



Sonia Cancian. *Families, Lovers, and Their Letters: Italian Postwar Migration to Canada.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010. 192 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-88755-187-1.



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Published on H-Canada (May, 2011)

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In 1979, migration scholar Robert F. Harney challenged historians to explore the worlds of migrants themselves.[1] Since that time, we have seen two primary responses to this call: one rooted in a *place* that explores the making of a group or category (e.g., ethnics, ethnicity, whiteness, class, citizenship) inside national or regional parameters, and the other rooted in transnational works that link people and capital across great distances and dissect the varying influence of borders on these relationships. While transnational histories have made us more aware of the interconnected worlds of migrants, we still have a limited understanding of the channels through which these migrants communicated. *Families, Lovers, and their Letters*, by Sonia Cancian, takes an important step in that direction. The book positions migrant letters as revelatory windows into the “impact of migration experienced by [postwar] Italian migrants to Canada and their kin and lovers who remained in Italy” and the “social, cultural and emotional” strategies employed by these actors (p. 5). Cancian describes letters as a “high-

way” bridging two worlds, a topic to be studied in its own right (p. 9). Although usually only a few paragraphs, letters articulated the ambitions, expectations, ideals, needs, and anxieties of what she calls “transnational households living apart” (p. 6).

The extensive use of private sources distinguishes Cancian’s monograph on migrant letters from earlier efforts. Remarkably, she obtained written correspondence from both sides of the Atlantic, thus making for a compelling transnational conversation. The book consists of six collections of thirty letters each, with a cast of actors representing a range of settings from an Italian agrotown to small cities, mining settlements, and large centers in Canada. These are complemented by a set of oral interviews with the authors of the letters and their descendants. Although her enthusiasm for her sources is evident, Cancian is careful to not overstate the capacity of letters to maintain and strengthen contacts. Silences, for example, could be a way for one party to avoid authority, obligations, or communication, she notes. Never-

theless, letters were the primary mode of communication for transnational households during the early postwar period.

The first chapter introduces the main characters, setting the stage for more intensive analysis of embedded themes. Chapter 2, the strongest in the book, addresses the central role of epistles in maintaining the flow of family communication. We find that participation in one another's lives extended well beyond the sending of remittances and well-wishing. Writers and recipients stayed informed about important family and religious events, good and bad news, town gossip, and the status of other migrants in Canada, in addition to matters of documentation, housing, and job markets. In one poignant correspondence, a young man in Italy offers to help his brother in Canada participate in a local religious procession by pinning an envelope of money to the statue on his behalf (p. 50). Letters enabled migrants to maintain some level of "presence" with family and community even when they were physically absent.

Chapter 3 explores how letters "reified and reinforced normative gender behavior in transitional households" (pp. 72, 104). Cancian surprisingly employs the "separate spheres" dichotomy to describe how letter writers understood their actions and ambitions within the male breadwinner and domestic, submissive female archetype that marked the Italian countryside they left. We are told that even though Italian female migrants to Canada exerted themselves in leisure, workplace settings, and fashion beyond what was possible back in Italy, they interpreted these advances as temporary arrangements. Women would surrender them when a husband arrived in Canada to reestablish himself as the family figurehead, in both a financial and psychological sense of the term. Thus, migration momentarily disrupted, but did not displace, preexisting gender hierarchies. Finally, chapter 4 dissects the "emotional energies" that emerge from the letters of loved ones living apart. Cancian insightfully

demonstrates how quickly the intense messages of longing fluctuated between expressions of love and misery, particularly among those bounded by romantic love. She also distinguishes between feelings of loss communicated by parents whose children went to Canada (seen as permanent) and the salutations and reassurances among spouses and *fidanzati* (courting lovers) experiencing a temporary rupture.

Having written a brief but interesting book, Cancian sometimes leaves the reader wanting more. Given the uniqueness of her sources, for example, she could have done more to tie the insights they yield to the work of scholars who have inspired her. Her chapter 3 assessment of the "prevailing image ... that women continued to be identified as belonging to the domestic sphere" also would have benefited from further elaboration (pp. 76, 102). Almost twenty years ago, Franca Iacovetta, also a historian of Italian migration, concluded that the model of male dominance/female submission is too simplistic.[2] We might extend this statement to a discussion of images and communication. There is ample evidence in Cancian's letter excerpts to suggest that economic conditions (especially availability of work), cultural practices, and household demands in Canadian cities made the maintenance of former gender roles unsustainable. Indeed, the letters reveal that the prevailing language of feminine duty was cast in domestic terms, but the actions of the women themselves frequently fell outside of these imperatives. It might be better to ask: if forms of patriarchy and female domesticity persisted as the image or ideal, what practices--especially those paradoxical--enabled this conceptual arrangement to persist?[3]

Cancian's provocative use of letters suggests further lines of inquiry. The emotions expressed in the letters might also be probed as a form of body history. Joy Parr points out that "trauma by definition goes to a conceptual space where the social and the sensuous body meet." [4] We could

learn much about how migrant bodies felt the trauma of separation and force of institutional, geographical, social, and cultural change. A second fascinating topic might be to analyze the themes of nostalgia and *il destino* (force of destiny) in migrant letters. The latter comes up on a few occasions. In one case, a *fidanzato* (betrothed male) warns his bride-to-be about talking with other men, lest *il destino* take control and tear them apart; in another, *il destino* is blamed for the long duration of a couple's physical separation (pp. 80, 125). These interesting stories suggest that participants drew upon common scripts of fear, fate, and superstition that might tell us even more about the worlds of the transnational letter writers.[5]

That *Families, Lovers, and Their Letters* raises new questions for discussion is testimony to its innovation and uniqueness. One can only wonder when another scholar will locate hundreds of letters from families in two corners of the world and conduct a similar study. Until that time, this book offers us a rare glimpse into the personal correspondence of transnational migrants and the loved ones they left behind.

Notes

[1]. The article appeared most recently in Robert F. Harney, "Men without Women: Italian Migrants in Canada, 1885-1930," in *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers, and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s-1960s*, ed. Franca Iacovetta, Paula Draper, and Robert Ventresca (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 206-207.

[2]. Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 80

[3]. This is a question voiced earlier by Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," *Canadian Historical Review* 76, no. 3 (September 1995): 371.

[4]. Joy Parr, "Notes for a More Sensuous History of Twentieth-Century Canada: The Timely, the Tacit, and the Material Body," *CHR Forum, Canadian Historical Review* 82, no. 4 (December 2001): 745.

[5]. Such an investigation could be informed by Robert A. Orsi's excellent cultural analysis of religious commitment and superstition. See Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

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Citation: Stephen Fielding. Review of Cancian, Sonia. *Families, Lovers, and Their Letters: Italian Postwar Migration to Canada*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

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