TO LEAVE WITH YOU

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN FILM
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

October 2018

Abstract

To Leave with You is a documentary journey between mother and son, examining the reverberations of four years of intimate partner violence over the following fifty years. In 1967, my mother was drawn to a highly intelligent and compelling figure: an apparent revolutionary, invested in social change, who came to Canada as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War. Against this backdrop of profound tumult and resistance against larger forces, my mother found herself winded by the realization that she had married a violent man, and was now pregnant by him. The film witnesses key moments of her attempts at departure, how others assisted or hindered, and how leaving was finally possible. This documentary project was structured to examine how closely collaborative methods of filming impact the final project, and the entwined praxis of biographical and autobiographical modes of storytelling, inherent to point-of-view films on family.

Acknowledgements

This film would not have been made without the collaboration of my Mother, to whom I am deeply grateful for this transformative journey.

I profoundly wish that there was no reason to make this film. For that, I must also recognize my father.

Marjorie Milliken and Lee Willis graciously participated in the filming process, offering their insights and experience from the time they knew my mother to this day.

I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the support and kind patience of my Thesis Supervisor Ali Kazimi and Reader Brenda Longfellow whose experience, insight and feedback has been invaluable, as well as the continued and inspiring support of John Greyson throughout the process. Grateful as well to filmmakers Min Sook Lee, Svetla Turnin, Amit Breuer and Marina Serrão, whose feedback at the rough-cut stage informed the final shape of the film. Kuowei Lee's administrative and moral support of the project has been beyond the call. Thankful as well to members of my cohort and other years for their support and friendship, in particular, Daniel Negatu, Polina Teif, Katia Houde, Sophy Romvari and Alex Cortes Coronado. Dr. Janet Deruiter was instrumental in shaping some of the early questions around the psychological makeup and how victims and perpetrators experience trauma differently, as well as early childhood and inter-generational transmission of traumatic events.

My Great Aunt Jill Ker Conway passed during the producing of this film. She was a deep source of inspiration and guidance to my work, and its autobiographical connections.

Above all, I am deeply grateful to my dear Patricia Arias whose love and moral support is a source of boundless strength.

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Introduction

> The authentic and pure values–truth, beauty and goodness–
> in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act,
> a certain application of the full attention to subject.[1]
>
> *Simone Weil,* Attention and Will

In an early morning of September in 1971, on the East side of Vancouver, my Mother left my father for the last time. She had awoken early with the memory of a fight the night before that had made her decision to attempt to leave, for the fourth time, clear. In the melee, she noticed that, for the first time, I understood what was happening: this was violence, not play, and as an infant, I wailed. She slept apart from my father that night, and stealthily, efficiently moved through her morning ritual of feeding me, clothing and packing her things. My father did not awaken. She got free.

Image 1. *To Leave with You.* Cady Williams in Vancouver.

I only know these details of this story because of this project. *To Leave with You* is a documentary journey between my mother and I, examining the reverberations of four years of intimate partner violence (1967-1971) over the following fifty years. This occurred prior to the struggles to establish women's shelters in Canada, the first of which appear in 1973, all set up by women, many of them survivors themselves.[2] This time period left my mother with few resources other than friends and family, and family was not an option.

The film explores how my mother was initially drawn to my father, a highly intelligent and compelling figure for several reasons. He was an apparent revolutionary, having organized for Students for a Democratic Society (a 1960s-era activist student association, actively affiliated with protests against the Vietnam War), and been invited to be a staff member of the newly established Company of Young Canadians (also a 1960s-era organization, operating as an arms-length agency set up by the Canadian federal government, which focused on community-based projects run by youth).

This was timely; he had objected to the Vietnam War not on religious grounds, but moral ones. This was principled and compelling to my mother, who saw in my father a striking example of powerful, compelling leadership, one that explored the world in new and exciting ways. He was the "very picture of a sixties radical,"[3] she said. They partnered immediately. Shortly thereafter, she found herself winded by the realization that she had married a violent man, apparently in contradiction with many of his own principles, and was now pregnant by him.

This project came about as a result of reflections on the content and process of making my 2015 film *The Pass System*, a historical exposé of the Canadian system of the same name, designed to segregate First Nations peoples from the white population, creating a multitude of enduring impacts. Throughout the making of the film, I wondered about the psychological impacts colonialism has, not only on the colonized, but in particular, on the people imposing the destructive policies. What is the cost of this violence, to the perpetrators?

The Pass System also generated many questions about methodology in cross-cultural colonized situations. Is the presence of empathy a sufficient guarantor that ethical, cross-cultural and reciprocal approaches to filmmaking will be followed? How can we ensure respect is given to a subject throughout the filmmaking process? What stories are mine to tell?

My partial, working answer to those questions was that beyond Indigenous protocols that were essential to be followed, there needed always to be a search for the reflection of self in the reflection of the other; and that an autobiographical search needed to be at the centre of the work. This would encourage a respectful and seeking process, as I was implicated in the film as well. How was my worldview formed by the privileges granted through segregation? *The Pass System* would thus be born of the determination to expose a colonial crime, the desire to assist in the seeking of justice for that crime, and a search to understand how my identity, as a settler Canadian, had

been forged by the narratives that drove its creation and subsequent six-decade enforcement.

I set about my thesis project with the determination that I would push my ideas about collaboration further than I had done before, involving my mother at every stage from research to the final cut, to support her sense of connection with the decisions made about the representation of our, but largely her, story. Her voice in the various stages of the project was significant, and revelatory, along these lines, but importantly, as a chance to unearth and shift important memories, for us both.

Formally, the project explores the active voice of the filmmaker in framing the moments to be captured, and in determining questions of duration and proximity in filming and in audience reception. How close do filmmaker and subject need to be to convey the intimacy of memory, re-explored in their original spaces? Is the original geography necessary to stimulate memories for a subject? How can a filmmaker make space for new experiences to occur, while filming, about memories that are traumatic, and work in a non-intrusive way to allow these realizations to come forth?

To Leave with You is the first part of a larger project. This film is about my mother's experience of violence, how she freed herself, and how that reverberated into her present. It attempts to document, in a fragmentary and episodic way, the elements, both practical and psychological, that my mother needed to leave. The role of the outsider looms large in the film, exposing the crushing impact of having one's story

disbelieved, as well as the profound effect of an open offer to help, without conditions, and the existence of a safe haven, unknown to my father.

Much remains to be explored on this journey. Filming and interviewing my father was key to my mother's participation in our film together, of which there are several hours of footage already. Questions of process–which film to make first, or whether to make both films simultaneously, has presented ethical and personal challenges. I came to the conclusion that it is only just that the aggrieved be heard first.

Beginnings: Fear of Death

This beginning was my fear of the end. My mother is now seventy-three, and amongst many things I wish to ask her, this is among the most fundamental. Her history with my father is in part my history, and profoundly affected both our lives. She went underground with me, cutting off ties to new and old friends to hide her whereabouts from my father, and changed her name. Determined this would not adversely affect me, she sought out a powerful community of activist, like-minded men and women to surround herself and her child with a supportive, intellectually nourishing environment– while uncomplainingly doing what was necessary to feed and clothe me. During that time, she was a waitress, she cleaned houses and she was a postal worker, although her focus was always transformative social change.

Her reflections on this time span now cover almost fifty years, giving her responses a compacted, almost poetic thoughtfulness, full of the weight of time. This, amongst other experiences, are coalescing at the moment, and I notice in her a certain freedom; an independence born of many experiences wrestling with others' theories. This time, now, is hers. The distillation of her life is now story, embodied and full, even if there is still potentially much to be written.

And yet, this is not a time where she has fossilized these realizations into unmoving conclusions. On the contrary, they are alive, and as she moves around these and other moments, there is the possibility of new discoveries about old events. It is possible for us to learn, with her, as she renews her thoughts and sifts her feelings

about how she processes these traumatic events. This may be a rare quality, I do not know, but I sensed that it was responding, organically, to several searches of my own.

Reflections on Analogous Experiences of Violence:

Connective Tissues

In attempting to understand and eventually shape my Mother's story, I believe it was useful, and ethical, for me to approach the subject with an embodied and self-reflexive grasp of my own experiences of violence. An enduring question is: what impacts, if any, may have come from witnessing violence as an infant? Is it possible this may have unsettled me in some fundamental way?

My childhood and teenage years included several experiences with violence; as a victim and aggressor. Growing up in Saskatoon in the seventies and eighties, the prevalence of youthful male/male violence was rampant, bordering at times on sport. Young boys and men often met after school to fight, pummelling each other into the schoolyard dirt. Homophobia was fashionable and largely unchallenged by authority figures. Given my curious nature, intellectual interests, and powerful examples of female leadership at home that challenged conventional notions of masculinity, it wasn't long before the fear of difference produced the result that I was branded with the epithet of "fag", even before I had any clear sense of what my sexuality might eventually be. With it came schoolyard punishment at the hands of other boys, sometimes a few at a time. By grade six, when I changed schools, I had decided I would pre-empt violence with violence, once challenging the class bully to a fight after school, resulting in double bloody noses. However, this momentary pain earned a dose of respect (or perhaps fear) from my classmates, and an accompanying peace.

At home, we lived collectively with other single women and their children, which was an oddity, not for the seventies, but certainly one for Saskatchewan. We shared homes, meals, and activities, social and political, and had access to an organic farm, where we grew vegetables, lived, worked, and celebrated holidays. There is a special kinship amongst the children who experienced this at times inspired, at times heartbreakingly flawed intentional experiment in community child-rearing. The only other boy I was raised with was both my friend and rival. I clearly bullied him on occasions, and as a young boy, we fought, and often I was the instigator. This haunts me, even though we are now close and dear friends, who call each other brother. In later years, on several occasions, his mother reminded me of my violence towards my brother, something I have trouble recalling with any detail. But the memories were clear for her, which I found disturbing. Simone Weil's observation that there is a "marvellous indifference that the strong feel towards the weak"[4] is perhaps useful in understanding this seeming amnesia: I indeed was older, and stronger, but I'm unsure if it's indifference I felt, as I search these fuzzy memories.

I remember feeling a general unease and nervousness as a child, however, and perhaps this was not simply the societal intolerance I was surrounded by. It may have a deeper, earlier, and more traumatic root: an abduction when I was five, in Vancouver. This was violence of the most difficult to understand kind. A stranger lured me into his shiny and large two-door sedan on the promise of candy, as I exited a corner store, empty-handed. I was lucky to survive this encounter, which included sexual abuse that I will not detail. Bizarrely, and to great risk to himself, my perpetrator returned me to the

exact spot where he abducted me: the corner store, making it easy to find my way back to my deeply-distressed mother's arms.

Before this, my Mother had often told me that the moment of my awareness of my father's violence was the key, final moment that made her see that the time had come to leave for good. I do not recall that moment. Is there a primordial unsettling of the spirit if a baby is raised in an environment of violence? Does the memory operate in unknown ways, settling into some fundamental part of one's spine, thus unconsciously controlling our movements into the future? I will never know for certain, but a focus of my work has centred on the search to expose hidden facts about the past, and how they impact identity.

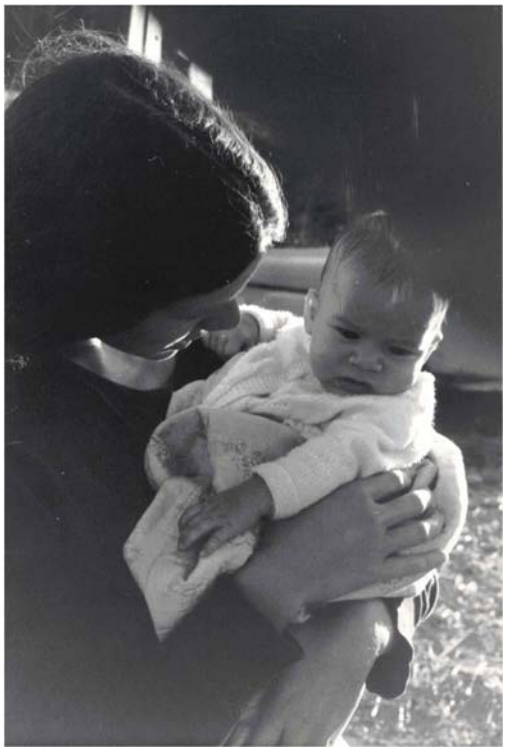

Image 2. Cady Williams holds Abu Sawma. 1971.

As I mentioned, I felt an ethical and emotional imperative to begin this process with the victim's story. In this case, my own mother, who fled the fists of my father, as I witnessed, as I have forgotten, but may have recorded somewhere. I knew a parallel process had already begun: I had asked my father, before undertaking this process, if he had hit my mother. He responded with a seemingly breathtaking ease: "yeah, I hit your mother". In part, this film is a result of my incredulity at this casual admission.

A few years after that admission, I wanted to see if I could make two films, one from the point of view of the victim, one of the perpetrator, with me, their child, as a fulcrum connecting the two. My mother had agreed. Now to approach my father.

My Father

While at dinner during one of his visits to Toronto, I asked my father whether he would agree to make a film about his experiences in this conflict, explaining I was interested in the impact of violence: what it was like for him to hit someone, and how had it affected his life? That might seem to be a patently naïve question, doomed to ensure a flat “no” for most people. However, I thought there may be several reasons for him to consent, and be interested in the subject. For one, he is completing a PhD in sociology, and often speaks of a predilection for scientific, fact based analysis. He also appears to have an apparent lack of shame about virtually anything. He desires a closer connection with me, and I have in previous times insisted that this connection be based on truth. However, he declined initially to participate, saying, “that’s all I would be remembered for”.

I discussed this reply with my mother, who agreed this would be the case, and unfair to him. In response, I shifted my focus to be a portrait of him, with a focus on the places significant to the early years of his relationship with my mother, and where we all lived together as family. He agreed to that.

I knew there was a possibility he might share along the way elements of his thinking and experiences in those locations, which he has, but it’s still very early in the process. I only met my father at 26, so there has been a great deal to understand, from his perspective, and he is not always forthcoming on matters of concern to me. I am not convinced yet that a film with him will be a valuable reflection. It may be worthwhile in

terms of a son getting to know his father, but I feel there is still more filming to do before I can settle into editing such a work.

I also wondered how compelling he would be as a subject: he has expressed no substantial remorse for his actions, and that stands in the way of any truthful reflections about the fact that his violence precluded the opportunity for him to be a father, as my mother fled for her safety, and to provide a healthy environment for me to grow up in. How could the audience find him of any substantial interest?

In the end, I feel a more interesting film may come from rigorous dialogue together, between father and son. My father seems to weather forcefully direct conversation remarkably well. Perhaps, in part, it may be because he appears to be very isolated and alone. This may be the price that is ultimately paid by violence: one finds oneself with no one who wants their company.

Instinctually, I feel there is much more that needs substantial reflection in relation to my father, and I am unclear how much further I wish to approach a man who appears to have little regard for the consequences of his actions.

A Possible Film

My previous film, *The Pass System*, exposed a little-known aspect about Canadian colonial practices: that the government had endorsed and enforced an illegal system of segregation on First Nations communities in Western Canada for over sixty years. The film showed evidence of the system's enforcement that was directly at odds with assumptions made by some settler historians about the "effectiveness" of the system.[5] This seemed to reveal an assumption–that because historians were largely unable to locate documentary evidence of the system's enforcement, it was unlikely to have been of any import, or significant disruption to First Nations' peoples' lives. However, this was undermined by evidence found in the research process that documents relating to its enforcement had been intentionally destroyed.[6]

Another essential missing element from historical sources, was the lack of direct research with the people concerned, in communities. I could find no evidence that settler historians had reported, from oral history research with the communities affected, how this system had drastically curtailed their fundamental freedom of mobility, and how that differed from the treatment of their white colonizing neighbours.

I had wondered how a country's people could endorse such an obviously cruel and destructive system, applied in part to control and limit parents' access to their children in residential schools.[7] As obvious as that cruelty now may appear to us, I had witnessed settlers deny the impact of the schools during my research for *The Pass System*, and evidence of that denial is still easy to find.[8]

It seemed to me that some of the negative reactions to residential school stories seemed strikingly similar to reactions that Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) perpetrators appear to have in response to being confronted: deny, attack or downplay the impact.[9] That kind of denial and cruelty was something I knew about personally. It was embedded into our family history.

My mother has spent nearly fifty years considering the harm caused to her. I wondered about how these traumatic events form autobiographical narratives of her identity, after such a significant portion of one's life. My point of view in this was by no means objective or even displaced from the events. My mother left my father when I was one and a half, so I was an infant when the events occurred. I believed that my mother's embodied testimony could support those who know leaving is much more difficult than it may appear.

I also wondered how the perpetrators are impacted. It seemed to me that to abuse someone, especially repeatedly, may result in some sort of psychological cost. Could my father really walk away from this history, emotionally and psychologically unscathed?

I was concerned about how to build a process that would have a high probability of leading to a meaningful outcome for all involved. A friend who had recently produced a family-focused autobiographical film spoke to me of how the process had ruptured his relationships with most of his family, a result I feared as well. Through a cautious and

collaborative journey with my mother, I would radically clarify my approaches to documentary, moving them to a higher standard, based on definitions of love.

Examining Form and Process: Films of a Similar Approach

At the beginning of Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie,*[10] the filmmaker shows us a fixed shot of a tree being relentlessly whipped by the force of a powerful gale. It's a durational shot, demanding that we witness this existential resistance. It's perhaps a metaphor for her mother's resilience and silence about horrors she has endured during the holocaust. It stands alone, however, not simply as metaphor, but as a request to view this tree as itself, and bear witness to the majesty of its defiant nature. The sound, however, is of microphone capsule overload–a continuous, rough whap of a sound, hinting that what we are about to see is too overwhelming to even capture. It is also possibly a response to Wittgenstein: "Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning."[11]

The search for a form for my mother's film, one that could express the overwhelming nature of being struck by the contradictions of my apparently progressive father–began with a conversation. I wanted, initially, to explore the moments when and where the violence occurred. These thresholds contained condensed and clearly traumatic moments, if we could gently expand and examine them, they might hold the promise of understanding the depth of the assault, and what new world was entered into when they occurred. I asked my Mother if she would visit and film at a location of these memories, in the hopes that it might open up these moments for others.

A small, friendly-looking cottage on bucolic Ward's Island, Toronto, held some of the worst memories for my mother. I wanted to explore the questions of proximity and framing raised by *No Home Movie*, and when we arrived, on a bright and warm fall day, I saw the contrast evident in the location itself: the houses were right next to each other. They were small. People would have heard my mother scream.

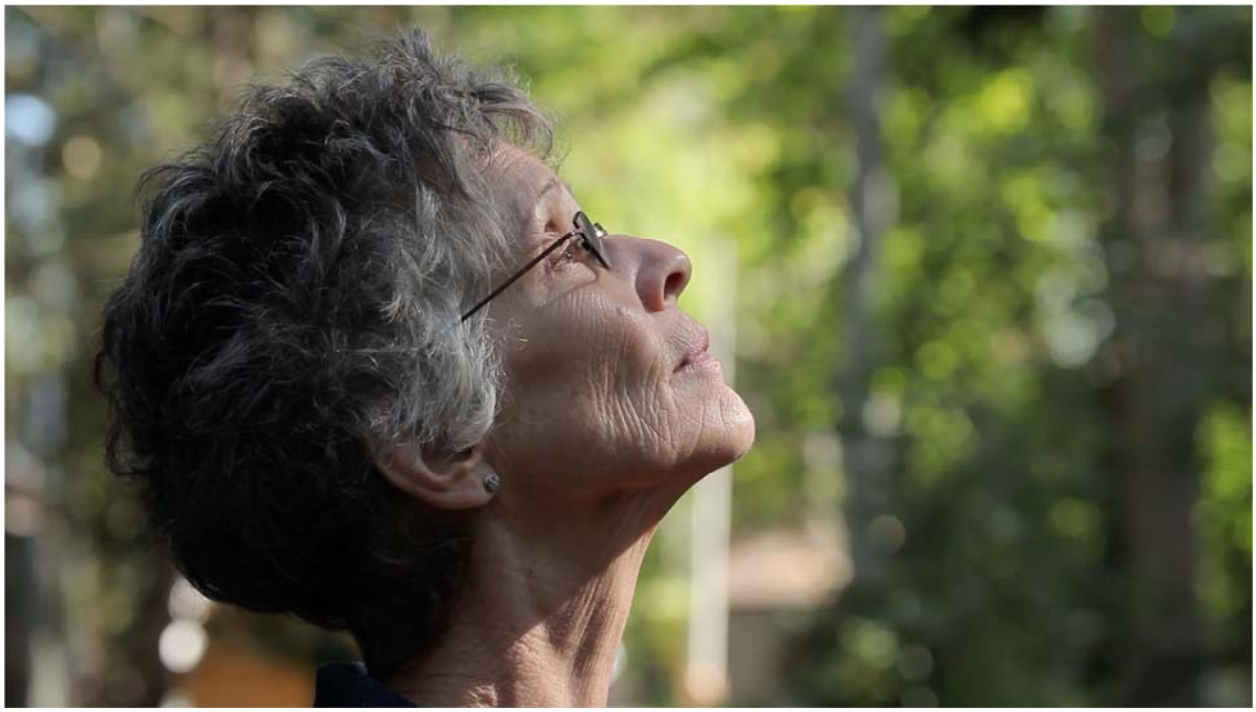

Image 3. Small Room for Arrivals*.* Cady Williams.

This theme–the crippling, isolating aspect of denial or lack of response, and it's powerful, freeing antithesis, became a core aspect of the film, but I was only to fully realize this in the editing room. It became apparent from that film test, (which became a small film, *Small Room for Arrivals),*[12] that I wanted to capture the sense of isolation my mother experienced, even when she was in public. The use of a long, 300 mm lens nearly wide open in aperture was used to achieve compression and low depth of field,

heightening the sense of isolation. The counterpoint to this were wide shots, where we could witness passersby, who would come to suggest the possibility of people intervening, ignoring, or denying her account of things: the world beyond, full of potential opportunities of freedom and of possibilities for danger.

Another witness came to be significant: the natural world. It would express for me the epic nature of the narrative, and the enduring persistence of life. I often sought locations that would suggest how my mother may have survived by recognizing the elemental, the natural truth of things. She survived in part by turning her gaze outward, to me, and seeing the reflection of the violence in the child's eyes, not by an inward gaze lacking freedom or empathy, locking her in with her own thoughts and feelings.

Image 4. *To Leave with You.* Cady Williams on Toronto Island.

No Home Movie employs a contrasted geography to explore a gap between the said and the unsaid, the seen and the unseen, and in small examples inspires some of

the formalism of *To Leave with You.* Akerman's patient camera is often motionless, witnessing and listening to conversations that suggest underground rivers of her mother's endurance. Akerman also surrenders, without nostalgia, to what she can never capture–a full picture of this. Through empty rooms of her mother's home, punctuated by glimpses of her mother, and fragments of audio that reveal her presence, we surrender as well to the knowledge that our perception will always be partial; it will always be framed by our point of view. Even when both of them appear significantly in the frame, Akerman mediates this through a halting conversation on Skype, and through their affectionate conversations, we perceive the lack, the distance and the yearning to understand more than we ever will. Akerman's mother died shortly after the film's release, and Akerman committed suicide less than a year later. As I mentioned before, it is fear of death that in part led to this journey with my mother.

Jonathan Caouette's 2003 point-of-view documentary *Tarnation* powerfully and unrelentingly examines the impact of his childhood through to adulthood, through decades of home movies and images, foregrounding the histories of his mother throughout. His mother received electroshock therapy at the request of her mother and father, fundamentally disrupting her mentally. The film confidently uses the aesthetics and process of home movies (disregard for lighting, sound recorded with onboard camera microphones, apparent lack of concern for framing), to broaden the reach of a very traumatic history. The editing is operatically psychedelic, often scored to music, and the viewer is guided through the many-sequenced story through a series of approaches to text on screen, in the third person. Some echo silent movies, others mix

Warhol-esque representations of the same image, overlaid with commentary or key moments where information moves the film forward.

Tarnation inspires me because of the filmmaker's deep care for what has shaped him, an unflinching search for how he can view that history clearly, and an apparent fearlessness in revealing it. His viewpoint embraces, almost violently, the fragmentary nature of our ability to write autobiography in moving images, and particularly in the aesthetics of consumer videotape. Caouette does not remove himself from the story, and embraces both a documentary point-of-view, and an artistic video paintbrush, exploding the notion of the disinterested outside observer, one he can never be. Caouette's process resembles what might happen if Pollock's action painting collided with personal history, mediated by a marriage of *Arte Povera* and Warhol; the random is embraced, then shaped by a vigorously youthful search through hopes and wastelands of identity.

Sarah Polley's 2012 *Stories we Tell* is a much more composed reflection and personal history investigation into the filmmaker's origins. Comprised of interviews, recounted stories of her father and siblings, re-enactments, and archival footage of various sources, it's a reflexive process where the filmmaker begins her interviews by asking her interviewees to tell her the story of her deceased mother "from the beginning until the end".[13] Visually, the film is a deconstructive process that reveals, and simultaneously embraces, the artificiality of the formal interview. Using several cameras, where we initially see the microphones, setups and the run-in to the interviews, we then

move into the intimacy of the story, which unearths a hidden secret of an affair between Polley's mother, resulting in Polley's birth. It turns out that her previously known father was not her biological father.

Polley's film attempts a comprehensive representation of this history with multiple points of view attempting to reach a coalescing point, where truth may gently reside. As narrator, Polley reads the following, part of a letter to her biological father:

> As I begin this process, I don't know what form my project will take. I don't know if it's a personal record for myself, or something to be made into a piece for others to see at some point… and I wouldn't even pretend at this point to know how to tell it beyond beginning to explore it through interviews with everyone involved, so that everyone's point of view, no matter how contradictory, is included.[14]

Polley explores the multiplicity of viewpoints and the pitfalls in a process where there may never be a unifying point of view that reveals the truth of the story. However, through examining the discrepancies and omissions in the stories, we might approach a prismatic vision of it, perhaps somewhat Shakespearian, but never complete. From Richard II:

> BUSHY Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows,
> Which shows like grief itself, but is not so;
> For sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears,
> Divides one thing entire to many objects;
> Like perspectives, which rightly gazed upon
> Show nothing but confusion, eyed awry
> Distinguish form. (1. 2. 14-20)[15]

The ethical and epistemological paradoxes inherent to choices made about what is inside or outside the cinematographic frame is evocatively responded to in Kirsten

Johnson's 2016 documentary *Cameraperson.* The film employs an associative, episodic structure built of scenes of Johnson's multi-decade years as a cinematographer, and contains a scene where Johnson walks backward across a busy New York boulevard, filming philosopher Jacques Derrida as he converses with several people who accompany him. Stopped in the middle of the boulevard as they wait for traffic, Derrida says to Johnson, "Careful! She sees everything–she's totally blind! That's the image of the philosopher, who falls into the well, while looking at the stars."[16]

Another scene employs a similar metaphor of wind as Akerman's: as an expression of that which overwhelms, while employing a more searching, personalized perspective. Johnson's mother had developed Alzheimer's and they both visited her childhood home in Wyoming three years after her diagnosis, where she attempted to recall the architecture and objects of her past. At one point, Johnson follows her as she roams the grounds of their country property, in a dusty valley dotted with scrub brush, grasses and large boulders. Johnson's camera zooms in, appearing to search for details of her reactions, going in and out of focus as she does. She then slowly zooms out to reveal the valley and her mother standing silently in the midst of the landscape, bordered with fencing. A great gust of wind whips up and its force is such that it nearly destabilizes her mother, who momentarily stands still to keep her footing.

Johnson and I are friends, and, over the years, we have spoken of how one can approach filming other human beings. It's clear in this film and in the breadth of her work that she works from a place of great empathy and care for her subjects; an eye of

love, one that observes with care and searches for associative patterns, not one that merely documents or dissects. *Cameraperson* reveals that it is evident that she places great trust in process, and seeks to create genuine emotional connections with those she films; you can hear her questions, full of the emotion of the moment she is filming, and see reflected in her subject an evident reciprocity.

All four filmmakers, Akerman, Caouette, Polley and Johnson had either expressed not knowing where their process would take them, and the immediate and subsequent risks involved. Johnson had been derailed by the central subject declining participation for safety reasons in a film she was making in Afghanistan, and had to construct a completely different approach to her eventual film, going through several, wildly different iterations of the film, settling on its exploratory, poetic structure, involving her family and her process:

> "Everything surprised me. I mean, truly everything. I was hit by a two-by-four by the fact that it was too dangerous for this girl to be in this film. Then we had to start over. Then when I finally said, "Okay, I'll let myself be in it. I'll go search for this footage that has troubled or marked me."[17]

Caouette feared misrepresentation saying to *The Guardian*, "One of my biggest fears, as we were looking for distribution, was that it would be made into a freak show by whoever picked it up, that they would position it, and me, in a way that would see us ultimately buffooned."[18] Polley worried that she might be losing her mind in the process, saying in narration (in a letter to her father), "Every time I feel I have my footing, I lose it. I can't figure out why I'm exposing us all in this way. It's really embarrassing, to be

honest. Have I totally lost my mind trying to reconstruct the past from other people's words?"[19] In an interview with *Notebook*, Chantal Akerman revealed how unknown and unsettling the process was to her, and it serves as a chilling harbinger of her eventual suicide: "And I didn't know I was going to make that film, otherwise I would probably not *dare* to make it."[20]

Collaborating from a Place of Love

Roland Barthes observed in 1974 that a discourse about love continues to be a conversation of an "extreme solitude."[21] I feel that observation is still contemporary. Bell Hooks adds to that observation in 2001, observing possible reasons for a continued resistance to speak of love in intellectual environments: "Taught to believe that the mind, not the heart, is the seat of learning, many of us believe that to speak of love with any emotional intensity means that we will be perceived as weak and irrational."[22]

Image 5. *To Leave with You.* Lee Willis and Cady Williams.

Collaborating from a place of love would naturally need to begin with a definition of love, and I find M. Scott Peck's version to be of use: "The will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth."[23] A framework for making this film, based on that definition, would make space for myself and my mother to reframe this traumatic history in a different way: one that recognized its impact

through the decades, and empowered my mother throughout the process. In other words, the opposite of what had occurred.

To this end I wondered if my mother's sense of ownership and attachment to the film would be somehow stronger and more natural if we were closely and deeply involved in decisions about how the film would be told. I was pleased that she agreed to be involved throughout the entire process: from research, to production, to the final cut of the film.

Image 6. *The Pass System.* Philip Favel. Sweetgrass First Nation.

I brought my experience of close collaboration with Elders and community members in the making of *The Pass System.* It was essential on several levels: in its process of following Indigenous protocols with Anishinaabeg, Kainai, Saulteaux,

Nehiyaw, and Dene Elders, in the viewing of building the film along its way, in sharing research and evidence of governmental wrongdoing in a reciprocal way, but also in its political stance as a film centred on the decolonization of settler thinking. I also made the film with the hopes that it would assist in the seeking of justice for the crime that was the system, as well as its continued aftershocks that reverberate to the present.

The collaboration with my mother would be similar in many ways, and in some ways more involved. We began by examining work done on the subject: viewing and critically viewing films together on domestic violence, such as Cynthia Hill's *Private Violence* (2014), Frederick Wiseman's *Domestic Violence* (2001), and Attiya Khan and Lawrence Jackman's *A Better Man* (2017), amongst others. A key takeaway from these screenings was my mother's critique that more context was sorely needed, in her view. She hoped to hear more about what brought these people get together in the first place. Through affirming in our film that my mother had genuine and reasonable cause to hope for a positive, exciting union with my father, and that he betrayed that hope through violence, we could provide the context she thought essential and lacking.

We also read many of the same books and articles on the subject, grounding us in some of the existing literature and discussions on the subject. The #*MeToo* movement happened to coincide with this process, which deepened our conversations about the potential relevancy of the project.

We sourced and located archival materials from the period, consulting the City of Toronto Archives, the Archives of Ontario, Library and Archives Canada and the Vancouver Archives, as well as my mother's personal files and photographs. There are actually few photos as my mother left in such great haste, there were few of her belongings from the period with my father that had survived.

I originally thought I would oscillate the framing of the story from its time to the present. This was my process in *The Pass System*–to collide and associate visual and auditory elements from the past with interpretations of the present to underscore the idea that trauma and injustice reverberates through the decades. It is not of the past.

However, I wanted to keep this project as contemporarily situated as possible, in part to underscore that point. My mother's sharing of her story is alive with clear and precise details. It gives one the sense that she has both achieved a certain freedom and an ability to consider carefully the impacts of this history on her life. From a contemporary political standpoint, I wanted to anchor the story in what I perceive as an urgent need. There is a clear imperative, I believe, to hear, in a full and embodied way, a woman speak about how she gained her freedom from a man who beat her.

We charted some of the most important moments, their locations, and anything in particular that stuck in her memory. We made a google spreadsheet in which she wrote details, and an example of one of the entries is below. For clarity, my name at this time was Abu.

IDEAS/QUESTIONS/EVENTS	WORDS /TEXT	IMAGES/ PLACES	Time Period	SOUND/ MUSIC	NOTES/RESULT
Public violence. Public protest of his violence from stranger. My journey to leave		Ottawa	Spring 1971 warm enough that grass is green		Sitting on a sloop in a park. First time Abu touches the ground with bare feet. Make up my mind I want him to be raised in a warmer climate. Have California in mind. There is an argument (do not remember about what) I get up to leave holding Abu. He follows, catches up with me on sidewalk and slaps me across my face. As I twirl around with the impact, I hear a male voice call out loudly "Hey!" (not sure if he said more. Felt a bubble burst. Ignored all kept turning and walked away. He did not follow. I wonder if man took him on at that point. The man's intervention gave me enough time to get back to the house where we were crashing, ask to borrow $10 and leave for the bus station to begin the journey that included finding the "diapers"

Image 7. *To Leave with You.* Sample of Cady Williams' Experience Graph.

From these locations and commentaries, we began to discuss what might be selected as essential to a film. My mom and I discussed and agreed that some filmed elements might just be a process to get to another stage, with the understanding that many documentaries leave the majority of the footage on the cutting room floor. We also knew this could only ever be a fragmentary, poetic view of this story. The scenes would amount to stanzas: dense, simple, and evocative, rather than a more complete transmission of narrative information.

The research and filming process spanned two years, with substantial breaks in between to let things settle, and distill questions. It also allowed the reflexive process a chance to deepen, give time for the revealing of new information, and find a mode based on the act of filming in a certain location. The landscapes we chose were not benign: they were witnesses to violence.

Embracing a Limited Vision: Resistance Against Illusions of an Omniscient Cinema

Film coverage allows a director to choose between several different angles of either the same shot, or cover a scene in different ways, with a wide angle, for example, then a lens of a different focal length, for a close-up. In practice, it can represent shooting with more than one camera, and can involve camera movements (e.g. dollies, cranes, drones or sliders).

This is in part to fulfill goals of presenting different views of a particular scene or of stimulating the viewer, but it also offers something that is impossible in real life–the ability for the viewer to be in several places at once. This is, nonetheless, inherent to film, as a narrative device, as any transition from one shot to another presents new information. It can, however, present the viewer with an illusory, fantasy or dream-like suggestion of omniscience, one that I wished to avoid in this project, in favour of a point-of-view that echoed the act of bearing witness to an intimate and difficult story.

Image 8. *To Leave with You.* Cady Williams in Ottawa.

I also wished to avoid the ethical conundrums presented by a process that intended to seek the truth of this process of my mother's departure from my father. I was not intending to prosecute these moments, so I did not seek *evidence*, in a manner evoked by Akira Kurosawa's multiple-versioned fictional vision of violence in *Rashomon.*[24] This was about hearing about what practical and psychic steps it took to lead to my mother's departure, without the pretence of an authorial version of her experience.

I wished to centre our focus on this process, and on the subject, through the formalism inherent to a locked-off frame, and the self-evident personal perspective of the solo hand-held, rather than opting for conventional filmic coverage.

There is a mix of composed mnemonic shots, revealing my mother in locations where the violence took place, or nearby, hoping to ground the geography of story, but also allow for new discoveries of these locations, together–my Mother, myself, and the audience. My mother's intensely present testimony of her experience on Toronto Island in *Small Room for Arrivals* led me to believe that this surrender to one point-of-view, had practical advantages with respect to the content created.

Image 9. *To Leave with You.* Cady Williams at Log Cabin Rest Stop.

The live action of the entire film is shot and recorded by me, with the exception of one shot taken by my mother. This allowed for an intimacy that may have been very close to impossible, even if there was a small conventional documentary crew along (director of photography, sound mixer, director and assistant). My mother's testimony in a car in Ottawa could likely not have occurred in the same way, if the car was full of

others, as professional and experienced in such situations as they might be. In any case, it would likely have changed the dynamic.

It also presented technical challenges, as I wished to record with professional equipment of sizes and weights that required considerable setup time. This could, however, be advantageous, giving time to root both my mother and I in the landscape and collaboratively make decisions about the nature of the next shot. Affixing lavalier microphones was often a way to spend a little time to ease into upcoming moment as well.

Notes on Sound and Silence

An understated use of sound was essential, I believe, to the underscoring of the need for close listening, at the heart of this film's purpose. Inspirations for use of sound in this manner include the previously mentioned *Cameraperson* and *No Home Movie,* as well as *The Assassin* (Hou-Hsiao-hsien, 2015), *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), *A Man Escaped* (Robert Bresson, 1956). All have either an overall or momentary austerity of sonic treatment, allowing the viewer a moment to experience the sound as a discrete and isolated element, devoid of competing commentary with visuals.

The use of exclusively diegetic sounds restricted the film to representing the real, something I wished to fuse to the audience's experience of my mother's testimony. Extended L cuts (where the sound extends after a picture edit point) and J cuts (where the sound precedes the picture edit) bridged the episodic structure of the picture edit. Finally, sharp cuts and long fades to silence, which brings the audience into the location where they are watching the film, and by extension into the present, were intended to work as enjoining and implicating the audience in what it just heard.

Conclusion

This film had to be of practical use to people attempting to understand how difficult it can be to leave a relationship where a man is beating a woman. All cinematic elements needed to work modestly, with rooted intent, to present how hard that apparently simple task can actually be. I and my mother hoped it might be a convincing antidote to the casually naïve, judgmental and damaging question, “why didn’t you leave sooner?” The question, so commonly asked, that blithely centres the victim as being responsible for her freedom, and excludes the culpability of the perpetrator, by failing to implicate them for their damaging violence. As my mother said in one of our interviews, “That’s not the question to ask. If someone asked me that question, I wouldn’t talk to them again.”[25]

How we listen, how we witness, and how we collaborate with documentary subjects, matters as much as what we witness, and is political. I hoped that by collaboratively shaping a creative film production process with my mother, it would ultimately empower both the filmmaker and the subject in the ways they needed. The result of that collaboration is probably best summarized by my mother:

> I got new insights. I got new strengths from re-looking at it. I thought I had figured everything out about it, and this film has me thinking about it. You know the whole experience about the man in Ottawa? That’s totally new to me. I mean, that’s wonderful. It gave me new angles and new insights and actually was very refreshing.[26]

Endnotes

[1] Simone Weil and Siân Miles. *Simone Weil: An Anthology*. (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 214.

[2] Margo Goodhand, *Runaway Wives and Rogue Feminists: The Origins of the Women's Shelter Movement in Canada.* (Black Point: Fernwood Publishing, 2017), 3.

[3] *To Leave with You.* Directed by Alex Williams. Toronto: Alex Williams. 2018.

[4] Simone Weil and Siân Miles, 179.

[5] F. Laurie Barron. "The Indian Pass System in the Canadian West, 1882-1935." *Prairie Forum* vol. 13, no.1 (1988), 34.

[6] Harold McGill. Glenbow Archives, Harold and Emma McGill Fonds, M3281, Correspondence regarding Indian Pass System, July 11, 1941.

[7] *The Pass System.* Directed by Alex Williams. Toronto: Alex Williams and Tamarack Productions. 2015.

[8] Kieran Levitt. "Alberta Private School Sees Merit in Asking about 'Positive Effects' of Residential Schools" *The Star Edmonton*. September 24, 2018. Accessed Sept 30, 2018. https://www.thestar.com/edmonton/2018/09/24/alberta-private-school-sees-merit-in-asking-about-positive-effects-of-residential-schools.html

[9] Sarah J. Harsey, Eileen L. Zurbriggen, and Jennifer J. Freyd, "Perpetrator Responses to Victim Confrontation: DARVO and Victim Self-Blame," Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma 26, no. 6 (2017), 645.

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[11] Ludwig Wittgenstein and Georg Henrik Von. Wright. *Culture and Value* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1980), 16e.

[12] *No Home Movie.* Directed by Chantal Akerman, 2016.

[13] *Stories we Tell*. Directed by Sarah Polley. Toronto: National Film Board of Canada. 2013.

[14] Ibid.

[15] William Shakespeare and Peter Ure, *King Richard II* (London: Methuen, 1961), 70.

[16] *Cameraperson.* Directed by Kirsten Johnson. New York. 2016. Excerpt from *Derrida,* Directed by Amy Ziering and Kirby Dick. New York, 2002.

[17] Kate Erbland. "Sundance: How 'Cameraperson' Filmmaker Kirsten Johnson Found Herself in Her Own Documentary". *Indiewire.* January 30, 2016. Accessed September 25, 2018. https://www.indiewire.com/2016/01/sundance-how-cameraperson-filmmaker-kirsten-johnson-found-herself-in-her-own-documentary-28426/

[18] Gareth McLean. "My Life, the Horror Movie." *The Guardian.* April 16, 2005. Accessed September 6, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2005/apr/16/features.weekend

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[21] Roland Barthes, *A Lovers Discourse: Fragments.* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2010), 2.

[22] Bell Hooks. *All about Love: New Visions*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2018), xxvii.

[23] M. Scott Peck. *The Road Less Travelled*. (New York, NY: Touchstone, 2003), 81.

[24] *Rashomon*. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. Tokyo: Daiei. 1950.

[25] Cady Williams, interviewed by Alex Williams. Toronto, ON. August 25, 2018.

[26] Ibid.

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