Vite Italiane
ITALIAN LIVES IN
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Susanna Iuliano
For almost the entire second half of the last century, Italian was the most commonly spoken language other than English in Western Australia. Although there were more Italian-born migrants in the city of Melbourne, the number of Italians in Perth was proportionately the highest of all Australian capital cities. In its heyday, the first generation numbered 30,000 in WA and in the 2006 Census, over 100,000 people in the state claimed Italian ancestry. Given their significant numbers, the signs of Italian lives in Western Australia are many and varied; some obvious and distinct, others so subtle as to have become part of shared conceptions of Australian ways of life. The Italian language is taught in more schools across the state than any other; Fremantle is promoted to tourists for its Italian charm; some interpretation of Italian cuisine is familiar to most households as a staple (usually ‘spag bog’); and the list of foods that were once considered unpalatable markers of otherness are now commonplace (garlic, olive oil, espresso coffee, parmesan cheese, and so on).

Notwithstanding the century-long Italian migrant presence in Western Australia, there is little evidence of this history in the state archives, and among the few books written on the subject there was none that attempted a complete history. The Italian Lives/Vite Italiane project was conceived to begin to redress this imbalance and was ultimately made possible through a Linkage Project from the Australian Research Council, with collaboration from The University of Western Australia, The Italian-Australian Welfare and Cultural Centre Inc., the Office of Multicultural Interests, the State Library of Western Australia, the WA Museum, the Italian Consulate in Perth and the Cassamarca Foundation in Italy. The project reference group included representatives from each of these institutions and helped provide practical, intellectual and moral support for the research work, as well as links to community and local organisations, so vital to its successful completion. Special thanks, in particular, are due to Enzo Sirna, Paul Rafferty, Ann Delroy, Stephen Anstey, Brian Stewart, Sue Sondalini, Sarah Brown, Vittore Pecchini, Cristina Mele, Giuseppe Gialdino, Giorgio Taborri and Antonella Stelitano.

Without a doubt the lion’s share of the work, in particular the researching and writing of this excellent book, was accomplished by the project’s postdoctoral fellow, historian (and Fremantle-born daughter of Italian migrants), Susanna Iuliano. The limitless energy and commitment that Susanna brought to this endeavour is exceptional. She collected over 200 oral histories, archived in exacting detail a substantial selection of these in the state library, and was the main coordinator of a richly resourced education kit and website. Susanna, like many second-generation migrants, was motivated in her work by a deep sense of gratitude and pride shaped by an intimate knowledge of the sacrifices of her parents’ generation, much of which was ultimately intended ‘for the benefit of the children’. That Susanna managed to condense so much information into the final manuscript is a testament to her abilities as a writer and historian.

Vite Italiane focuses on the history of the first-generation migrants; hence the experiences of the second and subsequent generations and the contemporary realities of transnational ties and visits between the two countries are not included here. Indeed, the entire project was coloured by a sense of urgency that ‘time was running out’ to collect the firsthand accounts of the migrants themselves about their journey to Australia, their settlement, and their working and family lives. Many a conversation with Susanna began with the poignant account of yet another funeral. But this book is far from simply a homage and a celebration; it presents the complex everyday lived realities of men and women and shows how these unfolded in the particular places of this state. Along with the sheer pleasure of reading
the vibrant and often heartfelt accounts of Italian migrant lives, some of the highlights of the book include the first published explanation of the origin of the uniquely Western Australian term ‘ding’, new evidence and eyewitness accounts of the Kalgoorlie riots, a measured uncovering of the little-known history of internment and prisoners of war, insightful analysis of marriage and gender roles, as well as a holistic overview of community and cultural life in general.

One of the surprises of the project for me was the interest it attracted from students in Italy, evident in the number of enquiries received from them and their interest in the Italian Lives website. Having lived and worked in Italy for the past two years, I have been struck by the apparently very limited knowledge of Italian migration history among most Italians there, which, considering that for every Italian-born resident in Italy there is another living abroad, can only be described as some form of national amnesia. Despite this book’s frank critique of Australian multicultural policies and their ability to deliver substantive equality and a true sense of belonging to migrants, what is currently offered to most new settlers in Italy and Europe is a far cry from what is available in Australia. It could also be argued that much of the colour, shape and weave of successful multicultural Australia was formed and crafted through the Italian migrant experience. The stories of Italian lives, then, have a particular resonance and importance – not only as hitherto untold chapters in Australian history but also in the history and contemporary reality of their homeland and beyond.

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To my parents and the many other thousands of Italians who migrated to Western Australia: I hope I have captured and conveyed the truth of your stories. I am honoured and grateful to you all for sharing them with me.

To the almost three hundred people who participated in interviews and workshops: your candour, humour and hospitality made the work of collecting your stories such a pleasure (although I am still wired from all the espresso). Through your stories, I have learned so much about everything, from what life was like on a farm in rural, post-war Italy to how to make cotechini (but not how to eat them). Most of all, I’ve learned that with courage, energy and _buona volontà_, you can make a better life, whatever your circumstances.

For those whose stories are not included here, I hope you recognise something of your own personal experience in the words of fellow migrants. Although it was not possible for me to interview all 20,000 Italians in Western Australia, I hope this book inspires people to record the firsthand migration experiences of their family members, neighbours and friends. Another outcome of the _Vite Italiane_ project is an education kit which provides practical guidance on how to collect migrant histories.

This project would not have been realised without the inspiration and drive of my friend and colleague Loretta Baldassar. While she continues to insist publicly that the project was all my doing, Loretta was the architect of _Vite Italiane_, the one who conceived of the project and established its foundations. Like any good Italian builder, she didn’t just monitor the master plan from afar, she rolled up her sleeves and got her hands dirty working alongside her subcontractors. She did all this while juggling numerous other projects and teaching commitments as well as raising a young family. Thank you, Loretta, for creating an opportunity for me to work with you. I am so glad our friendship has survived this project.

To Richard and Michal Bosworth, who first encouraged me to think that migrant history was ‘real’ history and encouraged me to study it in Canada: since embarking on ‘History 101’ as an undergraduate, I have been fortunate to have had Richard’s unwavering support and guidance. Thank you for your encouragement, patience and editorial advice. While I still don’t know how to punctuate or avoid word repetition, I hope I have applied your most important teaching: to be intellectually honest.

To the project partners, who provided much more than just financial support: thank you for your valued input, enthusiasm and patience. _Vite Italiane_ was funded through the Australian Research Council Linkage program, which supports collaborative research and projects between universities and other community, government and industry groups. I hope the links this project forged between The University of Western Australia and our community partner (the Italo-Australian Welfare and Cultural Centre), government partners (State Library of Western Australia, WA Museum, the Office of Multicultural Interests, the Italian Consul of WA) and industry (Cassamarca Foundation) will endure.

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The town was about 4 kilometres away from Tirano, in the mountains. It’s near the border of Switzerland...we had pastures, some in Italy and some in Switzerland. You lived from the land. You made enough grain and wine. We had cows, two cows, we also kept a pig to make sausages and lard. After school you would go to the countryside to help collect chestnuts, make bundles of the wood cut from the vine...we didn’t have land that was all together like here, it was spread out – a piece of land here, a piece 500 m away and so on. That was our work when we were seven or eight years old...Dad was here [in Australia] when they built the rabbit-proof fence...He always used to talk about it at home, you know. He would say there is no place like Australia. He said there was lots of space. He worked hard but he made a few shillings...then when he went back to Italy he bought some land. Dad always used to say, ‘Boys, go to Australia’.1

Egidio Della Franca was one of 25 million migrants who chose to seek their fortunes outside Italian borders from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century.2 Mass migration of Italians began during the 1880s and escalated to record levels in the years between 1900 and 1915. By World War I, some 14 million people had left Italy, most of them bound for Europe or the Americas. Separated by several oceans and many thousands of kilometres, Western Australia figured marginally in this great exodus. Only a few thousand Italians had come to Western Australia by 1900, almost all were male and most were in search of gold or fertile fishing grounds. It was not until the 1920s, when the United States imposed severe migration restrictions, that more Italians began making the long trip south to Western Australia. Following paths made by earlier migrants, approximately 14,000 Italians came to Western Australia in the inter-war period.3 Not all migrants remained and settled. Some returned to Italy with little or nothing to show for their southern sojourn. The luckier ones returned with savings to buy land, fund dowries or finance future migration journeys. At the end of World War II, there were just over 5,000 Italian-born people living in Western Australia.

The decades after World War II were the heyday of mass migration from Italy to Western Australia. Following the widespread devastation of war, an average of 300,000 migrants left Italy each year, with the majority bound for Europe and the Americas.4 Some 17,000 Italians arrived in Australia every year of the 1950s, with migration slowing to around 8,000 per annum in the 1960s.5 A small but significant proportion (around 10%) of these post-war arrivals settled in Western Australia, among them my own parents.6 By the early 1970s, following several decades of mass migration, the number of Italians in Western Australia had increased sixfold to its apex of 30,000.7

Today, while the number of people in WA claiming Italian ancestry, myself included, continues to grow (100,000 according to the 2006 Census), the Italian-born population is ageing and rapidly diminishing. Since the 1970s, Italy has gone from being a nation of emigrants to one increasingly attracting immigrants. With few new arrivals from Italy and little purpose or prospect for renewed mass migration, the Italian-born population will continue to dwindle and disappear within a generation. What Italian presence will remain in Western Australia, if any, beyond the lives of the current migrant generation? This book seeks to answer this question by exploring the history and legacy of Italian migrants in Western Australia. It also examines how Italian migrants themselves have been influenced by the people, geography, politics, economy and culture of Western Australia.

Italian migrants have figured in a minor way, if at all, in most general accounts of Western Australian history.8 When they are mentioned, they are the shadowy victims of Goldfields xenophobia or a footnote in the story of development of the state’s mining, fishing or market gardening industries. The fact that few Italian
migrants left much in the way of written records helped render them largely invisible in the state’s historical record until more recent times. Since the 1970s, with burgeoning interest in social, economic and oral histories, and with government policies encouraging the recognition of multicultural identities, a growing number of historians and social scientists have turned their attentions to the lives of Italian migrants in Australia and Western Australia.

Given the smaller size of its migrant population relative to Victoria and New South Wales, Western Australia has not featured prominently in national studies on Italian migration. The few local studies proudly detail the contributions Italians have made individually or as a group to the progress of key industries and places in the state. Some have examined Italians in a more nuanced way, exploring how stereotypes, prejudices and differences in class, gender, regional and generational backgrounds of migrants (and their children) have impacted on ethnic and transnational relations and the development of italiantità.

This book builds on these studies to argue that Italian migration to Western Australia was fundamentally influenced by the state’s ‘frontier’ economy and society. For much of the twentieth century, particularly in the pre- and inter-war periods, Italian migrants who came to Western Australia were more likely to be male, live in rural areas and work in a few key industries (mining, fishing and agriculture). That these tendencies were more pronounced in Western Australia than in other states contributed to a history of conflict and eventual accommodation that was particular to the state. The idea of Western Australia as a place where isolation fostered harmony and consensus is challenged by the fact that the most dramatic examples of anti-Italian sentiment in Australian history took place on the Western Australian Goldfields during the inter-war period. Anxiety generated by thousands of miles of undefended coastline also ensured that the internment of Italians in Western Australia during World War II was particularly harsh relative to other states. The flipside of the ‘clannish sense of fundamentally shared identity of interests’ which united Western Australians was a fear and distrust of outsiders which sometimes manifested itself as xenophobia or more virulently as racism. Italians were by no means the only or most maligned targets of prejudice, but as the first and largest...
group of migrants from a non-Anglo-Celtic cultural and linguistic background to settle in Western Australia, their experiences influenced how Western Australians encountered subsequent waves of migrants who were ‘different’.

Against this broader landscape, *Vite Italiane* explores the geographic, political, economic, social and cultural aspects of Italian lives in Western Australia from the 1890s to the present. While an understanding of the experiences of the earliest Italian migrants is vital to a comprehensive exploration of these five key areas, the focus is primarily on the post-war years when the vast majority of Italians came and settled. Although the book draws from a range of archival sources, its backbone is oral history. Approximately 170 in-depth interviews were conducted with Italian migrants as well as four group discussions in which 115 individuals took part. With more than half of the Italian-born population of Western Australia now aged 65 years and over, it was important to capture their firsthand experiences of migration before it was too late. With more time for reflection in their retirement, and with the sobering reality of illness and death confronting an increasing number of elderly Italians, many were eager to look back on their lives.

Interviews were conducted with migrants in suburbs across metropolitan Perth and in regional Geraldton, Kalgoorlie, Harvey, Bunbury, Manjimup, Pemberton and Albany. Initially, interviews were semi-structured, compiling comprehensive life histories involving a wide range of participants who responded to a public invitation to share their stories. In the second stage of interviewing, participants were chosen more selectively via community networks according to their period of arrival, regions of origin, age, sex, occupation, social and religious affiliations, visa class and place of settlement. The many thousands of pages of interview transcripts, some of which are now archived in the State Library of Western Australia, give insight into a range of migrant experiences from the hardship of internment to the excitement and trepidation of a proxy bride meeting her husband face to face for the first time.

It is particularly important for groups like Italian migrants to share their oral histories given their often limited education and literacy in both Italian and English. Storytelling is also an important part of the Italian peasant culture. Just how important was made clear to me some years ago on a trip to Italy when my grandmother snatched a book from my hands and said, ‘Why are you reading? I’ll tell you everything you need to know!’ In the absence of written materials which reveal how Italians felt about their migration experiences, oral histories can make immigrant voices audible and immigrant lives visible. Like all sources though, oral testimony reveals meaning in its contradictions and inconsistencies. That is not to suggest that interviewees are not telling their truth. Rather, as Italian historian Luisa Passerini argues, people use myths to shape their oral narratives and it is the role of the historian to be aware of and explore the divergence from fact ‘where imagination, symbolism and desire break in’.

Despite the diversity of Italian migrants, their stories revealed certain recurring themes, images and archetypes which represented aspects of the migrant experience shared by many. At the heart of each of the following six chapters lies a central story told and retold in various ways. These narratives detail the geographic, political, economic, social and cultural lives of Italian migrants in Western Australia. They reveal a complex and contested history of Italian migration to Western Australia and the ambiguous sense of belonging it engendered. Italians were needed, but not wanted. Italian migrants took this message to heart and, despite a gradual process of accommodation and intercultural understanding, are still at times uncertain about whether or where they fit in their adopted land.
Left: Silio Di Marco, Lucca, 1928, aged 2. Photograph sent to his father, Dante, in WA.
Top: Borgo a Mozzano, Bagni di Lucca.
Middle: Dante Di Marco with brother-in-law Stefano Bindi in the Botanic Gardens, Perth, 1929.
Bottom: Palmira Di Marco outside homestead, Karragullen, 1938.
Around that period in 1926 there was a lot of migration. One of my uncles migrated to Argentina, another to London and another went to Holland. There must have been some talk about Australia then, being a new country, and they [my father Dante and his brother-in-law Stefano] decided to come here. But I don’t think they knew where they were going...My father started working for a Chinese gardener in Osborne Park for a couple of years...Then my father and my uncle went down south...When my dad came back from Normalup in 1933, he bought 100 acres from the mill owners at Canning Mills...He cleared the land with just a mattock axe and a kangaroo jack...That was done all by hand...there were no machines, even if there were, we didn’t have the money to pay for them...My father had no money so he built a shack out of trees he’d cut in the bush...It was galvanised iron on the side and roof (about 7 feet high), only one beam. The horse had better accommodation than we did because at least he had a gabled roof!

The path from Bagni di Lucca in Italy to an orchard in Perth’s Darling Ranges is a long and winding one. Crossing mountains and oceans, twenty-eight-year-old Dante Di Marco left his native Tuscany bound for Western Australia in 1926. Leaving behind his wife Palmira and baby son Silio, Dante followed in the footsteps of his brother-in-law and sponsor, Ugo Bovani, in search of work and the opportunity denied him in his hometown. At the time of his migration, Bagni di Lucca was home to around 7,000 people, most of whom were engaged in small-scale agriculture. As its name suggests, the town was also famous for its thermal hot springs, which had long attracted tourists and noblemen. But tourism was not enough to sustain the local population and, from the turn of the century, its residents increasingly left for seasonal work campaigns to Europe or further afield to the Americas or Australia. A decade after his departure, Dante sponsored his wife and son to join him, further expanding the links in an ever-lengthening migration chain connecting Tuscany to Western Australia. During the inter-war period, Dante was one of around two hundred mostly male migrants who came to Western Australia from Tuscany, almost all from the provinces of Lucca or Massa Carrara. Many eventually returned to their hometowns but those who stayed settled in what were then semi-rural areas fringing Perth such as Osborne Park, Kelmscott, Balcatta, Wanneroo, Kalamunda and Karragullen.

Dante Di Marco exemplifies the ‘bush pioneer’, taming the wilderness with a mattock axe in hand, planting neat rows of vegetables and fruit trees which became his family’s livelihood for generations and contributed to the state’s export economy. The idea of Italians as rugged pioneers who, through hard work and enterprise, brought progress to wherever they settled is held dear by Italian migrants in Western Australia. The ‘bush pioneer’ image was often raised in interviews and I was constantly urged to highlight stories of how Italians ‘did it tough’ in the bush. This emphasis reflects in part the predominantly rural roots of Italian migrants, and the importance of the bush in the earliest stages of Italian settlement in the state. Even after World War II when urban residence became the norm for most Italians, a stint in the bush was a rite of passage for many (particularly male) migrants in the earliest stages of their migration.

MIGRANT ORIGINS
The complexity of Italian migrant identities reflects vast differences in economic, political and social structures across and within the Italian regions from which they came. Italians who left their paese (which significantly means both town and nation in Italian) after Italy was unified as a nation, came from one country but many Itlayes. The regional and parochial distinctions in language, loyalties and customs so characteristic of Italy reflect very real
and long-standing historical differences between north and south, city and countryside, town from town. Many historians cite these differences as proof that Italians were not nationalised for at least a century after Italian unification in 1861 and some still argue that familiar and local ties continue to take precedence above national loyalty. The importance of campanilismo, the parochial pride Italians feel for their hometown, is particularly important in understanding the complex identities of Italians, including Italian migrants.

The term 'campanilismo' comes from the word campane or belltower, whose ringing in the town square marks the boundaries of belonging between the parenti (family members) and paesani (fellow villagers) who hear its chimes from the stranieri or forestieri (foreigners) who do not. Regardless of where or how long migrants lived outside their paese, they still heard the bells. Migration did not sever such a strong connection to a local place. Instead it broadened, as migrants built new ties between their town of origin and place of settlement, interconnected with the variety of towns and cities around the world where their fellow paesani emigrated. It was the very strength of parochial and kinship ties that fostered the information networks and provided practical support that helped migrants navigate their way halfway around the world to Western Australia. The same ties helped them find jobs, a place to live, and companionship in a new and often hostile environment.

Like all of Italy’s migrants, the vast majority of Italians in Western Australia came from towns, provinces and regions in rural areas of the north and south of Italy where land was divided among many. Areas of high migration were characterised by economic stagnation and political conservatism where peasant farmers embraced tenure where landless sharecroppers (mezzadri) worked the land for large estate owners. In these areas, cultivators were more likely to become politically active and agitate for change rather than vote with their feet and leave.

Before World War II, the earliest Italian migrants to Western Australia were from the northern regions of Lombardy, Tuscany and the Veneto or Sicily, Apulia and Calabria in the south. A high proportion of Italian miners on the Goldfields before World War I originated from towns in the ore-rich province of Bergamo and the alpine valleys of the Valtellina in the province of Sondrio. Around the same time, the nucleus of Fremantle's Italy was formed by migrants from Capo d’Orlando (Sicily) and Molfetta (Apulia). In Perth, the significant number of Italians who established market gardens in the Osborne Park–Wanneroo area in the interwar period hailed mostly from the provinces of Messina, Reggio Calabria and Sondrio.

In the post-war period, Italian migrants continued to come from both Northern and Southern Italy (Figure 1). However, in keeping with the general pattern of Italian migration to Australia the balance tipped more in favour of Southern Italians. Between 1945 and 1969, three-quarters of all post-war arrivals from Italy were from four southern regions: Sicily, Calabria, Abruzzo and Molise. The towns which sent the most migrants to Western Australia after World War II were all located in Southern Italy (see Table 1).

While the vast majority of Italian migrants to Western Australia came from specific towns and regions in Italy’s north and south through chain migration networks, a small but significant minority of post-war arrivals came from different origins as either displaced persons or assisted passage migrants. Italians selected for assisted migration in the 1950s and 1960s under the terms of a government agreement between Italy and Australia were more likely to come from cities and towns in Central and Northern Italy. Those who came as displaced persons, or ‘DPs’, after 1945 were from the contested border areas on the Istrian peninsula and Dalmatian coast which Italy ceded to Yugoslavia after World War II. Italy's north-eastern border regions had a long and chequered history of occupation by successive empires including the Venetian, Austrian, Napoleonic and Italian. After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire following World War I, the Istrian peninsula and parts of the Dalmatian coast became the Italian region of Venezia Giulia and remained so until the end of World War II. During treaty negotiations between 1945 and 1947, the area came under the administration of the United Nations but parts of it were occupied by partisan forces loyal to the Yugoslav Communist leader, Marshal Tito. Amidst conflicting claims about
**TOP TEN TOWNS**

1. Vasto - Reggio Calabria - Calabria (21%)
2. Delianuova - Messina - Sicily (19%)
3. Sinagra - Chieti - Abruzzo (18%)
4. Siderno - Campobasso - Molise (12%)
5. Macchiagodena - Lucca - Tuscany (5%)
6. Caulonia - Sondrio - Campania (5%)  
7. San Giorgio Morgeto - Ascoli Piceno - Veneto (4%)
8. Capo d’Orlando - Treviso - Lombardy (3%)
9. Naso - Benevento - Marche (2.5%)
10. Castell’Umberto - Avellino - Puglia (2%)

**TOP TEN PROVINCES**

- Calabria (21%)
- Sicily (19%)
- Abruzzo (18%)
- Molise (12%)
- Tuscany (5%)
- Campania (5%)  
- Veneto (4%)
- Lombardy (3%)
- Marche (2.5%)
- Puglia (2%)

**TOP TEN REGIONS**

- Calabria
- Sicily
- Abruzzo
- Molise
- Tuscany
- Campania
- Veneto
- Lombardy
- Marche
- Puglia

Above Figure 1: Major regional, provincial and parochial origins of Italian migrants to Western Australia, 1945–1969. Source: National Archives of Australia, Alien Registration Records 1945-1969. S=2917.

Left Table 1: Major town, province and region of origin of Italian migrants to Western Australia 1945–1969. Source: NAA Landing card records, s=2916.
Top: Licia Stazzonelli (nee Zelesco) at school in La Spezia, 1949.

Middle: Licia's autograph book with hand drawn map of Istria. Inscription reads, ‘Wherever you go, always keep in your heart the memory of your native city and your first friends’ followed by a quote from Dante’s Inferno ‘Pola, presso del Carnaro / ch’Italia chiude e i suoi termini bagna’ (‘Pola near the Carnaro river, which ends Italy and bathes its boundaries’).

Right: Licia and her younger sister aboard the Oxfordshire en route to Australia, 1950.
the ethnic make-up of the region and ongoing fighting between Yugoslav communists and allied sympathisers, many Italians fled. Even more exiles left after most of Venezia Giulia was ceded to the Yugoslav Republic (now Croatia) in the 1947 peace treaty. People who had been living in the occupied areas lost their Italian citizenship and had to carry Yugoslav identification. They could apply to retain Italian citizenship but, if successful, they had to leave for Italy within twelve months. Among the many thousands of DPs was Licia Stazzonelli (nee Zelesco) and her family who, after fleeing Pola, lived in a series of refugee camps in Italy before coming to Australia in 1950.

The city of Pola was in the province of Istria but now it belongs to Croatia. We came to Australia in 1950 because our land was taken over by Marshal Tito. We had to leave. We could have stayed there and become communists or else we were told to go. Both my parents wanted to live in freedom so we left Pola. First we were taken by boat to Trieste. I remember that we stayed there for a very short time until we were assigned somewhere in Italy because we were 'displaced persons' - we had no status, we were refugees. Then we went to Ruffino, just out of La Spezia, where we lived along with other families from Pola in army barracks. We were there from 1947 to 1950...The government promised that they would build big apartments but that never eventuated so my mother decided that we should come here...12

Around twenty thousand DPs from Eastern European and Baltic countries were resettled in Western Australia between 1948 and 1950.13 Approximately 15 percent (2,900) were from Yugoslavia, although how many of these were Italian-speaking residents of the former Italian territories in Istria and the Dalmatian coast is unclear.14 Many, like Licia’s father Giovanni Zelesco, were classed as ‘Yugoslav’ upon entry to Australia despite having formally declared their nationality as Italian on the Certificato di Opzione [Certificate of Option for Italian Nationality] they signed prior to leaving their former homes. Twenty years after he was resettled in Australia, Giovanni was still so incensed at being labelled ‘Yugoslav’ that he had his Certificate of Naturalisation amended to read, ‘The grantee of this Certificate declares he was born in Pola, Italy and not as shown [Pola, Yugoslavia]. His correct nationality prior to the issue of this Certificate was Italian and not as shown [Yugoslav].15

That ethnic identity does not always correspond with nationality is also apparent in the life stories of migrants born and raised in other parts of the Italian diaspora. ‘My grandfather was Calabrese and my grandmother from Reggio Calabria on my mother’s side. On my father’s side, my grandmother was Sicilian,’ explains Eduardo Rizza who was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1933. Fleeing Egypt with his family just before the Suez Crisis saw the expulsion of many European residents, Eduardo briefly returned to Italy with his family, then migrated to Argentina and later re-emigrated to the United Kingdom before coming to Australia in 1969.16 His brother-in-law Eduardo Maddaloni was also born and raised in Alexandria, the son of a Sicilian father and an Egyptian-born mother of Maltese origin who was classed as a British subject and expelled during the Suez Crisis in 1956. ‘At home, we used to speak always in Italian, no English at all,’ recalls Eduardo, who after leaving Egypt lived in London for thirteen years before coming to Perth in 1970. Working as a skilled tradesman in the Western Australian fishing industry where many of his colleagues and clients were Italian, Eduardo recalls their initial bemusement at his cosmopolitan roots. ‘I was a “pommie ding”. I’m not kidding, they called me a “pommie ding” and some other people called me an Arab, saying that I was the brother of Mr Arafat!’17

While migrants born outside Italy who speak and identify as Italian make up only a tiny proportion of the Italian community in Western Australia, most Italian migrants have transnational links that tie them not just to their paese of origin in Italy, but to all the other places around their world where they or their families and paesani emigrated. The experiences of the great mass of sojourner migrants who travelled back and forth between their Italian paesi and the Americas or Europe are an important part of the collective memory of Italian migrants in Western Australia. For many migrants, Western Australia was not the first or only destination in their migration journeys. Sometimes, a family history of transnational migration is quite literally part of their cultural baggage. When ten-year-old Anna Orifici migrated from Ucria, Messina, with her mother and siblings in 1956, all their family’s possessions were packed into an old American-made trunk which had belonged to her grandfather who brought it back from one of his sojourns to the United States in the early 1900s.18 These earlier migrations did more than just establish links which fostered later migratory flows; they helped create...
a culture or mindset in which migration became an accepted strategy for meeting specific economic goals. *L’America* was as much a state of mind as a geographic place. It encompassed all migrant destinations that held out the promise of wealth and security. In the same way, in the minds of its emigrants, the paese is not just one dot on a map but a series of points which connect the community of paesani around the world.

**MIGRANT PATHWAYS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

For most Italian migrants, particularly single males who dominated migration flows from Italy to Australia until the 1960s, arriving in Western Australia was not the end of their journey. Until they decided whether sistemazione (establishing one’s house and family) was best achieved in Italy or Australia, migrants rarely settled long in one place. In the earliest stages of their migration, migrants moved around the state covering vast distances in search of work and opportunity. In the pre- and inter-war periods, they were to be found in the mines and timber camps of the Eastern Goldfields or on farms in the state’s South-West. In the post-war period, single or unaccompanied males commonly worked temporarily in country areas before either returning to Italy or sponsoring a fiancée or wife and family to migrate and then settle more permanently in the metropolitan area. The paths taken by Italian migrant women in Western Australia were far less circular. These women did not simply follow their menfolk to all corners of the state. While small but increasing numbers of women began joining their fiancées, husbands or fathers to rural parts of the state from around the 1920s, Italian migrant women were more likely to reside in metropolitan areas. Such a pattern indicates not just a preference for urban living (with its greater access to varied employment for women, and less social isolation), but also a conscious decision by families to ‘settle’ in Western Australia rather than sojourn.

Different again were the migration trajectories of displaced persons and assisted passage migrants who were initially required to follow paths set for them by the Australian government. DPs and assisted passage migrants were housed temporarily at camps in Northam or Belmont before being assigned work in country areas. While they were constrained to live and work under contract in specific places for two years, the factors which influenced where they eventually settled – availability of employment, affordable
housing, and proximity to family - were not so different from the majority of chain migrants. Assisted passage migrant Angelo Masiello who emigrated from Scauri (Lazio) under government contract in 1952 recalls,

Prima m’hanno mandato nel bosco, al sud, vicino Nannup... Noi avevamo il contratto col governo che dovevamo lavorare per due anni sotto il governo australiano e poi eravamo liberi di andare dovunque. Eravamo un gruppo e lavorammo per il governo sulle ferrovie per diciotto mesi. Dopo diciotto mesi lasciai il bosco e andai a Nannup...

At first they sent me to the bush, south near Nannup. We had a contract with the government that you had to work for two years and then you were free to go wherever. There was a group of us and we worked for the government on the railway for eighteen months. After eighteen months I left the bush for Nannup... 19

Little Italies

While a single male sojourner in the inter-war period left a very different footprint compared with a post-war proxy bride joining her husband or a displaced person, their paths converged in ‘Little Italies’ or neighbourhoods that served as commercial, residential and recreational hubs for Italian migrants. Much of the vast literature on Italian migrants in North America has focused on the development (and decline) of Little Italies and their relationship to and impact on Italian ethnic identity.20 In the Western Australia context, the relatively small size and more dispersed nature of Italian settlement, together with official and public attitudes which directed migrants to ‘go bush’ where their labour was most needed, fostered more diffuse rural settlement compared with North America. In 1933, 70 percent of Italians in Western Australia lived in non-metropolitan areas.21 During the 1950s, there was a dramatic decline in the number of Italians residing in and moving to country areas and, by 1960, almost two-thirds of Italians lived in the Perth metropolitan area.22

Whether Italians lived, worked and settled in the city or countryside, their movements and settlement patterns were shaped by factors such as proximity to work, availability of affordable land and housing, access to shops and services and to support networks of friends and family. While government policies and public prejudice also directed them into certain areas, a more significant influence was campanilismo, particularly for sponsored migrants who dominated migration flows from Italy to Western Australia. Campanilismo helped create highly localised migration chains that connected towns and regions in Western Australia with specific places in Italy. The importance of parochial or regional loyalties in the construction of ‘Italian’ spaces in Western Australia is apparent from the specific localities where Italians lived and settled around the state.

Fremantle

As the first Australian port of call for all European migrant ships, Fremantle occupies a significant place in the memories of hundreds of thousands of migrants. After a month at sea, the first glimpse of Fremantle filled some with optimism and others with trepidation. For those who had endured a rough crossing, Fremantle was a welcome end to their suffering. Others were underwhelmed by the sight of tin roofs and, if they arrived on an evening or weekend, by the quiet empty streets. ‘Guarda un po’ qua c’è un allevamento di cani-lupi’ (‘I thought a pack of dog-wolves lived here’), explained Fiumano Manlio Bertogna who, on arrival in 1951, was bemused by the iconic red dog painted on the Dingo Flour Mill silo in North Fremantle.23 ‘Arrivato a Fremantle, ho visto tutto “fl at”’ (Arriving in Fremantle I remember how fl at it was), recalls Giacomo Bettinaglio who left his native mountainous Bergamo in 1949.

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Fremantle’s importance for Italian migrants can be traced back to the turn of the century. In 1897, with the opening of Victoria Quay, Fremantle replaced Albany as Western Australia’s main port. According to Leopoldo Zunini, Western Australia’s first resident Italian vice-consul, Fremantle thus became, ‘the new Brindisi, the key to Western Australia’.24 At the turn of the century, Zunini counted just over 180 Italians in Fremantle, almost all of them fishermen from either Capo d’Orlando or Molfetta.25 The first Sicilian fishermen arrived in the 1880s, setting up initially at Point Peron and fishing and selling their catch cooperatively through The Rockingham Fishing Company under the leadership of Cono Glorioso. While nobody is sure what spurred the initial migration, some speculate that Italian seamen on cargo ships which loaded at Cockburn Sound spread the news of fertile fishing grounds at return ports of call in Sicily.26 A similar source
of information may have drawn the first fishermen from Molfetta to Fremantle around the turn of the century. From the start, the two fishing communities were distinct, with the Molfettesi more inclined to live on their boats and, when they could afford it, in shared accommodation in High and Cliff Streets. When they were not at sea, the Sicilians lived in the streets running up from Marine Terrace close to their boats and South Jetty where they landed their catch. The fledgling colony soon attracted businessmen such as wine saloon keeper John Florio, fruiter Onefrio Lo Schiavo, greengrocer Antonio Vergona, restaurateur Antonio Groselli and merchant Luigi Re who offered services to the growing number of Italians passing through and living in Fremantle.

By the 1920s, with more wives and children joining husbands and fathers, a greater range of Italian commercial, institutional, religious and recreational structures were established, giving Fremantle an increasingly Italian ambiente. In the early 1920s, barber, SP bookmaker and agent Biagio Seminara, who migrated from Capo d'Orlando in 1912, established the Club Giovane Italia (Young Italy) in Bannister Street. The Club was the place in the 1920s for Fremantle’s Italians to eat, drink, dance, gamble and, following extensions in 1927, sleep. Given its significance as place of disembarkment, boarding houses and wine saloons in Fremantle became important staging points where Italian migrants fresh off the boat could get their bearings, hear about what jobs were going and plan their next movements to other parts of the state. In the 1920s, Brescian migrant Con Funazzi’s wine saloon and boarding house in South Terrace functioned as an unofficial labour exchange for Italian migrants.

In the 1930s, Funazzi’s saloon was bought by Giuseppe Maffina from Chiuro (Sondrio), another ex-miner and publican whose property had been attacked in the Kalgoorlie Riots of 1934. While the extent of hostility towards Italians on the Goldfields had no parallel in Fremantle, prejudice existed nonetheless. In 1906, an inquiry into the fishing industry commissioned by the WA Government heard complaints from ‘British’ fishermen that Italians undercut fish prices and unfairly survived on ‘a bit of dry bread’. While the committee made recommendations to improve the quality of fish sold and the marketing system, nothing could be done to stem Greek and Italian domination of the industry. Tensions continued throughout the inter-war period as the number of Italian fishermen living and working out of Fremantle grew. ‘Nice schnapper washed in filthy gutter: dirty dags’ doings’ proclaimed the Fremantle Herald in 1921 which called for the local health inspector to put a stop to the ‘reprehensible practice’ of foreign fishermen rinsing their catch in the gutter carrying water from the Fremantle Ice Works. The place where Italian fishermen moored their boats in the Swan River was unofficially known as ‘Dago Bay’ and during World War II a significant number of Fremantle’s Italians had their fishing boats and property confiscated, and were interned as ‘enemy aliens’.

After the dark days of war and internment, Fremantle’s Italian population experienced its most dramatic period of growth. With around 200,000 people passing through the port each year in the 1950s, Fremantle continued to be an important way station or thoroughfare for migrants on their way to other parts of the state. The growth and diversification of industry in and around Fremantle also encouraged more Italians to stay and settle. By the mid 1960s, the number of Italians in Fremantle peaked at around 3,500, just over 10 percent of the local population. Sicilian and Apulian fishermen continued to join their friends and relatives in the fishing industry. However, Italians from increasingly diverse regional origins settled in Fremantle, finding work at State Engineering Works, the Ford Motor Company assembly plant in North Fremantle, the D’Orsogna smallgoods business or the Mills & Ware’s biscuit factory, or slightly further afield in Kwinana’s heavy industries.

As the number of Italian residents increased in the immediate post-war period, more social, commercial and cultural institutions sprang up to service their needs. When Fremantle restaurants like the Roma and the Capri were first established in the early 1950s, they fed (and the Capri also housed) mostly single or unaccompanied migrant men who then dominated migration flows. Cafe bars such as Orlando’s on South Terrace also catered for a mostly male migrant clientele providing them with a ‘living room’ outside of their boarding houses or cramped shared living quarters where they could gossip, gamble or share information about work or family. It was not until the late 1960s, with the opening of the Italian Club Fremantle on Marine Terrace, that the men got an official clubhouse in which to meet, drink and play cards and bocce. Since its inception, the club has served as more of a recreational and cultural facility, while groups such as ANFE Fremantle (Associazione Nazionale Famiglie degli Emigrati)
addressed the social and welfare needs of Fremantle’s Italians. So too, did the Catholic Church, specifically the Ursuline Sisters and the Oblates, both of whom had Fremantle missions.

In 1950, Oblate Father Pietro Abramo arrived from Italy to minister to the Italian faithful at Saint Patrick’s Basilica and beyond. He was quickly followed in 1951 by Father Gaetano Nanni who delivered Italian masses and baptised, married and buried almost every Italian in the area. Abramo, Nanni and a succession of Italian-speaking Oblates who came in the ensuing years also presided over a growing number of feast days venerating the patron saint of specific villages from which Italians originated. The largest and best known was the Blessing of the Fleet. First celebrated in Fremantle in 1948 by fishermen from Molfetta to venerate their patron saint, the Madonna dei Martiri, the Molfettesi were soon joined by their counterparts from Capo d’Orlando, who included the Madonna di Capo d’Orlando in the procession. The festa began as an expression of campanilismo of migrants from these two towns and grew to encompass the broader loyalties of Italians in the Fremantle area as well as Portuguese and Croatian fishermen connected with the fishing industry.

In contemporary times, the celebration of the Blessing of the Fleet on the streets of Fremantle each October attracts thousands of spectators and tourists, in addition to the elderly Italians who take part in the procession, carrying the banners and sashes of the specific Saint or Madonna of their own hometown. After the procession, the Italians return to their homes in suburbs such as Hilton, Beaconsfield, South and East Fremantle or further afield to the Cockburn and Melville areas, where their numbers have grown since the 1970s. The tourists and spectators move on to South Terrace (known locally as ‘the cappuccino strip’) to enjoy a latte or short black at Gino’s or one of the numerous sidewalk cafes that have populatod the street since Papa Luigi’s pioneered alfresco dining in Fremantle in the 1970s.

In the late 1960s, Sicilian-born Nunzio Gumina bought Papa Luigi’s Pizza & Coffee Lounge on the corner of South Terrace and Collie Street from the Bello family. The ‘dingy dive of a cafe’ was a coffee bar on the ground floor, and a gambling den in the basement where patrons could play cards, pinball and slot machines. In the early 1970s Gumina staged boxing tournaments in the basement for the ‘local toughs’.

It wasn’t legal in those days but it was tolerated…a week after I opened I got a letter from the Fremantle Council saying they’d had many complaints about my clients. During the day it was mostly Italian men who’d arrive at 9 am and chat all day. At night it was young men playing the machines. These young men weren’t well regarded. If someone walked past they would joke and spit. You never saw any women because if the odd one came in or passed by there would be wolf-whistles, comments and cat calls…34