

Migration of Culture(s) – April 2006 (Abstract submitted by Dr Diana Glenn)
“Unrecorded Lives”: Oral Narratives of a Group of First-Generation Campanian Women Residing in Adelaide, South Australia

My paper will focus on 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. Although, 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), the majority of Campanian migrants to Adelaide were not the beneficiaries of assisted passages. Instead, 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. Therefore 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 group of informants, who began arriving in Australia in the early 1950s, left behind tightly-knit nuclear or extended family groups, located in rural and provincial communities in Campania, in order to settle in the urban destination site of Adelaide, South Australia. During the early years of settlement, the informants’ efforts to renegotiate identity took place against the backdrop of an official policy of Assimilationism. For a number of post-WWII arrivals from Campania, the streetscape and way of life in Adelaide in the 1950s proved invigorating and rich with possibilities, while others experienced disillusionment and disorientation. The sense of cultural dislocation experienced by the informants was not only influenced by the diverse political, linguistic, juridical and social framework of Adelaide’s post-war Anglo-British society, but also by the presence of migrants from other regions of Italy, who did not necessarily identify with the cultural and linguistic codes of the Campanian arrivals.

The project informants were raised according to traditional, paternalistic family values involving strict ordinances in matters of family honour. Religious devotion was a core value and the women were raised with the expectation that they would marry locally and undertake the single, important journey of their lives, that is, as a bride arriving at the home of her future husband. The outbreak of war and the resultant devastation and disintegration of a their age-old community way of life in Campania changed all expectations and the permanent move to Australia necessitated the revalorisation of self, cultural identity and core values, as well as the development of strategies to facilitate the integration of Australian-born offspring.

The interview transcripts provide a rich source of information on traditional courtship and matrimonial practices, cultural norms and expectations, socio-cultural and religious rituals, rites of passage, gendered expectations and roles, and the preservation of linguistic codes among a group of women whose direct voicing of personal memory offers valuable insights on the negotiation of selfhood in an alien environment.

The paper will consider the ways in which the informants developed mechanisms in order to survive the difficulties of cultural displacement and marginalisation from mainstream culture. The informants’ “outsider” point of view will provide vital

information on the significance of cultural dislocation as a feature of South Australian society in the last fifty years.