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Autoethnographic Fragments of My Grandmothers

Nana was in the hospital. I gave blood. I drove up to Los Angeles with my mother, her daughter. Nana was in and out of sleep, in and out of the world, and didn't know who I was or that I was even there. I didn't know who I was or that I was even there, in that hospital, in the room, giving blood, eating small, stale chocolate cookies that the nurse who poked my arm gave me. When Nana died three weeks later, I was not there and of course I wanted to be there but I wasn't, I couldn't, I don't know where the hell I was I just know I wasn't there but my mother was and she took a picture and I looked at the photo and tried to see evidence of Nana's soul leaving her body, standing by it, but nothing was there like I wasn't there.

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“I itch all over,” she said. “Will you scratch my head, my back, my arms please?” she asked. Grandma Toby was nearly bald from the chemo, her skin reddish-pink, sitting in the wheelchair in her hospital room at Kaiser Permanente, trying to scratch at places she couldn’t get to. She didn’t have enough hands and fingers to scratch simultaneously in all the areas that were irritating her. I did what she asked me to. I didn’t want to, I didn’t want to feel her skin or scalp and what the chemo was doing, because of that tumor in her head, but I had to do it because I had no other choice.

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This writing incorporates the theoretical practice of authoethnographic sketching (Rambo, 2005b, 2007; Rambo Ronai, 1998; Tamas 2009) and authoethnographic vignettes (Humphreys, 2005) to present changes and evolution of myself within contemporary culture when it comes to aging, health, medicine, hospitalization, and death. Indeed, autoethnography, according to some, is the study of the self in one's own culture (Hayano, 1979). I use the physical ailments and breakdown of both my grandmothers (Nana on my mother's side, Grandma Toby on my father's) to address issues of death and aging through short sketches and vignettes, each six sentences in length. This form is borrowed from the online journal, *Six Sentences*, and its corresponding community blog, that challenges writers to convey evocative and meaningful scenes, narratives, and prose poems within a six sentence framework. Rambo (2007, p. 533) states that such textual sketches are

> an incomplete study, by definition. Information is left out or suggested, and the mind's eye is invited to fill in the details. Likewise, the descriptions in an autoethnographic sketch lay down lines representing something the autoethnographer observes or feels, and the reader fills in the details. Like a drawing or sketch, an autoethnography could be seen as a stagnant, closed representation of a subject, which comes to an artificial end. But like a sketch, an autoethnograhy could always be open for interpretation.

Rambo (2005b, 2007) formulated autoethnographic sketching from her experiences as an art student. Humphreys (2005) developed his theory of autoethnographic vignettes when "as an organizational ethnographer [he] searched for analytical and representational strategies and forms that would enable me to increase self-reflexivity and slough off any notion that I might be one of the 'academic tourists who only manage to get to the surface of any inquiry they pursue'

(Pelias, 2003, p. 369)" (p. 842). Autoethnographic vignettes are "an alternative approach to representation and reflexivity in qualitative research" (Humphreys, 2005, p. 840). By limiting my writings to six sentences, each sketch becomes a fragment of a memory, a form of writing that Derrida (1987) explored in *The Postcard*. Thus I will call these "autoethnographic fragments" rather than sketches or vignettes. Derrida (1987) begins with a hypothesis: "You might read these *envois* as a preface to a book that I have not written" (p. 3). Elias (2003) contends: "Hypotheses of this kind enforce a specific performative quality in the text, as they always involve an intent, addressed, not so much to the writer himself to write a book, but to the reader to read the book which was never written" (p. 240). Using this as a lens onto my collection of autoethnographic fragments, each represents a longer work I have not written, a memory I have not fully recalled. They are isolated links to the whole of my lived experienced; they can stand alone like a (prose) poem, conveying place, emotion, and the sociological epiphany (Denzin, 1989).

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Much of the current available autoethnography addresses pain, loss, cancer, disease, and death of the other and how the self reacts to this experience (Ellis, 1994, 2004; Berg & Trujillo, 2008). In this case, I follow the form. There have been recent calls for autoethnography to address more than narratives of pain and negativity, such as joy through humor (Jones, 2007; Hemmingson, 2008), although joy can arise from loss, as one man explains after the death of his wife:

> I am more joyous. I really do live my life now according to the credo 'Life is Short.' I do not take anything for granted. I spend more time doing things I really enjoy. I am more outgoing and sociable, and my circle of friends has expanded. I smile more than I

> used to, and I have discovered that most people smile back at me. (Berg & Trujillo, 2008, p. 162)

I have not experienced joy out of the death of my grandmothers, although I was relieved that they would no longer suffer the pain of their ill health, and the humiliation of being invalid. I did not derive a sense of "life is short" from the experience, but an understanding that suffering and sadness is an evitable part of aging and life.

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I remember Nana shop-lifting in front of me when I was five or six. We were in a store, and I eyed a bag of plastic army soldiers, and she said, "Ssshhh," looked around, and quickly stuffed the bag of soldiers into her over-sized purse. Later, when we left the store, she presented me with the bag and laughed and said, "Here you go, caca boy." This is what she always called me, from as long as I remember: *caca boy*. I was delighted to have this bag, these new toys, and I didn't care that they were stolen because I didn't know what that meant—to steal—to shoplift—and I didn't care. Years later, as I did my own shoplifting, and was arrested twice for it, I would remember this incident and I would think: Well, if Nana got away with it and it was okay, then it's okay for me to do it and get away with it.

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Grandma Toby always slept on the couch; either at her apartment or when she would baby sit me and my little brother. She could not sleep on a bed. When I went to her apartment, I slept in the bedroom and she slept on the couch just as she slept on the couch when she came over and my parents were in Las Vegas or somewhere else. A cousin once told me she used to always sleep on the couch waiting for her husband, the grandfather I never knew; he'd come home late drunk,

and quiet him down, not wake the kids, and he would beat her, and she would take the beating just as long as he wouldn't beat on the kids. I have no idea if this is true.

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"Opposing the fragment to a complete text means endowing the fragment with the power to begin the work of interrogating the text, its premise, and its totality" (Elias 2002, p. 245). Questions arrive from my fragments: how did I know this about Grandma Tobey if I wasn't even born then, and there?

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I think I heard that from a cousin. I am not certain who, exactly, told me that should Grandma Toby but someone did. Of course, I call into question my memory, especially these snippets of images of both my grandmothers. In writing about his own childhood, Denzin (2005, p. 255) states: "The process of writing was a process of self-construction and then reconstruction […] based on ongoing conversations with myself and with memories of my past. These memories were reconstructed through an interior dialogue […] to make sense of the present by writing through these memories." Denzin cannot be for certain that his memories are exact, what his imagination and inner self have changed in the present representation. I find myself having similar interior dialogues when I remember both my grandmothers, who died within six months of each other when I was twenty-three. Twenty years later, and recalling images and scenes of them when I was a child, I attempt to make sense of the memories, which are brief incidents in context, thus written out in six-sentence sketches. Memory "is a fractured, revisionist, personal history, an attempt at a personal mythology" (Denzin 2007, p. 298).

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"An epigraphic fragment that begins with a concern with its own ontology and topos is a performative fragment" (Elias p. 239). These fragments—my fragments (for I must own them)—perform memory the way a poem performs imagery.

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A year after both my grandmothers passed, I wrote a poem about Grandma Tobey:

"The Power to Heal"

I stood like a photograph
at my grandmother's hospital bed;
the x-rays of the tumor in her head etched
in my head like papers of unconditional surrender.
Only a month ago, she seemed so full of life.
I recalled, once, going to her home and using
her old manual typewriter to squeeze out
one of my first short stories. I remembered
helping her to her feet that day, as she fell
to the floor; I was taking her to the hospital
to find out why she was having these dizzy spells,
these memory lapses.
(I'd called my parents and said,
You better come, waiting outside the emergency ward
for them, abandoning her when the truth came true.)
I stood

there and wanted to touch her dried, wrinkled skin,
the wispy hair on her scalp, those
last fighting strands of from radiation treatment,
and heal her like some sort of saint,
like a snake-dancing Alabama preacher
with the divine gift of life, gothic
and southern in every sense of the word:
the touch, the touch.

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I have never written a poem about Nana and I am not sure why, though one could consider these six sentence fragments as "prose poems." Poetry and autoethnography make a smooth blend of genres. Richardson (1994) presented nine lyric poems about her domestic life as a method of questioning "pragmatic authority, representational data, and prescribed limits or boundaries" (p. 7) where "the narrative is only implied […] each a 'mini-narrative […] representing an emotionally and morally changed experience" (p. 8). The "poems could also be re-ordered, implying yet different plots" (p. 8). Richardson (1994) goes on to argue that "sociologically, each lyric poem represents a 'candid photo' or an 'episode' or epiphany" (p. 9). Moments of epiphany are the core of ethnographic accounts and sociological (auto) biographies (Denzin, 1989, 1997). I make the same argument for my autoethnographic sketches—their arrangement as presented here, or in different order, can apply different overall narratives; more importantly, they represent sociological experiences of family, disease, and loss, and how these experiences affected me psychologically then, and now: twenty years later. These fragments reveal the

cultural milieu of Western medicine, hospitals, and health care. “Cultures provide prefabricated narratives for hooking up the events in our lives” (Richardson, 1994, p. 9).

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My poem was an attempt to describe my feelings of helplessness, and the fear I had when I took Grandma Tobey for the CAT scan and they told her about the tumor. We were both shocked. I did not know to calm her down and that helpless feeling overwhelmed me and made me feel small. “In our culture, we are not taught how to care for a dying person” (Berg & Trujillo 2008, p. 162). Indeed, I wished I had special powers to make it all go away, to make life normal again for her, for the family.

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Death instigates autoethnography. “I felt a hollowness that writing ethnography and theory would not fill […] Three deaths in the space of three years changed the way I thought of myself as a writer” (Denzin 2005, p. 256). The passing of a husband, a mother, and a brother moved Ellis (1994, 2008) to write memorable autoethnographies. Berg and Trujillo (2008) composed a co-authored text that chronicled Berg’s eventual passing: “When Leah was diagnosed with cancer, I wasn’t sure I could handle what I would go through” (p. 162).

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Rambo (2005) describes her grandmother as “5’5”, a height she informed me was quite tall for a woman who grew up in her era; she was rail thin from hyperthyroidism and a poor diet. She dressed tastefully in designer clothing that was typically purchased from one of several exclusive clothing shops in San Francisco” (p. 561). Rambo describes her grandmother as she would draw

her grandmother on “white paper, in black India ink” (p. 561); her grandmother “would be standing, her face in profile, her head tossed back, her back facing the viewer, gracefully holding a fashionable cocktail in her outstretched hand” (pp. 561-62). Then the image changes: “I would paint Grandmother as specter, a nightmare on canvass, with muddled colors that ran together” (p. 562). Rambo reveals conflicting memory images of her grandmother. The descriptions of my grandmothers are not as detailed, limiting myself to the six sentence structure, but: I cannot remember how they looked or dressed, or how they have changed in my memories. I can only recall their faces, the color of the skin, the sound of their voices.

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Nana was around 5’6” and overweight, dealing with diabetes all her life (and which was instrument in her death). She loved sweets, she loved to nap all day, and she loved me, her caca boy. She dressed modestly—now I can remember!—usually clothes from discount stores and places like the Salvation Army store (which is where I think she stole the bag of toy soldiers, but I am not certain about this). She had a bit of a waddle when she walked.

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Grandma Tobey was around 5’4”. I’m not sure of her ethic background other to say that she was Caucasian. Her maiden name was Jennings and the Jennings lineage came from the Midwest: Wisconsin and Minnesota. Irish and Norwegian I believe. Sweden. I have no idea what she once did for a living—no profession, just general work.

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Autoethnography proves to be an effective narrative tool for writing about mothers (Ellis, 2008; Ronai Rambo, 1996) and grandmothers (Rambo, 2007). We study those in our family that came before us, to get a glimpse of what we (the self) may experience in the future. Grandmothers can offer sage advice: "My grandmother said I should never write down anything I would not want quoted […] how we are seen haunts us" (Tamas, 2009, p. 615).

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Nana did not have any other children except my mother. My mother says that when she was six-years-old, she would leave the house in the morning and not come back until the evening, hanging out with friends, playing, and Nana never asked where she was or what she was doing. "You can't let kids that young out in the world alone like that," says my mother, "with all the predators out there." The world was different back then. Today the news if filled with Amber Alerts, abducted and missing children, murdered children by their own parents or strangers, children lured into sex games by adults on the Internet posing as children. Today is different than when I was a child—I used to run around by myself after school when I was eight, nine, ten, and then I would go home, alone, and wait for my parents to come home from work.

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I was a latch-key kid in a way although I kept my house key in my pocket and not around my neck. I enjoyed coming home alone and watching TV*: Lost in Space, Popeye, Speed Racer*. If my father wasn't working he would watch other things, he wasn't interested in my shows, so I preferred it when he was away at work and I could watch what I wanted. If I was grounded from watching TV, he would check the small TV if it was warm, and he'd know I was watching, and

he'd take the belt to my ass. I remember a lot of punishments. I don't remember what I got in trouble for.

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I remember Nana saving me from a spanking from my mother. I was three or four. I don't know what I did. I ran to Nana for protection from my mother and Nana picked me up and said, "Don't hit him!" I know my mother was not happy with this interference. "He has to learn," she said and Nana said, "Learn what?"

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Are these memories correct? I believe they are.

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No one believes me when I say this and this is what I say when I talk about memory: I clearly recall being inside my mother. I remember a moment, an event: I recall Nana looking down at me, touching me but not touching me, there was something between us; it was like watching her on a screen. She said: "Oh, the baby kicked!" and I kicked again. "Oh!" said my nana, "again!" Nana had her hand on my mother's protruding pregnant belly. I felt loved and safe and I went to sleep and stopped kicking.

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My mother and father did not get together until I was five. I never knew him until I was five and I remember being afraid of him when he came over. I remember hiding under a table. I remember my mother saying, "This is your daddy." I didn't know what a daddy was because I had never had one. There was only me and mommy those first five years.

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My mother found an apartment in the city after she got at the phone company. She wanted to get away from her mother. Nana then moved into an apartment in the same complex to be near me. My mother was not happy about that and I don't know why. I remember going over to Nana's apartment and it always felt safe there. I don't know why I didn't feel safe in my mother's apartment.

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Grandma Toby gave birth two five children: Uncle Craig, my father's older brother, Aunt Myra and Aunt Kathy, his older sisters, and Aunt Shelly, his younger sister, whom he used to take care of. My father was allowed to go out and do what he wanted: party, get drunk, do drugs, and at age eighteen, impregnate my sixteen-year-old mother. This was 1965. I was born July 12, 1966, so I must have been conceived on or about October 19-20, 1965. Blending the biographical with the historical, I wonder what was happening on those dates. In October of 1965, the war in Vietnam was under way and protests were starting to happen and on the 18th the Indonesian government outlawed the Indonesian Communist Party—in July, 1966, the Warsaw pact ended with support for North Vietnam and on the 12th Indira Gandhi visited Moscow and two days later Israeli and Syrian jet fighters clashed over the River Jordan.

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These memories are not only fragmented, the layers of theory and analysis are fragments. They are brief when they could go on for pages; they cite snippets of other works without going into explication. These too are postcards—postcards of thought, postcards of methodology. They are ideas jotted down on napkins or pieces of conversation heard in passing; they are ear-marked

pages in scholarly journals. They may appear to be incomplete yet they deliver the intended message with brevity. This paragraph is six sentences long.

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"To be fragmentary of the given word, which can (in its fundamental passivity) then be accommodated: proverb, enigma, verse inscription, censure? Raw speech passed over the cooking fire of enunciation. There is nothing missing from the fragment" (Pierssens, 1981, p. 167).

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In these autoethnographic fragments I have employed "systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.737). There are four selves, four voices: memories from my childhood self, memories from my young adult self, memories from my adult self, and my autoethnographic self that analyzes and engages in discourse on the nature of the self, memory, and autoethnography (a meta-self if you will). The representation of these four selves is my attempt at showing the evolution of my being through the lens of fragmented memories of my grandmothers. "The self is something which has development; it is not there initially at birth but arises in the process of social experience and activity" (Mead, 1934, p. 199). When Denzin (2005) writes down his memories of playing cowboys and Indians when he was a child, he traces, through systematic memory writing, his development as a politically aware self of race relations. Rambo Ronai (1996, 1998), through her layered accounts, traces the development of her self from sexually abused child to a feminist sociologist. Speedy (2008) calls these "narrative therapies" that "position personal agency firmly within social and political discourses" (p. 93). My current feelings and thoughts about death, grandparents, cancer and loss have been

influenced by my experiences with the decay of my grandmothers; although twenty years old now, these memories still linger around the heart and are firmly etched into my psyche.

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My mother goes to the cemetery several times a year to place flowers at the graves of both grandmothers, her mother and mother-in-law. Both were cremated and both are on the same Catholic grounds. Nana is in a box in the ground by her mother and Grandma Tobey is entombed into a mausoleum wall. She can take care of matters for both of the dead at the same time, in the same hour. I know there will be a day I will have to do the same for her and it is a day I am not looking forward to, yet it is a day we must all endure eventually.

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