

# The Southern Belle: Personal Narratives in the Negotiation of Identity

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## Personal Narrative: Temporal and Social Folklore Networks

Traditionally, folklore narrative study has confined itself to social narratives that embody a larger audience than the private sphere of the family. Yet the family or the private realm intertwines with the social. What makes the social meaningful—or what shapes the way we exist within the social—lies within our personal accounts, the stories we inherit, the embedded texts that enable us to read other texts. As social beings, we learn to translate signs into meaning, to make narrative connections. We teach a child to recognize signs in order to make sense of the world. And despite our best intentions, the personal narratives we pass on to our children often carry with them stratifying worldviews that can only be rearranged when examined closely. To examine personal narratives, embedded texts that connect the social and the private, is to examine our world. Accordingly, within this paper, I endeavor implicitly to present the context and narrative of my mother's stories in an examination of my own changing perceptions of the world.

Sandra K. Dolby-Stahl asserts that the critic or folklorist is an "informed reader" (1985:53). She is an "insider," someone with "circumcised ears" who can hear and interpret the intimate aspects of the personal narrative as well as provide critical response (1985:45). Dolby-Stahl believes that research methodology on personal narratives should include:

- (1) an acknowledged "documentary" frame;
- (2) clear allowance for the *individual* response of the listener;
- (3) commentary by an audience-interpreter whose relevant "folk group" is the same as the storyteller's;
- (4) identification of an audience-interpreter who knows the conventions of literary criticism and could thus translate his or her "emic" commentary into "etic" terms for purposes of (as Periti Peltto suggests) "cross cultural study of behavioral systems"; and
- (5) an audience-

interpreter willing to accept full responsibility for the act of interpretation. (1985:53)

As I attempt to analyze my mother's stories, the burden of my methodology is an inexhaustible range of data, little tidbits here and there that influence and filter my readings, which I may or may not be conscious of and which also must be sorted through for relevance to the project. It is understandable, then, that my textual accounts cannot fully exhaust all of the possibilities—those possibilities become future projects. Yet, as Dolby-Stahl concludes, "The reader-response critic, conscious of his subjectivity, struggles not so much with the fact of his subjectivity but rather with the inescapable demand that he translate his personal response into the conventions of his more influential interpretive community" (1985:54). Articulation is the critic's burden. It is also her tool, her own ability to connect seemingly disconnected signs and texts into a meaningful story about the world. And so our critical reading does not escape the tyranny of story. Instead, it enters into the realm of other stories, other narratives, other readings. As Roland Barthes asserts in *S/Z*, each text is a sign, "a code . . . an interweaving of voices from other texts outside this text or the world which we live within, voices that create a cultural and historical grid of expectation. The code is a wake of that already" (1970:20-1). And so, this text becomes an interweaving of voices, other texts, other stories.

Stories tell us about our possibilities. The present is knowable only because of past categories or stories, repeatable representations. Derrida reminds us, "There is no meaning outside of memory" and no possibility of narrative without memory (1986:10-11). "Memory," he argues, "is also the measure and chance of [the] future" (1986:20). Our past stories or historical constructions shape our present world and determine our options for the future. Within the boundaries of story, we learn the meanings of our roles as well as our social and private mobility within those roles. As Jack Santino suggests in his work on Pullman Porters, "Narratives and their sequences are artfully structured in such a way as to provide a generally meaningful symbolic statement about the categories of the porter's life and the range of possibilities available to him within those categories" (1983:394). Each of us must enter into a similar "symbolic" world of language, the social realm which Lacan asserts is governed by the "Law of the Father" (Lemaire 1977:83), the realm where we "become conscious that [we are] still in the making and, turning towards the future, integrate [ourselves] into the social, into Culture, and re-enter into language" (Vergote 1966:115). Personal narratives, connective language building

blocks, become a fundamental foundation. To begin to understand ourselves, we must begin to understand our inherited stories, the connective fibers which link generations and network our social and private existences. If we wish to influence the present, we must unwind the stories of our past, reexamine our possibilities and, in doing so, open the present and future with added options, opportunities that we might otherwise have overlooked. Often our blindness is a result of looking over the same material in the same way. Re-looking, re-seeing with a critical eye, provides a larger visual field and thus a larger opening for alternatives.

### **Enormities: The Critical Burden**

Exchanging stories involves a complicated acting-out process. At one moment the storyteller appears to dominate the process, at another the audience. What seems like an easily identifiable process is often an entangled interweaving of various roles. Thus a storyteller is also an audience member, and the audience/reader/critic creates along with the storyteller. Where the roles separate is a critical judgment. Henry James believed that the reader was created by the writer as an essential element in fiction. Although fiction may serve different functions than folklore narrative, I think both depend on audience/reader/text interaction. An oral audience, like the reader sitting quietly in her chair balancing a book or the critic gathering various data into one textual account, must know and be capable of processing signs in order to understand the performance/text. If the storyteller/writer-critic creates an interested audience/reader, that audience/reader, in turn, becomes a co-creator with the writer.

The folklorist searches at one end for the common elements of affiliation and meaning, and at the same time must create and invent her own self as a reader/character/audience within the performance/text. As Stanley Fish asserts, "The place where sense is made or not made is the reader's mind rather than the printed page or the space between the covers of a book" (1980:81). The "real" text, the "real" performance, then, is the one which occurs between the reader and the page, the space apart from the text/performance, the space that strips away all masks until the only thing revealed is the self creating the self, the reader creating the reader, the audience creating the audience, the folklorist creating the folklorist.

And because the audience/reader is created, a character in the text, whether the text be the performance or the critic's paper, this act of assertion is a forceful move, a willed act in that it shapes a particular worldview. If we search only for meaning, Jane Tompkins

argues, "the text remains an object rather than an instrument, an occasion for the elaboration of meaning rather than a force exerted upon the world" (1980:225). The critic/folklorist, by examining the forces that shape the reading act, the reader, the audience, and a worldview, receives an added burden of responsibility. She must account, in part, for her own particular emphasis within the text/performance. She must look at the act of criticism/interpretation as a political tool, an act that yields certain properties visible within the text/performance.

The critical act for me involves a conscious sorting out of all my hidden pressure points or exposed agendas, the playful tensions being created between the performance, the text, and myself. Accepting responsibility for the windows I choose to look through is, perhaps, the most vital aspect of Dolby-Stahl's methodology because it forces the critic/folklorist to acknowledge her political and personal bias: Interpretation becomes an active networking movement, open to exchanging roles and process review.

### **Context: The Boundaries of Story**

At 18 I realized that I had never heard my mother talk about herself. The revelation was startling. For many years I assumed Mother did not want to talk about her life, but gradually over the last ten years, I have come to see her as someone who was never invited to say anything, nor found it politically advantageous to do so. Silence, I have learned, is also a narrative.

What Mother did say was usually an impersonal statement that I could have read on any car's bumper sticker about how women should fill certain roles. Through impersonal statements such as, "A woman never travels without her husband," Mother taught me "proper expectations." And if there was struggle in her statement, the surface appeared calm and factual. Clearly, in our home, Father ruled or the sons ruled, and women fulfilled roles that helped, served, and circulated around or throughout that patriarchal realm.

I fulfilled my role expectations by getting married at 18 and let go of worrying further about the mother-daughter relationship. Although longing for such mothering, I realized the futility of it and the apparent hopelessness of the relationship. I let go of the possibility of reconciliation with my mother and, it seemed, she, too, let go. Perhaps the most unnerving moment for my mother was when I divorced an outwardly respectable man, left the family religion, and pursued my education. In essence, I began to challenge everything she had based her life upon. I stepped outside of the role she had so

faithfully modeled. Prompted by my father, her perceived priesthood/patriarchal authority, she took on the motherly role of trying to appear interested and friendly in case she could guide me with love and kindness back to family traditions, values, and religious roles. Thus she set out to fulfill her duty as she had done in the past. I think she believed it would be like taking a child to the zoo, buying a bag of popcorn, tangling a bit in conversation, and then taking her home, reformed and renewed. Instead it became a journey of descent into the dark complexities of human relationships where passions, hopes, disappointments, and I believe, a place for some sort of love and respect emerged. Now I hope for reconciliation.

In recovering the "lost self" of my mother, I am uncovering myself. What I have come to understand is that the recovery lies in the exchange of Mother's stories, stories which tell me how she sees the world. Recovery also lies in my willingness to become her audience, someone who will listen, someone who invites her to be an individual with ideas, thoughts, and feelings. In the exchange, we create spaces for our relationship to change through emerging possibilities. Now I see my mother as a woman who has filled her world with stories that confirm what she believes to be her roles, and how those roles function with other people. I am discovering, as Dolby-Stahl did, that "through the art of the personal narrative, [Mother] has subtly expressed a personal belief, and more significantly perhaps, she has welcomed the intimacy that accompanies my response to her story" (Dolby-Stahl 1985:62-63). When I began to listen to her stories, I began to know something about my mother, and I began to know something about her mother and so on. Moreover, I began to unravel the stories that had been handed down to me, tales that I had unconsciously begun to live, or disregard, but always active dramas for me to tangle with in the darkest corners.

Much as Demeter brought back her daughter, Kore, from Hades, my mother seeks to bring back through her stories, her daughter. I have also journeyed to the underworld to find my mother's lost self and to understand the stories, including the silence, that have shaped my perceptions of the world. Although the changes in my life which included my divorce and religious disillusionment may have appeared abrupt to my mother, they were not to me. I came to a crossroad in my own life where I had to begin to explore the forces that had directed my life and the direction my life needed to assume. It was time to understand my mother's statements and the structure of my patriarchal family. Thus at 22, I started to peel away the layers of the years. I became willing to explore the family silence. And I became

willing to examine my own silence about painful incidents that had significantly affected my life. Although I chose not to confront the family, leaving aspects of the family narrative silent, I pulled the layers further to understand the family patterns that permitted such destructive forces. I examined the pieces one by one to find someone to blame, someone who could be held responsible, someone like my mother who seemed to enforce by her every word and action the bending of women to the desires of the fathers and the sons. And just when the blame rested so easily upon her, her stories unraveled layers beyond my vision to a far different understanding, an understanding which all began with the planting of flowers.

After my divorce, Mother came by only if she had a mission to accomplish. One day, when I was busy outside planting flowers, my mother visited. She stood quietly looking over the garden. She said, "Why don't you plant a little more red in the middle of the purple for depth." I looked up rather surprised at her comment. After all it was unusual, far different from a bumper-sticker statement, and at the same time remarkably useful. In a matter of minutes we set off to find the right flowers at the local nursery. The afternoon adventure turned into a long season of exchanging information about flowers and the hopes and fears of the gardeners concerning them. We didn't venture into any other topics. We stayed where it was safe.

The next spring we returned to our gardens. I'd go with her to find flowers for her garden, then I'd spend an afternoon helping her plant. It was at those moments when our hands were busy turning over the earth that other topics slowly came to the surface. My mother's parents were growing older and incapable of functioning without outside aid. Mother often went to their home to handle disputes over their needs. On one afternoon while planting, she received a call for help. I went with her and watched from a distance the interchange between an aging, frustrated father and his daughter. She put her hand on his shoulder, pulled his head closer, and said, "I know it doesn't feel good when you pee your pants and you can't remember how it got there, but no one cares, Dad. We understand." In a few minutes the dispute seemed settled and Mom and I were soon back in the dirt planting flowers. But something had changed. Mother said, "It's difficult to see my father like this. I have to put a sheet over the seat of my car because he pees on everything. I know it embarrasses him. You've got to watch them, Mar; after all, someday I'll be old too, and I'll need you to understand."

It seemed casual enough, but I knew that something significant had changed between us. Elliott Oring suggests that a "dyad tends

deliberately to choose the seemingly trivial and fortuitous as the foundation for their traditions" (1984:21). Likewise, I found that it was the shared trivial day-to-day events such as caring for an aging parents or planting a flower that began to open intimate opportunities.

Shortly after the incident with her father, Mother and I went to lunch. That day I was angry with my ex-husband over child-raising disputes, and the topic spilled over into our otherwise uneventful lunch conversation. My mother stopped eating and said, "What do you expect people to think about you after your divorce—leaving a respectable man and all." It was the perfect invitation to lay out our expectations. For the next two hours, while our lunch grew colder, Mother told me how disappointed she was to have a daughter like me, someone who hadn't accepted the roles that had been so important to the family. At the same time, I let her know that I didn't care much for the family. At the end of the lunch I informed my mother that I had no interest in being a part of the family if it meant filling the roles she had carefully modeled. I told her to make a choice: me as I was, or no daughter at all. It was then that my mother chose to descend to find her daughter, the angry woman sitting across the table. And she chose to find her daughter through personal, oral narratives which became useful stepping stones to bridge the gap.

After that lunch, my mother and I made it a regular occasion to go to lunch and talk. Over the table, over the comfort of food, her stories began to emerge. Much like Santino's porters, Mother's stories served to "reconcile the contradictions and to understand better the universe, the world, the world [she] lived in, the world [we] were contained by" (1983:410). At first, Mother would eat quickly and make short statements that would later become part of a story. Often the statements would be preceded by an observation I made about a woman's role in society. Mother always responded with the line, "I can't understand what those women want; after all, your father has always treated me like gold; he has never once hinted that I wasn't his equal." I would smile, but I never pressed her to examine her statement; I simply dropped the subject. But then one day I said, "Mother, your experience may be very different from those of other women, and for that reason, they feel that they need equal rights." She nodded and dropped the subject; yet after that day she added, "I know you and I are different, but that is how it is for me." And in that one statement her stories began to take shape. She began to say, "We're different . . .," and then a story would transpire that explained those differences by the way she viewed herself and her roles.

Often I feel that my mother tells me her stories because she knows that I have begun to understand the significance of them and will pass them on to others. At times, I feel much like Alice Walker when she says,

Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories—like her life—must be recorded. (Walker 1983:240)

In recording Mother's stories, I sought to capture the "urgency" that Walker speaks of which I believe becomes evident in the performance, ". . . the manner in which she spoke . . .," and the fibers of the context. Afterwards, I will discuss the function of Mother's stories—"the business that gets done" in telling me the story.

#### **Text: Examining Connective Fibers**

In August, 1986, four years after my mother and I began to plant flowers, I asked my mother if she would record some of her stories. Each year we went with a small group of women to a Shakespeare Festival and it seemed to be the perfect, undisturbed time to put a recorder on the coffee table and listen. When Mother agreed, I turned the recorder on. She would only tell the stories if no one else were present. She felt awkward with the recorder on the table. So I would prompt her with specific questions which allowed her to begin talking. I tape-recorded the following six stories over a four-day period, Monday, August 4, through Thursday, August 7, 1986, in Cedar City, Utah.

My mother's stories are strongly interwoven with her southern background. Her family settled in South Carolina in the late 1700s and began building a large cotton plantation equipped, as my grandmother says, "with hundreds of slaves to make their grits until that damn war took them all away." The war crippled the family plantation; in fact, it destroyed the home and left the family financially devastated.

M.B.: Would you talk about the plantation?

MOTHER: The plantation wasn't as glorious as *Gone With the Wind's* Tara. (Silence.) The kitchen was separate from the main house because they didn't want the black help to catch it on fire and destroy the whole house. And the dresses were sewn on the women's bodies until they rotted off. So all those beautiful dresses are a myth. But we always had a black woman to cook for us. I know my grandmother did, and my mother had black help although she preferred to do her own cooking. You couldn't trust slaves, you know.



M.B.: Why not?

MOTHER: You could turn your back on the blackies in the kitchen, and even trust the blackies that did the yard work, but you never trusted the farm help; they'd kill you if you turned away from them. That's another thing, we treated our slaves like gold; they were lost when my great-great grandfather set them free. They didn't know what to do with themselves.

M.B.: What did you do for them?

MOTHER: Well (silence). The war destroyed the house; a lot needed to be rebuilt, so we couldn't afford to keep many of them. After the war, you know, we had to pay them for working. It wasn't much. In fact, we could only afford the kitchen help until all that civil movement started pushing up the pay. Then my mother could only keep one to help around the house. It wasn't till we moved to Utah that Mother had to do her own work in the house and cooking in the kitchen.

M.B.: Is there anything else about the plantation?

MOTHER: No, not tonight. It wasn't as grand as the movie. No. And it wasn't like that television movie *Roots* either.

M.B.: What was the difference?

MOTHER: Like I said, we treated our slaves well. They were just like children.

M.B.: What do you mean like children?

MOTHER: They needed a master. They needed someone to tell them what to do. They couldn't read or write. (Silence) Nothing more. (Stopped recording.)

The southern belle motif emerges as a common thread in my mother's stories. She speaks of the woman's role as that of the "southern belle" and the man's role as that of a "southern gentleman." Understanding the motif involves understanding the hierarchy of roles on the plantation. Farm help was the lowest form of life, then yard help, then kitchen and household help, then daughters, then the wife, and finally the masters, who were the sons when the father was away. Over all the father was the master of the plantation and home.

M.B.: Would you tell the story of your father?

MOTHER: My father was a good man. He was different from your father, but that is the way he was.

M.B.: What was different about your father?

MOTHER: He'd call me from work sometimes and tell me he didn't like the boy I was dating. That meant I had to get rid of him quick. He couldn't even call me after that. (Silence)

M.B.: Will you tell the story about your checking account?

MOTHER: Oh, that is just a little one. (Silence) One time I gave Daddy my check to put in the bank for me, cause his name had to be on my account, and later when I went to withdraw all the money it wasn't there. Daddy had decided that he needed the money. He was that way. If Mother picked out furniture for the house and Grandpa felt it was too extravagant, he'd go down to the store and get something more practical. Mother was always surprised when the furniture was delivered because it wasn't what she ordered. But you didn't question Daddy; he was a southern gentleman. (Silence)

M.B.: Why didn't you question a southern gentleman?

MOTHER: You'd never catch him in the kitchen. Once I did something he didn't like; I took a class on nursing from the LDS Business College because it was right next door to my work. Grandpa didn't want me to be a nurse. (Silence)

M.B.: Why didn't he want you to be a nurse?

MOTHER: He told me that it would be too hard on me physically because of the bloodclot I had in my leg at age fifteen. But I know that what he really objected to was that I might have to see men's bodies.

M.B.: So what did you do?

MOTHER: I took the class anyway because I knew I would get a job at the Primary Children's Hospital and only see boys, not men. Daddy didn't believe women should drive cars either. We were never allowed to ride bicycles, or go swimming, or think about going to college. I was expected to contribute to the household budget. (Silence)

M.B.: What did you contribute?

MOTHER: I was assigned to provide clothing for Linda [younger sister] when I turned 16 and could get a job. And Daddy charged me forty dollars a month for room and board after that. My daddy and I were always closer than I ever was to my mother. I kept telling the family that Dad would be a lot easier to care for than Mother. But they wouldn't listen until now when Daddy is gone and Mother just wants to sit around and be a southern belle.

Sometimes the southern belle image is evident in a sentence that Mother drops along the way. For example, when I shop with my mother for her clothes, she seeks an article of clothing which would make her look "small, like a lady should," or a pair of shoes that would make her feet "look small like a southern belle's feet." The ironic fact is that my mother stands an even five feet four inches tall and wears a size six dress. She is small but does not see herself as "small enough"; thus, the search for the ideal dress or shoes that will render the vision complete is the task of her shopping. In the last few years, she has even sought to find dresses that will complement my father's suits when he is on church assignments and she must stand beside him. "I need to look like the Bishop's wife should," she says.

Another aspect of the southern belle image is beautiful hair. My mother's quest is to find a hairdresser who can best accentuate her "lovely gray hair." This is difficult because inevitably she finds one hairdresser who can, as she says, "do the front, but doesn't get the back flat enough . . . it's too full, doesn't make my head look small enough."

Fitting the image of the southern belle is the quest of most women in my mother's family. Often their behavior is evaluated by other family members based on this image. For example, Mother's Aunt Althea was found dead in her car holding a canning pan. The autopsy showed that she had died from carbon monoxide poisoning, thus a probable suicide. For months family members have debated if Aunt Althea really did kill herself because, as my mother says, "She died without any make-up on, and anyone knows that Althea would have put make-up on if she really wanted to kill herself. After all, she was a true southern belle." The story has been recorded in the following way:

M.B.: What happened to Aunt Althea?

MOTHER: She died following a long illness. She had the flu. The family didn't want it to look like she died in the car without the garage door open. It doesn't look good. She had a canning pan in her hand in case she threw up in the car before she got to the doctor's office. (Silence) She must have thrown up in the car and not been able to get the garage door open. (Silence) I know if she really wanted to kill herself she would have done herself up fancy.

M.B.: What do you mean do herself up fancy?

MOTHER: She always was one to put on all that make-up before going out. I'm not like that. I can just run a comb through my hair and be out the door when your father tells me he wants me to go with him. Your dad likes that about me. But those southern belles go all out. It used to take Jean [cousin] a full hour if her husband told her he wanted to go some place. But Aunt Althea would have put her make-up on if she really wanted to die.

M.B.: Why is that?

MOTHER: She was a true southern belle. So was Aunt Ruth.

M.B.: Aunt Ruth? What happened with Aunt Ruth?

MOTHER: Aunt Ruth put on all her make-up, climbed in the bathtub, and then slit her wrists. It was a big mess when they found her, but her face looked pretty. Now if Aunt Althea had wanted to kill herself she would have done the same. She had the flu, and you never can never tell.

M.B.: Is there any more to this story?

MOTHER: No. (Silence) That is all the story I tell about them.

My mother's stories about her mother are woven around her own evaluation of her mother as a southern belle.

M.B. Are there any stories about your mother that you could tell?

MOTHER: All she wants to be is a southern belle. She just sits around in that home and waits for someone to wait on her. All she wants is to sit and look pretty. All she talks about is if all the ladies at the home notice how pretty her dress is and how lovely her hair looks. When I tell Harry [her husband] that someone tells me my hair is lovely, he calls me Grandma Davis. (Silence)

M.B.: What does that mean to you?

MOTHER: I hate that because I am not like her. All she wants to be is a southern belle. When Grandpa retired, she said that she retired too and didn't want to fix him any more dinners. Now who was supposed to do the cooking?

M.B.: So what happened?

MOTHER: Grandpa's a true southern gentleman and wouldn't set foot in the kitchen. But that is how my mother is; she just wants to be a southern belle, sit and look pretty and go to lunch. When Harry came to tell her that Duncan [Mother's father] had died, all Mother said was, "I'll have to get my hair done and buy me a pretty dress." (Silence) She wanted Grandpa's casket to be all perfect for a southern gentleman. My sisters and brothers thought that Grandpa should be buried in a nice oak coffin, but Grandma found a bronze-colored casket that she said "looks like Duncan." She's like that. She wanted Daddy to be buried in something that would be flashy, something like a southern carriage. So Harry and I took her to the mortuary and let her pick out the casket without all my brothers and sisters there to interfere.

M.B.: Was she happy then?

MOTHER: Yes. Although one of the boys thought Grandpa was being buried beneath his dignity. (Silence) You can't please everyone.

M.B.: Anything else?

MOTHER: It is so sad to see her this way. She cries. She doesn't remember unless she wants to. (Silence) That is the funny thing. (Silence)

M.B.: What is funny?

MOTHER: She remembers what she wants to. She's mad at Daddy for dying without her. She's mad that he came to get Uncle Jim [brother, who died a few months ago] before he came for her. (Silence)

M.B.: Why would Grandpa do that?

MOTHER: That is the man he was. He was always close to his brothers. Mother resents him now. But she isn't always in the real world. I'm going to turn this off. How do you turn this off? (Recorder stopped.)

My father occupies many of Mother's stories. She revolves around his world. Her stories often center upon not getting in his way, and playing the role of wife according to his desires. She evaluates a dress based on if "Harry will like it." She can only decide to participate in any activity after first calling my father to see if it will interfere with his planned schedule. When she was hospitalized for bloodclots in her leg, she asked me to call my father and explain to him that she was really very ill. I realized that she was asking his permission to be ill. After my father indicated that he understood, my mother suffered silently as she has always done. Following a vacation for their 35th wedding anniversary, my mother began to tell me stories about my father.

M.B.: Talk about Dad for a minute.

MOTHER: He always treats me like a queen. This week he isn't speaking to me. It's one of those times when he is mad at the whole world. I try not to get in his way when he's like this. What else can I do? (Silence)

M.B.: What do you do?

MOTHER: He wants me to learn to invest our money, but I think that's his job. I don't ask him to clean the house. A man should take care of the money. He told me on our vacation that he was disappointed in the fact that I hadn't taken an interest in the family financial planning.

M.B.: What vacation?

MOTHER: I told you. We always go to Yellowstone to celebrate our anniversary.

M.B.: What happened?

MOTHER: I don't think it is my place. And anyway, if I did, he would just do what he wants regardless of me. He wants to be sure that I have enough money if something were to happen to him. Your grandfather did that for Grandma. But that is a man's job.

M.B. What is a man's job?

MOTHER: Once your father yelled at me for not taking care of a tire problem. So I went right down to the tire place and had the tires fixed, and then your father was mad because I didn't get the inner tubes from the tires back. So I went back and got the inner tubes and then gift-wrapped them and took them over to your dad's work and put them right down on his desk. I said to him, "Next time, do what a man should do." (Silence) He understood and he has never asked me to fix the car again. I think a man should put gas in the car and change the oil. I'm a lady. (Silence)

M.B.: What else about Dad?

MOTHER: But your dad is a righteous man. I don't know what I do that makes him not want to talk with me.

M.B.: Why won't he talk with you?

MOTHER: I think he just has a lot on his mind. I know that he has church conference coming around and he needs to plan and worry about that. He'll talk in a few weeks when it gets over.

M.B.: How do you live with that?

MOTHER: Your father is a righteous man. I don't think it's my fault anymore. I just let him be. We're different that way. (Silence)

M.B.: What do you mean? Who is different?

MOTHER: You and I are different. I don't try to change your father. (Silence)

M.B.: Do I try anymore?

MOTHER: He has a lot on his mind. We get along real well. We have a lot of fun together. You don't see that.

M.B.: No. I don't live there anymore. And I don't remember him having fun. (Silence)

MOTHER: He is just not talking this week. That is all.

Finally, every now and then, my mother talks about herself in a story.

M.B.: What were you like as a girl?

MOTHER: Even though I played the piano and sang, my parents never complimented me. They always felt Olive and Linda [sisters] had all the talent. (Silence)

M.B.: And so?

MOTHER: But they could depend on me. That called me "Dependable Jo." I guess it is best to be someone you can depend upon. (Silence) I still like to play the piano and sing. Your father bought me a piano so I could do that.

M.B.: Do you like the new piano?

MOTHER: Maybe I should take it back and spend the money in a better place. That's what I told Harry one night and he got all mad and said, "Can't you accept a gift of love?" and I knew then that I had hurt his feelings. I quit talking about it then.

M.B.: Anything else you want to say?

MOTHER: I'm getting a headache; I'm going to get a Coke. I only drink Coke when I'm around you; otherwise I'm pretty good. (Recorder pause.)

M.B.: Settled? Talk some more about yourself.

MOTHER: What can I say? I know that I am not really beautiful, but I take good care of myself. I keep watching Mother to see how things go for her. I know that I won't be like her, but you never can tell at 70 what will happen. (Silence) Your father keeps saying I'm going to be just like her if I don't get out and use my mind. But Mother's got a disease and so it wouldn't have mattered if she used her mind or not.

M.B.: What do you do with that information?

MOTHER: I want you to remember how I took care of my parents. It is a sad thing seeing Mother this way. (Silence) Yesterday. (Silence) The day before we came here, I went down to the home and she was wrapped up in the shower curtain to go out for breakfast. I had to help her find a dress. She wasn't in the real world yesterday. Today. (Silence) When we get back, I'll probably find her in the real world and she'll tell me how she wants to die. But you remember, I may be the same way.

M.B.: What do you want me to remember?

MOTHER: I may be the same way. My sisters always want to go to lunch and discuss Mother. I see that she is running all of our lives from that home. Daddy never would have done that. Then my sisters will gripe about their husbands. They think I'm too noble because I don't say anything about your father, but I tell them I don't have any problems with Harry. He treats me like gold.

M.B.: Is that what you think?

MOTHER: It doesn't matter what I think. I wouldn't tell them anything else.

M.B.: Why not?

MOTHER: A lady doesn't talk about those things.

M.B.: Why not?

MOTHER: Things have changed. You might talk about those things. But I don't think I should. (Silence)

M.B.: Are there any other stories about yourself?

MOTHER: Not right now.

Over lunch, weeks later, I read back to my mother the taped transcript of her stories to be sure that she felt they were her stories. She listened carefully, then said, "Maybe you should call my cousin Jean and ask her about the southern belle; after all, she would know more than I do." I told her that I wasn't interested in Jean's story, but rather that I wanted to record what she had to say on the subject.

With that in mind, she agreed to listen to the other stories, and afterwards she indicated that they were her stories. "I'm not a southern belle," she said. "Now your grandmother is a southern belle; maybe you should talk with her." I smiled and again emphasized that I wanted to record her stories. It was obvious that she was very nervous about this paper and about how others might evaluate her stories. As she talked, I thought she looked older and tired. She seemed to feel that matters were beyond her control. As the lunch progressed she began reciting the stories again, as if I were no longer sitting there, as if she needed to remind herself of who and what she was. She said, "It's okay to be a southern belle if you can afford it." Soon after, lunch ended and the topic was closed. A few days later she called and ask me to lunch. I told her I was working on my paper on the southern belle and wouldn't be able to make it. She said, "Maybe you should call your sister and ask her about the South; she's real good about history." It became evident that she would be unwilling to discuss this paper further with me.

### Analysis

The very act of collecting and interpreting stories from my mother may appear to violate the ethical nature of folklore. I believe it does to some point. If I insisted that my mother analyze or interpret her stories as I do, then it would be a violation. It would rob her of the dignity of her stories, the dignity she seeks to preserve when she tells me such stories. And if I pressed her to understand the contradictions or the social implications of her stories, she would retreat.

I believe in time Mother will add more stories that will stretch deeper and scrape the skin off these recorded tales, but for now these stories serve her purpose; they reinforce a world she needs to believe exists in order for her to have a place. And her stories, by the framing sentence, "We're different . . .," allow her to put me in her otherwise tightly arranged role system. Often that sentence is now placed in the middle of the story, a reminder of the beginnings of our conversations, a reminder of how we began telling these stories.

I started off needing to understand the patriarchal system in our family. I see my Mother's stories as tools to support such a system, a system in which she is a victim, a person without form except in a role within the system. Thus she participates in her own victimization. Not only did she grow out of a traditional southern family which operates in a strict patriarchal hierarchy, but she is also an active member of the Mormon church, which is founded upon the same principles of patriarchy. The patriarchal system functions as the moral



frame of all her stories. She evaluates much of her worth on the basis of her support of the system. For example, she talks of obeying her father's wishes: not dating a boy, giving up her money to a joint checking account, later discovering that the money was needed for her father's desires; and none she sees as a violation of her rights but rather as her understood duty as a daughter to her father. She even sees the replaced furniture not as a violation of her mother's right to own furniture, but rather as an unquestionable decision that her father was entitled to make. Furthermore, the story of the old plantation establishes her place and her mother's place in the home, and in relation to the other slaves. They were to oversee the slaves below them. It is interesting to note that my mother talks of the plantation as if she were there in the 1800s, a part of the ongoing frustration of keeping the "blackies" in line. And my mother sees herself as someone a parent could "depend" upon to fulfill her duties.

As my grandparents could depend on my mother to fulfill her duty, so can my father. Mother encircles my father's life. He is the center of her universe. She expects him to take care of her financially, physically, and emotionally. In return, she grants him the title of "righteous" and total control over most of her life. Although she denied she was a "southern belle," she later conceded that it was okay to be such if it were "economically affordable." In essence, she can afford to be a belle as long as my father provides the physical and financial comforts that have made this possible. And though her home is not a plantation, she understands that she is to oversee it much in the same way that her mothers before her oversaw the plantation. To be treated "like a queen" or "like gold" is to say, according to her world, that "our family treated the slaves like gold," and thus freedom or equality is too much to ask or may even be undesirable because then she/they "would be lost" without the guiding fathers. In essence, Mother is protected by the system that holds her in place. She can expect to be fed and clothed in the same careful way a child is fed and clothed. To step beyond those boundaries involves a personal risk, a risk beyond her abilities as she understands them. Although her husband pushes her to expand beyond her limited role, Mother clearly establishes her own role limitations. She will not participate in financial matters because she sees this as a man's role. She will not put gas in her car or change the oil, nor will she step outside of these limitations to "expand her mind." Thus her stories serve to reinforce the status quo of the system.

Many of her stories evaluate other women who are under the same patriarchy but haven't learned to fill the proper role expectations

in an effective manner. For example, conflicts arise when her mother refuses to sit down and shut up. In effect, her mother has violated in a serious way one of the main ethics of her role within the system because she demands to be acknowledged as a human being who desires to be noticed and, even more so, dealt with. Although her mother is doing exactly what a southern belle has been trained to do, which is to sit and look pretty, this behavior is now in the way. After all, without the man, her husband, her useful functions have been taken away, and she is left alone in a home, away from the functioning roles of the other women in the family. The alarming fact is that two of her sisters have already committed suicide, leaving a reminder to the family that there wasn't much else for them to do. At the end of the southern belle's journey is a quiet place to sit down, to wait or to die; either way the belle is without function. Even the family members refuse to deal with the suicides by sidetracking the issue into a debate over the use of make-up which would indicate the intent of the women's actions. The issue is not so much whether they killed themselves, but whether they did it according to the traditional, southern belle role.

The obvious fact is that my mother is facing such a future. She is 59 years old this spring. She stands nervously on a tense edge where she sees her mother alone, fading, and where she understands that two of her aunts have committed suicide to escape such a fate. And sitting across the table is her daughter, a woman who has left the "protective arms" of the patriarchal system and challenges the roles by leading a much different life. To walk along the edge juxtaposes the reality of her own world just over the edge. I believe she is frightened. I believe she has begun to unravel her stories because she has instinctively felt the tension of that edge and doesn't quite know where the balance lies. I believe she is addressing in her cautious way a need for negotiation with the other side of the edge, a place where her daughter stands, a place far removed from her side of the system, a neutral place like the soil of flowerbeds or a restaurant where her safety is assured. I believe she is negotiating our relationship's present and future roles. Her stories enforce and address issues surrounding roles within the system of patriarchy, and she chooses to unfold those tales with an audience, her daughter, outside of that system, thereby allowing a space to negotiate, to say "We're different . . ." and to hear in return, "But, so very much alike, if we could only discover a place . . ." By negotiating spaces, Mother creates a reader's role, someone she can safely count on to listen.

And finding a place will involve the tedious exchange of roles. Mother instructs me carefully in the art of preserving dignity: the dignity of caring for an aged body that no longer functions within the system, the body she will wear and I will care for like the body her mother wears that she must care for. In saying, "You've got to watch them, Mar; after all, someday I'll be old too, and I'll need you to understand," she invites me to observe the rites she performs in order that I may learn what rites to perform for her in the years to come. It is not enough to her that I learn to care for an aging parent; I also need to learn to understand the role reversals taking place: I will assume the role of mother to her as she has assumed that role for her mother, I will unwrap the shower curtain from her wilting body and dress her for breakfast, I will put my hand on her shoulder and draw her close, whispering, "It doesn't matter how it got there, Mom; I understand."

Understanding an aging mother is not enough for me. I am learning to value aspects of the role she models, such as orchestrating a color-balanced garden. On neutral ground both Mother and I were able to give a little—a little more room each time a subject fell between our careful turning of the ground. And though I do not agree with many of her assumed role limitations, I respect the moments in her stories when she rises up in strength and demands her established place, moments like the tire incident with my father, or helping her mother pick out a casket for her father that resembled a southern carriage rather than the oak coffin which was the choice of the other seven brothers and sisters. No, I do not see my mother as holding the trumpet of Joshua: the walls will not tumble down when she blows; but at least when she whistles, we all know where she stands in relation to the wall. And knowing how to stand in relation to walls is something I continue to return to my mother to understand. In many ways she has learned to manipulate the system she lives within, and although I have chosen to step outside of that system, the lessons of living beside and in between walls can be valuable tools to me.

I did discover in Mother's stories threads of emotional incest, although no evidence of physical incest. My mother's need to be the good daughter or the all-serving wife to her father and her husband left the door open to boundless male activity. When my father was not at home, Mother believed that the sons were the next priesthood/patriarchal authority; and therefore, the sons became surrogate fathers and rulers in the real father's absence. Not only did this belief create a symbolic power structure, it also created incest

positions for the sons. In essence, the male becomes the sole determinant of what rules and boundaries he sets up. And if the mother remains silent, a nonentity devoid of personal identity and power, her own daughters become vulnerable to limitless sexual actions. In addition to the powerlessness which Mother chooses in the presence of men, she also lived in a home that limited access to sexual knowledge. The strange suppression of sexual awareness in my mother's family, even of anatomical information such as my mother would have received in taking a nursing class, which was against her father's wishes because she might be exposed to a male body, adds to the powerlessness of the female. If the females have no access to sexual information or identity, that information or identity is defined by the male, which as many feminist critics argue, has always been the case under patriarchal rule. Although I longed for a mother who would, as Rich concludes, undo or rescue the daughter from the father's emotional rape, I do not believe that my mother has the ability. What my mother cannot do for me, as I suspect many daughters of my generation must concede, I must do for myself. The themes of victimization within my mother's stories give me a place to begin—an opening to reexamine what leads one to become a victim.

### **Conclusion**

If I were to say that I walk away from this article renewed and completely satisfied with the relationship between my mother and me, it would be a blatant lie. I am not, which leaves me all the space in the world to return to the tables for further negotiation. And I will return, over and over again, until there is a place in our worlds for her and me to co-exist. If feminism has taught me anything, it is that we must expand what it means to be responsible human beings in the course of human interaction. To ignore my mother because of her refusal to give up a system that both feeds and abuses her would be an act of tyranny, the likes of which would be similar to the system she operates under. That is not to say that I have not fully given up the system of my family, the system that abused and fed me. I have given up my part in the destructive patterns of the patriarchy by refusing to participate in the system in my assigned role. The challenge has always been to step outside of it, and yet, reshape relationships with those who choose to remain. I wish that I could assign blame to a responsible party for injuries I suffered under the real and symbolic abuse by male family members, the system of the fathers and the sons, but the traditional and historical implications would thunder down a judgment far beyond this generation and leave

me with the same decisions and responsibilities. By stepping outside, by negotiating, new worlds may emerge. And as Rich suggests, "This is where we have to begin" (Rich 1981:292).

By beginning in the traditions of my mother and those mothers who have come before us in the family, I can develop an understanding of my inheritance. I can see her place in my world and my world in hers. It is as Maxine Hong Kingston describes in her book *The Woman Warrior*: "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (Kingston 1976:10). Therein lies the importance of my mother's stories to me: they have given me the power to evaluate and to assess the unconscious and conscious gathering of my mother's stories and the system in which I was raised. Reexamining Mother's narratives with a critical eye opens a larger visual field wherein the present and the future are enlarged for greater, more promising alternatives and possibilities.

Dolby-Stahl argues that personal narrative research, combined with literary folkloristic methodology, may lead to a "fuller understanding of folklore texts" (1985:63). I believe that it not only adds a fuller understanding, but it also allows the folklorist to account for her subjective choices (previously couched in "objective" language) and critical judgments. By reading texts or reading performances that include a larger range of "insider" possibilities, the reading act and the critical paper become a created space, a narrative connection that is filtered through our own cultural and historical experiences. Articulating that process is the critical burden.

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