

Literary Women: Exploring the Voices of Delia De Santis and Venera Fazio¹

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Abstract: In 2016 editors Venera Fazio and Delia De Santis published *Exploring Voice*, creative texts and personal essays by 26 Canadian women of Italian heritage. This is one of many volumes that Fazio and De Santis co-edited. This paper discusses their inspiration for writing and their motivation for giving so much of their time to the literary community at large. We look at their contribution to Italian-Canadian literature as authors, editors, literary volunteers and cultural agents.

Keywords: Women, Writing, Anthologies, Italian-Canadian, Cultural Agents

They may write in English or French in a country that is not Italy, but their writing is certainly inspired by their Italian heritage. Canadians of Italian origin have influenced the evolution of literature and literary criticism in Canada. This essay explores the work of two key literary figures in Italian-Canadian literature. Delia De Santis and Venera Fazio are not only Canadian authors with Italian roots, they are also cultural agents of the Italian-Canadian literary community. They create venues and seek opportunities for their peers so that Italian-Canadian voices, established and emerging, will be read and heard. By so doing De Santis and Fazio facilitate and encourage their peers to explore their literary identity. As published writers, Delia De Santis is best known for her short stories whereas Venera Fazio is a poet and nonfiction writer. This essay introduces two unsung literary women and explores their contribution to the body of Italian-Canadian literature. This text is part of a larger trans Canada research project, which looks at the complexity of a multilingual and multicultural environment and its influence on the writer's journey towards her development as a literary artist. I draw on literary works as well as conversations and interviews that I've had with the authors.

¹ Venera Fazio passed away on December 23, 2017, in Bright's Grove, Ontario.

Men were key players in the birth and rise of Italian-Canadian literature, a body of writing which became visible in the 1970s. The founders of the Association of Italian Canadian Writers (AICW) were mostly men, but women (including Delia De Santis and Venera Fazio) have ensured its survival for three decades. The AICW celebrates 32 years in 2018. In April 2016, to mark the AICW's thirtieth anniversary, De Santis and Fazio were honoured at Montreal's Blue Metropolis International Literary Festival.-

In the essay "Italian Canadian Literature: Our Women, Our Writers," I argued that despite their slower progression, women have played a crucial role in bringing the Italian-Canadian creative expression to the foreground. Women usually have less time to devote to writing and their often unremunerated literary career because of their traditional roles and responsibilities which include caring for children and elderly parents, managing the household and social calendar. This is also true of Delia De Santis and Venera Fazio. However, in their case, their progression or visibility as authors is also affected by their roles as volunteer cultural agents.

Although they were publishing decades ago in magazines, anthologies and journals, De Santis and Fazio took the long road and several detours before seeing the appearance of their first full-length books as authors. Delia De Santis' first published work was the story titled "Nonna's Night Visitors" which appeared in 1977. She continued to publish her stories in magazines in Canada, England, Italy, and the United States. Her first authored book, *Fast Forward and Other Stories*, appeared in 2008, three decades since the publication of her first story. In 1993, Venera Fazio published her first nonfiction piece titled "What's in a Name?" – which she considers the launch of her literary career. Her first book, the collection of poetry *The Fabric of My Soul*, appeared in 2015, more than twenty years later.

These two authors are best known as editors of anthologies, that is, they are known for featuring other writers, and in particular Canadian writers of Italian heritage. De Santis and Fazio have often worked in tandem in organizing literary events, but also in preparing volumes for publication. Together Delia De Santis and Venera Fazio have co-edited the anthologies featuring Sicilian heritage writers: *Sweet Lemons: Writings with a Sicilian Accent* (2004) and *Sweet Lemons II: International Writings with a Sicilian Accent* (2010). They are also two of the three editors on the following volumes: *Writing Beyond History: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry* (2006), and *Strange Peregrinations: Italian Canadian*

Literary Landscapes (2007). Delia Se Santis is co-editor of *Italian Canadians at Table: A Narrative Feast in Five Courses* (2013). Venera Fazio is co-editor of *Reflections on Culture* (2010).

In 2016 De Santis and Fazio published the volume *Exploring Voice: Italian Canadian Female Writers*, a volume which includes twenty-six contemporary writers. The book showcases prominent authors such as Gianna Patriarca, Mary di Michele and Caterina Edwards, but also young writers and emerging voices. *Exploring Voice* features the fiction, nonfiction and poetry of twenty-six women of Italian heritage. The volume was carefully set up to include a creative text and a personal essay on writing by the author herself or an academic essay by another writer or critic. For instance, literary critic Maria Cristina Seccia contributed an essay on Edmonton author Caterina Edwards; and emerging writer Liana Cusmano wrote an essay on Montreal author Mary Melfi. On the other hand, Toronto short story writer Darlene Madott and Windsor author Marisa De Franceschi contributed both a creative text and an essay on writing. To quote the back cover of *Exploring Voice*:

The essays offer us honest and thoughtful insights into the lives of these talented women. They provide biographical details and an overview / analysis of the writer's accomplishments and, often, the motivation for writing. We are taken along on the inner journeys that have led them to self-discovery and success in their field... Writing is an act of communication. Going public and / or publishing your work requires courage and perseverance.

The volume *Exploring Voice* also includes creative contributions by De Santis and Fazio. In her personal essay "On Writing and Dreaming" (published in Italy as "Sullo scrivere e sul sognare"), Fazio writes: "When someone asks me how or why I became a writer, I hesitate before answering. Should I tell the truth or should I reply with a superficial but socially acceptable answer? I never wanted or planned to be a writer" (*Exploring Voice* 173). In her early forties she was a married, stay-at-home mom, caring for two young children. She had worked as a social worker for nearly twenty years before becoming a mother. Her career included counselling sexual assault victims, runaway children and shift work in a 24-hour psychiatric crisis centre. She seldom read for pleasure. The voices of troubled clients filled what was once her inner quiet space. She was ready for a career change. Once her children were in school full time, she knew she did not want to go back to social work. She therefore relied on dreams for direction. Venera Fazio writes, "Luckily for me, when I asked my dreaming mind for an answer to

what I should do instead of social work, I received a straightforward reply. The next morning, I dreamt I was sitting at a desk, writing stories. My face reflected the same absorbed, blissful expression I have when I am reading. I felt the sense of peace/inner quiet ... as well as something more—a feeling of completeness” (*Exploring Voice* 174-5).

And so, Venera Fazio was convinced that writing would bring her the peace of mind that she lost after decades of helping others as a social worker. In “On Writing and Dreaming,” Fazio goes on to explain that in a second dream she realized that she must write about her family. A third dream convinced her that she could not write about family without reclaiming her Sicilian heritage. For most of her life, Fazio had been called Verna, the English version of Venera: “The anglicized version of ‘Verna’ had been forced upon me by an English neighbour and my grade one school teacher. No doubt these adults were trying to be helpful by giving me a name that was easy for the Anglo community to pronounce. But being called ‘Verna’ never felt authentic” (*Exploring Voice* 175).

Thus, the first step to reclaiming her Sicilian heritage was to change her first name back to its original Italian “Venera,” a process which took “several years of correcting friends and family” (*Exploring Voice* 175). “I am glad I persevered,” Fazio writes. She reminds us of Maria Mazziotti Gillan, an Italian American poet, “who also changed her name to be accepted in an Anglo society,” who wrote that “changing your life starts with accepting all the parts of your past you were so anxious to give away” (“Changing My Name” from *Ancestors’ Song*, 13 as quoted in *Exploring Voice* 175).

For Delia De Santis, too, her Italian heritage is a key element in pursuing writing. In a 2006 interview published in *Bibliosophia*, she says,

I think I started writing in my head when I was a little girl. I was shy when I was growing up, and I didn’t have many friends. That left a lot of time for me to dream and make up stories in my mind. Maybe it was a way of burying the loneliness. But I didn’t actually start writing until I was in my thirties. My two sons were small and we had moved to a hobby farm. Being alone a lot through the daytime and being close to the land again enabled me to reconnect to my childhood—in Italy we used to live on a farm—and the stories just started coming back. Only this time I decided that I would not let my dreams slip away. So I bought myself a typewriter ... and not really quite knowing what I was doing, I began to write. (Canton)

Delia De Santis explains in detail what inspires her to write and how the writing process works for her:

I've been a jack of all trades all my life. I have gone from hairdressing to real estate, to accounting and being a partner with my husband in a land development and construction company... Besides the work that earned me wages, I always enjoyed the other aspects of my daily living: taking care of my house ... helping with grandchildren when needed, parents, cooking good meals, getting involved with the community, friends... Nothing unusual, just what most other people do in life. But for me, these life experiences—when balanced properly ... are positive and inspirational means leading to my writing. For example, I can have a very satisfying time working in my flower garden—I love perennials ... and suddenly as I am doing work with my hands, my mind begins to *imagine*... so that not only flowers germinate in my garden, but also ideas. However, the ideas may have actually been triggered by something else before the gardening. Now, with the ideas starting to gel, I need to find time to start writing. So, if I feel the story is the kind that is going to force itself out of me more or less at once, then I might drop everything and start writing. (Canton)

Like many contemporary Canadian writers of Italian heritage, De Santis and Fazio were raised at the intersection of the rural and the urban. They grew up in suburban homes in Canada where small town mentality and Italian regional traditions reigned. Delia De Santis was born in Atina, in the province of Frosinone, in the region of Lazio. She immigrated to Canada with her mother and siblings at the age of thirteen, in 1957. They joined her father in Bright's Grove, Ontario. She still lives there with her husband. They have two grown sons and grandchildren.

Venera Fazio was born in Bafia, Sicily, and came to Canada with her mother and brother in 1951 to join her father who was already in Dundas, Ontario. In a recent interview, Venera Fazio recalls: "It was traumatic for my brother and I. I was mute for about six months; my brother regularly checked behind the furniture for the missing grandparents we had left behind" (Canton Email Correspondence with Venera Fazio, June 2017).

Fazio and De Santis first met in the early 1980s, but they didn't get to know each other well until the late nineties when they were both seeking a literary community. They began taking the same writing workshops and, in 1998, both began volunteering for the Association of Italian Canadian Writers (AICW). They were elected to the AICW executive board at the Vancouver conference in 1998. They have served on the board, off and on, for the past twenty years. Delia De Santis was the AICW treasurer for several terms. Venera Fazio was AICW president from 2008 to 2010.

The question of personal identity and its connection to cultural heritage are key issues for Delia De Santis and Venera Fazio, as it is for the writers featured in *Exploring Voice*. Whether it be a positive or negative force, their Italian heritage is nonetheless engrained in their writing. It may be the impetus or the muse that sets free a story or a poem or a novel. In "On Writing and Dreaming," Venera Fazio says: "My culture of origin is my Muse" (*Exploring Voice* 176). In the essay "Rage as Creative Fuel," Toronto author Michelle Alfano says that her "ethnicity felt like a trap." Therefore, her heritage provoked her writing. Alfano writes that she has given "a great deal of thought to the connection between her writing and her heritage: "Would I have taken the path I have taken as a writer if I were not Italian, not a Southerner, not a Sicilian, and subject to the cultural norms of that culture?" (*Exploring Voice* 25).

De Santis and Fazio were born in Italy, but they became women and writers in Canada. They began writing and publishing in the adopted land while maintaining strong ties with Italy, through their parents' traditions and by visiting relatives in Italy. Their writings depict the conflicts and contrasts between Italy and Canada but also the bond with the homeland. In the essay "Hungry Hearts," a critique of De Santis' collection *Fast Forward and Other Stories*, Loretta Gatto-White writes: "... the immigrant's culture and the conflicts they face provide the author with a wealth of conflict and secondary intrigue." In an interview with Gatto-White, De Santis says: "These are the people I know best. They are my community. I understand them and can hear the sound of their words, their tone, what's hidden behind the words; I know it all" (*Exploring Voice* 88).

The children of immigrants are raised speaking the heritage language in the home while learning and mastering the language of the host country outside of the home. Immigrant children negotiate dialect and traditional customs in the home, English at school, and Canadian customs outside of the home. This reality is represented in literary works by women featured in *Exploring Voice*. And it is also illustrated in Venera Fazio's collection of poetry *The Fabrics of My Soul* (2015). She has included Italian and Sicilian dialect in her poems. Similarly, in De Santis' story "No Man of Music," the main character Rosetta speaks broken English, to reflect that she is from the old country. The story is about an abused older woman who clings to St. Anthony when her adult Canadian son throws her down the stairs.

In the essay "I Remember Therefore I Am," literary critic Silvia Bizzini Caporale argues that the writing of contemporary Italian-

Canadian women is “representative of a duality difficult to come to terms with and of the every so often complex process of accepting a divided cultural identity. What springs out from these authors’ writings is that their splitting up, more often than not, does not materialize in abstract and complex theoretical issues, but in everyday life and experiences like cooking, playing, dressing...” (106). This is particularly evident in Delia De Santis’ short story “A Special Day.” The story illustrates well the narrator’s role as a member of the in-between generation (i.e., in between the rural heritage and the urban present), in between the children who completely identify as Canadian and the parents who are still connected to the old country. De Santis describes the planting of trees (i.e., working the land) as an activity which connects all of the generations: “My parents came to help... They know so much about the soil and what it takes to make things grow, the nutrients. Before emigrating to Canada they lived off the land. It means a lot to them to give plants a good start” (*Italian Canadians at Table* 192). This is indicative of the fact that it meant a lot to the now elderly parents to give their children a good start by coming to Canada, the land of hope and opportunity. This scene clearly illustrates the juxtaposition of generations—the grandparents and the grandchildren—and the narrator-daughter-mother as a member of the in-between or sandwich generation. The narrator states: “Our boys were there, too, pretending to labour—too little for real work” (*Italian Canadians at Table* 192). De Santis goes on to show the father’s long-term resistance to the host culture and his slow adaptation which takes place only with the appearance of grandchildren: “he has finally started to accept the new generation, including some of the ways of the new world. Perhaps he has seen that, even with a certain breaking away from the formality and the stiff ‘old country’ ways, nothing terrible has happened” (*Italian Canadians at Table* 193).

Both De Santis and Fazio have a lot to say, and much to share through their writing. Why then, did they not solely concentrate on writing their own narratives as most writers often do? Venera Fazio explains why she devoted a lot of her free time to other writers, by editing their writing to be included in anthologies and featuring them at literary events, instead of working on her own writing: “I have a social work background and love to organize. I wanted to promote Italian-Canadian culture since that background was ignored while I was growing up. It was important to me to edit Italian-Canadian writers because when I started writing, Italian-Canadian writers were invisible” (Canton, Email Correspondence with Venera Fazio, June 2017). In the

essay quoted above, Venera Fazio explains that writing was difficult for her as a young student: she often received bad marks for composition. Sadly, after decades of writing and publishing, writing has once again become difficult for Fazio as has speaking. In 2015, Venera Fazio was diagnosed with a brain tumor. The surgery was successful, but it left her with some impediments. "Writing is a slow and painful process, now more than ever," says Venera Fazio (Canton, June 2017).

In a recent interview, Delia De Santis explained why she wanted to volunteer for the Italian-Canadian community. She says, "In one way or another I have always been involved with the Italian-Canadian community locally, as a way to give back to our greater community for the opportunities we were given as immigrants to this country." She explains further:

But being a writer I saw the need to reach out across the country and help promote Italian-Canadian writers, to showcase their work, to bring it to the attention of the greater community. This was something that needed to be done from the inside, we couldn't expect others to do it for us. We, Italian Canadians, have talents. We are hard-working and creative, so why not create our own opportunities? I felt proud to help to provide those opportunities, to see our writers being recognized more and more. But most of all do something that gave them encouragement. We all need that little push in whatever we're doing. (Canton, Email Correspondence with Delia De Santis, June 2017)

I asked both women to talk about the story or poem they are most proud of. For Venera Fazio it is the poem "Broken," about her Uncle Carlo who came to Canada, then was deported back to Italy where he died in a mental institution. Fazio says: "It was a situation that our family didn't discuss, but writing the poem was an opportunity to discuss it with my aunts and uncles. After my uncle was deported, his family broke ties with the rest of our family. Writing this poem helped rebuild the bridge between us and that is why I am so proud of it. I'm glad to have my cousins and aunt back in my life" (Canton, June 2017). This poem, "Broken," clearly illustrates Fazio's desire to write about family and roots, as well as to honour those who were marginalized:

BROKEN by Venera Fazio²

In memory of Zio Carlo Fazio (1922-1969)

A snake
skin of ebony
mirrors
shimmering Sicilian sun
stretches
across your tombstone.

While you were alive
we locked your name
in our family closet
sealed it shut with silence.

Decades later
from cracked seal
seeped sibling stories:
your rages
quickness with switch blade
suicide attempt
in the reservoir of Cootes Paradise.

Then, confinement in Hamilton Sanatorium.
The skipped medical payments
your deportation back to ageing parents
and early death by pneumonia
in archaic Messina hospital.

Before the war
Carlo was *molto bravo*
lamented a sister.
He suffered a brain injury
falling off an army truck
said one brother, not convinced.
Another brother declared
No, no, he was broken ...
days trapped in a sewer.

² Previously published in *The Fabric of My Soul*. Montreal: Longbridge Books, 2015.

Someone snitched and the Germans
bombed the hideout.
Your uncle was the only survivor.

The snake snaps open his jaws
points unfurled fangs
towards me.
Can only the living
fully forgive each other?¹

Delia De Santis is most proud of “Faces in the Window,” a short story about the elderly, published in *Fast Forward and Other Stories* (2008). “I love old people and I like writing about them a lot. I feel a great sadness about the confinement of old people, especially the ones who have no one to even come to visit them in nursing homes,” says De Santis (Canton, June 2017). The story is about Sam’s loneliness as his acquaintances and neighbours pass away. He had hoped to spend his remaining years with his friend, August. Sam says, “August, when we get older and more than half crippled, we should live together at my house or yours—take care of each other” (*Fast Forward* 83). But when August dies of cancer, Sam is completely alone. The neighbourhood changes as the old houses are torn down, new buildings go up and younger people move in. Sam feels disconnected and isolated: “Now he went to look around in the stores all day long, the fancy mall nearby. There, he met the sons and daughters of his old acquaintances, most of them not remembering his name and anxious to get away” (*Fast Forward* 84). Sam had been in the same house for forty-five years, when a senior citizens’ home was built in the empty land next to him. Late in the evenings he sits in his back yard and plays the accordion, which reminds him of his youth. The music draws “faces in the window” from the old folks’ home next door. Sam plays for their benefit as much as for himself:

He serenaded them in the late night when the sun was giving light to another world and the moon was a faded blossom drooping above his orchard. And he saw their eyes twinkle, each pair of them, the eyes of all the ones who had gotten old before him and gone. He played and played until he saw his fingers become slim and his body young and full of rhapsody that flowed down his leg and his foot like a soft drum that touched the earth with it. (*Fast Forward* 85)

The short story “Faces in the Window” illustrates De Santis’ sensitiv-

ity towards the elderly. Clearly, one of this author's objectives is to write about those who have no voice. De Santis says: "I love writing dialogue, and a lot of the plot in my stories is moved forward with dialogue. I like to understate, knowing that the reader who reads my stories can fill in details with their own imagination..." (Canton, June 2017).

Both Delia De Santis and Venera Fazio write about people who have a love and connection to the land, reminding them of the homeland, Italy, and their rural upbringing. They are women connected to their roots: the traditional strong mother type who caters to her loved ones and others in need, yet assertive and independent. Women with a firm voice however gentle it may be. Women who work to give others a voice, through dialogue and characterization in their own writing, and to other writers via the books they publish as editors. They are nurturing women and literary givers—wholehearted and self-effacing. These are extraordinary women who bring to mind Pier Giorgio Di Cicco's 1986 poem, "The Most Extraordinary Women in the World." Most importantly, however, Venera Fazio and Delia De Santis embody the best of the homeland and the adopted country.

Much of De Santis' and Fazio's writing deals with cultural heritage, family and relationships, featuring strong female characters. For each of these writers, the connection to her heritage and/or the rural setting led to writing. Writing gave them a voice. Many Canadian women writers raised in an Italian immigrant environment were not encouraged to "speak," and therefore many of them used their writing "to speak up" or "to speak out." Windsor author Marisa De Franceschi makes this very clear when she says, "Growing up in a terribly repressive, conservative and restrictive family, like many of my generation ... Conventions had to be followed, rules obeyed. No one was to steer far from the path" (Canton 2006). In *Exploring Voice*, Gianna Patriarca contributes an essay on writing titled "To Be or Not to Be Still Italian: Notes from a Canadian Writer." She says, "I write because I can, I write because I choose to do so, because it is an action that I control and it will not abandon me unless I want it to abandon me. Writing allows me the choice I was not granted as a child and it is proof that I exist and that I am here" (*Exploring Voice* 243). As Fazio writes in the Introduction to *Exploring Voice*, "Writing gives these women freedom of expression." In essence De Santis and Fazio, as well as many of the contributors in *Exploring Voice*, chose to pursue writing to have a sense of freedom, a sense of self, after having been raised in a setting where women featured others first (family, children, parents). But in many ways, that

same selflessness and self-effacement that is often still expected of Canadian women raised by Italian immigrant parents off the page (and that many have rebelled against on the page) manifests itself very clearly in the literary pursuits of De Santis and Fazio. They have clearly chosen to feature other writers before themselves.

Venera Fazio and Delia De Santis have mentored emerging writers thereby contributing to the growth of Italian-Canadian literature for the past two decades. Their generous efforts as cultural promoters have too often been overlooked. Delia De Santis and Venera Fazio are two of our unsung literary heroines. They are the initiators and the organizers who have paved the way for emerging writers, as well as the established writers who are their peers, because they want to see our literary community shine. For more than three decades the Association of Italian Canadian Writers has been representing Canadian voices of Italian heritage and giving a sense of community to many literary artists. And for twenty of those thirty years, Venera Fazio and Delia De Santis have consistently volunteered their time, working on projects together and independently. They love what they do and they believe that their contribution makes a difference to our community of writers. And it certainly does.

The voices of De Santis and Fazio are not only their own as authors; the voices of De Santis and Fazio are also those of other authors, especially women, that they have featured in their work as editors and cultural agents. Venera Fazio and Delia De Santis are like mothers who put their children first. Like mothers who are proud when their children succeed. As editors and as authors, De Santis and Fazio have reason to be proud of their contribution to the Canadian literary scene.

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