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Abstract

The publication in 2008 of the English version of Emilio Gabbrielli's (2000) novel *Polenta e Goanna* and the new re-introduced edition of Rosa Cappiello's *Oh Lucky Country* in 2009 constitutes something of a landmark in Italian- Australian writing. Cappiello's novel is now the second most-published work by a first generation Italian-Australian writer after Raffaello Carboni's (1855) *Eureka Stockade*. Although Italians in Australia have been writing about their experiences since the mid 1800s and have produced texts such as those by Salvado (1851), Ercole (1932) and Nibbi (1937), a coherent corpus of Italian-Australian writing has developed only after the post-World War Two migration boom which saw some 360,000 Italian-born migrants entering Australia between 1947 and 1972.

GAETANO RANDO

Recent Italian-Australian Narrative Fiction by First Generation Writers

The publication in 2008 of the English version of Emilio Gabbrielli's (2000) novel *Polenta e Goanna* and the new re-introduced edition of Rosa Cappiello's *Oh Lucky Country* in 2009 constitutes something of a landmark in Italian-Australian writing. Cappiello's novel is now the second most-published work by a first generation Italian-Australian writer after Raffaello Carboni's (1855) *Eureka Stockade*. Although Italians in Australia have been writing about their experiences since the mid 1800s and have produced texts such as those by Salvado (1851), Ercole (1932) and Nibbi (1937), a coherent corpus of Italian-Australian writing has developed only after the post-World War Two migration boom which saw some 360,000 Italian-born migrants entering Australia between 1947 and 1972. While the majority have contributed in some way to Australia's economic development (see Castles et al 1992) only a few hundred have written about their experiences, producing memoirs, (auto)biographies, poetry, theatre and narrative fiction. Although this writing has made relatively little impact on mainstream Australian literary culture and has attracted relatively little attention it deals with political, social and cultural issues and an alternative perspective of Australia from the periphery that makes it worthy of critical attention.

The most substantial study to date of first generation writers is provided in Rando *Literature and the Migration Experience* (1988) which explores the development of Italian-Australian narrative fiction from 1965 to 1986 and examines some thirty-five volumes of novels and short stories produced by some twenty-seven first-generation writers who relate their feelings for and reactions to the new environment and their attitudes towards their place of origin. That study provides an in-depth analysis of works such as Pino Bosi's (1971) seminal Italian Australian novel, *Australia Cane* (Australia is a dog of a place), and his short story collection, *The Checkmate* (Bosi 1973), Gino Nibbi's (1965) short story collection, *Cocktails d'Australia* (Australian cocktails), and Rosa Cappiello's (1981, 1984) novel *Oh Lucky Country*. In their totality these narrative texts relate the anger, frustration, the hopes and disappointments lived by the immigrants, the traumatic experience of leaving one's native land and of having to start again in a new country with the realisation that perhaps one can never really 'belong' completely, and the need to negotiate liminal times and spaces which only the immigrant has known. It is a view of the migration phenomenon and of the host society that only the immigrant can give, a manifestation, as Bhabha points out,

that has the ability to shift the ground of knowledges through the possibility of cultural contestation posited by cultural difference (1990b 313).

Since the completion of *Literature and the Migration Experience* and related studies (Rando 1988b, 1988c, 1991a) the number of narrative texts in volume form (in both Italian and English — English being used somewhat more than in the past) published by first-generation writers has doubled and a substantial corpus of narrative texts in English by second- and third-generation writers has emerged. This article proposes to continue the examination of Italian-Australian narrative fiction by considering works published from the mid-1980s to the present by first-generation writers while a subsequent essay will address texts produced by the second and subsequent generations.¹

Rosa Cappiello is perhaps the first-generation writer best known to the Anglo-Australian reading public. An innovative and progressive writer among a group that does not often transcend biographical elements and is generally characterised by conservatism in both technique and concept, she is the only first-generation Italian woman migrant to have gained a measure of recognition by Australia's literary institutions, factual errors, problematic interpretations, and controversies notwithstanding. A recent example of the problematic nature of critical engagement with Cappiello's work is Nicole Moore's part of the introduction to the 2009 edition which, *inter alia*, attributes the derivation of the title of Cappiello's novel to Donald Horne's well-known book while Cappiello has consistently stated that she had no knowledge of Donald Horne's work when she formulated the title *Paese fortunato* (*Lucky Country*), using an Italian syntagmatic collocation that has implicit ironic connotations² — the English title was formulated by the publisher out of deference to Horne who at the time was Chair of the Australia Council. Moore then goes on to state that Cappiello was writing back to 'her own troubled country in damnation of the migrant's paradise. In the early 1980s Italy was rocked by a major political scandal ... the pope was shot and a big earthquake in Southern Italy killed 3000 people' (Cappiello 2009 vi). The relevance here is somewhat problematic since in terms of Italy's socio-cultural situation the contextual background to *Paese fortunato* (as indeed Cappiello's first novel *I semi neri*) is more appropriately located in the endemic social, economic and political problems of Southern Italy, in particular the Neapolitan hinterland, and their treatment in literature by Southern Italian writers (see, for example, Crupi 1979 and 2002). Later trends in Cappiello's narrative writing indicated that she could distance herself from autobiographical migrant themes and capture something of an 'Australian' quality while at the same time retaining an Italian cultural and linguistic base. These trends are evident in excerpts of her third novel 'in progress' (begun during her time as writer in residence at the University of Wollongong in 1983 but unfortunately never completed), whose intertextual references combine the raunchy sexuality of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and the existential alienation of Franz Kafka, as well as short stories such as '10/20 dogs under the bed' (Cappiello

1988). This is a whimsical, spirited, punchy, paradoxical story told in the first person by an old man obsessed by sex and death whose existence is plagued by his mate Josse's obsession with greyhounds in yet another vacuous get-rich-quick scheme.

Cappiello was to prove an isolated instance of a first generation writer of fiction who wrote exclusively in Italian, gaining a measure of institutional recognition although ultimately the language barrier and other factors made her decide to return to Italy. With the exception of Cappiello and Antonio Casella (the only first-generation writer to write and publish exclusively in English [see Casella 2007 41]), other writers have remained well below the radar of Australia's literary establishment despite some increase in the production of narrative fiction in English and a diversification of themes beyond those strictly linked to the Italian Australian migrant experience. Raffaele Gesini's novel *Il certificato* (*The Certificate*) (1993) provides a realistically pessimistic view of Italy's public sector through the narration of the protagonist's futile attempts to resolve a complex matter with an Italian government bureaucracy, noted for its labyrinthine machinations, and the extreme angst caused by this experience. Fernando Basili's short stories (2002) are all set in Tuscany and relate in fine ironic detail the wit and ingenuity (reminiscent of some of Boccaccio's tales) employed by their working class / lower middle class characters in finding solutions to complex life situations. Some of the short stories published in the anthology, *Premio 2 giugno* (1999), present themes that have no connection with the migrant experience and are in some cases intensely existentialist, while Pino Bosi's novel, *Moon Crescent and Silent Bells* (2002), set in Israel, relates the story of an Italian Australian character, ex-Foreign Legionnaire Ludovico ('Ben') Benelli, caught up in the complex intrigues of the Palestinian/Israeli struggle but ultimately hopeful that there will be one day a world without nations or frontiers (Bosi 2002 175). Paolo Mazzarella (1994) and Rina Arfi Fameli (2006 and 2007) have published romantic fiction written in Italian, possibly inspired by the widespread popularity of Amalia Odescalchi's novels among first Italian-Australian generation readers. Both writers have set their novels in Italy and have adopted a formula commonly found in the Mills and Boon variety of the genre, although Mazzarella (128–32) does introduce a brief if slightly outdated discourse on female emancipation in contemporary Italy, while Fameli contains a passing mention of Italy's disastrous condition after the First World War (5–6). A few first-generation writers have also published adolescent and children's fiction, in some cases in bilingual mode (for example, Acquaro 2001), although these genres have tended to be mainly the province of second-generation writers such as Melina Marchetta and Archimede Fusillo.

A further example of the trend to diversified themes is found in Antonio Casella's novel *Southfalia* (1980), a fantasy fable of Australia's political present that is clearly relevant to Australian events of the 1960s and 1970s set in the context of Western Australia as a colony founded by the ancient Romans. The only explicit Italian migrant connection is one of the minor characters, the

Sicilian greengrocer Filippo Grassi, ‘an imported serf’ (30). Casella migrated to Western Australia with his family from San Fratello, a small mountain village in Sicily, in 1959 at the age of 15 and after some years engaged in ‘normal’ migrant occupations, obtained tertiary qualifications and pursued a career in teaching and creative writing (Casella 2007 41–42). The protagonist of his second novel, *The Sensualist* (1991), is first generation migrant Nick (Nicola) Amedeo. Since his arrival from Sicily in 1938, Amedeo has achieved substantial material success in the construction industry and contributed, like many of his real life compatriots, to the transformation of the Perth cityscape. However, after forty years events force both Nick and his Australian wife, Joyce, to confront themselves and their personal histories as well as their relationship with their two children. Joyce’s journey takes her back in memory to the north-west of Western Australia, a vast alien land feared by its white inhabitants ‘where a woman, more so than a man, might be lost and none would notice... a landscape that listened for the music of black-boys played like zithers by the easterlies’ (4). Nick returns in spirit to the harsh environment of the mountains of Sicily, a country ‘of eagle’s nest villages hanging precariously from white clay ridges in the sun’ (4) with ‘more arrogance than a beauty queen and white stone ridges as lonely as the Australian outback’ (88) conditioned by its myths and implacable rituals, to confront suppressed traumatic childhood memories.

A third novel, *An Olive Branch for Sante* (Casella 2006), as yet unpublished, is set partly in Australia, partly in Sicily. While in *The Sensualist* the rural settings of Sicily and Western Australia are marked by a sense of harshness, loneliness and alienation, in *An Olive Branch for Sante* the rural environment is presented largely as wholesome and spiritual, while the city is either non-existent or, when it makes an appearance in the Australian section, is vapid and alienating. Australian-born Ira-Jane, a product of contemporary Australia, decides to explore the Sicilian roots acquired through her adoptive *nonni* (grandparents) despite her conviction that ‘memories are self-indulgent, a sign of weakness, a wasteful sentimentality’ (1). Her trip to Sicily to re-establish contact with Ira la Rocca, the daughter of her *nonni*, leads her to meet Ira’s son Sante Marzano, born and bred in the hilltop town of San Sisto (province of Messina). Sante decides to return with Ira-Jane to Australia to become acquainted with the land where he was conceived and ends up working in Clem Franzetti’s olive plantation in Western Australia. It is in the countryside of both Sicily and Australia that the protagonists find spiritual solace, and in some cases transformation. Sante and Ira-Jane seal their spiritual union in the Kimberlies where in the ‘remote, galactic landscape [that] spoke of times far more ancient than the Mediterranean’ (305) both young people find what they are seeking — an identity beyond the confines of the space and the culture they were born into as well as some answers to metaphysical questions about life: ‘She could see it now. Ira-Jane without Sante was a leaf searching for a tree. Sicily brought them together, it took a pool in the Kimberlies to crystallize the significance of that event’ (305).

The West Australian outback is also the setting for Emilio Gabbrielli's novel, *Polenta and Goanna* (2008), which is based on the meeting and intermarriage in the early twentieth century between traditional Western Desert Aboriginal people and Italian migrants in the remote northwest goldfields region. The novel presents themes of anti-racism and the gradual and tentative establishment of intimacy and kinship between people from radically different cultures (also found in Nievo [1994], to an extent in Salvado [1851], and as a marginal theme in Carboni [1855]) and an autobiographical twist is produced by the fictionalised account of the writer/protagonist's search in outback Australia (similar to the technique adopted in Stanislaw Nievo's search for the New Italy settlers in his novel *Le isole del paradiso* [see Rando 1991b 50]) to recover a lost Italian-Aboriginal identity.

Polenta and Goanna is the English version of the original Italian text (Gabbrielli [2000]) which predates Franco Di Chiera's SBS broadcast documentary *Hoover's Gold* (2006) on Italian migrants hired by American engineer J. Edgar Hoover in the early 1900s to work in one of the then-richest gold deposits in the world, the Sons of Gwalia mine at Leonora. Gabbrielli extrapolates the stories of these miners beyond surface reality by blending the historical content with the arcane mystique of the writer/protagonist's experiences in the Western Australian desert. These stories are imaginatively combined, providing a skilful tale of cultural adaptation and the blending that occurs between the Italian miners, the desert environment and its original inhabitants. One significant example is the story of the Sicilian, Angelo Bellini, whose relationship with Aboriginal people has led him to adopt a way of life in such close contact with the land that when the writer/protagonist finally finds him he appears Dantesquely mute in his lack of ability to converse in his native language: 'in the last years of his life he had buried his original instrument of communication and was now, not unhappily, disinterring something he had pragmatically turned his back on forever' (Gabbrielli 2008 215). It is through his close contacts with the Aboriginal families of these Italian miners and their descendants that the writer/protagonist, sharing a meal of spaghetti and kangaroo tail around their campfire, finally comes to the realisation that,

I was enjoying a spiritual communion with these people, with whom I did after all have something in common... And I thought I heard a human cry of recognition rising over the parched lake that night, like a challenge: a cry of solidarity with the bones turning to dust at the Norman Castle, the bones lying in the cemetery in Gwalia, the bones of Angelo Bellini soon to be laid to rest in the sand, the bones scattered in the deserts and the 'dead hills'... (Gabbrielli 2008 235)

A postmodern interpretation of historical migration experiences is also found in Paolo Totaro's (c. 1996) short story, *Storia patria* ('History of the Fatherland'), which in 1993 won the literary prize *Premio Letterario 2 Giugno* promoted by the Consulate General of Italy (Sydney). The story focuses on how chance is the main factor in determining human events. It is told through an exchange of letters over 1859–60 between the characters living in Naples and Sydney who relate facts based

on the socio-historical realities of the period and their existential consequences that illustrate the similarity of the human condition in the two cities: colonialism (Naples too was colonised by northern Italians as a result of the *Risorgimento*); the vitality and the poverty of the people of Naples and of the Aborigines; the provincialism of art; the moral problems posed by the emerging sciences.

Another perspective on Italian migration to Australia is provided in Giovanni Andreoni's historical novel, *Zucchero* (Sugar) (1995), set in the North Queensland sugar belt. Andreoni begins his historical, though somewhat sketchy, tour de force with the kidnapping of Micronesians to work as forced labourers in Queensland's developing sugar industry and ends his saga with the internment of Italian Australians during the second world war. The novel is a social realist interpretation of relations between Anglo-Australians and 'the other' and focuses on the exploitation and discrimination displayed towards the Kanakas and the Italians who replaced them, as well as towards the local indigenous population reduced to living on the fringes of society.

Other first-generation writers have combined the existential, and in some cases highly personalised, dimension of post-World War Two migration experiences with socio-political themes. Pietro Tedeschi's two novels relate the story of Morcia, a young militant left-wing fitter and turner from Reggio Emilia in northern Italy, who reluctantly emigrates to Australia in the early 1950s. Tedeschi traces Morcia's physical and metaphysical journey from unsettlement in Reggio Emilia, an industrial city down but not out in the years immediately after the end of the Second World War, to potential resettlement in Wollongong, a developing industrial city without the technological sophistication and political worker awareness of Reggio Emilia. The first novel, *Senza camicia* (*No Silver Spoon*) (1986), begins with the worker occupation of the Officine Reggiane steel plant, Morcia's subsequent unemployment and struggle to make ends meet, his decision to emigrate with the accompanying condemnation of Italian Christian Democrat government policy on emigration (the government treats Italian workers and peasants like two-legged animals) and ends with Morcia boarding ship to leave for Australia. In the second novel, *53B* (1993), written in English and only partially published (1991), the protagonist's name is changed to Reggio. It begins with Reggio's arrival at the Bonegilla migrant camp where he participates in the Italian migrants' revolt against bread rationing and is subsequently assigned to the labour force at the Port Kembla steelworks as an unskilled worker despite his Italian trade qualifications. Reggio, in fact, soon discovers that although British and North European qualifications were recognised, their Italian equivalents were not, a state of affairs that led to paradoxical situations in which the foreman sought 'advice from the [Italian] fitter's labourer because he knew more than the tradesman himself' (1993 182), while 'the humblest, the dirtiest, the most impersonal jobs...were especially reserved...for the Italians' (1993 183) even though 'the big Diesel locos which pulled the trains on the railway network

inside the Steelworks showed in big letters the [Italian manufacturer's] name ANSALDO' (1993 183).

Reggio needs to find his space both in the steelworks and in the Berkeley migrant camp where he lives during his first twelve months in the Illawarra. His space at Berkeley is marked both by his association with his Italian friends, all young single men, and by the attempts they make to establish a rapport with some of the other migrants at the camp, mostly made up of English families. On the work front he is appreciative of the fact that the steelworks offers him the opportunity to regain his self esteem after years of forced unemployment. However the chaotic and inferno-like atmosphere of the place makes him uneasy ('a steel jungle submerged in smoke, dust, fire, and the roars and bangs filling the air where people entered in hundreds as if swallowed by the giant jaws of hell' [1991 183]) and he is dismayed at the primitive methods used in clearing a flooded area: 'Both teams were going to dig a metre-deep ditch to reach lower ground seventy metres away. "How original! And what about water pumps?" I asked myself. "Leonardo [da Vinci] invented them four or five hundred years ago."' [1991 193]). Despite this he is prepared to adapt to local work practices by proposing a quicker and more practical way of clearing the flooded area, a solution that earns him the praise of his Australian foreman:

He pointed at me with a grin. 'I couldn't have done it without the help of me mate here.'...I didn't understand one word Fred had exchanged with his compatriots, but I had grasped the real meaning of the definition 'mate' for the first time...Right down in the gut I felt good. (1991 194)

Reggio's initial perception of Australia is positive and enthusiastic though critical and not necessarily accepting in all its aspects. Australia is seen as a land of rugged natural beauty that offers a fresh beginning, new opportunities and new experiences and challenges. His first year in Australia has changed him from the passive, limp, withered human being who had set foot on the boat in Genova to an assertive, self-confident and critical individual whose perceptions of the world have been set in focus and whose horizons have been widened (1993 190), thus forming a basis for further exploration and contact with the new country.

A counter-discursive questioning of dominant notions of history and nation applied to both Italy and Australia constitutes an important element of Adelaide-based Vincenzo Papandrea's novel, *La Quercia grande* (*The Great Oak Tree*) (1996), which proposes emigration as an experience containing submerged values that need to be recognised, recovered and reassessed. These values are created by a blending of traditions and customs taken both from the place of origin and from the new land, and include family relationships, solidarity among people from the same town, class solidarity, accepting the new country without forgetting the old, the concept of personal political commitment. The novel is a detailed description of the thoughts, feelings and perceptions, hopes, doubts and disappointments of a group of *contadini* as they experience the transition from agricultural Careri

in the Calabrian mountains to Adelaide's industrial belt. After the end of the Second World War, the *contadini* of Careri had, like their forefathers (see Crupi 2002 151), actively participated in the struggle for land rights promoted by the political left. Because of this the local conservative power elite (the landowners, the priest, the local government authorities) employ various stratagems to force the *contadini* to emigrate.

The initial impact with Australia is disorienting and disconcerting but with the passage of time most of the members of the group gradually begin to find their niche in the new order. Rocco Musolino works hard in Adelaide's factories to save money to bring out the rest of his family and to buy land in order to resume his preferred vocation as a *contadino*. Sergio and Paolo become actively involved in their trade union but when Sergio speaks Italian at a union meeting he is quickly told to shut up (158). For most of the group, migration and settlement lead to the realisation of some of their dreams through sheer hard work. Rocco is able to buy his farm where, as well as commercial production, he can carry on some of the old traditions — making his own wine and tomato sauce, the annual killing of the pig to make ham, sausages and other smallgoods. Rocco's son, Bruno, is the one who best manages to blend the old and the new. He obtains professional qualifications in agriculture which provide access to a career as well as allowing him to help his father manage the farm, while his contact with an Aboriginal elder leads him to gain an insight into Australia's ancient mystique.

As well as existential and socio-political themes, the novels of Charles D'Aprano and Giuseppe (Joe) Abiuso raise the identity issues that confront the 1B³ and the second generations while Marisa Fazio's (1992, 1997) narratives explore themes of nostalgia, place, identity, intergenerational relationships and the expressiveness of the Sicilian dialect. Abiuso's novella, *Diary of an Italo-Australian Schoolboy* (1984 100–60),⁴ is a story in which bitterness and farce are intertwined as an adolescent Italian boy is put through the wringer of assimilation. Mario Carlesani, the protagonist/narrator, lives in Fitzroy (Melbourne) where his parents are caught in a vicious circle of poverty and misfortune. His school experience is equally disadvantaged as he keeps being failed and made to repeat third form in an education system that does little to address the special needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students. When his family situation is ultimately resolved, Mario decides to drop out of school and go and look for work in the Northern Territory (which he considers to be the last genuine Australian frontier) where he will join his friend Geoffrey's big brother in the top end's 'silent nights all surrounded by those white ghost gums' (1984 160). Despite his problematic school experience, Mario has established a positive relationship with some of his teachers. The History teacher encourages his somewhat unarticulated search for the spirit of Australia while Miss K., who sometimes unofficially teaches sex education instead of mathematics, encourages Mario to become active in the Victorian Secondary Students Union. Mario thus moves

from a position of feeling alienated from all aspects of Australian society to an awareness of class solidarity and an appreciation of the 'true' spirit of Australia. Abiuso's thesis is that while society, through its various institutions, excludes and alienates the CALD migrant, individual Australians can offer the migrant practical help or can lead the migrant to an understanding of the Australian spirit. While Mario becomes an active participant in Australian society even if he may not fully accept it, his parents fail to achieve this because of the isolation brought about by their lack of English and through their insistence in maintaining traditional Italian peasant values and their unwillingness to accept the new land.

Jim Romano, the protagonist of *Tears Laughter and the Revolution* (D'Aprano 1998), decides to join the Australian Army Labour Corps in 1942 when the country comes under threat of Japanese invasion as a gesture of solidarity towards his Australian friends (3). Over time his initial disinterest in Australian social and political issues due to his strong sense of Italianness dissipates as he becomes an active participant in union activities, and in 1952 he is sent as one of the Australian delegates to the Vienna peace conference. The trip includes a visit to Italy and proves to be both a physical as well as an intellectual rite of passage. He returns to Australia a committed left-wing intellectual with the conviction that change in the social power structure will be brought about by the working and peasant classes — a political belief that remains with him even when he obtains tertiary qualifications and pursues a teaching career. Jim Romano actively participates in the debates on multiculturalism, the emerging sense of Australian social and political awareness and the Republican movement as well as the more focused issue of the acceptance of CALD worker participation in the Australian labour movement. As part of the process, marked by a number of return trips to Italy, he also finds a resolution to the question of personal identity, reconciling the earlier swing from identifying as an Italian to identifying as an Australian with the emergence of an Italian Australian identity which combines elements of both thus being able to move effortlessly like a swallow through the liminal space that marks Italian/Australian boundaries.

Whereas D'Aprano deals with the experiences of the unskilled immigrant worker who eventually obtains professional qualifications in Australia but remains substantially 'working class' at heart, Enoe Di Stefano's *L'Avventura australiana* (*Australian Adventure*) (1996) is a sensitively told and in parts moving novel about the aspirations of a middle-class couple that discusses, in some considerable detail and with feeling, the condition of Italian migrant women in the '50s. These women are perceived by Di Stefano as simple and basically religious beings intent on following and generally supporting their husbands, creating a home and rearing children in the new country. The central character, Nica, an artist in her own modest way, arrives in Sydney in 1950 with her lawyer husband Enzo and finds she has to come to terms with a society which recognises neither her teaching qualifications nor her artistic aspirations. Nica and Enzo are quite dismayed when,

a week or so after their arrival, they begin to look for work and are advised by the 'old' migrants that the most they can aspire to is a job in some factory. Far from being a land of opportunity, Australia becomes, at least in the initial phase of immigration, a land of disillusionment. However, the couple never quite lose their initial optimism which is shored up by Nica finding employment as a decorator of statuettes for a manufacturer of Catholic religious objects in the city, while Enzo stoically accepts his lot as a sorter in a local bottle factory (a physically fatiguing and soul-destroying place that reminds him of Dante's inferno) where he works extra shifts in order to save money to buy a house. When Nica becomes pregnant she feels isolated and alone without the family support structure she would have had back in Italy but the arrival of the baby takes on a symbolic meaning for her since she feels that she now has a definite commitment to the new country. This commitment is reinforced in the basically optimistic conclusion of the novel when Nica, finally settled into her own home and with her brother about to arrive from Italy, finds that she is pregnant again.

Diasporic issues and the situation of Italian migrants in Australia abandoned to their own devices by an uncaring Italian political elite constitute one of the many intricate, complex and at times confusing sub-plots that are intertwined throughout Pino Sollazzo's, *Il Capolavoro del secolo (The Masterstroke of the Century)* (1988), a novel that brings together the themes of love, sex, passion, fast cars, criminal activity and the bandit-hero developed in his earlier short stories (Rando 1988a 355–57). The protagonist, Dino Crifone, is a Calabrian master criminal who, together with his associates, executes a number of daring criminal exploits that include a highly imaginative fraudulent scheme to squeeze money out of the Italian-Australian community. Posing as impresarios who are organising a series of concerts in Australia for a famous Italian popular singer, they sell tens of thousands of tickets for concerts that will never eventuate. In real life, such concerts constitute significant events in the Italian-Australian diaspora, particularly for first generation migrants, and Sollazzo comments that they are organised with great pomp and ceremony by impresarios who extort 'Italian workers who rush in their thousands to see a singer from the fatherland ... [and] cry like little children when they hear the Italian national anthem' (10). Throughout the novel, Sollazzo provides further comments on the way that the 'ordinary' Italian migrant is subject to exploitation and discrimination. He criticises the Italian government because it has 'virtually abandoned us to our destiny of migrants' (9) and the high and mighty ways of its representative in Melbourne, the Consul General for Italy, 'who considers himself better than everyone else and...rides in a Rolls Royce driven by a personal chauffeur... [but] if you want to get a document from the Consulate you've got to go through hell and high water!' (48). Discrimination also comes from some Italian-Australian institutions connected to the Italian ruling class, such as Melbourne's Italian language newspaper *Il Globo* as well as the anglo-Australian media — Sollazzo comments that 'in this southern land

we migrants are like desert dust...every time we make even a slight mistake, they [the media] immediately shoot us down, or they give us a large dose of poison' (47). In this context the protagonist Dino and his band, who finally repentantly stage the promised concerts in a gesture of solidarity with working class migrants, represent the ideal bandit heroes found in modern Calabrian literature, and in the Calabrian folk narrative familiar to many older Calabrian Australians. Although modern globalised bandits, they maintain close ties with the south of Italy and adhere to its traditional code of honour, stealing from the corrupt and exploitative rich to give to the poor and refusing to have anything to do with drugs. They are considered true sons of the south who with their pragmatic intelligence counter institutionalised Italian and Australian prejudices that portray southerners as primitive, ignorant and stupid. In this respect Sollazzo reflects concepts that are not uncommon among the older immigrants of southern *contadino* origin who regard the Italian government (and its institutions) as ineffective, something alien to their reality, an instrument of corruption and oppression.

Although not related to an Italian-Australian context, long time Perth resident Alfredo Strano's novel *Cristo se n'è andato* (*Christ Has Gone Away* [2003] — the title closely calques Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*) — presents migration as existential defeat caused in part by the social and economic problems of Calabria, in part by the ruinous colonial policy pursued by Italy's fascist government.⁵ It is the story of Cicillo, son of a small landowner of Acquasanta in the Calabrian mountains who had obtained trade qualifications as a mechanic and, rather than face unemployment, decides to leave his pregnant wife and follow the fascist government's call for workers to emigrate to the newly conquered Italian territories in Abyssinia. There Cicillo establishes a relationship with Tata' who is of mixed Italian/Abyssinian parentage and with whom he has a child. He is also brought into extended contact with the fascist system as well as with the consequences of Italian intervention in north Africa that include instances of cruelty to the local inhabitants (including massacres). The outbreak of the Second World War delays his return to Acquasanta in 1947, no longer young and with the realisation that the leprosy he had contracted in Africa has now become terminal. Notwithstanding its conclusion, Strano's novel presents the theme of hope, through the possibility of brotherhood between people of different cultures and ethnicities, as well as a message of universal peace, through the condemnation of war seen as a punishment from God and a manifestation of the madness of humankind (Strano 2003 191–92). This perspective derives from Strano's concept of the social dimensions of Christianity enunciated in the first of a series of memoirs, *Prigioniero in Germania* (*Prisoner in Germany*) (1973), and subsequently developed as a constant theme in his other writings (Strano 1991 and 2001).

Writing about the migration experience is thus one of the many and varied cultural practices developed by Italians who have migrated to Australia. Although the number of first-generation Italian-Australian writers who have published in

volume form is relatively small in terms of the size of the community, they have produced a significant corpus of texts which can be seen as belonging to the 'minority' and largely invisible streams present in Australian literary culture. These texts present some points in common with the general corpus of alternative literatures although ultimately they display a number of differences through the themes related to the expression and critique of Italian cultural values and practices, the sometimes complex appraisal of the relationship with Italy and the equally complex relationship with the new country. Texts produced by first-generation writers in particular are often characterised by counter-discursive elements that function to interrogate and destabilise hegemonic views of nation, as well by the temporal and spatial dislocations resulting from the mapping of two overlapping cultural contexts.

Themes treated in texts of narrative fiction are to some extent more selective and more focused than in poetry, memoirs and (auto)biography (there has been a virtual 'explosion' in the production of memoirs and biographies by both first- and second-generation writers in the past fifteen years or so). While some narrative texts (Di Stefano 1996; Tedeschi 1986 and 1993) contain quite transparent (auto)biographical elements, others (Cappiello 1984; Gabrielli 2008) transcend the immediacy of personal *vissitudes* to explore the more universal aspects of the human condition. In both cases, however, common themes are those related to the cultural and social identity of the Italian-Australian community, the generally un-nostalgic recall of the Italian pre-migratory past and the present relationship with Italy. There is an implicit critique of the Australian ruling class and, more particularly, of the Italian ruling class which is in many ways held responsible for the upheavals caused by the migration process. The effects of the migration process are, however, perceived differently by different writers. For some the passage to a new world involves the realisation of a richer and fuller life. For others the long crossing has not lived up to its promise. The dream did not become reality and nostalgia triggers a sense of not belonging either to the past or to the present, a metaphysical wandering that cannot be fully resolved. While many of the narrative works deal with the social realities of the diaspora, some also provide a constant and ever-shifting appraisal of two different worlds and two different cultures in the attempt to demythologise and remythologise past and present in the light of new experiences.

Despite the lack of cultural negotiation with the mainstream, first-generation Italian-Australian writing can be considered as providing an interesting example of Bhabha's general observation regarding the potential of Australia's pluricultural society to present views from the periphery (Bhabha 1990a 6). To what extent Italian-Australian narrative fiction (and also theatre and film) can contribute to this 'rewriting' yet remains to be seen, although the regional and localised differences articulated by some writers certainly contest dominant notions of history and nation, thus contributing to the interrogation of the national as emergent from both

local communities and global diasporas. It does nonetheless provide one of the many examples that can be incorporated in Sneja Gunew's theoretical framework for analysing ethnic minority writing in Australia by changing the definition of what is considered 'Australian literature' and challenging conventions that appear to be attached to migrant writing (1994). In *Haunted Nations*, Gunew argues that there cannot be a full understanding of Australian culture and identity without the inclusion of minority cultures. This inclusion will allow the investigation of the representation (or of the absence) of the 'other' and provide alternative ways of considering Australianness. Gunew's arguments present interesting links to Bhabha's observation that minority discourse, as a subaltern voice of the people, can transcend time and space (1990b 309), and to the claim made by Edward Said that the exile/migrant can apply a double perspective — things are seen both from the point of view of what has been left behind and of the here and now (1994 44). The vision of the new world is filtered through the one left behind, leading to the development of an original/unique sensitivity and the construction of a new morphology of the present.

NOTES

- ¹ The selection criteria represented by the terms 'first generation' and 'narrative fiction' are not entirely unproblematical. Peter Dalseno's lightly fictionalised autobiography *Sugar, Tears and Eyeties* (1994), for example, is not included since the author arrived in Australia as a baby and writes about issues that are more pertinent to the second generation experience.
- ² The irony consists in using a noun + adjective structure to state the opposite to the literal meaning expressed by the noun group. Cappiello's novel clearly suggests that for the protagonist Australia did not turn out to be a 'lucky country'.
- ³ The term is used to refer to individuals who have migrated to Australia as children or young adolescents and who have received some or all of their education in Australia.
- ⁴ The exegetical history of Abiuso's novel has a somewhat unusual twist. The initial version was written in Italian and English in 1972, circulated in cyclostyled format, and an excerpt was published in Abiuso et al (1979 92–98). There are some very striking resemblances between Abiuso's novel and the more sugar-coated film *Moving Out*, produced in 1982 by Pattinson Ballantyne Films, that could be construed as indicating that the film drew substantially from the novel but without any acknowledgement.
- ⁵ In his non fictional writings Strano (1991, 2001) presents migration to Australia in a much more positive light.

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