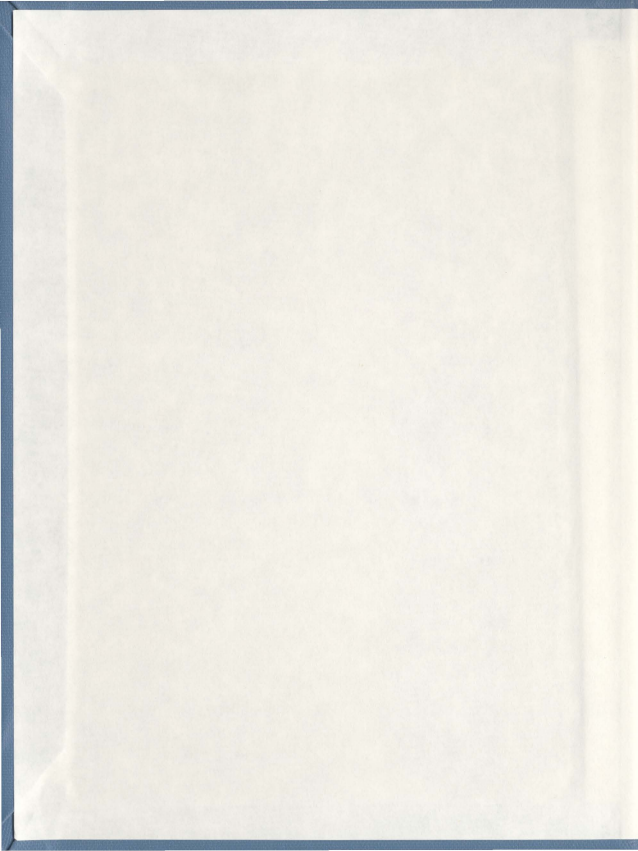


"SO 'NA BUJANES(A) IN CANADA":  
THE LANGUAGE & POETRY OF  
CONCETTA SINIBALDI

CRISTINA PIETROPAOLO







**“‘So ‘na Bujanes[a] in Canada”:  
The Language & Poetry of Concetta Sinibaldi**

by

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*Dedica*

For Nonna

Dedicated to the memory of Concetta Sinibaldi Colalillo

1927-2011

A formidable matriarch, full of grace and wit, a great teacher, lover of language  
and beloved grandmother

## ABSTRACT

When one considers the history of immigrants in Canada, many of the details get lost. Toronto has had a long history of an Italian presence and community in the city, but most forget that these immigrants began elsewhere, and in particular, it is largely women who are forgotten as social historians put the pieces together. Through a series of extensive interviews with one Italian immigrant woman who arrived in Toronto in 1956 and through an examination of the folk poetry she wrote, this thesis attempts to fill in some of those details of her identity, pre- and post-immigration. Moreover, it also closely considers the importance of the poetry she wrote as it related to her life.

Concetta's poetry can be defined as "folk" because it played two major roles. The poetry she wrote about her beloved Boiano allowed her to remember a time and place that no longer existed after the Second World War, and when she extended it to her fellow Boianesi in Canada, her poems acted as a mouthpiece for the community as well. The birthday poems she wrote for her family and her friends meant that she could fill her role as the matriarch, the "*nonna*." These poems, particularly the ones she wrote for her granddaughters, dispensed advice in the safe form of a loving poem. The thesis culminates with a discussion on the poem she wrote for her 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, which combines elements of her Boiano poems and her birthday poems in order to create what was probably her most personal and sophisticated poem.

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## A NOTE ON THE GLOSSARY

I have retained certain words in their original Italian during the course of this thesis. This is not for the sake of affectation, but rather, because their English translation does not truly do justice to their meaning. *Contadina* is probably the most important of these because it is how Concetta defined herself. However, further details of the word will be explained later on. *Paesani* is another. It is the plural (as opposed to *paesano*, masculine, singular) for other people from the same area, be they neighbours in the same *frazione* (see below for an explanation), or friends from the town proper of Boiano. Yet the word *paesani* means more in Italian than just the geographic bonds between people. Some of the other words to be used are *località* and *frazione*. *Frazione* classifies all of the hamlets scattered around the vicinity of a larger town, like Boiano. Concetta is from the *frazione* of Castellone. Some others around the area include Monteverde, Sepino and Civita. *Località* indicates the neighbourhood, or district of the larger *frazione*. Concetta was from the *località* of Pitoscia. A *consuocera* is what the mother of the groom is to the mother of the bride. They are in-laws, but not in the same way as the bride is to her mother-in-law or her brothers-in-law. However, because this is not a word that Concetta tended to use, *cognata*, which refers to a sister-in-law, shall be used in its stead. Concetta used this word often, and because her relationship with her son-in-law's mother was not a distant one, the closeness of *cognata* works better in describing the relationship between the two women. There seems to be no English language equivalent. Finally, the word *nonna* will come up, which is simply the Italian word for grandmother. She was known as *nonna* to her granddaughters and even to their friends. *Nonno* is the Italian for grandfather.

nov 8-07, I  
 A Cristina Con amore  
 un giorno Londono, de'otto  
 novembre di mattina, arrivo  
 una cieogna con un bel estimo,  
 Il cestino era rivestito di rose  
 e coperte, lenzuola, e cuscini e  
 dentro c'era una sorpresina.  
 E una donna<sup>2</sup> che aspettava con  
 attesa Trovo quel cest<sup>3</sup> e l'ho  
 non sapendo che f<sup>4</sup> era, era  
 omala.  
 Con meraviglia<sup>5</sup> vedo e c'era  
 dentro? Trovo una piccina bambi  
 tutta condita, bella rossa e colorita,  
 Come il colape del cestino.  
 E ora e belle a risulata che son  
 passati 26 anni da quel lontano  
 autunno, quella piccola bambina  
 che fatta molto grande.

pag 3 - II  
 a studiato, ti salutavo, pero ancora  
 non eri laureata, quel com'incute  
 la salute non alla 3 anni ancora  
 per esser più sicura della tua  
 per l'occasione.  
 Come andai a una festa domine  
 da Dio e sta viene e l'accompagno  
 la prefigge del miala, nel suo  
 bambino, padre e della sempre  
 una bella bambina  
 propostose con<sup>7</sup> tutti i suoi  
 famiglia, e a chi conosce i miei  
 tutti strada, e non si dico di me  
 uomini che mai si ripetute giovani  
 abbiamo bisogno.  
 a noi ti vogliamo tanto bene che  
 per noi tu una parte con la  
 tua famiglia, ti volemmo sempre  
 l'uno! pero noi di tutti case  
 e non più fare compagnia.  
 pag 3 - II  
 E ora una piccola Cristina, ti  
 dico che un bambino, non  
 se come, pero capivamo più  
 fare capiti, spara, e la madre sempre  
 per chi, che ti dati abitanti a casa  
 un po' più organizzata.  
 dal essere come la tua mamma  
 che tu sempre insegna come nella  
 ordine in casa e nella tua vita,  
 che la persona originale viene sempre  
 che tutte perpetua.  
 Mi fanno qui più dolci - un abbraccio  
 a un bacio, e spero che non ti abbini  
 in queste ultima frase.  
 questo è uno regalo che mamma  
 ti ha! pero c'è pure un po' di storia  
 Cristina bella ti voglio bene la  
 una augurio parte da un la nostra  
 molto auguri ancora per il tuo  
 compimento, e nelle anni ancora  
 sempre con noi.  
 a la mamma Carolina e i bambini che  
 ti restano tutti e storia mi vengono  
 che sono parte di una storia

Plate 1 – Example of Concetta's handwritten birthday poem

## BONASERA BUJANES' / GOOD EVENING PEOPLE FROM BOIANO

Bonasera a tutt' frastier' e Bujanes',  
mo v' dic' du parol' d' quill' biell' paes'.

Good evening to all the foreigners and  
people from Boiano  
Now I am going to recite a few words  
for you about that beautiful town.

Ru sem' lassat' ch' malincunia  
p' meni a trua' lavor' e cres' mei la famia.

We left it with melancholy  
To come to find work and to better raise  
our families.

Sem' lassat' ri genitur' sul' e vecchiarrell',  
ma sem' pensat' semp' d'arturnà  
a quill' Boian' biell'.

We left our parents alone and aging  
But we always thought of returning to  
that beautiful Boiano.

N'n c' scurdam' mai addò sem' nate e cresciut', ch'  
pan' d' grandina e frufellela,  
ch' pecura, vacch' e pourc',  
gallin' e ciucciariell'.

We will never forget where we were  
born and raised  
on corn bread and *frufellella*,<sup>1</sup>  
With sheep, cows, pigs,  
chicken and donkeys.

Sem' lassat' l'e vecchie casarell'  
l' vi' chien' d'prèt' e shumarell[e].

We left those little old homes  
The streets full of stones and small  
brooks.

L'[e] campagn[e] verd[e] e biell'.  
E ri fuoss[e] chien[e] d' rosp' e raganell[e],

The green and beautiful countryside  
And the ditches full of toads and frogs

Che candavan'sera, matin[e] e jurn[e].  
E nu ch' zappavam' semp' attuorn'.

That sang in evening, morning and in  
daytime  
While we hoed around them.

Zappavam[e] dalla mattina a la sera,  
e r'turnvam' a la casa a ru lum d'la cannella.

We would hoe from morning to night  
And returned home to candle light.

Quann' iavam dend[e] vicin' a ru fuoc'[e]  
eva biell[e] a v[e]dè ri pitt' vuot[e].

When we entered, we went near the fire  
It was beautiful to see all the empty  
dishes already set on the table.

Dop[e] n' poch[e] arrivava la mamma  
ch' nu cuppin' e na 'tianella,  
e rigieva ri piatt[i] de fasciur[e] e taccuzzell[e].

After a while, Mother would arrive  
With a ladle and the *tianella*<sup>2</sup>  
And she would fill the plates with  
*taccuzelle* and beans.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Frufellella* is a mixture of left-over greens, potatoes, beans and hard bread often garnished with grated cheese or pepper flakes. Concetta's own recipe for this dish usually involved at least fifteen different ingredients.

<sup>2</sup> A *tianella* is a type of large copper pot.

<sup>3</sup> *Taccuzelle* are a fat, square cut of homemade pasta.

Dop' magnata la bella cena unit' ch[e] n'armuni,  
c' mettevam[e]  
vicin' a ru fueche a parlà tutti d'famia.

C'faceva la caveza, la maia e la puntinia  
e c'steva semp' unt' a la famia.

C d[e]ceva ru rusarie tutt'aunit[e],  
e ci iavam[e] addurmi' che savam[e] sfinit'.

chell' che mo' n'esist[e] no la' e no qua,  
sem[e] piat[e] l'ambiend' de ru Canada.

E mo ringraziem[e] a ru Clob d'Bujan[e]  
Ch' [e] macar[e] cia' riunim[e] ogni tand'  
ch[e] tutt' ri paesan[e].

E ci arecurdam[e] tand[e] cos[e]  
d' la giovendù passata a Bujan[e]  
ché semp' ru paes[e] nuotr'e  
n'n c[e] ru scurdiam[e].

Ma mo stem[e] chiù cundiend' ancora  
ca t'nem[e] ru nostr[e] San Bartulume[o],  
sand' protettor [e]

Ch'[e] pozza benedic[e] a tutt' nu d'Bujan,  
e le nostr[e] fami[e] vicin[e] e lundan[e].

Buonasera a frostier[i] e Bujanes[e].  
e v'[i] dic' grazzi[e]  
che set[e] senduta la poesia da 'na Castellunesa.

After eating a nice supper, together in  
harmony, we would settle  
by the fire to talk as a family.

We would knit socks, sweaters and do  
embroidery,  
And were united as a family.

We would say the rosary all together,  
And trundled off to bed when we were  
tired.

That no longer exists here or there,  
We have taken on the Canadian way of  
life.

And now let's thank the Boiano Club  
That we can at least get together once in  
a while  
With all our *paesani*.

And we can remember so many things  
About the youth we lived in Boiano  
Which will always be our town  
That we will never forget.

But now, we are happier still  
Because we have our Saint  
Bartholomew,<sup>4</sup>  
Our saint protector

That he blesses all of us from Boiano,  
And out families, near and far.

Good evening to those from Boiano and  
those from elsewhere  
I thank you  
For listening to a poem from a woman  
from Castellone.

1994

<sup>4</sup> Saint Bartholomew is Boiano's patron saint.

*She sang beyond the genius of the sea.  
 The water never formed to mind or voice,  
 Like a body wholly body, fluttering  
 Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion  
 Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,  
 That was not ours although we understood  
 Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.*

*The sea was not a mask. No more was she.  
 The song and water were not medleyed sound  
 Even if what she sang was uttered word by word.  
 It may be that in all her phrases stirred  
 The grinding water and the gasping wind;  
 But it was she and not the sea we heard.*

*For she was the maker of the song she sang.  
 The ever-hooded, tragic gestures sea  
 Was mere a place by which she walked to sin.  
 Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew  
 It was the spirit that we sought and knew  
 That we should ask this often as she sang.*

*--The Idea of Order at Key West by Wallace Stevens*

If language is what helps to shape our worldview, what happens, then, when we experience more than just one language? What happens when you transplant a person who is more accustomed to remembering things, storing them neatly and efficiently in her mind rather than writing them down? What happens when you suddenly immerse this kind of individual into a completely different culture with a different language?

These are broad questions to answer and each depends on the context of the particular person they concern. In the case of this thesis, the context is that of Concetta Sinibaldi Colalillo, a Boianese woman from Italy who immigrated to Toronto, Canada in 1956 when she was twenty-nine years old. Like many immigrants, she experienced the immediate culture shock of coming from the familiar rural expanses of her hometown to

the foreign urban spaces of her new home. Like many women immigrants, she had to negotiate the balance between homelife and worklife, and all of the complications that came with those responsibilities. Moreover, like most immigrants, she also had to navigate the murkiness of a new and unfamiliar language in a vastly different culture. Whereas some of her contemporaries found themselves in too alienated a position, effectively cut-off from the new language and ostensibly, the new country, she navigated successfully, despite not formally learning English until a later age, years after immigrating.

There are three major areas of Concetta's life that this thesis will discuss in order to illuminate her experiences of language and poetry in the broader context of her rural roots and urban immigrant identity. The experiences of her life preceding immigration allowed her to perhaps unknowingly develop a set of skills that gave her the tenacity to shift into another culture and yet not get lost in it either. Language—as it is for us all—was an integral part of her life, in both its oral and written forms. In her youth in Italy, before the advent of television and with very limited access to radio, language play was a common entertainment among children and adults, the knowledge of which she carried with her into her adult and elder years in Canada. It was also during her youth in Italy that she first experienced other languages, because of the disruption that the Second World War brought to her hometown with the presence of foreign soldiers who occupied the area. Later on, adjusting to a different language was something she had to learn as a young immigrant woman in Canada. Ironically, it was in this non-Italian country that she spoke less Boianese (the local dialect that was her first language, named for her hometown of Boiano) and more Italian for the first time in her life. Eventually, she

formally added the English language to her repertoire through her ESL courses, and partook in the informal creation of *italiese*, a compound immigrant language derived from Italian (Italiano) and English (Inglese). During the later part of her life, she reconciled these different linguistic identities by writing her poetry in all three languages: poetry about home or the old country was always written in Boianese (another linguistic endeavour, since historically, it had never been a written language); poetry written for the people in her life was written primarily in Italian but also in English. English was the language she would always be the least comfortable with, yet she still incorporated it into her life, speaking it with her grandchildren, with non-Italian friends, and eventually even with limited experimentation in her poetry. Each of her languages was indicative of a different part of her whole self, giving her different and occasionally conflicting perspectives. Her poetry was where these differences were channeled, and it was her poetry which best represents all of these life experiences.

Much of this thesis (particularly the first two chapters) will deal with the circumstances of her life (and, by virtue, the broader cultural contexts which influenced or dictated those circumstances). The reason we read and study literature is because it gives us insight into other circumstances, other contexts from other places and other times. All of these circumstances effectively inform the writing that an individual might produce, be it prose or poetry. In his foreword to *Italian Folktales in America: The Verbal Art of an Immigrant Woman*, Roger D. Abrahams writes,

It has long seemed to me that one of the major problems of folklore study has been that we have regarded texts as being capable of speaking for themselves, as if they are works of art which can be understood regardless of their economic, social, or cultural underpinnings. They are the artistic products of individuals living simpler lives than our own, and we have allowed ourselves the ethnocentric luxury of assuming that we, as ideal

informed readers, will instinctively understand and factor into our encounter with these texts, the details of this more circumscribed community and economy. We are attracted to these confabulations precisely because of their directness and simplicity of means, and it has seemed most important to us to address ourselves to questions of the retentions and transmission of these expressive objects. (xiv)

Following Abrahams, Concetta cannot be divorced from the context from which she came, and nor can she be separated from the experiences that resulted from the context. Like storytelling, the act of language, whether delivered formally in a poetic performance, or spoken colloquially on a day to day basis, is completely defined by the time and place in which it occurs.

In tracing Concetta's history from when she was a girl in Castellone in Italy, to her immigration to Toronto and then her retirement which led to the beginning of her poetry writing, it becomes clear that her immersion in an oral culture influenced her sudden decision to start writing poetry. Her life as a young *contadina* and then as an immigrant spurred her to write her poetry to remember and savour her experiences for better or for worse. Her poetry also allowed her to reconcile the distance and the difference she felt between herself, her old country and her new country. Victor Turner's turn of phrase *betwixt and between* suits Concetta and her poetry; she did not truly feel she belonged in Canada, but the Italy she knew before she left drastically changed in her absence. She also had to balance between the morals and values she learned as a child in Italy as a member of a large communal group with herself and her own politics and beliefs as an individual in Canada. When she finally had a moment, and began to reflect on her life rather than only living it, that is when the poetry came out.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The first grain of an idea for what this thesis has become developed after writing a mock thesis proposal for a graduate folklore course. At the time, the mock proposal was focused on the folksongs of Italian and immigrant Italian women, and I was interested in finding the continuity (if any) between them. As I began the research for that project, I learned very quickly that there was a limited body of work concerning the history of postwar Italian immigrant women in Canada. What was available was excellent work done by social and immigrant historians and folklorists. *The Italian Immigrant Women in North America* in 1978 was one of the earliest publications in Canada on the subject, edited and published by Robert F. Harney, also the founder of the Multicultural Heritage Society of Ontario. Franca Iacovetta has published and co-edited several books concerning Italian women and Italian immigrant women, but it was the chapter she wrote "From Contadina to Worker" in *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (1992) that particularly struck me, as did the work of Donna R. Gabaccia and Luisa Del Giudice, who respectively wrote about Italian immigrant labour history and immigrant traditions of Italians in Toronto. These are some of the best examples of what I found, and it also helped very much that it was Canadian source material (or international in Gabaccia's case). The United States has a longer history of Italian immigration so while there is more that is published and readily available, the context is still American rather than Canadian, the difference mainly lying in the fact of the American history of assimilation and the melting pot versus the Canadian position placing emphasis instead on building a multicultural mosaic. I did not dismiss what I did find (for example, Herbert Gans' *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of*

*Italian Americans*, 1962 and Nathan Glazer's *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City*, 1970) but read carefully instead and took what I could. There were also several articles published in the *Journal of American Folklore* and in the *Journal of Folklore Research* about Italian immigrant experiences, but they often proved to be too specific and were helpful to me on a more general level.

Most of the published work I had found thus far focused on social history, which made me wonder about the role of women in that context. Because I knew both of my grandmothers, I also knew that many Italian women worked outside of the home after they immigrated, but that just as many stayed home, either by choice, though mostly not. Perhaps this was why women seemed to be absent from much of the history? In researching the Italian social clubs established in Toronto, it became evident that they tended to be geared towards men and the church organizations catered to women who founded various Ladies' Auxiliaries in their parishes around the city, later in the 1970s. The social clubs tended to be established earlier perhaps due to their ties to labour activism and unions in the city, despite the massive numbers of female workers, and tended to be headed and organized by men. Though later research would prove my assumption wrong, it also seemed that there were few memoirs and biographies written by or about Italian women, though books in those genres by and about Italian men seemed more readily available, whether it was *Rocco Perri: The Story of Canada's Most Notorious Bootlegger* by Antonio Nicaso, or *Pietro's Book: The Story of a Tuscan Peasant*, a memoir by Pietro Pinti and Jenny Bawtree. The few works by or about Italian women that I did find tended to be had little in common with Concetta's experiences, and

were often written by women who had significantly more formal education and economic prestige.

After I became more intrigued by Concetta's poetry, I researched Italian women's literature, immigrant or otherwise, and it became apparent very quickly that while there was a lot of fictional work by Italian women and Italian immigrant women, there was less that was autobiographical or poetic. There is a good body of poetry that falls under the category of Italian-Canadian poetry collected in publications like *Pillars of Lace: The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Women Writers* (De Franceschi 1998) and *Italian Canadian Voices: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose* (DiGiovanni 1982). The prefaces and introductions of these collections addressed the history of Italian-Canadian poetry, and confirmed my suspicion that nearly all of what was published was written by the children and grandchildren of Concetta's generation, termed either poets of Italian Canadian background or poets of Italian Canadian descent depending. The introductions to these books led me to autobiographies and memoirs, since this was a genre where there was a little more room for immigrant words to be published. Two important books turned up in this search: *The Value of Worthless Lives: Writing Italian American Immigrant Autobiographies* (Serra 2007) and *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant* (Ets 1999). I was relieved and delighted to find these books since they proved me wrong (at least a little bit), because here were accounts of immigrant experiences in their own words. These books emphasized the role of autobiography in Italian women's creative expression, and while it would be an insulting generalization to say that only women write autobiography and only men write literature, it must also be said that the tendency

of autobiography in women's writing is more common. Ilaria Serra writes about the role of this genre:

Immigration and autobiography have several connections. Immigration works as a kind of Copernican revolution that destabilizes an individual's sense of self: one is severed out as a single particle from the rest of the universe of countrymen; that individual is no longer at its center. The effect is a new sense of loneliness and responsibility. Pushed to their limits, immigrants are called to act with a stronger sense of responsibility as well as a growing sense of individualism. Immigrants also discover their identity or the wholeness of their egos once they are destabilized. Their discovery is a natural reaction to keeping balanced, as instinctive as crouching down or retreating into oneself at the prospect of something frightening. It is as though the immigrant feels the ground shifting under his feet, and autobiography [or in this case, poetry] becomes the tool to build his or her centrality and identity as a particle of this chaotic universe. (2007, 16-17)

Serra's argument applies to immigrant poetry as well, so I widened my search to look for material about immigrant poetry about any group rather than just Italian immigrants, which helped a great deal. I found essays about immigrant poetry in Germany, about poetry written by exiled Iranians in the United States, and also found work by Christl Verduyn who addressed issues of what she terms minority literature and how it is perceived by the majority. All of this work helped a great deal, even though Karim Persis' piece "Charting the Past and Present: Iranian Immigrant and Ethnic Experience Through Poetry" (2008) revolved around people who lived as exiles rather than having had the choice to leave voluntarily (albeit very reluctantly) like Concetta. The theme that came up over and over again in much of the poetry and the commentary accompanying it, was the sense of trying to foster an identity within the context of cultural disconnect.

English and Newfoundland folk poets were also brought to my attention. Though they were not writing from the perspective of immigrants, they did write from the same rural perspective as Concetta, about so-called mundane things of day-to-day life as she

did. This matter of the “ordinary” quality of folk poetry was elucidated by Roger deV Renwick’s work *English Folk Poetry* (1980) and also by Pauline Greenhill’s *True Poetry* (1988). The introductions and prefaces from a few collections of Italian-Canadian poetry were also particularly useful for me in developing ideas about the significance of the pastoral in Concetta’s poetry beyond the obvious connection to her rural childhood upbringing.

Although this thesis is about the poetry and life of one immigrant woman in particular, I still required historical context. Concetta gave me lots of context as it related to her, but in order to fully understand the social history of her life in Italy and then her life in Toronto, I had to consult some history as well. *The Fascist Experience* by Edward D. Tannenbaum (1972) was an excellent reference that documented Italian social history from the moment Mussolini assumed power. While her experiences were also true, Tannenbaum provided an alternative perspective. *A History of Contemporary Italy* (Ginsborg 1990) gave a clear account of the country after the war was ended. Only the first chapter or so was of good use to me, despite the fact that the book is excellent—it was also moot, since Concetta left in 1956. *Women in the Shadows* by Ann Cornelisen (1977) was also interesting, in her treatment of four Italian women living in the Mezzogiorno in the decades after the war, and how they coped from day to day. Although the book painted a rather bleak picture of life for those women in Italy at that time, it also cemented what Concetta had been trying to tell me when she talked about women in Italy as second class citizens, in an extreme sense. Reading through these history books was an interesting process as I found myself validating Concetta’s experiences by the dates and records documented by these books rather than the other way around, which seemed

wrong, given that the historians who wrote these books had not had even a modicum of the experience Concetta had in Italy and in Canada.

Finally, in order to make certain that I was not abandoning folklore during my reaearch, I gratefully consulted *Italian Folktales in America* (Mathias and Raspa 1985), *Folklore by the Fireside* (Falassi 1980) and *Looking Through My Mother's Eyes: Life Stories of Nine Italian Immigrant Women in Canada* (Del Negro 1997). Del Negro's work especially helped me to form ideas about the structure of this thesis, since I was trying to do something similar.

My bibliography at the end of this work reflects some of the more peripheral and broad scale research, as I attempted to deepen my understanding of social history in Italy, of labour history in Toronto, and of Italian immigrant history in Canada. I can only hope that this thesis will contribute to filling in part the gap in the documentation of Italian immigrant women's history in Canada.

## METHODOLOGY AND REFLEXIVITY

## THE PROCESS

My grandmother Concetta and I did approximately fifteen interviews together, two of which were over the telephone. In between all of that, there were informal questions here and there, that typically resulted in me grabbing anything immediately handy in order to jot down notes. On one occasion, it was several tissues, much to my grandmother's amusement. The interviews with her were conducted in the summer of 2009 from July to August. There were two follow-up interviews in December 2009, and the telephone interviews happened in the late winter and early spring of 2010. There were also brief phone calls to clarify details as I transcribed the interviews and began to sift through all of the information. On average, our interviews together in her kitchen were at least an hour in length, sometimes a bit shorter, and once, a whole two hours. Generally, all of the phone calls were kept short, never exceeding a half an hour's time.

Before attending graduate school, I had been in the habit of carrying a tape-recorder with me to my grandparents' home. Often when we were eating lunch or supper together, both my grandmother and my grandfather told stories about their childhood, neighbours they knew in their town and stories of witches, ghosts and werewolves. I tried to record as much as I could, conducting highly informal interviews. Sometimes I would just let the tape recorder run, capturing the entire meal and all of its conversation on tape, whether mundane, lively or silent. Most of these recordings are from Sunday lunches where others in addition to my grandparents and I were present. Though most of the stories were told on their own, sometimes, a particular one was requested. In these cases, the story turned into a more overt form of performance. My grandmother, being

conscious of the tape-recorder, would sit up straighter, clear her throat and begin to tell whichever story was requested in a more formal style of language, speaking Italian and enunciating carefully. This was a sharp contrast to her usual speaking pattern, which, if her granddaughters were involved, was often a blend of Italian, Boianese and English. Inevitably, at some point during the story, she would be interrupted by my grandfather, who would interject with some detail it seemed to him she had forgotten, or his opinion on the story. Usually, she would hush him with a quick terse word in Boianese, and slip more readily into her regular speech patterns, more at ease and less formal with her tone of voice. Initially, I thought that Sunday lunches would be an ideal setting for some early interviews, as the flow of food tends to stimulate the flow of conversation, particularly in the environment of a more drawn out Sunday lunch, but this quickly proved to be too complicated as there were too many people coming and going and talking at the table. Even after lunch, the socializing typically continued with phone calls as well as relatives dropping by for a coffee and a chat. Even if the telephone remained silent, and people did not come to visit, the other family members hanging around became too much to navigate for the purposes of a distraction-free conversation, particularly considering the curious nature of my family and their penchant to interrupt a conversation in order to ask their own question.

After my failed Sunday interview attempts, we decided to meet a couple of times during the week, and those meetings turned into daylong periods of time. I usually arrived an hour or so before lunch, we customarily ate at 1:30 or 2:00 in the afternoon. Sometimes, my grandmother had already prepared lunch, sometimes we would prepare it together, and sometimes on a day she felt more tired than usual, she sat in her chair by the

large kitchen window and directed from there while I prepared the meal. Instead of interviewing directly during lunch and recording everything, I kept my notebook open beside me, and that way if anything came up during lunch, a story, song, joke or otherwise, I could jot something down to remind myself to ask about it later. I *did* use lunch to record some of my grandfather's talk, which, aside from being interesting on its own, also helped to fill in some of the peripheral details of my grandmother's stories. After lunch, when we had finished the coffee and when the kitchen was tidy and the lunch dishes put away, my grandfather would go to the living room couch and take his afternoon siesta, while my grandmother sat in the kitchen reading her newspapers. A little while later, she and I would sit, either in the kitchen by the big window, she in her chair and me in mine, or, more often than not, we sat at the big kitchen table.

#### THE TECHNOLOGY

Though I used a Sony tape recorder previously in my early pre-graduate school recordings, I decided for the sake of digitizing, time stamping and transcribing to use my laptop instead, using a software application called Audacity, which effectively turns the computer into a tape recorder, picking up whatever sound is made in its vicinity. I had tried this in the past for fieldwork for papers for various classes and was generally pleased with the results of quality of the audio, but when I listened to the interviews I did with my grandmother there was also a bit of distortion, feedback, and occasionally an electronic tone emitting throughout the course of some interviews. I think that the computer was alien to my grandmother. However, I had subjected her to it before when I did some long distance interviews with her using two other programs: Skype, which

allowed me to video conference with her, providing the essential face to face environment that fostered more intimacy and the longer conversation that I find difficult to achieve over the telephone, in conjunction with another program called Audio Hijack, which recorded only the audio activity on Skype rather than turning the whole computer into a recorder as Audacity does. In any case, it was at first strange for her, I think, as occasionally the computer screen would go to "sleep," and she would interrupt herself, concerned that that it was shutting down, and I would lose whatever we had recorded. The other problem was that my grandmother would forget the volume of her own voice, which would gradually become softer and softer. While this was a positive indication of the level of comfort she felt as we progressed with our conversations, it also made it difficult for the computer to capture her voice clearly. In the end, I was still able to transcribe everything sufficiently. I should have tried to find a microphone to make things simpler, but I did not, partly because I was concerned that another piece of technology, especially one more recognizable as a recording device would make her more self-conscious—even the laptop faded into the background after the first couple of interviews—and partly, because the thought of getting a microphone just did not occur to me. In retrospect however, it clearly would have improved the audio quality of the recordings, and would not have put my grandmother off; she would have got used to it fairly quickly.

#### THE CHALLENGES AND THE ETHICS

Another fieldwork challenge, and one that I had not really expected, was that despite the familiarity and strong relationship between myself and my grandmother, I do not think

she ever fully understood what I wanted from her. Though I am certain she was pleased that I was so interested in her life and how she grew up and the details of her immigration experiences, she told me often enough that she still did not understand what exactly I wanted to write about, and how her life was so central to this. She was proud of the fact that I was going to graduate school, and though I attempted to explain to her many times, she still did not know what to tell her friends when they asked what I was doing in St. John's. The first two interviews we did are fairly indicative of this, since there are awkward moments where I hesitated, not knowing how to frame what I wanted to ask. Though I thought about thematic interviews, and made lists of questions to ask, in practice, I had to find other ways to pose those questions. Of course I explained that I was interested in her life as far as how she interpreted her experiences as a woman, and in a fit of bad judgment, I even used the formal academic language of my thesis proposal to explain this to her, which I immediately felt embarrassed about—in hindsight, it was condescending and elitist. Thus, the first two interviews are full of lots of starts, stops and long pauses, consisting of basic information only such as date and place of birth, family history and those sorts of introductory things. It was good information to have, but not what I was after, though I eventually realized that I was naïve in thinking that she and I would just plunge into the interviews, and that these first two interviews were essential in deepening our rapport. Though my grandmother and I had always been very close (she was with my sisters as well), this process of the interview was a new dynamic for us. The early interviews that made me cringe as I was transcribing them were essential for us in figuring out this new way of speaking with each other. It was not until at least the third interview as I distinctly remember that there was suddenly synchronicity in the

conversation, where it did not matter anymore that she did not understand what I was after, and it did not matter anymore that I was worried about asking questions that were too broad. It occurred to me that everything we had been warned about in introductory folklore classes actually did happen as far as the fieldwork process went.

The theme of one of our interviews was on the topics of pregnancy and menstruation and how, in the very traditional and patriarchal society she grew up with, these matters were spoken about and dealt with. After reading Pat Caplan's article "Learning Gender: Fieldwork in a Tanzanian Coastal Village," (1993) I reflected on how by the time that my grandmother was my age now, she had already been married for several years, had two small daughters and had relocated her entire life to another country. Though she was very proud of my scholarly achievements and those of my sisters, my grandmother often expressed disappointment that none of us are married, never mind the fact that we had not produced any great-grandchildren for her to cuddle and fawn over. Just as Caplan explained in her own reflexive article about the relationship she had to the women she was interviewing, there was a divide between my life and my grandmother's life in this regard. I wondered months later if when she spoke about women and pregnancy *what* she told me was tempered by the fact that because I am unmarried and childless, I was not actually a "woman" to her mind. Though she was incredibly progressive, there were some traditional qualities of gender construct that occasionally trumped this social progressiveness. Part of the reason she was okay with it was because my sisters and I were in school for so many years, and she was a strong believer in the value and importance of formal education. However, this desire to see us all happily partnered off and settled (preferably with babies for her to play with) was not

necessarily a bias on her part, but simply a reflection of the cultural expectations she grew up with.

One of my technical challenges was that of the only two recorded conversations we had specifically about her poetry, I managed to accidentally lose both on my computer, having saved them improperly before they had been backed up or even transcribed. Luckily, I still had my notes and my grandmother humoured me when I told her what had happened. By this time I was back in St. John's, so I telephoned her and took as many notes as possible as I asked her again about her poetry and how she felt about it. This is absolutely something I wish I had spent more time on, or even that I had not deleted those interviews so carelessly.

#### THE OTHERS

There were other people who became integral to the fieldwork for this thesis—mainly, my grandfather and my mother. Oftentimes my grandfather would confirm things that my grandmother talked about. For instance, my grandmother told me how when she was a young girl, she did not spend much time in Boiano proper, and stuck closer to home. I did not question this too deeply; from the way she talked about it, I simply assumed that this was just the way things were in Castellone where she lived. However, after talking with my grandfather who one day was telling me about the dances he and his older brother Emilio used to attend in Boiano, said “Ask your *nonna*,” as he often did (he gets concerned that he is not remembering things accurately) before stopping himself and saying to me, “No, she wouldn't know—girls weren't allowed to go to Boiano.” This was really revealing to me, and sent me off in another direction, and I questioned my

grandmother more closely about this, getting some more important detail about life and social mores for girls in Castellone, and the expectations of her mother. If I had not had this casual conversation with my grandfather, it would have taken me a lot longer to get there. This happened on more than one occasion.

My mother has been of tremendous help as well. Besides translating the poetry from Boianese to English, I often phoned her about things for which I had no frame of reference which would have otherwise fallen through the cracks. She helped me to understand some of the things that went unspoken, not because my grandmother was necessarily avoiding them, but because she would forget as she told me stories that I did not have all the same detail and knowledge of what Boiano was like in the 1930s or what Toronto was like in the 1960s, beyond what I had heard from others and read in books. There was one instance where I was extremely grateful to my mother for her clarification, or I could have made a dire error with my assumption. In Chapter Two, in a section where I write about my grandmother and her family moving to their first proper home in Toronto on Crawford Street, on my first writing I had no idea that things were actually as difficult as they were. Either my grandmother did not want to tell me, or she did not mention these hardships because she felt they were not worth mentioning.

My aunt Isabella Colalillo-Kates, a poet in her own right, typed up many of my grandmother's poems for a self-published collection—in particular the Boiano pieces—in which she included some of her own work as an appendix to my grandmother's poetry. The collection is called *Bujan' Mie Paese Biell'*. While the transcriptions were extremely useful to have on hand, especially since I do not speak Boianese, and only understand about half of it—seeing it on the page was tremendously helpful. In addition, my

grandmother loaned me her work and allowed me to photocopy it so that I had her original material to work from. Primarily, it was her Boiano poetry, but all the others, birthday poems and whatnot, were not all there. She had bits and pieces of rough copies, but all of the good copies had been given to the people for whom they were composed. Isabella included some of these in the collection, I can only assume based on the rough copies she found in my grandmother's collection. Therefore, the poems she wrote for my sisters, for my mother and my aunt have all been omitted, since they were not in the folder I looked at. Another omission, and these poems are rare, were two commemorative pieces she composed in honour of her *cognata* (my other grandmother) Carmela and her *cognato* (my other grandfather) Paolo, each composed after their respective deaths, six months apart from the other. I believe my father has copies of these in his files, but I could not find them in time for this thesis. For the purposes of this thesis I have concentrated on her Boiano poems, her birthday poems and her wedding anniversary poem, but it would have been nice to have as complete a collection as possible nonetheless.

#### THE SHORTCOMINGS

There are two small things I want to address lastly. I have written this thesis with a great deal of trepidation and self-consciousness. Partly, this is because this is not a stranger's life (though I would hope not to write about a stranger clinically or callously). I clearly want to do my grandmother's poetry and life justice, but it was hard to really get into some of the details. In particular, it was tricky not to go into family dynamics (be they positive or negative) and needlessly complicate her words. A great deal of my

nervousness is also due to the fact that I want to show this work to my parents, particularly to my mother, but I worry that I will have some of the details wrong, and that not only will she find some grave mistake and assumption within the body of the work, but she or other family members might be disappointed by a less than accurate portrayal.

Finally, the most difficult thing was to write after my grandmother passed away. Aside from the obvious emotional connection that I have to my grandmother, I also had to remember that I could no longer phone her up and ask her for further clarification, or talk to her about what I had written. There are some areas of this thesis in which I stray uncomfortably close to speculation—I found the second chapter especially difficult to write and I think that shows, since that part of her life was quite tenuous; everything was changing all the time and she had to figure out how to be herself in a new country. This is also the part of her life of which I have the least information, despite the in-depth interviews, and I can only assume that this was a difficult time to talk about deeply. I used my mother's references as often as I could, but this was not always possible since there are always going to be details and minutiae that my mother (nor I) does not know about my grandmother's life. I had intended to give a copy of this to my grandmother before I submitted it to see what she thought, but clearly, this is not possible now, so I can only hope that she would have been pleased by what she read.

## LA VITA CONTADINA D[E] BUJAN' / THE LIFE OF A CONTADINA IN BOIANO

È na sera che ne me net é de fà niend'  
e m'è menute nu pensier' come me vè sempe  
che steme a na terra straniera.

Na nostalgia me send de la terra lundana,  
ca suò passat' tant' ann che la seme lassata  
peró ma ice la scurdame.

Fra chillio cuoll' e vall verde e aqua chiara  
e gend' che fà ru via vai,  
pecché Bujan' è biell e ce ne vandam' assai.

La nustalgia che send' e ancora più pesanda  
che me vien ammend' mama, tata  
e che ievane accusiari' e buon  
che ce capivan' come avevane cresciut' na famia.

Ann' cresciut' sei fii che tant' respett' e simpatia;  
sem' cunciend' rispettus' e capiend'  
ca devane buon' cunss a tanta gend' e a famia.

Iavam' che le pecure, le vacche, e ri purcielle;  
ma la sera come iavam' a clas casea ieva sempe biell'.

Ci meteiva le gran' e può ci scugnava  
che ri ciucc' aggiravan' pe' fà shì le gran  
e può che n palumella ce menava pe l'aria  
p' à recapà le gran' de la cama.

Savam' accusi cundient dope finit'  
ca meniva mamma che ru caniestre chine de piatta,  
cucchiari' e bicchier nu fiasch' de vine  
taccuzze e fasciure e pure na saviciccia.

Ce magnava, ce beveva, ce parlava  
e dope ce doveva arimette la paia  
che le lenzora cheine ce la mettavame 'ncape  
e ce purtavam' a la paiera.

Ce faceva l'arremessa p' ru viern'  
ch' tenavame vacch', puorc' e pecora  
che ce faceva ru iacce pulit' ogni guiorne.

It's an evening when I don't feel like doing anything  
And a thought came to me, as it always does  
That we are in a foreign land.

I feel nostalgia for that land far away  
So many years have passed since we left it  
But we will never forget it.

In those green hills and valleys and clear water  
And people going to and fro  
Because Boiano is beautiful and we were proud of it.

The nostalgia that I feel is even more profound  
As I think of my mother and father  
Who were so good and kind  
Who understood one another and how they raised a family.

They raised six children, good-natured and respectful  
Always conscientious, respectful of others and  
understanding  
Who gave good counsel to many people and to the family.

By day we accompanied the sheep, the cows and the pigs  
But at night, when we went home, it was beautiful.

We would harvest the wheat and then glean it  
And the donkeys would turn and turn to let the grain  
seeds out  
And then like a dove we would throw it in the air  
To sort the wheat from the chaff.

We were so happy when we finished  
Because mamma would come with the basket full of dishes  
Spoons and glasses and a flask of wine  
*Taccuzze* with beans and even a sausage

We would eat, drink and talk  
And then we had to store the hay  
And with the sheets full of hay we would carry them on  
our heads  
And bring them to the hay loft.

As forage for the winter months  
Because we had cows, pigs and sheep  
Who needed a clean bed of hay every day

Ce purtava le grane le belle pane.  
 Pane ch'addurava de farina fresca  
 e ch'eva cuott' a ru furn' fatte a lena.

Mamma c' avezava a le quatt' de la matina,  
 p' amassà chella bella farina. E può faceva ru bell paniell'  
 de quatt' chini l'une che ieva accusi buon p' ott' iurne'.

E chesta è un pó di storia d' come seme cresciut'  
 che tanta gioia dend' a 'na terra fertile e pianaò  
 che ma'ricord che ieva Bujan'.

E questa è un'altra mis poesia che da tanti anni  
 state a sentire; e spero che vi sia gradita  
 che viene dal profondo del cuore per voi qua tutti uniti.

E con rispetto e nostalgia vi dò mio abbraccio;  
 un saluto a tutti voi e alle vostre care famiglie.

Un grazie ancora di aver ascoltate le mie povere parole  
 che vengono da una vecchia contadina  
 e non da un professore.

Con questa ultima frase vi saluto a tutti quì presente  
 che no serve dirlo ancora  
 che siete tutti Bojanesi e buona gente.

Ciao a l'anno che viene, a chi ci arriva  
 per fare un'altra bella serata  
 con un piatto di taccuzelle e fagioli  
 e un bel bicchier di vino.

We would bring the grain, the beautiful bread  
 Bread which smelled of fresh flour  
 Which had been cooked in a wood-burning stove

Mamma would get up at four in the morning  
 To knead the bread with that beautiful flour.  
 And then would make beautiful loaves  
 Which weighed four kilograms each  
 Which would last for eight days

And this is a brief story of how we grew up  
 With so much joy in a land fertile and flat  
 That I remember Boiano being

And this is another one of the poems that you have been  
 listening to for so many years  
 I hope that you have enjoyed it  
 Because it comes from the bottom of my heart to  
 all of you united here.

And with respect and nostalgia I give you my embrace  
 And a greeting to you all and to your dear families

Thank you again for having listened to my humble  
 words.  
 That come from an old *contadina*  
 And not from a professor

With these last words, I bid you all a good evening  
 It's not necessary but bears repeating  
 That you are all Boianese and good people.

See you in the coming year and those that will see it  
 To spend another lovely evening  
 With a dish of *taccuzelle* and beans  
 And a good glass of wine.

CHAPTER ONE:  
LANGUAGE, SONG AND DIALECT IN BOIANO  
1927-1945

Concetta Sinibaldi was born in the rural village or *frazione* of Castellone, just outside the town of Boiano in the region of Molise, roughly an hour south of Rome by train. She grew up on a plateau near the base of the Matese Mountains in a *località* or neighbourhood called Pitoscia, once the site of an ancient lake.<sup>5</sup> Boiano is the main town, and serves to tie together the loose collection of *frazioni* surrounding it, of which Castellone was one. Concetta was proud of her roots as a *contadina* and often self-identified as such. Among other things, she was a poet, a feminist, a gardener, a chef, a baker, a volunteer, a worker. However, it was the first twenty-nine years of her life lived as a *contadina* in Italy that set the frame for her character and informed the rest of her life and endeavours.

Concetta was the youngest member of her family, the baby of five other siblings. She also had two half-sisters from her father's previous marriage (his first wife died), but they were much older, and she did not interact with them daily. Her only sister, Teresa, was nineteen years older and married by the time Concetta turned four. Teresa was her protector, and treated her to little luxuries "like [new] shoes and material for a dress." Concetta was closest to her brother Filomeno when she was young, who was only three years older, and the gentlest of her four brothers. He died of rheumatic fever when he was only seventeen years old, and she described herself as "his nurse and his guardian. I entertained him while everyone else worked in the fields." She still remembered his last words to her: "Be brave." The next oldest was Carlo, who picked on her mercilessly. She

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<sup>5</sup> This part of Italy is often overlooked in favour of its wealthier neighbour Abruzzo, a region it was actually a part of until 1963 when Campobasso was separated from the region to form what is now Molise. Molise on the whole tends to fall into a generic category of Italy and often loses its regional identity. Andreina Di Clementi noted, "[a]t least until the 1960s, Anglo-American researchers tended to see [the *Mezzogiorno*] as a enormous anthropological deposit of a European past that had everywhere else disappeared, leaving Italy's *Mezzogiorno*—'the land that time forgot'—as much a part of the Third World as the Samoan Islands or Amazon forest." (79)

jokingly referred to him as "the terrible one." Donato was the next brother, nine years her senior, and though he picked on her too, he was never as mean as Carlo and her other brother Pasquale could be to her. She said it was because "he had a different heart."

Donato went missing during the Second World War, lost somewhere in Russia. In her husband's livingroom in Toronto, a photograph of him posing in his military uniform with a horse in a photographer's studio hangs on the wall. Pasquale was the eldest, born in 1918, and up until his death five years ago, her last living sibling with whom she maintained a close relationship with telephone calls and the occasional visit to Italy over the years. Her parents were Teresa Pitoscia and Gauenzio Sinibaldi. Her father was a tall man whom neighbours nicknamed *Il Polacco*, the Pole, for his red hair and blue eyes, features that her brother Donato also shared. Her mother was a strict woman, and the spitting image of Concetta herself. There is a rare photograph of her that rests on a shelf in Concetta's livingroom: a black and white image of a woman with a serious face wrapped in a shawl. Concetta was close to both her parents though in very different ways. Her mother had expectations of how she was supposed to behave, and taught her to cook and clean, and to look after her brothers by ironing their clothes and preparing their supper. Her father was more lenient and doted on her tomboyish tendencies, encouraging her mother to give her a little more freedom. Concetta likened his relaxed nature to the fact that he left Castellone to work abroad in the United States and Brazil. His worldview was larger than most members of his community at that time, particularly women like her mother who were relegated to staying behind. Concetta described herself as a nosy, precocious child, always asking questions. She obeyed her mother (most of the time), and did her chores around the home, and helped with the farm animals, but she also got into

her fair share of mischief. She had a strong sense of justice, and when she felt that she or a member of her family had been slighted, she often played a prank in retaliation. One of her more infamous capers involved pitching a dead cat into a neighbour's well, poisoning the water and causing the well to be shut down for weeks.

#### LA CONTADINA

Before anything going further, the word *contadina* must be properly explained. In Italian, the word is used to describe the agro-labourers who lived in the countryside. In English, the word very loosely translates to "peasant," or even "subsistence farmer," but neither of those words truly imply the meaning of *contadina*. The word "peasant" was sometimes used by Concetta herself in conversation, but only very generally, and most often to describe the insult she felt when she was accused of being a peasant in the pejorative. She stated very clearly, "We are peasants. The meaning of peasant is not poor or lower in class—they were richer than most people in town." What she meant by the latter part of the statement is that she and her family owned some of their land, unlike the majority of the lower classes who lived in town, who did not. She also clarified this by saying that after the Second World War, even the wealthy members of the town came begging to the *contadini* for food, since their currency was no longer valuable; there were no markets from which to purchase anything. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, the word *contadina* will be used the majority of the time in the place of the word "peasant." In addition, depending on the usage, the vowel endings of the word may occasionally vary: *contadina* with the *-a* ending refers to the singular feminine; the word *contadini* with the

–i ending refers to the plural. For the masculine the word ends with an –o, and for the feminine plural, the word ends with an –e.

The *contadini* were largely rural people with little formal education who worked the land, most often working in the fields. With the exception of trained professionals who tended to live in Boiano proper, the majority of the area was made up of *contadini*, who were part of a completely oral culture. The *contadini* of Boiano spoke the dialect common to the area called Boianese in Italian—or *Bujanes'* in dialect—and named for the town. Boianese of course has similarities to regional dialects from Molise and with the dialects from its border regions of Campania and Abruzzi, but despite this, a town or community dialect is still localized and unique to that small area. Until recently, Boianese (again, as is the case with most dialects), was entirely oral, and had never been written down until *paesani* like Concetta began using it in their personal writing. In 2007, a local scholar, Michele Campanella published a Boianese dictionary called *Dizionario del dialetto e della civiltà di Boiano*. It has become more and more common for *paesani* to create dictionaries of their respective hometowns.

In the first interviews, Concetta spoke mainly about how and where she grew up. Some of the *contadini* of Boiano, like her father Gaudenzio, owned modest plots of land scattered around the countryside, rather than in centralized areas, “[a result] from the exigencies of the law of inheritance,” which ordained that the plots must be split among sons and split again and again through generations of descendants (Banfield 1967, 51). In addition to working their own modest plots of land, Concetta and most other *contadini* also worked land belonging to *padroni*, landowners who lived in town, in Boiano. By her account, the *contadini* lived simple but hard lives that were largely dictated by the

seasons, which determined the sowing of seeds and the harvesting of crops. "I grew up with *semplicità* [simplicity]," she said. In addition to some land, Concetta's father also owned some animals, including chickens, a cow or two, some pigs, and most importantly, sheep. Sheep were an integral part of the *contadini*'s lives in Boiano, and were depended upon for extra income. As a little girl, her duties at home were to feed the chickens in the morning, and to help look after the sheep in the afternoons, when they were in the lower hills. Concetta explained that traditionally only boys were allowed to stay with sheep overnight in the summer months when the flocks were taken higher into the hills, as it would have been improper for girls to do so. She loved her sheep and her favourite was named Milella; she said she used to name them all. The real danger for the sheep was actually the wolves that lived in the mountains who roamed the outer reaches of Castellone, preying on sheep; for this reason, most families also kept sheepdogs and Concetta named hers, affectionately, and perhaps a bit ironically, *Lupo*, or in English, Wolf.

Despite the idyllic sense of country living that occasionally pervades the tone of her stories about Boiano, and the fact that most of the *contadini* could have been at home in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it would be unfair and inaccurate to say that they were an unequivocally isolated group of people. Franca Iacovetta writes,

[The peasants] did not come from a background of isolated, closed villages, neither were they completely self-sufficient farmers isolated from a market economy and ignorant of the world beyond their town. Typically, they resided in agro-towns (*paese*) perched on a hilltop or nestled into a mountain-side. Daily, the town's peasants and agricultural labourers walked long distances to the scattered fields and the commercial estates below. In some cases, people also resided in houses scattered outside the town, thereby creating a less distinct break between urban center and countryside. (1992, 9)

Since Concetta and her family lived in the countryside, walking to their land was not as much of an issue for her as for the others that Iacovetta talks about in the above quotation. They were firmly attached to the land they lived on. Robert Redfield offers his own description of peasant life, and it is true at least on a cursory level of how the *contadini* likely perceived their own lives and surroundings.

Even at this misty upper level, I do think that something remains of the assertion made as to the peasant view of the good life; but others might not accept the following statement of peasant values: an intense attachment to native soil; a reverent disposition toward habitat and ancestral ways; a restraint on individual self-seeking in favour of family and community; a certain suspiciousness, mixed in with appreciation of town life; a sober and earthy ethic. (1989, 78)

Like many other rural working-class cultures, the *contadini* nurtured their relationship with the land, treating it, in John Szwed's words, as "sacred," (1971, 152) and with respect since the land and what it could yield determined the quality of their living that year; some years there was extra and some years, there was not.

As a girl, Concetta had to stay close to home, and so she did not often get to leave Castellone until she was a young adult. She explained that it was unseemly at the time for unmarried young women and underaged girls to go wandering together. If they did go to Boiano, it was in the company of a married chaperone (usually her mother). She said this "stupid attitude" towards girls frustrated her constantly and she always craved independence and tested her mother's limits. Still, she recalled a busy marketplace in Boiano (in addition to the smaller weekly market in Castellone), with people coming from Civita, from Sepino, from Monteverde and all of the other surrounding *frazioni*. Peddlers from even further away passed through selling fabrics and trinkets, as did the *zingari* (the Italian pejorative for Roma, likening them to pests—the Boianese word for

mosquito is similar: *zingera*). The *zingari* existed in an inbetween sort of place. They were always outsiders, but also regular fixtures, camping just by the church in Castellone. Children from Castellone and children from the caravans always played together, including Concetta, though the adults never mingled. The Roma were always kept at arm's length, suspicion propagated by stories of their alleged tendency for thieving and swindling. The Roma also moved around frequently, and for the *contadini* who depended and placed such emphasis on the land, this was more cause for misunderstanding. They sold a mismatched assortment of goods in the market, and as did Ethiopian traders whom Concetta remembered selling medicinal herbs and remedies. Though Boiano was still fairly provincial and locals were suspicious of outsiders, Boiano also had a male tradition of working abroad which established a habitual coming and going from Boiano to other parts of Europe and sometimes as far as South America, the United States and Australia.<sup>6</sup> Donna Gabaccia noted that despite this persistent migration, "most of Italy's migrants remained economically and emotionally enmeshed in subsistence production and their rural communities" (2000, 82). There was a certain amount of geographic movement of the *contadini*, then, and according to Concetta, this is how outside cultural influence gradually percolated into the community of Castellone.

"Communal living," for lack of a better term, was a fundamental aspect of life for the *contadini*, which meant that larger scale chores like tending the sheep were shared between neighbours and families of each *località*. For instance, sheep were pooled together, and the workload was divided amongst the *contadini* according to the number of

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<sup>6</sup> Effectively, this was a precursor to the latter mass work migration of the post-Second World War era, but most (not all) of these men tended to come back again, which happened more rarely in the following decades, their wives and children eventually joining them in another country. Sometimes men abandoned their families and began life anew in another country.

sheep each family possessed—if one family only owned twenty sheep, then they might be responsible for only two days' tending during the week; if another family owned forty sheep, then they might be responsible for four days' tending per week, and so on. When it came time to milk the sheep, they were milked *en masse*, and the milk was divided according to the same criteria. This communal method also applied to the harvest and production of food, including tomato-making (sauce making), corn shucking and wine making. These were all responsibilities shared by the community, and Concetta talked about the singing that accompanied the work (in the fields too) to make the time pass more quickly.

When you harvest the corn you put 'em on the cement place and evening you have to take the *sfoglie* (husks), so we used to get all together, the neighbours—for example, tonight, I pick the corn and you help and the next night it was somebody else . . . and you help each other. After we would finish to do that, Zio Pasquale would play the harmonica and we used to dance, boys and girls, whoever was there, even the old people.

In the wintertime, outdoor work could not be performed and community activities were transferred to the indoors. In his seminal work *Folklore by the Fireside*, Alessandro Falassi defines the Tuscan oral tradition of the *veglia* as “the ritual evening gathering of family and friends by the fireplace.” (1980, 5) Concetta said that the wintertime was made for talking and telling stories, “because that was the only entertainment we had it in the old country—there was television, even radio only a few people had it”; in addition, there were significantly fewer chores to be done in the winter, thus the *contadini* had more time for stories. As the foundation of singing and storytelling, rhyming and joking were social activities in Boiano. As is the case with many children, particularly those raised in a deep oral culture, wordplay was an integral part of Concetta's childhood, in various forms. Though singing was especially popular in Castellone and often

accompanied work, Concetta recalled her childish rhymes and jokes as her first efforts with wordplay.

#### LULLABIES, RHYME AND SONG

It seems that the natural place to begin is to give a brief account of the lullaby, the first form of rhyme and song Concetta was exposed to when she was an infant. Aside from her own compositions later in life, these were some of the songs she remembered best, and she learned them "from my grandmother and my mother. I heard my mother, not too much my grandmother, 'cause we were all big [by then]. My mother used to sing to Enzo and Giovanni [her nephews]." When her daughters and granddaughters were born, she sang the *ninna-nanna* to them in turn. In Italian, the lullaby is called the *ninna-nanna*, named for a common refrain in many lullabies that goes, "ninna-nanna, ninna-o," nothing more than a nonsense song, much like Mother Goose. The Italian lullaby is now being revisited by Luisa Del Giudice who posits that, for some Italian women, the lullaby was actually a way in which women could lament for their frustrations, cleverly disguised as a tune to soothe children to sleep (1988, 270-293). Concetta could not speak to this, but since the *ninna-nanna* was important to her in her life, it warrants a mention. She tended to use the versions she had learned from her mother and grandmother, but also saw fit to add her own "invented" verses at the end of the lullabies. Years later, she and Diodato, her husband, sang all the time to their granddaughters. She started with the *ninne-nanne* she knew so well, before introducing them to play songs and rhymes. The following observation is entirely unscholarly, but after hearing her, it always seemed on a purely aesthetic level that Concetta's dialect was perfectly suited for lullabies, the inherent rising

and falling lilt of Boianese suiting the pace of a lullaby. Concetta's own mother, who according to Diodato had a wonderful voice, may have perhaps influenced her in this respect.

Concetta said that rhyme was an underlying fixture in songs in Boiano, thus emphasizing the importance of wordplay in this culture. The songs that most members of the community sang were familiar and readily accessible, but songs could also be individualized to suit a much smaller group of people or children or even one single person. It was these kinds of songs which Concetta made as perhaps her first poems. Childhood rhyming was easily transferable to song, and song was a prevalent expression for her and her fellow *contadini* who often sang while working in the fields, making their menial tasks pass by a little more quickly. Popular songs were certainly known in Boiano, though as she said, not many among the *contadini* owned a radio, and Concetta's family was no exception to this; radios were still very much a luxury in the 1930s and 1940s. Popular music was generally introduced by passers-by, predominantly peddlers who visited the weekly markets in Boiano, bringing with them the latest songs from larger cities. Concetta remembers hearing a song called *Campagnola Bella*, a well-loved song performed today by folk musicians in Italy and abroad, for the first time in the market place. Each regional dialect made its own imprint on a popular song since there were no recordings for the *contadini* to refer to. Words deviated from the standard popularized form of a song, and became localized through changes in pronunciation and occasional word replacement in dialect. After listening to some songs played for her from a collection by Alan Lomax called *Abruzzo* (the neighbouring region, of which Molise was once a part), she recognized some of the songs, but noted that words were pronounced

differently, or that lyrics were different here and there. She also observed that, on occasion, the melody varied slightly, and said that the singers on the Lomax recording went faster whereas Boiano singers would have gone more slowly, or that their voices went up instead of going down in some places.

The songs and the rhymes that Concetta invented as a child did not have to make sense; in fact, most of what she said she composed when she was young was largely nonsense—it didn't matter if it made sense, the point of the rhyming was simply that: to rhyme. The humour lay in the fact that the words being rhymed did not go together. She said the more deliberate jokes and puns came later, after she got older, and developed a stronger grasp of the meanings of words. David Crystal observed "[l]anguage play is pre-eminently an amateur, domestic matter—playable by all, regardless of sex, age, social background, or level of intelligence. All we need is an awareness of the rules, and this comes in the normal course of child development as we acquire our ability to listen and speak . . ." (1998, 53) Crystal seconded Alessandro Falassi who wrote, "the folklore of children (whether performed for them or by them) was instrumental in the acquisition of adult verbal art and of an increasing degree of syntactic competence." (1980, 74)

The songs Concetta remembered with the most fondness, but perhaps with the least detail, are called *ariette*—meaning "little songs," from the operatic term *aria*. The melody was always the same, or at least, there was little variation. The words were highly changeable and fluid depending on the singer and the subject.

We used to call [them] *la arietta*, okay? We used to invent the words, they were not songs somebody wrote or told you, we used to invent them. We used to say, *che bel vente cielo che m'venuto . . .* The melody was the same. Even the big kids sang. They used to get together and sing these songs, but the melody was fantastic, because they could make it lower, higher, changing the voices between them—like my mother, my patina,

my *nonna* Maria, my cousins, they all grew up with singing, there were all kinds of songs they used to sing, but all songs they invented, familiar between them, not from the radio. . . . Who had a radio? <Laughs.>

They were always songs that had, in her words, been “invented” in and amongst the community. Concetta only remembered bits and pieces of her childhood songs and nonsense rhymes. They were so changeable she said, that nothing they made up ever stuck for very long. Yet she spoke mainly about the *ariette* because they could be about anything: when she was a child, Concetta could make up a song about the sheep that she had to watch after school, or the river, or she could make up a little song about someone else from the village. In terms of songs composed about other members of the community, these were often satires, which she told me about in connection with young so-called fallen women who became pregnant out of wedlock, who had to leave town and came back again months later without a baby. She said they were mean songs, and that one had to be careful about when and where they were sung, since the *carabinieri* could charge a person with slander if they were overheard. The subjects of her nonsense songs were wide and varied, but it did not matter, since it was the act of rhyming itself that was key. This skill with language was something that she carried with her and it informed the poetry she wrote later on as well as her perceptions of other languages.

As she got older, Concetta’s inventive childhood songs began to give way to the fascist songs she had to learn and memorize in school including Mussolini’s anthem and also to the hymns she learned at Sunday Mass. In a conversation over the telephone, she talked about one of her favourite memories about singing in the mountains during the occasion of the *fešta* for Sant’ Egidio [Saint Giles], and sleeping over in the church:

We celebrated Sant’ Egidio up the mountain. There we used to go out in our costume [traditional folk dress]. We go out the night before and make

a big fire in front of the church and singing all night long. . . . Yeah they [the men] sang songs—like folk songs and everything. The women, we were around another fire and singing songs—not folk songs, were not allowed to do that. Prayer songs [about] Sant' Nicola, Sant' Egidio, all these story songs, and saying the rosary. All those songs they used to sing . . . when they got together a bunch of men [to sing], the mountain was trembling [with their voices]. It was really beautiful to be there up at night.

In Canada, when she participated (which was often) in various church processions and pilgrimages on Greyhound buses bound for Buffalo, New York and Penetanguishene, Ontario to visit shrines, she and all the other women sang hymns, which were interspersed with the recitation of prayers in a rhythmic cadence. Performance and audience, as they shall later be discussed in the third chapter, are both integral aspects of some of the poetry she wrote, stemming from the inclusionary and participatory influences of song and its role in her hometown.

#### BUJANES' AND BOIANESE: A BRIEF HISTORY

Dialect is often perceived, both by outsiders and by dialect-speakers themselves, as less legitimate than standard Italian. On a trip to Boiano in 2007, Concetta's older brother Pasquale self-deprecatingly mocked the southern region of Calabria when he remarked, "they talk *più brutto* [even worse/ugly] than we do." Concetta had (as does her husband Diodato in particular) a fondness for jokes that poke fun at dialects even when they are from the same region. One of Diodato's favourite jokes is about two dogs who meet, one from Bari and the other from Lecce (both of these cities are in the region of Puglia, the heel of the boot) who try to goad each other over the strangeness of the other's accent. The sentiment of these kinds of comments and jokes reflected a general feeling amongst Concetta and her *contadini* contemporaries that dialect, no matter where it is from, is

simply not good enough when compared to standard Italian. In her poem "La Vita Contadina D[e] Bujan'," she wrote:

Un grazie ancora di aver ascoltate  
le mie povere parole  
che vengono da una vecchia  
contadina  
e non dan un professore.

Thank you again for having  
listened to my humble words  
That come from an old  
*contadina*  
And not from a professor.

The word *povere* translates to *poor*, but the meaning of intent is better articulated by the word *humble*. All self-deprecating humour aside, it is clear that Concetta's turn of phrase comes from a very real culture of undervaluing dialect in Italy. Her behaviour during the early interviews reflected this too in terms of how she chose to speak, though she did not actually verbalize any such sentiments during the interviews. There was a significant change between her performance of the early interviews and between the last interviews. At first, Concetta tended to sit up straighter and she spoke more carefully and formally in Italian rather than dialect, clearly hyperconscious of being recorded. She tended to use this tone to tell a particular story when she knew that she was being recorded, or sometimes, if there were guests over who were not family, or *paesani* from Boiano. She often slipped out of this flow of speech without realizing it, quickly falling back into the cadences of Boianese. Other times, she was jarred out of her performance by an interruption from her husband, whom she would immediately scold in Boianese. When she picked up the story again, she continued not in Italian, but in dialect, suddenly at ease.

Before continuing with a discussion of the language that Concetta grew up with, it would be best to consider an overview of the history of her dialect and region. The neighbouring town of Sepino is one that has been excavated repeatedly since the 1970s.

The community lives in homes that were constructed atop more ancient ones, with those below now exposed to the air once again. Sepino was one of the central towns belonging to the Samnites (*i Sabelli Samniti* in Italian), the agro-warrior people who lived in the area thousands of years before, becoming well-known for being a formidable enemy of the Romans. An ancient stone gate from Sepino is one of the remains, with a trail leading in the direction of Boiano. The gate is marked with the old Latin name for the town: Bovanium (literally, *ox-crossing*). In Concetta's day, the town was called Bujano, until it was modernized to Boiano. Now in Canada, the Boiano Club increasingly uses the old spelling, presumably to be more closely connected to the past: in some publications and on commemorative plaques it is spelled Bojano. The Latin [v] being converted to a [j]. Traditionally, the letter [i] did not exist in Boianese, nor did it have a set alphabet for its dialect.<sup>7</sup> In 1997 Michele Campanella published *Boiano: Tra Storia e Cultura Popolare* in which he discussed the dialect, and its history, through a cursory examination of the various invading cultures it witnessed and survived:

The first thing to consider is that many of the words in the Molisano dialect in general, and the Bojanese dialect in particular, come from foreign languages.

There are many words that come from French (in dialect one says *sparatrap* for a *cirotto* [match], *tirabuscio* for *cavatappi* [corkscrew]) and many others, quite a few come from German (in dialect we say *pretessinere* for *prezzemolo* [parsley], *atso* as an expression which are both very close to the German words with the same meaning), and there are also Greek terms (*taute* to refer to a *cassa da morto* [casket]), and also Turkish words (*fressora* to refer to a *padella* [skillet]). Basically all the peoples who

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<sup>7</sup> There are others, in that traditionally words would have been shortened, particularly proper names, as a sign of affection and friendship. A name like *Cristina* to *Cristi*. Finally, the other notable distinction is in the [-s] sound that is actually closer to [-sh]. Therefore the name *Cristina* would resemble *Crishtina* (or *Crishti*) outloud. The end vowel or syllable is usually left hanging, swallowed by the speaker. The name *Emily* or *Emilia* is shortened to *Emi* (and Concetta sometimes anglicized it to *Emmy*); the name *Adriana* is shortened to the familiar *Adria*; Concetta's own name is often shortened by those from the same region who know her, to *Conce*.

came to our land as invaders left their traces in the evolution and formation of how we speak. (1997, 263-264)<sup>8</sup>

This “picking up” of other languages and assimilating words into the local language is typical of many regions of Italy, particularly those regions in the Mezzogiorno of southern Italy, which was more open to invaders than the north (though certainly northern Italy endured its fair share of invaders as well). For instance, in Calabria, which is a region as far south as one can go without falling off the peninsula, there is, in some communities, a tradition of smashing *piñatas* at important *feste*, like the celebration of patron saints. Their *piñatas* usually take the form of small to medium sized terracotta clay pots rather than the more commonly-known Mexican *piñatas* which popularly take the form of colourful *papier-mâché*. Initially, the uninformed are unaware of the connection Calabria has to Spain, and often make the mistake of assuming that perhaps this is simply a copy of another culture’s tradition for the sake of pageantry and amusement. The Spaniards had a long presence in Calabria, and left behind traces of their culture and language, both of which were subsumed and became part of the larger scheme of Calabrian culture.

#### DIALECT VERSUS FORMAL EDUCATION AND STANDARD ITALIAN

Benito Mussolini marched on Rome and seized power by *coup d’état* in 1922. When she was old enough to begin school Mussolini’s educational reforms directly influenced Concetta and her perceptions of language. Mussolini sold his fascist agenda through ideals of nationalism and of cultural unity. Although Garibaldi had been largely

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<sup>8</sup> Translated by Giuliana Colalillo.

successful in the political unification of Italy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Italy remained (and still is to a degree) a culturally disparate country, each region so diverse from the other that dialects were essentially unrelated languages unto themselves.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, with ambitions of greatness, and an egomaniacal and arguably romanticized view of the past, Mussolini took it upon himself to unite—or rather, to standardize Italian culture. The primary way in which he sought to achieve this was through language by attempting to quietly eradicate the regional dialects. These dialects were, in his mind, keeping the people of Italy divided.

The Italian language, as it is presently known, has its origins in Tuscan dialect—specifically the Florentine dialect, which, as a language, was first made popular by Dante Alighieri's *La divina commedia* (The Divine Comedy) in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. His original work is now classified as medieval Italian, and has been translated into modern Italian (among dozens of other languages). Machiavelli was also a Florentine and his *Il principe* (The Prince), published in the same century as *La divina commedia* helped cement the literary ascendancy of the Florentine dialect. Italians say that Dante did for the Italian language what Shakespeare did for the English language in terms of his massive influence in the creation of words and on the way people spoke. By the time Alessandro Manzoni wrote *I promessi sposi* (The Betrothed) in 1827, he chose to publish the definitive edition in 1842 in Florentine despite his own roots in Milanese dialect. The novel is now regarded as being *the* classic in the Italian literary canon. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the long and continuous process of the *Risorgimento*, there was some debate as to what form standard Italian should take, and the literary prestige attached to

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<sup>9</sup> Historians agree that the date of Italian unification cannot be precisely pinpointed. The common consensus is that the process began in 1815 with the end of Napoleonic rule and ended in 1871.

Dante and Machiavelli's works, along with Manzoni's publication, helped to weigh Florentine as the clear choice. Moreover, that the Italian Renaissance had largely been born and fostered in Florence (which subsequently became known as a cultural epicenter) also helped. By the time Italy had been unified by Garibaldi in 1861 there were two additional factors: the first Italian dictionary published in 1621 was Florentine, and the *Accademia della Crusca*, the first official legislative body of the Italian language was based in Florence. For all of those reasons, the clear choice was to establish Florentine as the predominant character of the Italian *lingua franca*.

Dialects can be counted by the hundreds all over Italy though the speakers are small in number due to the regionality of each dialect. Modern Italian increasingly pervades pronunciation and vocabulary, but the fact remains that dialects are distinct, and speakers from different regions cannot communicate with each other. The exception is when speakers from neighbouring regions have some words in common. For example, some of the dialects in Naples, which is the geographic neighbour of Molise, may have similar intonation or cadence, but Napolitano still remains a different language. When one looks even more closely, dialects become even more specific to towns—hence Concetta's dialect being known as Boianese, or the dialect from the small town of Maierato being known as Maieratano. Therefore it begins to become clear as to why the songs, rhymes and jokes of Concetta's youth in Italy remain so intangible, like fragmented pieces of silk that fly away. Her dialect is called Boianese, after her hometown. It would be an oversimplification to say that Boianese is simply a localized version of the larger form of Molisano however; there are words that exist (or existed) nowhere else in Molise than in Boiano. As such, Concetta typically refers to herself as a

Boianesa (or, in the old dialect, *Bujanes'*) with the exception of only one line in her poetry (which will be discussed later), in which she refers to herself as a *Castellunes'*, or one from Castellone.

By the time Mussolini came along in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was clear to him that the peasants, whom he purported to champion, needed to be educated, and the best way to approach that was through the education of peasant children. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly for Concetta, he decreed that *all* children—girls included—under fifteen years old had to go to school; for the first time, in Italy, girls were being formally educated. In *The Fascist Experience*, Edward Tannenbaum addressed the institution of formal education in Italy at that time:

As was to be expected, the regime was least successful in integrating the rural masses into the national culture through the schools. In the late 1930s it eliminated the last vestiges of specialized instruction in the poorer and more remote areas. . . . The situation changed only with the creation of the Royal Commission for Rural Schools as the heir to the Balilla in 1938.<sup>10</sup> When this commission brought these schools under the direct jurisdiction of the ministry of education . . . the central authority was more concerned with providing a standardized education for all children than with adapting local schools to local needs. Ironically then, it was not the 'revolutionary' party but rather the incorrigibly bourgeois educational establishment that took over the task of "assimilating" the rural masses into the dominant national culture. (1972, 173)

Up until then the only school most *contadine* girls were likely to attend was *la sila*, as Concetta did before she was old enough to begin school. *La sila* was a sort of kindergarten cum daycare run by a local woman or women in the community, who were paid by the parents of their charges with bread or eggs or a little bit of money. In return, the children (usually girls), had care while their parents worked in the fields. They spent

<sup>10</sup> The full name of the Balilla is Opera Nazionale Balilla, a fascist youth organization that was responsible for school education from 1927 until 1938, when it was subsumed by the Gioventù Italiana del Littorio, a youth section of the National Fascist Party.

their time doing small crafts if they were old enough to learn or played together. It is unclear whether or not *la sila* was formally instituted by the state at any level, but it seems more likely that while Concetta was a young child, women ran *la sila* privately, out of their own homes.

Concetta, then, was in a unique position as part of a new generation of Italian girls who were being formally educated for the first time. Her own mother could not read or write and nor could her older sister and half-sisters. Up until then, attending school had not been mandatory for children, be they boy or girl—though certainly, it was more common for boys to attend than girls—her own brothers were evidence of this. Most *contadini* believed that education for girls was an impracticality when they were being groomed to run a household and to work in the fields and help care for a farm. As an example of this by stark contrast, Concetta's *cognata* Carmela who was born in 1914, was never sent to school where she lived in Maierato, Calabria. She remained illiterate all her life. The only exception to the education-for-boys-only rule, was if a girl came from a wealthy family who might have been in a position to provide a tutor to teach her to read and to write. Public education in Italy was in dire straits until Mussolini made his reforms. Though his goal was to inundate the impoverished masses with propaganda, one of his better initiatives was in putting a public education system in place. Concetta loved it and read whatever she could get her hands on.

... we didn't have too much books, whatever you could grab, I loved it, read it—a piece of paper, anything I could read. So many beautiful books—when I was seven years old, when I started to go to Grade 2, it was the Bible. Every night I have to read the Bible to my mother, my father, my patino and my patina because nobody could read—my father yes, [he could] but they make me read three or four chapters until I said “A basta ‘mo!” [Enough!] But I was reading like you read any book—I didn't know the meaning of the words. I love those stories. Bertoldo,

Bertoldino and Cacasenno. Pinocchio. You won't believe the laughs you get if you read those books.

Concetta essentially began performing for others at a young age—a foreshadowing of the performance of her poetry much later in life, whether it was practicing a story or poem she had to recite for school to her sheep, or by reading the Bible to her family, even when she could not comprehend the meaning of most of the words. Some of her teachers felt that she showed great promise, and hoped that she would continue her education in Campobasso, the capital city of Molise. She reflected the barest beginnings of a massive change for the *contadini*.

Following suit with his ideas about the value of a national culture, language and poetry were integral parts of Mussolini's new curriculum, which Concetta and her classmates studied faithfully alongside arithmetic and geography. Concetta said that when she was in school, the new curriculum dictated the study of four languages: Ancient Greek, Latin, French and Standard Italian. Dialect was not supposed to be spoken at school, and speaking Italian was encouraged instead, perhaps in an attempt by Mussolini to raise the peasants from their humble status to a level where they might at least be able to speak like their class superiors. Given the curriculum's stipulation of those four languages, it seems fair to say that Mussolini and his language education was a way to connect to his romanticized view of classical culture. In any case, language was divided into two neat categories for Concetta a young age: Italian was for school, and Boianese was for home, but these distinctions blurred and the former began to influence the latter.

[Mussolini] never prohibited the dialect, but at school, no dialect. You have to speak Italian, but out, you can speak whatever you want, but the Italian language was really strict in school. French, Greek, Latin and English. You have to do it. After the war, he disappeared, and they

changed it a little bit—they took off the Latin and the Greek. English and French were still around.

Concetta explained that she went through at least two shifts in dialect, first during her childhood, and then just before she left Italy to immigrate to Canada. She would also unwittingly participate in the proliferation of her dialect in Canada while it began to change even more quickly than before back in Italy, standardizing at a faster rate.

Tannenbaum argued,

The schools were most ineffective in the south [particularly Sicily, Calabria, and Basilicata] . . . which remained semicolonial ghettos of the northern half of the country. . . . The economic and cultural gap between these regions and the north was wider than ever before [post-Second World War]; hence, the efforts of the regime to impose the standards and values of the latter on the former largely failed in the schools as in most other agencies. (1972, 174)

According to Tannenbaum, Mussolini's efforts ultimately failed and though Tannenbaum is absolutely correct in noting the disparity between the north and the south after the end of the war, Concetta's experience of the education system varies from Tannenbaum's account in terms of the influence it had on her and her language. It is important not to forget the effect of the Italian language on the Boianese dialect, which despite being taught for only a short period of time before the war, quickened the pace of outside influence on dialect. The first shift in dialect was based on vocabulary. Concetta recalls that there were words that fell out of usage when she was a child and that her grandmother spoke a more archaic version of Boianese. She does not recall an issue of comprehension between generations, but her grandmother could not resist teasing her at least a little bit about it: when Concetta came home from school and performed her latest song or joke, her grandmother would laugh and tell her "I can't understand you!" Concetta said the later shift in dialect pertained more to her daughters' generation rather

than to her own, this time affecting pronunciation rather than vocabulary. With Concetta's help, a brief chart was drawn up in order to track the basic changes from the version of Boianese her grandmother spoke, to the version of Boianese her grandnephew Antonio, who lives in Boiano, still speaks. She decided to use the word *pane* (bread) as to illustrate her observation.

<i>Concetta's nonna</i>	<i>Old Dialect</i> p'n • p[an]n[e] • (bread)	
<i>Concetta</i>	<i>Pre-War Dialect</i> pan' • pan[e] • (bread)	-vocabulary change (more Italian influence)
<i>Daughters (Isabella &amp; Giuliana)</i>	<i>Post-War Dialect</i> pan' • pan[e] • (bread)	-pronunciation changed -cadence changed
<i>Grandnephew (Antonio)</i>	pane • (bread)	-more standardized emphasis

1.1 Table of Shift from Old Dialect to Post-War Dialect

Michele Campanella traced the history of the evolution of Boianese, and confirmed what Concetta already knew from experience. He noted that as the dialect modernized, more vowels began to be added to the pronunciation of a word (as noted in the above table), rather than being dropped or swallowed by the speaker as had been done by older speakers. Thus by the time Concetta was in school, Boianese had already changed once in her lifetime, and would begin to change even more rapidly, spurred by the outside influence of Mussolini as aforementioned.

Along with the usual subjects of arithmetic and geography, Concetta and her classmates also learned poetry at school. Dante and Pascoli were two of the primary standards that she remembers studying and both remain a part of the curriculum in Italy. Giovanni Pascoli became one of her favourites, and a volume or two of his poems were mixed in with her other books on the shelf in her living room in Canada. Pascoli's work

was very pastoral and revolved around simple themes of domestic life, though his most famous poem "La cavallina storna" (The black and white mare) was about his father's assassination and the mare who faithfully brought his body home. Concetta still loved reading Pascoli's poems years later.

Concetta recalls that she and her classmates learned the poetry by rote, and the teacher used to call on them to recite any given series of stanzas out of their regular order. Given the formulaic manner in which she was first exposed to poetry, she began to associate it with math rather than with literature. This association was further emphasized by her love of form and meter and rhyme later in life when she began to compose her own poetry. Concetta attended school with her brothers roughly three or four mornings a week until noon, when children were sent home; school was organized in that manner because the children of *contadini* had chores to contribute at home in the afternoons, in addition to the duties performed early in the morning before school. Concetta's own responsibilities consisted of feeding the chickens in the morning, and in the afternoons, she had to look after the sheep and the family cow. She practiced her recitations by reading aloud to the sheep she watched in the foothills:

School it was only from eight to twelve it was and I used to go do my homework while I was watching the sheep—because at night I would fall asleep—and I used to do all my homework and bring my pencil and book with me and if I have to learn a story you have to tell the next day I would read it out loud if no one was around to the sheep. And sometimes I was sitting and they come around me and they looked at me, and said "What are you doing?" and I said, "Get out of here, go eat your grass."

There are scraps of the English language found in Concetta's childhood memories, and the most tangible evidence of this remains in her father's old house. The house is still there in Pitoscia, where a sign painted on a kitchen wall reads "CLEAN AS YOU GO," with an arrow pointing down at where a garbage can used to sit in the days of British occupation in Boiano toward the end of the Second World War. Earlier still, in the 1930s when Concetta was a little girl, she and the other girls in the *località* used to go and visit a cousin who lived a mile or two away. This cousin was older than most of the girls in the neighbourhood, but she spent most of her time at home alone since her husband was away, working in the United States. The husband sent his young wife a record player and records of American music, and the girls would put them on.

She used to have a record player . . . and we used to go there to dance. She had American records—what did we know, we didn't understand. It was one of those [record players] you have to wind with a handle. We were just dancing, what did we know about the words, we didn't know anything about the songs.

It seems surreal to think that some American records found their way to rural Italy, where most people did not even have running water or electricity at the time, and where Concetta knew only in the vaguest sense of *America*, which meant "away" more than anything else.

The war was an integral part of Concetta's childhood and formative adolescent experiences, and she first witnessed a German occupation of Boiano and then a British invasion and subsequent occupation of the town. In both instances, the soldiers camped nearer to Castellone, where she lived. Concetta remembered the exact date of the German arrival on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1940; at the time, she was in Grade Five, though school would eventually be suspended, and she never received official credit for that year. Thus her

formal language education was interrupted indefinitely, since she was too old to go back to school by the time the war was over and, preoccupied with the sociocultural and economic fallout of the war, she did not take it up again. This break in the regular pattern of Concetta's life was marked by her first experiences of the other in her hometown. Up until that point she had only made rare and special trips to the marketplace in Boiano, as discussed earlier. This time, the other was represented in the groups of soldiers camping nearby, and the foreign languages they spoke. Unlike the preceding invading forces from Spain and from France hundreds of years prior, the presence of Germans and British did not influence language, but rather provided an exchange of language. For Concetta, their presence was symbolic of a major shift in the culture she had grown up with.

The first group of soldiers to arrive were German, who came to Boiano toward the end of 1940 and stayed for about a year, or perhaps a little more, Concetta is no longer certain. They camped in the fields just outside Castellone proper, and quickly became a regular fixture of Boiano life. They were apparently fairly friendly at first, and interacted with the Boianese, including her, although most of the *contadini* appeased by the initial friendliness still remained cautious.

I was not afraid of them because they used to give me chocolate. There was one soldier, he was crazy, because he used to show Dad the picture of two little girls. Said, 'I have two little girls, now they are big like you, but I haven't seen them for five years.' And he always wanted to [talk], but I can't speak with him and he can't speak with me. He said a few Italian words like, once in a blue moon.

Somehow, she managed to make conversation with this particular soldier. She never mentioned whether or not the soldier knew a word or two of Italian, though, based on her recollections, it does not seem likely. When she accompanied her mother on a special trip to the weekly market in Boiano, Concetta saw another side of the German presence. She

recalls seeing a small group of Jews with German soldiers acting as guards, and that she was bewildered by their presence, since there was no local Jewish community in Boiano or its outlying *frazioni*.

There were 3000 Jews in Boiano, they were in a camp, at the far south of the piazza, a big factory for tobacco—we used to plant it before the war—and they would ship them there. That's where the Jews were all fenced in. [I saw them once in the market], eight people with two German soldiers, one in front and one in behind them as they did the shopping. When the invasion from the Germans left, they left too.

Even with research, it was difficult to ascertain any more information about the Jews interned at the factory, though the tobacco farm was also used to intern Roma people collected from around the countryside. According to Giovanna Boursier of Project Education of Roma Children in Europe,

At Boiano, in Molise, prisoners were housed in five sheds of an old tobacco factory, in conditions so inhumane that even the fascists sought to move them to other premises [but] not the Roma . . . who were only moved when the camp closed down in August 1941. (2010)

Concetta did not remember where the Jewish internees were taken after that, only that they were removed from the tobacco factory after awhile. Roma history says that the internees in Boiano were taken next to another town called Agnona, far to the north, perhaps en route to a concentration camp in Germany or Poland.

On occasion, as more ground was gained against Hitler and Mussolini, the Allies would shoot from planes, and on one rather memorable day, the pilot and gunner seemed to mistake the *contadini* for soldiers as they worked in the fields, picking grapes for the fall harvest.

All Boiano was full of Germans but not in town—around. And they were all covered with green stuff and you didn't know if they were there or not. They looked like a forest. So this boy had binoculars and said, 'Uh oh.' We were in the fields picking grapes. It was harvest time, around October

the twentieth, the twenty-second, something like that. That was the time we picked our best grapes and we took the binoculars and we were beside a big huge chestnut tree. And he started to look and said, "Look, look, I can see the pilot!" . . . . But they saw us, and they started to shoot at us with machine guns. So we ran all around. If it were not for that chestnut tree, we would have been killed. But they killed so many Germans because they did three or four rounds. They were going back and then going down again with the machine guns. . . . The field is still there, but that chestnut tree, I went to check, it's not there, somebody cut it down . . . I wanted to take a picture of it. It was the size of four or five meters in diameter around—really, really big, and we were under that. I don't know how they spied us, because all of the people that were picking the grapes, they all went under the grapes, lying down when they start to shoot at us . . . . Lots of Boianese [were hurt], but no, that day nobody was killed except the Germans. I don't know how they saw they were camped, and they were having lunch because my brothers Pasquale and Donato, they went down to check afterwards and they didn't see the dead they were already covered up, but they saw that they had been eating, they saw all those aluminum things they used to eat, all over the place. But they couldn't get closer because the Germans didn't want them to get close to the dead. It was really awful. Really awful. But after they continued to pick the grapes and make the wine two days after.

The departure of the Germans from Boiano as the Allies pushed north through Italy from south of the Mezzogiorno ushered in British occupation to Boiano, and soldiers arrived October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1943, and remained there for about a year.<sup>11</sup> Concetta generally remembers these men with more fondness than she remembers the German soldiers. She used to climb trees to hide in so that she could fire little rocks and pebbles at them with the slingshot her brother made for her, driving her mother crazy with her tomboyish behaviour. She would never have taunted or teased the German soldiers the same way, no matter how friendly they purported themselves to be.

The English they were laughing. They heard that it was a pebble—*bang!* They'd look around they wouldn't see anything. I should have kept that slingshot. . . . Not because [the English] were bad, they were good, they

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<sup>11</sup> Concetta remembered dates, but these were sometimes contradicted by official historical accounts. However, for the purposes of this thesis, it is her memories and experiences of that period—rather than precise historical dates—that are important.

give us the chocolate, they gave us crackers and as a matter of fact, when they were in Pitoscia, I used to wash their clothes, they paid me.

She earned a *mezza lira* or roughly ten cents for each shirt and each pair of pants that she washed, and she ironed and folded them carefully. During their stay, one of the British generals became quite friendly with her father, and they would often share a glass of wine in the evenings and talk. Sometimes, this general would bring other small gifts to my grandmother as payment, and once it was a small brick of cheddar cheese. She had never seen cheese that colour before, and decided to feed it to the dog in case it had gone off, despite the Englishman's efforts to tell her that it was good to eat—the potential tastiness of the cheese was lost in translation.

The next incident occurred one night when some soldiers, scouts sent ahead to investigate, appeared out of the looming darkness, startling Concetta and her mother who had come down the mountain to bake the bread. After ascertaining that their house was not the only one with unexpected visitors, Concetta returned home where the soldiers had taken down an old battered pot and filled it with water to boil over the fire. When it was finished, they added tea leaves—and offered it to their surprised hosts.

I had never seen tea like they did it. They took the pot we used to make the mash for the pigs and they boiled water in it instead! The good pot was buried in the ditch, and nobody told them. They took the cups from the cupboard and poured and they asked if we also wanted tea. Everyone refused. That's why I hate tea!

These were her very first encounters with other languages and other points of view. Yet one of the first things Concetta talked about during the course of fieldwork, was how her father was more lenient with her than her mother because he had been away, had worked in other countries, so that subsequently, "his worldview was bigger" than her mother's. It appears, then, that Concetta made this connection between language, points of view, and

worldview at a relatively young age, though perhaps she could not articulate this until later years.

Concetta came from a very orally-based culture, and she learned how to play with language at a young age both in a formal (at school) and informal (at home) way, both styles to later influence her poetic form. We can see that she was clearly influenced by the strong rhythms of her rural life, as daily tasks and chores were inherent parts of her life. We can also see that this period of her life prepared her a little bit for the immigration that was to come. Perhaps it did not ease the stress of immigrating, but it gave her a sense of how others lived, further emphasized by her close relationship with her father, who had been away to work many times, and had passed on this sense of patience for other worldviews to his daughter. The war, as terrible as it was, also gave her a sense of survival in the sense of making the best of situations, and persevering despite interruptions. She was always a tenacious person, but this period of adolescence during the war really honed that quality for her, and it was a quality that would help her greatly during the next phase of her life as an immigrant in Canada.

## EMIGRANTI / EMIGRANTS

Bonasera a tutti a chiè presend'  
A chesta festa,

Good evening to all those attending  
this feast,

Ca mo v' facci rìre e v' facce  
Mete la mane a la testa

I'm going to make you laugh  
and put your hand to your head

Seme lassat' ru biell' paese Bujan'  
Tutte ch' diebt' e na valisa

We left a beautiful town, Boiano  
Full of debts and with one suitcase

P'mieni' a na terra straniera  
I senza sapè seci stava la terra  
Sotto ri piedi.

To come to a strange land  
Without knowing whether there would actually  
Be land under our feet

Sme arrivat' tutt' che nu bastimend'  
Carich d'bauli e more d'aggent'

We all arrived on a ship  
Loaded with trunks and herds of people

Da tand' pais' vicin' lundan'  
Ma savam' tutt' 'Taliane

From so many other towns, both near and far  
But we were all Italian.

E può 36 pre 'ngoppa a nu tren'  
Pe' differende vie, pe rincunrà  
Le nostre famie.

And then after 36 hours on a train  
By different routes, in order to be reunited with  
Our families

Però tutte seme arramast' deluse  
Diceme la verdà e non facem' scuse

But we were all left disillusioned  
Let's tell the truth and not make excuses

Ri prime tiemp' qua e' sta' dur'  
e' tutt' quand' ca c'chiagnavam'  
Ru bell' Paese e ri cumpagn'

At the beginning, it was hard here  
And all of us here cried  
For our beautiful town and our friends

Seme lassat' ri genitur' che ru core spezzat',  
Ma tutt' seme partut'  
E non c'e seme pensat'

We left our parents with broken hearts  
But we all left  
And we didn't think about that

Ma quann' seme arrivat' quà  
E ne' vedam nessun' de lor',  
Pensavam' a Bujan' che na pena a ru cor'

But when we arrived here  
And did not see any of them  
We thought of Boiano with a heavy pain in our  
hearts

E la Domenic ache iavam' a la messa  
E c'incuntram tutti ri paesan'  
Pensavam' ca c'i trovavam' e a Bujan'

And on Sunday when we went to mass  
And met other *paesani*  
It felt as though we were in Boiano

Però n'ieva la verdà,  
Ca 'stavame a Toronto, Canadà.

But it was not real  
We were in Toronto, Canada.

E mo che seme crescut' tutt' na famia  
Ch'e sudore e sacrificfatt' pe' st'e vie;

And now that we have raised our families  
With sweat and sacrifices in our lives

Allora ringraziam' Die e tutt' ri Sand'  
Ca mo stem' buone tutt' quand'.

E allora i ve salut' nu surris'  
Vueme c'bene e stame c'amici:

Amici semp' vicin' e lundan'  
Però arricurdame ca seme d'Bujan'.

1993

Well we thank God and all of the Saints  
Because now we are well off

And so I greet you with a smile  
Let's love one another and remain friends

Always friends, whether close by or far away  
But always remember, we are from Boiano

CHAPTER TWO:

WORK, ESL AND ITALIAN:  
NEGOTIATING TORONTO

1945-1980

Concetta immigrated to Toronto, Canada in the late fall of 1956. Italy, much like the rest of Europe, was devastated after the end of the Second World War, particularly in the southern regions of the country, from the Mezzogiorno and beyond to Sicily. The Italian economy, which was never particularly beneficial to the *contadini*, was in an even worse state than it had been before Mussolini's efforts to improve it before the war started. Boiano and its surrounding *frazioni*, where both the Germans and the British had passed through, keenly felt the aftermath, and many traditions and calendar events were put aside as people began to rebuild their lives.<sup>12</sup> Concetta said, "there was no happiness after the war." She was seventeen years old by the time the war was over, and much of that time was spent mourning the loss of her brother Carlo, an Italian soldier who went missing in Russia, and working in the fields with her parents. She was married by the time she was nineteen years old, after meeting Diodato who was from a neighbouring *località* called Colalillo. Five years her senior, they did not meet until he returned after an eight year term in the Italian army (he was already in the army by the time the war broke out). They married on January 20<sup>th</sup> 1947, and for the next ten years or so, she settled into a new pattern with her husband Diodato; they had two little girls: Isabella, born in 1948, and Giuliana, born in 1950. Concetta and Diodato continued their lives together as *contadini*, working the land that belonged to her father-in-law, Giovanni.

In the years that followed the war and throughout the subsequent economic depression, all over the Mezzogiorno, Italian men began to seek work wherever they could find it, which caused them to go further and further afield, thus marking the bare beginnings of the largest mass migration, over more than fifteen years, that Italy would

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<sup>12</sup> The tradition of *la cuccagna* (the climbing of the greaspole named for the Italian land of plenty, *Cuccagna*) is one such of example. Both Concetta and Diodato have only the vaguest recollections, and it seemed to them the tradition stopped some time before the war.

ever see. Sixty per cent of the total Italian immigration to Canada was made up of immigrants from the southern regions (and in turn, Italian immigrants made up the largest percentage of European immigrants to Canada)—Abruzzi, Molise, Basilicata, Campagnia, Puglia, Calabria and Sicily—from 1951 to 1961 (Iacovetta 1992, xxii). The process of chain migration, then, involved the temporary breakup of families, and it left many women behind to run the farm and rear children while their husbands sought work overseas.

For the most part, men left their home relatively secure in the belief that their wives would continue to run the farm efficiently and that their relatives and the wider community would keep tabs on the woman's activities. (Iacovetta 1987, 7)

Although there was already an older history of Italian migration to the United States, many Italians from the Mezzogiorno in this period opted instead to go to South America (mainly Argentina and Brazil), Australia or Canada.<sup>13</sup> Young single men were often the first to leave, since ostensibly they had the least to lose, though eventually, young married men followed suit, and they left their wives and families behind, sometimes for years at a time.

Concetta's husband Diodato was one of these young married men; he left Boiano on December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1953, and travelled by ship with a ticket purchased with money loaned to him by his father-in-law. His plan to work in Canada was only meant to be temporary, just long enough for him to earn enough money to return to Italy to buy a bit of land for himself, and to buy a tractor with his cousin; to offset the cost they were going to share the machine between them. This was also indicative of a major change in farming for the

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<sup>13</sup> There was also a pattern of migration within Italy, as southern *contadini* travelled to the larger cities in northern Italy, causing an internal clash of town and country. Paul Ginsborg writes about this in *A History of Contemporary Italy* (1990).

*contadini*. Though technologies did change or improve from time to time, the mechanization of technology for the *contadini* was a rapid change, and, in some respects, spelled the end of a traditional way of understanding the land. He arrived in Toronto via Halifax in December, moving in with his older brother Emilio and his family. He lived and worked in Toronto for the next three years. With respect to the reason Diodato decided to stay in Canada and call for his family, Concetta only said (as Diodato himself did as well), that "he got used to things," in Canada. Thus he made the executive decision to send for Concetta, their young daughters and his father.

He decided to come here and that's it. But, you know, with the notion to come [back] here like they used to do those days, to stay three, four, five years, and then go back and earn some money here, but it was not like that, and then we come. *Laughs*. The war ruined everything. Okay, before Italy was not so good, because there were so many people and not enough left. First of all. Second of all, Italy was owned by all rich people and you have to work for them. For example, you worked all the year around and at the end, you have nothing, just [enough] to eat. So . . . after the war everybody start to go away because it was worse and like before the old people used to come to the States but to bring the wife here was rare. They used to stay all their life, sending the money in Italy, buying the land, making progress over there but not here.

Concetta's experience of immigration would have been vastly different (or perhaps not have happened at all) if it were not for her brother-in-law Emilio. The circumstances behind a decision to emigrate can be complex, and in the case of Diodato, not a part of what he originally intended at all. His older brother Emilio was an Italian soldier, captured as a prisoner-of-war in North Africa and interned in a camp in England for the duration of the war. After the war was over and Emilio was released from internment, the British Government granted him the option to stay in England as a naturalized citizen rather than to go back to Italy and he decided to stay. He returned home to Boiano to marry a young woman named Iolanda, and after sponsoring her immigration to England,

they settled and started a family, and had six children. After a time, the Government gave him the option to remain in England or, to emigrate to Canada or Australia. By this time, Emilio had become enamoured with English culture and in 1951 he opted to move himself and his young family to Canada, which struck him as being the most “English” outside of England. Moreover, Canada was also a place where there would have been better economic opportunity for and for his family. In 1953, when Diodato wanted to come to Canada to work, Emilio was able to sponsor him. This type of chain migration became quite common for the burgeoning Italian community in Canada (as it did for other immigrant groups as well) during the 1950s and 1960s. Diodato first worked for the Toronto Transit Commission on the nightshift as a watchman. He had some other jobs here and there, but his last and longest job was at the slaughterhouse at the Junction in Toronto’s northwest end.

Back in Italy, Concetta was enjoying the first real independence of her life: she was running the farm, and looking after the hiring of hands, she was managing the family’s money, and she was raising two little girls, and all without the financial support of Diodato’s earnings—though he wanted to send her some, she always told him that they were fine, and that he should keep it, to save it because eventually, it might be needed.

I never had time for myself. Because I had two girls, work on the farm, Nonno’s father, the cow, the pigs, the chickens, you know, there was not time for myself to sit and relax. I used to do that in the evening, ‘cause all the neighbours sit outside in the summer and talk for awhile, but you have to get up early in the morning. It was really hard. . . . Then I got sick, but still the way I was, I was working, because you couldn’t find people to work. Sometimes I find someone, but *<trails off>* It was hard for me, time for myself—it was very little.

She said that of course she socialized in passing with neighbours, but that was the extent of her leisure time. She was also preoccupied with some health complications, which

meant that a nurse had to visit every day to administer a needle. Still, Concetta talked about this time with pride in her voice—that she did all of this by herself without faltering. She did not express the sentiment of “enjoying her independence” as it has been put, but it was evident in her actions and in her initiative to take charge of the situation, and in the pride in the tone of her voice as she spoke about this. Concetta’s circumstances did not necessarily reflect the average experience. For one, most women with absentee husbands who worked abroad depended on the money those husbands sent to them (even though it was not uncommon for that money to be sent back with the intent of going towards the eventual purchase of some land). Franca Iacovetta has pointed out that there was a distinct gender divide in monetary earnings among Italian immigrants: generally, it was men’s earnings that were saved and women’s earnings were used for household payments and expenses. Concetta’s experience varied partially because of her own insistence that Diodato save the money rather than send it to her overseas, but perhaps also because the land and house on and in which they lived belonged to her father-in-law Giovanni, rather than the more uncertain rentals from wealthy landowners from Boiano. Her ability to manage things was also reflected in Giovanni’s actions. It was his opinion—which was quite progressive given the strict patriarchal values and gender roles that persisted among the *contadini*—that Concetta was more than capable of taking care of things. Accordingly, he let her run the farm as she saw fit; she even oversaw duties that traditionally fell to men—for example, by looking after the hiring of hands. Concetta’s father-in-law was so impressed with her, that when he died, he willed to her his land to do with as she pleased for one year. This was extremely rare—as a rule, women only very rarely inherited land, and more often than not, had no property rights at

all. Concetta said, "this was not normal, but happened more [often] than you think."

Which is to say, that on occasion, when their husbands went to work elsewhere, some of them decided to settle in that elsewhere and took new wives. When this happened, they might sell their property, and would often leave women destitute. However, Concetta said that some women "but not too many, cause they were too stupid," would put the money their husbands sent to them in separate bank account under their own name to purchase their own lands, as a preventative measure should their husbands betray them.

Her father-in-law's admiration was a boon for her and showed the kind of respect she commanded. However, it still meant that she was incredibly busy from sunrise to sunset. Her load of work was only increased when Diodato sent for her and the rest of the family in 1956. She began to make preparations to emigrate: she bought train tickets for their trip to Naples, and boat tickets for their journey to Halifax; she sold the animals; she decided what she had to leave behind and what she could pack into trunks to take with them.

[I]t was hard for me because you have to work in the fields all the time, because when *nonno* [Diodato] left, I had to continue for three years. He left a cow and I had a cow—until the day I come here [to Canada], I sold it a few weeks before I came here. I had a donkey—same, I sold it a few weeks before I came here. I had corn, grain, wine, potatoes, I had them all in the house—'cause we [left] at the end of October. I sold everything and I pay the fare because I told *nonno* not to send me no money 'cause I would sell all those things I had. What I sold: *nonna's* bed, the *comò* [dresser], there was another China cabinet. That's the only three things I sold, the rest, all my furniture, my sister went to get it. She sold it to somebody 'cause she didn't have room for it . . . . The rest, I left everything in the house, whatever I had it, whatever I could bring, dishes, glasses and everything else I left there. I don't know what happened to all this stuff. We had pots and pans, copper ones [but] everything disappeared. . . . Empty. The house was empty.

Somehow, she managed to fit pots, pans, dishes, blankets, even two wool mattresses into those two trunks. She placed all the fragile items in the middle of each trunk and carefully surrounded them with a mattress as insulation. She sewed sheets together to cover everything and contain it all. Years later she remarked that she would not have known what to do had the Customs Officer assigned to them decided to search their luggage—she would have had no idea how to pack it all again and make it fit. On October 28<sup>th</sup> 1956, she left Boiano. Concetta's brothers—Pasquale and Donato—accompanied her and her girls and her father-in-law to Naples on the train to see them off. From there, they boarded a Greek ship called the *Olympia* and set off. The ship stopped once at the port in Lisbon, but Concetta spent most her time feeling sea-sick in their tiny second-class cabin while her little girls played games in the corridors, and visited their grandfather who had a first-class ticket (the only ticket available after a mix-up that was the fault of the travel agent she dealt with), and was staying in another cabin. The entire sea journey took ten days, and since the ship was delayed, they arrived late at Pier 21 in Halifax. Concetta remembered that they arrived on November 6<sup>th</sup>, but because of the ship's delay, she and her family had to wait thirty-six hours before boarding a train to take them to Toronto. Subsequently, the official immigrant documents declare November 7<sup>th</sup> as her date of arrival in Canada. They were received with sandwiches made of sliced bread and processed cheese. Concetta's reaction to this food was less than favourable thinking it was not proper food at all. Sliced sandwich bread and Kraft singles cheese slices became staples in her refrigerator over the years (as they did in her daughters' refrigerators as well). Concetta and her family missed the regular train to Toronto because of the *Olympia's* delay, and instead they boarded a later and

unscheduled train to Toronto. As such, the train only stopped once in Montreal, and the remainder of the trip took a shorter time than expected. They arrived in Toronto on November the 9<sup>th</sup>, and Diodato was waiting to meet them at Union Station—his *paesano* worked at Union Station and tipped him off on their arrival information. After a three-year absence, her youngest daughter Giuliana hid behind her mother's legs (much to everyone's amusement), at first unable to recognize her father and his now nearly white hair.

The most significant detail she recalled of being processed as a new immigrant at Pier 21 was that she became "Concetta Colalillo," registered under her husband's name rather than as "Concetta Sinibaldi," whom she had always been. Legally, in Italy her married name was Concetta Sinibaldi in Colalillo, the *in* to indicate that she had married into the Colalillo family. One of the left over pieces of Napoleonic law in Italy meant that women kept their own names, even after marriage. Concetta explained that if a woman wanted, she could change her last name, but that it often involved a fee and lots of red tape, so most women—if they even had a desire to—didn't bother. Concetta felt that for a woman to take her husband's name after marriage was to refute her blood and refute her father. When she landed at Pier 21, Concetta was led to believe by officials receiving the immigrants that in Canada, she was legally bound to have her husband's name, which was not actually the case. However, with no English language skills and with the culture shock of arrival, she was reluctantly persuaded to think otherwise.

Why do I have to give up my father's name [Sinibaldi] for Colalillo? . . . I came in this family but I am not blood of the Colalillo. TO get use to it was really hard for me, really really hard. To tell you the truth, if I knew all these things that I knew after, I would never have changed my name. Because I thought it was a law or something . . . I didn't know better, so I changed everything because [I thought] that's the way it's supposed to be.

This change in name was symbolic for her, representing her arrival as a stranger to a new country, and signifying that she was truly no longer in Boiano; a new identity was thrust upon her as she became an immigrant outsider, with no grasp of the language. Even years later, she was still resentful that she had become "Mrs. Colalillo" without her volition.<sup>14</sup>

#### LANGUAGE IN THE HOME, LANGUAGE IN THE CITY

Concetta, her daughters and father-in-law moved in with Emilio and his family, where Diodato was already living, at 256 Clinton Street, north of Harbord Street, during the peak of the biggest wave of Italian immigrants Canada had ever seen. Toronto had long borne witness to generations of immigrants (and continues to do so), and the post-war group of Italians wound up settling in what was then known as "the Ward," a district in Toronto's downtown west end, bounded by Spadina Avenue to the East, Dufferin Street to the West, Harbord Street to the North and Dundas Street to the South. The Italians tended to settle around the outskirts of College Street, which bisected the Ward from east to west. By the time Concetta and the wave of Italian immigrants arrived, the Ward had already been the home for countless Jews, Roma and Eastern Europeans who came to the in the mid to late 1800s. Today, the area of College Street is called Little Italy, proclaimed mostly in name only by street signs installed by the city. In its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, the street was lined with Italian-owned grocery stores, butcher shops, clothing and shoestores. Two staple establishments left over from this more Italian era—called the Café Diplomatico at the corner of College and Clinton and Bitondo's, a pizzeria on Clinton around the corner from the St. Francis of Assisi church on Grace

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<sup>14</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, she decided to sign the consent forms with her full married name.

Street—still remain. But when Concetta arrived, the College Street neighbourhood was still developing and it took some years for the Italian community to settle and integrate into the fabric of the city.

What this gradual development meant for dialect-speakers like Concetta was that some common language was necessary in order for individuals in the community to reach out to each other, since the comfortable dialects they spoke were so disparate. The adjustment from the rural to the urban, from one culture to another, was understandably not an easy one for Concetta; it rarely was for any immigrant. She was obliged to be grateful for a home to live in—and of course, she truly was—but after being so independent in Italy, living in someone else's home felt cramped and uncomfortable. Furthermore, she had to rely on others to be her guides in the industrial urban newness of Toronto. Much like the Roma (*zingari*) in Boiano who were always on the fringes of society, in a seemingly surreal twist Concetta found herself to be on the periphery of a community and of a culture that she did not immediately have a way of connecting to. She said that, "Language was the worst part of immigration," and that language could divide and isolate just as much as it was capable of unifying. Frustrated and unhappy with this new place, she said that she asked her husband, "Why don't you send me back, why did you call me here?" She said she felt doubly embarrassed because she was "poorer in Canada than at home, in Italy. . . . It was hard to accept everything," and she resented having this necessitous circumstance thrust upon her.

At the house on Clinton Street, there was coexistence of Boianese and English. Concetta could speak her comfortable Boianese dialect with her husband and with her daughters and with her in-laws, as she was accustomed to. Outside of the home, there was

no ready-made community for Concetta to support the dialect, and therefore there was no place for Boianese. Cousins and friends who had previously been a stone's throw from Concetta's front door were in Italy—or, those *paesani* who had immigrated lived in another neighbourhood, city or even another country. Her brother-in-law Emilio spoke English with his children, who did not speak Boianese and very little Italian. Even Diodato (though later on, Concetta would surpass his skills in English), had at that point, grown used to hearing English as the predominant language on a day-to-day basis, and was attending ESL night school classes at Harbord Collegiate whenever he could. Concetta's sister-in-law Iolanda, however, had never learned to speak English even after living in England for a number of years, where there were far fewer Italians than there were in Canada.

For an immigrant, encountering the predominant language is isolating, and often even more so for immigrant women, who were more likely to remain at home more than their male counterparts. Concetta stayed at home for the first seven months after arriving, leaving only to walk her daughters to school in the morning and home again in the afternoons and to do grocery shopping. She had only her sister-in-law Iolanda and her father-in-law Giovanni to talk to—which could be difficult, given that they each had different ways of doing things. Even though they were family and lived in the same home, they did not necessarily do things the same way, or even share all of the same space at the same time.

Far from huddling indiscriminately, people living in these crowded households had a deep-seated sense of propriety and retained as much as possible their sense of nuclear family. At supper, for instance, families sharing a kitchen ate at different or overlapping times as each woman, who alone was responsible for her family's meals, awaited her husband's

arrival from work before heating her pot of water for pasta. (Iacovetta 1992, 89-90)

For instance, Concetta's family had two bedrooms—one for her father-in-law, whose age and position as patriarch warranted the privilege, and the other for herself, Diodato and their little daughters. Concetta also kept her food in a separate pantry in the basement so that there would be no confusion. For her, it was an odd and occasionally strained situation.

Because of their relationship as in-laws, etiquette dictated that Concetta's sister-in-law Iolanda "show her the ropes," but there were limits because of Iolanda's own relative isolation. Still, she showed Concetta around the neighbourhood landmarks—like how to get to the grocery store. As a *contadina*, Concetta had been accustomed to growing and producing everything herself—from making pasta and bread from scratch as she had been doing since the age of seven, to collecting eggs from the hens and milk from the cow—a large grocery store was at first a disconcerting experience. Though she had of course been to the market in Boiano and the smaller market in Castellone, these markets made up of carts and temporary tables and booths were set up around a *piazza* outdoors and people arranged their wares accordingly. By contrast, the grocery store was this large enclosed space, where people purchased food that seemed to have materialized out of thin air—which is not to say that she was a shell-shocked country bumpkin, simply that as a *contadina* she knew how food was grown and harvested—in the grocery store, that connection did not seem to exist.

The first time I went to shop . . . there was a big huge store like a supermarket, called Power. So we went to shop, with *zia* Iolanda, which I had never been to a big store like that in Italy. And she said, "Okay, wait for me here. I have to cross the street to buy some meat." There was a Jewish butcher there. Could she say, "Let's go get the meat first and then

we come to shop?" There I was in that store like a stupid, looking at people. So I take a buggy and look around. But I didn't know what to buy because *I* never went shopping in Boiano. So [Iolanda] came back. We did the shopping. She made her own shopping. I bought some pasta. She could have said, "Come to the butcher's, we gonna buy something different there." They had cheese. There in Power's, there was no cheese [just] the brick cheese [orange cheddar]. I buy some salad—there was no *rapini* in those days—there was swiss chard, cabbage.

For someone who was accustomed to making her own pasta, buying it pre-made was something different. The "brick cheese" was something she recognized from when she did laundry for the British as a girl, since she was given a large piece as payment (she fed it to the dog, not trusting that it would taste good). Like her reaction to the sandwiches she was presented with in Halifax upon arrival, some of what she saw in the store (particularly the packaged items) was unrecognizable as food. It was another ten years before she saw more familiar food items again, until after Johnny Lombardi opened his first grocery store and began importing meats and cheeses from Italy.<sup>15</sup> She was also quite busy in those first years of immigration, and only had limited time for certain types of food production. In Italy, the pasta-making, tomato-making and wine-making were an inherent part of the daily or weekly or seasonal work schedule, since that was how people got their food. In Toronto however, these kinds of foodways fell to the wayside as the immigrants coped with working and adjusting to their new home. They were taken up again, just not right away. Concetta however, after some trepidation, met her challenge, and became quite deft at spotting a bargain or haggling with salespeople about a price.

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<sup>15</sup> Johnny Lombardi was the son of Italian immigrants from the previous generation to arrive in Toronto. He became a prominent figure within the Italian-Canadian community, and was most famous for founding CHIN radio, the Italian-language radio station in the city. Today, a statue of Johnny sitting on a bench rests in a mini-piazza at the corner of College and Grace, in the midst of Little Italy, within view of the CHIN building.

Language is the thing that gives one much of the ability to tap into a community, a society, a culture, but for new immigrants it often acts as an impasse rather than a bridge. In *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, Iain Chambers writes,

None of us can simply choose another language, as though we could completely abandon our previous history and freely opt for another one. Our previous sense of knowledge, language and identity, our peculiar inheritance, cannot be simply rubbed out of the story, cancelled. What we have inherited—as culture, as history, as language, as tradition, as a sense of identity—is not destroyed but taken apart, opened up to questioning, rewriting and re-routing. The elements and relations of our language and identities can neither be put back together again in a new, more critically attuned whole, nor be abandoned and denied. (1994, 24)

Nor is language limited to traditional text—that is to say, words on page, or words spoken aloud. Along with dealing with a language barrier, Concetta also had to learn to read an entire culture, from the way in which food was packaged, to the way in which people interacted (or did not interact) with each other as they passed one another on the streets. There is a story about the distinctively coloured and patterned mosaic tiles decorating the older subway transit stops throughout the city: It is said that the subway stops were deliberately designed in that way by the Toronto Transit Commission so that the illiterate masses of the city could recognize their stop rather than having to rely on reading the name of the stop etched into the tiles. Even now, children in Toronto first recognize the subway stops by colour—“the green stop” (St. George Station), or “the one with the flower” (Dupont Station). What this story illustrates is that there are different ways to read different kinds of text; the issues that the illiterate people of the city once had to deal with were now transferred to European immigrants, who had no English (and a lack of basic literacy was still very much a part of that). A routine and simple task to

her now like grocery shopping was a completely unknown and foreign experience for Concetta back then.

Despite her eventual ease with the neighbourhood and with the tasks she had to perform, it was still a strange city. Concetta talked about how it was not a particularly "Italian" city, in that she only noticed very few other Italians. In fact, there was an earlier generation of Italian immigrants in Toronto, who arrived before the Second World War, and just after the First World War.<sup>16</sup> However, this older Italian immigrant presence in Toronto went largely unnoticed by Concetta and she had quite the opposite impression of an Italian presence in Toronto.

[There] were not so many Italians those days and it was hard to be friends with people because you don't know how to talk to them. Like, at once if they ask you a question [and] your language is really really bad and that's why you stay away. . . . Even if you want to be friends with some people, they don't like be friends with [any]body, would [not] say good morning, good evening, or hello or anything. No. They pass by. You know what I wrote[?] I live in the dead, mute city.<sup>17</sup>

In another conversation, she likened what she called the *ambiente* of the city, or the ambience, to the zombies she saw in old black and white b-movies on television. She felt that many of the Italians that were now living in Toronto too had fallen prey to this colder attitude, citing an example of the disappointment she felt when the Neapolitan family who moved into her neighbourhood did not return her friendly overtures. As one of the only other Italian families on the block, she felt that it was important that they should be friendly with each other. This lack of congenial friendliness was representative of the

<sup>16</sup> During the war, many of these earlier immigrants were termed "enemy aliens" by the Canadian Government, and either fired from their jobs or in the worst scenarios, placed in internment camps. There is a possibility that they were not "Italian" enough any longer for Concetta and her fellow immigrants to recognize them as such. This particular group was also more spread throughout the city, since there had never been enough of a population to sustain a district like the one that Little Italy became in the 1960s.

<sup>17</sup> This is a reference to a line from the poem she wrote for her 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, to be discussed in the next chapter.

immediate disconnect with people that she felt, a reflection of her difficulties with the language she could not speak. For the first few years, she was, for all intents and purposes, muted by her own lack of English skill but also felt invisible to others by virtue of the lack of eye contact and idiosyncratic human interaction that she was accustomed to in her hometown. How could she begin to understand a language when she could not understand the way people behaved in the street?

Concetta's *cognata* Carmela, who arrived in Toronto in 1961, stayed home like many other Italian immigrant women. She did not work (mainly because her husband wished her not to), and so her world did not extend much further than College Street, where the church and the grocery stores were. She came to Canada as an illiterate person—she had never gone to school since she was already too old by the time Mussolini implemented his education reforms, and always signed her name with an 'X'. She had a brother who lived up the street and a sister who lived down the street—she and her neighbour forged a friendship, and a door was cut into the wooden fence in between their backyards so that they could come and go as they pleased. It would be presumptuous and unfair to say that Carmela was lonely, but, to a certain degree, it would be within reason to argue that she dealt with more isolation on a regular basis than an immigrant like Concetta did. Iolanda's life on Clinton Street was similar. Although she rented the spare rooms to boarders before Concetta and her family arrived, she did not go far from the home except to run errands.

It took about seven months before Concetta was propelled by her own tenaciousness to make her own connections in the neighbourhood, outside the boundaries of the home. She had always found it difficult to stay still, and now her days at home

were limited to household tasks rather than the more rigorous schedule that she was accustomed to maintaining in Italy. She talked about three Italian friends that she eventually made on Clinton Street, and what a relief it was, but in particular, she talked about her neighbour, a woman named Mrs. Carmen.

This lady [Mrs. Carmen] we start to say hi to each other after a long winter we don't see anybody. Her daughters Rose and Mary they used to go to St. Peter's School with Isa and [Giuliana].

Concetta said that at first they only chatted superficially, greeting each other in passing and commenting on the weather, when they ran into each other outside their respective houses. But eventually the cordial relationship developed into a real friendship and Mrs. Carmen taught Concetta her first few words of English. Mrs. Carmen's friendship proved to be invaluable in the end—it was through her that Concetta secured her first paying job in Canada at a factory in downtown Toronto. Relieved that she would now be useful and productive again, she happily—though with a bit of trepidation—took Mrs. Carmen up on her offer.

#### WORKING AND OCCUPATIONAL ENGLISH

Concetta was always proud of the fact that she and her husband had a joint bank account, and that she never had to ask him for money—that he trusted her to take what she needed when she needed it. Many of her friends and acquaintances had the opposite experience, and she talked about some women she knew who had to hoard any money they earned for themselves, while others had strict allowances allotted to them by their husbands for groceries and other household expenses. In Canada, Concetta took up her role of family money manager again as she had done in Italy and carefully and frugally managed her

family's budget, always spending and saving wisely and effectively. She developed a (rather accurate) reputation in her family as a savvy consumer and expert bargain shopper. The capable independence Concetta had so enjoyed and fostered within herself in Italy came through again in Canada, driving her out of the home to forge her own relationship with her new country, attempting to negotiate it on her own terms rather than by the circumstances put upon her. It was this type of attitude that helped her build her friendship with Mrs. Carmen.

Mrs. Carmen took Concetta to get a job in a shoe factory owned by a company called Jack Foot Shoes. She began work in April of 1957.

She say, "You want to come and try?" and I say, "Why not," so she took me there. . . . I didn't say I like [it] because it was a job I never done. So, but anyway, it was nice because I wasn't stuck in place, they had to send me all over the place, so my main thing was I have to they were sewing all the backs of the shoes and they cut it and they put it in a pile, and they have to sew the lining inside and have to put the sign with the stamp like from 5, 6, 7, 6 and a half, whatever the number of the shoe.

A large percentage of the Italian immigrants who arrived in Canada between 1951 and 1961 were *contadini*, used to working the land rather than working in factories. In Toronto, the manufacturing industry employed many Italian immigrant women. In *Such Hardworking People* (1992), Franca Iacovetta notes,

While Canadian-born women swelled the ranks of the white-collar work force in the decades following the Second World War, immigrant women, most of whom lacked English and possessed few marketable skills, provided low-paid, unskilled, and semi-skilled female labour in industry. (1992, 93)

Today, the corridor of Spadina Avenue bisecting Queen Street and King Street is fairly trendy, and warehouses that used to be full of sewing machines and irons have been converted into lofts, artists' studios and clubs and, as gentrification has firmly taken hold,

condominiums and chain stores infiltrate the area. In the late 1950s and early 1960s when Concetta worked in these establishments—which would be more accurately described as sweatshops—the warehouses were all garment factories, shoe factories and toy factories. The owners employed hundreds of immigrants, including women like Concetta who worked at these jobs, and she remarked on how common it seemed to her that women left their jobs suddenly, usually because of responsibilities at home. Concetta was fortunate because her father-in-law Giovanni helped her with her own daughters when they were still too young to be left alone after school. Still, there were many immigrant women who kept working despite their difficulties in balancing home and work, because, as one Concetta's friends told her, "If I don't get out of the house I'll go crazy!" Concetta describes some of the types of work she did at Jack Foot Shoes below:

It was nice because I wasn't stuck in one place. I used to go around the machine, spray the shoes before we pack with the shine thing on, we have to put the lace, I have to go to the children's shoes with all white things. I put the little buckles on the children's shoes, packed the shoes, I used to do everything and they loved me.

Despite the different kinds of stations she worked, it was still monotonous labour, and so Concetta and her fellow workers tended to talk amongst themselves surreptitiously to make the time pass more quickly, and she noticed that although there was a great deal of interaction between all of her co-workers, they still seemed most at ease with others who shared their language.

The major part you talk because of language and that was the base and you talk with the one you understand better otherwise you mix up and talk with everybody wrong or right. Gossip, cursing the boss. . . . That was the talking . . . we used to do it between women.

These factories she worked in were the first places where she was interacting directly with others on a daily basis, and so work became her first real foray into a broader immigrant

life, where she worked side by side with other immigrants who were from all over the world including Italy. At first she said she naturally gravitated toward the other Italians, feeling that they had the most in common, or at the very least, a common language. It was still a new experience for her however, despite the shared ethnic background, because Concetta was speaking more Italian than she ever had before, rather than Boianese. It seemed Mussolini's efforts at unifying Italy through language was actually more effective once Italian emigrants removed themselves from their country and settled in another, where the only common language they had with one another was standard Italian.

Concetta had at least one mildly embarrassing moment that she joked about when she failed to recognize other Italians. Two new women began work at her factory one morning and she overheard them chatting with each other, but could not seem to place their language; by this time, she had been working a few months, and her ear was getting more familiar with the sounds of other languages spoken by her co-workers. During the short lunch break, she asked a friend where they were from and wondered if they were Greek or perhaps even Portuguese. Her friend laughed at her and told her that they were both Italian, from Calabria in the south. The irony of learning more about Italian dialects in a foreign country was not lost on her—and nor was the experience of meeting Italians from other regions outside of Italy. She was not alone in this regard: Carmela, her *cognata*, years later had her own embarrassing moment. Carmela only spoke Maieratano, her dialect and not Italian which she never learned since she had not had the opportunity to attend school. Carmela had begun to grow used to Italians from other regions, and assumed that not many would easily be able to understand her particular dialect. She and her sister were walking along College Street and she felt safe as she made humorous,

albeit crude, comments about some men waiting for shaves in a barbershop. To her surprise and dismay, a man walking behind them burst out laughing—and he quickly explained that he was from a neighbouring village close to Maierato where they spoke a similar dialect and had understood everything she said; Carmela was mortified.

At work, Concetta also began to hear other languages for the first time, all at once, meeting people and other immigrants from other countries almost all at once.

Well, at the first place where I worked, there was a Jewish lady, Mrs. Carmen, Sara was German—she was young. Maria was Greek and Angelina was from Lucania [another southern region of Italy]. They were all women there. The men . . . I remember Joe was from Bari, Celestino from Foggia. The other place I worked they were from all over Europe: German, Ukrainian, Polish. French? No, there were two from Malta and from Sardinia and the rest from Italy, north and south. And the place where I worked first there was one Portuguese—Rosa. I couldn't stand her. And then when I worked [at Cadet Cleaners] there were quite a few Portuguese there, but I just worked there for a month to help my friend. They were all Portuguese, but the Portuguese came after years. The south, the north, the middle of Italy, they were all the first ones to come here. Everyone was friendly, they were okay.

After seven months and some encouragement from her friend Mrs. Carmen, Concetta got up the nerve to ask for a raise—she was making .50¢ an hour at this time and intended to ask for \$1.00—and was turned down immediately, with no promise of a future raise.

Frustrated with her employers, she used her lunch break to look for a better paying job. She had been living in Toronto for just over a year at this point and she had successfully kept herself employed for several months although her English was still weak and most of what she did know was limited to work-based and related English, including names of machines and phrases like "Help Wanted." Her bosses only spoke English, so she learned what she could from listening to them speak and from other workers and it proved to be

enough to give her the confidence she needed to seek other work and to assert herself.

Occasionally, there was a funny result.

Me and [a] Greek girl, Maria, at lunch time we had an hour and we start to walk around the street where we see the signs, "Help Wanted." But we don't know, we know they need people. We ended up in one place on Queen Street. It said "Help wanted." That's all we knew. . . . We went all the way up three floors—there were no elevators in those days—and this guy says, "Yes lady, you looking for somebody?" I said, "Looking for a job." He said, "It's no job for girls here, it's a boxer's school." I said, "Oh my God!" . . . I never forget that . . . they were boxers, it was a school for boxing.

She eventually found a toy factory on Spadina Avenue, where she possessed enough language skill to negotiate her wages with her new employer, and secured 95¢ an hour to start. The job she got was only a seasonal one, but she found that this was the one that really marked the beginning of her integration into the city.

#### ESL AND THE RECIPE BOOK

In 1959, almost three years after immigrating, Concetta and her family bought a house at 722 Crawford Street, near Toronto's Christie Pitts Park, moving in a more northerly direction away from the College Street area and above Bloor Street. The Crawford Street house was symbolic of the transition she had made into the city; she now knew the proverbial lay of the land; she had a steady job; she had more space in this new house, which she said had big bright windows and large rooms, and collectively, she and her family were becoming independent. They were settling in. And yet, complications arose shortly after the move to Crawford Street when Diodato was laid off from work. This was worrisome because although they owned the property, they had a mortgage to pay, and then Concetta got sick again, which made it exhausting for her to keep up her busy pace. In order to ease the cost of the mortgage, she rented the second floor of the house to

supplement the family income. At first, this only added to the stress, since the first family was loud, messy and difficult to deal with. When another family moved onto the second floor replacing the previous one, things got better. Her new tenant, a woman named Isolina, became a maternal figure in Concetta's life, and as such was addressed as *zia*. Isolina's twin sons Donaldo and Dionino stayed in touch for a several years after Concetta and her family moved and Isolina passed away. They worked as hairdressers and it was Dionino that Concetta went to see when she decided to cut off her long hair.

By this time, she was working at a factory owned by Nikki Toys where she stayed until 1962. At this juncture, a typical day for Concetta meant that she was up at 6 o'clock and getting her daughters ready for school, making lunches for them and for her husband, before leaving for work (she had never spent such little time on the preparation of food). She prepared dinner the night before, and left it in the fridge to be reheated by her family, if her work schedule meant that she would miss suppertime. Her mind was partially at ease because her father-in-law was at home in the afternoons when her daughters returned from school. Weekends were reserved for cleaning on Saturday and, of course, for church on Sundays. Therefore, in keeping such a busy schedule, Concetta did not have much time to devote to English as a Second Language classes, though she did try.

Her neighbour was an Englishman named Mr. Neil who lived alone since his wife and daughter had passed away years earlier. Mr. Neil was Concetta's first English friend after she admired his flower garden. He struck up a friendship with Concetta and her family, becoming quite close with them while they lived on Crawford Street, according to Giuliana, Concetta's youngest daughter. He had a sort of paternal relationship with Concetta and Diodato, and acted as a second grandfather to their daughters. He taught

Concetta much of what she knew about flower gardening, and in exchange she told him about growing tomatoes and cultivating grapevines. The backyard of her home in Toronto on Romar Crescent is always in bloom in the summertime, and she has a particular affection for bleeding hearts, roses, and the large bright fuchsia flowers borne by her beloved cacti. Gardening was how she and Mr. Neil broached the language barrier between them.

Her first ESL experience was at a school called Costi, an organization established in Toronto to facilitate immigrant transition into the school; they still exist, and provide ESL courses, professional development courses and social services for immigrants. However, the class was in the evening, which made it tiresome and difficult for her to attend. She recalled that there were a variety of people attending the classes—Chinese, Japanese, German and Polish—among many other immigrant groups. Her next ESL attempt was at a middle school on Dufferin Street south of Eglinton Avenue called Fairbank. She said this class was nearly all Italians, but she did not stay long there either since she was still working so frequently. Like many immigrant families, Concetta was establishing herself in the city, and though she still hated parts of it (particularly Toronto winters, which she complained about her entire life in Canada, despite growing up at the foot of mountains where there was a copious amount of snow in the winter), she was slowly growing at ease with her new life aided by her developing English language skills.

Her favourite ESL class came some years later. Concetta stopped working in 1975, after her longest stretch at the Ganz Brothers where she had been working since 1963; health problems interrupted her work, and though she was briefly employed at Cadet Cleaners, it only lasted three months before she decided it was not for her. Her first

granddaughter had been born a year before, making her a grandmother in addition to her other roles. Over the next ten years, four more granddaughters were born, and she began splitting her time between volunteer work with the Ladies' Auxiliary at St. Charles Borromeo Church, the Cancer Society and the Heart and Stroke Foundation, and with her granddaughters. When they were old enough to go to school, she began volunteering there too, as a chaperone on field trips. Other children in the class called her "*nonna*" like her granddaughters did.

By this time in 1962, she lived at 5 Romar Crescent in the northwest corner of the city. A bungalow on a large piece of land, it was a far cry from the house she liked so much on Crawford Street—but the Toronto Transit Commission expropriated it so they could build a secondary subway exit, and so they were forced to move. Diodato bought the house without discussing it with anyone first, drawn to it because of the large plot it sat on—he had long wanted a large vegetable garden. Though the house was small, in time Diodato built an extension, including the kitchen corner with the picture window where Concetta did so much of her writing. He also built a second kitchen in the unfinished basement where Concetta did all of her heavy cooking.<sup>18</sup> She had now been in Canada for just shy of twenty years, and for the first time since arriving in 1956, finally had enough spare time to devote to formally learning the English language.

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<sup>18</sup> Thanks to both Concetta and Diodato's efforts, the backyard flourished, replete with grapevines growing on a *pergola* made of recovered pipes, all affixed to each other and forming a canopy over the back patio. Tomatoes, zucchini, corn, peas, peppers, lettuce, radicchio, chickpeas, strawberries, chives, swiss chard, cucumber, fava beans, *tortanelle* (the massive, fuzzy spiraling cousin to the cucumber), potatoes, parsley, onions, garlic and basil all grew in the back, alongside snapdragons, bleeding hearts, marigolds, sunflowers, impatiens and roses nestled against pear trees, apple trees, and of course, the ubiquitous fig tree found in many an immigrant backyard, faithfully bearing fruit against all climate-induced odds. Rosemary and thyme and a plethora of other herbs grew in large planters made by Diodato out of old rubber tires and tire irons. Cacti hung in pots suspended from the *pergola*, some growing ostentatious pink flowers. In the frontyard, gooseberries were harvested every fall, and two large bushes had been cut to resemble overgrown birds, with flowers for eyes, under a large hazelnut tree.

The class was run at a primary and junior school during the daytime rather than the evening, so the majority of the class were women, some of whom could go to class and then pick up their children from the same school. She talked about this class with the most fondness since the teacher encouraged them to get to know each other, to develop comfort. These women were not necessarily all workers—but they were all immigrant women which forged a bond between them.

She finally found the right school when she began attending a program not too far from where she lived, on Eglinton West near Dufferin Street. The program was taught by a Lebanese woman and attended mostly by women since it ran during the day. Many of these women worked at home, or had shift work, with children in school and husbands at work. She speaks of those days fondly, in remembering the women that she befriended, and the similarities they shared in their immigrant limbo identifies. In order to raise money, the women at the ESL program decided to put together a recipe book that would include traditional recipes from their home countries. The culmination of her class was a homemade cookbook prepared by the class, to be sold at the Christmas fundraiser. A collection of recipes from around the world, it was carefully typed up and photocopied by the teacher, and assembled by the students with a thick red card stock cover, stapled to the white printed pages. The inside cover was signed by each of the students. The first page reads:

December, 1977

Dear friend,

We are a group of immigrant women and we would like to share with you some of our cooking traditions.

Here are some recipes from GREECE, the land of Socrates and Homer, from ITALY, the land of Leonardo da Vinci and Michaelangelo, from YUGOSLAVIA, the land of Nikola Tesla, Njegos and others.

You will find that most of our recipes will take a long time to prepare but we feel that, to achieve something good you must make an effort.

We did our best in writing this book and we hope that you'll enjoy it.

Good luck!

The collection includes recipes from the aforementioned countries, as well as France, Portugal, the Middle East and the former Czechoslovakia, covering everything from soups, pastas and dumplings to desserts.

This is an important document because it shows an allowance for a new kind of cultural exchange. Women who may not have otherwise met outside of the ESL class, found that their cooking meant they had something else in common.<sup>19</sup> It is an earlier incarnation of later realizations that not all of *nonna's* recipes were traditional ones that she had learned in her youth in Italy. In fact, some of her most popular dishes are ones that she did not grow up with. Most famous were her eggplant dishes that she learned from a *paesano* who had picked up the knack of making them in northern Italy in Bologna. There are also her infamous cream cheese cupcakes, the most popular of her Christmas cookies, which are also not a recipe she grew up with in Italy, but rather learned here. Even her zucchini bread with walnuts was not something she learned how to make from her mother or grandmother, but rather from a friend she met, post-immigration.

Concetta resented being called to come to Canada, and for a time she wondered if she might have been more content in Italy, but she was shocked and dismayed to find that

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<sup>19</sup> This is a theme that has been noticed by others as well, as for example, a book published in 2003 called *Tasting Diversity: A Celebration of Immigrant Women and Their Cooking* (Baird and Brown) executed by the Working Women's Community Centre in Toronto.

Boiano had continued to d/evolve during her absence. This points to the presence of the Boano of old in her poetry as not so much a place, but rather a time that she longed for, and how she tries to reconcile with that disconnect. The culture shock of going from the familiar rural space to the unfamiliar and disturbingly large urban spaces was immense, but in interviews, she tended to play it down, only hinting at how adrift she truly felt those first seven months—and yet, she refused to get lost in the maelstrom. This chapter was largely biographical and descriptive, but necessary to go through in order to understand her life before poetry, before retirement, as a period in which she was uncertain about so much. Her natural friendliness alleviated some of that stress, and she began to branch out, to get to know others, at first with work, and then later with her neighbour Mr. Neil, culminating with her ESL class and helping to produce the recipe book. Food and language were two aspects of her life that began to draw her out of the one-dimensional immigrant identity thrust upon her by circumstance, allowing her to begin the process of integration, and the path towards renegotiating her identity.

## BUJAN' TRASFORMATE / BOIANO TRANSFORMED

Carissimi Bojanesi, e tutti quelli che sono entrati  
a far parte del nostro bel paese.

Emò ve voi parlà de ru nostre Bujan' antich'  
ca nu ci arricurdamam'e  
però dop sedic' anne d'assenza  
ru sò truate tutt' strane.

La gende, tande vie November can n'n sapavame,  
e 'na cosa strane come ann' transformate Bujan'

Non stann' chiù ortura verde, e acqua fresca e bella;  
so muorte pu[r]ri cuttielle[e], ruosp[e] e raganelle,  
che candavan' all'imbruni e de la sera  
pe' dirci che ieva ora de i a la casa pe' la cena.

Non c'e stanne chiu' iumende e ciuccuarielle  
chi che la vard, e chi cu ru trainiell'  
ca c'purtavana a la campagan pe' lavore;  
e la sera la las casa p' ci' a ripusà.

A la casa truavam la mamma  
ch' preparava la cenarella e ieva tutta condenda  
quann' turnavam a la casa pe' arregne le piatta de  
fasciur e taccuzelle.

Dop' la cena a parlà de la famia,  
e dope c recitava ru rosarie  
e ci andavame a durmì.

La tradione nostra è finita, pecchè  
la gende vecchia o è morta or è partita.

La giovendù du uoie n'n pensa più a niende,  
sole lavorà e a ru divertimend'.

È fta la camapagna bella, verde,  
tutt' pulite che faceva Bujan' tutt' ny paravise.

Mo vide sule case e plazzinie  
però n'è ciù biell' come a ri tiempe  
nuostre quann' c'avezavame la mattina  
e c'sendive galle, puorce, e pecorelle

Dear Boianesi and all those who came  
To be a part of our beautiful town

Now I am going to talk to you about the  
old Boiano  
that we remembered  
but after a sixteen year absence  
I found it very strange

The people, so many new streets that we  
couldn't know  
It's strange how they have changed Boiano

There were no more green gardens and  
and fresh beautiful water  
Even the frogs and toads have died  
Who would sing as the twilight set in  
To tell us it was time to go home and have  
supper

There are no mares or donkeys anymore  
Neither bridled nor pulling a cart  
Like the ones that would carry us into the  
countryside to work  
And then bring us home again at night to rest.

At home, we would find Mamma  
Who prepared supper and was very happy  
When we returned home so she could fill  
our plates with beans and *taccuzelle*.

After supper, the family would all talk  
And after saying the rosary  
We would go to sleep

Our tradition is finished because  
The old people have died and have left

The young people today don't think of anything  
Except for work and having fun

Finished is the beautiful green countryside  
so well kept it made Boiano seem like a paradise

Now you only see houses and small apartments  
but it's hardly as beautiful as it was in our time  
When we would get up in the morning  
And hear the roosters, pigs and sheep

e le galline che ci candavane  
la canzona matutina.

Mo c' stann sole machine oe camiune  
ca ti tiè da guardà ca te muttene  
sotte senza perdune.

La storia che ve so raccontata  
non ci sta chiu, ca seme lassate Bujane  
che ri frastriere e la giovendù

E mò ve' dich' a tutte voi cari Bujanes',  
non ce scurdame Bujan' cambiate,  
ch' è sembre ru nostr' paese.

Di più c'è un'altra cosa che ho nel cuore,  
che quasi ogni anno abbiamo capi grandi  
in mezzo a noi, a vedere come orgoglioso siamo  
perchè noi tutti quà presenti  
veniamo da Bojno; paese orgoglioso,  
distrutto cinque volte  
e sempre rifiorito, e risorto forte.

Come i giovani Sabelli che l'ho hanno fondato  
per un bue che hanno incontrato.

Ed ora vi dò la buonasera e buon divertimento,  
a tutti chi ci ha dato onore  
a questo grande avvenimento.

2001

And the chickens sing to us  
their matins song

Now there are only cars or trucks  
Of which you have to be careful or they will  
Run you over without a care

The story which I have told you  
Is no longer, for we have left Boiano  
To strangers and young people

And now I tell you all dear Boianesi  
Let's not forget Boiano, so transformed  
Because it is always our town

There's one more thing I have in my heart  
That almost every year we have important people  
Among us to see how proud we are  
All of us here  
To come from Boiano, a proud town  
Destroyed five times  
And always re-born and risen strong

Just as the young Samnites who founded it  
In honour of the oxen that they met

And now I bid you good night and a good time  
To all those who have given us an honour  
At this great event.

CHAPTER THREE:  
BRIDGING THE LANGUAGE GAP  
WITH POETRY  
1980-2011

Concetta began to write poetry in the last thirty years, a pastime she likely had not indulged in since she was a child at school in Boiano. Her poems are in Boianese, but also in Italian, and there are several in English, which, as a second language (or even a third one when one considers standard Italian the second) posed a challenge to her form and style.

She wrote them all in her kitchen, at the little writing desk made by her husband Diodato in the corner by the large picture window on one side overlooking the backyard where she and Diodato grew vegetables, grapes and flowers burst from every corner. The fig tree growing in the greenhouse is adjacent to the kitchen and a window connects the two sides. She wrote lots of other things there too. She kept all of her papers in filing boxes under the window with phonebooks and address books organized by country (one for Italy, Argentina and Australia, one for Canada), medical files and information, phone bills and hydro bills, church bulletins and magazines, the free dailies brought to her by the personal support workers who assisted her with household chores and to care for her husband. She spent time reading in her chair there by the window too, going through her prayer book at least every day, reading about the lives of saints and cheap Italian romance novels brought to her by a friend. In the summertime, she soaked in the heat and the humidity reading outside on a patio chair. She collected books about Boiano; the two Michele Campanella books used for this thesis were borrowed from her collection. She also kept two slim volumes of poetry on the desk that one of her favorite priests, Padre Donato, from her church St. Charles of Borromeo, had written in Italian.

She began writing partly as an indirect result of having, for the first time in her life, more spare time than she knew what to do with. She stopped working at the Ganz Brothers factory in 1975 due to an operation and when she had recovered, she could not get the same job again. After a brief and disheartening three-month stint with Cadet Cleaners around the corner, she decided to stay at home and retire. The house and mortgage were all paid for, and her daughters had begun their own adult lives and no longer lived at home. Her father-in-law Giovanni had passed away a few years earlier in 1967 and her husband was still working full-time, so she suddenly found herself at home during the day, which was something of a new experience for her; of course, she became restless. She was only 48 years old at this time and so with her typical boundless energy, decided to devote her efforts to other areas to fill in her time outside of the house. She began to volunteer with various charities, by selling daffodils for the Cancer Society, by raising money for the Heart and Stroke Foundation, and by arranging church bazaars and pilgrimages to holy sites around southern Ontario and New York State with the Ladies Auxiliary at her church. Her first granddaughter was born in 1976, and so she became "*nonna*", a role she adopted with great relish. Over the next ten years, four more granddaughters were born, the youngest in 1986. As they got older, she happily lent her services to their schools, where she often volunteered as a chaperone on field trips. Ever popular with children, the other children in the class called her *nonna* too. When she turned 60, she got her driver's license, and she picked her granddaughters up from school or at the school bus drop-off, drove them to swimming lessons in the summer time and took them to the park. She especially loved taking them to Black Creek Pioneer Village, a heritage site in the north end of Toronto, where they baked bread from scratch, gave

buggy rides, and demonstrated other activities from the 1800's; she always admired the hoops and sticks and jump ropes that children could play with, reminded of her own childhood.

This more leisurely period for Concetta was reflected by the broader Italian community, as it too grew more settled and integrated. As Little Italy in downtown Toronto established itself in the 1960s, some of the Italian community gradually began to move further north in the city, to St. Clair Avenue West, which, when Diodato arrived in 1953, was still predominantly farmland, and her street, Romar Crescent, was all fields. By the 1960s and 1970s it was considered suburban, and many Italian families moved in that direction and further north to Concetta's neighbourhood to get away from the cramped space of downtown. The stretch of St. Clair between Dufferin Street and Lansdowne Avenue is now considered to be Toronto's second Little Italy, and called the *Corso Italia*.<sup>20</sup> Italians owned businesses, they had their own churches with Masses in Italian which was a far cry from the church basement Masses Concetta attended when she was still new in the city. In what was still very much a Protestant city at the time, if Italians wanted their own Italian Masses, they were typically relegated to the basement of the church, and not allowed to worship upstairs. The St. Francis of Assisi church at College and Grace at this time also began its annual Good Friday Procession, and held a St. Anthony's Procession in the summertime.<sup>21</sup> As the Italian community grew more and more settled, the popularity of the St. Anthony procession waned in comparison to the

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<sup>20</sup> Many Italians continued to progress even further away from College Street, moving into the outskirts of North York, just north of Romar Crescent, and beyond to Woodbridge, Ontario, now a Little Italy unto itself.

<sup>21</sup> St Anthony is popularly known as the patron saint of travellers and lost things—already important for many Italian immigrants, he became doubly so as they felt themselves to be a bit of both of those as immigrants: lost travellers. As they became less lost, the need for St. Anthony grew less and less.

Good Friday Procession, which is now well known throughout the city of Toronto as the Good Friday "Parade."

Italian social clubs in Toronto were organized more or less in reaction to a city by-law which stipulated that no more than three men could "loiter" on the sidewalk for an extended period of time. Italians—and men in particular—accustomed to a *piazza* culture in which men and women frequented their hometown squares to take a customary evening *passeggiata*, to socialize, needed to find another way to recreate this. They took their *piazas* inside, and the social clubs were organized so that men had a place to go. The social clubs became safe havens. Initially, they tended to be more or less exclusive for men—there would be smoking, espresso, card playing—not typically a place for Italian women. Social historian Franca Iacovetta explains the nature of Italian immigrant public life in Toronto at that time.

The world of kin, family, and paesani would increasingly overlap with the wider world of parish, clubs, and other community activities. Social outings and formal meetings would form a greater part of the lives of many immigrants, in particular those of the men. . . . By 1971 there were approximately sixty Italian clubs in Toronto. . . . The clubs were important gathering places, especially for men, while the annual dances and picnics they sponsored provided an opportunity for women and children to participate. (1992, 152)

It seemed natural, then, for these clubs to take an interest in heritage and culture, and "preserve" their regional cultures as much as possible. Of course, naturally, most men forgot that their Italian immigrant mothers, wives and daughters were already doing so through the foodways they brought with them. In any case, these social clubs, organized and designated by town or by province, became the organizing bodies for community events that now take place all over southern Ontario. Concetta belonged to the Boiano Club which was formed in the early 1970s. The Boiano Club organizes several events a

year, and the culmination of these events is held at the end of the summer on the last Sunday in August, at Mary Lake, near King City, Ontario. Families from Boiano and its environs come to Mary Lake where there is a Mass and then a procession, before a long leisurely lunch. People come with coolers, picnic baskets and even charcoal barbecues. It's an all day event with games and folk music and dance performances in the late afternoon. They also hold various meetings for all club members throughout different times of the year, and it was at one such meeting that Concetta was first given the idea to write poetry.

Concetta's identity had shifted again, as she became a Boianesa-Canadian rather Italian Canadian or an Italian immigrant. She was able to reclaim her regionality during this period of her life, essentially caught in a bubble, a product of both worlds. This period marks the beginning of another shift in her identity—perhaps this time, a more complex shift, since for the first time, she was defining herself as a Boianesa (rather than an Italian, since by this time the Italian community of Toronto had been well-established) and yet, fully aware that she was not the same Boianesa who left Italy. Moreover, she was well aware that the Boiano she knew as a child and a young woman was vastly different. As she discovered even on her first trip back to Italy in 1969, the Boiano she left in 1956 did not exist anymore as she remembered it. Her most recent trip to Boiano was 2006, where she was dismayed to discover that the huge scarred chestnut tree that had protected her from the bullets of the Allies firing at them when she was a child had been cut down, and that many of the fields she had once worked were now completely overgrown and neglected. Though she was aware of the changes that were happening already in Boiano on her first visit, and noted all of the gradual (but for her overnight)

changes on other trips between her first and last, it was still a shock to her.

Communication between *here* and *there* evolved as well. The telephone call from immigrant families to or from their family back home in the old country used to be extremely important; long distance was expensive, and calls were less than frequent.<sup>22</sup> As compared to the early and mid-years of immigration, when letters were sent back and forth at a snail's pace, the use of things like e-mail and skype were inconceivable, and yet Concetta began to be in regular touch with her great-nephew Antonio, who would send her pieces of news, snippets of recently published local Boiano history, the latest about his grandfather and her brother, Antonio, whom she spoke to perhaps once or twice a year on the telephone.

Even the Boiano dialect she spoke had changed again more dramatically than the two previous shifts (as addressed in Chapter 1) she herself had experienced in such a short span of time during her youth. This time, the distinctive pronunciations, for example, the *-sh* sound that went with any sibilant *-s* word, had gone; her daughters were teased by their cousins for "talking like the old people." In an ironic shift, the Boianese dialect as they had learned it, as Concetta still spoke it, had been accurately and well preserved in a completely foreign country, where it effectively exists in a time bubble. It is hard to say how much longer it has in Toronto, since it fades more and more the older that generation of immigrants gets, and, as is well-known, a language must be spoken, formed by tongues and lips, teeth and mouths in order to remain alive. In another irony, it

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<sup>22</sup> Charlie Chiarelli, a storyteller from Hamilton, Ontario who immigrated from Sicily as a boy with his family, speaks to this experience in his collection *C'u' Fu*, when he describes the steps his father took to prepare, whenever the telephone rang—he smoothed his shirt, quickly straightened his hair—before answering. Chiarelli joked that he and his siblings practically had to stop their father from going upstairs to put on a tie and jacket if the telephone call was long distance from Italy.

seems that Concetta has preserved what was an essentially oral language on paper in her written poetry.<sup>23</sup>

Given that it was an oral language, it is also worthwhile pointing out that Concetta was one of the dialect's first transcribers, writing the language out in her poetry. In one interview, she said because there was no set alphabet, she interpreted the language one way as she wrote it while others may have written it in another. Some years back, a visiting professor from Boiano heard her read one of her poems ("Bujan"). Very impressed with her work, he dutifully wrote it down, and presented her with the poem newly transcribed onto official city stationery. She thanked him gracefully, but told him that though she appreciated his efforts, he had taken some liberties with the spelling of her words, unknowingly choosing to spell them in a way in which she would not have chosen herself.

Concetta's poetry is placed in particular locales and times as dictated by the language she chooses to write in. Her poetry in dialect is always about Boiano and about being a *contadina*. Only one notable exception steps out of this categorization, a piece called "Emigranti" or "Emigrants," in which she wrote about arriving to a new country from the old—yet even so, by situating the poem in that specific time, the poem is still about *leaving* Boiano and written from the perspective of one who is away. In their introduction, Ashworth and Graham discuss the significance of location and place.

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<sup>23</sup> Concetta was of course not the first to do this. There is a theme even in literature of dealing with the relationship between the spoken word and the written word. There is a novel called *Riddley Walker* by Russell Hoban, which is set in a post-apocalyptic England. As a result, language has fallen apart, and all proper names, all words and written language have been bastardized. The novel sets up an interesting binary dilemma between the written and the oral which Walter J. Ong addresses more academically in his book *Orality and Literacy*. Writers like Indigenous poet Lee Maracle who comes from a strong oral tradition, refuses to see anything written as finite, and will continue to revise and add to her work, even if the work has been published. In some instances, published pieces have more than one date attached to them, showing that she went back to revise an already published piece.

In defining the discourses of inclusion and exclusion that constitute identity, people call upon an affinity with places or, at least, with representations of places, which in turn, are used to legitimate their claim to those places. By definition, such places are imaginary but they still constitute a powerful part of the individual and social practices which people use consciously to transform the material world into cultural and economic realms of meaning and lived experiences. Senses of places are therefore the products of the creative imagination of the individual and of society, while identities are not passively received but are ascribed to places by people. (Ashworth and Graham 2005, 3)

In her own words, Concetta wrote:

Sem' lassat' ru biell' paese Bujan'	We left our beautiful Boiano
Tutt' ch' diebt' e na valisa	Everything in one suitcase
P'meni a na terra straniera	To come to a foreign land
I senza sapè s[e]ci stava la terra	Without knowing if there was earth
Sott' ri piedi.	Beneath our feet.
...	...
Ri prim' tiemp' qua e' sta' dur'	The early times were hard
Pe' tutt' quand' ca c'chiagnavam'	For everyone was crying
Ru bell' Paese a ri cumpagn'	For our beautiful village in the country
...	...
E la Doemicna che iava' a la messa	And on Sunday we went to Mass
E c'incuntravam tutt' ri paesan'	And met all the <i>paesani</i>
Pensavam' ca c'i trovavam' a Bujan	For a moment, we found ourselves in Boiano
Però n'ieva la verdà	But it wasn't true
Ca 'stavam' a Toronto, Canadà.	We were still in Toronto, Canada.
...	...
E allora I v' salut' nu surris'	And now, I'll give you a smile
Vulem c'ben' e stam' c'amici:	All the best for we are friends
Amic' semp' vicin' e lundan'	Friends always, near and far
Però arricurdame ca sem' d'Bujan'.	Because we are from Boiano.

#### THE POETRY

Concetta produced at least some thirty-odd poems (some of which are included in the Appendix) possibly more, though it is difficult to tell, since she often gave away the

poems she wrote for particular people. The poems have been written in three different languages depending on the type of poem it was and they can be categorized into three major categories: Boiano poems; birthday poems; and people poems, which also include any poem she may have written for a person outside of the parameters of their birthday or the poems she wrote for couples on their anniversary. With the exception of her Boiano poetry, all other poems are essentially untitled—rather, they are dedicated to the person or persons for whom she wrote the poem. For example, “Per Padre Gregorio,” “Dedica a Teresa Patullo Bosa,” “Per Nella e Emilio Patullo” and a “Maurizio e Rosella,” and there are others as well. These people poems will not be discussed in great detail, though her Boiano poems and birthday poems will, which is why a brief description was included here. Finally, she penned a long anniversary poem called “Dedica a Diodato e Concetta: A L’occasione del 60iesmo anniversario dei loro matrimonio” (Dedicated to Diodato and Concetta: On the occasion of their 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary), an autobiographical poem that she wrote in honour of her anniversary with Diodato. This poem belongs in a category all of its own, since there is no other poem in her repertoire like it in that firstly, the length puts it beyond any of her other pieces at twenty-five stanzas, it details all the important dates of her life from just before she was married on, and finally, though she wrote it in anticipation of giving it to anyone (the language was Italian rather than dialect), she performed to an audience of her family and friends unexpectedly, thus changing the dynamic of her typical reading.

The first category—her Boiano poems, are immediately identifiable because they are written in dialect. Pastoral imagery of farmland and countryside recurs as she describes rivers, fields of wheat and the frogs and toads that sang in the ditches. These

poems are also marked by the idea of leaving, or rather, having left, and being written from afar. It might even be accurate to say that these poems are lamentations for the old country, long gone, and so of course, nostalgic, but with good humour and resolve underlying those more melancholy elements. The poems have a certain sorrow for what is no longer there, and yet, they are comforting to read rather than saddening. The poems used to break up the chapters of this thesis belong to this category, and each one speaks about Boiano—whether it is the introduction, a recounting, a departure or a reconciliation, each represents the simultaneous closeness and distance Concetta felt at varying periods of her immigrant and post-immigrant life.

Concetta also produced birthday poems, unwittingly adding to the body of birthday literature. Some of the great poets of English literature—Dylan Thomas, Ben Jonson, Sylvia Plath and Samuel Johnson—have all written birthday poems (Mullan 2011). Her birthday poems are written almost exclusively in Italian, with a few exceptions when the person it is for speaks only English—for example, she wrote a poem for her friend Sharon Gosciola (Sharon and her husband Peter were some of the first friends that Concetta and Diodato made in Canada) called “The song of life for someone dear so that she never fears.” Concetta also made exceptions for two of her granddaughters and wrote those poems in English. Her son-in-law received a poem in Italian, whereas her daughters received poems in Boianese. Her birthday poems are characterized by her celebration of the person whom she wrote about, sometimes with a piece of advice or gentle criticism incorporated into the piece, signifying that the poem was meant for a family member rather than a friend (even a close one like Sharon).

Performance was also an integral part of these poems, on a personal level, an interesting contrast to her Boiano poems, which were far more public.

In her study of the folk poetry of rural Ontario, *True Poetry*, Pauline Greenhill defines folk poetry as follows:

Locally composed folk poetry celebrates people, events, and . . . scenes that versemakers consider especially appropriate. Folk poets can criticize what they see as inapposite . . . In these ways folk poetry imparts and expresses aspects of . . . culture. (1989, 5)

Although Greenhill is speaking here about some of the characteristics of Ontario folk poetry, those qualities still apply to Concetta's folk poetry. Moreover, Concetta's folk poetry can be further contextualized as "ethnic" or "immigrant" literature; certainly, it can be added to the canon of Italian Canadian poetry. Her poetry is important because "poetry offers us a distilled and rarified imagination" (Serra 2007, 11), and when one considers this within the context of Concetta's poetry, it becomes obvious that she would not have written *this* poetry, *these* poems, had she not immigrated. In speaking about the Iranian American community, Persis M. Karim suggests that poetry "[f]or Iranian Americans . . . has served as the medium of continuity between Iran and the US" (2008, 112), and it seems that poetry serves a similar purpose for Concetta and her connection to Boiano, and by extension, her poetry also provides this link for the Boianese community in Toronto with their hometown as well. In this sense, she acts as a spokeswoman for her community, though she would never have predicted the adulation she received for her poems.

In the context of Italian-Canadian literature, there is a respectable canon. *Pillars of Lace: The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Women Writers* edited by Marisa De Franceschi are *Italian Canadian Voices* edited by Caroline Morgan DiGiovanni are two

such examples. Concetta's poetry stands apart from these however, largely because lack of formal education and near exclusivity to being composed in either Boianese or Italian. The majority of Italian-Canadian poetry and prose has been written by the Italian-born children of immigrants who came to Canada at a young age or by the Canadian-born children of Italian immigrants and though many of them identify as Italian second and as writers first, their immigration history and Italian past still informs their writing. Mary Di Michele, Gianna Patriarca are two particularly well-known Italian-Canadian poets, who write about both the past and the present, and play with using more than one language in their poems. Concetta's own daughter, Isabella Colalillo Kates, is another such poet, with two published volumes. This generation received the formal education and training that their parents did not which helped them to achieve some social and economic upward mobility, as many of these immigrant children became professors and artists, including poets. As such, their poetry is predominantly in English (or French), though Italian and to an extent, dialect, play important roles in their writing.

Concetta and her contemporaries produced comparatively little writing, primarily because working was a priority in order to secure a stable future for their children. In his own work about the Italian-Canadian community, Concetta's son-in-law Vincenzo has become fond of paraphrasing the following anecdote:

It was an old superstition, sometimes half believed by the simplest emigrants, that the streets in [America] were paved with gold. When they got here, they learned three things: first, that the streets were not paved with gold; second, that the streets were not paved at all; and third, that they were expected to pave them. (Terry Coleman as quoted in *Blood of My Blood* by Richard Gambino)

As has been discussed in Chapter Two, often it was hard for Italian immigrants to take ESL courses because they were working all of the time, but also because of the

pervasiveness of basic literacy within the Italian immigrant community in Toronto. Many, like Concetta's *cognata* Carmela, could not read or write even in Italian, let alone in English. There may well be notebooks similar to the ones Concetta used kept neatly in a desk drawer or folder full of writing by other Italian immigrants like her, but, since even Concetta's work was rarely seen outside of the home and the Boiano Club, there is no way to tell.<sup>24</sup> Ilaria Serra's book *The Value of Worthless Lives* is aptly titled when it comes to Italian immigrants, for they thought their lives were not worth much in the grand scheme of things. Concetta's own bemusement at being interviewed for this thesis supports this idea, as did the fact that she could never fully understand why anyone would want to write about her; she was pleased, insofar as someone found her life interesting and wanted all the details, talking about different aspects and periods of her life for the most part easily and openly, but she never comprehended why anyone outside of her circle of family and friends would really care about her poetry or her immigrant life.

In recent years there have been a handful of memoirs and autobiographies published by immigrants, though many of these tend to focus on work and public life.<sup>25</sup> Though Concetta felt very strongly about workers' rights and though she was a thorn in the side of her employers at the various factories where she worked, her poetry transported her back to Boiano, and the birthday poems and people poems are a reflection of what she deemed important enough to write about. To the uninformed, perhaps her

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<sup>24</sup> A few years ago, my father answered his front door to find the neighbour's elderly father on the other side, holding a thick folder of papers. He explained that he knew my father made books and wondered if he could help him to put his own book together. The papers and notebooks in the folder he was holding were his own memories, from his earliest memories as a boy in Italy to the last handful of years in Canada.

<sup>25</sup> There was one book in particular called *Pietro's Book*, a memoir by Pietro Piniti and Jenny Bawtree. Pinti was a *contadino* in Toscana who did not immigrate; however, Concetta enjoyed his book thoroughly because his life in Italy was so similar to the one she had before she emigrated.

poetry comes across as domestic in the pejorative sense of the word. Serra addresses an aspect of this:

Our Italian immigrant women complicate the notion of the ethos of work we have seen so far, because for almost all of them, having a job is their first taste of an independence they had never felt. Female immigrants are twice crushed under history, both by society and by their own families. [The stories in the book] give a modern inflection to the concept of quiet individualism because women's individualism is generally a recent discovery. Many of our women writers define themselves as being in the backgrounds of other people's stories... with a limited scope of action.

Some of these women are the prototype of the Italian [immigrant] grandmother, a figure of mythic proportions . . . . This matriarchal figure is present as an origin myth that gives successive generations a sense of continuity with their ancestral past, and she provides a strong model of a powerful woman . . . . (2007, 17)

Concetta was certainly the matriarchal nucleus of her family, perhaps in a family of women in Canada (her husband, her son-in-law and the cat the only males as compared to her daughters and granddaughters which, including herself, brought the total female count to eight), this was something easier to achieve. In any case, as Serra writes, Concetta did occupy that sense of matriarchal origin; now that she is gone, her poetry achieves this for her. Her poetry is not only the link for her own fellow Boianesi in Canada to their *paese* in Italy, but it is also the continuity for her family, perhaps in particular to her granddaughters, linking them to her beginnings in Boiano but also linking them to her own voice and reminding them of things they should remember in life.

#### BOIANO POEMS

These are the poems that come immediately to mind for most that know her work when they think of Concetta. These poems are her love letters to the home she did not want to leave, to a place that no longer exists, written from the vastly different home she grew to

love. Concetta wrote at least ten poems on the subject of her hometown of Boiano from roughly 1992 to 2003 according to the dates accompanying them; there may be additional ones somewhere in the house. Her daughter Giuliana typed many of her poems, including those about Boiano for her. Her other daughter, Isabella, also typed them up and then bound them in a collection Isabella called "Bujan', Paes' Mie Biell' e Altre Poesie" in 2008.<sup>26</sup> By that time, Concetta did not write as often as she once did. The Boiano portion of the collection is comprised of ten poems, beginning in 1993 with "Emigrante" and ending with "La Vita Contadina de Bujan'" in 2003.<sup>27</sup> The poems mainly focus on what life was like when she was living there compared to the changes she observed in 1969 on her first visit back after emigrating thirteen years prior. Her last visit there was in 2006. They deal with themes of nostalgia and are often written about the life of the *contadini*, which she felt was underrepresented at the Boiano Club, despite most of its members coming from such backgrounds. Certainly it is an underrepresented experience even in the academic work concerning Italian immigrants.

She started writing her poetry when the president of the Boiano Club asked "the ladies of the club [to] write something about where you grew up,"—to write some poetry about Boiano as it was and how it changed.

When we start this business to write, the president of the club said, "You making the *zeppole*, we making pasta and *fagioli* with the *còteca*"—you know, the pig—"all these traditions, why don't you write something about this, like, tell the people our traditions and how we change." So that's how we started. So we were four ladies. First year they did two of them, but they didn't write nothing, like [only] all [about] Boiano, and the *paese* and "we went to the *piazza*, we watched the boys who walked by," you know, all these nonsense things to me. So first when I wrote it, I did part of you

<sup>26</sup> "Boiano, My Beautiful Village and Other Poems."

<sup>27</sup> "Emigrants" and "The Life of a *Contadina* in Boiano."

know of my first one, and part of the people who left and what we were doing so that's how they were amazed.

She admitted that she was reluctant at first, self-conscious about what the end result would be, but quickly took the poems she created, and threw herself into the process with clear ideas about how to write and what to write about. When asked why she wrote, she replied,

I get really enthusiastic because whatever I write, that's like the true story of my youth or a true story of my life. And I feel so proud of myself, writing down something which somebody else can read and *lo voi trasmettere* [I want to transmit it] through the family, the old-fashioned way we were living, and that's how I feel about it.

Concetta demonstrates with her explanation that she adheres to one of the main elements common in folk poetry: recording the truth or rather, the sense of writing down only what has happened. About this aspect of folk poetry, Greenhill notes,

The verse itself draws extensively upon known prototypes, which are often examples of traditional wisdom, et the simple reproduction of the prototype is much less common than its re-creation or refiguring. This means that at the same time a poet or presenter takes personal accountability for a statement in verse, he or she may temper its individuality because it is also something that has been around for a while. . . . In effect, the poet . . . [writes] a poem [for] the community not only on his or her own part but also because it represents an already recognized truth. (1989, 212 - 213)

Concetta's poems are accounts based on memory and the feelings those memories evoke.

Though this comes across as being the strongest in her Boiano poems, her birthday poems, as will be discussed, are also "true." In addition to that autobiographical quality, there are features, themes and characteristics that all of these Boiano poems share.

Perhaps the most obvious is a clear harkening back to her childhood in which she learned that poetry ought to rhyme. Her poetry then follows suit, and has a strong sense of rhyme.

The number of lines per stanza may vary from poem to poem, numbering three in one

poem or four another, but rhyming is always an integral feature. Furthermore, the stanzas often take the form of rhyming couplets, even though this is not consistent with every Boiano piece. The rhyming is how she defines her poetry as such—otherwise, it is just writing, and does not seem as significant or unique to any other small piece of writing or any other story told to her granddaughters.

Concetta read one of her first poems “Emigranti” in 1993 at the Boiano Club, where a special gathering had been arranged in honour of forty visiting Boianesi. The subject of the poem was well-suited to the audience and it was very well received by her audience:

There were forty people from Italy, from Boiano, the mayor, everybody, there were six hundred people [altogether] and everybody was yelling and screaming, *Brava! Brava! Brava!* The mayor was a Colalillo, one of the family, he came up to me and he wanted to know who I was. I presented myself [as] Sinibaldi not Colalillo: La signora Sinibaldi in Colalillo. So he came up to me, he wanted to know who I was. [I said,] “I am the sister of Pasquale Sinibaldi.” He said, “Oh that’s why you write all these things, ‘cause Pasquale, he likes to talk too.” So that made me feel really proud, proud of myself and proud of what the people did, [what they] accomplished [as immigrants].

Many marveled at the level of detail of every day life as it had once been in her poetry and wondered how she could have remembered everything, to which she simply told them that she had a good memory. She recaptured the past for herself and for her fellow Boiano immigrants, and made it alive again in the few minutes it took her to read that first poem. Through the course of the next several years, she would read more of her Boiano poetry to members of the Club and at other social gatherings, winning local recognition from the Italian-Canadian community. She won two awards from the Boiano Club for “Best Bojano Poem” and was recognized with some other women for her achievements by the Columbus Center, the local Italian-Canadian cultural hub.

In Italian (and in dialect), the word *nostalgia* translates to longing. Concetta was quite self-aware of her usage of *nostalgia* in the poetry. Moreover, the conscious decision to write her first poems in Boianese (as decreed by the president of the club) also reflects this connection to the concept of *nostalgia*, in reviving a form of the dialect that few spoke anymore (although, as I have already noted, in an ironic twist, the dialect as she spoke it was better preserved in Canada, where it existed in a time bubble, than in Italy, where the dialect kept changing and adapting, leaving little trace of the older dialect behind). In the poem "La Vita Contadina di Boiano" she wrote,

Na nustalgia m' send de la terra	One night I felt longing for
lundana,	that faraway land
ca suò passt' tant' ann che la	So many years passed since I
sem' lassat'	left it
però mai ce la scurdam'.	But never will I forget it

She also uses the word deliberately in "Bujan" when she wrote,

Ru sem' lassat[e] con tanda	We left it with so much
nustalgia	nostalgia
però dende a ru core nuotr'	But in our hearts
quill' nome non va mai via.	That name will never be forgotten

Her deliberate usage of the word *nostalgia* indicates that she actually resisted superfluous sentimentality in the poem, and took care not to romanticize the past through the proverbial rose-coloured glasses. Her poems appealed so strongly to the Boianese community in Canada because they were accessible. She was one of them, a *contadina* and immigrant, and she wrote and read her poems without pretension. Whatever the motives of the president of the Boiano Club to ask for poems written about Boiano in dialect may have been in terms of creating a Boianese Canadian identity will never be known, but it was his idea that resulted in the ultimately real and true poetry by Concetta.

Still, Concetta still delves into the romantic in some of her other work, particularly in the poem, "Bujan"<sup>28</sup> another of her early pieces. She wrote:

Ru paese mi sta' dent' a 'na terra chiena,  
circundata da rusciell' d'acqua,  
muntagn' verd'  
e tanda gend' che la zappa man'

My town lies on a plain  
Surrounded by streams,  
green mountains  
and people who hoe the land  
by hand

Fundata da ri Sabelli, giuven' forte e biell',  
che suo menut' da terr' luntan'  
fuonn' cacciat' da ri g'initur'  
ca la ci steva tanda fame.

Founded by the Samnites,  
young, strong and beautiful  
who came from a faraway  
land  
They were exiled by their  
parents because there was a  
famine

...  
Sem' discentend' di ri Sabbelli  
Sanniti  
ch'lor' cenn' insegnata 'na bona via.

...  
We are descendents of the  
Samnites  
Who taught us to follow a  
sound path

...  
Paese di cultura antica e moderna;  
Per chi discende da forti, giovani Sabbelli

...  
A town with ancient and  
modern culture  
Because it comes from strong  
young Samnites

By incorporating the Samnites<sup>28</sup> into her poem Concetta engaged with the romantic, but despite this, there is a clear distinction for her between nostalgia and romanticism. As she wrote, nostalgia is a longing for the recent past, whereas she reserved romanticism for a long ago past to which she claimed lineage. She made the connection between the ancient past and the recent past in order to reinforce the idea of the strength and beauty she said all the people of Boiano possess/possessed. In this sense, her poetry again acts as

<sup>28</sup> The Samnites were tribe of ancient people who historically controlled the area of Boiano from at least 350 BC when the Romans encountered them for the first time until 82 BC when the Roman dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla finally vanquished and dispersed them through what some historians argue was ethnic cleansing; in Chapter One, there was mention of Sepino, a community down the highway from Boiano which was built on top of the Samnite city Samnium and has been undergoing extensive excavation for the past two decades.

continuity, but this time between the ancient past and her own past as a *contadina*. She was telling her audience that they are more than humble peasants, but the descendants of a great people. Even more importantly, she drew a connection to the historical fact that the Samnites too, like the Italian immigrants, came from elsewhere, made the best of their new home and rose above their challenges.

Finally, Concetta located her poetry within the regional culture of Boiano by mentioning the specificities of the culture (outside of the dialect), most obviously by naming *frufelella*. *Frufelella* is a dish made of leftover greens, hard bread and herbs and beans, all mixed together in a pot; *frufelella* is a dish she never found in the repertoire of any other Italian immigrants she knew who were *not* from Boiano. However, this detail, while comforting for her Boianese listeners, does not mean that her poetry lacks any broader appeal. Though her poetry frequently reiterates that she is a Boianesa and proud of it, it can still appeal to a more universal immigrant experience, particularly for other Italian immigrants, but to other immigrants as well.

#### PERFORMANCE AND AUDIENCE

Her Boianese poems are always composed with an inherent awareness of the audience. It is relatively easy to spot a poem that she has written for a Club meeting, or with the intent to perform, because she incorporates her audience in the piece itself, clearly addressing them; the audience becomes part of the performance in this way. In "Bonasera Bujanes'," ("Good evening Boianesi") the poem is clearly meant for the audience as even the title is a greeting to the audience.

Bonasera tutt' frastier' e Bujanes',  
mo vi dic' du parol' d' quill' biell' paes'.

Good evening to all the foreigners and people from Boiano  
Now I'll say a few words about this beautiful town.

In incorporating the audience into the poem, she also creates an intimate atmosphere despite the largeness of the room (more often than not a large banquet room), inviting people in. Basil Bernstein wrote,

Different forms of social relationships may generate quite different speech systems or linguistic codes by affecting the planning procedures. These different speech systems or codes may create for their speakers different orders of significance. The experience of the speakers may then be transformed by what is made significant or relevant by the different speech systems. (1964, 36)

Concetta used what Bernstein has termed "codes" by employing lines of greeting or salutation in the opening of her pieces there by fostering a sense of inclusiveness. For example: "Buonasera Bujanes" [Good evening Boianesi] or "Buonasera a tutti" [Good evening to all]. She frames her poems in this manner, usually addressing the audience again in the last stanza or two as she bids them thank you and good night. Despite having witnessed some of the performances over the years, it is difficult to recall whether she said a few words before beginning her recitations, or whether she simply allowed the opening (and closing) stanzas to do that for her. This style also provides what Dell Hymes has termed a "breakthrough into performance" (2004, 79). Instead of the ritual "Once upon a time," used in many *märchen*, in her poetry, a line of greeting does the trick. The audience knows that they are being addressed and that she is now performing. She also used a few lines of Italian in some of her Boiano poems, which lent an air of formality to her performance, and served to further emphasize the idea of her

performance and to recognize and address the audience.<sup>29</sup> In "Bujan' Nuostr'," her address of the audience takes the two first stanzas and the two last stanzas, as she thanks them for listening.

Buonasera a tutti i paesani di  
Toronto,  
E quelli venuti da Boiano;  
vi auguro<sup>30</sup>  
buon appetito e buona giornata.

Insieme con onore e con allegria  
a tutti noi uniti  
in compagnia, ricordando  
quell giorno  
trent' anni fà che il Club  
Bujanese  
incominciava le sue attività.

...  
Ed ora, un saluto e una  
buonasera  
a tutti presenti di questa bella  
tradizione,  
e al dottor Roberto Colalillo<sup>31</sup>  
che ha avuto l'onore di venire  
a vedere un'altra Boiano  
in una terra lontana.

Grazie, e un saluto a tutta bella  
compagnia  
E grazie di cuore che avete avuto  
pazienza di ascoltare  
la mia povera e dialettale poesia.

Good evening to the *paesani*  
of Toronto  
And those who have come  
from Boiano, I greet you.  
*Buon appetito* and good day.

United together with honour  
and joy,  
we remember the day

thirty years ago, that the  
Boiano Club  
began its activities

...  
And now it's time to say  
good night  
to all here witnessing this  
lovely tradition,  
and, to Dr. Roberto Colalillo,  
who had the honour of seeing  
another Boiano  
in a faraway country.

Thank you and a salutation  
to this nice company  
And a sincere thank you for  
having the patience to listen  
to my poor/humble poem in dialect.

<sup>29</sup> As I child, I remember that as soon as the person on the other end of the telephone was a fellow *paesano*, Concetta's voice got louder, more familiar, more song-songy and mirthful; even if the person on the other end was a good friend who *was not* Boianese, her voice never got quite as loud. There was something about the dialect that gave the speaker (or in this case the poet) the impetus to just dive in.

<sup>30</sup> The "vi" pronoun is plural, and is used appropriately in order to address the large group, but in contrast to her much more usual way of addressing groups of people, it seems that Concetta also used it in order to stress formality. Had she been less formal, she might have said something like "ci salutiamo" or "and we say hi."

<sup>31</sup> Roberto Colalillo was being honoured by the Boiano Club that day at the gathering.

These lines are distinctive to both the performer and the audience because these words appear only at the beginning and the end, and when contrasted with the style of one of her dialect poems, the use of Italian denotes a clear formality that, in Erving Goffman's terms, *keys in the performance* (1959). Aside from this formal use of language to bookmark a Boiano poem, the rest of the language in the poem, the dialect, is utterly colloquial; the only codification she uses to denote it as poetry is to make it rhyme, which as Richard Bauman writes, "may be used to key performance, or it may simply be a formal feature of the language, as when it figures in certain forms of reduplication, or it may appear in speech play..." (1975, 296). Of course, rhyming is part of Boianese speech play so even when she began to read her poems aloud, no one was particularly surprised to hear that they rhyme.

In his chapter on the poetry of an English folk poet named Martha Bairstow, Roger deV. Renwick defines folk poetry as "made by ordinary working-class men and women about matters in their own primary environments" (1980, 158).

Working-class folk poetry differs from traditional song poetry in that—like local songs—its topics and sentiments are far more explicitly situated in the poet's bounded and knowable world, whether that world be confined to the narrow matrix of a family, a friendship or occupational group, a small-town community, a district, or, at probably the widest level, a culture region like a country. . . . Real happenings in the immediate cultural contexts of maker and audience are by far the preferred topics of working-class folk poetry. (Renwick 1980, 5)

Renwick's definition fits with Concetta's work about Boiano: There are certain recurring images and themes, such as day to day chores around the farm, the farm animals she worked with, working in the fields, and the hills and rivers that she remembers so clearly. Leaving Boiano is another of the recurring themes, and all of these are based on her own "knowable world" as Renwick terms it, and also following suit with Concetta's own

strong belief that poetry must be a true account of the things that she knew to have happened. It also follows then that these were her first poems, since the material was familiar and comforting, before she began to compose poems for the people in her life.

#### BIRTHDAY POEMS

The personal poems she wrote she said came "naturally, the words came spontaneously." She also felt very strongly that honesty was important, and this could dictate the outcome of the poem because she felt she must address both sides of an individual. She said, "Sometimes I write the good part of the person, sometimes the bad." The idea is to "teach a lesson," particularly in pieces she wrote for her daughters and granddaughters. The intent was never to offend, but to "teach something from the bottom of my heart." She recalled that even as a young woman in Boiano, the worst part about gossip was that it created secrets that would result in embarrassment or shame. Gossip was all well and good, as long as it was true. Even if her tone in her poems comes off to the casual reader as criticism, it is not meant to be aggressive and to incite resentment but rather to be firm and insightful.

Concetta's birthday poems were very much a reflection of her immersion in Canada. It is possible to speculate that had she remained in Italy, she may never have composed birthday poems since traditionally in Italy the birthday was not celebrated; rather, it was the *onomastico* or, the name day, that was important. Children were often named after the patron saint of their hometown, or after the saint on whose feast day they were born. Even if a child were not named for a particular saint, their names usually belonged to, or were affiliated with one. Concetta's own name is derived from the

Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism; she celebrated her *onomastico* on December 8<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. The *onomastico* is still important, particularly to Concetta's generation, but in Canada at least, it tends to fade into the background behind the birthday. Concetta celebrated the name days of her family by making a special meal for them or by giving a small gift. For birthdays, she made a cake and she wrote a birthday poem.

As was mentioned above, there is a history in English literature of birthday poems, from the short and often clichéd sayings found in birthday cards purchased in a drug store to the birthday poems written by more illustrious poets including Dylan Thomas and Sylvia Plath. Samuel Johnson wrote a birthday poem called "One and Twenty" which has been described as a "satirical celebration of a titled man's coming of age" (Mullan 2011). There is a history of comedic birthday poems which are typically meant to be affectionate in their satirical wit. Concetta took a slightly different approach with her birthday poems, and instead of using humour, she used the poems as an opportunity to share some advice.

The poems she wrote for friends and family were always directed to them specifically which meant that she selected the language to write in accordingly, either in English or Italian (Boianese was always for her poems about the town). There are others that she wrote as commemorative poems like the one she wrote for her *cognata* Carmela after she died. She also wrote poems for wedding anniversaries, like the one she composed for her brother-in-law Emilio and sister-in-law Iolanda's 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. With the exception of one poem, which a friend asked her to write for the wedding of two young people Concetta did not know very well, these poems are always

for those she knows personally, be it family member, priest or friend. These poems are typically shorter than the ones written in Boianese, but the rhyming is still a key feature. Concetta said that it is harder for her to rhyme in Italian than in Boianese, where it is second nature to her. Generally and on a surface level, the poems praise the individual they have been written for, but they are not the same type of narrative as her Boianese pieces. They also contain some word of caution or advice towards the end, usually in the second last stanza. This characteristic of these poems bring to mind Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's observation that "[l]ike fables and proverbs, parables are a traditional technique for coping with problematic social situations." (1975, 107) While a poem and a parable are not precisely the same thing at all, perhaps Concetta felt compelled to advise her family members, not in order to deal with a social situation, but rather, to deal with a character flaw she perceived to be a real barrier for the person at hand, or in some cases, to deal with a fragile and weakening aspect of the overall family dynamic. Certainly, the reaction she got from some of her birthday poems to family, despite all of her best intentions, is that they were not always graciously or well received. Still, her firm conviction in truth rather than passive deceit for the sake of politeness trumped every time, and so, she kept writing, even if the person she wrote for did not want it or rejected it, or even if she could not bring herself to share the poem, fearful of the reaction.

As in her Boianese poems, she locates herself within the poem by writing words like, "and please don't be angry at my words above/ it's your grandma's brand of humour," just as in her Boiano poems where she thanked the audience at the end and also apologized for her poor uneducated words. The poem is meant to be a bit like a conversation (albeit one-sided), and Concetta has been hesitant in the past about giving

the poem to the person for which it was intended. Sometimes her gift of the poem was met with a faltering acceptance by some of those for whom it was intended, knowing only too well that accepting Concetta's opinion was part of it. Her birthday poem was never meant to berate or judge, only to impart a bit of advice, combined with her urge to "tell the truth" – that is to say, to be honest, was one of the most important things she felt the poem did. Perhaps it was because the bulk of these personal poems were composed towards the end of her life, and she felt she had to fulfill the role of the matriarch in another fashion (in addition to all of the ways she already did act in this capacity). She felt that with age came a certain right, and more importantly, a certain responsibility to tell people what she really thought when it counted. The following is from a birthday poem called "A Cristina con amore":

Che Dio la possa accompagnare  
nel suo cammino  
perchè è stata sempre brava  
e rispettosa con la famiglia  
e con tutti che incontra.  
E non voglio parlare dei suoi nonni

che non si è mai rifiutata quando  
ne abbiamo bisogno  
e noi ti vogliamo tanto bene.  
che sei, per noi, una perla, con  
la tua presenza.

Però mia piccola Cristina  
ti devo dire un segretino  
Non so come, e per quale motivo  
devi abituarti un po' ad essere più  
organizzata  
devi fare come la tua mamma  
ch'è una persona ordinate.

Mi fermo qui per darti un bacio

May God accompany her on her path

because she has always been good  
and respectful with her family  
and with everyone she meets  
And not to mention, with us, her  
grandparents  
she is always there when we need  
her  
and we want all the best for you  
you are, for us, a pearl with your  
presence.

However my little Cristina  
I have to tell you a little secret  
I don't know how or by what  
motivation  
but you have to be a little more  
organized  
and take after your mother  
who is a person with everything in  
order.

I'll stop here with a kiss

e non arrabbiarti per questa  
ultima frase  
è uno scherzo che nonna ti fa  
c'è anche un po' di verità

and don't be angry by the words  
above  
it's just some teasing from your però  
Nonna  
but, there's also some truth there.

Concetta always tried to deliver advice and criticism with honesty and humour to soften the blow. It varied from poem to poem just as it varied from person to person. In other poems, she had to be more subtle in her criticism so as not to offend. Someone might question why she felt she had to include the advice/criticism at all if she knew that some might be offended where others might not, but, she felt it was her right and role as a grandmother, as the matriarch. Her intention was not to hurt, but rather, to ask people to look at themselves and their actions. The following is an excerpt she wrote for another granddaughter, this time in English, since this granddaughter does not understand Italian.

And now that angel has grown,  
healthy  
strong  
determined  
intelligent

she moves in her own way,  
to help everybody  
she meets along the way

these words come from Nonna's heart  
she knows you deeply  
from the bottom to the top  
and loves you from the bottom of her heart

I could write much more about you  
but for now  
I just want to say  
I love you  
and hope you'll stay with us  
all day  
and enjoy your 30<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The fact that she only ever produced these kinds of poems in honour of a family member or friend's birthday lent a certain gravity to her words, since the poem was clearly written for a special occasion. Just as her Boiano poems were true and faithfully gave listeners and readers a clear impression of what life was like in Italy and what it was like to immigrate, her birthday poems are also true. Concetta enjoyed gossip—but only if it was true. She had very little regard for speculation or conjecture, and tried always to live truthfully and honestly.

#### LA BELLA FIGURA AND THE 60<sup>TH</sup> WEDDING ANNIVERSARY POEM

The culmination of Concetta's poetry took the form of the poem she wrote in honour of her sixtieth wedding anniversary called "Dedica a Diodato e Concetta: A L'occasione del 60iesmo anniversario dei loro matrimonio" in which she incorporated aspects of her Boiano poems and her birthday poems. Though the content and performance of the poem will be discussed, it is first necessary to explain the meaning of *la bella figura*, and its relationship to Concetta in order to fully understand the significance of this poem. One of the most important aspects of Italian immigrant life is the notion of *bella figura* or *fare la bella figura*, which is the Italian equivalent of "making a good impression" or even "keeping up appearances," except that the *bella figura* extends to more than one facet of Italian life rather than simply social mores. Gloria Nardini explains with the following definition:

[B]ella figura is a central metaphor of Italian life, admittedly an extremely complicated one. It is a construct that refers to face, looking good, putting on the dog, style, appearance, flair, showing off, ornamentation, etiquette, keeping up with the Joneses, image, illusion, esteem, social status, reputation—in short, self-presentation, an identity, performance and display. Further, I contend . . . that as a cultural code it is deeply

embedded as one of the primary arbiters of Italian social mores, so deeply imbedded that natives are frequently unaware (consciously at least) of conforming to it. But understanding Italian life is impossible without understanding the intensity with which one must *fare bella figura*. (1999, 7)

In order to further explain Nardini's definition, an example for which the *bella figura* took shape in Canada is how some Italian immigrants insisted on baking bread using only white flour once in Canada, as a symbol of having achieved some sort of upward social mobility. In Italy, white flour was too expensive, and the *contadini* typically used whole wheat to make their bread and pasta instead. White flour was a luxury, only to be used for special occasions, if ever. Post-immigration, it eventually became part of the regular baking repertoire of many Italian immigrants, preferring to use the white flour instead of the whole wheat.

Concetta was always aware of how she sounded—she was careful about the way in which she presented herself on paper, how she liked the world to see her, and this was further elucidated by the interviews, where she was frank, open and honest. Concetta never seemed interested in status, but, she did not escape the clutches of the *bella figura* either. One of the first pieces of writing she shared at the beginning of the interviews was her autobiography, which she had decided to pen in the late 1980s, as a record of her life. Later, it would be discovered that the version of her life story she read that day actually contradicted much of what she opened up about during the interviews. When her youngest granddaughter learned of what had been read, she expressed confusion and incredulity, as she was right to do. *Bella figura* complicated things for Concetta, who occasionally expressed opinions consistent with traditional values and ideals according to the rural Boiano mindset, but that were inconsistent with what she actually thought, what

she actually believed. For example, when one of her granddaughters was preparing to graduate from university and planning to travel around Europe and the United Kingdom for a few months, Concetta's immediate reaction was, "why don't you settle down, save your money and *then* you can travel." In response, her granddaughter told her that were Concetta in the position of being young, free of responsibility and possessing the money to travel, she knew that Concetta would leave without a second thought. She was right—and sent Concetta postcards from different religious sites every week so that she might live vicariously. She was first acting as the concerned *nonna* should, being concerned for safety and then offering practical advice as was expected of her by *la bella figura* and how a grandmother of her cultural background should act. However, this contrasted greatly with what she actually thought of the idea of a young woman travelling abroad by herself—that she would have liked to do it, had she had the opportunity when she was a young woman.

The poem Concetta wrote for her 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary was written in 2007 and consists of twenty-five stanzas. It is her longest poem and tells the story of the life she shared with her husband Diodato from the time they first met whilst working in the fields up to that anniversary. The poem is distinctly personal and autobiographical, quoting names and dates, and quite amazing since it covers all the major changes of her life, and also incorporates some of the sentiments she used in her Boiano poems and in her birthday poems. Furthermore, the style brings to mind her birthday poems, but the performance aspect of the poem brings to mind her Boiano poems; it is a culmination of both, and it is the latter (the Boiano aspect) that will be addressed first.

Concetta wrote the poem with the intention of reading it aloud, though she had not anticipated reading it in front of the small crowd she did, as suggested by her use of Italian to compose the poem rather than dialect. Her daughter Giuliana also translated the poem into English and printed the poem in both languages for guests to take home. Concetta had not known that she was going to perform the poem to all of her family and closest friends until the date of her anniversary, but the first and second stanzas (in addition to the rhyming dedication which prefaces the poem) are two parts of a formal greeting to the audience nonetheless, albeit a more subtle greeting than the overt ones used in her Boiano poems.

A 2 persone con amore  
che hanno passato 60 anni  
nel nome  
del signore

-1-

60 anni fa eravamo due persone  
strane.  
ed ora siamo circondati da due  
figlie  
e cinque nipoti  
con orgoglio e con allegria,  
e la famiglia di Diodato a farci  
onore dei Colalillo

-2-

Ed ora vi direi un po' di storia  
del nostro passato,  
E per dirvi come ci siamo  
incontrati.

To two people with love  
Who have passed 60 years  
together, in the name  
of God

-1-

60 years ago we were two  
strangers  
and now we are surrounded  
by two daughters  
and five granddaughters  
with pride and happiness  
and with Diodato's family to  
give us the honour of the  
Colalillo's.

-2-

Now I want to tell you a bit  
of our past history  
And tell you how we first  
met.

As compared to the beginning of the Boiano poems, the address to the audience in this poem is not as overt. The last lines of the second stanza above specifically mention the Colalillo family, thereby suggesting that she knows who she is speaking to, and the same

goes for her reason in naming all of those specific people she mentions, which strikes the reader as more similar to her birthday poems, but unlike most of her personal poems, this one includes a formal greeting at the start and finish, similar to her other poetry about Boiano.

The content of the poem is very much like her personal poems in the autographical information it recounts, but is melded with the pastoral imagery that is so pervasive in her Boiano poems so that it succeeds in a happy medium between both. She and Diodato first met while they were working in the fields, so it is appropriate that Boiano acts as atmosphere and a character in this poem.

-3-

Eravam' in campagna a mietere il grano.

Io andava a prender l'acqua e li salutai.

Mi chiersero di portare l'acqua ache a loro

E cosi incomincio che questo mio  
vecchietto si innamorò.

We were in the fields, cutting  
wheat.

I went to get some water and  
greeted them.

They asked me to bring them  
water as well,

And that's how my little old  
guy fell in love with me.<sup>32</sup>

In her treatment of the role of poetics and place, Marthe Reed writes, "[p]laces [...] are deeply specific, and often richly resonant for us in terms of memory, emotion, and association. As such, place affords a vital window into the creation and experience of poetry where the poet is herself attuned to the presence and effect of places" (2008, 1). Concerned with the roles of space and place in relation to four particular poets, Reed discusses how these affect the poetry that is conceived of as a result. Her theory applies to Concetta.

<sup>32</sup> In Diodato's version of the story, he and his brother called to her to bring them some water too and she snapped at them to get their own. Having noticed her auburn hair and quick tongue, he said he was impressed and wanted to know immediately who she was. She brought them water anyway.

Concetta wrote her poetry as a result of where she was physically, spatially, and abstractly, the result of the process of immigration, navigating it, and then eventually, settling in another part of the city where she could make peace with herself, her life and her circumstances, as a woman, a *contadina*, an immigrant, a Boianesa, an Italian, a mother, a grandmother, a wife—the sum of all of these experiences.

## DEDICA A DIODATO E CONCETTA / DEDICATED TO DIODATO AND CONCETTA

A L'OCCASIONE DEL 60ESIMO ANNIVERSARIO  
DEI LORO MATRIMONIO / ON THE OCCASION OF THEIR 60<sup>TH</sup>  
WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

A due persone con amore  
che anno passato 60 anni insieme nel nome  
del signore

-1-

60 anni fa eravamo due persone strane,  
ed ora siamo circondati da due figlie  
e cinque nipoti  
con orgoglio e con allegria  
e la famiglia di Diodato a farci onore dei Colalillo

-2-

Ed ora vi diro un po di storia del nostro passato  
E per dirvi come ci siamo incontrati.

-3-

Eravamo in campagna a mietere il grano.  
Io andava a prendere l'ac qua e li salutai.  
Mi chiesero di portare l'acqua ache a loro  
E cosi incomincio che questo mio vecchieto si  
innamoro.

-4-

Cosi incomincio a domandare prima ai fratelli e  
la cognata  
Chi era io e se era fidanzata e come mi chiamava!  
E poi ai suoi amici, perche lui era stato 4 anni in  
guerra,  
E non sapve piu niente dele ragazze dei vicinato.

-5-

Cosi una sera a l'insaputo di niente,  
Si presento a casa mia col suo fratello maggiore  
Perchiedered la mana a me e ai parenti  
Perche quelli erano i tempi di allora;  
Non potevi incontrare un uomo in mezzo alla  
stradada sola.

To two people with love,  
who have lived 60 years together, in the name  
of our Lord.

-1-

60 years ago we were two strangers  
now we are surrounded by two daughters  
and five granddaughters  
with pride and happiness  
and with Diodato's family who give us the  
honour of the Colalillo's

-2-

Now I want to tell you a bit of our past history  
And tell you how we first met.

-3-

We were in the fields, cutting wheat.  
I went to get some water and greeted them.  
They asked me to bring them some water as well,  
And that is how my little 'old guy' fell in love  
with me.

-4-

He began to ask, first his brothers and sister-in-law,  
Who I was and if I was engaged and what was my  
name!  
Then he asked his friends, because he had been away  
for four years in the war  
And did not know anything about the girls in the  
neighbourhood.

-5-

One night, without my knowing anything,  
He arrived at my house with his older brother  
To ask me and my family for my hand in marriage.  
That is how it was done in those days;  
You could not meet a man in the middle of the street  
on your own.

-6-

E così incomincio la nostra storia  
Da due persone senza conoscersi  
Diventa una memoria che è durata per 60 anni.  
E questo io lo auguro a voi qui presente altro e  
tanto.

-7-

Il nostro fidanzamento fu breve.  
Solo sei mesi per vedere le nostre intenzioni.  
Se eravamo fatto l'uno per l'altro.  
Così, piano, piano ci conoscemmo e diventammo  
amici  
che ogni giorno che passava eravamo sempre più  
felici.

-8-

E così sei mesi dopo nel nostro fidanzamento  
Facemmo una decisione di unirvi per sempre.  
Sceglemmo il giorno e la data.  
C'è quel giorno fu preparato,  
Il giorno più bello della nostra vita  
Che sono 60 anni che ci facciamo compagnia.

-9-

Il 20 gennaio 1947, alle 11:00 di mattina  
Furono celebrate le nozze di Concetta Sinibaldi e  
Diodato Colalillo,  
Nella chiesa Madonna della Libera.  
Eravamo tre coppie quella mattina  
Che abbiamo giurato lo stesso destino  
Davanti a quella Vergine Santa che ci Benedetti a tutti quanti  
E continua a benedirvi a noi e le nostre famiglie.

-10-

Così per me incomincio un'altra vita  
In una casa strana, con gente che non sapeva  
come doveva comportarmi!  
Però, non fu troppo duro  
che mi abituai subito al loro ambiente senza paura.

-11-

Eravamo contenti e felici  
che con la sua famiglia diventammo subito amici,  
specia con mia cognata Annunziata  
Eravamo come mamma e figlia.  
Qualsiasi cosa ci doveva fare in casa,  
lo facevamo sempre unite.

-6-

And that is how our story began  
For two people who did not know one another  
Grew memories that span sixty years  
I wish the same for those present, and more.

-7-

Our engagement was short,  
Only six months to determine our intentions,  
To see if we were compatible with one another.  
Slowly we got to know each other and became  
friends,  
And each day that passed, we became even  
happier

-8-

And so six months after our engagement,  
We made the decision to be united forever  
We chose the date and the day  
And that day was made ready.  
The most beautiful day of our lives,  
And it has been sixty years that we have been together.

-9-

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 1947, at 11:00 in the morning  
Was celebrated the marriage of Concetta Sinibaldi  
and Diodato Colalillo,  
In the church of the Lady of Liberty.  
We were three couples that morning  
Who all swore to the same destiny  
In front of that sainted Virgin who blessed us all  
And continues to bless us and our families.

-10-

And so for me began another life  
In a strange house, with people whom I did not  
know how to behave.  
But, it was not too difficult  
And I soon became used to their ways of doing  
things, without fear.

-11-

We were happy and contented  
And with his family, I soon became friends,  
Especially with my sister-in-law Annunziata.  
We were like mother and daughter.  
Whatever needed to be done in the house,  
We did together.

-12-

Dopo dieci mesi del nostrol matrimonio  
venne Emilio dall'Inghilterra  
per sposarsi anche lui con Iolanda Mainelli.

-13-

Così Ascenzio e Annunziata avevano sistemato i  
due fratelli,  
volle andare a vivere da soli per formare la loro famiglia;  
avevano due figli grandi che erano Giovanni e Maria

-14-

Rimanemmo soli io, Diodato, Papà Giovanni  
e Iolanda.  
Appena sposao, Emilio era onnato in Inghilterra,  
per chiamare la sua sposa in quella terra.  
Dopo quattro mesi vissute insieme,  
Iolanda partì per raggiungere suo marito.

-15-

Rimanemmo soli in tre.  
Ci lavorava da mattina a sera per non farci  
mancare niente  
Per vivere bene ci lavorava in campagna e a casa a  
tutte le ore.  
Pero eravamo contenti e felici perché c'era l'amore.  
Un amore bella e infinita, che dopo diciotto mesi  
arrivò la ciccogna  
a portarci una bella bambina.  
L'accogliemmo con gioia e amore!  
Che era un angelo mandato del Signore.

-16-

Cresceva bella, cattivella e intelligente  
Che a chi parlava rispondeva sempre attenta.  
Vent'uni mesi dopo del primo angioletto!  
Arrivò un'altra bambina bella come uno specchio.  
Così crescevano due gemelli.  
Le vestiva e pettinava e scarpe sempre uguali,  
Che loro lì piaceva di come la gente le chiamava.  
Il loro nome fu strano a tutti –  
Tando che a mamma e papà che al vicinato –  
Perché non avevamo messi nessun nome delle  
nostre madri.

-12-

After ten months from the day of our wedding,  
Emilio came home from England  
To himself marry Iolanda Mainelli.

-13-

Ascenzio and Annunziata, having settled their two  
brothers  
Wanted to live on their own to raise their family;  
They had two grown-up children already, Giovanni  
and Maria.

-14-

We were left alone, me, Diodato, Papa Giovanni  
and Iolanda.  
Soon after they married, Emilio returned to England  
To sponsor his wife in that country.  
After living together for four months, Iolanda left to  
Join her husband.

-15-

We were left alone the three of us.  
We worked from morning to night so we would lack  
for nothing.  
To live well, we worked in the fields and in the  
house around the clock.  
But we were happy and contented because we had  
love.  
A love so beautiful and infinite that after eighteen  
months, the stork arrived  
To bring us a beautiful baby girl.  
We welcomed her with joy and love,  
The little angel sent by the Lord.

-16-

She grew beautiful, naughty and intelligent.  
Whomever she spoke with, she responded with  
attention.  
Twenty-one months after that first little angel arrived  
another little girl, as pretty as a mirror.  
They both grew in beauty  
And seemed to be twins.  
I dressed them, and combed their hair and they wore  
shoes always the same.  
They liked it when people called them.  
Their names were strange to everyone –  
As much as to my mother and after to the townspeople –  
Because we had not named them after our mothers.

-17-

Mia madre a Isabella la chiamava Isamaria.  
 Anche lì domandava come ci chiamava la nostra  
 bambina  
 Poi per Giuliana fu un'altra storia.  
 Così per non sentirlo  
 gli dicemmo ch'era il compare a mettergli quel nome.  
 Così rompemmo la tradizione  
 che erano sempre gli stessi nomi a Castellone.

-18-

Che tanti sacrifici, l'abbiamo cresciute, mamma  
 e papà insieme.  
 Che venne il 1953, e ci separammo.  
 Diodato volle venire in Canada  
 perché il fratello era venuto qua dall'Inghilterra.  
 Diodato partì il 3 dicembre del '53  
 E rimanemmo sole, tutte e tre.  
 Erano piccole tutte e due.  
 Gli dispaque tanto che rimanemmo sole.  
 Pensando che qua era meglio di là,  
 però non fu così,  
 che per abituarci fu duro e faticoso anche per lui.

-19-

Tre anni lontani fu così duro,  
 però ci abituiamo ambedue, lui qua e io là,  
 con tanti sacrifici per un giorno riunire la famiglia.  
 Dopo tre anni si decise di chiamarci qua!  
 Però io gli dissi: "Bada a quel che fai.  
 Non voglio che poi ti sentirai in colpa di avermi  
 chiamato."  
 Lui disse di essere sicuro ciò che faceva.  
 Pensava un futuro meglio per la famiglia.

-20-

E allora arrivò il giorno della partenza  
 che fu il 28 ottobre del '56.  
 Fu il più brutto della mia vita di lasciare la tutta la  
 mia famiglia  
 e venire in una terra strana senza sapere niente!  
 Però non ci volle molto di apprendere l'ambiente.

-17-

My mother called Isabella, IsaMaria.  
 And so she would ask her what our new baby's name  
 was.  
 And so for Giuliana, it was another story.  
 In order to avoid that nagging all the time,  
 We told them that it was her godfather who had chosen  
 her name.  
 In this way, we broke the tradition  
 That led to always having the same names in  
 Castellone.

-18-

With many sacrifices, we raised our daughters, mother  
 and father together.  
 When 1953 arrived, we separated.  
 Diodato wanted to come to Canada  
 Where his brother had come from England.  
 Diodato left the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 1953.  
 And we were left alone, the three of us.  
 Both of them were small.  
 He was very sad at leaving us alone.  
 Thinking that it would be better here than there,  
 But it wasn't so easy.  
 It was hard and difficult for him to get used to it too.

-19-

Three years apart was very hard,  
 But we both got used to it, him here and me there,  
 Making sacrifices so that one day our family would  
 be reunited.  
 After three years, he decided to call us here.  
 But I said, "Be careful in what you do. I don't want  
 you to feel guilty after having called me over."  
 He said that he was sure about what he was doing  
 And thought of a better future for his family.

-20-

So the day of departure arrived,  
 Which was October 28, 1956.  
 It was the worst day of my life to leave all my family  
 And come to a land without knowing anything about it!  
 But, it did not take long before becoming  
 accustomed to a new way of life.

-21-

Era tutto diverso dai nostri costumi!  
 I cibi, la lingua, in una città molto grande.  
 Non c'erano asini, cavalli, e capretti.  
 No pecore e no galli e galline che ti svegliavano  
 al mattino.  
 No paesani per dirgli "buongiorno" o "buonasera!"  
 Mi sembrava la città dei sordo-muto  
 che camminavano a l'impiede.

-22-

E ci abbiamo passato oltre 50 anni in questa terra  
 strana,  
 Che ora è diventata il nostro legame.  
 Lasciamo la nostra famiglia e paranti, gli amici e paesani  
 Per incontrare gente strana in un paese lontano.  
 Lasciamo il nostro paese d'infanzia  
 Dove eravamo stati felici e contenti con tutti quanti.

-23-

Abbiamo passato 60 anni insieme!  
 Con coraggio e orgoglio che per noi due è stato  
 un sogno.  
 Ci siamo sempre capitati in tutti i punti  
 Che non c'è stato mai discussione sul nostro conto.  
 Abbiamo cresciuto due figlie con amore e pazienza.  
 Hanno studiato con tante intelligenza  
 E ci sono laureate e noi siamo contenti.

-24-

60 anni fa eravamo due soli  
 ora siamo dieci con l'aiuto del signore.  
 Cinque nipote che siamo così orgogliosi di loro  
 che li vogliamo tanto bene a tutte e cinque.  
 Un genero amabile e rispettoso  
 che sembra un vero figlio per noi.

Di Isabella e Giuliana non voglio parlare  
 Che sono sempre accorte per noi due  
 Che qualcosa ci dovesse mancare.

-21-

It was so different from our customs!  
 The food, the language, in a very large city.  
 There were no donkeys, or horses, or goats.  
 No sheep and no roosters and chickens to wake you  
 up in the morning.  
 No neighbours to say "good morning" or "goodnight."  
 It felt like a city of the deaf-and-dumb,  
 Who walked like zombies.

-22-

And so we have lived for over 50 years in this strange  
 land.  
 That has now replaced our old ties.  
 We left our family and relations, our friends and  
 fellow townspeople  
 To meet strange people in a faraway land.  
 We left the village of our childhood  
 Where we were happy and contented with everyone.

-23-

We have lived 60 years together!  
 With courage and pride.  
 It's been a dream  
 We have always gotten along  
 And we've never instigated any fights.  
 We raised two daughters, with love and patience.  
 They studied with much intelligence  
 And they completed degrees and we are happy.

-24-

60 years ago we were alone.  
 Now we are ten, with the Lord's help.  
 Five granddaughters, of who we are proud  
 and whom we love very much  
 A son-in-law who is loveable and respectful,  
 Who seems like a real son to us.

And I will not speak of Isabella and Giuliana,  
 Who are always there for us  
 For whatever we may need.

-25-

E questa e un po di storia di due vecchietti  
innamoroati, Diodato e Concetta  
Che 60 anni fa ci sono sposati.

Ed ora voglio dire grazie a tutti voi qui presenti  
stasera  
A farci onore e compagnia  
che siete tutti la nostra famiglia Colalillo,  
e con vostri consorti, e i vostri mariti che siete  
con noi tutti.

A big kiss and a big hug to the Gosdciola family,  
because you are my family too.

Ed ora vi do un augurio a tutti voi qui presente,  
Che Dio vi dia una lunga vitai insieme con salute, amore  
e sempre contenti oer cento anni ancora!

January 20 2007

-25-

So this is a bit of the story of two little old  
lovers, Diodato and Concetta  
Who were married 60 years ago.

And now I want to thank all of you for being  
here  
Who have come to honour us and keep us company  
You are all the Colalillo family  
with your partners and spouses  
and everyone else together here tonight.

A big kiss and a big hug to the Gosciola family,  
because you are my family too.

And now I want to wish all of you present,  
That God gives you long life, in good health and love  
Always happy for 100 years more.

## CONCLUSION

When *Anne of Green Gables* was broadcast on television, Concetta became enamoured with the little red-haired girl, who she said reminded her of herself. She was also fan of the Laura Ingalls character on *Little House on the Prairie*. She admired the movie and television show respectively for the time periods in which each was set, drawn to them because they recreated for her a familiar past with their rural locales, lifestyles and small town dynamics. More importantly, she really identified with the rebelliousness, the intelligence and the independence that each of these Anne and Laura displayed. These girls reminded her of her childhood when she acted out against her mother's wishes for her, whether it was firing pebbles at English soldiers with her slingshot from the safety of a tree's branches, or punching a boy in class who had the gall to pull her long braids (à la Anne Shirley), or searching for her precious new barett in a field with the family cow in tow. As a girl, Concetta often felt stifled, limited by the strict social mores for girls in Boiano. Later, when she was one of so many women who had no input over their husbands' decisions to move their families to Canada, her successful navigation of immigrant life was, in part, due to her independent nature, her inquisitiveness and most importantly, the same defiance she embodied in childhood when she refused to accept the constraints of circumstance.

It was not a coincidence that Concetta came to *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Little House on the Prairie* at a quieter stage of her life, when she no longer worked outside of the home. Concetta sought connections to her rural past in Boiano, and her poetry was a reflection of that as well at first, though as she continued to write, her poetry became about making connections with the present and future as well.

Her own identity was reflected in her poetry, which she produced for some twenty-odd years. She did not write it prolifically (though she was always writing or reading something), producing a poem only once or twice a year, but her poetry is important and memorable of her identity as one who was not truly Canadian (and never would be) and one who was no longer from Italy. She lived in between two worlds with a foot set firmly in each. Her poetry is a culmination of her identity shifts, a complex negotiation between Boianesa, Italian immigrant and Canadian—as such, the language of her poetry reflects these different aspects of herself. She wrote primarily in dialect, but also in Italian and even began to experiment with English.<sup>33</sup>

One of the most important reasons that Concetta's poetry—particularly her poetry about Boiano—is so significant is precisely because of this under-representation of those voices from most official documentation and history. Though Boianesi obviously related to it, and praised her for her work, it applied to other immigrant experiences as well—she had much in common with the immigrant women she met through her ESL programs (as discussed in Chapter Two), despite coming from different cultural backgrounds, or coming to Canada under slightly different circumstances. Her poetry was about loss, about love and the people in her life, and it was also about transition and negotiating change; though she never said so, it seems to this reader that her poetry was the way in which she could bring together her new world and her old world, the way in which she could happily exist in between. In Canada, she still held with many of the stricter social mores and norms she was raised with in Italy, and as such, was still very much the Italian

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<sup>33</sup> One of her last pieces to me was painstakingly typed on the second hand computer her daughter had set up for her. She used it to check her e-mail from her grandnephew in Boiano and to use the word processing software to experiment with typing. The letters of the keyboard were magnified by the placement of large printed stickers with the corresponding letters on the keys, to help her see them more easily.

*Contadina*. On the other hand, she also had less conservative ideas about gender, about social justice and about herself that were more easily aired in the open in Toronto, rather than being subsumed in the name of "tradition" in the Boiano of her youth. It seems that as she settled into Canada over the years, she began to live comfortably with a foot in each world. This is not to suggest that everything was neatly compartmentalized into one or the other, and often she could contradict herself, but this is only fair; however it is true to say that she worked to reconcile these contradictions into a more balanced perspective. In his essay about Iranian immigrant poetry, Persis M. Karim writes, "poetry was the [...] genre of writing that registered the tenor of Iranian immigrant sensibility" (2008, 111), and connects this to identity by continuing with a quotation from Naficy who wrote, "hybrid and syntactic cultures. . . symbolically borrow from both the indigenous society and the new one to which they have located" (2008, 111).

Concetta wrote all of her poetry when she was in the "*nonna*" phase of her life. She could not have written these poems at any other time of her life which is to say, that everything she wrote about was the sum of her experiences as a rural girl, a teenager during the Second World War, a young woman with two little girls and a husband working in another country, later joining him and becoming an immigrant herself, as a factory worker and then eventually as a grandmother. Her poems were not just nostalgic narratives of her lost home in Boiano, or praise for her new home in Toronto, but an extension of herself. They were one of the ways in which she reconciled her past with her present; a reluctant immigrant who always longed for a warmer climate, she managed to determine her own life on her own terms regardless. As she said about her poetry, her intention was "*trasmettere*" or to transmit what she knew, what she remembered to her

family, friends and peers—especially her granddaughters. Her poetry “transmitted” the best of herself and the best of the culture(s) she felt she belonged to. In one conversation two years ago, she asked what lunch was for that Sunday, and upon hearing the answer (*melanzane alla parmigiana*) she said, “Good. That’s right. That’s why I taught you.” In Italy as a young woman, her goal of becoming a teacher was not achieved because of the war, circumstances clearly beyond her control. The poetry she wrote, was, in effect how she still felt one more way she could teach her daughters and granddaughters, the summation of all of her experiences (even if many of those experiences are left out of her poems) and she could not have produced anything other than she did.



Plate 2 – Concetta in the kitchen corner, with bemused suspicion at the computer recording her words.

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Plate 3 – Concetta and the author at age 3





