



***RE-CONSTRUCTING SELF WITHIN THE FAMILY:  
RE-BUILDING THE FAMILY ALBUM***

ANNIINA SUOMINEN GUYAS

**Abstract**

This article analyzes a photograph using the method of memory work. Focusing on remembering and family relationships, it is a visual and verbal deconstruction of autobiographical memories that are acknowledged to inform and influence the author's current private and public roles, and self-perception. The article provides an example of self-inquiry through personal artifacts.

The struggle is now, the past is made in the present. Family photographs may affect to show us our past, but what we do with them—how we use them—is really about today, not yesterday. ... There can be no last word about my photograph, about any photograph. (Kuhn, 1995, p. 16)

*Mummu – Grandma* by Anniina Suominen Guyas, 1996



**Re-constructing Self**

This paper is a demonstration of a critical image-based study as well as a deconstructive autobiographical inquiry practiced through a form of “memory work” (Kuhn, 1995; 2000). The purpose of this autobiographical writing is to deconstruct my learned gender roles through the memories sparked by a photograph. I aim to underline the educational potential of the rupture and fragmentation of learned self-perceptions.

It is central to this study to emphasize that photographs and other similar artifacts do not document events and people but actively construct memories and create meaning. Further, private memories, formed within larger socio-cultural contexts and socially learned behavior, “can bring together the personal, the social and the historical” (Kuhn, 2000, p. 179). Our memories shape our identity and can “place us as members both of families and of wider communities—communities of class, gender, nation, for instance” (Kuhn, 2000, p. 179).

Because I see the private and public aspects of one's life as relational and inseparable, I understand the proposed educational significance of this practice to be embedded in the efforts of becoming active inquirers and re-tellers of one's life. Instead of continuing to live accepted, hurtful, or comforting stories of one's life, the potential for educational growth is in the constant search and retelling of stories that serve the needs of one's current life situations. Who I am, and become, is inherently interconnected with my life as an educator of children, youth, and adults of diverse needs, life-stories, and abilities.

In this paper, I perform a “memory work” (Kuhn, 1995) in three different stages: reading stories into the photograph of my grandmother, interpreting those stories, and analyzing “the story of the story” (Eakin, 1999, p. 59), which in this case is the inquiry into the relational reading of my visual, oral, bodily, and emotional memories that are embodied in this image. The first two, reading stories into the image and interpreting them, happened in part simultaneously. My professional practice has become part of my most private self and vice versa, and as I analyzed the past, I approached it from both a scholarly and a personal perspective. I protected my family's past by explaining people's behavior with social issues, but I also attacked these past relations, seeking confrontation—even if only in my imagination.

As Kuhn (1995) writes, memory work happens both in the past and in the present. The work is “never ending, not revealing the ultimate truth, but greater knowledge” and “new understanding of both past and present” (p. 8). Through the analysis process I have come to a different conclusion with this image. This may not be my last interpretation of the image, but it helps me to understand my current scholarly and artistic work, and motives in conducting them. I have come to understand, for example, how profoundly my physical move from one continent to another made me re-define myself in relation to my new environment and question everything I had been before. Smith (1998) writes that: “the very sense of self as identity derives paradoxically from the loss to consciousness of fragments of experiential history” (p. 108). I lost who I had been before, but the loss of the “learned” helped me to start interpreting these fragments. Even though the process of reconstructing my identity most evidently parallels the physical move, “the awakening of a questioning attitude towards my own life and the world around me” had happened earlier (Kuhn, 1995, p. 102). The radical changes in my life pushed me “to find a voice” for this questioning (Kuhn, 1995, p. 103).

I find aspects of feminist resistance in my behavior; I am searching for language and knowledge that will help me to question the limitations of the perceived self and to continue to explore and develop my female identity. I am searching for language and space within academic limitations that would allow me to tell my stories from an immigrant’s, a woman’s, and an educator’s perspective about “the complicated and painful process of identity” (Hirsch, 1997, p. 215).

My story is an educational/educator’s story; it is about finding a voice, defining an identity. Although I was hesitant about including autobiographical aspects of my story in my research publications, I also knew that I had to do it; I had to write about the hidden and silenced stories of my past and discuss the previously unspeakable to gain my full potential as a scholar and an educator. To trust and respect myself as an educator practicing a form of critical pedagogy sensitive to complex variations of diversity, I had to confront the very personal biases shaping my identity and professional practice (Hesford, 1999).

***Initial Reading of the Grandma Photograph  
(written in February, 2002)***

*In this photograph (Figure 1), I portrayed my mother’s mother wearing a nightgown against a flower-patterned background. On my request she covered her face with a dark wooden mask that she holds in her right hand. My mother and sister find the image disturbing, dark, and uncomfortable. Women in my family are living in an empowering period in our family history. We seek academic success, achieve our goals, leave our home country, divorce to leave abusive marriages, find new independence and social power, and discover new happiness and pride in who we are. The photograph of my grandmother speaks of the underlying power structures between different generations in my family. It inspires me to write with and for family members adjusting to new and constantly changing life situations.*



Figure 1. *Mummu – Grandma* by Anniina Suominen Guyas, 1996.

While writing this paper based on the photograph I took of my grandmother several years ago, I was continuously confronted by the ethical dilemma of writing about self in relationship to one's family. Critically re-evaluating one's identity within the pre-set limits of family lore, myths, silenced narratives, and accepted modes of narration is not an easy task. Behar (1995) asks the very sensitive question of "What do you do when your parents are 'the other'?" (p. 67). I have focused on the legacy of the different generations of women in the family, but I have also found myself re-writing the story of my family (Byng-Hall, 1990).

Like so many others, I arrived in the United States as a student with high expectations and nothing but two suitcases filled with what I needed to start my new life. This photograph of my grandmother was among the items packed tightly into my two bags. Over the past seven years, the photograph has been a focal point of the various combinations of memorial altars I have created in the apartments in which I have lived.

It has become customary in my family that the oldest daughter stays close to home, marry, and have a family. By leaving home, I ended this tradition of sacrificing personal goals to devote myself to family and marriage. I am the first oldest daughter in four generations who will not be given final acceptance among the women in the family through establishing my own family. Instead, I have gained acceptance among the women in my family, especially from my mother, by strongly following my professional and artistic goals.

In the image in front of me, I see my maternal grandmother posing against a patterned fabric, which I recognize as my grandparents' old comforter. Sometimes, on weekends, we—my siblings and I—were allowed to stay overnight at my grandparents' house. When I was small, or if I was the only grandchild staying there for the night, I was permitted to sleep next to my grandmother. I find the strongest connection to my maternal grandparents through these memories of spending nights with them.

Even if I had thought that the only reason for choosing this fabric as the backdrop was to add movement and liveliness to the image, the connection to my childhood memories is so strong that, at an unconscious level, I must have found it meaningful. The earth colored, plant motif fabric adds historical depth to this image by evoking child-

hood memories. When looking at the image, I tend to relate it more to my childhood and current life than to the year 1996 when the photograph was taken. Still, if I would name a moment in our interaction that changed my relationship with my grandmother, this session would be just that. Since she has not been photographed often, I believe that, through creating this image, I took partial control over the memories she would leave behind. My family's past and my grandmother's personal history became personally significant to me. Instead of listening to the tales of past family life and re-telling these stories myself, these narratives seemed to influence a more conscious formation of myself: I had become an active participant in creating a familial past and stories.

I originally took this photograph for a college project that addressed gender roles, power, and class. Back then, none of these issues were really clear to me. I have only in the past few years started to verbalize my visual work, and my current photographic family projects are influenced by the contemporary inter-disciplinary visual and textual memoirs and "memory work" (Kuhn, 1995) that often intertwine personal and theoretical aspects of researching memory, autobiographical writing, and identity (Hirsch, 1997; Rugg, 1997). For this project, back in 1996, I borrowed a cape from a TV station's wardrobe and, fascinated by it, I decided to ask people I knew to wear it. I gave them directions and guidelines, but my models mainly chose the poses and created characters for themselves. My grandfather wearing the royal blue cape is absent from this photograph. He also held a mask in his hand, but did not cover his face. Even if not aware of it, I obviously played with gender roles and power structures in the family. My grandfather is the artistic maestro in the family, while my grandmother's role is to perform daily, necessary routines. My grandfather wears the cape, where my grandmother's conservative nightgown covers her body with a tight bow around her neck.

In analyzing the image of my grandmother today, I discover I am still bothered by its striking power to evoke discomfort. This photograph needs further reading, and I need to read it. Her gaze, the maternal omnipotent gaze (Hirsch, 1997) that has so strongly controlled my mother's life, still continues to influence me. Although the (imaginary?) gaze my grandmother gives me is friendly and nurturing, it also measures and judges me. The wooden mask's easy and relaxed glance fools



me into looking on the side, giving my grandmother a perfect chance to evaluate my current being, without my being aware of this. I still do not know why I brought the Sri Lankan masks into these photographs, but by offering my subjects the masks, I gave them a chance to either totally or partially cover their faces, and thus appear unrecognizable, or to voluntarily reveal their personalities. Even if not aware of my intentions at the moment of photographing, I was re-negotiating the power structures in the family by giving my subjects partial control over their portraits.

After my initial interpretations I wrote a fictional letter to my grandmother. While I never intended to show it to her, it was my way of confronting her about the difficult relationships between mothers and daughters in the family. At the moment of writing this letter, I had begun reading autobiographies that focus on relationships between family members. Carolyn Kay Steedman's (1987) *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Annette Kuhn's (1995) *Family Secrets*, and bell hooks' (1998) article "Writing Autobiography" had especially influenced me, and my intention for writing this letter was to state accusations and voice silenced desires.

*Letter to mummu—grandma  
(written in early spring 2002)*

*I see you hiding behind the mask. I cannot see your eyes, our eyes don't meet, but I can feel your gaze. Your increasingly religious attitudes have added judgment to the looks you give me. I wonder whether you are correcting yourself, or me, before the eyes of your God?*

*Your mother was a character in all meanings of the term. She was determined and persistent **so am I, and so is my mother**, but also a caretaker **so are you, so is your daughter and so am I**. These characteristics were built in our identity during early childhood. The identity she built according to expectations set for her as the oldest daughter in the family **you are your mother's only daughter, my mother is your oldest and I am her oldest daughter**, the daughter*

*to be trained as a maid. She was never to put herself before the needs of others, but be strong and self-sacrificing. It took you almost seventy years to find a voice for yourself and to ask for attention, didn't it? Your mother's consistency and need to control the course of events stretched the common understanding of appropriateness as she even planned her own funeral and burial; as if she could, by doing this, plan her afterlife. Your mother did not give you much space to develop your own personality, did she? I remember her caring in a practical manner, but not emotionally. Did she cherish and admire you? Did she physically or emotionally express love?*

*You have always been modest. You have put yourself down. We were all artists, except you and some others married into the family. Especially when compared to your husband, you have been the maid. All your children were talented in the arts and you saw this talent in your grandchildren. How did this make you feel? Were you left out or were you actually happy without the tormented gift most of us shared?*

*We never heard stories from the hospital you worked at. Did nothing worth telling ever happen there or did you just not want to share these stories? I remember you baking, cooking, cleaning the house with me, teaching me the necessary skills of good housekeeping, taking us on little trips. You were the first person to give me what I wanted and I felt important, as you trusted me to make good practical decisions in purchasing clothes for school or special events. The women in the family hadn't yet won the trauma of being born as God's ugly maidens, generation after generation, to serve others.*

*I love you as my grandmother, but have you been a good mother? You admitted that you would do everything differently if you had known better, but don't we all? I have seen*

*you grow in strength the last few decades as you took over the documentation of the family events and children growing up; you have presented your view of perceiving life along with your husband's. Through faithful and consistent observation and documentation, you have taught us all to value the special characteristics of each child in the family, defended the independent right of a child to develop a strong, unique personality.*

*I need to think about my mother as your daughter, as I need to think about myself as my parents' child. My mother's love towards her children has always been tender and devoted. We grew up knowing that we were always the priority in our mother's life, but my mother was raised without appraisal, acceptance, closeness, and emotional caring. She grew up observing the praise of her younger siblings' special characteristics, herself under a strict control. **You even read her letters, didn't you?** This led to her loss of identity during puberty and made her feel unworthy. You failed to tell her that she was talented in many ways. She was, like all of you, surprised when she succeeded in school, but as she reached adolescence, she became an underachiever **and so did I.***

Writing this letter, I knew I would break through the public face of the family, reveal unspoken aspects of our family life, become a betrayer, as I did not want to "play along" with the unspoken rules (hooks, 1998; Kuhn, 1995). None of the texts I read, that concerned themselves with the ethical issues related to writing one's family narrative, helped me to justify my project, to ease the discomfort. Even though hooks (1998) describes the writing experience as freeing, she considers the possibility that her struggle is caused by her resistance to let the past go, to completely heal from the past events.

The longing to tell one's story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of

release. It was the longing for release that compelled the writing but concurrently it was the joy of reunion that enabled me to see that the act of writing one's autobiography is a way to find again that aspect of self and experience that may no longer be an actual part of one's life but is a living memory shaping and informing the present. (p. 431)

While I have recently found creative writing therapeutic and reassuring, this project is not yet liberating but needs further analysis. Gillis (1996) mentioned how it is typical in current society to find meaning through the past, rather than in relation to a person's living environment. I had to first locate myself in my lineage of generations of women to understand myself the way I am today, as I distanced myself from my family when I re-created myself in my new living context in United States' culture and society. Writing my story will change me, and it already has. I will never again be the same person I was when I started.

### ***Second Reading*** ***(written several weeks later, spring 2002)***

*I have been able to take distance from this image and its analysis, and suddenly the process seems clearer to me: From this image, I search to explain my current feelings toward my family. I confront the image to find reasons for the feelings I have toward my family.*

*I have always, even though I am thirsty to hear the tales, questioned family stories. Family stories evoked by memories or photographs have made me feel that I belong to a continuously changing group of people. They made me search for similarities in appearances, but they also made me question each person's roles within these stories. Eakin (1999) argues that an individual's interactive relations to other people (especially family) and his/her living environment are the key components to understanding an individu-*

*al. I did not want to carry the role created for me within the family structure, instead I wanted to “shoot back” (Hirsch, 1997, p. 282), to become a subject who, with words and by re-reading these images, changes the familial system that has formed me as an object and who takes over the power of shaping my identity. I break, fragment, rupture, and contest the family lore, and through this practice I cause personal change in attitudes and behavior that I hope are collective of women in the family. I find myself “resisting the image;” my acts of “reading, re-reading, and misreading thus become forms of active intervention” (Hirsch, 1997, p. 215) and every reading births a new me. By contesting the image, I contest the “familial gaze” (p. 193) that has shaped the ways I view myself.*

*The process has become therapeutic. The photograph of my grandmother will still talk to me from the wall, but I have broken my grandmother’s gaze by analyzing the reasons my mother and sister might find this image disturbing. I believe that for them it represents the repression we still feel as women in my family. It reminds them how we need to work towards positive change to create opportunities for one’s natural desire to hear praise and to feel love and acceptance. The photograph also talks about the limits our close and caring family has built to separate each family member’s individuality from others by categorizing us all according to simplistic stereotypes. Each one of us plays a role in the family drama and the roles are hardly ever modified.*

### **Third Reading**

***(begun some days later in 2002, completed in 2006)***

*A very similar photographing session to the one I conducted with my maternal grandparents in 1996 occurred when*



Figure 2. *Anniina x 2.*

Photograph courtesy by Paula Toiviainen (1984).

*I was about ten years old. All of the children in my family were photographed individually and together in my grandfather’s basement studio. The location in my later photograph is almost identical to the early one, and the structure of my setting imitates the one that appeared almost twenty years earlier.*

*As I recall this session, all four of us (my three siblings and I) look uncomfortable. Only my brother has been able to squeeze out a natural-looking smile. We performed for the adult audience, posing for a photograph taken with the intention that this photograph would be later transferred into a painted portrait.*

*Even as a child, I found it difficult to relate to the portraits of myself; I failed to relate to my grandfather’s artistic vision of my self (Figure 2). Not realizing the similarities between these two sessions, I rebuilt the set, only to photo-*



*graph my grandparents instead of their grandchildren. Marianne Hirsch (1997) writes how Eugene Meatyard's mask photographs "document the limitations of the family photography, that which it cannot record or tell" (p. 100). I read the same intentions into the photograph I took of my grandmother; I re-lived and re-constructed what had happened decades ago and aimed to show what was previously left out.*

By photographing my grandparents, I subjected them to the same kind of posing we were subjected to as children, but I also included them in this session from which they were previously excluded. Most importantly, I inverted the conventional roles of parents and grandparents photographing their children and thus holding the power of preserving collective and personal memories (Hirsch, 1999). In her analysis of Meatyard's mask series, Hirsch (1997) suggests: "when we are photographed in the context of the conventions of family-snapshot photography ... we wear masks, fabricate ourselves according to certain expectations and are fabricated by them" (p. 98).

The group photographs taken of us as children, and the memories based on these images taught us to believe in our personalities as we learned them. We learned to believe in the myths of the special characteristics of each one of our personalities. From the moment we were born, or perhaps even before, our personalities were narrated to create characters that played roles in the family lore.

I grew up adapting to the role of a strong-willed leader who needed little comfort when facing hardship, while my sister on the other hand, was portrayed as more quiet, withdrawn, and creative. Although changes in each of our behaviors surfaced as we grew beyond family influences, the actions were always reflected in the light of the guiding, established identity.

By photographing my grandmother, I gave her permission to pose freely *at least partially* from the myths she had grown to believe in. While she often appeared self-conscious and reserved in the other photographs of her and made statements about the photographer unnecessarily wasting film on her aging looks, in this photograph she appears to be in

charge of her pose and gaze. She claims the focal point of the image and plays with the position of the mask she is holding.

## Conclusion

Through the analysis of a family photograph, I have attempted to break the blocks and boundaries that others and I have built for my personal growth and development. I recently realized that most of my projects since this photography session in 1996 have involved my grandparents in some form. I have grown to understand the generational legacy of family lore and its effects on the scholarly and artistic work I create. Through this personal and public artistic inquiry process I began to critically re-evaluate and then re-build my family album. Further, by exposing the silenced and most private memories to an artistic and narrative analysis, I allowed past memories and future expectations, dreams, fears, and desires to intertwine and relate, leading to a changed perception of my private and public selfhood.

My pedagogy emphasizes the importance of change and self-reflexivity, and combining artistic inquiry with theoretical studies has helped me to be more sensitive to diverse ways of being aware (Diamond & Halen-Faber, 2005). I have grown to investigate critically my pedagogy and philosophy through searching for connections between my personal life story and the public tale by and within which I live (Clandinin, et al., 2006).

Although I would not necessarily call this analysis process typical to my research, it provides a good example of how knowledge construction and coming to understanding is not linear, but rather layered. What I can express through words is only part of what I know. My visuality is as intellectual and analytically deep as my verbal thoughts. I like the idea of self-outing accepted self-perceptions through the process, and finding self-determination and temporary closures through the method of writing as an inquiry (Green in Flemons & Green, 2002; Richardson, 1997, 2000). The possibility to re-write my life-narrative through re-representing my story that "no longer serves [me] well" feels comforting (Kiesinger, 2002, p. 95).

## References

- Behar, R. (1995). Writing in my father's name: A diary of a Translated woman's first year. In R. Behar & D. Gordon (Eds.), *Women writing culture* (pp. 65-82). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Byng-Hall, J. (1990). The Power of family myths (Byng-Hall interviewed by Paul Thompson). In R. Samuel & P. Thompson (Eds.), *The myths we live by* (pp. 216-224). New York: Routledge.
- Clandinin, D. J., Huber, J., Huber, M., Murphy, M. S., Murray Orr, A., Pearce, M., & Steeves, P. (2006). *Composing diverse identities: Narrative inquiry into the interwoven lives of children and teachers*. New York: Routledge.
- Diamond, P., & van Halen-Faber, C. (2005). Apples of change: Arts-based methodology as a poetic and visual sixth sense. In C. Mitchell, S. Weber & K. O'Reilly-Scanlon (Eds.), *Just who do we think we are? Methodologies for autobiography and self-study in teaching* (pp. 81-94). New York: Routledge-Falmer.
- Eakin, J. P. (1999). Relational selves, relational lives: Autobiography and the myth of autonomy. In *How our lives become stories* (pp. 43-98). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Flemons, D., & Green, S. (2002). Stories that conform/stories that transform: A conversation in four parts. In A. Bochner & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Ethnographically speaking: Autoethnography, literature, and aesthetics* (pp. 87-94, 115-121, 165-169, & 187-190). Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.
- Gillis, J. (1996). *Myths of the family past in a world of their own making: Myth, ritual, and the quest for family values*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hesford, W. (1999). *Framing identities: Autobiography and the politics of pedagogy*. Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hirsch, M. (1997). *Family frames: photography, narrative and postmemory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hirsch, M. (1999). *Introduction: Familial Looking*. In M. Hirsch (Ed.), *The Familial Gaze* (pp. xi-xxv). London: University Press of New England.
- hooks, b (1998). Writing autobiography. In S. Smith & J. Watson (Eds.), *Women, autobiography, theory: A reader* (pp. 429-432). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Kiesinger, C. (2002). My father's shoes: The therapeutic value of narrative re-framing. In A. Bochner & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Ethnographically speaking: Autoethnography, literature, and aesthetics* (pp. 95-114). Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.
- Kuhn, A. (1995). *Family Secrets: Acts of memory and imagination*. New York: Verso.
- Kuhn, A. (2000). A journey through memory. In S. Radstone (Ed.), *Memory and methodology* (pp. 179-196). New York: Berg.
- Richardson, L. (1997). *Fields of play: Constructing an academic life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed., pp. 923-948). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rugg, L. (1997). *Picturing ourselves: Photography and autobiography*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, S. (1998). Performativity, autobiographical practice, resistance. In S. Smith & J. Watson (Eds.), *Women, autobiography, theory: A reader* (pp. 108-115). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. (Original work published 1995)
- Steedman, K. (1987). *Stories*. In *Landscape for a Good Woman*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers.

## About the Author

Anniina Suominen Guyas, Ph.D., is assistant professor of art education in the School of Art at Kent State University. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to the author at [asuomine@kent.edu](mailto:asuomine@kent.edu).