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Baldo, Michela

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Michela Baldo
 University of Manchester
 michelabaldo@yahoo.co.uk

Queer in Italian-North American women writers

Abstract

This article seeks to investigate the meaning of the term queer in the post-migratory setting of Italian-Canadian and Italian-North American women writers, and constitutes thus a contribution to recent studies which project the notion of queer within a diasporic framework. Specifically, it aims at analysing the ways in which the term has been recontextualised in this transnational context with reference to issues of ethnicity. Within cultural theory the concepts of 'queer' and 'diaspora' have been informed by post-modern and post-colonial theory and have intervened on theories of time, space and identity infusing them with notions of transgression, contingency, power and conflict.

*This study is based on the analysis of excerpts taken from short stories and poems in *Curraggia: Writings by Women of Italian Descent*, an anthology edited by three second generation Italian/Canadian lesbian and feminist writers (as they define themselves), published in 1998 by Women Press, a publishing house based in Toronto. Through these and other literary excerpts written by the same writers I would like to implement some previous studies (Fortier 1999, 2001, 2003; Gopinath 2003, 2005; Ahmed 2003, 2006) on the concept of queer in diasporic contexts.*

1. Queer diasporas

Any discussion on how the concept of **queer** has been manipulated and used outside the British context needs to start from the very significance of the concept. Queer is believed to have been popularly adopted in the early 1990s and is a product of increasing debates around the question of lesbian and gay identities. However, as an intellectual model, queer has been produced not only by lesbian and gay politics and theory, but has been informed by other post-modern theoretical discourses which constitute late twentieth century western thought. In opposition to lesbian and gay studies' notions of identity politics, which assumed identity as the necessary prerequisite for political intervention (Jagose 1996: 77), queer politics is based on 'a more mediated relation to categories of identification'. The awareness that gay life has often generated its own disciplinary regimes, in the form of obligatory haircuts, t-shirts and dietary practices, for example, has led in the past few years to a deeper understanding of how too rigid categories of gay and lesbian have risked reinforcing the same heterosexuality they tried to oppose (Jagose 1996: 92-93). Such a risk was and still is due to the discursive

structures and representational systems that determine the production of sexual meaning which are informed by dominant discourses which seek to maintain and reproduce the heterosexist privilege (Jagose 1996: 92). Deeper awareness of this risk was provided by Foucault (1981), who understood sexuality as a cultural category and not an essentially personal attribute, and Butler (1990), who stated that gender is a cultural fiction, a performative effect of reiterative acts. These post-structuralist scholars have challenged the notion of a stable and fixed identity which was at risk of working against those constituents it claimed to represent. Queer theory offers an alternative to previous understandings since it conceives gender and sexuality as fluid, unstable and in motion.

Thus, the poststructuralist understanding of identity as provisional and contingent has enabled queer to emerge as a new form of personal and political identification (Jagose 1996: 77-78). Queer politics, by promoting a politics of difference as opposed to one of identity, has also provided a critique of the causal relationship between a secure identity and an effective politics. Such a politics is not based on whom we are and to our similarities to a group but on experiences of oppression and desire as a means of collective political affiliation. It involves a continual evolution and questioning of the spaces that we occupy in order to fully explore the possibilities of sexual becoming; it relies on respect for the multiplicity of identities, sexualities and forms of relationships that people discover in their lives (Davis 2005: 26).

Queer theory is thus an ambiguous theory given its fundamental indeterminacy and its commitment to denaturalisation, in the footsteps of Butler's (1990) separation of categories of gender and sexuality, and Foucault's (1980) critique of natural sex. Since queer evades programmatic description, it has been used in a variety of ways, and has consequently been valued differently in different contexts (Jagose 1996: 98). It can be, for example, a synonym for lesbian and gay or less often 'lesbian, gay and bisexual' (Goldman 1996: 173); it can be used as a fashionable rather than theoretical term as can be seen in some of the mobilisations of 'Queer nation'¹ against the threat of poststructuralism to the political gains of lesbian and

¹ Queer Nation was an organization founded in March 1990 in New York City, USA by AIDS activists. The founders were outraged at the escalation of anti-gay and lesbian violence on the streets and prejudice in the arts and media. Queer Nation's popular slogan "*We're here. We're queer. Get used to it.*" was adopted and used by many in the LGBT community. Aside from its militant protest style, as opposed to the more reformist gay rights organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign or the Log Cabin Republicans, Queer Nation was most effective and powerful in the early 1990s in the USA, and used direct action to fight for gay rights. Queer Nation is credited with starting the process of reclaiming the word queer, which, previously, was only used in a pejorative sense and Queer Nation's use of it in their name and slogan was at first considered shocking (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_Nation).

gay battles. In this context queer serves, for example, to distinguish old-style lesbians and gays from the new ones. Ultimately, the term can be employed to describe an anti-normative positioning with regards to sexuality. Although queer has tended to occupy a predominantly sexual register, recently its denaturalising project has spread to categories of identification other than sex and gender (Jagose 1996: 99).

The notion of queer, as shown, has been exploited in different ways and risks being turned into an umbrella that includes everything, even contradictory perspectives, and therefore eventually erases the very diversity that queer tries to highlight (Goldman 1996: 170). My understanding of queer in the present discussion moves mainly from its acknowledgment of identity as unfixed and multivalent and from its resistance to whatever constitutes the norm. With regard to the first point, in saying that queer identity is not fixed we affirm that it might not always occupy the same space and thus that it is in motion; in saying that it is multivalent and against the norm we affirm that it should do more than simply signalling an alternative sexuality, rather it should offer a way to analyse the expression of our many intersecting selves, it should be structured around the blurring and interconnection of identities (Goldman 1996: 173) cutting across race, gender, sex and ethnicity. Queer speaks of diversity within unity, and points towards inclusion rather than exclusion, of all those identities which are subversive and anti-norm. These two characteristics have the potential of making queer theory applicable to a wider range of phenomena by including categories such as race and ethnicity, which for so long have been silenced in queer theory. This potential is realised through the notion of diaspora, which, in the Italian-Canadian context analysed in the present paper, is metaphorically linked, although in problematic terms, to ethnicity.

Diaspora derives from the Greek *dia* (through) and *sperein* (to scatter) and hence is “a dispersion from”: it invokes the concept of a locus, of a *home*, from which the dispersion occurs. However, if diaspora invokes concepts of the trauma of separation and dislocation, these traumas are also potentially ‘the sites of hope and new beginnings’, they are terrain where ‘memories reassemble and reconfigure’ to form new homes and new spaces (Brah 1996: 193). Diaspora thus signifies a site, a space (Brah 1996: 194) located between the global and the local where new landscapes of identities are negotiated. Processes of diasporic identity formation show that ‘identity is always plural, and in process’ (Brah 1996: 197). Within postcolonial theory diaspora refers to multilocality, post-nationality, non-linearity of space and time. From a transnational and intercultural perspective, and in opposition to

exclusive ethnic approaches to migration, ‘the term converses with other terms such as border, transculturation, travel, creolisation, metizaje, hybridity’ (Gilroy 1993, 1994 quoted in Fortier 2001: 406).

By analysing a diasporic phenomenon such as that of the Italian-Canadian/North American women writers, my article seeks therefore to expand the sometimes limited horizons of queer, by adding the identity categories of ethnic, revisited in light of the new understanding of diaspora, without, however, discarding the importance of sexuality. Such an analysis is apparent in recent studies (Fortier 1999; 2001; 2003; Gopinath 2003; 2005; Ahmed 2003; 2006) which have projected queer culture and politics within a diasporic framework, in an attempt to exploit the potentialities of queer theory. Some of these studies have concentrated on questioning or queering the notion of home, attachment and belonging in diasporic communities (Fortier 1999; 2001; 2003), others have paid attention to questions of nation, ethnicity and family and on how diasporic subjects seem perennially outside the confines of these entities (Gopinath 2003 : 140); and others have directed their interest towards queer phenomenology as a way of questioning the idea of sexual orientation towards objects in space and time and as a way of questioning the racialisation of space, therefore focussing on post-modern diasporic understandings of space and time (Ahmed 2006).

My study starts from the idea of movement, of being ‘out of place’ or moving between spaces and times, an attribute that both queer and diaspora share in their revisited forms. This idea is also fundamental in the present paper because it is strongly connected, in the narrative constructions of Italian-Canadian/North-American women writers, to questions of displacement as a form of translation.

2. *Curraggia* and the Italian-North American writing context

The idea for *Curraggia* was developed during an initial discussion, in 1990, between Nzula Angelina Ciatu², a lesbian poet, and Domenica DiLeo³, a lesbian political activist and writer

² Nzula Angelina Ciatu is a feminist writer of Sicilian mixed-race origin. Her work, published in many anthologies and journals, reflects on race politics, ethnic identity, class consciousness, sexuality and gender’ (Ciatu et al eds. 1998: 354).

³ Domenica DiLeo is writer of Southern Italian origin (Calabria region) living in Toronto. She has been involved with Women’s Press *Fireweed* and with *Effe*, an Italian feminist publication. She is a member of *Avanti*, an

(they were later joined by Gabriella Micallef⁴, a lesbian film director) about their experience of growing up in Italian working class families trying to make sense of their identity as Italian-Canadian women. The outcome of this and other following discussions was the desire to use their own experience in feminist organisations to reach out to other Italian women, to provide a space for them to represent their diversity. Although the three editors are Italian-Canadian, the writers who contributed to the anthology are not only Canadian (although Canadians constitute the majority of the contributors) but also North American, mainly from the Northern states of the US. The title of the anthology is in Southern Italian dialect and stands for ‘courage’. Although the Southern Italian word is masculine: ‘curraggio’, it is turned into a feminine term by adding the vowel “a” at the end, in line with the spirit of this literary work. *Curraggia* is an invocation to all Italian women to be brave, speak out and narrate their experiences (as translated literally in the expression ‘Let’s be brave’) as explained by Di Leo (1998: 15): ‘I laugh at the courage that we as Italian women have always had and continue to have in all the forms that shaped our lived experiences’. The same principle is found in another recent anthology of writing collected by Maria Coletta McLean in 2004, *Mamma Mia. Good Italian Girls Talk Back*, which is comprised of eighteen short stories by Italian-Canadian women writers. Although the title of this second anthology caused great controversy, and the first editor, Gina Valle, breached her contract with the publishing house ECW because she did not agree with it, it seems that behind both enterprises lies a will to contest the norm, to queer common assumptions regarding ethnic women and to oppose various forms of oppression.

This determination is part of a double project which aims at challenging stereotypes circulating in North-America about women of Italian descent as obedient wives and selfless, giving mothers, but also to combat cultural and familial codes such as ‘omertà’ (a Southern Italian term which stands for cultural silence) which prevented these women, for example, from talking about sexuality or incest/abuse they had experienced within their Southern Italian families (Ciatu 1998a: 19). The editors of *Curraggia* wanted women living in North-

Italian Lesbian and Gay social support group and *Voce Alternativa*, an Italian feminist group. Her writing revolves around issues of family and community. Her published poetry includes *Gay Pride Day* and *Cigars and Cigarettes* (Ciatu et al eds. 1998: 354-355).

⁴ Gabriella Micallef is a lesbian feminist of Sicilian and Maltese descent living in Toronto. She is a film and video director/producer extremely active in anti-oppression work and in community development (Ciatu et al eds. 1998: 357-358).

America who identified themselves as Italian to talk about ‘their isolation, violations, fascinations’ and ‘to speak about the least spoken, to say the least said’ (Micallef 1998: 21).

Many of the short stories and poems of *Curraggia* explore the cultural and sexual identities of Italian North American/Canadian women who transgressed the rules of their ethnic community and became estranged from their families as a result. Transgressing those rules could simply mean not being married, as expressed in the verses of Adriana Suriano (1998: 36) in the poem ‘Coupled’: ‘I am the shameful one who sleeps without a wedding band, wakes up with my maiden name, signs my own rent checks’; or it could refer to having a more Anglo-Canadian style of life, dating men without wanting to commit to marriage for example, as expressed by Francesca Schembri (1998a: 29) in the poem ‘Meglio Morta che Disonorata’ (translated: ‘Better dead than without honour’) in which a daughter talks to her mother: ‘We do not want to be married. Figlia che disgrazia, ma come fai a guardarmi in faccia⁵’, and as expressed in ‘Hyphenated identities’, also by Francesca Schembri (1998b: 103-109), in which the protagonist blames herself for having been forced, by the Italian extended family, to hate and reject her daughter because of her teenage pregnancy outside marriage.

Given these considerations, it is not surprising that a self-definition of these women as lesbian or bisexual was encountered with even more hostility, since it endangered the Italian family structure, based on patriarchal hetero-normativity. Because of a homophobic Italian Catholic culture, strengthened as a consequence of immigration to Canada and North America due to a desire to preserve the family institution in a hostile land, there has been a widespread tendency in these women to completely separate ethnic and queer spaces and lives (Fortier 1999: 3). There is the notion that being lesbian/bisexual/queer cannot coexist with being Italian, hence the uncomfortable split between homosexuality and ethnicity. The anthology is thus an attempt to come to terms with this split, a split which is expressed by Nzula Angelina Ciatu, a co-editor of the anthology with the following words (1998a: 17): ‘What I could not be in my Sicilian community was lesbian and feminist. What I could rarely express, in either the Italian or feminist communities, were the complexities of my mixed-racial heritage’. The same idea is invoked by Francesca Di Cuore (1998: 114) in ‘Leaving Home: Reflections of a

⁵ My translation of the Italian verses is as follows: ‘My daughter, you wretch! How do you to look me in the face again?’

Catholic Lesbian’: ‘I was a daughter of the patriarchy and it demanded heterosexuality; it would not allow me to pursue my love without guilt and shame’.

The concept of queer, even though this term is not always used in the anthology, pervades the majority of the stories and poems, as there is a general attempt to break silences, to challenge normative beliefs around women sexuality and to look at them in a new light.

In order to better understand the spirit of the anthology, it is useful to consider *Curraggia* as part of the broader context of Italian- North American writing as it shares much with other Italian-North American anthologies⁶ and writings, such as the afore-mentioned *Mamma Mia. Good Italian Girls Talk Back*’ (McLean 2004) and *Hey Paesan. Writing by Lesbian and Gay of Italian Descent* (Capone et al. 1999) which features some of the writers of *Curraggia*. Some of these writers have also written in *Fuori. Essays by Italian-American lesbian and gays* (Tamburri 1996) – Janet Capone for example – or have published other books on the concept of queer, as has Anna Camilleri.⁷

Generally speaking, this writing inserts itself within the broader phenomenon of Italian-Canadian writing, a body of literature produced in the last thirty years by writers of Italian background living in Canada. This literature began in about 1975 with the work of Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, who was also one of the founders, in 1986, in Vancouver of the Association of Italian-Canadian writers (Pivato 1994). Although the majority of the women writing in *Curraggia* do not belong to this association (with the exception of a very few), their work shares similarities of style and content with writing by the authors of this association. The authors of *Curraggia*, like other popular Italian-Canadian women writers such as Mary Di Michele⁸, Mary Melfi⁹, Caterina Edwards¹⁰, Darlene Maddott¹¹ are preoccupied with

⁶ The Italian-Canadian writer Dino Minni states that the short story genre, which is featured mostly in anthologies, is typically an ethnic genre, since it often deals with marginal people (1985: 63-64).

⁷ Anna Camilleri is a queer femme writer, video artist and performer, currently living in Toronto. She is a member of Taste this, an interdisciplinary performance troupe which toured the west coast extensively and has produced a collection of fictions. She is the co-editor of *Brazen Femme* (Arsenal Pulp Press), a collection of essays and poems about reinterpreting what it means to identify as femme; author of *I Am a Red Dress* (Arsenal Pulp Press), a graceful narrative about recovery, family and identity; and leading lady in *Sounds Siren Red*, a one-woman show that combines monologue, poetry and performance to break down and rebuild the image of the archetypal woman. Her latest anthology, *Red Light: Superheroes, Saints and Sluts* (Arsenal Pulp Press), is a thoughtful re-visioning of the female icon’s place in culture and history. Her extensive and creative questioning of identity and how it is expressed and interpreted contributes an original and necessary voice to queer/feminist dialogue (<http://www.curvemag.com/Detailed/642.html>).

⁸ Mary Di Michele is a Canadian poet, novelist and teacher. Born in Lanciano (Italy) in 1949, she emigrated to Canada with her family in 1955. With *Mimosa and Other Poems* (1981), a series of monologues between two daughters and their immigrant father, she became a major voice among the growing numbers of Italian-Canadian

issues such as patriarchy and the place of women within the family and the society at large. *Infertility Rites* (1991) by Mary Melfi, for example, shows how issues of motherhood and reproduction are entangled with notions of ethnic identity and assimilation (Verdicchio 1997: 54). However, the anthology *Curraggia* contains a large number of stories about female homosexuality, a topic which is not popular in Italian-Canadian writing, and that is missing, for example, in *Pillars of Lace. The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Women Writers* (1998), edited by the Italian-Canadian writer Marisa de Franceschi.¹²

This study therefore looks at *Curraggia* as a project with the courage of breaching this specific silence about same sex desire, along with other silences deriving from the difficulties of integrating different cultures, experienced by Italian immigrants in Canada.

The majority of Italian-Canadian writers were either born in Canada to Italian families (who had emigrated mainly from Southern Italy in the 1950s and 1960s) or arrived in Canada at an early age and grew up there. The compelling desire to write originated, according to them, from the necessity to solve and accommodate a generational conflict, the same conflict we observe in *Curraggia*. This conflict arises from splitting the self to account for opposing loyalties: the one faithful to Canadian values inculcated through formal education in English (self-promotion and individualism), and the other to Italian values (patriarchal roles and attachment to family, for example) which are taught at home through dialect or Italian (Pivato 1994: 124). Italian-Canadian writing thus explores a doubleness of identity experienced by second generation Italian immigrants and inevitably becomes an attempt to translate the Italian language of emotion into the Canadian-English sphere of consciousness in order to resolve and negotiate a linguistic and cultural conflict (Pivato 1994: 121-122). As stated by

writers. In 1994, with the novel *Under my Skin*, she dealt with topics such as media, violence and identity. Her last novel, *Tenor of Love* (2005), deals with the life of the singer Caruso (Pivato 2007: 205-207).

⁹ Mary Melfi was born in Campobasso (Italy) and came to Canada in 1956. She completed her studies at the University of Montreal and published many books in a variety of genres: *A Bride in Three Acts* (1983), *A Dialogue with Masks* (1985), *Infertility Rites* (1991) and *Stages: Selected Poems* (1998) (Pivato 1998: 374; Anselmi 2007: 7-18).

¹⁰ Caterina Edwards was born in 1948 and has an Italian, Croatian, Welsh and English background. Her family emigrated to Canada in 1956 and she grew up in Calgary. With the publication of her first novel, *The Lion's Mouth*, in 1982, Caterina Edwards became the first Canadian writer to explore the life of an Italian immigrant woman in Western Canada. Her first play, *Terra Straniera* (1986) published under the title *Homeground*, examines the life of Italian immigrants. In her writings there is a strong desire to challenge narrative conventions in Canada (Pivato 2000: 119-121).

¹¹ Darlene Maddott is a Toronto lawyer and writer. She published in 1985 a collection of short stories, *Bottled Roses*. Her most recent work is a film script, *Mazzilli's Shoes* (Ciatu Nzula et al. eds. 1998: 357).

Pivato (1994: 127): ‘The most important task for Italian-Canadian writers has been the uncovering and translation of their immigrant experience as an act of self-discovery’.

The writing of *Curraggia*, like Italian-Canadian writing, revolves around a cultural and linguistic translation which is fundamental in this revisiting of the concept of queer. The preoccupation with translation is also evident in the preoccupation with genre. These writers experiment with and move across different genres constantly. Anna Camilleri and Mary Melfi, for example, transform their novels into plays or scripts for radio; others, like Mary Di Michele write novels as a way of paraphrasing their poetry while others still write essays and autobiographical non fiction (Domenica DiLeo, Mary Di Michele, Caterina Edwards), moving subsequently to poetry or novels and viceversa.

3. Translation, language and narrative

Translation in this context is viewed as a tool which enables the act of writing; it is a metaphorical tool of representation and is connected to language. For the authors of *Curraggia* language is an issue greatly discussed in the poems and short stories. One of these: ‘Nana’s Peaches’ by Carol Mottola Knox, is about the frustration, but also the humour, generated by the misunderstandings between a granddaughter and her Sicilian grandmother who cannot get her ‘pictures’ back from the drugstore because everybody else thinks she asked for ‘peaches’ (Mottola Knox 1998: 37).

The women of *Curraggia* talk therefore about miscommunication between generations and about the constant process of translation that seeks to enable communication. This condition is almost always signalled through the use of two or more languages (Standard Italian and Italian dialect) other than English in the same text (Pivato 1994). Such an interplay of languages expresses the linguistic and cultural negotiations at work in this post-immigrant society. Italian and Italian dialect are used in *Curraggia* (as in other Italian/Canadian/North American writing) mainly in the form of insertions of noun phrases or sentences related to Italian food, greetings and traditions. This phenomenon can be labelled

¹² Marisa De Franceschi was born in Muris (Udine) Italy. She went to Canada in 1948 and grew up in Windsor (Ontario). Her short stories have appeared in a variety of publications and in a number of anthologies. *Surface Tension* (1995) is her first novel (De Franceschi ed. 1998).

codeswitching, a term taken from Linguistics which describes the phenomenon whereby a bi- or multilingual speaker in communities where two or more languages are in contact shifts from one language to another in the course of a conversation (Milroy and Mysken 1995: 7). In literature this device is not arbitrary, that is, it is not simply a mimetic device used to give the reader a flavour of the author's heritage language, but has a more symbolic function. In the case of Italian-Canadian writing it contributes to the portrayal of a group identity, since it can signal a character's perspective in terms of his or her emotions and attitudes (Martins 2005: 2). This signalling is possible because codeswitching 'reflects and creates focalisation' (Mätta 2004: 48). Focalisation is a concept from Film Studies¹³, and refers to the lens through which we see characters and events in narrative. Codeswitching, by juxtaposing two different cultural worlds, Italy and Canada, produces constant changes in focalisation, contributing not only to the polyphonic structure of this writing but to its competing ideologies.

Translation and multilingualism must be thus considered as complementary concepts and are not only linguistic but also political and cultural (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990). The increasing use of translation and other languages in fictional texts 'provides a comment about our social-cultural values and the state of the world we live in' (Delabastita and Grutman 2005: 13). In addition, more and more narratives not only draw on multilingualism but 'describe and fictionalise the encounters and struggles between continents and people' (Delabastita and Grutman 2005: 21) in which translation and multilingualism play a major role.

In *Curraggia* narrating and translating are effectively the same process, as the everyday linguistic and cultural translation undergone by these women takes the shape of a narrative which weaves and constructs their identity. The idea of narrative now circulating in some strands of the Social Sciences, and in the new poststructuralist approach to narratology, stresses the fact that identity is constituted and reconstituted in the process of narrating. According to Somers and Gibson: 'We come to know, understand and make sense of our social life through narratives, that is by locating ourselves in networks of relationships embedded in time and space' (Somers and Gibson 1994: 58-59). Space and time are core

¹³ Focalisation refers to 'the point behind the lens where the light rays from a point being photographed converge to form an image' and by extension also 'to the location from which a subject will record sharply on film'. It can also refer to 'the degree of sharpness and definition of the image' (Konisberg 1988: 133).

concepts in narratology and narrative theory and stress the importance of contextualisation in any analysis of social phenomena.

These two concepts are then fundamentally related to translation. Indeed the very word translation means to transfer, to move. It involves taking something away from a place and moving it into another space and in this sense it is linked to Migration Studies, which deal with phenomena such as displacement and resettlement. Italian-Canadian/North American writing is the product of a dis-placement, and as such it refers to something ‘other’ than the national, and responds both to the points of departure and of arrival (Verdicchio 1997: 110). Writing in the Italian-Canadian/North American scenario implies the concept of a movement which begins in itself and returns to itself mutated. This constant travelling of the mind opens up the possibility of reviewing things from a refreshing distance in order to avoid designating them and limiting them (Verdicchio 1997: 111).

Translation and writing/narrating in *Curraggia* aim thus at re-suturing the intergenerational gap opened up by emigration. The processes are connected to the concepts of space and time because they deal with movement both in history and from one country to another, but also because they ‘problematise the integrity and homogeneity of these categories by fictionalising different spaces and cultural realities within North American/Canadian boundaries’ (Beneventi 2004: 220). Here, space represents a physical terrain which is appropriated, negotiated by the immigrant or post-immigrant subject who ties that space up with his/her cultural specificity (Beneventi 2004).

Given these premises, the concept of translation and narrative seem to represent good metaphors for the concepts of queer and diasporas. Like translation and narrative, queer and diaspora involve the idea of a spatio/temporal transformation, a circular translation or movement between languages and cultures which produce new spaces and memories which eventually participate in new narrative-identity constructions.

4. Queer diasporas as re-creation of home. Towards a notion of ‘transqueer’ narrative

This section will provide an analysis of samples of writing from the anthology *Curraggia*, and from related books in which the term queer is employed, so that a better understanding of queer in the North American/Canadian context can be reached. In particular it aims to show

the importance of language as a way of enriching the understanding of this concept, along with the concept of translation and narrative as previously mentioned. Hence the term 'transqueer narrative' which sees queer as a form of translation.

A starting point for this discussion is the studies by Fortier (1999; 2001; 2003) on the notion of *home* in relation to diasporas, drawing on Brah's (1996) notion of *homing*. Home is specifically placed in relation to diaspora not simply because it represents the original place from which migration started, but because it involves a discourse of the reconstruction of home in the country of arrival. Diaspora is becoming home, 'it is the project whereby one participates in the new reality that the new arrival creates with the very act of arriving' (Harrison 1979: 87). Diaspora is therefore the condition which produces the writing of *Curraggia* (as product of the displacement of a wave of emigrants from Italy in the post-war period) and it is also the process of enacting 'homing desires' (Brah 1996: 180) so that one can feel at home in the new country.

The writers of *Curraggia* are a diasporic product; they are the outcome of their parents' or grandparents' emigration and have in some cases migrated themselves due to the impossibility of living in close knit ethnic families, since their 'unpopular sexual orientation means that they end up needing a certain amount of distance from their families' as Giovanna Capone¹⁴, a writer who contributed to the *Curraggia* collection, explains in *Fuori* (1996: 36). She says that as a result of moving from her family's city, New York, to San Francisco, home of a large lesbian and gay community in the US, she feels a divided person, 'torn in half': 'an Italian in New York and a lesbian in California' (Capone 1996: 36).

How many times have I been forced to choose under incredible painful conditions where my loyalties stand, and what *my* freedom encompasses? How many times have I wondered: to which "family" do I most belong, the lesbian/gay community of San Francisco, in which I've lived as an out lesbian for many years, or my Italian American family in New York, which is my ethnic base, the family into which I was born, but the family where I too often feel invisible and isolated as a lesbian? (Capone 1996: 37).

¹⁴ Giovanna (Janet) Capone is a lesbian poet and fiction writer of Neapolitan origins. She was raised in an Italian/American neighbourhood in New York. Her writings have appeared in various books including *Unsettling America: A Multicultural Poetry Anthology*, *The Voices we Carry: Recent Italian American Women's Fiction*, *Bless me Father: Stories of Catholic Childhood* and *Fuori: Essays by Italian/American Lesbians and Gays* (1996). She was one of the editors of the anthology *Hey Paesan: Writing by Lesbians and Gay Men of Italian Descent* (1999) (Ciatu et al eds. 1998: 353).

The difficulty of having to deal with such an ‘inhuman choice’ between families, as Capone (1996: 36) puts it, is also expressed by another contributor to *Curraggia*, Anna Nobile¹⁵, in ‘Thicker than Water’ a short story in *Mamma Mia* (2004), where she claims that she was forced to emigrate to Vancouver from Toronto in order to live a true life.

I have travelled three thousand miles in order to live a life that is not a lie, which is filled with caring, likeminded people. From this distance, my mother can be proud of whatever “successes” I share with her, and the things she doesn’t want anyone else to know are easily hidden, denied. Any closer and her shame would be too much for me to bear. She would have to lie again. I could say that leaving behind a family that forced me to hide and deny myself for one that loves and embraces me has been worth the sacrifice, but the dulling of love with shame and guilt, absence and loss, has cost us both. I miss my mother and I believe she misses me as well (Nobile 2004: 99-100).

This painful split between family and ethnicity, as mentioned in section two, is thus, in some cases, the product not only of a metaphorical movement away from the family but also of a physical displacement. In both cases, there is a sense that this gap needs to be filled since the self cannot bear living in such a schizophrenic condition. Hence the need of these women to return home, re-imagine home. These queer diasporas do not involve movements away from an original home but rather the journey of returning home. As stated by Fortier (2003: 116): ‘Queer migrations are not merely *against* the childhood home but, rather [...] they *reprocess* the childhood home differently’. The focus is not simply on childhood homes as coherent origins fixed in the distant past and excluded by queerness, but on what happens when one returns home. Such a return is exemplified by memory, is a remembering home and ‘offers the possibility of reassessing and reconciling with the childhood home’ (Fortier 2003: 124). Remembering is not merely about retrieving memories of the past but about imagining new spaces to populate with ghosts of the past and presences from an imagined future (Fortier 2003: 124).

¹⁵ Anna Nobile is a writer and a journalist living in Vancouver. Her work has appeared in journals such as *the eyetalian*, *effe*, and *The Antagonist Review*, as well as the anthology of erotic fiction *Hot and Bothered*, and the anthology *Mamma Mia: Good Italian Girls talk back* (McLean Maria 2004) (Ciatu et al eds. 1998: 358).

Queer diasporas are therefore transformations of home through the desire to reconcile split images of past, present and future. This is well expressed by Anna Camilleri in her short story 'Red dress', included in *Curraggia*, which was followed by the novel 'I am a red dress' (Camilleri 2004). The theme of the two texts is the re-visiting of familial secrets: father-daughter incest in an Italian-Canadian family of Sicilian descent. While in the first novel the female victim of violence dreams of wearing a red dress at the funeral of her father, in the second novel the theme is further developed. The red dress becomes a recurrent image, and turns into a metaphor: the desire to re-dress personal history and to heal the wounds of the past through the imagination. The red dress becomes a symbol of defiance of the Sicilian rules which stipulate women should dress in black to mourn the dead; it becomes a synonym of the queer energy, the feminine energy that makes women alive (Camilleri 2004). As expressed by Camilleri:

This story is a lexicon between my grandmother, my mother, and I – the stuff that mythology is made of – mother, maiden, and crone. Grandmother notices a red dress. Mother imagines wearing a red dress. Daughter becomes the red dress. The redress (Camilleri 2004: 12).

In this sense the return home, the return to family, is the re-invention of family. Home is not just a fixed place to return to but a variety of spaces of attachment which are constantly discursively constructed (Fortier 2003: 131). These constructions are performed by juxtaposing objects referring to a traditional notion of home, like the kitchen, with scattered images of the present, as in the following poem in *Curraggia* by Nzula Angelina Ciatu (1998b: 125-127):¹⁶

Untitled

Shame & guilt
feelings i 'm familiar with
anger takes getting used to

[...]

shame

everytime i struggle

to speak italian

when sicilian rolls from me

naturally

smoothly

still i dare not speak

this forbidden tongue

shame

because even my sicilian is limited

a stabbing reminder

of all severed

by assimilation

shame & guilt

at every family gathering

my working-class secondlanguageenglish

[...]

shame for having become estranged,

from my roots

guilt

for what i can't turn back to

first generation

living the borderlands

piece together

identities

chewed by oppression

finally

at the kitchen table

surrounded by italian dykes

hands swing
 with **gusto**¹⁷
 high pitched voices & accents speak
 i savour every word
 [...]

at the kitchen table
 reunited
 with parts of myself
 i'd always run from
 guilt
 for having hated my ethnicity
 rage
 for having been made to hate it
 frustration
 feeling I'm drawing attention
 to myself
 marginalised ethnic dyke
 [...]

The protagonist of the poem revisits home out of a desire to integrate into her current life the traditions and the home language previously rejected and hated, due to a school system that in the 1960s in Canada was centred on the assimilation of minorities (Pivato 1994).

Queer is here inherently tied to a reconstruction of home which challenges and blurs a canonical separation of spaces, putting Italian dykes in the place where, by tradition, the Italian heterosexual woman has been relegated. Such a space becomes a hyperspace where the protagonist floats between two cultural models, situating herself at the crossroads between old culture and new culture.

The Sicilian language, along with her frustration at not being able to speak it fluently, is part of Ciatu's identity construction process. Moreover, the misspelling of English language pronouns such as I, and the adjectives Italian and Sicilian, written in lower-case letters like it would be in the Italian language, shows how this identity reconstruction works by mixing

Italian dialect.

together, in new ways, different cultural elements. The importance of language, and with it translation, is even more evident in two poems by Giovanna (Janet) Capone (1998a:135-136) in *Curraggia*:

Last night I was visited by the ancestors

They sat heavy in my dreams
the dead ones
now undead
were talking, laughing
resting their hands on big bellies.

There was coffee
in demitasse cups
and crumb cake
on the table,
a cardboard box of **cannoli**
and almond **biscotti**
and lots of loud laughter
“Ha ha ha,
She thinks she’s different from us
because she’s queer?”

“Non farmi ridere!” one aunt said

“Same problems, same pain.

Same old shit!”

[...]

Va fanculo¹⁸, you ancestors!

You sit too heavy

¹⁷ ‘Gusto’ means literally ‘taste’. Here it has the meaning of ‘pleasure’.

¹⁸ The expression is a swear word very popular also among North Americans of non-Italian origin (Serianni and Trifone 1994).

in my dreams

[...]

Le sorelle di mia mama¹⁹,

mia mama, i miei parenti, tutti

Molti avi

ieri sera

some dead

some still living

All of you flourishing wildly

in my soul

“Lesbian? **Va Nabola!** You think

you’re different from us?

You think your life will be free

of pain?

Non farmi ridere!”

In this first poem queer is understood as a form of translation: the scattered noun phrases and sentences in Italian and Southern Italian dialect referring to food or swearing are an attempt to depict the language of conversation, and to translate and reassess the linguistic and cultural roots of the protagonist. The family members are ghosts who haunt Janet’s dreams and remind her, in their mother tongue, of the common destiny of pain and suffering she shares with them. Being queer does not make Janet different from them and behind this statement there is irony: ‘Va Nabola!’²⁰ Non Farmi ridere!’ (Translated: Go to hell! Do not make me laugh!). Queer describes a process of estrangement and a struggle for integration that Janet has in common as lesbian with her parents and relatives who emigrated to North America from Italy and fought to adapt to the new country. Queer refers thus to a diasporic home which is already queer since its in-betweenness (Fortier 2003: 123) is a site of struggle between different cultural values, the North American and the Italian. The poem is an attempt

¹⁹ The spelling of *mama* is incorrect: it should be written with double *m*. This is a very common pattern in the anthology and attests to the fact that firstly these second or third generation Italians in North America have not mastered the language and secondly that Italian abroad is contaminated by the English language.

²⁰ The expression ‘Va Nabola’ translated literally means ‘Go to Naples’ (Sobrero 1996). Janet relatives and ancestors come from the region Campania in Southern Italy whose main city is Naples and therefore that was an

to reconcile this separation by creating a dream space where the protagonist self can remember a new home.

These same considerations can be applied to a second poem by Janet Capone (1998b: 128-130).

Dago Dyke

At 23

I left my family behind

on New York

I often picture me

at that time

short dark hair

leather jacket

and a big black motorbike.

Screaming dyke.

I always liked

the colour black,

in fact,

I have aunts 4 feet 11 inches high

who wear it all the time.

I picture me

at 23

breaking the traditions I was raised by.

Che vergogna! Malafemmina!

Defying **la famiglia**

You gotta have alotta guts²¹

expression used to dismiss somebody's ideas, sending him/her away to the far city (probably used by people living in the countryside far away from Naples).

²¹ The phrase 'You gotta have alotta guts' represents an instance of 'ethnolect'. This term refers to the ethnic belonging of a speaker born in a place where the language he/she speaks is not his/her mother tongue (Salmon Kovarsky 1998: 68). This is the English language spoken by Italians immigrants in North-America and is

to live another way.
[...]
In another time
this **paesana**
used to make eggplant
with her mother,
drop breaded slices in a pan
and let them fry.
I got her soft brown eyes
and my father's darker skin.
Now, like him,
I drop my keys
on the kitchen table
when I'm home.
But I live alone
no **paesana** there
to greet me.

Even now, at 33,
I grate **Romano** cheese
Fry eggplant in a pan
[...]
and remind myself
that despite the cost
I'm the boss
in my kitchen
and my life.

Janet' sexual orientation has forced her to leave home, a condition expressed by the juxtaposition of the Italian cultural perspective of the importance of living with family in the invocation 'Che vergogna! Malafemmina! Defying la famiglia' (translated: What a shame!

characterized by prosody, intonation and phraseology which differ from other varieties of English spoken in the country and can be defined as English with a Southern Italian accent.

How bad a woman you are! Defying family), and the North American perspective which stresses independence. Now, at 33, Janet discovers how much her sexuality is tied to her ethnicity, from the colour she wears (black like her Southern Italian aunts) to the food she eats (Romano cheese and eggplant). This realisation, this mental journey back to family allows her to re-interpret and remake, in an empowering way, the space she inhabits miles away from her real family. In this new space she turns into a *paesana*²², a hybrid product of immigration, a woman from a diasporic village she has recreated for herself. These same concerns, about how homosexuality cannot be separated from ethnicity, are also expressed by another Italian-North American lesbian writer of Sicilian descent, Rose Romano. In her controversial essay *Coming Out Olive in the Lesbian Community: Big sister is Watching you* Romano (1996) by calling herself Olive, critiques the lesbian community for not being able to look at differences within the white community.²³

The examples analysed have shown that translation and language play a crucial role in diasporic narratives. To overcome the schizophrenia inherent in a bilingual culture the writers of *Curraggia* must reevaluate the heritage culture by impregnating the English language with the meaning and the emotions left behind in the Italian or Southern Italian dialect (Pivato 1994). The risk is that the use of Italian and Southern Italian dialects in the texts becomes empty signs, and the otherness sought to enrich and understand the self is often never grasped. However, the Italian in the text contaminates the English (see the lower-case for I, Italian and Sicilian in Ciatu's poem, and the Italian pronunciation of 'you gotta have a lotta gusts' in the second poem by Capone) and the Italian is contaminated by the English (the spelling of the Italian words is often wrong and reproduces an Italian pronounced with an English accent). The hybridity created by multilingualism I believe disrupts binary oppositions between cultures and so contributes to queering stereotypical images of family and ethnicity.

²² According the Italian dictionary compiled by De Mauro (2006), *paesano* is 'chi e nativo o abitante di un paese' (the person who was born and lives in a village). For an Italian, *paesano* is thus a person who is from the same town or a nearby town in Italy. For an Italian-North-American instead, *paesano* refers to Italians from the same region in Italy while for English-North Americans who are not of Italian origin it can signify Italians in general and it is used in a friendly way.

²³ Rose Romano is the author of two collections of poetry: *Vendetta* (1990) and *The Wop Factor* (1994) (Lorriggio 1997). She wrote also the essay, *Coming out Olive in the Lesbian Community: Big Sister is Watching You* (Romano 1996).

Translation is a metaphor of queer: a constant movement back and forth between cultural values in the impossibility of separating one vision from the other, and with the desire of not being trapped by fixity. Translation also exemplifies the mechanisms through which diasporic narratives are constructed: by a constant movement in and out, by an energy which destabilizes current assumptions, which queers stereotypes. This movement in and out generates hyperspace, ‘spaces that are physically inhabited and those that are absent traces or memory of the past’ (Beneventi 2004: 221-222). Memory and time cannot be separated from the concept of space since the writers of *Curraggia*, by re-imagining home, include in the same poetic and discursive space both the present, the memories of the absent past and the desires of the future.

Queer and translation participate therefore in the narrative construction of the Italian-North American/Canadian women writers. I would like to call such a narrative ‘transqueer’. Narratives demand that the meaning of an event be discerned only by connecting it, spatially and temporally, to other events. A core idea of narrative is emplotment; according to social narrative scholars Somers and Gibson (1994), plot is a construct made out of elements selectively chosen and causally linked together in a given setting and time.

By adding the concept of narrative to transqueer, we stress the importance of looking at queer identity as a plot in which every element is strictly connected to and dependant on the other, as in a web. This brings us back to the necessity, stated in the introduction of this paper, of considering queer identity as inclusive of many intersecting identities, such as race and ethnicity, which have been ignored in the mainstream perception of queer. The examples analysed proved that for these women, returning home is a way of queering ethnic identity (which has always been considered fixed) through their ‘queer’ sexuality. In so doing they also re-perform their ethnicity; they re-ethnicise themselves and state their cultural diversity, enriching their understanding of queer (Fortier 1999).

A clear example of this is given by Laura Scaccia Beagle (1998: 137)²⁴ in the poem ‘Syllables, Symbols and Rhythm’ in *Curraggia*:

²⁴ Laura Scaccia Beagle is a guitarist, singer, songwriter and a teacher of English as a second language to adult women. She lived in the Chicago area most of her life (Ciatu et al eds. 1998: 353).

It was much more difficult to explore [...], embrace the identity of being queer. I honestly struggled with the labels “lesbian” and “dyke”. For me the queer identity is uncovered rather than proscribed or apparent in the same way ethnicity is. I have struggled with a queer identity as shameful [...]

[but then] I became aware of how interwoven my Italian identity is with my woman-loving identity. I think it's impossible to view them separately (1998: 137).

7. Conclusion

This article has aimed to expand recent discussions of queer diasporas by including in the analysis terms such as translation, language and narrative. *Curraggia* has provided a starting point for tackling these concepts since many of the stories featured in this anthology deal in general with the notion of female sexuality and homosexuality, and with their close connections to the ideas of language and ethnicity. Notwithstanding the fact that *Curraggia* takes the form of a fictional account of the lives of a great number of women, it was born as a political project to give a voice to ‘ethnic’ Italian women. The queer agenda of *Curraggia* is present, therefore, in the investigation of a paradoxical and unthinkable link: being Italian and being lesbian in the traditional diasporic Italian communities in North America. The anthology fictionalised nature does not prevent a sociological analysis of the concept of queer since the borders between fiction and non-fiction have become more and more blurred. Fictional narratives cannot be separated from ‘narrative’ as understood in the social sciences: literature has an indexical value both for history and society and must be analysed with relation to the needs of society at large (Iser 1993: 263). Furthermore, the notion of queer is better understood by taking into account the power of fiction, the power of the creativity that, as in a play, ‘liberates the imaginary from all banal everyday links and enables us to see things differently’ (Iser 1993: 158). Through examples taken from the anthology *Curraggia* and from other related writings, I have investigated the ways in which queer in diasporic contexts re-magines, reinvents, redresses gender, sex and ethnicity and the way in which ethnicity also re-visits the presumed homogenisation of queer in North America, which does not currently take into account cultural specificities.

The women of *Curraggia* who had separated different spheres of their lives in order to survive in different environments (either in the often heterosexist and homophobic Italian families or in the assimilationist North American environment), set out on a journey which takes them back to family, the first ethnic network as stated by Fortier (1999: 4) as a source of their suffering and exclusion but also as an imaginative metaphor of possible enrichment and change, of new and creative ways of being, as expressed by Anna Camilleri in *I am a red dress*:

I believe in the power of narrative, and I believe that imagination is the single most important precursor to change. [...] I saw a future for *myself* in my stories- and it was there that I created a place for myself in the world, where I made sense of my experience (Camilleri 2004: 173).

Starting from the ideas of Brah (1996) and Fortier (1999; 2001; 2003) regarding queer and diasporas as homing desires, as remaking home, I then interpret this metaphorical journey home as characterised by a linguistic and cultural translation, by a displacement which challenges temporal and spatial fixity and which contributes to the construction of unfixed narratives which I call 'transqueer' (from the terms translation and queer).

The notion of narrative as applied to transqueer allows me also to elaborate on an understanding of queer in the Italian-North American diasporic context so that it includes ethnicity. Such a notion offers the possibility of understanding just how interwoven are the many aspects of our personalities and how important is to look at the co-presence of different identities within the same person. Ultimately it allows us to see how these identities are spatially and temporally interconnected in order to create that difference, that specificity which the women of *Curraggia* invoke for themselves.

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