

# Italian Canadiana

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SPECIAL ISSUE

**The Traces We Leave:  
Italian-Canadian  
Writings and the  
New Millennium**

# Italian Canadiana

*Italian Canadiana* is the peer-reviewed journal of the Frank Iacobucci Centre for Italian Canadian Studies (University of Toronto). It publishes scholarly research articles and reviews in English, French, and Italian devoted to research on all aspects of the lives, history, art, and literature of Italians and their descendants in Canada and the rest of North America (Mexico, the USA) both in recent as well as in earlier periods.

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*The Traces We Leave:  
Italian-Canadian Writings and the New Millennium*

Guest Edited by Carmen Concilio

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# TRACKING THE TRAJECTORIES OF GENNI GUNN'S WRITING

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*Summary:* This article examines Genni Gunn's writing in light of her childhood immigration experience and contends that, despite the crypto-ethnic approach she has adopted vis-à-vis her Italian-Canadian heritage, migration figures prominently in both her fictional and personal works, which bear traces of her autobiographical vicissitudes and reflect her own process of coming to terms with trauma. Indeed, her novels, stories, poems, and travel accounts all develop along shared trajectories, which include not only the obsession with travel, movement, and memory, or the search for identity and interpersonal ties, but also the focus on loss, grief, and abandonment, which are typical psychopathologies of migration trauma. Ultimately, Gunn embraces creative writing as a site of healing from the loss and pain endured as an effect of separation, abandonment, and migration, which are investigated beyond identification with a specific ethno-cultural group to encompass universal human experiences of trauma.

## *Introduction*

we've become who we are because of our pasts  
—Genni Gunn, *Tracks: Journeys in Time and Place*

Engaging with the past, with its hidden secrets and “ocean of ghosts,”<sup>1</sup> is, for writers who have faced migration-related traumas, a necessary stage in the process of overcoming loss and pain and achieving some sort of healing. Italian-Canadian writer and musician Genni Gunn (née Gemma Donati) is well aware of the need to confront her “ocean of ghosts” and has undertaken this endeavour throughout her creative production, which ranges from fictional novels and short stories to poetry and creative nonfiction. Remembering, she claims, is key to knowing and identity, since “without memory we would not

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<sup>1</sup> Gunn, *Permanent Tourists*, 175.

know who we are.”<sup>2</sup> The ways in which she deals with her childhood immigration experience are, however, distinctive from those of other Italian-Canadian writers and reflective of her specific autobiographical vicissitudes.

The attitude that Gunn displays toward her migratory experience in her more personal writing is seemingly ambiguous and fluctuates between quasi-denial and outright confession. On one hand, she “discounts suffering any childhood immigration trauma”<sup>3</sup> and describes her emigration to Canada not as an uprooting but as just another journey, similar to numerous others she embarked on while in Italy. In her travelogue *Tracks: Journeys in Time and Place*, for instance, she writes, “This was certainly not the first journey I had taken.”<sup>4</sup> “Our coming to Canada was the latest in a series of displacements that had us in constant movement,”<sup>5</sup> but it also coincided with the moment of family reunion, so that Canada became “synonymous with family and home.”<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the information about her family history that she discloses in her autobiographical poems, essays, and travel writing clearly signals the pain and suffering she endured as an effect of separation, migration, and abandonment, three traumas she experienced prior to emigration to Kitimat, British Columbia, at the age of seven. Indeed, as she explains in her autobiographical essay “Imagining Home: Chamber Music for Migration” (2022), her entire childhood was a constant migration between Trieste, Udine, and Pozzecco in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region, where her sister Ileana was raised by paternal grandparents, and Rutigliano in Apulia, where Gunn was entrusted to the care of a maternal aunt, while her itinerant parents were transitory, elusive figures who would pop into their lives only occasionally. In *Tracks*, she writes, “My parents [...] delighted me with their arrivals and, with their departures, left me in a state of permanent longing.”<sup>7</sup>

In Gunn’s case, pre-migration trauma is, therefore, more significant than peri- and post-migration experiences. This explains, in part, her mostly

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Margarese, “Dialogo con la scrittrice”; author’s translation.

<sup>3</sup> Johnston, “Review of *Tracks*.”

<sup>4</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 10. This idea is echoed in the recurring line “You became a family,” which appears in four poems in the series “Departures,” from her early collection *Mating in Captivity*, 57, 62, 64, and 66.

<sup>7</sup> Gunn, “Imagining Home,” 10.



“crypto-ethnic”<sup>8</sup> approach vis-à-vis her Italianness and the consequent absence of focus on Italian-Canadian immigration and related migration tropes in her writing, which features instead ethnically indistinct, albeit restless, disconnected, and emotionally displaced characters. Having experienced displacement and family dispersion as the norm in Italy, she does not perceive Canada as a foreign territory,<sup>9</sup> but immediately, and somewhat ideally, equates it with home and family – an identification which, counter to the typical immigration story, allows her to subdue the loss of the motherland/mother tongue, which remains focal in the works of other Italian-Canadian writers. In a similar manner, cultural clash and adjustment to the new environment become secondary compared to family reunion and bonding, even if they are additional traumas that Gunn has to face. In the chapter called “Sundays” from *Tracks*, for instance, while recalling her family’s weekly excursions into the British Columbian wilderness as moments of “laughter and music” and family “forging,”<sup>10</sup> she also admits that they might have been her “father’s way of transcending isolation”<sup>11</sup> in the “remote and inaccessible” bigoted community of Kitimat, which excluded outsiders, including Gunn, who many years later still felt “ostracized by those people with whom [she]’d gone to school, as if they feared that [her] proximity would leave them sullied, contaminated.”<sup>12</sup>

Gunn’s choice to refrain from dealing with migration upfront in her fictional and poetic universe is, however, neither a negation nor an obliteration of the traumatic experience. This is witnessed by the numerous traces of her autobiographical experiences and Italian heritage that can be found in all of

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<sup>8</sup> Hutcheon, “A Crypto-Ethnic Confession,” 314. Like Hutcheon, Gunn uses her ex-husband’s surname, in lieu of her Italian surname, Donati, to launch herself as a writer – a choice presumably driven by the intent to avoid being pigeonholed as an ethnic writer so as to access a broader North American literary-scape. However, at the same time, she has never disjoined herself from the Association of Italian-Canadian Writers, nor has she disclaimed critical readings that situate her works within the context of the Italian-Canadian diaspora. Instead, on many occasions, she has interacted with scholars like Joseph Pivato in Canada or Anna Pia De Luca and Deborah Saidero at the *OltreOceano* International Centre for Migrant Literatures at the University of Udine, Italy.

<sup>9</sup> In their discussion of *Tracks*, Terzian and Austen point out that Gunn does not experience Canada and Italy “as divorced from one another. They are instead an amalgam, Canada becoming in Gunn’s depiction one more region of Italy”; Terzian and Austen, “Locating the Traveller,” 235.

<sup>10</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 14.

her works,<sup>13</sup> from her very first publications in the early 1990s (*Thrice Upon A Time*, *On the Road*, and *Mating in Captivity*) through *Tracing Iris*, *Hungers*, *Faceless*, and *Solitaria*, all published between 2001 and 2010, to her most recent collections, *Permanent Tourists* (2020) and *Accidents* (2022), both of which followed the publication of her travelogue *Tracks: Journeys in Time and Place* (2013). Simply, her choice reflects a desire to explore trauma from diverse angles, both personal and universal, within the symbiotic relationship that she creates between her fiction and nonfiction. Indeed, if we look at her oeuvre in retrospect, and especially in light of the increasing attention she has given to retelling her migration story in *Tracks* and in personal essays, we will notice how it develops along core thematic trajectories which include not only the obsession with travel, movement, and memory, or the search for identity and interpersonal ties, but also the focus on loss, grief, and abandonment, which are typical psychopathologies of migration trauma.<sup>14</sup> These trajectories are explored not merely within the context of the writer's personal ethno-specific experiences, but also, and above all, as universal human tragedies, because "really, we are all displaced [...] either by war, emigration, jobs, deaths, desires."<sup>15</sup>

Far from being absent from her writing, the migratory experience is rather the propelling force that triggers and fuels it. It can be considered a sort of underlying soundtrack or, to borrow Gunn's analogy, its "*passacaglia* [...] a recurring bass line, with variations textured over it."<sup>16</sup> By following the trajectories of Gunn's writing, this paper examines how her migratory experience is masterfully translated into the narrative through thematic orchestrations, melodic variations, and the evocative rhythm of figurative language, so as to relocate the act of writing as a site of healing and recovery.

### *Compulsive Travelling, Migration, and Homing*

One obvious way in which Gunn translates migration into the narrative is through the focus on travelling, movement, and motion – the constant bass

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, De Luca, "I personaggi itineranti."

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Theisen-Womersley, *Trauma and Resilience*, in particular the chapter "Trauma and Migration," 29–65.

<sup>15</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Gunn, "Necessary Passions," 181. Gunn uses the term *passacaglia* to describe her life, in which "the bass notes would be music, writing and translation," three different ways in which she engages with language.

notes, if you will, of her existence. As she recounts in "Imagining Home," her experience as a migrant subject extends well beyond her early childhood wanderings across the Italian peninsula and her first two journeys to Canada, one at age seven on board the *Saturnia* and the other, at age eleven, on a flight from Fiumicino airport.<sup>17</sup> Vagabondage was the norm in Canada as well, as her family moved from Kitimat to Vancouver to Fredericton and back to Vancouver.<sup>18</sup> Later, as an adult, she spent twelve years on the road in Canada as a rock musician,<sup>19</sup> and then continued travelling around the world and back to Italy almost yearly. The attraction toward movement is so entrenched in her family history that she wonders whether they have "an inherited gene, the movement gene, the restlessness gene."<sup>20</sup> Yet rather than consider it a curse or the root of tragedy, as often occurs in immigration tales, she presents human (im)migration as a natural phenomenon akin not only to the migrations of birds, fish, and other animals but also to the endless motion of the earth and its ever-shifting mantle and crust.

This less emotional, quasi-scientific approach allows Gunn to embrace migration/travel as a "comfortable state, a detachment from the trappings of physical place"<sup>21</sup> and, consequently, elicits a rethinking of the relationship with Italy and homing. Sylvia Terzian and Veronica Austen argue, for instance, that home, for Gunn, becomes a sort of "dwelling in displacement,"<sup>22</sup> "a state of being" rather than a specific "geographical locale."<sup>23</sup> Her dual status as "perpetual traveller" and "perpetual immigrant"<sup>24</sup> enables her to accept Italy as "an elusive, imagined *home*"<sup>25</sup> and thereby overcome nostalgic attachments to the places of her childhood which no longer exist as they once were. Indeed, by considering homing as the instinctive bird-like ability "to

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<sup>17</sup> Gunn, "Imagining Home," 73.

<sup>18</sup> Gunn, "Imagining Home," 76.

<sup>19</sup> Gunn, "Imagining Home," 77.

<sup>20</sup> Gunn, "Imagining Home," 80. During the Second World War Gunn's father worked for the Special Operations Executive, then in the post-war for the Allied Military Government in Trieste, and then, following the Trieste agreement of 1954, came to Canada. Her maternal grandfather was also a trackman in Apulia who relocated every couple of years and, ever since migrating to Canada, her mother has developed the habit of changing houses "in two-to-four-year stints"; Gunn, "Imagining Home," 76.

<sup>21</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Terzian and Austen, "Locating the Traveller," 223.

<sup>23</sup> Terzian and Austen, "Locating the Traveller," 226.

<sup>24</sup> Terzian and Austen, "Locating the Traveller," 226.

<sup>25</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 7, original emphasis.

return to a certain place when displaced from it,"<sup>26</sup> Gunn dissipates the threat of estrangement inherent in mythical utopian idealizations of the lost home and welcomes them instead as "shimmering and enticing."<sup>27</sup> Italy, in *Tracks*, becomes her "dystopian Utopia," "a place of desire" in which she is both displaced and happy.<sup>28</sup>

By positioning herself as a dynamic traveller, Gunn welcomes utopia from what Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor calls a "speculative standpoint,"<sup>29</sup> in which she is "always projecting a farther horizon" and "while never reaching it," she yearns to continue travelling because it is only by travelling that she can "grow a narrative of her own."<sup>30</sup> During her homing journeys to Italy, therefore, Gunn envisions the mythical home as a moving horizon in which she can invent new images of herself, because, as she admits, each return involves "an adjustment, a re-evaluation, both of myself and others."<sup>31</sup> This allows her to reject the ethnic subject's obsession for roots and locate her identity in the possibility of exploring ever-new routes. As Kath Woodward explains, while "roots offer a means of marking ourselves out as different from others and the same as those who share the same stories of origin,"<sup>32</sup> routes are open to diversity and possibilities; they are a process that equates the "potential for change and the desire to look forwards as well as backwards."<sup>33</sup> In other words, Gunn's commitment to travel is "a rejection of the ethnic subject's need for rootedness and an acceptance of rootlessness as part of identity";<sup>34</sup> it thereby allows her to imagine herself as a transnational, cosmopolitan subject, capable of feeling at home in multiple spaces.

Just as Gunn's uprooted life has turned her into a compulsive traveller, many of the fictional characters in her stories and novels are also "permanent tourists," subjects in movement who are constantly in search of "new landscapes and emotional terrains"<sup>35</sup> in which to confront the unexpected and

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<sup>26</sup> Gunn, "Imagining Home," 74.

<sup>27</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 110.

<sup>29</sup> Wagner-Lawlor, *Postmodern Utopias*, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Wagner-Lawlor, *Postmodern Utopias*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Woodward, *Understanding Identity*, 144.

<sup>33</sup> Woodward, *Understanding Identity*, 136.

<sup>34</sup> Saidero, "Utopias," 88.

<sup>35</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 8.

the unknown and to renew themselves.<sup>36</sup> Like Gunn, they root themselves in travel to counter their dislocation, dissociation, and placelessness. In *Hungers*, for example, many of the stories feature restless Canadians who travel across a number of foreign countries in an attempt to escape into the familiarity of alienation – an anonymity which reflects, as Gunn states, her own restlessness and need to experiment different fluctuating landscapes,<sup>37</sup> because it is through travel that one discovers the unknown “about one’s self, about others, about one’s relationship to time and place.”<sup>38</sup> Although their search for affection and connection remains elusive, it is the experience of travelling that ensures new perspectives and never-ending possibilities of transformation. In “Thicker Than Water,” for instance, Claire says, “It is as if we have removed an opaque layer from our retinas and we have another, more accurate vision now [...] Nothing is what it seems; the earth a shape-shifter.”<sup>39</sup>

For Gunn and her characters, travel is thus a “yearning for metamorphosis,”<sup>40</sup> a need to recreate themselves elsewhere and to ultimately re-invent themselves anew with every new voyage, just as nature continually changes and renews itself. Recurring earth- and animal-related imagery metaphorically signals this connection, suggesting that we are all interconnected to/in the natural world, despite feeling disconnected from ourselves and other human beings.<sup>41</sup> In the poem “Fossil Highway” from the collection *Faceless*, this kinship is, for instance, evoked through a web of metaphorical and metonymic associations between the human body and nature: rivers are “arteries nurturing the earth”; “water sings birth songs”; “the mountain speaks stone erupts its language / from within”; the poet’s hand is “a fossil highway”; her “birth tongue echoes / in the beat of wings and the eye is a shutter [...] elusive as bear tracks after rain.”<sup>42</sup> At the same time, however, these associations also remind us of the precariousness of life, the instability

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<sup>36</sup> Gunn borrows this definition of “permanent tourists” from P.K. Page’s eponymous poem.

<sup>37</sup> See De Luca and Saidero, “Esperienze,” 40–41.

<sup>38</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Gunn, *Hungers*, 227. This observation echoes Gunn’s admission that when she journeys into foreign territories, it is as if “an opaque film has been removed from my eyes, rendering my vision more acute”; Gunn, *Tracks*, 8–9.

<sup>40</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Many of her characters are also geologists, marine biologists, geophysics professors, and anthropologists interested in exploring the earth’s formations, evolution, and history.

<sup>42</sup> Gunn, *Faceless*, 18–19.

of human relationships, the elusiveness of continuity and rootedness, and that loss and death are intrinsic to life. Like the earth, we are bound to shape-shift, because everything erodes: “Year to year, stone falls, ice melts into flash floods, heavy rain furrows the paths [...] we, too, are made of sandstone, of the compressed debris of our pasts which, like salt, is unstable and shifts and buckles and liquefies under pressure.”<sup>43</sup>

### *Loss and Abandonment*

Loss, grief, absence, and abandonment are the themes – melodies for the musician – through which Gunn skillfully echoes and explores in her writing and poetry her pre-migration childhood trauma of separation from her parents and sister, which signal her deep-rooted need for understanding and knowing, “for it’s the knowing / that joins us to the ghost limbs of our past.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Gunn’s experience of being abandoned to the care of her aunt and severed from her sister is the cause of her emotional displacement and leaves her with a longing not only for physical connection and affection but also for information about the mysterious lives, whereabouts, doings, and personalities of her parents, whose secrets she tries to unravel for her entire life. About a decade after their reunion as a family in Canada, Gunn also had to face the additional grief from her father’s untimely death, which has left her forever “hungry” for answers about his work as an agent for Churchill’s secret army, the Special Operations Executive.

In her three poetry collections (*Mating in Captivity*, *Faceless*, and *Accidents*) there is thus a crescendo of poems about her parents<sup>45</sup> which reaches its climax in the series “Absences” from her latest book. In the poem “Trieste,” for example, Gunn seeks reconciliation with her parents by confronting her father’s ghost, a man “cloaked in political mystery and intrigue,”<sup>46</sup> whose secrets, she knows, will probably remain forever buried with him, but which she nevertheless feels compelled to uncover in an attempt to achieve some true knowledge about him:

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<sup>43</sup> Gunn, *Hungers*, 229.

<sup>44</sup> Gunn, *Accidents*, 11.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, the poems in the “Departures” series from *Mating in Captivity*, or the poems “Like Ruins” and “Incendiaries” in *Faceless*. Even the title poem, “Faceless,” echoes the faceless women in “Verbena’s Paintings” and “Mother” (from *Accidents*) where the opening verses contain a clear reference to the dead corpses of the Body Worlds exhibit.

<sup>46</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 100.

[...] no archived voice  
nor print can solve the myth  
he is. It's up to me now to scale  
the bluffs of time, to scour our familiar coasts

Vancouver port, Trieste, to chase his ghost  
down childhood trails  
that lead me here, breathless and too late.<sup>47</sup>

Her memories allow her to gradually dissipate the mythical, albeit fragmented, vision she has constructed of him as “Ulysses, searching for the untravelled world”<sup>48</sup> and to acknowledge the pain he suffered as an effect of his own dislocation in quasi-exile, because his “anti-fascist activities made him vulnerable in post-war Italy.”<sup>49</sup> In *Tracks*, she admits, “In Canada, my father longed to return to some imagined place, to some connection, a memory perhaps, restless and unsettled. He travelled back and forth across lands and oceans, yearning in desire.”<sup>50</sup>

In “Verbena’s Paintings,” “Mother,” and “Absence,” Gunn instead comes to terms with her elderly mother, a woman whom she initially envisioned only as the absent “gypsy” artist whose presence in youth she “pined for,”<sup>51</sup> without being able to acknowledge the difficulties and grief her mother also endured as a female artist, as a secret agent’s wife, and as a forty-year-old widow with a young child to raise in Canada.<sup>52</sup> Through her mother’s paintings of naked, “faceless women, pieced together, ripped, painted on,”<sup>53</sup> Gunn discovers the mother she never knew: a pale and frail “cut-and-paste,” “always broken/limbs askew,” “always a pattern of fury, of rage against rage,” “her eyes patterned / by grief and disbelief.”<sup>54</sup> As she writes in “Mother,”

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<sup>47</sup> Gunn, *Accidents*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 104.

<sup>49</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 109.

<sup>50</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 103–104.

<sup>51</sup> Gunn, *Accidents*, 27.

<sup>52</sup> “This is the mother I never knew, the mother I imagined as a gypsy, freed from the manacles of culture, of her parent’s disapproval. A gypsy with golden bangles, tiered skirt and anklets, whose small brass bells announced her presence. A gypsy, not my widow mother, who awoke alone to a frigid Canadian morning in 1972, my father in a morgue downtown”; Gunn, *Tracks*, 128.

<sup>53</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 154.

<sup>54</sup> Gunn, *Accidents*, 23–24.

[...] Fragile now  
 unmasked, I finally glimpse between bleached  
 ribs your heart in all its pulsing pain.<sup>55</sup>

The revelation shatters the idealized identity Gunn had constructed for her mother as a child in the attempt to compensate for her absence and allows her to understand that her mother's constant need for movement and relocation is her way of coping with the losses she carries within, "as if she were forever trying to distract or escape herself."<sup>56</sup> It thereby enables a mother-daughter re-connection and a recognition of affinity with the lost mother, with whom the equally restless daughter shares the need for change and the urge to "travel as a means of escape."<sup>57</sup>

As occurs in the writing of other Italian-Canadian women, by rediscovering her mother, Gunn also re-appropriates her Italian heritage, especially through the food her mother cooks. In the chapter "Crostoni, Intrigoni, Bugie" from *Tracks*, she writes, "although uninterested in cooking when we were small, as the years pass [my artist mother] experiments endlessly to rediscover recipes her mother made, resulting in strange savoury delicacies, vaguely familiar, as if in our collective memory there exists a familial palate."<sup>58</sup> She also admits that her family, like all other Italian immigrant families, upholds ethnic traditions and rituals from *home* in the new country:

Though isolated from the rest of the family in Italy, we observe our own rituals and traditions, albeit either modified to suit us or invented here. For example, our birthdays are not complete without a St. Honoré cake from Fratelli Bakery on Commercial Drive, a family reunion definitely requires rice croquettes and *panzerotti*, Christmas would not be Christmas without *crostoni*, and my mother would not be my mother if she couldn't revise traditions at will.<sup>59</sup>

Gunn's fictional works equally reflect her need to cope with her abandonment trauma. From her early novels *Thrice Upon a Time* and *Tracing Iris*,

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<sup>55</sup> Gunn, *Accidents*, 26.

<sup>56</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 156.

<sup>57</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 156.

<sup>58</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 127.

<sup>59</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 130.



which deal with an abandoned child's search for identity and the need to retrace a missing mother, down to stories like "Bloodlines" and "Strays" in *Permanent Tourists*, which chart a daughter's search for her father, Gunn focuses almost obsessively on how parental abandonment affects a child's identity and psychic and emotional development, as well as on mechanisms of adaptation. Her continual engagement with this traumatic experience<sup>60</sup> is aimed at investigating how the absence of mother-daughter and father-daughter relations are responsible for feelings of dislocation, lack of self-worth, emotional frailty, and difficulties in establishing genuine social and intimate relations. Through her characters, who are often fictional projections of herself, she also probes how the experience leaves children with a perpetual and pressing need to know why they have been rejected and neglected, since without this knowledge they remain imprisoned in a spiral of illusion and deception which impedes true healing and compromises survival.

In *Tracing Iris*, for instance, the social anthropologist Kate Mason is obsessed with knowing why her mother preferred eloping with a lover over her and thus scavenges the past for traces that can lead her to Iris, in a way not dissimilar to Gunn, who scavenges her family history "like a forensic anthropologist, searching for proof."<sup>61</sup> Having been discarded as a child, Kate is emotionally crippled and has troubled relationships with her father, his new wife, and her own flimsy lovers, whom she regularly abandons. The truth she discovers about her manic-depressive mother and her attempted suicide, internment in psychiatric facilities, and alleged illegitimate baby do not, however, release her from her emotional bewilderment, nor do they allow her to overcome her "overwhelming distrust" toward people<sup>62</sup> – especially toward her father, who concealed Iris's death under a web of lies in the hope of protecting his young daughter. In fact, although she remembers how her father lovingly took care of her as a child and his kindness toward Iris, Kate cannot forgive him for letting her believe that Iris abandoned them, thus leaving her forever longing for her mother's return and consumed by both her need for

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<sup>60</sup> The topic is also addressed in *Solitaria*, where the focus is on the disruptive effects that abandonment has on the family, including migration and the burden of keeping terrible secrets. In fact, when Piera is obliged to abandon her illegitimate son David to the care of her sister, her family is scattered between Italy and Canada, while she has to tacitly preserve the horrible truth about her incestuous relationship and her brother's murder. Revealing these secrets to David disrupts his life as well.

<sup>61</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 59.

<sup>62</sup> Gunn, *Tracing Iris*, 267.

an explanation and the never-ending fear of being abandoned again. Had she known that her mother was dead, rather than missing, she “would have lived a different life”<sup>63</sup> because she would have had the possibility to grieve for the loss, instead of remaining trapped in the illusion of a reunion. Her resentment and distrust also prevent her from believing that her father did not kill Iris and thereby shatter any possibility of reconciliation with him as well.

Like Kate, Denise, the protagonist of “Straits,” cannot accept her father’s decision to abandon the family. She journeys to Thailand in order to track him down and bring him home, but instead finds that he has a new life there with a pregnant Thai girl. The discovery shatters her constructed idealized memories of him, while fueling feelings of resentment toward him. For both women, the disappearance of the mother/father is “*an event for which the adaptive infrastructure is unprepared*”<sup>64</sup> and thus leaves a hole inside them which makes them unable to feel compassion and affection and hinders their ability to move on, while marring their relationships with other people, including the remaining parent. In other cases, the strategy of adaptation of abandoned children is to embrace extreme goodness, like Paris, the motherless child in “Bloodlines” who does not reject the father that abandoned her at birth when he spirals into early Alzheimer’s but takes care of him in the illusory hope of finally building a ghost life for them. By forgiving Cole for leaving her, Paris releases herself from the pain of separation and is able to see the frailty and suffering of “her once larger-than-life father,”<sup>65</sup> a successful rock star whose career rapidly declined into a self-destructive spiral of substance abuse.

Since loss is a universal human experience, Gunn does not limit her analysis to child abandonment, but explores multiple variations of loss. Because of her personal experience, however, rather than focusing on loss of place, language, or culture, as many immigrants do, she addresses her attention mainly to the loss of family and interpersonal relations and the consequent loss of self it occasions. The stories in *Permanent Tourists*, for example, focus on how the disconnected members of a support group attempt to overcome their grief for the loss of a loved one – whether a spouse, a child, a lover, or a parent – and of their self-worth as a consequence thereof. Under scrutiny are chiefly the tremendous effects of loss and perpetrated grief, which include

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<sup>63</sup> Gunn, *Tracing Iris*, 267.

<sup>64</sup> Gunn, *Tracing Iris*, 260, original emphasis.

<sup>65</sup> Gunn, *Permanent Tourists*, 80.

self-blame, self-destruction, and self-annihilation through alcohol and drug abuse, self-harm, and suicide. In the title story, which gathers many of the characters in a group session, Ellen cannot help blaming herself for her daughter's abduction and thus confines herself in her apartment where she compulsively watches TV documentaries in a desperate attempt to find her missing child. Eroded by their sense of guilt are also Paris's drug-addicted father, Cole, and Ferris, an alcoholic who killed his wife in a car accident. Both men become neglectful and unable to commit to relationships. Ferris also shields himself by refusing to engage with other people's sorrows because "compounding sorrow, he thinks, is a tidal wave, violent dangerous. He fears the tsunami, the acceleration, the debris of guilt, the currents, the engulfment."<sup>66</sup> The inability to cope with grief and guilt has even more tragic outcomes for the two half-sisters in "Solitudes," where Marissa embraces suicide as the ultimate form of relief after her mother's death, while Vivian is haunted by her choice to neglect Marissa, who symbolically becomes the boulder she is condemned to roll up the hill for eternity, like the souls in Dante's *Inferno*.

In other stories, some characters try to cope with loss and "rescue their misplaced selves"<sup>67</sup> by recurring to partial amnesia and selective memory – a strategy which is equally futile and deceitful since the attempt to remove trauma through forgetfulness does not provide release from grief, but rather kindles it secretly, until it resurfaces unexpectedly and more vehemently. Remembering her own dead father in the poem "Incendiaries," Gunn writes,

Grief too is a fire its flames outrun us  
burst us spontaneous combustion we can't  
escape<sup>68</sup>

In order to avoid being eroded by grief and succumbing to loss, we need, Gunn's stories suggest, to come to terms with it. As Ferris is reminded: "*The reality is you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss [...] You will be whole again but will never be the same.*"<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Gunn, *Permanent Tourists*, 74.

<sup>67</sup> Gunn, *Permanent Tourists*, 73.

<sup>68</sup> Gunn, *Faceless*, 16.

<sup>69</sup> Gunn, *Permanent Tourists*, 62, emphasis in the original. This is a citation from Elizabeth Kübler-Ross which, in Gunn's story, is used in the poster that the therapist gives

### *Memory and Identity*

For Gunn, as for many immigrants, memory plays a key role in this process of healing and reconstructing selfhood. Re/membering the past by sharing traumatic experiences with others prompts a sense of bonding and connection with both familial people and strangers, which can lighten the burden of pain. Moreover, the process of sharing memories – as Gunn does with her sister Ileana or her Aunt Ida in *Tracks* – broadens perspectives of remembrance and thereby fills the gaps of altered, forgotten, or unknown facts. It thereby elicits a journey inward which allows Gunn to rediscover her childhood self. As she writes, “In Myanmar, my sister and I remembered our child selves, and recounted who we were, mixing and matching our memories, as if to rediscover each other”;<sup>70</sup> they were sharing “small bits of our childhood – the missing links, and also those memories that diverge and converge, so that even our *shared* pasts are both strange and familiar. She tells me things that happened to her of which I have no recollection, though I was there.”<sup>71</sup>

While memory provides a passage to the past and allows her to retrieve past identities, she is also aware that this journey “is an act of imagination, a re-envisioning of the unknown.”<sup>72</sup> In Gunn’s view, in fact, memory is mutable and changeable, “in constant formation, mutation,”<sup>73</sup> as landscapes are, and is thus ultimately elusive and unreliable. In “Ghost Men,” Skye, for instance, observes that “memory [...] is elusive, not firm, but altered by time, like the earth’s surface, softened or hardened, charred or greened, depending on the person’s bias, or culture, or any of a hundred other circumstances.”<sup>74</sup> Traveling back through time is thus like entering a foreign landscape, where what was once known and familiar becomes unfamiliar, faded, altered, distorted, or magnified with every new recollection. Yet it also ensures the possibility of continual re-invention of self because identity is grounded in memory.

Equally transformational and elusive is identity, which Gunn envisions as neither unitary nor single but as necessarily ambiguous, multifaceted, and

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Ferris to aid his process of healing.

<sup>70</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 9.

<sup>71</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 101, original emphasis.

<sup>72</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 103.

<sup>73</sup> Gunn, *Tracks*, 10.

<sup>74</sup> Gunn, *Permanent Tourists*, 157. Gunn considers “the natural world a perfect metaphor for memory, for (e)motions, for relationships, for all that is in endless motion and change”; Gunn, *Tracks*, 8.

shifting. In many of her poems, the idea of an ever-changing, chameleon-like identity is elicited through the metaphors of masking, unmasking, and masquerading, which signal how we impersonate different versions of ourselves through an anonymous wearing and shedding of the multiple masks we are obliged to hide behind in our increasingly technological world. In "Faceless," for example, the paradigmatic image of the faceless woman, who must hide behind the transplanted face of another woman in order to reclaim her true identity, aptly conveys Gunn's belief that we are a constellation of differing subjectivities, each of which needs to be acknowledged as part of the self. At the same time, since the image is employed to tackle the eternal dilemma of being vs. appearing, a divide which becomes particularly painful for those who experience migration, it can be regarded as an eloquent metaphor for the migrant subject who has to come to terms with the duality of a hybrid self.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, owing to geographical, cultural, and linguistic dislocation and relocation, migrant subjects wear a double set of masks: in their ethnic community, on one hand, and in the social context of the host country on the other. This creates an inner split that fuels feelings of rejection toward the part of the self they want to repress and thus leads them to metaphorically tear off a part of their face, leaving it bare, stripped – in other words, faceless like the disfigured woman in the poem. Retrieving identity necessarily entails a reconciliation with one's lacerated face, because "without your face / you could be no one."<sup>76</sup>

Although cryptically, Gunn's writing thus addresses many of the concerns shared by other Italian-Canadian writers and, like them, situates her work within a transcultural paradigm wherein the issue of ethnicity is explored in the context of more universal themes and experiences of trauma. Just as migration is explored through the lens of travelling and her abandonment trauma through the lens of loss, the process of coming to terms with her ethnic self is situated within her broader confrontation with the multiple masks – those of young girl, daughter, lover, wife, friend, sister, rock star, poet, and woman – that she wears and sheds in her poems as she tries to web an interior dialogue with herself and with others. It is also metaphorically refracted through her dislocated fictional characters, who can be considered masks behind which Gunn conceals/reveals her own search for identity, truth, and healing.

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<sup>75</sup> For a full discussion of this argument, see Saidero, "Le maschere dell'io."

<sup>76</sup> Gunn, *Faceless*, 32.

Ultimately, under the surface, Gunn's fictional world voices her own need for connection, connectedness, and belonging. Writing becomes her way of travelling into the self and provides a space of healing and remembrance in which she can deal with her migratory traumas, make sense of her restlessness, and situate herself as a permanent tourist – that yearned-for condition which allows her to experience alienation and transcend it, to reimagine ways of feeling at home everywhere on the earth, and to bond with others, so as to achieve some relief from pain and appease “the ocean of ghosts roaring in her head.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Gunn, *Permanent Tourists*, 175.

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