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Article abstract

Noting that “everyday conversational narratives” are now being researched for what their structure and form can reveal about sociocultural patterns, the author recounts and analyzes a number of stories circulating in her own family about her late grandmother. She is alert to the dynamics of personal relationships, as well as to conventional notions about gender roles and social propriety, at work in the life of family tradition. Her interviews with relatives not long after her grandmother's death demonstrate, she dares, that “funeral stories constitute a site for the negotiation of cultural and interpersonal meaning.”

MANA'S FUNERAL STORIES: FUNCTION, STRUCTURE, AND CONSTRAINTS OF ONE WOMAN'S POSTHUMOUS STORIES

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Talking about the past is an important human activity, and narrative is a widely recognized and accepted way of doing it. While traditional folk narratives form one corpus of cultural stories, everyday conversational narratives are becoming recognized as worthy of generic status in their own right. Conversational narratives occur anywhere, anytime, which makes them particularly sensitive to the ways in which individuals connect with larger social concerns. As Barbara Johnstone points out, there is a need to investigate how individual identities make use of sociolinguistic conventions : "If people never followed any rules, they would not be understood, but if they always followed all of them in the same way, they would seem like robots rather than people" (1993:5). The relationship between narrative rules and the people who use them is important because it enables an alternate view of cultural identity construction.

Within the field of personal narratives, there is an important difference between stories where the narrator is the protagonist, and those where the protagonist is not the narrator yet is known to the audience. In the latter case, the storytelling situation is more dynamic because the narrator is being evaluated on more criteria than the ability to tell a story. Gary Butler notes that the degree of audience familiarity with the protagonist will affect inferences made about the narrative performance :

In such narrative events, "creativity" is in a sense shared by both narrator and audience, and is as much dependent upon common sociocultural understanding of the nature of relationships . . . as it is the product of the application of the narrator's competence . . . [1992:52]

The performance of a family personal narrative is a complex negotiation of both story forms and personal interactions. The content of the stories has purpose on one level as a way to define the personal identity of the tellers. But content also has meaning on another level, since it constitutes a means to a social end. In this paper personal narratives will be analyzed in terms of funeral stories, wherein everyone knows the protagonist and the various narrators. The stories record notions of death and the funeral experience, which in turn comprise a shared experience.

In a sense, this kind of study addresses Charles Briggs's call to study texts as "social relations that have shaped who gains what types of rights to produce and receive texts" (1993:420). Conversational narrative discourse connects stories directly to their producers and receivers. The result is an opportunity to investigate communication beyond what is merely said ; it is a way to look at how oral urban narrative transmits culture.

Funeral Narratives

In her investigation of another kind of family narrative, the courtship narrative, Sandra Silberstein (1988) studied three generations of women who were related to each other. She was impressed by the consistency of conventions chosen by both the women and men to tell their stories about how they met their spouses. The participants avoided topics like sex and birth control—indeed anything that might be confrontational—and instead paid careful attention to staging the women as assertive despite their positions as the objects of pursuit. Silberstein concluded that these family histories were as much created by narrative as documented by it.

The funeral story performs a similar function to that of the courtship narrative in that both mark important life cycle changes. Both types of narrative provide ways for tellers and listeners to produce the meanings of their relationships. Cultural reality is, as Deborah Schiffrin notes, "continually created, negotiated, and redefined in concrete acts between persons who are participating in some kind of interactive situation" (1994:139). In the funeral story, storytellers create their cultural reality by reaffirming and redefining their relationships both to the deceased and among themselves.

This paper documents the structure, function, and constraints of stories told by my family members about my grandmother, Mana, after her death in January 1995. I find support for Silberstein's analysis that cultural histories have as much to do with the story form as they do with the life they document. Further, I conclude that posthumous stories are both multifunctional and constrained by expectations about what kind of story should be told about a dead person.

Form and Function

As a subset of personal narratives, funeral stories share the more or less universal function of making sense of experience. James Gee notes that "no human, under normal conditions, fails to make sense when narrativizing his/her experience" (1985:11). It is a quirk of the posthumous situation that the storytellers make sense of their own lives by telling about the life of someone else. While the stories often include the teller and the subject of the story, it is understood that the

focus should be on the deceased. Although any particular funeral story may have been told before the subject died, the same story takes on new connotations posthumously. Survivors need to accommodate themselves to a new situation. The retelling of the past in light of an occurrence in the present suggests that the needs of the storytellers likely figure significantly in the stories told. Making sense of experience through a funeral narrative is therefore a process complicated by variables such as memory and emotional need.

Erving Goffman suggests that, in order to transmit information, the story form needs to package content in a way that can be processed meaningfully in the minds of the audience. The packaging, however, inevitably affects the information :

What a speaker does usually is to present for his [sic] listeners a version of what happened to him. In an important sense, even if his purpose is to present the cold facts as he sees them, the means he employs may be intrinsically theatrical, not because he necessarily exaggerates or follows a script, but because he may have to engage in something that is a dramatization—the use of such acts as he possesses to reproduce a scene. [Goffman 1974:503-4]

The importance of this observation, as John Robinson notes, is that the retelling of an experience is part of a “continuing effort to organize that event in meaningful terms” (1981:66). The form is being used to express the situatedness of personal narratives : “they occur in distinguishable contexts of interaction and can be used for a wide range of pragmatic functions. The situated character of speech exerts important constraints on the content and form of personal narratives” (Robinson 1981:59). Form and function, then, will interact in ways which will sometimes accentuate the requirements of the story form chosen, and other times emphasize the more situated concerns of the teller. I do not expect to chart a comprehensive description of conventions of funeral narratives. Death is a topic dealt with in a myriad of ways by many different cultures and religions. (This particular family is not religious and generally has an unsentimental view of death.) Nor do I expect to divine the full range of significance for every story. My aim is to analyze the forms and functions of the stories told based on my participant knowledge of the storytellers and their relationships with me, Mana, and each other.

Constraints

My analysis of constraints will show the importance of looking at textual structure together with social roles of the participants. I assume that, while the structure of the stories will exert pressure to abide by certain parameters and conventions, so too will the network of relationships among the participants. My role as a family member no doubt affected the stories told. Further, cultural constraints are at work on both the level of the story form and of the woman's lived

experience. The telling of this woman's life posthumously is necessarily complex, since the stories must negotiate the constraints of her life as a woman as well as the constraints of the funeral story as a form. Finally, it is important to consider the salience of gender as a constraint in any given storytelling situation.

Barrie Thorne has argued for examining "encounters where gender seems largely irrelevant as well as those where it is symbolically and organizationally central" (1990:108). This broadened site of significance allows for an examination of dominance that extends beyond gender. For example, variables such as age, familial role, and personality can interact with gender in any number of multiple and contradictory ways. The importance of a flexible analytical stance is its sensitivity to how gender operates in context. This study, while disadvantaged by small numbers, has the advantage of portraying context in its complexity at a time of heightened meaning-making. The challenge is to identify the criteria by which gender is constructed, as well as recognize when interactions transcend such patterns.

Thorne's question of how gender is made salient invites a consideration of the spectrum of influence at work in social roles and generic text in the construction of gender. This study finds that social roles make gender apparent in some circumstances, contradictory in others, and not salient in yet others.

Methodology

I conducted five interviews with family members who had the closest relationships with Mana. The storytelling episodes were videotaped in the sixth week after her death, and covered events from her childhood to her final days. I informed my storytellers that the purpose of my request for their memories of Mana was twofold. First, I wanted, for the sake of my two sons, to record these memories before they faded. Second, I mentioned that I was using the stories for a school project on oral histories.

My role as interviewer/listener undoubtedly helped to shape the storytelling context, and so I mention some details to place these effects in a larger context. My family members see me as particularly interested in our family history. I once riffled through Mana's old photos, made copies, and distributed framed versions as Christmas gifts. Similarly, I gave gifts of old home movies copied onto video. A few weeks before this study, I hosted a small gathering to mark Mana's death by watching some of those home movies together.¹ My actual question in this videotaping project was general: "I'm interested in hearing your

1. Mana felt that she had been preyed upon by funeral home operators when Papa died. She vowed that she would not have her loved ones wasting their money on her when she died. She joined the Memorial Society and chose the option whereby they would collect her body and cremate her without a service or unnecessary expense.

memories about Mana." It was clear that the participants had thought beforehand about what they would tell, which likely makes the choice of stories significant.

I was the common denominator to all five storytelling sessions, obviously, and interacted to varying degrees in all of them. The sessions ranged from a few minutes to slightly more than an hour, and I chose to analyze one story from each session. I made my choice based on what seemed most characteristic of the storyteller. My role as ethnographer in this study about a particular kind of story has its strengths and weaknesses. Michael Agar poses an inevitable conflict between theory and ethnography in the analysis of a life history :

Ethnography is committed to an understanding of a given instance of the human experience—the environment that surrounds it, the history that precedes it, the intent of the persons who create it, and the pattern that gives it form. Theory, on the other hand, embeds concepts in a network of propositions, touching the human experience at selected points via implicational threads. [1980:229]

I expect, therefore, that gaps and tensions will occur between the form of the funeral story and the situated investments of the individuals involved in the storytelling process. As participant, I can interpret context in a more nuanced way than an outsider ; however, previously established relationships can exert their own constraints on storytelling. Further, this storytelling situation was a hybrid between an interview and naturally arising conversation. I tried to avoid a structured interview situation because I wanted the stories to be shaped by something other than my questions. As Nessa Wolfson notes, narratives found in interviews are told with "elaboration and emphasis on the specific part of the story which answers the question that has been asked" (1976:192). However, the lack of a formal interview leaves the shaping variables more open to conjecture. While the subjects were encouraged to tell what they wanted, they were aware that they were responding to my agenda (or their perception of it.) I am hoping that my ethnographic contribution will aid in this area. I have a store of information on how these storytellers sound when they speak and tell stories spontaneously. I also hope that Wolfson's observation about spontaneous interviews will work in my favour : "the degree of solidarity between the participants will affect the verbal behaviour of the subject" (1976:197). It is worth noting that this storytelling situation was more formal than the usual occasions when I videotaped home movies, and all the participants were somewhat nervous.

The first narrator is Kim, Mana's daughter, who is a sixty-four-year-old white woman who cared for Mana during her last years with Alzheimer's. The story is recorded in Mana's house, where Kim and Mana lived together.

Kim's Underwear Story

Kim : One day were in Eaton's, my mother and I. I was only about twelve, you know. And uh we were walking along—and this was when I was twelve, it was I guess toward the end of the—no I was less than that, I guess I was about eight or nine. And ah, the war, I guess was just over. And at that time you couldn't have elastic in your underwear because anything made of rubber, everything went to the troops and you know, for, you know, whatever they used it for. And ah, so you had—your underwear pants were buttoned. You had a button at the side.

Cinda : I see.

Kim : We were walking through Eaton's, and my mother said, "my button broke." I said, "oh, no !" (laughter) "My pants are going to fall down." So we walked up and there's an elevator there and I said, "No, what do we do ? What do we do ?" And she just calmly looked down, her pants fell down, she picked them up and put them in her pocket and walked into the elevator. And I was just so embarrassed. (laughter) And of course, she started giggling over that. So, —

Cinda : So you were mortified and she—

Kim : I was mortified, oh dear, as only you can be mortified if your mother's pants fell down in Eaton's. (laughter)

Cinda : That's great.

The story is a conventionally structured episodic narrative as defined by Labov (1972) : it has a recognizable beginning (In Eaton's when I was twelve . . .), linked episodes which contain the complication of the underpants falling down, and the resolution of Mana picking them up. The coda of Kim's embarrassment reminds the listener that the story has been told from a child's perspective. The story is tightly structured as an internally cohesive event, and leaves little room for listener involvement.

The function of the story conforms to expectations of a funeral story in that it shows the deceased in a good light. Any conflict that arises between the characters is safely deflected onto the "woman against environment" theme, or absorbed by the childish concerns of the narrator. The source of the humour is Mana's unflappability in an embarrassing situation, and contributes to an impression of her as a happy, unconventional woman.

A consideration of the full range of constraints operating on the story requires some mention of the larger storytelling context. While Kim and I have a feeling of appreciation and cooperation during the telling of the story, it is partly as a result of her successful negotiation of dominance. I offer the opening negotiation of the storytelling situation as a basis for this discussion.

Opening Negotiation With Kim

Cinda : Okay. After a while we'll just forget about the camera.

Kim : Pardon ?

Cinda : After a while you just forget about the camera. Gary and I did this last weekend. We just set it up and sat on the couch and just yacked for an hour. Whatever we could remember.

Kim : Is it on ? Is it going ?

Cinda : Yeah, it's going. Whenever, if you think of ah — I'm just looking for whatever memories you have of Mana.

Kim : God !

Cinda : Yeah, I know.

Kim : Well, interview me.

Cinda : Okay, well maybe we could start with what you remember about her life.

Kim : You mean past, like ah ?

Cinda : Yeah, like ah, like I was remembering her talking about when she sort of arrived down the St. Lawrence, when she first came here—

Kim : Down the St. Lawrence.

Cinda : Yeah, when she first arrived—

Kim : Oh, you don't want to hear about Scotland—

Cinda : Yeah even Scotland—

Kim : I'm not the kind of person who can carry on a monologue.

Cinda : Yeah, yeah. Um, I remember her talking about um her father being a salesman of material for suits and stuff. Like the stuff I have heard from her background, you would probably remember a lot more of what you heard than I would.

Kim : Well, she used to talk—she lived in Aberdeen in Scotland, and she used to talk about going to the farm, the family farm on her mother's side, the Reid farm, which was outside Scotland [sic], it was actually near a little town called Inch, and ah, I gather that's where her mother and father met

I offered Kim an open agenda for stories she might want to tell, but she indicated a wish to have me set the agenda by interviewing her. However, when I offered prompts of Mana's arrival in Canada, or Mana's father's occupation as a seller of suit material, Kim resisted. When she asked "Don't you want to hear about Scotland ?" it seemed apparent that there was a particular place in the narration of Mana's life where she wanted to start. Wolfson found that the topic of a conversational narrative is set by the teller (1976:191). By implication, Kim's negotiation of the storytelling situation results in an interaction closer to conversation than an interview. Kim did return to address my prompts, but they

occurred as part of a more stylized script. For example, when she referred to Mana's father, she called him a "haberdasher." When she told of Mana's immigration, she focused on the trip over, where passengers on the ship were apparently able to walk on icebergs. (My prompt suggested a focus on Mana's excitement as a young adolescent about arriving in Canada.)

There was a similar negotiation out of the storytelling situation forty minutes later. She again asked for my direction by saying "What else ?" but responded to my prompts with confusion, challenge, or disinterest until she finally asked if we could "take a break." Undoubtedly she was tired—she does not like to talk for long periods and was afflicted with asthma that day. However, her deployment of dominance effectively placed me as a passive listener, and ended the storytelling situation once she had delivered the stories she was willing to tell. At the same time, however, it seems apparent that Kim operated on a set of assumptions about what I was looking for in her storytelling. The episodes she told—all from Mana's early life—suggest a storytelling function of filling in information about a part of Mana's life that I knew little about.

The constraints on the story seem to arise from a number of sources. The topic choice and characterization of Mana seem to be shaped by the conventions of the funeral story, since she is portrayed as a happy woman in a humorous situation with a minimum of interpersonal conflict. Kim appears to have chosen a number of stories to tell based on her impressions of what I wanted to hear from her. Gender does not appear to be salient in this story, although the story may well be marked at the level of lived experience, since Kim needed to engage in an unarticulated negotiation of power rather than a more assertive admission of what she wanted to say.

Kim's only child, Rick, tells another appropriate funeral story, but uses a distinctly different structure. He is a thirty-year-old white male, and his fiancée, Sue, prompted him into the story. Rick's connection with Mana operated through her role as his caregiver for a significant portion of his life.

Rick's Lunch Story

Sue : Lunches.

Rick : Oh, oh, thank you.

Cinda : (to Sue) If you're going to be part of this, you should go over and sit over there. You're the prompter here.

Sue : No.

Rick : Mana making, Mana was the most creative lunch, bag lunch maker. You know Mom, Mom [Kim] was very meticulous about—the sandwich was done in Saran Wrap. You know, everything was in a container ; nothing had to be brought back, right ? It was always bundled properly. Well Mana was a big re-user of things—

Cinda : (laughter)

Rick : And you know I just remember—what she'd do is take those, you know, grocery vegetable bags, right ? That are about this long, and cut them in three. So now you got three begs. Course there's only one of those bags that has got a bottom to it.

Cinda : A bottom.

Rick : Right, but she used all three during the week. And so she'd make a sandwich then wrap it up in one of those sections, and then keep it together, put an elastic band around it. So by the time lunch time rolled around, you had this bow tie sandwich.

Cinda : (laughter)

Rick : And of course, not only is it a bow tie sandwich, but one of her favourite—I loved sweet gherkin pickles when I was a kid, and she used to put those, or grapes all plucked off the stems, into the old styrofoam MacDonald's packages, and put an elastic around that. Well, gherkin pickles—you know, they're not really sealed, those things, you know. Well, there would be gherkin pickle juice all over the sandwich, all over everything, like dripping in your locker. But boy, I'll tell you, she used to find ways to make—

Cinda : Save.

Rick : Save things and make a lunch. Always saving things like that. If you ever saw the drawer next to the fridge, it was full of twistums, and elastic bands, and bags. And she'd save bags like bread bags that were full of crumbs but she'd use them as something—you know she wouldn't wash them out, just throw them in there with crumbs in the bags, just throw them in with everything else . . . and bread bags—

Cinda : And didn't she save, like plastic shopping bags and then get such a huge bundle that she had to go give it to some organization or something that needed bags ?

Rick : Oh, she'd oh, the whole kitchen cupboard would be full of bags. Uh, and pie plates were huge. Like, you know, when you buy a pie plate at Loblaw's or something—save all of those—save ev-, oh, sour cream containers and stuff like that.

Cinda : (laughter)

Rick : Piles of them. And you'd never be able to find the top. There were just too many—you know, it's not like, like you had just four or five tops and four or five containers. You had forty or fifty and you had to try to find the tops to them. You know, and she'd keep them all and she'd use those for lunches, too. And always be disappointed if you didn't bring it back. Have to bring those things back. (laughter) You know . . . and she had a million of them.

Cinda : Well I guess this is Depression years stuff.

Rick : Absolutely. Yeah, yeah, gotta keep everything.

Cinda : And she told stories of being at work and what she would do at work to be cost-conscious. She'd take—

Rick : Oh, really ?

Cinda : You know those fat elastics ?

Rick : Yeah.

Cinda : She would cut those in three. Lengthways, to make more elastics so you wouldn't have to buy so many. (laughter)

Rick : So that's why there was—

Cinda : This was at work. That's why there were so many elastics.

Rick : No, and I always looked at those elastics, and who would, and they were all jagged, you know, and I could, I could never figure that out.

Cinda : (laughter) She'd cut them.

Rick : Well now that makes sense now. That's very interesting.

Cinda : But it's just, I think of her boss walking in each morning and seeing her, like hard at work at her desk cutting elastics.

Rick : Yeah, but, but they certainly didn't get rid of her quickly.

Cinda : No, no, I think she could have died at her desk as far as Mike was concerned.

Rick : Yeah.

Rick's story operates as what Catherine Riessman calls an habitual narrative because he does not focus on a particular episode, but what Mana "would" or "used to" do habitually (1988:151-73). The structure is less self-contained than Kim's, and elicited more involvement from his listener. His regular repetitions of "right ?" invited me to confirm or acknowledge the details he presented. The story thus operates on two levels. First, it is likely as rehearsed a core narrative as Kim's ; he has obviously thought about it beforehand to be prompted into it by Sue with the use of a one-word title. He also uses stylized repetitions like "save things and make a lunch," which serve as thematic reminders that become increasingly humorous as he piles on more examples. Despite its rehearsal, however, the story invites involvement, and succeeds by prompting his listener into adding examples in a kernel fashion to support his observations about Mana's saving habits. The story results in Rick learning new information about Mana that serves to support the story that he has told.

Our negotiation of roles was very different from my engagement with Kim, since I became a co-narrator in his story to support his view of Mana as an obsessive saver. The function of Rick's structure was to encourage cohesion and solidarity with me as someone who would recognize the trait he was staging.

His story of Mana, although very different in form and function from Kim's, serves a similar purpose : to show a somewhat dottier version of Mana as happy and endearing. Once the camera was turned off, however, our conversation

ranged to a discussion of Mana's manner of controlling his behaviour as a child. When I suggested that we turn the camera back on, he asked me not to. I infer that constraints of the funeral story were operative here, since Rick included no trace of conflict in the story.

It is notable that gender does not seem to be salient in either Kim or Rick's stories. I wonder if a less obvious constraint of the funeral story might be to avoid gender related topics. Silberstein observed that topics of sex and birth control—both very relevant to heterosexual courtship—were consistently absent from those narratives. Perhaps the taboo generalizes to funeral stories, where a presentation of the deceased in a friendly familial role is more acceptable than a gender-related view of her behaviour. The absence of gender constraints changes in the next two stories, both of which transgress funeral story conventions in order to "tell the truth" about an aspect of Mana's life.

My father, Don, Kim's brother, is a sixty-six-year-old white male who remains committed to a masculinized view of the world. Since he has had the benefit of decades of my helpful analyses, I can only conclude that he has made a decision to be ineducable. His story is structured as a single event, but nevertheless elicits involvement from his listener for clarification.

Dad's Piano Bench Story

Dad : I can remember being upstairs and hearing a guy I didn't like—this was a guy named John Maclean—and he and his wife were friends of the family. And there were just them, and there might have been one or two other people there. It was a very small group. And he kept, this guy kept calling Mana a prima donna. He said it a million times—I was going to go down and smash him myself. "You're a prima donna, Madge. You're a prima donna. You're a prima donna, Madge." And this went on and on and on and on. And I'm, I was ready to kill him. And this was the piano bench incident. I went down and my Dad had picked this up and just smashed it down. He didn't touch anybody.

Cinda : So he—Mana and Papa were in the middle of an argument and this fellow—

Dad : I don't even think they were arguing. The guy was just attacking Mana.

Cinda : So why would that make Papa smash the bench ?

Dad : Because, the guy was a friend of his.

Cinda : So he didn't feel that he could smash him so he smashed the bench ?

Dad : You know, he was just totally frustrated with this guy insulting his wife and—

Cinda : —and he couldn't do anything about it.

Dad : And being a friend of his.

Cinda : I see.

Dad : Who is he going to hit ? What's he going to do ? So he just took it out on the piano bench. I remember that vividly. I came down the stairs anyway because I was coming downstairs to hit this guy. And he's standing there with the piano bench and slap ! He just couldn't stand it anymore. Like Mana was mad at him, I guess, through the whole thing.

Cinda : Mad at Papa ?

Dad : I suppose.

Cinda : I see.

Dad : Because this guy John Maclean was defending Papa and attacking Mana, but Papa didn't like Mana being attacked, so it—

Cinda : Right.

Dad : was total frustration. I remember that, that night. That's just one of many.

Cinda : Right.

Notable in this story is the absence of a focus on Mana. The story instead centres on three men as the actors, and Mana as the excuse for the confrontation. Masculinist assumptions abound : Dad was coming down to smash John Maclean because of frustration, and Papa had to smash the bench from frustration. Clearly, the assumption here is that a man, once frustrated, has to smash something. Papa is also situated in conflict because he wants to protect Mana and fight with her at the same time. Significantly, Mana has no voice in this story. Dad invests thought in what Papa was thinking and feeling, but Mana is a silent mystery.

The function of the story, then, is to break a code by telling about serious family conflict. The story is episodic like Kim's, but I interact with more interview-style questions. Although my involvement is accepted, my contribution is not co-narration like it was with Rick. I ask for clarification because I see holes in his story. He contradicts himself about whether or not Mana and Papa were arguing. I also recognize the world view he is propounding about "what a man's got to do," and I resist it by trying to pin his story down.

This story operates under different constraints than the underwear or lunch stories. Where these latter stories were more conventional funeral stories in that they recalled humorous events which characterized Mana in a benign familial role, Dad approaches a topic that would be less conventional as a funeral story. Despite the absence of Mana's thoughts and feelings, Dad has illuminated a part of her life that would otherwise be obscured, that of Papa's violence. The purpose of his story is more to tell "the truth" about some aspect of Mana's life than to illustrate one of her characteristics. The story also seems to function as an explanation of Dad's (as opposed to Mana's) life. His reference to the story as "the piano bench incident" implies a hermetic placement of it in his own past.

It is evident that Dad makes a decision to transgress the funeral story convention because when I prompt him about stories which contain conflict, he asks "Do you want to hear about that ?" Dad's second wife of twelve years, Jean, discourages this line of storytelling, as is evident in the following conversation where I prompt Dad into telling about the years of Papa's violence. I know that talk of Mana and Papa's early happiness will lead Dad into his stories of their subsequent unhappiness.

My prompting of Dad

Cinda : You've also told about in the early years you would come home from school and she and Papa would be you know in a warm embrace of some sort.

Dad : Oh yeah. In the real happy years, down in the east end.

Cinda : Right, before you moved to Leaside.

Dad : They used to neck. They used to suck face.

Cinda : Mom and Dad in the living room, right ?

Dad : Yeah.

Jean : They were very open with their affection.

Dad : Oh yeah.

Jean : You keep saying the happy years, you know.

Dad : Before the golf club and drinking.

Cinda : And that was at Leaside.

Dad : That's when the business started making a bit of money and he changed his social life. Now he had to play golf, had to gamble, drink, things changed, but ah, do you want to hear about that ?"

Cinda : Well, whatever, this is your history, you tell what you have to tell.

Jean : So how was Mana, like. That didn't affect her. She still played the piano, still was sociable.

Dad : Yeah, Mana got sucked into the golf club routine, and uh, but everybody loved her, and she still played the piano for all those people, and ah...

Interestingly, Jean both introduces the conflict and then tries to resist it as a topic. Despite her resistance, however, Dad returns later to break the taboo and tell the stories he knows are not appropriate as funeral stories. Jean's reinforcement of the taboo seems possibly multifunctional. It might be that she is trying to keep the focus on Mana, since talk of violence would refocus specifically on Papa. However, Jean is a social worker who is familiar with family violence. Her bracketing of the violence from the piano playing seems an attempt to return to the conventions of funeral narratives. In any case, Dad is only temporarily

dissuaded from telling stories that were likely as important to him, as a powerless child in this household, as they were to Mana.

My own story contains structural elements of the other three stories told so far. I am prompted into the story by my partner, Gary, as was Rick by Sue, and conversation is part of the story. The story is habitual, in that Mana “would tell” this story. In a way, it is a story-about-a-story-Mana-told. Like my father, I tell a gendered story to “tell the truth” about an aspect of Mana’s life that I know would not normally be a topic for a funeral story.

Cinda’s Abortion Story

Cinda : And then, stories after that about how ah she would go—after she was married, she would go over to her mother’s for lunch every day and ah, one day she was on her way and um, called her mother from the phone booth and fainted.

Gary : Oh.

Cinda : And her mother said “Oh, you might be pregnant.” “Oh heavens, I wouldn’t know I was pregnant.” And it was like . . . the implication was that she didn’t know what she needed to do to get pregnant, and that it was something that just happened to her without knowing.

Gary : Which, of course, reminds me of the stories about um that Mana would tell about abortion. “I don’t know why everybody makes such a big fuss about that . . . that . . . somebody showed me—”

Cinda : It was Papa. She said—

Gary : They did a . . . coathanger—

Cinda : No, she said that the doctor came the first time, um and ah made some kind, brought some kind of instrument with him—

Gary : It was a doctor ?

Cinda : Yeah, and brought an instrument with him and um gave her the abortion and then Papa made an instrument—“because he was so handy”—(laughter) and made this instrument that she would then be able to administer to herself every time she was pregnant.

Gary : Unbelievable.

Cinda : Yeah, and I, and then she said, “Then I’d just go lie down for a couple of hours”—

Gary : Yeah, yeah.

Cinda : —and it would all be fine.

Gary : And I heard her tell that story.

Cinda : Many times.

Gary : I, I, you know, you wouldn’t believe it but—

Cinda : Yeah, and then she would say, and “Oh heavens”—that seemed to be the way she started so many of her stories—“Oh heavens, if I hadn’t

had abortions, I would have had twelve kids !"

Gary : Yeah.

Cinda : (laughter) Can't have that ! (laughter) Yeah, that was pretty strange. So she could go from sort of the one extreme of being so wide-eyed and "Oh, I would never think that would happen," and then just speak so matter-of-factly : "Oh, of course I had to have abortions—I mean, how else is a woman to cope ?"

The function of the story is to show Mana in a quasi-feminist light, taking control of her reproductive capacities. Like my father, I have a world view that comes through in the story, but because my listener is Gary, the interaction is in more of the co-narration mode that Rick and I shared. I show another side of Mana's life that would not come out as a conventional funeral story, and it resists the portrayal of Mana as passive and silent.²

The story is structured as a story that Mana told, and included a mimicking of her voice. Livia Polanyi suggests that "when reported speech is present in a text it is the exceptional encoding and thus acts evaluatively" (1979:210). Mana is quoted as being shocked to learn reproductive knowledge, then is indignant about any assessment that she should not be able to control her reproductive capacity. Other quotations, about Papa being handy (and therefore useful in constructing abortion equipment), and Mana needing only to lie down for a couple of hours, serve to pair grandmotherly statements with an ungrandmotherly topic. Thus, the story's form, function, content, and topic choice all work to explode a "grandmother" stereotype and portray Mana as unconventional. Constraints of the funeral story are also operating in that I am aware it transgresses funeral story conventions. It functions in a similar way to my father's story because it "tells the truth." But its focus on the life and voice of the woman implies politics of a distinctly dissimilar stripe.

The stories of my two sons (Gannon, aged eight, and Dillon, aged five) show elements of what Sarah Michaels identified in children's stories. The teacher in her study attempted to keep the stories on topic despite children's differing storytelling styles. Michaels identifies a storytelling style whereby the "overall point must be inferred by the listener from a series of concrete anecdotes" (1985:41). Gannon, being older, is obviously more socialized to the conventions of narrative that Gary and I are seeking. In the video, Gannon becomes visibly distressed when Dillon wanders off-topic near the end of their storytelling session.

2. I wonder now, actually, why I never asked Mana why birth control was not an option here, since condoms presumably would have been a possibility.

Gannon and Dillon's Interaction

Cinda : Okay, Pook. What do you remember about Mana ? When you think of her, what do you remember ?

Gannon : I think, ah, let's see, ah—

Dillon : I think about her that she ah says "Come on, go on my lap."

Cinda : Oh, is that right ?

Gannon : Yeah, and she calls me Rick.

Cinda : Oh, is that right ?

Dillon : What does she call me ? I forgot.

Cinda : I don't know.

Gannon : She calls him Greg. [Gary's cousin]

Cinda : No, she doesn't know Greg.

Gannon : Well she calls—

Dillon : calls me, she calls me Joe. [my brother]

Cinda : What did she look like ?

Gannon : Well, she has dark, well she doesn't look like anything right now.

Dillon : She looks like this—

Cinda : No, but what did she look like ?

Dillon : She looks like this. She looked like that. She had a teensie, weensie, weensie head.

Cinda : You're being silly. (laughter)

Gannon : and she had wrinkles and she had brown hair.

Cinda : Wrinkles and brown hair, okay.

Gannon : um

Cinda : And what did she sound like when we got up to the cottage and got out of the car ?

Gannon and Dillon : "Yah, yah, yah!"

Gannon : "Where's my kiss ?"

Dillon : Yeah, "Where's my kiss ?"

Gannon : "Want some chocolates and some candies ?"

Cinda : Yeah ? Okay, so she liked sweets.

Gannon : Then we'd go and play with um Grandpa, Dadat ? [Don]

Cinda : Yeah ?

Dillon : and then we went to—and then we played soccer with Dad and, and ah you.

Cinda : Uh-huh.

Gary : Did Mana have any toys there of any sort for you ?

Gannon : Yes.

Dillon : Yeah. There was—ten thousand toys inside.

Gannon : Sort of like. And, and um, I also remember one time when um, when she got out some colouring books and some, um, and some crayons—

Dillon : We coloured.

Gannon : We all did. Even Mana coloured.

Cinda : Oh, is that right ?

Dillon : Yeah and she doesn't even know how to colour—

Gannon : But she's a good colourer.

Cinda : Uh-huh ? Okay.

Dillon : She doesn't scribble.

Cinda : No ?

Gannon : No, she's good.

Dillon : She's a artist, like us.

Cinda : Do you ever remember her reading to you ?

Gannon : Yes I remember—

Dillon : You're going to love our presents. [It was my birthday.]

Cinda : Is that right ? What did she read to you ? Do you remember what it was ?

Gannon : I remember one—it was a, um one time—we brought some books, to um, the cottage and we piled them up on the table and we sat on Mana's lap and she started reading them to us, and then—Dad, Mom, you're going to knock over the flowers.

Cinda : Oh thanks. (laughter)

Gannon : You're welcome. Um the, um, um, and I also remember there's a colouring book where ah, where there's a few words in it, and it's like, it's like a book—

Dillon : (mimicking Gannon's hand movements) You need to find all the words—

Gannon : Naw—and you have to draw ? And the words are in, in the middle of—it's like it's a train book, and she reads us those, that. I remember her.

Dillon : My sock is breaking, Mom. Look. Can you cut this ?

Cinda : Is there anything else ? Or is that about everything you can remember ?

Gannon : That's everything that I—

Gary : Do you remember any of the particular toys she had for you ?

Gannon : Yes I do, a kite. And she had " Battleship."

Dillon : She had a Frisbee.

Gannon : Yes, she has a frisbee. She had a soccerball. Uh-huh. She had skis. She had a boat.

Cinda : Um-hum.

Dillon : No, Asia had that. [their cousin]

Gannon : No, she did.

Gary : Where do you think of her standing when you think of her ?

Gannon : On the porch. On the porch of the cottage. Where the stone is ?

Cinda Uh-huh ?

Dillon : She has a camera.

Cinda : Uh-huh ?

Gannon : and let's see. I also remember—when I think of Mana, I think of Kim.

Gary : Yeah.

Cinda : Um-hum ?

Dillon : She looks like Kim.

Gannon : Yeah, a little bit.

Cinda : What sort of clothes did she wear ?

Dillon : Do you know that ah—

Gannon : Mostly she wore a red sweater.

Cinda : That's true.

Dillon : Do you know a Power Ranger Kimberly ? Do you know that Kim and another kind of Kim. Kimberly and just Kim. They start like just Kim.

Cinda : So do you remember anything—

Dillon : So they both go like Kim—Kimberly and Kim. And Tommy and Jason—

Cinda : What on earth does this have to do with Mana ?

Everyone : (laughter)

Gary : Be careful, Gannon. [Gannon has flopped over on his side, relieved that Dillon's associational wandering has been brought under control.]

Cinda : Okay, now you're being silly.

The forms of their descriptions range from the complex associative ideas noted by Michaels to more specific responses to interview questions (1985:53). I tend to police the responses to make sure that my purpose in hearing their memories is being met. Although Dillon's linguistic revelation about the word Kim also appearing in the word Kimberly is understandable, I censor it as being off-topic.

The function of the storytelling session is to do what I ask—remember things about Mana. Both boys become excited when they talk about things that are important to them, like toys and Power Rangers. The constraints are not so much imposed by funeral conventions, but more by my questions and monitoring of their answers. I notice that I asked what Mana “sounded like,” which prompted them to speak in her voice. However, Dillon had done this once before I prompted it. Since Gary and I also mimicked Mana, it may be a characteristic of our group's storytelling style.³ Gender does not seem to be a salient factor in this interaction.

Discussion

It is apparent from this study that funeral stories constitute a site for the negotiation of cultural and interpersonal meaning. Storytellers use a range of theoretical story forms—episodic, habitual, kernel, associational—to negotiate and define their particular, situated relationships with the deceased and with each other. Conventions of funeral stories are used strategically by the storytellers, whether the purpose is to abide by the conventions or contravene them. While a significant proportion of this sample breaks with convention, I suspect that it is an anomalous occurrence. When Silberstein noticed the consistency of courtship narratives across generations, I wondered about what transgressions of their taboos would look like. I was prepared to transgress funeral conventions and knew that I could also prompt my father into doing so. This confluence of influence is not likely a common one. In any case, however, both the abiding by and contravening of convention still relies on the existence of the convention. While Thorne credits deconstruction with questioning boundaries, there is—here as elsewhere—the inevitable complicity of deconstruction with what it deconstructs. My father and I rely on the boundaries of funeral story conventions to enable our transgressions. Significantly, too, our breaking of taboos contributes to opposite visions of Mana.

Similarly, the study offers support for Silberstein's conclusion that narrative creates history as much as documents it. The life of one woman is created as much by the expectations associated with funeral stories (and the breaking of their taboos) as by the content of her life. Kim and Rick tell appropriate stories which portray Mana as humorous, in a benign family role, doing something mildly unconventional with a minimum of conflict. It is thus also clear from this study that the telling of a woman's life is affected by what story is being told, by whom, to whom, when, and for what purpose.

Implicit in the funeral story is the generic form of the biography, which suggests that there exists a solvable mystery in the subject under scrutiny. Michael Ondaatje, in his novel *Running in the Family*, looks at the assumptions underpinning the biography when he returns to Sri Lanka to collect family members' posthumous memories of his father. Ondaatje's postmodern interrogation of biography strips it of any pretension to objectivity. His suggestion is that, although the deceased existed, the meaning of the person is created and recreated by living people through the story form. Ultimately, his father would have to remain a mystery to him, since the form, function, and constraints of posthumous storytelling reveal as much about the living as they do about the dead.

While gender is a factor in funeral stories, its interaction with other variables is complex. Dominance can be expressed with or without gender as a

3. Kim quoted Mana as saying "my button broke," and "my pants are going to fall down," but did not noticeably alter her voice from the way she presented her own.

variable, and men or women can tell kernel stories cooperatively with the aim of solidarity. Deborah Tannen's observation that gendered cultural differences are imbricated with issues of dominance is important here, since both seem to be at work in the funeral story, but in indirect ways. Like Ondaatje's father, Mana was a real person and therefore subject to different gender constraints at different times in her life. These constraints become further complicated, however, once she becomes a character in someone's story. Her words and actions become deployed to serve the needs of the storyteller's form, function, or individual set of constraints. Dominance thus becomes a multivalent force. Kim's storytelling dominance, for example, interacts with her gendered role as Mana's caregiver. (It is highly unlikely that Mana's son would ever be her caregiver, and even when Mana visited my father, it was Jean who attended to her needs.) Thus Kim's storytelling dominance operates in contradiction to an aspect of her gendered lived experience.

By contrast, Rick was brought up in a female-dominated household, since his parents were divorced early on, and Papa died before he was born. Thus, the constraints of Mana's lived experience become displaced by her powerful role in Rick's life. His ability to tell a "female-style" story may be influenced by female culture and dominance. The idea of female dominance becomes complicated again when we consider that Mana's ideas of both culture and power were shaped by patriarchy. Thus, had Mana and Kim brought up a little girl in the same circumstances, their tactics might well have altered. The question of how gender operates in funeral stories, therefore, is a slippery one.

Funeral stories constitute a way for survivors to make sense of their experience. However, these stories also attempt to represent a life, which immediately calls up questions about truth and reality. Ondaatje's conclusion to his study of his father's posthumous stories works just as well for my study of Mana's stories :

"You must get this book right," my brother tells me, "You can only write it once." But the book again is incomplete. In the end all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues. Not that we thought that we would be able to fully understand you. [1993:201]

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