

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

Nick Trujillo is a Professor in the Communication Studies Department at California State University, Sacramento. He thanks Carolyn Ellis, Pam Chapman Sanger, and Bryan Taylor for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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.¹ 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)²

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.

*

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

