FROM THE FIELD: STUDENT ESSAY
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Memory-Keepers: An Ethnographic Look at Female Agency among Italian-Americans

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While doing ethnographic research in Bayonne New Jersey among my extended Italian-American family over the summer of 2008 I began to see how deeply memories were valued within Italian-American communities. From fall 2008 to fall 2009, I continued my research in Asheville and Chapel Hill, North Carolina, also with people of Italian ancestry. These interviews supported the idea that memory aids in the construction and maintenance of Italian-American identity and works as a defining feature of female agency within the community. While studying gender roles of Italian-American women it became apparent that an important aspect of feminine identity for this group is the role of "memory-keeper". The women of this cultural group achieve valued roles within the family as they pass on the ways of the native country through their cooking of regional foods, enforcement of the traditions of past generations and through their "kin work," or keeping up with sometimes distant family members and family lore. The work of Italian-American authors and scholars such as Edvige Giunta make reference to such a memory-keeping function in earlier generations of Italian-American women as well.

"Becoming Italian-American": Maintenance of Identity Through Memory Keeping

In the preface of her work, *Writing with an Accent: Contemporary Italian American Women Authors*, Italian-American author and scholar Edvige Giunta wrote: "Becoming Italian-American: a process of splitting and joining, blending but not melting, absorbing but not assimilating; a negation with cultural identities and language that I often perceived at odds with each other; a rethinking of the question of – and the quest for-origins" (Giunta 2002: x). This cultural balance of identity can be easily observed in contemporary Italian-American families, such as my own. Observation of older family members led me to wonder how this process of "becoming Italian-American" progresses and is maintained. Through participant

observation and formal interviews in the Jersey City/Bayonne area of New Jersey and in both Chapel Hill and Asheville, North Carolina I began to narrow my focus on the construction and preservation of Italian-American identities in the women of those communities. It became clear that the culturally valued trait of memory worked as a tool to preserve cultural ties to Italy and provided an avenue for female agency. By passing on traditions through generations and maintaining connections within and between families women have cultivated the role of what I have labeled as "memory-keepers." The Italian-American culture remains distinct in large part due to the continued production of regional foods and the maintenance of family ties.

In the case of my two Italian-American great aunts, daughters of early twentieth century immigrants, the traditional Catholic Church-based values of Italy and the pull of economic forces at work during the American Great Depression intersected to form their feminine identities. Both women entered the workplace at an early age to contribute to the support of their family and reentered the workplace once they had families of their own. They passed on to their own daughters a set of regional Italian recipes as well as a strong work ethic, which included the value of both economic and domestic contribution to the home and family. To this day, their English is peppered with Italian words and phrases though they rarely attempt to speak their parents' native tongue. These lived experiences recall Giunta's reference to "absorbing but not assimilating; a negation with cultural identities," a process which creates memory-keepers such as my great aunts.

Stance: "Native" vs. Outsider Status

Deciding to study a social scene in which I was already deeply immersed has proven to be both extremely beneficial and problematic. Early on I had come to terms with the fact that my research was going to be defined by my subjective perspective. Being aware of this perspective, however, has given me more insight into my social scene. I feel that this "insider" or "native" angle to my research has added a personal element that I deeply enjoy.

In her article, "How Native is a 'Native' Anthropologist", Kirin Narayan discusses many dilemmas that I have faced in the field. In her piece she works to deconstruct the notion of a native anthropologist and explains, "Calling attention to rather than smoothing over, 'native' identity perhaps helped to revise ingrained power imbalances in who was authorized to represent whom" (Narayan 1997:24). Acknowledging my place within my social scene has allowed me to understand my position not only in my work but also in the relationships with the people who are my participants and relatives. Unlike the majority of my participants I did not grow up in a large Italian-American community nor have I ever experienced living in poverty. However, as I conducted interviews with individuals like my greats aunts, I began to develop closer relationships based on an exchange of personal stories and mutual understanding. While relatives of my grandfather's generation will still view me as a child it seems clear that including them in the process of

writing this ethnography has opened up avenues for more mature conversations and perhaps persuaded them to view me with more respect.

These elements of cultural identity that define my great aunts and me differently complicate my status as an "insider." This realization has also allowed me to become more aware of how "factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race or sheer duration of contact may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status"(Narayan 1997:31). I can see that while I am a "native" to my social scene that doesn't mean I am coming from the same frame of reference as my participants. This fact was made more apparent when I began to conduct formal interviews. Hearing participants tell stories from their respective pasts and explain a variety of feelings about their Italian-American culture made me aware of how facets of each of our identities work to construct a wide range of perspectives on this dynamic social scene.

Memory as a Facet of "Kin Work" and Female Agency

"You know you should really talk to your aunts about this." This is the sentiment that in a sense started my entire research project. Once I had decided I wanted to study Italian-American culture I began the rather epic task of choosing a focus for my work. As I told different family members about my research ideas every one of them suggested I talk to my great aunts. I realized early on that I wanted to interview my great aunts to understand their experiences as first generation Italian-Americans. The universal insistence that I do so underscored the value my family placed on their memories and demonstrated what respected positions they held because of their knowledge. It became clear that my Great Aunts Josephine, or Jo, and Celeste are in a sense the memory-keepers of our family. Their ability to remember the past and keep track of the goings-on of the many different branches of our family gives them a great deal of agency.

It seems that this value of memory can be further understood in the context of the private sphere of the home. In her article "The Female World of Cards and Holidays: Women, Families and the work of Kinship", Italian-American anthropologist Michaela di Leonardo deconstructs the multiple types of work that women do in their homes and communities, all of which rely heavily on personal memory. Within her Italian-American social scene of Northern California, di Leonardo observed that female participants were involved in three different types of work: "housework and childcare, work in the labor market, and the work of kinship" (di Leonardo 1997:341). The author elucidates this dynamic third type of work: "By kin work I refer to the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross household kin ties, including visits, letter, telephone calls, presents, and cards to kin; the organization of holiday gatherings; the creation and maintenance of quasi-kin relations; decisions to neglect or to intensify particular ties; the mental wok of reflection about all these activities…" (di Leonardo 1997:342). It seems clear that a key element to "kin work" is memory, which thus works to define the lived experiences of women. Since remembering dates and maintaining contact with individuals in and outside of the family falls mostly on women it not only proves

to be a shared experience but one that can create bonds within communities and through generations.

Within my social scene the value of memory has become more pronounced as my Aunt Jo and the people around her cope with her dementia. While Jo is in relatively good health for a 90-year-old woman, her memory loss has proven to shift her role in the family. Di Leonardo explains "Kin work is not just a matter of power among women but also of the mediation of power represented by household units" (di Leonardo 1997:343). It seems that since Jo's dementia causes that type of forgetfulness that made living in an assisted living facility necessary it has limited the type of kinship work in which she can participate. She is no longer able to cook large meals and keep up with the network of relations and friends she once did. Even though Jo became confused as to who I was during our interview, she was still able to tell me in-depth stories from her youth and could even remember some details that her sister Celeste had forgotten. Since my two great aunts have always been extremely close, it has been rather hard for Celeste to see her older sister age in this way. During our interview as Celeste spoke of Jo's condition she explained "Seeing her (Jo) the way she is today it breaks my heart because she's always had good memories and now she feels she's just wasting time not doing anything…I try and encourage her and tell her 'we're all getting old and its something we have to get used to'…there are times that I'm really happy that my sister could recall things, in fact I tell her 'Jo some of the things you remember I've forgotten'…" Within this sentiment Celeste describes both her and Jo's sadness about Jo's dementia but also explains how an ability to remember certain things makes them both feel optimistic. In fact, it is the memories of the distant past that are the ones that are so valuable in maintaining a sense of continuity and family identity and these are the memories that Jo can recall. The importance my family places on maintaining a living link to the past is what appears to preserve Jo's status as memory keeper and protects this element of her female agency. Since the role of memory keeper is constructed in the private sphere of the home but extends into the more public spaces like the neighborhood, an analysis of Italian-American communities would allow for a better understanding of the development of female agency.

"The neighborhood was a very nice family"

While a sense of community is arguably a strong element in all social scenes it has come to my attention that the feeling of community as an extension of the home comprises a key component of an Italian-American construction of cultural identity.

In July of 2008 my parents and I set out on a road trip to New Jersey. This was to be the trip in which I collected formal interviews from both of my great aunts. After hours of mind-numbing highway driving we made it to the Garden State. My first full day in New Jersey was spent at my mom's cousin Lou's home. Lou is my Aunt Jo's oldest son and he graciously arranged to pick his mother up from her assisted living facility and bring her to his house for the afternoon. After lunch I

began my interview with my Great Aunt Jo by asking her to describe the area of Jersey City, New Jersey where she grew up. She answered by simply saying, "The neighborhood was a very nice family." Sentiments like these can be found the in conversation I had with Jo's childhood friends Rose and John Di Giacinto that same afternoon as well.

Three days into our visit when I sat down to interview my Aunt Celeste in her sunny living room in Tom's River, N. J. my first questions revolved around her childhood. Right away my aunt explained that "We (she and her family) were very poor but so were all of our friends so we didn't realize that we were that bad off…the neighborhood was all tenement houses and poor people." Through this description I was able to see that the lived experience of poverty formed a strong bond of solidarity within her Italian-American community. This strong sense of "taking care of your own" could also be found in comments she made about how her mother treated others. Celeste explained, "Mother was always taking care of people, as little as we had she would always gave 'em a care package…she shared everything." It was clear that this was an area that was made stronger by a value of reciprocity. A few days earlier, Rose Di Giacinto expressed similar sentiments when talking about her own mother's involvement in the raising of her children. Rose explained that her mother was someone she could "always depend on." While outside sources, like doctors, could sometimes not be consulted due to financial reasons Rose's mother could always be counted on to "use what she knew" to help. It seems clear that what Rose's mother "knew" was a product of both what her mother taught her and skills she developed living in the tenement neighborhood where she raised Rose and her older brother. The passing on of this type of knowledge not only aided Rose as a young mother but demonstrated the strong generational ties maintained within families and communities. The ways in which Celeste and Rose described their mothers' giving natures made it clear that they both admired each of them a great deal and also exemplified how the value of "kin work" was passed on through generations.

It appeared that Celeste, Rose and Jo all noticed the work it took to maintain this sense of community they cherished. As a result, they in turn continue to write cards, send gifts and keep in touch just as they had seen their mother do. Di Leonardo calls attention to this type of intergenerational work by explaining, "We tend to think of human social and kin networks as the epiphenomena of production and reproduction; the social traces created by our material lives…But the creation and maintenance of kin and quasi-kin networks in advanced industrial societies is *work*; and, moreover, it is largely women's work" (di Leonardo 1997:342). While my great aunts might not refer to the tasks they perform within their homes and communities as "work" because of the joy this effort brings them I am sure they would agree that the maintenance of relationships is not easy and that it is a responsibility left mostly in their hands. It seems clear that along with happiness these responsibilities also give both of my aunts the power to be reference points on nearly all family-related issues ranging from cousins' birthdays to stories of our heritage.

Looking at the walls of my Aunt Celeste's wood-paneled living room I was overwhelmed by all of the pictures of family and friends. Against the far wall stood my great aunt's and uncle's armchairs, which were distinguishable by the framed Purple Heart above my uncle's chair and the cluster of her children's pictures that hung above my aunt's. It seemed that my great aunt took as much pride in her children as my great uncle did in his Purple Heart. Through this observation I was able to see how the value of family helped define the concept of home just as the concept of home was enlarged to include the larger community. It appeared that my Great Aunt Jo's description of her childhood neighborhood as a "family" alludes to the dualistic influence the domestic sphere of home has on Italian-American communities and vice versa. It seems clear that neighborhoods made of up of immigrants mostly coming from the same country if not the same region would have similar cultural values that, while cultivated in the home, would also define the larger community.

While similar ethnic backgrounds allowed for the development of tight-knit neighborhoods like the one where my great aunts grew up, economic hardships caused by the Great Depression also worked to strengthen these communities and foster a shared value of "kin work." Di Leonardo explains how socioeconomic trends can affect work done in the home, "...for visitors and for those who were residentially proximate, the continuing commonalities of women's domestic labor allowed for kinds of work sharing-nursing, child keeping, cooking, cleaning- that men, with their increasingly differentiated and controlled activities probably could not maintain" (di Leonardo 1997:346). Within this context one can see that the types of "kin work" that were done while these communities worked to survive economic hardships helped to form strong networks of support. My Great Aunt Jo explained this concept when she stated, "(Growing up) we were poor but we were rich in family". In this response Jo is notably not just referring to the relatives she lived with in her home but the larger network of people within her community. It seems clear that providing neighbors with food, child care and other forms of support not only maintained relationships but also provided women of my great grandmother's generation with a means of gaining agency during times when most things were out of their control.

"That's why Pop left Italy!" Food as Cultural Memory and Female Agency

My grandfather was the one who first made me aware of the strong link between food and Italian identity. As I sat across from my grandparents at a restaurant we often frequent when I am back home I scanned the menu, saw the word "polenta" and knew what we were in for. Sure enough, as I looked up I saw my grandfather point at the menu and exclaim, "That's why Pop left Italy!" While most people would never be offended by this corn meal based patty found in many Italian dishes, the very mention of polenta sends my grandpa into a rant. The story goes that my great grandfather was so poor in Italy that all he and his family could afford to eat was polenta. In my grandpa's tale this poverty and overexposure to

polenta is what made my great grandfather get on boat to American alone at the age of 17. It seems that food unites the people of my social scene not only around a table but also in giving them a sense of cultural identity and pride. Because of Pop's disdain for polenta and the poverty it stood for my grandfather still refuses to order it at restaurants. It is clear that this refusal to eat polenta is not only an act of pride but allows my grandfather to feel connected to his father and his Italian heritage.

My grandfather's disdain for polenta works to illustrate not only a personal connection he makes between food and Italian heritage but also a cultural value that he wishes to maintain and pass on. Throughout my life my grandfather has always praised my cooking abilities. Whether he was eating Italian Wedding cookies I made with my grandmother as a small child or twirling the seafood linguini I made last Christmas, he takes a noticeable amount of pride in my ability to cook. It seems that this culinary related pride is a result of the social structure of "kin work" that he saw in his Italian-American neighborhood growing up and in the home he later created with my grandmother. When I make Italian food and show my enjoyment in doing so my grandfather is able to see my ability to carry on both the culinary and other "kin work" related traditions of his mother and sisters. Here it seems he takes true pride in the fact that I have the potential to be the keeper of his family memories and pass them on to my own family. Through this perspective one can see the value that male family members place upon the domestic roles of women as not only good cooks but also as the passers-on of the varied cultural traditions related to the home.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the various ways that Italian-American women maintain Italian heritage and demonstrate positions of power within the family through cooking, I consulted works written by contemporary Italian-American authors. *The Milk of Almonds: Italian American Women Writers on Food and Culture* edited by Louise DeSalvo and Edvige Giunta, allows readers to gain a more vibrant perspective on the cultural link between female agency and food within Italian-American communities. Within this collection of works is a powerful piece by Mary Beth Caschetta, entitled "The Seven Sacraments". In her short story Caschetta describes how cooking the traditionally Catholic Italian Christmas Eve meal helped her feel more connected to her Italian identity and her spirituality. Caschetta writes:

> Last Christmas, after Maria Salerno and I cooked a different fish for each of the seven sacraments, I started believing in God again. Maybe it was my friendship with Maria and her sister, Jannette, their loud conversations, their insistence on tradition, their cheerful faith and careful food preparation. Maybe my past came back to claim me…It's hard to say for sure. I used to pretend I wasn't Italian. (Caschetta 2002:67)

Within Caschetta's narrative she describes the difficulty she faced in understanding her Italian identity. As a young girl she denied her heritage and strived to be like the blonde Protestant girls she grew up around. After meeting the

Italian-American friends, the Salerno sisters, whom she describes in the quotation above, she began to feel comfortable with her Italian roots. Through cooking traditional meals and sharing experiences with similar others, Caschetta was able to take pride in her Italian identity. Toward the end of her piece she writes, "Maria and I cooked for nine hours, using memory and our taste buds to guide us, paying homage to our grandmothers, each of whom had cooked a variation of this meal throughout her life"(Caschetta 2002:75). Within this context it becomes clear that for generations of women that feel detached from their Italian heritage, cooking can work as a tool to regain cultural connections. It seems that the power to create a bond with one's ancestral background through food allows Italian-American women to have another level of agency within the domestic sphere.

While the act of making Italian meals works to maintain the use of traditional recipes and a rather vibrant link to an ancestral homeland, the gratification of being a skilled cook can also work to give Italian-American women a source of personal pride. An example of this comes in the form of my Great Aunt Jo's famous carrot cake. Throughout her life my aunt has touched many lives with her baking. From sending Christmas cookies to friends and family to staying up baking banana bread to bring to co-workers for a morning treat, Aunt Jo became known for her culinary gifts. Throughout decades of measuring flour and shaking sprinkles many people told my aunt that she should make a profit on her baking abilities. After years of persuasion she finally listened and opened her own bakery, which sold baked goods at her storefront in New Jersey and delivered items as far as Manhattan. Her favorite cake to make and eat was a rich nutty carrot cake with thick cream cheese icing. Carrot cake also happened to be her best seller and flew off the shelves at prestigious stores like Dean and Deluca. Jo's tremendous culinary talents granted her the agency to use her skills to build her own business.

Di Leonardo further analyzes this by explaining, "Revealing the actual labor embodied in what we culturally conceive as love and considering the political uses of this labor helps to deconstruct the self-interest/altruism dichotomy and to connect more closely women's domestic and labor-force lives"(di Leonardo 1997:347). While both of my great aunts worked outside of the home from their early teens to their late 50s, it seemed that all of the jobs they held in the public sphere were always quite distinct from the work they did in the domestic realm. Yet when Jo began producing baked goods for a profit she was able to bring the two worlds together and in the process gain more financial agency.

Even though Jo achieved a great deal of success outside of the domestic sphere with her cooking, she and her younger sister also maintained a fair amount of power within the family because of their cooking abilities. One can easily see the power dynamics that take place during meal times by simply looking at who is serving the food. While other people are permitted to help carry the food out or pass bread around the table, my great aunts are always the ones who take everyone's plates and dole out their respective culinary masterpieces. It seems clear that this act of feeding others and literally portioning out the food they made works to empower my two aunts. The act of serving a table full of people not only allows my aunts

to take a sense of pride in the meal they cooked but also establishes a sense of agency on a visual level. In observing the distributions of food it is easy to see the matriarchal roles my great aunts play in our family. Michaela di Leonardo explains the ways in which this display of "kin work" can influence family dynamics, "…we see that kin work is not only women's labor from which men and children benefit but also labor that women undertake in order to create obligations in men and children and to gain power over one another" (di Leonardo 1997:347).

A "Hybrid" Perspective: How Memory Continues Cultural Traditions Across the Atlantic

Reflecting on the value of memory and the ability it gives Italian-Americans to connect with their Italian heritage made me realize I needed to consult someone who, unlike my great aunts, maintained an Italian identity that was not rooted in a past generation. Luckily I knew just the person to talk to.

As I drove to the Suman's house for roughly the four millionth time I began to feel nervous. Since making friends with Francesca Suman our junior year in high school I have always associated her house with uncontrollable laughter and delicious meals. Yet on this rainy afternoon while I sat in front of the wood and brick two-story house I was trying not to think about delicious cups of minestrone and was attempting to prepare for my interview with Francesca's mother, Anna. After living in the U.S for over half of her life there are still some linguistic elements of English that give Anna trouble. Particular sayings or phrases still confuse her and this confusion usually results in a fair amount of hilarity. Explaining that "man candy" did not necessarily mean that the boy Francesca and I were discussing particularly enjoyed sweets and other similar experiences allowed me to see how language can work to affect cultural identity. Edvige Giunta this link through her personal knowledge of languages.

> Language is a manifestation of cultural identity. My languages are diverse and interconnected: English (which I first learned and spoke in its British form), Italian (which evolved from the regional Tuscan dialect)…Brief excursions into other languages did not last: English, so foreign to my immediate cultural experience and origins, would become my language of choice, and as such it would come to permeate my sense of cultural and binational identity (Giunta 2002. xi).

I'm confident that while Anna has not read Giunta's work that it would resonate with her own lived experiences. It seems that Anna's bilingual abilities also work to construct the way in which she views her cultural identity and could be part of the reason why she defined herself to me as not an Italian-American but as a "hybrid." Anna's memories are constructed through the perspective of an Italian-American "hybrid" whose lived experiences in Italy were defined by her native tongue and whose assimilation to life in America was influenced by the process of learning English. I have come to believe that she makes this distinction because, while she

enjoys living in the United States and considers herself an American, the way she interprets American culture is through an Italian lens.

As I sat across from Anna on the cozy green couch where I have spent endless hours I noticed how different she looked compared to my other participants. Since she is from the Northern city of Verona, Anna has much lighter features than my Southern Italian informants. With blonde hair, fair skin and blue eyes the only thing that gives her Italian ethnicity away is her thick accent. The way Anna speaks English is quite similar to the way she speaks Italian. Fast paced and rhythmic, her way of speaking has caused her quite a few problems over the five years she has lived in the American South. Though Anna's accent simply places her in the large category of foreigners as far as Americans are concerned, for Anna, her accent is a facet of her Northern Italian identity. After I asked her about the differences she perceived between Italian and American culture she simply stated, "When I first arrived the difference was clear but now things are blended." It seems that passing years and the assimilation process have deeply affected Anna's memory. While living in America has constructed a "hybrid" identity for Anna, which in turn has worked to "blend" the cultural differences that were once so distinct, her memories of Italy and Italian traditions have allowed her to keep an active tie to her place of birth. Anna is able to stay close to her Italian roots and keep memories alive through maintaining traditions.

When I asked Anna about her first few years in the U.S she described feeling quite isolated. She explained that since she "came alone" her Italian traditions were "less strong." She felt that she needed to make more of an effort to assimilate than to continue the customs she knew. However, these feelings did not cause Anna to give up all Italian practices. She was dedicated to maintaining some Italian traditions for herself and for her children. While most of her Italian practices revolved around food, Anna explained that the celebration of Santa Lucia's Day was always an important event when her children were young. On the feast day of Santa Lucia, December 13th, Anna would give small presents of candy and sweets to her two daughters just as she had received when she was small.

Anna's face lit up as she explained how much her daughters enjoyed observing Santa Lucia's Day. Her reaction made it clear that bringing this cultural tradition to her family gave her a sense of agency and demonstrated, as well, the important role that she plays within her family. Within her social scene di Leonardo also found that the maintenance of tradition fell under the umbrella of "kin-work": "...life histories revealed that often the very existence of kin contact and holiday celebration depended on the presence of an adult woman in the household" (Leonardo 1997, 342). It seems that in addition to maintaining Italian traditions in her American home, Anna works to keep her Italian family a relevant part of her life through yearly visits to Verona and regular phone contact. In terms of this understanding of "kin work" it seems that Anna's "hybrid" cultural identity has worked to define the home she has made for her family. When asked how she views herself as a mother. She explained, "I raised my children Italian." Sitting with Anna near the fire, I looked over at a mantel full of family photos above which

hang stylized posters of Venice and Rome. One can easily understand how her home and even her children are defined by her memories of Italy.

"I've seen so many changes"

As is the case for all immigrants, first generation Italian-Americans must work to assimilate to life in the U.S. The generations that follow continue the aspiration of creating a better life for their children than the one that they have experienced. While this value of giving your children the things you didn't have is not unique to Italian-Americans it certainly affects Italian-American communities in a dynamic way. As women of my great aunts generation worked most of their lives to provide more comfortable lifestyles for their children they removed social elements such as poverty that defined their own lived experiences. Generational changes within families and the larger social effects of modernity together have caused a strong shift in perceptions of Italian-American communities and the individual's involvement in those communities.

Even though my great grandfather passed away about 40 years ago, Celeste still recalls him saying "I've seen so many changes" quite often toward the end of his life. It seems that the social shifts my grandfather witnessed during his lifetime were quite extreme. From a poor boy in rural southern Italy to a homeowner in Jersey City my great grandfather likely saw many dramatic changes, including the unique cultural differences between himself and his children. This generational shift that seems engrained in the hyphen between Italian and American is expressed from a mother's perspective in Janet Zandy's poem "My Children's Names." She writes:

> My children have heavy names; Thick sliced, roped and braided names; Old world names; Names reeking of steamer ships; close quarters, and shadows; Names of heavy black cloth; and stiff, sweaty secret.
> My children want names that climb; and cling to the sun; Diaphanous names; Clear pool, clubs, and right-school names; Names whose sails billow out; White and clean names; American names; Names that sound like something you buy. (Zandy 2002:64)

Within this quote Zandy works to express the emotions a mother feels as her children begin to adhere to different social values than she has. She sets up a dichotomy between Italian and American cultures through contrasting sentiments like "have heavy names" and "want names that climb." Through her use of weight-related images Zandy allows the reader to understand the burden Italian identity can carry and the relative ease American identity appears to bestow in contrast.

Sentiments regarding the lives of my great aunt's children in comparison to their own appear as a testimony to Zandy's poem. When I asked Celeste what differences she saw between her own childhood and the upbringing her children had her response was peppered with phrases like "(they) didn't have any hardships" and "it was a big improvement." Rose mirrored these ideas in her own reaction as she explained the generational differences with sentiments like "they had more

freedom" and "more material things." While Rose remarked on how different things were for her children she was quick is note that they were raised with the "same values" as she was. She explained that she always "stressed education" to her kids, a value that was no doubt resulted from her parents' determination to get ahead. It seems that as time goes on the social weight that Italian identity once carried in the U.S has lessened. As a result, it is the work of the memory-keepers to remind each following generations of the work it takes to maintain the lives that previous generations worked for us to have.

In the spring of 2008 I conducted an interview with my only Asheville participant, who for privacy purposes I will be calling "John." Coming from a later generation than my other participants John was able to provide a different perspective on the Italian-American community. John grew up in Long Island City, New York, an area very similar to the one in which my older informants were raised. During our interview John described his childhood home as an "Italian neighborhood with no outside to it. I had no sense of a world outside of this little bubble where I lived…(the area was) mostly working class Italian migrants who spoke Italian …a lot of the social habits and traditions were rooted in the Italian household as it was." It seems that John never questioned these ideas because they were the norm. Only when John moved out of his mostly Italian neighborhood did he begin to see that the way he grew up was not necessarily a common experience. He described the move as a "culture shock" that made him realize that he actually enjoyed living in a community where he could have a little more autonomy. In his late teens John began to feel "claustrophobic" within his close-knit family. He explained "It was hard for me to find my own way, my family tried to keep a tight hold…but it's not all bad, there is something wonderful about their desire to stay together but it can be very oppressive and that is what made it essential for me to make that break." For John, and perhaps others of his generation, the value of "staying together" held by those who shared the travails of the Great Depression is no longer such a desirable goal.

While generational changes work to influence different opinions about Italian-American communities and the value systems within them, they also shift the ways in which roles, such as memory-keeper, are maintained. For the women of my great grandmother's and even great aunts' generations the role of memory-keeper defined a personal agency that was denied to them in other realms of society. In Ann Cornelisen's work *Women of the Shadows: A Study of the Wives and Mothers of Southern Italy*, the author provides an historical perspective of the role of memory-keeper within her rural Southern Italian social scene in the mid to late 1950s. Cornelisen explains,

> The women know how to sign their own names, but in any practical sense they are illiterate. Fortunately they have encyclopedic memories. I asked Chichella once how they could remember everything, dates, names, what places looked like and what people said. She gave me a little half-smile, not of self-pity, but of apology and said: 'That's all we have.' They are willing to share it. (Cornelisen 2001: 29)

This quotation emphasizes the fact that in past generations the role of memory-keeper provided one of the only avenues for female agency. Yet even as women of today experience more agency in other realms of their lives the role of memory-keeper is still valued and actively continued. Michaela di Leonardo explains how contemporary Italian-American women carry on "kin work." "These younger women, though, have *added* a professional and detailed interest in their jobs to a felt responsibility for the work of kinship…Taking on or ceding tasks was clearly related to acquiring or divesting oneself of power within kin networks, but women varied in their interpretation of the meaning of this power" (di Leonardo 1997:343). Within this sentiment di Leonardo clarifies the process through which "kin work" responsibilities are passed on within "kin networks" and emphasizes that while some women may not perceive the role in terms of gaining agency they still incorporate it into their lives. Through this perspective one can see that while generations of women may perceive the role of memory-keeper differently today, it is still a valued position especially among women who can remember a time when it gave them agency in otherwise disempowering times.

Giving a "Voice" to the "Voiceless"

As I began to analyze how the act of remembering defined the role my participants played within their families it became clear that this theme was also present in the Italian-American literature I had been reading. Through this deconstruction of the link between memory and agency it becomes clear that modern Italian-American female authors are able to gain personal and social empowerment by explaining their cultural experiences. Edvige Giunta explains the dynamic way this group of authors is able to use memory. "A self-awareness of the ways in which women have not been allowed full use of their voices underscores the memoirs of Italian-American women. What shapes their project of ethnic recovery is a political, feminist consciousness…" (Giunta 2002:125). The author goes on to explain that current Italian-American authors are "a group of writers who have found in the memoir the means by which to re-read and rewrite not only their lives, but also their cultural history" (Giunta 2002:125). Through writing many female Italian-American authors are able to give agency to the generations of women before them. The ability to form a cultural dialog for and about women who in the past were socially disempowered allows for a new conception of feminine identities. It seems clear that this process can be extremely empowering for authors. Giunta uses a quote from author Edward Said's work *Representations of the Intellectual* to explain the personal agency that modern Italian-American authors gain through deconstructing cultural memories. "Looking back to the past, then, while 'beset with half-involvement and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, and adept mimic or secret outcast on another'" (Said, in Giunta 2002:137). Giunta goes on to explain how this "paves the way for a future in which the voiceless can learn to transform their own silence into language and action" (Giunta 2002:137). Through this conceptualization one can see that contemporary Italian-American female scholars are able to continue the traditions of memory-keeping and spread cultural narratives to wider audiences.

Conclusion: "What was important was that we were all *paisan*"

As the narratives of my participants show, the language and values of the old country are extremely important to those new to this country because they contribute so significantly to an immigrant's sense of identity. It is clear, in turn, that the values of the new country also shape the way in which many of these recent arrivals create homes and communities for themselves. As they cultivate these new spaces and identities, first- and even second-generation Italians tend to put regional differences aside and come together under a unified ethnic status. My grandpa describes this value of solidarity by simply stating "what was important was that we were all *paisan* (countrymen)."

However, as time passes and new generations are born in America it stands to reason that this Italian identity will shift to an Italian-American identity. It is this cultural shift that makes the value of memory so vital. Memory of traditions is what keeps the identity distinct and ensures that the "Italian" piece of "Italian-American" won't disappear. It seems clear that as time goes on Italian-American communities will continue to influence American society and in turn will be influenced by the culture around them. The persistence of this dynamic process of "splitting and joining, blending but not melting, absorbing but not assimilating" will make continued study of these communities all the more fascinating. The Italian-American memory-keeping women can take a large amount of credit for the prominent place that their community plays in the consciousness of broader American culture.

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