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# Narrating Nadia An Interview Lost between Translation and a Kidnapping

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### Article abstract

This paper is a narrative inquiry into a series of interviews conducted by the author, uncovering an aspect of her family's oral history. The interviews revolved around her grandmother's experience with her son's kidnapping and permanent disappearance in 1976, during the Lebanese civil war. From a post-modern perspective, the author assesses her place as an active participant in the conversations. Within this framework, she reflects on how language and culture came in the way of her conversations; on the power she held in translating and presenting her grandmother's words; and on translating silences and non-verbal messages.

**SPECIAL SECTION: NARRATIVES OF TRANSLATION WITHIN  
RESEARCH PRACTICE**

**Narrating Nadia: An Interview Lost between  
Translation and a Kidnapping**

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This paper is a narrative inquiry into a series of interviews conducted by the author, uncovering an aspect of her family's oral history. The interviews revolved around her grandmother's experience with her son's kidnapping and permanent disappearance in 1976, during the Lebanese civil war. From a post-modern perspective, the author assesses her place as an active participant in the conversations. Within this framework, she reflects on how language and culture came in the way of her conversations; on the power she held in translating and presenting her grandmother's words; and on translating silences and non-verbal messages.

Oral history transcripts are “like silent memoirs waiting for someone to rummage through them and bring their testimony to life” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 709). This form of history preserves old stories; seizes people’s feelings, gestures, and spoken words; and impacts listeners and readers in a way that the written word often may not. What follows is my attempt to rummage through one transcript of my family’s oral history. The end product of this rummaging, however, was to equally “disappoint” me and exceed my expectations.



Ernest was 23 years old, and an only son among six daughters. He was a soft-spoken, gentle man and a bank employee waiting to travel to London in pursuit of a work opportunity. But on one “Black Saturday” in 1976, he was kidnapped on a roadblock in Beirut. It was a day and a time when the lucky few escaped; some were imprisoned, others were killed immediately, but all based on the stated religion on their identity cards.<sup>1</sup> About a year ago, on one of my unfortunately rare visits to my grandmother Nadia’s house, I remember seeing for the first time a picture of my uncle Ernest displayed in a frame. While my grandfather was still alive, pictures of my uncle were never allowed to be displayed. In Lebanese tradition, this would have been an implicit acknowledgment of death. So for thirty years, and like many parents of kidnapped or disappeared persons, he clung to the belief that his son was still in captivity and that, one day, he would reappear. His family was obligated to followed suit. The newly visible photo disturbed me for some time. I wondered how Nadia had felt, spending her days seated in her living room, surrounded by pictures of her other children and grandchildren. They all seemed to share her life from within the frames, while her son was tucked away in a drawer for 36 years. This thought drove me to inquire into my grandmother’s story and her experience with her son’s kidnapping.

Over the course of several meetings in a three-week period, I interviewed Nadia in an unstructured, focused, intimate manner that “[took] place in the largely situational everyday worlds of [her] society” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 709). The interviews were conducted in the vernacular Lebanese dialect of Arabic. I subsequently translated and transcribed her replies into English using a combination of literal and broad translation (Baker, 2006). I gathered and used field texts of different forms (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000): a video recording of the interviews; notes I took in my journal during our exchanges; pictures of my grandmother, of her humble home, of the religious icons heavily scattered around her house, even one of the Virgin Mary attached to her cane, and another on a necklace around her neck. In my analysis of the interviews, I then located and reconstructed representations of past and present observations and experiences that helped fill in some missing details from my own memory of the kidnapping. From my reflections and gathered field texts, and in the tradition of feminist research, I positioned and placed myself within the text to construct a narrative understanding

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<sup>1</sup> During the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990, 17,000 people were kidnapped or disappeared (Act for the Disappeared, 2012).

of Nadia's experience (Pavlenko, 2002; Davies & Harré, 1990). As such, this narrative interview became "both the tool and the object" of my research (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 361). In what follows, I aim to uncover an aspect of my family's oral history through a series of narrative interviews with my grandmother, which I conducted and subsequently translated. Second, I negotiate my role before and after the interviews and while the writing and translation was taking place. Using a reflexive, deconstructionist narrative approach, I look at the effect of my uncle's kidnapping on my grandmother's life, and critically examine my own place as narrative researcher and interpreter. Such a deconstructive approach explores tensions, contradictions, and diversities; it is a "self-revising, self-questioning mode of openness to the 'other'" (Caputo, 1977, p. 73); it is about breaking down and unraveling established "realities."

Ethical considerations revolved around issues of translation and transparency. With the help of another native Arabic speaker, I endeavored to carefully represent Nadia's words and meanings, mindful of the linguistic variations and nuances. Although I was aware of issues of confidentiality of shared information, our conversations were often interrupted by others, namely her daughters, who took turns visiting and sharing stories they too remembered of the war, their family, and their only brother. The nature of such casual exchanges would not typically require a written approval or waiver from one's grandmother or aunts, especially when the stories they told were part of our shared family history. However, I explained to Nadia the reasons behind the "formality" of my visits, the interviews, the nature of the research I was conducting, and the role that she would play therein. As my research took on a more concrete academic form, I went back to see my grandmother and carefully rearticulated the nature of the final product that was likely to get published. I received her approval in the form of "It's just a story."

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) offer alternative ways of conducting qualitative research, away from formalistic, scientific modes of inquiry, towards one of recognizing, understanding, and using people's experiences for research. They invite researchers to construct experiences narratively, and to represent what happens in the cracks and spaces between stories and experiences. It is within these cracks and spaces that my research rests. This narrative approach is a method of observing, interpreting, analyzing, and interacting with an experience or a body of data. It is an attempt to make sense of ruptures in the normal course of a life; to make sense of the unexpected, the incoherent, and the ignored:

“Narratives . . . draw on taken-for-granted discourses and values circulating in a particular culture” (Riessman, 2008, p. 3). The particular culture in question is Lebanese, and translation of the culture and the Arabic language played a central role in my inquiry. Slavova and Phoenix (2011) stated that “translation is the movement of selves in/through language to other places, cultures, selves and positions” (p. 331). Textual and linguistic translation has given way and evolved into social and cultural translation in fields such as women’s studies, anthropology, cultural studies, and many more. In multicultural and multilingual settings, the culture has to be translated, interpreted, and dealt with, not only the language (Filep, 2009). Hoffman (1989) was able to do so by translating her sense of self through her stories and experiences emigrating from Poland to Canada. Similarly, through gathered essays, De Courtivron (2003) addressed bilingualism in the context of writing and living in two different countries and languages. Spivak (2000) insisted that translation is politically motivated and thus allows us to understand ourselves as well as others. In so doing, and with an awareness of one’s positioning within given research, we are better able to construct genuine meaning and divulge new discoveries.

“What’s for lunch today, *teta*?” [Term of endearment for “grandmother” in colloquial Lebanese Arabic.]

*“Eggplants with meat and tomato sauce on a bed of rice.”*

A few minutes later, “It’s absolutely delicious.”

*“It’s all in choosing the right eggplant, *teta* [Elders often use their own title when addressing the young]. Always make sure the stem is green; brown won’t do. It only means it’s been at the grocer too long.”*

“*Teta*, what year did you marry *geddo*?” [Term of endearment for “grandfather.”]

*“I don’t remember. I know I was 23. He had 7 liras in his pocket [\$2] when we got married. He worked as a carpenter for the French army at the time. [Without pausing.] And if you’re choosing the long and narrow-shaped eggplant, the bottom should*

*not be pointy—never pick the pointy eggplants. Go for the long ones, but with the rounded bottom. You understand?”*

“Yes teta, I understand. So tell me the order of your seven children. Who came first?”

*“Well, there was Nina...Norma...then E...[Mumbling—she did not pronounce his name, “Ernest.”] then Amale...Nawal...Noha and Hoda. [Again without pausing, she continued.] The big eggplants cannot be hard – stay away from those. It only means there are too many seeds inside and they’re usually bitter. The big eggplants should be neither too hard nor too soft—just perfectly ripe. That way you’re certain there will be no big seeds inside.”*

Since his disappearance, pronouncing Ernest’s name has, in many unarticulated ways, been prohibited in the family. There was never a casual mention of his name for fear of bringing on unwanted memories and tears. Over the years, I have heard very few stories about him, mostly in response to the few questions I dared ask about the kidnapping. His parents and sisters seem to have forced him out of their consciousness as a way to deal with their loss. Sadly, my cousins, siblings, and I diligently stuck to that tradition. His was never a household name. On that “Black Saturday,” his name was also kidnapped from the lips of his own family.

“Did khalo [Term of endearment for “uncle”] get any special treatment from geddo?”

*“Well, your grandfather always wanted him to help out in the carpentry shop, but your uncle refused. That was a strong source of friction between them. Have a peach, teta.”*

[I reach out and grab one.]

*“No, not this one.”* [Seemingly disappointed in my choice, she takes it from me and puts it back in the fruit bowl.] *“Let’s see...”* [She turns a few peaches over, examining each one carefully.] *“Try this one here...yes, this one’s good.”*

She handed me a peach that did not look appetizing at all, just delivered from the small grocery store nearby. It was slightly indented, its color was a pale, unappealing yellow, and it had no sign of ripeness. But to make her happy, I took it from her and tasted it. I never really enjoyed peaches. In those meticulously organized baskets at the supermarket, I carefully, almost diligently, went for the most flawless looking peach; a perfect peach, I always thought. Sitting with my grandmother in her living room that day, struggling to discuss loss and kidnapping, I learned how to choose my peaches. I also wondered: how was I to incorporate such a conversation into my research, and how was I to translate such rituals into a language and a culture that is so different than the language of my research? Douglas and Moustakas (1985) maintain that for creative interviewing to take place, we must forget the “how to” rules, and be able to adapt to challenging situations.

The custom of food sharing and offering dates back to biblical times in our part of the world. Typical of any Lebanese gathering, our visits revolved around food; from the sweets I brought with me to her house, to the meals she carefully planned to feed me, and the snacks readily available for the expected and unexpected guests. Food dominated our conversations and often got in the way of my interviewing. In addition to getting lessons on picking eggplants, I also learned how to choose peaches and how to smell a good plum. She fed me raw almonds as we conversed, cleaned out fish bones for me at the lunch table, and enthusiastically dictated recipes of every dish we had together during those few days. As intent as I was on dismissing chats about food, I needed to remind myself that this was the expected custom. Our conversations were also interrupted by the loud noise of the meat grinder from the kitchen, and by passing cars in the neighborhood as her front door remained securely opened. There were the usual visits by her daughters, and the occasional visits by my cousins and their children, and by neighbors who came in unannounced for coffee or to drop off a new dish to share with Nadia. I also got to meet an old cousin of hers on his way to Beirut and the young boy delivering groceries. Looking back, whether or not I was cognizant of it, I was also playing a role at Nadia’s house. Part of the ritual was that in return for my visit to her house, I had a gentle obligation to eat her food and accept her generosity. My physical presence provided a sense of pride for Nadia, not only because of my rare visits, but also because it gave her something new to share with her friends, neighbors, and family. I accepted this unspoken bargain.

### Translation of Language, Culture and Self

Translation carries the risk of ambiguities, of being faced with statements and gestures that often carry different meanings and multiple readings. Using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative approach, I negotiated the complexities I faced in my inquiry, and while "in the midst" of my grandmother's story. These complexities revolved around the translation of both the language and the culture, and issues regarding my own expectations and place in the interviews. How was I to translate the place of verbal and non-verbal messages and gestures into another language? How was I to interpret them, especially when they often spoke louder than words? Temple and Young (2004) point out that "communication across languages involves more than just a literal transfer of information" (p. 4). Though I am fluent in Arabic, I struggled in translating some of my questions and expressions verbatim from English while in the midst of our conversations. This is expected when we remind ourselves that phrases and words in one language often do not exist in another. Such a handicap surfaces most often during unstructured interviewing. For instance, I was caught off guard while trying to probe my grandmother with questions such as: "What did that mean to you?" and "How did that make you feel?" I wanted to encourage her in a supportive manner to speak up, but there is no equivalent to these expressions in Arabic—at least not in the fluidity and ease with which we say them in English during empathetic conversations. After some deliberation, I understood that such expressions are unusual in that part of the world. Though Arab society is rich in networks of family and friends, there is something to be said about the want of depth in our daily interactions with others in these networks. We seem to provide the physical presence needed during sickness or loss; there are always many shoulders to lean on, as our homes get filled with family and friends, especially during mourning or difficult times. But effectively, how many of those visitors does one truly rely on to analyze, extract, and "talk the crap" out of a difficult personal experience? A more common Arab approach is to "let it go," "move on," and believe that "it is predestined."

However, as I reflect on my western approach to probing Nadia to "dig deep within" and "let it all out," I wonder about the value of the Arab traditional method of "letting it go," and to what extent my grandmother's healing might have been due to this approach. It seemed to me that she had benefitted from "moving on" and not dwelling on her loss. Maybe, at some level, it was time I acknowledged the effectiveness



of this method and the role that this cultural attribute had played in allowing Nadia to deal with her pain. I wondered about the extent to which my “research is imbued with western assumptions about self and identity” (Chase, 2005, p. 670). Was I being disloyal to my ethnic culture by being so critical? Has my embrace of the Anglo-American culture turned me into a patronizing outsider? From which position was I listening to her? An American or a Lebanese? Which position am I now writing from? To which culture do I owe allegiance? Which continent is home to my pen, to my thoughts? I may have, as Spivak (2000) pointed out, attended to translation from within my own western lens, my own biculturalism, subjectivities, and expectations. As I sat near Nadia, questioning her with a pen, paper, and a camera pointed at her, I had briefly become a stranger, probing into her life and history. The distance between us on her small sofa had translated into a larger distance due possibly to the generational difference, but also to the fact that I had emigrated from Lebanon more than three decades earlier. I wondered if there was a distance of cultures, of education, of lifestyle, of expectations, of priorities, that got in the way of openness on my part.

De Courtivron (2003) highlights the challenges that a bilingual writer faces in living with and writing in two languages. I wondered if I had “lost” part of my grandmother’s past in the translation, and if I had managed to genuinely represent who she was in my translation of her words and her life (Hoffman 1989). And in translating the culture, was I at some level guilty of translating my self? Was I the one who was lost? Were my struggles in translating my grandmother’s story in fact about me as much as they were about her? My views, perceptions, and expectations of my grandmother and her story were marred by the person I had become. And “who I had become” was now tied to my grandmother’s narrative: “in trying to understand the ‘other’ we learn about (our) ‘selves’” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 714).

I continue the conversation with my grandmother, intent on not sidetracking.

“Who was khalo with when he got kidnapped?”

*“His friend who also got kidnapped was a handsome young man. He was a newlywed, and had a four-month old son. He was bringing him milk that day in the car.”*

“How did you find out what happened?”

*“We knew the details immediately. We tried everything... we tried everything. We spoke with the President and with ministers. There was a nurse they knew at the hospital that was near the roadblock where it happened in West Beirut.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“You know, she saw them...she saw them, when they got stopped and put on the wall 4 or 5 of them. They gunned them all down One of them only got shot in his waist and the others were... [Nodding her head in regret.] They took them in the Red Crescent ambulance.”*

“So they shot them and left them there? Only one survived? He didn’t get killed?”

*“Yes, only one of them made it but got injured. The others I don’t know. He didn’t get shot [referring to Ernest]. That’s what the nurse said. She knew them.” [Indecipherable prayer and a slow swaying of her body.]*

### **Power Relations and Multiple Accounts**

Speedy (2008) invites outsider witnesses to “notice what struck a chord . . . and what expressions and images from the story resonate with events or images from their own life” (p. 106). Listening to the story of my uncle being gunned down brought to mind a similar atrocity that took place a few months after his disappearance. It happened a short distance away from our apartment building, this time by militia from the opposing faction of society. We woke up to the sound of gunfire at 2:00 am. Had my brother and I been allowed to join my parents on the balcony, we would have seen that a number of men had been placed on a wall and executed with their hands tied behind their backs. The next morning, local authorities dug up the ground where the executed men lay and buried them. The conversation with my grandmother both reawakened and

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<sup>2</sup> During the Lebanese civil war, Beirut was divided between the predominantly Muslim/Palestinian controlled “West Beirut” and the Christian inhabited “East Beirut.” These sectarian designations are remnants of the war that continue to be used today in many circles.

cemented that childhood memory. I would imagine that after seeing this massacre befall the other faction of society, my parents should have envisioned the fate of my uncle. Once again, I did not share this memory with Nadia, nor did I question her belief that her son could have survived the shooting. I understood her desperate need to live in denial. My power in this “conversation” was once again surfacing. Briggs (2003) reminds me, however, that “the power relations that emerge in interviews are embedded in the data they produce” and that such “discursive mediation should not be viewed as a source of contamination but rather as a crucial source of insights into both interviewing processes and the social worlds they seek to document” (p. 244).

The nature of the relationship between researcher and participant can take on many forms. Feminist research rests on the ethics of care, respect, and equality between researcher and researched. Stressing the value of asymmetry in such interview relationships, Young (1997) and Atkinson and Silverman (1997) found that the blurring of power made for more interesting inquiry. By their standards, my approach in the inquiry and my use of power were becoming extremely “blurry,” though I could not help but feel shame at my method. In addition to the power and exclusivity I had in translating her words, as well as the power to shape the reader’s opinion and decide what to reveal, I was also able to manipulate the actual conversation with my grandmother and its ensuing outcome. For the power hungry, interviewing presents many opportunities.

My control over the interview was evident in the above exchange. My grandmother sounded confident and certain of the information she received about the details of the kidnapping. There was no room or reason for me to question her story. Any doubt, even in her mind, has washed away after all those years. She told the story convinced of the truth of the matter and its indisputability, and I knew I was not there to get to the “truth” of my uncle’s story, but wanted simply to understand how my grandmother had handled the news and dealt with her pain. Throughout the years, however, I heard many versions of the outcome of my uncle’s kidnapping, as recounted convincingly by every member of our rather large family. Some have said Ernest was taken to a Syrian jail, while others were convinced he was in a Palestinian camp. Some were told that his remains were at the bottom of the sea, while others claimed he might have lost his memory and is living with a new identity. The more “pessimistic” ones at the time of the kidnapping believed he died on the spot. Some of my aunts are quietly still waiting; others have long given

up hope. I wonder though, how many of these versions of the story the family has shared with Nadia. Lebanese tradition rests on the idea of not telling someone the hard truth if they need not know it. Family members will often decide the nature and extent of unfortunate information that needs to be disclosed to a person involved. For instance, if an elderly though conscious person is diagnosed with a serious or terminal illness, the family will decide whether or not to inform the patient of the news, and how much of the “truth” to disclose. With this tradition in mind, I could not be transparent with Nadia and tell her what I too had heard. So I partook in the lie, the hiding, the “cover-up,” for fear of upsetting her or planting an unnecessary seed in her seemingly rested mind. Having internalized this cultural trait, I kept silent in my conversation with Nadia.

Riessman (2008) cautions not to expect to find the narrative in an interview, but to actively co-create it with the interviewee (p. 41). An active participant is to engage in reflection, acknowledge one’s place in the conversation, and reflect on the negotiated nature of the interview (Fontana, 2003, p. 58). In retrospect, I wondered if I had been able to play this role and become an active participant in the conversation; whether I was able to reveal parts of my own self, perceptions, and place both within the interview and in my relationship with my grandmother. My “asymmetrical reciprocity” (Young, 1997) revolved around the fact that the exchange with my grandmother did not represent an authentic conversation, as I had hoped. Candid conversation entails interchangeably exchanging ideas and thoughts; it is when the interviewee also shares in asking the researcher questions, and where opinion is exchanged. For instance, I did not, though I could have, shared my own memories with Nadia about my uncle, memories shaped from rare pictures I had seen of him. I could have shared with her what hearsay I had gathered since I was six years old about the details of the kidnapping when it happened. But I did not. I had started to partake in the cover-up at a young age.

“Did you ever dream of him?”

*“Yes of course. The first day it happened. I dreamt of him the minute my eyes finally closed. I saw him as a small child wearing a wide ribbon across his shoulder [a sash] with no clothes on. He was dressed this way and naked. [She seemed somehow excited, physically recounting his appearance, helping me visualize what she saw in her dream.] He stood by me. He stood by me but I couldn’t grab him or hold him. [She swiftly hugged*

the air in front of her to describe how she tried to hold him.] *I can't remember. But he stood by me, yes, he knelt by me, with the ribbon across his shoulder.*"

"Do you think he was saying good bye? Is this before you knew all the details?" [I later regretted speaking so fast. She was quiet for a few seconds, remembering.]

*"Yes. He knelt by me, dressed this way. That was the first night."*  
[She was quiet again for some time. I learned to wait for the answer. Then she spoke again more softly.] *"I thought he wanted to apologize to me because I told him not to go and to be careful"*  
[Her voice thinned out in a slightly higher tone.] *"He was kneeling this way to apologize and say 'you were right.' I don't know."* [Indiscriminate prayer. Then quiet again.]

"If he could see you right now and tell you something. What would it be?"

*"Now? What would he want to tell me?"* [Pondering the question for some time.] *I'll tell you what he would say: 'You were right to always be paranoid.' And then he will say: 'It's my father's fault.'"*

"Why would he say that?"

*"It's his father's fault."* [Nodding in agreement with her own statement.] *If he had been giving him an allowance, he would not have gone to that part of town for work."*

[She was blaming my grandfather, and I did not/could not delve into that issue. I was too focused on how she felt about her son. After some time, I asked:] "Do you still dream of him?"

*"About twice a month now. I always tell him 'Where are you going? Don't leave.' Here, try this plum now."*

"I'm too full teta. I can't take another bite."

But as any good Lebanese woman, she insisted and ignored her guest's refusal. She carefully went through the fruit bowl, turned a few plums over, found the right one and handed it to me. Again, it was a perfectly imperfect plum.

It was overwhelming to imagine that my grandmother spent all those years reliving the kidnapping in her mind. In retrospect, a common expression from Nadia that often came at the end of any short or long visit by her daughters was: "Where are you going? Don't leave." We joked around that she was sometimes needy or demanding. But what we didn't know was that for years, she had been repeating those same words to her son in her dreams, and perhaps feared to also lose her daughters on any given day.

Speedy (2005) presented a non-normative approach to dealing with mourning. By borrowing other people's voices, Speedy articulated her own feelings associated with the loss of a loved one. She dealt with her pain by standing in the shoes of the one who had passed. For days, I reflected on my approach in the interviews. How was I to help my grandmother address her pain? Did I not know the right buttons to press or the right questions to ask? I had expected the interviews to achieve, among other things, therapeutic results (Speedy, 2008). I had in mind a powerful documentary of a Palestinian mother who tearfully spoke of her kidnapped sons during the same "Black Saturday" in 1976 when Christian and Palestinian militias competed in committing atrocities against each other. I imagined that Nadia would get to consider her own personal mourning, reflect on her experience, voice it, and finally achieve closure with her loss, which I was certain did not exist. I imagined I could help her reach "the interiority of [her] self" (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997, p. 314) and see her tear up like the Palestinian woman. But none of this happened. My grandmother was controlled, relaxed, remembering and articulating maturely every detail. She did not cry, she did not ask me to stop, and she did not curse the perpetrators. Her angelic smile was imprinted on her face as she embodied forgiveness. I soon found myself torn between two sentiments: on the one hand, I was content with the realization that my grandmother seemed to have reached some sort of closure with her son's loss, not needing me to "rescue" her from what I imagined to be her silent, internal suffering. But on the other hand, I was disappointed by not getting the "juicy" ending I had anticipated. I slowly came to realize that my expectations of the interview were naïve. I had already visualized our conversation, imagined her answers, her tears, and her gratefulness for the opportunity to finally "let it all out." I had

conceptualized the end product, and assumed it was going to be a matter of time before Nadia told me her story . . . exactly the way I wanted to hear it.

What I did get from the interviews, however, was something unexpected. It happened on the last scheduled day of interviewing, when I turned off the camera and we went into my grandmother's bedroom for her afternoon nap. While lying beside her, we chatted casually, waiting for her to fall asleep. And right there, within talk of family relationships and marriages, she said:

*"No one . . . no one I know has suffered more in their lifetime than I have suffered with your grandfather."*

For a few moments, I was speechless. It dawned on me that all the hours of interviewing had been wasted. I was addressing the wrong issue from the start. The doorbell rang; we were interrupted. It was time I drove back home.

Mazzei (2004) "heard" silences in her research conversations with and about the identities of white teachers in an urban environment. These silences were "present both in the absence of speech and in speech acts," and disrupted the "tranquil assurances of the spoken word" (p. 26). The silences in my interviews revolved around Nadia's suffering with my grandfather. She avoided the subject of her husband with her silent gestures and dismissals. I had not succeeded in addressing or translating those silences: "nonverbal communication both informs and sets the tone for the interview . . . looks, body postures, long silences" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 371). I thought of these silences on my long rides back to Beirut; I saw them while reviewing the video recordings. They were all related to questions about my grandfather. I wondered how to translate her body language when she gave that split-second, seemingly bored expression, twitching her cheek to one side, eyelids slowly blinking, as if to say "it's not important" or "forget it." Looking back at the video recordings, I knew what that expression meant instinctively—it was part of our "let it go" and "don't go there" mentality. I ignored those silent messages, however, because I was busy assessing how to get to the essence of my intended focus, anxious to arrive at the ending I expected. In retrospect, no matter how well intentioned we may be, interviews will never produce the desired results if the story itself did not already exist within the participant. I needed to listen "to the silences and take seriously their promise" (Mazzei, 2004, p. 28). I realize now that just as I

chose my fruits based on outward perfection, I was looking for the outward romantic closure to my grandmother's experience with her son's kidnapping. And just as with choosing my fruits, I needed to see beyond the outward and the obvious. My grandmother seemed to have made her peace with her son's kidnapping, but had suffered much longer with her husband.

### **Limitations and Revelations**

In this narrative inquiry, I set out in search of a particular story, but stumbled upon another that was entirely different but equally informative. Given that narrative research is "retrospective meaning-making," I reflected on whether I succeed in "shaping or ordering of past experience" in a way that communicated my grandmother's story and made it worth telling (Chase, 2005, p. 656). On the one hand, this narrative reflective account offered a glimpse into the limitations and challenges of interviewing and of translation. Looking back at the interviews with Nadia, I did not hear the silences; I imagined myself to be an "active participant"; I was quick to speak my mind; I had pre-conceived expectations; I could have/should have gone back for more interviews to address her gestures and silences; I could have better chosen the camera and had more clarity in the recording of sound and volume; I felt handicapped in asking some questions, and was uncomfortable with my power in translating her words and ideas. But more importantly, during the interviews and afterwards, I did not address Nadia's 58-year struggle with my grandfather. All of these missteps exposed the limitations of my narrative interview and the long road that lay ahead before I could claim proficiency. I wondered if I "let down" Derrida because I had presented my own "vulnerabilities." But such is the nature of a deconstructive approach to research.

However, there is undoubtedly a more constructive perspective when looking at oral family histories, particularly one where the research exceeds expectations. Irrespective of how much a researcher might scrutinize, analyze, regret, and reflect on the approach in data gathering, the end result is undoubtedly rich in information and history that on the one hand grounds the researcher with a more profound view of his or her family history, but also enriches the reader with a wider interpretation of other cultures, languages, and traditions: "Stories are social artifacts, telling us as much about society as they do about a person or group" (Riessman, 2008, p. 105). Though on the one hand I was disappointed to



find my interviews laden with limitations, some of what I did find out was this: that by tragic coincidence, Ernest was named after his own uncle who had also died unexpectedly in an accident at the same ripe age of 23. I found out that the first egg laid by the chicken in the backyard always went to my uncle and not to any of his six sisters. I found out that every time a daughter was born, the family panicked over who would give their father the “bad” news. I found out that my uncle was the only child to attend the elitist Choueifat School, while his sisters attended the local, second-rate parochial school. I saw, as if for the first time, all the icons spread around her house, and understood the extent to which religion might have helped my grandmother come to terms with her loss. For whatever they’re worth, such details spoke to me louder than what I had been there to investigate. But the most telling of all was that my grandmother never ceased to relive her son’s kidnapping in her mind, asking him not to leave her that day. And even after 37 years, my grandmother was still unable to pronounce her son’s name.

Teta Nadia passed away during the publication process of this research. I regretfully did not make the time to continue our conversation during the past year. Addressing her family and friends during the funeral service, the parish priest said that a mother dies for the first time on the day of her son’s kidnapping, and spends her life waiting for her actual burial. Whether or not my grandmother made peace with her loss, whether or not she forgave the kidnappers or forgave her husband, teta Nadia’s gentle smile was a remarkable disguise of her resilience in the arduous life she led.

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