

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Rosa Cappiello's *Paese fortunato* and the Poetics of Alienation Isobel Grave and Giancarlo Chiro

### I. Alienated memories

Sbarcammo a Sydney il 24 di dicembre, in una giornata di sole iridescente che mi separò nettamente da un'età, da una cultura, da un'altra vita, proiettandomi in una concezione dualistica.<sup>1</sup>

(We got off the boat at Sydney on 24 December, an iridescent sun-soaked day which abruptly separated me from another time, another culture, another life, and projected me towards a dualistic conception.)<sup>2</sup>

Rosa Cappiello arrived in Australia from Naples as an assisted migrant on the passenger liner *Guglielmo Marconi* on 24 December 1970. She came at the tail end of a mass migration movement which had brought over 350,000 Italians to Australia in the post-war period.<sup>3</sup> Cappiello's first years in Sydney coincided with a watershed period for Australian society. The election of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972 ended decades of conservative rule and was marked with the immediate withdrawal from Vietnam of the Australian Defence Force. Already by the late 1960s and early 1970s it had become apparent that the assimilation policies of the previous two decades had left non-British migrants socially and economically disadvantaged and relatively isolated from the wider Australian community. Jerzy Zubrzycki's 1968 report revealed that non-British migrants faced a range of difficulties with schooling, the workforce, non-recognition of overseas qualifications and housing.<sup>4</sup> The 1973 *Inquiry into the Departure of Settlers from Australia* (also chaired by J. Zubrzycki)<sup>5</sup> focused on the need to provide new arrivals with services in the initial settlement period if they were to stay and settle successfully. Also in 1973 Immigration Minister Al Grassby issued a reference paper titled *A Multi-Cultural Society for the Future*,<sup>6</sup> which he argued for on the basis of social justice and the development of human capital. In it he outlined a vision of an Australian society able to sustain growth and

<sup>1</sup> Rosa Cappiello, *Paese fortunato* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981) 8. Further references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Rosa Cappiello, *Oh Lucky Country* trans. Gaetano Rando (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009) 4. Further references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text. The work was first published in 1984 by the University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland.

<sup>3</sup> Gaetano Rando, 'Italian Australian Literature: A CALD Perspective of Migration and Life Down Under,' *Reading Down Under: Australian Literary Studies Reader* eds. Amit Sarwal and Reema Sarwal (New Delhi: SSS Publications, 2009) 250. It has been estimated some 90,000 Italians later returned to Italy or moved to other countries after settling in Australia (Stephanie Thompson, *Australia through Italian Eyes: a Study of Settlers Returning from Australia to Italy*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Jerzy Zubrzycki, *The Questing Years* (Canberra: Australian Citizenship Convention, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> Immigration Advisory Council, Committee on Social Patterns, *Inquiry into the Departure of Settlers from Australia – Final Report* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> Al Grassby, *A Multi-Cultural Society for the Future* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1973).

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change based on equal opportunity for all Australians – Indigenous Australians, migrants and the Anglo majority alike. At the same time, race was removed as a factor in the selection of migrants, officially ending the White Australia Policy,<sup>7</sup> and international agreements relating to race and immigration were ratified. In 1975 the *Racial Discrimination Act (1975)* outlawed discrimination based on race and ethnic origin.

But history is not memory, even if in contemporary historiography it has been acknowledged that their respective contours are not sharply exclusive. Lynne Segal writes: ‘Even those wishing to exclude the slipperiness of personal experience from the greater certainties of historical excavation cannot escape the significance of what [has been described as] the “irreducibly human dimensions of historical reality”.’<sup>8</sup>

In 1978, when Rosa Capiello started to write *Paese fortunato*, the newly-arrived migrant’s diaristic account of the first two years she spent in Sydney,<sup>9</sup> the social reality she reconstructed took little account of the new politics of Australian multiculturalism which was attracting the interest of both the Anglo-Australian majority and the increasingly politically active ethnic minorities of the day. Capiello’s portrayal of Australian multicultures is one of unredeemed Anglo-centricity on the part of the dominant majority and alienated segregation on the part of minorities. Furthermore, as Rando has observed, ‘The migrant environments described in the novel are dominated by materialistic considerations which over-ride traditional values from the migrants’ cultures of origin’.<sup>10</sup>

The slumscapes of inner Sydney portrayed by Capiello in *Paese fortunato* are intended to be emblematic of the migrant condition. They are also representations of

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<sup>7</sup> This so-called ‘policy’ was not a single policy in itself. Rather, it was an amalgam of policies and attitudes provided for under the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, the legislation under which all the relevant racist instruments – such as language testing procedures, colour determination, and so on – were established. See also James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration* Second Edition (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 14.

<sup>8</sup> Lynne Segal, ‘Who Do You Think You Are? Feminist Memoir Writing,’ *New Formations* 67 (2009) 122. She is quoting from Bill Schwarz, ‘Already in the Past: Memory and Historical Time,’ *Regimes of Memory* eds. Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Sneja Gunew chastised an early reviewer of Capiello’s work for making a facile correlation between the persona of the narrator and the authorial voice. (Sneja Gunew, ‘The Grotesque Migrant Body: Rosa Capiello’s *Oh Lucky Country*,’ *Framing Marginality: Multicultural Literary Studies*, Melbourne University Press, 1994, 95.) Some overlap between the narrator and the authorial voice, however, has been acknowledged by Gaetano Rando. While he refers to *Paese fortunato* as a *novel*, he remarks that it is ‘narrated in the first person by its protagonist Rosa who, despite a transparent autobiographical correlation, is not *fully* identified with the author’ (Rando 253; italics ours). While the distinction between the authorial voice and the narrator is acknowledged to exist, it is not always easily drawn, as Brigid Maher notes. (Brigid Maher, ‘Identity and Humour in Translation: the Extravagant Comic Style of Rosa Capiello’s *Paese fortunato*,’ *Translating Selves: Experience and Identity between Languages and Literatures* eds. Paschalis Nikolaou & Maria-Venetia Kyritsi, London-New York: Continuum, 2008, 147). Our arguments supporting at least a partial identification of the narrator with the authorial voice are based on the same ‘transparent autobiographical correlation’ of name, dates, places and circumstances. We believe that they are also well supported by Capiello’s own declarations. In the article ‘Why I write what I write,’ she states: ‘What I write originates from autobiographical sources and will continue to do so until my descent within myself is finished and I’ve dissolved most of my flotsam and jetsam and emerged cleaned out and full of sympathy and solidarity with life.’ (Rosa Capiello, ‘Why I write what I write,’ trans. Tony Mitchell *Australian Society*, January 1987, 25).

<sup>10</sup> Rando 253.

historical reality and of the personal space experienced first hand by the narrating consciousness. The narrator's insistence on the details of her own slum dwellings and those of her fellow migrants reverberates parodically against the preoccupation with the house in the migrant consciousness and in its literature.

Cappiello's narrative provides a contrast to traditional first-generation stories in which the house is a recurrent motif embodying the ever-present aspiration to security and belonging, to stability and affluence.<sup>11</sup>

Cappiello wrote *Paese fortunato* while living in Redfern<sup>12</sup> and in the work she names Redfern as one of the places where she found accommodation after she left the migrant hostel.<sup>13</sup> Redfern has been recognised, along with some other inner-city areas, 'for much of their history ... as the worst slums in Australia ... and a dumping ground for human and industrial refuse'.<sup>14</sup>

But Cappiello arrived on the cusp of change in the context of urban Sydney as well. As Joe Flood points out,

By 1970 it appeared that the whole inner city area would be completely redeveloped for business purposes and the working class inhabitants would be displaced.

However at the same time, affluent and articulate professionals began to move into the inner city and to remodel the historical precincts. A struggle developed between a network of citizen action groups and developers, culminating in a series of unique 'Green Bans' by the rank and file of the Builders Labourers Federation in 1970–72 to prevent areas of cultural and heritage value being demolished or redeveloped.<sup>15</sup>

In *Paese fortunato*, the residents of inner Sydney are not only oblivious to any movement for renewal driven by a sense of urban history or heightened cultural awareness, they appear in complete syntony with the slum-like conditions they inhabit.

Gli uomini ostentano capelli lunghi e barbe rossicce, le donne un'aria sciatta ... Alcuni del gruppo stanno pitturando à naïf la facciata della casa, dove vivono a branchi. Colori violenti. Colpiscono come un pugno agli occhi l'anonimo del vicolo. Lungo il marciapiede pochi alberelli sfrondatai. Accosto al muro, il marmocchio dei turchi, nudo, è accovacciato a far la cacca. All'angolo troneggia il pub. Giovanottoni in pantaloncini e magliette bianche ritemprano le energie bruciate dagli allenamenti nel parco, coi

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<sup>11</sup> Rita Wilson, 'Excuse Me, Is our Heritage Showing? Representations of Diasporic Experiences across the Generations,' *Fulgor* 3.3 (2008): 103.

<sup>12</sup> Santina Rizzo, 'Interview with Rosa Cappiello,' *New Literature Review* 24 (1992):117.

<sup>13</sup> Rosa Cappiello, *Paese Fortunato* 70.

<sup>14</sup> Joe Flood, 'Urban Slum Reports: The Case of Sydney, Australia,' *Understanding Slums: Case Studies for the Global Report*, 2003, DPU (Development Planning Unit) University College, London, [http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu-projects/Global\\_Report/pdfs/Sydney.pdf](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu-projects/Global_Report/pdfs/Sydney.pdf) 6.

<sup>15</sup> Flood 4

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bicchieri colmi in mano ... C'è il giornalista, il Take Away, la puzza di pesce fritto e patate rancide ... Il mio regno ... Mi pento di non essere pittrice ... Dipingerei ... il rigagnolo immalinconito dove si disseta il gatto, la donna scaruffata che al mattino fa capolino in vestaglia lercia e già ubriaca ritira la bottiglia del latte. (*Paese fortunato* 42–3)

(The men sport long hair and reddish beards, the women have a slovenly look about them ... Some of the group are painting *à naïf* the front of the house where they live all together. Violent colours which hit out at the anonymity of the lane like a punch in the eye. The Turk's child is squatting naked against the wall, shitting. On the corner the pub reigns supreme. Young fellows in shorts and white singlets, brimful glasses in their hands, restore the energy expended in training in the park ... There's the newsagent, the takeaway, the stench of fried fish and rancid potatoes ... This is my kingdom ... I'm sorry I'm not a painter ... I'd paint the wretched gutter where the cat slakes its thirst, the unkempt woman who in the morning, already drunk, pops out in her filthy dressing gown to collect her bottle of milk.) (*Oh Lucky Country* 34–5)<sup>16</sup>

Early in the work (and in her migrant experience) Capiello turns her attention to the ethnic communities in Australia, and her views are damning. These communities are atrophied, she states; they are not authentic representatives of a national identity and its cultural values, but rather 'piccoli universi separati e nemici tra loro' (separate, mutually inimical little universes):

Scoprii che ... il vento spirava un fiato pietrificato dalle comunità etniche. Come nuovo membro, ero irremovibile. Ci sputavo sopra, in quanto non stirpe o elemento compositivo che significa razza o costume, bensì pretesa di creare piccoli universi separati e nemici tra loro. Non volevo, né dovevo sacrificarmi. (*Paese fortunato* 10)

(The atrophied breath of the ethnic communities was wafted to me on the wind. As a new member I adamantly refused to have anything to do with it. I spat on it since, rather than being a cohesive basis for race or tradition, it served as a pretext for the creation of separate, mutually inimical little universes. I would not, must not sacrifice my individuality.) (*Oh Lucky Country* 5)

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<sup>16</sup> The translation under-realises the lexical meaning of the source text at one point in the passage, attenuating the negativity of Capiello's portrayal. The source-text expression 'a branchi', realised in the target text by the generic locution 'they live all together', refers explicitly to the semantic domain of herd animals of the same species 'gruppo numeroso di quadrupedi ... della stessa specie'. In an extended sense 'branco' is a term of disparagement for a group of thuggish people 'accolta, gruppo di persone per lo più facinorose o poco raccomandabili, o anche semplicemente invadenti e fastidiose'; a further disparaging figurative meaning of 'branco' still closely connected to the literal sense of 'herd' is in reference to people of a conformist stamp. We would argue that a full realisation of the herd-animal metaphor would underscore Capiello's central themes of a dehumanised ethnoscape and a heightened sense of exclusion on the part of the narrator, who is not, nor wants to be, 'part of the herd'. *Dizionario della lingua italiana*, 'branco' Devoto-Oli eds. Firenze: Le Monnier, 2004–5.



Cappiello's perception of an anachronistic mismatch between the homeland culture and the culture of the ethnic communities in Australia, the latter imaged as 'un fiato pietrificato' (atrophied breath), corresponds to the well-documented phenomenon of cultural fossilisation of the migration experience of the times.<sup>17</sup> But there is more to be noted in Cappiello's early, programmatic self-alienation from the ethnic communities, and it will reveal attitudes that could be problematic for a postcolonialist reading of the importance of *Paese fortunato*. According to Sneja Gunew, in Cappiello's work 'outcast voices from the gutter, from the bottom of the heap, boil over into a flood which sweeps away many clichés about being a migrant'.<sup>18</sup> But whose are these voices?

Gunew relates the pervasive representations of gross human physicality in the work to Bakhtin's theorisation of the "grotesque" body [which is] representative of a celebratory aspect of pre-industrial popular culture ... [and] contrasts with official and classical culture'. The grotesque body, with its reverse faces, is liberating, 'breaking down the distinctions between high and low, sacred and profane culture, thus demolishing hierarchies of power'.<sup>19</sup> But who has the power to invoke its restoring iconoclasm? The 'fiato pietrificato' described by Cappiello as emanating from the ethnic communities clearly does not belong to this liberating grotesque body, and is dealt with accordingly – 'ci sputavo sopra' ('I spat on it'), says the narrator. The connection between this act of rejection and what the narrator goes on to say: 'Non volevo, né dovevo sacrificarmi' ('I would not, must not, sacrifice my individuality') is somewhat ambiguous.

In the above translation, Rando relates Cappiello's closing remark to an issue of personal identity, and realises this meaning with the addition of 'my individuality' as the grammatical object of the verb 'sacrifice'. But this is not quite consistent with the sense of the Italian reflexive verb 'sacrificarsi' in the source text, which means either 'offrire in sacrificio la propria vita per una determinata causa' ('to give up one's life as a sacrifice for some particular cause') or the slightly overlapping 'accettare privazioni, sacrifici e rinunce per il benessere altrui o per raggiungere un dato scopo' ('to deprive oneself, to do without, either for the benefit of others or to reach some particular goal').<sup>20</sup> The narrator's declaration, 'non volevo, né dovevo sacrificarmi', would encode the second meaning to read as 'I didn't want to make sacrifices, and shouldn't have to'. While at first sight such an interpretation is less obviously connected to the issue of identity than is Rando's ('I would not, must not, sacrifice my individuality') it preserves what we think is a deliberate choral echo in the source text. One does not have to look far to find the correlation between the migration experience and the idea of 'sacrificarsi', where this is meant as enduring deprivation and hardship in order to achieve a particular goal. Exploring the correspondence of sojourn migrants, Jacqueline Templeton notes that the emigrations themselves are referred to

<sup>17</sup> Jupp 26.

<sup>18</sup> Gunew 94.

<sup>19</sup> Gunew 98-9.

<sup>20</sup> Devoto-Oli eds, 'sacrificarsi'

there as 'sacrifici'.<sup>21</sup> Whichever way 'Non volevo, né dovevo sacrificarmi' is interpreted, it serves to distance the speaker from the ethnic communities and specifically from the engagement of the ethnic communities with the working (class) life in the achievement of a particular material end.

Sneja Gunew notes that non-English-speaking background migrants 'tend to be relegated to "honorary" working-class subject-positions'.<sup>22</sup> In reality there is nothing 'honorary' about Rosa Capiello's working class status as a migrant in Sydney, or about that of the narrator, whose work experience may be summarised as 'a number of poorly paid, exploitative jobs in factories and restaurants, often with older migrants as her bosses'.<sup>23</sup> *Paese fortunato* documents the narrator's poverty, the precariousness of work in an era that was seeing the end of the post-war boom, the exploitation within the migrant work force and gruelling work routines. James Jupp notes that 'most European immigrants up to the 1970s were, or became, working class'.<sup>24</sup> In Capiello's case, 'became'. From the description of her family situation in the article 'Why I write what I write', we gauge that her socioeconomic background is in fact closer to the 'piccola borghesia' (lower middle-class) than to the working class, though she acknowledges that economic factors in part motivated her decision to emigrate.<sup>25</sup>

## II. The Poetics of Alienation

The passage of the author of *Paese fortunato* from lived experience to artistic expression was animated by feelings of 'disquiet and rebellion' which arose from the sense of alienation with life in both Italy and Australia:

I write because I don't fit into the environment I live in. By environment I mean both the Australia whose negative aspects I experienced before they were counterbalanced by its positive ones, and the Italy where I grew up and developed a critical and intellectual sense – along with a sense of disquiet and rebellion and a considerable lack of patience with myself and with reality. I took up writing in Italy to fill the void and the dissatisfaction I felt within myself. In Australia I write to animate and give a purpose to vacuum that surrounds me, a void and a vacuum which I have perhaps unconsciously expanded by being too sensitive and difficult to attempt to

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<sup>21</sup> Jacqueline Templeton, 'Here, There or Nowhere? Italian Sojourners Write Home,' *The Australian Immigrant in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* eds. Eric Richards & Jacqueline Templeton (Canberra: the Australian National University, 1998) 64-5.

<sup>22</sup> Gunew 98.

<sup>23</sup> Maher 142

<sup>24</sup> Jupp 27

<sup>25</sup> Rosa Capiello, 'Why I Write, 25. 'I emigrated to Australia partly through choice and partly through necessity. I applied to emigrate to Canada but my application was rejected for some reason without any explanation. My family was quite normal. My father worked at the post office, my stepmother was a housewife, my brother worked in a bookshop, my sister went to school and I worked in a furniture shop.'

communicate successfully with others.<sup>26</sup>

An artist imprisoned in a working class skin, who can escape the ‘vacuum’ only through literary engagement – this is the contradiction which underpins the poet-protagonist’s appraisal of her art, causing her at one point to subtract it from actuality and make it depend on a string of unrealisable conditions, at variance with the reality of the factory floor and the writer’s inescapable identification with the worker:

Tutto il giorno pedalando sulla pesante macchina da cucire penso al libro che vorrei scrivere, se sapessi scrivere, se bazzicassi persone erudite, e se avessi portato a termine i normali anni di studio come tutti i cosiddetti poeti maledetti, alloooora ... Faccio la macchinista, operaia, lavorante a macchina, cucitrice. (*Paese fortunato* 88)

(All through the day while working the heavy sewing machine I think about the book I’d like to write, if I knew how to write, if I kept company with educated people, if I’d completed all my normal schooling just like those damned so-called poets ... But I’m a machinist, a factory worker, I work on the machine, I sew.) (*Oh Lucky Country* 75–6)

Physical work is paired with time – the worker–author’s time – in a foregrounded adverbial phrase, ‘tutto il giorno’ (‘all through the day’), which precedes the action ‘pedalando sulla pesante macchina da cucire’ (‘while working the heavy sewing machine’). The tension between ‘pedalando sulla pesante macchina da cucire’ and that other work, the work of authorship – ‘penso al libro che vorrei scrivere’ (‘I think about the book I’d like to write’) – is underscored by the contemporaneity of the physical and intellectual processes. Later in the passage we will see that the first defeats the second.<sup>27</sup> The realisation of her art depends on three conditions; in terms of syntactic analysis, on two present time protases and one past time protasis, expressed in Italian by two imperfect subjunctives and one pluperfect subjunctive respectively:

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<sup>26</sup> Capiello, ‘Why I Write’ 25.

<sup>27</sup> Seated at her machine, the author-protagonist Rosa describes how the plot of the book she would like to write takes shape: ... la trama ... comincia debolmente a prendere consistenza, formo l’idea, la frase, ... dapprima cigolando, sbuffando, sudando materia cerebrale e poi di getto, son marosi, son valanghe, montagne d’acqua che straripano dalla diga eretta intorno alla mente. Che voluminosi romanzi rosa, gialli, fantascientifici, autobiografici, pornografici nei giorni e nei mesi trascorsi nella factory di J.&M. Se solo avessi potuto pagarmi una segretaria da tenere accanto alla macchina, o soltanto un registratore che registrava i pensieri, a quest’ora, sarei additata non solo come la più brava, ma anche la più prolifica autodidatta’ (*Paese fortunato* 89).

(... the plot ... begins gradually to take on an indistinct shape. I formulate an idea, a phrase ... initially squeaking, puffing, sweating grey matter, and then all in a gush, waves, landslides, mountains of water overflow the dam erected round my mind. In the days and months spent at the D. & A. factory I could have produced voluminous novels – romances, thrillers, science fiction, autobiographies, pornography. If only I could have paid a secretary to sit by me at the machine, or even if I’d just had a recorder to record my thoughts, I would by now be acclaimed as not only the best but the most prolific self-educated woman writer.) (*Oh Lucky Country* 76).

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se sapessi scrivere, se bazzicassi persone erudite, e se avessi portato a termine i normali anni di studio come tutti i cosiddetti poeti maledetti, alloooora (*Paese fortunato* 88)

if I knew how to write, if I kept company with educated people, if I'd completed all my normal schooling just like those damned so-called poets (*Oh Lucky Country* 75–6)

All three are known as 'remote conditionals'. Though variously marked across languages, the meaning of a remote conditional is that it 'entertains the condition as being satisfied in a world which is potentially different from the actual world'.<sup>28</sup> The past time protasis – 'se avessi portato a termine i normali anni di studio' ('if I'd completed all my normal schooling') – has, additionally, the counterfactual's seal of irreversibility. Modality is the first vehicle in this passage to express the unrealisability of the aspirations of the poet – 'macchinista, operaia, lavorante a macchina, cucitrice'. Unrealisability is next picked up and reinforced by rhetorical repetition in a string of synonyms and near synonyms for her role as a worker – 'macchinista, operaia, lavorante a macchina, cucitrice' – which reverberates with the sound of the sewing machines separating the writer from 'tutti i cosiddetti poeti maledetti' ('those damned so-called poets').

Rosa Capiello's poetics are shaped by constraints on time, physical energy and mental space, by the impact of place and by interactions within her ethnoscape, not by the unfulfilled conditions mentioned above. A wish to flout establishment literary canons converges with these factors as regards conventional structuring. *Paese fortunato* consists of over two hundred and twenty pages of chapterless text, with minimal paragraphing and an arrangement of narrative event that responds to the 'ritmo di emozioni personali e impersonali' ('the rhythm of personal and impersonal emotions'). She identifies the basis of her poetics early in the work:

Pensieri superesasperati. Non completati sul filo della logica, ma al ritmo di emozioni personali e impersonali. Vagliati sul pullman dell'emigrazione e poi rifiniti all'hostel e per le strade. (*Paese fortunato* 7)

(Over-exasperated thoughts. Not produced by a rigorous process of logic but by the rhythm of personal and impersonal emotions. Well-sifted on the migrant bus and then refined at the hostel or in the streets.) (*Oh Lucky Country* 3)

This may be read as a disavowal only of overall structure. The privileging of emotional content provides its own ordering criteria, and these will become evident at the level of smaller textual units, particularly the sentence, and sentence-like units. As we see in the early manifesto, Capiello goes on to image as 'sifting' the process through which the 'personal and impersonal emotions' are selected to become poetry.

<sup>28</sup> Anita Mittwoch, Rodney Huddleston and Peter Collins, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, eds. Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey Pullum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 748–9.



In Italian the term ‘vagliare’ means the process of passing a substance through a sieve, but it is also a lexicalised metaphor denoting the process of critical appraisal.<sup>29</sup> Then on to the process whose end result is what she describes as the ‘[pensieri] rifiniti’, translated in the target text as ‘refined’ – to be understood as closest to the first sense of the verb ‘refine’ in English, namely ‘to bring to a fine or a pure state; free from impurities’ and not to its second meaning, ‘to purify from what is coarse, vulgar or debasing; make elegant or cultured’.<sup>30</sup> Capiello’s style is certainly ‘rifinito’ in the sense that it has received the finishing touches that will make it suitable for a multiplicity of purposes. The question of *how* this process of finishing off takes place will find some answers in the examples below. It is linked to the question of *where* it takes place; this may be, as we saw above, on the factory floor; in the early manifesto she specifies only ‘sul pullman dell’emigrazione e poi ... all’hostel e per le strade’ (‘on the migrant bus and then ... at the hostel or in the streets’).

Rosa Capiello’s style – which for the purposes of the following discussion means primarily the linguistic features of her sentences – is irregular, making it difficult to find a passage that could be called representative. Within a single maxi-paragraph she may move from a simple sentence to sentence fragments of varying length, to textbook-style complex sentences with one or more embedded clauses. The arrangement of such sentence types follows no predictable order – it is determined by the emotion–style nexus. The following example illustrates four sentences or sentence-type units. They have been numbered in order of appearance and are distinguishable, respectively, as (1) simple sentences, (2) non-clausal sentence fragments, (3) complex sentences and (4) clausal sentence fragments.<sup>31</sup>

Scoprii i parchi immensi (1). Il latte cremoso (2). L’indifferenza (2). La diversa nazionalità delle ragazze (2). La stessa malinconica [malinconia] disfatta (2). Scoprii che c’erano inferni diversi (3). Uno per ragazze sole (2). Uno per giovani soli (2). Uno per le donne sposate (2). Uno per i figli (2). Assommandoli, formavano un unico inferno prefabbricato (1). Quello degli emigranti (2). E che il vento spirava un fiato pietrificato dalle comunità etniche. (4) (*Paese fortunato* 9–10).

(I discovered the huge parks, cream laden milk, indifference, the diverse nationalities of my fellow lodgers, the same defeated melancholy. I found out there were different hells: one for single girls, one for single guys, one for married women, one for children. Together they added up to a single prefabricated hell – the migrant’s inferno.

The atrophied breath of the ethnic communities was wafted to me on the wind. (*Oh Lucky Country* 5).

<sup>29</sup> Devoto-Oli eds, ‘vagliare’.

<sup>30</sup> *Macquarie Dictionary*, ‘refine’ *Macquarie Dictionary* 5<sup>th</sup> edition (Sydney: Macquarie Library, 2009)

<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that the translation does not reflect the way Capiello uses syntax to underscore meaning in this passage. In the target text non-clausal and clausal sentence fragments have been integrated into four textbook sentences, three simple and one complex.

In the first set of fragments (Il latte cremoso. L'indifferenza. La diversa nazionalità delle ragazze. La stessa malinconica [malinconia] disfatta) the syntactic divisions frame the narrator's inability to connect, reminding us of T.S Eliot's vertically represented fragmentation:

On Margate Sands.  
I can connect  
Nothing with nothing.<sup>32</sup>

The effect in Capiello is a syntactical representation of the sense of alienation and disconnection within and among migrants, whose only shared experience is that of migrancy itself and the segregation of migrants' lifeworlds from Anglo-Australian society. Disconnection is reinforced by the semantic disparity of the listed items. If we allow that the fragments are actually part of a run-on list which starts with 'i parchi immensi' of the first sentence, we have a size-substance contrast 'i parchi immensi' and 'Il latte cremoso' ('the huge parks and creamladen milk'); further contrast emerges between concrete and abstract with 'Il latte cremoso' and 'L'indifferenza' ('creamladen milk and indifference'). The sum of such parts will never compose a whole; the only harmony is the convergence of the 'diverse nazionalità' ('diverse nationalities') in the 'stessa malinconica [malinconia] disfatta' ('the same defeated melancholy'). The second set of fragments is homogeneous in semantic domain and characterised by a high level of rhetorical repetition: 'Uno per' is repeated for each category of person:

Scoprii che c'erano inferni diversi. Uno per ragazze sole. Uno per giovani soli. Uno per le donne sposate. Uno per i figli. Assommandoli, formavano un unico inferno prefabbricato. Quello degli emigranti. (*Paese fortunato* 10).

(I found out there were different hells: one for single girls, one for single guys, one for married women, one for children. Together they added up to a single prefabricated hell – the migrant's inferno.) (*Oh Lucky Country* 5)

The syntactic divisions underscore the isolation, as does the reduplicated 'uno'. And the sum of the parts, this time, is the whole:

Assommandoli, formavano un unico inferno prefabbricato. Quello degli emigranti. (Together they added up to a single prefabricated hell – the migrant's inferno.)

Repetition of 'sound, syllable, word, phrase, line, strophe, metrical pattern or syntactic structure' has been identified as the feature of poetry which most distinguishes it from prose.<sup>33</sup> We might turn this correlation around to say that

<sup>32</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Poems 1909 to 1935* (Glasgow: The University Press, 1957) 72.

<sup>33</sup> *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan eds. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993) 1035–7.

'Rosa Capiello's *Paese fortunato* and the Poetics of Alienation.' Isobel Grave and Giancarlo Chiro.

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repetition is the feature of Cappiello's prose which brings it closest to poetry. The repetition of syntactic units in the four-part sentence-fragment series, 'uno per', is only one of several forms of repetition that drive her poetry. Another is the sentence-internal category of apposition, which we glimpsed earlier in the narrator's self-definition 'Faccio la macchinista, operaia, lavorante a macchina, cucitrice.' ('But I'm a machinist, a factory worker, I work on the machine, I sew').

This type of apposition (whose nucleus here is constituted by the first two elements in the string, namely 'macchinista' and 'operaia') is defined as 'supplementary'; it explicates through specification. In it one idea expressed as a noun phrase is illustrated in terms of another idea expressed as a noun phrase – 'macchinista' in terms of 'operaia'.<sup>34</sup> But Cappiello's exercise in apposition is hyperbolically self-defeating and grammatically atypical (supplementary apposition has characteristically two elements, the anchor, which is the first noun phrase and the appositive, which is the second noun phrase, adduced to explain the first). In her idiosyncratic adaptation of the category, however many terms are added to the anchor, they all return virtually the same meaning: the only informational gain is a small degree of specificity, across the string from the initial, generic 'macchinista' to the last item, the more exact 'cucitrice'. The constraints of time and place, and the physical effort that fills them, expand across this short stretch of text to absorb the writer's identity irretrievably.

A less overt and more pervasive form of repetition in Cappiello's work is embedded in one of the simplest of grammatical constructions and one of the most widespread across languages – coordination. Coordination links two or more grammatically identical units – they may be clauses, adjective phrases, noun phrases – within a sentence. Cappiello's coordinations typically link four to five noun phrases, connecting them with punctuation (the comma) rather than a combination of punctuation and the coordinator 'e' ('and'). In the example below, Cappiello has shaped the structure to be the vehicle of her social polemic against the consumerism which dominates Australian society, and which is obliquely represented by an old tramp. The narrator and her friend Lella come across an old woman who is settling down for her evening meal beside the toilet block in a park. The organising trope is the banquet, parodied by the solitude of the diner, the squalor of the place and the menu of scraps, whose abundance underscores, item by item, the abundance of neglect in Australian society.

E poi la vecchia alcolizzata ... Passandole accanto, Lella dava uno strappo alla bisaccia a tracolla della vecchia, per vedere il bottino rimediato nei bidoni della spazzatura, e assieme al fetore rancido saltavano fuori ossa di pollo, pallottole di vermicelli, tozzi di pane, foglie di verdura, cornicioni di pizza, che andava a divorare dopo aver preparato il cantuccio per la notte, accosto al muro del gabinetto nel parco. (*Paese fortunato* 27)

(Then there was the alcoholic old woman ... Lella, passing by her, would give a tug at her knapsack to take a look at the booty assembled from the rubbish bins, tipping out, together with the rancid smells, chicken bones,

<sup>34</sup> Rodney Huddleston, John Payne and Peter Peterson, *The Cambridge Grammar*, 1357.

vermicelli rolled up in balls, bits of bread, lettuce leaves, pizza crusts, which the old woman would then devour after making her bed for the night in the shelter of the toilet wall in the park.) (*Oh Lucky Country* 20–1)

The coordinated units are:

‘ossa di pollo, pallottole di vermicelli, tozzi di pane, foglie di verdura, cornicioni di pizza’  
(chicken bones, vermicelli rolled up in balls, bits of bread, lettuce leaves, pizza crusts)

They are all noun phrases, semantically uniform as to domain – the domain of food – and grammatically uniform as to complement: ‘di pollo’, ‘di vermicelli’, ‘di pane’, ‘di verdura’, ‘di pizza’. The relationship of the head-noun to the complement (of ‘ossa’ to ‘pollo’, for example) underscores the theme of inequality and deprivation in the midst of plenty: in the tramp’s banquet ‘pollo’, ‘vermicelli’, ‘pane’, ‘verdura’, ‘pizza’ all figure, but only the parts of these items that are discarded – ‘ossa’, ‘pallottole’, ‘tozzi’, ‘foglie’, ‘cornicioni’ – literally the ‘bones’ of the chicken, ‘balls’ of vermicelli, ‘bits’ of bread, ‘leaves’ of lettuce, ‘crusts’ of pizza.

One of Capiello’s central contentions in her condemnation of Anglo-Australian society is that the forces of consumerism have caused family relations to disintegrate through the feverish attempt to accumulate capital. We turn to a passage that illustrates this thesis; it correlates consumerism with alienation through the medium of speed:

Dipingerei le genitrici coi figlioletti al seno che senza essersi lavate i denti corrono assondate al lavoro, la furia e le bestemmie nel preciso attimo in cui irrompono per via, spronate dalla fretta caotica di liberarsi della prole, il sangue intasato di cents ... le mani che carezzano amare, le parole assurde che si scambiano quando si riuniscono a cenare. Dipingerei la febbre del guadagno. (*Paese fortunato* 43)

(I’d paint the mothers with their little children dangling from their breasts who, without having brushed their teeth, run still sleepy to their work, the sound and the fury of that precise moment when they rush out into the street, spurred on by the chaotic hurry to free themselves of their offspring, blood polluted by cents ... hands which give bitter caresses, the absurd words which they exchange when they gather together for their meal. I’d paint the feverish race for gain.) (*Oh Lucky Country* 35)

In consumer society the other is either a resource to be exploited or an impediment to gain. Speed is the correlative of consumerism; in the portrayal of the breast-feeding mother cursing her children as she rushes to work, speed reverberates lexically; within the space of a single sentence five different words express speed, either as enactment or result: ‘corrono’ (‘run’); ‘la furia’ (‘fury’); ‘irrompono’ (‘rush’); ‘spronate’ (‘spurred’); ‘fretta caotica’ (‘chaotic hurry’). The lexical encodings of speed drive the

travesty of this scene, where the mother and child image sacred in Western iconography is transformed into the image of dehumaniser and dehumanised; note the lexical reinforcement, as the text progresses, with 'figlioletti' ('little children') being later referred to simply as 'prole' ('offspring').

In Capiello's text the coordinated structure is well suited to the encoding of speed and the effects of alienation produced by it. Her coordinated structures invariably carry strings of new information; the coordinates are rarely modified (except to return a uniform message about the component items, as we saw above with the tramp's feast). Where their components are human, as in the two coordinations below, the other emerges as representative of a category, often a caricatured category, to be itemised, then replaced by the next in the sequence. In the first of these examples we find the males that populate the streetscape around the hostel:

La sera, poi, una gara di velocità nell'impupazzarsi e sgusciare sul tratto di marciapiede e sui gradoni dell'hostel, dove boccioli fascinosi, di primo petalo, satrapi, beduini, tagliatori di canne, disoccupati, mettevano radici ad aggraffare la puttana uscita a respirare. (*Paese fortunato* 11)

(In the evening everyone was in a tremendous rush to get all dolled up and slip out onto the footpath, the steps, in front of the hostel, where pretty young lads, satraps, bedouins, canecutters, layabouts, lay in constant wait to grab the first tart who came out to take a breath of air.) (*Oh Lucky Country* 6)

The second coordination is sweepingly reductionist:

Crepassero tutti, lesbiche, omosessuali, malati, savi e normali, tanto che ci campano a fare. (*Paese fortunato* 40)  
(Damn them all, lesbians, homosexuals, sick, wise and normal people, what do they live for anyway?) (*Oh Lucky Country* 32)

The categorisations proceed first by sexuality (inspired by the narrator's rejection of Elena's sexual overtures) then by seemingly haphazard characterisations of people in terms of broad physical and mental states. This second categorisation theme is based on a string of nominalised adjectives; 'malati, savi e normali' ('sick, wise and normal people') which collapses individuals into classes in virtue of a single attribute. It is not clear whether the sum of the classes constitutes the narrator's view of society as a whole at that point.

As we saw, Capiello states that she put the finishing touches on her art at the hostel or in the streets. And in the book, place has become one of the main subjects of her art. It seems appropriate to end at that place where her story of alienation gains its first contours – in the hostel.



La cuccia assegnatami non ha finestre. Un lettino, un comodino, una sedia, un armadietto, un comò con lo specchio. Le pareti di legno son rialzate dal suolo di una ventina di centimetri, salendo sulle sedie si spia l'intimità delle vicine. (*Paese fortunato* 9)

(The doghouse assigned to me didn't have windows. A bed, a bedside table, a chair, a small wardrobe, a dresser with a mirror. The wooden partitions were raised some twenty centimetres from the floor and by standing on a chair you could spy on your neighbours in their most intimate moments.) (*Oh Lucky Country* 4)

Her description has its point of departure in the central, dehumanising metaphor of the 'cuccia' ('the doghouse'); it proceeds by signalling what the room does *not* have, foregrounding the symbolically charged absence of windows. Then to what it does have – 'Un lettino, un comodino, una sedia, un armadietto, un comò con lo specchio.' ('A bed, a bedside table, a chair, a small wardrobe, a dresser with a mirror.') The repetition of 'un/una' ('a'/'one') before each item underscores its anonymity, while the lack of a grammatical nucleus in this verbless syntactic frame carries forward the sense of fragmentation. If the ordering of human types in the coordination immediately preceding this one might have seemed haphazard – 'malati, savi e normali' ('sick, wise and normal people') – the same cannot be said here. The detail of the mirror, 'un comò con lo specchio' ('a dresser with a mirror'), which concludes the list, is a strategically positioned symbol of the identity and re-incarnation theme that drives the migration event in Cappiello's work and defines the narrator's alienation.

... al passo emigratorio noi ci ordinammo un bel funerale di identità, per reincarnarci in fogne, in operaie, in ingranaggio, in fiocchi, in bocconi per satrapi. (*Paese fortunato* 11)

('... with the act of migration we had ordered ourselves a fine funeral for our identities, to be reincarnated in sewers, as factory workers, in machinery, in knots, as tender morsels for despotic men.') (*Oh Lucky Country* 6)

In this paper we have sought to characterise Rosa Cappiello's art as the poetics of alienation, firstly in the attitude it reflects towards the dominant Anglo-Australian culture of the day and towards the ethnic communities. In relation to the first of these groups we have pointed up some degree of anachronism between her representation of Anglo-Australia and the phenomenon of multiculturalism that was asserting itself at the time her account begins. Her unselfconscious use of labels that categorise according to ethnicity ('the Greek girls'/'those lousy Greek cows', 'the Turk's child', 'the pretty Lebanese poofter', 'the Yugoslavs', 'the French and Danish women') portrays a deeply divided vision of Australian society. Her isolation is completed by her sense of disconnection from the Italian Australian community, which she detests for what she sees as its crass materialism and its reduction of life to 'the feverish race for gain'. This suggests that her alienation may not have been the result only of the

migration and settlement experience but that it had its roots in her personal pre-migrant life and in deep-seated notions of national identity. As regards the ethnic communities, however, we have hypothesised that her deep sense of alienation was intensified by her critical and literary background.

In the second half of this paper we have viewed her poetics from a technical point of view, focusing on her experimentation with syntactic categories in order to create effects of fragmentation. Pivotal to the discussion is the tension between physical survival and the genesis of her art, with the discussion then widening to show how Capiello's poetics reflect the experiential contours of separation, marginalisation and exile, and the attendant loss of identity.