

Baby Boy Cousins: Looking for Roots, the Essay Documentary

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Abstract

Baby Boy Cousins: Looking for Roots, the Essay Documentary by Adrian Wills

How does the essay documentary curate truth, and who benefits from the personal transparency required of the essay film – the audience or the filmmaker? This research creation examines the thematic and conceptual research and created methodologies employed by Montreal filmmaker Adrian Wills to create his first essay film “Baby Boy Cousins”. Adopted as an infant, Wills embarked on a two-year journey in search of his birth family in Newfoundland for this research creation. Through real-time documentation, he uncovered the heartbreaking truth that his birth mother had taken her own life, amongst other family secrets. “Baby Boy Cousins: Looking for Roots, the Essay Documentary” investigates the essay film’s unique ability to authentically explore subjective experiences and emotions while acknowledging the limitations of objective truth. It explores the work of acclaimed essay filmmakers Sarah Polley, Alan Berliner, Chantal Akerman, and Deann Borshay Liem in relation to the construction of “Baby Boy Cousins”. Moreover, this research creation examines the intricate ethical considerations surrounding personal transparency. It investigates the delicate balance between meeting audience expectations and safeguarding the privacy of the filmmaker. “Baby Boy Cousins: Looking for Roots, the Essay Documentary” concludes with profound insights into the transformative power of personal filmmaking while acknowledging the essay filmmaker’s need for psychological self-care when engaging in personal vulnerability.

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Dedication

To Mary Margaret, my birth mother, I am so glad I finally found you.

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Accessing the Project

Baby Boy Cousins :

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Clip 2: 00:14:09-00:27:26 (<https://vimeo.com/adrianwills/bbcextract2?share=copy>)

Clip 3: 00:25:38-00:32:07 (<https://vimeo.com/adrianwills/bbcextract3?share=copy>)

Clip 4: 00:40:34-00:51:38 (<https://vimeo.com/adrianwills/bbcextract4?share=copy>)

Clip 5: 00:51:39- 00:01:03:49 (<https://vimeo.com/adrianwills/bbcextract5?share=copy>)

Clip 6: 01:12:10-00:01:22:28 (<https://vimeo.com/adrianwills/bbcextract6?share=copy>)

Introduction

The research-creation “Baby Boy Cousins: Looking for Roots – the Essay Documentary”, comprises two elements: 1) selected Clips from my documentary essay film *Baby Boy Cousins* (which I shall refer to as *BBC*) represent the creative research that explores complex cinematic strategies to express my deeply personal search for my roots, my birth family and history as I was adopted in my earliest childhood; 2) the present written component that contextualises my research and creative process within the critically established modes of the essay film, reflecting on the key creative processes of mise-en-scene, montage, and sound work. In doing so, the work examines the pivotal intersection of the essay documentary with memory and the memoir.

I began the *BBC* project with little knowledge of my birth story, aside from my place of birth: Newfoundland. I initially thought I would make a documentary investigating what it is to be a Newfoundlander, and to collect Newfoundlander adoption stories that intersected with my own – to provide a comprehensive portrait of adoption, relinquishment, and displacement. But, while filming, I learnt that my birth mother had taken her own life. This sent me veering off course and in an entirely new direction. I sought to understand what had happened. And so, over the two years of my MFA residency, I embarked on an inquiry into the personal form of the essay film where I was front and center, the character followed. This meant wrestling with questions such as: *Can it be traumatic for the filmmaker to be so candid in the essay documentary? How does the essay documentary curate the truth? And, finally, Who does the essay film serve the audience, or the filmmaker?*

In my extensive filmography – spanning twenty years between my undergraduate studies in Film Production at Concordia University and my MFA study begun in 2020 – I have been an active professional filmmaker. I have directed short films, dramatic series, movies of the week, documentary series and feature documentaries that have been presented in international festivals, and broadcast in Canada and internationally. I was the invisible filmmaker crafting stories through the point of view of others, letting my own perspective filter in through the more subtle conduits: the characters I followed, the way my interviews were edited, my cinematic and

narrative design. *BBC* was my first essay film, which opened up a multitude of new avenues for me both stylistically and thematically.

A New Perspective

As the adopted child unravelling his own story, he – I – needed a voice, and a perspective. As I amassed material for my research-creation, I realized I could no longer be outside of the story looking in, I could no longer be just an objective director. *BBC* forced me to not only confront my own past, but to challenge my notion of filmmaking. I was at once the subject and object of my own creation. I embarked on an understanding of how to create a documentary essay, while also gathering up the complex threads of my own story.

My methodology was to film and research concurrently. I went to locations, met people, learned their stories, and discovered how they had interacted with my birth mother and recorded all these encounters. The film was shot over five separate trips to Newfoundland, one to Arizona and Maine, and various shootings in my hometown of Montreal (all during the Covid epidemic).

I started the filmmaking with no knowledge of who my birth mother was or whether she was alive. I issued a call on Newfoundland radio and this took me on a two-year journey where I committed to learning and documenting every discovery on film, in real time. Once I compiled all the information, alongside my longstanding editor, Heidi Haines, we crafted the story. Each trip I returned with footage, and we edited – and essentially “wrote” the film together. We did not know how the story would unfold.

Essay documentaries can braid fiction, fact and identity in first-person nonfiction films. There is a juxtaposition of multiple layers of meaning through the creative deployment of oral testimonies and archives that can lead to representations of memory. There can be a deeply felt sense of place. “But what if documentaries aren’t simply informational but rhetorical? What if they aren’t only rhetorical but also poetic?”¹ With this essay documentary, I injected as much objective reality as possible in the film through on-camera discovery. Crafting the resulting

¹ Bill Nichols, *Speaking truths with film : evidence, ethics, politics in documentary* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016) 91.

footage into a narrative became an iterative process of reflection, where I introduced poetic representations of key experiences using experimental means. This process brought me closer to an honest representation of the adoption experience.

Throughout this text I explore how my approach to, and understanding of the art and craft of documentary film and cinema vérité, helped me in my research creation explore the subjective, and process based, questioning nature of the essay film. In this written component, “Chapter One” focusses on the definition of the essay film and my pre-production for *BBC*. “Chapter Two” looks in detail at my research creation, the discoveries I made, and how they intersected with notable films in the essay canon while I explore how I incorporated these inspirations into *BBC*. Finally, “Chapter Three” investigates the ethical question associated with the transparency required for the essay film. I conclude with what the essay film offers to someone who is undertaking a very personal search.

Chapter 1 – Thematic and field research prior to filming

In this chapter, I present a discursive exploration of the thematic and field research behind *Baby Boy Cousins*. By sharing my motivations, I aim to provide a deeper understanding of the profound journey of personal identity and family connections captured in my film.

I begin with the inciting incident – a radio call-out – that sets me on a path of exploration, ultimately leading to my first meeting with my birth family. As a seasoned filmmaker, I explore the power of family stories in some of my past work, and how they have shaped my filmmaking methodologies and influenced my creative processes, including my use of cinema vérité. Extensive research on adoption and the essay film genre forms the thematic foundation for *BBC*, I delve into the interplay between adoption narratives and the distinct qualities of the essay film: how it can capture self-reflection and the uncertainties of stories with unknown destinations. I also examine how authenticity of the moment plays a crucial role in the essay film.

I recount a pivotal call with essay filmmaker Tiffany Hsiung, early in the process of *BBC*, prior to my first encounter with my birth family. Her insights shape my approach and mindset as I navigate the unknown. The initial encounter with my birth family becomes a turning point, revealing profound revelations, including my birth mother's tragic suicide. This shapes the direction and narrative of the film, adding complexity to its exploration of personal identity and family history. I conclude with a concise timeline of my production journey, highlighting significant milestones and key developments in the production of *BBC*.

Radio Call Out: the Inciting Incident

I was born in St Clare's Mercy Hospital at 16:15 pm on January 17, 1973. In 2019, during a trip to Newfoundland with friends, I discovered my birth records, and I learnt that my birth name was Wayne Cousins. When I had that piece of paper in my hand, I knew I had to make a film to learn about my history.

I decided that I needed to go on radio in St John's, Newfoundland on Voice of the Common Man (a radio station that has been in existence since 1936 – though Newfoundland only became an official member of Canada in 1949) and film the encounter. I chose VOXM as years ago they

had been the radio station in Newfoundland that showcased adoption stories. I read my non-identifying background summary aloud (ex: see Clip 1“VOCM”_00:57:10-:03:25:00). This non-identifying background summary was given to every child who has engaged in a closed adoption. My non-identifying background summary read as follows:

Biological Mother: 20 years old, 5’7” tall, weighed approximately 150 lbs. She had brown hair, hazel eyes and wore glasses. She was of Irish/English descent. She was one of five children, all of whom were in good physical health. She had completed grade 8 in school and had been employed in a service occupation (laundry work) since leaving school. She was a quiet girl who did not talk very much, nor did she find it easy to express her feelings. The biological mother felt that she was unable to provide a good life for her child and wanted the best for him. She saw adoption as being the best way of providing him with all that she would like him to have.
(Wills)

I wanted to provoke a discussion: to tell the radio audience I was making a documentary, film the encounter, and present my information publicly. This act of sharing my story on the radio aligned with the essayistic approach I ended up using for *BBC*, by embracing the self-reflexive and self-searching nature of the essay film genre, though at the time, I did not realize this. I had not yet decided to make an essay film. By sharing this personal information with a wider audience, I created a public record of my search, and also opened the possibility of connecting with individuals who might have valuable information about my birth family. Within three weeks my personal information was shared over 20,000 times in Newfoundland. With that came an email in my inbox that cemented my history. My aunt Ellen Pellerin (maiden name Cousins), my birth mother’s oldest sibling, contacted me. I was Wayne Cousins, or Baby Boy Cousins, born to her second youngest sibling (of five), Mary Margaret Cousins.

Family Stories: Past Methodology in My Work

Cinema verité (so named in France; in America and the UK, it was ‘direct cinema’) emerged in the 1960s. Filmmakers introduced lighter, 16mm equipment into previously

unexplored territories: the intimate spaces of ordinary people's homes, teenagers on bustling dance floors, backstage moments with celebrities, behind-the-scenes of political campaigns, and even within the confines of psychiatric hospitals. Cinema verité filmmakers captured extensive footage and, through the art of editing, uncovered compelling narratives. The advent of synchronized sound allowed the filmmakers to record image and sound simultaneously, enabling the audience to eavesdrop on genuine conversations. In cinema verité, they were trying to catch the moment as it happened, to live the experience with the character they followed. Cinema verité focused on capturing the immediacy of the experience and portraying events as they occurred, aiming to capture the "truth" of those moments. Unlike traditional documentary filmmaking, cinema verité typically did not include a narrator, allowing the characters and situations filmed to become the script. The filmmaker collected a significant amount of footage and then used editing to convey their point of view.

The immediacy of cinema verité was a great influence on my past work. I have created commissioned films for Cirque du Soleil, where I documented the creation of their shows, such as *All Together Now: Beatles Love*², *Michael Jackson: The Immortal Tour documentary*³, *Avatar: Toruk the First Flight*⁴ and *Corteo: Through the curtain*⁵. Additionally, I followed Guy Laliberté, the founder of Cirque du Soleil, for a year when he trained with N.A.S.A and Ruscosmos in Russia to become Canada's first space tourist. This culminated in his visit to the International Space Station, which I captured in the film *Touch the Sky*⁶.

My artistic focus has revolved around stories centered on family and human connections. Some examples of this in my past work include the nine cinema verité films I created for Cirque du Soleil over a fourteen-year period. Among other things, they examined familial bonds as they were created, shaped, and cemented through the rehearsal process at Cirque du Soleil. In my most successful documentary, *All Together Now*, I explored the members of The Beatles, their widows, and the father-son producer duo, George and Giles Martin, as a family unit that had

² *All together now*, vols. (Apple, 2008).

³ *Michael Jackson, the immortal world tour le documentaire*, vols. (ZDF/Arte, 2012).

⁴ *Cirque du Soleil: Toruk - The first flight : inspired by James Cameron 's Avatar*, vols. (arte, 2016).

⁵ *Corteo: Through the curtain*, vols. (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006).

⁶ *Toucher Le Ciel = Touch The Sky*, vols. (Eone Entertainment, 2012).

endured the loss of two of the members of their family – John in 1980 and George in 2001. They came together to grieve and create the iconic Cirque du Soleil show, *Love*. In a discreet manner, I captured intimate conversations between Paul McCartney and George Martin, the Beatles’ producer (and a father figure to the band). I used portable microphones worn by Cirque employees working close to them, while I discretely filmed with a long lens. I retroactively obtained consent in order to release the footage.

In *Leonard Cohen: Tower of Song* (yet to be released) I featured Leonard’s son, Adam Cohen, as the central figure. The film depicted a memorial concert orchestrated in honor of Leonard Cohen, precisely one year after his passing. In the Jewish tradition, one year marks the transition from mourning to celebration. Through Adam Cohen’s perspective, we witness Leonard’s creative process, seamlessly merging present concert footage of notable artists playing his music in homage, with archival material of Cohen throughout his life, to evoke an emotional connection between a son and a father.

In *Michael Jackson: The Immortal Tour Documentary*, I filmed Michael Jackson’s family and collaborators less than a year after his untimely death. The film captured a collective mourning, as his closest were still grappling with the void left by his absence.

In *Entre Les Mains De Michel Tremblay (In the Hands of Michel Tremblay)*⁷, I demonstrated the extensive influence of renowned author Michel Tremblay’s work, originating from the intimate family interactions observed around his mother’s kitchen table, that he observed and penned into his world, in a paean to his mother. I filmed comprehensive interviews with Tremblay over a five-day period. We then traveled across the world, visiting locations in Japan, Scotland, and England, and introduced the audience to subjects profoundly influenced by Tremblay’s work, unknown to the author, including a transgender woman who transitioned after performing in Tremblay’s play *Hosanna*.

BBC resonated with the themes of family and the new bonds that are formed through shared experience (as in my Cirque films); mourning loss (as in the Cohen and Jackson

⁷ *Entre les mains de Michel Tremblay = In the hands of Michel Tremblay.*, vols. (Ciné qua non Média, 2007).

explorations); and the ways that the remnants of memory - photographs, and texts have a profound effect on the lives that are left behind (I used archives as a storytelling tool in a lot my past work). But in *BBC* I explored these themes more personally than I have in the past.

Adoption and the Essay Film

With *BBC* I tried to find an answer to a lifetime of questions that silently gnawed at me: to find my birth family, find who my people were, and to discover layers of my identity that were withheld due to my adoption. For as long as I can remember, I knew I was adopted. I was born in St John's, Newfoundland and adopted into a multicultural family: a Maltese mother who emigrated to Australia, an American father from New York, and an adopted little sister from Baffin Island (Nunavut): half French, half Inuit. I discovered that being adopted is entwined with its own mythology. I could not rely on physical bearings as you go through life – no father's knobby hands, or mother's strong eyes – so a sense of personal solitude was filled with a mythology that I created of who my parents could be.

To prepare for *BBC*, I watched numerous films that had adoption at their core: *A Place Between – The Story of an Adoption* (Kaltenbaugh 2007); ⁸*Adoption and Addiction: Remembered Not Recalled* (Sunderland 2012)⁹; *Becoming Nakuset* (Anderson-Gardner 2021)¹⁰; *Une Femme, Ma Mère* (Demers 2020)¹¹; *Birth of a Family* (Hubbard 2018)¹²; *Les Fantômes Des Trois Madeleine* (Dionne 2001)¹³; *My Invisible Mother* (Huynh 2016)¹⁴; *To My Birthmother* (Shaffer 2002)¹⁵; and *Mum's the Word* (Scheyen 2019)¹⁶. I was trying to understand as an adopted person what I was embarking on with this research creation. I felt a schism both as a filmmaker and as someone undergoing a journey that provoked enormous fear – the fear of rejection. I read numerous texts concerned with adoption and displacement, including: *The*

⁸ *A Place Between – The Story of an Adoption*, vols. (National Film Board of Canada, 2007).

⁹ *Adoption and Addiction: Remembered not recalled*, vols. (UK, 2012).

¹⁰ *Becoming Nakuset*, vols. (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2021).

¹¹ *Une femme, ma mère*, vols. (K-Films Amérique, 2020).

¹² *Birth of a Family*, vols. (National Film Board of Canada, 2018).

¹³ *Les fantômes des trois Madeleine*, vols., 2001.

¹⁴ *My invisible mother*, vols., 2016.

¹⁵ *To my birthmother*, vols. (National Film Board of Canada (NFB), 2002).

¹⁶ *Mum's the word*, Interactive documentary, vols. (Evenings and Weekends Productions, 2019), Available: <https://mumstthewordthefilm.com/>.

Primal Wound Understanding the Adopted Child (Verrier 2012)¹⁷; *Mourning the Loss Builds the Bond: Primal Communication Between Foster, Adoptive or Stepmother and Child* (Waterman 2001)¹⁸; *Family Wanted: Adoption Stories* (Holloway 2005)¹⁹; and the Canadian Government report *The Shame is Ours: Forced Adoptions of the Babies of Unmarried Mothers in Post-War Canada* (Eggleton 2018)²⁰. I listened to the hour-long weekly podcast with Haley Radke, *Adoptees on*²¹, and the Montreal podcast *Out of the Fog* (Thuynh, Macdonald)²² where I heard over a hundred conversations where adoptees shared their stories – each one fascinating in its complexity. The candidness, longing, and sense of profound loss I found there strongly influenced my own understanding of the theme of abandonment – and helped give shape to my feelings as I navigated the fraught terrain of my own story.

I found myself drawn to the essayistic form of filmmaking for its ability to capture uncertainty. In essay films, I observed individuals searching in a self-referential and self-reflexive manner, which resonated with the authenticity of the process of deep examination. Films that influenced me included Deann Borshay Liem’s Emmy-award winning tandem essay films *First Person Plural*²³ and its follow-up *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*²⁴. These films delved into Liem’s family, with the loss, and the reconciliation of her identity as a Korean adoptee living in California. Another influential work for me, was Peabody Award-winning filmmaker Tiffany Hsiung’s short film *Sing Me a Lullaby*²⁵. This twenty-nine-minute short was filmed over fourteen years between Canada and Taipei. In this poignant film, Hsiung explored the complex tensions between love and sacrifice in her search for her mother’s birth parents.

¹⁷ Nancy Newton. Verrier, *The primal wound understanding the adopted child*, vols., 16th print. (Baltimore: Gateway, 2012).

¹⁸ Barbara Waterman, “Mourning the loss builds the bond: primal communication between foster, adoptive, or stepmother and child” *Journal of Loss and Trauma*. 6.4 (2001): 277–300.

¹⁹ Sara. Holloway, *Family wanted : adoption stories*, vols. (London: Granta, 2005).

²⁰ Art. Eggleton, Chantal. Petitclerc, and Judith. Seidman, *The Shame is Ours : Forced Adoptions of the Babies of Unmarried Mothers in Post-War Canada*, vols., Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology (Senate of Canada, 2018).

²¹ Haley Radke, “Adoptees on,” n.d., Available: www.adopteeson.com.

²² Huynh, Pascal, Macdonald, Kassaye, “Out of the fog,” n.d.

²³ *First person plural*, vols. (New Day Films, 2015).

²⁴ *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*, vols. (Kanopy Streaming, 2015).

²⁵ *Sing Me a Lullaby*, Short Documentary, vols. (Golden Nugget Productions, 2020).

I studied other essay films, particularly those dealing with displacement, by filmmakers like Chantal Akerman (*News from Home*²⁶, *From the East*²⁷, *South/Sud*²⁸, and her final film *No Home Movie*²⁹), Alan Berliner (*First Cousin, Once Removed*³⁰, a meditation on a family member's Alzheimer's), Sarah Polley (*Stories We Tell*³¹ her quest to find her birth father), and Ross McElwee (*Sherman's March*³² considered one of North America's first essay films, where the filmmaker documented his search for love). In these films the structure of discovery, trauma and then healing are some of the themes that became influences in *BBC*.

Michael Renov, a leading documentary scholar, argues that all documentaries serve four major functions: to record, reveal, or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyze or interrogate; and to express.³³ The essay film encompasses these functions while also serving as a critical reflection on a problem, presented in a self-reflexive manner by the filmmaker.

By calling some documentaries “essays” we are then thinking not only about their subjective or poetic qualities but also about the impact of these qualities on the epistemological expectations associated with nonfiction cinema. The essay film contradicts, for example, the assumption that the world can be known in a definitive way. It shifts the focus from the end product of the investigative effort to the process by which knowledge is created. To speak metaphorically, it is the movement, not the destination, that matters the most. Documentaries that embrace this model often suggest important inquiries, but they do not strive to provide comprehensive answers.³⁴

²⁶ *News from home*, vols. (Cinéart, 2007).

²⁷ *From the East*, vols. (First Run/Icarus, 1993).

²⁸ *Sud*, vols. (Shellac Sud, 1999).

²⁹ *No Home Movie.*, vols. (Icarus Films, 2021).

³⁰ *First Cousin Once Removed*, vols. (Home Box Office, 2016).

³¹ *Stories we tell*, vols. (Lionsgate, 2013).

³² *Sherman's March : a Meditation on the Possibility of Romantic Love in the South During An Era of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation*, vols. (First Run Features [distributor], 2014).

³³ Elizabeth Astrid Papazian and Caroline Eades, *The essay film : dialogue, politics, utopia*, Nonfictions (London ; Wallflower Press, 2016) 87.

³⁴ Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro, *Crafting truth : documentary form and meaning* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2011) 151.

In line with Renov's argument, I focussed on the process of recording and revealing in real-time my investigation, rather than to offer any comprehensive answers. My inquiries were primal. Where, and who do I come from? Who could I have been? Recognizing the importance that I was an active participant in the story, I took on the role of the character with the highest dramatic stakes in *BBC* and became the enunciator – the spokesperson for the film. The essay film was the most effective vehicle that I could find to express my personal voice. In *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics and Utopia (2016)* film scholars Elisabeth Papazian and Caroline Eades edited a series of essays that elucidate the relationship between a documentary filmmaker and the audience. They believed that the essay film can be understood as a text “negotiating the tension between strategies of avoidance and explicit modes of address towards their community of spectators ... from the gaze into the camera to subjective framing to voiceover narration and the presence of characters/ and narrators.”³⁵ But that “the presence of an author or of authorial intention, appropriates for itself the enunciative work of the film as a whole.”³⁶

In my authorial intention, I found myself reflecting on and imagining who my parents could be, and, in turn, who I might have been. Renov aptly suggested, “While all documentary films retain an interest in some portion of the world out there-recording, and less frequently interrogating, at times with the intent to persuade and with varying degrees of attention to formal issues – the essayist's gaze is drawn inward with equal intensity.”³⁷ I turned my gaze inward and sought powerful ways of expressing the intensity of lived emotions.

Authenticity of the Moment: Meanings and Methods

I wanted to record the moment authentically while also portraying the questioning and uncertainty I experienced throughout my search for my family history. According to noted film scholar Laura Rascaroli, a quality shared by all film essays is the inscription of a self-searching authorial presence. This authorial voice approaches the subject matter not in order to present a factual report (the field of traditional documentary), but to offer an in-depth, personal, and

³⁵ Papazian and Eades, *The essay film : dialogue, politics, utopia* 99.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 277.

³⁷ Michael Renov, *The subject of documentary*, Visible evidence ; v. 16 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 87.

thought-provoking reflection.³⁸ It introduces the filmmaker's voice (the enunciator) in dialogue with the spectator similar to the investigations made by Papazian and Eades (2016).

I wanted *all* my discoveries to be on camera, for the film. I instructed everyone involved in the process with me not to reveal any information about my family history, until it was discovered on camera. This decision impacted the way I chose to record all my discoveries. I employed two cameras: one that would record me, and the other, the person I spoke with.

They allowed me to record my immediate responses and witness the unfolding journey. However, I did not fully anticipate the personal ramifications and difficulties that would arise from learning on camera, previously unknown information about my birth mother.

In tandem with watching all my research material (see "Adoption and the Essay Film") I approached filmmaker Tiffany Hsiung for guidance prior to my first meeting with my birth family. Hsiung's experience in making *Sing me a Lullaby*³⁹, provided me with valuable perspectives. The Toronto filmmaker searched for her mother's birthparents in Taiwan, as a way to try and heal the rift that existed between her and her mother (adopted into a Canadian family), and who was lacking the ability to demonstrate the maternal affection that Hsiung sought. Hsiung was always on camera in her film, and through her voice over narration, we understand her personal fear about uncovering her family's secrets. True to the essay film, she questioned the journey that she embarked on and whether it would allow her and her mother to find a healing path.

One of the key aspects Hsiung emphasized to me in my research call with her, was to capture the authenticity of the moment. When Hsiung first found her mother's birth parents in Taiwan after a long search (they did not even speak the same language), her cinematographer hung back in the hallway and allowed the moment to play out. The moment was captured in audio. Hsiung was wearing a microphone. Her decision to show the visual encounter from a

³⁸ Laura Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments" *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*. 49.2 (2008): 35.

³⁹ *Sing Me a Lullaby*.

distance, opting for an audio-focused approach, allowed the audience to immerse themselves in the emotions of the scene. The audience was not shown who the director is speaking with. There was no shot, no counter shot. But we hear everything, and feel the immediacy, heartbreak and longing through Hsiung's halting Taiwanese. Hsiung's approach during her encounter with her mother's birthparents in Taiwan is similar to the approach I had used in my previous cinéma vérité work. For example, in an audio technique used in my Beatles film – *All Together Now: Beatles Love*, where I captured intimate moments through surrounding microphones and long-range camera. Hsiung's variation of this respected the emotions and sensitivities of all parties involved, without losing any of the gravitas of the moment. This influenced the way I decided to present my first family encounter in *BBC* [(ex: Clip 2_“Meeting my birth family”_00:19:04-11:29:04)].

Transcending the Tension Between the Essay Film and Cinéma Vérité

My first meeting with my birth family was a turning point for me. During the meeting with my Aunt Ellen Pellerin (maiden name Cousins), she agreed to wear a microphone. My newly discovered cousin, Mara Pellerin, accompanied Ellen for support and also wore a microphone. Equipped with a multichannel mixer on my back, I attended the meeting, wearing a portable microphone, to independently record every moment. It was my first realization that I was no longer just an observer but an active participant, and I had little control over what would unfold. I captured us walking in long lens at the beginning of the meeting, and the rest of the meeting plays out in audio.

Beyond the emotional impact of the meeting, it was also significant in shaping the trajectory of the film, and its thematic resonance with the broader exploration of family, truth, and personal identity. In this meeting, I learned of my birth mother Mary Margaret Cousin's suicide. It served as a foundation for the central question I ask in *BBC* “should you go looking for the truth?”

This heartbreaking moment was captured in audio. In *BBC* I cut away from our conversation once this is revealed. This choice ensured that I kept some of the experience private, while still allowing the observer to feel the emotional weight of the revelation in real

time. This took an emotional toll on me, which I decided to record, in keeping with the ethos I had developed for *BBC*. As Papazian and Eades argue

In the documentary, the distance between subject and object is maintained, whereas the essay film attempts specifically to address this distance and explore its nature and function. The movement of addressing the subject/object divide does not happen through the effacing of mediation; rather, the essay film is about the enunciation of a subject, the ‘testing of expressive subjectivity’ directed to an audience.⁴⁰

With the shocking news of my birth mother’s suicide, I started to understand how personally transparent the experience of *BBC* would be. In the first meeting with my birth family, I was unable to get a lot of information about my birth mother, Mary Margaret Cousins. She and her sister Ellen had become distanced, and their childhood was vastly different. I learned that Ellen, the oldest sibling, had been sent to be educated by the nuns in Placenta Bay, Newfoundland whereas Mary Margaret, the fourth youngest of five, was required to stay at home in Conception Bay, Newfoundland. Jack Cousins, their father had fallen ill and was rendered unemployed. There was no more money to send Mary Margaret (or her youngest brother, Gerard) away to be educated as a child.

Since I didn’t have a filmed interview with my aunt, the information she shared with me was crucial for the development of my journey. It became an audio track that I returned to repeatedly during the editing process, shaping and structuring *BBC*.

The meeting also served to set up the pivotal tension between essay filmmaking, and *cinéma vérité*, which I attempted to transcend with the way I chose to communicate with the audience. I used this audio conversation over a scene of me looking through the book of family photographs that my aunt Ellen Pellerin (maiden name Cousins) gave me in that initial meeting, but filmed a day after, in Greenspond, Newfoundland, where my birth mother had lived after she distanced herself from Ellen.

⁴⁰ Papazian and Eades, *The essay film : dialogue, politics, utopia* 88.

I wanted to understand more about my birth mother, and what I encountered were more questions: Why did she suicide? Who was she? How much did my adoption change her life? The unexpected nature of the discoveries I made also shaped the production journey, which was non-linear and reflected the numerous returns and loops I made while I circled the core of my experiences and discoveries. This first meeting became a crucial audio memory, a key component in the construction of *BBC* and served as a catalyst for the subsequent narrative development in *BBC*.

Baby Boy Cousins Production Timeline

I made five separate trips to Newfoundland, one to Arizona and Maine, and various shootings in my hometown of Montreal (all during the Covid epidemic). They were:

- March 13-14 2020, was my first trip to Newfoundland: I filmed with the Radio Station in Newfoundland (VOCM), I filmed with Jean Ann Farrell, head of Newfoundland Adoption Services, and I filmed with Newfoundland author Michael Crummey.
- Oct 5-10 2020, was my second trip to Newfoundland –I rephotographed my adopted family photographs (projected 35 mm slides), I met with aunt Ellen (Mary Margaret’s oldest sister) and cousin Mara Pellerin (no camera was allowed, only sound was recorded). I was given a book of photographs of my birth mother, Mary Margaret Cousins, and a written family history with a timeline and family tree and told of my birth mother’s suicide, I filmed my first interview with Norm Woodland in Greenspond, Newfoundland (Norm was Mary Margret’s pallbearer, and neighbor).
- March 24 2021, Montreal shoot – I filmed my deep depression and reaction to Mary Margaret’s death at home.
- April 13-25 2021, my third trip to Newfoundland: I filmed my second interview with Newfoundland author Michael Crummey, I filmed with Shawn Burray (when he was a boy in grade eight, Mary Margaret took him in from his broken home and cared for him for nine months – he is now my age), I filmed my second interview with Jean Ann Farrell: head of Adoption services, I filmed

my second interview with Norm Woodland.

- Aug 17-31 2021 – My fourth Trip to Newfoundland: I filmed with Lorraine Rideout (she was part of the foster home where I was housed for my first four months of life), I filmed with actor Mary Walsh about her abandonment as a child (she was cut from the final film), I filmed with funeral director Brent Abbott at Kittiwake Funeral Home about any information he had about Mary Margaret’s suicide (he was cut from final film), I filmed my visit to Puffin Island Lighthouse (where Mary Margaret Cousins and her husband Ernest Wheeler (a lighthouse operator) would go together, and I filmed my third interview with Norm Woodland. I filmed with Major Bob Kean of the Salvation Army (where Mary Margret was a soldier), and I filmed with Roland Burray (Mary Margaret’s neighbor and accountant and oldest resident of Greenspond, Newfoundland).
- Nov 10-17 2021, I filmed in Sedona, Arizona with Aunt Johannah Cousins (Mary Margaret’s second sister).
- Feb 10-17, 2022 My fifth trip to Newfoundland: I re-photographed photos of Mary Margaret newly received from aunt Johannah Cousins (in Arizona), I filmed with Aunt Ellen Pellerin (maiden name Cousins) and my cousin Mara Pellerin (Ellen’s daughter). They agreed to their only on-camera interview. I filmed my fourth interview with Norm Woodland and his wife Cavell (she only found her father when she was in her mid-forties), I filmed my second interview with Major Bob Kean and with Major Cassie Kean, Salvation Army (which was cut from the film).
- Feb 26 – March 1 2022, Rockport, Maine – I filmed with experimental filmmaker, Walter Ungerer. Walter witnessed my adoption and could supply context about my life once I was adopted, as he was a close family friend of my adopted family.
- May 9 – May 10 2022, Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario –I filmed where Mary Margaret took her life.

In the following chapter, I explore these production journeys by linking them within the context of my theoretical framework for *BBC*.

Chapter 2 – Production: Theoretical and contextual framework

In this chapter, I delve into the specific filming methods employed during the production of *BBC*. These methods evolved organically as the narrative unfolded, where real-time discoveries about my birth mother, Mary Margaret Cousins, presented both opportunities and challenges. These shaped the dynamic nature of my storytelling and deeply impacted my personal journey. To provide a broader context for my production choices, I drew inspiration from Sarah Polley's influential essay film *Stories We Tell* and the works of Diann Borshay Liem, an essay filmmaker who shared my adoptee experience. Throughout this chapter, I explore the role of memoir, sound, and music – including music concrete and Mary Margaret Cousins's theme (which my cousin Mara Pellerin wrote for *BBC*), and the sonic drones that we invented for *BBC* to reflect the tension I felt as I underwent my search. I analyze the use of voice-over in the essay film genre, examining how this technique shaped my storytelling and was used to engage the audience. Inspired by the emotional resonance of my field zoom recordings, I sparingly employed voice-over in my own work. Moreover, I investigate the significance of photography and ethnography in the essay film genre, and how these elements influenced my production choices for *BBC*. I also explore the evolving narrative of Mary Margaret throughout *BBC*, and the personal difficulties I encountered throughout the process of making *BBC*.

Research – Production and Methodology

My birth family, Aunt Ellen Pellerin (maiden name Cousins) and Mara Pellerin provided me with invaluable items during our first meeting together: a book of photographs that featured my birth mother and my extended birth family – spanning four generations. They also gave me a detailed family tree, and a twelve-page document that outlined our family's story in narrative form.

The filmed encounters with these items were the backbone of *BBC*. The book of photographs was my cherished talisman. I shared it with individuals I encountered during my journey, including Norm and Cavelle Woodland (Mary Margaret's neighbors), Shawn Burry (a child my birth mother took in from a broken home), Major Bob of the Salvation Army (a leader within the organization where she served as a soldier), and author Michael Crummey (an emotional historian and writer who provided me with contextual insight into Newfoundland). These encounters and my editing of them, demonstrated my self-reflexivity in terms of how I

processed the information, and became one of the main components of *BBC*. According to film scholar Bill Nichols when speaking about filmed encounters he states that they are personal in nature:

The filmmaker becomes more than a professional maker of films; he becomes a collaborator and confidant, a partner in life to a remarkable degree. What emerges is a dialogical truth, the type of truth about the self that only arrives in, and through encounter, interaction, and relationship. It is radically distinct from factual or logical truth and from personal or subjective truth. It is not what is true for just the filmmaker or just his subjects alone and not what is true about the world in its empirical facticity. It is the manifestation of what is true when two people engage with one another and through their dialogical engagement discover for themselves, and us, aspects of our shared state of being not otherwise evident.⁴¹

With these filmed encounters I wanted to understand who my birth mother was, how she lived, and why her life took the course that it did. I used the book of photographs to instigate conversation. The visual prompt became something that the interview subjects could engage with, seeing photographs of someone they have not seen in over twenty-five years. My encounters became the script of my film. They slowly revealed to me who Mary Margaret was, and the choices she made. Because I filmed myself receiving the information, they also became a portrait of who I am, as the main agent who is relentlessly searching.

Each trip that I took to Newfoundland required me to reflect on the information I received about my birth mother, and her life. I turned towards other essay filmmakers to understand how they had crafted their work. How had they made sense of their personal stories and created a film with it? How is an essay documentary a way of curating truth? In traditional documentary forms (of which cinema verité is one) there is an attempt to show a comprehensive account of a subject, but for the essay documentary the notion of truth is multifaceted. In my previous work, my methods focussed on one perspective of “truth” but with the essay

⁴¹ Nichols, *Speaking truths with film : evidence, ethics, politics in documentary* 83.

documentary I experimented with various notions of truth in a multifaceted narrative. It was constructed through my personal perspective, and through others stories.

In an essay documentary, the filmmaker becomes an active participant in the narrative, expressing their thoughts, and emotions. By curating truth through a subjective lens, the essay documentary can demonstrate the limitations of an objective truth. The essay documentary emphasizes the importance of personal experiences and emotions in our understanding of the world. According to American film scholar Louis Gianetti “an essay is neither fiction nor fact, but a personal investigation involving both the passion and intellect of the author.”⁴²

Case Study of the Essay film – Sarah Polley’s *Stories We Tell*

Actor and filmmaker Sarah Polley’s documentary feature *Stories We Tell*⁴³ inspired me to embrace multiple perspectives, engage in self-reflection, navigate the complexities of memory and personal narratives in *BBC. Stories We Tell* heavily influenced me both narratively, and formally (including sound, editing and cinematography). One aspect that I found powerful was Polley’s use of multiple perspectives and voices. She incorporated interviews with family members and friends, archival footage, and re-enactments that explored different accounts and memories of her family’s history, while also self-reflexively commenting on it. This allowed for a multifaceted examination of the truth, highlighting the subjective nature of personal narratives. In *BBC*, I also incorporated diverse perspectives from my birth family, adoptive family, and other individuals involved in my adoption journey.

There are similarities in the way both, myself, and Polley, chose to craft the story (and the family secrets) that were revealed to the audience, but also differences in our intention and approach. In *BBC* I engaged in layered storytelling that revolved around, and evolved from, family secrets, that unfolded in front of the audience. Beginning as a search for my biological mother, it transitioned into the question of whether – or not – we *should* search for the truth. I wondered what does the truth reveal, and is it worth the cost?

⁴² Rascaroli, “The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments” 24.

⁴³ *Stories we tell*.

In *Stories We Tell*, Polley also committed to searching for her truth and she followed at least four primary narratives in her film to do so. First, there was the inciting incident;⁴⁴ Polley was called by a journalist who had discovered the hidden story of the filmmaker's parentage: Polley's biological father was in fact the successful film producer Harry Gulkin, a renowned Montreal film producer (Oscar nominated for *Lies My Father Told Me*), and not Michael Polley, an actor, the man Polley had always believed to be her father. This spurred Polley to make her film. The second story followed Polley's investigation into whether or not her mother, Diane Polley, had had an extramarital affair. We learn she did have one with Harry Gulkin. The third story followed the making of the film itself. The fourth story dug into the very nature of storytelling: how stories have shifted over time, and how these are the crumbling foundations on which we have built our family histories. According to film scholar Andrea Doucet:

[T]here is a larger theoretical, epistemological, and ontological narrative that frames the film and touches upon questions about what stories are, who they belong to, how they change in the telling, how listeners and audiences' matter, and what stories do within families. In the end, what begins as a family narrative ends up dancing at the edges of large epistemological and ontological questions about truth, subjectivity, narrative, ontological narrativity, and the performativity of stories.⁴⁵

As Polley investigated her family's stories she realized that there were gaps, contradictions, and subjective interpretations. These varying perspectives bled into the formal aspects of how Polley chose to make *Stories We Tell*. She employed different mediums, mixing Super 8mm film with Digital video. Polley's interview footage was of her family members, and men who may or may not be her father, and friends of her mother. These were intercut with her actual home movies, and reconstructed scenes with professional actors (playing her family members) shot on Super 8mm. The audience was led to believe these were Polley's real home movies but they were fictionalized. ⁴⁶ As explained by the film's producer Anita Lee "Super 8

⁴⁴ Andrea Doucet, "Ontological narrativity and the performativity of the Stories We Tell Stories We Tell" *Visual Studies*. 30.1 (2015): 98–100.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

cameras are “a medium of a certain time. We associate Super 8 with home movies lost in basements, and we literally searched through people’s basements for the right Super 8 camera.”⁴⁷

Stories We Tell became a hall of mirrors, allowing Polley to kaleidoscopically craft the story she wanted to tell. It also commented on the vast spectrum of subjective “truth”, very much dependent upon who told the story. Polley conducted interviews and shot the film for several months, edited for several months, and then repeated the process. “With this film, I was slowly discovering what I was doing as I was making it,” Polley stated when interviewed. “With each interview and each shoot, I was putting together what I ultimately wanted to do.”⁴⁸ It became clear to her that the accounts and memories she had begun to collect were not fixed ones, but were being made and remade over time. She noted, “Because it’s a film about storytelling, and how we tell stories and why we tell stories, I thought it was really important to include the process of making this film itself in the film.”⁴⁹ This exploration resonated with my own tortuous journey through the muddy terrain of perspectives that gradually revealed my own adoption story. Like *Stories We Tell*, *BBC* became a medley of archives, words, photographs, people’s recollections and candid family secrets, which I discovered with each shoot.

In *BBC*, I layered cinema vérité encounters and archival footage in an emotionally cinematic way, with filmed imagery on 16mm, used to evoke time, and a few recreations with actors that were shot to pass as archival (ex: see Clip 2 “I couldn’t see that baby”_06:42:00-07:44:00). Like *Stories We Tell*, I shot the film over many months and, with each trip I filmed, the story would deepen, layer and wind itself around me. Polley employed archival footage from the era to further complicate her storytelling (i.e., footage of her mother Diane Polley singing on CBC, footage of Diane Polley acting, or the real promotional films made about Harry Gulkin etc.). These archives blended with Polley’s fake archives, further exemplifying and simultaneously questioning the idea of truth in storytelling. In so doing Polley creates her memoir of the experience. All is colored with her subjectivity.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁴⁹ Doucet, “Ontological narrativity and the performativity of the *Stories We Tell* *Stories We Tell*.”

Memoir in the Essay Film

Through the lens of memoir in *BBC*, I also captured the process of unraveling my family history and created a portrait of my birth mother, Mary Margaret Cousins. By intertwining my personal narrative with Mary Margaret's story, I invited the audience to understand her life, struggles, and the impact she had on my journey of self-discovery (ex: Clip 4_ "Visiting the grave" _05:44:00-07:32:00). Memoir allowed me to share my thoughts, doubts, and discoveries as I navigated the process. It humanized the narrative, making it relatable and engaging for viewers who may have had similar experiences or an interest in personal stories of self-discovery. Unlike Polley, in *BBC* I tried to illustrate *not only* how the truth constantly alters the stories we (the audience, as well as the subjects in the film) tell ourselves, but also to thrust the audience into the perspective of what it is like to *not know* those stories, to not know that truth. My goal was to mirror the experience of what adoptees that are searching for their birth family may feel. Professor Kate J. Waites (2015) sees Polley's film as a "documemoir" and discusses memoir as follows:

The purpose of the memoir is to stitch together a self, or a new understanding of self from the "wreckage" of life experience ... As with most artists' self-portraits, the memoirist "is not just engaged in self-reflection but has a job to do... The artist has to translate his or her appearance in the mirror into some representation."⁵⁰

Both *Stories We Tell*, and *BBC*, employed methods to translate this representation of self. While Polley manipulated the meta-narrative using techniques such as having Michael Polley read a script he wrote, as well as Polley including conversations in the edit about breaking the fourth wall, her primary creative choice was to make the interview subjects words as raw and naked as possible. The audience could not be distracted by anything but their power, for fundamentally they are the stories we tell. In *BBC*, the authorial voice was intimately connected to the subject matter, particularly when the film revolved around my personal experiences as the filmmaker. Film scholars Spence and Navarro tell us:

⁵⁰ Kate J. Waites, "Sarah Polley's Documemoir 'Stories We Tell': The Refracted Subject" *Biography*. 38.4 (2015): 544.

The author stands out not only as an agent capable of shaping the documentary material but also as someone who has privileged access to the reality documented, a sort of insider whose knowledge is based on concrete, lived experience. These are films with a strong autobiographical component, in which subjectivity poses no danger to authenticity but serves instead, as theorist Michael Renov nicely put it, as ‘the filter through which the real enters discourse’⁵¹

The Role of Sound and Music in the Essay Film

Sound plays a crucial role in the essay film genre, as demonstrated in both *Stories We Tell* and *BBC*. Sound design, music, foley, ADR (Additional Dialogue Recording), and atmospheric elements have all contributed to deepening the emotional narrative and immersing the audience in the film’s world. Film scholar Laura Rascaroli states:

Unlike the documentary film, which presents facts and information, the essay film produces complex thought that at times is not grounded in reality but can be contradictory, irrational, and fantastic. This new type of film...no longer binds the filmmaker to the rules and parameters of the traditional documentary practice, such as chronological sequencing or the depiction of external phenomena...It gives free reign to the imagination, with all its artistic potentiality.”⁵²

In *BBC*, I used sound to emphasize the artistic potentiality of the emotional experience. An example of this can be seen when I initially learn about my birth mother’s suicide. The crashing waves, fused with my expression of grief, create an auditory backdrop that intensifies the emotional weight of the revelation. The crashing waves serves as a metaphorical representation of the overwhelming emotions on my psyche. (ex: see Clip 2_ “Waves crashing”_11:00:00-11:33:00).

⁵¹ Spence and Navarro, *Crafting truth : documentary form and meaning* 71.

⁵² Rascaroli, “The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments” 27.

In *BBC* I chose to create a sense of the unknown and discovery through the use of sound. Film theoretician Bill Nichols (2016) argues that, “Sound remains essential and sound provides a major point of identification for the viewer. It guides us through the imagery; it lends coherence, emotional intensity, and sensory rhythm; it draws us into a state of epistophilia (n.b. the love of knowledge) as we set out to experience and know the world in a distinct way.”⁵³

I chose to work with my composer, Tim Baker, and sound designer Sacha Ratcliffe because of how they emotionally connected to the material that I showed them at a fine cut stage of *BBC*. For both, *BBC* was their first feature documentary experience. Baker was the main composer and lead singer of Hey Rosetta! – a Juno-nominated Canadian independent rock band (2005-2017) from Newfoundland. Baker agreed to create music for *BBC* because he had been a bandmate in Hey Rosetta! with my newfound Newfoundland cousin Mara Pellerin (the daughter of my aunt Ellen Pellerin (maiden name Cousins)).

Baker, incorporated the use of an old pump organ to generate an organic drone sound. This drone served two purposes in conveying emotional states to the audience. Firstly, it created a sense of mystery, longing, and anticipation – intensifying the tension within *BBC*. Secondly, the drone had a Celtic sound that felt intrinsic to the Newfoundland landscape and resonated with my roots, adding an authentic and personal touch to the sonic experience. (ex: see Clip 2_”Greenspond”_04:27:00-06:44:00)

We created various audio drones and categorized them based on their specific emotional and narrative functions within the film. This allowed us to strategically place the drones at key moments, such as in memories, water-related scenes, and important turning points in the story. This provided the audience with the space to feel and process these moments alongside my journey. The drones added depth and resonance to the overall audio experience, as well as a subjectivity intrinsic to *BBC*, influenced by the essay films that I watched as research.

⁵³ Bill Nichols, *Speaking Truths with Film*, Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary (University of California Press, 2016) 73.

I used music and sound design to reveal my inner state and communicate it to the audience. The filmed Newfoundland landscape in *BBC* played a significant role. I employed a form of “musique concrète” as a key component of my sound work. Traditionally, “musique concrète” refers to electroacoustic music that incorporates collected sounds from the real world, rather than relying solely on traditional musical instruments.⁵⁴

I created an organic soundscape using sounds from nature and my interactions with it. The use of natural sounds, such as the wind whistling through tall grass, the power of ocean waves, raindrops, footsteps, and breath, added a metaphorical layer. These sounds iterated the unrelenting nature of my search for truth and the transformative journey. The fusion of different elements, including my filmed conversations, archival footage, and the 16mm imagery, aimed to represent, in part, the emotional perspective of my birth mother, whom I never met, as well as my own subjective emotional state during the process of discovery, grief, and questioning.

I wanted to infuse *BBC* with an authentic, heartfelt quality with the sound and music feeling both fragile and human. I decided to ask my birth family to be involved in my creative process because Mara Pellerin, my newly found cousin, was a professional singer. I employed her singing voice as a representation of my birth mother’s “voice” in *BBC*. The decision to involve my birth family in the creative process not only deepened our personal connection, but I also wanted the viewers to feel the impact of this collaboration.

Initially, when Mara Pellerin heard about my radio call out looking for my birth family (the inciting incident in my film), she woke at 5 a.m. with a tune she felt compelled to get up and write. That tune was a lullaby. Two years later I heard that lullaby, and I used it to help me musically structure *BBC*. Mara Pellerin wrote me an email recently illuminating her decision to collaborate in the film, which, like her mother, Ellen, she had initially been unsure she wanted to do. “That tune really did feel like an external download in two parts,” Mara wrote “The first when it arrived the day we heard about you and I squirrelled away in the basement [...to compose it]. The second was a year later with the feeling of getting poked awake at 5 a.m. ...and a voice telling me to get up and record it right now to share with Mom.”

⁵⁴ James Wierzbicki, *Music, Sound and Filmmakers: Sonic Style in Cinema* (Routledge, 2012) 9.

I used Mara's lullaby to structure my film and I further emphasized the emotional vulnerability of my state as I told my story. It was Mary Margaret's theme. Furthermore, Mara's willingness to participate in *BBC*, despite initial uncertainties, added an authentic emotional dimension. Her voice helped weave together thematic elements, operating on a subtextual and textual level, which revealed how personal connections intersect with creative collaboration in *BBC*. (ex: see Clip 4_ "lighthouse" _01:15:00 -01:48:00) & . (ex: see Clip 06_ " Grand Canyon" _00:26:10-01:11:00).)

Voice over Narration

One of the key elements of the essay film is the direct address of the protagonist, with first- person voice over narration being the simplest way to represent this address.⁵⁵ In essay films, the narrator's voice becomes the central point of identification and often represents the filmmaker's perspective. As film scholar Laura Rascaroli states: "the pervasive presence of a voice-over, a frequent and characterizing marker of the essay film, has often been accused within documentary theory of producing an authoritarian discourse and superimposing a reading on the pure truthfulness."⁵⁶ Initially, I had two concerns about using voice over narration in *BBC*: I did not want to sound too authoritarian, and therefore hide the confusion I was experiencing, and I felt that voice over narration could lead the audience to believe that the author of the film already knew the ending. Both would undermine the methods I employed to capture my experience. As film theoretician Bill Nichols (2016) argues, voice over narration can feel as though the author has already processed the experience.

It is the literal voice of the film, and it arrives in the form of "He Who Already Knows," a voice that marshals sounds and images in support of a carefully crafted perspective known from the outset ... The spoken word stands for the disembodied, omniscient, invulnerable filmmaker who

⁵⁵ Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments" 38.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

retains full control over the assembly of images and the rhythm of the film.⁵⁷

After watching other films about adoption (notably *I Think You've Been Looking for Me*⁵⁸) – I felt the use of a crafted voice over narration in an adoption film could risk making the audience feel that the story is being told to them after fact. I wanted the audience to feel the authenticity of the moment, allowing them to experience the journey alongside me, fostering a sense of empathy and immersing them in the adoption journey. I wanted the impact of each revelation to affect the audience as it affected me, the subject.

This became a major point of discussion with my thesis supervisor, Professor Marielle Nitoslawska, and my Master's program cohort. I needed to allow the viewer into my experience, but I also needed to confront how I would do this without using the voice over. Professor Nitoslawska voiced the pivotal question I had been wrestling with: "How do we get inside your head?". The phrase "build from unknowing," suggested by Professor Aaron McIntosh, became a guiding principle for me, inspiring me to delve deeper into the unknown and embrace the exploration of my own journey. My academic colleagues suggested that I record my thoughts using a zoom recorder to bridge this narrative tension. I did this when I was in the field shooting, which allowed a contemporaneous window into my state of mind as I filmed. I brought those zoom recordings into the edit room, and they were fundamental in understanding how I should shape the scenes without betraying how I felt at the moment they were being recorded.

The zoom recordings were a blueprint, transporting me directly into my inner turmoil. They captured the confusion and uncertainty as I attempted to create a portrait of the birth mother I'd never known, all the while feeling that I was chasing a ghost. These recordings were only heard in *BBC*, directly, on one occasion. Act 3 opens with me, sitting on a plane to Arizona. As I look out the cabin window, the zoom-recorded narration haltingly reflects: "Sometimes it feels like a bit like a Greek tragedy or something...that you go looking for ... you go looking for

⁵⁷ Nichols, *Speaking truths with film : evidence, ethics, politics in documentary* 66.

⁵⁸ *I Think You've Been Looking for Me*, Documentary, vols., 2018.

light and happiness. And what you find is, you know, the similar tones and colours of things you've already experienced.” (ex: see Clip 5_“plane”_11:24:00-11:47:00).

I recorded voice over narration twice in the film. I used voice over narration to open a window into my anxieties at the beginning of Act 1(ex: see Clip 01_”set-up”_00:28:00-00:52:00), and when I was travelling to Arizona in the beginning of Act 3 (ex: see Clip 5_”plane”_11:49:00-12:13:00).). The rest of *BBC* employed real edited conversations. These replaced the space that a voice over narration would occupy in the essay film, and allowed the viewer to experience my emotional state, while I remained vulnerable and authentic. I ensured that my voice in *BBC* did not feel written, or fictive in any manner.

Photography in the Essay Film

Film scholar Laura Rascaroli called the essay film “dialectics of fiction and nonfiction; it is a cinema of pure reflection, where the subject becomes the basis of an intellectual construct, which in turn is capable of engendering the over-all form and even the texture of a film without being denatured or distorted.”⁵⁹ One method the essay film avoids distorting the texture of a film, while speaking to the essence of its form, is the use of photography as a story telling tool. The essay film can deal with memory, and photography assumes a role in essay films in relation to memory. In Deann Borshay Liem’s films, *First Person Plural*⁶⁰ and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*⁶¹, Liem demonstrated the significance of photography in exploring personal narratives. An Emmy-nominated filmmaker with *First Person Plural*, Liem embarked on a search for her birth mother in Korea, and in the sequel *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*, she sought out the young girl whose life she replaced in the Korean orphanage (Liem was adopted to America and Cha Jung Hee stayed in Korea). Liem incorporated cut-up photographs of herself and the Korean girl, Cha Jung Hee, intertwining their features and identities to visually explore their interconnectedness.

⁵⁹ Rascaroli, “The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments” 31.

⁶⁰ *First person plural*.

⁶¹ *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*.

This cut up method inspired me to try to liberate my personal photos and to create a sense of vitality and connection to my history. Susan Sontag (1990) explored the use of photography as a medium to create this continuity:

The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery. Any photograph has multiple meanings; indeed, to see something in the form of a photograph is to encounter a potential object of fascination. The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: ‘There is the surface. Now think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way.’ Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.⁶²

In *BBC* I used a composite of my personal photography – which I re-filmed and transformed – and photographs of my birth mother, as a canvas for experimentation with the fantastical. I found myself peering into photographs of my birth mother Mary Margaret Cousins, probing for any story I could glean. According to the cultural theorist Susannah Radstone, photographs served “as a powerful medium that can convey silence, absence, contradiction, as well as generate new identities and memories.”⁶³ Ultimately, I could not accomplish what I really wanted to; I couldn’t bring Mary Margaret back to life. So her photographs served as a means of exploration and creation, enabling me to engage with her memory and helping me to re-construct her identity for myself. In *On Photography* Susan Sontag encapsulates this act of fantastical realism perfectly. For Sontag, a photograph is a found object that “trades simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real. They are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information.”⁶⁴

Despite being estranged from my adopted father for more than twenty-eight years due to a dysfunctional family environment, I understood the significance of including the 35mm family photos taken during my early childhood and at the beginning of my adoption process. After

⁶² Susan 1933-2004. Sontag, *On photography*, 1st Anchor books ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1990) 26.

⁶³ Susannah. Radstone, *Memory and methodology* (Oxford ; Berg, 2000) 184.

⁶⁴ Sontag, *On photography* 63.

petitioning him through another family member, a Kodak carousel slide tray containing fifty photos, including my baby pictures, was sent to me in Montreal. American film theoretician Bill Nichols writes of “the voice of documentary” to demarcate how documentary films “speak” to us by how they arrange their filmic elements in order to represent the world.⁶⁵ These early photographs became part of the “voice” of my story. I wanted to portray these images differently, to convey my discomfort and the sense of being an outsider within a family to which I was not biologically related, and with whom I struggled. I chose to refilm the images using experimental techniques and created fantastical images.

During my second trip to Newfoundland, I embarked on a series of experiments in collaboration with my cinematographer Mario Janelle. Using a fish tank, a slide projector, and a black spray-painted plastic tub, we projected the 35mm slides of the photographs into an aquarium filled with water. Initially, the water alone was not dense enough to clearly display the image of the baby pictures. To bring the projection into focus, we poured thirty five percent cream into the water, causing it to become heavier and allowing the image to gradually appear. This process imbued the images with a ghostly quality, as if they were emerging from smoke. Throughout the filming process, we used forty-four litres of cream as we re-filmed various pictures from my childhood. By angling the slide projector downward and clamping it to C-stands, we projected the images into the water-filled black tub. We created ripples in the water by sloshing the tank or animated the images by generating drops on the water’s surface with our hands.

These re-filmed photographs (including my pictures from the day I was adopted at three-months old) served as a means of reactivating and rediscovering their significance. Cultural theorist Susannah Radstone (2000) argues that, “There is no “peeling away of layers to reveal a “real” self” but rather a constant reworking of memory and identity”.⁶⁶ By recontextualizing these images of myself as a baby through the use of water, I provided a space for dialogue about my past. The experimental techniques allowed the images to become active once again, which

⁶⁵ Spence and Navarro, *Crafting truth : documentary form and meaning* 65.

⁶⁶ Radstone, *Memory and methodology* 184.

invited a sense of discovery and enabled me to express and explore my personal narrative. (ex: see Clip 2 "photos" _02:10:00-02:31:00)

At the beginning of my journey, while on-air at the radio station, I expressed my desire to meet someone from my birth family and to understand who these people were – “to see someone I looked like”. Subsequently, I received photographs of my birth mother and her family. However, simply seeing the photographs was not enough for me; I wanted my birth mother, Mary Margaret Cousins, in motion. Therefore, during my final trip to Newfoundland, after acquiring more photographs from aunt Johannah Cousins, in Arizona (my birth mother’s second oldest sister) I re-filmed these photographs.

I collaborated with Bud Galton, a Newfoundland photographer, who agreed to re-photograph the original images of Mary Margaret Cousins on 35mm film. I filmed the printing of the photograph in a darkroom. Selecting five specific photographs, we filmed the moment when her image begins to appear on the photographic paper. (ex: see Clip 06_”Developing”_01:00:00-01:19:00) Susan Sontag (1990) states that: “While old photographs fill out our mental image of the past, the photographs being taken now transform what is present into a mental image, like the past.”⁶⁷ These photographs of Mary Margaret were the only tangible parts of my birth mother I was able to interact with, so by rephotographing them I was in a sense reappropriating them into my memory, and I transformed them into a mental image. I created them afresh.

Ethnography in the essay film

BBC is an observational and ethnographic film, as it delved into the culture of Newfoundland, where my birth mother, Mary Margaret Cousins, grew up. Over the course of two years, I made multiple trips to Newfoundland, as well as visits to Arizona, Maine, and Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, gathering information and immersing myself in the culture and history of the places connected to her story. By collaborating with Newfoundlanders who filmed with me and who generously shared their perspectives and experiences, I gained a deeper understanding of the cultural context of the island in the 1970s. For young women of modest means, it was difficult

⁶⁷ Sontag, *On photography* 139.

living in a province that had recently become part of Canada, facing economic challenges of its own. Newfoundland was also heavily freighted with religion, and the societal judgements mired within it.

According to American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, “like poems and hypotheses, ethnographies can only be judged *ex post*, after someone has brought them into being.”⁶⁸ My approach to *BBC* resonated with Geertz’s perspective on ethnography. Ethnography allows for discourse between individuals from different backgrounds. Through storytelling, imagery, symbols, and tropes, ethnography seeks to uncover truths and challenge preconceived notions.⁶⁹ *BBC* embraced these aspects as I explored the complex and layered society of Newfoundland, offering access to an inner world that outsiders often do not have the opportunity to witness.

In Newfoundland, someone not from the Rock, is a “come from away”, and for traditional Newfoundlanders you are either a “bayman” or a “townie”. A bayman, is anyone who does not come from St John’s (the city) – and townies were seen as the upper class; not to be trusted. Mary Margaret Cousins and the Cousins family, are from Conception Bay, and therefore that makes Mary Margaret, and I, a bayman, and not a townie. But I am also a “come from away”. I am both an outsider and an insider. This allowed me privileged access to ways of being, practices, lore, and language while engaging with the same knowledge from a distance as an outsider. I delved into the intricacies of the Salvation Army (ex: see Clip 4_”Major Bob”_08:38:00-11:15:00), explored the coastal village of Greenspond, and learned about the experiences of lighthouse keepers on Puffin Island (ex: see Clip 4_”Lighthouse”_01:07:00-03:16:00).

What I discovered also shed light on the challenges that Mary Margaret Cousins faced as a single woman who was at times underprivileged and traumatized. In fact, many experiences and interactions throughout my filming highlighted the sensitivities of, and around,

⁶⁸ Clifford. Geertz, *Works and lives : the anthropologist as author* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988) 147.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Newfoundland women who appeared on camera and shared their stories. It took a long time before people like Lorraine Rideout, the daughter of the foster family who cared for me, and Cavell Woodland, Norm Woodland's wife, were able to feel comfortable enough to share their personal narratives (ex: see Clip 3_ "Foster family" _03:27:00-06:45:00) &(ex: see Clip 5_ "Cavell's search " _01:00:00-02:23:00). This time was spent, for me, carefully gaining their trust. And – on their end – the gentle dismantling of mistrust and reluctance.

BBC became an ethnographic exploration of the resilience of individuals navigating complex societal dynamics. It provided a unique glimpse into the culture, history, and personal experiences of Newfoundland, creating a bridge between the imagined and the real, and fostering a deeper understanding of my own identity and connections to the place and people I encountered. I agree with anthropologist Clifford Geertz who said “whatever else ethnography may be... it is above all a rendering of the actual, a vitality phrased.”⁷⁰

What Happened to Mary Margaret? – Navigating Personal Loss and the Essay Film

Throughout the process of making *BBC*, I uncovered a series of revelations about Mary Margaret Cousins that significantly changed the narrative and my understanding of who she was. Initially, Mary Margaret was described as a “quiet girl” who possessed creativity, gentleness, and kindness. However, as I delved deeper into her life, more complex and contradictory aspects emerged.

The first significant revelation was that Mary Margaret had taken her own life, which introduced a tragedy I did not expect to her story. She moved to Greenspond, a small and isolated community that could only be accessed by ferry. I heard that she was in an abusive marriage with a lighthouse keeper who was also the town drunk. Despite this difficult situation, I also learnt that Mary Margaret was able to influence her husband and successfully stop his drinking.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 143.

Mary Margaret's role as a caregiver and nurturer became apparent through her acts of mothering a young teenage boy for nine months (Shawn Burray), providing him with support and care. She also became deeply involved as a soldier with the Salvation Army, showing her commitment to helping others. Mary Margaret took in a teenage girl from a broken home (Maggie Burton) and treated her as a daughter for ten years, demonstrating her capacity for love and compassion. While she had few friends, she was loved by those who knew her. Tragedy struck within a short period when Mary Margaret's mother, her much-older husband, and her surrogate daughter, Maggie, all passed away in the span of three months. These losses undoubtedly added to her emotional turmoil.

However, contradictory behaviors emerged, such as her engagement in drinking with her husband, indicating a more complicated and troubled side to her life. She experienced a range of emotions, including anger, fear, and a sense of isolation. Mary Margaret's departure from Greenspond did not happen immediately, as initially claimed. Instead, she started relationships with other older men who also had drinking problems before eventually leaving the community. She then moved to Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, where her second oldest sister, Johannah Cousins, had a daughter named Ruth, whom Mary Margaret had helped raise as a baby.

During her youth, according to Johannah, Mary Margaret caused difficulties for her family, driven by her deep-seated anger. As Johannah alleged, Mary Margaret was abused by the town doctor. I did speak to aunt Ellen Pellerin (maiden name Cousins) about this. These challenges could have contributed to the complexities and struggles Mary Margaret faced throughout her life. I also learnt from aunt Johannah Cousins in Arizona, that soon after Mary Margaret gave me up for adoption, she got a job with a foster family taking care of their baby boy, convinced it was her son that she had given up. Ironically, I was in a Newfoundland foster home until my adoption, but not the one Mary Margaret worked for. That foster family fired Mary Margaret when they understood her true intention. However, all the information that I learnt about my birth mother, were other people's "truths" about her.

As the narrative surrounding Mary Margaret transformed, it revealed to me a complex and multi-faceted individual, I strove to capture this complicated essence. *BBC* depicted the

complex layers of Mary Margaret's experiences, emotions, and relationships as they challenged the initial understanding that I had of her in my non-identifying background summary, where she was, simply, a "quiet girl." The journey I undertook and what I discovered was earth shattering for me.

As I have discussed thus far, essay films often blend documentary and autobiographical elements to delve into complex themes and personal experiences, inviting the audience to reflect and engage emotionally with the subject matter. The process of making *BBC* was filled with emotional challenges and moments of uncertainty. The lack of quick and forthcoming answers about Mary Margaret Cousins, created a sense of something unfinished and left me with an incomplete portrait of who she was. This constant state of not knowing what was the truth, and having to wait until my next trip to Newfoundland to gather more information was difficult to navigate.

BBC's exploration of my real-time experiences of grieving my birth mother – whom I have never met, and will never meet – the dream of who I wanted her to be, and the mythology I had built around her, added a layer of extreme vulnerability. By placing the audience in these real-time situations and filming myself as I learned personal information, I allowed them to witness my process of receiving and processing that information.

As the subject of *BBC*, I actively engaged with the story. This required me to process the information I learned on camera, in real time and to make choices about how to continue. This rendered the story active rather than passive. It required me to be open and receptive to the unexpected, even if it meant being uncomfortable and unseated from my directorial chair. These reflections created vulnerabilities and exposure that are characteristic of the essay genre.

The Challenges of Editing in the Essay Film

The editing process of *BBC* was as challenging as the film itself. After each leg of the journey, my longstanding editor, Heidi Haines, and I would watch the material and cut it based on our understanding of the story. However, since we didn't know who Mary Margaret Cousins was or what the film was about, the interviews were edited with the knowledge that they could

change with each subsequent journey. I was always concerned that *BBC* wouldn't be active enough.

Heidi's presence during the editing was invaluable. We have had a relationship spanning many years (we have made fourteen projects together), and as a mother herself, she provided a unique perspective. In the process, she also learned about my personal life (which I had kept secret prior to the film), which added another layer of complexity to the editing room.

The experience of re-watching and re-learning about my birth mother through the footage was anxiety-inducing. I constantly worried that there was no coherent story. While I have gone through similar processes in other documentaries I have made, this film, due to its personal nature, lacked the buffer of objectivity in the editing room.

With each leg of my journey, my impression of my birth mother, Mary Margaret Cousins, would change based on the new information I obtained. We spent over 550 hours editing to create an 84-minute film. Much of this footage consisted of interviews that we would transcribe. After each trip, we would distill the information I discovered and begin crafting the story. However, in the editing room, we found it challenging to strike the right balance between emotion and information.

Maintaining distance during the editing process was incredibly difficult. After each editing session, I would go away, review the transcripts, and use highlighting and cards on the wall to start piecing the story together. From the beginning, I had envisioned a progression from darkness to light, from not knowing to knowing something. I shot footage with this in mind, incorporating elements like me looking through a magnifying glass at slides or speaking to the adoption agency with my hand against the glass, borrowing the feel of a film noir or mystery.

However, when I discovered my birth mother's suicide and the fact that her death date in January followed my birthday by two days, I couldn't help but be affected. I was born on January 17, and she died on January 19. It struck an emotional chord, even if it could simply be characterized as apophenia. I wondered if my birth in her life had anything to do with her death.

My last trip to Arizona solidified many things for me. My aunt Johannah Cousins played a significant role in the discoveries she shared with me, opening up about Mary Margaret Cousin's traumatic past and allowing me to share mine. The release she offered me began to initiate a healing process.

The editing process was a complex and emotional journey, with each step unveiling more about my birth mother and myself, mirroring the quest, with all my questioning. This reflexivity is reflected in *BBC* itself, and is characteristic of the essay film.

Chapter 3 – Ethics and transparency in the essay film

Throughout this chapter, I explore the ethics of documentary filmmaking, and how they impact the essay film, where transparency is an expectation of the genre. I speak of the challenges of making a film with both my newly found birth family and my adoptive family, the responsibilities I undertook, as well as the methodologies I employed in order to ensure that I was acting in an ethical manner with all of my subjects. I explore how I navigated and mitigated the ethical dilemmas that could arise.

I investigate the essay films of Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March*, and Alan Berliner's *First Cousin, Once Removed* and their influence on my views regarding the ethical considerations of making an essay film, as well as the expectation that the audience has of transparency and "truthfulness" in this genre.

I also investigate who the essay film serves – the audience or the filmmaker? To provide a broader context to my research creation, I examine the profound influence that Chantal Akerman's work (specifically *News from Home* and *No Home Movie*) had on my formal choices. I also investigate the potential harm that can occur with the self-reflexive transparency required from the filmmaker in the essay film. I conclude by providing insights into the benefits and personal growth a filmmaker can derive from creating a deeply personal essay film, and I caution with a definite need for psychological self-care in regards to the filmmaker's transparency should they undergo this process.

Ethics in the Essay Film

The essay film raises questions about the subversion of the filmmaker's agency through the need for transparency (in order for the story to resonate), as well as the potential cathartic effect of this transparency on both the filmmaker and the audience. Is it cathartic for the filmmaker and/or audience to be so transparent in the essay film? Film scholars Elizabeth Papazian and Caroline Eades argue that the essay film resonates with spectators because of its ethical stance considering subjectivity "in a world that is dominated by a plethora of images

where artistic newness seems to have been exhausted”.⁷¹ The audience trusts that the essay film will be honestly subjective, and transparency becomes one of its currencies.

In my exploration of the essay film genre, the transparency of the filmmaker Ross McElwee in *Sherman's March* struck me, where he openly discusses his failed love life and made it a central focus. The film's full title, *Sherman's March: A Meditation on the Possibility of Romantic Love in the South During an Era of Nuclear Weapons And Proliferation*, reflected this introspective approach.

In 1986, McElwee received a grant to follow the path of General William Tecumseh Sherman during the Civil War, known for his destructive actions in the South. However, the film became a documentation of McElwee's own romantic relationships and anxieties about finding a partner in the South during the 1980s, when the fear of nuclear war loomed. *Sherman's March* blurred the line between the historical narrative and McElwee's personal journey. It is anecdotally, also the first essay film I ever encountered, when I watched it in my undergrad program at Concordia in 1998.

On viewing *Sherman's March* and the dynamics between the filmmaker and the women McElwee courts, film theorist Bill Nichols' asks: "how do filmmaker and social actor respond to each other; do they react to overtones or implications in each other's speech; do they see how power and desire flow between them?"⁷² The film was intrusive (but made by McElwee, so the viewer is more comforted), with McElwee finally confessing to his diaristic camera: "it seems I'm filming my life in order to have a life to film."⁷³ This reflection on the personal nature of the film is further demonstrated, when one of his potential partners pleads with him to stop filming their emotional lives, calling it "cruel Ross."

⁷¹ Papazian and Eades, *The essay film : dialogue, politics, utopia* 300.

⁷² Bill. Nichols, *Representing reality : issues and concepts in documentary* (Bloomington ; Indiana University Press, 1991) 44.

⁷³ Bunty Avieson, Fiona Giles, and Sue Joseph, *Mediating Memory: Tracing the Limits of Memoir* (Routledge, n.d.) 126.

In the case of *BBC*, I worried about facing the same challenges as both the creator and subject of the film. I grappled with ensuring that I did not embellish or mischaracterize myself, while I also carried a weighty responsibility towards my birth family, adopted mother and adopted sister, and the individuals who agreed to speak on camera. The representational process in the editing process required careful consideration to uphold the ethics of transparency and respect for all parties involved. While I shot *BBC*, I received sympathy from those I approached because I was searching for my birth mother. Newfoundland is well-known for the generosity of the inhabitants, and true to this spirit, everyone I encountered wanted to help me in my search.

The ethical complexities of *BBC* were further heightened by the presence of the camera. According to the French documentarian and anthropologist Jean Rouch (seen as one of the founding fathers of cinema verité with *Chroniques D'un Été*, 1961) the camera acts as a psychoanalytic stimulant that “deforms but not from the moment that it becomes an accomplice. At that point it has the possibility of doing something I couldn’t do if the camera wasn’t there: it becomes a kind of psychoanalytic stimulant which lets people do things they wouldn’t otherwise do.”⁷⁴

Approaching my new family for the first time, I had to earn their trust and convince them to open up to a complete stranger, asking for their faith that I would handle their stories with respect and create a finished film that accurately portrayed their experiences. It involved requesting them, (and any participants in *BBC*) to sign a release, which relinquished their rights and control over how their lives were represented. This raised ethical questions. The filmmaker holds the power to shape the narrative, while the subjects may fear their stories being stereotyped, or distorted.⁷⁵

With *BBC* this responsibility was amplified due to a myriad of emotional minefields, including sensitive topics like suicide, abandonment, abuse, depression, and anxiety. This was further complicated by the fact that I couldn’t reveal the full scope of Mary Margaret’s story to

⁷⁴ Renov, *The subject of documentary* 127.

⁷⁵ Nichols, *Speaking Truths with Film* 151.

the participants until I finished learning it myself. Film theorist Bill Nichols argued that “Documentary filmmaking is fashioned from the lives of others, sometimes in very raw, unmediated forms. Ethical guidelines would seem to be a necessary precondition to responsible forms of interaction and representation when the lives of others are the signifying substance of a film.”⁷⁶

To navigate any ethical dilemmas in *BBC*, I took several approaches. First, after filming with a family member, I informed them about what I had discovered about Mary Margaret’s life up until that point. I wanted to ensure transparency and avoid manipulating them or influencing their memories with new information. Second, just before completing the film, I invited the family members to watch it, verify its contents, and allowed them to voice any concerns they might have.

A lesson I have learned from previous documentaries is the importance of corroborating information with multiple independent sources before including it in the film. Nichols states that “Documentaries usually invite us to take as true what subjects recount about something that happened even if we also see how more than one perspective is possible.”⁷⁷ This approach ensures a responsible and factual representation of history. In the case of *BBC*, my birth family expressed gratitude as they discovered new aspects of Mary Margaret’s life, allowing them to reconcile their emotions, particularly regarding her passing. Ultimately, maintaining ethical considerations throughout *BBC* was essential to me, both in terms of the relationships with my subjects and of accurately representing their stories.

Transparency in the essay film

Who does the essay film serve – the audience or the filmmaker? On one hand, the essay film offers a personal and subjective exploration of a topic or experience, claiming to speak only for itself. It allows the filmmaker to investigate their own thoughts, emotions, and perspectives, providing a platform for introspection. In this sense, the essay film serves the filmmaker as a means of personal exploration and creative expression.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 155.

⁷⁷ Nichols, *Representing reality : issues and concepts in documentary* 21.

The essay film is also open to interpretation by the audience. It invites viewers to engage with the filmmaker's experiences, and reflections, allowing for a dialogue between the filmmaker and the audience. The audience can derive meaning, and personal connections from the film, expanding their understanding of the subject matter and potentially prompting their own reflections. According to film scholars Elizabeth Papazian and Caroline Eades (2016) "The essay film is infinitely personal, claiming to speak only for itself, and yet infinitely comprehensible and open to interpretation. It offers the possibility of making visible identity without entailing identification."⁷⁸

With *BBC*, I initially set out on a personal search without the specific intention of making an essay film, but with the definite goal to find identity. Early on, as the filming began and I encountered unexpected emotional challenges and revelations, *BBC* took on the form of an essay film organically. I watched essay films in order to learn from others how it is done. Once I understood about Mary Margaret's death, I was looking for a suitable approach on how to film the emotionally fragile location of Sault Ste Marie, Ontario, where my birth mother had taken her life. I wanted to ensure that the portrayal was respectful and avoid any sense of over-dramatization. Professor Nitoslawska introduced me to the work of Chantal Akerman, a Belgian documentary and fiction filmmaker. The personal choices and freedoms Akerman exhibited in her essay work, inspired me when I was at my most fragile.

I watched Akerman's essay films, including *News from Home*, *South*, *From the East*, and *No Home Movie*. There I found inspiration in exploring the essay film form, especially when I was at a loss at how to film Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. *News from Home* particularly resonated with me, for the sheer duration of shots, subject matter, framing, and juxtaposition. *News from Home* demonstrated the self-reflexive questions that Akerman asked⁷⁹ while striking the tone that I felt was respectful for what I wanted to accomplish.

⁷⁸ Papazian and Eades, *The essay film : dialogue, politics, utopia* 168.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

News from Home consisted of long shots of New York City in 1976, where Akerman lived after moving from Brussels at the age of 21. Her camera captured empty streets, occasionally populated by people, but without focusing on any individual in particular. There is a sense of loneliness in her frames.⁸⁰ At times her shot is a stable, slow travelling of the city streets of New York from the perspective of the passenger window.

In voice over narration, Akerman read intimate letters sent to her by her mother, Natalia, (sent between 1971 and 1973). These letters described Akerman's family, expressing their longing for her, and repeatedly implore Akerman to respond. Akerman reads in a deadpan voice, and the cityscapes visually blend with the audio, creating a sonic overlap where her voice is drowned out. This juxtaposition generates a sense of confrontation and tension, highlighting the dichotomy between her physical presence and her mother's absence. We feel her alienation.⁸¹ It became a dialogue between Akerman and her mother, using the compositions and perspective of the shots as Akerman's response to the letters. Akerman's shots were "between forty-eight and fifty-six inches from the ground – her personal height of view".⁸² *News from Home* created a unique, introspective essay film.

News from Home influenced my approach to filming Sault Ste. Marie in *BBC* (ex: see Clip 5 "Sault Ste. Marie" 07:48:00-11:24:00). By using a slow traveling shot as I drove through the streets of Sault Ste. Marie, I captured a similar sense of contemplation and observation. I accomplished this by what I chose to film – the concrete, the industrial nature of Sault Ste. Marie with its smokestacks spewing fire. My still compositions of Sault Ste. Marie were not of people, further contributing to the feeling of detachment and emptiness.

The juxtaposition between Sault Ste. Marie and Greenspond, Newfoundland created a jarring contrast. In Greenspond, I walked through and interacted with the landscape, and expressed a sense of my search for connection. In Sault Ste. Marie, the slow traveling shots through the city gave the impression of a ghostly presence, which emphasized my absence from

⁸⁰ Spence and Navarro, *Crafting truth : documentary form and meaning* 222.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁸² Papazian and Eades, *The essay film : dialogue, politics, utopia* 186.

the frame. Additionally, the inclusion of a cinema verité scene where I visited Mary Margaret's house created a moment of direct engagement with Sault Ste. Marie. In that scene, a small conflict occurred when the people next door to Mary Margaret's house, felt intruded upon as I looked at Mary Margaret's house from the backyard. I included this conflict in the edit of *BBC* because it mirrored my own internal conflict. I felt like an interloper, trying to discover what I could about my birth mother in what was an emotional location for me. Some of the immediate footage we shot in Sault Ste. Marie was captured with an iPhone, as our time there was limited, and it was the most readily available tool. This contributed to the personal transparency and emotional resonance of *BBC*.

Over these city shots of Sault Ste. Marie, I included an audio edit of an interview I did with my cinematographer John Walker where I candidly expressed my thoughts in dialogue with what I was experiencing about my birth mother and how she ended her life.

I get it. I get when you go through pain – that sometimes it hurts so much that you just don't want to continue. I understand that. Like I understand what it's like when you're- when you feel like you've been- or when you feel like you don't have anything really to cling to, and you just feel really alone and lost ... And you just kind of – you know, fall in whatever path you can, hoping that that's going to help you get through it. But I mean, I'm not Mary Margaret, you know? I'm not – obviously I made different choices. Or she made different choices.

By drawing inspiration from *News from Home*, and adapting its techniques, I was able to capture a similar mood and also evoke a sense of painful honesty.

As I edited *BBC*, Chantal Akerman's essay work continued to influence me, particularly her last film *No Home Movie*. This essay film, shot in 2014 in Israel, also orbited around Akerman's relationship with her mother, Natalia, (in which we learn she is a Holocaust survivor). Akerman employed long-duration shots, a characteristic feature of her style, but this time she positioned herself mostly covered by her mother in the frame. This visual representation

emphasized the profound importance of her mother in her life and the strong identification she felt with her.

No Home Movie presents the primal script of the autobiographical litany that had become increasingly explicit in the artist's statements and filmed self-portraits ... Here, in her last film, we actually hear the impossibly stretched and repeated goodbyes and terms of endearment that so elegantly hang over *News from Home*.⁸³

Akerman accumulated over forty hours of footage with her mother using various devices like her phone, computer, and digital camera. She never intended to make a film out of this footage, and then her mother died. The spontaneous and intimate nature of the footage, captured without the explicit purpose of creating a film, lent a raw and authentic quality to *No Home Movie*. This unexpected abundance of footage became a precious record of their time together, ultimately forming the foundation for this, Akerman's last essay film. Akerman handed the footage to her editor saying "we may be able to do something with it."⁸⁴

While editing *No Home Movie*, Akerman admitted in interview that her mother, and their relationship formed the center of her work. Once she completed *No Home Movie*, Akerman committed suicide. There was an intimacy to the footage in her last film, that felt like a dialogue between the mother and her child, not just in words (they discussed her mother's experiences with the Holocaust for the first time) but also in the way Akerman framed objects (a broken blue chair in the backyard over turned by the wind, makes three appearances) as does the longingly framed empty shots of the apartment.

After being touched by Akerman's story and her relationship with her mother, reflecting on *BBC* and my experience in the edit room, I wondered whether the personal transparency that is at the core of essay films does not have an effect on the filmmaker? Documentary scholar Michael Renov (2004) states that "Autobiography has become a tool for coupling liberatory

⁸³ Ivone Margulies, "Elemental Akerman: Inside and Outside *No Home Movie*" *Film Quarterly*. 70.1 (2016): 63.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

public testimony and private therapy.”⁸⁵ Filmmakers often strive to present a complete and honest story to their audience, and in doing so, they confront and disclose aspects of their lives that they may not have shared publicly or even acknowledged to themselves before. Knowing that I was making *BBC* for an audience, I felt I had to tell the most honest story I could, based on all the information that was available to me. However, paradoxically, I revealed feelings and facts about my life that I may have not otherwise.

Coupled with the feat of crafting this material, over and over, in the edit room, I found myself in a fragile state. It does not feel coincidental that Akerman waited a month and a half after *No Home Movie* had its premiere and then took her life. It’s important to recognize the potential impact that the process of making an essay film can have on a filmmaker’s psychological well-being and to prioritize self-care and psychological support throughout the creative journey.

The personal nature of essay films and the vulnerability required to create them can be transformative for both the filmmaker and the audience. It is through this introspective and emotive process that powerful and resonant stories are told, challenging conventional narratives and offering unique perspectives on the human experience, but it can also take its toll on the psyche. And sometimes that toll can be too great.

“Truthfulness” in the Essay Film

In the essay film, personal subjectivity is an integral part of the experience. Film theorists Spence and Navarro (2011) note the major distinguishing factor between nonfiction and fiction is the question “Might it be lying?”⁸⁶ In non-fiction films the audience expects the world to be represented accurately, but it is important to recognize that documentaries and especially essay films present a particular truth rather than an absolute truth.

⁸⁵ Renov, *The subject of documentary* 17.

⁸⁶ Spence and Navarro, *Crafting truth : documentary form and meaning* 21.

Bill Nichols maintains that documentaries are “fictions with plots, characters, situations and events like any other... that like the constructed realities of fiction – that must be scrutinized and debated as part of the domain of signification ideology.”⁸⁷ There is no privileged access to reality, and documentaries employ various techniques and elements that are also found in fiction. Michael Renov states that nonfiction uses many “fictive elements”: the construction of character as ideal type; the use of poetic language, narration, or musical accompaniment to heighten emotional impact or create suspense; the deployment of embedded narratives or dramatic arcs; and the exaggeration of camera angles, camera distance, or editing rhythms.”⁸⁸ As a working filmmaker, I am well aware of these elements and choices that shape the work. Selecting phrases from a three-hour interview, framing the speaker in a particular way, editing the interview with specific images, and employing montage techniques all contribute to the presentation of a point of view. These decisions inevitably influence how the audience perceives the subject matter and the story being told. With a span of over two years of shooting, and a condensed final film duration of under one hour and a half, *BBC* was not a comprehensive and “true” representation of reality. The editing process inherently involved selecting and shaping footage to create a narrative that captured the essence of the story being told.

Alan Berliner’s essay film, *First Cousin, Once Removed*, served as a strong influence on this aspect of my research creation. Berliner documented his second uncle Edwin Hoenig’s experience with Alzheimer’s over a period of five years. The film’s narrative was constructed as a collage, and did not follow a linear structure, but maintained an emotional narrative logic that reflected the portrait of memory loss. Despite jumping in time, the film created an emotionally accurate depiction of the progression of dementia. Edwin Hoenig’s background as a renowned poet at Brown University added layers to the narrative of memory loss.

There are parallels between my portrayal of my birth mother Mary Margaret Cousins in *BBC* and Berliner’s approach to capturing his first cousin, Edwin Hoenig’s experience with Alzheimer’s in *First Cousin, Once Removed*. Alan Berliner intercut conversations with Edwin

⁸⁷ Nichols, *Representing reality : issues and concepts in documentary* 107.

⁸⁸ Renov, *The subject of documentary* 24.

Hoening, archival materials, and interviews with people connected to Hoening's life, including Berliner himself as a secondary protagonist in the film. *First Cousin, Once Removed* non-linear structure allowed the filmmaker to present Hoening at different stages of his Alzheimer's, creating a collage of memories and experiences. Berliner repeatedly, at different time intervals, spanning years, asked Hoening the question "What is memory?". He captured different responses as Hoening's mental acuity changed. He told Hoening, "I think a film about you will teach a lot of people what memory means".⁸⁹ Berliner edited the footage, highlighting the profound impact of memory loss when Hoening ultimately lost the ability to speak. Hoening's Alzheimer's progressed to such a state that he made the whistling sound of a bird as his only form of communication; the words of the lauded poet irretrievably lost. The viewer is aware that Berliner would never know how Hoening felt about *First Cousin, Once Removed*.

In *BBC* I too employed a repeated question asked at different intervals to all the participants, exploring the theme of searching for truth (ex: see Clip 3_ "Should we look for truth?"_01:49:00-03:28:00) . Just like Berliner, I was willing to ask difficult questions to authentically portray my experience. While I will never know Mary Margaret's feelings about *BBC*, my intention was to create a compelling and thought-provoking portrayal that resonated with viewers and deepened their understanding of adoption. Like Berliner, I was hoping that in making a film about a close family member and opening up my life, I would teach a lot of people about what adoption means in all its complexity. With "*BBC*" my answer to "truthfulness" in the essay film, like Berliner, is emotional honesty.

Conclusion

By delving into the intricacies of my own life, and the life and death of my birth mother, I embarked on a cathartic journey of self-discovery and understanding. *BBC*, though difficult, and raw, allowed me to emerge into the light of knowing. It was created to evoke a similar catharsis in the viewers who engage with my film. It aimed to convey an emotionally honest subjective experience that touched the spirit of the viewers, but also reconciled multiple perspectives without judging or silencing them.

⁸⁹ María del Rincón, Efrén Cuevas, and Marta Torregrosa, "The representation of personal memory in Alan Berliner's *First Cousin Once Removed*" *Studies in Documentary Film*. 12.1 (2018): 19.

I am reminded of Russian painter and art theorist Wassily Kandinsky's reflection on the purpose of art in his work:

The concept of "inner necessity" resonates with the idea that art should strive to touch the spirit and evoke deep emotional responses. The working of the inner necessity and, therefore, the development of art is an ever-advancing expression of the eternally objective in the temporary subjective.⁹⁰

Just as Kandinsky believed in the ultimate use of color and form as artistic perfection, the essay film seeks to achieve a similar sense of artistic perfection through its emotionally honest storytelling.

My method of "curating truth" in *BBC* was to build a memory of Mary Margaret Cousins through my employment of photography, footage shot, and sound, with a filmic tribute that allowed her dignity, while ensuring that her hard life and what she strove for was seen and recorded for posterity. While crafting *BBC*, I personally incorporated her into my memory – so my way of curating truth was to turn my birth mother, whom I never met, into an active memory.

BBC allowed me to delve into personal stories and experiences, rooted in the exploration of family, and to find a deeper understanding and connection using the methodology of the essay film. Any filmmaker making an essay film – in considering the broader implications – should navigate the fine line between sharing their story authentically and intruding upon the privacy of others. I learnt tremendously from that navigation.

Consent and open communication with family members and individuals featured are essential to ensure everyone's well-being and agency. It is necessary to find a balance in sharing traumatic events and ensuring mental health is not adversely affected. After undergoing this

⁹⁰ Wassily Kandinsky and Sadler, Michael T.H., *Concerning the spiritual in art*, First edition., ArtWorks (Boston: Dover Publications, 2006) 57.

research creation process, I believe that transparency should be approached with caution and an awareness of personal boundaries. The personal nature of *BBC* was a departure from my previous works as a filmmaker, and presented considerable challenges. It required me to confront and film my own traumatic grief, and it exposed the trauma that Mary Margaret and I experienced in our lives. Sharing the film with family members (new and old) and receiving their heartfelt response demonstrates to me this can be emotionally resonant.

The explorative nature of the essay film allowed me to discover the vastness that came before me, erasing the sense of solitude that I have carried since I can remember. As an adoptee, before I made *BBC*, I thought that my life started with me. I thought of my personal history as a sheer unbreakable wall that I could never see behind. When I finished *BBC*, I realized I was wrong. It wasn't a wall that was behind me, but a dam. That dam broke and out of it – in frightening torrents at times – flowed my identity. This has given me both a sense of perspective and a new strength, neither of which I ever imagined I would get the opportunity to experience.

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