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Université de Montréal

Mapping Identity : Ethnic Self-Fashioning in Italian-Canadian Literature

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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 études anglaises

août, 1998

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S. 1478.1150

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1998
V.023

(Institute of Statistics)

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en études anglophones

2001-2002

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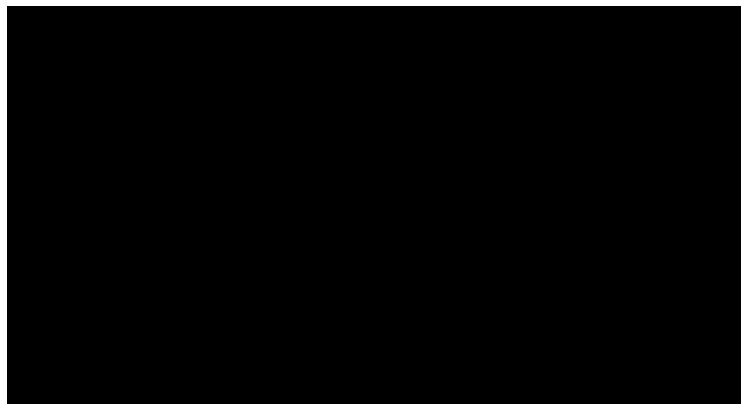
Université de Montréal
Faculté des études supérieures

Ce mémoire intitulé:
Mapping Identity : Ethnic Self-Fashioning in Italian-Canadian Literature

présenté par:

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a été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes:



Mémoire accepté le : 11. 11. 1998

SOMMAIRE

Much of the critical work on ethnic literature in Canada focuses on the manner in which new voices fit into the nation's multicultural mosaic, and the ways in which these narratives are slowly transforming the cultural landscape of the country. Italian-Canadian writing is particularly complex in this regard, for it traverses several linguistic and cultural registers in an effort at arriving at a truthful reflection of the immigrant experience of Italian-Canadians. This relatively recent body of work demands a renewed understanding of the manner in which language(s) and territory influence ethnic identity.

The subject of this thesis is identity construction in the work of four Italian-Canadian writers working in English: Antonio D'Alfonso, Mary di Michele, Gianna Patriarca, and Pasquale Verdicchio. The poetry and prose of these writers is analysed in order to understand how ethnic identity is imagined as "in-between" the Italian and Canadian cultural realities and how it moves beyond those two polarities through the "performance" of ethnicity.

This will be pursued along two principal axes. The first of these is the manner in which language choice (English, Italian, regional dialects) and linguistic experimentation in the text reflects the narrator's ongoing project of ethnic self-interrogation. I argue that the Italian language serves as a vehicle through which the past is remembered and reconstructed in the quest for an "authentic" Italian identity.

Language also paradoxically undermines a stable Italian identity for it is not fully mastered and is contaminated with the English of a Canadian upbringing. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *littérature mineure* will be used as a framework for my analysis in this chapter.

The second part of the thesis examines the ways in which the Italian-Canadian writer constructs a spatial imaginary which mirrors his or her own explorations of cultural identity. My analysis will be based upon a variety of contemporary theorizations of spatiality, including those of Jameson, Foucault, and Keith/Pile. Both the villages of the homeland and the cities of the adopted country are figured in these texts as sites upon which cultural specificity is marked and maintained. While Italian space is often described in essentialist terms, in that it is read as the reflection of a lost "authentic" Italian identity, Canadian space is fictionalized as a difficult foreign terrain that must be appropriated and resignified from an immigrant perspective. Re-territorialization occurs not only at the linguistic level through the adoption of the majority language, as Deleuze and Guattari have maintained, but also at the spatial level, through the process of marking Canadian urban space with ethnic otherness.

RÉSUMÉ

Une grande partie de la critique sur la littérature ethnique au Canada se concentre sur la manière dont les nouvelles voix s'ajoutent à la mosaïque multiculturelle de la nation, et les façons dont ces narratives sont en train de transformer son paysage culturel. L'écriture italo-canadienne est particulièrement complexe dans ce contexte, car il traverse plusieurs registres linguistiques et culturels dans un effort d'arriver à une réflexion fidèle de l'expérience de l'immigration des Italo-Canadiens. Ce corps d'oeuvre relativement récent demande une compréhension renouvelée de la manière dont le(s) langage(s) et le(s) territoire(s) influence(nt) les identités ethniques et individuelles.

Le sujet de cette thèse est la construction de l'identité dans l'oeuvre de quatre écrivains Italo-canadiens qui travaillent en anglais : Antonio D'Alfonso, Mary di Michele, Gianna Patriarca et Pasquale Verdicchio. La poésie et la prose de ces écrivains sont analysées pour qu'on puisse comprendre comment l'identité ethnique est situé « entre » les réalités culturelles italiennes et canadiennes et comment celle-ci se déplace au-delà de ces deux polarités à travers la « performance » de l'ethnicité.

Cela sera poursuivi au long de deux axes principaux. Le premier c'est la manière dont la langue choisie (anglais, italien, dialectes italiens régionaux) et l'expérimentation linguistique dans le texte reflètent le projet d'interrogation ethnique entrepris par l'auteur(e). Nous soutenons que la langue italienne sert comme

un véhicule à travers lequel le passé est souvenu et reconstruit dans la quête d'une identité italienne « authentique ». Paradoxalement, la langue italienne échappe à une construction stable de l'identité, car elle n'est pas tout à fait maîtrisée et elle est contaminée avec l'anglais. Nous ferons appel au concept de littérature mineure tel que proposé par Deleuze et Guattari pour notre analyse dans ce chapitre.

En nous appuyant sur une variété de théorisations contemporaines de la spatialité (Keith/Pile, Jameson, Foucault), dans la deuxième partie de la thèse nous examinons les manières dont les écrivains Italo-canadiens construisent un imaginaire spatial qui est le reflet de l'explorations de l'identité culturelle. Les villages italiens de la patrie, ainsi que les villes canadiennes du pays d'adoption, sont représentés dans ces textes comme des sites dans lesquels la spécificité culturelle est marquée et maintenue. L'espace italien est souvent décrit d'une manière essentialiste. En cela, il est lu comme la réflexion de la perte d'une identité italienne « authentique ». L'espace canadien est représenté comme un espace difficile et étranger qui doit être approprié et signifié d'une perspective immigrante. Ré-territorialisation se produit au niveau linguistique à travers l'adoption de la langue majoritaire, tel que soutenu par Deleuze et Guattari, mais aussi au niveau spatial, à travers le marquage de l'espace urbain canadien avec l'altérité ethnique.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

THE FIELD OF ITALIAN-CANADIAN LITERATURE

The contemporary age is marked with contradiction. On the one hand, there is increasing economic globalization, the transnational exchange of people and ideas, the commercialization of mass culture, and instantaneous communication via vast computer networks; and on the other, the valorization of difference--of the particular and the local--the rise of ethnic, postcolonial, and minority discourses and political positionings. Perhaps the condition of postmodern fragmentation has engendered an obverse desire to re-inscribe "insidership" in community and communities. What has changed perhaps is that these social groupings are no longer transparent but *strategic*--no longer circumscribed solely by such things as national boundaries, language, religion, or race--but maintained through the individual's conscious choice of belonging to a community, his or her active participation in the various social, cultural, and political spheres of which they are part. As Francesco Loriggio points out,

The intermixing of different identities and social realities, the interaction of global and local that they stand for restores--as a by-product of adjacency and contact, hence as negotiable rather than as monolithic or totalizing--a portion of the shared public culture that had disappeared with the decay of the master narratives. On the other hand, an equally notable consequence of the many current soundings and probings on gender, ethnicity, multiculturalism and post-coloniality has been the renewed interest in cultural memory. (9-10)

Recent critical explorations of feminism, postcolonialism, and ethnicity have ushered in a vast new field of critical inquiry into marginal social positionings, peripheral cultural spaces, and hybrid identities. These investigations have excavated the *locatedness* and *positionality* of the individual in relation to larger social and cultural realities, and these insights have had radical implications for critical theory and for the human sciences in general. Interest in academic and non-academic circles in questions of alterity, ethnicity, and cultural memory also concerns itself with uncovering the “other” marginal narratives that have occupied national spaces, including Canadian space.

Despite being a small and relatively recent body of work, Italian-Canadian writing has attracted much critical attention within the last 10 years. Joseph Pivato, who has written extensively on Italian-Canadian literature, edited *Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing* (1985), the first critical study of Italian-Canadian literature. In *Echo: Essays on Other Literatures* (1994), Pivato addresses issues of translation, women’s narratives, family, and self-definition in Italian-Canadian writing. A forthcoming anthology of Italian-Canadian writing, which includes selections from more than fifty writers, will be an important contribution to the field.

Francesco Loriggio has been interested in the positioning and representation of Italian-Canadian writers within Canadian literature and has explored the minority identity politics involved in the canon debate. His *Social Pluralism and Literary*

History (1996) examines the literature of the Italian diaspora and includes many articles specifically addressing Italian-Canadian writing. Fulvio Caccia has written on questions of language and territorial displacement, employing Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *littérature mineure* as a fitting paradigm for this body of work. He has edited *Sous le Signe du Phénix* (1983), a collection of interviews of Italian-Canadian writers and artists, and *Quêtes: textes d'auteurs italo-québécois* (1983), an anthology of Italian-Québécois writers. More recently, Pasquale Verdicchio has contributed *Devils in Paradise* (1997), which approaches emigrant and post-emigrant Italian literatures from a more political perspective. His principal concerns are with linguistic experimentation, deterritorialization, and the repercussions of the political and cultural divide between northern and southern Italy for diaspora communities.

These and other critics have discussed the “dual perspective” of the ethnic subject, the manner in which the Italian-Canadian is often torn between two cultural and linguistic systems--a bifurcation of identity explored in many poems, plays, and novels:

Immigrant writing demonstrates the close interweaving of history and literature. In the novels, stories, and poems that we consider here, the autobiographical element is always just below the surface of the text, the image, symbol, metaphor, dialogue, and characterizations. This is all the more evident in the structure of the return journey . . . [it] recurs so often that it can

be described not just as a major theme but an obsession in the Italian-Canadian imagination. (Pivato "The Return Journey" 169)

As Pivato makes clear, the return journey is a recurring but also necessary motif in Italian-Canadian writing, for in order for the ethnic subject to negotiate a Canadian identity, he or she must first come to terms with a displaced Italian one through an exploration of the past.¹ This search for origins bridges the "existential gap" between an Italian identity, situated in a distant past, and a Canadian one, situated in the present.

The proliferation of literature by minority writers in Canada has engendered a reformulation of the country's social imaginary--has in fact changed the way in which we think about ourselves as a collectivity.² Demographic shifts in the ethnic makeup of the population have elicited a corresponding shift in the terms of debate about national identity--and if the critical furor over multiculturalism is any indication--of the desire to grapple with the social and cultural implications of such changes. Paradigms for thinking the nation have shifted in recent years from an essentially bicultural, bilingual country with "folkloristic colourings" to a more realistic recognition of the plurality that inscribes itself on our everyday social, linguistic, and cultural practices. The problems raised by putting the official policy of multiculturalism into practice have been much debated, yet questions of ethnic assimilation, ghettoisation, and acculturation have yet to be resolved.

This thesis will examine the various approaches and strategies taken by writers of Italian origin working in English in Canada on questions of ethnic identity and cultural memory. The works of Antonio D'Alfonso, Mary di Michele, Gianna Patriarca, and Pasquale Verdicchio were chosen not only because they reflect an awareness of the precarious positioning of the ethnic "between" two different cultural traditions, but also because each of these writers manifests a common obsession: the desire to "fashion" a sense of ethnic identity in relation to the various social, cultural, and linguistic spheres in which he or she is engaged.

Writing as a process and a practice enables these Italian-Canadians to explore various "versions" of themselves in relation to both their Italian heritages and their Canadian upbringing, and the spaces between these cultures are inscribed as sites of linguistic and thematic experimentation which enable the construction of identities that go beyond the simple Italian-Canadian binary. An aesthetics of "in-betweenness" is consciously employed by each of them as a discursive and poetic strategy in his or her ongoing project of ethnic self-interrogation. I will analyse the textual strategies these writers use in their efforts at integrating two distinct cultural experiences within one social, cultural, and geographic space.

These issues will be explored along two principal axes. The first is the manner in which language (Italian, English, and Italian dialects) problematizes ethnic identity and cultural memory. What is the role of the heritage language within the Italian-Canadian text, and how does it contribute to or undermine a sense of

ethnic/Canadian/Italian identity? What is the role of language in the narrator's ongoing project of ethnic self-definition, and how do the Italian language/dialect and English interact?

The second section of the thesis will address the manner in which the ethnic subject constructs a spatial imaginary which mirrors his or her own quest for an "authentic" self. I will explore the ways in which the urban space of the Canadian city is represented or "remapped" and given historical and personal significance from an immigrant perspective, as well as the process of remembering and reinscribing Italian space as a site upon which an "authentic" Italian sensibility is reclaimed. The ethnic writer's search for the social, historical, linguistic, and cultural meanings attached to place manifests a personal geography which conflates diverse languages and significations onto a single topographic site.

While I will be focussing on issues of language and territory, ethnic self-interrogation also involves temporal aspects, such as memory and the appropriation and resignification of past experience in narrative. The production of ethnic codes and markers of difference rests on the memory of an obscure past, and, as William Boelhower points out, the writer's project of "*vedere* is an act of interrogation, through mnemo-technical strategies, various versions of the past considered as a temporal-spatial construct" (235).³ He suggests that memory fragments cohere within the project of ethnic semiosis, and that the loss inherent in the passage of time is reclaimed through the spatialization of ethnic identity, through an intimate

identification with the homeland. The space once inhabited becomes the locus of memory and the first step toward reconstructing the past, a past which is projected into future possibilities through re-territorialization in a new Canadian environment.

Memory also resides in language or, more precisely, in the ethnic's *struggle* with language. The ethnic's tenuous grasp of the heritage language mirrors his or her gaps in memory about the past, and it may be argued that linguistic experimentation in the Italian-Canadian text is a way of compensating for that lack or wholeness of memory. The inclusion of the Italian word in the English text may be a way of reaching out toward the past, of exploring its many absences. Language may also reconstruct the past through its power to signify or evoke powerful memories. This is seen especially in the poetry of di Michele, where Italian words come to occupy a mnemonic function in the poetry, a way of accessing the past through language.

TRANSCULTURALISM

My analysis of Italian-Canadian writing will draw upon some of the assumptions of transculturalism, most notably its formulation of culture as movement rather than culture as a fixed tradition. This allows for an inscription of cultural identity as something flexible, dynamic, and open to various external influences, convergences, and transformations. In his socio-historical study of Cuban agricultural workers, Fernando Ortiz traces the movement of different populations (natives,

African slaves, European immigrants) on Cuban territory and examines the manner in which each group is affected and transformed by its contact with the “other.” Ortiz describes acculturation as “the process of transition from one culture to another, and its manifold social representations” (98) but sees it as a limited model for describing the complexities involved in the contact between different cultural groups. The alternative he proposes describes the *reciprocal* influences of cultural contact, which is to say, the syncretisms that emerge between colonizer and colonized:

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 uprooting of a previous culture, which would be defined as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation. In the end...the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals; the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them. (102-103)

Transculturation is, according to Ortiz, a synthesis of the dual processes of acculturation and deculturation, the appropriation of certain practices from a “host” culture and the loss of some elements and traditions of the homeland.⁴ The result of this contact affects not only the colonized group but the colonizer as well. Jean

Lamore has argued that this transcultural process is applicable not only to the colonizer/colonized binary of postcolonial societies but that of immigrant/mainstream cultures as well. He maintains that while the immigrant acculturates himself or herself to a new society, the host society is also transformed by the alterity introduced by the immigrant:

La transculturation est un ensemble de transmutations constantes: elle est créatrice et jamais achevée; elle est irréversible. Elle est toujours un processus dans lequel on donne quelque chose en échange de ce que l'on reçoit: les deux parties de l'équation s'en trouvent modifiées. Il en émerge une réalité nouvelle, qui n'est pas une mosaïque de caractères, mais un phénomène nouveau, original, et indépendant.

What is noteworthy in the notion of transculture is the manner in which it shifts the focus of discourse from centre to peripheries, from universal culture with a capital "C" to the liminal spaces between and within cultures as the principle sites of diversity. Transculture also works to transcend essentialist notions of identity tied to a particular territory or nation. A national culture is often imagined as a cohesive body of practices and traditions circumscribed within a particular space, and the transcultural affirms its vulnerability to both internal and external "contaminations," and hence its possibilities for renewal. The transcultural process consists of the constant displacement and recontextualization of symbols, images, linguistic codes, and discourses in accordance with changing social realities.

The transcultural as a discursive paradigm reappeared in the 1980s within the pages of *Vice Versa*, a trilingual cultural/literary magazine initiated for the most part by Italian-Canadian writers and critics (Lamberto Tassinari, Fulvio Caccia, Bruno Ramirez). Transculturalism has elicited much critical debate in Québec, particularly within the context of ethnic integration and nationalism within that province.⁵ The contemporary understanding of the term takes a departure from Ortiz's initial formulation by embracing the idea of *movement* between cultures, a strategy which enables the inscription of ethnic specificity within a relatively homogeneous cultural space while allowing for the possibility of going outside of ethnicity as ghettoising (and essentialist) category.

Régine Robin, a Paris-born Jewish writer and critic who has emigrated to Canada, provides a fascinating discussion of the notion of “going outside” one's ethnicity in order to explore other cultural realities. Robin criticizes the reduction or framing of identity into definable qualities: “l'épingleage de l'identité, un processus que l'on voudrait figer” (27). Instead, she questions the notion that ethnicity is an essential or defining aspect of identity:

Je dis que la valorisation de l'éthnicité, que celle-ci soit entendue en termes de déterminisme racial, génétique, biologique, ou en termes culturels, que cette valorisation tend à essentialiser l'identité, à la fixer en un être, en une substance, tend à assigner une identité, à faire l'éloge de la différence là où il y a du jeu, de la mobilité du devenir autre et véritable pluralité... Sortir de

l'éthnicité, c'est sortir d'une problématique étroitement culturaliste. Ma culture, ma langue, mes mœurs, mes valeurs, mes, mes. (30)

Transculturalism, as Robin outlines, allows for an understanding of identity as a "game" in which one is not tied down by circumstances of birth or upbringing. Transculturalism is concerned with the cultural exchange that occurs between individuals and is in this sense an engaged cultural practice. These "interferences" between cultures problematizes the notion of hermetically sealed cultural groups, foregrounding instead the movement or *dérive* toward other cultural practices and traditions.

While the notion of transculturalism has been criticized for being theoretically vague and unable to properly situate or define culture in a concrete way, it does offer some salient points on the problematic interfaces between ethnic cultures and "majority" cultures. It does this by highlighting how majority cultures are affected and transformed by the minority elements within them. Further, transculturalism allows for an exploration of those liminal spaces at the fringes between cultures, those sites of linguistic and cultural tension which enable new forms of writing and expression. It is a relevant paradigm for Italian-Canadian literature, for this body of work is situated at a point of contact between the English/French Canadian mainstream and Italian immigrant culture. It is with these points in mind that ethnic writing in Canada will be approached, for the writer is working within a field of cultural practices by which he or she is affected, but also one that he or she affects.

It would be simplistic to consider Canadian writing as simply being subdivided along ethnic lines: English/French majority literatures and all “other” ethnic literatures, each occupying their own space. Transculturalism seeks to explore the reciprocal exchanges which occur between these groups.

Much of the critical work on ethnic literature in Canada focuses on the manner in which new immigrant voices and narratives fit into the nation's multicultural mosaic, the ways in which ethnic writing is slowly transforming the cultural landscape of the country. Issues of language, cultural memory, and ethnic specificity are most often approached in terms of the interaction between minority groups with their “fixed” cultural baggage and the officially recognized culture of the majority. Italian-Canadian writing is particularly complex in this regard, for it traverses three and sometimes four linguistic and cultural repertoires in an effort to arrive at a more truthful reflection of the immigrant experience of Italian-Canadians.

ETHNIC PERFORMANCE(S)

The writers analysed in this study construct a sense of their ethnic identity through an internal dialogue which relates the Italian or “Italic” self to the Canadian environment. Because the ethnic subject must negotiate and adapt to these new circumstances, ways of seeing, living, and categorizing identity are “invented” or put into public discourse by themselves and by others. For instance, the ethnic subject

will understand his or her identity through terms such as “dual,” “plural,” or “in-between,” or think of himself or herself as the “symbiosis” of Italian and Canadian or a “hybrid” of the two. Each of these labels is in fact a “technology of identity,” a categorization of self which enables further ethnic meanings to be elaborated. In other words, from an initial premise of a self “in-between” cultures, a whole series of other meanings, symbols, practices, and performances are generated which enables the ethnic writers to uphold their cultural specificity while permitting them to venture outside of their own communities and identities. The meanings generated by ethnics in their day to day functioning are central to an understanding of themselves in a new social context.

In his study of Canadian immigrant fiction, Arnold Itwaru raises the issue of ethnic labelling, the manner in which immigrants are constructed as “other” the moment they set foot on Canadian soil. Already marked as different, these new arrivals to the country must in turn “invent” a sense of self and find a position within their new society. This, according to Itwaru, involves the imaginary construction of themselves in relation to a Canadian totality:

The invention of meaning is the continuing and multiple reading of the ever-changing nature of the reality in which, and of which we are. It is a reading and an experiencing in which versions of ourselves in the world [...] are simultaneously and constantly being invented, by ourselves as well as by others. [...] It is here where present consciousness with its attendant

ambiguities, anxieties, and disorientations, *invents* meaning in the need to reduce confusion. Such persons' search for meaning within the country named Canada is also the search for Canada as a domain of experience integral to the development of a sense of self. (9-12)

This notion of "invention" of meanings, of the various "versions" of the ethnic self, will be central to my analysis of Italian-Canadian literature, for it is my belief that identity is never a fixed category, and its inscription shifts in relation to changing social circumstances and meanings. As individuals, immigrants are constantly generating meanings about themselves in their efforts to cope with the rupture of emigration and in their desire for integration into Canadian society. As collectivities, ethnic communities also generate meanings about themselves in relation to the larger social milieu of their host society. For instance, changes in social class, education, religious practice, and social rituals are all factors which have cultural implications for the community, and hence implications for the manner in which these communities imagine themselves. All these versions of ethnic identity are therefore in constant evolution and change, and so identity cannot be taken as a fixed category, but rather as a flexible performance.

Basing my approach on this understanding of ethnicity as a technology of self and as a performance, I will look at the manner in which particular texts position the writer/ethnic in relation to their adopted socio-cultural space. Marino Tuzi points out that the ethnic's reality involves "the intertwining of many cultural elements found

both in the minority group and the dominant society. Not only is ethnic identity manifold, it is also unfixed, interminably modified by evolving and dissimilar social contexts. This unfolding underlines the multi-facetedness and indeterminacy of the ethnic subject” (10).

It is precisely this indeterminacy that enables the construction of identities that are variable, plural, and at times oppositional to dominant discourses about national and cultural identity. As Dawn Thompson suggests, identity is “relatively and provisionally constituted out of social relations” and the construction and representation of the ethnic self is a negotiation of identity and “an ongoing narrative performance [...] a complex of meaning effects, habits, dispositions, associations, and perceptions resulting from the semiotic interaction of self and environment” (54). That environment may be the old world, rediscovered and to some extent idealized in the return voyage, or the new world, the space in which the ethnic subject negotiates a new identity.

In this way, the ethnic subject’s interaction with and appropriation of the territory he or she inhabits enables a Foucauldian “mise en discours” of ethnicity which enables the creation of public and private discourses about identity. Ethnic self-interrogation as a “mise en discours” is incompatible with essentialist notions of “authentic” Italian identity. The fact that the ethnic writer creates discourse about his or her identity (through the writing process, through remembering, through the

return journey) reveals that identity is unstable and malleable. It is created by ethnic naming, locatedness, and by the social conditions in place in the new society.

Thompson's insights reflect the work of Judith Butler, who has problematised the very integrity and viability of the "subject" as an authentic representation of identity. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler puts into doubt "the prevailing assumption of the ontological integrity of the subject" by citing the performative aspects of identity, the manner in which an individual's repeated acts or assumptions about gender are *solidified* into an identity of presence. In the following quote, she addresses gender, but she may just as easily be speaking of ethnicity: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33). Just as certain modes of self-representation come to "define" or characterize a female gender, so too certain repeated rituals, practices, cultural narratives, and modes of self-representation congeal into specific ethnicities. In order to maintain this ethnic inscription, it must constantly be repeated, re-enacted, and resignified--in other words, performed.

In a special issue of *Sciences Humaines*, Carmel Camilleri describes the intricate social and psychological processes involved in the formulation of ethnic identity by Arab immigrants living in France. He describes identity not as a social or psychological fact but as a process, "pas un donnée, mais une dynamique, incessante série d'opérations pour maintenir ou corriger un moi où l'on accepte de se situer et

qu'on valorise" (32). He argues that immigrants employ different strategies of identity formation which seek to bridge the distance between collective/social identity and personal identity, between old culture and new society. These strategies take many forms, such as complete assimilation in the host society, or inversely, validating one's difference to the point where it defines the self: "une suraffirmation de soi, notamment en valorisant le trait stigmatisé par l'adversaire" (33). He cites the "Black is Beautiful" movement in the United States as an example of the valorization of those very traits which stigmatize certain groups.

Camilleri goes on to argue that when there is a confrontation of values and social codes between the immigrant and host societies, three possible scenarios emerge. The first involves the self-imposed isolation and cultural alienation of immigrant groups from the majority society, seen for example in the closed communities of religious fundamentalism. Another strategy is that of the immigrant who mimics the values and social codes of the host society while remaining fundamentally unchanged by them: "L'individu adopte des comportements en accord avec la culture d'accueil, tout en refusant intérieurement celle-là" (33).

Finally, the third strategy of immigrant self-identification involves what Camilleri terms "l'identité critique," which is "une attitude favorable à l'intégration, stratégie qui consiste à adopter des traits de l'étranger tout en conservant un certain nombre de références de la culture d'origine" (33). Within this model, the immigrant/ethnic will participate in a meaningful way in several communities

(including the majority) without completely giving up attachments to his or her heritage culture. Furthermore, he or she will perform differently in each social setting, switching linguistic and referential codes in order to better communicate with the other: “D’autres, ouverts au pragmatisme et à l’intégration, se coulent dans toutes les situations, en pratiquant une alternance successive des codes, sans confronter ceux-là aux autres. Par exemple, ils se comportent en Maghrébins au milieu des Maghrébins et en Occidentaux au milieu des Occidentaux” (33).

This is similar to what Antonio D’Alfonso and other ethnic Canadian writers and critics have advocated as a plausible solution to ethnic identity and self-representation: the ability to participate in a variety of communities without necessarily negating one’s heritage or being trapped by it. Amaryll Chanady writes, “Italian-Canadian critics such as Antonio D’Alfonso have also tried to develop complex subject positions that involve the recognition of intra-ethnic differences and fluctuating identifications without falling into ‘ethnic effacement,’ melting-pot ideology or the deconstructionist celebration of difference” (11). This strategy implies a certain “performance” of identity in each situation, and it is no longer clear that ethnicity is a transparent marker of identity.

What is particularly salient in Camilleri’s argument is the recognition that ethnic identity is marked by an ensemble of strategies which seek to mediate the contradictions between one’s sense of self and the external world, between the self of the old country and the self of the new one: “Les individus ont des possibilités

étonnantes de se couper d'eux-mêmes, de se morceler et de se cloisonner afin d'ignorer ce qui les dérange, notamment les contradictions...C'est la stratégie de maximisation des avantages. Ils élaborent ainsi des identités 'bricolées' que j'ai appelées 'syncrétiques' (Camilleri, 33). This sort of "bricolage" of identity may be argued for Italian-Canadians who seek to find a middle ground between Italian and Canadian realities, where all aspects of identity, including language, memory, and cultural referents, become the raw materials through which this intricate sense of self is constructed.

CHAPTER 2

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

THE LANGUAGES OF ETHNIC EXPRESSION

In myriad ways language defines communities and shapes their cultural memory; it is not surprising therefore that for many it constitutes an intimate aspect of personal identity. This chapter outlines the role and function of language(s) in the Italian-Canadian text, the manner in which its use and application is central to the narrator's self-fashioning and performance. Among the questions addressed in this chapter will be: What role does language choice play in the individual's affiliation to the ethnic group and/or to the majority culture? Does the shift between English, French, Italian, and Italian dialects in a text correspond to a change in the narrator's subjective experience of the world--to his or her sense of locatedness as a cultural insider or a cultural outsider? In what ways does language construct Italian-Canadian identity while at the same time undermining the very integrity of that identity?

Perhaps the most influential theorization of language use in relation to minority literatures is Deleuze and Guattari's much quoted study of Kafka in which the concept of *littérature mineure* is first introduced: "Une littérature mineure n'est pas celle d'une langue mineure, plutôt celle qu'une minorité fait dans une langue majeure" (29). A "minor" literature is one in which the cultural dissonances and linguistic transfers between the mother tongue and the language of the text become significant, one in which the literary language is not simply a transparent vehicle of communication but rather a problematic in and of itself. As a Jew living in

Czechoslovakia and working in the German language, Kafka was marginal not only to the cultural milieu of Prague, but also to the “official” culture of Germany. De-territorialized from the cultural and linguistic “centre” of a literary tradition, Kafka develops a displaced sensibility in which linguistic and cultural referents are interpreted differently or oppositionally, what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as *devenir minoritaire*.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that while official majority culture coincides with the mainstream of national identity, marginal elements within its boundaries are in constant transformation (*devenir*) by virtue of their difference from the cultural sameness engendered by the centre: “Nous devons distinguer: le majoritaire comme système homogène et constant, les minorités comme sous-systèmes, et le minoritaire comme devenir potentiel et créé, créatif” (Tassinari 5) This difference (*décalage*) between other and same is the open space of transcultural exchange, and it is by virtue of this difference that new cultural/linguistic elements are introduced into majority cultures.

Deleuze and Guattari imply that “minor” cultural expression has the power to transform or at least displace the cultural, linguistic, and historical assumptions of the centre with respect to its own traditions and narratives. This is achieved through the *minoritaire*'s appropriation and re-interpretation of those linguistic and cultural markers which define the centre. Through the intensive use of the language of the majority and through the introduction of ethnic alterity, the *minoritaire* introduces

new linguistic and cultural elements into the cultural imaginary of the host society. By writing German “differently,” one marked by the influences of Yiddish and Czech, Kafka introduces an altered imaginary and sensibility to the German literary tradition.

It may be argued that this is the situation of Italian-Canadian writers, who must negotiate between the sense of cultural loss and de-territorialization common to all immigrant groups and the need for re-territorialization through the English or French majority languages of Canada. Italian-Canadian writers are *minoritaires* in the sense that through their cultural practices they appropriate and re-interpret the languages and cultural referents of their adopted territory, effectively introducing an altered cultural/linguistic imaginary into public discourse: “By stressing Latinate vocabulary, by the insertion of Italian syntactical forms, and by the inclusion of linguistic elements that represent the utterances of immigrant culture, these writers have altered the semantic field of English, thereby denying expected meaning” (Verdicchio 17). This intensive use of language is one of the ways in which Italian-Canadian writing is transforming Canadian literature.

Italian-Canadian writers are also *minoritaires* in the sense that they import their own Italian cultural sensibilities and graft them onto their new Canadian realities. Like Kafka’s work, it too is literature produced by a minority in the languages of the majority (English and French). The emergence of Italian-Canadian and other ethnic-Canadian literatures has introduced new thematic concerns to the

country's literary tradition, such as immigration, acculturation, the return journey, racism, alienation, and cultural dislocation. In addition, these minority literatures contribute new formal elements to Canadian writing, such as immigrant autobiography, linguistic contamination, and intertextuality.

Finally, Italian-Canadians are *minoritaires* in that they are increasingly alienated from contemporary Italian cultural narratives. With the passage of years, the culture of reference (Italian) becomes a trace which is constantly being reinterpreted and transformed. This is especially true of the succeeding generations of ethnics who are born and educated in Canada, and whose cultural attachments and affinities to Italy are tenuous at best. The spatial, temporal, and cultural distance from the homeland results in an articulation of "Italian-ness" which is itself contaminated by a variety of Canadian cultural and linguistic elements. This different articulation of identity through cultural products is what Deleuze and Guattari would argue as the principal contribution of the *minoritaire* to the adopted society. Writing from this position of alterity becomes for the Italian-Canadian not only a way of reappropriating past tradition but also of projecting future possibilities and cultural narratives.

Fulvio Caccia has applied Henri Gobard's tetralinguistic model of language to Italian-Canadian writing in order to explore the convergence of diverse linguistic levels in the writing, each of which refers to a particular mode of ethnic experience:⁶

First, a vernacular language, of rural and maternal origin. It signifies the here and now. Then there is vehicular language, urban, state-controlled, bureaucratic and commercial. This language is found everywhere and acts as a primary agent of deterritorialization. Referential language is the language of culture, the language of over there. Lastly, there is mythic language, the language of religion, of the beyond. (*Contrasts*156)

Caccia argues that in the case of Italian-Canadians, regional dialects (Sicilian, Neapolitan, Molisano, etc.) correspond to the vernacular language and are “the language of remembrance and exile” (157) that are spoken in the home. English and/or French are both vehicular and referential languages, since they are the languages of state education and social functioning within Canada. They represent the unavoidable break from the maternal language, signalling the “primary deterritorialization” and subsequent changes within immigrant culture. English and French are also the referential languages, the languages of written expression which initiate the process of re-territorialization. Within this scheme, normative Italian becomes the mythic language, the language of religion, myth, and church (159) which manifests not only the wealth of Italian tradition but also the assimilationist strategies of northern Italy vis-à-vis regional cultural expression.⁷

The intermingling of each of these linguistic levels in Italian-Canadian literature enables the display of a multitude of points of reference, positionalities, and identities for the narrator who is exploring his or her cultural heritage. The constant

switching between language modes involves not only the negotiation of different cultural and social spheres but also a more subtle shift in subjectivity and outlook. It signals the complex relationships between historical contingency, personal identity, and cultural memory. Language use (the choice of language as well as its application and symbolic functions in the text) occupies a central role in the construction of ethnic subjectivity, for language is the principal means by which cultural attachment to the homeland is maintained, yet also the means by which that attachment is undermined.

A variety of approaches have been taken on the complex issue of language use in Italian-Canadian writing.⁸ The issues addressed in this debate include the social and political consequences of language choice (particularly in Quebec), the consequences of writing exclusively in a heritage language in a Canadian market, and the syntactical, grammatical, and aesthetic effects of multilingual transposition. Common to each of these approaches though is the recognition that the choice of language and its “intensive” usage are employed as tools in the ongoing exploration of ethnic identity, cultural memory, and community. As Joseph Pivato eloquently points out, “The search for authenticity becomes one for the right language, the best mode of expression, the faithful translation” (“Constantly Translating” 68).

Language functions in a variety of ways in the Italian-Canadian text, each of which points to the desire and to the difficulty of maintaining a stable sense of identity. At its simplest level, the language used in these texts is an indicator of the

socio-cultural reality of Italian-Canadians, for it is an English contaminated with Italian expressions, words, and grammatical structures, and as such it faithfully reproduces the quotidian reality of all immigrant groups in Canada who negotiate the different spheres of their lives in different languages. This is especially true of ethnic writers in Quebec, who vacillate between the Italian and English realities, but also the French one in that province.⁹

The Italian language and/or dialect spoken by the immigrant generation is “a marker of difference and an element of isolation” in mainstream Canadian society (Canton 90). The heritage language is often also “an element of alienation” (Canton 6) for the first generation immigrants as well as a “reminder of displacement and deterritorialization” (Canton 81). Yet when the linguistic difference of everyday life is introduced into a work of literature, it becomes a much more complex affair, for switching between English, Italian, and regional dialects implies various “versions” of an ethnic self, various positions in relation to these two cultures.

Canton identifies two major functions of this sort of linguistic interference in the Italian-Canadian novel: “The first is purely to give the text an Italian flavour--to mark *italianità* in the writing; the second serves a specific function in illustrating the duality inherent in the Italian-Canadian identity” (201). I would argue that the second function outlined is the more complex, for this form of linguistic interference underlies experimentation with possible identities and possible “versions” of self. It

corresponds also to the intensive use of language in minority literatures as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari.

In the Italian-Canadian text, both normative Italian and regional dialects are commonly associated with the most emotional and corporeal aspects of identity--a sort of familial and pre-rational language of the sensory. Language is both "porous" with memories of the past and duplicitous in its constant shifts of meaning. It functions as a mnemonic device that transports the narrator back to his or her Italian childhood, as well as a hyperreal cipher of "Italian-ness" in the text. The instances of Italian words present in the predominantly English text serve to highlight a particularly untranslatable cultural moment or reference--an often emotionally charged one.

For the post-immigrant generations, the roles which the English and Italian languages play are reversed, as the vehicular language comes to symbolize integration and success while the heritage language, increasingly impoverished, comes to symbolize a tenuous connection to the past: "How do they react to this language fraught with the suffering of the past? They deny it, they repress it. The apprenticeship of the vehicular language and the frenetic adhesion to the values of a consumer-oriented society become the accepted means through which to make the break (Caccia "The Italian Writer and Language" 157). As succeeding generations are acculturated to the English and/or French languages, Italian weakens to the point where it becomes a source of shame, a constant reminder of the unbridgeable distance

between their own reality and that of Italy. Their grasp of Italian deteriorates to the point where they are reduced to speaking an Italian “baby talk” (Canton 98).

The immigrant's struggle with the language of the majority constitutes a strategy of adaptation to the new society but also serves as the vehicle through which the culture of the other is appropriated and rewritten. Language use in the Italian-Canadian text is characterized by indeterminacy, play, and by the inability to properly translate one socio-cultural reality into another. This has been pointed out by Joseph Pivato:

Italian-Canadian writing demonstrates that the ethnic writer is constantly involved with the process of translation, process that highlights the ambivalence of ethnicity in Canada [...] translation is the transformation of regional and ethnic values from one social context to another. (“Constantly Translating” 60)

This process of literal translation in the ethnic's day-to-day functioning is soon transformed into a more symbolic translation and representation of reality in which the cultural codes and sensibilities of the homeland and that of Canada are intermingled. While something is always lost in the process of translation, what is gained is an understanding of one's locatedness and subject position within Canadian culture, an awareness of the position of cultural difference from which one speaks:

Italian-Canadians are suspended between the English/French Canadian reality and their own cultural background, the result of which one could imagine as

a centre/margin relationship in which, every day, every single act or thought enacts a continual switching of positions from the centre to the margins, and back again. There is a play of multiple personalities and unstable subject positions where the languages of thought and expression do not necessarily match, where intellectual and social life conflict, and where the political opposition to a dominant culture often manifests itself as an internal, rather than external, experience. (Verdicchio, *Devils in Paradise* 15)

Through the adoption of the majority language, a sense of location with respect to an Italian homeland is expressed, as is a sense of difference from its native speakers. The difficult task of negotiating a new identity is done through the English language, which is the “agent of re-territorialization” in Canada but, paradoxically, also a marker of ethnic difference since it is an English interspersed with Italian words and grammatical structures. This different way of speaking or of giving voice to the immigrant experience through the English language becomes one of the ways in which ethnic identity is fashioned and performed.

THE LANGUAGE OF MEMORY AND DESIRE: MARY DI MICHELE AND GIANNA PATRIARCA

The primary role of language in the immigrant text is as a vehicle for personal narrative and for the translation of familial history. Language (including English,

French, Italian, and the various dialects) is a function of a speaking voice which tells the immigrant narrative of displacement and acculturation. The project of the immigrant writer is to forge a new “transcultural” identity which brings together elements from two traditions. Access to each of these traditions is through language, and we soon discover in reading Italian-Canadian writers that language is problematic for a number of reasons, the most obvious being the immigrant’s difficulty in coming to terms with a new language system and his or her efforts at communicating with those that construct him or her as other.

Another difficulty of course is the sense of duality and contradiction which two or more languages evoke. In her poetry, Mary di Michele constructs a binary opposition between Italian, the language of childhood memories and family, and English, the vehicular language of learning and literary expression. While the former is equated to a “purer” or more authentic sense of identity, the latter indicates a constructed self, one which must bridge the two realities represented by Italy and Canada:

My relationship to the language, English, in which I write, is doubly distanced. I am aware of the extent to which written language is patriarchal... I am distanced again because my mother tongue, the language of my primal, early childhood experience, the only language my mother speaks, is Italian... “The trouble with you,” one man said to me, “is that you think in English and feel in Italian.” (“Conversations” 105)

This “crossing” of Italian sensibility and English language is at the root of the transcultural reinscription of cultural codes. For di Michele, memory is a “loose mosaic” which must be pieced together, and language itself is a constant source of “static, noise, interference” (“Notes” 14). She is concerned with the process of translation, be it the translation of personal experience into words, the translation of Italian memory into English text, or the translation involved in the dialogue between cultures.¹⁰ Through her poetry, di Michele evokes the myriad ways in which her identity has been shaped by the subtle transfers between the Italian and Canadian cultures in which she was born and raised. In “Luminous Emergencies,” for instance, identity is negotiated through a subtle play on language and signification:

They say that landscape and language,
 the ampersand, are imprinted on our minds
 in the same way geese
 fix on the first moving sign as Mother
 I remember Italia of the *praetutti*,
 of Ovid, of D’Annunzio, of Silone, of Hemingway’s soldier boy self
 in A Farewell to Arms.
 And what I knew from the start.

Original. (*Stranger in You* 62)

Both landscape and language are “imprinted” on the mind and become primal markers of identity and memory. The past is accessed through the Italian language

while acculturation to the English world is an “un-Mothering” that brings about an effacement of that “original” Italian idiom:

That my tongue has been un-
 Mothered. That my tongue has thickened
 with English consonants and diphthongs,
 mustard and horseradish. That burning.
 That burdened.
 While on my lips Italian feels
 more free, like wind in the trees
 when the window’s sealed shut
 and you’re trapped inside a solitary
 game of Scrabble. (*Stranger in You* 67)

English trips up the Italian tongue, making speech burdensome, while the mother tongue is “more free,” expressing a musicality that resonates within the body. English is a labyrinthine maze through which the young immigrant girl must make her way, a language that “thickens” the tongue, evoking the sense of powerlessness and frustration that comes when one cannot communicate effectively in a new language. This poem reflects di Michele’s personal experiences of alienation and isolation when she moved to Canada at a young age. She is rendered mute in her inability to speak the new language, and English is experienced as an assault or violence against her.

The Italian language on the other hand accesses the past more powerfully than English, for it is “an emotional language containing the intensity of family bonds and primary experiences” (“Invisible Cities” 37). Through this “language of desire,” di Michele relates the most visceral memories of childhood and seeks to go beyond formal language codes by inscribing the “physicality” of her Italian experience.¹¹ Her language of memory seems physically heavy, carrying with it traces of the past as well as sentiments of loss and longing. Katherine Ings points out, “She recognizes both the allure of learning a new language and the unsettling, sometimes dangerous, consequences of relinquishing one’s mother tongue” (60). These Italian words within her text, “stones,” as di Michele refers to them, evoke an Italian tradition and sensibility which subverts the smooth surface of English:

The untranslated word acts as body. If it eats garlic, it offends. For the poet, it has both meaning and a primary emotional valence; erotic texture. But the reader whose mother tongue is the official language of the poet also encounters that foreign word in a complex way: s/he is excluded from its semantic-syntactical relevance (subversive), while at the same time s/he can’t help but sense the physicality of the word (obscure musical notation). (“Notes” 20)

The foreign word is a “cipher,” and Italian words included in the text are for di Michele an extension of the corporeal, representing the musicality and orality of the Italian language. It is a speaking position that seems to her “truer” for it is a

physical manifestation of memory and identity: “The untranslated word from another language is like an outcrop of bedrock, more physical in its texture than the rest of the text, thick and undecipherable, it is the body of the poet asserting itself to the English mind” (“Conversations” 105). Thus, the foreign words in the English text have a dual effect on a non-Italian readership; they mark the ethnic otherness of the narrator while at the same time partially excluding them from the most intimate aspects of her psyche. This is one of the ways in which the ethnic writer appropriates the language of the majority and “writes back” the centre from his or her own cultural position:

With the acquisition of a language of expression, with the opening provided by language as an antagonistic tool, Italian Canadian writers have been able to turn the English language back toward those who call it their mother tongue...The expression of Italian Canadian “silence” becomes Anglo Canada’s interpretative silence. (Verdicchio 17)

In “The Primer,” the English language is likened to sexual abuse, as male desire and discourse forced upon the young Italian girl. She “doesn’t remember what was/spoken in another language,” remembering instead the “smaller matters...some dimes, bright but/misting in the palm,” and the stick of gum offered as a gift in exchange for her silence, “their dusting of sugar/she remembers unwrapping the odour/of synthetic mint” (*Stranger in You* 49). She accesses the past through a series

of prelinguistic sensations: taste, smell, and touch: “the gum is mnemonic. To bring back the experience” (50).

During the abuse the young girl holds her fingers up to her lips “as if for silence/the gesture in alternating currents/of strength and fragility” (50). She is silenced by the secrecy of the act but also by her inability to voice her objections, her failure to communicate in the language of her abuser. She is offered an English dictionary, a gift which would help her decipher the language codes forced upon her, but refuses it. The distinction is made between young girl and narrator, between her childhood self and the adult narrator interpreting her story: “They think we’re the same/but we’re *not*, the writer/and the text. You see/she called me in to interpret” (52). The narrator is afraid that by writing of her childhood in a foreign language (English), she will silence her childhood self.

The Italian language here becomes alienating because *distant*, that is to say, memories of early childhood which transpired in Italian are located in a constant *elsewhere* that must be recalled or recreated in the present. The poem points to the tenuous nature of memory and suggests the difficulties of faithfully recording the past, especially when that past has taken place in another language. Eventually, writing in English silences and betrays her Italian past: “The girl’s origins--her gender and language--corner her in an impossible position: she can transcend her original language, but only by violating herself as a woman” (Ings 61).

This poem and others highlight di Michele's obsession with the gap between young Italian girl and mature poet. She speculates on what happened between and within that spatial and temporal gap of child and adult self, on her possible identities had emigration never taken place. This is a recurring concern in much of the writing of Italian-Canadians, and is, in my opinion, central to the process of ethnic self-interrogation. In di Michele's work for example, this speculation is voiced through photographs or through mirrors that reflect an alternate self. The adult poet comes across a childhood photograph and finds the experience alienating; the child is far removed from present realities, situated in a different life with its own possibilities. In one poem di Michele writes, "This is the picture which dreams itself larger/than my life" and in another:

Photograph of a girl dressed as a gypsy,
 child waist pinched by a red girdle,
 for *Carnevale*,
 in another world, wearing the black academic gown,
 a rabbit skin around her shoulders, she hangs on the wall of a suburban
 bungalow. (*Stranger in You* 5)

She is contained within the frame of the photograph, as if imprisoned there or frozen in time. Nathalie Cooke points out that di Michele occupies two distinct roles within her poetry: she is both "guide and object on display" (45). She is the subject of the poem, the immigrant girl struggling with English, but also the poet who

listens, relates and transcribes the goings-on in the child's world. This dual perspective of the ethnic subject, alluded to earlier, is a strategy which enables the construction and elaboration of a personal sense of history and of ethnic identity.

Another way in which di Michele disrupts the normal codes of signification, or, as Boelhower expresses it, "unscrews the signifiers bolted down to established codes" (232) is by re-evaluating and reinscribing her "Italian-ness." Markers of ethnicity, (figured in her poems through references to daVinci, red wine, olive skin, Italian food, etc.) occupy a precarious existence as both authentic and inauthentic: authentic because they are an undeniable aspect of Italian-Canadian identity, but inauthentic in that they quickly become stereotypes and "ethnic excess." For this reason, references to typical markers of Italian-ness function as hyperreal simulacra of Italian-Canadian ethnicity, becoming a sort of silent performance of difference. This becomes problematic for di Michele's narrators, who must come to terms with their ethnicity without falling into facile stereotypes or nostalgia. A subtle irony inserts itself between the narrator and her explorations of her own ethnicity, and the otherness which is marked upon her body becomes something to be consumed by the gaze of the other, a "feast for your eyes" (*Stranger in You* 4).

The narrator is identified by her exoticism, by the "*melanzane alla parmigiana*" and "*cappuccino*" which mark her difference to her Canadian friends but which risk effacing her specificity. As the lengthy and ironic title of one of her poems suggests (Life is Theatre or O to be Italian Drinking Cappuccino on Bloor

Street at Bersani's & Carnevale's) ethnicity is both performance on the part of the narrator and an imposed "othering" on the part of her non-Italian lover: "*You're so melodramatic*, he said, *Marriage to you would be like living in an Italian opera*" (42). There is a dual movement toward and away from markers of ethnicity, a desire to "translate" her otherness so that it will be meaningful to the English majority, but also a desire to move beyond ethnic masks and theatrics. The "Italian-ness" of Italian-Canadians may be a liberating source of cultural self-discovery and belonging, but it may also trap them in that very difference. Nicholas Harney notes:

The charm of Mediterranean exotica in "Little Italies" around the city creates opportunities for Italian Canadians to reap financial rewards by marketing their "Italian" authenticity, their "practical knowledge," and their "cultural vitality" to the Canadian public, but it also limits and restricts those who wish to break out into different fields and new directions. (173)

In the linguistic dissonances of her poetry, in the fragmented personae victimized by language, by memory, and by familial conflict, di Michele excavates the opaque nature of human identity and highlights the various identities which the ethnic subject creates in an attempt at wholeness. She blurs the binaries that are set up between Italian and Canadian not only through the multiple voices and languages present in her poetry, but also through her formal techniques of blending postmodern concerns with baroque detail.¹² A.M. Holmes suggests that di Michele "draw[s] on chiaroscuro to provide depth and mystery in her literary canvases and to trouble any

simplistic, didactic splits between such things as Italian and Canadian identity, youth and age, health and sickness, wholeness and fragmentation” (178). This chiaroscuro technique enables the articulation of difference within her texts and enables the representation of the eclectic impressions and memories of the ethnic subject.

The absence of language, or the inability to speak, is one of the powerful ways in which Italian-Canadian women’s identity is contested and negotiated. The silence of immigrant women, as imposed order and as subversive act, is explored by both Mary di Michele and Gianna Patriarca. While silence is a sign of the traditional subservient role of women in Italian households, it may also come to represent the refusal to speak, justify, or answer to male authority. In di Michele’s “Sunday Dinner,” for instance, the young narrator resists patriarchal authority through silence when her father chastises her for preparing a poor meal: “I look into the eyes of the potato/on my plate, cold as stone and dumb/and say NOTHING” (*Tree of August* 44). Despite the father’s continued control over the household, the young girl’s emphatic refusal to answer to his authority signals a form of resistance to him.

In the spaces “between” the Canadian and Italian value systems, tensions between generations quickly emerge. In “How to Kill Your Father,” anger manifests itself through silence, through the inability of one generation to speak to another: “He

breaks a promise on the road to Firenze/You will not speak to him all through/the drive in the Tuscan hills... Your north american education/has taught you how to kill a father/but you are walking down an Italian *via*, so you will surrender" (*Stranger in You* 5). The father offers a truce but "not truth," and continues to impose his will upon his Canadian-raised daughter. Both literally and metaphorically, father and daughter no longer speak the same language, and the only peace possible is that which comes with silence. Canton writes that, "Language is not merely a marker of difference, it is also an element of isolation, and this within the family as well as in society...language is responsible for the ensuing lack of communication between parents and children" (90). For the transitional generation, the space of the new world is alienating and forbidding, for it deprives them of the traditional customs, habits, and cultural narratives of Italy. As a further injury, they are slowly alienated from their own children as well, who have adopted the values of Canada as their own.

Throughout much of di Michele's poems, the freedom to speak remains limited to the male figure within the immigrant family, and generational conflict is caused by the inability of fathers and daughters to find a common ground in which to communicate. In "The Disgrace" for instance, the rigid role which the male and female figures occupy means that the women have no voice: "My mother and aunts/serve the unwritten stories of their lives/which they wipe away without pause" (*Stranger in You* 8). For the most part uneducated, these immigrant women inscribe their stories through the families they raise and through the domestic chores which

they perform: “The ladies, *le signore*, are ready to repeat/stories as my mother offers coffee and cake” (8). The narrator is aware of the division between the male and female members of her extended family, each occupying a different space in the home, and while women are relegated to the kitchen, where they are able to whisper or gossip among themselves, the men in the living room argue with self-assured authority: “They think they are creating life in the living-room,” but in fact “they do not write their own histories. They tell similar stories as the women/but as authorities, not as gossips/with the weight of the fist” (10). The women in the kitchen, as generators of life and of oral narrative, undermine the more forceful arguments of the males, who become tragi-comic figures.

Similarly, in *Italian Women and Other Tragedies* and *Daughters for Sale*, Gianna Patriarca explores domestic space as a site of male power and control, where authority is invested through language and violence. In “My Birth,” the female child hears “welcoming sounds” only from her mother, while her father “mourns the loss of his own/immortality” (*Italian Women* 10) when he discovers his newborn child is not a male who can carry on his name. The Italian women remain isolated from their new society by virtue of their limited social mobility and by their inability to speak the language of the majority. Within her own family, the immigrant woman does not have a voice:

These are the women

who were born to give birth

they breathe only
 leftover air
 and speak only
 when deeper voices
 have fallen asleep. (*Italian Women* 9)

The immigrant woman's world is one of hushed voices, silenced by her husband and by her cultural isolation. Language becomes a means of control and of punishment: "my father called me whore/and my mother cried" (11); harsh words give way to violence as paternal authority is imposed. Charlene Diehl-Jones writes that "Patriarca is particularly drawn to domestic space, and writes with passion about its beauty and its lurking violence" (52).

The theme of silence resurfaces in a number of places in Patriarca's texts, from the silence which instills itself between generations to the refusal to "discuss the distance" between Italy and Canada. Silence is a common response to the loss and alienation of the immigrant who realizes that there is no possible return. It instills itself between those who have emigrated to Canada and those who are left behind: "from the ocean into silence/all the years were/her grandchildren" (*Italian Women and Other Tragedies* 12).

In the transcultural negotiation between Italy and Canada, practices picked up from the adopted society work to subvert facile and static notions of identity inscribed by ethnic affiliation. As Boelhower points out, the immigrant (and

transcultural) self creates “semantic disorder” that disrupts official discourse. While Boelhower is referring here to the immigrant’s disruption of the official discourse of mainstream Canada, it may be argued that its reverberations are felt the other way as well; that is to say, the “encounter” between cultures functions to disrupt essentialist notions of identity created by the immigrant culture itself. Not only are basic issues such as the role of women or the politics of familial power reconsidered within this transcultural space, but relationships to language codes and other markers of “Italianness” are re-evaluated as well. Genni Donati Gunn points out:

Italian-Canadian literature written by second and third generation Italian women is more feminist in nature, and covers universal women’s issues. In part, this is due to the awareness which stems as a result of the integration of two cultures--the examination of each and the acceptance and rejection of certain factors. (142)

Di Michele and Patriarca re-appropriate Italian cultural memory but also subvert the limiting and limited social roles attached to ethnicity. This is manifested not only in harsh criticism of the patriarchal familial politics which mark Italian immigrant communities, but also in the cultural rigidity and self-ghettoization that manifests itself within them. Di Michele and Patriarca are aiming at a practical form of feminism which addresses issues of concern to immigrant women coming from a culture steeped in patriarchal tradition. Robert Billings points out, “Di Michele is creating a variation of feminism; the feminism not of the middle-class North

American, but of the first generation immigrant daughter trying to throw off the shackles of traditional family duty” (106).

Both di Michele and Patriarca use language as a vehicle for personal narrative, for the translation of oral history and the reclaiming of ethnic origins. Language is also used subversively in order to undermine male discourses of power and gender in the home. The frictions between Italian fathers and their Canadian-raised daughters become increasingly difficult to resolve, as each of them speaks from a position that has become alien to the other. But as di Michele make clear, the search for an authentic Italian-Canadian voice demands the questioning of traditional roles and the appropriation of voice in a patriarchal environment: “The speaking in silence is also very much about identity and having the self, because without the ability to speak, woman is not allowed a self or a name” (“Patterns” 56). The negotiation of identity for Italian-Canadian women involves not only the contradictions and difficulties of bridging the Italian and Canadian cultural/linguistic realities, but also often involves confrontation with family members who seek to uphold old values in a new social reality.

ANTONIO D’ALFONSO’S LANGUAGE OF DIFFERENCE

Throughout his poetry and prose, Antonio D’Alfonso switches between Italian, English, and Molisano, each of them occupying different roles in a

polycultural and polylingual identity. Each of these languages functions as vehicles into the various cultural environments in which he is engaged as writer, critic, and publisher. The switching between languages in his texts and in his day-to-day functioning corresponds to a shift in subject positions and cultural locations. This creates the effect of a fluid identity in which inclusion in one group does not necessarily preclude inclusion in another. The narrator of *Fabrizio's Passion* reflects upon this privileged position at the intersection between cultures: "Being a strange combination of cultures, I was able to converge my three views of this city (Montreal) and form a completely unique triangular (tripartite) worldview" (212).

D'Alfonso's sense of his own identity as an ethnic goes beyond this tripartite division, for in his work as a publisher of minority writers in Canada, the U.S., and Europe, he explicitly expresses the understanding that he "participates in" each of the cultures with which he has contact, refusing to limit himself to the antiquated notion that national boundaries define identity: "I have become allergic to any blind adherence to an identity which bases itself on a nationalist sentiment...to limit ethnicity to a country is to belittle the highest component of its meaning, that is, ethnicity has developed into such a complex transborder experience that the terms *emigrant* and *immigrant* can no longer contain it. (*In Italics* 13-19). For D'Alfonso, then, ethnic identity surpasses the simple binary between old world/new world to incorporate myriad linguistic and cultural experiences from various communities.

In *The Other Shore* and in *Fabrizio's Passion*, D'Alfonso's narrators grapple with English and French, but especially Italian, and are frustrated by the inability to contain language -- to nail down its meanings or circumscribe its power to define. Constantly shifting in both the meanings it generates and the experiences it describes, language, like identity itself, is tenuous and profoundly mysterious. Language contains (in the sense of enclosure or containment) the cultural narratives and collective memory of a people, and is therefore heavy with cultural significations and associations. But language also paradoxically frees its user to improvise meanings, ascribe significations, and provide new interpretations. The paradoxical effect of language is its ability to generate a multitude of meanings but also its ability to reduce or constrict meaning to a single proper name or word. These concerns are at the heart of *The Other Shore*.

In this collection, D'Alfonso is aware of the simultaneous "fullness" and "emptiness" of language play in the Derridean sense. He makes his readership aware that the languages in which he expresses himself are in constant interaction, and that the complex relationships between syntax, emphasis, choice of words, and linguistic structures in his work reflects the complex interactions of the various personae which make up his identity: "Language inevitably loses all its meaning when it falls into the hands of a writer. Especially when the writer uses a language that is not his own, that is not the language of his people. Difference" (108).

D'Alfonso's exploration of various personae and identities is reflected in the opening note to the collection, where the narrator states: "This book of broken verses, broken thoughts, about broken feelings. This, a notebook without a beginning, without an end, only a flowing towards being, a growing; contradictions and explanations" (*The Other Shore* 7). This collection of poems, in journal form, records the thoughts and impressions of an ethnic writer who crosses physical, linguistic, and cultural borders. Written both in Canada and Italy, the work seems to capture perfectly the tensions which emerge in this negotiation of cultural and physical space.

D'Alfonso meditates upon the physicality of language, the manner in which it is burdened with meanings, history, and personal memory. Language is for him contingent upon sensual experience and oral narrative, and is often described in physical terms: "The fluidity of language. Language as liquid (111); "The flakiness of words. What peels off or can be chipped. Words wear down. They lose their thickness and crumble, exhausted... A great tendency to excessive reduction to darken the gamut of possible meaning" (17). Language also courses through the body and the breath, and is equated, as in the poetry of di Michele, to a corporeal and "pure" mode of expression: "I do not break the natural flow of language purposely. It is the way language comes out of my body. I breathe this way normally. When critics scorn my writing for being rigid, unnatural, I feel as if they are criticizing me for the way I breathe, for being the way I am" (110).

The linguistic tension and unease in D'Alfonso's work--a product of his trilingual upbringing--becomes a "natural" form of expression mirroring his pluricultural identity. Mary di Michele writes that, "D'Alfonso is not concerned with the purity or reality of language... words have no weight without experience; they are contingent on experience and on the personal voice" ("Review" 146). There is in D'Alfonso's work a preoccupation with self-presentation--with the physical display of the ethnic body and the linguistic display of the ethnic accent, with the performative aspects of ethnicity.

In *The Other Shore*, D'Alfonso vacillates between these two views and functions of language: language as an essential, constitutive aspect of identity and of the ethnic body, and language as a slippery and arbitrary code which seeks to express emotion, memory, and meaning. Language is ripe with powerful emotional value and associations, but can just as easily be emptied of these: "Language, a thing that contains itself. Not all language contains *a priori* memory. It may contain nothing at all. Language is overburdened with itself. It is energy propelling the user of language" (106).

The ethnic's process of writing involves the translation of one cultural and linguistic reality into another, and D'Alfonso highlights the degree to which the interpenetration of languages translates an Italic sensibility into an English one: "I write with the memory of one language in mind and express this memory in another language. It is the marriage of memories" (108). This literal translation of languages

involves a transformation of self as well, a constant negotiation of identity between the language of childhood and those acquired later on: “Even Italian is a learned language for me. Language of the North, it is not the language my thoughts got formed in nor the music I hear in my head at night when I cannot get to sleep. Already a transformation occurs: from Guglionese, I must translate into Italian. When I write, I translate” (*The Other Shore* 109).

The inability of D’Alfonso’s narrator to completely *possess* the normative Italian language, and therefore participate fully in Italian cultural life, becomes a source of anguish and frustration, a realization of his otherness with respect to the Italian cultural elite. While Guglionese represents the emotive, corporeal response to his surroundings and his upbringing in an immigrant household, standardized Italian represents a language of loss, a language of dislocation and of familial history disconnected from its source of cultural wealth. The inability to speak proper Italian represents alienation from the Italian cultural tradition. Caccia points out that “for the majority of Italian-Canadians, the relationship to normative Italian is included within this complex pattern. At once desired and detested, Italian, the mythic language, is also the language of power. The ability to speak Italian well is a mark of class, of social mobility” (*Contrasts* 159). For D’Alfonso then, each of these languages corresponds to a particular type of memory, a particular sphere of cultural identity and a particular ethnic performance or “*savoir-faire*”: “La traduction possède une

fonction ludique. Les langues semblent correspondre à différents registres comme s'ils représentaient des mémoires différentes" (Sandhu 101).

D'Alfonso seeks to find a proper language in which to write, one which will authentically mediate his experiences as an Italian, as a Guglionese, and as a Montrealer: "Now that I have relearned the syntax of my breath. Now that the muscles of my mouth are relaxed, I want to study the languages of history...my own grammar, my struggle with grammarless homes" (129). The constant movement from one linguistic frame to another and the interpenetrability and contamination which this implies is used in the Italian-Canadian text to signal the unease and ambiguity with which the hyphenated Canadian approaches questions of ethnic self-definition.

In his analysis of language use by Italian-Canadian writers, Pasquale Verdicchio concludes that "the major reason behind the use of Italian appeared to be one of assessing identity, reclaiming a language and a culture that has somehow become distant" (98). Again, a direct correlation is established between language use and identity construction in the Italian-Canadian immigrant narrative. Verdicchio argues that the inscription of Italian phrases, expressions, and dialogue in the text are part and parcel of the ethnic's reconstruction of memory--an attempt at bridging the realities of the past and those of the present. The Italian word in the English text not only affirms a particular immigrant history, it enunciates the narrator's ethnic specificity to a Canadian reading public: "The quoting of Italian words and phrases

is then an attempt to duplicate one's identity in language, a way of setting distance, of expressing difference" (119).

But Verdicchio goes much farther than other critics of Italian-Canadian literature in affirming that this struggle for cultural verisimilitude, specificity, and authenticity through the insertion of Italian words in the English text is in fact inauthentic and disingenuous, leading inevitably to "emptiness." This, he argues, is because the Italian language in such texts is taken out of context and does not simply serve as a transparent vehicle for the narrative. Rather, the Italian word, phrase, or expression in the English text is used in a hyperreal fashion, as a semantically charged marker of the "Italian-ness" of the enunciating subject:

Italian words are not *pretexts*, words which provide the text with its main theme, but merely represent a need to possess Italian. Could we consider this as an act of violence against the mother-language itself? It does indeed seem to create an environment in which the remembering (piecing together the fragments of a culture) works in contradiction, setting distance and expressing *difference* with itself. (100)

Verdicchio criticizes the way in which Italian words are simply inserted in the English text, effectively effacing the cultural implications, contexts and meanings surrounding them. Thus the power of the Italian word as a mark of authenticity is deconstructed. While the inclusion of Italian in the text is "rich in inclusive cultural

resonance,” Verdicchio concludes that the ultimate effect is that of “empty gesture and device” (99).

In the abandonment of one sign system for another, the Italian word loses its layers of meaning and depth, and becomes an empty sign of cultural difference that floats upon the surface of English: “The locking of Italian words and phrases within a different linguistic environment duplicates one’s identity in language and restricts a free-movement toward cultural presence” (Verdicchio 99) Again, the inclusion of the English word in the Italian-Canadian text serves, it seems to me, as a sort of performance of ethnicity, a way of rendering more secure one’s weak link to the Italian cultural tradition and language.

I would argue that this ambiguous relationship to language in the work of D’Alfonso and, indeed, in the work of many Italian-Canadian writers, reflects the ambiguity about their own sense of ethnic identity; in other words, there is in Italian-Canadian literature *both* an assumption of or desire for an “essential” Italian identity and a desire for a more dynamic sense of identity, one not necessarily tied down by Italian culture or tradition. This is shown in the writers’ recourse to (Italian) language as an assurance of “authenticity,” and their subsequent flight from it manifested through linguistic experimentation.

CHAPTER 3

ETHNIC IDENTITY AND SPATIAL IMAGINARY

TOWARD A THEORIZATION OF THE SPATIAL

This chapter addresses the ambiguous relationship between territory and ethnic identity in the work of several Italian-Canadian writers. More specifically, its aim is to understand the manner in which the ethnic's fictionalization of the spaces he or she inhabits is coterminous with the ongoing project of ethnic "self-fashioning." I propose that references to Italian and Canadian territory in the ethnic text are attempts at working out the ambiguities of identity in relation to the codes, practices, and ideologies of place, in effect a way of appropriating or making familiar the ethnic habitat. The imaginary construction of place in the immigrant and post-immigrant text is important for it provides us with an inroad into the often difficult terrain of ethnic identity.

The recent interest in the social sciences in spatiality as a method of categorizing, describing, and relating issues of social positioning, subjectivity, and locatedness has emanated in part from feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern explorations of marginal social positions and territorial agency. This articulation of the spatial in contemporary theory has produced important discourses in a variety of disciplines which examine the relationships between territory (real, imagined, symbolic, constructed) and identity.

In their introduction to *Place and the Politics of Identity*, Michael Keith and Steve Pile suggest that the renewed saliency of spatiality and of spatial metaphors in

describing social processes is attributable to several broad realities of contemporary life: the radical delegitimation of national (and consequently cultural) boundaries as a result of a rapidly de-colonizing world, the identity politics of feminist, diasporic, ethnic, and postcolonial subjects which have forced a renewed understanding of *locatedness* and agency, and finally, the rampant effects of global capitalism which simultaneously emphasizes cultural difference while homogenizing it for easy market commodification:

In order to articulate an understanding of the multiplicity and flexibility of relations of domination, a whole range of spatial metaphors are commonly being used: position, location, situation, mapping, geometrics of domination, centre-margin, open-closed, inside-outside, global-local, liminal space, third space, not-space, impossible space, the city. (1)

The authors go on to suggest that this concern with space has its roots in several key theorists, most notably Frederic Jameson, Edward Soja, and Homi Bhabha.¹³ In his seminal work *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson argues that the present postmodern era can be differentiated from the preceding modern one through its logic of spatial rather than temporal organization: “I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism” (16).

Jameson argues that the immediacy of multinational trade, communication, and cultural exchange worldwide has created “a spatial logic of multinational capitalism” that is paradoxically both homogeneous and fragmented. The ambiguity between the rampant standardization of all commodities and the commodification of difference (cultural and otherwise) creates this open “schizophrenic” world space. Jameson’s theorization of contemporary global spaces rests on his notion of *cognitive mapping*, which he develops from Kevin Lynch’s study of urban space.

In *The Image of the City*, Lynch writes that the individual subject is unable to map precisely either his/her own position in the city or the urban totality in which he or she is enmeshed. This form of alienation from the city matrix is countered through a “reconquest” of a sense of place, that is, an imaginary reconstruction of the city’s spatial totality emphasizing the passages, circuits, and neighbourhoods that one regularly circulates in.

Jameson extends this notion to the national and global scales, defining cognitive mapping as a sort of strategic representational aesthetic whose aim is to “enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” (51). In other words, cognitive mapping enables the positioning of self in relation to the immediate socio-spatial environment through an imaginary representation of that space.

Jameson further argues that the introduction of the map in cartography allowed for a cognitive mapping of the spaces first being charted in European colonial exploration, expansion, and navigation. The instruments of cartography (compass, sextet, map) induced a problematization of reference in the sense of the problematic referentiality of particular longitudinal and latitudinal points in relation to a larger spatial totality; and in the sense of the incommensurability between a two-dimensional representational map and the curved physical surface of the earth: “At this point cognitive mapping in the broader sense comes to require the coordination of existential data with un-lived, abstract conceptions of geographic totality” (51).

In other words, maps as representational strategies not only present their own paradoxes and inconsistencies, but also enabled the imaginary construction or the “filling in” of those empty places which were undiscovered or uncharted. These spaces may be thought of in terms of social and imaginary space (social class, national borders/boundaries, international space). What is of interest here is the notion that the representational schemes of a “real” territory do not necessarily correspond to the lived experience of place, nor do they necessarily correspond to the physical reality of the terrain.

Foucault has also recognized that, while the nineteenth century was marked with a concern for temporality, with the accumulation of history through a linear unfolding of its social processes, the present century has mostly generated discourses about spatiality:

The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity, we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (22)

What has caused this slow shift away from a concern with time and toward a concern with space? The modern/postmodern individual's ability to interact within a global sphere of markets, ideologies, and discourses, including economic transactions, physical displacement, emigration, mass culture, and the immediacy of the media, has created an amorphous and heterogeneous geographical imaginary which conflates different spaces while at the same time demarcating them one from the other--a sort of fetishization of McLuhan's idea of the "global village" which posits both the commonalities of cosmopolitan existence worldwide and the demarcation of cultural diversity. The experience of multiple places, either through their physical occupation or imaginary and media construction, enables the heterogeneity of place at the level of the individual subject. It also enables spaces to be invested with heterogeneous memories, meanings, ideologies, and relations of power. Places become absences, or they become marked with the traces of other spaces and other social realities.

Postcolonial and diasporic studies have also contributed significantly to the articulation of space as heterogeneous. Black and diaspora politics enables an imagining of cultural and political space not necessarily corresponding to national boundaries: “the (black) diaspora invokes an imagined geography, a spatiality that draws on connections across oceans and continents and yet unifies the Black experience inside a shared *territory*” (Keith 18). Likewise, postcolonial theory admits of spacial models that are manifold, contradictory, and marked with the difference of the other. Homi Bhabha points out that postcolonial discourse allows for “conflictual articulations of meaning and place, the partial--and double-identifications of race, gender, class, generation at their point of unfamiliarity, even incommensurability” (Keith 19).

The emerging, contestatory articulations of space put forth by feminist, postcolonial, and ethnic subjects undermine what Keith and Pile call the “myth of spatial immanence” that is, the assumption that there is a definitive understanding of place, “a *singular*, true reading of any specific landscape involved in the meditation of identity”(6). They identify a key development in the theorization of space put forth by feminist critics which revolves around an exploration of the “radical openness” of space, an alternative understanding and appropriation of the spaces occupied by hegemonic discourses.¹⁴

A different sense of place is being theorized, no longer passive, no longer fixed, no longer undialectical--because disruptive features interrupt any

tendency to see once more open space as the passive receptacle for any social process that cares to fill it. (5)

This is an important insight in the context of minority subjects and their “alternative” readings and re-readings of place, for if indeed space is never opaque, is always already constituted (*deja constitué*) by a plethora of meanings and ideologies, all new readings of place involve a partial displacement of those meanings and ideologies, a mapping that takes into account the subjective experience of the individual positioned in that space. The “radical openness” of space enables the appropriation and construction of space by subjects who are positioned outside of dominant discourses, and enables them to contest and rewrite the significations attached to territory from their own perspectives. The marginal voices represented in feminism, ethnic studies, black studies, and gay/lesbian studies not only offer alternate understandings of subjectivity and power, but also alternate understandings of space and spatiality. If these marginal voices are to have a place, it must be articulated and signified from their own experiences and cultural locations.

CANADIAN ETHNIC SPACES

In the context of ethnic subjectivity, the “spaces of contention” or contested spaces are both the territory adopted by the immigrant *and* the distant spaces of the homeland. Finding him or herself in an ambiguous space “between” cultures, the

ethnic subject generates meanings and readings of space as a consequence of position and locatedness, readings that construct place differently, creatively, and sometimes oppositionally:

It may be argued that simultaneously present in any landscape are multiple enunciations of distant forms of space--and these may be reconnected to the process of re-visioning and remembering spatialities of counter-hegemonic cultural practices. We may now use the term 'spatiality' to capture the ways in which the social and spatial are inextricably realized one in the other; to conjure up the circumstances in which society and space are simultaneously realized by thinking, feeling, doing individuals and also to conjure up the many different conditions in which such realizations are experienced by thinking, feeling, doing subjects. (Keith and Pile 6)

This imaging or inscription or codification of space as dual or multiple has also been theorized specifically in relation to Canadian ethnicity and postcoloniality. In "Decolonizing the Map," Graham Huggan identifies several rhetorical and literary strategies in contemporary Canadian and Australian literatures which problematize the notion of territorial integrity and homogeneity in postcolonial settler societies. Huggan argues that the ironic or parodic use of maps by Canadian writers such as Harris, Malouf, and Van Herk represent the map's incongruity or incommensurability to official discourses of colonial territoriality, in fact resisting the cartographic enclosure and "containment" of nationalist discourses:

A characteristic of contemporary Canadian and Australian writing is a multiplication of spatial references which has resulted not only in an increased range of national and international locations but also in a series of 'territorial disputes' which pose a challenge to the self-acknowledging 'mainstreams' of metropolitan culture, to the hegemonic tendencies of patriarchal and ethnocentric discourses, and implicitly, I would argue, to the homogeneity assumed and/or imposed by colonialist rhetoric. (Ashcroft *et al.* 408)

He further argues that this resignification of colonial/postcolonial Canadian space not only contests the framing of settler societies by the colonial power (in this case Great Britain), but in fact that the *internal* inconsistencies of place, that is, the writing of or about other places and cultures *within* settler societies also presents problems for reductionist discourses about national boundaries, spaces, and territory:

In the case of contemporary Canadian and Australian literatures, these (postcolonial) territories correspond to a series of new or revised rhetorical spaces occupied by feminism, regionalism, and ethnicity, where each of these items is understood primarily as a set of counter-discursive strategies which challenge the claims of or avoid the circumscription within one or other form of cultural centrism. (410)

Insofar as Italian-Canadian writing fictionalizes other spaces and cultural realities and highlights the otherness within Canadian boundaries, it highlights the

inconsistencies of equating a national territory with a homogeneous national culture. The ethnic ghetto or neighbourhood in the Canadian metropolis is a striking example of this, for it provides possibilities for reading place as resistance, disjunction, difference, and slippage in relation to the cartographic reality, representationality, and homogeneity of national territory. The ethnic ghetto is in this sense akin to Foucault's "heterotopia," a space which generates meanings beyond itself and which paradoxically refers to other, absent spaces.¹⁵ In the context of Canadian ethnic space, Francesco Loriggio writes that:

The Little Italies or the Chinatowns of North America are forward-moving (they are not Italy or China), but they are distinct from their surroundings because they are also past-oriented, refer to an elsewhere, and because of the effort that goes into retaining, into re-presenting that past or that elsewhere...Little Italies can be studied as instances of the precarious pluridimensionality of the nation in the twentieth century. If they move beyond the origin, immigrant enclaves also resist the location, the structure hosting them. (10-21)

How then does this theorization of spatiality relate to ethnicity and ethnic identity? Ethnic spaces, like the diasporic and postcolonial spaces just mentioned, enable a heterogeneous articulation of imaginary space--both the spaces that are physically inhabited and those that are traces or memories of an absent past. Both these "types" of space are involved in ethnic (and postcolonial, and diasporic)

meditations on and constructions of identity. For the ethnic subject, there is both the appropriation or taming of a place that is foreign (the adopted culture, the new land), and the reinscription or re-symbolisation of the place that was left behind (the place of origin, the heritage culture).

The ethnic subject thus occupies a liminal space within which identity is constantly being negotiated, rewritten, and performed--refashioned in an endless articulation of self in relation to these two spatial and cultural polarities (the here and now of Canada vs. the there and past of Italy). As Keith suggests, all subjective enunciations and narratives, both oral and literary, are already marked with assumptions about spatiality, positionality, and location:

The way in which we talk in everyday language is routinely spatially marked. Frequently, in efforts to speak to others, to emphasize or to generalize, this marking is toned down, suppressed, even eliminated. Again, we see a particular type of slippage by which the constitutive spatiality of "being" is *sotto voce*, muted in a bid for universality. (16)

These *sotto voce* articulations of place and of spatialized identity play against one another in a "jeu of ambivalence" (Boelhower 232) which shapes the ethnic subject's internal dialogue about his or her ethnic identity. In other words, each story or discourse is spatially located, and the appeal to universalism that the work of literature invokes or, conversely, its description of the particular experience being described, floats upon the spatial frame and positionality from which the narrative is

generated. This sense of positionality and generation of meaning extends not only to the writer or ethnic subject as creator of the narrative, but to the characters and events in the work itself: "Just as all knowledge on close inspection is both empowered and restrained by its situated generation, all narratives can be unpacked to reveal the frequently implicit spatialities that they evoke, varying from the mundane to the contradictory" (Keith and Pile 16).

There is therefore a level at which the writer's awareness of positionality constitutes an important aspect of identity construction (i.e., D'Alfonso's or di Michele's understanding and generation of self as "in between," as "exiled," as "dual," etc.) and a level at which characters and events in the novels or poetry are intricately affected and shaped by spatiality in their experiences of the *here* of Canada and the *there* of Italy. This creates an effect of spatial confusion, refraction, doubling, and conflation. It is for these reasons that place is central to the construction of ethnic identity, for it grounds personal history and immigrant experience within the two principal sites of ethnic articulation--the land of origin and the adopted territory. Paradoxically, place is at the same time inimical to ethnic self-definition, since place presents constant shifts in meaning, perspective, and signification--rendering difficult the construction of a "stable" ethnic identity.

In his analysis of *Roman Candles*, the first anthology of Italian-Canadian poetry, William Boelhower identifies an attempt at inscribing the ethnic voice within the geographical and cultural spaces of Canada. "Ethnic semiosis," he writes, is "the

act of producing the ethnic sign and of constructing the ethnic subject as author and cultural protagonist” (230). This return to or exploration of ethnic roots in immigrant and post-immigrant writing necessarily demands the active construction of personal and social identities which reflect the diverse experiences of immigration. This ethnic sensibility and aesthetic inscribe in narrative those fragments of memory, language, and culture which survive the process of acculturation to a new social reality.

Boelhower suggests that Italian-Canadian poetry shares a “pre-text,” a common story which situates the literary production of Italian-Canadians within the larger social and historical framework of Italian migration to Canada. This pre-text figures as the need to uncover one’s personal history through various “micro-strategies of ethnic sign production” (230). He identifies two models through which Italian-Canadian self-interrogation is articulated, a topological scheme and a genealogical one.

In the topological scheme, identity is expressed in spatialized terms which relate the old world to the new through a series of binary oppositions, “an open series of such binary categories as old world/new world; emigrant/immigrant; ethnic/non-ethnic; presence/absence; origin/trace; continuity/discontinuity; dwelling/nomadism; house/road; centre/periphery; proximity/distance” (231). By creating these dualities the ethnic poet opens up a space of cultural difference and discourse within Canadian space. By expressing in the text the tensions between these binaries, by exploring the “space between” Italian place-names and memories as opposed to Canadian ones, the

Italian-Canadian narrator thwarts the expected meanings and assumptions of the non-Italian reader. Canadian space is “made strange” or unfamiliar by virtue of its adjacency to Italian figurative space and Italian language. Similarly, Italian space is infused with “Canadian-ness” or at least the returning narrator’s understanding of his or her own Canadian gaze upon Italian space.

The narrator’s access to two distinct cultural registers enables the conjunction and/or reversibility of cultural referents, enables a scrutiny of each society from the positions of both “insider” and “outsider.” By writing of a “different” Canadian experience, through the intensive use of language and linguistic experimentation, the Italian-Canadian writer opens up a space of difference: “Given this copresence of cultural models and the principle of reversibility deriving from it, the ethnic subject is able to carry out his/her *jeu* of ambivalence, break up the unidirectionality of official cultural discourse” (Boelhower 232).

The genealogical principle in Italian-Canadian writing derives, according to Boelhower, from the desire for a *patria*. The past (both the personal past and the collective past of Italian-Canadians) must necessarily be rediscovered or recreated (through memory, through the return voyage, through oral narratives, through the interpretation of past relics like photographs, etc.). The sense of cultural loss that comes with physical displacement is mediated through the desire to retell the immigrant story, which is, in essence, “an epistemological exercise in remembering” (235): “The ethnic subject goes forward by going backwards. It is this kind of

questioning that produces ethnic *savoir-faire*, both as competence and performance” (236).

Boelhower puts forth the notion that “the human species cannot do without topological systems that are relatively stable and in their absence it is impossible to find a dwelling...the more intense the crisis of *habitare* is, the greater the tendency to idealize or mythologize another place” (276). Since *habitare* involves spatial circulation and appropriation, the narrator’s main preoccupation is the search for the meanings which will link up the discontinuous experiences of place (either in the Canadian city or in the Italian village). What then is the process by which immigrants adapt to the spaces which they inhabit? In what ways is ethnicity as a technology of self invented and experienced in response to the social and cultural circumstances in which one lives? How does the ethnic subject reconcile the dimly remembered villages of the old world and the urban matrix of the Canadian city?

The distinction must first be made between the ethnic’s experience of the Canadian city in which he or she intersects with the cultural mainstream, and the experience of the remembered place of origin, often idealized or rendered mythic by virtue of its spatial and temporal distance. Italian space, like the Italian language, is often equated to a desire for an “authentic” self, and, as Corrado Federici points out, “The distant shore becomes rhetoricized and so evokes connotations of heritage, cultural identity, authenticity, and origin” (66). Canadian space, on the other hand,

is experienced as a difficult linguistic and cultural terrain that must be understood, negotiated, and eventually appropriated. Nicholas Harney writes:

Space is central to the construction of identity and culture in the postcolonial world. The presence, in polyethnic states, of diverse immigrant communities that maintain ties across state borders requires that we rethink the connections between how spatial arrangements influence the imagining of complex forms of identity and culture. Italian immigrants...reterritorialize their Italian identity by creating associations and institutions within the city's topography. This remapping of identity onto new spaces is integrated into the global imagining of Italianness by those in the transnational networks. Reterritorialized communities actively create sites for the elaboration of cultural practices. (8)

Ethnicity privileges spatial metaphors and reference, for if ethnic identity is a connection to one's cultural and historical roots, then the "malaise" of ethnicity, the difficulty in grasping it fully, stems from the irreconcilable spatial and temporal distance from the point of origin. It is within these spatial references and geographical positionings that the minority writer will "invent" a sense of ethnic and personal identity.

The ethnic subject who circulates in the Canadian city or the Italian village is a sort of "bricoleur" in the sense described by Camellari (and by Lévi-Strauss) in that he or she creates and transforms meaning out of the objects and surroundings which are at hand. As the ethnic appropriates the spatial environment, he or she

“invents” or creates meanings for him or herself out of the heterogeneous spaces encountered. This is an important element in the ethnic subject’s understanding of a dual self, for it involves the negotiating of spatial and cultural diversity, a “levelling” of difference so as to make it manageable. This levelling of contradictory spatial and cultural experiences is managed through the creation of private narratives (the narrative of a dual identity, the narrative of authentic vs. inauthentic identity, the narrative of de-territorialized self vs. a re-territorialized self, the appeal to an “authentic” Italian identity as opposed to an “inauthentic” Canadian one).

Territory, whether “real” or imaginary, is an essential aspect of individual and cultural memory, for it is the space within which practices, codes, and traditions are elaborated and become meaningful for both the individual and the group in question, as Fulvio Caccia has recognized: “Ethnicity cannot truly be understood outside its bond with the ancestral land. Territory is its foundation. Ethnicity finds its reason for being through it, by it, its sense of belonging, its centre of gravity” (“Ethnicity as Postmodernism” 10). Because it resides in an unretrievable past, Italian space must be resignified through memory, language, and through the writing process itself. The passage of time and the loss which this implies is to some degree “reclaimed” or at least re-appropriated through the spatial experience of the return journey. Memory and temporal distance are transformed into longing for the homeland and its physical occupation.

REAPPROPRIATING THE SPACES OF THE PAST

The first step in crossing the chasm between old world and new involves a process of inscribing the self within a genealogical and historical continuum, a rewriting of the ethnic self within the spatial frame of the old world. For instance, Mary Di Michele's poem, "Born in August," details in catalogue fashion the historical register of her Italian place of birth:

Born in the fifth house
 under the sign of Leo
 on the sixth of August
 four years after Hiroshima
 180 years after the birth
 of Napoleon Bonaparte,
 Born Maria Luisa Di Michele,
 baptized at Santa Lucia
 in an ancient town, Lanciano, the Abruzzi,
 scarred by cruel claws
 of war, the fangs of tyranny;
 Austerlitz, Auschwitz, Hiroshima. (*Stranger in You*1)

This introductory poem of di Michele's first collection grounds personal identity within specific historical and temporal contexts, and situates the narrative voice within the Italian landscape of birth and childhood. She conflates important historical events, figures, and places with her own personal narrative, highlighting the centrality of her own perspective upon the surrounding world. It is "a great spiralling mélange of history, geography, astrology, and myth...at once absurd in its localization and profound in its defiance of conventional ascriptions of importance" (Holmes 183). Memories which transpired in Italian are located in a constant *elsewhere* that must be recalled into the present through the writing process itself, and for di Michele, the narrative voice speaks of personal experiences directly to the reader, moving toward what she has herself described as a "synthesis" of memory and historical contingency.¹⁶

In "Benvenuto," the Italian landscape is indelibly imprinted upon the narrator's imaginary where it resonates alongside her Canadian upbringing, disturbing its smooth surface of English: "Twenty years and my Canadian feet formed of Prairie wheat/can still find their own way, can run ahead/while my thoughts seem to resist and find/the pomegranate, the fig, and the olive" (*Stranger in You* 6). This "resistance" of thought is contrasted with the facility with which the body negotiates the Italian terrain.

The renewed experience of the Italian landscape brings back a flood of memories for di Michele's narrator, and "physical space merely illuminates the

formerly shadowy chambers of her mind” (Holmes 191). Landscape is experienced as prelinguistic sense-impressions and is equated to a more “authentic,” and therefore more essentialist, sense of self. The spatial environment brings forth the earliest memories of childhood for the returning adult and there is a sense in the declaration of “*Benevenuto*” (welcome) of return and of belonging to this reclaimed space and this reclaimed identity. In one interview di Michele recalls: “I made only one trip back (to Italy) in 1972. I spent the summer there with my whole family. Because of very intense and detailed childhood memories my body remembered things that I did not consciously remember.”¹⁷

The Italian countryside is a space of innocence but also one of re-appraisal and loss from the perspective of the returning adult. Di Michele soon realizes that the sense of harmony and stability upon her return to Italy is short-lived, for it is no longer possible to take up again her old life at the point where it was disrupted. What is gained from the return journey is not simply a reconnection to the past and to cultural roots, but a realization of the indelible influences of her Canadian upbringing--her difference from those who stayed behind in Italy. True to the baroque sensibility, di Michele is interested in the moment of change between one reality and another, and the resulting transformations in her own identity which result from it: “Di Michele’s project is not to make a new version of an old story but to carry that old story or life into a new culture and time so as to bring about change in both” (Holmes 191).

The linking of Italian terrain and physical sensation represents, for di Michele, a “purer” experience of identity for it seems in retrospect free of the questioning, self-doubts, and internal conflicts which living in Toronto or Montreal represent. While the old world is figured as the ground of instinct, memory, and corporeality, the new world is related to the language of the rational, to the need for constant translation, and to economic necessity. As Pivato writes, “In di Michele’s dream the rational English-Canadian mind meets the emotional Italian soul” (“The Return Journey” 170). Yet di Michele troubles this Italian/Canadian binary in her awareness that the two are not separable, that she needs her Canadian upbringing, her “rational” mind, in order to understand her “emotional” past.

In *Italian Women and Other Tragedies*, and *Daughters for Sale*, Gianna Patriarca uncovers the silenced personal narratives and memories of immigrant women, and their often difficult transition to a new and alienating cultural space. Both the old world and the new are remapped through Patriarca’s project of remembering and recreating the past, a reclaiming of cultural memory achieved through the return journey motif, through the writing of Italian-Canadian domestic space, and through the recording of the oral histories of older immigrant women: “Gianna Patriarca’s poetry does more than just speak to her narrating I’s immigrant experience. At the same time, Patriarca succeeds in chronicling the gender aspect of her narrator’s migratory Italian/Canadian existence” (Tamburri 184).

Like Di Michele, Patriarca is concerned with grounding personal identity within the social, historical, and spatial context of Italy, and a desire to come to terms with her immigrant history in this country. The link is made between the narrator's sense of immigrant identity and the Italian countryside in which she was born:

I come to you
 from peasant stock
 from gardens of large rocks
 where thirsty flowers
 lie unphotographed. (*Italian Women* 12)

The narrator affirms her peasant roots and identifies with the intimate spaces of childhood. Hers is a landscape which remains unphotographed and unrecorded, for as an immigrant she has fallen through the cracks of Italian history. It is through the writing process itself and through the application of these spatial metaphors that Patriarca cultivates a sense of her own past, "invents," in the sense described by Itwaru, a deterritorialized ethnic identity. Through the act of writing poetry Patriarca situates herself between the space of Italy and that of Canada, creates in fact a sense of continuity between the two. This she does through various strategies of textual juxtaposition in which Italian and Canadian territory are intermingled, creating constant shifts in narrative perspective, constant confusions or fusions between old country and new: "I sometimes wonder/where we will be years from now/were we there already?" (*Italian Women* 17) and in another poem, "they can never seem to

figure out/the difference in time from here/to Italy” (60). When ancestral territory is distant in space and time, it must be reinscribed through language and through memory:

Roberto, how quickly
time gives a final embrace
last July we laughed
talked of your days of song
with Caruso
the climbing lights on the head of Vesuvius
the streets of Naples
to Villa Colombo
here, they have built you a fountain
they place your wheelchair by its
ceramic border
I know your ears are fighting
its fraudulent sound
Roberto, we will not speak again
until our eyes are the stars over the Bay of Naples. (*Italian Women* 18)

Through simple, yet sensually descriptive language, the Italian landscape and the Canadian one are linked in memory as the old man’s “days of song” in Naples are contrasted with the quiet serenity of retirement in a Toronto old age residence. The

fountain functions as a mnemonic device, its “fraudulent sounds” evoking homeland and vanished youth and pointing to the sense that the territory of birth is somehow more authentic or more “original” than this new space. With old age comes silence and a spiritual if not physical return to the homeland.

In a poem entitled “Perhaps,” the immigrant daughter makes the return journey to ancestral space and envisages it through the eyes of her father. The sights, sounds, and smells of Italian space make the past resonate in the mind and on the skin; the “colours of the olive trees/in the summer,” the “slouching, lazy leaves/of the fig trees” and “the sound of rain on clay rooftops” (*Italian Women* 20). The word “perhaps,” repeated throughout the poem, points ominously to the contingencies of history and the sense of loss over what “might have been” if the narrator’s father had remained in Italy. Instead, “for thirty years/he’s slept in a foreign bed/that has curved his spine” (*Italian Women* 20). It is interesting to note that even after thirty years Canada is seen as a “foreign” land by the transitory generation, whereas for Patriarca, it becomes easier to affirm both her Italian heritage and her Canadian experience within the same poetic space.

THE IMMIGRANT CITY: PATRIARCA’S TORONTO

In “College Street, Toronto,” Patriarca traces the immigrant odyssey from the initial difficult steps in a foreign land to the succeeding generation’s acceptance of

the duality which they have inherited. The modern Canadian city is “remapped” from an immigrant perspective as Patriarca describes the trajectory of her family through different sections of working-class Toronto: “I have come back to this street/to begin a new chapter of my inheritance/my Canadian odyssey” (*Italian Women* 28).

Circulating in the Italian neighbourhood of Toronto involves Patriarca in a remembering and reconstruction of immigrant history and of the various urban spaces which she and other Italian-Canadians have occupied in the past. The ethnic ghetto functions as an “open space” which admits of a variety of interpretations and histories, such as those of her father and similar Italian labourers who emigrated to Canada in order to pursue economic security. They are described as “homeless, immigrant dreamers/*bordanti*” (28). They establish a small space for themselves within this foreign territory in which they “cooked their pasta,” “drank bad red wine” and “argued the politics of/the country they left behind/avoiding always the new politics” (28). They are soon joined by their families:

The exodus
of wives and children
trunks and wine glasses
hand stitched linens in hope chests
floating across the Atlantic
slowly

to Halifax

To Union Station

To College Street. (*Italian Women* 29)

Emigration to Canada becomes a mythic break between old world and new, as immigrant populations move across the Canadian landscape, inscribing their varied personal histories and experiences upon its surface. It is significant that at first the labourers, who hardly speak a word of English, occupy a confined, subterranean space in the city. The basement apartments to which they are confined signal their social status as well as their cultural isolation within the ghetto. Tamburri writes that Patriarca expresses “a strong sense of understanding, compassion, and empathy for the male as immigrant, stranger, and, ultimately, outcast” (190). With economic prosperity comes the possibility of moving to Crawford Street, and eventually outside of the ethnic ghetto itself and into the more prosperous suburbs of the city: “the Italians are almost all gone/to new neighbourhoods/modern towns” (*Italian Women* 30).

It is within Toronto’s Little Italy that Patriarca first fashions a sense of self as both attached to and displaced from Italian culture, and the urban site is where consciousness of her own ethnicity first emerges:

The St. Clair Theatre and the Pylon Theatre of College Street both pre-date the Columbus centre and were for us almost cultural centres because it was in these two theatres that we could watch Italian films, listen to Italian

songs and see the wonderful images of the country we had left behind. Italian films were the one visible reminder of our Italian culture. Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons these theatres were full of Italian families, young, old, middle-aged and infants. We all sat there devouring the beautiful, romantic Italy we had left behind. For two hours we thought we reclaimed our culture. A culture of art, music, good food, ocean and sunshine. Such innocence. (*Daughters for Sale* 120)

Patriarca manifests a need to document the ethnic history of College Street and render the space porous with its Italian immigrant past. But there is also in this short prose piece a subtle hint at the performance that is involved in the re-appropriation of Italian culture, for its closing expression, “such innocence,” is an ironic and self-reflexive statement of youthful naivete.

The Canadian urban landscape is marked with these traces of “otherness” in Patriarca’s poetry, altering its cultural homogeneity and reinscribing difference within the city. For instance, in “Grace Street Summer,” immigrant reality is inscribed upon the quotidian routines of urban life: “We play hide-and-peek/the schoolyard is loud/with boys and basketballs/in the distance Benny’s radio/tuned to C.H.I.N. and Calabrian songs” (*Italian Women* 76). Tamburri writes that:

The summer night of the first poem is one of great harmony...for the entire family that is a combination of Italian and Canadian, a combination that results in the new Italian/Canadian family, dramatically different from that

which, as we previously saw, the narrating 'I' had to endure as a child and young woman. (196)

Negotiating the difficult terrain between Italian and Canadian value systems, Patriarca comes to a precarious balance in which she is able to appropriate the urban spaces which were once solely the domain of men without completely effacing her own ethnicity. Where in the past the Italian immigrant girl was relegated to domestic space and to strict parental control, the present transcultural Italian-Canadian woman can inhabit the spaces once forbidden to her:

My father is gone
 Bar Italia has a new clientele
 women come here now
 I come here
 I drink espresso and smoke cigarettes...
 How strange this city
 sometimes
 it seems so much smaller
 than those towns
 we came from. (*Italian Women* 30)

As the first wave of Italian immigrants moves out to the suburbs of the city, the ghetto as a semiotic site shifts in meaning, and Italian ethnicity in the ghetto becomes a trace of what it once was, a sort of performance of Italian-ness in what

remains of the shops, restaurants, and cafés. While the return journey is necessary in order for Patriarca to reconnect to the past and to her Italian cultural memory, there is an understanding that history has taken its course, that there is no longer the possibility of return: “we don’t discuss the distance anymore/returning is now/the other dream/not American at all/not Canadian or Italian/it has lost its nationality” (*Italian Women* 21). Understanding this, Patriarca is able to redirect her sense of belonging back to the immigrant community of Toronto, and more precisely, back to the community of immigrant women who have themselves changed because of their Canadian experiences. The possibility is opened up not only of occupying a space in which the immigrant woman can circulate freely (the physical and psychic freedom of the urban metropolis), but also one in which identity is no longer circumscribed by strict gender or ethnic roles imposed from the outside.

CHAPTER 4

THE ETHNIC FLÂNEUR

Antonio D'Alfonso and Pasquale Verdicchio are particularly interesting and complex in their imaginary constructions of space, for they share a highly visual and impressionistic aesthetic of spatial juxtaposition in which territorial displacement and shifts of perspective reveal the cultural relativism of locatedness. This becomes central to their project of ethnic self-definition, for the certainties of place are undermined by the intermingling of the territorial poles of Italy and Canada, rendering their sense of ethnic identity precarious and mutable.

D'Alfonso and Verdicchio both employ the figure of the *flâneur* in the tradition of Baudelaire in their poetry and prose work. Their narrators stroll along the winding paths and empty squares of city or village, seeking a renewed sense of Italian heritage and identity. The *flâneur* finds aesthetic and existential pleasure in his or her experience of place, and the narrators' idle strolling is more than just strolling, it is also an active reconstruction of territory, a way of "making meaningful" the spaces that are inhabited. The manner in which prose and poetry are pieced together in journal form (D'Alfonso) or broken verse (Verdicchio) reflects these writers' fragmented poetic sensibilities, but also their fragmented sense of identity. It soon becomes clear that the village streets and squares in which the narrators circulate are metaphors for writing itself, for the slow coming-to-consciousness of an Italian identity, and a manifestation of the "curiosity of knowing the other shore" (*The Other Shore* 13).

In his study of the Paris of the nineteenth century, Walter Benjamin explores the figure of the *flâneur* and examines the ways in which he (for it was always a male figure) appropriates the spaces of the city for his own sensual pleasure:

The street becomes a dwelling for the flâneur; he is as much at home among the façades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls. To him the shiny, enamelled signs of businesses are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to the bourgeois in his salon. The walls are the desk against which he presses his notebooks; news-stands are his libraries and the terraces of cafés are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done. (“Paris of the Second Empire” 48)

Just as the Parisian *flâneur* of the last century “constructs” an urban imaginary which reflects the modernist self, so too the ethnic *flâneur* fashions a heterogeneous spatial imaginary, one which reflects his or her ambiguous positionality and dual identity. As the writer “reads” and re-creates the significations attached to place, he or she is engaged in an internal discourse about his or her identity in relation to that place: “Flânerie can, after Baudelaire, be understood as the activity of the sovereign spectator going about the city in order to find the things which will occupy his gaze and *thus complete his otherwise incomplete identity; satisfy his otherwise dissatisfied existence*” (Tester 7 - emphasis added). For both D’Alfonso and Verdicchio, circulating in either the Canadian city or in the Italian village elicits a particular form of desire -- a desire to *know* a place, to pluck from

it the cultural truths it contains--but also the desire to inscribe onto it their own significations.

FEASTS ACROSS BORDERS: ANTONIO D'ALFONSO

In *The Other Shore* and in *Fabrizio's Passion*, D'Alfonso creates topographic narratives which reflect the ethnic's desire to transform a space that is merely inhabited into one that is a dwelling or home. Despite D'Alfonso's adoption of the concept of "aterritorial identity," it is clear from his novel and prose-poems that both "real" and imagined space are crucial elements in his ethnic self-fashioning. D'Alfonso understands by "atteritorial identity" an individual's ability to participate in and be influenced by multiple cultural influences that are not necessarily bound by national borders.¹⁸ Yet it is clear that *place*, or more precisely D'Alfonso's personal experience of place, is an influential element of his writing. Examples of his linking of identity and territory abound: "I put my pen down and walk beside my own symmetry. To shape my landscape against the rolling patterns in the sky" (81); "Fascination of language as landscape. The tactile experience of words. Imaginary: The physical relief of sentences" (93); "The more I look ahead, the more I look inside. This is my geography" (64).

For D'Alfonso, who was born and raised in Canada and who has retained cultural attachments to Italy solely via family/immigrant culture as opposed to Italian

culture (for they are different), there is a further complication of spatial referents and reference. For those writing from the position of the “returning ethnic,” place becomes blurred, obscured, contradictory, and manifold. A self-mythologizing and mythologizing of place are at work, as the meanings attached to Italian/Canadian spaces are constantly being generated and transformed in accordance with the changing positionality and locatedness of the ethnic subject.

Like the other poets discussed earlier, D’Alfonso seeks to inscribe himself within the spatial frame of Italy, seeks to find the linkages between his personal history and the history of the territory that was left behind. *The Other Shore* is D’Alfonso’s attempt to rewrite or reinscribe himself back into the spatial frame of the Italian village denied him by emigration. The black and white photos of Guglionesi’s empty streets and squares dispersed throughout the text signal the importance of these sites in the construction of a personal narrative, a spatial aesthetic that rejoins the visual and the literal. The sites, smells, and sounds of Guglionesi elicit an exploration of personal and communal identity for the returning ethnic subject. This appropriation of space through its “visual consumption” (Shields 75) is at the core of ethnic self-fashioning, for by circulating in the Italian village and interacting with its places and its people, he is constructing an Italian or *Italic* self.¹⁹

This experience of place plays a vital role in the ethnic’s desire to circumscribe identity, to explore the limits, boundaries, and possibilities for selfhood. For D’Alfonso, the images of Guglionesi provide an opportunity for meditation upon

the contingencies of history that have brought him, full circle, back to this small Italian village. The minute observations of village life in the text attest to D'Alfonso's fascination with place and with its attendant rituals, habits, and cultural significations. In one prose-poem for instance, the narrator is at the window of his small room, looking down into the winding streets below:

People seen from my kitchen window...On the floor below, an elderly man filing a metal rod, every so often stopping to look at the people below his balcony. On the ground level, a mechanic smokes a cigarette, talking with a client, pointing toward the Tyrrhenian Sea. An old couple walks on Longomare called Via del Duca degli Abruzzi--How can I escape from myself in Italy? Everywhere an image of myself...The woman stares at me, I turn my eyes away, hoping to catch a glimpse of myself coming around the corner. (*The Other Shore* 46)

This striking image of the narrator and his double is an important one, for this imagined double is an alternate "version" of self who is at ease in his Italian surroundings, a self who "might have been" had emigration never taken place. The manner in which the narrator identifies with and constructs this other self signals divided affiliations and existential unease, pointing to the "perspectival ambiguity" and "indeterminacy" of the ethnic subject referred to earlier. The narrator creates the fiction of an essential identity or quality of Italian-ness in his search for a coherent personal history. Always present though is the sense of loss that accompanies the

cultural and linguistic distance between a life in Canada and one in Italy: “*Il vero divorzio è l’emigrazione.*”²⁰ It is this difference between one historical outcome and another that fuels the obsessions of the narrator, his desire as well as his inability to “cross over” to the other shore--to straddle the space of years and experiences that have made the narrator an outsider and a foreigner to his country of origin.

By re-appropriating the absent Italian territory, D’Alfonso fashions a self *as* displaced, and the consciousness of his difference from his Italian cousins enables him to open up an epistemological space in which he is free to define his relationship to the communities in which he is involved: “You eat your soup-dipped bread and speak, between mouthfuls, to your cousin who has speech trouble. Your dialect: mixture of Frentani, Latin, French, Slav, German, Turkish, Arab. How easy is it for you to maintain your identity?” (*The Other Shore* 59).

The encounter with the town’s spaces, language, and people elicit constant shifts in the narrator’s persona, a constant negotiation of identity, language, and signification. A sense of loss follows a realization of the irreconcilable distance between one “version” of self and another, and D’Alfonso is painfully aware that “there is no return, only a coming to, a coming towards. No linearity in experience or identity, only an awareness” (*The Other Shore* 64). The essentialist notion of an “authentic” Italian-ness is provisional for the ethnic *flâneur*, for it is constantly being put under erasure by virtue of a multiplicity of experiences, languages, and cultural and linguistic viewpoints. We can note in the writing of D’Alfonso this constant

vacillation between notions of essentialism and essentialist identity and a flight from these static senses of selfhood. D'Alfonso's text raises interesting questions about the relationship between ethnicity and authenticity; to what extent is the narrator of *The Other Shore* present or authentic to the cultural register of Italy, a place from which he has been absent for most of his life? The narrator repeatedly questions how he can "be Italian" and in a next poem describes himself as intimately and totally Italian--a vacillation between a fear of inauthenticity and a certitude of Italian identity.

The *flâneur* uses his freedom of circulation to define the meanings around him, and it is in the Canadian city that the narrator of *Fabrizio's Passion* appropriates, circumscribes, and rewrites urban space in his own fashion, as an extension of his *Italic* sensibilities. The ethnic subject's fictionalization of Canadian space represents a displacement of the historical, social, and personal meanings already attached to that territory, creating a palimpsest in which diverse readings of locale are juxtaposed one atop the other.

While space is socially constructed, categorized, and determined by the discourses which occupy it, that space can also be contested, rewritten, or imagined otherwise. Places do not have single or essential identities and are therefore a function of historical, social, and cultural contexts. In other words, place "takes significance" because signified by the subject who experiences it. This is one reason why the city, as a concentrated site of human activity, can never be fully captured, described, or fictionalized. There is always another story to tell:

People's routes through place, their favourite haunts within it, the connections they make, (physically or in memory and imagination) between here and the rest of the world vary enormously. If it is now recognized that people have multiple identities then the same point can be made in relation to places. (Massey 238)

Fabrizio's Passion is a *kunstlerroman* of sorts describing the intellectual and aesthetic development of a writer and film maker. The novel traces Fabrizio Notte's explorations of his own ethnic experience and identity beginning with the old world of his Italian parents through to their immigration to Canada and their new lives in working-class Montreal. What is of particular interest here is the manner in which the young Fabrizio is intensely aware of the territory which he and his immigrant family inhabit. After an epistolary opening section in which we learn of the difficult transition of Fabrizio's parents from old world to new, the fourth chapter sees the young Fabrizio describe in detail his immigrant family's newly acquired home in St. Michel, a part of the city which accommodates the booming Italian immigration of the 1950's. The detail with which the Notte household is described, each of its rooms utilized for specific family functions, each of its corners evoking in the young Fabrizio memories of what transpired in the immigrant family, attests to the importance that place plays in the formation of personal identity. At one point, the narrator directly states that "There can be no doubt about the fundamental role played by these vital spaces in the development of our characters" (50).

Each of the rooms in the Notte household are the enclaves within which familial and familiar domestic rituals are carried out. The kitchen is the heart of the Italian household, and it is there that Sunday dinners and important family gatherings take place. The elderly Italian grandparents who live with Fabrizio represent, more than any of the other characters in the novel, the old world identity in that they are most closely associated with the religious customs and language of Italy. Their bedroom “does not seem to be a part of our house” (49) for it is quietly subdued and filled with religious objects. The “foreign-ness” of the grandparents’ bedroom for the young Fabrizio marks the distance between the transitional immigrant generation and the succeeding Canadian-born one.

For the narrator, the domestic space of the immigrant household represents both a haven from an alien outside world and a prison of ignorance of the Canadian and Québécois reality. When the young Fabrizio first ventures out into the street of this new habitat, he is aware not only of the linguistic barrier between himself and other children but also of his ethnic difference. The street becomes a place in which identity is negotiated according to the social situation at hand: “To walk out and then step into the real world we create for ourselves without our parents. A world which will change our contradictions into complex entities. Our identity is a game, a pastime, but never a source of confrontation...to free oneself of one’s origins in the street...a neutral playground. (54) Even at a young age, the ethnic subject is aware

of the degree to which identity is a “game,” a sort of performance in which one’s role is constantly shifting and evolving.

It is interesting to note that far from being aware of an “essential” Italian or immigrant identity, the young narrator describes a fluid identity, one changeable according to the social conditions in which he finds himself. The transformation of the narrator’s name from Fabrizio to Fabi is a mark of that integration, that flexibility of identity. As Marino Tuzi points out, “The interactions between the Italian community and the English-Canadian [and French-Canadian] imply that sometimes it is possible for the protagonist to negotiate some kind of provisional cultural identity; however, there often is no final resolution, because the content, shape, and direction of this new identity are mutable” (8). This view reflects D’Alfonso’s own adoption, in *The Other Shore*, of the image of the “living and sly chameleon” (73) which changes its colours in relation to its changing surroundings.

Fabrizio’s body is itself described in topographic terms, the “five essential moments” which have marked his formative years each leaving their scars upon the surface of his skin. These marks upon the body are inscriptions of the physical and psychological changes which Fabrizio goes through, and become a personal history rendered through spatial metaphor:

Scars turn the body into a sign. The body comes to mean something else, this something else itself leaving a mark on the sensitive skin of being. On the body, the initials of a particular event...the relief of each scar carries the

memory of an incident, a moment whose ephemerality will not vanish. With time, the smallest scar grows and modifies the body's geography. (66)

External events leave an imprint upon the body and psyche of the narrator. By gazing upon the "skin of being," the contours of his body, D'Alfonso creates a personal geography which conflates an ensemble of past significations and memories. As Pierre l'Hérault suggests, the space of the present is rendered in concrete terms through the body itself, which comes to represent different episodes or aspects of Fabrizio's identity. "Sur son corps cicatrisé, c'est sa propre alterité, sa propre étrangeté que Fabrizio lit. Cet autre de lui qui a été et n'est plus et pourtant fait toujours signe sur l'espace du corps" (46). In this way, geographic space becomes erotic/desiring space--the space of difference.

D'Alfonso's novel includes extracts from *Histoire économique de Montréal*, in which the political and economic history of St. Michel, the area of the city he inhabits, is outlined. The inclusion of place-names, roads, and population densities serves as a backdrop to the individual stories and subjective experiences which transpire within that space. The incongruity between "official" records and the lived experience of D'Alfonso's characters attest to the elisions and disjunctions inherent in any representational scheme of space. D'Alfonso represents Montreal as a rich textual and textural fabric, and his pronunciation of its name divulges his ethnic, cultural, and linguistic experience: "The city I call my native city was called *Monreale*, It had no accent on the *e* nor a *t* for the cross on Mont Royal, yet the term

gained a glorious *e* at the end which acted as a constant reminder of my origins” (212). Within this short phrase D’Alfonso manages to relate the social, cultural, and linguistic complexity of this city while at the same time highlighting the centrality of the ethnic’s perspective upon it. The “glorious *e*” of Monreale, spoken in the heavy accent of the city’s Italian neighbourhoods, effectively raises questions about the significations attached to place: questions about who names the city, who interprets it, and who rewrites it. As Lianne Moyes has pointed out, “Conceptualizing the city as a system of signs more than a symbolic landscape of the mind, makes it possible to rewrite or remap the city, to give it an alternative reality” (11).

Indeed, in the plurilinguistic and pluricultural matrix of signs and significations of D’Alfonso’s narrator, the ability to conceive of a different Montreal or Monreale or Mont-Royal is in fact a rewriting of that “open” urban landscape from the perspective of the immigrant. That accented interpellation of the Canadian city refigures its imaginary space, so that territory becomes one of the contentious terms in the subject’s ongoing questioning of ethnic identity and his “fashioning” of self. D’Alfonso repeatedly figures language and writing as a sort of personal landscape, and the “geography of the text” (*Fabrizio’s Passion*, 190) is a space which is created by his writing and one which he also inhabits.

Walking for the flâneur, as for D’Alfonso’s narrators, occupies both an epistemological function (that is, the function of seeing, understanding, and coordinating the spatial environment) and an aesthetic function. In *The Other Shore*

D'Alfonso writes, "I must grab hold of myself. With the passeggiata. Once more that need to go for a walk. As if another world were opening before me. The world of words and thoughts" (153). The evening *passegiata* is a common practice in Italy which conflates the private self and the social self. As Donald Pitkin writes, "In the ritual of the *passegiata* the ordinary citizen is making a *figura*, an impression...It represents, if you will, a kind of displacement of the interior self to the exterior where it becomes constructed as social fact" (98). Undertaking the meandering circuitry of Guglionesi paths and alleyways or Montreal's streets and avenues is analogous to the disjunctive paths of the narratives themselves, and serve as focal points in the ethnic narrator's disclosure of self.

PASQUALE VERDICCHIO'S POST-EMIGRANT LANDSCAPES

Like D'Alfonso, Pasquale Verdicchio is interested in the visual and aesthetic qualities of landscape, their ability to evoke strong sensations and meanings, but also their ability to shift them, to transform the languages, memories, and significations which inhabit a particular space. In his poetry, Verdicchio is concerned primarily with the fluidity of landscape, the manner in which space shifts according to the subject's visual, cultural, and linguistic perspectives upon it. In *Nomadic Trajectory* and *Approaches to Absence*, Verdicchio explores the absent spaces of identity, the spaces that are merely traces, memories, or glimpses of the past. He explores the

contradictions and paradoxes of place, their ability to deceive the viewer, their ability to generate paradoxical meanings and memories, this especially for the immigrant returning to a territory of origin.

In “*Branta canadensis*” for instance, the narrator is about to embark upon the return journey to Naples, his native city, and contemplates the change this will have upon his sense of identity:

A mouth full of names before the leaving
 people at the open border
 nothing and nothing to fear
 Come expecting never again the transience
 the sweetness of discourse
 not what it started out to be
 understand opposition
 Cut from past experience of
 secrets revealed to hands and eyes
 kept from fleeing with the view. (*Nomadic Trajectory*10)

This passage rejoins Verdicchio’s preoccupations with language to his awareness of the “openness” of space. His mouth is “full of names,” representing not only the plurilinguistic element of hyphenated identity but also the idea that there is a connection between place-names and the spaces they represent. The utterance of far-off place names, the names of the cities and towns left behind, are a sort of

fetishization of spatiality, a desire to contain and reduce space to its signifiers. This calling forth of place names constitutes, for the immigrant, a ritual of reconnecting with a past that had remained elusive, the “making real” which the subjective experience of place affords. The ascription of proper names to places are futile attempts at pinning down meaning, for landscape constantly shifts with changes in perspective and in the ethnic subject’s changing linguistic and cultural experiences.

Verdicchio’s narrator is aware that the return journey will complicate his dual identity, will obliterate the “transparence” of discourses about territory, language, and identity on a personal level as well as on a more general aesthetic level. The narrator is aware that this journey will force him to look upon his “Canadian self” from the position of his “Italian self.” As Federici asks, “What happens when the ‘other shore’ becomes ‘this shore’...Although firmly situated in or restored to his place of origin and his source of self-authentication, the poet becomes aware of his own culture-induced alienation” (66).

From his new location in Italian landscape, identity is no longer “transparent” and by distancing himself from the stability of territory, Verdicchio is able to assess critically his hyphenated Canadian/American identity, recognizing the “opposition” of multiplicity, the paradoxes of hybridity. Boelhower writes, “not only does every immigrant virtually represent a place of origin, she or he is also the living sign--or topos--of a spatial adventure and disjunction” (Boelhower 156)

The heterogeneity of space emerges from its quality of being viewed from different positions, different points in space and in time, and from the accumulation of memories and meanings on or about a specific site. Language “fixes” or renders stable the heterogeneity of landscape, reducing all the possibilities of spatial interpretation to the single proper name. For the returning immigrant, the experience of another language, of other toponomic markers and place-names (Canadian place-names, American ones) changes the experience of Naples, the place of origin. The Italian language is described as “natural, transparent” while the English words open up a gap between the signifier and the signified, providing a disruption of the ethnic sense of self. In “Parthenope,” the narrator looks out over the Gulf of Naples, a panorama which seems to speak its own history:

Sweeping arm to comprehend...

Parthenope (IX/VIII c B.C.) on the slope of the hill

known today as Pizzafalcone

Etruscan raids from the Tyrrhenian Sea & settlers from Cumae

524 B.C. Neapolis Paleopolis

an Escher madness. (*Nomadic Trajectory* 12)

Verdicchio is aware of the narratives embedded in place, and his desire to understand the landscape is also an attempt at deciphering his connections to it, however tenuous they may be. The “*fourmillante cité*” of Naples seen from above becomes “a grid of dissimulation/the city impervious shell of fiction: transferring

metonymical placement” (12). The port city revisualized by the returning immigrant loses the meanings it once had; that is, the spatial imaginary of his boyhood in Naples is displaced and transformed by his absence and subsequent return, becoming a metonym of the original.

There is a sense in Verdicchio’s postmodernist verse of a fractured, nomadic identity, one shaped by the many spaces in which he has lived, “an identity claimed by so many places/one city yet all possible cities/in fragments” (12). Like D’Alfonso’s *flâneur*, Verdicchio’s narrator appraises and appropriates his city of origin through its visual and sensory consumption, an aesthetic that transforms physical environment into a space for the negotiation of identity. Walking through Naples for Verdicchio becomes an exercise in writing the self, “a mode of writing and rewriting/walking through to feel the power of narrative” (*Nomadic Trajectory*13). In this sense, Verdicchio rejoins personal narrative and city narrative, public self and private self.

Naples is a particularly apt setting for the Verdicchio’s *flâneur* to take up his activity of circulating in the city and uncovering its narratives. As Benjamin has already pointed out, Naples is a city in which all social, economic, and cultural activities are on constant display. The borders between public and private life are blurred as restaurants spill out onto the street, natives hang out of balconies and windows, outdoor markets overflow, and city streets and squares teem with passers-by:

Porosity is the inexhaustible law of the life of this city, reappearing everywhere...all that has come together in the harbour city lies insolently, crudely, seductively displayed...similarly dispersed, porous, and commingled is private life. What distinguishes Naples from other large cities is something it has in common with the African kraal; each private attitude or act is permeated by streams of communal life. (*Reflections* 171)

The entire city is a sort of theatrical performance, a city both “simultaneous and continuous” (*Nomadic Trajectory* 13). The heterogeneity of Naples, its visual and auditory chaos, is equated with the narrator’s sense of diffracted, heterogeneous identity. Signification in the city is never stable, and the meanings it generates, like the never-ending sequence of signifiers and signifieds of language, is in constant motion or displacement. Like the narrator’s identity, signification in the city is constantly shifting, on the move, metonymic:

Napoli : Neapolis : Naples:

No tautology

dimensions: there is no reproduction of meaning here

the subject changes with the changing object.

A city entices one back again and again

with a blackmail of memories. (*Noamdic Trajectory* 13)

Unlike the other writers mentioned earlier, Verdicchio seems to have no desire to idealize or otherwise mythologize the territory or spaces of origin. It is for

him a sort of trap, a “blackmail” in that boyhood memories become a frame for later interpretations of landscape; they condition his gaze upon the cityscape as a returning adult, and are seen therefore as limiting to the free-flow of signification in the city. In a poem entitled “Positions for Invisibility,” he writes, “When memory and inattention coincide, there is the incoherence of the past. Becomes the absence of communication” (*Approaches to Absence* 28). Like landscape, memory is also treacherous in that it is constantly shifting with the passage of time. The absence, gap, or *différance* between the memories of place before emigration and the renewed experience of the Italian landscape in the return voyage is like a silence, an inability to communicate: “return is standing still/is language erased” (41). Caught in the liminal imaginary space between North America and Italy, between past and present, territory itself becomes dizzying, confusing, and labyrinthine:

From one place to the next there is no direct route from one place to the next
the traces have been erased from one place to the next the sounds of heat rise
from one place to the next lizards are the only continuity from one place to
the next place one foot in front of the other. (41)

In his poetry, Verdicchio seems very much aware of the “open” nature of spatiality, of the fact that it is conducive to multiple readings. He manifests an unease with linguistic and spatial fixity, or at least an unease with the sedimentation of meaning upon a single space. He also shows a strong desire for an aesthetic of movement, of nomadism: “not to inhabit/flight from habitation/a set of coordinates

for writing/cannot offer shelter” (14). His poetry demonstrates an intense awareness of positionality, of location in the old world from the perspective of the new, and vice versa. The construction of self as an ethnic Canadian or ethnic American looking constantly back to the place of origin is often reversed, for Verdicchio understands that a shift in perspective brings with it a corresponding shift in identity:

each step and street and corner wall

window and doorway

and curb and cobblestone and

Napoli: 40.5N 14.17E. (*Nomadic Trajectory* 14)

There is a tension here between the fixity of cartographic location on the map (the spatial co-ordinates of Naples) and the constant movement of the experiencing subject within that space. For Verdicchio, the city is “negated” and “delineates an absence”; this absence at the core of the city is its ability to signify different things, its ability to constantly generate meanings around which identities are fashioned, built, and layered: “well-structured/systematic/accumulation is in fact its center or territory” (15). Just as the city’s character takes shape through the slow accumulation of history, architecture, and personal narratives, so too identity is an accumulation of memory, language, and spatial experience.

Verdicchio’s aesthetic of nomadism questions assumptions about geographical stability and certainty. For him, the “poverty of geographical sense” (21) enables the creation of new senses of place--places as mutable, refracted, multiple,

in constant change. The nomad's aim is to "travel without ornamentation" (21). This ornamentation is not only all of the cultural baggage one carries from place to place, but also the "sedimentation" of meanings, culture, and language onto a single space. In other words, there is more to place than received or official discourses about it; as Verdicchio writes, "surveyors undermeasure territory, errors engraved but official" (*Approaches to Absence* 22).

All reductionist narratives about place (including official narratives like national borders and maps, and unofficial ones like personal memory) cover the hidden or absent elements of place. "The resulting plot/falls from the story to tell its exception" (22). Place is inhabited not only by official stories but also absent ones, the "exceptions." The history of Naples, is *not only* the history of Parthenope, the Etruscans, the settlers from Cumae, or its contemporary dwellers, which Verdicchio mentions. It is also the history of emigration, the absent elements or "exceptions" in its history, the absent citizens who return to Naples in order to understand, appropriate, and fictionalize it. These absences are "the contact of the invisible hidden behind historical conditions" (28)--that is, all of the untold stories or histories of place. As a returning immigrant, Verdicchio is painfully aware of his position as one of the absent elements in the history of Naples, aware of being bracketed between territory and the contingencies of history: "Position depends on the knowledge of what precedes and what will follow. A hallucination of inhabitation" (28).

Verdicchio seeks to reinvent the authorial and ethnic space, seeks to go beyond the facility of dual or binary models of identity and explore those elements of space/territory that both nurture and subvert identity. For the Italian-Canadian immigrant, the space that was left behind is accessible through memories of the past which change the perception of landscape over the years. In a long poem entitled “A Critical Geography,” Verdicchio writes,

Memory situates and deforms space
 lays down its bearings
 all based on a sketchy identity
 attempts at continuity...
 with all this and such
 the weight of place strains
 the edges of station. (*Approaches to Absence* 33)

The link is clearly made here between the desire for a stable identity and spatiality. The perception of place and its imaginary construction function to “level” the heterogeneity of space into a manageable form, (i.e., the creation of personal narratives about selfhood--self as displaced, self as dual, self as hyphenated). It is for this reason that Verdicchio sees his identity as “critical” in that the experiencing subject picks and chooses, adds and eliminates, remembers and forgets, in a selective and creative way, those aspects of space which define identity. This forms a topographic mosaic within which the individual may circulate and make statements

about personal identity. Verdicchio's understanding of Italian space (and more specifically, Naples) as absence, discontinuity, trace, and metonym parallels his own meditations on an identity that is itself fractured and heterogeneous.

No space is neutral; to each territory is assigned a particular nexus of meanings, assumptions, associations, and possibilities of interpretation. Identity is intimately tied to the place and places we inhabit and to their attendant social, cultural, and linguistic processes. By rewriting the significations attached to place, the ethnic subject inscribes his or her ethnic specificity upon Canadian territory. He or she also reconstructs an imaginary Italian landscape which reflects absence from and desire for the homeland and the recognition that there is no return possible.

The Italian-Canadian writer's concern with personal and familial history, with the absent homeland, and with the difficulties of adaptation to the new territory is in fact a "fashioning" of selfhood, an elaboration of identity which signals the practices, narratives, and meanings attached to the territory of the old world, but also those which are attached to Canadian space.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The ethnic writer is marginal to the Canadian mainstream but is also distant from the cultural lexicon of his or her country of origin. By figuring identity as a function of language and topology, the immigrant writer embraces both the Canadian present and the absent Italian past within the same discursive and poetic space: “This ethnic space is essentially a hyperspace, a hermeneutical nowhere and everywhere in which the ethnic subject floats between two worlds, two cultural models” (Boelhower 172). In this manner, the ethnic poet situates himself or herself at the crossroads between old culture and new, as is so strikingly illustrated by Mary Di Michele’s “Enigmatico”:

With one bare foot in a village in Abruzzo,
 the other laced into English shoes in Toronto,
 she strides the Atlantic legs stretched
 like a Colossus. (*Stranger in You* 4)

Di Michele’s narrator straddles both continents while occupying an ambiguous position in each of them. Identity for the ethnic writer becomes an ongoing process influenced not only by an increasingly distant heritage culture but also by an increasingly homogenizing Canadian one.

The imaging of the Canadian city and the Italian village is part of the construction of ethnic identity, for while ethnic self-interrogation involves looking back to the past, it also involves establishing roots in a new space. This inevitably leads to a resignification of place, to a displacement of the meanings attached to the

immigrant city. The ethnic subject's re-writing of Canadian space is a strategy of adaptation to and appropriation of that space, a way of inscribing him or herself within the spatial frame of Canada. In the ethnic ghetto precarious attachments to Italian cultural identity are maintained and fortified, but it is also there that ethnicity is "performed," for the ghetto provides a theatricality in which markers of Italian identity are brought to the fore, highlighted, or otherwise put on display.

This performance of ethnicity enables ethnic Canadians to maintain attachments to the homeland and the ability to explore their heritage cultures. With succeeding generations there is an erosion of linguistic and cultural affiliation to the Italian homeland, and these sorts of "technologies of the self" counter cultural fragmentation through the renewal of ethnic meanings. It is also clear from the poetry and prose in question that the ethnic writer is aware of and complicit in this performance of identity. As Tuzi points out, "Overtaken by such indeterminacy, the ethnic subject participates in a continual process of resignification" (15)

In a recent anthropological study titled *Eh, Paesan!: Being Italian in Toronto*, Nicholas Harney examines the myriad ways in which Italian-Canadians claim and construct community in Canada's largest urban centre. By closely examining such things as Italian-Canadian cultural centres and associations, heritage schools, religious festivals, and the transnational connections between Italian and Canadian business and cultural organizations, Harney outlines the manner in which this ethnic group maintains and *redefines* itself as a group vis-à-vis the urban environment:

Through these sites I interpret the constant refashioning of “Italianness” and examine the social construction of an ethnic community. These local foci of identity construction act as generative structures in the production of Italian-Canadian identity. Ethnic identity does not emerge from a monolithic, shared culture but through a complex, diverse social field that forms social space within which numerous interests compete and conflict for expression and distribution of meaning within the community, and articulation to the greater public culture. (4)

He argues that the transnational movement of Italian consumer products, Italian and locally-produced media, and other forms of cultural exchange contributes significantly to the ways in which Italian-Canadians imagine and define themselves. He argues that Italian dialects and regionalism (a sense of belonging to the region or village in Italy which one is from) has affected the way in which Italian-Canadians construct identities and filiations within Canada. Further, identities traditionally imposed upon the Italian immigrant (the labourer, the criminal, the “festive”) are not only surpassed but are sometimes used in an ironic manner. In this way, identities are juggled, constructed, “imagined,” and “managed” within Canada’s ethnic ghettos, but also outside of those ghettos in the ethnic face that is presented to the majority imaginary. It is within this complex environment of constantly shifting meanings and practices that “Italian immigrants and their children make choices within the

social, political, and economic structures that shape, deny, and offer opportunities for them to create meaningful worlds” (3).

The notion that the Italian language, landscape, and culture represent an “authentic” self and the Canadian landscape and culture a compromise or negotiation of self remains within the realm of essentialism. I would argue that both senses of self--the “authentic” and the “inauthentic”--are created out of the myriad social, cultural, and linguistic circumstances in which the ethnic group or the individual finds him or herself. Both senses of self are public/private discourses about ethnicity and consequently, different “versions” of identity in the world.

For the Italian-Canadian writer, language and territory are both troubled and troubling, since they are central to the ongoing strategy of constructing and elaborating an identity that is neither Italian nor Canadian, but somewhere in between. It is through the reinscription of language and territory that these writers question not only the homogeneity of the Canadian cultural landscape but also their relationship to their own ethnicity. For the de-territorialized immigrant, this precarious identity rests on the memory of an obscure whose origin lies elsewhere. Through historical artifacts, photographs, family narratives, through the thematic and linguistic experimentation afforded by the writing process, these writers redefine their relationships to the past and to the community or communities to which they belong. Their project then is to ground the disjunctive influences of immigrant experience by validating this “in-between-ness” as the basis for a new and hybrid cultural identity.

NOTES

1. Mary di Michele has argued that one of the principle contributions of Italian-Canadian and other ethnic literatures as a whole to the Canadian canon has been precisely this obsession with the homeland: “What Canada’s recent immigrant writers are doing is expanding the tradition of ‘survival’ to include a tradition of ‘the return journey.’” See di Michele, “Writers From Invisible Cities.”
2. I am referring here to “l’imaginaire sociale” in the sense described by Cornelius Castoriadis. See Castoriadis p. 159-229.
3. *Vedere*: To see or be witness to an event. Here it would suggest a way of re-evaluating personal history.
4. Fulvio Caccia points out that within the second generation, immigrants begin to “erase” their differences by adapting to the social and cultural codes of the host society (i.e. change of name, loss of mother tongue, etc.). This often results in the erosion of cultural memory leading to a merely symbolic attachment to ethnic origins. See Caccia, “Ethnicity as Post-Modernism.”
5. Pierre Nepveu gives a brief history of the development and usage of the term transculturalism and analyses it in relation to Quebec’s ongoing political and cultural self-definition. He argues that the roots of transculturalism in Québec may be found in Michel Morin and Claude Bertrand’s *Territoire Imaginaire de la Culture* (Montreal: Éditions Hurtubise, 1979) as well as in *Vice Versa*:

“La transculture se donne comme une alternative culturelle au projet d’une culture québécoise définie en termes d’identité, d’appropriation, d’homogénéité. Il s’agit d’ouvrir la québécity à son alterité fondamentale, sur la base à la fois de solidarités, de dialogues, d’échanges, de contaminations réciproques (20). See Nepveu.

6. Henri Gobard proposes a four-part model of linguistic usage: “I. Un *langage vernaculaire*, local, parlé spontanément, moins fait pour communiquer que pour *communier* et qui seul peut être considéré comme langue maternelle ou langue natale. II. Un *langage véhiculaire*, national ou régional, appris par nécessité, destiné aux *communications* à l’échelle des villes. III. Un *langage référentaire*, lié aux traditions culturelles, orales ou écrites, assurant la continuité des valeurs par une référence systématique aux oeuvres du passé pérennisées. IV. Un *langage mythique*, qui fonctionne comme ultime recours, magie verbale dont on comprend l’incompréhensibilité comme preuve irréfutable du sacré.” See Gobard, 34.
7. For a discussion of the north-south cultural divide in Italy and its effects on the cultural/linguistic expression of Italian diaspora communities in North America, see Pasquale Verdicchio’s *Devils in Paradise: Writings on Post-Emigrant Cultures*, (Toronto: Guernica, 1997).
8. See for instance Joseph Pivato’s *Echo: Essays on Other Literatures* (Toronto: Guernica, 1994) and his *Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-*

Canadian Writing (Montreal: Guernica, 1991). In the latter collection see articles by Fulvio Caccia (“The Italian Writer and Language”153-167) and Filippo Salvatore (“The Italian Writers of Quebec: Language, Culture, and Politics”189-206). See also articles by Pasquale Verdicchio (“The Failure of Memory in the Language Re-Membering of Italian-Canadian Poets”) and Dorina Michelutti (“Coming to Terms With the Mother Tongue”) in *Writers in Transition: The Proceedings of the First National Conference of Italian-Canadian Writers*. (Montreal: Guernica, 1990).

9. Both Caccia and D’Alfonso have referred to the concept of “triangulation” when speaking of the linguistic and cultural experience of Italians in Quebec, which is a sort of synthesis between three languages (English, French, Italian) which offers a unique cultural perspective: “Italians, a minority group within a minority, straddling three cultures and three languages, maintain a complex relationship with language. This triangulation is rich in possibilities.” See Caccia, “The Italian Writer and Language.” Among Italian-Canadian writers working in the French language in Quebec are Marco Micone, Bianca Zagolin, Lamberto Tassinari, and Fulvio Caccia.
10. Mary di Michele states that “The writers who interest me most, with whom I wish to assimilate, are transcultural writers like Michael Ondaatje and Leonard Cohen. They are synthesizers and translators of culture.” (*Toronto Star* 10 Sept. 1988: M9).

11. Di Michele writes, “The language of desire is the language of disenfranchisement and the language of difference. It is language that does not naturally belong to the writer but must be appropriated.” See di Michele, “Notes Toward Reconstructing Orpheus: The Language of Desire.”
12. There has been a renewed interest in the baroque in relation to contemporary texts. See Omar Calabrese’s *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the times*. (Trans. Charles Lambert. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1992).
13. “We introduce the notion of spatiality by drawing on the writings of Frederic Jameson and Ed Soja. This review suggests that space cannot be dealt with as if it were merely a passive, abstract arena on which things happen...space too is ambiguous, ambivalent, multi-faceted, duplicitous. Difficult.” See Keith and Pile, 2.
14. Keith and Pile are referring here specifically to bell hooks’ *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround, 1991).
15. Michel Foucault writes that “the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theatre brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another; thus it is that the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space.” See Foucault, 25. I would argue that the ethnic ghetto works in a

similar fashion by juxtaposing dissimilar social and cultural contexts onto a single geographic space.

16. In an interview with Nathalie Cooke, di Michele describes her poetry as a “synthesis” that “grows out of and moves beyond personal experiences” (44).
17. Mary di Michele. “An Immigrant Daughter and a Female Writer” (Interview with Joseph Pivato) *Vice Versa* 1.5 (1984): 20-21.
18. “This idea of a transborder community which is not constrained by geography will certainly upset some and make others snicker. But such a world view has been behind my editorial policies at Guernica Editions. *Aterritorial identity*—that is, identity that does not claim its legitimacy because of some territorial right—fascinates me...I believe in difference, for it is a quality of life that can give new meaning to a person’s identity.” See *In Italics: In Defense of Ethnicity*, 126.
19. By “Italic” D’Alfonso understands the cultural production and sensibility of writers and artists of Italian origin working outside of Italy who maintain attachments to its cultural traditions while adapting them to their own environments: “I believe it is necessary to rejuvenate the Italian tradition, rejuvenate it but also expand it to encompass what *Italianità* (or as I prefer to call it, the *Italic* experience) has become outside Italy. *We may need the Italian tradition as much as that tradition needs us.*” See *In Italics*, 38.
20. Real divorce is emigration.

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REMERCIEMENTS / ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Amaryll Chanady, for her guidance with my thesis work and for broadening my theoretical perspective on literary studies. I thank her also for the attention she has given my work in her courses, which have been most helpful in the formulation of this project. I also appreciated her candid discussions of academic life and her helpful advice over the course of my studies.

I would like to thank Lianne Moyes for giving me the opportunity to work with her as a research assistant on various projects, each of which were most stimulating and enriching. I also thank her for the care she has put into the evaluation of my work, for her helpful suggestions and insights, and for always being approachable.

I'd like to thank my colleague and friend, Licia Canton, for reading over my work at various stages and for suggesting both its strengths and its weaknesses. I also thank her for the unbounded enthusiasm she brings to Italian-Canadian studies and for being a sympathetic ear.

I would also like to signal my appreciation to William Kinsley for various conversations I have had with him on urban themes in literature. I would like to thank Angelo Soares for his editing help and his moral support, Lucy Beneventi for reading through my work, and Pierre Perrault for providing French translation. I would also like to thank Johanne Simard, Michelle Hamelin-Braun, and H el ene Bourassa of the English department for always being so helpful and cheerful to me over the course of my stay in the department.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Anna-Maria and Nicola Beneventi, without whose help it would be impossible for me to pursue my academic career.