

PROMISE ME

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Abstract

Promise Me (2020) is a 24-minute dramatic film inspired by true events that occurred while I was directing *The Women I Have Become* (Duke, 2007). *The Woman I Have Become* (TWIB) is a documentary about eight African, Caribbean and Black Canadian women living with HIV in Toronto, Canada. My new work essentially is a fictionalized treatment of one woman's interactions with the child welfare and education system. In this fictional film, the main protagonist Charlie Thomas (15) is facing the reality that her mother Yolanda Thomas (40) is dying from complications of living with HIV, and can no longer parent as she has before. Out of loyalty, Charlie insists on being her mother's caregiver until the very end. Though her actions may cause child welfare and the school board to tear their family apart, she feels she has no choice, knowing that she may have to live with a decision that's outside of her control. The film culminates with the apprehension of Charlie for missing too much school due to supporting her mother at home.

Poetic flashbacks of Yolanda's life in better days, scattered throughout the film, remind the viewer that she is so much more than her illness. The intersectionality of various social issues such as race, gender, poverty, motherhood and HIV/AIDS status, and their resulting oppressions, are contrasted against the truth that her Black life was also filled with so much joy, beauty and hope. The result is a social commentary on numerous Canadian institutions, specifically the health, education and child welfare systems. In addition, this support paper documents how my long artistic practice of making social justice documentaries has now evolved into the genre of new neorealist fiction.

Dedication

This project is dedicated to Rhonda and to my ancestors.

Acknowledgements

I am eternally appreciative of my thesis advisor John Greyson for his continued guidance. Prof. Greyson's significant body of work in the area of HIV/AIDS and his knowledge and execution of various dramatic genres supported my venture into neorealist HIV cinema.

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Chapter One: Introduction

I describe myself as a Black queer filmmaker activist, which means I use filmmaking, which is my art, as a form of activism (Sandoval and Latorre, 2007). *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop* author M. K. Asante provides more context for Black activists when he writes that:

“An activist uses her artistic talents to fight and struggle against injustice and oppression—by any medium necessary. The activist merges commitment to freedom and justice with the pen, the lens, the brush, the voice, the body, and the imagination. The activist knows that to make an observation is to have an obligation. (203)”

My artistic practice as a filmmaker exercises an interdisciplinary approach that melds practical and theoretical documentary storytelling methodology with social justice practices. My creative works are also informed by my lived experiences of being a queer cis-woman who grew up in government housing, sought an education in the health sciences, and became both an elite athlete and a writer of critical essays and poetry. I engaged in community building exercises that included mentoring young artists and connecting with Black community elders (all activists) while being grounded. All of this informs how I produce work that speaks to what it means to be a Black person living in Canada. I investigate this topic vigorously, using the gaze of all these experiences, but most importantly as a Black artist.

Up until now, my films have never been about me, or directly concerned my life. They may contain metaphors that speak to my life, but I avoid discussing my life in movies altogether. It would seem monotonous for me. The formulation of new works serves to expand my knowledge on issues and therefore my ability to communicate the details more robustly. Writer/performance artist/queer activists John Arsenault (2019) suggests that my documentary

filmmaking practice embraces a negative capability aesthetic which is a concept derived from theatre and poetry criticism to describe a creators' capacity for disappearing into their work.

This theory was first established by poet John Keats who was a fan of Shakespeare and his style of writing a story from a state of openness with various perspectives and points of view (Dhiffaf, 2011). I perceive that this may be the case in documentaries where I attempt to unpack the pervasiveness of systemic oppression in our society by incorporating conflicting voices and arguments to recreate tensions mimicking the typical confusion and uncertainties experienced in that very issue.

However, it's not exactly clear how this practice translates in *Promise Me*, a neorealist fiction inspired by true events I observed when producing and directing *The Women I Have Become* (2007). *The Women I Have Become* (TWIB) is a 43-minute social justice documentary commissioned by Women's Health in Women's Hands Community Health Center (WHIWH-CHC)¹ and several AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs) to raise awareness about the stigma and discrimination African, Caribbean and Black (ACB) women living with HIV face in Canada as they navigate health care systems.

Unfortunately, during the production, one of the featured eight women endured the apprehension of her children by an Ontario-based child welfare agency. She was considerably ill at the time and passed away soon after. A week before the premiere of TWIB, the very same

¹ Women's Health in Women's Hands-CHC is a community health centre that provides primary healthcare to racialized women from the African, Black, Caribbean, Latin American and South Asian communities in Toronto and surrounding municipalities.

child welfare agency censored the film, forcing the removal of any references to the apprehension of Rhonda's children as well as more intimate scenes. This significantly altered the tone of the film, obscuring the horror of what happened as well as the joy and love they showed for each other.



Image 1. *Promise Me*, Poster. Photo credit: Yvano Wickham-Edwards

The outcome of this ill-fated event is *Promise Me*. *Promise Me* is genuinely inspired by the censored content. It serves as a commentary on how Black women's stories are missing on the issue of HIV/AIDS despite the 30th anniversary of the appearance of this illness. *Promise Me* is also indirectly inspired by separate documentaries and videos I've produced about the issue, as well as my experience as a Black queer feminist activist living in Canada. More importantly, it is motivated by the question: what kind of dramatic film does someone with my background and experience with HIV/AIDS documentaries make today? This paper will explore in detail how an interdisciplinary artistic practice which includes negative capability

documentary filmmaking, lived experiences and learned social justice theoretical frameworks aligns with new neorealist film theory to produce a unique gaze into the experience of Black women living with HIV in Canada. This exploration is definitely a journey of discovery and reflection that will no doubt continue on for the many years as I continue pursuing perfection in my artistic practice.

For this paper, I will be applying the terms, African, Caribbean, Black (ACB) and African Canadian interchangeably as well as the terms social justice and social issue(s).

Chapter Two: Development of the Story

In terms of film production, *Promise Me* culminates what Jordan Arsenault (2018) calls my “triptych on HIV and AIDS in Canada that constitutes crucial viewing for activists, policy-makers, health practitioners, and legal advocates working on the topic.” I have helmed numerous documentaries about women living with HIV, HIV non-disclosure, criminalization and the law. In order of occurrence, my first was *The Women I Have Become* (2007), then *Positive Women: exposing injustice* (2012) and most recently I produced *Consent* (2014). I have also made a myriad of community-based PSAs and television documentaries about the Black experience in Canada and throughout the African Diaspora. The idea for this new work developed after several attempts to produce a fiction film that would build awareness about the challenges of HIV disclosure in the Black community — especially how disclosing one status negatively affects positive women.

Disclosure: A Creative *Prequel* to *Promise Me*

Initially, I attempted to tackle the effects of Canadian HIV non-disclosure on the lives of ACB women through a short hybrid-fiction entitled *Disclosure*. Hybrid fiction is essentially a cross-pollination of genres. In this instance, I was interested in blending elements of drama and documentary. I’ve identified several causes for this new direction.

First of all, I believed that my earlier documentaries about disclosure had failed to adequately illustrate this difficult process, and I wanted to accomplish this by painting a picture of HIV disclosure as a highly reasoned process where people weigh the costs and rewards. The

process is so intimately and morally charged that a documentary format is at a disadvantage. Filming someone in a verité or observational doc style while they are disclosing their status in real-time is impossible without transgressing ethical, emotional and legal issues. Compound that with the draconian Canadian HIV non-disclosure laws that potentially led to an aggravated sexual assault charge (a federal offence) severely complicate the option of making a documentary. On the other hand, a hybrid fiction approach, blending the genres of documentary and fiction with other creative elements, has the potential to address different aspects of the dilemma.



Image 2. *Disclosure*, Raven Dundas, Photo credit. Alison Duke

Secondly, women have unique barriers to disclosing their HIV status to lovers, family, friends, the employers and the world, and this is especially true for racialized women. I would say it shares intersecting oppressions with the issues taken up by such new online social movements like #metoo, #BLM, and #gender-fluidity, #sexuality, significantly complicating this task.

Logie, James, Tharao, Loutfy (2011) suggested that HIV-positive women feel like they are experiencing overlapping forms of stigma and discrimination such as HIV-related stigma, sexism, racism, and homo/transphobia stigma and discrimination. As a result, disclosure is not a straight line but a winding path. Consequently, my desire to dramatize HIV disclosure was an artistic strategy to deal with the complexities of how one would manage this in today's society.

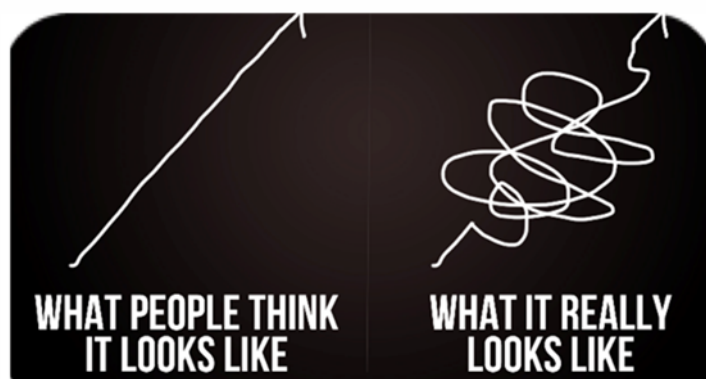


Image 3. Illustration, Notisha Massaquoi, Found Image

Unfortunately, Toronto Public Health doesn't have a disclosure model of best practices that citizens should follow. Their primary work is around testing and surveillance of PHAs. While doing this research, I was cognizant that creating work as an HIV negative person ran the risk of spreading unintentional false narratives. I understood that the stakes were high. People could face criminalization, lose lifelong friendships and support systems, and be prone to poor medical decisions if the messaging in my film about disclosure proved to be misleading. I incorporated elements of *Women's Health in Women's Hands*, CHC's five-step HIV disclosure model that they were developing to address safety issues for ACB women and decrease the risk of stigma and discrimination in the act of disclosing². WHIWH-CHC created this model after

² The realities of Disclosure (2014) Wangari Tharao for The Women's Health in Women's Hands-CHC

accumulating the experiences of over 100 women living with HIV. The purpose of the model was to provide a point of entry into the decision-making process and emotional journey of the person disclosing, in support of women who felt that they were all alone in the process, and also for workers to assist women's choices around disclosing.

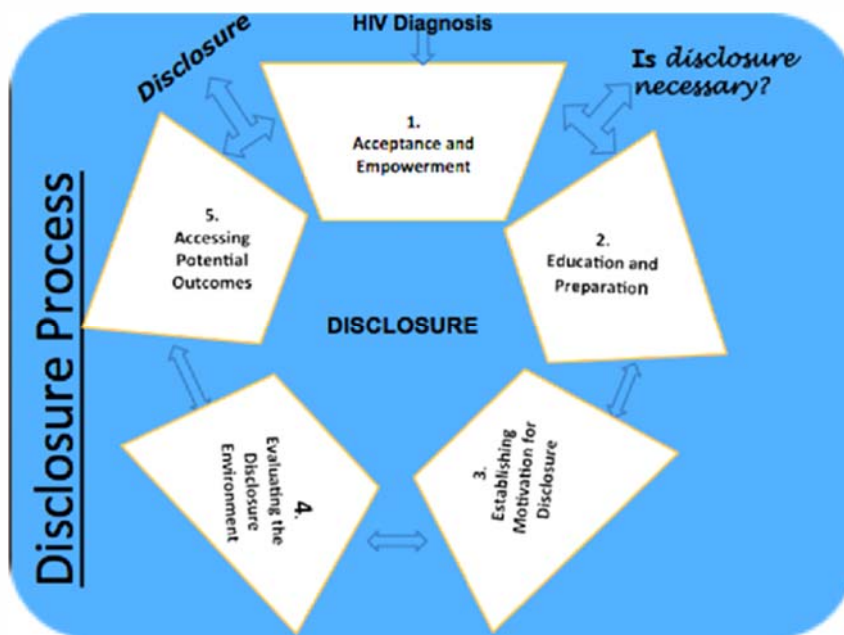


Image 4. Illustration, Courtesy of Women's Health in Women's Hands-CHC

Three fundamental narrative questions emerged from this initial research. What happens when someone doesn't disclose? What transpires when a person doesn't disclose 'the right' way? And, what happens when a person thinks that they can't disclose due to concerns for their safety?

I workshopped various scenarios inspired by these basic questions with a group of four HIV positive women that I recruited through local ASOs. The ASOs were sent a brief that outlined what I was doing, and the themes that I was fleshing out. I mentioned that each would be granted a small honorarium for their participation, and that I would provide bus tokens and

snacks. We had nine submissions. I pre-interviewed the women individually on the phone to discuss any trepidations that they might have and then selected four.

I wanted to include everyone, but coordinating nine people was not possible, as I had limited resources. In the end, three were HIV advocates in the community, who had previous experience speaking to the media about their HIV status. Paulina and Chantel were two of eight women featured in TWIB, and Muluba Habanyama was a journalism student who had recently disclosed her status on YouTube and appeared very comfortable with my videotaping, audio recording and using their names. One woman needed to remain anonymous but agreed to an audio recording. I designated her as Woman 3.



Image 5. *Disclosure*, Conrad Coates (l) and Raven Dundas (r) Frame Grab

We met as a group several times to review my three-story scheme. I invited them to discuss the scenarios and characters. How realistic were the stories? How the characters lived? What did the characters do for a living? I prompted them to role-play these ideas based on their experience living with HIV disclosure. We concluded with each informally presenting their

feedback and comments, concerns about their personal experience. Here is a sample of what was recorded during our sessions;

“I would have two different personas, I would be the life of the party, when people ask me who I was seeing and I would say I’m dating someone and then go home by myself, and live by myself. But people would want to look him up on Facebook...I think they know I’m lying but I have to...It’s hard to keep a secret.”

Chantel, woman living with HIV

“When I disclosed to my dad, it was a point that I thought I wouldn’t make it because I got into an accident and had major surgery. I told him and daddy started crying, he said, ‘Not you, not you,’ and then he told my mom who is a medical professional. A few days later she asked my doctor if she can use the same cup.”

Paulina, woman living with HIV

“I’m dating now. I have a boyfriend... But I used to stop you before you get close to me. Before you hurt me I’m going to hurt you. I’m going to find a fault in you before you have a chance to find a fault in me. Because I know the fault in me and I don’t want to deal with rejection over and over again.”

Woman #3, living with HIV

“I actually found myself in the position that I always wanted to hide this forever. I didn’t want to disclose to anybody and I thought that if I ever did I would be bringing into a lawyers’ office. Like you can’t say this and stuff, you can’t. I never pictured myself like just telling people naturally, telling them wasn’t trusting anyone actually it was actually just a thought in my head....Being in the hospital and kind of like almost actually dying and I think later on this like I need to actually find a way to live with this and to um to deal with my situation, accept my situation...so it came like I love to talk and entertain and educate and then it just became I want to do it that way.”

Muluba, living with HIV

This process of workshopping approaches to HIV disclosure with community members confirmed that the process of HIV disclosure is replete with internal and external conflicts, especially for women. I realized that building motivation for fictional characters to disclose and presenting the sober outcomes of such a declaration could serve as an enlightening resource for the criminal justice system, social workers and the larger community.



Image 6. *Disclosure*, Muluba Habanyama, Photo Credit: Alison Duke

Muluba was so powerful in these conversations that I concocted a plan to include her in the film by having her interview the main actors of the three stories, who were also being played by the same people. The film would then take a hybrid approach where documentary type interviews conducted by Muluba (who was a journalism student in real life) would be interwoven with the three narratives. The cast was Raven Dauda and Conrad Coates to play the different characters in the three scenarios. They were professional actors and ACTRA members, and they also agreed to be interviewed by Muluba about their roles, what they personally thought about the characters and scenarios. We shot the interview in one day at Cinespace Film Studios.

Collectively, they shared personal stories on how they are connected to the issue and themes, and I edited this footage into vignettes. Then, Muluba had a major health set back and was admitted to Casey House³. Her weight dropped to below 45 kg. She was not able to keep food down. Her HIV specialist directed her to stop all extracurricular activities (including being in the film) until they could evaluate what was happening to her body and get her weight up.

³ Established in 1988, Casey House is Canada's first stand-alone hospice for people with HIV/AIDS.

Nevertheless, Muluba's medical scare prompted me to reflect upon the worst-case scenarios for Black women living with HIV/AIDS. I then remembered Rhonda. She was one of eight, Toronto-based, HIV-positive African, Caribbean and Black women who agreed to be in a semi-observational documentary I produced and directed called *The Women I Had Become* (2007). The film intended to highlight the stigma and discrimination experienced in the Canadian health care system and other sectors.

Surviving with HIV for over 15 years, Rhonda was one of the first women of Caribbean descent to publicly disclose her HIV status to the broader Black community in Toronto and become actively involved in advocating for change. She grew into a local hero in the HIV/AIDS community for always being on the front lines, volunteering for HIV ad campaigns and clinical trials. She was a feisty, fun and unforgettable person.

Unfortunately, Rhonda's health had declined considerably over the years and her medical care proved too complicated for her to manage on her own. She relied heavily on family, friends and ASO workers for assistance. During the production of TWIB, her condition worsened and her inability to take care of herself ultimately led to the apprehension of her two children by a child welfare agency in Ontario. Shortly after I wrapped production, Rhonda passed away without seeing her children again.



Image 8. The Women I Have Become - Rhonda after apprehension of children, Frame Grab

The story about the apprehension of Rhonda's children was subsequently censored by the child welfare agency. This was arranged immediately after they were informed by the children about the film launch on World's AIDS Day in 2007. One week before the screening, they sent a letter ordering the production to remove all references to the children, child welfare, and the apprehension (see the letter in Appendix 1)

Rhonda's permission for her children to appear in TWIB was no longer valid due to her death. The child welfare agency commanded that we conceal the identity of her children because they had become crown wards, and the state now the acting legal guardian and decision-maker of the children. As a consequence, I had to blur her children's faces and change the pitch of their voices to conceal their identities. Worse, I had to remove some very candid moments of them with Rhonda that showed their distinct personalities. In the end, I had to delete approximately 17 minutes from the final film. I've been reflecting on this story ever since. By the end of the pre-

development of this thesis project, I concluded that making *Promise Me* would fulfill a longing to acknowledge her life and make it right.

The initial research for *Promise Me* centred on the apprehension of children from an HIV-positive Black mother. This inquiry involved re-watching the published version of TWIB and screening unedited footage that I captured of Rhonda and her children for this film. I also watched other HIV films including the documentaries that I have produced over the years. The discussion guide that was developed and rolled-out for TWIB was a valuable resource as well.

Participating in community consultations for the Ontario Children's AIDS societies report, 'One Vision One Voice,' facilitated by project leader Kike Ojo, was essential to define the narrative arc of a fictional story about child apprehension, and to create convincing characters that could best tell the story about what happens to ACB women living with HIV when they intersect with child welfare systems. These community roundtables held across Ontario were in response to the Toronto Star's 2014 expose by Journalist Jim Rankin,⁴ which highlighted the overrepresentation of Black children in child welfare care. I felt it was necessary for me to actively engage in these community meetings, to assess how significant the topic is and what is currently being done about it.

My secondary research employed a process of co-writing the screenplay with Lindsey Addawoo and workshopping the script with actors, social workers and public-school teachers.

⁴ Jim Rankin report on racism and child welfare was discussed in various Black community newspaper including Pride News: <http://pridenews.ca/2014/12/17/racial-profiling-in-child-welfare/> Magazine

These activities were necessary to produce a story that represents what happens with Black women living with HIV when they intersect with the child welfare system.

Even with this activity and care, I feared that people would not believe the story and/or dismiss it outright as an exaggeration. So we worked hard to ensure that the story was told in an appropriate tone. I was compelled to represent those realities as they existed, to lift the veil of hypocrisy from our institutions and reveal how systemic privilege, power, hegemony and intersecting layers of oppressions continue to (re)stigmatize and (re)discriminate against Black women living with HIV. This meant that I couldn't pull punches, we had to make the audience feel uncomfortable, even to the point where they would question the horror they were seeing.

HIV/AIDS as a Growing Social Issue Among Black Canadian Women

HIV in the Black community has been a growing concern for a while. TWIB was created in response to the rising number of ACB women living with HIV in Toronto, Canada. During 2000-2005, a monthly HIV positive women's group hosted by WHIWH-CHC had increased from a few dozen to 200 members. These meetings, which introduced workshops on personal and professional skills-building, HIV treatment strategy and care and joy provided a safe space for the women to reflect on their unique challenges. A prominent theme that arose out of many issues was how to tackle the stigma and discrimination they faced within the health care system.

Before the production of the TWIB, Women's Health in Women's Hands-CHC produced and disseminated the first evidence-based research study which reflected the reality of Black women living with HIV. Tharao, Massaquoi, & Teclo (2005) in their report, 'Silent Voices of

the HIV/AIDS Epidemic: African and Caribbean Women in Toronto 2002-2004,' noted, that between 2003 and 2005, Black women had the highest new infection rates in Ontario and within the city of Toronto.

The 2016 epistemology of new HIV infections reveals a story where women are becoming more exposed. Women make up approximately 23.4% of the latest reported cases (PHAC, 2018). Furthermore, 78% of new HIV infections among females were attributed to heterosexual sex, versus 22% by injection drug users. New infection rates of Black and Indigenous women are 46% and 31% respectively, while white women make up 14% (Haddad, 2018). Although the quantitative data indicate a sustained overrepresentation, what it doesn't show is how ACB women are treated within health care and other agencies.

A subsequent report by Tharao & Massaquoi (2013) expressed how African and Caribbean women living with HIV/AIDS continued to be dissatisfied and frustrated with service providers and medical health professionals who in their eyes still lacked the necessary training and/or skills to provide proper care, support, and sensitivity to them and their families. These women articulated how they still encountered stigma and discrimination when disclosing their status to health care workers.

At the time of *The Women I Have Become* production, WHIWH-CHC didn't have the evidence-based tools to help address safety issues and mitigate the risk of stigma and discrimination in the act of disclosing (Tharao, 2014). However, TWIB evolved from being a resource to "build awareness" about the prevalence of HIV infection among ACB in Ontario

(and Toronto), into an advocacy tool to fight against stigma, discrimination and other inequities this community of women faced while navigating their health care. This sentiment was expressed by Notisha Massaquoi, the Executive Director of WHIWH-CHC in the TWIB discussion guide, graciously focussing the conversation back onto the Black women living with HIV who were negatively impacted. Massaquoi writes:

“Our communities continue to struggle with misinformation, HIV stigma, social exclusion, and a host of many other factors that leave us, as Black women, in a state of overexposure and vulnerability to this devastating virus. The making of the documentary, “The Woman I have Become,” is our way of speaking to our communities. The strategic goals of WHIWH-CHC are to INCREASE, INNOVATE, and IGNITE. In keeping with these, we aim to increase our awareness of HIV/AIDS, use innovative strategies to accomplish this goal, and we strive to ignite action and mobilize our communities to fight collectively against the spread of HIV/AIDS (3)”

Massaquoi's comments echoed the feelings of the many women featured in TWIB, including an anonymous woman who stated in the film, “It’s not the HIV that kills you, it the stigma.” Unfortunately, she also passed away a few years ago from HIV complications. I cannot state her name in this paper but she was in her early 40s.

Using Documentary Evidence as Source Material and Inspiration

What happened to Rhonda and her family in 2007 has bothered me for the past 12 years. I still think about what happened to her, her daughters and how those intimate family scenes of them together were violently censored by child welfare. I remembered how she invited me over to her house to relay the story of their apprehension as it happened that day. My thoughts are fragmented about it. It feels like I am still in mourning, creatively, both for not being able to legally exhibit or discuss what had transpired, and as an activist, mourning my inability to expose yet another systemic cover-up. Meanwhile, our community members are dying. It

reminded me of the iconic HIV poster Silence=Death⁵, created at the height of the AIDS epidemic by Avram Finkelstein, Brian Howard, Oliver Johnston, Charles Krelloff, Chris Lione and Jorge Socarrás for ACT UP, a slogan that fights back against political micro-aggressions and hypocrisy (Emmerman, 2016).

This state-imposed censorship of TWIB replicated and reinforced the surveillance and micro-aggressions that the family experienced when trying to secure support from the child welfare and the kid's school. Before we were permitted to screen the film to a public audience, we were ordered to show it to a manager. We organized a private screening for her review. While the credits rolled, she wiped tears back and declared, "This is a really important film. I want my workers to see it!" I don't know if her statement – that she perceived the film as an opportunity for enlightening her staff – was intended to make me feel better, because it didn't. The process of apprehending Rhonda's children when she was direly ill and censoring that apprehension from a film that would go on to train her army of child welfare workers seemed disingenuous in so many ways.

⁵The Silence = Death Project slogan drew parallels between the rise of Nazism and the AIDS crisis, declaring that silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, then and now, must be broken as a matter of our survival.



Image 9. *The Women I Have Become* - EMS call for Rhonda - Frame Grab

Creel, Rimal, Mkandawire and Bose (2011) suggested that including people with HIV/AIDS in mass media interventions is shown to reduce stigma. Therefore, censoring the film may have caused additional, if not unnecessary harm to Black women living with HIV. Secondly, apprehending children because they missed a lot of classes while taking care of their mother who is dying is counterproductive to what children should be learning about life. What could be more important than children being with a parent during the last months of their life? Math? English? Geography? It makes no sense. And thirdly, why did child welfare want to use a sanitized version of the film as a training resource for their staff, as opposed to the full-length version?

The degree to which this agency reproduced HIV stigma and discrimination had reached such a toxic level that the censorship of Rhonda's life, even after death, involved preventing her children from attending the screening or receiving copies of the film to watch on their own. I saw the entire affair as a missed opportunity for the agency to show compassion for Black women living with HIV.

The article, 'The Missing 17 Minutes' Duke (2016) was the first time that I publicly confessed to being censored. This situation had almost crushed my creative spirit, and I didn't want to rehash those bitter memories. However, with time and some distance, I gained a novel perspective. Why not make what happened into a film (detached from any organization) that could shine a critical lens on these past events? I made a pact with myself, that if I was going to make this film, I would do my due diligence to make sure that it would be an honest exploration of the facts. I didn't want my bitterness to dominate the premise for a film.

Watching the final *TWIB* film again and going through all of the raw footage of Rhonda and her family captured on mini DV unveiled many useful details (and truths) that I had either forgotten or didn't understand at the time. Eventually, I was able to incorporate some of these observations into this new work -- but that was not without going through a process of sorting out what was necessary to show and what was not. For example, the administration of her prescription medicine was always a strong visual for me. Rhonda was quite frail and had a litany of illness associated with HIV such as a mycobacterium avium complex (M.A.C) which is bacteria found in everyday food, water and soil that affects people with extremely low white blood cell count over a prolonged period. The pills for this were enormous, and the regimen was constant. She was also receiving dialysis treatments three times a week at St. Michael's Hospital (who allowed me to film it) and was in and out of the hospital regularly due to breathing issues. I had to decide which of those medical issues was important to show and what worked the best cinematically. I have italicized some of the specific actions, scenes and dialogue inspired by this process:

Even though I had forgotten about her laboured breathing, I noted it for the new work because it would give Olunike, the actor playing Charlie's mom, something to do and I could add the breathing to the soundscape. I also incorporated the taking of large pills for visual effect.

Further, Rhonda had also suffered from HIV encephalopathy, an infection that spreads throughout the brain also known as "AIDS dementia." AIDS dementia produces deterioration in cognitive functions such as memory, reasoning, judgment, concentration, and problem-solving. She slept a lot in the middle of the day. I thought she was tired, not that her brain was shutting down. We discussed every other aspect of her diagnoses but this never came up and I didn't recognize what it was. This realization came at the end of production. I believe that I was too overwhelmed. This was my first film on the subject matter and it was a challenge to see it all. Now I can see how AIDS dementia displayed itself. For instance, on the day when her children called 911, she could not recall what the EMS workers were asking her to do moment to moment. Another time, she went to the bank and forgot the basic procedures.

I shared this info about AIDS dementia with both Olunike and Breonna and they used it as the context for why they didn't have the typical mother-daughter relationship, and why roles were reversed in their household.

When filming the scene dedicated to Rhonda's issues with her HIV medication, I was astounded by her comprehensive understanding of the negative side effects. She relayed a story about how one drug caused the pigmentation of her skin to darken and how her doctor did not believe her until she brought in a photograph of herself before treatment. I didn't know that Black

women were not included in a lot of the clinical testing of HIV pharmaceuticals. It seemed that the absence of Black women in clinical trials resulted in a lot of unexpected side effects for this population.

I incorporated Rhonda's astute knowledge about side-effects in the dialogue between Yolanda and Maxine and also included a framed photograph of Rhonda in better times, that hung in her home in the epilogue of Promise Me as a tribute to her life before HIV. The difference is striking.

While Rhonda also had the support of local AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs), such as BlackCAP, African Association of People Living with AIDS, Voice of Positive Women and even AIDS Committee of Toronto, (an organization that used to primarily service gay men), her daughters inevitably became an extension of her care, overseeing an extensive medication regimen that included pills, injections and an inhaler for breathing issues. I had captured a lot of this activity in their home. They had an assortment of alarms that buzzed throughout the day, signalling what she needed and when. Being able to comply with this strict administration of drugs largely depended on how she was feeling.

Rhonda's extensive challenges with medication became the central issue for Yolanda in Promise Me.

On non-filming days, Rhonda would summons me to help her with errands. It was not often but I'd take her grocery shopping or to the bank. It was usually eventful, so I brought my camera during these visits. One day Rhonda asked me to drive her to an office building downtown. A social worker from a child welfare agency had called a meeting with her medical support team (including her ASOs) to discuss what was happening in her home. I did not get

permission to attend the actual meeting. However, afterwards, Rhonda provided me with the details. The social worker called the meeting because both of Rhonda's children were missing too many days of school. The worker threatened to remove them from their home if Rhonda didn't take better care of herself, i.e. take her meds more consistently.

Maxine references this meeting during her home visit with Yolanda. But obviously, Yolanda was not able to commit to the instructions. She broke a promise.

The hyper-surveillance of Rhonda's family in real life began when one of her children's teachers confronted them about their continuous truancy. During this process, Rhonda's HIV status was disclosed as a slip when trying to explain. The teacher then thought it was her duty to report Rhonda's HIV status to the principal, who immediately called in a child welfare agency to look at the matter. This led to a social worker from the agency being assigned to their family, and from then on they were under constant monitoring. Rhonda said after this happened that she began to feel marginalized by the school. Even the more likeable teachers started speaking to her in disrespectful tones. They would document her daughters' behaviour more rigorously and request her presence at the school for the most mundane concerns. She felt like they just wanted to stare at her all the time

This experience inspired the scene in Promise Me, with Charlie, her teacher and her principal at school.

Rhonda called me after her children were apprehended by the child welfare agency. She asked me to come over to her house and interview her about what had transpired. She wanted it documented, immediately. Rhonda's girls meant everything to her and they were also her

lifeline. It was a tragic moment in the film. She died shortly after due to the complications of her illness, and news of her death came with an outpouring of support for her children by the ASOs, friends, and HIV community members. Many of us believed that although Rhonda was quite ill, the apprehension of her daughters caused her to pass prematurely.

Yolanda's collapse after Charlie is apprehended is symbolic of Yolanda's untimely death.

Time has a way of making things clear. I now believe that Rhonda agreed to be featured in the documentary to give her daughter some hope. I now know, through my participation in community-based discussions like 'One Vision One Voice,' and interviews with health care advocates for women living with HIV, that the hyper-surveillance of Black women living with HIV by child welfare systems operating in Canada is nothing new, it's quite common. I now know that what the child care agency was doing when they censored my film. Most of what I know now is based on my understanding of oppression.

Since the making of TWIB, I've discovered numerous cases of Black children being removed when there is no threat or harm to life. Those cases, as well as the apprehension of Rhonda's children, became a source of inspiration for the entire film.

I wanted *Promise Me* to symbolically restore the 17 minutes that the child welfare agency required to cut from TWIB. But there was also a process of determining how this new work could be truly impactful. What was I trying to say? What were the social conditions that I was trying to expose and hopefully transform? And what was the tone? Massaquoi (2017) explains

that to be transformative in one's work, you must "rewrite" the traditional approaches so that, "highly charged emotional moments," becomes the spark for analyses, theorizing and practice.

The emotional standoff between Charlie's teacher, Ms. Woods, Principal Walton and child welfare worker Maxine, does more work than narratively led us into a climatic apprehension. It helps us to theorize how these institutions organize themselves with regard to the apprehension of Black children.

The dialogue in this scene reinforces their actions and exposes how inequity and injustice are perpetuated by institutions through people who by "just doing their jobs" are not "doing anything" to support those in need. Even, individuals working in these systems who are conflicted by the rules and may even have solutions to circumvent negative outcomes for Black families, are unable to act. There is no coincidence that this realization in the film happens at the same time we are beginning to sense an inevitable apprehension of Charlie. Ms. Woods, the teacher who represents the conscience of the film, tries to bring some emotional awareness to the situation. "I think you are being too hard on her mother," she says. Maxine, the worker responds, "We are just doing our jobs." Ms. Woods then lays out the entire case, "Her mother is sick! She needs support. You need to get her a nurse." Principal Walton immediately cuts her off, balking, "All right! That's it! I've been doing this long enough to know what real potential looks like!"

This last line from Walton speaks to how identity is used to establish one's worth in society and whether or not that said person with said identity merits assistance. What is the identity that Principal Walton and Maxine are speaking to? Is it because she is Black? HIV positive? A single parent? Living in poverty? What is it? This way of thinking is similar to reports of Black women having longer wait times for medical help when they go to the hospital

because the staff perceive her as having a higher pain threshold. Or when a Black toddler gets suspended from daycare for "fighting" because the worker perceives them as older and more responsible for their actions. When I asked Kike Ojo, the project leader of 'One Vision One Voice,' to describe how Black women living with HIV are treated by child welfare in comparison to a white woman living with HIV, she responded: "White women are offered more supports." Is this because the system doesn't value Black people and (because of this) they behave like Black families don't love their children? After all, how can they love something or someone that has no value?

The idea of having value and being of value is set up in the first scene and used throughout the film to the very end.

When Maxine meets with Yolonda, she rudely asks, "Do you love your daughter?" Then, right before the apprehension, Principal Walton raises the question of value again when he snaps, "I've been doing this long enough to know what real potential looks like!" Questioning Walton's motives, Ms. Woods snaps back, "Looks like?" He continues, "We can't bend the rules for everyone." For him, helping people deemed as having "less potential" is seen as "breaking rules," whereas doing a little extra for those perceived as having "more potential" is seen as a better use of resources. His rationalization confirms an internal bias of the system. Ms. Woods pushes back again: "For a little Black child?" The implication here is that Charlie is not just a Black girl but "little," which subtly diminishes her value in the eyes of the education system.

This confrontation agitates Principal Walton to the point where he declares, "I think that we are done here." As he starts to leave, Maxine walks away too, leaving Ms. Woods by herself

in the hallway. Hopeless, but still trying to change their minds, she shouts, “It’s not over, you don’t break up families.” Not only is Ms. Woods the conscience of the story, she also represents the Black middle class who is often left to pick up the pieces whenever there are problems in the community. However, they can’t do much because their employer is often the source of calamity for the community. The next time we see Miss Woods, she is fastening Charlie’s beautiful sketch drawing of her mother onto a classroom display. The work receives a “Special Mention” ribbon, which is yet another value placed on her.

The emotions that may arise for the viewer at this point make the issue very obvious. For Charlie and Rhonda, and families like them, living with HIV means they have endured all sorts of injustices. Using raw emotion in this way, Massaquoi (2017) asserts that the marginalized people and their endeavours remain central to the work. I am hoping that the emotional journey constructed within *Promise Me*, points us in a direction of how to do better as a society.

Scene(s) of Injustice to *Promise Me*

The process of being inspired by real events captured in a documentary, and then shaping those moments into another completely self-contained narrative arc and emotional journey is an incredible artistic endeavour. *Promise Me* unfolds over the course of three days. I do not specify whether the scenes are consecutive but for this discussion, I will suggest that the first scene opens on Day One, and that the film moves linearly.

The film fades up on Charlie helping her mom move from the breakfast table to the couch. It's morning. Through sparse dialogue, we know that Charlie has been missing school and

that Yolanda is quite ill. Maxine, the family's social worker, stops by seemingly unannounced and sees that Charlie is late for school. She then wakes up Yolanda, who is now resting, to conduct a status report. The meeting is heart-wrenching as Maxine insinuates that Yolanda is not working hard enough to get better. Yolanda, feeling highly disrespected, tells the worker to leave and as a result of this stressful meeting, Charlie stays home, missing school again.

This triggers a flashback of a young Charlie blowing bubbles while waiting for her mom to come home from work. Judging by Yolanda's uniform, she appears to be a nurse or working in health care. She is vibrant and fun. They hug and we can witness the deep love they share. The flashback serves to counter the narrative of the scene prior. Their current life is troubled by a chronic illness, stigma and discrimination. This ends day one.

The next morning Yolanda seems to be feeling a bit better. Charlie is trying to hustle, and manages to leave her house, albeit quite late. She ends up arriving at Ms. Woods' class when it is over. Miss Woods speaks candidly with Charlie, and it seems that she is in her court. Then, Principal Walton appears and makes it clear that Charlie's absences have been tracked. Walton tells Charlie to leave, before threatening Woods that this latest incident puts a line in the sand. Ms. Wood, who is Black, seems trapped between the rules set out by the education system, and what is the right thing to do for a student in Charlie's situation.

This theme of 'hiring Black' to work in institutions like the education system and child welfare is subtly introduced here, and immediately we see her in conflict. Just because Miss Woods is a Black woman who works for the institution doesn't mean she can stop racism,

discrimination, bias or any other forms of oppression practiced against community members by that institution. In reality, it would be a challenge to try and change any oppressive rules within institutions, regardless of a person's race, gender, faith, age, sexual orientation or class because institutions have invested so much into keeping things the same

After this micro-aggression, Charlie lets off steam by playing in the park, first by herself, and then with some of the neighbourhood kids who are a little younger than her because she has not had the opportunity to grow up in the outside world—even though she functions maturely beyond her years inside the home. This scene is inter-woven with Yolanda, who appears to have gained strength and is now getting dressed up to leave their home and surprise Charlie at the park. Charlie seems relieved and compliments her mom on how she looks. She presents art that she is working on, inspired by a photo of her mom taken years ago by Charlie's father. We only see rough sketches. Yolanda is privy to the finished work. But through their exchange, it is conveyed that Charlie is a budding artist and her mom is very proud of her. Day two ends with hope.

On the third and final day, Yolanda is not doing well again. Possibly the activities from the day before proved to be too much, and she regresses. Exhausted, she then confesses to Charlie that she may be dying and that Charlie must come to terms with her inevitable passing. Charlie echos the social worker's words and insists that she needs to try harder. Yolanda painfully agrees to try. They fall asleep on the couch and we cut to another flashback, this time of Yolanda in earlier years taking a photo with her husband, Charlie's father. This is intercut

with flash-forward shots of Charlie using the photo to draw a portrait of the mother. Charlie is then woken up by the beeping medical alarm.

She is frustrated that she missed school again and a chance to play with her friends due to taking care of her mom whom she believes is not trying hard enough. She leaves the house in a huff to go to the store to get food. Although we have yet to see Charlie being disrespectful towards anyone up until this point, it seems like typical behaviour for a teenager who feels like she has been cooped up all day.

Meanwhile, at the school, Maxine is in conversation with Principal Walton about a plan to remove her from the home. Ms. Woods rushes over to their meeting to explain how this is “not right” and how *both* the school and child welfare should be offering more assistance instead of breaking up the family. Later, Yolanda, who has been sleeping all day, wakes up to the sound of a worker pounding on her front door. A few beats later, Charlie returns and is apprehended just outside the apartment by child welfare workers led by Maxine. Yolanda’s worst nightmare comes true when she hears Charlie scream her name as she is being chased. Suddenly, she realizes that her caregiving daughter is gone. Charlie sits stoically inside the child welfare vehicle as if in shock. She begins to daydream about the time she saw her mom at the park, how happy they were, how much hope they had.

Back at school, Ms. Woods fastens Charlie’s beautiful drawing of her mother on the art competition board and gives it an honourable mention. It includes a handwritten message. We

cut to a montage of Rhonda created by footage taken from the TWIB to put a face to the horror
this story has been inspired by.

Chapter Three: Cinematic Influences

Producing authenticity is not fundamentally a cinematic innovation. So many fiction films are based on true stories. However, producing drama inspired by situations captured in a documentary may be unique. PBS' cinema blogger Sean Axmaker suggests that using original documentaries as source material for adapting real-life stories and events is in vogue. From *Forrest Gump* (1994) to *Narcos: Mexico* (2019), quite a few contemporary movies and dramatic television series have implemented a hybrid-fiction approach, fusing documentary footage into the fiction to better situate the viewer in the place and time of the story. However, I could only find a handful of mainstream fiction films that have been inspired by a specific non-fiction film.

Some of the standout documentaries that have been remade into dramas include: *Grey Gardens* (1975), directed by Ellen Hovde, Muffie Meyer, and the filmmaking brothers Albert and David Maysles, which is a portrait of Edith Bovier Beales and her daughter Little Edie (eccentric relations of Jackie Kennedy). *Grey Gardens* was remade in 2009 by Michael Sucsy as a feature film of the same title starring Jessica Lange and Drew Barrymore, with exacting performances and a wandering 70s camera style typical of that era; James Marsh's high-wire documentary, *Man on the Wire* (2005) became the fictional remake *The Walk* (2015) by director Robert Zemeckis, which recreates the non-fiction account but is told entirely through a flashback narrated by actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt; Robert Epstein and Richard Schmiechen's gay history documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), remade into Gus Van Sant's Academy award-winning, *Milk* (2008) starring Sean Penn as Harvey Milk, who channels the same energy and fervour as his documentary namesake; and John Zaritsky's Academy Award-winning Canadian documentary *Just Another Missing Kid* (1981), investigating the disappearance of Ottawa

teenager Eric Wilson (who went missing while driving his Volkswagen camper to a university in Colorado), remade as the drama *Into Thin Air* (1985), directed by Roger Young and starring Ellen Burstyn (*Requiem for a Dream*).

I did not find any instances of Canadian-made HIV or ACB documentaries receiving this sort of adaptation. I can only assume there are many examples of independent producers, remaking their unknown independent documentaries as dramas, but I discovered two mainstream directors who have achieved this with success.

Werner Herzog produced his documentary *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997) depicting a German helicopter pilot's escape after being captured by the Viet Cong in *Rescue Dawn* (2006), into a feature drama starring Christian Bale. Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbara's documentary *Party Monster* (1998) about a NYC club kid who spiralled out of control after killing his drug dealer, reprised this case five years later, as a feature drama of the same title with an ensemble cast including Seth Green, Macaulay Culkin, Marilyn Mason, and Dylan McDermott. Both of these are great examples of how to translate documentary into drama effectively, but there is no clear road map for how to do it, unlike the more common practices for adapting a novel or even a theatre production.

Audiences have an appetite for real stories. So it makes sense that the observational documentary could be a valuable resource for fiction films. Moscovitch (1993) describes observational documentary or direct cinema as films that record life as it happens, and because

they are unscripted and unrehearsed, these films can play a role in the artistic practice of fiction filmmakers seeking to further their authenticity.

Likewise, documentary film scholar Bill Nichols (2001) confirms that observational documentaries set up a frame of reference closely akin to that of a fiction film, where we look in on and overhear social actors who are individuals, performing representations of themselves to others. If documentary purists, such as Leacock, Drew and the Maysles brothers are correct in their belief that in the right hands, their camera could be considered a transparent device that did not change the action when using the observational filming techniques, then Gade and Jerslev's (2005) suggestion that the observational documentary has the potential for an accurate portrayal of any given social reality at a specific time in history means that directors can then employ the social framing and a superstructure of behaviours and actions that they generate to shape performances. At the very least, the documentary version of the story can be research.

This may be true, technically, however, practically, documentary-making is a painstakingly long process that requires, passion, commitment, time, money and skill. I'm not convinced that many dramatic filmmakers would want to go through the trouble of producing a documentary as research material for the development of their fiction film. Whenever I've signed on to make a documentary, my attention remained solely on the people and the issues that would satisfy my pursuit of the truth. Thinking about such a final result (the production of a dramatic film) while shooting the documentary would seem to defeat the purpose.

Still, there is something to be said about being inspired by observational footage of someone's life. It grounded me. I believe that this feeling of getting grounded was captured by the late documentary filmmaker, Albert Maysles, who spoke openly about his approach to filming people and/or issues as being neither subjective or objective but a spiritual process. In an interview with Megan Cunningham (2014), he asserts that documentary filmmakers should:

“...have an open mind, a loving spirit, a talent for gaining access to people, maintaining a rapport with them, a confidence that you really belong there based on a true feeling of doing the right thing for them, for yourself, for the film — all that allows you to express emotions that really gets to the heart of another person and without the cold objectivity of a scientific report.”

For me, being able to reference and reflect on the footage of real events and share it with the actors and crew grounded our production. Everyone on the team approached everything seriously. They too wanted to honour Rhonda and represent the issue thoughtfully.

Being able to also reference and reflect upon several ground-breaking social justice documentaries made by Black Canadian filmmakers enabled me to confidently implicate Canadian institutions in this new work. Documentaries co-directed by Roger McTair and the late Jennifer Hodge da'Silva such as *Home Feeling: the struggle for a community* (1983) for CBC, explored the oppression of new Black immigrants who lived in the marginalized and stigmatized Jane/Finch neighbourhood in the 80s; and *Black Mother Black Daughters* (1989) co-directed by Sylvia Hamilton with Claire Prieto for the NFB explored anti-Black racism. Shelagh Mackenzie's *Remembering Africville* (1991) and Sylvia Hamilton's, *Speak It! From the Heart of Black Nova Scotia* (1992) were both about the trials and tribulations of Black Nova Scotia. David and Jennifer Holness' *Speakers of the Dead* (2000) looked at the erasure of early Black settlements in Ontario and Charles Officer's feature documentary *Unarmed Verses* (2016) illustrated how Black families in public housing are being affected by Toronto's gentrification.

Officer's TV documentary, *The Skin I'm In* (2016) about journalist/provocateur Desmond Cole who claimed that the Toronto Police Service had stopped him over 50 times since moving from Winnipeg to Toronto exposed the institutional bias in carding. Karen Chapman's reflective short *Walk Good* (2017) about a Black mother's grieving process after the loss of several of her children due to gun violence and Ngardy Conteh George's CBC Docs POV television documentary *Mr. Jane and Finch* (2019) about an 80-year-old activist/amateur filmmaker who decides to run for public office, showed aspects of Black life in Canada affected by institutions and aim to support a disenfranchised community often stigmatized within mainstream institutions.

There are a few social issue films produced by Black filmmakers that were released after the production of this project that I want to reference for aiming to support a disenfranchised community often stigmatized in the mainstream media. Philip Pikes', *Our Dance of Revolution* (2019) which heralds the lifelong friendship of a group of local Black LGBT activists and their AIDS activism, and the multi-directed *Being Black in Toronto* film series (2019) skillfully curated and created by up-and-coming Black filmmakers, together show the possibilities of imagining new conventions, changing old narratives, and expanding beyond one-dimensional portrayals of the Black community.

Despite having a rich treasure trove of documentary and historical evidence as reinforcement for my artistic mission, I still had to come to terms with exactly what truth was I trying to communicate. After all, 'Inspired by true events' could mean anything. How much poetic license could I take? What genre should I use to tell the story and why? And how would the genre influence any liberties that I wanted or had to take, or was it the other way around?

As a fiction, *Promise Me* is guided by the trajectory of new wave Black fiction film directors who make unapologetically raw movies about the struggles in the Black community from an emotionally charged singular auteur voice. From movies that sprung out of the LA rebellion such as Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1978) examining the inner-city life of Black Los Angeles to Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) addressing racial tensions in NYC, to Clement Virgo's *Rude* (1995) and Stephan William's *Soul Survivor* (1995) for ushering in a new Black Canadian cinema aesthetic while talking about marginalized communities, to commentaries on gender such as the late John Singleton's study of Black masculinity in *Baby Boy* (2001), Cheryl Dunye's Black women prison drama, *Stranger Inside* (2001) and Charles Officer's ode to Black women dealing with the epidemic of gun violence in Canada *Short Hymn_Silent War* (2002) to the impact of fascism in Haile Gerima's bleak outlook on Ethiopian society during a repressive totalitarian regime in *Teza* (2008); to Ryan Coogler's dramatic rendering of a real-life tragedy, *Fruitvale Station* (2013) recounting the final hours of Oscar Grant, shot by San Francisco transit police on New Year's Day, 2009. All of these films powerfully speak to legacies of injustice throughout the African Diaspora in a manner to which I aspire.

In terms of film theory, the selection of a visual style and technical treatment for *Promise Me* was highly influenced by the tenants of the new Neorealist cinema. New Neorealism is essentially a contemporary version of Neorealist movies established by Italian filmmakers which captured the real living conditions of impoverished and working-class Italians after WWII (Landy, Nowell-Smith, Millicent, Bondelle). While classics of Italian Neorealist cinema, such as

Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945), Luchino Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (1948), and Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) were inspired by a communist agenda that desperately wanted to expose and critique their disastrous post-war economy, (Di Carmine, 2010) one could argue that the depictions of Italy as a troubled nation in the new Neorealist cinema such as Marco Giordana's *One Hundred Steps* (2000), Giuseppe Tornatore's *The Unknown Woman* (2006) and Matteo Garrone's *Ghommorrah* (2008) do not come from such a singular political ideology. New Neorealism seems to be produced out of a desire for individual filmmakers/artists to make known their personal opinions and judgements about what is happening in Italian society. This is perhaps this is the most glaring way to distinguish the two.

Matteo Garrone is arguably the most popular and successful Italian new Neorealist filmmaker, and has made numerous statements to emphasize this distinction. The online streaming service mubi.com⁶ has quoted Mateo Garonne as saying:

“Although, I'd obviously like to find my own way and not be considered an imitator, some have claimed my style is a new neorealism. But neorealism is of course a style that is connected to an earlier period of Italian cinema. I do owe a great debt to those directors — to Rossellini and many others.”

However, in other interviews Garonne seems to contradict himself, when he confirms his careful attention to the real living conditions of his films' characters, the use of vernacular language, together with the choice of non-professional actors which are clear reminders of characteristics that contributed to creating the original Neorealist cinema (Bondelle, 1983)

Promise Me connects with the new Neorealism through the shared tactic of trying to provide a visually engaging look at social problems of contemporary life in particular societies

⁶ <https://mubi.com/cast/matteo-garrone> is a online film streaming service, distribution, curation hub

and communities. Garonne's production of *Gomorra* offers a glimpse of life in Italy, consumed with violence and sexual obsessions (Di Carmine, 2010), while *Promise Me* offers a glimpse into life living with HIV as an ACB woman in Toronto. In her article, *The Cinema of Matteo Garrone*, Roberta Di Carmine describes several qualities that I feel are similar to my artistic approach. For example,

"He tells stories about 'real people' and 'real situations', often people he knows... which results in a 'tone of engagement' and point of view that is 'from the inside.' He mixes 'professional' and 'non-professional' actors. He "embraces cinematography with a style that reflects emotional involvement with his art." (3) "He has an investigative eye that makes him study real people and places before shooting, as he is interested in how people are, how they think, where they come from and how he might represent them effectively." (4)

Similarly, I am telling a story inspired by people that I know and have spent time with. I have incorporated both professional actors who are members of ACTRA with non-professional actors into the production. My lead Charlie is non-professional and so are the supporting actors, such as Charlie's father, Charlie's friends and the other people that played the social workers during Charlie's apprehension (one of them even worked as a security guard).

Di Carmine also mentions that Garrone's ability to offer a view of an 'underground world' on topics that rarely get sympathy from an audience, could also be an aspect of new Neorealism. I can argue that the production of films about HIV in Canada is also rare and that films about Black Canadians living with HIV/AIDS even more so. I have to add that it is helpful that our ACTRA student contract allowed me to uniquely combine union and non-union actors on screen, a tactic of new Neorealism. But it is worth noting that outside of this venture this union rule would discriminate against me and all sorts of filmmakers wishing to put new stories with unique voices on the screen, particularly Neo-realist stories.

At the very beginning of this process, I researched a litany of Canadian fiction HIV films across various genres at VTape, the Canadian distributor of the largest collection of Canadian HIV films. I watched everything they had about HIV/AIDS in every genre, including: Steve Reinke's five min short experimental gay sex film, *Why I stopped going to Foreign Films*, 8 (1991); Glace Lawrence's 22-minute documentary, *The Colour of Immunity* (1990) geared towards Black youth exploring issues of AIDS awareness as well as safe sex practices; Darrien Taylor and Michael Balser's 30-minute *Voices of Positive Women* (1992), featuring nine women from around the globe living with HIV; and last but not least, Ho Tam's 24-minute documentary, *Book of James* (2005), about art, AIDS and the activism of ACT UP member James Wentzy.

Vtape is also home to the seminal feature films by filmmaker/artist/professor John Greyson: *Zero Patience* (1993), the HIV musical, *Lilies* (1996), the coming-out play-within-a-movie, and *Fig Trees* (2009), a documentary-opera about South African AIDS activist Zachie Achmat. These are all daringly cinematic and socially powerful works about HIV, and are also quite useful examples of cinematic style and/or genre. Vtape (2012) describes Greyson's collection and his use of hybridity (a categorization of cinema that is produced by mixing two or more genres), as employing: "Brechtian techniques and camp humour as instruments of cultural and political activism"(2). I feel like his practice of bravely mixing genres that are often considered completely opposing or clashing helps to wake people up to the truth. Getting the genres to work in conversation with one another in the same film takes great mastery and made me think more deeply about the aesthetic principles in my work beyond genre. Greyson's work was very informative for me in terms of thinking about how to communicate my ideas about love and the role of medication as sub-themes.

I could only find a few fiction film references that would be considered cinematically stylized interventions to HIV stigma and discrimination in the African, Caribbean and Black context. The films which made the most impact for me, in terms of narrative and technical content, were produced by African American queer filmmaker, Marlon Riggs, Black British queer filmmaker Isaac Julian and Canadian lesbian filmmakers Debbie Douglas and Gabrielle Micallef.

The late Marlon Riggs had an enormous influence on the Black LGBT gaze. He worked as a journalist and professor and made unconventional documentaries, tackling subjects that were avoided or taboo at the time even within the gay world, by putting himself as a Black gay man in front of the camera. The Ubuntu Biography Project ⁷ hypes Riggs cult classic *Tongues Untied* (1989) as an in-your-face hybrid-documentary meant to bring awareness about the Black gay man's body politic, through performance, monologue, poetry, song, interviews with HIV positive activists and snapping (nonverbal gestures). His work clearly demonstrated Black men's otherness within the onslaught of HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States, and showed how the mere voice or presence of Black people who were impacted could produce a strong visual/emotional impact.

Marlon's *Tongues Untied* drew my attention to the rhythms of pain, poetic justice and love. He was very efficient in his editing, splicing together scenes to propel proper 'shade' at certain issues. Capturing how one must have felt living with HIV at the height of the epidemic,

⁷ Created by Stephen A. Maglott (1953-2016). Biographical tributes to distinguished LGBTQ/SGL people of color/African descent.

Marlon ministers every beat and every frame, and not a moment was wasted. I wanted the pace of *Promise Me* to savour each beat, yet carry that same urgency, that there was no time to waste.

Black is ...Black Ain't (1994) is another Riggs documentary that is of particular interest. For this work, he filmed monologues and narrative interjections from his hospital bed while being treated for illnesses associated with HIV. Again, he wanted to provide a visual representation of Black gay men in this space. Creatively I was intrigued by Marlon's embrace of his own HIV to highlight the medical issue for what it was. I know that I could never do that (i.e., appear in my own films). But I deeply appreciate the emotions that he was able to conjure up by lending his personal story to the issue. The careful way he juxtaposed other gay male voices provided a resounding chorus that became an effective call to action. I took his work as a call to join the battle, fighting the silence around HIV/AIDS in the Black community, and I wanted *Promise Me* to conjure love and outrage like a Riggs film.

The work of internationally renowned British filmmaker and installation artist Isaac Julien was also of great interest. His breakout film, *Looking for Langston* (1989) combined “authentic archival newsreel footage of Harlem in the 1920s with scripted scenes to produce a non-linear impressionistic storyline celebrating Black gay identity and desires during the artistic and cultural period known as the Harlem Renaissance”⁸. Though not specifically about HIV, it was produced at the height of the AIDS crisis and several actors died after the film was made, including, Matthew Baido.⁹

⁸ Isaac Julien, Interview as told to T. Cole Rachel, 2937 words Isaac Julien on the changing nature of creative work, June 23, 2017

⁹ Isaac Julien discusses this on his artist website 2019 <https://www.isaacjulien.com/news/3>

I was immediately drawn to Issac's deeply poetic visual explorations that welcomed the desires of Black men — not as mere bodies but as people with agency who exhibited emotions and memories. Perhaps it was my early love of poetry as an art form, or that he worked with different mediums and was able to re-produce a Black art modernist style, or that he was able to capture the notions of Black queer love that remained essentially invisible in cinema, that kept me engaged even upon repeated viewings.

His use of impressionistic dreamscapes against the backdrop of Langston's poetry produced a dramatic tension questioning intersecting forces of race, sexuality and class upon the lives of Black men — and the difference of being fulfilled versus unfulfilled. The fact that this film did not include any content about living with HIV/AIDS, (nor should it have to because that was obviously not a part of Langston Hughes' life story, as he passed away before the crisis) should not disqualify it as an AIDS film. It was a commentary on love and desire which was necessary at the time. *Looking for Langston* continues to be a seminal film for me, as Julien beckoned to alternative identities of Blackness that were far removed from contemporary cinema. Although I position both Marlon and Julien's work as highly inspirational resources for creatively looking at the Black body politic in cinema, their work is largely gendered towards Black men.

AnOther Love Story: Women and AIDS (1990) produced and directed by Debbie Douglas and the late Gabrielle Micallef, was the first and only Canadian fiction film I found about racialized women living with HIV/AIDS. This beautifully shot and executed, heavily

scripted, short video is groundbreaking work about an interracial lesbian couple grappling with the results of an HIV test and disclosure to a network of chosen family. It was originally commissioned for the ACT/Trinity Square Video Toronto Living with AIDS series (1990-1991), and was cable-cast on Rogers Maclean-Hunter networks in Toronto. The series was coordinated by video artists Michael Balser (1952- 2002) and John Greyson. Encore screenings at the 10th Massimadi, InsideOut in Ottawa, and RIDM demonstrate that this video has lasted the test of time and will be remembered for years to come.

Currently distributed by Vtape and mentioned in a listing in www.queerdocumentaries.com, there is not a lot of information about the creative process of the filmmakers. However, Dr. Ryan Conrad's 2018 International's Women Day article, 'From the Video Vault: Canadian Women on HIV/then and now' penned for the online resource <https://aidsactivisthistory.ca/> duly notes *a AnOther Love Story: Women and AIDS* as one of the "brilliant work of Canadian women who have challenged and informed audiences with their activist films and videos for nearly 30 years."¹⁰ Conrad lists it alongside other groundbreaking women's HIV films to follow including Quebec-based video artist Anne Golden's 1991 documentary *Les Autres/Women and AIDS*, and my own works, including *The Women I Become*, *Positive Women: exposing injustice* and *Consent*. However, what makes *AnOther Love Story: Women and AIDS* unique and precious is the fact that very few queer women in Canada were making fictional work that included race so provocatively, so it is an extraordinary piece of cinema about Black and racialized women.

¹⁰ [queerdocumentaries.com](http://www.queerdocumentaries.com) is a website that was create ways to question thinking about queer theory, how to form attitudes towards information production while making it easier to think about queer theory, witnessing primarily local pressures that are upon queer subjectivities and their experience against violence and the solutions they find against this violence, seeing how they stand common ideas and fight them.

What I thoroughly enjoy about *AnOther Love Story* is how subtly it portrays the aspirations of a community of racialized lesbians to have adequate information and services about HIV/AIDS like their white male counterparts, by showing the women existing in a world that feels and looks distinct from gay male culture. They are navigating their spaces through an ACB lesbian lens that seems real. As a black female queer activist, I feel at home with them.

The themes of HIV disclosure in *AnOther Love Story* registered closely with my first idea for my thesis film, and also helped me to think about my technical aspirations for *Promise Me*. For example, it follows one of the basic tenants of Neorealism by blending an ensemble cast of nonprofessional and professional actors. I recognized many of the non-professional performers from local art spaces and Pride activities, like LGBT activists and noted lesbian deejay Verlia Stephans, and HIV activist Douglas Stewart, who is the former Executive Director of Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention (BlackCap). Although, the camera movement and blocking is not as edgy as most Neorealistic cinema, it skillfully does the job of sculpting complex interpersonal relationships and tensions on screen -- quite an accomplishment for a team of young filmmakers.

It also helped me to think more deeply about the tone of *Promise Me*. The story is told in such an entertaining and non-threatening way. Some of my documentaries are very serious. It reminded to try and strike a balance of intrigue and humour so that the audience can enjoy the ride and the message.

While these above cinematic influences have guided me on developing the narrative arc, characters' behaviours, technical treatment and visual style, certain theoretical themes and ideas have informed the entire process from production decisions to the project delivery and roll-out.

Chapter Four: Themes and Ideas

Producing films about the Canadian Black experience through an anti-Black racism lens, however noble, is not simple. There is considerable push back from the film industry, funders, and general audiences that are used to watching and constructing stories and images about Black people that are stereotypically American and/or not consistent with the reality of the systemic nature of oppression in Canada. These gate-keepers seem unaware, if not unmoved, by how institutions such as the Canadian education system continues to underserve many communities from diverse backgrounds. For instance, there is a lack of awareness that there are unique dimensions in the experiences of Black youth who experience schools as carceral spaces, ones that alternate between outright neglect and heightened surveillance and punishment for any perceived disobedience.”¹¹ These themes, as well as the child welfare theme, are often ignored.¹²

When approaching my thesis project, thoughtful considerations were given to critical theory frameworks such as anti-oppression, anti-Black racism and queer theory, embedded within a social justice and evidence-based research framework that confirms these realities. I relied on these knowledge systems specifically to break through the industry noise that often pushes back to say that these realities, especially those experienced by Black Canadian women living with HIV, don't exist.

¹¹ Maynard, Robin, Canadian Education is Steeped in Anti-Black Racism Nov, 29, 2017 The Walrus, <https://thewalrus.ca/canadian-education-is-steeped-in-anti-black-racism/>

¹² Kike Ojo (2018) *One Vision One Voice*, Report. Ontario Associations of Children AIDS Societies

Anti-Oppression Practice/Framework Themes (AOP)

AOP is defined as a tool that is used to understand and respond to the complexity of the experiences of oppression (Burke and Harrison, *Communication, Relationships, and Care: A Reader*, 2003). The goal of AOP is equity, and the elimination of disproportionality and disparity (Ojo, 2014). By taking an AOP approach in analyzing the social mechanism involved in the daily experiences of my characters, I have discovered that their oppression is not limited to anti-Black racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, sanism, ageism, ableism, etc. These oppressions are experienced inter-sectionally.

I see this approach, although coming from the social sciences, as a multi-layered practice used by humanistic filmmakers, much like Garonne's new Neorealist approach. In order to understand the society and community he is capturing, his lens is directed with an empathetic quality. Di Carmine (2010) describes it as trying to capture the painful conditions of characters without “carrying judgment.” He first tries to hear all sides of the story and then workshops those ideas to make sure he is representing the truth.

Specifically, naming AOP as my part of my artistic practice means that my work is purposely designed to try and right a wrong. An AOP framework is intentionally steeped in social justice initiatives (Notisha Massaquoi, 2017, Baines 2017, Roni Strier, 2006), and “historically rooted in approaches to social problems that focus on how the larger system protects the unearned privilege and power of some groups of people while generating difficult and unfair conditions for many others” (Baines, 2017, 2). Ironically, AOP is often absent within many

social institutions that purport to embrace it. This lack of empathy displayed by child welfare societies and the education system is at the centre of *Promise Me*.

Working from an Anti-oppression framework confirms to me how *Promise Me* is far from being an exaggeration or departure from reality. In the film, Yolanda shoulders the burden of many labels: 'Woman,' 'Black Woman,' 'Black Single Mother,' 'Living with AIDS,' and 'Living in Poverty.' These carry stigmas in Canadian society that are somehow deemed compatible through continual cultural hegemony and the marginalization of Black women.

Most liberal-minded social justice folks would agree that being 'anti'-oppression means being against the oppression of people. However, not many would agree with what oppression looks like, and therefore would not know if they were oppressing someone, even though the oppression is omnipresent and felt by everyone in different ways. I agree with the author, professor, feminist, and social activist Bell Hooks when she states that, "Being oppressed means the absence of choices." (Hooks, 2014, 22) Furthermore, I feel that anti-oppression means living in a world where everyone has the same choices regardless of their identity.

Baines (2017) clearly defines oppression as when a person acts or policy is enacted unjustly against an individual or group because of their affiliation to a particular group. (2) Massaquoi (2017) adds that to understand the oppression faced by someone, you must acknowledge how "Most forms of oppression are based on what a person is or what they are perceived to be, irrespective of what they do or how they live." In other words, one's identity (for example, being a woman, a Muslim, or a Black subject) is a part of that person's oppression, so

much so that the appearance and social location of our Black female character living with HIV may prompt many questions that would not necessarily be asked if the person had another identity. For example, how did she get infected with HIV? Was she promiscuous? Why is she a single mother? What is her level of education? Does she have a job? Why isn't she working? Who is Charlie's father?

Part of my understanding as a writer/director about how a Black female character living with HIV should be portrayed is understanding how different the treatment would be if our matriarch and her daughter were white, from another racialized group, or Indigenous. Massaquoi goes on to suggest that oppression happens, "Not because of what that person does but because the individual does it in a marginalized body." Although many other identities give way to marginalization, I am particularly interested in how race, gender, and HIV status influence how the marginalization looks. There is a certain amount of victim-blaming and victim shaming when it comes to a Black woman and I wanted to ensure that the portrayal of her and other Black characters would both illuminate their oppression and complicate the rationale behind it.

Intersectionality Theme

In terms of identity, every character in the film has not just one but several. It may be a challenge to pinpoint, the one identity in each that is facing the most oppression at any particular time. Kimberle Crenshaw (2004) who coined the theory of "intersectionality," argues that, "the experience of being a Black woman cannot be understood in terms of being Black and of being a woman independently, but must include the interactions between the two, which frequently reinforce each other." (2) Adding HIV, would compound the oppression and create obstacles

that are not often understood within the conventional way of thinking about antiracism, anti-Black racism, feminism and/or other social justice advocacy structures we have.

When thinking about intersectionality, one should not think about hierarchies of oppression but instead, try to understand how oppressions work together to magnify experiences. Massaquoi (2017) argues that intersectionality offers a way to amplify the systemic forces in which differences such as race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status (again I would add, HIV status) interrelate as distinct categories, rather than conflating them into a single expression of oppression. An intersectionality strategy helped me grasp how race stereotypes, gender stereotypes, and HIV stigma and discrimination, etc., are compounded in the lives of Yolanda and her daughter Charlie.

Social justice pedagogy often categorizes oppression into four inter-meshing facets, otherwise known as the four "T's" of oppression (ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal) and all exist inside one another (Singh, 2013). In *Promise Me*, I focus my attention on the institutional and interpersonal oppression that is related to the egregious behaviour of social workers and teachers in real life. These behaviours, as portrayed in the themes, dialogue, and overall dramatic arc of the film, serve to highlight the structural barriers and power dynamics that Yolanda and Charlie face.

Institutional and Interpersonal Oppression Themes

It is clear that the child welfare institution has a history of oppression directed against Black (and Indigenous) families. In the report *One Vision One Voice: Changing the Welfare System for African Canadians*, it is noted that while ACB children represent 8 percent of the Toronto population, they represent 41% of all children and youth in care at the Toronto-based Children AIDS Society.

A community consultation for LGBT parents and their families about the report at 519 Church St. in Toronto on September 26, 2015, highlighted how: “poverty, not type or severity of maltreatment was the single most important predictor of the placement of Black children into foster care, and the amount of time spent there.” The report named a number of negative outcomes for Black children who ‘age out’ of the system including: not completing high school, higher rates for teen pregnancy, increased homelessness, unemployment and an involvement with the criminal justice system. (Ojo, 2016)

The final report did not include any data that specifically spoke to the experiences of Black parents or children living with HIV. However, some ASO workers in attendance spoke out about how the child welfare system is targeting Black HIV positive women and children. HIV positive Black women have a history of intersecting with child welfare through maternal practices. Mother-to-child transmission through pregnancy, labour, breastfeeding is often used as grounds for surveillance by family services or even apprehension (Margolis et al., 1988, Tompkins and Gail, 2008), although HIV is not a risk in and of itself to newborns when mother undergoes preventative antiretroviral therapy (ART) and proper training.

worker, Ms. Woods, a teacher, and Principal Walton. In this fishbowl, the characters are not self-contained units but shown in relationship to, and between, people and history, people and communities, and people and institutions. It is like they are trapped in a force field where they are constantly negotiating their power. We can see the ultimate toll and the heavy weight of continually having to physically, emotionally, and socially maneuver around these oppressions.



Image 11. Alison Duke attending One Vision One Voices LGBT community consul

Anti-Black Racism Theme

There are moments in the film where raw emotions are addressed in a public way. However, there are times when pain and suffering are experienced in silence. For me, the public moments represent the overwhelming frustration that the Black community collectively experiences in Canadian society. In contrast, the quiet moments are meant to express the weight that anti-Black racism has on the individual and their social well-being. Due to the unique cultural and historical realities for Black people who live in Canada, the US, the Caribbean,

Africa, the Middle East, the UK, and Europe, there are different ways of defining anti-Black racism based on geographic location. I will use the Canadian context because this is where I am from, and this is where the story of *Promise Me* takes place.

The term 'Anti-Black Racism' was coined by Ryerson University Social Work professor emeritus activist Akua Benjamin. Anti-Black racism highlights, “The unique nature of systemic racism on Black-Canadians and the history as well as experiences of slavery and colonization of people of Black-African descent in Canada.”¹³

According to the Toronto Action Plan to confront anti-Black racism in Toronto, anti-Black racism "is policies and practices embedded in Canadian institutions that reflect and reinforce beliefs, attitudes, prejudice, stereotyping and/or discrimination that is directed at people of African descent and is rooted in their unique history and experience of enslavement and colonization here in Canada." The report continues that;

“The legacy of anti-Black racism lies in the current social, economic, and political marginalization of Torontonians of African descent. It is experienced as a lack of opportunity, poor health and mental health outcomes, poor education outcomes, higher rates of precarious employment and unemployment, significant poverty, and overrepresentation in the criminal justice, mental health, and child welfare systems.” (1)

Despite this overrepresentation of adverse outcomes in Black communities, Akua Benjamin (2017) questions the fact that consistently there is a lack of community leadership voices at the table when decisions are being made to address the issues. She suggests these are the type of micro-aggressions that the Black community has faced for years.

¹³ Akua Benjamin wrote about anti-black racism in her thesis and first expressed the term Publicly. According to the Black Health Alliance, <http://Blackhealthalliance.ca/home/antiBlack-racism/>

Anti-Black Racism is yet another reason why there are not more support systems addressing the needs of Black mothers living with HIV. Some global approaches to understand the issue of child caregivers, which include African nations, seem to have more compassion (Murphy et al., 2010, Onesibindi, 2017). Evans and Becker's (2009) study of HIV positive African parents from Tanzania and UK noted that positive parents, even those with physical impairments who were confined to bed for months or, in some cases, years, continued to perform their parenting role, providing love, care, support and guidance to their children.

This was of paramount importance in protecting young people from the emotional impacts of HIV on the family. These young caregivers felt that they had become closer to their parents/relatives as a result of their caring responsibilities. I hope for this type of compassion in Canada, but I feel there is still denial about the systemic oppression of Black mothers. At its core, this is why a film like *Promise Me* is necessary.

Queer Theory Theme

Another aspect involved in the intersectionality of the themes of race, gender, and HIV status in *Promise Me* is queer theory. Queer theory is a term coined by Italian feminist and film theorist Teresa de Lauretis in the early 90s and later defined and redefined by other feminist/queer scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich and Diana Fuss (who followed Foucault). Like AOP and anti-Black racism, it emerged out of critical theory which presents criticisms of society and culture by applying knowledge from the social sciences and humanities (such as sociology and literary criticism) to address hegemony and power (Lauretis, 1991, Hanson, 1999, Giesecking, 2008).

Ellis Hanson describes queer theory that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick helped to identify as the radical deconstruction of sexual rhetoric. According to Kosofsky, queer theory attempts to "develop links between various forms of progressive activism" (i.e., the lesbian and gay movements, the women's movement, HIV/AIDS activism, and movements for racial justice, among others), and "the analytical rigour of poststructuralism" (especially that of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Paul de Man) concerning the problematic of sexuality. Although lesbians and feminist scholars were at the heart of defining queer theory, much of it developed out of a response to the AIDS crisis, which promoted a renewal of radical activism responding to the growing homophobia brought about by public responses to AIDS.

Queer journalist, editor, professor, and AIDS activist Michael Warner's 90s mantra, "We queer things when we resist regimes as normal" nurtured new forms of political organization, education and theorizing about being gay and/or living with HIV. In his book, 'The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and Ethics of Queer Life,' (2000) he writes:

"What we inherit from the past, in the realm of sex, is the morality of patriarchs and clansmen, souped up with Christian hostility to the flesh [our vile body, Saint Paul called it] medieval chastity cults, virgin/whore complexes, and other detritus of ancient repression. Given these legacies of unequal moralism, nearly every civilized aspect of sexual morality has initially looked deviant, decadent, or sinful, including voluntary marriage, divorce, and non-reproductive sex." (6)

Max Horkheimer, a foundational researcher of critical theory, suggests that the function of theory may be "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer, 1982, 244). I feel that whenever possible, I must reject what society has taught me in terms of what is normal and the power dynamics that come along with those norms, especially when it pertains to sex, sexuality, and gender. Seeking liberation from all these trappings is key

to my work. Even though we did not "write-in" the sexual identity of any of the characters in *Promise Me*, my vagueness should not be viewed as avoidance, but as a storytelling device that problematizes HIV representation and forces the audience to do some work. What is considered 'normal' regarding this issue? How can this story address misconceptions about the identities impacted by HIV transmission without pointing to sexuality? I thought answering these questions directly would constrict the discourse about HIV to sexual orientation. I wanted to displace the bias that is typically attributed to queer identities because HIV/AIDS is now mainstream and affects everyone.

While Charlie's father does not physically appear with family in the present and is relegated to a flashback scene where he is taking Yolanda's photograph in happier times, it may be assumed that Yolanda and Charlie's father are in a heterosexual relationship, which takes the stigma away for HIV/AIDS is a "gay" disease. Having no discussion about what happened to dad or disclosing his HIV status or health or even whether he is alive or deceased complicates things. The viewer is forced to question heterosexual norms and stereotypical transmutation stories to decipher what happened. Did Charlie's dad transmit to mom or vice versa? Or was injection drug use or an intravenous blood transfusion involved? Again, my ultimate goal is to queer the "normal" conversation about the sexual history of marriage life between a man and a woman and also the typical transmission story.

One thing for sure is that today HIV transmission is not relegated to one particular identity, yet the problems of representation remain quite apparent. Queer theory pushes against how HIV status is treated in biomedical discourses. Haraway (1989) believes that the scientific

discourses become "lumpy" when not including the nature of our biology in verbalizing the problem and solution. In *Queer Theory and Biomedical Practice: The Bio-medicalization of Sexuality*, Spurlin (2019) affirms how “biomedical knowledge is always already mediated through culture by analyzing normative racial, gender, class, and sexual ideologies that regulated early understandings of the epidemiology of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the West and the postcolonial world while informing global health policy on HIV/AIDS.” My access to queer theory allows me to specifically disrupt:

- The persistent misrepresentation of HIV/AIDS as a gay disease (Mayer, 1991)
- The coalition politics of much HIV/AIDS activism that rethinks identity in terms of affinity rather than essence (Saalfeld, 1991)
- The focus on lesbians and gay men but also include bisexuals, transexuals, sex workers, people with AIDS, health workers, and parents and friends of gays; the pressing recognition that discourse is not separate or second-order reality (Jagose, 1996)
- Dominant depictions of HIV and AIDS and representing them otherwise. (Edelman, 2013)
- The rethinking of traditional understandings of the workings of power in cross-hatched struggles over epidemiology, scientific research, public health and immigration policy (Halperin, 1990)

When unpacking queer identity within intersectionality, Massaquoi (2017) suggests that, “Queerness is less a matter of what a person is that is considered offensive, but rather what that person is perceived of sexually doing or not doing.” The pioneering feminist scholarship of Butler suggests that when it comes to sex and gender, our body is not 'independent materiality that is invested with power relations external to it but is that for which materialization and investiture are coextensive' (Butler, 1993: 34). Addressing these questions about the HIV

positive character(s) such as Charlie's mom and dad, together and independent of one another, in *Promise Me*, helps one begin to understand the state of HIV/AIDS in the ACB Canadian community.

Taking an AOP approach supports my artistic practice in a documentary, as it provides practical and diverse theories to consider (one might say: "perhaps too many to balance!"). However, having these perspectives is how I am able, for the most part, able to remove myself from the issues and incorporate many different points of view regarding social issues.

In the practice of fiction filmmaking, the AOP framework lends itself quite naturally to Neorealism, and new Neorealist approaches as they are also to make films uncovering and investigating societal problems.

Jordan Arsenault interviewed me on December 10, 2017, — with Montréal vidéaste Étienne Ganjohian – to delve into my film subjects, my strategy for authorial removal, and about the 17 missing minutes from *TWIB* that inspired *Promise Me*. I was asked to articulate my artistic practice in terms of how I develop my work beyond physical activities, such as writing, creating shot lists, blocking, camera, and lighting.

Jordan Arsenault's framing of my artistic practice as a 'negative capability' would mean that I am absent in my work. This is mostly true for documentaries, where I am not the central subject, and multiple voices are pontificating their truths based on lived experiences or academic

research. However, in this fiction foray, where I am also not on the screen, I find that I am very present in all aspects of the work, not in plain sight, but hiding in it.

For example, the opening scene where Charlie is taking Yolanda to the couch is part of my life, coming from my experience of being a caregiver and knowing what it is like to carry the full weight of someone. Charlie's wardrobe can be construed as being queer, much like how I identify. Charlie's loneliness and isolation are how I felt growing up, as well as what I witnessed in Rhonda's home. The emotional embrace of Charlie and Yolanda at the end is about the relationship I wish I had with my mother, as much as it represents the love between the characters. The reference to Charlie's artwork that starts as sketches, before the revealing of a stunning portrait, is how I feel about making art. It is also a painful, scary process before it becomes a work of art. Furthermore, finally, the title *Promise Me* represents the promise that Charlie's mom was not able to keep, but also all of the unfulfilled dreams we have due to oppression.

By using AOP to shape *Promise Me*, I was able to address the horror of being a Black woman living with HIV in Canadian society, but also highlight the love that persists despite the horror. Life is not Black and white. *Promise Me* is a love story within a horror story — the enduring love between a teenage girl and her mother, who is living with HIV and the horror of living with HIV as a Black mother.

Chapter Five: Pre-Production/ Post-Production

The story was written by myself, and the script was co-written with Lindsay Addawoo. It took us one month to write, but we made revisions up until I hired producer Fonna Seidu. Most of the crew were found on Mandy.com. Lucas Joseph was shortlisted from 20 CVs for the position of cinematography.

The casting was quite unconventional. I cast the Canadian Screen Award-winning actress Olunike Adeliyi who plays Yolanda immediately after meeting her at an event in 2018. I was on a panel for Black History month, and she waited until after the event to speak to me. We hit it off, and she was a source of encouragement getting this film off the ground. She met me several times, to workshop the dialogue, discuss the motivation and dramatic tension of each scene as well as her look and wardrobe.

Once I locked the script, I started casting for the other characters. I cast my friend Alana Bridgewater as the character Ms. Woods. Then we had a casting call for the other characters. It took me a while to find 15-year-old Breonna Williamson. I had some support from Rachael-Lea Rickards, who ran Broadway Bound Theatre camp for young Black actors for several years in Toronto. Through some connections we found Breonna. Breonna attends a performing arts school, and this was her first film.

Approach to Cinematography

I did not know Lucas before making this film and found him through mandy.com.¹⁴ Over twenty people applied, and he was my top choice throughout the process of narrowing the field down to three and conducting phone interviews. I was immediately drawn to his reel. He did not have much on it, but everything was beautiful. His lighting was gorgeous, he was able to sculpt faces and give locations depth, and his compositions were reasonably sophisticated. He also was not afraid to move the camera. The other DOP's reels that I reviewed were very static, tableaux in nature. It was important to me that the film had a realistic tone, was well blocked, but also had a lot of movement close to real life.

I shared my shooting script and mood board with the top three DOP candidates, booked meetings with each to review their ideas about the cinematography and then selected Lucas. Lucas and I had several meetings, and we hit it off immediately.

When we met to discuss the look and feel of the cinematography and spent considerable time discussing how the movement would be incorporated. I was eager to use movement in a particular way — a way that highlights how pain and struggle immobilizes Black women but then how it can also represent joy and hope without being too big. We discussed how each actor would move through their spaces, and came up with a strategy. For example, Charlie would always be moving noticeably more than her mother, especially when inside their home. When she was outside the home, she was moving in a way that reflected the wonderment of a child

¹⁴ mandy.com is an online platform that started in 1996 to showcase job opportunities to a creative community of actors, film and TV crew, theatre professionals, child actors, voiceover artists, dancers, singers, musicians, models and extras

denied the freedom just to be a kid. You could always feel her thinking. Moreover, the big thing for us was that whenever two adults were present, we always wanted Charlie situated in the middle of the adults to emphasize that she was physically caught in the middle between her family and the system.

I have to say, Yolanda's struggles to sit up and lie down come from the brilliance of Olunike. For most of the scenes on the couch, in between takes, she seemed like she was sleeping and would slowly move into position. She did this a few times, and I thought we should try having her say her lines while moving. It was sort of an economy of blocking, as you would see in neorealist films where they do only one or two takes in order to be in the moment. It worked since she is so talented. It seemed like it did not matter what she was doing, sleeping on the couch, taking pills, applying makeup or wrapping a scarf, or posing for her husband taking that gorgeous photograph -- she was able to be in the moment, moving at an exacting speed. Her performance is mesmerizing.

We also wanted the cinematography to emphasize the passage of time. We shot an overhead lock off Charlie and Yolanda dozing off on the couch. We came up with a plan for all of the flashbacks to be captured in slow motion, even when there was talking and we were not going to hear the actual sound. I recorded the sound anyway to have the option of adding it to the edit. Lastly, in terms of colour palette, we aimed for muted blues, yellow and red tones when inside the house, and used a fog machine to make the air in the interiors feel thick and hazy. For the exterior scenes, we wanted them to feel colourful and to be brighter and warmer. We wanted the colour red to be significant for Yolanda. I did a lot of prep with Lucas. We visited our

locations several times, reviewing lighting and blocking out the scenes, and thinking about our shooting order.

We wanted to shoot our montages not just to show the passage of time but also capture the emotional journey of the characters. We spoke about techniques that I learned and used in the work I created in Prof. Hoffman's MFA production class, such as shooting a long take and being inspired by Haiku. Haiku is a traditional Japanese poem consisting of three lines, for a total of 17 syllables. The first line has five syllables, the next line, which is in the middle, has seven, and then the last line has five. Haiku are usually about nature, are very short and usually not complete. They are more like a temporal expression of spirituality. I did not take a literal approach to use Haiku (e.g., I did not equate word count to shots, meaning, five words would mean five shots). I used the rhythm of Haiku to shape the action in the montage. It was a great exercise of writing the essence of the scenes as the beginning, middle and end (or introduction, theme, tension). These helped me to keep the montages sparse. Here are some of my Haiku inspiration:

Montage 1.

She blows bubbles outside
Mother arrives and pops them
They hug each other

Montage 2.

She puts on makeup
She wraps her head with a head tie
She leaves her house

Montage 3.

Charlie leaves her school
She plays with nature and kids
Her mother arrives

Montage 4.

They fall asleep
Her father takes a photo
The photo is mom

Approach to Locations

Promise Me was filmed in two interior locations: Monsignor Fraser College in Scarborough and a private storefront apartment in Rexdale, Ontario (as Charlie and Yolanda's home). We selected our exterior locations to be close to our interior locations.



Image 12. *Promise Me*, Monsignor Fraser College - Community Centre, Location Scout Photo

We got to use this school through the *Stolen by Africa* community program which uses the space for an enriching programming geared towards Black Youth in Scarborough. The location was approved by the TDSB, and cost \$500. We submitted a standard COI and hired one of their staff to supervise. We were only allowed to book this location for one and a half days, so we maximized our time by filming some of our exterior park scenes on the school grounds. We also dressed the classroom the night before.



Image 13. *Promise Me*, Yolanda and Charlie home, On-set Photo

After scouting several spaces to play as Yolanda's home, we used the storefront apartment belonging to our producer's mom. The apartment did not have a staircase, which is what the script called for, but the layout of the home allowed me to think about some creative blocking. The apartment was naturally cluttered, which we found worked for the story. We made Yolanda's couch the centre of the action by removing a matching love seat and chair and

rearranging the room. We strategically switched the placement of the dining room table and couch so the light from the window would naturally spill onto her face. We added various medical props and pills to make it look like the person who lived there was suffering from a chronic illness, and also make it believable that a 15-year-old could be managing the household. Clearing out some of the bunker furniture and decluttering a bit helped give more space for the actors to move freely.

We wanted to be able to get at least two different camera angles for each significant beat. We made sure the lighting throughout was dark and moody by adding light-coloured curtains to the front windows, which helped to soften and mute the light trickling in. We used a fog machine to accentuate the hazy dark feel. We wanted the space to feel as if Charlie and her mom were in their own little world. We wanted the space to feel claustrophobic, like a cocoon. This allowed us to provide a stark contrast to Charlie's life outside their apartment (i.e., the school, the park, and playground), which was lit much brighter. As much as Charlie wanted to stay inside the apartment to help her mom, whenever she was outside, we wanted the mood to feel happy because she was allowed to just be a kid.



Image 14. *Promise Me*, Yolanda On-set Photo Credit: Lucas Joseph

We used the same exteriors of the building for our daydream and action sequences. The front door area served as a place of memories for Charlie when she was younger. The alleyway was the place we see her dad taking a Polaroid of her mom in happy times, as well as where Charlie sketches that same photo years later. I felt that if the daydreams were to take place closer to their home, these would remind the viewer that their home space was once a happy place full of life. I thought this would give more emotional weight to what was currently going on inside.

Approach to Wardrobe

The wardrobe was decided through a series of conversations with our stylist. I wanted the colour red to figure prominently throughout the film. We decide to focus our red on Yolanda's dress that she wore in 1997. Red is a colour I featured prominently in *Positive Women: exposing injustice*: a billowing scarf that racialized women in the film used as a prop to help them to express their feeling about having HIV visually.

Red is an iconic colour, referencing the red ribbon, which is used as the universal symbol of awareness and support for people living with HIV. It was first created a decade after AIDS began decimating communities by a coalition of 12 artists connected to Visual AIDS, a New York arts organization which raises awareness of HIV. They were filmmakers, photographers, painters, and costume designers, and they got their inspiration from yellow ribbons tied on trees to denote support for US military fighting in the Gulf war. I wanted red to be an in-your-face symbol of HIV/AIDS. We searched for a long time to find the right red in the right style for that Polaroid portrait taken in 1997. It took us six weeks to find the dress. We ordered it online from Top Shop in London. I was just praying that it would fit. It did, and she worked it.

I wanted the rest of the colour palette to be blue, orange and yellow, but the wardrobe stylist convinced me that we should go with more neutral tones i.e. muted browns, greys, green tones so that the red could play prominently. We added blues and yellow gels to our lighting. We did not have a huge budget, but we tried to communicate what we were looking for through photos that we curated for each character. We asked cast to bring in clothing they thought would work. Everyone brought their wardrobe at the second table reading and we were able to have a complete cast wardrobe fitting. I invited the wardrobe, H/MU, and props to give the final say on the overall look. The wardrobe department had to do some prep work on Yolanda's bathrobe and do a little more work on Charlie's wardrobe. We eventually let Charlie's wardrobe be more about the utility of her clothing rather than the colour. She was always in a hoody and wore a jacket inside as if she was always about to leave home but could not.

Approach to Rehearsal

Working on the script with the actors was an on-going process. Olunike and I met every few weeks between October 2018 to February 2019, to refine the character motivations for Yolanda. These sessions were wonderful for me being a first-time drama director working with a seasoned pro. She is also mother of an adult daughter and generously brought a lot of perspective and personal experience to the role. While it was easy to work with her, it took me some time to find a young actress to play Charlie. I approached Broadway Bound, a theatre company for Black tweens and teens for some suggestions and eventually found Charlie.



Image 15. *Promise Me*, Olunike (l), Angie (m) and Breanna (r) rehearsal

In March 2019, we held two table reads with the entire cast and key crew. For each session, we first read the script as-is and then I asked them to improvise where they wanted and/or just speak naturally. I recorded the entire read and then made adjustments to the scripts afterwards. Most of the time I removed dialogue that seemed too on the nose or redundant. We tried to figure out what was unnecessary. My goal was to make the dialogue as sparse as possible and make sure there was enough room in the script for reactions to what was being said. After the first table read, I had to recast the role of Maxine because the actor dropped out. During the second table read, it didn't take long for the actors to be able to go off-script.



Image 16. Promise Me, Olunike (l), Breonna (m) and Alison (r) On-set

I encouraged the actors to ad-lib and make any adjustments that would help them make the lines their own or more believable. I held extra rehearsals with Yolanda, Charlie, and Maxine to review some of the more emotionally charged scenes. This was a special time for these cast members to make adjustments to the script and bond with each other over the scenes and the themes. I wanted to get across the fact that both Yolanda and Maxine cared for Charlie in different ways. I wanted to make sure we hit the right pitch and distinguished between Yolanda's motherly love and Maxine's caring, which is tainted by the colonized history of child welfare.

Breonna's mother attended each session and was in the room for all activities relating to her daughter. She played a valuable supportive role in making sure Breonna was okay throughout the production.

Please note that even with all of these rehearsals that helped me reshape the shooting script, I made adjustments to the script throughout the filming. In terms of the dialogue, I would rewrite lines on set after realizing that the actors were able to convey so much emotion non-verbally. Other times I would ask the actors to improvise lines if the scripted ones felt too clunky or needed shortening. A few times, I wrote new dialogue the night before and rehearsed the new lines with the cast during makeup.

Approach to Editing

Due to scheduling issues, Eui Yong and I did not start physically editing the picture until a few months after completing the principal photography. Before starting, we had many conversations about our goals around the look and feel of the film. After these initial meetings, Eui Yong edited from home. It was truly a collaborative process. It only took ten days to produce an assembly. We were open to each other's suggestions and feedback. We were crafting a story that takes the viewer on an emotional ride in Charlie's life. We were not afraid to lose angles or shots, or even scenes that did not work or interfered with the emotional flow of the story. We were not afraid to experiment with the beginning of the film, Yolanda's meeting with Maxine, the social worker, Charlie's apprehension by child welfare, and the flashbacks.

The only section of the film that took a bit longer to nail was the ending. Eui Yong and I tried a few different endings and switched a few scenes around to make sure that what we wanted worked. The overall style of editing was minimalist in form, and we went with straight cuts that felt natural and to the time of the unfolding events. We treated the slow-motion footage

for the flashback scenes with straight cuts. Music played a significant role in how we cut these scenes. We treated some of the raw footage with eFX to remove boom in reflective surfaces, etc.

Approach to Music and Sound

Our approach to the music in *Promise Me* was primarily influenced by the score of Barry Jenkins' fiction, *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Instead of piano and percussion, we scored primarily for string instruments. I used more original classical compositions, created by Ezinma, in an attempt to shake viewers to their core. Specifically, the music was composed first as a trigger for memories and flashbacks, but then we added more layers to drive emotional scenes and support the pacing.

Even though we were using a more classical music approach, I wanted the music to feel soulful like LA Rebellion filmmaker Larry Clark's *Passing Through*, but also have the barometric pressure you feel when watching Arthur Jafa's art piece *Dreams are Colder than Death* that helped to build the narrative tensions and suspense. We did much work filling the ambiance by incorporating on location diegetic audio recordings as well as non-diegetic sounds created through Foley. We kept the background sound low enough in the mix, so you might feel it before realizing that you hear it. Ezinma scored every track, and we made a sound-alike on two tracks.

Community Screening Notes

The detailed notes from rough-cut screenings, as well as my technical notes, are in Appendix 3. We conducted several closed screenings of the picture-lock to help us get feedback on the content, and test technical aspects of the film. The following are a few comments I received, writing after a work-in-progress screening at Vtape on World's AIDS Day on Dec 1, 2019. Please note, these are direct quotes that were emailed to me after the screening.

Jay, Professional Midwife, pregnancy specialist of HIV positive women of 30 years

"Women have always struggled to have our voices, and our stories heard about the sounds of the fray. The dominant script is written by those who have greater access, greater power, greater privilege. Our stories are written by others, and we are minimized, silent, monochromatic, one-dimensional supporting cast. We are background help. We eat last at the table. When discussing HIV/AIDS in Canada there is a proper emphasis on Gay men; their communities, struggles, challenges, costs, valour, and victories. But it is absolutely not reflective of the wider landscape, the broadly peopled reality of HIV/AIDS. The struggle in Canada is an on-going story of many genders, many ethnicities, many realities and very stark differences. Women of colour especially are disproportionally represented in HIV statistics, bear greater weight from social detriments of health, access care later, are diagnosed later, are sicker, are subjects of far fewer appropriate research initiatives, and have their stories and voices muted by racism and lack of access. Thank god for Alison Duke, a gifted story-teller who shines a light on women and HIV/AIDS and champions the stories it writes across our communities. Her film *'Promise me'* is a raw and powerful telling of truth. It is beautifully and honestly written, acted and filmed without any distraction or pretty overlay. Ms. Duke preserves dignity while silently

laying out the responsibility in all its complexities. *'Promise me,'* is haunting and subversive art at its most imperative."

Junior, HIV positive activist, original BlackCap support member

"I think the worst thing in life is to have that life and to be forgotten or worse to be made invisible. Thanks to Alison Duke's groundbreaking film, this hopefully will begin to stem that tide for Black Women living with HIV/AIDS. Ms. Duke brings forth the untold story of one of these Black Women, who fought fearlessly while living with the effects of HIV/AIDS. Not only did she highlight the effects of this disease, but also the 'affects'. The film shines a worthy light on a warrior Black Woman, one of many who were/are raising children, while trying to stay alive while fighting HIV/AIDS. Most importantly, the film also tells the story of the surviving children, their untold struggles, including insufficient support systems (shameful), our society willfully neglects to afford them. Not in terms of resources mind you, but the severe lack of empathy ("I'M JUST DOING MY JOB...") is not a good enough response to this crisis. I know this is just one of the many stories to be told, but I thank Ms.Duke for starting a well overdue conversation."

Jade, a social work student

"One of the especially striking things about *'Promise Me'* is how the film conveys the many systematic abuses that positive Black women/mothers face while still foregrounding the intimate ways in which these violences are felt and contested within their everyday lives. On the one hand, the film clearly gestures to the ways in which Black women with AIDS/HIV are rendered simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible within prevailing institutional structures. For

example, the film draws clear attention to how these women are ignored within prevailing medical institutions for AIDS/HIV (indicating, for instance, that the treatments are making Yolanda sicker opposed to better, and thus highlighting the fact that said treatments are usually not tested on Black women within the white hetero-patriarchal milieu of the health industry), while also demonstrating how this erasure is felt in concert with the hyper-surveillance that these women face from state/governmental institutions, such as child welfare agencies and social work.

I found this particular aspect of the film important because it highlights the complex ways in which prevailing discourses around AIDS/HIV are Euro-androcentric - ranging from questioning who can, will, and wants to get diagnosed/treated to highlighting the fact that living with AIDS/HIV happens, not just in the body, but within a deeply racialized, classed and gendered society. *Promise Me* brings these knowledges to the foreground of AIDS/HIV narratives, thereby educating newcomers to the field about these experiences while also reminding seasoned community members who either cannot or do not engage these narratives of their importance.

Yet, at the same time, the film also kept the pain and love that is often intimately felt within and against these realities intact, using the intimate ground upon which these narratives are lived out to draw the viewer's attention to the structural abuses that Black women with AIDS/HIV face (and how they and their families seek to resist these abuses as a result).

There is something deeply agentic if not radical about how the film does this. The viewer really feels the characters in the film; we feel moved by their simultaneous love for one another and frustration with the school/social worker/health care system; we feel the joint vibrancy and exhaustion they encounter within and against these systems; the viewer just generally feels the characters and their story. Yet, at the same time, these feelings don't end with the film itself, as you are urged to see the characters as living, moving people who exist with you as opposed to for you/your entertainment. In short, the film invokes a complex effect that is hard to describe; but you feel it, and this feeling happens in tandem with the aforementioned educational aspects.

The result of this, at least for me, was profound, because it seem to strike a balance between teaching audience members who are ignorant to these truths (assumedly a white, middle-class subject — often the subject who pervades mainstreams AIDS/HIV rhetoric and activism) while still genuinely visioning the lives of positive Black women onto the screening — somehow riding the line between teaching privileged folks without catering to their gaze. Personally, I find this a valuable teaching method because it engages privileged people in the AIDS/queer/gender and sex community who are unwilling to learn these knowledges, while still genuinely representing the voices of those folks whom these same people have tended to erase. In this sense, the film felt kind of alive; it was like an animated educator or passionate protestor who, while speaking to bring knowledge into/against a broken world, ultimately speaks for themselves; to give themselves and their community life and love in the face of literal or social death.

Chapter Six: Ethical Issues and Considerations

Promise Me is a story inspired by true events while producing *The Woman I have Become*, which is a documentary that was commissioned by WHIWH-CHC. In the fiction film, I changed all names, locations in the film and even changed the family structure. Instead of two daughters and no father in TWIB, I show only one daughter and highlighted a father figure. I also focused on a story arc that combined events that were experienced by numerous Black women living with HIV. The film also contains what I have learned about child apprehension since making the documentary in 2007.

I asked WHIWH-CHC for permission to use the footage of Rhonda from *The Women I Had Become* in the prologue of the film. I did not use any footage of her children or family. I showed the final cut of *Promise Me* to the Executive Director, manager of their HIV program as well as their HIV outreach staff, to secure their approval about how I used the footage before showing it to the outside world. They were satisfied with the end result and want us to show the film to their monthly support group. It was important for me to follow these steps. I wanted to ensure sure that the work was not reinforcing or adding more stigma and discrimination to Black women living with HIV. I also received permission from the person responsible for Rhonda's estate when she had passed, and she was quite thrilled with the end results.

During the development of the script, I reached out to social workers and educators to review it for their input. It was important very early on that we were on the right track in the telling of this story since we were implicating the education and child welfare systems. I wanted the portrayal of social workers and teachers to reflect on the types of conversations that occur

about Black families. The dialogue had to be nuanced. I received valuable feedback and even suggestions along the way to help realize the dialogue and interpersonal interactions within the scope of the issues presented.

It was important that we did screenings with the community before thinking about a wide release in 2020. We did not want to put anything out there that was going to re-stigmatize, and we also wanted the film to be a resource for bringing awareness about the issues experienced by Black women living with HIV and add dialogue to the landscape of factors that affect the Black community.

Our production had to make a few ethical considerations. First, we had a number of non-binary folks on the crew who were not being addressed appropriately on set. This was reported to the producer, and we had a meeting to figure out how to handle it. We decided to incorporate an acknowledgment of how people wanted to be identified in our daily production meeting, where we introduced new crew and plans. Secondly, because we were employing children, we made sure we adhered to all rules, limitations, and constrictions set out by ACTRA. We made sure that their parents were on set. We gave our lead actress ample time to prepare for scenes and take breaks throughout. We did not film more than 10 hours a day. Moreover, finally, we made sure that everyone received an honorarium and appropriate credit for their work.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This paper attempted to question and analyze whether a fiction film can adequately depict the realities of Black women living with HIV today, and if so, what is involved in that process?

Up until this point, my artistic practice has taken an interdisciplinary approach that blends my knowledge and experience of making social issues documentaries with an activist way of being in the world. Documentaries, as a genre of filmmaking, connect more comfortably with social issue initiatives like HIV awareness because they inherently are supposed to aim to tell the truth and create positive impacts.

My process of making documentaries about HIV throughout my career has been primarily supported by HIV organizations, activists, and researchers who live, sleep and breathe AOP, queer theory, anti-Black racism, and a well-documented shared history. It is, therefore, more manageable for me to embrace a negative capability working mode because usually, everyone is on the same page in terms of the facts and goal, and also because, ideologically, underneath HIV activism is our commitment to the motto SILENCE=DEATH. For this reason, I can rely on people telling their truths.

On the contrary, producing fiction about HIV/AIDS feels different. There is a creative license in fiction to necessarily make what you want. However, I have to make a concerted effort to ensure that the story being told is based on reality or the shared history. Even when I am critical of, or with HIV activism/movements/theories/treatments/prevention strategies/disclosure strategies/criminalization, the work must add to the conversation of what it means to live with

HIV within the vast landscape of living within our society. There are too many risks to overlooking facts or realities (i.e., unnecessary stigmatization, discrimination, criminalization, health and safety issues, etc), especially for characters who are from marginalized communities. It is equally vital to be concerned about exaggerating the issue. This will only scare people away, which is counterproductive to the purpose of producing a film about HIV.

Arsenault (2017) suggests that I may abandon the use of negative capability in order to produce *Promise Me*. I agree. I did not have to treat all of the characters like they are 'working-from-the-same-moral-compass' in order to remain completely objective. Fiction demands a hero and a villain. Here, you could present a moral dilemma and cheer for a side. It wants you to root for someone. You could create actions for characters that would help to raise the stakes and/or highlight the struggle even more. You could be on the margins injecting emotions and moral principles from your life.

I feel that negative capability did help to layer the many themes of oppression in the film in a balanced way, but it has limitations.

From the very beginning of this process, I was quite worried that my artistic practice would not be adequate to help me reach my creative and activism objectives. I was quite surprised by how my AOP awareness grounded the production. It did not magically disappear because I was working in fiction. It stayed with me. It informed my decisions about story arc, characterization, mood, tone, and messaging. It informed me how I could confidently work in a new Neorealist style. It informed how I would create each mise-en-scène that sought to put a

spotlight on institutional and interpersonal oppression. It informed how I would use themes such as anti-Black racism and queer identities to demonstrate the socio-politics of identity.

This was a process of being okay with bringing what I already know to the project and building on the work of others. The discovery of new Neorealism as a genre was quite liberating. It aligned well with my cinematic instincts and techniques. I could use my imagination to be as raw as possible. I did not have to pull punches. I could make it as profoundly emotional as I wanted to go with my actors. This to me is cinematic freedom.

In the end, *Promise Me* is a horror story within a love story — the enduring love that a teenage girl has for her mother who is living with HIV. It illustrates yet another horror experienced by Black mothers in Canada.

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Filmography

AnOther Love Story: Women and AIDS (1990) Debbie Douglas and the late Gabrielle Micallef

Baby Boy (2001) John Singleton

Being Black in Toronto series (2019) Valerie Amponsah, Yasmine Evering-Keer, Sharine Taylor
Adrian Wallace, Yvano Wickham-Edwards

Bicycle Thieves (1948) Vittorio De Sica

Black is ...Black Ain't (1995) Marlon Riggs

Black Mother Black Daughters (1989) Sylva Hamilton and Claire Prieto

Book of James (2005) Ho Tam

Colour of Immunity, The (1990) Glace Lawrence

Consent (2015) Alison Duke

Do the Right Thing (1989) Spike Lee

Dreams are Colder than Death (2014) Arthur Jafa

Fig Trees (2009) John Greyson

Forrest Gump (1994) Robert Zemeckis

Fruitvale Station (2013) Ryan Coogler

Gomorrah (2008) Matteo Garrone

Grey Gardens (2009) Michael Sudsy

Grey Gardens (1975), Ellen Hovde, Muffie Meyer, Albert and David Maysles

Home Feeling: the struggle for a community (1983) Jennifer Hodge da'Silva and Roger McTair

If Beale Street Could Talk (2018) Barry Jenkins

Into Thin Air (1985) Roger Yonng

Just Another Missing Kid (1981) John Zaritsky

Killer of Sheep (1978) Charles Burnett

La Terra Trema (1948) Luchino Visconti

Les Autres/Women and AIDS (1991) Anne Golden
Lilies (1996) John Greyson
Little Dieter Needs to Fly (1997) Werner Herzog
Looking for Langston (1989) Isaac Julien
Man on the Wire (2005) James Marsh
Milk (2008) Gus Van Sant
Mr. Jane and Finch (2019) Ngardy Conteh George
Narcos: Mexico (2019) Doug Miro, Chris Brancato, Carlo Bernard
One Hundred Steps (2000) Marco Giordana
Our Dance of Revolution (2019) Philip Pikes
Party Monster (1998) Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbara
Passing Through (1997) Larry Clark
Positive Women: exposing injustice (2012) Alison Duke
Promise Me (2020) Alison Duke
Remembering Africville (1991) Shelagh Mackenzie
Rescue Dawn (2006) Werner Herzog
Rome, Open City (1945) Roberto Rossellini
Rude (1995) Clement Virgo
Short Hymn, Silent War (2002) Charles Officer
Skin I'm In, The (2016) Charles Officer
Soul Survivor (1995) Stephan William
Speak It! From the Heart of Black Nova Scotia (1992) Sylvia Hamilton
Speakers of the Dead (2000) David and Jennifer Holness
Stranger Inside (2001) Cheryl Dunye
Teza (2008) Haile Gerima

Times of Harvey Milk, The (1984) Robert Epstein and Richard Schmiechen

Tongues Untied (1989) Marlon Riggs

Unarmed Verses (2016) Charles Officer

Unknown Woman, The (2006) Giuseppe Tornatore

Voices of Positive Women (1992) Darrien Taylor and Michael Balser

Walk Good (2017) Karen Chapman

Walk, The (2015) Robert Zemeckis

Why I stopped going to Foreign Films, 8 (1991) Steve Reinke

Woman I Have Become, The (2007) Alison Duke

Zero Patience (1993), John Greyson

Appendices

Appendix 1: The Letter From a Child Welfare Agency

RE: The Woman I Have Become.

As you know, Child One and Child Two are wards of the crown and in care of this Society. Both are Children. We understand that they signed a form of consent or offered their verbal consent to being portrayed in your film. They did so at the time when their mother was ill and without fully understanding that they do not wish to have their images portrayed in your film nor do they wish any information to be made public that would identify them in your film. Any consent they purported to provide would be vitiated by the fact that they were children at the time and unable at law to enter into any sort of contract. We also wish to point out to you that section 45(8) of the Child and Family Service Act makes it an offence to “publish or make public information that has the effect of identifying a child who is a witness at or a participant in a hearing of the subject of a proceeding, or the child’s parent or foster parent or a member child’s family. A person found to have contravened this provision may be subject to a fine of up to \$10,000, three years in prison or both.”² Xxxx, Manager – Communications Department, wishes to view this film immediately and this is our written request for your facilitation of that viewing.

Signed.

Acting Chief Counsel.

Appendix 2: Principal Casting and Key Crew



Image 17. *Promise Me*, Charlie, Frame Grab

Breonna Morrison is a newcomer to film. She has been studying theatre for several years in Toronto, Canada. Breonna landed the role of Charlie in *Promise Me* after a wide search for young Black female talent. She was able to channel lived experiences into the story as her mother had personal lived experiences in her youth dealing with the child welfare system in Canada. Together we were able to work through Breonna's expressions throughout the film and take the viewer on a wonderful internal journey. I feel this is just the beginning for Breonna. Look out Hollywood, look out everyone because Breonna Morrison is on her way.



Image 18. *Promise Me*, Olunike as Yolanda, Frame Grab

Adeliyi was born in Toronto, Ontario to Sunday Adeliyi, a Nigerian computer scientist and Roxiana Bell, a Jamaican nurse. Raised in both Jamaica and Canada, the well-travelled actress ultimately earned a place at the highly coveted American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City. After graduating from AADA, Olunike returned to Toronto to pursue a film, television, and theatre career which ultimately landed her the series-regular role of Leah Kerns in the highly rated and vastly popular television series, *Flashpoint*. Olunike's popularity gained momentum after her appearances in films and TV shows such as *SAW 3D*, *French Immersion*, *The Listener*, *Two Cities*, *Being Human*, *Republic of Doyle*, *Group Home*, *A Christmas Horror Story*, *The Emissary*, *Lost Girl*, *Killjoys*, *Boost*, and *The Girlfriend Experience*, to name a few.

In 2012, Olunike was nominated for "Best Performance by a Female - Film" at the Canadian Comedy Awards for her performance in "French Immersion" and won the 2014 Black Canadian Award for "Best Actress" for overall performances that year. This year, Olunike will star alongside Anna Paquin (*True Blood*), Cynthia Nixon (*Sex and the City*), Melissa Leo (*The Fighter*), and Denis O'Hare (*Dallas Buyer's Club*) in a feature film, *The Parting Glass*. Also due out, Olunike will be seen working alongside Tom Holland (*Spiderman*), Daisy Ridley (*Star Wars*), and David Oyelowo (*Selma*) in the anticipated dystopian SyFy feature film, *Chaos Walking* directed by Doug Liman (*The Bourne Identity*, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*). Olunike is currently on CBC's new breakout comedy, *Workin' Moms* created by Catherine Reitman (*black-ish*).



Image 19. *Promise Me*, Angie Reid as Maxine Nicols, Frame Grab

Angie Reid has appeared in several feature film and television productions as well as producing and narrating her personal documentary entitled "The Six After Dark" where she

tackles the plight of the homeless, drug addicted and mentally ill in Toronto's downtown core. Her passion for helping those in need recently got her recognition by the Toronto Services Board Community Member Award for saving the life of an overdose victim. You may have seen her starring as Lopez in the popular online web series Teenagers and more recently as a featured image in the NDP promotional commercial advocating diversity. She will also be featured as Mimi, and indigenous protester during the infamously historic OKA crisis in the soon to be released feature film Beans directed by renowned indigenous director Tracy Deer.



Image 20. *Promise Me*, Alana Bridgewater as Mrs. Gail Woods, Frame Grab

Alana Bridgewater is a Toronto actor and singer, who is best known for her role as 'Killer Queen' in the Mirvish rock musical *We Will Rock You*. She recently made her debut at the Signature Center on 42nd Street in NYC with the prestigious Soulpepper Theatre Company in *Spoon River* and *First Ladies*. Other Soulpepper Theatre credits include the title role in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Rose – A Musical*, *Idomeneus*, *Porgy & Bess*, *Riverboat* and the Global Cabaret Festival. Other theatre productions have included *Shrek* and *The Wizard of Oz* (Grand

Theatre) and *Hairspray* (Charlottetown Festival). Alana's film and television credits include 'Hannibal' 'Dino Dan,' 'Lost Girl,' and 'Mysticons.' She is the voice of Mr. King Dice in the hit video game 'Cuphead'. She received a Gemini nomination for CBC's "Gospel Christmas," has sung backup vocals on tour for Johnny Reid, and performed in the Toronto Blues Society's "Women's Blues Revue." This month, Alana will embark on a national tour singing backup vocals for Johnny Reid, and will be recording her sophomore album.



Image 21. *Promise Me*, Wyatt Lamoureux as Principal Dan Walton, Frame Grab

After a 17-year career in emergency shelters, Wyatt Lamoureux let his creative soul loose full-time. An ACTRA member and sci-fi fan, he fantasizes about playing Jean-Luc Picard's rebellious brother. Also a writer, he enjoyed a grand-slam of plays in the GTA this year, at Scripted Toronto, InspiraTO, and Newmarket New Play Festival. As a novice film maker, Wyatt is in post-production on his short noir(ish) film, *Apple Pie, Ice Cream*. He has features and a TV pilot he is all too happy to gab about.

Cast:

Mitchell Ballantyne, Police Officer
 Joy Amissah, Young Charlie
 Tyrone Moses, Mr. Thomas
 Nick, CAS Worker
 Richard Chevelieu, Voiceover Actor (CAS Worker)

Extras: Charlie's Friends:

Finn Campanella
 Alan Kashkevich Hurst
 Aryanna Awful
 Alison Park
 Denika Ellis
 Isabelle Hazelwood
 Charlotte Hallowed

Producer:

Dreaming of creating a world where artists and creatives don't procrastinate, Fonna Seidu swoops in to support teams execute their vision on time and on budget. Starting her film/television career in 2018, she has already worked as Travel Coordinator, Production Manager, Line Producer and Producer on many short films. Bringing her 5+ years of project management in the community arts not-for-profit world, Fonna has experience implementing collaborative media projects, promotional marketing campaigns, conferences, and speaking tours. As an accomplished community leader, she helped plan and actualize over 45 unique events across the Greater Toronto Area, managed teams of 33+, and maintained project budgets exceeding \$100,000. When she is not freelancing, Fonna works an Assistant Producer at

Adjacent Possibilities Inc., where she coordinates films that bridge systemic change with personal narrative

Co-writer:

Lindsey Addawoo is a filmmaker from the Toronto area and graduate of Ryerson University's RTA School of Media. In 2014, she earned a Tara Award nomination ('Best Upper Year Script') for UNDERside, a student-based webseries project highlighting underprivileged youth based on their social class, gender, and race. In the past, she has worked in TV broadcast journalism as a freelance news writer and chase producer at CTV News Channel. With a strong interest in sci-fi, fantasy, supernaturalism, and cultural mythology, she now lends her efforts to diversifying the speculative fiction world. Her script, 'ROOM 219' (formerly called 'Diagnosis'), placed in the quarterfinals for ScreenCraft's Pilot Launch TV Script Contest. That same script later took her to the Caribbean where she was a recipient to mentorship under the Bahamas International Film Festival 2015 Screenwriters Residency Program. In 2016, Lindsey completed the BlackWomenFilm! Leadership Program 2018, that same year she co-wrote and co-directed, Queen of Hearts, an Afro-futurist tale about a ruthless queen who has to deal with the betrayal of a lover.

Cinematographer:

Lucas Joseph is a Canadian Cinematographer based in Toronto, Ontario. Crafting his technical and creative skills at Sheridan College, Lucas was selected for a post grad internship at SIRT (Screen industries research and training centre) after 2 years with the team, he expanded his network and started his own freelance production company at Lucas Joseph Media (LJM).

Working professionally for now 5+ years in the film industry, Lucas had various roles including DP, camera operator, camera assistant, and focus puller for multiple commercials, music videos, Episodic/reality TV and short films . Currently he's worked on over 15 productions internationally including productions in Cuba, Korea, Germany, the UK and all across North America. He has over 35+ cinematography film credits under his belt ranging from commercial shoots with Holt Renfrew to videos with Chocclair, Beenie man, and Usher.

Editor:

Eui Yong Zong is an award-winning filmmaker whose works have screened at TIFF Student Showcase, Hot Docs, Montreal World Film Fest, CamFest, Reel Asian and many others. He directed a docu-fiction *Leftover* which won the Toronto Film Critics Association Award in 2015. His first fiction film *Sun* screened on CBC's 2017 Canadian Reflections programming and on Air Canada's Enroute inflight entertainment system. He's recently completed a mid-length doc *Until We Meet Again* as part of his MFA thesis (York University), which was funded by SSHRC (Social Science and Humanities Research Council grant). Yong worked as assistant editor for films such as *My Enemy My Brother* (Hot Docs), *Sugar Sisters* (CBC), *Superfood Chain* (TVO) and *War Story* (History Channel). His editor credit includes: *Over Time* (Bravo Factual), *I Hold the Decho in My Heart* (CBC), and *Here and Mars* (NFB FAB).

Composer:

Ezinma (eh-zee-mah), also known as Classical Bae was a featured violinist in Beyonce's *Homecoming* (Netflix). Beyonce is quoted as saying, "Her violin adds so much to my music." Ezinma also worked with Pharell Williams as a violinist on the score of *Black Panther* (2018).

Ezinma first picked up the violin when she was three-years old. Born in Lincoln, Nebraska to a Guyanese father and a German-American mother, Ezinma's mixed cultural and ethnic background influenced her musical upbringing and helped mold her into the versatile artist she is today. Growing up, there was a melange of music booming from the stereo: Parliament, Bill Monroe, Bob Marley, Van Morrison, Billie Holiday, Earth Wind and Fire, Bob Dylan, and Roberta Flack to name a few. These artists—along with her classical study of Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart—were influential in Ezinma's development and continue to inspire her today. Ezinma, she felt a strong need to present the world with a different side of her and a new context for the classical violin. Since then, Ezinma has collaborated with jazz, R&B, pop, hip-hop and electronic artists such as Beyonce, Stevie Wonder, Mac Miller, and Clean Bandit. Ezinma's style cannot be limited to one genre. Her music is a blend of virtuosic melodies and orchestral soundscapes with hard hitting beats.

Set Designer:

Ladan Siad is a Multidisciplinary Creative Technologist who works with art, design, and technology to tell narratives about the world. Ladan is a natural born collaborator and has used their skills to teach and help in many community-based projects in both Washington, DC and Toronto, Canada. As the Creative Director of Practice of Creation Studios, a multidisciplinary art and design studio they create distinctive brand identities for organizations and individuals impacting change locally and globally. Not limited to one creative practice, Ladan's directorial debut was a short film titled IFTIN (2018), about a genderqueer Somali-Canadian teenager is forced to spend the day taking their grandmother to her appointments, forcing the two to confront their assumptions of one another.

Wardrobe Stylist:

Sophia Rickson has been in costuming since her childhood, as her father is a Costume Designer as well. Currently, she runs her own Costume Design business and her objective has always been to give every customer and project 100% of her effort. Having the opportunity to run her own business has taught her to balance tasks while maintaining a high level of professionalism. Not only does her business design for hundreds every year, but they host various types of events as well; from charitable golf tournaments, to large scale banquets, to smaller boat parties. Sophia started in the TV/Film industry because of CAFTCADEMY and later joining CAFTCAD. She's been an assistant, a daily, a set super and a Designer. She loves breakdown and being as hands on when building and designing as she can. She has volunteered at various events, exhibits, classes and recently was the Volunteer Coordinator at the Inaugural CAFTCAD Awards. Her dream is to be a Costume Designer in TV/Film and CAFTCAD has shown her that it is possible.



Image 22. *Promise Me*, Young Charlie (l), Alison Duke (r) Credit Yvano Wickham-Edwards

Appendix 3: Chronological Shooting Schedule

The following is the chronological shooting schedule for the shooting script. We shot the Day 1-3 interior home scenes in chronological order to help simplify things for me as a first-time dramatic director and shot the class room scenes in reverse order to make sure that we had the continuity of position of the art work displayed on the walls. In terms of technical. I often combined several shots into one. For example, the opening shot #4-6 was captured with a long take dolly move and again, the montages were inspired by Haiku.

Scene # 1	INT CHARLIE'S KITCHEN Charlie washing dishes	Morning 1/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor	Props Cooking Dishes (pot, spoon) Pill bottles Pills Timer device	Set Dressing Dirty dishes Medication tray Unkempt home
Scene # 2	INT CHARLIE'S DINING/LIVING ROOM Yolanda can't finish her breakfast	Morning 1/8
Cast Members 2.Yolanda Taylor	Props Blanket	Set Dressing Plate/cutlery Mashed vegetables Tea cup
Scene # 3	INT CHARLIE'S KITCHEN Charlie gets Yolanda her morning pills	Morning 1/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor	Props Glass of water Pill bottles Pills Timer device	Set Dressing Dirty dishes Medication tray Unkempt home Sound A buzzer goes off
Scene # 4	INT CHARLIE'S DINING/LIVING ROOM Charlie brings Yolanda her pills and takes her to living room	Morning 7/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor 2.Yolanda Taylor	Props Blanket Charlie's Backpack Glass of water Pills	Set Dressing Dirty dishes Mashed vegetables Unkempt home Charlie's school books Back pack

Scene # 5	INT CHARLIE'S FRONT FOYER Maxine checks in on Charlie and Yolanda	Morning 4/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor 2.Yolanda Taylor 3. Maxine	Props Maxine's bag Blanket	Set Dressing Shoes Coats Unkempt home/clutter Charlie's Backpack Sound Knock at the door
Scene # 6	INT CHARLIE'S DINING/LIVING ROOM Maxine chats with Yolanda	Morning 3/8
Cast Members 2.Yolanda Taylor 3. Maxine	Props Blanket Maxine's Folder	Set Dressing Unkempt home
Scene # 7	INT CHARLIE'S KITCHEN/FOYER Charlie stops cleaning up to listen in	Morning 1/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor	Props Cooking Dishes (pot, spoon) Pill bottles Pills Timer device	Set Dressing Dirty dishes Medication tray Unkempt home Charlie's Backpack
Scene # 8	INT CHARLIE'S DINING/ LIVING ROOM Maxine chats with Yolanda	Morning 3/8
Cast Members 2.Yolanda Taylor 3. Maxine	Props Blanket Maxine's Folder	Set Dressing Unkempt home
Scene # 9	INT CHARLIE'S KITCHEN/FOYER Charlie stops cleaning up to listen in	Morning 1/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor	Props Washing Dishes	Set Dressing Dirty dishes Charlie's Backpack Unkempt home
Scene # 10	EXT CHARLIE'S FRONT LAWN	Morning 2/8
Cast Members 1.Younger Charlie 2. Yolanda	Props Bubble maker	Set Dressing Front yard
Scene # 11	INT CHARLIE'S DINING/LIVING ROOM Maxine leaves after heated discussion with Yolanda	Morning 1 3/8
Cast Members 1. Charlie 2. Yolanda Taylor 3. Maxine	Props Blanket Maxine's Bag	Set Dressing Unkempt home Charlie's Backpack

Scene # 12	INT CHARLIE'S DINING/LIVING ROOM Charlie stays up doing homework.	Night 1/8
Cast Members	Props	Set Dressing
1. Charlie 2. Yolanda Taylor	Blanket Charlies School books Charlie's Backpack School suppose Art supplies	Unkempt home
Scene # 13	INT CHARLIE DINNING ROOM Charlie looking at mom and food	Morning 3/8
Cast Members	Props	Set Dressing
1. Charlie 2. Yolanda	Pills Glass of Water Blanket School books Backpack	Bowl of Porridge Cutlery (Spoon) Unkempt home
Scene # 14	INT CHARLIE'S LIVING-ROOM Charlies waits until Yolanda falls asleep to leave for school.	Morning 1/8
Cast Members	Props	Set Dressing
1. Charlie 2. Yolanda Taylor	Blanket Charlies School books Charlie's Backpack School supplies Art supplies Water Box of NRTI drugs	Unkempt home Pill boxes
Scene # 15	INT/EXT CHARLIE'S FOYER Charlies looks at Yolanda before exiting.	Morning 1/8
Cast Members	Props	Set Dressing
1. Charlie 2. Yolanda Taylor	Blanket Charlies School books Charlie's Backpack School supplies Art supplies Water Box of NRTI drugs	Unkempt home Pill boxes Sound Door open and close
Scene # 16	INT/EXT CHARLIE'S LIVING-ROOM Yolanda eyes open, looks out window.	Morning 1/8
Cast Members	Props	Set Dressing
2. Yolanda Taylor	Blanket Water Box of NRTI drugs	Unkempt home Pill boxes
* may need to add 16 b EXT. Charlie walking on street to school		
Scene #17	INT. SCHOOL CLASSROOM Charlie is given one last chance	Morning 1 4/8
Cast Members	Props	Set Dressing
1.Charlie Taylor 4.Miranda Woods 5. Principal Walton Background Actor A.3 * Students	Attendance Sheet Charlie's Backpack	Art class room stuff Art competition board

Scene #18	EXT. CHARLIE'S HOUSE Charlie plays kickball with friends	Afternoon 2/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor	Props Soccer Ball	Set Dressing Makeshift nets Charlie's Backpack Children's Backpacks Jackets etc
Background Actor B.8 * Young kick ball players		
Scene # 19	INT. CHARLIE'S DINING/LIVING ROOM Yolanda watching Charlie play from window	Night 2/8
Cast Members 2. Yolanda Taylor	Props	Set Dressing Plates of Food House is tidier Blanket still there
		Wardrobe Yolanda's Red Dress
Scene #20a	EXT. CHARLIE'S HOUSE Charlie plays kickball with friends	Day 2/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor 2.Yolanda	Props Soccer Ball	Set Dressing Makeshift nets Charlie's Backpack Children's Backpacks Jackets etc
Background Actor B.8 * Young kick ball players		
Scene #20b	INT. CHARLIE'S HOUSE Runs inside to see mom	Day 4/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor 2. Yolanda Taylor	Props	Set Dressing Blanket still there Plates of Food House is tidier
		Wardrobe Yolanda's Red Dress
Scene # 21	INT. CHARLIE'S HOME Charlie grabs a polaroid of Yolanda	Day 1/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor 2.Yolanda Stephens	Props Polaroid of Yolanda	Set Dressing Plates of Food House is tidier Blanket still there
		Wardrobe Yolanda's Red Dress
Scene # 22	INT. NIGHTCLUB Young Yolanda dances as man takes photo	Night 1/8
Cast Members 2.Yolanda Taylor 7.Charlie's Dad	Props Polaroid Camera Glass of wine	Set Dressing Party Lights
		Wardrobe Yolanda's Red Dress High Heel

Scene # 23	INT. CHARLIE'S HOME Charlie tries to convince Yolanda that she hasn't change	Day 5/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor 2.Yolanda Stephens	Props Blanket Charlie's Backpack Pill bottles Pills Polaroid of Yolanda School books Timer device	Set Dressing Plates of Food The house is tidier
Scene # 24	INT. CHARLIE'S HOME Yolanda is having a bad morning	Morning 2 2/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor 2.Yolanda Stephens	Props Blanket Charlie's Backpack Glass of water Pill bottles Pills School books Timer device	Set Dressing Dirty dishes Mashed vegetables Medication tray Unkempt home Sound A buzzer goes off
Background Actors B.8 * Young kids playing		
Scene # 25	EXT. CHARLIE'S FRONT OF HOUSE Charlie leaves	Day 1/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor	Props	Set Dressing
Background Actors B.8 * Young kids walking to school		
Scene # 26	INT. SCHOOL CLASSROOM Mrs Woods discovers Charlie's sketch pad	Day 2/8
Cast Members 4.Miranda Woods	Props Attendance Sheet Clipboard Sketch Pad Charlie's sketched of mom in red dress	Set Dressing School classroom stuff Art competition display Beautiful art 15 years
Scene # 27	INT. INSERT TEXT FROM DRAWING An inscription from Charlie on her artwork	Day 1/8
Cast Members 4.Miranda Woods	Props Charlie's sketch of mom	Set Dressing Text on bottom of Photo
May this remind you of who you are. Dad loved you and I do too. Xoxo Charlie		
Scene # 28	INT. SCHOOL CLASSROOM Mrs Woods marks Charlie absent	Day 1/8
Cast Members 4.Miranda Woods	Props Attendance Sheet Clipboard Sketch Pad Charlie's sketched of mom in red dress	Set Dressing School classroom stuff Art competition display Beautiful 15 year old art

Scene #29	INT.	SCHOOL CLASSROOM - HALLWAY Mrs. Woods heads into the Principals office	Day 1/8
Cast Members 4.Miranda Woods		Props Clipboard/ Attendance sheet Sketched drawing of photo	Set Dressing School hallway
Scene #30	INT.	PRINCIPAL WALTON'S OFFICE It is decided that Charlie is to be taken from her Mother	Day 1 4/8
Cast Members 3.Maxine Walker 4.Miranda Woods 5.Principal Walton		Props Clipboard Attendance sheet Sketched drawing of photo	Set Dressing Principal office stuff
Scene #31	EXT.	CHARLIE'S HOME Charlie is stopped by Maxine	Day 2/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor 3.Maxine Walker 6.Police Officer		Props Grocery bags Police badge Vehicles Unmarked Car Maxine's folder Eggs	Set Dressing
Scene # 32	INT.	CHARLIE'S HOME Yolanda sees Charlie's apprehension	Morning 2/8
Cast Members 2.Yolanda Stephens		Props Blanket	Set Dressing Dirty dishes Mashed vegetables Medication tray Unkempt home Small table Glass of water Pill bottles Pills Timer device Charlie's back pack School books
Scene #33	EXT.	CHARLIE'S HOME Maxine talks about foster home	Day 1 2/8
Cast Members 1.Charlie Taylor 3.Maxine Walker 6.Police Officer 2.Yolanda		Props Maxine's folder Unmarked Car Police badge	Set Dressing Vehicles Wardrobe Red Dress
Scene #34	INT/EXT	CHARLIE'S HOME Yolanda sees Charlie's apprehension	Morning 3/8
Cast Members 2.Yolanda Stephens		Props Blanket	Set Dressing Dirty dishes Mashed vegetables Medication tray Unkempt home Small table Glass of water Pill bottles Pills Timer device

Scene #35	INT SCHOOL CLASSROOM	Day 1/8
	Mrs Woods pins the winning artwork up in the classroom	
Cast Members	Props	Set Dressing
4.Miranda Woods	Honourable mention sticker	School classroom stuff
	Sketched drawing of photo	
Various artwork	Other amazing artwork	

Appendix 4: Chronological Strips**CAST MEMBERS**

Charlie Taylor	1
Young Charlie	1a
Yolanda Stephens	2
Maxine Walker	3
Ms. Woods	4
Principal Walton	5
Police Officer	6
Charlie's Dad	7

Chrono Stripboard					
Sheet #: 1 3 4/8 pgs	Scenes: 1	INT Morn.	CHARLIE'S HOME Maxine checks in on Charlie and Yolanda	1, 2, 3	Est Time 4:00
Sheet #: 2 1/8 pgs	Scenes: 2	EXT Day	BACKYARD Younger Charlie and Yolanda frolic in the back yard	1a, 2	Est. Time 1:00
Sheet #: 3 1 7/8 pgs	Scenes: 3	INT Morni	CHARLIE'S HOME Maxine threatens to take Charlie from Yolanda	1, 2, 3	Est. Time 2:00
Sheet #: 4 1/8 pgs	Scenes: 3pt	INT Day	CHARLIE'S HOME Montage of Charlie doing different things	1, 2	Est. Time 1:00
Sheet #: 5 1 pgs	Scenes: 4	INT Morni	CHARLIE'S HOME Charlie makes breakfast and heads to school	1, 2	Est. Time 2:00
Sheet #: 6 2 2/8 pgs	Scenes: 5	INT Morni	SCHOOL CLASSROOM Charlie is given one last chance	1, 4, 5	Est. Time 3:00
Sheet #: 7 2/8 pgs	Scenes: 6	EXT Day	CHARLIE'S STREET Charlie plays street hockey with friends	1	Est. Time 1:30
Sheet #: 8 1/8 pgs	Scenes: 7	INT Day	CHARLIE'S HOME Yolanda watches as Charlie plays	2	Est. Time 1:00
Sheet #: 9 3/8 pgs	Scenes: 8	EXT Day	CHARLIE'S HOME Charlie runs home after playing hockey	1, 2	Est. Time 1:00
Sheet #: 10 1/8 pgs	Scenes: 9	INT Day	CHARLIE'S HOME Charlie grabs a polaroid of Yolanda	1, 2	Est. Time :30
Sheet #: 11 1/8 pgs	Scenes: 10	INT Night	NIGHTCLUB Young Yolanda dances as Charlie's dad takes photo	2, 7	Est. Time 1:00
Sheet #: 12 1 pgs	Scenes: 11	INT Day	CHARLIE'S HOME Charlie tries to convince Yolanda that she hasn't c	1, 2	Est. Time 2:00
Sheet #: 13 2 6/8 pgs	Scenes: 12	INT Morni	CHARLIE'S HOME Yolanda is having a bad morning	1, 2	Est. Time 3:00
Sheet #: 14 3/8 pgs	Scenes: 13	INT Day	SCHOOL CLASSROOM Mrs. Woods discovers Charlie's sketch pad	4	Est. Time 1:00

Sheet #: 15 1/8 pgs	Scenes: 13pt	Day	INSERT TEXT FROM DRAW- ING An inscription from Charlie on her artwork	4	Est. Time :30
Sheet #: 16 1/8 pgs	Scenes: 14	INT Day	SCHOOL CLASSROOM Mrs. Woods marks a red x on Charlie's name	4	Est. Time :30
Sheet #: 17 1/8 pgs	Scenes: 15	INT Day	SCHOOL CLASSROOM - HALLWAY Mrs. Woods heads into the Principals office	4	Est. Time :30
Sheet #: 18 2 pgs	Scenes: 16	INT Day	PRINCIPAL WALTON'S OF- FICE It is decided that Charlie is to be taken from her Mother	3, 4, 5	Est. Time 2:00
Sheet #: 19 1/8 pgs	Scenes: 17	EXT Day	CHARLIE'S HOME Charlie is stopped by Maxine	1, 3, 6	Est. Time 1:00
Sheet #: 20 1/8 pgs	Scenes: 17pt	EXT Day	CHARLIE'S HOME Maxine talks about the foster home	1, 3, 6	Est. Time :40
Sheet #: 21 7/8 pgs	Scenes: 17pt1	INT/E Day	BACK OF CAR Charlie sees her mom running after her	1, 2, 3, 6	Est. Time 1:00

Appendix 5: Post Production Notes

John Greyson - Thesis advisor notes on R/C — 7/16/19

Congrats! Great cinematography, very moving performances, fluid & responsive editing -- it such a powerful work of very effective neo-realism... I love how your story builds to the final reveal of the red dress, outside in the sun -- a great unexpected beat -- extremely moving -- and in this way, demonstrates mom's deep love for charlie -- and such an effective contrast to the very shocking abduction by the social workers. I'd actually call this a fine cut -- it s already working very well -- here s my small notes - and a few thoughts at the end.

—both mom and daughter give excellent performances -- very compelling and subtle -- social worker is very good (in a very difficult role that could have been over the top) -- principal and teacher are ok (i think the editing can easily fix their scenes)

—Consider starting film with a title which says something like: Based on an actual case which occurred in Regent Park, Toronto on May 16, 2015.& The goal of this title is to be the more specific the better -- even if its not one single incident -- maybe you've in fact combined plot elements from several different stories -- because of course, the purpose would be: such a title would establish this is a real story -- it doesn't give anything away -- it s not any sort of spoiler — but it does frame the story for the audience as based on fact -- which I think is crucial --because as we've discussed, I think many middle class audiences will react to the shockingforced abduction you depict by saying -- oh, that s too over the top & too melodramatic& &Toronto social workers don t behave this way -- (we're so hard-wiring to hollywood exaggerating -- over-amplifying -- simplifying -- whereas this title, insisting that your film is fact-based, will make us watch those scenes with different eyes

—social worker is quite good throughout -- very 3-D, yes she s awful, but not a cliché -- suggest you trim the lines & I am, here you are & -- instead, just use silence -- them looking at each other -- teacher -- need to build in beat before she says; hows your mom?" --do it with looks -- she asks questions and charlie doesn't t answer overhead pill shot -- mmm -- feels a bit too stagy-- do you have another angle overall in the second half, I feel there was some tightening that could happen -- trimming shots and beats -- there were some unnecessary repetitions of beats, emotions... confrontation in hallway-- the lines are a bit on the nose, and the performances are a bit melodramatic -- other takes? you may find in your coverage that if you can focus on when they re listening (not speaking), that might make it less melodramatic... love the reveal of the dress... consider cutting the final mom shot from van window -- feel like we ve already had this beat...feels a bit false

—title: Disclosure -- consider finding a title that is more suited to what your film is -- (you started with this theme, back many years ago -- but the film has become something that is much more specific... What about &Timer; -- referring to the first thing we hear....? Really excited by this film -- very moving -- and powerful

—Looking forward to seeing the fine cut -- and suggestion -- if you want to do a fine cut screening in Nat Taylor -- generally Tuesdays can work well -- Manfred finishes his classes at 6pm -- so you could do 6:15 or 6:30 -- great for you and Yong to see it on the big screen!

Fine Cut - Locked picture notes/ 9-4-19:

JG notes on FC of Promise Me

So powerful! It's really working -- performances are amazing -- beautifully shot

I think the title works perfectly

score is strong / emotional -- very effective

the titles and based on Rhonda are perfect -- perfectly supporting your story -- and the final beat of the archival... wow

I have almost nothing -- just a few trims -- questions...

7:55 -- try tightening up / overlapping more charlie arrival at school -- and the teachers words...

14:01 -- trim either charlies arm -- or yolanda head move -- one or the other (right now its a double beat)

15:18 -- cut this overhead couch shot (feels like a repeat) -- go straight to alarm at 15:24

16:36 -- consider moving this scene earlier -- to before the alarm at 15:24?

17:11 -- any way to cut out his; I think that we& done here? (a repeat)

17:31 -- this scene is confusing -- (powerful -- but confusing) -- I assume it's charlie knocking

(but why wouldn't she not have brought key with her? seems quite inconsiderate -- forcing her mom to get up off couch and let her in...) -- and then at 18:09 we see Charlie coming home -- so it couldn't have been charlie at the door...

Solution: couldn't yolanda just be waking up? -- no knocking, no ;mom please open door; -- just yolanda waking -- she senses something is wrong... (nice echo of archival couch shots at end of film)

20:52 -- for me the emotional climax is the hug -- and the red dress -- so i'd suggest moving this honourable mention; beat of the drawing BEFORE the hug/red dress -- archival -- beautiful / powerful (do you need the vacuum shot? feels a bit short right now, and busy) --

Credits: if you like, good to add in Barbara (your reader) and Kuwei -- here'ss the guidelines

Picture lock Notes - 01/12/2020:

Prof. Barbara Evans notes on Picture lock

It's a lovely, touching and anger-inducing piece but I do have a few comments. I find the music a bit cloying and sentimental and distracting - is there anything you can do diminish these aspects? I can imagine something more impressionistic and abstract that would reflect the emotional upheavals Charlie is going through.

I find the social worker's performance not as convincing as the others, particularly Charlie and her mother who are very natural and believable. One thing you can do in editing to help is to play her performance off reaction shots of the other person/s, so that we only see her briefly but can watch the reaction her words have on the other. Would heighten the dramatic impact and help her performance immensely. The same goes for the teacher and the principal, to a lesser extent.

In the flashback to the scene of her mother being photographed, I suggest reversing the second and third shot of her so that the more pensive and questioning expression comes last.

Do you think you've given enough information so that audiences will understand the nature of her mother's illness?

We tried to address as much notes from faculty advisors as possible unless we felt it took away from my artistic practice or goals of the film.

AD notes for the sound mixer:

Sound Mix - general clean up sound and cuts, and add a few lines ADR.

08:00 Add more shuffling under timer and title

00:18 increase the audio of shuffling through to 00:50 when she sits on the couch,

00:32 increase heart rate (subtly) until Yolanda lands on the couch then decrease the HR rate as she lies down.

1:21 Yolanda add ADR* change audio to - Please go now. I don't want your school calling me

1:39 sweeten audio on dishes add sound to putting down a dish

2:02 Maxine add ADR* - "Can I come in?" or "Will you let me come in?"

Also, add soundscape from outside bleeding into the house. The sound outside stops when Maxine shuts the door

2:20 add sound of chair and Maxine's heels

2:13 Maxine add ADR* "What's going on?" or "I need a status report."

4:04 Lower Yolanda's volume on "You know she can hear us!"

7:18 Add subtle soundscape in the schoolyard, Ms. Woods, feet, the sound of Charlie's feet rushing, taking off hoody, subtle school announcement in the b/g.

Maybe need a music cue here as well

8:02 -- Add soundscape - pls fill in

10:44 -- Audio needs clean up through to 12:03

12:59 - Sound levels are off - needs cleaning and good mix

14:04 -- add Heartbeat sound efx when she is taking pills

15:52 -- Charlie add ADR* -- redo line - "Just don't die"

16:10 - 16:24 -- some mic hits throughout. do we need Maxine ADR

We are still experimenting with the compositions until the final sound mix but please make sure all the b/g music is at an appropriate level

Colour correction:

The colour of the interiors in Charlie's house were muted and we brightened all the exterior scenes (outside of the house) such as the school and park to feel more vibrant.

Graphics and titles:

I took a classical approach to the title and graphics.