



# Queer(ing) Italo-Québécois Literature

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Working paper series

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The word "Canada" in a serif font, with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".



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# The Struggle for Recognition

In 2018, Monica Meneghetti published “I’m Queer and Italian-Canadian – Coming Out Was Twice as Hard” in the *Globe and Mail*. That is the seed that set my research in motion. The year before, Vancouver-based Meneghetti came to Montreal to read from *What the Mouth Wants* (2017), a memoir about food and her queer lived experience. She chose to read only about food, preferring not to share queer content with the Italian-Montreal audience. She was fearful of the audience’s reaction.<sup>1</sup>

There are approximately 316,000 residents of Italian heritage in Quebec;<sup>2</sup> Italian is the fifth most spoken language in Montreal.<sup>3</sup> A growing number of Italo-Québécois identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>4</sup> They are openly queer outside the family circle and beyond the Italian community. Traditionally, the queer experience is not discussed or even acknowledged in Italian immigrant households. It’s not a topic for Sunday lunch with the family, as Anthony Portulose vividly illustrates in his creative nonfiction text “Another Timeless Italian Tradition.” There is still some reticence in the Italian community, in both private and public spaces. “Italian immigrants, they weren’t gay,” Steve Galluccio states in the documentary *Creative Spaces: Queer and Italian Canadian* (2021). The traditional values of the Italian community in Quebec have often led to the marginalization of its members who identify as queer. “It’s a kind of trauma,” says Domenico Beneventi in *Creative Spaces*. Still today, in some cases, those who identify as LGBTQ+ are shunned by their own family. Some queer children may experience rejection or prejudice much like that which their parents or grandparents lived when they arrived as immigrants to a new country decades ago. They may be treated like outsiders, or they may be made to feel that they do not belong.

This paper explores the cultural production of Quebec English-language writers who function at the intersection of ethnicity and sexual identity: the LGBTQ+ and Italian community. We will introduce the writing of established and emerging literary artists: Steve Galluccio, Christopher DiRaddo, Liana Cusmano<sup>5</sup> (aka BiCurious George), Vee DG (aka Vanessa Di Gregorio), Anthony Portulose and others. These writers are the children or grandchildren of Italian immigrants to Quebec, and they identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

- 1 In fact, in her *Globe and Mail* article, Meneghetti recounts that some members of the audience who purchased the book emailed her to complain that they had been misled.
- 2 Statistics Canada. *Census Profile: 2021 Census of Population*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. 15 Dec. 2022, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&SearchText=quebec&DGUIDlist=2021A00052466023,2021A000224&-GENDERlist=1&STATISTIClist=1&HEADERlist=0>, accessed 8 Jan. 2023).
- 3 According to 2021 “knowledge of languages” data. Statistics Canada. *Census Profile: 2021 Census of Population*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. 15 Dec. 2022. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&SearchText=quebec&DGUIDlist=2021A00052466023,2021A000224&GENDERlist=1&STATISTIClist=1&HEADERlist=0>.
- 4 The writers discussed here use the acronym LGBTQ+ instead of the more inclusive 2SLGBTQIA+. LGBTQ+ is more easily recognized by non-activist / non-academic communities. The 2S designation does not fall within the scope of this paper because the writers discussed are of Italian heritage.
- 5 Liana Cusmano is my first-born child.

We will discuss the connection between their creative work, Italian heritage and queer identity. We will also explore how these writers and their works are received by the larger Italo-Québécois society.

The beginning of Italian-Canadian literature is often cited as the late 1970s, with the publication of *Roman Candles: An Anthology of Poems by Seventeen Italo-Canadian Poets* (1978) edited by Pier Giorgio Di Cicco. In 1983, Fulvio Caccia and Antonio D'Alfonso edited *Quêtes: Textes d'auteurs italo-québécois*, which included the work of 18 writers. Some contributions were translated into French from English and Italian.<sup>6</sup>

Over the past four decades of literary production by Italians in Quebec, scholarship has been dedicated to this corpus, including M.A. and Ph.D. theses. However, only a few scholars (see Michela Baldo, Domenico Beneventi, Paolo Frascà) have published on queer Italian-Canadian literature. There has not been any specific focus on queer Italo-Québécois literature in English until recently. This began to change with the release of *Creative Spaces: Queer and Italian Canadian* (2021), a 28-minute documentary in which three Montreal English-language writers (Steve Galluccio, Christopher DiRaddo and Liana Cusmano) discuss the intersections between their lives and their work. In 2022, the film was presented at Montreal's international film festival image+nation culture queer.<sup>7</sup>

Given the final version of the film, the subtitle of *Creative Spaces* could have been "Queer and Italian Montreal." However, in 2019, when we began the research, we had planned to interview the 10 writers we had identified across Canada. Domenico Beneventi writes, "It was an eye-opening and touching experience, bringing together two worlds that so often seem at odds with each other: on one side, family traditions held together by immigrant memory, the Italian language and its various dialects, the rituals and celebrations of domestic life, reunions, food, and extended family; on the other, chosen families based on networks of friendship and care, on community organizations and, yes, on nightlife" (*Here & Now*, 15). Because the research leading to the documentary *Creative Spaces* sparked much interest across the country, we produced an anthology (*Here & Now*): "one that shows the rich and complex experiences of queer Italian Canadians" (*H&N* 15).<sup>8</sup>

By introducing and discussing a specific cultural production—a growing literary corpus in Canada—we look at the meaning of the term "queer" in the post-migratory community of Italo-Québécois writers who use English as their primary language. We are examining the concept of "queer" within a

- 6 Mary Melfi, Filippo Salvatore and Vincenzo Albanese were included in both *Roman Candles* and *Quêtes*. In the early years, English-language writers of Italian origin in Quebec included Mary Melfi, Antonio D'Alfonso, Filippo Salvatore and, a few years later, Mary di Michele, who moved to Montreal from Toronto. French-language writers included Marco Micone, Fulvio Caccia, Paul Tana, Carole David, Bianca Zagolin, Lisa Carducci, and Francis Catalano; and Italian-language writers, Lamberto Tassinari, Elettra Bedon, Nico Bignami, Corrado Mastropasqua, and Ermanno La Riccia.
- 7 "A pioneer of LGBTQ+ cinema for close to four decades, image+nation culture queer is dedicated to sharing the stories and experiences of LGBTQ+ people through film and media" (image+nation, "About Us").
- 8 *Here & Now: An Anthology of Queer Italian-Canadian Writing* (2021), edited by Licia Canton. Page references from this volume will be indicated as H&N. The volume includes the literary work of more than 35 queer Italian-Canadians, and there is a second volume in the making, scheduled for publication in 2023. The research involved in this project has led us to identify close to 50 queer and Italian-Canadian writers. Those who are English-language writers in Quebec are discussed in this paper.

diasporic framework and illustrating what that looks like in Quebec and on the Italo-Québécois literary scene. As literary critic Michela Baldo writes, “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” (“Queer” 35). Baldo’s study on queer Italian-North American women writers is pertinent to our discussion of queer Italo-Québécois writers. Similarly, the documentary *Creative Spaces* presents interviews with Italo-Québécois writers that focus on temporality, spatiality, and affect. Domenico Beneventi, literary critic and queer studies scholar, provides a theoretical framework for these interviews and discusses the notions of transgression, intergenerational conflict, and creativity.<sup>9</sup>

In his introduction to *Here & Now* (2021), Beneventi notes that “the invisibility of queer writers of Italian-Canadian origin may be explained, to some degree, by the lingering taboos around the subject matter—some are still not comfortable writing such personal stories” (*H&N* 16). He makes the point that “demographics and patterns of migration” are also a factor: “since the majority of Italian Canadians can trace their roots back to the large wave of Italian immigration... the transitional generation would not be writing about these kinds of subjects. It is their children and their grandchildren, born and raised in Canada, who are writing their queer stories, and we start to see an identifiable body of queer writing emerge in the early 2000s” (Beneventi, *H&N* 16).

The term “queer,” Beneventi writes, “has increasingly become recognizable as shorthand for a very diverse collection of communities and sexual and gender identities” (*H&N* 17–8). Whereas openly identifying as a member of the LGBTQ+ community can be accepted in Québécois society, it is not quite so within the Italian-immigrant community.<sup>10</sup> To echo Meneghetti’s experience, it is important to point out that the contribution of LGBTQ+ individuals was absent at the exhibit “Italian Montréal,” held at the Pointe-à-Callière museum from March 10, 2021, to January 16, 2022. The objective of the exhibit was to showcase “the community’s important contribution to economic, social, and cultural life in Montréal” (Pointe-à-Callière Museum). Although the exhibit included filmmakers and playwrights, as well as movie clips, Steve Galluccio and his work were left out. This appears to be an example of the Italian community contributing to the erasure of LGBTQ+ realities, which Beneventi talks about in the documentary *Creative Spaces* (2021).

9 For studies that deal with the concept of “queer” in diasporic contexts, see Fortier 1999, 2001, 2003.

10 In a recent virtual event, Anna Camilleri (a contributor to *Here & Now*) states that despite making art as an openly queer and Italian-Canadian creator for 25 years, still today people come to her in a whisper to say: “I’m also Italian and queer” (*Here & Now: An Anthology of Queer and Italian-Canadian Writing - Reading and Discussion*, 52:14–53:28).

At a public event on July 21, 2022, Steve Galluccio mentioned that he wrote to the Pointe-à-Callière museum to express his disappointment (Queer and Italian in Montreal, 105:17). The email response from Pointe-à-Callière, as Galluccio explained, was that the exhibit was created with the active participation of Montreal's Italian community and specific organizations.<sup>11</sup> Galluccio concluded that “prominent members of Montreal's Italian community” did not want him in the exhibit. One of the exhibit components was a video featuring about 130 Italian Montrealers: from medicine to business to the arts. At least two playwrights featured at Centaur were included, but not Galluccio, whose plays were produced at the same theatre.<sup>12</sup> Including Galluccio's photo or displaying his books or a poster of his international hit *Mambo Italiano* would be to openly include LGBTQ+ material in the exhibit. This modus operandi, then, functions as a form of erasure.

In the film *Creative Spaces*, Galluccio states that he wishes young people knew more about the struggle of LGBTQ+ individuals. In fact, the exhibit does not reflect an accurate or full account of Italian-Montreal history and lived experience. Young LGBTQ+ Italian Montrealers would not have seen themselves represented in the exhibit. As a child of Italian immigrants, Steve Galluccio dedicated his professional and creative life to LGBTQ+ issues. Through his writing for the stage and screen, as well as in interviews, he has actively brought queer Italo-Québécois issues and voices to the fore. Galluccio's creative work and his struggle as a gay man are clearly part of the history of Montreal's Italian community (Galluccio, *Creative Spaces*).<sup>13</sup>

In direct response to the Pointe-à-Callière exhibit's omission, and erasure of a component of the community, the event “Queer and Italian Montreal” was held on July 21, 2022.<sup>14</sup> Hosted by Christopher DiRaddo, it featured Steve Galluccio, Vee DG and Gaspare Borsellino, once president of the *Gruppo Italiano Gay e Lesbico di Montreal* or GIGL.<sup>15</sup> In June 2022, Borsellino donated GIGL's 10 years' worth of documents<sup>16</sup> to the *Archives gaies du Québec*. It is surprising, then, that the organizations responsible for the “Italian Montréal” exhibit did not find

11 The Pointe-à-Callière website lists the following organizations: Italian-Canadian Community Foundation, Alliance Donne/Femmes italiennes du Québec, Canadian Italian Business & Professional Association (CIBPA Montréal), Casa d'Italia Montréal / Casa d'Italia Archives / Italian-Canadian Community Archives of Quebec at the Casa d'Italia, Italian Institute of Culture in Montreal, National Congress of Italian-Canadians (Québec Region), Order Sons and Daughters of Italy.

12 Galluccio's most recent play, *In the Beginning of Time*, is scheduled to be shown at Centaur Theatre in winter 2023, <https://centaurtheatre.com/shows/at-the-beginning-of-time/>, accessed 8 Jan. 2023.

13 “I was very political during the act up, the whole AIDS era. We've had a lot of gains, there's still I think a lot of work to do, but I'll let the younger generation deal with that. I think that gay history is not maybe taught enough ... a lot of young gays think that it's always been this easy ... when I do tell them about the discrimination we faced in Montreal... The police profiling, the protests ... the raids of the bars and all that, they know nothing about it. And I wish that more people would talk about it.”

14 The public event was held at the Italian Cultural Institute with the support of Accenti Magazine and Festival Fierté Montreal as part of its programming. The event included a roundtable discussion about what it means to be queer and Italian in Montreal. Istituto Italiano di Cultura Montreal. “Queer and Italian Montreal.” *Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation*, 21 July 2022, [https://iicmontreal.esteri.it/iic\\_montreal/en/gli\\_eventi/calendario/2022/07/queer-e-italian-montreal.html](https://iicmontreal.esteri.it/iic_montreal/en/gli_eventi/calendario/2022/07/queer-e-italian-montreal.html). Accessed 8 Jan. 2023. See “Queer & Italian in Montreal.”

15 The group had 70 members and lasted for approximately 10 years, from 1996 to 2006.

16 These included magazines, brochures, and newspapers, as well as administrative documents about the activities of GIGL. Alan Wong mentions GIGL and interviews Gaspare Borsellino in his Ph.D. thesis: “Between Rage and Love”: Disidentifications Among Racialized, Ethnicized, and Colonized Allosexual Activists in Montreal.” The Federazione Puglia Montreal's outdated site still mentions GIGL and a phone number: <http://www.federazionepugliamontreal.com/indirizzi-e-telefoni-utili-di-montreal>.

evidence of the *Gruppo Italiano Gay e Lesbico di Montreal*. For the community at large, the group was invisible. In fact, as stated on the *Archives gaies du Québec* website, “Il est rare de recevoir un don d’une communauté culturelle.”<sup>17</sup> As Borsellino mentioned at the “Queer and Italian Montreal” event on July 21, GIGL was born because gays and lesbians born into the Italian community in Montreal sought like-minded people to socialize with, people they could identify with.<sup>18</sup> The “Queer and Italian Montreal” event was “a sort of redressing” for the oversight of the Pointe-à-Callière exhibit (DiRaddo, “Queer & Italian in Montreal”).



Left to right: Christopher DiRaddo, Steve Galluccio, Gaspare Borsellino, Vee DG. July 21, 2022. Courtesy Italian Cultural Institute in Montreal.

- 17 In Quebec, “communauté culturelle” is a government term which refers to an ethno-cultural minority (not the Francophone cultural majority), originating from various immigrant groups (Italian, Vietnamese, etc.) and making up the cultural diversity in Quebec society.
- 18 Borsellino mentions that, when GIGL sent a public service announcement to publicize their events to Italian-community newspapers, the announcement was published without the words Gay e Lesbico, thereby modifying/censoring the name of the group. That was in the 1990s and early 2000s. It would appear that there is still resistance today. See “Queer & Italian in Montreal.”



# Works in English by Queer Italo-Québécois Writers

The literary production of Italo-Québécois artists is quite varied. Steve Galluccio, Christopher DiRaddo, Liana Cusmano, Vee DG and Anthony Portulose represent different generations, ranging in age from twenties to sixties. All of them have presented their work in public spaces, either in person or virtually, and are recognized by their peers in literary circles. Galluccio and DiRaddo have been active much longer than the younger writers who have come to the fore within the past decade.

## Steve Galluccio



Still from *Creative Spaces* (2021).

Playwright and screenwriter Steve Galluccio was born in Montreal in 1960. His parents both emigrated from the small town of Galluccio in the Italian province of Caserta.<sup>19</sup> He was raised in Little Italy. He graduated from Concordia University with a Bachelor's degree in translation. As Galluccio states in "You're Never Gonna Make It" (Galluccio, 2021), he "never really worked as a professional translator except for translating" his own work. He later took creative writing workshops at Concordia, where one of his theatre professors said that he "was born to write" (*H&N* 49).

Steve Galluccio has written about his Italian-immigrant roots and about being gay. His work includes the Gemini award-winning TV series *Ciao Bella* (2004-2005), *Surviving My Mother* (2007), *In Piazza San Domenico* (2009), *Funkytown* (2011), *Montréal à la Galluccio* (2012), *The St. Leonard Chronicles* (2013) and

19 Steve's father arrived in Montreal in 1951, and his mother, a year later. They were married in Montreal. "Like many Italian immigrants, my parents contributed to Montreal's Italian community. I am very aware of Italian-immigrant culture and its evolution within the context of Montreal" (*H&N* 50).

*Little Italy* (2018). He is perhaps best known for the play *Mambo Italiano*<sup>20</sup> (2002), which is still produced all over the world. Galluccio's works are, in his own words, "distinctly about Italian-immigrant culture" (*H&N* 49). Scholar Michael Heinz describes Steve Galluccio as "an Anglophone playwright of Italian extraction" who "cast a critical look at Québec as an immigrant nation through the filter of Italo-Québécois attitudes to homosexuality" (Heinz 75).

Still today, queer literary artists do not always feel comfortable writing about their lived experience or creating fictional characters that reflect that reality. However, Galluccio came out through his play: "When my play *Mambo Italiano* first came out, I had a really hard time talking about being gay. Everyone knew I was gay because of the play. I couldn't deny it. I was used to not talking about being gay" (*H&N* 49). The play was adapted into the movie, *Mambo Italiano* (2003),<sup>21</sup> sold in more than 53 countries, and brought Galluccio international recognition.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the movie has brought attention to the city of Montreal.<sup>23</sup> Galluccio's recent post on social media illustrates the importance he ascribes to the play *Mambo Italiano*.<sup>24</sup>

- 20 In *Mambo Italiano*, Angelo and Nino are a hidden same-sex couple in a conservative and Catholic Italo-Québécois society. They break up when Angelo tells his parents that he's gay and Nino does not come out of the closet.
- 21 In the documentary *Creative Spaces*, Galluccio states that his parents attended the French-language premiere in 2000; that is how they found out that their son was gay. Although Galluccio wrote the semi-autobiographical play *Mambo Italiano* in English, Michel Tremblay's French translation was produced first, by Théâtre Jean-Duceppe in the year 2000. In 2001, Montreal's Centaur Theatre produced the English premiere. The play was adapted into a film by Steve Galluccio and Émile Gaudreault.
- 22 It is the most noted creative work by a Québécois (or Canadian) of Italian origin who identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community.
- 23 One cannot overestimate the influence of the film on the international level, as traveller Uwern Jong writes: "About a decade ago, a friend handed me a DVD of a Canadian gay movie, *Mambo Italiano*, charting the adventures of a young gay Italian man trying to break tradition in his stereotypical first-generation dysfunctional family and migrant community in Montreal, Quebec." Jong admits that "Canada's second-largest city wasn't ever really on my radar ... before watching the movie, there wasn't really much of a reason to visit Montreal... But the movie did succeed, beneath its gay storyline, to paint a charming impression of Montreal for me... Montreal seemed like a laid-back, village-like, cycle-friendly, coffee-cultured, foodie-frenzied, cultural melting pot. And what's more, the city had an "Omosessuale Village," <https://www.outthere.travel/montreal-taking-pride/>.
- 24 "Last night. There I was in at Théâtre Jean Duceppe. The birthplace of *Mambo Italiano*. 22 years ago next month. And just before the brilliant play Showtime started, ... a brief video on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this legendary theatre company, in a venue that holds 800 audience members, was shown. 'Les grandes comédies de Duceppe.' And there it was. Again. *Mambo Italiano*, on screen, on the stage of its birth. One of the company's biggest hits that began its beyond my-wildest-imagination journey there. A rush of memories came flooding back of that opening night. 22 years ago. The exhilaration. The thunderous laughs and the applause. It all came back, electrifying my being. 22 years. So many lifetimes ago. So much has gone down since then. Loves, deaths, illness. But that. *Mambo Italiano*. Remains unscathed" (Facebook, 18 Nov. 2022).

## Christopher DiRaddo



Still from *Creative Spaces* (2021).

Christopher DiRaddo was born in Lasalle, Quebec, in 1974, of a Montreal-born father of Italian descent and a mother of Irish descent. His paternal grandfather emigrated from Italy to Montreal in 1927, then brought his wife over. Both came from the small town of San Pietro Infine in the province of Caserta.<sup>25</sup> DiRaddo has been active on the Montreal literary scene for about two decades.<sup>26</sup> He is the founder and host of the Violet Hour Reading Series and book club. He also organizes LGBTQ+ literary events in collaboration with Fierté Montréal and the Blue Metropolis International Literary Festival. In a recent article, he describes his journey as a young gay Montrealer and his connection to Fierté Montreal (DiRaddo, 2022).

DiRaddo has published short stories, nonfiction and interviews. He is the author of two novels: *The Geography of Pluto* (2014) and *The Family Way* (2021). The first is about Will, a 28-year-old who comes out to his mother while getting over a love affair. Through Will, the author presents the city of Montreal and in particular life in the gay village. In the documentary *Creative Spaces*, DiRaddo states that he's "a kid of the village" (DiRaddo, *Creative Spaces*) that's where he understood that he could make a life for himself, that he could aspire to become more than a priest. He wanted to become "a professional homosexual" (DiRaddo, *Creative Spaces*). Through his character's experiences in the village, DiRaddo counters Will's mother's assessment that being gay is "a very lonely life." The novelist creates a character who has a full social

- 25 Interestingly, Christopher's paternal grandmother was born in Ontario. His great grandfather was one of the Italians who came to Canada to build bridges. He and his wife had a few children (including Chris' grandmother) in Canada, then returned to San Pietro Infine. Therefore, his paternal grandmother was born in Ontario, raised in Italy, and returned to Canada when she married.
- 26 As DiRaddo explains in *Creative Spaces*, after the last LGBTQ+ bookstore closed, he decided to start the series: "Something happened to me I think when I turned forty where I just realized that the things that I wanted to happen in my life maybe weren't happening fast enough and I wanted to kind of do things... It's too bad Montreal doesn't have a gay bookstore anymore, for instance. So well why don't we do an event where we bring in LGBTQ authors into town so that they have a place to read from their books and find new readers." DiRaddo produces "The Violet Letter," a monthly newsletter devoted to LGBTQ literature in Montreal.

and romantic life. DiRaddo's *The Family Way* goes further by chronicling the experience of a gay man who donates sperm to lesbian friends so that they may conceive a child. In an interview with journalist Matthew Hays, DiRaddo says, "I realized I had an opportunity here to comment on what it means to be a family." Rachel Giese describes *The Family Way* as "an astute chronicle of modern queer life at middle age" and "a timely tale about creating families that can fit us all" (DiRaddo, 2021).

## Liana Cusmano



Still from *Creative Spaces* (2021).

Liana Cusmano (they/them), also known as Luca and BiCurious George, was born in Montreal in 1995. Although Cusmano's father was born in Montreal, his parents emigrated from Calabria, in southern Italy. Liana Cusmano's mother, was born in the Veneto region, in northern Italy, and arrived in Montreal as a child. A graduate of McGill University, Cusmano is a novelist, poet, spoken word artist and filmmaker.<sup>27</sup> Cusmano was the 2018 and 2019 Montreal Slam Champion, and runner-up in the 2019 Canadian Individual Poetry Slam Championship. They have performed at Montreal's Pride and in the "I See You" tour. Liana Cusmano has published in English, French, and Italian. They wrote and directed the film *Matters of Great Unimportance* (2019), based on their short story by the same title published in 2016. They also wrote the film script for *La Femme Finale*, screened at the Cannes Film Festival (2015). Cusmano created "Peuple, Poésie, Politique" in the television documentary series *Vivre ensemble* (2021). As Cusmano indicates in their biographical note, "through writing that focuses on heritage, queerness, and mental health," they aim "to help others feel seen and safe" (*Open Book* 2022 and CIBA Books 2022).

27 Cusmano ran in the 2019 federal election and worked as Interim President of the Green Party of Canada (2020-2021). They are also the youth representative for Italian-Quebecers who have roots in the Veneto region and attend the annual congress in Italy. Source: La Fédération des Associations de la Vénétie au Québec.

Cusmano's debut novel, *Catch and Release*, is about coming of age and coming out. The narrator, 21-year-old Lucca, looks back on her childhood and adolescence as she comes to terms with her sexual orientation. As Kaila Johnson comments, "The non-linear timeline, moving between the past and the present, unfolds the complexity of Lucca's relationship to her queerness." Cusmano's main character must also acknowledge that she needs medical care for depression and anxiety: "I was doing so poorly... I wanted to be a calm, stable, grown-up university student at the cusp of her twenties, who wasn't sad all the time or constantly fending off anxiety attacks or always feeling like she was a thousand different people all caught up in one evolving body of suicidal teenage sameness" (*Catch* 116). Crystal Sutherland writes: "As Lucca works through her past and deals with her present, she spends a great deal of time considering ways to end her pain, thinking about what it would be like to vanish, and thinking of ways she could end her life."<sup>28</sup>

Cusmano's writing deals with their Italian origins and the constant battle to assert their identity, a motivator for creative expression. Several spoken word performances and published texts address loved ones who work against the queer narrator. As Michela Baldo points out, in Cusmano's "A Poem About My Grandmother"<sup>29</sup> (2020), the elderly woman's constant misgendering of the grandchild is an "unintentional and devastating form of erasure" (*H&N* 31). In a performed (slightly different) version titled "Boyfriend," Cusmano says, "My grandmother doesn't understand why I can't just do things the way she did, the way my mother did, the way her mother did, as if we were all objects on an assembly line instead of items crafted by hand."<sup>30</sup> In "Snails," Cusmano uses the snail as a metaphor for a trans person. Cusmano writes: "Our silhouettes are holding hands in the petrichor on the night we hear a cracking beneath our feet. We crouch down in the dark and see dozens of snails. Snails that have come out onto the sidewalk to breathe after the rain, snails that meet their untimely demise as their shells are crushed beneath the sole of someone's shoe. You only notice that they're there after you've already stepped on one" (*H&N* 151).

28 In evaluating the book for youth, Sutherland warns, "The rapid first-person narrative bringing the reader into Lucca's sometimes obsessive thinking and the success of the narration could be harmful to readers who have experienced suicidal thoughts." See <https://www.cmreviews.ca/node/3011>, accessed 11 Dec. 2022.

29 See also Cusmano's personal essay "So, You Have Boyfriend?" in *Transformations Canada*.

30 See performed version: <https://www.facebook.com/productionseureka/videos/865062777684181/>, accessed 11 Dec. 2022. Eureka Productions, "Performance 'Boyfriend' de Liana Cusmano," Facebook, 8 Apr. 2021.



## Vee DG (Vanessa Di Gregorio)



Courtesy of Vee DG.

Vee DG (they/them), also known as Vanessa Di Gregorio, was born in Montreal in 1993 and raised in St. Leonard. Their father was born in Montreal, of parents who came from the province of L'Aquila, in the region of Abruzzo. Vee DG's mother was born in Molise, Campobasso, and immigrated with her parents to Montreal.

A nonbinary multimedia artist and writer, Vee DG's work focuses on transnationalism, historical revisionism and the personal, and the inconsistencies of memory. They have degrees in photography and film production from Concordia University. They are a founding member of CIAO (Canadian Italians Against Oppression). They are dedicated to social justice work, community mutual aid, and providing a platform for marginalized voices through community art.

Vee DG's work deals with Italian heritage, immigrant settings and a search for identity, bringing together the present and the past through memory and physical spaces ([vanessaaisling.com](http://vanessaaisling.com)). In the poetic prose text "I remember you as you were," Vee DG writes:

*I have been waiting for a rebirth of wonder, a sense of discovery. I am dropping tiny figures on maps in binary, remembering other fragments. Here, a bathroom where I took it all in my mouth. Here, an abandoned lot where he felt it acceptable to touch. There, a castle where I rested my head one night. There, a table overlooking the still blue sea, we shared a breakfast. There, I felt it—the wonder. Felt it so entirely, felt discovered, a ship arriving even though I existed before the ship ever docked.*

*We know they did not discover America. They were not the first to sow their seeds... I am afraid that the wounds heal, but the scars keep people away. I am afraid the wonder was a culmination of imaginary moments whose peak occurs at a meeting with the board of immigration officers. Decisions of fate. I am afraid the moments will disappear and fade over time, like ticket stubs I keep. Ticket stubs that lose their shape and ink, stored in a box in an otherwise empty closet. I keep them because I know they meant something to me once, but I can no longer remember what (Di Gregorio).*

In their personal essay “Repentance,” Vee DG explores three different settings: their grandparents’ home in the Montreal neighbourhood of St. Michel, the hometown in Molise, Italy, and the twin towers in New York City. The author reflects on the destruction that has taken place in each location and how it has affected them as an individual:

*The Italy the year of the earthquake: 2002. It was the same year Nonna & Nonno’s Saint Michel home flooded. Nonna woke up to discover many of the relics they’d brought with them from Italy were destroyed... .*

*The earthquake and the flood and the towers. These moments were so earth shattering, so distinct, and with each of them, the gap between the person I was before and after widened (H&N 81-2).*

Vee DG’s creative work juxtaposes their “Italian Mediterranean heritage and Canadian nationality” and illustrates the struggle of living in between both realities. “I exist between both,” Vee DG confirms (vanessaaisling.com). “Nen te ne jí” (which translates as “Don’t Leave”) is “a commemoration of the Italian immigrant presence in Montreal.” The piece was inspired by Montreal’s Little Italy: “The everyday stories of the neighbourhood are now lost, but I searched for the traces of its families, and their first movements here: Were they happy? Did they regret their journey?” As a second-generation immigrant, Vee DG asks “what has been left behind?”

## Anthony Portulese



Courtesy of Anthony Portulese.

Anthony Portulese was born in 1993 and raised in the east end of Montreal. His parents were both born in Montreal and raised in Italian immigrant homes. His maternal grandparents came from Bellosguardo, Campania. His paternal grandmother was from Scanno, Abruzzo, and his grandfather, from San Nicola d'Ardore, Calabria.

Anthony Portulese currently works in human rights law but also has degrees in art history and pharmacology. His literary work has been featured on the *Short Story Show* podcast. He published an article about his great-aunt and her role in Quebec activism, titled "How 'Those Uneducated Italians' Secured Education Rights for Canadians." Portulese's writing on art history appears in *Rutgers Art Review*. An excerpt of his forthcoming first novel, set in Montreal and titled "Two Cousins in a Café," appears in *Here & Now* (2021).

In his nonfiction text, "Another Timeless Italian Tradition," Portulese describes his discomfort at family gatherings when he is pressured to bring home a girlfriend. His grandmother suspects that her grandson is gay and encourages him to confide in her. This is evident when she says how much she loves the orderly, Pierre, who had nursed her husband in his final months:

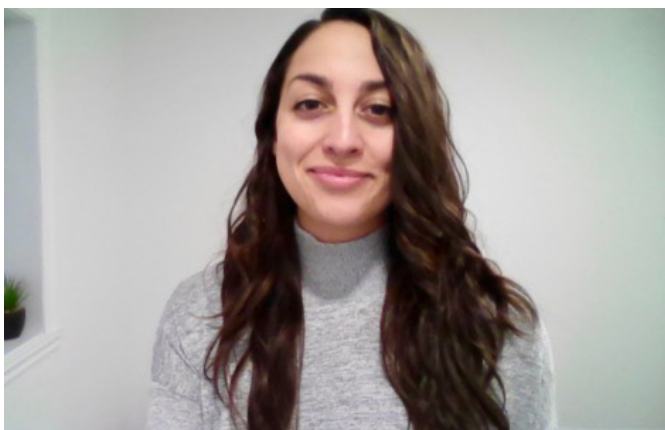


*"Y'know..." she interjected. "Pierre, 'e likes boys..." "I realize... liking boys... I t'ink it's ok. It's 'ow Pierre was, ah... born, yeah? An' I still love 'im... jus' like a gran'son, I do."*

*I suddenly found myself matching her heavy breath. Perhaps she believed it was her first and final opportunity to broach this subject (H&N 79).*

Unlike DiRaddo's main character in *The Geography of Pluto*, who tells his mother he is gay when he worries she may die in the hospital, Portuluese is unable to come out to his grandmother on her deathbed.

## Julia Gerbasi



Courtesy of Julia Gerbasi.

Julia Gerbasi was born in 1994 and grew up in St. Leonard. Her parents were both born in Montreal. Her maternal grandparents and her paternal grandfather emigrated from Calabria. Her paternal grandmother is from the Campania region. Gerbasi is the author of *Unsent Letters* (2021). As Pamela Pagano points out, "The chapters of Julia Gerbasi's life are finely intertwined with the act of writing." The letters are to family and other loved ones as well as to the author herself. The "key themes" of her life are "breaking and holding the traditions of my Italian Canadian family." Gerbasi's writing deals with anxiety and gender-role expectations. *Unsent Letters* represents "myself and my truth," says the author. "So LGBTQ community as well as mental health" (Pagano). Gerbasi states, "you can call me Mind Wanderer, or you can call me Rainbow Girl (yes, cue pride flag emoji)." Gerbasi includes an image of a handwritten poem on her site:

*I don't want to be idealized  
I want to be seen  
heard, accepted, forgiven, understood  
Known  
for the light  
& who I am beneath  
all the broken and distorted pieces of me  
(signed Jules)<sup>31</sup>*

31 Gerbasi's writing is accessible on her website: <https://www.juliagerbasi.com/>.

## Other Writers

The volume *Here & Now* includes the writing of Alessandro Giardino and Phoebe Fregoli. Although they live or have lived in Montreal, they are not strictly speaking Italo-Québécois writers.<sup>32</sup> Raised in Toronto and New York, Fregoli came to Montreal to study creative writing at Concordia University and lived in the city for seven years.<sup>33</sup> Fregoli writes fiction, scripts and poetry. The poem “On the Beach” appears in *Here & Now* and points to the poet’s queerness and Italian roots. Alessandro Giardino is an Italian-language author living between Montreal and the United States, where he is a university professor. He recently released the novel *Sindrome di Caravaggio* (2022). “Michael,” an excerpt of his novel, appears in English translation in *Here & Now*.

The publication of *Here & Now* in 2021, and the public (virtual and in-person) events that followed, helped to identify new names in the growing corpus of queer Italian-Canadian literature. With work having begun on a second volume, new names have come to light, including Michael D’Itri and Michael Belcher, who reside in Montreal.<sup>34</sup>

32 This paper discusses English-language Italo-Québécois writers, who were born and raised or spent most of their life in Quebec. Giardino came to Quebec as an adult, and he writes in Italian. Fregoli came to Montreal to study (see following note).

33 “I lived in Montreal for seven years, and love it there, but I am not from Quebec and so would definitely not identify as an Italian-Quebec writer.” Email from Phoebe Fregoli dated 7 Dec. 2022.

34 D’Itri’s “STOP” was published in the student-run graduate journal *Headlights Anthology* produced by Concordia University’s English Department. American-born Belcher, who now works in Montreal, has written and produced plays.

# Queerness, Italian Heritage, and Ongoing Challenges

The writers discussed here belong to different generations of the Italo-Québécois community. Although the genres and approaches to writing may differ, their works deal with elements of their queerness and the influence of Italian heritage. “Growing up as an LGBTQ person very often you feel that you have to keep yourself hidden in some way, especially if you’re growing up at a certain historical period where there is the whole question of the closet, of the secret of the closet,” states Beneventi. “And it’s in the speech act of coming out of the closet that you, in a sense, reclaim your own sense of identity. Especially when we’re talking about the Italian-Canadian community. Very often one cannot talk about their actual identity, their real identity. And so it remains the open secret in the family” (Beneventi, *Creative Spaces*, 2021).

Their writing, like their lived reality, is informed by the immigrant experience of their parents or grandparents. In *Creative Spaces*, for instance, DiRaddo recounts being told by an uncle that “boys don’t hug” (DiRaddo, *Creative Spaces*, 2021). Queerness and ethnicity visibly intersect in the writing of Galluccio and Portulose. Liana Cusmano’s spoken word performance “Boyfriend” (Cusmano 2023) is especially poignant in bringing these themes together: “When I tell my grandmother that I have something important to tell her, she asks me if I’m pregnant. When I tell her about men and women and all the love I have to give, she says she would have preferred it if I were pregnant.”

The Italian immigrant community is recognized for its contributions to business and professions that are considered stable (lawyer, accountant, doctor, educator, businessman). Italian immigrants came to Quebec to work, to improve their lives, to make money and elevate their social status. This was clearly shown at the recent exhibit “Italian Montréal,” which featured photos of businesses, middle- and upper-middle-class homes, etc. The children of Italian immigrants were expected to pursue money-making professions. The decision to become a writer or filmmaker, for instance, is not what is traditionally expected or hoped for by immigrant (grand)parents. In the personal essay “You’re Never Gonna Make It,” Galluccio mentions that his career path was not well received by extended family and Italian-Canadian friends. The very act of pursuing writing as a profession, not to mention writing by openly queer individuals, causes disruption to conservative social structures, family and community expectations. Furthermore, the Italian community is traditional and religious: emphasis is placed on getting married with the intention to have children, which, typically, same-sex couples do not do. Anthony Portulose vividly describes the expectations of the traditional Italian-Canadian family:

*... the conveyor belt of tradition rolled onwards through the kitchens of East End Montreal. From the diploma to the mortgage to the marriage, it dragged my generation down the same checklist as our parents. As my cousins and their long-term boyfriends waltzed into adulthood, I danced alone. After all, Italian wedding halls weren’t accustomed to two grooms steering the tarantella circle” (H&N 78-9).*

Queer individuals do not meet the traditional life trajectory, thus causing (internal and external) conflict. And “that makes for great writing” (Beneventi, *Creative Spaces*, 2021). However, how do the queer writers discussed in this paper relate to their families and the Italian community in Quebec? Are they included, seen, heard? Or are they rejected because of their difference and untraditional paths, their sexual and/or gender identities? We find some of the answers in the characters they’ve created, in poetry and nonfiction texts, in interviews as well as in literary events and exhibits such as the one discussed above. Galluccio and DiRaddo, given their life experience and literary accomplishments, portray the queer Italo-Québécois (character) as confident. In DiRaddo’s *The Geography of Pluto*, Will’s mother loves him unconditionally. Galluccio’s Angelo in *Mambo Italiano* stands up to his parents. The older writers also speak with authority and confidence in interviews. In “Another Timeless Tradition,” however, Portulose describes in detail the discomfort he feels at every family meal because he is different. Vee DG alludes to not being accepted as a queer person. This is especially so in “the year without a summer”: “The fog settled into all our secret places.... Till there was nowhere left for people like us” (Di Gregorio). And Cusmano explains that they have gone to family events in a binder and tie: “My grandfather was really excited that I wore his tie, but other people were less excited” (Cusmano, *Creative Spaces*, 2021).<sup>35</sup> In *Mambo Italiano*, through Angelo’s conversation with his mother, Galluccio describes what it was like to be an Italo-Québécois gay man in the 1990s:

*Waking up every morning hoping that I would get through the day without being humiliated ... I spent the formative years of my life feeling like a piece of shit, ma. Feeling ashamed. Trying desperately to fit in, but my paesani they never let me in because I was a fag. And you know what they do to fags in Italian high schools, ma? Do you? They kill them! Not physically, but mentally they destroy them by chipping away at their dignity day after day after day, ‘til you don’t care anymore. ‘Til you’re so numb that all you wanna do is disappear. Go somewhere where no one is ever gonna bother you again. But there is no such place, ma. There is no such refuge (Mambo 85).*

That was decades ago. As Galluccio states in the documentary *Creative Spaces*, once he came out,<sup>36</sup> he did not stop speaking about his gayness, on or off the stage. He states that he has no private or public persona; he is the same in every setting (Galluccio, *Creative Spaces*, 2021). A younger DiRaddo did not think he’d live a meaningful life because he was gay (DiRaddo, *Creative Spaces*, 2021). We see the progression from his first novel to his second: DiRaddo “grew up,” and, like his characters, he has found a new definition of family. How much has really changed today? Cusmano indicates that there is still prejudice: “If you’re a good person ... nothing bad will happen to you. And that’s just not true. That also hearkens to immigrant culture, which is that if you work hard and

35 Cusmano goes on to say, “Expressing my queerness in that private setting still felt public and exposed.”

36 Steve Galluccio wrote, on Nov 25, 2022, on Facebook: “I was looking through old photos last night. And, except for my childhood, which I don’t remember much, I realized that I was absolutely miserable through the seventies and the early part of the eighties, until the mid to late 80s when I finally created the life I wanted for myself.”

you sacrifice, everything will fall into place.... Oh, you know, if you're queer, oh, you just have to graduate from high school and then nobody will bully you anymore. I think that's cruel" (Cusmano, *Creative Spaces*, 2021).

No matter how much the times may have changed and society may have improved, there will always be rejection and disappointment in some form, silencing and erasure. Cusmano's "Snails" denounces the act of "silencing" by "speaking of a fragility and violence still so real for many in the queer community. Comparing some queer experiences to the life of the snail . . . whose existence we often only become aware of as we feel a shell being crushed under our feet" (Frasca, *H&N* 42). In "Snails," Cusmano writes: "What is the word for the sound of your own destruction announcing your presence? What does it mean for your existence to be noticed only during your annihilation, for the two to be so tightly intertwined? How many times have we announced our presence and immediately had it challenged in schools, targeted in public bathrooms, destroyed at family dinners?" (*H&N* 151).

DiRaddo, however, is hopeful that the individual will mature and gain the skills necessary to live a full life as a queer person: "Given enough time, you will find your tribe" (DiRaddo, *Creative Spaces*, 2021). In other words, the queer person will find a family, albeit not necessarily a traditional one, and a community that is accepting of who they are. And this is such a powerful and encouraging message for the younger generation. In the meantime, the act of writing can be a substitute for that family or community. In "The Safest Place," Cusmano writes: "As a queer person, the safest that I have felt was while writing, because there is nobody, there is no one and nothing, that will judge me or threaten my safety just for writing about it. When I was younger and in the closet, I was afraid I would be ridiculed or threatened. Writing about my queerness had none of those risks. Exploring and expressing my feelings privately eventually gave me the courage to share them publicly, on a stage and to an audience" (*H&N* 52).

This paper gives a realistic and inclusive account of the Italian-immigrant community and its artistic contributions, while contributing to the study of English-language writing in Quebec. Our discussion has focused on the works and the voices that are often unseen, or purposely silenced, within the Italo-Québécois community. These writings "are filled with sadness, shame and frustration, but also with tenderness, joy and hope" (*H&N* 31). Some of the writers discussed are known in literary circles, even internationally, or they are making important contributions to Canada's literary scene. They have piqued the interest of academics and researchers, particularly in migration studies and queer studies.<sup>37</sup>

Queer Italo-Québécois literary artists write and create "to reclaim and rebuild their homes as queer" and Italo-Québécois. They may do this with "whatever stolen or cropped painting or photograph" they might want "to hang on the wall of their houses" (Baldo, *H&N* 33). Of most fundamental importance is that these are "the houses they have built for themselves" (*H&N* 33). As Baldo emphasizes, this speaks of "the courage we want, the courage we have" (*H&N* 33). The conservative nature and traditional values of the Italo-Québécois

37 ÉRÉQQ (*Équipe de recherche en études queer*) partially funded the documentary *Creative Spaces* and the volume *Here & Now*. DiRaddo, Cusmano and Portulese were recently interviewed for the Queer Italian-Canadian Artists project at University of Toronto's Frank Iacobucci Centre for Italian-Canadian Studies. The interviews will be available to researchers in 2023.

community has often led to the marginalization of its LGBTQ+ members. We have seen that this can lead to the erasure of group, or a component of a community's history, in the construction of an exhibit that details its history. Quebec (and Canada) has embraced the contribution of queer Italo-Québécois (and Italian-Canadian) writers to the nation's cultural and social life. What is the Italo-Québécois community waiting for? Why is there still resistance to embracing the children and grandchildren who belong to gender and sexual minorities? This may be due to fear of the unknown and diffidence of that which is different and unusual.

What needs to be done to bring these writers to the fore? As Galluccio states, we need to talk about it more. And we need to do more projects that bring attention to silenced individuals, writers, artists, and others.<sup>38</sup> "Throughout my life and artistic career," Galluccio asserts, "my experience as a writer and as a queer person has always intersected with my experience as a son of Italian immigrants" ("You're Never Gonna Make It" 49). As Beneventi asks, "must one aspect of identity be 'cleaved off' from another, or is there a boundary space?"<sup>39</sup> There is such a space for the writers discussed, but we are waiting for the elements of resistance to recognize that space.

Beyond academia, this paper is of social value: it challenges the reticence often present in Italian-immigrant communities with respect to sexual and gender diversity, it highlights the artistic importance of these intersecting identities, and it encourages conversations about inclusion. It responds to the "whispering" that is still going on today.

With this research, we bring attention to a very niche but growing literary corpus while contributing to migration studies in Quebec, Canadian literature and Italian-Canadian studies, thereby filling an existing gap in scholarship. Because very little has been published on queer English-language writers in Quebec, we hope that this paper will serve as a stepping stone for future work on queer Italo-Québécois writing.

38 For instance, one of the collaborations resulting from Queer and Italian Canadian Project is "Queer Spaces in Montreal and Toronto" by Vincenzo Pietropaolo and Liana Cusmano, a poetry and photo project to counter the Italian community's silence. Supported with seed funding from York University's Mariano Elia Chair in Italian Canadian Studies.

On November 19, 2022, at a roundtable discussion organized by Canadian Finance Minister David Lametti to listen to the Italo-Montreal community's priorities and concerns, Licia Canton spoke about the Queer and Italian Canadian Project and the Italo-Montreal community's silence vis-à-vis the marginalized members of the Italian-immigrant community.

39 Beneventi refers to Gloria Anzaldúa's "frontera." See *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987).

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