

MAKING CONNECTIONS, BRIDGING COMMUNITIES: NEW DIRECTIONS IN ITALIAN- CANADIAN STUDIES

PAOLO FRASCÀ
(University of Toronto)

LICIA CANTON
(University of Toronto, *Accenti Magazine*)

Sommario

Questo articolo offre una breve storia critica dello sviluppo degli studi italo-canadesi e presenta due progetti che hanno recentemente contribuito all'espansione del campo in nuove direzioni teoriche, pedagogiche e metodologiche: il progetto Indigenous-Italian-Canadian Connections e il progetto Queer Italian-Canadian Artists, che fa parte della più ampia iniziativa nota come Queer and Italian-Canadian Project. Il presente articolo introduce brevemente il primo progetto e si concentra sul secondo, fornendo una storia dell'iniziativa e descrivendo i vari sforzi orientati alla comunità (italo canadese) e allo studio a essa collegati; questi includono un documentario, un'antologia e un progetto di ricerca qualitativa. Il documento si conclude con una descrizione metodologica del progetto di ricerca qualitativa Queer Italian-Canadian Artists. Questo progetto di ricerca mira a identificare e studiare le esperienze dei creatori LGBTQ+ o queer italo canadesi, i modi in cui i valori tradizionali delle comunità italo canadesi hanno portato all'emarginazione dei suoi membri queer e i contributi degli italo canadesi queer alla vita sociale e culturale (italo canadese)¹.

Keywords: Italian diaspora, Italian-Canadian writing, LGBTQ+ writing, community-based initiatives, Indigenous communities

¹ Paolo Frascà is also the co-director, with Angela Nardozi, of the *Indigenous-Italian-Canadian Connections* project, for which separate knowledge-dissemination efforts are underway. For more information, please visit the project website at www.iicconnections.com.

Italian-Canadian studies: Yesterday to today

Italian-Canadian studies is an interdisciplinary field that emerged in Canada in the 1980s and became a recognised area of scholarly inquiry through the establishment of institutions such as the Mariano A. Elia Chair in Italian-Canadian Studies at York University in Toronto, the Centre for Italian-Canadian Studies (later named after the Honourable Frank Iacobucci) at the University of Toronto and the journal *Italian Canadiana* (first issue 1985) at the University of Toronto. In its institutionalised forms, since its inception the field has had a multi-faceted mandate that encompasses research, teaching and community-oriented work.

The University of Toronto's Frank Iacobucci Centre for Italian-Canadian Studies (henceforth 'Iacobucci Centre'), housed within the larger Department of Italian Studies (St. George Campus), has a well-defined mandate: "to study the cultural and social life of the Italian-Canadian community, viewed in the context of multiculturalism and related to the evolving themes that inform research and writing on Canadian history generally". The mandate clearly highlights the interdisciplinary approach of the Iacobucci Centre and its "aim to foster the activities of academics, artists, professionals, and community activists working on topics related to all aspects of culture, experience, and history of the Italian diaspora in North America" (Italian Studies Website, 2020).

This mandate is remarkable particularly because it highlights the need for Italian-Canadian studies to be a scholarly space that is in active conversation with the community and that engages with political issues that affect Italian-Canadians. We can see this, for example, in the inclusion of 'activists' in the list of community figures that the Iacobucci Centre wishes to welcome into its operations, as stated on the Centre's website, and in the common use of language that appeals to multicultural, pro-migrant policies. Similarly, the Mariano A. Elia Chair, on its web page, highlights the importance of featuring, in its speaker series, "internationally respected scholars, researchers on all aspects of Italian-Canadian life, artists, and community members involved in issues of importance to Italian Canadians". On the same web page, the Elia Chair also promotes the idea of the university as a place "without walls" and thus a space that is open to all and that is

connected to the social realities that surround it. Though outside the scope of this paper, the ways in which the geographical location of these important institutions – the only two of their kind in so-called Canada – may have impacted the focus and objectives of the field of Italian-Canadian studies are important to recognise².

We can see that, like many other disciplines in the humanities that are invested in the social and connected to particular social groups, Italian-Canadian studies is a field that values contributions from outside of the academe and that recognises its own impact on the life of the communities it studies and with which it engages. Moreover, most scholars who teach and publish in the field are Italian-Canadians themselves and thus constitute what we could describe, in Antonio Gramsci's (1971:41) words, as "organic intellectuals": thinkers who are not outsiders to the social group that they may intellectually explore or even represent. It is vital to the field of Italian-Canadian studies that its socially engaged and community-oriented energy be harnessed in order to maintain its impact and value within and without university campuses. This is especially important since Italian-Canadians, as an ethnic group, have been able to acquire great political, social and economic power. The acquisition of social privileges lessens the need for self-advocacy and self-legitimation, which have been important factors in the field thus far.

When skimming through publications in Italian-Canadian studies, we notice that this field has historically held at the centre of its aims the solidification of a history of Italian presence in Canada. It has often done so with a clear objective of legitimising the role of Italians in the making of Canada. In a special volume authored by Maddalena Kuitunen and published by the Iacobucci Centre in 1997, titled *From Caboto to Multiculturalism: A Survey on the Development of Italian in Canada (1497-1997)*, the author writes, in the first few pages, that "today, students of Italian, above all if they are of Italian origin, can trace their links to Giovanni Caboto (1449-1498) [...]: the discoverer of Canada' (8). In the book, Kuitunen also cites particular episodes during

² The expression 'so-called' before 'Canada' is used here to acknowledge that (1) the entity known as 'Canada' is a product of European colonial expansion whose unified nationhood may be questioned and (2) a large number of the territories included in the definition of 'Canada' are actually completely unceded, are under claim or have been annexed through questionable treaty-making processes. See, for example, the Toronto Purchase Treaty No. 13: <http://mncfn.ca/torontopurchase/>.

which the Italian-Canadian community “claimed Caboto as a discoverer of their land of adoption” (11). We can see how the appeal to colonial histories, from which the mainstream migrant experience is arguably vastly disconnected, has played an important role in the formation of the cultural and historical imaginary of Italian-Canadians. We find corroborating evidence of this in the naming of Italian-Canadian cultural spaces, such as Toronto’s Columbus Centre and Villa Colombo and Montreal’s Cabot Square. Browsing through the indexes and archives of Italian-Canadian publications, such as the lengthy ‘Bibliography of Italian Canadian Studies’ found on the Iacobucci Centre’s website, one learns that the field has been dedicated to attesting Italian presence in Canada in areas such as demography (particularly enclaves), labour, cultural production (particularly Italian-Canadian literature), language (particularly *italiese* and language variation), discrimination (particularly internment during WWII), traditions (particularly family and regionalisms) and affect (particularly displacement and nostalgia). This body of research has made a strong case for the legitimisation of Italian presence in Canada and has contributed greatly to the elevation of the Italian migrant to a figure that exemplifies productive citizenship and is unwaveringly committed to hard work, to family and to the (adoptive) nation culturally and politically.

The new projects at the Iacobucci Centre both honour the well-established tradition of the field and confront, through queer and Indigenous perspectives, the figure of the ideal Italian migrant that the field has contributed to establishing.

Some of the questions that the *Indigenous-Italian-Canadian Connections* project asks in order to challenge normative and colonial conceptions of Italian presence in Canada are as follows: What are the existing connections between Italian-Canadians and Indigenous Nations and communities? How have Italians contributed to the horrors of colonialism in Canada? How can Italians, as European settlers on this land, be in solidarity with Indigenous Nations and be committed to reparations, reconciliation, honouring treaties and restitution?

We know that the regulation of gender and sexuality has been an instrument of colonial expansion in this context and elsewhere. As Martin Cannon (1998) highlights, colonial policies have worked to alter Indigenous understandings and traditions around gender and sexuality

“through institutionalizing a structure of power and kinship relations that were both patriarchal and heterosexist” (7). These systems have also worked to racialise and marginalise non-normative sexualities (8). These colonial systems of nation-building, furthermore, force migrants to reproduce models of familial structures and genderedness that situate them in proximity with ideals of citizenship and afford them particular privileges; the latter is certainly the case for white Italians, who greatly benefit from their European origins with respect to finding their rightful place in trajectories of colonial projects such as Canada.

We also note that, recently, some Western conceptions of queer sexualities and genders have entered the mainstream and have, in some cases, been co-opted or contributed to nationalist endeavours; scholar Jasbir K. Puar (2007) describes these phenomena as *homonationalism*. The project *Queer Italian-Canadian Artists* challenges the conceptions of the ideal white Italian-Canadian citizen from the perspective of gender and sexuality, particularly as these relate to following particular models of integration, assimilation and ‘self-production’ in order to achieve ‘happiness’ (Ahmed, 2010:43). The project asks Italian-Canadian communities to continue looking inward, but in liminal spaces yet to be openly explored: What are the experiences of LGBTQ+ or queer Italian-Canadians? How have the traditional values of Italian-Canadian communities often led to the marginalisation of its queer members? What are the contributions of queer Italian-Canadians to Italian-Canadian cultural and social life? Who are the most marginalised and unacknowledged in the queer community?

Overall, the two projects focus on voices that are missing from mainstream Italian-Canadian cultural and academic discourses: Indigenous and queer voices. This paper will focus on the latter group. In the next two sections, we offer a description and history of the larger *Queer and Italian-Canadian* project (led by co-author Licia Canton). This project includes a documentary, an anthology and numerous public-facing activities, some supported in part by the Iacobucci Centre. The last section focuses particularly on the research project *Queer Italian-Canadian Artists*, an academic offshoot of Canton’s larger initiative (and co-directed by Canton and Paolo Frascà); this project uses qualitative structured interviews to collect data on the experiences and work of creatives who are queer and Italian-Canadian and is funded through the Iacobucci Centre.

Queer and Italian-Canadian

The *Queer and Italian-Canadian* project, led by Canton, celebrates the cultural production of Canadians who live at the intersection of two communities: the LGBTQ+ and the Italian-Canadian³. The project thus far includes a documentary⁴, an anthology⁵, a series of online literary readings (some available on YouTube)⁶, a number of roundtable discussions at virtual academic conferences and events⁷, a social media campaign⁸, a series of media interviews⁹ and a website¹⁰.

The queer experience is not easily discussed in many Italian-Canadian households. There is still 'a kind of lingering taboo' and a

³ Although Canton does not identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, she has been recognised as an active ally (as spoken by Monica Meneghetti on 29 June 2021, during *Here & Now: Readings and Discussion* that was posted on YouTube on 5 July 2021 [see *Accenti Magazine*, 5 July 2021, 1:15:00]). Canton is also the parent of a child who identifies as non-binary and uses they/them pronouns.

⁴ The documentary, *Creative Spaces: Queer and Italian Canadian*, was directed by Canton (2021a).

⁵ The anthology, *Here & Now: An Anthology of Queer Italian-Canadian Writing*, was edited by Canton (2021b).

⁶ The following four literary readings are available on YouTube: *Here & Now: Queer Italian-Canadian Readings* (April 2021) (Violet Hour, 15 April 2021), *Here & Now: Queer Italian-Canadian Readings* (May 2021) (Violet Hour, 21 May 2021), *Here & Now: An Anthology of Queer and Italian-Canadian Writing – Reading and Discussion* (*Accenti Magazine*, 8 June 2021), and *Here & Now: Readings and Discussion* (*Accenti Magazine*, 5 July 2021).

⁷ The first event was the panel 'Queer and Italian Canadian' at Librissimi Italian Book Fair on 9 May 9 2020. Two events were held at the annual conference of the Canadian Association for Italian Studies (CAIS) in June 2021: 'Contemporary Writing and Other Works by Queer Italian-Canadians' (a panel of academic papers) and 'Literary Performances and Discussion with Queer Italian-Canadians' (a roundtable).

⁸ Information about the social media campaign can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/CreativeQueerItalianCanadian>, <https://www.facebook.com/Here-Now-An-Anthology-of-Queer-Italian-Canadian-Writing-104254428541696>, and <https://twitter.com/HereNowVolume1>.

⁹ See OMNI News coverage (OMNI News, 4 June 2021, 2:49; OMNI News, 2 March 2021; OMNI News, 25 January 2021).

¹⁰ For more information on the project, visit <http://www.queeritaliancanadian.com/>.

'culture of silence' within Italian-Canadian communities¹¹. In the past, being openly queer could have been met with violence or ostracism from family. Still today, some members of Italian-Canadian communities adhere to a culture of silence, which contributes to the erasure of LGBTQ+ experiences. The *Queer and Italian-Canadian* project was initiated in response to this silence: to bring attention to the children and grandchildren of immigrants who are members of the LGBTQ+ community. Their voices are often unheard, and their creative work is rarely acknowledged by the Italian-Canadian community itself.

Whereas the beginning of Italian-Canadian literature can be traced back to the 1970s, queer Italian-Canadian writing is a new literary corpus. In fact, the *Queer and Italian-Canadian* project has been instrumental in discovering and identifying the writings of queer Italian-Canadians¹². In his introduction to the anthology *Here & Now*, Domenic Beneventi notes that "the invisibility of queer writers of Italian-Canadian origin may be explained, to some degree, by the lingering taboos around the subject matter – some are still not comfortable writing such personal stories" (Canton, 2021b:16). He makes the point that "demographics and patterns of migration" are also a factor:

[...] since the majority of Italian Canadians can trace their roots back to the large wave of Italian immigration in the late 1960s, the transitional generation would not be writing about these kinds of subjects. It is their children and their grandchildren, born and raised in Canada, who are writing their queer stories, and we start to see an identifiable body of queer writing emerge in the early 2000s.

(Canton, 2021b:16)

In the past, queer literary artists did not always feel comfortable writing about their queer reality or creating fictional characters that reflect that reality. In some instances, the writers came out – so to speak – through

¹¹ As spoken by Domenic Beneventi in the documentary *Creative Spaces: Queer and Italian Canadian* (Canton, 2021a).

¹² When we first began the project, we were aware of 'a handful of writers'. As of publication of this essay, we count over 45 writers.

their creative production. One such example is playwright Steve Galluccio. In the documentary *Creative Spaces*, Galluccio states that everyone knew that he was gay because of the play *Mambo Italiano*. His parents attended the French-language premiere in 2000; that is how they found out that their son was gay¹³.

More than twenty years later, how much has really changed within the Italian immigrant community? Anna Camilleri, an author in the anthology, states that despite the fact that she has been making art as an openly queer and Italian-Canadian creator for 25 years, still today people come to her in a whisper to say, "I'm also Italian and queer"¹⁴. Much *has* changed in the last two decades with respect to LGBTQ+ issues, especially in public discourse. However, despite the normalisation of LGBTQ+ people in Canadian mainstream culture, the Italian-Canadian community has lagged behind in public acceptance and valorisation of their queer children and their cultural production. For some, being queer and being of Italian origin is irreconcilable. The project seeks to remedy this by creating a platform where the intersection of queer and Italian-Canadian identities can be explored safely, openly and creatively.

A history of the project

The making of the *Queer and Italian-Canadian* project has been affected by the pandemic. In a 2021 article titled 'COVID-19: A Boon or a Bane for Creativity', published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, experts studied creativity in professional and everyday spheres. Regarding everyday creativity, Maxence Mercier et al. (2021) "observed a significant increase during lockdown"¹⁵. But professional creative

¹³ As spoken by Galluccio in the documentary *Creative Spaces: Queer and Italian Canadian* (Canton, 2021a). Although Galluccio wrote the semi-autobiographical play in English, Michel Tremblay's French translation was produced first, by Théâtre Jean-Duceppe in 2000. In 2001, Centaur Theatre produced the English premiere. It is considered one of the most successful plays in Canadian theatre history. The movie, *Mambo Italiano* (2003), was an international hit that sold in more than 53 countries.

¹⁴ As spoken by Anna Camilleri on 3 June, 2021 (*Accenti Magazine*, 8 June 2021: 52:53).

¹⁵ See, for example, Natalie Proulx's April 2020 article '12 Ideas for Writing through the Pandemic with the New York Times': <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/learning/12-ideas-for-writing-through-the-pandemic-with-the-new-york-times.html>. (Accessed: 29 November, 2021).

writers, for instance, have had difficulties producing during COVID times. As Vancouver author Monica Meneghetti passionately stated during an event, she was unable to function during the pandemic: “Oh my God, I’m a mess. I can’t write” (*Accenti Magazine*, 5 July 2021, 1:16:50). Many of us can identify with Meneghetti. But this project – the *Queer and Italian-Canadian* project – motivated us to get up every morning, to do research, to seek collaborators and to raise funds. For the most part, the *Queer and Italian-Canadian* project has taken shape and grown during the COVID-19 pandemic and largely because of it. Thus, one could say that it is a pandemic project.

The project began taking shape in early 2019. Its aim was to highlight the work of LGBTQ+ Italian-Canadians in order to emphasise the importance of diversity, acceptance and inclusion in our communities. As Beneventi writes in his introduction to the anthology, the initial steps of our work were

[...] first, to find the ‘hidden’ community of writers of Italian origin who were LGBTQ+ and give them the visibility they so deserved – for, to our knowledge, there were only a handful of such writers in the public eye. Second, [to] shed light on the everyday lived realities of people growing up queer within the Italian-immigrant community – a community that is so often silent on such questions. We also wanted to explore to what extent these writers and artists draw from both their ethnic roots and their gender and sexual identities in their own creative process. (Canton 2021b:15)

In early 2019, we knew of only ‘a handful of writers’ who openly identified as members of both communities through their writing or in interviews. When this project began, some hesitated to participate because they would clearly be identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community, while others hesitated because the project is closely linked to their Italian upbringing (i.e. rejection, mistreatment). The reluctance to be identified as either queer or Italian-Canadian confirms the importance of our project, which has helped to shed light on the suffering that has taken place in Italian immigrant families and to create a space for conversation and healing.

As mentioned, the project includes a documentary, an anthology, a media campaign and a number of scholarly and public-facing activities. The documentary *Creative Spaces: Queer and Italian Canadian*¹⁶ was released in March 2021. The volume *Here & Now: An Anthology of Queer Italian-Canadian Writing*¹⁷ was published in June 2021. With the *Queer and Italian-Canadian* project, and specifically the film and volume, we have begun a much-needed conversation, we have tackled issues that are not often discussed in the Italian-Canadian community, and we have taken concrete steps in response to the culture of silence. Sadly, when compared to violence or mistreatment, silence has often been the more positive response to queerness in the Italian-Canadian family and community. However, the failure to acknowledge a family member who does not follow the traditional path, who does not meet the expectations of the Italian-Canadian community, is certainly damaging.

In the documentary, Montreal writers Galluccio¹⁸, Christopher DiRaddo¹⁹ and Liana Cusmano²⁰ discuss the intersections between their lives and their creative work, touching on spatiality (private spaces

¹⁶ The documentary *Creative Spaces: Queer and Italian Canadian* premiered on 3 March 2021, at a virtual event organised by the Iacobucci Centre at the University of Toronto. The 28-minute documentary was made possible by the Queer Studies in Quebec Research Group, also known as Équipe de recherche en études queer au Québec (ÉREQQ), and the Association of Italian-Canadian Writers (AICW). See the two-minute trailer at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xu8_ZzbcLo.

¹⁷ The official (virtual) launch of *Here & Now: An Anthology of Queer Italian-Canadian Writing* was on 22 June 2021, organised by the Iacobucci Centre at the University of Toronto. The volume was published with the support of the Iacobucci Centre at the University of Toronto, the University of Calabria, AICW, English Language Arts Network (ELAN), the Mariano A. Elia Chair at York University, ÉREQQ, Longbridge Books and *Accenti Magazine*. See <https://accenti.ca/product/here-now-anthology/> for details.

¹⁸ Galluccio is a playwright and screenwriter. Besides *Mambo Italiano* (2003), he is also known for the Gemini award-winning TV series *Ciao Bella* and the movies *Funkytown* (2011) and *Little Italy* (2018).

¹⁹ DiRaddo is the author of *The Family Way* (2021) and *The Geography of Pluto* (2014). Since 2014, he has worked to create a space for LGBTQ literature in Montreal – producing and hosting the Violet Hour reading series and book club.

²⁰ Cusmano (they/them/iel), aka BiCurious George, is a spoken-word artist and arts educator who works in English, French and Italian. They wrote and directed the film *Matters of Great Unimportance* (2019) and wrote the film script for *La Femme Finale* (2015), screened at the Cannes Film Festival. Their first novel is titled *Catch & Release* (2022).

versus public spaces), temporality and affect. Beneventi, professor of English and comparative literature at Université de Sherbrooke, provides the historical and theoretical commentary in the documentary. He heads the FRQSC-funded queer studies in Quebec Research Group, also known as Équipe de recherche en études queer au Québec (ÉRÉQQ)²¹. As Beneventi writes in *Here & Now*,

It was an eye-opening and touching experience, bringing together two worlds that so often seem at odds with each other: on one side, family traditions held together by immigrant memory, the Italian language and its various dialects, the rituals and celebrations of domestic life, reunions, food, and extended family; on the other, chosen families based on networks of friendship and care, on community organisations and, yes, on nightlife.

(Canton, 2021b:15)

We were inspired to interview queer Italian-Canadian writers for this documentary after having read Meneghetti's (28 May 2018) *The Globe and Mail* piece 'I'm Queer and Italian-Canadian – Coming Out Was Twice as Hard'. The initial plan was to interview about 10 writers in different parts of Canada. Although Canton's expertise is not film, Canton knew a film would reach a wider audience, different generations and multiple communities²². Writers in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver had agreed to be interviewed. We began in Montreal, where the director and cinematographers (Béatrice Langlois-Bettez and Justine Rivard)²³ reside. With COVID-19 restrictions and a deadline to complete the documentary, the team was obliged to produce a film that is different from what was originally intended but a good start

²¹ The cinematographers are Béatrice Langlois-Bettez and Justine Rivard, Université de Montreal. Canton, Beneventi, Cusmano, DiRaddo and Galluccio participated in a roundtable discussion, moderated by Frascà, right after the premiere at University of Toronto's Iacobucci Centre.

²² Due to the pandemic, the film was only screened publicly (virtually) on 3 March 2021. It has been used in the classroom and at nonpublic virtual events. This is unusual, of course, and contrary to the reasoning for doing a film in the first place: to reach more people.

²³ Langlois-Bettez and Rivard were students in cinema at Université de Montréal when they worked on the documentary as cinematographers and editors.

nonetheless, with the hope of interviewing other writers across Canada in the near future.

Here & Now, the groundbreaking *Anthology of Queer Italian-Canadian Writing*, was initiated because we were unable to interview writers across Canada; therefore, we had to find another way to bring these voices together. To date, *Here & Now* is the most comprehensive volume of writing by queer Italian-Canadians. To be included in the book, a contributor did not have to write about being queer or of Italian origin, but they had to identify as belonging to both communities. The volume features nonfiction, poetry, scripts, fiction, a graphic story and interviews. The contributors are established and prize-winning authors, as well as emerging writers²⁴. For some, this is their first publication. Some authors have chosen to use pseudonyms.

The creative contributions are preceded by a three-part introduction by scholars Beneventi (Université de Sherbrooke), Michela Baldo (University of Birmingham) and Frascà (University of Toronto). In her essay, Baldo focuses on the production of lesbian writers and makes the link with the volume *Curaggia: Writing by Women of Italian Descent* (1998), which appeared more than 20 years before *Here & Now*. As Baldo states, the writings in *Here & Now* “are filled with sadness, shame and frustration, but also with tenderness, joy and hope” (Canton, 2021b:31). Frascà describes the volume as

a celebration of the change and the diversity that our communities have cultivated in this new home. [...] Diverse is what we are, here and now: a community of first, second, third, fourth generation migrants who recognize each other as sharing similar histories while upholding one another, as this collection does, in our differences. (Canton, 2021b:38)

²⁴ Contributors include Elena Basile, Tina Biello, Anthony Bonato, Anna Camilleri, Frank Canino, Jessica Carpinone, Rachele Clemente, Paul Coccia, Cusmano, Amber Dawn, Luis De Filippis, Anthony DeFoe, Vanessa Di Gregorio, DiRaddo, Nikki Donadio, Matthew Fox, Frascà, Phoebe Fregoli, Galluccio, Alessandro Giardino, Elio Iannacci, Erica Lenti, Ariana Magliocco, Violet Mayhew, Steff Juniper Mendolia, Meneghetti, Anna Nobile, Anthony Portuliese, Jeremy Saunders, Luca Cara Seccafien, Jonathan Settembri, CJ Volpe, Daniel Zomparelli and allies Michelle Alfano, John Calabro and Gianna Patriarca.

The collection of creative works opens with Meneghetti's personal essay 'Biting the Parmesan', a revised version of her piece in *The Globe and Mail* mentioned above. Writings, from poetry to screenplays, by more than 35 different creators follow. Luis De Filippis, for instance, shares the script for their prize-winning film, *For Nonna Anna*. Amber Dawn sets her poem, 'preliminal rites', in a small town in Abruzzo. Erica Lenti's 'Why I Won't Tell My Grandmother I'm Gay' and Anthony Portulese's 'Another Timeless Italian Tradition', both nonfiction texts, deal with the refusal to come out to their grandmothers. Matthew Fox's short fiction, 'Toronto, 1937', depicts the gay and lesbian underground scene in the 1930s. Some of the contributors are well known as Canadian writers, but they may not be easily recognised as being of Italian heritage. *Here & Now* is a milestone in Canadian literature. It also fills a gap within Italian-Canadian studies.

This project holds personal value for Canton, who has a very strong connection to her cultural roots²⁵. Being Italian-Canadian for her means living fully in the present as a Montrealer, a Quebecer, a Canadian. She had hoped that her community, by now, would have been more inclusive, more embracing, less silent. This project is also in response to her disappointment. At the start, Canton thought she could use her position within the Italian-Canadian literary community to bring some attention to writers and artists whose experiences have purposely gone unnoticed. Canton was motivated by questions such as the following: What can we all do to be more inclusive? How can we encourage others to listen, to speak, to be informed? What concrete steps can we take? Ideally, this project will reach beyond creative and academic collectives and encourage people in the community to start a conversation, ask questions, look for information, find answers. Every person that is touched by this project can help to fill the silence that has been detrimental to the queer children of immigrants, so that the Italian-Canadian community and the LGBTQ+ community can be in conversation with one another. Ultimately, it is hoped that the *Queer and Italian-Canadian* project will help us to rethink (trans-)national belonging in Italian-Canadian communities from a gendered

²⁵ Canton is quite involved in the Italian-Canadian community, specifically on the cultural scene as a creative writer, a magazine editor and an organiser of events.

perspective and to rethink belonging in queer communities by considering questions of ethnicity and tradition.

There is still a lot of work to be done, and we plan to release a second documentary and another volume. In the meantime, we hope that the *Queer and Italian-Canadian* project will inspire others to work on additional initiatives, organize events and start conversations that lead to more queer inclusivity. What Beneventi writes of the anthology, in his introduction to it, is equally true of the project as a whole: this work

demonstrates in various ways, the bonds of feeling, affect, and desire that cut across the artificial borders of languages, communities, genders, and sexualities. Each of us – writers and readers – are made the richer for lingering, even momentarily, in that threshold space of possibility and mutual recognition. (Canton, 2021b:23)

Canton and Frascà connected while the documentary was being edited and pieces were being collected for the anthology. An ongoing collaboration and a friendship were born, with the clear goal of challenging normative conceptions of Italian-Canadian identity and creating not just safe, but joyful spaces for queer Italian-Canadians to connect and create together. The Iacobucci Centre at the University of Toronto, previously under the directorship of Nicholas Terpstra, has supported a number of efforts connected to this project. In particular, important funding has been allocated to interview queer Italian-Canadian artists in order to understand their personal and professional experiences more fully and to create pedagogical tools that allow students to learn about this important aspect of Italian-Canadian social and cultural life. This academic research project is called *Queer Italian-Canadian Artists*.

***Queer Italian-Canadian Artists* qualitative interview project: Objectives and methodologies**

Through this study, we aim to demonstrate that queer Italian-Canadian creators contribute to the richness of Italian-Canadian culture while they also constitute an important element of the pluralistic cultural and social landscape of Canada. We aim to do this by exploring and

analysing the cultural and creative phenomena that lie at the intersection of queer and Italian-Canadian identities and experiences. Through literary analysis, using theories of migration and of sexual and gender diversity, and through community-based qualitative research (structured interviews) informed by queer interdisciplinary research methodologies (Meezan & Martin, 2008), the project provides insights into the queer Italian-Canadian community with two main objects of focus: (1) the artists' experiences at the intersection of their sexual/gender and ethnic identities and (2) their creative work and its connection to their gender/sexual and ethnic identities and experiences. With the help of Ariana Magliocco, Heather Sdao and Sam Rosati Martin, our research assistants, we have collected about ten interviews thus far; we aim to collect five more by the end of the 2021-22 academic year and to author our first study by the end of 2022. A digital platform is also in the works and will be launched in late 2022: this will contain short video excerpts from the interviews and the artists' biographies. At this time, our project focuses on the authors included in the anthology, *Here & Now*, with the hope to lay the theoretical and methodological groundwork for a research project that is long-term and broader in geographical scope.

Our project responds to important academic and cultural urgencies. Academically, it adds a vital layer to the study of the social and cultural life of Italian-Canadians, which is the mandate of the field of Italian-Canadian studies, thus helping to provide a more complete, accurate and inclusive account of our community and its contributions. From a cultural and public perspective, it both targets the reticence with which matters of sexual and gender diversity are, more often than not, discussed in Italian-Canadian communities (particularly in Italian-Canadian media and public functions) and reaffirms the importance of the humanities in building kinship and fostering inclusion.

With this project, we wish to make clear that a generative juncture exists between queer and Italian-Canadian identities and that this is most tangible in artistic production, with a focus on creative writing. Different gender and sexual identities are represented in our pool of interviewees: lesbian, bisexual, gay, trans, non-binary, women and men. Different migration experiences are also represented: from first- to third-generation migrants, from northern to southern regions of Italy, from Canadian urban and suburban contexts. Looking at these creators'

experiences and their cultural production, we aim to document the ways in which queer and Italian-Canadian identities may be in tension with one another but not mutually exclusive. Our project wishes to highlight that these intersecting identities can be productively and inclusively integrated. The value of the intersection of queer and Italian-Canadian identities is evident to us as researchers and, particularly, as consumers of queer Italian-Canadian cultural production, so we wish to formalise and disseminate these observations through our research.

As mentioned, this academic work arises within the field of Italian-Canadian studies and is being conducted through the University of Toronto's Iacobucci Centre. Through preliminary research carried out in issues of the journal *Italian Canadiana* from the last three decades as well as through the Iacobucci Centre's Digital Archive of Italian-Canadian Studies (which records books, book reviews, media files and articles in this field; 3800+ total entries), we notice the exceptionally marginal presence of research on queer Italian-Canadian realities (one article by Beneventi (2019) in volume 34 of *Italian Canadiana*). We are, however, aware of additional literary and linguistic scholarship in this field by Beneventi (Université de Sherbrooke) and Baldo (University of Birmingham), who are both connected to the larger *Queer and Italian-Canadian* project in different ways. Additional documentation connected to queer migrant/Italian-Canadian experiences has been carried out at *Il Museo*, the museum within the Italian Cultural Centre of Vancouver. The work at *Il Museo* is particularly focused on family values through a series of interactive videos titled *3 Queers Chat in East Vancouver* and an exhibition titled *Family Lines: Lesbian Family Heraldry*.

Research that focuses on Italian-Canadian women, on the other hand, is extensive and rotates around three main themes: (1) women's contributions to Italian-Canadian cultural production, particularly literature; (2) women's labour, particularly in education, social services and in the domestic realm and (3) more generally, women's role in the emancipation and integration of the Italian-Canadian community (these are often case studies). Volume 11 (1995) of *Italian Canadiana*, dedicated entirely to Italian-Canadian women, is a particular example of this important pioneering scholarship in our field. We are thankful for this gender-specific research because it has opened the way for

further inquiries in gender and sexual diversity in Italian-Canadian studies and has made the field more perceptive to such issues.

We are also familiar with additional studies on LGBTQ2SI+ issues in Italian-Canadian contexts: an MA thesis in gender studies on issues of heteronormativity and sexual diversity in third-generation southern Italian-Canadian women (Talarico, 2003) and a sociological study on the tension between religious practices and queer experiences (Pride) in Montreal's queer Italian-Canadian community (Fortier, 1999); of particular interest, in our study, is the concept of 'divided lives', which is often discussed in the above publications as a feeling of having to live a double life, particularly with respect to having to perform normative gender roles and to hide one's non-normative sexuality in Italian-Canadian cultural contexts. While many of the existing studies do not focus on cultural production, they help to provide additional context and insight to our research, with particular respect to cultural conflict and traditional values. We have also discovered information on Italian-Canadian lesbian and gay collectives in 1970s Montreal (Fortier, 1999; Wong, 2013) and are inspired to find out more about this history in order to further contextualise our study.

A field of research with which our project interacts is Italian-American studies, where a more-established record of research and outreach activities on sexual and gender diversity exists. The Italian-Canadian and Italian-American contexts share many commonalities but diverge in important ways, in addition to the connected but differing histories of the two states; one of the main differences is the often central role of Italian-Americans of the second and third generation in sexual liberation movements during the 1970s and 1980s, such as the founder of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, Vito Russo; the founder of Caffé Cino, Joe Cino, and the famous performer Madonna, to name a few. Another important difference within academia is the presence of organisations that bring together Italianists and Queer studies scholars, such as the Queer Caucus of the American Association of Italian Studies²⁶. While we are interested in situating our research within a history of queer Italian-Canadian experiences and in

²⁶ Two important works that also mark this difference are the pioneering volumes on queer Italian-American topics *Fuori. Essays by Italian/American Lesbians and Gays* (Bordighera Press, 1996) and *Our Naked Lives: Essays from Gay Italian-American Men* (Bordighera Press, 2013).

drawing comparisons with the US context, the main objective of our project remains a comprehensive analysis of the *current* experiences of queer Italian-Canadian artists and of their creative work.

To do this, we are also collecting additional materials that can contribute to conversations on this intersection of migrant and queer identities. These include media (newspapers, magazines, film, television, radio) and social media content that deals directly with issues of sexual and gender diversity in Italian-Canadian communities; recent (2020-2021) examples of this are a set of anti-LGBTQ+ opinion pieces published in the *Corriere canadese* and Canton's documentary *Creative Spaces: Queer and Italian Canadian*. While other materials have been identified, further investigation and in-person visits are required to access these materials and to build relationships with the professionals and artists involved. Student researchers will be particularly helpful with locating additional materials.

Beyond the highly specialised field of Italian-Canadian studies, which also attracts numerous cultural and literary studies scholars, as well as scholars in migration studies and comparative literature, our research also joins important conversations in areas of queer studies that focus on diasporic phenomena (e.g. queer Jewish studies, queer migrant studies). Furthermore, our project answers the call to decentralise queer studies and theories from their Anglo-American strongholds (Holland, 2012; Driskill et al., 2011; Frascà, 2017) as well as the invitation to recognise the importance of gender and sexual diversity in diaspora and transnational studies (Eng, 2010; Manalansan, 2006; Luibhéid, 2008; Cohen, 2010; Tudor, 2017). While the ethnic history of Italians in North America is nuanced by periods of xenophobic and, by some standards, racial discrimination, this study engages very carefully with these issues as they arise, in order to ensure that white Italian experiences are not equated to those of racialised groups. And at the same time, we acknowledge the work that needs to be done to include non-white Italian-Canadian voices in this conversation.

While the aim of the project is to explore the particular intersection between queer and Italian-Canadian identities, this research takes into account the nuances and specificities that make up these two categories: queer and Italian-Canadian. Therefore, the project will yield important insights about what it means to be a queer Italian-Canadian artist, while recognising that these experiences cannot be reduced to homogenous

master narratives – the hegemonic aims of the construction of master narratives is precisely what we aim to challenge and destabilise. The use of queer theories will be particularly beneficial in articulating differences, nuances and idiosyncrasies and in welcoming these variabilities into the processes of this research. Additionally, our expertise in Italian history and migration allows for the integration of different class, regional and linguistic perspectives into our analysis.

This study will contribute meaningfully to our understanding of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of queer Italian-Canadians from the larger Italian-Canadian community. More specifically, we will study the ways in which the creative production of queer Italian-Canadians reflects the artists' relationship with their ethnic identity and community. The analysis of this relationship will take into account the considerable diversity of experiences and identities within the queer community and how these variations impact the relationship of queer Italian-Canadians with the ethnic community. This study will also benefit scholarship on sexual and gender diversity in other migrant communities in Canada, particularly those from southern Europe.

The interviews, which began in the summer of 2021 and are conducted online (on Zoom), are currently being carried out by undergraduate and graduate research assistants. The interview process is centred around a questionnaire and is supported by carefully developed ethics and distress protocols, given the delicate nature of the discussions. Our questionnaire is composed of 42 questions divided into sets that cover the following areas of inquiry:

- Demographic information and family histories;
- Ethnolinguistic vitality: ethnic self-identification, relationship with Italian language(s) and culture(s), interaction with other languages and cultures;
- Hetero/Homonormativity: being 'out' to the family, family structure and expectations, abuse and violence in the home;
- Gender performativity: need to misgender oneself, need to perform (dress, behaviour) a particular gender around family and the Italian-Canadian community;
- Marginalisation: sense of belonging in the Italian-Canadian community, intersectional factors that contribute to exclusion (race, class status, marital status, etc.), disidentification, anti-sociality;

- Kinships: support networks, role of Italian heritage outside of the community, chosen families, community building;
- Creative stimuli and praxis: culture-based creativity (inspiration, presence and influence of Italian cultures and languages in creative work);
- Public visibility and accountability: political value or creative work, audience and reader response, self-censorship and self-expression;
- Hopes for the future, in particular with respect to generative intersections between queerness and Italian heritage.

Graduate and undergraduate researchers have been a core element in this project, not only with respect to data collection and management but also in improving its methodologies. Student researchers have used their expertise in interview-based research, data management and technology and literary-cultural studies in order to allow this project to overcome important obstacles and to be more mindful of the ways in which it extracts information from its subjects. We are especially thankful to Magliocco, whose previous experience conducting qualitative research in the field of social justice education helped to ensure the first interviews ran smoothly; she also helped to train undergraduate researchers. Student researchers have also contributed immensely to the sense of community that this project fosters, building important relationships with interviewees; these networks are fertile ground for future community-oriented and scholarly collaborations. Finally, the researchers have shared with us that the project has made a positive impact on their personal and professional journeys. In personal correspondence that we have obtained permission to share, Magliocco has described this experience as “nothing short of transformational”:

Connecting with other queer Italian-Canadians has profoundly impacted my sense of self. This project has allowed me to imagine a future in which my queerness and Italian cultural identity can exist in harmony. In reconciling and integrating these different identities, I know I am healing ancestral wounds. By documenting the stories of queer Italian-Canadians we assert that we exist – that we have always existed. This project is a reclamation and re-imagination; it is an opportunity to take up space in

a cultural community that has often encouraged us to keep our queerness to a whisper.

Sdao, a senior undergraduate student who has been conducting interviews since the summer of 2021, shared, in personal communication, that before working on this project, she had “rarely conceptualized [her] *italianità* and queerness in tandem, rather, as separate aspects of [her] life”. For Sdao, this project has fostered “a new sense of *comunità* and belonging in both queer and Italian-Canadian spheres”.

Conclusion

Our article has highlighted the relevance of the field of Italian-Canadian studies in conversations that are at the forefront of sociocultural change and academic innovation. By incorporating Indigenous and queer perspectives into the study and understanding of Italian-Canadian experiences, we can provide a more whole and nuanced account of the life of our communities. This, in turn, can disrupt constructed and idealised notions of the Italian *migrante* that contribute to violent colonial pursuits and marginalise some community members. Through the study of queer Italian-Canadian experiences and of the cultural production that is often inspired by these intersecting identities, we honour the diverse realities of our communities, we foster spaces in which Italian-Canadians are able to celebrate the diversity of their communities and challenge the violence or silence/silencing often faced by queer Italian-Canadians, and we celebrate the cultural and artistic fecundity at the juncture of queerness and *italianità* (plural) in this diasporic context.

References

- Ahmed, S. 2010 *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Beneventi, D. 2019 'Queer Appetites: Embodied Desire in Monica Meneghetti's *What the Mouth Wants*', *Italian Canadiana*, 34:67-74.
- Cannon, M. 1998 'The regulation of First Nations sexuality', *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 18 (1):1-18.
- Canton, L. (ed.) 2021 *Here & Now: An Anthology of Queer Italian-Canadian Writing*. Montreal: Longbridge Books.
- Cohen, C. 2010 'Death and Rebirth of a Movement: Queering Critical Ethnic Studies', *Social Justice* 37 (4):126-132.
- Driskill, Q-L.,
Finley, C.,
Gilley, B.J.,
Morgensen, S.L. (eds) 2011 *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press.
- Eng, D. 2010 *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Fortier, A-M. 1999 *Outside/in? Notes on Sexuality, Ethnicity and the Dialectics of Identification*. Department of Sociology, Lancaster University. Available at: <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/resources/sociology-online-papers/papers/fortier-outside-in.pdf>.
- Frasca, P. 2017 'The Importance of being *Ernesto*: Queerness and Multidirectional Desire in Umberto Saba's unfinished novel', *gender/sexuality/italy*, 4:121-141.

- Gramsci, A. 1971 'The Intellectuals'. In: Hoare, Q. & Smith, G.N. (trans.). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- Holland, S.P. 2012 *The Erotic Life of Racism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Italian Canadiana* 1995 Issue 11.
- Kuitunen, M. 1997 *From Caboto to Multiculturalism: A Survey on the Development of Italian in Canada (1497-1997)*. Toronto/Welland: Frank Iacobucci Centre for Italian Canadian Studies/Soleil Publishing.
- Labrecque, M. 2000 'Mambo italiano: histories de famille', *Voir*, 21 December. Available at: <https://voir.ca/scene/2000/12/21/mambo-italiano-histoires-de-famille/>. Accessed: 29 November, 2021.
- LoGiudice, J.A. & Carosone, M. (eds) 2013 *Our Naked Lives: Essays from Gay Italian-American Men*. Lafayette: Bordighera Press.
- Luibhéid, E. 2008 'Queer/Migration: An Unruly Body of Scholarship', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 14(2-3): 169-190.
- Manalansan, M.F., IV. 2006 'Queer Intersections: Sexuality and Gender in Migration Studies', *International Migration Review* 40(1): 224-249.
- Meezan, W. & Martin, J.I. (eds) 2008 *Handbook of Research with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender*

- Populations*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Meneghetti, M. 2018 'I'm Queer and Italian-Canadian – Coming out was Twice as Hard', *The Globe and Mail*, 28 May. Available at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/first-person/article-im-queer-and-italian-canadian-coming-out-was-twice-as-hard/>. Accessed: 29 November, 2021.
- Mercier, M.;
Vinchon, F.;
Pichot, N.;
Bonetto, E.;
Bonnardel, N.;
Girandola, F. &
Lubart, T. 2021 'COVID-19: a boon or a bane for creativity', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, art. 601150. Available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.601150/full>. Accessed: 29 November, 2021.
- Puar, J.K. 2007 *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Talarico, F. 2003 *Women in a Southern Italian-Canadian Subculture: Sexuality and Socialization* [MA thesis], Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Tamburri, A.J. (ed.) 1996 *Fuori. Essays by Italian/American Lesbians and Gays*. Lafayette: VIA FOLIOS Bordighera Press.
- Tudor, A. 2017 'Dimensions of Transnationalism', *Feminist Review*, 117(1):20-40.
- University of Toronto n.d. 'Frank Iacobucci Centre for Italian Canadian Studies'. Available at: <https://www.italianstudies.utoronto.ca>

[/research/frank-iacobucci-centre-italian-canadian-studies.](#)

- Wong, A. 2013 *'Between Rage and Love': Disidentifications among Racialized, Ethnicized, and Colonized Allosexual Activists in Montreal* [Doctoral thesis], Concordia University.
- York University n.d. 'About', York U: The Mariano A. Elia Chair in Italian Canadian Studies. Available at: <https://elia-chair.info.yorku.ca/about-us/>.

Filmography:

- Accenti Magazine 2021a *Here & Now: An Anthology of Queer and Italian-Canadian Writing – reading and discussion* [online video], 8 June. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irNPBV7Z2Gw>. Accessed: 29 November, 2021.
- . 2021b *Here & Now: Readings and Discussion* [online video], 5 July. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJ2EUb8BGmo>. Accessed: 29 November, 2021.
- Canton, L. (director) 2021 *Creative Spaces: Queer and Italian Canadian* [motion picture], Montreal.
- OMNI News 2021a *Creative spaces: la voce degli scrittori queer italo-canadesi* [online video], 25 January. Available at: <https://www.omnitv.ca/on/it/videos/creative-spaces-la-voce-degli-scrittori-queer-italocanadesi/>. Accessed: 29 November, 2021.

- . 2021b *Creative spaces: la comunità italiana in Canada e quella LGBTQ* [online video], 2 March. Available at: <https://www.omnitv.ca/on/it/videos/creative-spaces-la-comunita-italiana-in-canada-e-quella-lgbtq/>. Accessed: 29 November, 2021.
- . 2021c *'Here & Now', un'antologia di scrittori italo-canadesi queer* [online video], 4 June. Available at: <https://www.omnitv.ca/on/it/videos/here-and-now-unantologia-di-scrittori-italo-canadesi-queer/>. Accessed: 29 November, 2021.
- Violet Hour 2021a *Here & Now: Queer Italian-Canadian Readings*, 15 April [online video]. Available at: <https://youtu.be/N5NWn8-MxJQ>. Accessed: 29 November 2021.
- . 2021b *Here & Now: Queer Italian-Canadian Readings*, 21 May [online video]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCxXy9NkNPU>. Accessed: 29 November, 2021.