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Deprovincialising Italian Migration Studies: An overview of Australian and Canadian research

Susanna Iuliano and Loretta Baldassar

(University of Western Australia)

For many of us who had never been much beyond the small world circumscribed by the ring of mountains that cut off Valle del Sole's horizon in each direction, who had never passed out of hearing range of the village church bells, America was still all one, New York and Buenos Aires and the Sun Parlour all part of some vast village (Ricci 1990:162).

For Vittorio Innocente, the young protagonist of Canadian writer Nino Ricci's novel *Lives of the Saints*, "*l'America*" represented much more than a geographical expression or national entity. As for millions of actual emigrants from the Italian peninsula in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "*l'America*" was as much a state of mind as a place. It encompassed all places overseas that held out the promise of wealth and security including Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, Canada and Australia. While this mythical "*America*" of the migrant imagination was unconstrained by conventional borders of nation states, most historians and social scientists have traditionally examined Italy's emigrants through the lens of various national histories, assigning to migrants specific roles in nation-building. This is particularly apparent in studies of migration (and not just the Italian variety) to the United States, that reinforce the myth of America as a 'nation of immigrants' (Green 1999:62). In contrast, the study of Italian migrants and migration in Australia and Canada has been peripheral to nationalist historiographical discourses. In these countries, Italians, as the largest group of non-English and non-French speaking migrants, have become key characters in debates about ethnicity and immigration.

Insights into the Italian migrant experience in Canada and Australia have come from fields as diverse as linguistics (e.g. Chiro & Smolicz, 1998, 2002; Bettoni & Rubino 1996; Rubino 2006; Kinder 1999; Vizmuller-Zocco 2002; Giampapa 2005), film and cultural studies (e.g. Scarparo 2006; Wilson & Scarparo 2005; Scarparo & Wilson 2004), literature and life-writing (e.g. Del Negro 1997; Rando & Turcotte 2007; Rando 1992, 2004; Pallotta-Chiarolli 1999; Dell'Oso 1998), health sciences (e.g. MacKinnon 1996), and economics and political science (e.g. Galimberti 1998; Masi; Mascitelli & Zucchi 2006; Battiston & MacKellar 2005). This essay attempts to examine how historians, anthropologists and sociologists of Italian migration in Australia and Canada have built

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and expanded on Italian American perspectives to provide a more nuanced view of Italian migration.

Following Italian Unification, the United States received a significantly higher number of Italian migrants than either Canada or Australia, particularly before World War One (Rosoli 1978:350-5), thus explaining the focus of Italian American studies on this period in history. Australian studies tend to focus on post World War Two migrations, as the bulk of Italians arrived there in the 1950s and 60s. Canada's scholarly literature, like Canada's migrations, represents an intermediary case. Yet, there are striking similarities in how the United States, Canada, and Australia received and settled Italy's migrants compared with other major Italian immigrant-receiving countries. In Germany and Switzerland, for example, Italians were segregated as guest workers, denied access to citizenship, and never acknowledged as "nation builders" (Gabaccia 2000:177-87, Wessendorf 2007, 2007a). In France and in Latin American countries such as Argentina, migrants and their descendants are portrayed as fully integrated into society, not as distinct ethnic groups (Green 1999). By contrast, in the United States, Canada, and Australia, Italians were allowed to enter (with restrictions), and therefore encouraged to assimilate, naturalise, and give birth to citizens. Gradually, assimilationist views in these countries gave way to an acknowledgement (with varying degrees of tolerance) of cultural differences. Today, Italian migrants and their descendants are seen as members of distinct subgroups within multi-ethnic societies (Castles et al. 1992).

Unlike the United States, which adopted a more *laissez-faire* approach to ethnic pluralism, in the 1970s Australia and Canada put in place multicultural policies to support and manage ethnic difference and secure minimum economic and social standards for migrants (Castles 2000). Multicultural policies and funding frameworks in Canada and Australia encouraged a growing interest in ethnic histories, particularly the history of Italian migrants as the largest group of non-Anglophone (or Francophone) immigrants in either Commonwealth country in the post-war period. Over the last thirty years Italian Australian and Italian Canadian studies have grown considerably in scope and complexity, particularly in relation to issues of "identity politics" and most recently, in the post 9/11 political climate, with concerns about dual allegiances.

Canadian historian Robert Harney (1977) described the late seventies as a time when the "frozen wastes" of Italian Canadian studies previously dominated by 'filio-pietists and errors in judgement' began to thaw (1977:21-23; see also Bosi 1972; Cecilia 1985; Vangelisti 1956; Spada 1969). Harney and the generation of scholars he instructed produced complex studies that explored the influence of class, gender, regional, and parochial identities on the development of *italianità* among Italy's migrants and their descendants in Canada (Harney 1974, 1978, 1979, 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1988; Harney & Scarpaci 1981; Zucchi 1988, 1991, 1993; Iacovetta 1992, 1995; Iacovetta & Gabaccia 2002; Sturino 1985, 1990; Ramirez & del Balso 1980; Ramirez 1991; Meintel et al. 1995; Peressini 1990, 2004; Salvatore 1998; Sabetti 1995). In Australia as in Canada, early work on Italian migration was guided by theories of cultural loss and immigrant assimilation (Borrie 1954; Price 1963). Perhaps not surprisingly, the most well-known writing on Italian-Australians at this time was the best selling novel (22 editions in two years), *They're a Weird Mob*, by Nino Culotta (aka John O'Grady 1957). The book was aimed at an audience who were responsive to notions about the way migrants should settle into Australia, including Italian readers (after all, they wanted to belong), providing

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an example of how migrants, then known as “new Australians”, might assimilate and become “true Aussie mates” (Bosworth & Bosworth 1993).

The assimilationist framework in Australian Italian writing eventually gave way to studies preoccupied with questions of cultural transmission and the formation of Italian ethnic collectives (Cronin 1970; Huber 1977; Thompson 1980). This change was influenced in part by Marxist labour and feminist scholarship which foregrounded the socio-economic plight of minorities (Martin 1978; Bottomley & de Lepervanche 1984; Storer 1976; Alcorso 1991). With some notable exceptions (e.g. Cresciani, 1980; O’Connor 1996; Baldassar 2001; Baldassar and Pesman 2005; Bosworth & Bosworth 1993; Girola 2000), there have been far fewer Italian-Australian community case studies, either village-outward or little-Italy focused, than in the Canadian or American literature. Since the 1980s, a number of general surveys of Italian migration to Australia have been published (Pascoe 1987; Jupp 1988; O’Brien 1989; Castles et al. 1992; Cresciani 2003).

The predominant themes in Italian Australian and Italian Canadian studies resonate with the older, more extensive body of Italian American works. A consideration of labor and working-class peoples has been a constant concern in the three places (Gabaccia & Otanelli 2001; Iacovetta 1992; Castles et al. 1992; Alcorso 1992). Italians were admitted into each of these countries as low-level workers fulfilling the meanest, dirtiest, most dangerous jobs. Described as European coolies, they were at first employed as factory fodder in the U.S and as miners and labourers in Australia and Canada. Their obvious zeal and commitment for work, which for Italian migrants represented the only means to economic and social security, made them feared and despised in the host settings, particularly by labour unions. High levels of social exclusion and hostility further consolidated the occupational (as well as residential) segregation in certain of the lower skilled employment sectors (including fishing, market gardening, building and later small businesses). At different times in the various histories of the three countries, Italians became a visible (often despised) minority group and arguably formed a quite discrete “proletarian diaspora” (Cohen 1997:58) with limited education, high rates of illiteracy and, even after several decades of settlement, limited English language skills. These proletarian diasporic identities were, of course, diverse, demarcated by regional, gender, and generational differences. Yet Italians emigrants have not remained uniform in class terms. Over time, some occupational mobility, but, more importantly, increased wealth, has altered the group’s profile. In many respects they become an entrepreneurial “mobilised diaspora” whose members have used their language, network, and occupational skills to modernise and mobilise, both through ethnic enclave economies and, more recently, through the ethnicity industry and the development of a cultural diaspora.

A focus on gender and women’s roles in the migration and settlement process of Italians has been another common concern in Italian Australian and Italian Canadian studies which has been influenced by Italian American perspectives. While earlier studies emphasised the importance of Italian migrant women in maintaining family survival, women were portrayed as operating in patriarchal family structures (Yans-McLaughlin 1977; Smith 1985). Most of the Australian and Canadian literature on Italian migrant women has managed to eschew this victim perspective through the influence of more recent feminist and Italian American research which has emphasised migrant women’s agency (Gabaccia 1988, 1991; Gabaccia & Iacovetta 2002; Tirabassi 1992). In Canada,

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Iacovetta's work on Southern Italian migrant working women in post-war Toronto emphasises the power and autonomy that Italian women exerted within the structural and cultural constraints of industrial societies and migrant family life. In the Australian context, while less systematic, there have also been a growing number of studies and some memoirs that have explored the intersections of ethnicity and gender portraying Italian women as protagonists and negotiators of ethnic cultural and political practices (Andreoni 1994; Pesman 1992, 1993, 2002; Diana 1988; Ciccotosto & Bosworth 1990; Vasta 1992; Baldassar 1999; Iuliano 1999, 2001). These themes are captured evocatively in Marlina Marchetta's (1992) runaway bestseller, *Looking For Alibrandi*, which explores the changes in attitudes held by and about Italian-Australians over the generations through an account of a single mother and her daughter's coming of age.

The attitudes of Italian governments towards Italian expatriates has also been a major concern for Italian Australian and Italian Canadian scholars with a particular emphasis on the attempted fascistisation of Italian communities during the 1920s and 1930s (Cresciani 1980, 1983, 1988; Bosworth & Bosworth 1993; Bosworth 1996; Bruti-Liberati 1984). Given the higher rates of internment of Italians and naturalised citizens of Italian origin during the Second World War in Canada and Australia, studies in these countries have explored both the Fascist affiliations of immigrants as well as the background of racial prejudice that contributed to internment policies (Bosworth and Ugolini 1992; Iacovetta, Perin & Principe 2000).

An area of burgeoning interest, again influenced by a well developed body of Italian American work, is the issue of generational change, multiple or hybrid and symbolic ethnicity which have been explored in case studies in Australia (Palotta-Chiarolli & Skrbis 1994, Baldassar 1992, 1999) and Canada (N. Harney 1998). The discussion in the most recent scholarship of hyphenated identities has been linked to anxieties about asserting "whiteness" (Castles et al. 1992; Baldassar 2006; Verdicchio 1997) and the tendency for multiculturalist politics to define and potentially marginalize migrants according to their ethnicity (Fortier 2003). The economic success of the first generation and the expansion of the second and subsequent generations into the professions have also contributed to the "whitening" and broader "acceptability" of Italians in Anglo-societies. This increased status is further reinforced by the arrival of new immigrants from places like the Middle East and Africa who are considered even more culturally distant from the Anglo-mainstream. As a result, Italians in multicultural societies are confronted with the irony of, on the one hand, being more accepted into the mainstream and, on the other, needing to reassert notions of ethnic difference in order to retain a visible place in the pluralist society.

Understanding how regional ties have shaped Italian migration patterns and influenced the formation of ethnic identities in the new world is another common concern in Australia and Canada. The influence of the "village outward" methodology pioneered in Italian American studies by scholars such as Samuel Baily (1983) and Donna Gabaccia (1988) is apparent in a range of Italian Australian and Italian Canadian works. Canadian historian Franc Sturino (1990), for example, used a village-outward perspective to trace the movement and permanent settlement of migrants from the town of Rende (Calabria) to Toronto before the Second World War. Sturino argued that not only was *campanilismo* or parochial loyalties of paramount importance in facilitating migration and settlement, but the strength of migration chains between particular towns in Italy and North America

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acted as a powerful “pull” factor which had far more bearing on the migration process than any “push” factors in the society of origin. Zucchi’s work on the shifting loyalties of Italian migrants in Toronto from narrow parochialism to a broader ethnic ‘national’ identity also emphasised the importance of *campanilismo* (1988).

While many Australian scholars have highlighted the importance of *campanilismo* in understanding Italian migration in a general way (Bosworth & Bosworth 1993; Bosworth 1996; Baldassar & Pesman 2005; Cresciani 2003), fewer studies explore the specific parochial origins and loyalties of Italian Australians (but see Baldassar 2001 and Cosmini-Rose 2004). Nonetheless, regional origins have been of interest to scholars studying the transformation of culture: Rina Huber’s (1977) *From Pasta to Pavlova* analyses the values of migrants from the Veneto and Calabria; and Giorgio Cheda’s (1979) work details the Ticinesi experience in Australia. More recently, there have been a number of regionally specific studies, including work on Tuscans in Western Australia (Boncompagni 2001), Valtelinesi in Australia (Templeton 2003), Trentini in Australia (Bozzato 2004) and Veneti in Australia (Baldassar & Pesman 2005). This region of origin focus may in part reflect the greater diversity of regional origins of Italian Australians compared with Italians in North America and the fact that there are fewer places in Australia with very large concentrations of migrants from specific towns as in North American cities.

Understanding why Italy’s migrants and their descendants clustered in urban neighbourhoods and how these neighbourhoods shaped the changing identities of Italian migrants has been a particular focus for Italian Canadian scholars. Taking their cue from earlier studies of Italian migrants in specific urban settings in the United States (Nelli 1970; Barton 1975; Yans-McLaughlin 1977; Briggs 1978), scholars such as Robert Harney began to examine in detail Canadian “Little Italies” such as those in Toronto and Montreal which were the destinations of choice for the majority of Italians in pre and post-war Canada (Harney & Scarpaci 1981; Ramirez & del Balso 1980; Painchaud & Poulin 1988; Zucchi 1988; Iacovetta 1992). Given the distinct regionalism characteristic of the Canadian national polity, these studies were soon followed by a number of works exploring the spatial dimensions of *italianità* in Western Canada “beyond the frozen wastes” (Sestieri Lee 1987; Scardellato 1989; Wood 2002). Most recently, such work focuses on the ways that Italian migrants and their descendants colonise space to signal the Italian presence in the landscape of the increasingly plural and multi-ethnic city of Toronto (N. Harney 1998).

The more diffuse nature of Italian settlement in Australia, coupled with strong government rhetoric against ghettoisation of ethnic communities (Bottomley & de Lepervanche 1984; Martin 1986), mitigated against the development of “Little Italies” that were as large or cohesive as their North American counterparts. While the vast majority of post-war Italian migrants in Australia eventually settled in large urban centres where there were greater opportunities for jobs in manufacturing, construction or small business, their first years in Australia were often spent in mines, farms, or timber camps in rural and regional areas. Consequently studies place more emphasis on rural and regional settlement. While there have been some studies of Italian migrants to specific urban settings such as the Italians of Carlton Melbourne (Jones 1962) or Fremantle’s Italy, (Bosworth & Bosworth 1993), Italo-Australian scholars have focused more on the settlement and work patterns of Italians in rural and in larger regional areas such as North

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Queensland (Douglass 1995), South Australia (O'Connor 1996), or Western Australia (Gentili 1983).

In more recent times, both Italian Australian and Italian Canadian studies have been characterised by a profusion of micro-histories exploring the experiences of Italian migrants from Powell River to Port Pirie (Scardellato 1985; Bromley 1955). Apparent in these studies of specific places of settlement is an increasing emphasis on transnational as opposed to national perspectives. Italian American scholars have also encouraged and supported this shift highlighting the value of comparative and transnational approaches (e.g. Baily 1990, 1999; Gabaccia 2000; Gabaccia and Otanelli 2001). Transnational approaches emphasise continuing links between home and host communities and so reveal that the process of migration can extend beyond settlement into the subsequent generations.

Over the last decade, the application of theoretical concepts such as diaspora (see Luconi 2006) to the Italian migration phenomenon as well as broader comparative and transnational approaches to studying Italy's migrants, have begun to challenge and deprovincialise Italian migration studies in a range of contexts, including the United States, Canada, and Australia (e.g. Verdicchio 1997; Fortier 2000; Gabaccia & Iacovetta 2002; Baldassar & Gabaccia forthcoming 2009). The emerging transnational approaches to Italian migration may encourage scholars to look beyond the local and make connections among Italian migrants in a broad range of international settings, including the Australian and Canadian. Fostering international collaboration between Italian studies scholars everywhere through conferences, publications, and academic exchanges will further help to deprovincialise Italian migration studies.

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For an overview of Italian Studies in Australia, see Moss 2004.