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Speaking Through Silence in F.G. Paci's *Black Madonna*¹

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Abstract: The relationship between food, consumption and language has been of recent interest to scholars studying immigration and multiculturalism. This essay proposes that F.G. Paci focuses on the mother-daughter relationship throughout *Black Madonna*, in which the central conflict of the novel revolves around representations of food — and of force-feeding and excretion in particular — ultimately to argue for a necessary balance between mind and body for hyphenated identities within multicultural contexts. The conflict between force-feeding and excretion — ingesting and expelling — foregrounds the politics of food and its potential for calcifying tensions between inclusion and exclusion. While Paci demonstrates how Canadian multiculturalism requires a negotiation of immigrant identities, he does so through food-related themes that symbolize cultural knowledge and belonging. In this essay, the character of Assunta, the Italian-Canadian immigrant mother, is read as a vehicle for Paci to give voice to the challenges and complexities of immigrant experiences.

Keywords: Paci; *Black Madonna*; immigrant identity; multicultural identity; consumption; communication; food

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In his 1982 novel *Black Madonna*, F.G. Paci writes of Italian-Canadian experience, championing the importance of communication among first- and second-generation immigrant family members. Representations of food — Italian food in particular — function in the novel as structural devices for exploring the symbolic role that food plays in bridging cultural differences. When language is not readily accessible, it becomes the duty of the body to express the inexpressible. *Black Madonna* can be read as a narrative that explores the emotional, cultural, and political changes that surround bodily acts of consumption and expulsion, sanitization and uncleanliness, and freedom and control. Representations of bodily acts appear throughout the novel as vehicles for Paci to examine the complex emotions of passion, desire, resentment, and displacement — phenomena that are not easily transcribed into words, but are, rather, sensual experiences felt through the intimacy of mind and body. Paci argues for a balance between mind and body and examines the possible consequences of leading an imbalanced life as an immigrant in Canada. This paper focuses on how the author presents these issues of imbalance through the mother-daughter relationship between Assunta, the Italian-Canadian immigrant mother of the Barone family, and Marie, her rebellious daughter. Paci explores these issues within the broader, complex context of the Barone family. In doing so, he demonstrates the importance of balancing the mind and body when faced with the obstacle of negotiating belonging in relation to one's own cultural identity: in this case, Italian heritage in a multicultural milieu.

Paci portrays the West End of Sault Ste. Marie, the Italian-Canadian neighbourhood the Barones call home, as a deteriorating memory and a fading piece of history to mirror the cultural deterioration and silencing of Assunta. This post-World War II context foregrounds the anxiety that the Barone family feels about their difference as Italian immigrants in Canada. Set in the era in which Canada was reacting to cultural nationalism with the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, an

official policy governing cultural difference in Canada, the novel clearly addresses the anxiety for immigrants to ‘fit in’ to ‘mainstream’ Canadian society. Notably, the policy signals the necessity for Canada to acknowledge its cultural diversity, as well as an underlying compulsion to accept some forms of cultural expression and prohibit others that fail to adhere to the norms of Canadian society. In this paper, I will read Assunta as a character that demonstrates Sara Ahmed’s concept of the “stranger stranger,” a theory that describes the limitations of cultural acceptance in a multicultural nation. More specifically, I will explore how Assunta is excluded from feeling a sense of belonging through images of uncleanliness symbolized by objects such as her chamber pot. But Assunta is lifted from the category of the “stranger stranger” when Marie realizes her mother’s particular relationship to food — that is, the potential of food to bridge differences between cultures. I read food in the novel as a language, or a medium of non-verbal communication. In *Black Madonna*, representations of food highlight themes of alienation, detachment, and lost identities to address the hidden history of Assunta’s immigrant experiences. Evoking Assunta’s immigrant stories acknowledges the importance of confronting the challenge of balancing hyphenated identities. Paci demonstrates the need for this balance — represented through language, the body, and consumption — as a means to overcome cultural barriers and achieve the necessary bridging of cultural identities that is essential for individuals to fully participate within multicultural contexts.

The image of the city in the novel is that of a wasteland, with an industrial steel plant at its centre and remnants of neglected houses in the old West End neighbourhood. The emphasis on a clear lack of growth and the images of death within the city produces the framework to interrogate and reflect on the reductive nature of Canada’s cultural metaphor of the mosaic, for both are instances of loss and silencing. The identity and history of Assunta remains hidden for

most the novel, much like a tile of a mosaic that lies flat, unidimensional, and dehistoricized. While multiculturalism is painted as an inclusive space for a variety of cultures and ethnicities, Eva Mackey challenges this idea in her book, *The House of Difference*, in which key problems and contradictions are acknowledged in the language of the Multiculturalism Act. Mackey's work provides theoretical support for this essay's analysis of Assunta as a character whose complex identity is tragically discounted and forced into obscure representations of cultural difference. Mackey argues that official multiculturalism, rather than promoting inclusiveness, is an "at-tempt to manage a potentially dangerous situation through recognition and management of culture" (77). Mackey deconstructs the Multiculturalism Act to reveal the connotations of specific terms like "management" and "recognition." She interprets "management" as a strategy that arises out of a fear of those in power being engulfed by immigrant cultures; the policy aims to "recognize" ethnic groups while also "managing" them at the same time. In this context, the Act de-fines ethnic subjects as groups, or communities, and simultaneously strips a sense of individuality from those subjects. Consequently, the complexities of entire cultures and immigrant experiences are recognized only as superficial signifiers, such as culinary traditions and stereotypes, to uphold the national ideal of multiculturalism. Paci explores this silencing and loss of individuality through the novel's focus upon the lives of the Barone children. In their minds, their parents re-main mere stereotypes of Italian immigrants without any depth of explored history or past, and this is suggested when Paci explains that "Marie knew only the barest details of Assunta's life in the old country" (29). Paci raises questions not only about the lives and history of the parents, but also about immigrants who become faceless as their history and culture are reduced to shallow signifiers of difference.

Questions about Assunta's history remain unanswered; however, it is through food that her struggle with her hyphenated identity surfaces. Assunta resists the "[influence of] the English and their stupid eating habits" by cultivating a sense of belonging within the home, in which food and eating habits become symbols of resistance (32). When Marie returns from a university in Toronto with new eating habits, Assunta interprets her refusal to eat Italian food as a lack of participation in her history and in the shared heritage of her family. For Assunta, sharing food is sharing a part of her Italian homeland; Marie's rejection of her food is a rejection of her mother. She lashes out: "You come into my house and you don't eat my food . . . An ingrata you are. A stranger you are. How can you be my daughter?" (102). Assunta reacts against the ignorance of her children, who oppress her when she tries to offer a taste of her past and homeland. As a result, Assunta faces rejection and is silenced by Marie's conscious decision to avoid eating her mother's food. Marie, in her turn, derides her mother's abrasive actions as she impatiently tells her brother Joey, "I've never been able to understand why she's always tried to push the food down our throats while she eats nothing herself" (102). The conflict between Assunta's force-feeding and Marie's refusal to consume Italian food highlights the tensions between inclusion and exclusion within the family and the larger multicultural context. This episode of intense and violent emotion when Assunta attempts to force-feed her children stems from her fear that they will never have what she has: a holistic knowledge of the culture that she has lived and loved all her life. While Assunta gives her children big helpings of traditional foods like pasta, she barely eats her own Italian dishes. Her limited indulgence in her own food suggests that food is symbolic of the knowledge and passion for Italy that Assunta already has and wishes to share with her children; however, her point of view remains hidden largely because her expression of Italian culture is not judged as valuable by her children. Importantly, Assunta does not discard her cultural heritage in exchange for acceptance,

but, rather, increasingly rejects the idea of fitting in by maintaining her language, culinary traditions, and connection to her Italian roots. Indeed, Mackey's argument of the connotations of "management" is demonstrated in Paci's account of Assunta, who exists as a locus of cultural knowledge but is reduced to a figure of manageable stereotypes who has only food to offer to her children, and by extension, to the country.

While the novel demonstrates how people become merely stock identities contained within symbols of cultural difference, it simultaneously encourages the reader to think about unvoiced immigrant stories that may be silenced within dominant literary traditions. Although Paci gradually reveals traces of Assunta's history and the secrets of her life through images of food, Assunta's identity remains fragmented; old photos, food, and tradition become all that she is. It is through subtle symbols such as the chamber pot that Paci gestures towards the liminal state of existence for Assunta, who uses both food and the body as objects of resistance against the fragmenting effects that multiculturalism can have. For Assunta, food counteracts the depreciation of her culture because it functions as a communicative tool for imparting Italian cultural knowledge to her children.

Assunta's immigrant experience is also silenced through the language barrier that exists between the children and their parents — a barrier that manifests on the level of the body. Marie repeatedly feels child-like because of her inability to find the "right" words to express herself, often resorting to silence and saying nothing at all to her parents. Violence ensues at the Barone Christmas dinner table when a bowl of ravioli pasta becomes the fiery centerpiece between language barriers and deeply rooted feelings of resentment. Assunta's force-feeding and Marie's frustration at her mother's refusal to accept that her new diet excludes pasta becomes another instance in which Marie feels infantilized; she tells her father, "I'm 24 and she persists in treating

me like a ten-year-old.” Here Marie turns away from Assunta and toward her father to speak, ignoring her mother’s pleading for communication: “why you not speak to me? I understand!” (102). In a surge of inexpressible emotion, Marie violently grabs a handful of pasta and stuffs it into her mouth as an exaggerated display of force-feeding to visibly show, instead of express in words, what Assunta’s force-feeding physically feels like. Later, when Marie tells her husband Richard the story of what happened, he interrupts her, “but it was such a childish thing you did” (108) to which Marie admits, “I couldn’t help it” (109). The language barrier leads to feelings and emotions being left unexpressed throughout the novel, and so the body must speak in the absence of words. Paci thus presents the stomach, rather than verbal communication, as a medium of expression, and language inhibitions are rendered through bodily sensations. Marie and her brother Joey often state that they feel a “sinking feeling in [their] stomach” (44) or a “choking sensation” (42) when they cannot find the right words to say, a situation that frequently leaves them “choked with emotion” (73). Assunta attempts to compensate for the lack of shared language by sharing her food. Without language, however, Marie sees her mother as an “illiterate peasant” (37) lacking education and refined etiquette who has a “stupid obsession with food” (74) that leads Marie to dislike her body and resent her mother’s seemingly forceful methods of feeding her. For Marie, to consume Italian food is to surrender to her mother’s methods of shaping her into a “good Italian daughter” (67), and she eventually rejects the food as a way of thwarting her mother’s control: “If she couldn’t go [to the party], she’d starve herself to death. Then she’d show her. Her mother would be sorry then” (37). The stomach is thus presented throughout the novel as a site of emotion and rooted anxieties. These emotions and anxieties manifest themselves through Marie’s perception of her body, for she “couldn’t help thinking of her body as gross and indecent” (76). Marie’s bodily shame returns to its source in her mother, who constantly reminds her of her bodily

expulsions. As Assunta declares during one mother-daughter fight, “I wash the shit from your pants all the time.” While Marie understands her mother’s “earthy vulgarity” as a malicious act, it may also be read as Assunta’s way of demonstrating how deeply she knows her daughter (71).

Bodily shame and Italian food become triggers that lead Marie to feel out of control and to see her body and Italian food as repulsive. Julia Kristeva's definition of the abject, that which we do not live with, but sanitize, relates to Black Madonna in terms of the intimate connection between food and identity. Here sanitization refers to the process of assimilation: Marie treats Italian food as a contaminated and unassimilable object (the abject) that threatens her desire to disavow her Italian heritage; however, she can never completely separate herself from her culture. Kristeva illustrates the experience of abjection with a description of vomiting to demonstrate how the self ('I') simultaneously rejects the milk and itself: “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it . . . I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself” (3). Whereas Marie feels ashamed about her earthly bodily excretions, Assunta accepts them and does not ignore the abject. Marie's ultimate repulsion for Italian food and her diagnosis of anorexia suggests that she desires to disavow her mother and heritage: “Since her first year at university she had stopped eating Italian food altogether. Later, it wasn’t only Italian food, but anything having to do with her mother’s particular dishes” (100). In rejecting her mother, Marie is rejecting the Italian elements within her. Indeed, Marie believes that abstaining from Italian foods will allow her to achieve some form of truth and understanding about herself; however, the abjection of her mother’s food (and heritage) only leads to an imbalance within herself: she cannot ignore her Italian roots without consequences. When she returns home from university with new dietary routines, her stomach recoils at the taste of her mother's food: “The food had an immediate effect. Her head felt it was lolling on an unsteady ship. She felt nauseated . . . her stomach began

to heave” (103). The unsteady ship metaphor suggests that Marie has become imbalanced. Indeed, at university she is focused on becoming solely rational and logical by sub-merging herself in mathematics and philosophy, but in doing so, she loses the ability to reconnect with the emotional depth of home: “Marie . . . used mathematics as a way of breaking her parental connection” (139). In not consuming her mother's food, Marie loses the opportunity to communicate through the only language that Assunta knows: the body.

The disconnect between Assunta and Marie is not only worsened by quarrels over issues of consumption, but also over issues of expulsion. Assunta's chamber pot appears at several points in the novel and becomes a symbol of her inability to adapt her “old ways” to Canadian conceptions of hygiene. As Marie states, “she's never adapted. She's stayed adamantly Italian” (160). The image of Assunta's chamber pot as an undesirable object of waste reminds the reader of the wasteland that is the city of Sault Ste. Marie: both are represented as sites of excrement, or remnants of the past. Each reference to excrement is important within this narrative of cultural identity. Notably, Kristeva's theory of the abject does not apply to Assunta, for she refuses to sanitize her culture; however, while Assunta adamantly preserves her language, culinary traditions and hygiene habits, the city of Sault Ste. Marie is bleached of its historical significance: “urban renewal came and levelled the eyesores” of the city (20). The dissimilarity between Assunta and the city demonstrates her unwillingness to assimilate into what is considered acceptable. In speaking of the barriers that prevent immigrants from fully participating in Canadian society, I believe it is important to consider Sara Ahmed's critique of multiculturalism. Ahmed argues that multiculturalism is simply a term motivated by the nation's desire to appear committed to openness, though, in reality, it is only tolerant of certain forms of cultural expression. In *Multiculturalism and the Proximity of Strangers*, Ahmed resonates with Mackey's argument about

multi-culturalism and “management of difference,” for she formulates a difference between acceptable immigrants and unacceptable immigrants to highlight the social and political pressures for assimilation. Ahmed focuses on the “two figures of the ‘the stranger’”:

In one figure, the stranger appears different, but is the same underneath; this stranger can be assimilated, and even welcomed, insofar as it enables the nation itself to appear as different. In the other figure, the stranger’s dress can reveal only a strange being; this stranger stranger cannot be assimilated. The stranger stranger, however, cannot simply be understood as the unassimilable other: rather, such strangers are assimilated precisely as the unassimilable and hence they allow us to face the ‘limit’ of the multicultural nation (‘we’ are open to some strangers, but not the stranger strangers, who refuse to be ‘native’ underneath). (106)

The concept of the stranger stranger permits Ahmed to approach multiculturalism more closely and to distinguish between what a nation treats as desirable difference (shallow expressions of cultural heritage) versus undesirable difference (difference that offends national values). Ahmed’s analysis is consistent with the limits of inclusivity under official multiculturalism in Canada. Assunta remains what Ahmed would describe as a stranger stranger, or the unassimilable, when she refuses to sanitize her culture, or assimilate, to fit into Canadian society. The death of Adamo, Assunta’s husband, launches Assunta into a mourning period, which then serves as an opportunity for Paci to comment on dominant Canadian ways of life and highlight his particular minority perspective. Joey tells the Catholic priest, Father Sarlo, “Since [his] father’s death it’s like she’s become a total stranger” (158). In cutting her hair strangely and not sanitizing her chamber pot, Assunta becomes a figure that is distant and difficult to understand because she is not like the woman she used to be. While the story remains fixed on the children’s lives and on Maria coming to terms with her Italian culture, it also follows Assunta’s decline into the role of a stranger

stranger. Thus, Paci highlights the boundaries of multiculturalism by juxtaposing first and second generation hyphenated identities who are included or excluded from Canadian society based on the extent to which they retain their cultural heritage.

Assunta's six-month mourning period, during which she returns to her "old-world" traditions while coming to terms with the loss of her husband, becomes an occasion for Paci to speak about the silencing of those who do not have a voice as immigrants in Canada. The image of the chamber pot functions as an opportunity to explore the forgotten history of Assunta's immigrant experience; the excrement is simultaneously symbolic of Assunta's rejection by Marie and the larger community as a stranger whose inability to adapt has rendered her alienated, but is also a statement of her resistance to this exclusion. Assunta removes herself from the abject through acts of resistance, for she is described as remaining "so blatantly old-country with her vulgar ways. Like still keeping a chamber pot under her bed at night" (39). Indeed, Assunta demonstrates her refusal to sanitize her culture through her determined use of the chamber pot:

The TV room hadn't been aired yet. He could smell the foul odour of her chamber pot. She made a practice of emptying it out first thing in the morning, but it still managed to leave a lingering smell. (80)

The lingering smell suggests a part of Assunta that can never be sanitized or made into the proper assimilable subject; although she attempts to clean it in the mornings, which suggests that she does try to be "acceptable," she does not achieve this status. Cultural differences surrounding such matters as personal hygiene and an inability to operate in the English-speaking world underline Assunta's failure to assimilate in Canadian society. Thus, the eventual death of Assunta seems inevitable because it hovers over the novel's central conflict of imbalance in its depiction of Assunta as never fully coming to terms with her new space in Canada; her inability to become the

“acceptable stranger” causes both an internal death within Assunta and her literal death at the end of the novel. Her Italian traditions keep her alienated and silenced and prevent her from being able to speak for herself except through symbols of food and excrement.

The need for balance between the mind and body emerges through conflicts that arise when there is a refusal to negotiate some kind of symmetry between Italian traditions and Canadian ideals. Tension between the mind and body is especially prevalent during the episode in which Marie discovers she has been accepted into a university away from home, placing a further strain on the relationship between her and Assunta. Marie describes her experience of acceptance into university through terms associated with the experience of eating food: she “read and reread the letter, savouring every last morsel of triumph” (65). Consuming the gratification of the letter bite by bite, and word by word, she achieves a sense of triumph over her mother and the Italian roots from which she so desperately seeks to separate herself. This opportunity suggests that Marie desires a kind of nourishment only attainable from what her mother resists: a Canadian life-style. Similarly, Assunta disassociates herself from her daughter's academic achievements and continually privileges her own values over her daughter's education in the same manner that Marie distances herself from Italian values by championing education as the only thing of importance. The dichotomy of Italian values versus Canadian education is symbolically presented through the different levels of the home. The “Italian-speaking house” is downstairs in the kitchen, where food functions as a symbol of resistance against the threatening “English speaking country,” which is represented through the education that Maria begins to embody upstairs when she opens her acceptance letter (69). However, Assunta's rejection of her daughter's education is not a deliberate disapproval of intellectual development but rather a resistance to the Canadian reality that exists outside of her self-imposed exile. This hostility hinders her relationship with Marie, who similarly

is unable to connect with Assunta because of her own rejection of her Italian heritage. Ironically, both yearn for a connection to each other's worlds and make subtle attempts to understand the standards of the other; however, they are restricted by the obstacle of communication. When Marie leaves for university and marries Richard, a man of British descent, she begins to literally and figuratively lose the nutrients and nourishment she needs to survive her second-generation experience. By denying her body her mother's food, she develops "a mild form of anorexia nervosa" as she struggles to define and distance her mind apart from the bodily cravings associated with home (141). Marie's education, marriage, and diet fulfill her conscious desire to emancipate herself from her mother's Italian influences, though only on a surface and conscious level. Unconsciously, however, her anorexia suggests that food not only serves as a cultural rejuvenation, but also as a violent repression of her Italian heritage.

Marie finally discovers a sense of balance when she begins to see the perspective of her mother after having a child of her own and becoming separated from the academics of her school and her husband. Paci explores the dichotomy of the mind and body further through the relationship of Richard and Marie: "If Richard's work was pushing him higher into the sky, Michael's birth had brought her down, closer to the earth" (151). It is through this experience of birth, an experience "closer to the earth," that Marie can connect to her mother. There is a shift in her perception of how to raise her child when she becomes less engaged with her schooling. During the early stages of Michael's childhood, after much reluctance, Assunta is given babysitting time by Marie; however, Marie demands that the "instructions for feeding the child would be scrupulously followed" (149). Marie maintains authority over when Michael eats and what he eats to deliberately restrict opportunities for Assunta to gain control of Michael's life and, by extension, Marie's. This power struggle surrounding food can be further examined with Arjun Appadurai's

study of what he calls “gastro politics” in his book *Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia*. As Appadurai argues, gastro-politics is a power-hunger that occurs when “food can be made to serve . . . semiotic ends . . . [from] those who control the cooking and serving process” (501). Marie always fights to maintain some measure of control over herself and against her mother, and she intentionally provides strict instructions for Michael's diet as an attempt to avoid having her own childhood experience imposed on her son. Marie refuses to serve the same Italian foods as her mother because it reminds her of her own powerless position at the dinner table, where her mother would “[direct] operations as if managing a war game” (32). Ironically, of course, Marie resembles the same ty-rant-like figure at her own dinner table when she insists on Michael eating his food and resorts to physically slapping him when he refuses to do so. She is then forced to confront the same questions and reality that her own mother had resisted confronting: “he had come of her flesh and yet he had the capacity to think and feel in a way entirely different from her . . . she had made him, carried him inside her, and now he had no right to be different from her” (142). Paci captures the process of Marie becoming more like her mother through this dinner scene, which is a deliberate reenactment of the behaviour and feelings that Assunta demonstrated and experienced as she grappled with Marie's rebellion. Marie is drawn back to her Italian roots through the reconnection with her body that occurs when she has her own child to care for. Once Marie has achieved this sense of grounding, she can return home and cherish the memories of her mother. Following Assunta's funeral, Marie seeks out what she calls the Hope Chest — a chest belonging to Assunta, passed through generations and containing memories of its owner — an important part of Marie's childhood and a reflection of the broken relationship with her mother. The object had remained inaccessible to Marie until she sought to unveil the “value hidden in the old trunk” and mend the gaps between her and Assunta through a desire to understand her mother's past and her

Italian heritage (188). Indeed, she symbolically embodies her mother at the end of the novel when she wears Assunta's black madonna dress, suggesting Marie's emotional connection with and resigned resistance to the complexities of the Italian culture that shaped her childhood experiences. In the novel's conclusion, then, Paci suggests that Marie has gained insight into both her Canadian and her Italian roots and begun the journey towards achieving balance in her life.

In an effort to give voice to stories often silenced within dominant literary traditions, Paci's novel begins and ends with attention given to minority identities. Significantly, Paci employs the death and decline of Assunta to represent her marginalization within Canadian society and give voice to her silenced story. It is through the dominant narrative of Marie's quest for identity that Paci appeals to a wide audience, but within the narrative lies hidden Assunta's immigrant experiences, which speak through symbols such as food, excrement, and the body. Paci challenges this silence through representations of Assunta's resistance, evident in the mother-daughter relationship that consists of disagreements about what it means to be Italian-Canadian and in her embracing of the position of the "stranger stranger" when she deals with the death of her husband. Paci works to destabilize these boundaries of the acceptable and unacceptable stranger by following the narrative of Marie coming to terms with her Italian roots. The conflict between Marie and her mother is grounded in the difficulty of communication: Assunta finds agency through a connection with the body, whereas Marie distances herself from her body and the food that connects her to Assunta. It is through the mother-daughter relationship that Paci is able to defend the importance of balancing mind and body in making the self a place of belonging. The dichotomy of the mind and body thus represents the struggle to balance Italian and Canadian identities in the novel. Assunta literally and figuratively experiences death when she is not able to balance her identity by connecting with her Canadian children and society. Paci thus demonstrates the

complexities of living a hyphenated identity with the novel's central conflict: achieving a balance is difficult, yet crucial for surviving in multicultural Canada.

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