

Nostos and Nineteenth-Century Italian-Canadian Immigration: Mapping the Earliest Latin Quarters¹

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Abstract: In this article, I examine the formation of the first Latin Quarter in London (ON) at the end of the nineteenth century, and thus at the dawn of modernity. I analyse how these first (mostly Southern) Italian immigrants attempted to soothe their need for a sense of belonging, how they negotiated their collective *nostos* and, concomitantly, how they dealt with the palpable nostalgia for a return to their Mediterranean homeland.

Keywords: *Nostos*, Mediterranean, Latin Quarters, Nineteenth century, London (ON).

The travels of the Greek Ulysses, the *homo viator*, were restricted to the Mediterranean basin by the classically anointed Pillars of Hercules, and thus his journey always implied a return: the journey-back-as-*nostos*. Indeed the whole culture of Ancient Greece demonstrated a sharp awareness of limits and borders. Friedrich Nietzsche understood this concept only too well; in *The Birth of Tragedy* he argued that the *agon* and the *nostos*, the departure and return, the interplay of Dionysius and Apollo, were central to Greek epistemology. Without Dionysius there is no Apollo and without Apollo, *hubris* destroys Dionysius.

The advent of modernity in Western culture, however, was marked by a new celebration of limitlessness. The *Mare Nostrum* was no longer simply a sea that facilitated navigation between neighbouring lands; travel now entailed crossing the ocean, in its frightfully limitless expanse. The unstoppable liquidity of the ocean shifted the attention beyond the mentioned Pillars of Hercules, and the journey for the Ulysses of modernity—equally full of *metis*, *téchne*, and the urge to discover—often became a journey without the epilogue of a *nostos*, without return. Michaela Ardizzoni and Valerio Ferme's *Mediterranean Encounters in the City* underscores precisely these “transitional areas between the liquidity of transport and the stability of rootedness” (1) in Mediterranean culture. Starting with Homer's Ulysses, and followed by millennia of Mediterranean seafarers, travellers, and later, specifically, emigrants, these Mediterranean people would learn to bend in order

¹ The equivalent of the so-called Latin Quarters to be found in some Canadian cities are the areas referred to as “Little Italy” in many North American urban hubs.

to reach their goals, which sometimes involved profit but often lay merely in survival and in the acceptance that a return to their homeland was impossible. In contrast to the Greek protagonist, the many Ulysses of modernity would thus pay a high price for their travels. Their new circumstances as hard-working, low-income immigrants on another continent often entailed that they could never return back home. Dante's Ulysses, for one, reveals the heroism as much as the ruin of a journey without a return.

The one-way journey of the modern-day Ulysses often spurred nostalgic attempts to recreate the atmosphere of the place left behind, a kind of reconstruction that clearly had to respond and adjust to the societal and climatic forces of the newly discovered environment. As Franco Cassano points out, with the increasing shift towards the centrality of Atlantic geopolitics, the development of European Atlantic modernity from the eighteenth century onward, and the shrinking of Mediterranean communities with subsequent waves of emigrants in the nineteenth century, "an entire discourse was produced that combined geography and climate to [...] reify cultural differences in a most resilient conceptual framework" (Cassano xii). This discourse, Cassano argues, would insist on "the intoxicating tyranny of the new" (xii) which would permit the vanquishing of cultures that were based on a fundamental, timeless relationship between the human being and society.

Claudio Fogu similarly indicts the profound erasure of Southern Italy's Mediterraneanness in the nineteenth century. In his *From Mare Nostrum to Mare Aliorum*, Fogu argues that it was the nation-building doxa of the *Risorgimento* that fractured the notion of Italian modernity. Iain Chambers's *Mediterranean Crossings* offers an alternative way of understanding Mediterranean modernity anchored in the sea. One can read in these works the tensions that underlie most investigations of the Mediterranean in modernity and the relentless critique of teleological modernity and its numerous dichotomies. From the well-known orientalist tropes that dismiss the Mediterranean outside the purview of history to the Mediterranean as a site trapped in a circular temporality (Glissant 50), from the emergence of the discipline of Mediterranean history in the nineteenth century to the birth of the transdisciplinary Mediterranean Studies in the early 1990s, perspectives on the Mediterranean seem hardly ever to be all-encompassing. Certainly the presence of crises—be they economic, political, aesthetic, literary, temporal (and recently also humanitarian)—have typically engulfed narratives of modern Mediterranean communities.

Clearly, as the myriad local histories unfolding across the Mediterranean demonstrate, the region did lose its ancient strategic importance with the onset of modernity. Concomitantly, the North began its rapid rise as the *Abendland*, the land of the evening—and thus the land that had reached a presumed maturity and was worthy of emulation. The many Mediterranean, and especially Italian, emigrants who left the Mediterranean regions to cross the Atlantic—particularly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, during the dawn of a new

mechanized modernity—were the first Southern emigrants to experience the tyranny of Northern epistemologies that glorified machines over humankind and natural resources. Following Carl Schmitt, Cassano locates the foundation of “Occidentalism” in the fusion of two fundamental symbols: that of sea and that of land. The sea stands for mobility beyond the Pillars of Hercules and honours utilitarian individualism and enterprise; the land signifies ethnic, cultural, and linguistic belonging and, above all, it symbolizes a profound sense of place.

Italian society, in all its multifaceted varieties, has a time-honoured sense of place that is countered by the navigational pull of the sea. The waves of Italian emigrants who have pursued seafaring quests in search of a more affluent lifestyle have always been sensitive to their new-found spatial settings. These new locations often proved to be anything but the paradises so zealously sought. More often than not, the new-found reality catapulted the hopeful emigrants into “aberrant forms of freedom,” which, in Cassano’s words, “do not know the restraint of limits and the importance of returns” (xiv). As a result, emigrants at this time attempted to create reassuring boundaries around their new spaces that would lend them a sense of community and belonging and that would offer support among their *connazionali*. An examination of the plight of the first waves of nineteenth-century Italian emigrants (who became Ocean-bound immigrants) and the new places they chose to call—somewhat hesitantly—home, can reveal surprising insights into the present-day immigration and juvenile emigration cycles, which remain two of the most pressing issues in the Mediterranean, and particularly in contemporary Italian society.

In the pages that follow, I intend to present a case study of a number of Italian settlers who attempted to create an enclave for themselves in the mid-sized Canadian city of London, Ontario, a neighbourhood that became one of many so-called Latin Quarters in Canadian and, more generally, in North American cities. It is interesting to note that the first members of the London (ON) Italian community came specifically from Mediterranean islands, which had been relegated to the periphery of Italian society from the very beginning of modernity; as a result, in their new environment these settlers were already familiar with the role of the ‘Other’ that they, as immigrants, were immediately forced to assume. I intend to show how these first Italian settlers at the end of the nineteenth century attempted to soothe their need for belonging and for identification with a particular place, while also considering the ways in which their coping strategies are relevant to us today.

Before attempting to engage critically with these issues, however, it is important to understand how the Italian community in this mid-sized Canadian city, whose population today is around 380,000, came to be formed. Daniel J. Brock reports that in 1874 the first Italian immigrants arrived in what was then a conglomeration of suburbs with a population of 25,000 (197). A wealthy engineer, Ingegnere Ribighini, had been actively engaged in the petroleum industry in the nearby town of Petrolea, which was then nicknamed the Victorian oil town and is often

credited with launching the oil industry in Canada. Ribighini had established his base of operations as a commission merchant in London (ON) and, finding the city lacking a custom tailor, he placed an advertisement in an Italian-language newspaper in New York City, in hopes of attracting the attention of an Italian tailor willing to migrate to the then-oil refining capital of Canada. This advertisement was seen by the young tailors Carmelo Paladino, Angelo D'Ambra, and Giuseppe Famularo. Together with their families, the three tailors formed a group numbering at least fifteen people. They were all interrelated (it was customary to emigrate with family) and they had emigrated from the tiny volcanic island of Lipari. They had been destined for Buenos Aires—like many emigrants from Southern Italian communities, they sensed the similarities between the Latin American continent and their own homeland—but their ship was taken off course by a storm, and was forced to enter the New York harbour. It was here that they read Ribighini's announcement and decided to instead immigrate to Canada, specifically to London. One of Carmelo Paladino's daughters, Angelina, who was born in 1879, would become the mother of Guy (Gaetano Alberto) Lombardo, the famous singer and bandleader who rose to fame in the first half of the twentieth century.

Daniel Brock reports that on arrival, the group from Lipari was directed to Ingegnere Ribighini, who found them accommodation in the very heart of the city, at O'Callahan Terrace, which overlooked the forks of the river that runs through London. Incidentally, this was also the area where early British and Irish settlers had built their first abodes when London was founded, some eighty years earlier (Brock 200). Before he left the city for good in 1878, Ribighini assisted the Italian group to obtain both tailoring and shoemaking work from London residents (Brock 200-01). Following Ribighini's departure, Angelo D'Ambra and Carmelo Paladino took over the leadership of the Italian community. Other Italians arrived in the succeeding years, many working in the tailoring trade as tailors, cutters, and dressmakers, some opening and running their own tailor shops, or opening and working in steam laundries. By November 1877 the group was referred to as the "Italian colony," and a sense of moderation seems to have characterized their community: a city-commissioned report at the turn of the twentieth century, cited by Brock, describes the Italian community as "peaceful, useful and industrious" (200). By 1901 the Italian community had grown to include 206 people. It also became increasingly diverse; while most of the Italians who settled in the city prior to 1905 were from Lipari or the neighbouring Sicilian city of Messina, after 1906 a massive wave of Calabrese immigrants, soon to be joined by Northern Italians, began to flood the city. That said, many of the Italians who arrived in London in the last decades of the nineteenth century sojourned there only briefly before migrating further in search of a better climate—often pressing on towards the border cities of Windsor and Detroit, or continuing further into the United States. Brock reports that other Italian groups, driven by the same motivation, continued south to Cleveland,

Ohio, or chose to proceed further into eastern Ontario to reach St. Catharines, Hamilton, and Toronto (202), an area that, to this day, boasts a strong presence of second-, third-, and fourth-generation Italians.

The area where Ingegnier Ribighino had lived—a block of town houses known as Camden Terrace (now demolished), close to the Roman Catholic Basilica, where all Italian marriages, baptisms, and religious services took place—soon became the area where the Italian community chose to live. This area became commonly known as “the Latin Quarter,” a name further popularized when a well-patronized restaurant opened in the area in 1953, and became a popular dining spot for the following 38 years until it closed in 1991.

In 1901, more than 75 percent of the Italian community in London is reported to have resided either in the Latin Quarter or a few blocks away. The area was bound by Queens Avenue and Fullerton Street and Carling Street from Ridout to Talbot Streets. Households frequently comprised three generations, as well as other relatives and employees (who more often than not were also related). Brock reports that just three years after his arrival, Carmelo Paladino was already writing back to his native Lipari requesting employees for his tailoring shop (202). All the women of the Italian community prior to 1905 are reported to have married within the group. A number of men of Italian birth, however, are reported to have married women of English, Irish, or German origins. The customary practice that enhances continuity and rootedness, whereby the first male child is named after the paternal grandfather, the second after the maternal grandfather, and the third after the father, with the same naming pattern followed for the first three female offspring, was predominant among the Italian community at the turn of the twentieth century. The inhabitants of the Latin Quarter also seem to have upheld a high degree of sexual morality. Brock reports that of the 225 baptisms in this community recorded during the years 1875-1905, only one illegitimate birth was noted. This was far below the average for the city in general and its Roman Catholic population in particular (Brock 206). It was also customary within the Italian community that children learn to play a musical instrument, and later several members of the community earned their living either in whole or in part as musicians, the most popular being the aforementioned Guy Lombardo and his brothers. For the decades to follow the music business was second only to the tailoring trade, with cigar-making and fruit-selling later becoming popular occupations.

Evidently then, the first Italian community in London attempted to deal with their sense of up-rootedness and loss, and with the difficulty of adjusting, by creating a well-defined cultural enclave. It seems to be human nature to recoil instinctively and raise boundaries when confronted by those who look, act, and speak differently from oneself. As Brock puts it,

Human nature being what it is, it was difficult for the Anglo-Saxon community, and the Irish Catholics in particular, who had had to struggle to achieve social and economic status in earlier years, to view the Italians and all such

[Southern] foreigners, who had emigrated to Canada in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as being of the same social order as itself. (201)

The Italian community was thus not accepted outright, and everything indicates that one culture had to surrender to the dominance of another in order to avoid being demonized as 'Other.' Clear proof of this is the Anglicization of Christian names and, where possible, also of surnames. Giovanni, Maria, Gaetano, and Annunziata became John, Mary, Guy, and Nancy. A great deal of creativity was used with surnames, where, for instance, Marchese became Marks; Salvano, Sullivan; LoGiudice, Logie and Logindice; Pascuzzo, Pask; and Scoramagia, Miles (Brock 204). Where possible, many Italians changed the spelling of their surnames to include typically English letters such as "y" and "w," as is testified by the contemporary spelling of many Italian surnames in Canada: Sicoly (for Siculi), Bald (for Baldi), Baymont (for Baiamonte), Mayle (for Mele), Peltier (for Pellittieri), Treat (for Territo).

The Italian community not only struggled to adapt to a different climate, culture, and language, but also to assert its dignity and its respectability, and employment proved to be an important channel through which this could be achieved. It is well documented that this first Italian community in London was exceptionally industrious; indeed, as early as 1877, the *London Free Press* lauded the industry of the "Latin Quarter" inhabitants (Brock 206). The Italian tailor and shoemaker shops were patronized because of the quality of their work, which was consistently delivered after short waiting times. As a result, many such family businesses prospered, and many women within Italian families were also gainfully employed as dressmakers, seamstresses, and cutters. By the 1880s, for instance, Paladino was described as relatively wealthy and "making \$20 a week, as he had done in past years, by working until after midnight week after week for long periods of time" (Brock 200).

The case of the Latin Quarter of London, Ontario portrays the ever-shifting interactions and challenges at the micro-level of the many difficult realities faced by the first waves of (mostly Southern) Italian immigrants in their attempt to settle on the North American continent. Their passage was not just long and arduous but it was also often a one-way voyage. The Italians' journey without return would initially be defined by a spirit of singularity which would lead them to celebrate their loss of roots and the search for a better life, but this spirit was often quickly defeated and countered by the necessity of communal, creative output in enclaves such as Latin Quarters. In some cases, becoming wealthy did enable a return home, or at least the possibility of hoping for such a return, with the full knowledge that the strange new land could also still be called home. As Cassano suggests,

being confident in the *nostos* (return) and also its opposite being somewhere else when one is at home, this, which was long seen as a disease, is the possible solution: This double and antinomic grammar of the crossed borderland, this finding a home not in equilibrium but in the oxymoron. (33)

The many Italian immigrants of the late nineteenth century were indeed people without the prospect of *nostos*, and it was, for all intents and purposes, a falsehood to call the new space that they inhabited “home.” Like Ulysses they housed hope within themselves, but also the hardships that come with wandering and desiring the fatherland. The mobility of Southern Italian communities at this time sheds light on the identity of the South of Italy today as a region that still struggles to speak with its own voice. As the geopolitical focus returns to the Mediterranean—certainly the launch of the aforementioned Mediterranean Studies and the Studies of the Global South/s since the early 1990s has helped to shift this focus—the South of Italy faces new challenges. The first Italian immigrants’ negotiation of their collective *nostos* and their palpable nostalgia for a return to their homeland remind us that we all descend from those once labelled ‘Other,’ and, even more importantly, that we are all presently related to ‘Others.’ This fact is ripe with meaning today as the cycle is repeated: *mutatis mutandis*, the ‘Other’ arrives by the boatload on Southern Italian shores with the vain hope of permeating a mostly impenetrable social fabric.

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