

Auto

## In Search of Naunny's Grave

Nick Trujillo

*This article critically examines family stories and accounts about my grandmother that were generated after her death. In particular, I discuss three interpretations of the grandmother's identity that were represented in these stories and accounts: (1) the grandmother as giver, (2) the grandmother as server, and (3) the grandmother as body. In this article, I blend various forms of writing, including confession, impressionism, and critique, in an effort to reveal the emotions of family members (including myself), as well as my interpretations of their stories and accounts. Although this article is about a particular grandmother (who was also a mother, aunt, great grandmother, great great grandmother, cousin, and other family positions), the identities discussed here have implications for how women in general are interpreted by their family members. Keywords: aging, grandmother, frailty, autoethnography, family narratives*

I was devastated when I learned about the death of my grandmother, whom my sisters and I called "Naunny." I vividly remember when I heard the message from my dad on the answering machine that January evening in 1994; I instantly fell to my knees and started crying and praying for her. I knew that she had been moved to a nursing home because of her dementia and that she had developed a case of the flu, but I had no idea that her flu had turned into serious pneumonia. To this day, I still wish that my dad had called me earlier so that I could have traveled to Los Angeles to see Naunny one last time; instead, I went there to attend her funeral and deliver her eulogy.

Two summers later, I visited relatives in Los Angeles for the first time since her death. Whenever I visited L.A. in past years, I would always spend time with Naunny and Pete, her second husband, and it felt very empty not being able to visit her in her little apartment in East L.A. So instead of visiting her there, I decided to visit her at her gravesite.

I called my Uncle Chuck, the older of Naunny's two sons, to see if he wanted to go with me. He agreed to go, since he had not been to his mother's grave since her death either. He called Tim, his eldest son—and her very first grandchild—to see if he wanted to go with us. He, too, had not been there since her death, and he agreed to go. Tim was baby-sitting his 10-year-old (and first) grandchild, Lance. So the four of us—a son, two grandsons, and a great great grandson—crammed into the front seat of Tim's truck, and went in search of Naunny's grave.

### Family Narratives and the Grandmother as Text

*For many children, a departed grandparent lives on, immortalized in their hearts and minds.*  
(Korinhaber 101).

*And so Eloya's eternal life in heaven has just begun. But her life on earth has not completely ended, because her life with us will continue in the memories we will always have of her, and in the stories we can still tell each other about her. So I ask all of you friends and relatives here today to hold on to your*

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*memories of Naunny, of Grandma, of Aunt Elsie, of Mom, and to share your stories about her with one another.*

(From Her Eulogy)

I had gone to Los Angeles that summer to interview several family members about my grandmother, trying to fulfill in a more formal manner the words I uttered during her eulogy. Before my trip to L.A., I had sent letters to about 30 various relatives, asking them to write down their memories of Naunny. I ultimately received over 20 written (and a couple tape-recorded) responses from family members, each of whom shared their memories of her and their feelings about her. I also obtained the family journal I had asked her to start many years earlier when I was a graduate student (and writing a paper on family genealogy), as well as the daily log she kept at the request of my Uncle Chuck in the last several months of her life when she was suffering from dementia and could not remember much about her day. She continued this journal when she was moved from her small apartment to a nursing home, and wrote in it until three days before she died from pneumonia.

I also conducted over 15 semi-structured interviews with family members, asking them a variety of questions, including, among others: What do you remember most about Naunny? What is your first memory of her? Can you describe some times when you were with her? (What did you do together? What did you say to each other?) When was the last time you saw her? (What did you do? Say?) How would you describe her defining qualities and attributes? What was her significance to the family? What will you miss the most about her? These and other questions, adapted depending on the nature of the family member's relationship with my grandmother, elicited various personal stories and accounts about this beloved woman.

Several scholars have discussed the importance of family stories. Kristen Langelier and Eric Peterson argued that family storytelling is "a discursive practice that produces familial culture" (50). In their summary of family communication, Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfus, and Bochner noted that family stories teach moral lessons, connect generations of family members, and define the identities of family members and of the family itself. "Most families," Yerby and her colleagues concluded, "develop a corpus of stories that define their history, depict what makes them unique 'as a family,' establish the values and principles to which they are devoted, and characterize the identities of each family member" (206).

In this article, I examine family stories and accounts that characterize the identities of my grandmother. To some extent, I treated these family stories and accounts about my grandmother as *texts* to be interpreted. As a set of interrelated texts, these stories and accounts can be used to reconstruct some of the various meanings of my grandmother. In this sense, these stories and accounts are what Shotter and Gergen would call "texts of identity," and my grandmother herself can be considered a text, open to multiple interpretations. As Elliot Oring (258) wrote, lives are "artful and enduring symbolic constructions which demand our engagement and identification," concluding that "[l]ife history, therefore, is not only one of the genres of literature; it is one of the genres of self." As a text, then, my grandmother is open to many readings, some of which I might never have made from my position as a particular grandson with a particular relationship with her.

As a member of this family, however, my own recollections—my own texts—are indeed part of this analysis and, therefore, shaped my interpretations of the family

stories and accounts about my grandmother. In this sense, this study has an *autoethnographic* quality as well. As Norman Denzin defined it, autoethnography refers to the "turning of the autoethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur" (227). Carolyn Ellis concurred, noting that an autoethnographic approach does not attempt to squeeze out others, but rather recognizes Michael Jackson's directive that "our understanding of others can only proceed from within our own experience, and this experience involves our own personalities and histories as well as our field research" (17). However, as Lyle Crawford added, "to take up a cultural text and position it in my lived experience through autoethnography is to change how I experience others as others." (167) Such an approach encouraged me to examine how my interpretations of the family stories and accounts about my grandmother were shaped by my own interpretations of her, and *vice versa*; that is, this approach encouraged me to examine how my own interpretations of my grandmother could be reshaped by examining the family stories and accounts, leading me to reinterpret her identities in the family as well as her meaning in my life.

Finally, I also adopted a critical perspective, drawing especially on feminist literature, and analyzed these family stories and accounts—including my own—not only as texts that reconstructed the possible meanings of my grandmother, but also as political resources through which certain images of my grandmother in particular, and of the women in my family in general, are reinforced and reproduced. "No narrative is innocent in this view," Bryan Taylor wrote, because a critical perspective "clarifies how that discourse privileges certain meanings" (191). With respect to *family stories*, Langellier and Peterson (50) argued: "[F]amily stories are not simple representations of preexisting family history. . . . Rather, family storytelling names practices of social control. Stories and storytelling both generate and reproduce 'the family' by legitimating meanings and power relations. . . ." From a critical perspective, then, family stories and accounts about certain family members not only reconstruct the identities of those family members; they also reinforce certain ideologies of family. This study is not only an autoethnography of my grandmother; it is also an *autocritique* in which I attempt to reflect on how certain images of my grandmother and other women in my family are privileged through these stories and accounts, and on how I myself may have helped to reinforce these images in my own stories and actions.

The purpose of this article, then, is to examine some of the identities of my grandmother that were represented in the stories and accounts of family members (including myself), and to reflect critically on how these identities of my grandmother privilege certain ideologies of women in the family. I do so by analyzing the stories and accounts of family members, and by drawing on my own memories of my grandmother; I also include selected passages from my grandmother's journals in an effort to have her voice be heard as well. This article blends various forms of writing, including autoethnography (see Crawford, Ellis, Ronai), impressionism (see *Communication Studies* 298, Corey and Nakayama, Goodall), critique (see Conquergood, Clair, Trujillo), and poetry (see Friedrich, Richardson) to reveal the different interpretations of my own grandmother as well as to evoke responses by readers who may recall, and perhaps reinterpret, their own grandmothers and/or other women in

their families. After all, as Arthur Bochner advised, "One of the uses of autoethnography is to allow another person's world of experience to inspire critical reflection on your own" (quoted in Bocher and Ellis 22).

*My cousin Tim pulled his truck into the main entrance of Calvary Cemetery in East Los Angeles, a huge one with thousands of plots accessible via many winding roads. Uncle Chuck, Tim, and I instantly recalled how the place looked on the day of her funeral. It was early January when she died, and Christmas decorations were still visible at family gravesites throughout the cemetery. Most were plastic trees and other paper decorations that might have looked tacky in isolation, but in combination they glimmered with elegance in the sunlight. The sight of those Christmas decorations shining in that cemetery is one of my most cherished life memories.*

*Even though we recalled the general area where Naunny was buried, I went into the information office and obtained a map of the large complex. An elderly man at the desk circled the large section where we could find my grandmother's grave.*

*Tim parked his truck near the area, and we piled out and started walking toward the spot where we thought her gravesite was located.<sup>1</sup> Lance giggled as he jumped over various markers. "If you step on somebody's grave and you don't know who's in there," he said, "you'll have dreams about that person."*

### The Meanings of "Grandmother"

*Grandparenthood is clearly a systematic, life-cycle transition that alters relationships and offers a variety of role possibilities and opportunities for meaningful interactions.*

(Erlanger 167)

*It's funny how many names she had. She loved to rattle all of them off as a little joke: Eloya Juanita Martinez Trujillo Alcaraz.*

(Grandson, age 49)

*She showed different faces to different people.*

("Son-in-Law"—Husband of "Former" Daughter-in-Law, age 70)<sup>2</sup>

My grandmother did indeed have many names, as well as many nicknames, depending in large part on the relationships she had with various family members. When she died, she was survived by two sons, eleven grandchildren, fourteen great grandchildren, three great great grandchildren, and numerous nieces and nephews (and grandnieces and grandnephews), cousins, and in-laws. She was, of course, "Mom" to her two sons. She was "Tia Eloya" or "Aunt Elsie" to her many nieces and nephews. She was "Naunny" to me and my two sisters, a name I coined when, as my dad told me, I had tried to say "Grandma" as an infant and "Naunny" came out. My cousins called her "Black Grandma," because, as one of my cousins (age 49) wrote, "she had black hair and our other grandma who had gray hair we called 'Gray Grandma'—well, we were little kids and life was a lot less complicated then." My cousins' children called her "Chubby Grandma," because of the cat, named Chubby, that lived with her and her husband Pete for 18 years. And my own nieces called her "Naunny Grapes," because, as my 7-year-old niece wrote, "What I remember most about Naunny Grapes is that we ate grapes." In this sense, then, this

analysis is not just of a "grandmother," but of a family matriarch who held many family positions in her large extended family.

While she had many names and nicknames, she also had many meanings, or, as her "son-in-law" put it, "she showed different faces to different people." In the next section, I discuss three of the recurrent interpretations of my grandmother that were represented in the family stories and accounts about her, including: (1) the grandmother as *giver*, (2) the grandmother as *server*, and (3) the grandmother as *body*. These interpretations are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive but are illustrative of the defining identities assigned to her by various family members in their stories and accounts. Each interpretation also reinforces certain ideologies regarding the role of grandmothers in particular and of family women in general.

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*Uncle Chuck, Tim, Lance, and I scanned the many graveyard markers in the general area where Naunmy was buried. The first one we recognized was the gravesite of Charles Trujillo, Naunmy's first husband and Uncle Chuck's father. Charlie, Sr. died in 1934 at age 32, when Uncle Chuck was just seven years old and my father was four. Uncle Chuck looked at the graveyard marker and recalled the day he found out about his father's death. "My mother was in bed, still recovering from diphtheria," he said. "Your dad and I had the Sunday funnies on the floor and we were listening to a guy on the radio who would read the funnies. He was really dramatic. We were following along when the doorbell rang. I answered the door, and a plain-clothes policeman was there. He said, 'Is your mother home?'*

*I said, 'Yeah,' and went to get my mother.*

*I was standing in the doorway with my mother when the policeman said, 'Are you Mrs. Trujillo?'*

*She said yes, and he said, 'I hate to tell you this, but your husband was killed.'*

*Well, you know your grandmother. She couldn't stand bad news. She immediately passed out. So, Jeez, here I am, seven years old, and I just found out that my father was killed, and now it looked like my mother had just dropped dead too. I remember I fell on the floor crying. I'll never forget that."*

*Uncle Chuck chuckled softly, then continued. "It was the middle of the depression, 1934, your grandmother was just recovering from a life-threatening illness, and now she's a widow with two kids. But we survived, and in fact, we landed on our feet running, which was amazing. And I don't ever remember feeling that I was poor or in a terrible situation. I don't know how your grandmother did it. I mean other people would have fallen apart."*

*"She had to deal with traumatic things her whole life," Tim said, looking at the grave of the grandfather he never met.*

*"Oh yeah," Uncle Chuck said. "Several of her brothers and sisters died very young. Her father suffered a stroke and they lost their ranch. They had a bunch of kids through all that. It was rough times back then. Practically everybody in the family at one time or another had some illegitimate child or something. But her home was always open to all of them—wayward daughters, children, anyone and everyone."*

### *The Grandmother as Giver*

*Naunmy would give the shirt off her back—to anyone. We all got to the point of not telling her that we liked something of hers, because she would just give it away. Naunmy truly lived a life of, "It's better to give than to receive."*

(Granddaughter, age 35)

*I've finished my Christmas shopping. At least all we can afford! This is one-time I wish I'd been born rich, instead of poor. I'd love to give so much more. Pete says, 'It's better to receive than to give.' I always tell him, 'You have to share, that's what living is all about. You know, Bread cast upon the water.' He says, 'For that, you get a soggy mess.' Oh well, to each his own.*

(From Naunmy's journal, 1982)

In many respects, giving may be the defining act of any mother or grandmother. In her discussion of family and nostalgia, Stephanie Coontz noted that throughout history, both men and women have romanticized giving by mothers (and, by extension, by grandmothers) as an act of altruistic love and generosity. Indeed, most children expect their grandmothers to give them gifts for their birthdays and holidays, and cookies and candy or other treats when they visit them. Quite simply, the identity of giver is an idealized one that has been used by some people to define what grandmothers in particular—and women in the family—are supposed to be.

Not surprisingly, many of the stories and recollections about my grandmother focus on her generosity to others. Family members remembered that Naunmy would give you virtually anything. Several relatives made almost identical comments, as illustrated in the quote from one of her granddaughters above, and by her niece-in-law (age 74) who wrote this message: "You never told her you liked something she had, because the next thing you know she would give it to you or send it by mail to you. I have a Persian lamb jacket she sent me because I told her I liked it on her."

Other family members told stories of when my grandmother gave money and/or gifts to them. One grandson (age 51) shared this recollection in an interview:

"I was her first grandson, so I got a lot of attention. She lived near my grammar school when I was growing up. Everyday she had lunch for me. She was always giving me money. One time she didn't have money, so she went door-to-door to borrow money from the neighbors to give to me, so I could buy some dumb mask or something."

Another grandson (age 49) had similar memories of her giving nature:

"When we were kids, Grandma was working at Louise's Cafe on Broadway as a waitress. Almost daily we would stop in on our way to or from school, and she would get us an order of pancakes or a coke. I'm sure the restaurant made her pay for those, but she always had a big smile and greeted us, 'Hi sweeties!' with that great voice of hers."

Other family members recalled how she opened her home to any family member, especially relatives who were moving to or visiting California. One niece (age 53) wrote this recollection:

"Dad would tell us stories about how in the 1930s everyone in the family from Colorado who was going to California to look for work stayed first with Aunt Elsie and Grandma. Auntie and Grandma put everyone up, not just individuals but entire families! My mom, dad, and I lived with Auntie and Grandma for a short time until dad found work."

Her son (age 65) recalled the time when he was a teenager and still lived with his mother: "At the [one-bedroom] house we rented, she gave me the bedroom, and she slept on the couch, which is, of course, so much like her."

Relatives also remembered how Naunmy wrote letters to them, even though they rarely wrote back to her. Her niece-in-law (age 74) put it this way: "After she retired, she wrote to us at least twice a week. One time she even wrote to our dog to see if he would answer her letters, as we weren't that good at answering them." Naunmy

herself commented on not receiving letters from her family in an entry to her personal journal in 1981:

*"Pete [her second husband] always tells me, 'You should write a book! Even if it didn't get published, you'd at least get a rejection letter, which is more than you get now, with all the letters you write.' I wish you kids would write. I don't mind writing. In fact, I like to. It's given me something to do since my retirement. But when you write for three months to some very dear people, with no answers, it's very frustrating, and a very big worry! Please write! God Bless!"*

Finally, and most importantly, virtually all of the relatives described how Naunny gave love and acceptance to literally everyone she met. One granddaughter (age 45) put it this way: "Grandma was always there. Always very positive. She'd always tell you how beautiful you were." The second husband of her "former" daughter-in-law (age 70), admitted that he was surprised when Naunny accepted him into the family, even though he married the woman who conceived seven of her grandchildren with her son:

*"Your aunt told me that your grandmother would accept me as a son, which I thought was hard to believe. Normally you don't accept anyone until after you get to know them. But sure enough, the minute I met her she gave me a big hug, and we got along famously from then on. . . . She accepted me as part of the family, and then our son as the same. I always found that to be fantastic, because I lost my own mother and father many years earlier, and they basically were her age, just a little older. . . . I thought of her as a mom, and at the same time as a very good friend."*

Other relatives also recalled how her sense of family extended to friends and even acquaintances as well. As one granddaughter (age 35) wrote: "Naunny and I would take walks every other morning to the neighborhood market. I remember that she was so friendly and kind to everyone we would meet on our little excursions: cab drivers, waitresses, bus drivers, grocery store clerks. . . . She would call everyone 'honey' or 'sweetie,' and really mean it."

I have very similar recollections of my grandmother's identity as giver. When I lived in L.A. during my undergraduate years in the mid-1970s, Naunny always found a way to slip me a \$10 or \$20 bill whenever I visited. Most of the time, she would just grab my hand, put in the bill, then squeeze my hand until I agreed to take it. But even when I refused, telling her that she should keep the money for herself, she found a way to give it to me, secretly placing it in my bookbag or my laundry.

My fondest memories of Naunny as a giver, however, are of her yearly visits at Christmas to our home in Las Vegas. I thought she was poor, but she always found a way to bring piles of presents with her on the Greyhound bus for us. I learned many years later that she was very poor and went into more debt every year to pay for those gifts. But that didn't matter to Naunny, because she was determined to buy the nicest gifts for her grandchildren.

As I interviewed various family members for this project, I learned that in an effort to give gifts to her family, Naunny spent well above her means throughout her life. She was the third youngest of twelve children, born in 1907 into a poor family of coal mine workers and sheep herders in southern Colorado. She believed good times were ahead when she married and moved to the promised land of California in 1924, but her husband was killed ten years later when my father and his brother were young children. After his death, Naunny worked for a cookie company for 19

cents an hour. But neither her husband's death or her low wage kept her from buying everything for her two boys. As my father (age 65) recalled: "My mother didn't have any money, but she always got us everything. I don't know how she did it. I guess she'd pay something like 50 cents a week. I had a Schwinn bike, all the best gloves, footballs, everything. . . ."

Whatever money she had at a given time would be spent on others rather than saved or invested. One niece (age 53) recalled the time when she visited California from Colorado when she was 14 years old: "One day, Auntie took me into downtown L.A. to have lunch. I thought she was rich, but I found out later that she had to cash a war bond to do it! It was a real treat. . . . I was young and living like a movie star." Even on the very rare occasions when Naunny acquired some money, she spent it quickly. My aunt (age 66) recalled a time when Naunny's father died and left her and her two young boys with a \$4,000 insurance policy:

"To have that kind of money back in those days was considerable. But your grandmother was funny about it. She once told me, 'Well, I probably should have bought a house or something, but what the heck, I didn't want to.' So she blew the whole darn thing. They went through the Sears catalogue and ordered everything they ever wanted. The guys also had tap-dancing lessons and music lessons, and they were dressed like little gentlemen. They had a great time for awhile, until she had spent it all. That was your grandmother."

In summary, the grandmother's identity as giver is an idealized one, especially as reconstructed in the stories and accounts of family members who recall a deceased loved one. This identity is interpreted as one through which a grandmother expresses her love for her family, and through which family members reconstruct their grandmothers as loving ones. As one of Naunny's grandsons (age 51) put it directly, "What motivated grandma to give so much to all of us was her love of family."

During the course of this study, I also realized that my grandmother gave so much at least in part to influence others' perceptions of her *family's* identity. As I interviewed members of my extended family, I learned that by giving gifts, money, her home, and other things, my grandmother symbolically demonstrated to others that she and her family were not poor, when in fact they were poor. Naunny would spend whatever money she had, would cash in her limited savings and bonds, and if needed, would borrow money from neighbors, all in order to give to family members and to give the impression that she and her family had "made it." As one grandson (age 51) remembered: "I remember when I was growing up, she dressed like a sophisticate. When we went somewhere, it was always in a cab, never in a bus. I loved the smell of the red leather seats in Yellow cabs. She always gave a big tip. We'd eat downtown, not in a little local joint." Paradoxically, the more she gave to enrich our lives, the more she needed to borrow, and the poorer she became. Yet she yearned to give even more.

As I read and analyzed the family stories and accounts about her role as giver, I also recognized my own complicity in reinforcing the paradox created by my grandmother's giving and spending habits. Like most kids, I loved to get presents, and my enthusiasm every Christmas no doubt motivated my grandmother to try to give even more the next year. More importantly, when I was a young adult and old enough to recognize my grandmother's financial situation, I continued to accept and reinforce her giving. For example, when I was an undergraduate student living in



Los Angeles, I continued to accept her monetary gifts, although I knew she could have used the money for herself. On at least a couple occasions, I even went to Naunny's rented one-bedroom house in East L.A. for a visit when I thought I needed an extra \$10 or \$20 for a date or a new eight-track tape or whatever. I relieved my guilt by never asking directly for the money, but I knew she would always give it to me, whether I asked or not. In retrospect, I could have saved or invested some of that money for her, but I was too focused on spending to satisfy my own desires rather than saving to satisfy my grandmother's needs. Of course, even if I would had saved her monetary gifts to buy her something really nice or to invest it for her, she ultimately would have given the gift to or spent the money on some other family member. After all, that was my grandmother.

In the final analysis, although the identity of grandmothers and other family women as givers may indeed illustrate their altruism and love for family, it also reveals how they subordinate their own desires, and ultimately themselves, for others. And when family members assign such positive meaning to this identity, and then share these views with other relatives in family stories and accounts, they reinforce the subordinate position of grandmothers and of other women in the family. In so doing, family members define loving women in the family as subordinate ones who sacrifice their own desires to buy and to do things for us, thereby reproducing conditions under which family women may continue to subordinate themselves, at least if they want to be described as "loving" ones by their families. This subordinate role is also reinforced in the identity of the grandmother as *server*.

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*We continued to search for Naunny's grave, but next came across the grave of Naunny's mother—Uncle Chuck's grandmother. "Grammy was a quiet little woman," Uncle Chuck recalled as he looked at the marker. "She took care of us while your grandmother was at work. She was always there for us. Your dad and I would get up in the morning, go to the bathroom, brush our teeth, have breakfast, and go to school, and we didn't have to worry about anything. The breakfast was always ready, and when we came home from school, our clothes were picked up, washed, folded, and put away, and our bed was made. As soon as we got home, she'd start making tortillas. It was the perfect childhood. Your grandma was just like that too."*

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### *The Grandmother as Server*

*Beans and torts [tortillas]. That's the first thing that comes to mind when I think of Grandma.*  
(Grandson, age 43)

*We're about to go to Las Vegas for Christmas. . . . We've got a dozen empanadas, a dozen tamales, three pounds of chorizo, and three dozen tortias.*  
(From Naunny's journal, 1982)

Naunny was not only a giver; she was also a server. She was a person who always waited on, took care of, and looked after others. She was the epitome of the cultural ideal that women in general are "supposed to care about and for others, and to be nice, responsive, supportive, and friendly [and] deferential and helpful" (Wood 85),

and that grandmothers in particular exhibit "an unselfish devotion to the needs of others" and place "a life priority on service to others" (Kornhaber 109).

Several family members recalled fondly how Naunny served them and others. One niece (age 53) described her time with her Aunt Elsie in this way: "It was so pleasant just being there [with her]. I didn't have to do anything. We'd get up in the morning, and she would have breakfast ready. We'd eat, sleep, and talk." A grandson (age 51) talked about how she served her second husband Pete, whom he and his children called "Uncle Pete":

"Uncle Pete was a sweetheart and a great musician. And a stone alcoholic and a real couch potato. The extent of his physical activity was getting up in the morning, watching Grandma fix him breakfast, drinking a few beers or whiskey, and watching TV. He'd get thirsty, and ask in that whiny voice of his, 'Honey?' Can you get me a beer?' He wouldn't even get off his chair to get his own beer. . . . But Grandma treated him like a king. He was treated like a baby his whole life, and Grandma continued to treat him like a baby until the day he died [in the mid-1980s]."

Although Naunny served in several ways, most relatives recalled how she served *food* to them. A niece (age 76) wrote about her memories of a special meal at my grandmother's house: "My first turkey dinner was at my Tia Eloysa's house. At that time, there were five of us and we were lucky to get hamburger. She had a big turkey and all the trimmings, including pumpkin pie. We thought she was rich. What a treat it was for us."

A nephew (age 67) and niece-in-law (age 65) told me of a time when Naunny taught them how to make tamales. Her nephew started the story:

"We went to visit them one time, and we got to talking about food, and got to talking about tamales. We said, 'We'd sure like to learn how to make tamales.' Aunt Elsie said, 'Well, you just get all the kids together and you pick us up and we'll come over and make tamales.' And that's what we did. We spent all day long making tamales one Saturday. We picked them up early in the morning and they were here until late in the evening."

Her niece-in-law finished the story:

"Your grandma told me what kind of meat to buy, and how to cook it the night before, and the seasonings and spices. And she told me where to get this and where to get that. It cooked and cooked and cooked. We had all the kids over and we made tamales. And still to this day, when we're all here at Christmas time, the kids say, 'Hey, let's make tamales.' I say, 'No, Aunt Elsie's not here. Forget it.'"

Many relatives talked about the simple beans and tortillas that constituted her signature dish. "She wasn't a very good cook," her youngest son (age 65) said on a tape he sent to me. "She'd buy the most expensive cut of meat, a filet mignon or something, and throw it in the frying pan, and open up a can of mixed vegetables. But beans and tortillas were the staple, and [my brother and I] loved them." One of her great grandsons (age 28) also remembered her beans and tortillas:

"She had a special ladder for me to sit on at the table when I ate. She always had that squeeze butter. And she used to make us banana splits. But her beans! She was famous for her beans and torts. I was her bean boy. I could just eat a bowl of beans. Nowadays I can't eat just a bowl of beans. It has to be beans and something else. But with her, I could just eat her beans."

My own recollections of Naunny, especially of the time when I went to college in L.A. and visited her and Pete every week, are similarly flavored with images of her beans and torts, as well as the banana splits with the soft ice cream because the tiny freezer compartment in her little refrigerator couldn't close due to a buildup of frost.

Naunny continued to prepare and serve food to her two sons long after they moved out of the house and started families of their own. Her eldest son (age 69) recalled that after he married his second wife in the 1960s, "my mother used to bring over a big pot of beans and freshly made tortillas every Saturday." Her youngest son (age 65) remembered his trips to L.A. to visit his mother: "Even when I was an adult living in Las Vegas and would go down to see her for three or four days, she'd be waiting by that door and say, 'Do you want some torts and beans?' And I'd say, 'Yeah, mom.'"

Serving food may be the quintessential traditional activity of grandmothers and other family women. Susan Bordo has discussed this cultural expectation of women, noting that preparing and serving food has at least two meanings in our culture. First, like giving, serving food has been viewed as an activity through which women have demonstrated their love for others. As Bordo (122) noted, "Food is equated with maternal and wifely love throughout our cultures"; and she quoted Elias Canetti who, in writing about the mother and wife, noted: "Her passion is to give food" (221). Second, serving food has been used as an activity through which women have been subordinated in our culture, especially when cooking is naturalized or "representationally 'reproduced' as a quintessentially and exclusively female activity" (Bordo 125).

Bordo also argued that this identity as servers of food has led many women—especially mothers, and by extension, grandmothers—to serve others while denying service—and food—to themselves. As Bordo wrote: "Denial of self and the feeding of others are hopelessly enmeshed in the construction of the ideal mother" (118). Coontz concurred, suggesting that "men's greatest veneration of female self-sacrifice was often reserved for mothers" (55). Bordo noted that this denial of self may manifest itself in eating disorders, aerobic obsessions, alcoholism, refusal to seek medical attention, and other self-destructive practices.

Sadly, my grandmother did suffer from self-denial, and she did engage in some of these self-destructive practices. She constantly denied herself food, and many relatives believed that she was anorexic throughout her entire life, a topic I will discuss in the next section. She ate very little, but she smoked cigarettes and drank wine daily, causing her to have a frail body and a variety of illnesses and ailments. However, although she suffered from these various pains and problems throughout her life, she rarely if ever complained to others. Several relatives fondly recalled her regular use of the expression "peachy keen" to describe her state of being, regardless of her ailments on a given day. A grandson-in-law (age 38) wrote this about her: "When I think of Naunny, I think of someone who never complained. It was always, 'Peachy keen.' Did she ever have a bad day? If she did, she never showed it."

Indeed, I recall one time when I learned that Naunny had cracked her sternum simply from sneezing. I called her immediately to find out how she was doing. "Peachy keen," was her trademark response. When I asked how she could be "peachy keen" with a cracked sternum, she made some self-deprecating remark

such as, "Oh, I'm just a bag of old bones anyway," and redirected the conversation to talk about how I was doing and feeling.

Perhaps the most vivid illustration of her focus on others and her self-denial occurred during the last few months of her life at the nursing home. She was suffering from dementia and a host of other problems, and she had been taken away from her apartment—her "pad," as she called it. In her daily journal, she wrote about how absolutely miserable she was feeling. Consider, for example, this passage from 1993:

*"Another day in this hell hole! I want to go back to my pad, if I still have one to go to. It seems as if I've been here forever, and that I have no one that cares what happens to this old bag. I just told my nurse's helper, 'I want to go home.' She said, 'This is home for now, so make the best of it.' I'd better quit making a pest of myself, and try to make the best of a bad bargain. What bargain? I just took 5 pills, all at one swallow. I don't know what they're for, but if they will help me get out of here. I'll eat ka ka if it will help me get back to my pad, if I still have one!"*

Few, if any, of her relatives knew that she was suffering to this extent. One granddaughter (age 45) recalled her last visit with her grandmother: "When [my sister] and I walked out and said good-bye, that was the hard part. I knew I was saying good-bye to grandma. I looked back and I didn't want to leave. I had a feeling that I wasn't going to see her alive again. So I went back to the bed, and she says, 'I've been so lucky. Look at these beautiful granddaughters. I'm so lucky.' Rather than dwelling on the fact that she was there dying in a nursing home, and she'd lost her pad, she talked about how lucky she was." Even at the end of her life, Naunmy focused on others and refused to focus on herself, except in a private diary that some family members only read after her death.

Perhaps Naunmy's self-denial, even as she suffered in the nursing home, was another way of serving and giving, by providing family members with the peace of mind that she was doing fine, when in fact she was often sick and usually suffering, especially toward the end of her life. Perhaps it was also her way of enacting the "mask of aging," whereby some elderly people engage in "concealing or masking inner feelings, motives, attitudes, or beliefs" (Featherstone and Hepworth 378) in an effort to hide the effects of aging from others (and from themselves) and to maintain whatever autonomy they can salvage. Whatever the case, in serving us and denying her own needs, Naunmy clearly and willingly subordinated herself in the family. As Gerda Lerner noted, "the use of the phrase *subordination of women* instead of the word oppression . . . includes the possibility of voluntary acceptance of subordinate status" (234).

Family members reinforced Naunmy's subordination of self during her life by accepting her service so willing, and by refusing to challenge her self-denial more forcefully. Personally speaking, I always ate her beans and torts, but rarely encouraged her to eat. I always let her do the dishes after I ate, and make the bed whenever I stayed at her house or apartment. And I always let her "peachy keen" remark suffice, never insisting that she talk—really talk—about how she was really feeling. I have ultimately recognized the dreadful consequences of defining my grandmother in this way when I read the journal she kept during her stay in the nursing home. Like other family members, I knew that she wanted to go home to her "pad," but I assumed that she would ultimately be "peachy keen" in that nursing home, and that she would recover from the flu. But now I know that privately she was so very, very miserable. I only wish that I had realized back then that by always defining Naunmy

as a loving person dedicated to serving others, I may have ignored the fact that she had some very serious needs that I could have served, at least in some small way, during her life.

Family members continued to reinforce Naunny's subordination and denial of self even after her death, by sharing stories and accounts that recalled so fondly how she served us, how she subordinated herself, and how she did so willingly and without complaint. This is not to say that family members should not recall fondly how our grandmothers and other family women have served us. However, as bell hooks argued, we should honor women's history of service to their families, but avoid reifying such service as women's "natural" role. When we do reify such service in family stories and accounts (as some of Naunny's family members, including myself, have done), we oversimplify the richness of the meaning of these important women in our families, and we reproduce conditions under which other women in the family may choose to serve others and subordinate themselves, without complaint, at least if they wish to be described in the same loving terms.

\*

*We still had not found Naunny's grave, so we decided to walk to an area that we had avoided because the sprinklers had been—and still were—running. As we dodged the sprinklers, Tim said: "I remember Grandma used to say, 'When I die, I want to be buried with my mother.' I said, 'How come you don't want to get buried back in Trinidad [Colorado] with your father?' She said, 'Trinidad? All the teenagers drive by and throw their empty beer cans in the graveyard.'"*

*We laughed, remembering her unique sense of humor and her ability to laugh at anything, even death. Tim then told us a story of when he visited Trinidad, Colorado, the early home of my grandmother: "I'll never forget when we went to visit there, and we met some little old lady who was Grandma's cousin. She says, 'I remember the night your grandmother was born. My little three-year-old sister died that night. She had influenza, and it was snowing. My dad took off with her in the middle of the night, and then later that night I saw him coming up by himself.' All the graveyards are filled with little kids. I guess wintertime was terrible. Anybody who was sick or weak couldn't make it."*

*"That's exactly what happened to your grandmother," Uncle Chuck said. "She got that horrible flu that was going around, and it turned into pneumonia and she just couldn't make it."*

### *The Grandmother as Body*

*She was a sensual, sexy little grandmother who loved pretty clothes, good dance music, and especially her family.*

(Grandson, age 49)

*She would not eat. She still had this thing about how thin she was. I think she was anorexic her whole life.*

(Granddaughter-in-law, age 50)

*I hated to see her get that dementia. I felt sorry because she was realizing it too, that she couldn't remember things. I had no choice but to put her in the convalescent home.*

(Son, age 69)

In recent years, critical scholars have directed their attention to how the body is used politically in society (see Featherstone, Hepworth, and Turner). Applying the work of Michel Foucault, as well as literature in feminism and cultural studies, critics have argued that the body is a key resource in reproducing particular ideologies. Foucault (1979) argued that the body always has an ideological function in society because it is "invested with power and domination" as an instrument of production, while, at the same time, it is controlled by "a system of subjection" (25–26). As Arthur Frank summarized: "Embodiment is anything but a neutral constant in social life, representing instead the political principles of class . . . and gender domination" (42).

Although my grandmother lived in one single body during her life, the nature of that body changed as she aged, as did its meaning to her relatives. In this section, I discuss four distinct senses of my grandmother's body that were represented in the family stories and accounts—the grandmother as: (1) a sensual, sexual body, (2) an anorexic body, (3) a frail body, and (4) a dead body.

*The grandmother as sensual, sexual body.* Feminists have critically examined how women are objectified as sexual objects. Critics have discussed how the male gaze, especially as exploited in media representations, projects women as sexual objects that are continuously on display; as Laura Mulvey put it, "Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle" (11). Others have examined how women control their own bodies to conform to the idealized "feminine beauty system" of American culture (MacCannell and MacCannell).

I am not really old enough to remember my grandmother as a woman in her sexual prime, and I never saw her as a sexual or sensual woman. She was 48 years older than I am, and so she was in her 60s by the time my adolescent hormones encouraged me to recognize the sexuality of others, though I could not at the time see a woman in her 60s as a sensual, sexual being. But many of the relatives I interviewed and/or who sent their written reflections did remember her as a young and middle-aged sensual woman. One grandson (age 49) wrote about her sensuality eloquently in a letter:

"I remember the time she and Uncle Pete moved back to L.A. from Denver into an apartment across from Lincoln Park. As soon as they got into town, I ran down to see her after school. The door was slightly ajar, and she was standing in that dark little place wearing a beautiful dark suit with long, dark gloves and had this hat on with a veil. She looked so beautiful! I ran over and gave her a big hug and just soaked it all up, her voice, the smell of her perfume and power. To this day I remember that smell. In fact, I just recently started using a hair care product called Improve-Hair-so-Thick, and it smells just like Grandma. Every morning I rub a little onto my hands and into my hair, and there's my Grandma—that distinct voice, the little dark house, the scent of cigarette, the perfume and the powder."

As I interviewed family members and read their written remarks, I was quite surprised to learn how much she objectified herself and others *sexually*. A granddaughter-in-law (age 50) shared this story about Naunty:

"Your grandma told me of a time back when she was a young woman and she was in a bar with some family and friends, and somebody gave her a slip for her birthday. There were a bunch of men and some women in the bar, and she went into the bathroom and put on the slip and came out. At that time it was real risqué. She said, 'Yeah, I came out and danced in my slip and everybody was shocked.' But it seemed like that's what she liked to do—shock people in that way."

A niece (age 53) recalled what her Aunt Elsie told her: "I remember she used to say: 'I've only been married twice. I was faithful to both, but, oh, the fun I had between marriages.'"

I was also surprised—actually a little shocked—to learn that my grandmother loved to hear and to tell dirty jokes. Her granddaughter (age 45) told one joke that she said was one of Naunmy's favorites: "An elderly woman met a fellow at a bar. The fellow looked at her, and she said, 'I may have winter in my hair, but I have summer in my heart.' Well, one thing led to another and they went back to a motel. Finally the guy tells her, 'Lady, you may have winter in your hair and summer in your heart, but if you don't get a little spring in your ass we'll be here 'til next fall.'"

Her daughter-in-law (age 66) revealed that Naunmy also loved limericks, and she told me one of her very favorites:

"Here's to the girl who wears red shoes,  
She'll smoke your cigarettes and drink your booze,  
She's lost her cherry,  
but that's no sin,  
She still has the box the cherry came in."

This same daughter-in-law also indicated that Naunmy's bawdy sense of humor continued when she was in the nursing home. As she recalled:

"When your grandma had her broken hip at the convalescent home, she couldn't get out of bed because it was very painful. This adorable physical therapist came in and was cajoling her. He said, 'Can I help you Mrs. Alcaraz. We'll put on your pajama bottoms.' I said 'Moin, you're not appreciating this physician here.' Without missing a beat, her response was, 'What, you want to see an old snatch?' He got kind of flustered, and that just delighted her to no end. I'm sure the idea that at her ancient age and in pain she was flirting with this young guy appealed to her sense of humor."

I *never* experienced this identity of my grandmother when she was alive. I was too young to know her in her dating prime, and she never told me about any of her dating experiences. Nor did she ever tell me a dirty joke, even when I was in college and old enough to understand and appreciate one. I do not believe that she ever told a dirty joke to my father, her youngest son, either. Perhaps she wanted to "protect" us, given that he was the youngest son and I was her youngest grandson. Regardless of her reasons for keeping this part of her identity away from me, it was an initially jarring, but ultimately quite pleasurable, experience to hear it in the stories of family members. For me personally, this identity of my grandmother adds even more color and character to my fond memories of her. It also helps me to recognize, as Cunningham-Burley warned, that I had been stereotyping my grandmother as an elderly, asexual woman, even though she actually became a grandmother when she was a middle-aged woman, one who was younger than my wife is today. I also realize that I failed to recognize that grandmothers, even elderly ones, are also sensual, sexual beings.

However, I also believe that my grandmother's sexual identity may have led her to make some poor decisions regarding her health. Indeed, as she grew older, it became more difficult—and ultimately impossible—to maintain her identity as a young, thin, sexy "girl." I believe her inability to maintain this identity in part led her

to become an anorexic, another image of her body that defined who she was for much of her life.

*The grandmother as anorexic body.* Numerous feminist critics have discussed eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia. Drawing on Foucault (1979), Carol Spitzack argued that anorexia is one way in which women discipline their bodies in an effort to conform to our culture's narrowly (and thinly) defined ideal of feminine beauty. Susan Bordo pointed out that while eating disorders often begin early in a young woman's life, they can become even more problematic as a woman gets older and tries to resist her body's changing physiology with far more effort. Indeed, Bordo argued that some women come to despise their womanly form, preferring a girlish or boyish body that is "reminiscent of adolescence" (Coward 41).

During the course of this study, I learned—or, more accurately, confirmed—that Naunny lived most of her life under what Kim Chernin called the "tyranny of slenderness." A granddaughter-in-law (age 50) recalled a time when she visited Naunny in the hospital: "She was in the hospital and she wouldn't eat. So I said [to my husband] 'Make her eat,' because he could always make her do anything. She did, but then afterward she said, 'God I feel like throwing up.' And I thought, I wonder how long that has been going on."

This same granddaughter-in-law recalled what happened on another occasion when she took Naunny to the doctor to get a checkup: "One time I took her to the doctor, and he told her, 'You've got to eat.' We came out of the hospital, and there was this chubby girl standing outside. She looked so happy, but grandma said, 'Look at how fat she is.' I said, 'Jeez Grandma, didn't we just go through this.'" A granddaughter (age 45) shared a similar story about how Naunny would sometimes make fun of one of Pete's relatives who she thought was overweight: "Grandma used to make fun of [her]. She said she would walk in with this tight skirt and this fat butt and these little feet with high spiked heels and make dent marks in her linoleum."

In her own personal journals, Naunny also made critical comments about her own body and the bodies of others. She made this entry when she was in her early 70s: "*Today, Pete and I will go on a diet to try to lose some of the pounds we put on over the Christmas holidays. Pete weighs 202, me 108. All my life I've had a 24-inch waist. Now in my old age, I'm getting middle age spread. . . . I look like an avocado!*" Even in the last few months of her life, she was concerned with how her body looked: "*I love taking my bath at home, where I can soak. But I don't like these young chicks with the cute solid bodies staring at my bones. I too had a nice body a long time ago!*"

My own memories of Naunny support the idea that she had an eating disorder and was overly preoccupied with her own body. I remember when my sisters and I were kids, Naunny would let us play with the flab under her arms. She'd put her arm straight out, and we would flip her flab back and forth. Naunny always made self-deprecating jokes about her flab, but it seems that she tried for her entire life to lose that flab by not eating. Paradoxically, the more she starved herself in an effort to lose that flab, the skinnier—and the flabbier—her arms became.

During my lifetime, Naunny usually weighed close to 100 pounds, and I remember many years, especially late in her life, when she weighed in the 90s and even the 80s. Each day, she smoked cigarettes, drank a little wine, and ate crumbs. Yet she would display her waif-thin body proudly every time I visited, and ask, "Don't I have a girlish figure?" Like most relatives in my family, I would always say "Yes,



Naunny," even though I thought she looked pathetically frail in her skimpy bathrobe. I wonder now if our affirming responses reinforced her continued anorexia. If we all had answered, "No, Naunny, you look frail and sick and you need to eat," might she have eaten more and enjoyed better health? I doubt it, but the feeling that we might have been able to make more of a difference still lingers in my mind.

I also wonder if we used the fact that Naunny lived to be 86 to rationalize our choices not to intervene more forcefully with regard to her eating disorder. As one grandson (age 51) put it: "It's ironic in this day of diet and health food, my grandma lived one of the unhealthiest lives. She was a chain smoker, she drank wine or cough syrup everyday, and had a diet of jelly beans and coffee. And she lived to be in her late 80s." Whatever the case, her "girlish figure" and our reluctance and/or inability to motivate her to change her dietary habits no doubt caused unnecessary additional deterioration to her body, especially during her last few years.

*The grandmother as frail body.* As time passed on, my grandmother did what every grandparent who lives a long life does: she got old, and her body deteriorated. Part of my grandmother's identity for family members, thus, is as an old, frail woman.

Bryan Taylor has argued that the *meanings* of frail identities are continually negotiated "in order to account for problematic events, to orient [people] toward the older adult's impending death, to define—and thus indirectly control—the older adult, and to locate the existing self in relation to the past and establish its moral meaning" (195). Although these and other meanings of frail elders are negotiated during the elders' lives, they are also negotiated by family members and friends after their deaths as well, especially as people recall the last times they were with departed elders. As one niece (age 53) wrote: "The last time I saw her at her apartment, there was a sadness about her. I would write and send packages, but she didn't respond. Dad quit writing because she didn't answer his letters. She had given up. The vivacious, spirited woman was gone, but the memories of her are sweet and treasured."

My grandmother's identity as a frail, deteriorating body was especially heightened during the last couple years of her life when she experienced dementia. The memory of his decaying mother is a particularly painful one for her eldest son, Chuck, because he lived geographically close to her and spent more time with her during this period than any other family member. As he admitted:

"It's too bad in a way that my memory has been clogged up with how your grandma was these last few years, with her dementia. I'd like to remember her when she was more vivacious. But the last two or three years of her life, she couldn't take care of herself. I'd go over to the house and it would be really hot. She'd have all the burners on because it was cold that morning, but in the afternoon it was hot. She'd say, 'It's really hot today.' I'd say, 'Yeah, it's hot because you've got all the burners on.'"

He used these and similar stories to account for his decision to put his mother in a nursing home:

"I had no choice but to put her in the convalescent home. The last time she fell, she broke her wrist and her hip, so she couldn't even use a walker because she couldn't support herself. So, after she recovered, they told me to find a convalescent hospital because she wasn't sick anymore. She couldn't be on medical because she was in recovery. I found the closest convalescent hospital. She needed somebody to bathe her, take her to the bathroom, all that stuff."

Like most of my relatives, I knew that Naunny did not want to be in a nursing home, but I do not believe that any of the relatives truly understood the depth of her depression while she existed in that place. I only discovered how badly she felt after her death, when I read the daily log she kept in the nursing home. This journal contains a log of the TV shows she watched each day and glowing reports of visits from various family members. But it is also filled with sorrowful accounts of her day-to-day experiences. Here are some representative passages:

*Another miserable day. They had me walk, holding onto a wall board at 1:30 PM. Took a shower and I was shaking. It was so cold!*

*The lady in the next bed to mine just sits and chews on her tongue! Good thing she doesn't have any teeth. She wouldn't have a tongue left!*

*Another day! Dear Lord, how much longer will I have to stay here? I want to go home, wherever that is.*

*It's 7:30 PM. Most lights are out. I'm not used to such early bedtime! Oh well. I'll try!*

*I have to go pee pee. Hops the helper hurries. I don't want to pee in bed! . . . I should have peed in bed. The helper came in grumpy, because I'd disturbed her dinner.*

*Have to go potty, but all the girls are busy with serving breakfast. So I'll have to wait until someone can open my prison gate!*

*How can I get out of this cage? I feel trapped!*

*Why can't I go back to my pad? Or do I have a pad? I wish I knew for sure. It's the uncertainty that's driving me nuts!! And will I have to spend Christmas here? Oh, Lord, get me out of here!*

*The loneliest Christmas I've ever had! The tears just keep coming! (I only pray that my Chuck and Bill and the rest of the family are having a fun day!)*

These and other passages from Naunny's last journal reveal several themes discussed by researchers who have studied life in nursing homes (see Krause, Henderson and Vesperi, Savishinsky). First, these passages suggest that Naunny felt very constrained and powerless in the facility and in the "cage"—or behind the "prison gate"—of her bed. As Joel Savishinsky wrote: "While the linking of nursing homes with asylums and prisons may seem extreme, the point is that institutional life . . . presents some common features . . . [including] the residents' loss of control and self, their separation from society, and the precedence of institutional routines over individual needs" (4). As her granddaughter (age 45) described her last visit with her grandmother: "[My sister and I] wheeled her around, taking a tour of the place in her wheelchair. We were just chit-chatting. She kept saying, 'Get me out of this joint!'"

Second, Naunny's nursing home journal reveals that she desperately wanted to go home to her "pad" as she called it. "A true appreciation for the negativism about old age institutions," wrote Daniel Krause, "requires an understanding of one obvious fact, that the institution is not home; for most residents, it will never be looked as such" (68). Naunny's "son-in-law" (age 70) described his last visit with her in this way: "When we went to visit her, she looked at me with big eyes and asked me, 'Is my pad still there?' She didn't want to stay at that convalescent hospital. She wanted to go home. It may have been the best thing for her to go home, but there was no one to take care of her there."

Third, her journal suggests that Naunny was starved for conversation. "Residents not only wanted company," wrote Savishinsky, "they wanted communication" (241, emphasis his). Apart from occasional family visits and often uncomfortable interactions with staff members, Naunny mostly watched television shows. "On either side

of her were women who were suffering from Alzheimer's," Uncle Chuck told me, "so she didn't even have anybody to talk to on a regularly basis. That's what she really missed."

When I read these and other passages from Naunny's nursing home journal, I feel so many emotions. I feel very sad that she was suffering so much during the last few months of her life. I feel very angry that the staff at the nursing home didn't handle her with more care and compassion. But mostly I feel very guilty about not calling her more often and for not making the time to travel to L.A. to visit her in that nursing home.

Her last entry was dated 1/5/94, and it read: *Bill and Chuck came by at 6:30. Tim and Jimmy came by at 7:00. They, the nurses, had trouble finding a vein for the I.V.*

Three days later, Naunny died of pneumonia.

*The grandmother as dead body.*

*I sure hope that when my time comes, I'll go quickly, like Aunt Alice. She was 86, and active to the last! She and two girl friends went out to dinner, and as they were going to sit at the table, Alice collapsed. She was taken to the hospital, and she died three days later.*

(From Naunny's Journal, 1982)

The final identity that some relatives constructed for my grandmother was as a dead body. My Uncle Chuck and cousin Tim were the only family members in the room when she died. "I wasn't even planning to go there that morning," Tim recalled, "but I woke up and just thought I'd stop in to see how she was doing. It turns out she was dying. . . . She was out of it, in a coma. You could see her eyes, and they were just blank. But she was strong. She wasn't gasping, just trying to breathe. I guess her heart stopped or something, because she just grimaced, and that was it. Just a little grimace, and then perfectly still. And I knew she was at peace."

"Your dad had been there all morning long," Uncle Chuck remembered. "I went up there to relieve him, and he went back home. Tim came in and was there when she died. She was in a coma all morning long. The doctor had asked me whether we wanted to use life support systems or just let things happen. Your grandma said she didn't want to be on life support systems. She had said that well before. Anyway, so I told the doctor that her request was not to be put on life support. He said, 'I think that's good.'"

I asked Uncle Chuck how he felt at the moment of her death. "When she actually died," he said, "I felt a combination of things. I was sorry to see her go, because I'd never get a chance to talk to her again. But on the other hand, I didn't want to see her suffer either, so there was kind of a feeling of relief. Not that it all happened at exactly the same time."

The next time any of us saw Naunny was at her rosary and funeral, though none of us were actually supposed to see her there. As Uncle Chuck explained: "When she died, she looked really skinny and didn't look good at all. I told the mortician that it would be a closed casket, that we'd put a picture of her when she was younger and people could remember her that way. But then at the rosary, your mother asked if she could see her. I asked the mortician, and he said sure. And she looked great! Your mother and aunt went up there and came back and said she looked great. So I went up there and thought Wow! Maybe this happens a lot? I wondered why they had her fixed up so nice if this was going to be a closed coffin? Just in case I guess."

My aunt recalled the story this way: "They had a closed casket at the rosary, but

your mother and I wanted to look at her face and tell her goodbye. Your grandmother was from a time when that was a tradition. She wasn't like modern people where death is so damn untidy. She dealt with death head on. So your mother and I both knew that your grandmother would have wanted it to be open, and we sort of goaded each other. We went to the funeral director and asked him, 'Does she look okay?' And he said, 'We tried to make her look nice, and besides, she did look nice.' So we opened up the coffin, and sure enough, there she was with her pretty hands, which had stayed gorgeous, and this lovely look on her face. She was wearing her little purple P.J.s. Your mother and I were blubbering all over each other. The minute he opened up the coffin, we both went, 'Mom!' She looked so cute. Of course, this goaded everyone to come back in from the parking lot to say good-bye to her."

Everyone, perhaps, except me. I am not afraid or sickened by dead bodies in caskets. I saw numerous dead bodies in my youth, when I served as an altar boy at countless funeral masses. Yet I have never wanted or needed that kind of closure for the few friends and relatives who have died in my lifetime, and I simply do not wish to have my last memory of a departed loved one to be of their lifeless corpse in a box. I understand and respect the needs and desires of others who wish to say one final good-bye to the body before it is buried or cremated. But I did not look at Naunny's body in the coffin at the rosary or at the funeral, and I have never regretted my decision. I do, however, find it rather ironic that several relatives said that Naunny looked "skinny" and "not very good" at the end of her life, but "nice" and "cute" in death, suggesting that the "mask of dying" may be even more powerful than the "mask of aging" discussed earlier.

The very last image I had of my grandmother was of her spirit dancing at the cemetery the day she was buried. My cousin, her granddaughter, described the scene on that beautiful January day: "All the graves were decorated for Christmas, the breeze was blowing, the Mariachi band was playing, the kids were dancing. It was like a Fellini movie, it was so surreal. It was really sad, but it was also so beautiful. And when they played that song, "Ama Polla," "My Little Poppy," that Grandma loved so much. . . . Well, you know how music is when you're feeling emotional. My eyes were all blurry, and all the kids were dancing on the gravestones. What a legacy to leave behind. People don't usually say that they love funerals, but I loved Grandma's funeral. It was a beautiful funeral. I felt like grandma was there, dancing in the breeze and sweeping over us."

I, too, believed that Naunny was there, and I, too, felt her presence there. And perhaps because that was the last place where I was with her, the search for her grave two summers later was even more meaningful. . . .

\*

*"Here it is!" Tim said, pointing to Naunny's gravesite.*

*Immediately, my stomach tightened. For some reason, I felt upset with my dad for not calling me when Naunny's illness turned for the worse. "It happened so quickly," he had said when I asked him why he hadn't called me to let me know that Naunny was about to die. But I also recognized that it was my own damn fault for not calling her more often at the nursing home. I knew I was really the one at fault, for making the stupid assumption that she would recover from the flu, get out of that nursing home, and be back at her "pad" in "peachy keen" condition, just as I thought she had always been.*

*As I walked toward Naunmy's grave, I started to dread what I might feel when I actually saw her tombstone. Would it be guilt for not calling her more often? Shame for writing so infrequently? Sorrow for not making her eat more and watching her deteriorate? Self-pity for not getting to see her one last time?*

*Would I need to confess to her? Ask her for forgiveness?*

*I arrived, took a deep breath, and looked down at the marker. It read, simply: Elsie Trujillo Alcaraz, 1907-1994. And instead of guilt or shame or pity or sorrow, all I felt was pure joy, for having known, and having been loved by, this wonderful woman.*

*"Her name was Eloya," Uncle Chuck said, "but nobody knew her by that name. Everybody knew her as Elsie."*

*Uncle Chuck, Tim, and I stared at that marker in silence for several minutes, while Lance continued to run through the sprinklers. Each of us remembered—no doubt very differently—what an unselfish, proud, funny, sensual, sexy, frail lady was buried there, one who had graced—indeed, who had helped to produce—our lives.*

*And, so, the search for her grave had been successful, but the search for the many meanings of her life still continues. . . .*

### The Search Continues

*Since older people become grandparents at different stages of life, the meaning of grandparenthood varied.*

(Hargrave and Hann)

*She was the glue that kept everybody together.*

(Niece-in-law, age 65)

In many ways, this article presents a critical analysis of stories and accounts about a particular grandmother who had unique meanings to the many members of her large extended family. As I noted throughout this study, family members reconstructed various identities of this beloved woman, depending in large part on the nature of their individual relationships with her. In this article, I discussed three recurrent identities—the grandmother as giver, as server, and as body—that were represented in family stories and accounts about her. Not surprisingly, I also discovered other unique identities as well, including the grandmother as purveyor of ethnic culture, as spiritual leader, as a safe haven from family conflicts, and others, though these identities were mentioned in far fewer stories and accounts of family members.<sup>3</sup> I emphasized the recurrent identities represented in the stories and accounts to articulate her common meanings to family members, but, in so doing, I, no doubt, have oversimplified her meaning as a unique person who had a variety of identities for individual family members.

In other ways, however, the identities discussed in this article do not only represent the unique meanings of my own grandmother; they also represent some of the general meanings of grandmothers and other family women in American culture. Indeed, Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Bochner argued that family stories are "both particular and universal," noting that "there is a uniqueness and particularity to what happened" in a given story, "but we know that similar events have been replayed in a different form or sequence in many families by many other people"

(204, emphasis theirs). Indeed, as Carolyn Ellis put it, "the story's generalizability can be judged by whether it speaks to readers about their experience" (133). I believe and hope that the stories and accounts presented, as well as the identities discussed, in this article do indeed speak to some of the readers.

Of course, this article is not so much about the identities of my particular grandmother or of grandmothers in general, as it is about how family members construct the identities of their grandmothers and other family members in their communicative practices. In this sense, as Bryan Taylor argued, "the frail elderly body is a site of struggle between different narratives seeking to authorize their particular versions of its meaning, value, capacities, and limitations" (197). As the elderly population in our country and throughout the world increases in years to come,<sup>4</sup> it will be even more important to develop richer understandings of the elderly and to avoid stereotypes which oversimplify them. As Featherstone and Hepworth cautioned: "It seems to be very often the case that we fix elderly people—usually those without resources—in the roles which do not do justice to the richness of their individual experiences and multi-facets of their personalities" (382).

Researchers can go a long way in contributing to the development of richer interpretations of elderly family members. However, as Taylor advised, "researchers should continually question their complicity in the symbolic construction and regulation of the frail elderly" (197). Leonard Hawes similarly called upon us to adopt a "set of research practices . . . that require researchers and theorists to implicate our own subjectivities in our research practices as well as explicate the communicative practices of others" (9). I believe that autoethnographic analyses and critiques may be particularly well-suited for enacting the reflexivity advocated by these and other scholars. I know that in conducting research for this study, I became far more aware that many of my own stories and accounts about my grandmother reinforced her subordinate position in the family, and that by subordinating her in this way, I had been stereotyping her and, most disappointingly, taking her for granted.

I close with a poem that expresses some of the feelings evoked by this study of my grandmother. . . .

*"500 Rummy"*

*I'm sorry, Naunny, that I didn't behave well  
the one time you did not let me win at 500 Rummy,  
when I was a young boy.*

*I'm sorry that I didn't answer most of the letters  
you continued to send to me,  
when I was away at school.*

*I'm sorry that I didn't call you more often  
to say hi and small talk,  
even though you never really had much to say.*

*I'm sorry that I didn't visit you  
during your brief stay in the nursing home,  
before you died so unexpectedly.*

*I only wish that you were still alive,  
so that years from now I could feel even more guilt  
about not doing these things.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>I turned on my tape recorder when we entered the cemetery, and let it run continuously while we walked the grounds, with the consent of my uncle, my cousin, and my cousin's grandson.

<sup>2</sup>For my grandmother, family members remained family members, even after a divorce. Thus, even though her eldest son was divorced in the 1960s, his ex-wife remained her daughter-in-law, and her subsequent husband was considered part of the family by my grandmother. I identify him as her "son-in-law" throughout this article.

<sup>3</sup>I did not develop these other identities in more detail in this article because relatives made very few comments about them in letters and interviews. This is not to say that these identities are less important because I had very limited "data" about them. For example, her youngest son (my father) was the *only* family member to explicitly comment on her (and his) ethnicity as a Mexican-American, when he recalled the following incident:

"The only time I saw her get mad, happened when I was really little—maybe five years old—and Chuck was maybe eight years old. We were living in the house on Pasadena Avenue, and our neighbors were Anglos. They had two little blonde girls, and we were playing in the dirt with them one day. Their mother came out, and told her little girls, 'I don't want you playing with those dirty Mexican kids.' We went in and told mom about it. We weren't feeling very good about it. That was one of the few times I remember my mother getting mad. She went outside and just reined on that lady. She said, 'My boys are as good as anybody, and better than most!' She really got bent out of shape. That was the only time I ever saw her mad in any way in my whole life."

Naunmy herself rarely drew attention to her ethnicity. She lived in a largely Mexican-American section of (East) Los Angeles, she went to a Spanish-speaking church (until the last few years of her life), she sang Mexican songs, and she cooked beans and tortillas, but she rarely commented on her Mexican heritage and she spoke English to family members. Perhaps she wanted the family to assimilate more fully into mainstream (i.e., European-) American culture. In this sense, Naunmy might have been an indirect and possibly inadvertent purveyor of ethnic culture, because many family members recognized their own Mexican-American heritage when they visited her, not so much by what she said, but by where she lived and what she cooked. Thus, although this aspect of her identity may be an important one for some family members, it is one that was not directly apparent from the stories and accounts analyzed for this study.

<sup>4</sup>Anderson reported that by the year 2010, it is expected that the elderly (people 65 years of age or older) will represent about 14% of the U.S. population. Hargrave and Hanna reported that 80% of older people in this country have children, and that of these, 94% are grandparents and almost 50% are great-grandparents.

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