

## Uncovering Paths to Teaching: Teacher Identity and the Cultural Arts of Memory

By Susan Florio-Ruane & Linda G. Williams

Audacity had liberated them. They were pioneers, though they never walked an American plain and never felt real soil beneath their feet. They moved in a sadder wilderness, where the language was strange, where their children became members of a different race. It was a price that must be paid.

—Mario Puzo, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, 1964

So kindly were all the teachers with whom I worked and the children whom I taught that I actually had to look in the mirror to realize that I was colored. . . . I loved my boys and girls. I taught Negro, Jew, and German as they came to me in the many changes that 45 years in one district will bring. The mixture was interesting to watch in the classroom. . . .

—Fannie M. Richards, as quoted on the occasion of her retirement, June 20, 1915

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### Introduction

This article reports our collaborative research on teacher identity as revealed by examining paths to teaching. When individuals enter the teaching profession, they appear to be making a personal career choice. Beginning educators look ahead, envisioning the teachers they hope to become. At this time it is rare to look backward, to revisit the path that led to the decision to teach. Yet who we are and where we

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stand as we begin our teaching career is shaped by history, society, and culture. To understand the teachers we are or will become, it is helpful to understand the larger picture that encompasses our personal histories. It is important to know about 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.

This research acknowledges that apparently personal decisions are supported by and heavily influenced by previous sociohistorical events and ongoing cultural processes. When individuals enter a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), they join others who bring their own particular histories with them. Knowing the stories of our own paths and the stories of the paths taken by others is a significant part of the development of one's identity not only as a teacher—but as a member of the larger teaching profession. Thus we began our inquiry both autobiographically and collaboratively, seeking to uncover our own paths to teaching through historical and cultural investigation. The collaborative nature of this work required that we conduct our research in conversation with one another, seeking to “connect the webs of our local microcultures into a much more complex network of webs linking human beings over time and across distance and difference” (Florio-Ruane with deTar, 2001). This article reports on that work and also discusses what we see as its implications for teacher education.

### **Uncovering Paths to Teaching**

To uncover the paths each of us have taken to teaching, we turned to our ancestors. For Williams, these included African American women who migrated from the South to Detroit between 1850 and 1920. 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 sizeable segments of the teaching forces in their cities of entry. Curious to know more about our figurative “grandmothers” who broke paths for us into careers in teaching, we traced two mother/daughter pairs.

We crafted a hybrid genre for our research-based accounts of our foremothers' paths to teaching. Influenced by Mary Catherine Bateson's (1989) case studies, we borrowed her term, “life compositions,” as we wrote accounts to recover what our predecessors' experiences might have been. In particular, we focused on what led them to want an education and to want to educate others. In so doing, we learned about the roots of our shared intense valuing of education (in particular literacy education), as well as the similarities and contrasts in the paths our forebears took to become teachers.

In our research, autobiographical and biographical inquiry reached beyond the boundaries of personal interest. Our perspectives as teacher educators enlarged as we studied the micro- and macro social factors that influence the decision to teach. Moreover, since inquiry into teacher identity depends on remembering, both as recalling and reconstructing a person, a time, a place, and a cultural milieu, this process of self discovery led us to the discovery of others (Au, 1995). We thus accessed aspects of teacher identity—especially race—which are difficult to discuss, but remain central to an examination of the history of our profession and troubling to our efforts to recruit and prepare a multicultural teaching force.

Several compelling, contemporary life histories and narrative accounts (e. g., Casey, 1995; Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995; Foster, 1997; Munro, 1998; Weiler, 1998) explore and contextualize the path to teaching taken by both women and men. Generalized accounts based on large samples (Waller, 1935; Lortie, 1975; Rousmaniere, 1997), provided by sociologists and historians of education offer snapshots of the profession and how people adjusted within it. Gendered patterns of choice are explored in other historical texts, such as well-known ones by Rury (1991), and Perlmann & Margo (2001). From this accumulation of multi-disciplinary research we have the sense of teaching, especially at the elementary grades, 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 20C. Notwithstanding this literature, we lack an integration of the personal and the cultural, the local and the global as these impact the decision to teach. We have much to learn about the remarkable range and variety of contexts out of which teachers have come and within which they have worked across the enormous changes of the last century (see, for example, Williams, 2006).

### **The Cultural Arts of Memory**

Remembering the paths our foremothers have taken to teaching involves not only recalling previously known facts, but crafting narratives on the basis of learned information. The task of understanding is one that involves both reason and imagination to construct a past whereby one can situate and understand a present (Florio-Ruane with deTar, 2001, p. 7). Uncovering paths to teaching, we have found, is thus akin to what anthropologist Michael Fischer (1986) calls plying the “cultural arts of memory.” Cuban (1994), who has also researched teachers' lives and work, likens research on these hidden realities to archaeology. Finding only shards of pottery, the investigator must try to infer the whole pot and its context—what the people who made and used it must have known, valued, believed, tried to accomplish, needed—and to visualize the situations in which they lived and worked. To ask and try to answer such questions about the remnants of people's lives helps us to understand human nature. To do likewise with the remnants of teachers' lives is to help us to understand our own profession and place within it.

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The African-American and the Italian mother/daughter pairs we focused on were part of the national and worldwide shifting of rural, southern populations northward to industrializing urban centers after periods of civil war or revolution. The women members of groups whose hard won rights to democracy were delayed and derailed during the harsh economic depression which followed in the 1870's. These women left few tracks—so few that, indeed, the authors of this research were neither aware of them nor of the paths they broke for those of us who followed and became teachers.

To tell the story of their discovery, we began in our mothers' attics. Each of us, for different but equally difficult reasons, found ourselves joining siblings to empty the attics of our parents' homes—the places where we had grown up. Perhaps because of our interest in life stories, we lingered over photos, notes, programs, worn yearbooks, clippings—what researchers on women's literacies have called “ephemera” because of their informally preserved, scrapbook-like qualities (Gernes, 1992). These materials were of relatively little interest to others in our families, but seeking clues from family history we found ourselves asking questions and piecing lives and situations together out of them. Why had our mothers and grandmothers chosen to collect and save these shards? What did they tell us about who they were and who we might be—especially as they related to culture, identity, and education?

From this starting point, we traced the experiences of African-American migrants to Detroit and Italian immigrants to New York from whom each of us had “descended” to become teachers. As such, we were engaged in dialogic cultural, historical, and autobiographical inquiry into identity development as a process of sense-making taking into account context as well as temperament, choices as well as history, social structure as well as resistance. The life compositions we developed are works of literary nonfiction from which we have drawn on factual accounts of events, mementoes, oral history, archival information, and literature in an attempt to recover what the almost invisible experiences of such women might have been like.

To this we added the additional task of interweaving our emergent life narratives—putting them in dialogue with one another in and across time. This was necessary, and was possible, because although we both had grandmother's attics and other means to compose our own lives as educators, we came from very different cities, grew up in different eras, and were born into families with different ethnic backgrounds and social histories. This act of interweaving the narratives—and the searches for information—also served the research purpose of cross-checking our interpretations with one another as we composed lives of women who both shared a great deal and differed in important ways. We were able to grasp some of the wider societal factors and forces constraining experiences of our predecessors which were previously not available to us in our memories, assumptions, or even in our readings of received narratives of the history of teaching in the U.S.

We found that autobiographical and biographical research is foundational to the study of culture and identity in our time—it is a way to un-freeze static, stereotypic ideas of self, other, and group. These ideas are often evident among our students,

who seem to struggle with conversations about race, social class, gender—and teaching (Florio-Ruane with deTar, 2001). Thus we hope that just as “breaking the frames” helped us to understand the nature and relevance of remembering diverse paths to education and teaching in our own lives, so such exploration might similarly serve beginning and experienced teachers as a fundamental part of their coming to understand themselves better as teachers.

### **Two Life Compositions**

Many factors were at play and ultimately transformed the life, education, and work of the African-American and Italian women who arrived in northern cities around the turn of the last century—a period of worldwide social transformation. The transformation was felt in the individual fortunes of people, in their families and social networks, and in the emergent mass public educational system in the urban U.S. Individually and collectively, we found evidence of this transformation as we sifted through the memorabilia of our parents’ and grandparents’ lives in the attics of our family homes. Race, class, and gender are intricately intertwined in the experiences of Lucia and Octavia Santa, Italian immigrants to New York City and Maria and Fannie Richards, African-American migrants to Detroit. Their stories illustrate the complexity of identity formation and the generational struggle to name, and rename themselves as teachers, as well as mothers and daughters.

#### ***Lucia and Octavia Santa***

Florio-Ruane is the first teacher in her family and the daughter of a woman who was an excellent student and hoped to teach if resources had been available in her family. Florio-Ruane began her search by interviewing elder members of her own family, asking them questions about some of the books and photos she had found in her family home. In one interview Florio-Ruane found a particularly rich vein to mine—a distant family connection to the novelist, Mario Puzo. In a household notable for its narrow range of texts used by women (for her great-grandmother, photo albums and prayer cards; for her grandmother, prayer books and sewing patterns; and for her mother, women’s magazines and a tattered copy of Dr. Spock’s classic book on childrearing), there was a surprising attic discovery. Florio-Ruane found a well-worn copy of *The Fortunate Pilgrim* by Mario Puzo. Unaware of the book or why it was in the attic, she turned to her Aunt (Zia Philomena, or “Aunt Phyllis”) with questions. “Did Mom read this book?” she asked. “Sure. We all did,” replied Aunt Phyllis—as if Florio-Ruane should know. “Why? I thought he was popular for the Godfather books.” “Mario was your Uncle George’s cousin,” Aunt Phyllis replied.

Uncle George was Aunt Phyllis’ late husband, related to Florio-Ruane by marriage. Uncle George was Florio-Ruane’s favorite—and she was his. They spent many hours in her high school and college days talking about topics usually “unspoken” in her extended Italian American family—the church, politics, racism,

his life working on the New York Central railroad, and his childhood bout of rheumatic fever. “Read the book,” said Aunt Phyllis. It is about Uncle George’s family. Cousin Mario (she chuckled because his last name was not really “Puzo”), was in *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. All of the relatives are there—it’s really Mario’s life story. But he mixes up some things—like who did what exactly—so you can’t read it as straight facts. But the boy who gets sick, that’s your uncle.”

Florio-Ruane found in this autobiographical fiction a turnkey—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. Subsequent long conversations with Aunt Phyllis (what might be considered ethnographic interviews) combined with study of many of the traditional scholarly resources and close study of Puzo’s work, launched a life composition briefly described in this article.

In the quotes with which this article began, we hear first about Lucia Santa, the fictional matriarch in Mario Puzo’s first and only autobiographical novel. Based on the experience and temperament of his own immigrant mother, Puzo tells us what it was like for an immigrant from southern Italy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to live and raise a family in New York. And, 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.

Unlike Lucia, who experienced “being Italian in America,” her children—and of special interest to us, her daughter—became “Italian Americans” (Fischer, 1986). Lucia was aware of this distinction. It is part of the sad geographical and social wilderness she traversed. Language and education have chiefly to do with the shifting identity of Lucia Santa’s offspring. Their experience of formal schooling certainly was a part of the process by which they will be differentiated from their mother.

Puzo tells us that among Lucia’s difficulties was her inability to understand English. She had come to the U.S. with oral fluency in her mother tongue—a regional dialect of Italian. Chances are, however, that Lucia had only limited fluency and comprehension of what had become, just one generation earlier, the “standard” language of Italy. In 1900, the idea of an Italian national identity and a language considered to be “standard Italian” was still relatively new to people who lived in Mezzogiorno south of Rome and who emigrated to the U.S. in the largest numbers. So, when Lucia speaks of her children becoming another “race,” we can interpret the raced aspects of her life in two related ways.

First, as a southern Italian peasant, in a country that continues to name and grapple with what is called its “southern problem,” the history of her region (including its social, economic, political, ethnic, and linguistic roots) was considered “other” by mainstream Italians living in Rome and northward. As northern Italians were making the unification of Italy happen, they perceived the very different population of the south as racially inferior and an obstacle to the dream of becoming a modern European state (Schneider, 1998).

Second, upon coming to the U. S., her offspring entered the public schools in New York and learned to speak English, and that language became the first (and perhaps only) language spoken by Lucia's grandchildren. Her children also learned to read and write—skills in which Lucia was only minimally prepared in her brief formal education in Italy. In her homeland, peasant girls generally had three years of formal education, typically in a local convent school and often in exchange for their labors in service to the nuns who taught them (Barolini, 1999). Like Fannie Richards' immigrant pupils in Detroit to whom we will soon turn, Lucia's children experienced free, mandatory, public schooling in New York—at least until eighth grade, and often beyond. Finally, as Puzo's novel reveals, education and literacy became pivotal in each of the children's fates in his or her new country.

In Puzo's novel, Lucia's concerns for loss and change were embodied in her daughter, Octavia. The only daughter, and one of the elder children in Lucia's clan, Octavia was portrayed as a young woman on the cusp of a new identity as an American. She was a fluent reader, writer, and speaker of English. What is more, she saw schooling and literacy as essential means by which her younger siblings could make successful lives—ones of relative financial security with occupations which were secure, afforded them personal safety, and removed them from the grasp of corruption and crime which threatened the children of immigrants.

But Octavia was a woman also close to her mother's side. It was not uncommon for her literally to sit at her mother's elbow at the kitchen table, talking over the family's problems and helping Lucia with her "homework," the piecework she did for the thriving millinery industry in Manhattan. In the novel it is likely that Octavia in part personified Puzo's own affinity for literacy and illustrated the tension between literacy and family. He reported in an interview shortly before he died that telling his mother that he had chosen to make his career in the field of writing made her both sad and angry. She likened such a career to that of someone selling drugs for a living (Gross, 1986).

Octavia was tied and torn by two factors in her desire to make a career, not as a writer, but as a teacher. She was tied to her immigrant mother's commitment to family and to a woman's work as the center of family life. Further, she was encumbered with her mother's angst about losing her children (via their new language and education) to another "race." While other authors (e.g., Lortie, 1975; Rury, 1991; and Perlman & Margo, 2001) 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.

For Octavia, becoming a teacher was not the easy solution to resolving inter-generational tensions. 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. Rather, for Lucia's generation, it was the work of men and



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of religious sisters. In Puzo's story, however, there is a metaphorical step Octavia can take to actualize her goals and enable her daughters and granddaughters to go further and enter the career of teaching. Experienced at sewing, which was both an activity she helped Lucia with for the family's needs and also as work-for-pay which could be done at home, Octavia retained a position as a sewing teacher.

It seemed that in modernizing the sewing machine by electrifying it and making it more powerful for the many sewing tasks traditional women faced, there was a need to offer free instructions to all women who purchased a new sewing machine. In her role as a teacher for a sewing machine company, Octavia blended the teaching role, her belief in knowledge derived from the study of text, the work of the hand, the domestic arts, and the realities of two economies among the women she and her mother represented—the working Italian immigrant woman who, based in the home, did sewing in order to support her family without leaving them; and the new Italian American woman who benefited from education, instruction, and new technology.

American schooling and English language and literacy fluency still retained close ties to the role of the woman in immigrant society. Octavia taught a craft typically practiced by females, but she taught it explicitly in a school-like setting and with supporting text. Moreover, she taught women to use a machine which could make their work faster, more profitable, and more powerful. Finally, she left the home to do this teaching and earned enough to make the expected contributions to her household's income but also enough to enjoy some freedom as a young working woman living in a large, interesting city.

If we look at the next generation of young Italian-American women—the “daughters” of Octavia—we see that they 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. They did so, unaware of the path to teaching of another group of women—educated black women who came north just prior to the Civil War.

Juxtaposed with the quote from Puzo's novel is a quote from Fannie Richards on the occasion of her retirement from teaching in the Detroit Public Schools. Fannie and Lucia were contemporaries and, had they lived in the same city, Fannie might have taught some of Lucia's children in public school. It is at the intersection of two life narratives that we begin to see not only how little we know about how, as teachers, we are linked to the women who came before us, but also how little we know of one another, as teachers of different races, who have followed different paths to teaching broken for us by very distinct ancestors.

#### ***Maria Moore Richards and Fannie Richards***

Williams is a second generation teacher in her family; her father, aunt, and uncle were also teachers. Curious about the path to teaching evident in her own family,



she found she had to go beyond the immediately preceding generation to the initial African American teachers in Detroit. Her research led to various mementoes that her grandmother, Ethel Andrews, had saved over the years, including scrapbooks and photo albums, as well as stacks of miscellaneous announcements, programs, obituaries, and memorabilia. Born in 1888 in Detroit, Mrs. Andrews frequently reminded her children and grandchildren that they were “Old Detroiters,” but it was not until this research inquiry—nearly 30 years after her death and upon her father’s selling of the family home—that the full import of this term became apparent.

Found among the mementoes was a collection of articles Mrs. Andrews had saved on Detroit’s first African-American teacher, Fannie Richards, who taught in Detroit from 1865 to 1915. It turned out that Miss Richards and her mother, Maria Moore Richards, were well acquainted with Mrs. Andrews’ parents. The families were in the same social circles and religious congregations (Second Baptist, and then later St. Matthews Episcopal). In addition, the families shared involvement in various social, literary, and philanthropic activities including the Detroit Study Club, the Willing Workers, and the Phyllis Wheatley Home for the Colored Aged (Williams, 2006).

When Miss Richards applied to teach in the public schools of Detroit, she was 23 years old, the youngest member of the esteemed Richards clan. Like many northern cities around the time of the Civil War, Detroit had a small, but visible African American population. Fannie Richards belonged to the upper echelon of that community; her family was considered to be among the “Cultured Colored 40,” a name that the press bestowed upon the several African American families of means within the city or whom Ethel Andrews called, “Old Detroiters,” distinguishing this early group of migrants from the later, larger waves of southern migration that occurred between 1910-1920. Fifteen years prior to the Civil War, many of these families had migrated from long-standing free Black settlements in the South located mainly in Virginia.

The Richards family originated in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where Maria Moore (Fannie’s mother) was born in 1800 to a Scotsman and a free woman of color. At that time in Virginia, free Blacks had many of the privileges that were later reserved only for Whites. Literacy, a tool of wealth and power in antebellum Virginia, was distributed only amongst the highest classes of both the free Black and White communities (Fischer, 1989). At the time of Maria Moore’s birth, literacy was encouraged by some elite slave owners who reserved the right to teach Blacks they enslaved, and the most progressive communities maintained “colored schools” (Hartgrove, 1916).

Maria Louise Moore had attained some distinction as a student of history and was evidently well thought of by both Whites and Blacks in Fredericksburg. In 1820, she married Adolph Richards, a native of Guadalupe. He operated a carpenter’s shop and fit in well with the industrial class of free Blacks (Hartgrove, 1916). The Richards had 14 children. Most began their education at home under the tutelage of Maria Moore Richards, but as they grew older, they were sent to tutors who were hired by African American community members to teach their children. This practice

became illegal, however, as laws in the South became more restrictive for even free Black families. No longer were persons, Black or White, allowed to teach any person of color how to read and write. Court records show that Mr. Richards was among a group of free Black men who petitioned the Virginia State legislature to build a school for colored children. This was in 1838, two years before his youngest daughter, Fannie Richards, was born (Reid, 1996; Katzman, 1973; Schweninger, 2001).

This brief history so far tells us much about many of the families out of which African American teachers, both male and female, were cultivated. McHenry and Heath (1994) remind us that diverse African American communities existed in both southern and northern cities prior to and after the Civil War. Within each of these communities there was a substantial group of highly literate citizens who organized literary societies, schools, and other social organizations that focused on self-development, education, and social justice.

Fannie Richards was about 10 years old when her father died, and her mother decided to relocate the family to Detroit, a city she heard was sympathetic to the plight of African Americans. The Richards family was followed by other well-established free Black families, who had capital to purchase property and/or establish businesses, as well as a fervent interest in acquiring an education for their children (Reid, 1996). Fannie attended the small private school run by Second Baptist Church, the central institution of the burgeoning African American community. She later is reported to have attended the Toronto Normal School (Detroit News-Tribune, 1915). When she returned to Detroit, she worked in a small private school for Blacks, until she decided to apply to the Detroit Board of Education to teach in the segregated Colored School No. 2.

Obtaining a position within the Detroit Public Schools was no small matter for a woman of color—even one as well “connected” as Fannie Richards. She, herself, describes the series of events as somewhat serendipitous (Hartgrove, 1916). One morning, she was walking to the small private school where she taught when she noticed that a previously abandoned building was being refurbished. She inquired of a workman on the site about the purposes of renovation. He responded that the building was intended to become Colored School No. 2. When Miss Richards heard this, she decided to apply to become the teacher in Colored School No. 2.

Detroit maintained separate schools for its White and Black citizens, despite a state law designed to eliminate school segregation. In addition, the education provided was not only separate, but unequal. For instance, children of color were offered only six years of schooling, compared to the twelve years of education offered White children (Katzman, 1970). The one school available to Black families was in a ward distant from where most families lived. The decision to open Colored School No. 2 was perhaps made to appease the many complaints African American parents made about the lack of education available to their children. But never before had the Detroit Board considered hiring an African American teacher, although there were several qualified Black teachers in the city. Fannie Richards’

application may have indeed been welcomed because an African American teacher of her status might have pacified the rising frustration of both wealthier and poorer families of color. Indeed, John Richards, Fannie's brother, a well-known politico and power broker among the Black and White elite, was a leading critic of the lack of educational opportunities for Black families. By hiring his sister, Fannie Richards, as the teacher for Colored School No. 2, the Detroit Board was perhaps able to respond to the growing outrage provoked by the segregated and unequal educational opportunities for Blacks in Detroit.

But Miss Richards was well prepared for the challenge of applying to the Detroit Board. Besides having earned her teacher credential in Toronto, Miss Richards came from a long-standing literate family that was well-versed in the uses of the word for social and political agitation. After placing first in the teacher examinations, Fannie Richards was hired as Detroit's first African American teacher in 1869. It was not long, however, before she was engaged in the battle to desegregate Detroit's schools. Miss Richards joined with her brother, John D. Richards, and John Bagley, a wealthy, White industrialist, to see a lawsuit to fruition. As a result of these desegregation efforts, Fannie Richards and her pupils were transferred to the integrated Everett School where she taught for 44 years before retiring (Hartgrove, 1916; Pebbles, 1981; Reid, 1996). Ironically, because of the desegregation of the schools and the relatively small Black population at the time in Detroit, Miss Richards taught mostly poor and working class immigrant children throughout her long career.

For Miss Richards and subsequent African American women who became teachers in Detroit's schools in her lifetime, the path to teaching was purposeful and nurtured by family and community. Shaw (1996) in her research on Black professional women at the turn of the last century, points out that African American families were well aware that their daughters would have to work to support their families, and that the only way to avoid domestic or agricultural work was to become a professional—and virtually the only profession available at the time was school teaching. Thus, Miss Richards' decision to teach could also be viewed as a strategic response to a culture that generally dismissed both African Americans and women and limited the opportunities that were available to them.

### **Lives in Context: Comparison and Contrast**

This African-American dynamic in pre-Civil War Detroit contrasts sharply with the entry into education of Italian immigrants of mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century New York. When African-American teachers like Fannie Richards were setting up the first kindergarten in Detroit and working with both African-American migrant and European immigrant pupils, Italians were just beginning to leave the mezzogiorno in large numbers, a response to their disappointment with the failure of promised reforms of the Risorgimento, or unification of Italy (Beales & Beagini, 2002). Unlike the Northern Italian immigrants who arrived in the United States in smaller number

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nearly a century before then, the Southern Italian “new immigrants,” were not only non-English speaking and marginally literate at best, they also came to the U.S. mistrusting the authority of government that was not local and a clergy thought to be complicit in their oppression. Many mistrusted “the word”—both as it was spoken by the powerful and as it was held in writing by the government and the church. Their education was exceeding limited as well (Mangione & Morreale, 1992).

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 and as suspect fugitives incapable of democratic self-government (Richards, 1999). With the First World War and subsequent closing, in 1920, of European immigration, the influx of European immigrants went from a torrent to a trickle. Italian immigrants and their offspring gradually grew to identify, not by villages left behind, but by their new status as ethnic-Americans. Ultimately their identities changed from incorrigible, illiterate outsiders to citizens who were assumed to be, along with other entrenched ethnic immigrant groups, “White” people, and with this ascription came a change in self-regard (Luconi, 2001).

The story of Maria Moore Richards and Fannie Richards also challenges static popular conceptions. Black teachers are often assumed, in the popular imagination, to have experienced underfunded, inadequate schooling themselves. When speaking about African American teachers who taught prior to and immediately after the Civil War, it is assumed that they had been enslaved and that their literacy attainment was the result of a kind master or clandestine activity. McHenry and Heath (2001) note that these conceptions are based, in part, on the tendency to “valorize poverty” rather than “detail the contributions of middle- and upper-class African Americans” (p. 261), whose presence and accomplishments are now being documented more thoroughly by researchers (see, for instance, Hine, 1994; Peterson, 1995; Shaw, 1996; Royster, 2000; Wolcott, 2001.) Fannie Richards’ successful career also challenges the popular explanation of school failure created by cultural mismatch. This explanation asserts that children are more successful in school if there is cultural congruency between the pupils and the teachers. Miss Richards’ career is an explicit example of successfully teaching across and within class, racial, and ethnic boundaries that were continuously shifting and redefining themselves over time.

Weiler (1999) reminds us that the stories we are uncovering are complex and should be sifted through carefully to understand the various perspectives. In her own work documenting the work of country school teachers in California, Weiler came to recognize that the “social and cultural world of my mother and other teachers was built on assumptions of White and Protestant hegemony” (p. 44). These hegemonic circumstances were evident in the life compositions of Fannie Richards and Octavia Santa. Equally as powerful in these narratives were the constructs of gender—how women were perceived and what roles they could assume. Class, too,

especially as it concerned self-determination and the allocation of women's labor, was another issue that demanded further examination.

When placed side-by-side, these cultural narratives provoked numerous conversations and comparisons. The racial juxtaposition of Fannie Richards and Octavia Santa in terms of individual power was explored on many occasions. Accustomed to thinking in generalities of Black women being less empowered than White women at the beginning of the last century. The findings of both researchers called into question persistent stereotypes and assumptions. Our narratives helped us to zoom in more closely and see how both African American and Italian American women asserted their own power within a racially imbalanced and unfair system. The fact that Octavia Santa was "raced" in terms similar to the experience of Fannie Richards points to the overwhelming power of racial constructs in developing personal and professional identity. Each woman, however, pushed against these boundaries through the development of literacy. They recognized the importance of possibilities and opportunities that literacy provided, and they both sought the power afforded those who taught.

Another frequently explored issue was that of class and labor. Like their mothers, both Fannie Richards and Octavia Santa were "working women" during a time when the norm for White middle-class Protestant women was to stay at home and care for the family and house. Octavia Santa managed to blur the boundaries between piecework and a career by using her English language and literacy to teach a skill that allowed women to remain at home and earn money for their families. Thus, technological advancements helped Octavia Santa realize a new sponsor of literacy (Brandt, 2001) that provided an opportunity for economic change. Paradoxically in Detroit, department stores did not hire African American women for sales or training positions until well into the 1960s (Williams, 2006). Because of this, there was little middle ground between the work of the domestic (where most urban Black women found employment at the turn of the last century), and the work of the professional teacher. Fannie Richards, like Octavia Santa, worked and took care of her mother and occasionally other family members (she never married nor had children of her own). She was clearly, however, a member of the Black elite by virtue of her family connections, her education, and her status as a paid professional within the community. The tradition of Detroit teachers emerging almost exclusively from the established and fairly conservative elite class was evident through the 1940s, and even today, one can detect echoes of this cultural shaping of the Black teaching force in Detroit and other cities (Williams, 2006).

### **Implications for Teacher Identity and Teacher Education**

The majority of elementary teacher candidates at our respective institutions are, like the historic and current majority of practicing U.S. teachers, female and "White." What we mean by this term is that they are of European descent, monolingual English speakers, and from working- and middle-class backgrounds. For

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most of our students, multiple generations have passed since their forebears immigrated, and they are well-assimilated—what we might call “mainstream”—and what Florio-Rune’s great grandfather, who emigrated from Southern Italy to the United States in the early 20C might have dubbed, “medi-ganes.”

Raising the topic of culture, as we often do in literacy courses, we frequently draw a blank from our students. Of course, the students acknowledge that their pupils come from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds—surely they “have cultures” that need to be respected. But in terms of their own positions *vis a vis* their pupils and their roles as educators, culture is merely a characteristic of minority children and families and, as such, a problem of practice to be studied and solved as part of becoming a good teacher.

As the stories of Fannie Richards and Octavia Santos illustrate, culture is a broad lens that deserves to be brought in closer and examined more directly and distinctly. Identity is neither fixed nor independent of context. 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. This calls for inquiries of both breadth and depth. Looking solely at the personal, we fail to acknowledge how individual thought and action are shaped, constrained, channeled, and sponsored by social, historical, and political systems. Yet focusing exclusively on the systemic nature of behavior among members of ethnic, racial, or gender groups, we fail to account for the nature and role of human agency within those systems. Finally, while looking at a watershed period of global change and change in education more than a hundred years ago, this work is part of a trend in immigrant studies to learn from the past in ways that anticipate and offer enriched ways to think about our contemporary period in teacher education and also plan for our future.

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. Perhaps, more important, 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. As we continue to struggle with questions of race, ethnicity, gender, and class—in-



dividually and as a profession—experienced teachers and teacher candidates may benefit from cultural and historical examinations of their own paths to teaching, an examination that crosses generational lines and includes a consideration of the role of literacy in the broader context of historical and cultural change. Such collaborative research helps to disrupt the persistent idea of static, bounded groups with stable practices, beliefs, and tools for communication. By examining our paths to teaching, we come to understand our work in the here and now in a new light—and we discover in the memorabilia of our individual and collective past patterns of migration and adjustment, people coming into contact with diverse others, newcomers entering new activity settings, and transformations over time in family life, work, gender roles, and political sensibilities. When we look at our own lives for evidence of our paths to teaching, as well as the lives of others, we also examine our tacit assumptions about who we are as teachers, how we differ and are similar to one another, and what we need to “re-member” both individually and collectively to create ourselves as teachers in the unfolding story of our profession.

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