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# Ethnic identity and race: the “double absence” and its legacy across generations among Australians of Southern Italian origin. Operationalizing institutional positionality.

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## ABSTRACT

The paper provides a discussion on the concept of “double absence” and its legacy among participants originating from Calabria, Italy. It illustrates the impact of such an embodied affective state in light of race-ethnic relations perceived intergenerationally. While the first generation of participants manifest a condition of feeling “absent”, the second generation present a condition of “liminality”, as a result of a socialization process between “the world” of their immigrant parents and the Australian one. The third generation, due to a perceived positive evaluation about their ethnic background, manifests its ethnicity proudly. A pivotal role is played by the amount of cultural capital accumulated by the participants, dynamics of assimilation and the exogenous pressures the participants perceived from the “common sense” of the dominant society, as Gramsci terms it. Individuals’ ethnic identity appears to be shaped by their institutional positionality, which is their ethnic perception of “being in the world”.

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## Literature on Italians in Australia

The social incorporation of Italian migrants in Australia has been reasonably well researched. The research, which peaked in the 1980s and 1990s, referred to the first generation of migrants and covered demography (Bertelli 1987; Hugo 1993; Parimal and Hamilton 2000), history (Cresciani 2003; Pascoe 1992); sociology (Castles 1991; Chiro 2008; Smans and Glenn 2011; Storer 1979), sociology of religion (Pittarello 1980; Bertelli and Pascoe 1988 and linguistics (Bettoni 1991; Bettoni and Rubino 1996; Kinder 1990; Leoni 1995; Rubino 2006). Notable research on the second generation and, in particular,

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second-generation Italian-Australian women focusing on gender, cultural practices and mobilities and care, was conducted by Pallotta-Chiarolli (1999, 2010), Vasta (1992), and Baldassar (1999, 2011). While Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010) adopted Anzaldúa's (1987) borderland and *mestizaje* theories on "being in the middle" and applied them in the field of ethnicity and identity negotiation among Italians in Australia, Vasta (1992) and Baldassar (1999, 2011) focused mostly on the sociological aspect of the second generation and identity struggles. Central to their work is the debate related to "being in the middle" of the second generation. However, an ascription and juxtaposition a priori of the ethnic identity to an entire generation of individuals (see Vasta 1992) might emphasize the unchanging nature of ethnic identity. This leaves unanswered questions on the intergenerational dynamics of ethnic identity relations across the generations, and how individuals perform their ethnic identities in contrapuntal and sometimes contradictory ways through every-day practices.

The motivation for the present paper emerged from the desire to revisit previous research on Italian-Australian migration and race-ethnic relations. The study is an essay concerning the trigenerational processes of mutual adaptation related to their ethnicity in Australia. It was further decided to carry out the empirical research with a focus on one particular Italian regional group: the Calabrian. The choice was determined in part by the problematic nature of considering Italians in Australia as a homogenous ethnic group with a common language, customs and lifestyles. As Castles (1991, 56) noted twenty years ago, the great regional and social differences in their country of origin is a feature that Italians transferred to Australia.

### ***Italians and Calabrians in Australia: contextualizing race relations***

This section provides an overview of Italian migration to Australia, which focuses on Calabrians, and contextualizes considerations of race relations after their arrival in the "host" country, as a result of their status of non-British migrants in Australia.

Until the 1920s, Italian migration to Australia had remained infrequent. However, between the two Wars, Italians could be found working on the cane fields of North Queensland, mining in Kalgoorlie, farming in New South Wales and Victoria and fishing in Fremantle and Port Pirie. The Italian-born population reached gradually its peak of nearly 365,000 persons in 1977, when it made up 2.3 per cent of the total Australian population.

In Italy, the "Economic miracle" which overturned the depression between the 1950's and 1970's, largely bypassed Calabria. While Central and Northern Italian cities experienced unprecedented growth, rural Southern villages became increasingly depopulated. Desperate conditions of poverty, together with bilateral political agreements signed by the Italian and the Australian

governments during the post-war period, brought Calabrians in Australia, in mass, who saw the opportunity to work, originally in the sugar cane plantations. It was specifically the province of Reggio Calabria, which has provided the most substantial share of regional migration to Australia, primarily employed as shepherds, miners or farmers (Marino and Chiro 2014).

In Australia, after the Second World War and until 1953, Calabria became the most represented Italian region, with its 14,000 migrants, most of them peasants originating from a small number of underprivileged rural villages adjacent to the Aspromonte hinterland. In the 1970s, Calabrians represented the largest percentage of any Italian regional group, with more than 47,400 migrants (Marino and Chiro 2014).

When arrived in Australia, the influx of Calabrian workers originated racist attitudes of the Anglo-Australian dominant group. The open hostility was due to their inability to speak English, on their – real or imagined – association with poverty, low education and organized crime and, above all, due to their skin colour (Baynham and De Fina 2005). Southern Italians were treated differently from Northern Italians, and considered not-yet-white-ethnic. Such ambivalence was concomitant with the legacy left by the White Australia Policy that passed in 1901 and intentionally favoured immigrants from certain European countries, mainly northern Europeans. This was in order to build a “white Australia” (Nelson et al. 2013). According to Nelson et al. (2013), the racist Act focused on the dictation test to exclude “non-white races from Australia” (260). Although it was dismantled in 1973, the racist policy targeted of racial discrimination all non-Whites (including Southern Italians), their race and ethnicity for decades (Marino 2012; Nelson et al. 2013). Hence, Whites were Anglo. Italians (especially the Southerners) were not. Such a white fantasy supremacy made the “assimilation” of the Southern Italian group problematic, within society where the dominant population had an Anglo-Saxon physical appearance (Bottomley 1997).

### **Understanding the double absence through a Bourdieusian lens**

Double absence is an embodied affective state. This particular state of being (or, more exactly, non-being) is manifested by those immigrants who feel displaced because they have left their country and feel that they are an unwanted presence within mainstream society. It is generated by a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors, such as experiences of racism, the migrants’ awareness of having a different cultural background from that of the “host society”, or the migrants’ psychological remorse about having left (and consequently having betrayed) “their” people”. This could lead immigrants to perceive themselves as “absent”, an absence which appears to be twofold. The dualism arises because individuals can be simultaneously considered “foreigners” (or strangers) in their country of

origin because they no longer live there, as well as in the dominant society, too, where metaphorically they do not really “have a place” (Bauman 2007, 2011; Marotta 2002).

Double absence should be conceptualized by adopting a theoretical framework based on the Bourdieusian concept of Capital and considerations of power. According to Bourdieu (1986), besides economic capital, there are other forms of capital, such as cultural, social and symbolic. Cultural capital is to be understood as the sum of valued knowledge, social and physical characteristics and practical behavioural dispositions within a social field. Social capital is understood as a resource based on group membership, while symbolic capital is understood as the resources available to an individual on the basis of prestige. Every form of capital can be accumulated by agents and might influence the individual’s positions within a field. This process produces what he terms the “games of society” (Bourdieu 1986). Specifically, according to Bourdieu (1986) a number of “forms of capital”, material or immaterial, can be accumulated by individuals and then employed when needed in order to reach their goals and improve their positions in “the field”. I argue that such a struggle to possess and accumulate forms of capital might have repercussions on the ways individuals construct and transmit their ethnic identities.

The relations between the two theories consists in the fact that within the diasporic field, individuals, according to the ways they perceive their ethnicity and race, might construct different ethnic identities. Moreover, since the Bourdieusian’s perspective has been challenged (Devine-Eller 2005) for the absence of the concept of race in his analysis, the present study will interpret the dynamics of race relations among the three generations by taking into account the “common sense” of the dominant society, what Gramsci (1999) called the *senso comune* of the ruling class. According to Gramsci (1999), such common sense of the dominants is not imposed merely from above; rather, the operations of its power and its success depend on consent from below. The consent is key; it is a form of cultural hegemony Gramsci (1999) that, I argue, might influence the dynamics of race relations among the participants.

### **Methodology: sociocultural and linguistic profile of participants**

The present research is based on a three-year period of fieldwork among members of the Calabrian<sup>1</sup> community of Adelaide, South Australia. Such site was chosen as it was constantly mentioned by all the participants during their interviews. I contacted the presidents of the numerous Calabrian clubs of Adelaide who generally organize a plethora of community events. I introduced myself asking permission to attend meetings and to be involved as a volunteer in the club, specifically, as a folkloric musician. A flyer of the present project, providing my university email, has been given to each club,

together with the Participant Information Sheet. The flyer was both in English and Italian and has circulated for several months during community events. The participants contacted me voluntarily until I gained insight within the ethnic community by playing the role of a fellow Italian immigrant, precisely, a player of traditional Calabrian musical instruments. In a number of social events, people knew me as *u sonaturi* (the musician), due to my knowledge of traditional Calabrian music. Participant observation and interviews allowed me to reflect on informants' narratives, and to witness a variety of what I call *faits sociaux* (social facts).

The participants of the present study are thirty adult individuals, who reflect three generations. They all include Calabrian and Australian-born members. All the first-generation participants were born in Calabria, originate from several different villages and migrated to Australia during the 1950s and 1960s. Their median age ranges from 65 to 84 years. This group is made up of ten pensioners, who generally attended a few years of primary school in Italy. The male participants, once they had migrated to Australia, occupied positions as manual labourers, working mainly in factories. Among the first-generation participants, there is one originating from the researcher's parents village of origin: Palizzi. My positionality permitted me to investigate the Calabrian community from an insider's perspective. The female participants are mainly housewives. Conversations with them were conducted in Calabrian. The direct translation of participant's words is in square brackets. The second generation are ten sons and daughters of the first-generation immigrants. Their median age ranges from 37 to 44 years. This group is represented mainly by business owners (i.e. owners of Italian restaurants or of companies in the construction industry), office workers and secretaries. Three of them are housewives. Eight participants completed high school, one attended middle school, and another attended university. The third generation is represented by ten participants who are university students or young office workers. Their median age ranges from 18 to 26 years. Conversations with second and third-generation participants were conducted in English. The following section begins with a selection of case studies across generations.

## **The first generation**

### ***Vince's (Vincenzo's) case study***

Vince, a 71-year-old male, is the youngest of eight children who originated from a large and underprivileged family from the village of Cirella. He migrated to Australia in the 1960s when he was 22 years old. In Cirella, Vince used to sleep with three of his brothers. In recalling his time in Calabria, he remembers that on some nights, because of his hunger, he would dream of a big beefsteak, and bite his brother Luigi's arm in his sleep:

In my village<sup>2</sup>, Cirella, there were no toilets; we ate from the same plate; we did not have bicycles. As for meat, I never saw any, but all of us were always together, we were happy. Here, we have been abandoned, and even if Australia has given to me bread, I miss something.

His first job was in Broken Hill, as a miner. After one year, he moved to Adelaide and met his future wife, Rosa, who was also Calabrian. Subsequently, after a troubled correspondence with the families in Italy, the couple finally married in December 1970. After years of *sacrifici* (sacrifices), the couple opened a successful travel agency that catered for a large number of *paesani* (people from the same village) living in Adelaide who were unable to speak English. However, despite their economic prosperity, Vince said he misses something when, every night, he plays the *organetto* (concertina), which he brought from Calabria.

In November 2013, Vince invited me for “*na sonata* (a jam session). There was a 1990s brown Holden Commodore parked in front of his house with a sticker of the Italian flag at the back of the car. Vince must reside here, I thought. After lunch, while making coffee, Vince said:

*Non mi trovu, ancora sugnu spaesatu, e passaru cinquant’anni! Non staiu bbonu cca, cu “i cancaruni, e mancu dda, all’Italia, quandu tornu ogni annu.*

[I haven’t really settled in, I’m still stateless, and more than fifty years have passed! I am neither comfortable at home here with the *Skippies*, nor there, in Italy when I return every year].

Vince talked gesticulating, with his shiny gold ring; and said:

*Quandu unu decide di partire, è già cambiatu. Ora, né carni né pisci, sugnu.* [When someone decides to leave, they’ve already changed. Now, I am neither meat nor fish].

Then he grabs his *organettu* and says:

I play every night to drive the sadness away ... anyway, let’s just have this jam and let’s not think about it.

## First-generation narratives

Numerous episodes of discrimination were identified in the participants’ narratives. This occurred mainly in the in the course of their workplace, where the particular “common sense” of the hegemonic society expected migrants to conform to established patterns. Such experiences and events might have contributed to their hybrid position.

Rocco reported:

They used to call us *dago*, *wog* and *maccheroni*. I did not understand those words.

Similarly, another male participant reported:

At work, in the car factory, the supervisor used to call us *Tony* and *Blackie* but we just ignored that. During the lunch break, we used to play cards and every time the boss would take our cards and throw them into the rubbish bin and the *Poms*<sup>3</sup> used to make fun of us. After work, we could not go to the pub nor catch the bus because it would end up in a fight.

Paradoxically, it seems that when the immigrants tried to adapt to the host society's "norms", a blatant diversity emerged. During the 1950s, it was arduous to adapt to the "Australian way". Sometimes the migrants were expected to be "invisible". When this was not possible, they felt they needed to act ultra-correctly. That is, they felt they had to behave more correctly than the locals. Informants who worked in factories reported that they were treated like children who needed to be taught how to behave (technically and morally) by supervisors and colleagues. A number of them reported that they were given the same nickname. To avoid xenophobia (or being ridiculed), many conformed to such a hegemonic "common sense", therefore precluding any career improvement, and remained labourers for life. Gina, a female participant reported:

It was horrible, when we were not able to speak English. When I was pregnant, at the hospital, I felt pain in my tummy and the nurse did not understand me. She was with another nurse and they both started to laugh. I felt I was dying inside. I did not give them the satisfaction of seeing me hurting, I cried when they left, the whole night. When I gave birth to Teresa I decided that I must learn English, no more ridicule. Now I can speak and write.

A male participant who migrated reported:

When I used to work in the North of Queensland, the boss used to say to me "Tony". Once he called me "dirty *dago*". He wanted me to fight while working so that I would lose the job. That night I saw him at the hotel; he came to me and whispered in my ear *bloody wog*, I punched him. The police came, they brought me away.

The above extracts encapsulate traumatic events in the daily life of first-generation participants of the 1950. Numerous episodes of racism, mostly "direct", that is discriminating because of one's racial characteristics, were juxtaposed to "cultural" racism – or Culture racism (Barker 1981) – in which essentialistic views, a widespread acceptance of stereotypes, and negative attributes concerning different racial and ethnic population groups are hetero-ascribed (Barker 1981). These experiences contributed to shape the participants' ethnic identity Romm (2010).

### **The immigrants' sense of betrayal**

Another widespread feeling emerged among participants: a sense that seems to generate an undeletable tacit remorse. Giovanni, 75 years old, reported:



Here in Australia I often dream to be elsewhere, I do not feel this is my place, but the strange thing is that it happened even in Italy, twenty years ago, when I returned. I went back to Italy because my father was sick. They treated me as a stranger! I feel that I am forever in transit. I often think and dream of a place that is different from the one where I currently live. Every time I curse my village when I am there but I dream about it when I am in Australia.

Giovanni reported cursing his mother country because *they* treated him as a stranger. There is the persistent suspicion of betrayal, which validates the immigrant's feeling of being at fault. Specifically, together with their claims of feeling miserable in the receiving country, there is a sense of being rejected in the country of origin, due to the regret of "having betrayed" the mother country and those *paisani* (towns folk) who did not emigrate.

### Francesco's case study

The present participant was contacted through a personal link, since he originates from my parents' village: Palizzi. Francesco, 80 years old, after a "life" spent in Australia, recalled when he visited "home" for the first time.

In August 2014, before starting the interview, he showed me his house, bought after a life of privations. There were pictures of his *paese*, and a number of religious images. He confessed to me that he left his heart in his *paese* although he does not have any relatives living there anymore. Francesco asked me about "his" *paisani*. It seemed he had not fully realized the decades that had passed since his departure. He wanted to hear news about specific residents of Palizzi, the ones he used to call by the *njuria* (nickname), such as *Ceciu l'orbu* (Vincenzo the blind) and *a Monaca* (the nun), all old people at the time of Francesco's departure. Francesco's long-term memory was remarkably lucid, in remembering persons and places. He asked me about the *Piazza* (the square), the only one in the centre of Palizzi. In his mind, it was big and spacious, whilst in reality, its length does not exceed a few squares metres. He wondered if, during the feast day of the patron saint Palizzi was crowded with people from everywhere. He said:

*A piazza e u campanili furu l'urtima cosa chi vitti quando, partendu, mi votai pe salutari u paisi.*

[The square and the bell tower were the last things I saw when, while leaving, I turned around to say goodbye to my village]

The last image Francesco had in his mind as he left Palizzi was its *campanile*, the last picture he brought to the "new world". Francesco's narrative encapsulates the complexity of the migratory experience and its emotional dynamics of the diasporic *rite de passage* which includes migration, settling and returning home. The sense of displacement as a Southern Italian labourer, the fear of dying in a foreign land, the feelings of shame or a sense of guilt at

leaving his *paese*, metaphorically seen as the “centre of the world”, has led Francesco to biographic fragmentation, causing an idealisation of his mother country. Specifically, the idealisation of one’s *paese* (village), the remorse of the immigrant who has left his mother country and the frustration of being perceived as a stranger by the *paesani* in Italy emerge from his narrative. The feeling of being at fault becomes apparent in the following statement.

After fifteen years I went back to Calabria. I went to the square, my eyes filled with tears of joy. Peppe, who used to be my best friend, said: “Here he is, the Australian! Why did you come for? To show us your nice golden watch? Do you still speak Italian, Mr Francesco?”. They called me Mr Francesco, not *don Ciccio*, as they used to call me before. I lost the respect they owed me. They treated me as a stranger! It was because of envy! They think I do the easy life in Australia. They make fun of the ones who leave, but I am not a Judas!

The feeling of having committed a sin lies in Francesco’s intimate conscience. He claims he had lost the respect of the *paesani*. Francesco interprets his unresolved conflicts with the *paesani* in Italy as a consequence of their envy.

## The second generation

The following contributions are extracts from informants’ interviews and field-notes and concern narratives related mainly to the second generation’s personal experiences at school and their visits to Italy.

### School experiences of the second generation

Tina, a 45-year-old female reported:

I used to get chased out of school by a boy. He used to walk behind me and call me *dirty wog*. I saw him many years later in a pub in North Adelaide. He came up to me and said “do you remember me?” he said “you turned out all right”. And I answered him: “you did not, you have always been racist”. Oh, what a relief.

The discrimination experienced at school and the perception of not being accepted in their “own” country influenced the participants’ choice of friends.

They usually preferred to relate to other schoolmates with Italian backgrounds. Four participants recall their school experiences as follows:

I had never realised that people could really classify me as different, only because I did not have blonde hair and blue eyes. I got taught very soon that the salami in class, instead of the meat pie or the vegemite, could make the difference. “What’s this disgusting smell?” I got asked every day. So I tried to be like them ... but it was not enough.

At school, I was bullied sometimes for the lunch box *mamma* used to make, with *cotolette*. For one year I did not speak at all. Now, everything has changed. My nephews sell their Italian lunch box, for 5 bucks to their Aussie mates.

Sometimes, to avoid criticism, they conformed to the expectations of the dominant group's perspective:

My Italian-ness was evident in me as if I had a sign. I started believing the things my classmates knew of Calabria: I am dodgy, noisy, we are fruit sellers and *maf-fiusi*<sup>4</sup>. When someone made a joke, I laughed with the rest of the class.

At school I tried to be more Australian than Italian, I felt ashamed of being Italian. When I first saw my classmates' parents, I realised how different they were from mine: they were polite, whereas mine were ... louder, simple people.

In the above extracts, the participants conformed to their classmates' view of their ethnicity. According to their peers, for example, the participants' parents were seen either as "simple people" or as having links to the Mafia. In order to avoid embarrassment in the classroom, these participants accepted that stigma and laughed with the dominant group. Hence, the children rejected their parents as "simple people", mirroring the xenophobia of the wider society.

Moreover, the second generation seems to have experienced other conflicts deriving from the constant need to demonstrate to their parents (the first generation) their "Italian authenticity".

### Pressures from the family and community

Maria, 47, was born in Adelaide. After her father passed away, in his forties, her mother (Giovanna) and her four daughters relied on the support and assistance of a large number of *paisani* and relatives. The language at home had always been Calabrian. Giovanna raised her four daughters with values such as upholding family honour, respect for parental authority, strictly consistent with those practised in Calabria. Therefore, Maria and her sisters embodied the ethnic cultural dispositions of their parents at home.

Maria's narrative reveals that the perception of occupying a position in limbo can also originate from pressures within the family domain (i.e. when parents criticise their children's patterns of behaviours, seen as "too Aussie").

"Too much freedom for Aussie kids". Mum always used to say. I remember all of my friends used to go out on Friday and come home very late. Many of them could stay overnight. For me that was impossible. I could not even dare to ask dad to stay overnight. For my mum, my classmates were sluts, 'cause they wore miniskirts and slept overnight.

The family domain was a place of "restrictive tradition or opposition to the outside" (Baldassar 1999). For Maria's mother, her daughter's friends represented an inappropriate model to follow, and pubs associated with "Australian leisure" were considered deplorable and un-Italian. Maria's

narrative, particularly her mother's attitude towards her "classmates wearing miniskirts and sleeping overnight", reveals something more than pressure from the "ethnic" community. Maria reveals how gender roles in her household were different from the ones experienced by Anglo-Australian girls. Through her story, it appears that she was living in a patriarchal household in which the dominant common sense was concomitant to a male-dominated power structure that expected a female daughter to behave in a specific way.

The pressures might have emerged from the disequilibrium between the different worlds: the immigrant parental one and the dominant (Australian) one. Usually, conflicts arose when the standards and expectations of one "world" did not coincide with those of the other. For example, Peter, a 44-year-old reported:

Many years ago there was this very influential man from Calabria, in the community. He wanted me to play the *concertina* for him. I used to play the concertina with my family, but he was not family, and he was rude. Kept insisting ... Typical Italian. I am sorry to say that, mate. Anyway, I said that I am busy, I did not play for him, and my dad got upset.

The disequilibrium of cultural expectations between the culture of the parents and the dominant one generated personal conflicts for individuals unable or reluctant to "play" the ethnic role expected of that "field" or situation. For example, the participant, in his twenties, refused to conform to the behavioural expectations of the "Calabrian community". While stressing the difference between the "way Italians do" and "the Australians do", he first identified himself as Italian, then he kept a distance from such an ethnicity, blaming an excess of intrusiveness. In doing so, he deliberately used the term *mate* to mark the distance from the Italians and emphasize empathy towards Australians.

A 40-year-old female recalled:

When I went for a walk in my suburb I always tried to escape from Italian acquaintances to avoid being stopped or kissed. They were too loud for my friends.

The above comment expresses the fear of criticism experienced as a result of having Italian origin. In order to be accepted by their Australian peers, participants attempted to avoid public situations where they were required to "act" as Italians.

### **Between Scylla and Charybdis: feelings of being neither one thing nor the other**

A 45-year-old participant reported:

I cannot say I am Italian, nor am I completely Australian, I am in the middle, or neither one nor another, my surname is X, it is Italian, my blood is Italian, face is Calabrian.

The feeling of perceiving the Self as neither Australian nor Italian, the characteristic of being out-of-place in both the two “worlds” seems to be widespread among the second generation, sometimes relegated individuals to a liminal space.

The literature has different theories about the self-perception of “being in the middle”. Being a *métèque*, with a consciousness of biculturalism, can be disorienting or, conversely, it can provide a positive understanding of diversity in which individuals are seen as mediators between two worlds (Baldassar 2011). Moreover, in Pallotta-Chiarolli’s study (2010), borderland theories of ethnicity negotiation are juxtaposed to the issues of “The Embodied Performance of Gender” (2010). The scholar analyses, in a multicultural society, the embodiment of gender expectations among individuals conscious of their biculturalism. Reflections of what is referred as “multicultural-multifaith that brings individuals in the middle to perceive institutional culpabilities and systemic invisibilities” (2010) are the foci of Pallotta-Chiarolli’s work (2010).

The issue of double cultural competencies – and the disequilibrium between the Australian world and that of the parents – can involve a third issue: the perception of “feeling different” from the Italians in Italy. A 44 years old female participant reported:

When I was in Calabria, my aunt looked at my ring and called me Australian. When we were making the salami, she laughed because I was not good. In Australia I can say I am Australian because I was born here, but my friends call me the Italian because of my parents. So where is my place?

Identity is self and other’s ascribed. Meaning “is ascribed by the self and by others” (Pallotta-Chiarolli and Pease 2013). In the above quote, the participant identified herself as Australian when in Australia and as Italian when in Italy, although in both *loci*, her identity is perceived differently by others.

Mary and Rose, respectively 42- and 20-year-old participants, reported:

I have lots of unresolved issues about myself, I feel I have never fit in here, in Australia. But I feel very strongly my family’s roots.

My mum always felt that she never belonged neither to Australians nor to Italians at school. She grew up with a very broken Italian and a very broken English with a *wog* accent.

Mary reported she did not feel like she belonged to either the Australian or to the Italian world. However, she wished her children to be aware of their roots because now being Italian is not a matter of shame anymore. Rose saw in the broken language her mum used to speak, the *vera causa* of her

marginalization. Moreover, the term “wog” used by this young participant seems not to carry the stigmatized status of the past. This might give strength to theories of reclamation of identity and race, in particular, Bromberger et al.’s (2004) concept of ethnicisation, Smith’s (1991) “ethnic revival” and Roosens (1989) ethnogenesis.

In March 2014, Rosemary and Joe, both second-generation participants, invited me for lunch at their place. They asked me to bring and play the lira.

Rosemary: I am not Italian like my mum, but, for *Poms*, I am very Italian. Here, for them, you are Italian, no matter if you were born here in Australia, like me, our face, or blood are Italian. Even if you do look like them, or act like them, here, you will never be considered a pure *Aussie*!

Afterwards, she, proudly showed me what she cooked and said:

“Please, help yourself, *mangia* [eat]”

Researcher:

Thank you, I would say that here there’s plenty of *wog* food on this table!”

[Embarrassing silence].

Rosemary:

Actually the word *wog*, is kind of a forbidden word for us, at home especially. Now people are proud of that.

Joe:

I hate that word too, I was called “a *wog*”, at school.

The couple reported their repulsion towards the word *wog*, which was a taboo at home. They identify themselves as *lost*, feeling neither one thing, nor the other. Their ethnic identity is the response to the Anglo-Australians’ perception of them. They told me that even if someone was born in Australia, acted, resembled and talked like a *pure Australian*, this person would never be considered as pure as “them”, because of their face and Italian “blood”. Below, are other reported perceptions of “being in the middle”:

When I was a child, my schoolmates always found the way to tease me in class. Hence I tried to cover up my Italian-ness. But after school there was the other life, at home.

I am in between, because I am just never *gonna* be an Italian, I did not grown up there, I grew up in the Australian culture, but I do not feel Australian, at all, because they do not see me the same as them.

The perception of identifying themselves as neither Italian nor Australian or of considering themselves to be both Italian and Australian, might be explained by the legacy of their parents’ double absence. Participants, at a very young age, have embodied the ethnic cultural capital of their parents, and inherited their stigma. At school, just like their parents at work, second-

generation participants occupied a subordinate position, due to their excess of alterity in the eyes of their Anglo-Australian classmates.

It is relevant to stress that, together with the embodiment of cultural capital, they were also living a process of cultural assimilation, which is also another form of racism (Harrison 1995) 2010. In other words, the feeling of being ashamed of their Italian ethnicity, due to the existence of racism at school among a majority of classmates who were Anglo-Australians, leads to a discussion not only on the racial and cultural discrimination experienced by the second generation, but also to a focus on a racism that was institutional.

## Generation III

### *Peter's case study*

Peter, 26-year-old, whose mother was born in Sydney. His father was born in Calabria and emigrated to Australia when he was three years old. Like many of his peers, Peter never experienced discrimination at school on account of his Italian background; rather, he admits to having teased a number of Asian students, because of their “nerdy” appearance.

In May 2014, I asked Peter if, at school, he had ever been discriminated against on account of his Italian background. He replies:

What do you mean? If someone teased me ‘cause I am a *wog*? Never happened. We Italians used always to be all together, playing soccer at lunch time. Actually, we used to *fuck around* with Asians, ‘cause they are nerds!

Physically different from the dominant group and with a “cultural heritage” that differed from theirs, their Asian classmates had become the new inferiors. The other participants gave similar responses to the same question:

Not really against us Italians, but I found discrimination against Asians.

Not at all. Although there were fights between the Australians against the middle Easterners.

Never, but there were problems with other schoolmates, like the Asians, for them it was harder than us.

At school, participants of the third generation were rarely discriminated against. Rather, they were able to be assimilated into the symbolic field of power of the dominant culture. Peter, for example, teased the “new arrivals” who, due to an apparent lack of cultural resources of the hegemonic society, had subordinate status in class. Peter acted towards the new immigrants as Anglo Australians used to treat his grandparent. This is a form of racism which appears to be perpetuated towards new immigrants.

### The third generation: “being Italian is cool”

This section addresses the individual’s changing attitudes towards her ethnic background among third-generation participants. Additionally, her experiences over the years at school are investigated to establish whether episodes of racism have ultimately affected the individual’s identity.

Generally, third-generation participants manifest a positive attitude towards their Italian origin:

Being Italian is such a cool thing. The style, soccer, cars, everything is cool. The way we eat together.

I go to X shopping centre every Saturday with *nonna*. It’s such a cool thing to go grocery shopping with her, greeting her friends in Italian: “*Eh compà!* [Godparent]”, buying *wog* food, talking with the hands!

Being Italian it’s cool. We got an Alfa Romeo.

Participants used the pronoun *we* to express ethnic connection with their Italian origin. Specific “markers of identity” (style, fashion, the ability to cook) seem to be perceived as characteristics of Italian-ness.

The enthusiasm and pride towards their ethnicity suggest this “generation” of participants feels “pleased with their ethnic background”. Certain markers of “what being Italian is” might be conceived of as “key symbols”. Moreover, a widespread use of the word *wog* among such youth, to express “a quality”, has been noted. Two female participants report:

I am a *wog* for my classmates. That doesn’t bother me at all.

I have never been teased for being Italian. My Aussie friends say I am *wog*. I don’t care. When they need a tip on fashion they say: “Francesca knows that, she is Italian!”. It’s cool with me.

In the above quotes, the participants claim to have never been discriminated against at school, although they have been called *wogs*. Such a term seems also to be used by the youth as an adjective, to indicate specific dispositions. For example, an informant enjoys being considered Italian by her friends, since they rely on her predisposition to good taste. It seems that the word *wog* is charged by semiotic content across generation. However, the significance extremely differs from generation to generation.

### Conclusion

The study found a cross-generation widespread manifestation of conditions of double absence, “in between-ness” and a perceived positive evaluation about one’s ethnicity.



As regards the first generation of participants, experiences of and cultural racism, of not having accumulated “enough” dominant cultural capital (e.g. language) and resentment towards the *paesani* in Italy, appear to be the *vera causa* of their double absence. Such perceptions have been contextualised in the historical period characterised by the legacy of the White Australia Policy. Their diasporic position within the hegemonic field appears to be one of *atopos* [with no place]. Moreover, participants, after “a life” in Australia, report feeling not “at home”. This feeling has a specific term in Italian which is *spaesamento*, deriving from *spaesato* (literally “being out of one’s own town”).

The second generation, *mutatis mutandis*, appear to experience double absence too. Their double absence lies (in part) in their parents’ legacies. Together with the experiences of cultural racism perceived at school (i.e. an essentialistic view on Italians), participants seem to have embodied both the ethnic cultural dispositions of their parents and the dominant one. However, what they embodied was “not enough”. For example, within the “dominant world” there was the constant perception of carrying an inappropriate “ethnic being” in forms of markers of identity (surnames, clothes, lunch boxes, etc.) this results as a stigma towards their race. On the other hand, the second generation were perceived to be inappropriate within the “Italian community” since they have not incorporated “enough” markers of Calabrian ethnicity (i.e. they were too Australian). This “lack of capital” originated a conflict between different senses of belonging to Italy and Australia. Their racial and ethnic conflicts should be understood in the Anglo-Australian post context mass migration of the 1950s.

Participants of the second generation grew up with the experience of cultural ambivalence. External categorization was an important contributor to their ethnicity. The perceived undesirable presence of their parents, who were seen as “peasant migrants” by their classmates, jeopardized their ethnic identity. A number of participants accepted the ascriptions given to them. This acceptance appears to be the result of the perceived pressures experienced at school, consistent with the way Italians were institutionally seen in that period. This is in line with a Gramsci (1999) who sees the subordinate group as complying with the dominant group, by internalizing the rulers’ “values” and accepting the naturalness of domination. Moreover, growing up with the experience of cultural ambivalence, and therefore with a “multicultural-multi-common-sense”, might generate conflicts that disclose something more than pressure from the “ethnic” community. In Maria’s narrative, it was evident how gender roles in her household were different from the ones experienced by Anglo-Australian girls. Such a disequilibrium of common sense (e.g. living in a Calabrian patriarchal household, and having Aussie schoolmates, at school) involves also gender expectations which shape the second generation’s ethnic identity.

The third-generation participants, compared to their parents, shifted “from Pavlova to pasta”.<sup>5</sup> Such ethnic revival is the result of the success of the “made in Italy” brand, multicultural identity politics (i.e. celebratory forms of multiculturalism in schools), the increased wealth and transnationalism of the first generation – along with the arrival of professional migrants – (Baldassar 2011). The third generation can emphasize their ethnic identity through the visible practices that the second generation, in the past, tried to hide because this was perceived as inappropriate. Such “freedom to choose” has given them the ability to accumulate “voluntarily” their ethnic culture and convert it into cultural capital. This new status appears to be coherent with the current dominant institutional perception of “the Italians” whose “common sense” sees “being Italian” as no longer a stigma in Australia.

I consider such dynamics of race relations as one’s institutional positionality that is the individuals’ perceptions of their ethnic being in the world. What was abhorred by the dominant society in the past, then came to be caricaturised, and successively celebrated. Such ethnic and racial negotiations are the consequence of their cultural assimilation which brought the third-generation Italian Australians to become “the new Whites” in Australia. As a result, not only these participants seem to be totally assimilated into the dominant culture, but they also see the new immigrants as Anglo Australians used to see their grandparents. This is a form of racism which seems to be perpetuated. While the value of the paper is an essay concerning the trigenerational processes of mutual adaptation related to their ethnicity and race in Australia, its limitation can be the analysis on a specific group of immigrants (rural Calabrians) who were not coming from an upper social class background (1st generation).

## Notes

1. Calabria, in southwest Italy, occupies the toe of the country’s boot-shaped peninsula.
2. All quotations are verbatim.
3. Australians from a British background.
4. Linked to the Mafia.
5. Huber (1977).

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