SPACE AND RELIC IN FRANK PACI'S *BLACK MADONNA*

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Abstract: This essay investigates Frank Paci's dominant themes of death and life in *Black Madonna* and the author's use of relics to retrace post-migrant spaces. I examine his connections between immigrant and post-immigrant generations in the microcosm of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, and the way he preserves memories of the past (family, work, religious practices) while refashioning an Italian regional identity from a deterritorialized position. My approach to the themes of death, life, Italianness, and gender relationships is shaped by Michel de Certeau's theories of place and space. Relics are defined here as something that survives the passage of time—either at a specific location or across spatial movement—and is invested with a sense of devotion. My argument is that Paci's writing is devotional insofar as it preserves the memory of immigrants by disseminating the text with different kinds of traces (e.g., human, behavioural, linguistic). In function, memories act as relics. However, Paci's writing is ambivalent towards memory, since quests for emancipation are also forcefully voiced by the author as challenges to preservation. This tension is at the core of *Black Madonna*, where Italian immigrants, practices, and places are represented as outdated, dead, or doomed to disappear, and yet deserving recognition and affection. In my view, Paci's writing is more compelling when the relic as "place" interacts with a narrative of practices (or operations) that defy stability and actualize "spaces." I will refer to this as a narrative of mobilized relics. Relics are a valid analytical tool to investigate the ties with Italy and ethnicity in the passage from immigrants to post-immigrant generations, from one historical subject to another, both of which are liminally positioned between cultures. In this sense, *Black Madonna's* exploration of an Italian-Canadian microcosm spurs further transnational investigations of contemporary Italian identity through the migrant intergenerational lens.

Migration continues to reshape the demographic, socio-economic, and cultural contours of Italy, both because Italy is the destination of thousands of immigrants each year and because Italians themselves leave their country in statistically relevant numbers. These phenomena are part and parcel of the “new mobilities,” as they have been dubbed by some researchers, that are now typical of the society in which we live, a society that reflects increasingly complex physical and virtual transnational relationships.¹ In another way, these new mobilities are gradually redefining notions of Italianness, of feeling Italian, and of expressing *Italianità* abroad that past generations of migrants and their offspring have fashioned and refashioned in their own terms. Cultural analyses of migratory spaces are playing a key role in this remapping of Italy and Italianness within a transnational scenario; this is done often by investigating cultural texts that illustrate experiences of crossings in the context of either immigration to Italy or Italy’s diasporas in the world, and occasionally by delving into the interconnections between “pre-occupied spaces” across chronological, textual, and geographical discontinuities.²

While scholarly discussions of twenty-first-century mobility and transnational Italy underpin my reading of Frank Paci, the scope of this essay is limited to a critical analysis of *Black Madonna* through the lens of space at an intergenerational juncture. Like many other cultural texts, this novel portrays experiences of settling and crossing. In particular, how past generations preserved and/or reinvented an Italian identity abroad in the crucial passage from one generation to another is the main theme of *Black Madonna*, which offers a good overview of aspects of the post–Second World War Italian migration to Canada. It is this book and its implications that I will be discussing in the following pages.

Italy emerged from the ruins of the war as a country with an immense reservoir of labour power—due to high birth rates and the stop of emigration flows under Fascism—that became a significant resource for the reconstruction of post-war Europe and for the overseas labour markets. Rather than a positive feature, for many of the masses of individuals involved, this was an entirely undesired,

¹ In addition to Tirabassi and del Pra’s *La meglio Italia*, a historical volume on contemporary Italian migrations, see also Sheller and Urry on the emergence, in the twenty-first century, of the “new mobilities paradigm” as a critique of “static” social science. For a critical examination of the interrelations between practices of mobility, nationalism, colonialism, and globalization in the context of modern Italy, see Ben-Ghiat and Hom, *Italian Mobilities*.

² I am referring to Fiore’s volume *Pre-Occupied Spaces: Remapping Italy’s Transnational Migrations and Colonial Legacies*.

heart-breaking situation. In major cities such as Toronto and Montreal; in middle-sized urban centres; and in railroad, mining, and steel towns, the newcomers revived familial and communitarian values that the seasonal migrants of the first and much smaller wave of immigration had introduced into Canada in the early twentieth century.³ While the reproduction of old everyday practices and associational life strengthened feelings of Italian regional and national identity among the immigrants, these practices created additional challenges for the identities of second-generation Italian Canadians.

Mostly known for its feminist ideas and powerful construction of ethnic female characters, *Black Madonna* is the second of a dozen novels published by Frank Paci since *The Italians*, a bestseller in 1978–1979 and one of the foundational texts of Italian-Canadian literature.⁴ In his fictionalized depiction of post–

³ See Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada*. In the 1950s, the influx of Italians to Canada reached unprecedented levels that made Italy the second largest source of Canadian immigration after Great Britain from 1948 to 1972. The number of Italian immigrants to Canada jumped from 3,898 during the 1931–1940 decade to 20,682 in the 1941–1950 period; it reached its peak in 1951–1960 with 250,812 units and fell drastically after 1967 when a new immigration policy was enacted, dropping from 190,760 in 1961–1970 to 37,087 in 1971–1978 (Ramirez, *Italians* 7, table 1). On previous migrations from Italy, Italian labourers, and the formation of Little Italies, see Robert F. Harney, *Dalla frontiera alle Little Italies*. Focusing on Italian settlements in Toronto, Harney combined multiple approaches, including Hayden White's historiography and Italo Calvino's novels, as suggested by the title of one of his essays, "If One Were to Write a History of Postwar Toronto Italia," contained in the posthumous collection *From the Shores of Hardship*, edited by Nicholas D. Harney, 75–103. For Italian literary works on Canada, see Sanfilippo. Other historical and cultural overviews of the Italian immigration to Canada can be found in Nicholas D. Harney; Zucchi; Jansen; Martellini, in Bevilacqua, De Clementi, and Franzina, Vol. 1, *Partenze* 369–384; and in the same series, Ramirez, Vol. 2, *Arrivi* 89–96. Related ethnographic and literary topics are dealt with in Perin and Sturino. On the transition of Southern-Italian men and women from rural villages and peasant culture to the factories of Montreal in the 1950s, see Princigalli's 2009 documentary *I Got Up My Courage—Ho fatto il mio coraggio*.

⁴ It is commonly accepted that this literature was officially inaugurated with the publication of Di Cicco's *Roman Candles: An Anthology of Poems by Seventeen Italo-Canadian Poets*. A number of collective works have appeared thereafter, such as Pivato, *The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing*; Loriggio, *L'altra storia: antologia della letteratura italo-canadese*; De Franceschi, *Pillars of Lace: The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Women Writers*; Di Giovanni, *Italian Canadian Voices: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose, 1946–1983*; and Canton et al., *Writing Cultural Difference: Italian-Canadian Creative and Critical Works*. For the most recent collective volumes, see also the Association of Italian Canadian Writers website: www.aicw.ca/books.

World War II Italian immigration to Canada, Paci interrogates the preservation of Italian regional identity in the peripheral industrial town of Sault Ste. Marie, Northern Ontario, by exploring the transition from immigrant parents to the next generation. This Italian regional identity and culture is exemplified by the parents. Before the war, Adamo Barone moves from an agro-town in the Abruzzi region to Sault Ste. Marie, where the presence of an Italian colony had already been recorded since the 1910s (Moroni). He starts working for the local steel plant and, after the war, Assunta joins him as a mail-order bride from Novilara, a rural village in the adjacent province of Pesaro, in the Marche region. In the West End—the Italian-Canadian section of town—Adamo and Assunta own a house, participate in the social life of the immigrant community, and raise their two children, Giuseppe/Joey and Maria/Marie, who represent a new generation that contends with the old-world practices of immigrant parents in order to shape its own future.

Black Madonna focuses on family and place at a time of crisis. Opening the novel, Adamo's death sets the tone of the narrative: the event accelerates the decline of an old way of affirming ethnicity, which Assunta still embodies, and the emergence of a new ethnic conscience in Adamo's children. The West End is the other protagonist of the novel: its decay runs parallel to the crisis that invests the life of the Barones and of the local Italian-Canadian community at large. Movement and stasis, life and death, decay and renewal alternate and overlap to reveal the process of reinvention of an Italian regional identity from the perspective of the immigrants' children that Paci himself represents, being born in Pesaro, Italy, in 1948 and having emigrated to Sault Ste. Marie in 1952 with his parents.

This essay investigates Paci's dominant themes of death and life in *Black Madonna* and the author's use of relics to retrace post-migrant spaces. I examine Paci's connections between immigrant and post-immigrant generations and the way he preserves memories of the past (family, work, and religious practices) while refashioning an Italian regional identity from a deterritorialized position. My approach to the themes of death, life, and Italianness is shaped by Michel de Certeau's theories of place and space. In refocusing attention from the producer to the everyday consumer in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (117–118), a seminal change in perspective, de Certeau identifies "place" (*lieu*) with a "configuration of positions," a distribution of elements in a "proper" and distinct location, whereas "space" (*espace*) is a "practiced place" because it occurs as the effect of operations deployed within it. In brief, the former implies stability, while the latter assumes

movement. He claims, with respect to enunciation, that “space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization,” and modified according to the changing contexts. Streets and texts are examples of places that can be transformed into actualized spaces by acts of, respectively, walking and reading. De Certeau consequently maintains that, within stories, place is “a determination through objects that are ultimately reducible to the *being-there* of something dead” (e.g., pebbles, cadavers, and tombs); and space is, instead, “a determination through operations which, when they are attributed to a stone, tree, or human being, specify ‘spaces’ by the actions of historical subjects (a movement always seems to condition the production of a space and to associate it with a history)” (118; emphasis in the original). Stories do not simply provide an oppositional view of place and space, but they also “organize the play of changing relationships” between them by constantly “awakening inert objects” and “putting to death” mobile elements in numberless forms.

Defining relics in *Black Madonna*

In *Black Madonna*, the textual labour of transforming places into spaces, and conversely, spaces into places, is carried out by investing relics with semantic ambivalence. Relics are defined here as something that survives the passage of time, either at a specific location or across spatial movement, and is invested with a sense of devotion. My argument is that Paci’s writing is uniquely devotional insofar as it preserves the memory of immigrants by disseminating the text with different kinds of traces (e.g., human, behavioural, linguistic). In function, memories act as relics. However, I will also claim that Paci’s writing registers a fundamentally ambivalent attitude towards memory, since quests for emancipation are also forcefully voiced by the author as challenges to preservation. This tension is at the core of *Black Madonna*, where Italian immigrants, practices, and places are represented as *being-there*, outdated, dead, or doomed to disappear, and yet demanding and deserving recognition and affection.

The most direct association of relics with “something dead” is established immediately, in the first of the 13 sections that compose the novel. The text opens with an Italian-style funeral consisting of a mourning scene inside the Barones’ house, and the funeral cortège outside that follows the mass in the West End. The dead body is Adamo’s: his corpse lies “in his best dark suit and shoes in the middle of the bed, with rosary beads in his hands and flowers on either side of

him [...]. His face was powdered and made to look more like a street dandy than a factory worker [...] like some aged gigolo instead of the bricklayer he was" (12). Two candelabra at the head of the bed throw their shadows against the walls "like hulks of stone," and other candles placed around the room create a grotesque atmosphere. Around the bed are Assunta and other "Black Madonnas," immigrant women all engulfed by their black clothes, "a chorus of professional mourners" sobbing and wailing over Adamo's corpse. Everything is set up as if the scene were taking place in some village in Italy, while in fact the original community is absent, having probably mourned Adamo's death upon his departure from the village. Emigration in rural societies has indeed been likened to death, "[f]or on a symbolic level [it] is a variant or a version of the passing away, of the journey of the deceased" (Pitto 127). "In remote Italian villages," writes Joseph Pivato, "emigrants were once sent off with funeral-like rituals. Upon leaving, these people were no longer considered part of the community; in effect, they were dead to their families and friends" ("The Return" 171).⁵

Assunta, Joey, and Marie are the only family members attending Adamo's funeral, but the author places the siblings literally on a different level away from their mother, as to emphasize the generational gaps that lie at the heart of the narrative. Before entering the bedroom to pay their last respects to Adamo, Joey and Marie wait in the basement, startled by the loud crying coming from upstairs and concerned over their mother's irrational behaviour. When Adamo had lost his long battle with cancer in a hospital room, Assunta, "in near hysterics," had opened the windows of that room "to let his spirit out" (6). Afterwards, she had taken his body from the funeral home into the house, and any attempt to reason with her had been of no use. The external narrator informs us that the "mother was old-country, but never to this extent" (7). Adamo's death, the first one in the family to occur on Canadian soil, affects Assunta in ways that are beyond her children's comprehension. They can only detect the physical consequences of it:

His mother's look said it all. Her face, reddened and swollen with weeping, was a hideous mask. Her lips were bloodied and her hair disheveled, as if she had been tearing at it. He couldn't look straight into her eyes. They had a crazed look about them that scared him. [...] She had become thinner than ever. It seemed her frame

⁵ About emigration and death/mourning, see also Martelli, "America, emigrazione e 'follia' nell'opera di Pirandello."

had slightly collapsed. She was hunched over. Her face had wrinkled badly [...] her martyred expression. She was undeniably an old woman now [...] [a]nd the black dress, along with the heavy black stockings and the kerchief, seemed to suit her perfectly. (9)

Assunta looks like a remnant of another time; in fact, the physical deterioration of her body prefigures her own death, as described at the end of the novel. But by assigning her a “martyred expression” and the characteristic appearance of a Black Madonna, Paci adds a religious quality to this figure. In the eyes of Joey and Marie, Assunta is a remnant: a dead fragment, a ruin, independently from her husband’s death, but precisely because of her stubborn attachment to “strange old-country customs that she insisted on maintaining even though they were primitive and embarrassing” (11). Like the other peasant women of the neighbourhood, the Black Madonnas, she also “could’ve stepped out of the middle ages” (13). Marie, the *ingrata* of the family, the one who is in eternal conflict with Assunta and sets off to Toronto in order to not submit to her mother’s impositions, asks, “How can she be my mother if she’s never had the slightest idea of who I was? [...] She’s like a fossil. She’s in the wrong time and the wrong country” (17).⁶ The term “fossil” is used here with a negative connotation, suggesting difference from and repudiation of what is outdated and displaced. But it is an ambivalent connotation, since the archaeological meaning that the word carries suggests that that enduring material is worth recovering and examining. In this implied act of preservation lies the connection between fossils and relics, although the latter, I argue, entail a degree of mobilization of memory that, in Paci’s writing, transcends the archaeological recovery. Moreover, this concept of the Italian immigrant as a fossil, randomly scattered in the most unpredictable places, encompasses all the local community of the West End. “How could the southern Italians ever have come to Northern Ontario?” wonders Marie during the funeral cortège, while recalling the passage of the Queen of England, the supreme symbol of imperialism, through “a settlement of semi-subdued Italians” (21) on the occasion of her visit to the local steel plant. Here the category of “southern Italians” comprises people of similar class origins

⁶ In *F. G. Paci: Essays on His Works*, Pivato argues that *Black Madonna* is still studied in Canadian college and university courses possibly because it “portrays the most graphic and powerful image of ethnic self-hatred [Marie’s] to be found in North American literature” (12). For a psychological reading of the mother-daughter relationship in the novel, see Sciff-Zamaro, “*Black Madonna: A Search for the Great Mother*” 77–100.

and habits beyond precise geographical distinctions (Assunta herself comes from what we perceive today as a region of central Italy). Marie's ethnic self-hatred highlights the culturally dominant power structure that appeals to her for its rational order that clearly contrasts with the illegible practices of her ethnic group. To eradicate the signs of her Italian affiliation, she has in fact left "the Sault" (pronounced "the Soo," a short version of Sault Ste. Marie often used to refer to that city) to study mathematics in Toronto and has married an English-Canadian Protestant man.

The transition from the inside of the Barones' house to the surrounding neighbourhood, where Adamo's corpse is taken for the last time, reveals some important elements regarding the dynamics between place and space. The accumulation of relics, of dead objects, intensifies as the focus shifts from Adamo's wasted body in the bedroom to the ravaged West End, "chipped away piece by piece" as a result of urban renewal. As Joey drives the limousine behind the hearse, we follow his gaze and thoughts through the external narrator:

From Our Lady of Mount Carmel they went down Cathcart toward the steel plant. A few houses still stood in this part of the neighbourhood. They had been neglected so long, however, that they were in various states of disrepair. Built close together at the sidewalk, they had enclosed verandahs and fenced-in backyards with rickety sheds or garages. The Italian ones were easily distinguishable in the summer by their vegetable gardens [...]. They all had that imitation brick siding that had long been faded by its exposure to the steel-plant air. Joey knew it was only a matter of time before these too were torn down. (19–20)

This place hardly bears the signs of past Italian presence and practices. The irreversible changes that have hit the old industrial area are before the eyes of Joey who still lives and works in the West End. Joey is the affectionate son who, at age 28, has never left home, the family, or the Sault to go to Southern Ontario, forsaking his dream of becoming a professional hockey player. He works at the local steel plant like his father used to and knows that sooner or later he will have to sell the family house, which Adamo had re-built with his own hands. Paci draws attention to the causes of the dispersal of the Italian-Canadian community of the West End. On the one hand, the construction of the International Bridge (opened

in 1962), connecting the twin cities of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, and Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, on the Ontario-Michigan border, spells the community's demise by cutting a big section out of the Italian-Canadian neighbourhood. With the coming of urban renewal and city plans to make room for apartment buildings and homes for senior citizens, the eyesores are demolished, shops are shut down, and houses owned by many Italian Canadians are sold to avoid expropriation and depreciation. On the other hand, the drastically reduced influx of Italian immigrants is a destructive factor for the community, as Adamo rightly points out. In one of the many flashbacks, he complains that the children of Italian immigrants are the first to move away from their parents to the East End: "They become *English* [...]. And Spina told me—he said people stopped coming from the old country. *Porca miseria*, what're you going to do? It's all finished. Things that you build, they have to be torn down. Look how many years I work on this house" (66; emphasis marking code-switching in the original). For Adamo, ethnicity relies on physical place, territoriality, and reiteration of practices. When these visible marks deteriorate, that identity is "finished." Now that Adamo is deceased, his identification with the neighbourhood remains but can only be conveyed through a lexicon of death. "You would lie there soaking in the dark, and your flesh would tan to the colour of your bones" (21), thinks Joey while leaving the plant gate with the cortège and reminiscing Adamo's talk of retirement. These words are evoked later on, before the deserted streets of the West End: "No more kids on the street. No more ball park and school rink. There were the remnants left—remnants of the decayed body that had tanned to its bones" (23).

"Space" and gender

In *Black Madonna* the remnant as "place" functions in two ways: first, as decaying body of both the immigrant and the place that the immigrant occupies; and second, as opaque practice that configures as relic whatever devotional value is associated with it. In my view, Paci's writing is more compelling when the relic as "place" interacts with a narrative of practices (or operations) that defy stability and actualize "spaces." I will refer to this as a narrative of mobilized relics. Fundamentally, the relic is ambivalent because its coincidence with either "place" or "space" depends on the subjective and generational viewpoint. For instance, those customs and people (like her parents) that Marie judges as outdated, "something dead," are also the same practices and individuals that have made

the West End an Italian “space.” Two opposite models of relating oneself to Italy are at work here: one based on the reproduction of old-world practices, and the other founded on the rejection of Italianness and the desire to access the North-American mainstream. In either case, de Certeau points out that operations specify spaces “by the actions of historical *subjects*” whereby “a movement always seems to condition the production of a space and to associate it with a history” (118; emphasis in the original). The de Certeauian notion of space conjures up a fraught connection between agency and migration—in itself a manifestation of movement, even in its latest form of “new mobility”—that encompasses the generational divide under examination and engages the overarching question of the agency of Italy’s emigrants outside of Italy. Viewing migration as a key factor in the definition of historical subjects, Francesco Loriggio has, for instance, argued that Italian Canadians (including immigrant parents) should be considered “new historical subjects” in the construction of the Italian nation, rather than “partners whose function is to learn and obey, to carry the torch, to constantly Italianize themselves and keep silent” (27).⁷ In this sense, relics, in their double connotation of places and spaces in *Black Madonna*, represent a category for exploring the evolution of the ties with Italy and ethnicity in the passage from immigrants to post-immigrants, from one historical subject to another, both of which are, to different degrees, liminally positioned between cultures.

What I have suggested to term a narrative of mobilized relics—roughly evoking de Certeau’s actualized spaces, along with what he calls “the play of changing relationships between places and spaces” in a story (118)—is visible, for example, in Paci’s use of two overlapping temporal structures. The storyline follows Adamo’s death and culminates, six months later, with Assunta’s own death, Marie’s trip to Italy, the selling of the house, and Joey’s new life with Annalise. A series of analepses, instead, takes the narrative back to when Marie and Joey were young kids, the Italian-Canadian community was cohesive, and the West End was a practised place, that is, a “space.” As a whole, the passages back and forth

⁷ In his analysis of the role of the Italies outside of Italy, Loriggio states, “Only when Italian élites 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” (“Italian Migration outside Europe” 27; emphasis added). On this topic see also Ferraro, “Italianization of Emigration to Canada.”

provide an attentive account of the Italian migratory experience in the microcosm of the Sault.

Although a peripheral area of Northern Ontario, to Adamo, Assunta, and the other Italian immigrants, “the Sault [...] was *l’America*” (*Black Madonna* 10; emphasis in the original). As such, it condenses all the expectations and paradoxes that *America* can conjure up. The Sault is both a land of opportunity and sacrifice. Adamo’s job at the steel plant grants him the possibility to buy a house and a car and to send his children to school well beyond his fifth-grade education.⁸ However, in the plant, Adamo becomes ill with cancer from working in the furnaces. A proud and skilled bricklayer, he tries to pass on his trade to his only son: “It’s as honest and good work as you’ll find. To build things that last when you die. To feel the brick in your hands—these pieces and blocks that make larger things than you are” (62–63). Adamo sets up a workbench in the cellar and with his tools fixes up the family house and helps renovate the local Catholic church, although he is not a religious man and believes that religion is for women. By renovating the church, he contributes to a major symbol and gathering point of the Italian-Canadian community, but he also puts into practice his work ethos, which to a bricklayer means to build durable “houses or churches or bridges.” His view that the plant is “no place for a real bricklayer” reveals a basic discontent with the job that he has endured in Canada to support his family. The contrast is rehearsed when his son Joey goes to the masonry changing room to empty out his dead father’s locker, and he pictures Adamo as a “bricklayer going to the various furnaces to line them with fire-brick. Keeping the inferno going. Instead of building homes and bridges as he had always meant to” (63). The fact that Adamo has been working for decades and is still working in that “inferno” when he becomes ill reinforces the idea that the steel plant, and by extension the Sault and *l’America*, is a source of good and bad life changes alike.

Joey also works in the plant, but after 10 years, he still considers his job “a temporary state of affairs” (58). Although playing hockey professionally has long been his dream, his life has been in suspension ever since his father discouraged him from pursuing a career in sports. When Adamo dies, Joey finds himself with a

⁸ Ramirez recalls that the possession of a house—the measure par excellence of the migrant’s “ancestral desire” for material and psychological stability—after World War II became “part of the Italian migration folklore” through a popular song that spoke of “a little house in Canada which had a pool with fish inside, was surrounded by lots of lily flowers, and was admired by passers-by” (*Italians* 14).

mother who is still a mystery to him after almost 30 years and a house that the city is trying to expropriate. The death of his father is an awakening moment for Joey. Upon recovering Adamo's mason tools in the changing room—the brick hammer, the trowels, the rule, the chisels—a strange and confusing feeling overcomes him. The trowel that Joey handles “could have been the first one [Adamo] had ever owned since his apprenticeship days in Italy” (63). From Italy come the shaving utensils in the room, objects that Adamo carefully used over the years till they were completely worn out, which reveals a traditionally frugal way of living. Later on, Joey finds out that laying bricks gives him satisfaction. By using his father's tools to start his trade, he thus reestablishes a connection with Adamo and, ideally, with Italy, where that family tradition had first originated. Even though this kind of recognition stresses generational and ethnic continuity, the novel does not fail to notice that crucial changes intervene in the transition from immigrant to post-immigrant generations. Notably, the swift transformations that wipe out the West End compel Joey to think of himself and his new activity beyond the borders of an enclosed ethnic group held together by strong territorial ties, like the one his father had proudly helped to shape. At the end of the novel, Joey builds a pyramid in the back garden of their house, which he has sold due to the pressures of urban renewal. It is his last day there, so the pyramid will not last, but “it nevertheless would be hard to tear down” (198). If the construction is another symbolic act of reconnection with Adamo, the imminent destruction of the house signals that Joey will have to make place in a different corner of the city. Within my analysis of relics, Joey's pyramid—a copy of a ruin or a relic—evokes the very purpose of the original pyramids as burial sites. His pyramid, and its imminent removal, can thus be read as a metaphor for the dispersal of the Barones and the local Italian-Canadian community. Joey's gesture encompasses at once cultural devotion and awareness of the changing times.

Joey's condition implies that retracing identity is more than just uncovering the strata of tradition like in an archaeological operation. It entails reinventing and redefining the elements of that tradition for the future generations according to the present circumstances in which each individual is enmeshed. On a more general level, the text seems to suggest, without going in depth, that the dispersal of the local community pushes it to disseminate, and likely refashion, its practices elsewhere, in other places. This movement outward marks, in de Certeau's terms, the “putting to death” of an Italian “proper” place (*Practice* 121), the West End, and at the same time it establishes a new, still undefined, space “caught in the

ambiguity of an actualization" and subject to be "modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts" (117). Paci's novel is not so much concerned with this new unfolding space in which the Italian-Canadian community, after losing control of a certain territory, may in the future reinvent itself, or where relics of the West End—people, objects, and practices—will still reappear, although in scattered order. Rather, it incorporates spatial disruption as a decisive element of alteration into a representation of generational change that starts to emerge while the community is still in place, from within it. Most strikingly, such change occurs on the female side of the parent-children relationship, as the relationship between Assunta and Marie illustrates.

In *Black Madonna*, place is gendered in accordance with the familial and social values embraced by the immigrants. Ramirez observes that in Canada the Italian immigrants viewed family as a "cooperative enterprise whose material and emotional well-being was dependent on the specific roles that the various members were expected to perform" (*Italians* 12). While Adamo is the breadwinner and the steel plant is his workplace, Assunta is supposed to perform her role of wife and mother within the domestic confines, in contrast to many post-war immigrant women who, in the bigger urban centres, worked in the factories (Princigalli; Ramirez, *Italians* 13). Assunta's dream of becoming a mother leads her to marry Adamo by proxy and leave her small village to never come back. It is unclear to what extent she is incapable or unwilling to adapt to the new country, but it is patent that it "seemed she had gone from one Italian village in Marche to another one in Northern Ontario—the West End" (*Black Madonna* 11). Her stubbornness in conforming to the old-country rules is primarily the result of resentment and fear. Joey remembers her complaining to Adamo, "How can I have come here? How? I was so content in Novilara," or shouting at him "from suppressed rage" asking to go back home (94): "Any change to her surroundings was a threat to her. To move out [...] was unthinkable. To ride in a car with her was an ordeal in itself. His father [Adamo] had been denied countless vacations" (93). The fear of change and of the outside reinforces Assunta's own sense of authority inside the house, and at the dinner table in particular:

Assunta Barone was an absolute tyrant at the dinner table. [...] The table was like her theatre of operations and her rules were unquestionable. Whatever was put on the table had to be eaten. [...] If dinner was for four she cooked for six. If for six, there was food

enough for eight. And woe to the person who didn't eat his full portions. [...] Nothing escaped her eye. She sat imperiously, [...] and anticipated their every move. She directed operations as if managing a war game.

Mangia this and that, she'd say. *Non è bastanza*. (31–32)

The abundance of food that Assunta always displays on the table is, like the house, a visible measure of the material well-being that the Barone family has reached. Dishing out food is a daily ritual meant to exorcise the old spectre of hunger. After all, indigence and hunger have been the primary causes of depopulation and social erosion for innumerable Italian villages.⁹ However, the determination that Assunta exhibits at the table also reveals an emotional struggle. She is concerned that “the English” may influence the eating habits of her daughter, for whom weight is an ongoing preoccupation. Assunta's despotic manners are thus also to be read as war operations against the North-American cultural model that threatens her values: she contrasts the dominant order with her own rules.

It is worth noting that the war lexicon contained in the description above is reminiscent of the language that de Certeau adopts to define a “tactic” that is a “calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus” (*Practice* 37). Tactics are ways of operating that the weak subject uses “within enemy territory” to fight or “trick” an order imposed on it, without subverting it. In effect, Assunta's operations are ephemeral victories: they allow her to survive on alien grounds while already being challenged by her daughter, *l'ingrata*, *pazza*, *stupida*, as she indignantly calls her. Since adolescence, Marie feels ashamed of her mother's habits: her screaming out loud “like a vulgar washerwoman,” keeping a chamber pot under her bed, “chattering like a magpie” at home with her friends. Assunta's failure to pick up the language is not only embarrassing but a main cause of incommunicability with her children who struggle to channel their thoughts in Italian or in her *marchigiano* dialect. Marie breaks away from her mother first by rejecting her rules at the dinner table, then by no longer attending church,

⁹ It is widely recognized that the analysis of food and consumer habits among Italian migrants has become a valid methodological tool to investigate popular cultures and ethnic identities in the Italian diaspora. See, for instance, Cinotto, *The Italian American Table: Food, Family, and Community in New York City*; Zanon, *Migrant Marketplaces: Food and Italians in North and South America*; Teti, “Emigrazione, alimentazione, culture popolari” in *Partenze* 575–597; Paolini, Seppilli, and Sorbini, *Migrazioni e culture alimentari*; and La Cecla, *Pasta and Pizza*.

and ultimately by using education as a means to leave home and the West End, which she likewise finds intolerable. Within Paci's writing, Marie's bold resistance to her mother represents, in other words, a direct challenge to the very act of preservation of the immigrant memory and an embodiment of the children's liminal struggle for a self-fashioning identity.

In the social microcosm that Paci portrays, the church is another gendered place, a venue for religious practices and the most important symbol of the Italian presence. As in many other Italian communities abroad, it is a powerful promoter of associational life and national identity within the neighbourhood. Father Sarlo, the local priest, is a relevant figure to the analysis of relics, as he facilitates, in my view, the reassessment of the neighbourhood and of the immigrant parent as relic, which is vital to the construction of a devotional mode of writing. In the tenth section of the book, Father Sarlo claims that immigrant parishioners of the West End can be understood only through their connection with place: "What you have to know about these people, Joey, [...], is that they come from places—villages and towns—where their families had lived for generations. Coming to this country was like going to the ends of the earth for them. Like going to China" (*Black Madonna* 159). He thus conceives the neighbourhood as the fulfillment of the immigrants' need to make a place like one's village, "where everyone could know each other and where there was a sense of community" (159). As a crucial agent in this social project, the church summons its members to share responsibilities according to their gender roles and skills. For instance, in *Black Madonna*, going to church or mourning are duties of women, while men's participation is limited to main religious festivities and the *Festa* of Our Lady of Mount Carmel procession. However, when skilled people are needed to renovate the church, the symbol of the Italian-Canadian West End, builders like Adamo are called in to share the effort because "a village is nothing without the house of God" (159). Conversely, once the urban renewal sets in and the neighbourhood drops its homogeneous ethnic identity, the church loses its aggregating function and the presence of an Italian priest is not necessary anymore, as the impending replacement of Father Sarlo with an Irish priest suggests. An immigrant from Calabria, Father Sarlo acts as a cultural interpreter between the old and the new generation. After Adamo's death, Assunta's behaviour changes dramatically and in ways that Joey cannot grasp. He first takes her to a psychiatrist but to no avail since she does not follow "the rules" of the game (154–155). Then, he turns to Father Sarlo, the only person to whom she opens up. The priest tells Joey about ancient customs that the widow

is expected to observe in certain Italian villages, and to which Assunta seems to conform. Always in her black mourning dress and kerchief that hides her hair cut down to the skin, Assunta spends the day sleeping on the sofa in front of the TV, which she can barely understand; going to church; reading the popular post-war women's magazine *Grand Hotel*; and, when spring arrives, walking in the fields by the tracks "seeing if the *cicoria* is out" (81). In the past, picking chicory had been a practice with a purpose—bringing food to the table—and surely involved "a lot of dreaming to make these fields seem like the land she had never wanted to leave" (174). But after her husband's death, walking in those fields for the widowed Assunta merely means "lacking a place," in de Certeau's vocabulary, performing an operation emptied of its original dream and goal (towards the end she wanders without even picking chicory). This kind of meaningless walking thus becomes a "leftover" that anticipates the character's own physical transformation into an inert object, a dead body. In fact, to easily reach the fields Assunta starts using the tracks near her house, something dangerous and unacceptable for a respectable woman according to "an unwritten rule in the neighbourhood" (82). Tragically, beside those tracks, Joey one day finds her body sliced in half by the train, the same means that had first taken her away from her village and later to the Sault.

Whereas for some migrants the solution to the suffering of transplantation coincides with the return to Italy, for Assunta the sacrifice ends with her own death abroad. In *Black Madonna*, as well as in Paci's more recent novel *Italian Shoes*, the return journey is indeed carried out by the immigrant's children as a way of coming to terms with their Italian identity, a process that implies both continuity and rupture from the parents, and a personal reinvention of ethnicity. Marie, the *ingrata*, at the end of the novel boards a plane to Italy to attend her cousin's wedding in Novilara, thus making the trip of which Assunta had always dreamed. Joey notes that she "didn't look out of place" among those Italian-looking people at the gate (198). Moreover, the black dress that she wears and that had belonged to Assunta accentuates her resemblance with her mother, thus revealing one of the ironic changes that Marie undergoes throughout the novel. Another one is, for instance, her progressive disillusionment with Toronto, which she had envisioned as the anti-Italian West End and where, instead, her ethnic background helps her land a teaching position at a moment of economic distress.¹⁰ If Paci uses Adamo's carpentry and bricklaying tools to reconnect Joey to his father, he reconfigures the

¹⁰ For a closer analysis of these ironic changes, see Tuzi, "Provisionality, Multiplicity, and the Ironies of Identity in *Black Madonna*," in *F. G. Paci* 69–106.

mother-daughter relationship through Assunta's trousseau trunk or *bavulo*, the wooden chest containing the dowry and traditionally passed on to the daughter, in Southern Italy. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard characterizes such vessels as "intimate"; the *bavulo* is not an everyday piece of furniture, nor is it opened daily. As such, it is not accessible to just anybody and it displays an order that is not merely geometrical but that "can also remember the family history" (78–79). Assunta keeps the trunk locked, thus feeding for a long time Marie's fantasies that the "Hope Chest" may hide some noble family origins: "A scandal maybe. Like she was the illegitimate daughter of a grand duke sent to America to safeguard a reputation" (194). When she finally opens it, after Assunta's death, she notices that "as she dug deeper the contents appeared to be older, as if she were unearthing various layers of a person's life" (190). She finds bed linens, clothes, a black dress, family pictures, and some religious items that she uses, as relics, to set up a shrine. From the pictures, she gets "a good sense of the land" and of the "people of the earth" her mother came from. On the one hand, Marie cherishes these objects and the trip to Novilara is an indication of her willingness to understand her mother (and herself) by going back to the soil that had shaped her identity.¹¹ On the other hand, the conclusion of *Black Madonna* hints at a break from the mother since Marie decides to take the *bavulo* to Italy and give it as a wedding present to her cousin Marisa, the daughter of Assunta's sister. By doing so, she ultimately mobilizes a relic or transforms a "place" into a "space," in de Certeau's language. Indeed, she reinserts the trunk into a cultural circuit whereby, as opposed to Canada, passing down this object from mother to daughter is a signifying practice.

New generations, new spaces

My analysis has focused on the relationship between immigrant and post-immigrant generations in *Black Madonna* through notions of space and relics. However, Paci's exploration of generational change inspires other questions in relation to past and current migrations; the cultural practices that individuals and collectivities carry with them; and the reinterpretation of old-fashioned relics

¹¹ In this regard, Mark Trecroci's journey in Paci's later novel *Italian Shoes* represents the actualization of Marie's project. For a recent examination of the theme of return within the writing and the translation into Italian of Paci's *Italian Shoes*, and of works by Mary Melfi and Nino Ricci, see Baldo, *Italian-Canadian Narratives of Return: Analysing Cultural Translation in Diasporic Writing*.

into new transnational spaces. Ultimately, Marie and Joey embody an existential condition that is characteristic of many immigrants' children insofar as it entails various degrees of rejection, pride, and negotiation of their hybrid identity. In grappling with practices and values imported from rural Italy, the Barone siblings acknowledge, fertilize, and move beyond the worldview of their parents. With its being understood that the siblings voice change and continuity in a specific geo-cultural context, the question of dealing with the relics of immigrant parents resonates with scores of young women and men straddling cultures all over the world. Time and again, their memories of growing up as bicultural or multicultural combine devotion towards and distance from the parents; acceptance and refusal of inherited customs; as well as ambivalent feelings towards the residing country.¹² Beyond the scope of this article, but tied to its central argument, are questions about how the Maries and Joeys of North and South America, Europe or Australia, and their own children have preserved and reinvented an Italian national or regional identity. These questions also apply to the future: how are these individuals currently connecting to identity and reshaping it in our era of social media, "roots" tourism, and study-abroad programs? What kind of Italianness do they claim while new generations of Italians export *Italianità* abroad and the children of immigrants to Italy are also mobilizing their parents' relics and fashioning new hybrid Italian spaces? My contention is that Paci's *Black Madonna* is relevant not only for its exploration of an Italian-Canadian microcosm but also because it spurs further transnational investigations of Italian identity through the migrant intergenerational lens.

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¹² These memories that are connected with post–World War II migrations to North America are, for instance, the backbone of stand-up comedian Sebastian Maniscalco's shows. His hilarious and sarcastic sketches on modern American social behaviour are often woven around stories of his Italian upbringing in suburban Arlington Heights, north of Chicago. Some of these sketches are viewable via Maniscalco's website, www.sebastianlive.com. For a powerful theatrical exploration of the generational conflicts unique to mothers and daughters within a poor post-war immigrant family, see San Francisco Bay Area actress and writer Maria Grazia Affinito's solo performance, "Eating Pasta off the Floor." A short clip is available at mariagraziaactress.com/eating-pasta-off-the-floor/. For a historical and cultural study of post-war Italian immigration to the USA, see the two volumes of *New Italian Migrations to the United States*, edited by Ruberto and Sciorra: Vol. 1: *Politics and History since 1945* (2017), and Vol. 2: *Art and Culture since 1945* (2018).

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