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Rebecca Centeno
CUNY Hunter College

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You'll be home by when?

by

Rebecca Centeno

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Thesis Sponsor:

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Date

Andrew Lund
Signature

August 5, 2017
Date

Shanti Thakur
Signature of Second Reader

August 5, 2017
Date

Ivone Margulies
Signature of Third Reader

1. ABSTRACT

You'll be home by when? is a short personal documentary about trying to locate home. In my film, I seek home in both city and country, using first-person narration and exchanges with my grandmother, Gloria Centeno. Reflections on family and loss reveal how we relate to spaces and to each other.

The concepts of family and home are universal, yet abstract to communicate. To define and express them visually is challenging, because for many of us these definitions change depending on time and space. The mother-daughter relationship and longing are core themes explored in the film. My grandmother's voice-over, in phone conversations and voice messages, reveals what it is like to communicate with family while living in another place.

A train-of-thought diary-style narration guides the viewer through a maze of memory about family and loss in Texas and meditations about daily life in New York City. Spatial images, such as the room where my mother died and our family's house in Texas that was recently sold, are juxtaposed with street and subway scenes in New York City revealing our relationship to physical spaces, all representing home. Opposing forces—city and nature, movement and stillness, sound and silence, alienation and connection, public and private—help communicate a pull back to Texas. Poetry and metaphor are used to articulate the subjects of family and home while color, symmetry, and camera movement are used to depict these concepts cinematically.

2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The film opens with a 15 second landscape shot of cacti in the country, as bugs and birds fill the soundscape. Visually, the colors are saturated, bright green and warm with yellow hues from the sun. This long take allows the viewer to be present in the calmness and serenity of nature. The next shot offers an almost violent juxtaposition—10 seconds of subway cars passing loudly through the 79th Street station

in New York City. Once it passes, we see two people across the platform, which represents a physical and symbolic barrier, while the film title floats on screen. The framing of the subway station, with its pillars, is symmetrical and emphasizes the architecture of the place. Both shots prepare the viewer for the film's perspective. In the country, the colors are warm reds and yellows, the framing asymmetrical, and the camera is not always fixed on a tripod. In the city, cold blues and greys dominate, the framing is symmetrical, and the camera is almost always fixed on a tripod. The contrasts of colors (warm and cool), of framing, and of camera movement represent the contrasts of city versus country.

My thesis film makes references to Chantal Akerman's *News From Home*, particularly in the beginning. I was inspired by *News From Home*, because it resonated so strongly with me about my experience living in New York City and speaking to my grandmother on the phone, as I often do. The pull home, the private conversations in public spaces, the pangs of isolation and alienation and utter loneliness, with a tragic suspicion that Akerman will not return home to her mother, are all so familiar.

I was inspired by the work of Akerman: her radical form of long takes, her focus on everyday life, her use of color, and meticulous framing. In *News From Home*, Akerman reads letters from her mother in Brussels, spoken in a French monotone voice, while showing life in gritty 1970s New York City. As we hear the letters from home read aloud, we feel Akerman's presence behind the camera. The use of symmetry and a fixed camera of mostly wide shots permeates the film, which creates a sense of detachment. The camera uncomfortably observes people in places, who sometimes look directly into the lens, but it does not move to interact with people.

Bold camera placement choices, the middle of a subway car or walkway tunnel as faces float toward the lens, looking directly at the camera and at the viewer, inspired my approach to filming in New York City. Ordinarily, as a resident and filmmaker here, my initial response is to get out of the way of oncoming traffic. Who wants to stand, with a camera, in the middle of a passageway tunnel with hundreds of people walking toward you? As a resident, I am used to weaving in and out of streams of people in the

subway and navigating through crowds in the streets. As an experiment, for myself personally and for the camera, I wanted to *not* get out of the way.

Facing people and architecture head on was something I had not considered, and while it seems like it would create a more intimate portrayal of life in New York City, it can actually create the opposite effect. The precision of framing and use of wide shots created a detached, cold feeling.

For months, the film consisted of images of New York City combined with my grandmother's voice-over, without any narration from me. The references to Akerman overpowered the film, and audiences were confused about the story I was trying to tell. I decided to experiment with narrating the film to contextualize the story and establish scenes for the audience. In order to create a more personal connection with the viewer, I narrated the film to sound like a diary, or as if I am telling a story, or writing a letter to a close friend or relative. It was written like a train-of-thought monologue. The intention was to help the viewer understand scenes, and to then let the scenes and my grandmother speak for themselves. Therefore, I tried to limit the amount of exposition and show more than tell in the film.

The narration begins over an image of an escalator in the 34th Street subway station. People stare directly into the camera emotionless, creating an uncomfortable feeling, which most audiences have responded to with laughter. The clip shows people on-the-go, riding up and down the escalator, but it doesn't show them getting off of it. This constant stream of people moving diagonally up and down the screen, one right after the other, while never stopping or exiting, is what city life often feels like for me. The next shot reenacts Akerman's subway tunnel footage by having a fixed camera in the middle of the 14th Street passageway. Bodies walk toward the camera and past it as the narration continues.

I repeat the words "this is" in the narration, providing a seemingly straightforward explanation of what is being shown on screen. "This is my grandmother. We're in East Bernard, Texas, just west of Houston...This is a wild turkey. We're in Bulverde, Texas...This is the room where my mother died...This

is the view from my window in New York...This is the block I live on.” The descriptive cues tell the viewer what they are looking at, without which the image may lose some meaning. It also helps to connect the viewer with the narrator, creating a three-way dialogue between the screen, viewer, and the narrative voice. The repetition of “this is” also shows how some places are easily identifiable, but maybe not as easily known or understood. Likewise, the core question of the film—the location of home—is not so easily answered.

Subject Matter

The film engages with the subject of mother-daughter relations overtly, in the exchanges with my grandmother and references to my mother’s passing, as well as subtly, particularly through three shots. In the image of “the block I live on,” which shows a city intersection, toward the end of the clip an older woman walks slowly with a younger woman. The shot hints at this relationship and then cuts just in time to avoid staring. Toward the end of the shot with the Asian man, a mother and daughter walk across the frame. The daughter zips up the mother’s backpack or adjusts it. A man then walks through the frame, triggering a cut. Finally, toward the end of the film, my grandmother references a poem called “Trees” by Joyce Kilmer. We see cut Christmas trees in the foreground lining the street for garbage collection. Toward the shot’s end, a mother walks in frame with her daughter, and both enter an apartment building. In this scene, my grandmother cannot remember the name of a poet and upon remembering says, “Joyce Kilmer! Can you read it to me?” The footage of the mother and child walking together as my grandmother asks me to read her a poem, represents caretaking roles and role reversals that transform over time, when we care for our parents. At this point, the viewer can assume that I read the poem to my grandmother.

My film also focuses on the subject of everyday life, which is in much of Akerman’s work, the films of Ross McElwee, and explored in depth in Ivone Margulies’ *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday*. I find these moments often overlooked or deemed insignificant, in life and in film,

but they matter. Even the act of having a meal together, or washing dishes, like in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels*, can reveal much about a person and where they are in that moment. Both McElwee and Akerman use the subject of everyday family life to create new meanings out of them.



Still from *You'll be home by when?*, 2017, by Rebecca Centeno.



Still from *You'll be home by when?*, 2017, by Rebecca Centeno.

In one scene, my grandmother talks about my cousin getting married and how they found a house. She references the “beautiful drapes” a number of times and emphasizes how glad she is that the seller is letting them keep the “venetian blinds.” During this scene, we see images of advertisements on a night street in New York City and hear audio of cars driving on wet pavement. This is a metaphor for what

is actually *real* and meaningful and what is not. A woman spreads her arms over a country field, touching plants. The first shot of my grandmother is her touching her plants in a similar way. The advertisement shifts to a beautiful, empty, well-decorated house as my grandmother speaks about my cousin's new drapes: "The lady said all her draperies, all her window treatments, were included. Beautiful, beautiful drapes. Can you imagine having to put in venetian blinds? When they said they were looking for a home, I said 'make sure that they have blinds, or you're going to have to buy the venetian blinds.'" The venetian blinds are *real* in my grandmother's story, while the interior house shots in the advertisement are fantasy. This placement of my grandmother's voice over the advertisement contrasts the tangible with the imaginary, and the word "magical" on screen is to be taken sarcastically. The intention is to communicate that real tangible life is more "magical" and meaningful than fantasy, even though the opposite is often sold to us.

In the middle of the film, we break, in a sense, from the narrative pattern presented thus far in the film. This is the only time in the film where we hear music, and it is diegetic sound. The music, acoustic Spanish-sounding guitars, plays in New York Penn Station, but perhaps it could also be heard in Texas. During this scene, the camera floats unfixed from the tripod and wanders through the station. I placed the camera on a stabilizer, which creates a gliding feel. During this scene, I read a quote from Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, which was in my horoscope "one year, on my birthday." The quote is, "Ah, Harry, we have to stumble through so much dirt and humbug before we reach home. And we have no one to guide us. Our only guide is our homesickness" (153). In the last sentence, we see people watching the guitarists perform, but their faces look lost. The narration in this scene ends with, "I just want to stand still for a while." The desire for stopping movement, to "stand still," represents a longing for feeling at home and at peace in time and space.

In the next shot, an Asian man stands near a shopping cart full of bags of cans facing the camera. This represents alienation versus connection. In the previous New York Penn Station shot, the camera moves with a stream of people but does not stop to connect with another person. In this shot, the

act of stopping while silently facing another person represents longing for connection. It is the only time in the film where the camera connects with another person in the city. This shot initially had voice-over and narration. After several attempts to change the narration, it continued to confuse audiences.

When I was filming this, he and I stood silently facing each other for about 5-10 minutes in the drizzly rain. It reminded me of magical moments that happen in New York City, where there is a brief connection with a complete stranger. Ivone Margulies, my third advisor, said the audience needed to feel what I felt during filming. It became clear that the narration was detracting from what I was trying to communicate, namely connection.



Still from *You'll be home by when?*, 2017, by Rebecca Centeno.

The clip begins as he wipes his face, a hint at feeling tired and wasted from the city. He looks into the window behind him, which appears to be an expensive apartment building, a fantasy for people who cannot afford it and a reminder of the house advertisements we saw earlier. He stares inside for almost 10 seconds and then turns around, leans on the building, and stares directly at the camera looking away a few times as people pass by in front of him. The entire take is about 45 seconds. The pattern of symmetry is consistent, but this time a living person creates the symmetry, not just pillars or static pieces

of architecture; there is a tree trunk and a man on the left and a pole and shopping cart on the right. The colors are also symmetrical, with white and red on opposite sides of the frame.

The story of the barn swallows that my grandmother tells serves as a metaphor for the subjects of family, children, and home. As she speaks about the swallows who “make their nest outside [her] door,” we see an unmarked street in New York City with 5 doors in close proximity. Two starlings enter the frame, and one flies toward and past the camera as my grandmother speaks about a young bird leaving the nest. The starlings walk back into frame when she says they “fly back to the nest” and then walk out of frame as she says, “after a while, they were gone, both of them.” This sequence also embodies longing. There is a reference here to to the beginning of the film, when my grandmother says, “It’s a circle. You always come back to your grassroots. It’s just...home.” The barn swallows return to their nest too: “The children come back. But it’s only in the Spring.” The story of the barn swallows takes on a new meaning when we watch it in the context of the film, and the metaphor of the birds is subtle yet clear.



Still from *You'll be home by when?*, 2017, by Rebecca Centeno.

The subjects of longing and mother-daughter relationships are most pronounced during the voicemail montage in the subway. We hear 5 consecutive voice messages from my grandmother, going back to 2012, during Hurricane Sandy. My narration that “she calls to check up on me during storms and to find out my address,” is another reference to everyday life. Listening to the actual messages, which are

real and not recreated, one right after another, while underground, in an enclosed space, emphasizes feelings of isolation, confinement, and loneliness. In the final voicemail, left during the holidays, she sounds like she is crying while mariachis play music in the subway car, reminiscent of Texas and my Mexican roots. People look depressed and lonely; the two people in the foreground face in the opposite direction. As the subway car departs the station, its grey metal frame dashes across the screen, and we arrive at the next location, a grey wall with graffiti on a New York City street.



Still from *You'll be home by when?*, 2017, by Rebecca Centeno.

The subject of spaces, and our relationships to them, is present in the scenes where I visit Texas to help my parents move. The house I grew up in has been sold, my grandmother reports in the film over a saturated image of mailboxes lining a country road. We transition to dark and intimate shots inside a house, memorializing what will soon be lost. The camera looks outside through window frames, at shadows on the floor of the room where my mother died, and onto a picture frame of a bird. All these images are in contrast to the structurally framed wide shots of the city. The house footage creates a sense of emotional freedom, intimacy, and a departure from the strict, cold public spaces of the city.



Still from *You'll be home by when?*, 2017, by Rebecca Centeno.

When a train arrives at the Canal Street subway station, the camera shines a fixed and uncompromising gaze on people exiting subway cars and walking forward into the city. It stands stubbornly in place as the train departs the station and people exit the frame. Movement and stillness, contrasting forces in the film, are expressed here. This scene represents a desire again for stillness and stopping in the constant flow of the city.

The film ends with a sequence referencing two poems called “Trees,” one by Joyce Kilmer and the other by Hermann Hesse. The subject matter of home, longing, mother, and death are articulated in the Hesse poem, which is actually much longer than quoted in the film. It is excerpted in my narration:

You are anxious because your path leads away from mother and home.
 But every step and every day lead you back again to the mother. Home
 is neither here nor there. Home is within you, or home is nowhere at
 all...It is a longing for home, for a memory of the mother, for new
 metaphors for life. It leads home. Every path leads homeward, every step
 is birth, every step is death, every grave is mother. (58-59)

In this scene, I relinquish power¹ about the concept of home to the poet. “Home is within you, or home is nowhere at all” smashes the idea that home exists in a physical place outside of ourselves (59). The location of home is within us. The last lines are my grandmother saying, “You always miss your

¹ See notes about the narrator relinquishing power on page 15, about Ross McElwee’s *Sherman’s March*.

home. That's normal. It really is." Then, she asks me the title of the film, "So...you'll be home by..." black screen, "When?" The ending is intentionally open-ended and meant to be thought-provoking.

My Relationship To Thesis Subject

Up until my thesis, most of the films I made were activist/advocacy pieces about social issues. In 2016, I found myself surrounded by loss: I was recently divorced; my father was selling our family home in Bulverde, TX; and the building where I worked and grew attached to in New York City had just been sold. I was reminded of the loss of my mother in 2001, when I was seventeen years old. Since moving to New York City in 2002, I often struggled with feelings of homesickness and a pull to Texas and my family. The three losses in 2016 motivated me to visit Texas and reconnect with my roots. For my thesis, I wanted to try something radically different, to make a personal film about the subject of loss. I began filming my family there and conducting interviews about loss and death.

The film went through many iterations. Initially, I thought it would be about loss and people whose parents died at a young age. I started reading books and watching films about the end-of-life, doctors and death, and personal films about loss. I quickly noticed, though, that the research kept dragging me back to 2001. I didn't want to be stuck in the past when what was happening currently was overpowering. It motivated me to change the direction of the film to one that explored the present. The intention then shifted to making a film that represented loss, family, home, and displacement. Practically speaking, this also made the most sense. Since I live and work in New York City, I felt the subjects of homesickness and displacement could better be articulated in a film shot here. It is the separation from home, or Texas, that helps create tension and contrast in the film.

Over the years, my grandmother, who is my father's mother, and I have grown closer. I knew I wanted her to be a part of the film from the beginning, which she agreed to early on. She is a natural character on screen and represents both mother and home in the film. I filmed one interview with her at

her home, recorded hours of phone conversations, and saved all of her voice messages since 2012. Excerpts from these recordings, none of which were scripted, comprised her voice-over in the film.

I thought the story would best be told as a documentary film. Initially, I wanted the film to be more abstract and experimental, using only my grandmother's voice-over, similar in form to *News From Home*. I avoided narration for months, but it was apparent after editing and test screenings, that the references to Akerman overpowered the film, and that my intention and story were not strong enough to connect with audiences. Once I began using narration, the story coalesced quickly. Structurally, I organized the footage almost as a train-of-thought monologue, as if I was speaking to a friend about trying to understand home and about what was happening in daily life, internally and externally.

3. RESEARCH ANALYSIS

My approach to research was watching films and reading literature about similar subject matter: loss, home, family, spaces, mothers. I watched films by Chantal Akerman, Ross McElwee, Errol Morris, Judith Helfand, Laurie Anderson, Shanti Thakur, and Melissa Saucedo Gonzalez, a Hunter IMA MFA alum, many of which dealt with the subject of loss and/or family. Helfand, Akerman, Thakur and McElwee all made films about the loss of a parent or grandparent. Anderson's essay film, *Heart of a Dog*, reflects on the loss of her husband Lou Reed, and that of her dog. Gonzalez's autobiographical film, while not about loss, is an intimate autobiographical portrait about her experience with prenatal depression. Morris' film *Gates of Heaven* is about a family who runs a pet cemetery in Napa, California. His film, *Vernon, Florida* is about turkey hunters in the south. I wanted to see how Morris approached making films about death in a lighter way through conversations with interesting characters. I also read books and articles that were about the films, filmmakers, and subject matter above.

Documentary Influences

I was inspired by personal documentary films about family and loss, especially those made by women directors. Chantal Akerman's films resonated with me the most, because of their haunting quality. The images of *News From Home*, for example, stayed with me for months. In Miranda Popkey's article, "Chantal Akerman says 'a film is a film is a film,' but hers really are different," she quotes Akerman saying, "Tomorrow or after tomorrow or after one year, you will remember these shots. Usually you forget. But you won't forget my shots because I insist, I insist right up to the point where it's almost unbearable."

News From Home reminded me of my own experience, and that of friends, who moved to New York City from other places and struggled to communicate with family from home. I discovered Akerman's films after she passed away, and I was struck by her form and the sadness in her films. In *No Home Movie*, she documents the final moments of her mother's life. In *I Don't Belong Anywhere*, she says, "I realized that my mother was at the center of my work...now that my mother is no longer there, there's nobody left." The mother-daughter relationship, and the pain of separation and loss, resonates so strongly in many of her films.

In the article, "News from Home: Remembering Chantal Akerman," Daniel Drew writes about "contrary forces" within Akerman's films: "belonging and separation, approach and retreat, movement and stillness, and ultimately, life and death." Drew also writes about "private emotions onto the vision of wide open public spaces," which is something I was inspired to recreate in my film, because it represented what it feels like when I talk to my grandmother on the phone in a public space in New York City. All of the other contrary forces are also part of my experience living in the city and trying to locate home.

Judith Helfand's, *A Healthy Baby Girl* and *Love and Stuff*, both show her relationship with her mother, and Helfand is a character in both films. Toward the end of *Love and Stuff*, Helfand, crying, asks her mother who is dying, "How do you live without your mother?" Her mother responds calmly after a few

seconds, “You do. You learn to.” Helfand’s narration in *Love and Stuff* is honest and witty. The film is sad but also funny at times and never feels maudlin. I was inspired by Helfand’s ability to show the close relationship she had with her mother and to make a film about dealing with her mother’s passing that was complex emotionally and did not feel melodramatic or overly sentimental.

Finally, I searched for films that were about physical spaces and read literature about the concept of home. Documenting spatial elements intrigued me, but it was difficult to find films where the subject was a physical place. Akerman’s *La Chambre* and *Hotel Monterey* grapple with this. Her film, *From the East* depicts people occupying public spaces, without the use of narration or voice-over.

Akerman’s aesthetics and McElwee’s narration were most influential for my thesis. In the New York Time’s article, “The Director’s Director: Chantal Akerman,” Donadio states that Akerman “transforms the everyday into the metaphysical” in *From the East*. I think she does this in all of her films. Similarly, McElwee transforms everyday home movie footage into autobiographical documentaries, through the addition of narration.

NARRATION

Melissa Saucedo Gonzalez’s autobiographical documentary film, *Before David*, intimately shows family life and emotional distress. Gonzalez uses Skype conversations with her family and a close friend to discuss what she is going through in her pregnancy with prenatal depression. I was inspired by her creative approach to use conversations to serve as voice-over, rather than traditional narration.

McElwee’s documentaries deal with personal subject matter, and his intimate, self-effacing narration over footage of family and friends transforms what could be considered “home movies” into documentary films, whether they are about dating and failed relationships, like in *Sherman’s March*, or portraits of friends, like *Charleen*. He speaks directly to the viewer, guiding them through the footage and what is on screen. I was drawn to the approach of speaking directly to the viewer and his conversational

tone. In *Sherman's March*, he tries to understand why his relationships keep failing. McElwee, the narrator, "relinquishes his power of judgment to his friend Charleen, who becomes the voice of wisdom and vitality, telling him what he is doing wrong with women" (Lopate 262). This "ego-slaying strategy" (262) was also inspiring when considering the ending of my film, when I relinquish power as a narrator to Hermann Hesse's poem, "Trees."

FRAMING

I found commonalities in the framing techniques of Chantal Akerman and Wes Anderson. Akerman's framing is called "architectural" in *I Don't Belong Anywhere*, because the composition is meticulous and takes into account structural elements, like walls and pillars when placing the camera. She frequently frames people and places in the center, creating symmetry, and faces things head-on. For example, if filming a subject in front of a flat surface, like a wall, she will often place the camera directly in front of the wall with the person in the center, not off to the side. Similarly, Wes Anderson often "puts his subjects in the center of the frame, or has his subjects split center" (Potterton, "A Visual Analysis of Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums*"). Both break the traditional *rule of thirds*. Both filmmakers pay particular attention to details when framing, how the camera is precisely tilted with structural elements in mind, how lines are formed, where people and props are placed. Every detail helps to create an intentionally crafted portrait. Both directors sometimes create frames within frames in their composition.

Potterton's analysis of the visuals in Wes Anderson's film, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, discusses his "deliberate color schemes, negative space, symmetry, or composition to create a visually pleasing picture, evoke an emotion, or give insight into characters (or sometimes, all three)." This can be said for many, if not most, of Anderson's films. His use of symmetry is artfully shown in :: kogonada's short film, *Wes Anderson // Centered*.

I like the idea of using form and cinematography in documentary to help shape narratives. Direct cinema and verité filmmakers who are strictly handheld, focus primarily on what is in front of the lens.

However, camera placement and framing are equally important and not objective at all; Neither is editing. I wanted to push myself to create images in my thesis that were highly intentional. Since I was interested in showing people's relationship to place, specifically how people in New York City interact with the architectural and structural elements that dominate our immediate surroundings, framing became very important to show this relationship.

COLOR

I was inspired by the use of color in *The Wizard of Oz*, films directed by Wes Anderson, and *Seven Hours to Burn*, by Shanti Thakur, my second advisor. Color is used in *Seven Hours to Burn* to differentiate India and Denmark. Reds and pinks are used in the film when the subject is about India. For Denmark, the colors are yellow, blue, and green. When these worlds come together, so do their color palettes. It inspired me to color correct my thesis film using warm, saturated colors for footage in Texas and cool, blue tones for footage in New York City. The city footage was shot mostly during winter. I color corrected it to a blue/grey tone to feel cool and detached. The Texas colors are enhanced and saturated. The shots with the mailboxes and the cacti, for example, were manipulated to create images that are much brighter than the original shots. I feel the manipulation of color in Texas is warranted, because I was trying to create a romantic, dream-life effect, and I was less concerned with realism. The fact that it is unrealistic reminds me of *The Wizard of Oz*, and the land of Oz, which is bright and beautiful, but also a dream. Wes Anderson's highly intentional use of color inspired me to pay particular attention to minor details, especially in the city. Hints of red pop out in shots that are mostly blue/grey.

Poetry and Literature Influences

I read books by, or inspired by, Buddhists on the subject of home. Hermann Hesse and Robert M. Pirsig, who both wrote books with passages that resonated with me about home and place, were both inspired by Buddhism. Hesse's "Trees" poem stood out immediately. During the research phase, I also remembered a passage in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* by Pirsig

about the contrasts of city and country life. I had not read the book in probably 10 years, but I remembered the sentiment of the passage clearly. Pirsig writes:

It's paradoxical that where people are the most closely crowded, in the big coastal cities in the East and the West, the loneliness is the greatest. Back where people were so spread out in western Oregon and Idaho and Montana and the Dakotas you'd think the loneliness would have been greater, but we didn't see it so much.

The explanation, I suppose, is that the physical distance between people has nothing to do with loneliness. It's psychic distance, and in Montana and Idaho the physical distances are big but the psychic distances between people are small, and here it's reversed.

...

And people caught up in this primary America seem to go through huge portions of their lives without much consciousness of what's immediately around them. The media have convinced them that what's right around them is unimportant. And that's why they're lonely. You see it in their faces...when they look at you, you're just a kind of an object. You don't count. You're not what they're looking for. You're not on TV.

...

But in the secondary America we've been through, of back roads, and Chinaman's ditches, and Appaloosa horses, and sweeping mountain ranges, and meditative thoughts, and kids with pinecones and bumblebees and open sky above us mile after mile after mile, all through that, what was real, what was *around* us dominated. And so there wasn't much feeling of loneliness. (366)

In Thich Nhat Hanh's books on mindfulness, he emphasizes our awareness of our physical body in time and space. In *You Are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment*, he encourages repeating a poem during sitting or walking meditation, which begins, "I have arrived, I am home" (37). Hanh says we can breathe in and say to ourselves the first part, and breathe out and say the latter (37). He continues, "I am already home, I don't have to run. I am at home, in my true home. The address of my true home is clear; life, here and now. Peace is something that becomes possible the moment you stop.

Stopping is an essential aspect of Buddhist meditation” (37). I was inspired by the simplicity of the quote above. This answers the question posed by my thesis film’s title in three words, “I am home” (37).

As I state in the film, Hermann Hesse is my favorite author, because he writes often about the subjects of home and wandering. Influenced by Eastern religion and Chinese philosophy, he also came to know Carl Jung. He, like Jung, wrote about the duplicity of human beings, of the spiritual and studious life versus emotional and animalistic life. This is a theme in most of Hesse books, like in *Steppenwolf*, which translates to “a wolf of the steppes.” I wanted to explore the following contrasts: nature and city life; home and wandering; alienation and connection; private and public; physical and metaphysical spaces.

4. THESIS PRODUCTION PROCESS

I accumulated much footage of Texas when I was considering basing the story there. Images from inside our house, interviews and time spent with my grandmother, landscape shots, and driving shots were all filmed over trips to see my family. When my idea shifted to base the film in New York and use voice-over of my grandmother, and minimal, if any footage from Texas, I began to record phone calls with her.

For the phone conversations with my grandmother, I used a Zoom Audio Recorder and JK Audio CellTap 4C Audio Adapter, to capture the audio through a cell phone. None of the calls were scripted, although on a few occasions I asked her to repeat something, or say a name specifically. During the phone calls, I hand wrote timecodes and words she was saying. These rough transcriptions filled pages of notebooks, and they helped me to locate clips during editing.

The footage in New York City was mostly shot in winter, and on days when it was drizzly. This was both lucky and intentional. I wanted the city to appear depressed and heavy, not in sunshine and full light. Luckily, we had a rainy winter. I also picked days where it was drizzly enough to film outside using

just an umbrella and near sunset. The result was a color palette that was greyish blue. The cars driving on the street created a wet pavement sound.

I shot the film anamorphically, with a cinemascope ratio of 2:35:1 to create a “film look” but also to shorten the architecture of the city to a more human scale. I find the skyscrapers in New York City masculine and phallus-like. My intention was to create a more horizontal image and focus on people and the ground.

When I recorded the narration, I imagined I was speaking to someone telling them a story about what I was going through with the pull homeward toward my family. This guided my approach in recording, in what to say, and in how to structure the edit. I would record a few sentences, go back to the footage, and edit placing in any voice-over with my grandmother. After a scene, I’d imagine what intuitively would come next, in train-of-thought, write it, record it, then edit. Each scene was crafted this way. The script wasn’t written all at once, but sequence by sequence. In the narration, through exchanges with my grandmother, and in my use of footage, I wanted the viewer to feel like I was speaking to them as I would to a close friend.

For months, when the film was not narrated, the feedback was that it was too detached. I now feel like I accomplished telling a story that audiences have said felt intimate. I think I accomplished making a diary film about my family and home, and about being from one place while living in another.

Telling a personal story is incredibly difficult. Speaking to other filmmakers who made autobiographical films, watching personal documentaries, and working with my advisors helped me overcome my fear of narration. It became, unintentionally, a diary film. This was a beneficial mistake. It was certainly a learning process. In Phillip Lopate’s article, “In Search of the Centaur: The Essay Film,” he writes about how “first-person narrative...awakens the appetite for confession” (261). I found this to be true, and I learned that this happened with me. Although, I am not sure this always serves the film. It does feel like a diary, and a part of me wants to hide it away. I learned about the line in diary and

autobiographical films that needs to be observed, so they do not feel self-indulgent. I read Doug Block's "The Ten Rules of Personal Documentary Filmmaking," after presenting my film. In the future, I would revisit them when considering making a personal film, because I think his "rules" are on point to avoid making a film that feels self-indulgent.

I am used to thinking much about the audience response. When I make activist/advocate pieces, I always consider my responsibility to the public. I was inspired by Akerman who seemed to not care about the audience. I thought, "how freeing" that must be. I still wonder about my film's public benefit. It can be a learning tool for diary films, to inspire others to make them and show what works and what does not work. I hope it can also be useful to people who are living in New York City, who are not from here, who feel isolated and/or lost. It can show them that they are not alone in feeling this way.

With this project, I learned about making a personal film, integrating narration into a film, and how to use footage cinematically to express emotion. Artistically, even without narration, audiences responded positively and said I was effective in creating emotional spaces with observational footage. They felt loneliness and isolation in my New York City footage. When they saw footage from Texas, they wanted to return there, and they felt connected. It was filmed with a completely different style, more of how I am used to filming. I learned to be expressive cinematically. I learned to not be afraid of narration, and to use it if it will benefit the story.

5. AUDIENCE AND EXHIBITION

The film was accepted for distribution in the Filmmaker's Coop in New York City, an artist-run non-profit organization that distributes avant-garde films. On June 16, 2017, it screened there with other films from Hunter's IMA MFA Program in a show titled, "At Home in New York." I will continue to submit the film to documentary, experimental, and avant-garde film festivals such as The Ann Arbor Film Festival, Black Maria Film Festival, Big Muddy Film Festival, and festivals that focus on elders. I think the

film speaks to audiences who have struggled with family issues, and loss in particular. Hopefully, it resonates with people who left their place of origin to live somewhere else. I would also like to work more with individual scenes in the film and explore their potential for micro-documentaries. For example, the barn swallows scene could potentially be a stand-alone micro-doc about metaphors, transforming the everyday into something more meaningful.

The only copyrighted material in the film is the outdoor shot of the Life by Luminara advertisement on the street. At this point, I am unclear if the diegetic song in Penn Station is proprietary. I would argue that use of the advertisement is parody. The placement of my grandmother's voice about the "beautiful, beautiful drapes" is tongue-in-cheek, almost as if she herself is advertising or selling the importance of drapes and venetian blinds when purchasing a home, just like the advertisement is telling us about the importance of candles in a home. I do not foresee any legal issues that may impact my ability to exhibit the film.

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