Desiring Subjectivities in Motion: Italian-Canadian Women in-between Travelling and Dwelling

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Abstract
This article will investigate the dynamic and conflicting relationship between homeland, belonging and exile in the texts of the Italian-Canadian writer Mary Melfi. The theoretical insights and suggestions developed within the field of Diaspora studies and their contiguity with other discourses, such as feminist and multicultural theories, will provide a conceptual framework for an examination of Melfi's diasporic poetics. I will argue that Melfi's exploration of the technologies of subject construction, such as heteronormativity as well as the Canadian multicultural apparatus, intersects with contemporary feminist critiques of mainstream liberal conceptualisations of "universal citizenship". Her attempts at deconstructing the normative vision of citizenship as the "passive holding of rights" (Richter 2006: 40) leads her to question the "happiness duty" (Ahmed 2010) migrants have to perform in order to comply with claims of national belonging.

Mary Melfi, an Italian-Canadian writer living in Montreal, has tackled the multiple dislocations caused by her triple minoritised location as an immigrant woman and Anglophone writer in an overwhelming French-speaking context. The author of several collections of poetry, novels, a memoir and a number of plays, she has highlighted how gender politics intersect with the "competing demands of (multicultural) citizenship and the desires of diaspora" (Cho 2007: 94). As in the case of the poem "Point of Convergence" by Shani Mootoo, where the diasporic subject's self-definition defies both the slavish repetition of her maternal genealogy and governmental labelling, Melfi's texts foreground a "subjectivity in disparity with itself, with its cultural group, with its immediate realities and with its social role or performance" (Hogan 2007: 42). The *mise-en-scène* of the oversexualised self she presents in her poetic production

and the spectacle of the split self she offers in her novel, *Infertility Rites*, interact with the overarching spectacularisation of ethnicity carried out by official Canadian discourses of multiculturalism. Writing against the grain of Canadian official desire for diasporic authenticity, Melfi has explored the wide-ranging implications of a "diasporic mimicry" which is complicit with and at the same time challenges the smooth performance of ethnicised otherness within multicultural contexts (Kamboureli 2009: 110ff). The ambivalence towards one's ethnic origins, as illustrated by Melfi, seems to be played out within a situation of "over-looked-at-ness": "in the double sense of social surveillance and psychic disavowal – and, at the same time, overdetermined – psychically projected, made stereotypical and symptomatic" (Bhabha 1994: 339).

Migrancy, memory and sexuality are some of the thematic nuclei around which Melfi's texts unfold. She foregrounds the necessary incompleteness of memory and its unstable connection with imagination and desire. By tapping into the rich reservoir of nomadic figurations of identity (the immigrant, the exile, the diasporic self) but also of figures of "staying put" (such as the Bride of her homonymous collection of poems), Melfi investigates the tension between loss and the double vision offered by the dubious pleasures of exile (Lamming 1992), where marginality and dislocation act as *pharmakoi* against the complacent conformism of belonging.

Before focusing on Melfi's novel *Infertility Rites*, I will explore how different theories of diaspora have enucleated the relationship between homeland and belonging, travel and home, and how the ritual of citizenship performed by diasporic subjects can potentially disrupt the showcasing of ethnicity enacted by the multicultural state (Anselmi 2007: 7).

1. Investigating homing desires

In his seminal study *Routes*, James Clifford argues for a simultaneous investigation of dwelling and travelling, location and dislocation, *home* and *away*. According to his account, travel, thanks to its "historical taintedness" (1997: 39), could be used as a translational term, a concept-practice capable of connecting "nonequivalents, overlapping experience marked by different translation terms: 'diaspora', 'borderland', 'immigration', 'migrancy', 'tourism',

'pilgrimage', 'exile'" (1997: 11). Clifford's broad use of the word "travel" and his timely reminder of the need to investigate location in all its nuances (from the scholar's own position to the undertheorised and undervalued work of home-building which follows the experience of displacement) is a useful point of departure for an exploration of the simultaneous and fractured dialectics of roots and routes inscribed in the diasporic condition.

A crucial and highly disputed element within the theorisation of diaspora(s) is the elaboration of new ways of belonging within and beyond the forms organised by the nation-state. Attempting to sort out the complex cartography of diaspora conceptualisations, Clifford points out the porosity of the borders which precariously circumscribe that notion, its semantic overlap with other forms of either forced or voluntary dispersal ("immigrant, expatriate, refugee, exile community [...]") and the way in which it explodes old conceptual categories, such as "bounded community, organic culture, region, centre and periphery" (1997: 245). He also questions Diaspora Studies' essentialisation of home as a given[1], where living in diaspora is tied to the re-creation of a hypostasised homeland, whose imaginary and *real* aspects congeal into a referent that resists interrogation. Clifford rightly underlines how this account falls short of problematising the "ambivalence about physical return and attachment to land" (1997: 248), and fails to note the work of cultural recreation performed by diasporic communities outside the boundaries of a faithful and frozen "connection to a source and [...] a teleology of 'return'" (1997: 249). It also devalues the lateral affiliations among different diasporas made possible by "a shared, ongoing, history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance" (1997: 250). Although diaspora practices cannot be conceptualised in any simple, binary relationship either to the nation or to globalisation, in clarifying their discursive domain Clifford attempts to disentangle specifically diasporic identity patterns

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[1] Clifford's main polemical target is William Safran's definition of diaspora, which has been highly influential in successive theorisations of the term. The features identified by Safran — dispersal from homeland, collective memory of the "original" home, failed integration in the host country, myth of return to the ancestral home and continuing relationship with the home country — exclude nearly all the historical experiences of diaspora from the definition. (Clifford 1997: 247-50)

from "the norms of nation-states and indigenous, and especially autochthonous, claims by 'tribal' peoples" (1997: 250). For one thing, diasporic communities tend to refuse any linear trajectory from immigration to integration sustained by assimilationist nationalist ideologies: in point of fact, the (at least) double allegiance maintained by diasporic populations allows them to maintain a critical distance from the norms and values of nation-states as well as from the presumed natural bond between people and land expounded by nativist identity formations.

One important issue ignored by Clifford is the relation of diaspora to the plight of immigrant communities and, by the same token, the interrogation of identity and belonging in these overlapping but distinct formations. Clifford maintains that a linear developmental narrative sustains immigrant communities struggling for naturalisation in the host society along the colour line. On the contrary, I would argue that the strategic attachment to a *home* made by diasporic subjects can work as a tactic against forceful assimilation and/or the ethnic caging brought about by the multicultural liberal state. Monika Fludernik (2003) traces a link between the rise of a diasporic consciousness in the mid-nineties of the last century and US multicultural politics. She captures some of the paradoxes within which diaspora politics is caught in its direct confrontation with the state: she sees diaspora as directly involved in a politics of identity, where different groups negotiate with the state their access to symbolic and material resources.

While this could be one of the outcomes of diaspora politics, theorists such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, among others, have focused on the subversive potentialities of diasporic cultures, namely the disruption of the notion of authenticity and of the construction of essentialised differences between distinct migrant groups. Bringing to the fore the multiplicity of identifications jostling in one and the same diasporic subject — identifications with the country of origin, the country of residence, perhaps another minority culture in the country of residence — also means attending to the temporal dimensions implied in the asynchronous rerouting of past memories in the new sites of belonging.

On the other hand, Vijay Mishra has questioned the too-easy celebration of diasporas as communities devoid of any territorial

claims and/or conservative tendencies. He has illustrated the complex dialectics between diasporas and nation-states centring on the fraught notion of *homeland*. Taking his cue from Slavoj Zizek's argument about the imaginary (in a Lacanian sense) character of the Nation-Thing, Mishra emphasises the significance of an investigation of the "diasporic imaginary" in relation to "people's corporeal and even 'libidinal' investment in nations (as denizen or outsiders)" (Mishra 2007: 19). Exploring the different nuances of meanings that the question "Where are you coming from?" holds in the various locations of his own diasporic existence, Mishra makes a point not dissimilar from Paul Gilroy's conception of diaspora as the "realm of the hybrid" (2007: 19). For both, belonging is measured against conflicting allegiances which place us between *nóstos* and *exodos*. The racist question asked by nation-states in relation to diasporic communities, "What shall we do with them now?" (2007: 20), by causing them continuously to doubt their *origins*, marks a disjuncture in the nations' "beliefs about the distinctive nature of bounded communities and cultures"[2]. If diasporas are seen as hampering a full enjoyment of the Nation-Thing (which is predicated upon a strategic syntax of forgetting as well as upon a nostalgic longing for presumed organic communities), then diasporas' ability to cope with their own ghosts and repressed traumas, "[their] pain of adjustment with reference to other pasts and other narratives" (2007: 16), could also work against a compulsive repetition of nation building as "a racially pure ethnic enclave" (2007: 10).

Contemporary feminist theory has questioned the usefulness of the concept of travel and seen it as cut off from lived experiences of migration and from different histories of movement. Moreover, feminist scholars have analysed the overvaluation of migrancy and travel at the expense of a careful consideration of notions of *home*, *origins*, *continuity* and *tradition*. In *Questions of Travel*, Caren Kaplan has highlighted the imbalances of material and ideological power at play in an undertheorised notion of travel and its mythologisation in

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[2] Brydon (2007), "In the Name of Home: Canadian Literature and Global Imaginaries", Paper presented at the Conference *TransCanadaTwo: Literature, Institutions, Citizenship*, October 11-14, University of Guelph. Available at myuminfo. umanitoba.ca/Documents/1345/transcan2.pdf, last accessed August 20, 2012.

a number of modernist accounts as well as in postmodern euphoric celebrations of dislocation and displacement. She has also pointed out how, in the progressive metaphorisation of figures such as exile and homelessness, what is left out is their intractable materiality (Kaplan 1996: 2). Kaplan's text takes issue with the hypostatised binary division between *home* and *away*; she therefore also contests the inconspicuous role that the notion of immigration has played in contemporary Euro-American criticism.

Questioning the theoretical (ab)uses of migrant experience as "the basis of an ethics of transgression", Sara Ahmed (2000: 82) examines the concept of *strangeness* in connection with the building of communities. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's notion of nations as "imagined communities", Ahmed shows how the body of the stranger is functional to the construction of a fantasised multicultural nation "as a way of imagining the nation itself, a way of 'living' in the nation, and a way of living *with* difference" (2000: 95). The myth of the immigrant nation (as exemplified by Australia, the case studied by Ahmed, but what she says seems valid for Canada too) works to conceal the different histories of movement, home-building, violence and exclusion that characterise the white settler groups, the various immigrant communities, and indigenous peoples. In her acute analysis of the *official discourse* of multiculturalism, Ahmed points out how, through the hypostatisation of the stranger, the presumed homogeneity of national space is not problematised at all: "the strangers become incorporated into the 'we' of the nation, at the same time as the 'we' emerges as the one who has to live with it (cultural diversity) and by implication with 'them' (those 'specific ethnic groups')" (2000: 95). Defined against the hegemonic subject, who *ontologically* belongs to the nation, strangers paradoxically become a means to affirm and at the same time deny the heterogeneity of the nation-space (2000: 96). A supposedly neutral arena for the negotiation of (crystallised) differences (of *natives* as well as *strangers*), the nation hinges on the notion of authenticity, which is used to tame the "being out-of-place" (2000: 96-7) of those strangers whose inclusion does not cease to threaten its precarious cohesiveness.

The daily re-narration of the nation involves, as in the performativity of gender analysed by Judith Butler, both a collective and singular investment in its hybrid nature, at once fictive and *real*,

and a simultaneous marking out of strangers, outsiders, foreigners who question the transparency of belonging and therefore keep the issue of national identity constantly open. Drawing on Judith Butler's notion of sex materialisation as the repetitive practice "which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility" (Butler 1993: 2), Ahmed argues that the coherence of nation space is predicated on the materialisation of boundary markers on the skin. The unmarked body would thus recall the structural *blindness* of liberal nation-states with respect to the contingency of particularised bodies and their different access to citizenship. This "androgynous" body seems to mimic the supposed neutrality of the public sphere and its disavowal of "women as historical subjects" (Richter 2006: 39). What is disavowed are those bodies and desires which are excessive, ambiguous, abject: "those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject" (Butler 1993: 3). Ahmed broadens this conception of abjection as a practice of subject constitution to theorise upon the boundaries of bodily and spatial intelligibility; in this perspective "the forming of the boundaries of 'unmarked' bodies – bodies-at-home or bodies-in-place – has an intimate connection to the forming of social space – homeland" (Ahmed 2000: 46). As the "founding repudiation" (Butler 1993: 3) of the normative subject, *the strange bodies* disarticulate the equation between the containment of bodies and the boundedness of spaces, and thus conjure up the spectre of "multiple connecting, active, partially uncontrollable bodies"[3].

2. Abjected mother/lands

The *dilemmatic spaces*[4] of home constitute the chronotope where the protagonist of *Infertility Rites*, Nina Di Fiore – a Canadian artist of Italian descent and a part-time research assistant in a data

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[3] Rault (2000), "Orlan and the Limits of Materialization", in *j_spot, The Journal of Social and Political Thought,* vol. 1, no. 2, June. Avalaible at http://www.yorku.ca/jspot/2/jrault.htm#3, last accessed August 20, 2012.

[4] Honig (1996), "Difference, Dilemmas, and the Politics of Home", in Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, pp. 257-77; quoted in Brydon (2007), "In the Name of Home: Canadian Literature and Global Imaginaries".

management society, "a data machine" (Melfi 1991:154) and also "a cage made of flesh and blood" (Melfi 1991: 127) – tries to come to terms with the liminality of her condition: "[…] neither Canadian nor Italian, but a citizen of the underworld, trapped, in its maze, where it is always badly lit. Nothing happens here, though ghosts love to pee and shit on trespassers like myself" (1991: 48).

Acting as a composite textual companion — at the same time a diary, recording her attempts at begetting a child and the series of miscarriages she undergoes, an interior monologue, a gathering of statistical data, and a feminist dystopia — to its hybrid protagonist, the novel problematises traditional visions of home as well as of belonging as "associated with kinship, blood, family home, neighbourhood communities and gendered nineteenth century bourgeois versions of domesticity and its value"[5]. From the very start (represented by the phonetic pun of the title, with its homophony between rites and rights) we are introduced to one of the central issues of the text: the developmental narrative implied in the vision of motherhood as a rite of passage from youth to maturity is caught within an essentialised reading of ethnicity and gender as prescriptive axes of identification within the biopolitical management of *strangeness* by the multicultural apparatus[6]. At the start of the novel, the narrative resembles the classic story of an immigrant's failed assimilation as a result of the unresolved tension between the protagonist and her powerful mother figure, who represents a scapegoat for her daughter's (mis)perceived failure to live up to the standard of the *American* easygoing way of life. Spectres of misery and patriarchal oppression in the homeland, conjured up by her mother, do not assuage Nina's exilic feelings in the face of the equally sexist attitudes she encounters in North American culture. The metaphor of exile, frequently used in the text to highlight Nina's emotional, psychic and cultural displacement from her hostland as well from her homeland, could be connected,

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[5] Brydon (2007), "In the Name of Home: Canadian Literature and Global Imaginaries".

[6] Parodying the master discourse of assimilation, Nina says: "Can't concentrate. Looks like Ms Difiore is still controlled by her old country's well documented sociological expectations (in ascending order: from girl to woman, woman to wife, wife to mother)" (Melfi 1991: 155).

Eva Karpinski suggests, to feminist conceptualisations of the term, where it signals women's ontological disconnection from their bodies and their maternal genealogy, complicated by the dangerous "coupling of biological and ethno-cultural essentialism" (Karpinski 2007: 119):

Nina's initial estrangement from essentially defined "femininity" finds its counterpart in her exile from the body as a locus of ethnic identity which is inscribed on it. Even though she feels alienated from her Canadian environment, she no longer has any attachment to the old country. For her, the condition of marginality results in multiple displacements. (2007: 119)

In the text, the incommunicability with her mother is also accompanied by Nina's splitting into two dutiful daughter figures: Dora, the fertile woman, and Mary the successful lawyer perfectly integrated in the Canadian ethos. The conflation between home and nation, repeatedly disputed and ambivalently searched for, is complicated by Nina's yearning for the maternal plenitude she has felt exiled from since her parents' immigration to Canada:

What Mary does not reveal is that her parents, like many other Italian immigrants of their generation, frequently sacrificed their offspring to the Golden Calf (Real Estate). The mythical beast has to be fed first, children came second. (Melfi 1991: 93)

The dream of upward mobility and incorporation in the body politic of the Canadian nation also shapes the picaresque life story of Mary/ Maria, the protagonist of the *O Canada Poems*. The (im)morality tale of Mary/Maria's rise from rags to riches stages the immigrant's schizophrenic condition, a condition which is the consequence of the coercive dismissal of the past and the subsequent pseudo-embrace of the sphere of national mythology. Here, the prosthetic body of the Statue of Liberty — as in the homonymous poem, and also in *Camouflage* (Melfi 1997: 126-7) — not only symbolises the "seamless immigrant assimilation to the metaculture of the United States" (Berlant and Warner 1998: 550), but is a metonym for universal citizenship's technologies of cultural and bodily defacement (Richter 2006: 39). In *Infertility Rights*, the ambivalent desire for and assimilation within a hegemonic middle-class, white femininity is problematised by the fact that the protagonist appears to be

psychologically stuck in her unrecoverable ethnic past. In this regard, the figure of the exile seems to acquire more positive meanings: it stands for the awareness of the "contrapuntalism" of vision (Said 1994) and, as a trope, it is functional to a de-Oedipalised version of becoming-woman (Braidotti 2002). Melfi counterbalances what she perceives as a show of "diasporic authenticity" in her community, as well as "the obsession with group identity" (Karpinski 2007: 120) eagerly fostered by Canadian multiculturalism and sanctioned in the Multiculturalism Act under the key-words of "preservation", "enhancement", and "sharing" (Kamboureli 2009: 104), with the ironic dismantling of national imaginaries (Melfi 1991: 33-4), the foregrounding of the racialised and gendered processes at the heart of nation formation[7], and the localisation of the family as "the school where national subjects are made" (Kamboureli 2009: 189):

Daniel asks me to partake of the late banquet — on Mother's table, home-made desserts of her region: panettone, scarpelle, scarurella, and torrone; […] edible Italian culture inciting patriotism and good-will. […] Mother always needs to make a point of her generosity and affluence. Or is it her past she is showing…[…] Daniel wants me to focus on what is available here and now (pleasure, Italo-Canadian style). All his efforts to cheer me, to keep me present where I am, fail. The underworld's magnetic powers are too strong — am drawn to it…In a cold room, across the barrels of home-made wine, right next to *prosciutto*, on an emotional hook, spoiled. (Melfi 1991: 131-2)

In Melfi's autobiography, *Italy Revisited*, the split between "hostland and homeland [...] seen as cohesive tensional entities" (Mishra 2006: 16) and the ensuing intergenerational conflict (which are central in *Infertility Rights*) seem to give way to a more sustained attempt at investigating her sense of dislocation within the *longue durée* of Italian migration to Canada. Her declared aim to write an ethno-memoir, an "edible history" (Melfi 2009: 48) of her (mother) country, in order to preserve traditional customs and recipes is subtly displaced (also thanks to her mother) by a progressive understanding

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[7] "The metaphoric depiction of social hierarchy as natural and familial" (McClintock 1997 in Kambourely 2009: 189) recurs in the novel (see for example Melfi 1991: 56-7; 125) and is the main theme of one of her subsequent collections of poetry, *Office Politics*.

of how histories of (im)migration have problematised any linear and
naive re-capturing of the lost homeland. Analysing similar contexts,
Lisa Lowe has questioned the centrality of the Oedipal narrative
as a model to be applied to the reading of some Asian-American
diasporic narratives. She rightly underlines how the "topos of the
generational conflict" (Lowe 1996: 77), redoubled in the pseudo-
antinomy between nativism and assimilation, understates "the
historically alienated relationship to the category of citizenship"
(1996: 12) experienced by immigrant communites, linking it to a
"privatized family opposition" where what is at issue is the linear and
static trasmission of immutable cultural values (1996: 63). As Lowe
argues, the figure of the immigrant, (dis)located in the contradictory
meeting-point between the nation-state's surveillance apparatus and
transnational capitalism's constant need for disenfranchised labor,
questions both the emancipatory narratives developed within liberal
discourses on citizenship and the fetishised aestheticisation of ethnic
differences inscribed within the multicultural paradigm (1996: 9).

   In her exploration of the notion of tolerance as a practice of
discourse and strategy of governamentality, Wendy Brown has
highlighted the Janus-faced nature of the concept: its utopian,
conflict-free vision of social interactions at home carefully conceals
its embeddedness in (neo)imperial adventures abroad. The
depoliticised attitude of liberal democracies is particularly evident,
Brown argues, in their conscious naturalisation of culture and in
its subsequent conflation with ethnicity and race. Constructed on
the fiction of the neo-liberal individual who rejects all notions of
collectivity, the discourse of tolerance – when applied to issues of
multicultural coexistence – shows its patent contradictions. Based
on the free choice of the individual agent, this discourse sanctions
the ethnicised individual on the basis of his/her allegiance to a well
defined ethnic group. In this case, a form of cultural determinism
seems to apply to the subjects to be tolerated, "identity [is] taken to
be given, saturating, and immutable" (Brown 2006: 35). A corollary of
the reification of culture as essentialised cultural or ethnic belonging
is the privatisation of difference in the strict domain of one's home,
without the possibility of breaking through the homogeneity of a
presumedly neutral public sphere. The language of fear, as one of
the tactics governments use to stave off any contamination with
undesired otherness, acts as a virus in one of Melfi's poems, where

the monologic attitude of the state, under the pretense of civic
tolerance, tries to model the migrant subject in its own likeness:

I'm unilingual
I can only speak Fear
To government clerks and unemployment cops
Is fear a language? Of course it is
Fear shows me up as a foreigner
My country of origin: the Leaning Tower of Babel
[…] Fear is my mother tongue
I shall always be in its debt
A true servant
(Melfi 1999: 64-5)

In *Infertility Rights*, the notion of the female subject as a site of
clashing discursive systems and conflicting expectations points to
Judith Butler's discussion of Woman as a "normative ideal" (Butler
1990: 21). The injunction to "be a good mother, to be a heterosexually
desirable object, a fit worker" (Butler 1990: 185) intersects with a
prescriptive notion of what counts as a good life. Nina's incapacity
to live up to the ideal of multicultural happiness is repeatedly
perceived by herself, her husband and her assimilated community
as an unpatriotic act:

Unlike tears which can turn any woman into a pretty young thing in need
of protection or a kiss from a man, bitterness is associated with older
folks […] the very antithesis of what is feminine, the smile goddess. […]
Bitterness is a crime against society. No one is allowed to do it. Failure by
itself is fine, tolerated, as long as one is still nice. […] The all-American
woman is never bitter. Sad, on occasion, but bitter – no sirree. Bitterness is
seen as an irreversible process. Beyond help. Beyond repair. Terminate the
old bitch. (Melfi 1991: 47)

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed shows how happiness
works as a technology of governmentality, enshrined as an
unquestioned social good and as a right both in British society
and in the USA (Ahmed 2010: 133). In her view, happiness is a
"perpetual duty" to be performed by migrants willing to prove
their allegiance to the project of nation building. Exploring the
relationship between happiness, nationhood and citizenship,
Ahmed adopts the figure of the "melancholic migrant" as the

subject precariously hovering between the harsh reality of racism and the yet-to-be-realised utopia of multicultural happiness. The melancholic migrant has to subscribe to the liberal policy of assimilation, legitimating through his/her forgetting the Empire's revisionist historiography that requires:

a social obligation to remember the history of empire as a history of happiness [...]. If in the 19th century the native must become (more) British in order to be recognized as subject of Empire, in a contemporary context, it is migrants who must become (more) British in order to be recognized as citizens of the nations. Citizenship now requires a test, we might speculate that this test is a happiness test. (2010: 130)

Yet, if the injunction to be happy falls unequally upon subjects, depending on their different histories, the imperative to fit in with the multicultural ideal requires a tacit obligation to divest oneself of one's cultural identity, or to consider it a nonessential background to the unhampered exercise of a 'felicitous' citizenship. Elaborating upon Freud's discussion of mourning and melancholia, Ahmed suggests a different interpretation of the disabling melancholy of traumatic loss; she envisions a possibility of agency "by inhabiting the negative rather than presuming the normativity of happiness" (2010: 161). Mary Melfi's rhetoric of failure seems to work precisely as a mock-rewriting of the happily-ever-after inscribed in multicultural assimilative metanarratives[8]. Moreover the romance plots, so often used in her poetry and prose, could be read as "erotic allegories", a way to "metaphorize the public sphere even when narrating apparently private stories" (Shohat and Stam 1994: 230). In *Office Politics*, as in *Infertility Rights*, her exploration of the workings of the state is equated to an alienating Kafkian bureacracy, where the immigrant woman is compared to a dehumanised machine at the service of the "multi-national" (1999: 28), "corporate tribe" (1999: 4), to an accomplished performer in the art of invisibility (1999: 79), or to a "ghetto princess" rescued by "the Government itself, the sought after invisible husband" (1999: 61). Another of Melfi's poetic personae, Ms Rosetta Stone, ironically hired for her computer decoding abilities, would literally prefer to speak in the stark

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[8] On this issue, see also the excellent essay by Hogan (2007: 48- 9).

simplicity of binary code rather than perform the stale script of the "female complaint" (Berlant 2008).

In *Infertility Rights*, the out-of-placedness of Nina's bleeding[9] and her abortive body leak into the social space. This leaking threatens its borders and, like the viscosity explored by Jean-Paul Sartre and Mary Douglas, it defies any easy categorisation and assimilation into the neat and orderly categories of the nation. The protagonist's impossible dream of reconciling her own feminist rhetoric of total independence with the bourgeois ideal of marital happiness is exacerbated by her recognition of insurmountable class-barriers that shatter her precarious trust in "the North American mythology. The pursuit of Success, with a capital S, is a legitimate one, even for the downtrodden, decadent ladies of the night or otherwise" (1991: 32). The romance of marriage as the merging of two complementary beings is frequently satirised in Melfi's poetry and it is often used as an analogy for the silencing of the immigrant woman, following her subjection to the dictates of the state machine.

Confined to her ethnic background, Nina finds some respite in her artistic activity, where she can elaborate upon her feelings of alienation and unreality. The dream-quality of the novel is underlined by the description in the text of Nina's surrealistic painting. As in Frida Khalo's pictorial autobiography, the image shows an insistence on the grotesque materiality of the reproducing, menstruating, pregnant, abortive feminine body. Fighting the aphasia typical of the hysterical woman, caught in the compulsive repetition of her symptom and in her vessel-function (Nadotti 1998: 234), she challenges the stasis of the "well-disciplined, law-abiding, state sanctioned individual body"[10].

Starting from *A Bride in Three Acts,* Melfi has repeatedly taken issue with the statuesque immobility of a proper, stereotypical femininity embodied by North-American, middle-class womanhood. In the poem *Mercy Killing* the bride ironically wakes up from her stagnation thanks to the magic power of a vacuum cleaner. In *A Bride in Three Acts* the Bride, a complex and contradictory

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[9] Like a body-performer, Nina seems to use her body as her canvas. Thus, the syntax of blood that rules the narrative literally takes shape in the different nuances of her bodily fluids (Melfi 1991: 42-43).

[10] Rault (2000), "Orlan and the Limits of Materialization".

figuration of "dwelling-in-travel" (Clifford 1997: 2), moves under the powerful gaze of someone who is often out of view and who seems to dictate her different performances, from a tamed object of sexual consumption to an enraged guerrilla-fighter. A Duchamp "bachelor machine", the "manikin-like" (Melfi 1997: 60) quality of the Bride is functional to an overall examination of the "disciplinary function of the (wedding) rite" (Hogan 2007: 49). As a matter of fact, Nina's exilic point of view allows her to discern the ritualised character of any identity performance[11] and, at the same time, "the unperformable in all performativity" (Butler 1997: 138), namely the hegemonic group disavowal of ethnicity (Gunew 2004: 78). The spectre of authenticity that haunts the Canadian project of nation formation is ironically undermined in the novel by Nina's sarcastic comment on the similarity of male economies of sexual desire North and South of the border: "When Canadians sell their land for one point one trillion of dollars no one will complain that Miss Canada and Miss USA will be one and the same (even now they are true look-a-likes)" (Melfi 1991: 84).

Nina's paintings could be interpreted as speech acts which disturb a series of binary oppositions (beauty/ugliness, normal/ pathological) and which are based on a normative concept of the subject that creeps into every fold of ordinary life. The fear to deviate from the norm is the rhythm that beats her every-day life and bestows political significance on the trespassing of the threshold dividing normality from madness: showing that it is possible to cross this fence means questioning the frontiers inside a society as well as inside subjects (Tommasi 2009: 69)[12]. While her body refuses to comply with the duties of "a good citizen of this land. Fertile" (Melfi 1991:170), she progressively distances herself, living in a separate world, "the underworld" (1991: 81) from where she draws the unmediated oneiric material of her paintings (1991: 121).

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[11] For example, in *This Planet Could be God's yo-yo*, the immigrant's act of "passing" is given an ironic twist when she understands that the "native" is playacting too (Melfi 1999: 94).

[12] I am paraphrasing Wanda Tommasi's stimulating essay on the possible, fruitful disruption of the normative dimension of so-called normality brought about by "delirious" states of mind.

The fragile and illusory division between romance and nightmare, dissected in Melfi's poetry, is given a new twist in *Infertility Rights*, inasmuch as the Canadian "ecology of belonging" (Gilroy 2000: 55) is now explored by a subject who is ill at ease with "those embodied rituals of everydayness by which a given culture produces and sustains belief in its own 'obviousness'" (Butler 1997: 152). The immigrant's acts of defiance are also portrayed in *Office Politics*, for example in the poem *One day I woke up*, in which the new-found acceptance of her difference challenges any acts of containment and marginalisation:

One day I woke up and there I was —
larger than life
Things have never been the same since
Every morning a team of office queens
looks for ways
to cut me down to size
I smile
I carry a contagious virus (Pride, Type A)
for protection. (Melfi 1999: 12)

During the journey through motherhood, recorded in her "id's diary" (Melfi 1991: 60), Nina attempts to destabilise the sedentary quality of identities as well as of the words that should describe them, words like mother or woman, as well as the ethnic definitions available to her, "Italian", "Canadian", "immigrant Italian", or hyphenated "Italian-Canadian" (Karpinski 2007: 119). Exiled from an illusionary secure and fixed place, she learns as well that identity is "politics rather than an inherited marking, its articulation and re-articulation grows out of the very tension raised between these two constructs: one based on socio-cultural determinants; the other on biological ones" (Minh-ha 1994: 14). Her homing desire (Brah 1996: 180) is situated in the conflicting dynamics of "desire and affect within the interstitial spaces of culture/ethnicity and politics"[13]. Drawing on Gilroy's discussion of the dialectics of routes/roots, Brah's "homing

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[13] Rus (2006), "Mediating Homing Desire", *Thirdspace. A Journal of Feminist and Theory and Culture,* Vol. 6, Issue 1, Summer. Available at http://www.thirdspace. ca/journal/article/viewArticle/rus, last accessed August 20, 2012.I am indebted to Rus's perceptive reading of Brah's conceptualisation of "home".

desire" connects the desire to belong with a de-naturalisation of home, that is, homing is related to a process of uneven becoming and daily re-invention of a sense of location. Similarly, Nina's desire for motherhood could be interpreted as a way to negotiate the "foreignness-within-herself":

Like someone who aspires to create a new country out of an old one, I need to use illicit methods for my dream to come true. Daniel is unaware my being made pregnant is more important to me than physical pleasure; he is unaware of my willingness to be invaded by something I know nothing about, and I am glad of it for my baby, the peacemaker. (Melfi 1991: 13-14)

The way out of her existential impasse, her "infertility maze" (Melfi 1991: 48) seems to be, in the end, her decision to abandon "the wound as a proof of identity" (Ahmed 2004: 58). If Nina's initial desire to be whole and complete is contradicted by her recognition of the irreconcilable tensions between "both the unconscious and the conscious, between home as psychic inhabited space and home as an external place of residence"[14], new ways of imagining the nation are still to be envisioned in the aftermath of her painful delivery of the "other (within)herself/her other self" (Minh-ha 1994: 9).

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[14] Rus (2006), "Mediating Homing Desire".

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