

ENTANGLEMENTS: EMLACED, TRANSNATIONAL AND TRANSCULTURAL TRAJECTORIES IN LIFE-WRITING BY ITALIAN- AUSTRALIAN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I explore how engaging with autobiographical writings by Italian-Australian women has allowed me to reflect on my own emplaced, transnational and transcultural trajectory. Through a combination of archival research, textual analysis and personal narrative, I trace my encounter with a rich, though often overlooked, corpus of autobiographical writings that emerged in community contexts – particularly through literary contests organized by the National Italian-Australian Women’s Association – which resulted in the publication of two books of short stories: *Give Me Strength* (1989) and *Growing up Italian in Australia* (1993). Drawing on concepts such as ‘locational feminism’ and ‘transduction’, particularly as examined by Jasmina Lukić (2023), I consider how these texts speak across time and place, and how they resonate with my own experience as a scholar, writer and Italian-Australian woman and mother. I analyse these stories in search not of a fixed historical truth, but of what Nina Lykke foregrounds as ‘poetic truth’: a form of knowing that reverberates across subjectivities in the form of a resonance. This essay merges creative and academic writing and is grounded in a desire to read, share and amplify the vibrant, collective voices of translingual and migrant women.

Keywords: Life-writing; feminist studies; migration; translingualism; transnational communities; autobiography; Italian-Australian literature; Italian-Australian history

IT IS A RAINY JANUARY DAY AND I AM SITTING in the special collections section of the State Library of New South Wales, in Sydney, Australia. My bags are checked into the locker area, from which I can spot the majesty of native trees, glowing in this otherwise gloomy morning. Just a pencil and small paper squares, carefully cut, stare at me from the big wooden table. It is January, we established, and it is quite a hot day here, but my body still alerts me that today, somehow, it might snow. I have been living in Australia for around twelve years now, yet I never fail to get this bewildering

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feeling after the summer (winter) break – it gets icy towards the mountains, we must be careful if driving – except we are about to enjoy an afternoon in a leafy, sunny bay or just rushing with our bikes through daily tasks.

These feelings I am holding quite close today are the same that brought me to this very archive that is about to transport me to similar feelings, but in other times, and the same that offered me, unannounced, a way toward reflecting on my own writing, or perhaps on scholarship and writing as such. I have now lived the greater part of my adult life on the unceded land of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, 17,000 km from where I was born and where almost all generations of my family have lived and still live. Ironically, for a scholar whose main research interests lie in migrant writing, I have hardly ever reflected on my own trajectory of migration. After birthing and mothering two Italian-Australian girls who will grow up wearing a multiple set of seasonal, physical and emotional lenses – just like me, perhaps – I felt the overwhelming desire to know more about my position, about me and the communities that I am part of and that are part of me.

The desire I feel today is to connect the emplaced experiences I go through daily (winter-summer overlapping in me being just a small fraction of them) with those of other women and writers, transnationally, to allow myself to understand me in a different, more collective and transhistorical way. In other words, I need to remap the reverberations across which my own subjectivity moves, is refracted by, and gives form to a discourse that is both anchored and influenced by the place I sit in right now, as it is – again and again – by other places and lives and writings. This is something that feels quite like the epiphany of snow in my summer mentioned above: a common seed that takes root and begins to sprout, even if it is not physically there, or is there for just a moment, through a bout of wind, a piece of paper, a sentence, a word.

Archive

Despite the long time spent in Australia, my scholarship has mostly revolved around texts produced translingually in my native country, Italy, and through one of the most direct yet mediated forms of literary expression: poetry. I believe in the epistemological and transformative power of distance: and to this day I believe the physical *distance* between myself and the words I studied passionately offered me an unusual yet powerful prism toward which I could let my philological analysis articulate. An aspect that I never really explored though, especially in its physical embodiment, was *proximity*. It is – perhaps surprisingly – only after some ten years in Australia that I felt ready to enter the space of physical proximity that invested me when I first approached translingual and migrant Italian-Australian writings and especially writings by Italian-Australian women. I had the first key of access to this corpus through poetry again, and in particular through performing an analysis of verses by Paolo Totaro and Enoe Di Stefano, two of the most established contemporary Italian-Australian poetic voices.¹ Through their works, and their emplaced transnational perspectives, I began to be driven by the desire to explore what is to

date an extensive yet – with a few exceptions – a severely understudied corpus of works.² This drive towards proximity in turn propelled an interest in fluid and *informal* forms and in life-writing as such.

To conceptualize the field, I rely specifically on a study of translingual life-writing by French and Francophone women authored by Natalie Edwards, who identifies life-writing as characterized by a ‘mark of openness’, able to apply transformative pressures to genre boundaries, and as a fluid space, able to include autobiographies, journals, diaries, letters, oral histories and formal and informal writings about the self.³ If we immerse this discourse into an intersectional one, it becomes clear that this non-normative pressure is multiplied in women’s writings as they have developed across the centuries outside of due visibility and acknowledgement but also outside of the normative genre pressure which we see in male-authored autobiographies in European literatures at least since the assertion of Augustine’s and then Rousseau’s autobiographical paradigms.⁴ The corpus of stories I am studying is as such constitutively stratified, composed of informal and formal archival material, and my explorations are still to take full form in an organic study. But in the space of this article, I would like to focus on what was the first specific intersection I approached and which trajectories it allowed me to discover.

As already mentioned, part of my desire to explore proximity was propelled by the experience of being an Italian-Australian woman, mother of two Italian-Australian girls. My point of departure was therefore two anthologies of autobiographical narratives by women authors – and related extensive archival materials held at the State Library of New South Wales – published towards the end of the twentieth century and titled respectively *Give Me Strength* (1989) and *Growing up Italian in Australia* (1993).⁵ Each volume captures a selection of short stories collected as a part of literary contests organized by the National Italian Australian Women’s Association at a crucial time, that is, very shortly after its own foundation in 1985.

The voices, lives and communities woven into these collections are many, as are their literary and historical values. Upon my first read, I realized that they speak to two concepts discussed by Jasmina Lukić in a work on reading transnationally, namely ‘locational feminism’ and ‘transduction’, which I should like to discuss briefly.⁶ In her analysis, Lukić examines transnational feminist thought by considering its emplaced nature, as well as the translocal reverberations and generative processes that it enacts across multiple waves of transmission and across *physically* or *apparently* distant stories, histories, places and communities. In doing so, Lukić employs Susan Friedman’s critical notion of ‘locational feminism’, which relies heavily on the generative concept of transculturation.⁷ Transculturation is the tangible product of contact, collision, immersion, synergy, contamination. It is a transformative process and the product of that process as well. Similarly, the concept of ‘transduction’ – which Lukić discusses and expands upon, building on Lubomir Doležel’s initial theorization – in its etymological nuance, points to the existence and relevance of a chain of transmission and to the transformative power of the process, vital to women’s writing and its related entanglements.⁸

The anthology *Give Me Strength*, edited by Anna Maria Kahan Guidi and Elizabeth Weiss, flourished at first organically from a transitional feminist project. A brief excursus in the history of the National Italian Australian Women's Association, which organized the 1986 contest and supported the publication of the book, can help us trace generative trajectories of transduction. The Association was founded in 1985 by a group of women under the leadership of Franca Arena, and its birth was marked by a conference in Sydney that saw the participation of eight hundred Italian-Australian women, the majority of whom were working-class women in one of their first experiences of collective participation in Australia or outside their original place of migration. Exploring the proceedings of the conference, what captures the reader's attention are the stories within the stories, which take form in a continuum, like a chorus, and the urgent need to talk and listen demonstrated by speakers and audiences alike.⁹ Elena Marinucci, one of the invited guest speakers from Italy, noted that 'there is no way you can play down an experience like this. Getting together so many women wanting so much to talk, with such understanding, such courage and such warmth...'.¹⁰ As I read about the history of this community group and the Association – captured in thousands of flyers, photos, notes, drawings – in many of my summer-winter days, the literary contest that generated *Give Me Strength* began to seem to me to have sprouted almost transitively from that collective body, and from its located, subjective, and yet fluid, nature and its desire to share. Not by chance, the organizers decided to publish the book of selected entries from the contest with Women's Redress Press, a publishing house itself run by a collective of translanguaging women, which holds another locationally feminist story that would merit separate exploration. The archives, the material traces left by these highly entangled experiences, the voices of the women that were there then, those of the women that continue this work today, are both the bridge that brings them to me – letting them reverberate against my emplaced subjectivity – and at the same time the product of a process of transculturation that is still generative, and still fully in the making.

Story

The Twenty-Fifth of April is a very important day for Italian peoples. It is the *Festa della Liberazione*, the day of the liberation from fascism and the Nazi occupation, a day celebrated across the country and within diasporic communities worldwide. This year I became aware of a literary contest organized in the town where I studied, Pavia, that was aimed at collecting stories from the Resistance. For a long time, I had thought to capture in words the story of my grandfather as a *partigiano* [partisan] and his whereabouts in the vicinity of Murazzano (in the province of Cuneo in Northwest Italy) and the story of his brother alike. Hence, I read more about the contest in the hope I would feel ready to write. The contest call explicitly mentioned that both stories and *legends* were admissible in an acknowledgement that legends were valid as part of history itself. This call for legends and stories made me think about the Italian-Australian stories I study and their status, especially when I

encounter – more frequently than not – notes that mention that a narrative was somehow fictionalized, or that some elements had been hidden, or that pen names had been adopted (as in the case of almost all the entrants in the earliest contest in 1986) or that anonymous material had been submitted. It made me think, after quite a long time, of the status of literature and its relationship with history and most of all the ever-unresolved question of what truth is. Was I after the truth? My encounter with the work of the philosopher and feminist scholar Nina Lykke not only allowed me to approach academic writing in a different, more creative and personal way, but also supported me in discovering what form of truth I was really after.¹¹ More specifically, Lykke elaborates extensively on the concept of ‘poetic truth’ that is key to this research:

The English philosopher Hywel D. Lewis defined poetic truth in terms of the aesthetic and ethical effects that good art and literature may produce in an audience. He argued that they can make us see something well-known from a new angle that allows its concrete and unique specificity to appear in unexpected ways. We may become fascinated, feel it as an epiphany and think-feel: ‘Yes, that’s true, it is like this, but I haven’t thought so before!’ This is what is called a ‘poetic truth’.¹²

The truth is vibrant, fluid, multilayered, unexpected and functions more as a resonance, a bioluminescence, than as a statement. This is what I was after and what I have found so far in my entangled summer and winter.

There would be many ways for me to begin to describe in detail the many stories I have explored, and the truths I found in them, yet none seems more convincing to me than simply encouraging the reader to read them in full. The best position I can adopt is to do my best to foster the circulation and the sharing of these stories amongst my students, friends and colleagues. But just as an invitation to read them, I would like to conclude this piece by focusing on one story from the second anthology, *Growing up Italian in Australia*. This text must be read in conjunction with *Give Me Strength* as the two volumes serve, to some extent, as counterpoints to each other. At the risk of oversimplifying, I could say that the former is the book of the *mothers*, relaying first-hand accounts of physical migration from Italy to Australia from the 1930s to the mid-1950s, and the second is the book of the *daughters*, looking back at what it really meant to grow up as a migrant in an Italian-Australian family and shining a light on migrant girlhood and womanhood from another internal and entangled perspective. The books are inseparable in my mind and on my desk: two parts of the same lively body.

The story I have chosen is authored by Anna Maria Dell’oso and titled ‘The Sewing Machine’.¹³ A woman, born in Melbourne to an Italian family, discovers that an old Singer sewing machine, the ‘macchina da cucire’ her mother owned and used for the family, might be worth quite a good sum of money if sold today as a vintage piece. She then decides to travel from Sydney to Melbourne, and to accompany Uncle Alf, a brother-in-migration and friend of her father who owns the houses her family used to live in, to check whether the sewing machine is still there, in one of

the let houses, and to regain possession of the Singer sewing machine for the purpose of selling it. Her mother is very sure it must still be there in one of the houses in Kew or Collingwood: 'I still got that one a *La Casa di Collivud* [...] or maybe a *La Casa di Chiu* – I dunno, somewhere anyway for sure'.¹⁴ Uncle Alf shows up in his enormous car, which is a true time machine. Anna Maria's memories of learning to drive, his gesticulation having remained the same, begin to intersect with the narration and alter time in the story. The first stop is *La Casa di Collivud*, where a Vietnamese family now resides, the kids and the grandparents having lunch, a children's show playing on the television. While Uncle Alf is busy with some maintenance work, which he likes to do himself, Anna Maria re-enters her house-*casa*-past, one full of entangled stories: *Zia Doris* [Aunt Doris] and the cookies in her shop, the cone dolls made by her father and destroyed by a classmate at recess, two women who worked in the local shoe factory then restoring the dolls. A young boy suddenly shows up in the basement where Anna Maria is trying to locate the sewing machine, bewildered by the lack of reference points in a present which seems to conceal the ineliminable past: "Hi", I say to the boy, who's about eight years old. "I'm looking for a sewing machine. My mum left it here a long time ago." His face flushes with alarm and, in a second, is gone'.¹⁵

After *La Casa di Collivud*, it is time for *la Casa di Chiu*, left in a terrible state by a group of young, insolvent and fugitive tenants. Now, the time of her adolescence materializes. The feeling of not quite fitting in, of playing the violin as an act of rebellion. More years pass by but still there is no Singer sewing machine in sight. Whilst Uncle Alf and Anna Maria are packing and leaving, the former realizes that he left his wallet at their first stop in Collingwood. The pair rush back to *La Casa di Collivud* and it is evening – almost night – there when they arrive.

And this is when it happens, when the various entanglements appear in their circle, our circle:

In the backyard, I peek – though I shouldn't – through the lounge-room window, hoping to see the little boy's face. Instead, through a curtain of an old sheet, I catch a glimpse of a woman, maybe in her thirties, bent over a sewing machine [...]. She cuts threads with her teeth, not seeing me, busy [...]. She's like a character out of a fairytale, an Asian Cinderella [...]. With a shock, I recognise the sound her feet are making – it's the Singer treadle [...].

[...]

'So, you no find *la macchina*, eh?'

'No', I tell him, 'I could not find it'.¹⁶

The entanglements I have been sensing so strongly in my summers and winters are the circles of steps, words, feelings, relationships, communities and subjectivities that ground our collective, emplaced yet transnational paths and words – as women-in-migration, writers, mothers, daughters, sisters, allies, observers, wanderers. It is on

the final image of the circle that Anna Maria's story, my story and our transnational community of letters eventually converge – on a continuing generative trajectory that can only bring us to an unstable, open and certainly impossible conclusion.

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NOTES

¹ See Paolo Totaro, *Collected Poems (1950–2011)* (Leichhardt, NSW: Padana Press, 2012); Enoe Di Stefano, *Terra Australis* (Sydney: Tipografia P. Fabreschi, 1970); Enoe Di Stefano, *Voci di lontananza* (Strathfield, NSW: Enoe Di Stefano, 1978); the study I refer to is Alice Loda, "'Surging Tide at Dusk": Translingual Poetics between Italy and Australia', *Journal of Literary Multilingualism*, 2.2 (2024), 190–221.

² For an exploration of Italian-Australian literature, see the most complete study to date: Gaetano Rando, *Emigrazione e letteratura: il caso italoaustraliano* (Cosenza: Pellegrini, 2004).

³ Natalie Edwards, *Multilingual Life Writing by French and Francophone Women: Translingual Selves* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 3.

⁴ For an overview, see Sergio Zatti, *Il narratore postumo: confessione, conversione, vocazione nell'autobiografia occidentale* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2024).

⁵ *Give Me Strength = Forza e coraggio: Italian Australian Women Speak*, ed. by Anna Maria Kahan-Guidi and Elizabeth Weiss (Broadway, NSW: Women's Redress Press, 1989); *Growing up Italian in Australia: Eleven Young Australian Women Talk About Their Childhood* (Sydney: State Library of New South Wales Press, 1993). The volumes collect stories submitted as part of literary contests organized by the National Italian-Australian Women's Association in 1987 and 1990 respectively. Despite their invaluable potential for transnational literary and historical discourse, the texts have predominantly enjoyed a local and national circulation and have yet to receive the level of international scholarly attention they deserve. Materials, manuscripts and documents related to the contests and the stories are held at the State Library of New South Wales (MLMSS 5288, National Italian-Australian Women's Association, New South Wales Branch Records and related adds-on).

⁶ Jasmina Lukić, 'Reading Transnationally: Literary Transduction as a Feminist Tool', in *Pluriversal Conversations on Transnational Feminisms*, ed. by Nina Lykke and others (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 139–54.

⁷ For a generative discussion on transculturation at the intersection with the ecological notion of ‘edge’— central to my reasoning here and in my studies in general – I refer to Ilaria Vanni, ‘The Transcultural Edge’, *PORTAL: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 13.1 (2016), 1–8.

⁸ Lukić refers in particular to Lubomir Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

⁹ The history of the association and its first conference is mapped in Joanna Savill, *Protagoniste non spettatrici: Cinderellas No More: Ten Years of the National Italian-Australian Women’s Association* (Waremba, NSW: National Italian-Australian Women’s Association, 1995). The book is enriched by reproductions of archival materials, manuscripts, original documents and photographs.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹¹ From Lykke’s extensive list of publications, see in particular Nina Lykke, *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2010) and *Writing Academic Texts Differently: Intersectional Feminist Methodologies and the Playful Art of Writing*, ed. by Nina Lykke (New York: Routledge, 2014).

¹² See Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, p. 174.

¹³ Anna Maria Dell’oso, ‘The Sewing Machine’, in *Growing Up Italian in Australia*, pp. 43–63.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

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Talking Points