Distinct Places Imbued with Importance in the Lives of Immigrants: Frank G. Paci: *Black Madonna* (1982)

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Frank G. Paci is referred to as "Canada's invisible novelist" (Pivato "Invisible" 7) at the same time he "has been called one of the father's of Italian-Canadian writing" (Pivato "Invisible" 8), too. My present aim is to contribute to a better understanding of his fictionalized world deeply touched by the air of realism. My analysis will concentrate on this textually richly layered novel *Black Madonna* (*BM)* from the point-of-view of spatial representation. According to Domenic A. Beneventi "[…] very little work has been done on the representation of 'place' from a minority perspective, on the ways in which ethnic communities and individuals construct spatial imaginaries which reflect their own sense of identity and belonging" (216–7). *BM* has already been approached and interpreted from different perspectives among them: character portrayal, language use, acculturation, genealogy. In my view place consciousness plays a very important role in the novel under survey as well, therefore, I shall focus on the spatial markers, signs and practices applied in the text.

Paci immigrated to Canada with his mother in 1952 at the age of four and they settled down in Sault St. Marie, Ontario. This city was favoured by Italian immigrants at that time so much so that a "Little Italy" has existed there for long the traces of which have not entirely disappeared yet. Apart from *BM*, Paci's two other novels: *The Italians* (1978), and *The Fathers* (1984) are also set there. This is how Paci remembers:

> My mother emigrated when I was four, my father having preceded us. We took roots in the Italian section of Sault. Ste. Marie, close to the steel plant and the Soo canal. The Sault is a small city in Northern Ontario, virtually at the juncture of Lake Superior and Lake Huron. Needless to

> say, it was very far from what my parents had been used to in Italy. ("Interview" 5).

Sault St. Marie as it is delineated in *BM* is a divided city with two distinct major parts: the West End and the East End. Early in the novel the reader is guided through the different neighbourhoods; the obvious conflicts between being anchored in one of the districts and that of a possible migratory existence among them and even outside them is one of the themes that novel focuses upon. The "Little Italy" where the fictionalized Barone family live belongs to the poor part.

The intricate relationship between cityscape and mindscape is one of the conundrums around which the narrative unfolds. Marie, the young daughter, wants to get out of the house where she was brought up by her demanding and far too traditional Italian mother, Assunta. "Marie thought of herself as a foreigner in her won house"(66). Her infinite and sincere desire is satisfied when she is admitted to university in Toronto where she is heading to pursue her studies in the big city in the process of self-discovery and self-definition. It is a great achievement for her since: "Ever since going to high school, the West End was becoming more and more intolerable to her. For some reason she found everything about it either obnoxious or trite" (29). As Enoch Padolsky sees it: "[she] leaves the cultural restrictions (in her view) of the West End Sault for the more liberating locale of urban Toronto" (48). Her resentful and restless feelings are emphasized all through the novel: "And start fresh from somewhere else. Away from a *dead neighbourhood* in a narrow-minded provincial city. Away from a family that had nothing in common with her – and a mother who lived *in another world"* (77; emphasis added).

Yes, indeed Assunta lives in another world that she transports from Italy to the house built by her husband, who has recently passed away. The house is the microcosm of the "Old World" ("la via vecchia") situated in the radically different "New World" ("la via nuova"). Marie remarks: "[…] *that house is the extent of her* [her mother's] *world*, like a castle surrounded by the moat of the West End" (161; emphasis added).

Most of the significant and often traumatic incidents are related to the family house. Gaston Bachelard tells us: "[….] our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the world. If we look at it intimately, the humblest dwelling has *beauty*" (4; emphasis added). Bachelard's assertion supports an ideal but it is certainly disputable regarding the Barones' dwelling

place where the space within the house becomes a terrain of power exercised by Assunta that everybody wants to leave behind. The children's mother, after her husband's death is responsible for creating a sense of placelessness for each member of the family including her own self. It is only Joey, her son, who is trying to create a kind of private sphere for himself in the house but with little success. Assunta also feels disoriented and it is only her kitchen that provides her with some sense of comfort and to which she has a peculiar kind of emotional attachment. This is where she can prepare the meals for her family now and can exercise her despotic power. She was "[…] an absolute tyrant at the dinner table" (31) forcing her children, particularly her daughter, to eat more than necessary because in her early years she suffered from lack of food back in Italy. Padolsky notes: "Marie employes figurative language when she describes her mother's past behaviour: 'The [kitchen] table was like [Assunta's] theatre of operation and her rules were unquestioned' (32)'" (77). The mother unreasonably and helplessly convulses with hysteria when Joey prepares a meal with her girlfriend in her/their kitchen: "'What you doing in *my* kitchen?' (sic) Assunta said harshly. […] 'who told you to use *my* kitchen?' […] 'You get out of *my* kitchen! Get out!'" (168; emphasis added) To escape from the suffocating ambiance of the house Assunta often goes to church. Interestingly enough, the place for worship which was very important particularly for Italian immigrant women, is not described in detail in *BM*. Assunta is distorted by her nervous, piercing, and helpless agony of spatial dislocation. Padolsky notes: "This process of adaptation, of moving between two worlds, and finding a place within them, is for Paci, a serious issue" (57). For example, as far as Assunta is concerned even when her husband, Adamo, (whom she married by proxy), is still alive she constantly experiences cultural alienation. She tells him: "'How can I have come here? How? I was so content in Novilara. You'll never know! Never!' […] 'Just give me my passage money back. Let me go back where I came from.'" (94) Nostalgia weighs gravely upon Assunta. According to Edward Casey : "One of the most eloquent testimonies to places' extraordinary memorability is found in nostalgia. We are nostalgic primarily about places that have been emotionally significant to us and which we now miss: we are in pain (*algos*) about a return home (*nostos*) that is not presently possible" (201) Further, Casey adds that the word was coined by Johannes Hoffer, a Swiss medical student in 1688. Hoffer said that it was a synonym for homesickness and that it "admits no

remedy other than a return to the homeland" (qtd. in Casey 201). Assunta's cherished dream to return to her native land is never realized. The location that brings her closest to her homeland are the railway tracks. Marino Tuzi notes: "[…] she [Assunta] finds solace in the open space surrounding the railway tracks because it reminds her of the hilly fields of her youth" (89). The emotional attachment to the tracks indicates that Assunta's identity is not fixed; but rather merges with an unfixed locale, a space that actually serves to bridge places; and this is what fills her with relative comfort. She resides in an emotional, spiritual and physical desolate abyss in the New World; walking along the tracks she manages to maintain imaginative and imaginary ties with her homeland. Pivato remarks: "Throughout the novel run the railway tracks of the border city. The train brought Assunta to her new life many years ago and now it took her away from it. The tracks unite the past and the present and the living and the dead" ("Enigmatic" 2). Ironically enough, it is exactly the tracks that cause her death; she is run over by a train and loses her life not long after that she got to know that their house has been sold. The reason for selling the house were the drastic changes their neighbourhood has to endure. The Italian ethno-space in Sault St. Marie slowly starts to disappear; the houses are demolished or are to be sold to city planners. This is how Joey sees the physical layout of this residential area:

> In his peculiar state Joey was struck by the images of the apartment buildings against the glow of he full moon. They were like *gravestones* marking gigantic graves. And the parking-lots beneath them were the flowered mounds of earth that covered the West End. (133; emphasis added)

Despite this dismal and decaying ethnic neighbourhood , "with its dominating Steel Mill [in] the declining West End" (Padolsky 39), this is where Assunta, apart from the railway tracks, builds up relative spatial security: in the very house that she thinks is hers. When she learns that her husband has left it for her son she goes through another of the many tremendous crises she has already been confronted with. Mother and son break into a flaring row:

> "This is *not* your house, Ma," he [Joey] said, infuriated with her.
> […]
> "What are you saying?: she said smugly. "This is my house."
> "No, Mamma! He had to shout back. "This is my house."
> "*Stupido!*" she yelled back. "This is my house."
> Losing his temper, he screamed at the top of his voice.

> "It's my house, understand! Babbo [his father] left me this house!
> It's mine, not yours!" (169; italics original)

Assunta's in part not unexpected death prevents her from facing the consequences of having to move out of the house inherited by her son. Martin Heidegger convincingly argues: "[…] dwelling is a building in which man takes shelter […]" (145). For Assunta the house built by her husband is the only shelter in which she feels safe, therefore having to part with it means losing security in a threatening and disturbing world that surrounds her in Canada.

Selling the house has given a new thrust in the development of the family's life. Marie is informed about the course of events when she returns home to attend her mother's funeral. However, her attention is centered only on one object in their home; she is again seized by her very strong almost demon-like obsession to find the key to the dowry and trousseau trunk Assunta took with her from Italy. Marie calls it Hope Chest ; "she […] used to think of it as *her personal possession*, even though it had always been locked in their mother's bedroom. Joey could remember Marie's *determined efforts to find the key*" (10; emphasis added). Sciff suggests:

> For Marie the chest has become part of a ritual; it has always scattered her as something mysterious and her curiosity to discover Assunta's hidden secrets has become stronger and stronger, but she has always been unable to find the key to open it. Her failure in finding the key symbolizes her failure in finding a key to enter and understand her mother's nature. (95)

We are informed at the very beginning of *BM*: "Assunta calls it a *bavulo* in dialect. According to her it contained her only possessions when she crossed the ocean" (10; italics original). The intrinsic importance of the trunk is foreshadowed in an enigmatic way till the very end, when Marie actually has no difficulty opening it because it is not even locked. Assunta is likely to apprehend her impending doom and wants to depart without appropriating the secrets that she has hidden for long. In Novilara the dowry trunk is supposed to be handed down from one generation to another on the occasions of the daughter's marriage or the mother's death. She informs her children about this tradition when they are young. Bachelard devotes a whole chapter "Drawers, Chest and Wardrobes" in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) to the particular position these self-acting spatial entities convey. He says: "[....] drawers and chests [are]

hiding places in which human beings, great dreamers of locks, *keep or hide their secrets*" (74; emphasis added). Earlier, he also mentions that we start to daydream in the house where we were brought up. (4-5). Marie daydreams of opening the chest; being close to the Hope Chest fills her with joy on the one hand, but on the other hand also with frustration because of not being able to open it. Quite unexpectedly when she finally manages to do so with ease a new world opens up for her as well. Sciff maintains: "Now the moment to take hold of Assunta's treasures has arrived; Marie is now ready to begin the journey into her mother's secret world (95). Bachelard remarks that in the case of chests what fascinates us is that they "[…] are objects *that may be opened* (85; emphasis original). Marie is a perfect example: "After all those fruitless years of searching. […] Casually she [Marie] reached over to see how securely the lid was locked. To her *utter surprise* it moved" (190; emphasis added). She goes through the Hope Chest's contents meticulously layer by layer discovering all the hidden objects among them clothes, linen, photographs, "religious items" (191), candles and a small font. Sciff suggests: "Passing from one layer to the other is like going deeper and deeper into the past; it is a retracing back her maternal lineage, a lineage, lost in the mists of time" (96). Marie is completely lost in time while she is curiously probing the trunk: "Marie noticed that as she dug deeper and deeper the contents appeared to be older and older, as if she were unearthing various layers of a person's life" (190). Padolsky observes: "The 'open' mystery of the Black Madonna, symbolized by the open chest, can be 'solved' by entering the past, confronting the realities and values of Italian culture […] (51). Marie puts on a black dress that she finds there and "She wasn't surprised that it fit like a glove" (191). She goes through a ritual while changing the bedroom into a kind of sanctuary; the formerly aggravating bedroom becomes a holy place. Marie creates a sphere similar to an altar where she lights candles in front of a picture-stand holding old family photographs embraced by two small statutes of the Virgin. The interior of the trunk dominates the exterior world around it. Marie's outward life turns inward; she goes through a personal transition in this imaginative space that she has formed and discovered where "[…] she felt her mother's presence […] 'Mama, I'm sorry,' she said out loud" (192). In this sacred space Marie is also tempted to pray for a moment" (192). The space comparable to a shrine becomes the blessed place for reconciliation between daughter and mother. Padolsky emphasizes: "[…] Paci is very much at home in the

‘underground’ world of psychological space […]” (55). The Hope Chest plays a central role in Marie’s psyche from childhood to adulthood. Interestingly enough, she decides to take it back to Italy when she is invited to one of her cousin’s wedding after her mother’s funeral. She says: “’I don’t deserve it and she [her cousin] can probably make a better use of it than I can” (195). The Hope Chest becomes a transitory place, a liminal zone that also has a temporal function via connecting different passages of time.

Assunta’s dream of going back to Italy is fulfilled by her daughter. Critics call our attention to the far-reaching importance of the return journey in Italian-Canadian literature. Pivato says in short: “The most significant effects of the return journey experience, then, are revealed in the literary works themselves. The return journey recurs so often that it can be described not just as a major theme but as an obsession in the Italian-Canadian imagination” (“Return” 170). Marie’s sudden and initiatory decision is quite unexpected and there is no foreshadowing given how she will be transformed after she has visited the land of her parents. Will she move as “minority subjects” often do between “two spatial and cultural polarities (the here and now of Canada vs. the there and past of Italy)?”(Beneventi 232). Will she develop an in-between existence? Pivato claims that in Italian-Candian writing the major metaphor is that of the journey: “The immigrant journey is a metaphor for the journey of life” (“Left” 38). We might assume that Marie may live in a “third space” in her future life, and experience a threshold existence but it remains unknown. Beneventi’s observation certainly holds true both for first and second generation immigrants, including the character of Marie: “The first step in crossing the chasm between the old world and the new involves reinscribing the self within a genealogical and historical continuum, often in the context of the ‘return journey’” (223).

Marie’s brother, Joey also moves away; he leaves behind the crumbling urban terrain of Little Italy and chooses to go to the other end of town, to the East End, where the space of the mainstream culture is propagated mainly by the Anglophones. Earlier, when Marie escapes to Toronto to lodge in a mental space in which she can realize her own self; she finds it significant to confine herself to the space of rationality: the realm of logics and mathematics. Simultaneously, Joey flees to the domain of dreams, to dreamland; he is seeking rather, in contrast with his sister, a spiritual space than a rational one. Joey’s dreaming of a huge lake on which he can either skate or play ice hockey is an often recurring motif

in the text: “In bed that night he had his *familiar dream* of skating on a *limitless expanse* of a lake as huge as Superior. He thought it was a lake because it was so huge and he was alone with only the *sky above him*” (57; emphasis added). It is not the depth of the lake that he is enthralled by but the horizontal vastness of the space and vertically by the openness of the space above him. In his dream, in his invented space, he is free from the unavoidable anxiety that is manifest in the interior of the house where he lives. For long his dream is in the centre of his everyday life; strangely enough, it is this very dream that confines him to the West End: “[…] they [his dreams] were too strong – and he hadn’t quite managed to live in the world outside the West End” (88). Formerly, “All he could look forward to was his dream” (96). But over time, he changes and looks forward to a “new” and real habitat and as mentioned above, and moves to another residential area in town. Before doing so, however, like his sister, he also goes through a kind of ritual; both of them hold a place in memory of their parents: Marie an altar, Joey a pyramid.

The pyramid Joey builds in the garden is just as mysterious as Marie’s altar in the parents’ bedroom By building a memorial for his parents Joey expresses a conciliatory and respectful gesture towards his parents: “The base of the pyramid took up almost the complete width of the garden. Around it, the rest of the area was littered with materials. Pieces of broken brick. Bags of cement and lime. A crate of bricks. A wheelbarrow with wet mortar” (197). Joey’s father is a bricklayer in the steel plant.; Joey inherits his manual skills and he intends to follow in his father’s footsteps in an inventive and artistic way. He listens to his father’s parental and determinative advice: “That’s [plant] no place for a real bricklayer. You have to build houses or churches or bridges – that’s what you have to build” (63). Creating new places, constructing new dwellings have always been an integral and essential matter in the Italian community’s life. Paci recalls: “My father and his friends on the same street, for example, all enjoyed working with their hands. They all renovated their homes, made basements, installed plumbing, and then for years fixed this or that” (“Interview” 11). Joey pays tribute to his parents by erecting a pyramid-like monument with the help of his father’s admired tools which painfully reminds one of a burial place. The truly revered trowels’ significance is beyond their physical presence: “Yet each trowel, like the first, fit so well in his [Joey’s] palm that they could have been made for him” (64). Assunta’s black dress comes to the reader’s mind that “fit [Marie] like a glove” (!91). On the one hand, both the

trowels and the dress settle a forgiving and generous reconciliation of differences between the children and their parents. On the other hand, I also agree with Tuzi who claims: “Yet the narrative redemptive moments – Joey’s reconciliation with his sister and the erecting of a brick pyramid that is a *totem to the immigrant past* – are infused with a sense of *flux*” (72; emphasis added). “The totem” will disappear, Joey’s future is unforeseeable; his transplantation to a new ethnic enclave will certainly effect his refined sensibility.

In conclusion, I followed Beneventi’s assertion according to which: “[…] place is central to the construction of ethnic identity […]” (232) My objective was to prove that the exploration of the spatial arrangement in *BM* will deepen the understanding of the novel. Undoubtedly, all through this intensely place-oriented narrative, be it private or public, the places that create idiosyncratic spaces are constantly present. The story unfolds as the places emerge and come into a distinct view at the different layers of the narrative structure. The places’ character and nature, however, change at their different occurrences. Various places are endowed with different implications and spirits altering notably and undeniably. For instance, one part of the city slowly disappears, the deserted house is likely to be bulldozed, the railway tracks that first bring encouragement and hope finally induce death, the closed Hope Chest is open and is transported, the bedroom is transformed into a shrine, Italy that is first connected to the past becomes a land to be discovered. In the light of all the above, I fully agree with Beneventi: “Paradoxically, place is at the same moment inimical to ethnic self-definition, since place presents constant shifts in meaning, perspective and signification, rendering difficult the construction of “stable” ethnic identity” (232). In *Black Madonna* past, present and future are interwoven in the characters’ lives; their emotional attachment to certain stages in time is just as unsteady and agitated as their attachment to different places: characters and places are in transition.

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