STAY IN TOUCH

by

Johanna Thompson

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 Visual Arts York University Toronto, Ontario

April 2017

ABSTRACT

The following paper is written support for the *STAY IN TOUCH* exhibition on display at Special Projects Gallery at York University from April 3rd to April 7th 2017. In this body of work, I use processes of weaving, knitting, crochet, embroidery and photography to touch the past and to feel reciprocally touched by it. I explore the ability of touch to imaginatively transport a person to another time or place. By embroidering images from my collection of family photographs I emphasize the tactile and ephemeral nature of memory and the photographic object. In working with family history and personal memory I am considering the gradual disappearance of my own history. Through repetitious acts of making, I engage with remembered gestures and body memory. Drawing from personal experiences, this paper focuses on mnemonic storytelling to reimagine memories of touching and feeling objects and spaces.

DEDICATION

For Henry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Katherine Knight, and my committee Yvonne Singer and Anna Hudson, as well as Program Director Barbara Balfour. Thank you for your continued support and guidance.

Thank you to Betty deBrouwer, I have greatly enjoyed our hours spent crocheting together. All the things you have made have profoundly inspired me.

Thank you to Sheri Nault, I am forever grateful for your support and friendship.

I am thankful to David Laurin for his unfailing support. Your encouragement means the world to me.

Finally, thanks to Ivy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF IMAGES

INTRODUCTION

My thesis exhibition addresses object making and storytelling as a means of forming connections between the past and present, between hands and materials, between what is lost and what remains. As noted in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, "We might say that as soon as the question 'What is lost?' is posed, it invariably slips into the question 'What remains?' That is, loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it" (Eng 2). Through working tactilely, with photographs, yarn and thread, I am engaging with what remains of something lost. I explore the ability of touch to transport someone to another time or place. Using craft processes, I attempt to touch the past and am reciprocally touched by it. I create remembered gestures and bodily memory through repetitious acts of making. My work is an exploration of the ways memory is felt in the body and how we carry the past with us into the future.

In my work I am often searching for the physical traces of the past, whether through remembered gestures or through the aged newspaper clippings and photographs I find. This search is hopeful. I anticipate and remain open to the possibilities that new information reveals within the past. I feel hope despite my knowledge that disappearances are more or less inevitable. I hold on to the collections of found anonymous photographs because of my hope that they may be reunited with their owners one day. Accumulating masses of found and family images I engage with their slow disappearance and hopefully stall it. Photographs are touched and touch back. I emphasize their tactility and engage with them intimately through the embroidery with which I adorn them. I use textiles to engage with remembered and lost histories in

an immediate, haptic way. I use gestures of knitting, crocheting, and weaving to recall childhood memories of craft. This work begins with and returns to connections and memories.

LILIANE

While I was completing my undergraduate degree at NSCAD University in the winter of 2014, I bought a collection of photographs on eBay. The package was small but densely packed - the weight surprised me. I picked it up at the post office on Novalea Drive in Halifax. I was in a rush and opened the package while sitting on the bus. The photographs were arranged in six or seven piles, wrapped in paper, stacked next to and on top of one another. Delighted, I began dismantling them. I only ever found a single name written on the backside of one image - *Liliane*. It was a photograph of a baby. The name was both a personal identifier and entirely anonymous and untraceable.

Going through these photos, I began to glean certain details and imagine others. Although the package was shipped from France, I cannot be certain that the collection originated there. The writing on the photographs is entirely in French, therefore it seems likely that they originated in France or in a French speaking region of Europe. The family depicted appeared to have travelled often. Most of the images appear to be taken on vacations and feature subjects posed in front of monuments and buildings, and portraits photographed on boats or beaches. Many of the images are of mountains – likely the Swiss Alps, where the family is often shown hiking and skiing. The photographer also turned their camera on babies, pets, and farm animals. The subjects always appeared to be relaxed and happy. Based on the dates handwritten on the back of many of the photographs, most were taken over the course of World War II, yet I find no trace of it represented through the images. The photographs themselves did not provide visual clues to indicate an environment of trauma and difficulty. This leads me to

Image 1 - Unknown Photographer. *Liliane à 8 mois 1/2*

wonder if the collection originated in Switzerland, as it was a neutral country during the Second World War.

In this collection of 400 photographs, at least 100 photographs are of a woman with white hair. She is unnamed. The photographs, dated between 1925 and 1955, were in no clear order when I received them. When I review the photographs, I watch the anonymous woman both age and become younger. Time becomes flexible. It can be rearranged through the order of the photographs. Sometimes a man is photographed alongside her. He's tall and handsome and wears a pair of thick rimmed glasses.

Sometimes a younger woman who I imagine to be her daughter is with them. I realized at one point that the white-haired woman might in fact be many different women in the collection. I decided she was a single character and chose to view the entire collection as her story. I think of the collection as titled ‘Lilliane' though this is not her name but the name of the baby, the only name written on any of the photos. She remains nameless. I wanted to know her but I ultimately couldn’t. Some things could be gleaned from the photographs alone. The people were athletic – they were often pictured skiing or hiking. They enjoyed spending time outdoors. They appeared to be wealthy as they travelled often and were usually very well dressed. It seemed like a large family, or they had a lot of friends. The woman seemed well loved and the family appeared happy. I wanted to know more and I couldn’t.

This was the first time I’d received a whole collection of anonymous photographs. Usually I only acquired one or two images at a time from sources like flea markets. The seeming completeness of this collection amazed me. I was in wonder of the collection and shared it with other people. The images were the subject of seemingly endless speculation, in speculating we were participants in an *event of photography*. As theorist Ariella Azoulay describes:

> The event of photography is never over. It can only be suspended, caught in the anticipation of the next encounter that will allow for its actualization: an encounter that might allow a certain spectator to remark on the excess or lack inscribed in the photograph so as to re-articulate every detail including those that some believe to be fixed in place by the glossy emulsion of the photograph (86).

I see my work with this collection as an encounter that allows the photographs to

constantly be reinterpreted. I become both a spectator and an author, remarking on and responding to the details within the original photograph. The woman is gone. I am aware of the photographed subject's mortality and feel saddened by it. I wonder who knows and remembers her. And in lieu of any concrete answers, I feel a responsibility to maintain the collection. I cannot know whether or not the collection is complete and wonder how many images of this family live on elsewhere. Sometimes I imagine that someone is looking for the photographs and one day chance will reunite them. I feel an obligation to keep the photographs safe until they are needed by someone again.

This collection became the impetus for the production of my final undergraduate work titled *Liliane*. In this body of work, I began making copies of the photographs and embroidering them. By reworking the images, I cause them to exist in an altered trajectory. They are imbued with new meaning and given a new life. The embroidery serves to hide parts of the photograph while revealing others. In *Camera Lucida,* French philosopher Roland Barthes introduces the term *punctum*, defining it as an element of a photograph that "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me" (26). The punctum is accidental and it finds you. The punctum is an unintentional detail in the image that *strikes* the viewer. Shawn Michelle Smith comments upon Barthes' haptic use of the punctum, "Deeming the punctum a wound, Barthes reminds one that desire and grief register powerfully in the body. Feelings have physical effects. Indeed, Barthes's entire understanding of photography is remarkably tactile; his experience of viewing is one of being touched" (35). I pierce the photograph when I embroider it as the photographic punctum described by Barthes pierces me. I am making the punctum more physical.

Image 2 - *Liliane*, 2014.

I use the process of stitching through the images to work through a sense of separation and longing for a history that I cannot be part of. The process is slow and laborious. Through the labour of stitching I am forced to revisit each photograph again and again, committing them to memory. My fingers trace the lines of embroidery as I work. The process demands that I focus on the minuscule details in the image. The choices as to where and how I will alter the image, and what colour thread should be used arises from a conversation between myself and each individual image. In some instances, I block out the faces in the image because I want to draw attention to the impossibility of knowing the subjects. There are times when I focus my stitching on a particular part of the figure's body and cover it. The embroidery tricks your eye into

Image 3 - *Untitled*, 2016.

seeing movement and, in this way, I can animate the photographed figures. This gesture resists the notion of the frozen image and its existence is effectively altered.

These photographs carry both the narrative of the subjects they depict and of their physical experiences as objects. With *Liliane,* I began exploring how photographic objects move through space, change hands and transform themselves, get misplaced or forgotten. They exist in a state of fragile fluidity. They are objects marked by their history. Novelist and critic Susan Sontag writes about the photograph's innate ontology:

> Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire. Photographs, which fiddle with the scale of the world, themselves get reduced, blown up,

> cropped, retouched, doctored, tricked out. They are, plagued by the usual ills of paper objects; they disappear; they become valuable, and get bought and sold; they are reproduced. Photographs, which package the world, seem to invite packaging. They are stuck in albums, framed and set on tables, tacked on walls, projected as slides. (4)

Through the gesture of embroidering the photographs I am emphasizing their object-ness and engaging with their ephemerality. I am grappling with the sense of loss and yearning I feel towards the subjects depicted. Kate Palmer Albers writes in *Uncertain Histories* that “Photographs fail, often spectacularly, in their ostensible promise to narrate the past” (5). The photographic image makes apparent my separation from the subjects depicted.

Although the work *Lilliane* is not a part of my thesis exhibition, the discoveries I made about photography and memory through it, and the processes that I began to utilize while working with these photographs are foundational to the work *STAY IN TOUCH.*

HOMESICKNESS

I completed my undergraduate degree and moved back home to Ontario in January 2015. At this time, I turned from making work about friends and strangers to making work about my family. The anonymous photographs I had previously dedicated my attention to had been standing in for the family photographs that I had been separated from. Returning to Ontario meant a turn towards the production of work that was both personal and local. Familial memories and the ephemerality of my own history became a source of inspiration. I wanted to look at my memories of experiences that were in the process of disappearing or being forgotten. A guiding force in my practice has been what Palmer Albers describes as “a compulsion to dwell on history - on how it is recorded, stored, forgotten, collected, saved, narrated, lost, remembered, and made public” (4). When I thought about my family photographs in relation to the anonymous photographs I was dealing with in *Liliane*, I wondered if the collections of photographs and objects I was gathering would meet the same fate. The *Liliane* collection felt sad to me because it felt misplaced or left behind. In working with family history and personal memory, I consider the gradual disappearance of my own history. I feel nostalgia when I look at old family photographs. I yearn to go back. Russian scholar and artist Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as

> A longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed, Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long - distance relationship. A

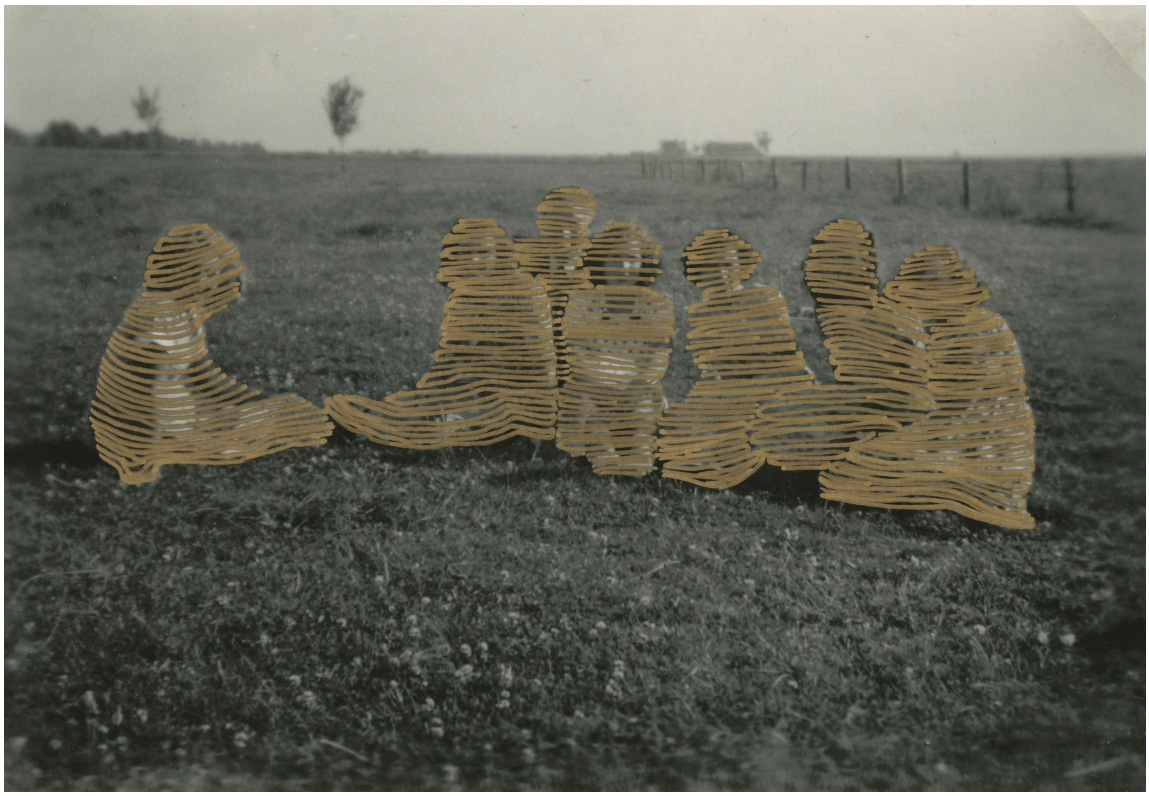

Image 4 - *Relatives*, 2016.

> cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images - of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. (xiii)

In *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction,* American literary theorist Roberta Rubenstein describes nostalgia as a temporal homesickness, "While homesickness refers to a spatial/geographical separation," she says, "nostalgia more accurately refers to a temporal one" (4). My graduate work explores nostalgia and a desire to return to something that is gone. I have continued to work with photographs to reference family histories, while incorporating work with textiles into my process. My engagement with textiles is a return to materials and processes that I associate with home and memories of my childhood. When I engage with yarn and thread, I am revisiting my childhood explorations of materials. In that

sense, my textile practice is deeply nostalgic. By engaging with practices like the ones I explored as a young child guided by my mother and grandmother, I am resisting the disappearance of those experiences and considering the fragility of the past.

While studying photography during my undergraduate degree, I was often concerned with documenting my family. My parents and grandparents were aging and my younger siblings were growing up. I only saw my youngest brother a few times a year and every time he'd be taller and his hair would be longer. I wanted to document the changes I saw as they were happening before my eyes. Considering this, I find resonance in artist Zoe Leonard's writing about the impulse to record a familiar and disappearing urban landscape. She says:

> Objects and places are employed to tell the stories of their owners and inhabitants. This is a constant thread in my work, this kind of archaeology. I'm interested in what we make and what we leave behind. I want to see the clues and signs, the flaws and beauty. I know the world will never look quite this way again, and I feel that I want to look closely, to hold it near." (97)

I photographed my family in the backyard, at the beach, and on vacation. I made these photographs of them because I wanted to grasp a particular point in time in our lives. I wanted to freeze my loved ones in images. I knew that my family had stopped making prolific photographs. My dad had a video camera that he used regularly from 1990 – 2003, stopping when the video tapes for the camera were no longer produced. Once the common practice of film development became inaccessible in my small hometown, my family stopped printing photographs. My grandmother had been dedicated to putting together photo albums for most of her life but stopped in 2007 when it became

Image 5 - Zoe Leonard. *Chapter 20;* from the series "Analogue," 1998-2009.

increasingly difficult to fill the albums as fewer family photographs were printed. The recording of family history was something I valued and I took it upon myself to participate in. By continuing to photograph and print images of my family's everyday experiences, I resisted the shift away from documentation that I was observing.

Leonard's series *Analogue* was produced over the course of a decade, from 1998 to 2009. Leonard archived storefronts closing throughout New York City, focusing upon their decaying facades. The series documents the vanishing face and texture of twentieth century urban life, gradually expanded to include photographs taken in Mexico City, Cuba, Eastern Europe, Africa, and beyond. Leonard produced 412 prints for the

series and while each print was modestly sized, the entire installation of gridded photographs was monumental. In this work, Leonard intentionally leaves the black frames surrounding the film and the brand names Kodak and Fuji are clearly visible, drawing the viewer's attention to the analogue medium. As Leonard puts it: "New technology is usually pitched to us as an improvement . . . But progress is always an exchange. We gain something, we give up something else. I'm interested in looking at some of what we are losing" (89). Leonard acknowledges the loss at stake in her photographs and uses the photographs as a means of grasping a vanishing way of life. She says, "It was only when these old shops began disappearing that I realized how much I counted on them – that this layered, frayed and quirky beauty underlined my own life. I felt at home in it" (91).

I relate my practice to Leonard's desire to look closely and to hold near the things that are disappearing. Out of an awareness of their disappearance, I wanted to look closely at my family memories. I examined family photograph collections while continuing to document my family. The photographs I took became part of the collection. Documenting my family allowed me to continue to feel close to them. I am aware, as Leonard says, that they "will never look quite this way again" (97). When I make photographs of my family and my home, I anticipate viewing them in a future when I am separated from them. I anticipate looking at them and feeling nostalgic for them.

IN A FUTURE SEPARATED

My grandfather Wesley Thompson passed away in September 2014. He was an avid collector of things and was particularly passionate about antique cars. He had a car garage (it was a converted Esso station). There was an office in the building that had been left untouched after his death. Starting in April 2015, I entered the space to photograph what had been left behind.

I don't know when he was last here, but there were ashes in the ashtray on his desk. I was faced with eighty-eight years worth of collected things: ashtrays and antique cash registers; a non operational pinball machine; a collection of license plates; dusty manuals for antique cars; plush toy animals; newspaper clippings; photographs; matchboxes; and ticket stubs. I was overwhelmed with these material traces laid out before me. I went back to the same space several times over the span of months and every time I saw something new. Through collecting photographic images of my grandfather's various objects and collections, I attempted to construct his identity in his absence, trying to manifest his presence through his possessions. I saw these objects as the last physical embodiment of him. They carry a trace of a life lived. Sociologist Tonya K. Davidson writes in *Nostalgia and Postmemories of a Lost Place,* "stories and objects have a reciprocal relationship. Objects inspire stories; stories are contained in objects invested with meaning. Stories also work up and conjure lost objects" (51).

Objects tell a story, but only part of the story. These objects and images are insufficient. I can only get so close. As Barthes wrote in *Camera Lucida* that "Not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory … but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter memory" (91). My memories of my grandfather transformed when I

contemplated the photographs I made. Every time a memory is reconsidered, it is reconstructed and altered. In photographing this space, I constantly reevaluated my knowledge of him. Yet my attempts to locate and understand my grandfather were futile. American sociologist Avery F. Gordon defines the complexity of personhood as meaning:

> That all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others . . . People suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves. Complex personhood means that even those called "Other" are never never that . . . Complex personhood means that people get tired and some are just plain lazy . . . At the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning. (4)

The black and white analogue photographs I took in my grandfather's garage cannot encompass his complexities. The photographs of his garage display rows of ashtrays mounted along the wall and the old cash registers sitting alongside one another on a shelf. I don't know his motivation for acquiring so many ashtrays or what his connection to cash registers was. The series of photographs document my grandfather's bookshelf crammed with car manuals and photographs on the walls and on the desk. I photographed a faded photograph of my grandfather sitting on a fishing boat, grinning with his pipe in his mouth with the text printed beneath the photo reading *God does not take away from the allotted time of men those hours spent while fishing.* Another image

features a row of photographs of the Esso station when it was first purchased. Light from the windows is reflected on the dusty glass, obstructing parts of the image.

Even the completely mundane objects my grandfather kept, ashtrays for example, become exceptional when absorbed into a collection. Once a single object becomes a collection it cannot be stopped. British artist and filmmaker Tacita Dean has written on collections in relation to her collections of postcards and of four, five, six and seven leaf clovers,

> I know people whose lives are dominated by their collections, ceaselessly searching in flea markets, auction houses and specialist book shops, never resolving their quest. Whether you are collecting versions of popular songs, postcards of lighthouses or votive sculptures of Our Lady of Montserrat, your collection will never let you be. You've started so you must continue, and with most collections, there is no end. Whether it is postcards of lighthouses or four-leaf clovers, there can never be the definitive collection. For what is more inert than a finished collection. (15)

Collections have always been part of my practice and everyday life. I was raised by collectors. My dad is always collecting something. We used to go searching antique markets and auctions on the weekends together, looking for treasures. In my art practice I collect images and materials: newspaper clippings, photographs and yarn. In making photographs, I am collecting moments. Memories are made physical in hopes of preserving them though, as Palmer Albers says, these photographs seem to fail "in their ostensible promise to narrate the past" (5).

I want to understand my grandfather's collections. When were they started and

what was the significance of the objects he was drawn towards. I want to know the meaning they carried for him yet I must resign myself to not knowing. This collection is similar to the collection of photographs I bought on eBay. I can only get so close to a person from looking at their objects and photographs. The photograph blocks you and speaks more to an absence than a presence. Rubenstein introduces the term the *presence of absence* describing it as "a lack that continues to occupy a palpable emotional space; the presence of absence is the presence of unresolved mourning" (112). I feel this absence deeply.

I attempted to retrieve my grandfather's identity through his collected objects. I want to hold onto fragmented pieces and am overwhelmed by the impossibility of the task. These objects may outlive us but they aren't immortal. They will scatter and decay. I am scared of not fully understanding what it is that I am losing. I can't stop thinking about the trail of matches my grandfather left everywhere he went. I still feel like I'm following them. My practice is driven by separation, loss and desire.

In the fall of 2015, my grandmother Patricia Thompson gave me an unlabeled roll of film and asked me to get it developed for her. She told me that it had been shot by my grandfather several years ago while on a fishing trip with friends. My grandfather had been an avid fisherman so the story seemed plausible even though I had no recollection of him ever holding a camera. I was intrigued by the roll of film and I carried with me for several months in anticipation. I imagined what the images would look like. I would fantasize about them, trying to picture what had transpired on this fishing trip, what moments he had captured and why. I wanted to know what moments my grandfather would choose to freeze in a photographic image. Eventually I took it to be developed. I

asked them to take extra care in handling the roll of Kodak film my grandmother had given me. A week later I returned to pick up the developed film to discover that the roll of film had never been used. The film had ever been exposed. It had probably never even been loaded into a camera.

I cried on the subway home. I felt a loss for something that had perhaps never really existed. I had convinced myself that the photographs from the fishing trip could have revealed something to me, that there was something to be learned from them. The experience made me aware of complex dimensions of my grandfather's identity that I could no longer access.

SLOWLY, STITCH BY STITCH

I began to knit in reaction to feeling dislocated when I moved to Toronto to begin my MFA in September 2015. I didn't feel at home but through carrying knitting with me I was able to bring a sense of home with me wherever I went. I would often knit on the subway, a process filling a gap once left by an unexposed roll of film. Knitting reminded me of my grandmother and my mother, and of my Nova Scotian friends, all of whom knit and weave and embroider. I knitted to comfort myself, to feel connected to something and to locate myself in an environment that felt disorienting. When my hands are busy, my mind is focused.

When I started, I became preoccupied with knitting because it kept me balanced and mitigated anxiety. Knitting became an embodied gesture through which I could remember and feel connected to my past, friends, and family. To other places and other times. The gestures and movements I make mirror the movements of others. In *Agency and Embodiment,* author Carrie Noland identifies kinesthesia as the suggestion of intimacy with another that is sustained by an intimacy with the self (14). Gesture is empathetic. American scholar and choreographer Susan Leigh Foster states that kinesthesia or our sense of movement "includes the feelings which allow us to guide our movement in the dark, which prompt us to shift from an uncomfortable position, or which [permit us to] respond with overall bodily tension as we watch a runner cross the finish line or an angry child throwing a tantrum" (Leigh Foster qtd by Noland 13). Through the act of knitting and crocheting, I am engaging with a history of remembered and shared gesture. I am responding bodily to gestures I have seen my loved ones make.

My grandmother, Betty, is a prolific maker. As a child, I watched her sew clothing

for my dolls. She made a miniature denim jacket out of an old pair of jeans, and knit tiny socks and leggings out of the yarn scraps from her knitting projects. Other times I picked out the fabric and sewing patterns for dolls' clothing at the store and brought them to her to make for me. I would sit next to her and watch her sew. I would thread the sewing machine needle for her. I observed and participated. Textiles and handiwork are rooted in a tradition of oral teaching. My early childhood experiences with knitting were guided by my mother who had been taught by her own mother. I find comfort in this multigenerational knowledge and learning. The practice of knitting is nostalgic. The knitted objects that surround me, whether my own or my mother's or grandmother's, all bear an implied trace of the hand. They carry a memory of gesture. I am honouring the stories and practices of the past through an engagement with these traditional modes of production.

My great grandmother knit a large blanket that my grandmother later divided to be shared as keepsakes. The fragments went to various family members. My grandmother has also made a blanket for each of her grandchildren and great grandchildren. I started making blankets because it felt familiar to me to do so. The renowned textile artist Sheila Hicks explains that the "textile is a universal language. In all of the cultures of the world, textile is a crucial and essential component. Therefore, if you're beginning with thread you're halfway home" (Ford Foundation). In the act of making a blanket, I am engaging with a familial tradition and the blanket comes to directly represent memories of my past and home. In American queer theorist Eve Sedgwick's art practice, she engaged with textiles, primarily through weaving. She writes about the ingrained gestures inherited from her family, "The feel of any kind of

fiber between my thumb and fingers - in a gesture I probably got from my grandmother, who also taught me to crochet and embroider - just is the rub of reality, for me" (72). Through craft processes, I am able to seek and find a sense of a memorialization which eludes photographs.

My piece, *Granny Square,* started as a simple daily practice. Every day I would crochet a single square. This practice gradually evolved into something larger, as the material grew it became collaborative. My grandmother began to work with me to piece the squares together. I would lay out the pieces on the floor of her living room or stack them on the kitchen table. We both became invested in the practice of creating and joining crocheted squares. Working with my grandmother to make something felt good. It was something I hadn't thought of much since I was a child and reconnecting with that history was important. The gesture of making was an act of memory. As I worked, I thought of the countless knit and crochet blankets that I engaged with as a child. I thought about the scale of my body in relation to the scale of the blanket. The scale of the blankets that I remembered shrunk as I grew.

I am interested in the way the body remembers through repetitive gesture. Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow is evident in the work both my grandmother and myself have undertaken. Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as a mental state of operation in which "people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (4). In a flow state, a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus and satisfaction in the process of the activity. This level of immersion can feel as though one's own sense of existence is

suspended temporarily and they are temporarily relieved of the pressures of everyday life. American Sociologist Richard Sennett wrote in *The Craftsman,* "All skills, even the most abstract, begin as bodily practices" (10). Knitting is a technique learned in the body. The loops of thread are continuous. The knitting process relies on patterns of movement: bilateral, coordinated, repetitive, rhythmic, automatic. Every stitch is informed by a pattern of previous experience, thought, and reflection. People who learn to knit are often able to hold that knowledge for a lifetime. They could stop practicing for months or years and pick it up again with relative ease, because the gestures are ingrained in their body's memory.

My practice serves to emphasize the importance of working by hand. My work celebrates the inherent errors of the human hand and centres the repetitive actions of making. My practice of knitting to engage with tactile acts of memory began to encompass other forms of craft including several styles of weaving, crocheting, and latch hooking. Embroidering photographs, though responsive to punctum rather than bodily memory, ties into this. Each of these practices is time-intensive. I engage with knitting and other crafts as a temporal narrative and a means of marking time. Because my process of making is so time intensive and slow, each piece comes to represent a passing of time. I weave, knit, crochet, embroider, and latch hook, and each stitch and pull of thread is an act of memory.

My fingers guide the yarn and I feel it move through my fingers. Craft is about connections. Sedgwick notes that materials touched touch back:

> Even more immediately than other perceptual systems, it seems, the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity;

> to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap or enfold, and always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the textured object. (90)

When I touch handmade items, I connect with the hands of the maker. I connect with the hands of my mother and grandmother when I wear the clothing they've knit for me. The materials carry traces of their hands. Textiles themselves are structurally dependent upon connections. Knitting is made up of repeated interlocking loops that build upon the previous row and gradually extend in scale. I make things to understand what it feels like to form these connections. I am forming material connections and connections through time.

Image 6 - Unknown Photographer. *Henry deBrouwer on his horse, aged* 21, from a family photo album, Unknown Date.

HOLDING PHOTOGRAPHS

My grandfather, Henry “Henk” deBrouwer emigrated from the Netherlands when he was 21. He was the eldest of ten children. The whole family came by boat, first landing at the pier of The Holland America Line in Hoboken, New Jersey. They then stopped briefly at Grand Central Station. As they awaited their train, they were interviewed for the New York Times.

> *… “There is not enough land in our country,” Mr. de Brouwer said. Although his ten-room house and sixty acres of land, far from the area flooded in February, has been adequate, he never would have been able to give each of his six sons a*

farm.

"We did not want to leave our friends," Mrs. de Brouwer remarked. As she spoke the children displayed wallets crammed with pictures of home. Henk, the oldest at 21, was astride his pet horse on one; his brother's flock of geese was in another scene, the girls' flower garden filled a third; their large house was shown from many angles in others. A final scene showed the family and friends seated around a table at a party the night before they sailed aboard the Nieuw Amsterdam.

(Author Unknown, "Dutch Family of 12 Moving to Ontario", The New York Times, April 22 1953)

I've looked at that same photograph of Henk on his horse on countless occasions over the years. The photograph is now kept in an old photo album at my grandparents' home, secured to the page with gold photo corners. It has aged over time, developed cracks and tears. The edges have been dulled and are soft to the touch. I trace the cracks on the paper's surface with my fingertip. The photograph's history is ingrained on its surface.

I am interested in the experience of photographs as objects meant to be held and felt. I experience old photographs through the way they fit in my hands, the way I reach for them and hold them out for others, the way I arrange and rearrange them on the floor. I believe that photographs are felt through our bodies. Australian photo historian Geoffrey Batchen writes of the photographic object: "Designed to be touched, these photographs touch back, casually grazing the pores of our skin with their textured surfaces. In this mutual stroking of the flesh, we are reminded once again that an image is also an object and that simulation is inseparable from substance" (61). Photography

is essentially haptic. I see this in the newspaper account from 1953, the photographs shared with others. The children, my grandfather's siblings, display the photographs in their wallets to the news reporter, they are physical objects in the world.

I can't have the same experience with my grandfather Henry's photograph that I had with the anonymous photo collection. People exist here and now who can talk about my family's photographs. I still touch the photographs and they touch me back, but the anonymous photographs from *Lilliane* block me in a way that my family's collection of photographs do not. My concern is that these narratives attached to my family photograph collection are unstable and could be lost, and there isn't much I can do about that instability. I can listen and record and try to tell the truth but that can be just as unstable. All the photographs I love could be separated from their narratives and lost one day, and perhaps end up in a flea market or on eBay - and there is a limited amount that I can do to stop the gradual disappearance of family history.

Looking at the newspaper article led me to look through collections of photographs of my family. I was drawn to the photographs in which arms and hands cut across the frame as two figures stood reaching for each other or when they were pictured close to one another. The photographs freeze the closeness. I sought out these moments of connection, captured on film and preserved and began to alter them. I started embroidering over a photograph of my uncle and brother reaching for and touching each other to reinforce the tactility of photographs. I used red thread to match the red coat in the image, and extend the image further into physical space. There is an intimacy to the way I work with the photographs. I concentrate on small details for prolonged periods, becoming closely familiar with each photograph's subtleties. Roberta

Rubenstein writes of fixing the past, “To fix something is to secure it more firmly in the imagination and also to correct – as in revise or repair – it. Even though one cannot literally go home again (at least, not the home of childhood that has been embellished over time by imagination), it may be recoverable in narrative terms” (6). In embroidering the photographs, I attempt to fix them, both in a reparative and a securing sense. The practices of memorialization that I learned through *Lilliane* reoccur here, as I fix these photographs which are not yet lost.

Image 7 - Unknown Photographer. *Jim and a friend holding the mastodon bone,* from an envelop of photographs in my family photograph collection, 1987.

GIANT BONES OF A PREHISTORIC ANIMAL

> ". . . the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. After twenty years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways; we would recapture the reflexes of the "first stairway," we would not stumble on that rather high step. The house's entire being would open up, faithful to our own being. We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way in the dark to the distant attic. The feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands" (Bachelard 14).

Thus does French philosopher Gaston Bachelard describe haptic memory, a form

of sensory memory which refers to a recollection acquired through touch. I remember how things felt to the touch. In particular, I remember my grandparent's basement. The entrance was a wooden door with a cold metal handle. The creaking wooden steps of a staircase lead down to the dark basement. The cool cement floor had old rugs strewn across it haphazardly. A wooden crib was stored in a corner. The room was windowless. It was pitch black when the door was shut and the lights were switched off. I remember hiding in the dark down there when I was little. Among the ordinary objects, there was a large bone gathering dust in a dark corner. It was there for as long as I could remember. Its presence felt natural and unsurprising.

Recently, I uncovered a small clipping from a newspaper glued into a family photo album that explained the bone in the basement. The album was labeled '1976'. I don't know the date the article was published, nor the publication it was featured in. It describes the uncovering of prehistoric bones on my grandfather's farm.

> *Henry DeBrouwer's farm in south-east Kent County is producing more than farm crops these days. In fact some items - giant bones of a prehistoric animal - may soon catch the attention of officials of the Royal Ontario Museum and the ministry of culture and recreation.*
>
> *Allan Woodliffe, a naturalist at Rondeau Provincial Park, described the find Wednesday as being "very significant." He said the bones were probably those of a 3,000 to 4,000-year-old mastodon, a giant mammal which once roamed this part of the world. According to Mr. Woodliffe, a mastodon somewhat resembled today's elephant although the body was hairy and it featured huge tusks . . . .*
>
> *Mr. DeBrouwer said the bones were unearthed by a drag-line operator*

working on a farm he owns a few miles east of Morpeth last week. "There could be more bones there and we intend to look for them," he said. "If the museum is interested, they can have them." The largest of the bones found measures nearly 50 inches in length and is, according to Mr. Woodliffe, a hip bone.

"It's been quite a conversation piece around the farm in the last few days," said Mr. DeBrouwer. "Quite a few people have stopped by to have a look." Also unearthed were some ribs, as well as a large vertebra. (Boughner)

These mastodon bones spent more than twenty five years in my grandparent's basement. When I was young, my cousins and I would play with one particular bone (I think it was a femur). We would measure our bodies next to it, and trace its form with our fingers. Our engagement with the large bone was tactile, vivid and exploratory. I was small next to the bone and it felt important.

I asked members of my family what they remembered about the mastodon bones and I was met with conflicting accounts. Both small and large details were inconsistent. It seemed that everyone in my family had some knowledge but I never got anything that felt concrete. My grandparents' memories of the same event were inconsistent. My grandmother helped me look through the dozens of photo albums that she's crafted over a lifetime to find any of the existing traces of the mastodon bone story. There was really very little. I found a few photographs scattered throughout boxes and photo albums. But even the small newspaper clipping I found in a photo album omitted the year that the bone was uncovered (1976). The femur is in my Aunt's basement now, but the rest of the bones have been misplaced. I'm sure there are still bones scattered through the soil in that field east of Morpeth.

EXHIBITION WALK THROUGH

The exhibition *STAY IN TOUCH* is on display at Special Projects Gallery from April 3rd to 7th 2017. The exhibition consists of woven, crochet, latch hook and knit textiles and embroidered inkjet photographs. Overwhelmingly textural, the work was produced with a range of tools. I used knitting needles, crochet hooks, embroidery hoops, darning needles, frame looms, a tabletop loom, weaving shuttles, embroidery needles, beading needles and a latch hooking tool (among others) to produce the works in the exhibition. I worked with tools and techniques that I had observed or participated in as a child and the exhibition evokes those memories.

Granny Square, March 2017

Entering the gallery space, I look up to a crochet blanket hung on the wall across from the doors. It's made of nearly a hundred granny squares, a traditional crochet technique where individual crocheted squares, sometimes called 'motifs' are stitched together to make a larger item. Each motif is constructed by working in rounds from the centre outward. I use more than a dozen colours of yarn and nearly every motif is different. As I work, the blanket consumes me and I am weighed down by it. I watch it expand in scale before my eyes and think about my experiences with textiles as a small child who observed the scale of handmade blankets as enormous. I try to reenact the scale of the blanket of the blankets I experienced as a child. The blanket seems large when I am in the midst of making, surrounded by countless stacks of completed squares. I become immersed in a flow state. This begins as an individual project and evolves to become a collaborative project with my grandmother.

Image 8 - *Granny Square*, 2017.

Traditionally crochet blankets were constructed from mismatched scraps of yarn left over from completed projects, resulting in a jumble of colours and patterns. As yarn was once a scarce commodity, utility was sometimes emphasized over appearance. In working from a wide range vibrantly coloured yarns, and avoiding any clear pattern, I reference that history.

Weaving Sticks, February 2017

I use wooden weaving sticks to create this work. Weaving with sticks is a relatively uncommon weaving method. Each weaving stick resembles a bamboo knitting needle with a hole at the bottom. They are held together in sets of two to six. I thread a length of yarn through the hole at the end of each stick. I knot the ends of the threads together. I hold the sticks together in one hand and wrap yarn and string around sticks in a figure eight gesture around the other. I do so continuously, and focus on maintaining even tension. The process relies upon rhythm and repetition. The wrapping becomes so dense that it eventually falls off the ends of the sticks and onto the strings threaded through the end of the sticks. The yarn is wrapped around itself to create a surprising density to the material. When I finish weaving, the yarn is cut from the sticks and the loose ends are tied. Each woven piece measures between eight and fifty inches in length. I work with a variety of yarns including acrylic, wool, and cotton string that I gather over time. Some pieces are vibrant neon pink and yellow, while others are more subdued with peach and rose and soft blues. Several of the narrow woven strips hang close to each other, overlapping and twisting in a cluster.

Two Latch Hook Wall Hangings

Latch hooking is a process in which lengths of yarn are tightly looped through a gridded mesh canvas using a latch hooking tool. The tool has a wooden handle and resembles a crochet needle with a latch attachment. The mesh canvas, made from a rough rope material, provides a firm backing. I repeatedly pull pieces of yarn through the gridded mesh canvas. Each panel is a vibrantly coloured accumulation of yarn,

measuring around 20 x 40 inches. The choices I make in terms of the yarn used are intuitive. The length of yarn varies throughout each piece. The mass of neon yarn glows.

The repeated gesture is strenuous. My back and hands feel sore during the slow process of making. As I work, I fall into a rhythm of repetitive gesture. The piece becomes gradually heavier as I build up the dense material. This work evolves from my interest in performing laborious and repetitive gestures as an aid to memory. Through repetitive movement the gesture is memorized.

Eight Weavings

Woven wall hangings line one wall. They are a variety of sizes, from twelve to fifty inches in length. They are made of brightly coloured neon acrylic and wool yarns. They hang at various heights. The viewer must reach up and bend down to view all the pieces. This bodily involvement in viewing the works mirrors the ways in which my body moves in making them.

“In woven fabrics two sets of yarns cross perpendicular to one another. One set is called the warp the other set weft” (Chandler 14). I create each weaving by passing wooden shuttles wound with yarn back and forth across a small tabletop loom. I raise and lower the warp threads with every pass. The woven material is formed when the warp and weft threads intersect and overlap. I use a comb to beat down each new weft thread that I pass across the loom in order to achieve a tightly woven material. At other times, I pass the thread through loosely and the resulting weave has some transparency. My process of weaving is exploratory. I work with various types of looms, some handmade and others store bought. This results in an array of forms. In the

beginning, I make very small weavings and they grow larger in scale as I become more confident in my abilities. Weaving involves my whole body, relies on quick repetitive movements. My weaving practice is about those repetitive bodily movements and gestures.

Three Arm Knit Forms

I knit using a technique known as ‘arm knitting’ in which my arms act as a substitute for knitting needles. The process involves my whole body. Each stitch passes from arm to arm, so the gesture of knitting is exaggerated in the process. I use thick white wool resembling loose netting. As I work my body is tied up by the craft. The process is laborious. The scale of the knitting relates to the human body and the pieces function as transparent shells or skeletal structures of an absent person. They loosely resemble skeletal structures. They are made to contain my body. Suspended by fishing wire, the transparent forms appear to float in space. Each knit pieces reach across the space for each other, touching at a single point. The light material moves gently as you pass by. The light passes through the netting and leaves shadows on the wall and floor. The hanging wool forms relate to the bones I found in my grandparents’ basement as a child.

String Through Canvas

A single small trimming of white cotton canvas measures 12 x 8 inches. The material is rectangular with uneven and fraying edges. Various tones of white and yellow cotton string and embroidery thread are pulled through the canvas in a roughly

arched formation using a sewing needle. The cotton string is densely layered and the gradual accumulation of thread resembles a mess of white and yellow hair. The process of continually pulling string through fabric is calming. In a flow state while working, I achieve an incredibly deep level of concentration in the gesture I am making.

Six Embroidered Colour Photographs

These works are comprised of family photographs of various sizes from the 1940s to the mid 1990s. Each image is scanned and then enlarged to various sizes around 13 x 19 inches and framed. The images feature multiple figures either sitting close to one another or reaching towards each other. In choosing the photographs I pay particular attention to the placement of the hands and the proximity of bodies in relation to each other. I embroider, draw on, and bead them in order to make them more tactile and physical. The drawing on top of some images references the pattern of the knit and woven material elsewhere in the exhibition. I punch holes through the paper with an awl and work with the back stitch and the running stitch, using embroidery thread in vibrant reds, blues, greys and golden yellows. The stitching frames and covers the bodies in each image. The embroidery obstructs parts of the photographs and draws attention to others. The colour of embroidery floss and patterns of stitching are repeated throughout the photographs.

One of the photographs, dated Mach 1959, depicts my paternal grandparents standing next to one another. My grandmother wears a knee length pleated skirt with a white blouse under a blazer. She carries a dark handbag on her arm. Her short blonde hair is neatly pinned away from her face. One of her arms is linked with his. She holds

Image 9 - *String Through Canvas*, 2016.

his arm at the shoulder. Her other hand holds onto her blazer as if to adjust it. She is smiling, her eyes looking to the distance. My grandfather wears a suit, one hand in his pocket and the other is held in front of his torso. His tie is dark with two diagonal stripes in a lighter colour. He is grinning and his gaze meets the camera lens. They stand on a lawn with a row of trees in the distance. I embroider the image with lavender thread that radiates out from the centre where her hand is linked around his arm. The stitching makes the image move, forcing the eye outwards from the middle. I focus on the suspended event of connection in these images.

CONCLUSION

In 2001, Tacita Dean produced a work titled *Floh.* The work took the form of a book that was produced as a limited edition of 4000 hand-numbered and signed hardbound copies. The title came from the German word *Floh* meaning flea, as in flea market.

Image 10 - Tacita Dean. *Boys in Snow;* from the series “FLOH,” 2001.

Contained within the book were 163 photographs found by Dean in flea markets throughout Europe and America. Dean deliberately presents the found photographs in a book format, inviting viewers the hold the photographs in their hands, similarly to how they would've been held in the flea market where they were found. The physicality of photography is emphasized. Dean forms new connections between lost, anonymous photographs by placing them in a book to be viewed together with other images. "I do not want to give these images explanations," Dean wrote, "descriptions by the finder

about how and where they were found, or guesses as to what stories they might or might not tell. I want them to keep the silence of the flea market, the silence they had when I found them, the silence of the lost object" (Dean qtd by Godfrey 92). Dean anticipates that the books will return one day to the flea markets where her project originated.

Dean mourns the demise of analogue photography. In an age of digital imagery, the photographic object pulled from the flea market is at risk of disappearance. She is mourning an experience of finding photographs. As fewer photographs are printed, fewer photographs are lost and rediscovered. I relate to this project in terms of my concern for processes and experiences that are at risk of disappearance. I am engaging with what remains of something lost, exploring the potential of touch to transport me to another time or place.

The difference between my collection of family photographs and the lost photos from eBay (or the flea market) is that my personal photos exist at a point before forgetting. There are people who can still speak to the identities of the figures represented in my known family photographs. Embroidering the photographs, I fix them in my memory. I use textiles to engage with my remembered history in an immediate tactile way. I use gestures of knitting, crocheting, and weaving to recall childhood memories of craft, making material connections across time.

I'm interested in the things about the past that can't be pinned down and the stories that get confused and jumbled. In my attempts to uncover a narrative, I am met with uncertainties. Often my process begins with searching and asking questions. I build a collection of information, documents, and objects. I'm concerned with gathering

fragmented pieces of narratives and attempting to reconnect them in my own way. I am interested in the stories we tell about our pasts and the way narratives often become confused and tangled and distorted with time.

American essayist Elaine Scarry writes in *The Body in Pain*, a "made object is a projection of the live body" (280). The craft works in the exhibition *STAY IN TOUCH,* are projections of my body, now memories. The scale of some of the knitting, which includes three arm knit forms created with thick white wool, is comparable to the human body. These pieces in particular loosely resemble skeletal structures. The knitting was made to contain my body, as the *Granny Square Blanket* was made to be large so that I might feel small next to it. As American art historian and critic Max Kozloff writes in *The Poetics of Softness,* soft sculpture necessarily evokes the body:

> A soft thing can be poked, moulded, squeezed, scrunched. In a word, it's surface is elastic, and it's densities are scandalously rearrangeable.[…] [A] soft sculpture, in various proportions, might suggest fatigue, deterioration or inertia. It mimes a kind of surrender to the natural condition which pulls bodies down . . . And regardless of how abstract is a soft sculpture, it will unavoidably evoke the human (90).

The pieces I have crafted become bodies of memory.

In *The Faraway Nearby,* American novelist Rebecca Solnit writes about the importance of stories and their necessity to guide us. "Stories are compasses and architecture; we navigate by them, we build our sanctuaries and our prisons out of them, and to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice" (3). But the stories we navigate by are fallible.

What are we left with when the narratives that guide us begin to fall away? In Gordon's notion of c*omplex personhood* we remember and forget and stories change when people forget or exaggerate or lie. Narratives are revealed and hidden over time. The stories and memories we tell ourselves and others are always shifting and their meaning is always changing. The processes of creation that I am undertaking are a gesture towards committing these narratives to memory, they are a means by which to *stay in touch.*

WORKS CITED

Azoulay, Ariella. *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography.* London: Verso, 2015. (Ebook)

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. New York, New York: Penguin, 2014.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1980.

Batchen, Geoffrey. *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*. Cambridge: MIT, 2002.

Boughner, Bob. "Bones of Mastodon Found on Kent Farm." Unknown Publication. Unknown Year.

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia.* New York: Basic, 2001.

Chandler, Deborah. *Learning to Weave.* Fort Collins: Interweave, 1995.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007.

Davidson, Tonya K. "Nostalgia and Postmemories of a Lost Place: 'Actualizing My Virtual Homeland'." *Ecologies of Affect: Placing Nostalgia, Desire, and Hope.* Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier UP, 2011. 43-63

Dean, Tacita. "Collections." *Selected Writings 1992 - 2001.* Gottingen: Steidl, 2011. 15.

"Dutch Family if 12 Moving to Ontario." *New York Times* 22 Apr. 1953. (Author Unknown)

Eng, David L., and David Kazanjian, eds. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning.* Berkeley: U of California, 2008.

Ford Foundation "Sheila Hicks: Begin With Thread." Online video. *Ford Foundation.* Vimeo. 7 Oct. 2014. Web. 9 Mar. 2017.

Godfrey, Mark. "Photography Found and Lost: On Tacita Dean's Floh." *October* no. 114 (Autumn 2005). 90-119.

Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2008.

Kozloff, Max. “The Poetics of Softness.” 1967. Materiality: *Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015. 90-92.

Leonard, Zoe. “Out of Time,” *October*, no.100 (Spring 2002). 89-97

Noland, Carrie. *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.

Palmer Albers, Kate. *Uncertain Histories: Accumulation, Inaccessibility, and Doubt in Contemporary Photography*. Oakland: U of California, 2015.

Rubenstein, Roberta. *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction.* Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Weather in Proust.* Ed. Johnathan Goldberg and Michael Moon. Durham: Duke UP, 2011.

Sennett, Richard. *The Craftsman.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Smith, Shawn Michelle. “Photography Between Desire and Grief: Roland Barthes and F. Day Holland.” *Feeling Photography.* Durham: Duke UP, 2014. 29-46.

Solnit, Rebecca. *The Faraway Nearby*. New York: Penguin, 2014.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador, 1973.