Franca Iacovetta

# Writing Women's Community-based Pluralism into the History of Canadian Multiculturalism

**Abstract**

*In contrast to the male and elite focus of much of the scholarship on Canadian multiculturalism, this study highlights the neglected history of women's community-based pluralist activism. It does so through an analysis of the populist-oriented cultural programs and social work interventions of the International Institute of Metropolitan Toronto, a post-1945 liberal pluralist social welfare organization that sought to integrate immigrants into Canadian society while also promoting cultural diversity. Set against the claim that Institute-style pluralism helped to inform later official multiculturalism, the article adopts the concept of a double-edged pluralism to assess the limits and possibilities of a flawed and uneven yet influential ideology, and one that contained contradictory elements. It also discusses the themes of difficult stories or conversations and entangled narratives in relation to the Eurocentric bias of much Institute pageantry and commemoration as well as the confidential case files.*

**Résumé**

*Contrairement à l'accent masculin et élitaire d'une grande partie de la recherche sur le multiculturalisme canadien, cette étude met en valeur l'histoire méconnue de l'activisme pluraliste et communautaire des femmes. Elle est réalisée à partir d'une analyse des programmes culturels plutôt populistes et des actions sociales de l'Institut International de la Métropole de Toronto, une association caritative libérale et pluraliste de l'après-guerre qui visait à intégrer les immigrants dans la société canadienne tout en promouvant la diversité culturelle. Opposé à l'affirmation que le pluralisme institutionnel favorisait la formation du multiculturalisme officiel ultérieur, l'article adopte le concept d'un pluralisme à double tranchant pour évaluer les limites et les possibilités d'une idéologie imparfaite, mais influente qui contient des éléments contradictoires. L'article tient compte également d'histoires ou conversations difficiles et de récits emmêlés en relation avec le biais eurocentrique du faste et de la commémoration de l'Institut ainsi que des dossiers confidentiels.*

Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien 39 (2019) 28-45

The scholarship on Canadian multiculturalism sheds important light on myriad themes, including the role played by male elites – politicians, policy-makers, leaders of ethnic communities, and others – in the adoption and evolution of official multiculturalism. It also offers insightful analysis of the critical texts, philosophical values, and social behavior underpinning Canadian articulations of liberal pluralism (Lupul 1978, Kymlicka 2001, Forbes 2007, Temelini 2007, Day 2010, Caccia 2010, Haque 2012). However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the historical role of women as multicultural advocates who sought to implement pluralist principles 'on the front lines' through community-based activities. This article helps to address this gap through an examination of the International Institute of Metropolitan Toronto, a post-1945 liberal, pluralist, and multi-ethnic social organization that served non-English-speaking newcomers, primarily though not exclusively Europeans, and promoted community-based programs and cultural diversity. Staffed in part by multilingual workers from the targeted immigrant communities, the Toronto Institute combined the neighborhood focus of a settlement house with a wider self-definition as a central community hub serving the city's different nationality groups.

A central claim of the larger project, which highlights the women without ignoring the men of the Institute, is that the women's still largely unknown pluralist activism helped to lay the groundwork for a later support of official multiculturalism among ordinary Anglo-Canadians. Here I focus on the women who figured so prominently in the Institute. Instead of a 'top-down' analysis of admittedly influential male elites, then, I offer a "bottom-up" study and critical assessment of women's more grassroots-oriented pluralism. The research also contributes to the growing historical scholarship mapping the longer and multiple roots of late-twentieth-century pluralism in North America (Selig 2008, Greene 2005, Kazal 2008, Cupido 1998, Igartua 2006, Iacovetta 2011, 2012).

In arguing that the Toronto Institute espoused a double-edged, or paradoxical, pluralism, my analysis moves beyond polarized depictions of liberal pluralism as constituting a progressive or retrograde ideology. It offers instead a multilayered framework for assessing the possibilities and limits as well as the tensions, contradictions, and ironic implications of an approach to incorporating immigrants into a self-defined immigrant-receiving nation-state. The evidence reveals, for example, that the desire of Institute personnel to encourage integration in a manner that preserved ethnic cultures and promoted diversity existed in tandem with a seemingly contradictory insistence that immigrants 'absorb' core Canadian political and social values. Similarly, activities meant to preserve and celebrate cultural distinctiveness, such as the multi-ethnic cultural programs and folk festivals, existed alongside the efforts of counsellors and class instructors to reshape immigrant behaviour in conformity with dominant middle-class Canadian models. The concept of a double-edged pluralism also applies to the social work interventions of Institute caseworkers: at times, they acted like progressive pluralists; other times, intrusive experts. It also invites attention to the limits or ironies of an Institute-style cultural

pluralism that, for instance, harnessed folk cultures to a modernist nation-building project to produce a more robust multicultural nation while sidelining Indigenous peoples and racialized immigrants. The Institute's double-edged pluralism also played out in a contested context marked by opposing liberal calls for ethnic inclusion, the imposition of conservative gender and family models, and Cold War agendas. In probing pluralism's positive (multi-ethnic community-building) and negative (Eurocentric, assimilative) features against a contemporary context shaped by an acute refugee crisis, raging xenophobia, fears of terrorism, and declarations of multiculturalism's failure to incorporate immigrants, I ask, too, whether even a deeply flawed multiculturalism offers any redeeming qualities or lessons for our current horrific times (Bannerji 2003; Schrover/Moloney 2013). It took the death of a boy to prompt action, but the lauded Canadian response to the Syrian refugees, which was heavily community-based, arguably fits an Institute-style pluralism that resonated with progressive people. In addressing the double-edged character of Institute pluralism, I also consider the themes of entangled narratives and difficult stories or conversations.

**Some Historical Context**

The Toronto International Institute came into formal existence in 1956, when two post-war reception groups established in 1952 merged and joined the American Federation of International Institutes. The U.S. institutes date to 1910, when social worker Edith Terry Brower founded the New York City institute as a department of the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association). Dozens of institutes, which also had roots in the settlement house movement, emerged in cities across the interwar United States. Opposing the era's dominant assimilationist ethos, they embraced a liberal stance that combined an endorsement of cultural diversity with an insistence that immigrants adapt to the American mainstream (Mohl/Betten 1974, Mohl 1982, Hoganson 2007). After World War Two, some new institutes, including Toronto's, were established.

Located for much of its history in the immigrant-heavy west-end, Toronto's was the lone Canadian institute, though its personnel networked with other pluralist-minded Canadians as well as their US institute colleagues. In addition to reflecting the U.S. movement's goals, the Toronto Institute's liberal-integration mandate also drew on a long history of Canadian pluralist experiments that, through a mix of celebration and appropriation, portrayed Canada as a mosaic of integrated cultures. Such dynamics characterised the collection activities of turn-of-the-twentieth-century women's handicraft groups, for example, and the popular inter-war folk festivals organized by CPR (Canadian Pacific Railway) promoter J. Murray Gibbon; they also informed the intellectual currents among late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century social reformers (Henderson 2005, McKay 1994, Bellay 2001). The wide-ranging activities of the community-chest-funded institutes, including Toronto's, included help with jobs, training, welfare referrals, and counselling. They ran social,

recreational, and cultural clubs and programs meant to bring together newcomer and host groups as well as English and civics-oriented classes aimed at integrating newcomers into the Canadian mainstream. Institute personnel also engaged in public debates over immigration, organized social work conferences, and lobbied for more specialized immigrant social services, though, as reformers, they never openly resisted the laws or immigration bureaucracy (Mohl/Betten 1974, Urban 2017).

Like its predecessors and contemporaries, Toronto Institute personnel claimed a unique position as the cultural intermediaries of an increasingly heterogeneous city, interpreting immigrant cultures to Canadians and Canadian culture to newcomers. They argued that, unlike the unilingual, indifferent, and often hostile Anglo staff of the mainstream agencies and government departments serving immigrants, their multilingual and multi-ethnic staff possessed the cultural sensitivity and knowledge required for the job. Certainly, Toronto's staff represented a multi-ethnic group of Anglo Canadians, ethno-Canadians – of European heritage – and immigrants, though their training varied enormously. Overall, women outnumbered men. The first and most influential director and later head of group services, Nell West was a veteran Anglo-Canadian social worker and welfare administrator while her University of Chicago training mirrored that of many U.S. Institute personnel. Subsequent Toronto directors included some Europeans and one Trinidadian. The counsellors and caseworkers were mainly multilingual east European refugees and southern European immigrants of professional and middle-class urban backgrounds. Previous occupations included lawyer, engineer, trade official, teacher, and university graduate. The few professional social workers among them provided the others with on-the-job training. In the 1970s, a South Asian and Caribbean counsellor (both men) were hired.[1] Staff also included ethno-Canadian women earning part-time social work degrees and social work students. The many female volunteers, also ethnically mixed, included Anglo volunteers from the Institute's co-sponsors (e.g. Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto), women's groups (e.g. Catholic Women's League), and community groups (e.g. rotary clubs, YWCA, and folk culture councils), and ethno-Canadian women from organizations like the Canadian Polish Congress and Italian Immigrant Aid Society (Iacovetta 2006).

The Toronto Institute was also an intercultural space: the middle- and working-class members who joined the various clubs and participated in community events represented more than 50 'nationality groups;' the clientele that sought counselling was even more diverse. As newcomers themselves, Institute staff were not simply Anglo-Canadian agents of Canadianization acting upon 'foreigners.' The records generated by their varied activities also contain entangled narratives, or histories, informed in part by the shared class and ethnic or cultural background particularly

1 Profile drawn from Archives of Ontario (AO), International Institute of Metropolitan Toronto (IIMT) MU6385, MU6390, MU 6426 Personnel files, Committee minutes, Board minutes.

of the European staff and members. The observation also applies, albeit to a lesser degree, to some of the staff-client interactions involving women from similar cultural backgrounds. By contrast, Institute efforts among the post-1967 immigrants from Asia, the Caribbean and elsewhere barely began before its demise in 1974, making its pluralist experiment one that occurred primarily within a white European context – as did the official multiculturalism it helped to inform.

In contrast to the polarized US scholarship, which focuses on the interwar US institutes and either praises them as agents of diversity or critiques them as liberal assimilationists (Mohl 1982, Gabaccia 2002, Greene 2005, Hoganson 2007), my dialectical approach, as previously noted, aims to capture the tensions, contradictions, and complexities involved. A look at the social, recreational, and cultural clubs, for instance, reveal a contradiction between the Institute's democratic pluralism – which aimed to nurture civic engagement by encouraging members to vote and serve as officers in their respective clubs and establish their own agendas – and staff insistence on supervising each group. Indeed, staff complained about the heavily east European Outdoor Group, which organized picnics, hikes, and camping trips, as being too autonomous (Iacovetta 2006). The Institute's Christmastime activities were also double-edged. Female staff combined charitable acts, such as distributing food baskets to needy families in their neighbourhood – with the more community-affirming festivals of carols, which featured multi-ethnic choirs and drew a mix of people from the Institute's surrounding immigrant communities, and cookbook projects. In regards to the baskets, they acted much like any social service personnel, selecting 'deserving' recipients and rejecting others, though they also persuaded the city to include more 'ethnic' food items (such as olive oil and canned tomatoes) in the baskets. By contrast, the multicultural cookbook projects, where female staff and female members of Dutch, Czech, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian and other European origins shared 'favourite' Old World recipes 'adapted' for busy Canadian women like themselves, and holiday stories that celebrated meaningful get-togethers over commercial excess, encouraged female friendships across ethnic difference, at least among the primarily middle-class women involved (Iacovetta 2012). To illustrate further the Institute's double-edged pluralism, I focus on two different types of activities: cultural programs and social work interventions.

**Pluralism as Spectacle**

The Institute's cultural programs aimed to encourage multi-ethnic collaboration (in part by encouraging a mix of Anglo and ethnic groups to mount the events), participation (as in folk-dance events where people were encouraged to practise the steps of another group's folkdance rather than simply observe), and mutual understanding and respect. By bringing people into the 'uplifting' or 'festive' intercultural space created through music, dance, and handicrafts, Institute personnel hoped to encourage a more cosmopolitan outlook and greater enthusiasm for a

pluralist nation. They spoke in terms of building an international community, or local United Nations in Toronto, that would act as a model for the post-1945 nation.

A common strategy was to promote pluralism through colourful spectacle. Institute staff organized bazaars where the culturally curious "Canadian" could sample foods from far-off lands, buy 'unique' crafts and practice folk-dancing steps. They mounted Ethnic Weeks and Ethnic Sundays that showcased a group's history, folklore, crafts, and food to wider publics with concerts, films, stories, exhibits, and banquets.[2] Attracting several thousand people in the late 1950s, the folk festivals on which the Institute collaborated featured a dizzying array of folk performances. The dance line-up for one year included: Scottish and Canadian square dances; Serbian and Ukrainian folk dances; the Buffalo Institute's Swedish troupe performing Scandinavian dances; an Italian Choir; an Israeli folk troupe; French-Canadian Folk Groups from Sudbury and Quebec; a Hindu love dance; an African Rain Dance; two Philippine dances; and a group of "Iroquois Indians" from Six Nations reserve at Brantford, Ontario performing "Chief Hiawatha" (Native-American) dances.[3] The elaborate Nation Builders Shows of the 1960s drew between 12,000 and 20,000 people to the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) stage.[4] Starting in 1969, the week-long Metro Toronto International Caravan induced hundreds of thousands people into buying a 'passport' to visit international pavilions located across the city to partake in the songs, dance, food, and drinks of the world's major cities. By turns spectacle, trade show, and domestic tourism extravaganza, Metro Caravan outlived the Institute by 30 years.[5]

Several observations concerning these events highlight the theme of paradox as well as entangled narratives, and difficult stories – or rather, the avoidance thereof. First, the events drew culturally diverse audiences, suggesting the Institute could be an effective promoter of a populist pluralism that helped to acclimatize particularly Anglo-Torontonians to public displays of cultural distinctiveness. To fully appreciate this point, we must recognize (or remember) just how profoundly Anglo, Protestant, and somber Toronto still was in this period. However, the strategy could also serve to turn immigrants into quaint folk performers obliged to place their cultural gifts

2 AO, IIMT MU6472 File: Letters 1959-62, Institute *Newsletter* (later *Intercom*) 1957, "Old World Bazaar"; MU6413, File: Ethnic Occasions, "The Ethnic Weeks"; MU 6415 File: Latvian Federation, 1957; MU 6413 File: Ethnic Federations 1957-64, Flyer German Week Feb 17-23 1957; MU6416 File: Institute Folders 1957-1959, Flyer Lithuanian Week Feb. 9-14, 1957; F884, MU6413, File: Ethnic Occasions, 1957, Flyer, Latvian Week, March 31 to April 6, 1957.

3 MU6416 File: Folk Festival Minutes of Meetings Only, Flyer/Programme, 9th Annual John Madsen Folk Festival, Cherry Hill Farm, Sat, June 23, 1956.

4 MU6407 File: Community Folk Art Council 1963-1974, *Community Folk Art Council Newsletter* 2 (1964).

5 AO, MU6385 (B280523), Metro International Caravan, Executive Committee, 1969 Plans; news clippings, Colin Murray, "Metro International Caravan … Toronto's at home to the world," *Toronto Telegram Weekend*, 21 June 1969; McKenzie Porter, "Reckless of WASPS to Ignore Caravan," 4 July 1969; Report of Institute Caravan Committee, 21 May 1969; *Intercom*, July 1969.

and talents on public display for the benefit, even consumption, of Anglo-Canadians. The related argument that the nation that accepts the immigrants' cultural gifts is enriched viewed pluralist community-building as "a two-way street" that required the ethnic groups' "readiness … to come out of their isolation and present themselves to the [Canadian] community" and the "voluntary … interest of the Canadian public in the New Canadians."[6] Still, success depended above all on Anglo-Canadian participation and acceptance. As West's successor as director put it, the folk events staged by individual ethnic groups had a role to play in preserving difference, but the nation's interests were best served when these "artistic and cultural talents" were "exercised nationally" and enjoyed "by all ethnic groups, by immigrants, by new Canadians" and, most especially, by "old Canadians." Indeed, it was through "the attendance by old Canadians that the greatest good can be achieved for all concerned."[7]

Second, amid the eclecticism of the performances and pageantry, these venues privileged British and European groups. The festivals' historical formats usually had the British groups and, on occasion, other 'northern races' like the Scandinavians, open the show. The continental Europeans often dominated the middle sections, followed by certain more 'exotic' acts. In between, there was usually some tokenistic representation of Indigenous peoples, Quebeckers and French Canadians, and African Canadians (who were usually gospel singers).[8] Third, the nationalist and Whiggish narrative imbedded in the commemorations of Canada as a nation whose *two* 'founding races,' but especially the British one, had learned first to tolerate, then accept, and finally celebrate the cultures of others reveals as well plenty of historical forgetting. Or in other words, the avoidance of such difficult stories as the forced removal of Indigenous children to residential schools and the anti-Chinese head taxes and exclusionary laws. This pattern also marked the Institute's Canadiana Weeks, which highlighted Canadian milestones by such insidious practices as featuring an "Indian and Eskimo" handicraft display as backdrop for a lecture on "Indians in Ontario" by a government official who no doubt delivered the immigrant-friendly discourse of the era to justify a continuing policy of assimilation.[9]

---

6 City of Toronto Archives (TCA), Social Planning Council, SC40, Box 53, File International Institute of Metropolitan Toronto 1961-63, Robert Kolm, Group Services Evaluation for 1956-58 for Review Committee meetings, May 16 and June 30, 1958.

7 H.C. Forbell quoted in AO, MU6411, File: Cultural Festival 1961-2, Meeting, November 8, 1961; and in File: Cultural Festival, Minutes of Meeting to Consider Establishment of an Annual Cultural Festival, November 8, 1961.

8 See, for example, MU6416 File: Folk Festival Minutes of Meetings, Minutes of Program Sub-Committee, April 3, 1957, and Minutes of Meeting March 29, 1957 to discuss 1957 Programme.

9 MU6404 File: Canadiana Week, 1961-65; 1963 Flyer/program; *Intercom,* 1963. On this government strategy, Heidi Bohaker and Franca Iacovetta, 2009, "Aboriginals are Immigrants Too: A Comparison of Citizenship Programs for Newcomers and Indigenous Peoples in Postwar Canada, 1940s-1960s," *Canadian Historical Review* 90: 3 (September) 427-62.

Fourth, the participating European ethnic groups used these events to advance a politics of cultural assertion that entailed "a dialectical dance" of resistance to and accommodation with the host society (Wilmsen 1996, Nedervereen 1996, Cupido 2010). Institute personnel courted the 'ethnic organizations' for these events because their cultural groups heavily subsidized them by providing the conductors, choreographers, performers, costumes, instruments, and handicrafts. Also deeply invested in cultural preservation and commemoration, these groups also used the Institute's platform to insert their own historical narratives into the frame and to make culturally assertive claims to a pluralist nation. Consider 1963 Hungarian Week, which attracted positive mainstream press. The president of the co-sponsoring Hungarian Canadian Federation, Gabor C. Temesevary, influenced the coverage of an English-language newspaper by providing reporters with compelling Cold War narratives about the treasures brought into Canada by people "who loved their art so much they stopped to pack paintings and art objects into their suitcases" as "they were fleeing" their "Communist-over-run" country. Here, entangled narratives of culture and freedom enticed a few thousand people to make this a highly successful Ethnic Week.[10] Behind the festival stage, the Institute, ironically, dealt clumsily with ethno-political tensions, the staff's insistence that members leave behind their Old World feuds being a hopelessly naïve strategy.

Finally, these highly eclectic cultural events exhibited elements associated with "liberal anti-modernism" (McKay 1994, Hoganson 2007), but ultimately aimed to harness ethnic folk traditions to a modernist nation-building project. Certainly, the festivals contained a nostalgic (anti-modern) lament for an allegedly simpler and more authentic past, but the main intent was to mold a new modernity that would serve the nation in an era of increasing heterogeneity. The 'top-down' political or social engineering suggested by, for instance, Paul Martin Sr.'s 1947 Canadian Citizenship Act, sought to ensure loyalty to the nation among an increasingly heterogeneous population that shared neither 'blood' nor history by making respect for diversity a core Canadian value (Martin 1993). Institute leaders agreed with the premise of the new citizenship act, but they also adopted a populist strategy of encouraging support for pluralism by corralling colourful folk cultures into public spectacles – doing so in Canada's largest, wealthiest and arguably most influential city (Iacovetta, 2011). Through television and other media, Toronto's sassy form of pluralism would have an influence beyond its metropolitan borders.

**Social Work Interventions**

While an intercultural space that allowed for the possibility of cross-cultural relationships, the Toronto Institute was also a contact zone where interactions particularly between counsellors and clients occurred within a context of asymmetrical

10 MU6473 File: Hungarian Art and Exhibition, 1963 Toronto *Telegram* news clipping.

power relations.[11] The case files produced by Institute counsellors and caseworkers – of which my data base includes 7,000 – are both rich and frustrating sources that contain entangled and competing narratives, difficult stories and conversations, and multiple negotiations. Many include a remarkable amount of personal detail – whether about anxious refugee parents trying to locate children still overseas, professionals in crisis due to severe downward mobility, or harried working mothers – while many others do not. Furthermore, most cases end abruptly, making it difficult to assess outcomes, though they are nevertheless revealing in other respects. The files permit us to explore differences between, for example, the urban and skilled German immigrants and east European refugees, and the heavily rural and lower-skilled southern Europeans. We can see too that many scenarios cut across class and culture, including those related to family dynamics. Highly mediated sources, case files require careful assessment. Ignorance of the paradigms within which caseworkers operated or failure to recognize the mix of professional and subjective evaluations involved can lead to misinterpretation (Scott/Gordon 1990, Gordon 1989, Peel 2011). The social workers did wield power over clients in these local sites,[12] though they never exercised full control. Some clients suspected of being mentally ill end up in a psychiatric hospital, for example, while others do not. Some counsellors' limited social work training shows up in the subjective notes about disliking or distrusting a client, though, significantly, blurring the professional-private divide by taking a distressed client home for lunch was acceptable practice. By 1970, the files look more professional, but contain very little commentary, making it difficult to assess interactions with the much smaller numbers of post-1967 racialized immigrants.

Drawing on anthropological as well as psychological models, pluralist, or 'social cultural,' social work methods stressed the role that group-defined culture (from ideals and art to laws and institutions) into which individuals are socialized played in shaping behavior. Here, too, paradoxical elements emerge. Institute personnel promoted the equal validity of cultural difference; this stance reflected the premise that, since different cultures can exhibit radically different social standards and moral values, one should not pass moral judgments on beliefs and practices characteristic of cultures other than our own. At the same time, however, they also adopted a culturally deterministic script (as in the principle that humans follow the dictates of their culture) to inform an assimilative claim that, to integrate, immigrants had to swap, albeit voluntarily, one culture for another, or be maladjusted. They also claimed the right, as gatekeepers, to define Canadian community norms and demand conformity to them. This, in turn, justified intrusions into immigrant life (Iacovetta 2006).

11 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992).

12 Michel Foucault, *Knowledge/Power* (London 1980).

Some of the Institute's intrusions amounted to positive interventions. A case in point is the 'experiment' to encourage southern European parents to make greater use of existing health and welfare services in order to meet their children's needs. Like other Institute experiments, the campaign was at root a community-based project involving extensive Institute presence in a designated (west-end) neighbourhood. Led and implemented by women, the project (1962-1964) generated a mix of pathologizing discourses regarding, for example, the misplaced distrust of 'rural villagers' towards outside experts, and progressive measures. The latter included recruiting women from the targeted immigrant communities, and when that was not possible, someone with some cultural similarities (the Portuguese worker was from Brazil), rather than insisting upon Canadian social work credentials. The strategy did not avoid class and other distinctions between staff and clients, given the urban middle-class status of the former and the humble rural origins of the latter, but the fieldwork notes attached to thirty of the 75 cases collected from the project suggest it was a generally effective experiment. Under project director Edith Ferguson, a Canadian social worker who had worked in the refugee camps in Europe after the war, the all-female staff, which received on-the-job training, handled referrals from a dozen elementary schools in the immigrant west-end. These fieldworkers initially accompanied the public health nurses visiting the families in question, but then did much of the follow-up work on their own.

The very first school referral handled by the project offers insight into these women's ability to succeed where Anglo-Canadian nurses failed. The Italian worker, Maria Cosso, a university-educated northern Italian who also spoke English and French and had some business and journalism experience, persuaded the mother of a 14-year-old Italian girl with deteriorating eyesight to get her prescription glasses. According to the referral, the girl's school nurse (also a public health nurse) had tried for two years to convince an evasive mother to take her daughter to a nearby eye-clinic for testing, but each time, the woman would promise to consult a private doctor and do nothing, and then, on a follow-up call, insist that her daughter was healthy. Cosso was able to convince the mother to get the daughter glasses. While the shared Italian and immigrant background likely helped, Cosso's success owes more to the skills of diplomacy and persuasion she developed in the course of visiting hundreds of Italian and some Portuguese households during the early stages of the project. As her field notes for these 'block visits' show, she was quick to label some women with such loaded phrases as "a typically southern peasant type" (i.e., "wearing a black handkerchief on her head"). But they also show a mix of polite demeanor and firm diplomacy, and an ability to establish a rapport with clients, as suggested by the frequent references to women asking her to stay and visit. Without discounting likely embellishment, these requests are notable given immigrant suspicion of social workers and the absence of a social space in most of these crowded households. Indeed, a number of those conversations occurred on the front porch and involved entangled narratives about being immigrants adjusting to

life in Toronto. The notes also reveal that Cosso persuaded the mother in stages, first coaxing her into admitting the daughter had problems with her eyesight, then gaining her permission to make an appointment and escort the girl to the clinic for tests, and, then to pick up her glasses. This positive outcome also generated more school requests, resulting in dozens of children getting their eyes, ears, tonsils, and chests examined and treated, among other treatments.[13] Some of the mothers later sought out Cosso and colleagues for additional assistance.[14]

This is not to suggest that all or most of the cases, which contain their fair share of difficult conversations, went smoothly. The fieldworkers sometimes used heavy-handed, guilt-inducing tactics; they pressured one mother into admitting her child to a psychiatric hospital, and another to an institution for "retarded" children, even though both women were extremely distressed over their respective situation.[15] Alongside the positive outcomes (38% of cases with an outcome), were those that ended in failure (25%). Most of the latter involved school requests to investigate whether a child's poor attendance or poor performance was due to an undiagnosed illness or poor diet causing malnutrition hence problems with concentration and performance. Here, the nurse and Institute staff were more invasive, asking the parents prying questions about family diets, work schedules, and doctor's visits. In cases of prolonged truancy, the fieldworker delivered a school's stern warning, as Cosso did to the parents of a boy who, it turned out, was missing school because his injured construction-worker father kept using him as an interpreter in appointments with medical and welfare officials (a common occurrence that school authorities, public nurses and Institute staff alike lamented). As she delivered the threat of court action should they continue to keep the child out of school, the parents slammed the door on Cosso and nurse, abruptly ending that difficult conversation.[16] These examples also suggest a co-relation between the reason for contacting the parents and the outcome. The enormous amount of staff time that these cases involved also made it difficult to replicate a project focused on one west-end neighbourhood on a large scale. Indeed, one of the Institute's male staff complained that it was creating unfair expectations within the immigrant communities.[17]

---

13 This discussion draws on: AO, F884, MU6469 (B436173) File: Neighbourhood Visits 1962, 'Second call, 1962-1963 etc.; CTA, SC 40, Box 53, File 1 A–International Institute 1961-63, Edith Ferguson to Project Committee, 24 April 1962; Edith Ferguson, *Newcomers in Transition* (A Project of The International Institute of Metropolitan Toronto, 1962-1964) – hereafter *NT*. The highlighted case is #1 in the 30 cases (20 Italians, 10 Portuguese; 16 girls and 14 boys under 16) in my sample of 74 cases and one of the few cases discussed in *NT* ch 5. Note that these cases are not part of my data base as they were produced by a special branch project.

14 Case 4, 24, and 28 in 30 child health sample.

15 Case 30 in ibid.

16 Case 3 in ibid. Also, Case 2, 8, and 26 in ibid.

17 CTA, SC40, Box 53, File 3A - Parkdale Branch 1961-63, Project Director Report to Project Committee, 15 May 1963; H.C. Knight to Leon Kumove, Report on Institute, 21 June 1962, 5 Sept 1963.

Success also depended on the parents' willingness to accept the assistance offered; the files suggest that mothers and fathers tolerated or accepted some outside intrusion when a child's health were a stake. In that regard, these cases reflect, if only implicitly, an entangled, or shared, narrative regarding the universal value of children's health, even if the interactions were not egalitarian. By contrast, Italian, Portuguese, and Greek immigrant parents were far less willing to negotiate a child's education when struggling family finances or homeownership strategies aimed at improving financial security were at stake. Institute counsellors failed to stop struggling parents (usually of large families with several children) from taking children out of school early to contribute to the family income. The dozens of case files of early school leavers (under age 16) and high school 'drop-outs' capture counsellors trying to persuade teenagers, most of them of southern European origin, to remain in school, and prepare for trade programs, with promises of landing more respectable or secure jobs than the menial or dangerous factory and construction jobs held by their parents. The girls were particularly encouraged to aspire for work in a 'clean' setting rather than their mother's 'dirty' factory. Frustrated counsellors sometimes blamed parents or other adults for sacrificing the children's chances for a better future, one defined in terms of modest upward mobility. Yet, these well-intentioned intrusions were also arguably double-edged in that 'progress' was limited to facilitating a youth's entry into better working-class jobs. Institute staff could imagine these boys as mechanics or plumbers, and the girls as secretaries or cashiers, but not as university-bound youth who might aspire to a career.

The most difficult stories contained in the Institute case files concern domestic violence. As the analysis of one particularly thick file dealing with domestic abuse illustrates, some of these files hint as well at the entangled though still unequal relationships that developed between immigrant female counsellors and immigrant female clients in crisis. The singled-out case, chosen because it encapsulates key themes, belongs to a sample of 25 domestic violence cases, which in turn belongs to a larger set of 250 cases involving family conflicts of different types. The complex scenarios and narratives contained in these family conflict files also reveal paradoxes, including that related to the era's dominant family discourses, which depicted the (nuclear) family as both a bulwark against Communism (and other threats, ranging from rising juvenile delinquency to homosexuality) and itself in need of shoring up. Notwithstanding their respect for cultural difference, Institute counsellors encouraged and cajoled their clients, whom they viewed as the product of more deeply patriarchal cultures, to aspire or conform to a Canadian family ideal that was itself rooted in paradox. The much-vaulted Canadian family combined the patriarchal ideal of male breadwinners and female homemakers with the contradictory notion of an egalitarian partnership. The Institute's pro-family approach meant that caseworkers sometimes advised a woman desperate to be rid of an abusive husband to instead send him to them, or some other family agency, for counselling on 'proper' Canadian marital relations. Under certain circumstances, however, they put aside

family models to become the abused woman's ally, though they clearly preferred the scenario, or narrative, of transforming foreign tyrants into proper Canadian husbands (Iacovetta 2006).

The singled-out case involves Mrs. V., a 38-year-old Hungarian refugee of the failed revolution of 1956, a nurse, and mother of two young boys. She first entered the Institute in February 1958 to request help with daytime English classes (presumably in preparation for taking Canadian nursing exams), evening work, and locating a live-in nursery for her sons. The multilingual female counsellor who handled the case knew her client was separated from her husband, a doctor then interning in a hospital outside Toronto, and that he was obliged to pay child support, but not that he was abusive. Indeed, her first entry says Mrs V. spoke optimistically about life improving.

The first indication of the woman's problem surfaced months later, in June, when a "weeping" Mrs. V. reported that two strange men came to her flat late at night claiming to be government inspectors authorized "to investigate her private life, because they have a bad record about her." When they returned the next day, they admitted her husband had hired them to find "evidence for a divorce [adultery]," adding that he also wanted full custody of the children. However, it was not until a few weeks later, after Mrs. V. had been served divorce papers and the Institute had found her a lawyer, that her primary counsellor and other Institute staff discovered the extent of her nightmare. According to a detailed pretrial statement drawn up by Mrs. V.'s lawyer with the help of a Hungarian-speaking female volunteer, the husband for years had been beating her, even when pregnant, and the children. He also flaunted his adulterous affairs, including one involving the wife of his "best friend" in Budapest, another doctor, which resulted in "a very ugly scandal" and the couple's separation. Keen to avoid a messy divorce court case, which coincided with the outbreak of the Hungarian revolution, the husband fled to Austria. He then convinced Mrs. V., described in the affidavit as feeling "sorry" about the break-up and anxious about her "sick" (not specified) boys given the scarcity of doctors and medicine in Budapest, to join him. In the refugee camp, the husband, Mrs. V.'s statement reads, showed "such hate toward me and my children" that "even the [refugee camp] authorities…were very disappointed." Following one particularly vicious beating – the husband attacked her after she, angrily objecting to his plan to send a Budapest "girlfriend" some nylons while her sons lacked "shoes or dress," threw a book at him – the local police wanted to charge him and return him to Hungary, but she declined. He was then posted to a city hospital in Innsbruck until the couple obtained their visas and flew for Canada in summer 1957.

The affidavit notes that the abuse continued in Toronto, forcing Mrs. V. to take temporary refuge in the home of Hungarian friends. During his monthly visits while interning out-of-town, the husband, it says, "never gave us any financial assistance but rather made me black and blue all over." He also accused her of seeing other men – a common accusation among abusers – hence the private detectives. Mrs. V.'s

decision shortly after that incident to move into a flat with a Hungarian woman friend and her boyfriend proved disastrous: they reportedly drank a lot and kept asking for money. She promptly returned to the Institute in winter 1958 to ask for help in sponsoring her mother, though nothing came of the request. Soon afterwards, she attempted suicide by swallowing poison. In hospital, she agreed to undergo a psychiatric evaluation and place her children with the Catholic Children's Aid Society until she recovered. By the time of her release, however, the children were still living with her flat-mate although everyone thought her an 'unreliable' foster mother. The final two entries then note, first that Mrs V. was told that her husband is blocking the children's placement, and, secondly, that she has placed them in an out-of-town orphanage.[18]

The legal affidavit from which this summary is drawn is the closest we as historians can get to the woman's still mediated (by lawyer and interpreter) narrative of escalating desperation and then of defiance. Yet, even it simplifies a more complex, and truly difficult, story. A few additional observations, which emerge as well from my reading of the other domestic violence files, shed additional light on the nature of the social welfare encounter that transpired. First, the Institute's pro-family approach explains why the caseworkers' initial strategy to this, and other such cases, was to save the marriage. When Mrs. V. reported the incident with the private detectives, the genuinely concerned staff promptly alerted the police. They also sent the husband a stern letter that admonished him, "a person seeking professional status," for his behavior and urged him to seek therapy. Since he was currently not in Toronto, they offered to refer him to an appropriate family agency in the city in which he was living. As in most other cases of domestic abuse, the husband ignored the advice.

Second, once convinced there was no chance of reconciliation between Mrs. V. and her husband, the Institute caseworkers abandoned talk of reuniting this family and instead tried to help her secure a favourable divorce settlement and temporarily place her children in foster-care. Here, the turning point was the suicide attempt. In other cases, it was the counsellors' witnessing the man's aggressive or "strange" behavior either in family court or during a visit made to the Institute, usually to deny the allegations or issue threats. Third, and relatedly, the sympathy shown Mrs. V. reflects the counsellors' evaluation of her as a "good mother," thus suggesting a degree of subjective moralizing. The evaluation surfaces in several different texts that make up the file. A referral letter to a welfare agency written by senior staff notes that "we are favourably impressed with Mrs. V." as a mother and recommend support. In a final entry, the woman's main counsellor records an exchange during which she reportedly told Mrs. V. that "we all know that she is a good mother, and we want her to keep the children." The entry adds, a little more ominously, that the counsellor also told Mrs. V. to continue to "lead a good life so that no one [can] testi-

18 Case #2233 of my Institute data-base of 7,000 case files.

fy against her," and "to cooperate with us." While not an exemplary witness, the woman's flat-mate also reports that the husband "is very strange and unkind to his wife." Corroboration is also important to other abuse cases, often resulting in significant interventions.

Finally, the relationship is hardly egalitarian, but the file captures the caseworkers' year-long involvement with Mrs. V. Most of their activities involve meeting her pragmatic needs, registering her in English classes, securing her some cleaning jobs, placing her sons in a nursery and then a summer day camp, and interpreting for the Ontario Nursing Association. Moreover, the contents of the main counsellor's case file on Mrs. V. (as with others) indicate that she had developed a degree of trust with her client. Like many other clients, Mrs. V. is caught in the social welfare net and has more than one counsellor involved in her affairs. However, she enlists the help of the supportive Institute staff, particularly her main female counsellor, to deal with less sympathetic ones, such as a local Immigration department counsellor, a man, who threatens to refuse her emergency support because he finds her an 'uncooperative' client. A sense of trust also informs Mrs. V.'s (translated) suicide letter to her main Institute counsellor, which reads: "I am very sorry I was so much trouble to you," but "bodily and spiritually I am breaking down." "I would like to live to see my children grown up," it adds, "but I wouldn't be able to stand losing them." Blaming her plight on her husband's cruelties, and expressing hope that God will forgive her sin (she is a Catholic), she asks the counsellor "to see that my children get loving care from someone who will substitute for the mother they lost this way." Significantly, the suicide letter, and the relationship it represents, prompts the hospital psychiatrists and doctors to involve the Institute caseworkers, especially Mrs. V's main counsellor, in the woman's recovery plans. And, yet, even this case ends abruptly. Finally, this case, which is exceptional for the suicide attempt, also contains entangled narratives of abuse and mental health. Whereas the usual focus of such discussion is on the abusive man's mental health, here the discovery that Mrs. V. used poison brought "from home" prompts speculation of "a pre-existing personality disorder" or a long-time "depressed state" possibly related to her "personal difficulties."

**Conclusion**

A consideration of the hitherto neglected role of women's community-based pluralism through a case study of the Toronto International Institute sheds critical light on the possibilities as well as limits of an important, if deeply flawed, liberal experiment in which women enacted pluralism on the front lines. Female personnel, many of whom were immigrant or ethno-Canadians, played major roles both as promoters of a populist pluralism that helped to acclimatize particularly Anglo-Canadians to public displays of cultural distinctiveness, and as social workers counselling their mainly European clients. The article assessed the doubled-edged nature of Institute-style pluralism in the ways defined at the outset of this article mainly through atten-

tion to cultural events and social work interventions related to children's health and education, and to domestic violence. Identifying the root causes of that double-edged pluralism is complicated, but it stemmed at least in part from a paradoxical assumption that host societies can integrate immigrants into the mainstream – a process that inevitably involves a degree of homogenization to dominant norms – while preserving and promoting their 'authentic' folk cultures. Without exaggerating the relationships forged between newcomer counsellors and their female immigrant clients, the evidence presented also suggests that the Toronto Institute's distinctively multi-ethnic profile requires us to avoid reductionist portraits of them as Canadian agents of Canadianization while also acknowledging the significant degree to which these mainly middle-class counsellors carried out host-society-defined social work interventions.

The themes of difficult stories or conversations and entangled narratives that also frame this article were discussed in relation to the Eurocentric bias of much Institute pageantry and commemoration as well as the confidential case files. The latter offer insight into how Institute newcomer female counsellors held difficult conversations with their newcomer female clients and how they sometimes forged meaningful if unequal and short-term relationships, or alliances, with newcomer women clients in crisis. The illustrations suggest that a shared ethno-cultural or immigrant background with a client could help a fieldworker or counsellor establish trust with a client, but a worker's capacity to persuade and built rapport with her client mattered too. Finally, the article demonstrates, by demonstration rather than theoretical explication, how we might interpret the case files in ways that avoid the pitfalls of either a strictly empiricist stance (which assumes that the files capture what actually happened) or a post-modernist one (which views the files as simply the file-maker's 'fiction').

**References**

Bannerji, Himani, 2003, "Multiple multiculturalisms and Charles Taylor's politics of recognition," in: Barbara Saunders/David Haljan (eds)., *Whither multiculturalism? A politics of dissensus,* Leuven: Leuven Press, 35–45.

Bellay, Susan, 2001, "Pluralism and Ethnic/Race Relations in Canadian Social Science, 1880-1939," PhD diss., University of Manitoba.

Caccia, Ivana, 2010, *Managing the Canadian Mosaic: Shaping Citizenship Policy*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Canadian Handicraft Guild, http://www.canadianguild.com/modules.php?name=Historique.

Cupido, Robert, 1998, "Appropriating the Past: Pageants, Politics and the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 9:1, 155-86.

----, 2010 "Public Commemoration and the Politics of Cultural Assertion: Winnipeg Celebrates the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation," *Urban History Review* 38:2 (Spring) 64-74.

Day, Richard J. F., 2010, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Forbes, H. D., 2007, "Trudeau as the First Theorist of Canadian Multiculturalism," in: Tierney, 27-42.

Gabaccia, Donna, 2002, *Immigration and American Diversity: A Social and Cultural History,* Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Press.

Gordon, Linda, 1989, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence, Boston, 1880-1960*. New York: Penguin.

Greene, Victor, 2005, "Dealing with Diversity: Milwaukee's Multiethnic Festivals and Urban Identity, 1840-1940," *Journal of Urban History* 31:6, 820-849.

Haque, Eve, 2012, *Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework: Language, Race, and Belonging in Canada,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Henderson, Stuart, 2005, "'While There Is Still Time': J. Murray Gibbon and the Spectacle of Difference in Three CPR Folk Festivals, 1928-31," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 39, 139-174.

Hoganson, Kristin L., 2007, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, ch 4.

Iacovetta, Franca, 2006, *Gatekeepers: Reshaping Immigrant Lives in Cold War Canada,* Toronto: Between the Lines.

----, 2011, "Immigrant Gifts, Canadian Treasures, and Spectacles of Pluralism: The International Institute of Toronto in North American Context, 1950s-70s," *Journal of American Ethnic History,* 31:1 (Fall) 34-73

----, 2012, "Food Acts and Cultural Politics: Women and the Gendered Dialectics of Culinary Pluralism at the International Institute of Toronto, 1950s-60s, in: F. Iacovetta, V. Korinek, M. Epp, eds., *Edible Histories, Cultural Politics: Towards a Canadian Food History,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 359-84.

Igartua, José, 2006, *The Other Quiet Revolution: National Identities in English Canada*, 1945-71, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kazal, Russell A., 2008, "The Lost World of Pennsylvania Pluralism: Immigrants, Regions, and the Early Origins of Pluralist Ideologies," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 27, no. 3 (Spring 2008)

Kymlicka, Will, 2001, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights,* London: Oxford University Press.

Lupul, Manoly R., 1978, ed., *Ukrainian Canadians, Multiculturalism, and Separatism: An Assessment,* Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.

Martin, Paul Sr., 1993, "Citizenship and the People's World," in: W. Kaplan (ed.), *Belonging: The Meaning and Future of Canadian Citizenship*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

McKay, Ian, 1994, *Quest of the Folk*: *Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia,* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press.

Mohl, Raymond A./Neil Betten, 1974, "Paternalism and Pluralism: Immigrants and Social Welfare in Gary, Indiana, 1906-1940," *American Studies* 15:1 (Spring), 15-26.

Mohl, 1982, "Cultural Pluralism in Immigrant Education: The International Institutes of Boston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, 1920-1940," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 1:2 (Spring) 35-58.

Nedervereen, Jan, 1996, "Varieties of the Ethnic Politics and Ethnic Discourse," in: Wilmsen/McAllister, 115-126.

Peel, Mark, 2011, *Miss Cutler and the Case of the Resurrected Horse: Social Work and the Story of Poverty in America, Australia, and Britain,* Chicago: University of Chicago.

Schrover, Marlou/Deirdre Moloney (eds.), 2013, *Gender, Migration and categorisation: Making distinctions between migrants in Western countries (1900) 1945–2010,* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Scott, Joan/Linda Gordon, 1990, "Exchange", *Signs* 15 (summer), 15: 4, 848-852.

Selig, Diane, 2008, *Americans All: The Cultural Gifts Movement*, Cambridge MA: University of Cambridge.

Temelini, Michael, 2007, "Multicultural Rights, Multicultural Virtues: A History of Multiculturalism in Canada," in: Tierney, 43-60.

Tierney, Stephen (ed.), 2007, *Multiculturalism and the Canadian Constitution,* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Urban, Andrew, 2017, "Social Work and Substantive Justice: The International Institutes' Response to Discriminatory Immigration and Naturalization Laws, 1924-1945," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 37:1 (Fall) 5-29.

Wilmsen, Edwin N., 1996, "Premises of Power in Ethnic Politics," in: Wilmsen/McAllister, 127-142.

----/Patrick McAllister (eds.), 1996, *The Politics of Difference: Ethnic Premises in a World of Power.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.