My Life is Over Now

A novel and critical commentary

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On the Margins of Mainstream

It hardly matters that some people see themselves as Catholic, Jewish, Black, Multicultural, American or Australian. Once a manuscript takes leave of the typewriter it comes opened to use, misuse, typecasting and categorisation, despite the munificent advice of those who warn of the dangers of ghettoisation or prejudice. What does matter is whether this categorisation becomes an object of promotion or vilification. Surely the latter is the more pressing problem to be addressed by all parties?
(Castro 1991: 48)

She didn't write it.
She wrote it, but she shouldn't have.
She wrote it but look what she wrote about.
She wrote it, but 'she' isn't really an artist and 'it' isn't really serious, of the right genre - ie. really art.
She wrote it, but it's only interesting/included in the canon for one reason.
She wrote it, but there are very few of her.
(Russ 1984: 76)

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Introduction

The novelist and the literary theorist, both integral to the literary industry have separate and very different roles. The novelist's central concern is the creative process; the creation of a work of fiction that will stand on its own. It is not that novelists are unaware of their influences, their position in the world, their gender, their race, their nationality, their class but these are integrated into the fabric of the novel.

The literary theorist on the other hand takes the novel and, much like a scientist, analyses, compares and classifies. The literary theorist pulls apart the fabric, exposes and assesses the individual threads, places the novel within a context, arguing for the most part that it does not stand alone, that it is written within a language, a tradition, a culture.

As a student undertaking a Masters in Creative Writing I am required to produce both a novel and a critical commentary. The commentary must to some extent engage in literary theory, and more to the point it is expected that my novel be an integral part of that critical and theoretical discussion.

First and foremost I am a fiction writer. It is the writing of the novel that I find the most challenging and (when it works) the most rewarding. Fiction that works effectively has the reader identify with the characters and allows the reader to step into another world from a new perspective so that what has been revealed cannot be ignored:

> Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and the humiliation of other unfamiliar sorts of people . . . This process of coming to see other human beings as 'one of us' rather than as 'them' is a matter of detailed description of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as . . . the novel. (Rorty 1989: xvi)

Rorty's premise that the novel allows us to see others as 'one of us', to identify with characters whom we normally see as different and 'other' means that the novel can bring us closer to an understanding of the world, and other people than any other genre. Certainly, as a reader, this is my experience of the best novels I have read.

My aim in my fiction writing and specifically in the writing of my novel, *My Life is Over Now*, is to give readers a new experience, one that will force them to reassess their views, opinions and beliefs, so that they will alter the way they look at the world - specifically here, how they look at family relationships and conflicts, at women and mothering, and at migrants.

Therefore, I am acutely aware of my position and the position of my characters, as migrants, as women, as members of the working class. I am constantly exploring ways of writing which will have the reader see other human beings as 'one of us' rather than 'them':

> I remember standing on a chair while my mother pinned the hem of new dresses, her voice, that voice of hers, 'See how lucky you are, your friends can't afford new dresses,' I can hear her. . . Her face lit up at the sight of Aldo or Paolo or Luciano - never for me - never glad to see me. The sight of me was the memory of things to be done. 'Bring the washing in, put the pot on, do the dusting, the bed . . . I don't remember her ever kissing me or holding me.
> (Gandolfo 1998: 103)

As a fiction writer, then, I hesitate as I approach literary theory for though I can see the importance of it, it is the novel, the creative work, that is my prime concern.

I come to literary theory somewhat reluctantly, with some suspicion. And the questions which inevitably arise for me are: Can the novel stand on its own? Can my novel stand on its own? Can any novel stand on its own? And what is the effect of literary theory and criticism on the way a novel is read and received?

Literary theory and criticism like all writing (like the writing of fiction itself) is affected by the writer's (in this case, theorist and/or critic's) background - by their gender, their culture, their nationality and race, by the literary tradition they come from and have been influenced by. Literary theory and criticism is 'political', (Eagleton 1983: 203/9) it affects the way a novel is read, received and interpreted, and therefore it is just as, if not more, important to understand the factors influencing the theorist and the critic as it is to understand the factors influencing the novelist.

Literary theory and criticism has undergone a series of challenges and changes over the last twenty years - Marxism, feminism and postcolonialism have all had a major impact on the way that literature is read. However, broadly speaking the role of literary theory

and criticism has always been and continues to be to analyse and interpret, to sort and classify, to assess value and therefore to canonise - or not. This engagement in theory can play an important role, it is through it that we can learn much about literature, literary tradition and development, that we can start to question our social and academic constructs of 'excellence' and even of what we call and define as literature.

Readers' choices are limited by what is published, by what is reviewed, by what is available on the shelves in the bookshops and libraries. And in turn what is published, reviewed and available is affected by current trends in academia, in literary and cultural theory and criticism. At best, literary theorists and critics are conscious of the constructs that perpetuate the status quo and work to challenge, to confront and to invent new ways of reading. At worst they perpetuate the status quo, writing to ensure that their definition of literature is contained within their confines - usually - white, Anglo and male.

This critical component of my thesis focuses on these questions exploring in particular the genre of 'migrant' or 'multicultural' literature. I will argue that this genre classification, developed by literary theorists and not by novelists, can have a negative effect on the way the novels of Italo-Australian women writers including my own novel, are (or are likely to be) read and received.

I will be focusing on literary works or works that are aspiring to be literary and not on works of popular fiction in this thesis. My reasons for this are fairly straight forward. First of all, it is a matter of personal interest, and the fact that my novel, *My Life is Over Now*, is a literary work and not a work of popular fiction. Second, as far as popular fiction goes - romance, crime, to some extent science-fiction, horror - the 'ethnicity' of the author seems to be either of no relevance at all or so important that is it almost always disguised - writers often writing under Anglo pseudonyms. Third, the dynamics of the marketplace, readership and literary theory and criticism operate differently in the area of popular fiction than they do with literary fiction and therefore would require separate analysis.

Not Just a Wog

It was my contact with the feminist movement in the 70s, as a teenager, that raised for me the question of 'identity' and 'identity politics'. Female, non-English speaking (or more precisely a 'wog') and working class. My allegiances fell basically in that order. Of course, the lines were never that clear and the order was never fixed.

I am also white, heterosexual and able-bodied, however, I did not identify consciously with these groups. I knew, of course, that I wasn't black or gay or disabled. In these cases I was part of the dominant groups, the 'universal' and it was a long time before I realised the importance of naming these aspects of my identity:

> . . . *only they* get asked about their ethnicity and how this matters to their writing. Just as *only women* writers get asked about how gender effects theirs; *only gays* get questions about sexuality; *only black* writers about skin colour. (Spencer 1992: 27)

Identity is complex and cultural identity is more than just simply a matter of country of birth or ethnic background, nor is it fixed and unchanging. In my childhood my father was Sicilian, and then Italian-Australian, now increasingly he insists he is Australian. 'I've lived here longer than I lived there,' he says. On the other hand I was adamantly Australian throughout my childhood even while others constantly identified me as Italian or as a 'wog'. In my late twenties I started to identify as an Italian-Australian, and now after a recent trip to Sicily, I see that I am also, at least in part, Sicilian.

The label 'migrant' or 'multicultural' may be one that writers assume themselves because of their place of birth, their ethnicity, their ancestral background or even their country of choice - their adopted homeland.

Cultural identity can also be constructed by marketing departments of publishing companies, by reviewers and critics. The construction of the 'Grunge' genre is one example.:

> Whatever else it might name Grunge also refers to a marketing ploy. Observing the street cred that Grunge bands like Nirvana possessed, elements of the literature industry saw a way of obtaining relatively high levels of credibility and sales among a large and untapped 25-40-year-old market by promoting a set of new writers as

> being the literary expression of that same sentimental teen spirit. (Syson 1996: 142)

Helen Demidenko[1] is an example, somewhat extreme maybe, of how cultural identity can be constructed by the writer:

> As I read widely and became more engrossed in the writing, I decided to take the name Demidenko, a Ukrainian name, in empathy with the characters I was creating . . . the persona adopted for writing took over my life . . .
> Helen Demidenko (Jost 1996: 208/9)

In this thesis I am going to focus on the ethnic background of the writers and how that background, affects the way that their work is read and received. However, I am not saying that the place of these writers within the Australian literary industry is affected solely by ethnicity. Gender, race, class and sexual preference along with ethnicity are all key factors affecting the way writers and their works are received and read.

Just as writers of English speaking background have fared better than writers of non-English speaking background, so have middle class writers fared better than working class writers, white writers better than black writers, male writers better than women writers. But not all white writers nor all black writers are treated equally, for they are either male or female, gay or straight, able-bodied or disabled, working-class or middle-class. And it is no accident, for example, that the writers of non-English speaking background who have achieved (or are beginning to achieve) the most success in Australian literature are men.[2]

The statement, 'I am not just a wog', that titles this section, is central to this commentary for a number of reasons. Firstly, as I have outlined above, I am not just a wog, I am a woman, and I am working class and of a certain age, a certain shape, a certain political leaning, a certain sexual preference . . . and all of these factors are aspects of who I

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[1] Helen Demidenko is the pseudonym for Helen Darville, an Australian writer who, not only changed her name, but also her 'cultural identity' and claimed she was Ukrainian. Her novel, *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, won a number of awards before it was discovered that her real name was Helen Darville.

[2] Brian Castro and Christos Tsiolkas, for example, are two male writers who have moved into/are moving into the mainstream.

am, aspects of my identity that influence my writing and my life; and that influence the way others perceive me and my writing. Secondly, and this is the main argument in this commentary, when I am categorised as a 'wog' or a migrant or of non-English speaking background there is an assumption that that is all I am and all I have to talk about is that condition of being a migrant or a 'wog' or of non-English speaking background:

> My novels (only one has been published, *Walk a Barefoot Road*) contain migrants, as do some of my stories. But their status of migrant is taken for granted as they battle with one or another of life's problems. It is not central to their lives . . . Being a migrant has been of marginal importance in my life, even though I could not speak English when I arrived here. I would even dare to suggest that being a migrant is marginal to the lives of most migrants. (Houbein 1992: 83)

And thirdly, there is an notion of the 'wog' being less than, just as the aboriginal is seen less than, and therefore what could I possibly have to say or write that would be of any value to the English speaking majority.

The Genre[3] and the Writer

> I am an American writer, who, like other American writers, wants to write the great American novel. *The Woman Warrior* is an American Book. Yet many reviewers do not see the American-ness of it, nor the fact of my own American-ness. Maxine Hong Kingston (Gunew 1990: 48)

Writing by non-English speaking background writers in Australia has worn a number of labels over the last twenty or thirty years. Migrant Writing. Multicultural Writing. Ethnic Minority Writing. Non-Anglo-Celtic Writing. Writing by those of non-English speaking background (NESB). Writing by speakers of languages other than English (LOTE). These labels all aim to distinguish the work of this group of writers from the work of Australian writers generally. They are different terms for the same genre, and are often used interchangeably.

The writing in this genre (including poetry, drama, short stories, and novels) is as much as any other writing in this country, 'Australian'. The writing in this genre is, even when its focus is specifically on migration (and it is not always), exploring an Australian experience. What I take issue with, then, and will be exploring in this thesis, is the use of this genre classification to *put down* the work of

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[3] The word genre, of course, has two very different sets of associations. Often it's now used in the context of popular literature, where it frequently implies 'not literature', but rather some low-level formulaic production. But its older use is by formalist academic literary critics, for whom it means established literary forms such as the epic, tragedy, comedy, realist novel and so on.' (Carr 1989:6)

I have specifically used the term genre to refer to writing by those of non-English speaking background because I believe, and will be arguing in the body of the thesis, that this writing is most often seen as 'not literature' and that, like the genres of popular fiction - romance, detective etc - it is viewed as having identifiable features, being formulaic.

The term 'immigrant genre' was used by Rosemary Marangoly George because she says "it could be argued that the contemporary literary writing in which politics and experience of location or rather of 'dislocation' are central narratives be called the 'immigrant genre'". (George 1992:72) George argues for classification of this genre to separate it from 'postcolonial writing' and makes her distinctions mainly on the basis of content. While I agree that many migrant/multicultural novels are concerned with these themes, these are not the only themes they are concerned with and therefore, in the case of Australian literature, not all 'migrant/multicultural writing would fit into George's 'immigrant genre'.

non-English speaking background writers *as less than*, as *not good enough* to be called 'Australian'. This notion of 'not being good enough' is not related only to literature. As migrants, as ethnics, as 'wogs', many of us at different times have been made to feel *not good enough* to be Australian:

> Although Abdullah is one of the very few authors of Asian background who have achieved substantial publication in Australia, her finely crafted stories have not yet received the attention from critics that they deserve. This is possibly because, although she is Australian-born, the experiences she writes about place her inevitably on the 'periphery', and beyond the line that has hitherto lovingly enclosed Australia's 'traditional' authors on an enclave that is deemed 'central' to the nation's literary and cultural development. (Gooneratne 1992: 116)

The process of defining what is part of this genre and what is not, is fraught with difficulties. Multicultural writing is not a 'thing' that can be defined or pinned down, it is difficult to mark the boundaries, to draw the line:

> . . . how you define its boundaries, and how to identify the specificities of its perspectives. As well there is the question of who is included and excluded, what viewpoint is being employed, and how this relates to existing frameworks. (Papastergiadis 1994: 13)

We claim as Australian writers such as Christina Stead who lived most of their lives overseas. We claim as Australian writers whose works are completely set outside Australia, 'Barbara Hanrahan's, *Flawless Jade*, for example, concerns a Chinese family and is set entirely in China and Japan - and is still known as 'Australian' literature. (Salter 1995: 15)

It appears that as an Anglo-Celtic Australian it is almost impossible to escape being 'Australian' at least in the eyes of other Australians. And therefore Australian-born Anglo-Celtic writers whether they write about Australia or not, whether they live in Australia or not, remain 'Australian writers'.

However, most writers of non-English speaking background (whether they are born in Australia or have come to live in Australia as migrants or refugees) are not considered 'Australian writers'. There are writers of non-English speaking background who have written on particular and definite Australian events and situations; Raffaelo

Carboni's *The Eureka Stockade* is an excellent example and yet he is classified as an 'ethnic writer' (Bosi 1984: 136)

Writing from a non-English speaking background is excluded from Australian writing or, if not excluded, is marginalised as if these writers are not writing of an Australian experience - as if the experience of migration, of being the child of migrants is not an Australian experience. However, with 21.8% of Australians born overseas (Steketee 1997: 9) and a further group having one or both parents born overseas, writers writing about the migrant experience, such as in Rosa Cappiello in *Oh Lucky Country* or the experience of growing up in Australia, as with Melina Marchetta, in *Looking for Alibrandi*, are writing of an experience common to many Australians. The landscape and the content of their work is Australian. Therefore, the work is Australian for it cannot be anything else.

The work of writers of Anglo-Celtic background like Jolley and Morrison[4] who have written about migration in Jolley's case, and migrants in Morrison's, is seen as Australian writing while the work of Walwicz, Gooneratne, Capaldo is seen as 'migrant/multicultural'.

This genre classification - migrant/multicultural is used to label and identify both the writer and the writing. The writer is identified as being of non-English speaking background. Generally this means they are migrants or the children or grandchildren of migrants; their background is not Anglo-Celtic, that is they or their parents or grandparents have come to Australia from non-English speaking countries. They are not from Britain, Scotland or Ireland, or from Canada or America; they are not Indigenous Australians; and their native language or the native language of their parents and grandparents is not English.

All the writers found in this genre fit the above criteria. There are writers like David Malouf who fit the above criteria but are not referred to as 'multicultural' or 'migrant' writers. David Malouf is considered an Australian writer regardless of his migrant background. I will be exploring the reasons for this later in this thesis.

Sneja Gunew and Kateryna O'Longley in their introduction *to Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations* divide 'non-

[4] Elizabeth Jolley's novels including *Milk and Honey* and*My Father's Moon* often have issues of migration and cultural dislocation. Sally Morrison's novel, *Mad Meg*, is the story of an Australian-Italian family.

Anglo-Celtic Australian writing' (Gunew 1992a: xxi) into three groups. The first group included those dealing with the contrast of cultures and the 'juxtaposition of Australia and the parent culture'. This writing is the traditional 'migrant' writing usually written by the first generation, the writers who have migrated to Australia. The second group is usually made up of second-generation writers who are at home in both cultures and these writers 'translate one reality into the other and mediate between the two.'

The third group are the more experimental writers, 'those who forge new languages and new representations.' (Gunew 1992a: xxi). These writers grouped together within the genre have different concerns and interests and different literary backgrounds. It is important to remember, for example, that second-generation writers of non-English speaking background have been through an Australian education system and their knowledge of literature is often based mainly on the 'English' tradition.

I will be using the term 'non-English speaking background writers' to denote the writers that I am focusing on. I do this even though it is a term which negatively classifies the writers because I want to ensure that the point is made that the writers included in this genre - whether called - 'migrant writers', or 'multicultural writers' are not a homogenous group. They do not share a culture, language or religion, they do not share political or philosophical beliefs. Some are migrants, some are the children or grandchildren of migrants. Some are refugees. What they have in common is that they or their parents or grandparents came to Australia from a non-English speaking country.

'Migrant writing' or 'migrant literature' is the oldest and still the most common term used to identify writing by non-English speaking background writers. It raises the expectation that the particular piece of 'migrant writing' will focus on issues of migration from the point of view of an *actual* migrant. It assumes the authentic voice of experience. It assumes the author and the narrator are one and the same person. It assumes a particular kind of writing.

Sometimes, the term 'migrant writer' is used to describe second-generation writers like myself or even third-generation writers like Anna Couani, writers who have never migrated anywhere (Gunew 1994: xi-xii). At other times, the work labelled 'migrant writing' maybe

written by a writer who is migrant or the child of a migrant but the work itself does not deal with issues of migration at all.

'Migrant writing' is:

> The general shorthand term for minority ethnic writings in Australia . . . In other words it is seen as transitory and not really rooted in the place at all. It is often talked about in the marketplace as a literature that deals with themes, characters and events situated 'outside' Australia.
> (Gunew 1994: 4)

The term 'migrant writing' identifies the writing by theme, the interest in the writing being sociological and historical but not literary. The insinuation is that this writing is closer to oral history than it is to literature, (Gunew 1994: 12) that it is not crafted, that the stories are written as they were lived. They are read, then, as historical documents would be read to gather information rather than to engage with the language and ideas of the work.

'Multicultural writing' and 'multicultural literature' are more recent and somewhat broader terms. Multiculturalism was developed as government policy in the 1970s. It represented a shift away from the assimiliationist polices which dominated the 50s and 60s.

Multiculturalism is:

> . . . based on the idea that ethnic communities, which maintain the languages and cultures of the areas of origin, are legitimate and consistent with Australian citizenship, as long as certain principles (such as respect for basic institutions and democratic principles) are adhered to. (Castles 1993: 116)

Cultural pluralism was only one aspect of the policy. Multiculturalism was (is) also concerned with issues of social justice - access, equity and participation, aiming to ensure Australians of non-English speaking background have access to the same services and the same opportunities as all other Australians.

Ellie Vasta argues that another 'aspect [is] that of ethnic and national identity' (Vasta 1996: 48). She contends that the dominant Australian identity is based on the oppression of aborigines and migrants, positioning them as the 'other'. Multiculturalism, according to Vasta has not altered this, it 'is part of a strategy of domination over minorities by the majority . . . multiculturalism is a power relationship' (Vasta 1996: 48).

I agree with Vasta that not only has multiculturalism failed to stop racism but that it has at times worked to perpetuate it, creating 'an atmosphere of passive tolerance . . . there is still a dominant ideology of Anglo-ness as well as an official but unrecognised everyday racism . . . (Vasta 1996: 70/71).

Essentially, the policy was based on a welfare model, focusing on the needs and problems of migrants rather than on the contributions made by migrants to Australia (Gunew 1994: 5). Where multiculturalism celebrates the contributions made by migrants at all these are limited to acknowledgments of the variety of food and restaurants now available, or to community festivals which focus on food, display home crafts and exhibit amateur traditional dance and music. (Gunew 1988: xvii)

"Multiculturalism intersects, but is not synonymous with, immigration', (Gunew 1994: 5) the term 'multicultural writing', like the term 'migrant writing' has been used to define writing by those of non-English speaking background whether they have ever migrated or not. The term 'multicultural' was meant to be inclusive of all cultures however it generally has not included Anglo-Celtic Australians, Indigenous Australians or migrants from English speaking countries.

The term 'multicultural writing' is deceiving for it insinuates 'many' cultures - it can be said that Australia is a multicultural country, a country made up of many cultures, but it cannot be said that any one writer is 'multicultural'. Most writers come from one or two, occasionally three cultural backgrounds very rarely from 'many' cultures.

As well as identifying the writer's background as non-English speaking, the term 'multicultural writing', identifies the writing. When a piece of writing - a novel, poem or short story is labelled 'multicultural writing/literature' the reader assumes the subject matter of the work is related to being of non-English speaking background, that it is either about migration or the problems of migration, or the problems associated with being second- or third-generation Australian of non-English speaking background.

What happens then when non-English speaking background writers deal with a range of themes in their writing, when they write some pieces about migration, about being a migrant and some pieces that have nothing to do with migration at all? Does the classification of

'multicultural writer' do them justice? Does it really reflect the nature of their writing? Or does it act to homogenise the differences (Gunew 1994: 23), placing together all those writers of non-English speaking background and all their writing as if they are the same:

> I am sitting here, pre-packaged and presented in a false statement of homogeneity with others whose gender I do not share, whose age I am not, whose experience I have not shared, whose politics I may well disagree with, and all with the blessed invocation of multiculturalism; all because we are not Anglos and this is in itself and by itself supposed to mean something. (Papaellinas 1987: 17)

Other terms have also been used to describe writers of non-English speaking background, to replace 'migrant writing' and 'multicultural writing'. 'Ethnic minority writing' is a more recent term adopted by Sneja Gunew because it 'signals that such writing needs to be seen always in relation to something designated . . . as ethnic *majority* writing; this usage ensures that cultural majority groups no longer remain invisible'(Gunew 1994: 23).[5]

In this discussion I am concerned with the advantages and disadvantages caused by categorising the work of any group of writers, but especially of writers of non-English speaking background and therefore identifying their writing as something other than 'Australian literature'.

I will be exploring why this categorising has come about and how, if at all, it has affected the level of recognition given to works by Australian non-English speaking background writers. I will not be entering a debate as to which term is the most appropriate, the most useful or the most acceptable; to a large degree this is determined by the context.

[5] While it is important to make visible the majority group, and to distinguish the majority as a group, it is cultural domination that needs to be made visible. As we know from historical examples such as apartheid in South Africa, it is not always the majority group that has the power.

Mainstream or Margins

> It is, therefore, necessary to . . . recognise that the problem here is not that of other cultures but of the dominant culture, which insists that the 'other' must always be recognised through racial or ethnic differences.
> Rasheed Araeen 1992 (Jordan 1995: 452)

The categorisation of the writing of non-English speaking background writers, places their work outside the mainstream, in the margins of Australian literature. Whether this is in the end to the detriment of the writers and their works, is the main focus of this thesis.

Australian literature, as Sneja Gunew argues, (Gunew 1994: 19) comes from an English tradition. In universities and schools, literature has been (and continues to be in some cases) taught in 'English Departments'. This creates a sense that all literature is English or written in English even when what is being studied is French or German or Russian. Australian literature has come to us from inside this English tradition, it is an Anglo literature that brings to us either the Australian or the English (motherland) landscape, the English or Australian culture and identity. We are an Anglo-Celtic country with, of course, an Anglo-Celtic literature, this even when over 18% of Australians are of non-English speaking background (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996).[6]

It is inevitable, therefore, that anything written from outside of this English tradition is seen as 'other', as 'exotic' (Hawthorne 1989: 259); the reader's interest often becoming a voyeuristic one (Hawthorne 1989: 264). What becomes noticeable, be it in Rosa Cappiello's *Oh Lucky Country* or in my novel, *My Life is Over Now*, is not what is happening for the characters but that the characters are not Anglo-Celtic.

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[6] The Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996 Census shows that 13,498,094 persons over the age of 5 years speak English only, while 2,487,073 persons over the age of 5 speak a language other than English. These figures do not reflect the total number of persons of non-English speaking background in Australia because many of us born in Australia but whose parents are of non-English speaking background, speak English at home and only speak our parents' native language with our parents and elderly relatives - therefore we are not picked up by these figures. We are, however, of non-English speaking background.

Among the comments from some readers of the first draft of my novel - 'I learnt a lot about Italians,' and 'I didn't know Italians did . . . ' The Italian characters in the novel are seen as 'other' and representative of a whole culture, rather than a mother who has lost her son or a working-class woman, trying to make her place in a new country. It is not that I want readers to ignore the Italianness of Lucia in *My Life is Over Now* or Rosa in *Oh Lucky Country* but I want them to see further than that:

> Many said that it was only his mother's will that had kept him alive. She fought with God for his life. It was a tug of war and she gave everything. There was much suffering for Luciano in those extra weeks and months of living - did Lucia watch her son and wish him dead - wish the pain away? It's unlikely, for she was praying for a miracle . . . (Gandolfo 1998: 67)

This focus on the ethnicity (could be gender, class, sexuality) of the character, or for that matter the ethnicity (gender, class, sexuality) of the writer, stops us, the reader from seeing 'other human beings as 'one of us'' (Rorty 1989: xvi)

It then raises the question for me as to whether a novel written by a non-English speaking background writer (with non-English speaking background characters) can ever be part of the mainstream of Australian literature.

'Mainstream' is defined in the *Macquarie Dictionary* as 'the dominant trend . . . ' (Delbridge 1982: 584). But how can we define 'mainstream' in the literary industry? For the purpose of this discussion, I have divided the literary industry, broadly into five main areas: the writer and their work, the publishers, the funding bodies, the reviewers, and academia.

There are writers whose work is experimental, avant-garde and therefore often inaccessible to many readers; the works of these writers often sit in the margins. However, in the case of writers from non-English speaking background it is not only those experimental writers - Ania Walwicz, Anna Couani - who remain in the margins but also writers like Lolo Houbein, Yasmine Gooneratne, Antigone Kefala, Velia Ercole, whose works are - in language, form and even content - mainstream. The works produced by these writers are at least as accessible as the novels of other Australian writers - Elizabeth Jolley,

Drusilla Modjeska,[7] Peter Carey, Helen Garner . . . It is not the writing that marginalises the works of non-English background writers, it is the response of publishers, reviewers, academics and readers to the writer's background.

Mainstream publishing is dominated by the large, profit-making publishing houses (many of them multinationals):

> . . . Rigby Heinemann, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press and Macmillan are all British-owned, Thomas Nelson is Canadian-owned, Longman is US-owned, and HarperCollins is own by Murdoch. Local imprints such as Cheshire, Dove and Rigby have been absorbed along the way. HarperCollins is also a large trade publisher, along with Penguin and Hodder Headline, both UK-owned, Pan Macmillan and Transworld, both German-owned, and the US-based Random House. Between them they dominate the market. (Davis 1997: 149)

They publish most Australian literature, they have access to all of the bookshops, they have large marketing departments which ensure their books are reviewed in the mainstream and literary press. Writers may have some measure of success (if success is measured here by sales or recognition through reviews and prizes) if published by small presses or even if they self-publish, but this is rare.

Funding for writers comes via the Australia Council's Literature Board as well as the via arts ministries at the state level. These bodies give funding to those writers and projects which they see as having potential - this is usually measured by the number of publications the writer has, as well as via peer assessment of the project outlined in the application. Small project grants may occasionally go to writers outside the mainstream but the larger grants and fellowships, because of their criteria, do go 'mainly [to] the established old guard' (Davis 1997: 118).

I am including awards and prizes under this funding section; though not always government sponsored, the awards and prizes assist in funding and supporting writers. The major Australian prizes and awards such as the Miles Franklin can certainly bring books to the attention of the public and are known to increase sales. These prizes are part of the mainstream literary industry.

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[7] Both Elizabeth Jolley and Drusilla Modjeska are migrants too, however, as English migrants they are not relegated to the margins.

Reviews are important. There are so many books published and released each week that it is difficult for most readers to keep up. Reviews help readers to find the books which best suit their tastes. Being reviewed in the mainstream press and in the major literary journals can make the difference between a successful novel and an unsuccessful one. However, '. . . the circles of reviewing do seem to be limited . . .'(Davis 1997: 121), reviews are often written by a small group of writers and critics, and on the whole the books reviewed are still mainly those written by middle-class, white men. [8]

Academia plays a major role in the canonising of literature. Barthes says, 'Literature is what gets taught.' (Gunew 1988: xv). Books survive through the years because they are introduced and reintroduced to readers through schools and university, because academics write about them, make them a focus of discussion and exploration. It certainly guarantees readership and I cannot think of any mainstream writer whose work has not been taught in universities or written about by academics - but I can certainly list a number of 'marginalised' writers who have not been taken up by academia. '. . . a sustained campaign by an academic can make a writer's career . . . those who fail to attract the right sort of academic attention are likely to be overlooked as 'serious' or 'literary' writers.' (Davis 1997: 118)

The question of what makes a novel part of the mainstream is a complex one. Rosa Cappiello's *Oh Lucky Country*, for example, was published by University of Queensland Press, a local, but nevertheless mainstream publisher. Cappiello did not receive funding for the writing of the novel; however, the University of Wollongong later received funding to employ Cappiello as writer-as-residence which qualifies as some form of official recognition by the government of her

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[8]In 1995 as part of a Women's Writing unit I taught at Victoria University of Technology we surveyed the review pages of *The Age* over a two month period. On average 80% of the books reviewed and 70% of the reviews were written by white middle-class men.

Similar research in the United Kingdom shows that the situation there is much the same:

> *The Times Literary Supplement* gives women about 20 per cent of its reviewing space, *The Guardian* about 18 per cent, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The New Statesman* (unlikely partners) romp home with 27 per cent. *The London Review of Books* gives women a miserable 16 per cent (and 86 percent of its reviewers are male). (Gerrard 1989: 43/4)

status as a writer. *Oh Lucky Country* was reviewed (not necessarily favourably) in the mainstream media including *The Australian,* (Gunew 1994: 95) and is taught in a number of university courses including as part of Literary Studies at Victoria University of Technology. However, I would argue that *Oh Lucky Country* is not part of the mainstream of Australian writing. It is read as 'migrant writing', not as 'Australian writing which happens to focus on migration' and if referred to at all in books of Australian literature this is only in passing.[9] It is, and remains, excluded and on the margins of Australian writing so that it exists outside and provides a 'frame' (Gunew 1994: 28) for what is Australian literature.

In other words, how we know what is Australian literature is by knowing what is not; and how we know what is literature is by knowing what is not literature. Just as my experience of being of non-English speaking background in Australian is an experience of being 'not Australian'. 'Where do you come from?' they ask. I have only ever lived in Australia, I come from Australia - but they ask because they *know* I am not Australian - Australian is what I am not:

> You never accept me. For your own. You always ask me where I'm from. You always ask me. You tell me I look strange. Different . . . You think you're better than me. (Walwicz 1989: 242)

> We were always asked: Where do you come from? Were you born here? Where did your parents come from, how long have they been here? How did you learn to speak English so well? How long have you been living in Australia? It must be a long time. Oh so you were born here? (Pitsis 1989:259)

Ethnicity is not attributed to those writers of Anglo background, 'who would ever expect to hear Patrick White described as an ethnic English writer of Australia? No, his gaze (no more or less ethnocentric than any other's) is more usually described as universal . . .' (Papaellinas 1993: xiii).

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[9] *The New Literary History of Australia* (Hergenhan 1988) only mentions *Oh Lucky Country* in passing; *Australian Literature: A Historical Introduction* (McLaren 1989) mentions the novel briefly and then not at all in a positive light:

> Rosa R. Cappiello's novel, *Oh Lucky Country* is . . . a desperately bitter narrative of the life an Italian finds waiting for her in Australia where sex offers the only escape from economic exploitation. (McLaren 1989:43)

The margins, a place of exclusion, a place on the fringe outside on the boundaries. To be marginalised is to be excluded from the dominant group and as a consequence from any advantages that fall on the dominant group. The dominant group is the 'universal man' (Gunew 1994: 29) and has the power:

> He is the standard by which everything else is measured . . . whiteness, to the white is the norm. It has a normative status in the same way that "man" has a normative status.
> (Hawthorne 1997: 35-36)

Australian writers of non-English speaking background are not alone in the margins - women writers (more women writers have made it to the mainstream now) gay and lesbian writers, Aboriginal writers, working-class writers are also on the margins of Australian Literature.

In the margins we are qualified - we are not the writer, we are the woman writer, the black writer, the lesbian writer, the ethnic minority writer, the working-class writer - we are that which is outside what is regarded as the 'norm' - and therefore usually not as good.

The 'canon', the greats of literature, come from the dominant group, from the mainstream. And if and when a writer of non-English speaking background does ever make it into the canon, gains overseas recognition they become Australian or acceptable as Australian - so that the only 'migrant' and 'multicultural' writers remaining in the category are those that **are not good enough** to be considered 'Australian' writers. The non-English speaking background writers who have made it to the canon are no longer viewed/spoken of/referred to/as non-English speaking background writers - they become then Australian writers. This is, it appears, an international trend:

> Writers of national fame or of striking formal accomplishments or of international fame are often categorically excluded from the realm of ethnic writing. This is illustrated by the cases of Nathaniel West, Eugene O'Neill, or Vladmir Nabokov and suggests the limited scope of what we define . . . as ethnic literature . . .
> (Sollors 1986: 241/242)

In Australia, David Malouf is one example:

> . . . no, sorry, not Malouf, he's not one, a multicultural writer . . . though Malouf is of NESB, he isn't one. He is well known overseas and says he is Australian, so it's official. (Papaellinas 1992: 166)

Other non-English speaking background writers insist they are Australian too, but for them (for us) it does not seem to work. David Malouf does not often write explicitly of the experience of being a Lebanese migrant in Australia (he does, however, often write about identity and exile). Is this because he knows that to write of those experiences would be to expose himself as not the 'norm'?

I believe so, for it must be clear to him as it is to me that while he remains at least on the public stage - Anglo - we can claim him as ours - Australian.

Of course, there are also issues of gender - he is male and there are no women of non-English speaking background who have the same status that Malouf has in Australian literature (matter of fact there are very few women at all that have the status of Malouf in Australian literature). It is also interesting to note that other non-English speaking background writers that seem to be moving into the 'Australian' rather than 'migrant/multicultural' categories are also men - Brian Castro, Christos Tsiolkas for example. It appears, on the surface anyway, that this is because there are no non-English speaking women writers who are good enough. After all very few women of non-English speaking background have had the number of books published that Malouf or Castro have, therefore they have not received the prizes, or the critical support. Cappiello for example has only had two novels published, and only one of those - *Oh Lucky Country* - has been translated into English. It is important to remember the difficulties faced by many women writers, the competing demands placed on them by their families and by society. These difficulties are accentuated even further in the case of migrant women who often have to work long hours in factories as well as cater to the needs of their families. However, there are many women of non-English speaking background writing - anthologies of 'migrant or multicultural' writing as well as bibliographies listing writers of non-English speaking background provide ample evidence of their existence and of their work - but their work is not being supported by

fellowships that would allow them the time to write, their work is not being published, not being awarded prizes - at least not at the rate of the male writers.

Gender is only one factor; there are also male writers of non-English speaking background whose work is categorised as 'migrant/multicultural' - Peter Skrzynecki, George Papaellinas, Manfred Jurgensen, to name a few. It is difficult without lengthy investigation to give concrete explanations as to why a writer like Malouf has made it into the mainstream while other non-English speaking background writers don't. In the space available here all I am doing is speculating, raising questions - gender is one, class is another. Malouf comes from an educated, middle-class background, he grew up with books and reading (Malouf 1991), the world of literature was one he was familiar with. Higher class, wealth and education allow for greater cultural and linguistic mobility.

Is it that his writing fits within the English tradition? Is it, as Catherine Mackinnon is quoted as saying, that 'Equality has come to mean a right to be treated like the white man when you can show you *are* like him' (Hawthorne 1997: 41)? Malouf's writing (and Castro's too) comes from a European tradition, and therefore has a more international focus, it is only now in his most recent novels that Malouf has turned his attention to Australia.

It could be that Malouf is 'ahead of his time', that he is one of the few writers of his age to have made it into the mainstream, because many of them as migrants have not had the opportunities, or been too busy with basic survival. But now, with more opportunities, younger non-English speaking background writers may start to appear. We will have to wait and see, there are some signs that this is beginning to happen with (male writers already mentioned - Castro and Tsiolkas and to a lesser degree Marchetta and Epanomitis, though all these writers except Castro have only had one novel published).

Of course, we need to ask if non-English speaking background writers want to be part of the mainstream. Some certainly do and their voices will be heard later in this thesis. Some do not want to be part of the mainstream, and believe that there are advantages for them and their work if they remain in the margins:

> . . . For me, as a fiction writer and poet . . . the marginal position is a desirable one, one which escapes confines inasmuch as that is

> possible . . . if you are prepared to publish your own work and write for a fairly small audience, as I am prepared to do, then you can maybe avoid the problem which so much big press literature has -- that of being bland, conservative and already seen.
> But although I accept the marginal position so fully, I suspect there was never another one open to me. The history of my life as an artist is one of multiple exclusions. It is only now in retrospect that I am grateful for the absence of an accepting peer group to which I would have had to conform. (Couani 1992: 97-8)

Personally, as a writer I want recognition for my writing. I want my writing to be read and judged for itself. I want to make a living as a writer. I want my writing to have an impact on readers. It is as part of the mainstream of Australian literature I believe that my writing has the greatest chance - after all the Australian (literary) market is already quite small.

Certainly, I want readers to know that I am female and Italo-Australian, my gender and ethnicity are important to me as a person and as a writer but I do not want them to be a qualifiers for my writing. Is this possible?

Is it possible to maintain a non-English speaking background profile and be accepted as part of mainstream Australian writing? Where do we place writers like Peter Skrzynecki, Lolo Houbein and Yasmine Gooneratne? Are they mainstream writers? They have been published by mainstream publishers, they have been reviewed and are studied to some extent in universities. They maintain their non-English speaking background identity but as long as they are referred to with qualifiers - 'migrant writer', 'Sri-Lankan-Australian writer', we have to question whether they ever have been or will be considered 'Australian writers'. There are no definite answers here, no clear line that marks the spot where writers move from the margins to the mainstream. It is, of course, partly a matter of perception but I am waiting to read reviews of the works of these writers that do not categorise them, I am waiting for them to be referred to as Australian writers.

History

Migrants of non-English speaking background have been coming to Australia for over two hundred years, and their history is linked to the history of Australia since white invasion.

Initially non-English speaking migrants were:

> appropriated as subjects in literature (in the sense of providing themes or being subjects of scrutiny) but they have not been speaking subjects in their own discourses. (Gunew 1982a: 48)

Eve Langley's *The Pea Pickers* is one example. In this 1940s novel Italians are presented as 'primitives, children, animals or deaf-mutes . . . ' (Langley 1991: 90) One of the best known depictions of a migrant in Australian writing is John O'Grady's *They're a Weird Mob* (Culotta 1957) written under the pseudonym of Nino Culotta. This novel, depicting the life of an Italian migrant in Australia advocated assimilation and reinforced the stereotypes of Italians and migrants generally.

There were novels written by writers of non-English speaking background before the 1970s but it was not until the late seventies and early eighties that the 'genre' migrant or multicultural writing started to become visible within Australian literature. This was mostly due to the work of a small group of non-English speaking background writers and academics (some writers themselves) to make 'an absence visible.' (Gunew 1994: 4-5). They established the presence of writing by non-English speaking background writers through the production of anthologies and bibliographies; the introduction of academic courses in universities, the development of a body of theoretical work; and the reviewing and publishing of work by writers of non-English speaking background. They also joined other lobby groups to ensure that government programs and funding were accessible to non-English speaking background Australians generally and in the arts in particular.

A number of anthologies published in the 1980s focused attention on the ethnic minority writing. In 1982 *Displacements: Migrant Storytellers* was produced by Sneja Gunew and published by Deakin University. It was followed by *The Strength of Tradition:*

Stories of the Immigrant Presence in Australian 1970-81 edited by R. F. Holt and published in 1983. In 1985 *Joseph's Coat: An Anthology of Multicultural Writing* was produced by Peter Skrzynecki. Also important was the journal *Outrider: A Journal of Multicultural Literature;* its first issue appeared in 1984 (Gelder 1989: 195-7). The editors had slightly different definitions of 'migrant writing' and different criteria for selection, they provided, via these anthologies the opportunity for a number of writers to be published for the first time.

Why were these anthologies (and others that followed) produced? Why did theorists, critics and writers - such as Gunew and Jurgensen - work towards the establishment of a 'multicultural literature'? Much as the work of Australian feminist literary theorists[10] concentrated on making visible the work of Australian women writers, the 'multicultural literature' theorist did the same for writers of non-English speaking background. Prior to the birth of this genre very little writing by writers of non-English speaking background was published. These theorists and writers aimed initially to show that writers of non-English speaking background did exist, and then to create opportunities for having the work of these writers published and recognised, '..focus[ing] on genuinely Australian writing and writers whose themes [had] tended to be overlooked.' (Holt 1983: xi)

Like the work done by feminists to highlight and reclaim women's writing, it has had some success. But rather than, as has been achieved at least to some extent with women writers, these writers being integrated into the mainstream of Australian literature, they have remained on the outside, in the margins:

> Until very recently Aboriginal and migrant artists found it extremely difficult to get published in this country. Special publishers began to propagate their work. Their good intentions served those in power: they reinforce the concepts of "mainstream" and "marginal" of "open society" and "ghetto". (Jurgensen 1987: 8)

Jurgensen points the finger at the specialist publishers, while Robert Dessaix blames the 'multicultural' industry:

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[10] D. Modjeska (1981) Debra Adelaide (1988) Patricia Clarke (1988) Lucy Frost (1984) Dale Spender (1988)

> . . . despite all those bibliographies, anthologies, rectified curricula, conferences on multiculturalism, Australia Council guidelines, government reports and learned articles in respected journals like *Meanjin* and *Outrider* . . . and despite all those academic salaries and fellowships . . . despite all that, those Anglo-Celtics just will not sit up and pay attention . . . (Dessaix 1991: 23)

There is no doubt in my mind that prior to the moves made by writers and academics to highlight and showcase literature by writers of non-English speaking background through the publication of anthologies and bibliographies, few writers were being published, and even fewer writers were being recognised within the broader Australian literary industry.

However, while it may have been 'strategically necessary in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s as resistance to assimilation . . . ' (Brewster 1995: 99) This categorisation of non-English speaking background writers and their work appears to be having a 'marginalising effect' in the 90s. (Brewster 1995: 99)

What specifically is responsible for the writing of non-English speaking background writers remaining on the margins of Australian literature? Is it as I have just argued the result of the categorising of this writing by literary theorists and critics? Or is it the quality of the writing itself? Or, is it in the nature of our society which will always identify and discriminate against those of non-English speaking background and their work?

If it is the latter, then categorising of writers of non-English speaking background is important for it makes the discrimination visible and therefore easier to deal with.

I want to explore the genre more closely to look at the positive and negative aspects of the work of these writers being categorised as part of the migrant/multicultural genre.

Advantages of being labelled

The lack of recognition and the 'silencing' of non-English speaking background writers was the incentive to invent a category which would give these writers a place within Australian literature. It can be argued that the establishment of the genre has given voice to writers whose work may otherwise never have been published. In anthologies mentioned above there are, for example, a number of writers who have remained relatively unknown, whose stories would probably never have reached an audience without the existence of the particular anthology and its focus on 'migrant' 'multicultural' or 'ethnic minority writers'.

As part of the work done in this area, 'markets' have been established, some would argue, for writing that focuses on multicultural issues. This market, primarily an educational one, has created some demand and some writers have been able to exploit 'this category as a means of getting their books into the textbook market for schools and universities.' (Jurgensen 1984: 50)

There has been the establishment of units within Literary Studies degrees which focus on 'multicultural writing' as well as a growing awareness in general literary studies units, focused on Australian literature, that the work of non-English speaking background writers, along with the work of Aboriginal writers, should be included. This has, to some extent, resulted in the development of a canon of writers of non-English speaking background who have become reasonably well known among students of literature.

This has been achieved, at least in part, by the effort of those who produced anthologies and bibliographies which have given us 'concrete examples' that these writers exist. In some cases, inclusion in anthologies has promoted the work of particular writers so that they have been published in the mainstream:

> . . . the case of *Beyond the Echo* . . . as a direct result of its publication, three writers had their own collections published: Langford, Vavere and Giles . . . It appears the anthology tactic of promoting writers does work after all. (Gunew 1991: 46)

All three novels were published by Penguin, Susan Hawthorne, the editor at the time published all three writers:

> It was pre-recession and that helped. I think in a different economic climate none would have been published. Sally Morgan's success and the bicentenary, that is, political timing assisted Langford. Sneja [Gunew] sent all three manuscripts to me for reading. Sometimes one or two people in the right place makes a difference. Angelo Loukakis at Random has also played a similar role. (personal conversation with Susan Hawthorne)

However, these anthologies and others like them continue to be the only way that many writers of non-English speaking background get published:

> Whereas today there would be an outcry if an anthology containing no women's writing appeared (though women are still by no means given equal representation), the principle that one-third of an anthology of Australian literature should be devoted to non-Anglo-Celtic Australian writers is still far from accepted.
> (Gunew 1992a: xix)

The literature by writers of non-English speaking background, like the literature of Aboriginal writers even though it remains in the margins, has made an important addition to our 'discourses of nationalism and identity' (Gunew 1992b: 40). It has brought attention to and highlighted the need for people to have their stories told, and brought attention to and highlighted the fact that not all Australians have the same story.

The role played by academics and writers of non-English speaking background has been important in showing that writers of non-English speaking background exist, that they are writing and have been writing since they arrived in Australia and that this writing has introduced a much 'broader and richer spectrum to Australian writing' (Jurgensen 1981: v).

Disadvantages of being labelled

> Joseph Conrad, Primo Levi, and Vladmir Nabokov, writing in Australia today would be labelled 'multiculturals'.
> Multicultural has become synonymous with Martian. The term denotes a literary kiss of death and sends academic critics scurrying for their bedside Virginia Woolfs. Ethnic or multicultural writers are little green men and women from Mars landing on Anglo-Celtic Australian soil with their foreign-sounding names and ray-gun typewriters. (Safransky 1992: 204)

I am concerned that the work done by these academics and writers to establish and publicise this genre and these writers does not benefit the writers in the **long term**; that creation of this genre has resulted in the further marginalisation of writing by non-English speaking background writers.

Multiculturalism has not reached much past the eating of Vietnamese soup or Indian curries:

> . . . if a migrant dares leave his/her allotted niche and venture out into the mainstream with pretensions of being taken seriously as a writer then the gates will come crashing down as fast as you can say 'multiculturalism'. Multicultural writing which purports to support linguistically disadvantaged groups can bring them into the mainstream has managed to do exactly the opposite ensuring that they remain at the margin . . . (Casella 1994: 147-8)

The labelling of any group of writers/literature as a particular genre sets up expectations in the reader (Carr 1989: 6). We all know what to expect from novels in the romance or the crime genre and in the same way we think we know what to expect from novels in the migrant/multicultural literature genre (or for that matter novels labelled 'Aboriginal writing'). This results in some readers never being introduced to the novels in this genre either because they are not interested in migrants or wogs or because having read one they assume they have read them all.

There is an assumption that non-English speaking background writers 'particularly those who draw attention to their awareness of languages other than English' and a culture other than Australian or English in their work are 'in the main dealing simply with their own life-stories . . .' (Gunew 1994: xii).

These works are read as oral histories rather than works of literature, and as such remain on the margins of literary production. The focus is on content, rather than form, on the 'story' rather than the language or the structure. The assumption being that there is very little skill, craft or creativity involved, after all these writers are just telling the story of their lives. 'The playfulness or reflexivity in their writings, manifest for example in the work of Rosa Cappiello and Ania Walwicz, remains largely unacknowledged' (Gunew 1994: xii).

Irony is not read as irony in these works because writers of non-English speaking background are not believed to be able to be ironic. (Gunew 1992b: 44)

These works are read as presenting one life which reflects the universal experience of that cultural group - that Rosa Cappiello in *Oh Lucky Country* is, for example, reflecting the experiences of Italian migrant women generally - rather than telling the story of one woman's experience of migration. These are considered authentic accounts rather than creative works.

Historically, both women and ethnic or racial minority groups have been discursively situated as somehow closer to the 'authentic' and therefore to 'nature' and experience - in opposition to the intellectual and rational approaches connected with white and male:

> Why are 'authentic' and 'literalness' conceived as oppositional terms? This is not a literary-critical issue dealing, for instance with the work of Patrick White who is granted [the ability of] both creative privilege and insight into the 'problems of Australian culture'. . . (Grossman 1996: 1)

These works are taken to be autobiographical and are 'subjected to the more rigid rules of autobiography where experimentation is less usual than with the novel' (Hawthorne 1989: 261). It is also this presumption of the autobiographical which results in a certain negative reading of a novel like *Oh Lucky Country,* the assumption that it is a true story results (in my experience) in the Australian reader feeling defensive of the attacks made by the 'real' narrator against the 'real' Australian. This kind of reading assumed that all that these writers can write is their 'real' life stories:

> They are ways of saying: 'You cannot write in any other way but that of the Greek Australian because you are Greek Australian; you cannot write in other way because you are Italian Australian' . . . In

> my case, I have been described as Chinese Australian. The assumption would be that there is no other way I can write besides that of dealing with racism and the Chinese question. If I launched into something else I would be described as inauthentic.
> (Castro 1984: 48)

Let's look for a moment at the Helen Demidenko/Darville scandal which made obvious the complex nature of authenticity both in relation to the text and to the author. Her novel *The Hand the Signed the Paper,* at first assumed to be an authentic account of a Ukrainian family history (Jost 1996: 236), was awarded a number of prizes. Some critics (Bone 1995: 15) argued that the novel was anti-Semitic but they were faced with claims that this could not be censored, had to be heard because it was the 'real' experience of a particular family (Bentley 1995: 22). We can only speculate as to whether the novel would have won prizes if the author had been known to be Helen Darville:

> . . . It was made quite clear that one of the most important reasons the book won the award was because it was an important expression of the migrant experience, and in saying that, I'm quoting the judges. There was much talk at the time of the book winning the Miles Franklin in particular that it was about multicultural Australia . . . There's no doubt in my mind that if it had been just simply Helen Darville, daughter of English immigrants, writing a book, a fiction about Ukraine, it wouldn't have come close to winning any award . . .
> Alan Kohler, editor *Age* (Jost 1996: 146)

I doubt whether *The Hand that Signed the Paper* would have been published let alone awarded prizes had it been known that the author was Helen Darville. The novel would immediately have been identified as controversial and possibly anti-semitic and therefore too much of a risk. It was the supposed 'authentic' nature of the novel that protected (to some extent), the novel, the novelist and the judges. It was the authentic voice of the migrant writer that made acceptable to some[11] a novel that may not otherwise have been acceptable:

> . . . [that] a young woman of English descent whose life experience had been confined to a comfortable middle-class suburb of Brisbane would have been seen as the appropriate person to interpret experiences as profound and traumatic as those that occurred in

[11] The debate on the literary merit of the novel became quite heated at times, with reputable and respected critics on both sides

> Ukraine during the 1930s and 40s? Of course not. Helen Darville would not have won the Miles Franklin award because she wouldn't have been in the race. It is a moot point whether the book would have been published. (Jost 1996: 160/1)

There is a contradiction here - I have argued earlier that writing by non-English speaking writers is seen as 'less than', however, in this case it made the novel more publishable than it may otherwise have been. Is this the 'growing allure of multiculturalism . . . ' (Riemer 1996: 139) or is there always an allure of the exotic and some individuals chosen to represent it or is it that the works of some non-English speaking writers are in 'vogue' (Riemer 1996: 139) or is it that in the politically correct climate we live in there was pressure on the literary industry and therefore the judges of the Miles Franklin to '. . . award their prize to the work of a writer they took to be of Ukrainian descent reflect[ing] a determination to adjust the real or perceived bias in such awards towards writers of Anglo-Celtic extraction' (Riemer 1996: 140)?[12]

We will never know for certain, the judges have not made any admission of this nature. However, whether the Miles Franklin was awarded to Helen Demidenko because she was Ukrainian or not, the nature of the debate that preceded the award reinforces the place of both the autobiographical narrative and writing by those of non-English speaking background back on the margins - for authenticity was seen by some at least to replace in part literary merit.

If the award was given to *The Hand that Signed the Paper* because the author was of non-English speaking background even though the book was not the 'best one' nominated, then there is obvious discrimination. If, however, the Miles Franklin award was given on the basis of literary merit, the debate that followed the announcement of the award, that accused the judges of giving the award to an inferior work because of the writer's ethnic background is another version of the same discrimination. It seems that we (the literary industry and readers) know that novels by non-English speaking background writers cannot win the award on their own merit, this is because we know the work of these writers is not good enough, not because we are aware of the reading positions of the judges.

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[12] Malouf and Demidenko are the only two writers of 'non-English speaking background' ever to have been award the Miles Franklin award - Demidenko is not, we now know, of non-English speaking background and Malouf is 'Australian'.

The reading of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* was predicated on the notion of life story - much like the reading of novels by Aboriginal writers. It means these books/novels are read in a different context - taken like a dose of castor oil because they are good for you and you will learn something from them - rather than as literature - to be savoured, enjoyed, engaged with:

> . . . a new short-story collection called *The Blue Mountains in Mujani* by Latvian-born Aina Vavere is categorised on the cover as 'stories of immigrant experience'. Sartrians and pious multiculturalists may queue for it, but no one else is likely to. On the other hand, *The Blue Mountains in Mujani,* stories of witchcraft and delusion and the pain of building a new reality, by the Australian writer Aina Vavere, might have had a fighting chance. (Dessaix 1991: 26)

It is not only the assumption that these writers and their work are solely concerned with the experience of migration, of being a migrant or a child of a migrant in Australia, but also that once you have read one you have read them all. This implies homogeneity, not only by placing them in the category of life story but assuming similarities across cultures. Differences are not recognised, for what can an Italian and a Vietnamese writer have in common except possibly some 'thematic' preoccupations'. (Gunew 1994: 23)

As there was (and still is among some groups) the assumption women writers speak in some kind of 'unified voice', it is also believed to be the only possible manifestation of the migrant voice. Homogeneity is always implied. (Gunew 1992a: 42)

They are read because they provide an insight into the 'exotic' (Hawthorne 1989: 259) rather than an insight into our own culture, our selves. The style of the writing, the structure of the novel, the imagery is taken to be from that culture, from that life rather than the work, the creation of the writer.

In addition, there is also the problem of language, especially for those writers for whom English is their second language - and the assumption that as a writer from non-English speaking background that they do not know the language.

They are not given the same 'respect' in relation to their work, one thinks of the early attempts to edit work by Aboriginal writings into 'proper English.' Or, more recently, the failure to edit Aboriginal writers for fear of imposing standard Australian English:

> Put yourself in the position of an editor faced with the following lines:
>
> *Father's only edge has gone*
> *Why is it that people are sleeping dreadful dreams?*
>
> . . . it may be that the author simply does not know that, in standard English, we dream dreams rather than sleeping them. If the writer were Dylan Thomas, we would accept the phrase as splendid poetry. Are we being prejudiced when we query the phrase with the non-white author? Or if we do not query it, are we being prejudiced by failing to give the author the same critical help we would afford a native speaker? (Hudson 1982: 15)

These works remain on the outer, they do not make it to the literary canon, if they continue to be studied and written about at all it is in marginal areas - in university subjects called Multicultural Writing, Migrant Writing, Minority Writing - there is a sense in which we believe they are not good enough to be published outside the genre. We believe they are not as good as those novels and novelists published in the mainstream, that they are being published as a form of social justice, to balance the inequities.[13]

These writers and their work are given a lower status, of some interest possibly, but certainly not 'great literature' which impacts on the writers' careers, on the way their work is received.' It is not infrequent to see writers reject the label 'multicultural' either because they fear the stigma attached to it . . . (Ommundsen 1995: 160):

> The warning is against calling me a 'multicultural' or an 'ethnic'. Both are euphemisms for 'the other' . . . 'Ethnic' denotes anything belonging to a people . . . I will not be called an ethnic. Stop it. I am Greek. Or if you like, Australian . . . Call me Australian. And Remember I didn't say English . . . (Papaellinas 1987: 15)

These works are seen as not as good as - predicated on the notion of excellence, that 'somehow excellence streaks ahead and that the 'good' writer transcends any contexts of history, class, gender, race' (Gunew 1992a: xviii). That a good writer will finally be discovered and published, and if these writers of non-English speaking background have not been published in the mainstream it is because their writing

[13] Individual publishers may well publish the work because it is good writing, original, fresh but marketing departments will often categorise - pointing out the ethnic background of the writer, placing them within the multicultural genre - so that the book reaches us the reader already pre-packaged and we believe we know what to expect.

is not at the level of 'excellence' that is expected. It assumes a universal agreement of what is 'literature' and especially what is 'great literature'. So the works of these writers, and the writers themselves, remain in marginal positions in relation to Australian literature. It is only when the writers become famous that they are no longer regarded as 'ethnic' or gay or black.

Most writers have support networks that include other writers and/or those interested in writing, this means that they have people interested in reading and commenting on their work, on listening to and discussing their ideas. This helps the development of their writing. Writers of non-English speaking background are frequently isolated, they do not have access to the same networks and supports that Anglo-Celtic writers have. This is related to problems of language, and of not knowing what services and supports are available. It means that writers of non-English speaking background are less likely to receive information about grants, about courses, about writing groups, about publishing opportunities. Often they find themselves isolated from their 'mother' country and culture too, their work having become too Australian, 'earn[s] a negative response' (Bobis 1994: 127) from critics and readers in their 'mother' country. They don't belong therefore in either culture, their writing does not belong in either culture.

There might be or have been some advantages for some writers, as in the case of Helen Demidenko, with the winning of awards and prizes this may not necessarily result in ongoing recognition for the writer - recognition that ensures them a place in Australian literature.

This discussion of advantages and disadvantages of being categorised as a 'migrant' or 'multicultural writer' assumes that there is/was a choice for writers of non-English speaking background as to whether they be categorised into a separate group/genre. It assumes that 'multicultural professionals' (Dessaix 1991: 28) - academics and critics - created the genre and not that the genre is a reflection of the social and political situation in Australia (Rizzo 1995: 149). But what if the existence of the genre is a reflection of the social and political situation in Australia, a reflection of the racism and prejudice that exists, in that case no matter what the disadvantage of being categorised this may be the only way that these writers could ever get published.

And if we then acknowledge that this categorisation had some benefits but that now it is 'causing considerable harm to writers of non-English speaking background . . . ' (Dessaix 1991: 24) and that writers should do all they can do to avoid its tag:

> No established migrant writer *needs* to appear in an anthology, and no migrant who isn't established should be caught dead in an anthology, unless he or she wants to be marginalised for life. . . (Dessaix 1991: 28)

This may not be possible, there may not be many other publishing options for writers of non-English speaking background.

Dessaix may be right when he says that 'no established migrant writer *needs* to appear in an anthology' of migrant or multicultural writing if he means that the established writer can find other outlets for his/her work, however the voice of the established writer of non-English speaking background needs to be in the anthology for political reasons - to draw attention to migrant and multicultural writing and to the importance of the inclusion of these themes and voices in Australian literature.

Dessaix goes on to say that no 'migrant who is not established should appear in a migrant/multicultural anthology 'unless he or she wants to be marginalised for life . . . ' Many writers of non-English speaking background would agree with Dessaix, once a writer's work is in such a collection it is difficult for the writer to do away with the label.

It does depend, of course, on what one means by marginalised - here as I have said earlier Langford, Vavere and Giles had books published by Penguin after their appearance in *Beyond The Echo* (Gunew 1988). The initial collection of works for an anthology promoted through advertising and through writers' networks can draw out material that may not otherwise make it to publication. The anthology editor is privy then to the quantity and quality of the work by, in this case, non-English speaking background writers and is able, as Sneja Gunew was, to promote the work of these writers to editors and publishers.

Italo-Australian Women Novelists

There have only been four Italo-Australian women novelists to date in Australia whose novels have been published.[14] The first, *No Escape* by Velia Ercole, was published in 1932; she was followed over fifty years later by Rosa Cappiello with her novel, *Oh Lucky Country*, published in 1984. In more recent years two other novelists have had their novels published, Melina Marchetta's *Looking for Albrandi* in 1992, and Julie Capaldo's *Love Takes You Home* in 1995.

Why have there been so few Italo-Australian women novelists?

> Being Italian American, being female, and being a writer is being thrice an outsider, and why this is so is partly in the history and social background of the Italian women who came to this country, partly in the literary mould of the country itself. (Barolini 1985: x)

It is not difficult to understand why there have been so few Italo-Australian women writers; to begin with, the majority of Italian migrants came to Australia from southern Italy, from small rural villages. They were poor, and illiteracy was common especially among the women. South Italian women moved mainly into factory work, where they worked long hours. They did not have access to English classes and, because they spent most of their time with other migrant women and with their families, many of them never learnt to speak English. Even now, many of these Italian women migrants, some of whom have spent a life time in Australia, do not speak English.

The novels written by these four Italo-Australian women novelists (as with the novels of many other writers of non-English speaking background) defy the boundaries set by the genre 'migrant or multicultural writing' but remain classified as such and as a

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[14] There are two other novelists that need to be mentioned here - Diane Cilento wrote two novels, *Hybrid* and *The Manipulator*, in the 70s. I have not included Diane Cilento for two reasons - first of all her novels are not 'literary' they are popular fiction based around the film world. Secondly Diana Cilento, is a fourth generation Australian and quite removed I believe from the experience of being of non-English speaking background.

Elise Valmorbida's first novel, *Matilde Waltzing*, was published in October 1997 as I was in the final stages of this thesis. It is too early yet to tell how this novel will be received, reviewed and recognised so has not been included here.

consequence I believe, have been relegated to the margins of Australian literary production.

It is important to note that while this thesis concentrates on the work of Italo-Australian women novelists, Italo-Australian women writers have been active in other areas. Italian women's drama has been particularly popular as well as short story and poetry writing. There is also a number of auto/biographies written by Italian women including: *Amelia: a long journey* (Triaca 1985); *Emma: A Translated Life* (Ciccotosto 1990); and *Approaching Elise* (Polizzotto 1988).

Velia Ercole - *No Escape*

> Two animals, caged, snarling at one another. He was sickened. Without arguing further he grabbed his hat and bag and went out of the house and down to the livery stables. As he went down Main Street he was greeted by those he passed. Few went past without a smile or "Good morning, Doctor." Several stopped to speak with him on various local topics. Because of his state of mind these casual amiabilities assumed importance. They know me and like me well enough, he thought. These people are friendly. She could have been happy enough if she had wished. Her cursed obstinacy! I've had to give up as much as she has given up. She has made no effort. These morbid women! A man is a fool to marry. (Ercole 1932: 160)

Ercole's first novel, *No Escape*, published in 1932, and quite successful at the time has all but disappeared. It is out of print[15] and very few people have heard of the novel or the novelist.

No Escape was published in London by Butterworth, and it won the 1932 *Bulletin* novel prize. *Dark Windows*, Ercole's second novel, based on the lives of her mother's French relatives was published two years later. She went on to write a number of other novels (mostly romance) under her pseudonym - Margaret Gregory (Adelaide 1988: 60).

Ercole was born in White Cliffs, New South Wales in 1907. Her father was an Italian doctor, Dr Quinto Ercole and her mother was Australian born of French and Irish parents. (Rizzo 1995: 122)

No Escape's central characters are an Italian doctor, Leo Gherardi, and his wife, Teresa, living in a small Australian country town. And it seems that at least in part the character of Leo is modelled on Quinto Ercole who was also a political refugee and a doctor who moved to country New South Wales. (Rizzo 1995: 123)

Leo Gherardi was involved in socialist activities while at university, there were problems and he was forced to leave Italy. His wife, Teresa, was an opera singer and she left behind a promising career to follow her husband. They, Leo and Teresa with their son, Dino, settle first in the city but after some financial problems resulting from Leo's poor investments they move to Banton, a small mining town.

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[15] I was only able to find two copies of the novel in Victoria. One copy is kept in the Special Collection at Melbourne University's Ballieu Library and the other at the State Library. I made enquires at several secondhand bookshops without any luck.

Their intention is to gain a pardon for Leo and save enough money to return to Italy as soon as possible. Leo and Teresa both seem committed to that goal but the return home is not so urgent for Leo, who as a doctor, (if not as famous as he and Teresa believe he would have been in Italy) and with a reasonable command of the English language has started to make friends, to care about the community - planning to improve the hospital and health care generally in the area. He has started to assimilate, to settle in the town.

For Teresa, it is much more difficult to break the isolation - she does not have a profession to occupy her, to bring her respect. Language and culture but also differing values and interests isolate her from the other women:

> Dire and unspeakable outrage! Annihilation of respectability! The wife of Banton's doctor doing her own housework, not because she could not find good servants . . . one could understand that . . . but because they cost too much! Sad breaking of Banton's code . . . The minister's little wife was utterly routed . . . (Ercole 1932: 52)

Teresa is not willing to assimilate, to abandon herself to them, she does not give in to any of their pressure, her focus is elsewhere, she does not want to find herself fitting in.

The town, or at least the town's women, find her annoying and difficult:

> She's too stuck-up. Thinks we aren't good enough for her. Would you have believed it! . . . we can get on quite well without her. I'm sorry, though, for her husband. He's such a charming man. So much more adaptable. (Ercole 1932: 134)

Teresa's blight is not just that of a migrant woman, though her foreignness does exacerbate the problems she faces:

> . . . Ercole was one of the women writers of the early part of this century who made brave attempts to make the private lives of women and essential part of their society's consciousness . . . For Ercole, the private crisis of a migrant family also becomes a commentary on the isolation and narrow-mindedness of Australian people in the outback. (Rizzo 1995: 156)

Teresa's blight is that of a woman whose ambitions go further than an outback town, further than being the wife of a country doctor. A woman with dreams for herself as well as for her family.

The isolation, the realisation that her dreams, and his, will never be realised is devastating for Teresa. She tries a range of strategies but in the end she suicides, believing that by her death at least she can save her husband and son.

Teresa's mental decline is, for me, the most gripping and confronting part of the novel. There are no more choices for her, she is powerless to change the situation, she cannot regain her life:

> That sensation of sinking was physical. Several times lately she had found herself cowering against a wall, pressing her head there, trying to merge herself into that imagined darkness, to touch the lowest pit of misery . . . (Ercole 1932: 172)

After Teresa's death Leo reconciles himself to the fact that he will never return to Italy, her death did not have the effect she had wished. Leo marries a local woman and settles into the life of the country doctor.

In *No Escape*, Ercole certainly deals with the problems facing a migrant Italian woman, the isolation, the difficulties of making friends and developing relationships, of accustoming oneself to a foreign culture:

> And then Teresa was left to her loneliness. With bleak eyes she watched the progress of the game . . . A half hour passed. She still sat, defying all genuinely kind efforts to provoke her interest. Heavy, heavy was her presence . . . A dull pain grew in her, a sense of her failure, her defeat. She had done something wrong, said something wrong, had proved to be utterly inadequate, unable to profit, advantage herself by any overture. (Ercole 1932: 52)

Ercole is also concerned with the isolation and loneliness faced by many women living in the Australian outback. These issues were being dealt with by a number of women writers at the time, in different ways, for isolation and loneliness were important issues for all women in the bush.

Central to the novel is the relationship between the Leo and Teresa, issues of gender and power in marriage are part of Ercole's concerns in this novel:

> We should never have married! That was the mistake. You would have been better off without me. I would have been better without you. We were fools. But you were a fool as well as me. Now you

> must stand by your bargain. We are in this together. I do my part as well as I can. (Ercole 1932: 157)

There is a number of heated arguments and fights between Leo and Teresa, they are often over dramatised, Rizzo argues that they are 'reminiscent of nineteenth century Italian opera in the grand tradition of Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* . . . ' (Rizzo 1995: 142). I agree that there is a larger than life drama in the novel. 'Teresa plays the madwoman and she is not weak' (Rizzo 1995: 142). Ercole uses these devices to highlight the male power in marriage which can bring down even a strong woman.

Ercole is concerned here with what a woman has to give up for a man, like other novels of the time 'Richardson's Maurice Guest . . . Prichard's *The Black Opal* . . .' Teresa finds that her ' . . . aspirations come into conflict with [her] . . . relationship with a man . . .' (Ferrier 1985: 9). Unlike these novels though *No Escape* does not end in a happy resolution for Teresa, the message from Ercole, '. . . for women, a central commitment to art is undesirable or impossible' (Ferrier 1985: 9). It is interesting to note, though we can only speculate on the significance because very little is known about Ercole, that before she married Velia Ercole had written literary novels, however as Mrs Margaret Gregory she only wrote romance novels. Was this in part a result of her marriage and the commitments that marriage bought with it? Was this the sort of pressure she foresaw in *No Escape*? There is some record of her obvious disappointment with this change:

> Her change of direction was purely a bread and butter thing. What she considered her better work, she wrote under the name "Velia Ercole". The trash, as she termed it, was under "Margaret Gregory". Margaret Ryan in a letter to Santina Rizzo (Rizzo: 1995 167)

Ercole gives us not only insight into the private lives of this family, the violence that simmers in their relationship, but at the same time paints a picture of life in the country town of Banton. There are issues of social justice; the poverty of some families is contrasted with the middle class snobbery of others. To label this a migrant or multicultural novel is too narrow a description of what Ercole is exploring in *No Escape*. This is more than a novel about 'the sometimes insurmountable problems faced by migrant women . . . ' (Spender 1988: 299).

The failure to see the novel more broadly, to understand Ercole's use of migration as a device to explore issues of unfulfilled dreams, of life's disappointment, of marriage, undermines the novel.

At the same time it is important to acknowledge *No Escape* as the 'first Italo-Australian novel' (Cooper 1992: 68) and among the first to be written by any non-English speaking background woman writer '. . . her novels broke the ground for multicultural literature in Australia twenty years before the publication of Judah Waten's *Alien Son.*' (Rizzo 1995: 128). *No Escape* portrays Italian characters not as stereotypes but as real people dealing with real problems.

The genre of migrant/multicultural writing did not exist in the 1930s in Australia, if it had this may have been the first book to fall into its net. It is only in retrospect that *No Escape* has been labelled as such. An important novel in the history of Australian literature and yet in the 1990s few have heard of the novel or the novelist.

The 1930s was a productive period for women novelists:

> Women were producing the best fiction of the period and they were, for the first and indeed the only time, a dominant influence in Australian literature . . . (Modjeska 1981: 1)

At the time *No Escape* did reasonably well, it won *The Bulletin* competition in 1932 and previous winners included Katherine Prichard's *Coonardoo* and M Barnard Eldershaw's *A House Is Built.* But these novels and novelists remain much better known (mainly due to the work of feminist academics such as Dale Spender and Drusilla Modjeska) in comparison to *No Escape* and Velia Ercole. Drusilla Modjeska in *Exiles at Home* mentions the novel only once and then in the 'second rank' along with 'Jean Devanny, Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Jean Campbell . . . ' (Modjeska 1981: 4) (Rizzo 1995: 127):

> Franklin and Ercole had their country town childhoods in common. Both wrote promising first novels in their early twenties that dealt with living in the outback. But *My Brilliant Career* was much more popular and well known than Ercole's *No Escape.* Both women wanted a career of writing and did so as expatriates.
> (Rizzo 1995: 134)

So why did this novel never receive ongoing recognition? It is not dissimilar to other novels of the time which concentrate on the

plight of women in the bush; the writing is at times tedious but also often intimate and vivid:

> All this is lifelike, what we see of it; and so are the two principal characters: sensitive, intense, impulsive, trying to assimilate themselves to the new and strange conditions, but hoping to return eventually to their beloved Italy . . . The book is written with humanity and an intense sincerity. (Green 1961: 1047)

No Escape may not be one of the greatest novels ever written, but it is comparable to other novels of its period. The writing is as good as in *My Brilliant Career* and the story as compelling. It appears, then, that even with the revival in interest in early Australian women's writing, even the feminist academics and critics - mainly white and Anglo-Saxon - are only interested - and this may be unconsciously - in the stories of their British and Irish ancestors, but not in those of migrant women.

Ercole was not among the women writers that Nettie Palmer promoted through her critical writings in the early 1900s, certainly I could not find any evidence of Palmer commenting on Ercole's work nor could I find any evidence of contact or correspondence between Ercole and other women writers of her time. She was obviously not part of the networks, and we do not know the reasons why she was not part of the networks, it may have been by choice, it may also, of course, have been because she was of non-English speaking background and did not have the same access to these networks.

Rosa Cappiello - *Oh Lucky Country*

> I write because I don't fit into the environment I live in. By environment I mean both the Australia whose negative aspects I experienced before they were counterbalanced by its positive ones, and the Italy where I grew up and developed a critical and intellectual sense - along with a sense of disquiet and rebellion and a considerable lack of patience with myself and with reality. (Cappiello 1987: 12)

Rosa Cappiello's *Oh Lucky Country* was first published in 1981 in Italy, in Italian. *Paese Fortunata* won the Italian Premio Calabria award in 1982. The novel was translated by Gaetano Rando. *Oh Lucky Country* was published in Australia in English in 1984.

Cappiello was born in Naples and migrated to Australia in 1971. *Oh Lucky Country* has become the classic 'migrant' novel, and in that capacity has done reasonably well:

> . . . *Oh Lucky Country* has been reprinted three times in eleven years. The literary merit belongs entirely to Rosa Cappiello who has created a masterpiece of Australian literature . . . (Rando 1995: 65)

Rando may well think so, but as was discussed earlier, this novel is very rarely mentioned in discussions of 'masterpiece[s] of Australian literature' and its reprints I would think are more likely to reflect the increased reading of this novel in university courses on multicultural writing than due to its popularity as a classic Australian novel.

It was certainly not well received in Australia when it was published, 'the immediate response was to dismiss it patronisingly as incompetent' (Gunew 1994: 95).

Oh Lucky Country, is written in the first person, the narrator's name like the author's is Rosa, and so it is read as an autobiographical work, perpetuating:

> . . . the production of unified subjects: the author, the narrator, the woman, and the migrant converge in the spurious unity of an 'I'. The text is heard as a natural, untutored confession. (Gunew 1994: 95)

Rosa, the narrator, like Rosa, the author, is certainly a migrant, arriving alone in Australia in the 1970s. But this is not oral history, this is a novel, a work of fiction.

Rosa arrives in Australia to find that it is 'not the promised land' (Cappiello 1984: 1) she was led to believe it would be. We follow Rosa into cheap and noisy rooming houses, into factories and into the homes and lives of the people she meets.

Cappiello creates a parade of carnivalesque characters to raise issues of class and gender, as well as ethnicity. Its narrative drives a re-visioning and re-focusing of Australian experiences of nationhood, identity and place.

The characters in this novel are often larger than life, nauseating, grotesque:

> Sofia is their founder. A sow in heat. She lets out her ample breath, attracting to her lap the Opera House, Ayers Rock, the Kwinana Freeway . . . A superhuman task for anyone but not for her . . . She possesses a belly capable of doing in a whole regiment . . .
> (Cappiello 1984: 19)

They challenge our notion of the migrant, of women, of the working class. Cappiello reverses the 'migrant gaze . . . [so that] the migrant may in turn, transform the Australian experience into an object of scrutiny.' (Gunew 1985: 176) and instead of the migrant being the 'object constructed by Australian culture . . . ' (Gunew 1985: 174) the migrant constructs both herself and the Australian culture:

> Anzac day is a great national holiday, a day for lots of drinking. Dusty ghosts who resurrect the martyrs of the past, no longer with us, kaput, and, after the parade, when cannon, machine guns, flags, patriotic speeches are all wrapped up and put away, the wankers rush off to the pub to wash the residue of desert dust out of their throats. For me it is a day of rest, a different day from the usual, a day which makes the migrant feel part and parcel of the system, you can be patriotic in any country . . . (Cappiello 1984: 76)

This is a provocative, confronting, evocative, bawdy, excessive text and Cappiello uses a mixture of genres and literary styles to disrupt and challenge our notions of ethnicity, gender, and class; to break down the unities and homogenous characterisations of 'migrants' and 'women' forged in male Anglo-Celtic Australian discourses. The women in *Oh Lucky Country* - migrants, working class, cannot be silenced, they do more than speak on their own behalf, they take control, they are not the victims here. 'All the women are unruly; they

curse in technicolour, and none acts out a traditional sex role. Just as it overturns familiar migrant-distress stories . . .' (Gunew 1994: 102)

The reading of *Oh Lucky Country* as autobiographical ignores or worse denies the references to literature and cultural traditions both Italian and Australian that layer Cappiello's text. She mirrors *Dante's Inferno* to create the:

> 'migrant inferno' and the narrator is called Rosa. There are roses, infernos, peripatetic, narrators, guides in various guises, and always . . . invocations of the female principle-parodically inverted Beatrices and worse, as we shall see, when we arrive at Rosa's Assumption. (Gunew 1994: 96)

And uses Australian images:

> . . . references to the 'prison' of 'emigration rejection', the sea, King's Cross, the pub and, at more general levels, the world of outcasts and the gutter, those masses imprisoned in squalid inner city surroundings. As in so much early Australian writing, the prison and the process of imprisonment function as organising tropes . . .
> (Gunew 1994: 96-7)

Cappiello's use of the extremes, extremes of character and extremes of language to create the world inhabited by the poor, the working class and especially the women and the migrants, a world which has no place for the polite and diplomatic, for good manners, a world that allows only for survival or not.

Is *Oh Lucky Country* a migrant or multicultural novel? *Oh Lucky Country* is certainly the story of a migrant experience in Australia, and probably more than any of the other novels discussed here can be called 'migrant or multicultural literature', however, this is also a working-class novel:

> This is the female factory worker, wife of the modern coolie and coolie herself . . . Slave of the dollar . . . Those who have no possessions aren't worth anything. The only thing modern about it was that women worked just as hard as the men . . .
> (Cappiello 1984: 14)

It is also a feminist novel, Cappiello constantly undermining 'patriarchal power . . . by the fact the women are consistently the bearers of phallic power' (Gunew 1994: 106):

> . . . Ah, women, little did you know the value of an intact womb here in Australia as we approach the twenty-first century. Many of the women were kicking themselves because they hadn't had their virginity surgically restored. When the black hole was being discussed, that sacred hole put up for auction, a wave of homicidal rage would sweep over me. (Cappiello 1984: 11-12)

The women in *Oh Lucky Country* lie about their status as virgins, they have no respect for the virgin, or for the men who seek her.

Oh Lucky Country is a migrant novel, the tale of Rosa who arrives in Australia in the 1970s to find that she has not arrived at the 'lucky country'. But to classify this novel as 'migrant or multicultural', if that genre classification sets up expectations that this is an oral history of one woman's experience, if that genre classification limits its readership to those interested in 'migrant' novels, then it is a real pity and it means that this novel will never be given the recognition it deserves as one of the 'great' Australian novels of this century.

Melina Marchetta - *Looking for Alibrandi*

> At the 6th International Feminist Book Fair in 1994 . . . Marchetta said that her portrayal of Josephine in *Looking for Alibrandi* was of her own making, a "Frankenstein", not a model of an authentic Italo-Australian teenager. Her own experiences are just as legitimate as any other person's experiences of growing up and living in Australia. She does not feel she belongs in Italy because she is deeply influenced by Australian culture. She said that her next book would not be about an Italo-Australian because she does not wish to be pigeonholed." (Rizzo 1995: 95/6)

Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi* was published as young adult fiction by Penguin in 1992. It won a number of awards, the 1993 Children's Book Council of Book of the Year for Older Readers, the 1993 Australian Multicultural Book of the Year Award, the 1993 Kids Own Australian Literature Award for Older Readers (KOALA), the 1993 Variety Club Young People's Category of the 3M Talking Book of the Year Award and shortlisted for a number of other awards.

This is Melina Marchetta's first novel. She was twenty-seven years old when it was published in 1992. *Looking for Alibrandi* is the story of Josie Alibrandi's last year at school, a story about growing up. Josie is confronted, as all young women are with society's rules and constraints. These are represented in this novel by the peer pressure at school on one hand and the pressure to conform to the Italian community's rules on the other hand:

> . . . what's this about you and your friends driving around Bondi Junction half-dressed last week?'
> 'Who told you that?'
> 'Signora Formosa saw you. She said you and your friends almost ran her over. She told Zia Patrizia's next door neighbour and it got back to Nonna.'
> Telecom would go broke if it weren't for the Italians.
> (Marchetta 1992: 11)

Josie's connection to the Italian community is through her grandmother. Josie's love for her grandmother is tainted by her grandmother's adherence to Italian customs and rituals. Josie's mother was not married when she had Josie and that brought shame on the family:

> Sometimes I feel sorry for [my grandmother]. I think that my birth must have cut her like a knife and I feel as if she's never forgiven Mama. But she loves us, even if it is in a suffocating way, and that makes me feel very guilty. (Marchetta 1992: 35)

Josie's mother never lied to Josie about the circumstances of her birth and it is during the early part of the novel that Josie's father reappears. He doesn't know about Josie and is not pleased when he finds out. However circumstances push them together and they do come to know each other by the end of the novel.

There is a number of important relationships explored in the novel - between mother and daughter - both Josie and her mother, Cristina, and Cristina's relationship with her mother, the relationship Josie has with her grandmother and then with her newly discovered father. Also central to the novel are Josie's friendship with her girlfriends:

> Lee and I have a weird relationship. We pretend we have nothing in common, yet we can talk for hours on any subject. We pretend we come from two different parts of society, yet both of us are middle-class scholarship students. We pretend that our families have nothing in common because people in her family use words like 'wogs' and mine happen to be 'wogs'. Yet I respect her more than any of my friends, although I couldn't tell her that because we both pretend we don't know the meaning of the word. (Marchetta 1992: 20)

The strong often competitive female friendships are celebrated in the novel, along with the intelligence and energy of these young women as they negotiate their parents, their boyfriends and each other.

Is this a migrant or multicultural novel? Josie is third generation Australian of Italian background, and she and others identify her with her Italian background:

> 'She called me a wog, amongst other things,' I said, finally. 'I haven't been called one for so long. It offended me. It made me feel pathetic.
> 'You are a wog, Josie. Does it offend you to be one?'
> 'I'm an Italian. I'm of European descent. When an Italian or another person of European descent calls me a wog it's done in good warm humour. When the word "wog" comes out of the mouth of an Australian it's not done in good humour unless they're a good friend. It makes me feel pathetic and it makes me remember that I live in a small-minded world that makes me so furious. (Marchetta 1992: 88)

Being Italian is central to this novel, the Italian culture and traditions are pressures that she must bear as she grows up, but being Italian is not what this novel is about. *Looking for Alibrandi* is about growing up and coming to terms with who you are:

> I'm not saying my life will be easier now because I finally feel free. I'm not saying that people will stop whispering about me behind my back. Because I think if I lived life like a saint and walked with two feet in one shoe; if I wore the clothes of St Francis of Assisi and suffered like a martyr; if I lived by the rules and never committed a sin, people would still talk. Because human nature is like that. They'll always, like me, find someone to talk about . . . It matters who I feel I am . . . (Marchetta 1992: 261)

It does matter that Josie is Italian and that Melina Marchetta is Italian. It is important for young women of non-English speaking background to see themselves represented in fiction (for they are rarely represented in fiction or television or film) and even more important to see the work of a young woman of non-English speaking background published and awarded prizes. And so, yes, this is 'multicultural literature' if what we mean by that is that the writer and the characters come from a culture outside of the dominant Anglo-Celtic one; however, it is a pity if the classification of this novel into that category means that it is assumed to be of interest only to girls of non-English speaking background.

Julie Capaldo -
Love Takes You Home: a novel in 13 delicious meals

Baccala for lost travellers

Appetiser	*If you travel alone you could disappear*
Entree	*Love makes you sick*
Main course	*I want our child to be perfect*
Dessert	*Your family is your family*

(Capaldo 1995: 89)

Capaldo's *Love Takes You Home* was published in 1995 by Mandarin Press. At a time when Italian food has become trendy, is served in the cafes of St Kilda and Fitzroy, a time when Italian delicacies, much sneered at in the past, are making their way even into the most conservative sandwich shops, when foccacias, semi-dried tomatoes and marinated artichokes are as familiar as cappuccino, it is not surprising that it was the food aspect of this novel that attracted attention. The book was launched with a coffee competition, the marketing department were obviously wanting to cash in on our current epicurean tastes.

But this is a novel not a recipe book. Food and recipes are used here as metaphors for life and love, and for death and the emptiness that comes when love is withheld.

Love Takes You Home is Grace's story for it is she who is the 'keeper of all the tales, the seeker of truth in every heart, including her own.' (Elliott 1996) It is the story of her family, how they came to be in Australia, how they came to be at all. The stories and recipes combine to give us a sense of Grace's life.

Central to the novel and to Grace are Pino, Valda and Graziella. Graziella is the wicked grandmother who makes everyone's life as miserable as she can. Pino and Valda, family friends become Grace's real family and it is Pino and his cooking who Grace is especially attracted to - and the stories that come with the cooking:

> Full of noise and music and smells. I was younger, chubby and soft, with pale blue eyes and dark curly hair. I smiled a lot when I was with them, and they let me listen in and follow them around . . . Zio Pino would sit Alessandro and I on the green chair beside him and he would tell us stories. The rest of the family sat at his feet or leaned on the back of his chair, close to his head, so our legs and arms

> lightly touched each other. We formed a circle where stories could spin and grow and were kept alive. (Capaldo 1995: 8)

Grace's parents - Judy and Anthony are much less real to her than Pino and Valda, less demonstrative, less willing to enclose her in their circle:

> The word in Italian is *famiglia*, but my family has never felt familiar to me before. I think of the way Anthony pulls back when we hug, how Judy avoids my eyes when we speak. I think of Graziella kissing me with her thin hard lips . . . (Capaldo 1995: 228)

Capaldo weaves together the stories of a family through the lush and rich images of food, of cooking and eating. Here love is represented by food, by the generosity of the host and the cook. Capaldo explores life and relationships via food:

> When I cook, often I see people too scared to eat, too scared to let go and try something new. "Just try," I beg. "Have a taste." But some people pick, pick at the edges like little spoggies, only having nibbles. To fully taste--you need a mouthful, so the teeth can chew and the flavour is released. (Capaldo 1995: 66)

Grace's relationship with food is a complex one in the novel, it is, on the one hand, the place of love and pleasure, and on the other, it is forbidden and needs to be controlled:

> . . . I played with the food on my plate rearranged it, nibbling the same piece over and over, Graziella seemed to grow smaller. For the first time I realised Graziella could not make me eat. I stopped visiting her. I stopped visiting Zio and Zia too. I rang Anthony and Judy regularly so they wouldn't feel the need to see me. I knew something was wrong, that I was hurting myself but I felt like I was on a ride that couldn't be stopped. (Capaldo 1995: 213)

It is the trip to Italy, to the land she had heard so much about from Pino, the land where her grandparents were born that in the end proves to be healing for Grace. There she must remove the curse her grandmother left behind:

> 'He says he is old and he welcomes death but he is cursed with life. He says, you are the only one who can lift the curse, to free him.' She looks at me intently and I know she is not joking. She tells me the path of a curse is circular and she asks me if I understand. I think of Graziella's sour mouth, the bitterness of her face and nod my head. '*Ho capito*,' I say.

> I put my hand on the old man's shiny head--I don't know why, it just seems right. In my best Italian I say, *'Ritorni a casa, sei stato salvato.'* (Capaldo 1995: 235)

Love Takes You Home is the story of Grace coming to terms with her family and her childhood so that she could make sense of herself. I do not think that this is a great novel, there is a number of places where I find the narrative too disjointed even for this fairly disjointed structure and style. There are times when the stories and the recipes are repetitive and the characters - especially Judy and Graziella are too familiar, stereotypes.

Is this a migrant or multicultural novel? This novel does explore the world of the first- and second-generation Australian Italians. The Italianness of the novel is vital to it, as important as any other aspect but this is not a novel about being a migrant or the difficulties of settling in Australia. The themes and concerns of the novel are broader than issues of migration, of non-English background children growing up in Australia. Capaldo is interested here in family relationships, in secrets and pasts that remain unresolved. She is exploring a girl's journey into adulthood, and the obstacles put there by parents and grandparents who still have not come to terms with their own lives.

Helen Elliott reviewing the novel in the *Sunday Age* (Elliot 1996) focuses on the authentic nature of the tale, 'Capaldo has obviously reached into her own family . . . ' Why obviously? Has Capaldo said this is the story of her family? She is not directly quoted in the review. Elliot's review generally quite positive about the novel ends on what for me is a sour note:

> I hope that Julie Capaldo isn't a one-novel novelist, and that she can write like this without the autobiographical props . . .
> (Elliot 1996: 7)

Well here we go again. Elliot has not called *Love Takes You Home*, multicultural or migrant literature - but she certainly has put it in its place.

Enza Gandolfo - *My Life is Over Now*

> I grew up on stories. Tales spun by my grandparents and parents, by my uncles and aunts. Tales of Sicily and a village on the hill and a life that was better than this life. A life left behind. My childhood was sewn together with stories, nostalgic longings, which became part of the fabric of my life.
>
> This is not my story, this my grandmother's story. Hers is not the only story to tell for in each family and in each life there are many stories, but fifteen years after her death, it is her story that haunts me. (Gandolfo 1998: 3)

My Life is Over Now is my first and, as yet unpublished novel. Central to *My Life is Over Now* is the relationship between Lucia and her daughter, the relationship between parents and their children, between siblings. This story, based in part, on my grandmother's life, is a work of fiction and in it I am exploring the nature of the hatred that can develop between family members. A hatred that can result in estrangement that lasts a lifetime, many lifetimes.

Lucia and her family have settled into life in Australia when their youngest son, Luciano dies of leukemia at twenty-four. His death alters their lives in a way none of them could have predicted. There is, of course, the sorrow and grief that comes with the death of a son and brother. But there are other consequences, first of all plans to return to Italy are set aside for ever, because Luciano is buried in Australia it is no longer possible for them to leave:

> Lucia watched his face, the distant look in his eye, the yearning for soil. She sat at the table, the silence of memories covering their words. Soil, the whole of the earth covered in soil and yet Giovanni yearned for that particular soil and nothing here could ever come close. She wished she could encourage him to return, at least for a visit. She wished she could let him go or go with him but she could not - she could not leave and she could not bear to have him go. (Gandolfo 1998: 165)

Secondly, after Luciano's death, Lucia and her daughter, Rosa, start to argue about Luciano's estate and how it should be divided, this begins a feud between Lucia and Rosa and then between Rosa and the rest of the family. Lucia dies having not spoken to her daughter for over fifteen years:

> My mother hates her mother - it is as simple as that, she says. We have asked all the questions. All the years of our lives we have asked, but there are no satisfactory answers. Maybe there is an answer somewhere deep inside my mother that I cannot get to. An answer that maybe she too has lost touch with but she is secretive my mother, too secretive. It's a trait, says my father, when she can't hear, that she inherited from her mother. (Gandolfo 1998: 192)

The novel opens with the grand-daughter's voice, she is remembering her grandmother with affection, she is looking at what she has inherited from her. Inheritances are important in this novel, the grand-daughter is looking for an answer, she wants to know how the grandmother she knew and loved could maintain a life long feud with her own daughter. She wants to know if she has inherited that same ability to hate from her grandmother - could she write off her mother, her brother, for a life time, is that capacity in her genes:

> As well as my brown eyes, I inherited my name from my grandmother, Lucia Anna Rotelli. The first daughter is named after the paternal grandmother. This is a tradition, a tradition that creates a chain, a connection between the living and the dead.
> I am not my grandmother, other lives have tainted, stained, woven their threads through my genes, into my stories. Painted their experiences on my skin; but my identity, my life is inextricably attached to hers.
> The love of a story well told and an addiction to espresso coffee. Nostalgia for a distant land, an obsession with death, and a body large and loud. *You are just like your grandmother.*
> (Gandolfo 1998: 3)

The grand-daughter, is the first person narrator at the beginning of the novel. Most of the rest of the novel is from third person point of view with the main focus on Lucia. The narrative goes forward and then back to find the place where the relationship between Lucia and Rosa starts to break down.

Mothering is explored here, the myths about mothering and being a mother. The stereotype of the 'mother' in the Italian culture as the Madonna. Lucia's sons adore their mother - she came first - before their wives. These two sons did as their mother asked until the day she died and they saw their role both as obedient and respectful sons, and as protectors.

Mothers are supposed to love all their children and love them all equally - do they? How can they when each child is an individual, each so different. Lucia loved her sons to the point of obsession -

varying in degrees with each son. How did she feel about her daughter?

Memory and truth are important in *My Life is Over Now*. There are many versions of who Lucia was - her sons remember one woman, her daughter-in-laws another, her daughter yet another and each of her grandchildren has different memories that create for each of them a different grandmother. Some remember a crude old woman, some a strong manipulative one, others remember a matriarch, a story teller, a woman with a wide and warm embrace and chocolate treats hidden in the cupboard.

Is it likely that this novel will be classified as migrant/multicultural? Why do I resent the possibility that this novel will be classified 'migrant or multicultural? There was a time when I considered writing this novel with 'Australian' characters - well obviously it would not be this novel but a novel that explored the nature of mother/daughter relationships, of inheritances and family conflicts. I was tempted to use Australian characters because I did not want the novel to be categorised as a 'migrant or multicultural novel', I do not want it to be marginalised. I want the novel to be judged on its merits, not prejudged because of its genre classification.

My Life is Over Now has Italian characters, Italians who migrated to Australia, it had to have, the fact that they are Italian and migrants is part of the story, vital to it. It places certain pressures on the relationships, it places certain boundaries - cultural - on the way that people act and react. *My Life is Over Now* has Italian migrant characters because I wanted to give voice to Italian Australians. I wanted to represent them and their lives as people, as people who are migrants but that being migrants is not all that they are. So the use of Italian migrant characters in this novel allowed me to tell the story I wanted to tell, but it also allowed me the opportunity to give others a greater understanding of the experience of migration and of being Italian - from my point of view - this is not oral history.

Lucia is a migrant, who was she before she migrated to Australia and who did she become once she landed here? How did the process of migration affect her? What happens to your sense of yourself when you are no longer able to do what you once took for granted? When you lose your confidence? When you're unsure if you can provide for your family?

In the novel I want to recreate my grandmother's experience of displacement so that the reader too experiences that displacement. So that the reader too is forced to negotiate a foreign terrain, a foreign language, a foreign culture - and is forced through and with the character to structure a new reality and a new sense of self.

The protagonist in my novel, Lucia, is a migrant. One of the problems with classification of people be it as migrants, homosexuals etc, is our assumption that that somehow tells us who they are. That 'migrant' is all they are, as Caston says in his introduction to a collection of work by Greek writers:

> It is probably true to say that the experience of migrating colours the life of a person till the day he or she dies and there is a sense in which it is true to say: 'Once a migrant always a migrant' . . . however it is equally true that most migrants are more than migrants, that their whole being is not made up of being a migrant . . . (Caston 1988: 14)

My grandmother experienced the displacement that comes with migration. Displacement in a foreign language, culture and landscape - but she was also a mother who lost a son, a mother who was hated by her only daughter, a mother who was the 'Madonna' for her living sons, she was also a lover, a matriarch, a grandmother. The process of writing the novel is for me the process of discovering and creating who she is.

This novel is based on a 'life story', the life story of a migrant women and it is obviously a novel that would fit into the category of migrant or multicultural literature since the main characters are Italian migrants, however, if the novel is seen as being a novel about migration then that is a misrepresentation of the novel and its concerns.

Of course, one has to weigh up the benefits - it may be that the novel would be more easily picked up and published and marketed as a 'multicultural' novel either because this could be done by a specialist publisher or because it may attract some government publishing assistance or be seen to cater to some niche market. But what does this mean in the long term, for the writer and for the novel. *No Escape* has disappeared and *Oh Lucky Country* appears only to be of interest to those studying multicultural literature or Italian-Australian Literature. It is difficult to know whether this is changing as *Looking For*

Alibrandi and *Love Takes You Home* are only recent publications and there are so few novels written by Italo-Australian women.

What needs to be done?

> If others will not take the subject of Italian American writing seriously, we will . . . in the Sicilian version of the Noah's Ark story, after the Lord chose two of all His creatures to board the ark, the fleas found they had been forgotten. So they slipped on by getting into Noah's beard. As the Sicilians say, 'We are like fleas: if the Lord forgets us, we must use our own wits. (Barolini 1985: 50)

Altering the way that work of writers of non-English speaking background is read and received is not going to be a matter of just doing away with the label of migrant or multicultural writing even if this could be done. Certainly, if this were possible, if readers could have available a broader range of Australian books, to choose from and if without the genre labelling they could choose novels by writers of non-English speaking background without the prejudice, this would make a major difference to the shape of literature in Australia. However, even without the outward labels I wonder if publishers would be any more likely to publish these works, whether the reviewers would be any more likely to review them, or the academics any more likely to set them as texts in their courses? It is unlikely - for the labelling reflects an already existing set of prejudices in our society, the labelling names and makes visible the prejudice that is already there.

To alter the way that writing from non-English speaking background writers is read and received needs to be part of a number of changes. It needs to go hand in hand with changes to the way we in Australia view each other; the way that our identity as Australians is based on notions of what is not Australian; the way that our sense of who we are and, how we locate ourselves is based on an image of the 'other' (Trinh T. Minh-Ha 1989: 217). It needs to be part of a sustained effort to reduce racism.

At the same time, if we could alter the way that the writing of non-English speaking background writers is read and received, if we could ensure that the work of these writers is made more visible, is given more support and attention, is read by more people then this would, I'm sure, help to educate, to increase awareness and to reduce racism. The writing of non-English speaking background writers, like the writing of Aboriginal writers, can help to change the racist nature

of our society by increasing understanding and creating the possibility of seeing 'them' as 'one of us' (Rorty 1989: xvi).

Altering the canon to make room for these writers and their work is not simply a 'matter of replacing one set of texts with another. A canon is not a body of texts *per se*, but rather a set of reading practices (the enactment of innumerable individual and community assumptions, for example about genre, about literature, and even about writing).' (Ashcroft 1989: 189) These 'reading practices' are entrenched in all areas of the literary industry 'in institutional structures, such as education curricula and publishing networks' (Ashcroft 1989: 189) and in the reviewing and marketing of books and anthologies and in reading. There needs to be an awareness, a willingness to look at our current 'reading practices' and our literary tradition and to realise that in a multicultural society writers come from a range of backgrounds and traditions.

It requires active work in the area of reading writing by non-English speaking background writers, the willingness to struggle with the writing and the ideas that do not fit easily into our notions of what literature is. Those supporters of writing by non-English speaking background writers and the writers themselves have for a long time struggled for the recognition of their work, with limited results.

It is not that they have not been producing work, *A Bibliography of Australian Multicultural Writers* published in 1992 by the Centre for Studies in Literary Education at Deakin University Press, Geelong and compiled by Sneja Gunew, Lolo Houbein, Alexandra Karakostas-Seda, and Jan Mahyuddin, named over nine hundred writers from a range of non-English speaking backgrounds.

The problem is, as I have said before, that the work of these writers is not supported and has not been recognised as part of Australian literature:

> . . . the little reviewing of writings of non-Anglo-Celtic Australians which does occur is often implicitly carried out from such a position of apparent neutrality. That the reviewers are uninformed about the literary and cultural traditions from which the writer produces her or his text is never an issue. The measure is always whether explicitly or not, that of English literature as it is traditionally conceived. (Gunew 1992a: xix)

The place of writing by non-English speaking background writers on the margins, some argue, is because these writers have not reached the standard of excellence expected of Australian literature:

> The reason so much migrant writing is 'marginalised' is that, *in this basic sense*, it's often not very good - and obvious reasons: the author's English simply doesn't allow him or her to produce meaning at the same number of levels - to intersect with the same number of other texts and contexts - as a native speaker's. No matter how good the story, 'literature' demands more - good stories are two-a-penny. (Dessaix 1991: 26)

The multicultural theorists argue that literature or writings produced by writers of non-English speaking background is unfairly judged against very 'English' notions of excellence. That the writers are coming to Australia and writing from a range of different backgrounds and traditions and that this is not taken into account.

In the 1994 report, *Access to Excellence: A Review of Issues Affecting Artists and Arts from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds Overview Report* by Stephen Castles and Mary Kalantzis for the Centre of Multicultural Studies at the University of Wollongong, notions of excellence in the arts and the effect on the arts and artists of non-English speaking background were given special attention.

The research undertaken for the report divided the concept of excellence in three ways:

1. A discriminating excellence. That is excellence as a standard that discriminates art from non-art, the good from the bad. It is this discriminating excellence which is used to establish the canon:

2. Excellence as discrimination. This is the same notion of excellence but there are forms of discrimination in the 'negative sense-mechanisms for exclusion'. Networks are defined and work to exclude and narrow access to the canon.

3. Discriminating Excellence without discrimination. This 'reconstituted notion of excellence . . . [to] discriminate in the positive sense without discrimination in the negative sense.' The report's focus is to reformulate excellence in the arts in order to ensure there is minimal discrimination in the negative sense. (Castles 1994: 8)

A number of writers were interviewed and their experiences of 'discrimination' documented in the report. Birimbir Wongar describes

the peculiar difficulties of establishing a working relationship with Australian publishers:

> . . . an editor at Penguin . . . sent a letter to my agent in which he said: 'He writes well, but I don't like what he is doing. This could be seen like discrimination but so be it.' There are only a small number of publishers here so I started sending my manuscripts overseas. My trilogy was published in German and in the US before Macmillan published it in Australia. (Papastergiadis 1994: 124)

Excellence in the arts is predicated by the tradition, the culture, the educational background that we come from. In Australia with our very English literary tradition, even if we studied some of the Russian, European and American classics, our criteria for judgement and our skills of analysis came from the English notion of what is good literature. It is, therefore, understandable that when we are faced with 'foreign' literature - writing by Australian Aboriginals and by those Australians whose background and influences are European, or even more distant - African or Asian or Caribbean or Pacific Island or Latin American or Arabic - we find that it does not measure up to our standard of excellence. This is at the base of the problem for many non-English speaking background writers in Australia. These writers are also alienated from their parent cultures, their influences are now a mixture, a hybrid and their writing, therefore, may not find itself a home in either culture.

To create a place for writing by non-English speaking background writers necessitates a development of a new way of reading and analysing texts:

> . . . in other words, to read via cultural difference. Slowly and painfully we are learning to read in terms of class and gender distinctions, but cultural difference is not yet an inevitable category in the interpretative process . . . To read the old literature via cultural difference renders visible . . . the extent of the English and Irish elements which dominate Australian writing. (Gunew 1992a: xvi-xvii)

There needs to be greater awareness among critics of the 'positionings involved, particularly one's own as a reader' (Gunew 1994: 59) both the individual reader and the reading community, otherwise we are constantly judging and dismissing the writing of non-English speaking background writers and of Indigenous writers not

because of the lack of skill, talent or creativity of the writers but because of our lack of willingness as readers and critics to acknowledge that we read from a particular position and that it is not the only possible position and that from other positions the texts that we choose to canonise may be vastly different. That from a different position we may find much that is rich and rewarding in the writings of non-English speaking background writers.

In addition, these writers (especially first-generation writers who have migrated to Australia) are also faced with a foreign industry, they do not have a 'network of support . . . in the academic world, in the publishing industry, with reviewers or people in the media . . .' (Barolini 1995: 49). They do not have the connections with other writers to enable them to benefit from peer assessments, or result in invitations to festivals and readings. They are often isolated in their quest to establish themselves as writers. Non-English speaking background writers need to support each other, to develop networks with each other and with mainstream Anglo writers. To some extent this is happening through the setting up of journals such as *Multicultural Writing*, through the presence of non-English speaking background writers and theorists as advisers to the Literature Board of the Australia Council during funding assessment meetings[16] and through the continued work of academics like Sneja Gunew, George Papaellinas, Yasmine Gooneratne, Merlinda Bobis.

The notion that Australian literature is other than what we have come to understand it to be, that its identity is not Anglo-Celtic, not white, not male, not middle class is a threat to the sense of who we are:

> The very idea of a hybrid cultural identity exists as a challenge to notions of a singular national identity, and thus to discourses of nationalism.
> (Ommundsen 1995: 161)

To Australians who are nationalistic, and whose sense of identity has at least in literature being tied to the bush and to an English and Irish heritage, this is threatening and so are the these texts, 'a threat to the canon, and so defined as a failure or as marginal'

[16]In 1997 participating advisers to the Literature Board included Andrew Riemer and Peter Skrzynecki.

(Jurgensen 1992: 30). This is not conscious for the most part but manifests itself as a protection of what is seen as historically Australian and in need of preservation rather than acknowledging that it is 'the confrontation with the foreign [that] opens the door to a new understanding of the familiar . . . ' (Veit 1992: 131):

> Words are feared because unlike food they cannot be assimilated, and words in another language emphasise the spilt within subjectivity. (Gunew 1994: 62)

Just as we are beginning to see the benefits of reading Aboriginal literature and reassessing our history and sense of who we are, so too, we can learn from the writings of non-English speaking background writers. It is important that these texts, are published:

> Literary history is falsified if it doesn't record all voices and give access to these voices by publishing, keeping in print, and making part of study of courses those writers who aren't only the prominent ones of the dominant tradition. (Barolini 1995: 43)

As writers of non-English speaking background, we need, first of all, to continue writing, and ensure that we don't in our work perpetuate the stereotypes or alter our writing to fit the mainstream. It's important that we continue writing to give voice to those of non-English speaking background, to give voice to our concerns and interests:

> . . . preexistent positionality locates the ethnic subject on the margins of the universal - he/she is always reminded of the universal's authority and power, and yet simultaneously attracted to it. The struggle of the minority subject . . . is thus to transgress the limits that the dominant culture places upon him/her. She asks that the promise of universal art to accommodate her be kept. The ethnic artist aspires to join the dominant's universal culture, to slough off 'ethnic' and solely identify as 'artist', yet at specific historical moments the ethnic 'text' evinces a suspicion of the universal that belies its all inclusive claims and displays its particular modes of interpellating the ethnic. (Palumbo-Liu 1995: 194)

We need to work together to change the assumptions made about migrant/multicultural writing. We need to challenge readers to be more aware of their reading positions, of their culture, their literary tradition. We need to forge a place for ourselves by reviewing each other's books - not so that we give uncritical support but so that we

ensure respectful criticism and insightful reading. We need to work to ensure that readers are aware of the many writers out there whose writing is interesting and exciting, whose writing deals with a range of subjects and ideas. If we don't, then our work, like Velia Ercole's *No Escape* will disappear, or like Rosa Cappiello's *Oh Lucky Country* will be read by only a few who have a particular interest in multicultural or Italo-Australian writers. These writers and their stories are as Australian as those of Peter Carey or Patrick White, without them our understanding, our appreciation of our own country and of the world will remain limited, narrow.

Conclusion

Writing by non-English speaking background writers will continue to be labelled and categorised as long as Australians see those of non-English speaking background as 'other'; as long as they continue to see Australia as an Anglo-Celtic nation, even if almost a third of the population is of non-English speaking background; and as long as those of Anglo-Celtic background are the dominant group, the ones with the power.

The role of literary theory and criticism has always been and continues to be to analyse and interpret, to sort and classify, to assesses, to value and therefore to canonise - or not. Those works that make it to the canon, are supposed to be the 'best', however, notions of excellence and worth are subjective, based on ideology, on values and on cultural and educational background. We need to push the boundaries of what is Australian writing to ensure that it is as broad as possible, to expose the mainstream, the canon as 'a construct, a fiction, not a fixed and unchangeable reality . . . ' (Hutcheon 1988: 62)

The categorising of work by non-English speaking background writers makes it less likely that the writer will be taken seriously in mainstream Australian literature. Especially when the categorising is framed by certain assumptions - life story, authentic, not crafted or creative, same as every other migrant story, not good enough to be considered 'unqualified' Australian literature. Those writers of non-English speaking background who do make it to the mainstream are no longer referred to as non-English speaking, they are Australian writers. This insidious practice ensures that the category of non-English speaking background writers continues to be seen as 'lesser', not as talented.

There are other categories of writing by minority groups where the assumptions about the works in those categories is more positive (or becoming so) - magic realism is considered rich and powerful writing, black American writing is considered to be strong, and lesbian writing considered experimental, pushing the edges of language. It maybe that with a concerted effort on the part of non-English speaking background writers, their work, too will come to be seen in a more positive light - only time will tell. However, with the exception, to

some extent, of magic realism these other categories still denote the 'other' - the black writer, the lesbian writer. And the writers and theorists who support these writers are caught in a bind because in order to make visible the writing of these writers, to ensure their work gets published they have to continue to categorise it, to highlight it and this, in turn, continues to marginalise the work.

My novel, *My Life is Over Now*, if it is published, I have no doubt will be categorised as a multicultural/migrant novel. The categorising may be done by the marketing department of my publishing company and/or by theorists, critics and reviewers. Some of those who categorise it will be supporters of writing by non-English speaking background writers and some will not. The categorising will affect the way the novel is read and received but this is only because we live in a society where racism, prejudice and discrimination continues to affect the way we relate to each other and therefore the way that we read. Otherwise my novel would be a novel about motherhood, about families, the characters, Australians from an Italian background, a novel written by an Australian writer who is a woman of non-English speaking background.

I believe that literature can bring people closer to seeing 'other human beings as 'one of us' rather than as 'them'' (Rorty 1989: xvi) so for me there is a great deal invested in bringing the work of non-English speaking background writers (Aboriginal writers, working-class writers, lesbian and gay writers) to a wider readership. We need to work with the theorists and critics, for they do affect the way works of literature are read and received, we need to work with them to challenge the 'mainstream' and the 'canon' and to create an interest in the work of non-English speaking background writers just as feminists have created an interest in the work of women writers.

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