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“Unrecorded Lives”: Oral Narratives of a Group of First-Generation Campanian Women Residing in Adelaide, South Australia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines issues of identity and cultural maintenance, as evidenced by the oral testimonies of a generational cohort who were born in the region of Campania in Southern Italy and who emigrated to Australia in the 1950s-1960s. During the post-war period of mass migration by Italians to overseas destinations, an Assisted Migration Agreement was signed by Australia and Italy (in 1951); however, the majority of Campanian migrants to Adelaide were not the beneficiaries of assisted passages. Rather, sponsorship by spouses, relatives or *paesani*, followed by cluster settlement patterns, were strong features of transnational immigration by Campanians to South Australia in the post-WWII period. As a result, the journeying and resettlement experiences of this project's sampling of first generation Campanian women were predominantly influenced by family kinship networks operating within a system of chain migration.

The paper will consider the ways in which the project informants developed mechanisms in order to survive the difficulties of cultural displacement and marginalisation from mainstream culture. The participants' "outsider" point of view provides valuable information on the significance of cultural dislocation as a feature of South Australian society in the last fifty years.

This paper considers issues of identity formation and cultural maintenance evidenced by a migration stream from Campania (in Southern Italy) to Adelaide, South Australia in the post-WWII period. The research project currently encompasses the oral narratives of three discrete groups. The first group of informants consists of Campanian women who migrated to Australia in the Fifties and Sixties and who reside permanently in Adelaide. The oral testimonies comprise experiential narratives, with a view to analysing the effects of cultural dislocation, the maintenance of core values and the connections that exist between the place of origin and the migration destination point. In the oral testimonies of the second group of interviewees,

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consisting of Campanians who lived in Adelaide for a time after WWII but who decided to return to Italy, the informants discuss the experience of living and working in Australia and the reasons for the return to the locus of origin. A third group of interviewees comprises women over 60 years of age who are of Anglo-British origin and who were residing in Adelaide during the peak years of migration by Italians in the post-WWII period. Their narratives offer valuable social commentary on the impact of mass migration on the receiving community and the resultant transformation of the cultural landscape over time. The present discussion focuses on selected findings from the life narratives of the first group of informants only: a first-generation cohort of twenty women of Italian origin, all of whom were born in the region of Campania and emigrated to Australia after WWII, with the intention of settling in the city of Adelaide. The primary source of research data for the project, which is ongoing, is a series of digitally-recorded interviews, conducted in Italian and based on a detailed questionnaire in which the participants were asked about their life in Italy, the voyage to Australia, the experience of permanent settlement in Adelaide and their ongoing sense of *italianità* and *campanità*.

The ages of the project informants range from 58 to 101 years (in 2006), a median age of 75.6 years of age. Fourteen informants are from the province of Benevento, four are from the province of Avellino and two are from the province of Caserta, with the first arriving in 1953 and the last in 1968. Twelve informants arrived in Adelaide during the Fifties, and eight settled here during the Sixties. The diversity of languages used by the respondents included standard Italian, English, regional dialects, Australian-Italian and hybrid variations of all of the above. Most of the women received 3-5 years of primary school education in Italy.

The interviews were carried out, for the most part, in the participants' homes, where the enduring portrait gallery of loved ones, in the form of photographs of the living and the dearly departed, bore evidence of the visual narrative that the women and their families had constructed across a radius of time and which provided a tangible link with the past and with their former youthful selves.¹ In the early years of settlement in Australia, a deceased relative was always respectfully referred to as “*la buonanima*” (‘the good soul’), a practice that reflected the inclusivity and permanency of membership to familial networks and kinship groups, in life and in death. For the women’s Australian-born offspring, the photographs and the stories they captured provided a sense of connection with a place, Italy, that was an evocation of memory; a locus of remembered experience outside the parameters of the daily existence of the second generation but one that nevertheless exerted a powerful influence on their socialization. The construction of the interpretive narrative framework for the project was influenced by my own self-reflexivity and insider status as a second-generation member of the Campanian community resident in Adelaide. As a researcher, I was cognizant of the fact that through the documentation of the women’s stories through oral history techniques, my research was also effecting the recovery of experiential narratives that were at the forefront of the consciousness of many second generation Australian-born of Campanian origin. As Shacklock and Thorp observe:

The flexible boundary between participant roles and the joint construction of the life history through the dialogic interaction between enquiry conversants means that the account often says a lot about the researcher conversant as well. (Shacklock & Thorp 2005:157)

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The interview transcripts reveal the women’s personal reflections on a variety of issues, such as the maintenance of regional linguistic codes and socio-cultural rituals, including propitiatory and celebratory rites; changes to traditional courtship practices, religious observance and kinship networks; gendered expectations and the impact of transnational migration on identity, values and cultural norms.

The majority of the project participants were raised in patrilineal rural communities where it was expected that brides would leave their families in order to take up residence in the home of their husband and his family. The informants were all raised in accordance with time-honoured and paternalistic family values involving strict ordinances in matters of family honour and loyalty. “The family was everything”, the participants declared over and over. Patrilineal authority was entrenched and the rule of fathers was law: “Fathers were strict with their daughters”; “Girls had to remain silent. One didn’t know anything”; “Dad didn’t want the three oldest girls to go to school because he was jealous and feared that they would write to boyfriends”. The enculturation of young, unmarried women in Campania between the Wars ensured that during their lifetime, daughters were brought up to make a single, solitary journey that was sanctioned by the community and articulated through family networks and Catholic ritual. The journey was the one to be undertaken by young women to the Church altar, as virginal brides.² For unmarried women, the preparation of their bridal trousseau was a central preoccupation and many of the informants were skilled in sewing and embroidery: “In order to become productive wives and mothers and to improve their marriage prospects, girls received embroidery and dressmaking tuition at a very tender age” (Tence & Triarico 1999:5). The bride’s dowry, of which the trousseau (*il corredo*) was an integral part, represented a potent symbol of a woman’s worth and marriageability. In Roman times, the giving of a dowry (*dotis datio*) was seen as a means of “improving the economic position of the husband’s *familia*” (Gardner 1986:100). A young woman needed all her talent and ingenuity to produce the finest sets of handcrafted linen and household effects to take to her new home after marriage. After the evening meal, families would gather around the fireplace and recite the rosary while the women and girls embroidered, knitted or sewed. The informants described the importance of the trousseau and the desirability of its positive assessment on the part of the prospective bridegroom’s family. A negative appraisal could have a lasting effect on a girl’s reputation and standing within the community. The informants recalled that before the wedding day, the bride’s trousseau, carefully starched and folded, would be put out on display in a specially prepared room at home for the entire neighbourhood to go and inspect. On such occasions, the bride’s parents would offer sugared almonds (representing fertility for the marital union), liqueurs, coffee and biscuits.

The interviews revealed that control of women’s sexuality and fertility was exerted through strict adherence to the cult of virginity before marriage. Strictures were imposed by male members of the family and upheld by senior females, in order to preserve the family honour. Young women were kept in ignorance about intimate matters. They were subject to endogamous courtship practices and the imposition of silence and obedience. Travel was restricted and there were limited opportunities for formal instruction. With the overriding influence of Church dogma, too, life choices were strictly defined. Identity was circumscribed by the family and by the values of the community and there was no place for the exercise of autonomous judgement or the expression of individuality. By the same token, the bonds of community cultural identity ensured that individuals were supported and sustained by the collective:

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family, Church and wider community. After marriage, a woman’s identity was subsumed by the family of her husband. She was to demonstrate obedience to her husband in all matters, although, in reality, domestic power was often wielded by her mother-in-law.

The traditional agrarian way of life in Campanian provincial communities was largely unchanged up to the outbreak of WWII. The women spoke of long days of labouring in the fields for their families who cultivated corn, grapes, fruit, tobacco, olives and chestnuts. With Italy involved in the European theatre of war, the invasion of the German Army, the arrival of the Allied Forces and the disintegration of tight-knit communities, the resultant necessity by the participants to emigrate brought about a revalorisation of their former identity and way of life. The informants spoke of the Second World War in Italy as a time of great suffering. Young women were hidden in wells, dugouts and caves. There were food shortages and, after the Allied bombing raids and retreat by the German forces, electricity and water supplies were cut in parts of Campania and roads and bridges destroyed. The hilltop community of San Giorgio La Molara had been chosen by the occupying German forces as a command post and the bombing of the town on 29 September 1943 is a source of unhappy recollection:

A bomb fell [...] 100 metres away [...] then the whole street was bombed [...] we fled to the countryside [...] we spent the first night on our feet, seized with fear [...] we were too frightened to go back to the town and retrieve our mattresses and blankets.

Thus the oral testimonies are underpinned by images of loss, fragmentation and death. For many families, migration offered an escape from the endemic reality of *miseria* and *povertà*. Contributing to the gradual decline of communities in Southern Italy and the breakdown of the seasonal patterns of rural labour were the effects of industrialisation, war, the devaluation of the currency, the outbreak of phylloxera, internal migration to industrial centres in Northern Italy³ and other centres in Northern Europe, transnational migration and the destruction caused by natural catastrophes, in particular seismic activity. Historically, Benevento has suffered numerous earthquakes that have caused devastation and loss of life. The *borgo antico* of Molinara was literally abandoned by its residents after the terrible earthquake of 1962. Today people refer to the two Molinaras: the pre-earthquake Molinara with its traditional way of life, and the post-earthquake Molinara, signifying a radical cultural shift for the resident community.

The region of Campania has long endured the destabilisation of its settled communities. In classical times, Campania, known by the Romans as “*Campania Felix*” (“fortunate countryside”), was noteworthy for its production of quality grains, wine and olives. The ancient geographer, Strabo (*Geography*, V, 4) considered Campania “the most blest of all plains”:

Above these coasts lies the whole of Campania; it is the most blest of all plains, and round about it lie fruitful hills, and the mountains of the Samnitae and of the Osci [...] A proof of the fruitfulness of the country is that it produces the finest grain [...] all the country round about Venafrum, which is on the border of the plains, is well-supplied with the olive.⁴

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Campania's origins predate the establishment of the Christian faith and the six centuries of Roman domination that commenced in the fourth century B.C. Various occupied also by the Greeks, Etruscans, Samnites (whose sacred emblem was a bull), Osci, Visigoths, Ostragoths, Longobards, Normans, Swabians, Angevins, Aragonese and the Bourbon dynasty, the region's history is a multi-layering of invasion, conflict, settlement, ancient ritual and cultural diversity.⁵ Today Campania has a population of 5.7 million and covers an area of 13,595 sq. km. Its mountainous terrain is divided into five provinces: Avellino, Benevento, Caserta, Naples and Salerno. As was the case in antiquity, Campanian agriculture produces grain, vegetables, olives, grapes and citrus fruit, with manufacturing industries and tourism making a significant contribution to the modern local economy.

The former traditional way of life in rural communities in Campania was marked by cyclical patterns of activity and ritual celebration to which the entire community adhered. The yearly calendar of community events reconciled pre-Christian elements, such as ancient fertility rites, with the conventions and doctrine of the Catholic Church, particularly during the Christian cycle of Christmas, Epiphany, Lent and Easter. The various pilgrimages and feast cycles of the Campanian Madonnas, for example, la Madonna delle Grazie, la Madonna del Carmine, la Madonna di Pompei, la Madonna di Montevergine have ancient origins and are part of a cosmology sanctioned by custom. A number of these religious festivals have been reproduced in South Australia in a way that preserves the traditional significance of the event for the transmigrated community. The preservation of rituals and artefacts makes possible the expression of loss, grief and transience in which the entire community can partake and publicly confirm its membership of the community of origin, even at a remove in spatial and temporal terms.

By the advent on 10 August 1950 of the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno* (State Fund for the South), an Italian government fund set up to construct infrastructure such as roads, electricity lines, sewerage systems and to promote investment in the economically depressed areas of the South, community life for many had been radically altered and employment opportunities were scarce (Renna 1998:95). During the post-war years of mass migration by Italian nationals to Australia, an Assisted Migration Agreement was in place, which had been signed by the Australian and Italian governments in 1951. Bosworth states: “the numbers immigrating to Australia were appreciable, taking the Italian-born population from 120 000 in 1954 to 228 000 in 1961 and to a peak of 290 000 in 1971” (Bosworth 1988:616). However, the majority of arrivals to Adelaide from the five provinces of Campania were not the beneficiaries of assisted passages and had to rely, instead, on the sponsorship (*atto di richiamo*) arranged by spouses, relatives or *paesani* already settled in South Australia. The paradigm for Campanian migration to Adelaide was therefore one of chain migration followed by cluster settlement patterns and the maintenance of strong family kinship networks at the destination site. The earliest arrivals began to send remittances (*rimesse*) back home to their families in Italy. Compared to post-war arrivals from other Italian regions, Campanians became the most numerous regional group to settle in Adelaide after the war: an estimated 10,145 Campanians, more than the number from Calabria and from the Veneto region (O'Connor 2004:59-60).

The Campanians settled in the western suburbs of Findon, Seaton, Grange, and in the east and north-east of the city in Campbelltown, Payneham, Glynde, Firlie, Hectorville, Newton, Paradise, Athelstone, Kensington and Norwood.⁶ Today the Campanian-born in Adelaide enjoy a wide and varied network of clubs, associations

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and purpose-specific groups, such as prayer groups for the veneration of San Pio da Pietrelcina (Benevento), and their activities are broad-ranging.⁷

In analysing the oral testimonies of a group of Campanian women in their diasporic context, the project aims to record and analyse the maintenance of core cultural and social values, over a fifty-year period, by individuals who found themselves undertaking an extraordinary and unexpected journey to the other side of the world, where the political, juridical, linguistic, religious and social framework was predominantly Anglo-British. On the part of the new arrivals from Campania, the streetscape and way of life in Adelaide proved invigorating and rich with possibilities for some, while for others there was a painful sense of disillusionment and disorientation: “I felt disoriented. I had completely lost my bearings”. The efforts to renegotiate identity took place against the backdrop of selective migrant entry and an official policy of assimilationism. In daily life, there were the war-time stories recounted by returned Australian servicemen who had experienced tours of duty in Southern Italy, the negative stereotypes of new arrivals perpetrated in the media, and the continuing attempts by individuals on both sides of the cultural divide to communicate meaningfully to one another. During the post-war period, the scale of mass migration and its effect on the lives and consciousness of established and newly-formed communities in Adelaide cannot be underestimated. For people arriving from provincial Italian communities, as was the case for numerous Campanians, the cultural impact that they experienced was on many fronts, for example, with the Anglo-British mainstream, with Italians from other regions and with settlers from other parts of Europe. The city of Adelaide became a focal point for the convergence of polysemous cultural identities whereby familial, village-based, provincial, regional and nationalistic affiliations were part of the flux of multiethnic identities, languages, cultural values and religious credences. For many Campanians during the early years of settlement, the preservation of regional distinctiveness was a core value informing their daily practices and the social conditioning of their offspring. More importantly, however, was the development of strategies in order to survive the fragmentation of self, brought about by cultural dislocation.

All of the project participants were keen to share their stories; the evocation and direct voicing of remembered experience articulated by some in a state of eagerness and joy at the re-telling, while for others it was accompanied by moments of intense personal anguish during which they wept openly. The project conversants realised that their identity and place in the community of origin had been altered irrevocably. During the narrative sequence of key moments during their lives, events that constitute the typologies of human existence – and childhood, adolescence, maturity, courtship, marriage, childbirth, aging – the women understood that through the process of emigration, a vital link had been broken with their historic and ancient communities. As such, their cultural practices had continued at a remove, dislocated from their source and crystallised spatially and temporally, with the result that in order to preserve a sense of identity and continued membership with the community of origin, certain practices were emphasized and defended more vigorously in order to prevent their diminution and loss.⁸ Luisa Passerini states: “La storia orale può contribuire [...] a scoprire [...] la dialettica tra passato e presente” [Oral history can contribute in revealing the dialectic between the past and the present] (Passerini 1978:xxxviii). The transoceanic voyage, undertaken by many across a vast unknown sea, was a defining moment in their lives: a metaphorical *descensus Averno* that was to shape the vicissitudes that lay in store. As one participant revealed: “I had come out

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with the idea of earning some money and then returning to Italy. When the ship docked in Fremantle, I looked back at the expanse of water that I had crossed and I thought ‘How will I cross all this water again? I don’t think that I will ever return to Italy’”.

In the course of surveying their lives and the mechanisms that they employed to survive what was, in the early years at least, an unfamiliar and alien Australian environment, the participants found themselves challenging and being challenged by norms on both sides of the cultural divide. In the negotiation of cultural boundaries and the re-evaluation of their sense of self and their *italianità* in an Australian context, the participants delineated new borderlines of cultural integration; re-assessing core values and norms of conduct that had been transposed to the new place of settlement. For one participant, the process of demarcation began back in Italy when her husband demanded that she and their three sons move to Adelaide. The woman was vehemently opposed to the idea. “I will go to Australia because you are my husband”, she declared, “but I will mark a sign upon this wall and if I go to Australia, like it or not, I will never return”. When, after a few unhappy months in Australia her husband insisted that the family move back to Italy, the woman stood her ground and refused to go. He returned to Italy alone and she took on extra employment to raise her sons and pay the mortgage. Six months later, her husband returned to Adelaide. She had never weakened her resolve and the family stayed in Australia. Hence the narratives offer insights on the contribution of individuals whose collective synergy and resilience have had a major impact on the cultural milieu in which they settled years ago.

For a number of the participants, the experience of transnational migration widened their personal choices, freeing them from traditional safeguards and impositions. These women willingly participated in cultural risk-taking and the exercise of autonomous judgement, whether in their roles as breadwinners, cottage industry managers, microcreditors, mediators or organizers of collective child-care and aged-care for family and friends. One of the informants postulated, “there was no America here”, yet, like the others, she was nevertheless willing to adapt and shape cultural practices in order to survive in the new environment. This did not mean that the women rejected engrained cultural values *in toto*. However, they seized on opportunities to adapt their skills to a new social domain and a radically different labour market.⁹ Most of the participants were not confined exclusively to the domestic sphere but shared in the dynamic of economic engagement with the outside world. The women spoke of household duties and paid employment that took place at all hours, with little respite. They worked night shifts, took on any extra commitments or tasks that came their way, and were often praised by their employers for their work ethic, willingness to learn and adaptability to change. When their offspring reached marriageable age, they recognized the unsustainability of traditional and inflexible endogamous practices in the face of a multicultural, social mix.

In their places of employment, in public domains and in their private, domestic spaces, the women negotiated with their kinsfolk, nurtured and nourished their loved ones, created supportive networks through which they could valorise cross-cultural influences and developed links to facilitate the successful integration of their offspring within Australian society. Indeed, a number were dismissive of traditional strictures that demanded women’s unquestioned obedience and they were equally scathing about the lack of opportunities for learning: “We were kept so ignorant”; “Married women in Italy didn’t tell you anything. Everything was kept hidden”;

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“Girls were always controlled by their families”. According to Vasta: “as cultural custodians and cultural brokers, Italian migrant women have been protagonists in the maintenance of Italian language and culture, all the while negotiating new cultural and political practices” (Vasta 1992:154).

At a recent congress held in Adelaide, Assessore Rosa D’Amelio from Campania spoke of her feelings as a young girl observing the fragmentation of family units as her loved ones departed for overseas destinations: “I watched as pieces of my family departed”. As with the project participants, the solidarity and sense of belonging to a community were being destroyed after the Second World War, thus, for the reassembled family members in the antipodes, cultural identity, as a source of inner strength and richness, had to be preserved in the alien environment. The *topos* of migrant literature attests to a crystallisation of values that occurs cross-generationally in the new place of settlement. What the experiential narratives highlight is the extent to which this phenomenon of crystallisation and the stalemate tensions it produces were constantly being reassessed by the informants.¹⁰ Their narratives, candidly observed and rich in detail, are an important, ongoing dialogue that offers valuable insights on the complexity and diversity of Australian cultural identity from yesteryear to today.

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NOTES

¹ Antonio Gibelli regards the photographic medium as a potent aid to memory that is bound up with the need to remember and be remembered by family and community (Gibelli 2005:146).

² Or, as Gaetana Aufiero maintains, the tradition that allowed women “un solo viaggio, quello verso la casa dello sposo” [a single journey, the one to the bridegroom’s house] (Aufiero 1998:79).

³ Paul Ginsborg states that in the five years of the economic miracle (1958-63), more than 900,000 people moved from the South to other Italian regions (Ginsborg 1989:297). According to Luigi Favero and Graziano Tassello, the number of Italian expatriates in the period 1876-1976 is estimated at more than 25,800,000 (Favero & Tassello 1978:11). See also Ciuffoletti & Degl’Innocenti (1978).

⁴ *The Geography of Strabo*, published in the Loeb Classical Library, 1923, reproduced online at:
<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Strabo/5D.html>
(Accessed 7 September 2005).

⁵ For recent historical studies see Nicolino Calzone (1986); Nicola Santillo (1996); Cosimo Nardi (1996); Fiorangelo Morrone (2004).

⁶ “The eastern municipalities of St. Peters, Payneham, Kensington-Norwood and Campbelltown attracted 30 per cent or more of the Italians settling in metropolitan Adelaide, an unusually high concentration” (Warburton 1983:184).

⁷ See Carchedi (2004:99-186).

⁸ “For migrants who suffer strongly from a sense of loss and separation through the migration experience, an adherence to long-known and trusted values is one way of maintaining certain ties, and also one’s sanity” (Vasta 1991:171).

⁹ See Roslyn Pesman Cooper (1992, 1993).

¹⁰ See my earlier findings (Glenn 2004).