

**RESEARCH, PEDAGOGY AND STUDENTS AS FAMILY STORYTELLERS AND ORAL  
HISTORIANS:  
RECLAIMING MISSING VOICES IN THE LITERATURE OF DIVERSITY  
By Elizabeth Stone**

“This is my life, Cutting up old film/don’t edit the wrong thing out.” So warns Robin Coste Lewis, in one of her poems. “Dick-and-Jane-with-me Page Spread, The Upper Room II, Flipside Self.” The lines speak tersely to the necessity of preserving memory, both personal and historical. Otherwise, says Coste, we are left with only “a tale of amnesia.” Hers is a view shared by Patricia Hampl who has written, “If you don’t tell your own story, someone else will tell it for you.” Both views inform the research I do on personal narrative often, though not exclusively, in relation to ethnicity.

For about 15 years or so, I’ve been teaching “New Wave Immigrant Literature,” a course which draws on works by or about the major immigrant groups that have come to the United States since the passage of the Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965—recently the top “sending” nations have been China, India, the Philippines, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. Since neither I nor my antecedents are Asian, South Asian or Central American, my students often ask me—very politely--why I am interested in teaching a course on ethnicities, none of which are my own. In fact one student said to me, again with great politeness, “You don’t seem to *have* an ethnicity.”

Oh, but I do,” I told her. In fact I have two. All my grandparents were immigrants—my maternal grandparents came from Southern Italy early in the last century. My paternal grandfather was a rabbi who, with his wife, came at about the same time from Eastern Europe. Ordinarily I probably wouldn’t speak personally, but the events in this election cycle, and in our streets, make it difficult not to, so if you’ll give me a moment to speak autobiographically, and to do my part to resist “a tale of amnesia” what I’d like to make clear are the ways in which my family’s experiences shaped my interest in both storytelling and ethnicity. Both, in turn, have informed my research and teaching, and the interplay between them.

My grandparents came to this country at a moment not so different from this one. At the time the Dillingham Commission, a bipartisan Congressional group, was arguing that southern and eastern European immigrants in particular were destroying the country, and was initiating measures to dial back to the quotas that had existed in 1890, favoring Northern and Western Europeans, and to bar Asians altogether--thereby demonstrating, as we all know all too well right now, that racial and ethnic bigotry are as American as apple pie.

I didn’t know about the Dillingham Commission as a child, but in my family, as I was growing up, it was absolutely clear from the family stories I heard that it was tough to be Italian: I heard the story about how my mother’s family gathered around their radio in 1927 to listen to news reports about Italian-born anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti, being executed for a murder most knew even then that they did not commit; I knew about the most humiliating moment in my grandmother’s life when after living here for 35 years, she was forced to register as an “enemy alien” during World War II, a devastation the family carried for years. (Turned out her records couldn’t be located because someone at Ellis Island had misspelled her name and then misfiled the papers). Even the love stories had a message—my parents married one another for a lot of reasons but my mother always said, not entirely in jest, that as an Italian she was making her patriotic stand against both Mussolini and Hitler.

In 1980 or so, I wrote an article for *The New York Times Magazine*, interviewing other Italian-Americans of my generation, called “It’s Still Hard to Grow Up Italian,” because even then—it was the height of “Godfather” frenzy--cultural expectations for Italians were modest at best. In fact I recall a moment with my editor, her blue pencil hovering above a line where I mentioned my uncle, the novelist, who had already published several detective novels. “Oh,” said the editor. “This doesn’t belong. This uncle was on your father’s side, the Jewish side, right?”

“No, I said.”

I also had an aunt who was a painter and a mother who did Strindberg on Broadway. I hadn’t known how to understand their trajectory, given their origins, but I was by then coming to understand that the family stories they told at large family gatherings were a resource. They gave a troubling history, yes, and they also said what the pecking order was, but they offered strategies for managing and even transcending. These stories were parables—they not only informed and warned, but they instructed, inspired, prescribed, prohibited. They toted out family heroes, ordinary people who had been brave or talented or daring. I interviewed 100 people, got a thousand stories, and realized most families had these unacknowledged resources. So I wrote a book and about the time it was time to update it with a new introduction, I created “New Wave Immigrant Literature.” And none of it would have happened without Sacco and Vanzetti.

The literature of immigration is usually by or about families in diaspora--families that are removed from their country of origin, not just in time but also in space. Some of these families can’t go home again. Hence family stories set in the country of origin are a particularly precious resource. My research on family stories influenced my pedagogy and the ways I taught some of the works often on my syllabus—for instance, Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* and Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban*.

If my research influenced my teaching, my teaching—and my students—influenced my research: one of the ongoing questions in immigration research is about transnationals—families who can and *do* go home again and who feel a continued sense of affiliation with the country of origin as well as with this country. Scholars wonder: Is transnationalism a viable stable identification? Or is it a state that will eventually lead to further assimilation, one generation at a time. A generation gap between parents and their children is not unusual in families with a long time tenure in this country, but one class I taught was very attuned to intergenerational tensions regarding assimilation in the work of Jhumpa Lahiri, Edwidge Danticat and Lan Samantha Chang. Did family stories enter into these tensions?

Three students—Jane, born in Russia, Despina, whose parents were born in Greece and Erica, whose parents were born in Cuba— were sufficiently interested in the question to collaborate with me subsequently on a qualitative research project probing whether parents might actually use family stories to try to positively reinforce their children’s attachment to the country of origin and to do what they could to discourage their children from too rapidly Americanizing.

First, they stipulated a definition of “transnational,” using accepted criteria such as bilingualism, ongoing contact and visits with family members in the country of origin, an an interest in regularly accessing country of origin news channels

Eventually, they interviewed 23 people from 13 countries: Albania, Bolivia,

Chile, China, Cuba, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Haiti, Korea, Palestine, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, and Turkey. In analyzing the themes of the family stories they had collected, my collaborators and I found that parents did use family stories in the way we had hypothesized and were able to categorize six different varieties of such usage:

1. Tales of home remedies associated with the country of origin.
2. A denigration of ethnic or political groups, past or present, that have been “enemies” in the country of origin.
3. An extensive knowledge of the country of origin’s history and politics. Sometimes the knowledge goes back several centuries.
4. A celebration of endogamy--“and they lived happily ever after”-- or an expressed disapproval of exogamy via cautionary tales—“and of course it didn’t work out for them.”
5. an idealization of one’s own ethnic group.
6. An idealization of the country of origin, especially for its beauty

My collaborators found that to some degree, attitudes toward the country of origin depended on whether the family expected to return. Erica’s father had been a political prisoner under Castro. She and her family were here to stay, a family principle that was reinforced in their choice of a name for her. “I was named Erica after Leif Eriksen, whom my parents admired because he was an explorer,” she said. “Every time my mother told me the story of how I got my name, she reminded me that Leif Eriksson was the first to discover America.”

Our article, “Transnationalism as a motif in family stories,” was published in *Family Process*, a refereed psychology journal, with an interest in ethnicity and the family.

Third and last: Most recently, I’ve begun requiring students to do an oral history of either an immigrant or the child of an immigrant. I then choose half a dozen or so of these oral histories to become texts for the course—discussed in class, and included on the final exam. Teaching students to do ethical and appropriately researched oral histories is labor intensive, yes, but I include the unit because I feel there are far too narrow a range of immigrant voices readily available: canonical literary texts represented too few countries, too many highly educated writers of privilege. Those who are not highly educated, or who come without documentation, are either missing altogether, or appear in documentaries. No matter how well-intentioned the documentary, those who appear do not occupy the subject position and therefore do not have control over the integrity or placement of their utterances. I’m thinking here of *Balseros*, about Cubans who were apprehended and held at Guantanamo as they attempted to reach Florida in small boats, some eventually being permitted enter the US. I’m also thinking of the documentary about “The Golden Venture,” a boat carrying 260 undocumented Chinese immigrants which ran ashore in Queens.

I’ve now done the oral history unit with two different classes, the pedagogy of which was recently published in *Oral History Review*. The first time around students did interviews for what resulted in 22 oral histories from countries including Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Iran, Iraq, The Philippines, Poland, Sweden, Trinidad, Turkey, Viet Nam and Yemen. One student, himself the child of Dominican immigrants, interviewed his Bangladeshi sister-in-law, as an interviewer asking her questions he’d always wanted to ask but never felt comfortable asking. Another student interviewed her Iraqi-born roommate and finally understood something t her roommate had never explained and she had never asked about: why her roommate’s

father had been so upset that time when he noticed at dinner that she was wearing nail polish. My student learned that Muslims must wash their hands before eating, and that their hands must be bare, which includes being free of nail polish. When my student's roommate appeared at the table with nail polish, her father knew she was not practicing her religion as she'd been taught to. Yet another student, who herself had once lived through the discomfort of being undocumented immigrant interviewed a friend's boyfriend, an undocumented Ecuadoran who had finally gotten to this country through Mexico led by a coyote, but only after three financially costly and life-threatening previous efforts.

Said the interviewer, in her own reflections, "I consider myself a moderately educated person...But as I took the train home, I realized...that before I met Luis that night, if he had even so much as smiled at me in passing, I would have ignored him. In fact, I probably would have subconsciously pegged him in my mind as one of 'those Mexicans', who leer at every woman on the street and drink beer on the corner while waiting for jobs to come to them. But Luis does not leer and is not a layabout, and it had taken me far too long to recognize that."

Two of the most interesting oral histories, to me anyhow, raise the question of what I can only call post-national identity, a step beyond transnational identity. One oral history subject was the daughter of Ugandan diplomats, born in Vienna, with a childhood spent in Calgary, London and New Rochelle with occasional visits to Uganda. She identifies with no nation state at all. The second subject was the son of citizens of India who had lived and worked in Saudi Arabia for 30 years where their son was born. But Saudi guest workers are not entitled to citizenship, nor to residency once their employment ends, nor are their children, entitled to citizenship or residency, even if born in Saudi Arabia. When this young man's parents retired, they returned to India; however, he had no desire to go to India with them, a country he had never even visited, so he migrated to the United States. These two accounts raise questions about the durability of affiliation with, and loyalty to, a nation state, especially in diasporic times.

On a macro level, we are already contending with post-national politics. Less explored, and worthy of exploration, is the personal experience of these post-nationals. So perhaps another research project generated by classroom practice awaits me.