

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Two companion pieces, a video documentary and written analysis, provide the text for this exploration of how women's life stories and the mother-daughter narrative are preserved through the transmission of inherited objects. The video documentary reveals the lives of six diverse women who each discuss the politics of receiving and passing on family heirlooms, and inevitably share the stories their artifacts represent, recalling details of their own lives and of their female ancestors. The written analysis, focused in the three key areas of Stories, Objects and Inheritance, is inclusive of research in reminiscence, oral history, storytelling by women of color, the mother-daughter bond, consumer behavior and exchange, ethnography, anthropology of gift-giving, and personal narrative by and about women. This project is informed from a feminist worldview, drawing on socialist feminism's connection of capitalism and material access to patriarchal domination of women.

The research reflects the power of the stories. Women's personal narratives mirror the realities of their daily lives and exhibit a rich diversity of experience and culture. Further, as women's reminiscence and storytelling become an active part of a more inclusive historical archive, women of color's narrative and interpretive voices are also validated. The power of objects is revealed as they are passed through generational channels, gaining invaluable status and acting as an emblem of the spiritual nature of a kin group. Finally, the power of inheriting an inalienable possession is divulged, not just for one woman but also for her entire family system. When a woman inherits an object, she embodies a symbolic status ascribed to her simply by being a woman: keeper of the kin, guardian of the artifact, and guide in preserving and passing on the rituals and stories of women who came before. Inalienable possessions are bundled with personal biographies. Holding the artifact and ensuring the "rules" of transmission (such as passing it along gender lines or passing it on during a particular celebration or life transition) becomes more critical than preventing the object from breaking or landing in the wrong hands. Inheritance of an object is one sacred step in the family journey.

The stories recounted by six women in this research are not the stories of all women, but speak to the politics and privileges of holding inalienable possessions that have been present for women for generations. Their stories and the supporting research move this niche of women's experiences from cupboards, basements, cedar chests and journals to the archives of a truer American history.

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InHERitance:
The Transmission of Women's Inalienable Possessions,
Personal Narrative and the Mother-Daughter Bond

by
Jessica Ashley

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InHERitance:
The Transmission of Women's Inalienable Possessions,
Personal Narrative and the Mother-Daughter Bond

Review of Literature

Background

When I first began to interview women on video about the cherished objects they possessed, given to them from their mothers or grandmothers and intended for inheritance by daughters or granddaughters, it was as if someone had given me entry into the personal journals of their lives. Their life stories, the stories of their foremothers and dreams for their daughters, unfolded for me. As I heard more and more of these stories, themes arose around the anxiousness for storing objects and feeling burdened by other people's valuables; the responsibility of being the guardian of an heirloom and consequently, the family history; the compelling feelings shared of passing on the life stories of their mothers and themselves; the unspeakable value of a battered cookie sheet, a box full of record books, or a tattered family Bible. A peek into their lives quickly developed into an extensive visit with these women and their narratives on video and in this written companion, based on one research question: *How are women's life stories and the mother-daughter narrative preserved through the transmission of inherited objects?*

This subjective research is rooted in my relationship with my own grandmothers, one of whom is featured in the video. The intense personal narratives that arise out of this research are not just records of these women's lives but are comprehensive indications of how objects and their associated stories preserve

women's personal and political history. The subjectivity of their voice – or mine – is not new in the arena of personal narrative, testified by a group of feminist academics who claim, “It is precisely because of their subjectivity – their rootedness in time, place, and personal experience, and their perspective-ridden character – that we value them.” (Personal, 263)

To delve into the study of how women's life stories and mother-daughter narratives are preserved through the transmission of inherited objects, I have chosen to review research in three key areas put simply: Stories, Objects and Inheritance. Within the realm of stories, I have read works on reminiscence, oral history and personal narrative, with focus on personal narrative by and about women, women of color and the mother-daughter bond. My research on objects has rested in consumer behavior and exchange, which has its foundation in ethnography and anthropology of gift-giving. In accordance with my own feminist worldview and interest in conducting feminist research, I have found guidance and scholarly foundation in the feminist research that follows. It should be noted that many works are cited and referenced in this project by researchers who do not identify as feminist.

In reviewing research, I came across a quote from Mirra Bank's *Anonymous Was a Woman* that encapsulated the personal pull of this project for me. The passage is by a woman who quotes her grandmother, reflecting on a family heirloom, “My whole life is in that quilt...All my joys and all my sorrows are stitched into those little pieces...I tremble sometimes when I remember what that quilt knows about me” (Bank, 94). When I read the passage, I immediately phoned my mother and

grandmother to share it with them. Our understanding of the quote was a mutual understanding of each other and our commitment to each other to act as keepers of cherished family objects for each other and keepers of stories about each other. Only a few months before, as a wedding gift, my grandmother gave me one of her quilts, pieced from aprons and dresses that she, her sister, mother and grandmother wore. She told me stories as I unfolded it over her lap, my mother's and my own, encouraging me to put the quilt on my bed rather than hang it on the wall, to feel it and use the material well, as each of the women before me had. Most of the women whose clothes make up the quilt have long passed away, but my mother swears the objects they left for us are still warm with their touch, and my grandmother still uses those things to spark stories of their lives and her life with them. In this quilt, just as in the many objects passed down to many other women, I did not just hear the stories, I was *given* them. The stories and the inheritance were stitched into this artifact, now not just mine, but all these women's before – *ours*.

The Stories of Women's Lives and the Mother-Daughter Connection

Women's Personal Narratives

An extensive pool of research exists in the collection and analysis of women's personal narratives. The publication and validation of research by and about women of color has given depth to women's personal narratives. Further, the breadth of research is no longer centered on white, upper-class women of privilege. Rather, more

and more women's experiences are being recorded, and the methods for studying narrative are expanding, allowing for a many-voiced body of research about women's lives. The generalities once acceptable in referring to women as one whole are steadily receding, revealing narratives by and about women from diverse countries of origin, classes, professions, sexualities, ethnicities, political affiliations, and experiences.

In response, narrative form, the interpretive framework for collecting and assessing life stories (Personal, 13), expands with the diversity of sources and informants. Specific to personal narratives of women's lives, feminist researchers who make up the Personal Narratives Group conclude, "*Narrative form*, an inclusive term amenable to cross-disciplinary studies, suggests in its more encompassing nature that a narrative might be viewed as fluid rather than fixed in the variety of shapes that it can assume" (Personal, 99). The narratives of the women interviewed in this project are associated with the objects they have inherited or will pass down to female kin. Some narrative by the participants is relayed chronologically. However, the overlying form is narrative prompted by the object.

Gender is a consideration in much research on narratives and the link to heirloom objects (Personal, Curasi et al., Weiner). However, this project makes gender – specifically, women – the main component in the intersection of stories, objects and inheritance. Moving gender from consideration to center is an assertion that a woman's life stories cannot be separated from the dynamics of her gender. The

Personal Narratives Group plainly delineates why this link is more prevalent for women than men:

Certainly, men are affected by the social construction of gender, but for men, gender has been an unmarked category. For a woman, however, the story is rarely told without reference to the dynamics of gender. Women's personal narratives are among other things, stories of how women negotiate their 'exceptional' gender status both in their daily lives and over the course of a lifetime. They assume that one can understand the life only if she takes into account gender roles and gender expectations. Whether she has accepted the norms or defied them, a women's life can never be written taking gender for granted. (Personal, 5)

This negotiation of gender described by the Personal Narratives Group is further fleshed out when women interview women to obtain personal narratives for qualitative analysis. Catherine Kohler Riessman's "When Gender is Not Enough: Women Interviewing Women" acknowledges that narrative analysis can be applied to women's life stories (Riessman, 172) because of the connection between society and self, particularly when both narrator and interviewer are making sense of gender within the life stories. Riessman writes, "As a universal human form for reconstructing and interpreting the past, narratives link our experience to the world and our efforts to describe that experience, or make meaning of it" (Riessman, 172). The meaning of gender comes about as women collaborate to tell and interpret personal narratives (Riessman, 190) when there is a feminist inclusion of accountability and self-reflexivity on race, class and experiential diversity. Including "contrasting cases that explicate the diversity of women's experiences" and a "variety

of narrative forms used by different cultures,” Riessman explains, can result in life histories that “contribute to societal analysis of gender” (Riessman, 189).

Bettina Aptheker’s examination of the meaning of daily experiences reiterates how life stories collected by and from women of diverse cultures and experiences contribute to an epistemology of gender. Aptheker simply states the connection:

Women’s stories locate women’s cultures, women’s ways of seeing; they designate meaning, make women’s consciousness visible to us. Stories transform our experiences into ways of knowing – about ourselves as women and about ourselves as women looking at the world (Aptheker, 43).

As the collaboration of feminist scholarship and personal narratives has developed, the incentive to produce research “for women” has evolved as well. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, editors of *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, acknowledge the draw of feminist scholars to personal narrative as academic advocacy, assessing:

The appeal of oral history to feminists is easy to understand. Women doing oral histories with other women in order to recover their stories and revise received knowledge about them have seen their work as consistent with the principle of feminist research later codified in the phrase ‘research by, about, and for women’ (Gluck and Patai, 2).

Self-reflexively, Gluck and Patai describe their own work within the body of feminist research in oral history:

Through our work of framing, presenting, interpreting, analyzing, and making the work public, we have believed, simply and finally, that we were contributing

to the larger collectivity of women – making a kind of return. By documenting women’s representations of their own reality, we were engaging in advocacy. We felt that our work was, indeed, political and that it was for women (Gluck and Patai, 3).

The turning point, Gluck and Patai ascertain, came when feminist scholars began to dissect the relationship between the narrator and interpreter, concluding, “It was no longer possible to ignore the distinct imbalances in power and privilege that characterize most women’s oral history projects” (Gluck and Patai, 3). This is seen in the changing face – and voice – in the many-disciplined approaches to personal narratives.

Whereas the systems of oppression certainly continue to be enacted in the disciplines that rely on and produce life stories, from anthropology to literature to psychology and beyond, feminist scholarship has contributed to the “transforming these fields and dissolving their boundaries” (Gluck and Patai, 3). Contributing to the development of oral history (Gluck and Patai, 223), feminist collection and analysis of women’s life stories have filled books and studies, videos and films, tape recorders and kitchens, making public what was once reserved privately. Aptheker asserts, “Many of women’s stories have never been written. They form an oral tradition, passed on from one generation to the next” (Aptheker, 40). Personal narratives give permanence to these words and meanings, putting them into tangible form, making them material, and enabling them to be passed forward.

The Mother-Daughter Narrative

Acting as “primary documents for feminist research” (Personal, 4), women’s personal narratives are an answer to the call for more documentation of the role and significance of the mother-daughter bond within women’s lives. Although the lifeline connection between mothers and daughters has inked the pages of feminist inquiry, research and publications, there remain many empty spaces for examination on the intergenerational passage of women’s stories. Adrienne Rich’s call for mother-daughter narrative asserted, “The cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story” (Rich, 225).

Existing mother-daughter research follows in the narrative form, melding the interdisciplinary fields of psychology, art, theology, sociology and literature (Hirsch, 178). Marianne Hirsch credits Rich for changing the landscape of mother-daughter research and literature. In her controversial book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Rich demands that the mother-daughter connection is moved to the center of women’s personal narrative study. Hirsch cites the call for feminist research,

Rich’s voice, both personal and scholarly, resting on research in various academic fields as well as on her own experience as a mother and daughter, helped create a novel form of feminist discourse, which, I would argue, had freed scholars to consider extremely personal experiences as valid subjects of scholarly inquiry.
(Hirsch, 178)

Rich’s connection of the personal – her experience as mother and daughter – to the political – the simultaneous validity and absence of research on women’s connections

and in particular, the mother-daughter relationship, is echoed by Aptheker. Mother-daughter narratives are lost along the way, Aptheker claims, as a symptom of sexist devaluation of women's words and experiences.

Some of us cannot remember women's stories. We think we must have heard stories from our mothers, grandmothers, or aunts, But when we think about it we can't remember anything or we can remember family jokes, or the repetition of stories about hurt feelings, or feuds. These do not feel like teaching stories, although sometimes later we realize that we have learned from them. Sometimes we better remember stories by our fathers, grandfathers, and uncles. And sometimes, too, in those stories, women are made to seem incoherent or unreasonable or frivolous. The fact that some of us cannot remember the women's stories – the fact that some women may never have told stories to their children – is a symptom of our oppression as women (Aptheker, 41).

The mother-daughter narrative that does exist does not usually escape an interpretation of the impact of oppression on women. Surveying literature in this genre, Susan Koppelman writes, "The most common mother-daughter story describes the patriarchal harvest of the nubile daughter with or without her mother's protest or resistance," (Koppelman, xvi). The explosion of mother-daughter literature, Koppelman continues, is directly related to political empowerment of women and by reading it, we are bringing a bigger worldview home: "While not denying or ignoring differences among us, we read these stories to find out what we share, what binds us together, and how other women have learned to transcend the rules and the roles, to learn that mothers and daughters can be sisters" (Koppelman, xxxv).

The Inalienable Wealth of Objects Passed Down

The objects passed down from generation to generation, considered “outside the limits of exchange,” have been recently explored within consumer research. The meaning, value and transmission of these objects has branched from the ethnographic and anthropological study of gift-giving among indigenous people (Curasi et al., 3, Weiner, Fox.) and arena of property and monetary research (Curasi et al., 2). These objects, however, are uniquely “things that people should not give or sell, but keep,” and are distinguished as ‘inalienable possessions’ (Curasi et al., 0).

Record of inalienable possessions includes items of varying scale that are purposefully kept out of the market force (Curasi et al., 1-2). Whereas research on reciprocal gift-giving is plentiful (Fox, Weiner, Van Baal), there is little to be found that removes the element of exchange. The study of inalienable possessions further opens research to the idea of receiving and keeping an object, and specifically keeping that object “within the confines of a kinship structure” (Curasi et al., 2).

The concept of inalienable possessions is relatively new, with the defining works published as late as 1992 by Annette Weiner. Subsequent research is clustered in studies published in 2000-2001. The most exhaustive of these publications by Curasi et al. notes the lack of exploration, “A possible connection between cherished objects, ‘keepsakes,’ and inalienable wealth has been broached superficially in previous research. However, the connections remain largely under-theorized” (Curasi et al., 2).

Curasi et al. mark the metamorphoses of objects that are cherished into inalienable wealth. Interviewing multiple members within kin groups, they examine how the objects travel from generation to generation with emphasis on how inalienable possessions are 'kept' (Curasi et al., 0). Inalienable possessions are invaluable, priceless by virtue of capturing the social identity of an individual or group (Curasi et al., 2). Weiner notes,

In general, all personal possessions invoke an intimate connection with their owners, symbolizing personal experience that, even though private or secret, adds value to the person's social identity. (Weiner, 36).

Inalienable possessions, however, are distinguished among other personal artifacts in that they carry the mythology of the kin group, acting as a shared emblem of family history, family values and family continuity (Curasi et al., 18-23).

Once objects are moved into the status of inalienable possessions, Curasi et al. note that they are more likely to be stored and displayed in protective environments (Curasi et al., 30). When the inalienable possession is used, it is likely done in ritualized ways, often prescribed by previous guardians, and affirming a sacred status of the object itself (Curasi et al., 42).

The sacrilization of an inalienable possession increases the level of responsibility of the family member who holds it. The age and fragility of the object impact how it is handled. However, the idea that the object is infused with family mythology and history and will continue to survive as it is passed on, is also emotionally weighty to the person who now holds it. Curasi et al. posit, "Material and immaterial elements together afford the object power and legitimating benefits for the

kinship group” (Curasi et al, 42). This power can make keeping an object a burden as well as a responsibility.

Curasi et al.’s research acts as a thorough response to the previously unfulfilled area of inalienable possessions and their intergenerational transmission in kin groups. Their analysis that the ideology of keeping an item has more power and value than the item itself, is paramount. However, the space left in their research, as well as previous research on inalienable possessions, is how this process is gendered for women. Their work broadly considers the impact of passing objects down within same-sex lines, but does not explore the specific impact this process has had on women. Although affirming the inextricable link between storytelling and transmission of inalienable possessions, research is mute in how the transmission of inalienable possessions has maintained women’s personal narratives from generation to generation.

Inheriting Inalienable Possessions

Women as Kin-Keepers and Object-Inheritors

How are women chosen to inherit inalienable possessions? To understand the matrilineage of stories and objects, we must consider investigations of kin-keeping within the family structure. Women primarily have been distinguished as kin-keepers and as reporting closeness to their own extended family members, backed by “generations of family literature [that] have built a portrait of the dominant position of women in family affairs” (Hodgson, 168). Rooted in similar research on grandparent relationships, Strom & Strom report, “Some studies support the idea that maternal

grandparents play a more significant role in the lives of grandchildren than do paternal grandparents,” finding in their own study that “relationships with maternal grandmothers appear to be the strongest among all grandparent-grandchild dyads” (Strom & Strom, 142). The significance of a relationship with a maternal grandmother is reaffirmed by Lynne Gershenson Hodgson in her examination of “Adult Grandchildren and Their Grandparents: The Enduring Bond.” Hodgson’s measurement of emotional closeness of respondents to grandparents cites an imbalance in who is chosen as the “closest” grandparent. The first shift in balance results from the default of having only one living grandparent. Hodgson found that by a margin of 77% to 23%, the sole living grandparent is likely a grandmother. Secondly, Hodgson reports, “even when a respondent had more than one living grandparent, grandmothers were often chosen over grandfathers” (Hodgson, 159). The reported dominance of women in negotiating family affairs thus impacts the grandparent relationship (Hodgson, 168).

These family ties set the stage for the transmission of inalienable possessions between women. The emotional closeness to maternal grandmothers as well as active kin-keeping roles make it no surprise that gender preference plays a role in the transmission of objects from generation to generation. The sample studied by Curasi et al. indicates that “preferred guardians are by and large a same gender descendent rather than other gender descendent or same gender affine (kin through marriage)” (Curasi et al, 15).

The role of daughters-in-law, while gender affine and less preferred as guardians of family artifacts, increase the likelihood that inalienable possessions will be passed down to a woman. Questions may be raised about how increasing independence and mobility of children from their parents impact on the ascription of object guardianship by gender (Curasi et al., 31), causing an examination of when and how inalienable possessions cross gender lines. Although there is the possibility that “gender-neutral” objects may cross gender lines as they are passed on (Curasi et al., 33), it resounds that objects assigned “male” or “female” status follow along those gender lines in inheritance. Curasi et al. note the infrequency of crossing gender lines in their own sample, noting the default of daughters-in-law in the process of transmission:

Although our data include numerous examples of women entrusted to hold inalienable male objects for future male caretakers, we find few instances of men entrusted to keep objects for women this way...Daughters-in-law, while suspect and less preferred than daughters, nevertheless, seem to win out over sons as caretakers of inalienable wealth” (Curasi et al., 33)

The Hierarchy of Heirloom Inheritance

The actual transmission of inalienable possessions is surrounded by ritual and intragroup politics. Passing down inalienable wealth maintains and results in hierarchy within the kin group (Curasi et al., 4) while the ritual of changing hands affirms the sacred nature of the object and all it represents within the family. This phenomenon is addressed in literary and anthropological examinations of gift-giving.

Anthropologist J. Van Baal's study of Trobriand trade, known as *gimwali*, finds a marked delineation from ceremonial gift-giving. Van Baal argues that gift-giving is distinguished by its purpose of "establishing or strengthening relations" (Van Baal, 39). Even as one person is chosen or prescribed to be the keeper of an object, the process of giving is still inherently communal.

Lewis Hyde's cross-discipline inquiry of the erotic life of property and gift giving reveals three facts about gifts: "as a natural fact (when gifts are actually alive); as a spiritual fact (when gifts are the agent of a spirit that survives the consumption of its individual embodiments); and as a social fact (when the circulation of gifts creates community)" (Hyde, 150). Hyde's theory has application to the process of inheriting artifacts and their affiliated stories. The objects that women keep (natural fact) represent the stories of their lives and women before (spiritual fact), and reestablish family dynamics and history when they are passed on (social fact).

Although favor is demonstrated when the new keeper is chosen, often a "sacred, changeless order" is adhered to in determining who will get the object next (Curasi et al., 4). For example, if the original keeper of the inalienable possession passed it on to her daughter, every effort will be taken to continue to pass it on in this prescribed fashion. Curasi et al. call on further anthropological research to contend that individuals receive inalienable possessions, but do not own them. Instead, "custodians merely enjoy rights in inalienable possessions" (Curasi et al., 5), reinforcing the spiritual nature of the object.

Guardians, Not Owners

Once a woman becomes guardian of an inalienable possession, her responsibilities include sharing it with the kin group (Curasi et al., 6), maintaining any family rituals that involve the artifact and preserve the identity and values of the group, including “rites of passage, reunions, and calendrical rituals” (Curasi et al., 8). A predominant occurrence for guardians of inalienable possessions is the obligation to act as family recorder, take on kin-keeping that previous guardians assumed, and ensure the survival of the object and the stories, strategically recreating the cycle. In doing this, both the individual and group are reaffirmed: “Both storytelling and ritual use convey the sacred status and power of the object and affirm the social order and reality ideally reproduced by each new generation” (Curasi et al., 21-36). Hyde refers to this assignment and assumption of the guardian role as identifying with and nourishing the spirit of the gift, with the consequence of seeking “to keep the gift in motion” (Hyde, 149).

As women keep cherished objects in motion through generations, much more than the artifact is active. The dichotomous emotional connection is passed along as well. These emotions are sometimes those of anxiety and tension as guardians face the fear of finding the next generation’s guardian (Curasi et al., 21), and the obligation of preserving, displaying and storing objects of inalienable wealth (Curasi et al., 36-37). Conversely, women also experience honor in keeping these emblems of family history, power in maintaining the narratives, and comfort in establishing their own immortality by creating or passing on objects reflecting their own life stories (Curasi et al., 5-36).

Conclusion

The research reflects the power of the stories, as women's personal narratives reflect the realities of their daily lives, exhibiting the rich diversity of experiences and cultures once women are no longer categorized as one whole with only one voice. It also points to the power of inclusion, making women's reminiscence and storytelling an active part of the historical archive and validating narrative and interpretive voices of women of color. The research reveals the power of objects passed through generational channels, gaining invaluable status and acting as an emblem of the spiritual nature of a kin group. Finally, the research divulges the power of inheriting an inalienable possession, not just for one woman but for her entire family system, symbolically deeming her what her gender has ascribed her to be: keeper of the kin, guardian of the artifact, and guide in preserving and passing on the rituals and stories of women before. In sum, the research makes clear that inalienable possessions are bundled with personal biographies, making keeping the artifact more critical than ensuring it does not break or land in the wrong hands, and making it one sacred step in the family journey. In the space of this step, I have room to ask, *How are women's life stories and the mother-daughter narrative preserved through the transmission of inherited objects*, and to turn the cameras on six women whose own lives, stories and heirlooms have much to add to the answers.

Methodology

This project was borne of an idea for a small, simple documentary. The documentary would piece together the narrative of five to ten women, capturing their stories and self-interpretations as they described and shared cherished objects that they inherited from their mothers and would pass on to their daughters. What unfolded is a 100-minute documentary centered on five women, diverse in their experiences and nature, telling more stories and details than I could have ever imagined. Alongside their individual segments is my grandmother. The documentary dances between autobiographical and biographical from the transition of participants to Grandma Alice. Their many, many explanations, tangents, questions and answers take their own sweet time even in the final edited version. Their collective story, the narrative of *inHERitance*, has taken a long time to tell, defined by the following process.

The Project

This project consists of two companion pieces: a video documentary and written segment, both serving as text to the research. My research is informed from a feminist worldview, drawing on a socialist feminism's connection of capitalism and material access to patriarchal domination of women. I have indulged in the merge of Marxism and radical feminism in a socialist feminist perspective as I have studied women's narrative attachment to material items redistributed intergenerationally. The threads of radical feminism emerged in creating a video as a non-standard text to record their narrative and preserve it in an original format as a contemporary artifact.

In order to “explore and express the complexities of women’s lives” (Reinharz, 202) in the context of the video and writing, I have relied on interdisciplinary feminist research and analysis to question and inform the sociopolitical choices I made from the first interview through the editing process. The process was designed and carried through as a “feminist encounter,” as described by sociologist Sherna Gluck as original material that “validates women’s experiences, enhances communication among women, discovers women’s roots, and develops a previously denied sense of continuity” (Reinharz, 126).

The Participants

There is a definite collective narrative of *inHERitance*, with themes and likenesses among each of the interviews, all rooted in the research question, *How are women’s life stories and the mother-daughter narrative preserved through the transmission of inherited objects?* However, each woman is diverse in her experiences, character, self-reflexivity and familial relationships. As a feminist and as a person interested in giving voice in the space of this documentary to people and stories not given several minutes, let alone a hundred, it was and is paramount to me to seek women of diverse cultures, races, religions and family structures. Although limited geographically to the Corvallis and Portland metro area, I sought participants who would be living diverse lives within these boundaries.

Who Are The Participants?

In this section, I will provide brief introductions to the women who were interviewed in the video. Following will be a review of the process of selecting and interviewing participants, editing the video and addressing issues that arose throughout the project.

The participants for this project are Beverly, Charlyn, Jo, Lessie and MaryAnne, with transitional interview segments with my grandmother, Alice.

- Beverly is in her 70s, a resident of Corvallis and a long-time recorder of the details of her life. She has kept her “record books” for over thirty years. They began as financial record-keeping and have grown to include intricate drawings and scrapbook mementos, diary entries and logs of how she spends her days in Corvallis. Only recently retired, Beverly now volunteers as a clown for a local charity. She is a single mother of four, with two daughters. One of her daughters is involved in family history and is interested in inheriting her mother’s record book collection.
- Charlyn is in her late 30s and works as a history professor. She lives with her boyfriend in Corvallis. . She is an only child of a father who was an historian and a mother who is a collector of many family artifacts. Charlyn’s parents came of age in the Depression era and took possession of family heirlooms, including jewelry and china, during that time. Charlyn strives to live simply and struggles openly with the burden of carrying on the artifacts while still loving their antiquity. She has no children nor any plans of having children.

She plans to pass on her treasured artifacts to the children of close women friends.

- Jo lives in Corvallis with her retired husband. She has two grown sons and several grandsons. She also has a granddaughter who is intently interested in family history and artifacts. Jo is an only child who grew up in the Depression era. She is the sole beneficiary of her parents' estate and has since taken on the responsibility of distributing their artifacts among her children, grandchildren and cousins. Jo has formed a strong bond with her only granddaughter and looks to her as the family member most interested hearing life stories. Among the many antiques Jo has kept, she prizes the family dishware and glassware, Bibles, handmade quilts, dolls, and linens.
- Lessie is an African-American woman who came of age in the height of the Civil Rights Movement. She comes from a large, closely-knit family raised on a farm. She is a divorced mother of one adult daughter and the grandmother of an infant boy and toddler girl. She has begun recording a family tree, family facts and stories, with hopes of creating a book to detail the legacy. She also has coins and many photos, which she will pass on to her granddaughter. She has a strong sense of women's connections, is family-centered and forthright in her Christian beliefs. Lessie lives outside Portland and is a teacher and vocalist.
- MaryAnne lives in Portland and is married with two grown children. She works for PBS and is very socially aware. She studied anthropology and has a

keen understanding of American cultural history. She did not call herself a feminist, but she spoke from a feminist perspective. She is an only child and has a house full of artifacts passed on from her ancestors. She surrounds herself with these artifacts, choosing to use them in her daily life. She prizes a spinning wheel passed on to the oldest daughter in each generation, cookware and dishes, paintings, a sewing machine and a wedding ring with her engagement diamond and those of her mother and grandmother. Her daughter will receive most of the artifacts. With two grandsons, MaryAnne hopes for the birth of a granddaughter.

- Alice is almost 95 years old and the only living child of seven. Alice has two daughters, four grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. She lives independently, is an avid sports fan, skilled card player and dynamic storyteller. Alice has distributed most of the artifacts she has received from her family, including a quilt made from apron and dress fabric of her mother, sisters and grandmothers. She also plans to pass on a cookie sheet that was purchased in the 1800s and used weekly by her mother. She is the sole holder of the family stories.

Seeking Participants

My personal identification with this project originated in my close relationship with my grandmother. To acknowledge this, I chose to use abbreviated interviews

with my grandmother as a transition element between segments and to include my grandmother in this community of participants.

Inevitably, I first thought the participants would be older women with a greater realm of life experience and stories, and a greater likelihood of holding family heirlooms. I sought participants using the modified snowball method, beginning at the Corvallis Senior Center. A life stories class was gaining popularity there among members at the time, and through a meeting with the activities director, I placed ads for participants, met prospective participants and was referred to active members at the Center.

I continued the modified snowball method of recruiting interview participants by visiting a racially-diverse and women-focused church in Portland and speaking in several classes at Oregon State to discuss my research and expand the age category I was targeting. The more I discussed my project, the more possible interviewees I encountered, an occurrence not uncommon in choosing life story informants (Wallace, 141). Further, I encouraged each prospective participant to recommend the names of friends or colleagues. This method was full of good intentions on my part and on the part of the people I met. However, many older women were hesitant to give out names and phone numbers. In response, I asked the candidates to please pass on my information to create an "opt-in" recruitment. Through these methods, I met the five women whom I selected to interview for this documentary.

Participant Criteria

I conducted pre-interviews by phone with each woman in the larger pool of prospective participants. The pre-interview enabled me to establish some initial rapport by explaining why I was interested in coming into their homes with a video camera to tape them talking about these invaluable items. During the pre-interview, I chose or declined participant involvement based on predetermined criteria. I required that each interview participant was:

- a woman
- keeper of a family heirloom that had been passed on to her and that she intended to pass on to a female family member *or* acting as the keeper of a family heirloom she originated with intention to pass on to a female family member
- willing to show the heirloom item with the interviewer during the interview and willing to have the item videotaped
- willing to be videotaped.

Addressing Daughter Relationships

During the process of establishing a cohesive group of participants, it became clear that I would need to address three priority areas in selecting participants: daughter relationships, racial diversity, and sample size.

The first area I addressed was my original criterion that each participant intend to pass on her family artifact to her daughter. I decided to extend the inheritance relationship to other females, including daughters, daughters-in-law and granddaughters. It became apparent in the pre-interviews that many of the candidates who did not have daughters had given thoughtful consideration to the people who would inherit their family artifacts, perhaps more than those with daughters who

would serve as a “natural” recipient. Further, several of the candidates spoke passionately about their close connections with grandchildren or daughters-in-law and the importance of creating a space for the transmission of the heirloom with other women or girls in their family community.

Addressing Racial Diversity

The second area that I addressed in the process of finding participants was my own definition of diversity and the decisive factor that I was not making connections with women of color interested in involvement in the project. I recognize a broad definition of diversity, inclusive of race, class, gender, sexuality, geography, age, ability, level of education, access to resources, and religious affiliation, among other characteristics. My priority was to provide a “safe space” on camera of diverse backgrounds, experiences and characteristics. I concentrated on seeking out women of color specifically because of the racial homogeneity in the community where I sought participants and among the group of women who responded to my call for interviews.

Several factors influenced the racial homogeneity of the women I pre-interviewed. Foremost, the demographic of women I encountered where my research took place – at the senior center, in the places where I worked and taught, on campus, and in the community – were predominantly White. Second, my resources limited my travel and my limited foreign language skills were a barrier to making connections with women of international descent who expressed an interest in interviewing.

I pursued names of several Latina women in the Corvallis area and after many attempts, was unable to speak with them directly. The women who provided the names

to me later explained that the Latina population in the town are segregated from students and White residents, making it difficult to make meaningful connections quickly. They also explained that this segregation made many local Mexican women uncomfortable with the idea of bringing a white woman who did not speak their language into their home to view their family valuables. Without the ability to translate over the phone nor direct access to the women to establish rapport, I was unable to include a woman of Mexican heritage from Corvallis in the research.

There is one African-American participant in this project. Her description of coming of age during the Civil Rights movement is vivid and valuable addition to the tapestry of this documentary and my research. There are many more stories and cherished objects to be shared by women of many more ethnicities and cultures, and I look forward to a more expansive project in a more racially-diverse environment where I can see this commitment through.

In grappling with this, I also examined my own definition of diversity, choosing ultimately to seek, celebrate and examine the complexities of the participants' lives rather than focus solely on their racial identification as an indicator of difference. Although the resulting research is mute to the stories of women from a wide range of racial and cultural heritages, there is an obvious need to conduct similar research in ways that sensitively and inclusively bridge the age-old gaps of social conditions, language and cultural practice.

Addressing Sample Size

The third area I addressed was the number of participants I would interview. My objective to run inclusive research pushed me to continue the search for more participants. I paused this search once I interviewed six women (including the brief open-ended interview conducted with my grandmother), re-viewed the hours of footage collected and began to transcribe and code thematic elements in the video text. I chose to give each woman's story appropriate space within the video to maintain context and rich exploration. This choice halted my search for more participants but allowed me to acknowledge saturation (Wallace, 143) in video length and topic.

Participant Population

The six women interviewed for this project reflect a multiplicity in age, era, class, family dynamic, region of descent, education, marital status and social hierarchy within the family. They range in age from mid-thirties to mid-nineties. Two participants are married, two participants are divorced, one is widowed and living single, and one participant cohabits with her long-time partner. All participants have grown children, with the exception of one participant who has made a decision to not have children, yet identifies several children of friends to be a part of her close kin circle. Also, with the exception of this participant, all of the participants are grandmothers.

The Interviews

Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes to avoid transportation of their cherished artifacts. I requested that each participant choose one or two objects to focus on during our interview. However, each participant requested that we view multiple items. Often these items were displayed or packaged elaborately, making transportation difficult.

Interviews ranged in length from one hour to two hours. In most cases, the participants continued to tell stories after we ended the interview, and some even after the camera was turned off or the batteries had completely run down. This exemplified the urge to give their own voice to life stories and inherited objects.

I used a semi-structured interview method (Reinharz, 18), asking from a list of prepared questions as well as questions designed out of the pre-interview specifically for individual participants. In addition to designing prepared open-ended questions and adding inquiry as appropriate during the interview, I also offered the participants and the camera assistant the opportunity to ask questions, make comments or suggest areas to explore on tape.

While I did self-disclose to each prospective participant that my interest in the thesis topic was fueled by my maternal relationships, during the interview I was conscious of how my self-disclosure could untenably dance between rapport-building and self-interest. Following the words of researcher Mary Bricker-Jenkins, I tried to "look for cures from the participant as to readiness to know more about me" (Reinharz, 33). I actively validated the participants' responses to my questions with

nods and nonverbal cues (Reinharz, 19). This method worked well, particularly when I asked questions that verified the participants' expertise around certain objects and collections. For example, the participants most often invited me to disclose my knowledge of Depression glass – an uncommon interest among women my age – if I asked an informed question about a particular piece in their cabinet.

The process of developing rapport with five of the participants followed in the footsteps of my relationship with the sixth interviewee, my grandmother. In interviews, I enacted a personally comfortable “daughter” role and was reciprocated with a nurturing and teaching “impulse” that has been previously noted in gerontological research of women by women (Reinharz, 67). The daughter approach may have simultaneously helped me to gain access to the participants' private sphere of family life (Reinharz, 63) and “exacerbated the social desirability factor” (Fischer, 6). This social interaction (Wallace, 146) gave rhythm to the questions and responses, sharing of personal information and priceless objects, and eventually, to the format of the video documentary.

Filming The Video

...feminists have a need for the recent past – history – to be alive, instructive, interactive, so as to be able to perpetuate (the) *movement*. Living, working, and fighting in perpetual present – a culture of oblivion – allow little opportunity to progress; there's nothing to build on (Juhasz, 96).

The process of filming and editing the video piece of this project was a literal dissection of a feminist framework, frame by frame. Early on, I made a decision to

disclude my own voice in *inHERitance*, with the exception of analysis in the filming, editing and presentation of the video. Translated into written terms, I was charged with telling a story without using my own words. Piecing the video together with an aspiration of equitable, accurate storytelling was an exercise in the movement that feminist documentary-maker and writer Alexandra Juhasz describes above. The interviews took a new life in video form. To examine the filming process, I will highlight the areas of perspective equity and technological comfort.

Perspective Equity

The perspective of the camera is paramount in choosing to set up a shot for a video. How I chose to place a woman in the camera is how the audience would first meet and get to know her. Her position – seated or standing, looking down or being viewed from above, taking up the space or very small within it – sends messages to the audience about who she is in this specific context. Strategizing angles and perspectives that create a sense of equity between interviewer and interviewee, and consequently audience and participant – these *eyes* of the video – are a significant aspect of this feminist documentary.

During the body of the interview, the camera was set up at eye-level with the participant and adjusted so the women could comfortably walk or sit without looking directly into the camera. The age and ability of several of the participants required that we spend most of our interview seated. The position of the participant, camera and interviewer were carefully considered for this reason, as well as to establish equity in perspective from the lens and from the women. When participants did walk through

their homes to show objects in their display or storage, the camera followed the women, who act as guide for the interview and audience.

Technological Comfort, Confidence and Disruption

Creating a comfort with the technology used to film the women was an important consideration throughout the interview process. Relying on campus-owned and borrowed equipment that often failed was an obstacle to ease in use. In previous video interviews with my grandmother, I observed her confusion at technical problems with this “new” genre. I knew going in that my reactions to unforeseen problems would need to be quick and assured. I talked my way through this process.

I strategically explain how I would set up the camera, microphones, headphones and cables, and then made sure to clarify any changes I made as I adjusted the camera angle or tested the mic. In an effort to make the camera unobtrusive to the participants, in several interviews I sacrificed the quality of lighting, audio or length of time I spent in the homes.

Technological errors ensued, causing some tension among the participants who did not understand the problem or why we would need to pause the interview. Many batteries died at crucial narrative moments and often, the audio came through too low or too garbled. I tripped over my own cables, knocked over the own tripod, and had to leave one interview abruptly before it started to replace new but faulty batteries. These moments were overwrought and passed quickly once I asked women to share their family keepsakes with me.

In retrospect, less concern of disrupting the participants or worrying them with technology they may not be familiar with, would have resulted in more “professional quality” interviews with better lighting and increased audio clarity. The gift of amateur filmmaking and equipment that offers no confidence to the interviewer, is diminutive. My camera assistant and I captured many wonderful candid moments with the participants as I hovered over them to adjust a lampshade or while they allowed me to clamp a microphone on their blouse. I chose to include many of these snapshots into the documentary as a glimpse into the everyday selves of the women on film.

Reciprocal distractions did arise, particularly by the participant who initially bristled when I left her house to buy batteries. Throughout the interview, she hassled with her own diversions, yelling at her husband to stop the cats from fighting outside (twice) and jumping up at a brash buzzer to take a casserole out of the oven for dinner. These unplanned and fumbled moments reveal a naturally-arising dichotomy of women’s daily negotiations with the very objects they are using to tell their own stories and the stories of the women who surround them.

Editing the Video

Editing *inHERitance* was much longer and much more intimate process than I could have ever calculated. During the span of time that the video was conceived and finished, I moved from Oregon to Chicago, displacing myself from a campus environment where I had access to extensive video equipment and instructional resources. Swift technological advances in editing hardware were taking place, and I

was quickly out of my element in many ways. In order to complete the project, I had to make some tough decisions about gender and voice, and about how I would find and use equipment.

Feminist Making the Cuts

Knowing I would need help handling equipment and executing the interviews, I acknowledged the radical aspect of my socialist feminist perspective with a decision early in the life of the video that I would produce this video only with the assistance of women who identified as feminist. Michele Collins quickly joined me in a camera assistant capacity for the first two interviews and in congruence with feminist methods of filming. I filmed the remaining interviews on my own, still ardently maintaining my all-feminist, all-female crew.

This all changed when editing equipment and ability became a commodity. Within a year, editing technology was updated and my skills were outdated. I looked into renting editing space, hiring a professional editor and acquiring privileges at a local campus facility. I was not able to pursue any of these options immediately because of high fees or requirements that I enroll in another university program.

While working at Elmhurst College in the suburbs of Chicago, I contacted the Instructional Media Center on campus to inquire about using their editing facilities. I met Chris Curtin, instructional media specialist, who agreed to do the video editing under my specific direction, using new computerized editing technology recently given to the school. Chris agreed to act as the editor free of charge during weekly

sessions. The opportunity was my ticket to completing my research, albeit a ticket on an entirely different bus.

Weighing Gender

Chris Curtin is a man who has not had any academic study in Women Studies, gender studies or ethnic studies. When I considered his proposition to edit the video with me, I had to consider his gender and his perspective. I discussed this with him, using the basis of our mutual background in journalism to talk about objectivity and bias. I wanted to be sure that he understood my perspective and my own feminist analysis and how that would impact the video editing.

I had to weigh the offer Chris made with his gender. I felt it was worthwhile to negotiate my intentions to produce an all-women, all-feminist project with getting the project done. While Chris does not identify as a feminist, he is socially acute and amenable to my perspective. In collaborating, I felt it was necessary that we agree that the project would be feminist, even if he was not. I was clear with Chris about my perspective and since then, he has been undoubtedly supportive of the vision. Coincidentally, we discovered that Chris and I were both journalism majors at the same school, and had taken all the same video and editing classes with the same professors. Our shared education and editing foundations further balanced my concerns about adding a male to the crew because of a basic, like language that I did not experience with other people.

Our collaboration caused me rethink my position within the filmmaking. I decided to give myself the title of director and producer. Chris acts as the editor and

Michele acted in the role of camera assistant, but each is self-defined in the credits with a title of their own choosing.

Editing and System Logistics

The video is edited on an Avio computerized system that stores video on a hard drive, using branded software to create a multiplicity of effects. In weekly three-hour sessions that spanned nine months, we collaborated skills to fit more than ten hours of footage into a cohesive whole. Chris and I meet weekly for approximately three hours per session. Chris operated the hardware, according to my editorial decisions, step by step, second by second. His input was solely technical and as I became more comfortable with the logistics of operating the Avio, Chris incorporated my technical direction as well.

The editing process is never the same twice. The computer editor enabled us to go back to segments to check the steps of editing an effect (our effects were as simple as a fade to black to the very complicated transitions of a slow motion video in the background with fading text in the foreground and an audio segment playing over the video). However, many details impact how the computer works, and we often reinvented our process several times before it worked. We spent an hour on fifteen seconds of video one week, using a totally different technique than we had the week before to do a similar effect.

Because the process is time consuming and complicated, I kept the effects to a minimum. With a participant-centered focus, I chose to use white text on a black

screen, and other simple edits to keep the viewer concentrated on the women and their words.

A general editing guideline is that it takes one hour to edit one minute of video. I would estimate that I spent four sessions per interview segment, totaling 12 – 15 hours from beginning to end. Some sessions were spent working entirely on the audio of one interview. Other times, we quickly edited ten minutes in three hours. In addition, we spent almost two months making final adjustments and editing the opening segment and closing credits.

The system enables the user to edit and store works in progress. As it is university-owned, any completed projects are removed at the end of an academic term to allow hard drive space for continued student use. With *inHERitance* finalized and copies made, it was erased from the system and is presently in existence in video format alone.

Voices on Video

Following methodological choices on gender and resources, I addressed voice within the project. I was not only concerned with the element of voice in the space I allotted each participant on tape, but also the actual splicing out or letting run words, phrases and the many idiosyncrasies of speech. The impetus for examining voice in the video was the completion of the first interview.

After editing my first interview down to seven minutes from seventy minutes of footage over four sessions, I showed the completed segment to friends and family.

Each reviewer said the same thing: They wanted to see more of her, they wanted to know more about her.

I reconsidered notes from my original thesis proposal about my objectives for the project. I wanted the women to tell their own stories in their own ways. I realized that there was much more to the participant's story that I left out of the segment. Whereas the pace is quick and the segment is concise, I felt that many of her quirks had been edited out – her lip smacking and hesitation at answering any personal questions about her mother, her intentness at finding a man, the problematic comments about bisexuality and race. Although I wanted to be respectful of the participant's and her stories, and although I wanted to make sure everything was in context, I did not want to edit these women into people who were politically correct or articulate or anything they are really not. While a moment of silence or the incessant jingle of a dog collar may not “address issues of theoretical interest” (Wallace, 147), they may give a clue to the life behind the life story. This reflection led me to the decision that the remaining interview segments would be longer, fuller and more reflective of the individuality of the women.

I did edit out a lot of lip smacking; however, I also negotiated by keeping in some silence, some awkward moments (that pesky casserole timer going off, for example), and many more moments that were unique to the women and their experiences. Whereas I felt embarrassed at one participant's messy house, I purposely placed a shot in her segment of her unmade bed. It showed how intent she was at keeping all of her mother's things in her own home, and how excited she was to show

me each item. The visual was interesting and gave a clue not mentioned in the oral interview.

I also grappled with editing my own voice out, particularly the “uh-huh” comments and laughter at the very quirks that kept the participants’ interviews lively and accessible. My original intention to keep my voice present only in how I strung together the edits and divided and named segments, eventually fell away after long hours working to erase a fraction of a second captured on tape. My negotiation to let my voice slip through a few editing cracks is validated by gendered conversation analysis (Reinharz, 24) and women’s oral history collection. Kristina Minister’s feminist framework of oral history is reliant upon the nonverbal and verbal communications women share in a narrative research relationship for indication of mutual decoding, interpreting and “taking care” to outwardly express verisimilitude (Minister, 32). My words, as well as the sounds of support sometimes deeply buried in the background of the footage by participants, reveals this mutual empathy quickly and “naturally” arising in the interview. Again, Minister:

Keeping in mind the explicit vitality of women’s nonverbal communication reinforcement, feminist interviewers let their natural communication encouragement work by uttering positive vocal minimal responses, tempering a monotonous ‘uh huh’ with equivalent facial expressions and nods. Verbal reinforcement abounds as interviewers anticipate narrators’ thoughts, occasionally cause an overlap with their own words, and at times link and fill in incomplete thoughts. This kind of work does not interrupt narrators; it supports them... Although narrators do most of the speaking, interviewers offer anecdotes to narrators’ extended descriptions, thus contributing their own self-reflection to the project. To repeat, in woman talk,

reflexivity is not only legitimate, it is inseparable from the process. Feminist interviews are not a radical departure from the most meaningful kind of oral history; they simply make the self-reflexivity inherent in the experience of the interview explicit and part of the performance record (Minister, 38).

The result of refocusing my editing style is a video that is 100 minutes long. This is not advantageous for use in a classroom or at a presentation, but it accomplishes a thoughtful orientation of letting the women reveal stories that have been quieted, whispered or previously transferred only among family members. I encountered so much zealousness to tell stories – from women I interviewed to people I have casually discussed my project with – that I felt it was necessary to give ample space to those stories. I learned this: These stories are begging to be told. I decided this: I would give some space to six of them and sometimes, include my nod of support.

Future Research

There is a great deal of room to for research of mother-daughter life stories in connection with object inheritance. There are many stories to be told and inalienable possessions to be shared that are representative of women's diverse and rich lives and backgrounds. Specifically, there is a need for further research that links inherited objects and the life stories of lesbian women, women of varied ethnic and racial backgrounds, and women living in or raised in non-traditional family structures. Finally, as indicated by the women who participated in this project, there is a conflict

in the honor of holding an heirloom and the burden of being responsible for the object's well-being. This aspect of object inheritance and oral history inheritance is in need of continued research.

Analysis

Women used to be custodians of the family history, custodians of the family artifacts. The man would take pride in having sons who would carry on his name, but it was the women who carried the quilts and the furniture from place to place and outfitted their daughter's home. Custodians of the family *stories*. (Maryann)

There are many threads that connect the six interviews in *inHERitance*. In this section, I will underscore three themes among their observations, stories and responses to questions. These three themes are once again divided the central areas of into stories, objects and inheritance.

Stories

Within her stories, each used gender and era as a means of self-definition and as a starting point for discussion of the inalienable wealth in her possession. During the interviews, each participant voluntarily places herself on a continuum of time in recent American history as well as on a continuum of matrilineal connections. This immediate orientation appeals to assumed universal understanding about the struggles or successes of a time period, most notably the Depression. It also places the participant in a line of female kin, in particular her mother or daughter, making note of the gender politics of the time.

The stories of how Charlyn came to keep family heirlooms are bound to the stories of her mother coming of age during the Depression. Charlyn expresses an aversion to the negotiations her mother made and the ensuing attitudes about keeping "old stuff." In one of her opening explanations of her mother and the family

heirlooms, Charlyn uses her mother's era – albeit in contradictory statements – to define their relationship and begin to define herself.

My mother is the only one who wanted [family keepsakes]. Growing up during the Depression, the idea of keeping anything old was just like, 'No! We do not keep old stuff. That's old, it's dirty, it's nasty. It's gone!' They kept *nothing* from the past. And my mother still – I shop at garage sales and I go to the Goodwill and everything. She's horrified at the idea of buying anything used because of growing up in the Depression and that's what they had, old stuff, beat up stuff, stuff that was hand-me-downs, stuff that they had bought used. So my mother was the only one that wanted anything and she was also the one that had the best rapport with her grandmother. It wasn't a case of them dividing it up. It was a case of my mother saying, 'I'm taking it or else it's going to get thrown out.'

(Charlyn)

Charlyn's description of the Depression era her mother grew up in is countered by Jo, who herself was raised during the Depression. Jo uses an explanation of the time period to express why she holds so many of her family's inalienable possessions.

If anything, I think being without makes you to have this desire, 'I'm going to have more.' So you work harder and because there were times when these people were really struggling...If anything, that was probably the influence, was, 'I'm going to have more than that someday.'

Later, Jo connects her granddaughter on this continuum of time and gender. She explains her granddaughter's interest in the stories and objects Jo holds in trust for her with reference to the age in which her granddaughter is living. Austerely, Jo says, "Children have a lot now. I guess the simplicity of it appeals to them."

Describing life as a teenager during the Civil Rights movement enables Lessie to orient herself among stories of her mother and her daughter. Lessie's intention to pass on strength and moral value to her daughter are connected to her own past as well as pioneering African-American women during and before Lessie's lifetime. This is exemplified in Lessie's explanation of her daughter's embarrassment during Black History Month as one of only a few children of color in her school.

'Cause she was the only one – maybe about three African-American students in her *whole school* of five hundred!...And she says, 'So embarrassing.'...And that's when I want them to be *proud*. Because even now, I get that. Being a member of the Portland Opera Chorus, sometimes I'm the only African-American doing things in other groups. And I understand what she's saying, but I want her to feel and I want my children to feel like: *You are an American, a human being, a person*...It is a hard way to go. I may not even been in the chorus without Mahalia Jackson and Marianne Anderson, people that have paved the way for me...And you know, it's just come such a long way and I was thinking that it was even worse before my time because of slavery...I just want them to know that it's *important* that we know our history. 'Cause that way it'll help us to know who we are and where we're going... You need to have some kind of strength, and some kind of knowledge of what has happened in the past. Even though you don't want to relive it, you just want to know it...It's sometimes hard to save everything because it's, it happens so fast and sometimes it is a little bit, um, emotional. You know, we worked and we got to where we are. And we're proud. So, we gotta pick up from where we left off and take the torch and keep it going!

Even when the points in time are not specifically defined by years or generations, the participants connected themselves to their matrilineal line as a way of introducing and defining themselves. Beverly does this poetically when she plainly

states, "Well, after all their mothers gave them life and I think it's good to know where you came from and what your mother went through. It kinda helps to give you your identity too. When you know more about your mother, you know more about yourself, I think."

In defining themselves within their matrilineage, the participants often abruptly turned their attentions to their fathers, grandfathers or other influential kin. This regularly occurred when the participants were asked direct questions about their mother's or grandmother's life stories. Male identification was used not only as a counter-point in describing female identification, but more often, there seemed to be a strong pull to give space and affirmation to the men in the family. Lessie is drawn to her father's life story and the missing details that she searches for in talking to her twelve siblings. When I open the topic of the long span of time in her mother's life history spent bearing thirteen children, Lessie's response quickly veers from an acknowledgement: "That's true! And the kind of work my father did. Although I know he worked on the highway and the railroads, but I really want to know specifically, where did he work, where did he help?!"

The narrative of women's lives fluidly arises out of the narrative of things in each of the participant interviews. This sinuous connection is clear when my grandmother, Alice, points out the pieces of aprons and dresses that make up the quilt she handed down to me. The biography of the object gives clues to the story of my great-grandmother and her daily life, told through the memory of my grandmother and her daily life. Timeline and gender are revealed through the quilt:

This was Elva's dress and that was Elva's dress. And this was...this was a dress of mom's. These two were aprons. 'Cause she wore an apron everyday, you know, clear over...one that fit over the top of her. And when she'd go out to the garden, why she'd always bring apples from the trees or vegetables in her apron. She always had her apron full of vegetables when she'd come in, instead of taking a pan out with her [smiles].

This evolution of personal narrative and object narrative continues even in the event of loss of a loved one and loss of objects. Despite her mother's death and the subsequent loss of heirlooms, Beverly's description of what she does not have reveals some narrative about the lives of both women.

My grandmother died when I was a little tot and my mother died when I was sixteen. She died suddenly. She had surgery and didn't recover. And so there was nothing passed down. It just seemed like that was all lost. And I have a sister that has gone into genealogy and she's tracing family histories. And we've always felt kind of bad that we don't have anything that's been passed along. Some of the family have a few little things that belonged to my mother, like candle holders or something like that, but I don't have anything.

Objects

The personal narratives of the participants are conjoined with the narrative of their inalienable possessions. The biography of the object reveals a delicate balance between the honor of guardianship of these emblems of family history, and the burden of guardianship in a mobile age.

The emblemism of heirloom objects discussed by Curasi et al. is restated by the participants in this project. Pointing to a family-kept mantle clock, Maryann

describes the importance of the “provenance of all our pieces.” She continues, “Because to me, when I hear that clock tick, that to me, I can hear it. That’s my family. I’ve heard it all my life.”

Similarly, Lessie’s keepsake coins speak to the emotions that overrode her family’s economic struggles:

But that’s possible that the coins could have been symbolic of where we came from. *Don’t forget where you came from*, because there was not a lot of money. None whatsoever. Uh, but we made it and had lots of love. And we had lots of fun!

Once taken in by current guardians, participants reveal the changing representation to include their own stories and symbols. When objects are lost or low in supply, several participants created new keepsakes to pass forward to female family members, imbued as symbols of themselves.

Because I think sometimes like when you write somebody a letter, what you’re really coming through is what you really are like when you write a letter. And so I think with these books, what comes through is what I’m really like inside.” (Beverly)

The dailiness of Lessie’s life comes through in her story of how the idea to write a book on her family history originated.

I’m just thinking...trying to do the books and what have you...I think I got the idea, however, of the book from Oprah! I think that came from Oprah! ..But I think the birth of my granddaughter was the main thing, what really triggered that I had nothing. Nothing really to give her, show her any history at all. And I thought, *Well, I’ll just start myself*.

In addition to the symbolism of the objects, there is validity in the physicality of the objects. Maryann expresses the connection between having the objects close

and continuing the family narrative: “I know =much more about my mother’s side because she pursued it. She had it and could point to it.”

However, living in a mobile age when storage space is limited and “people don’t have attics anymore” (Maryann), can cause conflict for current guardians of several generations’ heirlooms. Even though she has struggled to take over guardianship of several key heirlooms, to Charlyn, an only child, the prospect of being the sole recipient of many objects is significant:

And I’m like ‘Oh my God...’ It’s a great responsibility. At some point all of this stuff is going to come to me, and some of it I am going to have to keep out of obligation. And I’m not looking forward to that. I like to stay in small spaces.

Even Maryann, who describes herself as reveling in the “old and worn,” problematizes the physical possession of heirlooms that crowd most of her home. “We’re living in a small house right now because Mike’s still looking for work...,” she says, “We’ve had four generations worth of stuff, and right now, it’s all down in the basement in what we call our archives.”

There is equilibrium to the burden of guardianship. The responsibility of keeping inalienable possessions and preserving all that they symbolize is significant to the participants as well. Beverly articulates the balance by saying,

I think it makes me feel good that somebody’s interested in these books. [laughs] Someday, maybe I should just toss them all into the trash or something! But it’s neat to know that somebody thinks that all this effort is worth something and they’d like to keep it. Means a lot, really.

After all, as Curasi et al. found in the words of their informants, inalienable possessions are not owned, but kept in trust. Although Maryann uses her heirloom objects in many realms of her daily life, she also takes care in preserving them for transmission to her daughter. She explains the boundary of ownership and guardianship, "It's not yours. You're using it right now, but it's going to go to the next generation."

Inheritance

The transmission of inalienable possessions is a ritualistic process that often indicates or represents a life transition among the women interviewed. Whether objects were handed down to mark a daughter's coming of age, were received at the death of mother, or were created with intentions of originating an heirloom, liability is present for preservation and continuity. "In essence, we're handing not only the items, but we're handing on responsibility, a job," Maryann articulates, "I'm moving on and it's now your job to carry on the traditions forward."

The transmission of artifacts is a gendered process, drawing on modern elements of family mobility yet relying on traditional ideologies of women as kin-keepers.

I'm giving things to my granddaughter because in this day and age...If I give things to my grandsons, you know...People divorce and it may get lost. So I will have to compensate with what I give to her with some kind of money...I don't know. But I want her to have it because I figure she can say, 'This is mine. I keep it,' if anything happens if she would get married, if anything

happens. So it would be passed on then to her children.
(Jo)

Connections between mothers and daughters are exemplified in this process of inheritance. Charlyn's aggressive attainment of family artifacts her mother holds reveals the conflict and negotiation present in their relationship. Charlyn details the disbursement of family dishware only weeks before she would move out of her parents' house after college:

I think one night, I was like, 'I think it's time I took the dishes with me.' 'Cause we had been talking about it for several years, but you know when you're living with other people and everything, she didn't want to risk them and I didn't want to, moving back and forth. But I was going to be living by myself and staying there for a while. So we sat down and we kind of divided it up. Like, 'Well, I'll keep the four red teacups and you can take the four red— the ones I like to make chocolate pudding in — the four red pudding cups. I'll have these plates and you'll have these plates. We divided all the colored glass in half. And there were some things that she was like, well, you can take this and I'll keep this. We went on for like an hour, negotiating who was going to keep what at whose house. And then we wrapped it all up nice and tight and I took it with me when I left a couple of weeks later.

In contrast, Beverly has identified her daughter Karen to one day receive the books. Since this has been established, Beverly has noticed Karen adopting more of her mother's characteristics and reinforcing that Karen is the natural recipient for the keepsake.

My daughter Karen, the one that wants the books, she, like me, likes to sew and so recently, she made a whole slipcover for her sofa and she took bright colors. And so my grandson says to her one day, 'Mom, you're turning

into grandma! You're doing things just like grandmother.'
 [laughs]...It's like she's starting to become more and more
 like me.

Once received, decisions about how a daughter should replicate her mother's usage or display of the object are critical connections to the relationship. While Charlyn and her mother did not agree about how much of the inalienable wealth should be kept and passed on, their mutual use of the china for holidays was unspoken and continued. Maryann's maternal connections are present when she puts the objects to daily use in the same tasks her mother and grandmother performed:

It's not that one thing stands for any one person.
 You've all touched it, put your hands on it. You've seen it. You've learned to walk holding on to it, whatever it is. It's had the touch of tradition on it, it's had the touch of many generations. So for me it means much more to have the items and use them than keep them in a museum-like setting and never touch them... There's no life to that.

The transmission of artifacts to a daughter-in-law holds its own emotional weight. In accordance with Curasi et al.'s observation that daughters-in-law are passed inalienable possessions in trust for the next generation and are regarded with more suspicion than a blood relative (Curasi et al., 15), Jo explained how she chose to pass on certain objects to her sons' wives:

I didn't need all these teacups... I gave each one of those, then I've given them pickle dishes, things that there were so many of... They all met my mother. Unfortunately, they all knew her when she was elderly and she'd already – her mind was beginning to fail. But they knew and liked her and they understood. And so they cherish these. [The mother of her granddaughter]

will see that her daughter will take care of the things I
give her, as long as she's in her house.

The participants in this project expressed connection to the women who may one day hold the objects they cherish, an immortalization of themselves and their family's past. Beverly's hopefulness followed a brief moment of laughter when she considered throwing her treasured record books in the trash:

I think it would be great to pass them down and maybe
somewhere, away when I'm long gone some great-
grandchild or somebody might find them interesting and
be able to do something with them that I would never
even dream of right now. So they're just here and
anybody that can use them, can use them [smiles].

The women interviewed in *inHERitance* each expressed a vision of themselves in the middle of generations of women before and generations of women ahead. Each woman is adding autobiography to biographies of foremothers and inalienable possessions, continuing to breathe life into stories and objects that write the narrative of women's lives.

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