

## Visiting *La Madre Patria* Heritage Pilgrimage Among Montreal Italians

Laura Sanchini

Volume 32, Number 2, 2010

Tourisme culturel  
Cultural Tourism

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1006311ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1006311ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)  
1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Sanchini, L. (2010). Visiting *La Madre Patria*: Heritage Pilgrimage Among Montreal Italians. *Ethnologies*, 32(2), 235–253. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1006311ar>

Article abstract

This article focuses on visits to Italy undertaken by young Montreal Italians. I have divided these trips into three separate categories: the school trip, the extended stay, and the family visit. These trips allowed my informants to access Italy on three different levels. The school trip gave them the opportunity to experience the touristic elements of Italy, while the extended stay allowed them to understand the realities of living in Italy. The family visit gave them a chance to trace their family history and experience their parents' hometowns. These trips and the narratives that accompanied them have become identity markers for these Montreal Italians as well as a way for them to shape cultural awareness.

# VISITING LA MADRE PATRIA

## *Heritage Pilgrimage Among Montreal Italians*

**Laura Sanchini**

*Memorial University of Newfoundland*

I never felt stupid or rejected in Barisciano.... How could you be rejected? This is where you come from. This is where we would be living if it weren't for my grandfather; this is where my grandfather lived (Steven Scalia 2008).

I have never been to Italy. Having Italian citizenship and an immigrant mother, this is something I rarely admit. I grew up listening to stories about Italy from various family members; some of my family lived there, others have merely visited, but I was always left feeling that my Italian identity was somehow diminished since I have never visited our *Madre Patria* – our homeland. Young Montreal Italians, like myself, were brought up on stories of their homeland told by immigrant family members. Many have been to Italy several times and consider it a necessary experience for the cultural identity of young Canadians of Italian descent. Second and third generation Italian Canadians in Montreal are in a unique position when it comes to their heritage pilgrimages to Italy; they are not immigrants themselves returning to the country they left behind, nor are they visiting their distant familial past with little connection to the area. In this article I explore the narratives of these young Montreal Italians visiting Italy, the reasons why they undertake such visits and the identity folklore generated by them. This article is part of a larger study on ethnic identity among young Montreal Italians that focused on how they performed their Italian heritage; through food, religion and ethnic display.

The methods for this study are steeped in qualitative research and while my research does not draw upon a representational sample of Montreal Italians, I believe that what “such approaches lack in breadth,

they make up in depth and, as such, provide a necessary counterpoint to survey-oriented research” (Del Negro 1997: 25). To this end, from April to July 2008 I conducted ethnographic interviews with twenty Montrealers under the age of 35 about their experiences as members of the Italian community. I began by interviewing acquaintances of mine who grew up in Italian families and who then, in turn, referred me to friends of theirs. Thus, I was able to interview a rather homogenous group of Montreal Italians. As a Montreal Italian of this generation, my upbringing was comparable to most of my informants and I believe this allowed me better access to their anecdotes and narratives as they could explain their traditions and customs without worry of judgment. This research expands upon issues of immigrant folklore and Italian ethnicity while examining the identity of a rarely studied group – the children of immigrant families. It also intersects with the burgeoning study of roots tourism and heritage pilgrimage by offering a unique perspective of how such issues contribute to the maintenance and performance of cultural identity.

“Roots tourism” is a return movement by members of a diasporic community to a shared homeland. In his research, Paul Basu notes that roots tourism is a journey

made by people of Scottish Highland descent (or part-Highland descent) ordinarily living in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and in other regions where Scots have historically settled to places associated with their ancestors in the “old country” (Basu 2005: 131).

I choose to utilize the parameters of roots tourism when dealing with my informants’ stories instead of the terms “return migration” or “return movement.” Though I acknowledge that the visits my informants undertake are part of the roots tourism movement described by Paul Basu, I prefer Celeste Ray’s term “heritage pilgrimage” (Ray 2001).

Basu notes that while “return migration” and “return movement” have been used interchangeably in academia, there are significant differences between them and neither term applies to the type of heritage pilgrimage I am investigating. “Migration” would assume that my informants were returning to Italy to live, much as many Jews fled to Israel after its inception (Basu 2005: 131), while the term “movement” implies that these trips to the homeland are a collective undertaking by the Italian community in Montreal. Roots tourism comes with a

certain amount of group organization. For example, travel agencies regularly book tours to Scottish towns, and community groups send members back to the homeland for genealogical research. One event that pertains to this is the Orkney Homecoming of 1999, where over 150 Canadians of Orcadian heritage went to their homeland for a week of lectures and historical tours (Basu 2005: 133). This was not the case with my informants. They all undertook family or individually-based trips with no formal tourist organization assisting them. I am not aware of any travel agencies in Montreal offering group trips to Italy with the purpose of rediscovering one's history and heritage. For these reasons, the term "heritage pilgrimage" will be used in place of roots tourism, though I acknowledge their many similarities. A heritage pilgrimage may involve journeys to sites that recall pieces of history but also to sites that fit into the personal narratives of the family (Basu 2005: 133). This was often the case with my informants, who would visit the Fountain of Trevi one day and the family plot in the village cemetery the next.

Dean MacCannell asserts that tourists search for authenticity. They seek to see how the locals live their lives and "authentically" experience another culture as if they were community members (MacCannell 1976: 94). The boundaries between insiders and outsiders are not easily overcome and to experience a culture "authentically" is nearly impossible for a foreigner. Richard Sharpley writes:

It is probably true to say that at some time or another, most people have tried to distance or disassociate themselves from other tourists, convincing themselves that they are somehow better or enjoying a more meaningful experience (Sharpley 1994: 63-64).

Most important to my research was the fact that the word "tourist" was absent from my informants' narratives. Whether they went on a school trip to Rome, or a family vacation to Sicily, they all felt that Italy was their home as soon as they got off the plane.

The main issues I am addressing in this article are that of identity. Why do members of a community feel the need to return to their ancestral homeland? What do they hope to find once there? Does the heritage pilgrimage have any bearing on their cultural identities? Finally, as Basu writes (2005: 145), why do generally integrated middle-class citizens want to effectively unassimilate themselves in order to discover a more distinct, ethnic identity ?

As Jane Dunsiger states in her 1982 Master's thesis, "for some individuals a sense of identity is associated with a given geographical location. This place is viewed as 'home' because that individual identifies most clearly with that set of attitudes, values and customs" (Dunsiger 1982: 20). She focused her thesis on the narratives of eight immigrants in St. John's Newfoundland who returned to their homeland to visit. She explores the construction of "home" as both a cultural symbol and physical place in their narratives and how symbols are "manipulated by different individuals to suit the needs of changing situations" (Dunsiger 1982: 31). She investigates the themes of adaptation and how the immigrant viewed his homeland after spending years away from it. The themes raised by Dunsiger brought to mind additional questions for my research. As my informants have spent most of their lives in Canada, living in the multicultural and pluralistic environment of Montreal, how would they identify with the attitudes, values and customs of Italy? Also, what role did Italy play in the construction of my informants' identity as Italians?

While discussing their life stories, many of my informants discussed their trips to Italy, and it soon became clear that these visits were an important part of what being Italian meant to them. These trips fall into three categories that reflect the main types of visits my informants experienced and their identifying characteristics. The first type I have identified is the school trip, which was commonly offered at high schools where most of the student body is of Italian ancestry. The second trip type is the extended stay. The focus of this kind of visit is living as a resident of Italy, which contrasts sharply to a short, tourist-centered trip. The final category is the family trip, which focuses on both the tourist experience and on rediscovering personal/familial history by spending time in the family's ancestral village and visiting remaining family members.

Aside from the experience of these visits, the narratives my informants bring home with them are a constantly evolving performance. The narratives of these trips serve as counterpoints to the stories of their parents and grandparents, and as reverse immigrant narratives for my generation. These narratives uphold or contradict the stories of their immigrant relatives and cement, for the community, a continuing, intergenerational relationship with Italy. These narratives can be typologized according to experiences common to my informants' stories. Part of the experience of visiting Italy is coming home with all these

stories and anecdotes to tell about one's time there. I will focus on the delineation between the actual trips and the ways in which my informants spoke about them. To do so, I have devised a two-pronged typology to better classify the commonalities of these narratives as belonging in Italy and inaccurate expectations. Belonging in Italy encompasses the sub-categories of familial hospitality, societal acceptance and historical/nostalgic attachment. The second type, inaccurate expectations, focuses on comparing and contrasting the Italian and Canadian lifestyles, and also the differences between parental stories (past) about Italy and the reality of the informants' experiences (present).

Under the general theme of belonging in Italy falls the sub-category of familial hospitality. This theme occurs most often in the narratives of those who undertook family visits and is focused on how the generosity and acceptance of Italian family members affected my informants' feelings of attachment to Italy. This familial hospitality is clearly seen through the sibling duality of Alexander and Steven Scalia. Both brothers went to Italy on numerous occasions together and both spoke of the overwhelming hospitality shown to them by the family members they were visiting. However, each was affected in a different way. While one brother describes familial hospitality as a way for him to feel connected to Italy, the other, who has been on the very same trips, does not. Alexander's narrative, though he often speaks of feeling welcomed by his family, never asserts a deep feeling of attachment to Italy. His younger brother Steven, who repeatedly speaks of the affability of his Italian family members, often expresses a feeling of being part of the communities he visited. They both speak of the accommodating and hospitable nature of their grandmother in Sicily and how they were constantly fed large meals by every member of the family. The difference in their narratives is noticeable; Alexander asserts: "They were very hospitable, it was nice to see them. I could finally put a face to the voice I heard on the phone. For me, this trip to Italy was to attach with roots that I didn't know about, with family members I don't know existed" (Alexander Scalia 2008). Steven's narrative, on the other hand, places much more importance on being loved and accepted by his family. He explained in the journal he kept on his first visit to Italy:

I really don't miss Montreal at all. I feel comfortable in the village. Our family members in Cattolica are such nice hosts and they all love us so as if we were their own children (Steven Scalia 2004).

Societal acceptance was a second sub-category under the general theme of belonging in Italy. This theme was found in the narratives of informants who undertook the various trip types and was focused on fitting in with Italian society. Informants such as Michelle De Vincenzo, Tania Zampini and Sabrina Pianese spoke of how comfortable they were living as part of Italian society for their extended stays. They addressed the issues of adapting to life in Italy, making friends and being accepted by non-family members. Clorinda and Angie Antonacci, sisters who undertook many family visits, also present a sibling duality in their narratives. They have taken the same trips to Italy since they were children and yet have very different narratives when discussing their visits. Clorinda talked about her love of Italy and how much she treasures going back every summer to spend time with her grandmother in a small village. Angie, who also goes to visit her grandmother, limits her stays in the village to a few weeks because she does not enjoy the rural lifestyle. When Clorinda discussed her friends and the social life she has in Italy, she says: "The friends that we made, I still have those friends. They have always been there for me. I went last year when my dearest friend got married and I was able to attend her wedding. We had a huge feast, lots of food" (Clorinda Antonacci 2008). Her sister retorted, "Yeah but it's a hole. My grandmother is there. I go see her, max three weeks, or take a gun and shoot me" (Angie Antonacci 2008). While most of my informants discussed being part of society in Italy, it had varying degrees of importance in their narratives.

The historical/nostalgic attachment is centered on discussions about landmarks such as tours of family villages or visiting the Sistine Chapel. A major theme in my informants' narratives was the historical/nostalgic category. This theme is focused on visiting both architectural and familial landmarks, such as the Fountain of Trevi and a village cemetery. Alexander's narrative is full of these historical/nostalgic references. He writes about going on walking tours of his ancestral village with his grandmother as a tour guide and how this helped him discover a sense of place in a foreign country. He also repeatedly made references to tourist landmarks in his narratives. He discusses churches in Europe, the houses he visited in Italy, and the fountain in his father's village.

This sub-category also encompasses the various landmarks my informants discussed in their narratives. Visits to touristic or historical locations were interspersed with familial and nostalgic places. They talked about visiting the Sistine Chapel, and the houses their parents

grew up in, both places playing different yet important roles in their visits. While visiting family is personally meaningful, having a funny tale to tell about going to a famous landmark is equally important. In his journal, Steven Scalia makes recurrent references to visiting the places where his family comes from, while also interspersing his narrative with funny stories about his experiences at various tourist spots. He wrote about his visit to the Vatican:

Yesterday, we woke up all around 7 o'clock and hurried up to get ready to go see the Vatican.... Once arrived we found out that women and children under twelve can go into the Basilica wearing what they wanted but men had to wear pants. We were obviously wearing shorts, it was forty degrees! So me, Christina and Mom were able to have access to it but Alex, Jason and Dad didn't. Of course, Jason being the Jason that he is, tried screwing the system by putting his shorts nice and low. However he was denied by the intelligence of the security guard (Steven Scalia 2004).

Elizabeth Cotignola expressed similar narrative elements. She describes visiting Milan and subsequently visiting the “house [her] grandfather built, the market, the church where [her] mother was baptized” (Elizabeth Cotignola 2008). This same theme was echoed by the narrative of Lucia Silvestri, who discussed visiting major tourist destinations while also spending time where her mother was born and raised.

The narratives of my informants also reflected their inaccurate expectations. There were two sub-categories to this type: the contrast between Italian and Canadian lifestyles and the comparison between the reality of my informants' visits and what their parents had told them about Italy. The narratives I collected reflect the differences between the lifestyles of Canada and Italy. In general, Italy, even in the major cities, is portrayed as the slower, calmer and healthier lifestyle, while Canada, more specifically Montreal, is seen as a fast-paced metropolis. This was a major theme in the narratives of my informants. Though many reported feeling comfortable in Italy as soon as they landed, they definitely encountered various situations that reminded them of the differences between Italy and Canada. Celia D'Andrea focused on the differences in worldview that she perceived between herself and her Italian family. Even in the cities, she found them to have rather old-fashioned ideas about clothing, appropriate conduct for women, and



dating. For her, this was a marked contrast to Canadian views on these issues.

Jackie De Stefano's narrative was full of references to the differences between Italy and Canada. She cites corrupt politics, weak social infrastructure and lack of jobs as the main reasons Italy differs from Canada. Sabrina Pianese spent a fair bit of time describing the differences between Florence and Montreal. For her, Florence harkens back to a time when businesses were closed on Sundays:

The fast paced craziness that we have here [in Montreal], where we are running against time, you don't have there [in Florence]. It's so nice that people actually enjoy their time. Even in the big city! Even in Florence. Everything is closed on Sundays. Restaurants are opened though. You have the luxury to take time for yourself. Doesn't matter if tourists want you to stay open, you're closed (Sabrina Pianese 2008).

Another contrast described by my informants was that they were permitted to do things in Italy they would otherwise not have been allowed to do. Lucia Silvestri talked about her grandmother, who was visiting Italy with her, allowing her to wander around the town unsupervised. Lucia's grandmother would never have allowed her to wander around her Montreal neighborhood alone. Lucia and I spent a lot of time together before we began Kindergarten and we were rarely allowed to play outside unsupervised. Clorinda Antonacci had her first boyfriend in Italy when she was still in high school.

I got away with a lot of stuff there [in Italy], I had a boyfriend for the first time. He was from Abruzzo [a largely rural region of south central Italy], much older. He was a jackass. I don't like Italians from here [Montreal]. I like Europeans. Here they have no traditions (Clorinda Antonacci 2008).

Steven's narrative also expressed this unprecedented freedom when visiting Italy. His cousins, who were all much older, came to visit Steven, his brother Alex and their cousin Jason, with some beer. He explained:

They came with their share of beer. I didn't drink a lot but Jason lived up to expectations and was asleep ten minutes later. The next morning I woke up to puke and pieces of partly digested chicken on the floor. I later found out that Jason had puked loads and he and Alex cleaned up. Well, Alex did his best. He pulled a towel out of the bathroom to clean up as much vomit as possible. That was smart. What wasn't [smart] was the fact that he threw it out of the window and it landed at

the footstep of the back entrance of the hotel, which probably traumatized some of the hotel's clients (Steven Scalia 2008).

The last sub-category under the inaccurate expectations theme is the differences between the past and present. By this, I mean how the stories told to my informants about Italy by their parents contrast with their actual experiences in Italy. Many parents spoke to their children about Italy in extreme terms: either Italy was this wonderful dreamland or it was a land of poor farmers with no hope for the future. The reality of modern day Italy is very different from both these caricaturizations. Lucia Silvestri described feeling surprised by visiting her parents' hometown because it was a lot more civilized than she had anticipated. From what her parents had told her, she believed she was going to visit a town reminiscent of a refugee camp. Much to her surprise, this was not the case. Elizabeth had the same experience. She was shocked at how wealthy her family was, since her parents had repeatedly told her that their village was a poor farming village. Alexander Scalia had the opposite experience. His father had long told him about the small village where he was born and about the fountain that stands at the entrance to the town. When Alexander arrived at the village gate he realized his father had possibly exaggerated the grandeur of the fountain and the town itself. The fountain was a small trickle and the village was nearly empty.

While Lucia, Elizabeth and Alexander were shocked at how different Italy actually was compared to what they had been told by their parents, other informants such as Jackie De Stefano and Steven Scalia were surprised by the population in Italy. Italy is home to many immigrants from Europe, Asia and North Africa. Jackie wished that there were a smaller immigrant population in Italy because

the fact that there is a big immigration crisis in Italy makes it a lot harder to meet genuinely Italian people. Most of the people living in Italy are Albanians or Croatian or from Turkey. Oh the Albanians! (Jackie De Stefano 2008).

In regard to heritage pilgrimages to Italy, three of my informants had been on a school trip visit. Typically, this type of trip is offered in senior high school at a school with a large Italian population. This type of trip is also often centered around Rome or other major Italian cities. Celia D'Andrea, now a 24-year-old law student, explained that her first trip to Italy was with her high school classmates, most of whom were of

Italian descent. Her excitement about being in her family's ancestral homeland was tempered by the disappointment of visiting Rome during the night and spending barely a week in Italy. This sentiment of disappointment was also expressed by Jackie De Stefano. Although she did not take part in a school trip to Italy, she was dismissive of the many Montreal Italians' ignorance of the realities of Italy. She comments: "Montreal Italians, there are many who haven't been to Italy, nor will they ever go to Italy. Nor do they understand Italian culture or politics, but they have this great notion of Italy as being this motherland" (Jackie De Stefano 2008). This is a theme common to many of my informants when speaking of school trips to Italy. Abstract pride in Italy is insufficient; one should understand the social and political situations in Italy before pride and identity can be justifiably claimed.

One could easily assume that school trips to Italy would be an easy and educational way to reconnect with one's heritage. This was not the case, however. Not one of my informants discussed rediscovering a sense of identity or personal history on this type of trip. They spoke of arguments among classmates and flights delays, not of family sagas or hometowns:

The first time [I went to Italy] I was in grade eleven, but I can't say it was a monumental occasion or awakening. It was with my class and we had such problems with our flights! I would have liked to spend more time there, but we were on a tour bus at night seeing all these amazing places, at night! The Coliseum, everything was done so quickly that I don't remember anything. What a rip-off of a trip! I didn't experience Italy like I should have (Sabrina Pianese 2008).

When I asked for the reasons for partaking in the school trip to Italy, the overwhelming response was that it was a cheap way to experience Italy as a teenager with no parents around. When each informant spoke of it, they told me their experiences rather ambivalently. It would seem that the main reason for the disappointment of my informants was that this type of trip did not allow for anything other than obvious tourist attractions. The school trip is characterized by a short stay in Italy and follows a tourist-centered pattern. These trips were generally focused on Rome and its main attractions such as the Coliseum and the Fountain of Trevi. The informants I spoke to who experienced this type of visit did not express enjoying the tourist experience in Italy. They felt this type of trip robbed them of visiting family, their hometowns and of feeling properly "Italian" since they

were seen as foreign Canadians everywhere they went. To them, this type of trip was not the proper way for anyone of Italian descent to experience their homeland.

The second category of trip is the extended stay. A number of my informants had chosen to spend a considerable amount of time living in Italy when they were young adults. Such stays were usually connected to work or university exchange programs and typically lasted one to six months. This type of visit was not centered around the informant's hometown or family, nor was it focused on rediscovering cultural history, but my informants all spoke of cementing their Italian identity through these stays. Five of my informants undertook such a trip at a somewhat later age than the school trip. Four of them, Michelle de Vincenzo, Elizabeth Cotignola, Celia D'Andrea and Sabrina Pianese went separately for a month to live in Florence. The Florence trip, as it is known among Montreal Italians, is a four- to six-week-long stay, offered by language schools in Italy. Italian language or literature classes are offered at the school during the day while weekends are left free to travel around the country. This type of trip was different in several ways. For many of them, it was the first time my informants had been living on their own. This in itself was a life-changing experience. Since they were in Italy long enough to have to deal with the mundane tasks of everyday life such as buying groceries and paying electrical bills, the young women who undertook this trip were able to truly come to understand Italy as a country, not simply as a vacation site or as some romanticized homeland. Elizabeth explained:

I always had an affinity for Florence since I went that first time. This was very special to me because it was the first time I was on my own and I was there long enough [a month and a half] to feel like I was living there. I wasn't in a hotel; I had a little apartment and had to go buy my groceries in the little Italian grocery stores. I was there long enough for it to become familiar to me so that was so wonderful (Elizabeth Cotignola 2008).

Though all four who undertook an extended stay in Italy could have found the time to visit their families, none did, even if they had done so on previous family vacations. I believe this was the case because it is not a trip taken to meet previously unknown family members. Nor did anyone feel the need to reconnect with an ancestral hometown. This trip was focused on the individual discovering Italy on their own terms for themselves. Jackie De Stefano spent six months living in Turin

as part of a business school exchange program. She described her time in Italy as a culture shock for the most part:

Growing up Italian [in Montreal], I thought would help me fit in but it didn't. I was like a fish out of water. Traveling through Italy and living in Italy are two different things. Living in Italy was when I learned about the problems about Italy, whereas traveling depicts it as a picturesque society where everyone is in love and happy, gondola rides, and it's just not that way. That was a big shock for me (Jackie De Stefano 2008).

A significant part of the extended stay was learning Italian. While most of my informants spoke some Italian before heading to Italy, learning the language was the main reason for such a long stay. They all felt that living in Montreal hindered their ability to speak "proper" Italian since many dialects from the 1950s immigrants are still floating around Montreal's Italian community. The stay allowed them to fully immerse themselves in a language they wanted so deeply to become fluent in. Some spoke of feeling embarrassed for not speaking Italian as well as they should. Sabrina, as an example, refused to speak until her Italian improved. She explained that "people were speaking proper Italian and I'm self-conscious of my Italian right away. Just saying an address and I'm uneasy" (Sabrina Pianese 2008).

The third category of trip my informants experienced is the family visit. My informants spoke of reconnecting with a history that had been only an imagined past until their visit to Italy. Six of my informants took such trips with their families. The pattern of this type of trip is fairly consistent. Typically, the parents take their young children or teenagers to Italy for a few weeks during the summer months. They spend some time visiting large cities and tourist destinations before heading to their native towns to live with what remaining family still resides in the ancestral village. All of the family visits took place in small villages or towns in southern Italy. What really stood out during my interviews was the level of description and emotion my informants expressed when talking about this type of trip. There were many comments about the beauty of the buildings and the history, but the language used was rather passive and unemotional. When they began talking about visiting their family, they began padding their narratives with stories and anecdotes that were not present when describing tourist attractions. I will discuss these themes later in the article.

Having lived many years in Canada and having no real direct contact with Italy (apart from phone calls to family), it is not surprising that many of my informants had no idea what to expect and that many of them expressed anxiety about returning to their ancestral homeland. Most of their ideas about Italy were centered on what immigrant family members had told them. Alexander Scalia, an eighteen-year-old student, told me: “I was quite anxious the first time we went. This is where it all started for the Scalias and the Di Paolos. I wanted to see what it was like and mostly how it differed from Montreal, from Quebec, from the Montreal community” (Alexander Scalia 2008). His younger brother Steven, eleven at the time of his trip, kept a journal of his first visit to Italy at his mother’s request. His pre-visit entry reads:

I’m so excited! I can’t wait to see all of the family that I’ve never met before! I’m going to have so much fun in Italy! We’ll stay there for a while and then go to Sicily, the island where my dad is from! I can’t wait! I don’t know what to expect, so I’ll just have to wait (Steven Scalia 2004).

The first time my informants arrived in their families’ villages always seemed to elicit a shock, usually positive, but surprising nonetheless. Alexander Scalia explained that his first view of Sicily was startling to him as his father had built up his hometown to epic proportions. The reason for this was twofold. On his family visit to Italy, he went to both his maternal grandparents’ hometown of Barisciano in Abruzzo and to Cattolica Erclea in Sicily where his father was from. He laughingly recalled:

Then we got to Sicily.... My dad spoke of Cattolica Erclea as the center of the world. I was expecting something grandiose. He said that at the entrance of the village is a fountain, a famous fountain where the water never stops. What is this fountain? It’s a stick in the rocks! Ok?! Let’s just say my dad put my hopes up a bit too high (Alexander Scalia 2008).

About Barisciano Alexander told me : “The difference is huge [between Montreal and Barisciano]. This is a village where people kept animals in their homes. It kind of shows. My *zio* [uncle] Mario (Nonna Pia has a sister there), he still raises his own rabbits and his rooster and chickens over there” (Alexander Scalia 2008).

Sometimes the shock is simply because of the reception given to the visitors. Steven’s journal describes the family’s arrival in Cattolica

as the biggest event that town had seen in quite a while, “When we arrived, it seemed like the whole village surrounded us because a Canadian family had arrived, as if they’ve never seen Canadians before” (Steven Scalia 2004). During our interview, Steven described how strong his emotions were when meeting family members for the first time: “I was very excited to go to Italy the first time not only to see my family that I’ve never seen but you see people who are part of you who have lived with your grandfather, that your father knew that I never got to know” (Steven Scalia 2008).

Sometimes the initial reaction to arriving in Italy is the realization that your relatives are no longer the subsistence farmers your grandparents always described them as. Elizabeth Cotignola was taken aback when she visited her dad’s hometown and realized her family was, in fact, quite well off. This was a recurring theme among my informants. Being presented an image of Italy by their parents paints a caricaturized version of their homeland, either as a picture-perfect Motherland or a downtrodden country of poor farmers. Family visits allowed for my informants to create an image of Italy for themselves, separate from what they had previously believed. Lucia Silvestri had a similar experience when she first visited Italy at age nine:

The first time, I went with my sister and grandmother. That was a weird trip! Because you know how your parents are always saying, ‘back in my day!’ Now when you’re a kid living in a city you hear these poverty stories, you kind of picture them living in a teepee or something (Lucia Silvestri 2008).

Many of my informants were shocked by the differences in attitudes found amongst their Italian family. They had assumed that simply because they were of Italian descent, their worldviews would match those of their Italian counterparts. This, however, was rarely the case. At these moments my informants realized how much Canada had influenced the Italians living there. Perhaps it came from living in a major city with a wide variety of religions and cultures, but many of my informants expressed frustration at the seemingly old-fashioned mentality of their Italian family. The main concern was the lack of privacy. In Cattolica, Steven noted that no one had actual doors, just beaded curtains so people were constantly streaming into each other’s houses. It was only the day the family left that doors (which had never been noticed before) were closed to give the family privacy for the painful goodbyes. Clorinda and Angela Antonacci had different ways to deal

with the prying eyes of small town life. Angela chose not to spend much time in villages, while Clorinda ignored them.

Feeling a deep sense of pride is something most of my informants spoke of when visiting Italy. Both the visitors and those visiting expressed pride for differing reasons. The Italians were proud because they were showing off their long-lost Canadian family; the visitors on the other hand, were proud to be in Italy, speaking the language and walking the streets their families built. Alexander explained that one day while he was staying in Barisciano, his maternal grandmother, who was on the trip with his family, took them on a walking tour of the town where she laid out his family's history in the village:

Nonna was our tour guide. She would tell us "This is where your auntie Paola and uncle Mario were born. This is where I lived when I was a girl. This is where my grandma lived". So I was able to retrace all of these ancestors that I never knew and just imagined the way they had lived their lives in that area (Alexander Scalia 2008).

Steven often wrote in his journal that when they arrived in the village, they would be taken to the town cemetery to visit the graves of dead relatives. This happened to him both in Barisciano and in Cattolica Ereclia. Both times he went without a second thought to visit the grave of dead relatives he had never even met. In each situation, he wrote of going to the cemetery to "visit the graves of our beloved family members no longer with us" (Steven Scalia 2004). Steven also noted that his visits to the tiny villages his parents come from brought about a deep sense of pride in his grandparents who made the difficult decision to leave: "When you compare their house [where my grandparents were born] to my house you say 'Goddamn! They did a really good job coming to Canada, you know? You're like Wow! I could be living in a shack like this. Instead I have four floors in my house'. Then you feel like 'Thank you Nonno, this is the best'" (Steven Scalia 2008).

Another consequence of my informants' family visit seems to be a renewed sense of cultural identity. This did not occur with the school trip or the extended stay. As Paul Basu writes, "return movements are steeped with meaning and to visit the homeland is often an extremely powerful, emotional and life-changing experience" (2005: 134). This belief was often echoed by my informants who were overwhelmed by family history and Italian pride in their hometowns. Elizabeth explained that:



The most moving experience for me in Italy was when I graduated from McGill, [and] as a gift, my parents took me to Italy for three weeks. It was the first time I went to my hometown. I'd never seen it. I met all the family I'd never met, all the cousins. It was really nice. I saw the houses my grandfathers built, the market, the church where my mother was baptized. I saw where my parents were from; so moving I can't describe – you hear things as a kid – you think "I'm Italian", but when you go you understand. This is what they had, what they left behind. There is a feeling of [knowing] I can always come back here because this is where I come from (Elizabeth Cotignola 2008).

I asked my informants why they undertook such family trips as young adults. I understood that when they were children, their parents wanted them to see where they came from but wondered about those who took family trips as older teenagers or adults. Elizabeth best summed up my informants' answers : "[I have] a longing for Italy when I'm not there. Which is funny because I wasn't born there and my parents don't even have this longing, but I do. Italy has always felt like home" (Elizabeth Cotignola 2008). For Tania Zampini, who has been to Italy four times, the feeling of belonging in Italy is one that hits her every time she sets foot on Italian soil.

It's very bizarre, like last year when I went, we landed in Milan and instantly... there was something about the aura. I felt like "Okay this is where I should be right now". I don't feel pressured, I don't feel strange. I don't feel like an alien in this place, or a tourist. I spoke to the bus driver like I'd been doing it forever. I thought to myself, "What is keeping me from being here? Like, why don't I come back more often? It feels like I'm just meant to be here". And that was a very sincere reaction. It wasn't artifice, this is actually how I felt (Tania Zampini 2008).

Clorinda and Angela Antonacci believe that in order to truly understand yourself, you must first understand your culture and family history. For the sisters, understanding their culture takes on various forms. For Angela, it entailed many short visits to Italy to visit family and tour the cities to keep in touch with her Italian heritage. However, she is mostly concerned with sharing the language and traditions with her young daughter, now aged two, in Montreal, than with visiting Italy. Clorinda, on the other hand, believes that to truly discover her heritage she must spend vast amounts of time in Italy. A teacher in her early thirties, she leaves Montreal each June when she is finished teaching at Pearson High School and heads off to Italy until she must return home

to Montreal for the new school year. These visits are, for her, the antithesis of her time in Montreal. She has a small garden in Abruzzo to tend to and she likes “the little towns because I have solitude there. [It’s] so peaceful. My grandmother is there. It’s about finding a connection to this other side of who I am. It’s tranquil” (Clorinda Antonacci 2008).

Montreal Italians visit Italy for many different reasons and in many ways. Each trip type offers a way for Canadians of Italian descent to interact with their home country. School trips offer a tourist-centered taste of Italy, often leading to narratives filled with disappointment, while extended stays allow young adults to immerse themselves in Italian culture on their own terms without parents coloring their images of Italy which then resulted in narratives permeated with feelings of belonging and acceptance. Family visits offer young Montrealers of Italian descent a way to reconnect with a history that is largely unknown to them. It offers them a sense of place and of family history that is lacking in Montreal for immigrant Italian families. These trips also serve to encourage young Canadian Italians to keep speaking Italian, to maintain ties with Italy and to bolster cultural identity, and often results in narratives that are heavily nostalgic. These narratives reinforce their connection to Italy and are outward performances of their changing relationship to Italy and their own complex and dynamic identities as Canadian Italians. The trips undertaken by these Montreal Italians serve as a means to authenticate their ethnic identity, and are a highly personal, emotional experience. Though this authentication may be viewed as artificial, it is nonetheless a meaningful and complex identity that is constantly evolving in various ways. These identity issues are felt most strongly by the children of Italian immigrants whose ethnic identity is perhaps more ambiguous than their parents – they are Canadian by birth but feel deep connections to their European origins. This highlights the idea that “home” is not only bound by geography and physical space but also by memory, nostalgia and imagination.

## References

- Basu, Paul. 2005. "Roots Tourism as Return Movement: Semantics in the Scottish Diaspora". In Marjory Harper (ed.). *Emigrant Homecomings : The Return Movement of Immigrants, 1600-2000* : 131-152. Manchester : Manchester University Press.
- Bella, Leslie. 2002. *Newfoundlanders : Home and Away*. St. John's : Robinson Blackmore Printing.
- Bendix, Regina. 1997. *In Search of Authenticity : The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Madison : University of Wisconsin Press.
- Del Negro, Giovanna. 1997. *Looking Through My Mother's Eyes: Life Stories of Nine Italian Immigrant Women in Canada*. Toronto : Guernica.
- Dunsiger, Jane Catherine. 1982. *A Comparative Study of Narrative Accounts of Visits Home Drawn From the Immigrant Ethnic Community in St. John's Newfoundland*. M.A. Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Koltyk, Jo Ann. 1993. "Telling Narratives Through Home Videos : Hmong Refugees and Self Documentation of Life in the Old and New Country". *Journal of American Folklore*, 106 (422) : 435-449.
- Kugelmass, Jack (ed.). 1993. *YIVO Annual : Going Home*. Evanston : Northwestern University Press.
- MacCannell, Dean. 1976. *The Tourist : A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York : Schocken.
- MacDonald, John and Leatrice MacDonald. 1964. "Chain Migration : Ethnic Neighbourhood Fomation and Social Networks". *Millbrook Memorial Fund Quarterly* 42 : 83-97.
- Oring, Elliott. 1994. "The Arts, Artifacts, and Artifices of Identity". *Journal of American Folklore*, 107 (424) : 211-233.
- Orsi, Robert. 2002. *The Madonna of 115th Street : Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*. New Haven : Yale Nota Bene.
- Pascali, Lara. 2004. *Two Stoves, Two Refrigerators, Due Cucine : The Italian Immigrant Home with Two Kitchens*. M. Arch. Thesis, McGill University.
- Ramirez, Bruno. 1984. *Les premiers Italiens de Montréal : l'origine de la petite Italie du Québec*. Montréal : Boréal Express.
- Ray, Celeste. 2001. *Highland Heritage: Scottish Americans in the American South*. Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press.
- Sharpley, Richard. 1994. *Tourism, Tourists and Society*. Huntingdon : ELM Publications.

- Soyer, Daniel. 2000. "Back to the Future : American Jews Visit the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s". *Jewish Social Studies*, 6 (3) : 124-159.
- Stahl, Sandra. 1989. *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative*. Indianapolis : Indiana University Press.
- Stern, Stephen. 1977. "Ethnic Folklore and the Folklore of Ethnicity". *Western Folklore* 36 (1) : 7-32.

### *Interviews*

- Antonacci, Angie. Personal Interview by Author. August 31st, 2008.
- Antonacci, Clorinda. Personal Interview by Author. August 31st, 2008.
- Cotignola, Elizabeth. Personal Interview by Author. June 19th, 2008.
- D'Andrea, Celia. Personal Interview by Author. May 13th, 2008.
- De Stefano, Jackie. Personal Interview by Author. June 20th, 2008.
- De Vincenzo, Michelle. Personal Interview by Author. June 20th, 2008.
- Pianese, Sabrina. Personal Interview by Author. May 30th, 2008.
- Scalia, Alexander. Personal Interview by Author, May 19th, 2008.
- Scalia, Steven. Personal Interview by Author. April 27th, 2008.
- . Personal Journal. June 2004.
- Silvestri, Lucia. Personal Interview by Author. May 31st, 2008.
- Zampini, Tania. Personal Interview by Author. May 15th, 2008.