

FILLING
IN THE
BLANKS

ESSAYS ON ART, MEDIA AND CULTURE

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ESSAYS ON ART, MEDIA AND CULTURE

MEDIA WRITING FALL 2014, RYERSON UNIVERSITY

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ALYSSA BISTONATH

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Before I was born, my older brother contracted meningitis. He was six weeks old. I have a faded memory of a photograph from that time. He is wearing a fuzzy blue jumper. I do not recall the colour of the sheet he is lying on or where the photograph was taken. His eyebrows are thick and furrowed. Who is he looking at? His pink, bulbous tongue peeks out. His face is warm and thoughtful. Was this tiny baby aware of his odd-looking mohawk? My mother told me that the sides of his head had been shaved to accommodate the needles used in his treatment. When I was a teenager, my father tore up that photograph and threw it away; I did not ask why.

As a first-generation Canadian, I am separated from my parents by time, space and nationality. There is a difference between the way I see myself and the way they see themselves. I have developed a reverence about sharing my personal story in its entirety, but my parents rarely talk about the times in their past where they have experienced hardship. I hear my peers talking about a similar divide with their parents (who have come from countries that have experienced war, or famine, or ethnic cleansing, or political unrest, or all of the above). A civil crisis¹ in

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Guyana caused a flood of my parents' generation to emigrate from their birthplace to Holland, England, Russia, the United States and Canada.² There are no photographs, no videos and no other forms of visual memory from this conflict that I can lay my hands on. Perhaps this is why my photographic work has been heavily influenced by the images that do exist of my parents' childhood in Guyana and their subsequent immigration to Canada. I crave a reconciled and complete history, and a common identity that can bridge our separation.

My work is a forum for exploring questions (of which I have many). What universally binds people together? What is the function of photography in creating these bonds? On one hand, I make work to satisfy my own curiosity, need for identity, and belonging, but what if this work conflicts with what is right, true or necessary? I find this particular question to be painful. It is my experience that an incorrect cultural perspective can muddy representation. This has resulted in a misstep on occasion in spite of my good intentions. I rarely arrive at satisfactory answers or photographs in this process of investigation. Still, I persist and keep approaching these questions from different angles. My hope is that the work will serve to build authentic bridges between the subject, the audience and myself.

My own identity, as I see it, is built on what I know about myself—my recollection of the past, my perception of the present, and my aspirations for the future. Each person is a mix of history, memory, truth, fragility and resilience. For this reason, I take my time when I shoot a portrait. In a single image, I hope to represent the subject's complexity as best as I can by juxtaposing a story or memory with the individual's home or work environment and the relationship between the person and myself. This happens through colour and lighting choices, selective focus, saturation, framing, gesture, symbolism and a variety of other devices. It is the most empathetic way I know of to layer all the intricacies of each person and a single moment into an image.

In the future, I want to experiment with more layers by adding new devices to those I have used in the past. A soundscape of an environment could be infused into a musical score to evoke a sense of space and rhythm. Adding the dimension of time could be achieved by combining the still image and the moving picture to convey a

present fact and a past remembrance. I wish to explore the animated GIF for this reason. They are often seen in online memes and high fashion advertisements, but I think they could be used to document the layers and complexities of not only people like my parents and myself, but for any person.

I often wonder why my parents had that photograph of my brother in the first place. Perhaps they believed my brother would pass away and it was an attempt to memorialize him (as fragile as he was). This unhappy photograph is one of many that my father has torn up over the years. What seems reasonable to him is a great crime to me. My brother is alive and well; that photograph is a part of his and my parents' story. Even though the events of that photograph happened before I was born, as a daughter and a sister, their stories are intrinsically intertwined with mine. And I want to remember as much as possible.

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¹A conflict arose between the two major ethnic groups in Guyana during its independence from Great Britain. The two groups formed political affiliations along racial lines. Conflicts between the groups erupted in varying measure for the thirty years post-independence.

²The Dutch and the British had both colonized Guyana at various points, making them a logical place to find refuge. Russia had rumoured ties to the socialist party at the time. The United States had rumoured ties to the opposing party. Many Guyanese students settled in the U.S. after their studies. Under the Trudeau administration in Canada, an open door policy for members of the Commonwealth allowed many Guyanese nationals to freely immigrate.



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ANGIE READY

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My identification as an “artist” has involved a long process of first acknowledging and then listening to my intuition. I have learned over time that intuition is formed partly by innate internal drives and also through the exposure to and acknowledgment of experiences (and art) that speak to me. Practicing patience and vulnerability in my daily life has been most valuable in leading me to accept this part of myself.

Watching Andrei Tarkovsky’s *The Sacrifice* in my early twenties was an experience that stayed with me for days. It was the first time I had encountered the work of an artist who was able to articulate every aspect of himself in a work: a fusion of his dreams, fears, desires, explorations, the conscious and the subconscious. His film was a revelation and proof that one could strive to have a life’s work.

For many years, I suppressed the energy that this film and other pieces of art produced in me and instead immersed myself in work that I felt was expected of me. I have now let go of these internalized expectations and no longer stifle the parts of myself that I want to express.

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Through stills and moving images, experimental sound, poetic language and dialogue, I am interested in exploring how socioeconomic background affects one's experience in the world, the consequences of loss and addiction and the roles of women in society. I also want to show how various stages of grief can affect one's perspective of the world and how grief can be cascaded through many generations.

The existential nature of work such as Jem Cohen's 1996 film, *Lost Book Found*, has deep resonance. The film contains imagery that is congruent with the narrative and the sentiment being expressed. The meditative and dreamlike quality of the film's scenes, primarily shot in the streets and storefronts of Manhattan, leaves room for contemplation and personal association. I am particularly inspired by the ideas expressed in this sequence:

"I sold peanuts, I stood behind my cart, and after a few weeks went by, I became a fixture to some, and to others I became increasingly invisible. I discovered that simply by standing behind the cart and selling, I had put both a wall and a window from which I could watch what happened on the street, on the block, on that long corridor of businesses and passers-by. And as I became invisible, I started to see things that had once been invisible to me."

I do not have the answers to the questions I pose in my work. To this end, I never know how a project will turn out when it starts; there is an unfolding that occurs as more material is produced. Intuition helps to navigate this path. I want to take more risks and go to places where I am afraid to tread. Above all else, the desire to work from a place of authenticity and to be able to produce work that is authentic remains most important.



CYRUS SUNDAR SINGH

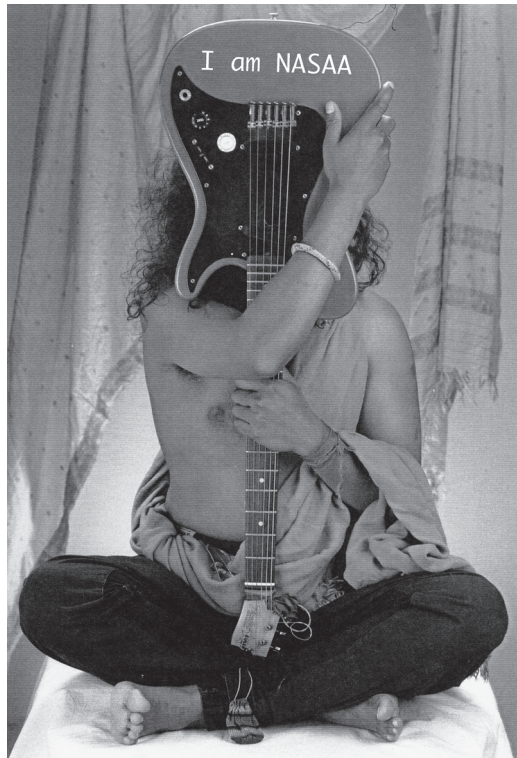
I am NASAA:

how colour, culture and curry continue to define and dictate my creative journeys

happyfish, happyfish where have you been?

In the early autumn of 2000, I opened a local newspaper to find a full-page, full-colour publicity photograph of myself with the caption: “South Asian Artist.” I was left speechless. I was in the midst of touring my critically acclaimed solo CD, *Cyrus: Sun to Star*, and had been invited to perform at the opening of the new Sir Christopher Ondaatje South Asian Gallery at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). I felt honoured to participate and looked forward to the opportunity to play my songs for an entirely new audience. This was especially poignant, as I had also participated in a community consultation to envision and design the ROM’s South Asian Gallery. Furthermore, my musical journeys had brought me full circle, back to exploring my Indian roots, and my CD creatively reflected that exploration.

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happyfish, happyfish what did you see?

Sun to Star was the culmination of my musical career spanning two decades, and the sound captured on the tracks was the creative distillation of my many and varied influences. From concept to completion, from publicity to promotion, I was fully immersed in all aspects of this fully independent project, and throughout that process I only engaged professional musicians, designers and promoters, including award-winning photographer Michael Chambers, who took the cover photo. In fact, I almost went bankrupt hiring all the professionals, but that is another story. The ROM's publicity department had all my required promotional materials and the consent to use them in promoting the opening event for the gallery. So, imagine my astonishment, after having paid my dues and having produced a critically acclaimed CD, that on that autumn day in 2000, I opened a local newspaper to find a full-page, full-colour publicity photograph of myself with the caption: "South Asian Artist," and without the required photo credit.

i saw my hopes soar high above the kites up flying

As an immigrant boy in Toronto, I remember being surrounded by people from many countries. There were Armenians, Chinese, Hungarians, Italians, Japanese, Latvians, Portuguese, Russians, Serbians, Trinidadians, Ukrainians, and so forth. Downtown Toronto was a City of Nations—a veritable Maple stew. However, I also remember hearing the term "East Indian" in reference to the country of my birth. This term baffled me. I did not know where "East India" was, and in fact I did not yet even know where the West Indies were located. I did not realize it at the time, but I was destined to remain a stranger—*L'Etranger*. I always knew the country of my birth. I came from India: the Asian subcontinent, the peninsular region in south-central Asia, surrounded by the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean.

too close to the sun my wings they are-a-burning

Jubilantly, together with my parents and siblings, I took the Oath of [Canadian] Citizenship. I renounced my Indian citizenship, surrendered my Indian passport and pledged allegiance to a foreign Queen. The trade-off? I became a Canadian

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citizen and fully embraced the *Trinity of the Maple: Leaf, Leafs, and Syrup*. I gave it all I had: charm, wit, talent, ingenuity, grace and skill, gallantly exploring my newfound identity as a Canadian. Just as I felt that I had finally found my Canadian belonging, towards the late eighties I began hearing the term “South Asian” being commonly used to refer to people who looked like me. Irrespective of where we hailed from, we were now collectively referred to as “South Asians.” At that time I began to wonder to whom and to what the term referred. Was there a South Asia on the map that I had simply missed?

happyfish, happyfish where have you been?

i've been confused and enlightened, educated and i'm frightened

One of the earliest uses of the term goes back to 1964, when Cambridge University established the Centre for South Asian Studies, which encompassed the countries of India, Pakistan, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Burma (now Myanmar). Even Afghanistan was included in this diverse list. However, it is interesting to note that the British once colonized all the countries listed above, and thereby the term “South Asian,” a politically charged and intentionally oversimplified misnomer, was created to corral all brown-skinned colonial subjects of the British Empire. The term, once a politically expedient reference for the conquered, has become a socially accepted term of reference throughout the world. So, what is wrong with that? Why does this matter to me? What does it have to do with my art and artistic statement?

happyfish, happyfish who are you now?

The impetus to conceive, create and disseminate my creative work is fuelled by the good, the bad and the ugly traits of human behaviour. It is also fuelled by my search for belonging within that triumvirate. Themes of belonging and finding home permeate most of my music, verse and visuals. Having come from “there” to “here” offers a unique opportunity to play in dual sandboxes. Even if I am forced to identify as to being from “there” and marginalized “here,” I continuously strive to creatively embrace this duality. The “I” is very present in my work, and my identity

being associated with it is not only expected, it is fully earned. “South Asian Artist” is a misnomer, a misrepresentation and sadly, a missed opportunity to embrace. I am NASAA.

*i am the river in which my spirit first burned
i am the ganges to which, your ashes are returned
i'm the hungry and the blessed
i'm the child on your mother's breast
i am happy, i am tired, i'm sad and inspired
i am fire, i am cold, i am the reflection you behold
i am sunshine, i am rain, i am the eye of the hurricane*

*happyfish, happyfish when will you live?
i am living, i am living
i am living, i am.*

— see why are you yes



Hearing my father speak from another room, with a naturally assertive tone of voice, you would not know whether he was lecturing or cracking a joke. His presence will easily fill any room with excitement, laughter, respect, or even nervousness. He is a provider for my family, extended family, neighbours and strangers. He is a righteous man with a dominant presence.

I come from a house that held back when it came to expressing personal feelings and emotions. This was normal for my parents due to them experiencing the same thing growing up. It is very typical in any Arab household for the standards and expectations to be laid out from a very young age. In addition to that, if anyone had an artistic talent, it was nothing more than a hobby. Even then, one was not to spend much time on it because school came first. Creativity was suppressed. The pressure to excel in academia became overwhelming.

My creative vision was getting clouded. There was a constant battle between exploring arts and doing something conventional. The expectations were excruciating. My father, who I define as a philanthropist and an intellectual, has set the bar

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high for my siblings and me. I am certain that he is unaware of the pressure I feel due to his good intentions.

While convincing my family that I needed to take a year off school after completing a diploma in creative advertising, I stumbled into photography. I invested my time exploring and using photography as an outlet. Viewing images once they were captured allowed me to travel back in time, which I found to be compelling and engaging.

Taking pictures reassured my love for the arts. I now know where to direct my creativity, but convincing my father that it is more than a hobby is a continuing struggle. A photographer is nothing more than a person with a gadget that takes photos. In my culture there is limited value in the word *photographer*. It is extremely discouraging to be surrounded by such judgment, but if those closest to you such as family did not devalue the art form, then the opinions of others would not be of importance.

Confronting my father with the truth about the ideologies of my culture was the plan. The first step was to reshape our line of communication. Knowing this was going to be a challenge, I went in expecting the worst. He made it clear that photography is no way to earn a stable living. I was left to do whatever I pleased, but he would not be satisfied with the decision I made and that left an unsettling feeling.

What he preached was the truth, but I wasn't looking for the truth. I was looking for support and encouragement. Being consistent with what I wanted to achieve, I continued photographing and getting involved with projects that allowed me to showcase my skills. Eventually others close to him and strangers from the community acknowledged some of my work to my father, leading him to take a closer look. He became more involved but still had a considerable amount of doubt when it came to securing a career.

Following a career path that I love and achieving what he envisioned for me led me to combine both the arts and academia. Graduate school was always in my plans. Doing an MFA has definitely given my father some peace of mind. His trust in higher learning is tremendous, definitely more than mine. To me, doing this MFA is for a personal learning experience. To him, it is to add value to my resume in hopes

of landing a stable job. To me, nothing is ever guaranteed, that's why I take everything I do in stride.



EDUARDO NUNES JANSEN

.....

My preoccupation regarding the human condition and existence, including my own, has always been a constant companion. That does not make me an artist. It makes me simply human. However, the initiative to produce some work that reflects these worries and might eventually reach a certain number of people, encouraging them to give these questions some thought and maybe even making them change attitudes or become engaged in some meaningful action, THAT would define in a more accurate way what I believe an artist is or should be.

I would be happy to think of myself as a humanist as well as a sort of cultural anthropologist. I spent a lot of my time travelling with some cameras to realize that the most important journey is ultimately within myself. Instinct, curiosity and experimentation have guided how I learned to use still and video equipment. Since my adolescence, I have been the cursed one with “the eye.” Every family function and happening would necessarily mean that I’d find myself with the responsibility of some sort of camera between my hands, unable to go play freely and get my clothes dirty. I embraced the tradition, except that nowadays the events that

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deserve my attention are of a different nature and, for my greatest joy, I may end up wearing filthy clothes when my shift is done.

After some research, and also by pure coincidence and/or luck, I found out that I might inherit some Gypsy, but certainly also a great deal of Sephardic Jewish blood from ancestors who were expelled from Spain in 1492 and found a new homeland later on in Brazil. History is a funny narrative. I was raised in a tradition of Catholic generations who did not know anything about their ancestors. All this ignorance had a reason for being so effective.

Culture, religion and many different aspects of everyday life are transmitted partly by oral tradition. When people are forced to face their existence silently and in disguise in order to survive forces such as the Great Inquisition, much is lost between the wise elderly and the misinformed, misled, young offspring.

I would like my photographs and documentaries to help me ask essential questions: Who am I exactly? Who were my ancestors? Why was I prevented from being raised with a strong/clear/solid identity as an individual who belongs to a specific group, who lives in a given territory with a past and history, or stories to tell? I search for answers to these questions. I try to give a voice to marginalized groups who catch my eye, wherever and whenever I choose to stop. I identify myself with these groups and I live my life feeling that I really am a part of different minority groups. In addition to these interests, I'm an educator as well as a language teacher living in the financial and money-oriented heart of this country. Languages are ways to learn about, and question, different cultures. Languages are very important tools in this endless search for identity/identities.

I would like my work to be defiantly humanist and therefore, *révolutionnaire* by nature. I would like to face and at the same time question, research, manipulate and expose the notions of identity, personal and collective identity crisis, immigration and migration. It seems essential for me to also examine how family relations and struggles, history and the importance of oral tradition, love, power and/or its absence solidify individual, group and national identity(ies).

Months ago, in a posting on a social media site, I read that Spain is voting on a law that would allow the descendants of the Sephardic Jews expelled in the 15th

century to apply for Spanish citizenship. From my mother's lineage alone, there are two family names that are included in the eligible families listed in the well-preserved Spanish archives.

In a search of my own identity and for survival reasons, I left my family and my country when I was 19 in order to get established in Canada. I landed as a permanent resident in Montréal, Québec, where I attended university and experienced Canada's most controversial identity crisis as a nation. When I came to this country, I left behind a gay younger brother. My intention was to go back and "save" him by bringing him to live in Canada as soon as I was established enough. When I felt ready to face such a challenge, my brother was transitioning and becoming my trans sister.

I also felt that I had to save my own mothers from living a mediocre life in a macho-run society: my biological mom and my second mom, a woman who grew up at my maternal grandparents' farmhouse and who helped raise my siblings and myself. My biological mother had to bow to male-made rules, which diminished and underestimated her power as the Sephardic Jewish matriarch she could have been if History (yes, with a capital H, the official one that is usually told and written by victors) had not taken such an unpredictable turn.

These combined stories paint an intricate canvas. My own story is still being written, since this is real life. And there is no better way to superimpose my narrative than using documentary media. Ideally my work will allow me to achieve this goal, which will also enable me to flourish as a documentarian, an artist, an educator and ultimately as a human being.



ELYSE BOUVIER

I think I've always been a photographer, even before I held a camera in my hands. Early on, I composed and captured images in my imagination, holding onto them for later as I described what I saw in my diary through poetry. I used descriptive language to contain a moment: how I felt, what I saw. Therefore, when I picked up a camera for the first time, it was an obvious extension of my life narrative. For me the act of journaling and the act of photographing are the same. They are musings about what I see and experience day-to-day. This is who I am as an artist: a diarist of images, a memoirist of moments. My work, then, is a lifetime of poetry and photography that overlap and mix with each other, so that I hardly know where one begins and the other ends.

I am very lucky that I come from a sentimental home that values shared memories. My grandmother wrote a novel about her life; my grandfather is the family photographer. My mother lines the walls of her home with family photographs, and my father writes poetry and chases after sunsets with his camera. But I am most like my father. Though he might not call himself an artist, my father's love

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of poetry and photography had a great influence on me when I was young. He taught me how to read Wordsworth, and he introduced me to the magic of the darkroom. The power of words and the beautiful simplicity of a photograph have resonated at the same frequency throughout my life, so I can't say which has had more influence over me as an artist. Now photography is my medium of choice, but there is some unspoken prose that matches each image I make.

When I was young, my father loved to show us his photographs. I recall the whirl of the slide projector starting up as he regaled us with stories from his childhood or his trip to Kenya, while he click-clacked through his personal slides. Neither of us knew it at the time, but these were my first experiences with performance art. The photographs, the sound of my father's voice, the old brown couch, and that wood-panelled wall can't be separated in my mind, each element an important part of how the photographs were seen. Those images gained meaning through the words spoken about them. Those slide presentations from my youth shape who I am as a photographer, now as part of the collective memory of both me and my father. For him, the experience is itself his gathered memories, and for me, those evenings listening to my father talk about his own photographs showed me how simple words can powerfully affect a photograph and its meaning.

Writing and photography have always existed as parallel in my life, unfolding side by side. Recently, I have come to realize how intertwined they actually are. Sometimes an image or a poem of mine will stand alone, but often there is a crossover. A photograph will have a specific story or context that, even if unspoken, is there just the same. I suppose this is why I always come back to working in 35mm format. I have explored photography with 4x5, pinhole, digital SLR, iPhone, and instant film, but I always come back to some form of 35mm. The camera fits into my daily life. Like Henri Cartier-Bresson says, it is "a sketchbook." My camera is my journal—a place where I can quickly capture fleeting moments or collect thoughts together to compose one image, or poem. When I'm working at my best, intuitively, as an artist and photographer, a poem or a photograph is crafted the same way: as a keepsake. They are made sometimes to put away for my own collection, but often for sharing sentimentalities with a greater community.

I don't believe in the separation between my personal and my public narrative as an artist. I can only photograph and share what I myself have experienced. In this way, I have grown to understand that I am not merely working to document life as an observer. My life is performance art: every image, every word, everything created. When I show a photograph, it's a page pulled from my journal, but it's also a page from a shared story of the communities in which I live. I cannot say that my photos are only about me. My work starts out in personal reflection, but finds meaning in becoming part of the collective. My images are not only my own. My words are not only my own. Every photograph I take is deeply personal and narrative, and every photograph I take is meant to be shared.



GYE-JOONG KIM

.....

Dreaming of the Transparent World Where Nobody Lies

Once, in one of my previous films made in 2007, *Dae-il Project*, I used the inter-title text in the beginning: “When I was little, I used to dream of the world where nobody lies.” It’s actually used as a director’s statement or premise set out for the rest of the journey of the film. The status of *Being honest* or *Not lying* is an *Idea* of my film to embark on an unknown journey, led by the interaction between two persons, a director and an actor.

When I was a child, I used to be frustrated with the situation that I am supposed to lie to anyone even with good intention. I didn’t want to speak a compliment to someone else for the things I don’t appreciate. I wanted to explain my thoughts and emotions directly, but I frequently was told off by my mother not to hurt other people’s feelings and not to be so stern about what I think. Her teaching was that all humans need to generously accept the obstacles that block the will and discipline. I now recollect why I was frustrated with the need to be articulate about what

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you think and feel. My claim was that if everybody is honest and saying the truth without hurtful intention, and if the mode of the communication is commonly accepted, no one would be offended by what I am saying to them. Then every opinion is widely accepted as much and also respected. I find this idea in present time is some kind of utopian imagining that the world is transparent in the connection through the minds of people, where everyone's mind is honest yet people communicate directly to each other peacefully. Why did I have obsession with such a thing? I don't really know. All I can remember is I was extremely immaculate with everything: tidying my desk, doing assignments in advance, sleeping and waking up on time, buttoning every button on my shirt and so on. The sternness and rigidity of my personality was born in the ground where I am comfortable, but the world around me always forced me to learn how to articulate my words to hide what I think and suggest a way to say things to please other people, or at least not to offend them.

When I was 20 years old, I decided to be a filmmaker but I was never conscious of what was the fundamental motivation to propel my artistic imagination. Through the course of time, I've gradually discovered a consistency of fascination through my career. Now I can trace back the moments of enlightenment that I experienced by being connected to the main philosophy of the films. In 1992, I had a chance to watch a few of the canonical avant-garde films for the first time in my life, and I was shocked to see in *Wavelength* by Michael Snow that a (supposedly) singular zooming shot can actually show the possibility to bring me to the deepest level of engagement to the unknown realm of my psychology. The film forcefully guided me to a revelation of perception and cognition of the act of seeing the window in the film for 45 minutes.

However, this never occurred to me again until I started going to film & video programs at the California Institute of the Arts in the U.S., seven years later. I seriously and consciously took experimental films and studied them through classes and screenings. Since my re-encounter with *Wavelength*, I delved into other structural films such as *Serene Velocity* by Ernie Gehr, and *Mashes of the Afternoon* by Maya Deren. Those films deal with imaginary vision and perception, which

require a new way of philosophical thinking. Later on, my study went further and wider to classical cinema such as Pier Paolo Pasolini's poetic cinema, minimalistic paintings by Donald Judd and the conceptual art activist movements of Fluxus. By the time I graduated, I found myself in sincere dedication to the music and practice of John Cage. I didn't know how far I could anticipate from the linearity of my exploration to satiate my desire to be enlightened, but his art at least was punctuating a critical period of my new start as a true auteur. Since then, after I returned to Korea, I pursued a way to establish my own practice influenced by these filmmakers and artists. After tiring struggles with life and filmmaking during the last 10 years in Korea, when relocating to Canada in 2013, I decided to reflect on what I have done so far. The first task was re-reading John Cage's book *Silence*, and soon I was struck by the fact that he never used metaphor. I finally came to understand why there is a connection between his aesthetic decisions on *Not using metaphor* and my *Not lying*. The structural films and other arts mentioned above require us to clear our complex mindset of spectatorship and see through to the reality of the world.

During a contemplative time recently, I was enlightened again to realize what I have been driven by and the organic proceeding of the journey of my life and art. The continuing flow of moving to different fascinations somehow was based on my impetus and impulse to be engaged with euphoria from exploring my own mental landscape. Again, this linearity is not what I have been conscious of but I am investigating it currently. And it is a miracle to discover that I haven't gone so far from the naive moment of the 20-year-old young man discovering the new realm of (visionary) perception. Actually, I am still what I am and have been and still looking for the ways to realize my childhood utopia: dreaming of the transparent world where nobody lies.



IRENE ARMIT

*“One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”*

Lord Tennyson — Ulysses

As a very young child, my father would ask me to participate in the recitation of the great English literates. Any given Sunday, you could find my pre-elementary self badly giving a rendition of Shakespeare, Tennyson, Wordsworth or Blake to an enthusiastic audience of my parents and friends. And because of this, Tennyson’s “Ulysses” would remain my life motto for as long as I could remember.

I strive to tell stories that are honest and forthright, true to my compassion for this glorious earth, and faithful to the spirit of imagination and beyond. I strive to be open to change, to be open to possibility, and to be clear in a message of hope, but lacking in false promises and unattainable happy endings.

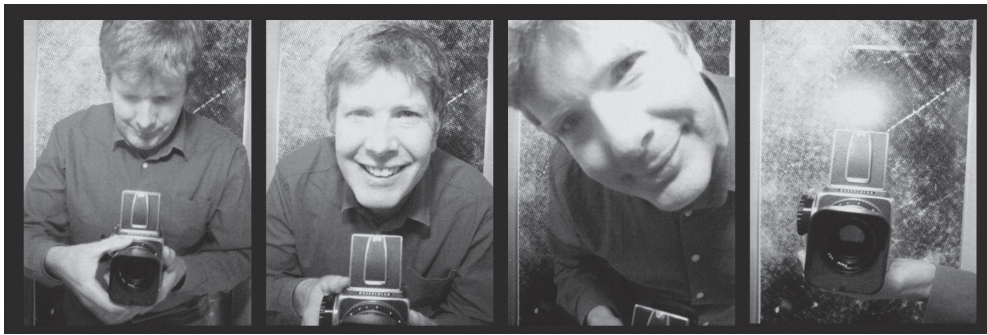
I seek to create cinematic stories that speak to my soul. However, this does not

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mean all is beautiful and positive. I do not want to be afraid of the grotesque and horrid. I find solace in knowing that life needs both dark and light, and that is where my films will live. Striving to be honest and true to my inner compass, I will forever change with the emotional tides and unpredictable winds.

I find life ever-changing and ephemeral, the oxymoron of its own existence. I will never find a happy ending; in its place I will find endless beginnings. Susan Sontag, in her book of essays on photography, speaks about her life before and after seeing images of the Holocaust when she was twelve. I immediately identified with her description of before and after. Twenty-five years ago, it was the images of the Berlin Wall coming down, and I was nine years old. Watching this historic event take place on our giant cubed colour television set, I will never forget my father telling me that history was being made. I didn't know a single person in Berlin, yet I was deeply affected. I cried at the images of families being reunited and of freedom being gained. It was a defining moment in my life, compelling me to be forever unyielding.

And I will not yield in my desire to be the very best of myself. And that is what I want my films to express: life changing; life moving forward; the ability to be reborn, to tear down the wall. When I think about those amazing men and woman who woke up one morning and said, I can change my own existence, against all odds—that's important. That's what makes me want to know more about humanity. The knowledge that no one can predict what happens next... Everyone is someone. Everyone has a story. Every story is worth telling. And every story needs a storyteller. We all strive, we all seek, we all find and we all hope we will never yield.



MARTIN FRANCHI

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I love my city. I've travelled and documented different places, but I love coming home to Toronto. The subject matter that fascinates me is the place, as opposed to those within it. Urban or natural landscapes fill my field of vision and it is these places that I find myself photographing again and again. While completing an undergraduate degree in photography at Ryerson, I became exposed to the field of architecture through which I could photograph subject matter that interested me and be compensated for it.

On a trip to the United Kingdom many years ago, I spent one week visiting a friend in London, which was an amazing city, but my goal was to travel to the Isle of Skye to explore. The density of London was overwhelming, and after the week I needed to escape the chaos of the city and go north. I found the farther north I went, the less populated it was and the calmer I became.

Within Toronto, I still find myself searching out these areas of space and calm—places that offer an escape from the hustle and bustle of the city proper. These areas encompass not only our vast park system found within Toronto, but also

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Queen St West at Callender St, Parkdale.

abandoned industrial sites and industrial areas that are quiet on weekends. Even the city can be peaceful at dawn, or on a day when there's been a huge snowstorm and the people that usually fill these spaces stay home and leave the streets bare.

I enjoy these times of solitude, whether I'm awake early for a bike ride, out photographing or just wandering around. In Bob Thall's book *The Perfect City*, he echoes my view of the perfect time to photograph:

"It is difficult to work with a view camera on crowded streets, so I often photograph Chicago at dawn or at sunset, when the business areas are almost deserted. Convenience was my first motive for working at these hours, but I became addicted to their particular qualities of light and to the quiet. These are moments when the city seems to lose its historical and social meanings and appears as a mysterious and dramatic organism. At 5:30 on a Sunday morning, downtown Chicago strikes me as a small mountain range or a coral reef-a breathtaking fact of nature."

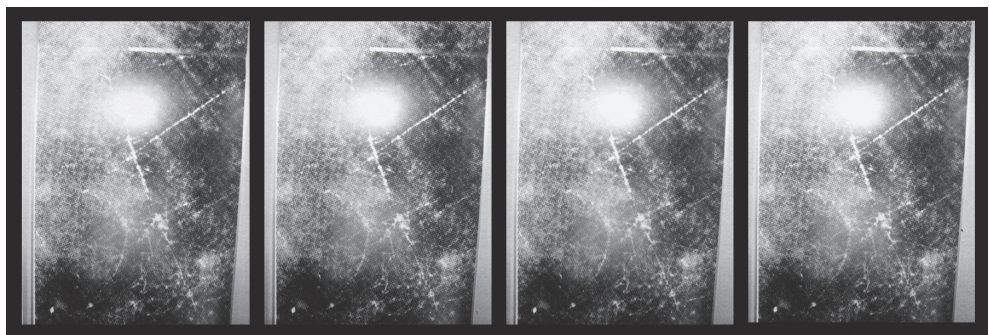
When the opportunity arose to return to school for graduate work in Fine Arts, I struggled with the decision. Being practical, I considered spending the money required for tuition on renting or purchasing equipment to pursue personal creative projects. On the other hand, by attending graduate school, I felt I could immerse myself within a community of creative people to help me to stay focused and to provide me with critical feedback. There would also be deadlines to meet that would serve to motivate, as well as the opportunity to learn new skills and be faced with new challenges.

On the first day, a new classmate of mine, Angela Ready, leaned over to me and said, "I love this, a bunch of photo nerds talking about being creative and they just get it." New challenges accepted.

In one of my classes, I presented the idea of comparing a Mississauga suburb with an area in New Toronto, which was one of the first suburbs in Toronto. I spoke about some of the quiet industrial areas I would ride my bicycle through in the evening or on weekends. My passion for these open spaces was identified by one of my instructors, Katy McCormick. She asked me why I wasn't doing a project on this subject matter, these quiet places, devoid of the chaos of the city? She commented that my passion for this solitude is obvious and that I should "give into the desire" to continue to develop this work.

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With her comments in mind, and my own passion for capturing the quiet beauty in these spaces where city and space meet, I realize that I have not exhausted this subject matter. I still find myself framing scenes around me as I wander these places of solitude, and I feel the need to photograph them, to document them in the most expressive way possible.



MICHELLE ASTRUG

One of my earliest documented memories hangs on a wall in my parents' house. It is a photograph that was taken at the Harbourfront Centre when I was about 3. I am smiling at the camera, wearing a paint-covered smock. In my right hand I hold a paintbrush and in my left, my masterpiece, a large canvas full of colourful paint smears. My dad recalls this moment quite clearly too because he was the one behind the camera. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" he had asked me right before releasing the shutter. "An artist," I proudly responded. I'm not sure what sort of answer you would expect from a child holding a paintbrush in her hand, but to this day my father recalls the disappointment that he felt.

This is not about how I was determined from a young age to become an artist. Or about the challenges and struggles I faced being raised by immigrant parents who equated success with money because they had started with nothing. Or about how I spent my high school years in the darkroom because that is where I felt the most comfortable, despite being steered away from art classes by my father. This is about my fear of failure. It is about a fear that did not exist in my 3-year-old self who was

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simply enjoying the process of creating. This is about how trying to overcome this fear has shaped my practice as an artist/designer today and affected the ways in which I teach creativity to others.

Picasso once said that all children are born artists. We don't grow into creativity, we grow out of it. We live in a society that is afraid of making mistakes and afraid of being wrong. We care too much about what others think and as a result we have stopped taking chances with our work. We are taught early on in life to avoid making mistakes and hide our failures. There are always a handful of students who ask me, upon completing their assignments: "Is this what you wanted?" It is a disturbing trend, one that has forced me to reevaluate how I work and develop my courses.

I have decided to embrace failure and not fear it. That does not mean that I have stopped trying. I have shifted my focus from the end product to the creative process. This alleviates the pressure of getting it right the first time and allows room for me to experiment. I have also removed myself from the computer. Working in analogue is a dying art, yet there is something extremely satisfying about working with physical materials. The safety net of the delete and undo buttons has been removed. The stroke of a pen is much more permanent than the stroke of a key. Creativity is an iterative process of trial and error. It is a combination of convergent and divergent thinking. In order to learn, you must fail. In order to fail, you must take risks.

The idea of embracing failure has become a trend and one that I feel is being preached more than practiced. We must learn to tolerate failure and teach creative thinking at a young age if we want to create a fearless culture. This does not mean rewarding incompetent work, but rather encouraging those who are reluctant to explore beyond their comfort zones, to take intelligent risks and share their failures. Failure is painful, but it is not a weakness. Fear had paralyzed my creativity for years and it almost killed my career, as I often opted for the safe route rather than explore new territory. I was taught that I only had one chance to get it right, and if I failed, then it was time to move on.

There was no hesitation in the way my 3-year-old self applied paint to the canvas

that day. I did not question the effect one stroke would have on the next, nor did I worry about the outcome. I was driven and continue to be driven by curiosity. I try not to fear the unknown. In order to create a fearless culture, we must experience failure, tolerate it, and ignore our desire to hide and avoid it.



NATHAN BURLEY
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In my last two years of undergrad, I took creative-writing poetry seminars. After completing “Creative Writing – Poetry I,” which I enjoyed, I felt good about enrolling in its sequel the following year. “Senior student of poetry,” my imaginary badge would read. With a year of learning the basics under my belt (haiku, sonnets, sestinas... metaphor, simile, allusion), I was now ready to spread my poetic wings and fly through the air like a scruffy, café-dwelling, metaphor-wielding eagle. We were to come to the first class with a written statement, detailing our intentions for our work in the coming year and read it aloud. Mine was about how I wanted to explore the crude and the abject, to channel the spirits of William S. Burroughs and Ol’ Dirty Bastard. Then there was something at the end about my sincere hope to develop a “unique voice.” It was textbook page filler. I was certain it would be unlikely to arouse any suspicion in my apathetic, poet peers. But then Tim, the poet laureate of our poetry seminar, in his fatherly psychoanalyst’s tone interjected, “Can I ask, what do you mean by ‘unique voice’?” calling me out.

“Well... a voice that is distinct from other voices.”

“So how will you know when you’ve acquired this unique voice?”

“Well... I suppose... I’ll just know in my heart,” I said, nervously opting for a sarcastic escape hatch. The class chuckled moderately.

“That’s actually an acceptable answer to most questions in this class,” joked my professor.

That year, I worked very hard to write poetry that was definitively unpoetic. I had this idea about contemporary poetry that it was all the same, that it was all written in this very soothing, nearly whispered voice (kind of like how Tim talked), and that it was all about carefully identified tree species, remote estuaries and strange, remembered details about the author’s dad. Clearly, I had only read two-and-a-half poems prior. Still, I felt poised, despite Tim’s astute questioning of my intentions, to stand atop a mountain and sing my song to the world—to be unique... voice-wise.

Voraciously, I filled my notebook with filthy poems about things I thought there probably weren’t very many poems about: racial epithets, abused dive-bar restrooms, the creative mind as unruly orgy. Though I enjoyed writing this work, filled with grotesquery and oddball energy, it was debatably not poetry, no matter that it looked like poetry, divided into stanzas and occupying the left hand of the page.

Though I doubt he ever read it, my roommate Alex posted proudly onto his bulletin board above his desk, my poem “NiggerCuntFaggot,” a far-beyond-my-reach attempt at poetic exploration of what I thought to be the three worst words in the English language. For this piece, I thoroughly researched and redrafted, knowing full well that I couldn’t get away with this. Tim had much to say about this piece. I was pretty uncomfortable and I don’t remember what Tim said in response, but it was probably valid. So “NiggerCuntFaggot” lived thereafter, displayed above Alex’s desk, to him a comedic prop—a marvellous symbol of gross audacity in an overambitious artist; so gleeful to him, the fact that I, his schlubby roommate, was that artist.

My greatest fear as an artist and as a person is to become a fraud. I learned with my first and last attempt to preach that, figuratively speaking, I never learned to paint the pigeon’s feet with perfection as Picasso did before he painted humanity as warped and arrestingly as he did. Perhaps what Tim was trying to tell me, in his entrancing, Patrick Stewart-esque voice, is that as an artist, you have to learn to be

the same before you can be unique.

Last year, I started producing rap beats on my laptop, something I had wanted to do since watching Kanye West demonstrate his MPC sampler for Bob Simon on *60 Minutes* (also explaining earnestly what a “dope-ass beat” is). This was a serious decision for me, to click the download button, unlike my more irreverent and unsuccessful approach to poetry. This was also a decidedly un-unique thing to do—to learn music production software and start annoying my neighbours. It’s an immensely prevalent practice amongst many music-enthused, laptop owners. The Internet is filled with us, possibly literally filled; I have genuine concern that the Internet is going to run out of aspiring producer storage soon.

In my mind were sepia-tinted visions of my favourite sample-collage producers—J Dilla, The RZA, The Alchemist—spending hours hidden in basement studios, surrounded by walls of records, a wealth of musical and cultural ideas being condensed or repurposed into concise, instantly understandable 4/4 beats. Though I don’t have towering stacks of records (I also don’t have a basement), I do have the Internet. I have the minimum amount of the Internet, which is too much. I find myself riddled with anxiety due to the amount of content that is available to me, and the finite amount of time I have to experience it all. Sampling music quells this anxiety for me. Now I not only listen to music, but also directly employ it. Heidegger called this *enframing*: seeing and understanding things in the world by how we can use them. And to use and to copy with fidelity is, finally, to understand.



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ORRI JÓNSSON

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I am not a conceptual artist. I have come to feel that ideas are cheap, and whenever I have tried to photograph one, or express one through music, I have failed. I tend to agree with Robert Adams: “Useful pictures don’t start from ideas, they start from seeing.”

I try to use photography as a learning tool, not as a device to illustrate a point. Not knowing where I’m going is of great importance to the process—to find out through the material I’m working with, to have a dialog with the medium and leave some things up to chance. The time between shooting film and seeing the results, after developing and making contact sheets, suits me well. It allows me to look at the images, to a certain extent, in a new way, less emotionally polluted by the moment of their exposure.

The physical aspect of any given creative process, the labour of it, fuels my thinking.

Apart from photography and music, I enjoy doing carpentry work, silkscreening, cooking, gardening, graphic design and, by far the most creatively challenging work of all: raising my children. I think the same force drives my work in what is

commonly called “the creative fields.”

About six or seven years ago, I was recording a string quartet for a composer that was making his second record and wanted to record everything to tape instead of a computer. At the start of the session, I explained to everyone the process of recording music to this physical medium and what it meant: there would be no editing of the music afterwards, we could record multiple performances but at the end we would choose one that would stand unaltered. Everyone nodded their heads in understanding, so far so good.

However, once we started recording, they would repeatedly stop in the middle of their performance, thinking we could keep a part of what they had just played and splice it together with another part that they were already happy with. Even after my description of the tape-recording process, they couldn’t grasp what it really meant until after repeated attempts. They were so conditioned by the cut-and-paste nature of digital recording that it took us about an hour of frustrating attempts and dialogue to get to the same page and be able to continue.

But at that point, something magical happened. Not only did the musicians individually switch into some mode of hyperfocus, they also started listening to what they played not only as individuals, but how they performed and sounded as a group. We recorded two full takes of the piece, one after the other—both amazing performances—and chose one, although we could have just as well chosen the other. Afterwards, although we all were happy with the results, the musicians were ecstatic and completely surprised at what had just happened.

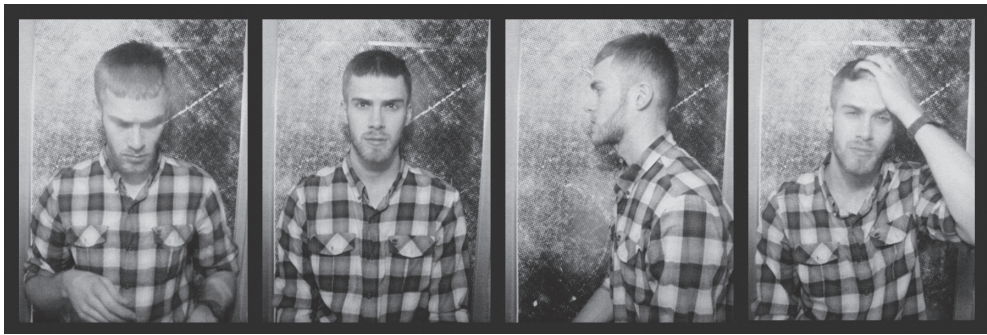
I have experienced moments like this over and over again since then, and have thus become sensitive to the relationship between your choice of analogue or digital tools as an artist and to what extent that decision shapes your creative process.

In his wonderful book, *How Music Works*, David Byrne rightfully points out that “neutral technology does not exist,” and I think the tools that artists use form their perception and approach to their medium to a much greater extent than most of us realize. I work in several different mediums, including photography, music and film, and will admit at this point, after countless attempts at working with digital

tools, that I consider myself “digitally challenged,” if there is such a diagnosis.

I find myself thinking of the term “documentary” within quotation marks, by default. I approach it with caution for its obvious limitations and my interest in the distinction between “objective truth” and “subjective interpretation” is lukewarm, at most. I tend to take Byrne’s statement for a fact and am not too concerned with a traditional interpretation of the “documentary” aspect of what I do.

I make work with the hope that it will be suggestive of more than it is and have some meaning beyond my control. I tend not to question my motives and I do find John Szarkowski’s observation on the life of the artist both sobering—if bleak—and comforting: “...there is no reward in art worth seeking, other than doing the work.”



PHILIP SKOCZKOWSKI

To express my personal statement about being a photographer, in text, would be rather futile. It is therefore that I shall inscribe some of the burdens I've come to behold over the short, yet seemingly rather long years of my existence that drive me in doing what I thought I'd be doing.

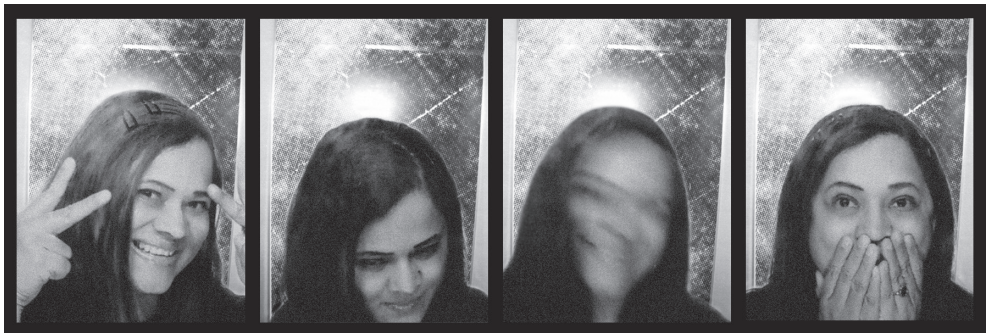
Through photography I can document, reflect upon, express, order and capture moments, which is essentially what photographers do. I came across these practices, unconsciously, in my early teen years during which I spent time across the globe. Having experienced personal loss at a young age, I've been frightened of it reoccurring; even the idea makes it unsettling. However, despite leading a fairly privileged life, comfort is something I shy away from as my experience and take on it is internally conflicting—to the point where I find comfort as a state of stagnancy. Five years ago, I'd say I want to change the world through the use of photography. Five years ago, I took my escapist street photography and started attempting to channel it into something larger than myself: into photographic essays on the human condition, and into existing in complex realities where I am neither a

stranger nor inhabitant; into places and spaces that have nothing to do with me, yet have everything to do with me; into confronting fear.

Fear is an awful thing. It can scare the literal shit out of us, prevent us from admitting guilt, and hold us hostage under the veil of venomous hatred. It can control entire civilizations; it can decimate your mind. Fear is the common man's kryptonite. It is not something measurable, nor really quite that tangible. It is an impulse, a signal, a reciprocated response to events, environments and experiences. A habit. Fear can lead to paralysis, to submission. Though I have experienced fear in my life—fear of loss, of pain, of regret, fear of sheer fear itself, even—it was not until revisiting Cambodia in the summers of 2010-2012 that I realized how powerful fear can be, especially when used systematically. It is during these years that I had been accompanying Cambodia's first female Member of Parliament, Mu Sochua, in her travels across the country. A social activist, political representative and loving mother of three, Sochua's goal resembles that of her kindred soul, Aung San Suu Kyi: for their people to have freedom from fear. It is this freedom that is essential in enabling progress and expanding capabilities. Freedom from fear is a struggle that every individual faces, regardless of geography, and it has been a prominent factor shaping my photography. From going out for photo walks to discover areas of cities I lived in to reaching out to people who intrigue me, photography has been a way for me to overcome the fear of separation or inaction. It is my tool to get outside my comfort zone. Photography is my point of entry into places and spaces that I wouldn't have otherwise been able to enter, at least not with grace.

It wasn't until my third visit to the Kingdom of Cambodia that I came across Aung San Suu Kyi's *Letters from Burma*; while staying in Sochua's home, I found this book on the dresser in front of the bed in the guest room. Filled with signatures of the people mentioned in the book, it felt surreal holding it, like a historical artifact, but personal. Without really asking, I read the book as I travelled through the hauntingly beautiful Cambodian countryside. With Sochua at my side, or rather with me at her side, I was carefully flipping the pages as though they were describing what was happening in present-day Cambodia—as if I were reliving a glimpse of Burma's struggle for democracy. The historical similarities shared by Cambodia

and Burma, at least in the sociopolitical sense, are astonishing. But that wasn't what made the read so surreal. It was the courage of these special women that grasped my heart, and the daily routines that they shared that made it so surreal. While reading, I'd glance at Sochua, looking at her as if she were Suu, and reading Suu's words as if Sochua wrote them. This is just one of the moments I felt truly connected with what I think I am doing right— trusting my gut and pursuing issues that matter to me. It felt transcendental, free from fear.



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SHIVANYA MULEKAR

“Will I be able to find my Philly?”

Sometimes I wonder, what makes a film stand out? Why does someone remember a film five or ten years later, or maybe even after 15 years? What is it that stays with you? Why does a good film bring tears to your eyes? What is it that you take home with you? Does it change you the way you think? Does it change the way you start looking at life and at the people around you? Does it make you a better human being? Or does it just leave behind a vacuum of emotions waiting to be explored? What does a good film do to you?

I'm on a journey to discover why films touch me. What attracts me to the emotional side of the film universe?

Watching the film *Best Boy* touched me immensely. Its main character, “Philly,” is my inspiration and I'm hoping he will help me find my Philly. Philly Wohl is an 87-year-old mentally challenged man who, at the age of 52, took the courageous step to move into a group home. He now lives there independently. When I saw the

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film, the first thing that touched my heart was Philly's innocence. Philly's simplicity and plethora of love for his parents immediately connects him to the audience. He makes me realize that the world is actually a beautiful place to live in; you just need to know where to look.

How and where do these filmmakers find these beautiful people? Where do these stories originate? It didn't take me long to research and realize that everyone around us has a story. Ira Wohl, the filmmaker, is Philly's cousin and he was the person who initiated the whole idea of Philly's moving out from his home, and he was the one who wanted Philly to be independent.

Films don't come out of nothing. There is a strong driving force and it has to be either love or passion, which drives the filmmaker to its subject. I wonder what is going to be my passion because I really need to find my Philly!

I come from a family of artists. My great-grandfather, Y.Sadashiv Bhagwat, and his passion for art and photography is my inspiration. He was one of the few proud owners of an Agfa camera in the early 1900's in India. This came at a time when India was still new to the field of camerawork and filmmaking. The family legend goes that after numerous efforts, he managed to import a camera all the way from London, England to India. So passionate was he about his camera, that he travelled 400 kilometres in a train to acquire the precious piece. I'm unaware of the details such as how he managed to possess a sophisticated camera during those times when India was under the British regime, or how much it cost him in those days to own a camera, or where he developed the pictures and all the other interesting details.

I think my first interaction with my great-grandfather's art was at the age of 10. I remember asking my grandmother about his work. My grandmother is one of the few who had an opportunity to witness his art. She said, "He was passionate about his camera and photography. He would spend hours lighting in the studio for a perfect shot. He was very aesthetic and intuitive in his approach."

Unfortunately, I never got an opportunity to meet him or talk to him about his work or his passion, but I did get to see the remains of his work through the empire of film theatres that he left behind. I believe the film theatres were a display of his art, just in a commercial form. I haven't fully been able to discover myself but I

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believe most of my art is intuitive just like him. I will never get an opportunity to learn and share his passion for art and filmmaking in person. However, his art and the memories of his artistic talent make a very strong impression on the way I want to look at my work. I somehow want to make him proud. I want him to be proud that his efforts of bringing that one camera to India, and his passion for art didn't really go waste. His strong character continues to resonate through his personality and passion for photography.

How does a filmmaker get the audience emotionally involved in a subject? Does the plot define the structure or is it the characters?

I think the first thing that the audience connects with is the character/characters. They are the ones that set the tone. The structure of the film follows the ups and downs of these characters. I'd like my art to highlight strong, passionate characters that are inspired by people around me.

Philly Wohl is one such passionate character and he captivates me with his innocence and his urge to learn and survive. Philly was 52 years old when the film was shot. He was leading a lonely life. A life that was filled with friends and family, and yet he was isolated. Philly was unaware of the circumstances happening around him, unaware of what lay in store for him.

When I see a film, I see more than what is there on the screen. To me, the film acts like a window into the lives of these characters and that's where the first set of emotions sets in. I feel privileged that someone is letting you in, into his or her life, someone unknown. This creates a bond, which is special; this creates a transparency, which immediately connects you to the film and its characters. I feel films are cathartic in their own way, and for an audience this whole process of catharsis enhances the viewing process.

Best Boy did exactly that to me. The moment I saw Philly Wohl, I connected with him and the film helped me come out of my shell and share my story.

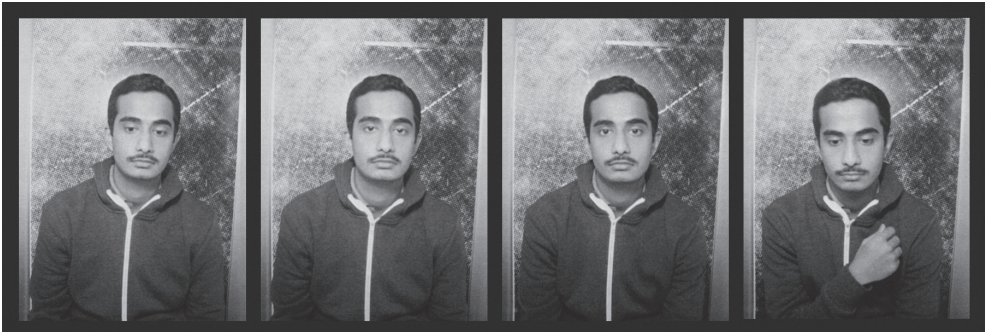
When I watch *Best Boy*, the affection, the warmth and the innocence of the characters reach out to me. The film is real. It makes me feel like it's the story of someone living next door. The people are identifiable. It's this truth that stays with me. And as I see the film again and again, I learn a bigger truth about the film. The

film is an inspiration. It is just not one man's story but a ray of hope to millions of others. Philly is pushed out of his comfort zone, his home shell, and he goes out on an adventure. For someone who's lived protected and sheltered all his life, a speck of freedom is an adventure within itself. Isn't this what life is all about?

Inspired by Philly's courageous journey, I'll be starting my journey to look for married couples with Down syndrome. I want to share their stories with the world. I want to share their lives and their emotions with the world. I want my work to inspire others with Down syndrome and encourage parents to let go of their children, to let them learn to live and find a life of their own. I want to share the stories of the parents who take that one big step: parents who overcome their anxieties and let their children with special abilities explore the world on their own.

I'm not sure if I can find Philly Wohl or someone like him, but I know for sure that I have found my passion in filmmaking and in a great way, Philly Wohl has guided me. I'm looking for emotional stories, stories that are real, stories that would act as a ray of hope to others. I think the first audience who has to like your film is you, yourself!

I believe expression is a challenging mountain and emotion is its peak. I need to climb the mountain. I know it's hard to reach there but if and when I do, I can see the world from a much better place.



SHOUNAK GANGULY

Leaving and Returning

“The wise see their past as destiny, the future as free will, and are happy in the present.” This was the perspective given by the Indian sage, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, to contextualize time in our minds, and it is the mantra that I have identified with the most in understanding the constant waves of change that have carried me and my family along to different situations. We moved from school to school, job to job, home to home, community to community, country to country, and the waves continue to flow to this day for one reason or another. Moving to and living in different lands from a young age—in places such as Thailand, the Middle East and Canada among others—has given me more knowledge than I could have ever hoped for otherwise.

When you move to such different places, you are put in this state of continuous discovery and you tend to spend a lot of time observing other people and their cultures. You also then spend time reflecting on your own heritage and values,

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to make sense of them and find the common threads between you and others: common threads that link your identity and your community with the rest of the world.

Gradually this reflective habit developed into the need to become a storyteller and put structured thoughts together to connect with a potential audience. This is why at the time of completing my secondary schooling, I made the decision to pursue an education first at the undergraduate level in filmmaking, and now further at the graduate level in documentary filmmaking. This was a big step for me because I am the first in the family to abandon the conventional path of either going into engineering or into study within the core scientific disciplines. Looking back, which I have done many times, I can say that at least I made a choice and whether it is right or wrong is insignificant, because it was already part of a progression of events leading me towards becoming a storyteller.

Storytelling is the root form of expression that our ancestors used since the beginning of human history, and we have simply diversified the ways in which we tell our stories. I classify myself as a storyteller because if you strip away the education, career and technical skills that I have, or will have accumulated, then I am left with observations and experiences, and with a desire to release them. Even if a large group of people do not see it or material reward is not forthcoming, I would still consider it a boon that I have been afforded the time to realize these ideas.

All this has led me to conceptualize the documentary film that I have in mind. I am fascinated with the city I was born in. Kolkata in West Bengal, India has been the natural home of my family for as long as they can remember, yet I can hardly call myself a local because I didn't grow up there. Since the age of six, I have not spent an extended amount of time there. My only exposure to the city has been short trips to visit family, and my parents' efforts to solidify our roots by exposing me to the writings, films and art that have originated from there.

There is no better time than now to return. I wish to capture and discover not only this city, but certain practices and ways of living that are especially unique to its people while also somehow connected with the expression of humanity common

everywhere. I am fully aware that I am simply acting on a feeling and I could very well be on the wrong track. Things may not turn out as they were built up to be, but that is fine. Whatever I am able to capture on film will be with the intent of discovering the essence of the place; in turn my hope is that a potential audience is able to find their own relation somewhere in the content of the film and feel that they have an insider's understanding of the city of Kolkata and its inhabitants. Anything more is a bonus.

My objective is to tell stories, ones that express our human qualities and kindle understanding of this life experience.



STEPHANIE POWER

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My current photographic practice is the result of a breakthrough I experienced in 2010. It was during that year that I gave myself a personal project: to use my iPhone (specifically, the Hipstamatic app) to create a body of work that is spontaneous and uncensored by my inner critic. While it felt at the time like a simple exercise in fun, it turns out that my first project—documenting the streets of New York City—changed my life. It is the reason why I find myself here in the Documentary Media program.

As somebody who has spent 25 years in the fields of art direction, graphic design and illustration, choosing this new way of image-making was a very intuitive and perhaps even auspicious move on my part. It also felt like a repudiation of my previous commercial work, partly because it was a response to a creative slump I was experiencing as my illustration career wound down. I've had a longstanding interest in photography, which now represents a step away from the previous structures I'd imposed upon myself. It is interesting to note that while I created no personal work as an illustrator, I am irresistibly drawn to shooting photographs. Without question, the body of work I am creating now is evocative of my authentic voice.

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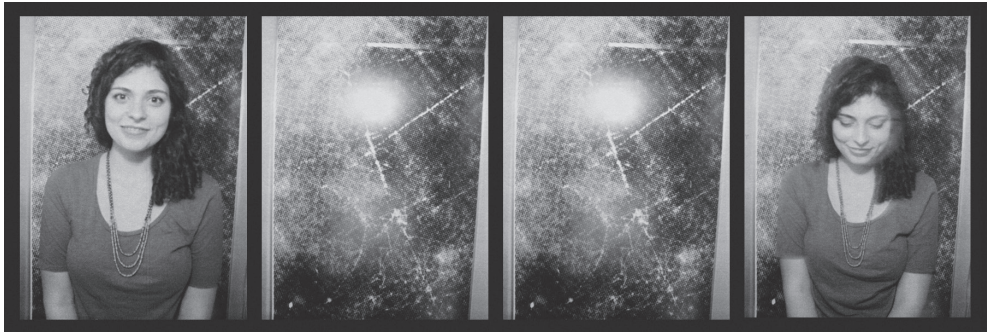


As soon as I began to shoot with my iPhone, I immediately found myself drawn to ambiguous or unusual visual juxtapositions; for example working with reflections in shop windows, which gave the impression of double exposures (Lisette Model's work with reflections has been an inspiration). While I own a Lumix GF1, and have accumulated some experience as a photographer, I still favour shooting with my iPhone, if for no other reason than the fact that it is the camera that is always with me. I shoot often inconspicuously, which is an advantage with the iPhone, because I am drawn to small, intimate, eccentric details and visual juxtapositions within cities.

I like to approach a day of shooting—or as I like to call it, “going on photo safari”—with the intention of psychogeographic wandering; this tends to jolt my awareness more than a shot of espresso. I shoot intuitively, automatically, never censoring myself, following whatever I am drawn to as I try to find the spirit of a place and its people. I like the pure act of play with no expectations. It is the most fun I've had in years. I am searching for an intimacy with the world I am in: the objects, places, people... whether seen directly or glimpsed. I do not believe that other people can see what I see, and that is the essence of what compels me to shoot.

As I grow into my practice, I would like to embrace a wider variety of camera choices to create my work. As much as I love the iPhone, I am aware of its limitations. My work is already beginning to evolve past the heavy Hipstamatic filters I loved in the past. I'm still drawn to these, but as I grow a bit more sensitive to the content of my photos, I'm less obsessed with adding effects. I've recently discovered that there is a whole movement around contemplative photography, which I find very similar aesthetically to what I have been doing. Early on, I called my project *wanderlings*, based on an obscure Buddhist website whose subtitle was “the journey begins.” As a practitioner of mindfulness meditation, I believe it was that which allowed me to intuitively embrace lens-based media as a response to creative block.

Through a simple and common device—a smartphone with a tiny lens—I have found a platform that has changed the way I see, and now I feel most connected to the world around me when I'm behind a camera. I have explored and experimented for several years, looking for ways to use illustration or graphic design to express my true voice, and I have found that photography serves my artistic expressions better.



TAMAR MANKASSARIAN

What is given with a name?

In the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, the final phase of the Ottoman Empire, many children of the surviving generation were defined by trauma from birth in the very names their parents gave them. There were children called Revenge, Hope or, in my great-aunt's case, Sadness (Tsavali). She was so named because her father was taken and murdered a day prior to her birth. Names were also used to revive lost loved ones through carrying on their legacy in this new generation. Tateh was my grandfather's older brother, and he is an almost mythic figure in my family's narrative. He was well respected, educated by a renowned Armenian writer and he became a journalist for the local newspaper. I am now as old as he lived to be; he was murdered along with most other Western Armenian intellectuals in the first stages of the genocide. This defined my family in many ways: their ingrained sense of loss and the attributes they value (education, for example). My father was named after him and he is the only one of his four siblings

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that carries a name so laden with emotional weight.

My own full name is Tamar Elizabeth Valantin Mankassarian, which is a name rich with memory and experiences that do not belong to me. It is saturated with struggle and triumph, weighed with suffering and the obligation to remember. Despite the fact that her ancient skin, piercing blue eyes and overenthusiastic attentiveness served to create an air of discomfort for me as a small child, I always felt connected to my grandmother because of our shared name, Valantin. I loved her, but was also scared of her, and knew even then that she seemed to serve as a link to a different and lost time that my family revered and which I simply couldn't understand. It was a common story among modern Armenian families, the grandmother who survived. She would occasionally recount her own childhood and describe the perilous journey she and her sisters had to make to Lebanon as orphans, smuggled out of the Ottoman Empire by the Near East Relief charity for their survival. Often during these times, she would retreat into an inner world where her eyes would become opaque and simply stare out on the balcony for a while, gently swaying in her rocking chair. As children, we were introduced to this story early on, but it wasn't until I was 13 and heard my father refer to her as a "genocide survivor," and asked what that meant did I really understand the true significance of it in my history.

I was also named after Tateh's mother, Tamar; she too survived the genocide and she also held almost legendary status in our history. Despite being illiterate, she was a powerhouse of a woman who helped the community and our family survive during unthinkable hardship. She made alcohol (arak) to trade secretly with Turkish soldiers for gasoline to cook and warm the house, she sneaked food to starving deportees who were on the road to their deaths, and she even performed some church ceremonies for the community after all the priests had been rounded up and killed. All of these stories, especially this tragedy, reside in my name. I feel both dehumanized and empowered by being seen as a symbol of their rebirth and legacy, and carrying their story within me everywhere. How does having your very name and identity be shadowed by past trauma shape you as an individual?

Having to incorporate genocide into my identity was difficult as a young person,

and honestly I think I distanced myself from the truth of it for a long time because the reality was too harrowing to face. It was difficult to do research on it or stare at it directly because it felt so close; it had always lurked in the shadows of memory in my family, something rarely discussed but deeply felt by everyone. Having such a terrible crime against humanity remain unacknowledged by the perpetrators to this day, together with the lack of retribution or recognition from the world at large, has affected the victims' ability to speak about it. Yet, regardless of what I might want, my name makes it impossible for me to forget or ignore.

After initially shying away from the truth of my own family history, I have begun more and more to tell the stories of my name to people who simply have no idea these killings ever happened. While hesitant to explore a personal pain so intimately bound up in my name and ancestry, the injustice of it slipping out of the world's consciousness as if it never occurred outweighs that hesitation. This conflicted compulsion for telling my own stories has shaped my perspective on what worlds I am generally drawn to portraying as I grow as an artist. The stories that draw me in are the ones that make people reconsider their origins, the stories less told because they are not deemed worthy of note by the media, the stories people would rather forget out of convenience. I am still working up the courage and humility to engage with many of these stories and to give them the respect and tireless dedication they require, which is my next objective. In many ways, the lives and events that I am compelled to focus on are all introspective quests, each exploring a different part of myself I don't yet understand. The inheritance of intergenerational trauma is of particular interest to me at the moment, as I come to know more about the circumstances of my ancestors' displacement, coupled with the fact that next year marks a century since the Armenian Genocide occurred. My interest in seeking out and expressing stories in general, however, also stems from the fear ingrained in me since I was named of losing something important through forgetting. If I, in my own small way, contribute to narratives others might turn away from, I can potentially help to maintain a legacy that holds the ability to teach us something, as my parents did when they named me.

Despite my initial reluctance of reconciling the wounds of my family within

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myself, I find am increasingly relying on them for a sense of stability and perspective; I am also repeating their stories more and more often, as many people simply have no knowledge that the Armenian Genocide ever occurred. I now take solace in the traumas of my name because they provide a window to a time long ago. Especially now, with so few survivors still living, my name is ever more alive with the memories few others will remember.



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THIRZA CUTHAND

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When I started making work, I was 16 years old and a semi-closeted lesbian in high school. I noticed there were no representations of teenage lesbians at that time. In fact, older queer people I spoke to thought of queer youth as being somewhere between 18 to 24 years old. I started making short videos about being a lesbian teenager. As time went on, I realized identity was a crucial component of my work. I make videos about race and mixed race identity, living with mental illness as an identity, and female masculinity and butchness as an identity.

I'm coming to a place now in my filmmaking career where I don't just want to talk about identity; I want to see those multiple identities in action as part of a story. I want to see a butch lesbian Cree/Scots character dealing with life and being part of a community.

My current project is a feature film script about a woman who sees a mysterious, green fireball in the sky; this grants her the power to turn people into a column of green fire when she is angry with them. This power is both a blessing and a curse: a blessing when it saves her from a brush with a serial killer and a curse when it

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threatens to touch her loved ones.

I am particularly interested in this concept of Indigenous women's anger because of the situation of murdered and missing Indigenous women across Canada. I find that even though it is happening because the perpetrators want us to live in fear, it is also creating a galvanizing anger within the community.

In *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, she says, "Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging." I think of this quote often when dealing with situations and facts of life as a colonized Other. There is a feeling of strength that comes with anger. The feeling of taking back the power that is being used against you in everyday life. I'm also aware that it can be a bad thing, such as in situations where lateral violence occurs.

So in this way, I am going outside of identity politics while still being informed by them. I am looking at the way society and communities incorporate people with different multiple identities. I am talking about the way we move through the world when our background is layered with identities that don't get a lot of airtime, either on TV or in mainstream cinema.

I feel that the current climate in Canada around the missing and murdered Indigenous women has made a lot of us who fit that threatened demographic feel like we should take things into our own hands. This task seems so overwhelming, considering there are multiple serial killers at work in many communities. I'm not sure the problem will ever be solved. But it doesn't hurt to have daydreams of justice. I think there is something cathartic about sitting in a theatre with your community and cheering for the vigilante, especially when the vigilante is a fictionalized person from your community that is being victimized in real life.

In my real life I do feel anger, but I am not a violent person. This is why I am interested in a character who doesn't actively seek out conflict and throw punches, but rather someone whose raw emotion seeps out whether they want it to or not.

My goal is to create an experience where Indigenous women can see themselves depicted on screen with a (mostly) righteous anger that is actually affecting the world around them. It's not much in the grand scheme of things, but at the very least it will help my community release some of the rage that is building every day

when our friends and family go missing or get murdered.

When I go on my Facebook feed, I keep seeing pictures of women who have disappeared. I just want to make a character who can counteract this feeling that we have no way to stop ourselves from vanishing.

My future work will continue this line of investigation: unseen identities living out our lives in all our complexity. When I started making work, I was hoping others would make similar work and increase representations of us. I think that theme carries on to today.

CRITICAL REVIEWS

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*The film makes an
emotional plea to its global
audience, shown in editing
choices that depict suffering
juxtaposed with gluttony
and exploitation.*

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A CRITICAL ESSAY ON DARWIN'S NIGHTMARE

Angie Ready

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Hubert Sauper's 2004 grainy, affecting documentary, *Darwin's Nightmare*, is a rigorous exploration of the profound exploitation of the people, culture and natural resources in the town of Mwanza and the surrounding Lake Victoria region in Western Tanzania.

The film is an analytical look at the economic, sociological, familial and personal impacts of colonialism and imperialism on the Lake Victoria ecosystem, presented through an interlocking web of montages and interviews with local women, children, men, fish factory owners and Russian pilots. There is a clear parallel shown between the introduction of the "predatory" Nile Perch to Lake Victoria and the foreign exploitation of and resulting impacts on the region. The fish serve as metaphor for the power dynamics of both the visible (the introduction of the fish themselves and how they have affected the surrounding infrastructure as well as the health and sustainability of the lake) and the invisible (the corporately-backed fish and arms industry which intends to endlessly exploit the region). This broader spectrum of the imposition (direct and indirect) of the first world on other regions of the globe shows very specifically how such globalization impacts and paralyzes

local cultures. The film gradually reveals how arms from Europe, Asia and elsewhere are brought into the Mwanza airport, where a lack of security is utilized. These illegally imported arms are used to fight wars in the Congo and Liberia in order to establish economic control of oil and other resources, which inevitably causes poverty and instability in the local region. The fish are exported primarily to Europe.

The presentation of the direct and indirect relationships between the pilots and the locals serves not only to show the power/privilege dynamic that is specific to this situation, but also to demonstrate how the microcosm is reflective of a larger issue relating to globalization. In one scene, a Russian pilot gives a television slide show to his peers, showing candid portraits of his Russian family back home as well as photos of the places he has travelled as a result of his profession (many locations are in war-torn areas in Africa). The physical objects shown in this and many other scenes with the pilots—which could be seen as incidental accessories—are materials only available to educated, foreign men. Electricity, shelter, televisions, digital cameras, bottled water, alcohol and stovetops are juxtaposed with footage of orphaned and hungry street children hurriedly cooking rice and beans over an open fire on the lakeshore. The girth and physicality of the Russians versus the gaunt figures of the locals (and often distended stomachs of the children) makes it difficult to believe that they are living in the same locale. They truly are living in different worlds.

According to the film, 500 tons of Nile perch fillet is “produced” each day in factories where labour is provided by locals. However, “statistical collection and reporting systems for the Lake need[s] to be improved in order to provide on a continuous basis more reliable data to monitor catches and effort;”¹ in 2008, the production number was reported as approximately 50,000 tonnes per annum,² approximately 137 tonnes per day. Against the backdrop of these statistics is an impending famine resulting from drought and economic infrastructure issues, which affect 2 million Tanzanians. Locals cannot afford to buy the fish produced in their own natural resource of Lake Victoria. Foreign interests (those with money) override the interests of the locals.

The orphaned children presented in the film cope with their unsafe environment and dire circumstances (prostitution, hunger, violence) through drug use (sniffing glue). HIV has devastated their families and left them with little choice but to live on the street. These children, who are only able to look out for each other due to a lack of resources (education, safety, parental figures), have little hope for the future. One of the most tragic scenes shows a group of children burning plastic from fish boxes (for the Nile perch) so that they can make glue for sniffing. This is a means by which they escape their situation temporarily and are able to “sleep anywhere and not have fear.”

Eliza, “girlfriend of many pilots,” becomes a central figure in the film, one who is exploited and abused on many levels. During one scene, in which she sings the song “Tanzania,” she is interrupted by one of her clients, an intoxicated Russian pilot, Dima, who mocks her words and their cherished sentiment. The violence he exerts when he brings her from standing to sitting in a chair beside him, although subtle, is indicative of the silence the women endure in order to make a living through prostitution. The violence is later referred to in a more overt manner when we learn that Eliza was killed by an Australian client. We learn when she is away from these men that she sees education (studying computers) as a way out of her current situation. These women do not have power over their own lives. There is a judgment and tone from many men in the film (locals and foreigners) against women who make the “decision” to become “whores.” The judgment is never placed on the men soliciting the services. Consumption of alcohol is shown in many of these scenes as a means of dealing with these more immediate scenarios of survival.

Through the collective images and the narrative presented in *Darwin's Nightmare*, attention is brought to the oppression and exploitation placed on many generations in this region of Mwanza. The complicit nature of the Tanzanian government is shown when government officials gather at the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) International Ecological Conference in Kenya and discuss a video that presents the Nile perch as a “predator” (the FAO report indicates that the declining rates of other fish in the lake are also the result of overfishing).¹ In response, a Tanzanian governmental minister indicates that

government officials are present at the conference “to sell our countries and to sell our fish.” An unwillingness to engage in dialogue about underlying issues affecting the region becomes clear. The overall message from the government is that the Nile perch provides employment, money and food to the area and more complex issues affecting the wellbeing of the average citizen are not their concern.

In his *New York Times* film review, A.O. Scott indicated, “[*Darwin’s Nightmare*] is clearly aimed at the political conscience of Western audiences, and its implicit critique of some of our assumptions about the shape and direction of the global economy deserves to be taken seriously...it [the film] turns the fugitive, mundane facts that are any documentary’s raw materials into the stuff of tragedy and prophecy.”³

Xan Rice, East Africa correspondent for *The Guardian*, wrote a year after the original release of the film, and spoke about the film’s impact on those who had participated:

“President Jakaya Kikwete [Tanzania’s President] said that *Darwin’s Nightmare*... had hurt the country’s image and caused a slump in exports of Nile Perch.

His tirade, made during his monthly address, triggered angry protests against the film in the western town of Mwanza, where it was shot. Richard Mgamba, a local journalist interviewed in the film, was detained by police and threatened with deportation. Other people who talked on camera have also been intimidated, according to Mr Sauper.

... he [Hubert Sauper] was worried for the safety of local people involved in the film. He denied the documentary was negative towards Tanzania. “I don’t think that the president has even seen the film. The very last thing you want as a film-maker is for the people left behind to be in danger.”⁴

The film makes an emotional plea to its global audience, shown in editing choices that depict suffering juxtaposed with gluttony and exploitation. *Darwin’s Nightmare* was nominated for an Academy Award in 2006 for Best Documentary Feature,⁵ which, by virtue of the Award’s mainstream appeal, has assisted the film, its subjects and themes in gaining increased exposure and awareness. The solutions to the issues presented in the film are not immediately clear, however, in the increasingly complex globalized world in which we live.

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¹ J.E. Reynolds and D.F. Greboval, "Socio-economic effects of the evolution of Nile perch fisheries in Lake Victoria: a review," *CIFA Tech.Pap.*, 1998, (17):148 p. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/t0037e/T0037E05.htm>

² Ananias Bagumire, for UNIDO, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, "A case study: The fisheries sector in Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania," *Impact of the Global Economic Crisis on LDCs' Productive Capacities and Trade Prospects: Threats and Opportunities*, 2009, P. 22.
https://www.unido.org/fileadmin/user_media/Services/LDC_SSC/Tanzania%20&%20Uganda%20Fisheries%20study%20-%20draft.PDF

³ A.O. Scott, "Feeding Europe, Starving at Home," *The New York Times*, August 3, 2005,
http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/03/movies/03darw.html?_r=0.

⁴ Xan Rice, "Tanzania Sees Malice in Darwin's Nightmare," *The Guardian*, August 17, 2006,
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/aug/17/film.filmnews>.

⁵ "The 78th Annual Academy Awards, Winners and Nominees" March 6, 2005, <http://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/2006>.

*Through the exploration of her
own complicated relationships,
Fox becomes the woman who tells
the story of a thousand women:
each one connected to the other,
not exactly the same, but all
expected to fulfill a dutiful role as
a proper and respectful girl.*

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**A FILM REVIEW: JENNIFER FOX'S
FLYING: CONFESSIONS OF A FREE WOMAN**

Irene Armit
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Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman offers audiences an extremely intimate window into the documentarian's own life. Jennifer Fox interacts with the camera in a nontraditional interview style; she speaks to the camera in a way one would recognize as a stream of consciousness, and no location is off limits, from the dining table, to the doctor's office, to the bedroom, fresh from lovemaking. One can feel almost too close to the subject but this informality allows Fox to delve into taboo subjects such as masturbation and sex. Her interviews are more like conversations between friends rather than director and subject. Her introductory narration begins, "I never wanted to be a girl, the way girls were supposed to be; I wanted to be like my father, I wanted to be free."

Fox divides *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman*'s six-hour journey into the female psyche into six parts. The first chapter, "No Fear of Flying," introduces Fox in her 40th year living in New York City, surrounded by close friends. As Fox begins a new relationship with a Swiss man, she also speaks about a married lover she continues to long for; he lives in Africa with his wife and children. The magnitude of the intimacy straight off the bat should be discomfiting, but Fox's ability to just

open up freely prevents any judgment. The camera work is steady, professional yet clumsy at the same time. Fox insists on “passing the camera” from one friend to another, creating a cinematic aesthetic that feels like a home movie, but edited with such professionalism that it somehow comes across as polished cinematography.

As the cinematic text moves into the second and third chapters, Fox’s diary confessions delve into details of her desire to have a child. Taboo subjects like female sexuality and maternal urges bring forth heart-wrenching admissions of regret and guilt. A poignant scene occurs in India: when women in a remote village ask how is it possible for women to masturbate, Fox holds up her two fingers; the camera cuts to the women’s reactions, they begin to giggle, ending in hysterics. No, they say, laughing, the movement of their colourful saris billowing in the frame. This autobiographical approach brings a human touch to women’s issues and what modern women face in this postmodern world.

In chapter four, the subjects of sex, marriage and sex trafficking take the forefront. During the exploration of these subjects, a pregnant Fox miscarries. Fox faces the camera, fully clothed but naked in her honesty as she speaks about the loss. She prepares a meal, turning the camera back to herself: an extreme close up of her eyes, questioning her life and stating, despite all her successes, she feels a complete failure as a woman. Through POV interviews with women in Russia, Cambodia and Europe, Fox turns to other women for answers about her own validity as a woman. The beauty of this stage of the documentary process is derived from Fox’s honest and touching uncertainty.

The next two and final chapters can only be described as desperate and freeing expressions. In chapter five, Fox and her married lover try to find their way back to each other when Fox gets an assignment to teach filmmaking in South Africa. Fox explores what she sees as the defining difference in men and women: sexuality. Her quest takes her to Pakistan and the border of Afghanistan, and later into the home of Somali refugees who describe the rituals of female genital mutilation. Fox moves into unpleasant memories of her own sexual abuse and the matriarchal influences that made her feel like “bad things don’t happen to good girls.” The end of chapter five sees Fox, naked and heartbroken in her bathtub, confessing that she and her

married lover have broken up over jealousy.

In the film's final chapter, Fox reunites with her Swiss boyfriend and the couple decides to undergo IVF to conceive, but are ultimately unsuccessful. Fox takes a trip to Washington to follow her own mother as she lobbies for funding for deaf research. Fox sees her mother in a new light, watching her "little mother wheeling and dealing with the big boys in DC." Fox struggles throughout the film with her mother's choices to stay home and be a model wife, so different from how Fox sees herself. The sleek visuals of Fox's mother walking down the halls of Congress in Washington, D.C. portray a contradictory image of a powerful elderly woman. Reflexivity might not be directly addressed in the film, but you sense that Fox sees herself as a researcher of modern feminism. Through the exploration of her own complicated relationships, Fox becomes the woman who tells the story of a thousand women: each one connected to the other, not exactly the same, but all expected to fulfill a dutiful role as a proper and respectful girl.

The film premiered in 2006 at the prestigious International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam, before its North American debut at the Sundance Film Festival in early 2007. The film went on to be screened at film festivals around the world, including in Croatia, Sweden, Greece, Israel, Canada, England, Italy and France. It enjoyed a small theatrical release in the summer of 2007 at the Film Forum in New York City, and then went on to have selected screenings across the United States, appearing in Chicago, Santa Monica, Hollywood, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Austin, Boston and other cities. It was well received by critics including *The New York Times*, whose reviewer John Anderson called it "an eclectic mix of film languages, including verité, self-shooting, diaries, narration, and what Ms. Fox calls 'passing the camera,' in which her subjects shoot one another as well as her. A personal memoir, feminist manifesto and examination of Global Woman! Ms. Fox seems intent on reflecting something altogether outside movies. Or even nonfiction. Balzac perhaps. Or George Eliot."

*He allows me to observe his
universe without letting me
actually be a part of it. That
reduces me to a voyeuristic
observer who is not welcome
into the picture.*

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**A VISIT TO THE ALEX COLVILLE EXHIBIT
AT THE ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO**

Eduardo Nunes Jansen

Initially, I had the intention of visiting the Colville exhibit at the AGO and then a photographic exhibit in order to draw parallels and find elements of comparison between the two artists' body of work. This seemed like a very interesting and challenging exercise. However, when I was finally able to lay eyes on Colville's paintings at the AGO, it was clear to me that I would have to concentrate my thoughts on the material that I had just discovered.

Aside from the occasional glancing at Colville's work at some library or bookstore (I remember seeing two of his most popular paintings, the woman with her binoculars and the horse galloping on the tracks towards a moving train), I had never been in touch with this artist's universe.

Just a few days before I was able to go to the AGO to see the exhibit, I had a visit from a friend who is originally from Halifax. When I mentioned that I was planning on going to the Colville exhibit, my friend's reaction surprised me and made me even more interested in seeing the artist's work. As soon as I mentioned Colville's name, my friend's facial expression became tense, his body stiffened and he said: "I remember him parading around Halifax in his luxury cars." Realizing that I was

somehow surprised with his reaction, my friend tried to explain himself a little better, without saying too much. He added: “My mother is an artist as well, you know?” After a few seconds, during which I did not say a word (though I realize my facial expression and nonverbal language must have said more than what I recall right now), my friend concluded: “He did well for himself. I have no intention whatsoever of going to see any exhibit on Colville.” And these words were the end of the discussion between us around the theme of the Alex Colville exhibit.

Although my friend did not elaborate on his reactions or thoughts, I realized that there was a latent tension between his perception of Colville, the artist's work and Colville's relationship to “his” public. Through my friend's discreet but very revealing words on the subject, I could sense the conflict, the politics and the controversy, as well as a certain negative perception of the artist by some people in my friend's hometown, the capital of the province where Colville spent most of his life.

I kept asking myself what would be the reasons for such a strong reaction, and that made me even more curious. I hadn't read any criticism or any information whatsoever on the exhibit or the artist. I wanted to get in touch with Colville's work in the most uninfluenced and “naïve” way possible.

Although my friend's reactions and comments intrigued me immensely, they did not shift my openness towards Colville's universe. I had decided that I would visit the exhibit with the eyes of a child (maybe I should say “some children”), with an unprejudiced, intuitive, unspoiled *regard*. Within a few minutes after entering the exhibit, I noticed that the museum had chosen to welcome the visitors in an *antichambre* with some explanatory texts and images of the artist and his family on the wall, but also with a disconcerting series of enlarged photographs of Canadian coins.

One of these wall texts states that in 2014, “Winnipeg artist William Eakin created monumental photographs of Canadian coins designed by Alex Colville (*Colville Centennial Coins* by William Eakin).” Colville designed the Canadian animals depicted on the coins. It seemed to me that the choice to talk about money (and maybe that was also a hint about the subject of politics, art and Colville) was clearly stated at the very beginning of the exhibit. The apparently sweet comment that many Canadians carried Colville in their pockets for many years without even

realizing it, sounded almost sarcastic to my ears. I realized that the photographs of the coins were larger and placed higher than any other frames throughout the entire exhibit, which made me feel uncomfortable somehow, although I would not have been able to express exactly the reason.

I started considering that talking openly about money in the way the subject was introduced by the museum is a metaphor and a suggestion. This material debate corrupts the ritual of seeing artists and their work as a representation of a more *value-struggle-mandated, spiritually-elevated, socially-minded-responsible* ideal in the world. I quickly wondered if I was reading too much into those photographs of coins on the wall. Or was I simply reacting to some obvious message that the images convey and hide for the perceptive eyes and minds?

The fact that a contemporary Canadian artist pays homage to another fellow artist in the way Eakin did, choosing as a subject the symbol of power, conflict, struggle and control throughout history, then placing it at the opening room of the exhibit is disturbing to me. I thought that choice was one of poor taste and a real faux pas.

The contradiction between these ideas and the artist's statement, "It's the ordinary things that seem important to me," is very clear. Colville does not strike me as an individual who valued simply the "ordinary things" in life. A little later in the exhibit, a text talked about his fascination for foreign cars, especially the German-engineered ones. I suddenly hear my friend's comment about Colville "parading around" town in his luxury cars (while most people were probably struggling with their everyday life challenges).

These subtle contradictions between the artist's real identity and the representation that the Art Gallery of Ontario is attaching to Colville are very intriguing to me. As one reads on the walls of the gallery, the comments about the artist's love of the rural landscape and local people from little places in which he lived, I cannot stop myself from seeing in his paintings a glorification of the benefits that are reserved to a select privileged group in society. My eyes and heart were bombarded with these bourgeois depictions of a white privileged class in Canada, in which there is no reference or suggestion of a different reality outside of that small, secluded, tra-

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ditional and usually rich white-blond-blue-eyed world as it is depicted for instance in *To Prince Edward Island* (1965), *Child Skipping* (1958), and *Dog in Car* (1999), to name but a few.

Personally, I cannot relate to any of his paintings although I admire the quality and the plastic beauty of the work itself. None of these images presenting Colville's universe invite me in or give me a feeling of belonging, sharing and recognition. None. I would probably never have access to a milieu such as the one that he shares in his tableaux as if they were a common and simple reality to most human beings. They are anything but that.

The museum states, "Alex Colville's iconic paintings present scenes of everyday Canadian life," and "Exploring issues of anxiety and control, trust and love, Colville's particular view of the world is always profound." These scenes of everyday Canadian life are not representative of a very large number of Canadians and their true reality, as I previously suggested. These scenes depict everyday aspects of the specific reality of certain Canadians. The range is limited to a small group, which leaves me feeling some indifference to Colville's art when it comes to social conscience and mindfulness. I cannot see a profound universal representativeness in the way the artist expresses his preoccupations and views on life and human reality in his paintings. Colville stated: "The universality of art I suppose always springs from the particular." I feel that in his case the particular might just be too exclusive to become universal.

One cannot dissociate the artist's creation and the artist's own personal narrative. It seems to me that Colville lived a long and privileged life. His experience early in life with war, when he was only 22 years old, was one example of the privileged place in which he seems to have lived his life. In 1942, just out of university and newly married to the woman with whom he would spend the rest of his life, Colville enlisted, joined the Canadian Infantry and quickly rose to a commission as a second lieutenant. He was flown to London in 1944 to take an appointment as an official War Artist as the war was quickly drawing to an end in its final stages. During that period he travelled in Europe "to Yorkshire, the Mediterranean, the Netherlands and northern Germany," documenting and recording as an artist what

he saw. He witnessed some of the horrors of the war from once again, the very privileged position of an official and well protected War Artist. Colville explains it himself: "I felt my job was to simply report. I tried very hard to do the best stuff I could do as a War Artist. I thought at least because no one was shooting at me, I could try and do reasonably good work."

I followed the sequence of paintings and themes into which the gallery organized the exhibit. The show unfolded as a book whose pages I would turn one after the other. I saw the interesting influence that Colville had on cinema and how important writers such as Alice Munro found inspiration in his work. I discovered the sense of mystery, agitation, menace and fear that lives in the artist's paintings and which are embodied by his subjects (humans or animals) or simply by some objects like in *Horse and Train* (1954), *Woman with Revolver* (1987), and *Refrigerator* (1977). In order to mention the notion of inherent danger in his work, Colville said: "I don't intend to be menacing, but I do think of life as being essentially dangerous. We never know what's going to happen from one day to the next."

I feel that Colville asks some questions and suggests some scenarios that look unanswered and unfinished to me. He allows me to observe his universe without letting me actually be a part of it. That reduces me to a voyeuristic observer who is not welcome into the picture. I felt like the outsider who is allowed to observe from a distance, but who will never relate to the action in the images and who might never be included in them. It is like observing statues in a church, knowing that they represent a godly reality that my humanity cannot reach or might never deserve to attain.

Finally, towards the end of my visit to the exhibit, I had a better understanding of certain facts. I felt better informed to understand my friend's immediate reactions to the mention of Colville's name and art. I could imagine some reasons that motivated his categorical refusal to see the show that the Art Gallery of Ontario had curated. My friend seemed to question the supposed status of "masterpiece" of Colville's paintings. I would need to talk to him again and try to understand his position in more depth.

In conclusion, I must say that I see Colville as a very talented artist who seems

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to have belonged to an elite his whole existence. He was born into a “good family.” He was a white, nice-looking, talented, heterosexual man. His paintings (as well as the frames he personally designed and made by hand in his home wood workshop) are skillfully, realistically and technically done in a beautiful and geometrically well-manicured way, as his surroundings and his environment presumably were. As I write about these facts in Colville’s life, other artists come up in my mind, like Francis Bacon, for instance. What a contrast!

Colville’s work represents to me the art of depicting the privileged. It is, for me, an art about and for an elite. This obviously does not make him a less important or less gifted artist. His images do not particularly move me. They raise questions and establish a great level of tension, unbalance, uncertainty and suspense at a personal level, not at a social level. In this way his art seems to have a limited range of depth and strength. As a contrast, I see Diego Rivera’s work as being diametrically opposed to Colville’s images on many different levels.

Colville’s art does not change my way of seeing life or other individuals. It does not encourage reflection or change at what I personally consider a higher level, which relates to social engagement and conscience. I do not necessarily believe art has to do this, but then if it does not, it will be limited to telling the narratives of an exclusive group and embellishing their walls and environment. And that might be perfectly fine for some people.

*Colville's success is partially
due to the accessible nature of
his subject matter. His work
is an intimate encounter with
everyday life and human fragility,
often with surreal undertones.*

.....

ALEX COLVILLE AT THE AGO

Michelle Astrug

.....

“It’s the ordinary things that seem important to me”

– Alex Colville

With over 100 works on display at the AGO’s Alex Colville exhibition, the Canadian artist’s retrospective feels anything but ordinary. The AGO is the first gallery to showcase Colville’s extensive work since his passing in the summer of 2013. The show is curated by Andrew Hunter, the AGO’s curator of Canadian Art, in collaboration with the National Gallery of Canada and runs from August 23, 2014 – January 4, 2015.

The exhibition is organized into five themes, not presented chronologically. The themes are: 1. *Everyday Colville*, which introduces us to Colville’s scenes of everyday Canadian life; 2. *WWII: A Soldier’s Story*, which explores Colville’s years as a war artist and the impact it had on his life; 3. *Animals: On Good and Evil*, which examines the depiction of animals in Colville’s works; 4. *An Inherent Danger*, which raises questions about the psychological space of Colville’s subjects; and 5. *On Love and Loss: Life with Rhoda*, which summarizes Colville’s loving relationship with Rhoda, his wife, muse and frequent subject. Featured alongside many of these works are

Colville's sketches and studies, along with some never-before-exhibited paintings and related works from popular culture.

Upon entering the exhibit, we are presented with a painting of a woman peering directly at the viewer from behind a pair of binoculars. She appears to be on a ferry. Her face is obscured by the binoculars, as is the identity of the seated man who is hidden behind her. The title, *To Prince Edward Island* (1965), reveals very little about the subject. Who is this couple? What is the nature of their relationship? What is the subject of this woman's gaze?

It is easy to understand why one may simply dismiss Colville as a mediocre regional painter based on his titles alone. Works such as *Woman at Clothesline* (1956-57), *Couple on Beach* (1957), and *Family and Rainstorm* (1955) depict everyday subject matter as their titles suggest. But, as in *To Prince Edward Island* (1965), it is the way that these ordinary scenes are illustrated that is unsettling. Many of his works feature a static, solitary subject. His human subjects rarely face the viewer, or objects such as binoculars and animals obscure their faces. His muted colour palette and flat lighting do not leave much in the way of contrast. However, upon further examination, his brushstrokes reveal a pointillist technique comprised of hundreds of tiny multi-coloured dots. Shadows rarely exist; his subject matter is often left floating, motionless, not fully grounded.

Pacific (1967), like so many of his works, suggests something beyond the moment, an element of surrealism below the surface. A shirtless man with his back to the viewer stands in a doorway looking out at the water, his head cropped by the canvas. In the foreground, a gun sits on a table, beckoning the viewer. Tension fills the air. It's as if we are caught in the moment of a story with no beginning or end.

Colville's distinct hyperrealistic style emerged at a time when Abstract Expressionism was flourishing, setting him up as a serious artist who refused to follow trends. Hunter attempts to show Colville's influence on contemporary film, literature and music by creating pairings of his work, which are scattered throughout the show. A short video loop from director Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) showing a girl on a lighthouse behind binoculars is one of the more obvious images paired with *To Prince Edward Island* (1965). Other pairings include a cover of an

Alice Munro book, a Tim Hecker sound installation, a short loop from the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men* (2012) and a comic book by David Collier. One of the more interesting influences are four appearances of Colville's work in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), which unfortunately cannot be displayed, as MGM would not grant the AGO viewing rights.

The show is an in-depth look at Colville's complex compositions. Colville's success is partially due to the accessible nature of his subject matter. His work is an intimate encounter with everyday life and human fragility, often with surreal undertones. His imagery is haunting and captivating, forcing us to question our own perceptions of reality.

*What came out of the speakers
sounded innocent enough to
begin with—a slow fade-up
of a beautifully played harp—
but once the singing started,
I knew I had never heard
anything like this before.*

.....

**ALL HORNS AND THORNS, SPRUNG OUT
FULLY FORMED, KNOCK-KNEED AND UPRIGHT**

Orri Jónsson
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This essay has been drifting through my mind now for weeks, a verbal wreck of scattered thoughts and notes floating around my subconscious. Elvis Costello observed that “*writing about music is like dancing about architecture*,” and I see his point. I should have known better.

Music is a slippery thing to discuss, an intangible emotional medium that only exists as an experience in time and doesn’t sit comfortably within theories and the written word, writing being an explicit medium while music is an ambiguous one. That is what I find most seductive about it. I wish I could claim to attempt the impossible, but since David Byrne has already proven that insightful writing about music is indeed possible, let’s say that I will try for the improbable. Music has been a driving force throughout my life, an ongoing source of inspiration and comfort, so here is my attempt at an architectural mambo...

Some years ago, I asked a friend of mine, who is a music critic, to suggest some new music that I might like and throw it my way. I passed his house some days later and through the car window he handed me two unmarked CDs, accompanied by a warm grin. I put one of them in the CD player, pushed *play* and drove on.

What came out of the speakers sounded innocent enough to begin with—a slow fade-up of a beautifully played harp—but once the singing started, I knew I had never heard anything like this before. Being in my early thirties at the time, I thought I was safely past my years of youth, where one is easily baffled and swept off one's feet by new experiences, so I drove on. Ultimately though, I drained my cool, gave in to complete bewilderment and pulled over. I turned up the volume and surrendered to a voice that sounded like a nine-year-old brat spitting out lyrics that could have been written by a middle-aged, nineteenth-century poet, much too dense to grasp at first listen. I was stunned and filled with childlike enjoyment.

So how do you write about those you-had-to-be-there moments?

Oh, where is your inflammatory writ?

Your text that would incite a light, "Be lit"?

I was familiar with the anecdote about Phil Spector, when he first heard the Beach Boys' single "Good Vibrations." He was also driving in his car when the song came on the radio and was so flabbergasted by the sound of it that he had to pull over, not able to focus on his driving while listening to the music. I had just had my Phil Spector moment, when I first heard Joanna Newsom's album *The Milk-Eyed Mender*. The album is a curious collection of songs that are both playful and disciplined, childlike yet strangely mature, quirky but quite tender. All but two are arranged for harp and voice, and though the songs are often a bit odd, they are also articulate and delivered with such unapologetic force that they left me in a state of awe.

In light of the fact that Newsom was only 18 and 19 years old when she wrote most of these songs, their maturity is baffling. I can only take her own words for it:

I wasn't born of a whistle, or milked from a thistle at twilight.

No; I was all horns and thorns, sprung out fully formed, knock-kneed and upright.

About a year and a half later, I saw Joanna Newsom perform two solo concerts at an old church in Reykjavík. I have had my share of amazing concert experiences and, although live performances sometimes manage to be quite transcendent, they rarely take you beyond the fact that you are watching human beings perform written material

on musical instruments. What confronted audiences those nights in Reykjavík, however, was a curious metamorphosis of a harp-woman creature delivering her music with such urgency and conviction that your emotional defences were rendered useless. I don't recall ever having witnessed such a morphing of a musician and her instrument into one; it's a powerful and somewhat uncomfortable experience because it forces you to approach the performance in an unusually emotional way. You are really left with only two choices: surrender to the flood wave or run for the nearest exit.

How do you translate these emotional experiences into written words?

Anyone who has tried to photograph the Grand Canyon can appreciate the task.

And as for my inflammatory writ?

Well, I wrote it and I was not inflamed one bit.

I could speculate about the reasons for how this music affected me, when I first heard it on that gloomy afternoon while driving in Reykjavík, but I figure that's another essay. Music works in mysterious ways and our perception of it depends on numerous ambiguous factors, for example "*...where you heard it, how much you paid for it, and who else was there,*" in the words of David Byrne. If I would have heard it a year before, or a year later, I suspect my reaction to it would have been quite different.

I find moments like these invaluable, unpredictable encounters that manage to bypass the intellectual filters of our minds and shake our hearts. Sadly, we tend to guard ourselves against such episodes when we grow older, because they expose our fragility and we associate them with sentimentality and weakness. Fortunately, as Tod Papageorge pointed out: "*...love always happens by shock and surprise,*" a great way to break down our defences. Although for most of us these shocks become fewer and farther between as time passes, we can continue to tap into this well of emotional first encounters. Its nourishment is deep and long-lasting.

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¹ The title is a quote from Joanna Newsom's song, "Sawdust and Diamonds," taken from the album, *Ys*.

² Other quotes used are from the song, "Inflammatory Writ," from the album, *The Milk-Eyed Mender*.

*In An Island, one might ask,
“Is that someone pushing
a janitor’s broom? Why is
he pushing it so hard?” The
answer—it’s the percussive
backbone of the whole song.*

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AN ISLAND BY VINCENT MOON

Alyssa Bistonath

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At first one wonders if the sound on the television is working correctly.¹ In deafening silence, the camera pans up from pitch-black water to reveal the solemn faces of the band Efterklang. The silence is a caesura, an intentional musical pause. The camera is so close that only their mouths can be seen, then their eyes, then what they are looking at—the island in the distance. The sounds of the waves and the creaking boat slowly build into a bold crescendo to begin the film.

Director Vincent Moon understands the saying, “Music is art for the whole body.” Known for his oeuvre of documentary shorts playfully called the *Take Away Shows*, his films are experimental, one-take recordings of bands performing in elevators, busy city streets and rooftops (or wherever the sound happens to be good on the day he is shooting). Moon uses the handheld camera like a musical instrument. He plays with rhythm, texture and feel, akin to the polyrhythms of a jazz drummer. In 2011, Moon paired with the aptly named Efterklang (meaning *remembrance* or *reverberation* in Danish) to create *An Island*—a 48-minute, album-length documentary about memory, sound and community. Efterklang, a trio of childhood friends, recorded songs from their second album, *Magic Chairs*, on Als Island off

the coast of Denmark. Moon then used his improvisational method to create a symphonic piece that plays out in multiple movements. Each movement provides an authentic glimpse of the Danish community by juxtaposing the landscape and inhabitants with the band's memories.

"Where can we start?" The film's sparse voiceovers are spoken in Danish. The corresponding English captions read like a beat poem. "I remember you in high school, walking everyday as if you were 10 minutes late."

Moon creates rhythm by idly panning his camera lens across the green hills and dense forests of the island. The hypnotic shots ebb and flow to the quick movements of a truck, or the lazy ones of a boat. And then, a chaotic, blurry, dark and moody scene erupts. Efterklang and Moon are making music with the landscape, playing the way a child would. What would conventionally be considered noise or interference is an important part of the sound they are achieving.

The first time I saw Moon work in this way was in a short piece he did with Arcade Fire. Richard Perry ferociously rips paper at the beginning of each bar of their song "Neon Bible." The sound resembles the *thwap* of a snare. In *An Island*, one might ask, "Is that someone pushing a janitor's broom? Why is he pushing it so hard?" The answer—it's the percussive backbone of the whole song. "Why are there balloons in the room all of a sudden?"—For popping of course, an improvised cymbal crash. At times, they seem like mad scientists, conducting equally mad experiments. They capture the sounds of their feet splashing puddles, logs being thrown from one pile to another, metal rods clanging against old farm equipment, and the cracking twigs under their feet. The latter sound is explosive and resounds like a gunshot. The editing reflects the metre of the escalating soundscape and Efterklang's songs. Jump cuts resemble the type of blinking one would do to avoid being hit in the face with a wily branch.

Each song, simple and elegant at first, gradually gets more complex with voices, instruments, makeshift percussion and the soundscape. Moon moves up from the singer's nose, pulling all the way out so you can see the sheer number of bodies contributing to each song. These artists are intent on collaboration. The band and the director include 200 inhabitants of the island in the recordings. In each scene

a different group plays instruments or sings en masse. In the credits, Moon and Efterklang dedicate the film to the island of Als.

I got the feeling after the first song that the islanders were distant relatives of the band. It struck me enough to look it up.² And it turns out they are not so distant relatives. Eight of the collaborators are the parents of the band members. I was pleased to find that the band grew up on Als Island. The narrative structure never allowed for an explicit explanation. They never say, “this is our hometown” or “these are my parents” or “this is where I went to school.” I would never have known for sure unless I had looked it up. The piece is not only an experiment, but also has allowed the band to go back home and engage their parents, and other members of their community. And to the band’s delight, “it’s captured on film forever.”³

The film can be viewed online at: <http://youtu.be/9ciF3lzzEiQ>

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¹ Moon used a method he coined private-public screenings to distribute his film. Audience members were sent a digital copy of the film if they promised to organize a public screening with at least five people. The screenings were listed on the film’s website (by country and city) so that individuals could find a place to see the film in their neighbourhood. I screened this film at a church at Harbord and Spadina that happened to have a handful of comfortable couches, surround sound and a widescreen TV.

² It took an hour of researching on the following:

An Island’s website (www.anisland.cc),

Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Efterklang) and ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Als_\(island\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Als_(island)))

The Encyclopedia Britannica (www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/17393/Als)

I found the answer hidden in a blog post on the band’s website (efterklang.net)

³ Band-member Rasmus Stolberg expresses this in a 2011 MTV interview (<http://youtu.be/bWGVznnS7Pk>)

Largely shot in cinema verité style, Babylon'13 has been documenting the crisis since the beginning. From capturing protests, depicting Maidan medics and shaming police officers, to interviewing paramilitants on the frontline battles, or even picking up arms themselves, the collective has produced a vast media documentation of the situation on the ground.

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BABYLON'13

Philip Skoczkowski

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Though media has always been thoroughly involved in arguably shaping the continuum of contemporary politics, and quite seriously and more so importantly, in very real outcomes affecting more and more people globally, the very nature of media production (and its distribution) has changed quite significantly. Through digital technologies, especially communication platforms, citizen-run media has become a vital factor in not only protesting, but also in organizing, informing and stimulating (engaging in participation, reaching out to) people around the world, arguably providing real tools for political engagement. From local social participation to globally gathered pressures, contemporary media platforms have enabled movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the San Francisco BART Riots, the London Riots, Vigilante Hackers (Anonymous), and the Egyptian or Tunisian Revolutions. Whatever is happening, it's that people are using multimedia technologies to effectively challenge authoritarian states, or states within states (in the case of vast and widespread corporate activities). Not only are citizens more capable of taking up *arms* in the form of mobile phones, cameras and an array of new gadgets, but also there is real strength in the sheer notion of documentation, abbreviation and distri-

bution of societal predicaments. It seems that citizens around the globe have been more capable of fighting back against their governments and engaging alternative actors into action. Many movements are formed organically through *hashtagging, sharing and liking*. Babylon 13 is one of the instances where a movement has developed parallel to uprisings (currently full out warfare) in the Ukraine. The collective of filmmakers, producers, activists, artists, and even militants, represent a unique example of contemporary, socially adhering citizens.

It was just this past winter that I had gone back to Poland for Christmas holidays with my family. Ukraine was a serious, but not overly spoken about topic at the dinner table. Someone joked this could be a good reason for me to move back to Europe, with such powerful themes developing. One could see it as an aspiring war photographer's opportunity. And many did see it that way, taking up arms with microphones, cameras and computers. Their statement:

"Ukrainian cinematographic community couldn't step aside from events that are happening in Ukraine. We will publish our films, make subtitles for them in English, so that not only Ukrainians but the world community could observe and judge what is happening all around the country. We just understood that the best thing we could do in this situation was to make films--not simply film, but actually do something alternative to both document and support these protests."¹

Simple, yet honest. Although Facebook likes or YouTube hits alone do not really do much in terms of concrete change, after viewing over one hundred and eighty videos (and new ones being uploaded almost daily), one gets a better idea of how valuable the featured work is. From countering Russian propaganda to bridging bonds between local (and arguably global) communities, Babylon'13 is producing what can be seen as contemporary inversed Third Cinema, in the sense that it is not only being distributed very openly, but more so due to its somewhat pro-Hollywood aesthetic. After all, the majority of filmmakers involved are essentially from Ukraine's cinema production teams, using their expertise of storytelling to convey strong and clear information and calling people to join the movement. Largely shot in cinema verité style, Babylon'13 has been documenting the crisis since the beginning. From capturing protests, depicting Maidan medics and shaming police

officers, to interviewing paramilitants on the frontline battles, or even picking up arms themselves, the collective has produced a vast media documentation of the situation on the ground. With cinema-quality imagery and straightforward yet clever editing, the videos bring multiple perspectives into play. Though these perspectives are quite one-sided, pushing forward propagandistic tendencies, it is exactly what seems to be needed in the region to counter state-controlled media. From a local point of view, this information is crucial in shaping social consciousness and participatory engagement. Countries in Eastern Europe are still very much going through a social clash, where forward-thinking intelligentsia is still being challenged by old Soviet mentality and habits. These deeply rooted social cleavages play a significant factor in allowing Tsarist-like behaviour to persist as it has. Babylon'13 directly addresses these issues by showing people how different people, from all sides of the country, are uniting to fight for their land, and more importantly, for their children's land. The finely produced footage, which is often intense and at times aesthetically soothing, charges at the viewer with an array of emotions. From discombobulating images of citizens chasing down a flag cutter to utterly dreamlike encounters of Ukrainians using Morse code to communicate with a displaced Ukrainian fleet, the socially engaging value that the videos behold is tremendous. Even as a Polish viewer, the unraveling of events in the Ukraine and the similarities of a people striving for freedom is uncanny—genetically emotional.

Despite Babylon'13's consistency of putting out material online, their Indiegogo fundraiser failed to achieve its five-thousand dollar mark, and posting online clearly isn't enough for the videos to make it to the broader public. The need for deeper engagement and reach has led to two brothers from the collective touring North America, hosting screenings and discussion panels. What is interesting is that there is an understanding that calling out for direct state support is futile, at the very least to say, questionable, and that the primary focus is on citizenship engagement. It seems inspired by the words of Ousmane Sembène: "When one creates one does not think of the world; one thinks of his own country. It is, after all, the African who will ultimately bring change to Africa."² Where in this case it is the Ukraine, just as it were Egypt not so long ago, and Turkey. As the events in Ukraine

unfold, and Babylon'13 engraves a respectable name for itself within the reawakening civil engagement, it is interesting to see the increasing will and transparency of the people involved in the videos—from collecting grievances of protestors to more clinical interviews with civilians gone militant. It seems the combination of diverse distribution and collective involvement has been legitimizing *this* Ukraine's voice to the point where it is being taken very seriously as a tool to change people's perception of reality. Babylon'13's documentaries, or rather ongoing documentation, hold much more value than meets the eye. It can be argued that it is not only a form of qualitative research of the situation on the ground, but more so it gives the ability to present its findings to common folk, avoiding confusion of academically written language. Public screenings to large audiences seem to be fulfilling fundamental democratic functioning, where civil engagement is put at the core. Maidan Square was clearly shaken by the screening of *The Square* (2013), creating dreadful anticipation of escalating events while strongly bridging geographically distant people—creating a sense of oneness, calling them to arms.

It is clear that simply using social media for *likes* and *retweets* isn't going to change the world. It will pave mainstream pathways for general audience consumption, but it will not engage the global population directly with the issues at hand. The technology allows for conscious photographers and filmmakers to have their content available at the click of a button or at the swipe of a finger - leaving unbelievable potential for its use. However, what is more important is the tangibility of using this media. From the openness of approaching diverse people to interview, to the sensibility of editing and directness of screening, Babylon'13 is proving to be quite the unique collective of individuals who are striving to sustain a country and free their people.

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¹ Babylon'13, members at Ryerson Documentary Media Masters Class, 2014

² Ousmane Sembène from "The Art of Hunger: Redefining Third Cinema." [<https://www.ica.org.uk/blog/art-hunger-redefining-third-cinema>], 2014.

*The film relies completely
on its visuals and sounds to
present what can perhaps be
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BARAKA

Shounak Ganguly

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Baraka, directed and photographed by Ron Fricke, was released in 1992 and had the distinction of being the first film to be digitally restored in full 8K resolution in 2008. Fricke travelled through twenty-four countries across six continents, documenting natural events and human cultural practices, which he packed into a ninety-six minute Todd-A0 70mm format film; he utilized slow-motion and time-lapse techniques he had developed while working with Godfrey Reggio on *Baraka*'s stylistic and thematic predecessor, *Koyaniscatsi*.

As with *Koyaniscatsi*, in *Baraka* there is no dialogue, no narrator nor any voice-over. The film relies completely on its visuals and sounds to present what can perhaps be described as a compilation capturing different expressions of life.

From the very beginning, this documentary shifts from location to location at a moment's notice. In the mountains of Nepal is a breathtaking scene of dawn at the Pashupatinath Temple of Kathmandu, with shots of a sadhu reading from his scriptures. This then connects back-to-back with a shot of a host of pilgrims offering prayers at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The film further shifts to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, where an elderly woman touches a shrine in reverence, then to Iran, the

Emam Mosque, the Reims Cathedral in France and so on.

Soon it is a futile exercise to keep track of the sheer visual force and activities that appear over the course of the film. This is the deliberate way in which it has been paced. The structure is there to emphasize moments, moving from one to another steadily, sometimes with a connecting shot, sometimes without. Introducing dialogue would have hurt the cohesiveness of the imagery by splitting the film from scene to scene, as without any narrative device it functions as a whole.

There is a particular scene that takes place at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. The sun sets on the temple walls and the silent Singha statues peer out towards a forest on the horizon, beyond the marshland. There is no explanation given, nobody is there to guide the viewer as to the background or context of the event unfolding before their eyes. Accompaniment is in the form of an ethereal musical score, mixed in with sounds captured from the location. Perhaps there was an underlying desire expressed through this style—a desire to induce in us the qualities of an observer reflecting personally, rather than an audience simply consuming a predetermined message when viewing the film.

Through the silence and the simple unfolding of events, there is an ambiguity, a distance kept from cause and consequence. We are shown natural events alongside man-made disasters, some majestic and some horrific, beautiful in their own ways. The camera hovers above a flock of birds over Lake Natron in Tanzania, where such is the clarity of the water's reflection that two skies seem to move together. This is in contrast to the burning oil fields in Kuwait much later in the film, where the sky is blackened in smoke and parts of the earth charred as a result of the Gulf War.

In some instances, there are shots of people just staring back at us through the lens. Those few seconds with them seem much longer than they are: A tribal boy from the Kayapo tribe in Brazil, more serious than a man twice his age; a prostitute in Bangkok, Thailand, her make-up betraying the hopelessness in her eyes; and that wrinkled old man in Varanasi, India on the verge of tears, or anger. Before you can tell, the film cuts to a dead man being burned at the pyre after the body is already reduced to ash, though half the head and face is still clearly visible.

There is something to be said about the beauty of the cinematography. Some of

the time-lapse sequences are incredible—clouds rolling like steam across the screen, or the stars floating far above the remote areas of the world at night. A personal highlight was seeing tribes from Indonesia, Kenya and Brazil in all their colourful splendour performing ancient rituals that have been captured with sincerity.

Baraka is as close as any film has come to representing a visual meditation of the life experience. The scenes look beautiful captured in the 70mm format, no matter how sublime or tragic. If I write in any further detail about the merits of watching this film it would go into my deeper personal reaction, so I leave a blank slate for the next potential viewer. Every individual will come out of it feeling differently and take away their own meaning—a certain scene or moment will resonate with them more than others, just as I chose certain parts to highlight in this review. Still, we would have shared in a familiar experience, and that is the truth that lies within every second of the ninety-six minutes of this film.

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the archival photographs; however,
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people nor preacher. In fact, this was
not even a “church” but a façade of
the original, now deconsecrated
and decommissioned.*

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CHAINS OF FREEDOM

Cyrus Sundar Singh

An evicted, dispossessed and displaced Canadian community is further disgraced by unconscionable actions at City Hall.

Halifax, July 2014. I walked onto a pastoral landscaped garden by the Atlantic Ocean. Dotted with trees and fenced in like a corral, this was Seaview Memorial Park on the Bedford Basin under the Mackay Bridge. Inside the chain-link gate, a tall sign in mustard yellow proclaimed, “*Africville: The Spirit Lives On.*” I immediately looked around for spirits, but saw none and continued to stroll along the park. For over 150 years, Africville was home to a tight-knit black community, until the 1960s, when the City of Halifax evicted its residents and bulldozed their homes so part of the land could be used for the new Mackay Bridge.¹ The city also razed the only church, which was the heart and soul of the community. In 2002, the Canadian government proclaimed Africville a National Historical Site,² and in 2010,³ the city formally apologized for displacing the community and reneging on promises made, and set aside just enough funds to build a replica of the original church. As I walked to the far side of the park, I saw the church on the other side of the fence, but could

not access it from the park. Fenced in and feeling frustrated, I walked back towards the original chain-link gate, next to the tall sign in mustard yellow that proclaimed, “*Africville: The Spirit Lives On*,” and that’s when I noticed the other sign, erected a few metres away, which proclaimed, “*You Are Entering a Dogs Off-Leash Area*,” and just below, “*Welcome to This Smoke-Free Space*.”

On *Destination Halifax*, a website dedicated to tourism and marketing of the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), there is no mention of Africville, nor is there a black face in its eleven photos depicted on its “Experience Halifax” webpage.⁴ Moreover, while the website proudly promotes The Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21,⁵ the site of the famous port of disembarkation for over a million immigrants who arrived there in the mid-twentieth century, it does not promote the presence of the people of African descent. Between 1749 and 1816, approximately ten thousand black people came to Nova Scotia, including three thousand African Americans who had served on the side of the British during the American Revolution (1775-1783). They were given passage on British ships, which brought them to Shelburne, Nova Scotia. The name of each passenger was listed in a historical document kept by the British naval officers titled *The Book of Negroes*.⁶ If your name did not appear in the document you could not escape to Canada. Furthermore, Maroons from Jamaica, black United Empire Loyalists, and freed and fleeing black American slaves took refuge in Halifax. Some of them settled in Halifax’s Bedford Basin and founded the community of Africville.

Although an 1839 painting of the Bedford Basin clearly shows buildings in the area, it was not until 1848 that black settlers were allowed to purchase land in this area, and the organization of a church signaled the official beginning of a vibrant community. Over the next hundred years, isolated and situated on the outskirts of Halifax, Africville became the destination for undesirable industries such as a prison, a “night-soil” disposal pit, an Infectious Diseases Hospital and a Trachoma Hospital.⁷ As further insult to its taxpaying residents, the City of Halifax refused to provide basic utilities such as sanitary water, sewage, fire protection and street-lights, basically forcing its residents into depressed poverty conditions. Nevertheless, until it was forced to relocate in the 1960s, Africville remained a close-knit

community, anchored by the Seaview African Baptist Church.

After circumventing the off-leash dog park, I finally entered the replica of the “heart and soul of the community”⁸ only to realize that the “heart and soul of the community” was never intended to be rebuilt nor revived. This church was not a church but rather the Africville Museum, a politically motivated gift from Halifax Mayor Peter Kelly, along with an apology. This replica seemed real just like the archival photographs; however, there were no pews nor pulpit, no people nor preacher. In fact, this was not even a “church” but a façade of the original, now deconsecrated and decommissioned. It was a museum crammed full of artifacts, articles and apologies; pictures, postcards and pundits; odds and ends like an antique shop of curios. My favourite item was the faded wood banner above the door under the exit sign, which read: “God is Love.” Indeed, God may have loved but the City of Halifax did not. It was so packed full of stuff that there was no room for God, the congregation or the community.

Ironically, back in August 1962, inside the same Seaview African Baptist Church, a hundred residents of Africville gathered to voice their unanimous decision to remain in the community.⁹ Tragically, by October of the same year, the community was resigned to the inevitable evictions. To prevent squatters, the city demolished and burned down each house once it was vacated. Although the community was promised that the church would only be removed after the very last person was vacated, it was demolished in the middle of the night—an unconscionable action by City Hall. The people, once self-sufficient, independent and proud, taxpaying land owners, were now subjugated, forcibly evicted, made dependent and coerced into public housing and welfare. Additionally, in a further demoralizing move, city garbage trucks were sent in to move them out and relocate them.

Halifax, autumn 2014. Although HRM Council voted to decommission the “dogs off-leash” designation at Africville Park before the end of 2014, the vote came with this caveat: as long as a suitable replacement for another off-leash dog area can be found nearby. The dog owners continue to protest to keep the dogs at Africville, and the former Africville residents continue to pressure City Hall to do the right thing. In an online *Tripadvisor* review from July 10, 2012, the writer states: “Great off leash

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Dog Park. Incredible view and all the doggies you can handle running free.”¹⁰ To be able to run free, unshackled, unchained, was the cry of hope for those enslaved, but in Africville, even a formally designated memorial space honouring the descendants of freed slaves cannot compete against the collective ignorance of citizens and unconscionable actions at City Hall. In Africville, the long walk to freedom continues to be an unending journey.

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¹ <http://africvillemuseum.org/>

^{2,3} <http://www.africville.ca/timeline/>

⁴ <http://www.destinationhalifax.com/experience-halifax>

⁵ <http://www.pier21.ca/about>

⁶ *The Book of Negroes* is the single most important document relating to the immigration of African Americans to Nova Scotia following the War of Independence. It includes the names and descriptions of 3000 black refugees registered on board the vessels in which they sailed from New York to Nova Scotia between 23 April and 30 November 1783.
<http://novascotia.ca/archives/virtual/africanns/BN.asp>

⁷ Halifax Mail Star, August 9, 1062

^{8,9} <http://africvillemuseum.org/the-story/>

¹⁰ http://www.tripadvisor.ca/ShowUserReviews-g154976-d2424119-r134896560-Seaview_Memorial_Park-Halifax_Halifax_Regional_Municipality_Nova_Scotia.html#REVIEWS

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**FRANK, MADNESS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA:
A REVIEW OF THE FILM FRANK**

Thirza Cuthand
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Led by an enigmatic man named Frank, who consistently wears a giant paper mache head with a neutral expression, we meet them at the beach where their most recent keyboardist is attempting to drown himself. The band members of The Soronprfbs have issues. The protagonist, Jon, happens upon the scene and is promptly hired by Frank to fill in for a show they are doing that night. Jon is a terrible, struggling songwriter, coming up with lyrics like “Lady in the red coat what you doing with that bag?” Something about him must be off-putting, because the rest of the band members hate him already. They have good reason to, since he is microblogging about his experiences with the band on Twitter, and when they go to a cabin in the woods of Ireland to record their new album, he tapes dramatic, intimate, creative moments surreptitiously and posts them on Youtube.

This creates a lot of hits and likes, which Jon interprets as fans. They end up being invited to play South By South West (SXSW), where they go and discover that their 23 thousand hits aren’t really a lot, and also that people aren’t so much fans as they are fascinated by the obvious mental illnesses at play in the The Soronprfbs. The other band members leave, with just Frank and Jon to play their gig at SXSW.

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At the show, Frank has a panic attack and collapses onstage without singing a single song. Back at the hotel, Frank panics again and runs into the street and gets hit by a car. All Jon can find is his giant head in pieces. His search for Frank leads him to reunite the singer with his band, where they jam together and Frank's talents shine again.

This film is really about two things: the use and misuse of social media, and the link between mental illness and creativity. By exploiting his bandmates on social media, Jon tries to portray himself as an impartial observer, when in reality, by posting these private moments he has already shown himself to be judging these people and their perceived lack of control. While he does not have talent, besides the technical skills of a keyboardist, his bandmates, Frank in particular, have a unique vision and a unique manner of getting that onto tape. Instead of learning, Jon is more of an infiltrator, presenting out-of-context rehearsals to voyeuristic viewers and readers online.

The links between mental illness and creativity have been made for eons. There was a book written about the connection between creativity and manic depression by Kay Redfield Jamison called *Touched By Fire*. She looked at several poets and writers like Lord Byron, Robert Burns, and Herman Melville, who had battled manic depression (Jamison prefers that label rather than bipolar disorder), and discovered connections between their highs and lows and their creative processes. During highs, they wrote voluminously. During lows, they went back over their work and made edits.

This can be applied to Frank, the title character. While in his giant head and working on his music, he is in his element. When pushed too far, and when his head is destroyed, he goes back to his parents' house and hides out, seemingly a broken man, but mostly just depressed. Jon makes assumptions that his childhood must have been traumatic for him to have these psychiatric issues, but Frank's parents assert that he had a fine childhood, he was just mentally ill. The head itself leaves an impression on Frank; after it is removed there is a large red welt circling his forehead from where it sat.

Tying the mental illness and social media threads together, there is the unset-

ting knowledge that Jon knew right from the start that exposing these people's lives meant exploiting their disabilities, in particular Frank's. This brings to mind larger themes of exploiting people with mental health disabilities, from the days long ago when a family could go visit the asylum for an afternoon and stare at the patients, right up to the present when people are put through extreme situations in reality shows which test the limits of their sanity.

Frank handles these issues with compassion and humour, allowing us to identify with Frank and his problems while also respecting that there is, in the words of Aristotle, "no great genius without a mix of madness." At the end of the film, Frank is singing off the cuff without the aid of his giant head/persona, "Fiddly digits, itchy britches, I love you all."

Herzog's film accepts Treadwell's thesis that co-existence is possible, but also adds another layer, demonstrating the risk inherent living with the bears. Herzog is able to construct a parallel narrative that asks the audience to take a critical look at Treadwell's story about human-bear interaction.

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GRIZZLY MAN

Martin Franchi

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When Werner Herzog directed *Grizzly Man*, he put a twist on the familiar documentary genre by re-using footage shot by another filmmaker. As most traditional documentaries are made using principal photography created by the director, along with archival footage and other important content, *Grizzly Man* presents something different. In this film, Herzog succeeds in creating a compelling story out of Timothy Treadwell's original documentary, spinning the narrative in a new way.

One of the most interesting features of Herzog's film, from a production standpoint, was the way that he created an original narrative out of Treadwell's footage, certainly not the story that Treadwell had originally intended to tell. As I watched Herzog's unique approach, I was drawn into the narrative and fascinated to learn why Treadwell spent so many summers in Alaska living alongside the bears.

As it turns out, Treadwell spent thirteen summers in Alaska, living amongst the grizzly bears and documenting his interactions with them. Along with Jewel Palovak, he established a foundation to protect the bears that they called Grizzly People. Treadwell used the footage he shot in the North to support this foundation and its goals of protecting the grizzly bear.

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The story that Herzog put together comes across as a fair representation of who Treadwell was, and what he believed was his mission to save the grizzly bears of Katmai National Park and Preserve. The irony of Treadwell's mission to protect the bears lies in the fact that there was never any record of bear poaching in that park. It seems that Treadwell may have done more harm than good. By living in such close proximity to the grizzly bears, he may have habituated them to humans, which is always destructive to wildlife.

Treadwell's footage, even out of context, shows that his narrative is one of co-existence and mutual respect with the grizzly bears. Treadwell's footage captures his ability to live freely with the bears, while still retaining a healthy respect for them. Treadwell repeatedly comments that the bears could easily kill him, and yet, the bears seem to have little interest in him. Even though Treadwell explains how he talks to the bears, while I watched, I kept thinking, "how is he able to do it?" It seemed so improbable.

Herzog's opening shot of the film has Treadwell speaking to the camera. Under him are the dates of his birth and death, so the viewer quickly understands that Treadwell did indeed die as a result of a bear attack. Thus Herzog's narrative begins by impressing on the viewer the peculiarity and perhaps the risks of trying to live amongst grizzly bears each summer. This point is emphasized and highlighted with interviews of Treadwell's friends and others who live in the area where Treadwell spent his summers. Many thought Treadwell was crazy to be camping out with bears around without a shotgun.

As Herzog shows more footage shot by Treadwell, he demonstrates a duality in the original narrative. Individuals interviewed for the film, by and large, lead the audience to conclude that Treadwell was misguided in his belief that he could co-exist safely with the grizzly bears. However, Treadwell's footage gives the viewer the sense that he is not reckless in his approach to filming or interacting with the bears. He seems relaxed and at ease with the bears and most importantly, he had spent thirteen consecutive summers in the Alaskan bush without incident. That fact is repeated several times in the film.

Herzog's film accepts Treadwell's thesis that co-existence is possible, but also

adds another layer, demonstrating the risk inherent living with the bears. Herzog is able to construct a parallel narrative that asks the audience to take a critical look at Treadwell's story about human-bear interaction. The audience may find themselves nodding in agreement when Herzog concludes the film with his thoughts on what ultimately happened, perhaps pinpointing the critical mistake that Treadwell made that ultimately cost him his life. Herzog's unique and ingenious use of Treadwell's footage, along with his new perspective, succeeds in creating a compelling documentary that tells a related, yet different story of *Grizzly Man*.

*Burtynsky's camera has a
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IMPRESSIONS OF WATERMARK

Shivanya Mulekar

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The filmmakers Jennifer Baichwal and Edward Burtynsky extend the meaning of *Watermark* by analyzing how we shape water and in return how water shapes us. The film touches upon 20 countries each exploring this force of nature, each country narrating its own silent story and accusing humans on how they are shaping nature.

The essay will look at the distinct symbols and images used by the filmmakers to explore the complex and ongoing crisis between man and nature, both playing their role to survive in this world. It will highlight the crucial issue of environment and how the interference of humans is in turn making this situation of water worse. The intention is to bring a new dimension and explore the film in a new light, focusing on the unique storytelling and editing pattern used by the filmmakers.

Water is clearly the protagonist as well as the underdog in this film, and the filmmakers strongly depict the role water plays in our lives. History proves that civilizations have been built around water. Every religion and every culture has a special place for water in their rituals and their ceremonies, reinstating the importance of water in our lives.

The filmmakers take us on a journey of realism, revealing the various roles mankind plays in abusing the most important element of nature that we as humans need to survive, *water*. *Watermark* opens with a powerful frame where the audience sees tonnes of water gushing out. It looks invincible! The water, with its power, looks strong, angry, forceful and yet free flowing—an element so natural, creating beautiful shapes just like a painter would create shapes with his brushstrokes on an easel. Just when the audience is enjoying this captivating image, the filmmakers slowly pull back the camera to shock you with the revelation. Water is now revealed in its true state, its captivity at the world's largest dam in China. The dam is crowded with people watching an angry, captive source of water gush out. I can imagine that the filmmakers gave their opening shot a conscious thought, so that they could establish the narrative for their film ahead.

The film is beautifully edited, like a game of chess where with each move that nature makes, humans counteract with an even stronger one. The filmmakers bring out the example of nature and in this game there are gains and losses to be had. It's natural for water to decide its own course, yet every time nature seems to do so, humans intervene in the plan with something big. Then nature adapts and changes the course of water, but the domino effect seems to be on the humans themselves, which everyone is oblivious to. The filmmaker interviews an old lady in the Colorado basin. She remembers the river, which was the main source of water to their town. She says, "And one day it was all gone." The interview leaves you numb; the camera then focuses on the cracks in the dry riverbed, revealing a dry landmass far into the horizon. The town is nowhere to be seen, people are not living there anymore.

The filmmakers act as vigilantes and point their camera to the beautifully designed step wells in Rajasthan, India. Built in medieval times, the wells are geometrically designed structures that were used to store water. At no point do we see the filmmakers stepping inside the maze-like structure of the wells; they stand at a distance, as if respecting it and paying their homage to a water-harvesting body.

The film is often shot from above, capturing breathtaking visuals and posing a very subtle question to the audience. Without much context, the narrative clearly

defines the purpose of the film. The film is definitely posing a question to the audience, giving them answers through the visuals and yet asking them a silent question, “What are we doing to our environment?”

What really struck me is the approach of the filmmakers with their minimal interviews! Why didn’t they ask more questions? And why were minimal words used throughout the film? What was the importance of this shooting or editing technique?

One interview, which stayed with me even at the end of the film, was that of the “water guard.” The filmmakers talk to a frail-looking young man in his early 20s. He is Chinese and he tells the camera that he is the water guard. The camera follows the beautifully designed paddy fields and my mind questions the role of a water guard. How is this one frail man going to guard something like water? Isn’t water a natural element, free-flowing and free for all?

The film uses silence and eerie sound effects at some points, raising questions about the environmental footprints of humans and the immense harm that they are causing to the generations ahead. The film is shot beautifully, yet poignantly, pointing out how water connects cultures, people and animals; for that matter, we humans are made up of 70 percent water and yet we risk losing it forever. The very startling, yet immensely powerful, shot is that of the river basin near San Filipe, Mexico where the river symbolically represents a tree. The river basin shows its expanse like the branches of a tree that has stopped growing. The tree seems to be shrinking as the camera moves forward.

Another powerful image, which made a strong impact, is that of the geometric circle-fields in Colorado, USA. The half-harvested fields are symbolic of the celestial bodies representing the vastness of the earth or the moon. The fields look like diagrams from the sky, diagrams which are man-made but serve the purpose of agriculture. Contrasting these perfectly shaped diagrams are the unevenly distributed paddy fields in China. Following the natural path of the soil, cut unevenly and cutting the mountain in various shapes, the uneven shapes serve the purpose of storing water for the crops.

The film draws upon contrasts with the image of the dam under construction in

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China against the barren river basin in Colorado. The images depict the importance and presence of humans; however, one is building towards destruction and the other one is already destroyed.

The other protagonist in the film is one of the filmmakers, Edward Burtynsky himself. He is the one who is the silent observer in the film, asking those silent yet powerful questions. His photos are alarming yet soothing, captive yet enraging, silent yet mysterious. Burtynsky's camera has a critical eye and he explores the landscapes that are affected by industrialization, whereas Baichwal balances his visuals with her keen eye on the edit. The film is deliberately edited like a photo book or a magazine, giving the audience the time to stay and observe, get in sync with the filmmakers' views, form their own opinions, and understand the gravity of the problem posed. Each story weaves a silent arc and leaves the audience with a strong visual, in turn asking them a potential question.

The geometric-shaped fields, the well-constructed dams, the images of industrialization and the questions of pollution lead you to the source of the problem, man himself. Man created all this to suit his needs. He created all these shapes, but in the process ended up disturbing the natural element of water. Nature meant water to be free-flowing, untouched. The filmmakers thoughtfully end the film on a silent yet soothing note, depicting the water flow in its natural form, untouched, clean and in its true natural self.

The film searches the soul of water and in return asks us to search our own soul. It poses the very question of survival. Where do we see ourselves without water? What is the meaning of our existence without this water that we take for granted in our lives?

*By having a less negative tone,
Beats of the Antonov succeeds
in maintaining the dignity of
the people by showing them as
resilient, triumphant, joyous people,
regardless of their circumstances.*

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MARCHING TO TWO DIFFERENT BEATS

Ebti Nabag

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Premiering at the 2014 Toronto International Film Festival, the People's Choice Award-winning documentary, *Beats of the Antonov*, tells the story of the citizens of the Blue Nile and Nuba Mountains in Sudan. Mainly shooting in the war zones of those regions, director Hajooj Kuka made it evident that the story of this under-reported area would be a story about the people. With no media-produced imagery and information, Kuka was able to produce an intimate glance into the lives of people living in the region and refugee camps.

Beats of the Antonov sets the story to two different beats. The title refers to the Russian-made Antonov planes, supervised by the Sudanese government, that rain down bombs targeting rebel groups, but in the process destroy the homes and lives of villagers in the same measure. The film opens with a horrific bombing scene that is depicted in the chaos and the shakiness of the frame. Shortly after, we see the villagers uniting for a chorus of cultural song and dance. At first this is baffling to the average viewer, because the sequence of events is unexpected. Kuka shows the people celebrating through loud music and elaborate cultural dance. Later, one discovers that this is their way of healing. It is demonstrated by song and dance.

With a few Sudanese intellectuals from the region and North Sudan interviewed alongside villagers and soldiers from the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile, this documentary was made for the Sudanese by a Sudanese. Intellectuals touch on the root cause of the war, linking it to the identity crisis Sudan is facing. Many Sudanese people struggle between identifying themselves as Arabs or Africans. While the Sudanese culture is predominantly black, the Arab side is most glorified, leaving those in the South fighting for their rights. Hajooj does a great job presenting all sides: from those embracing both identities to those preferring one to the other, usually the Arab identity.

What is fascinating about this film is the creative approach the director chose to take. With all the pain and sorrow the villagers are enduring, one would think to bring forward and focus on the anger, grief and agony of the people. Instead, he filled the screen with the beat of hope and unity through the villagers' traditional Sudanese music and dance. It was interesting to see how those living in these regions rely on music as a form of expression, celebration, coping and ultimately survival. Music, dance and wrestling are some of the rituals that are seen performed by those living in the refugee camps.

Kuka takes the viewer on a journey with the people. He shows a euphoric, magical realism that is captivating throughout the dancing and celebrations, followed by long occasional moments of silence. The silent moments come after villagers talking about loss of family members, or after gunfire. While some can say Hajooj romanticizes the war, and wish he addressed the origins of the war from a more political point of view, it is safe to say that this documentary is not meant to be simply reportage. The film uses art and cultural practices as the universal language instead of politics, which would have disempowered the people of the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile.

By having a less negative tone, *Beats of the Antonov* succeeds in maintaining the dignity of the people by showing them as resilient, triumphant, joyous people, regardless of their circumstances.

Beats of the Antonov is presented through the eyes of Sudanese people, which makes it confrontational for those from Sudan. While this documentary was

released for an international audience, its value will eventually be determined when shown to Sudanese audiences within Sudan. There is hope for a new, more dynamic debate about identity and bridging the gap between the marginalized residents in the rural areas and those in the North. Unfortunately, at the present time, a public screening of the film in Sudan will most likely be restricted due to government policies, and viewing of the film will have to be done in private.

The way the people of the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile lead such hopeful, joyous lives leaves those living in first world countries with questions about happiness and contentment. For those that are fortunate, it takes little for one to be angry and plenty for one to be satisfied. Happiness is unreachable and drowning in self-pity is constant. Throughout this documentary, one can expect to compare one's life to what is witnessed on screen. You redefine happiness, breaking it down to a simpler form, rooting it in acceptance, unity, and hope.

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SONIC PUNKS SEEK FOR NEW BEAUTY OF MUSIC AND SOUND

Gye-Joong Kim

Fuck Buttons, the British experimental music duo, did a rare appearance in June 2014 at NXNE, an alternative music festival in Toronto. The scene was actually rather solemn until the duo showed up. They started taking the stage and stirring sporadic shouts from the floor. They embarked from drone sound and slowly adjusted volume and pitch. The sound became a rhythmical wave of electronic “noise” full of provocative intention. The duo was demanding the audience to open not only their ears but also the door to a hidden pleasure. In order to describe their music, it is hard not to use unfamiliar ways of depiction, as can be seen in a review from *Time Out* magazine:

“There has always been menace in Fuck Buttons’ music, but it used to exist in balance with lighter, leavening moments... plays like a utopian nightmare of mechanization... pointedly pitiless, inexorable... like a printer whirring away at a thousand-page document...”

Let’s look at punk musicians. The icon of the social rebel is related to their gestures. For example, Sex Pistols ridiculed social norms by using the code of the anti-conformist. Their public appearances and disconcerting actions made them even more famous. The listener or worshipper of the band became excited with their

action. Here we can come to realize that the psychology of self-awareness, of being rebellious or revolutionary is correlated to the subliminal euphoria generated from the body of those who are unable to easily speculate its origin. What is it that makes them anxiously pleasurable? From seeing that the listeners find this music much more reactionary to the “unpleasant” disturbance, we realize the necessity of the reflection on a connection between pleasure and abomination. I wouldn’t go deeper to find out the psychological analysis, but otherwise we can’t explain why there are cult fans of this music.

Noise music has a distinctive history of using improper and unpleasant sound, which is normally not regarded as beautiful. The notion of typical beauty refers to the object or art that makes us engaged with a deeper and profound reaction in our mind, which consequently brings pleasure. However, the standard of beauty has been socially adjusted and the vulgarity of the outcast has been intentionally ignored. However, especially during the last few decades, due to electrical devices that were invented to generate various sounds for music instruments, there is an enormous flux of new ways of making music and sound. The new mode of indulgence is followed by this new culture of music. The melody, texture and rhythm are now released from social boundaries or categories of traditional senses of music. The (electronic) new sounds provoke latent pleasure of listeners who are willing to throw themselves into the experience of an other-worldly-trance. The glitch music is a relatively newer sub-genre of noise music, which is another good example of utilizing improper sound as music. Here, glitch is specifically referring to a digital-error-scratch generated during the operation of a computer. These images and sounds are regarded as unusable and ephemeral; however, users (who are sensitive to musical sense) develop them into new realms of pleasure, which stem from “unpleasurable” digital scratch images and sounds.

Back to the stage of Fuck Buttons, speeding up the heartbeat of private listeners at night by the hard and heavy sound of rock music. There is something, in the discreet moment, in which we can’t comfortably comply to admit that the trance, guilty pleasure, euphoria and sublime are experienced all from the object of obscenity. Fuck Button’s music catches a hold of the mysterious moments when our sentiment

is transmitted from “guilty” anxiety to “virtuous” euphoria. Their music walks along the line where punk, noise, trance and industrial genres can be comprehended all together in one track. That’s why the music tracks in the album are often 50 minutes long, which is almost symphonic composition. The duo try to guide the listeners in a more contemplating pace, so as to get them to acquire what’s possible only through patiently waiting for moments. This is also in a sense the musical gesture constructed out of tradition and built up as accumulation of musical culture: metallic and urban sound of industrial (Noise With Wound, Einstürzende Neubauten), digital techno trance (Kraftwerk), the harshest frontier of noise music (Merzbow), and vulgar pleasure (Throbbing Gristle). It would suffice it to say that this duo’s music should be more significantly regarded than it is now, especially when we need to explain this complex musical phenomena and culture. Might it then also be okay by now to indulge this “disturbing” sound full of unknown excitement and claim it’s a good piece of music?

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THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE LEFTOVERS

Nathan Burley

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Like most, I was drawn to watch HBO's *The Leftovers* because of its striking premise: two percent of the earth's population abruptly vanishes without any discernible cause. An early teaser for the series shows a tired, errand-running mother in her car, talking on her cellphone with the composure of someone who is certain that in the ensuing seconds her crying infant son will still be in the backseat. In the very next moment, the car seat is inexplicably empty and she is in the street, screaming for help amidst the surrounding chaos caused by the "departure." It was certainly enough to pique one's interest. The series, however, focuses not on the event itself but on its aftermath: the grim scenario in which people must continue to live without even a speck of concrete explanation regarding the mass disappearance. Two percent of humanity is a particularly sinister amount to have vanished—certainly more so than ninety-eight percent. Since the vast majority of people remain, the event's effects are largely psychological—or worse, philosophical.

Since the success of *The Sopranos*, HBO (along with other cable networks) has been churning out dramas that: a) are centred on a conflict-ridden male anti-hero (Walter White, Don Draper, Jimmy McNulty, to name other members of the despicable-yet-

sympathetic protagonist canon), and b) possess a bleak worldview. It is the golden formula of the modern “prestige” television era—bad people are more interesting than good people and certainly more entertaining. *The Leftovers*’ rendition of this ubiquitous bad-good guy is Police Chief Kevin Garvey. He is played by Justin Theroux who deftly keeps his facial expression wavering somewhere between fear and anger for the duration of the series. In the show’s present, Garvey does his best to raise a disenfranchised teenage daughter without his wife, who has joined the menacing, white-garbed, cigarette-smoking cult, “The Guilty Remnant.” But at the time of the “departure,” Garvey was cheating on his wife with a nameless woman who vanishes right beneath his chiseled, perfectly manicured body. Prior to the incident, outside her motel room, the woman bluntly asks Garvey, “Are you a good guy?” “No,” he responds with a rare certainty. It almost warrants a laugh, which is a big deal for a show that might offer two or three mild chuckles dispersed throughout its ten-episode first season. *The Sopranos*, after all, could be as genuinely funny as it was violent or nihilistic.

This is the first recurring criticism of *The Leftovers*: not that it is dark, but that it is so unrelentingly dark. While dabbling in theology and existentialism, the show is, at its heart, about the doubt and darkness that ensue after loss. Such a level of gloom inevitably brings viewers to ask themselves, “Do I really want to submit myself to something so endlessly bleak?” The answer perhaps lies in the paltry viewership of *The Leftovers*’ season finale, which was less than half that of *True Detective*, HBO’s most recent triumph—the story of a drug-addicted nihilist and a depressed, middle-aged adulterer obsessively chasing the culprit behind a series of pagan, ritualistic murders in the deep south. HBO’s southern ultra-gothic drama averaged eleven million enthused viewers weekly, myself and Obama included.

The Leftovers is co-created by Damon Lindelof, who was also the co-creator and showrunner of *Lost*, the mystery/sci-fi show known for powerfully compelling plot twists (says Paul Rudd’s character in the movie *I Love You, Man*, “I think that you have my season two *Lost* DVDs... It’s just that Zooey hasn’t seen them all yet and she’s really curious as to what was going on in that hatch”). *The Leftovers* is similarly blessed with talent for filling its world with secrets, but is much less interested in ever revealing

them. *Lost* was structured around reveals, leading only to further twists and turns, collecting such mystique and high expectations along the way that its conclusion, meant to tie it all together, left its viewers famously unsatisfied. In addition to its gloom, viewers are also highly critical of how *The Leftovers* teases viewers by posing questions that one would hope lead to bigger answers, but are generally abandoned, left festering in the viewer's memory. For instance, Chief Garvey's institutionalized father (the former police chief) has schizophrenic episodes that place a great deal of cosmic importance on a National Geographic article about Cairo, Egypt from the 1970s. This, in particular, created a great deal of digging and speculation from a titillated Internet community but developed no further as the show trudged on.

This is not to say that these mysteries will never be addressed (*The Leftovers* has agreed with HBO to make a second season), but only that if we learned one thing from *Lost*, it is that the answers are never as intriguing as the questions. *The Leftovers* prefers big questions, questions like "what's the point of it all?" whose answers aren't beneath conspicuous hatches. During the course of *The Leftovers'* first season, we learn a great deal about the characters and the damaged world in which they inhabit, but we learn nothing of what it was that caused one hundred and forty million people to disappear. If viewers can look past their need for a tidy conclusion, there is a rich, uncanny dystopian world to be seen and enjoyed on the other side. My favourite details in the show involve the inevitable monetization of the global tragedy. For example, in lieu of corpses, families are able to purchase silicon dummies made to look uncannily like their departed loved ones for burial purposes. The season finale involves the devastatingly cruel employment of these dummies by the terrorizing local cult.

The Leftovers is far from *The Sopranos*— or even *True Detective*—level excellence. It fails to be as iconic or consistently hit the mark that it aims for. Perhaps because its premise is as constraining as it is intriguing. But the world in which it operates is new and compelling, if disorganized in the early going. But the series is not so merciless that it would end its first season without a faint glimmer of hope. The sun is coming up and Chief Garvey and his daughter walk hand-in-hand through empty streets and they are smiling for possibly the first time ever. What occurred just prior

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was thrillingly chaotic in ways only *The Leftovers* can be. But this subsequent scene was surprising in its brief moment of calm and relief. Brief is the key word. Surely the next season will take the series back into the pit of despair in which *The Leftovers* is most comfortable. I'll be back with it, curious to see how much deeper into that pit the show can possibly reach. But as for what's at the root of the show's central mystery, that which initially drew me to watching *The Leftovers* in the first place, I'm not expecting any answers.

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THE LIMINAL STATE: A FLYING FRAME OF MIND

Stephanie Power

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Whenever I travel via plane, the moment I take my seat, I am aware of a liminal sense of being in a state of flux. I gaze out through the window and I'm distinctly aware of my thoughts: everything from the panicky, "well, this airplane could crash" to the idealistic, "I could be going anywhere right now... I could be anything." (What? Anything???) As I study other taxiing planes with strangers' tiny heads visible in the rows of windows, I wonder who they are and what is on their minds. Are they experiencing this same sense of existential angst that I am?

John Schabel's *Passengers* is a perfect photographic manifestation of this liminal sense I've grown to associate with air travel. My first encounter with this collection of images was finding online a grainy image of a very young boy framed by an airplane window, rain sweeping down its exterior. His hand is pressed hard against the glass, his palm eerily dark, and he is gazing out with something that could be wonder. Or is it anxiety? The graininess of the photo makes his face both hard to read and utterly compelling. The composition is simple, and while we are immediately cued to the obvious—that we are looking at an aircraft window—we can't quite imagine how the photographer was able to capture this image. The window itself looks like it

could be floating in space, which feels very intentional. As we settle into the book and encounter page after page of similarly composed photos of passengers of all kinds, we are left with an impression of not only the transitory state of airplane travel, but most importantly, of the passengers' fragile, almost dreamlike inner lives.

Schabel did what would now get a photographer arrested in today's hyper-anxious, post-9/11 airport climate: he shot this portrait series of passengers between 1994 and 1996, positioning himself in public spaces with only occasional disruptions from security. At first he did try to shoot people in planes already in motion, but it didn't prove workable, so he settled for shooting near gates. He doesn't reveal which airports he shot from, because it doesn't serve his purpose; the shots themselves work best in the context of that liminal state—on the airplane, the confines are transient: we are nowhere, and our emotional state is vulnerable because of that.

While technical specs feel irrelevant in a discussion of an artist's work, it is instructive to note that on his Nikon camera, Schabel used a 500 mm lens with a 2x teleconverter, which created 1,000 mm of zoom. What makes this impressive is that he managed to articulate highly emotional portraits from an extremely long distance from his subjects. This is an astonishing feat.

Schabel shot mainly at night to give himself the best opportunity to clearly view the passengers inside the plane. He must have also understood that by doing so, the illumination of these faces, framed in an exterior darkness, would give all the photographs a haunting quality: the inner warm glow vs the unknowability of the outer darkness. Each shot addresses the "flying frame of mind," as Schabel puts it. "I like that the photographs are so no-place,"¹ he says. They are indeed, and this is crucial to Schabel's visual story. When we fly, we are squeezed into a giant sardine can that contains our souls, and every plane is the same, just as every airport is the same—the whole experience reinforces our state of no-place. Schabel articulates this beautifully in his understanding of how an airplane window frames a passenger's face. It appears to be a window into the soul. Despite the graininess of the images, and the distance from which they were shot, they are emotionally arresting and our connection to these strangers is immediate. In fact, it is because of Schabel's technique that the photos achieve a mesmerizing quality.

Schabel and his editor Jack Woody, founder of Twin Palms Publishers, took almost 10 years to put this slim volume together. While it seems like a very long time to edit a book, the effort shows. There is no text accompanying the photographs, and the book is very simply designed with one almost full bleed photo per page, sitting in a narrow frame of white, with some photos facing blank black pages. Each photo gives the book a sense of repetition that not only mimics row upon row of airplane windows, but also integrates beautifully with its very intentional meditative quality. Neil Young once wrote the song “Everybody Knows This is Nowhere.” I can’t help but wonder if he wrote it on a plane.

“Passengers” Twin Palms Publishers, Santa Fe, 2012. 112 duotone photographs, 8” x 10”
(www.twinpalms.com)

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¹ Schiller, Jakob. “You’d Be Arrested If You Tried to Take These Airplane Photos Today | WIRED.” Wired.com. February 11, 13.

The characters' incredible risks and sacrifices for their beliefs are keenly felt, as you follow them into a changing understanding of not only their own expectations of what a government should be, but also an understanding of what is needed to unify a people.

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THE SQUARE BY JEHANE NOUJAIM

Tamar Mankassarian

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Director Jehane Noujaim's documentary *The Square* humanizes the revolution of Egypt by delving into the hopes and heartbreaks of people on differing political sides, whose country has been thrown into chaos.

This evocative and engaging film follows three main characters (who form the narrative of the film) from their initial, united idealistic revolution against President Mubarak, to their ultimate division in the polarizing chaos that follows the newly created political vacuum. The narration from a young man named Ahmed Hassan begins the film; he explains his own Egyptian upbringing and the context of growing discontent in his society because of government-sanctioned violence and torture against a mostly impoverished population. With his youth and unceasing optimism he seems to represent a new generation of Egyptians who wish to change their circumstances even though they are facing a legacy of a 30-year dictatorship. While he is arguably more secular and moderate than most of the population of Egypt, having his perspective driving the story forward gives the audience a face and a destiny to follow, and also a sense of how much ordinary people were risking by defying their government in any context. The other two main characters

are Khalid Abdulla, an English-Egyptian actor who had returned to support the revolution, and Magdy Ashour, an older family man who has sworn allegiance to the Muslim Brotherhood. Khalid Abdulla is also quite a westernized and secular participant in the revolution, so the inclusion of Magdy's perspective is vital for the film to claim to have a genuine portrayal of the Egyptian people.

The title emphasizes Tahrir Square as a symbol of revolution and the people's will, and also as the main stage for this documentary; the battle for this landmark serves as a microcosm for the battle for the future of the country. The initial revolution is filmed with all characters involved being united with thousands of other Egyptians of all ages and religions to displace Mubarak from power. The euphoria when they eventually succeed is palpable and historic; the friendships forged (notably Magdy and Ahmed) seem unbreakable. It is after this, however, that the main conflict emerges, with the military taking control pending the democratic elections, and eventually escalating the levels of violence and brutality against the people. Their idealistic expectations of revolution and empowerment disintegrate, and the population begins to turn on one another. The shaky, on-the-ground footage of the face-offs between soldiers with their military tanks and civilians is terrifying, and immediately and totally immerses you in the everyday plight of living in post-revolution Egypt. Morsi is a divisive figure, both in the country and in the cast of characters, being the first democratically elected figure in the country while contrastingly tailoring laws to increase his own omnipotence, coupled with allegedly making deals with the military. The characters and country itself spin into chaos with peaceful protests being violently disrupted by soldiers, and hospitals being gassed with American-made bombs. I feel like the latter inclusion was particularly important for Western audiences who could otherwise remain disengaged from the political landscape of the region and assume that their governments and lives are far removed from the people suffering on screen. There are interesting interviews with military officers denying their violence against civilians, juxtaposed with the undeniable visual evidence to the contrary. Also a huge theme, social media itself could be counted as a character in this film as it is both engineer and catalyst of many of the waves of revolution the Egyptian people experience.

Magdy and Ahmed's close friendship is an engaging and human look at the division of Egypt on a minute scale; as friends they are ultimately divided by beliefs and find each other on opposite sides of a blood-soaked battleground.

While focusing on the perspective of just a few individuals limits the scope of the documentary, it also adds a humanity and accessibility to a world and a people that seem distant to most North Americans, who often rely on their media's generalized and chaotic portrayal of the Middle East. The characters' incredible risks and sacrifices for their beliefs are keenly felt, as you follow them into a changing understanding of not only their own expectations of what a government should be, but also an understanding of what is needed to unify a people.

The film ends on a note of hope when the biggest demonstration on record occurs under President Morsi, implying that now people are more politically aware and fighting for their own rights more than ever. The constant revolutions, however, just serve to portray the reality of how long it will take and how much death will be necessary in order to accomplish real change in a country which has been under dictatorship for the entirety of its modern history. Despite the re-visitation of arguably unrealistic idealism at the end of the film, *The Square* combines artful storytelling and terrifying reality to engage the audience and vividly articulate the struggles and consequences of a country battling for a form of freedom and civil liberties that it has never experienced.

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WHY SHE PHOTOGRAPHED: ON FINDING VIVIAN MAIER

Elyse Bouvier

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The recent discovery of the previously unseen work of mid-century Chicago photographer Vivian Maier (1926–2009) captivates us on many levels. Not only do Maier’s beautiful images of the people of Chicago draw us in, but her story—or lack thereof—is compelling: a woman on the fringes of society who observed and captured images for no one (perhaps not even herself) to see. Maier’s work was never shown publicly or privately; many of her film rolls were never developed and she spent her days not as an artist, but as a nanny. In the digital world in which we now live, where Facebook and Instagram occupy our everyday lives, it’s unfathomable that someone would create magnificent photos and not seek the attention and praise of her peers. This is exactly the perplexing question that the 2013 documentary *Finding Vivian Maier* sets out to answer: why *did* Vivian Maier take photos? The film, directed by John Maloof, follows his discovery of the lost photographs and his quest to find out more information about Maier and her images by attempting to pull the pieces of her life into focus.

And the film is a fair attempt to do just that, although, arguably, not an unbiased one. As Maloof owns the majority of Maier’s work, at times the film feels more like

a long-winded advertisement for his prized collection. Uncomfortably, there is far too much of Maloof himself in front of the camera offering little extra to the audience in the way of insight, aside from his own story of how he found the work of Ms. Maier. This is especially problematic in light of recent information concerning the rightful legal copyright and ownership of her work. Maloof may not even be in a position to reproduce her work legally. The legal battle, lack of concrete information about her as an individual, and her prolific body of work only serve to heighten Maier's mysterious status as a cult-like undiscovered photographer of Mayan proportions in American media. Amidst all this information about Maier, and the one-sided documentary by Maloof, we are left with no other choice but to come to our own conclusions about the talented Chicago nanny.

Maier's work is marvelous. She exhibits a keen eye for interesting compositions and capturing light and activity in the city. Maier's images, like one of a partially destroyed building framing the evolving metropolis in the background, have a certain resemblance to Berenice Abbott's earlier images of a changing New York. Beyond just the urban landscape though, Maier has a particularly good eye for the quirky moments of city life, exemplified in her photograph of a young boy atop a horse squarely framed by the bridge above him. Her real strength, however, lies in the portraits she captured of the people in the city. She managed to capture every array of human emotion. An image like the one of the elegant young lady in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is cut off at the bottom by presumably a car whooshing by and, yet, catches the woman's sideways glance at just the right moment. Or take Maier's image of a couple: limbs wrapped around each other on a train in which we can hardly see their faces but Maier's keen composition and eye have captured the intimacy of another fleeting moment of human connection. Her images of children are especially striking. She often photographs children at their own eye level, giving each child the viewer's full attention as they look directly at us. I'm drawn to an image of two young black boys: one with a Mickey Mouse cap on, looking curiously and unflinchingly at her, the other facing away. We can only wonder how the people she photographed responded to her, or if she managed to make herself as invisible as her photographs, so as not to disturb. One thing does

become clear in viewing her photographs: we can know more about Vivian Maier by observing what she did, in the faces of those she photographed.

Throughout *Finding Vivian Maier*, Maloof grapples to understand Maier. He seeks out and interviews families for whom she worked as a nanny. The accounts, perhaps purposefully, give us conflicting pictures of the person Maier was: “The children loved her.” “She was a bully.” “She was neurotic.” “She was full of energy.” These complexities could be telling us a lot about her and, yet, are so unspecific that we are left with no better idea of the person she actually was. Unsurprisingly, Maloof’s own voiced musings don’t bring us any more clarity and I start to wonder if Maloof is in love with the mystery more than the reality of Maier herself. The film unfolds, mostly following Maloof’s own journey, and it’s revealed that this is a woman who is unique and unremarkable at the same time. She was an archetypal, reclusive artist on the fringes of society, and yet, conversely, has more understanding of humanity through her photographs than many artists could hope to know. The mystery of Maier doesn’t need to be solved, as Maloof valiantly seeks to do, but instead the search for understanding needs to be refocused on what is most important: the photographs she left behind.

On reflection, the verbal recollections and descriptions of Maier are unsurprisingly really, matching the personality or description of any number of artistic people. Perhaps if she had been a wildly social, normal person, we would not have the pictures she left with us today. Instead what we have is a treasure trove of images that speak so intimately of the human spirit and allow us to know much more of Maier than we think. It could be that as the film suggests, Maier was a woman who was antagonistic in nature and struggled with mental illness from some possible trauma in her life. These suppositions are likely true, but do they matter? One man interviewed says, “I don’t think she took all those photographs to have them turn to dust. I think she took all those photographs to be seen.” Carole Pohn, who knew Maier and was, as she says, “friendly with [her] for ten years,” seems to have only a slightly richer understanding of Maier. Pohn recalls a moment when she ran into Maier on the street. Pohn tells her that she doesn’t have time to talk and Maier just cries out, “but you’re my friend!” This is the most heartbreaking and revealing

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moment in the film, the recognition of a woman crying out for human connection.

Repeatedly, Maloof struggles to understand *why* this woman wouldn't share her photographs. "What's the point of taking photos if no one will see them?" The film not only leads us to believe that a hard life and mental illness stopped Maier from the recognition she could have achieved, but also possibly prevents us from fully understanding her, keeping the mystery of her work alive. I think the bigger question we need to ask is why the issue of *why she photographed* matters so much. We are uncomfortable by the thought that someone with such talent did not take photos for recognition. Not one person who knew Maier in the film seemed to have any understanding of what might have motivated her. But what if the reason why Maier—and perhaps why any photographer, for that matter—takes photos is purely to identify with another human being, if only for that moment when the shutter clicks? Maier is not here to answer the *whys* so I can only draw my own conclusion: that she took photographs to connect with and understand the world around her. And now, her photographs are the only clues left to help us understand her.

NARRATIVE ESSAYS

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*Your virtual extended self
has more value—because it
represents power—than your
actual, physical existence.
You're only as good as the
last picture you posted, and
how many likes you received.*

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A BRIEF TALE OF FOMO

Irene Armit

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From the moment I wake up in the morning to the moment I go to bed, I, like almost everyone else I know, suffer from FOMO. For those of you who have never come across this acronym, it stands for Fear of Missing Out. This phenomenon is reflected in the inability to just sit still, the need to be in constant communication, to never feel like you're missing out. Technology such as social media runs not only our lives, but also our psychological state of mind.

Always Online

It starts in the early hours of the morning: eyes open to the alarm sounding from a smartphone, turn off the buzzing with a tap of the finger, and open the email icon with another. And it doesn't stop there—next it's a finger tap to open text messages, Facebook, Facebook messenger, Twitter, Instagram, et cetera, et cetera. And this continues in wave after wave of finger taps until the head hits the pillow at night, and even then you might still be finger-tapping.

So why do we have this need to constantly be aware of the goings-on and happenings of those in our virtual social circle? And why do we need to ferociously participate in our own online presence? There is a popular meme with a picture of young adults sitting together at a table, all looking at their cellphones, ignoring that they are together in the present moment; written over the image is a quote from Einstein, “I fear the day when the technology overlaps with our humanity. The world will only have a generation of idiots.” Is this the dawn of the age of idiots?

The Age of Idiots

I have to question this idea of a generation of idiots because I tend to believe that we are extending our sense of self over an impressive new platform, connecting us with people we rarely, if ever, encounter in our daily lives. This opens up vast amounts of information, and that information must be shared through our own agency. We want to be constantly working, moving towards increased knowledge, to feel good about ourselves.

We can't forget that we come from a society that praises work. The cellphone, and all its activity can be viewed as Susan Sontag described using a camera in her book *On Photography*: it appeases the anxiety that a social class is conditioned to feel when not working.¹ Now we are always busy, always in touch, always busy working on something. The worker bees are working away.

This demonstrates how much energy we have, that we want to constantly be connected. What needs to be addressed is the stress and anxiety that come from never taking a break. A record number of Canadians find themselves in a depressed or anxious state. Technology has gone from zero to 100 in a short period of time. Now we have to re-learn how to live with this new virtual space and with our own present, physical self.

Google It

Technology has changed communication, forever, and in a very short period of

time. When I was in high school, we used encyclopedias and had to go to the library to do research. This is unheard of in today's society. There were time considerations as well; if you couldn't get to the library before 6:00 p.m. on a Sunday, you would have to wait until Monday. Today, although one can argue it's not always correct (always verify your sources), you can get far more content on the Internet, through extensive and expansive search engines that provide the most up-to-date and relevant information.

This ability to acquire such a large amount of content has both pros and cons. It has forever changed dinner debates. Just a decade ago, if you had a heated disagreement about when William the Conqueror invaded England, it would continue to be a debate for the remainder of the evening. That is, unless the restaurant happened to have a copy of a short history of England on hand. Today, you just Google it, and the debate is over.

This is very relevant in my family, where my father was the fountain of information for almost everything I did. He had a long career as a journalist before moving into the finance business. I would go to him for almost every research project, asking him for various bits of information. Somewhere in the last few years, whenever I ask him for a historical fact or political leader's name, he simply says, "Google it." Often it's done in a teasing manner, but still, there's value in advising me to Google it. As Russell Berk writes, "It takes only a moment of surfing the web to realize that the Internet is a cornucopia of information, entertainment, images, films, and music—mostly all free for accessing, downloading, and sharing with others."² My dad's a smart man, but he's not smarter than a billion people put together.

This is what the Internet represents: billions of people connecting with each other at the same time, sharing information. This is why FOMO is so prevalent; you feel as if you need to be on top of your online profile all the time, otherwise you'll miss out because there's just so much going on. And I think that's true, if you're using the Internet to digest and distribute information. However, FOMO really comes from communicating because you feel alone, without actually trying to connect on any other level either than the Internet.

Attention is Power

James Franco wrote an article for The New York Times in which he states, “Attention seems to be the name of the game when it comes to social networking. In this age of too much information at a click of a button, the power to attract viewers amid the sea of things to read and watch is power indeed [...] hell, it’s what everyone wants: attention. Attention is power.”³ This says volumes about how people view their social media presence. Your virtual extended self has more value—because it represents power—than your actual, physical existence. You’re only as good as the last picture you posted, and how many likes you received.

A new social dynamic has been created, where the virtual world is more informed about your life than your close friends and family. A gap has been created because of how much we share online versus what we share through real-life interactions. People no longer feel the need to inform others about events and milestones, because you’ve shared this knowledge on one or more social media platforms. This creates a barrier between yourself and those who do not participate on a social media platform.

Although creativity may appear to be stifled by the regurgitation of the same information of current events, there is much room for democratized creation. An example of this is crowdsourcing. Projects that once would never have a hope of being funded are being made, by small donations by friends and family, as well as strangers and anonymous benefactors. Once you have the experience of surfing through the Internet, an abundance of information can be found on how someone got a movie made, or when an exhibit is happening.

Social media has even been credited with revolutions, and organizing political movements. The Arab Spring began on Twitter, and social media can be solely credited with the Occupy Movements that swept over major metropolises all over the world. These are examples of what can happen when the freedom of information offered by the Internet stops invoking FOMO and starts giving agency to a disenfranchised population.

Sherry Turkle, author of *Alone Together*, talks about how FOMO perpetuates a disconnect between what we expect from people and what we expect from technol-

ogy.⁴ We want to filter out what isn't directly our own concern. We edit out the bits that we feel are irrelevant, but what are we left with? A skeleton of self-interest, lacking in any knowledge of all that we find "uninteresting." This is a real problem, because when we ignore our surroundings, we become isolated and alone. This is a prison of our own making, created by an unwillingness to engage fully in all things that are connected to our lives.

Fleeting Control

Turkle calls this the Goldilocks effect—"not too close, not far, just right." We can edit, delete and retouch; this goes back to James Franco's point about power. We have complete power and control over our avatars, but not so much over the daily routines of life. The feeling of control, however, is fleeting, leaving us wanting more. We are left with an insatiable appetite for more information, more attention, and more power. When, inevitably, that need cannot be met, we meet our old friend FOMO.

The fear of missing out isn't going anywhere, but it's important to acknowledge it for the superficial and fleeting feeling that it is. It's a fear that needs to be understood and then overcome.

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¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Allen Lane, 1978), 10.

² Russell W Belk, "Extended Self in a Digital World," *Journal of Consumer Research* 40.3 (2013): 477-500. Web.
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/stable/info/10.1086/671052>

³ James Franco, "The Meanings of the Selfie" *The New York Times*, December 28, 2013, Web, accessed November 2, 2014.
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/29/arts/the-meanings-of-the-selfie.html?_r=0

⁴ Sherry Turkle, "Connected, but Alone?" TED Talk, Web, November 10, 2014.
http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together

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BETWEEN BINARIES

Tamar Mankassarian

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Like many others, my identity is compiled of several parent cultures, from different parts of the world that sometimes conflict with each other. Those whose being is due to the merging of cultures also have to straddle the fence between the two, living in the gap of understanding that occurs when ideologies are at odds. This has been the case for my family, especially my father's side who have been Christian Armenians living in the Middle East for several generations. Having lived in Canada for the better part of a decade, but having been born and raised in an Arab country, I gratefully value the different perspectives this has afforded me in my life. However, the gap I am living in seems to be getting wider, as the Middle East is falling into increasing chaos and the paranoia and fear that is growing in North America is palpable. This widening distance is so often perpetuated by the media and exacerbated by ongoing wars and violence in the Middle East. Especially recently, the concept of "us versus them" is seen so often in the news that it's difficult to see any common ground. In North America, acts of terror and the term "terrorists" seem to be equated immediately with Islam, whereas in the Middle East what is seen as American imperialism and hypocrisy is widely publicized and

criticized. I've begun to witness a polarizing of opinion among my own friends around the world, especially after recent events such as the bombing of Gaza this summer, with some publicly declaring online that "self defence against terrorists" is necessary, while the others argue that America is funding war crimes. In these situations, it's difficult to break through the "us and them" argument, and this divide has affected my family for generations, at different times being both "us" and "them." When things become strictly black and white, the people who inhabit the many shades of grey are usually the ones who are put at the most risk.

My mother is an Anglo-Canadian and my father is Armenian Lebanese, and I grew up in the United Arab Emirates. Our lives have been defined by bridging cultures and embodying a new way to live outside of expected norms. Having lived in both the Middle East and Canada, I find that I represent each side whenever I am in the other; in any Arab country, I am a Westerner, but in Canada I am often seen as an ethnically ambiguous representative of perhaps antiquated notions of "The East." History is the only way we can make sense of the contemporary global landscape, and I would like to examine my own family's history of living on the edge of historical events that often involve the clash of these two ideals: East and West. The two previous generations of my family have, in different circumstances, lived in the parts of the world where these two ideals have merged in society and subsequently disintegrated into violence. The Ottoman Empire is where my grandparents lived; it was huge and expansive with many different minorities living under a Turkish Muslim government. Decades later, my father would be raised in Beirut, Lebanon, which was known around the world as being the "Paris" of the Middle East because of its comparatively open culture and its Christian government's influence, also having a large range of different sects and religions living in the comparatively small country. My own upbringing also contains a modern merging and conflict of elements of East and West, living in the United Arab Emirates, which has become a hub of international trade and home of a large array of expatriates under a Sunni Muslim Government. In my case, the differences, thankfully, do not manifest themselves in widespread violence, but in gaps in the societal structure that hold potential for the compromising of basic human rights. The term "East"

in this case refers to what is traditionally known as “The Middle East” including Arab and Muslim countries, while “The West” for my purposes will be defined as what is seen as the “Western World,” including North America and Europe, with initially Christian but increasingly secular inclinations. My tracking of my family history and paralleling it with the greater historical conflicts of the time is painting a portrait of only one family straddling these now opposing world views; obviously there are many examples of these conflicts in other parts of the world and many families who have differing experiences.

* * *

Almost a hundred years ago, a young Armenian orphan girl is sitting in a basket on the back of a mule, being smuggled over the borders of the crumbling Ottoman Empire by American missionaries for her survival; she would land in Lebanon. Her ancestors had been in what is now Eastern Turkey for thousands of years, but with the nationalist ruling government of The Young Turks having formulated their own answer to the lingering “Armenian Question,” which the Sultans of the Ottoman Empire had been pondering for decades, they were now mostly wiped out and displaced. Her father was murdered and she was forced to leave her widowed mother in the disintegrating empire, taken by Near East Relief, an American charity organization that had dedicated itself to saving the orphans of the genocide, who were now in turn being targeted by the Young Turks. The Ottoman Armenians were the biggest and most prosperous Christian minority in the Muslim Turkish governed Empire, and they had increasingly started demonstrating and voicing their desire for more rights and security than their “infidel” status had afforded them up to that point. Many unfair taxes were imposed on the Armenian population, combined with regular looting and rape that would go unpunished, and, prior to the genocide, the disintegrating Sultanate ordered massacres of tens of thousands at a time to repress Armenian protests against such treatment.¹

During the last years of the Sultan, the Young Turks, a nationalist Turkish party, and the Armenian resistance parties such as Hunchak and Dashnaksutiun were

both ironically trying to achieve the same thing: constitutional reform. However, the Young Turks saw the Armenians as an obstacle rather than as comrades and their ideal version of government excluded them completely.

Bulgaria had been fighting for and eventually gained its independence in 1909, and to the Young Turks, whose revolution had successfully removed an impotent Sultan the year before, it was yet another sign of their weakening grip on their legendary empire as well as an example of why Christians should be distrusted.² It resulted in the Armenian massacres of Adana in 1909, which was an important precursor to the widespread genocide to follow six years later. An Armenian province also bordered Russia, which the Turks were still extremely ambivalent about because of the recent Russo-Turkish War of 1877, and they were constantly paranoid that the Armenians were colluding against them with their Christian neighbours. The constant intervention and scrutiny by European and Western powers about Turkish treatment of the Christians within their Empire also aggravated the Turks, and caused them to resent the Armenians even further for inviting this foreign intervention and influence. It was a tumultuous time for all minorities within the Empire, but Christians and Armenians especially, because of the perceived threat they represented to the Young Turks' schemes of grandeur. There was a growing Armenian middle class, which perpetuated a stereotype of wealthy Armenians profiting off the degradation of the Empire, despite there also being a huge number of Armenians who were poor farmers struggling under the many taxes imposed upon them by the government. There were many minorities within the Empire: Kurds, Assyrians, Arabs... all would fall under either the "us" or "them" category depending on their religion. There were, of course, many cases of Muslim minorities and Turks helping the Armenians and other marginalized Christians under this government-sanctioned extermination, but they would do so risking their own lives. My own grandfather was saved by a Turkish Effendi who changed his birth papers so he would officially appear younger, and therefore avoid being drafted into and then subsequently murdered by the army, as they did with all Armenian recruits at the time. I would argue that religion was definitely not the main motivation of the massacres, but was used as a pretext for a pan-Turkish

nationalist agenda.

This was the first genocide of the twentieth century, one that would not be able to be labelled as such for decades, because the term was not invented yet. The treatment of the Armenians, however, did prompt the first use of the term “crimes against humanity,” and also one of the first American International Red Cross relief³ envoys (not affiliated with any American wars) during the massacres preceding the Genocide. America was extremely supportive in supplying aid and relief to the Armenians, since they saw them as Christian comrades, and arguably I would not be alive today if it weren’t for the altruistic work of their missionaries in saving the last of the Ottoman Armenians from extinction. Following the war, however, because of Turkey’s political and strategic importance in the region of the Middle East, America allowed the Turkish government to deny their crimes and actively try and erase them from the consciousness of the world. To this day, Turkey denies the genocide and America fails to officially acknowledge it due to the importance of their alliance.

* * *

Approximately sixty years after the displaced orphan girl reached Lebanon, she has raised five children with her husband and they are all grown. Her youngest son has recently brought home a new Canadian wife from Montreal. On his return home, there is a repetition of polarization at work, a parallel dread from her own girlhood in the form of a seemingly harmless and maternal order to shave his beard; she is afraid he will be mistaken for a Muslim in their primarily Christian neighbourhood and be shot without question. The landscape of Lebanon had so deteriorated that such simple physical attributes are a sign of allegiance, the difference between life and death. The newlyweds were cowering together in a basement in Beirut with the rest of the family, celebrating an unlikely first-year anniversary under heavy shellfire and candlelight. The same destructive forces that displaced his mother are again at work around them, Lebanon’s many sects now in discord, all fighting for their own goals. I would argue that while the circum-

stances are different, the root of the problem is the same: demonizing the other, especially when they are also your neighbours, always leads to bloodshed. However, the nature of the disintegration of this collection of cultures and peoples was less systematic than was the case in the Ottoman Empire, where it was government-enforced discrimination, and more chaotic and self-sustaining. “The other,” in this case, is everyone who was not on your side.

The Lebanese Civil War lasted from 1975 to 1990, and saw Lebanon disintegrate into dozens of religious and political factions and consume itself with violence and terror. The greater powers fought each other through the microcosm of Lebanon in the global context of the Cold War, funding whichever side most benefited their goals (the main sides being Christian Maronite, Shia and Sunni with many other splintering factions within those), while the people of Lebanon became the primary casualties. There are many complicated causal factors in this deterioration, but there are several fundamental schisms between Eastern and Western modes of thought that acted as a basis. Influenced by previous French colonialism, Lebanon’s right-wing Christian Maronite government and school systems reflected the residual effects of Western control. Prior to the founding of Israel, the ratio of Muslims to Christians was quite equal, though Muslims were notably excluded from government, which led several pan-leftist Arab parties to form, resentful of Western intervention.⁴ However, following the exodus of thousands of displaced Palestinians, Muslims became the majority and also brought the Arab-Israeli conflict into Lebanon. The indiscriminate and bloody retaliations from Israel, in response to Palestinian guerrilla warfare tactics, devastated much of the southern Shia people and infrastructure and started to polarize the Lebanese population. The Christians sided with the West and Israel, feeling threatened, outnumbered and trying to maintain power as a minority. The Sunnis and Shi’ites would lean more towards their downtrodden Arab brothers, the Palestinians. These are only the basic initial groupings, since in the following years they would all disintegrate into infinitely smaller political, religious and ethnically motivated factions. Everyone would end up fighting one another, and alliances and ceasefires would come and go with frightening and efficient regularity.

After getting Canadian citizenship and marrying my Canadian mother, my father moved back to Lebanon with her to start their married life together in 1980. My mother got a job as an English teacher and my father worked at a bank downtown, trying like thousands of Lebanese to maintain at least a shred of normalcy in their daily lives and making the perilous journey to their respective jobs every day, with fighting and shelling flaring up periodically around the city. East and West Beirut were divided by a particularly dangerous “no man’s land” between the sides where snipers would always be stationed. “Identity card killings” were common in the early stages of the war, where checkpoints were set up on the road by sectarian militia and depending on what religion was printed on their cards, drivers would be murdered on the spot. During their anniversary, they were being shelled heavily and would have to flee to the mountains. It was this that led to their eventual decision to leave Lebanon and find somewhere new; this leads to the third conflict, which is of a different nature.

* * *

About twenty years after their decision to leave Lebanon, borne from experience in a bomb shelter, the not-so newlyweds would be living with their three children in a much safer place. Their eleven- year-old daughter will ask her mother with genuine bewilderment one day, why she must change from the sleeveless shirt she was wearing into something else. “Because you will get stared at,” was the simple answer. It was loaded with implications I could not yet understand, and while obeying her instruction, I still couldn’t quite grasp why I would be stared at. From that age onwards, however, I couldn’t not notice the eyes constantly watching me as I went outside, no matter what I wore. This third example of cultural conflict will be framed primarily through the lens of the treatment and perception of women in the society I lived in. My parents moved to Abu Dhabi, in the UAE, for work in what was, at the time, a burgeoning country rich with the possibilities that large amounts of oil can provide. I was born there and in many ways grew with the country, since, when my parents arrived, it was relatively unknown and remote in the conscious-

ness of the world. As the influx of expatriates and foreign trade continued throughout the last part of the twentieth century, the fledgling society began to show cracks while trying to compromise with the ideals of traditional Islamic values and laws and also cater to the growing influential Western presence, which helped shape the country.

Abu Dhabi was a confusing place to be raised, though in retrospect, it gave me an enormous amount that I am grateful for. I had very happy years there, and in comparison to the places in which the two previous generations of my father's family had settled, its safety, political stability and idyllic climate were a paradise. There is a highly diverse population and my life was undeniably improved by my exposure to this heterogeneity, and all lived together without violence or the fear of disorder that creates such a dangerous environment for a place with many minorities. It has become a modern symbol of East meeting West, with its sleek, prosperous beach-laden landscape. Compared to its neighbouring Gulf countries (for example, Saudi Arabia), it's very progressive; many times I have been asked in Canada if it's forbidden for women to drive, if I was forced to wear a hijab, whether I had to live in a compound as a western expatriate... the answer to all of which was no. It gave me a great education, life perspective and general acceptance of diversity. But because of its youth as a country, combined with its huge amount of wealth, its rapid expansion resulted in a society that was fused hastily together by global economic necessity and traditional Gulf values.

The conflict in this case manifested as social rather than physical, and there were symptoms of this everywhere. On the one hand, for example, there were no sexually explicit or suggestive images in the media or advertising, which I actively prefer to the sexual objectification of women tied to consumer capitalism that is rampant in the western media. North America has many of its own instances where women's rights and perspectives are not valued, the media and its commodification of women's bodies definitely being one of them. However, because of the conservative local culture of the Emirates, coupled with the large number of impoverished male migrant labourers brought in to work away from their families, the gender ratio in the United Emirates was actually one of the most skewed in the world and

lead to some unfortunate societal problems. While you weren't being objectified in the media, walking outside in the streets was always an objectifying experience, even without wearing "provocative" clothing. Being intensely stared at and harassed by groups of men was commonplace; it happened with so much regularity, I perceived it as normal. It's important to note it was not just migrant workers who perpetuated this predatory atmosphere; other men of all nationalities and incomes contributed to the cars beeping, conspicuous stalking and general harassment. However, the skewed gender ratio of over two men to every woman⁵ is mostly due to the comparatively high percentage of the population that are poor migrant workers which created a very male-dominated public environment.

Guards and gates had to be commissioned at our school because there were multiple cases of men exposing themselves to children, and I have known friends who have been assaulted. Walking alone as a woman was rare, since being followed was common. We young girls saw these men as a monolithic whole, whose constant leering and intrusive gaze usually evoked resentment and fear. They are another symptom of the gap created by the compromise of two differing worldviews. Capitalism, for instance, a primarily western mode of economics, was definitely in full effect in the Emirates, where there were malls every few blocks and an extreme luxury consumerist culture began to become the norm in the upper echelons of society after the turn of the millennium. However, the ethics and human cost of this consumerism is overlooked and the Western (at least, outwardly projected) emphasis on human rights and civil liberties is absent. This leads to the exploitation on a mass scale of these indentured, impoverished men, usually from Pakistan or India, who have been told that the Emirates will give them a better life. In reality, they are transported like cattle, made to work long, backbreaking hours, often in dangerously high temperatures, after having their passports taken away from them. They have to work off the debt of their plane tickets with interest while making almost nothing, combined with also having to send some of it back to their families. The stark contrast between the absurdly rich and the thoroughly destitute is often on display in the Emirates, but the inhabitants are trained not to notice it. You see the dozens of busloads of them, all filthy and wild-eyed, resembling a

pack of starving dogs, watching others enjoy the luxury they created and are yet forbidden from touching.

Another contrast is that the Emirates has one of the best educated groups of women in the region; they have become very powerful, and, in many cases, are not as stifled as many people in the western world perceive women of the Middle East to be. The founder of the country, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan al Nahyan, had an uncommon (for the time) interest in educating the women of his country and ensuring that it was made a priority, which has translated to an extremely well educated generation of women. Their achievements are often celebrated in the news, the most recent uplifting example being Major Mariam Al Mansouri, who is the first female fighter pilot in the Emirates and who recently became internationally famous by leading strikes against ISIS in Iraq. At the same time, however, there are very few laws protecting women from sexual abuse, since a version of Sharia law still stands in the country and this relies more on male testimony. There was a case a few years ago of a British woman, who was on holiday with her fiancé in Dubai, reporting a rape, which happened in her hotel. This resulted in her own trial and imprisonment for public alcohol consumption and premarital sex with her fiancé (both of which are illegal). The rapist was also charged with premarital sex since he claimed it was not rape, which carries a much heavier sentence.⁶ While this case is rare, it is not an isolated one. There have also been instances of physical abuse of sponsored Filipina workers who usually work as housemaids in the region, who, if they run away, can be charged with the crime of “absconding” from their employer. I would argue all women in the Emirates—Emirati, Filipina or European—must keep to the shadows when it comes to sexual abuse, since it is understood that you will not find help or at least it would be much more risky to come forward. Your character and honour would be called into question, and it would have to be determined how, exactly, you provoked such an attack and you could actually get jailed instead. The dehumanization of a large portion of the population, namely the male migrant workers, and the lack of laws protecting the rights of the much smaller ratio of women in the country, leads to a malevolent undercurrent, which undercuts the outwardly beautiful and prosperous veneer of the country.

Out of the three locations I have examined in my own family, the Emirates holds the least amount of trauma caused by cultural conflicts and the greatest potential for reaching a peaceful society in which multiple faiths and ethnicities can coexist. However, its rapid development has not provided time to evolve a core foundation of human rights which would ideally protect not only migrant workers, but also all women, whether considered nationals or not. Lebanon was able to recover slowly from the sectarian violence that tore the country apart for a decade and a half, largely because of the benevolence of President Hariri who used his own fortune to rebuild much of downtown Beirut. However, his assassination and the multiple assassinations of political figures that occurred regularly after the war have combined with the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which still serves to create an air of instability. Especially now, that atmosphere is heightened due to the fact that Syria, which surrounds the country from all sides, is now in the midst of its own devastating civil war. Turkey now has a much smaller Armenian population, most of whom do not openly acknowledge their ancestry to avoid the discrimination that still occurs, and the genocide has been actively erased from history within the country. As a symbol of the lingering effects of the genocide, Turkish Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was murdered in 2007 in broad daylight by a teenage Turkish nationalist because he was speaking out about the genocide publicly. Mentioning the genocide and “degrading Turkishness” is illegal and carries prison sentences for those who commit this crime. However, after the murder, a symptom of changing attitudes of public discourse was expressed in the form of approximately 200,000 people demonstrating against his murder, holding banners that proclaimed “We are all Hrant Dink” and “We are all Armenian.”

Extremists are gaining more ground with the chaos that follows the Western intervention in places like Iraq, and the self-destruction of Syria and countries like Egypt and Libya, which are still recovering from their revolutions several years back. The Palestinian and Israeli conflict has been so entrenched over the last few decades that it seems to serve as a symbol of clashing ideologies and the endless bloodshed that comes with the dehumanization of “the other.” My hope is that fear does not perpetuate more of this on a global scale. There are people who do not

see two mutually exclusive worlds that threaten one another, but different parts of home. The wars in Iraq, Syria or Lebanon are not just a far-off violence that could eventually jeopardize Western security, but conflicts in places where loved ones were forced to flee, places that are still a part of them. Hopefully, globalization and the increasing integration of cultures combined with empathy can help undo some of the perpetuation and fear of “the other” before more violence is committed in the name of the binary worlds that we seem to cling to. We all have the potential to be either “us” or “them,” and should be mindful of when dangerous polarizations can occur. Symptoms can arise without a realization of what’s really happening... maybe you are a person of colour that has constantly been singled out by airplane security for “a randomized search.” Maybe you are a woman travelling abroad uncovered and it invites the assumption that you are immodest and clearly “available.” “The other” is labelled unwillingly, and anyone is susceptible to this label depending on where they are. Through the people I have met in the gap between ever polarizing worlds, I know that a middle ground is possible. Fear does not always have to be the instinctual reaction to otherness; if we can take the best of both worlds and leave the destructive impulse for violence, a compromise is achievable. Being mindful of differences and the reasons for them is what is necessary; by dehumanizing others, you are dehumanizing yourself.

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^{1,2,3} Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 45-46.

⁴ Marius Deeb, *The Lebanese Civil War* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980), viii.

⁵ Library “The World Fact Book: Sex Ratio” *Central Intelligence Agency*, 2014, accessed November 18, 2014, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2018.html>.

⁶ Nadiya Khalife, “Dubai’s Shameful Record on Rape,” *The Guardian*, January 29, 2010.

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**CURATING MY LIFE:
MUSINGS ABOUT INSTAGRAM AND ONLINE IDENTITY**

Elyse Bouvier
.....

I posted my first photo to Instagram on December 25, 2010. I have a hazy memory of that moment—setting up the shot, posting it, and thinking to myself: what’s all the fuss about? Four years and over two thousand photos later, Instagram has become a daily part of my life and, even stranger, part of my identity. Over time I’ve been introduced to others whose life has been influenced and shaped by interactions with the app. What started out as an experiment in sharing daily moments has turned into a collective narrative for over 200 million people around the globe. The implications of millions of people interacting with each other on a common technology platform are far-reaching and a new conversation is starting: one about the shaping of identities and personal memories in an age of instant online sharing.

Recently, people have started to introduce me in conversation as “my friend Elyse who has a lot of followers on Instagram.” This fact is announced with a certain awe and pride in their voices, like they know someone important. I almost always smile awkwardly and mumble something about “dumb luck” and quickly try to change the conversation. I’m not trying to be falsely modest, I just question what the worth of this “social media currency” actually is. I grapple and worry that

NARRATIVE ESSAYS



My first Instagram post from Christmas 2010. At least I “liked” it.



Tim Lampe (@timlampe) and Young Mee Rim (@halfgirl) from our trip around Banff National Park in August 2014.

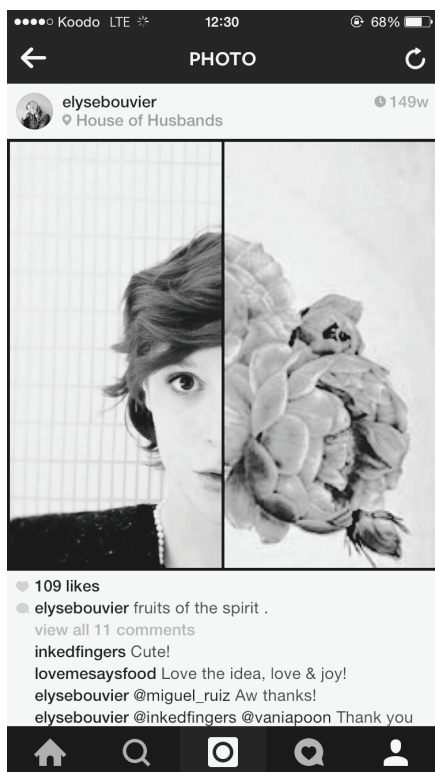
my number of followers sets certain expectations of who I am. I get frustrated by feeling the pressure to show a certain life through my posts. And yet, there's also a bizarre sense of pride at having my personal creative explorations thrust into the critical eye of an eager audience, of my curated life being approved by strangers.

In August, I hosted a week-long photography trip to my backyard, the mountains of Banff National Park in Alberta. I was joined by one of my best friends, and three other people with whom I had mainly interacted online. The idea came about quickly. A series of tweets turned into a Facebook conversation, and suddenly a group of near-strangers were spending a week together driving around the mountains. There was an excitement about the event, an eager thinking that relationships started in an online world could suddenly collide and become something more tangible, or at least move offline. I should clarify that it's not that these friendships didn't feel real before. In fact, I didn't feel like I was meeting strangers for the first time, but old friends who just happened to live in far-flung areas around the globe. I knew these people, didn't I? I mean, I had seen what they posted on Instagram for years. I knew where they liked to eat, their sense of humour, their style, what they did in their spare time, and I even inferred about their relationships and connections to the people around them. Our trip would be more like a reunion than a first meeting. And in many ways the week was like that.

We chatted. We laughed. We nodded our heads along to our favourite songs as we excitedly drove around, exclaiming at the beauty outside our windows and stopping to photograph it every so often. But what became clear after several days in one car with these people were all the things you couldn't possibly know about someone just from observing a collection of images online. Those little quirks and individual traits are what really attract us to other people and what make up a friendship. Moreover, we couldn't possibly have known beforehand what each other's reasons were for being on that trip. In many ways, that week reinforced some of the discomforts I had been feeling about my own interactions and the contradictions in using the app: that there is a difference between what I present online and what I know to be true about myself.

For me, Instagram started out as a personal and creative narrative, a way to

NARRATIVE ESSAYS



My most "liked" Instagram post from the Banff trip, August 2014

Early on, I used Instagram to creatively explore how to present myself.



capture and share my memories, a visual diary that I use to fervently post all the “real” moments happening in my life. Until they aren’t real anymore. Until they aren’t me anymore. At some point, I question every photo and caption and my insecurities rise up around the number of “likes” I am getting. Is my own story being influenced and changed directly by my relationship with an iPhone app? In discussion with other people who actively use Instagram, there’s a common understanding that what we are doing is curating our own story. “At the time when I take a photo, I know I like it, and I want to share it. But then there are times where I’m almost forcing myself into this. Then [...] I question whether I like it or not because I didn’t get the reaction I expected,” says Zach Bulick, a designer from Victoria, BC.¹ Olly Lang, a photographer from London, UK, admits, “There is an initial curation that removes anything that fails to have the right impact, or that I don’t think leaves the right impression.”²

The most interesting thing is that everyone has a different idea of how personal their online identity is. Chris Amat, a designer from Calgary, AB, is adamant that he has “a very distinct separation” between work and his personal life: “I have gotten countless emails from young followers who claim that I am living the dream and they want to know how they can do the same thing with their life. The reality of my Instagram is far from the real world.” Amat’s separation between his online identity and personal life is admirable, and yet, still says a great deal about who he is as a person. Looking through his gallery of images, it’s obvious that he is meticulously building a brand for himself, crafting a persona that he uses to sell his work. His young followers don’t see that separation. They look at Instagram as some sort of truth, even when it’s only part of the story. Bulick reinforces this by saying, “I’ve met a few other friends who are really active on Instagram and there’s this impression that everything in life is an adventure and if you’re not fulfilling that adventure, if you’re not taking advantage of that, that you’re failing at life somehow. That’s not ever explicitly said but it can feel [that way]. It’s the ultimate app to entice your fear of missing out.”

There is something about sharing personal moments in such a public way that makes you feel wholly insecure but is also oddly satisfying. Posting something that

you find aesthetically pleasing and then being rewarded by your peers in the form of “likes” and “comments” affirms something in your own identity. It’s a critical and delicate balance and one that I don’t always feel comfortable with. There is no way to keep our personal stories from being shaped and altered by an audience’s reception of them. Once an image is available for public consumption and criticism, it will ultimately begin a feedback loop that, in turn, changes the creator of the image. Each image shared builds upon the last reaction, which, over time, subtly changes the image creator’s own identity and view of self.

This idea has thrown me into crisis. I am a photographer, or more specifically, I am an artist who uses photography. I’ve never called Instagram a portfolio, but everything I am publishing on Instagram is a portrayal of how I want to be seen. Otherwise, why would I post it online? It is, therefore, exactly that: a portfolio of my life. There are other reasons, of course, behind our need to post and share our stories online: being part of a shared experience or sharing important moments with family and friends. However, I can’t help but see all of these other rationales as being tainted by our constant desire for approval. Is this a jaded view to take? Perhaps. This idea of needing others’ approval is not meant to be negative, but intended to suggest that we are driven by a longing to be affirmed by those around us, a need that is intensified by the instant feedback created by online sharing.

In a blog post published by i-D Magazine in June 2014, Ryan White quotes author J. G. Ballard from a November 1987 interview. Ballard, whose writing themes often include “the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments,”³ discusses the ways he sees the future of technology and community unfolding. Ballard is quoted as saying: “we’ll all be simultaneously actor, director and screenwriter in our own soap opera.”⁴ Ballard’s sentiment is eerily accurate and, more importantly, touches on the idea of an autobiographical self in the context of new media, especially in Instagram, an app whose whole intention was to be an “instant telegram” for the modern age. Further, Ballard suggests, “in the media landscape, it’s almost impossible to separate fact from fiction.” The lines between our online and “in real life” selves are blurring, so that we hardly know where one begins and the other self ends, where one self is real and the other, as

Ballard observes, a fiction.

The popularity of platforms like Facebook and Instagram shouldn't really be surprising to us. After all, we are obsessed with telling our own stories, aren't we? In fact, this compulsion might even be necessary to our sense of self. In an article from the online magazine, OZY, Qi Wang explains this:

"Psychologists have found that personal storytelling helps us shape our "selves." In the process of sharing our stories, we are telling others and ourselves how our unique experiences make us who we are. Our stories, capturing intimate details and our innermost thoughts and feelings, can best separate ourselves from other selves. These other "me's" serve as a looking glass against which the storyteller establishes him- or herself as a separate, distinct individual." 5

The process of sharing ourselves through social media is really just the same as "personal storytelling." It's not that this drive is new—after all, stories are older than the concept of time—we are just revealing our stories in a different form, one that is immediate, and ever evolving. We capture, and then share, snapshots from our lives that become a series of clues about our identities. They are more than clues though. They shape a carefully curated, heightened idealization of self. Brittany Staddon, a photographer from Canmore, AB,⁶ says that her Instagram account is only in part how she sees herself but more accurately, it's a reflection of who she wants to be. In my interview with Bulick he tells me that, "a lot of the photos [I post on Instagram] have a memento quality that wouldn't be apparent to anyone except me." The collected works speak to the outside world, but also directly about whoever created them.

I'm certainly not the only one for whom Instagram, and an online identity, has crossed over into flesh and blood interactions. I hate to use the term "real life" here because "real life" now encompasses an online personality as much as offline interactions. Online dating is now just dating. "IRL" has pretty much left our vocabularies as quickly as it came. Our perceptions of what is *real* are changing.

I know of a couple⁷ who met through Instagram, starting dating, and as a natural extension of their relationship, documented their new life together through Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook (and truth be told, there are numerous couples

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The last #26inLondon photo I posted on my way to the airport, concluding a collection of two years' worth of memories.

An image from a memorable "Instameet" of people from around London that I had come to know through Instagram.



who have met through the app). When he proposed to her two years later, he filmed the entire day and posted it to his YouTube channel. Soon after, their engagement was noticed by The Today Show and various blogs and they were interviewed about their remarkable “21st century love story.” The couple’s combined followings on Instagram total over half a million people who are all intently watching their relationship unfold.⁸ Of all the proposal videos out there on YouTube, this one is particularly uncomfortable. Far from being a home video documenting a moment, the video is directed to an audience. It feels staged, making the whole event seem totally disingenuous. How much of the filming is about their relationship with each other, and how much of it is about their relationship with their “followers?” I can’t help but feel troubled by the entire charade and how much the video blurs the lines between personal and public. Watching the video should feel intrusive, right? The fact that, instead, it feels more like a scripted reality TV spot is what makes it all the more awkward. The video is like *The Truman Show*⁹ but the protagonist is holding the camera; it’s Ballard’s “soap opera” prediction playing out in 2014.

Maybe I am being judgmental of a couple I have never met, but when people choose to document so much of their relationship online, isn’t it there for public consumption and critique? Their story isn’t between two people anymore, it’s actually a story of two people plus half a million more. And it’s an important story about how much we are willing to share about ourselves and our relationships with an online audience, and how, in doing so, we might be changing our own realities. Our world is not getting bigger because of globalization, it’s getting bigger because we are weaving a strange new dimension into our relationships with electronic pulses, connecting us across spaces that are no longer merely physical.

From 2012 to 2013, I was living overseas in London, UK where I created personal hashtags to catalogue my daily life in London as I saw it: #25inLondon and #26inLondon tidily collected up my images up for me for later. That collection is an important part of my memory of living in a new city, in a new culture, and the photos do document the personal journey I went through over the time I was there. But when I tell myself, naively, that I post images online for myself, for creative therapy, for friends and family, that is only part of the truth. Everything

I post is available for thousands of people to see anytime they want. So, this is the real truth: I created a public collection as a way to remind myself of my time spent living overseas but also, subconsciously, to exhibit an image of whom I want to be. Instagram is the crisis of living in the spaces of whom I really am, and who I want to be known as.

And herein lies the absurdity of Instagram. We look at someone's collection of images and, like peripheral vision, we fill in the spaces to create a person, an illusion, a mega-self. We think to ourselves that the age-old adage, "A picture is worth a thousand words," must then mean that a whole gallery on Instagram speaks an entire library's worth. Even in those instances when the images aren't "personal," we imagine what the person who shared those photos must be like. And then there's the fear that we if we don't collect our moments, lining them up neatly inside digital whitespace, that they'll disappear. Bulick echoed this by saying, "There's a bit of fear about what if I don't get it back again. But I think if I think about that too much, then I would blind myself to what could be the next thing or what could be the new thing. [...] Are you binding yourself to what is present and ahead of you, versus what you experience in the past? That's what I think about."

With this in mind, I flip through my Instagram images from the past few years, those that live as an online homage to my life. But these images are static and feel removed from me. What becomes apparent is that my most important memories actually aren't recorded there. Allusions to them, yes. But the most life-forming moments since December 25, 2010, the moments that shaped my identity and crafted my current sense of self, are missing. But I can still recall those memories vividly. Dreamlike sequences of kissing an ex-lover in an old library; tears of frustration and loneliness in a London Underground station; crunching through the frigid cold of Alberta's backroads while the sun dances off the snow around me; a conversation of few words with my best friend, together, hiding in the trees along the Thames; and driving the narrow roads that wind through green Irish hills feeling ageless, timeless, and utterly, wholly myself.

.....

¹ These and other quotes from Zach Bulick were from an interview I did with him on November 4, 2014.

² The quotes from Olly Lang and Chris Amat were from a series of email surveys I sent out to friends in early November asking them about their experiences in using Instagram, particularly where it pertains to sharing their personal memories on the app. Four people in total sent back their surveys to me and their answers somewhat informed my approach to the topic of Instagram and identity.

³ “Ballardian”, as defined by the Collins English Dictionary, is something that is “resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in Ballard’s novels and stories, esp. dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes, and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments.”

⁴ White, Ryan. “I Think, Therefore I (instagr)am. Cyberpunk Novelist J.G. Ballard, Predicted Social Media in i-D 27 Years Ago.” i-D. June 13, 2014.

⁵ Wang, Qi. “Why Americans Are Obsessed With Telling Their Own Stories + Asians Aren’t.” OZY. October 21, 2014.

⁶ This is from a short interview I conducted with Brittany Staddon on November 1, 2014.

⁷ I have been following @withhearts, Cory Staudacher, on Instagram since early 2012. We’ve often conversed through the app and had conversations in comments on each other’s photos. We bonded over a shared love of coffee and even did a coffee exchange in the mail once. I still have yet to meet him or his fiancé, Bethany Olson, offline.

⁸ You can read much more about their story and the amount of press it received through Staudacher’s website in the “Press” section: <http://www.withhearts.co/press/>

⁹ “The Truman Show,” starring Jim Carrey, was a 1998 science fiction film that followed a man through the constructed reality he lived in and was being broadcast to millions of people until he begins to question the “reality” of his life.

*I am in the bathroom at recess when
two girls approach me and ask in
unsure and quiet English, "You
Indian?" They smile intently. I have
seen them looking at me before in
the hallways with my friends. I look
down at the floor, curl my lip and
narrow my eyes, say "no" and quickly
leave the bathroom.*

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DIRT BROWN CHOCOLATE

Alyssa Bistonath

.....

There is a time when I achieve an easy satisfaction by describing myself as “brown,” because I know that it will cause an unsuspecting friend of a friend to laugh with unease or even shock. This reaction makes me feel powerful and funny.

I first realize that I am brown while playing in a sandbox at the church in Winnipeg where I would eventually go to elementary school. I am wearing white shorts with yellow and green palm trees swashing up the sides, a matching t-shirt with a single palm tree over the breast pocket, and knee-high tube socks with a smart yellow trim. My waist-length hair has been carefully formed into a French braid. The short curly bits around my face have been pulled back with two of my day-of-the-week barrettes. Today is Tuesday, and I am three years old. I am playing with twins who are older by two or three years. “My mother says that I can’t play with you because you have dirt on your face.” I know the boy is saying something mean to me by the cutting tone of his voice and the mocking look that settles in his eyes as he waits for my response. I look blankly at him, studying the splatter of dark brown freckles across his nose and cheeks. And I say the only thing that I can think of: “I don’t have dirt on my face.” His twin sister, a little girl with angelic blonde hair

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separated at the crown of her head into two pigtails, looks at me before shoving her brother so hard that he face-plants in the sand. She pauses and I feel like she is going to say something kind to me, but before any more words can pass between the three of us, their mother calls them to the car. I never see them again.

I do not mention this incident to my mother, because I am not certain whether I have actual dirt on my face or whether he is referring to my dark skin as dirt. And while the former was undesirable because my mother took great pleasure in keeping us neat and tidy, the latter was something mysterious to me and at the time I didn't have the language to articulate the shame it evoked.

My father has had a beautiful house built for us on Shorecrest Drive. My happiest childhood memories are there. I use the mountainous prairie snow to build forts in the winter, and I catch grasshoppers with my next-door neighbour in the summer. My parents and three brothers ride their bicycles around the lake, while I sit on my Dad's handlebars and ask to stop a million times so that I can climb a tree. We return home and eat lime-green sorbet cones and watch the orange sun cast the climbing trees into silhouette. These memories are pure, and for the majority of my life they do not have room for the hate words that were spray-painted on the walls of our house before we moved in, or the fact that we stood out in the all-white subdivision.

On the day of the auditions for the Christmas play, I am on the stage in the church auditorium looking down at my second grade teacher and the parent volunteers. My ears are burning red and my throat is dry. I am asked to sing *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. The way that they are looking at me is scary, so I whisper that I do not know the words. They tell me that I can go.

I am cast in a "special part" of the play. I attend rehearsals with the adults instead of the other children. My brother and I run onto the stage in tattered clothes, with messy hair, and black shoe polish rubbed onto our chins. A shopkeeper gives us bread or something like it, and we smile with joy! A stationed soldier is disillusioned from the war but reflects on the plight of the two dirty homeless children and remembers the true meaning of Christmas. He sings, *I'll Be Home for Christmas*; we hug the Santa-looking shopkeeper with thankfulness as he magically pulls chocolate coins out from behind our ears. The rest of the children

are cast as angels, sheep, Mary, Joseph, and wise men. Their beautiful costumes are handmade: they wear gold pipe-cleaner halos; sapphire, emerald, and ruby coloured robes; and stand reverently near the baby Jesus. The play runs on television in Winnipeg until I am a teenager, long after we do not live there anymore.

I know from the movies to look longingly out the back window of our van as we leave our home in Winnipeg behind. It takes me time to understand why my father packed us up and moved us to another province. Our new house is on Faywood Drive in Brampton, Ontario. Our new neighbours are from India, and they bring us food unlike even the Indo-Caribbean food I am used to. They are kind, and their daughter has long black hair like mine. I have only ever met one other brown child outside of my family before now. When the girl and I realize our bedroom windows face one another, we make a pact to go to them each evening so we can talk. Months later, her family starts beating drums every night. The culture shock of Brampton is fierce. Race is more overtly addressed. The girls in my new class tell me that I cannot play Little House on the Prairie with them at recess because I do not look like any of the characters. I cry a lot and my teacher scolds me. Kids on the bus shout “Paki!” at us as my brother and I walk home. My family does not sleep at night because my father doesn’t want to tell our neighbours that they are disturbing us. In protest, I close the shutters to my window.

* * *

My brothers are too old to go to Sunday school at our new church so I go by myself and sing with the other children:

Jesus loves the little children.
All the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white,
They are precious in his sight.
Jesus loves the children of the world.

I know the nearest colours to my skin are black and red, but neither seems right.

* * *

Penny is a quick study at just over a year old. Her parents, my friends, and I marvel at her new trick.

“Penny, what colour is Dada’s shirt?”

“Blue.”

“That’s right Penny! What colour is Mama’s sweater?”

“Black.”

Jokingly, I point to my hand under the warm glow of the kitchen light: “Penny, what colour is my skin?” She takes longer than usual and eventually says, “orange.”

I laugh, but maybe she can see in my face that I don’t quite know how to respond. The conversation around the table moves on to grown-up things. And then, what seems like ages later, Penny announces, “brown!”

* * *

I am in junior high when my parents buy a house across town. I jump at the chance to change schools. I enter the new class mid-term; a group of kids in my homeroom surround me before *O Canada!* and threaten to cut my hair with scissors from the wood shop. My eyes redden with tears, but I manage to not cry.

I eventually find my way. My new school has way more brown kids than my old one. There are two other Guyanese girls in my grade who also have long hair past their waists. They have a handle on the in-crowd. Through them, I discover dark lipstick, fancy upsweeps, and red jeans. Within a year, I am wearing an Orlando Magic bomber jacket and Filas and I get pulled out of my class and scolded for speaking patois. It is popular for Indo-Caribbean kids to call each other “coolies”—we do not know the history of the word, but it somehow makes us close. I quickly learn what is cool about Indian culture from the first-generation Canadians (saris—yes for weddings and only if they are modern; eyebrow threading—absolutely; mehndi/bindis—yes for everyone courtesy of Madonna and Gwen Stefani; Bollywood—yes). Brown kids of any ethnicity make fun of each other with the terms “ref” (refugees) or “fob” (fresh off the boat). This tells the offender that they have done something outside of the set parameters.

Being in the English as a Second Language class is not cool. The kids who have immigrated from India struggle with English and have no clue about these rules. I am in the bathroom at recess when two girls approach me and ask in unsure and quiet English, “You Indian?” They smile intently. I have seen them looking at me before in the hallways with my friends. I look down at the floor, curl my lip and narrow my eyes, say “no” and quickly leave the bathroom. I avoid them in the playground as if they are trying to take away my newfound coolness. I felt guilty, and even now I feel sad now when I think about it. Their hair was long like mine.

* * *

At twenty-three, I am a photography intern at a weekly newspaper in Toronto. I go all over the city at all hours of the day and night to photograph restaurants, apartments, and nightclubs. Tonight I am on my way to photograph a concert for the *Snaps* section of the paper. It is raining, and I use one of the precious taxi chits given to me by my editor. I want to use the time in the taxi to work through my nerves and feelings of dread about the shoot. I hate crowds. I’m often groped, elbowed, or met with disbelief that I am actually the photographer that the paper has sent. The orange taxi picks me up at my house. Like the majority of taxi drivers, he asks me where I am from and like usual, I say “here.” He doesn’t accept this answer. “Where are your parents from?” I’m in the middle of saying Guyana when he cuts me off and says, “I know where you’re from.” He tells me that my people are from the southern part of India. He goes on to tell me that I am from the lowest caste, and that he is from the highest. Anger bubbles up and stops at my throat. He does not look at me. I hand over the taxi chit with the tip box marked zero.

In my late twenties, I apply to universities in the United States. For one Ivy League school, it is mandatory that I identify my race on my applications: Caucasian, Asian, African, Latin, or Native. And although I know that there is a difference between race and ethnicity, I desperately want to draw in another box that says, “Other.”

* * *

As the plane touches down in Addis Ababa, I marvel at my good fortune. I am about to embark on my dream job—a photo assignment in rural Ethiopia. We spend the night in Addis, waking early in the morning to drive in our white Land Cruisers all day and into the night. Eventually we end up at the office of our hosts, and settle in for another sleep. The next day we drive from dawn until breakfast, and then we hike. When we arrive, children emerge from all over the village to greet us. They know our host well, and he teaches them a song that reminds them that eating iodine salt is good for their eyes. My partner goes into the village to speak with the elders. I stay back with our host and the children, and he asks me to say something inspiring to them. I am twenty-four years old, and not quite sure I have the life experience to tell them anything of use. I launch into the whole story of where I came from, and how it took me two planes, two cars, and a hike to get halfway across the world to visit them, and that I am very pleased to meet them. My host translates and the children begin to roar with laughter. Between their laughs, they point at me and cry *Habesha!* I ask my host what it means and he smiles broadly, “They do not think that you come from halfway around the world, because you look like one of them. Habesha, they are calling you their own.” I spend the rest of my twenties traveling back and forth between Toronto and countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. There are many people, in many countries that tell me that I am one of them.

I come home from Ethiopia that summer and things go downhill. Work slows to a halt, my boyfriend breaks up with me, and in the fall, my closest friend Emily moves into a refugee house as a support worker. I go from seeing her every day to barely seeing her at all. I miss her wicked sense of humour, and watching *Lost* on DVD together late into the night. It is a time of transition; my parents are living in another country, and I am terribly alone. Emily’s friend Dar is also having a hard time, so we make plans to hang out. We click immediately, and over the next year she helps me get out of my funk. We hang out every day, we make work together, and years later we start a business with Emily and her boyfriend John. I remember meeting Dar as teenagers and filing her into the “brown” category. Her name is Dar, her last name is Mustafa, she comes from a Muslim background. Her skin is pale,

but a lot of brown people have light skin including my mother and brother. One day I am saying something about being brown and I nod to Dar for support. “Wait, what?” Dar looks at me like I have blown her mind. “Alyssa, you know that I’m not brown right?” and I say, “Of course you are.” We go back and forth and her incredulosity grows, as does the volume of her voice. She is laughing so hard that I feel tears come to my eyes as I embarrassingly realize, Dar is not brown—she is white.

* * *

My Dad’s younger brother has a moustache and drives an American-blue Sunbird that sparkles in the sun. He laughs so hard at his own jokes that we cannot help but join right in. He comes in and out of our lives, telling us crazy stories and buying us Bart Simpson bubble gum. For a time his Sunbird is parked in our driveway because he has come to recover from a quadruple bypass surgery. He teaches us how to play cards, makes us Long Island Iced Teas (without the “Long Island” he jokes). He claims to be the Guyanese checker champion and never lets me win, even though I am nine and he is supposed to let me. He loves the movie *The Party*, starring Peter Sellers. Each time my uncle watches Sellers (who is in brownface) play the slapstick role of a bumbling Indian man, he laughs with such conviction that we fear that the stitches that line his chest top to bottom will burst open. It is the first time I see someone brown depicted in a movie. I feel the same unease as I do when I watch *The Flintstones* and I know Fred is about to do something stupid for which he will later get in trouble.

There is a lack of people who look like me in the western media. Ten years pass and there are more. The guy from *Heroes*, the guy from *Lost*, the guy from *Harold and Kumar’s White Castle* something or other. Russell Peters starts making brown jokes. Then there is *Slumdog Millionaire*. And of course the singer M.I.A whom I am relentlessly told I look like by strangers on the subway, by boyfriends, and even by my closest friends. She is the first brown girl to go mainstream, and it always feels weak to me that people think to themselves: “Oh you’re brown, I know a brown girl, actually you kind of look like her, do you know her? Isn’t she great? Don’t I know a lot about brown girls? Aren’t I culturally sensitive?”

* * *

In the last year of high school, I am spending a lot of time with a boy from my history class. He is kind and witty. We go for drives in his white Taurus, he comes to my youth group with me, and we talk on the phone a lot. One day he takes me for a drive to see his house. He tells me that the block had been all white families when he was little, and that one by one, the houses have all been sold to Indian families and that he and his family are the only white ones left. He looks at me earnestly and tells me that his family has decided to stay. I know that he is trying to tell me something that will bring us closer together—that he doesn't care that I am brown. I immediately wish that he hadn't said it. I have not been thinking about our racial difference at all. A couple months later, I move to Toronto for university and we lose touch.

A year after university ends, my boyfriend Michael and I have just gorged ourselves on sushi. We are mighty proud of ourselves. We leave the restaurant and head south on Spadina. He flicks his palm against my wrist, popping my hand in his, and I hold on tight. This is how we routinely walk down the street. An elderly lady approaches from a distance. She starts flailing her arms wildly and opens her eyes wide. She calls me the c-word and tells me to go back where I came from. Michael puts himself between the woman and me, and we quicken our pace. We hear her yelling about white men being with non-white girls, and she adds a bunch of racial slurs directed at me. When we are some blocks away, we have to stop because I am shaking so hard. He is more concerned with putting distance between us than listening to what she is saying, so I repeat her words. He responds by saying, "I don't want you to go back to Winnipeg, Cinnamon Girl." I begin to sob, and he wraps me up in his giant arms.

Years later, I see the same woman outside of the Stephen Bulger Gallery while I am there on another date. She does not notice my companion and me because she is yelling at the people dressed in black and smoking out front. She repeatedly uses a homophobic slur, screaming and yelling that she was in the neighbourhood before any of them. I want her to stop.

* * *

Emily and Lisa have to go to the bathroom. They are both toting their babies, so I offer to sit at our lunch table and hold them in the meantime. The little babies play with my yellow scarf and smile at me as I pump my knees up and down, talking to them as if they're already adults. An old man comes in from the cold, and looks at the three of us. "Such cute babies!" I nod and smile widely in agreement. Then he shakes his cane at me, "But they're not yours, are they?!" He immediately laughs at his own joke in the way that the elderly do, mouth open, neck stiff, the upper half of his body swinging back and forth defying the permanent crook in his back. This was a year or two ago and I had just been in Honduras on assignment. My skin is a stark contrast to the cream and beige skin of the two babies. I immediately think, *someone would never say that to a white woman holding a brown baby, would they?* A mix of emotions goes through me as I look at the liver spots on his hands and the twinkle in his eyes. I have so much to say, but instead I smile and I say, "Nope!" He laughs again, shaking his head at his own cleverness. I tell my friends about the old man when they get back, and they roll their eyes signifying that they know what I am thinking. And they do.

* * *

I am in graduate school where we talk about gender, race, and representation almost every day. Upon reading the first sentence of a Washington Post article called *Little Guyana, an Indo-Guyanese enclave in Queens*,¹ I am agitated. The travel writer describes a "neighbourhood of Queens where the residents are Indian but sound like Bob Marley when they speak." He goes on to say a number of things that enrage me. I want to repost the article with a long tirade, but I am in my thirties now, and I do not want to act rashly, or appear petty.

Weeks later, I laugh out loud to myself when I read the article titled, *The Washington Post Discovers Indo-Caribbean People*.² The author writes, "As Americans prepared to commemorate Columbus discovering the New World this October, a travel writer from the Washington Post fell asleep on the A train and accidentally discovered Indo-Caribbean people in Queens, New York." The article is cutting and

says what I wanted to say with more gravitas than I could ever dare. I immediately look up the writer and follow her on Twitter.

I tell all of my friends that I am writing a piece on being brown. Their reaction is rather unanimous.

“You never talk about that.”

“Yeah, you’ve never addressed that in your work before. Why is that?”

I tell them that it seemed too obvious of an issue to address, that I don’t want to be that pigeon-holed. I have the words; I just never wanted to say them. I thought it was enough to have learned to laugh at myself and at the carelessness of others; to try to have compassion when people who look like me scorn me to make themselves feel better; to forgive myself for the times when I did it too; to brush off overtly mean words; to refrain from saying them. People know that othering is bad, but not how it takes shape in vague and in subtle forms over a lifetime. Little brown girls become grown brown women who have internalized and taken personally all the ways that they are made to feel like they do not belong.

* * *

It is a couple of weeks until the end of term. I know that I shouldn’t be out late on a school night. But I’ve just had a nap and I am feeling ambitious, so I go with Dar to see our friend perform in a comedy show. At the end of the night we all hang out at the tables in front of the stage. Dar introduces me to a brown guy from Brampton. He asks me which part of Brampton I am from. And I say with a wry smile, “the brown part,” and he says, “we’ve all heard that one, honey.”

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¹ Ray Cavanaugh, “Little Guyana, an Indo-Guyanese Enclave in Queens,” The Washington Post, October 9, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/travel/2014/10/02/38ec1260-4998-11e4-a046-120a8a855cca_story.html.

² Suzanne Persard, “The Washington Post Discovers Indo-Caribbean People Exist,” October 27, 2014, <http://theaerogram.com/time-washington-post-discovered-little-guyana/>.

*And it occurred to me at that
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GETTING ZEN BEHIND THE LENS

Stephanie Power

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The day my father and older sister Carol drove to St. John's to board a plane that would eventually connect them to New York City, I died a little inside. It was 1966 and I can still feel that little stab of jealousy and longing, watching the two of them load their sky-blue luggage into the trunk of Dad's Chrysler. How unfair it wasn't me going off to visit the vertical city with my father! Already I was in its thrall and I was only four years old. And all because of a travel poster I stared at every day.

Things haven't changed much. Only now I can say I have spent many days and nights walking the streets of New York and that—just as I had fantasized as a child—this city would inspire me and play an essential part in my creative growth, just when I least expected it and just when I needed it most.

“A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you, the less you know.”

— Diane Arbus

Teach Your Children Well

Long before I lost my innocence discovering a brutal photograph of the My Lai massacre in a copy of *LIFE* magazine, I created my own secret world from the photographs in *The Family of Man*. It rested on a bookshelf in the noisiest and most loved room of our house. Our basement rec room with faux-wood wall paneling and blacklight posters contained elements of magic: the Hammond organ, my brother's Les Paul, the aforementioned travel poster depicting New York City's iconic southernmost tip (circa late 60s), and this book. It was my sanctuary; here was the music I loved and aspired to: CSNY, Deep Purple, The Moody Blues, Elton John, Pink Floyd, the British cast soundtrack of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. And here were the photos that allowed me to imagine the world from my outport Newfoundland easy chair. I believe Dad may have brought both the book and the poster back from an earlier trip to New York. His sister Mary lived in Brooklyn and worked as a telephone operator since moving there in her early 20s, a surprisingly common thing for Newfoundland women during WWII. But New York's career choices were slim for them, and Mary had no aptitude for the skills of a charwoman (I have seen her chaotic apartment). Her real love found its release in dumpster diving and trolling estate sales on the Upper East Side. She entertained herself by carting furniture home to her flat in Sunset Park and stripping it in her kitchen. She was an eccentric, opinionated loudmouth. She loved cats more than people. And I wanted to be her when I grew up.

But in the meantime, I was content to curl up in the basement rec room with Edward Steichen. I had no idea who he was other than identifying him as the elderly-looking man on page 5 who must have picked out all these beautiful photos. I was four. I was easy to please. And I loved that big quote on page 7 from somebody named James Joyce!

*“... and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes
and then he asked me would I yes...
and first I put my arms around him yes
and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes*

*and his heart was going like mad
and yes I said yes I will yes.”*

Thank you, Mr. Steichen, for introducing me to sex! And all along, I mistakenly thought my first brush with sex was as a 10-year-old, stealing a secret peek of my mother’s *Cosmopolitan* magazine (wedged deep into an overflowing magazine rack), with a furry Burt Reynolds splayed out on the luxurious remains of some poor dead animal. I howled with laughter three years ago when Mom, now 90, gave me that very centerfold. I couldn’t believe it! She had ripped it out of her 1972 *Cosmopolitan* and stashed it. For 40 years!

The Family of Man became part of a ritual. There had to be the right music (my preference was either Moody Blues’ “Melancholy Man” or Elton John’s “Rocket Man”), and I had to have absolute privacy. There was something meditative about this experience and I couldn’t share this feeling with anyone. I was self-conscious about it, but I was certain that I could see things in this book that no other member of my family could even begin to understand. But this deep love I was feeling toward photographs would become sidelined. They were beautiful but I only had the ability to contemplate their subject matter. I couldn’t have understood what I know now: that those photographs were created by that era’s master shooters, and that the old man in the tiny photo on page 5 was *just a bit of a legend*. God, I had a lot to learn!

Wu Wei, What’s On Tv?

It was one thing to meditate secretly over an old photo book collection. It was quite another to grow up in a small town with nothing much to do but build my whole personality around television: *Laugh-In*, *Carol Burnett*, *Sonny and Cher*, *Charlie’s Angels*... these shows began to burn brighter than anything else in my life. I returned less and less to *The Family of Man* and more and more to Farrah Fawcett. I was discovering that there was one *and only one* thing that made me special: my ability to draw. I was *always* encouraged to do so. My parents couldn’t resist putting on a talent show in our living room, entertaining all visitors with the refrain “Stephanie, go get your drawings!” I’d shyly present my sketchbook filled

with portraits of Farrah, Jaclyn and even Kate, the nerdy Angel. I felt simultaneously awkward and pleased with the attention, reminding myself that I was lucky to have such talent. Later on in high school, I would dabble in photography, but only a little. It didn't register. Drawing gave me cachet. It was magical. The locals wouldn't reward taking pictures with the same enthusiasm. "That's a god-given talent you have! It's a mortal sin to ignore it!" the nuns in my high school clucked their blessing (subtitle: "Jesus will weep tears of fresh blood if you stop"). Thank you, good sisters, all. Clever drawing is hard. Point and click is easy!

We know that's not true.

If I were looking for one small sign as to how I might eventually find my way back to photography, I would receive it in my religious studies class in grade 11. And I wasn't looking, by the way. I was just being 16. Kindly homeroom sage, Mr. Flynn, was discussing Buddhism as part of that day's topic on Eastern Mysticism. He had just cracked up the entire class with the Taoist concept of Wu Wei, leaving us repeating the phrase until it was devoured in fits of hysterical laughter. But when he followed this up with a fairly simplistic description of Buddhism (something like: "mindful awareness of thoughts and actions, developing wisdom and understanding, staying grounded in the present"), I sat back at my desk and thought, *that sounds like something I could be when I grow up*. And when we slapped our religious studies book closed at the end of the period, I let the thought go.

Somewhere in Massachusetts, while I was giggling with my pals about Wu Wei, a New Yorker named Jon Kabat-Zinn was organizing his first Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction clinic, based on his Buddhist practice.

Revelations

I'm probably one of only a handful of people who liked the film *Fur* (2006). It's a fanciful depiction of Diane Arbus' life: an enigmatic fur-covered man named Lionel Sweeney becomes the source of her obsession and they fall in love. Trust me when I say his hirsute form would probably reduce Burt Reynolds to tears. *Fur* doesn't bother to accommodate a realistic depiction of Arbus' life and it is all the

more interesting for doing so. I'm willing to bet she would have grinned at this odd reimagining of her photographic spirit.

I fell in love with her work long before I saw *Fur*, and this lovesickness materialized soon after I moved to Toronto to study Fashion at Ryerson. Around this time, my brother gave me the Patricia Bosworth biography of Arbus, just as I had noticed it making the rounds of the clever photography majors on campus. I devoured it. The timing couldn't have been more perfect. I was twenty-three and immersed in a scene for the first time in my life. More tantalizing was the sense I felt of the very proximity of New York City. My desire to walk its streets was soon going to become very real.

With Frankie Goes To Hollywood, Soft Cell and the Cocteau Twins on the stereo, and a roommate leaving spaghetti trails on the walls and ceiling of our kitchen, I contemplated Arbus' work. I felt I had opened the door to an alternate universe, one in which I would find none of the gentleness and sentimentality that won my heart in *The Family of Man*. Arbus felt like a fearless psychological hunter, able to see through the lens and into the beating heart of her subjects. Her work scared me. But not in the same way the *LIFE* magazine photograph of the My Lai massacre did when I was eight. While I wanted to unsee that My Lai photograph but couldn't, seeing Arbus' photos had the opposite effect: they unsettled me, yes, but also made me raptly curious about what I sensed was the world's weird underbelly. She appeared to see the beauty in the marginal and I felt some innate understanding of her intention. Her process felt scary and nowhere more so than when she stripped naked and draped herself across the body of a man she was photographing with his wife.

I was still just a timid sophomore girl from out around the bay, but I decided I felt this great kinship with her, and not just because our birthdays were a day apart, nor because she was a New Yorker (which made her even more perfect). I couldn't help but wish I were born into a Upper West Side Jewish family with a classic six in the San Remo, and oh, with a *park* view. Could you blame me?

Years later, in 2005, my brother, who has long dabbled in photography but never to the point where he allowed himself to take it seriously, would give me yet another

edition of the Arbus biography. He had obviously forgotten his original gift, but that suited me just fine. I'd lost or loaned my copy, so finding it back in my life was like revisiting an old friend. Hello again, Diane. Welcome back. I well and truly understand what you are doing here now.

Wherever You Go

After school, my drawing and graphic design skills opened the door to a prestigious gig as an art director at Reactor, which was then the hottest studio in Toronto. The awards flooded in and I really enjoyed my work, but the road I was on was circuitous. Events were a product of happenstance, and not design. When art direction led to an illustration career, who was I to argue? It was all great fun. I couldn't foresee the day when illustration commissions would slow to a trickle. And the truth was that as work slowed down, it felt like it had become misaligned with my authentic voice. It was time for a change, but I was still unwilling, deep in the enchantment of do-nothing-stay-stuck.

Enter mindfulness meditation: the Buddha in disguise.

There You Are

It took a wrong-hearted relationship with a man to inspire change. My therapist was running a mindfulness class, and she suggested I try it. I had no hesitation. Instead, I had a flashback to grade 11. Jon Kabat-Zinn founded his first mindfulness clinic in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts, the very same year my mind got tickled with curiosity at the thought of Buddhism. Kabat-Zinn studied Zen with many teachers, notably Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk whose books are both simple and exquisitely phrased introductions to mindfulness. When starting his MBSR clinic, Kabat-Zinn found a way to interpret Buddhist meditation philosophy by removing the religious framework and creating a secular practice. At this writing, mindfulness has become deeply entrenched in Western contemporary society. While Kabat-Zinn's initial interest was to help patients to cope

with physical pain and emotional stress, I doubt he could have predicted what a significant change his program would make in the lives of others. Progressive hospitals adopted his program all over North America, and after a short stint in my therapist's program, I decided to enroll in the formal MBSR program offered at St. Joseph's Hospital, in Toronto's west end.

Early in the eight-week course, our program instructor gently warned us that devoting ourselves to a mindfulness practice, if successful, would inevitably result in life changes. I couldn't imagine what kind of changes, but I was feeling pretty secure. How bad can it be to see everything clearly?

Well... depends upon what you consider "bad."

The first departure was a dear best friend whose lifestyle was at odds with my desire to stay focused. The second departure was the questionable male whose days of messing with my head should have already been numbered. Then, there were arrivals: first, discovering I had the guts to learn the hard way how to teach illustration to young adults who I thought were much more talented than I was. Then, I noticed a group of new and lovely people slipping into my life. And then came a cat, a cat who showed up in my backyard in 2009 and decided he should stay. Beans Vincent: a giant black cat who would, with his extreme good nature, give me a few lessons in how to love.

Practice Makes Imperfect

I wanted to believe I had it all figured out. I meditated daily. I read books devoted to mindfulness with almost religious devotion. The voices of Pema Chodron, Jack Kornfeld, Thich Nhat Hanh and Jon Kabat-Zinn grounded me. I settled into teaching, with the hope that it was all I needed. I was still immersed in the world of illustration and inevitably came the realization that I wasn't moving forward. I was closing in on fifty (yuck) and had the overwhelming feeling that if I didn't try something new, I might never gather my wits to do so.

NARRATIVE ESSAYS



On Photo Safari

I had been travelling to New York City on and off for twenty years. Most trips centered upon my insatiable need to shop. Ever the clever consumer, I'd take an empty gym bag to Manhattan and fill it to the brim, buying every cute dress in the East Village. I exaggerate only *slightly*. Talk about ten years of missing the point: my dreams of New York had come true, but I could only see the city as a source of building my wardrobe.

It wasn't until my funds were tighter that I decided I had to create something inspired. It was 2010. Never once had I created a personal body of work as an illustrator, and I had to wonder about that. Now here in my hands was my first iPhone and an app called Hipstamatic, which looked like a brownie camera and featured half a dozen filters that superimposed vintage snapshot effects onto every photo. It had a tiny viewfinder and a slow shooting speed. The hidden advantage to this (and I *really* doubt it is something the programmers intended) was it slowed your shooting down to a crawl, and allowed you to get your contemplation on. I was in a position to understand how this might be a good thing.

There was no grand artistic intent about shooting the New York streets using Hipstamatic. It was an act of play. But I quickly realized intuition was on my side. From the moment I touched down, I was behind that iPhone lens. And I was unstoppable. I had no interest in censoring my impulses and I was filled with delight at the results. Drawn in by quirky details of graffiti and storefronts, eccentric people in the street, and most particularly, the nuances of reflections in shop windows, I felt unburdened from the old terrors of the blank page. And I wore inappropriately bad sandals the whole time.

I realized while shooting that I was inspired by Lisette Model's photograph series, *Reflections: New York City* (1939-45). I knew her as Arbus' teacher, and not surprisingly, I liked that connection. It was as good as any place to start. I purposely wasn't going for anything other than shooting stream-of-conscious through the unexpected pleasures of psychogeographic wandering. I knew enough at this point that being mindful and awake to my surroundings was all the inspiration I needed. I didn't know then what I do now: that many of my favorite photographers

used stream-of-consciousness as their guide—Robert Frank, William Klein, Garry Winogrand and Helen Levitt. On that very trip, I discovered Levitt's later work at MOMA; colour slides of her street photography were projected on the wall across the room from a screening of Paul Strand's *Manhatta*. I stood there, enchanted. She was showing us a gritty 1960s-70s New York, but her photographs were warm and humane.

Nights were spent uploading an edited selection of the photos I'd shot that day to Facebook. My friends, mostly artists, designers and photographers scattered across the country, were impressed. I wasn't expecting that. And it occurred to me at that moment: could this photography thing be IT? Why does interpreting the world through a lens, as opposed to a blank piece of paper, feel so right? Why hadn't I noticed that, all along, most of my creative crushes were on photographers?

I had reintroduced myself to New York by staying behind the lens and out of the shops. It was the best time I'd ever had in the vertical city.

Intermission

In 2011, I met a man from Liverpool who opened my heart and we quickly fell in love. I met him on Facebook, and before we finally met in person, he was one of those friends who cheered every photo safari post I made. He was, and will always be the one person in my life who gives me the confidence to stay behind that lens.

Believing Is Seeing

I was afraid to call myself a photographer. I wasn't working as one professionally, but after that New York trip, I continued to shoot street photography. Still, I worried, how could I call myself a photographer when I mostly shoot with my iPhone? I shoot with the camera that is always with me and that camera is my iPhone. The yin and yang of confidence and insecurity will probably always do a two-step over any medium I choose.

Most of the time *you aren't entirely sure what you want to do*. But being mindful

helps. So does patience. To paraphrase E.L. Doctorow, “(It’s) like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.” I love this phrase and hate it at the same time, because I know it’s true. Diane Arbus also riffed on this very feeling: “The thing that’s important to know is that you never know. You’re always sort of feeling your way.”

When your voice and your art are in alignment, doors will open to allow further explorations of the thing you love. I’ve taken some mad detours, but the road lead to this Master’s program in Documentary Media. I couldn’t have predicted this would be the eventual outcome of my New York Hipstamatic project, but it truly is. And just like shooting the streets of New York in my bad sandals, it feels absolutely right.

Near the end of our first term, I presented a rough mock-up of my photo book, *Wanderlings*, to the class. It was my initial stab at creating a stream-of-consciousness collection of my photographs from New York, Toronto and Philadelphia. And for the first time, as I stood there doing my show-and-tell to my warm and receptive classmates, I could feel the thread of acknowledgement awaken me: I am a photographer.

I found it comforting that it was not necessary to have a traditional “9:00–5:00, Monday to Friday job,” a house in suburbia, 2.5 kids and a dog to be successful. I came to the conclusion that living with a bit of uncertainty was not the end of the world and I became at home with that thought.

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HAS IT STARTED IT YET?

Martin Franchi

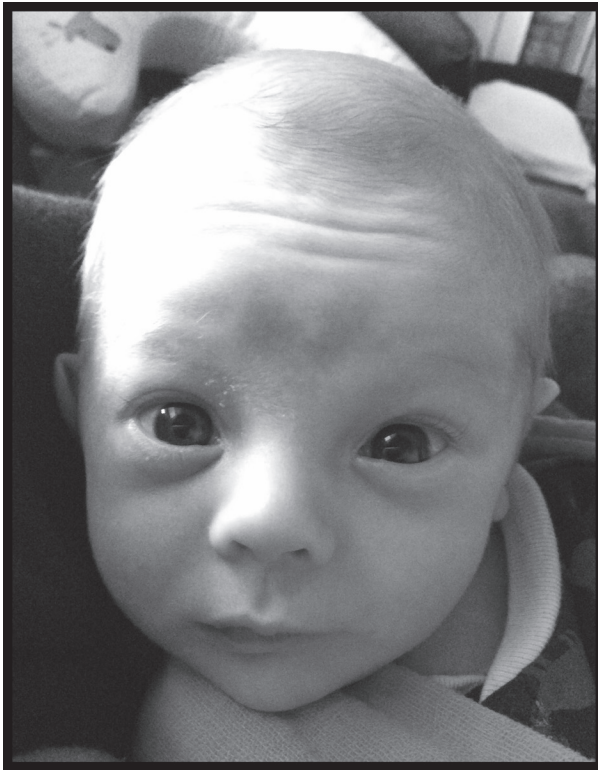
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“Has this ever happened to you? Have you ever thought that your real life hasn’t begun yet?”

The above quote is from *Forty-One False Starts*, by Janet Malcolm. I was astounded when I read it because I have always had this thought.

Growing up, I was always fascinated by electronics and, as I got older, I thought it would be prudent to carry this interest through school. I was in the eighth grade when a family friend suggested that I study engineering, as I would be able to design and build electronic circuits. At that moment I thought that my path was set. I attended a technical high school where I took courses such as electronics, drafting and machine shop, which augmented my university stream of courses and further solidified my plan to be an engineer. My grades were quite strong in mathematics and the sciences, which bolstered my university application. I was accepted to the Engineering Program at the University of Western Ontario. The plan was well underway and I was fitting into the societal norms of going to school, getting a good education then starting a career. My life had begun, or so I thought.

NARRATIVE ESSAYS



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Thomas Franchi, 3 weeks old, it has definitely started.

There was a problem: what I did not know until after starting university was that I was not really cut out for engineering. I did not have the discipline to do problem sets over and over until they became second nature. I enjoyed solving problems, but once I solved them, I quickly lost interest and sought a different challenge. I was unable to maintain the minimum average required and therefore forced to withdraw from the program. All I ever wanted to be was an engineer and now I was not able to continue my studies to achieve that goal. I had a part-time job that paid for school, so I was relatively debt-free. Beyond that, I had no idea what to do next. My plan had fallen apart and I was at a complete loss.

One day, while wandering through the World's Biggest Bookstore, I came across a book entitled *Generation X* by Douglas Coupland. I was moved by the book; I felt that the characters were living my life of frustration and listlessness. Coupland included definitions in the margins of the book for terms for new words, like McJob. I "got" what Coupland was saying. The economy was depressed and many of my peers were unable to find work even though they were graduating with very practical degrees. Reading *Generation X* somehow allowed me to let go of the idea that I had to obtain a professional degree to move on in life. I came to the realization that I could instead go to university because I found it interesting, rather than it being a means to an end, and I could find my way in the world post-graduation. I found it comforting that it was not necessary to have a traditional "9:00-5:00, Monday to Friday job," a house in suburbia, 2.5 kids and a dog to be successful. I came to the conclusion that living with a bit of uncertainty was not the end of the world and I became at home with that thought.

I had always had a love of photography, but had parked this interest away because I thought it was not a practical occupation. My newfound mindset offered a release for my love of photography. I realized I could attend university, study a subject which interested me and come out with a degree. My life would start once I completed this new plan.

I did attend a photography program at Ryerson. I assisted an established photographer after graduation, gaining an understanding of the field. I still worked part time at my McJob for some stability and benefits. Life took another turn, though,

and presented me with the opportunity to travel and live in New Zealand for four months. I took the side trip, all the while thinking that life would start afterwards.

I set up my own photography business after returning from New Zealand, which seemed like the natural progression of my profession. However, freelance work does not provide any sense of stability. In my mind, life had not begun yet, because I was trying to find work in my field while still holding down my McJob. I got married, but even that did not seem to define a beginning for me: in my mind, it was a change in my situation as I found a new, lifelong roommate. Different income possibilities presented themselves along the way, which I worked through and enjoyed.

I stumbled across an opportunity to return to Ryerson for my Master of Fine Arts degree. It offered yet another detour from my “real” life. I am not sure what possibilities will develop from this latest pursuit, but it seems like a good path to take. I am once again immersed in a creative environment, trying to obtain new skills and producing a body of work.

I am now 46, yet I still wonder when my life will start. I am overwhelmed by my studies, all in a good way, only to have life present another change: just three weeks ago, I became a father. I still do not feel like I am grown up, even as I hold my son in my arms—but that is okay. I have realized that all these experiences that I have had ARE life and that life is not about the destination, but the journey. Contrary to the comment in *Forty-One False Starts* that “soon you’ll start your real life,” my real life started long ago and I’m relishing every moment.

*This was our last full day in
Manhattan and I wanted to make it
a special one. "Have you guys been
up to the World Trade Center yet?
It's the best view of the city."*

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INTO THE SHADOW

Michelle Astrug

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I couldn't make out the sounds that were coming from the speakers of the desk radio. The reporter was speaking quite fast, his words drowned out by the noisy chatter from the other students in line with me. It was my first day at OCAD and I was waiting to have my student ID picture taken. I remember it being an unusually warm September day, beads of sweat forming on my forehead as we all crammed into the student office. It was a little odd that the radio was on full volume, but nobody seemed to question or mind it. Slowly, the chatter began to dissipate as the voice on the radio became clearer. "We have unconfirmed reports this morning that a plane has crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center."

My sister had never been to New York City. She had expressed interest in visiting after seeing my photographs from previous class trips, but was too young to go on her own. She was a couple of months shy of eighteen and I was twenty-three. It was the end of August and I had just wrapped up a contract for the summer. My plan was to enjoy the last week of summer without work before heading back to school to complete my second undergraduate degree. My sister was working a part-time job and starting her last year of high school. We had both been home for a few days

and were becoming restless.

The six-year age gap between us had slowly widened over the years and caused a clear divide in our relationship. We would constantly bicker and let days pass before speaking to each other, rarely spending time together. Over the course of that summer, however, our relationship changed. The arguments stopped and we began to communicate on the same level. Perhaps it was due to her maturity finally catching up with mine or knowing that we would not be living under the same roof for much longer. Either way, I wanted to take advantage of our newfound friendship, because I didn't know when the age gap in our relationship would reveal itself again.

"Let's go to New York." Neither of us started school until the second week of September, so we thought we'd spend the first few days of September in NYC and avoid peak tourist prices. It was decided. We'd leave that coming Friday, August 31 and return on Wednesday, September 5. Since we were on a tight budget, we would take the overnight bus and stay in a hostel. Not knowing much about Manhattan neighbourhoods, I found a hostel on the Bowery across from the now closed CBGBs, with a private room for \$29/night, a real bargain in Manhattan.

We took a lift to the bus station with my parents and boarded the 9:30 p.m. Greyhound due to arrive in Manhattan at 7:45 a.m. Saturday morning. The bus ride was fairly uneventful. We chatted about friends, school and life, snacked, listened to music and slept, barely noticing as we crossed the border into the States.

There is something magical about emerging from the darkness of the Lincoln Tunnel into the heart of Manhattan, into the sight of the bustling streets and into the shadows of the skyscrapers. It fills me with awe and excitement every time and as I looked over at my sister, it appeared to have had the same effect on her. We made our way through the colourful maze of the New York transit system and found our way to the Whitehouse hostel on the Bowery. I had only stayed around Times Square, so the rawness of the NOHO neighbourhood came as a bit of a shock. The hostel, though fairly clean, was also out of the ordinary. Doors lined a dark narrow hallway, in the same way you would see in a prison block. Our room was a few doors down to the left, the shared bathroom and showers, straight ahead. I guess you

can't expect much for \$29/per, but this was really bare bones. The room consisted of a small closet with no door, three nails on the wall and a large plywood shelf on which a double mattress was thrown with two pillows and two towels. The walls did not extend to the ceiling and there was a large gap between the bottom of the door and floor. "Just for sleeping, right?" We were both so excited to be in NYC on our own that we decided it would work for us. Later we found out that this hostel actually used to be a brothel and is now rated as Manhattan's worst hotel.

Having been to New York a few times before, I had seen most of the tourist sites. I wanted this to be a trip that my sister remembered, so decided it was worth revisiting the main attractions. We went to the MOMA, the Whitney and the Met. We took taxis, purposely got lost on the subway and walked the Brooklyn Bridge, pausing to take pictures with the Manhattan skyline behind us. I took her to SOHO, Times Square, Chinatown and Little Italy. We spent Labour Day wandering through Central Park. We ate from the street carts and from the hot buffets in the convenience stores. We walked until our feet throbbed, returning to our jail cell for the night, only to start again the next morning.

By Tuesday, our legs were sore and feet full of blisters and I was out of ideas. The key to exploring NYC is to break it up into small chunks and realize that you cannot do it all in one trip. We were foolish in thinking we could see it all and had been defeated by the city before we could conquer it. It was September 4th, my parent's wedding anniversary. After stuffing ourselves with pastrami and knishes at Katz's Deli, we decided to call our parents and wish them a Happy Anniversary. This was our last full day in Manhattan and I wanted to make it a special one. "Have you guys been up to the World Trade Center yet? It's the best view of the city." We decided to take my dad's advice and bought two tickets to go up to the observation deck on the 110th floor. It was one of the only attractions I had never explored. I had been up the Empire State building, but the line was too long on this trip so my sister and I had decided to pass.

The World Trade Center was fairly busy, but we made it to the 110th floor in about thirty minutes. It was early afternoon and lucky for us, a beautiful, sunny, warm day. The sky was completely clear, giving us a breathtaking panoramic view

of Manhattan. We spent a good couple of hours on the observation deck, taking pictures and trying to find the location of sites we had visited down below. In the centre of the deck was a kiosk where you could send video messages to friends, with a live view from the observation deck as your backdrop. Seeing that it was our parents' anniversary, we decided to spend the US \$10 and send our parents a video message from the top of the World Trade Center. We recorded our thirty-second message, hit send and decided we'd had enough. We descended and exited the building, only stopping briefly to take one last picture of the tower looming over my sister's head before heading back to our hostel for the day and then back home that night.

It was this picture that flashed before my eyes as I stood in silence with others, listening to the horrific events slowly unfolding over the radio. "...We now have two passenger planes within eighteen minutes of each other smashing into the World Trade Center." I met up with my family at home that afternoon, our eyes glued to the television. "We were just there. Last week, we were there. On top of that building." The video my sister and I had sent had become lost, only to arrive in my parents' inbox the following day with the message, "We are sorry for the delay as we are currently experiencing issues with our server."

My sister and I went back to New York in 2003 to see Ground Zero. We took the overnight bus again, but this time, instead of sleeping through the border crossing, we were rudely awakened and forced to take everything off of the bus. Our bags were emptied and searched thoroughly. We were what I would consider interrogated, about why we were travelling and where we were staying. The whole process took almost two hours. We boarded the bus and were on our way. As the light appeared once again at the end of the Lincoln Tunnel, and the silhouettes of skyscrapers and hundreds of people walking the streets came into focus, we could feel the excitement building up inside of us, but also sadness.

I held my sister's hand.

*She is missing from the photos of
her children's weddings, from the
birth of her children's children and
grandchildren, from holidays and
mundane gatherings. What is the
space, what is the sentiment that
is left by a person you have never
met, someone whose voice you
have never heard?*

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INTERIORS

Angie Ready

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There is a sense of orderliness, of uncompromising cleanliness that is required at all times. The kitchen floors never acquire a layer of living. The television is the epicentre of the house. Amid daily broadcasts of the local news at five, categorically followed by the national news at six, there are many things left unsaid. In between the tragedy and the danger, it is a sanitized veil through which the world is witnessed. The screen backlights others' pain and suffering.

Centennial for the nation. Montreal Expo. Lester B. Pearson. The Summer of Love. The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour. Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. Vietnam. Thanksgiving weekend: seven children lose their mother.

Two lavender sachets arrive in the mail every fall. They are accompanied with a seasonal card and cheerful, energetic handwriting. These envelopes are distributed, mailed, offered to those who are cherished, those whom she feels are deserving of their receipt. It is learned, after many years of this practiced ritual, that her mother grew lavender on the farm, that there is a remembrance in this act.

It is the early 1960s, specific date unknown. At least two slides are produced on this evening. She is wearing matte, bright red lipstick. Her sense of humour

shows through as she holds what appears to be a bottle of vanilla as she engages with her guests, all behind the photographer. She is missing an earring (perhaps too much dancing?). Her face and mouth form the expression of someone dynamic and energetic; her eyes are wide and amused and comically entertaining; very much alive and full of life. The colours in the slides are vibrant, like the energy she radiates. *Have you heard of that new band from England— The Beatles?* she asks one of her children. Never. Not until that moment.

All of the information about her has been passed down through anecdotes, via provisions procured in order to make her recipes, via casual references made. How the colour and texture of her hair (dark, thick) has skipped a generation to reach two granddaughters and one great-granddaughter. How all of the daughters and granddaughters have a variation on her nose. These photographs, these more recently discovered slides reveal more of her personality.

There is so much more that I do not know.

It is clear to the children of the children that there is a void left from her absence. This void is never articulated in words, but has been communicated non-verbally over the span of many years. She is missing from the photos of her children's weddings, from the birth of her children's children and grandchildren, from holidays and mundane gatherings. What is the space, what is the sentiment that is left by a person you have never met, someone whose voice you have never heard?

One by one, each of the children, passing the threshold into adulthood, moved away from the small town and open prairie skies to coastal rainforest. The fresh salt air, the waves and the wind allowed a new start. New ties and families were established. Everyday life was interrupted with regular trips "back home," even though little trace of immediate family— although many friends—remained in that place, a place that held much sorrowed memory.

What do we call her? She has always been "your mom" in speaking with her children and it has never quite been enough. Is she Grandma, Grams, Nana, Mama; another name that we will never know?

She worked part-time in that small-town hospital while her mother was ill. She was in high school and proud to have a responsibility outside of the family and to

earn her own money. She would visit her every day and stopped by her room during her shift. She took the first paycheque to her for safekeeping while she finished the remainder of her working hours.

She mentioned a few years ago that ironing was done on Sunday night whilst she listened to CBC Radio. The pile must have been never-ending. In our house, there was also an endless pile of laundry to be ironed, but it was stowed away behind a closet door. There was a radio that lived in our kitchen for decades, tuned to oldies station CISL 650, and never ventured down the dial.

Late in July, very early morning, we crossed the border into Alberta, waking just after Medicine Hat. The sun was barely rising. The Greyhound bus clipped along the open road; the mists hung around the gently rolling hills. I was groggy, but aware that we were a few hours due south of that small town. Her voice came into my head. *The prairies have their own beauty*. Their beauty, their subtlety, required silence and absorption.

Did she have anything that she wanted to say to us? There were the letters she had written to her best friend during those last years and months, those last weeks and days. I am told that they uncover her inner world of fear, knowing that she was leaving her children behind, orphaned. Was there a final acceptance and peace in these lines? The letters' contents, defended by one of her children, are not for others' consumption, are too private, and are not meant to be read by anyone but their addressee. The stack is pushed into non-circulation.

Was that her when two of the girls (now women) visited her grave and one of their phones made a digital acknowledgement after one of them asked, half humourously, *Hello, can you hear us up there?*

What made her laugh? One gets the feeling that she would have defied the stereotype of mother-in-law, her sense of humour keeping the husbands in check.

We have attempted to quietly recall her between the two of us, in this vastness of what we do not know. One year, procuring a few Don Ho albums from the vintage store in Fan Tan Alley, we immediately knew the reference without having to speak the words out loud. She used to play these albums in the middle of prairie snowstorms. Had she ever been to Hawaii?

She mentioned, long after the date, that reaching her forty-third year was momentous. This date, this age, was engraved in her mind, in her being, as an age that perhaps she would not surpass. Even now, in her mid-sixties, she ensures that her life insurance policy remains active.

Would it be fair to say that her children inherited her down-to-earth, no-need-for-pretension, call-out-the-bullshit temperament that remains in their beings? That there is and was *no time* for falsities? *How* did she laugh? The cigarettes surely contributed to her ill health. But her mother, also a widow and a smoker, lived to see her eighth decade, *her second clutch* becoming the three youngest children as they were raised into their late teenage years. *The younger ones do not remember her.* How can it be possible, that a decade of repeated, daily, hourly attentiveness and care is evaporated from memory? Does the body remember instead of the mind? Upon asking for a copy of the photos, it is discovered that the year a photo was taken is unknown by the second youngest, with a suggestion that her (older) sister is asked for reference instead. This exchange is quickly followed by another email with an attached photo scan, *another of my favourites*, of her grandmother, her maternal figure.

Who took these photos? When was she behind the lens; when was it the missing male figure?

I think we stayed so close because we thought if we did, that nothing bad would happen to us again. Spoken weeks and months after her brother had died, age 47, leaving two teenagers behind. The two youngest and the eldest have said *no children*. Did they fear a repetition of the vulnerability in the loss? Were they protecting themselves and the potential offspring?

Strong back. Resilience.

He had said that he wanted a family large enough to make his own baseball team. They came close, with seven. Would he still have chosen to go, despite the difficult circumstances, if he had known that she would only survive another six years?

There is an image of all of the kids, the youngest enfolded in her arms, all grinning, all loved. It is summer; they are inhaling orange popsicles (*a real treat*) that invariably drip down their fists. Other photographs were taken on this same

day—similar clothing is worn throughout. She is looking down to her left, to her second oldest, who is caught up in the spirit of the afternoon. The look of concern on her face seems fortuitous, given what we know now. What marked these special occasions, when it was determined that the camera should be brought out and have the children posed?

What are the details that people look at when they think you are looking away?

The women were gathered in the kitchen, loose semi-circle (standard form). Some were holding damp tea towels, others washing, some gathering up food remnants and stacking dishes—cleaning up after a family dinner (no special occasion), but meticulously planned and executed nonetheless. All hairstyles manicured, locks pristinely wrangled in place with hairbrushes, hairdryers and curling irons. One made a reference to the circumstances as children: *country bumpkins with soiled clothes running around barefoot*. A number of them laughed knowingly, but there was a shame undercutting those words: that they were *better off* and distanced from that now, that they would never return to that state.

At what point did she decide to find it fitting to say *wash* instead of *warsh*?

Six of them (seventh not born yet?) on the chesterfield, cheeks rosy, propelling each other, are engaging with each other. Excited. Squirming. Limbs bare and grubby from outdoor adventures, bibs and bodices soiled, edges of clothing worn. The girls with bobs, bangs cut short. Pure joy and innocence—their history had not yet been formed.

These days (those days as well?), we do not always think about what will happen to our candid photos over time. They are taken on a whim, sometimes out of obligation and circulated shortly afterwards.

Always standing in the kitchen, rarely sitting. Back strong against the world. Endless amounts of vegetables and fruit to be washed, peeled, chopped, arranged, cooked, served. Repeated. Movement and activity counter the silence.

She said that she had written a poem for her night class. She had wanted us to read it. I had been visiting for the weekend. It was brought out on the first night, before settling back into the roles of parent and child for the remaining days. We sat on the couch, a cushion between us, and she handed me the paper. I read it

NARRATIVE ESSAYS

through, did not know what was coming. She had written about the day she lost her, the darkness, the emptiness, the loss. The emotion was openly expressed, at last, there on paper. The most poignant and revelatory of conversations always (only) happen on the first night.

With each succeeding generation, a hope emerges. That fear will not abound and dominate. That risks will be taken, loves will be lost and found, skills acquired, calmness learned.

For us to mourn the loss without having known her.

I can hear their laughter through the photo as they pose for the camera, lined up, bodies close. Now adults, and many with children of their own, they have done this many times before, and that familiarity manifests in relaxed stances. It was a summer backyard gathering, perhaps a birthday. Fresh salmon had been grilled on the barbeque. Children zipped about the backyard, skinning their knees on the grass as they played an impromptu baseball game.

Resiliency has been practiced and passed down, restored and renewed. Their resilience, their humour, their strength, their full hearts are open for us to witness, to learn, while all of us move *through*.

The green fireballs continued to leap about, and then they came together. The light got bigger, green plasma undulating around the sphere. Then suddenly a bright beam of light shot out and hit Stephanie in the face, Alice turned just in time and avoided getting a face full of light. The green fireball then shot up into the sky and vanished.

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MACĪSKOTÊW: WHAT HAPPENED AFTER WE SAW THE BAD FIRE

Thirza Cuthand

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Stephanie and Alice had been friends since daycare. They met when they were two years old. I don't think their early conversations could have been terribly interesting, but somehow the two had managed to stay friends over twenty-six years.

Stephanie was a pothead. Stephanie was a notorious drug user and had only been sober during work hours and times of poverty. The day of the "Incident" was only a couple of days after payday, so she had a couple grams in her pocket and had just finished a joint when they decided to go for a drive in the country. Alice, being a straight-laced, sober person (and also the only one with a driver's license), was behind the wheel. They had cruised around Saskatoon while chatting about ideas and events of the day. They decided to get out of the city for a change, and drive up to Cranberry Flats.

Cranberry Flats was closed for the night, but as a rural park, the entrance was not guarded and it was easy enough to get in the parking lot. Alice turned up Lorne Avenue, and they drove along a moderately busy highway to the turn-off. It was incredibly dark.

"Look for their eyes," Alice said, meaning the deer who awoke at dusk. They were

sesquiurnal, meaning they slept twice a day. “Those fuckers better not come out. I can’t afford the deductible.”

They drove along a stretch of road, turning again onto the narrow strip leading to Cranberry Flats. It was a good twenty-minute drive, so Stephanie began telling a story about a film she wanted to make.

“I always thought there was something going on with Nazis and Residential schools. I read somewhere that they got Nazi doctors after the war to come over here and experiment on Native kids. I think it might be interesting to make a film about that.”

Stephanie continued expanding on her idea when they noticed two threads of light going back and forth across the road. They changed colours: red, orange, yellow, green, blue purple red orange yellow green blue purple, redorangeyellowgreenbluepurple.

“It must be our headlights shining on the power lines,” Stephanie thought. Alice thought the same. They were pretty similar despite the differences in drug use.

The lights changed; they got fatter, and paler. Looking like spots in the sky from a searchlight, but without the beam coming from earth. It was the strangest thing Stephanie had ever seen. She puzzled over it, “I must be hallucinating. I’m on weed. Fuck, weed never makes me see anything. Weird. Must be some good shit.”

They neared Cranberry Flats, but the lights had become hypnotizing. The entrance to the parking lot approached. They drove on. The entrance passed them. A car behind them flashed its lights. A couple of minutes down the road, Stephanie finally said, “What are those lights?”

Alice turned to her and said, “You see them too?”

They were unearthly. Fear made Alice do a perfect three-point turn in the middle of the road and go back.

“What the fuck are those?!” Stephanie asked. Or maybe Alice asked. I don’t remember. “Is it UFO’s???”

“Well they are unidentified and they are flying, I mean technically they are!”

“Shit! There are no power lines going back and forth across the road! They are all on one side!”

“That’s what I thought those lights were too!”

They drove a few kilometres down when Alice said, “I want to see if they are still there.”

She stopped the car by the side of the road, turned on her hazards, and jumped out. She jumped back in just as fast.

“They’re still there!”

“Jesus get us out of here!”

She drove the car down the road, slowing down all of a sudden.

“Why are you stopping? Get us out of here! What if they know we are here???”

“There’s a stop sign! I have to stop!”

The obligatory stop, then they moved on. They drove back to Stephanie’s house, talking about what they had seen. Alice took them to her house. She gathered supplies, flashlight, snacks. Told her Mom there were lights in the sky.

“Don’t youse girls get too close, they will take you away,” Alice’s mother said.

Stephanie felt more nervous, but curiosity was getting the better of her.

* * *

Ramona Wilson was 16 years old and last seen hitchhiking to a friend’s home in Smithers, British Columbia on June 11, 1994.¹ In April of 1995 her remains were found near the Smithers airport.² The Highway of Tears is the expanse of road between Prince George and Prince Rupert in Northern BC, but has grown to cover many other rural areas of the Interior and Northern British Columbia.³ Half of the women who have gone missing and/or been murdered on the Highway of Tears have been Aboriginal.⁴ The current number of missing and/or murdered women on the Highway of Tears exceeds 30.⁵

* * *

They didn’t drive out as far as Cranberry Flats again. They drove to Diefenbaker Park, which was on the edge of the city, but not outside the city limits. There was a hill there that could be driven on, so they went up the hill and looked towards the south.

There, in the not too far distance, were the lights; the two lights had changed.

They were green, with energy coming off them like fire. Flaming green fireballs, but they pulsated, turning into a solid light now and then. These were not flying saucers. Stephanie didn't know what they were. Aliens? A spirit? A warning?

The way they moved spoke of some kind of intelligent force behind them. They hopped over each other, they skipped around, they shot down to the earth and back up, they blinked on and off. It was almost as if they were fighting.

Stephanie and Alice got out of the car and stared.

"Do you want to go closer?" Alice asked.

"I'm afraid." Stephanie said.

They continued to stare. Stephanie got nervous and wanted to get off the hill.

"What if they come over here?" she asked.

"We'll run!"

The green fireballs continued to leap about, and then they came together. The light got bigger, green plasma undulating around the sphere. Then suddenly a bright beam of light shot out and hit Stephanie in the face, Alice turned just in time and avoided getting a face full of light. The green fireball then shot up into the sky and vanished.

"Stephanie! Are you okay?"

"Fuck! All I can see is green!" The light had burned into her retina, like when someone takes a flash picture.

"Let's get back in the car, can you see?"

"A little bit. I can feel the door handle."

In the car, Stephanie opened and closed her eyes, trying to get her vision back.

"Are we missing any time?" Alice looked at the clock in her dash. It seemed like a reasonable amount of time had passed. She turned to say something about it to Stephanie, when she noticed.

"Woah! Your eyes are glowing."

"What?" Alice asked?

"Your eyes are glowing green, look!" She pulled the visor down so that Stephanie could look in the mirror. Sure enough, there was a strange foggy glow swirling around in Stephanie's pupils.

“What is that?” Stephanie asked.

“I don’t know. It’s like those lights are inside you.”

“I don’t like this!” Stephanie said. They drove away, Stephanie staring into the mirror. The lights in her eyes faded after a few minutes of driving. When Alice dropped her off, she hurried into her house without looking up at the sky.

That night, Stephanie had a nightmare that green lights were manifesting in her bedroom, following the same swirling pattern they had in the sky. She woke her girlfriend with her screams.

The day after she saw the lights seemed normal, except for the unsettling feeling. The feeling that there was something she couldn’t explain.

“You sure were out late last night,” her girlfriend, Amber, said in the morning.

“Alice and I were driving and we saw lights in the sky,” Stephanie said, and described the events of the night before.

“Must have been some PCP in your weed,” Amber said. She didn’t like Stephanie’s pot habit, so she took any opportunity to strike some fear into her lover’s heart about her favorite drug.

“Then why did Alice see it too?”

“Oh god Stephanie, it was probably the casino lights, they are out that direction. My friend Jack says they have all kinds of spotlights out there, fireworks too!”

“Noooo. This was. . .this was different. There’s something out there.”

Amber remained skeptical. She knew Stephanie and Alice had a longstanding interest in the paranormal. It would be just typical of them to share a sandwich from Subway tainted with some LSD mold and have a simultaneous hallucination. She had seen Alice bring by books about aliens and bigfoot, or them going to horror films together about murderous poltergeists; once, she had even come home from work to find them in the living room with a Ouija board and the scented candles that were normally only lit when she and Stephanie were getting amorous. She had resigned herself to the fact that her lover was superstitious, but she drew the line at aliens ever being interested in a place like Saskatoon.

“What would they come here for? What could ever be interesting about Saskatoon?”

“I dunno. Maybe the end of a portal is there. Maybe they were coming through a wormhole from another dimension. Maybe there is something significant in that area.”

“Okay, so between Dakota Dunes Casino, Cranberry Flats, and the Dundurn Army Base, what could they possibly need? Guns? Money? Gophers?”

“Maybe.” Stephanie said in a hushed voice. “Or maybe it was a military experiment gone awry. Maybe Dundurn has some kind of super secret weapon. Like an energy weapon!”

“Oh you are so funny!” Amber suddenly said, and kissed her, hoping to distract her.

They let the topic drop for now.

* * *

Daleen Bosse was last seen at a nightclub in Saskatoon on May 18, 2004. When her husband woke up the next morning and she was still not home, he contacted the police. The Saskatoon Police Service told the family that she would come home, most missing people returned in 14 days. Over the next months and years they kept telling the family Daleen would return home, even though she was not accessing her bank accounts.⁶ Finally the police admitted that something more serious was going on. In 2008, they charged Douglas Hales, the bouncer at the nightclub where Daleen was last seen, with first-degree murder. He had confessed to choking Daleen to some undercover officers and led them to her remains, which he had set on fire. His verdict will come on December 17th, 2014.⁷

* * *

Alice had some ideas. She started reading online, googling as many UFO stories as she could. There were a lot of stories about metallic craft. She liked those, although they were not as inexplicable as her story. She told few people. She knew most would call her a liar, and her friend Stephanie was not as reliable a witness because she had been stoned at the beginning of their sighting, so her disclosures were few and far between.

And what about the green light? The light that had gone into Stephanie’s eyes?

Was it a possession? Stephanie seemed the same.

“Close encounter of the Second Kind,” she said to Stephanie.

“What?”

“That’s what it is, it’s the one just below close encounter of the third kind, that’s when you see the aliens. I thought it was Nocturnal Lights, that’s the very beginning of the scale, but then you got the lights in your eyes. A physical effect. That’s what happened, it was a close encounter of the second kind.”

“How far up does the scale go?”

“Fourth is when you get abducted. Fifth is when there is communication between you and the alien. But the Sixth . . .”

“What! What about the Sixth???”

“Sixth is when there is a death from the close encounter.”

They were both silent for a moment.

“Amber doesn’t believe me.”

“Well, you don’t have proof. Maybe we should go back out there. Do you think they will come back?”

They didn’t know anything of the original circumstances that had brought the lights to Saskatoon. They just knew it happened between 10:00 pm and 1:00 am. They discussed the surrounding factors. If there were clouds or not. What they had been talking about. They tried to recreate it over the next couple of months, but every time they turned onto the road heading for Cranberry Flats, the sky was quiet. They even stood in the parking lot at midnight, chilled and scanning the sky, only leaving when the coyote’s howls got too close.

“Maybe they were looking for someone,” Alice said quietly in the darkness.

“Maybe they found them,” Stephanie said, feeling even more unsettled.

The powers didn’t reveal themselves for a long time. And when they did, they terrified Stephanie.

Stephanie was a softie. She abhorred the idea of hurting someone. She had only thrown a punch once, when she was nine and fighting with her cousin. She punched him in the nose and it ended the fight and she never struck anyone again. She argued. She got angry. But, like so many women, she repressed her anger and

swallowed it, trying to keep it from hurting people. She got angry about many things: slights from family, catcalling men, racist white people. She used to write with abandon anonymously on her blog about whom she hated at any moment, and with good reason, most of the time. But she never threw a punch. And she soon learned she didn't need to.

It happened one day when she was walking home from the store. She heard footsteps behind her. A man's voice said, "Where you going sweetheart?" She felt her hackles rise. He started making kissing noises. She quickened her pace. He quickened his pace. Suddenly she felt a hand on her shoulder spinning her around to face him. "Listen to me when I'm talking to you, bitch!" he said. She could smell the sickly sweet scent of alcohol coming off of him. He started yelling at her about how he was a nice guy and she shouldn't be ignoring him. Stephanie started getting angry more than she was scared. How dare this drunk white man try to make her talk to him! But this time, as Stephanie felt the familiar anger rise, she heard a strange buzzing noise getting higher in frequency. She stared at the man in hate when she noticed his t-shirt smoldering.

"What the hell?" the man said, so oblivious it was with a laugh, so very oblivious to the anger he raised. And then it happened. It happened so fast that Stephanie didn't make the connection at first. The man burst into flames. And it wasn't a small flame. He became a pillar of fire. Stephanie staggered back and ran into the house. And then it clicked. They were green flames.

Stephanie got on the phone to Alice when she got in her house.

"Hello?"

"The sixth kind!" she said breathlessly. She could hear the sirens coming. The horns as the fire trucks tried to get traffic to let them by.

"What?"

"Come over! I need you to see something!"

Alice arrived within twenty minutes. She had to drive from the other side of the east side. She passed a charred body on the sidewalk a few blocks from Stephanie's house, covered by a sheet. Police were talking to some children who had seen it happen.

Stephanie was pale and drinking beer in her living room.

"I killed him," she said.

"What?" Alice asked.

"He was calling me names, and I looked at him, and he turned to green flames."

"The lights!" Alice gasped.

"Yes."

"A close encounter of the sixth kind, it's caused a death."

"I caused a death."

"No! No! I know you, you've never hurt anyone! It's the lights! The lights aren't just in the sky, they are inside you! They are protecting you!"

"I was so angry. But I didn't mean to kill him. I just wanted him to trip and break an arm or something. I didn't even think it would do anything!" Stephanie began to cry, her dog Bill came over and put his head in her lap. He was a very comforting dog.

"Is Amber home?"

"No. She's out with some friends."

"Listen Stephanie, you cannot, you just CAN NOT tell her that you think you set him on fire. She won't understand."

"I know."

"Spontaneous Human Combustion."

"Didn't they prove that was just something that happened to cigarette smokers?"

"Well you saw it happen, was that dude smoking?"

"No, but he was drunk. Maybe he was around smokers before and someone dropped an ash on him."

"Yeah and his clothes were made of copper and he burned green! Come on!"

"Pennies?" Stephanie asked hopefully. There was still such a thing as pennies then.

"I don't know what happened, but I know one thing, I do not want to make you mad!"

Stephanie gasped. "What if it isn't someone I hate who makes me mad?"

"Then don't look at them," Alice said.

“OMG. What if someone makes me mad and I look at someone else and set THEM on fire???”

“I don’t know.”

“For a minute, it felt like a good power to have. That dude was so obnoxious. But there are so many uncertainties.”

“Well maybe it’s a one-off. Maybe it won’t happen again,” Alice said helpfully.

Stephanie shook her head. “There are too many fuckers I want to burn. You know what it’s like being an Indigenous woman in Canada.”

Alice nodded her head sadly. Then she brightened up.

“You should go down to the Carl Jones trial!”

“Why?”

“He killed Angela! That woman from Poundmaker who went missing and turned up in a ditch!”

“Alice! Are you listening to yourself!? You want me to fucking stare at a murderer of Indigenous women and set them on fire in court? Are you serious? Really? Because I am pretty sure they can put two and two together and figure out I have the powers of green fire handed down from the skies!”

“Okay, okay! It was just a suggestion! You have the beginnings of a seriously kickass super power!!! I was just hoping to push you in the right direction, instead of setting fire to assholes that just call you cunt!”

“Hey man, he grabbed me! Who knows what else he was gonna do!” Stephanie waved her index finger to make even more of a point.

“Don’t get mad at me! Please! I will buy you a burger!” Alice pleaded.

Stephanie started laughing. Alice always knew how to defuse the situation.

It didn’t happen again for a long time. Probably because Stephanie got super cautious. Not sure if it was hatred or anger that got her mad, she tried to rein in her anger at people. She would walk away from arguments, check out, go to her happy place. It worked, for a while. She made an effort to do things that gave her some kind of pleasure.

Alice took Stephanie on many rides that spring to Cranberry Flats. They waited in the parking lot in the darkness for the lights to return. They thought that the

strange phenomenon might take back the powers that had been passed down. But night after night, the only lights in the sky were the stars, looking solemnly down onto the prairies.

"This isn't gonna work." Stephanie said, as they reclined in lawn chairs in the dark parking lot.

"Maybe we have to wait until next fall, maybe they only happen once a year."

"Maybe they only happen once," Stephanie said. "Why couldn't I have gotten a good power, like the power to heal or something?"

"I dunno. Maybe there is something to be said for women's anger. Maybe it's something you are gonna need."

"Amber hates that we keep coming out here late at night."

"Really?"

"Yeah. She thinks we're messing around."

"But I'm straight. It's impossible."

"Well I know that! But she is suspicious anyway."

"How do you know that?"

"I checked her texts."

"Stephanie! That is crossing a line!"

"I know, okay! I feel guilty about it."

They drove back into town and went to a bar for a couple of drinks. Stephanie got tipsy, not pukey drunk but not sober either. They went back to Alice's place and had a couple more, Stephanie getting a little more drunk. Then they called a cab. Said goodbye.

Cabs aren't the safest rides home for women, much less Indigenous women. The driver and Stephanie exchanged pleasantries. Stephanie told him where she wanted to do. He turned on the meter and started driving. And driving. And he passed her neighborhood.

"Stop! Let me out! You're going the wrong way!" Stephanie said.

"Shortcut," the driver said.

"No it's not! You totally passed my neighborhood! Stop the cab you fucker!"

"Shut up!" the driver said.

Stephanie looked around for her cellphone. The battery was dead. It could only ever stay powered for a day before it needed to be plugged in, and it was about 4:00 a.m.

She remembered a trick she had heard from a sex worker friend. They had told her if a car is taking you somewhere you don't want to go, just open the door, because most people didn't want to fuck up their car. So, with a deep breath, Stephanie unlocked and swung open the door about 800 meters from the edge of the suburbs.

"What the fuck did you do that for?" the driver demanded. He stopped the car, but the anger had built up in Stephanie. And she didn't care anymore. It was gonna come out.

She leapt out of the car after seeing the telltale wisp of smoke. By the time she hit the ditch, there was a green fireball in the cab where the driver once sat.

She ran. She ran as fast as she could down some alleys, feeling slightly dizzy from the booze, and feeling jolts of anger course through her body. Candle-sized drops of green fire lay in a scattered trail behind her. She breathed. She had to calm down, she had to stop it, because if they knew it was her...

She called Amber.

"Amber! I need you to come get me!"

"It's five in the morning babe! Where are you?"

"Uh, Briarwood. Like near the slough."

"You mean the lake?"

"Whatever they call it. I took a cab but the driver tried to kidnap me!"

"Oh my god! Okay, I am on my way."

* * *

Shelley Napope, Calinda Waterhen, and Eva Taysup, all went missing in the 90s and their bodies were found outside of Saskatoon. John Crawford was successfully prosecuted and convicted of their murders. He confessed to 16 murders in total. His crimes got scant attention from the community, and some say it is because his victims were aboriginal women.⁸

* * *

In the car on the way home, Amber asked all about the cab driver, what he looked like, what the cab number was, she was going to go home and call the cops and report him.

“Amber, you cannot call the cops.”

“What? Babe, he is probably a serial rapist or killer who uses his cab job to get women! He has to be stopped! At least lose his job!”

“I know! I know I know, it’s just, he’s not gonna do that again. I know he won’t.”

“What did you do? Holy shit Stephanie! What did you do???”

“Nothing! I just got angry! I couldn’t help it! I can never help it!”

“Did you kill him?” Amber demanded.

Stephanie sunk to the floor feeling doomed.

“Stephanie! Did you kill somebody??”

“I can’t help it!”

“How did you do it?” Amber asked, her voice seemed so alien to Stephanie, not at all like the voice she had so often heard with tinges of affection. This voice was cold and calm.

“I set him on fire,” Stephanie said simply.

“With what? Matches? A lighter?”

“With my eyes,” Stephanie said, and then told Amber everything. The lights in the sky, and how the neighbour kid died, and how the comedian died, and the cabbie. The drips of green fire as she ran. She confessed it all.

“Stephanie! That is ridiculous! You’re lying! Why are you lying!?”

“It’s not a lie!”

“How do I even know that there is a cab driver, or a cab? What if you and Alice had a fight and she dropped you off in the middle of Briarwood?”

“No! It’s true!”

“Stephanie, I don’t think you should lie to me anymore about your relationship with Alice. You’ve known each other forever. It just makes sense...”

“NO! Amber, she and I are like sisters, AND she is straight, AND I can’t believe you would call me a liar! I was almost raped or killed or raped AND killed, and

NARRATIVE ESSAYS

you're being a fucking jealous girlfriend! What the hell is wrong with you?"

And then she felt it, when she least wanted to. When it was so undesired. That sense of anger building up. She turned her face away from Amber.

"Stephanie! Look at me! Why can't you look at me!?" Amber yelled, grabbing Stephanie's face to turn it back. Stephanie felt helpless with rage, rage leftover from her encounter with the cabbie. She turned to face Amber.

"Why are your eyes so green?" Amber asked.

Stephanie felt her anger get mixed up with panic. She felt desperate, and started to redirect her anger somewhere else, somewhere that wouldn't hurt anyone. Amber screamed. Their potted aloe vera plant was burning in a vivid green flame.

"Oh my god!" Stephanie said.

Amber grabbed a fire extinguisher from the kitchen and sprayed it on the fire. It didn't do much, but the fire burnt out on its own.

Amber turned to Stephanie. "What does this mean?" she asked.

"It means I can control it."

For the first time in her life, Stephanie felt powerful.

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^{1,2} "Highway of Tears Murders," *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, October 24, 2014, Web, Accessed November 18, 2014.

^{3,4,5} "Murder and Racism along the Highway of Tears," *The Vancouver Sun*, August 29, 2009, Web, Accessed November 18, 2014.

⁶ Jim Bronskill and Sue Bailey, "Aboriginal Women Fair Game for Predators amid Public Indifference," *Canoe Network CNews*. Canoe Network CNews, September 18, 2005, Web, Accessed November 18, 2014.

⁷ Meaghan Craig, "Verdict Date Set for Douglas Hales First-degree Murder Trial," *Global News*. Global News, November 14, 2014, Web, Accessed November 18, 2014.

⁸ Chris Purday, "Serial Killer Who Roamed Saskatoon Met with Indifference," *The Edmonton Journal*, November 26, 2003, Web, Accessed November 18, 2014.

We had our weekly idea-sharing meetings on Mondays. I was excited. I had found an idea which could be developed into a TV show. This was going to be my first big break into North American television.

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MY JOURNEY AS A RESEARCHER

Shivanya Mulekar

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Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.

— Zora Neale Hurston

North American reality TV content has always amused me. It fascinates me for being quirky and unique in an unconventional way, for always challenging the audiences and for always being the topic of discussion. My first reaction to the North American reality TV industry was the question: has television really come to a dead end? Are these reality TV shows for real? How authentic are these wives from *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*? Is the *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* family really eccentric or do they just appear so on the TV screen? Is the drama behind the scenes of *Storage Wars* for real? Why would someone sit glued to their chair to watch the spat between the mothers and Abby Lee Miller on *Dance Moms*? What makes *Toddlers and Tiaras* such a popular show?

I tried to think. What was the merit in their banter, where was the entertainment in show business? When I watched each one of these TV shows, I couldn't put my finger on what I really liked, but all I can say is that I found them very charming.

They had an unreal fabric of emotion, which was instantly captured by the camera, and yet they were real stories. I liked the idea that the camera was giving me an opportunity to pry into others' lives; it was like watching Allan King's *A Married Couple*.

Coming from a country that entertains millions with scripted drama, reality TV was definitely a new ballgame for me. Having worked with broadcasters in India, I had witnessed stories evolve out of research discussions. I knew research was like a treasure box waiting to be discovered and this knowledge and experience led me to my journey as a researcher.

I research ideas. I research people for ideas, I research news for ideas, I research billboards for ideas, I research crossword puzzles for ideas, I research books for ideas. As a researcher, I research human stories in every possible corner.

The foundation of my reality TV research began with watching a lot of episodes; I watched shows from *Holmes on Homes* to *Chopped*, *Sarah's Cottage* to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, *Dance Moms* to *Toddler and Tiaras*, *The Real Housewives* to *19 Kids And Counting*. I've seen all these shows and more, and there are certain questions that always hover over my mind: Who are these subjects or families? Where do they live? What is their lifestyle and why is it unique, so that they now have a TV show about them?

My first interaction with a possible TV show idea and development deal came on February 12, 2011.

I started my day with a long list of words. It was, however, one of the dull research days and it was hard for me to concentrate, so I decided to shift gears. I decided to scan newspapers for articles to see if an interesting story popped up. I soon found out that in research, sometimes it's hard to decipher what is good and what isn't. There are days when everything you read seems like an interesting story and then there are those days when everything that you read seems boring and not leading you anywhere. I think this was my lucky day.

I was researching the quintessential American family: the family that stayed together, had simple values and stuck with each other in difficult times. I started with small newspapers, to find what happened on the local circuit and what

mattered to people living in small towns. While I was scanning information in local papers, fun things came up like prom event announcements, wedding announcements, school-level competitions, opinions on local politics and local food fests. I really liked what I was reading for two reasons: one reason was that these local papers were giving me access to the lives of people living in a town unknown to me, and secondly, I was learning this new language of American culture with every article. Sometimes it was just a picture that said it all. During my research, there was one picture that caught my attention. The picture was grainy, black and white, but the caption caught my attention. It said, "Winner of Rodeo Queen Contest." The winner was a pleasant-looking girl in her early twenties and from the town of St. George, Utah. She was confident and looking at the camera with a shining smile. She was wearing boots, a cowboy hat, jeans and a belt with a huge buckle. This one picture said so much to me about the Western culture, and the importance of rodeos and rodeo pageants for this town, that my next reaction was impulsive and instant. I sifted through layers of Google pages to find out if there were any TV shows on rodeo queens. I researched for three days and I looked for news articles, production house releases; I searched for TV magazines and, surprisingly, found no information on any TV show on rodeo queens. Now this was the time when I started researching and finding more information about the Rodeo Queen Pageant. My search led to me to realize that the pageant was held all over the U.S. and in some parts of Canada, particularly in Calgary, and it was considered a moment of pride. Participating in Rodeo is unlike being in a beauty pageant. It's not about the swimwear or the beauty, but it is all about keeping the culture intact. Rodeo is a piece of history. Rodeo Queen Pageants started in 1910 in Pendleton, Oregon and have since become a professional cowgirl athlete competition where the participants are expected to know how to ride a horse. They are judged on their personality, their ability to speak to an audience and their skill to participate in the barrel racing form. This story was my master find. I believed this story had an element of true American essence in it.

We had our weekly idea-sharing meetings on Mondays. I was excited. I had found an idea which could be developed into a TV show. This was going to be my first big

break into North American television.

I started my presentation with my other ideas. I was keeping Rodeo Queens as an ace to be revealed in the end. I talked about finding a group of seven chefs in Toronto, home designers, and psychic twins; however, there seemed to be no interest in any of the ideas. I then said, “I have one idea.” I paused. I wanted to build up some curiosity on what I had in my idea basket. I could sense the anticipation building up in the room. I said, “I have read a small article about these pageants that happen in small towns in the U.S. They are called Rodeo Queens. These are not beauty pageants but there seems to be some interesting stuff happening there.” The producer said, “Have there been any TV shows around this idea?” I said, “NO.” He said, “I like it. Find out more information about Rodeo Queens.” Research and scouting is a very funny world to be in. Sometimes it takes months or years of reading to find that one big idea. And sometimes one small article can lead you to find what you have been looking for all this time.

My first phone call was set up on Wednesday of the same week. I had set up a meeting with an ex-Rodeo Queen Pageant winner, who was now a coach and was mentoring a few pageant queens. I had already started visualizing the show in my mind. I thought the show would be something like a mashup of *Dance Moms* and *Toddlers and Tiaras*. The show could have a mentor/coach like Abby Lee Miller in *Dance Moms* and could be shot in cinema vérité style like *Toddler and Tiaras*. Little did I know that my phone call with the Rodeo Queen coach would change everything.

The phone call was set up for 2:00 p.m. on Wednesday. My producer and I used the office conference number to call Debbie, the rodeo coach. We exchanged pleasantries and my producer asked her what she thought of the TV show idea. Debbie had a southern accent and she sounded very excited. She said she had trained many rodeo queens and definitely saw this as a potential TV show. We spoke for another twenty minutes and ended on a note to catch up again with more information. My producer seemed happy with the development. It seemed like we had caught a big fish and it was time to sit and enjoy a hearty meal.

After a few days of researching and preparing to get to the next step of casting, I

walked into the office early one morning. I liked to walk into a quiet office and get settled in, plan my day, read through my emails and chart my strategy for the next research story. The moment I opened my email, my heart sank.

My producer and I sat in his office. The board full of sticky notes behind his head seemed like a whirlwind of words. At this point, none of them made any sense to me. I was reading the sticky notes for the tenth time. There was silence in the room. An American production company outdid us. While we were still in the research stage of Rodeo Queens, the American company was sending out invitations for a casting call. It was the same email that had sunk my heart this morning. It was a game of wild goose chase; the one who caught the goose, went home and had an early dinner. My producer was calm. He said, “These things are very common in the TV industry. It happens all the time. All we have to do is keep trying.” I had learnt my *lesson #1*. Research was a painstaking game, where you had to stand first no matter what. My months of searching through those pages of Google had become futile. It was all about timing, timing and only timing. Great ideas could be standing next to you on your train ride home, but it’s about getting to that idea first and we as a team had lost out in this race. I decided to move on.

I have had some interesting encounters during my research. Once, I exchanged emails with a senior airline chef, who caters to the world’s largest in-flight catering service. The chef supervises the daily preparation of 130,000 fine dining meals, along with a few thousand extra orders for catering. He called it “cooking by numbers.” The chef planned 1,400 menus a year and his grocery list looked something like this:

- 3 million fresh eggs
- 400 tonnes eggs liquid pasteurized
- 2,000 tonnes flour
- 300 tonnes lamb
- 255 tonnes beef tenderloin
- 150 tonnes prawns
- 26 tonnes lobster
- 75 tonnes smoked salmon
- 90 tonnes salmon fillet
- 1,250 tonnes chicken products (chicken thigh, chicken breast, chicken whole and leg quarter)

That was the most remarkable grocery list I had ever come across!

The world of research really fascinates me. I may not have the best tools yet, but the sheer joy that these stories offer leaves me asking for more.

My next encounter with a possible big TV idea happened completely by chance. I was searching for people in unique professions. One of the articles I was reading mentioned “Accident Extrication Specialists.” The specific search didn’t lead me anywhere but I found an article in a U.K. newspaper, which mentioned a “Ship Extractor Specialist.” I was intrigued. What does a Ship Extractor Specialist do? Why would an adventurous fiction writer want to be a Ship Extractor Specialist? Is this profession for real?

Max, a ship extractor specialist, had a skilled job and a skilled team of military trained professionals. His routine job involved going to third world countries and stealing cargo ships from pirates. His death-defying career really pulled me in. I picked up the phone and made a call. My phone call with Max’s agent was informative yet brief. I got all the information that I was looking for, yet they were not keen on working on a TV show. The team had just signed a high profile, Hollywood film deal about a month back and they wanted to wait and see how that project went. I would contact the agent again after two years only to learn that that their film was a success but they were still not interested in developing a reality TV show.

Research takes you to the deepest corners of Google data pages. There is so much information hidden there that one really needs to be like “Indiana Jones” who is on an adventure of discovery. There are no rules; research has no boundaries or methods, each story chooses its own form. One word or one small picture can lead you to the most hidden corners. My search for these unique professions had ended but another story had just begun.

Since my Ship Extractor story was not usable, I decided to look for Airplane Extractor companies. This is what I found:

Nick is an American airplane repossession expert. Based out of Indiana, his company repossesses planes for banks. When a plane owner goes into debt, the bank reclaims the plane. The sneaky owners hide these planes in the most unexpected airstrips of airports around the world. Nick and his team of experts

fight dangerous situations and reclaim or steal the plane back from the owner and return it to the bank. The company has so far repossessed 1,500 airplanes for different clients all over the world. I was impressed by the structure of the company. I had never heard of a profession like this before. I was wondering, now who lives a real life as if one is living a life off a film set? I sent an email to Nick and his associates. The next turn of events took my producers and me completely by surprise. When I had initially connected with Nick, he had just gotten out of a deal with a producer in the U.S. and was looking for a potential production studio for a TV show. Nick already had a TV show but he wasn't too happy with the producers and he was looking for potential studios. My interest in his profile and my email sent him flying to Toronto. He called me on a Monday afternoon to inform me that he was flying in on Wednesday to meet our production team. Nick was flying in his private jet and was going to park at the private bay at Pearson Airport. The moment I relayed this news to my producers, I sensed a silence in the office. The producers were a boutique production studio and were completely unprepared to welcome a reality star from America. The next two days were spent in preparation for Nick's arrival.

Nick arrived with an associate at the studio office. As he walked in, the television at the entrance was playing *Mayday* in a loop. The producers had borrowed a few episodes of *Mayday*, a television series on aircraft crashes and investigations, to be played on the TV only that day. Nick was a small, stubby man. The producers and Nick disappeared into the conference room. The office was silent. I could hear the buzzing tone of the occasional fax machine. I looked around the office and realized that everyone was curious to learn more about Nick, but it seemed like everyone was pretending to be busy. Nick stayed in the conference room for an hour. No one knows what transpired in that room and I'll never know the exact details. Nick and his associate left the office around 4:30 p.m.

It had been three days since Nick left and there was no mention of the conversation and the meeting with him. Barely able to withstand my curiosity, I walked into the producer's office and inquired about the meeting with Nick. I was informed that Nick was going to ask his lawyers to send in some papers but the producer hinted

that we might be walking into murky waters and that the chances were that this deal might not go through. I had experienced one big failure earlier and I thought I knew how to tackle a situation like this. I nodded and walked out of the room silently.

Research is the core of every story. One could take various approaches to research. It could either be informal research where the filmmaker could connect to a great idea through a friend, family member or friend of a friend; the other way to approach this would be by taking the unconventional, formal method. This unconventional method is freer, out of your comfort zone and more challenging. Every research project should lead you to find something new, either a new story or a new culture which could have a story hidden within. Sometimes the journey is not about finding the idea but the information that you have collected during your journey.

My final story is just about that. Research is a key part of my life. I do not have a specific time for research. I research all the time: when I'm traveling, when I'm in cafes or even when I'm in between projects. My mind trails off to find the next interesting TV or documentary story idea more often than I can focus on something. Research is like meditation to me. It soothes me. I relax when I get into the world of researching and it further satisfies me when I find an interesting story idea that I can sell.

It had been more than two years since my last big story. My research process had slowed down a bit. I was still researching and had found some interesting stories; however, none of them were leading me anywhere. I took the opportunity to go through my old notes. It was more of a retrospective look. Sometimes I research for ideas, make notes and move on. I came back to these notes after two years.

It was quite magical to find these notes, these old research story ideas. It gave a fair idea of what I have been researching for all these years. As I was going through them, I could find one common thread, and that was family. I found a blog about mega families. I had sifted through the blog a couple of years back and hadn't searched further. When I came back, I was coming back more mature and experienced. I knew what the broadcasters were looking for now; I didn't know what they

wanted two years back. I was looking at the blog with fresh eyes. My search led me to a Mennonite family of a twelve-member family band. The midwestern family are Iowa farmers and they are on a gospel mission to sing and play music. They live two lives: one on their farm and the other on their forty-five-foot bus that transports them to prisons, churches, camps, festivals and nursing homes, performing a mix of bluegrass and southern gospel music.

Everything about them intrigued me: the size of their family, their religion, their music, the musicians, their performances and their two lives. I felt I had found a quirky yet inspirational American family that the audiences could look up to. I presented the idea to the producers but the initial reaction was a rejection. I wasn't going to let go of this idea easily. I gathered more information and spoke to the head of the family. They sent me write-ups about their family and their activities and they sent me links to their performance videos. The more I saw of them, the more confident I became. Their family videos were charming. The family was simple, had basic values and their mission was to spread love for God. My instinct was: I wish I could meet this family.

The family was visiting Leamington, a small town in Ontario. We agreed to meet on July 15, 2014. The head of the family, Marlin, and I connected and we decided to meet at the Mennonite church in Leamington. It was a four-hour drive into the countryside from Toronto. I was more nervous than excited. I was curious to meet a Mennonite family and see what their church looked like. My exposure to the Mennonites was limited to what I saw in films and on TV, or had read in books. I was completely taken by surprise. The church was filled with 150-200 guests. I entered the church hall with curiosity and eagerness. Little did I realize that I was going to be the center of attention that day. The Mennonite community turned heads to look at the first brown girl they had probably seen in Leamington or maybe even in their whole life. The experience made me self-conscious. I then jumped onto the forty-five-foot long bus to meet the Mennonite family and their kids. The kids also took me by surprise. They took turns to come out and sneaked a glance at me. Their innocence and curiosity made me smile.

The bluegrass music and the family's musical performance at the church left me

spellbound. The music, the energy of the family, the coordination of the musicians and the role of the father as an orchestra conductor was laid out well and well practiced. There were so many issues within the family that were still left to be explored. What was the chemistry between the parents and the kids? How do the family manage to stay on the road and live in a bus six months in a year? Who manages their farm while they were away? What about schooling for the kids? How would the family cope with the girls and boys growing up? Would their band change or stop playing once the older girls get married and move out? There seemed to be too many questions to be answered, too many stories to be told, too many emotions to be explored and shared, too much new gospel music to be recorded and sung.

This was my first idea that went beyond the doors of a production studio in Canada and travelled all the way to the U.S. to a distribution agency. The distributor is currently in talks with a couple of broadcasters in the U.S. If all goes well, this will be my first North American TV show. Reality TV and research has given me an opportunity not only to connect with the unknown world of people, but also to learn more about their life. Research has given me a window into their unseen and unexplored life. Is research a form of documentation? Maybe not a visual documentation, like documentary or photography, but research is definitely a documentation of memories, which still remains least explored.

Research has been a journey full of memories for me. Research is one good reason why I wake up in the morning and rush to my computer. It puts me into a sense of curiosity as to what would I unravel today. It gives me hope to come up with that one brilliant idea which might be a great TV show one day!

I knew I represented hope, and hope cannot display signs of hesitation or weakness. I waved good-bye, I kissed my hand and sent them a kiss and I disappeared among the other travellers. I wasn't afraid. I wasn't nervous. I felt like someone probably feels when released from prison, just at that moment when there is a new life to build and great hopes for a new beginning and happiness.

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ON LETTING GO

Eduardo Nunes Jansen

My biological mother had breast cancer when I was a few weeks old.

Many years after this episode, as a grown-up man, I had enough information about all the elements in play to conceive my own theory and explain why she developed this potentially fatal lump on her left breast, the breast behind which her heart was skillfully nested.

It took me about twenty-five years to somehow articulate the whys, the maybes and the ifs about such an event.

Back then, as an infant, the only knowledge that I had was the possible memory of the time spent in her womb, sharing with her the essential body fluids, oxygen, warmth, movement, sound, darkness, sheltered solitude.

My only possible knowledge was the vital rhythm of her heartbeats, which allowed my own heart to have a reason for beating.

Part of my only sensual knowledge was the solar aura of her areola and nipple in my mouth as I fed on another sacred fluid of hers.

My hands on her body, and on the softness of her breast close to my face, one of my eyelids against her bare skin, the other eye open for more than liquid nourish-



ment, constituted the essential part of my very first experiences outside of her body.

Her scent being read, interpreted and registered in my mind and soul as I took each breath, one of the many precious gifts she has given me, taught me silently about the outside world.

Her hands around me, holding and protecting my vulnerable body, my whole self, initiated me in the realm of movement.

The energy flowing from her veins and mammary glands directly into my mouth and then to my guts, cells, blood and every single aspect of my being taught me about transformation and evolution.

My responses to her, my own inertia and movement as I received her vital energy and passed it along and back to her, to the world, were as if in a mysterious, unrehearsed play.

A quarter of a century later, I was closer to what society says a man is supposed to be.

I would not intend to say the obvious, however stating the obvious truth about who we are, what we do and how we relate to the rest of the world outside our own is one of the most difficult tasks to accomplish.

I have been told I was determined in the womb to settle down and never be born. It took almost half a day for my head to present itself and cross the border between my original universe and the exterior world.

The mouth is this dark cavity that becomes an instrument of connection with the vessel, the nave, the supreme being, the creator of life.

This is the same mouth which I was trained later to use with words in my mother tongue in order to have a similar connection to the world outside of the safe boundaries of my mother's surroundings.

But my mother was separated from me very early and I was not breastfed anymore.

On my first trip to Canada, as soon as I crossed the line separating the people who were travelling from the people who were simply gathering around the international boarding gate hoping to say a last good-bye, I did not look back at first and just kept on walking. Then, after an agent standing at the beginning of a line-up for police inspection of who was leaving the country checked my papers and ticket, I turned around to look at them. My biological mother was standing in the middle

with other members of the family around her. She was crying. Others were crying too, but she was still, and thick tears came down her face. I could see them from a distance. I took a deep breath and did not cry. I wanted to be strong, for that was the beginning of a journey that would save me and allow me to save others as well. I had a goal to reach, a mission to accomplish. I knew I represented hope, and hope cannot display signs of hesitation or weakness. I waved goodbye, I kissed my hand and sent them a kiss and I disappeared among the other travellers. I wasn't afraid. I wasn't nervous. I felt like someone probably feels when released from prison, just at that moment when there is a new life to build and great hopes for a new beginning and happiness.

When a doctor in Recife found that my mother had breast cancer, he gave the news to my father and then decided that they would not tell her anything. She did not demand an explanation or a diagnosis. My father must have told her some vague lie and they left the doctor's office. In Northeastern Brazil, as people say, men decide and whoever is smart enough, obeys.

Within a few days, my father had made arrangements with the only brother he had in São Paulo, in the southern and most developed part of the country, to stay at his place with my mother and take her to "the best *doutor* in town". I can easily imagine my uncle saying that sentence. I almost hear it being said in a carefully enunciated Portuguese of someone who had put himself through school in Rio to become a lawyer.

My parents arrived in São Paulo in the middle of what seemed to be for them the coldest winter of their lives. My mother was thirty-two years old then. They were both born and raised in one of the driest and warmest parts of Brazil, so much closer to the Equator than gigantic São Paulo. They did not have proper clothes for the winter and my uncle's wife, a lean, obsessively Catholic woman, had to lend my mother a few pieces from her wardrobe. The women had very different upbringings and such different accents that they first asked themselves if they would ever be able to communicate properly.

My mother still did not know exactly why she was in São Paulo and she was not about to question her husband's decision.

She had an appointment with “the best doc in town,” thanks to my uncle’s many connections with politicians and the local elite. The diagnosis was confirmed to my father. My mother still did not know exactly why she was in São Paulo, but she would listen carefully to whatever her husband would tell her.

In a few days, she was admitted at the hospital believing that she would go through some analysis. When she found herself in a gown, lying in the surgery room, one of the nurses pulled on her white and beautifully aligned teeth, thinking they were dentures. My mother laughed. The doctor arrived, the anesthetic was given, and only then my mother was told that her left breast was going to be completely removed.

Darkness.

When she woke up, she was immobilized and sedated in bed. Only then she cried.

I woke up in tears and wet. One of my mother’s older sisters had temporarily adopted me while my mother was in São Paulo getting medical attention. That aunt of mine had eight kids: five sons and three daughters. The girls were so excited to have a baby at the farm that while my aunt was busy with the endless chores of managing the house, they would fight to determine who would change my diapers and feed me. I was a few months old and that family was ready to keep me forever in case my mother did not return from the big city in the south.

My brother and sister were under a different aunt’s responsibility.

Most of my mother’s brothers and sisters (there were 18 or 20 overall, my grandmother having spent most of her adult life getting pregnant and having babies) were farmers in northeastern Brazil and they were all more or less spread in the Brazilian *sertão* according to the location of their property.

I spent months of my infant’s life being washed, fed and loved by different girls and women. My mother’s sisters would often visit each other and check on their sick sister’s children.

During dinner, with his whole family sitting around a big table, my uncle would ask to hold me as he ate. My aunt would protest saying how dangerous that was and how easy it would be to burn me with hot soup. He would not reply. He would look at one of the girls and the baby would soon be on his lap.

I lived with this family until I was one year and a few weeks old.

My parents had to stay in São Paulo as my mother recovered and the doctor made sure that there was no more cancer in her body. Missing her children, and having moved with my father to their own house in a small town two hours away from the capital of the State, my mother wished to have her children back.

When I left the farm, I was starting to say my very first words in Portuguese. I could say “Alô!” pretending I was speaking on an old telephone they had in the farmhouse.

One of my female cousins was chosen to accompany my godmother (one of my mother’s sisters who had never married) and I to João Pessoa, the capital of Paraíba, where I was born, in order to meet my father who would wait for us there and take us to São Paulo with him. On the bus to the capital, my cousin and godmother held me and cried all the way.

When I left the farm, I was told many years later, all was silent. My uncle left the house and went into the *caatinga* to return only two days later, exhausted, starving and dehydrated. He nearly killed himself.

My father was not able to take three children to São Paulo on his own. Biatríz, a young woman who had practically been raised at my maternal grandparents’ farmhouse—helping my grandmother with the kitchen and the housework—accepted to accompany my father on the journey. She took care of me, the baby, while my father looked after my brother and my sister, who were respectively six and five years old.

My uncle’s connections allowed my father to take a ride with all of us in a military airplane carrying equipment between Recife and São Paulo. We were shipped like this to the biggest city of Brazil, where my mother, still recovering, waited for us.

As the plane made its descent to our destination, probably turbulence, decompression and stress made me pee on Biatríz, on whose lap I was travelling. I was introduced into my new life in the arms of another new “mother” wearing clothes that smelled like baby’s urine.

I did not let go of Biatríz. I held on to her as if she were the last human being on the face of the earth. I did not want to have anything to do with my biological

mother and refused to leave Biatriz for several days after our landing in São Paulo.

My mother, I was told later, would cry night and day, overwhelmed by guilt, helplessness and despair. When I was finally able to somehow recognize the woman who had started breastfeeding me, probably by her scent and the texture of her skin, I held on to her with my short arms and all my heart. She had to take me everywhere she went, even when going to the toilet and while taking showers. My crib had to be put beside her bed and I would only sleep if I could hold her hand.

I was about three or four years old when my father decided that my crib was already too small for me and too close to his own bed. I was sent to sleep in another bedroom with my siblings and on my new single bed.

The first night, when I asked my sister, who slept on the lower level of a bunk bed that she shared with my brother, to stretch her arm and give me her hand like my mother used to do, I was told that there was a giant crocodile who slept under my bed and who would devour my whole arm if I stretched it outside of the bedframe.

When I come to think of it, that was not my first shock treatment in life on learning to let go.

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SOLDAT DE FORTUNE

Cyrus Sundar Singh

It is November 11, 2014. I contemplate Remembrance Day and the legacy of the one hundredth anniversary of the start of the First World War. I am thinking about photographic images from these and other battlefields. As far back as the mid-nineteenth century, embedded war photographers were sent into battle to capture images that were disseminated through print, and/or were displayed in galleries for public viewing. This was especially the case with pictures of the “enemy” or “prisoners of war” or the “other.” Most times, there was no consent asked for or given for the photographs. The ability to grant consent to someone and the ability to take from someone without consent are flip sides of the same “power” coin. There is power in the ability to grant consent to being photographed. However, the best laid plans, protocols and policies do not always show themselves in the heat of exploding grenades or land mines, flying bullets or air strikes. Wars do bring out the worst in humanity, and in times of war we tend to regress back to the “law of the jungle.” Even when we are not at war, when there is a power imbalance of wealth and poverty, when push comes to shove, the loud will drown out the soft; the aggressor will subjugate. The meek and the voiceless will go hungry.

NARRATIVE ESSAYS

From the moment I walked into the exhibit, *DISPATCH: War Photographs in Print, 1854-2008*, at the Ryerson Image Centre (RIC), I felt as if I were attending a funeral. This feeling became stronger as I headed down the exhibit's long corridor, filled on both sides with images of *War*: soldiers, both friend and foe, dead and living, past and present, full frame, cropped, reduced and enlarged, exhibited in full glory and full gory. Finally, at the end of the hall, I saw what looked to me like a body lying in a casket. I stood in front of this "casket," viewing the diminutive body displayed within. The caption read:

LUC DELAHAYE
French, b. 1962
Taliban
2001
Chromogenic Print
Chrysler Museum of Art, VA,
Gift of Chrysler Contemporaries

The "casket" was actually a large eight-feet by four-feet photograph. The only other item sharing the space was its accompanying caption. I stood before it, silent and pensive, as I have done in front of many actual caskets before interment. The difference here is that this particular viewing will remain forever a viewing—no burial, no song, no fife, no drum. And the person being buried is nameless.

He lies in state, framed in pine against the fallen leaves of autumn's maple gold and copper. Against the khaki and green of soldier's fatigues, a lone shell-casing lies sheltered between his right arm, and body turned left, head turned right, eyes half open, socked feet right over left, almost posing. The vignette is dreadful, bloodstained but graceful, a made-up corpse for staging, gaping wound cut-deep reveals the blow that may have silenced this abandoned foe. The ebb and flow of footprints do not reveal the path taken but cut-deep into shallow dust, bearing witness. The Taliban.¹

What is most notable about the photograph is the complete absence of identity, a narrative bereft of the subject's voice. Only the photographer is named. In contrast, the display to the right of the *Taliban* exhibits a set of five large, black and white photographs depicting U.S. Marines from a series titled *Garmsir Marines* by

photojournalist Louie Palu. The caption is filled with full names, nicknames, ages, ranks and the location of their deployment: *Garmsir District, Helmand Province, Afghanistan*. Each photograph is a full-framed close up of the Marine's face with his helmet on, aesthetically posed and filled with dignity and respect. These photographs espouse a sense of virility, justice, victory, and the power to consent in having their images photographed. It seemed clear that the photographer and the photographed were on the "same side" and were complicit in telling the same story.

I wondered about the role of the photographer in gaining trust from the subject in front of the lens, and the nature of this interaction between photographer and subject. While this consent is both granted and respected, what happens when the subject is unable to grant (as in the case of the dead Taliban) or denies consent? What of the voiceless and the disenfranchised or the meek—is their silence accepted as acquiescence? How does a war photographer navigate the rules of consent while embedded with an army? Do we just see what we are supposed to see in order to perpetuate a certain story? Is there ever truth in photojournalism? Is there such thing as true independence of the press? Photographs lie and so do photographers.

In my own role as a documentary filmmaker, I must procure consent from every subject that I place in front of my camera. In order for me to deliver my finished film for broadcast, I am required to also deliver an Errors and Omissions (E&O) certificate for insurance purposes. This E&O certificate is only granted if there is explicit consent from all subjects who appear in the documentary. Almost always, subjects sign a release form. Very occasionally this consent may be visually/verbally recorded on camera. Without this consent, the film cannot be broadcast. Therefore, it is incumbent upon me as the filmmaker to have full consent, ideally in writing, from every subject before I press record. This is standard practice within the television broadcast industry. However, surprisingly, this does not appear to be the case with embedded photojournalists and documentary photographers.

At the October 1, 2014 opening of the *DISPATCH* exhibition, photojournalist Louie Palu, whose work was featured in the exhibition, spoke with curator Dr. Thierry Gervais. The exhibition examined the production of war photographs, the

role of photojournalists, and their collaboration with picture editors in the press.² In his presentation, Palu spoke eloquently about his oeuvre to date. He spoke of why, where and how he approached the subject(s) through his lens. Palu also established for the audience the kind of person that he was: from his roots as a child of Italian immigrants in Canada to his art-school tenure to his first break as a photojournalist. He connected the aesthetics of his photography directly to European painters and their art, and proudly stated, “What we do is painting,”³ thereby, justifying the art gallery space as an appropriate forum for photojournalists and for the general public to engage in debates about world issues.

Palu’s talk also centered on war photography and his time embedded with soldiers in combat, in particular with the U.S. Marines in Afghanistan. During the Q&A following his presentation, this writer asked Palu how he acquires consent from his subjects, especially those in combat. Palu replied that consent is procured “on a case-by-case basis.” Photojournalists embedded within the U.S. Army only do so with full consent of the army to capture the events on the battlefield as long as those pictures, which will go through a vetting and censoring process, support the narrative of the government. Individual soldiers may or may not have the power to grant or deny consent, or do they? Palu went on to indicate that if a soldier is really upset and does not want to be photographed, Palu acquiesces to his wishes. He provided the following anecdote:

“I’ve been in the middle of firefights where guys are dragging their dead friend down the trench and they’re like ‘don’t fucking take pictures.’ I have been threatened, and or I’ve had friends who’ve gotten out of the Medevac helicopter, I think some Marines were loading some children they had accidentally mortared and one of them walked right up to my friend, a photographer, and punched him in the face. I tell you now, it’s all haywire. You’re allowed to be there, it’s loud in the helicopter and you get punched in the face. I use balance; there are times I’m taking photographs... it’s a case-by-case basis.”⁴

In a *McGill Reporter* article posted on Monday, October 29, 2012, Louie Palu was asked about his thoughts on the prevalence of affordable smart phones and the emergence of citizen photojournalists who witness or participate in the conflict itself:

“If someone participates in the conflict or an event they are covering, then they are not

neutral witnesses and, by my definition, generally are not journalists. The camera has empowered many people to do many things, which I think is a great thing; however, that does not make anyone or everyone with a camera a journalist.”⁵

In my subsequent email exchange with Palu, he offered the following statements about his work while he was embedded with the Marines:

“...Just to clarify, soldiers and marines have an ‘enemy’, I don’t as I am a photojournalist. I am not a combatant nor do I carry a weapon of any kind. All my work was published in the media and I am not aware of any of my work being used for propaganda as my work can only be used in a journalistic context. Usually my presence on the battlefield, especially in firefights is forgotten, soldiers are busy doing their job and are busy fighting and focused on that not me. Also the Taliban do not give embeds or normally take journalists out with them unless in rare circumstances they are paid, but normally they kidnap or kill journalists so I can’t say what the insurgents offer journalists.”

It is interesting to note that Palu owns the copyright to all his photographs and documentary content, and they can only be used for editorial purposes. All other usage “REQUIRES PERMISSION FROM THE PHOTOGRAPHER.”⁶

In 2004, Orville Schell, Dean of the University of California, Berkeley Journalism School, and Eric Stover, war crimes reporter, explored the nature of embedded journalism at UC Berkeley’s conference *The Media At War: The U.S. Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*. Issues explored included how living and eating under fire with U.S. troops influenced reporters. Did journalists ask enough hard questions about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq? And most importantly, were their stories accurate?

Stover and Schell brought together a large cast of prominent journalists to conduct a post-mortem on the media’s coverage of the Iraq War. The first issue was embedded reporting. Embedded journalism is not a new phenomenon, but never before have reporters taken part in the assault on a major city like Baghdad from inside military vehicles. Among other issues, they explored ethical questions such as journalists pointing out targets they see to military personnel, or, when does patriotism end and the independence of the press begin?⁷ “Embedded reporting is a good idea, but it shouldn’t be the only food item on the menu,” says Schell. “Getting coverage only from embedded reporters is like looking only into a microscope. What we need is something of the broader picture, and the chance to know other

aspects of the whole enterprise.”⁸

There is a long history of war photographers and embedded journalism. From the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, photography was the new tool for documenting the world around us. Over the course of a hundred years, documentary images were captured with a long list of quickly evolving photographic equipment and materials. One of the earliest subjects of photojournalism was the battlefield, and starting in the mid-nineteenth century, war photography became a staple in Europe, the U.K. and North America, producing many iconic photographs.

The first battle to be photographed for publication was the Mexican-American War (1846-48); then, twenty years later, the American Civil War (1861-65), where the Northern Union army was pitted against the Southern Confederate army, not only on the battlefield, but also within the ranks of the photojournalists. Many Union and Southern war photographers were sent to cover the battles, and according to the Photographic History of the Civil War, “Many photographs were taken by Southerners, but most were lost to history. The natural disappointment in the South at the end of the war was such that photographers were forced to destroy all negatives.”⁹

On August 14, 2009, Associated Press (AP) photographer Julie Jacobson was embedded with the U.S. Marines in Dahaneh, Afghanistan. When Lance Corporal Joshua M. Bernard was mortally wounded by a Taliban fighter’s rocket-propelled grenade, Jacobson captured the aftermath with her camera. In his 2009 article for National Public Radio blog, writer Frank James notes that:

“The photo is a rarity, a picture of a fatally injured American fighting man in Afghanistan or Iraq and so it’s news worthy for that reason alone. But the same thing that makes the photo news, also makes it extremely troubling for many people to view. It is difficult to witness the moments when a young service member’s life is ebbing away. For that reason, AP didn’t release the photo as early as it could have. In an article published Friday, the news service explains that it waited until after the funeral of the Maine native due to the photo’s sensitivity.”¹⁰

Was such respect extended to our nameless Taliban described above? Do we

just see what we are supposed to see in order to perpetuate a certain story? Is the subject just an instrument, played by someone else? Is there ever truth in photo-journalism? Is there such thing as true independence of the press?

Todd Gitlin, professor of Journalism and Sociology at Columbia University and panelist at the UC Berkeley's conference, *The Media At War: The U.S. Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*, asserted that the military and the media do not necessarily have irreconcilable interests. However, he noted that, "Embeddedness has a built-in swerve toward propaganda... because an embedded reporter is on the team." A reporter shares the risk and is dependent on the soldiers he is traveling with for his very life. The desire to write negative stories about them, said Gitlin, is quite diminished. Even for a reporter riding in a tank with American soldiers, any casualties inflicted by the crew usually occur off screen and out of sight. The result, said Gitlin, is that the point of view of the reporter approximates the view of the government's own camera. War reporting becomes a travelogue. He likened some war coverage—particularly that practiced by television—to a televised sporting event. Rather than journalism, it becomes entertainment. When the primary motive of media institutions becomes audience share, then these institutions "seek a rapture of attention" in order to procure as many eyeballs as possible. This, said Gitlin, conflicts with "a journalistic duty not to please," but rather to shake the safe assumptions of their audience.

The statue of Saddam Hussein being pulled off its pedestal by a crowd tells a story, a visual story of a toppled ruler. However, according to Barbie Zelizer of the Annenberg School of Communication, University of Pennsylvania, that powerful image also seemed to symbolize what was happening in the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. Such inferences are inevitable, and she said, they are questionable—especially when a wider view shows that the crowds are minimal, and it is American soldiers actually doing the toppling.

Zelizer offered a related critique of print journalism. She focused on the use of photographs, many of which she deemed to be both visually dazzling and journalistically inappropriate. During times of war, newspapers make much more extensive use of photographs, said Zelizer, publishing more photos than normal,

giving them greater prominence, displaying them larger and using more color photos. One example: The New York Times more than doubled its usual number of photos during the war. Photos have explicit subject matter but they also have suggestive power, and they should be more widely recognized as reporting, contended Zelizer.¹¹

Zelizer displayed a portfolio of exquisitely composed photos that had appeared in the nation's newspapers. For instance, there was the shot of a handful of Iraqis against a desert backdrop with the dusty sky glowing a luminescent orange. The photo was placed in the newspaper above a group of battle stories. Such images are artistic, dramatic, even beautiful, but not newsworthy, argued Zelizer. In effect, she said, they use eye-popping color to dazzle, and end up masking the darkness of death. How did the war images published by the media "function"? asked Zelizer. Often, she said, they served patriotic and not journalistic purposes. The prevalence of these beautiful images provided a prism for patriotism and thus, she said, became tools of public consensus that facilitated U.S. military and political ends.¹²

In his 2003 interview with Bill Sullivan at New York's Ricco-Maresca Gallery, photographer Luc Delahaye comments on his infamous 1994 Taliban photograph: "He was dead a few minutes lying in a ditch." Dressed in a khaki uniform, his boots stolen, the corpse has a grace that almost seems posed. The photograph itself looks like it might have been taken by someone floating high above in a balloon. All time seems to have stopped. "This is an example of fast," Delahey continued. "In my head I am thinking only of the process. Do I have enough light? Is the distance good? Speed too? This is what allows me to maintain an absence or distance to the event. If I impose myself too much, look for a certain effect, I'd miss the photo. This happened very fast; I need to make it slow. I see the two crossing in my mind."¹³ Delahey adds, "Photojournalism is neither photography or journalism. It has its function but it's not where I see myself: the press is for me just a means for photographing, for material—not for telling the truth."¹⁴

In a subsequent 2007 interview by the writer/founder/editor of *Conscientious Extended*, Joerg Colberg asked Delahaye about the controversy surrounding the display and sale of the Taliban photograph in a gallery with a price tag of fifteen

thousand dollars. Delahaye responds, “I’m avoiding these discussions.” Colberg further states:

“...we’ve lately seen the development of photography that lives at the intersection of photojournalism and art... In a sense, there never was such a clear distinction between photojournalism and fine art in the first place, with many photographers, like Henri Cartier-Bresson, working right in that gray zone. But, I think, in the eye of the public, photography still is either art or photojournalism, or something that is not necessarily real or outright fabricated and something that is a depiction of reality. There are all kinds of problems I see with this. For example, shouldn’t we be a bit concerned if the aftermath of a natural (and, to a large extent, man-made) disaster can only be found in museums or art galleries—the places where many people expect to find, well, art—something that doesn’t necessarily reflect “reality?” Don’t we move things that need to be discussed in quite a bit of seriousness into a space which might suppress this discussion?”¹⁵

Delahaye’s response: “I don’t really feel concerned by this issue—the issue of the classification of my pictures by their viewers.”

Delahaye’s infamous *Taliban* image feels like homage to another photograph one hundred and thirty years earlier. In 1863, Union photographers Timothy O’Sullivan and Alexander Gardner captured two iconic pictures of the American Civil War. These men were on the field during the Battle of Gettysburg, shooting images of the aftermath for their *Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War*. One photograph, entitled *Home of the Rebel Sharpshooter* depicts a Confederate corpse sprawled in a trench; a second, *A Sharpshooter’s Last Sleep*, shows another corpse in a different location, with Gardner’s published caption suggesting this was a Union soldier. However, experts have identified the corpse as being identical in both shots. For Brian Winston, “The only explanation is that Gardner was lugging a body around with him, re-costuming it as he went and even, some suggest, turning the head despite rigor mortis.”¹⁶ Winston further states, “The central question for documentary ethics is how much mediation is ethical?”¹⁷

Similarly, in 1862, Gardner’s photograph from the Civil War battlefield was the first war photograph to be publicly displayed at Matthew Brady’s New York Studio. The review in *The New York Times* stated:

“The Dead of Antietam both horrified and fascinated people. It was the first time in history that the general public was able to see the true carnage of war. One reporter wrote, “Mr.

NARRATIVE ESSAYS

Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along streets, he has done something very like it.”¹⁸

Outside of war, embeddedness can also be called into question when the photographers are outsiders creating a greater narrative without the true participation or consent of the subjects. In 1936, *Fortune* magazine paired poet James Agee and photographer Walter Evans, on an assignment to Hale County, Alabama to produce “an article about the cotton tenantry in the United States.”¹⁹ Likewise, Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell were on assignment to capture the sharecroppers in the Deep South. Agee and Evans spent two months embedded with three families of white tenant farmers photographing and recording their daily living conditions. Although *Fortune* did not publish the article, Agee and Evans published it four years later as the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The authors stated, “The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent and fully collaborative.” Although their mission was to photograph reality, in fact, the scenes were posed and constructed for the camera. Furthermore, the tenant farmers were not given a voice. They became mere two-dimensional objects through Evans’ lens and a backdrop for Agee’s patronizingly abstract prose. There is so much text that it is easy to get lost in its forest of philosophical pontifications.

It is interesting to note that four popular magazines of the day, *Fortune*, *Life*, *Time* and *Sports Illustrated* were all owned by a singular entity, Time Incorporated. They had the lion’s share of magazine circulation, and also contracted a select group of these photographers and writers for their editorial content. If a picture paints a thousand words, then the camera becomes an invaluable tool for the media to manipulate the message.

Whether or not the pictures are colour or black in white, the issues of consent, embeddedness, exploitation, propaganda (both inside and outside war) and for commercial and artistic purposes are not black and white. There are many nuanced shades in this discussion.

I end my exploration with the words of award-winning documentary photographer Vincenzo Pietropaolo.²⁰ In his long and distinguished career, Pietropaolo’s photographs have been displayed in numerous solo and group exhibitions,

permanent collections both private and public, and numerous publications; he has published over eight books but has never procured a written consent from any of his subjects. In a recent telephone interview, Pietropaolo stated, “I feel that getting a written consent from my subjects would hamper my ability to capture the decisive moment. There’s an unspoken consent that is implicit in the moment between the subject, the camera and me. I stay true to the intent of why I took their picture and as long as I do not juxtapose their images against a completely unrelated story or sell it for commercial purposes, that’s all the consent that I require.”²¹ It is also interesting to note, however, that Pietropaolo’s website contains the following explicit warning, “All images are the property of Vincenzo Pietropaolo Photography and cannot be used or published without his express written consent.”²² There is clearly a line between consent to be photographed and the copyright inherent within that photograph for artistic and industry-related commercial exploitation or end use.

NARRATIVE ESSAYS

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¹ Cyrus Sundar Singh, Taliban

^{2,3,4} Ryerson Image Centre, "Dispatch: War Photographs in Print, 1854-2008," curated by Dr. Thierry Gervais, <http://www.ryerson.ca/ric/exhibitions/Dispatch.html>.

⁵ "Four Burning Questions for Louie Palu, Photojournalist," McGill Reporter, October 29, 2014, <http://publications.mcgill.ca/reporter/2012/10/for-louie-palu-photojournalist/>.

⁶ Louie Palu, www.louiepalu.com.

^{7,8} Bonnie Azab Powell, "Reporters, Commentators, Visit Berkeley to Conduct in-depth Postmortem of Iraq War Coverage," UC Berkeley News, March 15, 2014, http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/03/15_mediatwar.shtml

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photographers_of_the_American_Civil_War

¹⁰ Frank James, "Photo of Marine's Fatal Wounding Sparks Debate," The Two-Way: Breaking News from NPR, http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2009/09/photo_of_marines_fatal_woundin.html?sc=nl&cc=totn-20090908

^{11,12} Jeffery Kahn, "Postmortem: Iraq War Media Coverage Dazzled But it is Also Obscured," UC Berkeley News, March 18, 2004, http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/03/18_iraqmedia.shtml

^{13,14} Bill Sullivan, "The Real Thing: Photographer Luc Delahaye," <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/sullivan/sullivan4-10-03.asp>.

¹⁵ Joerg Colberg, "A Conversation with Luc Delahaye," Conscientious Extended, June 12, 2007, http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/a_conversation_with_luc_delahaye/.

^{16,17} Brian Winston, "Ethics," in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal and John Corner, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 182.

¹⁸ Terry L. Jones, "The Dead of Antietam," The New York Times, September 24, 2014, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/24/the-dead-of-antietam/?_r=0.

¹⁹ James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. Forward.

²⁰ Vincenzo Pietropaolo, "Portfolio," http://www.bulgergallery.com/dynamic/fr_artist_cv.asp?ArtistID=62

²¹ Phone interview with Vincenzo Pietropaolo with author, November 13, 2014.

²² Vincenzo Pietropaolo, "Books," <http://vincepietropaolo.com/books>.

*As in Muay Thai, the art of
documentary is to express oneself
honestly, and follow through with
mutual growth and respect, and
when in need, to defend oneself
and free oneself from oppression.*

.....

THE ART OF EIGHT LIMBS: BRIDGING THE WORLDS OF MARTIAL ARTS AND DOCUMENTARY MAKING

Philip Skoczkowski

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“But mommy, I don’t want to hurt the other kids!” was how I ended training karate as a child. I was seven or eight years old, growing up in Ottawa, Canada. I remember first entering the dojo, petrified of the other kids shouting out their Katas, the ultimate shock for an introverted only child. Despite not really knowing why I took up the martial art, whether it was my own decision at all in the first place, the journey ended before it got started. Though I went back to karate in my early teen years, but never going past an orange belt, I never really made much out of martial arts at first. You do all these push-ups, squats, awkward stances and stretches. My young mind could not conceive of what all this training meant; the notion of *craft* was not yet prominent. Shying away from physical contact sports, I immersed myself into photography—a *craft*, that only later on I realized had much more to do with awkward situations, stretching oneself and being strong, than I ever would’ve imagined. My late teens ended up with me training in two *crafts*: photography alongside a newly developed love for Muay Thai. *The art of eight limbs*, Thai people call it. It is the most damage provoking of the martial arts: using your shins, knees, fists and elbows, Muay Thai can be deadly. It was meant to be deadly. Used by the



King's soldiers, ancient Muay Thai, known as Muay Boran, was the unarmed form of military combat. Meant to cut straight to its targets, this martial art has been used in warfare amongst South East Asia's greatest armies, but not exclusively. It has served Buddhist monks as a tool for community teaching. Being introduced to Muay Thai is like taking on an informal (or sometimes formal) oath—you are meant to better yourself to have the capability to better the lives of others. In contemporary Thailand and Cambodia, young boys have hundreds of fights under their belts. Serving as a way of income, on which entire families may rely, the lifestyle is a tough one indeed. One can consider Muay Thai as a form of *expressing oneself honestly*, that is, if one wants to take on the burdens that come along with it, the *will to fight*.

[Now may I inform you at this point that I am writing this narrative as I myself am developing a will to fight, in a literal and metaphorical way, as a martial artist, and as a photographer.]

At this point, you might be asking, but what does Muay Thai have to do with some guy taking photographs? The answer is both that I selfishly want to share my thoughts on a physical activity I enjoy, and that this art of eight limbs can be translated into an equal amount of essential points on becoming what I want to call a human-developmental visual artisan: a photographer dealing with challenging sociopolitical situations that restrict or retard human development. My early twenties were all about looking at critical approaches to past, present and future human development forms. The realities seem grim, and there is a real urgency in honest action, without wasting away human capacity and capabilities, which is a framework within which much of the world operates. To use the words of a true legend:

Man listen. You see—really—to me, ok, to me, ultimately martial art means honestly expressing yourself. Now it is very difficult to do. It is easy for me to put on a show and be cocky and be flooded with a cocky feeling and then feel like pretty cool and all that. Or I can make all kinds of phony things—you see what I mean—blinded by it, or I can show you some really fancy movement, but to express oneself honestly, not lying to oneself and to express myself honestly, now that, my friend, is very hard to do; and you have to train, you have to keep your reflexes so that when you want it, it's there. When you want to move, you're moving, and when you move you are determined to move—not taking one inch—not anything less than that.

— Bruce Lee

One can take these words literally, but their application is quite transcending and applicable to everything from martial arts to craftsmanship, to individual human development or civilizational development. In this piece, I will attempt to use lessons learned and taught in Muay Thai to briefly introduce eight practices, or intentions, one may consider when taking up various forms of documentary making.

Firstly, without getting too deep into the vastly celebrated use of visual media in practitioner- researcher, human development engagement, it is important to note that the use of photography or video is increasingly playing more prominent roles in facilitating truly engaging citizen practices. With Brazil as a exemplary leader in participatory video and action research for citizen action, Donald Snowden, who pioneered its use in 1967, describes the process:

“The ability to view immediately one’s self speaking on videotape assists individuals to see themselves as others see them. This self-image conveys the impression immediately that one’s own knowledge is important and that it can be effectively communicated. These video techniques create a new way of learning, which not only build confidence, but show people that they can say and do things that they thought were not possible before.”¹

The use of audio/visual for real political processes is a powerful tool, perhaps just as much, if not more, than its use in art galleries or other settings. Documentation reflects the world and conversely has the ability to shape it. Especially today, with social media capabilities through the roof, our world is being widely documented every second of the time. From Instagram, Twitter, Facebook or YouTube to more succinct forms of information narration such as e-zines, or portfolios. The world is watching and reflecting what it is seeing, cyclically moving through regurgitated direction being shown in the media. Hence the emphasis on how important the creation of documentaries is. If one wants to enter this battle of voices, one better have the will to fight. The following paragraphs will describe eight points to consider when entering the documentary ring. As in Muay Thai, the art of documentary is to express oneself honestly, and follow through with mutual growth and respect, and when in need, to defend oneself and free oneself from oppression.

I. Confrontation.

This can be understood in two ways. Confronting your subject of interest or confronting the issue at hand. Either way, in order to gain access to one's world, one has to face it. Directly or indirectly, confrontation refers to the exchange of vulnerabilities. It takes great courage to confront someone or something and it is usually the first step in formulating opinion. Like entering a dojo, or throwing that first punch in the ring, confrontation gets the story started. It is crucial to keep an open mind as you do not know what will be the first strike, what kind of person you are facing, or what kind of organization or complex situation you are entering.

II. Acknowledgement.

The second point is to acknowledge what or who is at hand, to understand the issue or opponent you are facing. This requires the use of imagination and nudging, jabbing it with questions and prepositions. Exchange of blows, or simply human interaction, allows for the unfolding of events. Action and reaction. Acknowledgement and appropriation. In order to be able to document, one needs to accept certain truths, strengths, weaknesses.

III. Dance.

You need two to tango. Documentation cannot happen without energy bouncing back and forth. From the most basic concepts of body language towards your subjects to more complex notions of layered interaction with the subject—this includes research and reassessment of it. Getting access into an individual's world is one thing, while getting access to particular spaces and places is a whole other level of the dance. Despite using the term dance, by no means is this to be taken frivolously. Muay Thai is a form of dance: there is a band that dictates the tempo of the fight and there are the fighters that dish out the moves. In documentary, there is the urgency of creating a body of work along with the stakeholders involved in the issues. The tempo is set by various parameters and the ability to dance accordingly is crucial.

IV. Grace vs Nature.

*“Grace doesn’t try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries. ... Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it over them. To have its own way.”*² This is probably the most contradicting point to make, however, a key facet in the art of eight limbs, whether it be Muay Thai or documentary making. A fine balance is required, where flow of acceptance is complemented with strength of action. It is not always possible to get access to places, spaces or individuals. Accepting certain realities is key in appropriating progressive behavior, in adapting to the situation. Grace is required for truths to be revealed while nature is required to prevent grace from turning into passivity. As graceful as one should be, it should not be mistaken that taking up the role of a documentarian has to come with a somewhat forceful nature of communicating vital information.

V. Calculated Moves.

The best documentaries seem to be done so naturally, they allow the audience to immerse themselves into the lives of others, into situations beyond their sight. While content is, without a doubt, at the epicentre of documentary, appropriating all moves is crucial. This means everything from the medium being used, to editing, to distribution of it all. Moves matter. Whether it is making use of specific technologies to achieve stylistic virtues, or if it’s using specific content to allow the viewer to make up their own opinion, documentary can have an unbelievable influence on collective action.

VI. Participation.

As mentioned in the beginning, participatory forms of media for human development have never been more relevant. From practitioner-researcher engagement for civil society action in Brazil to fighting Russian propaganda and calling-up-for-arms cinema of civil protest in the Ukraine, documentary must be participatory, with a cause. Muay Thai has a strong tradition of passing on knowledge of the art, as

so should documentary as a form of knowledge transfer of itself. Documentarians cannot be self-absorbed individuals who merely reach out when they need to create content. Being immersed into the societal realms of what is at stake is fundamental in attempting to make sense out of it.

VII. Discovery.

Self-improvement, not to be misinterpreted as self-masturbation, as notoriously pointed out by Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*, is at the heart of human development. By stripping away the things you think you know and striving to push your boundaries is how *cinéma vérité* largely functions, after all. The constant thirst for discovery and reflection is another fundamental point in the art of eight limbs. Seeking more knowledge should be a mantra of any fighter or documentarian for that matter.

VIII. Respect.

This probably should've been the first point made. One cannot emphasize enough about respect, how valuable it is to the whole process of exchange, interaction, confrontation or dance. It is the first thing you must abide to when taking up Muay Thai training. Without it, there is no training; there is no progress, only opinionated ego—staleness.

Creating documentaries is not merely a process of gathering information and presenting it in an intentional, often seemingly objective way. I have attempted to present some of the lessons that Muay Thai has to offer as not only a martial art, but more so as a lifestyle choice. Honestly expressing oneself, being at the epicentre of it, the art of eight limbs is a craft that requires you to better yourself so you can better the lives of those surrounding you. Though I have been slowly assimilating these teachings into my photo documentary practices, the process is long and requires a lot of determination. The main point to convey from this is that docu-

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mentary can be a utterly powerful tool facilitating human development, however it must be taken on seriously, as with great power comes great responsibility.

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¹ Donald Snowden, "Eyes See; Ears Hear," (Memorial University, 1983), <http://www.fao.org/docrep/X0295E/x0295e06.htm>.

² Terrence Malick, *Tree of Life*, 2011, taken from *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis (see Book 3, Chapter 54).

The analog-digital issue has gotten sidetracked in an unfortunate for-or-against debate about which is “better,” bypassing the fact that each medium has its strengths and weaknesses and they should not be compared as equals. Analog and digital are, to certain extent, different languages, and it should be recognized, as in linguistics, that the language you use forms a framework for your thoughts.

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THE MESSAGE OF THE MEDIUM

Orri Jónsson

On a dusky Tuesday morning in October 2011, I received a phone call from a friend of mine, bassist and composer Skúli Sverrisson. He told me he had an album's worth of material, arranged for acoustic bass and tenor saxophone, and asked if I would be interested in recording it. Say, tomorrow? He wanted to record it in a certain church in Reykjavik that had specifically vibrant acoustics and he wanted to record everything live to tape. Hence the phone call to me, knowing that I only recorded to tape. I was in.

The next morning, I drove to my studio and loaded a van with my 1" 16-track recorder, 4-channel tube pre-amplifier, several microphones, headphones, cables and other stuff I thought I might need. Once everything was set up in the church—the tape machine calibrated, four microphones in position, two for each instrument, one close and one further away—it was already past 7:00 pm. After having some food at a nearby restaurant, we went back to the church, they picked up their instruments, I put on my headphones... ready?

It was about 9:00 pm when I pushed *record*. At 11:30 pm we had successfully recorded the whole album, ten tracks, often not needing more than one take to

get the desired performance of a song, never more than three. Before packing our equipment back into the van, we sat down for a beer to celebrate a successful night of recording, Skúli still improvising on his bass in between sips. All of a sudden, he asked us if we minded doing another take of one song, since he sensed that we had moved into a somewhat different nocturnal mood, which he thought might suit one song. After a successful first take, he asked again if we would mind trying the same thing with another song and, sure enough, I pushed *rec* again. This continued until about 2:00 am, at which time we had recorded all the songs again, with a completely different feel to them, and these second recordings ended up on the final album, *The Box Tree*.

Anyone who has experienced, either as a musician or a technician, the usual recording process for an album will know that this way of working—recording a whole album twice in one night, with only live performances, no overdubs and no editing— would hardly be done on a computer. That is not to say that it could not be done, in fact there are some aspects of recording to a computer that would have made this easier than recording to tape. For example, it's easier to transport a laptop computer to different locations than an 80kg tape recorder, and the length restraints of a tape reel do not apply to the computer. However, the computer programs used for recording music are in fact designed as editing programs; by their very nature, they suggest extended post-production. Once you've recorded your audio onto a computer, you *see* it in front of you as a visual file on your screen, hopelessly unedited, and I have yet to hear of a musician or a recording engineer who has left that alone and released it unaltered.

As I grow older, I realize, more and more, how fortunate I was to have learned photography and recording techniques the analog way. This statement should not be misunderstood, yet, it frequently has, as a call to arms on my behalf in an imaginative war of analog vs. digital where my aim is to prove, once and for all, the infinite superiority of analog over digital. Although, after numerous attempts to use digital tools for my work, I have come to realize that I am somewhat digitally impaired, in no way do I begrudge the digital medium as a toolkit for creative purposes, even if its merit as an archival medium still seems quite questionable. My

concerns revolve around the predominant notion that digital is, by some presumed law of evolution, infinitely better than analog and should replace it in all aspects of creative work.

I still remember when the first audio samplers became available and how excited I was about this tool. The possibilities seemed endless and it really opened up a new way to make music in a more self-sufficient way. The thought of being able to make rhythms from any recorded sound and manipulate it to extremes was a revelation for me as a teenage drummer. Nevertheless, my attempts at using this tool in innovative ways turned out to be fruitless, and my first and only sampler rests comfortably in its original box in storage, relatively unused.

I have become increasingly interested in how, for artists, the tools we choose to work with, specifically relating to analog vs. digital, frame our creative thinking—how working in analog inevitably brings you down a certain route and how that journey influences your thought process, the ideas you get and, therefore, the end result. And, to what extent working in digital brings your work onto another path and what that does to your creative process. Over the past few years, I have recorded numerous conversations with artists working in different mediums about this issue and how they feel it affects their work: photographers, musicians, music producers/engineers, authors, publishers, curators, film directors, film editors, etc.

People often have strong opinions about surface-based issues regarding this: how gelatin silver prints differ from digital prints, vinyl records sound different from CDs, movies shot on film look different from those shot on digital media, etc. But I'm not after those issues so much, although they inevitably come into the equation to some degree. I want to dive deeper. There are some fundamental differences between these two worlds and I am curious to find out to what extent artists are aware of these differences and how it shapes their creative work—in what way it frees them up and what they see as obstacles, how the choices they make regarding each medium affects their workflow and how it may result in a somewhat different outcome, even conceptually, depending on their tool of choice.

One of my favorite Icelandic authors is Gyrðir Elíasson. He writes novels, poetry and short stories as well as being a prolific translator of authors like Richard

Brautigan, Velma Wallis, William Saroyan and others into Icelandic. His prose is quite unique, economic and dense, while eloquent and easily readable. To read him is not unlike drinking water, only later to realize that what you had was something much stronger and more nourishing. I knew from friends that Gyrðir had resisted using computers for a long time, being sensitive to the fact that, in the words of musician David Byrne, “neutral technology does not exist.” Gunther Grass claims that he can recognize the writing tool of any author from the first paragraph and Gyrðir’s own prose differs from that of most other writers in that it is extremely precise and understated, while highly personal. I was curious to know to what extent his style could be contributed to his working method since, judging from his consistent tone, he seemed to have found a way of using this tool without sacrificing his characteristic style. I went for a visit and, after expressing his hesitation towards switching from typewriter to computer, he described his working method to me.

Gyrðir always carries a notebook and constantly writes down ideas or paragraphs, usually on his long daily walks through Reykjavík suburbia or in the woods by his summerhouse; from those notes he handwrites the first draft with pen on paper.

When he feels the structure and flow of the piece is relatively clear, he types it into his computer, making multiple changes, inserting new ideas triggered by the physical action of his hands typing. He has set his Word program so that all he sees on the screen is a blank page with no visible editing options like cut, paste, font size, font type etc., simulating the blank page in a typewriter. Then he waits, sometimes for a few days, sometimes a few weeks, before printing the manuscript out and reading it from the printed pages while making changes with a pencil. Again, he waits. Then, putting the revised manuscript on the table next to his computer, instead of editing the file according to the changes he made, he opens up a blank document and writes everything again from beginning to end. He feels this encourages him to rethink it and it is a way to get back into the flow of his text, and multiple unforeseen things happen that he would not have thought of otherwise. He repeats this process as often as he deems necessary, often four or five times,

before he is satisfied with the work. Crucially, each time he prints a new version out of the computer, he changes the font type. He feels this helps him to read the text with somewhat different eyes, bringing forth nuances that he might not otherwise have noticed.

I got the chance to pick the curious brain of David Byrne once, when he was in Iceland for a concert, and he described to me a similar approach when writing an article for a New York newspaper. He had been working on it for quite a while in the computer, cutting and pasting his text until he felt everything he wanted to say was there. However, when he printed it out and read it over, he was not satisfied. Although all the points he wanted to make were there, the text felt ugly and did not read well. After searching for a solution to this, he decided, since the material was still fresh in his head, to scrap the whole piece and re-write it from scratch in one go, resulting in an article that had a more natural flow to it and was much more readable.

Like Icelandic musician Björk, Byrne came into music via the analog route but was immediately excited about the digital process and continues to make use of both mediums in his creative work. He described the process of working with musician Annie Clark, aka St. Vincent, on their collaborative album *Love This Giant*, as a mix of analog and digital methods. He maintains that the writing and arranging of the material could only have happened through the computer. Not only because he and Clark were often located in different cities, but also because the editing nature of their recording software allowed for them to bounce rough ideas off each other, fractions of songs that they would send over the Internet and each would then elaborate on and send back. However, Byrne wanted to do the recordings of the brass instruments that dominate the soundscape of the album without any editing, in order to preserve the live feel of the performances. To do so, he told the musicians that no editing would be done afterwards, and that their performances would stand unaltered, thereby enforcing a tape-restriction on the players, although recording to a computer.

Knowing what each medium does well and where its weaknesses lie can reveal a world of possibilities for approaching your creative work and makes for informed

decisions that can lead you down paths that you didn't know existed. The analog-digital issue has gotten sidetracked in an unfortunate for-or-against debate about which is "better," bypassing the fact that each medium has its strengths and weaknesses and they shouldn't be compared as equals. Analog and digital are, to certain extent, different languages, and it should be recognized, as in linguistics, that the language you use forms a framework for your thoughts. I would say that my first language is analog, my second digital, and I often run into problems when I try to translate between the two.

This issue, as it specifically relates to the film industry, was tackled to some extent in the film *Side by Side*, directed by Christopher Kenneally, where Keanu Reeves asks numerous directors, editors, actors and producers about the effect that the presumed death of film has had on the medium. Some observations in the film are rather predictable, like the fact that the pace of the average feature film has become visibly faster due to the ease with which the digital editing process can shuffle shots and scenes back and forth with a simple click of a button. Other issues are not quite as obvious to an outsider, like how the possibility of instantly viewing each take on the set affects the performances of the actors. According to some directors, it makes the actors more self-conscious and it shows in their performances. Another aspect affecting the performers is the fact that, prior to the digital era, each take had a time limit of about fifteen minutes, after which the camera needed to be re-loaded with fresh film and the camera gate checked for dirt. The testimonies of the actors interviewed in the film were quite different: some of them relied on the pace of these fifteen-minute sequences and needed the slight pause in between takes to collect themselves, while others strongly resented the film-imposed length limitation of each shot, preferring to keep going in order not to get out of character.

Still other issues are more complicated, like the fact that now it is possible to create almost any fantasy world or creature in hyper-resolution, making alternative realities more believable to the viewer. How this affects the creativity of the filmmaker is still somewhat questionable. George Lucas is the filmmaker who goes farthest in his marvelling at the possibilities of digital filmmaking; in my mind, a

prime example of a director whose creativity depended on the technical limitations of his medium. As the evolution of digital wizardry within the film industry allowed him to produce more believable renditions of his fantasies, the less creative he got. I don't even think I need to argue that point, do I?

On the other hand, there are filmmakers that are making use of the digital process to make works that could not have been made on film. In general, one sees this as an advantage for the kinds of documentary films which deal with subjects that don't lend themselves well to extensive pre-planning, and the footage limitations of shooting on film: for example, nature programs and spontaneous documentation of conflicts and atrocities. Other examples would be films like *Leviathan*, by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel, which rely on tiny and cheap, almost disposable, cameras that are put where film cameras physically cannot go. The cameras are then left running for an extended period of time, something that is unthinkable with film cameras, both in terms of the cost of film stock and the limited length of each reel.

Many people who have grown up with digital mediums as their primary tool and way of information are now being seduced by analog mediums, though quite often not for what they do best but rather their flaws: scratches, hiss and narrow frequency spectrum in music; dust, scratches, big grain and exposure fall-off at the edges the frame in photography and film, etc. Likewise, many are seduced by the post-production nature of digital mediums for dubious reasons, often resulting in a lack of focus and an inadequate approach to planning and production of their work in the earlier stages. "Fix it in the mix" was a phrase commonly used by musicians recording to tape as a sarcastic joke, actually describing flaws in the performance or recording that were unacceptable and needed to be redone. Today, however, this "fix it in post" attitude has become a norm of the digital recording process, resulting in music releases that so rarely represent unaltered performances by musicians, that when I actually hear one I am instantly moved. In neither case is the medium to blame, of course, but rather people's unfortunate lack of understanding of their most appropriate use.

Currently, the standard workflow of digital music recording is to collect multiple

takes of each performance of every instrument and then assemble a “perfect” take by editing the “best” parts from the whole bunch. In my opinion (as you might have guessed by the quotation marks), the fatal flaw of this approach is to buy into the absurd idea of “perfection.” Again, I think David Byrne described this best in his book *How Music Works*, when he observed that, “Once it’s perfect, it’s no longer a performance.”² In an interview with *The Wire* magazine in August 2014, Annie Clark observed that, “Trained musicians can sometimes get so focused on the athleticism of music that they forsake the heart of it.”³ The “athleticism” Clarke refers to typically resulted from the academic education of classically trained musicians but has now, to some extent, been replaced by the athleticism of the mixing engineer, cutting and pasting musical performances into “perfection.” Tom Waits once called this a process of “recording the bone, and throwing away the meat.”⁴

For better or worse, there is always a certain “performance element” to analog mediums because, in a sense, you are always working with “a moment” and that (dare I say “decisive”?) moment rarely survives the excessive post-production process of digital mediums. In digital, decisions are rarely made on the go and the tendency is to push all decision-making towards the end, while piling up mountains of raw material.

Benny Anderson of Abba revealed his approach to recording to Craig McLean from the English newspaper *The Telegraph*, an approach that can be considered to be the polar opposite of today’s normalized process of digital music recording. He was asked if there weren’t a number of outtakes from the original recording sessions of Abba that he would consider releasing at some point. His reply was that there are no unreleased Abba studio recordings in existence, because after finishing their albums they immediately wiped out from the master tapes the songs that didn’t make the cut. The assumption being that there was a good reason for which songs were not chosen to go on their albums and hence there was no point in keeping them. “While we were working, we took away stuff that we didn’t want to use. We completed the things we thought were good enough. That’s it, there’s nothing. I think it’s a good way to keep your cupboards clean.” Quite a house cleaning, I’d say.

While some people who came into art via analog processes hold them dear to the point where it hinders them in moving forward, others seem to have swept their analog past under the rug and wholeheartedly embrace the digital medium as a replacement for all things analog. Sometimes this view is voiced by quite surprising figures. One such unanticipated candidate is Peter McGill, the New York- based gallery owner and prominent curator of photography, representing many of the icons of analog photography like Robert Frank, Harry Callahan, Lee Friedlander and Gary Winogrand, to name but a few. Peter once asked me why anyone would, at this stage, choose to carry around a five-pound view camera, a box of film holders, heavy tripod and then have to wait for the results while the film is being developed, when you can get “better” results with a lightweight, handheld digital camera? Think about that for a second. To me, it seems rather obvious that you would get somewhat different results by choosing to photograph “the hard and heavy way” with a tripod—especially in terms of the uncertainty associated with not being able to immediately see the results when shooting film, as opposed to the hand-held immediacy of a digital camera. Isn’t it likely that you would be more attentive if you had a limited quantity of expensive sheet film and you wouldn’t be able to see the results until you’re far away from the location, probably the next day, or even the next week? Likewise, I suspect you would allow yourself more freedom to experiment with composition and subject matter when you can make almost infinite number of cheap exposures with your digital camera.

The Danish photographer Joakim Eskildsen is probably best known for his series *Roma Journeys*. He came to photography via analog but was forced to quit making analog C-prints because of serious allergic reactions to the chemicals. This resulted in him not making any prints from his photographs for several years, while watching the digital printing processes becoming better and researching the different techniques available. He has now switched completely to doing digital inkjet prints while still shooting on film for aesthetic reasons, related to the texture of the film grain and its technical handlings of highlights. He also utilizes some film-specific limitations, like the number of images available per roll and the latency between exposing the image and seeing the results, character traits unique

to the medium that he finds focusing for his work.

Likewise, the German printer/publisher Gerhard Steidl has carefully evaluated the pros and cons of digital and analog as they relate to the production process of his renowned photo books. In terms of original material from the artists, he prefers to get physical prints rather than scanning their negatives. He presumes that, if the artist has spent time making exhibition-quality prints of his photographs, they are a more representative source of the artist's vision than the raw negative. He finds it better to do colour correcting and retouching digitally, noting however, that, although it is easier to do this on the computer than on film, it takes much longer and is, therefore, often more expensive than the analog way. The reason for this is that, now that digital post-production possibilities are endless, artists seem obsessed with each minuscule detail of their image. Rather than judging the overall look of their work, they examine every single pixel, requiring multiple printouts and extensive time to finish. The designing and sequencing of Steidl publications is a process equally divided between the computer and human hands, shifting back and forth from computer work to sequencing physical printouts of each page. Gerhard still insists upon this physical aspect of the design work, in acceptance of the fact that physical labour triggers our creative thinking. Finally, the printing is all analog, since he feels that digital printing methods still lack the depth of analog offset printing.

In his essay on the photographer Francesca Woodman, *After You, Dearest Photography*, David Levi Strauss remarks that, "...seeing and making are not the same thing, that making has a logic of its own that must be attended to..."⁶ His observation echoes the prevailing sentiment of my own essay, that the medium you use for your creative work influences your thinking and, thereby, the things you make. My film-editing teacher, Richard Pepperman, pointed out that, in the pre-digital era, people had to learn the "tools of their trade" while in our post-analog world we are now required to study "the tool of the trades." The impact of this change, I think, is still greatly undervalued, but will hopefully become clearer to us once we can look back on this period from a distance. Would I have become interested in photography or music recording if I had not been able to use analog means to

work? I suspect I might have drifted more towards some of the art forms that have not yet been taken over by the digital revolution and still depend mostly on the physicality of the medium, like silk-screening, etchings or woodcuts. The concluding assumption is that an unknown portion of artists working today might not be doing what they do if not for the invention of digital media. Likewise, others, who could have flourished in the analog domain, have perhaps now chosen a different path, possibly outside the arts, because the physical route through the process is no longer available.

It needs to be acknowledged that these two ways of working are different and sometimes result in a radically different output. It defeats both mediums to argue about which one is better; instead they should be looked at as two toolkits that are at our disposal and that we can decide to use, or not, depending on their inherent strengths and weaknesses.

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¹ David Byrne, *How Music Works* (McSweeney's: 2012), 79.

² David Byrne, *How Music Works*.

³ *The Wire*. August 2014. Issue 366.

⁴ "Tom Waits: A Q&A About Mule Variations," *Performing Songwriter*, April, 1999.
<http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/interviews/99-apr-msopromo.html>

⁵ Craig McLean, "Why ABBA Won't Be Getting Back Together," *The Telegraph*, September 29, 2014,
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/music-news/11127498/Why-ABBA-wont-be-getting-back-together.html>

But instead of emphasizing the soulfulness and the warmth of the original, the vocal refrain is pitched-up and drenched in chorus and phaser effects. The sound becomes only vaguely human. The human element sounds trapped amidst machinery, trying to escape.

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TRAP MUSIC GETS WEIRD

Nathan Burley

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In November 2012, a rap video dropped on the Internet via Atlanta, Georgia. The song was called “All Gold Everything” by Trinidad James. The video and song rapidly drew attention to itself, taking rap tropes to an absurd extreme with impressive grace and gusto. An immediately striking figure, Trinidad James stomps about Atlanta’s residential streets rapping “gold all in my watch! / gold all in my chain!” Behind him, a large group of dawdling supporters, dressed in black, occupy the frame, creating a dark canvas over which Trinidad James’ bright, eccentric appearance shines. His hair billows out of his red bandanna. Large, gold-outlined sunglasses never leave his face. Flapping and flailing with his every embellished gesture is a light leopard-print cardigan. Beneath his cardigan is what seems like a posture-compromising amount of gold chains resting atop his bare chest and stomach. Rings and bracelets are in abundance. His style is timeless, of every era—loud, but loose and improvisational. When he opens his mouth to rap, naturally, gold veneer lines the entire bottom half of his teeth and, unsettlingly, just one upper tooth. This affectation likely contributes to his wide-mouthed, slurred delivery. “Gold all in my watch! / don’t believe me just watch!”

Trinidad James has since been signed by Def Jam to a two-million-dollar contract and subsequently dropped from the label. Perhaps his initial detractors were accurate in their style-over-substance criticisms, or perhaps it was a “difference in creative ideas” that James himself cited as the cause.¹ Either way, he owned the culture for one shining moment with an exaggerated aesthetic and uncompromising weirdness. “All Gold Everything” reaches its peak when Trinidad exclaims suddenly, with enviable charisma, “popped the molly, I’m sweatin’, whoo!” He is referring to the ubiquitous party drug MDMA and as he does, he hurls his arms up in the air, giving a cursory sniff to his exposed armpit. And then once more for emphasis, “popped the molly, I’m sweatin’, whoo!” The moment floors the viewer. This is no man, it becomes apparent. This is a hedonist *Übermensch*. Trinidad James is a swaggering, jewelry-obsessed, drug-enthused alien. Amongst the hubbub of James’ striking, viral debut, a culture would turn its eyes towards the south, where once again something wildly gripping was happening in Atlanta.

“We stay closer to our slave roots here in the south,”² Andre 3000 explains to *Spin Magazine* around the release of his group, Outkast’s second album, *ATLiens*. This was in 1996. The album is sonically spacey and distant, abandoning the George Clinton funkadelia of their debut *SouthernPlayalisticCadillacMuzak* for sounds a little more alien to hip-hop. The title track samples a vocal harmony from a 1967 soul ballad, “So Tired,” by The Chambers Brothers. But instead of emphasizing the soulfulness and the warmth of the original, the vocal refrain is pitched-up and drenched in chorus and phaser effects. The sound becomes only vaguely human. The human element sounds trapped amidst machinery, trying to escape.

“Greetings, earthlings,” a mechanized alien voice announces on the first track of *ATLiens*. The alien metaphor works within several dimensions in hip-hop. The hip-hop narrative is one of underdogs or outcasts (with a “c”). Most rap artists, from a racial and societal standpoint, feel alienated from mainstream culture. “They alienate us because we different, keep your hands to the sky” raps Andre 3000 on *ATLiens*. Hip-hop is very much about being outside of and against the norm. Secondly, the narrative plays on hip-hop’s individualistic emphasis—being the best means having the most distinctive style. Outkast are saying with their

album title that, stylistically, they are not even from the same planet as other rappers. There is also the alien aspect, of becoming famous—being separated and singled out from the general population. On the 2012 song “Buried Alive (Interlude),” Kendrick Lamar raps, “I said the music business was all I needed / when I got it I was greeted by an alien.” Outkast, coming from the standpoint of a marginalized race and a marginalized American south, embodies a multi-dimensional alien voice both literal and figurative. “Coming across your TV / extraterrestrial, straight from ATL,” raps Big Boi on “Extraterrestrial.” As technology would continue to develop, growing increasingly complex and increasingly accessible, future rap artists (as well as the rapper, Future) would take off from where Outkast took southern hip-hop, and explore further realms of alien weirdness.

Technologized vocalizations in pop music originate with the German electronic music pioneers Kraftwerk, who were early adopters of the vocoder. The device was originally created for the telecommunication industry by Bell engineer Homer Dudley who was granted the patent in 1939. The vocoder (a shortening of the term “voice encoder”) was first used for communications in World War II, scrambling and encrypting compromising allied telephone conversations. Thus, “the vocoder was witness to some of the most horrid and tragic moments in history,” says vocoder historian Dave Tompkins in a *New Yorker* short documentary about the machine.³ Kraftwerk used the voice encoder to robotize their voices and in turn, sing from the perspective of robots. “We are programmed just to do / anything you want us to / we are the robots,” goes “The Robots” over an R2D2-like, synthesized instrumental. In the 1980s, afrofuturist DJ Afrika Bambaataa would become a “vocoder ambassador—he had kids in an apocalyptic landscape looking to the future,” says Tompkins. Garbed in a cape and Viking helmet like a messenger from an exotic future, Bambaataa orders the listener to “rock to the planet rock, don’t stop,” in the song “Planet Rock.”

The pitch correction software “Auto-Tune” (a brand that became synonymous with a general product like Kleenex or Band-Aid) was released by Antares Audio Technologies in 1997. The effect was famously first heard in Cher’s 1998 hit “Believe,” distorting and warbling the emotionally weighty question, “Do you

believe in life after love?” In the 2000s, as Auto-Tune grew more prevalent and more publicized, public disapproval intensified. As Osvaldo Oyola writes in his essay, *In Defense of Auto-Tune*, “Auto-Tune makes it so that *anyone* can sing whether they have talent or not, or so the criticism goes, putting determination of talent before evaluation of the outcome.”⁴ Rapper and cultural influencer Jay-Z could sense a growing public disapproval of overly technologized music and in 2011 he released his single “D.O.A. (death of Auto-Tune),” a declaration of war on the pitch correction effect and all of its perpetuators. Over a hard, 90s-style beat, Jay-Z disparages the use of Auto-Tune as analogous to fakeness or weakness of character. However, the song was but a savvy marketing ploy, as the Auto-Tune effect is heard repeatedly elsewhere on his album *The Blueprint II*, which was executive produced by the notorious Auto-Tuned provocateur, Kanye West. The song was no more than a timely capitalization on audience condemnation of a production tool. And this condemnation was generally misdirected at aesthetic innovators like T-Pain (the rapper/ singer/ producer/ Auto-Tune enthusiast whose name would become so heavily associated with the effect that he released an Auto-Tune app named after himself), rather than artists who use Auto-Tune in a more secretive manner. T-Pain uses the effect not as it was intended (inaudibly), but instead abuses it, setting the retuning speed to zero, which distorts and mechanizes his voice, turning it into a strangely appealing synthetic instrument. High-minded disapproval of Auto-Tune is like the disparaging of blatantly altered images in work such as that of collage artist Martha Rosler, while ignoring the more subtly photoshopped images we see on magazine covers. As Oyola writes, “Chances are that even your favorite and most gifted singer has benefited from some form of technology in recording their work. When someone argues that Auto-Tune allows anyone to sing, what they are really complaining about is that an illusion of authenticity has been dispelled.” T-Pain embraces and emphasizes the malleability of all recorded music (for the purpose of admittedly silly but joyfully compelling pop songs i.e. “Buy You a Drank,” “I’m in Love with a Stripper”), while artists with illusions of authenticity benefit just as much from technology, perhaps even secretly auto-tuning their voice. In doing so, T-Pain ushered in the sonic possibilities of Auto-Tune to the hip-hop community,

the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Trap music is the creation of the American south. Its mecca: Atlanta, Georgia. “Trap” refers to the “trap house,” a derelict house from which one runs an illegal drug trade. Or more generally, “the trap” can refer to any area where drugs are sold. The term connotes the inescapable nature of the lifestyle for both dealer and user. As Outkast’s Big Boi raps on “SpottieOttieDopaliscious,” “United Parcel Service and the people at the Post Office didn’t call you back because you had cloudy piss, so now you back in the trap—just that, trapped.” Artists of the trap ilk both celebrate and bemoan the lifestyle, voicing a culture of moral ambivalence. To a lesser extent, it is an ambivalence felt by fans of the music as well. However, in the internal struggle, the side of drug-funded optimism—the “let’s just party” side—usually wins out.

Trap music instrumentals are, first and foremost, defined by the Roland TR-808 drum machine. Like most early drum machines, the 808 does not sound like a real drum kit but like a robotic imitation with its own aesthetic appeal. The kick drum sound occupies low sub-frequencies that one does not hear so much as feels. Its clap sound is immaculately cartoonish. Though 808s were and remain ubiquitous throughout all hip-hop styles, the thin, agile “tick, tick, tick” closed-high-hat sound is trap music’s chief stylistic element. The trademark of the trap beat is the dizzying deployment of the high-hat, carrying the beat with the dynamic between straight eighth or sixteenth notes and fluttering triplets in values as small as sixty-fourth notes. It is a sound that is in no way replicated by a human drummer. A prototypical trap beat will add simplistic, synthetic instrumentation (sometimes seeming to have come from a children’s toy keyboard) over the drumbeat, allowing the 808s to do the heavy lifting. However, willed by producer Lex Luger with nothing more than his laptop and FL Studio production software, the sound was pushed toward a lavish ideal. In a *New York Times* feature on Luger, his sound was described as, “... grandiose, almost operatic. It’s dope-slinging music that somehow evokes greater crimes—like regicide, maybe.”⁶ Luger favours a harsher, pounding trap music. Ominous horns and extravagant string arrangements are abundant—all synthetic, of course, and designed on a laptop screen. The cinematic pomp of Rick Ross’ “MC

Hammer” is a prime example.

The producer who would take the purely synthetic sound of trap music and bring it to undiscovered atmospheric recesses is Mike Will Made-It. Mike Will would master the opulent, drums-of-war Lex Luger sound and take it deep underwater. He usually begins his instrumentals with the high frequencies cut out, so it sounds like the song is being played at full volume in your neighbour’s house or rather in a submarine that is gradually surfacing. The sound gradually expands, building towards a burst of rich synth arpeggios and intricately programmed drums, each sound a personally customized relative of the 808. Mike Will’s beats are sonically detail-oriented. Each audible sound is painstakingly tailored to a specific vision—be it alien slow jam or hard-knocking yet harmonically subtle banger. In his work with rapper Future, the two would pave an Auto-Tune-laden road from the Atlanta streets to a strange cyborg planet. Others would follow.

In a piece on Future for *The Fader*, Naomi Zeichner wrote, “Future’s on his own planet, participating in this one on his own terms. He spent much of his early career on self-imposed studio lockdown, a lab rat reveling in the elasticity of his own voice and the hooks that popped up in his head.”⁷ Future began his career in the traditional trap vein. Dope slinging, lean consumption (Sprite mixed with promethazine and codeine cough syrup, a drug cocktail ubiquitous amongst southern rap culture) and promiscuous sex with beautiful women: these were his areas of expertise. The story goes that while recording for Future’s debut album *Pluto*, producer Mike Will, with an unusually chord-driven instrumental, was trying to nudge the rapper towards full-on singing. The chord progression is decorated by bubbling synth arpeggios constantly fluctuating between something resembling muted piano notes and a prickly, distorted harpsichord. Like everything that defines this music, the instruments have one foot in reality and one foot in the stratosphere. Mike Will recalled to *Complex Magazine*, “Future was like, ‘Man, basically you’re telling me to sing it. What are you trying to turn me into, an R&B singer?’ I was like, ‘Bob Marley wasn’t no R&B singer. You know you’re not an R&B singer. You just got an ill tone.’”⁸ What resulted was a surprising product from two Atlanta-based, trap artists. Mike Will’s beat is restrained. The drums spend

the early going filling empty space, slowly building momentum, not appearing in full until two minutes in. Future apparently succumbed to his producer's appeal towards melodicism. He more raps, though tunefully so in the verses, the Auto-Tune carrying his voice to notes that his intonation suggests. But this builds to a yowled, dramatically sung chorus. "Turn on the lights! / I'm looking for her!" The lyrics are of a strong narrative in which the speaker is searching through a derelict nightlife for a woman he formerly dismissed. For a rapper prone to textbook rap misogyny, Future shows a sensitive side, detailing his imagined life with this "hood girl, but good girl" whom he cannot find. And for a rapper aided only by Auto-Tune, Future shows an apt ear for song structure. His verses begin stilted in their melodic range, but running up and down the scale like a country singer in the pre-chorus. In the chorus, Future's voice cracks to such an emotive extent that no amount of Auto-Tune could repair it. His scraggily, smoky voice makes for a nice marriage with Auto-Tune, its distinctiveness not getting lost in the pitch mechanization. Delay effect as well is layered into the mix, expanding the spacey, alien quality of Future's voice.

With a pop-ready, yet decidedly alien aesthetic, formed from the throat of Future and Mike Will's computer, there was a path forged for a new breed of rapper to make his way into the cultural consciousness. Though rap is a genre that values individuality, there are few standouts amongst a whole Internet full of hubris-touting lyricists. Rapper, Auto-Tune singer, catastrophic weirdo—Young Thug is one, if not the one. And make no mistake: I use the term weirdo only in a positive light, as shorthand for hyper-individualism. Like Future, Young Thug first made a name for himself locally in Atlanta where strip-club DJs are the gatekeepers to local popularity. But as of last year, Young Thug is the most discussed rapper who has yet to release a proper album. This does not mean there is a lack of Young Thug music. Since 2011, Young Thug has shown immense breadth, releasing no less than ten free mix tapes, the first of which is titled *I Came From Nothing*—indicating a rough inner-city upbringing while also evoking an image of the rapper simply materializing in the Atlanta streets like the Terminator, nude but immediately ready to step into the recording booth.

Young Thug became a star in Atlanta and beyond with his 2014 single “Stoner,” an ode to drug consumption, but also a progress report from an artist on the brink of larger success. “I want Michael Jackson land,” he garbles, Auto-Tune warping his voice and not so much correcting pitch but assigning it. The beat, by local producer Dun Deal, bounces on a rubbery, electro synth-bass—heavily reverbed bells patterns ring over a sparse trap drumbeat. Then jumping to the song’s bridge, there is a jarring change in tone. Over lush piano chords, a saddened lead instrument (like an electric guitar, though certainly not one) slides down the scale like a tear down a cheek. Thug, gathering every ounce of sentimentality, sings like Billie Holiday, “I tell that bitch I feel like Fabo, I feel like Fabo, I feel like Fabo.” Who is Fabo? And why is it so poignant that Young Thug feels this way? Fabo is a member of short-lived, early 2000s Atlanta rap group DL4, whom *Complex Magazine* calls, “an inspiration on all kinds of Southern ‘ringtone’ rap, pop rap, novelty dances, etc...”⁹ Fabo in particular, was known for his copious drug use. So the line is actually quite clever in communicating Young Thug’s figurative high achieved through musical success and his literal narcotic high. Becoming famous makes you an alien within society, but narcotic intoxication makes you an alien within yourself.

It pains me that some of Young Thug’s greatest cyborg melodies contain highly misogynist exclamations. “Every time I fuck I gotta hit me ‘least like *two* bitches!” he sings with irresistible high pitched emphasis on “two.” This is on “Danny Glover,” Young Thug’s greatest mastery of his form thus far. Over a three-note pattern that sounds like it is being plucked from a rusty guitar string, strung across Saturn and Jupiter, Young Thug spews absurdities, sings them with all his alien heart. “Money stand like eight feet just like two midgets!” The melody borders on atonal but it is as if Thug is inventing his own scale. The song is so musically joyous, so infectious, so new that I cannot help but overlook lyrics like, “I’m a’ call my partner ‘fore I fuck the mother!” The song is on such a higher plane of alien weirdness, it’s as if any conception of normative human morality couldn’t possibly apply.

Rap lyrics are regularly morally corrupt. Misogyny is its greatest corrupter. It is a symptom of invoking authenticity in rap music that must ultimately be addressed. Rappers delineate qualities in their lyrics comparable to those of our culture’s

favourite anti-heroes: Tony Soprano, Jay Gatsby, Duddy Kravitz. In turn, rappers are treated as such: like fictional characters. In some cases, a rapper's persona is fictional, a larger than life personality reserved only for music. In other cases, artists are as they say, in which case the whole-hearted endorsement of their music and personhood by extension can invoke feelings of profound ambivalence. In their paper *The Words Have Changed But The Ideology Remains the Same: Misogynistic Lyrics in Rap Music*, Terri M. Adams and Douglas B. Fuller argue that rap artists have internalized recurring sexist "myths and stereotypes" and thus the misogyny in their lyrics have should be seen as a mirror held to the culture that created these myths and stereotypes.¹⁰ But this defense is moot if rap artists are, in regurgitating sexism, playing a significant role in its perpetuation.

Young Thug is no exception in habitually objectifying women, describing sexual acts in which mutual consent is not paramount. "I'ma' spread that pussy out like an acre" he raps on "Flava'" in graphic hyperbolic detail. I detest such sexist posturing, yet it's important to me that rap remains an unmediated, uncensored lyrical form. In the marriage between rap lyrics and hyper-electronic aesthetics, I see the marriage of two truths: the full scope of humanity—beauty and wit to ugliness and hatred—and the inherent alien qualities that hide themselves in a digitally integrated life. Thus I want rappers to continue writing in uncensored, if ugly, fashion no matter how certain lyrics conflict with my own sense of morality. In Young Thug, there is a rare instance of what seems like full personhood on display. His raps often veer into absurdities, nonsensical word play and flat-out gibberish that suggests there is little filter between thought and vocal expression.

In every aspect of his art and public life, Young Thug represents an anti-establishment weirdness. His Auto-Tune vocal eccentricity and taste for exotic synthetic beats are in direct conflict with the lingering idolization of hip-hop's golden era, when rappers rapped and only rapped over funk and soul samples and drum breaks. Like Trinidad James, Young Thug's appearance is bizarre, even more so. His frame is long and scrawny, though he stands at an imposing height. His wild, unkempt dreadlocks are usually kept in an untidy bun. However for Thug's first ever television appearance (as a featured guest of T.I. on *The Tonight Show with*

Jimmy Fallon), he styled his hair into two Princess Leia side buns. Alternative music blog *Noisey* wrote about the appearance with the headline “Young Thug Proved He’s The Future of Everything.”¹¹ Young Thug’s wardrobe became a thing of needless controversy in the hyper-masculine rap community. Indifferent (or intentionally stirring the pot), Thug posted pictures of himself very happily wearing a dress—a zebra-print skirt worn over jeans (cup of lean in hand) in one and a tight black crop-top with matching miniskirt in another. Other Instagram posts show Young Thug wearing red nail polish—red to match the colour of his Bloods gang affiliation. He also routinely posts pictures with peers, fellow Atlanta rapper Rich Homie Quan or mentor Birdman, captioning the pictures “me and my hubby” or “me and bae.” While predictable homophobic outrage ensued, so did cries of delight from the opposing side—that which takes great joy in seeing someone unafraid to be so brazenly themselves.

The term weirdo and the designation of alien are not negative terms. These are terms of endearment and even conceit. They are also not my terms. Since Outkast’s *ATLiens*, rappers have been using weirdness as a point of bragging, an indicator of their unique identity. Lil’ Wayne, long one of the more famous and eccentric rappers in the industry will frequently disassociate himself from humanity. “We are not the same I am a Martian,” he says on several songs. To hammer home the point that he is not of this earth, he titled his 2011 album, *I Am Not A Human Being*. New York trap-influenced rapper A\$AP Ferg regularly refers to himself as Fergenstein, aligning himself with presumably the composite human-monster that Dr. Frankenstein created and not the doctor himself. Ferg’s crew-mate A\$AP Rocky says on the song “Trill,” “I’m a weirdo but I’m rare though.” In the music of Future and especially Young Thug, there is an expressed weirdness that is at the core of my fascination. How gleefully they become cyborg tunesmiths; how their music sounds like R2D2 covered in mud—it is pure unadulterated weirdness that fulfills vicariously a fantasy of my own weirdness and perhaps that which boils in the deep recesses of us all. As digital culture continues to copy itself, creating an expanding homogenized bubble, this is what we want from our entertainers. This is what we want from each other.

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³ Nate Lavey and Jay Kang, "Object of Interest: The Vocoder - The New Yorker." The New Yorker. N.p., August 2014, Web, accessed November 26, 2014.

⁴ Osvaldo Oyola, "In Defense of Auto-Tune," Sounding Out, N.p., September 12, 2011, Web, accessed November 26, 2014.

⁵ Dmitry Leger, "Positive Vibrations."

⁶ Alex Pappademas, "Lex Luger Can Write a Hit Rap Song in the Time It Takes to Read This," The New York Times, November 5, 2011, Web, accessed November 27, 2014.

⁷ Naomi Zeichner, "Future: All the Way Real," The FADER, November 19, 2013, Web, accessed November 27, 2014.

⁸ Lauren Nostro, "Mike WiLL Made It: 10 Beats That Changed My Life - Future "Turn On The Lights" (2012)," Complex, N.p., January 11, 2013, Web, accessed November 27, 2014.

⁹ David Drake, "The 10 Major Influences On Today's Rap Sound - D4L," Complex, N.p., November 20, 2013, Web, accessed November 27, 2014.

¹⁰ T. M. Adams, "The Words Have Changed but the Ideology Remains the Same: Misogynistic Lyrics in Rap Music," *Journal of Black Studies* 36.6 (2006): 938-57. Web, accessed November 26, 2014.

¹¹ Eric Sundermann, "Young Thug Proved He's the Future of Everything on The Tonight Show," NOISEY. August 28, 2014, Web, accessed November 27, 2014.

*There's not much for us to talk
about in the car. My parents
are waiting for my future to be
sorted out. I turned eighteen a
few months ago. I can feel that
familiar pull on my chest once
more. I am not going to remain
here much longer.*

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YĀTRĪ
(Passenger)
Shounak Ganguly
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At the age of six, I had the unique opportunity of experiencing what a ride on a tram felt like when my father, on a subdued Sunday evening in Kolkata, decided to hop aboard one, abandoning his hunt for a taxi. We rode from one end of the city map in the north to the depot on the other side in the south, near where our house was located. Little did I know then that I was a very fortunate kid to be riding a tram, because this was one of the last functioning tram services in all of Asia and it still is to this day. We passed through the interiors of many colourful parts of the city, from the densest localities with historical monuments rising above, to smoggy industrial districts, and onto open fields resembling the Bengal countryside. Finally, as night fell and the city quietened down, we reached the end of the line and walked a few blocks home.

I can recall how I was waiting with my father by a particularly expansive street—looking around at the golden light of the late afternoon sun painting over the walls of weary Greco-Roman buildings overlooking the theatre that is any pada (locality) in Kolkata, with its host of eccentric performers acting out the script to their lives. Out here, the best seat is centre-stage.

NARRATIVE ESSAYS



As if on cue, those familiar bells ring out, courteously announcing the arrival of the grandfather of public transportation. A tramcar emerges from where the road drops off the horizon, growing bigger and bigger as it gets closer. Cars grudgingly navigate out of its way, changing lanes to leave the tracks open. The wheels of the tram screech against the steel rails of the track leading towards us. Antennas slide above the roof of the car, holding onto a cable from a network of lines cutting across the sky.

As it gets closer, I can make out the operator behind his grilled window, an indifferent look on his face as he peeks out, making sure no pedestrian or car is unfortunate enough to block the path. Behind me I hear soft voices. A crowd gathers up around us. A motley group comprised of families out for a Sunday picnic: uncles, aunties, khokas (little boys), khokis (little girls), workers gazing off into the distance, beginning to let their guard down after the day's work, and aged dadus (grandpas), who adjust their spectacles and clutch newspapers or canes, comforted to see their one friend who is still alive and will still be here after they are gone. We are all passengers, waiting.

We hop aboard; my father and I are seated by the window, on the left side. He knows I want to get a view of the city. Once everyone has embarked, the bells ring out again and we are off. The conductor (fare collector) makes his way through the car and completes his rounds. The tram begins to hum forward. The jatra (journey) has begun.

I hold my mother's hand outside the terminal at Don Mueang Airport in Bangkok on a breezy evening. I am looking towards where she is looking—my father searching for a taxi. This time we will take one. A few suitcases are all we have to load into the trunk; my parents don't want any more reminders of the situation we are coming from. I am too small to care, more interested in figuring out this new world. I climb into the back seat with my mother and the taxi drives off. I have never seen a highway rising into the sky, a great blur of lights pointing toward the future.

It is early afternoon on a summer's day in Bangkok. I walk in the opposite direction from the rest of the students going towards the next class. I instead take one last trip to visit the open-air gymnasium that I have played in for the last eight

years. It's quiet, nobody is there, and lunch period was over an hour and a half ago. There is a silence here that I cannot describe. Moments later I am sitting in the assembly hall with the rest of the school. Ninth grade is going to be over in a few days. In a way, I am glad, because over the last two years, I have been the target of all the bullies in my grade, but I have also known these same kids and their families for the last eight years. My senses have matured, so has my awareness. The changes within people and the passing of time pull at my chest, the inevitable nature of it all. There is a strange fever developing and I feel it because I can barely make out the voices around me and am not even bothering to put in effort to hear them. The school bell brings me back for a moment and I am pulled out, barely managing to follow out to the gate where a bunch of us jump into a friend's family van to get dropped home. The fever is unbearable. I collapse in my seat, exhausted. We are driven slowly out of the narrow lanes leading out from Sukhumvit Soi 15 (Sukhumvit Ave 15) and I catch a glimpse of the alleys and apartment buildings I used to walk past one last time.

I catch a glimpse of the pleasant January afternoon in Juhu, Mumbai from an office window. My close friend, Harshal, and I have just been instructed by the Principal of the junior college that we can either sit out of classes for the whole day or run thirty laps around the building as punishment for skipping the Indian Republic Day ceremony. I look at Harshal: thirty laps do not sound that bad, the building is not that big and we have it in with the college security guard who can exaggerate our exploits if the Principal asks for details. Harshal is lazy, and he will be damned if he develops the habit of listening to instructions now. I am about to tell the Principal I am okay with doing the laps, but Harshal pinches my arm discreetly. I decide to keep quiet and we accept the "punishment" to sit outside for the whole day. Ten minutes later, we've both climbed over the back wall of the building and escaped. Harshal laughs at me for actually considering doing the laps; we shake hands and nod before he leaves for home—the routine will continue tomorrow. I signal down an auto rickshaw and hop aboard, telling the driver to take me to the Bandra locality, where my mom is probably cooking Mangshor Jhol (chicken curry) and Mishti Doi (sweet yoghurt) at home. The roadside food stalls of suburban

Mumbai are about to start buzzing with the afternoon lunch crowd. Today is a good day.¹

The surreal desert of Riyadh spreads out into infinity. The sleek Kingdom Centre tower rises up as a solitary landmark, reflecting the dull sunlight of a morning in July. It is so cold inside the car; the air conditioner is turned to the maximum. My father's engineering job has brought him here, and we are at a place we never would have imagined to be. The car glides through the highway with only that tower looming in the distance. There's not much for us to talk about in the car. My parents are waiting for my future to be sorted out. I turned eighteen a few months ago. I can feel that familiar pull on my chest once more. I am not going to remain here much longer.

I am in the corner seat at the back of the bus. It is easy to recline and gaze out from here. The Transway 1C is headed towards Ouellette Ave. This is the last bus of the night, the beginning of my day. There are hardly any people onboard. I look outside to a city constructed in such a way that it could be the set of some Hollywood noir film. Of course, this is the border city, Windsor, across the river from the ghost of Detroit. The darkness is held at bay by scattered lampposts and fluorescent signboards of gas-station convenience stores. My education hasn't taken me to high tech production sets in some posh metropolitan city as I had naively imagined. I remain here. Yet I know that this darkness somehow feels right; this is a priceless feeling. For fleeting moments, I feel like one of the last people alive, not accountable to anybody or under any kind of expectation, swimming in this dark, simply here to experience as an observer. The bus ride is too short and I enter a corporate building, greet my co-workers, put on my headset, and continue talking to people around the world to fix their electronic equipment, punching in the date on my logs: 2:13 AM, 21.11.2012. It's okay, the darkness will come again tomorrow night.

Snow-capped trees pave the 401 Highway in southern Ontario on a harsh winter's day. Rohan plays a Bollywood mix from his iPod as he drives towards Pearson International Airport, or is he driving back? In a few hours, I will be in India or have I just returned a few hours ago? I am travelling from/to take a flight to/back

from/to assist my parents, finally plant a flag for our future, to finally own a home of our own. We don't know how long that flag is going to fly, but it will have been planted. I wonder how the environment is going to change/has changed completely once more. It is strange: these days a few hours is the difference between entire worlds appearing before our eyes, with our minds having a total sensory reboot and detachment from our previous location and actions. It is dizzying, unreal.

There are towers stabbing the sky if I look above. There are hundreds of faces passing me by if I look around. I am standing at a crossing signal to cross over and descend into the Dundas subway station. There are faces everywhere, shaped with imprints of entire lifetimes hidden inside. They pass by so quickly, I am not able to look properly and recognize them, yet there is familiarity. The signal changes and I am also on the move. The faces pass at a dizzying speed now. There is a TTC streetcar approaching. The signal has changed and people are still blocking the road, the driver rings his bell in frustration.

I sit up; I thought I heard a bell. The tram rolls deep into the evening. The curve in the track leads into an open field, darker than the rest of the city as there are no buildings around, just trees. In the distance, I see the orange light atop a tunnel leading into the depot. I go back to leaning on my father's arm, half-awake as the tram floats closer and closer towards the light. Home is still a few minutes away.

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¹ Ice Cube. "It Was A Good Day." With DJ Pooh. © 1992 by Priority/EMI Records. P2-57155. Compact Disc.

*An overflow of questions was raised.
Why do black women wear weave?
What does it mean to have good
hair and who decides what good
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black women wearing extensions or
weave? And why are women from
other races not recognized when the
word is tossed around?*

.....

WEAVE
Ebti Nabag
.....

“Black women call us sell out when dating white women, but you wear weave, YOU SOLD OUT!” is one of the last Facebook statuses on my newsfeed that caught my attention. What does this man mean by, “you sold out”?

An overflow of questions was raised. Why do black women wear weave? What does it mean to have good hair and who decides what good hair is? Most importantly, how does social stigma play a part in black women wearing extensions or weave? And why are women from other races not recognized when the word is tossed around?

Many women, especially black women, have long considered silky straight hair to be the definition of good hair. Getting good hair, in most cases, means transforming one’s natural afro-textured hair that is also referred to as nappy, kinky, coarse or woolly, to straight shiny, free flowing hair. Achieving straight hair can be done by hot combs, flat irons or adding chemicals to the hair that will result in relaxing the texture, making it easier to straighten. Wearing weave can eliminate all of those steps, but will develop issues such as itching, discomfort, spending long hours at the salon, as well as lots of money. Yet, it does not discourage women from doing

it. Hair has been a form of representation for many decades, and it continues to change and be socially constructed.

The journey of hair for blacks started during the slavery era. When the slave trade first surfaced, slavers collected an average of 300 Africans at a time; before they set sail, every slave's hair was shaved off. However, the slave owners did not do this to undermine the slaves' identities, rather, they did this for sanitary reasons. Whatever the reasoning, shaving their heads was the first step of stripping new slaves of their identity and lowering their status.¹ This was the beginning of wiping out a culture.

By the 1600s, slaves began to arrive in America. There were those who worked in the fields and those who worked in the home of their white masters. It was mandatory for house slaves to look "presentable" as they were in their master's and guest's company for longer periods of time; therefore, their appearance should not offend any of the guests, especially those who were white.² House slaves were granted time for grooming. Slave women were encouraged to iron their hair straight in the manner of their white counterparts.³ Those who worked in the fields were expected to cover their wool-like hair using a scarf. Soon enough, the appearance of all slaves, whether in the home or in the fields, started reflecting the status of their masters. Therefore, Sundays were granted as off days for personal usage and proper grooming.⁴

Ultimately, miscegenation produced women whose hair was considered "good," as it was straighter and softer in nature and appearance. The combination of good hair and lighter skin added to the pressure African-American women experienced from themselves and others to appear whiter. Regardless of how light your complexion was, if the hair showed any hint of kinkiness, the person would be unable to pass as white. "Essentially, hair acted as the true test of blackness, which is why some male slaves opted to shave their heads to try to get rid of the genetic evidence of their ancestry when attempting to escape to freedom."⁵

Slavery ended in 1865. Black women continued to style their hair the way white women did. Black women who adopted the white woman's hairstyle were viewed by the whites as "well adjusted."⁶ From then on, having "good hair" became a prerequi-

site for social status and made it easier for Blacks to start a life in America.⁷ Those that conformed to the Eurocentric standards were treated noticeably differently. Adjusting to what is viewed as the norm translated in more employment opportunities, and a higher social status.

With the rise of the Black Power movement in the 60s and 70s, Afros became associated with the evolution of “Black is beautiful.” Afros were the most popular hairstyle at protests and political rallies.⁸ Setting yourself apart meant having a bigger Afro. Even blacks with “good hair” were switching to Afros. Eventually, the Afro outgrew the political statement and into mainstream fashion when The Jackson 5 started wearing it.

This notion is still present in the twenty-first century. A black woman who sports a natural hairstyle did not internalize the idea that black hair is unacceptable; instead she communicates that she is connected to her roots, and this also applies to men with afros or dreadlocks.

Women who wear their hair in its natural state insinuate to those who wear weave that they have sold out. Wearing weave starts carrying other socially constructed ideas. Although those who wear weave are creating a more comfortable environment for others, weave is still classified as unnatural, carrying out an unsettling feeling. It takes a proficient hairstylist to achieve natural-looking weave. This is very costly due to the use of real human hair, an intricate way to create a natural part in the hair, as well as achieving smooth edges around the forehead. Even then, the plausibility of the hair being real is minimal due to the belief that black females are not able to grow long, beautiful hair.

While trying to escape the stigma behind nappy, wool-like hair, women who wear weave are redirected and placed under new classifications such as hood or ghetto.

Hood is used in reference to a ghetto, being a gangster slang word derived from *neighborhood*, usually hinting at a low-income, crime-riddled area. It is the opposite of the suburbs.

The urban dictionary, known for its uncensored definitions that reflect society’s logic, has twenty-two definitions of the word weave. Seven definitions have a direct

reference to black women, such as, “Mostly black in color, because the majority of people that wear them are black so they want it to blend in,” or, “Weave is hair extensions sewn into your real hair ranging from straw-like to Madame Tussauds’ quality. Black females tend to wear this and the odd mixed-race person [sic],”⁹ or “A form of hair extensions. Often used by black women, and celebrities [sic].” The need to emphasize and point out that the majority of women who wear weave are black is a point that I find insignificant.

Three definitions link women who wear weave to a specific physical appearance, and lower self-esteem such as, “Synthetic (fake) or real hair extensions worn by black women, usually in conjunction with long fake nails. Weaves are usually very easy to spot as they are different colored braids that what would naturally occur (read: red or bleach blonde) [sic].” Or, “About 80% of the women who wear weaves are usually shallow, lazy, stuck up, gold diggers, and/or have serious self confidence issues. Best to avoid this type unless you just want a one night stand. If they are too lazy to take care of their own appearance, chances are they are also too lazy to get a job, pay bills, or clean around the house.” Weave becomes a personality trait, or a lifestyle of a female.

When you hear the word weave, in reference to hair, most people associate it with black culture. When in reality, hair extensions and weave are universal. Definition number seventeen says, “Long hair for african american women. Even tho chris nd jessy have them. But they don’t count [sic].” Chris and Jessie do not count because their twenty-inch virgin hair/weave is not obvious. In the case of a black female, having twenty-inch silky hair can be implausible, going back to the idea that black women can’t grow long hair.

This applies to more than just hair extensions. Hairstyles that have originated in black culture, such as afros, braids, and jelled-down baby hair, only become chic and approved by the majority of people once they are no longer seen on black people, and are picked up by celebrities or the fashion world—the most recent style craze being bold pastel hair colours. Black females have sported coloured weave for decades in unique hairstyles, but it was profoundly unacceptable by other members of society. Pastel hair is now the new adventurous self-expressive trend

for other races. The double standard remains, sometimes reinforced by members from the same race. A Caucasian female with pastel purple hair is defined as creative, but a black female with pastel purple hair is ghetto.

Hair is a convoluted topic that involves colonialism, roots, identity, classification, strength, style and more. Social stigma is something that is feared by these women. To be different is something that is disapproved of by society. Characteristics that differentiate them from other members of society, in this case their hair, are viewed as abnormal. Erving Goffman defined stigma as, “The process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity.” This leads to black women losing the potential identity of where they come from, due to them conforming to social norms.

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^{1,2,3,4,5} Ayana Byrs and Lodi L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (St. Martin's Press, 2001)

^{6,7} Michelle, “A Look Back at the Black Hair Story,” *Naturally Curly* (2009): accessed November 14, 2014, from <http://www.naturallycurly.com/curlreading/kinky-hair-type-4a/a-look-back-at-the-black-hair-story/>

⁸ Ayana Byrd and Lodi L. Tharps, “When Black Hair Is Against The Rules,” *The New York Times*: accessed November 14, 2014 from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/01/opinion/when-black-hair-is-against-the-rules.html?_r=0

⁹ Urban Dictionary, Weave, accessed November 15, 2014 <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=weave>

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Text set in Tisa Pro and Abril Titling.
Printed at TLAC Printing and Publishing,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

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