Hurricanes, snakes and landlords: class exploitation and the ‘suburban dream’ of Italians in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Central to the social processes and economic development of Australia and many other western countries during the 1950s and early 1960s was the realisation of the ‘suburban dream’. It was around this myth that the most important phenomena of the time developed: namely, the dramatic expansion of the manufacturing industry and the complementary development of a new model of the family built upon the role of women as perfect housewives, who had to manage their homes and take care of their husbands and children. Considering the perspective of Italian women in Australia helps to uncover the class, gender and ethnic exploitation that sustained the ‘suburban dream’. In this article, letters written by two Italian migrant women in the late 1950s and early 1960s are considered. The two women describe their dramatic experiences of motherhood and settlement in Australia, with a particular emphasis on the terrible accommodation in which they were living. Far from being safe shelters, these homes came to represent the ultimate traps of a hostile social and natural environment. The suburban dream was ideologically superimposed onto a harsh reality of exploitation, ‘placelessness’ and alienation.

There is general agreement that the purchase of a house has played a central role in the lives of Italian migrants in Australia. It is well known that Italians have the highest ratio of home-ownership in Australia (Pulvirenti 2000:237). Furthermore, this is often interpreted as a sign of the success of Italian individuals, families and communities in Australia. While this is a legitimate assumption, this article argues the importance for reconsidering the problematic relation between Italian migrants’ ‘suburban dream’ of the 1950s and 1960s Australia, and the class exploitation that characterised their lives during that period. In particular, it will be argued that the purchase of a house for Italian migrants in Australia during the period of mass migration and in the following years was ideologically encouraged and concretely forced by class exploitation and isolation from
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the mainstream social context. From this perspective the high percentage of house ownership by Italians in Australia should not be read exclusively as a sign of migrants’ socio-economic success.

As argued by Pulvirenti (2000:237-238), migration needs to be considered as a gendered process. In particular, regarding home-ownership, it is important to consider the role played by Italian women in the management of the house and the family within the Italian-Australian context of the 1950s and 1960s. In order to reflect on this matter, the suburban dream can be linked to a strictly correlated and powerful idea: the middle class construction of the perfect mother/housewife.

Moving my analysis from this perspective, I will consider a few letters written by Italian migrants. These letters are part of the corpus of migrants’ original letters that I analysed during my PhD research. In my thesis I considered hundreds of original letters written by Italian migrants to Lena Gustin, the editor of two columns for the Italian newspaper in Australia, La Fiamma, between 1956 and 1964.1 The letters selected for this article show how two mothers articulated the relation between their experiences of motherhood and migration, in dramatic terms, through references to the terrible accommodation in which they were forced to live. The aim is to challenge the ambient rhetoric on house and motherhood, by giving back the voice to two Italian migrant women facing desperate situations.

Migration to Australia represented for many Italian migrants the passage from a rural to an urban life, as the majority of Italian migrants in the 1950s settled in urban areas (Castles 1992, 1994; Rando 1997). For instance, in 1954 more than 60% of Italian migrants in New South Wales resided in Sydney (Favero and Tassello 1983). This had significant and not always positive consequences.

Central to the social processes and economic development of Australia at the time was the “realisation of the suburban dream” (Game and Pringle 1997:117). It was around this ideal that the most important phenomena of the time developed, namely the dramatic expansion of the manufacturing industry and the complementary development of a new model of family built upon the role of women as perfect housewives. These housewives would not have to work but had to manage their homes and take care of their husbands and children. As happened in many countries in Europe (Ginsborg 1989), the symbols of this new model of family and society soon became the automobile, driven by men, and the house, managed by women with the help of new and increasingly advanced electrical appliances (Game and Pringle 1997).

The working class in Australia, including its large migrant component, played an essential, if subaltern, role in this economic, social and ideological process. First of all, the development and consolidation of capitalism depended on the availability of workers who either chose or were forced to accept harsh, dangerous and poorly paid jobs. Secondly, class exploitation was ideologically sustained by the suburban dream to which they aspired, and which pushed the working class, particularly migrants, to work hard for

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1 The letters were kept by Lena Gustin and later donated to the Mitchell Library (State Library of New South Wales).

2 The words ‘subaltern’ and ‘hegemonic’ are used in this article in reference to Gramscian theories (Gramsci 1950 and 1975). For Gramsci, subaltern groups are those groups who lack class-consciousness and are dominated through repressive means but also through cultural hegemony.
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results that were paradoxically material yet also illusory. For example, purchasing a house, or the many consumerist symbols representing a social promotion from working to middle class, did not alter the social reality of extended and poorly paid working hours. In fact, this consumerist ladder entrenched and reinforced workers’ reliance on their labour.

The Australian industrialisation and economic development in the post-Second World War period determined a progressive absorption of Italians in factories, in particular in car-assembly lines and the textile industry (Pascoe 1987), and infrastructures. If in 1947 36.8% of Italians in Australia were self-employed, usually in shops and small family businesses, it is noteworthy that in 1971 less than 15% were self-employed (Favero and Tassello 1983). Professional qualifications were usually not recognised by Australian authorities and employers; therefore, even when Italians actually were skilled workers, they were often forced to accept unskilled manual occupations (Castles 1994). These were often poorly paid, so that if either a husband or wife could not work, the financial situation of a family could lead to serious difficulties, especially when there were debts to repay.

Moreover, southern European migrants were usually employed in the most dangerous and arduous jobs (McConnochie, Pettman and Hollinsworth 1988). For instance, many Italians worked on the construction of the Snowy Mountains Scheme and the railways, often in isolated and difficult conditions (Panucci, Kelly and Castles 1992). It is perhaps worth remembering that during the construction of the Snowy Mountains Scheme each mile of the tunnel cost the life of one worker (Pascoe 1987:125). The work and living conditions of many Italians who were employed in cane farms were also very hard (Panucci, Kelly and Castles 1992).

Migrants often accepted these positions as a necessary path to a better socio-economic situation, usually represented by the purchase of a house and a car. The importance of buying a house for Italian migrants has been related to their peasant origins (Kee 1992, Castles 1994). Pulvirenti (2000) focuses in particular on the difficult socio-economic conditions that migrants experienced in Italy before deciding to migrate and the consequent desire to settle down in Australia. She refers to the Italian word sistemazione to describe how the house came to represent migrants’ ambition to achieve a better life for themselves and their families. Both Kee (1992:40) and Pulvirenti (2000:246) emphasise the hard work and sacrifices that migrants were ready to make to purchase a house. However, they fail to explicitly recognise that migrants’ desire to own a house was also the fruit of a hegemonic discourse through which host and migrant élites aimed at fostering a will for hard work, that is, class exploitation and social control.

The comparison between a migrant woman’s letter and the answer given to her by Gustin, who here takes a hegemonic position, clearly illustrates my argument. The migrants’ letter was reproduced by Gustin in her column. The following are excerpts from the letter:

La mia famiglia è diventata la mia croce. Persino mio marito di 6 anni e mio figlio sono diventati insopportabili. Ho i nervi a pezzi e se penso che potrebbe continuare così per tutta la vita, mi sento impazzire.3

Gustin, Lena. Il marito ha il coraggio che manca alla moglie. La Fiamma, 5 March 1963:13.

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[My family has become my cross. Even my husband of 6 years and my son have become unbearable. My nerves have gone to pieces and if I think that it could continue like this all my life, I feel myself going crazy.]

The difficult situation of the Italian woman is worsened by the fact that her husband does not understand her dismay:

Quando mi confido, o meglio mi sfogo con mio marito, per tutta risposta lui si mette a ridere. […] Forse neanche tu potrai capire la mia situazione. È facile dare consigli quando si fa la vita da signora.

[When I confide in, or rather open my heart to my husband, his only reply is to begin to laugh. […] Maybe not even you will be able to understand my situation. It is easy to give advice when you live the life of a lady.]

The following excerpt is from the response of Gustin, published in La Fiamma, and is significantly entitled Il marito ha il coraggio che manca alla moglie [The husband has the courage that is lacking in the wife]:

Tu devi guardare alle donne che sono dietro di te, a quelle che si sono proposte di arrivare ad avere la casetta e le comodità e che come te si sacrificano dalla mattina alla sera, ma senza brontolare, senza maledire.

[You have to look at the women who are behind you, at those whose goal is to own a small house and comforts and who like you sacrifice themselves from the morning till the evening, but without grumbling, without complaining.]

Here it is not difficult to see how the hegemonic perspective of the migrant élites, represented by Gustin, was operating in order to sustain ideologically class exploitation and social control through the symbolic value attributed to the purchase of a house. However, this does not mean that Gustin and many other migrants simply appropriated the suburban ideals of the mainstream Australian society. In this regard it is important to keep in mind the negative consequences of assimilation policies on migrant lives. These consequences were fostered by a contradiction that supported class and ethnic exploitation: the fantasy of assimilation was actually built upon a racist logic that made assimilation practically impossible. In particular, regarding migrants’ working condition, Elder (2005) argues that the official logic behind assimilation was that migrants, starting from lower living conditions, would progressively gain more opportunities provided that they were ready to work hard and adapt to the new country. However, the general Australian population was worried about migrants ‘stealing’ jobs or worsening working conditions by accepting longer shifts and lower salaries. The rhetoric of assimilation actually fostered racism and exclusion. Consequently, “large groups of migrants remained economically, socially and politically disadvantaged” (Elder 2005:110).

The decision to buy a house was also related to practical aspects, such as the difficulties of renting appropriate housing (Game and Pringle 1997), and the need to settle within migrants’ ethnic communities. Therefore, the purchase of a house was often a reaction to a situation of economic and social marginality. The dream of possessing a house often became a reality, but the price paid was high in terms of living conditions for both men and women (Bertelli 1983). It is for this reason that the rhetoric of sacrifice and successful migration should be read as complementary aspects of the same hegemonic support of class exploitation. However, it is also important to specify that many Italian migrants were already used to very hard work before they migrated. This was usually the case on the small family farms that barely guaranteed a means of subsistence (Thompson 1984). In others words, class exploitation had already begun in Italy.

Antonio Gambino (1998), in a recent historical book about Italian customs and mentality, describes Italy as a maternal country. He argues that the chronic problems of Italian society have their roots in the dominating model of family, which is based on the traditional figure of la grande Madre, who always protects her children and is always ready to forgive them. This interpretation is certainly founded in Italian stereotypes about the role and importance of the mother. However, D’Amelia (2005:7) has argued that in the case of mammismo we are faced with a typical example of the invention of tradition. She expresses the conviction that such a stereotype was actually developed during the 1950s out of a long sedimentation of themes, models and representations linked to various and very different cultural sources such as patriotism, Catholic ideology, scientific progress (in particular medical worries about hygiene) and feminine emancipation (D’Amelia 2005:10).

What I found particularly stimulating and pertinent is D’Amelia’s suggestion that all these discourses actually exorcise the ghosts of those mothers who worked hard on the land or in a factory and were often forced by the difficult living conditions to abandon their children, to put them into safekeeping or to send them to work at a very young age. This reflection is complementary to the myth of the woman as housewife, which developed in the 1950s and still constitutes part of the mammismo stereotype, using the fantasy of the perfect housewife to obscure the fact that Italian women have always worked (and spent time) outside the house, even if not always paid. Similar conclusions have been reached by scholars outside Italy, suggesting that, even taking into consideration relevant cultural and social differences between countries, the 1950s developed around the figure of the mother and the myth of the home, which, as argued by Hayward (2006:218), “represents metonymically the site for the ideological confrontation between production and reproduction”.

Considering in particular the Italian version of this hegemonic struggle, we need to bear in mind the strong complicity between the Catholic Church and the cultural hegemony of American capitalism. This is, once again, particularly evident in the construction of the ideal Italian wife and mother as perfect housewife. As emphasised by

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5 See for instance the reflection of American scholars regarding the ideal family and the ideal mother of the 1950s in the USA. May (1988:11) stresses that the “legendary family” of the 1950s was not the “last gasp of traditional family life”. Even more explicit is Thurer (1995:250), when she argues that “the fifties were an aberration. Far from setting standards of normality […] the 1950s were characterised by deviant family patterns. […] And contrary to the prevalent notion, many women were not full-time mothers”.

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De Grazia (1992:9), Fascism already demanded that “women act as careful consumers, efficient household managers, and astute clients”. However, it was only with the economic growth and the cultural changes of the 1950s that the figure of the ideal housewife in Italy became the essential link between Catholic morality and the exigencies of capitalism. The ideological construction of the woman as housewife was complementary to the capitalistic identification of the housewife as a target for a large series of household products (Ginsborg 1989). The housewife could thus preserve morality without renouncing all the comforts of modern houses. This is an assumption that Gustin often proposed.6

The two positions of Gambino and D’Amelia mirror a much larger and articulated debate about the role of the mother in Italian society (also from a historical and sociological perspective see Fiume 1995, Allegra and D’Amelia 1997). While the arguments are different, with Gambino considering mammissismo as a fact with strong consequences on Italian social and political life, and D’Amelia considering it as a cultural construction, they both support my contention that the myth of the ideal Mother was very powerful particularly during the 1950s, and therefore had a strong influence not only on Gustin and her editing of the two columns, but also on migrants.

It is bearing in mind this social and cultural context that I analyse the letters that two migrant women and the husband of one of the women wrote to Gustin. These letters are not about middle class suburban dreams, but about the harsh situation of the Italian migrant working class. Thus they reveal how the middle class myth of the perfect house/wife exorcised the still desperate situation of many working class and migrant women in the late 1950s and early 1960s. After reading the excerpts it will not be difficult to perceive that the dream of purchasing a house originated in the basic need of having a safe and comfortable shelter. It will also become apparent why the purchase of a house represented the major sign of a socio-economic improvement in migrant lives, and therefore often constituted the strongest migrants’ motivation for hard work and sacrifice.

Through the first group of letters it is certainly possible to recognise the deep bewilderment and discomfort of migrants, and attempt an empathetic consideration of one of the most relevant problems that they had to face during migration and settlement, that of being sick or injured while living and working in a new and often hostile environment. The first case is that of a woman whom I will refer to as ‘Giuseppina’. She and her husband began writing to Gustin when they discovered, only four months after arriving in Australia, that she had a terminal illness. In the archive three letters written by Giuseppina and six written by her husband have been kept. This group of letters is particularly important as it allows us to follow the reactions of the couple during the course of the illness. In the first letter, written by the husband, it is possible to find many interesting elements that characterised Italian migration to Australia. First of all, the wife’s terminal illness is perceived as the end of the dream of migrating for a better future:

6 See in particular the reflections of Crainz (1996) and Ginsborg (1989). The former also quoted an advertisement of Zoppas fridges in 1965 (“La famiglia, speranza di ogni italiano” [Family, the hope of every Italian]), remarking that it was not a Catholic sermon but an advertisement. Family, the core of traditional values, becomes the pivot around which consumerist revolution is realised (Crainz 1996:79). A similar example of advertisement was published in La Fiamma in 1961.
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Ma purtroppo da circa due mesi per me e la mia famiglia e crollato. Sogni e felicità e benessere poiché mia moglie si trova ricoverata in Ospedale di Sydney con un male incurabile che purtroppo i Medici non possono Operarla che il male e tanto avanzato che mai si potra guarire.7

[But unfortunately about two months ago everything broke down for me and my family. Dreams and happiness and well-being since my wife has been admitted to the Hospital of Sydney with an incurable illness that unfortunately the Doctors cannot Operate on her because the illness is so advanced that she will never be able to recover.]

Secondly, it is possible to see the cultural shock of the husband, in the fact that the doctors told his wife she was soon going to die:

Purtroppo mia moglie e al corrente del male che tiene che i medici ce lo anno detto, certo che anno fatto male che non dovevano dirle nulla a lei e non fa che piantare.8

[Unfortunately my wife is aware of the illness that she has because the doctors told her, they surely were wrong because they shouldn’t have told her anything and she doesn’t do anything but cry.]

It is important to consider that, until the late 1970s, it was common for doctors in Italy not to communicate explicitly a terminal condition to their patients.9 Thirdly, the man writes to Gustin to tell her that his wife would like to return to Italy but they do not have the money. The dream of socio-economic achievement becomes a nightmare where a dying woman is trapped in a foreign country (and, as we will soon discover, a dangerous apartment), and she does not even have the money to go home to die. He also asks Gustin to write to his wife to try and comfort her. Finally, the husband fantasises about a product that makes people with cancer recover, asking Gustin where he can find it:

Avevo letto sulla Fiamma di certe persone che si erano guariti con certe sostanze di petrolio adatto a questo genere di Malattia che si chiama tumore. Facci sapere qualcosa in proposito come fare per

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8 “Non sò proprio come incominciare.” (Ibid.)

9 I have come to this assumption from personal experience, as my grandfather died in 1978 from prostate cancer. The doctors never told him that he had cancer, nor that he was going to die. This personal experience is relevant as my grandfather was treated and underwent several operations in one of the largest and most advanced hospitals for the treatment and research of cancer in Italy. Thiele Rolando’s (1988) study regarding psychological assistance in the treatment of cancer demonstrates how in the late 1980s in Italy there were still profound differences in interpreting the concept of terminal illness itself, as many Italian doctors considered a patient terminal only when he or she went into coma before dying.
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avere questo petrolio e dove si trova. Forse chisà se anche a mia moglie farà giovamento.\textsuperscript{10}
[I read in \textit{La Fiamma} about certain people who had recovered with certain petroleum substances adapted to this type of illness that is called a tumour. Let us know something about it how to get this petroleum and where we can find it. Maybe who knows if even my wife can benefit from it.]

The following three letters are written by Giuseppina. The dominant topic of these letters is not directly the illness; rather it is her preoccupation with the condition of her children, which is related to the difficult relationship with the landlords. In the next three excerpts the violence of the landlords is described in vivid terms: “Due settimane fa mi hanno preso a sediate e per lo spavento credevo di morire”.\textsuperscript{11} [“They hit me with a chair two weeks ago and I thought I would die of fear.”] Furthermore, the landlords alternated physical violence with explicit threats:

Io e il mio bambino eravamo chiusi in camera sono arrivati i padroni di casa come una furia volevano aprire per forza la porta dicevano che volevano ucciderci.\textsuperscript{12}
[My young son and I locked ourselves in the bedroom the landlords came in a fury they wanted to open the door at all costs they said that they wanted to kill us.]

The landlords were also violent towards one of the scared and bewildered children:

Io mi sono tutta gelata e non parlavo più il mio bambino credeva che ero morta si era tanto spaventato che è uscito per andare a chiamare un Dottore, sa lei cara Lena cosa anno fatto i padroni di casa, come il bambino è uscito di camera me lo anno picchiato.\textsuperscript{13}
[I completely froze and I didn’t speak my young son thought I was dead he was so scared that he went out to call a Doctor, do you know dear Lena what the landlords did, as my son went out of the room they beat him.]

Together with the illness and the difficult relation with the landlords also came financial troubles, related to the fact that Giuseppina could not work hence the husband had to take care of his wife and children:


\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}
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Voglio ringraziarla per aver pensato a trovare un posto di notte a mio marito che ci sarebbe andato molto volentieri dato che abbiamo tantissimo bisogno di soldi ma purtroppo non può lasciarmi sola con i bimbi perché spesso di notte mi vengono emoragie.14 [I want to thank you for having thought about finding a night job for my husband who would have gone very willingly since we desperately need money but unfortunately he can’t leave me alone with the children because often at night I have haemorrhages.]

In the letters written by Giuseppina, her role of mother as care taker and protector of her children is often repeated as the only reason for staying alive: “Se non fosse per queste due creature che amo più della mia stessa vita mi creda mettere fine a questa mia povera vita”.15 [“If it were not for these two creatures that I love more than my own life believe me I would put an end to my sad life.”]

The physical suffering due to the illness is continuously related to the violence and nastiness of the landlords. Here is another example:

Mi è venuta ancora un’emorragia […] Ora sono sei giorni che sono in letto e per ben quattro di seguito ho avuto emoragia […] L’altra sera anno gridato tanto contro di noi che mi è preso un attacco di cuore così sono caduta per terra e ho battuto i reni.16 [I had yet another haemorrhage. […] Now I have been in bed for six days and for a good four days in a row I have had bleeding. […] The other night they shouted at us and I had a heart attack and so I fell to the ground and I hurt my kidneys.]

As apparent from the excerpts that I have included, despite the fact that Giuseppina knows she is dying, she focuses on the brutish behaviour of her landlords. This is also evident in other excerpts where for instance she writes that she will die if she does not move house soon. The focus of the husband in the following letters, however, is on the illness of his wife. Like his wife, his main concern is for their children: “Perciò lascio a te immaginare il dolore mio e quello dei miei figli, sapendo la Mamma che sta male”.17 [“For which I leave my pain and my children’s pain, knowing that their Mum is sick, to your imagination.”]


15 Ibid.


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I dottori mi hanno levato tutte le speranze che in casa non tornerà più, mi creda che siamo proprio in lutto. Non tanto per me ma per i miei 2 figli, loro non sanno nulla. [...] La dottoresse vuole che io lo dicesse ma io non voglio perché starebbero male anche loro due. [18]

[The doctors took away all my hopes because she will never return home, you can believe that we are in mourning. Not so much for me but for my 2 children, they don’t know anything. [...] The doctor wants me to tell them but I don’t want to because they would suffer too.]

La dottoresse mi ha detto che non arriva a due settimane, lei capirà quale dolore si prova sentirsi dire questa notizia. [...] Mi scusi signora se sbaglio qualche parola che scrivo in fretta per la paura che i miei figli vogliono vedere cosa scrivo. [19]

[The doctor told me that she won’t last another two weeks, you can imagine what type of pain one feels at hearing this news. [...] I’m sorry madam if I make the odd mistake because I am writing in a hurry for fear that my children want to see what I am writing.]

The last two letters were written by the husband, one three days and the other four months after Giuseppina died. The letter to Gustin concerning the death of his wife takes the tone and language of an obituary notice:

Tutto è finito, giorno 17 di venerdì notte alle ore 4 il nostro signore Gesù la ghiamata con se. Ora io e miei figli preghiamo che stia bene e che l’anima sua riposa in santa pace. [20]

[Everything is finished, Friday the 17th at 4 o’clock in the morning our Lord Jesus called her to be with him. Now my children and I pray that she is well and that her soul rests in blessed peace.]

Four months later Giuseppina’s husband writes to Gustin about the debts that he still has to pay. Nevertheless, he has moved house, as his wife would have liked, and this change seems to represent hope for a better life for him and his children. Once again it is possible to perceive how the quality and safety of the new house manages to represent practically and symbolically the quality of life itself:

Noi adesso abbiamo cambiato di nuovo abitazione e finalmente abbiamo trovato come si voleva noi ma mia moglie ora che poteva

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stare bene non ce più pazienza mi affido al nostro signore che mi dia la forza e coraggio anche per i miei due bambini.21 [We have moved house again and finally found what we wanted but my wife now that she could have been happy is no longer with us oh well I trust in the Lord that he might give me strength and courage also for my two children.]

The extraordinary opportunity of following the course of a terminal illness through the words of the patient and her husband reinforces my belief in the importance of studying original letters written by migrants using an empathetic approach to history. Such an approach gives the historian the possibility of discovering the truth from an abject perspective.22 In this case, the abject perspective is that of a woman who had just arrived in Australia where she discovered a future without hope and a society around her that was openly hostile (the landlords), or one that took care of her without considering profound cultural differences (the doctors). As emerges from the letters, she was the victim not only of a fatal illness, but also of her husband’s dream of migrating for a better life. However, the same dream that was so disruptive for the sick wife also fostered her husband’s resilience and his positive attitude towards a better future for him and his children. This apparent paradox is often at the core of migrants’ lives and histories.

The second example I consider in this article is based on the reading of a letter from a woman who tells the story of her life through the description of the difficult conditions in which she underwent her pregnancy and delivered her children, both in Italy and in Australia. A first interesting element is the continuous reference throughout the letter to the stork as the bird that delivers the child. While this reference is typical of Italian popular culture and is also used very often by Gustin, here it is particularly relevant because it contrasts with the expressive description of the condition of pregnancy and childbirth. In the first excerpt the difficult life conditions of female workers in Italy emerge as the cause of a miscarriage prior to her first full-term pregnancy:

Attendevamo l’arrivo della cicogna. […] In quel tempo lavoravo in un’industria tessile e per quanto il mio lavoro fosse trafficante non pensavo che avrebbe potuto essermi fatale. […] Una notte piovosa […] il nostro piccolo fardello se ne andò per sempre dalla nostra vita.23


22 I use the term ‘abject’ as proposed by Žižek (Žižek and Daly 2004). He refers to the abject perspective as the one from which it is possible to perceive the truth of a certain situation. He proposes as an example the Jews during the Holocaust. While Nazis and Jews both had a partial perspective, it is the position of the Jews, as excluded and abject, that defines the truth about the Holocaust. The term abject seems to me particularly appropriate when considering the perspective of people facing difficult situations related to their body, such as illness, pregnancy and violence, since, as Kristeva (1982) points out, the body has always been the main source of abjection.

[We awaited the arrival of the stork. […] At the time I worked in the textile industry and as much as my work was tiresome I didn’t think that it could have been fatal. […] One rainy night […] our little bundle left our lives forever.]

The image of the stork gives the woman the possibility of describing her miscarriage by referring to the foetus in abstract terms, such as fardello [bundle]. The traumatic event is also lightened by the use of a periphrasis such as “se ne andò per sempre dalla nostra vita” [“left our lives forever”]. Reference to the bad weather is used to dramatise the episode. However, the description of the following pregnancy, still set in Italy, becomes much more concrete and expressive, in particular the description of the difficult conditions in which the child was born. That day the snow had been falling for three consecutive days and the house was completely isolated. The husband goes in search of the obstetrician who lives five kilometres away, and who refuses to go to the woman’s house. Meanwhile the expectant mother and her mother stay alone in their isolated house without electricity and without a phone connection:

Quando fu per arrivare il dolce messia da tre giorni nevicava senza sosta. […] La grande quantità di neve caduta devastò ogni comunicazione e con una torcia potemmo così illuminare la tetra stanza […] non un filo telefonico perché tutto era sfasciato.[24]

[When the sweet messiah was about to arrive it had been snowing nonstop for three days. […] The large quantity of fallen snow destroyed all communication and with a torch we were able to light our room […] not even a telephone line because everything was wrecked!]

Particularly interesting here is the woman’s reference to the “dolce messia” [“sweet messiah”]. It is not clear if she is speaking about her child, who we will later discover to be a daughter, or if she is simply referring to Christmas. In both cases the reference to the Messiah is a signal that her story devolved from the religious model of the Nativity, as the difficult conditions in which her child was born were probably superimposed on those in which Jesus was born.

Finally her husband is able to stop a car driven by a soldier, who decides to help them, but they do not arrive at the hospital in time and the woman delivers the child in the soldier’s car. The entire scene is dominated by the snow and constitutes a perfect counterpart to the second pregnancy to be mentioned next, which marks the new condition of the woman and her husband as migrants in a hostile environment. In fact, the cold of the snow is now substituted by the hot and humid weather of tropical Queensland. This climatic change does not describe an improvement in their conditions of life but, rather, the inevitability of the suffering of poor people. In fact, everything seems to be worse than in Italy, including the presence of mosquitoes and other insects. The food is terrible and inadequate:

24 Ibid.
Il mangiare consisteva tutto il disgusto di noi immigrati [...]. Quando poi il mio stato di avere di nuovo un bambino era evidente mi razzionarono mezza tazza di latte e lo rinunciavo per darlo alla mia piccola che non aveva ancora due anni. [...] Fui ridotta allo stremo della mia costituzione.25

[The food constituted the complete disgust of us migrants [...]. Then when my condition of having a baby again was evident they rationed half a cup of milk for me and I gave it up to give it to my little girl who wasn’t yet two years old. [...] I was reduced to an extreme state of bad health.]

Also the husband’s work is hard, casual and cannot guarantee the means of subsistence. Once again the difficult situation is described through reference to the poor quality of the shelter where the family lives:

Una baracca di tavola, per uso finestre si alzava qualche tavola ma era meglio tenere chiuso per avventuali che sarebbe entrato qualche serpe. [...] Grazie a Dio non pioveva dentro il nostro idillio.26

[A wooden shack, for windows we lifted some planks of wood but it was better to keep them closed because any snakes could have entered. [...] Thanks to God it didn’t rain inside our idyll.]

The shack in which the second child is delivered is ironically compared with the humble but still impossible dream of a decent shelter. The tragic situation culminates in the final destruction of the poor shack by a hurricane:

In quel squallore nacque la nostra seconda bimba, per lei non sognavo una culla ricca di trine e merletti, ma un semplice lettino e nemmeno quello potei avere. [...] Un giorno un uragano squarciò ogni cosa della nostra umile dimora.27

[In that squalor our second baby girl was born, I didn’t dream of a cradle full of trimmings and lace for her, but a simple cot and I couldn’t have even that. [...] One day a hurricane ripped apart everything in our humble little abode.]

In these excerpts it is once again not difficult to see the influence of the narrative evangelical model of the nativity. The pregnancy, and in particular the moment of childbirth, becomes in this letter the expression of the difficult conditions of life, but also a way of reaffirming the power of love and family in facing such conditions. The main goal of this letter is not to complain, but to emphasise how a poor family can survive and grow, thanks to love and respect. This clearly emerges from other passages of the letter

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.
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that I have not quoted here. Moreover, in this letter, which was entitled, significantly, “Almeno vogliamoci bene” [At least let’s love each other], the births coincide not only with the moments in which their poverty vividly emerges, but also with the moments in which the family resists, survives and grows.

Both the examples that I have considered in this article present a dramatic description of migrants’ hard living condition in poor shelters within a hostile natural and social environment. The two situations described in the letters were certainly extreme and do not necessarily illustrate the average condition of Italian migrant families in Australia. However, a close and empathetic reading of letters written by the most abject migrants is essential for stimulating a critical approach to migration history. What we could call the “suburban nightmare” of Italian migrant women, gives us a vivid and dramatic impression of the terrible living conditions that many migrants experienced, showing the dark, exploitative and hegemonic nature of the “suburban dream”.

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