Finding Home: Journey of an Italian Immigrant

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Abstract

This paper accompanies an interactive multimedia documentary that tells the story of the Carlevaro family's journey from Palermo, Sicily to New York City, then to Brooklyn, Rutherford, NJ and eventually Stony Point, NY. The documentary explores the Italian immigrant experience in early 20th century Manhattan and the subsequent experiences of my great-grandparents Rudolph and Evelyn as Italian-Americans making their way in their new home. In this paper I describe the personal and academic occurrences that led to the pursuit of this topic, as well as the technological and creative processes I underwent in the making of this documentary.

The documentary, Finding Home: Journey of an Italian Immigrant, is available at http://juniperstudiopro.com/findinghome/ and as an ebook in the iTunes and iBooks stores on any compatible iOS device.
Acknowledgments

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Carlevaro

Finding Home: Journey of an Italian American

Carlevaro. My father’s last name passed on to me. What’s in a name? Why does it matter? For myself, and so many Americans, names matter because they are the last vestiges of a nationality buried in the past, when our ancestors donned the clothes of America and chose to raise their families in the United States. Each generation finds itself further and further away from the culture of their ancestors as traditions are mixed, adopted or forgotten. Often, all that is left are memories of memories. The assumed identity of “American” has been fully realized in us, the third, fourth or fifth generation. And yet I still bear the name Carlevaro, a name that connects me in some way to a place distant from my personal experience, but where so many others can claim their heritage: Sicily. Despite the years that separate me from my great-grandfather, who sailed in 1911 as an 11-year-old across the ocean to New York City, working on this thesis project I have discovered more than I ever thought possible of my great-grandfather’s story. And as each piece has come together, the story of my name, and those that bore that name has come to life.

Home is never a place I’ve had to look for. Home was always there in the splashing pool at my grandparents’ home in the summer, in the glittery New Years Eve parties at my Uncle Eddie’s grand dining hall, in the aroma of tomato sauce bubbling on our stove, and in the sound of the stories about my parents and their parents and their parents’ parents.
As a child, these stories tugged at my heart and made me long to understand where I came from. Like most young Americans, I am a mixture of many ethnicities, each one mingling and competing with the other. My identity is split between the origins of my family and my status as an American, a culture of the past and an evolving culture of the present. As a storyteller and documentarian I am drawn to uncovering and telling the story of my family’s origins. What if I could rebuild the past through a multimedia approach, piecing together the people, places and times with the artifacts of memory that were left behind? What would uncovering the context of my life tell me about myself, and so many others who share an ancestry of immigration? With the making of this multimedia documentary I hoped to discover the story of my family, preserve it for others to see and hear, and come to a greater understanding of my own place in a shared history.

I am not the first to explore the effects of immigration and assimilation on their own family in the United States. Many have researched their roots, rebuilding their family trees. Some search for evidence of noble or famous ancestors, others for forgotten stories or uncanny similarities. The popularity of this pursuit is evident from the many online resources for genealogical research such as ancestry.com, myheritage.com and familysearch.org. In addition there are TV series such as the PBS show “Finding Your Roots” and the NBC show, “Who Do You Think You Are?” in which celebrity genealogies are researched. Genealogical research can evidently provide television-worthy excitement, as long as there’s enough mystery and drama uncovered
in the process.

Others have approached their research from a documentary point of view, reconstructing genealogies in order to organize and understand visual, oral and written artifacts in their historical context. Their primary goals are to preserve and enlighten. This process not only reveals patterns in the lives of one’s ancestors, but evokes patterns in the world surrounding those ancestors. Much like historical archaeology, the objective is to uncover the ordinary to better understand how those who did not make it into the history books lived their day-to-day lives. Though we would not assume that all Italian-Americans lived their lives the way my ancestors did, by discovering the small events in their lives, we can come to a better understanding of the larger events of their time. A couple examples of this are Crossing Ocean Parkway by Marianna De Marco Torgovnick and Family by Ian Frazier. These are memoir-like books written through the eyes of the author detailing his or her observations about themself and their family within their greater bubble of historical context. The approaches of these books are very different, but they both similarly seek to observe a deeper pattern of culture, behavior and philosophy embedded within their family story.

Lastly, there is the anthropological approach to genealogy and memory. Donna R. Gabbacia’s From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change Among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930 examines, through in-depth social, historical and archeological research, the immigrants from Italy that settled in New York City and how these elements shaped their experience. Through this approach, Gabbacia effectively shows
how the organization of personal space can be a clue to understanding cultural
structures oftentimes invisible to our present-day eyes. Though not specifically about
Italian immigrants, Ruth Behar’s *Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your
Heart* analyzes the effect of one’s past on one’s academic understanding. She argues
that a person’s experiences, often familial, have a much more substantial effect on that
person’s academic pursuits and conclusions than the academic community cares to
admit. Going back through her research she connects her fieldwork with events in her
personal life – including stories of her Jewish Cuban heritage – that she has come to
realize shaped her understanding of and reactions to her research. Essentially Ruth
Behar tells her own story while telling the story of others she is coming to know.

In light of these variations of three approaches, I have tried diligently to utilize
aspects of all three in the research and undertaking of this project, ultimately to
produce a documentary that combines the elements of storytelling, documentation and
anthropology, a project that not only relates to my personal journey but the journey of
many who live within the context of their history and heritage. This project has
stretched me technologically, pressing me to find creative ways to accomplish
practically what I envisioned. Over the last year, I found the right programs and taught
myself to use them in the most effective way possible through online tutorials and trial
and error. In order to view my family and our heritage from an academic standpoint,
this project also pushed me to shift my perspective. I found numerous books and
documentaries that I used as guides and windows, finding my story within the many
viewpoints surrounding this topic. Ruth Behar writes, in The Vulnerable Observer, that “when the author has made herself or himself vulnerable, the stakes are higher” -- which requires “a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filter through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied” (13).

In my own case, I had to realize that studying my own family meant overcoming many of the romantic notions I have held onto since I was a child. It can be easy to romanticize the past, a similarity I found I had in common with my Great Uncle Eddie, who was my primary source for illuminating the lives of my great-grandparents, his mother and father. My interactions with Uncle Eddie particularly forced me to confront the ambiguity of memory. However, I found if I were very direct and consistent in my interactions with him, that information that was not sugarcoated or rose-colored found its way through the family myths, triggered by other memories that became more accessible.

Frazier, in Family unapologetically fills in the blank spaces, creating a world reconstructed from memories, documents, photographs and history. What I admired of his writing is that he awakens all the senses and invites the reader fully into the world of his family, speaking to the reader as if we have been there all along. “We were a restless family,” Frazier writes, “Dave and I walked the two and a half miles to town for the first time on a Sunday afternoon when I was eight years old and he was five” (313). Placing your audience within the story is just as important as placing yourself within your
research, especially when merging facts and memories. But breathing life into a story also requires vulnerability, the kind of vulnerability Behar writes about, a vulnerability exemplified by Torgovnick in *Crossing Ocean Parkway*. When speaking of her inclination to rebel against her Italian American heritage, she writes, “The ‘I’ is a heady release conflicted by a potent nostalgia…. I want the ‘I’ to linger along with the ‘we’ – to be part, somehow, of our collective memory” (153).

In understanding the context of my family’s journey I became extremely grateful for Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale’s sweeping book, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* and Mario Puzo’s *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. They both provided a historical and social background that served as a backdrop and a deeper understanding of my family’s journey. Telling the story of my great-grandparents’ experiences as both immigrants and Americans in the United States became at once a simple and complicated endeavor: simple in its goals and complicated in its execution. With the addition of the window of my own journey during this project’s development and implementation, I wasn’t sure if I would find a path through all of the memories.

It was during this process that I had to ask myself, why? Why do I want to tell the story of my family? It was time to be honest with myself. Growing up in the little town of Stony Point, NY, I had never lived more than 10 minutes away from my father’s family. My best friends growing up were my cousins and summers at my Babcia (Polish for “grandma”) and Popop’s pool are some of my most precious memories. Then, when I was 10 years old my Popop died of leukemia. I was young but I can still remember
realizing that my grandfather would no longer be sitting in his chair with a watchful eye on the pool through the big glass sunroom, and there would be no more Swedish Fish hidden in his desk for us when we padded through the house shivering and dripping to get a snack. A piece of the family was gone. Then the summer before my junior year of high school my Babcia slipped down the stairs and hit her head, putting her in a coma that she never came out of. I remember whispering to her on the hospital bed, apologizing for all the times – when she had briefly lived with us – that I had come home from school and snuck upstairs to avoid having to talk with her. Her funeral was the first time I saw my father weep.

There is rarely a moment when the Aunts, Uncles and cousins come together that we don’t reminisce about Babcia: the way she hid candy under the couch cushions or her funny way of yelling “chickee chickee” and pinching our cheeks. I feel the pain of loss whenever I see a Yoohoo (they used to keep a refrigerator stocked to the brim with it outside by the pool) or when people talk about spending time with their own grandparents. For a long time I underestimated how much my grandparents’ lives and deaths had influenced my identity, my choice of what to study and of how to live. It wasn’t until the summer of 2014 when I traveled to Italy for a summer course through the Duke University Graduate Liberal Studies program that I was reminded that the pasts of my grandparents remained untapped, and that even though generations had gone by, somehow I still retained a connection to this foreign land. This search for connection through heritage and history may simply have begun as a search for a lost
connection with my grandparents, a rediscovering of family I had lost.

As I began my search for connection, I had to overcome the shame long built-up from years as a shy adolescent despairingly trying to fit in. Ruth Behar writes of her own confrontation with her past, saying, “The woman who forgets the girl she harbors inside herself runs the risk of meeting her again...” (134). Love and appreciation for one’s family quickly goes out of style once you enter 7th or 8th grade, maybe even earlier for contemporary youth. The crisis of identity is exacerbated by the rebellion and feelings of shame youth encourages in us about family. There are individuals I know who were disillusioned with their families from a young age in part because they and unfortunately never had the support of a loving family. However, I did not have that excuse and yet I allowed myself to drift away from my family, though deep down I knew that was the last thing I wanted to do.

My last three years in graduate school have been some of the most difficult years in my life because of this very process of delving deeply into my “self.” Learning about oneself can sometimes be the most painful of all experiences, but the truth has a way of lurking below the surface. It took a catalyst to expose what was hiding deep in my psyche. In my second year of graduate school, my father underwent a knee surgery that went horribly wrong, resulting in a nine month long battle with infection and neglectful doctors. During that time I was struggling to do well in school and not give in to the anger and fear building up inside me. In the worst of it, during a merciless winter,
my father nearly died. I felt helpless, unsure of how to help. Seeing my father, usually a robust, smiling man with browned skin like well-done toast, instead pale, gaunt and limping, broke the dam. Since then I have wrestled with my shame, methodically shifting my way of thinking and coming to realize through this project that my family’s past is part of me, Italians, immigrants or Americans, no such labels can define who I am or who my ancestors were. It is the loss of the past that defines us, and the choice of whether or not to recover that past in our present lives that refines us.

The vulnerability this project required of me is something I long dreaded, but it seems ultimately to have been the unavoidable goal I set out for myself. Stepping back and placing myself within the larger scheme of identity I then started to ask myself, what does it mean to be fourth generation Italian-American? I am far enough removed that I identify more with being American than Italian, yet I am close enough to the way things were that I still live with the cultural consequences, whether good or bad, of being Italian-American. Many writers such as Torgovnick and Puzo, have explored their Italian-American status, in addition to many filmmakers, including Martin Scorsese in Mean Streets, and Francis Ford Coppola in The Godfather. Italian-Americans’ claim to fame often is the intrigue and excitement of being associated with the Mafia, which many people see in terms of a mystical exaggeration of Italian-American culture and ideals. This association with the Mafia is often the reaction I get from people when they hear my last name, and sometimes I don’t mind the attention, despite the fact that none of my family (except for my great-grandmother’s brief marriage to a mobster) ever
had ties with the Mafia, as is the case for most Italian-Americans. The sensationalizing of immigrant crime has blighted all immigrant groups that are “audacious” enough to enter the United States. This practice, amid other racist and hateful generalizations, often fostered swift Americanization, especially among young immigrants like my great-grandfather.

Despite the generalizations, many Italian-Americans take pride in their Americanized version of Southern Italian culture. What is interesting about the Americanization of immigrant cultures is that, as the third, fourth and fifth generations marry into other Americanized cultures, new traditions are added while some are taken out. As Americans, we can pick and choose, preserving the traditions we like and letting the others we don’t like fade away. We can do this because we are not tied to the customs and ways of thinking in which our ancestors were immersed because of the time and place they lived. Is it this mixing of cultures and traditions, these selections that we are free to make from the buffet of our heritage, that makes us distinctly American? As many scholars have pointed out, the United States is not just a “melting pot” or a “salad bowl” but a combination of both. It is evident from what I’ve seen in my own family, among my aunts, uncles, cousins and parents, that with time comes change in customs, yet there is also a fierce instinct within us admonishing to hold on to what makes us distinct, to the traditions that set us apart.

This desire to hold on to distinctive cultural traits may be hard-wired in all humans and one of the reasons why we maintain family and community. Or this holding
on to traditions may simply be a form of romantic nostalgia. But in the case of my extended family, I believe we hold on to our historic traditions as a reaction to Americanization. We instinctually sense the consequences of creating our own culture. The United States is unique in that the abandonment of one’s old ways is encouraged, but what replaces those ways is often ambiguity and therefore can cause anxiety. For example, the individualist mindset of modern America encourages you to move away from your family and leave your hometown behind. Many young Americans often look down on staying home as provincial and strive for the ideal of living on their own far from their family’s influence. A first-generation Italian-American would have viewed moving far from home – where culture and tradition was clearly defined and had existed for hundreds of years – as dishonorable and hurtful (Mangione & Morreale, 232).

Though an individualistic lifestyle is idealized in the USA, what replaces the support, structure and community of a family is left up to the individual to define and then find. There is comfort that we can find in traditions, traditions that may have been brought over from our ancestor’s country of origin.

I have found that the dilemma of my generation has been one of balance. How do I fulfill my status as American, fitting in with the society around me and accomplishing individual success, while still remaining distinct from those around me by preserving the precious (albeit removed) culture of my heritage? The fear of extinction haunts our pride of ethnicity while we resist being swallowed up into societal America’s cultural and racial labeling system. Perhaps the anxiety of labeling is what drives Italian-
Americans and other immigrants to hold tightly to their Americanized culture. My Babcia’s mother at first forbade my Babcia, a fair Polish girl, to marry my grandfather, a dark Sicilian boy, on the grounds that he was black. My mother’s mother had a similar reaction when she met my father for the first time. Of course as Italian-Americans rose on the economic ladder they eventually were assimilated into “white” America, but as of yet Italian-Americans still remain rather new to America, my family only having been in this country for a little over 100 years.

And yet, the rapid change in technology in just these 100 years has created a world that is more interconnected than it has ever been before. I have been able to find people on Facebook with my last name that live all over the world. Emphasis on interconnectivity, interactivity and a global perspective is fueled and facilitated by technology. The quest for balance in my own life has led me to this crossroads – preserving the power and potency of education while finding new ways to teach and learn in a world forever altered by technology. This dilemma that we face has led me to the format I have chosen for this project. A multimedia approach has given me the ability to create a multi-faceted and complex way of looking at myself, and my past.

Online archives, scanned materials, audio recordings and editing software made showing and telling my family’s story possible. My family and people around the world can interact with my research in ways that were not possible before.

My decision to pursue a digital and multimedia approach was also a creative one. I wanted to exemplify the power of interdisciplinary study while using my creative
talents in photography, design, video and writing. In the initial steps of this project this desire led to a search for software that would accomplish telling the complicated interactive story I wanted to tell. The National Film Board of Canada’s interactive documentaries served as an inspiration and springboard for this project, especially *Welcome to Pine Point*, a documentary by Paul Shoebridge & Michael Simons of “The Goggles.” I was inspired by how they brought to life a town that no longer existed through video, design, photography and text. Seeing that they used Adobe Flash to create their project I began researching this method. Further inspired by National Geographic’s digital interactive magazine (much like an e-book) I found that Adobe InDesign could create both flash documents and electronic publishing documents, enabling me to create in both formats. Having only used InDesign previously for print publications I took advantage of my free subscription to Lynda.com through Duke University as a tutorial resource in order to learn the interactive capabilities of the program. I used numerous programs in addition to InDesign such as Photoshop, Premiere, Illustrator and AfterEffects, all part of the Adobe Creative Suite, to edit the creative elements I gathered.

The third stage of this project was gathering the visual and auditory components and then designing the pages of the documentary using this information. Utilizing Ancestry.com and EllisIsland.org I was able to reconstruct my family tree, finding documents such as census records, draft cards and city directories that gave me clues as to where my ancestors lived and what they did for a living. My greatest primary
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resource, however, was my Great Uncle Eddie whose father and mother, Rudolph and Evelyn, were the principal subjects of this project. I spent many sessions recording interviews as he told me stories about his parents and siblings. He was also a wealth of visual information - photographs, cards, documents and scrapbooks - that I scanned using a high-resolution scanner and edited in Photoshop. The other interviews were with my Uncle Gilbert and my father, Mark Carlevaro, the two eldest children of Gil and Lynn Carlevaro. The home videos are artifacts my grandfather left behind, 8mm films that my father had digitized and I edited using Adobe Premiere Pro. A majority of the historical photographs, videos and musical pieces are from the Library of Congress’ digital archives.

Many of the ideas I had for this project came from classes that I took at Duke. The memory maps that serve as a backdrop for the “Rutherford” and “Stony Point” pages were drawn by my Uncle Eddie, an idea I got from a summer course at the Center for Documentary Studies called Literacy through Photography taught by Katie Hyde. The Google Earth video that follows a virtual tour of the places my family lived was inspired by a class I took with the Wired! Digital Art History and Visual Culture department taught by Dr. Sara Galletti, in which we learned new technologies for visually representing history and culture. Color Photography with Alex Harris, my advisor on this project, taught me how to tell a story with photographs using color and sequencing, while Video for Social Change with Bruce Orenstein and Interactive Multimedia Narratives with Chad Stevens at UNC updated my video editing skills in Premiere and
taught me professional interviewing practices. All the courses I took while at Duke informed this project in different ways, further equipping me for an interdisciplinary approach.

The development of this project has been challenging, exciting and life changing, and has established in me skills that I hope to build a career on. Though the search for identity is ongoing, I feel this project has helped me better understand why and how to search. Knowing that a version of ourselves always exists to influence our academic pursuits, how we remember and how we tell our stories will always inform the projects of my future. Through this project, I have come to realize and better comprehend my ambition as a documentarian, writer and artist -- which is to tell multimedia stories made richer through historical, anthropological, and sociological context -- infused with the courage of vulnerability.
Bibliography


