from ‘terrone’ to ‘wog’: ‘post’ colonial perspectives on italian immigration into australia


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The Italian presence in Australia has been seen in a wide variety of ways, but rarely from the point of view of post-colonial discourse. As Italian unification in 1861 represents the starting point for Italian mass emigration, the best way to approach the issue is to begin by reconstructing traditional views of Italian history and culture. Italian unification has generally been hailed as a positive step towards nationhood by a country which had hitherto been simply described as a ‘geographical expression’. The standard narrative traces Garibaldi’s steps from the embarkation of the ‘One Thousand’ at Quarto in Liguria and his landing in Marsala, Sicily to ‘liberate’ the South. His campaign is as celebrated as the man himself, described as the ‘Hero of Two Worlds’. Indeed, he is one of the few Italian political and military figures in modern history that the English speaking world can relate to, not least because of his penchant for things British, like the red shirts his men famously sported. The existing Bourbon regime he so deftly helped to bring down had been described by none other than British P.M. Gladstone himself, as the ‘negation of God erected into a system of government.’

In fact, unification really meant the military occupation of the rest of Italy by the Kingdom of Savoy (Piedmont). Until his departure for Marsala, Garibaldi had basically served his ‘revolutionary’ career at the service of the British government in South America. Moreover, his ‘liberation’ of the South had been with its substantial political, military and financial support. British interests played a leading role in Italian unification seen as a counterweight to French designs in the Mediterranean. The denigration of the Bourbon regime in the dominant media of the time provided the necessary ethical support for Garibaldi’s mission and constituted the founding justification of ‘Italian’ unification.

In reality, despite the difficult conditions of its poor, the Bourbon regime was neither irredeemably corrupt nor impenetrable to progress. Under its policies, a modest start towards industrialisation had already occurred, and few know that it was the first Italian state to construct a railway line (Naples-Porto). It expressed a florid intellectual and political life in spite of setbacks resulting from Bourbon repression after the 1848 revolution. Its economy was stable and productive and its finances sound. The hopes raised by Garibaldi’s campaign among the southern peasantry for land ownership were quickly destroyed. In constitutional, legal, administrative and military terms Italy had not really been ‘unified’, but rather had been ‘occupied’ by an all centralising Piedmontese state. Not surprisingly, the overriding priorities of the new Italian government were principally to industrialise the northern Italian economy. Accordingly, the new regime quickly stipulated agreements with the large southern landowners (latifondisti), thereby frustrating peasant aspirations. This, together with increases in taxation, not to mention the forced de-industrialisation of the southern economy, led to a general armed insurrection which went under the name ‘Brigantaggio.’ To quell it, martial law was declared and the Piedmontese army sent to the South and ended up numbering 120,000. It resorted to notorious ‘counterinsurgency’ tactics similar to those of the United States in Vietnam. The death toll, almost exclusively among civilians, was to reach almost 270,000. While the military’s losses were much lower - about 23,000 – this was still more than all casualties sustained by the Piedmontese army in the wars for the unification of Italy. The definitive repression of brigandry was to confirm the large landowners as the ruling class of the south in alliance with northern industrial interests.

The industrialisation of the North could not occur without ‘squeezing’ the only productive sector of the economy, agriculture. In southern Italy this was the principal source of income and export earnings. Taxation was increased particularly on

domestic consumption (for example the infamous Mill Tax was introduced in 1869), and after a period of trade liberalisation, heavy protectionism was adopted (1878). Before unification, the southern Italian economy had been the most viable in Italy in export terms. It had the biggest merchant marine fleet in the Mediterranean after the British with its agricultural products being sold throughout Europe and as far afield as Russia and the United States. Reaction to Italian protectionism by importing countries meant that southern Italian products were no longer welcome. Under these pressures and unfavourable world markets, the southern economy collapsed and the whole agricultural economy of Italy was placed under severe strain. 6

The political ‘benefits’ of unification were also meagre: Italy’s new ‘citizens’ obtained only limited suffrage. Suffrage was regulated by erstwhile Piedmontese laws; it was ‘extended’ from 400,000 in 1861 to 2 million in 1882 out of a total population of about 22 million and excluded non-landowners and the illiterate, a higher proportion of whom lived in the South. 6

As with the mirage of universal suffrage, for the newly annexed South, promises of free public education also brought mixed blessings. Although substantial resources were expended in this area, the national educational system imposed Tuscan Italian as the only accepted medium of communication. Just as Italy had not been unified democratically, so public education could not but reinforce the class-based nature of the newly forged ‘national’ society. Tuscan Italian was spoken only by a very small cultural elite. Even the architect of Italian unification, Count Camillo Benso di Cavour, prime minister at the service of the king of Savoy, preferred to speak French rather than Italian. Moreover, public education was established first in the North and only later in the South. Illiteracy ranged from 75% to 90%. 7 These factors conspired principally to push collective action beyond the realms of actuality, leaving open only individualistic options for self-improvement.

The post-unification system had thus left many rural Italians with little scope for progress. Economic advancement had been rendered impossible by government policies. Political participation was blocked by the very limited suffrage and military law. Public and intellectual discourse and the education system further marginalised the poor. As with education, huge investment in public transport networks also brought social upheaval and hardship, for emigration began to take on the form of a mass exodus in the 1880s, particularly from rural areas and the South. Initially emigration was opposed by governments to keep rural labour costs low in favour of southern landowners. However, the situation rapidly became explosive. Policy was forced to change, emigration began to be seen as a positive solution to social problems arising particularly in the South. Crime would be reduced and emigrants would send back much needed foreign cash to help their families left at home. This money helped to redress the trade imbalance due to protectionism, buoyed the internal market and ended up in banks which financed industrialisation. 8

Up to 27 million Italians eventually emigrated after Unification, although about half of this number returned. The regions most affected were Piedmont, Veneto, Marche, Abruzzo-Molise, Campania, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily (ranging between 1.6% and 3.3% of the total population per annum!). However, emigration from the North tended to be seasonal towards nearby European countries (consistently around 80% of the total) whereas in the South it was predominantly transoceanic (over 90% of the total went to the Americas) and was much more permanent in character. 9

For the purposes of our analysis, the significant aspects of this ‘unification’ process were the cultural repercussions. As mentioned above, the ‘backwardness’ of rural areas and particularly the South had been emphasised as a way of justifying occupation. Following ‘unification’ intellectuals seeking ‘to comprehend’ the reasons for the apparent inability of the South to follow in the wake of the North led to the formulation of the concept of ‘la questione meridionale’ where the situation of the southern provinces was described as being intrinsically backward and significantly as ‘immutable’ or static, that is, incapable of self-improvement (in other words Southern Italians had been ‘essentialised’, i.e.: attributed enduring and immutable characteristics). 10

Given that ‘positivism’ was the ascendant scientific ideology at the time it is not surprising that scientists sought ‘objective’ criteria to explain why ‘la questione meridionale’ did not appear to be amenable to self-improvement. A leading exponent of Italian positivist science was Cesare Lombroso, a northern Italian criminal anthropologist who looked for and found physical characteristics among southern Italians which he believed explained their laziness and proclivity to crime (based on his measurements of the skulls of stain brigades). Lombroso’s school of criminal anthropology would subsequently have a lasting influence.

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7 Villani, p. 294.
both within Italy and abroad in its construction of ‘la questione meridionale’. 11

In reality, as we have seen, the so-called irredeemable ‘backwardness’ of the South and rural areas in Italy was an artefact of unification, a colonial process recognised by contemporaries and acknowledged even as it occurred. It was a cultural mythology or ‘discourse’ that served the dominating classes. Much of the Sardinian Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s work on subalternity defined as the cultural submission of the oppressed to dominating narratives regarding their own reality and lives, was based on his analysis of unification and its nefarious impact on the lower classes in southern Italy. 12

An instrument characterising subalternity was, as we have seen, ‘essentialisation’. However, many of those imposed upon in this manner did not always accept these imposed discourses. The reaction to the collective existential crisis (also in the physical sense of the word) of Italy’s South and rural areas was the fundamental trigger for emigration. Emigration continued to be an option even when the hardship it caused both materially and culturally emerged in all its attendant contradictions. Emigration backboned as the only real solution and continued to attract the most energetic and enterprising elements. Indeed, it is common opinion amongst Italian emigrants that they represent the best of their breed. A famous song of emigration, almost the ‘national’ anthem of Calabria, is Calabria Mia, in which the refrain states: ‘Tutti u megghiu righi s’indiru’ or: ‘All the best of your children have departed’. If we are to look at emigration from the point of view of its protagonists, it was considered an investment or to use current economic terminology, a ‘business plan’. In fact, it was not the poorest that emigrated, but those that could spare enough accumulated capital to make an investment considered a certain source of future economic well being. Individual participation was generally one small piece of a much greater flow. In the immediate this has been termed ‘chain migration’ or to use another expression: ‘word of mouth investment’. However, the subalternity to which Italian emigrants had been subjected in their homeland could not end with their departure. To begin with, all emigrants start and often finish their lives in a ‘subordinate’ position. Moreover, the Italian government also advised foreign elites as to how they should receive and classify Italian immigrants, transmitting the notion that southern Italians were predisposed to delinquency and depravity. In particular, this coloured United States’ perceptions of Italian immigration where the vast majority of southern Italian migrants went. On witnessing the arrival of prevalently southern Italian immigrants, public opinion was stunned. Antipathy was so strong that the point where immigration was drastically restricted in 1924. For years immigration officials in the USA kept separate statistics for southern and northern Italians. 13

In turn, US opinion influenced Australian perceptions both popular and academic. The most significant works on Italian immigration published by Australian ‘experts’ of the time all reproduce this dichotomy of undesirable southern Italians as opposed to northern ones. Here, racial characteristics such as (desirable and progressive) blondeness were mistakenly attributed exclusively to northern Italians and (undesirable and backward) darkness equally wrongly to southern Italians. 14

Almost since Federation in 1901, the newly founded Australian Commonwealth had ‘protected’ its almost exclusively Anglo-Celtic society behind walls of the ‘White Australia’ policy. This policy was intended to bar immigration from any nation not considered ‘European’, with a preference for the British and Northern Europeans. Before the Second World War, Italian immigrants had numbered about 33,000. This was a small number when compared to emigration to the USA, but already culturally significant because it quickly became the largest non-English speaking group such that their presence aroused opposition in Australian society, ever fearful of ‘foreign invasion’.

The racial status of Italians, some of whom were seen as not being really white, nor quite black, was cast into doubt. Pseudo-scientific ideas of Italy as being divided into a ‘Nordic’ or ‘Alpine’ north and ‘African’ south were current in Australian scientific opinion until well beyond the end of the Second World War. One should remember that the cultural construct of ‘whiteness’ at the time was a defining aspect of ‘Australianess’. Inevitably this ideology informed the application of the White Australia policy. Moreover, it continued to condition its application throughout the 1960s and 1970s to the extent that Italians deemed as being of a ‘dubious’ racial colouring were not permitted to enter Australia. By the time these procedures


were abandoned, the bulk of Italian immigration to Australia was over. These ideas continued to have currency in mainstream public and political opinion until recent times, if not to this very day!  

The vast majority of Italian immigration into Australia mostly took place after the Second World War. Total numbers were eventually to reach 250,000. This meant that this immigration wave had been conditioned by another set of particular historical circumstances. Italy had entered the war against Great Britain and France in June 1940 on the side of Nazi Germany. In many ways this choice derived from the Fascist regime's pursuit, albeit in an extreme form, of the Italian state's traditional policy of southward expansion into the Mediterranean which had previously led Mussolini's government to definitively pacify Libyan resistance (with horrendous loss of life, akin to what had occurred some years earlier in southern Italy), not to mention the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935-6 (once again with enormous loss of life among the civilian population), using the previously conquered Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somalia as springboards.

When the Italian Government signed the Armistice with the Allies on September 8, 1943, Italian unity collapsed not only in its institutions, administration and army but particularly in legitimacy. Indeed, the whole edifice behind its geopolitical thrust had disappeared now it had in effect become a vassal state. Unification had truly been undone and with it the 'Piedmontese' structure of the state. The country was occupied in the North by the German army and administered there by what remained of the Fascist party as a vassal regime called the Republic of Salò. In the South the 'legitimate' government, which was still under the Savoy monarchy, continued an administration of sorts under Allied control. In the confusion, families were divided. Disbanded soldiers, left without orders, tried to return home in perilous circumstances. In some areas, particularly in the North, where Italian partisans operated, conflict took on a fratricidal aspect. Almost every Italian emigrant who arrived in Australia after the war can relate the disorientation that he or she felt on that day.

Eventually, by siding with the Allies and by strenuous resistance against the occupying German forces by the partisans, Italian polity gradually and partially raccourcised some sort of legitimacy which has consolidated into the mythology of 'Liberazione' from Fascism. On the strength of this narrative, the modern Italian republic was forged and founded. Indeed, the Day of Liberation is still celebrated in Italy as a public holiday on April 25. Symbolically, it coincides with Australia's celebration of its war dead, many of whom fell against the same enemy.

However, the poor huddled masses of defeat found it hard to believe in this 'Liberation' and saw only ruins. One should consider that in the immediate post war years there was widespread dissatisfaction with the new government. Collective protests, particularly in the South, again centred on the objective of occupying land held by absentee aristocrats. As had happened after Unification, many of these protests were brutally repressed by police with many deaths occurring (for example at Melissa in Calabria in 1949). Subalternity had not disappeared, and economic conditions were dire, once again particularly in rural areas and in the South.

So once again, emigration beckoned as the only solution. Those that departed for Australia brought with their meagre material baggage rich with family histories of previous transmigrations, mainly to the United States. In addition, they had burning memories of September 8, and the humiliation that had ensued. In effect, they had no homeland, excepting their village, friends and family. They could not identify with the re-nascent Italian state. The 1940s and 1950s when the majority left Italy, were the years of separatism, led in Sicily by the notorious bandit Salvatore Giuliano, and of the annexation of the erstwhile eastern Italian provinces by Yugoslavia. The very reality of emigration spelt admission of defeat.

Not surprisingly, the Australians who witnessed the arrival of the first wave of Italian immigrants subscribed to this narrative of submission: the Italians were the defeated, the humiliated. If they had come to Australia, it was because of their defeat and hence the only way forward was for them to assimilate into the local culture, which had demonstrated its utter superiority. Add this to the peasant background of many migrants, their illiteracy, their sentiments of inferiority and long memories of oppression by the powerful. In his autobiography Under Another Sky: The life and sentiments of an Italian emigrant, Carmelo Caruso, from Sicily, recounts his experiences in Queensland where many Italians found gruelling employment in the sugar-cane fields. He relates how assignment of virgin land there followed a precise pecking order of victory: the best lots went to the Australian born, then successively to the British, the Maltese, the Greeks, the Germans and only last to the Italians.  

Opinions of how to 'classify' Italians scientifically did not remain enclosed within ivory towered academica. They strongly permeated public debate and perceptions in Australia, as witnessed in the best seller They're a Weird Mob which sold over half a million copies and was even made into a film starring northern Italian actor Walter Chiari in 1966. Published as an ostensibly autobiographical novel, They're a Weird Mob ushered in the era of post-war Australian cultural assertiveness. The narrator

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and author, posing as a blonde northern Italian migrant, called himself Nino Culatta. In this work, southern Italians are depicted caricaturedly primitive and violent, needful of salvation by the baptism of beer and tablaffs, abandoning their knives and wine. Both works end with an appeal to the ‘New Australians’ as they were then called, to assimilate until their own culture was totally extinguished. The real author’s name, however, was John O’Grady. His work served to further confound public awareness regarding the reality of immigration and reinforced public views of the subalternity of (particularly southern European) migrants.

The weight of this conventional wisdom has conditioned perceptions to this day. Indeed, such is the hegemony of this narrative that many southern Italians themselves and their descendants have (albeit with misgiving) adopted it as their own ‘identity’. Current ‘multicultural’ debates and the ‘celebration of difference’ as witnessed in the Australian context by immigrants and their offspring are part of the term ‘wog’ and the use of ‘wogness’ are direct descendants of this process (see for example the interesting polemics and reflections in: www.wog.com.au). Insofar as ‘wogness’ is accepted uncritically or taken for granted as the defining narrative of one’s identity, we witness ‘de-centering’ or the adoption of other widely held prejudices as a definition of self.

To give one an idea of the impact of this ideological order on the minds of migrants, I can cite the example of a relative of mine, now in his eighties, who emigrated to Australia in the early 1950s. My cousin lived through the war as a soldier, was captured by the Germans after September 8, 1943, and was forced to work on the Atlantic Wall. During this time he defied German mistreatment to the point of risking his life for the sake of maintaining faith to his principles. Following the war he spent time as a POW in Great Britain. On arrival in Australia he worked for the local council on road-works for over 30 years despite being a shoemaker by trade. He took out Australian citizenship very early into his residence in Australia. Now a pensioner, his hobby is playing lawn bowls. One day, he recounted (itself significant for being considered a story worth telling) how one of his Anglo-Australian competitors made a mistake and assigned him fewer points than he had effectively scored. When I asked him whether he protested, he simply replied: ‘What’s the use? Remember, it’s their country.’

ITALIAN CULTURE IN AUSTRALIA

It is important to try to comprehend the state of mind of the immigrant on touching Australian shores. He or she had spent at least a month at sea, a passage costing many the worth of their entire inheritance and more. All literature written by immigrants recounts this leap from the known to the unknown as a constant leitmotif. In the mythology of the Mediterranean, change was represented by the god Janus, the two-faced doorkeeper. To pass under his gaze was a moment of truth when one had abandoned one’s previous life and identity. But had not yet acquired a new one. Any passage was considered a moment of vulnerability when the slightest unexpected influence could bring about unpredictable or even fatal consequences. Loss of one’s identity was not the least of these risks. Not coincidentally, after the arrival of Christianity, the Church placed saints at the gates of cities which Janus once guarded to ward off evil.

According to some models of the diasporic experience (as for example those of critic Homi Bhabha), the newly arrived immigrant inhabits a frontier land where his/her past and future mingle, where habitual modes of thought are no longer valid but where the future is as yet unclear. Disorientation is inevitable. Long held beliefs and ideals are challenged by this new reality and accommodation, with all the pain that this can cause, is inevitable. In terms of Italy’s recent history, on an individual level, immigration was like a new but more traumatic unification.

According to these theories, identity ceases to be binary, that is, ‘US’ as against ‘THEM’ but change becomes inevitable both for the hosts as for the guests. The host culture has to confront presences that do not belong to its cultural history or expectations. Alternatively, these ‘unhomely’ presences may constitute unwelcome reminders of long repressed memories or identities. Hence the initial push towards assimilation by the host society, as if to overcome this challenge to consolidated or not-so-consolidated identities.

The immigrant can react to assimilationist practices in a variety of ways as diverse as

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there are individuals. However, for convenience, I have grouped them into two extremes: either rejection of the new reality and therefore entrenchment behind what one constructs as the essential features of one’s own identity, or alternatively acceptance of change and rejection of one’s own heritage as inferior, outdated, shameful, in other words ‘accommodation’. Of course, both these narratives coexist, for one cannot completely exclude outside influences, just as one cannot totally abandon one’s origins. Mixed in with this process are tactics like mimicry and ambivalence, noted in countries with a history of colonialism, as a means of coping with overwhelming hegemonic force both economic and cultural. Hence many migrants have worn two faces: one for the ‘Anglo-Australian’ external reality and the other for their immediate family and friends. These processes can be perpetuated in their offspring with even more marked characteristics.

In general, hostility, discrimination or rejection of dialogue by the host society leads to greater degrees of entrenchment. In these cases, for the reasons outlined above, the Italian immigrant would not emphasise his or her national origins, but rather those of family, village, province and at the most, region. The language spoken would be the so-called ‘dialect’ rather than Tuscan Italian. Social events would remain within the circle of those familiar with this language. This is made possible by the fact that immigration is a mass phenomenon, not an individualistic option, and this was particularly so in the Australian metropolis.

The immigrant may not be aware that in Italy, the values and traditions (and even the dialect) he/she is preserving have been subjected to the ebbs and flows of history, hegemonic processes in economy and culture. They may have disappeared or become unrecognisable. Even when faced by evidence that things have changed in his home country the immigrant may still react by reaffirming that his/her mode of being is the ‘real’ way of being Italian to avoid disorientation or identity crisis. Thus he or she may oppose and reject other ways of interpreting his or her identity. This process is universal and has been termed ‘ethnic drift’ by sociologists.

However, one should realise what the technological parameters of this phenomenon were for Italian immigrants of the time. Telephone calls were either impossible or inordinately expensive. The flow of information in the media was a trickle compared to today. The same applied to travel back to Italy. Communication was also made difficult because the villages and towns most migrants departed from were in themselves subject to diaspora with the consequent breakdown of kinship structures and solidarity networks. To give one a measure of this existential condition, the writer mentioned above, Caruso, discovered that his father had taken ill and died only when a letter he sent home came back to him carrying the following laconic words written by the laboured hand of an anonymous postal worker: ‘Address see Deceased’. Moreover, return could be socially impossible: it would often only be accepted if in material triumph. Few ever returned from Australia in triumph.

The crossing and recrossing of boundaries which some critics have emphasised in the establishment of a diasporic identity, were not possible because of material circumstances in the case of Italian immigration to Australia which was substantially unidirectional, materially, culturally and psychologically. The only variation to this rule was in the extent to which the immigrants themselves created their own little homeland within domestic walls. However, this homeland was fabricated with crystallised memories and inhabited with behaviour patterns deriving from what they had left. Not surprisingly, these models are remarkably tenacious.

However, this it not to argue that no change (crystallisation) or only entrenchment ensued. The other option was acceptance or accommodation. Particularly the very young, single male immigrants, often with uncertain (or repressed) memories of their origin would assimilate rapidly and jettison any claim to the ‘old’ country. Marriage among this group often occurred either with women of non Italian origin or like minded women of an Italian background.

The generations born in Australia would perpetuate this trend towards accommodation as their hold on their forebears’ past would be even more tenuous. They would either uncritically reflect their parents’ crystallised views or adopt local Anglo-Australian perspectives on their own culture in a form of decolonising.

However, among a vocal minority resistance also emerged. Sometimes this took the form of deliberate celebration of diversity as contrasting identity practices were highlighted to underscore difference. A number of Australian-born Italio-Australians would consciously reinvest in modes of behaviour belonging to their forebears. For example, some would deliberately cultivate vegetables in their front gardens to make a statement about their own non-assimilated identities. On the surface this appeared to be a simple imitation of their parents’ behaviour; but in essence, it was a radical reaffirmation of difference, a rejection of assimilationist pressures. This process goes under the name of ‘re-inscription’. But it can take many forms and is almost universal among the Italio-Australian cultures.

Indeed, in almost all cases, whether in terms of accommodation or entrenchment, some type of ‘re-inscription’ did occur. For the first generation of immigrants, objects and habits belonging to their past life could assume the iconic value of an identity practice. Perhaps the very same objects or habits would no longer have currency in Italy. For their offspring, relics of past life in Italy, mythologies, or concrete objects such as tools or old photographs could acquire meanings which they had never had for their
parents. This process is evidenced particularly in the performing arts such as theatre. In one example, a film made by an Italo-Australian theatrical company, Broccoli Productions, reinterpreted the story of the famous Calabrian bandit Musolinone as if it had taken place in today’s Australian bush. Musolinone’s story has many points in common with Ned Kelly’s. In the case of actual objects, an old photograph of a woman together with her friends sitting in the town square will simply mean memories for the person portrayed, but for her children it can signify an alternative (possible or learned for) mode of living one’s social life and leisure very different from the anonymous metropolitan streetscape immigration has accustomed them to. Re-inscription here represents a conciliation of their parents’ past/present with the actual reality the Australian born generation was experiencing. It can also be construed as a form of coping or resistance against the other ‘essentialising’ narratives imposed on their own identities by the hegemonic host culture. From another perspective, re-inscription can also represent a form of accommodation between two unreconciled discourses, the one hegemonic, the other subaltern.

The issue of accommodation deserves further reflection. Even in the case of the most extreme entrenchment, accommodation is inevitable, if only in terms of the life led outside the home, particularly the workplace. Only in particular instances (within larger cities) were Italo-Australians able to recreate a ‘functioning’ totalising milieu of Italianness in Australia. This would particularly be the case of non-working and non-studying immigrants. However, this did not exempt them from the trend towards crystallisation and isolation from their country of departure due to technological limitations. Here, entrenchment can be construed as a negative form of accommodation by creating a homeland which, being deprived of contact with Italy and with ‘chronological’ evolution, could only be a simulacrum.

But this was a rarity; much more often accommodation would occur along lines of exchange or in dialogue with sectors of the host society. In the case of Italians in Australia, an important factor was the Catholic Church, well entrenched in society as a different narrative of ‘Australianess’ as opposed to British views. Traditionally the Catholic Church had often been oppositional not establishmentarian, and needless to say Irish influence was traditionally strong. The socialising aspects of religion brought Italians into a wider community which softened the impact of marginalisation, despite the different traditions which characterised it.

Similarly, but to a much lesser extent, political parties would welcome Italians, particularly those of the extreme left, like the Communist Party. With some notable exceptions (the cane fields of north Queensland) their impact was limited by the politically conservative or cynical (‘qualunquismo’) opinions of many Italian immigrants. It should be remembered that emigration remains an individualistic choice if not an individualistic phenomenon. However, a politically very conservative and pro-Catholic movement did arise under the guidance of the son of Sicilian immigrants, Roberto Santamaria. In the 1950s it was instrumental in splitting the Labour Movement and political Labor Party, thus prolonging the Liberal (conservative government) of Australia ultimately until 1972. In both these cases we witness evolution on the part of the host society to accommodate the new arrivals. 19

Other less evident factors encouraging accommodation also operated: the fact that many Italians hailed from a partially pre-capitalist mode of production and were producers rather than consumers meant that common ground could be found with other immigrants from a like background. Other affinities could be similarity of language, as with Spanish speakers, or of common cultural matrix, as with other peoples of the Mediterranean area. Hence, exchange and the adoption of different ways of doing things. This has been particularly important in gardening and food preparation, for which the Italians in Australia are justly renowned. Just as this knowledge has been transmitted to others, so have Italo-Australian families appropriated other practices (for example, Greek dips frequently feature on Italo-Australian tables). Sometimes the Australian born would encourage such change. In other cases, the cultural diversity already present among the Italian immigration, as for example with the Calabrian community, would find or discover natural affinities with others, particularly the Greek diaspora. All of these factors could lead to exchange along pathways which did not follow hegemonic unidirectionalism or forced assimilation on the basis of a preconceived model.

We are dealing here with consensual exchange, dialogue and comprehension made possible by the diasporic reality of Australia. Nevertheless, I believe we can affirm it to have formed part of the accommodation dynamic. I could term this ‘horizontal multiculturalism’ as opposed to the ‘multiculturalism’ later preached by the Australian elite in the 1970s which celebrated ‘cultural diversity’ only in so far as it was amenable to fruition by the hegemonic elite which attributed to itself the faculty to pick and choose among those aspects of the diasporic inheritance which best suited its purposes and tastes.

Accommodation also occurred with the hegemonic reality, but along pathways implying negotiation and not blanket adoption. A case in point is re-inscription of local practices to accommodate them with the cultural reality of the immigrant. For example, many Australian

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front gardens are decorated with elves and gnomes made of painted cement. The Italians adopted stone lions, if they were from Veneto, or eagles if they were from Abruzzo. Instead of placing these artefacts in the garden, they festoon the front fence, another typically Australian feature to reassert identity, or according to some, to warn off cultural assimilators. Similarly, the name of the village of origin is displayed in ceramic or wrought iron across the front wall of houses, just as British immigrants were wont to do. Likewise, whereas the backyard is an Australian recreational institution where sports are played, many Italians (like other immigrants) transformed it into a vegetable garden. Traditionally, Italians in Italy would never have a backyard or frontyard garden for that matter, rather, they would have a vegetable garden located in the countryside adjacent to urban areas. In backyard gardens, Italians would sow plants never seen in Australia often after their seeds had been smuggled in under the noses of vigilant customs officers. But next to them plants and vegetables never seen in Italy were also sown, particularly decorative ones.

These changes could affect members of the local Anglo-Australian community as well. Backyard exchange is part of community or suburban life in Australia and the Italians brought skills and abilities with them that were much appreciated by neighbours, even in such simple matters as growing vegetables, producing tomato sauce or pressing wine. Likewise, the backyard BBQ was readily incorporated into the Italian Australian life as opposed to the country BBQ ('grigliata') common in Italy. Such activity represents a form of accommodation to the new reality and the creation of a culture which is hybrid because it reflects the unprecedented needs and desires of those who created it. In so doing it has allowed the immigrants and indeed their offspring to find a sense of belonging, thus establishing an authentic culture neither 'Italian' nor Anglo-Australian. It has also enriched the cultural awareness of the host society.

A significant aspect of this is language: to accommodate the new reality around them, immigrants adapted English words to Italian, particularly to describe objects or grasp concepts which did not exist in their experience of Italy. Nearly always, the Italian dialect spoken was the starting linguistic parameter for transformation. Hence, 'fenza' for fence, 'tramba' for tram, 'bacciaarda' for backyard. Alternatively words were adopted from the Italian because they sounded similar to the English, 'carro' for car, or 'fattoria' for factory. This constitutes a fundamental form of appropriation and belonging. Many of these words have even travelled back to Italy with the returning diaspora of recent years, such that the term 'fenza' is today commonly used in Calabria to describe a 'fence' and is used as an alternative in the local dialect to the Tuscan Italian 'recinto'...

The recent 'discovery' of an Italo-Australian literature is only the further case in point.
something other than ‘ethnic’. Similar discourses can also be found among the few Italian critics who are aware of the Italian literature of the diaspora. These will emphasise ‘universality’ and ‘competence’ at the expense of agency and authenticity. Therefore, recognition of one’s work as literature remains a difficult task for the immigrant author, because it can upset ruling constitutive shibboleths of the cultural establishment both in the host country and the country of origin. Similar comment can be passed for the pictorial arts. 19

Many of the ‘cultural’ themes of the Italian diaspora in Australia reflect the enormous effort made to comprehend the new reality, both in terms of its natural and metropolitan wildernesses whose prominent characteristics can appear to be both superficiality and alienation. A good example of how this theme is elaborated comes from a well known Australian writer of Italian origin, Pino Bosi, and is taken from his collection of stories grouped under the title Australia Cane. In one episode, a freshly arrived immigrant named Giovanni knocks on a door to ask for directions to his brother’s house only to have it slammed in his face by a little old lady who also pulls her dog into the safety of the house. Exasperated he bursts out: ‘Australia Cane... Tengo dentro le bestie e lasciano fuori i cristiani!’ Apart from the general readily accessible meaning that an Italian immigrant was lower in dignity than a dog (there is also a pun on the word ‘cane’ meaning dog in Italian), the incisiveness of this remark depends on signifiers deriving from a specifically Italian cultural context: ‘Cristiani’ translated from standard Italian literally means «Christians» (believers in or followers of Christ). However, in a number of Italian dialects (both northern and southern) it means ‘people as opposed to ‘animals’. In other words: ‘These Australians keep people out and animals in!’ 20

What would have been the ‘normally’ fearful reactions of an elderly person in another context are interpreted here as an assault on one’s dignity as a person. This interpretation emerges because the purpose of the story is to reveal more about the overall dynamic in which immigration occurred than illustrating the behaviour of the participants. Italians were seen in derogatory terms by so called ‘mainstream’ Australian society, and this contempt was inevitably and perceptibly imposed on them. Hence, the tale is emblematic of the desire to contrast what is perceived as a universally attributed status of subalternity through the elaboration of a divergent narrative. Nevertheless, its success ultimately depends on the ability to transmit these signifiers to the ‘ignorant’ or unaware reader. Otherwise, its true meaning remains confined within the ambit of the Italian culture of immigration. The extent to which these signifiers travel beyond this social context to impinge upon the awareness of the wider community also indicates the degree to which true ‘multicultural’ consciousness has emerged in Australia.

Later Pino Bosi’s collection, the derogatory ‘essentialising’ attitude of a university educated English speaking Italian immigrant is held up for ridicule. This immigrant relates to an anti-immigrant, Anglo-Australian, ex-mayor that peasant Italians are accustomed to living together with animals. Inadvertently, in his desire to distance himself from his less ‘civilised’ compatriots, the ‘educated’ Italian ends up deriding the common Australian habit of keeping pets within the home. The author’s likely intention is to deliberately underscore the double irony of this situation. At the same time there is a play on the social and political hierarchy that produced the cultural subalternity among peasant Italians motivating their emigration in the first place. In a certain sense the circle is closed when Giovanni responds to the provocation by claiming his equal if not superior status by highlighting the value of his achievements and abilities:

“You prefer empty words but this soil needs a spade’s point and homes need bricks. You want people like him?”

“Watch your words”, Antonio Coccoza tried to interject. “You to your hoe and I to my profession.”

“Denigrating your countrymen to make a good impression, is that your profession?”

“I have a university degree” retorted Antonio Coccoza, trying harder to blend into the circle of onlookers surrounding them as he pulled out a visiting card. But Giovanni was resolved:

“I’m a graduate too, you know. I have a degree in sugar cane and I have already placed a deposit on the shop for when I graduate in fruitulture like my mate Gerolamo.”

Much of the irony is not evident in the English translation (for example the play on ‘cannia’ or sugar cane echoing the expression ‘povero in canna’ an equivalent to ‘dirty poor’), and many a reader will stop at the humour and not look any further. Yet, Giovanni’s spurious attribution of academic terminology to practical activities is a

19 For example the belittling criticism of being ‘ethnic’ has also been levelled at one of Australia’s leading writers on the immigrant experience, Pino Bosi. See Rando, G., “Pino Bosi and the Piccolo Mondo of the Italian–Australian Community” in Attretatne n 18 luglio–dicembre 1998, pp. 4-12. Other examples of Italy–Australian writers include: novelists Antonio Canessa of Perth and Venero Armanino from Brisbane (both Italian origins), Rosa Caspiello from Sydney (Catalan origin), and the first generation poet, Luigi Strano from Mount Wilson (Calabrian origin). On Calabrian authors see: Rando, G., ‘Dal mito della Calabria ai grattacieli dell’Australia. Scrittori e poeti calabroaustraliani’ in La Gazzetta meridionale, Cosenza, Anno 1, no. 2, 2003.

20 Rando ibid, on Bosi, P. Australia Cane (1971) p. 5.

21 Original in Italian: ‘Vi volette le belle chiocciola ma la terra vuole la punta della zappa e le case vogliono mattoni, Gente come tu voleti?’

‘Basta a parlare bene’ cercò d’interrompere Antonio Coccoza. ‘Voi zappate e io faccio la mia professione.’

‘Sparirei dei connazionali per farvi bene, e questa la vostra professione?’

‘Io sono cattone ribatte Antonio Coccoza confondendosi sempre più nel circolo di curiosi che andavano pressandoli, e cavò da una taschino un biglietto da visita. Ma Giovanni continuò ad insinuare:

‘Anch’io sono cattone, lo sapete? Io sono cattone in cannia e non già messo la capanna per il negozio, per quando diventerà cattone in frutticoltura, come compar Gerolamo...’ (Boi, ibid. 1971, p. 157)
form of ‘re-inscription’ of ‘Italian’ concepts with new ones, better suited to the Australian context. Indeed, it reflects the noted Australian prejudice in favour of the physical as opposed to the mental virtues. Immigrant Giovanni has learnt how to assimilate better than his supposedly more intellectually aware countryman, who may have not realised he was indirectly snubbing his Australian interlocutor. Giovanni is able to speak directly in the language of the colonising Anglo-Australian ethos as a pioneer nation and thereby participate in the narrative of ‘development’ as opposed to an essentialised ‘wilderness’. In contrast, the intellectual Italian reflects the typical superiority complex of the Italian educated classes, a characteristic of the colonial legacy we deal with in the first part of this essay.

It is worthwhile noting, however, that the attitude of this so-called ‘intellectual’ Italian immigrant is a parody of what in Italy is seen as true intelligence. There are many popular words in Italian which distinguish between intelligence and education, warning that the two are not necessarily synonymous. True intellectual aptitude has always been a quality prized by Italians. Nevertheless, education is also seen as a vital ingredient for success in life. Accordingly, Italian immigrants strongly encouraged their offspring to study to ‘get ahead’ in their new country.

This last observation represents a useful antidote to the celebration of derision informing the ‘wog’ debate. While it is true many Italian immigrants became frustrated with the point that it has become an Australian cultural stereotype, this is more a reflection of their ability to adapt and assimilate in Australia’s culture than any inherent ‘essential’ quality as Italians. Likewise, care should be taken when one affirms one’s identity in terms of the dominating narratives of the host society such as the ‘colonisation’ of the ‘wilderness’. The extent to which immigrants uncritically adopt this and other ‘local’ perspectives reflects their degree of ‘de-centredness’, and herein lie the limits of the cultural work of many immigrant Australians on the diasporic experience.

To conclude, the ‘postcolonial’ story of Italian immigration into this country cannot be divorced from the profoundly unjust manner in which the Italian elite forced millions to find their only path towards salvation through emigration. The legacy of the subordinate position occupied by the vast majority of Italian emigrants, however, was harder to overcome than material poverty. Economic, political and cultural subordination led to the creation of a condition of subalternity which deprived the poor of the capacity or ‘agency’ to express their own history and identities on their own terms. Rather, they were forced to adopt or tolerate a negative self-image, an identity imposed on them by the intellectual classes at the service of the elite. They were forced into a static representation without any recognition of their desire or ability to change were it not for outside intervention (‘essentialisation’). This image further justified their subordinate status and motivated their exploitation. Likewise, on arriving in Australia, the host society imposed upon immigrants a similar subordinate status. This time their cultural subalternity was ‘coloured’ by constructs of desirable whiteness and denigrated blackness. Australia was meant to be a ‘white’ country well into the 1960s. Immigrants not conforming to the standard were forced to adopt coping strategies to maintain psychological viability in the midst of assimilationist models which instructed them to abandon their own sense of self and identity. Once again the new arrivals were ‘essentialised’. Hence, immigrants were faced with the option between entrenchment or accommodation, or more often a mix of the two, ranging from mimicry and ambivalence to wholesale abandonment of any attempt at self definition when the prejudice of the surrounding society became too strong to resist. Reactions and resistance, however, did arise. Some would embrace the ‘wog’ label decentering their own elaboration of self by attempting to convert a negative image into a statement/celebration of identity. Others, particularly the generations born in Australia, would purposely reproduce practices and behaviour patterns taken from their immigrant forebears as a way of reaffirming difference and rejecting assimilation. This was part of the ‘re-inscription’ process: new meanings were given to old things and modes of being to deepen accommodation with the new reality not in the direction of submission to the greater Anglo-Australian narrative but rather as a form of negotiation or exchange.

This form of ‘horizontal’ multiculturalism could occur among immigrant groups or between these and the host society when both parties were willing to question accepted ways and modes of conceiving each other’s identities. This is opposed to ‘vertical’ multiculturalism, where the elite decides which practices and habits are to have currency and acceptance or be ‘chic’ and which others do not. Channels for this process of accommodation ranged from ‘over the fence’ backyard exchange or proximity, to cultural affinity, to the Catholic Church and political movements both of the Left and Right. Examples abound in popular architecture as well as in practices such as gardening or cooking.

Other cultural activities placed under the label of ‘arts’ reflect the same tensions and conflicts among competing narratives. At times certain works may purport to reaffirm difference and dignity unaware that they are falling back into the same ideological ‘de-centred’ trap.

The way forward lies in the willingness to ‘unpack’ discourses that essentialise ‘the other’. In other words, realising how much of what appears to be ‘conventional wisdom’ with regard to concepts of ‘the other’ is in reality a product of the faculty held by some in society to put ‘the other’ in his/her place. ‘The other’ thus loses the freedom to define his or her identity or worth and is stripped of recognition both in terms of what he/she was and is but also in terms of what he/she could become. True openness means having the ability to change one’s own views of self and being open to challenges on those grounds by ‘the other’.