

# A postmodern migrant subjectivity: Reading Italian-Canadian-ness, reading *Breaking the Mould*

CLARA SACCHETTI \*

## Abstract

This article ethnographically explores the ways in which members of an Italian studies book club in the small north-western Ontario (Canada) city of Thunder Bay express their migrant subjectivity by and through a discussion of Penny Petrone's memoir, *Breaking the Mould*. It is framed within a postmodern framework that draws attention to how people engage with a local discourse of Italian-Canadian-ness grounded on notions of homeland, heritage culture, and selfhood and challenged by notions of gender, immigrant generational position, and socio-economic class. It draws attention to the problematic of identity and highlights how vexation, tension, contradiction, rupture, and contestation is part and parcel of an Italian-Canadian migrant subjectivity in Thunder Bay and part and parcel of migrant subjectivity more generally.

**Keywords:** Migrant subjectivity, Italian-Canadian-ness, multiculturalism.

## Introduction

Current understandings about the meaning of migrant subjectivity are often grounded on notions of homeland, heritage culture, and selfhood in our rapidly globalizing, transnational world (Lee and Park, 2008; Brubaker, 2005). At the centre of these understandings is the question of what identity is, where it is located, and how it works (Svašek, 2010; Williams 2005). Increasingly, this involves examining how people take up various cross-cutting identic discourses in highly vexatious ways. A focus on vexation, or tension, contradiction, rupture, and contestation, is in keeping with a postmodern outlook that departs from both an essentialist and a social constructionist approach to the problematic of identity (Yon, 2007; Caglar, 1997).<sup>1</sup> My work follows in the wake of this theoretical orientation and examines how mostly well-educated, professional, women in the small north-western Ontario, Canadian city of Thunder Bay engage with a local discourse of Italian-Canadian-ness that relies upon notions of homeland, heritage culture, and selfhood (i.e., migrant subjectivity). I trace these engagements through the use of a current strain of feminist ethnography that requires researchers to ask about the complexities of gender in a way that recognizes the partial, contextual, and illustrative, rather than bias-free, complete, and representative, nature of knowledge (Pillow

---

\* Dr Clara Sacchetti is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Frank Iacobucci Centre for Italian Canadian Studies at the University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy and aig+c Research Fellow at Lakehead University, Ontario, Canada.

E-mail: csacchet@lakeheadu.ca.

<sup>1</sup> While the former assumes that migrant subjectivity is given by an individual's genetics or psychology and the latter assumes that it derives from a shared set of group beliefs and practices, both approaches downplay the significance of vexation.



and Mayo, 2007). This is recognized, too, by many research participants with whom I have spoken to and befriended. They are, for example, quite aware that scholarly work about Thunder Bay narrowly characterizes it as an out-of-the-way, working-class, hyper-macho, masculine, rural, mainstream white Canadian, nature-filled locale; a locale, in short, seemingly devoid of the city's other genders, professional classes, artists, cultural producers, and multiculturalism.<sup>2</sup>

Multiculturalism, in particular, is repeatedly cited by research participants who claim that it is critical for the public articulation of their ethno-cultural identity. Many praise how Canada's state policy of multiculturalism radically transformed the country's once hegemonic, assimilationist, mono-cultural discourse of "Anglo-ness" by allowing immigrants and their Canadian-born families to express, maintain, preserve, and share their distinct heritage culture, i.e., Italian culture, that originates from their non-Canadian homeland, i.e., Italy, that moulds who they are, i.e., an Italian ancestral selfhood, and that is informed by Canadian fairness, democratic values, and a tolerance for ethno-cultural diversity, i.e., a Canadian homeland, heritage culture, and selfhood (Mahtani, 2002).<sup>3</sup> Against this, a local hegemonic, fixed, essentialist discourse of Italian-Canadian-ness has emerged that casts Italians as Catholics known for their love of music and dance, tasty food, and joyful nature; as an ethno-cultural people who aspire to educate the public about Italy's glorious ancient Roman and Renaissance engineering, literary, architectural, and artistic achievements; and as immigrants who left their natal country due to poverty (i.e., *la miseria*) and through their commitment to traditional Italian values of hetero-normative family life, community, hard work, cleverness, and resourcefulness managed to achieve much economic, educational, and social success in their new ethno-culturally diverse home.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, appeals to Italy, Italian heritage culture, and an Italian selfhood within a Canadian multicultural context figures strongly here. Yet most research participant are cognizant of how this discourse downplays notions of gender, immigrant generational position, and socio-economic class. The latter challenge the discourse of Italian-Canadian-ness and are habitually summoned by the members of an Italian studies book club, aptly named *I literati* (also referred to by its members as book club, reading group, and the club). I joined the 12-member, by in large university educated, professional, self-identified first- or second-generation Italian-Canadian, mostly female book club in 1998. *I literati* was founded in 1995 to bring together intellectually-inclined, Thunder Bayites of Italian ancestry to chat about Italian, Italian-Canadian, and Italian-American familial, cinematic, musical,

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sullivan 2009; Dunk 1994.

<sup>3</sup> The massive influx of postwar, non-Anglo immigrants into the country, feminist and civil rights movements of the day, pressure on the Canadian government to recognize the status of First Nations Peoples, and demands for Quebec independence led to the Canadian government's now 30+ year commitment to multiculturalism (Harney 1998; Henry et al 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Northern Mosaic* 1975-97; The Institute for Italian Studies – Lakehead University website; Potestio 2005.

operatic, artistic, and political matters through an examination of various textual, aural, and visual materials. Decisions about which works to take up, the location and the time of club gatherings are collectively decided upon by the group. Meetings are hosted by specific members who are expected to provide plenty of food and wine while discussions are led by designated individuals who encourage attendees to reflect upon the main themes of a book, film, play, or musical work. Book club conversations tend to focus on the tensions surrounding the place and value of two different Italian and Canadian homelands, the distinctions between an Italian and Canadian heritage, the past-ness and present-ness of Canada and Italy, and their links to gender, socio-economic class, and educational levels. These tensions are, I argue, an integral part of an Italian-Canadian migrant subjectivity in Thunder Bay and are aptly illustrated in the *I literati* discussion of Penny Petrone's *Breaking the Mould* (1995), widely received as one of the most important books about Thunder Bay ever written.<sup>5</sup>

### Reading *Breaking the Mould*<sup>6</sup>

Everyone is already comfortably seated and engaged in chit-chat as trays full of *Provolone* and *Asiago* cheese, crusty Italian bread, and platters of appetizers are passed around. Reading club discussion about *Breaking* commences promptly at 8:00pm. Penny Petrone, the book's author and the de facto leader for tonight's meeting, begins by speaking about the ethnic self-loathing she embodied as a young, precocious, working-class, Canadian-born woman with southern Italian roots in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her memoir underscores how much she longed to escape her Italian-ness because it was widely shunned by her Anglo school mates, the Anglos who ruled the city, country, and the world in her day, the Anglos who were considered the 'real' Canadians. Penny outlines the difficulties she encountered during her adolescence while attending an Anglo-dominated academic high school, a departure for most Canadian-born Italians who were typically streamed into technical high schools, considered too stupid, unrefined, and working class to be liberally educated. She speaks of her struggles to be accepted as a normal Canadian which, at the time, meant being an Anglo or WASP. She informs us of how she refused to eat food with strong smells and flavours, refused to wear the clothes her mother made for her, refused to speak Italian, and refused her birth name by changing it from Serafina to Penny. She tells us how much she hated her differentness, how she "tried hard to erase the Italian-ness that the

---

<sup>5</sup> Petrone's *Breaking the Mould* (1995) has been translated into Italian, was roundly feted in, as Penny frequently put it, her "ancestral homeland of Italy," and received the 2002 F.G. Bressani Literary Prize. The members of *I literati* explored *Breaking* in December of 1999 with M. as the designated leader. Penny, however, led the evening's discussion. Note that throughout this article, I use initials when referring to reading club members (save for Penny) in order to protect their anonymity.

<sup>6</sup> For the sake of brevity, my description of this meeting is selective and focuses on conversations by some of the female *I literati* members.

dominant culture despised” even though she was never sure if her name, her appearance, her skin colour, or her breath were the factors that made her a foreigner in her natal birthplace. She recalls, citing *Breaking*, how her “Italian name... was anathema to” her, how she “wincing when [she] heard it called or saw it written” (Petronne, 1995: 186,188-189). She recounts, too, how her mother stressed the importance of education in order to get ahead in the “New Country” and to escape her family’s peasant, working-class roots, even though it was very difficult back then to be a smart woman of southern Italian heritage who desired to be highly educated. Even so, Penny elaborates, she was supposed to dream about marriage, children, and financial security, not university and higher learning. She concludes by pointing out that some people in the Thunder Bay Italian community are upset by *Breaking* because they feel that it mocks their ethnicity and reproduces older stereotypes of Italians as boorish, patriarchal, uneducated, overly family-oriented, Catholic, and unskilled labourers. Some feel that her memoir belittles Italian-ness. Penny takes issue with these interpretations since *Breaking*, she emphasizes, is about the machinations of life in pre-multicultural Canada. But she also points out that the book continues to be relevant because it gives voice to the universal experience of migration, of living between two different cultures and grappling with two different identities. She then asks reading club attendees if life is all that different for ethnic minorities today.

Some *I literati* members are clearly upset with Penny and disagree passionately with the implications of *Breaking*. Instead of answering her question directly, they contest some of the book’s themes. One member, P., speaks specifically about the third chapter, “Mamma,” which focuses on Penny’s relationship with her Italian immigrant mother. P. is a retired elementary school teacher and self-identified wife and mother who works tirelessly to promote Italian-ness in Thunder Bay. She is actively involved in a cultural organization that is mandated to teach Thunder Bayites about the world-wide historic and current artistic contributions, innovations, and creativity of Italians. P. is offended by the depiction of Italian mothers as harsh, cold, demanding, and manipulative and finds it disconcerting because it leaves the reader with the idea, citing page 64 of *Breaking*, that all Italian mothers are “reared in the dour fatalism of Southern Italy... always guarded... rejecting optimism and happiness to avoid bad luck... and never praise, hug, kiss, or listen to their children.” This is, R. claims, not how she thinks of Italian mothers and Italian women who take great pride in their domestic, family-making roles, and are generous to others. P. claims that her own recollection of Penny’s mother was of a giving, selfless woman who happily shared her traditions with Italians and non-Italians alike. *Breaking* also ignores, P. adds, all of the effort and time that well-educated, professional, mostly second-generation, Italian-Canadians put into promoting their culture in Thunder Bay. Italians are not entirely inward, not only into family and “their own kind,” but they like to share their heritage with non-Italians. There have been and still are, P. continues, many Italian

singing, dancing, and musical groups that are roundly appreciated by everyone in the city. *Breaking* says nothing about this Italian spirit of public sharing.

B., another reading club member, points out that she has never had a sense that being Italian was a bad thing and that most of her Canadian friends are “wannabes.” B. was born in Thunder Bay, is the only non-university educated reading club member, is a financially independent, single mother of two, and thinks of herself as a self-taught, liberally educated woman. She is proud and lucky to be Italian and declares that most of her non-Italian friends would like to be Italian because, to paraphrase, “Italians are so lively, have great food, support each other, and are into family. Canadians want to be Italians.” She recollects the joy of being part of a large Italian community in her youth and the positive feelings of belonging it continues to give her as an adult. The problem with *Breaking* is that it leaves readers with the impression that Italian-ness is bad by focussing far too much on Penny’s desire to be Canadian/Anglo. This, B. remarks, is damaging for the community because it doesn’t do enough to show how Italian-ness is, even in the days of Penny’s youth, valuable.

Still another *I literati* member, S., declares that she has always been proud of her Italian ancestry and joined the group to learn more about it. S. is a professional full-time librarian, has two sons, and hails from a very traditional 1950s immigrant family that requires fathers to be breadwinners and mothers to manage households. Although she does not herself practice these traditional gendered relations, she especially appreciates that her parents left the poverty of their homeland for a chance at a better life for themselves, their future children, and their future grandchildren. This was not, she stresses, easy for them: they had very little education, they only knew how to be farmers, and were not English-speakers. They came to Thunder Bay in the post-war period but still managed to hang on to their roots; and because of multiculturalism, S. is able to hang on to her roots as well. “It’s the best,” she claims, “of both worlds [because Italian-Canadians in Thunder Bay] can have good jobs, a good education, keep their traditions alive” and can, like her, choose to break with some of those traditions. S., specifically points out how she is not, like her mother and many other Italian immigrant women she knows, “stuck in the house,” because she has a career that she adores, is middle-class rather than working-class, and still sees herself as an Italian-Canadian woman, mother, and wife. In this way, S. is able to embrace and simultaneously reject certain parts of her Italian-Canadian-ness.

Other *I literati* participants suggest that P., B., and S. have fundamentally misread Penny’s memoir by underscoring that *Breaking* is grounded on the Anglo-dominated, historical-social milieu of Penny’s youth. C., a first-generation, southern Italian, post-war immigrant who has a university degree in English, teaches at a working-class high school, is a mother, is a wife, and is the breadwinner of her family, mentions that “life was different [in Penny’s youth because] Canada was dominated by the Anglos and the way to get ahead was to be like them. If those were the rules of the game then it makes

sense to play along.” Penny’s own mother, C. adds, seemed to understand this because she encouraged her children to get an education, even her daughters who were only supposed to be mothers and wives. C. adds that although she is not familiar with the older Thunder Bay described in *Breaking* because “it’s good to have an ethnic culture nowadays,” she nonetheless experienced similar prejudices as those described in the book. This was particularly acute for her because she was often ridiculed, and made to feel inferior, in elementary school for not being able to speak English when she first arrived in Canada in the 1960s. And despite the strength of multiculturalism in the city today and her success in mastering English, she is still sometimes left with the impression that non-Italians think Italians are not entirely an equal part of Canada’s mainstream society. She has noticed, for instance, that some of her non-Italian colleagues and acquaintances are both surprised and discomfited when they discover that she is Italian-born and of Italian heritage. C. suggests that this shows how being both Italian and Canadian is not so straightforward in Thunder Bay.

M., another second-generation, career-oriented, university-educated, and married conversant, similarly counters P., B., and S.’s remarks by stating that she, regardless of multiculturalism, experienced problems with her ethnicity and gender. She claims that this has something to do with the “not-so-great place of women” in the Italian community, which is connected to the work women are expected to do to create and maintain a tight-knit family. The mothering work required of women detracts from the time they have to work on their careers. It’s not that easy, from M.’s perspective, to be a career woman and an Italian woman in Thunder Bay; and it’s the reason why M. has chosen not to have children. She is, however, constantly questioned by other Italian-Canadians about her decision to focus on her career at the supposed expense of family. This troubles her relationship with her Italian-Canadian-ness and resonates with some of Penny’s past experiences of trying to be a smart, ambitious, career driven (rather than family driven) woman.

Penny thanks the group for their stories, for both supporting her point of view, and for enriching her understanding of ethnicity more generally. As is usual, Penny attempts to smooth over some of the tensions that emerge in reading club discussions by reminding us that we are all both Italian *and* Canadian. Her healing words are not entirely effective. Members who openly express their disagreement with *Breaking* seem betrayed by *I literati* members who agree with it. There is a strong sense, too, that those who agree with Penny’s work feel betrayed by those who do not.

Z., a member of *I literati*, calls me the morning after reading club’s discussion of *Breaking* to ensure that my ethnographic research about Italian-Canadian-ness in Thunder Bay is correct. She wants me to know that she is about the same age and generation as Penny and attended the same academic highschool. Penny’s negative experiences with her ethnicity, Z., asserts, stem from her desire to be part of middle-class Anglo society; that didn’t mean Penny had to be so miserable about being Italian. Z. informs me that she is,

and always has been, proud to be Italian, that she loves doing things with her Italian friends, and that she loves everything about her heritage. She wants me to know how radically different her experiences were from those of Penny's.

Z.'s phone call highlights how gender, socio-economic class, and immigrant generational position challenge the local discourse of a homogeneous, fixed, essential Italian-Canadian-ness in Thunder Bay. Penny's memoir illustrates how difficult, contra Z., it was for her to be part of middle-class Canadian society because of her peasant, working-class Italian-ness and suggests that such difficulty is relevant today for first- and second-generation ethnics who must find a way to live in two different cultures, regardless of the multicultural ideal. P., a second-generation Italian-Canadian counters Penny's remarks and insists that Italian-ness is not exclusively by and for the members of a particular community. P's comments speak, whether wittingly or not, to the multicultural idea that the traditions of various groups are to be valorised and shared with others and not simply maintained, preserved, and celebrated by insiders. And this spirit of sharing with others is embodied by Penny's mother, who was not the inward-looking, overly-familial oriented, woman depicted in *Breaking*. B. directly challenges Penny's avowed hatred of her ethnic differentness and her attempt to "erase the Italian-ness that the dominant culture despised," by pointing out the existence of Italian "wannabes." B., like P., also asserts her pride in, rather than hatred of, being Italian. Yet, B. covertly challenges P.'s remarks that Italian-ness is something to be shared with non-Italians by advancing a rather essentialist understanding of Italian-ness. B. implies here that Italian-ness belongs to those who have an Italian ancestry and thus cannot really be shared with non-Italian "wannabes." This also challenges, like Z., Penny's quest to erase her essential Italian heritage culture in her quest to become part of an Anglo/Canadian one. These comments frame Italian-ness as an inescapable part of one's given sense of selfhood and tend to follow the hegemonic discourse of Italian-Canadian-ness in the city. S., however, both upholds and contests the latter by calling attention to the advantages associated with being able to move between her Canadian-ness and Italian-ness. S. cherishes her Italian roots at the same time that she, unlike P.'s identity-talk, refuses to simply valorise the expected roles and responsibilities of Italian women; she also covertly challenges the way in which B. superiorises Italian-ness by taking issue with her heritage's traditional gender relations. In this way, S. stresses how she is a proud Italian-Canadian, wife, mother, and middle-class income-earning professional. C., countering P. and B., speaks out, following Penny, about the continuing difficulties of any straightforward celebration of Italian-ness from her position as a first-generation Italian immigrant. Her experiences of prejudice against Italian-ness differ from that of B., who found, and continues to find, solace in her Italian-ness; they differ from P.'s view of the greatness of Italian-ness and the obligation to share it with all Thunder Bayites; and they depart from S.'s declaration of pride in her Italian roots. M., in turn, questions P.'s straightforward valorisation of traditional Italian womanly obligations; she questions, too, S.'s gender critique by sug-

gesting that it doesn't go far enough. M. is troubled by the Italian commitment to family and its connection to the work and the sacrifices that women, in particular, are required to do in its name. She is troubled by the assumption that it is possible to be both an Italian mother and a career woman.

The identity-talk above unearths some of the vexations that surround what identity is, where it is located, and how it works. It reveals the ruptures that arise among a group of similarly socially positioned people who regularly stake claims to the local discourse of Italian-Canadian-ness and its attendant notions of an Italian homeland, heritage culture, and selfhood within a Canadian multicultural context, i.e., their migrant subjectivity. This is not unusual: many research participants with whom I have spoken are critical of a discourse that depicts all Italians as Catholics known for their love of music and dance, tasty food, and joyful nature (i.e., heritage culture, its links to an Italian homeland, and selfhood); that frames Italians as part of a glorious ancient Roman and Renaissance past (i.e., an Italian homeland and heritage culture); and that casts Italians as an economically successful, immigrant, cohort in an ethnoculturally diverse and tolerant Canada (i.e., an Italian-Canadian selfhood). *I literati* members similarly take up and contest this discourse in their conversations about gender, socio-economic class, and immigrant generational position. This calls attention to the problematic of identity that is, I suggest, emblematic of an important element in an Italian-Canadian migrant subjectivity in Thunder Bay and is, more broadly, emblematic of a postmodern perspective on the meaning of migrant subjectivity today.

### Acknowledgement

I wish to thank the four anonymous reviewers at *Migration Letters* for their critically constructive comments, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for its financial support during my fieldwork research, and the many research participants who have, and continue to, shared their life stories with me. Any errors and omissions are mine and mine alone.

### References

- Brubaker, R. (2005). The 'diaspora' diaspora. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28(1): 1-19.
- Caglar, A. (1997). Hyphenated identities and the limits of 'culture. In: T. Modood and P. Werbner (eds) *The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe: Racism, Identity, and Community*, London: Zed Books.
- Dunk, T. (1994). *It's A Working Man's Town: Male Working-Class Culture*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Harney, H. (1998). *Eh Paesan!: Being Italian in Toronto*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Henry F., Tator, C., Mattis, W., and Rees, T. (eds) (1995). *The Colour of Democracy: Racism in Canadian Society*. Toronto, Canada: Harcourt Brace and Company.



- Lee, Y. and Park, K. (2008). Negotiating hybridity: Transnational reconstruction of migrant subjectivity in Koreatown, Los Angeles. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 25(3): 245-262.
- Mahtani, M. (2002). Interrogating the hyphen-nation: Canadian multicultural policy and 'mixed-raced' identities. *Social Identity*, 8(1): 67-90.
- Petrone, P. (1995). *Breaking the Mould: A Memoir*. Toronto and New York: Guernica.
- Pillow, W. and Mayo, C. (2007). Toward understandings of feminist ethnography. In: S. Hesse-Biber (ed) *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Potestio, J. (2005). *The Italians of Thunder Bay*. Thunder Bay: Chair of Italian Studies, Lakehead University.
- Sullivan, R. (2009). The (mis)translation of masculine femininity in rural space: (re)reading "queer" women in northern Ontario, Canada. *thirdspace*, 8(2). (available at: <http://www.thirdspace.ca/journal/article/viewArticle/sullivan/247>).
- Svašek, M. (2010). On the move: Emotions and human mobility. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(6): 865-880.
- Williams, C. (2005). 'Knowing one's place': Gender, mobility, and shifting subjectivity in eastern Indonesia. *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs*, 5(4): 401-417.
- Yon, D. (2007). Race-making/race-mixing: St Helena and the south Atlantic world. *Social Dynamics*, 33(2): 144-163.