

From Narrated “Pathways” to Pastiche:
Complexities in Interpreting and Representing Conversations
with Italian American Teachers

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Abstract

From Narrated “Pathways” to Pastiche: Complexities in Interpreting and Representing
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This dissertation study focuses on the stories that five Italian American teachers tell about their pathways to the teaching profession. The overarching question of this study is: What happens when the researcher attempts to construct interpretations of how Italian American teachers in New York City describe their pathways to becoming teachers? This question is supplemented by the following related questions and subquestions: How, if at all, do the study participants describe their choices to become teachers within the framing concept of “pathways”? What other ways, if any, do the participants speak of their chosen careers? What framing concepts do they employ, if any, other than “pathways” toward their careers as teachers? How, if at all, do participants describe their “identities” as Italian American teachers within both the confines and the possibilities offered by the concept of pathways? What assumptions and biases does the researcher bring into this study that focuses on Italian American teachers’ descriptions and understandings of their career choices?

To interrogate, interrupt, and ultimately respond to these research questions in this multicasestudy, the researcher conducted open-ended interviews with five Italian American teachers who have taught or currently teach in New York City schools, aiming to explore both personal and culturally relevant histories of these specific Italian American teachers. Using Laurel Richardson’s (2005) creative analytic practices, the researcher aimed to present representations of her own interpretations of the “stories” that these teachers would tell about their specific “pathways” to teaching as Italian American teachers in New York City. The researcher attempted to convey a sense of the multitude of factors that could influence one’s interpretation of “story” by (re)presenting data in the format of pastiche, with textual layers of various voices intertwined.

The researcher’s “non-conclusions” included a furthered wondering of her own motivation in choosing to be a creator of a collage-like work, as well as a questioning of her reliance on the metaphor of “pathway” and the original research focus, especially in light of the conversations that ultimately took place. The researcher continues to seek to re-inscribe the focus of this work as a wondering about how to disturb, disrupt, and/or unsettle the category of “Italian American teacher.”

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Dedication

For my grandmothers, Phyllis Tenga and Concetta Paolucci, who,
as first-generation Sicilian Americans, showed all of us the way

Chapter 1: Pathways, Steps, Stories: An Introduction

*Sometimes I feel history slipping from my body
like a guilty bone, & the only way to call it back
is to slump here behind the wheel, licking sugar from my chin*

—Lucia Perillo, “The Northside at Seven”

1.1 Telling My “Story”

I was fascinated by the glassy, black sheen of the obsidian rock that Mr. Goldstein passed around our eighth grade earth science classroom. In the days that followed, I would be similarly engaged with the characteristics of the different classes of rocks we handled like objects of reverence—the bumpiness I felt when I ran my fingers over a metamorphic rock; the absolute wonder of the multiple facets and textures of the sedimentary rock at which I would gaze, realizing that what, in the past, I might have viewed as a whole was actually an assemblage of infinite, sometimes unidentifiable pieces.

At least, this is how I imagine I felt at the time. It must have been magical, in a sense, to discover the texture of the physical world, its layers of history, enough to inspire me to begin telling the adults around me, at thirteen, that I wanted to be a geologist. I think it was my father who said: “They have to travel away from home too much,” and a family friend whom I remember mostly for her heavily decorated fireside at Christmas, declaring “There’s no money in science.”

Now, I would like to think that I would have an answer to those statements. I might indicate that I was not aiming for wealth, or that there was nothing negative about traveling, that it would be exciting. I might point out to them that they were exemplifying the often-discussed discouragement of young women from entering science-related careers. But then, I simply

stopped mentioning it. I don’t recall whether or not I purposely silenced myself, but it is difficult to remember ever thinking about it again. At the end of the school year, I graduated and never considered the profession again. Later, though, it became a story I still tell over and over.

Next, I became attracted to a career in law. I imagine I was interested in the field because of the prestige that I often heard others attribute to lawyers; I deserved that, I told myself. We did not have any lawyers in the family, and I had a very vague idea of what they even did on a daily basis, I’m sure. I recall checking off “Political Science” on a college entrance form some time during my senior year of high school, the major I thought would best suit a career in law, before Robert Nelson changed everything. My favorite English teacher and I crossed paths in the large building’s lobby, and as we discussed my college plans, he quite bluntly and simply stated, “Be an English teacher,” in a manner so stark that it struck me as the right thing to do. Now, I would describe the feeling as having been seen. It was as if he saw me—I was an English teacher.

It made sense as I considered how, no matter how successful I was in mathematics and science, history, technology, and so on, I had read countless works of fiction throughout childhood, studied cereal boxes and encyclopedias, read the dictionary for pleasure on visits to my grandmother’s house, subscribed to mail-order book clubs, regularly checked out books from the local library. My parents had invested in my life this way, though they had never emphasized English as the center for my future career; they had never identified what I should do at all, in fact, except to insist that I would go to college. Still, when I majored in English and Adolescent Education in college and then began completing fieldwork hours followed by student teaching at the high school I had attended, and where my father, sister, and grandfather also attended, they were highly pleased.

When I entered the first classroom in which I would teach the tenth grade, at that very same high school, I noticed that it was room 332—the classroom where Mr. Nelson had taught me just a few years earlier. I was proud, teaching *Macbeth* and *A Separate Peace*. Teaching English was a career that felt natural to me, despite its expected challenges, which included managing adolescent behavior and constant changes in administrative requirements. My parents would tell acquaintances they encountered at the *salumeria*, buying Italian bread after church on Sunday, that their daughter was a teacher at this particular high school, and were often met with envy—it was a coveted position—with statements such as “How did she get *that* school?” It was considered very fortunate to obtain a teaching position in the neighborhood.

I cannot say for sure when I started to view my career choice differently—or if there ever were such an identifiable shift in how I viewed it. I think I became more skeptical of how proud I was entitled to feel. Perhaps I should say that I began to realize how others viewed it—not the ones my parents chatted with, but people outside of the family and the neighborhood. As a graduate student in a City University of New York (CUNY) English program, my colleagues whispered that the English *Education* students were not as bright as the English students—a difference that might seem preposterous and intangible to outsiders. We shared several classes together across both programs, and I did notice a difference, but levels of intelligence were not in evidence. Most of the English Education majors kept their classroom contributions short, or said nothing at all. They looked exhausted, and quickly gathered their materials at the end of class to head home. More often than not, they were Italian American women, and native New Yorkers, as many of my classmates had been in my college’s teacher preparation program, and as many of my coworkers were at the local high school. The English majors were a more diverse group demographically; most were not from New York, and they spoke incessantly in class,

dominating the conversation. They stayed after class to speak to the professor, seemingly completely confident, although some wore wrinkled t-shirts and had unkempt hair. They let it be known that they would be pursuing Ph.D.s or careers in journalism or creative writing, all the while over-pronouncing their Rs, as I saw it then, cringing, but most certainly not expressing any desires to become classroom teachers. I found myself straddling the line of both programs because of my daily experiences as a classroom teacher, native Brooklynite, Italian American woman, who was also pursuing a “straight” English degree, as we called it, without the Education coursework. And I was excited about writing my thesis and perhaps continuing to further my education. But I, too, was often quiet, intent on catching my bus right after class so that I could go home and finish preparing the next day’s lessons. When I probe more deeply, I also realize how I may not have been so confident either, as if the graduate English classroom were not a place in which I was entitled to dominate, or even enter, the conversation.

After seven years of classroom teaching, during which I also taught college writing as an adjunct for one semester at a local college, I decided to pursue a career path in academia. I began working as the program coordinator in a college teacher preparation program and applied for a Ph.D. in English Education, the degree which I currently pursue. My coworkers at the high school, family, and friends, nearly everyone, had an extreme opinion—though typically at different ends of the spectrum—when they learned I would be resigning from the New York City Department of Education. Mainly, people were shocked that I would ever leave a “city job” in which I had been tenured. After I was admitted to the Ph.D. program in English Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, I began to encounter confusion from others, or discomfort, wide-eyed and high-pitched overpraise; sometimes, my doctoral work was simply unacknowledged. Then there was my medical doctor, an Italian American man from Brooklyn,

who seemed to express genuine joy for me and asked if my parents understood what this meant. A friend declared: “Oh, once you’re teaching in higher ed, you automatically move up a social class.”

Further, as I am no longer in the high school classroom, perhaps others have even more of a sense of comfort in revealing their views of teachers in my presence. Recently, an acquaintance included teachers in her listing of civil servants employed on Staten Island—a borough of New York City with a reputation of being very politically conservative and with its residents supposedly possessing a stereotypical lack of intelligence as intertwined with their political views—who had “no other ideas about what they could do with their lives.” Many view Italian Americans who still live in Bensonhurst, a neighborhood in southern Brooklyn, or in other formerly Italian ghettos, similarly—especially when considering Italian American civil servants, which, for many, apparently includes similar assumptions about teachers with graduate educations.

1.2 Challenging Traditional Characteristics of “Story”

This isn’t a timeline, though, despite my attempts to narrate the professional and academic aspects of my life. It is a kind of tracing of how I have begun to think about my own “path” to teaching—the story I tell myself in this particular writing. As Smith and Watson (2010) write, “The origin and the history of the self, then, are fictions, although the history of utterances of that fiction can be traced...the self is split and fragmented...At a given moment what calls itself the self is different from itself at any other given moment” (p. 206). As I write it, I become more and more aware of how much effort I am putting into attempting to mold it into the traditional format of a story, with “a beginning, middle, and end,” the way Aristotle described a whole story. He further indicated that “Stories that are well constructed should not begin at

some arbitrary point but should conform to the stated pattern” (p. 26). I know, however, that there are other ways that I could have told it, and that I may tell it in the future—what Smith and Watson (2010) call “the changing stories of our lives” (p. 22). Aristotle’s insights, especially in relation to what has come to be thought of as the traditional Western components and temporal arrangements of “the story,” present a fairly firm view that does not seemingly allow for an aberration in format. He writes: “...a story, since it is the representation of an action, should concern an action that is single and entire, with its several incidents so structured that the displacement or removal of any one of them would disturb and dislocate the whole” (p. 27). It is this traditional Western concept of a story that contemporary theorists play with, challenge, and use as a springboard to suggesting that more postmodern views of narrative are perhaps more appropriate and relevant in their work.

Smith and Watson (2010), as I have indicated above, complicate understandings of the telling of stories, specifically about one’s own life, in their extensive writing on life narrative and autobiographical writing and acts. Far from being able to tell *the story of their lives*, as if it can exist apart from their telling, tellers of life narratives, “in the act of narration [become] both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation” (p. 1). Smith and Watson characterize life narrative, therefore, as “a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present” (p. 1). The entire act involves a constant “reinterpretation of the past in the present,” during which the teller “actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering”—with “narrated memory [viewed as] an interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered” (p. 22). Therefore, with my acknowledgement that a traditional Western view of story undergirds some of the language in this study, especially as it serves as a starting point, I am aware of how impossible it is for

narrators to tell our life stories, or stories about specific events or parts of our lives, in a way that can ever satisfactorily fit the model of Aristotle’s “whole story,” with the appropriate beginning, middle, and end—especially once we listen to a story with an ear for the multiple interpretations, possible and probable omissions, and moments where memory reinterprets, or perhaps, fails. Because, as Smith & Watson (2010) note, “the stuff of autobiographical storytelling...is drawn from multiple, disparate, and discontinuous experiences and the multiple identities constructed from and constituting those experiences,” it is likely that we would all tell different stories of our lives depending on the time of telling, the context, among other identifiable and unidentifiable influences (p. 40).

1.3 The Influence of Metaphor

Smith and Watson’s (2010) characterization of the process of telling about our lives also suggests that we examine metaphors that have been used to describe the telling. They cite the work of developmental psychologists who have shown that “we learn early in childhood what people around us, and by extension, our culture, expect us to remember” (p. 22). Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) extensive writing on metaphor complements this view to some degree. They write that

metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature...Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very

much a matter of metaphor.” (p. 3)

Emphasizing that the metaphors of a culture are bound with “our physical and cultural experience,” Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) work, by extension, might suggest that when we tell stories about our lives, we are always working through one metaphorical concept or another that makes sense within our particular culture (p. 14).

As Smith and Watson’s (2010) work indicates, various metaphors seem to be at work in the way scholars have viewed life narratives. For example, they point to James Olney’s work in identifying models of memory that seem to be enacted in Augustine’s *Confessions*. One metaphor is that of memory as an “archaeological ‘site where...[one] can dig down through layer after layer of deposits to recover what [one] seeks’ [with] memories [that are] recovered [this way being] unchanged, if decaying over time” (p. 23). Another metaphor that Olney identifies, as Smith and Watson (2010) indicate, is that of the act of “remembering [as] imagined as a process of weaving that makes new forms from memorial strands that are also in flux” (p. 23). Clearly, the metaphors we work with as tellers of stories, regardless of how conscious or unconscious we are of them, matter in terms of what we think we are doing when we tell a story, and how others perceive the stories they hear or read.

I began this study with an interest in how so many Italian American teachers found their way to classrooms in New York City, in light of my own “story” as I have interpreted and attempted to share above, in this very specific writing of my dissertation. But furthermore, I also found myself wondering, in terms of this dissertation research, and still find myself wondering what stories individuals tell themselves about how their foundational experiences influenced their career paths as teachers, and how I hear their stories. With an awareness of the almost inevitable use of metaphor that undergirds the act of remembering one’s life as one tells it, and

the act of telling itself, I also continue to consider how an individual’s view of what there is to tell about life is certainly intertwined with cultural metaphors. My initial research inclination to focus on Italian American teachers’ stories of their pathways to teaching, as relayed through interviews, reflects my own expectation of what is perhaps a traditional format for an American story—how one moved from one step to another to reach an ultimate career goal. The very assumption that a story of becoming a teacher can exist in this very traditional sense, with a beginning, middle, and end, might reflect what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) are referring to when they write:

When things are not clearly discrete or bounded, we still categorize them as such, e.g., mountains, street corners, hedges, etc. Such ways of viewing physical phenomena are needed to satisfy certain purposes that we have: locating mountains, meeting at street corners, trimming hedges. Human purposes typically require us to impose artificial boundaries that make physical phenomena discrete just as we are: entities bounded by a surface. (p. 25)

The act of telling about our lives is perhaps confusing, disorienting, difficult to imagine concretely—as if our lives could exist in some concrete form—if we do not have some bounded metaphor in which we can encase it. My desiring a telling or tracing of a pathway perhaps delivers instructions to participants on how to view and then tell about their lives, but I suspect that this metaphor is one that is commonly held by many Americans as well, as it reflects the movement through life toward a specific goal—a concept that fits well with that of the American Dream. Still, despite my awareness of the metaphor of a pathway to teaching and all that it connotes, I remained interested—and continue to be invested—in how other Italian American teachers might tell their own “stories” of becoming teachers—even with all of their

“contradictions, disjunctures, and ambivalences”—and so I do not necessarily believe that the metaphor should be abandoned (Miller, 2005, p. 48). In fact, continuing to investigate it may have lent itself to my processes of interpretation.

1.4 Research Questions

Therefore, I ultimately conceptualized the overarching question of this study as: What happens when I attempt to construct, following interviews in a multicase study format, interpretations of how Italian American teachers in New York City describe their pathways to becoming teachers? I supplement my major question with these related questions and subquestions:

- How, if at all, do my study participants describe their choices to become teachers within the framing concept of “pathways” that I propose?
 - What other ways, if any, do my participants speak of their chosen careers?
 - What framing concepts do they employ, if any, other than “pathways” toward their careers as teachers?
 - How, if at all, do participants describe their “identities” as Italian American teachers within both the confines and the possibilities offered by the concept of pathways?
- What assumptions and biases do I bring into this study that focuses on Italian American teachers’ descriptions and understandings of their career choices?
- In what ways, if any, do my assumptions, biases, and expectations affect how and why I attempt to construct my interpretations of my teacher participants’ responses to my interview questions in particular ways, and not others?
- What happens when I attempt to construct my interpretations?

- What other ways, if any, might I interpret and “tell” these teachers’ “stories” as well as my own about being and becoming Italian American teachers working in the greater New York City area?

To interrogate, interrupt, and ultimately respond to these research questions, I interviewed five Italian American teachers who have taught or currently teach in New York City schools, aiming to explore both personal and culturally relevant histories of these specific Italian American teachers. Using creative analytic practices (Richardson, 2005), which I will further describe in Chapter 3 where I delve into my methodological choices, I aimed to present representations of my own interpretations of the “stories” that these teachers would tell about their specific “pathways” to teaching as Italian American teachers in New York City.

To further complicate matters of interpretation, it is mandatory and even helpful to investigate the concept of the “I” who was involved in creating my work. Again, although it is possible that I attempted to identify my personal characteristics and experiences, and how they have helped to form my assumptions and biases, it has also been difficult to identify exactly where I stood—or stand—at any given moment. As Maxine Greene (1995) writes: “Neither my self nor my narrative can have...a single strand. I stand at the crossing point of too many social and cultural forces; and in any case, I am forever on my way. My identity has to be perceived as multiple...” (p. 1). I have intended therefore to try to write within and through this, knowing that, at all times, my work has been and is created by certain aspects of myself—both knowable and unknowable—that, for whatever reasons, have been and are expressed during the particular moments of researching, interpreting, and representing.

Recently, a colleague, with whom I shared my general topic of study, questioned my motivation for researching and writing about Italian American teachers. “Are you doing that

because you are Italian American? Is that why that’s interesting to you?” she asked while holding up her forkful of food at the holiday party. I smiled tightly and answered affirmatively but still in a vague tone. Later, I realized all that I left unsaid. A large percentage of teachers in New York City are Italian American. I should have indicated this fact to support the significance of my topic, I scolded myself. In addition, studying their particular histories of becoming teachers could perhaps prove helpful for the next generations of teachers of various cultural descents from around the globe. What can we learn from listening to Italian American “teacher stories,” and what, if anything, has been purported in related literature? How does attempting to narrate—or even represent in other forms—my interpretations of all of these possible variations on and within my larger focus possibly help other teachers and teacher educators to understand the varied complexities that characterize how and why individuals come to the career of teaching? What might any of these understandings about a specific and self-identified group of Italian American teachers’ interpretations of reasons for their chosen teacher career “pathways” contribute to current and future understandings of influences of specific cultural/ethnic identifications within the broad professional arenas of “teacher?” The following review of related literature provides some historical, literary, and theoretical background.

Chapter 2: Selected Voices: A Review of Literature

2.1 Italian American Teachers in History and Literature

Although I cannot remember how I came across *My Daughter, The Teacher: Jewish Teachers in the New York City Schools* (1993), my notes, still enclosed on a sheet of loose leaf set between two pages, indicate that I was grappling with the material in 2008, two years after I had begun teaching English in a Brooklyn public high school. I can recall being excited to learn that such a line of historical inquiry could be pursued, and I quickly turned to the index to look for any references to Italian American teachers. I knew that Eastern European Jewish immigrants and their descendants often lived and worked in close proximity to Italian immigrants, and assumed I would find at least some reference to Italian American teachers. When I read the passages that referred to Italian American teachers, I recall feeling somehow unsettled.

Ruth Jacknow Markowitz (1993) presents a stark difference between the two groups, both in general, and in relation to their views on becoming educated. In narrating her reaction to learning how deeply Eastern European Jewish American women “desire[d] education,” which she states she has consistently come across in her research, Markowitz writes:

Notably absent from most novels or oral histories of other immigrant groups who arrived at the same time as Jews from Eastern Europe is the same yearning for schooling. This absence is especially true among immigrants from Southern Italy, whose numbers in New York City approximated those of the city’s Jewish population during the interwar years. Although Octavia, the daughter in *The Fortunate Pilgrim*,

Mario Puzo's novel of immigrant Italian life during Depression-era New York City, wanted to become a teacher, her mother, like most Italians, considered school superfluous for Italian women. It took another generation before this traditional attitude toward women's roles changed and Italian-American women would be found in significant numbers among the city's teaching staff. (p. 6)

Markowitz only presents this literary reference as evidence of the way Italian immigrants perceived women's education, though she states that she has examined much material from this time period, the first few decades of the twentieth century.

In the often-quoted passage, Octavia, the daughter of Italian immigrants, seeks to pursue a career in teaching. While working as a dressmaker during the day, she tells her mother that she wants to take courses at night to reach this goal. Lucia Santa, her mother, "refused permission," saying "You, such a beautiful dressmaker, you earn good money" (Puzo, 1997, p. 12). When Octavia meets this denial with the sentiment "I want to be happy," Lucia Santa:

became a raging fury, contemptuous—the mother, who had always defended her daughter's toity ways, her reading of books, her tailored suits that were as affected as a lorgnette. The mother had mimicked Octavia in the perfect English of a shallow girl, "*You want to be happy.*" And then, in Italian, with deadly seriousness, "Thank God you are alive." (p. 12)

Though adding this striking fictional passage to her historical study might perhaps add some color to Markowitz's findings, demonstrating how Italian immigrants discouraged their daughters from pursuing higher education, it may be a quite embellished example of the type of discouragement that Italian Americans received from their parents when they wanted to pursue careers that no one in their family had desired to work toward or obtained before. I think of

Jerome Krase's (2011) article on the educational achievements and views of Italian Americans, in which he writes: "At present the expert and non-expert alike are forced to rely on pat generalizations, historical stereotypes, personal observation and intuition," which, when "put into practice is frequently patronizing or otherwise destructive" (p. 87). If the attitude that the character Lucia Santa demonstrates is really exemplary of the most common attitude of Italian immigrant parents, and perhaps their descendants, how can we be sure that it was related to then-dominant (and still dominant, for many) conceptions of gender? In fact, as became apparent in my continued research, for a time, Italian American women began graduating high school in much greater numbers than men did due in great part to their response to the increase in available opportunities. Men were able to find manufacturing jobs without a diploma (Cohen, 1992, p. 199). Therefore, although much research can be carried out in this area, I still found Markowitz's conclusion about Italian American attitudes toward women's education to be troubling, given the information I have examined throughout this research study.

Another work of fiction that describes the life of an Italian American teacher is Dorothy Bryant's (1978/1997) *Miss Giardino*. Anna Giardino is introduced to the reader as an older woman who has retired from her four decades-long teaching position at a public high school in The Mission, a storied neighborhood of San Francisco, and the very high school that she herself attended. At the very beginning of the novel, Anna is hospitalized after being found unconscious on the street, with no information about what actually happened to her. The hospital scene in which her sister Victorina visits illustrates similar notions about what it meant for an Italian American woman, especially the first generation born in America, to pursue higher education and teaching. In comparing Anna to their cruel father, Victorina states:

I don't know what it is. Something driving you. It makes you not need people,

makes you do things, like going to college, to make a place above us...I still remember his funeral. You, coming back from the university, just graduated, everyone so impressed, talking about you, not about him, talking to you, asking what you were going to do now, the college graduate." (p. 16)

Indeed, Anna had encountered this view from not only her sister later in life, but from her father, years earlier, when she first decided to go to college. Reliving memories of her father, Anna recalls: "During my four years at the university he has refused to see me. The deserter, the American, dead to him. 'You won't see me alive again,' he had told me when I left" (p. 17). There is certainly a sense here of leaving one's family both physically and intellectually to obtain higher education and a teaching position, with great negativity surrounding it all in this particular Italian immigrant family.

But Bryant's work of fiction also introduces an alternative view, perhaps one that can be considered more contemporary, from the character David, who serves as Anna's lifelong friend, more like a brother. In the following conversation, the value of a teaching career is addressed.

David states:

'I suppose I should have been born a woman and you a man. Then I could have made myself attractive and agreeable and been regarded a great success. And you would have been properly admired and rewarded for your abilities, instead of being stuck in a high school for forty years.'

'Does that sum up my life?' Anna asked sharply. 'Stuck in a high school for forty years. Is that so bad? So useless?'

'Of course not, I didn't say it was useless...just that you were capable of so much more.'

‘Such as?’

‘Well, uh, law...medicine...’ David watched Anna’s face and looked uncomfortable.

‘In any field you would have been so...I only meant it seems rather a waste for a woman of your talents to...’

‘Why is it that whenever anyone wants to pay me a compliment, he tells me my life was a waste? Why is it better to negotiate divorces or cut out tonsils than to train healthy young minds!...Money, that’s what you meant. I could have made more money. Well, I didn’t care about that. I cared about learning, about teaching minds to think. To take a normal ordinary mind and show what it could do...raise it above.’

(p. 36)

Later in their conversation, though, Anna acknowledges that “a woman with a B.A. couldn’t do anything else [but become a teacher] in 1928” (p. 37). Bryant’s work of fiction indeed reflects the view that Italian immigrants did not see the value in having their daughters earn higher education, and also that it could somehow engender feelings of superiority over one’s family members and community once it was obtained. But Bryant’s writing also illustrates a view that American society at large may hold about teaching, specifically that when one is well educated and capable of intellectual work, one should choose a higher paying profession, such as medicine or law, rather than enter the career of teaching.

Helen Barolini’s (2000) work also engages with the topic of beliefs about education in Italian American families. She introduces *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women*, a revised version of the original groundbreaking 1985 publication, with a discussion of how the pursuit of a different sort of career and/or lifestyle came to be so

discouraged by Italian immigrants and their descendants. Barolini writes that as peasants in Italy, these immigrants became used to a mentality of "self-denial...*la miseria* was the norm of life and there was no chance of a better one" (p. 11). In addition to this fear of pursuing a life based on anything "beyond one's home walls" because one would surely fail and become disappointed, there was also a "suspicion of education" and a view that

American schools were...a threat to the family because they stressed assimilation into American ways and gave children a language their parents did not have. Reading was ridiculed as too private, too unproductive, too exclusive an enjoyment...These were the criteria of a people involved completely in economic survival. And for their time and place, they were right. (p. 11)

Southern Italians' experiences in their native villages of Italy seemingly called for a lifestyle focused mainly on survival, with all other decisions hinging on and made within this framework.

Miriam Cohen (1992) is more apt than Markowitz to view Italian American families' decisions in light of the available opportunities for both men and women, as her study of Italian women in New York City in the first half of the twentieth century demonstrates. Cohen speculates on why Italian American girls during the late 1930s and early 1940s began to stay in school for longer periods of time. Her reasoning seems valid; she focuses on how the world had changed, and how this might have influenced Italian American families' decision-making. Importantly, the "female employment structure of New York City" had changed, and there were many more "clerical jobs" available for women (p. 162). These positions required a certain level of literacy, including mathematical competencies, and "by 1940 a high school diploma had become the standard prerequisite for most secretarial or bookkeeping jobs" (p.

162). The public high schools in New York City offered courses that specifically prepared women for these jobs.

Still, most Italian Americans were not pursuing higher education during the middle of the twentieth century. Cohen refers to the U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census (1950) report, which indicates that the greatest number of first- and second-generation Italian women identified as clerical and sales workers, and [machine] operatives. Italian men of the first and second generation mostly worked as craftspeople or [machine] operatives, followed by managers and proprietors. The only category in which “teacher” could have been included was “Professional workers” and the reported numbers were much lower in this area.

Interestingly, Markowitz finds that, although there were lower numbers of Italian American teachers between 1920 and 1940, the period for which she examined personnel cards of New York City’s public school teachers, the percentage of them who taught for thirty years and then retired was similar to the percentage of Jewish teachers who did the same—89.4%. Markowitz interprets these facts as a testament to “teaching being a profession, rather than a brief interlude prior to matrimony and motherhood for these women” (p. 143). I found these statistics surprising for female teachers, regardless of ethnic background, as I have heard many people note anecdotally that teachers in the early half of the twentieth century did not return to work after having children. I wonder how these misconceptions, not based entirely on fact, become part of the dominant narratives of a culture.

Perhaps it is due in part to the way individuals’ interpretations are received by others as facts, and then retold. Cohen’s examination of New York City’s Julia Richmond High School’s yearbook revealed that half of all Italian American graduates planned to pursue a clerical job, with only approximately 10% electing to go to college, and approximately 5% planning to

pursue a profession that would require a college degree. Cohen then addresses numbers of Italian Americans, specifically women, pursuing teaching in the 1960s and 1970s, when Italian American women, the focus of her study, go to college to “train for suitable occupations, such as elementary and secondary school teaching,” as she interprets the situation. Citing as part of their inspiration “modern feminism, committed both to enhancing women’s individual aspirations as well as to political and social issues of women as a group,” Cohen writes “College educated and oriented partly toward careers—for some, even beyond traditional female jobs like teaching—third-generation Italian women began reevaluating their positions within the family” (p. 194). There is, I would argue, a puzzling leap of sorts here, in Cohen’s judgment and interpretation. She traces how Italian American women move from jobs requiring no education, to clerical jobs requiring a high school education, to finally attending college and becoming teachers—what was unthinkable a generation or two earlier for most!—and yet Cohen still considers their holding of these positions to fit into a “traditional” women’s pathway and would certainly include the career of teaching in her ultimate concluding assessment of Italian American women’s lives during the middle of the century as one of the “limited” available options (pp. 194-195).

Cohen further troubles any view of a kind of progress for Italian families. She notes that despite their increasing rates of high school graduation, “Italian girls were not encouraged by the schools to go on to college” and, as a result, “Italian working-class families understood that education for their children did not guarantee equal opportunity” (p. 201). Strikingly, Cohen draws a contrast between “middle-class families” who saw higher education in light of “individualist aspirations for their offspring” and Italian American families, who found those

aspirations “less meaningful” and were interested for the “practical connection between schooling and jobs” (p. 201).

Markowitz, however, views “tradition” in quite another sense. After referring to *The Fortunate Pilgrim* as an example of how Italian immigrants discouraged their daughters from pursuing higher education, she states that “It took another generation before this traditional attitude toward women’s roles changed and Italian-American women would be found in significant numbers among the city’s teaching staff” (p. 6). Indeed, Markowitz emphasizes that, for Italian American women, teaching was *not* traditional, and instead represented a break from how they were typically expected to spend their lives.

Markowitz’s understanding of how non-Italian American families viewed their daughters’ educational pursuits is also quite different from Cohen’s view. She writes:

Unlike many of the female college students in the rest of the country, who seldom had vocational objectives in mind, immigrant daughters rarely had the luxury of attending a college to obtain a general cultural education, for the prestige, or for the social life. Their parents were not in a position to indulge a desire for education without a utilitarian purpose, and those who agreed to their attending schools of higher education were sold on the idea of a teaching career. (p. 13)

Unlike Cohen, Markowitz found that other groups aside from Italian Americans, including Eastern European Jewish American women, the subjects of her book, also saw the practicality of pursuing high school diplomas and college degrees, and that this was a major motivation for allowing their daughters to pursue these paths.

Christina Collins’ (2011) work also corroborates Markowitz’s understanding of how common it was to choose higher education for practical reasons. In her writing on the period of

the 1920s, Collins writes: “According to a former Hunter College president, older faculty at the school were ‘disconcerted by the vocational orientation and social ineptitude’ of their immigrant students in the early twentieth century, especially the Jewish women” (p. 18). Curiously, Cohen believed that this was unique to Italian Americans, whom she believed could not see any other purpose in becoming educated if there was not a practical aspect to it. I wonder how Cohen would write about any of the other various groups who later pursued teaching in greater numbers. Collins writes: “Teaching was seen by the city’s growing population of Blacks and Latinos as the way in which previous immigrant groups, especially Jews, had established themselves economically in New York, and calls for CUNY to offer the same opportunity to the city’s ‘new’ ethnic groups were growing in intensity” (p. 23). Perhaps there is a need for some nuanced understandings of what sparks motivation for pursuing higher education and thereby teaching, rather than a fabricated stark division between two seemingly competing perspectives.

In her review of research contemporary to the time of the writing of the Introduction of *The Dream Book*, in the mid-1980s, Barolini continued to find evidence of how Italian American students still seemed to uphold many values and beliefs passed on to them from their families that had emigrated from Italy. She writes: “At best, women are getting a mixed message: yes, better yourself through education, but don’t get beyond your family. Learn the wherewithal to gain economically, but not how to develop an independent mind and spirit which might take you away from us” (p.12).

2.2 Complexity in Choosing the Teaching Career

I became particularly interested in whether or not, and if so, to what extent, Barolini’s description might apply to Italian Americans’ decisions to pursue the career of teaching in the last few decades. In particular, the work of all of the above historians and literary critics

reinforced my question: What stories do we tell ourselves and others about the teaching career in Italian American lives? And moreover, how and why might my attempted interpretations of the teachers' expressed views during interviews be significant to the fields of teaching and teacher education, writ large?

It is my opinion that Florio-Ruane and Williams (2008) rightly introduce their work on pathways to teaching with the notion that individuals who become teachers necessarily decide to do so out of a complex set of circumstances. They write:

When individuals enter the teaching profession, they appear to be making a personal career choice...it is rare to look backward, to revisit the path that led to the decision to teach. Yet who we are and where we stand as we begin our teaching career is shaped by history, society, and culture...our personal histories. (pp. 7-8)

The word "path," as it is used in their article, may be initially misleading in that it typically implies a defined roadway that one can take to move from one point to another, regardless of how winding a road it is, or how metaphoric. However, Florio-Ruane and Williams do not seem to view the path in this way. Rather, they conceived of a study in which they would "autobiographically and collaboratively seek to uncover [their] own paths to teaching through historical and cultural investigation...in conversation with one another" (p. 8). They specify that they wanted to learn specifically about the histories of "those who came before us: to uncover the paths they broke, to understand the circumstances of their decision to teach, and to examine the nature of their educational commitments. We began this research as a search for the legacies of literacy and teaching that lead teachers into the profession and that ultimately influenced our own decisions to teach" (p. 8).

I would trouble their notion of “uncovering the paths,” as if these paths could exist independently of the researcher’s inquiring and collaborating to understand and create their visions of what happened. However, although they use this term, and their study is very specific to their personal circumstances, they do acknowledge the social nature of understanding the past in part by communicating about it with one another, as well as the available literatures regarding relevant social, cultural, and historical influences.

Florio-Ruane and Williams write: “To uncover the paths each of us have taken to teaching, we turned to our ancestors” (p. 8). Williams focused on African American women who “migrated from the South to Detroit between 1850 and 1920,” while “Florio-Ruane investigated women from Southern Italy who immigrated to New York between 1870 and 1920. These pioneering women were all but invisible by virtue of gender, ethnicity, poverty, and newcomer status, yet their granddaughters and great-granddaughters now comprise sizable segments of the teaching forces in their cities of entry” (p. 8). Quite relevant to my own wonderings, Florio-Ruane’s group under investigation included women like my great-grandmothers Stella Papalardo, Giuseppina Cirillo, Angelina Gentile, and Amalia Gualtieri, who emigrated to the United States from southern Italy during this time period, and whose great-granddaughters—myself and many of my cousins—are or have been part of the teaching force in New York.

Rightly, Florio-Ruane and Williams note that their review of the research on the subject of “the path to teaching” finds that the conclusions are over-simplified. They write that the impression given of teaching is “as an occupation rather than a profession; as women’s work; and as a career more notable for its homogeneity than for the social, political, and ideological twists and turns of its unfolding in the United States in the [twentieth century]” (p. 9). My interpretations of my own personal experience with others’ views of teaching has convinced me

that these are still very much the beliefs that the majority of individuals hold about the teaching profession, and there is little effort needed to view an individual’s entrance into teaching as a decision made with and through complex “webs of...local microcultures into a much more complex network of webs linking human beings over time and across distance and difference” (p. 8). If teachers could attempt to investigate their own decisions in terms such as the above, and share their tracings, I wonder if perhaps others would consider how what I view as their somewhat negative assessments of teachers might be influenced and even perhaps changed by encounters with this study’s interrogations: that is, of my study’s persistent questionings of the Italian American teachers who have participated in this dissertation research study as well as of my analyses/interpretations of their (and my) articulations and understandings of reasons for and influences on their (and my) particular career path choices.

Interestingly, Florio-Ruane’s work makes reference to *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, but in a much more nuanced way than Markowitz’s. While literally poring over materials in her aunt’s attic, Florio-Ruane comes across *The Fortunate Pilgrim* among the “narrow range of texts used by women...photo albums and prayer cards...prayer books and sewing patterns...women’s magazines and a tattered copy of Dr. Spock’s classic book on childrearing” (p. 11). When she inquires about it with a family member, obviously curious about how this particular novel came to be among this collection that did not include many books, Florio-Ruane learns that Mario Puzo was her aunt’s husband’s cousin. Zia Philomena confirms that everyone in the family read the book since “Mario was your Uncle George’s cousin” (p. 11). Though related through marriage and not by blood, Florio-Ruane still sees her connection to the story as “a way to access the past of a family which although not biologically linked to hers, was very close to her own in its background, immigration experiences, norms, values, and—in particular—in its experiences

of education and teaching” (p. 12). This is especially true with her aunt’s conclusion that although Puzo “mixes up some things,” “it’s really Mario’s life story” (p. 12).

Florio-Ruane thus interviews her aunt and examines other resources to trace the character Lucia Santa’s life history from southern Italy to New York. Florio-Ruane makes the somewhat unique point that “while Lucia is a fictionalized representation, she is one of the few women of her time and place whose story we have an opportunity to hear within Puzo’s detailed account of coming of age as an Italian American” (p. 12). In reading Florio-Ruane’s writing, I am more at ease with using Lucia Santa as an illustration of a particular interpretation of reality simply because the author has a personal connection with whom she has discussed the family in intimately detailed ways. Still, I cling to my assumption that there are multiple realities as well as multiple stories about those realities, and I continue to want to hear and attempt to know more.

Florio-Ruane and Williams’s work supports this view of the importance of learning through multiple stories. They write that “autobiographical and biographical research is foundational to the study of culture and identity in our time—it is a way to un-freeze the static, stereotypic ideas of self, other, and group” (p. 10). The topics that Florio-Ruane turns to in her description of the characters’ lives help to highlight, in a sense, major topics that I initially felt could be relevant in my own examination of my path to teaching as well as in my interviews with other Italian American teachers. She makes reference to southern Italian immigrants’ “fluency in [their] mother tongue,” which was usually not “the ‘standard’ language of Italy,” and the view that many Italians had of the southern region of Italy” (p. 12). Florio-Ruane also discusses a particular relationship with language, wherein the first generation born in the United States learns to speak English in school, and the second generation may not speak any Italian at all. She interprets Puzo’s novel as emphasizing that “education and literacy become pivotal in

each of the children's fates in his or her new country" (p. 13). In analyzing the character Octavia's interest in becoming a teacher, Florio-Ruane notices that Octavia struggled with her desire to become a teacher because of "her immigrant mother's commitment to family and to a woman's work as the center of family life" and "her mother's angst about losing her children...via their new language and education to another 'race'" (p. 13).

Interestingly, Florio-Ruane's research leads her to questions that are similar to mine about how women's paths to teaching are often viewed in starkly different manners, depending on ethnicity:

While other authors have written about white ethnic women's choice of teaching as a career because it is seen to enable a liminal work life—with and among children and also fitting with the rigors of raising one's own—others (Weiler, 1998; Munro, 1998) have interrogated the limits placed on teaching as 'women's work' for precisely the same reasons. (p. 13)

Refreshingly, Florio-Ruane dares to view Octavia's desire to become a teacher in ways more aligned with those who have interrogated the stereotypic limitations of the assumption that female teachers' roles are bound with the qualities of a natural nurturer, and not much else. She writes that "it was, in fact, a radical step toward financial and social independence from one's family. It was not the work of women who are mothers, daughters, sisters, wives...for Lucia's generation it was the work of men and of religious sisters" (pp. 13-14). This very specific insight into the state of teaching at those particular historical moments in the United States is quite illuminating, as so much of the available literature on teachers pins down teaching as a limited and traditional women's role. By the time the next generation came of age, Florio-Ruane notes that "the 'daughters' of Octavia...completed high school and post-secondary education and

became public or Catholic school teachers in notable numbers. They also married, moved out of the center city to nearby suburbs, and bore children. They ultimately became full participants in the educational system as pupils, graduates, parents, and in many cases, teachers” (p. 14).

Indeed, in this dissertation study, I sought to understand how and why there was such a great increase of Italian American teachers, especially women as well as to hold in a constant state of interrogation my choices in terms of how and why I decided to represent the Italian American teachers who participated in this study and their own interpretations of all these issues—as well as of my own.

Furthermore, I was impelled to also research how, in the generations that have followed, Italian American teachers are viewed in relation to other white teachers. Florio-Ruane and Williams write:

The story of Lucia and Octavia Santa disrupts the modern image of ‘White teacher’ that persists in the popular imagination. Far from a cohort of elite and privileged White teachers, a great many of the city’s modern teachers came from the ranks of the immigrant poor—especially those southern and eastern Europeans who themselves were viewed as racial minorities by Americans. (p. 18)

I think of how, anecdotally, the teachers who enter programs such as the New York City Teaching Fellows and Teach for America are viewed in contrast to the descendants of the immigrants described above. I wonder intensely why some groups are viewed as being motivated to teach as Maxine Greene (1995) describes here, while others are not: “We who are teachers would have to accommodate ourselves to lives as clerks or functionaries if we did not have in mind a quest for a better state of things for those we teach and for the world we all share” (p. 1). This perspective is key, I think, for being able to approach this understanding of a major

reason for becoming teachers—but this is not necessarily the primary framework through which many view teachers.

I remain intrigued by the multiple interpretations of Italian Americans choosing to become teachers. Researchers seem to mainly label their paths to teaching as more traditional and not really representing any important change in their lives besides financial. Only a few see their movement into teaching positions as radical in that it was a newer role for the women in their families and stood in contrast to the roles they had held before, which centered around taking care of the home and family. The binary situation that these views seem to create inspired me to undertake this research, conceptualized as a series of conversationally oriented interviews with study participants, as well as to attempt to represent, my interpretations of other, perhaps more varied perspectives that might be offered by these Italian American teachers in relation to their understandings of their chosen career “pathways.”

I also wonder if the general public seems to need to believe in the stereotype of the Italian American woman as living a traditional and limited life. For example, Cohen (1992) writes: “Neither high school attendance nor the experience of white-collar work offered the vast majority of working-class Italian women opportunities to redefine their roles within the family” (p. 199). From my situated perspectives, this is a troubling statement. Even as she notes that Italian American women had attained higher educational achievements and careers outside of the home than previous generations, Cohen still expresses the view that Italian American women were somehow living provincial lives because perhaps they were mothers, took care of their homes, provided nourishment. I wonder how Cohen’s research led her to believe that other women had cast off the mantle of motherhood and housework at the time. Even now, contemporary articles on the topic still show that women carry the greater “mental load” because

of all the tasks they have to complete to care for their families, while working inside the home or out (Desmond, 2017). Where exactly, I wonder, is the imaginary boundary that Italian American women have to cross in order to be considered academically and professionally successful? And what does it look like?

Mary Jo Bona’s (2018) writing on Italian American mothers and daughters suggests to me that perhaps the supposed assumptions of many in the general public that Italian American women are extra motherly, more provincial, and somehow, small-minded and stuck as a result, have roots in The Great Migration. It was common parlance at the time to discuss the “problem” of Italian immigration as well as that of other groups from Southern and Eastern Europe. During this period, which most historians consider taking place from approximately “1880 [to] 1920, southern and eastern Europeans migrated worldwide and in huge numbers” (p. 385). Bona writes that “Italians purportedly lacked the racial strain that would make them suitable American citizens” (p. 385). She notes that “an image of ‘primitive maternalism’ was liberally applied to immigrant mothers, in negative but also positive ways” (p. 385). Bona refers to Katrina Irving’s (2000) research on immigrant mothers, highlighting Irving’s interpretation that “in the dominant narrative of the immigrant family, as the ‘site of reproduction...is seen as the place where racially inferior individuals are propagated,’ the targeting of the family home (especially if it is a tenement dwelling) is viewed as ‘dysfunctional,’ and in need of ‘native intervention within that space’” (pp. 385-386). In other words, I wonder whether at least a portion of the general public is somehow predisposed to think of Italian American women in a certain way because of a deeply imbued prejudice that stems from Italian Americans’ earlier days of mass migration.

To some degree, Maria Laurino’s (2009) writing in *Old World Daughter, New World Mother* suggests a different way of viewing the seemingly prolific belief that teaching is a limited role. Laurino writes:

Entering college in the late Seventies, I was a member of that privileged generation that reaped the benefits, without doing any of the grassroots work, of the feminist movement’s radical challenge of the structure of American society and a workplace whose options had been primarily limited to the jobs of teacher and nurse. As Robert Reich noted in his book *The Future of Success*, in 1968 nearly 40 percent of women entering college said they wanted to become schoolteachers; by 1975 the number dropped to 10 percent, and the rate has remained about the same ever since” (p. 43).

In the particular context in which teaching was one of the few positions available for women at the time, it is somewhat understandable why one might characterize a woman’s selection of the career as somewhat limited. But it is quite another thing to continue to label the position as such, and the women who choose it, just because it *used* to be one of the only choices.

This should not imply that women who continue to select it as a career—women who make up that 10%—are somehow living smaller lives, missing out on other opportunities due to some short-sightedness of their own. However, this is a very common attitude that much of the research seems to express when it comes to Italian American teachers specifically. Again, I wonder if there is some other factor motivating the continued labeling of Italian American women as such, when, for example, I have never heard of white Teaching Fellows from other European backgrounds labeled this way when they take positions in New York City schools. In addition, I have not found any available literatures that attempt to interpret the significance of

Italian American men becoming teachers, hence the greater focus of this literature review on women.

Laurino's (2009) further writing addresses this view of specific "types" of women as being extra provincial and maternal. After explaining how she wanted to avoid being anything like her mother's generation of women, writing "*Sacrificio*, sacrifice, spilled from the lips of Italian-American women of my mother's generation like sugar poured into espresso as they resigned themselves to sweeten life's bitterness, usually at the expense of their own desires," Laurino expresses a realization that she has perhaps misinterpreted the situation, or had a mistaken view about the alternative (p. 100). She writes: "It wasn't until I became a mother that I better recognized how sacrifice, and its essential component compassion, are integral parts of life because no one is ever fully independent unless living in a fictive neverland of the never young, never sick, never old" (p. 100).

Laurino's examination of the writing of philosophy professor Eva Feder Kittay corroborates Laurino's conclusion that most of us, especially women, have to spend a large part of our lives providing care. She writes: "Kittay argues that equality-based policies have mostly failed women in the public and private sphere. Only a small number of women represent us politically, and whether working or at home full-time, women perform more than three-quarters of household chores and child-rearing responsibilities" (p. 101). Indeed, I find myself noticing that dominant narratives seem to want to tell a story of Italian American women as especially tied down by their families, and when they finally earned the credentials to take on teaching jobs, as still never as independent as other women. But which are the women, from which ethnic backgrounds, who, as a group, did not (or do not) participate in their families' lives to a large degree? There does not seem to be a ready answer for why this disparity of representation exists.

Maria Parrino’s (2011) research also recounts this seeming controversy regarding Italian immigrants’ attitudes toward education. Parrino writes that even Italian immigrants themselves, such as Leonard Covello, who became a well-known American educator, pointed to attitudes that the immigrants brought with them from Italy regarding schooling. Parrino states that “many scholars...stress the minimal school arrangements in rural southern Italy from which most Italian immigrants originally came” (p. 58). Still, Parrino notes that there are other scholars who “proved that Italian families not only did not object to schooling but even encouraged and supported their children, whose school achievement was not much different from that of other working-class children” (p. 58). Parrino’s reference to the many factors that may have influenced Italian attitudes toward schooling in the United States indicates that one simple narrative should not be retold again and again about Italian immigrants and attitudes toward schooling.

2.3 Individual “Stories”

Clara Corica Grillo’s autobiography, as interpreted by Maria Parrino, supports to some extent the widely accepted view that Italian immigrant parents did not see the value of education, especially for their daughters. In response to Grillo’s desire to further her education, she cites her father as stating: “What good is your education? You still have to wash dishes and diapers” (Parrino, 2011, p. 60). Interestingly, when Grillo leaves home to continue her schooling, she writes that her family perceives her as a “bookish nut,” which Parrino notes was often characterized that way by “immigrant families,” in which “the desire to study was seen as a derangement” (p. 61). Barolini’s writing, too, supports this, as Parrino notes, stating that “reading was ridiculed as too private, unproductive, too exclusive an enjoyment—free time should be spent with the family group. Learning gave one ideas, made one different: all the

family wanted was cohesion” (p. 61). Importantly, the literature shows us that it was not just young women who were exposed to this view of studying.

Fred Gardaphé (1997) also emphasizes how Italian American family life seemed to stand in direct opposition to one’s educational growth. “I grew up in a Little Italy in which not even the contagiously sick were left alone...The self-isolation that reading requires was rarely possible and considered a dangerous invitation to blindness and insanity,” writes Gardaphé (p. 175). Again, there is a reference to madness of some sort—of being out of one’s right mind for wanting to read and learn. Gardaphé recounts his feeling of familiarity when he first read Jerre Mangione’s *An Ethnic at Large* (1978) and learned that he was not the only one who was experiencing this in his family. Gardaphé notes that Mangione even referred to “being Sicilian and American” as leading a “double life” (p.175). To some extent, it is possible to conclude that these particular attitudes toward education in some families could indeed have discouraged some Italian Americans from furthering their education, which in turn would prevent them from entering the classroom as teachers for many decades.

Interestingly, as Grillo becomes able to earn money through her literacy—by writing letters for illiterate boarders—her family begins to “accept” her schooling. She is even able to pay her college tuition with the money she earns. But Grillo is one of “very few women” of her ethnic background who actually entered college at the time (p. 61). Strikingly and relevantly, she writes that “Those few often became elementary school teachers. I don’t recall from the ‘Little Italy’ where I lived, any female getting beyond that” (p. 61). Indeed, it is once again apparent that when Italian American women first began entering college, they chose the teaching career quite possibly because “professional opportunities available for immigrant women were limited and generally required more ‘feminine’ qualifications than educational experiences” (p.

61). Echoing the ubiquitous narrative about Italian American women and the teaching profession, Parrino cites historian Virginia McLaughlin's work which argued that "the fact that most of the Italian-American daughters entered the professional world as teachers proved their dialectical rather than conflicting relation with ethnic tradition, for they essentially performed what was considered by their families an acceptable 'feminine' role" (p. 62). Again, it is baffling to try to decipher at exactly which moment attaining higher education and taking on the profession of teaching went from being a radical accomplishment in defiance of expectations, to a limited role that merely reflected their family's and greater society's expectations.

Parrino shares another story about Grace Billotti Spinelli, who immigrated to the United States in 1916 from Sicily when she was ten years old. In Spinelli's case, she had received an elementary school education in Sicily, and therefore was prepared for the American school as far as content, although she had to learn English. Parrino indicates that "Although [Spinelli's parents] did not understand the language and were not always able to evaluate her progress...everybody in the family was convinced that 'there was no question that I was to stay in school until I became a teacher'" (p. 68). Again, each of us can speculate on the extent to which this was her way of reaching a limited and traditional role, or whether this was a radical achievement for a young woman in her historical context. Spinelli notes that, for her parents, "the only thing for their daughter to do in their desire to acquire a higher social status" was to study. I interpret this as indicating that Spinelli's Sicilian immigrant parents viewed teaching as an important accomplishment that would help the family to gain status in their community. Parrino poses the question: "Did this mean uprooting ethnic traditions regarding women's roles? Most likely, in this case American education was appreciated because it offered opportunities that did not threaten immigrant parents' idea of a typical feminine role" (p. 68). Parrino's

conjecture, one that echoes perspectives I have encountered before, again pushes me to explore the significance of teaching for Italian Americans in both past and current times.

Perhaps the angles from which I have been exploring histories, and the varied theses that specific historians have presented, are obscuring some key areas of focus, which are not so much whether Italian Americans who pursued teaching careers were doing something radical or not. Instead, I believe that it may be more interesting and helpful to try to trace the textures of their stories—assuming there are stories in any traditional sense and/or in non-traditional senses too—of how they believe they came to teaching, and what it might have meant for them and their families. Perhaps there is no need, let alone possibilities, to come to any sweeping conclusions.

Commonly, the Italian immigrants’ illiteracy is cited when describing the characteristics of the group that entered the United States during The Great Migration, most of whom were from Southern Italy. Geraldine J. Clifford (2014), who devotes several pages of her study of female teachers in America to Italian Americans, cites “Italy’s 1901 census” which indicated that in Calabria, for example, “79% of adults were illiterate” (p. 113). This was in contrast to the smaller numbers of Italian immigrants who arrived prior to this period, a group that came from “more urbanized and industrialized regions,” and which did produce “the relatively few Italian American women teachers” of the early twentieth century (p. 112). But Clifford, who titles the section “Teacher Daughters of the Contadini,” focuses on the southern Italian immigrants, writing: “these latecomers nonetheless came to define how America thought of and judged Italians and Italian Americans” (p. 113). Again, the Italian immigrant tendency to avoid higher education is cited: “Italian American youth grew up with the Old Country concept of *buon educato* (well raised): loyal to normative family and community codes of behavior, including not

aspiring to surpass their fathers' achievements. Family ambitions focused on family businesses, skilled trades, and labor unions, not investment in education" (p. 113). Clifford's cited statistics emphasize Italian Americans' lack of presence in higher education, with, for example, only 3.2% of Italian "second-generation daughters" graduating from high school in Providence, Rhode Island in the early years of the twentieth century, as opposed to 21.3% of Russian Jews and 23.6% of "Yankees" (p. 113). Not surprisingly, then, "only four Italians were among the 703 women at New York City's Normal College in 1910" (p. 113). I do find surprising, however, Clifford's reference to a statistic from 1973 in which she writes that "20% of New York City's white residents had Italian forebears, [but] only 10% of the city's 60,000 schoolteachers were Italian American" (p. 113).

It is unclear why Clifford chooses to end her section on Italian American teachers with a short reference to a teacher named Alice Newberry who "exchanged her rural Colorado school in 1909 for Denver's Webster School on the heavily Italian North Side" and "had never seen a city or an Italian. Calming the 'volcanic dispositions' of her fourth grade class of 50 took strenuous efforts; she named this her 'campaign against the Romans'" (p. 113). Since Clifford is not relating this passage to the position or history of Italian American teachers at all, it is unclear why it is placed in this section, and what the reader is supposed to do with it. Perhaps Clifford is trying to make a point about Italian Americans in school and how teachers of "Yankee" stock could not relate to them? Is she implying that more Italian American teachers were needed? Is it just supposed to be humorous?

2.4 Additional Historical Views of Teaching

Nancy Hoffman's (2003) studies of women and the profession of teaching in the United States grapple with the concept of "womanhood" and its relation to the teaching profession.

Indeed, as the title of the monograph under study indicates, the belief that teaching was women’s “true” profession was widespread. Horace Mann was perhaps one of the most prominent individuals—the Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education in the middle of the 19th century—who voiced this view, as cited by Hoffman (2003): “Is not woman destined to conduct the rising generation, of both sexes, at least through all the primary stages of education? Has not the Author of nature preadapted her, by constitution, and faculty, and temperament for this noble work?” Hoffman indicates that when this “mythologized” view of a woman teacher was not met, “she became the school marm, the spinster, the shrewish disciplinarian, an asexual failure, and the butt of humor” (p. 4). Catherine Beecher, too, wrote, as cited by Hoffman (2003): “The educating of children, that is the true and noble profession of a woman—that is what is worthy the noblest powers and affections of the noblest minds” (p. 75). These views by prominent individuals perhaps wrongly put forth the view that the large numbers of women who became teachers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did so—and perhaps still do so in the twenty-first century—because of the very fitness of the role of teacher with their assumptions concerning the roles of essentialized versions of both “teacher” and “woman.”

Although Beecher emphasized that women should not marry unless they were truly in love, which perhaps seems radical for the time, her other expressed views could have been damaging to women’s teaching careers, even as her encouragement brought increased numbers of women into classrooms across the United States. If “the female teacher...worked ‘not for money, not for influence, nor for honour, nor for ease, but with the simple, single person of doing good,’ then why should women expect decent wages for their work? (p. 37). Beecher’s views certainly would not have challenged the practice of “hiring two female teachers for the price of one male,” as was common (pp. 6-7).

But an examination of much of the writing created by teachers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be read as providing a different perspective on why women selected the field of teaching. Indeed, Hoffman (2003) clarifies as her major thesis

that women were entering the labor market for the same reasons as men—to earn a living, to take part in public life, and to take on challenges in order to test themselves. But because women were taking teaching jobs just at the historical moment when the doctrine of separate spheres issued from pulpits and printed tracts, public rhetoric exaggerated women’s motivation to lead children to virtue and downplayed the commonalities they had with male professionals in the labor market. In truth, women were public employees, negotiating contracts with school committees, exercising authority over children and adolescents (often young men) close to their age, speaking before school boards, and leading public school exercises before the gathered townspeople. (p. 7)

Based on my study of Hoffman’s work, along with Markowitz’s, Cohen’s, and Clifford’s, it appears that various views of teachers have been expressed with ease and confidence that do not actually take into account the variety of perspectives that would appear to exist alongside seemingly opposing views. For example, although it was true that teaching was one of few professions open to women—a 1912 report suggested that 70.5% of women who were college graduates and worked, did so within the teaching profession—this did not necessarily indicate that it should be viewed as a somehow lesser role.

Hoffman’s study of teachers’ writings indicates that, in her view, many of the nation’s earliest female teachers in the nineteenth century could be described as “plucky women setting out on a new course: to found a profession that provided a living wage, independence, and

greater access to the civic arena than was acknowledged at the time...teaching allowed women to act in public life" (p. 5). Instead of being confined to a heterosexual marriage, women often lived on their own, with several other women, or "shar[ed] a lifelong partnership with a female companion" (p. 8). Indeed, for women who did not leave the teaching profession upon marrying a man, the profession was often a lifelong career. Not only did women benefit individually by gaining greater autonomy including the opportunity to travel and engage in public intellectual activities, but they also often financially assisted their families back home which "conferred [on the teacher] prestige and status.

African American teachers in particular saw themselves and were seen as highly respected agents of progress who were leading young African Americans to a better life" (p. 8). Hoffman highlights the work of Geraldine Clifford who powerfully called "'teaching...a seedbed of feminism,'" which is not difficult to imagine, as the act of "leav[ing] home to teach was already nonconforming or rebellious" (p. 11). Hoffman emphasizes the new position teachers held in their lives by evoking images of "the platform that most mounted at the front of the class...the display of one's physical body in front of a group," noting that these were signs of their "opportunities for power that contradicted gender conventions" (pp. 46-47).

In tandem with acknowledgements of women's new roles, imbued as they were with new agency, are the ever present issues of race and ethnicity, and how stories/histories of women and teaching seem to be tightly bound with these issues, as well as with "American-ness" perceived as a singular concept. For example, writing in 1846 when the practice of enslaving Africans and African Americans was embedded into the nation's fabric, Catherine Beecher could only have been speaking to white women of Northern European descent when she wrote:

The plan is, to begin on a small scale, and to take women already qualified intellectually to teach, and possessed of missionary zeal and benevolence, and after some further training, to send them to the most ignorant portions of our land, to raise up schools, to instruct in morals and piety, and to teach the domestic arts and virtues...so great is the number of educated and unemployed women at the East, and so great the necessity for teachers at the West, that as soon as the stream begins to move, it will grow wider and deeper and stronger, till it becomes as the river of life, carrying health and verdure to every part of our land...the Christian female teacher will quietly take her station, collecting the ignorant children around her. (p. 78)

This missionary perspective of teaching can be found in renewed form in New York City, the site of this dissertation study, when primarily white teachers from other parts of the United States have been recruited through programs like the Teaching Fellows and Teach for America to teach in New York City’s public schools, attended by mostly black and Latino students, after receiving only a few weeks of training. Is teaching only mainly described this way, imbued with missionary zeal, when the teachers being focused on are mainly of white Northern European descent, entering schooling environments where the children do not reflect their demographics? Although the writing of some northern African American teachers who went south to teach formerly enslaved children and families also indicated a missionary motivation, it was typically tied up in their stated racial identity and they wrote of their potential students as “[their] people,” which perhaps gives a different connotation to their sense of purpose (p. 123). As indicated in my study of other scholarly work on the topic, this viewpoint is not reflected when Eastern

European Jewish teachers or Italian American teachers increasingly take teaching jobs within their own cities throughout the twentieth century.

Hoffman’s highlighting of the writing of Adele Marie Shaw is important to examine here, as it focuses on New York City schools in the early 1900s. Placing herself within the camp of the “progressives,” Shaw focused on ““Americanizing”” the students and often reflected “the nativist sentiments” that were widespread at this time, as ever increasing numbers of immigrants had been entering the nation for the past two decades from nations that were not Northern European. In describing how problematic the schooling was in New York City, Shaw, as cited by Hoffman (2003) writes: “With eighty-five percent of its population foreign or of foreign parentage; its salvation dependent upon the conversion of a daily arriving cityful of Russians, Turks, AustroHungarians, Sicilians, Greeks, Arabs, into good Americans” (p. 253). In my view, it is not surprising that when these immigrants or their descendants began to fill the ranks at the city’s colleges and then in the city’s public schools, where they had themselves previously sat at the mercy of teachers trying to “Americanize” them, that they would not be described in the glowing missionary terms of white teachers of Northern European heritage before them. As we previously saw, instead, the already popular stereotypes applied to their specific ethnic groups were used to reinterpret their positions in the classroom. As I am beginning to trace more clearly, dominant views of race, ethnicity, and gender within a society often cloud the narratives that historians turn to, or perhaps even rewrite them, so that it is difficult to draw one’s own conclusions outside of these dominant narratives.

2.5 Italian Women and Work

A major example of this phenomenon is the work of historian Jennifer Guglielmo (2010), who traced the histories of Italian women immigrants and their descendants as they entered the

United States between 1880 and 1945, specifically focusing on their labor activism in New York City. This focus on Italian and Italian American women’s relationship to work in both Italy and the United States frames my exploration of the literatures on Italian Americans in the classroom in powerful ways. In comparing the available literatures of Italian women’s “histories of resistance” in the United States to that of Eastern European Jewish women, Guglielmo finds that they are “few and far between,” characterizing this as a state of “invisibility” (p. 3). Worse, her review of past research typically indicated that Italian women were “apolitical” (p. 3). Quite strikingly, Guglielmo points to the example of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn who wrote in her autobiography:

‘There were practically no women in the Italian movement—anarchist or socialist. Whatever homes I went into with Carlo [Tresca] the women were always in the background, cooking in the kitchen, and seldom even sitting down to eat with the men.’ Yet I discovered that Italian immigrant women established anarchist women’s groups in precisely the same locales where Flynn organized workers, and on at least one occasion, she even ate in the home of a woman who organized such groups. (p. 3)

Guglielmo’s research indicates that Italian women “were absolutely central to early twentieth-century labor movements” in many cities in the United States, and were referred to by the Italian-language radical press as “the most passionate in the struggle” (p. 3). Amazingly, there seems to be no gray area between Guglielmo’s work and that of other researchers. Italian women in labor activism are either not written about at all, depicted as clearly uninvolved, or, after an examination of Guglielmo’s work, very involved indeed. Guglielmo grapples with this by writing that we must “expand our understanding of early twentieth-century feminism to

include diasporic, working class activisms that were not produced in English” (p. 4). She seems to attempt to understand the differences in the depiction of Italian women and Jewish women by noting that Jewish women more “immediately rel[ie]d on the established trade-union movement or cross-class alliances with middle-class women...especially before the Great Depression” while Italian women “turned most often to strategies of mutual aid, collective direct action, and to the multiethnic, radical subculture that took shape within their urban working-class communities. This political world was deeply transnational...*diasporic*” (p. 4).

Ultimately, Guglielmo does not provide these examples as “excuses” for why the histories told about Italian women are often so very far from what she discovered. Rather, she notes in what will be just one of many highlightings of the great paradoxes surrounding the telling of Italian American women’s experiences that

the image of the southern Italian woman as docile and apolitical emerged at precisely the same time as their mass-based participation in revolutionary social movements. The middle and upper classes in both Italy and the United States invoked such ideas to reinforce popular assumptions about the backwardness of rebellious southern Italians. Northern Italian elites justified their domination and exploitation of southern Italy by racializing the peasant women they encountered there as sexual and political deviants and as beasts of burden. Such ideas informed how the United States greeted Italian immigrants, the vast majority of whom came from the South. Italians quickly learned that to be ‘dark,’ ‘swarthy,’ and ‘kinky-haired’—as the U.S. press often called them—was to be despised and degraded. (p. 5)

Therefore, Guglielmo's view is that it suited dominant classes to continue to view Italian women as uncivil, in a sense, so that they could rationalize their continued exploitation, when it actually makes more sense to declare that Italian immigrant women were "more complete in their critique of power" than their descendants were (p. 8).

Although many researchers have often put forth the view, as I noted earlier, that when Italian American women entered the teaching profession, it was acceptable to their families because it could be reconciled with being a wife and mother, and kept them in a limited role. However, this view completely ignores the work, and the very public participation in protest in both Southern Italy and the United States that Italian and Italian American women had been participating in for generations. Reviewing Guglielmo's research has guided me in developing a conceptual framework that, in fact, is quite new to me in viewing the Italian American participation in the teaching profession. Guglielmo writes that beginning in 1892, "a wave of popular unrest washed over Sicily...in town after town peasants mobilized labor strikes, occupied fields and piazzas, and looted government offices...this marked a new era of social protest. For the first time, women led the social movement" (p. 9).

On a personal level, this knowledge was never passed on to me or to my parents from their parents who were the children of Southern Italian immigrants, four of whom were from Sicily. Nor have I ever heard other Italian Americans discuss this history. Some specific examples from this time period are especially striking. Guglielmo describes how thirty-six women in Piana dei Greci were "arrested after they occupied and then destroyed the municipal offices, throwing the furniture into the streets...close to one thousand women [then] formed a *fascio delle lavoratrici* (union of workers)...In the words of one woman, "We want everybody to work as we work. There should no longer be either rich or poor. All should have bread for

themselves and their children. We should all be equal...Jesus was a true socialist and he wanted precisely what we ask for, but the priests don't discuss this" (pp. 10-11).

This socialist spirit typically imbued the protests erupting throughout southern Italy, and it was precisely "in this climate that mass emigration from Italy took place" (p. 11). Guglielmo writes that women were responsible for an increasing number of tasks as men left Italy and they began to "articulate grievances, critique authority, and challenge oppressive conditions in new ways" (p. 12). She marks the Northern elites as "fear[ing]" southern Italian women who "routinely challenged the attempts by landowners, state officials, religious leaders, and other authorities to control and subdue them...The now familiar tropes of Italian peasant women as submissive, ignorant victims can be traced directly to Italian bourgeois attempts to possess such insurrectionary women in order to secure their own social and economic position" (p. 13). Quite strikingly, this language is not too far off from the language used decades later to characterize Italian American women who became teachers, viewing this as a continuation of their submissive roles in their families.

But Italian women worked in a wide range of capacities in southern Italy during the years that mass migration was occurring. Guglielmo's study of oral testimonies, for example, indicates that women controlled "the hiring and firing of workers, wage earning, and making decisions and preparations about when or if it was time for the rest of the family to migrate" (p. 15). Concetta Pancini, whose oral testimony was presented by Guglielmo (2010), recalled her mother and grandmother farming, canning, and then selling their crops at the market. Another woman who had been left with her child while her husband worked abroad, Cecilia Ferrari, sold her "weaving in markets throughout the hill towns surrounding Naples, while her husband worked on the canals and railroads in the United States" (p. 15). Most of the testimonies indicate that the men

often returned to Italy multiple times over the course of several years, illustrating that many Italians were migrant workers and their families were separated for years at a time. Importantly, is notable that the women who were left behind often led very public lives as they carried on the business of the family, with "a life of intense labor" beginning for many girls at "ten or eleven" and continuing for the rest of their lives (p. 15).

The violent clashing between Sicilian peasants and the Italian military and police in the 1890s, which led to the death and imprisonment of thousands of Sicilians, ultimately resulted in large numbers of Sicilian peasants joining the Socialist Party and organizing into labor unions as this was believed to be "necessary in the struggle to supplant capitalism and the state" (p. 36). This fact makes me wonder if there is any connection, even if many are perhaps unaware of it, between Italian Americans' attraction to many civil servant unionized jobs over the past century in the United States, including the teaching profession. If their history was imbued with the sense that the only way to survive was to gain power as a collective of workers, could this view have disappeared so radically in a few decades in the United States?

In their historical roles as presented by Guglielmo, Italian and Italian American women offered suffered at the violent hands of the police. In 1893, across many Sicilian villages, "women clashed with the police and were gunned down (some with children in their arms), imprisoned (many sentenced to eight to sixteen years), and beaten for their activities (some of whom were visibly pregnant or breastfeeding)...the large numbers of female victims suggests that women distinguished themselves on the front lines of the movement" (p. 38).

Italian women also eventually became labor migrants in large numbers, many working in sweatshops in the garment industry. Yet, related to their labor history, Guglielmo notes that they have been "rarely imagined in historical scholarship as labor migrants. Rather they are generally

depicted as family migrants, migrating only at the directives of the men in their families, to join and reconsolidate a family. Although most women migrated as part of family groups, they did so as workers whose paid and unpaid labor was critical to the survival of their families and to the expansion of industrial capitalism” (p. 45). Once again, Guglielmo notes a tremendous paradox: “Why did Italian immigrant women’s labor become invisible at the precise moment that it was so foundational to the global economic restructuring of this period?” It seems, indeed, to have been purposeful. She finds that “as their productive work intensified with the absence of male migrants, it was largely erased within census records and other government data. In the first decade of mass emigration, for example, the Italian government reclassified peasant women in official documents as *casalinghe* (housewives) instead of the former *contadine* (farmers)” (p. 48). In fact, Italian women’s “intensive physical labor” was very real and all-consuming, and often “deform[ed] their bodies” (p. 50).

I thus again am encouraged by this depiction to frame and interpret Italian American’s women’s entrance into the teaching profession in large numbers decades later through a lens that juxtaposes the work of teaching with the work that so many of their mothers and grandmothers had to perform to survive. And I am struck by the continuous recasting of their work depending on the desired narratives of those in power.

Since most Italian immigrant women had been skilled at sewing, lacemaking, and embroidery to some degree before coming to the United States, they took jobs in the garment industry when they arrived. Guglielmo writes:

Even as Italian men made the transition from seasonal labor migrations to settlement abroad, their jobs remained marginal and their wages were rarely sufficient to support an entire family, especially in winter months when seasonal

work in subway or building construction went idle. As a result, the wages women earned typically contributed more to the family economy than men's (p. 58).

In addition to working in the garment industry, women labored for "textile factories, cigar manufacturers, [and] canneries" (p. 59). After a long day of work in these factories, many also took on "homework" and assembled artificial flowers and paper boxes around their kitchen tables while also caring for children and the home (p. 68). And these jobs often involved facing serious health hazards:

In paper box factories glue fumes caused nausea; in the flower factories the aniline dyes irritated throats and skin; and in the feather factories swirling fluff caused bronchitis, asthma, and eye disease. Many of the work materials were highly flammable, yet fire escapes were rickety and inaccessible. Silk mills were not only very toxic places because of the poisonous substances used to dye cloth, but they were also intensely noisy places...Exhaustion from standing, the routine bending over to complete tasks, eye strain from long hours of close work in poor lighting, long-term exposure to unhealthy work environments, and the routine sexual abuse and harassment of some bosses and male workers made factory work extremely dangerous and difficult. (pp. 74-75)

It is puzzling to consider the views of the historians discussed earlier which indicated that teaching was such a popular job because it kept women close to home in a role that fit in with their maternal expectations, as if they were just emerging from such sheltered lives. Why isn't their taking on of teaching jobs later viewed as strategic decisions to improve their working conditions, enabled by the attaining of higher education, as they undoubtedly knew something of their mothers' and grandmothers' work lives? Or is it possible that the views of southern Italian

immigrants as “a menace to the nation... ‘excitable, impulsive, highly imaginative, impracticable’ with ‘little adaptability to highly organized society’ ...[as] advanced in the Dillingham Report of 1911 and “culminating in the Johnson Act of 1921 and...Johnson-Reed Act of 1924”—views that were essentially codified by the United States and used to restrict immigration—so deeply embedded in the nation’s view of a people that even after the passage of time, the attainment of education and of new careers, is difficult to “shake off,” and seemingly follows a group? (p. 89). One has only to read *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), for example, to wonder how and where the strong and widespread view of Italians as “‘vicious, ignorant, and degraded...so vicious, so depraved they hardly seem to belong to our species’” began to dissipate (p. 99).

Italian American women’s continued public involvement is also evident in their labor activism in the early twentieth century and beyond, which can be explored in greater depth in Guglielmo’s (2010) further research. Significantly, it includes detailed focus on several individuals, including Maria Barbieri, an anarchist activist. Barbieri wrote about her son’s death in 1903 “when a pot of boiling water fell on him while she was working in Hoboken’s textile mills” (p. 167). She responded in part by “call[ing] on other ‘proletarian mothers’ to unite against the entire system of capitalism, which not only took mothers away from their children but also valued profit over human well-being and filled one with prejudice” (p. 167). Again, I attempt to place the career of teaching in the framework of this thought, wondering how Barbieri considered the profession of teaching, which to some degree has typically granted individuals more time with their children after work, despite the fact that the position involves much planning and grading outside of school hours.

To an extent, then, I wonder if, for those women who seized teaching positions as soon as they could attain higher education, teaching was actually a feminist choice—not a limited position at all, or the only job they could get, but rather one that had better working conditions than what they had been used to, or what their mothers and grandmothers had experienced, while also allowing them to have a bit more time with their children outside of school hours—a claiming of what many might have viewed as their rights as mothers.

Again, Guglielmo’s work reminds me how the more dominant narratives are told and retold in historical literature while other tellings are obscured. In studying the aftermath of garment industry strikes in the first decades of the twentieth century—with the 1913 strike involving 20,000 mostly Italian women workers taking to the streets—Guglielmo notes that

much of the [available] scholarship advanced the idea that Italian women in the garment trades were unorganized and unsympathetic to the union movement because they composed only 6 percent (approximately two thousand) of the strikers, while they were almost 34 percent of the shirtwaist industry labor force at the time. But those who drew such conclusions relied exclusively on English-language source material and uncritically accepted the opinions of many in organized labor. As a result, the reputation that Italian immigrant women were often submissive workers and scabs was passed down from one generation to the next. (p. 179)

In fact, Guglielmo finds that Italian women made up the majority of members in the ILGWU and “the most successful organizers” (p. 189). Guglielmo describes a further example in the 1933 strike of dressmakers in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. In this strike, seventy thousand women walked off the job, including Italian/Italian American women, African American, Puerto Rican, and Caribbean women. In her review of the English language news

media's reporting of the event, she finds that "Several reporters were especially struck by what they saw as the new role of Italian women in this great uprising" (p. 243). Although the Italian women were indeed leading the charge, as they had been members of the union for a longer period of time than many women of the other ethnic groups, Guglielmo demonstrates that this was not the first time that they had done so. But this positive view of Italian women activists was written about in the Communist Party's *Daily Worker*. Guglielmo is quick to add that the *New York Times* "front page pictorial showed only men, and [their] text on the strike kept the thousands of women invisible behind the gender neutral term 'strikers'" (p. 243).

2.6 Italian American Teachers and A Broader Focus

I turned to Christina Collins' (2011) study, published as "*Ethnically Qualified*": *Race, Merit, and the Selection of Urban Teachers, 1920-1980*, for an interpretation that included the time period in which Italian Americans began entering the classrooms in New York City in greater numbers but found almost zero references to them in the entire text. It was, after all, meant to focus on the issue of race in the hiring practices in New York City, and despite the documented history of Italian Americans not always being viewed as white, as Guglielmo's (2010) and Salerno's (2003) work explores, their history would not necessarily be included here. One important reference to them, however, is included as related to African American teachers:

The Congress of Italian American Organizations noted during the hearings that only 10% of teachers in New York were Italian American, despite the fact that 20% of students in the system were of Italian background. Their president noted that although his community had not always been 'vociferous' in making such claims, 'perhaps the black people have taught us a great lesson in this respect...If you want something, you have to fight for it.' (Collins, 2011, p. 89)

Clearly, there are many unpublished, or even untold, stories about what Italian Americans encountered when they began entering the city's schools in larger numbers. Collins' work focuses on the racism that blacks and Latinos perceived by the largely Jewish teachers' unions. Prior to doing so, however, it traces the prejudices that Jewish individuals perceived when pursuing teaching jobs in the earlier years of their attempts at employment. In her concluding chapter, in which she discusses the demographics of New York City teachers, specifying the decreasing numbers of Jewish teachers and the increasing numbers of black and Latino teachers, Collins obviously includes Italian American teachers in the numbers of white teachers. Still, she does not include any specific references.

I would argue that Collins' rationale for studying the topic of teacher ethnicity still is worth examining, as it has implications for the rationale of my own study:

Public school teaching positions played a crucial role in the past century's conflicts over the role of race, ethnicity, and opportunity in New York, both because of the impact a diverse teaching force has on students and because public school teaching positions themselves have historically represented one of the most important sources of middle class employment for ethnic-minority groups in the city. (p. 180)

Though Italian Americans are typically not considered an "ethnic minority" group (unless one considers the City University of New York's affirmative action policy), and could not have faced exactly the same barriers that black and Latino teachers faced and are still facing, their expressed views of their experiences could possibly provide insight into our contemporary state of teaching in New York City.

If Italian Americans, the descendants of mostly illiterate immigrants who were supposedly anti-higher education, who were viewed as inferior to other white groups, and whose

language, geographical accents, and food choices made them “other,” could eventually fill the ranks of New York City’s teachers in the same school buildings where their parents or grandparents either had their names changed, were funneled into non-academic tracks, or dropped out, there must be something significant to learn about this—and there must be something significant to tell in the histories of teachers. If some researchers continue to profess that Italian Americans’ teachers’ presence in front of classrooms is limited and traditional, stagnant and lacking originality, then perhaps there are some deeply embedded and negative views of Italian Americans at play. And given these circumstances, by extension, how will the increasing number of black and Latino teachers in New York City’s schools be interpreted in the future? This study is my attempt to hear the stories—as fragmented, disjointed, contradictory and/or incomplete as they may be—that other Italian American teachers tell about their paths to teaching, and to talk and think with and through those stories in order to analyze and question my own listening, telling, and interpreting.

2.7 Related Educational Research

Educational research also occasionally highlights conversations about Italian American ethnicity among teacher candidates and professors. Published in 2002, a study titled “White Women Teaching White Women about White Privilege, Race Cognizance and Social Action: Toward a Pedagogical Pragmatics” gestured toward the complex nature of Italian American ethnic identity within the context of racial literacy studies. The authors of the study, Gillespie, Ashbaugh, and DeFiore, all white professors, experienced resistance from white female students, the majority of their student body, in social science courses where racism was studied. Of special note is DeFiore’s conversation with one white female student during a point in the semester when they were learning about white privilege. The student stated: ““You know, for

me it was your black hair that made it OK for you to be talking about race to us. Yes, definitely, the dark black hair and the fact that you are an Italian from the East coast. Those two features really made a difference to me. I could not trust someone who was tall, fair, you know...blonde” (p. 242). DeFiore reflects with the following statement:

In this story, I see how my ethnicity—100% Southern Italian—has shaped my teaching strategies when I teach about race, racism, and white privilege. It has been only recently and in this mostly white Northwest context that I have begun to explore my ethnicity and how it has played an important yet conflicting role in my ability to reach out to white students. I realized that my interest in race and racism might have as much to do with my ethnic heritage as it has to do with my understanding unearned white privilege sociologically. (p. 242)

DeFiore goes on to explain that at the beginning of teaching this particular course, she identifies her ethnic background to students, listing activities and experiences that she still takes part in based on having all four grandparents being from Southern Italy; “these include Catholicism, family, and food...the Italian dialect [of her grandparents]...the Sunday evening 3 pm required family meals, going to Mass, the [holiday menus]” (p. 243). DeFiore contrasts this conversation with the responses that some of her students give to her when asked about their own racial and ethnic background, which include statements like “I don’t have one” (p. 243). DeFiore’s reflection helps us to consider racial literacy understandings in a more complex context, though they stop short of what would perhaps be most beneficial, which would involve having pre-service and in-service teachers explore the historical experiences of their own particular group.

Bree Picower’s (2009) work further illustrates why these personal/socio-cultural/historical explorations are needed. In her article, “The Unexamined Whiteness of Teaching: How White Teachers Maintain and Enact Dominant Racial Ideologies,” one of the white, female pre-service teachers who participated in Picower’s study, Dawn, referred to her Italian American background during an interview. She stated:

Like when my dad came here to America, he had a lot of struggle. He started working when he was 10-years-old, and he didn’t know a word of English. He pulled himself up and he worked hard. He doesn’t now go back to the people who wouldn’t give him a job—and those were the non-White people! He had to go through his family—and his family lived in a very small apartment in Brooklyn, couldn’t afford a thing, and you know, he got over it. And he is over it now. (p. 201)

Picower offers an interpretation: “[Dawn] used her family’s Italian immigration story as the normative experience upon which all people should model success...[she] perpetuate[s] the myth of American meritocracy” (p. 201). Although Picower rightly points out that Dawn believes in the existence of American meritocracy and therefore views her father’s success as part of that system, much is lacking in both Picower’s interpretation and Dawn’s understanding of the past that a knowledge of Italian American history could inform.

After reading this research, I wondered how or, even, if, the teachers with whom I planned to speak would discuss their ethnic background as it related in some way to their pathways to teaching as well as their teaching experiences throughout their careers? The narratives above as cited by researchers seem to indicate that Italian American heritage can complicate, or at least encourage further questioning, when conversations take place about teacher racial/ethnic literacies.

Chapter 3: Approaching the Journey: Methodology

3.1 Case Studies

I primarily consider my Dissertation research to be a multicase study as defined by Robert E. Stake (2006). A multicase study consists of a number of individual cases but is, overall, a group, such as “a set of teachers,” as in the case of this research (p. 1). Despite the grouping of cases, each individual case can also be viewed as a single case, in theory. Stake (2003) characterizes a case as having “specificity” and “boundedness,” the very conditions that characterize each individual teacher in my study (p. 135). Still, this does not imply a simplicity in individuality, but each single case is still considered to be an “integrated system” with “working parts” (p. 135). Each teacher is considered a separate case in this vein, and each has at some point earned a teaching credential and taught in a public school classroom, with all of the possible influences of geographical location, historical context, and personal history, to name a few examples of possibly relevant contexts.

Though Stake (2003) describes three types of case study—intrinsic, instrumental, and collective—it can be difficult to categorize my work within just one of these categories. Though each individual teacher’s situation is interesting to me and relevant to my overarching research question, this study can at times be viewed as more instrumentally motivated than intrinsically motivated, at the same time that it is, by definition, a collective case study because of the number of cases it intends to study. I would characterize it as instrumental because I seem to have the expectation, or at least the hope—to “advance [an] understanding of another issue” (p. 137). However, I view this understanding as one interpretation in a very specific moment under very particular circumstances that I can only attempt to represent—both to myself and others.

As my research questions for this overall dissertation indicated, a large part of my focus was to explore the possibilities for creating interpretations of the case studies to share in the context of writing this dissertation. In his discussion of the recorded and shared outcome of a case study, Stake (2003) refers to John Van Maanen’s writing on “presentation styles,” which include: “realistic, impressionistic, confessional, critical, formal, literary, jointly told” (p. 144). I sought, throughout my researching, interpreting and writing processes, to explore some of the many ways of representing my interpretations. I did so, knowing that I indeed was “produc[ing] a portrayal of the case for others to see.” I thus experimented with various ways of illustrating my interpretations as well as simultaneously interrogating, through reflexive practices, what, how, and why I have represented as I have—all in addition to focusing on how these representations, in some ways and perhaps not others, have, or have partially have, or not at all have been able to directly address my research questions (Stake, 2006, p. 3).

3.2 Representing the Interviews: Creative Analytic Processes

From the beginning of this study’s conception, I was especially interested in working through the processes described in Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre’s (2005) “Writing: A Method of Inquiry”. Richardson terms these methods “creative analytical processes,” or “CAP ethnographies” (p. 962). Richardson, in particular, emphasizes the [postmodern claim] that writing is always partial, local, and situational, and that our selves are always present no matter how hard we try to suppress them—but only partially present... Working from that premise frees us to write material in a variety of ways—to tell and retell. There is no such thing as ‘getting it right,’ only ‘getting it’ differently contoured and nuanced.” (p. 962)

My understanding of Richardson’s phrase “partially present” has emerged from poststructural views of “subjectivity as a site of disunity and conflict,” rather than the humanist view, which “implies a conscious, knowing, unified, rational subject.” Poststructural theories posit “a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak...decentering the subject” (Weedon, 1996 p. 21).

Trying to attend to these more “post” perspectives, I thus also intended to “experiment with textual form” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 964). But in her review of contemporary qualitative research approaches, Richardson noted that particular representational modes still prevail, even though poststructural theories drew attention to ways that “representation” always is fraught in ways that cultural anthropologists Marcus & Fischer (1986) elaborated via their analyses of the “crisis in representation.

However, I primarily remain persuaded by some of those modes to which Richardson (2005) referred: “autoethnography, fiction, poetry, drama, readers’ theater, writing stories, aphorisms, layered texts, conversations, epistles, polyvocal texts, comedy, satire, allegory, visual texts, hypertexts, museum displays, choreographed findings, and performance pieces” (p. 962). I was inclined to lean toward the narrative and literary approaches listed here, identifying as part of my research focus my interest in exploring what happens when I write in these various genres throughout the research process. Ultimately, however, and as will be described in greater detail below, I created a format that I now describe as a combination of pastiche and layered text. As well, I elaborate on my attempts at poetic representations of interview excerpts, and I position all of these attempts as within Richardson’s articulations of “creative analytic practices.”

3.3 Conceiving the Interview

My motivation for exploring ways of attempting to interpret and “tell” was to try to create my own interpretations of why the telling matters so much and, it seems, matters not only to me. As “the researcher ultimately decides criteria of representation,” and scholars’ representations of Italian American teachers are among the ways the world learns about the connections between individuals of this particular ethnic heritage and a career choice, I share Stake’s perspective regarding the notable impact exerted by differing ways that case studies are shared (Stake, 2003, p. 144).

Further, the work of historians discussed earlier, and the conclusions they drew, the judgments they passed, also motivated me to devote work to researching as well as exploring of multiple and nuanced ways of telling. All the while, I have kept returning to Stake’s statement that “the whole story exceeds anyone’s knowing, anyone’s telling,” but I questioned whether there could be a whole story at all. It would seem that there are an infinite number of stories that can be created and told, rather than one story out “there,” that we can fully access about others or “inside” ourselves (p. 144).

The main ethnographically oriented method that I utilized for my case studies enable me to focus on in-depth interviews with each participant. I do recognize that poststructural qualitative methodologists (Scheurich, 1997; St. Pierre, 2009) have challenged any transparent, fully conscious, and unitary versions of “interview.” However, because of my still-primarily constructivist epistemological and ontological assumptions, I finally chose to work with Tim Rapley’s (2004) definition of an interview:

Interviews are, by their very nature, social encounters where speakers collaborate in producing retrospective (and prospective) *accounts* or *versions* of their past (or future) actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts...[In fact,] ‘a postmodern

sentiment would behoove us to pay more attention to the *hows*, that is, to try to understand the biographical, contextual, historical, and institutional elements that are brought to the interview and used by both parties’... [However,] When it comes to analysing interviews, I argue that *you should analyse what actually happened*—how your interaction produced that trajectory of talk, how specific versions of reality are co-constructed, how specific identities, discourses and narratives are produced. (p. 16)

While I planned to attempt to understand and share my interpretations of the *hows*, as Rapley recommends, I troubled Rapley’s phrasing of “what actually happened” as if it would even be possible for there to be one “true” definition of what happened. However, I was and still am willing to go along with his phrasing only as it focuses attention on exploring the language of an interview, the directions of the conversation, rather than extracting words from the interview in the form of simplified data.

Additionally, the notion of the interview “reflecting a reality jointly constructed by the interviewee and interviewer,” while rightly emphasizing that “interviews are *inherently interactional events*, that both speakers mutually monitor each other’s talk (and gestures), that the talk is *locally and collaboratively produced*,” is also problematic for me in that its phrasing seems to indicate that, after the interview, there still is somehow one version of what happened. However, in writing further, Rapley does note that ‘data,’ or more preferably, “the talk” you gain in a specific interview *is just one possible version*, a version that is contingent on the specific local interactional context” (p. 28-29). I would push even further, suggesting that each individual would have multiple strands of interpretation of what happened, and that these strands would reflect different facets of the interview. Indeed, certain aspects of James Joseph

Scheurich’s (1997) postmodern view of the interview *do* correspond well with my perspective.

He writes:

The researcher has multiple intentions and desires, some of which are consciously known and some of which are not. The same is true of the interviewee. [Further,] The language out of which the questions are constructed is not bounded or stable; it is persistently slippery, unstable, and ambiguous...Meaning and understanding shift, in large and small ways, across people, across time, and across situations. (p. 62)

Attempting to keep these points always in mind throughout my dissertation researching processes, I conducted open-ended interviews, opening with only one broad question and continuing primarily as listener in relation to my study participants’ responses. But I also engaged with my participants, sometimes following their topical leads, probing more deeply, and sometimes redirecting the conversation with a question or comment. I aimed to enact Rapley’s assertion that researchers “follow the interviewee’s talk...follow up on and...*work with them* and not strictly delimit the talk to [my] predetermined agenda” (p. 18). As each participant spoke, I responded in a number of ways: sometimes commenting on what was stated, sometimes asking various types of questions, sometimes sitting quietly, nodding, or gesturing, depending on which reaction felt appropriate in the specific situation. I agree with Rapley that “interviewing is never just ‘a conversation,’ [though] it may be *conversational*,” even as I continue to refer to my interviews as conversations. I fully acknowledge my “level of control,” including the fact that I “routinely decide[d] when to open and close various topics and the interaction as a whole” (p. 26).

I chose to use open ended interviews as my main source of data collection because I was interested in if—and if so, in what ways—teachers might (variously) speak about their

interpretations of their experiences related to becoming teachers. The method of interviewing, which potentially (and identifiable only to a certain extent) allows for the expression of wandering thoughts, of verbal exchanges, where topics can be further explored, probed, or clarified, was the appropriate choice for me, I felt, especially because such possibilities seemed to me to also completely intertwined with the nature of my research questions). I also consider my own written reflexive questionings, embedded within excerpts from the interviews, as part of my research methods. I consider these as such, especially because I spent time analyzing interactions among the various interview excerpts and other sections of quoted text, and attempting to interpret all these in relation to my overarching research study questions as well. Thus, I view my reflexive writings within the excerpts as also necessary in order to respond to my research questions.

3.4 Recruiting and Working With Participants

My rationale for recruiting participants also was based on Stake’s (2003) work. He writes that “Understanding the critical phenomena depends on choosing the case well” (p. 151). In addition, he emphasizes the importance of having a “purposive sample,” “building in variety and acknowledging opportunities for intensive study” (p. 152). Due to the importance of “spending extended time, on site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case” all the while “reflecting, revising meanings of what is going on,” it was essential that I select individuals who were geographically accessible as well as willing and able to contribute reasonable amounts of time to meet with me.

Another essential element, according to Stake, is “selecting a case of some typicality, but learning toward those cases that seem to offer opportunity to learn” (p. 153). Though

“representativeness” is significant, according to Stake, “potential for learning is a...somewhat superior criterion” (p. 152).

Using my own personal email contacts and social media environments, I posted a call for study participants who had taught P-12 grades in New York City, who identified as Italian American, and who would be interested in discussing their teaching experience and ethnic heritages.

I thus was able to recruit five individuals who responded to my call for study participants. Having met all my criteria, described below, these five agreed to participate in my study, especially once they were appraised of my study’s contours, requirements, and informed consent commitments. These five represent a variety of age groups, years of teaching, and identifying as males or females. My participants further self-identified as having Italian heritage, which I described, for the purposes of this study, as having at least one parent of Italian heritage. I relied on their own indications of their Italian heritage, although I realize how contemporary DNA and ancestry tests could complicate all of our understandings of ethnic identity.

An important note: Given the participant pool of those individuals who had responded to my call, I ultimately had to choose individuals with whom I already had established relationships. These prior acquaintance framings sometimes are identifiable in the varied interview conversations via references made to specific people, events, or places.

Following ethical guidelines for qualitative research interviewing, in particular, I used a secure digital recording application to record the interviews, and then stored them in a secure digital cloud. I also transcribed each interview and then also stored the typed transcripts in a secure digital cloud.

The impact that my pre-existing relationships with participants may have had on my interpretations of all interview responses not only is worth exploring, but also is necessary. I honestly was excited that these five study participants had expressed not only their interest but also their enthusiasm about my research study. Thus, as I began my research, I wondered what it would feel like to spend time with them in a way I had not done exactly before—discussing their views of their “pathways to teaching”—formalizing what we had perhaps discussed at least in part in the past as part of our shared interests and experiences.

I also fully knew that the power dynamics would be different from the way they normally were in the past, as a result of my conducting of formal research—as “initiator of the invitation” -- and I suspected that there could be an attempt to please me, to provide what they thought I needed and wanted to be successful at my own work (Miller, 1990, p. 8). Still, I also suspected that speaking with individuals with whom I had no relationship was also likely to involve “tension,” unequal power dynamics, and attempts to tell “stories” the way they imagined I would desire them (Miller, 1990, p. 8). Ultimately, when the option to interview these individuals became available, I was deeply interested in the conversations I could potentially have with these five particular participants.

At the conclusion of the transcription of the interviews, and given all these ethical issues that involved power relations, in particular, I indeed did share the recordings and transcripts with my participants, asking if they were comfortable with my using the transcripts in the ways that I ultimately had interpreted and represented these. Although they had all already signed agreements, I still wanted to provide the option for these participants to express any concerns. The only concern that I received was from one participant who wanted me to delete from the verbatim representations of interview responses the number of times the participant used the

term “like”—which I did, as these deletions did not significantly alter the transcripts or my interpretations of these. Other participant reactions included delight and amusement at hearing themselves, and in reading back the transcripts. None of my study participants expressed any desire to change or make any additional comments on my versions, interpretations of our interview exchanges.

3.5 Sharing My Interpretations

I actually did turn to Scheurich’s discussion of data analysis as that which I ultimately foregrounded in terms of the format as well as one aspect of my study’s research focus. Scheurich writes that “data analysis is...a creative interaction between the conscious/unconscious researcher and the decontextualized data which is assumed to represent reality, or, at least, reality as interpreted by the interviewee” (p. 63). As the research questions for this study indicate, I actually did begin the study with an interest in how I might engage in the process of data analysis as described by Scheurich, agreeing that “the written result, the final interpretation, of the interview interaction is overloaded with the researcher’s interpretive baggage...a mirror image of the researcher and her/his baggage” (p. 74). I thus aimed, in my work, to attempt to “‘play around’ or experiment...with ways to represent interviews that highlight the indeterminacy of interview interactions” (p. 74).

Furthermore, I subscribe to the notion of the “field-as-internal,” to use a phrase from *On Writing Qualitative Research: Living By Words* (1997). As such, I approached my conversations with Italian American teachers with the belief that “the transaction between what we’re experiencing [at least, our interpretations *of* what we’re experiencing] and how we feel about what we’re experiencing deserves to be written about as part of our representation of the ‘field’” (Ely, Vinz, et al., p. 16). As I have learned, or at least what I suspect, in examining the histories

and other related literature associated with Italian Americans, and teachers specifically, much within the stories that are told about Italian American teachers, as few as they are, seems to have much to do with the writers’ own feelings about their experiences, or even the prejudices they have internalized.

I attempted to read with these cautions in mind, and to challenge and grapple with the views expressed. In doing so, however, I also felt, at times, as if I were trying to present, in a manufactured orderly fashion, my own feelings—what I was inscribing onto and within the literature. To be sure, I’m describing one way that we interpret as we read as well as ways that historians and other scholars tell their stories, or rather, as is more common in positivist-leaning education research, make their “objective” claims. From positivist theoretical orientations, researchers tend to make such claims without attending to any of the subjective factors affecting any and all researchers’ interpretations of data; rather, they present their “stories,” research reports, professional publications as representing “facts” that many readers thus learn to “expect.”

In contrast, I assumed that my task in inviting, hearing, and interpreting “the stories” of Italian American teachers was really centered on this main endeavor: that is, to attempt to create written versions of these interpretations so that others may continue the processes of learning, feeling, interpreting, and recreating for themselves as they read my interpretive attempts.

There is even a false dichotomy, I would argue, between the concept of “data” and the concept of “ourselves,” as researchers. These data that I am eliciting and selecting as data only exist in the form in which I chose to collect these as such, because I asked for my study participants’ “teaching stories” in some very specific ways. And these data that I perceive I have collected are really textured by my own assumptions, beliefs, biases, and the way(s) I both ask

my questions as well as tell my own “stor(ies)” to myself—or at least the ways I do so consciously. I think of Florio-Ruane’s (2001) writing on how her childhood may have influenced her research interests and practices. She writes:

...I grew up hearing adults’ stories, although mine were told and heard in the home—folding laundry, cooking a meal, weeding the garden, at the dinner table. These stories helped me to learn where I come from and where I stand. As such, they organized, for better or for worse, how I made my way as a student and, ultimately, as a teacher. And they likely drew me to educational anthropology. I thought that my careful listening as an ethnographer would yield stories of the cultural experiences of other people. What I did not acknowledge was the extent to which my recounting of other people’s experiences was seen through the lens of my own. (p. 3)

Although Florio-Ruane acknowledges that she processes and retells stories through her own frame of reference, it is almost impossible to know fully and exactly all that is impinging upon, influencing, and framing how and why one interprets in ways that one does. In order to know, one would have to have a full and accurate picture of intangible elements, whose shapes are constantly shifting, if they have a shape at all. One would have to be able to almost emerge from one’s lens, in order to view it. Though many researchers engage in reflexive and metacognitive practices regularly, these are only attempts.

These unique productions of knowledge are what Haraway (1988) calls “situated knowledges” (p. 581). Essentially, Haraway finds that there is no specific “objectivity” to be discovered (p. 583). Instead, researchers must work with the ironic understanding that “only partial perspective promises objective vision” (p. 583). All perspectives, indeed, are partial,

contingent and constantly inflected with always shifting historical, socio-cultural and discursive influences.

In summary, we can only claim to have interpreted and then constructed certain versions and not others of what we think we are viewing from a specific point at a specific time, from our particular social, cultural, historical and discursive influences and framings, and through whichever medium these present themselves and through which we choose to communicate our understandings. I find Haraway’s reference to photography very relevant. She writes: “There is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura in scientific accounts of bodies and machines; there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds” (p. 583). I therefore approached my interpretations of interviews with the sharp awareness that I was quite actively and purposefully, even if I were not aware of the purposes, bringing together text that may produce particular understandings, though not all possibilities, about how and why several Italian American teachers found their ways to teaching. I strongly concur with Haraway that this is not the taking on of a “relativis[tic]” point of view, but rather, that such a stance enables teachers and researchers to advocate for the identification of “partial, locatable, critical knowledges” (p. 584).

What exactly did I expect to learn from my case studies? I imagine that I was looking to interpret, as well as to pay attention, to any extents possible, how and why I interpret as I do; why my study participants became interested in pursuing a teaching career; why and how they chose to teach their respective subject areas; if, why and how their decisions to teach fit into their family’s expectations as well as with the expectations of their identified cultural and geographical contexts, including their expected gender roles. I was also interested in what I might latch onto to further probe as indicators of my own interests, expectations, assumptions,

and biases. Thus it too was essential to identify and then attempt to move away from the assumption that I was listening to “a sum total of the past” (Miller, 2005, p. 52) in any so-called “story” that my study participants presented to me in response to my interview questions as well as during our extended conversations.

In writing the literature review above, I thus also attempted to describe my experiences as I read the written histories by various scholars that referred in some way to Italian American teachers, whether it was through the lens of women’s experiences with schooling, or the work of scholars who studied New York City teachers in general. I believed that I perceived contrasting opinions in the work I read, as well as clear interpretations of what had been studied, which most often still were presented as “facts.” But although these histories attempted to describe contexts, in actuality I felt that much was lacking in terms of exploring an individual teacher’s decision to enter teaching. As I approached this study, I thus intended to attempt to adapt a wider lens in which I could point to, knead, and attempt to verbally shape as well as interrogate my interpretations and particular versions of what occurred during interviews that might provide some of the threads that make up the patchwork of the quilt, to borrow a metaphor from Denzin and Lincoln (2005).

Intriguingly, although all of the stories we tell—indeed all of our utterings—are built upon an infinite number of tellings and shaped in unidentifiable patterns, seeking to trace the connections between what I still chose to conceptualize as my participants’ “stories” and the myriad other factors that might have influenced them is a mere attempt, though perhaps a worthy endeavor to attempt. And this is all while acknowledging the impossibility of ever thoroughly tracing the contexts that surround historical events, and the impossibility of ever thoroughly articulating what has been “discovered.”

Even given all these acknowledgements, throughout my study’s researching, interpreting and representing processes, I still attempted to take note of as many influences and insights that I could perceive and trace in my analyses of what I am positioning as “teachers’ stories”—that is, the responses, questions, worries and so on that they shared within the context of this dissertation research. I made these attempts with the hope of still being able to provide readers with a robust portrait of each single attempt, at a specific time and place, “to hear and to tell.” However, I do not want to give the impression that I believe these are “unproblematized recountings of what is taken to be the transparent, linear, and authoritative ‘reality’ of those teachers’ ‘experiences’ (Miller, 2005, p. 51). I fully realize that all participants spoke as they believed they should in the particular moment of my interviews with them, and I, too, in writing this Dissertation, am inevitably writing in a way that I think I “should” for the particular moment of completing an “acceptable” Dissertation.

Throughout all my attempts, I was motivated, in particular, by the prospect of perhaps creating a space through which a glimmer of insight might shine through into how contemporary individuals of various racial and ethnic backgrounds might forge paths to teaching and have a positive impact on the world. As Sonia Nieto (2006) has written in her Introduction to Howard’s *We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know*, “Part of the process of including whites in multicultural education means defining whites as ‘ethnics’ who have their own histories and identities...this recognition need[s] to be accompanied by a critical and truthful acknowledgment of white privilege, power, and abuses throughout U.S. history” (p. xv). Although Nieto states that white privilege should be acknowledged, she also insists on the examining of white ethnic history. This does not simply mean identifying the props of one’s ethnic heritage, but also examining the role of beliefs in white supremacy in and through the experiences of people of one’s ethnic

heritage. Within such contexts and framings, then, I primarily wished that my dissertation research could perhaps lend itself in some way to the work of those who seek to diversify the teaching force, especially in cities as diverse as New York.

Thus, in my representations of my research participants’ “tellings,” I attempted to use the form of a layered story combined with pastiche, relying heavily on the description of the form by Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul (2001). According to these researchers, a layered story contains multiple narratives that, instead of being categorized by voice or perspective, are positioned in an order that attempts to request that the reader view a particular perspective in light of the others next to which it is placed. This order is determined by the researcher, and therefore is supposedly a representation of the researcher’s deliberate decisions (although a researcher can never fully identify every influence on her decisions) about which narratives to place where. The format suggests that aiming to tell a unitary “story” will not convey the work of grappling with meanings, of attempting to understand one perspective while also considering how a seemingly opposite perspective could also be relevant.

The form of a layered story is particularly helpful when the researcher desires to emphasize the “fragments of information, splintered remembrances of many people, and ruptures of logic as various explanations are juxtaposed” (p. 79). The form can also be considered a method of “inquiring” so that the method of interviewing used in these case studies is accompanied by the method of layering narrative as an additional way of attempting to respond to my research questions (p. 79). In using the term “narrative” here, I do not intend to imply that I possess “whole stories,” in the traditional Western sense of having a beginning, middle, or end, nor do I claim that I have recorded and then transcribed any kind of unitary story. I use the term “narrative” here to refer to the sections, or fragments, that I have taken from the interview

transcripts and related literatures. All of the while, while developing Chapter 4, I continued to interrogate whether and to what extent I was working with the humanist concept of a narrative, at the same time as I was rejecting it. Significantly, my goal was for the “multivocality” of the layered story/pastiche form to emphasize “the diverse ways through which experience is interpreted and constructed” (p. 80).

Throughout my analyses and interpretations of my study participants’ responses and conversations, I also characterize my method of (re)presentation as partially illustrative of pastiche. For example, I often add my own reflexive notes, in italicized text, in the very midst of an excerpt from an interview in order to provide visual support of my attempts to display “dimensions of puzzlement, confusion, or roadblocks” (Ely et al, 2001, pp. 109-110). In choosing this format, I hoped to display “multiple data sources interact[ing] simultaneously...provok[ing] questions more than represent[ing] reality,” depicting the “intertextuality” that I believed would best represent the “outcomes” of this dissertation study, as will be further discussed in Chapter 5. Indeed, this format is based on my “acceptance and acknowledgment that how knowledge is acquired, organized, and interpreted is relevant to what the claims are” (Pillow, 2003, p. 176).

In my attempts to display the reflexivity with which I approached the writing of Chapter 4—to show my attempts as unable to ever completely achieve “ongoing self-awareness”—I looked to Wanda Pillow’s (2003) description of reflexive practice: “This focus requires the researcher to be critically conscious through personal accounting” of how not only the vast influences of social, cultural and historical events and influences, but also “the researcher’s locations (across for example, gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality), position, and interests influence all stages of the research process” (p. 178). I aimed to “produce research that

questions its own interpretations,” that attempts to “make visible the personal construction of the text” (p. 178; p. 189). Rather than fear this type of “reflexivity of discomfort,” I believe that working within it more meaningfully enabled my addressing of my research focus even as I simultaneously was grappling with deeper insights (p. 187).

For the purposes of honoring my participants’ anonymity, I changed all individuals’ names; I thus also characterized the people and places they described with ample robust detail so as to attempt to convey what I interpreted as their meanings, but with the exclusion of specific names and other identifying characteristics that could reveal their identities or their specific geographic and work-related locations. I rightly suspected that individuals were likely to share stories about their family members, coworkers, or supervisors, which, if not kept anonymous, could potentially disrupt their personal and professional relationships. Therefore, I was sure to strongly uphold their anonymity as well as my promises of confidentiality in relation to all aspects of this study.

Further, Florio and Williams’ viewpoint on “teacher identity” informed and inspired my further desire to engage in what Laurel Richardson (2005) calls “creative analytic processes” as a way of exploring various forms of representation of my interpretations. Florio and Williams write:

We find that identity as a teacher is related to many social, cultural, political, and economic factors that we can see at play in the narrative life compositions as well as in accumulated social research. Women’s roles in the family, kin networks, the changing nature of work, the role of education in the lives of women and girls, the role of racial ascription and racism in school and community, the economic constraints on families and children, etc., contribute to

the making of a life. How one negotiates the boundaries, challenges, and opportunities is the material of life narratives and compositions that can enlighten and possibly instruct and/or inspire. We need to understand these experiences as they have engendered several generations of teachers—both to help us understand our own lives and choices and also to illuminate the dynamics of education and social change in the nation at large... We bring such histories and, recollected or not, such narratives to our contemporary profession and also to each generation’s answer of the call to teach. The social historical nature of knowledge shapes who they were and also influences who we are...exploring our histories reveals that our paths were highly personal and deeply social—and that reconstructions of the profession based merely on the movement of large numbers of people into particular careers fails to capture individual choice—its drama, compromise, risk, passion, joy, frustration. (p. 20)

I attempted to address many of these complications as part of my dissertation study.

3.6 “Poetic” Representations

One creative analytic practice that I ultimately decided to work through was the creation of poetic representations of interview excerpts of participants’ words. These poetic representations range from longer reiterations of sections of the interview excerpts that I have reorganized in a poetic format to emphasize specific images or rhythms, to shorter representations, described below. I use the phrase “poetic representations” because in most cases I have not created a new original poem in order to grapple with my understanding of the interview and to represent it, but instead I have used whole phrases and sentences from the interviews. Still, I attempted to produce what many researchers have found that the use of poetry engenders, as described below.

Over the past two decades, many researchers have explored the possibilities of writing within the genre of poetry for various purposes related to their studies. Some attribute great power to poetry—almost a magical quality. Eisner (1997) wrote that “Poetry was invented to say what words can never say. Poetry transcends the limits of language and evokes what cannot be articulated” (p. 5). Faulkner (2007), in citing the work of Jane Hirshfield (1997), subscribes to the view of poetry as having the ““ability to clarify and magnify our human existence...we give ourselves over to a different mode of knowing: to poetry’s knowing, and to the increase of existence it brings, unlike any other”” (p. 218). Faulkner also cites Miles Richardson (1998) as noting ““poetry wants us to see...Those instantaneous sights, when things stand so clearly before us, when truth shows its face”” (p. 219). Carr (2003) indicates that the format of poetic representation also “produc[es] a shared experience” (p. 1330). For Laurel Richardson (2002), “poems are consciously constructed to evoke emotion through literary devices such as sound patterns, rhythms, imagery, and page layout. Even if the prosodic mind resists, the body responds to poetry. It is *felt*. To paraphrase Robert Frost, poetry is the shortest emotional path between two people” (p. 879). I thus attempted to convey the participants’ emotions as I interpreted them during the interviews, as Richardson describes it, which I would argue also conveys something of my own emotion.

For Melisa Cahnmann (2003), the use of poetry allows researchers “to [both] discover and communicate findings in multidimensional, penetrating, and more accessible ways...to ask new questions and use poetic structure to represent and interpret complexity” (pp. 29-31). Perhaps more so than other forms of communicating research, such as prose, Cahnmann writes that “a poetic approach to inquiry requires a keen sense of noticing from data collection and analysis to descriptive writing as foundational for an interpretive outcome” (p. 32). Furman and

Langer et al also describe the use of poetry as "a method of inquiry as we examine...meanings...through our own thoughts, feelings, and memories" (p. 313).

Many researchers share the view that the use of poetry to communicate one's research, especially with its typically "ordinary language and concrete, resonating images," as compared to "academic jargon and theoretical abstraction," results in it being more likely to "communicate with more liveliness and accuracy" and "to render the richness and complexity of the observed world" (Cahnmann, p. 32; p. 34). Furman and Langer (2007), too, focus on how poetry allows researchers to "vividly and evocatively present personal and intimate topics" (p. 302). Like Cahnmann, Furman and Langer, et al. also focus on the accuracy or "truth" of what can be communicated by poetry, but complicate their view, writing of poetry as "a vehicle through which to communicate powerful and multiple 'truths' about the human experience...poems are powerful documents that possess the capacity to capture the contextual and psychological worlds of both poet and subject" (p. 302).

Although their descriptions of the possibilities of poetry somewhat resonate with me, the language of "capturing worlds" is a bit problematic, as I later learned while attempting to describe the processes of interpretation with which I engaged in my writing below. Indeed, as quoted in Furman and Langer et al's citation of Poindexter's (2002) work, "She posits that the purpose of the research poem is to communicate the emotional and contextual world of the research respondent 'effectively and efficiently'" (p. 304). In my own work, I was aware that I was actually attempting to communicate more of what I chose to focus on, what I was struck by, and from a transcription made up of text that I actively elicited by hosting an interview and asking the questions. As Butler-Kisber describes her process, "There is no question that this found poem is my interpretation of Ann's story" (p. 234). Richardson (2002) writes that

constructing interview material as poems does not delude the researcher, listener, or readers into thinking that the one and only true story has been written, which is a temptation attached to the prose trope...Moreover, because the poetic form plays with connotative structures and literary devices to convey meaning, poetic representations have a greater likelihood of engaging readers in reflexive analyses of their own interpretive labor, as well as the researcher's interpretive labor. The construction of text is thus positioned as joint, prismatic, open, and partial. (p. 879)

Similarly, I do not work under any belief that I am presenting a more accurate or true narrative by using a poetic representation as the form; rather I am even more aware that creating these representations from interview transcripts is highly interpretive. Using poetry either "as a public form of representation or as an analytic tool within the inquiry process...will bring the researcher closer to the data in different and sometimes unusual ways that can yield new and important insights" (Butler-Kisber, p. 235). Richardson (1993) notes that using more experimental forms to inquire and to communicate research creates a situation in which "what we claim to know...is displayed as constructed knowledge" (p. 704). Perhaps this is one of the major implications of using poetry in this manner. The use of more traditional forms of inquiring and presenting research, such as coding, may present the mistaken view that knowledge has indeed been "discovered." Rather, I tend to agree with Richardson (1993) who writes that "poetic representation reveals...the inconsistencies and contradictions of a life spoken as a meaningful whole" (p. 704). Indeed, "by setting words together in new configurations, the relations created through echo, repetition, rhythm, rhyme let us hear and see the world in a new dimension" (p. 705).

Furman and Langer, et al. note the “compress[ed]” quality of research poetry, in comparison to an original interview transcription. Langer and Furman (2004), too, note that “the condensed form of a research poem leads to a more powerful presentation of data...the poem may more accurately express the intensity of emotions conveyed that may be lost in a longer narrative” (p. 7). Glesne (1997), earlier, wrote that “poetic transcription is...filtered through the researcher but involves word reduction while illuminating the wholeness and interconnectedness of thoughts” (p. 4). In describing her own processes, she writes that she “found [her]self, through poetic transcription, searching for the essence conveyed, the hues, the textures, and then drawing from all portions of the interviews to juxtapose details into a somewhat abstract representation” (p. 4). These descriptions suggest an almost-stripping away of excess material from an interview transcription to leave only what is most poignant, and to gather those words and phrases into a format that best depicts this strong emotion. Langer and Furman (2004) describe this as “a movement toward truly understanding the respondent instead of just re-stating the conversation” (p. 7).

In the next chapter, I attempted to work in this way, writing shorter, more condensed poems, after writing longer ones. Richardson (2002) finds that there is a somewhat significant difference in how a longer poem functions, as opposed to a shorter one. While longer poems may still “aim to convey ‘the story,’ shorter poems “focus and concretize emotions, feelings, and moods—the most private kinds of feelings—in order to recreate moments of experience...Each short poem represents a candid photo, an episode, or an epiphany” (p. 880). Richardson (2002) believes that these shorter poems align well with how people actually describe their lives: “people tell stories about *events* in their lives and the meanings of these events change through the invocation of different narratives” (p. 880). Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) indicate

through exemplary work that “the intensity and compression of poetry emphasizes the vividness of [the] moment” (p. 135). Additionally, they note that “What we find and report about others is intimately meshed with our own ways of seeing-or-not-seeing our ‘selves.’ Because of this, we owe it to our readers to be up front about our feelings, our process, our puzzlements, our disasters, and our victories” (p. 137). In the next chapter, via reflexive interruptions, I attempted to convey some of my thought processes, as I can now describe them, limited as these ways are, especially given the unconscious, the vagaries and slippages of language and memory, for example and as Scheurich reminds us.

Butler-Kisber reiterates the point that, with the possibilities of choosing from a variety of forms in which to share one’s research, “the selection of a representational form that best suits the researcher and what is to be communicated” is “encourage[d]” (p. 229). Eisner (1997), earlier, urged researchers to be “critically reflective,” suggesting that “we ask why we are interested in alternative forms of data representation. What functions do such forms serve? Do we really need them? What are we trying to accomplish with these excursions onto the edges?” (p. 6). In my attempts to describe why I am drawn to the use of poetic representations to both inquire and to communicate my interpretations, I necessarily probe my research questions further as well as my own epistemological and ontological assumptions. I do not know whether or not we can make the judgment, as Butler-Kisber has found represented in much of educational research, that “the more traditional, textual descriptions of qualitative findings do not adequately reflect the complexity of studying human behavior” (p. 229). My inclination is to suggest that perhaps none of our textual descriptions, whether traditional or more experimental (which are arguably moving closer to traditional, being that many researchers have used more experimental methods over at least the last twenty years to represent their work), are adequately reflective of

this complexity. But our descriptions of why we believe we are drawn to these methods, and what we think they may be able to express that other forms cannot, are perhaps even more meaningful than the actual forms we ultimately choose to write in.

Faulkner (2007) somewhat addresses the paradox of much of what is written about the use of poetry in qualitative research, writing: “Poetry is a precise way of seeing at the same time that it is conditional and partial and interested in approximations of something like truth. I also see the impossibility of articulating one vision of good poetry” (p. 224). Much has been discussed about the criteria against which poetry in qualitative research should be evaluated. Bochner (2000) refers to the “obsessive” and “incessant talk about criteria” as “boring, tedious, and unproductive,” emphasizing that “we get preoccupied with rigor, but are neglectful of imagination” (p. 267). Glesne (1997) suggests that “poetic transcription moves in the direction of poetry but is not necessarily poetry,” while Richardson (1993) writes: “Most of us will at best be only almost poets” (p. 12; p. 705).

In his attempts to describe what might serve as helpful criteria for poetry in qualitative research, Bochner (2000) writes that “the good ones help the reader or listener to understand and feel the phenomena under scrutiny” (p. 270). Specifically, he looks for “abundant, concrete detail...the flesh and blood emotions of people coping with life’s contingencies...structurally complex narratives, stories told in a temporal framework that rotates between past and present reflecting the nonlinear process of memory work” (p. 270). Bochner’s preference, however, for writing that tells “a tale of two selves; a believable journey from who I was to who I am, a life course reimagined or transformed by crisis” might lead some researchers to attempt to force a narrative for the sake of providing an entertaining read to an audience, rather than to convey what the researcher believes can and should be conveyed from research. Faulkner’s (2007)

criteria include “artistic concentration, embodied experience, discovery and/or surprise, conditionality, narrative truth, and transformation” (p. 230). Ultimately she acknowledges that “our conceptions of good or effective poetry may alter through time, experience, and changing tastes” (pp. 230-231). Clearly, there is no agreement about what criteria should exist for research poetry, but most researchers seem to have high expectations for poetry’s ability to evoke an emotional response in a reader.

Throughout my sharing of poetic representations based on each case study, including both longer and shorter ones, along with my version of Richardson’s (1997b) “writing stories,” I presented excerpts from each case organized by themes that I assigned to the body of interview transcripts as a whole—themes that I am fully aware I have written onto the text based on and within my research interests and the unfolding of the interviews based on my questions.

Richardson (1997b) developed the concept of writing stories for her own work as she found herself “contextualizing and personalizing” her previous work, “making it all new for the first time...reframing” (p. 3). She finds that by allowing the genres of ““selected writings”” and ““autobiography”” to “converge,” she “create[s] new ways of reading/writing that are more congruent with poststructural understandings of the situated nature of knowledge making. In the new convergence, we become writers, tellers of stories about our work—local, partial, prismatic stories. Writing is demystified, writing strategies are shared, and the field is unbounded” (p. 3).

In my particular case—writing a dissertation study—I am writing within a much shorter period of time than that which lapsed between Richardson’s earlier writings and the publication of *Fields of Play*. Still, my writing stories were attempts to share what I thought influenced my creation of the poetic representations, how I might articulate the ways my thought processes were working—as far as I could tell—and any other relevant autobiographical factors. Still, the

term “demystified” is challenging for me, as I believe that writing stories could actually deepen a reader’s understanding of all the possible influences surrounding the communicating of one’s research through writing, which leads to further questions and mysteries. Richardson (1997b) credits the creation of writing stories as “a way of making sense of and changing our lives” as well, since as we attempt to rewrite or retell our previous writings/stories, we “renarrativize [our] lives” (p. 5). It is compelling to consider how creating “stories of how texts are constructed” could result in changing our own lives, or our perspectives on our lives (Richardson, 1997b, p. 74).

Chapter 4: Attempting to Trace Paths: Presenting Case Studies

4.1 Introduction

I selected topics that, to me, seemed recurrent across my five participants’ interview transcripts, knowing well that, to a great degree, my participants referred to a specific topic or elaborated upon it because I had directly asked about it or indirectly approached the subject. To be clear, I do not claim that these themes have emerged of their own accord; rather I ascribed them into the conversations themselves to a large degree, and certainly into these pages of my dissertation research.

In the pages that follow, I share excerpts from the interview transcripts (sometimes sharing an excerpt more than once, as it fit into additional “categories” that I have interpreted as such) alongside, within, next to, and surrounded by quotations from a variety of other texts. As well, I scatter throughout my “poetic” attempts to represent each case, wherein I utilized phrases I plucked from the interview transcripts. Interspersed throughout these pages are also my attempts to create writing stories embedded in reflexive explorations for each of the participants’ cases.

In using this layered story-pastiche format, I deliberately set out to represent my acts of imagining how it is that I might be reading and thinking about the interview texts shared here, within what can be viewed as the single “moment”—or a series of moments—of writing this dissertation. Sometimes, this includes the identification of seemingly contradictory elements—my noticings of “multiple accounts of selves and experiences [which] “splinter the dogmatism of a single tale”” (Miller, 2005, p. 51). I took from my bookshelves texts I had read, annotated,

sometimes written about in the past, sometimes not, but always texts that I had experienced in some way, and that had become a part of the framework from which I experience the world, consciously or unconsciously. There is no way, of course, to know exactly how my reading of a poem several years ago has affected, or become a part of, my current mindset (and if I even would have remembered reading it, had I not still had the book upon my shelf). But as I reread each text, I become aware again of concepts, themes, ideas, images, and details that were part of the motivation that I had had to even pursue the topic of this dissertation. These also influenced what I asked during interviews, how I heard the responses, how I read the transcripts afterward, how I decided which topics to focus on, and how I layered and juxtaposed the texts in order to attempt to represent my understandings and wonderings. And these are only partial (and always offered in recognition of the very dangers of representation) representations. These thus, at the very best, can only be momentary acknowledgments, imaginings, that could be reimagined and reconfigured in some other ways, or partially deleted or edited, or redone or abandoned. With these awarenesses, I chose to write through and across the pages of this layered account in several styles in order to attempt to communicate how I think I was thinking as I assembled the text, and why, and how I think I am thinking now.

4.2 Unplanned “Paths”

Jennifer: “I didn’t want to go into teaching.”

Leo: “I didn’t start off down that path.”

Marisa: “Teaching was something that I didn’t want to do actually.”

James: “It’s not something I consciously planned to do.”

They spoke as they did, above, because of the question I asked, I think—along the lines of How would you describe your pathway to teaching? The responses above from four of the

participants all seem to indicate a kind of resistance to my question, with the phrase “I didn’t” repeating itself multiple times:

“I didn’t”

“I didn’t”

“I didn’t”

Right away, there is a kind of denial—almost as if they are saying that the concept of the path doesn’t work, exactly. Participants appear to me to be almost proud in honesty—that the career of teaching was not what they wanted.

Jennifer: First I was a music therapist, which, I found myself liking working with young kids the most out of all the different populations I was exposed to, I had other interests but I found myself working with young kids and liking it, and then after a few years I wanted to know more about the population—early childhood special ed. So when I was trained in music therapy I had like a semester of each population and a lot of the training was in psychology and in music but I was not trained in depth in early childhood development. So I did a lot of my own self-study, and then just like windows started to open where I was learning a lot about approaches and learning about autism which was the biggest population I was working with, and then there was the Greenspan approach, this guy Stanley Greenspan that I was really, really interested in, basically I started to get really, really interested in different approaches and wondering like how the autistic mind was interpreting information and just wanted to know more. But why I wanted to go into teaching was that I didn't want to go into teaching, I just wanted to learn more about the early childhood brain and development because I was working with them. And I was

self-teaching. Um, so I started to look for programs that were really focused on autism, [*I am struck by Jennifer's decision to pursue a graduate degree in Early Childhood Education because of her awareness of her lack of knowledge and how that knowledge could improve her work as a musical therapist with autistic children.*] focused on perception, how we're taking in information, how it's changing our brain, I was reading a lot of books that really opened my eyes to the autistic brain, but what happened was I got my master's in education so now I had this other degree. It was very research based...my thesis was research based and I student taught also, and I found a new interest, I really liked teaching. I really liked more to the day than just music. I liked reading books to kids and exploring pre-literacy. I like doing art and building.

It's as if Jennifer came to the teaching career by accident. It almost makes me chuckle, to imagine stumbling into a New York State teaching license, when I think of the time and commitment that it requires. I believe that Jennifer's response would surprise most people, who would imagine that an Italian American woman from Brooklyn would become an early childhood educator for some other reasons, such as the goal of having a job that supposedly works well for women raising families.

Leo: I didn't start off down that path. I started off on the path as being...I wanted to be an architect. So I went to City College. Actually I want to go before City College, let's go back to high school. [*Leo's phrasing here, makes me wonder where the "beginning" of the "story" lies. Leo considers his high school days, when he would begin telling the story of his becoming a teacher. Why not earlier than that? What other experiences might have led to the subjects he later pursued? Like Jennifer above, he chooses a starting point that is related to college and career. And I notice, now, that I am paying*

attention to the concept of a beginning. I am uncertain whether this is because I am looking for a starting point, or if I want to analyze where the teachers themselves locate their starting point and why. But even as I consider the starting points that Leo and Jennifer have described, and as I begin to analyze them, I realize that these are just the moments they have chosen to tell me about, in this particular conversation, on this particular day, in response to my particular question. I acknowledge that I cannot even assume that these are the "beginnings" they acknowledge when or if they ever look back on their lives and revisit their decisions.] Before City College I had an older brother who had gotten into college, and my dad turns to me one day and says, if you want to go to college, you better get into one of these city universities because I got no money to pay for you to go to school. I said ok, thanks for telling me. So luckily I had some good SAT scores and some good averages and I got into City College and I wanted to be an architect, that was always my dream, so I started off in the architecture program and then realized that that was a six year program. I says you know what, I don't want to be in school for six years, that's a really long time to be in school. I says, what can I do that's going to be less than six years and I can still use what I've accrued so far, so I says well I can go into teaching math, because I've already taken a lot of science and math courses which are all core courses I could use that for that degree and that's fine and at that time my older brother was a teacher, yea, just started, in Park Slope. I says, ok, nothing wrong with that, I'll start teaching, I'll have the summers off, and I'm already, I can get into that program real easy because I have all the credits, I'm not wasting any credits, so I went into math. I've always loved math. I did all the math courses and all of course the education courses, all the fun stuff. I was in City College for three years, and for my last

year I switched to Staten Island College because I wanted to do all my student teaching and all my on-site learning and all that, I wanted to do that in either Brooklyn or Staten Island. I didn't want to do it up in Harlem because it was tough to travel. I lived in Bensonhurst at that time. Actually I lived in the same house I am living in now. I took over my parents' house after they passed away. I took over the house, refinished it and I am still there. So I transferred over to Richmond College and I did my student teaching at Wagner High School and I eventually got a job at Wagner High School because I had my foot in the door there but I didn't start at Wagner.

“From 1990-2010...The percentage of Italian-American Elementary and Secondary Education Service workers increased (15.5%) while the employable Italian-American population (8.3%) decreased” (Milione, 2015, p. 125) . *This seems to be the only available numerical data on Italian American teachers in the ranks of New York City educators. Over the past several decades, a greater percentage of Italian Americans entered education-related careers in New York City. I wonder why there was such an increase, and I imagine that gaining higher levels of education probably factored in. Yet despite my desire to find a broad reason for this increase, the interviews I conducted indicate a diversity of life experiences and reasons for pursuing the teaching career. Even as I write this, I acknowledge that the professed reasons for pursuing teaching, and the participants' descriptions of how their experiences unfolded, are not necessarily “what happened,” but are representative of the way they have chosen to articulate their experiences into a “story.” On a personal level, I find myself thrilled with the details of each conversation, viewing them as almost poetic descriptions of lives, all so very unique, so different from one another, (and yet I still ascribe themes to the transcripts that I see as threaded throughout).*

Marisa: I always say...my path to academia was the most circuitous route possible. *[Marisa writes that she always says this. I wonder where and how she finds herself talking about her path to academia. And is this a "story" she has crafted before and told to a variety of audiences? I had not thought to ask her about her use of the word "always" during the interview itself. I wonder how it could have influenced the remainder of our conversation. But I was present with a kind of readiness to listen—to be an audience, almost; I think now, about how this is an example of being in denial of one's role as a researcher, and the power one has in the moment of the interview, and now, in the sharing of specific excerpts and in writing about them.]* Teaching was something that, you know, I didn't want to do actually. When I was an undergraduate, they didn't have any teaching courses available, but I was kind of like, I don't want to be a teacher, but I didn't really know what I wanted to do either. I didn't have a really clear sense. I mean...this is more about me as an individual than about any of my professional leanings, but I've always had a hard time, like, seeing the future, like, seeing my future...*[It's interesting to me that Marisa refers to these two ideas as if they are exclusive of one another—"me as an individual" versus "my professional leanings." I'm excited by what I view as almost a revelation of sorts, indicating to me to some extent that I want her to make this discussion somewhat more "personal" rather than list a set of actions and results that literally led her to the classroom.]* I've written this poem, and you might have heard...it in the past, *[if I had heard it, I didn't remember it, and I don't now]* but there was this time I went to Berkeley, California, because I wanted to see where the Free Speech Movement was. And I was...eating on Telegraph Avenue, and having a salad with a mountain of sprouts on it, and fresh baked brown bread with thick,

fresh butter... These two girls behind me were like probably, I was like 27, maybe...no, no I was 29. And, and they were, like, probably in their early 20s, and they were like, "I know... exactly what I want, like, I wanna live on a cul-de-sac just like where I grew up. And you know, like, what I want my husband to be"...they were just were so clear about...how they wanted to have husbands and children that could play in the cul-de-sac and...they just knew that they wanted that. *[I wonder why Marisa described her meal with such vivid detail as she described this moment in Berkeley. Was the conversation she was overhearing contrasting with what should have been a beautiful and pleasant meal?]* And I was just, like, "Holy shit, listen to them articulate this vision," and I was, like, "Uh." So I was just like, "Well I'm not...like, I can't"...So, at the time that I was on that trip to California, that was a business, it was through the social work agency I worked for, they had sent me to San Diego to present at a conference. I had been working there for almost four years, and I was kind of...at the beginning I was really interested in the work, and I loved it, and I was pretty committed to...I thought I was going to work there for the rest of my life. And I don't know, maybe that's just the kind of person that I am, but I always get super excited in the beginning—I was a case manager and an outreach counselor. So what does that mean? It's a drop-in counseling, drop-in center for homeless and street involved youth, ages 13-23. So it's kids that are, pretty much, on the street often considered to be throw away youth...And so, you know, the kids come in and these are kids that have been through foster care and lots of dysfunctional family intervention programs. So, in some senses, our goal isn't always necessarily to get them housing immediately. I mean, it's not that easy anyway. But it's, our goal is to, like, develop a positive relationship with them, because some of them have never really had

that. So ...that was really like the primary goal. And then, you know, so often...we would make goals and contracts with the kids, like, "What are our goals going to be?" "Oh, I want to...I need to get a birth certificate or I need to, like, you know, do those things." And, but, for me, the whole idea of setting goals was...I still remember...I was like "I never set goals in my life,"...so it was very striking, you know? And then, um, and I guess what's probably going to come out of this interview a little bit is that I'm still... 'Cause I didn't really want to become a teacher but, in the end, I've been like, I'm always thinking about pedagogy and how it's done today and how it used to be done when I was a kid. Because I was a very quiet kid and I was often daydreaming, and I wasn't really very engaged, whereas...once I became a teacher and I started learning about all these current methodologies like group work and...Not that I'm about group work for everything, but like the Turn and Talks and all that stuff, working in pairs. Then I realized how helpful that was for the kids who would be tuning out or who was shy, and I just felt like, oh, what might have things been like if I had gone to school a little bit later, like, would I have been more engaged? 'Cause I was like, totally, like a space cadet, zoned out, and that's why I became a poet. *[I think Marisa was referring to her personal qualities when she mentioned "what's probably going to come out of this interview," and how she believes she grew and changed over time—through and because of her teaching career. I make a mental note to pay attention to this as I read through (and write through) additional excerpts of her transcript.]* So what happened was that then when I was working in social work, my grandparents pretty much all died...they started, like a little bit before I started working there, but then the last three all, like my grandmother was the big, big, big, big one. I think you hadn't met me yet. Yeah, you never met her.

Yeah, so that was like she died and that was just huge. It was a huge loss for me, and...I remember I stayed home from work for like a week. And they sent me...a beautiful thing of...like a bush, like a pink bush...you could plant it in the ground, and they were, like, "From the [Social Work Agency] family." I mean I had this...kind of like, unusual relationship with my grandmother...people could be like, "Well, why wasn't, why didn't I get married?" Well, I wasn't even thinking about it. When I was in my 20s and I was living in Brooklyn, I was always hopping on the subway, like, "I'm going to the Bronx. I'm going to go visit my grandma and my papa. Like, I'm 24, I'm not even thinking about getting married or anything like that." Like seriously. I was really happy to go hang out with them. And I was so psyched to be living in the city with them, and I could go take public transportation to visit them, like, how fucking cool was that? To visit them in the past...meant going in a car, which usually meant driving with my mother or father or something like that, you know? My grandparents, my mom's parents I was very close to and they...didn't come to my college graduation 'cause they were...my grandmother's diabetes was kind of out of control. But still...then they were getting better and yeah, so I'd just go hang out with them...it was just awesome...so anyway, I guess one of the things that I wanted was... Annamarie was my supervisor and she's a really good photographer and she would take pictures of the clients when they were about to age out of the program. These beautiful black and white photos. So I was asking her to do that of my grandma and me and it never came to fruition because...she couldn't take outside without a flash or something and then there were these gray days, but anyway, so once my grandparents passed away and it was kind of like where I started thinking about the work that I was doing in social work, and...First of all, I didn't think I was very good at

it, which is like so typical of me, right? But I was like, "I'm not really, um, a behaviorist"...and that's what a lot of the work there was around. And I was like, "I think I'm more interested in learning about things like history or culture." *[I almost lose my breath a bit as I think of how the loss of her grandmother might have initiated this kind of longing for an understanding of history and culture, and her own family's history and culture. I seem to be looking for causes and effects, which are arguably concepts embedded in linear views of time. Is there any way to "read" the interview transcripts and truly stray from the desire for traditional "story," regardless of how aware I am of my tendency to do so?]* And I had already begun reading all of these memoirs, um, about Italian American women like Louise DeSalvo's *Crazy in the Kitchen*, *Vertigo*. Maria Laurino's *Were You Always an Italian?* And all those memoirs...like, Louise DeSalvo's, I definitely saw myself in her memoirs the most...the unhappy child...walking around pouting. And I don't know which, I think it's in *Vertigo* where she was like, "Oh, I always knew that if I saw that kid I, that I knew was me"...She didn't reach out to that child but, um, I guess I could say that's a poem that I've been wanting to write for a long time. Because some of the clients that I would connect with more strongly were the quiet kids...those were the ones who I had more of a soft spot for. Or like I could read them and the way that they could read me...So anyway...I started reading these books, and I started going to these open mics, and at the Cornelia Street Cafe and that was kind of like the beginning of that. *[I find myself trying to create a timeline of emotions, even though I know that nothing in life is ever really capable of being clearly laid out on a line, especially not one's emotions and the decisions one makes based on them. And yet, the compulsion is still there—Marisa loses her*

grandmother, longs for history and culture, expands her reading of Italian American women's memoirs, and finds herself in front of a microphone reading her poetry—not to imply that she lands there by some mystical power that controls her of course, but I hear this part of the discussion as reflective of how unexpected the events in this part of her life were, after her grandmother passes away.] And that was when I decided to take a class at Brooklyn College...and that was in the spring of 2009, I took a class with Bob. I think it was, um, Americans in the 19th century in Italy, so it was all of the ex-pats like Henry James and Edith Wharton and Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Dean Howells and all the text that they had written about Italy in...so it was...a really super cool class. And I was like, "Oh, this is so neat, like, I'm learning so much about"...I mean, actually that class kind of turned into a class about religion. It was like, this really heightened awareness of how, as an American, we're really Puritans. Like you've heard Bob say that, like, "We're going to Italy and we are the puritans 'cause just by living here," you know? *[I know Bob as well. He was also my professor in graduate school and my supportive, brilliant mentor. As I write this, it is only a few weeks since he has passed away, and this was also the last time I saw Marisa. At the time of the interview, we did not know about his poor health, or the conversation may have had a different tone. But since I also know Bob, she has only to mention his name for a swirl of memories, experiences, his voice and things he has said, to well up inside me, which I know somehow affects my experience during this conversation, but it is difficult to say how, exactly. I don't see this as a weakness of our conversation as a research experience at all; I believe it somehow adds texture and strength to our conversation, because Marisa's description of experiences means more to me than it would to someone who had not*

known her mentor. But I know that "means more" is a phrase that needs to be challenged. It should perhaps say "means differently."] So that was...something...And I was like, "I want something more intellectual," right? So then I went into teaching...I remember talking to Bob and being like, "Oh, I, I revere this man. He's so smart, he's brilliant," and he was like this professor I had as an undergraduate, Khachig Tölölyan. And so I've always been drawn to that kind of brilliance and revered it, but I didn't see it in myself so I was like, "Well, this is something I kind of want to do, but I really struggle to do it, so I'm going to..." I literally flipped a coin...[I notice that Marisa did not start her "story" about her "pathway" to teaching with a description of flipping a coin. But she could have. I think of how she could share this aspect as a funny story at a dinner party, without all of the details she expresses before it, and how random her decision would seem.] I had applied to social work school at Hunter and then I had also applied to the Teaching Fellows Program. And then I just literally was like, "I'm going to do the Teaching Fellows Program." And it, it wasn't for the right reasons...I was kind of like, "Well, if I do the Teaching Fellows Program, I can go from making \$28,000 to like 46." And I could live by myself—because up until that point, I always had three roommates with their respective significant others and I was sick of that. And I was like, "I want to live by myself," and then I got place in Queens which...you could really afford to live by yourself in Queens at that time. And so that's kind of why I went for the teaching but I wasn't...This is like an important point to kind of like play with, and I don't know...but like there was something very cool about social work. It had this...cool façade, right, whereas teaching didn't...[This is an important point. Often, I've heard individuals attribute the low status of teaching to the amount of money it pays, but I know that social

work does not pay much more. In fact, it might even pay less, especially over time. Why, then, does teaching seem "less cool"?] I was like, "Well, um, I'll have my summers off and I can go travel to Italy and become fluent in Italian," like all the wrong reasons.

[Ultimately, at least in this particular telling, Marisa credits her interest in Italy and the Italian language with influencing her in the direction of teaching, as she envisions the teaching career as allowing for summers of travel. For Marisa, the pursuit of the teaching career seems to be interwoven with her interest in being Italian American and her interest in her Italian heritage, both of which I connect to her relationship with her grandmother. There is an Italian American women's literary tradition of writing about grandmothers as powerful figures, and I think of a poem by Rose Romano (2016) that is, in my view, exemplary of this phenomenon.]

My Grandmother Cooking

I think of my grandmother
cooking, pots of water,
steam rising like the smoke
of incense, sprinkling salt
from the cardboard cylinder
into her palms, a quick shush
into the water, fire leaping.
Take ye and eat.
The sacrament, the holy flesh
and blood, flesh of our
flesh, blood of our blood,
the life offering
of the Goddess—
Earth Mother—
Mother Earth.
She said mangia
and the world was as round
and strong as she was.
Breasts that hang heavily
having fed the children,
belly that hangs heavily,
having held the children—

the beginning of the world without end,
the beginning of my world,
my beginning.
She said to waste food
is a sin, and offered
food in all directions,
my cauldron—her spaghetti pot,
my wand—
her wooden spoon,
my center.
I think of all those little
clay statues of the dark
round women. I think of
witches stirring
cauldrons of steam. I
think of my grandmother
cooking. (Romano, 2016, p. 21)

My reading of this poem, here, within the pages where I have placed it: there is power in the grandmother, something supernatural, even as she performs traditional household duties, such as cooking. And it is not in spite of these behaviors but because of them that she has power, and she feeds it to us. She feeds herself to us. Marisa appears to view her grandmother as a source of power to her as well, and is propelled toward a teaching career with this power.

The poem below, by Robert Viscusi, offers a perspective on Italian Americans in particular jobs, and I include it here as part of my frame of reference:

Sonnet 1.9

they said to us since you are italian learn to sing
tell jokes dance and make beautiful clothes
unless you are willing to study latin

in which case we have a steady market for italian schoolteachers
italian lawyers italian priests and politicians
and now we have given them the police force to run in fifty cities

we considered ourselves a race of heroes
from julius Caesar to garibaldi
we would have rather been bandits than busdrivers

but in this country they offered a pension
a beach house a restaurant if you were willing to work that hard
so we studied our little lessons

shrinking into comfortable wooden yodelers on clocks
we still do find huge broken italian heroes covered with graffiti
(Robert Viscusi, 2013, p. 5).

I take it to mean that many Italian immigrants and their descendants did largely settle into the symbolic career of bus driver in order to gain the comforts that America had to offer—I know that there is more to this poem, but this aspect of it evokes some of the history and concepts that I grappled with in the literature review of this dissertation. Although Viscusi separates “schoolteachers” from members of the “police force” and “bus drivers,” it has been apparent to me that many individuals view schoolteachers and I would argue especially Italian American ones living in formerly Italian neighborhoods as comfortable recipients of “pension[s],” much like the bus driver and the police officer.

Robert: It probably started with my mom, who really was my elementary school teacher because the teachers that I had in elementary school, it was a parochial school, were not good teachers, and so I didn't understand most of what the work was, so my mom, I think for about seven years would work with me about every night, every night to understand pretty much what was going on in the classroom, so I think I got the bug from her. I did much better in school. The only problem was she couldn't help me in high school so I sort of suffered there. I'm gonna regress a little bit because not that many people know about this. I didn't do really well in high school. It wasn't because I was stupid, or dumb, or misbehaved, some people think I was. I was tracked in a lower track back then so I really didn't get that academic support that I needed so I think I graduated high school with maybe a 79 or 80 average, and no colleges accepted me. But then one of the people

at the high school said, "why don't you go to night school?" so I said "which one should I go to?" so I picked Brooklyn College just because it was in Brooklyn and that's when my father had the talk with me, he said you don't have to work and stuff, and in those days if you took 21 credits, I think it was, and you got an A average they would accept you as a matriculated student, and I just caught fire there. I think it was because I was freer and I got into the day school. I was so happy that I think I would have majored in anything. I was very lucky. My freshman year, I took the basic courses and luckily I took a Foundations of Education course with one of the deans, and she really was so good that I struck up a relationship with her and asked her a lot of things and she said well, try this course, and I did and I kept going because I really liked it. I liked it also because the students that were there at that time, were flower children, and we really had the same thought. We wanted to help people and so we sort of got along together and supported each other and got through the program. *[Robert ties his pursuit of teaching very closely to his pursuit of higher education, which was not an experience that he necessarily expected to take part in after being rejected from colleges. He also seems to root his interest in teaching in the times—the sixties—when he attended college, connecting the spirit of the time to his vocation of teaching, an act of helping others.]*

"There is, within every Italian American family, a story about why the family left Italy, why its members emigrated to the United States. And although many emigrated for political reasons, usually, at the heart of a family's emigration story, there is a story about food, or rather, about the lack of food, a story about devastating poverty, malnutrition, disease, starvation, famine. This leave-taking story is embedded in the history of the peasants of southern Italy, although it has not always been articulated and shared, for it so

often involves shame—the shame of poverty, mistreatment, despair.” (DeSalvo and Giunta, 2002, p. 9).

*I’ve included the above excerpt because of the way I think it influences the way I read Robert’s description of his father telling them that he did not have to work, that he could focus on doing well in school. Robert’s parents were the first generation born in the United States in his family, therefore having had parents who emigrated during the period of the Great Migration, when earning a living was prioritized. I think of how unique it must have been for a first generation Italian American male in the sixties to tell his adult son that he did not have to worry about money. Robert, too, seems to indicate how rare this was, and how special it was to him with his tone. I think of how, at some point, perhaps when a family became somewhat financially comfortable, it was viewed as worthwhile to allow a son to prioritize gaining an education, as most immigrants did not possess a very high level of education. Still, I think of the massive tome *Italoamericana: The Literature of the Great Migration, 1880-1943* (2014), an anthology of writing by Italian immigrants to the United States, and how it emphasizes the following:*

Millions arrived between 1880 and 1924...all these immigrants spoke some variety of Italian when they arrived, and most went on doing so for the rest of their lives. They read and wrote newspaper articles, poetry, plays, novels, essays, histories, and all in Italian. They supported a vast production in every branch of literature. If you can name five of their writers, consider yourself an expert.” (Viscusi, 2014, p. xv)

I think of how our typical narratives about immigration from this time period, especially from Southern Europe, uphold a view of a lack of literacy that we readily accept, and it is, of course, largely true. But there were also many exceptions to this, and a large number of writings

in various genres in Italian that the communities of immigrants supported. In connecting these two quotations to one another and to this particular excerpt from my conversation with Robert, I intend to interrupt traditional narratives, to challenge myself to be a bit unsure, to be more uncertain, as I think this research calls for, and which I think is most relevant to my later efforts to draw “non-conclusions.”

James: It’s not something I consciously planned to do. I grew up in a family that wasn’t, I would say that they didn’t push academics to the level that I later understood when I got to high school. Like, most of my Jewish friends had been programmed from birth to go to college...whereas, most, how do I put this, like the majority of friends I had growing up...*[I am surprised, as James states what Markowitz (1997) described in My Daughter, the Teacher. But she was referring to the difference between Jewish and Southern Italian immigrants and their attitudes toward their children in the early part of the twentieth century, while James is discussing the sixties and seventies.]* There was an issue between Jews, Hispanics, and Italians because that was the demographic of the neighborhood, so while I knew people who were Jewish, people who were Asian, and you know every now and then sprinkled in, it was mostly like the Italians and the Hispanics and they really didn't, higher education really wasn't a thing. *[“Some young Italian Americans, for lack of education, are still locked in a self-imposed ghetto atmosphere. Their resistance to education was documented in a 1990 study which revealed that one out of every five Italian American students in New York City does not complete high school. With a dropout rate of 21 percent, Italian Americans ranked third highest, behind blacks and Hispanics” (Mangione & Morreale, p. 455]* At the time, it was Hispanics and African Americans and Italians were the three highest at-risk populations in terms of going on to

higher education, and I could see that. The Italians would drop out and get jobs, like construction, in the family business, and the Hispanics, it was a similar path, but the Jews almost without exception would be going to college...so anyway I mean again even my family, my parents, they were upset at you if you failed any subject but they didn't necessarily want you...it was important that you finished high school, but I never heard my parents say you should go to college, or in any way prepare us for the reality of higher education. It just wasn't anything that they understood. It wasn't in their context. My own family, my sister graduated with a very business set, she took a commercial diploma, she could type...do steno and all that, she went on to work. She worked at Irving Trust bank and then she went on to get a job at CBS in the secretarial pool which she, she was there for 42 years and she ended up sort of at the executive level, try doing that now. She did go for a year to Katharine Gibbs which was a secretarial school but that was just to buff up the skill set she already had, but she wanted to get more experience at it, and also they have a lifetime placement service, which, if you lose your job, which is ironic, she was sort of forced into retirement over a year ago, and I just said to her, you should call Katharine Gibbs if you want to, and she said, well I'm 62, what am I going to do for three years until I can collect social security. She called them up and they said yes we do still have that service for our graduates, so obviously she didn't do it but, it was pretty, pretty amazing. The placement service. A relic of a more genteel time apparently. So that was my sister's way. My brother just joined the military, like he went from sort of being directionless in his life, selling weed on the street and doing all kinds of crazy stuff to doing a 180 and joining the Air Force. So he did this, and he was there for years, and me and my [other] brother were just basically expected to graduate

and go to work, doing whatever, just whatever legit work we could do. So I was, I mean I've been working since I'm 14, catering halls, restaurants, I was a security guard. I was, different kinds of jobs, I worked for an eyeglass company, but you know none of this really caught me as being anything anyone would want to do for a living, not that these aren't good jobs ...but I will say, Mr. M, who was my English teacher and taught me to write, and Mr. L both, my social studies teacher, both insisted that I go to college. *[Much like Robert, James seems to linger on his attainment of higher education as the key event that led him to the teaching career, as it was not a given that he would attend college.]*

That both me and my brother go to college but particularly they felt that that was the thing to do, and that if we did that, then our lives would be profoundly changed by it, and it turned out that mine was. My conception of college when I was in high school was that it was four more years of high school, and I had gone through four years of high school, and I can't explain this, the system has changed so much, but how authoritarian and hostile to individual expression that system was, it was very, very much like that, and what you have is, I mean I could rattle off a list of things that happened. It was very strict and very patriarchal so to speak and unappealing, and why would I want to subject myself to four more years of this and pay for it, but as it turns out I ended up going to Brooklyn College and that the time I went, I think they first instituted tuition around 1981, around the time I went there, but it was still 600 dollars a year or something and I could afford that out of my pocket, from the part time job that I worked, I always worked. And the first class I took was an 8:00 class on a Monday, and it was an English class, and it was with Dr. Merritt, James Merritt, and the first class he said, I hope all of you will go on to take your PhDs because the median age for professors is approaching

retirement age statistically, and by the time all of you, in the next five or six years you're all done with college and going into grad school, there are going to be a ton of jobs in higher education, look at me, he says, I have the life of leisure. I work three days a week, sometimes twice a week, I have three months off in the summer, he says, I live a gala life of parties and I have very little work, and I thought, listening to him, I could really do that, that would be a great job for me, just to become a professor. I sort of had that in the back of my mind but I took all the classes I was interested in. I figured I would, initially I figured I would major in science, because that was very stressed growing up. I was very interested in it. The schools stressed it, Kennedy, when he wanted, when he said, his declaration about going to the moon was shortly before I went into elementary school, so they pushed a lot of money in science and math initiatives. Math wasn't my greatest subject but I was very into science. All of us were. My brother was a very accomplished astronomer, and he was, I remember sitting with him at like three o'clock in the morning and you had to take notes on the position of the...because there were no computers, so you had to take notes on the position of the, you had to know how to read star charts and convert minutes into degrees in order to set the clock right on the telescope...I know I'm like losing the thread here, but like, there was a lot of that going on. People also, it's something, It's difficult to explain even to my students today, but the seriousness with which people took their hobbies, like when Mars moves into, this is an example, when Mars is in opposition to the Earth, which means that it is making its closest pass to the Earth, like in the Northern Hemisphere, it's not too often that you get to observe that, and I think it was 1977, my brother would wake me up at 3:00 in the morning to observe this event and would go out there and it was the middle of February and it was freezing like

when we still had winters that were substantial, and it wasn't like 40 degrees in the middle of February, like we really took it seriously, and we took everything seriously that we did, martial arts, to a level that I can't even explain to my students, like it would be professional level today. So anyway, I figured, at the time, science at the time, I was more amenable to it, but it was almost exclusively male, I mean there were no women in any of these classes. I mean there were no women doctors when I was growing up, no lawyers, no professionals. I didn't know anybody who was doing that, because they were so disincentivized from doing that, then I would go to my English class and there were like 26 girls and the gay guy who was usually my friend Paul, and me, so I said I need to just change my major, and I did. And I never looked back, and I'm aware of how shallow that sounds but I mean at the time, yea, I get to talk about English and then I get all these girls, and there's like no competition, so, this is my path so in other words, like completely random. My parents never, they just expected us to enter the world of work but, so, I you know, I went through college, I found I had a talent for English, I graduated magna cum laude, and was inspired by Dr. Merritt and other people, Ginsberg, and Ashbery, and like that, that I had the opportunity to study with. They took a liking to me and they said, you know you really should go on to develop this. So I went to NYU as a grad, and I could have gone to other places that were cheaper, but at the time, you know they had the best English faculty, no doubt, so I moved in. And as it turns out I went so I took my MA and I finished my master's thesis and I was going to do my PhD and in the middle of this situation, this was 1992, sounds about right, my MA was 1990, 89, and by 92 I was already in classes doing my thing, and I was teaching in NYU and they just called me in August, the very end of August, and I'm getting ready to go back to teaching

my classes there and I got a call from my boss. She said the funding is cut, and me and two other teachers there, all on our way to our PhDs, all working, we all lost our jobs. But they didn't tell us this even in the middle of the summer, they told us three days before we were going to start, so I'm like what the hell am I gonna do, so as it turns out, maybe 24 hours later, I get a call from Lincoln High, from Ms. Binanti who was the Italian chairman who replaced Ms. Weiss, the Jewish chairman, she called me up she said "I know you don't know me but I'm the chairman of English at Lincoln High," and she says, "yea, listen I need an English teacher" and she said, I still knew, there were a lot of my old teachers still there, I'm out of school maybe ten years or so at this point but I still knew the faculty that taught me who remembered me, and she said "I know you have a job but I'm looking for an English teacher. I don't know if you know anyone who is looking for a job, but I need a teacher." So I said, "well, it just so happens, I might be interested in taking that job." So she was thrilled. This is a pattern that continued throughout my life. I got, basically, I got my job at my current high school because even though I was working as a consultant at the time, my name just kept coming up at AP meetings, like Ms. Binanti and Ms. Vintner told Ms. Smith to hire me. "You gotta get this guy. He's gotta teach." What happened was I ended up taking that job at Lincoln because it guaranteed me a year's employment so I taught there, I taught there actually for two years. I was excessed after the first year and they picked me up again, and then the third year the first term I was subbing, the principal was, you know we were all, everyone who was hired together. Me and Mike, and Tom, and Ellen and Lisa, all of us who were hired, the principal found a way to get rid of all of us before giving us tenure. In particular he was pissed at me because we didn't get along, but anyway he made sure I get bounced in

the middle of the term from my job, but I immediately—boom!—it was the middle of January, picked up a job at Telecommunications.

4.3 Jennifer

I left my interview with Jennifer thinking about the impact of young children in a teacher’s life, specifically a mother’s life. I met Jennifer at her parents’ home in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, where she would be spending the day. Jennifer did not have access to childcare, and we agreed that we would be able to speak to one another if her two daughters, both under four years old, could interact with their grandmother. They seemed very interested in hovering near us, interjecting with questions and comments about the DVD they were watching and the snacks they wanted to eat. At one point, Lilly lifted the little porcelain pitcher of half and half that had accompanied the coffee Jennifer had made for me to her lips and sipped, to our amusement. Their comments became embedded in our conversation to such an extent that they are in the interview transcription. Rather than view this environment as a distraction, I appreciated how it seemed to exemplify what many, if not most, of Jennifer’s interactions are like right now, as she raises her daughters. As a mother of two young children myself, every act of being *somewhere else* other than with them feels somehow like an emotional transgression, especially if I have arranged for an unnecessary social gathering.

Walking up third avenue after this interview, glancing into windows of what is a shop and restaurant-laden boulevard of sorts, I wondered whether my overarching research focus on teachers’ pathways to teaching was possibly stopping short of what is of equal or even greater interest to me—how women teachers, especially those from my own Italian heritage, with its assortment of cultural stereotypes—actually grappled with motherhood and the professional life, and how relevant their own interpretations of what it “means” or might “mean” to successfully

perform the job of a teacher is to the decisions they make about continuing to work or stay home with their children.

At the beginning of the interview, Jennifer indicated that she would probably “do better” if I asked questions in order to “bring out” her narrative. Of course, when I hear this, I know that there is no narrative within her just waiting to be evoked by an interviewer—me. I assume that I can attribute her request to a case of nerves, or perhaps even a desire to please me by responding to exactly what I want to know. In a review of the interview transcription, most of my questions were asked as I brought the interview back into “focus,” either after minor interruptions from the children or after I had interjected a comment relating my experiences to hers, which were not followed seamlessly by her continued discussion. The fact that I had to do this was troubling to me because it seemed to indicate that there was a general direction in which I wanted the interview to go. It mainly consisted of returning to the chronological nature of the experiences that Jennifer was sharing.

I began the interview with the question: *Where would you describe the beginning of your journey to becoming a teacher?* Even as I asked this, I was aware of how I was ascribing a kind of shape to her experiences, as the question practically insists on a traditional, chronological story. Jennifer began with her first career, but as the conversation continued, we spoke about her college experiences, her family’s expectations, her peers’ accomplishments, her current impressions of the teaching career, and her thoughts about the future.

After rereading Jennifer’s interview transcription, I remembered a very specific moment from my childhood. As a fifth grader in a Bensonhurst public elementary school, at which most of the seasoned teachers were descendants of Jewish immigrants, with some of the newer

teachers being descendants of Italian immigrants, I was always in what we informally called the “top class.” As a result of that status, we were assigned the strongest teachers, according to what I had heard, and now, looking back, I would still describe them as excellent.

Once, my fifth grade teacher, a stern woman named Mrs. Wynshaw who managed to somehow emphasize our creative writing while drilling us in phonics and mathematics (leading to whole class publications of books of poetry and newspapers!), told us that she had been a straight A student her whole life. I have a distinct memory of being so impressed by this; my amazement was followed by a curiosity about how it could be, then, that all she had done was become a teacher. I wish I could trace the roots of this odd perspective, as I see it now. I had not been born into a family of individuals with top professional careers, nor did they emphasize that I should seek out any of those careers. In fact, teachers were always spoken of with reverence in my home. Still, I had somehow managed to pick up what seems to be a commonly held belief in the United States—that high academic achievement should typically result in a more prestigious career than that of teaching. I cannot trace when this mentality dissipated, but as my earlier narrative writing might indicate, I later pursued teaching, also with a very high academic record, and in a decade in which educated women had many more opportunities than when my fifth grade teacher had most likely begun her career.

Jennifer’s comments about her high-achieving friends *not* becoming teachers were powerful as well, and her characterization of the career paths they did choose as “nontraditional women’s” roles.

I would characterize Jennifer’s own very specific interests that led to her pursuit of teacher certification, even though this was not her original intent, as very different from the historical narratives I read, which typically focused on the teaching position as a vocation for

individuals trying to step out of the working class, often as second generation Americans.

Despite the fact that Jennifer is describing her experiences at a very different historical period than the narratives I shared in the literature review, I believe that her experiences, as expressed in the particular moment of our conversation, are noteworthy and would possibly surprise many individuals who cling to certain narratives about Italian Americans in teaching, especially women, even today at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Jennifer began describing her pathway to teaching by naming the career she held prior to teaching as her beginning of sorts. She traced her intellectual pursuits which led to early childhood special education certification, after having been a musical therapist, and her first teaching job. She only referred to her high school classmates and her parents and brother when I specifically asked about them. I am tempted to draw the conclusion that she did not view her journey to becoming a teacher as having anything specifically to do with her family roots, but again, we were speaking under a very specific set of circumstances, with Jennifer aiming to support my research and respond in the way that she thought would be most useful to me, I can only assume. Still, there are interesting indications of Jennifer not necessarily consciously considering her Italian American heritage in any way relevant to her chosen career. Despite the fact that I mentioned the topic of my study, Jennifer never mentioned her Italian heritage. I do not believe that she sees herself as an Italian American woman from Brooklyn whose career choice is in any way derived from a family’s history and set of circumstances. Still, when I asked about the possibility of her mother’s influence, as her mother is a retired science teacher, she ultimately discussed her father’s feelings about her selected work, and how pleased he was when she finally took on the teaching job, which he apparently saw as a viable career for her.

It was interesting to see how Jennifer discussed her identity as a musical therapist in the present tense as she described how the field of musical therapy, including the program she graduated from, has expanded. I heard this and reread it again as the voice of an individual with a firm intellectual and ideological commitment to the content of her work. Still, she quickly followed up with comments about how she would not necessarily choose these careers again because of the low salary and intense workload. And this discussion is undergirded with a reference to having children, and how leaving them to report to a job needs to be financially worthwhile for her as their mother, while their father works two jobs so that she can be with the children.

I shut off the recorder after she seemed to express that she did not want me to record her discussion of one of her current projects. I honored her request but was struck by that final line when I reread the transcript—“this has nothing to do with teaching.” This statement seems to follow in the trajectory of the entire interview, with her career path being an almost enclosed avenue that she was hesitant to connect to the past or any other factor. But in looking back at the transcript, I am tempted to conjecture that her decision to take on part-time, self-directed work unrelated to teaching while caring for her children simultaneously, has everything to do with the career path that she left.

Poetic Representation

A music therapist

I wanted to know more

Windows started to open

I wanted to know more

I taught a thousand kids

impulse control

waiting your turn

figure out what's going on

wait

use your voice

be aware of your body

feel, use your body

Self- teaching

a lot of books

research

I found a new interest

reading books to kids

doing art

building

Thrown into the fire

the hardest class in the school

I stayed until 5

I stayed until 6

until my desk was clear

my to-dos were done

FROM NARRATED "PATHWAYS" TO PASTICHE

I

wrote reports

wrote IEPs

made lesson plans

made teacher surveys

cleaned the classroom

Now I lead Tinkergarten

being outdoors

kids playing outside—the value!

I used to take the kids

out on the roof in Brooklyn

where their playground was

unless it was under 32 degrees

then, I fought with the nurse

Let us go outside!

In Tennessee

Reggio Emilia

The kids could just explore

One day it was raining

warm, May in the

South

they put on raincoats, useless,

went swimming in the puddles

bugs crawling

a beetle crawling up his leg!

But in Brooklyn

it's too cold

As a teacher in a school you have very little control

My friends in high school

were really, really smart

did well

marketing

consulting

engineering

nontraditional women's jobs

my mom was a teacher

my dad an engineer

I never wanted to be an engineer

he hated his job, always

he's

never happy, with so many things

never happy

never wanted me to go into music

when I went into teaching he was glad I finally got around to it

If I could do it all again

I don't know
it's constant
education and advocacy
low paying
And to work so hard

I'm ok with fighting
just saying no
not accepting the salary
hire someone else
what pays the most?
there's never a job that's utopia
people suck
you might as well get paid

I wish I had learned how to sing

I attempted to create poetic versions of Jennifer's words as a method of exploring my interpretations of the interview. At the beginning of my first longer “poem,” presented below, based on Jennifer's words, I began where she began—with her role as a musical therapist, and then included aspects of her work as an early childhood teacher. I can see that I attempted to follow a traditional storyline, as I think Jennifer had attempted to tell, based on my questioning and what she most likely thought were my expectations. I used an indentation and list of responsibilities of Jennifer's several times throughout the poem to attempt to convey what seemed to be important to her and also, in most cases, labor intensive aspects of her work. I also attempted to contrast these aspects with what she herself described as a positive, pleasurable teaching experience when she was a graduate student in the South and had the opportunity to

experience playing with children outside in the rain during their school day. Looking back at this longer poem, I seem bent on sharing the topics and events that she shared with me in a very similar order, until the last line of the poem, where she states: “I wish I had learned how to sing.”

Although this was not how we ended our conversation at all, and was in fact related to her description of her musical experiences as a young person prior to studying musical therapy and becoming part of that profession, I clung to the line from the moment I heard it. Her longing for a different experience in this line seemed to be different from her almost wishing that she had chosen a more lucrative career path. There was a sense of longing there, that I read into it at least, that I did not hear at any other point of the interview. In a sense, I think I ended the poem with this line to attempt to turn everything upside down—despite the labor intensive careers and her disapproval of the low salaries available for people in her career fields, I thought that, in a sense, when the lines were placed in the specific order in which I placed them, that I was demonstrating her almost dancing away from it all, gazing longingly in the distance, wishing she had learned how to sing.

But this was of course all conjured by me, implemented by my rearrangement of lines, after seeming to attempt to stick so closely to the chronological order of our original conversation. Perhaps I did not want the ending to be about the sheer frustration of negative coworkers and low salaries, but that is how the conversation actually did come to a close. Of course, there are other factors—the time we had allotted for the interview, the rest of our responsibilities that had to be taken care of. Still, there was a sense that we had completed our dissertation-related conversation when she told me that I could (and I read into that, “should”) turn off the recorder, as what she was continuing to discuss had “nothing to do with teaching.”

I attempted to create a shorter poetic representation of her words, presented below, again drawing on what I experienced or what I would identify as most powerful and essential in the conversation—the number of children she taught, the focus on the voice and the body. Jumping to the final line, again, “I wish I had learned how to sing,” I think of her teaching autistic children to use their voices in song, to use their bodies, to relate to the world around them, and how she wished she had learned to use her voice as a more professional singer. In some ways, this shorter poem might even interrogate her own focus on looking for the job that pays the most, as if I really do not believe that she feels that way, after she shares her intense commitment to children experiencing learning outdoors. Or maybe I do not *want* to believe it. Is it so farfetched to come to a career such as teaching because one is passionate about the work of a teacher, but to ultimately reject it and any similarly low paying work seemingly because after gaining the role of mother to two children, that kind of work outside the home simply isn’t worth it?

Windows open
Be aware

Thrown into the fire
Figure out what’s going on

Never happy
Be aware of your body

I wish I had learned how to sing
Use your body

You might as well get paid
Use your voice

4.4 Passions for Specific Topics and Practices

James: ...English...was an easy subject for me, I loved English. I didn't have the training, the fanatical preparation that a lot of my friends' parents put them through, where it was taken for granted, you're going to college, possibly the best college you can go to, and it was expected that they would make something of their lives. My parents never, they just expected us to enter the world of work but...I went through college, I found I had a talent for English, I graduated magna cum laude, and was inspired by Dr. Merritt and other people, Ginsberg, and Ashbery, and like that, that I had the opportunity to study with. They took a liking to me and they said, you know you really should go on to develop this. So I went to NYU as a grad, and I could have gone to other places that were cheaper, but at the time, you know they had the best English faculty, no doubt, so I moved in...I could always write and read, I was always ahead of my, like in the 6th grade I tested at grade 12 in terms of reading, so obviously that wasn't a problem for me. I learned to read, my parents gave me that. Both of them were heavy readers, they were constantly reading, and to be an adult in my house meant that you were holding a book or a newspaper, so when I was growing up, I said I need to hold a book or a newspaper because at the end of the day when they finished everything, they would sit on the couch and they would read. All the adults, everyone was reading, and, you know, so, my parents loved to read, my mother even now she's got dementia, she's still reading, so I loved that too. I really took to that.

James' description of the reading in his home, and how he interpreted it, namely tied it to the experience of being an adult, was quite striking. In contrast to many of the narratives I described in the literature review, where Italian American men and women were viewed

as mentally unstable or as retreating from their families when they displayed interest in reading—what was viewed as an odd isolation of the self. I don’t attribute this difference to time period at all, as the ages of the individuals who shared these stories range over several decades, but include James’ generation. As many other parts of this dissertation seem to demonstrate, a major constant in all of my readings and interpretations is the prevalence of contrast—how some experiences appear to be so common, and yet they can be juxtaposed with very opposite experiences, challenging any attempts to locate a traditional or widespread behavior or ideology. I read James’ experience, as told here in the specific moment of our conversation, as partly attributing his love for English to the emphasis on reading he observed in his home, as well as his later success in operating in the behaviors of English—being “good” at it. But almost in contrast to his description of these influences in possibly being factors on his path to becoming an English teacher were his descriptions of his more social experiences at Brooklyn College—his discovery of how many women were studying English and his enjoyment of being one of the only men in that environment, with “no competition.” Again, it is nearly impossible to trace a linear path, or even a winding path, as the conversation seems to demonstrate a number of converging and sometimes contradictory factors.

Jennifer: I didn't know I had like this being outdoors and the value of kids playing outside—I never really understood until I had them. Even as a teacher, I knew how important it was for the kids to get outside each day for recess. We would go out on the roof because that’s where their playground was. I saw their behavior if we didn’t get to go outside. I fought with the nurse to let us go outside even when it was freezing, because when it was under 32 degrees they didn’t let us go outside. But in Tennessee

where I got my degree I was able to be in schools that were like different approaches and one was Reggio Emilia. The outside part was just part of it, and the kids could just explore and the day I was there it was raining, and it was warm, it was like May, in the South, and they would put on their raincoats which were useless and went outside and went swimming in puddles and had literal bugs crawling, and one boy wanted me to look at his beetle that was like crawling up and I was like aghhhh! But just letting, allowing that, and then coming home to Brooklyn to a school that had the typical mindset, it's raining we're not going outside, it's too cold, we're not going outside. It is so important to take them outside, and schools don't accept that enough.

Marisa: I started reading these books, and I started going to these open mics, and at the Cornelia Street Cafe and that was kind of like the beginning of that. And that was when I decided to take a class at Brooklyn College...and that was in the spring of 2009, I took a class with Bob. I think it was, um, Americans in the 19th century in Italy, so it was all of the ex-pats like Henry James and Edith Wharton and Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Dean Howells and all the text that they had written about Italy in...so it was...a really super cool class. And I was like, "Oh, this is so neat, like, I'm learning so much about"...I mean, actually that class kind of turned into a class about religion. It was like, this really heightened awareness of how, as an American, we're really Puritans. Like you've heard Bob say that, like, "We're going to Italy and we are the puritans 'cause just by living here," you know? So that was...something...And I was like, "I want something more intellectual," right? So then I went into teaching...So here I am, I'm teaching eighth grade and we have to teach a unit on short stories which means we're going

to read a whole bunch of short stories, and this was before the Common Core. So we're going to read a whole bunch of short stories and then we're going to write original short stories. And so like I...so it was like my first time reading O. Henry or Mona Gardner or all these other short story writers. And, and then we had to write one and so I wrote a short story as a model and I could tell you that probably my short story was not a real short story. But I tried to do it and it was a really creative piece. Like I mean at the time I was living in a building in Queens and I was always going to visit my grandparents in the Bronx. So the premise of this story was about a young woman who was a student in a middle school who would go home and, to her apartment building in Queens and then go visit Mrs. Hostess who was like this older woman living in the building. And she would like have her windows closed and, you know, it was kind of really warm in her apartment, but...having...been hanging out with my grandparents for so long, I was used to these things, right? So in the end, like the story is just like, Mrs. Hostess, who ends up passing away and then she's like, she's the heiress of like the Twinkie company. And so the character of the story wins a lifetime supply of Twinkies or something like that. I don't remember really what happened within the story but I wrote it so that I would read it aloud to my students and it became fun. What I did was, I put all my students in the story. You know, so I wrote it with a few of them in mind. But then as I read it to my other classes, then...it was like a way of learning to get them to be on my side...like when they heard their name in the story, they got excited. So...at this time, I was teaching eighth grade for the first time, writing a short story for the first time. I was going to open mics. It was like

a confluence of things of working with words, right, and then writing that really made me a writer. Like it was like a couple of different things. I think that's...I picked English because I was literally pre-med, which I hate, even saying that I was. I fucking hate that because every year I would teach at the middle school and I'd ask my smartest classes, my lowest classes, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" "I want to be a doctor or a lawyer." And I just feel like every kid is programmed to think like that...like if the kid has any sense of success, that's what they want to be. And I see that as a reflection of our society and maybe a little bit why I'm tired of teaching Writing 111 because I'm always competing with the pre-med kids who are like, "This is my elective." It's like, "No, this isn't your elective." Like "This is everything...you want to go to med school, fuck taking those weeding out classes." "Take this class, do really well, and then go do some post-baccalaureate program." But they don't, they don't listen to me.

So...anyway... I...majored in English. *[A thread seems to run through these excerpts from my conversation with Marisa, namely a deep commitment to literature and writing. Her descriptions throughout eventually lead to her drawing a sort of conclusion about the relationship that teaching had to her development as a writer. Again, I find myself questioning my research question—to what extent could more of my discussions have resembled Marisa's, had I asked a different question—but then I also attribute the depth of Marisa's discussion of her own experience to simply who she is as a distinct person. I realize how complicated this study is—and any study—as I question my own research questions, wondering how and why I react to my interpretation of*

Marisa's relationship to teaching and writing with such an interest that I want to upend or at least reexamine the entire study, starting from the research questions. These "reflexivities of discomfort" emphasize, for me, that the way a particular participant reacts to a particular question at a particular time is of great interest (Pillow, 2003, p. 187). Each participant's articulated experiences are necessarily influenced by multiple factors, including social, cultural, historical, discursive, and material influences. My other participants may not have been inclined to think like Marisa or discuss their lives the way she did, but again, I could also speculate that they could have spoken differently with different questions. But I partly desired to see which directions a conversation could go if initiated by a question about "becoming" a teacher.] When I first started reading at IAWA...my voice was cracking. I was so, like, unsure. But what happened in teaching was that I got an opportunity to explore my theatrical side. And I really liked it and so I was hamming it up for years in the classroom. I know those kids...remember me from the way I...like when I read *Bridge to Terabithia*...so after teaching eighth grade for three years, I was like, "I'm going to sixth grade. I'm done. I can't even like, I can't even handle it." So they gave me sixth grade and I wasn't so excited. I had read *Bridge to Terabithia* when I was in third grade. On my own...So it was like bizarre because I remember...Leslie dies. Like, "Oh, that's weird. I'm not really processing"...I still remember the pool of blankness, like, "What does this mean?" And then I just really didn't get it. And but then when I taught sixth grade, we talked about those things with the students. Like together in a group. So, so it was just kind of, it was just really cool and then the

story of the end is so beautiful and I kind of reenacted it, like, pretty much...I mean...I love that book. I've never even seen the movie and I never probably will. But it was like, because there's that scene where Leslie dies, right? Where she takes the rope and swings across the creek and then falls in. I taught it and I was teaching it with my ESL class and I didn't think they understood so I got up on my desk. And I was like, "Tarzan!" Like, "Whoo!" You know...I had this teacher when I was in high school, and he got up on his desk once and I will never forget it. Like as I'm telling you right now, I can... You know, and then, so I enacted it so they could understand what was happening, and then at the end of that story, the boy Jess brings his little sister, I don't remember her name, to Terabithia, which is like the pine forest where he would go with Leslie. Was like their special place where they were friends. And so he brings his sister to Terabithia and he crowns her the new queen of the Terabithians. And I read it like...I have the book. We could go get it. I could read it to you. It's like fucking awesome. *"There is, in the culture of the United States, no general recognition that a tradition of Italian American women's literature exists."* (DeSalvo and Giunta, 2002, p. 13)

"It is extremely difficult for an Italian/American woman to find a location from which she has the authority to write...However...Italian/American women do write, inscribing into American literature images of themselves that negate the stereotype of female passivity and validate woman as agents and subjects...The model for these empowered women is often the writer's illiterate peasant grandmother." (Mannino, 2000, p. 97). *I have already written about Marisa's*

relationship with her grandmother, and I find myself reiterating the connections I can make between the power she may derive from whatever it is that her grandmother represents for her (I can speculate about the strength one can find in a strong understanding of cultural heritage, foundations of sorts, something solid to base one’s own life on), and her understandings of how she became a writer, with so many aspects of her life converging—the English classroom, the poetry readings—she becomes a “writer-teacher” of sorts. Mannino’s writing about Italian American women writers over the past couple of decades feels relevant to me as I read into Marisa’s “story” a sense of the struggle to become, to make oneself into a writer. “...My relatives considered writing some kind of secret vice and never became openly curious about my uncle’s literary life. No one ever discovered what his writings were about; certainly not my Aunt Giovanna, whose reading ability did not extend beyond cooking recipes” (Mangione, p. 140).

Jennifer: I did a lot of my own self-study, and then just like windows started to open where I was learning a lot about approaches and learning about autism which was the biggest population I was working with, and then there was the Greenspan approach, this guy Stanley Greenspan that I was really, really interested in, basically I started to get really, really interested in different approaches and wondering like how the autistic mind was interpreting information and just wanted to know more.

4.5 Leo

I met Leo at a local pizzeria-restaurant before the dinner crowd would typically arrive, knowing that it would be quiet. As we began to set up the interview in the empty restaurant, the song “Maybe” (1958) by The Chantels played softly over the speakers. I remembered singing the song on a microphone in a crowded Italian restaurant almost twenty years ago when my father’s doo-wop and rock ‘n’ roll group was performing there. To some degree, there was a sense of nostalgia in the pizzeria, or perhaps I was searching for some familiar feelings. Leo arrived wearing a baseball cap, and sat across from me. He is in his late sixties, a retired secondary mathematics teacher, who lives in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. Our conversation began in much the same way as my conversation with Jennifer, with me asking for a description of a path or journey to the teaching career. Although I shared brief stories of my own teaching experiences, including my own hiring process, throughout the interview in cases where my own experiences related to the topics he was discussing, he did not react in any significant way, and seemed to insist on continuing from the very specific point at which he left off. I wondered if he really did see his path to teaching and his teaching career as a kind of straight line that could be traced; perhaps, alternatively, he was trying hard not to lose his train of thought. After a while, I wondered if he thought I was being almost rude or careless in attempting to have more of a conversation than to just listen, and I spoke less.

As I walked up third avenue in Bay Ridge, as I did after speaking with Jennifer, I said goodbye as Leo jumped into his small car—was it a Fiat?—I recall being almost captivated by the way he shared the importance of visual art in both his and his father’s lives. He did not seem aware of this similarity, and I did not point it out, but it was a parallel that I found myself being so excited to draw and then to later write about.

In the case of creating what is probably too lengthy of a poetic representation, presented below, of Leo's words, I did not start off the way I did in writing Jennifer's. Instead of beginning with his statement that he started off wanting to be an architect, not a teacher, I focused on his words about his home life, his identity as first generation American who grew up in a somewhat crowded (of course this is subjective) multigenerational home in which his mother took care of the home while his father worked with wood, with his hands. Although the next section of the "poem" cites his father explaining that he could not afford to pay for Leo's tuition, and that he had better gain entry to one of the schools within the city university system, and comes after Leo's explanation of his home life, in the actual conversation, Leo shared what his father said without first sharing how his father made his living, and supported an entire household, or that they were first generation American. My "poem" seemingly attempts to draw this conclusion and point out this trajectory.

I'm first generation

typical home

grandparents living with us

seven people in the house

mom never worked

dad was a cabinet maker

woodworker

my dad says if you want to go to college

you better get into one of these city schools

I got no money to pay for you to go to school

I wanted to be an architect

that was always my dream
but I says,
I don't want to be in school for six years
I can go into teaching math
nothing wrong with that
summers off
I've always loved math

my father taught me
do something where you don't
have to use your hands
my entire life
I work with my hands
it's a lot of work
do something where
you don't use your hands
become a teacher
you'll always have a job

he made all the cabinets
in my home
the kitchen cabinets
I still have things
he made furniture
two pieces of furniture
that I still have
80 or 90 years old now

all refinished

gorgeous

they will come with me

wherever I go

he was a craftsman

I could never do that

kind of work

he was a craftsman

I lived in Bensonhurst at the time

the same house I am in now

my parents' house

they passed away

I refinished it

I'm still there

dewey junior high school was a war zone

I taught bilingual math in Spanish

I knew very little Spanish

we spoke italian at home

in 1976 teachers were a dime a dozen

jobs evaporated

Bushwick in 1977 was like Vietnam

I got an appointment

teaching math

you know how rough it was?
on parent teacher night
we would get in our cars
nobody would leave
until everybody's car started
make sure nobody took
your battery
gave you a flat
I bought my own battery once
for fifteen dollars
from one of these little shops
I knew my battery.
they still have the best pastry shop
in Brooklyn

you had to fill out a paper
with all of your information
one of the boxes said
what's your heritage
I check Hispanic
I said
let's see what happens
they gave me my appointment
staten island
susan wagner high school
it was like a mayonnaise sandwich
white bread with mayonnaise.

six, seven years

I'm exceded

a junior high school in

Huguenot

brand new

real ritzy

nice

cool

I hated it

people would kill for this job!

I was dumbing myself down

no SATs, no Regents math

the parents had

Mercedes Benzes

they knew I was a photographer

I shot bar mitzvahs and

bat mitvahs

made sure they got a 90

so boring

so I went skiing by myself

in Colorado, 1990

a couple of months

ski bumming on sabbatical

then started teaching in Bensonhurst

high school math
with most of the students
I met there
I've kept lifelong connections
lifelong friendships
the subject you teach is arbitrary
one student of mine
she's a guidance counselor
still in the neighborhood
I saw her shopping on
18th avenue
the roots are still there

in the mid-nineties
I took a trip to Calabria
to visit my roots
to see what family
was still left
the town is a two bit town
doesn't have a traffic light
a few blocks
real tiny
I grab my camera
I'm walking
I walk into this bar
I have a coffee
order something to eat

a little pastry
I have a local paper
on the table
I'm reading
the guy comes from behind
the counter
goes who are you?
you talk like us but I don't know your face
you talk like us but I don't know your face
I'm ozzys son
I remember your father
I gotta show you something
walks me down the street
you see that house?
you see that door on that house?
your father put that
door in
your father built that door
and he put that door
in that house
we still have stuff that
your father made in
this town
I haven't been back since

I shared some of the parts of our conversation that puzzled me, setting them against one another in the "poem." I was unsure of why he would abandon the "dream" of becoming an architect, simply because it would take two years longer than the traditional four year degree.

Perhaps it had something to do with circumstances at home, but Leo did not go into this further. I also wondered what came first in Leo’s life—his father supporting the idea of becoming a teacher, since his brother had already become a teacher, or Leo’s abandonment of his dream to become an architect.

Again, I was powerfully struck by Leo’s discussion of his father’s rejection of manual work, even as Leo described the items that his father had built. He spoke with reverence, with seemingly strong awareness that these were works of art—that his father was a “craftsman,” as he put it, and that, despite the attainment of his college education, he “could never do that.”

In rereading and attempting to revise my lengthy poetic representation, I was frustrated with my own need to share some of Leo’s experiences at specific schools where he taught. Perhaps I was clinging again to the idea of a chronological path, and Leo’s own storytelling technique—possibly employed here because he was aiming to fulfill my research needs as he interpreted them—supported that tendency as well.

Interestingly, Leo shared anecdotes about his experiences related to the Spanish language and Hispanic heritage, having the actual experience of teaching bilingual math as an individual who could speak Italian, which has its similarities, and then ultimately gaining access to a job he coveted at a nearby high school in Staten Island, where he lived at the time, by claiming to be of Hispanic origin on a sheet he filled out for the DOE.

As I continued assembling the poetic attempt, I focused again on his interactions with specific cultural groups. He seemed to view Susan Wagner High School with humor, referring to it as “a mayonnaise sandwich” because of its lack of diversity, and then describing how he became embedded in many of his Jewish students’ lives by working as a photographer for many of their bar mitzvahs. When we discuss the high school that he ultimately retired from, a large

high school in Bensonhurst, which was heavily Italian American during the years that he taught there, he refers to the lifelong relationships formed, noting that "the roots are still there." The final stanza of the long poetic representation focuses on a trip he took to his father's hometown in Calabria, Italy. Leo shared this anecdote with me as an afterthought, practically, as we were wrapping up the conversation.

When I decided to create a much shorter poem, shared below, to try to "strip away" so much of the text and focus on the strongest images, I found myself focusing entirely on the visual artist aspect of both Leo's and his father's lives. I titled it "The Photographer," to indicate Leo's own status as an artist, then used his speech about his father being a "craftsman," and that he "could never do that." But even as he emphasizes his father's craft and the long term impact it obviously had on the small town in Calabria, the conversation ends with his admission: "I haven't been back since." I am not sure why this matters so much to me, but it surprises me to hear him say this.

The Photographer

I'm first generation

my father taught me

do something where you don't

have to use your hands

he made all the cabinets in my home

two pieces of furniture

80 or 90 years old

a craftsman

I could never do that

in the mid-nineties

I took a trip to Calabria

to see what family

was still left

this guy comes from behind the counter

who are you?

you talk like us but I don't know your face

you see that house?

you see that door on that house?

your father put that door in that house

we still have stuff your father made in this town

I haven't been back since

After creating the shorter poem, and thinking about the relationship between Leo's own art and his father's, I almost had trouble remembering the original focus of my research. Perhaps the images of strolling around Italy photographing the wooden doors one's father had made decades ago somehow seemed so far removed from the teaching career, and yet were practically the only part of my conversation with Leo that I wanted to focus on and remember. And yet Leo's "story" about his "path" to teaching including numerous details about getting hired, getting excessed, traveling to different schools, walking his resume into schools, utilizing personal connections to gain employment. Leo didn't spend much time talking about *why* he became a teacher, but rather *how* the process unfolded, throughout his entire career. Perhaps there is more

to his reasons for becoming a teacher that he did not share, whether consciously or unconsciously, and instead focused on the more concrete steps he took to ultimately retire from the New York City Department of Education.

I notice again my strong desire or expectation to find roots in one's family life, cultural life, and other early and foundational experiences that could have influenced one's decision to teach. I think perhaps this is why I cling to Leo's references to his father. As I write these notes, I finally realize that Leo's earlier dream to become an architect also reflected a desire to create, to build, to design, but in a different way than his father did. I wonder if I have attempted to interpret Leo's path to teaching as one that ran parallel to his stronger interests in art, which finally manifested for him through photography.

I write this poetic representation as well:

Bensonhurst

I took over my parents' house when they passed away

*The high school was heavily Italian
Lots of Italian American teachers, students
Lifelong connections
Lifelong friendships*

The subject you teach is arbitrary

*One student of mine is
A guidance counselor now
On 20th avenue or 19th avenue
Sixty-ninth street
One of those schools
I saw her shopping on 18th avenue
The roots are still there*

He says you see that house? You see that door on that house? Your father put that door in.

*We still have stuff that your father made
In this town*

4.6 Views of the Conditions of the Teaching Career

Jennifer: So I really only had one job before I had kids. So I called the school that I was at as a music therapist and they hired me right away. So I was thrown into the fire, I had the hardest class in the school, severe special ed, it was all self-contained, it was a very severe class, all twelve kids had IEPs that were very needy, I had two teachers' assistants, really I found the hardest part of teaching, the adults that I dealt with, and having to lead teachers' assistants that are sometimes amazing and I learn from them, sometimes really bad and I had to be uncomfortably there, in charge of them. I'm responsible for the kids, it's my classroom. I also learned to not deal with my administration because my classroom is my bubble, my family, and I need to control it my way. The administration was completely not supportive. I don't know, every school is different, every classroom is different, but kids are affected by the animosity in the classroom, so keeping it positive and making the best of it every day, but having to teach the kids, it's a hard job. Being pregnant in a preschool setting is great, though. I was very supported and very taken care of. So my journey into teaching really was to learn more about the kids and then I got this other degree... When Lilly was four months old, I started working as a SEIT [Special Education Itinerant Teacher], so there are part time opportunities with a special ed degree, which is great for being a mom. I mean, you choose, a lot of teachers that I know go back to work. I could not work in the capacity that I was working as a teacher, because I gave it my all, I stayed until 5:00. I never took work home but I stayed till sometimes 6:00, because I knew that when I went home I could not look at it, but I would stay until my desk was clear, until all my to-dos were done, you know, you have to write reports, write IEPs, and make lesson plans, make teacher surveys, like everything, clean

the classroom, teachers' assistants help of course but there is so much. I knew I couldn't work to the capacity, give it my all, if I came home, balancing work and being a mom is hard but great, like you really appreciate being home when you're at work, when you get to leave work. You appreciate going to work when its enjoyable, being out of the house, getting a cup of coffee, even commuting, it's like you have no kids with you. *[I really hear Jennifer here, as I myself attempt to accomplish what feels impossible, with work, school, and small children. This discussion rails against any beliefs in the teaching life being especially compatible with raising children.]* "All of the young women I met possessed the extraordinary idealism that goes hand in hand with college years. Many held onto the notion that life could be divided into phases, with one's identity easily merging into different roles without tension, doubt, or regret...I felt frustrated that I couldn't convey...how few good jobs exist outside of independent work that allow women to leave the workforce for many years and then return" (Laurino, pp. 66-67)

Perhaps teaching is one of those careers that one can return to. I included this quotation here because of its relationship with Jennifer's comments above, in which she makes it clear that she has no idealism about the integration of one's life as a mother with a demanding career such as an early childhood teacher. If she did possess this idealism in the past, it surely seems to have dissipated now. I think of my own life situation, and how I continue to work in a full time capacity as a faculty member, though teaching mostly online this semester, while also writing my dissertation, all after having given birth to my daughter, my second child. I suppose I, too, brushed off any idealism that I could possibly have had, to acknowledge the importance of time, and how a maternity leave, which doesn't actually exist in the United States, could throw off my career trajectory permanently.

Marisa: ...Once I got into the schools, I was like, "This is kind of everything that I don't believe in, like this authoritarian teacher-centered classroom." But it was also the way that it was set up...they want to make sure that you could handle the classroom and then you're on your own, you know? And that was really tough but I didn't want to give up. Like I know that there are people in that school who thought that I wasn't going to last more than a week. Because I was just like seemingly, um, I don't know, very soft or sweet, or not tough enough or who knows, you know? ...and I ended up making it eight years which is pretty good...the first three years I taught eighth grade...the first year...was kind of horrible. It was really horrible...but I think I learned so much, like even now it's like talking about it with Linda...we were talking about the microaggressions that students in our classes now give to us as women, right? ...There were times where...I remember this teacher Mrs. Richards, and she was such a good teacher and she was so calm. And she...came into my room to do special ed support. And I remember this kid coming over and just throwing a paper at me and I just picked it up and then...I was going to keep going and Mrs. Richards was like, "Oh, no you don't"...she intervened and it kind of like brought to my attention... you really learn so much in teaching because it's about how do you get along with people—can you get along with them? And for somebody who's as indirect as me, or has experienced a lot of indirectness, it was like a lot of hands-on training on learning to be direct. And it took years to get better at it...but that first year...what happened in that classroom was I had to grow with those students. I started to grow with them...I started to become a little...I learned to become creative and that's going to sound really weird because I'm a poet now and I'm a creative writer.

I'm a poet now and I'm a creative writer.

James: I got exceded from that job because, which I found incredible, because it was really just a tough school, the kids were really violent, heavy violence, gang violence, a school in Sunset Park, and I got tired of it. How many years can you get... For instance in my first year at Lincoln, I got a letter from the principal, I'm in class teaching and a student knocks on my door and hands me a letter. I open it up, there are two pieces of paper in it, one is a letter from the principal telling me what an astounding job I've done, another is my excess letter. So that happened a couple of times, and I'm like, I'm kind of done with it, again I'm done, I'm going to go, I'm going to figure out what I'm going to do, because I had to put my studies on hold, I'm going to take some time which ended up just doing consulting work, for IT at the time, so I worked for CBS and I worked for a number of places the big ones were CBS and later on Standard and Poor's where I worked for almost a year. And you know I had my own office and a lot of perks. If I waltzed in ten minutes late nobody cared, if I left an hour early nobody cared, if I took two hours for lunch, nobody cared, that was when my father was ill, and they said just take a laptop and be with your family just come to the meeting on Friday. So, people talk about business but they treated me pretty well and honestly, had I been teaching, and this was when my father was ill, he was in the hospital for six weeks, there's no way that I could have been there for my family. That's how human the profession is. It's the opposite. You have way more flexibility in business particularly today where you can do all of your work from home, then you ever could being bound to have to go to a place and teach a whole bunch of students who could care less. *[Although expressed in a different way, this part of the interview reminds me of Jennifer's explanation of how teaching was not compatible with the demands of motherhood. I become interested here, in the topic of*

"pathways" away from teaching, which are just as telling as pathways to teaching. In many ways, this is my own "story."] A lot of people don't know that public school teachers only get paid for ten months out of the year, they stretch it over twelve, so the illusion is that we have our summers off, but well I'm not working but I'm not getting paid, so how is that, I guess that is a form of time off, but it's not like I'm getting two months of paid vacation. I already earned that money, so that nuance completely escapes most people. My mission also has changed, like when I first started teaching, in my mind, my model was that I wanted the kids that I was teaching to experience college, to do what I did, in other words like to go from not really knowing what they wanted to do to a position where there was a place for them and at least give that a shot even if they didn't have the transformative experience that I have. Now however because of economic factors and changes in the society we're a middle school functionally, not a high school, that K-8 is elementary, and we're middle school, college is high school, and maybe grad school is college now. But the curve is certainly in that direction, but because that's happened now, the majority of our kids, I think we have something like 85% going to college, it's really high. That's no longer my mission. Now my mission has become sort of triage, like what are the things you need to know and sort of what can you expect in the demanding environment of higher education as it is currently constituted, and I'm at somewhat of a disadvantage because I don't know, I'm not certain how it's constituted now. And neither, and I'm going to put this on the record, would I be allowed to leave my building on a professional day and just go to a college for instance to your fine institution, and shadow a kid for a day and see what it's like to be a college kid now, because my model is like 35 years old now, my professors were like smoking in the

classroom, one of my professors was in the Hitler youth, which if you couldn't have guessed by the fact that he is the only person that I've ever seen use a cigarette holder and a monocle, and speak with a German accent, if that doesn't clue you in, you know, anyway, these are the experiences that I had. But my mission has changed and now I'm trying to make sure that the kids are somewhat prepared for that environment which I could still, again, I know enough people who teach in college who sort of have that as their main thing, I don't think the standards are the same as they were in those days, but I'm pretty sure you still need to read, write, and spell and you know all of the other basics that now need to be pushed to the forefront. I must admit that's less appealing to me as I get older because again with the exception of my honors class where I can have mature sort of, high level discussions about literature, like I could teach a book like *Cuckoo's Nest* which has very adult themes without apology or explanation to a class like that in a way that my general classes, it's less of an option, yea, just looking at the students they are more childlike, they've had a long developmental period, the period of independence which used to be between 5 and 8 in my generation and in my case was four, is now 12 or something, that, of any single factor like when I tried to inhabit the world of the Depression, the war years, and the economic boom, that was my parents' formative experience, and then I look at mine, which was the sexual revolution, social consciousness, domination of the left in politics, or leftist ideology in politics which informed sort of all of our antiauthoritarian events we had in the school, the sort of contempt we had of the older generation, that has been replaced, but like my father was working in a factory when he was 9, I had my first job when I was 14. I have kids now that are 17, they don't know their own street address. Again it's easy, for me to fall into

the prejudice that every generation has about the generation that comes after it and enforce the inadequacy of that generation. My father used to say you're 14 and you don't have a job, I had a job when I was 9. What kind of lazy person are you? Or easy for me to say you're 18 and you haven't had a job? But then again, our society is still capitalistic, and still requires you to have a work ethic, and show up on time, and maybe all of this will change by the time this gets published. But again these are the basic things, and I don't think it's a prejudice when, like, what they have gained as a generation, this is sort of my experience, I won't extrapolate into the rest of society necessarily completely but they are more childlike than we are, we were, and I said that in a good way, they've had a longer developmental period so they are less mature but also they're more sensitive, and while many people see that as negative, I don't see that as a negative, because when you become desensitized to what's going on around you, nothing ever gets fixed. Now maybe because kids who have been overparented are sort of entering the workplace we're having real discussions about the work place: why *can't* I just take a nap between 1 and 3 as long as I'm productive? Why can't I just work from my home? On one level I tend to look at that, I can look at that purely as a creature of my own time and say who are you that we should do that? But on the other hand there is also part of me that also says hell yea, why not, why aren't we adapting our work place culture, to meet the needs of the workers, right, because we're supposed to be radicalizing workers in order to achieve benefits and more rights, you know, commensurate with how productive they are which is by statistical survey, we're up 300% productivity in America but our wages are declining steadily over the same amount of time. So anyway this is it, you know, I think I've done some good, just to put a point

on it.. The more interesting question is why stay? Look how many can't hack it. Some need to be appreciated. I survived because I didn't need to be. I don't need applause at the end of a lesson. I think that's what gets you through your career. Thinking of it as your job that you're going to do your best at, but you can't be attached to the outcome. You can't expect that they're going to appreciate you for this. Because if you are attached to the outcome, then you're going to leave. Because there is very little in it in the long haul in terms of praise for you.

4.7 Parents' Views

Jennifer: I actually found an assignment from when I was in kindergarten or in grade school that "when I grow up I want to be a kindergarten teacher" and I never remembered wanting to be that which might have been my mom's influence. I think I wanted it for different reasons than when I went into being a preschool teacher now. And then my brother never intended on being a teacher but I think he saw the benefits of it, of being able to be a math teacher and the necessity to have smart people being math teachers in high needs schools. But I know we love our mom so I'm sure we were influenced by her, we love our dad too but never wanted to be an engineer. He also always hated his job, like always. He was never happy, he's never happy with so many things. So my husband went to Cooper Union for college which is an engineering school, dropped out, full scholarship, very prestigious school. He dropped out after one year because he did his internships or whatever with different engineering firms and he saw how suicidal people were, about their jobs, and it was depressing and they fought and they yelled and it was negative energy, and he was like I don't want to be in this environment for the rest of my life, and then he went to Queens College for music. I don't know if it made my dad an

angrier person, being in an angry environment all day long, and now the schools and the field are primarily foreign people, primarily, so it's a very different environment. My mom supported anything and everything I ever wanted to do. We were raised really to be good in school and we always were and she just trusted us, as long as we were safe in doing it and doing it well, it didn't matter what we were doing. My dad never wanted me to go into music, and never understood what I was doing, ever, and always, he needs other peoples' approval for things to be ok, once someone else said something about music therapy then it was ok, and then once I went into teaching he was like, oh I'm glad you finally like got around to it.

Marisa: My parents were, like I think they were happy because for them it was, um, I had, I had had so many jobs that were not regular or dependent, dependable. So like they were happy that I was going into this system where I was going to be a certain step and it was a system that they knew. Like my mom was a teacher in New York City too so she knew what these things meant. So I think overall they were pretty pleased and my parents were cool...they were never like, "Oh, why don't you like do a reverse commute into Long Island? Or like, so you could get more money"...they knew though that I was also aspiring to go to Brooklyn College eventually and so-You know. But they also knew that as hard as it was sometimes to teach in Corona it was also really meaningful to me...for multiple reasons.

Leo: Before City College I had an older brother who had gotten into college, and my dad turns to me one day and says, if you want to go to college, you better get into one of these city universities because I got no money to pay for you to go to school. I said ok, thanks for telling me...We spoke Italian at home. I'm first generation. I had the typical

home. My grandparents lived with us. My parents...my home had seven people in the house. My mom never worked. My dad was a cabinet maker. He did woodworking, cabinetmaking, he came here and he got a job with New York Telephone doing the same type of work, carpentry, cabinetmaking, all that stuff like that, that's what he did...I remember my dad always proud, both of my sons are teachers, and he says, you know I couldn't, my father, he always taught me, he said I want you to do something where you don't have to use your hands, he says, my entire life, I work with my hands, he says, I love it, I enjoy doing it, but its work, it's a lot of work. I want you to do something where you don't use your hands. Become a teacher, I remember his words to me, you become a teacher, you'll always have a job, you don't have to worry about getting fired or anything, you'll always have a job. That was his doctrine, his philosophy. He said I don't want you to work with your hands like I'm working. He made all the cabinets in my home, the kitchen cabinets, I still have things...he made furniture. He made two pieces of furniture that I still have. I had them refinished because they're probably 80 or 90 years all now, they're all refinished, and they're gorgeous pieces of furniture, and like I would never get rid of them, they will come with me wherever I go, I mean he was a craftsman, I could never do that kind of work, he was a craftsman.

Leo's description of his father's desire to have him work in a different capacity than he did, which was as a carpenter, makes me think of poems that have resonated with me in the past by Italian American writers of the same generation. The speakers in both poems below desire to work with their hands on an activity that an older relative clearly does well, but in Fagiani's (2014) "Stone Walls," his father does not show him how to use the tools, which seems to propel him toward the other option his father presents—learning to earn his living using his "brain." In

Lanzillotto's (2013) "My Grandmother's Hands," there is a longing that I can almost hear to be able to create as her grandmother does. I don't know for sure if this longing was so strong in Leo's experience, admiring his father's craft, but I consider the image of Leo moving into his parents' house in Bensonhurst, literally repossessing his family's piece of a "Little Italy," living among the crafts, teaching nearby at a largely Italian American high school, and I develop a sense of sadness and loss at the seemingly binary choice facing many individuals whose parents and grandparents were not formally educated but who were skilled artisans at their own particular craft. In considering what teaching is and has represented to many, I think also now, of what it was not, and how it took the place of fine artisanship in many individuals' lives, including the Italian American teacher I spoke to here. In looking for specific factors that could have influenced and pushed one toward a path to teaching, I now think also of the loss, of what one could have been moving away from, and how teaching was viewed at times as superior to professions in which one mainly worked with one's hands.

Robert Viscusi, one of my professors in the graduate program in English at Brooklyn College, described how Italians he met in Italy would, decades ago, wear a pen cap in their shirt pocket to try to convey an image of themselves as literate.

“Stone Walls”

People say it's in Dad's blood
—an Italian thing—his ability to place
each stone precisely where it belongs.
Dad's proud of his work. He lets me
hand him rocks, but he's the only one allowed
to use hammer and chisel to shape and fit them.
He's a neatnik and his basement workbench
has every manner of gadget and tool,
though he doesn't show me how to use them.
I struggle to saw, hammer, and screw together
a wooden cage for my pet serpents.

Most escape through the chicken-wire mesh.
When I say I'd rather play with my friends
than work in the yard, Dad repeats: *A man
either earns his bread with his brain or his back.*
Mom finds a snake in the kitchen,
and says she's going to crown me.
I love to read; maybe I'll try my brain (Fagiani, 2014, p. 84)

From "My Grandmother's Hands"

This is my hand.
This is my grandmother's hand.
My grandmother grew up holding crops.
I grew up holding crap, things that never lasted.
This is the difference between us...
Nonna! Show my hands to make the little circles!
Show my hands to flick *cavateel* so they jump
like grasshoppers off fingertips!
Guarda! Queste mani che scompaiono! Guarda!
Watch! The disappearing hands! Watch!
(Lanzillotto, 2013, pp. 29-30)

Robert: I remember my father telling me, and I can give you more of a background, he says, you know, Robert, I don't want you to work. All I want to see is that you study and work hard and I will never question anything that you do. My father was a manual laborer who worked in a school fixing boilers and cleaning them, and then later on he worked in the DOE warehouse in Queens basically doing the same thing. My mom worked in the federal government as an acc...not an accountant but someone, like a clerk, so those kinds of jobs...I only saw my father cry once, but once, when I passed my oral exams, my dissertation defense, and I went home to tell him, he was crying like a baby. He never verbalized how proud he was of me, but I knew he was. He just broke down because he knew what I had achieved. My mother was very proud and they came to my graduation and at Fordham in the Bronx and I'll tell you it was, as long as I live I will never forget the greeting I got after, you know, we went up on the stage individually

because there weren't that many of us and when he saw that...Every day I wear a leather belt. I'm wearing one today, you can't see it, that's in memory of my father. He rarely hit me but the discipline that he and my mom instilled in me was probably the reason why I was successful and they never asked me for anything in return, they just asked me to work hard and that's what you do. A lot of it was communicated like below the level, below the surface, the fact that he allowed me to go to college without working showed he believed in me. Everybody worked. I'm the first one in my entire family to go to college even to this day. Most of the guys I grew up with, played basketball, football, baseball with, didn't go to college except for one. I was sort of atypical, me and this other guy John. The culture, the culture of the house is extremely important and the interesting thing about it is that it's understood, it's below the surface, and the expectations are there but it's not verbalized, and they'll do anything to move any obstacle so you can be successful. I think my parents were successful because they knew what hard work was and they, you know, you wanted to please them. My mom could teach. My mom could teach. My father couldn't sign his name or read, he couldn't read. But I remember one day I came home from college and I had a desk down in the basement, I didn't ask for it, it was there when I came home. I think he took it for me, illegally took it from the warehouse, I didn't ask for it. My first day of teaching, I remember coming home and telling him it's really difficult, really difficult, I need a mimeo machine dad, I could make my own...and the next day, the mimeo machine! Yea, anything to remove the barriers. Because he knew, they knew your heart was in it. They knew it. When I was getting my doctorate I used to go there because I felt comfortable there in the house and I'd be working and my father would be sitting there in his easy

chair just watching me and you could see, he was watching, like he was watching to, [imitates his father staring at him with his hand under his chin]. So, you can't forget those days. My mother would make coff...Ma, make me coffee! I was a very fortunate man...My father, they never said, oh my son's got a PhD. Nobody even knew. I think it's the way we're brought up. But I wouldn't change it for the world. I wish today the kids would have that work ethic. I think that what I was brought up to do, I'm still doing now, working hard, studying, it's, it becomes who you are.

"Like most Italian immigrants, my family came into the English language with the mental habit of people who have lived forever in a dialect. Their speech marked them geographically and tribally. It assigned them a low place...Dialect was what they had spoken in Italy, a clear and indelible marker of their position in the Italian social universe. Their English would long have a similar impact on them. Varying degrees of Italian accent, of Broken English, and of lower-class urban patois accompany the portraits of Italians in vaudeville (Jimmy Durante, Chico Marx), in the movies (The Godfather, Goodfellas), and on television (The Sopranos)." (Viscusi, 2006, pp. 26-27) I include this quotation here to attempt to illustrate why I think some Italian American parents would emphasize education over all else, but also the following quotation, which provides another perspective. *"...While there was a respect for learning—a phrase my grandmother used to recite can be loosely translated as 'What you carry in your head, you don't have to carry on your back'—there was a competing sense of regard and esteem for the practical applications of one's talents. My family, for example, is still suspicious about how I make a living. My father, whom I adore, would still secretly like to see me go to law school, like my brother. Being tenured and promoted to full*

professor by forty did not impress. They think because I now teach two days a week, I'm working part-time and should waitress on the other days." (Barecca, 2002, p. xxiii)

"Once Italian Americans grew accustomed to living in English, the memories of many unhappy contradictions went underground. Most Italian Americans nowadays have forgotten their origins as orphans of massive political catastrophes." (Viscusi, 2006, p. xii.)

James: I grew up in a family that wasn't, I would say that they didn't push academics to the level that I later understood when I got to high school. I mean again even my family, my parents, they were upset at you if you failed any subject but they didn't necessarily want you...it was important that you finished high school, but I never heard my parents say you should go to college, or in any way prepare us for the reality of higher education. It just wasn't anything that they understood. It wasn't in their context. I learned to read, my parents gave me that. Both of them were heavy readers, they were constantly reading, and to be an adult in my house meant that you were holding a book or a newspaper, so when I was growing up, I said I need to hold a book or a newspaper because at the end of the day when they finished everything, they would sit on the couch and they would read. All the adults, everyone was reading, and, you know, so, my parents loved to read, my mother even now she's got dementia, she's still reading, so I loved that too. I really took to that. And also writing, writing was something that my mother said, when she was a girl, she was into writing, so she felt that we, she taught us to read and write basically before we went to school, and so I think also my mother, I didn't even know this until I guess I must have been thirty before I found this out but my mother in her senior year of college, she went back to Italy, excuse me, in her senior year

of high school, I think they went for six months. They hadn't been back in a long time so they took a boat, and this must have been right after the war, and they went back to see the family and she left in I think March, but what she did was she gave, she did all of the work in order to graduate in her senior year, she got from all of her teachers because they knew she was going to go, and she gave it all to a friend to submit, and when she came back, they said oh, no, we never got that, so her friend who had ended up graduating just basically took all of her work, so she never got a high school diploma. So I said "did you ever go back?", she said, "no, I was too embarrassed you know like to go back you know and so she never technically got a high school diploma, my mother, but anyway, I think that in some way fueled her desire to make sure that her children were at least literate and understood what was going on.

4.8 Peers' Views of Teaching

Jennifer: I went to an all girls' Catholic school, it's a high school, and I only know of one other who is actually an Italian teacher, teaches Italian, she grew up speaking Italian, so it was like natural for her to go onto teaching it. She's the only teacher. The girls that I was friends with in high school were the cream of the crop, like the highest averages, grades, the valedictorian and stuff, so they were really, really smart and did well like in terms of working. One's in marketing, one is in consulting, she went to Stern Business school, one was engineering, did Engineers for America or something like that, she went to other parts of the world, she went to Nepal for five years. I think my other friend is also an engineer and does construction site management, but nontraditional women's jobs. It was all women so you would think that a lot of them would be teachers since

education is primarily a women's field, but I am sure a lot of people became teachers but not that I'm friends with. *I hear Jennifer saying that her very high achieving friends chose careers that were "better" than teaching, or not traditional women's careers. And I hear it below, too, in Maria Mazziotti Gillan's (2007) poem, which is why I included it here. And, although Jennifer is of a younger generation than Gillan, if I permit myself the assumption that Gillan's poem is autobiographical, teaching is still described as a lesser career. This doesn't make sense, though, as Jennifer clearly reveres the career and knows how labor intensive it is. But for Gillan, the career is tied into motherhood and viewed as a limited role. And perhaps it is, for some, and not for others. I think about what this could depend on, how I can possibly tease out the concepts embedded within what I have just written.*

"I was supposed to marry. Everyone did. But when I graduated from high school I knew what I didn't want: to be married and pregnant like some of my girlfriends, right before they graduated, or right after. I didn't want to go to William Paterson College as my mother wished, to be a kindergarten teacher so I could be at home when my children had finished their days at school. 'I want to go to college, be a writer,' I announced, not listening when my accountant cousin said this was the most impractical ambition he'd ever heard of..." (Gillan, 2007, pp. 19-20)

Marisa: Like it had this, you know, like at the social work agency too, like it, it had this cool façade, right, whereas teaching didn't and there were a lot of people who were my friends and who were kind of like, "Why are you going into teaching?" Jeanine was like, "Go into social work, Marisa, go into social work," just on the basis of the fact that I think it has a cooler connotation, right? And then Sara Weiss was the same way. She was

like, "I can't believe you're becoming a teacher." And-Jeanine is a friend from undergrad and Sara was a friend that I made working in Brooklyn. We were working in the same used clothing store. But she was from the Boston area, so like had a similar per- and she worked in like Sotheby's or something so she was like an artist kind of person.

Robert: Most of the guys I grew up with, played basketball, football, baseball with, didn't go to college except for one. I was sort of atypical, me and this other guy John.

4.9 Teachers' "Other" Identities

Jennifer: I grew up playing instruments and I knew that I really liked music but I didn't know how to go into...So I grew up playing the flute, and when I knew I wanted to study music in high school I started taking piano, and what I wish I did take, I wish I learned how to sing. I sing at church now which is really my only musical outlet but it's income which is great, and I lead Tinkergarten now.

Leo: [The parents] knew I was a photographer, word gets around, I'm shooting bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs for all the students, because they're like oh Mr. Rinaldi's a photographer, we'll hire him to do the party...I was teaching at the college for several years, at night school, I was teaching photography for about five years. I was teaching photography in adult ed. They had a beautiful art department. I'm teaching photography, I had a great photo lab, and I'm teaching them how to use a camera, how to develop pictures.

Marisa: I was like, totally, like a space cadet zoned out, and that’s why I became a poet. It took years to get better at [teaching]...I learned to become creative and that’s gonna sound really weird because I’m a poet now and I’m a creative writer.

I’m interested in the many ways that the teachers’ professed interests, all related to art of some sort—performance, visual, literary—are also somehow tied in with their teaching lives. Or at least I want to find these connections. In a sense, it’s clear that Jennifer’s interest in music was one of the foundations of her interest in music therapy, which she describes as her starting point in gaining an interest in early childhood special education. Marisa explains how she became a writer alongside and through her teaching experiences. Leo’s evening teaching position in adult education at the community college where he teaches photography led to his connection to the principal of the school where he would eventually spend most of his career and retire from. And yet I don’t want to spend time making superficial tracings, from point A to point B. I’m interested, I suppose, in their own identities as artists as being inseparable from their identities as teachers.

Leo: Ironically, funnily, most of the students that I had met there, I’ve kept lifelong connections, lifelong friendships. The subject you teach is arbitrary, you know, it could be any subject, I mean I loved the math, don’t get me wrong, I loved the math, but I was teaching science for a while it was no big deal, it didn’t make a difference, the camaraderie with your staff, that you work with, and the students that you work with, it made it a pleasure to go into work. There were lots of good times. One student of mine, we kept in touch through the years, and now she got back to teaching and now she’s a guidance counselor at the school on 20th avenue and 69th street. I don’t know if it’s that

one or the one on 19th or 20th but one of those schools and she's a guidance counselor there and she's still in the neighborhood. I saw her about a year ago shopping on 18th avenue, and you know, the roots are still there.

4.10 Marisa

*my grandfather's grandfather was a fisherman in Italy
a deep sea diver
he could catch the fish but
couldn't bring the fish home
had to leave the fish with the noble people
who owned the land*

I've always had a hard time seeing my future

Living in Brooklyn
I was always hopping on the subway
going to the Bronx
to visit my grandma and papa
not thinking about getting married
or anything

I chose Teaching Fellows
so I could afford
to live by myself
in Queens
summers off
travel to Italy
become fluent in Italian

I know those kids
remember me
reading *Bridge to Terabithia*
I got up on my desk
reenacted the scene where Leslie dies
takes the rope
swings across the creek
falls in

I traveled several hours north of New York City to a small town where Marisa lives on the second floor of an old house, surrounded by old things, as she likes to think of them. She

seems to collect vintage dishware, the kind our grandmothers used, and I found myself photographing a framed image of a vase of flowers that her grandmother actually embroidered. I perched at the lower edge of her bed, as she lied back on her white bed in the late evening. She had indicated that this was where she felt the most comfortable conducting the interview. Her cat stretched out alongside us. Marisa spoke in what I immediately perceived and described to myself as a long monologue. Although I hesitantly punctuated the discussion with short questions, such as “What did your parents think about your becoming a teacher?” I almost felt as if she did not need me to be there, as if she already somehow knew this monologue. Of course, I knew intellectually that this was not true—that she was only lying back, speaking about this topic, because I was there, asking questions. But this is how I think I heard it, in a state of quiet awe, as if watching a performance that’s played before—that already knows the lines, the pauses, the stutters, how she will break off and then continue with another thread of her thoughts.

From the beginning of our conversation, Marisa rejects the notion of any type of straight “path” but still manages to speak in the confines of it, as she calls her path to teaching “the most circuitous route possible.” In the longer poetic representation shared below, I notice that once again, in most of the poem, I tried to convey a kind of traditional story, as Marisa, too, seemed to try to convey, though she often went off on very descriptive tangents to illustrate and emphasize points.

I realize, as I reflect on my poetic representations, that I “heard” Marisa discuss her grandparents for much of the interview and I selected these portions of her speech to include in the poem. I did not try to consciously and deliberately decide how her grandfather’s story of his time in Italy as a deep sea diver for the noble people factored into her decision to become a

teacher. I still do not have a ready answer for that. But perhaps I saw a shimmer of connection to her eventual interest in Italian American memoirs and her interest in traveling to Italy and learning to speak fluent Italian. She stated outright that she chose teaching over social work school because of the summers off that would allow her to work on her Italian interest.

Strikingly, it seems that one of the key points she made was that teaching middle school actually brought out her creativity, in both writing and interacting with others, and that teaching was what ultimately pushed her toward pursuing a doctorate in English and Creative Writing, for which she left her middle school teaching position. If Marisa and I could rewrite my overarching research question, it would perhaps be more along the lines of “What role did teaching play in your life, in becoming who you are now?” In this interview, as in the ones before it, why and how they became teachers almost becomes the least interesting part of the whole interview, and instead, other, more interesting and striking topics become more of my focus, and of theirs too, in some of the cases.

Unlike some of the others, Marisa readily refers to her Italian American heritage and interests, but this may be, as she indicates, because she already possesses a deep interest in Italian American writing.

I chose to end both poetic representations—the shorter one below and the longer one above—with a part of the interview that she told me with such a joy, almost jumping from the bed to grab her copy of *Bridge to Terabithia* to perform the role for me, and then deciding against it. There is something noteworthy about her eagerness to reenact the young character’s

swinging to her death across a creek, and how she grounds her belief that her students remember her in this very act.

In the shorter poetic representation, I again attempted to ground my interpretations in Marisa’s familial and cultural roots, inserting her words about her grandfather’s grandfather, a deep sea diver who “could catch the fish but couldn’t bring the fish home / had to leave the fish with the noble people who owned the land.” Although she is referring to a time period of many decades ago, it is interesting that she brings this story into the interview, one of the first moments in her life where she was struck so deeply, and was so confused by, what she learned about Italy. To some degree, it is a statement about the value of one’s work—for whom does one work—and rather does lend itself to a conversation about working as a teacher.

In the shorter poem, I perhaps highlighted in a clearer way the connections between Marisa’s “hard time seeing [her] future,” and the story from *Bridge to Terabithia*. But I didn’t notice this right away. In rereading the poem, I think of Marisa enacting the character whose very risky jump leads to her disappearance and death, while Marisa herself has trouble seeing her own future. Still, as I also attempted to highlight in the poems, Marisa continues to refer to herself as a poet and creative writer, and that this is something that she has “become.” I think perhaps Marisa really did “rewrite” the research focus in a way, primarily by showing me what her journey to becoming a poet and writer entailed, with teaching playing a role along the way.

my grandmother died

*they sent me a beautiful pink bush
that you could plant in the ground*

I saw myself in her

*The unhappy child
Walking around pouting*

I'll have my summers off

*I can travel to Italy
Become fluent in Italian*

I was teaching eighth grade

*Writing a short story
Going to open mics*

A confluence of things
Of working with words

Writing that really made me a writer

4.11 Teaching Successes

This section groups responses that seemed to express these teachers' thoughts about where and how they had been most successful. In some cases, I had asked a participant a question about whether and how they had felt successful, based on what they were already narrating, and in other cases, the participant began speaking of a certain feeling, a remembering of a success, such as in Marisa's case.

Marisa: The following year I think of my AP who would come and like, fucking [*I definitely debated whether or not I should remove the profanities from the transcript, but I never really intended to, enjoying the memory of Marisa's passion as she spoke*] come into our classrooms and be checking to see if we had this, this and that. You know? She, she got awarded like a school of her own so she was leaving. So she left I was like, "Woo

hoo!" And I just was like, I took carte blanche and I was like, "I'm gonna do whatever I want." So I taught seventh graders about the Harlem Renaissance and maybe I showed them things about I shouldn't have shown them about lynchings and things like that. But, if nobody's ever...I'm like, it doesn't matter if nobody's ever complained because, it could've sca- ... it doesn't matter. I did what I did but the kids were like ... they loved it 'cause I did what, a lot of the things my professor did and I used images. And like how to learn through images and looking at it through images so of course in different classes but I really remember this one eighth grade class, and they were probably my supposedly lowest level class, but they like...you know, like the best compliment I ever got was...so I had, I did this in seventh grade and then I had these kids when I was in eighth grade. And then eighth grade, Ronnie says to me, "Miss, are we gonna do Lazy Sway, Lazy Sway?" And he does this shake of the shoulders because he remembered the Langston Hughes poem, The Weary Blues-that I read and so he was like Lazy Sway, 'cause that's part of ... that's some And...to me that was just like, "It doesn't matter like what you get on this test, what you get, whatever. It just matters to me that you remembered that fucking poem." You know, "Like and that you could enact it with that kind of physicality." To me that was...the greatest thing in the world. And I really did-Well, see, this is another point...teaching actually, um, like for somebody who's as shy or thought I was as shy as I was, and you saw me when I first started reading at IAWA [Italian American Writers Association], my voice was cracking. I was so unsure. But what happened in teaching was that I got an opportunity to explore my theatrical side. And I really liked it and so I was hamming it up for years in the classroom. [I notice, again, Marisa's tendency to discuss a personality trait—to relate her experiences directly to a trait that she believes

she has, or a feeling that she is experiencing.] I know those kids remember me from like the way I read *Bridge to Terabithia*... Like so after teaching eighth grade for three years, I was like, "I'm going to sixth grade. I'm done. I can't even like, I can't even handle it." So they gave me sixth grade and I wasn't so excited. I had read *Bridge to Terabithia* when I was in third grade. On my own... So it was like bizarre because I remember reading all like Leslie dies. Like, "Oh, that's weird. I'm not really processing" ... I still remember the pool of blankness, like, "What does this mean?" And then I just really didn't get it. And but then when I taught sixth grade, like we talked about those things with the students. Like together in a group. So, it was just a kind of, it was just really cool and then the story of the end is so beautiful and I kind of reenacted it, like, pretty much. It's like, I mean, that, I love that book. I've never even seen the movie and I never probably will. But it was like, 'cause there's that scene where Leslie dies, right? Where she takes the rope and swings across the creek and then falls in. I taught it and I was teaching it with my ESL class and I didn't think they understood so I got up on my desk. And I was like, I was like, "Tarzan!" Like, "Whoa!" You know. I had this teacher when I was in high school, and he got up on his desk once and I will never forget it. Like as I'm telling you right now, I can-You know, and then, so, I enacted it so they could understand what was happening, and then at the end of that story, the boy Jess brings his little sister, I don't remember her name, to Terabithia, which is like the pine forest where he would go with Leslie. Was like their special place where they were friends. And so he brings his sister to Terabithia and he crowns her the new queen of the Terabithians. And it's like, I read it... I have the book. We could go get it. I could read it to you. It's like fucking awesome.

Robert: My first five or six years teaching were really very successful because I had very good people around me, people who push you, work with you. I started as a fifth grade teacher, my first two years, and then I moved to a self-contained sixth grade, did that for numerous years, and then middle school... My sister brings it up all the time because she knows if try to put things in perspective too much, she tries to tell me all the people that I've influenced and had contact with over the years and I don't think about it because it's scary for me to think about all the lives I might have touched and that to me is probably, I can't wrap my head around it because I will probably cry. As a professor now, about to retire, when I see our student teachers teach, I'm so lucky I'm observing them this semester. One time a couple of weeks ago I was almost in tears because you can see them, and this is what I'm able to give back to something I love.

James: I feel lucky, I feel blessed to have done what I've done, I think, I can literally point to people, you know like Auden said, you can really point to places where life is evil now, so let me invert that and say that I can really point to places where peoples' lives are better for me having been in them, and kids send me emails and such and say really wonderful things about me. I think I am philosophical in the way that I think if it wasn't me it would have probably been someone else to fulfill that void but who knows, I don't know where the origin of inspiration is, and I do believe that we do a sacred job, an important job, and a thankless one certainly, but it's important. When I think of something that I am really proud of from my teaching career, I think of one of my best students who is taking her Ph.D. She sent me an email not too long ago. I mean that's a good example. She never spoke, right, she just sat there and looked at you and just hung on your every word, but never interacted, never seemed bored, her hand never went to her

mouth. Once you get over how creepy that can be in many ways, she turned out to be like, she got a 5 on her AP exam. That may have been the first year I took the course over and she got a 5 on that exam, she was very good. I took her to see a friend who is probably the best female sax player in America who happens to be a friend of mine, we checked out some concerts, I took her out, to play with my friend, we spent an afternoon together with her. Yea, it would have to be 2007 because by 2010 those relationships of impact, those boundary dissolving relationships pretty much had gone the way of old flesh in this new generation, 2010 or thereabouts. I'm thinking like, what I was able to do with my student, I just said, I'm like, we're going to this concert, and I'd pick her up and take her to the concert and I'd drive her home, or I'd say we're gonna go introduce you to the musician and you can hang out together, which they did, and they were sitting there together playing music, and while I was reading this great book.

4.12 Robert

*Every day I wear a leather belt
in memory of my father*

my father fixed boilers
he said I don't want you to work
study

I wanted to prove myself
put a phd after my
Italian last name
I only saw my father cry once
when I passed my
defense

my father never said
my son's got a phd
nobody even knew

a kid said to me once

*mister, you're not white
I think he meant
that you care*

In recounting his high school days in Brooklyn, my father recalls that the Italian American students were mainly discouraged from attending college while students from other white ethnic groups were encouraged to apply, and to take higher level academic courses. He notes that he was hurt when a guidance counselor told him to become a mechanic, and defying this, he attended college and earned a Bachelor of Science degree.

There are undoubtedly numerous examples in the histories of the U.S, in particular, of challenges that Italian Americans encountered in their pursuit of higher education and in the professional choices they made. For example, along with their Jewish counterparts in the city university system, they constituted the reason for the implementation of mandatory speech evaluations as part of their degrees. Collins writes: “One woman who attended Hunter in the late 1930s recalled that she and her peers [were] forced to attend speech classes to remedy their provincial errors...Even in the American-born, Hunter’s teachers could hear a Yiddish or Italian sing-song back three generations” (p. 19).

I think of this history when Robert tells me that he believes he was placed in a lower track during his public school years because of his Italian last name, and that he received a poorer education as a result. Given that Robert, at the time of this interview, was the exact age of my father, seventy-one, and had grown up in a nearby neighborhood, I already had a context for Robert’s statements—of course, with all of my assumptions, biases, and expectations.

I meet with Robert in his office at the college where he is a full professor of Education, only weeks away from retirement. He tells me that this interview is especially poignant for him for these reasons, and that he is also writing a memoir.

Robert begins with his mother, helping him with his homework, "really my teacher," when he is asked to describe his journey to becoming a teacher. Unlike the prior interviews with my other study participants, he does not begin with a career goal or a first job, but at the place where he first felt that he was learning. I chose to begin the poetic representation with this topic as well.

Then, however, I jumped to another part of the interview where I had asked what his parents did for a living, and he informed me of his father's work fixing and cleaning boilers. I combined this statement in a stanza with his thoughts about his father's lack of formal education, and his father's desire to see Robert earn higher education, even if it meant not working at all while he was in school.

Interestingly, Robert does not discuss specific careers at all during much of the interview. He seems firmly rooted in education itself as the most essential aspect of his journey to becoming a teacher. This continues when he describes how inspired he was by attending Brooklyn College and taking an education course, and doing field work in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn.

Unlike my conversations with most of the other interviewees, Robert seems to strongly frame his pathway to teaching, and then to his later career as a college professor, within his Italian American identity. He develops the desire to "prove himself," "put a Phd after his Italian

last name,” and finds pleasure and honor in the fact that a student once told him, “Mister, you’re not white.”

Despite his description of how proud his father was when he earned his Ph.D.—now we were no longer discussing teaching at the P-12 level itself—Robert tells me that his father never bragged to anyone about his achievement, stating, “nobody even knew.” As in many of the other interviews, I find myself focusing on other questions somewhat related to my research question, but perhaps more expansive in nature. Again, it seems to me that a participant is describing the role of teaching in his life as it relates to many other aspects, including familial and cultural expectations, and the pursuit of other related or unrelated interests. The discussion of a pathway *to* teaching is not one that intensely holds either of our interests, seemingly, for long as the conversation ensues. In fact, one of Robert’s most animated moments is when he lowers his hand seemingly under his desk, out of my view, and tells me that he is gripping his leather belt which he wears everyday in honor of his father, and how he instilled discipline in him.

I caught fire
I was free

We were flower children

Everyday I wear a leather belt in memory of my father

He rarely hit me

I always wanted to prove myself

4.13 References to Italy or Italian American Heritage

Leo: We spoke Italian at home. I’m first generation. I had the typical home. My grandparents lived with us. My parents...my home had seven people in the house. My mom never worked. My dad was a cabinet maker...[In] May of 90...New Utrecht was

heavily Italian and there were a lot of other Italian American teachers... One student of mine, we kept in touch through the years, and now she got back to teaching and now she's a guidance counselor at the school on 20th avenue and 69th street. I don't know if it's that one or the one on 19th or 20th but one of those schools and she's a guidance counselor there and she's still in the neighborhood. I saw her about a year ago shopping on 18th avenue, and you know, the roots are still there... I took a trip to Italy in the mid-90s, I went to Italy, and I went to go visit my roots in Calabria. I wanted to see what family was still left. So I had an aunt and an uncle that were still there, my dad's sister, so I said, all right, I'm gonna look them up, I'm gonna go down there and I'm gonna look them up, so I went down there and I looked them up, and of course I hadn't seen them since I was a little baby. You know they were elderly people, they were very happy to see me. So it was very nice, ohh, we're so glad you're here, I got to meet the children and the grandchildren, now the next day I go out and I walk around the town, now the town is a two bit town, it's literally like it doesn't have a traffic light in it, a few blocks, its real small, real tiny. So I grab my camera and I'm walking around, I says I'm gonna walk around, take some pictures, meet some people. I walk into this bar, now you know what a bar is in Italy, a bar in Italy is like...you know you can sit and drink some coffee, you can have a drink,. So I walk into this place, it's pretty empty, I have a coffee, I order a coffee, I order something there to eat, a little pastry of some sort, I have a local paper on the table, I'm reading the paper, the guy comes from behind the counter, comes over to me and goes, "who are you?" Just like that, so I smile, I don't say anything and he says, and he says this in Italian, "you talk like us, but I don't know your face," because I was speaking in dialect, this local Italian dialect that only that town speaks that I learned from

my parents. He goes, "you talk like us but I don't know your face," so I tell him, "I'm Ozzy's son, my dad's name was Osvaldo. I says, "I'm Ozzy Rinaldi's son," he says, "no really? I remember your father." He calls his wife out. "You know who this is? This is Ozzy's son." He goes to me, "are you the younger one or the older one?" I go "I'm the young one." "Come, I gotta show you something." He grabs my hand, takes me down to the cafe, you can't make this up, he takes me down to the cafe, walks me down the street a little bit, he goes "you see that house? You see that door on that house? Your father put that door in." I says "no," yep, your father built that door and he put that door in that house." He says "we still have stuff that your father made in this town."

I only went that one time. I haven't been back since then.

I revisited some of my past writing on the neighborhood of Bensonhurst where I grew up, taught, and that Leo refers to in the adjacent excerpt. It is my attempt to convey all that is loaded into the reference to this neighborhood for me, during this interview: Bensonhurst is noticed nationally through a variety of media and news stories, from the setting of *Welcome Back Kotter*, the early seventies television show, to the 1977 film *Saturday Night Fever*, both of which star John Travolta, to the murder of Yusuf Hawkins in 1989 and the marches in Bensonhurst that followed. Maria Laurino's (2000) chapter titled "Bensonhurst" in *Were You Always an Italian?: Ancestors and Other Icons of Italian America*, is a journey through the images of Bensonhurst most commonly recognized throughout the nation. Laurino cites "the narrow wooden and brick row houses" to describe the "working-class streets;" she evokes the "woman leaning out a half-open window in an old housedress, a cigarette dangling between cracked lips" (pp. 121-122). Quickly though, Laurino takes us to the "marches organized by the African-American community in protest of two racial murders" (p. 122). There is Willie Turks in nearby

Gravesend, a transit worker, whose car breaks down after leaving a bagel shop. After having bottles thrown at him and his coworkers by a large group of Italian American teenagers while they are all sitting in a car that won't start, he is then dragged out of the car by Gino Bova and beaten to death. Then, there is Yusuf Hawkins, who was visiting Bensonhurst in 1989 to buy a car when he and his friends, too, are attacked by a large group of mainly Italian American teenagers, who believe Hawkins and his friends are a group coming to attack them because of a conflict over a neighborhood young woman. Hawkins' death is caused, ultimately, by gunfire from Joey Fama, described by Laurino as "hot-tempered and mentally slow" (p. 123). Laurino's description of Bensonhurst residents during the marches through the neighborhood by African Americans in protest of the murders reveals a community steeped in racism and its corresponding anger. She writes: "I watched dozens of young Italian-American men station themselves in front of the area's one-and-two-family homes to defend the sanctity of their neighborhood. The urban warriors stood with their feet apart, arms crossed at the chest. They wore sleeveless T-shirts to show off pumped-up biceps, and jeered, inviting confrontation. Watermelons, the emblem of Bensonhurst anger, were lifted overhead as residents shouted at protesters" (p. 123).

In her essay "On Being White, Female, and Born in Bensonhurst," Marianna De Marco Torgovnick (1994), too, moves quickly from her description of Bensonhurst's "tree-lined streets: two-, three-, or four-family houses...tomato plants, fig trees, and plaster madonnas often decorat[ing] small but well tended yards that face out onto the street" to a reference to the murder of Yusuf Hawkins in the summer of 1989, a story she learns about from her parents who are visiting her in North Carolina where she has moved (p. 4). Torgovnick insists that although she "detest[s] the racial killing, she also "unders[tands] it," going on to describe the mentality of

Italian Americans in Bensonhurst as "cohesive and provincial," and not accepting of "difference" (p. 6).

Coverage of Bensonhurst still appears occasionally in a variety of news outlets, nearly always regarding racial and ethnic tensions or changes. In 2010, Liz Willen writes about Lafayette High School, a building in the vicinity of both housing projects lived in by mostly African Americans, as well as the famous L & B Spumoni Gardens, an Italian American and Brooklyn institution. Willen reports on the burgeoning Asian population in Bensonhurst and Bath Beach and that it "brought with it a spate of violence against Asian students by non-Asian classmates at Lafayette High School" which was attended by mostly African American students. It wasn't just violence that was faced; "Asian immigrants complained that they were not placed in classes for English language learners and did not have access to guidance counselors. They had trouble enrolling in the courses required for graduation and could not get translation or interpretation services as required by law...they reported that school safety agents were impolite to Asian students; two described being treated 'like animals'" (p. 9). In 2014, *The Wall Street Journal's* real estate section published an article titled "Signs Denote Changing Times in Bensonhurst: Italian-American Enclave Shifts as Chinese Families Flock to Area." This time, Bensonhurst is referred to as having been previously known as a middle class neighborhood, though Laurino's and Torgovnick's accounts seemed to label it quite firmly as a working class neighborhood. Reporter Gabby Warshawer juxtaposes a poster celebrating "Italy's 2006 World Cup win" to the Chinese signs near an arts center (p. 2).

In 2015, the *New York Times* published anecdotes from "several Muslim Americans living and working in New York City" in the wake of "Trump's fear mongering...to find out whether they encounter discrimination in their day-to-day lives" (Silberstein, p. 1). A Social

Studies teacher at the actual building depicted as the "Welcome Back Kotter" school, Takhia Hussein, wrote on the topic of wearing a hijab to work: "When my students get up to say the Pledge of Allegiance, I'm up there with them, pledging every single day. It's devastating to think people are questioning our loyalty to a country that we love. I work in a very diverse school, so many of my students interact with Muslim students all day. I'll be honest, they never have asked me, 'Why do you wear the hijab?' A lot of them are just like, 'Oh they practice the Muslim faith. They wear it because of modesty. I think I'm the only hijabi teacher in New Utrecht High School, and you know, some of them have asked me questions about my faith, but nothing I deemed inappropriate or made me feel uncomfortable.'" When this inclusion in the New York Times is reported in the local Bensonhurst news site, *Bensonhurst Bean*, writer Rachel Silberstein commends New Utrecht High School for its environment of tolerance.

Robert: After I was teaching several years, I realized that I had been tracked in high school because of my nationality, because we were expected not to go in the academic program, and I, we, didn't know any better, we didn't even know what the SATs were, so I think we were tracked based on our nationality. Even in elementary school it was the same, the nuns wanted some of us, the majority of us to go to trade school but my folks said no. I think when I graduated high school I still didn't realize it, but when I was in college, I always wanted to give back to my community and I thought the best way of doing that would be to prove myself and to put a PhD after my Italian last name and I achieved that. I only saw my father cry once, but once, when I passed my oral exams, my dissertation defense, and I went home to tell him, he was crying like a baby. He never verbalized how proud he was of me, but I knew he was. He just broke down because he knew what I had achieved. My mother was very proud and they came to my graduation

and at Fordham in the Bronx and I'll tell you it was, as long as I live I will never forget the greeting I got after, you know, we went up on the stage individually because there weren't that many of us and when he saw that. Yes, so what I try to do and I like to do when I'm not working any longer is give back to that community, not in name only.

It was difficult to highlight just one passage from my interview with Marisa that referred to Italy or Italian American heritage because so much of the narrative she shared could be considered part of this section. Ultimately, I narrowed down my selection to the section below.

Marisa: I was like, "I want something more intellectual," right? So then I went into teaching.. I just went with the teaching and I wasn't really thrilled with it either, like, I was kind of ... I wanted to get that salary push and I wanted to also ... I was like, "Well, um, I'll have my summers off and I can go travel to Italy and become fluent in Italian," like all the wrong reasons. Which is so interesting and it's like, well, I remember somebody saying to me, "Well, you're not the first person to think of this." ...as a child I remember saying this to somebody. I was probably in like second or third grade and I was saying, "Well, yeah, my parents are very, very strict." "So at home it's like we're in Italy, and in school we're American." Now I also realized that like then when I finally reme- when I, when this memory kind of resurfaced, I remember being like very ashamed of this idea that I had thought. And it's like, I was so ashamed that I had such a misconstrued understanding of my cultural identity. But I think it still says something about the way I felt. And then it was also interesting going and teaching in Corona where I had so many kids who were like, "I'm Mexican, I'm Ecuadorian," and I was like, "I don't wanna correct them and tell them, 'No, you're not Mexican. You're Mexican-American.'" 'Cause that was kind of like, for me too, like I thought I was Italian. I didn't really have a

sense of Italian-American. Like it just wasn't in the, in the realm of thinking... But teaching actually, um, like for somebody who's as, like, shy or thought I was as shy as I was, like, and you saw me when I first started reading at IAWA [Italian American Writers Association], like, I was like, my voice was cracking. I was so, like, unsure... my brother had conducted an interview of my grandfather when he was in 10th grade for like a high school English project. Um, he recorded it on tape and then I had taken the tapes and converted them to CDs. And now, like, I haven't listened to it in years 'cause it's on my hard drive of my old computer, which is almost inaccessible but, like, this summer, if I go to Apple, they should be able to help me to get it. But so anyway, so I started listening to this interview with my grandfather and...my brother was asking my grandfather all these questions and like at the time, we were too young. We didn't know anything about Italy and like why they left. Like we never knew anything about it. It was just like ... And my grandfather's talking about like the noble people and I'm like, "What the fuck is he talking about the noble people?" That was like my first introduction to like feudalism. And a way that I had never, you know-like I didn't really understand it at all and, um, and that's kind of like the first line of that poem is like my grandfather was born a serf. And actually my grandfather was born in the United States and at age of three they went back to Italy because-my great-grandfather was like, "I don't wanna stay here. It's not, it's not what it was supposed to be." So then they went back to Italy and they had no plans of coming back, but it was my great-grandmother who was like, "It's too feudal here." "We have to go back to America," but you know-So and this is really fascinating because ... so this feudal thing is something that- So my grandfather is explaining how the noble people said that even though...'cause his grandfather was a fisherman, deep sea

diver. So he could go into this lake and he could catch the fish but he couldn't bring the fish home to his family. He had to leave the fish with the noble people because the noble people owned the land. And so that was my first tapping into this Italian history—that I was so wanting to know more about, right? *[I'm struck by Marisa's description of how her interest in Italian-related topics was sparked—by a shock, almost, that a society could be set up this way. I attempt to trace some connections between the way her interest in Italian-related topics helped to inspire her desire to pursue a more "intellectual" career, and how her identity as a poet emerged from this environment as well. It's fascinating—that her ancestors' powerless position, their location at the lowest level in society, had some sort of influence on her attainment of a teaching position in New York City, and ultimately, later, an abandoning of that position, or, perhaps I can use different language—an extension of that position—as a doctoral student in English and Creative Writing. [But this is what I was hoping for, I realize. A "story" like this was part of my expectation, and so it seems that I could be working very deliberately at creating it. I think that my interest in what stories teachers tell about their "becoming" teachers is really a question of what stories I can narrate myself, based on what they have said in a specific social situation to me, about their experiences.]* And so that was kind of like that fueled my, you know... meeting Bob was just like, "Holy Shit," "here's this person who is so smart and cares about this stuff in a way that is...cares about the stuff that I care about," right? And I mean that's kind of sounds like indirect tangent, what I just said. But, you know, um, he was able to intellectualize it in a way that I appreciated...

"the old rules of europe dissolve in the salt of the harbor

spend the rest of your lives telling each other what they were and you still will remember nothing of what they meant" (Viscusi, 2013, p. 10)

James: It's not something I consciously planned to do. I wasn't, I grew up in a family that wasn't, I would say that they didn't push academics to the level that I later understood when I got to high school. Like, most of my Jewish friends had been programmed from birth to go to college, like you know, whereas, most, how do I put this, like the majority of friends I had growing up, there was an issue between Jews, Hispanics, and Italians because that was the demographic of the neighborhood, so while I knew people who were Jewish, people who were Asian, and you know every now and then sprinkled in, it was mostly like the Italians and the Hispanics and they really didn't, higher education really wasn't a thing. At the time, it was Hispanics and African Americans and Italians were the three highest at-risk populations in terms of going on to higher education, and I could see that. The Italians would drop out and get jobs, like construction, in the family business, and the Hispanics, it was a similar path, but the Jews almost without exception would be going to college. I think looking back on it, I think part of it, was the fact that they were so over-represented in the school system, where I could tick off on one hand all the non-Jewish teachers I had, like you have Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and all the holidays, so the system was very slanted in that direction, toward that demographic, so anyway I mean again even my family, my parents, they were upset at you if you failed any subject but they didn't necessarily want you...it was important that you finished high school, but I never heard my parents say you should go to college, or in any way prepare us for the reality of higher education. It just wasn't anything that they understood. It wasn't in their context...And also writing, writing was

something that my mother said, when she was a girl, she was into writing, so she felt that we, she taught us to read and write basically before we went to school, and so I think also my mother, I didn't even know this until I guess I must have been thirty before I found this out but my mother in her senior year of college, she went back to Italy, excuse me, in her senior year of high school, I think they went for six months. They hadn't been back in a long time so they took a boat, and this must have been right after the war, and they went back to see the family and she left in I think march, but what she did was she gave, she did all of the work in order to graduate in her senior year, she got from all of her teachers because they knew she was going to go, and she gave it all to a friend to submit, and when she came back, they said oh, no, we never got that, so her friend who had ended up graduating just basically took all of her work, so she never got a high school diploma. So I said "did you ever go back?", she said, "no, I was too embarrassed you know like to go back you know and so she never technically got a high school diploma, my mother... One of my students from Lincoln, her parents were from Sicily, all of them were born in Sicily but she was the youngest, she was like maybe 2, so by the time she's 16, she's an American, she doesn't really know any other way, as opposed to her brother and her sister who were way older, so one by one as they turned 18 they all went back to Sicily, and then they were just waiting for her to graduate so that they could all go back to Sicily, and in the middle of her senior year, she comes to me and says "I don't want to go back to Sicily. First of all, I'm not Sicilian. She says all I'm going to do there is get married and have children and live in the village and I can't do that. Because I grew up in New York. And I want to go to art school and become a photographer. So I had to sit down with her mother and explain why I did this in concert with another teacher, and

intervened, to say look, you may look at her as Sicilian, she’s not Sicilian, she’s American, she’s not like her brother or her sister who were older, she’s an American, so by sending her back all you’re doing is basically, you’re going to ruin her life because she knows what it’s like outside that life so she should at least be given the right to choose and in the end we were successful in convincing her parents to let her stay, and she did go on and study art, and now she’s a teacher. I haven’t seen her in a long time but I understand that that’s what she’s doing.

4.14 James

James and I meet in his small apartment’s living room, surrounded by decades-old volumes of English and American literature. He is in his early fifties, a public high school English teacher several years away from retirement. The neighborhood in which he currently resides is also where he grew up.

After hearing the overarching research question, James quickly connects his experiences with education to his Italian heritage, comparing Italian Americans’ experiences to his Jewish friends’ experiences. After emphasizing that his parents wanted him and his siblings to earn high school diplomas, he acknowledges that they never discussed college with them, and credits two of his teachers for actually pushing him toward college, which ultimately led to a career in teaching.

I struggled to create a poetic representation of James’ “stories” in much the same way as I did with Leo’s, wondering exactly to what extent I should attempt to convey so many of the steps involved in achieving an actual appointed teaching position amid all of the excessing. Also as I

did with creating Leo's poem, I mostly tried to convey how I thought the narrative unfolded, inserting text related to each topic in the narrative in the order in which James literally discussed each topic, or in a similar order, but I ultimately abandoned a lengthy reiteration of my interview with James and wrote a shorter poetic representation, included below.

For me, the most striking image was of James and his brother on the roof during the winter of 1977, looking through a telescope and taking notes. I think he told me this story to convey how serious they took their interests and pursuits of learning.

At the end of our conversation, and the end of the poem as well, James tells me outright how he rewrites my research question, basically: "the question is really why stay?" He had spoken extensively about his feelings about the current state of education, or at least how he saw it in his teaching environment, and as compared to the way he perceived it as a student and as a younger teacher.

The High School Teacher

*Dr. James Merritt said
I hope all of you
Will go on to take your PhDs
Look at me
I have the life of leisure
I work three days a week
Sometimes twice a week
I have three months off
In the summer
I live a gala life of parties*

Listening to him I thought
I could really do that

*I'm introverted
People don't see the tension
between how I make my living
And what I want to do*

It was 1977, February, freezing

I remember sitting with my brother
An astronomer
You would go out there and observe
*Set the clock right on the telescope when Mars is in
opposition
to the
earth*

1.3

i was reading the story of stories
they tell you on the walls of ellis island
the stories disintegrate you like waves

they break you into a thousand thousand faces
looking out at the skyline from the ships
which of them do you become

you flutter across the stories like a wave
you are the change of shadow on the stories of stories
and the soft backwash of tiny waves on the narrow beach

you are not a story but an aspect of a story's story
and though you had expected a more substantial career
you appreciate the lightning swiftness of your influence

you are the eyes that transform the city
giving it the softness of Napoli (Viscusi, 2013, p. 2)

Chapter 5: Attempting Non-Answers, Drawing Non-Conclusions

“Everybody’s writing is suspect—not just those who write poems.”

—Laurel Richardson, *Poetics, Dramatics, and Transgressive Validity: The Case of the Skipped Line*

5.1 Assumptions, Biases, Expectations

Throughout this dissertation study, I have repeatedly referred to my own awareness of the limitations of this work. I have acknowledged that “stories” can never really “accurately” reflect a life’s trajectory for many reasons, including the inevitability that there really is no single, concrete “life story” actually being lived out—no one truth to uncover or reflect. Indeed, the tellings of a life are “social construction[s]” that create an interpretation of the particular life, which is all there can be (Miller, 2005, p. 53). Instead, I viewed my own autobiographical account that introduced this paper as well as the “stories” I heard and recorded as momentary constructions—often driven by my own seeming desires and expectations for certain forms and kinds of “stories”—serving social purposes. It was complicated, then, to continue to listen and read for “story,” as I acknowledged this. I kept focusing on myself—my own influences on the creation of the narratives I ultimately recorded; how I would present any interpretations of the interviews. As the project unfolded, this reflexive perspective, too, became part of my biases, my expectations. Namely, I expected to disrupt, to interrupt, any possibility of communicating that I had indeed heard a “story” and had accepted it as a “true” reflection of “reality.”

My expectations, then, inspired me to choose certain constructions and ways sharing of interview excerpts along with related literature, as I have explained above. Aiming to provide illustrations of how I might be processing what I was reading—by sharing and discussing

relevant and related history and other cultural perspectives—I attempted to act on—to “trouble”—my assumptions, biases, and expectations, even as they countered other assumptions, biases, and expectations of mine. These acts therefore led me to the construct or design of “layers,” which I also consider to be a type of pastiche format (though perhaps with the boundaries between the two formats quite blurred) in which multiple fonts were used to depict various voices, and to demonstrate where and how I was juxtaposing, or “corroborating,” ideas. My own processes of interpreting, or the versions of them that I can identify and attempt to share, were all that I could truly hope to communicate, in actuality—and even this ability to communicate is suspicious.

Indeed, my experiences with related literatures, as communicated in my review of literature, informed me that Italian immigrants and Italian Americans have told vastly different stories about their experiences, or lack thereof, with higher education, as well as their experiences with teaching. Additionally, through my wide-ranging literature review, I realized the extent to which Italian immigrants as well as Italian Americans have had stories told *about* them and their experiences with education and teaching careers. Further and consistently, Italian Americans’ status in various areas was constantly reinterpreted, depending on which powerful entities ruled in the given situation.

In fact, I found it all to be almost confusing to read through the various views of these various Italian Americans’ experiences at home regarding education. Further, I knew that I then would have to extrapolate from these literatures. This would include the need for my acute attention to the possible and dominant attitudes that might prevail in contemporary persons’ viewings of my study participants and their (eventual) teaching careers. And having read this literature, I too knew that my readings of these perspectives inevitably would affect how I both

constructed and viewed my own conversations with teachers. I was aware not only that my interviews with contemporary Italian American teachers most likely would yield a variety of “stories,” but also that I would wield power in being “the one” to decide how, why and which “stories” to “share”—that is, to represent my study participants. My dissertation’s decisions regarding issues of representation, of constructions of “stories,” of the myriad interpretations and choices in which I engaged—all required, finally, that I become acutely aware of the importance of how I would do all this.

5.2 Constructing My Interpretations

It was challenging to make a final decision about how to construct my interpretations of these case studies—especially recognizing “dangers” of colonizing, essentializing, simplifying, or contorting re-presentations of my study participants’ responses to my “official” research questions, for brief example. Initially, prior to even beginning this work, I imagined that I would craft a separate section for each of the five participants, where I would include much of the interview verbatim transcript as well as my own descriptions and interpretations, thus attempting to almost communicate a fixed, reified, static “portrait” of each “case.” But as my review of literature progressed, and I became deeply aware of the significance of perspectives framed and greatly influenced by numerous socio-cultural, historical, discursive and material contexts, events and forces when trying to interpret “Italian Americans’ experiences,” I decided that I needed to actually create my own ways (because the very concept of “method” implied a too-rigid and pre-determined set of steps, of “approved” ways of thinking and doing “research”) that would at least possibly approach illustrations of the varied factors that influenced my own interpretations of the teachers’ “stories.”

These concerns were the motivations for the way I organized Chapter 4. I ultimately created poetic representations of the interviews, tried my hand at “writing stories” about those representations—Richardson’s (2005) phrase for the telling of stories about our work that are intended to describe our understandings of the strategies we used—and created what I hoped would offer readers a pastiche of perspectives. I also layered in some relevant quotations, whether they supported what I interpreted as the overall “view” of the interview excerpt in some way, or provided readers (and myself) some perhaps alternative, unanticipated, wildly differing ways of reading it. I also interspersed poetry throughout the interview excerpts. And, in small sections of reflexive writing, I attempted to interrogate or comment on what I believed I was “doing,” or why I had made a certain decision, or why I needed to totally re-think what and why I had put forth as “what happened, what something supposedly ‘means.’” At times, this was uncomfortable, because there were seemingly infinite combinations of text that I could possibly construct and re-construct—both with texts that I had previously read but not included here, and the texts that I had included. The reflexive practices in which I attempted to engage throughout this study forced me to engage in incessantly recursive reconsiderings and reconfigurings. These all prevented me from easily assuming that I was simply describing what I thought were my motivations for one single decision.

I also have continued to question whether my decision to ultimately work only with the recorded interviews and other written texts caused Chapter 4 to fall short of what it could potentially be. For instance, how would the inclusion of images have changed each section?—images of family members, neighborhoods, maps. I conformed to the traditional expectations of writing in the genre of “academic, scholarly dissertation” to both posit and then to immediate attempt to questions and to complicate my interpretations. But were I to do this research and

writing all over again, I would now consider the possibilities of using digital technology, audio and video. Again, the infinite ways that I could have communicated what I interpreted as having occurred during our conversations—my realization of this—emphasize, I believe, that I perhaps attempted to be an artist rather than any rigid version of “correct academic producing certain knowledge” here. Instead, I’m now wondering about reasons that I choose to “be” a creator of a collage-like work—including those reasons prompted by my original assumptions about all of the possible influences on anyone’s decision to teach.

5.3 Framing Concepts: Pathways and Possibilities

Although I spoke with each participant about her or his experiences in becoming teachers, the concept of a “pathway” to a career did not necessarily hold as the framing concept that each teacher spoke within. In all cases, participants’ quite varied responses to my “pathway” question made it clear to me that there could be a knowable “beginning.” Each conversational starting point was, in a sense, arbitrary, with most participants stating that they had not originally wanted to be teachers.

Jennifer and Leo both appeared to focus on their first career interests as the location of their first steps on the “pathway to teaching.” Jennifer began her “story” by speaking about the career she had first—music therapist. But throughout our conversation, other potential “beginnings” of course emerged. For example, there were her experiences learning to play instruments, her mother’s own teaching career, her father’s desire that she have a steadier career. Leo began discussing the career he first desired—architecture—but then jumped back to his conversation with his father when he was in high school about where he might be able to go to college. Later in the conversation he also described his father’s thoughts about work, his desire to have his son work a job that was not physical. Leo’s “story,” with all of its wanderings,

vividly demonstrated to me that there are multiple “beginnings” and thus no clear path to describe. And yet Leo still attempts to do so, carefully laying out, in our conversation, each teaching position that he had, and how he obtained it.

Marisa at first used the framing concept of pathway in her explanation, calling her own “circuitous.” However, as the conversation continued, I noticed that she often referred to her psychological states or aspects of her personality. For example, after referring to her “circuitous path,” she described herself as always having difficulty in seeing her future. (She did, however, clearly state that she had not wanted to be a teacher.) She also quickly stated, after explaining that she thought she was going to work in social work for the rest of her life, that that was “the kind of person” that she was—someone who “always [got] super excited at the beginning.” Marisa continued in this vein, explaining how quiet she was as a child, how she was always daydreaming in school, “a space cadet, zoned out...that’s why I became a poet.” The other participants had described their pasts with more of a sense of sharing events, even if they explained how they felt in a particular situation. Marisa seemed to be unique in her framing of her past through the introduction of the psychological state or personality trait that was intertwined with a certain situation or decision. Loss was the state of mind she described as part of the cause of her career change. She connected it to her reading of Italian American literature, going to listen to and finally read poetry at open mics, and then pursuing teaching. I begin to wonder now, if these psychological states make up her own framing concept, utilized instead of or in spite of my own suggested concept of “pathway.” There are psychological depths here that could be explored, a task for which I am unprepared, unqualified. However, my recognition of this—or my suspicion of this—indicates to me that it is nearly impossible for me to in any way “fully” understand *why* my participants frame their “stories” in the ways that they do.

As I re-read through my layerings of text, I sensed that Robert may have been trying the hardest to conform to the framing concept of “path.” He described how his mother used to help him with his homework to counter the poor teaching he experienced at a parochial school. He used terms like “probably” and phrases such as “I think” as he aimed to make the connection between this early experience in his life and his later desire to teach. He referred to what could have been his emerging interest in teaching, stating: “I think I got the bug from her.” But the experiences that Robert described as the conversation continued point to the possibility that he could have had, and perhaps did have, many influential factors in his life that could have inspired his decisions to pursue teaching, to varying degrees. His description of how many people thought he was “stupid,” and how he later discovered that there were many factors that could have affected his achievement, and that it was not necessarily his fault—all indicated to me the possibility that he became a teacher so that he could almost “correct” the wrongs of those who were charged with educating him. He later pointed to a member of the college faculty who pushed him to take a specific course, Foundations of Education, as a tremendous influence, and also described his fellow students as “flower children,” seemingly pointing to additional factors that affected his decisions.

James intertwined his “story” about his “pathway” to teaching with his pursuit of higher education. He clarified that it was not a given that he should attend college, but his eventual interest in studying English and pursuing teaching stemmed from his entering college. But, as the excerpts indicated, there were many possible influential factors in his earlier experiences, as there are for everyone, when they are asked to trace a path. At one point, James described the interest in science that he shared with his brother, illustrating how they would study the stars together outside, in the middle of the night, in February. He apologetically inserted: “I know

I’m...losing the thread here,” indicating to me that he believed he was supposed to follow some order, stick to some theme. But even though he said this, our conversation resisted that thread throughout, resulting in lengthy “stories” from James about a variety of teaching and related life experiences. And James is the participant who directly told me that there was “a more interesting question,” which was “why stay?”

I also noticed that James consistently labeled his teaching career as an accident, almost—from going to college without ever having expected to or thought about it, to majoring in English, which he considered to be random and blamed it on his “shallow” interest in taking classes with so many women, to beginning to teach high school English, which only happened because the funding was pulled from his graduate studies.

I struggle to think of a metaphor that could work better than “pathways,” but there isn’t a shape that readily comes to mind. It is still unclear how we look back and construct our pasts to ourselves—“organiz[ing] or form[ing] fragments of memory into complex constructions that become the changing stories of our lives”—and even more unclear how we might variously and in always shifting ways perhaps “show” parts of these pasts to others (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 22). As I thought through and wrote through some of the interview excerpts in the last chapter, I began to notice that most of the conversations moved past the framing concept of “pathway” to teaching. Because of my extensive and reflexive re-viewings of my interview “data” as well as my own assumptions, biases and expectations, my participants spent much time talking about other topics, such as their experiences *during* their teaching careers, and the roles that teaching played in their lives. These other topics were both initiated by the participants and directly asked about or further probed by me. For example: “What role did teaching play in your life, in

becoming who you are now?”—this is the research question I imagined earlier that Marisa and I were writing, as we spoke.

5.4 Italian American Identities

In my own autobiographical passages, I began to see, at least to this writing point, that I referred to conversations in my life that were in some way connected to Italian American spaces. For instance, there was the conversation that my parents had had in *salumerias*. There was the excitement and sometimes envy that other Italian Americans had at my good fortune in gaining a teaching position at a school in an Italian American neighborhood (though a changing one). There was my parents’ joy at the fact that I would be close to home, at a school that was part of our family’s history.

I even highlighted the significance of Italian Americans in my graduate school experience, citing a strong presence of Italian American women teachers who were studying English Education at the graduate level. I also referred to my lack of confidence and a sense of belonging in the graduate English classroom, as I was reluctant to speak—a characteristic that I associated with the lack of experiences in my lineage with higher education, especially graduate school. But I am the individual who has framed and carried out this study and the writing of this dissertation, so my own tellings of my interpreted experiences of a pathway to teaching and their connection to being Italian American is, of course, quite biased. Indeed, not every study participant spoke of his or her Italian heritage.

However, Marisa readily integrated her experiences related to her Italian heritage within our conversation. She explained that she began reading Italian American women’s memoirs around the time that her grandmother died, and later in our conversation explained that her interest in her Italian heritage actually began when she listened to an interview that her brother

had conducted with their grandfather for a school project, when she learned that her ancestors had been “deep sea divers” for the nobility in Italy. Marisa then recounted the fact that she started going to poetry readings at the Cornelia Street Cafe (which were held by the Italian American Writers Association), then pursued a graduate degree in English, where she studied with a faculty member who had done extensive work in Italian American Studies, and then finally selected a career in teaching. She described her desire for teaching as based on all the “wrong reasons,” citing her resulting availability to travel to Italy and learn Italian over the summers. For Marisa, a connection to her Italian American heritage was arguably very much intertwined with her “pathway” to teaching, at least as she told it to me in our conversation.

When rereading my discussion of my interview with Leo and my accompanying poetic representations in section 4.5, I was struck again by my own realization and recognition of my strong desire or expectation to find roots in one’s family life, cultural life, and other early and foundational experiences that could have influenced one’s decision to teach. This is the heart of this dissertation, I think, what motivated it from the start. In many ways, I answered an underlying question from the very beginning of this study in (re)writing my own autobiographical tales—I very much associated my own pathway to teaching with my Italian American heritage and wanted to interrogate the extent to which they were related, to explore why it mattered, and to almost honor the connection. Thus, I now believe that this entire engagement can be said to investigate my own grapplings with the relationships between heritage and teaching. And the forms in which I chose to convey my data—including interview excerpts and all of the related literatures I selected—illustrated my attempts to do so.

5.5 Re-examining Research Focus and Implications

As described above, several of the interviews involved both the participants’ reference to the research focus as well as my own realization that my original research focus was not necessarily what interested me after speaking, in extensive “interview” ways, with each participant. For example, I described how, after writing the shorter poem about Leo’s experiences, I remained engrossed in how he had described his experience in Italy, finding artifacts of his father’s woodworking craft, and using his own artistic abilities to photograph them, then never returning, and yet living in his childhood home as an adult—but redesigning it almost “around” the pieces his father had crafted. I directly connected this focus on art with teaching, as he had selected teaching partially to honor his father’s desire that he choose a career where he did not work with his hands. But he remains a craftsman of his own sort, a photographer, and uses the materials of his father’s artistic production. Rather than intending to summarize what I have already described above, I refer to this understanding of mine to probe the very notion of having an original research focus.

For practical purposes, such as completing a Dissertation or other formal research project that conforms to specific qualifications, there must, of course, be a research focus, typically represented by research questions at the beginning of the process. But when working in some way with autobiographical tellings, whether through interviews or even through my own autobiographical writing, the “end” of the research necessarily has the potential to contain many more “open” “endings” than simple responses to a research focus. Miller (2005) ponders “what might happen to the forms and purposes of autobiography in education if they assumed the potential of imaginative literature to disrupt rather than reinforce static and essentialized versions of our ‘selves’ and our work as educators” (p. 54). In retrospect, I believe this very possibility is what could have drawn me to this study and the research focus I ultimately selected.

In the case of this Dissertation, each participant’s autobiographical “telling,” I argue, disrupts any “essentialized” notion of an Italian American teacher, as each articulated a variety of reasons for pursuing teaching, of possible influences, and of the relationship between the teaching career and other aspects of their lives. For this reason, any research focus that I could have chosen would fall “short,” with the autobiographical tellings of all of the teachers, including my own, becoming textual bodies that demonstrate the possibility of (probably) infinite insights into Italian American teachers, unsettling any simplistic understandings of them. Therefore, the focus of this work could be re-inscribed as a wondering about how to disturb, disrupt, and/or unsettle the “category” of “Italian American teacher,” but also of “teacher” itself.

5.6 Implications for Teaching and Teacher Education

Florio-Ruane and Williams (2008) write that “who we are and where we stand as we begin our teaching career is shaped by history, society, and culture...our personal histories” (pp. 7-8). It is necessary to recognize that what Florio-Ruane and Williams (2008) refer to as “our personal histories” are really our interpretations or understandings of what we think our personal histories contain, but our understandings are themselves influenced by the very factors that Florio-Ruane and Williams (2008) refer to, namely “history, society, and culture” (pp. 7-8).

Their perspective cannot be more relevant, more significant than it is now. In 2019, New York State released its *Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework*, a document directed toward various stakeholders—students, teachers, school and district leaders, families and community members, faculty and administration in higher education, and state policymakers. The Framework describes its purpose, in part, as the following:

The Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) framework is intended to help

education stakeholders create student-centered learning environments that affirm cultural identities; foster positive academic outcomes; develop students’ abilities to connect across lines of difference; elevate historically marginalized voices; empower students as agents of social change; and contribute to individual student engagement, learning, growth, and achievement through the cultivation of critical thinking (pp. 6-7).

One of the ways that teachers are encouraged to build relationships with students, to question and improve their own decision-making in the classroom, and to continue to develop personally and professionally is to examine their own “implicit bias,” “identifying and challenging...[their] biases” (pp. 27-28).

For me, with the specific interests of mine that have undergirded and enabled this project, it is clear that teachers would greatly benefit from being able to interrogate possible “reasons” for their own arrivals to the teaching career and all that these “arrivals” involved, all of the possible influences that may have led to these career decisions. Such reflexive questionings, I believe, could actually assist teachers in being able to begin to trace their own biases, conjectures and anticipations for their work as teachers. What better way could an Italian American teacher, and any teacher for that matter, identify what her own biases may be than to consider her own personal histories in relation to the histories of larger socio-cultural and historical contexts and events. For all of these already have had an impact on her positions in life, whether or not she has been conscious of them all along. I think, for example, of many schools currently functioning in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, in which the majority of students are Chinese and Chinese-American, and where the teachers are mainly Italian American. It could be quite informative, for example, for an Italian American teacher of a class of Chinese immigrants who are learning English as a new language to know that her grandfather, having been born in

Brooklyn, entered school as an English language learner as well because his family only spoke Italian at home.

This was me, teaching seventeen- and eighteen-year-old Chinese students who had to retake the English Language Arts Regents Examination to graduate, after having only just entered the United States within the last year or two. This very research study has prompted me to declare one of my current beliefs: that is, knowledge of one’s personal and ancestral histories changes how one sees—as well as who one is and can “be” in the classroom.

An infinite number of examples could be evoked to illustrate the potential connections of learning about the experiences of one’s own family as well as people of one’s ethnic or racial background in order to powerfully uphold the goals of the Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework. Concluding this study now, I understand that going forward, I desire spaces and conversations where preservice and in-service teachers can probe their own histories and connect them to their desires to teach and to the impact they may have as teachers. And I intend to do this, with full awareness that each conversation will be set in a specific social situation, with its own power dynamics, with individuals possessing their own assumptions, biases, and expectations, and that all of this will impact the “stories” they tell to themselves and to others. Still, these are important conversations, if teachers are to more deeply probe their decisions, their interactions with students, and the impacts they ultimately have on young lives.

Sonnet 4.8

if you knew how it was going to end would you start

if you knew how it was going to start would you end

the meaning of stories begins at every point and ends there as well

ellis island is only the ninetieth bead on a string of ninety one
any given story devolves its parts and boxes them separately
for forty-six thousand two hundred fifty three corners of the globe
so we have made ourselves a story the way we make ourselves dinner
we use what we can get including minds and hands to make it good
at the end of the meal our guests slip into their canoes and leave
the east river under the bridges is a festival of lights
at this edge of the world the ocean breaks against the continent
these lights grow more intense at times
rays carrying whole epics are passing unnoticed through your head
singing I trail my fingers along rows of bushes in blossom (Viscusi, 2013, p. 22)

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