

# MARCO CALLIARI, AN ITALIAN-QUEBECOIS ARTIST. A REFLECTION OF IDENTITY, CULTURAL BELONGING AND ARTISTIC PATRIMONY

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## Abstract

The following article explores the distinctive creative process that Italian-Quebecois artists undergo and how it is reflected in their work. The Italian-Quebecois artist strives to achieve a balance between family tradition, their parents' experience of immigration, identity and personal creativity. Their journey is a testament to a rising artistic patrimony that has yet to be categorized by academia.

*Marco Calliari, artista italo-quebecchese. Una riflessione sull'identità, sull'appartenenza culturale e sul patrimonio artistico*

Il presente articolo esplora il percorso creativo degli artisti italo-quebecchesi. Lo studio analizza la ricerca costante di un equilibrio fra tradizioni culturali e familiari tramandate dai propri genitori immigranti con l'identità e creatività personale manifestate dalle loro opere. Un testamento originale di un patrimonio artistico quebecchese non ancora pienamente valorizzato dal mondo accademico.

The fellowship of artists belonging to an array of cultural backgrounds in Quebec provides a preview of unique artwork, which echoes sentiments of displacement, linguistic divides and identity struggles undergone by their immigrant families. Personal experiences are internalized and transposed somewhat unconsciously in various artworks. This article will focus on how Montreal artists of Italian descent strive to achieve a balance between family tradition, their parents' experience of immigration, identity and personal creativity, through art. My initial observations of the Italian-Quebecois artistic community reveal the use of unconventional artistic language to express a unique cultural identity and sense of belonging. As a result, the artists internalize these phenomena and transpose them in a screenplay, film, painting or musical opera.

My intention is to examine the artistic progression and the complex construct of multilayered social identities internalized by contemporary Italian-

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Quebecois artists, and ultimately the way it is externalized in their artwork. As part of my research-creation Master thesis in Media Studies at Concordia University in Montreal, the study will focus on three major artistic sectors in Montreal: visual arts, theatre production and musical performance. Video-ethnography, qualitative journaling and research-creation methods will be adopted. Filmed interviews of two established and/or emerging artists in each of the disciplines mentioned will be conducted and a video-documentary produced reflecting this process of investigation. A written component will complement the documentary providing statistical evidence and additional observations made during the research-creation phase. The thesis is slated for completion in Fall 2015.

The following presents the preliminary findings of this broader study recorded during the first filmed encounter with author-composer and musician Marco Calliari, a Montreal-born artist of Italian origin. Calliari's interview is a catalyst to my queries, providing a candid and accurate understanding of the artistic progression of Italian-Quebecois artists. Such a phenomenon has specifically evolved in a complex setting of political, social and cultural conditions, which have come to define the Quebecois landscape.

It is necessary to elaborate a discourse that explores artistic expression of Italian-Quebecois works to begin understanding how artists connect their Italian ethnicity to a creative practice within a specific socio-political context. This document offers a contextualization of such dynamics that characterize Quebec, explores the particularities of how the Italian community interacts and evolves within the conditions that define the term, 'Italian-Quebecois artists' and finally, attempts to tie my methodology with a theory of the Italian-Quebecois artistic expression.

### **Quebec's Political Backdrop: The St-Léonard Crisis**

The most significant event that marked the beginning of tensions between the Italian community and nationalists of the Quebecois movement is known as the infamous *Crise de St-Léonard* (The St-Léonard Crisis). This critical moment that burst in 1968 was preceded by Quebec's renowned *Révolution tranquille*, The Quiet Revolution (1960-1966), which sought to modernize Quebec. St-Léonard was a neighborhood in rapid expansion after WWII. The area gradually became populated by a significant percentage of Italian immigrant families. Schools in St-Léonard progressively incorporated bilingual classes (English and French) in their French school system in response to the changing demographic needs of its citizens. Paradoxically, in the late 50s Italian immigrants

who were strongly Catholic were refused access to French schools, then controlled by Catholic school commissions, because of their ethnicity. This is a poorly documented fact verified noted in the article by Filippo Salvatore.

However, Francophone intellectuals concerned about the fate of the French language and the amplitude that English was taking among allophone communities, urged for action to be taken. The school commissioner imposed French unilingual classes in an attempt to limit access to English language instruction. This measure caused disarray among the Italian community. Not only did this threaten their fundamental right to choose the language of instruction for their children, but also the action itself was illegal. The Italian community became the first to manifest the unease and deep sense of injustice regarding the growing linguistic divides and cultural incongruities among Quebecers.

The subsequent failures by political parties to resolve the linguistic crisis electrified Quebec's drive for linguistic and cultural reform, the downfall of the Parti National to the first-time elected Parti Quebecois government in 1974, and the adoption, in August 1977, of the controversial Bill 101, also known as the Charter of the French language<sup>1</sup>, marked a determining moment in Quebec's history. The province proclaimed cultural and linguistic sovereignty while it imposed its laws on minorities. This led to a metamorphosis of singular cultures to define their sense of self within the very Quebecois identity struggle.

The unsettling political landscape of Quebec imposed a defining moment for citizens, particularly for the segment of the population that wasn't part of the ethno- and socio-economic hegemony that Quebec intended to build. It was a turning point in Quebec politics that polarized both the Francophone and Anglophone communities and left immigrant minorities disconcerted. The tumultuous political dimension that characterized life in Quebec was generally unbeknownst to the immigrants prior to settling in Quebec. The immigrants mourned their native land while simultaneously striving to achieve a balance between the nationalist movement and their intimate attachment to personal identity and cultural origin. Subsequently, the children born to immigrant families were entangled within a complex web of possible identities to inherit. Factors, seldom revealed, which dramatically distinguished immigrant life in Quebec from that in other Canadian provinces.

This discourse is amplified by virtue of a set of distinctive traits and complexities that the Italian community living in Quebec possesses. Although both Italian immigrants and native Quebecers were Catholic and shared phonetically similar mother tongues (French and Italian), a significant number of Ital-

<sup>1</sup> «To make of French the language of Government and the Law, as well as the normal and everyday language of work, instruction, communication, commerce and business».

ians in Quebec did not adhere, nor feel interpolated by the proposed nationalist vision of Quebec as stated in by Filippo Salvatore (*Referendum 1995*). This divergence in political vision galvanized the divide and incomprehension between the groups. The outcome is ultimately reflected in the work of Italian-Quebecois artists. Considering this significant social dichotomy, further exploration is essential to begin building a corpus and elaborate my theory on artistic ethnic expression in Quebec.

### **The Italian-Quebecois Artist**

My use of the hyphenated term 'Italian-Quebecois' refers to the first-generation born in Quebec from Italian immigrants who generally settled in Montreal during the last significant immigration wave, which ended around 1971. The majority of this cohort grew up in the mid 1960s and 70s and experienced Quebec's significant political crisis over self-determination. Furthermore, they felt, first-handedly, the effects of Bill 101's implementation in schools, particularly in urban Montreal. A generation of children caught in the political upheaval created during the adoption of Bill 101 and following that event, was hurled into the Francophone school system and often compelled to personify the Quebecois cultural model in order to gain acceptance. Consequently, the experience prematurely forced many Italians and other minority youths to strive, justify and clarify their cultural allegiance. I was one of those children. As an adult today, many questions regarding my profession as a filmmaker and my intimate relationship to my Italian roots have surfaced.

What does it mean to be an Italian-Quebecois or an Italian-Quebecois artist? Given the existing political undercurrents that most are confronted with in Quebec, it is necessary to establish which artists define themselves as Italian-Quebecois or not, and why. How do they understand the very crucial and sensitive political implications that the term 'Quebecois' has come to imply? This simple appropriation of a title implies a political position. More specifically, it indirectly affirms a preferred allegiance to a self-identity over another. The choice of using 'Italian-Quebecois', consciously combining both English and French spellings, affirms my conviction that cultural and ethnic composition cannot supersede nor negate the identity associated with birthplace. This implies that one trait cannot dominate another. Rather, the combination of both characteristics allow for an emerging Italian-Quebecois cultural canon to surface.

The Italian-Quebecois 'artist' is an individual who has deflected from professions traditionally encouraged by their immigrant Italian families, such as

choosing to become an engineer, physician or accountant. The individual 'Italian-Quebecois' artist digresses from those expectations, opting for alternative means to rationalize a complex set of experiences that involve the search for a distinct cultural identity and a sense of temporary rootedness.

This journey, often ignored, is testament to a rising Italian-Quebecois artistic patrimony and merits adequate categorization by academia. The goal is therefore to broaden the understanding of the Italian community living in Quebec's specific political context and accentuate social relevance by demonstrating how Italian-Quebecois artistic productions are reflective of transculturation, personal and physical displacements, and identity struggles.

### **Marco Calliari: Author, Composer, Musician**

I specifically chose to interview Marco Calliari, because of his cultural composition and the specific socio-political context to which he was exposed. Born in Montreal on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1974, Calliari's musical and cultural identity was significantly influenced by his modest Italian immigrant parents and their nostalgic attachment to their Italian heritage. More specifically, he was greatly impacted by his parents' love for opera and Italian melodies. Calliari's direct experience of Quebec's linguistic reforms as a child strongly shaped his musical genre. Trained in classical guitar and ignited by the need to express his multifaceted cultural reality, Calliari founded the only Francophone heavy metal band in North America, Anonymus, at age 14. This extreme musical choice contrasted greatly with his childhood musical influences. Surprisingly, Marco left the band, in 2003 to pursue an unexplained calling. He felt the need to express his Italian origins in his artistic practice, simultaneously creating a unique musical genre. Since then, Marco has revisited Italian and Quebecois classics, and composed his own opus rendering the material attractive to a contemporary audience, while singing in Italian. His Italian albums *Che la Vita*, *Al Faro Est* and more significantly his latest album *Mi Ricordo*, all connect the complexity of Quebecois identity through the lens of Calliari's personal relationship to his Italian roots. During the filmed encounter, Marco was at a loss for words when explaining his creative impulse and when trying to describe his musical genre. During our conversation, he used musical and lyrical narrative to express what he could not say in words, by spontaneously grasping his guitar and singing. It occurred to me that it was completely unnatural to ask an artist to translate his creative process into conventional codified language.

### Italian-Quebecois Identity

To my questions about identity and sense of belonging, Marco often responded with a sheepish smile and sighed. Looking afar, Marco instinctively responded in Italian as though the words able to transpire the authenticity of his feelings existed only in Italian. I, too, felt that speaking in Italian was the only way to genuinely convey my state of emotion. I was immediately attuned to his visceral and intimate attachment to his identity and native tongue, which perhaps can only be rationalized internally. His choice to pursue a career composing and singing in Italian rather than continue with Anonymus, was a tough decision. However, Marco realized that his embedded cultural and linguistic heritage couldn't be suppressed from his artistic practice.

The emotional roller coaster that surfaced during the interview confirmed the existence of heart-wrenching and continuous, often unconscious, self-questioning episodes about identity. That is the fundamental aspect of the Italian-Quebecois artistic community, which raises the question: how do artists connect their Italian ethnicity to a creative practice within a distinctive political, social, linguistic and exceptionally 'pluriethnic' climate, that has come to characterize the province of Quebec? Could it be that the distinct political and social stance maintained and encouraged in Quebec has obliged the Italian-Quebecois artist to further explore, affirm and establish one's own artistic style, identity and sense of place? In an attempt to convey sentiments of heritage, history, identity and a sense of belonging, the findings show that the creative process experienced by Italian-Quebecois artists enable them to articulate a unique narrative that speaks to these intricate political and social transitions. Given this specificity, Italian-Quebecois artwork possesses its own distinct cultural dimensions, which are in marked contrast with the ones inculcated through Quebec's national political landscape.

### La 'québécoisité'

Marco is a local Quebec-born artist, yet his musical genre is not sufficiently Quebecois, because he does not sing in French, but Italian. Due to Marco's deliberate artistic choice, his work is classified by the *l'Adisque* (the Quebec equivalent for the Juno Awards) as *Musique du monde* 'World Music', therefore cannot be nominated in several other categories. Marco's music is not officially recognized as 'Quebecois'. There is a fine line that artists must walk in Quebec, when they have Italian or other ethnic backgrounds. They can express a calculated amount of cultural distinction and composition, so long as it does

not supersede the norms of what it means to be Quebecois. Although Marco is aware of this frustrating contradiction, there remains an intangible need in him to maintain his Italian heritage through his music, at the risk of offending the Quebecois Francophone public, media and music industry.

Although several scholars of Italian origin in Quebec and across Canada have studied the question of Italian ethnicity, most define the Italian-‘Canadian’ experience, identity and immigration process, rather than distinguish the numerous factors that shape the Italian artistic expression within Quebec’s complex social environment.

“Enigmatico” (1995) by Patrizia Fogliato, is one of the few films that probes expression of Italian-Canadian identity from an artistic point of view. The act of producing ‘art’ is an unconventional demonstration of devotion and tribute to the Italian immigrant experience, by which the artist’s childhood is significantly inspired. The act of making art can dislodge and disrupt profound areas of the artist’s identity, which would otherwise not have surfaced, nor have had the opportunity to flourish. Yet again, little about this artistic translation is related to Montreal’s or Quebec’s complex socio-political context.

Francophone Quebecois intellectuals have recently designated: ‘la québécoisité’ as a set of beliefs and values that reflect a common way of being *Quebecois* (Gervais, Karmis, Lamoureux). Marco’s experience with *l’Adisque* is indicative of the incongruence in qualifying something or someone as sufficiently Quebecois or not. There is a misconception between the understanding of how ‘la québécoisité’ is an inclusive model and the reality that ‘it’ is continuously altered by the cultural and social contributions of diverse ethnic groups present in Quebec.

### **‘Mi Ricordo’ – *Je me souviens***

A test screening of the pilot documentary for my thesis was conducted in front of an arbitrary viewership in Montreal’s little Italy’s Dante Park in August 2014. Though there was a sense of appreciation, few reacted as hoped. In facing the audience’s apathy, Marco intimately shared an anecdote that renders the theory of la ‘québécoisité’ debatable. Marco was invited to perform at Quebec’s Saint John the Baptist National day festivities for the first time in June 2014. Thirty minutes into his show, an audience member demanding he sing in French perturbed Marco’s performance. A similar episode occurred during Marco’s performance in a multiethnic neighborhood of Montreal just a month later. A young man loudly requested that Marco perform his song in French.



Paradoxically, Marco performed songs from his latest album: *Mi Ricordo, I remember* in English and *Je me souviens*, in French. The latter citation strategically designates Quebec's license plate motto, which was changed from the previous "La belle Province" in the late 70s, by the then newly elected Parti Québécois. The album is incomparable, for it represents the first time attempt by an Italian-Quebécois musician not to simply translate renowned Québécois songs into Italian, but to enhance awareness of Italian and Québécois musical patrimony in a most avant-garde manner. This creative choice is accentuated by his subdued yet determining promotional strategy, which features a picture of Marco riding a Vespa while holding Quebec's flag, on the *Mi Ricordo* cd cover. Marco deliberately established a path to make sense of his cultural and political positioning, while remaining faithful to the complexity of his musical arrangements.

If 'la québécoisité', as it is now defined, is to become and remain relevant to all citizens of Quebec, it must be understood as a cultural phenomenon in continuous evolution and transmutation. It must address how it impacts the creative processes of Italian-Quebécois artists. More specifically, it must examine the resulting artwork representative of their mediation between a very personal and individual identity and Quebec's laborious and continuous effort to promulgate a national Québécois culture. The distinct political and social stance maintained and encouraged in Quebec has unconsciously obliged Italian-Quebécois artists to delineate, affirm and engrave their own artistic style and character. Marco Calliari's compositions and decisive musical choices provide significant evidence to further elaborate this thought process. Ironically, denominating a specific set of cultural values risks segregating individuals or groups that do not adhere to that cultural canon, nullifying 'la québécoisité's raison d'être'.

## Observations

It is clear that the process by which individuals will divulge essential and privileged information is painstaking, intricate and multifaceted. The 'creative process' is a construct, much like the development of 'personal identity' is. The process is composed of random moments influenced by various historical, social and political advents not only marked by a Québécois political landscape, but by the Italian immigration experience and influence within that very landscape.

Furthermore, accessing the process of ethnic artistic expression in Québécois society is complicated. Even more so when trying to understand its manifestation in relation to Italian-Quebécois artists, as it implies striving to ascertain



and validate their sense of identity through artwork. It is not simply a question of mirroring cultural hybridity or expressing a combination of two cultural veracities in artwork. Instead, it is a continuous struggle to express the accumulated cultural realities and experiences internalized by the artists. In the case of Italian-Quebecois artists, their work is reflective of this ongoing process.

The paradox emerges when ethnic artists of various disciplines produce artwork that is embedded with elements carrying distinct cultural compositions and plurileveled identities, which do not conform to Quebecois artistic industry standards. Thus, the Italian-Quebecois artwork is not qualified as 'true Quebecois' art. An ethnic artist can express a calculated amount of cultural distinction and configuration, so long as it does not supersede the norms of what it means to be Quebecois. What was unsettling during the interview with Marco was his need to rationalize his identity as a 'Quebecois', as though it is a status to attain, yet remains repeatedly unattainable, leaving Marco and his music undefined and undervalued. This confirms that no suitable term exists to categorize this phenomenological characteristic that clearly surfaces while creating and producing Italian-Quebecois art. Therefore, it is necessary to expand the study of those artworks and ground the process by which artists connect their Italian ethnicity to their creative practice within Quebec's political landscape.

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