Challenging Cultural Literary Landscapes:

Poetry as Mediation, Experience, and Myth

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ABSTRACT: "Challenging Cultural Literary Landscapes: Poetry as Mediation, Experience, and Myth" was originally written for an Italian special topics course on the experiences of Italian-Canadians. This essay covers the Italian diaspora's representation in Canadian literature with a concentration on the depiction of ethnicity, race, and culture. Specifically, it aims to examine poetry's importance to Canadian literature as a means to mediate experiences not easily conceived by prose language.

This paper examines poetry by Italian Canadian writers such as Mary de Michele and Antonino Mazza and Jewish-Canadian Leonard Cohen's first collection of poetry, Let Us Compare Mythologies. It analyzes poetry's importance to self-representation and cultural exchange and the complicated networks between identity and narrative through the exploration of themes such as migration, journey, and mythology.

Word is literally a virus, and that it has not been recognized as such because it has achieved a state of relatively stable symbiosis with its human host; that is to say, the Word Virus (the Other Half) has established itself so firmly as an accepted part of the human organism that it can now sneer at gangster viruses like smallpox and turn them in to the Pasteur Institute. But the Word clearly bears the single identifying feature of virus: it is an organism with no internal function other than to replicate itself (Burroughs)

The Word virus, as introduced by William Burroughs in his essay "Ten Years and a Billion Dollars", is an alien concept that exists outside of the human subject. Burroughs postulates that language is fundamentally divisive and is part of the totalitarian human construct; infecting, replicating, and invading. It is through language that we can trace a linguistic, genealogical tradition of exchange. Like culture and ideology, William S. Burroughs' post-structuralist theory of language may assist us in understanding binarism in human tradition and the conflict that arises with the intermingling of culture, language, and experience. I will employ Burroughs' theory to discuss and disentangle the tension between language and culture in the Italian-Canadian experience. It is through Burroughs' theory of language that we can understand case studies, such as how Mary Di Michele uses art as mediation, why Leonard Cohen encourages us to compare mythologies, and why Antonino Mazza invites us to make a home in his home.

Poetics refers to both the act of creating something new like a concept, expression, or methodology. However, poetics may also mean to be used to discuss poetry, entangling the word with the duality of semiotics and literary genre. Displacement poetics refers to poetry about displacement, usually written by displaced peoples, as well as poetic treatise about displacement. Poetics has a loaded definition within the term, merging how displaced experiences constitute world-making processes. In his article on displacement poetics, "Italian Canadian as Displacement Poetics: Context, History, and Literary Production," William Anselmi writes that ethnicized Canadian literatures are written in a state of displacement, and they are "emblematic of the process of constituting a socio-cultural community within a conquered, foreign, occupied or other space" (371).

He states that Italian-Canadian literature is complicated by three components:

1. Italy is the established point of origin; unstable, idealized, mythologized, and historical space.
2. Canada is used as a reference point for written comparison.
3. Italian-Canadian literature employs an imagined community, identifying "an identity of multiplicities, rather than a simple sum of the parts" (Anselmi 371).

The Italian-Canadian literary landscape is shaped by multiculturalism, the processes of displacement, and complex identities. In an analysis of Canadian multiculturalism, Caylee Hong and Renee Provost write, "in places like Canada, multiculturalism is a significant form of nationalism, not outside of it [...] multiculturalism can both enhance and hinder equality." The article posits that multiculturalism is divisive and "exacerbates conflicts between and within groups, segregating populations and hindering social and economic equality" (Hong and Provost). Multicultural Canada polarizes differences, creating fragmentation and decentralized national identity. As a result, Canadian national identity is exclusionary and privileges white, English-speaking, Anglo-Canadian voices.

The solution in a post-multiculturalist society is not ignoring differences, but acknowledging, respecting, and sharing them. Burroughs' theory argues that language is fundamentally divisive, as no one language exists to universally pertain to, represent, or seek to understand experiential realities. For Burroughs, language is a problem because it magnifies differences and creates conflict. Burroughs' solution is the cut-up theory. As Christopher Land summarizes, "cut-up is a politically radical form of writing that highlights the power relations inherent in language and the conservatism of conventional modes of both literary writing and the narrative form" (451). I propose that post-multicultural poetry functions like the cut-up theory—to disrupt linguistic barriers and explore experiential differences. This is particularly emphasized in the works from diaspora communities, such as the Jewish or Italian diasporas in Canada. Where language may fail to express the plurality of the multicultural realities, poetry is a tool for subversion against divisive linguistic institutions and the powers imbued within them.

In an article published by the Poetry Foundation, a collection of poets were asked, "Does poetry have a social function?" Stephen Burt suggests that every poet understands poetry differently, and, to every poet, poetry has a different function (297). From this definition, we can ascertain that poetry is derived from the social 'self.' However, Burt continues that poetry is not only about the 'self,' "even though 'social,' as the antithesis of 'individual,' implies some ground of agreement, something shared" (297). Poetry then is a personal exercise that bridges individual and collective experiences. I propose that there is something in poetry for everyone, becauseeveryone reads poetry with their own life experiences as the foundation of their personal reading practices. In the same article from the Poetry Foundation, Major Jackson provides an alternative definition, stating "[t]he function of poetry is that it does not have any function beyond its own construction and being-in-the-world. For this reason, poetry makes everything (and, yes, nothing) happen" (298-299). Poetry is a means of exchange, providing the ability to discuss and present the ideas, beliefs, and experiences of individuals and cultures that exist beyond the limit of words. Poetry not only illuminates the limitations of language but goes beyond them. By playing with language, logic, and space, poetry can say the unsayable. Jackson continues, "Whether as a form of witness, as a medium which dignifies individual speech and thought, as a repository of our cumulative experiences, or as a space where we "purify" language, poetry, like all imaginative creations, divines the human enterprise. This is poetry's social value. (299)"

Poetry is a way to subvert language by using language, and it functions as a tool for resistance and experience. Poetry can be used to communicate what is, what isn't, and what exists beyond language. Poetry has the potential to express and understand the pluralities of human experience. Poetry acts as a mediator between what can and cannot be said. It is for this reason that poetry has innumerable importance to recording and expressing the Italian-Canadian experience.

In Mary Di Michele's poem, "Lucia's Monologue," Lucia's mother acts as a mediator between Lucia and her father. The poem reads; "I talk to mother, and she tells him what she thinks / he can stand to hear. / She's always been the mediator of our quarrels" (Di Michele 163). Lucia's mother bridges the emotional, generational, and experiential barriers between Lucia and her father. Di Michele uses the mother as a tool for understanding differences. Lucia's mother is the stand-in for the poet, as she walks with a foot in two different worlds, augmenting and mediating experience.

"Lucia's Monologue" is situated within displacement poetics as a mediation of ethnicized identities. The role of communicator is placed on the mother, as Western culture prescribes emotional expression onto women. Lucia's mother understands both Lucia's emotions and the father's logic and cultural background. The mother's mediation is a process of translation, diminution, and interpretation, wherein she repackages discourse for/about the Other. Lucia identifies that she needs to speak to her father "person to person," but "[they] don't speak the same language anymore" (Di Michele 164,165). The poem addresses that the process of reporting the Other is problematic insofar as it does not account for authentically lived experience. "Lucia's Monologue" highlights language as divisive and sometimes detrimental to cultural mediation. As a result, the poem functions as a mediation of the author's experience, attempting to interpret and translate using poetry as a medium of exchange.

Leonard Cohen's 1956 *Let Us Compare Mythologies* is his first collection of poetry. The collection mythologizes and de-mythologizes Cohen's experience with religion and secularization as part of the Jewish diaspora in Canada. The poetry focuses on how Cohen manufactures, negotiates, and understands his identities. In his poem, "For Wilf and His House," the speaker questions his mythologized past and the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. One stanza reads:

> "Raging and weeping are left on the early road.
> Now each in his holy hill
> the glittering and hurting days are almost done.
> Then let us compare mythologies." (Cohen).

The lines comment on the difference of religions.

Cohen examines how Canada positions Christianity as the only good form religion, while all other differentiations are portrayed as "heathen[istic]" or as the villainous cultural/religious Other (Cohen). The speaker urges the addressee of the poem to consider a post-secular origin. The poem invites the reader to "compare mythologies" and imagine creation beyond divisive borders – Christian/non-Christian, Anglo/non-Anglo, us/them.

Italian Canadian displacement poetry like Antonino Mazza's "My House is in a Cosmic Ear" uses Italy as the idealized origin and Canada as the referential future. The poem uses the motif of cyclicism and mythological vision to tell a story about rebirth and migration. Mazza's poetry is a mediation of his culture and history as he mythologizes his own past. For Mazza, the poem, storytelling, and the reproduction of culture is the rebirth of himself — the cultural, historical self that is dualistically left behind in Calabria.

The poem pays homage to motherhood using water and creation imagery, evoking a return to fetal origins. For example, the clouds are "ready to burst" with the rain that runs through and shapes the landscape (Mazza 33). The cosmic house refers to his existence and the fertile, rich history of his home in Italy — the beautiful, mythologized history and culture remembered through the eyes of a child.

Mazza explicitly references Ulysses' journey in regard to his father's migration:

> "He was aboard a little purple ship, returning to our beautiful Calabria.
> Phoenician's and Etruscan's land, bathed by the sea of Ulysses" (Mazza 34).

The speaker, assumed Mazza, is Telemachus in the poem, eagerly awaiting his father's return. The comparison works so far as to mythologize Mazza's past as a place of his cultural history. The house is in a cosmic ear—the universe as ear-shaped— representing both the landscape and womb. The cosmic womb is not only his history but the reconstruction of his identity by references to a myth of creation and discovery.

> "I keep remembering this cosmic gift
> in my sleep.
> If the dream doesn't stop,
> if the word,
> if the house
> is in the word and we, by chance should meet,
> My house is your house, take it." (Mazza 34)

Mazza highlights immigration's potential as a site for exchange by exporting knowledge. The poem ends with an invitation to share culture and to understand his fellow man rather than use difference as a divisive tool against the cultural Other. Mazza's poem is an idealist take on exchange, and frames migration as a rebirth of the 'self' and of a new mythology. The poem identifies the unavoidable resurrection of creation stories as a positive reflection on the past as it is reworked for the uncertain future. Mazza's poem "My House is in a Cosmic Ear" is a cultural genealogy.

It is important that we turn to Homer as so many do when reflecting on the Western written tradition, particularly in the mind of poetry. Though not a creation story, Homer's epic poetry maps the destruction and creation of civilization in the mythical past. The Odyssey, narrated by Odysseus, tells of the end of the Trojan War as he travels through the Mediterranean. Odysseus explains the end of the war and his idea to trick the Trojans into letting the Greek soldiers into Troy. After a speech, the background minstrel sings a song for Odysseus, "taking up the tale where the Argives had embarked on their benched ships and were sailing away, after casting fire on their huts, while those others led by glorious Odysseus were now sitting in the place of assembly of the Trojans, hidden in the horse; for the Trojans had themselves dragged it to the citadel" (Hom. Od. 8.500-550).

Because it was Odysseus' idea to build the wooden horse and trick the Trojans into accepting it into the city walls as a gift, Odysseus is responsible for the destruction of a civilization. The betrayal of the gift is equally an insult to *xenia*, the idea that those who occupied your home would not cause you harm. Xenia is the foundation of a civilized and secure society, valuing trust and co-operation (Scott 17). The Greeks win the war with a betrayal of xenia, just as Paris had betrayed hospitality in Menelaus' home by stealing Helen, a violation of xenia. This is a subversion

This is a subversion of the Greek occupation of Trojan land, and an ironic, tragic ending to an entire city.

Over his 10-year journey home, Odysseus tells his story to the people he stays with, recreating civilization along the way. Homer's epic poetry maps a genealogy of civilization, both in the destruction and rebuilding of the history throughout Odysseus' journey. As William Anselmi writes, Odysseus is transformed into an artist as his "voyage leads to a cultural paradigm shift [and] the Everyman who divests himself of his religious anchorage is the artist, the actor that begins anew civilization, creating what Nietzsche will identify as 'necessary illusions'" (374). Odysseus uses language and storytelling to keep his personal history and the ethos of Troy alive. Odysseus becomes a mediator between the past and the present (history) and his experience in Troy and Attic Greece (experiential culture).

Anselmi suggests that the Ulyssean formulation mirrors the Italian-Canadian narrative, like many other displacement literatures. He quotes Piero Boitani, explaining that Odysseus' journey is "a mythical archetype which develops as a constant cultural logos in history and literature" (375). Anselmi suggests that "cultural logos" is significant to the critical reader because it addresses what is beyond the displacement poetics (375).

At present, multiculturalism approaches differences as performative and divisive identification of ethnic minorities. Sneja Gunew argues that diaspora and ethnic writing is a solution to the multicultural problem—"they offer a more nuanced grammar for cultural legibility within globalization" (11). Post-multicultural writing is a future enterprise that "offers a cosmopolitan mediation and translation between the nation-state and the planetary" (Gunew 11). Post-multicultural poetry embodies and celebrates the transnational multiplicity of identities rather than focusing on the integration of 'all' into a monolithic same-ness.

Mary Di Michele's "Lucia's Monologue" highlights the difficulties of communication and mediation of experience between cultural generations. Di Michele approaches the poem as the solution. Leonard Cohen's work questions the cultural-religious

sphere in the face of marginalization and the past. Antonino Mazza presents language as a tool to overcome the problems of the way we build up binaries and marginalize people based on difference. Mazza's epistemological approach to Western civilization uses writing as a site for exchange of culture and knowledge. The poems highlight the importance of poetry as resistance and possibilities for diaspora and multicultural realities. Poetry often speaks between worlds and words, using space and the non-verbal to communicate experience. Although, it is difficult to challenge a methodology while working within it.

Author Jeanette Winterson wrote a retelling of the myth of Atlas called Weight. Winterson reimagines Atlas' story to examine how Atlas may have understood his identity and responsibility in relation to his existence in the universe. Weight uses poetic storytelling to explore what it means to exist in differences, as Winterson's Atlas embodies the Other who is punished and lives outside of the world. The story begins and ends with the chapter "I want to tell the story again" (Winterson). She writes that myths are important because of their universality — myths are about simultaneous 'being' and 'becoming,' and are ultimately about what it means to be human (Winterson).

"What is it that you contain? The dead. Time. Light patterns of millennia opening in your gut. Every minute, in each of you, a few million potassium atoms succumb to radioactive decay. The energy that powers these tiny atomic events has been locked inside potassium atoms ever since a star-sized bomb exploded nothing into being. Potassium, like uranium and radium, is a long-lived radioactive nuclear waste of the supernova bang that accounts for you. Your first parent was a star" (Winterson).

In Weight, Atlas eventually gets to choose to live differently from his original fate to hold up the earth for eternity. Atlas chooses to let go, to embrace a different future elsewhere. As Winterson illustrates, mythology has the potential to tell the foundations of a people's beliefs and history—what they value, and how they conceive themselves as a people. Weight highlights that the story has power to express and

redefine the present in context of the past.
The story exemplifies the transformation of myth,
offering a way to contextualize what it is to share and
to be human from her experiences. Although Weight is
successful in reimagining personhood in the cosmic,
ancient past, the storytelling is limited to the prosaic
genre, and is unable to work beyond the writing
conventions. The story is only able to convey the
dimensions of Atlas' personhood within the context
of one culture, one language, and origin.

Poetry is essential to recording the histories and
experiences that escape the grasp of prose. As prose so
often leaves very little room for contradiction and
plurality, instead poetry is the tool and the solution.
Poetry has the power to use language and story to
subvert and reinvent, mediating the past/present and
the distance sometimes created between places and
people. Poetry can be a form of resistance for Italian-
Canadian poets like Antonino Mazza and Mary di
Michele, as well as for other diaspora writers like
Leonard Cohen. For these poets, poetry is an addition
and transfiguration of their mythos; it is a return and
a new beginning that reconciles the struggles of migration,
multiplicity, and belonging. Afterall, what are we all but
our own encapsulated universes and stories.
We are different cultures, languages, and poetry,
so, please, come and make a home in my home.
Let us compare mythologies.

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