

# Cosmic Ear: Calabrian Writers in Canada

by Joseph J. Pivato

I will begin with a quotation from a poem:

In a cosmic ear of sharp peaks and stepped hills  
where broom and cyclamen bloom  
side by side with lemon trees  
is the house where I was born. (19)



"Our House is in a Cosmic Ear" is the title of a poem by Antonino Mazza, a poet and translator who epitomizes Calabrian writers in Canada. Calabrians constitute a very large proportion of the Italians in Canada. There are an estimated 260,000 people of Calabrian background. Nevertheless little has been written about these people or their cultural impact on Canadian society. Calabrians in Canada are better known for their significant economic success. Many have achieved prominence in the professions. Their construction companies have changed the skylines of Toronto and Montreal. These achievements overshadow the modest endeavours of artists who are representing cultural roots and the experiences of immigration. However economic success does not always help us to understand who we are. We must turn to the artist to explore questions of identity.

Calabria is the most southerly region of Italy before we reach Sicily. Like other southern regions it has historically been identified with poverty and migration out of Italy. Calabrian men formed a significant part of the great Italian exodus. In the century between 1870 and 1970 almost twenty-six million Italians left their homeland. While many returned, this massive migration qualifies as one of the major diasporas of the modern age (Sturino).

At the beginning of his book of poems, *Per non finire*, Antonio Corea makes a strong statement about immigration:

Per più di un secolo i governanti Italiani hanno completamente abbandonato l'emigrante a se stesso ed al suo destino....(my translation) For more than a century Italian governments have

completely abandoned the emigrant to himself and his destiny. Denying him the most basic necessities, ignoring his most elementary human needs, in fact, considering him (especially the southerner) an inferior man to what he was before expatriation. (7)

It is best to frankly articulate this view of Italian immigration since it forms the subtext of much of the literature which we will be discussing. Calabrians in Canada often represent an outsider perspective on cultural and political issues, a one-down position.

The exclusion of the Calabrian is examined in *La Razza Maledetta* by cultural theorist and historian, Vito Teti who traces the growth of the idea of due Italia, two Italies. This racist notion maintains the superiority of the people from the north and the inferiority of people from southern Italy. Teti finds that this idea took firm hold in history, literature, anthropology and popular culture in both north and south. After a long list of writers and historians who have studied society in Calabria Teti explains:

Anche quando questi studiosi fanno riferimento a fattori storici, economici e sociali, essi considerano la razza come "causa causarum" della distanza tra le "due italie" (33). [my translation:] *Even when these researchers make reference to the factors of history, economics and society, they still consider race as the ultimate cause for the difference between the two Italies.* [The book title translates as *The damned race*]

This paper will briefly examine the phenomenon of Calabrian writers in Canada and their artistic activities in the context of Canadian cultural expectations, Italian north-south politics, and the subsequent rediscovery of "Italiani nel mondo."

What is happening to writers of Calabrian origins? Do they represent their particular regional culture in their writing? What do they tell us about the place of Italians in Canada and in Europe? We will explore these questions with reference to a number of active writers: Antonino Mazza, Peter Oliva, Antonio Corea, Darlene Madott, Franc Sturino and Francesco Loriggio. There are several other writers we could consider, but I have selected these as representative of the Calabrian experience in Canada.

In his studies of the literature of Italian emigration Pasquino Crupi has explored the shifting themes of despair and hope among these brutalized people. To demonstrate this flow of population he points out that between 1876 and 1905 Calabria lost one third of its population to emigration. His book, *Un popolo in fuga* (1991), is most appropriately titled since Crupi traces the desperate escapes of these people to North and South America (Crupi, 6).

In his book, *Intervista sulla Calabria* (1985) anthropologist, Luigi Lombardi Satriani reviews the reasons for emigration from Calabria:

In the literature on emigration, we find already in the nineteenth century the proponents of the instrumental motivations: one emigrates because it is impossible to live in the economic conditions of Calabria or of other Southern regions. And we find the proponents of the psychological motivations: one emigrates because one wants to emigrate, because one is

attracted by other ways of life, because one has enacted an anticipatory socialization with the new models. (46)

Prof. Cesare Pitto of the Università della Calabria goes further and argues that immigrants are motivated to go abroad by cultural factors as much as by economic ones. To support this argument Pitto points to the creation of neo-ethnic cultures such as Italian-Canadian, and, we could add, Italian-Australian (1996,123). Vito Teti in his *Paese e L'Ombra* examines the creation of new Calabrian communities abroad which are a reflection of the hometown. He calls these *il doppio*, the double, an attempt at recreation of Calabrian identity, a resurrection from the death of emigration (31). Teti's photographic examples are from his stays in Toronto. He makes many references to the important Calabrian writer Corrado Alvaro whose many stories on immigrants makes use of the theme of *fuga* and diasporic *doppiezza* (24).

Do Calabrian writers in Canada represent the two motivations—economic and cultural—for emigration? Writers of Calabrian background have not achieved as significant an impact as might be expected given their numbers. Italian-Canadian writing is dominated by people from Abruzzi and Molise both in their number, and the strong production of individual writers like Mary di Michele, Antonio D'Alfonso and Nino Ricci. Several Molisani writers also publish in Italian or in French; the most successful is Marco Micone. Despite the dominance of the Molisani Calabrian writers do make themselves felt in the literature.

The poem, "Our House is in a Cosmic Ear," by Antonino Mazza first appeared in 1978 in the landmark anthology, *Roman Candles*, edited by Pier Giorgio Di Cicco. In that first anthology of Italian-Canadian poems there were 17 writers, of which five were from Calabria. Of these five only one, Antonino Mazza, continues to write and publish.

The image of the cosmic ear is applied to Calabria in Mazza's nostalgic poem about his childhood in southern Italy. To Mazza this giant ear can hear the music of the cosmos and can absorb this magic sound and transmit it to the world as Calabrians migrate abroad. Just as his early life was central to his development as a writer, so too Calabria is central to the spread of Italian culture in the world. Many of his poems use these giant cosmic images. These global references are often in contrast to the rather intimate sentiments of nostalgia and expressions on family relationships:

For four years I dreamt of my father coming back.  
It was a childish dream.  
He was aboard a little purple ship, returning  
to our beautiful Calabria. (20)

And in another poem:

And the volcano again breaks the horizon. But my  
grandfather... the clay pipe in the orange groves  
belching mouthfuls of laughter. (29)

For Mazza the harmony of sound is not just a poetic image but a reality which he tried to achieve with this collection of poems. He first published them not as a book but as an LP recording made with his musician brother, Aldo Mazza in 1988. In this recording the reading of each poem is accompanied by percussion instruments and electronic sound. In some cases the music reproduces the ancient folk tunes of Calabria.

In his introduction to this collection Mazza comments that through this collaboration with his brother, he was encouraged to collect Calabrian poems remembered by immigrants in Canada. He even included one poem in Calabrian dialect, "Si sí veru poeta di Marsigghia," to represent a silenced past.

Some poems are personal and reproduce trips back to Italy, or recall his dead sister, or his grandfather. Though heavy with nostalgia the wording of many poems seems abstract object d'art. It is as if Mazza is attempting to capture some feeling through the very sound of the words. Mazza in trying to reproduce his early experiences and feelings of life in Calabria often becomes exotic:

The night our violet earth was lost beyond a disk  
of stars, our half moon was copper cup, and the heart,  
inside a chest of bones, a broken child;  
my ship rippling in a dish of honey.... (24)

Does Mazza want us to see his childhood in Calabria as exotic? Exoticism gives this experience a quality of otherness rather than one of understanding. His childhood perspective does not acknowledge the harsh realities of Southern poverty after the war. It was not a pleasure trip his father made to Canada, but one forced by economic circumstances.

In the essay at the end of his slim collection of poems, *The Way I Remember It*, Mazza writes about his first return trip to his village in Calabria:

All the inhabitants of my memory had gone elsewhere, all over Europe. I got some addresses from my grandmother – who was among the few relatives left in the village – and went off to Northern Italy where some of my relatives were... When I rediscovered them, the picture I had in my imagination of these giant men and wonderful, happy women died. They were now either working in a mine shaft and dying of cancer, or underground, parking cars. (45-46)

The tone in this essay is one of regret and surprise. The author, who is himself an immigrant, is shocked that others have left his village and that it has changed forever. The harsh economic realities of Calabria in the essay are in sharp contrast to the exotic images in the poems. For Mazza Calabria is beautiful, and though his family had to emigrate for economic reasons, he has been able to create a new culture in the new country. Mazza deeply regrets that his relatives in other parts of Europe have not been able to create a neo-ethnic culture, have not been able to take a part of Calabria with them. What does this tell us about the receptivity to other cultures in Europe? Vito Teti's *doppio* is not as evident among Mazza's relatives in Europe.

Antonino Mazza has published only two books of his own work: *Structures of Chaos* (1979) and *The Way I Remember It* (1992). This last title appeared in Italian as *La nostra casa è in un orecchio cosmico* (1998). His other publications are English translations of Italian writers: Eugenio Montale, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and others. In 1994 he published his translation of *Citta senza donne* by Mario Duliani, as *City without Women*, a chronicle of life in an interment camp in Canada during World War II. This is the first time this book appeared in English as a reminder of the ill treatment of Canadian citizens of Italian origin at that time. In the introduction Mazza is presenting a minority point of view which is at odds with mainstream culture, but he seems comfortable to maintain this outsider perspective.

Through his many translation activities Mazza is trying to mediate between Italian culture and English Canadian reality. By means of his own books and his translations Mazza is contributing to the creation of a neo-ethnic culture as Cesare Pitto describes it.

Mazza also illustrates another aspect of the Calabrians in Canada: their entrepreneurial spirit. He is a successful professional translator for commercial projects. After leaving behind the poverty in their towns, Calabrians work hard to achieve economic security and success in their new countries. With this focus on business one can speculate that the arts are not always perceived to be a secure way to economic stability. Is this why we have fewer writers in this community than we would expect?

## Antonio Corea



When poems are in Italian the feelings of nostalgia and sense of loss seem overwhelming. This is the case with the Italian poems of Antonio Corea collected in his book, *I Passi* (1981). The poems deal realistically with the experiences of immigration in Canada. There are poems dedicated to Calabria, trips to Calabria, to relatives and other immigrants. Corea even invents a new term, “Canabra” to mean Calabro-Canadese (85). Does this term indicate an acceptance of a new reality, a new life in Canada?

In contrast to Mazza, Corea has a more critical view of Italians and life back in Italy. His poems often use humour to critique situations. In “Il facchino” the porter at Ciampino Airport wants a larger and larger fee, to move the luggage, until the passenger asks him to return the luggage to the conveyer belt. In the poem, “Felice e l'orto,” the author has sent his brother in Italy some money and has left him his garden, only to have the brother ask him for more money to pay for the garden expenses. There is often the realization that the immigrant has also escaped the

difficulties of life in Calabria. There are references to conflicts, old hates, and revenge. There are references to the immigrant being forced to leave Calabria.

Corea is clear about the difficulties of life in Canada. There is loneliness and doubt, cold and hard work. Here too Corea sees humour. We find the newly-arrived immigrant lost on a one way street and trying to read the signs. In the long poem, "La casa," Giannino becomes obsessed with his big house. We hear echoes of "La casetta piccolina in Canada." This poem uses Italian terms like "morgheggio" to bring out the humour.

Corea's other collection of poems, *Per non finire*, includes poems in Calabrian. It begins with a strong statement about the Italian government's treatment of emigrants which is quoted at the beginning of this paper. The most striking aspect of Corea's poems is a sense of balance between the fate of the immigrant who must leave Calabria, and his hope for the future. There is no sense in these poems of the immigrant as victim. At the beginning of his collection, *I Passi*, Corea introduces himself as a member of the third generation of immigrants in his family (13). With this family history behind his poems, Corea represents both sides of Pitto's theory on motivation: economic reasons and cultural ones. For Corea there are the benefits of financial security and the freedoms which this brings, but there is also the enticement of a new way of life, a new open environment, and exposure to different cultures.

Antonio Corea, as the speaker in these poems takes a subject position that is in between the heritage of Calabria and the new society of Canada. There is also the assumption that Italian literature and culture can exist outside the peninsula. Corea is an example of the creation of the Teti's *doppio* in the new country.

## Peter Oliva

Peter Oliva was born in North America. His Calabrian grandfather was a coal miner in the mountains of southern Alberta, an area called the Crowsnest Pass. In 2004 Oliva was elected president of the Association of Italian-Canadian Writers. Oliva's first novel, *Drowning in Darkness* (1993), deals with the lives of Calabrian coal miners in this area. The novel recreates the experiences and dreams of two coal miners and one Calabrian woman. The novel gives many details about the dangers of the mine: cave-ins, methane gas, flooding, falls, and disorientation in the darkness. But there is also danger outside the mine. The story is set in the town of Frank which was half buried by a huge rock slide that came down Turtle Mountain in 1903. These dangers are juxtaposed with the history and mythology of Calabria.

The novel opens with Celi lost in the darkness of the mine. While he waits to be rescued he tells the story of Pep and his mysterious wife, Serafina, who is called Sera and was married by proxy. Woven into this tale are episodes from their early lives in Calabria, the town of Bagnara and the legends of the Bagnarote, women said to have special powers. We learn that Sera is from the small town of Scilla, near Bagnara. Sera's grandmother possessed these special powers and, it seems, has passed them on to Sera. She becomes the *figura doppia* of her grandmother. But can Sera exercise these powers in this remote mining town in Canada?

This novel is an example of combining a mythology of the old world, Calabria, with the strange experiences of immigrants to create a new story, in effect, a new mythology. But there are also many allusions to the poverty in Calabria, the reason why people leave and go so far away, even to work in dangerous coal mines. The central scene in the novel is a cave-in in which 27 men die; many are Italian.

Oliva's novel supports Pitto's theory on the motivations for emigration: culture is as important as economics. Pep attracted Sera to Canada not with economic enticements but with descriptions of the beauty of the flora and fauna. He even included bits of leaves and dried flowers in his letters to her. Once in Canada Sera eventually becomes unhappy with Pep because the life of a miner is so ugly. She escapes this ugliness by taking long walks in the surrounding forests and hills, until she eventually disappears.

This disappearance in the wilderness is a familiar archetype in Canadian literature. In both English and French writing it is often associated with the First Nations people as in the expression "going Indian," the embracing of some atavistic culture or values. To this nativistic Canadian motif Oliva has added a Calabrian woman and Calabrian myth and thus has enlarged it beyond the geography of either Canada or Calabria (Northey 18 & 88). This combining of different myths from old and new countries gives a twist to Vito Teti's theory of the *doppio*.

The novel ends with the rescue party searching deep in the mine and finding the body of Celi, the Calabrian narrator of the story. The Italian-Canadian critic and literary theorist Linda Hutcheon in her book, *The Canadian Postmodern*, suggests that a sign of maturity in a literature is the use of irony. Certainly in Peter Oliva's novel, *Drowning in Darkness*, we see this irony, this distancing from the immediate experience and the personal history. Other examples of the use of irony are found in the work of Darlene Madott (Tuzi 143).

## **Darlene Madott**

Of all the Canadian writers of Calabrian background there is only one woman, Darlene Madott, who has published a number of works. When her Calabrian grandfather entered Canada an immigration officer changed the family name from Madotta to Madott. Darlene Madott has written many short stories which deal with Italian women in Canada. We will look at her play, *Mazilli's Shoes* (1999), which deals with an Italian-Canadian family that returns to Italy to live. The father, Giovanni, has had a dream for 23 years of returning to Italy to start a business in his home town of Vasto. The rest of the family, his Italian wife, Maria and three children, born in Canada, think this idea is crazy and tell him so. Maria argues, "Can't you see you're confused? Italy is finished. Why can't you just accept? There's nothing there for us anymore."

Ignoring all this advice Giovanni buys a shoe store in Vasto and then convinces his family that life will be better there, that they really belong there. The different characters in the play review the reasons for returning to Italy and the reasons for remaining in Canada.

Madott's play explores the psychology and history of thousands of immigrants from Italy who left with the intention of working abroad, saving some money and returning to Italy to enjoy a

better life than the one they left. Most did not move back to Italy. Madott's drama plays out the scenario of one family that did return.

Madott writes from a third generation perspective on this question of moving back to Italy. She looks at this controversial issue with dispassion and irony. She is not emotionally involved with Giovanni's longing, or guilt. We note that she uses Vasto, in the Abruzzi, rather than a town in Calabria. Would the play be less believable if Giovanni returned to Calabria, *la razza maledetta*?

What does it mean to return to Italy? Where does each member of the family get a sense of belonging? While Madott uses many Italian sentences and translations of the English dialogue to give the play a sense of realism, there is little sense of the Italian perspective. There is no use of regional dialects. Are these returnees welcomed back in Italy? Do we get any sense of Italian attitudes towards immigrants entering Italy?

In Vasto the Mazzili family encounter all the petty bureaucracy and small town politics that you can imagine. Giovanni Mazzilli's dream collapses under the burden of the misunderstandings that result from these small conflicts. The play ends with the family returning to Canada, everyone except the oldest son, Francesco, who has fallen in love with a young woman in town.

By exploring the myths of the return to Italy Madott reverses Pitto's theory. For Giovanni Mazzilli life is more beautiful in Italy: the food, the fashion, the scenery, and the history. Only after the family lives there for a while do they realize that they are restricted in terms of their daily lives, their opportunities, their freedom, their relationships. For Madott our relationship with Italy and Italian culture is a very ambiguous one and so irony is the appropriate vehicle.

In her book of short stories, *Joy, Joy, Why Do I Sing?* Madott uses irony to explore personal relationships and those fragile links to our ethnic cultures. Darlene Madott is another example of entrepreneurship: she is a successful lawyer in Toronto and has been able to use her legal experience to explore human behaviour and motivation.

## Franc Sturino

The only person who has written extensively about the history of Calabrians in Canada is Franc Sturino, a social historian who has made this group his special interest. His book, *Forging the Chain* (1990) is a case study of immigrants leaving the province of Cosenza for Toronto. Sturino examines the movements of rural people who set out to join *paesani* already in Canada. Most worked as sojourners and intended to return to Calabria. The unique feature of Sturino's book is that it includes the points of view of the immigrants themselves by means of numerous oral interviews. His focus is on the *mentalità* of these immigrants, the attitudes, aspirations and values, which helped them to adapt to new and often difficult conditions in the New World. What is striking about Sturino's study is that it reveals the profound changes that began to occur in the isolated mountain villages once young men began to leave and send back money to their families.



Much like Pitto and Teti, Sturino looks at both economic and cultural factors for immigration away from the villages of Cosenza. Each generation that eventually settled in Canada saw that they could create a new ethnic culture in the host society.

A Calabrian by birth, Sturino co-edited the critical anthology, *Arrangiarsi: The Italian Immigrant Experience in Canada* (1989), one of the first interdisciplinary collections on the Italians in Canada. And he continues to teach and publish in the area of immigration studies.

## Francesco Loriggio

Francesco Loriggio, one of the most respected literary critics in Canada, is a Calabrian. His most significant essay on the Calabrian experience is "Going South: Notes for a Cultural Portrait of the Immigrant" (1996). The essay is a series of observations on the position of the Italian immigrant vis-à-vis North America and Italy.

The essay begins with a striking image: an Italian immigrant on a return visit to Italy in 1990 is surprised to meet black Africans waiting at the railway station. Many of us have had this experience. Suddenly his relationship to Italy is changed forever. He could once return to Italy and play the tourist; visit the Rome-Florence-Venice circuit. Not anymore. These African newcomers remind him that he is an immigrant like them. He is sharing the same narratives of migration. Loriggio explains:

The African immigrants are our link to Italy and to our post-colonial world, as we are theirs to Italy. They who are now where we could not stay, in those places which are receding from the immediacy of our everyday life, who here [in Italy] have other things to worry about than us. (94)

Loriggio makes a distinction between the private journey of the returning immigrant and the tourism of the Western imagination which traditionally identifies Italy with the Rome-Florence-Venice circuit, and the Renaissance. He points out:

Italian emigrants don't come from any of these cities, and if you visit them upon your return you do it in homage to myths that no matter how much you may want to uphold are still not you, the private you the trip is all about. (92)

As a Calabrian Loriggio brings an outsider perspective to questions of Italian culture and politics. Even after decades in Canada, graduate degrees and success in his profession his relationship with Italy is not resolved. Loriggio articulates this view which is often alluded to in the literature we have been reviewing.

Italians from remote and isolated areas like Calabria have never been part of the centres of power, the Rome-Florence-Venice circuit. Loriggio would go so far as to say that historically they have not really been considered part of Europe. And they are still excluded because they are in the south. They are still Vito Teti's *razza maledetta*. Their role is to represent the outsider perspective.

Loriggio is concerned with the condition of the ethnic minority intellectual in today's university and his/her ability to speak freely about the minority perspective and to promote pluralism in all its imperfections. He rejects the idea that English and, in Canada, French departments should speak for the ethnic intellectual. Such departments have a tendency towards uniformity of vision and a preoccupation with the official canon. Could we say the same about Italian Studies programs in North America? How do Italian politics and the North-South question affect these programs in North America? How often are Francesco Perri, Corrado Alvaro, Rocco Scotellaro and other Southern writers included in the curriculum?

Many academics and students outside Italy share Loriggio's views on the Italian immigrant in the world, and our need to critically re-evaluate our relationships with the peninsula. Some of these studies are collected in *Social Pluralism and Literary History*, a volume edited by Loriggio.

My Italian relatives have been asking me in recent years, "How are Italians regarded in Canada or in the United States?" To me it is a curious question, all the more because the Italians I have known have never before demonstrated such self-critical introspection. Why would Italians be asking this question now? Are they asking me about the North-South question? Are they asking me about negative stereotypes of Italians in the North American media? Or are they just looking for reassurances from an Italian immigrant who is supposed to continue to love Italy unquestioningly and uncritically? Have they rediscovered us, Italiani nel mondo, and decided to now re-evaluate their Italian identity? There are more people of Italian origin living outside Italy now than in Italy. Can Italian culture exist outside Italy? Even though I have spent years exploring these problems I do not know the answers to these questions. I do know that Italians outside of Italy have a different point of view on these questions. Calabrian writers are some of the first to raise these questions because of their traumatic history and outsider perspective on all things Italian. Many Calabrians voted on these questions by leaving their homeland for good. They have been very successful in their adopted countries because they work very hard; they are doers. We have seen this entrepreneurial spirit demonstrated in the writers themselves.

I will end with a young Calabrian writer who believes in free enterprise and open dialogue. Domenic Cusmano is a translator and publisher who founded the periodical, *ACCENTI: the Canadian Magazine with and Italian Accent*. In addition to publishing articles on all aspects of Italian-Canadian society it includes work by creative writers. But Cusmano is also interested in controversial articles which critique Italian society: the young professionals leaving Italy, Italians in the media, new immigration policies in Italy, the corrupt politics of Italy, and so forth. This magazine brings these unpopular issues before a wider reading public since it is published in English. Cusmano through a combination of business and creative writing demonstrates that the Calabrian outsider perspective is very much alive among Italian-Canadian writers, and I hope this will continue to be so for years to come.

## Coda

Canadian literature began to emerge as an identifiable national literature in the 1950s and 1960s. Writers and other artists focussed on creating a distinct Canadian culture, that of a northern nation. This creative activity led to a major change in our perception of Canada. Since

confederation in 1867 Canada had identified itself as a bilingual country: the English and the French were the founding communities. But gradually the country emerged as a multicultural nation. Today one third of the population is of neither British nor French background. Many ethnic minority communities contribute to the diversity of our culture. Italian-Canadian writers participated in the development of Canadian literature in both English and French, and in Italian. There are now approximately one hundred active writers of Italian background in Canada. These writers along with other ethnic minority authors have changed our national literature into a pluralistic one. Calabrian writers are part of this transformation.

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