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The Mirrored Road

By

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ABSTRACT

The Mirrored Road is a feature film that explores the relationship between trauma and memory, and questions the function of home movies as a vehicle for truth. The film weaves together family footage shot over the past 70 years, films from Hollywood's silent era, and new footage shot between 2017–2020. What initially began as a project about the life of my great grandmother Bessie evolves into an exploration of my own trauma, which unfolds slowly throughout the film and is prompted by stories of traumatic events surrounding Bessie's early life and the lives of those in her orbit. The process of interrogating the family footage and the family story brings unconscious memories into consciousness over the course of the film's three-year production, resulting in a journey of healing through the process of filmmaking.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Mirrored Road utilizes metaphorical imagery, first-person narration, family films and silent Hollywood films, among other footage, to tell the story of my great grandmother's life, and, through the process of making this film, to help me recover from my own traumatic experience. In other words, pursuing Bessie's story uncovers my own story, and ultimately, I learn more about myself than her.

My cousin Mary Taylor, one of the central characters in the film, says, "I think we get to know our relatives by knowing about ourselves more. I know more about my grandmother by knowing who I am." These were wise words, and ended up being true.

My intention in weaving such different material together—especially the archival and family footage—is to provoke others to question what they see, to look beneath the surface. My work continuously incorporates archival and found footage for this reason, to explore its hidden

dimensions. In the home movies there are a lot of gazes, eyes and expressions functioning as windows into a person as well as implying what they are gazing at. It was interesting to see what they focused on, where their eyes would wander with the camera. These are the moments that stand out to me in all of this footage. The gaze of the filmmaker. I saw elements of myself in all of it. I come from a family of filmmakers in a sense; they all contributed to this piece.

The family scenes are set pieces of family gatherings, Easter Sunday, weddings, outings, which underscore the universality of family, of being part of this ensemble. It also gestures towards the fact that each person will need to find their own story within the family, which I have done through the process of making this film.

All of the home movies from my childhood were shot by my father, a representation of the male gaze. In the film's opening, I reference the conscious and unconscious stories running through our minds while we are awake, and then asleep. I use footage my father took on one of our family vacations. The camera moves from a parasailer, to my mother and I, and then quickly to a topless woman running out of the water, then back to the family.

The woods are a theme in the film; where I grew up. It's the backdrop of my memories, and is preserved in footage my father shot on super 8 which appears in the film. There is much hidden in these woods, and one can't see the "ground truth" from the aerial view. In the opening of the film I describe recurring dreams about the woods. Later I shoot a scene walking through them with my father, who remarks, "You must have so many memories of this place." He references a book of poems written about the woods and Great Ledge by our late next-door neighbor Peter Davison, a literary agent and poet. The excerpt I included speaks of the primordial history of these Silurian-age granite formations, which used to form the edge of the North American Continent. There are lots of high places in the film. Great Ledge has a sixty-foot

drop; I show a photo of my father and his brothers on a mountain top in Wyoming, which conveys both a vantage point, and also danger.

I use the archival footage to fill in the gaps in the story, to turn a loose sketch into a cinematic narrative. Bessie was a teenage runaway from a farm in Nova Scotia. Her father was an abusive man, but we had few other details because she didn't talk about her life. She arrived in Boston at age seventeen, and after that the story is full of holes. She married my great grandfather, a widower with eight children, and had one child of her own, my grandfather Robert.

The silent film footage I use to help tell her story shows tropes/archetypes. The archetype of the evil stepmother, orphaned children, the saintly, Cinderella-esque character in *Sparrows* with Mary Pickford. There are scenes of women escaping, climbing out windows and getting on boats; all hints and guesses and surfacings from the subconscious about what really happened with Bessie.

After my great grandfather Bill died, Bessie went to work in the factories during WWII. According to public record, she never finished high school, but somehow went from factory girl to helping to wire the detonator for the atomic bomb. She never spoke about it, except to my grandfather. Nobody knows how she made that occupational leap, whether she knew what she was doing, or how she felt about it. The government films I use show a lot of missiles, with obvious symbolism, and there are implications about science both as discovery and secrecy—people peering into microscopes and at test tubes with mysterious contents.

Bessie was an enigma, the most secretive person on earth, according to those who knew her. That was, in fact, what drew me to her. Although I didn't answer the big questions, what I did

learn and how I evolved through the process of making this film was ultimately the more important thing.

The experience of seeing the world through my great grandmother's eyes, in her own films, was my only connection to her point of view, one that hasn't been passed down from different members of the family. Much of her footage seemed to embrace the all-American, postwar life; much of the footage was of the great American motifs and landmarks: vivid closeups of marching bands and majorettes in a New England parade, shots of waves crashing in the ocean, the wide-open spaces of the American West. But the reels of film she shot when she returned to Nova Scotia were different. She films her father, George Sibley, against gleaming machinery; a model T ford, a red tractor—things that he seemed to regard more highly than his family. One of the things I learned by interviewing Bessie's cousin Malcolm in her hometown was that her father George made the children work, but kept all the money they earned to buy himself these things, and that the family rarely had enough to eat. Malcolm describes a special hiding place where George would keep all his possessions, away from the family. There is also a shot of her brother Alex, who, like her father, was an alcoholic and an abusive man to his children. Alex walks across her gaze, but covers his face as Bessie films him.

There are lots of boats in Bessie's footage, symbolizing her own escape by boat, travel, possibility, and new powerful technology, which she was headed towards when she fled to Boston. I include a shot of my grandfather on his naval ship headed to Japan, then much-later footage of myself and my cousin as children on a Whale Watch with my grandfather, gazing at the water as a tail slips back under its surface. He was so proud of his mother's work on the Manhattan Project and felt in some sense she played a role in saving him from going to war—as well as cutting the war short.

When Bessie is seen in front of the camera, which would have been filmed by her second husband Whitey, we see her singularity, her aloofness, and I return over and over to a shot of her reading the paper. In the shot she has an aura of ease and control.

By examining footage of myself, slowing it down, and catching moments and expressions, I revealed the shadow side of footage. There is a reoccurring shot of me running across a bridge toward the camera, then footage of me walking away from the camera slowly. These images reappear, sometimes there are two of me, representing the divided self, and in the film's end I run back towards the camera, the two sides forming back into one.



Fig. 1: Film still from *The Mirrored Road*. Mary Hanlon, 2020

Watching the footage from my family's gaze reinforced the theme of patterns in families, within my own family, but especially the way in which family footage is performed and assembled.

Travis Wilkerson had a great line: “Home movies are the propaganda of the family.” I love this, but would take it one step further and say they are in a nuanced place. Not quite reality, not quite a deception. More a form of protective magic, especially in families with trauma. I came to realize while making this film that not everyone can face their trauma. One only does so if they are able. What’s the line, life never gives you more than you can handle? I think it’s a personal process. Just as the films are a protection from the truth, dissociative or blocked memories are as well. They are survival tools. When they stop being useful, you need a new tool.

In my case, I had to confront the memories and go through a process of speaking them, going to therapy, and creating a narrative around them. Often these events just live inside us. I was drawn to Bessie because I knew she had had this trauma. I knew there was also a history of trauma running down both sides of my family, but in the end it became about my own way of addressing it, not preaching one way to do it. I can only speak for myself and what happened for me. I did it with the support of my family story, which reinforced that trauma is a very real thing, and that it does pass itself down generationally.

I found out the hard way that I was capable of facing my trauma. It happened on its own, throughout the process of the film’s production, and I fought it, until I finally surrendered and understood that this was actually my story. I was led by Bessie, but in the end my journey is the only one I can clearly express without doubt. Hers is still in pieces, and we won’t know what really happened. But without my pursuit of her I may not have been capable of doing it on my own. The other revelation I had about inherited trauma and family experience is that one also inherits love and, in my case, artistic ability, sense of humor, and an array of other things that balance it all out. The idea is not rejecting the stuff that’s unpleasant. It is essential for me to take in all of it, see all of it. Seeing all of myself, the light and dark, made me a more complete

person. Although it was counterintuitive for me to speak about my trauma on film, and to be so vulnerable and visible, it turned out to be the key to my freedom. I am reminded of one of my favorite quotes from Rainer Maria Rilke, “Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.”

The most significant event in the film and in my journey of healing has been sharing my story with my parents, a two-year process that happened over the course of making this film. It ended with a deeper, closer relationship and a sense of safety and trust. I was finally able to show them all of me, and they accepted it. It was something for me, and probably a lot of survivors, that can be scary. We are afraid of not being heard or believed. But I *was* heard and believed, and that was also essential to my recovery. Through the process of filmmaking, which in this case was a form of art therapy, I have had an opportunity to know my parents better and in a different way. I fought for that because it was important to me. And I’m grateful they were supportive of it.

Ultimately the story’s peak is not some huge revelation about Bessie, something I didn’t already know. What was revealed about her was that she was a survivor of trauma, along with others in her family. And as I dug deeper, I found that the patterns of trauma and alcoholism within my own family were too significant to be ignored. My pursuit of Bessie became a catalyst for speaking about my own experience—the very thing, ironically, that Bessie refused to do. She would not talk about her life; she left the bad behind when she ran away from Canada. But then she found a similar life with her first husband.

In the film, I question theories about inherited trauma and ask questions about how trauma functions. How we often seek out the the kinds of relationships we are familiar with, even if they

aren't healthy. I found that Bessie and I both had this in common. Bessie made a physical escape and did find peace and happiness later in life, which is illustrated in the footage that turned up. She had somewhat of a happy ending, but died with all of her secrets. My escape proved to be internal. I had absorbed much of the inherited trauma and alcoholism in my own family, and have spent the last decade or so recovering from addiction and depression. My journey looks different from Bessie's, but is related to it. I felt she was a guide, a shadow sister, throughout my journey. She sort of showed me the light at the end of the tunnel, but I had to get there on my own.

Throughout the film I hint at something that is emerging, but it isn't revealed until more than halfway through. And even then, it's still somewhat abstract. I find the most useful films about trauma circle around the event without actually going there. I use poetic language and metaphorical, abstract images to support the dialogue about the event. The most significant one is an archival film of a girl searching a room and opening drawers, then slowly pulling out a wolf's head, looking at it, then hiding it behind her back. In the voice over I am speaking about something stirring in me, not knowing what that is, but knowing that somehow, I am a part of this larger story about family trauma.

What's important for me is conveying the feelings and experience of confronting and getting honest about an event that was significant and affected my life in myriad ways. But I choose not to reveal it in specifics. I keep my anonymity in that sense; that's not what the film is about, but I do hope the revelation of the feelings and the ability to transcend trauma and pain through processing it will help others. I was inspired to make this film because I know so many other people who have had the same experience, as well as some who have not been able to survive the effects of abuse. It is a topic that is under-represented in documentary film.

BACKGROUND

I began this process eager to make a film about Bessie's role in making the Bomb, about gender roles post-WWII, and about the way women are used as objects and metaphors to sell products; in this case, to promote the war. I had long been fascinated by film noir, and by how it reflects tensions omnipresent in American culture—like the women who had previously been doing men's work and doing it well, and who were now back in the home. But as I began showing early versions of the piece, teachers and peers alike agreed that the more interesting story was the family story. They pointed out, also, that the gender stuff had already been covered in film. How could I make my project more unique? I wondered. I had a hard time letting go of my original vision of the film.

I'd had a plan, but nothing went according to plan.

I became interested in my great-grandmother's story for two reasons. First was her work on the Manhattan Project during World War II, and the mystery of how she went from being a Rosie-the-Riveter-type factory worker to helping assemble the atomic bomb. Second was her place in my own early memories. Throughout my life I have had a scene in my mind of sitting on the lap of someone in a wheelchair, looking at putty-colored walls. Hands around me; old, wrinkled ones. When I could verbalize it, my father told me it was when he brought me to see Bessie in the early 80s in a nursing home towards the end of her life. She was my first memory, though not a person I saw much. I have also taken on the role of family archivist, and have been collecting and transferring photos and Super 8 films for the past fifteen years. There were all these vague stories: Bessie's father was a bad man, my maternal grandparents were both

alcoholics. My grandmother suffered from depression. I began to see this all around me, but mostly in myself.

CINEMATIC APPROACH

Due to the variation in media, archival materials, photos, new footage, I felt I should be more sparse with sound, but I do use music as a tool to forward my physical journey from Texas to Canada to Massachusetts as I meet and interview Bessie's relatives. In earlier versions I had scored the film, using sound as a dramatic tool. During the last months as I restructured, I found that silence spoke volumes in this project. My voice-over narration functions as a guide, and sometimes poetically to convey my personal experience and feelings throughout the piece, and once I removed the soundtrack, the dramatic effect was heightened. It was also more vulnerable, to be on my own, leading the viewer on a journey which ultimately became personal. But the choice to give the audience space to absorb what I'm saying, as well as the variety of different media; old films, new footage, photos, was a smart one.

My intent was to produce a synthesis of different material to create a unique style and effect. I'm inspired by Adam Curtis's work, by his ability to weave together different media and materials in a fluid way, in particular his film series *The Century of The Self*. I also found inspiration in Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, his way of telling a deeper story using voice-over about psychogeography in Los Angeles over slick, Hollywood films. But in terms of narrative style I'm more drawn to films like Sue Fredrick's *Sink or Swim*, Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, and Travis Wilkerson's *Did You Ever Wonder Who Fired The Gun?*, artists who have made experimental, essay films of a more personal nature. I was also heavily influenced by

Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite*, which is similar in subject matter to *The Mirrored Road*, and Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell*.

The story structure is both linear and non-linear. There is a clear journey from beginning to end, me seeking answers and physically traveling to find those answers. Although I traveled 5000 miles, I believe the more significant journey was my own evolution and cathartic discovery of my past, which was holding me back. But this wouldn't have happened without my making the physical journey, and slowly changing throughout that journey as I learned more.

I jump around in time, and do so using footage from different decades, the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s. I use images of family metaphorically to support the voice-over, adding to the emotional weight of the narration.

RESEARCH ANALYSIS

I spent a lot of time corresponding with the National Archives, and acquired about two dozen propaganda films, and a number of photographs. I contacted the Raytheon Archives to see if they had information about Bessie's time on the Manhattan Project, but I hit a dead end. I used public databases to search records and dates of where Bessie lived before she married my great grandfather, what steamship she might have been on when she fled her farm in Canada.

The most significant moment in the research process was the eight reels of film turning up in the summer of 2017, just weeks after I'd decided to make the project. My uncle said he had eight reels of 16 mm film in his basement that had belonged to Bessie. He had only watched a few, those that were shot out West where he resides. The wait for the footage was excruciating. When it arrived, I was blown away. A woman I had so little information about was also a filmmaker.

We had some common ground. My loose sketch of my great grandmother now flashed before me in richly colorful images.

They also functioned as a connector. Once sent out to family they reached more family, eventually connecting me with my father's cousin Mary Taylor, who had written a book on the family history and was a major contributor to this project, particularly through her archival materials and information about the family that I was missing. They all thought Bessie was a waitress, and I got to tell them she was an engineer on the Manhattan project. Mary showed me a very different story than the one I'd always heard about Bessie's life with my great grandfather and all the children in the family.

Some of Mary's material caused waves in my father's family. There were transcripts and excerpts from Bessie's stepdaughters that painted her and Bill in a negative way. What I realized is we won't really ever know the whole truth, but getting other sides of the story makes it closer to a whole story, not a fragmented one.

Michelle Citron's book *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* was central to my research, as was Judith Herman's book *Trauma and Recovery*. Denise Kiernan's *The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II* was also a great resource, with its first-hand testimonies from the women who worked on the Manhattan Project at the Oak Ridge, Tennessee site. The women of that generation are old now, many of them deceased; these intimate accounts of their work on the Manhattan Project contribute important information that would be hard to find in history books.

It was interesting researching, in tandem, the most secretive operation in U.S. history, and— from what I have learned—the most secretive woman on Earth, Bessie. She was probably selected for the Manhattan Project work at least in part because she was so good at keeping

secrets. I found our similarities and differences to be very interesting, too—we both kept in secrets, but she died with hers and I had to let mine out. This is the strongest connection between us, and it was only uncovered through my research.

Much of the research was interviewing the family, and asking very personal questions. It was a learning experience. Most of them didn't want to talk about trauma, or what might've happened to Bessie. My father and Mary Taylor did, and were the two main characters in the film. May Wolff added an interesting element; she had another perspective from her mother.

I uncovered a lot of information from the family—sometimes very contradictory, and little of it definitively provable. My sources all agreed that there was a pedophile in the family, my grandfather's half brother Eddie, and it was confirmed he abused some of his sisters, and ended up in institutions throughout his life. But I found no evidence of my great grandfather being sexually abusive aside from one claim. Still, I was drawn by these things, because of my own story. I moved towards them because they connected me to those sorts of familial patterns. And I felt less alone.

THESIS PRODUCTION PROCESS

This project began in 2017. I thought I was going to make a short film about Bessie and about postwar gender roles. It began outside the IMA program. I already had another treatment written for my thesis, and thought this would be a light, 20-minute short film. In no way did I want to be a character in it. I wanted to interview experts, which I did, and to use a lot of government propaganda films used to influence women to go to work during the war.

I finally brought the project in to my advanced studio class with Jason Fox in the winter of 2017. When I showed early cuts of it, he kept telling me to look more closely at the footage and

interrogate it. What was it actually telling us? I was still very focused on Rosie the Riveter as a myth/propaganda image and tried to pose her next to Bessie, to move back and forth between their two stories, using them as mirrors. I then took the film into an editing class with Kelly Anderson, who kept asking how Bessie was related to Rosie. Aside from their role in the war, she wasn't seeing it. I was also working on it in Marty Lucas's advanced studio class, where the family story really started to emerge. At that point I had travelled and done all the interviews with the family in Canada and Texas, and would soon go home and interview my father. People kept encouraging me to go with the family story and to add myself in. Essentially, I became the other character instead of Rosie. I fought it, but that was the way it happened.

My production process was guerilla-style. I worked with what I had. Sometimes it was messy. I shot some footage with the Canon C100 with Synch sound. But when I went on the road to Canada and Texas, I just had my Canon 5D and my zoom recorder. I shot on the fly; even using books and once a roll of paper towels as tripods. My cousin Maurya drove the car while I took shots of the road in Canada, and helped make sure the zoom was on and recording while I talked with my cousin Malcolm. It was challenging. I was meeting people for the first time, and asking them very personal questions. Being a one-woman show as an interviewer was hard, but it offered privacy and intimacy and enabled more interesting conversations to unfold, which with a camera crew would not have happened. I shot, edited, did the sound and all aspects of the project myself, which was a huge challenge but really taught me how to make a film. And what not to do next time.

By the time I finished my coursework in the winter of 2019, I had a 20-minute cut. I felt I was ready to really develop the project further on my own and with my advisor Marty Lucas, due to its personal nature. I knew how vulnerable I had to get to really go where I wanted to with it.

That wouldn't have happened in a workshop, but the IMA supported me getting to the point of having all my material in front of me, plenty of feedback, and a much better concept of documentary filmmaking. I also took a workshop with Travis Wilkerson at Union Docs, and showed a bit of the film there. I am a big fan of his film *Did You Ever Wonder Who Fired the Gun?*, about a family member of his in the South who was involved in a murder. His voice-over is haunting, and I am drawn to his filmmaking style. When we spoke after the workshop, he said that I might have too many voices in my head, and that I needed to go off on my own, make the film, then bring it back. This was exactly what I needed to hear, and what I ended up doing. Wilkerson had done an MFA at Cal Arts, and he told me that was what he also had needed to do. It was inspiring to hear.

The process of coming back to it and working closely with my primary advisor, Marty Lucas, was so helpful. He knows my story and my work well, and has been a huge support.

AUDIENCE AND EXHIBITION

It is my intention to apply *The Mirrored Road* to various film festivals, and I hope to have screenings of the film within my own community of filmmakers and artists. I intend to work on it further; the COVID-19 pandemic was limiting in terms of access to certain resources, like working with a professional sound engineer and colorist.

The Mirrored Road began as a more historical project that turned into a personal piece about trauma and how I overcame it. I am hopeful it will function on both of these levels; and draw a large audience. Although it was hard to be so brutally honest, I did so because I believe this is a subject that needs more representation, and I hope it will help other survivors of trauma.

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