

## Research Article

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# Nato Fuori Posto: Exploring Placelessness in Dean Serravalle's "The Buried Tree"

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**Abstract:** Building on the seminal scholarship of humanistic geographer, Edward Relph, this paper explores the postmodern notion of placelessness in Canadian-Italian literature. The author argues that placelessness can afford bi-cultural writers, and their literary protagonists, a degree of productive peripherality that works to deconstruct and undercut the authoritative dynamic of a culturally dominant place. Working with the concept of placelessness, the author analyzes, critically, "The Buried Tree," a short story composed by Canadian-Italian author, Dean Serravalle, to suggest that the metaphysical state is not one of precarity and dearth but, rather, one of purposeful resistance to the traditional, often oppressive notions of cultural hybridity. While Serravalle's text focalizes the strong senses of home and cultural rooting as fundamental markers of ethnic identity, placelessness, a space associated primarily with exclusion, can offer refuge and escape for the protagonist, Michele, who seeks both ethnic dissociation from the familial traditions into which he is born, and detachment from his innate, immigrant history. By exploring Michele's identity crisis, Serravalle seems to challenge the traditional narrative of lifelong, oppositional pluridimensionality, and posits placelessness as a productive, and perhaps necessary, personal state to establish, rather than to reclaim, one's cultural roots.

**Keywords:** italian-canadian, placelessness, cultural roots

## The Evolving Landscape of Contemporary Italian-Canadian Literature

Over two decades after the publication of Pivato's seminal text, *Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian Canadian Writing*, Italian-Canadian literature is experiencing an expansion of critical interest, and of the critical methodologies by which it is being examined. For Jim Zuccherro, Italian-Canadian writing is "now a subject of interest outside of the ethnic group, among scholars in the so-called 'mainstream' of Canadian literary criticism" (183). This body of literature, he adds, is the intersection where "the relationship between the past, place, and identity converge" (184) to constitute the ongoing discourse of diaspora, which is fundamentally connected to both the development and reclamation of Italian ethnicity in Canada following mass waves of immigration that began in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Despite longstanding, nostalgic tendencies that, through writing, strengthen ties to Italy as a means to cope with the perceived loss of Italian culture on Canadian soil, recent scholarship, including Franco Gallippi and Paolo Chirumbolo's *Italian-Canadian Culture in the New Millennium* and Giulia de Gasperi's *Writing Cultural Difference: Italian-Canadian Creative and Critical Works*, draws closer attention to a gradual and arguably inevitable discursive shift in authorship and attitude, whereby members of the nascent generation of writers—the Canadian-born descendants of Italian immigrants—desire not to memorialize familial traditions and cultural roots but, rather, resist and, to some degree, wholly sever them.<sup>1</sup>

Calabrò suggests that these writers, in the midst of a challenging and unsettling cultural movement,

<sup>1</sup> The phrase "first-generation" identifies those born in Canada to Italian-born (or immigrant) parents.

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"knew, consciously or unconsciously, that they were part of this great change, that they were the transition between their parents' ancestral culture and that of their future children's new Canadian roots" (64). This transition, a site of tension and liminality, foregrounds and is the product of a problematic junction of polarized, transnational settings and ethnic identities.

The profound, widespread sentiments of nostalgia and *italianità* that have permeated the pages of Italian-Canadian literature since the late twentieth century are, in more contemporary works, being expressed in "more muted tones" (Zuccherò 185), and challenged by thematic concerns of ethnic detachment, dissociation and, as I will explore, placelessness. These topics, though not universal descriptors of the Canadian-Italian ethos, reflect a developing trend that frames first-generation authors, and their literary characters, as conflicted ethnic subjects who, contemplating the inability to identify with and belong to their physical and cultural surroundings, occupy the space of Other, divided both in and between two, oppositional cultures.<sup>2</sup>

## A Complicated Identity: Italian-Canadian as Culture and Crisis

Whereas Isabella Colalillo Katz perceives writing as "the place where we fuse the old and the new identity [of Italians] in the exercise of the imagination" to preserve the imprint of the authors' familial culture (103), Calabrò questions, and even quietens, this intergenerational, ethnic imprint by acknowledging the inability for the "old" and "new" hyphenated identities to prosper in a coterminous manner in Canada during a period of transition which, for many Italian-Canadians, has been particularly transformative. In addition to noting that Canadian-born Italians have "never felt completely at home, with either culture" (64), Calabrò writes of the toxic, often destructive relationships between some immigrant parents and their children, whose attempt at assimilation is perceived as a betrayal or an insult to the Italian culture.

Assimilation, the arguably inevitable outcome of one's immigration, is, for many Italians, considered a "cultural crime" (Calabrò 65), worsened by the eulogistic tendencies of first-wave Italo-Canadian literature that exalt the Italian expatriates for their often sacrificial relocation. This inability to completely fit in with, and to be welcomed into, either ethnic group suggests, what Licia Canton and Giulia de Gasperi contend, is a literary exposé of "the juxtaposition, and the negotiation, of two opposing worlds" (14).

In *Echo: Essays on Other Literatures*, Pivato investigates the nature and effect of the antagonistic association between Italian and Canadian cultures by exploring the psychological outcomes of trying to reconcile two different positionalities. He explains:

One result of growing up with divided loyalties is a splitting of the self into inimical parts. Self-hatred is one of the markers of characters in ethnic minority writing . . . It seems that the price for becoming Canadian is self-hatred, hatred of the other self, the immigrant self. (166-69)

Pivato's claims, in addition to exposing the adverse reception of an absent, migrant past which, in Calabrò's words, "we had not even asked for" (65), frame Italian ethnicity not as a reason for celebration or pride but, rather, as a source of profound resentment.

The perhaps irreparable sense of shame contributes to an invasive inferiority complex. The realization that one is "unlike the people from the majority culture, that one is often regarded as an inferior or an outsider," Pivato explains, is the foundation for a bicultural protagonist's feeling of self-loathing (185). The complexity of the marginal position of Italo-Canadian subjects reflects the minority roots of Italian-Canadian literature itself: a corpus of writing "of the displaced and the marginalized rather than those in power or of the cultural elite" (Pivato 150).

The conflicted, polyethnic individual, frustrated by the burdensome and stifling obligation to both preserve and promote the culture of his or her parents, seeks, in the body of new wave writing, an escape from the ways of the old country: an escape that, for Pivato, is an attempt to separate not only from one's Italian family and ethnic background, but also from oneself (176). The minority subject, occupying a liminal

<sup>2</sup> I will use the term "Canadian-Italian" to identify the work or viewpoints of those born in Canada to Italian parents.

space where identity is continually (re)negotiated, seeks “a new sense of self, a new identity” (184) and, consequently, undergoes a transformative articulation of self in relation to cultural polarities: the known here and now of Canada, versus the exhumed there and then of Italy.

Though current writers may, perhaps unavoidably, recognize and, to some degree, even become inspired by the original imprint of their familial Italian heritage, there is, as both Pivato and Calabrò demonstrate, growing interest in dissolving this imprint to lay claim to a new territory—a place—that is both accepting and free from the haunting strictures and impressions of a lingering culture’s customs and literature. As Canton and de Gasperi argue, “In different ways, these opposing worlds inspire the writing of established and emerging writers” (14). It is precisely within this space of ongoing deliberation, but also of possibility for growing minority voices that I wish to position my analysis.

## Mapping Place and Placelessness onto Italian-Canadian Writing

While some academic work has concentrated on various representations of “place” from a minority, Canadian-Italian perspective, less work has considered the effects of “placelessness”: a complex, paradoxical space of outsideness, which enables one to resist the symbols and structures that establish and govern an overarching sense of place. According to Edward Relph, placelessness is defined as both a metaphysical attitude and condition which describes an environment or state that is, for the marginal ethnic figure, devoid of any personal significance, meaning, and attachment.

*Place and Placelessness* is a foundational, postmodern text that explores the relationships between people, their identities, and the spaces that they interact with and inhabit. In it, Relph suggests that placelessness, in addition to being characterized by its focus on subjectively meaningless landscapes, which include sites of commercialism, consists of a personal, rudimentary state of alienation from a specific place (143). Placelessness affords a productive, peripheral perspective that deconstructs and undercuts the authoritative dynamic of a culturally dominant place.

Building on Relph’s scholarship, I wish to examine how placelessness functions not simply as a state of precarity, but as a position of resistance to traditional notions of cultural hybridity, as well. While strong senses of home and cultural rooting are fundamental markers of ethnic identity, placelessness, associated primarily with exclusion, can offer refuge and escape for bicultural subjects who seek both ethnic dissociation from the familial traditions into which they are born and, as Pivato notes, detachment from one’s innate, immigrant history. There is a degree of autonomy in placelessness that belonging to a place cannot afford, a sense of agency rooted both in one’s ability to choose to identify with, against, or wholly without the culture(s) that constitute the very space of conflict from which a divided persona seeks exile. Such separation from and indifference to one’s cultural background, however, may not occur seamlessly and, consequently, creates significance worth investigating.

## Unearthing Dean Serravalle’s “The Buried Tree”

To better understand the function and effect of placelessness, I turn to “The Buried Tree,” a short story composed by the Canadian-born author, Dean Serravalle. The work centers on Michele, the son of Italian parents, who demonstrates both the inability and unwillingness to appreciate and participate in his family’s annual ritual of uprooting and replanting an unfruitful fig tree. Michele’s unapologetic criticism of the fruitless practice vocalizes his defiant, marginalized status and embodies an identity crisis rooted both in his affective appeal for cultural belonging and poignant desire to shed his Italian ethnicity. The empathetic relationship between plant and protagonist, whereby Michele pities the emblematic, distressed fig tree, articulates the mutual suffering of both entities who, born *fuori posto* [out of place], endure figurative and physical uprooting that tests the severability of hereditary rhizomes.

While Italian-Canadian texts typically frame a lack of belonging to topographical and social places as a fundamental source of restrictive inadequacy and incompleteness, Serravalle’s work seems to challenge the traditional narrative of lifelong, oppositional pluridimensionality, and posits placelessness as a prolific

and perhaps necessary personal state to establish, rather than to reclaim, one's cultural roots. Michele's instinct to both pity and curse the proverbial fig tree bespeaks the inherent struggle to negotiate and find an authentic sense of self in a space imbued with the social underpinnings of an immigrant generation. The narrator's resistance to ethnic symbols and practices, however, suggests that his cultural identity is not necessarily dictated and conscribed, but constructed and selected.

On the topic of cultural doubleness, Smaro Kamboureli suggests that dichotomous perceptions of culture, of being of and in one or the other, are deleterious. She suggests that cultural doubleness:

does not necessarily mean that we remain lodged within the inherited binary structures that have given rise to the construction of Otherness. Rather, it points to the fact that such discourse moves away from the very boundaries these paradigmatic structures have installed; in this case, boundaries do not separate, but mark the point from which something begins. (141)

Instead of simply pointing out that Canadian-Italians, divided by the innate conflict of their cultural duality, are born into and grow up in a state of dearth, I wish to interrogate notions of intergenerational and intragenerational polyethnicity and, more importantly, investigate both the temporal and spatial liminality of Michele, who does not identify with nor belong to a space of *italianità* forged by his immigrant parents.

Important to Serravalle's story is the relationship between the physical and cultural landscape, an often tense interaction of scarring hybridity, which is embodied by the split fig tree. The plant itself becomes a collision of ethnic association and dissociation, a symbol of precarity and possibility that acts, in the sphere of modern Canadian-Italian literature, as a transformative marker of how Canadian-Italian subjects have toiled with, and continue to work through, an existence defined by hyphenation. Serravalle's story, then, both imagines and surveys a new territory of identity that rejects the conventional narrative of Italo-Canadian difference and embraces, rather than dissolves, the frontiers of placelessness.

## Searching for "Home": Exploring Identity and Place

While the narrative focus of Serravalle's text does not chronicle the popular, immigrant experience, it does shed light on the importance of searching for ethnic rooting and an authentic place to call home: a process that, Filippo Salvatore argues, remains constant in Canadian-Italian writing (56). What must be explored, then, is the meaning of home for Canadian-Italians seeking an identity that is defined against, rather than passively alongside, that of their European ancestry.

Caught in a liminal position, the polyethnic persona, whom Kamboureli identifies as the "ethnic subject," is Othered in a web of old and new cultural registers, the destabilizing result of which motivates a symbolic deterritorialization (140), and a consequential search for (meta)physical belonging. In Canadian-Italian literature, identity exhibits similar registers which, according to Frances Giampapa, are mutual catalysts for the tense, tenuous relationships between members of the parental past who draw context and meaning from a shared, immigrant history imbued with *italianità*, and their offspring, who negotiate ethnicity by confronting parental assumptions regarding what it means to be of Italian descent in Canada (282).

Zuccherro suggests that, for Canadian-Italians, "home" is particularly problematic and characterized by a sort of provisionality: "the sense that everything here, in Canada, exists in relation to its counterpart there, in Italy" (185). Consequently, children of immigrants develop their identity around "competing myths of home, myths that incorporate the real and the ideal, the authentic and the possible" (185). Though "provisionality" captures the instability that Italo-Canadians endure, its mention does not fully convey the struggle nor contention that the foreign, Canadian landscape may embody. To better understand the effects of cultural deterritorialization and placelessness, I must turn to geographical conceptualizations of home as place.

Relf describes home as the foundation of identity, the "dwelling-place of being" and the "irreplaceable centre of significance" (39). Home, in its most profound form, is an attachment to a particular setting, a meaningful place that lays the foundation for one's existence and provides not simply the context for

human activity, but also the security and identity for both individuals and groups. Following the work of Robert Coles, Relph explains:

It is utterly part of our nature to want roots, to need roots, to struggle for roots, for a sense of belonging, for some place recognized as *mine*, as *yours*, as *ours* . . . To have roots in a place is to have a secure point from which to look out on the world, a firm grasp of one's own position in the order of things, and a significant spiritual and psychological attachment to somewhere in particular. (38)

One's yearning for rootedness is inspired not merely by the desire to connect with the people and practices of a culture but, more importantly, to identify with and belong to a specific, topographic place of meaning, as well. The need to have ownership of and security within a specific space is what Domenic Beneventi describes as a form of cognitive mapping: the (re)positioning of oneself in relation to the socio-spatial environment to appropriate and make meaningful the complexities and ambiguities of space (219). This process invites further discussion about how Canadian-Italian subjects can occupy places that are not simply physical geographies, but also dynamic social and cultural intersections.

The progression of Italian-Canadian writing, which concentrates increasingly on the metaphysical frictions and divisions defining cultural frontiers, suggests that each individual interacts with and reacts to both land and people in unique, complex manners. This contact reaffirms the need to revisit the intersections between ethnic identity and place to examine how articulations of space within the literary production of minority subjects reframe and destabilize the traditional, polyethnic models of literature in Canada. Such an analysis, then, demands a deeper understanding of contemporary notions of "space," "place," and "sense of place" to appreciate the contentious placelessness of the Canadian-Italian literary subject.

## An Examination of Space, Place, and Sense of Place

Massey imagines space not as an absolute and independent dimension but, rather, as an unfixed simultaneity of dynamism constructed from and determined by the social relations and discourses that occupy it (2). Space is an open, reflective construct defined, culturally, by the movements and communications of people both within and between the topographic locales in which they live and interact (Massey 4). It is a nexus where the daily actions of people intersect to form a heterotopia that creates, and is simultaneously created by, different forms of meaning.

Minority subjects often generate meanings and readings of space that "construct place differently and sometimes in opposition to the mainstream or majority culture" (Beneventi 221). This difference can be further examined to include a minority perspective of space from a position of placelessness: "an environment without significant places and the underlying attitude which does not acknowledge significance in places. It reaches back into the deepest levels of place, cutting roots [and] eroding symbols" (Relph 143). Placelessness consists of a pervasive, perhaps irreversible condition of alienation, whereby an individual can feel little or even no attachment to a place.

To grasp precisely what immigrant Italians have been constructing since their arrival to Canada, a closer look at the importance and essence of place is required. Place is equal parts geography and imagination. It is not just the "where" of something; rather, it is a compound of appearances, activities, and meanings that, ultimately, produce a fusion of mind and landscape, whereby "neither is finally separable or meaningful without the other" (Ryden 254). This symbiotic relationship, which can ground personal history and immigrant experience in various sites of ethnic articulation, is the root of a sense of place: a psychological phenomenon that identifies the powerful, often indescribable, affective connection between people and places.

Sense of place derives from the feelings, perceptions, and attitudes of positive identification that people generate with the space that they inhabit. It results "gradually and unconsciously" from living within a landscape over time and becoming familiar with, concerned for, and attached to its physical and cultural properties (Ryden 38). There is, superimposed upon a particular space, an unseen layer of use, memory, and

significance—an invisible landscape—of imaginative landmarks that affords people a new way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world around them (Ryden 40). Merely *being* in a place, however, is not the same as *belonging* to one (New 117); the first term suggests a simple awareness of existing in spatial surroundings, whereas the second reveals an attitudinal identification with a locale, a determination of self through a bond with the physical and cultural terrain.

## Laying the Groundwork: (Dis)connecting with Place and Culture

Pasquale Verdicchio frames Canadian-Italian literature as “the writing of difference” (227), whose vocabulary of arrival and departure collapses into a term indicative of a lack of place; the hyphenated identity signifies a lack of home and “sets us in a precarious situation in which while we are Italian and Canadian we are also not Italian and not Canadian” (228). This counter-positionality, indicative of an inherent incompleteness, is, Pivato would contend, a defining component of the minority literature that “straddles the frontier between two cultures” (167) and, as Susan Iannucci notes, envelops the Canadian-Italian subject with “a sense of wandering between two worlds” (224). What happens, then, when one *cannot* identify with his or her environment? How is one’s ethnic identity alternately shaped *without* sense of place?

Serravalle’s text explores these questions of dissociation and ethnic estrangement by shedding light on how the Canadian-born, ethnic subject negotiates his personal, cultural identity both in opposition to and wholly without his Italian origins. A profound application of placelessness, moreover, highlights the complex, seemingly contradictory effect of belonging to a place where both the concept of and pressure to belong do not exist, where one’s rejection and abandonment of place and culture consequently constructs a unique, potentially rewarding space of defiant Otherness, of an outside identity whose ethnicity is not yet understood or charted.

Calabrò positions the Italian-Canadian subject on a symbolic bridge, a suspended spectrum of ethnic affiliation that polarizes hyphenated heritages and, in so doing, complicates the contemporary notions of cultural attachment. Calabrò explains: “We are at the cusp of a new Italian-Canadian voice, one that is less sentimental, less nostalgic, less eulogist[ic], and more honest. It is the voice . . . of our children standing on the other side of the bridge, on the other side of the hyphen” (65). Serravalle’s work, then, in its rejection of the Italian culture, captures this new, honest voice and, thus, is a fundamental, post-millennial counternarrative of the archetypal Italian-Canadian writing that has, since the late twentieth century, gazed nostalgically toward Italy.

By analyzing Serravalle’s story through postmodern interpretations of space, place, and sense of place, which dissect binaries and borders and infiltrate the national imaginary at present, I aim, here, to engage in a discussion of evolving notions of cultural hybridity and hyphenation. This conversation seeks to confront current issues facing the identity of Canadian-Italians attempting to find and experience their “place.”

## Tilling the Soil: A Critical, Close Reading of Serravalle’s “The Buried Tree.”

For Zuccherro, ethnic minority writing is concerned mainly with reflecting the material and psychological outcomes of “translating the roots of Italian culture and identity into the terrain of Canada” (181). Michele, the wilting blossom of said transplant, grows reservedly both within and between the old and new registers competing in his father’s backyard garden, which offers an ideal site of conflicting, intergenerational understandings of place and ethnicity. His search for an authentic ethnic identity, one that is unequivocally tied to the formation of an unselfconscious, rather than performative, sense of place, enables Michele to occupy a transitional, liminal space: a literal and symbolic ground of struggle, confrontation, and negotiation that intensifies the minority subject’s placelessness and, in turn, produces a paradoxical, salient space that Relph describes as one’s “freedom from place” (140).

Through their discussion of spatial identities, Canton and de Gasperi suggest there are distinctions between the “social reality outside of the home and the small town customs and traditions recreated inside the home and in the backyard” (16). It is not surprising, then, that the plot of “The Buried Tree” takes place in the vicinity of Michele’s father’s garden (102), a motif indicative of Italian culture that, though *alfresco*, is bordered and defined by the immigrant presence of Michele’s protective uncles. Massey explains that, often, places that are the centers of home require enclosures and restrictions to both establish and defend the identity of the dominant group “through negative counterposition with the Other beyond the boundaries” (169). The garden, I will show, produces tacit yet palpable boundaries that frame Michele as an outside threat, not to the garden itself but, rather, to the cultural traditions and practices that cultivate it.

The language of the land, to which the terms “garden” and “backyard” belong, is a verbal trope in Canadian literature that can resonate with perceptions of ownership, social attachment, and power (New 6). The vegetable garden is a spatial metaphor, a microcosm that shapes and dictates one’s ability—and eligibility—to belong to a particular place. Space, in Serravalle’s story, becomes an active participant in the creation of place, one which resists Michele just as much as he attempts to resist it. Along the blurred boundaries between defying and coping, attitude and condition, Michele searches for an elusive place, a sense of belonging, buried beneath the cyclical sentiments of antipathy and division that start with a change of season.

“Every spring,” Michele explains in the story’s opening lines, “my family digs up a fig tree with the expectation that it will live again and bear fruit, like Lazarus raised from the grave. It lies in a shallow trench in our vegetable garden, asleep” (102). Michele’s explicit mention of the fig tree bespeaks an important Italian tradition of waiting in joyful hope for the plant’s annual, springtime resurrection from dormancy. The use of the phrase “my family,” which leaves out any mention of Michele’s own involvement in the familial practice, begins to expose the narrator’s lack of participation in the backyard tradition, an absence that is both a conscious choice and, I argue, the inescapable outcome of being Othered within a special, sacred space.

For Relp, a sacred space is one of religious experience; it is “continuously differentiated and replete with symbols, sacred centers and meaningful objects” (16). Though this short story’s backyard setting is, understandably, far from the Edenic garden of the Old Testament, its foregrounding of tradition and, more significantly, of the *fig* tree, the same plant whose leaves are plucked and used by both Adam and Eve to hide their nakedness, posits the vegetable garden as a postlapsarian plot located at the epicentre of a Christian, Italian ritual.

The fig tree’s ubiquity throughout Italy, a nation whose populace is overwhelmingly Catholic, suggests that the effort of Michele’s family to transplant and resuscitate the plant is an attempt to revive and pay homage to a revered symbol of the Italian homeland which stands, entrenched, in the middle of the family garden. The Biblical allusion to Lazarus, in addition to the description of a springtime advent which coincides with the Christian observance of Easter, frames the tree’s uprooting and hopeful ascent as a miraculous, Christ-like feat that, though transformative and inspiring for Michele’s fervent family members, continues to bury the Canadian-born stranger, the heathen, under a poisonous mound of expectation and sacrilege.

Though Michele conscientiously observes the tree’s uprooting, he is not, unlike the male members of his family, a disciple of its rebirth. While witnessing his uncles dig up and reposition the tree, Michele notes: “They purposely ignore me, and proudly refrain from asking me for help in keeping the tree steady. They believe I have nothing to offer in this area. This is their tree, and they don’t like to share what we don’t have in common, which is emigration from a beloved homeland” (103). Michele’s repetition of the collective pronouns “they” and “their” entrenches a dynamic of dislocation and exclusion, whereby Michele, incapable of sharing the immigrant, transatlantic rite of passage, is alienated from the members of his own family. The pronouns protect the constructed place; they are, following Massey’s approach, markers of an invisible, though felt and understood, boundary around a sacred place. They define and secure said place against the Otherness that grows beyond it. Moreover, the words “purposely” and “proudly” suggest not an incidental, unintentional event but, rather, a debilitating and deliberate act of exclusion, which seeks to protect the ownership of Italian heritage from the incoming threat of an estranged and Canadian-born outsider.

While Massey notes that spaces are devoid of an essential past and, accordingly, act as "meeting places," whose inhabitants usually come from somewhere else (171), the backyard garden creates a strong, unavoidable understanding of the past, a glimpse into the immigrant history that colours the meaning of that place. As Ryden suggests, "[t]o live in a place is to see and know what the people who lived there before you did with it" (64). Michele, knowledgeable of his family's shared efforts to preserve the place from which he is barred symbolically, is what C.D. Minni describes as an outside, marginal figure who, caught in a site of pluridimensionality, feels isolated because his emotional terms of reference are different from the mainstream culture (63).

Serravalle's spatial mapping of ethnic identity contributes to the formation of a discursive fringe: a crossroads between "old" and "new" cultural registers that places Michele in a peripheral position, looking inward. Relph, discussing the boundaries of place, suggests that "[t]o be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are, the stronger is this identity with the place" (49). However, the metaphysical borders that Michele's uncles erect, verbally and attitudinally, create a threshold that concentrates not merely on the frontier between inside and outside but, more importantly, on the impossibility of a passage from one area to the other.

The need for secure boundaries, for a defensive counter-positional definition of place and identity, is culturally masculine (Massey 7). It is fitting, then, that Michele seems to empathize with the thoughts and sentiments of his uncle's second wife, the "tall and blond" (102) visible outcast, whose marriage to uncle Tony has, in the past, been rumored to have ruined the family. Michele's daring exploration of his family's unfavourable affairs, Pivato would suggest, is "in contradiction to the popular myth of the happy, Italian family, the united, close-knit family" (150), an atypical choice that, I contend, continues to define the story's dissentient position.

Michele describes his aunt as being oblivious to the meaning of the allegedly spiritual rite and explains: "Despite all of that makeup, she can't hide her confusion. She wonders in a pouting sort of way why all of this fuss is being made over a tree that might or might not bear figs" (102). Michele's aunt's perplexity parallels the narrator's own tone of subversive disapproval, a state of discontent that motivates him to show pity for the fig tree while questioning the festive nature of the votive occasion, during which his uncles worship a plant that continues to die at their hands. Michele's position, Relph would argue, is one of emasculation, an "existential outsideness," which requires a "selfconscious and reflective uninvolvedness" (51), an alienation from people, places, and the practices within them, a sense of homelessness, of the unreality of the world, and of simply not belonging.

In this metaphysical space of solitude, places cannot be significant centres of existence but are, at best, "backgrounds to activities that are without sense, mere chimeras, and at worst are voids" (Relph 51). For Michele, placelessness is a condition that focalizes his inability to replicate a common origin and set of shared experiences that, Stuart Hall notes, are essential to the definition of one's cultural identity. Given the narrator's own perceived inadequacy, it is not surprising that he believes he has nothing to offer in "this area" (102): a social and topographic space of Italian tradition, which enables the "old" generation to strengthen its *italianità* across borders by pushing the "new" subject deeper into a placeless void and, consequently, further into a cultural elsewhere.

While absorbing his uncles' cutting stares of disapproval and dissatisfaction, Michele notes, "My uncles rip up the strings too harshly and the skin of the delicate tree is scratched. One of them snaps a branch to see if there is green and hope. It suffers in their grasp" (102). The old generation's insensitive treatment of the tree, which works, physically, to wound and split it, further merges the boundary between plant and vulnerable protagonist, whose own fragile bark is scarred by the difficulty of having, in Michele's own words, "your life in another's hands" (105). Such a sense of immobility and powerlessness affords a more detailed glimpse into "existential space" (Relph 12), wherein a culture is experienced, physically and psychologically, by an individual, rather than by a summation of communal meaning. This space, in Serravalle's story, mutually exists with, but not necessarily within, the place of the family garden and, as such, provides a distinct context through which a more profound understanding of Michele's potentially empowering outsideness is possible.



Upon witnessing the symbolic disrobing of the revered fig tree, Michele explains: As the tree is revealed, its dusty body language speaks to me with a broken accent. It complains about the long winter. Its split colour of gray and brown communicates an identity crisis. Perhaps it's not able to sense half of its extremities. Its hands are tied atop with old twine, and it passively leans toward the East, toward freedom. (102)

Michele's ability to comprehend the restrained foreigner's body language articulates an empathetic relationship rooted in the mutual desire to locate home. The fig tree's accent, in addition to indicating its migrant status, underscores its internal division, while the words "broken," "split," and "half," in conjunction with the composite colours of "gray and brown," portray a sense of incompleteness, a polyethnic placelessness that catalyzes an identity crisis with which Michele, bound by the unmistakably "*old twine* [emphasis added]" of familial expectations and traditions, is wholly familiar. Serravalle's vocabulary of lack, partialness, and duality emphasizes what Minni would argue is a "cultural fragmentation" (70) of self. In this light, Michele and the tree he describes are cultural outsiders growing or, arguably, wilting within a space to which they do not belong, and one which does not belong to them.

The tree's complaint about the "cold winter" revisits the literary trope that the Canadian landscape is harsh and demanding—a space that, for Beneventi, "is experienced as a difficult cultural terrain that must be understood, negotiated and eventually appropriated" (222). An authentic sense of place, in addition to being a foundation for identity and security from which one orients himself in the world, is the knowledge of "being inside and belonging to *your* place both as an individual and as a member of community, and to know this without reflecting upon it" (Relph 66). But what happens when an ethnic subject, marginalized by the community of the space into which he is born, cannot unselfconsciously possess such a sense? Can a person *choose* to not belong to a particular place? The tree's exhumation and replanting in unforgiving, unwelcoming ground reveals the collision of social and topographic understandings of place and, more importantly, begins to draw attention to Michele's desire and need to resist and escape the space from which he is estranged to reconcile his crisis in ethnic identity.

For Minni, "the question of identity is an important one in ethnic Canadian writing" (69). Central to this paper, accordingly, is the inherent, symbiotic bond between space and psyche, whereby identity is, in part, constituted by and negotiated through an affective connection with one's surrounding landscapes. Ryden's assertion, "in contemplating place, we contemplate ourselves" (40), articulates both the interdependence and the alleged inseparability of space and self. What is perhaps most interesting is the consideration of how ethnic dissociation, in Serravalle's story, influences the active production of what Relph identifies as "objective outsidership" (51), affording the ethnic subject a degree of agency in his placelessness.

Relph frames objective outsidership as "[t]he deliberate adoption of a dispassionate attitude towards places in order to consider them selectively in terms of their locations or spaces where objects and activities are located" (51). The disinterest in places implies the possibility of severability, an event that Relph acknowledges in the creation of objective outsidership: "[it] involves a deep separation of person and place" (51). Since place, especially in Serravalle's text, requires a profound level of commitment to its maintenance of symbols and routines, Relph cautions that a prospective requirement to "balance a need to stay with a desire to escape" (42) may ensue. When either need is too readily satisfied, people "suffer either from nostalgia and a sense of being uprooted, or from the melancholia that accompanies a feeling of oppression and imprisonment in a place" (42). Relph describes a spatial representation of Calabrò's view on the old generation's arrested development, a sense of place, but also of potential eternal paralysis, from which Michele tries to break.

After being scorned by his father for having (un)intentionally soaked the tree with far too much water (103), Michele continues to observe the ritualistic development and reclamation of space, a process that motivates him to question and conduct an anti-essentialist deconstruction of place. His approach problematizes the space's authenticity to expose its flaws and reaffirms the need to maintain both distance and detachment. Expressing his own frustrations and reservations, Michele explains:

In the meantime, the tree doesn't appreciate this feast around it. The same ceremony every year does little to lend spirit to its buried soul. It questions the logic of pulling it out of the ground and making it wait before it can stand on its own. I think it feels they make it suffer on purpose, to extend the ritual, which makes them cruel in intention. (104)

The narrator's vicarious perspective, blurred through his figurative occupation of the Othered fig tree, indicates his own counter-positionality in a space of spectacle fashioned by the spiteful "they" who, each year, hold the displaced entities in a public trial to test their eligibility and ability to survive.

Though Michele's uncles uproot the tree annually, its perpetually "buried soul" indicates that the recurrent effort is futile and, paradoxically, further represses its spirit with every attempt at its resurrection. Michele's scrutiny of the logic of forced uprooting, which exhumes the body but entombs the soul, implicitly exposes his own desire for placelessness that severs roots and erodes symbols. The phrase, "stand on its own," is even more significant when it is examined with an understanding of place as both desirable and distasteful; though Michele wishes to find belonging and a sense of home in his native, Canadian soil, his transposed longing to branch out autonomously suggests his need to plant new origins, rather than to reclaim or resurrect old ones.

Instead of sharing his uncles' hunger for painfully extracting one's roots, Michele translates the tree's whispers: "'Why should I stay and be the sacrifice of their ways?' . . . 'What makes their custom so noble and religious?'" (104). His conviction that his uncles intentionally make the surrogate tree, the vulnerable symbol of potential life, suffer suggests that the uncompromising immigrants, the oppressors of their place, feast not on its figs but, rather, on its failure, on the drawn-out struggle of trying to grow freely as Other in a constricted, toxic space.

As opposed to echoing, submissively, his uncles' enthusiasm, Michele asks: Why am I even here if they don't need me? I wish my girlfriend would arrive soon. She is picking me up and we're heading to a nearby greenhouse to get some flowers for her apartment. The irony is choking me but it's spring so I'm not complaining. (103)

The word "here," again, demarcates the presence of an impenetrable place, while the word "need" emphasizes Michele's essentially nonexistent role and fruitless contributions to the upkeep of said place. In the space of the garden, the narrator's failed attempt to operate the watering hose is an unsatisfactory effort to both embody and exude an authentic sense of Italianness, one that would be accepted by the community of cultural cultivators. The dispersal of the tree's surrounding soil, which results from Michele's sabotage of its transfiguration, creatively articulates the physical and figurative destabilisation of the garden space, an interruption which reveals the old generation's need to feast on and consume Otherness and, more significantly, Michele's exhibition of difference through displays of Italian simulacra.

Michele's determination to leave, rather than remain, in the contested "here" bespeaks not his desire to escape from Canadian soil and retreat to the Italian terrain but, rather, to remain, atypically, in Canada and resist the reclamation and preservation of his Italian, cultural roots. Though Michele's natural development of an authentic ethnic identity may remain indelibly bound up with the onset of an affective connection to a surrounding topographic and social landscape, his mention of retreating to a "greenhouse," in addition to redefining the ethnic subject's journey toward a sense of self, continues to promote the potentially liberating essence of placelessness. By favouring contemporary consumerism over time-honoured agricultural practices, and choosing to purchase a plant that, unlike the fig tree, may actually flourish in Canadian soil, Michele aims to further distance himself from his traditional family members and their crippling custom.

Like the defenseless, transplanted tree in inhospitable soil, Michele yearns for a sense of freedom from both his encroaching space and the family within it. While he is waiting for his girlfriend to arrive, Michele remarks, "She knows and feels my passion for escape and she also knows the strong roots, which have grown above ground to strangle me" (105). The narrator's asphyxiation, which echoes the yearly practice's choking irony, seems to hold him captive, bound by the arresting strength and influence of the transcendent, European rhizomes that figuratively penetrate a foreign terrain, and entrench both a steadfast appreciation for *italianità* and the frictions that result from it.

To Michele, escape from his family, and from the oppressive mask of Italian identity inflicted upon him, is not just an interest but, rather, an ardent need to ensure his own Lazarus-like resurrection, as well as the prospective discovery and survival of an authentic identity, freed from the barring, delimiting parameters of the arduous, transformative backyard space. What Serravalle's character seems to develop is not a

physical exile akin to his parent generation's transatlantic voyage to Canada but, instead, a self-imposed, psychological exile that affords him the occasion to live as a cultural minority in Canada or, alternatively, live as an outlandish figure of said minority.

When Michele's girlfriend arrives at the backyard, her first comment, "Oh my God, what a beautiful fig tree. My father planted one just last week" (104), is met with Michele's disdain. Her remark, which suggests a tacit understanding of and admiration for the familiar ritual, invokes revulsion from Michele, who confesses: "I am happy to see her but disgusted by what we have in common, which are family traditions. And I hate myself, for some unknown reason, for being attracted to the way she looks—like a black and white portrait of one of my relatives from Italy" (104). Michele's distaste for tradition, for intergenerational customs and appearances, motivates him to identify against his family's homeland and practices, to perceive, negatively, the easterly source of uprooting and transplanting as a marker of internal shame, crisis, and conflict. Michele's placelessness and outsideness, through which he is marginalized by his family and, simultaneously, granted the opportunity to both resist and reject his family's geographically and culturally cultivated place, create an especially complex, paradoxical site of belonging, wherein the conception of minority is not only relational but undecidedly and unmistakably Other, too.

By becoming romantically involved with a woman whose Lebanese origins would frame her as an ethnic outsider to the exclusive place of Italian custom, Michele actively positions himself away from familial expectation and, in so doing, aims to dissolve his ties to Italian culture. However, his seemingly indescribable, enigmatic physical attraction to his girlfriend's stereotypical, Italian appearance suggests that the process of ethnic detachment is treacherous and that, perhaps, despite an attitude of placelessness, one's innate and unconscious cultural registers are not yet completely severable. As Verdicchio explains, "what we have become and who we are is still struggling to be addressed . . . Identity is a reflection of how we position ourselves within, and in relation to, the narratives of the past" (228). Serravalle's text, then, generates a nexus of both time and space, where newer conceptions of polyethnicity, and the conflicts that ensue because of them, are still nascent, evolving, and waiting to be written.

The effort to both locate and embrace an independent, authentic identity is, in the last line of Serravalle's story, complicated by the prospect of remaining in liminality, suspended on the symbolic bridge of cultural affiliation: "I look to the tree again," Michele explains, "I pity it, yet I want to curse it for bearing no fruit" (105). The prospect of cursing the unfruitful fig tree reminds readers of the sacredness of the text's backyard setting and repositions Michele at the heart of the barren, postlapsarian garden. The implicit, Biblical allusion to the parable entitled, "Jesus Curses a Fig Tree," in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, sheds light on Christ's miraculous capability to curse and to consequently kill an infertile fig tree.<sup>3</sup> Despite Michele's apparent need to escape from the place of physical and cultural uprooting, his expression of the phrase, "I pity it," implies a current, ongoing inclination to help support, nurture, and grow the fig tree in an effort to preserve both its life and, with it, the cultural ties to his own Italian heritage. The purposeful coalescence of and symbiotic relationship between the scarred plant and protagonist suggest that the withering of one entity may cause the mutual death of the other.

However, Michele's ultimate yearning to, like Jesus in Bethany, curse and, thereby, kill the fruitless plant, does not preview the narrator's death but, instead, as Pivato would suggest, the metaphysical loss of the self-loathing, immigrant self (169). The word "yet," which abruptly interrupts Michele's state of sorrow, unearths his desire to sever, permanently, the rhizomes that bind him to an unwanted, inhospitable place. Michele, it seems, will no longer have to "stay and be the sacrifice of their ways" (104); he is able to embrace his sentiments of ethnic dissociation, and welcome his objective outsideness to occupy and belong to what is a constant and, perhaps, necessary elsewhere—nowhere and everywhere on the frontier of placelessness that affords the chance to be without *italianità*, without place. The narrator's closing remarks, however, reveal an awareness that deterritorialization and severance are not unproblematic and painless processes; the allusion to Jesus describes not a tale of human action but, rather, one of divine intervention, which begs the question: Is placelessness possible?

<sup>3</sup> In the Biblical parable, "Jesus Curses a Fig Tree," a hungry Jesus, upon seeing a fig tree with no fruits, says, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." The following morning, the fig tree had withered (Gospel of Mark, 11:12-25).

## The Future of Contentious Canadian-Italian Sentiments

On the topic of the evolving corpus of Canadian-Italian literature, Iannucci suggests that the authors emerging from this new wave of writing are, "almost without exception, the second generation, the children of immigrants who made the decision to emigrate" (224). Very few of these writers, she adds, are over forty (224). More importantly, these authors carry heritage with them "the way other Canadians carry the fact that they come from Toronto rather than from Vancouver or a farm rather than a city. Italy filters through in past tenses; their present is Canadian" (226). Like the nostalgic underpinnings of traditional, Italo-Canadian writing, one's attachment to and adoration for cultural custom are, in more contemporary literature, being expressed in ways that gesture toward a Canadian future, rather than toward an Italian past.

Iannucci's claims, however, help shed light on the complexity of cultural abandonment, and suggest that one cannot, in her words, simply "cease to be of Italian origin" (226). Though Michele demonstrates disdain for ethnic traditions and a desire to remove himself from a familial place of constant conflict and cultural exclusivity, his physical attraction to his girlfriend's Italian appearance, and his compassion for the uprooted fig tree, expose problematic, profound connections to his European roots that cannot be wholly and permanently severed.

Michele's disinterest in and distance from the practices of his Italian heritage, however, bespeak the possibility of placelessness as a condition and attitude of voluntary outsideness, a metaphysical space of resistance that enables the ethnic subject to reconcile his identity crisis and cope with the prospect of ethnic estrangement. Michele's peripheral perspective as an outcast affords him a degree of agency and forges, in Serravalle's story, a textual space of possibility, wherein the current wave of Canadian-Italians may begin to express desires for the establishment of new cultural roots in Canada. That Michele's birth occurs in the same year of his grandfather's passing reveals a cyclical process, whereby the symbolic death of the immigrant figure births a new generation, whose honest, less eulogistic viewpoints attempt to penetrate the social, topographical, and textual Italian-Canadian terrain.

New argues that if a language, together with the values that it encodes, has been generated and brought from somewhere else, and is now being used to describe a new environment, the old terms might no longer conventionally apply (10). When, for instance, Verdicchio writes of cultural hyphenation signifying "a sense of lack of what we might call home" (227), it is necessary, in light of emerging themes in Canadian-Italian writing, to approach and explore common ideas, such as home, ethnicity, and identity, beyond generational terms, with a vocabulary and framework that can also evaluate the integral spatial facets of polyethnicity. A discussion of placelessness, despite its semantic contradictions, resists older notions of cultural hybridity and hyphenation and, in so doing, both explores and articulates a transformative middle ground, where the very process of denouncing one's ethnicity makes one, at once, more Canadian and, at the same time, more ethnic (Minni 74).

What this paper does, then, is provide a useful, geographical way of discussing Canadian-Italian identities at a time when permanent dissociation from Italian culture, total severance from the strangling rhizomes of familial custom, remains, for Michele, a dormant desire that, like the fig tree itself, wilts every year with its attempted rebirth.

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