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Memoir as Cross-Cultural Practice in Italian American Studies

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Eljah,

The mud under my fingernails is not from clay. It's from clawing. I double knot your shoelaces. I steer your scooter away from walls. But I can't protect you. Not from bumblebees. Not from foul balls. Not from the flying objects that count.

I wish I could mold the world for you. I'd palm water to mend cracks, soften edges, pinch thick spots thin. The world I'd sculpt for you would be glazed in blue shine, smooth all over, and so, so loved.

Here is a map of a dangerous place. It might help you plant your feet on the ground. And a firm stance is the most important part of fighting.

Freddie Gray died from a broken back, cracked in a police van, on the day we drove you home from the hospital. You sat in your car seat, between your father and me. You didn't have the strength to hold your head up. It flopped, from side to side. It fell onto your chest.

—Meghan Flaherty¹

Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, not the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.

—Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

I stumbled upon memoir over twenty years ago, in 1996, when I read the galleys of a new memoir by an Italian American writer whom I had known only as Virginia Woolf's biographer and critic. At the time, I was a young academic who had recently turned away from James Joyce, the subject of my Ph.D. dissertation, to focus on Italian American studies. Joyce had served as an ideal literary father in my early years in the United States, when I saw myself as an Italian student abroad rather than an immigrant, and felt the allure of the modernist expatriates. As time passed, and my migration became as permanent as the move to another country can ever feel, I felt drawn to women writers who explored the reverberations of displacement and disconnection from Italy. For many of these women, the family migration long preceded

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their birth, and yet I felt a kinship. It was the early 1990s. That these writers were barely recognized as a literary group only made them more attractive. The pull of personal ethnic identity and long-standing feminist politics intersected in my new scholarly choice.

When I first read *Vertigo*, I recognized, as many Italian American women did, its radical quality. In this “unlikely narrative of how a working-class Italian girl became a critic and writer” (xxxvii), Louise DeSalvo dared to rewrite the history of her Italian American family, rejecting the trajectory of uncomplicated and successful assimilation.² If Italian American writers like Tina De Rosa wrote longingly of a lost home and family, DeSalvo wrote openly of the cultural anxiety and mental health issues that had haunted her family; she wrote as a writer and feminist biographer who had explored the impact of incest on Woolf’s life and work and used those strategies to understand her own familial and cultural experiences. Her raw and relentless exposure of what ailed her Italian American family—depression, suicide, domestic violence, sexual abuse—was a brave and necessary step that would lead to a layered and nuanced cross-generational personal and cultural exploration, actualized in several memoirs that she wrote in the following two decades, culminating in *Chasing Ghosts* and *The House of Early Sorrows*.

Vertigo signaled the beginning of a new phase of Italian American feminist writing.³ It also influenced much of my own work as an Italian American scholar. Reading *Vertigo* at an early stage in my career marked a pivotal shift as I grappled with my own ambivalent relationship to my culture of origins, which I articulated by infusing bits of memory work into my own scholarly writing. When, a year or so after reading *Vertigo*, I started teaching memoir, I recognized the potential for cross-fertilization between

² Many Italian American writers have acknowledged the influential role of DeSalvo’s work, especially of *Vertigo*. See the essays by Bernard, Fragoso, Ragusa, and Šukys in Caronia and Giunta.

³ Up until that point, most autobiographical narratives by Italian American women were fictionalized, including canonical texts such as Helen Barolini’s *Umbertina* and Tina De Rosa’s *Paper Fish*. *Vertigo* exposed issues that few if any Italian American writers had addressed openly and critically, such as domestic violence and sexual abuse. In addition, in writing a text that was formally a memoir—not an autobiography—DeSalvo linked herself to an emerging genre that spoke to the times, even as it traced its origins to earlier literary movements and writers, including modernist writers like Virginia Woolf, whose work, DeSalvo acknowledges, influenced her own memoir.

that genre and Italian American studies.⁴ Such recognition has led me to experimenting in a kind of writing that, in the spirit of feminist practices, collapses the personal and the political. My work in Italian American studies has also deeply influenced my pedagogical practice. The concepts of emergence, recovery, recognition, agency, and community, for example, have proven essential to my work as an Italian American scholar *and* a teacher of memoir. Now, going full circle, I want to propose that the pedagogy of memoir can contribute to the field of Italian American studies. Indeed, memoir writing offers unique opportunities for cultural practices that would allow Italian American studies to transcend disciplinary and cultural limits, thus enhancing the field's increasing relevance beyond insular boundaries. Such boundaries can lead to a self-defeating cultural/nationalistic identity to which memoir, as a cross-cultural pedagogical practice, offers an effective and exciting antidote.

Key chapters in Italian American history—such as the persecution of Southern Italian immigrants, the involvement of Italian immigrants in anarchist and socialist groups, the presence of Italian workers in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, the internment of Italian immigrants in World War 2—offer important insights that are relevant in today's climate of intolerance and discrimination. Integrating this historical and cultural knowledge into personal writing can prove invaluable to Italian American student writers and their diverse writing communities. It is also in line with the field's growing focus on the Italian diaspora and immigration in contemporary Italy (Parati and Romeo). As an interdisciplinary subject, Italian American studies typically includes courses from such disciplines as literature, history, sociology, American studies, ethnic studies, art, and music. The field can find renewed pedagogical energy and focus in the cross-cultural, self-reflective writing produced in memoir workshops that foster both cultural agency and cross-cultural understanding and community. Italian American studies stands to benefit from the inclusion of a culturally informed creative writing pedagogy of memoir in its curriculum—as a program

⁴ See my essays, "Teaching Memoir at New Jersey City University" and "Honor Thy Students."

requirement. And while my argument specifically addresses Italian American studies, it can be easily applied to other programs that focus on a singular cultural or ethnic experience.

Writing Back to History

I met Meghan Flaherty late in the spring of 2016. Barack Obama was still president and no one believed Donald Trump could win. A colleague poet introduced us. Meghan was taking his introductory creative writing course.

“She’s brilliant,” he told me. “Convince her to stay in school.”

A transfer student who had come to our university that year having taken a collection of courses at different colleges, Meghan was juggling school and caring for her infant son. She wasn’t sure she would return the following semester.

The writer’s event we were attending had just ended and the room vibrated with lingering excitement. Meghan shifted nervously from side to side. Behind her tentative smile, I sensed fierceness. I recognized the signs that sometimes both reveal and conceal a student writer’s readiness for mind-blowing work: some reluctance, even self-doubt, and a thinly veiled urgency. I suggested she take my memoir workshop, even though her genre was poetry. She could use the support of the memoir community. Many poets took my classes. When she raised her eyebrows, I reassured her that they made excellent memoirists.

In September, with Meghan among us, we framed memoir as a genre that emerged in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, Working Class Studies, and the resulting opening up of the literary canon. We talked about memoir as a perfect forum for difficult stories that lack a solid tradition of literary models, the unadorned stories of the disenfranchised, the voiceless, the silenced victims of familial, social, and political trauma. In November, the United States had a new president elect. Meghan, like other students, was visibly upset by the election results. She had completed a solid draft of a memoir about her grandmother, but wasn’t sure what direction to take next. I urged her to read some

cross-generational memoirs: Eavan Boland's *Object Lessons*, Kym Ragusa's *The Skin Between Us*, Louise DeSalvo's *Crazy in the Kitchen*. I knew she was of Irish and Italian ancestry. Maybe these books would help her reflect on the focus and shape of her memoir. These writers develop their memoirs as historically grounded cross-generational narratives that variously address the intersection of gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, immigration. The narrators of these memoirs do not simply travel into the past; they foreground their understanding of different kinds of memory and the power of memoir to function as micro-history. Conjuring up their ancestors on the page—an Irish woman who dies in childbirth in Dublin; Southern Italian peasants; African slaves—these authors conceive memoir writing as a necessary act of cultural reclamation and vindication of the past, but also as a way to understand their own contemporary predicaments in visceral, intuitive ways. I hoped that these historically grounded lyrical memoirs would help Meghan find a point of entry into the immigrant histories of her families in a way that made sense to her as a poet who felt constrained by the task of narrativizing the past. Close to the end of the semester, however, Meghan asked me whether she could write on something else.

“Of course,” I said. “Trust yourself. The story chooses you, not the other way around.”

Thus Meghan put aside her Irish grandmother's story and wrote “Elijah.” Instead of writing back, she wrote forward in time, although this writing, too, would necessitate interrogating the past. She also turned to Claudia Rankine and James Baldwin, whom she credited as the writers who taught her

how to write scenes in which the political invades the personal. Rankine writes about microcosmic moments like a conversation between friends, one black and one white, who are caught off guard by the intrusion of their ‘historical selves’ into their intimate moment... Baldwin taught me that the most powerful way to express what enraged me about the world was simply explaining what happened around my own dinner table.

In her excruciatingly moving epistolary memoir, addressed to her young black son, Meghan grapples with white privilege and its blind spots as she faces her terror of racial violence. Intimate moments of her

pregnancy and her son are interwoven with details from the news accounts of racial violence and police brutality against black people. History does not serve as mere background in Meghan Flaherty's memoir. She writes back to History. History, she makes clear in her memoir, is personal.

Explaining the historical continuity between yesterday's and today's racial inequality, Michelle Alexander writes: "racial caste systems do not require racial hostility or overt bigotry to thrive. They need only racial indifference, as Martin Luther King Jr. warned more than forty-five years ago" (14). When the present increasingly resembles some dystopian future, interrogating the past and taking an unequivocal position towards it, and towards its reverberating effects on the present, constitutes an ethical imperative. There are not "many sides" when white supremacists and neo-Nazis march on American streets waving the Nazi and confederate flags and people of color, including children, continue to be victims of violence, police brutality, and mass incarceration. The historical moment demands conscious acts of witness articulated with honesty, courage, eloquence—as in Meghan Flaherty's memoir.

Although I have always encouraged my students to explore connections between personal and historical memory, I recognize, as they do, that in the recent past, articulating such connections has taken on renewed urgency. The current political climate and the increasing strain of socio-economic issues in their lives has provoked more focused, bolder, and sharper responses, not only in the memoirs the students write but also in the topics of the literary events on which we collaborate. In the last couple of years, the public presentations of the work of the students and graduates of the NJCU memoir writing community have become even more poignant, embodying the spirit of Audre Lorde's words: "When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid" (*The Cancer Journals* 15). Here are some of the topics of recent memoir events at NJCU: "Othering Identities," "Que Eres? DominicanX," "Asian American Writers on Remaking the Past," "Without Borders: Writers on Language Crossings," "Power, Agency, Creativity: Black Women Writers and Artists," "The Young and the Reckless: Emerging Italian American Writers," "Black Lives

Matter: Emancipatory Writings & the Healing of the Black Narrative.” Students and graduates are not just audience; they are organizers, hosts, and featured writers. The seeds of these events that bring together the university and Jersey City community are planted in the classroom, where many of the writers become practitioners of a genre about which they may know little at first, but inevitably find life-sustaining.

The Course

New Jersey City University, where I have taught for twenty years, is uniquely situated for implementing a pedagogy of memoir as a personally and culturally transformative genre. The school attracts primarily students from Jersey City, an expanding urban center across the Hudson River from New York City. Our students also commute from the semi-urban towns of Hudson County—Hoboken, Union City, Bayonne. There are dorms on campus, mostly for students from southern New Jersey, out-of-state students, and a growing contingent of international students. Jersey City, a destination for immigrants from all over the world, boasts one of the most ethnically and racially diverse populations in the United States, a reality that is reflected in our student population. Many of our students are people of color, working-class, and first-generation immigrants; typically, they are the first in their families to go to college. Many of these students have been discouraged by high school teachers from going to college. Only a few consider graduate school an option. The way they meet their challenges and the remarkable work so many of them produce has shaped and reshaped my pedagogy, reminding me that “craft does not take place in a vacuum” (Aitken).

While my memoir workshop fulfills requirements for the creative writing concentration, one of the areas of specialization offered by the English Department at NJCU, many students in the literature concentration choose memoir as an elective; and students in the education concentration often take memoir to meet the writing requirement. Often, students from other majors—psychology, media arts, art, history, sociology, women’s and gender studies—take the course as an elective. Occasionally, NJCU graduates or senior citizens audit the course. I include these details to highlight the fact that not only are

my students from different ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds, but they are also diverse in age, academic background and interest, level of writing skills, and professional aspirations.

The first ground rule in my memoir workshop is this: “In this class, you should not talk about your life.” When I first make the announcement, students look at each other in dismay. How can they not talk about their lives in a course that is described by the same instructor as an in-depth exploration of their memories?

I smile and repeat: “In this class, you should not talk about your life.”

Usually, at this point one student notes that the key word is “talk.” We should not “talk” about our lives. We should “write” about our lives. This distinction becomes the springboard for our first conversation about the writer’s craft. We discuss, for example, the fact that memoir is not oral storytelling—which has its own strategies and goals. And the workshop is not therapy, although memoir writing can certainly promote healing. At the same time, I recognize that oral storytelling is often a crucial component of the students’ writing voices. *Secrets We Kept: Three Women of Trinidad*, a memoir published in 2018 by former NJCU memoir student Krystal Sital, relies on female storytelling as its narrative frame. As Janet Zandy writes, “The process of retrieval and remembrance is crucial. Writers who have access to a public audience serve as witnesses or mediators for those who have been silenced or denied opportunities for self-expression. Oral history as political activity and as literary expression is an important element of this writing.... The final ‘literary’ product is not just one of individual achievement but of a collaborative effort where the literary skills of the listener are joined with the memories of the teller” (*Calling Home* 11). For many of my students, speaking, listening, and being listened to, represents a new experience of power and authority as well as a way to explore cross-generational connections. Many interview family members, often calling them in other countries, and they often learn family stories about which they knew little or nothing. Thus, in the process of becoming memoirists, my students learn to be oral historians. Taking on this role often positively affects and transforms family dynamics, opening communication and cultivating

cultural agency and pride that defuse a legacy of secrecy and shame. Given the anxiety that memoirists often experience about sharing their work with family members, I am always surprised by the presence of supportive parents, siblings, and even grandparents when students present their memoirs during public events on campus.

Kym Ragusa's *fuori/outside* and *Passing*, two documentaries that explore racism and gender by focusing, respectively, on Ragusa's Italian American and African American grandmothers, provide excellent opportunities to discuss the use of strategies of oral history in memoir. Using prompts drawn from these documentaries, students work on short imaginative biographies of their families and communities, dramatic monologues in the voices of other people, and oral history interviews. Integrating oral history into the memoir project enables students to address the creative and cultural challenges prompted by remembering as an individual and collective act. It is also a powerful way to examine issues of language and literacy.

For my immigrant students, writing memoir becomes intimately connected to the history of their countries of origin, about which they usually know little and/or have not spoken. Grace Guandique writes:

The memoir-writing workshop let me finally tell the story that I have been carrying around, a story that my family wanted to tell, to scream, to shout at the top of their lungs, but could not. My family could not speak English. We did not have a place to be heard because immigration officials said we did not belong in America. We were not legal residents and therefore, the United States did not recognize us. To them, we did not exist. (6)

Historical research becomes an integrating part of the memoir writing project, often instrumental to identifying the links between historical trauma and mental health. I recommend Louise DeSalvo's *Writing as a Way of Healing*, which includes, in addition to research on the subject, prompts to write about trauma and

self-care activities. The latter are especially important to economically disenfranchised students with little or no access to mental health care.

Short guided in-class writing prompts help build stamina and confidence. They make the task of writing accessible to student writers who struggle with time management and deep cultural anxiety about their ability to write. The results of these simple, short exercises never cease to amaze me: although a few students groan initially, resenting being forced to write on subjects they did not choose, they are all eventually thrilled with the outcome: the writing they produce in these short bursts is detailed, well-paced, and has a distinct, fresh voice. And they are surprised that *this* writing was inside them, that something they had never considered worthy of being written about could generate a powerful memoir moment full of possibilities for further writing.

Forging a self-as-narrator that is distinct from the self-as-character proves essential to creating a reflective memoir. The realization of this distinction is the single most important intellectual, creative, and cultural moment for my students. It changes the rules of the game. It allows student writers to understand how stories are constructed and can be changed by shifting vantage point. The concept may be simple but it takes a sustained writing practice to grasp it. As they gradually create the stance and voice of a narrator equipped with the tools of the craft, many apprentice writers feel less burdened by past trauma—or process trauma in a manner that is bearable and, ultimately, healthier. And the writing gets better. There's no venting, no lashing out. There's a story. I use Vivian Gornick's *The Situation and the Story*, Kym Ragusa's voice-over narrator in *fuori/outside*, and key passages from memoirs that foreground the difference between narrator and character and the power of writing to transform the relationship to the past by generating not just new perspectives but new feelings, such as this one from DeSalvo's *Vertigo*: "Language, I have learned by writing about this, gives birth to feeling, not the other way around" (105).

The realization of the constructedness of memory proves especially useful for student writers who negotiate rigid social and cultural narratives of which they may have little awareness. For my Italian

American student writers, to move outside familiar narratives of food, family, immigration, work, education, power, success, Italy and America, for example, can prove challenging. Initially, the writing may revolve around the unchallenged tropes of food and family, but soon they dig deep and turn familiar narratives inside out.

In a memoir titled “Cracked,” Loryn Lipari used recipes as embedded narratives to explore family, gender, class, addiction, and ethnic memory (DeSalvo and Giunta 123-30). In another memoir, aptly titled “Bald,” she intertwined brain surgery and lesbian sexuality mapped out using the topography of New Jersey. Another student, Rebecca Poggiali, inserted “Baby Black Dolls,” a vignette in which her childhood love for, and identification with, black dolls is woven into an examination of race and racism in her family, in her braided memoiristic essay “The Lessons of Objects”:

I am a child of *Contadini*. I begin to think that Nona’s attempts to keep me from looking “dark” were not because she was ashamed of me, but perhaps because she was trying to protect me. If I couldn’t be “white,” she wanted me to look “white.”

I learn how to write with love and rage, blame and forgiveness. I have learned that my complexion changes. Sometimes I am dark, others I am light. There are days I am a leafy brown, and others when I am the same hue of the off-white curtains that hang in my living room. My cheeks turn pink when I am embarrassed and my lips are blue when I am cold.

After this vignette—in which she writes about the racialization of Italian immigrants, including the lynching of Sicilian immigrants in New Orleans in 1891, and the role of dolls in the civil rights case, *Brown v. Board of Education*—Rebecca places a sweet and almost sentimental piece about her grandmother titled “Pastina,” a quintessential Italian comfort food, creating a compelling juxtaposition that embraces contradiction and ambiguity.

Not all Italian American students are eager to write about their family history, whether because they know little about it or are reluctant, for cultural reasons, to talk about their families. This reluctance is by no means unique to one ethnic group. I have witnessed many lively class discussions where students validated the courage of their fellow writers to write honestly, even brutally so, and found their courage instrumental to authorizing their own stories. Writers from diverse backgrounds thus help each other get past the shame and fear of exposing one's family and culture to negative criticism. The understanding that results from writing viscerally and in a detailed manner about the past generates individual and collective cultural understanding and compassion, which can prove vital to the growth and well-being of a writing community that carries unexamined cultural traumas.

Matt Fondanarosa, an initially reluctant Italian American student, wrote about his deceased grandmother in a tender and elegiac memoir that taps into deeply felt sentiments. He articulated them in prose that was fresh and insightful, devoid of clichés. Having realized how little he knew about his Italian American grandmother, Maria Grazia Parisa Ricca Colino Florenza Fondanarosa, outside her role in his life, Matt created an ongoing dialogue with her. After completing a memoir about his intimate recollections of her, the following semester he turned to reconstructing her life, relying on family stories but also plunging into an intense reading of works about Italian American immigrants. He read Pietro di Donato and Tina De Rosa; he read about the Triangle fire. The readings had a dramatic effect on his writing, which expanded in scope as Matt saw himself, and his stories, in the larger context of his family and Italian American history but also of a literature in which he could now participate as an author. De Rosa's and di Donato's lyrical portrayals of working class Italian American characters influenced his understanding of the relationship between language and story: it was no longer about recounting, but about evoking, intuiting, and re-imagining the past. Both authors also provided Matt with models for reconstructing his grandmother's immigrant neighborhood. In his later writing, Matt disappears as a character, and his prose

breathes life into other characters whose stories are unveiled to him for the first time. We meet his grandmother as an immigrant child pushing a cart full of clothes:

Grace in her thick black stockings and winter hat, worn black leather buckle shoes, a grey skirt, red coat. The sun hangs low, blocked by rooftops casting their shadows over the street. She can feel the ruddy, blotched red faces of German children, laughing and pointing; women with scarves wrapped around their heads, carrying canvas bags of groceries, raise an eyebrow at her, as if to ask, “What kind of people are these sending children out like this?” But there are also those who smile at her. Old women with sunken mouths, dressed in black, clutching rosary beads and mumbling to themselves as they shuffle along in pairs, their arms intertwined. They must be coming from church, she thinks, and she wishes she could be there, kneeling on the plank of wood behind the pew, casting her head down in prayer. She begins reciting “Our Father” in her head, and when she gets to the part that goes, “on earth as it is in heaven,” she wonders what that means. Could it mean that Earth is Heaven? Then, would she be pushing a cart up there, too? She wonders how she can let herself think this way. How can she question God? Her stomach tightens and her head feels hot and itchy under her wool hat. She wants to confess her sin. The street goes empty, the street is quiet; she focuses on Tillie’s shadowy silhouette and begs God for forgiveness.

Matt realizes the power of memoir as a larger and inclusive cultural narrative enacted through empathic imagined encounters. His narrative of immigrant life addresses the questions: “Who are the people I come from? What have they lived through?” These questions help him avoid tribute narratives and overcome his apprehension about betraying family secrets.

Memoirists and/as Critics

The memoirs published over the last two decades by Italian American writers, especially by women, constitute a body of work that paints a nuanced and often controversial portrait of Italian American culture. Memoirists Louise DeSalvo, Susanne Antonetta, Mary Cappello, Joanna Clapps Herman, Annie Lanzillotto, Maria Laurino, Marianne Leone, Kym Ragusa, Lisa Romeo, Domenica Ruta, Helene Stapinski, and many others, write thoughtfully of Italian America; they read the past through a multiplicity of perspectives and historical contexts. Memoirs have helped shape the Italian American canon and become the subjects of student papers, doctoral dissertations, scholarly articles, and books. What has not received much attention, though, is the practice and pedagogy of memoir within Italian American studies.⁵ Scholars have focused primarily on the interpretation of works of memoir, which maintains an epistemological and hierarchical distinction between the critic and the writer. But the writer of memoir is also a critic in her own right, and memoir is itself deeply critical work.

For my students, remembering, recording, and sharing the stories and histories of their families and communities constitutes a vital part of the memoir project. Writing memoir helps them deepen their understanding of their family. In a memoiristic essay she wrote in my course on Italian American literature and culture, Cassandra Casella personalizes the historical memory of the Triangle fire by weaving her analysis of this historical event with the story of her grandmother, a garment worker, and her own story of third-generation immigrant who has been developing a sense of Italian American identity rooted in working-class consciousness. She sees herself as a spokesperson for her grandmother *and* the Triangle workers. “The process of retrieval and remembrance is crucial,” Zandy writes. “Writers who have access to a public audience serve as witnesses or mediators for those who have been silenced or denied opportunities for self-expression” (*Calling Home* 11). Writing memoir can help young (and older) Italian

⁵ DeSalvo, “When the Story Is Silence: Italian American Student Writers and the Challenges of Teaching—and Writing—Memoir.”

Americans develop a radically transformative cultural and historical self-awareness that ground their experiences in a complex and previously unknown cross-generational past—one that may examine, for example, both the history of racism in Italian American communities *and* the history of the racialization of the Italian south and Italian immigrants.⁶ Writing memoir can thus help students develop a sense of responsible cultural agency and citizenship in a cross-cultural community.

Italian American students who feel disconnected with their ethnic identity often write powerful memoirs that lucidly articulate the meaning and value of ethnic identity. Angelica Roman's memoir honors thesis conjures up her biological father, whom she only met once, during a court-ordered DNA test when she and her twin sister were fourteen:

Abandoned by my Dominican father and raised by my overly secretive Puerto Rican mother—who was abandoned by my Italian grandfather—I had cut myself off from considering myself to be much of anything.

Writing and reading memoir helped me delve into the ways in which my ethnic identity survived and taught me how to embrace the ways in which my ethnic identity faltered. Without memoir, I would never have learned that gaps in identity resonate in the person I have become nor would I have found camaraderie among writers who consistently teach me how to push against the boundaries of loss and displacement. I have been embraced in a world to which I never imagined I would belong. I now view my relationship with ethnic and immigrant identity not as a passive inheritance but as a living root that I must continually strive to cultivate.

⁶ See Bucci Bush, *Sweet Hope*; DeSalvo, *Crazy in the Kitchen*; Gennari; Guglielmo and Salerno; Ragusa's memoir and documentaries--all important contributions to the conversation on race in Italian American culture. In my courses, these supplemental readings provide students with a context for understanding familial and cultural experiences.

Angelica also explored her complicated Italian ancestry in “The Forgotten,” a memoiristic essay she wrote for my course Women in Literature. In that essay, she uses close readings of Italian American women writers and filmmakers as bridges to her obscure family history:

...my maternal grandfather...is not only lost to me, but ...to my mother.... I know that he was Italian and tall, that in the brief moments that my mother saw him as a child, he towered over her more than any other adult... I can see him at the doorway, but he is shrouded in darkness.

I imagine that my grandfather has a family, children, and grandchildren. I imagine that sometimes, in the quiet moments of his life—when he brushes his teeth, looks out a window, or lies in bed before he dozes to sleep, he remembers my mother, the daughter he abandoned. There is a reason I imagine him like this. There is a reason I don’t imagine him as a man who never thinks about the daughter he abandoned. My father has never wanted me.

The writer, barely twenty years old when she wrote this piece, establishes her competence as a reader of literary texts and the cryptic text of her own family history. She does so in spite of, and by claiming, cross-generational absence, loss, and displacement.

Again and again, I have seen how the practice of writing memoir guides students to become thoughtful readers and writers of their own experience but also of literary texts. The essays that students who have taken the memoir courses write in literature classes embody an understanding of texts that is critical, intimate, and authentic. In “Speed Bag Speech: Aggression, Fear, and Vulnerability in Italian American Masculinity,” an essay she wrote for the Italian American literature and culture class, Chloe DeFilippis drew on her memoir toolbox to write a tight analysis of masculinity and body language in Annie Lanzillotto’s memoir *L is for Lion*, Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull*, and her own family. I urge my students to cultivate authentic critical voices by drawing on the strategies of memoir through which they

have learned to read their own lives, instead of mechanically mimicking conventional literary criticism, by sprinkling their prose with jargon. My students develop and amplify the reflective voice of memoir in process journals, personal essays on the creative process, author statements that accompany weekly memoir submissions, and critical introductions to their theses. That many are first-generation college students makes this approach instrumental in facilitating a creative intellectual agency that they can carry with them—whether or not they pursue writing after college.

If You Believe in Me, I'll Believe in You

A semester after writing “Elijah,” Meghan took Advanced Memoir and continued to explore the story that had come to her at the very end of the previous semester: “Your father’s family didn’t seem as outraged as I expected them to be. I didn’t realize then that massacre has always been a part of the experience of being black in the United States. Tragedy was new to me because I’d had the privilege of ignoring it. My shock was a symptom of my privilege.” The harrowing experience of fearing for her son’s safety becomes the springboard for the narrator to delve more deeply into the persistent politics of race and racism in the United States. After completing her second memoir course, Meghan decided to do an honors thesis that would expand upon her earlier work. She articulated more clearly the need to connect her story with the history of the racialization of her Irish and Italian immigrant ancestors so that she could, as she puts it, “gain a better understanding of the racial divide I see within my own home and throughout the nation.”

I often tell my students the story of the encounter between Alice and the Unicorn. Most of them are familiar with Disney’s Alice but have not had an opportunity to delve into or appreciate the philosophical and ethical complexity of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. When the Unicorn first sees Alice, he says to Haigha, “I always thought they [children] were fabulous monsters! Is it alive?” And Alice says, “Do you know, I always thought unicorns were fabulous monsters, too? I never saw one alive before!” The Unicorn says, “Well, now that we *have* seen each other... if you’ll believe in me, I’ll

believe in you. Is that a bargain?” (287). If you trust your writing, I tell students, the story will come. But the story of Alice and the Unicorn is also a story about trusting difference. We are all “as large as life and twice as natural.”⁷

At the end of the semester, we always gather at my house for our traditional “MemoirFest.” Students and graduates from previous years, including some from my very first memoir workshop in the spring of 1997, enter the house carrying platters of food. Krystal brings jerk and curried chicken; Ana brings *pastelon*; Heather carries a tray of donuts from Judicke’s Bakery in Bayonne; Danielle has a pot of chile; Hia, a box of *kaju katli*; Claudio brings *empanadas*; Gina, Italian pastries from Aroma di Napoli in Nutley. I make *pasta alla puttanesca* and *pasta all’Amatriciana*. They make themselves at home in my kitchen. The dining room table is covered with platters.

About forty people sit on the sofa, chairs, piano bench, and pillows in a large circle around the living room that has become familiar to so many of them. Writer Annie Lanzillotto regularly joins us. Sometimes other writers come too, as do partners and close friends of the students. Each of us tells how we came to be part of this community. Then the new students begin to read. There are tissue boxes on the two coffee tables. There are stories of mothers, fathers, grandparents, forgotten ancestors, distant countries many still call home. There are stories of kitchens and gardens, of recipes, photographs, secrets. There are tears. There’s laughter, too.

Later we will break bread. For now, we listen.

⁷ ““This is a child!” Haigha replied eagerly, coming in front of Alice to introduce her, and spreading out both his hands towards her in an Anglo-Saxon attitude. “We only found it to-day. It’s as large as life, and twice as natural!”” (Carroll, 287).

Lanzillotto, who has taught workshops on “Autobiography as Resistance,” mentored many of my students when she was a visiting writer at NJCU. Over the years, she has been a witness to and enthusiastic supporter of NJCU student writers.

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