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Extract from Lucia's Story

Biographical note:

Enza Gandolfo is the author of many published short pieces of fiction and non-fiction, as well as the recipient of several grants and awards, including a Varuna Fellowship. Her novel, *Swimming* was shortlisted for the Barbara Jefferis Award 2010 and ABC Fiction Award 2008. Her previous books include: *Inventory: on op shops* with Sue Dodd (Vulgar Press 2007) and *It keeps me sane: women craft wellbeing* with Marty Grace (Vulgar Press 2009). Enza has a PhD in Creative Writing. She lectures in Creative Writing at the School of Communication and the Arts at Victoria University.

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Aldo was still only a boy when he decided he wanted to go to Australia. He first heard of this place, a kind of America, from one of his uncle (Giovanni's brother) whose letters issued invitations and promised a better life. Giovanni refused to go to Australia. His years in America, as a young man, had made him wary; he knew the value of his own country. To Aldo, his uncle's letters were charged with the promise of adventure, of a new and different life, the stuff of a young boy's dreams.

I have my own farm, Giovanni, my own piece of the earth. I can stand at the front door of my house and look out into the fields and they are my fields. We have rows of fruit trees all of them mine. No landlord to bow down to, to tell us what to do.

Together, you and I could create our own new world. Your sons could go to school, study and have jobs that keep their hands clean, their backs straight. Here they have a chance of another life.

Lucia was ready to go. She agreed with Aldo, it was worth taking the risk. She'd put up with village life but she longed for something more. Lucia's own mother, Domenica, her brother, Roberto and all three of her sisters were doing well in Libya. They had money and a life that in Sicily was beyond their dreams. (This was before the war, before the Italians were expelled from Libya empty-handed.)

Carmela, Lucia's daughter, said little in response to her uncle's invitations. He never mentioned her in his letters. She imagined her life, a woman's life, would be no different in Australia than it was in Sicily. No one asked her what she thought and she didn't volunteer her opinion. Paolo and even Luciano, Lucia's youngest, wanted to go to Australia but then they would have followed Aldo anywhere.

'America was hell for me,' Giovanni whispered to Lucia as they lay in their bed in the darkness. Underneath them, in the stable, they could hear the animals stirring, outside in the street dogs barked.

'They treated us like pigs ... worse. I treat my animals better than they treated us.' He sighed and turned his back to Lucia. 'They hated us. Can you imagine Lucia, what it is like to see the look of hate on the faces of complete strangers, on the faces of your neighbours, the men that you work next to ... hate and disgust. We disgusted them and what could we do. It was their land after all.'

Lucia pulled Giovanni's arms around to her. His head rested on her shoulder. She couldn't see his face, but she knew the look that accompanied that tone, low and childlike, the ends of his lips turned down, his eyes glazed over with shame, shame for all the Sicilians who put up with, and continued to put up with, the abuse.

'We couldn't speak the language, couldn't understand what they said. They spat at us in the street. No one cared if you were a good man, an honourable man, if you worked hard, if you had a mind—the bottom of the pile, the dogs.'

'It's okay Giovanni, we're not going. It's okay go to sleep.'

'We were young men, seventeen and eighteen. It was difficult ... working all day and then crowded together at night—five, six .. as many as eight men in one room. We had no money, but sometimes at night we'd go for walks. Always there was a group ready to pick a fight.'

'Lucia, the poverty, the squalor ... Castellino is rich in comparison. The work was dangerous. Life was dangerous. Three of the young men who arrived on the same ship were dead by the end of the first year—sickness, accidents, and fights. One or two became rich, of course, yes—*L'America e ci acconza e a ci uasta*. Not for my children, Lucia.

'When I came back, there was a crowd waiting for me at my parents' house. I could smell the rich tomato sauce my mother was cooking for lunch, the bread she'd baked that morning and the grappa my father had made the night before. They hugged me, patted my back, they smiled, they were happy to see me. Lucia I felt lighter, like a child again. I could walk, talk; I could be myself without having to watch my back, without fear.' He stopped and took her hand.

'I couldn't believe I'd survived Lucia, I couldn't believe I'd made it back. I never want to leave my home again.'

Lucia sighed, 'Many people are going to Australia now, and we won't be able to stop Aldo when he is old enough. So many of his friends have gone. Maybe Australia is not as bad as America.'

'Lucia, Australians, Americans they're the same people. They're not like us, not like Italians—what will we do if they want to go? How can we stop them?'

'You'll have to tell them about America, what it was like, how you were treated, so they can understand.'

'No, never. I don't want them ever to know of the squalor, of the shame, I'd be ashamed to tell them of my life in America.'

'We'll have to wait and see what happens when they are older—he's just a boy. It'll be years before he's old enough to go.'

'If he goes the others will follow him.'

'If they go, if our sons go, then we'll have to go with them. I don't want them to be alone without their mother and father. I know what it is like to be separated from my mother, I don't want that for my sons.'

'Oh Lucia ...'

'Giovanni it is not the time to worry. We'll pray that it won't come to that.' But instead Lucia prayed that one day Giovanni would change his mind. She prayed that Australia was not like America. She wanted to go; even after more than ten years in Castellino the villagers still treated her like a foreigner. Castellino would never be her home.

Giovanni's prayers were in vain, for Aldo never let go of his dream. He spoke less of it as he grew older, less of it in front of his father at any rate.

While Giovanni's brother urged them to join him in Australia, Lucia's family urged them to migrate to Libya. Then the war came and the Italians in Bengasa were expelled from the country, forced to leave with only what they could fit into a small square suitcase. Domenica had died by then, but Lucia's sisters returned to Italy, Paolina and her family to Castellino where Lucia and Giovanni gave them refuge.

'See,' said Giovanni, 'a migrant is always a foreigner. They can take everything from you in the end.'

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My father, Aldo, until his died in his late seventies, still had that spirit of adventure. He liked to travel and dreamed of going to America and to New Zealand, places that his poor health made inaccessible. He settled instead for trips around Australia with other Italian pensioners. He often said, 'I have been here longer than I was in Sicily, I'm Australian. I could never go back to the village to live.'

The Australians—the Anglo ones—no longer called him a 'wog' or 'dago' but they knew even if he didn't that he was not really Australian.

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I couldn't speak English on my first day of school. I was the first grandchild and my father insisted no one speak to me in English. He wanted me to learn Italian. He looked with shame at the children of some of his relatives who couldn't speak Italian.

The conflict between us began on my first day of school, when I realised my parents were leaving me in a place where people didn't understand what I was saying. I was scared but I was determined and I learnt to speak English as quickly as I could.

My parents like many migrants wanted to retain their customs and traditions. They wanted to remain Italian in Australia. That worked to some extent for them, it gave them some protection, and a refuge from the prejudice they faced in their workplaces. It didn't work for me. I wanted to be like my friends, my Australian friends. I wanted to go out on the weekends. I wanted to do all the things my friends were allowed to do.

'No,' my mother would say.

'But why can't I go Evelyn and Sharon are allowed?'

'They're Australian.'

'So am I.'

'You're Italian. Now stop that. If your father hears you, there will be trouble.'

After a while I stopped asking. I hated being Italian. I planned my escape over and over again.

I left home at eighteen. It was a pre-planned, premeditated escape. I packed while my parents were at work and my brother was at school. The pre-booked removalist came and together we shoved my belongings in his van. I left a note—*the first eighteen years were yours the next eighteen are mine*. I put the keys on top of the note, on top of the table and I pulled shut the door behind me. I moved into a room in a house not far from the University. I'd been waiting, planning, scheming to leave for more than five years. Night after night under the covers, praying to the Virgin Mary above my

bed (even though already I had doubts about her existence). Praying, just in case, and wishing I'd wake up Australian; free.

I felt trapped for years. Trapped inside a culture, inside language that I didn't want to be connected to. Trapped inside my parent's fears, not allowed to go anywhere without them. Not allowed out with my Australian friends and certainly not with boys. I spent many nights crying.

I felt alone sitting in the front of the van with the removalist. He loved the surf, he said, more than anything and this was his way of paying to get to the waves. *Drive, get out of here, get going.* I was terrified someone would see me, someone would ring them, and they would appear yelling and screaming, pulling me back inside.

It had taken me several attempts until I finally did it. Twice before I had tried—found a room, said I'd take it and then at the last minute not been able to go through with it. I was scared. But I knew I had no choice.

Now when I look back at this story I want to hold eighteen-year Cia. I sound like some new age guru on a meditation tape wanting to embrace the inner child. I want to tell eighteen-year-old Cia, she was brave, courageous and that I understand she believed she had no choice.

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It is a work day, a just after six. I am exhausted. I have walked from the station to my mother-in-laws. I'm having a coffee and waiting for my husband, Aldo, to finish work, pick me up and take me home. I am hoping Giovanni and Cia have put something on for dinner. Lucia is talking, but I am not listening to her, instead I am thinking about the fabric I bought at the market on Sunday. The dress I have in mind has a round scooped neckline and wide sleeves. The fabric is light, flowing. This is what I am thinking about when the phone rings, it is my son, Giovanni, he is in a panic.

'She's gone,' he says.

'Who?' I have no idea what he is talking about. But I can tell he is angry.

He tells me he has arrived home to a note, the keys and an empty room. He tells me Cia is gone. He tells me that she has taken everything – the bed, the posters, half the record collection.

'Are you sure?' This is all I can say, but my heart is beating fast and I feel the sense of dread rising. I put the phone down before he answers and I run. I run and run not even looking to see if there are cars coming, running and crying. Crying so much I can't see where I am going. But I am praying, praying to the Virgin Mary that Giovanni has got it wrong, that it isn't true. But of course I know it is true, and that everything has changed. I am running and thinking about Aldo – he will want to kill Cia, he will find it impossible to forgive her. I am running and thinking that I should have seen this coming.

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They tried to find me, came after me with curses and with tears. They knocked on my door again and again. I didn't talk to them for months and then I did and then I didn't again, this time for years. It was my father, Lucia's son who cursed me, yelled at me down the telephone line, wished me dead, said I was dead, said things my mother could not cope with. And I could hear her crying, trying all the time to pull the phone from his hands. He said awful things. You can imagine. He was angry. And so was I.

Relatives took sides. Some said that I was like Carmela, my aunt. They said I had inherited her hatred, her ability to disconnect herself from her family. Some said there was no good reason, after all my parents were good people, they did not beat me.

I just wanted my life, my freedom. I knew no other way to be myself. Things could have been different if I had been able to talk to them. Things could have been different if they hadn't been so strict. Things could have been different, if my mother had ruled the house. If my father had been less angry. If I was happy to be Italian, hang out with my cousins and marry young. If I had been born in the 70s and not the 50s. If I had had an older sister, cousin, if ... I hurt them. They hurt me. None of us knew any other way; each of us did what we had to do to survive; to maintain our sense of self despite the wishes of those we loved that we be someone else.

For years I stayed away.

It was this experience and the reconciliation with my family that started me wondering about my grandmother, about her relationship with her daughter, Carmela. I'd always thought of Carmela as the 'bad' one and my grandmother as faultless. But as I became Carmela or a version of Carmela, I realised that there had to be another story, another version, maybe several other versions.

Whenever I asked my father why he didn't speak to his sister, he'd say, 'They were my father's dying words.'

I think they were words said out of anger. What if Giovanni hadn't died then, what if there had been time to unsay the words, to take them back, to swallow them. What if lying in hospital silenced by his stroke, silenced for the first time in a lifetime, what if he wanted to see his daughter?

My father, Giovanni's son, took back his curses.

In a room in Delhi I wrote my family a letter. I hadn't seen or spoken to them for nearly three years. I was coming home after two years in Asia and India and if they wanted me back in their lives these were, I said, the conditions. I spelled them out—I would never live with them again. I would probably never marry or have children. I would do as I pleased as far as my own life was concerned.

I didn't wait for their response when I arrived in Australia I went to visit them. The first visits were awkward but the reconciliation has been lasting. They accepted my conditions, of course; though, as you would imagine; as the years have passed and we have become closer again, they have often voiced their disapproval whenever I have done things they disapprove of. But they know and I know that my life is mine. There may have been easier ways of getting here...

Later I heard another story. My mother stood at the end of the table at Christmas dinner and said, 'When my daughter returns there are to be no repercussions. She is to be welcomed back, by all of you.' They did as they were told both the women and the men. They did as they were told, Lucia's sons, my father and my uncle.

I knew it would be okay. My mother is not a Rotelli. And the man's word was not the law. And my father loves me.

I'd grown up believing that the feud between my grandmother and her daughter, my aunt, could never be resolved because of my grandfather's dying words. My mother says to me, in a conversation, in the kitchen, as I ask her about my grandmother, 'I would never have stopped seeing you—no matter what your father said.' She tells me the story of her mother who allows into her house her brother-in-law, her husband's brother, after her husband's death, even though the brothers had been fighting for years, even though her husband had sworn never to speak to his brother again.

'The dead,' said my mother, 'can't be allowed to rule the lives of the living.'

'A mother,' said my mother, 'can't be kept away from her children.'

And so, I can no longer simply explain the feud between my grandmother and her daughter by referring to my grandfather's dying words nor can I blame it on the fact that my father's family is Sicilian for so is my mother's. I have no doubt that both these facts (and I say facts rather than truths) played their own part, but they are not the whole story.

I can't reconcile my grandmother and the woman who didn't talk to her daughter for twenty years. It wasn't one sided of course, Carmela too had her part in it. I asked my mother, my aunt, my father (I dare not ask my uncle). My brother, my cousins and I, wonder what happened to make Carmela feel that way, we discuss it over many years; there must have been something, I say, something must have happened long before Luciano's death.

And what is inherited? What I have I inherited? Travelling in Asia for two years with a backpack and a journal, I learnt that I could not leave my family behind—that it did not work to dissociate myself from them.

Research statement

Research background

This is an extract from *Lucia's Story* (unpublished). It belongs in the sub-genre of diasporic life writing that fuses biography and autobiography to tell the story/s of both the individual and the family (examples include *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje). Like many contemporary memoirs, *Lucia's Story*, blurs the lines between fiction and non-fiction. However, while most memoirs continue to be written in the first-person, the "I" of the text representing the author's voice, *Lucia's Story* utilises multiple narrators as well as third and first person points of view to create a memoir that privileges the inter-subjective over the individual.

Research contribution

Lucia's Story creates an intimate experience of the world inhabited by the migrant family; places the experience of being a migrant in a dialogue with the experience of being a first-generation Australian; and illuminates the complexities of identity formation for migrants. Bakhtinian theories of dialogism and heteroglossia, provide a theoretical framework for this work that explores these complex relationships, and the fluid and shifting nature of identity.

Research significance

The significance of this work is its use of a hybrid form to explore familial relationships and the fluidity of identity as experienced by migrants and their children who occupy Bhabha's 'third space' between two cultures and languages. Memoir is an increasingly popular genre but it continues to be seen primarily as the individual's story. The use of multiple subject positions in *Lucia's Story* is a transgressive move that defamiliarizes traditional notions of memoir and interrogates notions of truth and identity.