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Writing the Smaller Stories: Research practices in family history writing

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The multiple compilations and presentations of the oral narrative histories, literacy artifacts, and other family history artifacts represented in this collection honor the man I remember as Grandpa Alonzo. The first presentation of interviews and archival research was gathered into a single chronologically living sketch to clarify the events of Alonzo's life. A more in-depth and ethnographic collection of stories, photos, histories, and interviews were collected over the summer of 2014, which were presented as a thirty-one minute documentary-style compilation situated within the broader spectrum of American history.

Taken together, the written project, research seminar paper, and multi-mediated presentations represent the smaller stories that may be displaced in the construction of American historical memory. My research with Grandpa Alonzo is more than mere "genealogy," but entails a mixed-method approach to family history writing that is rich, vibrant, and significant to the binding of family communities.

As a developing field within composition and literacy studies, family history writing has been marginalized within the academic research community as merely "genealogical." The work of this study is to establish a grounded methodology and exhibit the various methods through which continued family history writing will have an ongoing contextualized position within academic discourse.

Methodological frameworks were based in the work of Thomas J. Schlereth and Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberger-Halton within material culture studies to "get into the minds of the makers of artifacts." It is in the mind and heart that the family history writer wishes to go, not just to dwell in, on, or around objects made by the people whom we care about or care to know more of, but to represent the community that surrounds and supports individual stories. Family history writing is about the "living representation of the deceased" and how our writing contributes to the history and perception of families.

Research methods used within family history writing are varied and suited to not only the purpose of the writing being produced, but to carefully negotiate family values and sensibilities. Therefore, all methods employed must first consider the delicate and integrated subjectivity of the researcher. A family history writer is more than a participant observer - they must function as a member of the family either literally or metaphorically to respect the intricate nuances of values, beliefs, and feelings within the family community.

Three major writing projects were a result of this year-long research. Although the subject of research did not change throughout the study, each representation of the research built upon the insights and reflections of the previous. The first "Living Sketch" necessarily created a companion text created primarily through narrative reflection of the movements within the family community as more literacy was introduced into the collective belief system. The "Sketching Live" essay explored a oft neglected aspect of family history writing - changes within the literacy beliefs and values of a family.

On July 24th, the "Living Sketch" necessarily changed to a "Life Sketch" to re-vision the life of Alonzo for his community remembrance. The "Life Sketch" incorporated not only the oral histories and archival research of the first project, but was supplemented by ethnographic research and personal interviews held with Alonzo prior to his passing.

A final multimedia presentation was created as a culmination of research, practice, and theory within family history writing. This final format expands and explores how family history writing can be developed for specific rhetorical purposes.