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A CELEBRATION OF ITALIAN-CANADIAN VOICES

Sixty writers of Italian heritage presented their work at a groundbreaking Literary and Arts Conference

The Association of Italian-Canadian Writers (AICW), The Department of History at York University and Villa Charities, hosted a two-day literary and art conference on September 27 and 28. The event was, as the old saying goes, one for the books.

The conference—which was held at both York University and The Columbus Centre—featured a well-curated group of emerging and established voices from the Italian-Canadian community. Event chair, Rosaria Moretti-Lawrie, says that the conference title—*The Vines of Diaspora: Italian-Canadian Literary and Artistic Cultures*—more than lived up to its name.

“The works presented in these past two days were by 60 distinguished creative and critical thinkers,” she said. “They truly represent the evolution of the Italian and Italian-Canadian community because of the transformative way they choose to communicate their lives,” she said. Moretti-Lawrie’s own lecture, titled *Cultivating Identity: Italian Migrant Gardens in Toronto*, was one of the first presentations to give clarity and purpose to the conference. It analyzed the rituals, customs and behaviors of Italian-Canadians who garden. The presentation included poignant samples of Moretti-Lawrie’s interviews paired with the captivating work of legendary photographer and writer, Vincenzo Pietropaolo. Pietropaolo was also chosen as the keynote speaker and during his speech, he charmed the crowd by displaying and discussing some of the most galvanizing images of his career. He also unveiled his next career chapter with writer Liana Cusmano: a soon-to-be-published hybrid photo-literary book which captures pivotal figures in the Italian-Canadian Queer community.

The esteemed lineup also included national and international novelists (from Terri Favro to Connie Guzzo-McParland), poets (Silvia Falsaperla to Domenico Capilongo among them), playwrights (Rita Giancola presented a hilarious sample of her play *Mal Occhio*) and academics (Domenico A. Beneventi unearthed the work of theatre disruptor Michaela Di Cesare). The event also included groundbreaking panel discussion inspired by the recently published *Here & Now: An Anthology of Queer Italian-Canadian Writing*—a collection featuring literature from Steff Juniper Mendolia, Nicole Haldoupis, Elio Iannacci and many others. Iannacci was also in attendance and presented a paper on how the joint work of opera monarch Maria Callas and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini; pop queen Mina and artist Mauro Ballelli; disco queen Raffaella Carrà and costumer Luca Sabatelli. Iannacci was part of a number of interdisciplinary story tellers and scholars hailing from Canada, Italy and beyond.

“The survey of talent at this conference goes beyond the usual definitions of diversity,” said Christine Sansalone, president of the AICW. “We had new writers and first-time presenters sharing their soon-to-be published work alongside celebrated novelists, academics and writers— such as Darlene Madott, Joseph and Emma Pivato—who have many books to their name” she said. Joseph Pivato, who was the Mariano Elia Chair at York University between 1987-88, offered the first course on Italian-Canadian literature. Abril Liberatori, the current Mariano Elia Chair presided over the opening session at Founders College.

York University was well represented at the conference. From current PhD students like Steff Juniper Mendolia (Gender Studies), and faculty; Lucia Gagliese (Faculty of Health) and Carmela Circelli



(Department of Philosophy), York U alumni: Aldo Colangelo, Gianna Patriarca, Bianca Lakoseljic, Elio Iannacci, Rita Giancola, Claudia Nucci, Francesca Schembri and Natalie Boccia.

Other highlights of the event included a private screening of a moving short film called *For Nonna Anna* by Luis De Filippis. De Filippis, who is still in her twenties, notably won a Changemaker Award at the Toronto International Film Festival. Her movie mirrored the intergenerational aim of the event as it featured a Transgender teen caregiving for her Alzheimer's-beset Octogenarian grandmother.

A panel focused on the issues and opportunities pertaining to modern-day translation included brilliant female writer Maria Giuseppina Cesari, Nella Cotrupi, Caterina Edwards and Connie Guzzo-McParland.

The event ended with two remarkable individuals: 97-year-old writer with a PhD from York University, Aldo Colangelo (who shared an emotion piece called “L’essere umano, la vita e gli imprevisti” (loosely translated to “Human life and unexpected events”) as well as acclaimed singer-songwriter Frank Moyo. Moyo, who recently joined the Association of Italian-Canadian Writers, has been able to conjure countless viral moments with his music for years on social media. The musical artist’s tour-de-force performance of “Toronto to Milano,”—a love song he wrote about two of his favourite cities—summed up the whole vibe of this 2-day celebration. This was best heard and seen when Moyo belted out the lyrics, “dove tutto è più chiaro” (“here, where everything is clearer”) and a passionate conference attendee cried out “Yesss” in agreement.