

Columbia University in the City of New York

You See How Many Things I Told You?

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To Angelina, Marcella and Geltrude.

And to all my narrators.

Introduction to the research:

This paper will explore the journey that brought me to the research for my thesis project for OHMA.

In 2018, I moved to New York City, from Rome, and a few months later I wrote what I missed the most about my city, sitting down in my room. Most of it related to parts of my life before moving the United States, but some others are still relevant: *“Of Rome I miss the view from my window. The warm and bright light of a cold but sunny Sunday winter morning, that even driving on an empty Via Casilina is a subtle pleasure. The amazement you feel coming out of the Colosseum subway stop after an awful trip. The yellow Stefer tram on Via Casilina, that used to connect Rome to the southern part of Lazio, that for 1.50 euro brings you back to 1980 and I can almost picture my mom getting off in Centocelle holding hands with her now grown up nephew to bring him to the park. Watch Ascanio Celestini perform in a Quadraro square. Walking aimlessly in the city center at night. Le pietre d’inciampo (stumbling stones). Wander through Pigneto and think of Pier Paolo Pasolini and his movie ‘Accattone’. My neighborhood, but not the part that parks their car at a stop sign to go grab a coffee, but the kind that stops you to tell you that ‘here, forty years ago, there was no city.’”*

This feeling of nostalgia for a place that I love deeply started making me curious about how other Italians that I was meeting and getting in touch with perceived their own relationship with Italy and their hometown. As the years living in New York went by, going down that path I started thinking in reverse about the people I started considering friends and family here, their stories, their very often, Italian heritage, and the connection to it. I wanted to explore the duality of this feeling, belonging in two places, to two cultures that are similar and different and so far from each other that at the end it becomes a mix.

Rosella, born in Rome. Living in New York since 1996:

“We’re like people that are split in two. One side of you belongs there, and one here. I’ll never be one hundred percent something, one part of me will always stay here, and another one there. How do reconcile that? I don’t know. I don’t think you can reconcile them.”

Gina, born in Rome. Living in New York since she was a young child:

“Sometimes I think it’s, you know, the greatest gift I have is having this multifaceted cultural experience viewpoint [...] and then also it’s one of those, you know, double-headed dogs! It can be confusing!”

While I was exploring this idea, I also kept thinking, naively, that my life back home, and the people that were there, were not going anywhere. I kept thinking I always would have found them there, like if time were not going by for them as well. Then something happened.

My best friend’s grandmother, Marcella, suddenly passed away. I had the chance to see her just once after two years that I could not return to Italy due to Covid. I have a lot of memories with her, and she was family to me. Losing someone that I thought would have lived forever, even if I knew it does not work like that, I could not imagine home without her. I did not have the chance to interview her seriously, even if I heard a lot of her stories over the years.

It was a shock for me and when I started OHMA, I kept thinking I wanted to follow through on my initial idea, which was to investigate the duality of Italian-Americans and the experience of Italians moving to the United States, and the effect it has on their perception of their own culture when influenced by American culture and vice versa. However, month after month, I would go back and think about the fact that there are some people that I’ll never have on tape, and how much I would have wanted to hear Marcella’s voice again. I had been

searching for a simple way to express how I feel about this, about the idea of not having someone I love on tape, and not being able to listen to their voice again when I miss them deeply, until I read a sentence in an interview of Ascanio Celestini: “In recordings of people’s voices I find something extraordinary. So the thing I always suggest is ‘Record your parents, record your grandparents. [...] And even with all the technology we have today, we always miss on the voice, we never record it by itself, and there is something in people’s voices that is not on their faces.’”¹

Thinking about this, my interest shifted, all I wanted to do was to go home and record the people that I still could, their voices and laughter, their pauses and stories.

Because when someone tells you a story, it’s never just a story, there is a lot more to it. There is the person’s need to tell the story, but also their need to be there in that moment with me. This relationship is so complex, that I [as the interviewer] fall inevitably in it. And I find concrete elements that bring me into that narration. In that narration we give each other the tools we have to create a connection. I’m listening to the story, I remember something, and I think of more things, so I’m interested in that person because that person is igniting something.²

After receiving training at OHMA, I went back and listened to old interviews, regretting so much all my talking, interrupting and not asking the right questions. I asked questions that were too general, dates and other details that were not so relevant, when interviewing someone on their life history. I interrupted too much and filled the interview with stories that belonged to my life or irrelevant details. I did not know, until I was better trained, that silence is an answer. And that silence is also more than that. It is a space where the narrator reflects and thinks back on their life, a moment that often shares more than words. But not knowing that, I would try to avoid it, fill it, or make sure it would be brief.

¹ Ascanio Celestini in dialogue with Alma. *What are we going to put in this void?* (People, 2022), 19

² Ascanio Celestini in dialogue with Alma. *What are we going to put in this void?* (People, 2022), 69-70

I felt a void, and what made me feel better was that I knew that I was trying the best I could not to make the same mistakes again, but instead I was doing all I could to have something to freeze their stories and memories in time, and so, in a way, them.

That is how I realized that I was still interested in understanding and preserving stories of immigration and cultural adaptation to a new world, and how Italian immigrants were perceived and how their culture changed by living in the US, but at the same time I wanted to work on preserving the stories I had closer to home.

In anthropology, researchers usually go to find “*l’altro nell’altrove*” (the other, in another space), travelling, encountering another culture, and trying to understand the differences and similarities. Instead I belong more to the idea of researching “the other close to home.” There is always more to learn about those near and dear to us, aspects of their lives and experiences that we had no or limited knowledge about. This is exactly what I wanted to explore in my research, starting with the people that matter the most to me.

During my time at OHMA, I came in contact with the opinion that oral historians could not interview and work on people’s stories just because at some point they would pass away. This alludes to a debate that is central to the field: who is oral history for and what is its purpose? I am of the opinion that it is enough of a reason on its own. Not only is it an act of preservation for something that might otherwise be forgotten, but without it, we also risk losing the understanding of our roots and “*il posto da dove si viene*” (the place where we come from), someone that has known us since we did not even know ourselves, that has memories of our lives before we do and also has a story that we can connect to even if we did not live it ourselves, but that we must carry on, because it shapes our sense of belonging, of self, our ability to pass it down and, in a broader sense outside of the self, helps us understand events in the past and historical memory. Knowing where we come from, and being able to have mental images of those “origin” stories, is what keeps us grounded and rooted. It’s what

gives us the opportunity to hold on when we will slowly lose these people over course of time, and a way to feel less lost while experiencing it.

I have re-written this paragraph many times, and every time, putting this concept down in words, makes me tear up a little. I think I was around the age of twenty-five when I realized what was at stake, and that I only had a finite amount of time to be able to save it. Maybe for other people that comes much later in life, but I am sure that at some point all of us will have this feeling: the desire to be able to go back in time and record the people we missed. This is why, in my opinion oral history is so important and this urge is so real. No matter who are the people that mean something to us, no matter how much time we think we probably have, we should all dedicate some time to recording. I strongly believe nobody would regret it, years later.

Memory gets easily lost, now even more than before, with this heightened sense of memory-keeping we have through phones and computers. They are constantly in use taking pictures, sending messages and writing notes, recording videos that are never, or rarely, looked back on. Before, one had to remember a friend's number, their face, send a postcard, a letter or call from a phonebooth. I am not trying to say "the great old times," since I was also born when these practices were already slowly disappearing. However it seems that as time passes, memory is exercised less and less, and especially since something else remembers in its place, it is easier to not pay as much attention. Then when it hits home that we can no longer record that person, or take a picture of them, record their voice or that memory, we realize they are really gone. This is why it is so important to remember, to record and preserve, to go back and start paying attention to memories of the people we care about.

When someone passes away, the voice is often what is forgotten first; their words, sentences, ways of saying, little peculiarities. Not all of them, of course, but everyone has a personal and unique way of telling a story, mistaking certain words, pronouncing something,

and just using their own words. This makes up so much of what is to be preserved of their voice, both physical and metaphorical.

My approach to this preservation has been very much shaped by the work of the oral historians that I admire most, mainly Ascanio Celestini and Alessandro Portelli.

Oral historians cite more often words from their sources, and they keep as much as possible their sources style and syntax; when possible they indicate the name and last name of their narrators, that way they can recognise them as authors of their own stories, responsible of their own words, and include their own subjectivity and imagination, their verbal art in their telling of the story.³

Even if the interviews are used as part of research or a project, they are not the researcher's story, so therefore the narrators words are the best placed to tell the story. This ties strongly back to the importance of orality, but also to the importance of telling stories and creating images. When one goes back in their memory to tell a story, it is almost always thought about and described visually.

Telling these stories also takes on the importance of not only giving back to the people and/or community being researched in or to the area where the research happened, but also because telling the story creates a tether in memory, through which we are able to connect with that moment in history. It is also a way of bringing back that person, pulling them closer, and to life in the present, in a sort of continuum.

That is how and why my project moves through two different sides of the ocean that come together with their similarities and differences.

The process started with me reaching out to the people I had closer, my grandmother, friends of my mother that I grew up with, some of her colleagues, and then I started asking family of some of my friends, people that matter to me, or that ideally represent a part of my life or something significant to me. Some of the other narrators I met by accident, like Sal, the doorman of my old building in New York, or Alan, a man that was attending a class with

³ Alessandro Portelli, *Storie Orali: Racconto, immaginazione, dialogo* (Donzelli Editore, 2007), 81.

me at Columbia. Then other people offered, after I mentioned the idea I had for my project, feeling the need to capture these memories and wanting to share.

During the first interviews, I was really nervous, getting to know someone even more than what you already know, asking questions that potentially can be too private or might trigger a memory, it can be scary. I reassured my narrators – and in a way myself – that they were always in control, and that anything that they did not feel comfortable sharing or answering, they did not have to. It might seem obvious, but it is also something I learned throughout the year in the core courses of my program and through familiarization with the Oral History Association's *Principles and Best Practices for Oral History*. All my narrators responded positively to the interviews and were actually curious of the questions and eager to share, something that definitely helped my anxiety.

While I was listening back to all the interviews to edit them, I could feel also my attitude change between the first ones and the latter ones. I would stutter less and be more concise at the beginning asking introductory questions, I would know better when to take breaks and when to move on to the next questions, how to not interrupt and when the interview was coming to an end. I learned to prepare some topics before the interview to remember all the areas I wanted to go over during the session, but my personal approach for interviewing was always to let the answer guide the flow and the direction of the interview. I always tried not to have a too strict of an idea in mind, but to keep an open and curious perspective while listening. The instinct at the base of this is that what we want to do and say in our project is already in our mind in a way, at least the core of it, and what we have to do is try to put it in order.

As mentioned before, it is still very important to arrive prepared at the interview, because the interviewer is about to enter someone's life to know more about their story, but in a literal sense these people are giving us something of theirs that is very important, so

being sincere on why and how one is doing that research is very important. I struggled with that a little bit at the beginning because I felt certain that I wanted to tell their stories, but the outlines of where I was going with the whole research was not as certain. But as soon as they started talking, they realized it was a special time between them and me, a ritual, in a way. It is a connection and a bond that is created with the narrator. Portelli writes, “the interview is an exchange of looks because throughout [the interview] the interviewer observes the narrator, but the narrator also observes the interviewer to understand who they are and what they want, and on this conception, they craft the shape of their dialogue.”⁴ Maybe not necessarily outside of the interview, but the interview itself was something that both the narrator and the interviewer have decided to set aside and frame in time. It really means that one is trying to see and meet the other.

I started interviewing people in New York first, and then over the winter and summer breaks I went back to Italy to interview people there. Compared to interviews I had done when I was in high school, I had a level of preparation and insight that made these some of the most interesting I had ever done, and I got to know details and stories that otherwise I would have never heard, and that might have been lost. It happened often that narrators or others sitting in on the interview said “*oh, I had forgotten about this*”, “*I’ve never said this before*”, “*I didn’t know this, you never told us before.*” Sometimes in families it can be hard to set aside time specifically to go over someone’s life, and so some things are never known, because they were never asked.

In at least five interview sessions, members of the family would gather together and listen in silence, with almost reverential curiosity, as if watching something in a theater. Even if their reverence remained unsaid, it was clear that something important and special was happening: the passing down of stories, of anecdotes and memories that belonged to all of

⁴ Alessandro Portelli, *Storie Orali: Racconto, immaginazione, dialogo* (Donzelli Editore, 2007), 60.

them. I never felt worried that a small audience would affect the interview, and their presence was always respectful. In a couple of instances it even helped supplement the narrators responses when they could not remember a detail and they asked for help.

I vividly remember when I interviewed my best friend's grandmother, whose own words gave me the title of this project. She was sitting on the couch in her daughter's living room, I was sitting next to her, and then slowly, her daughter sat on the other end of the couch, my best friend next to me, another of her daughters then arrived, and after a point, a little shyly, not sure if they could add something, they also started their own personal trip through memories, reconstructing their story. It is something that warms me every time.

Sometimes the opposite would happen. The narrators would respond to some of my questions about their family or their relationship with them and say: "*oh, now that I think about it, I don't know, I've never asked about this story, or about this*" and for certain people they now cannot go back to ask, and you can see in their eyes the moment of realization and the subtle understanding of why we were really sitting there. The tether to the memory cannot pull, because there is not something on the other side that anchors it when the core of the memory has faded. This research to me is trying to recreate that tether, as much as possible, both for myself and my sense of belonging in order not to lose that connection in the future, and for the people that I love, for them to hold on to, or try to go back and create one while they can.

Sharing and reflecting on these topics together with my narrators reinforced in me even more the importance of recording the people we love while we have the chance, and trying our best to ask as many questions and hear as many stories we can.

The purpose behind this for me was not only to preserve the stories, but also to show that sharing memories and life histories can help us know something we might have missed about our family or our history. I believe we can understand parts of our history, where

certain choices might come from, how to overcome moments in our life where we feel lost, through the stories of other people that might have experienced the same or similar event, before us, or can help us fill that gap we have. As an example, one thing I have learned is why one of my narrators had to make certain choices in her life through retracing her family history with her, more specifically the role, actions, and expectations of her mother.

An aspect that was really challenging for me was, over time, to stay motivated. This was my first project, my first real set of interviews, the first academic research I have ever done, and at times I felt really doubtful and lost. All the other projects around me felt really driven with no doubts at all, instead I kept thinking that mine did not entirely feel like academic work because it was not trying to uncover some never-before-heard historical events, so I kept trying to find some hidden, deep, intricate reason on why I wanted to pursue this kind of research that was mostly focused on people that are part of my immediate family or friends other than the fact that I loved them.

I have battled with this for months, and then I realized that, for as simple as it might sound, my reason was genuinely preserving these people and their stories, in a perhaps seemingly naïve attempt to hold on to them, to have some answers, to ground myself and keep my roots that I am so deadly afraid of losing in the years to come. The narrators that belong to the side of Rome in particular are part of who I am, and knowing them and what they taught me is what helped me through some tough times, especially while living abroad. I think almost every day of how life will be once I will not be able to go back and find them waiting for me back home, and this is the only way I have found helpful to feel less scared and hurt about it. If anything, I will have something to go back and listen to, both I and the families of my narrators, which is more than most people manage to have.

Differently, the narrators that belong to side of New York, remind me of why so many people travel, of the connections and relationships you can create once you leave home and

your comfort zone. They remind me of how much there is to see and know, and how wonderful it can be to expand your knowledge and find so many incredible people that feel so similar and close even if they come from a completely different place and time.

I have struggled with the sense of guilt and feeling of nostalgia being so far away from my friends and family, often wondering if I had made a mistake moving so far and having ambitions that might be bigger than my abilities. Some of my narrators on the side of New York are some of the people that remind me that even for the fact that I got the chance to meet them and know their stories, it was worth trying.

Present narrators and absent ones:

The narrators that took part of my project mostly come from Rome and New York, with the exception of a few that were and are very important for me growing up, from other parts of Italy. The US narrators are all people that I have met during my years in New York, that were friends, or a new “family,” and a constant discovery for me. Each and every one of them is either family, in the larger sense of people that help you grow even when you are not related by blood, and/or people who, with their story, hold a very important meaning for me, like a place or a moment in my life.

I have always had a very conflicted relationship with time growing up, and even now, I am always looking back and trying to find ways to preserve a present that I feel slips through my fingers every day. While listening to their stories I felt like time was going slightly backwards and slower, but as soon as I started putting the interviews back together for this project, I began to wonder if it was enough to show them what I was trying to do, and if it was enough to show them the importance their stories have for me and to honor them.

The other narrators, *the present but absent ones* I have, even if they are not here anymore, are all the narrators I wish I had, to whom this project is dedicated. If not through recollection and memories from other people, since I will never have the chance to capture their stories again, this is what guides me through my work: the constant reminder of taking that chance, of making that interview even if you feel like you will have more time another day.

I have learned by doing, that the time is always now, even if we tend to forget it. The perception I have of how a lot of oral history that is made and consumed these days is based on it being catchy and perfectly clear in sound. This perception comes from podcasts I have listened to, produced both here and in Italy, or other kinds of projects developed through oral history. I understand the reason for recording a clear interview, so that it can more easily be preserved and listened to, but the most important thing should be to get the message across and keep exploring the field, when sometimes we obsess over certain details and lose the bigger message and the amount of time we had. “My” missing narrators are the ones that taught me that, and even if it was a harsh learning curve, it will always guide my curiosity moving forward.

Their words / translation / transcription:

Another aspect I have learned with this project is how to navigate, or at least try to, a bilingual project and its translation.

Is literal translation enough? Probably not. Then does the question get solved with just trying to explain what is missing in one language by expanding the text in the other? In a way. The reality is that you will never be entirely satisfied, because you would always want everyone to understand the original, to capture their tone, jokes, pace, pick up a dialect word,

and so on. So, when I decided to find a way to make the interview content accessible in two languages, both Italian and English, I tried to compromise and find someone that had a similar voice, or that could read with care and passion someone else's story. There are also always going to be words that will remain untranslatable like words in dialect that do not have a direct parallel, words in Italian that express a specific meaning, and the same problem can exist in English.

One thing that I noticed working on all the interviews that I have transcribed, is that orality and someone's way of speaking, their own personal way, is really what ties the relationship between the narrator and the interviewer, and in a way also with the person that then reads or listens to it. What we will remember of all the interviews, is maybe not the entire contents, but mistakes the person might have made that give an entire different sense to the sentence, or their unique way of pronouncing something, the inflection or their dialect. That is why it is so important to be precise and render that in when we transcribe.

This still remains one of the most difficult things for me about this project, I am still nervous that I might have not been able to render what my narrators are saying in its entirety, but when encountering this problem in the future, what I will try to remind myself is that certain things need to be embraced for what they are: aspects of this work that is not entirely in our control. The perfect translation does not always exist, but the best version of something is always out there to be strived for.

For knowing how to transcribe Roman dialect or a general more dialectal tone was really helpful to reread "*Rebel and never tamed*"⁵ and "*Mira La Rondondella*"⁶ to study how dialects and words were transcribed as close as possible to the narrators' way of speaking.

⁵ Alessandro Portelli, *I giorni cantati*, vol. 2, (Squilibri Editore, 2012).

⁶ Alessandro Portelli and Antonio Parisella, *I giorni cantati*, vol. 4, (Squilibri Editore, 2016).

It might sound simplistic, but reading these books gave me a real sense of what this type of work should look like, maybe also because I am from Rome, and so I have a different understanding of Roman, that reading it how someone said in the 1970's or 1980's was an incredible discovery for me, imagining a reality that otherwise I would not have the chance to experience.

Just like it was for my undergraduate thesis, or my high school project, or anything else I try to write or explain about why oral history and how I would like to be able to do my research, my inspiration and foundation comes from the work of Alessandro Portelli and Ascanio Celestini. I have read most of their work more than once, and every time I feel like all the confusion that is in my head when thinking of a project becomes clear in their work. I feel understood and found by their work. There is a piece that Celestini created in 2005 that is called "Clandestine Radio" a theater piece from the book *The Order Had Been Carried Out* by Alessandro Portelli about the massacre of Fosse Ardeatine.

This was an event in the history of Rome and Italy that was debated for decades, that should be a moment of unity for the Italian population, that should have no doubt about what and why it happened, but that still instead divides and changes how a part of our history is told as a nation, due to political reasons. I go back to that piece every time I need a reminder of why this work is important, I know its words almost by heart and it reminds me how many incredible people, women and thoughts have walked on the same streets I walked on for years.

Lastly, Celestini will be the Italian voice to a few of my American narrators that are part of the website I have built for this project. He will read the transcripts of two men that were born in the United States from Italian immigrants. And that is one of the things that makes me the most happy and excited about this work, the possibility to have the voice that accompanied me in many of my researches, in one my first personal projects.

Why a website for this project:

The reason behind the decision to create a website came from the exposure to OHMA, and the chances we were given to explore each other's ideas or the websites of people that graduated before us. Additionally, there was also the idea that this work, without a forum in which to present the interviews, photos, and overall stories, would then just render down to my own mental soliloquy and would have only been my thoughts about how much I will miss all of these people once they are gone. So a digital website seemed like the best way to give access to anyone that was interested in learning more.

Most of the decisions on how to edit and shape the chapters that compose each narrator's page, come from the idea of recreating their life path, including family archives of pictures and memorabilia, but the remaining chapters of each narrator vary across different topics. Rarely is it chronological, unless the style that the narrator decided to have was more catered toward that, like it was for Luigi Cardinali and Maria Rosaria di Paola. The rest was more shaped by the idea that I want the interview, and therefore the editing work, to be guided by what the narrator wants to talk about. It might be easier to view someone's life chronologically when they tell a story, and for some people it can be like that, that they might like to tell it in a chronological structure. But most of the times it is more so a matter of links through life. It is chaotic, all over the place and confusing, for the person to remember. It is the tiny little details that would have been skipped if someone else summarizes the story. Instead it is all about these details, it is all about the type of connection that the narrator makes in retelling their story:

Filomena would go back to talking about food, in very specific details: the smell, the kind, the execution of a dish, the ingredients used.

Maria Rosaria would go back to her dialect and on how her grandmother used to speak, the words and sayings she used to use.

Rosella would go back to the house, the buildings and the streets of Rome's historical center she grew up in. Describing visually in details how beautiful they were and how walking around in Rome and its buildings is what she misses the most about living in New York.

Luigi would go back and forth on how her mother being very religious but his wife being very political and close to what it used to be the PCI (Italian Communist Party) shaped his life and his methods as a teacher.

What brings these stories all together for me, is not only the fact that I know these people and that I am trying to preserve their stories, but also the fact that the details can spark a memory or an image of a person in many people. This is also not an exclusively Italian concept. Maybe the streets of Rome are different from the ones of a small town in New Jersey, or the food is not quite the same as what Filomena's mother used to make, but we can all find something of ourselves and our families in there.

On a more technical and aesthetic aspect, I have also used photos my mother took in the neighborhood of Quarticciolo, in Rome, with her students in 1989. She is a retired technology middle school teacher. She took those pictures as part of a project she did with her students in 1989 called "the goal is remembering". They went out in the neighborhood where the school was, and took pictures of landmarks in the area, or other things like a bus stop, a tram, a street sign that they knew would change overtime. The idea was to take these pictures to remember how things were then, and be able to look back at it in the future. My mother and her students won a city-wide photography contest back then with this project. An exhibition was organized by the city municipality of Rome in 2003, fifteen years later, to draw comparisons of the changes in the area, through the pictures taken by my mom and her students. I wanted things, for as much as possible, close to home. Just a couple pictures are

taken from the internet. What does not come from narrators comes from me, my mother or my friends.

My urge and therefore what the website embodies, is a time capsule, trying to put in as many highlights as possible, to be able to go back in forty years to the exact life there was in memories of my favorite people in the winter of 2022.