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Italian Australian Studies: a (post)colonial perspective

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In a recent issue of *Interventions* dedicated to a reappraisal of Italian studies, the editors comment on the way postcolonial approaches to the subject of Italian experience have been slow to take hold. They argue that colonialism "is still a significantly under-studied area in the Italian academy when compared to fascism, the Resistance and the workers' movement, on which there is a wealth of scholarship" (De Donna and Srivastava, 2006: 371). If it is true that "It is only very recently that scholars have begun integrating 'the history of Italian colonialism into larger narratives of Italian national experience'" (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller cited in De Donna and Srivastava, 2006: 371), then this present collection is important for expanding the story of Italy's influences in multiple intersecting fields. This volume brings together key essays and testimonials that frame a picture of Italy's rich legacy at "home", in Europe more widely, and of course in the (post)colonial sphere, with a particular emphasis on the Australian experience. What is clear throughout these pages, however, is that past, present and future circulate through and around each other, just as notions of nation - colonial, postcolonial, emigrant and immigrant - jostle for purchase in what is in fact a con-tested space always under negotiation.

To speak of Italian literature is either to delimit its range to a region - to specific borders - or it means to acknowledge the significant multiplicity of speaking positions that articulate contemporary Italy, including those that are often simply ignored or neglected, even within Italy itself.[1] Alternatively, Italian literature is the work produced by a staggeringly large diasporic community[2] that rewrites both home and adopted landscapes through the act of remembrance and re-imagining from the position of distant shores.

This volume examines all three phenomena, though with a focus on the way an Italian Australian story has emerged and evolved in its own unique way. In some respects it might be possible to define Australia, through this community, as an *Italian* space, very much inscribed and described by the many voices that characterise it. If this is true of the literary it is certainly true of the historical. To read the history of migrations, of wars, of movements, of responses to or against or beside social and cultural policies, is to read world history writ large. This irrespective of the efforts one might make to contain terms of reference, and to narrow the field of enquiry. So it is, then, with the present volume. In three interrelated sections, *Literary and Social Diasporas* seeks to map an understanding of the Italian experience onto the broader picture of diasporic stories, though with an anchor in the Australian-Italian experience. Such an attempt is necessarily fragmented and incomplete and yet still manages to reveal the extraordinary complexity of Italian influences.

Many of the contributions in this volume originated as presentations at a conference entitled *Minorities and Cultural Assertions: Literary and Social Diasporas* held at the University of Wollongong from 8–10 October 2004. The conference focused on the question of diaspora in a broad sense, but no doubt because the event was coordinated in large part by the Italian Studies Discipline, the project attracted a disproportionate number of contributions concentrated on the

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1 See Alessandro Portelli (2006) for an account of the neglect many first- and second-generation writers, particularly from Africa, Asia and Latin America, have experienced in contemporary Italy.

2 See Pivato (2005: 21) and his observation that Italian migration between 1870-1970 constituted "one of the major diasporas of the modern age" with Calabrian men forming "a significant part of the great Italian exodus".

literary and social aspects of the Italian diaspora. Other key areas of debate, however, included the health trauma of displaced Kashmiris, the fate of the *Siev X* refugees and the surprising and little-known role of Antonio Gramsci in the formulation of NSW Government multicultural policy in the 1970s. Another series of papers, examining the connections of diaspora to the Canadian context were published in a special issue of *Australasian Canadian Studies* (Turcotte and Rando 2005), and a further volume, focusing on Italian language presentations, is planned for 2008. But by far the largest concentration of works emerged around the themes collected here, and this perhaps reflects the serious gap in research activity for this field of investigation in Australia.

Although Italian studies conferences constitute a regular feature of Australian academic life, almost twenty years have passed since the last conference dedicated specifically to Italian Australian studies. An intensive three-day conference, *Italians in Australia: The first 200 years* was held jointly at the University of Wollongong and Macquarie University on 27-29 August 1988 to coincide with the Australian Bicentenary celebrations and the papers were published in Rando (1990), Arrighi (1991), and Rando and Arrighi (1993). These earlier volumes, together with Castles *et. al* (1992), can be seen as instrumental for providing an important initial corpus of work in the area. Since then substantial research into Italian Australian studies has been produced, as documented in Rando (2000) for the 1990s. The response to the 2004 conference confirmed the significant critical interest in the area and the need for further critical material to address and present such work, hence this collection.

The peer reviewed papers selected for inclusion in this volume fall into two broad categories: those presenting specific aspects of Italian Australian literature and those examining social, cultural and historical issues. A third category emerged unexpectedly from both the oral and subsequent editing process, and this was a series of direct testimonials - *Testimonianze* - which are the work of first and second generation Italian Australians. Because of their intimate and revealing nature, and the way they fuse the historical and the personal, they have been used to "introduce" the volume, and to enrich and texture the more academic deliberations. In the context of this volume's initial plan they proved an unexpected but invaluable addition.

Testimonianze/Testimonials

Writers' reflections on their work present a unique insight into the diasporic experience and introduce the personal into what can sometimes be a dispassionate critical narrative of statistical facts and figures that fail entirely to capture lived experience. This collection benefits from particularly revealing, honest and intelligent reflections that demonstrate the way writers construct and mediate the experience of dislocation in a "divided" environment. Venero Armanno's elegant account of the way Sicily and Australia interconnect both through the experience of the Italian diasporic community of which he was a part, and in the writing and research he produced in the creation of his novel *The Volcano*, offers a sardonic and knowing insight into the way space and place are remembered *and* invented. In Armanno's novels Brisbane is a mythical capital linked to Sicily generically by its hot climate and specifically though not altogether unambiguously by the Cloudland Ballroom, seen as a mirror image of Mt Etna, the most explosive volcano in Europe, considered since classical times to be the portal to the underworld.

Pino Bosi's fascinating account of the creation of what is in fact an emblematic first generation Italian Australian novel - *Australia cane* - provides both a rich glimpse into the early publishing world of Italian language newspapers in Sydney during the Italian migration peak of the 1950s, but also the at times controversial obstacles that can present themselves when non-mainstream or minority views seek a place within a country's dominant fields of cultural production. Antonio Casella, who migrated to Australia from Sicily at 15 years of age, writes novels, such as *The Sensualist*, that like Armanno's explore themes relating to Sicily and Australia. Casella's works represent the changing relationship of Sicilian characters to their two environments, and map the evolution of Sicilian traditional practices in an Australian context charting the relevance of past experiences to present dilemmas. Speaking of his novel in progress, he identifies a literary metaphor that speaks for the wider dilemma of migration, when two quasi siblings, one raised in the Mediterranean, the other in Australia, discover each other and come together. "Both young people are seeking an identity beyond the confines of the space and the culture they were born into. In coming together each adds to the other and by consequence to themselves, and that is the ultimate triumph of any relationship." It is perhaps, too, the triumph of diasporic experience.

Archimede Fusillo's contribution traces the familiar initial rejection of an "ethnic" background, even in the emerging role that writing was to play for him, and traces the way, perhaps inevitably, a return to core issues of identity and belonging began to provide a more authentic and enriched

voice for the well-known novelist. The role that family, and family storytellers play, in the formation of Italian Australian histories is one that circulates throughout this volume, and it informs the rich "stories behind the stories" that have made novels such as *The Dons* and *Sparring With Shadows* such successes. Jan Sardi, perhaps best known as the scriptwriter for *Shine* (1995), presents a fascinating inside story of his Italian Australian connections and their close and ongoing correlation to some of his work from his first film *Moving Out* (1982) to the recent *Love's Brother* (2004). One of the salient aspects of Sardi's testmonial is how an "ethnic" past and collective memory are dynamically mapped on to an Australian present, a process that comes full circle when, on leaving his father's home town after a brief visit, his grandfather's cousin "looked at me with eyes that reminded me a little of my grandfather, and said 'you must' [return]."

Francesca Matteini's original research on very recent trends in Italian migration to Australia shows that they are far less prominent in numeric terms and very different in relation to the type of aspiring migrant and motivations for migration than those of the past. Those Italians who express a desire to migrate to Australia find however that they have to deal with what are perceived as almost insurmountable entry barriers posed by the complex web of current Australian immigration requirements that stem the flow of would-be migrants from Italy through a plethora of obstacles. By contrast Peter Tesoriero's recollections of his family's complex migration path to Australia focuses on the more historical and traditional issues related to the Italian migration phenomenon. The long process across three generations that marks his family's transition from the island of Panarea to Australia through the United States leads him to conclude that we must recognise that "the connection with one place of origin is continually being modified and that place must inevitably have to share its importance with others." As this process continues to evolve it becomes less relevant to talk of diaspora.

Letteratura/Literature

Work on the critical appraisal of Italian Australian literature to date has tended to concentrate on first generation writers. The papers by Rita Wilson and Jessica Carniel are significant, therefore, because they provide studies of works by Italian Australian women writers beyond this first generation. Rita Wilson explores how authors of Italian descent construct cultural locations through their texts, by tracking their discourse on place and ethnicity. She discusses the problematic concept of "home"/ "homeland" in contemporary works by authors of Italian descent, particularly Anna Maria Dell'Oso and Julie Capaldo, and with some reference to Melina Marchetta, who, as intercultural subjects, establish in their fictional representations of "homeland" which are linked to but never contained by geographical boundaries. "Home", instead, figures as a site of loss or desire, but, above all, as a means of grounding their literary voices. By imagining as well as remembering an idea of home they create an important "writing space" in which "place" can be seen as a complex intersection of language, history and environment. Jessica Carniel investigates the importance of food and cooking in Italian Australian literature, focusing primarily upon Julie Capaldo's novel *Love Takes You Home* where the preparation and consumption of food is both thematically and structurally integral to the novel and its depiction of Italian Australian identities. Capaldo charts the development of the main protagonist's Italian Australian identity through her relationship with food, arguing that her struggle with an eating disorder is symbolic of her struggle to create a healthy ethnic identity and concludes that, while food is not entirely constitutive of ethnicity, it is a useful and appropriate metaphor, particularly within literature, for understanding the way in which ethnic identities are "cooked up" and "consumed".

Yet another largely untapped aspect of the corpus is the literary culture of specific regional groups. Gaetano Rando's paper explores the extent to which texts produced by first and second generation writers of Calabrian origin demonstrate characteristics of what might be termed a Calabrian Australian migration experience, similar to but to some extent different from that of other Italian regional groups. In contradistinction to prior homogenising attempts to consider the global rubric of "Italian Australian writing," this paper systemically attempts to locate the distinguishing traits and localised experiences that mark the literary production of Italian Australian writers from a Calabrian background. John Gatt-Rutter's paper examines an example of perhaps the most common type of text in the Italian Australian literary corpus, the achieved life as a canonical subject of life writing, by analyzing the cultural and social issues related to the writing of the biography of Sebastiano Pitruzzello from Sortino in Sicily. Pitruzzello, who began his Australian experience as a welder, went on to become a noted cheese manufacturer in Victoria. As Gatt-Rutter makes clear, the life story and success of one migrant became the symbol of the larger

Sortino diaspora that in turn led to the formation of a distinctive community in Melbourne whose ties with the home town are ongoing and dynamic.

Storia, Cultura, Società/History, Culture, Society

This section presents papers that examine specific aspects of Italian Australian history, culture and society. Gianfranco Cresciani provides a detailed analysis of the experiences of refugees from areas of Italian settlement (Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia) annexed by Yugoslavia after the Second World War which led to the mass exodus of some 350,000 Italians who took refuge in Trieste and in refugee camps in Italy. In Trieste and in Italy they were not welcome, because they were competing for the few jobs and houses available soon after the Second World War. In Trieste, in particular, they were resented by the working classes because they were perceived as Fascists and as taking over the control of the media, the economy and administration of the city. When Trieste was reunited to Italy in 1954 some 20,000 Triestini, dissatisfied with the situation and apprehensive for their economic and political future, emigrated to Australia, thus creating a specific enclave within the more general Italian Australian diaspora.

Joseph Pugliese's paper proposes a strikingly innovative area in the field of Italian Australian studies by investigating an aspect of a long-term but largely unexplored cultural dichotomy represented by the Italian presence in Australia. Traditionally the minority of Australians who have displayed interest in Italian culture have done so exclusively in relation to Italy's institutionally promoted high culture while the majority of Italian migrants in Australia represent a rich and varied folkloric *contadino*/peasant cultural tradition that has developed in their region of origin over many hundreds of years. Pugliese examines the different ways Southern Italian migrants in an Australian context have mapped their own non-hegemonic cultural assertions against representations of the Italian nation by its own institutionalised high cultural agencies.

Francesco Ricatti examines the letters of "ordinary" first generation Italian Australians written to the Sydney-based newspaper *La Fiamma* during the 1950s and 1960s when many migrants were grappling with initial arrival and settlement problems. Given the pressing need for advice faced by many migrants, *La Fiamma* ran two regular columns called *Inchiostro simpatico* and *Il Salotto di Lena*, edited by Lena Gustin. The first was a traditional women's column, in which migrants, above all but not just women, could ask Lena for advice and help. In the column called *Il Salotto di Lena*, however, she asked her readers to write about their experiences of life and migration. Ricatti's paper focuses on the relation between the construction of ethnic identities and discourses on gender, love, sexuality, the role of women in society and family, masculinity, that are found in both the original and final versions of the letters often published after strong censorship and editing.

Studies focusing on second generation Italian Australians have been limited, and as such, Michele Sapucci's exploration of how family dynamics, school/peer group experiences and the broader society contribute to the formation of second-generation cultural identity is particularly valuable. The paper explores how this formation is often linked to issues such as teacher stereotyping, family values, attitudes toward the host society, mainstream and "ethnic" views on gender/ ethnic relationships which can often involve the development of emotional patterns resulting from the experience of shame and of over-responsibility. Drawing from these patterns, Sapucci describes four main typologies, describing the attitudes second generation Italian Australians can develop toward their cultural background. Particular attention is given to the different forms of these experiences - from a smooth and unchallenging restructuring of the person's view on Australian and background culture, to more serious psychological crises.

Conclusione/Conclusion

This volume demonstrates both the diversity and dynamism of the field of Italian Australian studies. The discipline has embraced topics from outside its "traditional" ambit and has identified new areas of concern to scholars in the field. It has come at an opportune time and it is hoped that the publication of these studies may be instrumental in addressing a problem identified by leading Italian Australian journalist Nino Randazzo (2005) regarding the apparent tendency of the Italian community in Australia to lose its distinctive profile. What this volume makes clear is that a distinctive profile, like any great cultural force, is always in a state of transformation and self-interrogation. In this way a culture is never stable, never predictable and never complacent.

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