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Unsettling

By

Cynthia Groya

Submitted in partial fulfillment
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Véronique Bernard

Thesis Sponsor

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Date

Kelly J. Anderson

Second Reader

Dedicated to Marilyn Fischbach, who believed in my vision
and encouraged me to look beyond it.

This film is also dedicated to Gloria-Elayne Owens and Hope Carr,
for showing me history through their eyes.

For Peter and Catherine,
“- my sun, my moon, and all my stars”
E.E. Cummings

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ABSTRACT

Unsettling is an experimental essay film created during COVID-19 shelter-in-place isolation, documenting remembrances of traumatic life events and the impact these memories have on my vision and life. Preparing to leave my home, my marriage and the lifestyle I have inhabited for fourteen years, I contemplate, “What are memories?” “What do you hold onto from the past and what do you let go?” This film documents my personal journey exploring love, loss, denial, grief and acceptance, told in the third person. The personal ramifications of historic racism, cancer, divorce and white supremacy and the role these issues play in the way they impact my life is explored in this essay. Resourcing a vast video archive—moments and memories captured on my iPhone over a course of eight years—I diary personal observations from the footage and concurrently compose voice-over narration documenting this journey of self-discovery and analysis. The process of introspection reveals patterns and influences perhaps obscured by attempting to “live in the moment” that come to light when viewed collectively during the reflection process. Isolation adds to the intensity of this pursuit and early in the process, I intuitively take the position of third person as I begin developing the narrative arc, both to shield my already raw emotional state and to attempt some semblance of objectivity.

Through a layering of video clips, voice-over narration, ambient sound and music, I invite the viewer to come into my COVID-isolated world, and share my wide-ranging thoughts and perspectives on traumatic events past and present, informing the path I take forward.

Following the dictum “an uninspected life isn’t worth living,” “I” (through the third person narrator, “She”) question my memories, the symbolism of my archives, and the baggage I unpack on my journey of self-discovery.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In *Sans Soleil*, the narrator tells us, “In the world he comes from, to be moved by a vision, to call forth a portrait, to tremble at the sound of music can only be signs of a long and painful prehistory—He wants to understand” (Marker). Understanding, is a process.

Looking deep into how significant past and present life changes shape my memory and my actions is not the thesis project I originally planned. Shelter-in-place protocols imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic immediately prohibit the live interviews required for my original thesis project, bringing me face-to-face with the only viable material available to me: an archive of over thirteen hundred short videos captured on my iPhone. Surely there is something here with which I can construct a film? Cataloguing and transcribing the videos, I begin noticing repeating images and patterns—evidence of loss, denial, grief, and uncertainty.

With nowhere to go and nowhere to hide, I choose to explore the most impactful and the most painful memories, and ask myself “Why haven’t I dealt with these before?” There are obviously psychological issues involved here, so I begin with the dancing shadows coursing through my collection of videos. As the repetition of these and other recurring images appear, I want to understand my fixation on them; why I continually collect images of blue rushing water, blurred images of distant trees seen from cars or trains, shadows dancing on the wall. My experimental personal essay project begins just as shelter-in-place protocols are announced all over the U.S., and as the protagonist states in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, “necessity dictates.” Almost instantly, the perimeters and conditions within which my project can proceed are strictly limited, but as I state early in *Unsettling*, “even in isolation, there are deadlines.” Whether or not I want to address them, deadlines—real and self-imposed—have to be met. Since COVID-19 restrictions prevent the live interviews, necessity dictates I look to my own resources to create a completely different project than the one originally planned. If I am going to start and complete

this project, I need to depend solely on myself, my archives, and my memory. I am aware the personal essay process will necessarily include introspection and analysis of my motives and actions. All the excuses I have been making, not addressing the precarious nature of my personal instability and unresolved trauma, are suddenly in my face, and I have no place to go to escape me.

Leaving New York City immediately after classes are cancelled at Hunter College on March 12, 2020, I return to the marriage home in Princeton, NJ. I am not though, returning to Princeton solely to protect myself or hide from the pandemic. As part of the divorce process, I am sorting, packing and selling my home and the curated objects and memories collected over fourteen years of marriage. Documenting this process, augmenting my archive of short videos taken during the past eight years, provides the resources for this experimental essay film. The process of divorce, of packing up, selling and moving from my home to an unknown location impacts my awareness and increasing sense of insecurity and isolation, necessarily influencing the development of my project. Documenting this unsettling process also helps me remain objective during the trauma of it as the unknowns blur into an overwhelming sea of insecurity. Is this really a good time to pursue my personal history? Do I really have a choice?

The task of cataloguing and transcribing my video archives is massive and time consuming, revealing, sometimes comforting and other times, mysterious and disturbing. As the narrator in *Unsettling* states, "Though an unreliable protagonist, Memory will serve as Her shelter-in-place collaborator." But Memory alone does not serve my objective. As a repetition of imagery appears, I am slowly able only to discern a trajectory for my narrative. The turning wheels of an art installation I film several years before, activate an awakening of memories long abandoned. These spontaneous images offer brief recognition of significant events from my past: the way light reflects on an object during a memorable trip, reflections of trees on bodies of water,

dancing shadows. A video of undulating tree shadows projected on my bedroom wall, instantly recalls the day my father dies. Realizing I have not resolved the grief of his death, this singular video image begins the process of piecing together a pattern of loss, grief, reflection and denial. As I relate in *Unsettling*, my work grows increasingly dark after my father dies. “The shadows weave their smokey tendrils around Her heart. If She can not mourn, neither can She love.” There is no love at home. Perhaps there never has been. Perhaps I don’t acknowledge it because I am afraid to. (Do I love myself?)

As the shadows in my archive center around my father’s death, this is my point of entry for the personal essay process. In Cecelia Aldarondo’s *Memories of a Penitent Heart*, the narrator asks “If we only remember the good things about the people we love, what do we lose?” Remembering my father in the third person, I can acknowledge his many shortcomings. He is an imperfect father and an alcoholic and can be cruel in his deprecating humor and perhaps my memory doesn’t truthfully embrace the fullness of his attributes. I realize the pain of time lost with my father in the film’s development, giving me even more reason to grieve. Judith Butler writes, “Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss . . .” (21).

Growing up in my mother’s house, I am not permitted to speak of or to my father or spend time with him after my parents’ divorce. Likewise, the narrator of the film never allowed herself to mourn her father’s death. Neither are issues such as race, opposing political or religious views acceptable topics of discussion in my mother’s house, anything in potential opposition to the “painted facade.” Perhaps, this is why I am immediately distrustful of the brightly painted facades of Gloria’s hometown, where throughout the town’s history, people mysteriously

disappear after publicly disagreeing with the politics of white supremacy. Is pursuing the complicit history of the US and slavery a mirrored pursuit of my own complicit history?

Disconsolate in my marriage, my life, I begin traveling alone, seeking solitude, burying deeper into history, into the horrific truths of the country's ongoing past. Perhaps this is why I cannot see my complicity in this history. As the narrator in *Unsettling* quotes James Baldwin, we are ". . . still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it" (Baldwin 8). I am not willing to see my own involvement in this sordid history until the murder of Michael Brown, a young man the same age as my son who many years before, committed much worse offenses than the one resulting in Brown's murder. It is then that the dam of ignorance breaks and the shadows—of non-action, of regret for not spending more time with my father, of the racist history I have long ignored, of not speaking out to use my position of white privilege for good, of love and loss—become daily sentinels in my life. This experimental essay film is an opportunity to explore these shadows long ignored, and the traumatic memories—unresolved, haunting, not confronted or accepted—running currents through my life. As the narrator observes, "moving, silent, witnesses to loss, denial, the grief She never mourned."

This film is a lifting of the veil. As I recall in *Unsettling*, the murder of Michael Brown is an awakening to a fog of deception and denial I have been navigating for years. In cataloguing/confronting my archives, I am abruptly halted by the video image of my elegantly dressed foot moving slowly to orchestral music in an exclusive setting. A blood red light saturates the scene and instantly, I recognize the complicity. Dressed in a veneer portraying the fiction "everything is fine," I cannot see the complicity at the time. Inspecting the image now, with the distance of time, through the lens of the third person, it becomes illuminatingly clear. While pursuing the uncomfortable history of our country's recalcitrant history of denial and

inhumanity, I'm increasingly aware this appalling history is enmeshed with my own experience growing up in an all white community, schooled on a past shaped by white male narratives.

Other images reprise equally vivid moments of intense presence. A pair of sculptures enlivened by video projection instantly reminds me of the many trips to exotic locations with my soon-to-be ex-husband. The image jars me into acknowledgement that while we shared many things—a lovely home, a privileged lifestyle, a social network—we have very little in common. Importantly, missing from our marriage is the intimacy of touch. Is there anything more important in a relationship? The beginning of the end of this marriage occurs at the convergence of my awakening, documented by my solo trip to the South during my all-consuming study beginning in 2014, of American slavery and historic racism. The impact of my research, of the trip alone to Mississippi, influences my objective to return to formal study. Increasingly, my endeavors and pursuits are not *our* endeavors and pursuits. The images in my archive document this process of unraveling.

The characters in my experimental essay project are the Narrator, my father, Gloria (my friend in Mississippi), my daughter, my archive, my ex-husband, Memory, and She. “She” is the narrator, who is me. Throughout the project, She addresses my archive and her protagonist, Memory, in the third person, as I attempt to objectively document the process of reflection and discovery. In this state of uncertainty and emotional fragility, it is simply too traumatic to contemplate immersing myself in the archive while at the same time confronting the task of disbanding my home and my curated life. “She” becomes my mirror, my own reflection, my ally and adversary. My archives serve as the evidence Memory employs to create my personal essay - the film's narrative. Treating the archives as a research source allows me to more objectively catalogue and analyze them. “She” can be objective—“I” cannot. She, the analytical researcher can be trusted with the facts; I can not. The distrust is historic, carefully nurtured. My father trusted me

and he is dead. After the hospital tests, I assure him via telephone he will be alright, and instead, he dies. I hear the fear in his voice in that last phone call. It haunts me still.

The images I collect, and strategically labor to weave together, gathering force/agitation/meaning with their layering, are not intended to be taken lightly by the “emancipated spectator” (Ranciere 22), in a state of hebetude. These images, this narrative, arise from a sense of discomfort, melancholy, joy, contemplation—never from a place of lethargy. Do I, like Barthes, pursue my images “as a wound?” (Ibid. 22). Is the reason I slow the tempo of my images on occasion, to increase the “violence” of the memory? Through the third person, I do my best to objectively reflect the trauma, the resulting distress, and the process of “digging out” in the course of the film. Only by positioning myself in the third person am I able to persevere in this journey.

This project, this experimental essay film, is a monumental task and yet I realize this is the perfect time and condition for it. Reading various accounts of shadow lives, I learn the real danger is not in confronting our shadows—the danger lies in denying our shadows. The process may be devastating but I am quite familiar with devastation. It is the possibility for transformation that encourages me to proceed.

This is one of the opportunities of the shelter-in-place isolation. I have no place to go to distract from the process of uncovering the shadows. I can be present as they unfold and reveal themselves in the (temporary) presence of my home.

RESEARCH ANALYSIS

Contemplating my video archives, the recurring images of dancing shadows and reflections, Chris Marker's film *Sans Soleil* comes instantly to mind. In Marker's film, constantly changing imagery interconnecting memories with places around the globe instantly resonates with me. I have long wondered, "is memory local?" In *Hale County This Morning, This Evening*, RaMell Ross's film drives the viewer slowly through town familiarizing them, welcoming the viewer's perspective in an unfamiliar place. It is a journey of brief, intimate, impactful moments that heavily influence my own layering of sometimes dissonant and always personal, imagery. As the narrator in *Sans Soleil* famously remarks, "I've been around the world several times and now only banality still interests me" (Marker). The banal but precious daily presence of "being there" is what draws me to both films and I know I want to achieve this sense in my experimental film. Before bringing sometimes disparate images into a cohesive whole, I invest weeks viewing, transcribing and analyzing *Sans Soleil*. I'm transfixed by the way Marker simultaneously charms and disarms the viewer, speculating and philosophizing, never seeming to take himself too seriously while intentionally provoking serious contemplation. Watching *Sans Soleil* again and again, I take careful note of the way Marker travels back and forth in time, relating observances past and present, obscure and on occasion seemingly irrelevant, or perhaps, elliptical, and always intentional. I relate also to Marker's sometimes abstract imagery and poetic narrative addressing both personal and cultural issues. My images are the support for an uncharted journey into personal memory and reflection, and concurrently experiencing significant personal trauma, this is not a particularly well-advised time to explore the 'dark side' of my imagery. I decide none-the-less to pursue the shadows. Certain videos and still images in my archive arouse emotions in me, "bruising" my memory (Mavor 2). These images, the *punctum* Barthes defines as that power arising unexpectedly to "wound" us, are of course the images I find most compelling. They provoke in me "the very opposite of hebetude; something

more like an internal agitation, an excitement, a certain labor too, the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken” (Barthes 19).

The isolation of shelter-in-place provides the perfect opportunity to focus on this subject. Venturing into disconcerting territory, experiencing personal trauma, and concurrently cataloging images and their memories, I find the first material for my research in Carl Jung’s writings on dreams and shadows. Learning that the ‘dark side’ is something long denied, by upbringing, by culture, the Shadow not usually congruent with “best face forward,” Jung also offers the awareness that the Shadow is at the center of the creative self. I like that. After periods of denying the Shadow’s influence, my visual work over the past several years focusing almost exclusively on the dark side of my complicated history, *Unsettling* is an opportunity to acknowledge the dark side, to embrace the duality of my nature, and not be consumed by it. Claudia Brodsky writes about Proust’s famous Madeleine that “Unaided in its transformative powers by any additional mental image, the taste of the Madeleine is said to draw both visual and verbalizable memory from the undesigning depths of a “tasse de thé” (Brodsky 1015). My archives are my sometimes bitter ‘cup of tea’.

In the midst of the pandemic, officially homeless and hoping to plant my feet in the warmth and acceptance of Mississippi discovered three years before, I pack my car with the barest of necessities (importantly my twelve-year-old chocolate lab), and head back to begin unsheathing the poison daggers of my memory. Beginning my thesis project two months prior while selling and moving from my home, proves to be painful and distracting. Planting myself for a month in Mississippi, (where COVID cases are raging), isolated in a rented home void of distracting personal possessions, I anticipate a respite from the chaos in my mind. Though my Mississippi friends are nearby, I maintain isolation while pursuing research into my shadow self to protect my weakened immune system. The unfolding month, navigating a laborious, ongoing divorce

process and the insecurity of an unknown future proves more difficult than I imagine. Yet, consulting Jung, Bly, Campbell, and other experts on the “Dark Side of Human Nature” (Zweig & Abrams), I dive into the shadows. Carol Mavor writes “In total blackness, you confront your darkest fears, thoughts, and memories. You are in isolation with yourself” (Mavor 36). As the divorce process rages, loss and mourning join the shadows and it becomes almost too dark to see. Despair is real—and life-threatening. I can’t go back; I have nowhere to go. And yet perhaps I am in the perfect place to pursue this work: “The condition of being somewhere and nowhere and of carrying one’s past identity into a new surrounding produces the palimpsest sensibility” (Wigoder 35). Indeed, Kracauer suggests “The exile’s true mode of existence is that of the stranger. So he may look at his previous existence with the eyes of one “who does not belong to the house”(Kracauer 83).

Memory is elusive—like a specter, a ghost—shifting shape, opacity, and influence with the oscillating conditions of temperament and perceived personal well-being. Perhaps I encounter so much difficulty and resistance in locating memories because they are as transitory as the family and love relationships shaping them. In *Archiver Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida writes “The structure of the archive is *spectral*” (italics his). “It is spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent “in the flesh,” neither visible or invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met . . .” (Derrida 84). A part of me stays trapped in the failed relationship, the abandoned home, energy created in those homes and relationships traveling with me. They cannot be separated as they influence each other. They are my *studium*¹. Different homes, different relationships, different energy than the one previous, but I am present still; endeavoring not to dwell obsessively on the past - pursuing a present full future. Derrida

¹ Barthes writes that “To recognize the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer’s intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself, for culture (from which the *studium* derives) is a contract arrived at between creator and consumers” (Barthes p. 28).

writes that “. . . all the (Freudian) theses are cleft, divided, contradictory, as are the concepts, beginning with that of the archive. Thus it is for every concept: always dislocating itself because it is never one with itself” (Derrida 84). This description seems aptly to describe my own state, always dislocating myself, never one with myself.

In her Thesis paper entitled *The Mirrored Road*, Mary E. Hanlon writes “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” (Hanlon 6). Likewise, my archives expose my penchant for escape. Traveling by airplane, car, train, bicycle, taxi, *à pied*, and importantly, new technology—my reason for applying to Hunter’s IMA MFA program. I am constantly traveling, moving, trying to stay ahead of the shadows, experimenting with new ways of creating art in search of (to escape?) clues to the past, the past that haunts me, and to communicate those observations in my work.

Derrida states that “Freud did everything possible to not neglect the experience of haunting, spectrality, phantoms, ghosts” (85). Memory haunts me, and until now, I neglect to acknowledge and explore the haunting.

In “The Evolution of the Shadow,” Edward C. Whitmont writes “The shadow has to have its place of legitimate expression somehow, sometime, somewhere. By confronting it we have a choice of when, how and where we may allow expression to its tendencies in a constructive manner” (Zwieg & Abrams 30). If I am going to confront my shadows and the perpetual darkness invading my life, I am going to need professional help. While in New York, I benefit from the guidance of an enlightening therapist. My move out of the city and the resulting long distance zoom consultations become problematic when shelter-in-place also means my therapist’s move to her mother’s home in Long Island with her two young sons. Over several

weeks, it is apparent my therapist is not in a place to encourage reflection in peace and harmony. I wish her well and begin the slog on my own. Counting on my love of research and inquiry, I think I'm ready.

Exploring the significance of imagery in resurrecting memory, I can easily relate to Kracauer's "lapsarian metaphysical tone"(Wigoder 13), and his "melancholic perspective" based on his understanding of the "historical process—namely as an evacuation of meaning, a bifurcation of being and truth that has culminated in a modernity bereft of unity and substance" (Ibid.).

As melancholia and a fixation on enduring trauma from the past are constants of my *studium*, the mournful beauty and sadness of Alan Resnais's film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, resonates with me in many ways—also confirming my choice of third person narration. Barthes suggests "History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it - and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it" (Barthes 65). Resnais eloquently expresses the tragic impact of localized memory and the enduring personal devastation of war and man's inhumanity. The characters are nameless until finally at the end, they call one another by their place names, "Nevers" and "Hiroshima." This personal association with place is perhaps the only affirmation conceivable in this mad world. *Unsettling* is rife with "place," the being there, the leaving there, the missing, the traveling back and forth. All the memories in my archives are local. I am part of the landscape I record.

The haunted interiors and natural settings of Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* also resonate with me, the deteriorated walls reminding me instantly of torturous scenes from my youth and childhood. The dream sequences, the melancholy rain, the endless archival footage of war omnipresent in the characters' lives (reminiscent of the war in our own country 150 years ago and still raging), relates directly to the moral and ethical impact of historic racial injustice I examine in my multi-media work. The constant reflections caught unaware in *The Mirror*, always

present, always watching, remind me of my own out-of-body perspective, the narrative inspected in the marred mirrored surfaces of my work reflecting the viewer inside our quagmire culture. Tarkovsky's traveling back and forth in time, the experimental application of sound, narration, and imagery, encourage a desire to refine my own experimental process in addressing racial inequality and injustice in America, similar to Tarkovsky's endless trudging of soldiers through muddy water. I too strive to be "one of those who pull the nets in..."

(Tarkovsky).

Roland Barthes's writing on visual semiotics and the experience of the viewer are enlightening as I consider my images and the way I layer them for presence. As Barthes references in photographs that grab his attention, that evoke *punctum*, there is a layering of meaning that connotes deeper context in the images we perceive brought to the image from personal experience and culture.

As Barthes writes, "we can only recognize what we already know" (Leeuwen 94). The iconological symbolism of the objects repeated in my archives and layered in my essay—trees, windmills, shadows—are timeless iconic symbols we all give personal significance. Presenting these symbols in an unspecified reference to time or even place, like RaMell Ross' drive through town, the spectator and the experience they bring with them, relate to these iconic images incorporating their own, personal context, their own *studium*.

Motifs:

I know my journey through the south begins on a train. There is something mystical, haunting and timeless in the ghost-like quality of trains that fascinates me. Grace Lee suggests "a train in a film has the ability to blur the line between excitement and fear" (Lee). The train is an appropriate vehicle for investigating the past, and my presence that is consumed by it. Moving

through space and time on tracks leading to distant places—past and present—heedless, of headlines, of deadlines, of progress, there is an eerie sound to the train that seems resistant to change, especially in the south. Yawning and redolent of memory's aching persistence, I am drawn to the way trains move like cataclysmic hearses of time. As Lee continues, "The only constant with trains is contradiction." This is exactly the concept I have in mind as trains in *Unsettling* are seen simultaneously coming and going as they approach Yazoo City.

Regarding imagery, my first 'studied' image (as I remember) is a tree outside my first grade classroom. I can see it now. The sky is a dark steely blue-gray, perhaps preparing to storm, and the tree—without leaves—stands elegantly black ("black and blue" (Mavor 2)) and purposely poised, not rigid, but ready. (Is this the position I take when declaring my acceptance of the surgical process?) Reflecting now on that tree, I see her branches as arms (like Siva?). Trees continue to fascinate and comfort me—their resilience, their ability to adapt to extremes of weather and progress. They are a constant and perhaps the presence I miss most during my three years living in The City. The resilient, adaptive, life-sustaining force of trees replaced with lifeless steel and glass is isolating to me. Perhaps this is why trees wistfully populate the imagery I capture with my camera. There is nothing merely "supplemental" (Leeuwen 94) to the trees I incorporate into my project. Trees are a life-affirming force reminding me that no matter the trauma I experience—the world experiences—trees will persevere. Trees are a recurring symbol in my experimental essay film.

Sycamores, with their arthritic branches and leprotic skin, the "revealing and concealing" nature of the "thin pale bark that scales off in small plates" (Farlex), appeal to my sense of survival. My affinity with these warriors of nature is deeply personal and fortifying. ("Sycamore" could in fact be an appropriate alternative title for my project.)

Trees have universal iconographic meaning of course, and growing up on a Methodist diet of church and Sunday school, the tree and the cross—the enduring symbol of Christ—are undoubtedly entwined in my psyche. While the power of myth—of the Christ stories in particular—give structure and purpose to my youth, other myths fascinate me as well. Don Quixote, the windmill chasing *Man of La Mancha*, may have been the first to raise my curiosity about travel to foreign places, and the first to suggest to me that fairy tales and myths are just that.

In any case, the tall virgin pillars with Siva arms that begin erupting across the clear plains of my childhood are the symbol I choose to represent my father in *Unsettling*. While not a presence of my youth, the windmills have since become synonymous with that place. I am first aware of their omnipresence while driving in the dark to my hometown many years ago. I feel their ominous weight bearing down on me as I drive alone, surrounded by them, with only the flashing red warning lights atop their towers to warn oncoming planes. Whenever I visit, the windmills are watching (“the observed subject and the subject observing?”) (Barthes 10).

The photos I take documenting the windmill installations converge with a visit to my father after many years, against my mother’s wishes. I now have a son and her ire no longer inhibits my determination. My father does not share her flagrant disdain, and while I can acknowledge his imperfection, his alcoholism and sometimes violent temperament, my father, by contrast, never entertains delusions of purity. But why do I choose the self-edifying windmill to represent him? (Barthes insists “the *punctum* shows no preference for morality or good taste” 43); a windmill inside a windmill inside a windmill inside a windmill? Perhaps, because as faulty an example of humanity my father is, he loves me like none other. With bone-crushing hugs that take my breath away, his eyes peer deeply into my soul, no excuses, no rationalizations. He and his love are constant, just like the whirring presence of the windmills.



Still from *Unsettling*

Derrida writes that Freud tries to account for these (ghosts). . . as scientific, critical, and as positive . . . as possible. He writes that by doing so, Freud also “tried to conjure them” (85). Is that what I am trying to do with this project; conjure up the ghosts of the past to tell my story, to give my memories validity? And what of the future of this archive, this collusion of specters? As I leave my home without a known destination, where will my journey take me? Heartened by Jung’s analysis of Self as the creative center, “She” finally assumes the role of “me” at the film’s end. The future of the narrator, of She, of me, the one I create, can only be suggested. Beginning with the end, I am aware the future is mine to determine.

THESIS PRODUCTION PROCESS

As the blue-hued screen in *Unsettling* fades up, a translucent profile and three walking figures silhouette against a slowly moving tide. The rhythmic sound of crashing waves is accompanied by low ambient music as the narrator asks, “Can you stay in the same place for a long period of time and not get caught up in the confluence of shadows? After a short pause, the narrator continues, “When does a home become an overwhelming repository of memory?” As I soon reveal, shadows play an integral role in this journey.

First and foremost, I am grateful to my advisors who continually encourage me to edit and edify my narrative objective and tone. In a constantly fluctuating narrative, this isn’t an easy task and I’m grateful for their steady presence as I navigate these headstrong waters.

I am by experience, a visual artist, educator and eternal student, focused on learning about and communicating cultural awareness and memory especially as it relates to equality and justice. My work over the last several years focuses directly on social justice, historic racism in our country, and its personal ramifications. This film, this course of study is part of my on-going effort to understand and communicate this struggle, this dichotomy in our democracy. The IMA MFA program affords me the opportunity to pursue this historic narrative in contemporary context.

Process is at the heart of this project. Viewing, logging, and transcribing over 1300 videos during the first month of shelter-in-place isolation, my chemo drug-compromised immune system fortifies a commitment to remain indoors away from potential human spreaders of the Coronavirus—for a while. As I begin cataloguing and categorizing footage, as recurrent themes begin to reveal the outlines of a narrative, I’m aware additional footage is needed to further

develop my visual thoughts. Reflecting on filmmaker Chris Marker's process, Phillip Lopate relates, "In Marker's case, his camera arrives on time to record events, but his mind and heart take too long to catch up and appreciate it sufficiently at the moment. This time-delay also allows Marker to project an historical understanding onto otherwise bland or neutral footage" (Lopate 20). I can relate. On occasion, I go out seeking specific illustrative references to add context to my archival footage, yet it seldom works. My archive clips are mostly spontaneous, something subconsciously drawing me to the movement, the light, the atmosphere of the moment. An image appears before me and instantly captivates me. I don't analyze it at the time but if I have my camera available, I take a short video of it, completely dependent on the light and the mood. If the light changes or disappears, the image often retreats in visual or documentary importance. Timing is everything, but as I learn in my research, *studium* plays a large part in what I see.

As She relates in the film, this project is a process of revealing and concealing—with the imposing caveat of a deadline. Memory activated in the film by linear layering and interweaving images accompanied by ambient sound and recorded music, provoke Her to acknowledge complicity in the narrative.

Just as Barthes chooses to embark his study with only a few photographs he maintains "existed for me" (Barthes 8), I choose images evoking specific personal memories. While not analyzing them as such at the time of their capture, the process of revisiting and cataloging images in conjunction with others feeds a developing narrative in my mind. I am aware the images I bring together will be exposed to other spectators and much like the "ghostly blur" Geoff Dyer refers to in the forward of *Camera Lucida*, I bury my "self" in an intricate layering of various opacities; the harder to be seen. Even my paintings, featured throughout the film, are layered, feathered, permitting only glimpses of my work, never seen full-frontal. As I begin detecting and cataloging

patterns in my archives, I layer the images similar to my previous multimedia visual work involving memory. Layering images is cumulatively revelatory, in an intuitive “call and response” process where images seem to beckon, “You belong here,” “I need you here,” constantly back and forth. As the images begin to cluster into sections, a narrative begins to develop. Thoughts and reflections come to mind, most often as questions. “Why did this happen here? Where are you in this history? What are the personal ramifications of these events?” again, constantly changing with awareness. One thing is clear: Memory is local. The images I cull together create a sense of place to locate the unfolding memory, giving it presence, making it relatable.

To personally relate to the viewer in a film featuring few people, I employ narrative, sound, and continual trial and error. Drawing from over 1400 videos as this point, I create separate folders of related imagery as I identify different sequences. The process is tedious, challenging, and necessary: as I continually change order, opacity and durations, separation into desktop folders helps keep sequence images organized. Working in Premier Pro, one sequence at a time, video clips ranging from a few seconds to a few minutes at varying opacities and durations, are woven together, partially obscuring but cumulatively dimensional, moving constantly through the past and present. The narrative develops as images are joined together to weave a significant memory. Sound—ambient and recorded music—is pulled into this process, continuing the train of personal revelatory thought and emotion.

Sound

From the beginning of my project, even before I begin assembling pictures from my archives, I know sound will play an integral role in my film. April 2020 is a time of great sorrow, isolation and reflection for me, and from my youth, the piano is my solace in such times. The month after he and my mother marry, my father gifts me my first piano on Christmas. When we move into the grand marriage house, my father walks me to the sun room where my piano is waiting for

me and from then on, no matter the trauma, I always find comfort there. Music and sound play an integral role in resurrecting memory in my film.

The images from my memory are not borne in a void. As I roam through my archives, ambient sound accompanying images is integral to my memory and I continue to explore the impact of sound on how and what I remember. Ambient sound, the soundtrack of daily life, is instrumental in this process. “As a communicative medium sound carries information that is inherently temporal and evanescent—it can only communicate by always already disappearing into the environment. It thus supplies communication with a vital medium—to truly hear the world and each other—while unsettling signification with instability—to listen is to also confront the voluptuous richness of ambiguity” (LaBelle 200). I often stop and pull out my phone in the midst of nothing in particular, to record the sound around me. A distant train, the intermittent warning sounds of a large truck in reverse mode, the delicate chattering sound of birds and conversation mingling, the tinkling sound of water gurgling over stones - sound shapes place. Just as the layering of my images represent the intermingling influences of past and future on the present, the layering of sound—room tone and ambient sound, are integral to collecting and resurrecting memory for me. They are cohesive forces.

In April 2020, I schedule piano movers to deliver my baby grand to a junior high school in Trenton, NJ where I know the principal. For the last several weeks before the move, I sit every morning at my piano to compose whatever is playing in my head as I consider how this project might unfold. Heavily influenced by Philip Glass, my short daily compositions resemble the meditative, repetitive sound I find simultaneously soothing and melancholy in Glass’s work. His film soundtrack for *The Hours* rings especially resonant with me, but as my piano is slightly out of tune, I realize my final composition will not be recorded on it. Fortunately, someone in Thesis class remarks one night that “if I hear Satie’s *Gymnopédies* in one more soundtrack I will scream.” I have always loved the *Gymnopédies* and yet I understand my colleague’s rebuke:

That was then. The piece I am creating is about now – extremely influenced by the past and somewhat hopeful about the future, but present in tense. This minute, in a chaotic, traumatic, melancholy, unknowing, cataclysmic time in the world – and in my life – is my focus. The sound and the music I choose to dance with images I layer have to necessarily match my constantly changing mood/reflections influenced by places of memory. Fortunately, along with my video archives are several bits of music recorded at live performances I attend from all parts of the world. Music of various genres, styles, ethnicities, are recorded in the moment I am transfixed. reflecting the mood of the memory and instantly evoking time and place for me. In my film, few sounds are as unsettling as the tape ripped by the piano movers as they disassemble my piano. As I write, the ticking of a clock gifted to me many, many years ago, sits with me in this room, a constant reminder of time passing, always present.

During the assembly of *Unsettling*, I continually play music that is calming, stimulating yet other-worldly to activate my working environment. Over several weeks listening to Brian Eno's music, while searching to find music that fits the heartbeat of my project, I realize Eno's aura is perfectly attuned to my project. My original composition not yet complete, the rhythmic current of Eno's *Space Music* is a temporary substitute underscoring the various, occasionally incongruent, sounds accompanying my layered imagery.

My trips to the South, specifically Mississippi, are marked with a sense of foreboding and mystery extremely important in the sonic layering of images. Like many places, the visual dynamics of the pastel colored buildings in Yazoo City are deceptive to the casual eye. Ongoing conversations with my friend, Gloria-Elayne Owens, give personal validity to stories I know only by reading; hers are haunting memories of haunting realities. My conversations with other professional women and men in the Delta who grow up learning to successfully “navigate” Jim Crow, impress upon me the constance of oppression—and of resilience—in Mississippi. How

best to project that sense of oppression/foreboding and reveal the fiction of the cheery facades in a short sequence? One of the many illuminating conversations informing my first journey through the Mississippi Delta region includes a long, intimate interview with a teacher and school administrator in the Greenwood Public School system, Margaret Dean Harris. Harris shares openly with me her experiences—good and bad—of competing in a system overtly dismissive of academic scholarship and accomplishment in Education and in Journalism in Mississippi. She, like so many of the people I meet, persevere, and through her tenacity achieves a position of relative power and leadership. She shares readily with me because of my introduction from Gloria. During my visit with Margaret, I pass through an exhibition of student work and am struck in particular by a student's depiction of American slavery. The eyes of the enslaved people working the cotton fields portrayed in the student's work are haunting, and in reviewing these images, the one I include in *Unsettling* best represents the foreboding sense that hangs shroud-like over the brightly lit town of Yazoo City. The sound accompanying these layered visuals is integral to depicting the sinister nature I want to portray in *Unsettling*. To distinguish this sense, I draw on Bernard Herrmann's score for *Vertigo*. Chris Marker's fascination with Hitchcock's masterpiece intrigues me, and in watching the film, I too become mesmerized by the power of the soundtrack to give voice to the hypnotic visual sequences. I choose a brief, almost indiscernible clip from Herrmann's score to layer in this sequence, partially as an homage to Marker's example. As a reviewer notes: "Close your eyes and think of one sequence, and you may well remember Kim Novak's somnambulistic tour of San Francisco, from a chapel to a graveyard to a picture gallery. It is the music as much as the lighting and the filters that gives those scenes their eerie shimmer"(Ross). Barthes notes the only way to remember an image is to close your eyes. This resonating dreamlike quality is exactly the effect I want to achieve.

The images

In the film's culmination of over 450 short videos, still images, and recorded sounds, there is not one image of my father, one of the main protagonists in *Unsettling*. Much like Roland Barthes' omission of the photograph of his mother referenced throughout *Camera Lucida*, my father is missing. He is found in the blurring of the layers, as am I. (Is this a search for my father or a search for me?)

The scenes presented in the film travel from the present, backward through the past, returning at film's end to the present once again, representing the narrator's process of contemplating experience and memory. Sequences are presented as the narrator remembers them and in relation to each other in the process of remembering—not always in chronological order.

Time and Tempo

I also manipulate the duration of clips on occasion, slowing the tempo of recorded music, of ambient sounds and of the video clips I recorded. I find the effect—not slow motion, but of slowing motion and sound—to create a more resonant, dreamlike quality. Time is a relative factor, and the way it is portrayed is integral to the narrative's impact. To reflect the sense of time moving fast or slow, imagery and sound are slowed, sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes deliberately, for effect and for processing, to focus the blur of the past and expose impactful moments. Wigoder paraphrases Barthes to suggest:

“The cinematic dissolve that is used to signal the passage of time superimposes two images” . . . “there in the blurred space that reveals the relationship between cinematic movement and stilled images (one which Barthes also characterized as having a “palimpsest” relationship in his study of stills from an Eisenstein movie) exists this space between the image that has not fully departed and the new one that has not yet been fully formed . . .”(55).

This is where my narrative sits, in the “not fully departed” and the “not yet fully formed.”

Layering

I am always layering images in my artwork: Nothing is ever an entity into itself. It is always influenced by what happens before mingling with the present, trudging toward tomorrow. The sensation of being fully alive can only be represented by a laying of visual and sound imagery in various opacities. As part of the experimental process, I am sometimes deliriously surprised when combined methods and processes result in something completely unexpected, as in the Art Basel exotic vacations section where an op-art, neon effect results from the specific way I layer the order and opacity of images. I lose a few of these effects in the editing process and look forward to more of this experimentation in future films to discern more predictable outcomes.

Aesthetics

As a visual artist, I am always and foremost aware of a project’s optics, the way the project appears—to myself and to the spectator. Like renowned photographer Richard Mosse, who creates exquisitely beautiful images of unspeakable violence, I am drawn to the work of artists whose aesthetics appeal to and inspire my own. When relevant to time and awareness, I weave—again, almost imperceptibly—specific examples of other artist’s work into the narrative when it best expresses my experience reflecting their influence on me: I am paying homage. These artists and their works are credited at the film’s end, specifically, Olafur Eliasson’s work with layers of light in the collaborative performance of *Tree of Codes* in 2015, Sara Sze’s mashup of the banal and whimsical, creating monumental temporary sculpture and installations, and Nick Cave’s *Sound Suits* and *Until* installations of racial trauma, historic injustice and unbelievably imaginative ways to confront them.

AUDIENCE AND EXHIBITION

Barthes says, “Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see” . . . “In short, the referent adheres.” What the viewer brings to the sitting—the participation in the viewing—gives the viewing its meaning. Memory is an immersive experience and my goal with this personally revelatory film is to offer a narrative that—considering the limitations of zoom presentation—immerses the viewer in the power of emotional reflection and memory especially as it relates to personal experiences around American history, racism, loss and mourning.

The shelter-in-place restrictions of COVID-19 force a pragmatic reconsideration of how my film is viewed by the spectator. While virtual festivals provide the opportunity for greater audiences, my film will be viewed by individuals or small groups—at least initially—in private settings allowing what Jacques Rancière refers to as the “Emancipated Spectator.” My journey in isolation of things past—things lost and found—and how the recognition of these memories, events and trauma influence my present, are perhaps more relevant to viewers also experiencing isolation during this time of crisis and trauma. Watching from the viewer’s personal environment, one perhaps also filled with memories comforting and unforgiving, may allow a personal relevance inconceivable in the impersonal theatre environment.

As my exhibition experience is primarily as a gallery artist, I have no prior experience with film festivals. I have though identified film festivals that address social issues in an experimental/art realm including the New York City Independent Film Festival, Austin Art House Film Festival, Oxford Film Festival, Ann Arbor Film Festival, New Jersey International Film Festival and others. I also plan to approach galleries with an experimental focus, specifically Smack Mellon in Brooklyn, Various Small Fires, Regen Projects, and others. I am excited to identify and submit my film to these venues to open the subjects of historic racism, loss, grief and denial to wider

audiences. I will continue to identify venues that best represent these opportunities. I am also interested in hosting intimate discussion groups after viewings so audience members can share their views and relate their reflections during shelter-in-place isolation as many of the issues addressed in my film may relate personally to viewers. My intention is to create forums of communication and discussion where difficult topics—including the depression I and many, many others experienced during this time of chaos, insecurity, and isolation—can be openly and safely discussed.

Potential Legal Issues

My experimental essay film consists of short videos shot spontaneously on location, in parks, art galleries, live music venues, my home, in natural and urban settings. If something about the light, the sound, or the combination of these criteria strike a personal chord with me, I often record it on my phone. I document the experience of a particular place in time, which is why I have an archive of over thirteen hundred videos ranging from a few seconds to several minutes. As an exhibiting artist, much of the artwork seen in the film relating directly to the narrative is created by me. I also weave in brief glimpses of work by other artists who, like the literary influences I quote, inspire my own work and/or is particularly descriptive of the subject addressed in the narrative, also filmed in the spontaneous moment of experience. I am continually informed by the uncompromising exploration of artists and writers into historic injustice and racism and when particular works better illustrate the narrative, I include it. Most often, works by other artists are quilted into other imagery to create a cumulative effect. My intent is never to appropriate other artist's work and I acknowledge all artists and their work in the film's credits.

Music is a slightly trickier medium to credit in my project. The clips of music performed in live venues, from Mississippi to Paris, are taken in the spontaneous energy of the moment I want to hold onto, a place in time I don't want to forget. For that matter, and because most of these

videos were taken several years ago, I am unable to get releases from the artists. I have credited them and will, as travel and time permit, continue to search for these artists and get releases and/or license their work. I also feature the music of Brian Eno, specifically his *Space Music* and have credited him with such. Originally, I planned to compose my own soundtrack, but as the film documents, my baby grand piano is disassembled and transported before my composition is complete. Before my film travels beyond thesis, I plan to continue the process of creating my own soundtrack (not currently feasible). I will also consult with a fair use attorney to ascertain which works incorporated in my film qualify as fair use and continue to clear all rights.

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