

SYNOPSIS

"CHOICES FOR ITALIAN WOMEN IN MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA"

As members of a minority group living in Australia, Italian women have no choice but to define or have defined the nature of their identity. This article makes a study of the way Italian women have been defined both as individuals and as members of various groups. It looks at the inherent conflicts, strengths and weaknesses of these categories. The article concludes that during the multicultural era governments have not been able to take full advantage of the strengths of these categories but rather have increased their degree of alienation, isolation and disadvantage.

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CONTENTS

- 1 -

Introduction 1

Italian Women as Italians 1

Italian Women in Isolation 8

Italian Women as Non-English Speaking  
Background Women 13

Italian Women as Women 18

Conclusion 21

References 23

Footnotes 25

Short Curriculum Vitae 26

ITALIAN WOMEN IN MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIAIntroduction

As members of a minority group living in Australia, Italian women have no choice but to define, or have defined, the nature of their identity. Governments seeking to understand and meet the needs of this important group in Australian society impose their own definitions of Italian women's identity. The identity of individuals on the other hand is determined by complex interactions between personality, gender, community, class, ethnicity at a given time and place, all dynamic, fluid, adaptable and evolving variables. Italian women define themselves and have been defined in conflicting ways as a group and as individuals. This article will look at the tensions this creates and the strengths and weaknesses of categories such as "Italians", "Italian Women", "Non-English-Speaking Background Women" and "Women" for Italian women. Each category in different ways seeks to reach out, to move beyond stereotypes. These attempts to refine the image of Italian women and make it more responsive to time and place have not met with greater understanding or more equitable allocation of resources. This suggests that Multicultural Policies have not been able to effect substantive change.

Italian Women as Italians

After a period when ethnicity was basically ignored, governments sought to define the nature of "Italianess" and what

it might mean for them as service providers and vote collectors. Typical of definitions developed in the seventies and still currently in use, is the following definition of Italian women as mothers and girls:

The mother's role, on the other hand, is a more inward-looking one. She has full responsibility for household matters, in which she exerts a lot of power and for the care of her husband and children. She may be expected to foster the image of a dutiful and submissive wife, though this image is balanced by the so-called 'Madonna Complex' whereby a mother is placed on a pedestal and regarded as loving and giving, warm and compassionate. In some areas of Italy, particularly in the south, a woman's life outside the family circle is restricted. Many Italian men believe that any extra-marital association between the sexes inevitably leads to infidelity, which in a woman is not tolerated. Thus, a wife may be closely chaperoned outside the home and not allowed to associate with any man other than her husband or a close relative. In northern Italy, and in larger cities throughout the country, this strict attitude has been progressively relaxed; women find work outside the home and are able to mingle freely with men not connected with the family. While strong attitudes to divorce still persist, the fact that it has become law is an indication of change in male-female relationships.

... Girls are usually over-protected, and closely chaperoned once they reach the age of puberty. Any suspicion of pre-marital sexual experience may seriously affect a girl's marriage prospects.

In recent years, however, girls have gained far more social freedom in the more economically advanced regions of Italy and children generally have become less dependent on the family.

(D.I.E.A., 1983:9)

5

The problem with these kinds of definitions is that they take on a life of their own. The reader tends to give them permanency and generalises from what is an individual perception, located in a particular time and place, put through a particular class, gender and cultural filter.

Some Italians in Australia accept this crude "North/South" framework but seek to be identified with the more favourably viewed northern Italians. They create an artificial "Italianness" which had more to do with what would gain them acceptance and often has little to do with their own cultural base.

For an Italian living in Australia, a choice exists between the two major Italian stereotypes which operate in the wider community. There is the opera-loving cosmopolitan from 'Northern Italy' who came to Australia by choice. The more common stereotype is that of the Italian peasant, from poverty-stricken 'Southern Italy'. The stereotype dictates that they are factory fodder in cities or cheap labour in rural areas, speak English poorly, are unreliable and childlike because they are prone to emotional and physical outbursts, and live in extended families with subjugated women.

(Andreoni, H., 1985:169)

Those who opt to present themselves as acceptable, high-status Italians find that their fragile creation has little chance of surviving into the next generation, divorced as it is from daily realities. Others do not have the option of passing for 'Northerners'. They therefore either accept the low status of that 'peasant' label or seek to refine and give it higher status through increased knowledge and awareness.

Italian historians writing in Australia about Italianness and the Italian community in Australia, present their own perceptions of core values, isolated, distilled and frozen in time. These histories, written by men, rely heavily on written sources where women feature very little if at all. Thus Stiasci (1979) and Cecilia (1985) mention women only in passing whilst Bertelli (1985) still feels able to draw on the tradition of the THE BIG MOTHER figure

(...) The 'motherly instinct' prescribes full dedication to the child and anybody who can be seen as a child. A mother understands, covers up, forgives everybody and everything. Thus, the instinct of motherhood could explain many past and present Italian cultural traits. For instance, warmth in interpersonal relations, particularly towards children, can be traced to the direct influence of the mother figure. Children are to be loved, protected (Anglo-Saxons might say over-protected), even spoiled and allowed - up to their teens - a noticeable degree of freedom, although good manners are strongly enforced from an early age. This attitude favours the formation of character that is unsystematic and relatively unconcerned with laws and rules limiting one's own freedom (exemplified by the sometimes chaotic traffic of many Italian cities). This can also explain attempts at manipulating other people, as well as unexpected acts of generosity, humanitarianism, and the tendency to show tolerance towards others and oneself. The popular expression pazienza in the face of (real or imagined) insurmountable difficulties is indicative of the predominant influence of the Big Mother figure in the anthropological sense.

(Bertelli, 1985:60)

Whilst seeking to refine the readers' understanding of Italian culture, such comments succeed only in giving a new lease of life to a whole range of stereotypes about Italian women. Even

Cronin who also relies heavily on written sources and in 1956 interviewed only three women in her Australian sample of 48, at least is aware that her image of a Sicilian woman has little to do with the Australian counterpart.

Sicilian women who, in their homeland, were virtual prisoners as far as allowed freedom is concerned (as opposed to that taken by married women because of necessity) blossom in Australia: they work, have their own money, learn their way around the city, meet new people, and when they are tired and bored in the house they just go out.

(Cronin, 1970:208)

One way to avoid making generalisations and feeding stereotypes is to focus on individuals, their place of origin and how they have adapted to life in a specific place and at a specific time in Australia. It is through this process that Italian women begin to emerge as a significant and important section of the Italian community in Australia. Researchers who have recorded the histories and made contact with a whole range of Italian women are able to highlight the variety, strength and complexity of the interviewees, and question the prevailing stereotypes.

For example, interviews conducted in 1970 with the Abruzzesi and Trevigiani who returned to their villages permanently after having migrated to Australia, help us to understand those pressures which finally brought about decisions to return. Although women were only interviewed as wives of the head of a household, their particular views, attitudes and priorities are conveyed through direct quotations.

A woman from Celano who had returned to Italy in 1968 said:

"It is a disaster, but in order to improve your standard of living, you must have two jobs in Australia. Australians are not interested in getting on. When Elizabeth was three months old, I had to leave her with a woman and go back to work. And even with this work, we could only afford to buy an old washing-machine and an old refrigerator and a dirty house. It was a fibro house in the bush. Here, everyone has a new washing-machine and a new refrigerator. My bedroom is ten times better than my bedroom in Australia, and a house costs only half ....."

(Lindsay Thompson, 1980:203)

So much for the image of the 'lucky country'.

Through interviews directly quoted we also know a great deal more about some Trevisani women living in Griffith and Sydney in 1972. Discussions about male/female roles are thus linked to real people.

In the conservative households of Govi Lorenzin and Bresci, (2, 3 and 4), the husband and wife tended to keep their roles as segregated as possible. Working in a factory was not acceptable to these households, but such tasks as taking in unmarried male boarders, minding other people's children during the day, and sewing at home for a factory were.

In the modern progressive households, Preranti, Tomasielli, Santrin and Crespani, (5, 6 7 and 8) ... the husband did not object to the wife's working in a factory, though preferably not after the birth of the first child. (Huber, 1977:151)

Through these and similar interviews, it is not hard to identify the likely areas of need and stress. With such information, the implications for government policy and the delivery of

9

childcare, health, employment, language and education can not so easily be ignored.

Some studies move beyond refining perceptions of "The Italian Community" and defining disadvantage. To understand why, it is important to appreciate the particular focus of a book or research project about Italians in Australia. With Courage In Their Cases (Loh, 1980) declares:

(20) This book is by working people, about working people, about their everyday lives, and is published by a workers' organization.  
(Loh, 1980:2)

The workers are all Italians and the organisation is the Italian Federation of Emigrant Workers and their Families (F.I.L.E.F.).

The way the book is written allows the humanity and individuality of the participants to come through. This is a characteristic of those studies that have relied heavily on the techniques of the oral historian, using personal interviews in the first language and expanding from this base using memorabilia, letters and photos to bring stories to life.

Inevitably these oral histories bring out the special contributions, strengths and needs of Italian women in ways that other more general histories relying on written sources cannot.

Oral history is often about memories and perceptions. It inevitably highlights two areas of an individual's history: the difficulties overcome and the achievements. This, combined with the strength and forcefulness of the speakers and powerful photographs, does not readily encourage the perpetuation of the

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image of a passive, submissive, 'big mother' martyr, Italian woman.

The difficulty with oral histories is that you need large volumes of interviews before you can begin to identify with certainty shared experiences, make generalisations about systemic discrimination or identify where government policy and practices are not meeting the needs and ensuring that a fair share of the resources are reaching this particular group in Australian society.

#### Italian Women in Isolation

Italian women who speak little English, isolated either in an urban or rural setting, are not likely to emerge as a group unless particular care is taken to reach out to them. Examples of this kind of research are rare. The centre for Urban Research and Action (C.U.R.A.) in 1978 made a particular point of selecting a sample for its study of Ovens and King Valleys communities in which non-English-speaking migrant women living and working on farms predominated (C.U.R.A., 1978: 36). Andreoni from 1978-1983 also made a study of Sardinian women living in an isolated rural community in northern N.S.W. (Andreoni, H., 1983). The sample in both studies was predominantly Italian and identified similar issues all of which could and should have been acted upon.

Both studies in different ways identified the need for English Language teaching, translation and interpreter services,

driving lessons for women in the home language, culturally and linguistically appropriate child-care and medical services and ethnic community liaison officers. All point to services which are essential to reduce the isolation and vulnerability of these women and the children directly in their care. Given the similar needs identified in both samples, it is likely that other isolated Italian and non-English speaking women experience similar difficulties. For their voices to be heard at government level, the response has to be organised and focused. The emergence of groups of Italian Australian women establishing their own priorities and demanding their right to equal opportunity and access in education, employment and services indicates a growing sophistication amongst Italian women in Australia.

All organisations which purport to represent minorities, ethnic minorities and gender minorities in particular, have to cope with two different and at times conflicting functions. They have to build up the prestige and power of the group - in this case Italian women - identifying shared characteristics and qualities acknowledged as valuable by the power elite (Italian men and middle Australia). However, to justify the existence of a category (Italian women) which is worthy of a special focus and extra resources, it is necessary to identify clearly the depth and extent of disadvantage as well as the consequent specific needs.

12

For workers and welfare organisations the focus must be on identifying disadvantage and fighting for their redress within the given political framework. Thus we have the development of groups looking at women's issues within organisations such as Comitato Assistenza Italiani (Italian Assistance Association) and Italian Federation of Emigrant Workers and their Families.<sup>1</sup> These groups have the commitment and charter to collect data about the needs of Italian women in Australia and feed that information into government through endless enervating submission writing, conference papers, speak-outs, responding to reports and being available for consultation. The individuals charged with these difficult jobs need a great deal of support from their community and organisation because the task inevitably requires more than can be expected of an individual and frequently leads to the exploitation and finally exhaustion of the committed. The vulnerability of services designed to meet the needs of women within a specific ethnic group is constant.

Associations of Italian-Australian women can if they wish chart a different course. They are free to concentrate on issues that are divorced from those of disadvantage. This appears to be the path taken by the Association of Italian Women in U.S.A. and Canada if we are to judge by the conference The Italian Immigrant Women in North America in 1978. The papers are organised around the following headings:

12

13

- I Women in the Old Country
- II Early Years in North America
- III The Italian American Women: Generations, Roles, and Attitudes
- IV Women, Kinship, and Networks of Ethnicity
- V Images of Italian Women in the Arts.

(Caroli, 1978)

There appears to be some historical distancing of the hard times and periods of disadvantage and an emphasis on how things have changed with the consequent improved image and status.

Reservations and traces of bitterness persist however.

If the film portrayals of ethnics in general, and Italian women in particular, tell us anything it might be that the loneliest place of all is in the middle of the mainstream.

(Caroli, 1978:357)

The Italo-Australian Women's Association in Australia, to judge by their conference proceedings Noi Donne Italo-Australiane (1986) has had to balance the demands of increasing the group's prestige and the need to identify areas of continued disadvantage. The theme of the conference was "The Contribution of the Italo-Australian Woman in Australian Society" (il contributo della donna Italo-Australiana alla societa' Australiana). This was defined in a way that did not preclude the need to redress present and future inequities.

114

Their statement called for the recognition of the work of our pioneering women, their sacrifices and the humiliations they have had to endure, the recognition of their achievements and of their contribution to this country. Our women were also concerned that present and future generations of Italo-Australian women be given the opportunity of participating in society at all levels.

(Arena, 1986:II)

The thrust of the papers presented at both conferences suggests an emphasis on acquiring equal or at least greater access to resources and services as well as achieving basic rights in health, welfare, education and employment. Whilst declaring the need for Italian language maintenance and Italian language services for non-English speakers especially in the health area, the papers do not seem to suggest that all identified problems are unique to Italian women and can always be solved by the provision of services specific to the Italian community. Arguing for services that are for the exclusive use of women in one migrant group is a path destined to divide migrant women and one that is not likely to attract permanent funding from government except as a short term political expedient.

By focusing on the disadvantages that are the consequence of government's failure to target resources to meet the needs and satisfy the rights of this particular group of migrant women, the Italo-Australian Women's Association is aligning itself with other migrant women. They are declaring that they are prepared to share their past experiences, knowledge of the system and advantages of size, with women in other smaller, more recently arrived migrant communities. This willingness to

reach out to other women beyond their own ethnic community is an indication of the growing strength and political awareness of minority group women.

That these Italian women have chosen to align themselves in this way has given enormous strength and depth to the migrant women's movement and may well prove to be one of their major and most lasting contributions to Australian society. This approach has been advocated for some years. (Sgro, 1979).

Italian Women as Non-English Speaking Background Women

In the mid 1980s putting all one's energy into isolating and distilling separate cultural characteristics and core values is seen by many as counterproductive. It creates unnecessary divisions between ethnic communities and feeds too many stereotypes in the minds of the power brokers.

Far from equipping us all with new insights and skills in how to deal cross-culturally with one another, we seem to have created a bogey: the new sacred cow is ethnicity. I can't tell you the number of people who ask me for the thumb nail sketch of Lebanese or Italian or Jewish culture/practices/ideals.

(Kalowski, 1986:11)

These lessons, painfully learnt, have helped the development of solidarity across ethnic groups especially amongst women who suffer multiple and cumulative disadvantages in this society as women, as migrant women, as migrant women from non-English-speaking backgrounds (N.E.S.B.) and as migrant NESB

216

women doing the worst, dirtiest and most exploitative and marginalised jobs, or unemployed.

Research across NESB groups suggests that there is good reason for that solidarity although individuals and groups share migration experiences that relate to different times and places. To understand the migration experience no longer is it deemed enough or even appropriate to dust off some often Anglo-oriented analysis of traditional practices in the source country, usually written in English, about a distant time and a distant place. There appears to be general agreement that to better understand the complex interplay between ethnicity and other variables shared by NESB migrant women for example we need to know a great deal more about what is happening here and now in Australia. This is happening through research and women's networks.

In a draft of a research project of the child rearing practices of eight ethnic groups in Australia, the researcher introduced the eight commissioned background papers with a large section on what worked across all eight ethnic groups.

For the research study, we believe it is more accurate to talk in terms of clusters of attitudinal factors regarding child-rearing practices, than to imagine that ethnic group alone pre-determines those practices. There are many experiential and individual attitudes involved as well as ethnicity. These attitudes derive from a number of factors such as education levels of parents, whether from an urban or rural area, type of employment, whether mother is employed, experiences in migration etc.

In the case of people from different ethnic groups, attitudes deriving from recent experiences relating to migration, such as encountering a strange environment, language difficulties, emotional turmoil, are important variables which may have considerable impact on and, cause changes in traditional practices.

(Nelson, 1986:8)

From government's point of view, NESB migrant women's groups and structures offer a convenient consultation mechanism with this hard to reach group and a forum through which to appease with rhetoric and not necessarily with the allocation of greater resources. There is some evidence of some government attempts to reach out to this group. Usually however, the fate of these services is dependent on current political and economic winds. Marginal and vulnerable as they are, they can easily disappear without a trace as part of amalgamation or restructuring or rationalisation. As with community based welfare organisations, officers employed in the key positions have an extremely stressful job. They have to reconcile the needs of government whilst maintaining credibility with NESB women and responding to the articulation of need in the face of mounting research about multiple disadvantage and very little being done to change the situation in a substantive way. Their job is made easier by the development of a few Migrant Women's Resource Centres and formal and informal migrant women's networks such as that which is convened in N.S.W. by Franca Arena, member of the NSW Parliament. This developing solidarity amongst NESB women is gradually being extended to include

18

Aboriginal and some English speaking women supporters. There is  
at work a sharing of the pool of knowledge and talent,  
resourcefulness and sheer guts, in the quest  
for a shared goal.

(Kalowski, 1986:14)

Time and time again the nature and substance of NESB  
women's disadvantage has been highlighted, researched and  
elaborated at speak-outs, conferences, through government  
reports and academic analysis.

These relate to:

- Status
- English language, education and  
training/retraining
- Employment/unemployment
- Childcare
- Health/Welfare
- Law

(D.I.E.A. 1986:9-16)

There is much evidence confirming real disadvantage in these  
areas, evidence which has largely been ignored. Bibliographies  
abound with references to research dealing with most of the  
above categories.

The strength of NESB women as a category is that it  
identifies a large group of Australians and thus one likely to  
have greater political clout. Any weakness relates to the fact  
that the group is defined by its minority status and  
disadvantages, all of which are likely to lessen its power to  
affect change in the political arena.

19

NESB women and those who share their concerns and their fight for at least a lessening of disadvantage have had to face and cope with the dangers implicit in formalising such a broad, deficit category. For example, evidence of the individual achievements of NESB women in education and employment becomes ammunition used by governments and their academics to question the existence of NESB women's disadvantage as a group. Lack of statistical data to support or deny claims of disadvantage of specific ethnic groups and women within them is translated into an assertions such as

these second generation students, are, if anything, doing better than Australian students.

(Birrell, 1986:1)

NESB women have been able to define the nature of their disadvantage and the need for and nature of required catch-up and compensatory measures. They have not been able to commission the quantitative research and marshal the economic arguments needed to convince decision makers in male-dominated government to commit the extra resources. They have not been able to do it because of their minority status and those very disadvantages.

This has left this group very vulnerable in times of economic restraint, when the thrust behind multiculturalism has been deflected by economic concerns. At such times, not only NESB women suffer because less funds are available for their specific needs, they lose out also as members of ethnic groups

in general when funds for targetted programs or institutions are severely cut or eliminated.

Italian Women as Women

It is difficult to see a way forward when groups such as "Italians", "Italian women" and "NESB women" have proved to be so vulnerable in times of economic stress, and jettisoned as luxuries of the fat years.

Should NESB women pull back into their respective ethnic groups or should they become an even larger group and perhaps unite with the feminist movement? There is little evidence of the largely Anglo-Saxon feminist group being currently able to extend their notion of femaleness to encompass the range and at times conflicting definitions of womanhood, which exist within different cultural frameworks. The dynamic process of negotiating, elaborating, extending and evolving a new notion of what it is to be an Australian woman still has a long way to go. The slot for NESB women in general and Italian women in particular remains linked to 'patterns of powerlessness' (Barwick, 1985:35).

Attempts to put migrant women's issues on the agenda of Australian Feminism have not hitherto been very successful. The Third Women and Labour Conference in Brisbane in 1984 had as its theme "Racism". And yet according to Aboriginal and migrant women who attended the conference, the theme was barely touched upon, but relegated to optional workshops where the anecdotal

and descriptive was preferred to analysis and vigorous debate (Perera, 1985:18). A second conference held that same year, Margin to Mainstream: Women and Employment, met with similar difficulties.

At least as a result of the difficulties encountered at these conferences there is the acknowledgement that greater understanding and further studies are required. Conflict is inevitable because for some, sometimes, the concerns of the ethnic group override those of being a woman.

At the conference several black women said their current priority lies with their own community and not with forming alliances with white feminists.

(Johnson (et.al.), 1984:35)

Many Italian and NESB migrant women would share these reservations.

The reasons for such reservations become obvious when, in an attempt to give a framework to such discussions, Jeannie Martin questions whether ethnicity should always be a primary form of group/identity formation.

... we should ask whether the wholesale celebration of ethnic identity as positive might not also involve the celebration of female identities as negative. At a more general level there are clearly many situations of central concern to women where an ethnic group model might prove quite inappropriate to a positive articulation of their interests. Issues focusing on contraception, divorce, sexuality, violence, child care and health are obvious examples of this - issues clearly better understood and acted upon from a gender-based analysis and

122

to both for the primacy of the male, the enemy, or the ethnic.

gained in the long term in making the male the enemy, or the

(Martin, 1984:57)

perpetual outsider. Families are the strongest individual and

Clearly for Jeannie Martin, gender concerns override those of

Group identity base for so many men and women in migrant

ethnicity

communities. Nor is the monolingual English speaking

This image of migrant women as the most oppressed and

powerless is facile, condescending and finally destructive

because it does not permit the establishment of a power base

from whence to affect change. N.E.S.B. and Italian women's

experience suggests that there is a need for sub-groups such as

"Italian women" to develop solidarity, networks and share

information in the first instance. These however must neither

be linked only with disadvantage or powerlessness nor be

isolated or stagnant. There must always be room for new

generations and new members as well as renegotiated definition

of roles and priorities. Bridges must be built with larger

groups to reach out to those who at least share some concerns,

some of the time. The sheer size of the group, the dynamism

of its members and the range of skills and resources it can call

upon both within and beyond its borders will eventually lead to

its voice being heard and its needs being met.

Thus Italian women have moved to work with NESB women and

are moving towards a better understanding and dialogue with

Aboriginal and English speaking women. This does not preclude

or inhibit the maintaining of strong ties with ethnic

communities. Indeed this is essential if ethnic communities

are to retain their capacity to renew themselves and be relevant

45 23

to both men and women of future generations. Nor is much to be gained in the long term in making the male the enemy, or the perpetual outsider. Families are the strongest individual and group identity base for so many men and women in migrant communities. Nor is the monolingual English speaking Australian so very different.

### Conclusion

All Australians experience forms of discrimination and disadvantage. If more understood the processes involved and could appreciate the differences of scale and time, there would be a better chance of increasing understanding and improving the lot of different disadvantaged sectors of the community. Without some evidence of a willingness to share experiences, power and resources, anger amongst those most discriminated against can only increase. Italian women, after being for so long a part of the Australian society, still experience unacceptable levels of discrimination. This can only lead to outrage.

The strength and anger of the women experiencing the consequences of poor policy decisions, low status and lack of resources, should not be underestimated. A powerful example of this is to be found in the work of Rosa Capiello Paese Fortunato (Cappiello, 1981). She turns all the choices and definitions described in this article into real people and then allows them to interact. The result is a powerful, explosive testimony to the anger of Italian and NESB women. It puts back the human

24

dimension of disadvantage, stripped away by policy, reports and academic research. Her work confirms the feeling that the rights and needs of Italian and migrant women and their communities must become a substantive part of any successful future political, social and economic agenda. Where bridges are not built that allow for development and dialogue then groups based on disadvantage, ethnicity or gender have the capacity to create a destructive 'inferno'. Rosa Cappiello's book translated as Oh Lucky Country (1984) creates a world without bridges, where isolated individuals and groups are destined to destroy themselves and each other. As Italian women know, Multiculturalism in Australia, at least in its implementation to date, has not been able to ensure that this will not happen.

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. 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."

(Cappiello, 1984:4)

There is of course another category: Italian women as Australians. Only time will tell if this category will be allowed to emerge and blossom, making its dynamic contribution to the future of Australian society.

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26

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ff

2

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28