

I Am Your Ghost

D. Lee Williams

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Abstract

I Am Your Ghost is a film and media work that explores anticipatory grief, death and dying by expressing and visually representing the liminal spaces inhabited by both the dying and surviving members of my family. Collapsing the boundaries between the past, present and future, this project seeks to interrogate the concurrent experiences of absence and presence, fiction and reality, and ultimately aims to grapple with what is both impossible and possible (Kazubowski-Houston, 2020).

The creation of this project engaged a co-creative process between three generations in an Armenian family. It features my grandmother, my mother and I, both on screen and behind the camera. The project employs a multimodal approach to autoethnographic research, and includes interviews, performance elements and archival materials to create its visual language and storytelling.

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To my mother and late Nene (grandmother), this film is us. This film is years and generations in the making. It is a scratch at the surface of everything we have gone through and everything we are to each other. I love you. I made this film with you and for you. Thank you for going on this journey with me and teaching me what this work could become.

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Introduction

I Am Your Ghost includes a short film and media installation exploring the last year of my grandmother's life. Co-created with my grandmother and mother, this work spans over a year of our interactions with each other, depicted on the screen as 6 distinct segments that together make a 15-minute film. The media installation is a virtual recreation of my grandmother's apartment designed to house the films. Through its content, *I Am Your Ghost* explores maternal relationships, death and dying, trauma, and intergenerational care. It emerged from a year where my grandmother, my mother and I spent a great deal of time together after over a decade apart. The resulting work is the product of several core questions regarding remembrance, representation, and creation as a supportive practice.

Firstly, as diasporic survivors of war, how can we remember our histories and pasts when there are often few surviving records and great silences within our families? As a diasporic Armenian, I have been preoccupied with how to use my creative practice as a way to remember the people that came before me. In particular, I am interested in the stories of Armenian women and queer people. Amidst the challenges of finding historical records, there are the further challenges of Armenian women and queer people being too rarely represented in history or art (even within Armenian communities, let alone beyond them).

Relatedly, another question that *I Am Your Ghost* interrogates concerns artistic representation of traumatic experiences and histories. Through this work, I explore how we can show and tell trauma stories. I investigate the shapes a story can take when it is dealing with traumatic experiences and residues. The devices that I employ through *I Am Your Ghost* include using short vignettes, fragmented images, overlay, and stylized sequences. I also use music, excerpts

from audio interviews, and archival footage to create a layered audio-visual texture. My aim with *I Am Your Ghost* is to not only explore what is lost through trauma, but to trace some of what connects the relationships depicted.

And lastly, this work seeks to investigate how collaborative creative practices can be used as part of end-of-life care. Biomedicine often leaves much to be desired in terms of treating the whole person. As my grandmother dealt with myriad illnesses, I was repeatedly wondering what rituals and practices we could use to support her. Creating *I Am Your Ghost*, became one answer for us, as we together discovered the potential for media-making to operate as a supportive and transformative practice.

I Am Your Ghost is perhaps the most personal work I have ever made. Much of my recent work has been focused on collective stories that engage in worldbuilding, community building, and future visioning. While my thesis still engages in all of these elements, it accomplishes this in a different way than I had first imagined.

I had initially conceived of my thesis as speculative fiction. I had anticipated that I would create characters loosely representing members of my family situated in an alternate and imagined world. When I began my thesis, my focus was on larger socio-political conditions. Instead, this work directly features my family and my grandmother's home, where acts of daily care function as its central drama. This work has challenged me to live into my values, reminding me (again) that the personal is still political and that the "everyday" is a critical site for exploring larger socio-political, existential and ontological questions.

I Am Your Ghost invokes the past, present and future reflexively. It engages the last year of my grandmother's life, with all of its mundanity and tedium, through performance, filmmaking, and visual art. The work invokes awareness of the constructs and performativity of time and

sociality. Comingling embodiment and emergence, this cross-disciplinary work straddles many worlds (Kazubowski-Houston, vi).

Witnessing and participating in the dying and death of a loved one has been an immense experience. Crafting that experience into a work of art has been a journey. *I Am Your Ghost* is both the process and result. The central aim of this work is to develop a visual and creative language for the liminal and indescribable experiences of that time.

Making this work involved many twists and turns. The first section of this support paper gives background into some of the theories and influences that helped shape it. The second section of the paper explores significant influences. The third section investigates formal and methodological discoveries that accompanied production. And the final section of the paper details aspects of the post-production process, highlighting discoveries and challenges encountered throughout that phase of development.

Evolution of Beginnings

Creative Background

Over the last decade, I have been deepening questions that begin with *trauma*. Initially, I used *trauma* as a conceptual framework (fragmentation, nonlinearity, narrative rupture, silence), and the focus of my content (gendered and sexual violence, intergenerational trauma). Moving between video, performance art and theatre, I spent 2008-2012 experimenting and exhibiting nationally and internationally.

As my work matured, I developed a structural analysis of power, colonialism and the intergenerational impacts of trauma, broadening the political scope of the stories I have been telling. My art practice evolved from self-expression and connected me with the histories and ongoing political struggles of the communities I come from, belong to and intersect with. My arts practice is intimately tied to activism. The stories I tell care about justice; untold and underrepresented histories; and visions of futures where our communities thrive.



Image 1: Photo from *Dear Armen* live performance at Roundhouse, Vancouver 2016

In 2013, with Kamee Abrahamian, we created *Dear Armen*, an interdisciplinary project highlighting three generations of Armenian women, gender-benders and queers. The project included interactive performance, an immersive-media installation, and short film. As part of the project's lifespan, we produced four tours to major North American cities (2014-2016); two residency/creation periods in Yerevan, Armenia (2013 & 2015); and our short film travelled to festivals (2015-2017). We were supported by British Columbia Arts Council, the Province of British Columbia, and the Canada Council for the Arts from 2013-2016.

Dear Armen marked a maturation of form, and created a strong foundation for the following project, *World of Q*, for which we created two collaborative sci-fi films. Where *Dear Armen* focused on a historical and contemporary narrative, *World of Q*, looked to the future. The project was conceived with Kamee Abrahamian and grew from our indignation and frustration with the lack of diverse representation in science fiction films. For *World of Q*, we devised a collaborative process where the stories, cast, and crew comprised queer and trans folks, women, people of colour, and disabled people. Abrahamian and I created a structure, and invited the cast and crew to adapt and craft the project based on their own experiences. *World of Q* was supported with a Media Arts project and touring grant from the Canada Council and Regional Arts Council from 2016-2020.

I began my thesis while still working on *World of Q*. My initial proposal was to create a science fiction multiplatform work entitled *The Return*. That project aimed to explore and theorize Diasporic Futurisms alongside themes of computational vision. It sought to accomplish this through the creation of a fictional story set in a dystopian reality. A brief plot summary is that in the midst of global political turmoil, a trans activist is reunited with their grandmother on her deathbed. What had been imagined as a fictional dystopian reality, quickly became my

actual reality. I am the trans activist that was reunited with their grandmother on her deathbed amid a pandemic coupled with movements for social and environmental justice.



Image 2: Still from *Transmission*

When I pitched this project in the fall of 2018, none of us could have known that COVID-19 would soon transform what seemed like speculative fiction into reality. Productions halted as our university closed and most film productions worldwide were paused. The conditions of our real world started becoming more and more like the fictional worlds I had been developing since 2016.

In the storyworlds of *World of Q* and *The Return*, there was a global crisis coupled with an acute rise in social justice movements fighting against fascist government and far right conspiracy theories that were running rampant. While global crises and social justice movements predate the pandemic period we have been moving through, the arrival of COVID-19 amplified our real-world conditions to the hyperbolic conditions of my fictional storyworlds.

Not only was it suddenly not possible to continue with my thesis in the ways I had first imagined, but it also felt increasingly less relevant to me. I no longer felt the need to create an alternative storyworld. I felt like we were already living in an alternative storyworld. As we

moved through such an unprecedented time resulting in so much death and impact for our elder communities, it was the research that I was doing with my family that took on greater importance. The experimental works that now make up *I Am Your Ghost* took centre stage.

The Intergenerational Unspeakables Between Us

My family's story cannot be told without firstly situating it within the histories of forced migration that have been so significant to the Armenian people. My family is indigenous to the Armenian Highlands, in what is currently known as Eastern Turkey. Our histories in the region are marked by genocide and forced migration into neighbouring regions of Syria and Lebanon, where my grandfather and grandmother were born respectively. My grandfather was further displaced from Syria and lived undocumented in Lebanon until growing concerns of war led my grandparents to migrate to Canada with their children (my mother and two uncles).

The histories and realities of war, genocide and displacement have framed my family's experiences and our broader diasporic communities. Year after year, Armenian communities rally and protest the violent loss of life and land, coupled with the ongoing denial of the atrocities that have left surviving generations in permanent exile, still unable to contemplate return. Yet, inside my family home, our family's particular stories have remained largely outside of our conversations. Our personal stories, my great-grandparents,' grandparents' and parents' experiences were not topics that were discussed or reflected upon openly. This is not unique to my family and emerges as a recurring reality for many diasporic and immigrant families.

In an interview about her installation ...from *the Transit Bar*, Vera Frankel discusses the theme of silences between generations in immigrant households by saying:

The silence of trauma, when parents try to protect the next generation from internalizing the unspeakable, is very familiar in Canadian immigrant experience, though I am not sure the silence works. The fact that something is unspeakable is internalized through the silence itself (Pollock 264).

Chantal Akerman, a major influence for *I Am Your Ghost*, and my work more broadly, has openly discussed a familiar silence with her mother not wanting to discuss the Holocaust: “She never wanted to speak about Auschwitz...I asked her once to tell me more, and she said, ‘No, I will get crazy.’ So we could speak around, or after, or before, but the real moment, never. Not directly” (Rapold, 2015).

What I have discovered is that for many, diasporic storytelling lives between and beyond what is documented, recorded, and told. Despite a desire to document and give voice to shared histories, there is a deeper understanding that even when documentation exists, there is something unrepresentable – or something that defies representation – that persists. There are gaps that can’t be filled. These gaps have become a central point of interest in my work and raise questions for me about how to represent experiences that defy representation.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag examines the way war imagery is perceived. She states that “when there are photographs, a war becomes ‘real’” (Sontag, 2003, p 104). Calling back to her earlier work *On Photography*, Sontag argues that photographed events become more “real” than if they had never been photographed, but that after being exposed to them repeatedly they become “less real” (Sontag, 2003). In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, her argument evolves to highlight the ways that images of war are open to interpretation and are often manipulated to seem even more “real” (Sontag, 2003). She discusses the ways that the “real” has actually been engulfed by its representation: “Each situation has to be turned into a

spectacle to be real... People themselves aspire to become images: celebrities. Reality has abdicated. There are only representations: media” (Sontag, 2003, p 108). In the case of my family’s history, there are no photographs or documents that can attest to the *reality* of what has been survived. In making media about my family, I have had to question what and whose *reality* I am working to represent.

When it comes to representing the *lived experience* of *traumatic events*, the events themselves are only one part of the picture. The gaps and silences that are transmitted from one generation to the next relate to the ways *trauma* is embodied. And here, images often fail to make *more* real. Whether manipulated or not, images often fail to capture the complexity of absence.

In *Postcolonial Parabola: Literature, Tactility and the Ethics of Representing Trauma*, Jay Rajiva notes that “trauma literature tends to focus on gaps and absences (particularly those of time and memory) that challenge reductive forms of ‘knowing’ traumatic experience (such as, for example, certain types of objectivist historical research or biological science)” (Rajiva, 2017, p 3). *I Am Your Ghost* follows in this tradition of representing (or grappling with the inability to represent) the gaps and absences.

As a maker, my interest is not in representing the *reality* of the events that my family survived. Rather, I am interested in the potential for film and media to interrogate the silences and gaps themselves. Importantly, I am specifically seeking to create a visual language that can explore how the silences and gaps inform and shape our relationships with one another. To do this, I have experimented with what is visually represented, while also implementing audio-visual devices that aim to conceptually and formally point towards what cannot be represented.

The six films that make up *I Am Your Ghost* are fragments. Each film is between two to three minutes long. The audio interviews for each film reveal segments of memories, thoughts and feelings. On the screen, we see a range of archival footage, sequences of performances with the Ghost, and actuality footage depicting my grandmother, my mother and I. For every word a speaker says, many more are left unsaid. For every image we see, there are many others that aren't seen. And crucially, the performance of the Ghost operates as a visual cue for the many things that cannot be represented. These films gesture towards the spaces between my grandmother, my mother and I without seeking to resolve or explicate them fully.

Complex Familial Relationships

Another layer to this work and its creation is my own personal journey of reuniting with my family to assist in my grandmother's end of life care. My Nene (grandmother) has been a hugely influential figure in my life. She helped raise me, often taking the role of primary caregiver as my mother was often absent, working at all hours throughout much of my childhood. We were a close family, but like many families, and especially many diasporic and immigrant households, we have complex histories and challenging interpersonal relationships.

Within our family there are legacies of abuse, broken relationships, and intolerance. As the survivor of intrafamilial sexual abuse, my family home has been a site of further trauma. Additionally, growing up in the 80's and 90's in a culturally Armenian household and community, homophobia and transphobia were constant through lines. As a result, I moved away from home early and spent much of my adult life away from my family.

When I returned, my intention was to be present with my Nene and to assist my mother in caring for her. Over the years, I had started to work on rebuilding my relationship with my family at a distance, and had been surprised by the ways that time and age had changed the

dynamics in our relationships. Prior to moving home, I began to glimpse possibilities for us to bridge our divides.

When I made the decision to move back to Toronto, I simultaneously made the decision to do my MFA and to make a fictional work documenting the experience of reconnecting with my family. The story of exiled queer children reuniting with families is not often told. I saw generative possibilities in this. My intention on documenting my return home was to use my own experience as the research for the fictional work I hoped to build.

I did not anticipate that the research would become the work, nor that the work itself would emerge in collaboration with my Nene and mom. The camera became an activator for us, enabling us to witness and engage with each other in ways that were previously inconceivable.

A Matrixial Trauma Approach

I Am Your Ghost was a literal and figurative *journeying toward* while simultaneously grappling with the impossibility of ever fully *arriving*. Griselda Pollock asks in *After-affects | After-images*: “Do artists affected by, or obligated to haunting pasts, journey away from or towards an encounter with traumatic residues?” (Pollock, 2013, p. xxiii). In my own work, the answer to this question is: both.

When I look at my body of work predating and including *I Am Your Ghost*, I see that most, if not all, of my work to date has been both a *journey away from* and *towards* at the same time. Through my work, I critically engage with *trauma* as an exercise of/in/through aporia - that is to say, *trauma*, in my work and in my experience, is an irresolvable contradiction, and to critically engage with it means to contend with and embody that contradiction.

In *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Judith Herman describes trauma as something that renders a person powerless (Herman, 198x, p. 33). She states that in a traumatic event, “the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force... Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (33). I remember first reading Herman’s text in the aftermath of my own experiences with traumatic events. I did not resonate with the powerlessness described. However, what made sense was the notion that traumatic events overwhelm our systems of care. From psychoanalytic to philosophical theories, *trauma* has often been theorized as a site of loss and severance. Something is always irrevocably lost in *trauma*. And something, or rather the subjective experience, is severed.

Building on this, critical to my interpretation of *trauma* is an understanding that while the cause and impacts of trauma are palpable, there is simultaneously something *beyond* or *between* inherent to *trauma*. The linear and coherent understanding and subjective experience is the site of severance. What became a significant point of interest for my work is exploring the effects and affects of *trauma*. In particular, I became fixated on the sensory responses and echoes that repeat long after traumatic events and experiences.

Without a doubt, *trauma* is rooted in something having happened. It generates effects on a person - on entire communities of people. We can (sometimes) ascribe a narrative and facts to it. We can (sometimes) say, at such and such time, *something* occurred. And we can (sometimes) say that following that *thing* having occurred, we have experienced other phenomena. Yet, there is much more to *trauma* than what happened. To have an individual’s or an entire community’s systems of care overwhelmed produces other effects that are not easy (and sometimes impossible) to narrativize or return to coherence.

In some of my earliest work, I have taken issue with psychoanalytic theories that prescribe narrativizing *trauma* as a cure or remedy. In counselling for PTSD, it was suggested to me that if we can retell the story, somehow, we can heal what was severed or lost. I concede, there can be something *healing* in giving *trauma* a name, a date, a place. And yet, in my own experience, trauma has also persisted as a simultaneous negation, and narrativizing it has operated as an approximation. I could only ever get so close to it. I could only ever approximate describing it, understanding it, embodying it, and knowing it.

In one of my earliest professional works *Alluding to a Personal Story*, I filmed a single take of my telling a confessional style story about my experiences as a survivor of intrafamilial sexual abuse. The title references Lisa Steele's well-known video work *A Very Personal Story*, where Steele recounts the story of her mother's death. I created this work in conversation with Steele's powerful piece, and as part of a lineage of queer and feminist works that situate the body as a central site of investigation.



Image 3: Still from *Alluding to a Personal Story*

In *Alluding to a Personal Story*, I used a multi-cam set up to capture multiple perspectives of the same story that was told in a single take, partly in English and partly in Armenian. In editing

the film, I used fragmentation and repetition as key devices to convey the further fracturing of that linear story. For me, at that time, it was essential that the story not have a full coherence to it, because the story for me never cohered. All these years later, it still doesn't cohere as a singular event that is fully describable. Rather, *trauma*, in my experience, is a kaleidoscope. It is many things and it is also *not a thing*. It is both/and.

Through the editing of *Alluding to a Personal Story*, I worked to convey the significance of what is missing between the slices of footage that make up the image. As important as what gets seen and heard are the things that could not be articulated, the slices left on the "edit room floor," or the pieces lost or inaccessible in translation. That work represented a critical investigation of what is not only lost but is not possible to re-capture.

By contrast, *I Am Your Ghost* approaches *trauma* from a different position than I have previously interrogated. The site of loss and severance is not its primary interest. Rather, *I Am Your Ghost* is aligned with theories of the matrixial proposed by Griselda Pollock and Bracha Ettinger. Here, *trauma* is reconfigured as not only being something that is lost, but that within trauma there is also a movement towards connection:

[Matrixial theory] reveals... another dimension in human subjectivity, also structurally traumatic, that is not based on loss and separation. Instead it discloses parallel strings of yearning for connectivity and an inescapable potential for hospitality and compassion towards the other (Pollock, 2014, pg xvii).

The "parallel strings of yearning for connectivity" encompass the impetus behind *I Am Your Ghost*. This work seeks out the "intimacy between trauma and the aesthetic zone" (xvii). It aims to investigate *trauma* not only as a site of severance, but instead, that within trauma, particularly intergenerational trauma, there exist threads that *weave together* the texture of complex relationships.

Pollock contends that “the creation of after-images [can] bring about *transformation*” (xxiii). She is careful to note that these after-images are not about “cure or resolution,” but instead that aesthetic practices can potentially transform “the traces, the *after-affects* of trauma, personal or historical, inhabiting the world that artists also process as participants in and sensors for our life-worlds and troubled histories” (xxiii).

The process of creating *I Am Your Ghost* brought about transformation in the end of life care for my Nene. It enabled a new layer of connection and exploration within our complex familial relationships. This work has *traces* of our shared and individual traumatic histories and experiences. Yet, throughout this work, instead of *a trauma story*, what gets foregrounded is our ability to be present with one another (in and amidst *trauma*).

The performance of the Ghost is perhaps the most obvious *trace* of our shared, inherited, and individual experiences of *trauma*. It appears on screen as being with my grandmother. It sits on the couch next to her chair. It holds her hand. It lays in her lap. It enters the apartment and moves through various rooms. It inhabits her apartment, wears her clothes and sleeps in her bed. It visits the garden outside of her apartment, and it also visits the home that my grandmother, mother and I lived in together.

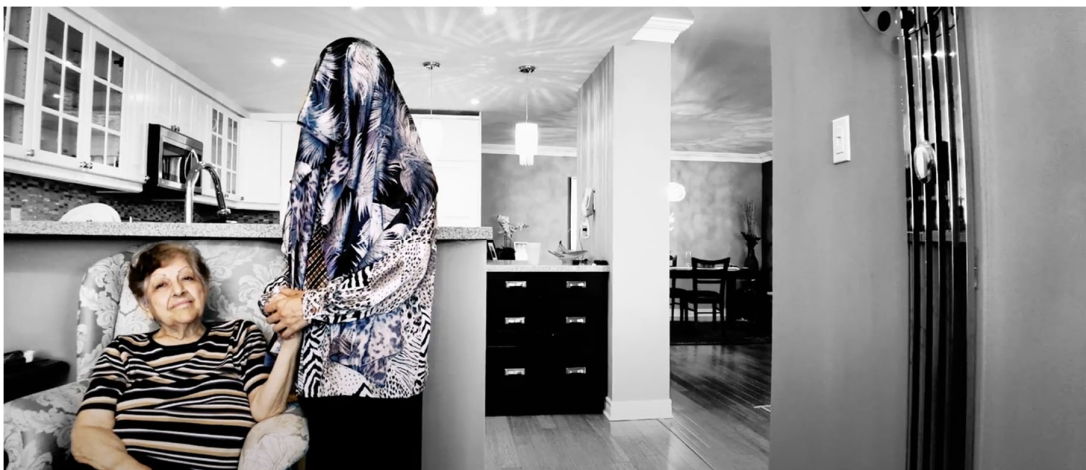


Image 4: Still from *I Am Your Ghost* where Ghost is holding Nene's hand

The Ghost is played by my mother and I, but the Ghost is also something else. It doesn't define itself. My grandmother does not react to it with fear or concern. In fact, she often appears calm in its presence, sometimes with a smile on her face. The Ghost is not ominous. It does not have a name, and it is not any one event, character or experience. It is what we cannot speak to each other, but what is present with us.

Significant Influences

Significant video and cinematic influences for the creation of *I Am Your Ghost*, include Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* and Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie*. Literary works that specifically shaped my thinking and craft include Betsy Warland's *Bloodroot: Tracing the Untelling of Motherloss* and Dana Walwerath's *Aliceheimer's: Alzheimer's Through the Looking Glass*. These works operated as close companions to my thought process from the earliest days of conceptualizing through to the final days of writing this support paper.

Measures of Distance

Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* is a video artwork that explores, among many things, displacement, dislocation and the relationship between mother and daughter. Hatoum, a Beirut born Palestinian, lived in exile when war broke out in Lebanon in 1975 while she was on a trip in London, England. The images and conversations featured in *Measures of Distance* were recorded during her visit to Beirut years later.

The 16-minute film explores intimacy and distance, “both conceptually, in terms of exile and estrangement, and visually, by employing photographs of her mother’s body both as close-up fragments and full body images”(Hutchinson, 2020). On the screen, abstracted images of Hatoum’s mother in the shower appear with Arabic text layered atop. The text features letters written by Hatoum’s mother, which is also translated through voiceover by Hatoum in English. Intercut with the reading of the letters are “taped conversations in Arabic between mother and daughter, in which her mother speaks openly about her feelings, her sexuality and her husband's objections to Hatoum's intimate observation of her mother's naked body” (Tate, 1988).

Hutchison describes this film well in saying, “distance is measured by the exile that leads to fragmentation of families, communities and nations” (Hutchinson, 2020).

From the first time I saw this work many years ago to revisiting it for the purpose of research for *I Am Your Ghost*, I have been consistently drawn to Hatoum’s remarkable ability to convey and hold tension throughout this work. The tension operates on both a formal and conceptual level. As a viewer, I feel close to the story, but never fully able to access all of it. As a non-Arabic speaking West-Asian/Middle Eastern person, I feel a longing to access the text on the screen, but I am only able to understand it through Hatoum’s voiceover translation. As viewers, we are privy to intimate moments and intimate conversations between Hatoum and her mother -- but they are fragments. We never get the whole conversation.



Image 5: Still from *I Am Your Ghost* showing overlay and use of subtitles

The interplay between intimacy and distance are elements that I used in *I Am Your Ghost*. As I was looking to develop a visual language that could speak to the paradoxical and simultaneous experiences of absence and presence, intimacy and estrangement, connection and loss.

Hatoum's work particularly informed the ways I employed layered imagery (using a diverse range of footage and juxtaposing or superimposing images atop one another); the use of interview sound recording and the musical soundscape; and using handheld versus locked-off shots. I used fragments of conversations rather than entire lines of thought and alluded to deeper context without revealing the full story. Hatoum's work served as a reference point for the ways that image, sound and personal story can come together to create a texture that is more than the sum of its parts.

No Home Movie

Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie* is Akerman's last film before her own death by suicide. The film has been described as "a documentary still-life study of her elderly mother, Natalia (or Nelly) Akerman, a Holocaust survivor born in Poland" (Bradshaw, 2016). The film juxtaposes long takes from inside Natalia's apartment, skype conversations between Chantal Akerman and Natalia, and scenes from beyond the apartment including a back garden, a local park and a desert (Bradshaw, 2016).

Critical to *No Home Movie* is the legacy of surviving the Holocaust. While there are moments in that attempt to unpack some of that history through conversation, the film does not foreground this history. Rather, it lives in between what is said and what is seen. What gets foregrounded throughout are the day-to-day activities of Natalia's life. Some of the most notable instances in the film are also some of the most banal: shots taken from a doorway, with a view into Natalia's day-to-day life, as she moves from one part of the apartment to another; scenes where Akerman's sister, Sylvaine "periodically arrives to take up the elder-care duties, and there are home-care nurses" (Bradshaw, 2016). The film is full of daily actions that typically go unseen and could be viewed as unremarkable.

In a 2009 interview, Akerman reflects on her 1975 work *Jeanne Dielman* in saying, “I made this film to give all these actions that are typically devalued, a life on film” (Criterion Collection, 2009). *Jeanne Dielman*, often cited as Akerman’s film most closely connected to *No Home Movie*, is a film that gives cinematic life and presence to the banalities of day-to-day life. These echoes are more hauntingly repeated in *No Home Movie*, as Natalia’s everyday life is captured with the viewer’s knowledge that these activities will be among the last for Natalia.

There are many striking elements in *No Home Movie*, but what has most informed *I Am Your Ghost* is Akerman’s exploration and depiction of the intimacy of the mundane, while also maintaining its formal distance. With similar echoes to Hatoum’s work, *No Home Movie* realizes what Griselda Pollock discusses in *Mother Trouble* in saying that the mother-daughter relationship can be viewed as “traces, vibrations and resonances, registered sonic and tactile intimations of othernesses, sharing space but never fusing, encountering but never dissolving their boundaries, jointly eventing without ever knowing fully the other’s event” (Pollock, 2009 p. 14). In *No Home Movie*, there is a closeness, a desire to lean into understanding one another, but there is always also a distance, an inability to fully know the other. There are many gaps. The film and the rooms are filled with silences.

In *I Am Your Ghost*, nothing extraordinary occurs. There is no high drama. Big family secrets are not confessed on screen. Histories of surviving wars are not interrogated. Instead, small daily experiences are captured such as watching television, making food together, and attending hospital appointments. Much of the films and the interactive are situated in my grandmother’s home. The interviews refer to histories that never get fully exposed. My grandmother talks about her angelic mother, who was born in the midst of the genocide. My mother references immigrating to Canada. I allude to the expectations my grandmother placed on me. My mother talks about being taken right back to her childhood and how my grandmother

was nasty to her. Overall, however, there is no depth of exposition into these references, and nothing remarkable transpires.



Image 6: Still from *I Am Your Ghost*, where Caroline and Yolande discuss going to an appointment

Yet, what may not be known immediately to an audience is that these simple acts are in fact remarkable. Despite all of the experiences that lie between my grandmother, mother and I, we were able to gather and be with each other during this time. We were able to offer tenderness and care, despite histories of not always receiving that from each other. We were able to collaborate on making a film, despite many years of finding it difficult to collaborate in our lives. Following in Akerman's cinematic influence, the film hopefully allows an audience to celebrate the mundanity without having to know the intimacy of these details.

Bloodroot: Tracing the Untelling of Motherloss

Bloodroot: Tracing the Untelling of Motherloss is a stunning memoir by Betsy Warland, where Warland “takes the reader with her as she negotiates her mother's growing incapacity and death” (CBC, 2018). The book, written as prose poetry, weaves together the final chapter in Warland's relationship with her mother. Warland, a queer writer, who had a distant but also

close relationship with her mother, recounts the many visits, hospitalizations, and moments leading into her mother's death. The work "weaves a common ground that moves beyond duty and despair, providing both questions and guideposts for readers, particularly those faced with aging and ill parents and their loss" (CBC, 2018).

Bloodroot was a constant companion in helping me navigate my own relationship to returning home and being in proximity with my family. Warland writes: "My mother's tolerance of me was enabled by a silent pact that I tell her very little about my life. This narrative traces the blank spaces of what we could not say, of what will never be known, of what will never be fulfilled" (Warland, 2000 p. 13). My experience with my grandmother was similar - a "silent pact" that I not discuss aspects of my life and my experience.

During the creation of *I Am Your Ghost*, a friend said to me, "make sure you tell your grandmother everything." This was a loving thought to ensure that I leave nothing unsaid. Yet, like Warland's work, *I Am Your Ghost* is made from a place of recognizing there are many things that simply cannot be said. Instead, *I Am Your Ghost* similarly traces the "blank spaces," creating a visual language for the unspeakables between us. I took inspiration from Warland's book, in embracing ellipses. Sharing brief glimpses into a series of moments. Offering a kaleidoscope of instances, phrases, pauses.

The form of the memoir and Warland's process in creating it have also been an influence for *I Am Your Ghost*. The book of prose defies typical non-fiction conventions, written somewhere between prose-poetry, poetry manuscript, and memoir. Some of the pages have only one line on them. Others read as a scene or sequences of prose, complete with dialogue. There is a lyrical quality not only to the words themselves, but to the format of the book. In this way, the form of the book plays against typical narrative conventions while creating both figurative and literal "blank spaces" on the page for the many elements of the story that cannot be articulated.

In *I Am Your Ghost*, I similarly play with cinematic, documentary, and video art conventions. There are performative and highly stylized sequences with the Ghost. There are documentary elements with excerpted interview footage. I use archival family footage to recall the past and add visual texture. I made decisions to split the screen and superimpose images to create juxtapositions and layered visual effects. Each of these borrow from film and video art conventions, using them in an experimental way designed to conceptualize and create an affective experience rather than a linear or coherent one, mirroring the embodied experiences of trauma, loss, love and grief that was present for us at that time.



Image 7: Still from *I Am Your Ghost* showing use of split-screen and using colour to create stylistic effects

Further, Warland's emergent process on creating , served as inspiration for my own emergent process. Warland writes:

I hadn't any intention of writing a memoir. I did the notation because it helped me to have some place to deposit my thoughts, memories and feelings... One day... I began my work routine: sat down at my laptop to do final edits on a suite of poems in *What Holds Us Here*. But, something else happened. A prose piece began writing itself. It was about my mother. Odd. But, understandable – I was still grieving – so, I gave myself to it. Assuming it was just something I needed to “get off my chest” (as my mother used to say), I went on to manuscript revisions.

Next day, the same thing happened. Next day: ditto. It was bewildering...As soon as I shifted my inscription routine to this modality and setting, Bloodroot took off: I could hardly keep up with it! (Warland, 2013)

Warland describes a process where the book almost calls to her to write it. She was involved with another task, another book, and yet, this book persisted and emerged. As Warland listens to the impulses guiding her to write it, the process of writing the book almost takes on a life of its own. Similarly, I was engaged in a different creative aim, yet *I Am Your Ghost* is the work that emerged. I will discuss the importance of emergence to the creation of *I Am Your Ghost* in a later section of this paper. For now, it is significant to note that I took inspiration from Warland's own process of emergence - where the work was discovered by responding to surprising impulses and information.

Aliceheimer's: Alzheimer's Through the Looking Glass

Dana Walrath's *Aliceheimer's: Alzheimer's Through the Looking Glass* is a graphic novel exploring Walrath's relationship with her mother, Alice, through the final stages of her mother's Alzheimer's. The book's title, references Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871). There are many striking features of this book, including its content, form, the evolution of its form, and Walrath's work as a medical anthropologist, which frames her own experiences with her mother's illness.

Walrath, who is also Armenian and a medical anthropologist and professor, created this book as a way to process and document her experiences caring for her mother. It is structured through a series of vignettes, including text, hand-drawn images and collages. Daniel Smith notes in an academic review of the book:

The book is a fitting illustration of how autoethnographic or autobiographical research might employ visual methods to ... enhance a text and deliver a multi-dimensional product that is an engaging and relevant piece of scholarship, while also being visually and textually accessible (Smith, 2018).

Of particular interest to me were the collaged elements of the pictures throughout the book. In fall of 2010, Walrath “made a pact with an artist friend... to make a drawing a day and to email them to each other” (Walrath, 2013, p. 5). To create the pictures, Walrath took a copy of Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and cut the book up, using shreds of the book’s text to make the texture of Alice’s bathrobe and other aspects of the collaged pictures. Using comics and graphic novels made sense as a form for Walrath “because comics are all about rule breaking... Ultimately, the precious originals disappear... as the originals disappear, new layers emerge” (2013, p. 5). Walrath further engaged this graphic form because of “a picture’s ability to tap into the subconscious processes for both the composer and the reader” (p. 5). I took inspiration from the use of collage and Walrath’s desire to break rules.

Magical Realism and horror were two genres that Walrath plays with, which were also influences for *I Am Your Ghost*. “The dominant narrative is a horror story. People with Alzheimer’s are perceived as zombies, bodies without minds, waiting for valiant researchers to find a cure. For Alice and me, the story was different. Alzheimer’s was a time of healing and magic” (Walrath, 2013, p. 5). Hence, Walrath’s graphic novel has elements of horror story, magical realism, intertwined with memoir and autoethnography.



Image 8: Still from *I Am Your Ghost* with Ghost in the hallway

The figure of the Ghost for me calls forth the horror genre, especially gothic and supernatural horror involving hauntings. In *I Am Your Ghost*, the haunting is inverted. Even though the film is largely about my dying grandmother, she does not play the Ghost. Rather, my mother and I, through play and performance, become the Ghost. I wanted to convey that something is happening to all of us in this experience. While the dying and sick are often seen to be something and someone that is being lost, I wanted to highlight that all people are undergoing a process of loss. More importantly, I wanted to highlight that something is also being gained by all people. The Ghost here is not ominous. It is present. It witnesses. It is clothed in something familiar that is made unfamiliar. It illustrates a bridging of worlds that cannot ever be fully known by one another, but is nonetheless engaged together.

Additionally, Walrath's work as a medical anthropologist is extremely significant to *I Am Your Ghost*. As I was making this work, I struggled to find references about dementia and Alzheimer's that didn't reduce the person with the illness to their symptoms. As will be discussed in later sections of the paper, the biomedical care that my grandmother received was very difficult for her, and by extension, for us as her caregivers. What struck me about Walrath's work is the way it makes space for the whole person. Alice's Alzheimer's is depicted

as a lens into another world. Much like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice and Dana Walrath embark in a new world together, where science and biomedicine are not the only ways that her mother's experience is defined.

I took specific inspiration from the notion of embarking in the creation of a new world together. I specifically did not want to represent my grandmother as only sick. She also experienced many other things, including a desire to engage with us in the creation of this project. Therefore, in *I Am Your Ghost*, I refrain from showing many details of my grandmother's illness or only representing us engaging with her as caretakers. Instead, I have sought to depict a more complex set of experiences, attempting to represent us grappling with memory, grief, anticipation, and connection with one another.

Emerging Forms

Emergent Design

A significant methodology employed in creating *I Am Your Ghost* is Emergent Design:

Emergent design refers to the ability to adapt to new ideas, concepts, or findings that arise while conducting qualitative research. In contrast to more structured approaches, an emergent design welcomes unanticipated information, often adding to the richness of the data (Pailthorpe, 2017).

Emergent Design as a methodology quite literally emerged. What had initially been conceived as research, became a process of/for creation. It was something like a treasure hunt, without knowing we were hunting for treasure. Everything from the filming itself, the character and performance of the Ghost, through to the references and the theories that formed and informed this project - all of these elements emerged from a willingness to adapt and creatively respond to unanticipated information. This work was very much a process of becoming. At the beginning there were my initial intentions and what I sought to consciously shape; throughout the process, there is what emerged.

In Emergent Strategy, Adrienne Marie Brown expands on a concept defined by Nick Obolensky: “Emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions” (Brown, 2017, p. 13). For Brown, emergence “emphasizes critical connections over critical mass, building authentic relationships, listening with all the senses of the body and the mind” (p. 3).

Something I had to confront early in the creation of *I Am Your Ghost* is how this work felt small compared with the initial story I intended to tell. When I set out to create my thesis film, I had imagined a large storyworld populated by characters who were fighting against systemic

oppression. I imagined big actions and struggles. The thesis I ended up making is a personal story about a family spending time together as one of them approaches her death. While this is a big moment for our family, it felt small to me in the context of our world. Added to that, *I Am Your Ghost* doesn't even tell a complete story. It offers a series of vignettes that partially depict the connection between four generations in the matrilineal line in an Armenian family. Those vignettes only allude to stories. They offer glimpses and fragments, not complete arcs.

A major learning for me in making this work was that I had to let go of the story I thought I needed to tell, to find the story that is now told through *I Am Your Ghost*. As I embraced this, I realized the ways that our simple interactions actually opened the doors to explore much larger patterns and ideas, including the ideas discussed in previous sections.

For Brown, one of the elements that defines Emergent Strategy involves interdependence. Brown defines interdependence as our ability to “meet each other’s needs in a variety of ways” (Brown, 2017, p. 87). And in order to achieve this, we have to “decentralize our idea of where solutions and decisions happen, where ideas come from” (p. 87). In the context of making a work of art, especially one that deals with traumatic histories, illness, death and intergenerational relationships, I had to let go of my vision for how this work had to be. I had to be open to learning from my mother and grandmother, and allowing our interactions to guide the work.

I learned to take my cues from what presented itself, especially paying attention to my Nene. If something appealed to her, if she showed interest and enjoyed something, I leaned into it further. If she expressed wanting more of something, I responded to that. I allowed the work to evolve based on her guidance and our shared experiences. In doing so, I was able to engage the creation of this work based on what was working for everyone involved. Instead of “crafting,”

my role involved deeper listening and a willingness to respond to what I learned as new information and new desires emerged.

The Path Taken

As I've stated, one of the reasons I wanted to return home was to support my mother in caring for my grandmother. My Nene's care had become very involved and it was largely my mother caring for her alone.

My grandmother had myriad health conditions including myelodysplasia, a blood disorder that required regular blood transfusions. Her health conditions were exacerbated by dementia. Her illnesses meant frequent visits to the hospital, tests, scans, treatments, and more. These trips became increasingly difficult.

She hated the hospital. She hated all the tests and treatments. Due to her dementia she did not always remember her diagnoses. This meant repeatedly going through the arduous experience of retelling her about her conditions. We would explain over and over again why she needed the tests, treatments, and scans that we took her to. No matter how many times we told her, it did not change or alter how much she hated everything about medicalized care.

I found her distress about attending her appointments very difficult. Despite knowing the important role they played, I could see the many ways that medicalized care fell short in addressing her whole person. I often felt helpless in how we could improve her experience and how we could assist in capturing the human component to her various illnesses and their ongoing treatments.

While the medical system treated her symptoms, we were engulfed with the reality that there was no cure. Added to this was our shared and individual grief. The anticipation. The

knowledge that we were entering her final months. I was constantly wondering how we could transform the challenge of this experience.

I began reading and thinking a lot about death and dying. I was curious how to better witness and participate in end of life stages. In particular, I began wondering what rituals and practices we could use to support my grandmother, and more broadly, how we could better support elders and dying members of our communities as they transition out of their earthly bodies.

In Aliceheimer's: Alzheimer's Through the Looking Glass, Walrath, discusses “medical systems as cultural systems” (p. 4). This was a needed perspective to come across in our day-to-day experiences of doctors pathologizing and locating specific sites of sickness in my grandmother’s body. What my mother and I could not easily find were spaces that welcomed my grandmother in the way that she was, or people who could advise us on how to support her more holistically. Walrath speaks to this in her book in saying:

If you believe that science is the only way to understand sickness and health, then finding the good in a disease state at the end of the life cycle is an uncomfortable notion. But for anthropologists, medicine is not just science but a collection of beliefs and practices. Biomedicine’s power to cure disease and to repair individual bodies has led to its spread throughout the world, obscuring the fact that it is a cultural system and that, like any human-made system, it has its flaws. (Walrath, 2013, p. 5)

What I was craving was any sign of others being aware of the broader impacts of biomedical care such as “the social and political determinants of sickness and health,” “the social aspects of science,” and “the racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism and other forms of structural violence embedded in biomedicine” (Walrath, 2013, p.4). And ultimately, what I wanted for my grandmother and for us as her caregivers was a way to engage in caring for her as more than attending to her symptoms. I was searching for not only something that would act as a counterpoint to the biomedical care that she was struggling with, but also for a way to engage with my grandmother’s evolving worldview.

As I watched my grandmother's dementia progress, I became aware of the fact that while she was embodying a different reality from our own. There were many changes to her behaviour that were not only about her being sick - she was also a thinking, feeling, sensing person whose ways of being had altered. Where she used to be anxious and worried, she had become lighter and easier. She would smile more often. She seemed unfussed about things that used to be high priorities for her. She loved watching TV shows and movies. She would read the calendar like a book, sometimes upside down.

I was curious how we could bring our worlds together. I wanted to engage in what Walrath described in her book about reframing dementia: "Reframing dementia as a different way of being, as a window into another reality, lets people living that state be our teachers -- useful, true humans who contribute to our collective good, instead of scary zombies" (Walrath, p. 5)

Creative Intervention

Initially, it didn't occur to me that the camera itself could be an answer for my grandmother. One day, I came over to her place and had some camera gear with me. She was curious what the bags were, so I opened them. When she saw the camera, she became very excited. I took out the camera and showed it to her. She wanted to hold the camera at first, but found it heavy. So, I held it for her. She laughed. She continued smiling and laughing as I began filming her.

This was surprising to me, because as my grandmother's illnesses progressed, she had become less interactive. She didn't initiate conversation as often. She was less and less curious about things going on in our respective worlds. Most often, she would watch television. I knew from what she said and how she behaved that she was comforted by and wanted us to be present, but she didn't often initiate interaction or conversation. Yet, when she saw my camera, she lit up.

After that first time, I began to bring a camera often on my visits. She loved being filmed. She repeatedly mentioned wanting to make a film together. My mother also enjoyed being part of the films and the filmmaking process.

I began to make smaller films for coursework, collaborating with my mother and grandmother. Initially, I viewed these as research for the fictional work I was intending to make for my thesis. At that time, I still didn't imagine this was going to become the thesis work in itself. I did, however, become very interested in our filming because I noticed how these interactions were changing my conception of filmmaking and the camera itself.

I began to realize the camera's potential to operate as a catalyst. The camera operating as a lens and vehicle for witnessing and documenting was familiar to me. As was the collaborative potential of filmmaking. What was new for me was that I began to see how the camera itself could become a catalyst for our interactions. It could be an activator.

The Role of the Camera

In *Staging Care: Dying, Death and Possible Futures*, Rajat Nayyar explores how collaborative audio-visual ethnography can “activate the imagination to engage with temporalities” (Nayyar, 2020 p. 76). Through the research that Nayyar did “with families seeking Moksha for their terminally ill and dying relatives,” the role of the camera as a facilitator was examined. Nayyar discusses the co-creative process of making memorial films with families in saying, “the camera emerged as an important affective technology for researching and intervening in possible futures” (Nayyar, 2020 p. 88).

In *I Am Your Ghost*, possible futures meant many different things. In essence, however, due to the camera's involvement, possibilities emerged that were previously inaccessible to us. In our daily interactions, we were not able to directly communicate about the myriad experiences, feelings, memories and thoughts that we were moving through and between us. There was no language to reconcile our past with, and no language to discuss what was coming.

However, when I brought out the camera, clicked record, or turned on the mic, suddenly a different set of possibilities emerged for us. The presence and engagement with the camera itself activated my grandmother, and it also activated our relationship with her. Through our interactions with the camera, my grandmother became interested in storytelling and play instead of watching television. We became collaborators instead of spectators. Our interactions with the camera itself made possible what had felt impossible.

Performance

The performance elements of this project also emerged as a result of my Nene's surprising response. I would sometimes assist in dressing my grandmother as we readied her for appointments or helped her undress after bringing her home following them. One day, I was in her room putting something back in her closet and I was struck with the impulse to put on her clothes. I had done this often as a child and on that day, it struck me as something I wanted to do. It was simultaneously a gesture of remembrance (harkening back to a time when I had done this as a child), and it was also a gesture of connection, of wanting to feel closer to her. Once I had put the clothes on, I took one of her scarves. As a child, I often played with scarves. I would put it on my head and pretend it was my long hair. This time, I put it over my head so that it was covering my face. I then walked into the living room to show her my outfit.



Image 9: Still from *I Am Your Ghost* where Lee is putting on the scarf to become the Ghost

When I walked in, she laughed. She said “is this a ghost? What is this? Who are you?” I peeked my head out from under the scarf and we both laughed.

In that moment I realized that we were both ghosts in some way. She was becoming my ghost, and in that moment I was her ghost. In the room with us were other ghosts. The ghost of my great-grandmother, who was always a topic of discussion. The ghosts of the many things that we couldn’t discuss: our past, her history, our cultural and world conditions. The ghosts of our histories together: her non-acceptance of parts of my identity, the difficult histories of intrafamilial abuse. We were surrounded by ghosts, and by embodying the ghost, it was almost like naming “the elephant in the room.” Instead of a name, we could give it a shape. Even if we never spoke about what it meant. And somehow, this was fun. It was playful. Even as it had come to represent so many serious and real things that lived between and beyond us.

When I told my mom about the Ghost, she was intrigued. I asked her if she would be interested in also dressing up as the Ghost and letting me film her. She agreed. In this way we would alternate spending time with my grandmother. Sometimes I was the Ghost and my mother was filming, and sometimes she was the Ghost and I was filming. I asked my grandmother if she

wanted to dress as the Ghost, and she laughed and said, “why would I do that?” So, instead, my grandmother would watch and laugh and ask questions. And together we spent some of the hardest times in play.

Since my grandmother’s death, the performance elements in this work have taken a new shape and new meaning. When we began this work, my mother and I were playing the Ghost, with the camera facilitating our interactions. Now, my grandmother has died. She is the ghost in the work. Yet on screen, she looks alive while my mother and I play the part of the Ghost. There is a reflexivity in this work that continues to evolve.

As I worked on completing the creative for this MFA, the film and the interactive have revealed new layers to me about what we were able to achieve and continue to materialize. During production, performance and filming were a way for us to ritualize and express what was inarticulable. Our performance of the ghost enabled us to make visible something deeply felt yet impossible to show or articulate otherwise.



Image 10: Still from *I Am Your Ghost* where Caroline is the Ghost

Now that my grandmother is gone, the film and interactive environment all point to the past. And yet, through the performance of the ghost, the content of the work looks outward to us, in this time. As a result, this work has become a type of teleportation device. It transports us between times. On witnessing the film and engaging the interactive environment we engage in a time that is now past. Yet, within the work there is something also looking outward and anticipating us being here. The interplay of the us as the ghosts then, speaks to a future state that we are living now where she is now the ghost.

Collaboration

Collaboration in the context of making *I Am Your Ghost* meant many things. Firstly, it has been an acknowledgement from the start that I did not make this work alone. This work is not the result of my vision alone. My grandmother and mother were not just subjects in this film. The camera was not an objective fly on the wall recording our lives. Rather, collaboration was an active engagement with one another, the camera, the process of creation and the final outputs. The three of us participated with each other in front of the camera and behind it. The making of this work was a shared negotiation of what could take place between us. The resulting films and media work are the culmination of a co-creative process involving the three of us working together to shape it. “Collaboration means, if only temporarily, implication in one another’s lives, with all the entanglements that carries” (Bacharach, 2016 p. 94)

Collaborating on *I Am Your Ghost* meant that the three of us participated in making decisions together. Some of these have already been outlined in preceding sections of this essay. My grandmother’s consistent interest in this process, the camera, in being filmed, and the Ghost are a few of the examples that illustrate how she guided and informed the direction of this work. My mother’s decisions about the framing of scenes, her camera work, and her direction on the

editing of the films, are further examples. Yet, our collaboration with one another runs deeper than the specific examples of shared decision-making. What is important about the nature of our collaboration is that it involved a willingness and commitment from each of us to consistently participate and negotiate with one another about what we should do together.

Timothy Murray describes the significance of “should” in *Empathy, Surviving and Collective Reflexivity*:

Here ‘should’ is key, as it is an ethical mode of questioning. Should we?... In this vein it is important to be clear about empathy’s deliberation: rather than mining emotions for the sake of aggrandizing aesthetic production, it is allowing for the possibility of life-based relevance and urgency. (Bacharach, 2016 p. 95)

Our collaboration with one another was about much more than the creative output that now comprises *I Am Your Ghost*. It was about an investment in understanding and engaging with one another. It was about our relationships with each other, the times we were moving through together, and a creative process that mediated and facilitated our interactions.



Image 11: Still from *I Am Your Ghost* where my grandmother, mother and I are discussing the film

Critics of collaborative creative production have often discussed the ways collaboration limits creative freedom (Coffman, 2009). However, I contend that the collaboration between my

grandmother, mother and I is precisely what enabled this work to become what it is. Creative freedom (and authorship) was not limited, nor was it privileged as the primary impetus behind the work. We engaged in the creative process together and what has emerged is the result of our ability to gather around an empathic co-creative practice. Our collaboration was not “an articulation around an object or medium, but around the unpredictability of coming together” (Bacharach, 2016 p. 95) It is through this unpredictable coming together that we discovered a “capacity for empathy at once spontaneous and intentional, yet neither calculated [nor] instrumentalizing” (p. 95)

Empathy - that is to say, our ability to work towards an understanding of one another - was integral to our collaboration. “Empathy divests the self of itself, reinforces social bonds and can be mediated deliberately. It has a far-reaching potential to transform the very reality of the collaboration -- its aesthetic qualities, contexts, institutional scope and those involved” (Bacharach, 2016 p. 95) However, I argue that empathy is an active commitment, not a destination. As explored in earlier sections of this paper with respect to a matrixial trauma approach, I am aware that there are impossibilities to fully understanding and knowing one another. This work specifically interrogates the gaps and spaces between a full-knowing of one another in many aspects, which also includes our collaboration. Hence, empathy in the context of our collaboration was and is an active state of grappling with complexities.

Collaboration should not be mistaken for a perfectly horizontal or equal experience. One of the complexities in collaboration involves negotiating power dynamics between collaborators. This is a very important consideration for *I Am Your Ghost*, and it is important to highlight that the collaboration between my grandmother, mother and I was not realized as a perfect ideal or ideology. There were power dynamics between us that have ethical implications to our

collaboration. Discussions about our collaborative process should not act as a mask that flattens the complexities of/in our interactions.

Because of my grandmother's illnesses and dementia, she was in a vulnerable position within the context of this creative work as both collaborator and subject. Her consent to participate was something that I had to confront consistently, asking her not once, but every time we brought the camera out. I explained, to the best of my ability, the intentions of this work, as I understood them throughout its evolution. Legal consent is not something I could obtain from my grandmother, as her dementia meant that I had to obtain that legal consent from my mother and uncle. But, my primary concern was to ensure that I took all steps to explain what this project was becoming, including that the resulting film and media could be seen by public audiences. My aim was to consistently work towards understanding whether she was okay with what we were doing and to determine, to the best of our abilities, whether she was genuinely aligned. This is not a perfect picture of consent and the power dynamics between us were not something we could reconcile completely.

Further, as the only self-identified artist in this collaborative effort, I bear a different responsibility than my grandmother and mother in our representations in this work. At each stage of our collaboration, and especially throughout post-production, I was both a participant and an artist. My attention included what Jean Rouch describes as both the "cine and an ethno perspective," where I was consistently aware of the aesthetic choices we were making alongside the cultural and interpersonal issues emerging between us. (Coffman, 2009, p. 65)

Therefore, I do not intend to paint a singular and perfect picture of the nature of collaboration within *I Am Your Ghost*. Collaboration here does not mean an ideal or only horizontal process engaged the same between all collaborating people. Rather, collaboration was an active process where we engaged the complex dynamics at play in our interpersonal, social and creative

relationships with one another. It was an active state. It was an imperfect process. Yet, it was integral and essential to this work.

Post-production

Experimental Form

Given the interdisciplinary nature of my work, it is not surprising that *I Am Your Ghost* leans into an experimental form. Prior to *Dear Armen* a great deal of my creative background was more in the tradition of video art than cinema or film. Coming from an education and background in Contemporary Art, my attraction to time-based media was initially to explore and interrogate it as a medium outside of typical film and television conventions. I had been attracted to the canvas of a time-based medium, but less interested in the narrative and storytelling conventions of film.

In critically exploring trauma, traditional cinematic conventions of linear storytelling and complete narrative arcs felt constraining and inaccurate to me. Yet, simultaneously, the conventions of documentary with its adherence to “the truth” felt equally problematic and ill-fitting for the content I had been making. My creative thinking lends itself to abstracted images, fragments of story, slices of representation. For these reasons, video art spoke to me as a medium of choice early in my career.

However, one of the challenges I encountered as a maker of video art involved its reception. Within contemporary art communities, conceptual art is understood. It is a language that is often shared, and puzzling through a work of art can be viewed as a worthy experience. Yet outside of arts communities, Contemporary Art, and especially conceptual art can be mystifying, alienating and incomprehensible. “Some art can seem so far removed from our everyday experience that it is hard to understand. Contemporary art ... can be especially

difficult” (Lopez et al., 2008) Contemporary Art, video art included, can feel alienating to wide ranges of audiences, including many of my family, friends and communities.

As my practice evolved, I realized that I did not want to make art that was only understood by artists or people with an arts education. I wanted to tell stories that spoke to wider audiences, including especially the communities I come from and belong to. In recent works including *Dear Armen* and the films in *World of Q*, I have worked to create works that are interdisciplinary and experimental in nature but lean more heavily into narrative and storytelling conventions. My work has grown towards including discernable story elements, more coherent narrative and rounded characters. I have given greater attention to building story arcs. Over time, I have grown more and more interested in narrative fiction.

When I departed from my intention of creating a fictional film, I began to explore *I Am Your Ghost* as an experimental documentary. Having said that, identifying the structure for these films was not an easy process. I found myself confronting major challenges with editing *I Am Your Ghost*. I needed to find a way to explore and experiment with the form, while still creating a coherent work that could be relatable - to my mother, and ideally also my grandmother, if she were still alive to see the film.

As I began considering how we would edit the film, I remembered an early video work I had made about my grandparents during my undergraduate degree. Re-memory was a video artwork that featured my grandparents talking with each other about Beirut, Lebanon. In the editing of that work, I had chosen not to add subtitles. It had been a conscious decision on my part to intentionally refuse to “translate” Armenian to the largely non-Armenian speaking audience that would view it. I had wanted to create a feeling of displacement and dislocation for the majority of viewers of the work, enabling only those with access to the language to be able to glean the story being shared. My grandparents had attended the exhibition and while

they loved that they were included in my work, one of their immediate pieces of feedback was that they were disappointed that I had not included subtitles. I remember my grandmother saying, “they won’t understand what we are saying.”

While conceiving of its structure and beginning the editing process, I was struck with the challenge of how to stitch together the various components that make up *I Am Your Ghost* in a way that would enable audiences to “understand” what my grandmother, in particular, is saying, without having to compromise the experimental elements of the work that, to me, are able to convey the many things that never get said and feel “unsayable” in the work.

Finding an Editor

I knew I was going to need and want an editor for *I Am Your Ghost* for a couple key reasons. Firstly, I am not a particularly skilled editor. When I am editing film, I get lost in the visual canvas of the material and lose track of the other elements that make for good editing: sequencing, cutting, storytelling, listening. As a director, I can pay attention to those elements, but when I’m working as an editor, my timeline is a mess of elements juxtaposed for reasons that make sense in my own head, but don’t make sense on the screen.

More importantly, however, I knew I would need an editor because of the content. Working with family archival footage, hours of interviews, footage capturing the day-to-day life of looking after my grandmother, and the very stylized scenes with the ghost - I knew I was going to need an editor to help me decipher what pieces of content are actually compelling, and what pieces of content are only compelling to me. I was and am so close to the material that I knew I needed someone with the skill and objectivity to help me sort through things.

With no budget and a very particular vision for this film, I set out to find an editor. By the time I began editing, COVID-19 was in full-force. This meant that I was able to connect with many editors who potentially had time they would not otherwise have had for my low/no-budget experimental film. In theory, there were lots of potential people to work with.

The first editor I began working with had worked on a lot of documentaries. When we initially met, I discussed the ideas of the film, showcased some of the footage that we would be working with, and it seemed as though there was interest and alignment on the vision. However, when we began working together, the film started taking on a very documentary-style aesthetic. The interviews were sitting front and centre and the focus was veering towards telling the story of my grandmother's illnesses from the perspective of my mother and uncle. We had no solution for how to integrate the ghost sequences and began discussing those sequences as a separate film. As the summer of 2020 progressed, fortunately/unfortunately, my first editor got some paying documentary work, and had to pause her involvement in this film.

Next, I worked with a long-time friend and professional editor who works on primarily scripted narrative film and television. She is also Armenian, a filmmaker and theatre artist. We had many points of relation regarding the content of my film. However, in our collaboration, the film again started taking on a very structured quality. Again, the central storyline tended toward more prominently featuring my Nene's illness and the various diagnoses she had been given. Hospital visits were foregrounded and discussions between my mother, my uncle and I about my grandmother were centred.

The film felt wrong to me, but I wasn't able to discern what it needed. I couldn't figure out how to make the interview footage, the actualities, the archival footage and the ghost work together. And then it happened again. My second editor suddenly secured some very large projects working in narrative television that meant she could not finish editing the film. At this

point we had reached the end of summer 2020, and I was beginning to realize this film wasn't going to make the early fall deadline I had set for myself.

I had hoped to complete the film before the start of the fall semester, in part because I am doing a double degree (MFA/MBA), and I knew that once the MBA course work returned, the constraints on my time would once again be enormous. Based on that, I was concerned I would have difficulty completing the film. But, I had a bigger problem on my hands - I did not have an editor, and I did not have a clear vision for how to edit this film. Where production evolved through a process of emergence and emergent design, editing was like hitting my head against a wall of structure. I was blocked and I didn't know how to solve the block. And crucially, nothing clear or synchronistic was emerging.

It wasn't until early 2021 that I finally found the right editor. Cailleah Scott-Grimes was a godsend for this work. We were in the same MFA cohort, and have been colleagues and friends throughout our MFA journeys. I attended Cai's defense and had been in conversation with her about her incredible film throughout. Before reaching out to Cai, I had interviewed two more editors, and had realized that I needed an editor with a similar experimental sensibility. I remembered that Cai and I had both completed our undergraduate degrees at University of Toronto and had both majored in Visual Studies (an interdisciplinary contemporary art program). There aren't words to describe what it was like when Cai said yes and expressed interest in the work.

Cai's experimental sensibilities were perfect for this film. She works well with being given big ideas and running with them to create cuts that we could play with. My previous editors wanted paper-edits or clearer direction before beginning to work on a cut. With Cai, we talked about the feeling, the selections of footage to include, possibilities for sequencing things. We could work with sketches of ideas and possibilities, rather than detailed directions. I could tell Cai

that we need to play with time, texture, aspect ratio - and that would be enough to give Cai ideas to go away with and put together a cut. In this way we improvised the editing - back and forth. Once I could see a cut, it became much clearer to me what needed to happen. I was able to discern what elements worked better together than others. Suddenly, the films had an emergent quality to them again.

Developing the Interactive



Image 12: Screenshot from Interactive Installation of *I Am Your Ghost*

In parallel with developing the film I began experimenting with the interactive for *I Am Your Ghost*. Initially, the interactive component was born from my original thesis proposal. In that original pitch, the interactive was conceived as the space that the storyworld for the films would come alive. In the short films for *World of Q* I could only hint at the larger storyworld. The fifteen minutes of screen time didn't allow for fuller exposition of larger conditions impacting the characters of the story. What I wanted to create was a digital experience where the storyworld could be explored through artifacts like newspaper clippings, excerpts of text, visual

collateral, and smaller segments of video. I also imagined it as an archival space for the research informing the work.

However, as the thesis evolved, the reasons for creating and conceptualizing the interactive component also evolved. After my grandmother died, I began to imagine the interactive as a game. What appealed to me about a game was the way that story could be explored in an embodied way through a combination of visuals, audio, interactivity and importantly rules. “Since games are composed of rules, they’re uniquely suited to exploring systems and dynamics” (Anthropy, 2012 p. 25).

My grandmother’s care and our interactions with her were a set of decisions made within constraints and parameters. For example, there were high stakes decisions like: should we take her to the hospital for another blood transfusion? She doesn’t want to go, but if she doesn’t go, she will be immediately weaker and we know that the ultimate outcome is that she will die sooner. There were lower stakes decisions too, such as: She needs more groceries, but there’s nobody else home with her. Do I decide to go out now and leave her alone, or do I stay and wait for someone else to be here before I do? Each of these decisions had consequences, and I was curious about creating an immersive environment where decisions and consequences could be embodied by the player.

Games are also about relationships and as a medium communicate them very effectively (Anthropy, 2012 p. 25):

Digital games are most immediately about the direct relationship between the player’s actions or choices and their consequences. Games are a kind of theater in which the audience is an actor and takes on a role -- and experiences the circumstances and consequences of that role. (Anthropy, 2012 p. 25)

In the aftermath of my grandmother's death, I became intensely interested in the possibilities of gamifying our story and experiences. Would it be possible to gamify and create an interactive experience where the player could embody the role of the grandchild to a dying grandmother?

There are other elements of *I Am Your Ghost* that I wanted to further develop including the character of the Ghost and the genre of gothic horror. The idea of a haunted house and ghost story appealed intensely and informed the early development of the interactive. I was curious whether I could play with conventions of horror to tell the story of a family drama. A particular reference in conceptualizing this is the game *Gone Home*.

Gone Home is a surprising genre-bending game, featuring a haunted house that isn't haunted. At the start, the player feels like they are embarking on a horror game. The player is Katie who returns "home" after living away in Europe. Since her time away, Katie's family has moved to a new house. The game opens with the player as Katie arriving at a large abandoned and haunted looking home. A note on the front door reveals that Katie's sister, Sam, has left home, warning Katie not to come looking for her.

On entering the house, the player finds it deserted. The rest of the game is spent roaming through a deserted house, searching for clues to help solve the disappearance of the family. There are no jump scares. There are no ghosts. But the anticipation that something will jump out, pervades the entire experience. Nothing really happens to substantiate the feeling that this house is haunted - except to say that the house is big, dark, and abandoned. It is night-time and raining outside. The player is unfamiliar with these surroundings and everyone is missing.

As the player interacts with different objects in the house, a voice over is triggered. The voice over includes excerpts from Sam's diary. The real story in the game is a family drama about Katie's younger sister discovering she is queer and having her first relationship. But what

makes the game feel haunted is the way that the environment is playing with the conventions of a good gothic horror story: the large old house; how abandoned and unfamiliar it is; its locked doors and creaking floorboards; and the crack of thunder outside. “It’s a game of emptiness, of voids that can’t be properly filled. Or to put it another way, it’s a haunted house in which the house is the monster” (Carpenter, 2019).

I began to think of my grandmother’s house as a character in this work. It is a space that I inhabited for months with her. It was a space that I walked through repeatedly, looking for clues to a woman that I wanted very much to know in a way that I knew was impossible.



Image 13: Screenshot from Interactive Installation of *I Am Your Ghost*, from inside the living room

I enlisted the brilliant talent of Jorge de Oliveira to develop the game, and we began to experiment with the possibilities. First, we began building out the game mechanics, the story, the characters and interactions. I was curious how the rules of the game could be used to convey elements of the story that were not possible to realize through the films. For example, we devised the story to begin with the player entering a “real world” scenario: Take grandmother

to her appointment. Yet, on entering the apartment, the player would find grandmother's apartment empty. The game would set the objective to find clues to determine where grandmother had gone. Throughout the progression of the game, the player would come to learn that grandmother had already died and that the player is roaming through a memory. Instead of inhabiting a "real" space, the player would discover that they were immersed in a psychological space of grief.

I began to consider the ways we could alter the game mechanics throughout the game to create a degradation of the "rules" of the game. I had been thinking about dementia, and the ways that dementia alters not only memory, but changes expectations for usual behaviour and routines. I became curious how the game could embody these elements, breaking the conventions of time and the expectations that would be established early in the game.



Image 14: Screenshot from Interactive Installation of *I Am Your Ghost*, from inside the family room

As we built the story and mechanics to the game, we realized that we needed more time and funding to build the future vision of this game. We were essentially building a new project, while still working on completing the films. At that point, I made the decision to build a prototype of the game for the purpose of my thesis. I decided that the first proof of concept was to build an interactive environment to house the films in *I Am Your Ghost*.

The central aim of the interactive environment is to explore liminality through a situated experience for the viewer. For this prototype, the elements of the future game have been broken down into simpler mechanics primarily involving movement through space, in this case, a recreation of my grandmother's home. The space is populated by objects that are simulations of her objects. The player experiences the environment via a first-person perspective, and is able to move through the space in an unnatural way. My aim here is for the player to embody the perspective of the Ghost.



Image 15: Screenshot from Interactive Installation of *I Am Your Ghost*, from inside Nene's bedroom

Inside the apartment the six chapters of the film are installed on various surfaces. The goal here is to create rooms within rooms. Lenses into the “real” world from inside the simulated world. I am looking to create an “out of body” experience that is simultaneously embodied. I want to situate the viewer in the work as more than a spectator of the films. To create an affective experience of grief - where one is able to move through the world of the film, which is largely set in my grandmother’s apartment.

Music & Sound Design

The music and sound design for both the films and the interactive component of *I Am Your Ghost* were very significant elements to this piece. For the musical arrangements and compositions, I worked with Anni Movsisyan, a queer Armenian multi-instrumentalist composer. Anni and I collaborated over a period of a year, first engaging in research for Armenian Folk music.

I Am Your Ghost does not overtly speak to the larger political conditions or Armenian histories. Yet, it was important to me that we find a way to include layers of historical context within the work. This was most notably achieved through the music that Anni created. Anni began by exploring arrangements in Armenian folk music and creating original compositions as well as creating an arrangement of Komitas *Yerginkn Ambel E* (The Sky is Cloudy).

Komitas was a significant part of our research. “It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of Komitas Vardapet (1869–1935) in narratives of Armenian music history, or indeed in narratives of modern Armenian history more broadly” (Olley, 2019). Komitas was an Armenian priest, musicologist, composer, arranger, singer and choirmaster. In his lifetime he collected and transcribed more than 3,000 Armenian folk pieces, of which 1,200 are still known. His work on Armenian folk music stands as a cornerstone in Armenian history

Komitas is also a significant figure in Armenian history due to his surviving the genocide. On April 24, 1915, Komitas was among the 200 leading figures of the Armenian community in Istanbul who were arrested and deported to prison camps. “The date now marks the official commemoration day of the Armenian genocide” (Olley, 2019). Komitas survived and was released from the camps, but was later institutionalized due to deteriorating mental health crises, suffering from PTSD.

Yerginkn Ambel E is the opening and closing track of *I Am Your Ghost*, and Anni’s research into Komitas served as major inspiration for the additional songs she composed for the rest of the segments of the film. The inclusion of these works are intended as more than a soundtrack. These compositions tell their own layers of narrative.

Ethical Considerations

In creating *I Am Your Ghost*, there are a few key considerations that I had to work through, some of which have been outlined in preceding sections. During Post-Production, one of the largest considerations concerned the ethics of representing my grandmother, her health conditions and her death. While this film deals with and represents aspects of my grandmother's illnesses and her death, I wanted to ensure that I treated this material with intentionality and integrity.

My grandmother died before post-production. While collaboration was integral to the creation of this work, post-production necessarily involved making decisions without my grandmother's feedback. She cannot review this film and tell my mother and I whether she approves or doesn't approve of the material we have used. As a result, I have worked with my mother and used judgment based on the information we have and what she conveyed to us in that last year to inform the choices made.

Given this, I worked to reveal our relationships and caregiving practices rather than the illnesses themselves. I did not shy away from depictions of my grandmother's illnesses, as that seemed important for both audiences and to illustrate my mother's and my own perspective. But I didn't focus on my grandmother's health conditions or the fact of her death. Rather, I worked to represent the feeling and experience of that time together, inclusive of my mother's and my own feelings and experiences about my grandmother's illnesses and death.

Further, I considered and kept at the forefront how much my grandmother disliked the biomedical care she received. I wanted that to be visible in the work. Hence, I included selections that I believe illustrate some of her struggle with biomedical care, with an aim to highlight the ways we worked through that time together.

I also had to consider the different tensions in the three relationships and perspectives represented. We each have different perspectives and sets of experiences with one another, and we have encountered challenges with one another. Further, we have different relationships with telling our personal stories in public spaces. My grandmother loved to tell stories that venerated the good parts of our shared past, often omitting some of the hard parts. My mother is very open about her challenging experiences and histories, but doesn't typically make art about them. As an artist, I have made work about my own personal experiences, often using either fiction or formal abstraction to ensure that works are not only about my personal experiences. I therefore felt a responsibility to tell a story that highlighted the strengths in our relationships while also creating windows into some of our histories, tensions and challenges. And I further felt that I had to be careful about the personal nature of the stories told - at once wanting to honour the personal, while also needing to ensure this work safeguarded the different perspectives when viewed by audiences in public spaces

For all of these reasons, I chose a highly mediated form for telling this story. I leaned into an experimental and stylized form in order to distance the visual material from conventions that speak to documentary truth telling. In the editing, we used the layering of footage, its opacity, split screen, voiceover, colour and sound to create a visual texture, seeking out a poetic form of storytelling rather than a linear or literal one.

When making decisions about what to include or not include, my aim was to create vignettes that play with the tension of what brings us together and separates us. I did this through juxtaposing scenes with my grandmother and the ghost, scenes of the ghost alone, and scenes with my mother, my grandmother and I. I further included archival family footage to integrate the presence of the past and make connections with the fondly remembered members of the family that are discussed in the interviews.

In terms of the interview voiceovers, I made selections that reference both what was enjoyable and what was challenging. For example, in the opening film *Mothers' Mothers*, I used the voiceover where my grandmother is recounting her relationship with my great-grandmother. In that selection, my grandmother tearfully recalls the closeness of that relationship, but also expresses her pain of that loss.

Regarding my grandmother's illness, I worked to balance selections of my grandmother in the hospital, with selections illustrating my grandmother being cared for. As mentioned earlier, it felt important that the films do not shy away from revealing that she was sick and dying. What was equally important was to also represent the experience of caring for someone who is sick and dying. I wanted to illustrate the difficulties in being that caregiver and to highlight some of the challenging decisions that a primary caregiver has to confront - including the questions of whether to continue treatments or not.

Akin to Betsy Warland's prose poetry in *Bloodroot*, I allowed each segment of this film to operate as its own small chapter. By constraining each segment to a short timeframe, the form itself allowed for a thematic snapshot—offering a glimpse, without having to arrive at full resolution. The short-within-a-short format allowed me to conceptualize and visually represent an array of theories and realities, and enabled a framework for balancing contradictory ethical considerations.

The final film in the sequence, *Mothers' Home*, deals with my grandmother's final days. I was very uncertain about including that footage. I felt conflicted about the impact of portraying her death in such a literal way. Yet, those final hours were some of the most profound moments of our time together. My mother and I slept in her room at the hospital. There were no more interviews. There was little said aloud. There was simply my grandmother's deep and slowing breathing, and us at her side. Of all the moments we shared over the last year, those final days

were extremely powerful. It was important to me that these were included in the final film. In particular, what I wanted to include in the film was the fullness of the silences between us.

For the final film, I did not include any interview sound, but rather made the decision to have my grandmother's breathing act as the guiding sound driving the final segment of film forwards. I further included only segments of my grandmother - before and after her death. I chose to focus on parts of her body, especially her hands and feet. To me, her hands and feet were symbolic of the life we had shared together, the paths we have walked together, and are also common imagery used in cinema to convey both life and death. My hope is that the selections used convey the intimacy of that time, while also protecting the integrity and dignity of my grandmother and her representation on the screen.

Conclusion

There is something deeply humbling about arriving at the conclusion, whether that is the concluding section of this support paper, the final cut of the films, or witnessing the end of my grandmother's life, which is the central story in *I Am Your Ghost*. I have not arrived at all the answers to the questions posed at the start of this paper. Rather, I have managed to carve a path through some of the initial questions concerning remembrance, representation and creation. The making of *I Am Your Ghost* has involved a rigorous personal, academic and creative process. This project has taken three years of consistent exploration—delving into grief, death and dying, and working to visually represent the liminal spaces inhabited by my grandmother, mother and I.

Through our work and time together, we crafted an intergenerational story that contains traces, vibrations and echoes of our cultural histories, interpersonal relationships and our individual perspectives (Pollock, 2009 p. 14). *I Am Your Ghost* represents our willingness to discover connection and closeness in the midst of loss (the losses that came before and during the making of this work).

Together, we engaged the camera and media-making as a generative and collaborative process that allowed us to discover new potentialities in the end of life care for my grandmother. More importantly, perhaps, this media-making process enabled us to uncover new possibilities in our relationships with one another. *I Am Your Ghost* transformed our ability to be with one another. It helped us give voice to things that are unspeakable, and enabled us to find new ways to share our time together.

Importantly, we got to play. Through all of the seriousness that is part of illness, aging, dying, caretaking, intergenerational trauma, and strained relationships, we found a way to laugh,

perform, reminisce and experiment. We discovered new ideas and old stories. We exchanged skills with each other.

In the post-production process of this film, I grappled with form and finding the right editor, discovered the unique possibilities of the interactive component to this project, and got to extend my research into music and sound. I was very fortunate to be able to further collaborate with the editor, musician, interactive developer and sound designer that all made this work possible in the form it takes today.

At a certain stage in the creative journey, we have to let go of the work and discover how it is received by others. For me, this will be the final step in a journey of letting go. I can't yet know if the rigour of this process has translated for audiences, but I look forward to the next layers of discovery that will be made through circulating this project.

The many discoveries made through the creation of this work have left an undeniable imprint on me and my work. I entered the creation of *I Am Your Ghost*, haunted by a familial past. That haunting has taken a new shape in my experience. I now live with friendly ghosts, anticipating their visits.

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