Italianization of Emigration to Canada: Or, What is the Role of the Italies outside of Italy?

Evelyn Ferraro
Santa Clara University, eferraro@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/mod_lang_lit
Part of the Italian Language and Literature Commons, Modern Languages Commons, and the Modern Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

Copyright © 2011 Rowman & Littlefield. Reproduced by permission of Rowman & Littlefield. All rights reserved. Please contact the publisher for permission to copy, distribute or reprint

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages & Literature by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.
In Migrancy, Culture, Identity Iain Chambers observes that present-day critical thought frequently adopts metaphors of movement, migration, maps, travel, and sometimes tourism to describe and explain the encounter with people and cultures that the European rationale is no longer able to domesticate in an era of increasing globalization. Chambers himself uses the metaphor of journey to represent this encounter and, taking on Said’s reflections on exile and his idea that homes are always provisional, he states that the questions we meet en route displace our terms of reference, which are the certainty of the point of departure and the promise of a return home. What is left along the journey is the “memory of a primary loss [that] has made of exile a suggestive symbol of our times” (Chambers 2). In Chambers’s discourse, exile is ultimately identified with migrancy, which differs from travel insofar as it denies a movement between fixed and certain positions, implying a “dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation,” and envisions the promise of homecoming as impossible. The idea of an unfeasible return here suggested does not simply apply to the migrants who have left home behind them, but also to those who reside at home; in fact, what is ultimately questioned and regarded as untenable is the possibility of a return to a dispersed “authenticity” and to the singularity of a culture in
a metropolitan world increasingly characterized by cultural interactions and transformations. In this paper I wish to consider some of the complex cultural and literary issues that the notion of homecoming entails in relation to Italy’s migrations outside of Italy. The main questions I intend to address include the following: In which terms can we envision a repatriation of migrants nowadays? And, what are the cultural implications of a symbolical repatriation that comes at a particular historical moment that marks Italy’s transition from a sending to a receiving country?

We can state today that Italian emigration has fully (Tirabassi 7) entered Italian public debate, after a long silence during which only a restricted group of scholars deemed it a worthy object of study. Multiple factors have contributed to the emergence of this field on the public scene, such as the formation of regional governments that have promoted contacts with the communities of local emigrants residing outside of Italy; the question of the Italian vote abroad; the issue of the repatriation of Latin Americans of Italian descent; a growing attention in the media to topics related to migration; and the phenomenon of immigration that has encouraged a more critical reflection on Italy’s migratory past while creating the premises for a fertile exchange on the relationship between emigration and immigration. As the interest around migration studies increases and scholars of old and new migrations discuss the interpretative categories that best fit the Italian migratory paradigm, a fundamental question needs to be addressed: what is the role of the Italiess outside of Italy within the public debate on Italian emigration?

In an essay centered on migration outside of Europe, especially to Canada, and on the relationship between Italy and its migrants, Francesco Loriggio has argued that the Italianization of emigration represents a challenge for the cultural and literary implications that it elicits. First of all, the attempt to reroute migration back to the nation should be interpreted as a sign of the contemporary evolution and postmodernization of the nation itself since, as Loriggio states,

Nations too adjust, postmodernize themselves; they allow double citizenship, grant to those who have decided to remain abroad the right to be represented in parliament and to vote in elections . . . knowing full well that in today’s world, there is cachet in being spread out, in having de-territorialized carriers of the national culture throughout the globe. A good amount of Italy’s total exports are connected with emigration. (“Italian” 24)

The perspective of a dialogue long due between the motherland and its migrants is certainly desirable, but it also poses many questions that should not be underestimated. For instance, who are the migrants that should be involved in the Italianization of emigration? The over sixty million people of Italian origin who live outside the peninsula? Or only those
who, among this large number of migrants or progeny of past generations of migrants, own an Italian passport? To be sure, the Italian presence in the world cannot be referred to or restricted only to Italian society or to what happens or has happened on Italian soil. Rather, the analysis of this presence should coincide with the study of *italianità*, of Italianess, “in its many garbs, as it manifests itself within the national soil, now that immigrants are a mainstay, and as it manifests itself outside the nation” (25).

Loriggio’s approach to the concept of *italianità*, a notion often associated with feelings and ways of conforming to traditions, styles, and habits that are generally perceived as typical of Italians, is rooted in both history and geography. It aims to globalize the history of Italy by mapping out a geo-cultural atlas of the Italian presence on the planet, which encompasses the former colonies where the traces of *italianità* may be faint, as well as the places of emigration, where these signs are more visible and easier to retrieve. Moreover, the notion of *italianità* is configured as a dynamic space with its own centers and peripheries that interact with each other on different levels and whose relationships should be explored contrastively. In this respect, the comparison between the hyphenated communities and cultures sprung from Italian migrations outside of Italy would prove fruitful and shed light on the multiple manifestations of outside-of-Italy *italianità*, which is instead typically identified exclusively with Italian Americana (26).

A further aspect that makes the bond between Italy and its migrants problematic concerns the cultural acceptance of the latter by Italian politicians and intellectuals. In fact, such a question represents the crux of the matter according to Loriggio, who suggests that a real process of reintegration requires more than simply granting political rights and prerogatives to deterritorialized migrant communities. At heart, migrants remain a cultural problem in as much as their identities are the result of the encounter and intertwining of different cultures and in their memories a premigratory past cohabits with the period after arrival in the new society.

Migrants, I contend, are “transitional-beings” or “liminal *personae,*” to borrow Victor Turner’s terminology, because they occupy an “in-between” space that does not correspond to a “state,” that is, a fixed point or condition that is culturally recognized (93–4). Looking at societies as structures of positions, Turner regards liminality as an interstructural situation that lays emphasis on transition and transformation rather than on “states” and their assertive nature. The limen, or margin, also indicates the central phase of the rites of transition by which relatively stable societies accompany every change of “state.” During the liminal period the condition of the subjects of passage is ambiguous especially due to their structural “invisibility”; indeed, they are “at once no longer classified
and not yet classified” (Turner 96) because their position is “betwixt and between” any culturally recognized fixed point. Furthermore, when we look at these “transitional-beings,” Turner writes, “As members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture” (95).

Quite similarly, not only do migrants as “passengers” resist any easy classification or denomination, as the ongoing debate on hyphenation in the field of Italian/American studies shows, but they also tend to be perceived and judged according to predetermined cultural settings by the host society and the homeland. In the eyes of the former, migrants are polluting “transitional beings” to be divested as much as possible of their premigratory past in order to grant them acceptance in the new society; the opposite holds true for the homeland that, instead, perceives its migrants somehow as polluted subjects whose decontamination and reinstatement back into the motherland hinges upon their capacity to abolish the memories of the period after emigration. Of course, if the homeland denies alterity and active participation to its migrants while trying to reabsorb them in the culture of origin, no bilateral exchange, and thus no dialogue can be imagined between the two parts.

This situation is precisely what Loriggio foresees as a risk inherent in the process of the Italianization of emigration: the symbolical repatriation recalled by Italian politicians and intellectuals coincides with an attempt to “re-nativize” migrants by drawing them back within the perimeters of “home” and of the culture of origin. The critic underlines that in the “rather unilateral, monological version of the politicians . . . the active participant is always Italy and the migrants always partners whose function is to learn and obey, to carry the torch, to constantly Italianize themselves and keep silent” (27). To accept Italian communities outside of Italy on the basis of their conformity to the image that those who reside at “home” have of them means to embrace a rigid interpretation of ethnicity, and thus of italiano, to silence the complex identities of the migrants and ultimately to grant them no relevant cultural role. Reciprocity and dialogue are only possible if a new concept of the migrant emerges:

Only when Italian elites have understood this, when they have gone through their own necessary ritual of familial recognition, only when they have demonstrated that they can perceive their migrant relatives as new historical subjects with their specific psycho-socio-anthro-ontological baggage, will they—politicians or intellectuals—have engaged the globalized era that their country has entered. (27, italics mine)

Therefore, cultural acceptance of the migrants’ alterity and a different conceptualization of the role of the Italies outside of Italy are part and
parcel of a challenge to reinterpret liminality as a space for productive confrontation or “as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (Turner 97).

One of the fields in which the promise of new configurations may find fertile ground to flourish is migration literature, although also in this case the Italianization of emigration (and of immigration as well) raises some important issues. From an artistic standpoint, migration, in spite of being a phenomenon of old and modern times, has always been a minor source of literary inspiration vis-à-vis other forms of travel, in particular, the exilic voyage that is instead one of the most recurrent and central themes in the Western tradition. Among the possible reasons, we could think of a certain “intellectual embarrassment” toward this subject (Loriggio, “Italian”: 27) and also the fact that whereas “the longevity and the glamour of stories about exilic itineraries are guaranteed by the events which beget the plot” (banishment, suffering and redemption elevate man to hero), migration is a private decision, its risks are private, “it has been too mainstream, too undramatic, too distant from the world of intrigue and headlines for it to investigate captivating, compelling plots. Not in high culture, anyway” (29).

Just as it is difficult to classify individuals who live between two (or more) worlds and cultures, so it is to locate their texts within migration literature, an emerging field fraught with questions about, for instance, the identity of its authors and the geo-cultural perspective from which they write, the language or languages that they adopt, their audience, the relationship between writing and the experience of migration, the elaboration of an Italian literature of migration and how it positions itself in regard to a canonical conception of Italian literature, and so forth. Over the last two decades, many of these issues have been tackled from two different points of view, namely one centered on the study of texts produced by emigrants outside of Italy and the other by immigrants who reside in Italy. The complex ties with this country and its traditions have provided a major subject matter within Italian Canadian literature since its origins in the 1970s. For example, in the long poem “Mimosa,” by poet and novelist Mary Di Michele, the male attachment to the Italian patriarchal values generates an overwhelming gap between a migrant father and his daughter, Lucia. The father, a worker that has given up education to build a family and make a living in Canada, vents his frustration at Lucia and the children’s generation at large that appears to disregard the past:

“If I had the language like you,” he says to me,
“I would write poems too about what I think.
You younger generation aren’t interested in history.” (15)
By “history” the father means, first and foremost, the family history, that is the oral account of the sacrifices that the parents have faced in order to provide their children with a better future. In this perspective, historical knowledge starts in the family and requires a willingness to listen to the old people and an appreciation for their efforts and Italian background. From the oral transmission of this history, writing should then draw its “truth” about the past and reflect the continuity between the private memory of the family and the collective image of the Italian nation, a country that the father does not see properly represented in his daughter’s poems:

These are good poems you have here Lucia
but what you think about Italy!
"a country of dark men full of violence and laughter,
a country that drives its women to dumb despair."
That’s not nice what you say,
you think it’s very different here?
You got to tell the truth when you write . . .

Dumb despair is what the rebellious daughter, Lucia, tries to escape by leaving her Italian parents’ house in order to pursue a career as an artist. Nevertheless, her identity continues to be split, rooted in two cultures, desirous on the one hand of emancipating herself, and on the other of reconciling with her father through a dialogue that, however, is impossible to achieve. Lucia resembles her father physically and for her curiosity and “anxious desire to be heard,” but she cannot express her feelings of guilt, shame, and love because they “don’t have a common language anymore.” For the daughter, the truth is before her eyes: his body is crippled, he is approaching the end of his life, and their relationship oscillates between monologues and silence:

and we love each other and say nothing,
we love each other in that country
we couldn’t live in.

Alienation and, simultaneously, the sense of being involved somehow in the same cultural tradition of the parents troubles Lucia and many other protagonists of the Italian-Canadian literature that, like her, occupy a liminal position, an in-between space that indeed also several authors share, including Mary Di Michele who was born in Lanciano, Italy, and emigrated to Canada at age six, in 1955. Furthermore, Di Michele’s poem contains a number of themes that have been explored by Italian Canadian
Italianization of Emigration to Canada

writers, such as: the figure of the father as patriarch; the absent or voiceless mother; the domestic and social role of women; and the linguistic gap between the Italian migrants and the children’s generation.

Often, the images, ideas, descriptions of events and characters, anecdotes, and humor that this type of literature provides are self-representative, but accomplish a dual goal: to reinforce contacts (Jakobson’s “phatic” function of signs) and promote cohesion within a group of people who can recognize themselves in those narratives; and to create a “collective archive” whose records, written rather than left in the oral form, preserve the memory of the migratory experience. This “inscriptive function of writing,” as Loriggio calls it (“Italian”: 33), is nothing exceptional, but in fact, it is in tone with the “ordinariness” of migration literature, a concept used polemically by the critic to highlight some substantial differences, if not incompatibilities, between Italian migrant cultures and Italian culture, which is traditionally more prone to resuscitate one of its past seasons of resurgence, such as Rinascimento, Risorgimento and, more recently, Resistenza than recognize the importance of new emergences (37–38).

Italian Canadian literature is mostly constituted by texts written in English or French by authors who either emigrated from Italy as infants (e.g., Mary Di Michele, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, Frank Paci, Mary Melfi) or were born in the new country (e.g., Nino Ricci and Antonio D’Alfonso). However, next to these there is also a small percentage of writers who have chosen to adopt Italian as their literary language even after they moved outside of Italy: Dino Fruchi, Romano Perticarini, Aldo Giosefﬁni, and Maria J. Ardizzi are some of these. It is difficult to measure the extent of this phenomenon that from an institutional viewpoint remains nearly invisible, since these authors are excluded from both Italianistica and Italian Canadian writing. Occasionally, their presence has been signaled by scholars who are involved in such hyphenated literatures as Italian American or Italian Australian, but their names and productions are still largely ignored.

In 1990, however, these writers were at the center of a conference held in Lausanne, Switzerland, whose proceedings were collected in La letteratura dell’emigrazione: gli scrittori di lingua italiana nel mondo (1991). The sections of the volume are organized by geographical area and the comments on migrant writers, although referring to specific literary experiences, provide a global overview of how italianità can manifest itself outside of Italy, through Italophone writers. As the editor of the volume, Jean-Jacques Marchand, remarks in the introduction, the materials presented at the conference and the debate that followed called for more precise definitions of the concepts implied by the topic. For instance, since migrant writers often deal with subjects not strictly connected with migratory themes, the participants agreed that “letteratura dell’emigrazione”
should indicate "l'insieme delle opere scritte da emigrati, qualunque ne sia la tematica" (XXIII), while "letteratura di emigrazione" should single out "le opere, scritte in Italia o all'estero, che hanno per tema l'emigrazione" (XIX, n.4). Moreover, the decision to set a linguistic restriction expressed not only adherence to the specific topic of the conference, but also concern about the limits beyond which we cannot or should not talk of migration literature. According to Marchand, indeed, by choosing to focus on Italophone writers we avoid shifting toward nationalistic interpretations of identity that would be otherwise necessarily implied in a debate on Italian migration literature.

The distinction proposed at Lausanne and later accepted and reformulated by others was that between "scrittori emigrati" and "emigrati scrittori" where only the former refers to people who reside abroad and whose primary occupation is to write literary texts. This leaves unanswered the question, often brought up in discussions on migration literature, of the literary qualities of works by migrants who do not rely on cultural or literary models of reference. In this regard, Marchand discourages a "concezione esageratamente accademica" that tends to stigmatize a priori any text by migrants without a solid literary background, although he also urges new criteria to evaluate this kind of writing. In addition, he raises the issue of the identification of the Italophone migrant writer outside of Italy, a figure that remains invisible to Italian institutions because, in spite of a gradual modernization of the nomenclature adopted for migrants, Italian law considers an emigrant "ogni cittadino che espatri esclusivamente a scopo di lavoro manuale." Obviously, such a definition does not explain the position of those migrants who modify their professional status over time or expatriate to engage in professional activities, two situations that have become more and more common since the postwar period, nor can it account for the transnational migrants and migratory movements that characterize our time.

In 1990, the same year of the Lausanne conference, three books, Io venditore di elefanti, Immigrato, and Chiamatemi Ali, were published in Italy as a result of collaborative projects between migrants who arrived in the country in the previous decade and Italians (See Khouma, Methuami, and Bouchane). These texts have ushered in a new literature of migration whose authors belong to various ethnicities and are giving rise to a conspicuous body of texts that often reach out beyond the autobiographical matter and present interesting phenomena of hybridization. In recent years, such a production has started receiving critical attention both in Italy and abroad and the debate it has originated has already highlighted some elements of comparison with the literature by Italian migrants outside of Italy. For instance, in her most recent book, Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture (2005), Graziella Parati demonstrates how contempo-
ary Italian culture is shaped by the intersection and interaction between the migratory past of Italy and the immigrant culture that constitutes her main object of study. Some of the issues and themes that she brings to the fore are similar to those that Loriggio deals with, such as the question of the presumed homogeneity of the European and the Italian cultures that they both criticize, and the ability of migrants outside and inside of Italy to “write back” or “talk back,” to be active participants in the encounter with other cultures and institutions (e.g., Italy and ex-colonizers).

Parati’s theoretical model of “destination culture,” described as a “projection and development into the future of present cultural turmoils and tensions,” suggests future scenarios within Italian culture and Italian migration literature in which a fundamental role is assigned to the migrants who now reside in Italy. A similar perspective is embraced by Armando Gnisci who in 1998 attempted to come up with a definition of Italian migration literature that lies at the intersection of crucial historical processes. To put it in his words:

[N]oialtri italiani dobbiamo imparare a imparare dal nostro passato migratorio, oltre che dalla breve ad esagerata (in tutti i sensi) esperienza di potenza coloniale, ad avere a che fare con il presente interculturale, in casa e dovunque nel mondo. Quest’ultima considerazione ci aiuta, infine, a formulare in maniera più compiuta la rivendicazione di una letteratura italiana della migrazione. Essa deve essere pensata innanzitutto come un fenomeno della modernità avanzata, senza precedenti. Inizia con le migrazioni di intere popolazioni di italiani verso tutto il mondo alla ricerca di lavoro a partire dall’immediato periodo post-unitario e trova il suo completamento nella letteratura scritta dagli immigrati, venuti in Italia da tutto il mondo in cerca di lavoro, a partire dall’ultimo decennio del XX secolo. (83)

To be more exact, this area of contemporary Italian literature that Gnisci identifies comprises the literature, expressed in Italian, produced by Italian emigrants outside of Italy and by immigrants, but the contribution that he acknowledges to the two components is unequal. In fact, he writes,

L’emigrazione italiana ha prodotto pochissima e sconosciuta letteratura in italiano. Inoltre, essa va considerata, ormai, come un segno del passato: è una reliquia da adunare e salvare. Resta nella sua ombra modesta e offesa, però, come letteratura italiana della migrazione, compagna antica, e morta da piccola, di quella dei nostri attuali e futuri scrittori “immigrati.” (79–80) 17

Gnisci’s suggestion stems primarily from the notion that, unlike many Italian “emigrati storici,” Italy’s recent immigrants possess a remarkable level of education. He also points out that “da questa letteratura gli scrittori di professione, quelli che stanno nelle storie e nelle antologie nazionali della letteratura italiana, hanno deciso di escludersi” (83–4, italics in the original).
Although the adjectives that Gnisci uses are a bit ambiguous and unflattering (i.e., antica, morta), his comments encourage, in my opinion, a deeper investigation of the existing outside-of-Italy migration literature in Italian, beyond any fixed classification of Italian migrants and in recognition of “Italy’s many diasporas,” to borrow the title of a book by Donna Gabaccia (2000), that is, of all the peculiarities and changes that have intervened in the Italian migratory processes over time. Changes that may well also refer to how the notion of italianità is revisited in migrants’ texts, if we conceive of ethnicity as something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual (Fischer), and according to the geo-cultural context that surrounds the subject. And this, in turn, brings us back to Loriggio’s call for a reconsideration of migrant identity and its bond with the homeland.

What I have hopefully conveyed here is that the issues implied in the Italianization of emigration do not allow for an unproblematic “homecoming,” to a return to a stable “state,” to a monolithic cultural identity and literary tradition. To re-appropriate and nationalize, in the sense of “renativize,” emigration is untenable and undesirable; the spaces that migrant narratives open up should be considered as moving toward a de-nationalization of the Italian literary canon and theorization of a transnational model of Italian literature.

NOTES

2. For a comprehensive discussion on the opportunity to adopt categories such as transnationalism, generation, and diaspora in relation to Italian migrations, see Maddalena Tirabassi, ed., Itiner: Paradigmi delle migrazioni italiane (2005).
4. By rites of transitions or “rites de passage,” Van Gennep means “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age.” They comprise three phases—separation, margin or limen, and aggregation—that mark the passage of an individual or group from a stable state in the social structure to another. Quoted in Turner, 94.
5. See Anthony Tamburri, To Hyphenate or Not to Hyphenate: The Italian/American Writer: An Other American (1991), and A Semiotic of Ethnicity: In (Re)cognition of the Italian/American Writer (1998), especially “Italian/American Writer or Italian Poet Abroad?: Luigi Fontanella’s Poetic Voyage,” 109–17. On the same topic, see the introduction to Poesaggio: poeti italiani d’America, ed. Peter Carravetta and Paolo
Italianization of Emigration to Canada


6. The idea that “transitional beings” are regarded as polluting comes from Mary Douglas, quoted in Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 97. The adoption of terms borrowed from the rhetoric of illness (e.g., *sanatoria*) to immigrants to Italy has been pointed out by Graziella Parati, in “Strangers in Paradise: Foreigners and Shadows in Italian literature,” *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, ed. Beverly Allen and Mary Russo (1997), 169–90.


8. Maria Ardizzi, born in Leognano (Teramo) in 1931, among others, published three novels in the 1980s (*Made in Italy, Il sapore agro della mia terra*, and *La buona America* as parts of “Il ciclo degli Emigranti”). A database (BASLIE) that contains bibliographical references about Italian migrants writing in Italian outside of Italy is accessible online at http://fmp-server.ital.unil.ch/ital/letemi.


11. In his definition of “scrittore emigrato,” Fontanella adds that he/she is “una persona che era già scrittore prima della partenza dall’Italia . . . , ovvero uno scrittore che, restando tale, ma emigrato definitivamente—diremmo meglio . . . ‘trapiantato’ in un’altra cultura—ha giocoforza assorbito di quest’ultima, modi temi forme e, soprattutto, la nuova lingua espressiva.” (*Parola Transfuga*, 13, italics in the original).

12. For instance, in 1991 the so-called Coemit (Comitati degli emigrati italiani) were [ri]baptized Comites (Comitati degli italiani all’estero).

13. For further information, see article 10, “Testo Unico sull’Emigrazione,” November 13, 1919 n2205. Quoted in Marchand, XVIII n2, italics mine.

14. In the early 1990s, the term “transnationalism” was coined “to emphasize the emergence of a social process in which migrants establish social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. . . . Transmigrants take actions, make decisions, and feel concerns within a field of social relations that links together their country of origin and their country or countries of settlement.” Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration* (1992), ix.

15. For a database (BASILI) of the migrant writers who write in Italian, see http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/basili2001.

16. “In my usage, a destination culture is therefore not only the culture toward which migration moves, but is a new hybrid culture that is the result of both the changes brought to a local culture by incoming people and the influence of that Western culture (with its internal hybridizations and pluralism) on incoming cultures.” Parati, *Migration Italy*, 70.

17. Following the symbolism attached to the “liminal personae” (Turner 96–7), the metaphor of death that Gnisci uses here allows for a vision of Italian migra-
tion literature as being in its "liminal" phase, in transition between old and new migrant writers, respectively symbolizing an internal process of dissolution and parturition within migration literature.


**WORKS CITED**


