³

³² Fernando Ortiz explains his reasoning in *Cuban Counterpoint*: "I am of the opinion that the word transculturation better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word acculturation really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or up-rooting of a previous culture which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation" (Ortiz 102).

³³ Caccia's interest in 'dialogue' and conversation is evident in his choice the interview for the structuring element of *Sous le signe du Phénix*. Moreover, in his introduction he justifies this choice by stating that "Dialogue: 'entretien entre deux personnes,' nous dit le dictionnaire. La 'plus souple des

Caccia's interests lie in tracking culture's movement through space and time and within individuals. This movement and 'journey' so keenly represented is inherent in transculturation, as Lionnet concludes, because "the prefix 'trans-' suggests the act of traversing, of going through existing cultural territories" (13). Its "specifically spatial connotations demarcate," for Lionnet and Caccia as well, "a pattern of movement across cultural arenas and physical topographies which correspond to the notion of 'appropriation,' a concept . . . that implies active intervention rather than passive victimization" (13).

The adoption of the term transcultural by Caccia, therefore, ties together his interest in describing an identity in movement, with his conception of minority ethnic culture. Like Lionnet, D'Alfonso and di Michele, Caccia is "[r]ejecting the binarism of self and other, nationalism and internationalism" (Lionnet 12) by refusing to step into identified and defined cultural binds. Preferring the irregular and nebulous designation of categories such as the baroque to more clearly defined classifications, he underscores the varied possibilities that an identity such as 'Italian Canadian' holds. His interest in examining the 'other' side of this identity—its development above and beyond its immigrant heritage—relates, as I will explore in the next chapter, to Mary di Michele's desire to explore and represent a side of Italian Canadian-ness that is anchored in gender.

formes d'expression' ajoute encore Valéry. . . . l'oeuvre en tant que telle est secondaire à mes yeux, c'est le cheminement qu'est ici l'objet de cette intervention" (17-18).

Chapter 3

Di Michele's Gendered and 'Embodied' Italian Canadian Identity

Fie, fie upon her!
There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lips,
Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton spirits look out
At every joint and motive of her body.

-William Shakespeare,

Troileus and Cressida, Act IV, v. 54

Mary di Michele's writing grapples with the evolution of Italian Canadian women's identity as Canadian society moves further and further away from the 1940's and 1950's—when the majority of Italian immigrants arrived in Canada. Her poetry is an elaborate dance of words and ideas, each poem giving voice to a persona who is interpreting her life and the world around her. Synthesizing experience, di Michele's poetry—usually written in the first person singular—develops and displays the thought processes of individuals who are sifting through present experience and past occurrences to arrive at an understanding of self.³⁴ Similar to Fulvio Caccia and Antonio D'Alfonso, she concentrates on the personal and delves into individual experience to illustrate the “transformation qui travaille la culture des immigrants et des fils d'immigrants italiens” (Caccia, Introduction, *Quêtes* 9). In an article published in the *Canadian Writers and Their Works* series M. Morgan Holmes describes di Michele's stance as “radical” because “while she writes within a loosely defined tradition of expatriate or immigrant literature, the perspective that she seeks

³⁴ In an interview with Ken Norris, published in *Essays on Canadian Writing* (1991) she explains her preference for the first person singular: “I like to ‘write’ using ‘I’ because of the sense of intimacy it creates in the text, because objectivity is as distorted a perception of reality as subjectivity, but subjectivity seems more honest to me” (8-9).

to convey is consistently imbricated with a feminist apprehension of gendered inequality and subordination” (166)³⁵. Her writing is a representation, *in the feminine*, of the multifarious heterogeneous nature of minority ethnic expression as Italian Canadian identity moves into its third and fourth generation.

Concentrating on the female perspective, di Michele has given an intimate voice to women who would otherwise be relegated to traditional positions where silent conformity precludes discussions and analysis of their lived experiences. In her article “Avoiding Stereotypes” Genni Donati Gunn—published in *Writers in Transition: The Proceedings of the First National Conference of Italian-Canadian Writers* (1990)—lists the ways in which Italian Canadian women are portrayed in Italian Canadian writing by “both male and female writers” (141):

There is the silent suffering immigrant woman; the ignorant immigrant woman; the immigrant woman who accepts her submissive role; the second generation immigrant woman who is struggling to overcome oppression; and the immigrant woman who stands as a symbol for Mother Italia, family, an entire culture. (141-142)

“Generally unmentioned”, she points out, “are two groups: professional, successful women and those women who do not fit the stereotypical good Italian girl model . . . [—in other words an image that,] deviates from social norms” (142). The narrowness of these portrayals, especially given the percentage of women of Italian descent in Canada, can be linked to what Gunn describes as the women’s “own silence” (143). It is the women’s unwillingness to break the very cultural codes that suppress expression and foster mistrust of ‘others’—a category which includes everyone except close relations—that has left their stories mostly untold and the complex nature of their identities mostly unexplored in Italian Canadian literature.

This dearth of varied female expression, despite the presence of a group of authors who do break the ‘codes of silence,’ has engendered a lack of what Antonio D’Alfonso describes in *In Italics* as “conscious culture” and therefore, a want of conscious female Italian Canadian identity. A detailed examination, and assertion, of

³⁵ ‘Radical’ is a term di Michele herself uses to describe her work as stated in her interview with Joseph Pivato “An Immigrant Daughter and Female Writer,” published in *Vice Versa* June-July 1984: 21-22.

oneself and ones experiences—“emotions, events, memories, reactions . . . which the Italian family traditionally dictates should remain unsaid” (Gunn 144)—broadens the definition of Italian Canadian identity to include the twenty-first century Italian Canadian woman in all her incarnations—that is, for example, the traditional woman, the working woman, the university educated professional struggling with work and family and the young woman who considers Italian a part of what it means to be Canadian.

In her poetry and critical writing Mary di Michele expresses a willingness to portray the intimate and examine the details of Italian Canadian female identity in ways that “go beyond the stereotypes.” One of her strategies for moving toward a fuller expression of this identity is to give voice to the personal. Exploring this desire to examine the self, she allows the personae in her poems to go further and deeper into themselves by delving into their experiences. The speaker in “Day Journey into Night” notices that to find herself is to re-live her experiences; as she “ride[s] deeper and deeper into the night” she realizes that as she does “soon all [she] will see is [her] own face” (l. 15-16, *Necessary Sugar*)³⁶. Traditional notions of Italian Canadian womanhood have, for the most part, concentrated on depicting the struggle between traditional Italian models and North American ideals of the feminine. As in Paci’s novel *Black Madonna* this conflict usually takes the shape of a mother/daughter conflict. Di Michele’s work, on the other hand, expands what is meant by Italian Canadian female identity by representing it with a broader scope. Although she too writes about inter-generational strife, in poems such as “Mimosa” (*Mimosa*) and “Pieta ‘78” (*Bread and Chocolate*), she increasingly includes topics/passages in her poetry that are more explicitly concerned with female experience in general. Influenced by various sources, such as feminist discourse, she has moved away from solely representing the immigrant experience in an explicit way. Holmes cites di Michele’s tendency to make “a search for feminine identity part and parcel of a

³⁶ When quoting di Michele’s work I will include in the parenthetical documentation the title of the anthology in which the poem was published when this information is not explicit in the text.

coming to terms with her Italian cultural heritage” and concludes that this quest for unification of struggles is the reason for her “distinctive edge” in the Canadian literary scene (168). She characterizes her own position as minoritarian and “marginal” (Ken Norris Interview) and in so doing she connects herself both to minority writing in general across cultures and time and also inserts herself within her own minority ethnic Italian community in Canada.

In “Writers From Invisible Cities”—published in *Canadian Women Studies/Les Cahiers de la femme*—di Michele echoes Fulvio Caccia’s interests and describes what she believes Italian Canadian writers are moving toward in their work. She states that what they “are doing is expanding the tradition of ‘survival’ to include a tradition of the ‘journey’” (38). It is a journey which she elaborates in her own work; one where perspectives and opinions are exposed as constructed and personal, where dichotomies and dualities are expressed and questioned, where objectivity is interrogated and where identity in movement is displayed. Despite a tendency in her collected poetry to go from portrayals that are clearly Italian Canadian—such as in her earlier work *Mimosa and other poems*—to oeuvres that exemplify less concrete thematic connections to immigration and Italy—as in her most recent publication *Debriefing the Rose*—throughout her writing she weaves together her visions of Italy with representations of duality, protean identity construction and figurations of the female body as it is lived by women. Her poetry is, importantly, an exploration which includes, amid depictions of Italian Canadian identity, women’s bodies, female companionship and sexuality. In this way, consequently the expedition of self-discovery that is this writing is also a reconfiguration of Italian Canadian womanhood.

While shaping Italian Canadian female identity, Mary di Michele’s poetry also showcases—as does Antonio D’Alfonso’s writing—the multiple influences that animate Italian Canadian identity as a whole. All identities are shaped by varied spheres, but the particularities of each sphere of influence are especially apparent in the consciousness of minority ethnic individuals, such as Italian Canadians, who live each one more concretely, separately and openly. Di Michele gives space and voice

to these influences in her poetry where personae live and grapple with the various forces that influence and shape their identities. Sometimes, in a poem such as “Oranges” (*Bread and Chocolate*) she makes it “seem natural, and even easy, to inhabit Canadian and Italian mental spaces simultaneously” (Holmes), and in other instances, ‘Enigmatico’ for example, the poet underscores the difficulty of balancing several, oftentimes conflicting, influences.³⁷ The protagonist in “Enigmatico” “cries out caught/with one bare foot in a village in the Abbruzzi,/the other busy with cramped English speaking toes in/Toronto” (l. 14-17). The Italian Canadian individual as she is represented in her writing is not only born of her Italian heritage; she is the result of a mixing and blending of places, people and times.

The influences that make up an ethnic identity—such as those portrayed in di Michele’s work—are described by ethnographer Benjamin Orlove as “surfacing” in his article “Surfacings: Thoughts on Memory and the Ethnographer’s Self” where he explains his understanding of his Jewish American identity. Orlove sketches a functional imagery that appropriately underlines the shifting nature of his identity and that mirrors di Michele’s interest in depicting what she considers to be the mutable nature of Italian Canadian identity. He states that his “various Jewish pasts are not simply an ethnic identity, concentrated in one piece of [himself] and absent from others, nor are they a cultural heritage, stored in a chest and removed ceremoniously on holidays and other occasions” (19). Underlining the complexity of his relationship to his ethnicity he describes his memories as “paradoxical” because of their ability to easily “rise to the surface” as well as their “capacity for remaining below the threshold of visibility” (19). These surfacings are exemplified in Italian Canadian author C. D. Minni’s short story “Roots” (*Other Selves*) where the protagonist, Berto, is on a trip to his hometown in Italy with his wife Carla and two children Mark and

³⁷ As I have explained elsewhere, the lines between author and speaker in Italian Canadian writing, and specifically in Mary di Michele’s work, are often not clearly drawn and therefore, although I will mostly be referring to the speaker or protagonist in the poems cited, occasionally I do not distinguish between the two; that is, the author and the voice in the poem.

Stella.³⁸ The opening scene is indicative of Berto's shifting identity, often using both first and third person pronouns: "he wakes in the dark confused, . . . I, the boy, wonder about the man[, but] . . . turned away from me, head sunk in her pillow, Carla sleeps—evidence that the man too is real" (17). The reader is oftentimes hard pressed to decipher which of the two is speaking—boy or man—because of Minni's seamless shifting from one to the other; for example, while in the garden the "boy could not see, but the soft fruit[—the figs—]he knew were ripe. He peeled and ate three, sometimes more, relishing the sweet seedy taste. Then he returned inside with an armload" (18). At first the 'he' refers to the boy, but then without warning it becomes a referent for the man living in the present. Minni's story is both an example of Orlove's idea that different facets of an identity surface at different times, and illustrates what Pasquale Verdicchio, in *Devils in Paradise*, states about "'ethnic' self representation" and identity being a process that "cannot be viewed as singular, unidirectional, and definitive" (24).

Di Michele also explores the fluid aspect of ethnic identity that Orlove explains and Minni depicts in his writing. She does so, however, in terms of a female Italian Canadian identity and thus valorizes in a slightly different manner the minority ethnic's—in this case Italian Canadian's—ability to live with memory "just below the surface," ready to be either forgotten or brought to the fore as need be. In poems such as "Life is Theatre or O to be Italian in Toronto Drinking Cappuccino on Bloor Street at Bersini & Carlevale's" (*Immune to Gravity*) di Michele depicts the ebb and flow of the past and present as they interact and mingle. While the speaker is both sitting in a cafe in the present, listening to her companion discuss her dramatic Italian tendencies, she is also reliving her childhood experiences of cultural difference. She is "openly savoring a cappuccino" and thinking about her youth spent "ashamed that [her] dinners/were in a language [she] couldn't share" (l. 2, 3-4) and being "as popular as pork on Passover" because she was Catholic at "a largely Jewish highschool" (l. 23-26). Her memories about her marginal status are explored as they

³⁸ This is a work that I have cited in the first chapter in connection with Italian Canadian figuration of the double.

surface and are examined with immediacy and detail as if she were re-experiencing them. The hyperbolic descriptions resemble child-like observations and underline the fact that these recollections and the voice that is telling them are from the past, yet, the ironic undertones are the result of an adult's perception. She is re-living what she had lived as a child in those moments at the cafe where her difference as an Italian Canadian is highlighted—"For you Italians, after all, he shouted after [her], *life is theatre*" (l. 62-63 emphasis hers). Both past and present are simultaneously unfolding when she returns fully to the "heated speech" (l. 60) that is taking place at the cafe after recounting that she felt like "*melanzane . . . [were] from outer space*" (l. 12, 15) and that her difference "weigh[ed] [her] down" "as if it were made of plutonium" (l. 37, 38). The present and past overlapped for a time. Both the child and woman listened to what was being said in the present as the wave of memories flowed in and out, leaving the woman, finally, to respond in the end. In the final lines of the poem, another more 'adult', or 'present'-minded, aspect of her identity comes to the surface and her memories fade into the background—without disappearing—as she now "expertly" balances her espresso and leaves "without drinking it" (l. 59, 61). Having developed strategies to cope with her difference, she no longer *needs* to express it outwardly or suppress it, she can decide to take it or leave it, highlight it or not, for those outward actions do not change the happenings in her mind.

What is of importance in her depiction of minority ethnic identity, as will be further explained, is movement. She opts for representations that concentrate on motion and active self-discovery while, like Antonio D'Alfonso and Fulvio Caccia, she also seeks to underscore the positive possibilities of such representations. Similarly, by preferring to underline the "shifting fields of encounters and exchanges" (25), Orlove avoids the tendency to see multiplicity in an exclusively negative light and rejects terms such as "fragmentation." He usefully explains his preference for the term "surfacing" over "fragmentation" because "[o]bjects that surface seem more dynamic and flexible than the static and rigid qualities of fragmented ones" (20). To his ear, he writes, fragments "sound as if they have firm,

sharp edges, whereas things that surface have softer edges, sloughing off some small pieces and accreting others” (20). Rather than fragments that “could be glued back together in a somewhat imperfect and cracked version of a former whole; things that surface keep changing in appearance, and an entirely new side can swim into view” (20-21). Each of di Michele’s poems, then, can be considered a ‘surfacing’ of sorts. A surfacing of influences that are sometimes Italian and sometimes not. They examine a particular aspect of human interaction as it is lived by personae influenced by a variety of places and people. The multiple nature of Italian Canadian existence portrayed in di Michele’s work can be described as a life lived with ‘networks’ of identity—that is, an identity formed by areas of influence or ‘networks’ that are comprised of people, ideas, places, notions that are as spokes on a wheel, although much less rigidly divided, with the center as the individual or meeting point. The locus of power is the individual that concentrates on different spokes at different times and in different combinations. Di Michele’s literary interventions are explorations of networks—such as Italian civilization, womanhood, motherhood, Abbruzzo-Molisano culture, history, work, immigrant heritage—and how they influence a person’s understanding of the relationships that fill her life. Orlove, as di Michele, concentrates on concentrates on the present and ever-changing nature of lived experience and lived identity rather than on a static version of the *past* that is evoked when we imagine the events that brought about the breaking and scattering that results in ‘fragmentation.’

Likewise, di Michele develops a poetics of fluidity where variance is valorized even though fragmentation does figure in her work. For example, in her latest printing of *Mimosa*, the picture of what we can imagine to be a father with his young daughter in his arms appears whole and then is shown with an increasing number of missing pieces. Furthermore while the picture is represented in its torn state, its appearance in pieces underlines not fragmentation but the more workable option of malleability because the fixity of a still photographic image is inadequate to portray an identity in constant motion and relationships that are ever-changing. As di Michele explains in an interview with Ken Norris, published in *Essays on Canadian*

Writing (1991), she concentrates on the “protean” character of identity and the dynamism of a pluralistic identity influenced by several languages and cultures (2-3) rather than on the fixing of labels and the hyphenation of appellations. In the way that Orlove describes the movement of his memories and how they influence who he is and how he lives his ethnicity, di Michele, in her poetry, ‘dances’ with the dynamic ‘networks’ that influence Italian Canadian identity, representing this intricate dance in her work. Second, third and fourth generation Italian Canadians boast greater and broader influences on their lives but they still live with a cultural reality influenced by their family’s immigration. The dual movement of this cultural reality—movement forward and connection to the past—as depicted by di Michele’s words and images can be described as a dance that showcases adaptability as individuals choose their partners; that is, which network to connect with and when.

While the individual is the center of the networks that she lives with, her body is the medium through which the material world is experienced. As a powerful filter, all experience must pass first through the body. Di Michele’s representation of Italian Canadian identity centers around fluidity and malleability but it also, as she explains in the interview with Norris, focuses on the importance of the body. “Our bodies write our lives,” she states, for it is through our skin and bones that we experience the world around us—through the body that we experience culture. Her writing is a representation of the dynamism of Italian Canadian identity as well as an exploration of the strategies through which the body can be recovered in language so it too can become a participating factor in the understanding of Italian Canadian identity and culture. In “Manifestations of Ice” (*Necessary Sugar*) the speaker emphasizes the impact that the body has by stating that “[a]ll [she] ha[s] is this body,/a bit of cloying fruit,/compact sweetness as found in dried figs” (1.63-65). What is expressed is the idea that fundamentally the body is an individual’s only ‘real’ possession and what happens to her happens to her body as well; hence, di Michele’s desire to valorize its significance for a conception of Italian Canadian identity.

Similarly, D’Alfonso also places significant importance on the body’s connection to experience. In *Avril ou l’anti-passion*, the narrator’s body becomes the

site of his story-telling. In the chapter entitled “Cicatrices,” it is the locus of his memory. He recalls events through the scars on his flesh and ‘reads’ his body so that is no longer just a vessel, but a symbol of his experiences: “La cicatrice transforme le corps en signe. Le corps qui se réfère à autre chose, cet autre chose laissant par la suite sa trace sur le sensible cuir de l’être” (961). As he recounts the story behind each of the five scars—stating that “[c]hacune des cicatrices porte en relief le souvenir d’un moment . . . modifi[ant par la suite] la géographie du corps” (61)—he tells the stories that make up his life. By structuring his story-telling around his scarred flesh he is, as di Michele, placing central importance on the body’s effect on memory and self-understanding.

Di Michele’s comparison of the body to food, as in “Manifestations of Ice,” further underlines her desire to ingest the body, incorporate its power and presence into her identity and into her understanding of Italian Canadian identity. The poet’s use of comestibles to enhance representations of this identity is doubly significant. Firstly, it underscores a desire to bring together mind and spirit by centering on the ‘incorporation’ of the body—described as an edible object—into an understanding of an individual and secondly, because of the importance of food in Italian Canadian—and Italian—culture. The preservation of culinary traditions represent both a connection to a homeland and a means of cultural expression. Through the body, and what it ingests, the spirit is ‘fed’ the cultural practices of the community. The body is a close participant in this endeavor and the culture is lived through its sensory interaction with food. In “Manifestations of Ice,” for example, the body is a “dried fig” and in “Reading Your Mind” (*Necessary Sugar*), the speaker’s thighs are “nibbled in shadow” (l. 7) for they are “white wedges of pear” (l. 6). Differently, in the “Marrying Man” (*Mimosa and other poems*) di Michele uses fruit in connection to women’s bodies to make more evident the male character’s tendency to ‘devour’ women and to take them as objects to be used and ingested by him. Di Michele writes: his fiancé was “a little apricot of a girl” (l.17) although “he really went for women/with the clean blondness of white wine,/squeezed from grapes shining with an oily polish” (l. 1-3).

whatever it is the body wants
 whatever it is the body wastes

not...

("Crown of Roses" l. 281-290)

By accepting the body's importance in the understanding of Italian Canadian female culture, di Michele couples the body with the mind in the cultural playing field. Grosz explains that "[r]eductionism denies any interaction between mind and body, [or any two sides of a dualistic construction] for it focuses on the actions of either one of the binary terms at the expense of the other" (7). Di Michele's poetry does not reduce Italian Canadian culture to either the body or mind, but instead depicts the importance of both in the fashioning and understanding of an identity living in one or more cultural milieus.

The division between the body, which although ever-changing and in constant motion is traditionally understood to be somewhat solid, and the notion of a person's spirit or 'essence,' which is traditionally understood as essentially invisible and without mass, is what di Michele questions throughout her work. What is central to her, she explains, is a desire to bring the two notions of body and spirit together—"to bring into the corpus", "to incorporate" (emphasis mine) the experiences of the spirit. In other words, to inscribe on and in the body the experiences of the spirit and, vice versa, to inscribe on the spirit the workings of the body so that they are engaging in a fluid exchange. The body inherits from this exchange the fluidity normally attributed to the mind and spirit and the spirit, in turn, gains in solidity. Grosz clarifies that to not explore the possible dialogue between spirit and body is "to reduce either the mind to the body or the body to the mind [and] is to leave their interaction unexplained, explained away, impossible" (7).

Di Michele does not deny the dualities of western cultural thought, she explores them in order that they may be brought to the surface in her specific cultural context and changed. In a poem such as "The Story of a Marrying Man" (*Mimosa*), she mostly concentrates on the separation between the genders—male bodies and

female bodies—but this representation also brings to the surface a network of traditional patriarchal thoughts that influence Italian Canadian female identity and that would otherwise remain hidden. Di Michele’s poetry further attempts to weaken what Grosz describes as the “correlation and association of the mind/body opposition with the opposition between male and female” so that “man and mind, woman and body, [could] become representationally aligned” (Grosz 4). As she exposes their mostly negative effects on individuals, she also, paradoxically—or perhaps with the spirit of practicality—mines the dynamic tension that these dualities provide. In both instances, however, the body is not denied and the Cartesian philosophical dichotomy between mind/spirit and body is questioned.

Other writers, such as Filippo Salvatore, rarely figure the body in their work, preferring to concentrate on depicting the mind’s musings and the ‘heart’s’ emotions without touching upon the experience of the body and its impact on them. In his poems “E fu L’Apocalisse”, “Nous, les rapaillés,” “Solidarnosc” and “Sagesse du père” (*Quêtes* 138-148) Salvatore’s narrative voice describes and analyzes experience. The physical body figures mostly as a transient mass moving along through the landscape but it is always secondary to the psychological state being outlined.³⁹ In Frank Paci’s novels, however, the body is ever present as a force in the understanding of identity. Yet, rather than an active element which plays upon self-understanding the body is often at the mercy of mental angst and serves to underscore that situation. In *Black Madonna*, for example, the daughter Marie becomes anorexic and refuses to eat. She reduces her body to its skeletal form as a rejection of her traditional Italian mother’s cooking and way of life. Her experience of her body is negative and the connection between her spirit and body is severed when she connects the latter’s fullness to her mother and, consequently, not to her own self. She rejects her own body as an accomplice to her mother’s ‘backward’ traditions and does not associate it to her own experiences. While figuring a disjuncture between

³⁹ These poems are collected in the anthology *Quêtes* edited by Fulvio Caccia and Antonio D’Alfonso and appear translated into French from Italian.

spirit and body very clearly, Paci also emphasizes the power of the body and the far-reaching effects of feeling that our *corps* is not under our control.

Mary Melfi also deals with the frustration of not feeling connected to one's own body when, in *Infertility Rites*, the protagonist is unable to have a child. While Melfi and Paci point to the powerful presence of the body in lived experience, di Michele defiantly tries throughout her writing to bring the two sides of this dichotomy together by consistently figuring the body and its functionings at the center of the individual's spiritual conception of self. In her work, the body itself is emphasized and not just the disjuncture between the body and spirit. Identity and the body are inextricably related and their connection and relationship are privileged—even when their detachment and dislocation are described.

In di Michele's poems the body figured in writing becomes the expression of spirit. In her masterful verses on Sappho, "Crown of Roses" (*Debriefing the Rose*), she confronts issues of feminism, creativity and modernity. The speaker praises Sappho's ability to "rend[er] the word as flesh" (l. 177) and with an ironic twist uses Freudian logic to counter anthropologist George Devereux's description of Sappho as having "a 'clinically commonplace/female castration complex'" (l.173-174). Lamenting what she describes in "Notes towards Reconstructing Orpheus: The Language of Desire" (*ECW* 1991) as the "loss of the body through language" (15), di Michele in her poetry brings to bear on the Italian Canadian identity the power of the body—especially the female body—through the power of words and literature. Acknowledging the body's marginal position in the canon di Michele explains in "Writers from Invisible Cities" (*Canadian Women Studies* 1987) "that women weaned on words find to their surprise that they have been identifying as human a tradition of literature that unconsciously excludes large areas of human experience and sensibility" (38). Her poetry attempts to redress this want of the female body and experience—the Italian Canadian female body and experience—in Italian Canadian writing and Canadian literature. As Luciana Ricciutelli points out, "the natural cycle of life: birth, childhood, sexual development, motherhood and aging" are a "central theme" in di Michele's work (quoted by M. Morgan Holmes in *Canadian Writers and*

their Works 175). She returns to this cycle and underscores the body's formative function in the production of ideas as well as in the conception of an identity. She understands, as France Théoret states in "Writing in the Feminine" (quoted by di Michele in "Notes towards Reconstructing Orpheus"), that "because pulsion [and] . . . a great inner drive [are] necessarily linked to the body, [the body's inclusion] enlivens the rhythm of the sentence" (365) and brings this drive to the 'word'.

She includes words of female flesh and body and in so doing they now figure among the vocabulary of this minority ethnic group's lexicon. For example, in "Life is Theatre," in her account of the onset of 'womanhood,' the speaker explicitly "discover[s] insomnia, migraine headaches,/[and] menstruation" (l. 30-31). In "The Disgrace" (*Bread and Chocolate*) the blood surrounding the young woman sitting in the kitchen—for example, the skinned rabbit sitting in the bowl of blood—mirrors the blood newly flowing from this adolescent. In this way, the body and its words become part of the language of a cultural group's literature and the words become flesh. As the words describing the body become increasingly important in di Michele's descriptions, the body becomes a force to be reckoned with in her conception of Italian Canadian-ness: "I know him with . . . language," expresses the speaker of "What is Desire?" (*Debriefing the Rose*), language "which must refer to the body,/thigh buttocks, penis, hand,/and mouth, *la bouche, la bocca*" (l. 6-10). As Stanton B. Garner Jr. in *Bodied Spaces* describes theatrical representations by Caryl Churchill as attempts to "redress th[e] absence [of the lived female body] and 're-embod[y] the female body on stage," so too does di Michele include "menstruation" and "pregnancy" in poetry to re-embod[y] the female body, and the body in general, in Italian Canadian literature (187).

Di Michele's inclusion of the female body and its functions in her poetry is not without ambivalence, however, for the young woman learning about menstruation, she writes, is being initiated into the "betrayal of the self/to the species" (l. 31-32). She is "discover[ing] despair" (l. 32). Moreover, in "White Lunch" as the protagonist's body is "changing/in a human way/. . . it felt grotesque [because she'd] . . . already been told/by Freud and the boys/what [she] didn't have"

(l. 57-62). Her poetry is not only an attempt to broaden the lexicon and bring the body to bear on the word, and therefore on the mind, it is also a depiction of the way traditional, subordinating discourses have shaped women's—and Italian Canadian women's—experiences of their bodies. The speaker in “White Lunch” (*Immune to Gravity*) describes her education that provided “fine art nudes” (l. 2), “airbrush strokes on soft-porn/centrefolds” (l. 3-4), the lack of a sex that was “screen[ed]” by a “snake” in “Dick Avedon’s photograph” and the sex that “would be adorned by a leaf/[o]r shaved” in “classical painting” (l. 32-43), but that left her “ignorant of her [own] body” (l. 1). The theme of not understanding one’s body, and consequently one’s self, is recurrent in her poetry as a whole. The body and mind are connected and denial of one is shown to engender denial of the other. Despair, in “How I Make my Body Disappear” (*Necessary Sugar*), is the result of “never [being] naked” (l.1) and not accepting the body as it is. The speaker states that she “keep[s] [her] shoes on/ even when all [her] clothes are off/the art of the nude . . . [being] reserved/for more beautiful women” (l. 2-7).

Her portrayal of this lack of acceptance and discomfort with regards to the body further exposes the mind/body dichotomy in order that it may be overcome and so that her interest in “synthesis” can be fostered (Interview with Ken Norris *ECW 2*). The Italian Canadian female subject depicted by di Michele continues to wrestle in a “sort of Houdini-like” fashion with the networks of her identity. She is especially battling with those that fostered a denial of the body in favour of sanctioned and established modes of living the female experience (Norris Interview 3). The conventional Italian family values are described by di Michele as “bonds that are sometimes restrictive, sometimes repressive” and their paring with traditional Roman Catholic ideals leaves the subject, as the poet explains, not to “amputate” but to struggle with the patriarchal ligatures that render coherence difficult. Her vision, however, precludes a complete detachment from family and tradition because, as she expresses, they are also “bonds of love.”

Nonetheless, in poems such as “The Disgrace” (*Bread and Chocolate*), di Michele, as M. Morgan Holmes points out, expresses infuriation at the “uncritical

turn to the lives of women” and sees the most common strategy of resistance to “repression”—that is, silent protest—a “simplistic and naive move” (188). The speaker of this poem is ushered into the world of adolescence and as she is seated in the kitchen “with a blanket wrapped around [her] middle” (l. 17) she observes her female relatives around her and relays their activities to the reader with a disdainful and apprehensive tone:

My mother and aunts are eating
the unwritten stories of their lives
which they wipe away without a thought
and the crumbs on the table (l. 19-22)

The depiction of the body offers a possibility for di Michele to contest female marginalization by giving voice to often muted utterances and little-noticed details of the quotidian. In order to counter the power of patriarchal depictions of the female body by those that “liked women even less than . . . [classical] “deities” (“Crown of Roses” l. 81-82)—namely, the classical Roman Catholic church—di Michele in her most recent collection of poetry is more explicit in validating the body as a positive experience. It is seen as a meeting point and not as a point of divergence. As such, it is a tool to overcome the rigidity of positions that hinder the protean conception and living of an identity. In “Crown of Roses,” the body is validated and seen as all encompassing:

A chalice of sky
a goblet of wine—
...
all these elements, air, water,
and earth in its nocturnal blazing

with desire:

in body all—
become fire.

(“Crown of Roses” l. 367-375)

Concentrating on the recuperative possibilities of considering the body a point of convergence, Elizabeth Grosz explains that the body “provides a point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable. [It is a] point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and the other, and all the other binary pairs associated with the mind/body opposition” (Grosz 20-21). Expressing her desire to highlight the body’s essential function in the creation and expression of an identity, di Michele counters the discomfort that women feel with regard to their bodies. In “At the Vaughan” (third part of “Beauty and Dread in 1959,” *Immune to Gravity*) the speaker describes her negative, indifferent, experience of her body by stating that she is “[n]ot comfortable in [her] body, it felt/not like a home but a place to sleep/not live, like a rooming-house, or not even that” (l. 1-3). In the face of a rigidly divided world view—exemplified in “The Disgrace” with the physical divisions of space mirroring mental and spiritual divisions: kitchen for women and the living room for men—di Michele’s speakers search for understanding, coherence and expression by looking to the experiences of other women.

While “The Disgrace” portrays the women around the table as self-deprecating, their presence in the kitchen as a *group* underlines the importance of female companionship in di Michele’s work. She expresses the power of female friendships and relationships in poems such as “Natural Beauty,” dedicated to her long-time friend Roo Borson (*Immune to Gravity*), where di Michele exhibits a longing to see her friend who is now “in California” (l. 92).⁴⁰ In the last lines of the poem “Natural Beauty” she extols her friend with melancholy, remembering her eclectic nature and highlighting the important resonance this woman has had in her life. She calls out her name, almost in the hopes that this will bring her back—“Ruth, a mouthful of flowers,/Roo, a Sufi dish like roses diablo” (l. 45-46). As she does so,

⁴⁰ Further underlining the importance her female friends through her dedications, *Luminous Emergencies* is dedicated to “Bronwen Wallace: *la meilleur, ma soeur*” (emphasis hers).

the power of the longing and its expression—"Something constricts my throat/visualizing you with your sweet/melancholy of wisteria" (l. 40-42)—reminds the reader of laments for lost love and underscores the power of female friendships in their breadth and depth. This power, which di Michele carefully depicts, is a force too little explored and valorized in Italian Canadian writing and in the Western tradition in general. Her expression of the ties between women gives Italian Canadian women the possibility to consider themselves part of a larger community of women within and without their community. This, in turn, breaks the isolation of their expression and modifies the construction of Italian Canadian identity by openly according women their community and, therefore, by changing the view of female identity, which traditionally exists not in conjunction with other women but in reference to men.

By touching upon classic historical examples of repression, di Michele also connects women of the present to a sort of communal and institutional spirituality of the past and she posits this against the traditional vision of the Catholic Church. In several poems she revisits, with Italian Canadian sensibilities, women's connection to witchcraft and the supernatural and re-appropriates an appellation and a community of women that were hunted and demonized. The patriarchal society that she denounces in poems such as "The Shape of Midnight" (*Necessary Sugar*) is one that was scared of women's power and even more so their increased power in a group. The speaker is walking alone at night and while she "fears . . . the shadows/the man-made lamps project" (l. 10-11), the witches she sees around her "are safe" (l. 8) because they are "kin to her" (l. 9). Moreover, in "Reading Your Mind" (*Necessary Sugar*), the protagonist posits Catholicism in contrast to spirituality in a broader sense. She highlights her power and says that she "can read minds" (l. 21), "tell you your birthdate/and your social-insurance number,/things you don't remember yourself" (l. 24-26). Her interlocutor, however, considers her "paranoid or psychic/depending on what [he's] prepared/to acknowledge" (l. 17-19). The speaker, in turn, concentrates on the moon and its history, comparing it to a "million-year-old

fossil" (l. 13) and attributes her power to something more visceral and tangible than psychic ability or dimensia. She ascribes it to her "woman's intuition" (l. 27). At the end of the poem her vision of the "Byzantine/features of a Christ" (l. 33-34) in the night sky brings her no solace as the speaker sees in Catholicism only male-directed power and a construction which denies women their power and leaves her denying her own body. "[B]orn Catholic," she states, "with a cross between my legs" (l. 38-39) she is left to forge an identity in a conflicted and disavowing social and spiritual landscape.

In her collection *Luminous Emergencies* she further explores the connection between her relationship with the female body and her relationship with the Church. In "Magi," the speaker describes the "belly, full and elliptical" (l. 17) of the young, and pregnant, protagonist. Blending together this "sixteen" (l. 1) year old's situation with the biblical story of Mary's impregnation by divine grace, the father of this baby is described as someone the young woman "hardly saw, the apparition/so thin" (l. 22-23). The parallels between one story and the other are clearly drawn with "the stumps of wings" felt "through the sharpness of his shoulder blades" (l. 24-25) and the "simple garments . . . [of] a knobby weave" (l. 29-31) mirroring the New Testament infant's swaddling clothes. Di Michele relates a story that although similar to the ancient one, is from the young woman's standpoint. It is about a woman who compares a red bow to the "spot of blood/she prayed for" (l. 12-13) and hence expresses her uncertainty at having to "feel/old" (l. 2-3) with the added responsibility. She underscores the female experience of the "visitation" and explores the woman's perspective of this event that has marked both female and Italian Canadian female self-conception. In allowing this modern figure of Mary to feel "dread" (l. 27) at the thought of something "feathered" and "furred" (l. 28) entering her, she frees the Italian Canadian woman from the weight of having to live up to the 'perfect' mother and woman. She humanizes an ethereal experience and therefore, brings the 'saintly' mother of God closer to 'human' mothers.

Moreover, both Antonio D'Alfonso and Fulvio Caccia, break cultural and religious taboos. They do so in their inclusion of explicit sexual encounters, as well

as with their adding a sexual dimension to their male and female characters in *Avril ou l'anti-passion* and *Golden Eighties* (respectively). As di Michele, they refute the dichotomies and rigid structures set up by Roman Catholicism and traditional Italian Canadian and Italian culture—both of which are heavily influenced by the Church.

The solace and refuge from dichotomized, structured and structuring relationships that di Michele proposes in her writing are her relationships with women—friends, family members and her daughter. She concentrates on delineating a network of female friendships and underscores their importance and ever presence for the female identities she is depicting. “Choosing Gifts for Women Friends, Their Long Hair” (*Debriefing the Rose*), for example, is a celebration of her friends and their distinct personalities—which are mirrored in the hair clips she chooses for them as tokens of affection. Once again outlining the power of women in her life and their presence as a community, the speaker expresses her need for them by stating that “hydro/electric power is not/enough you need them, their lips to read these words” (l. 44-47). Their relationship, represented as a warmth giving “hearth” (l. 44), is what nurtures her writing and allows it to exist. Their importance in this respect is akin to the import of the elements, “[e]arth, water, and turbulent/air,” (l. 42-43) and is in contrast with what she imagines the “vendor” of the hair clips to be thinking. The speaker accords her female friends the creative power to inspire while he sees them as “Frida after Diego has left her” (l. 6). Implicit in such an observation is the idea that a woman must necessarily be connected to a man to be identifiable and that if she is alone—or surrounded by women—she is dejected or rejected in some way. It is this rigid sense of who is who and how one should be—expressed by the opinion of the nameless “street-vendor”—that di Michele contests in her work. In creating and nurturing a space where women’s relationships are valorized she is leaving the door open for a broader interpretation of what it means to be an Italian Canadian woman. Her ‘odes to her friends’ create in and of themselves a network of female relationships that previously did not exist so explicitly as a possibility for Italian Canadian women.

Furthermore, in, “Wasted on the Old” and “French Kisses, Blue Brassieres” (*Immune to Gravity*), the author has created a community of women through the prolific use of the plural pronouns: “where we wanted to breathe” l. 14, “[w]e began to use makeup and padded bras” l. 37, “we tried to escape from the city” l. 44 and “[f]rom romance languages we learn” l. 7, “language from which we borrow” l.12, respectively. The protagonists in these works are not alone in their growing pains and the poems create and open a space for female voices to be heard and, in turn, connect with others by not only expressing their thoughts and feelings, but also by assuming a collective utterance. In these two poems the sense of community and friendship between women is what balances the topsy-turvy world the speakers experience because of the juxtaposition between what they are living and what society mirrors back to them. The protagonists dream of fairy tales “where Rapunzel embraces the witch” (“Wasted on the Old” l. 53) and the sense of a collective journey, fostered throughout di Michele’s work, acts as a cushion and a supporting beam to the identities balancing between these two—or more—realities.

In “The Passion Artists” (*Necessary Sugar*) di Michele reiterates the usefulness of women friends as sounding-boards when a new situation or change in life must be confronted. She especially highlights the advantage of her friend Carolyn’s presence in her creative process—the poem is dedicated to Carolyn Smart. Di Michele points out that she helped her figure out the “clue/that will help [her] to divine/the past, [and] accept every property/of the new chemical [she’s] become because of [her] latest catalyst, a man” (l. 4-9). After having set the scene—she is sitting on a porch with a woman and the glasses of their “apéritifs” are “conducting the duet of female voices” (l. 1-3)—the speaker points out that while a romantic relationship spurns on intense feelings and emotions, her friend helps her channel that energy into a creative force that allows her to understand herself and her art. Female friendships, in essence, ‘midwife’ every new facet of the ever changing and evolving identity that is depicted in her poems—through adolescence, as we have seen, and now into womanhood.

Di Michele's poetry consistently expresses the female Italian Canadian perspective—creating a community within a collectivity—and she also portrays a community of modern female friendships—which form a sisterhood of support—but, she also brings to her poetry ancient female communities in the form of her poem “Crown of Roses” (*Debriefing the Rose*) which tells the tale of the poetess Sappho. As with D'Alfonso's use of mythological beings, di Michele's invocation of Sappho is, among other things, a search for legitimization of her proposals through antecedents. Di Michele tells the story of Sappho as she sees it and highlights, more importantly, female relationships and creative expression in the face of repression and misunderstanding. Sappho is said to have “found her art in her friends” (l. 764) and although she “worshipped Aphrodite, not Apollo” (l. 33) her choice to be with women was not, as di Michele depicts it, because she rejected men but because in a positive stance she *chose* women: “I do not count /men my enemies as I count/ . . . women my *bosom*/friends” (l. 670-673 emphasis hers).

What makes Sappho an interesting subject in di Michele's corpus is her connection to the representation of a minority society living outside the polis. Lyn Hatherly Wilson in *Sappho's Sweet Bitter Songs* describes Sappho's writing in terms similar to those that could be used to designate di Michele's poetry. It is a “production of a female specificity” (Wilson 13) and as Wilson goes on to state, “[t]he women who appear in Sappho's songs seem to have lived within a predominantly female environment where even love was female-to-female or homoerotic” (13). Sappho's words are of this sphere and di Michele's re-appropriation of her ‘story’ is a desire to valorize “the poetic texts which are extant create or re-present a world according to a female perspective, in order to transmit and maintain a woman-centered culture” (13). Imminent “[o]utside this community, in the public sphere, looms a phallo-centric symbolic context that . . . was founded on paternal authority” (13) as the shadows of “man-made lamps” are often lurking in di Michele's portrayals of Italian Canadian female reality (“The Shape of Midnight” *Necessary Sugar* l. 10-11).

As a symbol, Sappho and her poetry serve as a spring-board from which di Michele can express political angst and struggles with power because, as Wilson observes, “Sappho’s world presents us with a site of difference, a place where distinctive, if stereotypically ‘feminine,’ values can attain prominence” (14-15). In this world of the Greek poetesses’ writing “women direct their gaze” and the power to act is in their grasp and not, as in di Michele’s earlier writing about specific Italian Canadian gendered interactions, out of the hands of the woman. She is the epitomy, at least for di Michele in her long lyrical poem, of open female classical expression. “Crown of Roses” is a synthesis of issues dealt with throughout her writing—the body, modernity, female relationships, power and creativity. Di Michele wishes to imbue this classical figure with a coherent character by removing ambiguous questions surrounding her life and death. To underline this she is careful to include in “Sappho on Ovid” (*Debriefing the Rose*) both the poet’s negation of her suicide—“I was no suicide. For the vegetable/god, a dirge was all that I ever/played” (l. 156-158)—and her admission of loving “Aphrodite above all . . . offer[ing] to love in the feminine” (l. 159-161). Di Michele is modifying Ovid’s account of Sappho because it is described as an “absurd story” (l. 155) that “deserves to die along with *his/Sappho*” (l. 155-156 emphasis hers). It is a version of her life and work that does not portray the Sappho that would best serve di Michele’s project of emancipation and courageously bold identity construction. Adding her fictive version of Sappho’s life to the other “fictions and fantasies . . . woven into traditions about her life” (Margaret Williamson *Sappho’s Immortal Daughters* 5), di Michele is overlaying Sappho’s story with her own desires and hopes as a minority ethnic female writer in Canada. She is, as has already been noted, including her expression amid centuries of other portrayals and this fact alone modifies the perceived—and often actual—silence of the Italian Canadian woman.

Countering the repression and silence of minority ethnic voices—the father’s silence in “Mimosa” and the silence of the men and women in “The Disgrace”—di Michele’s tackling of an ancient figure of female expression challenges the silence and attempts to redress it by interpreting Sappho’s writing and underlining the

perceived unjust treatment of her works. Her poems are described as “condemned . . . to the fire,/ashes .../ashes...” (l. 85-88) and echoes of their misappropriation and fragmentation are found throughout the poem. Further remedying the silence of minority ethnic women, the speaker’s dialogue with Sappho, interspersed with moments where di Michele speaks through Sappho’s voice, are moments where the two women—ancient and modern—interact and relate even though “Lesbos is thousands of miles/and millennia from Montréal” (l. 112-113). In this way, both are given a space to interpret their lives and atone for stifled utterance.

Along with a rectification of Sappho’s destroyed words, di Michele’s writing also re-instates Sappho’s feelings about female community as well as female erotic love. The lesbianism associated with Sappho and its expression in di Michele’s work is an additional breaking down of taboos in the Italian Canadian community. It is a re-appropriation of a possibility not afforded Italian Canadian women and a re-acceptance of a choice that was traditionally seen as a threatening posture vis-à-vis a patriarchal society. The poem elevates the expression of love that brought women together—in the ‘mythical’ community of Lesbos—from impossible, to a choice that is seen as an alternative to marriage which “Sappho says [is]. . . the funeral for desire” (l. 559-560). Sappho, then, is the figure—the messenger of sorts—that brings to Italian Canadian writing—through di Michele—the option of independent female identity.

Di Michele brings to Italian Canadian expression a revised vision of this collectivity’s identity by valorizing female utterance. Her poetry includes a vision of self-discovery that is inclusive and that visits all facets of feminine identity. Noting the silence of certain groups, her poetry seizes the unexplored possibilities of these quieted identity spaces. Adopting an idea of fluid identity in motion she portrays the ever-changing nature of selfhood throughout her writing. She allows this possibility to exist for a community that was traditionally caught between two realities by giving voice to possibilities and situations left in the dark. Di Michele articulates in her

poetry what Rilke in his *Lettres à un jeune poète*—a poet esteemed by di Michele⁴¹—stresses as the way to live more fully and consciously. As di Michele brings to light uncomfortable and painful situations in order that they be integrated and understood in the living of an identity, Rilke explains that:

Seules sont dangereuses et mauvaises les tristesses que l'on traîne au milieu des gens afin d'en couvrir la voix, comme ces maladies que l'on traite à la légère et sottement, qui font que reculer un peu pour éclater peu après d'autant plus terriblement . . . elles sont de la vie, de la vie non vécue, dédaignée, perdue, dont on peut mourir. S'il nous était possible de voir plus loin que notre savoir de porte . . . [c]ar elles sont les moments où quelque chose de nouveau, d'inconnu, vient de pénétrer en nous" (73-74).

As Rilke supports the exploration of the unknown and the deeply felt so that what it brings can be used to grow and change, di Michele underscores the importance of a kinetic identity and the flexibility of identity formation—especially in a minority ethnic context where plurality exists from its inception. Di Michele's writing purges the hidden and the unspoken so that it too can become a viable and vital part of Italian Canadian identity.

⁴¹ In her interview with Ken Norris she states that she "adore[d] Rilke of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*" and pointed out that he "was wise" in his understanding of the "female sense of the body in language" (5). She also cites Rilke's struggle with language and his awareness of its limitations in her article "Notes towards Reconstructing Orpheus." Also, in her poem "*La Benvenuta*" (emphasis hers) (*Debriefing the Rose*) she explores Rilke's work and his life through the speaker's interest in his effect on her.

Conclusion

Antonio D'Alfonso, Fulvio Caccia and Mary di Michele exemplify the changing representation of Italian Canadian identity in Italian Canadian writing. No longer is this body of work filled with the woeful expression of longing to go home, nor does it concentrate on the struggle of adapting to a new place. While there is an inherent acceptance of this struggle and an acknowledgement of the difficulties immigration entailed, even for second and third generation Italian Canadians who still feel the repercussions, the focus has changed. Caccia, in "L'ethnicité comme post-modernité" writes about the "défi de la seconde génération d'immigrés contraints de se 'construire une identité' sur un territoire autre" (13). Throughout their writing, these three authors showcase their responses to this challenge. They express their attempts to find and express a voice that mirrors their identity.

Each one posits an identity construction that in some way challenges the traditional notions of what it means to be Italian, and of Italian descent, in Canada. Their writings are no longer solely concerned with recording a realistic account of their struggle or of expressing their 'difference' as a minority ethnic group. They write about Italian Canadian reality through the lens of their own experience. Antonio D'Alfonso applies the concept of the baroque to Italian Canadian writing in order to underline its multiplicity and fluidity. He also concentrates on delineating the hybrid aspects of his identity by, among other things, invoking the mythological figure of the satyr. D'Alfonso posits a cumulative, fluid identity as a way of depicting the Italian Canadian's 'juggling' of realities and living 'between' several cultures.

Fulvio Caccia, like D'Alfonso, underscores the characteristics of Italian Canadian identity such as layering, movement, and multifariousness. He, too uses the baroque to underline these characteristics. Conversely, however, he concentrates on applying the notion of transculture and on portraying the 'journey' as an important motif in Italian Canadian expression of self. By highlighting the importance of movement and the *transientness* in the portrayal of a single identity that is inevitably

in constant motion, he re-figures the mythologized—and often demonized—journey of emigration. In Caccia's work, this expedition is now considered in a positive light—as a means to a greater development of self. He directs the theme of the journey inward and in this way the journey across the Atlantic is mirrored in the personal journey of self-understanding that he depicts. While not overlooking the trauma of being uprooted, his writing does not communicate a lament of the journey, rather, it concentrates on finding the tools and the means of expressing and valorizing a reality that has been transformed because of it.

Mary di Michele also attends to the personal nature of her poetic voice in her writing and often highlights the importance of self-exploration. She brings her concerns as a woman and mother to her poetry and in so doing transforms what is understood as Italian Canadian by bringing to bear on it issues that were not considered of central importance—such as, gender specificity, women in community and female friendships, a woman's experience of the female body and the effects of patriarchal attitudes etc. Through her work, gender and 'the body' have become more important aspects of this identity and voices of the hidden and unheard are finally being valorized.

Furthermore, all three authors, while part of a community, center on expressing themselves as individuals. Inherent in their work is a desire to offer their version of their reality and, as such, their writing is much less centered on being the voice of the cultural group as a whole. Instead of exhibiting the characteristics of a choric voice, their writings exude much more of a personal one. Here, the community speaks by virtue of each writer expressing themselves in a personal manner and not through any single author. The difference in tone and subject matter of D'Alfonso, Caccia and di Michele's work points to the complexification of the view of the Italian Canadian community and depicts it as it truly is—heterogeneous. The fluid and multiple quality of their representations renders more realistically the elaborate nature of this minority ethnic group's constitution and renders monolithic homogenizing discourses inadequate.

These writers challenge the traditional depictions of Italian Canadians in many more ways than can be explored in this space. Future areas of reflection on how they, and other writers, deconstruct Italian Canadian identity could include an examination of themes such as the representations of homosexual identity, concerns with the specificity of Italian regional affiliations, the idea of an Italian North American reality and the breaking of cultural taboos—some of which I touched upon: for example, questioning the supremacy of organized religion, defiance of the rules of Roman Catholicism and the open representation of sexuality and sex.

Antonio D'Alfonso, Fulvio Caccia and Mary di Michele all deconstruct the traditional notion of Italian Canadian identity by challenging static images of this identity portrayed in Italian Canadian literature. They go beyond the expected to challenge the conventional and bring this minority ethnic identity construction into the future without losing the distinctiveness it possesses as a cultural group.

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