

## The Economy of Persistence

### Mario the Tailor

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Walking up City Road, towards Newtown and away from the university, at the exact point where King Street starts, you may catch sight of a small shop. Its green paint looks as if it has been flaking away for some time. Below the shop window is the word TAILOR, also much faded. If you glance through the shop's front door you will see a figure working on suits (both male and female) and anything else that needs mending, altering and repairing. The figure at work is Mario Conte. He has been at work in this shop since 1966.

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This article is about Mario Conte the tailor and the world he has inhabited for almost fifty years. It is a specific account of postwar Australian immigration and the recollections and role of one person in the clothing and textile industry. Mario Conte

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arrived as a twenty year old in Australia in October 1954. He was part of the second wave of postwar immigrants who arrived between the years of 1950 to 1960 with the promise of sunshine all year round and a chance for decent wages. He arrived with the skills he had learnt as a thirteen year old from a tailoring apprenticeship with a local tailor. Mario's story is not that different from many other postwar Italian immigrants, except that he found work in his own trade and his business has survived in much the same form as when he started it in the mid 1960s. Elements of Mario's experience as a 'New Australian' can be found in the highly successful comic novel *They're a Weird Mob*.<sup>2</sup> John O'Grady wrote the book under the pseudonym Nino Culotta, and a year after publication in 1957 it had sold over one hundred thousand copies.<sup>3</sup> The book resonated with Australian audiences who recognised the difficult and sometimes humorous everyday experiences of Italian migrants as they made sense of different ways of being in a new culture.

Mario's family had lived on a farm in Baiano, east of Naples. They were winemakers but after World War II the price of wine plummeted and there wasn't enough money to feed the family of seven children. Mario's father returned to Italy after a short and unsuccessful trip to try his luck in Argentina and gave Mario the advice: 'you better learn something'. So, Mario found work with a local tailor. Despite there being work in Italy after the war, with plenty of small tailor shops, there was little money to pay employees. Mario was keen to earn more money, so he went to an employment agency, which had on display posters advertising life in Australia, Canada and Argentina. It was during this visit that Mario made the decision to leave Italy and come to Australia:

So just for fun, I started to ask how much they were paying here in Australia. At the time they were [paying] £3 a day. £3, we were getting if we're lucky 500 liras, which was three or four shillings. Just enough to go to a picture show on Sunday at the time. So me and another two friends, we apply to come here. But the other two friends, they dropped out. They didn't want to come. So I came all by myself.<sup>4</sup>

Mario said that he told a lie to the employment agency, that he liked hard work and wanted to go to Queensland to cut sugar cane. He left Naples on the *Castel Verde* with 1,100 passengers and nearly one thousand crew members on board. In telling his story Mario initially mixed up his dates and said he arrived in 1958 but on

further questioning he remembered it was 1954 and it was the *Castel Verde's* last trip to Australia.<sup>5</sup> Among the passengers Mario remembers there were:

Only 250 Italians, 500 were Greek, and 500 Maltese. We had to sleep one on top of the other, there was no air conditioning and [unclear] but it was very hot. Especially [going there], it was very hot.

The ship sailed to Fremantle, then Melbourne and on to Sydney, berthing on 14 October. The cramped and uncomfortable conditions during the voyage may have resulted in some tension as the day after the ship berthed it was reported there had been 'Racial Hatreds, Migrants Brawls on Liner', with one of the passengers saying that 'bad feeling on the vessel almost resulted in an all-in riot at sea'. The captain reported there were one or two fights between the Maltese.<sup>6</sup> The article concluded by saying the tensions were started because the Italians were receiving preferential treatment from the *Castel Verde's* personnel. Mario can't recall receiving any preferential treatment but was happy to leave the ship in his suit trousers and a shirt on the warm October day. He decided to stay in Sydney rather than go on to Queensland and soon found a job with a Hungarian tailor in the Royal Arcade, which ran between George Street and Pitt Street, opposite the Queen Victoria Building.<sup>7</sup> He estimates there were about thirty people working at the tailors, and the size of the organisation was not unusual. 'They were all big. Some of them were small. But most of the manufacturers, they were all big.' It was a good time to be in the clothing and textile industry as the industry was booming.<sup>8</sup> It was also an opportune time to be in Sydney as throughout the 1950s through to 1967 menswear manufacture was concentrated in New South Wales, while dressmaking and millinery was predominantly in Victoria.<sup>9</sup> Of course, there were tailors in Melbourne; for example, Carmelo Vitale opened his shop as a 'Continental Tailor' in 289 Victoria Street, West Melbourne, one month after arriving from Italy on 22 November 1948.<sup>10</sup> Many postwar immigrants worked on large-scale public works such as the Snowy Mountain scheme and the manufacturing and building industries, but they also opened their own small businesses. For example, Greeks opened milk bars and fish and chip shops in city and regional areas, while Italians created market gardens, and opened grocery and tailoring shops.<sup>11</sup> This entrepreneurialism of opening and operating small businesses typically reflected the skills and hard work of the new migrants.

Mario's job at the Hungarian tailors was to make pockets and he would make sixty-five pockets in eight hours. As he said he became quite good at it, 'because you always make the same thing'. This approach to ready-made tailoring meant supervisors could easily keep an eye on standards, and it related to a style of tailoring dating back to a tradition where workers were paid piece rates. The piece rates were seen to institutionalise the 'artisan ideal' but they also encouraged a fast turnover of production.<sup>12</sup> Traditionally, piece rates applied more to women workers, especially those who worked from home.<sup>13</sup> Mario was not paid piece rates at any of the places he worked. As he was twenty-one years old he was no longer an apprentice, and he was alert to the idea of receiving a better income. For this reason he stayed at the tailors in the Royal Arcade for only three months:

Because up the road, doing the pressing, they were paying £1 more a week. So I changed. I went and did the pressing. But I didn't like it because of the steam. I didn't like it. So I changed again and went to another—this was from Israel, making skirts with pleats.

He worked a machine that shaped woollen fabrics, which would be folded against cardboard, and then put through the steamer. He left the job as he developed an allergy to the steam processing. He moved to another Hungarian manufacturer on the fourth floor of a building in George Street.<sup>14</sup> There were about thirty people working there and he began making jackets, but again he was only given a segment of the garment to work on; this time the front of the jacket. He stayed there for three years earning £13 and 10 shillings a week, until he found another firm, which was paying £15 a week.

During the time he worked for these manufacturers, Mario remembers that men's dress was mostly of the English style, with 'blue jackets, silver (grey) trousers, and red ties. It was like a uniform.'

We were making so many blue jackets with the patched pockets and so on. On Sunday, many people were wearing that to go to the club, to go to the church, to go to the beach and so on. But most of it was English. But when—the fashion started to change when The Beatles came ... You know, especially for the pants. They started to go narrow.

This change in style was to affect younger people rather than the older generation whom Mario saw as 'more conservative', sticking to the wider trousers and the cuffs at the bottom. The new fashion featured:

Small lapels, three buttons, shorter jackets, the opening on the side no more than four inches really. The vent on the side. The body fit, you must have the body fit. It's for the young people. The trousers [stovepipe], short with ... like these. Because they had the white socks. They must show the white socks.

Working in the early 1960s, Mario was part of the textile, clothing and footwear industry workforce where almost 30 per cent were from immigrant labour, mostly from non-English-speaking European countries.<sup>15</sup> Mario arrived in the country knowing only two English words, 'money' and 'chocolate'. He found it 'very, very hard' to develop his English language skills, especially working alongside other migrant workers whose language skills were similar to his. One day, by chance, an opportunity was presented to improve this situation.

Lucky one day we were going here [*sic*] in Broadway. There was a picture show there [unclear] it's gone. We were looking at the picture outside and me and another friend we were speaking Italian. This man said but you don't speak English. No. Why? You only look into ... He said you know I can teach you English. Yeah, where? He was a teacher working at Glebe Primary School. I said all right. He gives me the address. The first day was two days a week, Tuesday and Thursday. The first day five of us went there. Then the next day there were ten. The week after, slowly we are up to thirty in two weeks.

For an immigrant arriving in the country with no prior connections or support this opportunity to learn English was a real bonus for Mario. He also found listening to the 2UE comedy radio program *Guess What?* helped.<sup>16</sup> He fondly remembers the format with the exchanges between a teacher and three students as funny and, as the 'talking was clear', he picked up a lot of language skills and understanding from the radio segment. The clothing and textile industry did very little to support migrants to advance their language skills, and for this reason migrant workers such as Mario who were 'placed at the "bottom" end of the labour market generally stayed there'.<sup>17</sup>

In 1966 Mario found a shop for rent for £4 a week at 14 King Street, Newtown. It had been a barbershop and the owner had died, so Mario agreed to rent the premises initially for a trial period of six months. When the building was offered for sale at end of the following year, Mario made the decision to buy it. When he moved into Newtown there were seven tailors between his shop and Newtown Station, which was one kilometre away. Newtown had long been a commercial hub, with a thriving retail trade dating back to when it was known as New Town in the early 1800s. The suburb was named after a shop, which served travellers on their way south, initially following an Aboriginal track, then a bullock route to the Cooks River. By the 1880s the busy commercial strip was attracting retail customers from the nearby western suburbs as well as local clientele.<sup>18</sup> Henry Marcus Clarke, who would go on to establish one of Sydney's largest department stores, began trading as a wholesaler and draper when he purchased a Newtown drapery business from John Kingsbury (a building that is now the Dendy Cinema) in 1883. In 1890 he moved the business to the corner of King and Brown streets, Newtown (now Clem's Chicken Shop). The emporium, which had almost an acre of floor space, was described as the 'largest, best lighted and most comfortable establishment in Newtown'.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to the Italian and Greek population in Newtown in the 1950s and 1960s, in the 1880s Newtown had a sizeable Jewish population and a synagogue was built just off King Street in 1912.<sup>20</sup> By 1926 there were sixty-three Jewish businesses in Newtown and eighteen of them were in textiles and clothing. The businesses included an upholsterer, a bag merchant, a hatter and mercer, a shoe store, a boot importer, a boot maker, a lace merchant and a milliner. C.G. Hatte, an importer and draper, opened his shop C.G. Hatte Ltd at 294 King Street in the late 1800s. He realised he was in competition with the city 'emporiums' and chose to stock his store with as many goods as possible, including lace mantles, parachutes, gloves, photo frames and chiffons.<sup>21</sup> In 1904 the bay windows were described thus:

tastefully dressed and fitted they present one of the most attractive features of busy Newtown, the King Street display especially being a millinery window with arches of snow, giving an Alpine effect, which has been created with considerable skill.<sup>22</sup>

Later, the store traded as Brennan's Department Store, named after Daniel Brennan who, like Marcus Clark, had begun business with a small drapery in Newtown in

1890. He had then taken over C.G. Hatte Ltd in 1908. Brennan's Department Store, at 294 King Street, Newtown, remained in business as a department store until 1989 when it became a video store and a gym.<sup>23</sup> By the late 1980s, retail patterns had changed, with a preference for big shopping centres with multiple retailers. Also affected by this shift in retail culture was the nearby Grace Bros department store, which closed its grand federation Queen Anne-style store on Broadway in 1992, despite having traded there since 1904.

There is nothing grand about Mario's shop, which is nestled between shops of similar size at the beginning of Newtown. At one stage, Mario had painted above the door of the shop, Sartori—M. Conte Continental Tailor. Today the 'Sartori' and the 'Continental' have been whited out, indicating that at one stage Mario made the decision that the ethnic specificity of his shop was not necessary for business; the word continental signifying he was a tailor from mainland Europe. For many years Mario recalls that his customers were mainly Italian and Greek. He described them as a community 'used to going to a tailor for a suit. Not buying ready made. Ready made at the time was English style or American style. Going to the European tailor was more Italian style or Greek style.'<sup>24</sup> Not only were the Greeks and Italians using the tailoring services, by 1966 postwar immigration provided nearly 50 per cent of the workforce for the manufacture of clothing.<sup>25</sup> Mario remembers that 'Surry Hills was full of manufacturers. In Leichhardt there were three [tailors] there, but two in Marrickville, one in Enmore, no, two in Enmore. There were lots of tailors ... also there was one in Earlwood.'<sup>26</sup>

One of the oldest tailor shops in Newtown was Defina's at 197 King Street, on the corner of Egan Street.<sup>27</sup> It had been started in 1926 when Robert 'Bob' Defina was twenty-one; initially he employed two others and by 1945 there were forty-five staff. He supplied to the trade, but also had a retail shop facing King Street. In 1959 Bob's son Robert joined him in the business. Robert had been a trainee executive with the department store David Jones, and on a year's working holiday received experience at Simpson Piccadilly in London and Brioni in Rome.<sup>28</sup> With Robert's expertise, and no doubt the influence of worldly travels, the shop was remodelled and modernised with clear simple lines, fluorescent lighting, black, yellow and cream vinyl floor tiles and walls decorated with shelves to display merchandise. By 1966, tailoring accounted for 35 per cent of the business and the shop sold

outerwear, knitwear, mercery and accessories such as grooming aids. Before the days of ready-to-wear, Bob made 125 garments a week. Over the years the shop scaled down as the competition increased. For example, by 1966 there were twenty-six other menswear stores within a mile radius of Newtown. This number is far in excess of the seven tailors along a small stretch of King Street that Mario recalls. Despite the modernisation of the shop, the type of clothing on sale at Defina's stayed fairly traditional. A feature article in *Tailor and Menswear* about Defina's states: 'Robert has not ventured into the world of mod. He says it is too risky and he prefers to remain with a quality image.'<sup>29</sup> Despite this reluctance to modernise, Defina's was one of the last of the 'old school' menswear shops to close in Newtown.

*Tailor and Men's Wear* was a trade journal which offered a comprehensive account of stockists, ideas for show windows, tailoring advice and men's fashion trends from 1946 until 1982. During the mid 1960s it ran a series of articles about the new trend of Australian men's clothing stores, many of which had been operating for many years, receiving makeovers.<sup>30</sup> Boutique-like shops were being set up such as The Mustang Shop in Grace Bros, Sydney, selling versions of the latest trends in clothes from London and New York, as interpreted by Australian manufacturers.<sup>31</sup> Anthony Hordern's in Sydney updated their menswear centre in an 'American styled modernisation' with honeycomb ceilings and panelled wooden walls and display units.<sup>32</sup> Paratel Menswear, which had traded for twenty years at 278 King Street, Newtown, was closed for a month in 1967 when it underwent renovations.<sup>33</sup> New features included bold street signage declaring 'Paratel Foremost in Suits', a new entrance with marble floor tiles leading to a chartreuse carpet showroom and concealed lighting which highlighted the silk-like gold wallpaper on one side and the contrasting orange, red and black nouveau design on the other. A photomural of the New York skyline decorated the back wall, with a staircase in front leading to the first floor. The layout of the merchandise was very similar to Defina's, with wooden shelving along the walls and a couple of display units in the centre of the store. Paratel sold mainly suits and a tailor shop was located on the first floor to provide alterations. Although the shop didn't supply sports clothes they supported local teams such as the Newtown AFL club, the Paratel basketball team and the Paratel ice hockey team. They also operated as a booking



agency for events at the Sydney Stadium organised by the well-known entertainment promoter Lee Gordon.<sup>34</sup>

Newtown underwent gentrification in 1980s, when inner-city terraces became fashionable to live in and the proximity to the city centre a bonus for the everyday commuter. Until this time Newtown was sometimes a 'rough' and challenging place to work. Before 1966, when the laws requiring local hotels to close at six pm, people were warned about being out at that time as drunks would spill out onto the streets having consumed rounds of drinks in a fast and furious fashion. Along with this, the suburb had a long history of petty crime. Over a five-year period from 1961 to 1966, Defina's was robbed twenty-one times. For three weeks early in 1966, Bob and Robert slept in the shop on alternate nights with a shotgun as they waited for bars to be fitted to the shop windows. Not only were the clothes of value to the petty thief but the cloth could also fetch a good price. Davis Plant, who had a tailor shop in Newtown in the 1920s, was the victim of a similar crime:

Thieves perpetrated a daring robbery at Newtown last night, when they broke into a tailor's shop in the main thoroughfare and almost cleared out its contents ... Mr Davis Plant was robbed of suit lengths and suits valued at about 250 pounds.<sup>35</sup>

The shop was left almost completely bare, with only a few oddments of suit lengths remaining strewn about the floor. Mario's shop, which had scarcely changed since it opened in 1966, was fitted with a wire grille over the front window in the early 2000s.

The bars have been there a while, about ten years ago. The insurance, they say if you don't put the bars they would increase the insurance. The business must be insured because of fire and so on, it's not cheap. Three years ago they break the glass, [but] they didn't steal anything.

Mario lived above the shop with his wife, who had worked as a knitter when they first met, and the first two of his four sons. It was typical that if you worked in the area you would live there too. King Street was always bustling with people and there were lots of children who played on the nearby streets. Some of the big employers in the area were the IXL Jam and Preserving factory, which was on the adjacent corner of Forbes Street (Mario said the factory employed five hundred to six hundred people) and Bonds, which had a factory at Church Street; there was also Bradmill

Cotton Mills, Sweet Bros. Store, and Alpha House, a boot factory. Mario stayed living above the shop until his two sons got older, and the family needed more room. Mario's shop was like many of the other small shops along King Street, with a recessed entrance and doorway, a timber framed full-length glass front and a small ledge at ground level. The inside of the shop is typical of a small tailor shop, a layout that dates back to the nineteenth century, with shelving to display the fabrics at a front counter and towards the rear a small fitting room and beyond that the workroom where Mario spends his day making and mending.<sup>36</sup> Today the front window is full of magazine clippings from the high-end English fabric company Dormeuil. Mario would order many of his fabrics from Dormeuil and each year they would send Mario a calendar at Christmas time. He would also source fabrics from Betty MacRae, Andrew Browden, and from Charles 'Charlie' Parsons in Surry Hills, who would supply good quality English fabrics, which he said were expensive at '£5 a metre but beautiful. I still have a suit from 50 years ago.'

Most of the cuttings in the front window are faded, as Dormeuil stopped sending Mario calendars four years ago. On a piece of cardboard scattered with magazine clippings of men in suits is an old handwritten message 'Have Your Next Suit Tailor Made' and 'Special Attention from Mario'. And under this Mario's humour is evident in the text cut from a magazine: 'Primo nel Mondo' (First in the World). Also in the front window a pair of silver grey trousers dangles from a clothes hanger and a black lace-up shoe rests on a small metal and wooden stand. This disembodied display looks dated and amateurish, especially compared to the suit jacket on the mannequin as you enter the store. The jacket is still under construction, the fine stripe of the black woollen cloth is covered with white tacking, keeping the pieces of the suit jacket and lining in place. This visible construction of the jacket is unusual to see and speaks of the labour and the skill required for bespoke tailoring. This style of shop window display dates back to the late 1800s where drapers and tailors would display clothing only in terms of the 'visibility and the quality of the goods and the symmetry of the window'.<sup>37</sup> The idea of clothing as the 'immediate remnant of a living, behaving person' was not developed until much later on.<sup>38</sup> Today, menswear shops along King Street have shop window displays that are stark in contrast to Mario's. Industrie and Jack London have on display complete outfits in pristine condition, with nothing of the process of the manufacture evident. Instead,

the display might say a lot about how the purchaser might dress for work, or when strolling along King Street.

One might wonder if there is something of the hoarder in Mario, as the shop seems fixed in a time warp. Scott Herring in *The Hoarders: Material Deviance in Modern American Culture* sees modern hoarding as connected to chronic disorganisation.<sup>39</sup> Mario may not be disorganised as much as he is happy to reflect a view of a past world in his shop, and in doing so he also displays something of himself. Throughout the 1960s, *Tailor and Men's Wear* would feature 'on-the-spot' observations of shop window displays.<sup>40</sup> Window dressing for menswear might be themed for 'Father's Day', or a 'Farm Yard Scene for Casual Wear Showing' or 'Sports Clothes in a Band Setting'. Readers would ask for new ideas for window displays and the magazine would suggest that the designs should be changed at least fortnightly.<sup>41</sup> Descriptions such as the following one would accompany a sketch of a window display:

Textured garments need a virile background and what better than a wind twisted tree in the background and a large piece of driftwood or clean stump as a centrepiece? Well-placed merchandise is interspersed with river stones.<sup>42</sup>

The relatively new idea of placing a model in the shop window was seen as:

an important factor as passers-by can visualise themselves in a similar position ... This is an excellent example of subtle salesmanship whereby the viewer puts himself in the model's position of trying on new and stylish clothes.<sup>43</sup>

Contrary to the way fashion works by creating the new; reflecting on a past world may have worked in Mario's favour. Instead of displaying the fashionable brand new, especially in the times of mass-produced clothes, which were often badly made and of poor quality fabric, the tailor-made offers a degree of luxury and a promise of service. Because Mario has been in the business a long time past worlds often overlap. He recalled that in the 1980s 'the Mods, a group of younger people started to follow the Beatles style and so on, and the women follow them the same. Three button jacket.'

'But don't you mean the sixties', I asked?

No. The Mods used to call here in the 80s, they used to go back and copy the Beatles style. And then the many young women had these skirts and jackets, short jacket. This was the first time women came in ... Because they could not find readymade. Well the manufacture, they didn't pick up for younger people. You could not find readymade, no. There were so many tailors that weren't doing it. They were all 17, 18, 19, or 14. I remember once I made a suit for [a boy]—he was 15. He liked the suit. But when he came to pick up, he came with his mother.

Along with the Mods, other fashion cultures also sought the skills of tailors. The 'walk tall' or 'lean look' which dominated teenage men's fashion in the 1960s was addressed by the ready-to-wear market but there were always subtle stylistic trends that fell outside the mainstream fashion market.<sup>44</sup> For example, the late 1960s saw the Sharpies (named for looking sharp) wanting 'flags'—trousers made with an extreme look, flared at the bottom but with no cuffs or belts—and they would go to places like Zinc & Sons, which still trades in Oxford Street, Paddington, Syd Green in Glebe and to Newtown to shop for shirts at a Peter Parkers.<sup>45</sup> In Melbourne, Sharpies would design their own figure hugging cardigans known as 'Connies' and order them from F. & L. Conte Knitwear in the Melbourne suburb of Thornbury, and Sam's Knitwear in Coburg. As one Sharpie recalled:

Well known 'tailors' made a killing as that's where most headed to have their pants made to measure. Quality Italian knits completing the outfit. No expense seemed to be spared and the girls always noticed. I don't know if it was purely the thing to do for the males, but it appeared that they went to a lot of trouble to look their best.<sup>46</sup>

While the Sharpies at one stage were into the classic fabrics such as Prince-of-Wales check and herringbone patterns, the Mods were also into new colours and styles of cloth. Mario didn't cater for the Sharpies; his clientele were the Mods. He used to show customers a fabric sample book from Betty MacRae, which offered wool mixed with mohair costing \$30 a metre, compared to pure mohair, which was \$250 a metre. As Mario described the fabric you could see him remembering the detail and the quality of the cloth:

It was a beautiful blue—look blue. You'd look at [it from] a different angle, it was a different blue. Brown. Different angle, look green. There was two or three colours in it. Younger people went mad. They loved it.

One of his clients was Kirstin Sibley who was part of the Sydney Mod scene from the early 1980s until about 1986. Known by her friends at school as 'Kirsty-Mod', she would scour op shops and markets looking for clothes but she also went to Mario to have a suit made. The suit he made was a grey silk double-breasted three-button jacket with a short straight skirt. It became a favourite and she would wear the suit with black and grey sling-back shoes.<sup>47</sup>

In the early years Mario would source Australian fabrics but he says a shift occurred in the early 1970s around the time when Australian Woollen Mills, which had begun in Sydenham Road, Marrickville, in 1909 manufacturing 'pure merino' and worsted and serge fabrics, closed its doors in 1972.<sup>48</sup> The threat to the Australian textile industry had begun much earlier, with the increase of synthetic fabrics in the late 1950s. Dorothy Hewitt experienced the textile industry first hand, working for a year in the Alexandria Spinning Mills in 1949. She described some of her experiences in her first novel *Bobbin Up* (1959), which was an account of the lives of female workers in the textile industry in Newtown and nearby suburbs. The novel had a political edge as it revealed something of the working conditions experienced in the industry, alongside the economics of the industry which was in a period of downturn caused by 'the influx of cheap Japanese textiles to Australia, a general tightening up in the overall economy and the usual seasonal factors'.<sup>49</sup> Alongside these factors, the most drastic effect on the clothing and textile industry was the 25 per cent tariff cuts introduced by the Whitlam government in 1973. From that time onwards there was an increased reliance on and supply of imported fabrics. Mario says he was reluctant to do so but there was no choice but to start buying imported fabrics, replacing previous suppliers like Yarra Falls Spinning Company, Melbourne that used to make 'very good quality fabrics'. Today good fabrics are expensive, and this creates a challenge for his business as he suggests in the following comment:

No, no, it's very hard now. Because the English fabric, most of them are expensive, \$200 a metre. Not many people are prepared to pay \$600 plus the GST just for the fabric. When they go to [unclear] buy the whole suit for

\$100. It makes it very difficult. Only the ones who want to get married or [he thinks] I want a good suit. That's all.

I asked Mario why he thought his business was the only remaining tailor shop in Newtown:

I survived because I was lucky I bought this property long ago. The change started to come on and the ready-made started to come in and the price was very low. They [the other tailors] could not survive any more. Also menswear started to disappear. King's Menswear was not there any more, and the factory in George Street he's not there any more. He sells dress for women that's all. Ron Bennett he was here in Newtown. Ron Bennett he was selling suit, he was not a tailor but selling the suit, yeah.

Ron Bennett's grandfather had set up a shop, J.T. Bennett and Sons, in Newtown in 1884, selling hats, gloves and canes. Around 1930 his son David introduced mercery, and would use off cuts of material to make trousers at 25 shillings a pair.<sup>50</sup> They also began selling shirts. Ron Bennett had left school at sixteen to become part of the business and throughout the 1960s travelled to the United States and London to observe 'what's in'.<sup>51</sup> He set up a number of shops across Sydney and catered for young men as well as an older clientele; he was seen as a menswear authority by popular media such as *The Australian Women's Weekly*.<sup>52</sup> After one of his overseas trips in 1966 he predicted that the Mod look would 'hit hard' in Australia in the following six months, and the new fashions would be a combination of 'way-out' Carnaby Street styles meeting the more conservative Savile Row.<sup>53</sup> He began importing Mod clothing and accessories but he also placed orders with local manufacturers who specialised in 'go-go styles'.<sup>54</sup> Like Paratel, he too sponsored a local sporting team. The team he sponsored was the local girls softball team known as 'Bennett's Babes'.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the competition from stores such as Ron Bennett, Mario still had a steady trade because 'people would prefer to buy it (tailor made) rather than ready-made. Plus I have the sample; they can choose what they want. Different style and so on'. Mario also had a steady trade by stocking shoes for men and children, and handbags for women.

When I started. I had nothing else and this woman at the hospital was making bags and said would you like to sell some bags? All right to put

something in the window and then the other one he told me ... there was a factory in Alexandria making shoes. And he say, 'Would you like to sell some shoes?' All right, I bought two dozen pairs of shoes ... there were many salespeople selling belts, selling shoes. They would come in ... and shirts, tie, bow tie. And slowly I would start to put things in the window.

Mario would also sell the well-known brand of Paramount shirts. Paramount, started in 1964, became a big name in business shirts but Mario says it has disappeared 'because it's gone to China'. The brand still exists but like many brands from the clothing and textile industry manufacturing production has gone offshore.

As you enter Mario's shop, to the left hand side is a stack of shoeboxes, including one labelled 'Astro Man Footwear of the Future' with an image of the moon and an astronaut in a full-face space helmet. The late 1950s brought in the jet age, and then by the 1960s the space age created a whole new theme for advertising and product names. I hesitate to ask Mario whether these shoes have been in the shop since the 1960s. One of the first books about Australian fashion was Norma Martyn's *The Look: Australian Women in their Fashion* (1976), in which she devotes a chapter to 'The New Look in Flight' arguing that flight not only brought the overseas fashion world to Australia but also took fashion to regional centres.<sup>56</sup> I would suggest that tailors such as Mario would also have contributed to enabling new fashions in Australia by using their fine skills and techniques to make the new styles. Competition for Mario in this period would have come from mass manufacturing, often with the use of cheaper synthetic fabrics. To counter the convenience and popularity of new synthetics, the wool industry, through organisations such as CSIRO, developed new ways to treat the wool fibre. In the nearby suburb of Annandale, Dale slacks were manufactured from 'sironized' wool, a process which created permanent pleating and creasing and allowed wool to be washable and shrinkproof.<sup>57</sup> Also caught up with the jet age theme of the day, Dale used the image of a Boeing 707 jet to advertise their slacks, describing them as the 'fastest moving in fashion'.<sup>58</sup> Another well-known menswear brand, Stamina Trousers, made by immigrant labour in Wollongong, ran a promotion on TAA's Boeing 727 inaugural flight from Sydney to Perth via Adelaide and Melbourne in 1965. Passengers received a free pair of Stamina Jetline slacks.<sup>59</sup> Stamina was *the* brand of trousers of the day and they were heavily promoted not only through campaigns such as the TAA

promotion but through a seasonal catalogue called 'Men of Stamina', and the distribution of a free pack of 'Men of Stamina' playing cards in the pocket of every garment.<sup>60</sup> Despite the catchy advertising promotions these brands have not survived, unlike Mario's business which for almost fifty years has seen the different fashions come and go, as new trends brought new fabrics, styles and clientele.

Today, Mario's clientele is mainly men, though occasionally women order a suit if they have difficulty finding an off-the-rack suit in their size. Until December 2014 Mario was making a suit a month, with each suit taking two weeks to make. Since then he has been doing mainly alterations and repairs to ready-made suits. He says: 'They are not worth the money they spend. When a suit is well made it will last fifteen or twenty years.' Sometimes past customers return with a suit Mario has tailored: 'It is always the same size but some say I still have your suit but it doesn't fit me any more.' Mario might alter the suit by drawing on the training he received as a thirteen-year old. Even though the styles have changed over the years: 'The cut has always remained the same but the style and the adjustment depends on the client and the material.' For Mario 'tailoring is an art' and the handwork that defines his trade is something which you don't find in readymade suits:

the proper canvas, the support inside, the hand stitching. In the manufacture they don't bother. I sew everything. Mostly today this is all glue. Maybe in six months or eight months the glue starts to come apart from the fabric. It looks terrible.

The technique he was taught in Italy was to measure the full length of the jacket and then halve the number, to have the measurement: 'If it is 46 we write 23. If it is 96 we write 48 because when we go to cut, that number we reduce again, so to make more easy.' While interviewing Mario a woman came in to finalise the arrangements for a suit. He measured her on the spot. Each measurement was written as a number in a row. The order of the number would indicate if it was the sleeve length, the back length, neck-to-shoulder and so on.

There aren't any tailors left in Newtown, perhaps the earlier generation weren't fortunate enough to have owned a building, or hadn't been prepared to work 'very hard' the eight or nine hour days, six days a week that Mario still works. Mario has always worked on his own although in the early years as the work picked up he



employed a friend to come in and help on Saturdays. He attributes some of his success to being a good listener:

I ask the client what they want. How they want they show the picture. And if there is a wedding they want something special. They tell me what they want. You have to be a good listener and they come with the picture and I copy [that is, draw a picture of] what they want.

And he knows that a ready-made suit is not for everyone, especially if their body is not a standard size:

Even today some middle-aged people they don't want a suit where it is very tight, no they want a comfortable suit. They could not find a ready-made suit they have to go to the tailor ... the one with tall, skinny, long arm he can never find a suit to fit him.

There are still bespoke tailors in Sydney—the oldest firms are Zink & Sons (1895) and J. H Cutler (1884)—but they tend to be for wealthy clientele.<sup>61</sup> And today, there is a new trade in bespoke with tailors coming from India and fitting clients in showrooms in Sydney, and then having the suits made using cheap labour offshore. Mario quietly sits alongside these businesses and the fashionable men's wear shops in Newtown. Mario survives because he owns the building and, as he says, 'I gave them what they want, that's it.' But Mario is also prepared to work hard, and do repairs and alterations to garments that fail his own standards of tailoring. Mario has participated in persistence. It is not about survival, as there doesn't seem to be any economic principal guiding him. No other shop window in Newtown displays its history in this way. Mario's shop window displays remnants of that history. The outdated displays indicate that Mario is not into the vagaries of fashion. He falls outside the fashion system. There is something about the display that tells us he belongs to a tradition, and he hasn't budged. His is the shop of a modern fairy story that offers the promise of another world, one you have to enter to understand. The shop seems to have ignored the 'rolling capitalisation' of King Street, Newtown. It's not that Mario is in any way wilful, maybe he just didn't see it coming.

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—NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michael Carter lives in Newtown and attended the first interview with Mario Conte, 24 March 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Nino Culotta, *They're a Weird Mob*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1958 (13th edition).

<sup>3</sup> Anne Dwyer, 'Nino is Doin' Orright' in *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 25 June 1958, p. 3.

The book was reprinted every year for the next thirty-eight years and was serialised on radio and in newspapers, as well as being made into a feature film in 1966,

<<http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/weird-how-my-relo-won-his-fame/2008/09/12/1220857835068.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1>>.

<sup>4</sup> Mario Conte, interviews with author, Newtown, 24 March 2015 and 5 May 2015. All further quotes from Mario Conte are from these interviews, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>5</sup> Conversation with Mario, 15 December 2015.

<sup>6</sup> 'Racial Hatreds, Migrants Brawls on Liner', *The Courier-Mail*, 15 October 1954, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> The Royal Arcade was demolished in 1970, just before the Green Bans halted the destruction of the key architectural sites and the urban development of tracts of land in various suburbs in Sydney. The arcade now houses the Hilton Hotel.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Maynard, *Out of Line: Australian Women and Style*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2001, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Peter McNeil, 'The Beauty of the Everyday', in Sydney Jewish Museum, *Dressing Sydney: The Jewish Fashion Story*, Sydney Jewish Museum, Sydney, 2013, p. 100.

<sup>10</sup> Carmelo Vitale, *Italian Historical Society*, <<http://www.coasit.com.au/>>.

<sup>11</sup> 'In the early 1950s nearly half of all Greek, Italian and Yugoslav born males were employers and/or self employed compared to only 20 per cent of Australia born', Lisa Thomson, *Migrant Employment Patterns in Australia: Post Second World War to the Present*, AMES Research and Policy Unit, Canberra, 2014, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> During the nineteenth century, in order to remain competitive employers demanded that piece-rates fall as output rose. See Bradon Ellem, *In Women's Hands? A History of Clothing Trades Unionism in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1989, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Raelene Frances, *The Politics of Work: Gender and Labour in Victoria, 1800–1939*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, p. 39.

- <sup>14</sup> Between 1947 and 1953 Hungarians came to Australia under the Displaced Persons scheme from Eastern Europe as part of the first wave of postwar immigration to Australia.
- <sup>15</sup> Michael Webber and Sally Weller, *Refashioning the Rag Trade: Internationalising Australia's Textile, Clothing and Footwear Industries*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2001, p. 49.
- <sup>16</sup> A popular radio program produced by Artransa production house.
- <sup>17</sup> Julie Kimber and Peter Love, 'Textile and Clothing Workers and Their Trade Unions' in Julie Kimber and Peter Love (eds), *The Time of Their Lives: The Eight Hour Day and Working Life*, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Melbourne, 2007, pp. 123–6.
- <sup>18</sup> See:  
<[http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/122708/WalkTourGritty.pdf](http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/122708/WalkTourGritty.pdf)>.
- <sup>19</sup> See:  
<[http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/122708/WalkTourGritty.pdf](http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/122708/WalkTourGritty.pdf)>.
- <sup>20</sup> McNeil, p. 113.
- <sup>21</sup> 'C. G. Hatte, Newtown', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 December 1896, p. 10.
- <sup>22</sup> 'C. G. Hatte, Limited', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 December 1904, p. 9.
- <sup>23</sup> In 1908 Daniel Brennan took over the business of C.G. Hatte Ltd., and in 1918 it became Brennan's Ltd. 'Mr Daniel Brennan', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 1928, p. 13.
- <sup>24</sup> Mario Conte interview, 5 May 2015.
- <sup>25</sup> McNeil, p. 109.
- <sup>26</sup> Mario Conte interview, 5 May 2015.
- <sup>27</sup> 'Meet Bob and Robert Defina of Newtown', *Tailor and Men's Wear*, September 1966, p. 22.
- <sup>28</sup> Tom Buerkle, 'End of Line for London Shop a Cut Above the Rest', *New York Times*, 30 January 1999. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/30/business/worldbusiness/30iht-simpson.t.html>>. Simpson Piccadilly was a traditional men's and women's clothing store which closed in 1999 after 63 years of business. Most of the sales staff were retired army officers. 'It represented a time in England that doesn't exist anymore ... The assistants were terribly polite, and there was a pecking order, like there was in life', said Jeremy Lloyd who worked there in the 1950s and later wrote about his experiences in the popular 1970s television comedy *Are You Being Served?* Brioni was founded in 1945 as a men's tailoring shop and is still a major men's fashion house owned by the French company Kering.
- <sup>29</sup> 'Meet Bob and Robert Defina of Newtown', p. 23.
- <sup>30</sup> In 1975 it was renamed *Men's Wear* but in its new form it only lasted until 1982.
- <sup>31</sup> 'New at all Grace Bros Stores: The Mustang Shop', *Tailor and Men's Wear*, December 1966, p. 26.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Anthony Hordern's Men's Wear Centre', *Tailor and Men's Wear*, September 1960, p. 56.
- <sup>33</sup> 'New Look at Newtown', *Tailor and Men's Wear*, August 1967, pp. 32, 33.
- <sup>34</sup> 'Lee Gordon presents Billy Daniels', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 November 1954, p. 7 and 'Lee Gordon presents Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 October 1954, p. 53.
- <sup>35</sup> 'Daring Theft at Newtown', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 May 1929, p. 12.

- <sup>36</sup> Alison Matthews David, 'Tailoring', in Valerie Steele (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, vol. 3, Charles Scribner's Sons, Gale Virtual Reference Library, Detroit, 2005, pp. 261–4.
- <sup>37</sup> Sara Schneider, *Virtual Mummies: Performance Design for the Shoe Window Mannequin*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1995, p. 9.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Scott Herring, *The Hoarders: Material Deviance in Modern American Culture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2014, p. 23.
- <sup>40</sup> Roger D. Anderson, 'Continental Influence in Display', *Tailor and Men's Wear*, November 1960, pp. 32–3.
- <sup>41</sup> 'New Ideas for your Window Designs', *Tailor and Men's Wear*, March 1965, p. 26.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> 'Five Fresh Ideas for Your Window Layouts', *Tailor and Men's Wear*, May 1966, pp. 22–3.
- <sup>44</sup> 'Walk Tall—New Teenage Trend', *Tailor and Men's Wear*, February 1966, p. 126.
- <sup>45</sup> *SkinsnSharps* website: <<http://skinsnsharps.com/scrapbook/2008/04/24/sharpies-the-early-years-1967-1969-by-chris-ohalloran>>.
- <sup>46</sup> 'Vicki', 10 February 2011, *SkinsnSharps* website: <<http://skinsnsharps.com/scrapbook/2008/04/24/sharpies-the-early-years-1967-1969-by-chris-ohalloran>>.
- <sup>47</sup> Rebecca Bowers, 'Mod Memories', <<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/the80sareback/2010/05/mod-memories/>>.
- <sup>48</sup> Marrickville was home to many woollen mills including the first and the largest, Vicars Woollen Mills. It closed down in 1976 and is now the site of Marrickville Metro Shopping Centre, <<http://www.marrickville.nsw.gov.au/en/library/history-services/past-exhibitions/industry-and-innovation/vicars-woollen-mill/>>.
- <sup>49</sup> Dorothy Hewitt, *Bobbin Up*, Australasian Book Society, Melbourne: 1959, p. 59.
- <sup>50</sup> Tony Stephens, 'The Man who put Fashion into Aussie Menswear', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 August 2003, <<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/08/22/1061529344331.html?from=storyrhs>>.
- <sup>51</sup> 'Ron Bennett Finds Out What's In', *Tailor and Men's Wear*, September 1966, p. 26.
- <sup>52</sup> 'New Fashions for Young Men', 'Teenagers Weekly' supplement in *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 13 April 1960, p. 8.
- <sup>53</sup> Carnaby Street fashions were featured in many *Tailor and Men's Wear* issues from this period. For example, 'It's a "Go Go": As Carnaby Comes to Rundle!' in *Tailor and Men's Wear*, September 1966, p. 24.
- <sup>54</sup> 'Ron Bennett Finds out What's In', *Tailor and Men's Wear*, September 1966, p. 27.
- <sup>55</sup> Mavis Gibbons, 'My Love Affair with Newtown', <<https://www.facebook.com/My-Love-Affair-with-Newtown-182740671797729/timeline/>>.

- <sup>56</sup> Norma Martyn, *The Look: Australian Women in their Fashion*, Cassell Australia, Sydney, 1976.
- <sup>57</sup> 'No Wrinkles or Shrinkage with Stabilized Woollens', *New Scientist*, 10 December 1959, p. 1156.
- <sup>58</sup> Dale advertisement, *Tailor and Men's Wear*, July 1960, p. 32.
- <sup>59</sup> 'Fast Takeoff for Jetline Slacks', *Tailor and Men's Wear*, January 1965, p. 29.
- <sup>60</sup> Steven Bedwell, *Vizard Uncut*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2007, p. 21.
- <sup>61</sup> This may be an understatement. In 2006 one of J.H Cutler's overseas clients commissioned a \$50,000 bespoke vicuna overcoat, which became the subject of Meg Lukens Noonan, *The Coat Route: Craft, Obsession and the Trail of a \$50,000 Coat*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2013.

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