

***Everybody Gets Sad: An Autoethnographic Research-Creation about
A Mother and A Daughter***

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A Thesis
In the Department
of
Communications Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Communication) at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

January 2020

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Everybody gets sad: an autoethnographic research-creation about a mother and a daughter

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This is a practice-based project that critically and creatively explores the figuration of the mother-daughter dyad through a situated feminist research-creation approach. This project understands research-creation as a knowledge-making practice, which interweaves critical theoretical analysis with creative processes of representation. This mode of knowledge-making enables both the production of an original video work as the centrepiece of the project, as well as a critical reflexive breakdown of the process of creation as part of a written component. Working from the interdisciplinary domain of communication and feminist media studies and drawing from a history of feminist film theory and video making, this thesis project engages with debates related to the writing and reading of gendered experience. This project contributes to a cultural history of representations of the mother-daughter dyad in and through self-reflexive film and video making. Specifically, this examination is put into practice through the production of a situated autoethnographic video of a mother-daughter relationship.

PREAMBLE

The following is a research-creation thesis which contains both written and audio-visual components. It is the recommendation of the author that you begin by reading the introduction and before moving on to Chapter 1 you watch the central creative object of this thesis entitled *Everybody Gets Sad* (see link in Appendix A). After watching the video you can move on to read the chapters of the thesis in their designated order. If at any time you wish to move directly to an unpacking of the film itself you can move to Chapter 3, where you will also find mention of 2 other rough cuts of the video (see links available in Appendix B & C). It is recommended that you watch the central video on a screen the size of a laptop (or larger) and use headphones when available. It is important to stress the fact that the video works (Appendices A, B, & C) are all unfinished and in-process creative objects. They are not stand alone pieces and must be understood within the situated context of this research-creation doctoral project (this point will be expanded on in Chapter 3).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my mother, Ivy, for participating in this experiment and for allowing me to write our story in the way I saw fit – however vulnerable that act was. This project would not have happened without the support and love from my friends and family who stuck by me when I tried to quit, many times. Key among these people are: Grace, Andrew, Lindsay, Teddy, Tracy, and Dorian (and Claudia Dorian’s mom!) – you are my fellow soldiers and you are powerful beyond words. Rachel, Jill, Amanda, and Katherine, thank you for watching cuts of my films as I flailed about in search of answers – your wisdom, guidance, and friendship was lifeblood for this project and me. Alison, Tia, and Trish you know that this never would have been completed without you – you literally saved me when I did not think I could go on – thanks for leading me towards the light when I didn’t think I’d ever find it again. Bubby, Lynn, Dad, and Josh - thank you for showing me what family means and for never leaving my side. Jeremy, thank you for your honesty, you turned me around when I didn’t think it was possible. Monika, thank you for helping me to see who I am and find the courage to stand up for my work in the face of resistance. Finally, I want to thank the generations who have come before me who have helped lay the groundwork for this project – this is for you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------------|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Beginning at the end: The Doctoral Defense (a presentation transcript)..... | 1 |
| Project Backstory: And now back to the Beginning..... | 8 |
| Thesis Questions & Structure..... | 10 |
| Like Water We Flow: A Note on Process and Story – Part I..... | 16 |
| Chapter 1 – Untangling the Mother-Child Dyad: An Interdisciplinary Lens..... | 20 |
| Representing Experience..... | 21 |
| The Mother-Child Dyad: Establishing the Frame..... | 24 |
| Psychoanalytic Perspectives: Freud & Lacan..... | 29 |
| Feminist Critiques & Interventions..... | 36 |
| Towards a Rethinking of Relationality..... | 41 |
| Chapter 2 – Feminist Methodologies & Queer Autoethnography..... | 47 |
| Feminist Standpoint Epistemologies..... | 48 |
| Situated Knowledges..... | 52 |
| Feminist Media Making: Mother Art(ists)..... | 55 |
| Documentary Film & Autoethnographic Praxis..... | 60 |
| Queer Territory..... | 69 |
| Chapter 3 - The object of creation: <i>Everybody Gets Sad</i>..... | 75 |
| Media Landscape..... | 76 |
| Production Materials & Timeline..... | 83 |
| Cutting Room Floor: <i>Smile Bitch</i> and <i>On Dreaming</i> | 85 |
| Emotional Outcomes: <i>Everybody Gets Sad</i> | 87 |
| What was it like to be the daughter of a recovering mother? (Parts 1-5)..... | 91 |
| Conclusion..... | 105 |
| Summary & Contributions..... | 105 |
| The Problem: Permission to Fail/Feel..... | 108 |
| And Like Tears We Fall: A Note on Process and Story – Part II..... | 113 |
| Mediography..... | 115 |
| Bibliography..... | 117 |
| Appendices..... | 126 |
| Appendix A: <i>Everybody Gets Sad</i> | 126 |
| Appendix B: <i>Smile Bitch</i> | 127 |
| Appendix C: <i>On Dreaming</i> | 128 |

INTRODUCTION

We are so used to speaking of life and death as if one had to avoid coming into contact with the other at all cost, as if it was necessary for them to keep their distance, hermetically separated from one another. But the reality is very different. – Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur

While it is perhaps unconventional to begin a dissertation with a transcript of the defense presentation, it is fitting for this project because this journey, as you will soon see, has been anything but conventional. As such, we start where this story ends.

Beginning at the end: The Doctoral Defense (a presentation transcript)

I never thought I would defend this thesis. It is true that at first I did, but after the defense of the proposal and increasingly over the course of the coming years the thought of finishing this, of being able to complete this project and let alone defend it, seemed to feel more and more impossible. The reason for this is rooted in the very core of the project I set out to do. The unspeakable, that is the problem. I set out to create a PhD about the representation of the unspeakable - that which remains unspoken. Specifically, I set out to represent the experience of the relationship between myself and my mother using experimental documentary and video-based autoethnographic methodologies rooted in a history of feminist and queer media making. To this very minute I can't even utter those words without feeling pangs of laughter and shame at the thought of this entire venture being real. But it is real and I am here, so thank you for engaging with our sadness and thank you for witnessing our pain.

To put it plainly, the trouble with rooting your work in that which you cannot speak, and that which historically cannot be spoken - is that it is hard to represent. And by hard I mean expanding on every side of itself, from the social, to the cultural, to the political, to the psychological, to the semiotic, to the embodied sensation of it - it lacks language and disciplined epistemological containers to allow it to be brought to light. What can be spoken then? That is where I had to begin since, to start, that was all I had. In the beginning there was Ivy and Vanessa, mother and daughter and something wasn't right, something was missing, something was not being said. As this was an academic venture I felt it to be necessary, rigorous, and also safest to begin this exploration by grounding it first at the level of theory.

For the purposes of this project that meant putting together an interdisciplinary theoretical lense that could grapple with both the form and the content of this adventure. Bound by a history of feminist documentary and film making I begin with the question of how to think through that problematic notion of experience - without wanting to engage in essentialism at any level of my work - instead wanting to open up new modes of thinking and making for feminist film theory. Careful to note the debates within feminist theory related to the difficulties of both writing and reading gendered experience, I align my goals with the task put forward by Theresa De Lauretis (84) whereby I am seeking, in my own situated way - to articulate the complicated relationship between experience and subjectivity and, to use her words, explore how - “how women become woman.” From the perspective of my work that query might be translated to an exploration, in text and on video, of the complicated ways in which the mother-daughter plot, or the Oedipal and heteronormative family narrative (among other interlocking stories), has come to shape the intersubjective relationship between Ivy and Vanessa.

As such, this project is about a particular gendered relation of kin - that of the mother-daughter relationship. Following the foundational work of Adrienne Rich (76) around the representation of the subject of the maternal I move to a brief unpacking of the role of desire in the master psychoanalytic paradigms put forward by Freud and Lacan, and I do this through the work of Lauren Berlant. I then use Marianne Hirsch’s work on the representation of the mother-daughter dyad to assist me in parsing through feminist revisions to those psychoanalytic paradigms. The reason that I set up this particular foundation of interdisciplinary thinking is to point to the ways in which both for the subject of the maternal and subsequently for the representation of the mother-child dyad there is a long, deep, and contested history of thinking that explores the bridges between the psychological and the socio-political meanings of those embodied experiences.

More to that point, the reason why the role of desire, as rooted in psychoanalytic thinking, is so interesting as a theoretical starting point for this project is that it offers a way of beginning to think about the ways in which gendered subjects orient themselves in the social world, and the complicated role the mother-child plot plays in psycho-social conditioning. From a critical feminist perspective, the unspeakable, begins to take shape here - in that it is the female subject in her role as mother and/or as daughter and soon to be mother - who remains tethered to the origin of both the proper functioning of the patriarchal structure as well as the signifier of the

that which cannot be spoken within it. The efforts that I touch on, all too briefly, through the work of French feminist psychoanalytic thinkers, is significant for my project because - in their unravelling of the wholeness of the symbolic, the unified ego and their expressions of the fluid, in-process, and relational nature of the female subject they open up modes of representation and meaning making for subjugated experiences. While I do not deny the essentialism that lurks below the surface of this history of feminist thinking it is invaluable in the development of oppositional modes of intellectual creation focused on the representation of gendered experience and specifically on the representation of the mother-daughter dyad.

Having begun my journey to the unspeakable from this curated theoretical landscape I turn to the next most safest and speakable terrain of discussion - that of the methodological underpinnings of this project. Stemming from the work of Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway, this project - by valuing and exploring my most intimate and vulnerable relationship - understands itself as a knowledge contribution that is highly rigorous in its commitment to a situated, embodied, relational, and reflexive creative research practice. It is concerned with the never-ending boundary negotiation that takes place with one's most intimate research subjects. Haraway asks, "How we become answerable for what we learn how to see?" In thinking about my efforts to represent the unspeakable this question bears enormous weight, as it is ultimately this point to which my work must return to if it is to hold true to its methodological and feminist roots. Thus on the one hand it was the task of this project to try and make speak a relationship which had existed in blaring silence up to that point, and on the other hand once the effort at making speak and bringing to light, through personal video making methods, succeeded, I would then have to be answerable for the experience I chose to see. This is a scary prospect when one does not know what they are looking for and they do not know what they will find. And I suppose it's all the more scary when it pertains to your own mother.

As a final layer of distance before engaging with my own experience I move through the collection of autoethnographic films and videos that paved the way for this thesis. Before I even understood what autoethnography was or experimental ethnography, or personal documentary, I saw Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite*. Before I understood why filmmakers used home movies to engage with their traumatic childhoods and to rework and fragment their own subjectivities, exploding the categories of identity and the legacies of oppression that bind them, before all that - I became obsessed with *Daughter Rite*. I frame the film this way because it's important to note

that I don't focus on this film because in combing through the literature and media it seemed like it would make an excellent comparable for my thesis work. Instead, I chose it because of how it made me feel the first time I saw it. Something about the way in which *Daughter Rite* engaged with "reality" and that which could not actually be spoken resonated with me. Through the anger, the shame, and their shared pain, I heard a silence that I also wanted to make speak. The fact that her "documentary film" is in fact a fiction of forgetting (to quote Catherine Russell) was inspiring to me, because I never trusted reality - at least not as it was captured on film, least of all in my home movies. The theoretical foundation and the methodological lens I set up are instrumental for a proper positioning of this research-creation project but it is Citron's rage, Akerman's sorrow, and Hatoum's monotonous fear, that I am able to access through their own showcasing of their legacies of pain (on film and video), that has truly paved the way for me to represent the experience of Ivy and Vanessa. It is they who have given me the courage to face my unspeakable.

The trouble with facing my story was that, echoing the problematic put forward by Haraway of "becoming answerable for what we learn how to see", I did not want to or was not ready to see what my story was when I first started this project. So what I did was start a film with the only stories I had. Inspired by the representational strategies put forward by the autoethnographic films that inspired me, I shot informal interviews with Ivy, I gave her the camera, I followed us around with the camera when we'd have our days together, I made a weird fake cooking show, I used my iphone when I had to, I collected all of Ivy's internet archive, and most of all I spent time with my old home movies. But none of that, none of those materials were the story. In and of themselves, what I shot and what I collected, collated, reviewed and categorized was just images and sounds waiting for me to find what I was looking for. What I found at first, unsurprisingly, was the frame that I had been given.

Smile Bitch, the first iteration of my creative object and the one I spent the most amount of time on, is the story of Ivy and Vanessa as Mother and Daughter in a family of funny women and charming and successful men. The family is the frame, albeit I'm never very clear on who is who, I'm not interested in having you understand the details, they are not important. What matters in this film is my anger. My anger at my mom for always being sad when I wanted her to be happy, my anger at my grandmother for never being honest about her sadness, my anger at my aunt for internalizing all of the shame she was raised with, and most importantly my anger

towards myself for feeling weighed down by a legacy of hilarious sad sacks and not knowing how to set myself free. I was looking to make speak Ivy and Vanessa and what came out was the making speak of our inability to be like them - like the Hollywood boys and men. We were always performers but we were never good enough, although for some reason we had to keep smiling. *Smile Bitch* is a macro first step to addressing my relationship with my mother - it's the closest I could go, because I didn't have the language to approach it any further. It was angry though, and nobody wanted an angry film because that wasn't nice, it wasn't processed, it was judgmental and it didn't seem fair to Ivy. My narration was raw and spiteful at times, like a teenager who felt misunderstood. It was all pretty embarrassing; it was all in the open, it all felt terrible.

What happened next was a series of attempts to back away from the autoethnographic and the documentary frame altogether. What I had learned from the editing process of *Smile Bitch* was that there was a possibility that my unspoken story may not be as pleasant as either I or anybody else had hoped. Don't get me wrong, I knew there was trauma at the root of all of this, I knew that our story was not a celebration of our joyous "womanly" inheritance. But I thought that somehow I could fix things. That first iteration was so angry in many ways because I was mad at myself for not being able to make her happy, because that was my role as daughter, I made everyone smile. So what I concluded at that point was that the materials I had, with their twisted roots in real life, were of no use to me because what was coming up was ugly - for me, for her, for everyone, and I couldn't bear it. My mother was in my life, is in my life, and so the negotiation of trying to maintain our pre approved performance in our weekly exchanges was proving more and more difficult, as I attempted to rip away at our smiling faces in my edit timeline. I tried fictionalizing our story, creating an alternate or hybrid reality through which to soften the blow of coming face to face with what I didn't want to see but that was unacceptable because - unlike an ordinary filmmaking venture, where one is free to allow the subject to guide the form of the piece itself - I had committed to a creative project that was highly disciplined, highly regulated, it had to be defended. This is a very important point to note about what this thesis project is, as a research creation contribution. This project, in its entirety, is evidence of the process of trying to do situated, vulnerable, personal creative video work within the bounds of the academy - never forget that. This is not a normal filmmaking practice. My search for the

unspoken is a regulated one, and that, I realized at this point in the process of creation, is an absolutely miserable thing.

Why so miserable? Because when you are looking for your truth, a truth that is tied to another, a truth that rests at the tip of your tongue but is mute, all you want is to get it out. And when you realize that your images and sounds are not making people happy you have to face the very unpleasant fact that maybe your unspoken is an ugly thing, maybe your truth is just not OK. And how then do you become answerable for that? How do you accept that? How do you negotiate that within the bounds of your research practice? I never would have made *Everybody Gets Sad* had this not been a doctoral project. Had I not been forced to remain within the research context that I set up, with my theoretical and methodological underpinnings, I never would have pushed through - and for that I am grateful. Well, now I am grateful, then I was very mad. However, what happened is that in the moment of realization where I had to recognize the limitations of my institutionalized making practice, I also had to realize the realities of my other contexts more broadly. To face the unspoken of Ivy and Vanessa now meant I had to look outside the family frame to understand her, my, our, story.

Looking backwards, *Everybody Gets Sad* is the logical next chapter after *Smile Bitch* - under the anger there is sadness and there is pain. This film is about making pain visible and the almost impossible task of doing that when you have inherited a legacy of performances that mask that. Our masks eat pain, in fact, they live on it. Internalized anguish and self-hatred makes for one hell of a comedian. I come from a legacy of very notable comedy writers, that's what *Smile Bitch* is about. In this iteration however, by focusing on Ivy and I and changing the frame from an Oedipal one to one of grief and loss something else emerges. Why grief? Because everything dies. Because Ivy and I have passed away along with the dreams that held us in place. Because in being forced to commit to this project and speak to the unspeakable using the autoethnographic frame, with time, there was nothing else that I could see. There was only sadness that emerged and a reluctant acceptance of my own continued reaching for a conclusion to a story that would ultimately kill me.

This film is about pain and love. It's about the complicated task of making space for pain in a legacy that has denied it. But where does our pain lie? What does our pain look like? And how have I told this story on video? The film, as you all have seen, is constructed based on the 5 parts of the grief process as stipulated by the Kubler Ross model for dealing with death and loss.

I do not use this model in any clinical way nor do I take it as fact in any scientific sense. These parts - denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance - present a kind of non linear and syncretic structure that allows for the kind of intersubjective undoing that this film is premised on. The mapping together of my mother-daughter plot and my inherited success plot as it pertains to the film industry is important for this work because it is at this nexus where our story takes shape. There are many overlapping maps of desire that could have structured our relationship but what I have chosen to make speak - what has emotional resonance for me at this time - pertains to the trajectory of performativity that we have been woven into and the complex and contradictory ways that we have navigated our way through it. The mediated nature of my past, present, and future with my mother is what made this film possible. I was, in many senses, drowning in content, ever since I was a little baby. Screens with pictures of me, of us, were something I grew up with and could not get away from. The proliferation of cell phone technologies and online video platforms has now come to mediate the world of Ivy and Vanessa once more, however, this time I'm not asked to smile or dance for the camera - this time I'm asked to reflect on healing and recovery for a Facebook group.

So then - "What was it like to be with a recovering mother?" - well, as a young woman who is crippled by the dream of becoming a successful Hollywood movie maker and simultaneously bound by a commitment to a critical feminist rejection of dominant modes of thinking and making - it's very painful. But it's also why I'm sitting here today presenting you all of this. The ambivalences, the contradictions, and the ugly feelings that serve to answer that question that my mother asks me make up *Everybody Gets Sad*. Addiction is not a simple thing. Our relationship to our own pain is not a simple thing, and I don't think this project provides any simple answers - or really any answers at all. What I have tried to do, by bringing together my filmmaking practice with my academic pursuits, is to provide you with my map, a map, for navigating the process through which I came to represent my intersubjective experience with my mother. The methods I used, including specifically the inclusion of a diaristic text within my written portion that addresses emotional outcomes of the filmmaking process, are all integral parts of the puzzle - however fluid it may be. The trouble with work like this (interdisciplinary, creative, personal) is that in its contingent dynamism, to borrow the term from Berlant and Warner, parts of this project are fragmented and "unfinished" in and of themselves, but, together

they form a whole. A whole that may come undone on close inspection, but perhaps that is exactly what it's supposed to do by keeping with its aforementioned frame.

By placing *Everybody Gets Sad* as well as the entirety of this thesis project within the queer archive of failure, and more specifically within the shadow feminism, Jack Halberstam (11) sets up, I aim not to co-opt the subjugated experiences of less privileged groups, and I aim not to claim any other position than my own. Nor do I put forward my map as a map that others should necessarily follow. My journey to this representation was very unpleasant. It was not fun, it was extremely painful. But what I learned from a confrontation with my unspeakable, through a research creation practice founded on autoethnographic video making, was that I could embrace the narrative of death and loss as a form of freedom from dominant roadmaps and in doing so release some of the pain that both Ivy and I have shared in our situated experience of mother and daughterhood.

To conclude I'm going to read a paragraph from my written text because I can't say it better than that. *I put forward this contribution as an argument for a creative research practice that comes from a place of the unknown, from a place of feeling, from personal experience that is uncomfortable, negative, and messy, and I will make the claim that it is through this kind of risky work that healing can happen. Healing, understood here, as the affective potential of pressing up against the tenderest parts of ourselves with the intended and intimate goal of an increased capacity to care. First and foremost, this is a capacity to care for and witness our own pain, and secondly it is a capacity to care for and witness the pain of others. For the purposes of this project, that would be understood through an intersubjective filmmaking encounter, both with my own pain as well as that of my own mother. This is an affective positioning (rooted in storytelling) that attempts to both acknowledge personal boundaries while at the same time highlighting the vulnerable bodies that are contained within and leak out of them.*

Project Backstory: And now back to the Beginning

In 2006 my video professor at the time, Martin Allor, screened a film for us entitled *Daughter Rite*, by Michelle Citron (1980). I was 21 at the time and I fell in love with the film. I fell in love in as much as I could not stop thinking about it. Something in it was unlike anything I had seen before – that was the kind of documentary I was interested in making. *Daughter Rite* is a short

personal film (53 mins.) about, among other things, the role of women within the American middle-class nuclear family structure at that time. What is arguably its most controversial aspect is its relationship to *the truth*. By appropriating from the representational practices of Cinéma Verité-style documentaries, Citron critiques and undermines the very “objective realities” upon which those films stand. Born of the second wave feminist movements of the 1970s, *Daughter Rite* is a striking example of a film that concerns itself with untangling the complicated ethics of “documentary” representation – from a specifically (white/upper middle-class) female perspective.

What then was so compelling about the film for me - having no direct relation to the cultural or political context that produced it? There are many ways that I could come at this question but the simplest answer has to do with the genre of filmmaking that Citron was working with – that of the home movie. I had been obsessed with my family’s home movie footage for years but had never known how to use it. Wanting to work in that uncomfortable place between the warmth of nostalgia and the nagging suspicion that things weren’t as they seemed, Citron’s film was inspiring. It was inspiring because documentary had never felt like the “artful representation of actuality” for me – I have never invested anything in “actuality” (Grierson & Hardy, 1971). My home movies have always seemed like some kind of Hollywood narrative that floats above of us, like a kind of mirror/mirage that blocks us from viewing the pain of our - often fraught - lived connections to each other. What seemed to always seep out of those videos for me - was the excess of guilt, anger, inappropriate joys, and resentment that they were trying so hard to contain. The confusing thing was that they made me happy – there was something comforting and seemingly necessary about their containment – their “family friendly” packaging. For *Daughter Rite* however, the home movie materials that formed it are anything but happy. The emotional shift that that film enables is a displacement of the nostalgia that is commonly associated, as echoed in my own experience, with those kinds of movies. Instead of friendly faces and warm family feelings we are faced with anger, resentment, and sadness – a curtain of shame that frames a confused and painful relationship to her mother.

The *home* aspect of “home movie” was what I consider to be the first thematic, if you can call it that, that I became preoccupied with as a filmmaker. It wasn’t just that “genre” of video, then, that piqued my interest, but it was how that kind of making enabled me to relate to those closest to me – those homes, with those people, that I spent my childhood in. Over the years,

those movies have made meaning out of my life experience. It is thus not surprising then that they would serve as a major video component for my thesis work and my ongoing exploration of matrilineal relations within my own family. Citron's film showed me that it was possible, from her perspective as a filmmaker, to speak to that troubled relationship to audio-visual "documentation" that I had been so concerned with. It also opened up a lineage of thinking around matrilineal relationships, and more generally, relationships between women, that has cast a shadow on my obsession with family and that precarious point in the line that I find myself in. Next in line for marriage. Next in line for babies. Next in line to (re)produce the blessed fruits of the heteronormative life cycle. The not-so-gentle tides of pressure from my mother and grandmother are eagerly awaiting the time when I will send them my very own home movies.

This thesis project represents my ultimate attempt at taking up, through the creation of my own filmmaking practice, that initial impetus that caught me almost fifteen years ago, the first time I saw *Daughter Rite*. Specifically, this was an impetus to develop a critical making practice that would allow me to address and represent a complex familial relationship among women – that of the mother-daughter dyad. The central motivation for this doctoral project thus comes down to wanting to explore the acts, the movements, the interchanges, and the silences that form *the process of communication* between my mother and I. More than that though, this work is about challenging myself to develop forms through which that communication can be represented, and thinking through how meaning and (inter)subjectivity is constructed in these processes. This motivation speaks to my own inability to find accessible and fitting storytelling structures through which to come to terms and make meaning from the experience of my family relations.

Thesis Questions & Structure

Following Citron and her groundbreaking feminist film *Daughter Rite*, this thesis project uses experimental documentary and autoethnography as a representational method in order to focus its frame on an in-depth look at a specific relationship between another mother and daughter - notably, between my mother (Ivy) and myself (Vanessa). The two separate but interrelated questions that structure the research-creation frame of this project are as follows: 1) What was it like to be the daughter of a recovering mother? And 2) How does one tell an intimate and

personal story if they don't have the representational means to speak to that experience? (Aka. How does one speak the unspeakable, in this case, using video making strategies? How does one do that publically? And how do they do it when it comes specifically to their most intimate other, their mother?). In order to address these questions, this project comes together at the intersection of documentary studies, feminist film theory, and feminist theories of experience - with a foundation built on critical feminist theory and feminist theories of media making. It is worth noting that the primary research question is one that was posed to me (the researcher/filmmaker) by my mother (the subject). This point will be explored further in Chapter 3.

The central creative component, entitled *Everybody Gets Sad*, is a 66 minute video which addresses the original prompt put forward by this thesis which was to produce an experimental autoethnography about the relationship with one's own mother. Question number 1 serves as the structuring principle for the film itself. Question number 2 highlights the central research contribution of the project, which lies at the level of process. More specifically, the process of personal storytelling and how one comes to narrate, represent and ultimately make meaning out of their own lives. Inspired by a history of experimental and autoethnographic film and video work from female identified authors seeking to represent their relationship to their mothers, this project follows in their footsteps, by contributing to an interdisciplinary collection of thinking and video making around the representation of a gendered relation of kin that remains buried and maligned within dominant histories of Western storytelling. The written component is divided into three chapters which guide the discussion and support the creative object through: a breakdown of an interdisciplinary and feminist history of the mother-daughter dyad as informed by psychoanalytic thinking (Chapter 1), an explication of its feminist methodological and media making foundations (Chapter 2), and a self-reflexive unpacking of the making process behind the central video object (Chapter 3).

This project is thus a contribution at the level of research in its interdisciplinary and situated unpacking of *the process* of personal feminist video making focused around the representation of the mother-daughter dyad; and it is a creative contribution to the constellation of media references that have shaped the feminist history and landscape that enabled it. Here, I am specifically referencing such films and videos as *Daughter Rite* (Citron, 1980), *Measures of Distance* (Hatoum, 1988), *Suburban Queen / Delirium* (Faber, 1985 / 1993), *News From Home / No Home Movie* (Akerman, 1977 / 2016), *The Body Beautiful* (Onwurah, 1991), *Stories We Tell*

(Polley, 2012), and *Cameraperson* (Johnson, 2016) (to be explored further in Chapter 3). While these films differ aesthetically and in terms of the specific subject matter or issues which bind their narratives (whether that be: sexuality and sexual identity, embodiment and beauty standards, diasporic and transnational identity, class and privilege, race, gender norms, sexual trauma, historical trauma, aging, mental illness, death, memory, mobility, family structures, and the documentary filmmaking process itself), I chose to group them for my purposes because they all express these issues through an experimental autoethnographic form structured around the mother-daughter dyad. In all these cases it is the film or video maker who is the daughter attempting to speak to their mother, including them in the process of representation in one way or another, so as to shift a familial legacy, that while bound not only by gender – is handed down through a problematic matrilineal relation. Problematic not in any simple sense of the term, but it is best understood as an intersubjective undoing, that involves the messy process of simultaneously taking down and bringing up ways of relating and making meaning out of ones most complicated relationship.

Chapter 1 approaches the feminist problematic of representing gendered experience and authorship through the work of Annette Kuhn (1994) and Janet Staiger (2003) from within the terrain of documentary and film studies. From there, it engages with the work of Theresa de Lauretis (1984/87), Joan Wallach Scott (1991), and Shari Stone-Mediatore (1998) to create the critical feminist frame in which it understands and situates the complicated relationship between experience and subjectivity. This chapter then uses the work of Adrienne Rich (1976), Marianne Hirsch (1981), and Lisa Baraister (2009), among others, to ground a contemporary discussion of the difficulties related to the representation of motherhood and maternal experience. In order to bridge the complex relationship between the psychological and the social aspects of motherhood elaborated on by the above theorists, this discussion gives way to a brief unpacking of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic underpinnings of the mother-child dyad more generally. Focusing specifically on critical and creative feminist revisions of psychoanalytic understandings of the mother-child plot, the chapter follows the work of Hirsch who divides the field into the American (Jessica Benjamin, Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein) and European (Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva) schools of feminist psychological and psychoanalytic thinking. While this terrain is broad in scope, for the purposes of this project, the focus is on the ways in which critical feminist thinking and making on the mother-child dyad have, in reaction

to a history of modernist thinking, led to practices of relationality and understandings of female subjecthood as *multiple*, *fluid*, and *in-process*. Using the work of Waldman & Walker (1999), Alisa Lebow (2008), and Michael Renov (2004), among others, this chapter then returns to documentary studies highlighting the parallel moves within the field to question hegemonic truths, the stability of the unified self, and what constitutes objective reality. Finally, this chapter continues to draw interdisciplinary pathways to thinking and making the representation of gendered experience around the mother-daughter dyad, by concluding with a brief look at the history of autobiographical writing through the work of Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson (2001) and Annette Kuhn's "memory work" (2002). The purpose of Chapter 1 is to explore the connections between a history of sociological and psychoanalytic work on the mother-child plot and the ways in which that plot has been reworked by feminist thinkers and makers to question the very *experience* of that story through the representation of their complex subjecthoods.

Chapter 2 lays out the methodological pathway within feminist research and making practices that grounds this research-creation project. Beginning with the work of Sandra Harding (1987) and Donna Haraway (1988) a discussion is set up surrounding what makes for "good" feminist research. Guided by cultural theorist Andrea Liss (2009), and in an effort to exemplify these aforementioned feminist research practices, this chapter traces a history of traditions in feminist media making that stems from early (70s) (mother)artists such as Elaine Reichek (1975-76), Sherry Miner & Ernest Larsen (1983), Susan Hiller (1979), and Laura Mulvey & Peter Wollen (1977), whose interdisciplinary work, I argue, takes up many of the research imperatives set up by Harding and Haraway. Mary Kelly's famous and contested installation *Post Partum Document* (1973-79) is of particular note in regards to its ability to challenge dominant conceptions of motherhood and resignify the mother-child relationship through rigorous autobiographical and relational creative practices. Considering the work of the above artists and thinkers, and building off of Chapter 1, this chapter moves from a broader unpacking of feminist media making traditions to return specifically to a lineage of feminist documentary and experimental autoethnographic filmmaking. The concept of the *reflexive interval* from postcolonial and documentary maker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1991) is of particular importance for this project as it describes the self-reflexive, relational, and risky conceptual making frame from which this work emerges. Using the work of Catherine Russell (1999), Julia Lesage (1999), Adams & Jones (2008), and Jack Halberstam (2011), I move from film theory

into queer territory and unpack the ways in which these documentary and autoethnographic practices enable representations of subjective experience that break with hegemonic traditions and allow for complex, entangled, and embodied expressions of self (however fragmented that self may be). In keeping with the problematic of this thesis (ie. *how to speak the unspeakable?*), and more specifically how to represent the mother-daughter dyad, this chapter looks at some of the methods employed by experimental autoethnographic filmmakers, like Michelle Citron (1980) and Richard Fung (1990), who have created personal video work on their relationship with their mother. The work of Zimmerman and Ishizuka (2008) is of particular importance when unpacking the use of home movies within this genre of filmmaking. Ultimately, this thesis is about the complex process of representing experience, from the perspective of a situated and gendered familial relation, and as such it is the goal of this chapter to set up a frame for the methodological and conceptual history that has enabled its research-creation (thinking-making) process.

Most importantly, it is not the goal of this project to essentialize any binary female or male identity or to view gender as separate from other interlocking categories that situate one's lived experience. Nor is it the goal of this project to essentialize the subject of the mother or daughter, or make any foundational claims regarding the nature of the relationship between these two subject positions. However, it is from a specific and situated gendered *familial story* that this project emerges and it is directly inspired by a history of experimental video representations that seek to work through that intersubjective bond. It is thus useful to frame this project as the coming together of two streams. On the one hand there is making (creative process) and on the other there is thinking (academic research), and they come together to form a research-creation framework. Stream number one is a theoretical foundation that begins with the problematic of how to represent and think through gendered experience and focuses the question around feminist theories of experience and critical thinking and making around the intersubjective mother-daughter plot. Stream number two is the pathway that traces a line from early feminist methodologies to documentary and experimental autoethnography and ultimately finds itself in the risky and vulnerable filmmaking space that this project situates itself within. Together these streams help solidify the relational and practice-based current upon which this project is founded. This is a fluid foundation that stems from a specific history of feminist thinking and video making which seeks to develop critical narrative strategies through which to speak the

unspeakable – outside of and against dominant ideologies and narrative structures which silence it.

Chapter 3 will focus in on the central contribution of this thesis and will unpack the making process behind the main autoethnographic video production - *Everybody Gets Sad*. It will begin by setting up the frame of films that structure the media landscape from which it comes, highlighting the formal strategies that shape many of these experimental videos and distinguish them from other more popular documentaries about parent-child relationships. In doing so, this chapter will unpack the methods that form its narrative structure as well as the ways in which these methods took shape over the course of the production process. From there, the chapter will appropriate from the representational strategies used within the traditions of autoethnography that frame it and will move to a diaristic and self-reflexive breakdown of the construction of *EGS*, which will interweave an explanation of the creative process with an autoethnographic through line that attempts to situate the reader in the parallel lived experience that gave way to its making. In other words, as a reader you will be asked to engage with the emotional outcomes and tensions which gave way to this project. I have chosen to represent the filmmaking process in this way because, from my perspective as the filmmaker, it provides the most honest viewpoint through which to understand the development of the tone and structure of the film, as well for the ultimate conclusion in which I ground this thesis work. It is thus a goal of this project and my research-creation practice to value and represent the messy, uncomfortable, and painful emotional core of *EGS* as an integral component of the filmmaking process. This chapter will also detail the elements of the process that were left *on the cutting room floor* and will speak to the two other rough-cut versions that were created (not to mention the many attempts at a fictional or hybrid version). The purpose of this chapter is to provide an account and reflection of the making process behind the central creative object of this thesis, and in doing so, to specifically highlight the productive potential of the difficult feelings (read: sadness) at the core of this research-creation work.

This thesis will conclude with a reflection on failure through the work of queer theorist Jack Halberstam (2011). I have chosen to situate this project, and more specifically the final work-in-progress version of *Everybody Gets Sad*, alongside his queer archive of failure and the shadow feminisms that he discusses through the work of such controversial writers as Valerie Solanas (1968), Jamaica Kincaid (1997), and Elfriede Jelinek (1983), to name a few. In doing so,

this thesis argues for the destruction and the unravelling of the stories that bind us. In employing the anti-social feminist frame developed by Halberstam in relation to the feminist theory and media making traditions which ground this project, I, like the feminist writers mentioned above, seek to point to the maps of desire and the dominant logics that encourage the representation of certain subjectivities over others. In doing so, I attempt to reject (or at least complicate) the stories that I've been written into, along with the history of voices that echo failure from the "antisocial" margins.¹ I make the claim that there is a freedom, a different worldview, for both myself and her (the mother), that opens up when we can admit failure, instead of trying to keep up and keep smiling. This is a "freedom" that is not happy or joyful all of the time, or a lot of the time, but that is the cost of telling different stories, of seeing what could happen when one tries to speak to what remains unspoken – you often may not like what you find when you get there. But this is a letting go for both of us, or at least it's a letting go that acknowledges an interconnectedness, as it is born of an intersubjective experience, and as such the process through which I make meaning of it is bound to another. Ultimately, in keeping with its methodological roots, it has remained deeply embodied and situated in a self-reflexive and relational creative process. In doing this it has allowed me (the filmmaker, researcher, daughter) to acknowledge my responsibility to my mother, as well as to an interconnectedness more broadly, and it has allowed me to do this as starting from a personal and complex Oedipal legacy to which I am joined, through another, in our privilege and our subjugation.

Like Water We Flow: A Note on Process & Story

Images of bodies of water flow through *Everybody Gets Sad* but they are never named. There are literal currents that structure the film but you'd never know it if you weren't paying attention. I did not initially intend for this. It's as if water leaked its way into the film in the same way that it has come to found my understanding of this research-creation process. A cleansing agent and also an agent of death - water is the unknown. Tranquil and glistening on the surface yet ice cold and rocky below. When you walk into the ocean or you jump into the lake, in waters unfamiliar, there is always a certain amount of calculated risk you take, as you can never be sure what you

¹ In refusing the stories that I am written into I also acknowledge my own complicity in the subjugation of others through the entangled plots that I live out in this privileged negotiation of self (and other).

will encounter once you are submerged. As a metaphor within the film for the shifting and misleading terrains for the performances of my own relationship to my mother, water continues out of frame, to symbolize the necessary element in this research-creation process that requires a letting go and a release of control. In joining with the flow of water, in facing the current of another, you do not know where you will go or how you will feel when you get there. To speak with my mother, to tell this story, to accomplish this thesis project, required me to flow. But to learn to flow is another thing, to learn not to struggle against the tides, and to accept where I'm being taken is an entirely new venture. It is here where pain comes in, where sadness prevails, and where emotional outcomes become the only map I have to show you how I wrote our story. *EGS*, and the filmmaking process that enabled it, is about learning to feel feelings when you are under water, because that is how both Ivy and I have gotten here. When you cannot see and you cannot speak your final option is to feel.

In accordance with the above, there are two thematic waves that came to shape the central story of *Everybody Gets Sad*. On the one hand there is a discourse around narratives of "success" linked specifically to creative production, whether that be within the film industry or as a professional writer or artist. There has always been a nagging discourse between Ivy and I, inspired likely by the many successful and creative men in my family, that struggled with what it meant to accomplish your dreams, and how those dreams related to legacies of women's roles within my family. On the other hand there is a joining narrative that is about addiction and its partner plot of recovery. It is important for the purposes of a proper situating of the work for me to highlight and briefly explain these two currents, as they are central to the plot(s) that hold Ivy and Vanessa together. As such, while the main video object is grounded in a lot of ways in discourse around addiction and recovery, it is not a contribution to disciplines or formal thinking centered on the subjects. Again, the goal is the *representation of experience* – success plots and narratives around addiction and recovery thus being integral stories in the complex network of meanings that shape the mother-daughter relationship which I have aimed to make speak. The film begins however with one of my central research questions as Ivy asks me "What it was like to be the daughter of a recovering mother?" That question became my research question, and the motivating push for the film itself, once I realized that that was the experience I was trying to speak to – or that that was what *she* was trying to make me speak. Without having the proper language to directly answer that question, *EGS*, and this thesis as a whole, is my response.

Once again, it is important to remember that these thematic undercurrents that make up our story were not articulated at the outset of this project. While I was aware that they were ones among many which shaped my mother and I, it was only at a superficial level, an unexamined level, that I was conscious of these plots. The representational practice of experimental autoethnography – the act of personal video making – was the research practice which forced a confrontation with the truth of my own experience, as understood through my relationship to my mother. Thus, unlike work that sets out to tell a particular story, I was setting out to find mine (ours), because the ones I had been given didn't sit too well with me. What this foregrounds is *the risk of not knowing* what you will find when you get there. This is a creative research practice that is all the more complicated when the risk is placed upon one's most intimate relationship – one that, up to that point, had wished to remain silent. This forces the work to *strain* the limiting categories which structure it – the “I” of the researcher/video-maker, the “dutiful daughter”, the “caring mother”, their “Jewish humor”, their “white privilege”, their “heteronormative” practices, and the academic “rigor” which founds this “creative” endeavour. These labels and indicators of relations of power are not ignored, as if their material/discursive effects are not real, instead through the process of video-making I-researcher/video-maker constantly question the clarity, satisfaction, and innocence of coherent results, stable selves, and objective truths, in exchange for the creative opportunity to address and question my most intimate other in the most public and institutional of places.

Thus I put forward this contribution as an argument for a creative research practice that comes from a place of the *unknown*, from a place of *feeling*, from *personal experience* that is *uncomfortable, negative, and messy*, and I will make the claim that it is through this kind of risky work that *healing* can happen. Healing, understood here, as the affective potential of pressing up against the tenderest parts of ourselves with the intended and intimate goal of an increased capacity to care. First and foremost, this is a capacity to care for and witness our own pain, and secondly it is a capacity to care for and witness the pain of others. For the purposes of this project, that would be understood through an intersubjective filmmaking encounter, both with my own pain as well as that of my own mother. This is an affective positioning (rooted in storytelling) that attempts to both acknowledge personal boundaries while at the same time highlighting the vulnerable bodies that are contained within and leak out of them.

What I will argue is that there is much to be gained from the perspective of practice when artistic creation, and more specifically film and video making, is tied to an academic research project (ie. making that is disciplined by histories of thinking). It will be made clear as you make your way through the coming chapters, and engage with the creative object itself, that this was not an easy venture or even a pleasant one, giving way to break ups, breakdowns, breakthroughs, and generally breaking apart. The task that was put forward at the start of this project was to find the language, specifically a video language, to represent a relationship, a story, that I did not have the means to. There was *no story I wanted to tell*, or at least I was unaware of the plots that lurked below the surface. There was really just a knowing that something was not being said, and as an aspiring documentary filmmaker I knew I had to say it, to make speak what had only existed in silence up to that point. As a doctoral student, I was invested in critical theory and unpacking the sticky feminist project of how to represent experience and understand gendered subjecthood, among other interlocking issues of identity, that position bodies within a social order. As such, as a storyteller obsessed with documentary film and determined to make peace with a growing frustration with representations of *the real*, I chose to unpack my most problematic, intimate, and unspeakable story. Most importantly though, it is necessary to note that this was a creative project set within the bounds of an academic research context – I did not simply chose to make a film about my relationship with my mother, I chose to make that film for a PhD project.

CHAPTER 1

Untangling the Mother-Child Dyad: An Interdisciplinary Lens

But we have never, never spoken to each other. And such an abyss now separates us that I never leave you whole, for I am always held back in your womb. Shrouded in shadow. Captives of our confinement. And the one doesn't stir without the other. But we do not move together. When the one of us comes into the world, the other goes underground. When the one carries life, the other dies. And what I wanted from you, Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive. - Luce Irigaray

For Marianne Hirsch (1981), “Any full study of mother-daughter relationships, in whatever field, is by definition both feminist and interdisciplinary” (p. 202). For her, any study of “women in patriarchal culture” requires the acknowledgment of the role of women as *mothers* and *daughters* while taking into consideration the larger historical, social, political and economic structures and institutions in which this dyad is figured. Working with this interdisciplinary landscape, this chapter will trace the bodies of thinking that found (and confound) this thesis project by exploring the ways in which the mother-child relation is integral to the formation of subjectivity (of the subject), as well as to the formation of sociality (of the subject’s position in and relationship to the external world, i.e. to the social formations and ideological institutions that underpin it). I will also acknowledge both the limitations and the possibilities of working with this complex and gendered dyad by structuring this discussion around the work of Lauren Berlant (2012), with her explanation of psychoanalytic object desires, and then moving towards the openings around maternal subjectivity offered up by Lisa Baraister (2009).

Along with Hirsch, and many of the other thinkers that this thesis project draws on, I utilize psychoanalytic structures for their usefulness in understanding “[...] femininity as culturally constructed and internalized by individual female subjects” (p. 11). It is also useful for thinking through the relationship between “family structures” and “plot or narrative structures,” which is precisely the place which this project finds itself in – trying to develop the narrative strategies through which to speak to a familial structure which it has struggled to develop the means to. Along with Hirsch however, this thesis acknowledges the limitations of a psychoanalytic framework, as it aims to create “[...] a space in which maternal subjectivities could be articulated and for the means of politicizing the psychological and the familial; both of these goals [being in] conflict with some basic psychoanalytic assumptions” (p. 11).

I will begin, by situating the project within a theoretical frame of critical feminist thinking focused on the *representation of experience* – as that is the object of this project. While the major focus of this chapter is to lay out a brief and limited history of thinking around the

mother-child dyad, the purpose of this is to establish a foundation for my own thinking and making practice regarding the representation of that experience. The ultimate goal here is to move through this history towards an exploration of feminist representations of experience and, more specifically, an engagement with the practice of *relationality* within feminist documentary filmmaking.

Representing Experience

Situated within the terrain of feminist documentary and experimental autoethnography, this creative research project takes up Annette Kuhn's (1994) call to the future of feminist film theory. In the postscript, entitled "Bent on Deconstruction," to the new edition of her classic book *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* Kuhn states that one of the underdeveloped and important territories for feminist film theory is in the direction of that tricky notion of *experience*. It is tricky because once one begins to unpack it either for the spectator or the "author" (contested terrains in feminist film theory), the "specter of essentialism" which haunts the discipline begins to rear its head. Without wanting to essentialize *women's* experience, or a *daughter's* experience, or a *mother's* experience - or even reinstating the authority of the knowing author - this project takes up as object, my (as researcher-video maker) most intimate experience with the goal of opening up (instead of freezing and shutting down) ways of thinking and making for a future of feminist film theory and practice.

Considering the above goal, this thesis employs Janet Staiger's (2003) notion of authorship as *technique of the self* (understood within a history of approaches to authorship). For Staiger, the study of authorship - an approach to "looking" at film texts - is a mode of analysis concerned with the question of *causality*. Her approach, founded on Foucault's later work on power and ethics, aims at restoring, "a revised conception of agency which comes from speech-act propositions or poststructuralism" (p. 50). Staiger states that, "the point is to rescue the expression of the self as viable, if contingent, act - a potent one with real effects" (p. 49). In this approach, the author is, "[...] reconceptualized as a subject having an ability to act as a conscious analyzer of the functionality of citations in historical moments" (p. 49). This historical subject is not a coherent autonomous self however, capable of producing clear and unified messages, "yet the message is produced from circumstances in which the individual conceives a self as able to

act” (p. 50). The important thing to recognize in this approach to authorship is the value that is placed on the act of self-expression (of the author) as that which has effects. The self understood here, not as unified or whole, but as nonetheless capable of active expression. The agency of the author in this case is developed through chosen performatives – performatives understood as “a citation of authoring.”² Writing the autoethnographic object of the mother-daughter relationship between Ivy and Vanessa can be seen then, from the perspective of Staiger’s approach to authorship, as a *technique of the self* – a working-through and unpacking of this intersubjective bond through a performative video production *as* doctoral thesis.

In keeping with this trajectory of thinking and making around gendered experience (stemming from a focus on the mother-child dyad) I underscore the work of Joan Wallach Scott (1991), Teresa de Lauretis (1984/87), and Shari Stone-Mediatore (1998), as helpful interlocutors for situating this project specifically in relation to feminist debates surrounding theories of experience. While de Lauretis’ notion of experience as *a process by which subjectivity is constructed* remains the foundation upon which this thesis addresses these debates, it is important to go further and acknowledge the complexities at play in this discussion.

Scott (1991) takes a feminist historiographic approach and explores the dangers of developing histories of difference based on categories of “experience” (For example: a gendered and/or racialized experience, a “woman’s” or a “black man’s” experience). For Scott, this tendency within the history of feminist theory itself has naturalized the identities of those being documented (p. 777). This ignores many central questions “about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured, about language (or discourse), and history [...]” (p. 777). In other words, by taking experience itself as evidence one does not call into question the structures of meaning that go into shaping it – thus *reproducing the terms of the system*. Scott calls attention to the importance of historicizing “the category of experience” which has been called on as explanatory evidence, within the practice of writing history, to “reinstate foundationalist principals.” For Scott, following the work of de Lauretis, the subject is “constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event (it doesn’t happen outside established meanings)” - but it is not fixed since

² Along with Foucault, Staiger uses Butler’s “extension of J. L. Austin’s speech-act theory” to theorize her understanding of authorship as *technique of the self*. (p. 50) As Staiger explains, “[...] all authoring statements by a subject are part of the subject’s authorship and constitute the technique of that self. What an author *is*, is the repetition of statements.” (p. 51) This is an understanding of authorship as repetition - as performative citationality.

discourse is “shared” and as such, “experience is collective as well as individual” (p. 793). For Scott, the feminist historiographic project becomes one of historicizing “the terms by which experience is represented” (p. 795). As such, and following Scott, this is a project that does not assume a clear link between “words” and “things” (p. 793).

In *Semiotics and Experience*, de Lauretis’ traces through a history of work in semiotics in order to articulate the relationship between experience and subjectivity. She looks at the role of semiosis in relation to “the subjective” and “the social” aspects of meaning production and how this relates to the meaning of (gendered) experience.³ More simply put, she is looking to understand the “relation of meaning production to experience,” or “how women become woman” (p. 186). To do this, she appropriates the notion of “habit” from Eco and Peirce. To have acquired a “habit” means that one acts according to a “prescription given by a sign” – this is both a “result” and a “rule” (p. 175). Her final claims position the role of feminist theory as that which can be found, “in that political, theoretical, self-analyzing practice by which the relations of the subject in social reality can be rearticulated from the historical experience of women” (p. 186). This however, does not imply a naturalization of “women’s experience.” Instead, it is the act of “(self-)analyzing” that experience (in the production of the habit and its deconstruction) that is itself political and potentially one of the major goals of a feminist praxis.

Along with the historiographic work of Scott, and “process”- driven definition supplied by de Lauretis, I intend to align this project with the “Mohantian” (transnational) notion of experience that Stone-Mediatore expresses. She states that,

If an empiricist perspective allows readers to address these texts [representing “experience”] only to collect data within given narrative paradigms, Scott’s [poststructuralist] approach is limited to authoritatively analyzing those paradigms. By contrast, a reading informed by a Mohantian notion of experience can attend to the relations between the text and the reader’s own experience and can thereby hear the text’s call to rethink the stories we tell of our own worlds. (p. 129)

A “Mohantian” notion of experience refers to the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, the noted feminist theorist specializing in transnational and postcolonial studies. For Mohanty

³ Peirce defines semiosis as the “process by which a culture produces signs and/or attributes meanings to signs.” (De Lauretis 1984, p. 167)

(2003), a feminist politics, if it is to acknowledge the challenges imposed by transnational and postcolonial critique, must be “[...] based on the specificity of our historical and cultural locations and our common contexts of struggle” (p. 107). This speaks to the need to work against “unifying” feminist solidarity politics that tend to erase issues of class and race in favor of a focus on gender. In the above quote, Stone-Mediatore is addressing the shift that this “Mohantian” notion of experience presents in relation to both the empiricist position (which is rigorously critiqued by Scott for among other things ignoring historical and socio-political context), and Scott’s (1991) poststructuralist position (which for Stone-Mediatore is limited by its reliance on discursive textual analysis).⁴ This understanding is important to this project because it points to the complex issues related to both the writing of and reading of personal experience narratives/stories. Whereas de Lauretis’ definition addresses how one might understand their (gendered) experience (as a process that constructs the subject - not as a coherent sense world that a coherent subject absorbs), Stone-Mediatore is pointing to the historical debates around how to read and interpret text documents of lived experience. Her “call to rethink the stories we tell of our own worlds” is precisely the impetus for this creative research. Or, put another way, this thesis project is focused on the development of those “oppositional [kinds of] speaking and writing,” which can, “help us to discern contradictions in our own experience [...]” (Stone-Mediatore, p. 131).

I will now move towards the relationship that is at the centre of the story that this thesis project seeks to tell – that is, the untangling of the mother-daughter dyad. However, before turning to the situated and embodied process of my own representation of experience it is necessary to outline the history of thinking and psychoanalytic storytelling that has informed this project’s research-creation frame.

The Mother-Child Dyad: Establishing the Frame

Although there has been an increase in work done on the position and subject of the maternal across disciplines since the mid to late seventies it is important to acknowledge that these investigations and critical (often creative) interventions are something that have not been around

⁴ Here I am not referring to “process philosophy,” a term associated with the work of Henri Bergson and Deleuze and Guattari.

for a long time (and the subject has gained more traction in certain fields over others, predominantly getting attention in the domains of: psychoanalysis, feminist studies, and literary theory). It has been less than 50 years since the publication of *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich's (1976) seminal text outlining a dualistic conception of motherhood as both *institution* and *experience*, and since then while the "silence" that she speaks of has gained many strong voices – the project of speaking of the mother and the goal of getting the maternal subject to speak have remained both incredibly complicated and taboo.⁵ Rich delineates two meanings of motherhood each one "superimposed" on the other. She describes them as, "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential-and all women- shall remain under male control" (p. 13). I come to this research as a daughter with a mother (actually with several mothers) but I am not a mother currently. While this may seem like a trivial point, irrelevant to my critical inquiry, it is important to note the place from which my desire emerges. There is a deep kernel of frustration, fear, love and intrigue that motivates this investigation and incites a creative practice, and it is the very figurations of the mother-child dyad that uphold (and tear down) my frustrations, while inspiring the theory-practice framework that founds it.

Motherhood - unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism - has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism. My individual seemingly private pains as a mother, the individual, seemingly private pains of mothers around me and before me, whatever our class or color, the regulation of women's reproductive power by men in every totalitarian system and every socialist revolution, the legal and technical control by men of contraception, fertility, abortion, obstetrics, gynaecology, and extra uterine reproductive experiments - all are essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers. (Rich, p.33-34)

Beginning with an extensive quote from the work of Adrienne Rich seemed like the most productive way of entering a discussion that itself has no properly understood means of access. What this passage points to are the innumerable ways, both institutional and experiential, in which motherhood maintains its essential contradiction – as that which is unspoken

⁵ In her book, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, Andrea Liss (2009) addresses this very difficulty of thinking and representing the maternal subject. Her work seeks to break through what she calls the "[...] taboo against thinking maternal bodies and minds." (p. xix)

(“unmentioned”), while simultaneously being heavily regulated and controlled by a set of complex discursive ideologies and material practices which work to secure the impossibility of the female subject (“the patriarchal system”). From this point of critical confusion come the assumptions which ground normative Western conceptions of motherhood. These include beliefs such as: “[...] a natural mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children,” or the notions that, “[...] isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is and should be, quite literally selfless; [and] that children and mothers are the “causes” of each other’s suffering” (p. 22-23). For Rich, these assumptions, (enacted on a daily basis through the *proper* functioning of both public and private institutions) perpetuate what she describes as the dual role of women within “[...] patriarchal mythology, dream-symbolism, theology, and language” (p. 34).

This duality is composed of, on the one hand, the idea that, “the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination [...]” and opposite this, “[...] as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing” (p. 34). From these two subject positions comes the final stitching together of the female (the devilish lady and the angelic mother).⁶ Here, Rich is careful to emphasize the fact that, in different ways, “These two ideas [become] deeply internalized in women [...]” (p. 34). It is precisely at this moment where one is able to see the importance and slipperiness of speaking of both the experience and the institution of motherhood. The result being, that the assumptions which ground motherhood as ideology support and are maintained by public and private material practices, policies, and institutions which further the very real yet simultaneously impossible concept of *maternal experience*. This leaves “women” in a split position, with a looming “destiny”, and the task of, in one way or another, battling their own internalized discourses of oppression.

Rich goes on to explain the complementary institution of heterosexuality which works to support the many assumptions surrounding the normative conceptions of motherhood listed above. In her chapter on the relationship between mothers and daughters Rich explains that,

Institutionalized heterosexuality and institutionalized motherhood demand that the girl-child transfer those first feelings of dependency, eroticism, mutuality,

⁶ The “negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers” is made apparent by Rich by the way in which the female subject is inherently both mother angel and devil woman – as such to be a non mother is to refuse a central tenant of her formation as subject, it is to refuse her “destiny.” (p. 34)

from her first woman to a man, if she is to become what is defined as a “normal” woman – that is, a woman whose most intense psychic and physical energies are directed towards men. (p. 219)

In a footnote to this point however, Rich is clear to separate, as in the case of motherhood, the distinction between institutional heterosexuality “with its social rewards and punishments” and the experience of heterosexual desire between two individual people “freely chosen and lived” (p. 219). I have an inclination here to stress the philosophical and psychoanalytic complications that arise when trying to untangle the difference between unique and “free” heterosexual ‘romantic love’ and the institutionalized heterosexuality which appears to found it – both psychically and socially. The complexity of the maternal position is further complicated when Rich explains that she “[...] was effectively alienated from [her] real body and [her] real spirit by the institution- not the fact- of motherhood” (p. 39). It would seem though that it is precisely at this point – where experience meets institution – that things get all the more complicated. As Rich acknowledges herself, there is an internalization of these contradictory discourses which feed into the very experience of ones own ‘body’ and ‘spirit’. It is at this intersection (between the subject as experience, and the social as institution) that psychoanalytic work offers it most fruitful contributions.

While *Of Woman Born* stands perhaps problematically next to some of the work that will be discussed later in this chapter, it is nonetheless critical for my purposes in three significant ways. The first being its methodological approach, more specifically its interweaving of a first-person narrative through the text in the form of journal entries.⁷ This is a textual practice that is used to varying degrees with varying purposes within feminist scholarship but which plays a central role in much of the work on the maternal, from Mary Kelly’s six part mixed media installation turned book *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979) to Lisa Baraister’s process of chasing everyday interruptions in her contemporary book *Maternal Encounters* (2009). The second factor is its ability to bring forward in a very approachable format, the extensive and complicated relationship between ideological and social structures and the actual lived

⁷ For Hirsch, the method employed by Rich was foundational in the sense that it was the, “First systematic study of the real role of women as mothers in society. [...] Rich’s voice, both personal and scholarly, resting on research in various academic fields, as well as on her own experience as a mother and a daughter, has helped create a novel form of feminist discourse which, [Hirsch argues], has freed scholars to consider extremely personal experiences as valid objects of scholarly inquiry.” (p. 201)

experiences of mothers. It is able to, in other words, expose the inherent contradictions and impossibilities that found normative conceptions of motherhood and the socioeconomic and political formations that uphold them. For example, Rich explicates the intersections between economic, political, and social development in America and its impact on the formation of the private sphere of the 'home' as the place for women and children. She states that,

These two forces - the humanitarian concern for child welfare and the fear for patriarchal values - converged to provide pressure which led to legislation controlling children's and women's labour, and the assertion that 'the home, its cares and employments, is the woman's true sphere.' [...] The home thus defined had never before existed. It was the creation of the industrial revolution, an ideal invested with the power of something God-given, and its power as an idea remains unexpunged today. (p. 49)

Here, we see a clear example of the deeply entangled relationship between the formation of the institution and the experience of motherhood for women in America. (It should read "for some women," i.e. there have always been wage earning women in America who did not have the socio-economic freedom or status to position themselves solely within the home.)

The third aspect comes from what Rich describes as "the core of [her] book", which is the ninth chapter entitled "Motherhood and Daughterhood." She explains that, "I enter [this chapter] as a woman who, born between my mothers legs, has time after time and in different ways tried to return to her mother [...]" (p. 218). This statement echoes psychoanalytic claims that will be dealt with shortly, but in the meantime, outside of the psychic formation of the subject herself, this chapter as "the core" reflects a strong and long held desire to come to terms with this *most* impossible and unrepresentable of relationships. This echoes Kristeva's (1975) claim that it is fundamentally "[...] the mother's mother who is encountered in the mother's relationship to the child" (p. 46). This is part of what Baraister refers to as the "relentlessly backwards movement of psychoanalytic theorizing of the development of maternity" (p. 46). Admittedly, this project continues this tradition to a certain extent and, to be quite honest, while I acknowledge the dangers it brings for the subject of the mother (as eaten up by the daughter, neither ever really getting to speak) there is something incredibly compelling about working through this theoretical inclination.

Marianne Hirsch (1981) contributes to the discussion five years later to remark on the fact that since the publication of *Of Woman Born* there has been a significant increase in research across disciplines on the subject of the maternal, but more specifically on the issue raised by Rich regarding the “absence of the mother-daughter relationship from theology, art, sociology, and psychoanalysis, and its centrality in women’s lives [...]” (p. 201). While Hirsch focuses on the mother-daughter division in particular her methodological structure is helpful to my present discussion in that it lays the groundwork through a variety of fundamental feminist discourses, each opposing and/or complimenting the other, ultimately creating a fertile landscape upon which to think the mother-child dyad.

Hirsch’s first step is to divide the terrain of feminist psychoanalytic work into three trajectories: French psychoanalytic traditions (based on Lacan), American psychoanalytic traditions (coming from neo-Freudian ego psychology and object- relations theory), and Jungian psychoanalysis. The reason for her focus on feminist psychoanalysis is backed up by a claim made by Juliet Mitchell (1975) where she explains that it is useful in allowing us to explore “[...] how we acquire our heritage of the ideas and laws of human society within the unconscious mind” (p. 203). While Hirsch acknowledges and addresses the limitations that bind the field, to which I will return later, she highlights the fact that, “[...] it helps us to understand how the laws underlying and underwriting patriarchy function within each of us, whether male or female, and how they affect our most intimate relationships” (p. 203-204). It is this particular aspect of the field that is so integral to this project and to its understanding of the mother-child dyad.

Psychoanalytic Perspectives: Freud & Lacan

Following the extensive work done by European and American feminist psychoanalytic thinkers, this thesis would argue that a move in that direction opens up much theoretical possibility after having established a dual conception of motherhood as *institution* and *experience* – the next step being to try and explicate understandings of how these dichotomous formations play out in the complex psycho-social development of female identification. Hirsch defends “feminist revisions” of psychoanalysis claiming that they “[...] allow us to appreciate the specificity of female, as distinguished from male, development and the effect of those differences on relationships among women” (p. 203-204). Keeping in mind the problematic of *how to represent*

gendered experience presented at the beginning of this chapter, it is thus useful to take a brief look at the psychoanalytic paradigms presented by Freud and Lacan that have founded much of the feminist thinking and art making that this thesis project is grounded in.

Lauren Berlant (2012), in her discussion of *desire*, differentiates between two psychoanalytic models, explicating the fact that for Freud,

[...] “desire” articulates the drives, or the infantile excitation that operates throughout the subject’s life, with relation to objects: primary objects in the original caretaking environment, like the breast or the mother, and secondary ones through which the subject can repeat the experience of desiring in her adult life. In contrast, a Lacanian model would call desire less a drive that is organized by objects and more a drive that moves beyond its objects, always operating with them and in excess to them, with aims both to preserve and destroy them. (p. 19)

I will return to the Lacanian model shortly, but for the time being what one will find at the origin of the Freudian model of infantile sexuality, is the maternal subject. The “desire” to which Berlant refers is that which motivates the actions of the drives, which are themselves formulated in relation to “primary objects” (and subsequently “secondary objects”) that stem from the development of infantile sexuality and the traumas that accompany it - all this centering around the child’s relationship to (or more precisely, their separation from) the mother (as “caretaking environment”). What is referred to as the “erotogenic zones” (more popularly understood as *erogenous zones*), are those bodily zones which under the process of normalization become associated with the respective male and female genitalia. What is critical for this project is the notion that this genitally structured mode of sexual organization is not in fact originary for Freud.⁸ Initially, Berlant explains that, “the infant’s whole body, the skin, and diffuse feelings of contact and movement provide the ongoing experience of pleasure” (p. 27). This is what Freud refers to as “polymorphous perversity,” which can be understood as related to the child’s needs for self-preservation (i.e. the feelings of pleasure) at a stage when they are positioned in relation to their mother as a physical body in-the-process of being mapped.

In other words, the child maintains an open physical relation to the mother as it engages in an,

⁸ This is described as the, “Pre-psychoanalytic assumption that sexuality only develops naturally with the maturation of the genitals at puberty and in ignorance of the infantile sexuality whose modes of organization [Freud (1905)] was later to describe in the three essays.” (p. 6, *Essays on Otherness*)

[...] exchange with its caretaking environment, and the sensuality of that environment [which] begins to produce excitation on [its] body, with its pulsating zones of repeated need, stimulation, and gratification. At some point the infant realizes that she is not continuous with the caretaking environment/mother/breast that she relies on for nurturance and pleasure. (Berlant, p. 27)

It is in this moment of initial separation from the maternal caretaking environment that “primary trauma” occurs and it is “[...] the site at which reactive aggression and love become entwined in desiring activity” (p. 27). This is the root of the vicissitudinal nature of the drives that Freud comes to develop, and is also, consequently, the terrain upon which his murky gender differentiations takes shape. The mixture of fear and anger projected outwards at the external world and the simultaneous need for self-preservation (love) that the maternal caretaking environment (as separate from the infant) is no longer guaranteed to supply, creates a traumatic event enabling a desiring turn inwards.

The turn to herself in the process of ego formation, spurred on by the primary trauma of separation from the mother (realization of mother, “caretaking environment”, as separate from infant) is, according to Jean Laplanche (1976), a result of the development of, “strategies of auto-eroticism, which is the only site of certain satisfaction once the mother is perceived to be Other” (p. 28). Thus, the figuration of mother as Other, in this model, is an understanding of the maternal as that which is now ripped from the initial stage of “polymorphous perversity” whereby she and the child existed in a symbiotic relation (from the perspective of the infant). She is now *lost*, representing, for the infant (and Freud) a lifelong search, motivated by desires that are both endogenously (from within) and exogenously (from without) conceived. The guarantee of auto-eroticism mentioned by Laplanche is complemented by the,

[...] re-rout[ing] [of] her self-pleasure back into the world, seeking substitutes for the lost breast / mother so that, as Freud writes, “The finding of an object [of desire] is in fact a re-finding of it.” But the infant (as child and adult) soon sees that even the gratifications of this re-finding are mixed with anxiety, doubt, and disappointment, for the substitute object of desire is always more and less than the lost real thing. (Berlant, p. 28)

Here, Berlant is referring to the formation of secondary object choices which are rooted in the initial relation to the mother (the primary object choice) but which have been sublimated out “into the world” for the *proper* (normative) functioning of the adult child. The desire which directs the movement towards (or away) from these objects is, according to Freud, looking for that which was *lost* in that primary traumatic separation. In other words, the “re-finding” that Freud refers to is the yearning for re-connection with that pleasurable and protecting maternal casing (container/receptacle) from which you were once violently removed as an infant – sending you on a life long journey in search of “secondary objects” through which to quench your desire for maternal plenitude.⁹ Of course, it can never be the *happy* and ultimately fulfilling re-encounter with the mother that one would hope, since as highlighted by Berlant, it sits on a rocky foundation of “anxiety, doubt, and disappointment” (i.e. ambivalence – bound to the entanglement of love and aggression) never living up to the demands made by your desires, always in excess of the “lost real thing” (i.e. the mother).

Within the Lacanian model however, this motivating maternal loss at the center of psychic desire takes shape within the *Imaginary*. This is Lacan’s “[...] state of misremembered self-continuity and wholeness” (p. 53). The Imaginary is held up by the *Symbolic*, which is understood as,

[...] the condition of traumatized fragmentation in which the subject — under threat of absolute loss/castration — must attempt to but never comfortably assume language and identity to manage her environment and speak her desire (for the mother, and then for the subsequent replacements). (Berlant, p. 53-54)

Access to the Symbolic is thus the means through which subjects take up their identities within the Imaginary. There is a likeness here to the subject’s condition in relation to Freud’s secondary objects – whereby it is through the Symbolic (through language, law, and signification) that subjects attempt to get “comfortable” and adjust to their normative environment, *but* as in the case of the secondary objects, the Symbolic is founded on ambivalence and requires a constant repression of the *Real* which exceeds it. For Berlant, the Real “[...] exerts pressure on the drives to find objects to love, but those objects, bound to the Symbolic, are always insufficient to the

⁹ As a side note it is important to keep in mind that, within this Freudian framework, the action is taking place on the side of the infant subject and not from the perspective of the mother herself who is seemingly silent when it comes to her own desires.

pressure of fantasy that keeps one driven toward them” (p. 53-54). The Real, in this case, may be looked as the remains of the originary and traumatic *loss*, which in fact enabled the child’s violent movement from infancy to subjecthood, and as such, it founds the very precarious (and anxious) “stability” upon which the Symbolic stands.¹⁰ It is also for these reasons that the Real must remain hidden – for it exposes the gaping hole (lost mother?) which is the foundation of the subject’s ability to maintain a coherent and functional sense of self, and it directs their desires toward that which is most suitable to the continued functioning of that unified self. Whether it is the search for coherent identity, or for *meaning* - the desire that motivates these Symbolic journeys is grounded in a necessarily repressed originary relation to the mother. As a transition to feminist critiques and interventions into these psychoanalytic paradigms (explained briefly above) this chapter now moves to address the Freudian notion which presents some of the greatest insights and as such the greatest problematics in regards to conceptions of the mother-child dyad and, to normative constructions of gender identity.

What Freud refers to as the stage in the infant’s life characterized by a sense of “polymorphous perversity” may also be likened to the stage of pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother. Hirsch explains that in his,

[...] three late essays on female sexuality he revises his equilateral theory of early individual development, and he stresses, both for boys and girls, the importance of pre- oedipal attachment to the mother. [...] All three of his essays revolve around the central mystery of female development - the source of a girl’s transfer of attachment to her father. (p. 206)

¹⁰ Again, this can be seen as the loss of the originary maternal care-giving environment – of the sense of fullness and pleasure from which the infant is traumatically removed. But, I should state my awareness and continued interest in the complexity that surrounds this separation, since in losing the mother the infant also loses a part of themselves thus making the trauma (and the figure of the mother) all the more tangled and significant. Work on Melancholia would be critical in this investigation. Berlant references Bersani (1986) when she explains that, “After the traumatic separation from the mother, it is said, melancholia becomes integral to love itself, a form of masochism derived from the simultaneity of self-loss and the loss of the loved one.” (p. 29) Another addition to this discussion would be the work of Kristeva (1977) and Battersby (1998). Lisa Baraister explicates their arguments, stating that for them, “[...] the maternal subject is peculiar in that her subjectivity is premised on being both for herself and for another. Kristeva’s notion of herethics is that the mother is at once ethical, heretical, and feminine constituting what Kelly Oliver (1993) has called an outlaw ethics in which the mother sees herself as responsible for the others life to the point of her own disappearance, which places her outside of the law of the symbolic.” (p. 16) This work echoes issues regarding the placement of the maternal/feminine within Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic models. (i.e. the mother’s (as other, as ultimate lack/plentitude) relation to the Real and the Symbolic.)

It is important to note, that it is prior to *proper* gender differentiation (prior to the founding distinction that comes to be through the Oedipal crisis) that the mother, as a figure within Freudian psychoanalysis, appears to reveal her most dynamic characteristics – not, however, as a coherent subject with her own desires, but as a limited subject (or maybe part-subject) whose very coherence is predicated on her life-giving connection to a child. Thinking about the split identification of the female as elaborated by Rich it is interesting to note the way in which, through a Freudian perspective, the mother as a subject in the pre-Oedipal phase is figured only by her symbiotic relation to a child (once again from the perspective of the child – figured by Freud as male). The non- mother female’s “suspect status” is further evinced here, by the fact that she is inherently incomplete according to the life cycle of the Oedipal complex – ending for the girl in her relation to her future child as final phallic fulfillment. There seems to be a complex relationship here, within the Freudian model, between the mother’s necessary relationship to her child in the pre-oedipal phase (with its lasting effects) and the female subject’s confused desire for and relationship to motherhood, a phallic substitute, and the Symbolic. (Kelly, 1996) For me, it is at this junction that the enumerable limitations and problems for female identification and maternal subjectivity within psychoanalytic thinking come to the forefront.

Within the properly functioning process of Oedipalization the male child comes to identify with his father and the female child comes to identify with her mother. The male child competes with his father for his mother’s love, but threatened by her lack (of a penis) he ultimately turns to his father for “correct” gender identification. Hirsch points out that “Girls, in contrast, feel ambivalent toward the mother who is both rival and object of desire.” (p. 206) For Freud, the male child resolves this crisis by fully identifying with the father and subsequently adopting from him proper love objects to which he should cathect his sublimated desire for his lost mother.¹¹ The girl, on the other hand, is plagued by ambivalence. Hirsch continues, stating that for Freud, in the girl child

¹¹ When it comes to solid gender identification within Freud it should be noted that Jacqueline Rose has argued the fact that one does not find, within Freud, that sexual difference ever “achieves purity or stability.” Instead, as Berlant explains, “It always produces anxiety and lapses into incoherence. Or, as Freud (1925) himself contends, “pure masculinity and femininity remain uncertain theoretical constructions of uncertain content.” No powerful umbrella theory has been invented to resolve these different readings of gender, sexuality, and desire in psychoanalysis.” (p. 40)

[...] the pre- oedipal attachment to the mother is never fully superseded by the desire for the father and neither is the Oedipal rejection ever overcome – ambivalence dominates a woman’s life especially her relationship with her husband and lover. (p. 206)

The girl child, unlike the male, is castrated to begin with and as such, her journey through the Oedipal complex is not motivated by the same urgency to identify as the boy’s. Instead, under this framework the female comes to be figured as *lacking* the same coherence as the male subject – her life being “dominated” by an ambivalence that does not permit for the complete disavowal of her connection to the mother. Thus, the female subject is not provided with the same kind of solid heteronormative foundation that guides male desire to cathect socially acceptable objects. These objects are invested through sublimating and projecting desires that stem from an originary relation to the mother and they take on an important role in the social *Imaginary*. This *Imaginary*, is maintained by, in this case, the female subject’s ability to repress their deep ambivalence through identification with, as wholly as possible, the *Symbolic/Law*.

In recalling the Lacanian model, the male subject is also plagued by an ambivalence that causes his anxiety, which motivates his recurring and lifelong need for “substitute love objects.” Berlant explains that,

For Lacan, therefore, sexual difference is organized not around the penis and vagina, but the *gendering of anxiety*. Neither the male nor the female ever “possesses” the phallus: it can only represent loss and desire. In Lacanian terms, however, only the woman represents the *objet a*, the unattainable Other who always exceeds the phallic value she is supposed to represent. (p. 57)

From this point I am going to move to feminist reworkings of these psychoanalytic models but this notion of woman as “unattainable Other” who is in excess of her “phallic value” is of particular importance to the theoretical underpinnings of this project. Acknowledging the limited time I have spent with Lacan and Freud, this project is nonetheless moved to question the relationship between the maternal as *inherent loss* that motivates desire and the female as *inaccessible and other* who is always exceeding the *Symbolic* and as such comes close to the *Real* which risks destabilizing the system in its entirety. My question is thus, whether this does not point to a fundamental link, within psychoanalytic work, between the formation of the female subject and the figure of the mother. More specifically, it appears as though the maternal, as site

of primary trauma and ultimate loss, figures both male and female as grounded in ambivalence which must be repressed, but it is upon the female subject herself that the weight of this ambivalence and loss has been projected leaving her bound to the mother as evidence of her status as “unattainable Other.” The female (as *soon to be mother*) is figured as that which cannot be (re)possessed but which is the source of the trauma which enables entrance into the Symbolic and the formation of the self as “coherent” subject. As such, her relationship to the *Real*, to that which is in excess of the *Symbolic*, is amplified by the fact that, as *soon to be mother*, she is positioned within it – that *uncanny* place from which ambivalent anxiety emerges. Thus, echoing Rich, this gives the maternal angel her demonic and dangerous other half, the devilish lady who at any time could *drop her mask* revealing the artificial signifier of difference which upholds the *Imaginary* landscape of the socio-political order.

Feminist Critiques & Interventions

As I sat in front of an edit screen and watched hours and hours of home movies I found myself captivated by the process through which my younger self engaged with her own ambivalent performance of femininity. Within the context of my home, the amateur video camera frequently had its lens pointed towards me, and as such, while I am not able to say this for certain, I sense that at an early age I became quite conscious of the performative nature of my family and my role in it. In doing so I became aware of both the masks I was supposed to wear (the smiling one), as well as the many ones that were less desirable and more threatening – “the sad fat hooker” is a notable one in that category. I learned quickly that this was one of the worst types of women to be because it combined three things my family didn’t care for: exposed sadness, fatness, and openness with ones sexuality/body. I remember once my (single and “wild”) aunt wasn’t allowed to come to a family event because she was too overweight. As a result of this I passed notes under a door with her to try and make her feel better. She was crying for hours but she didn’t want me to see. I think I was 7 or 8 at the time. I remember thinking to myself that I couldn’t understand why on the one hand she wasn’t invited and on the other why that made her so sad – I just really wanted everyone to get along. While I acknowledge the move that is required to map psychoanalytic frameworks onto my own creative storytelling process, it is important to note that it is from feminist revisions to these theoretical models that I came to

understand both the figuration of my own relationship to my mother and my family, as well as the impetus to represent it on screen.

That said, there have been and continue to be major criticisms of psychoanalytic work which focus around the fact that it supports paradigms dominated by male writers who formulate male orders and perpetuate the maintenance, in one way or another, of the system of patriarchal practices and institutions that are deeply embedded in the functionings of the social order.¹² On the other hand, as acknowledged by Mitchell (1975) it is able to tie together “private structures” with “public institutions” and as such helps to understand how mothering is a, “social structure that affects all other structures.” This emphasizes the formation of the subject in relation to external social systems and institutions (family & ideology) that figure their daily lives. Berlant states that for many feminist thinkers Freud’s “fictions of psychic order” appear to be, “[...] mainly symptoms of a more general turn-of-the-century misogynist malaise or a generically patriarchal imaginary” (p. 38). But, Berlant, Hirsch, and Baraister point to the work of several key American feminist theorists who have taken the trajectory laid out by Freud and reworked it to emphasize “positive values” for the female subject. Some of the key analysts/thinkers that will be mentioned here include Nancy Chodorow (1978), Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976), and Jessica Benjamin (1980). In their own ways these theorists draw from the Freudian Oedipal paradigm that was just discussed, as well as from neo- Freudian theory and object-relations psychology.

Hirsch explains that Dinnerstein and Chodorow “[...] take as starting points the formative importance of the pre-oedipal period and the female parent’s domination of that period for both sons and daughters” (p. 206). However, they do not focus so much on a strict Freudian interpretation and instead are motivated by object-relations psychologists,

[...] in whose theory the pre-oedipal period is seen not as a stage through which infants progress instinctually [...] but as an interpersonal field of relationships internalized by the infant and therefore configurative in the adult personality. (p. 206)

¹² I would like to add my acknowledgment here of the complex global and local interlocking systems of oppression which stem from and maintain the white, male, heteronormative patriarchal status quo. I am thus noting the bounded relationship between patriarchy and other economic, political, and social formations – highlighting the importance of paying attention to the imbalance of power not only for (straight/white) feminism but taking into account such things as financial status, race, sexuality, and mobility. This further emphasizes, once again, the complicated position of the mother as: individual experience, entangled ideological structure that serves the needs of various institutions in complex ways, and as an unconscious internalization of the meeting of all of these things.

This claim is significant since it grounds sexual difference (at least partially) in the actual relationship between the mother and the child. Female infants, in their likeness to their mothers, tend to be recognized as “extensions” of their matrilineal heritage, unlike boys who Hirsch explains are expected “[...] to become separate and autonomous. Ego boundaries between mothers and daughters are more fluid, more undefined” (p. 206). This line of thinking focuses on the formation of the gendered ego – for girls it is more porous allowing for a more fluid and *relational figuration* and for boys individual coherence and separation rule their psychic structuration. All of this being contingent on their initial interpersonal relations with their mother figure. This is a key aspect of much feminist work on the maternal. For me, it brings to light a possible root of the impetus to track down ones matrilineal heritage within feminist documentary film and video. This argument supports a kind of compulsion to return to the maternal connection, as well as to enact a more relational stance towards the external world.

Chodorow locates what she calls the “reproduction of mothering” in this relation of the female child to her mother. Here, the “destiny” of motherhood is located in the desire to cope with the ambivalence which her mother has handed down to her and to thus regain that connection (to her mother) by mothering her own child – with the unconscious goal of both working out “unresolved mommy issues” and receiving the relationality that does not come from her male partner. Dinnerstein, in an understanding of female as “other” states that she is this way only because she is first and foremost “mother.” This can be tied in with the point that was raised earlier regarding the complex relationship between woman as “unattainable (therefore lacking) Other” and the mother as ultimate figuration of that *loss* (woman always being the reminder of that traumatic *loss*). As such, for Dinnerstein, “[...] patriarchy itself is a reaction against female dominion in infancy. Maternal omnipotence is so great a threat that we are willing to acquiesce to male rule in adulthood” (p. 207). The power of the mother in infancy is thus presented as being so intense that the social, as founded on patriarchy, is a necessary reaction to an originary and “omnipotent” maternal reign. Chodorow and Dinnerstein believe that it is at infancy that the family structure must pose a threat to patriarchy by practicing *shared parenting*. For them, this familial practice “balances skewed sexual arrangements” allowing for a development that is not predicated on such explicitly gendered ego formations and interpersonal relationships.

Jessica Benjamin comes to similar conclusions as Chodorow and Dinnerstein but via an explanation of the centrality of difference in normative conceptions of gender. She explains that

boys and girls develop their positions as subjects through their relationship to their mother. However, unlike Chodorow and Dinnerstein, Benjamin points out the way in which “Selfhood is defined negatively as separateness from others” – girls thus defined as necessarily “different” than boys because of the ways they relate to their mother. What this leads to for Benjamin is the development of gendered selves along the complementary axis of domination (male subject) and submission (female object). She is highlighting the unnecessary differentiation in relation to “selfhood” that enables what she describes as “rationally” condoned violence, which is “the basis of sadomasochism.” Instead of looking towards equality there is an impetus to solidify sexual difference. Popular ideology supports this inherent “tension” between the masculine and the feminine, which for Chodorow, Dinnerstein, and Benjamin is rooted in “the lethal effects of the asymmetry of the pre-oedipal period” (Hirsch, p. 208). In other words (and once again), the imbalance in terms of caregiving on the side of the mother during infancy is looked at as a central cause of the signification of difference upon which oppressive and violent patriarchal values and institutions are maintained.

Thus, the solution to the violence of institutionalized motherhood for Chodorow, Dinnerstein, and Benjamin lies (at least in part) in the undoing of the primary role of the mother in the act of child rearing. With an emphasis on the impact this has on daughters, Hirsch states that, the normative role of the mother (as primary caregiver) simply, “[...] creates too much ambivalence about their own and their daughter’s female identity” (p. 208). This sentiment relates back to the anxious ambivalence which underscores the formation of subjectivity in the psychoanalytic paradigms described above. Thus, it is not surprising that it is precisely because of their relationship to and reliance upon Freudian psychoanalytic models that these thinkers have received much criticism – claims that they are limited theoretically by the very fact that their arguments are based on a flawed framework. Hirsch acknowledges these limitations, yet emphasizes the wide range of applications for their work and ultimately encourages the interdisciplinary potential that it brings. For her, the potential of the work of such thinkers as Chodorow, Dinnerstein and Benjamin, is rooted in the aspect that has already been raised many times in this thesis – namely, the ability of psychoanalytic frameworks to address the interactions between public and private structures, therefore bringing to light, in this case, the expansive role of the mother-child dynamic not just for the formation of the subject but for society as structure and ideology.

After addressing a discussion among American feminist psychoanalysts, Hirsch focuses on three central French feminist psychoanalytic theorists, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Helen Cixous. These three thinkers intersect in the goal of deconstructing what Irigaray (1980) refers to as “that sameness in which for centuries we have been the other” (p. 69). They seek thus to explore that which characterizes the impossibility of the feminine and to, “[...] define the specificity of the female experience, which is to be found in the silences and absences, in all that our culture has repressed and suppressed” (p. 210). An example of such a feminist artwork, within the domain of experimental video may be Chantal Akerman’s (1991) autobiographical film, *News From Home*. In this film Akerman reads letters addressed to her from her mother as a voice-over track that sits overtop of long wide shots of New York City. What is central, I would argue, for both that film as well as the central creative object of this thesis, is the role that silence and absence plays as a counterpoint to what can be interpreted as the fairly normal discourse between a mother and a daughter – in both cases – mothers who live away from their grown up daughters. In *Everybody Gets Sad* there is a constructed dialogue between a mother and a daughter, whereas in *News From Home* it is a one sided monologue, but while Ivy and I try to speak it is in what is not said and what cannot be said that our experience of mother and daughter truly lies.

Furthermore, a central difference between the American and European trajectories lies around a conception of the ego. Whereby for the American school the focus was on object-relations theory and ego psychology, the European school holds *the subject* in a much more problematic position with the goal of ultimately, “exploding the unified ego” (Hirsch, p. 211). In other words, there is much more of an emphasis on destabilizing the centrality of the subject within French psychoanalytic circles.¹³ However, where these two fields meet is on the female subject herself. Their theoretical intersections lie around the claims that, for

[...] woman the delimited, the autonomous, separated, individuated self does not exist (although our discourse functions as if it did). [...] Women’s being, because

¹³ Baraister highlights the work of Kristeva and Laplanche stating their mutual investment in, “articulating disruptive forces that lie at the edge of the symbolic.” (p. 15) Laplanche (1999), focused on the centrality of the Other in the formation of the unconscious, and Kristeva (1997) on the maternal as ultimate excess/danger to the Symbolic (the “ambivalent principle”). Baraister explains that “disruptive forces” are “[...] usually associated with the feminine, the excessive the exotic and the unrepresentable but provide the conditions for the emergence of a subjectivity thought of as ‘otherwise’ to the traditional male rational subject.” (p. 15)

of the quality of the pre-oedipal mother-daughter relationship, is, according to both traditions, continuous, plural, in-process [...] (p. 211)

There are many other important theorists to consider at this juncture but I have chosen to highlight the creative work of Luce Irigaray (1979), because I would argue that it can bring into focus the complex entanglements between mother and daughter which can be made to figure as the basis for certain *oppositional* strategies of representation (i.e. relationality) within feminist documentary practices.

Towards a Re-Thinking of Relationality

As students of Lacan, the work of Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva, is informed by a background that promotes (in one way or another) the shared goals of,

[...] dismantling the sameness and unity of the symbolic order that has excluded woman, of creating a discourse of plurality, [which for them] depends on a redefinition of the individual subject: it must be seen not as unified, integrated, whole, and autonomous, but as multiple, continuous, fluid, or as Kristeva calls it “in-process.” (Hirsch, p. 211)

For the purposes of this project, it is from this theoretical vantage point that a general understanding of the position of the female subject as “multiple” and “fluid” can be viewed as the ground upon which a formal strategy of relationality has developed within feminist video making. Documentary theorists, Waldman & Walker, and Lebow note the turn towards relationality (and reflexivity) in documentary, highlighting respectively, notions of *shared-goal filmmaking* and the move to *first-person filmmaking* which is often characterized, by Lebow and Renov, as centering around *the subject as plural*. The move to relationality in feminist documentary was brought on in the 1970s as well by a general problematizing of *the real* (not in a Lacanian sense). This problematization emerges in the same vein as much of the feminist critique that has been raised so far – a reaction against hegemonic truths which seek to render “concrete” and to “unify” for the purposes of power and control (those things which in general feminism traditionally opposes). Generally, within feminist documentary, relational and subjective practices are a rejection of,

[...] *a whole aesthetic of objectivity* and the development of comprehensive technologies of truth capable of promoting what is right and what is wrong in the world, and by extension, what is “honest” and what is “manipulative” in documentary. (My italics, Trinh, 1991, p. 94)

With this comes such issues as, the differences and tensions between relationality vs. reflexivity, and whether these notions bring anything, in themselves (as formal devices), to the aforementioned conceptualizations of the female and the maternal within the context of documentary film.

An excellent example of a work that highlights these issues, with a specific regard to relationality, is Milica Tomic’s (1999) multi-channel documentary project entitled *Portrait of my Mother*. Through her juxtaposition of video projections and layers of audio Tomic, as explicated by Elizabeth Cowie (2011),

[...] presents a work of memory and a process of memorial transformation of the space and time of the political of the public and the private, of the nation and the family, that is also a process of desire. (p. 163-164)

What is brought about, through the interplay of images and voices (namely, Tomic’s intermittent use of a child’s voice), is a “[...] voice that embodies both the past, as the child Tomic was, and the future, in which the daughter becomes mother to her own son” (p. 164). This recalls the backwardsness of much psychoanalytic thinking about the relationship between mothers and daughters, but there is a twist in this case in that Tomic is reworking these memories in the present with a movement forward that is motivated by her desires as a mother, as such “The meaning of the past is continually remade by Tomic in the present of remembering [...]” (p. 164). The relationality between Tomic and her mother on screen, in the audio mix, and throughout the piece as a whole, is able to raise the very implications that this project is focused around – the implications of the mother-child dyad for both the formation of the subject and the social and political institutions in which they live. As a final note, Cowie mentions the “encounter” between the work of art and the viewer and the potential for newness which may emerge from that event – this is a layer of relationality that could be

integral for a thinking of both the maternal and documentary practices – it is one that demands an imaginative engagement from outside of the dyad.

For Irigaray, woman is “never complete.” This is however, as pointed out by Baraister, a “Mimetic response to the mother’s body, [...] as having been ‘torn to pieces’ between fathers and sons, leaving her fragmented and unable to speak her difference” (p. 52). What is seen then, in *The One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other* (1979), is a “[...] jubilant articulation of fluidity in order to both reveal and reverse this fragmentation” (p. 52). The interpenetration between the maternal force, which hardens within the daughter, and the daughter’s ambivalent attempts at dealing with this irresolvable and unspeakable tension is what is at stake in Irigaray’s poetic efforts. What is remarkable about the piece itself is the tremendous emotional power it has. Through her blending of the I/you pronouns Irigaray is literally using discourse to dig up and re-present that relationship (one version of a relationship) that has not had much popular articulation. She is employing syntax against itself in order to produce something new. I view this as a kind of grammatical relationality (a formal relationality) that is able to bring out (through experimental narrativization) a very deep sense of psychic trauma between many mothers and daughters.

Finally, in framing the kind of relational and self-reflexive work that this thesis project is engaged in, it is useful to understand it in relation to the distinctions established by Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson (2001) for thinking through the complexities of forms of autobiographical writing. Smith & Watson situate the emergence of the term “autobiography” in a specific moment in time, stating that it,

[...] described writing being produced at a particular historical juncture, the early modern period in the West with its concept of the self-interested individual intent on assessing the status of the soul or the meaning of public achievement. By the eighteenth century notions of self-interest, self-consciousness, and self-knowledge informed the figure of the “Enlightened individual” described by philosophers and social and political theorists. (p. 2)

Autobiography has continued to expand today, now finding itself mixed up with such methods of life writing as “*testimonio*, *autoethnography*, [and] *psychobiography*”. (p. 2) It is precisely because of this varied history that Smith and Watson distinguish between the terms of *life writing*, *life narrative*, and *autobiography*. “Life Writing” is the umbrella term that they use to

describe all of the different forms of writing that “take a life as its subject” (p. 3). “Life narrative” is more specific however and, “might best be approached as a moving target, a set of ever shifting self-referential practices that engage the past in order to reflect on identity in the present” (p. 3). “Autobiography” then, stands as a “particular practice of life narrative that emerged in the Enlightenment and has become canonical in the West” (p. 3). While this thesis project positions itself within an autoethnographic tradition, rooted in video making (that will be explored in the coming chapter), it is important to acknowledge the trajectories of life writing from which it comes.

Keeping this brief history of autobiographical writing in mind, Annette Kuhn’s “memory work” in *Family Secrets: Acts of Imagination* (2002) is useful for situating this project’s critical and creative autoethnographic practice. For Kuhn, much of this work consists of sorting through her tumultuous relationship (what Kuhn refers to as a “murderous hostility”) with her deceased mother through the deconstruction and analysis of family photos and filmic texts. She describes “memory work” as that which “threads a line between cultural criticism and cultural production” and goes on to explain how it “spans the gulf between those who comment on culture and those who do the production” (p. 3). For Kuhn, “memory work” is nonlinear in that the goal of it is not to recreate a straightforward biographical narrative – instead, the object is to understand the relations between the private and the public/the psychic and the social and to explore, “the way memories shape the stories we tell”, in the present about the past, and to question “what makes us remember [...] reminders of the past that remain in the present” (p. 4).

Hirsch’s research on mother-daughter plots has been generative as a foundation for understanding an interdisciplinary history and web of critical feminist work on the complex familial figuration and as such I echo her when she states that, her book,

[...] takes as its point of departure the intersection of familial structures and structures of plotting, attempting to place at the centre of inquiry mothers and daughters, the female figures neglected by psychoanalytic theories and submerged in traditional plot structures. (p. 3)

Hirsch examines novels written by women from Western European and American traditions that address the mother-daughter plot and span the time frame of the 19th and 20th century. Her analytic frame is made up of, “psychoanalytic theories of subject-formation in the context of the narrative conventions of realism, modernism, and post-modernism” (p. 3). Central to her analysis

is Freud's notion of the *family romance*.¹⁴ She explains that, "By using the psychoanalytic notion of family romance, I treat both motherhood and daughterhood as *story* – as narrative representative of social and subjective reality and of literary convention" (p. 10). They are understood as "story" precisely because of their unfolding within specific psychic and social family narratives.

Referencing de Lauretis and Althusser, Hirsch states that,

[The family romance] traces both the story of women's "consent to" and dissent from "femininity" [de Lauretis], and the process of what Althusser has called "interpellation" and the process of conscious resistance against it. (p. 11)

Politicizing the maternal is not a goal of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. For this thesis though, politicizing the maternal, and the familial, are of great importance. In acknowledging this however, this work is not trying to essentialize gender, race, or sexual identity categories. Neither is it trying to define or moralize a coherent idea of mothering, fathering, or parenting. Again, this highlights the need to situate my own position as a writer and filmmaker - my own relationship to "cultural, literary [and cinematic] hegemony" (this will be the focus of Chapter 3).

As a means for setting up her own relationship to her subject matter, Hirsch addresses one of the central aspects of this doctoral work. She explains how she was a part of a "mother's group" in the 80s where the goal was to "formulate a language with which to discuss maternal *experience*" (p. 25). Concluding her discussion on the difficulties of that group project, she states that,

The "mother's group" had a profound impact on [her] book because it challenged [her], for the first time, to translate [her] experience as a daughter and a mother into discourse, to theorize on the basis of [her] experience. (p. 38)

What I take from Hirsch here is the challenge to think-and-make critically on the basis of my *experience* as a "daughter" and "video-maker." This project may be viewed then as an attempt to place my own "translation" alongside a selection of "translations" (/representations) - a selection

¹⁴ The Oedipal patterns which structure Freud's family romance are the fundamental narratives which guide the child's journey to "proper" (and heterosexual) subject formation. What is important for Hirsch is the way in which the family romance binds together both desire and narrative – which for Hirsch are, "operative in both fictional and theoretical writings, including, of course, [her own] book." (p. 11)

of film and video works that *create* through and on the basis of a *situated experience* of a mother-daughter relation. The following chapter will expand on the history of feminist documentary and autoethnographic film and video work that founds this project, beginning with an explanation of feminist methodologies and early feminist art-work around the subject of motherhood.

CHAPTER 2

Feminist Methodologies & Queer Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a form of critique and resistance that can be found in diverse literatures such as ethnic autobiography, fiction, memoir, and texts that identify zones of contact, conquest, and the contested meanings of self and culture that accompanies the exercise of representational authority. - **Mark Neuman**

At the base of feminist methods and methodologies rests the question of epistemology, which Sandra Harding (1987) describes as,

[...] a theory of knowledge. It answers questions about who can be a knower (can women?); what tests beliefs must pass in order to be legitimated as knowledge (only tests against men's experiences and observations?); what kinds of things can be known (can "subjective truths" count as knowledge?), and so forth. (Sociologists of knowledge call them: strategies for justifying beliefs.) (p. 3)

In thinking about traditions of feminist media, documentary video and experimental filmmaking in particular, the issue of epistemology does not disappear but becomes instead a responsibility on the part of the maker to work through questions of representation. In other words, for filmmakers or artists, this is a question of how their work makes meaning - how they are working through processes of signification. This chapter will go on to explore, within the field of documentary and autoethnographic film and video, a provocation that arises for theorists and makers that has and continues to demand that one address the problem of how to represent, position, and/or critique the framed and knowing subject - someone who *speaks* (even/especially when that subject is the maker themselves). I focus on this field in particular because it is the domain of media making from which this project emerges. As such, for the most part, it will occupy a large portion of what I speak to in regards to "feminist media" throughout this thesis, and in particular in Chapter 3. However, as a means of situating and justifying this doctoral project as that which is a methodological contribution at the level of scholarly *and* artistic merit it is important for me to briefly draw out a history of feminist thinking that has contributed to the legitimization of this kind of embodied, experimental, relational, and practice-based work within the academy – that which allows this project to be considered as "research" and not simply "art."

Coming from the domain of scientific research, Harding sought to discover whether there was, strictly speaking, *feminist methods* of inquiry. In the search for "[...] alternative theories of knowledge that legitimate women as knowers" she is careful and critical of how we locate and

look at what is referred to as “the best feminist research” and the subsequent methods and methodologies that are employed to construct it (p. 3). Harding defines *method* and *methodology* as follows: the former, “is a technique for or way of proceeding in, gathering evidence” and the latter, “is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed; it includes accounts of how “the general structure of theory finds its application in particular scientific disciplines.”¹⁵

Her argument however, is that “[...] it is not by looking at research methods that one will be able to identify the distinctive features of the best feminist research” (p. 3). She elaborates on three “features” of this superior feminist research but she is quick to note that “there is no good reason” to refer to these as “methods” in and of themselves. They are general aspects of the work which contribute to the researcher’s ultimate “selection of methods.” As such, it is not “methods” alone that are the deciding factor, for Harding, in establishing quality feminist research. What is important to note however, is her overall emphasis on a “historical approach” to this study. For Harding, and for many of the women whose work I will discuss here, a historiographic approach to looking at feminist thinking and making is a prerequisite to a continued productive and critical feminist future. Following this historiographic impetus, I will engage with early feminist media and art-work around the subject of the maternal and the mother-child dyad as a means of acknowledging the historical development of work around this “taboo” subject and, more specifically, to examine the application of feminist methodologies within it. The goal being, to lay out an interdisciplinary history of feminist thinking and making that has enabled the creation of this thesis project.

Feminist Standpoint Epistemologies

The androcentric ideology of contemporary [80’s] science posits as necessary, and/or as facts, a set of dualisms – culture vs. nature; rational mind vs. prerational body and irrational emotions and values; objectivity vs. subjectivity; public vs. private - and then links men and masculinity to the former and women and femininity to the latter in each dichotomy. [...] such dichotomizing constitutes an ideology [...] (Harding, p. 136)

¹⁵ Here Harding (1987) is referencing Peter Caws, “Scientific Method,” in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 339.

The problem is thus: can feminist thinking “[...] be used to undercut the legitimacy of the modernist epistemologies”? For Harding the answer is yes, and it is precisely because feminist claims have attempted to set out to expose the way in which the aforementioned modernist dualisms “[...] explicitly ignore gender while implicitly exploiting distinctively masculinist meanings of knowledge-seeking” (p. 141). What has to be acknowledged is the history that led to these “modern Western epistemologies” and the fact that they are not “philosophical givens,” but are instead “historical justificatory strategies.”¹⁶ Harding explains that, from Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton to Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant there has been a form of “knowledge-seeking” indebted to the work of “[...] the individual, “disembodied,” but human mind, beholden to no social commitments but the wilful search for clear and certain truth [...]” (p. 140). This is the epistemological ground upon which modernist dualisms and questions have been formed and it is the ground which substantive feminist claims have intended to uproot. There is and has been doubt however, as to what form a “feminist science or epistemology” would actually take or what it would even accomplish.¹⁷ Keeping that vital/critical scepticism in mind, Harding frames feminist epistemologies as “[...] still transitional meditations upon the substance of feminist claims and practices” (p. 141). She focuses on the “ambivalences” and the “contradictions” presented by the following *standpoint* epistemologies, choosing to present them as something to be “cherished” and not buried in the name of surface level unification.

Specifically, “[...] standpoint epistemologies ground a distinctive feminist science in a theory of gendered activity and social experience” (p. 141). Harding selects five thinkers who each present “different though related reasons [...] to explain why inquiry from a feminist perspective can provide understandings of nature and social life that are not possible from the perspective of men’s distinctive *activity* and *experience*” (My Italics, p. 142). The issues that arise stem from the fundamental contradiction that, as a group and in their own ways,

They simultaneously privilege women or feminists (the accounts vary) epistemically and yet also claim to overcome the dichotomizing that is

¹⁶ Harding describes these strategies as “[...] culturally specific modes of constructing and exploiting cultural meanings in support of new kinds of knowledge claims.” In other words, it has been the manoeuvring of epistemological claims that has led to the fact that “[...] scientific claims and practices became more intuitively acceptable than the theologies used to justify them.” (p. 141) Thus, these historic philosophical moves are not givens – they are a matter of what counts and does not count as knowledge.

¹⁷ Harding cites Donna Haraway (1981) as she asks, “[...] Would feminist authority and power to name give the world a new identity, a new story?”

characteristic of the Enlightenment/bourgeois world view and its science. (p. 141)

In a footnote to this point Harding highlights a fundamental irony related to the post-Marxist claims held by the majority of the standpoint feminists she mentions.¹⁸ She explains that they rightfully and powerfully critique the “parental Enlightenment/bourgeois and Marxist theories” for their dichotomy of labor vs. leisure replacing it with a “theory of human *activity* and social *experience*,” but in doing so they are criticized for neglecting to acknowledge the dichotomizing that underpins their own work.¹⁹

While explicating theories presented by Hilary Rose (1983-84), Harding notes a central concept within feminist theory – namely, Foucault’s (1984) notion of *subjugated knowledges*. For Harding (1986), Foucault’s concept brings to light Rose’s move towards a feminist notion of epistemology which,

[...] holds that appeals to the subjective are legitimate, that intellectual and emotional domains must be united, that the domination of reductionism and linearity must be replaced by the harmony of holism and complexity [...] submerged understandings within the history of science. (p. 144)

The “privileging” of “subjugated knowledges,” in one way or another, is precisely the work of the feminist standpoint theorists noted by Harding. Additionally, it would seem as though it is with this motivation that, for Harding, much of the “best feminist research” is created. The first “feature” that she explicates comes from research that, “[...] generates its problematics from the perspective of women’s experiences” (p. 7). This enables the second feature which, unlike “traditional” research, where the goal is men’s problems, its “[...] purposes of research and

¹⁸ Jane Flax is the only one of the five standpoint theorists that Harding focuses on who does not ground her theories to some degree in a post-Marxist critique. Her work in object-relations theory does however stem from another master thinker, and as such her psychoanalytic background opens her work up to other criticisms by the feminist community. The four thinkers who Harding analyses are (in order): Hilary Rose (*The Unity of Hand, Brain and Heart in Craft Labor*), Nancy Harstock (*Women’s Subjugated Activity: Sensuous, Concrete, Relational*), Jane Flax (*The “Return of the Repressed” in Feminist Theory*), and Dorothy Smith (*The Bifurcated Consciousness of Alienated Women Inquirers*).

¹⁹ Haraway offers an important parallel to Harding’s analysis which sheds light on Harding’s motivation for selecting the thinkers she did as figureheads for feminist standpoint epistemologies (especially her inclusion of Jane Flax’s psychoanalytic object relations work). Haraway states that, “Marxist starting points offered tools to get our versions of standpoint theories, insistent embodiment, a rich tradition of critiques of hegemony without disempowering positivism and relativisms, [...] some versions of psychoanalysis aided this approach immensely, especially Anglophone object relations theory [...]” (p. 186).

analysis are not separable from the origins of [its] research problems.” (i.e. women’s *experiences*) (p. 8). The third feature can be described as a research context whereby,

[...] the inquirer her/himself [is] placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter [as their object of study], thereby recovering the entire research process for scrutiny in the results of the research. (p. 9)

This can more simply be referred to as, *reflexivity*. Finally, what must be emphasized is that for Harding by starting with women’s experiences it means that this research is taking into account the layered relations of class, race, and culture. What this implies is that during the moments where the research is “scrutinized,” all of the intersections which create the researcher subject, constructing their subjective experience, get “[...] placed within the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint” (p. 9).²⁰ Thus, one may chose to refer to these “features” as specifically feminist “methods” (*reflexivity* is a popular one) but for Harding it makes more sense to consider them holistically, as criteria that are incorporated perhaps into different methodological structures (via, for example, political theory, applied sciences, psychoanalysis, or sociology), but which, when boiled down, make for “the best” feminist research contributions.

With these three “features” one can see the deep impact of feminist standpoint epistemologies, particularly their considerations of the complexities of female (embodied) experience and their critiques of masculinist and modernist claims to objectivity – in its suppression of the intersections which shape the subject-object research relation. Moving forward however, Harding likens these standpoint theories to attempts at a feminist “successor science” – claiming that, “[...] in significant ways, they aim to reconstruct the original goals of modern science.” This claim points to their attempts at repositioning “the female experience” (a subjugated experience) at the centre of research, and for the hope for a “[...] better account of a world, [and a] reflexive relation to our own as well as others’ practices of domination [...]”²¹ For

²⁰ It is made obvious by the fact that she uses both gender pronouns that, for Harding, both males and females can produce great feminist research. For her, “[...] neither men nor women should try to “blame” classes of people who are not responsible for designing and maintaining our social institutions for the sins of those institutions.” (p. 9) I would argue though that, while the “blame game” is not productive neither is ignoring the way in which subjects themselves perpetuate oppressive ideology through their everyday practices.

²¹ Haraway makes a quick but important point in connection to this claim, stating, “In traditional philosophical categories, the issue is ethics and politics perhaps more than epistemology.” This is important to keep in mind since, although the focus at this moment remains epistemological, there is an underlying and deep concern/connection for the ethical and the political dimensions/repercussions to these modes of “knowledge-seeking.” (p. 187)

Harding though, what feminist empiricism, feminist “successor science,” and feminist standpoint epistemologies address obliquely and quite problematically, feminist postmodernism attacks head on. While the research methodology for this project moves beyond the three features, as listed above by Harding, it is nonetheless within the bounds of a subjugated (mother-daughter relationship), situated (research question directly related to the experience of that relationship), and reflexive (my own subjecthood is placed directly within the research frame) research-creation practice that this project takes shape.

Situated Knowledges

Donna Haraway’s (1988) article entitled *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* was written “as a commentary on Harding (1986), [and was delivered] at the Western Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association [in] March 1987” (p. 248). I note this to exemplify the fact that these discussions were a part of what was an incredibly lively and important debate within feminist theory, and to point out that it took place only 32 years ago. Perhaps to some 32 years is a long time, but in the grand narratives and the history(ies) of the development of Western modes of thought and “knowledge-seeking” which both of these thinkers point to - this quite simply is not. The particular period in feminist thought that characterizes these waves of thinking is described by Haraway as, the “objectivity debates.” She explains that, on the one hand Harding centres her wedge between the legacies of the feminist push for a “successor science” and the move to “postmodern accounts of difference.” Haraway on the other hand, distinguishes between what she refers to as “radical constructivism” versus “feminist critical empiricism.” In thinking these two sets of divisions one can consider “radical constructivism” as a “version of postmodernism” which holds a particular affinity for what Haraway refers to as the “acid tools of critical discourse.” This is a thinking whose “head on” tactics make brutal semiotic and deconstructive blows to the modernist mindset with such claims like, “History is a story Western culture buffs tell each other; science is a contestable text and a power field; [and] the content is the form” (p. 185). In other words, it’s a very serious language game.

“Humanist Marxism” is another term that Haraway uses which subsumes thinking that is qualified under the title of “standpoint theories” and that coincides with “feminist critical empiricism,” a theory also indebted to Marxism, which “[...] insist[s] on legitimate meanings of objectivity and which remains leery of a radical constructivism conjugated with semiology and narratology” (p. 186). Thus on the one hand you have accounts of knowledge that are radically “contingent” and, as such, unstable and continually deconstructable, and on the other hand, you have a steadfast commitment to “faithful accounts” of the ‘real.’ Haraway is clear when she states that,

[...] ‘our’ problem is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world [...]. Harding calls this a necessary multiple desire for a successor science and a postmodern insistence on irreducible difference and radical multiplicity of local knowledges. (p. 187)

It is thus a shared “problem” (circulating around the notion of “objectivity”) that brings Haraway and Harding together: the need to balance the necessary toppling effects of postmodernism against the need for making a better, more “faithful account,” of the world. They come from slightly different angles, mobilizing different rhetorics on their way there, but ultimately the “successor” goals and the postmodern hopefulness that Harding presents come together, for Haraway, with her concept of *situated knowledges*; “I would like a doctrine of *embodied* objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: feminist objectivity quite simply means situated knowledges” (p. 188).

What then distinguishes Haraway’s *embodiment* from the embodied female experience advocated for by the standpoint epistemologists? Haraway explains that “feminist embodiment” has nothing to do with a “fixed” position in a necessarily *female* body. Instead, for Haraway, it is “[...] about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning” (p. 195). Her conception of “fields of meaning” as “material-semiotic” bridges the initial divisions that concerned both Haraway and Harding. *Situated knowledges* are thus *objective* but not “[...] about fixed vision [because] what counts as an *object* is precisely what world history turns out to be about” (p. 195). Haraway’s theoretical

move to (re)situate “objectivity” is actually a move that sets it on the run or perhaps multiplies it. In other words, she does not dismiss “objectivity” but instead *splits* it up, along with its accompanying “subjectivity”, and *re-positions* it – in “specific” “material-semiotic” bodies that do not access, transcendently, an object, but are busy being thoroughly “objective” here and there, but not everywhere at once.²² To effect this change she focuses on the forever-generative faculty of vision, on its “embodied nature,” in order to, “[...] reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into the conquering gaze from nowhere” (p. 188).

Thus, Haraway pins down those tools/terms that have been rhetorically wielded with material consequences for the purposes of exclusion and domination, and instead uses them as a means of promoting partiality *as* rationality (“Objectivity as positioned rationality”). (p. 196) But finally, with *situated knowledges* comes the burden of responsibility. This is key for the development of feminist methods and methodologies because it emphasizes the way in which researchers must “[...] become answerable for what [they] learn how to see” (p. 190). Our “objects” of study are never that way before we “position” them as such – what *situated knowledges* present are essentially “boundary projects” (p. 201). These are projects, for Haraway, that come with an added level of “risk,” they are “[...] about mutual and usually unequal structuring” and about acknowledging a foundational *lack* of “control” (p. 201).

Following that trajectory, feminist research going forward was thus required to heed Haraway’s warning and be wary that, “What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. [And as such] Siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice” (p. 201). This points towards feminist methodologies that, no matter the disciplinary intersection, maintain strong ethical and/or political responsibility in the design of

²² Haraway introduces two key terms related to her concept of situated knowledges: “splitting” and “positioning.” Splitting stands in opposition to “being” as well as the dichotomy of “self-other.” Splitting does not allow for the unified or fixed stance as such there is always a relation between (one that binds and does not allow for such a simple dyad). Haraway describes it as, “[...] heterogeneous multiplicities that are simultaneously necessary and incapable of being squashed into isomorphic slots or cumulative lists.” (p. 193) Positioning may be likened to the supporting practice to splitting, in that it, “[grounds] knowledge organized around the imagery of vision [...] [and it] implies responsibility for our enabling practices.” (p. 193) Ultimately, situated knowledges produce selves that are “[...] partial in all [their] guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another.” (p. 193) Thus, the “knowing self” as described by Haraway, is one that is thoroughly split yet grounded and, most importantly, its “objective” and “rational” accounts are directly related to the “joints” which connect it (imperfectly) to the world around it. (self as “node”)

their research “boundaries.” *Situated knowledges* demand the kind of reflexivity highlighted by Harding in combination with a kind of inescapably and grounded relationality that forces the researcher(s) to answer for the “objects” (and “bodies” of knowledge) they produce. For the methodological purposes of this project, it is thus on the foundation of this *lack* of control that the *risky* and *unequal* boundary project of bringing an unspeakable story to screen rests. Furthermore, I would like to highlight the ethical responsibilities related to the question of how one can *become answerable for what they learn how to see*. This tension within my own work will be elaborated on in Chapter 3, but I would argue that, for many of the artists and filmmakers that I discuss in the coming pages, it is precisely on this point that their work offers some of its most exciting potential.

Feminist Media Making: Mother Art(ists)

The critical question is precisely how the mother–child coupling is posed. Traditionally, the perfect paradigm of the figure of ethics and alterity—that is, the giving of the self to the other—is the mother. [...] Indeed, the mother’s lack of selfhood represents the singular exemplar of motherhood. The figure of the mother finds herself, ad infinitum, at the selfless centre bearing the burden of singular responsibility and representation. (Liss, p. xx)

Keeping in mind the development of feminist methodologies, as explicated above, I will now (rewind to the 1970s and) move to look at certain traditions in feminist media making - specifically in regards to the representation of motherhood and the mother-child dyad. Cultural theorist and art historian Andrea Liss (2009) traces a history of the relationship between the subject of the maternal and feminist art practices. Stressing the immense difficulty in “posing” the mother-child dyad, Liss is quick to underline the fact that, “[...] early feminists did not give up motherhood in a wholesale fashion but looked instead for ways to negotiate and refute polarized thinking that forbade the coexistence of feminism and motherhood.” (p. xvi) Echoing the attempts made by Lucy Lippard (1976) to, “[...] question the absence of artwork by women that addressed images or experiences of motherhood” (p. 1), Liss begins from the same time period and location - 1970’s United States of America – what she refers to as, “[...] the dawning of crucial early feminist artwork that addressed the complexities of the domestic and the maternal from the mother’s perspective.” (p. 1)

Liss discusses a number of early artistic works: *The Laundry Works* (1977) projects by the LA collective of “artist-mothers” known as *Mother Art* – these projects took place in local Laundromats where the artists would enact performances for the duration of the wash- and-dry cycle; *Laura’s Layette* (1975-76) was a piece by New York based artist Elaine Reichek who brought her maternal life into the gallery placing side by side on two canvases a knitted baby sweater and complex architectonic diagrams as a means of commenting on the “male dominated art world”; *Womb with a View* (1983) is a joint effort by Sherry Milner and Ernest Larsen which presents a “humorous” and “ironic” look at, among other things, the potential for emerging formations of subjectivity through a mother’s experience of pregnancy; *Ten Months* (1979) was a “pioneering photograph and text installation” by London based artist Susan Hiller who, while she was pregnant, “took full-body photographs of herself every day and kept a journal” which chronicled her observations of her “bodily and psychic journeys” in those months; and finally, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) is a film made in London by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen which re-figures the “dominant phallic gaze” in cinema working towards a representation of the maternal as a “[...] thinking, creative space in which the mother reconfigures the historically limited range of her prescribed cultural and psychic worlds” (p.17).

Laura Mulvey (1975), in *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema* came up with the now famous notion of “the gaze” which uses psychoanalysis to relate cinematic representation to male/female cinematic spectatorship in order to explain the way in which female characters are othered on screen, stripped of power – put in a position, through psychic processes of disavowal and projection, to be dominated by the “phallic” gaze. Kaja Silverman (1988) explicates this process thoroughly, adding an acoustic dimension to Mulvey’s dominating “gaze.” Instead of a focus on moving images alone, Silverman theorizes the treatment of the female voice in fiction film problematizing, like many of the artists discussed in this project, the use of the metaphor of the maternal. In her case, she associates it with the fantasy of “the sonorous envelope” – what she describes as “[...] a blanket of sound, [that] extend[s] on all sides of the infant” (p. 72). Silverman addresses Mulvey and Wollen’s film as well – calling attention to the same mid seventies period as Liss and noting it as, “[...] a distinct historical moment, the moment at which feminism intersected decisively with alternative cinema, film theory, and psychoanalytic theory” (p. 101). Silverman’s central concept of the “choric fantasy” is located precisely at that “intersection.”

In considering these five pieces, Liss acknowledges the many ways in which these artists, through their feminist practice, were able to challenge the problematic mother-child coupling. When discussing Milner and Larsen's video she points to the fact that much of this early work moved beyond simply addressing "motherhood" (and pregnancy as "subset") towards an actual exploration and untangling of the "[...] complexities of the mother's subjectivity and intersubjective relationships between the mother-artist and her child" (p. 5). There was however, what Liss calls "distancing strategies" employed in many of these early works (specifically in Hiller's piece) in order to ensure that these feminist projects were not co-opted by a kind of normalizing sentimentalism (i.e. the focus was not to be on "cute" babies and "happy" mommies – and arguably, neither was it to be on the precarious and overly emotional mother, *the woman on the edge*). It is useful to recall Harding when thinking about Liss' claim that what makes these works so powerful and "pioneering" is the fact that they "[address] pregnancy from the artist-mother's intellect and sexed subjectivity" (p. 16). This is a repositioning of the knowledge making subject so as to include (so as to learn to *see* and *hear* from) the subjugated position of the mother. For Liss, Hiller's photo and text installation shares an "affinity" with the work of philosopher Rosi Braidotti (1989), more specifically her "[...] ideas on subjectivity, the sexed subject, and bodily knowledge" (p.16). Liss quotes Braidotti, stating that,

The "body in question" is the threshold of subjectivity; as such it is neither the sum of its organs—a fixed biological essence—nor the result of social conditioning—a historical entity. The "body" is rather to be thought of as the point of intersection, as the interface between the biological and the social, that is to say between the socio-political field of the microphysics of power and the subjective dimension. (p. 16)

For Braidotti, and for these "artist-mothers," the body is found in the compromising position as laid out by Harding and then Haraway. It is neither "fixed biological" nor entirely a structure of language and "social conditioning." Finally, this exploration and reconceptualization of the mother comes to figure for what I would refer to as the practice of relationality in feminist filmmaking. In *Riddles of the Sphinx* there is a focus on "[...] how social issues coexist with the psychic space of the maternal" (p. 18) – in the film this creates what Liss refers to as "polymorphous maternal spaces" (p. 21). She likens this mode of relationality to the work of Luce Irigaray, explaining that,

She [Irigaray] accords a special significance to the fluid and multiple aspects of the maternal body, not only a literal and physical body but also states of being that must be phrased and imagined [...]. (p. 20)

It is thus *through* this relational stance of the maternal that these artists re-work, in multiple ways, the troubling mother-child dyad, turning to and speaking from the position of the mother herself while acknowledging the co-implications of social and psychic factors in shaping *her experiences* – all this without recourse to “sentimentality.”

There is one additional project from this time period to which Liss dedicates an entire chapter, describing it as, “[...] the best-known art project from the 1970s among those works that approached the maternal as a crucial site for art making and cultural address” (p. 34). This project is Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79). This document however, does not solely and most simply refer to “the point of separation between the mother and child.” Liss explains it instead as the imagining of a “newness” that results from possibilities for mutual acknowledgments and continuous unfolding of selves between the mother and the child. Here again, we see the points that were highlighted by Liss’ inclusion of the work of Braidotti and Irigaray, emphasizing the emergent kind of relationality and intersubjectivity that takes place between the mother, her child, and the “material-semiotic” world around them – bodily, psychic and linguistic intersections. This of course opposes the caricature of the mother as selfless preserver, defined by both plenteousness and ultimate lack. Instead, playing off of a psychoanalytic framework, “Kelly’s labor- and time-intensive project grants the mother an active thinking and writing space within the Lacanian scheme of the child’s Imaginary” (P. 24).²³ The *Post-Partum Document* is a work that was put together over the course of six years and is itself composed of six different sections. Liss explains that as one technique employed in the

²³ Liss explains the Lacanian Imaginary as, “[...] the space in which the infant lives in the maternal realm, before language, as opposed to the Symbolic, where the child accesses language and moves into the patriarchal world.” (p. 24) It is during this period that Lacan developed the “mirror stage.” In this stage it is the mother that returns a sense of coherent wholeness to the child but in *Post-Partum*, Kelly allows for the figure of the mother to “[reflect] herself back to herself.” (p. 25) This is an activation of the place of the mother – freeing her from simply acting as source of unity for the child. Liss explains this succinctly, stating that, “In psychoanalytic terms, language is the key site of differentiation from the mother. Thus Kelly’s active and informed position vis-à-vis her son’s language development sabotages the concept of the mother as a passive site.” (p. 28) It is thus through Kelly’s ingenious use of language, both her sons, her own, and Lacanian diagrams, that allows her to re-signify the place of the mother – reworking the troubling dyad so to acknowledge the active exchanges on both sides and the newness that is produced for the mother as well as the growing child.

document Kelly “[...] superimposed her texts onto her son’s drawings, creating an unusually strong visual metaphor for mother–child intersubjectivity and maternal distance within that relationship” (p. 29). This process of resignification allowed Kelly to create new discursive terrains for reimagining intersubjective relationships.

Kelly discusses the particular significance of the kind of relationality underlining the way in which, with *Post-Partum*, she was trying to “[...] articulate the feminine as discourse, and [that] therefore places the emphasis on intersubjective relationships which constitute the female subject” (p. 23). This is important because in pointing to the discursivity of the female subject Kelly is problematizing through “distantiation” the image of the maternal (and female) body. She highlights the central role of female artists’ bodies in much contemporary art at that time and, in going along with the anti-sentimental attitudes of many of the mother-artists previously discussed, Kelly decided intentionally to exclude all images of the figure of the mother in this work. Along with this, Kelly creates a link between the problematic Freudian notion of the child as maternal fetish object (phallic replacement) and the ultimate role of art objects as fetish objects – for her, this “[...] expose[s] the typically fetishistic function of representation” (p. 23). As such, it is through her acute abilities to resignify the practices that shape normative modes of representation that she is able to make emerge a new figuration of the mother- child coupling. I would argue that, in terms of a link back to feminist methodological practices, she is creating new and exciting *objects* of study through her reworking of the relational *subject* of the mother – this is a “boundary project” on a drastically different epistemological terrain than the one advocated for by modernist thinkers. For Kelly, this terrain is highly discursive, autobiographical, and deeply entangled in a history of masculinist psychoanalytic structuring.²⁴

Although the central objective of this thesis project, with a creative practice at its core, was, like for the above artists, to work through the complicated subject of the maternal and the mother-child dyad, it did so from a markedly different perspective - that of the grown daughter/child - and within a different historical moment. That said, it is only on the backs of the

²⁴ It is also important to note that most of these mother-artworks share a common method in their commitment to a long-term process. Liss explains that this was “a crucial part of early 1970s artwork based in rethinking psychoanalytic studies of gender differentiation and Marxist feminist ideas about the sexual division of labor.” (p. 38) We can draw again on Harding here, noting the relationship between feminist work in academia and the art world – both, in the seventies and early to mid eighties, preoccupied with a reworking of psychoanalytic and Marxist ideology.

work of these artists that the methodological road map for *Everybody Gets Sad* is even conceivable, let alone acceptable, as both art and research practice at the doctoral level - and for that I am both grateful and indebted to their groundbreaking work. The following history of feminist documentary and experimental autoethnography is not a separate trajectory from those mentioned above, but may be looked at as explorations that exist parallel to the problematics being worked out by these aforementioned (mother) artists – picking up on such feminist methods as autobiography, relationality, and reflexivity, while maintaining connections to academic discourse.

Documentary Film & Autoethnographic Praxis

In her discussion of how civil rights events of the 60s facilitated the upsurge in feminist documentaries, Ann E. Kaplan (1983) notes the invention of lightweight equipment associated with cinema vérité, described as, the documentary which “allowed reality to happen on the screen.” “Capturing” aspects of women’s lives, “allowing reality to happen”- these are precisely the assumptions about these early documentaries that would cause other feminist writers to reject them in favor of a feminist counter cinema. Claire Johnston (1973) is precisely one of those “feminist writers” who did not believe in the “reality” dream of the *direct cinema* (or cinema vérité) branch of documentary filmmaking. Instead, in her essay *Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema* she comes to see film as a form of “mediation” claiming that, “Women’s cinema cannot afford such idealism; the “truth” of our oppression cannot be “captured” on celluloid with the “innocence” of the camera: it has to be constructed/manufactured” (p. 37). With this she goes on the state that,

[...] the danger of developing a cinema of non-intervention is that it promotes a passive subjectivity at the expense of analysis. Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality. (p. 37)

The ultimate goal being, for Johnston, to develop “new meanings” so as to break apart “the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema.”

One can see reflected in these claims, characterized by Waldman & Walker (1999) as part of the “Reality Debates,” similar kinds of critiques and problematics as those that

surrounded Harding and Haraway's "objectivity debates." In both cases there is an urgent move away from the "passive subjectivity" and mirroring of the dangerous "all seeing" (abstract) objective eye. Waldman & Walker go on to state that,

[...] the wedding of the critique of realism with the goals of feminism was a crucial development that had enormous consequences for the direction of feminist film theory and marginalization of documentary within it. (p. 8)

Because of the fetishization of the realist principle in documentary precipitated by Grierson, feminist film theory remained heavily sceptical of documentary "truth" telling practices and turned to the more fragmentary and ambivalent territory of experimental and autobiographical filmmaking.

Looked at from a certain angle, the Griersonian project can be seen as a fetishization of the real based on an understanding of fetishism as explained by Silverman (1988). She explicates fetishism as resulting from the Freudian Oedipal complex. She states that,

[...] the fetish classically functions not so much to conceal woman's castration but to deny man's, and that this goal can be achieved only by identifying lack with what is exclusive to woman, i.e., with her anatomy. [...] woman who represents the "original" fetish, woman herself who is required to conceal from the male subject what he cannot know about himself. (p. 20)

Thus, if you follow this line of thinking, this would mean that for Grierson, the investment in artful representations of "real life" actually "announces" the artificiality of the "reality" which this kind of "social" documentary tries to "conceal." It "conceals" the formal filmmaking aspects which preserve the "reality" principle which subsequently renders coherent the world out there to be "captured" by the silent all-seeing filmmaker. This might go towards an explanation of the early feminist rejection of documentary film, as well as towards Cowie's (2011) desire to explore "the uncanny" or "the Real" that seeps out from within the "objective" documentary frame.

One can now gain a better perspective on the Mother-Art works mentioned above, particularly the work of Mulvey and Milner as directly springing out of this early somewhat anti-documentary (anti any kind of passive "representation of reality") feminist tradition and

motivation. Reflecting on the results of these “realist debates” Alisa Lebow (2008), echoing Michael Renov (2004), explains that,

The emergence of the subject in documentary has long been hampered by the burden of disinterested objectivity, an impossible ideal that required enumerable *evasions and repressions* to effect. (p. xii, my italics)

I would argue that the work that Julia Lesage (1999) discusses in her essay on experimental feminist autobiography points precisely to these “repressions.”²⁵ Waldman & Walker label this work “Innovative (Auto)biography”, Catherine Russell (1999) calls it (among other things) “New Autobiography,” and Lebow might extend, at least partially, the notion that many of these filmmakers share what she calls the “Child’s-Eye-View.” This area of feminist film and video making is characterized by the work of such filmmakers as, Michelle Citron (1980), Mona Hatoum (1988), Vanalyne Green (1989), Lynn Hershman (1989), Chantal Akerman (1991), Mindy Faber (1993), and Margaret Stratton (1994). It is from within this group of filmmakers, with their “Child’s-Eye-View,” that I wish to situate the video work of this thesis - *Everybody Gets Sad* (to be explored further in Chapter 3).

Each of the above makers could be said to have, through their work, “Enact[ed] in its stylistic ruptures and subject matter – an artist’s reflection on her womanly inheritance- a sensibility often found in women’s experimental autobiographical video as it expresses women’s fragmented consciousness” (Lesage, p. 309). The *fragmentation* of female consciousness is what is so central to the cause of this form of film and video making – a form which sits (un)comfortably at the axis of experimental film, documentary, and autobiography. The looming question throughout these works often pertains to the status of the referent in the video – a status which is always multiple and intentionally problematic. Lesage explains how the makers of experimental autobiographies,

[...] understand how hegemonic discourse refuses the reality of women’s fragmented consciousness. Unlike social issues documentarists working over the same twenty years in a realist mode, most of these women artists do not presume to represent a continuous stable identity or a cohesive self. Rather, they pursue

²⁵ Julia Lesage, “Women’s Fragmented Consciousness in Feminist Experimental Autobiographical Video,” in Waldman and Walker (1999), p. 309-337.

an epistemological investigation of what kinds of relations might constitute the self, using as a laboratory their own consciousness. (p. 311)

I might push this further and claim that these makers recognize the contingency of their conscious formations and as such they use the autobiographical mode as a methodological entry point through which to unpack the fragmentation at the root of their conception as subjects. Lesage claims that it is such things as, “material oppression, colonialism and racism, [and] the [overall] structures of women’s lives as women” that are the cause of this psychic splitting. (p. 310) What this splitting allows for is the opening up and the going over of a past (in the present) that, for these filmmakers, is rooted (to one degree or another) in the constantly unbinding knot of childhood trauma. For many of these makers this problematic is located in the gap that forms between images they have of the past (from their childhood), both material and in the shape of memories, and the uncanny feeling of the *real* that tells them (over and over again) that something is not right – that those images (however “evidential”) in fact *tell a lie*. It is precisely from this gap that the motivation for this thesis project emerges.

Lebow describes Citron’s filmmaking approach as the,

[...] feminist defamiliarization tactic that attempts to subvert naturalized power inscribed in the father’s patriarchal gaze. [This] posits the daughter’s authorial seizure of control over the images, and hence over the representation, of the family mythology. (p. 46)

Citron’s “destructive critique of the nuclear family” is composed of two interweaving narratives: one is of two supposed sisters in their mother’s home reminiscing about their childhood as their mother is sick in the hospital, and the other is a repeating segment of optically printed home movies. Citron (1999) explains that her film, “[...] blurs the boundaries between documentary, narrative fiction, and experimental filmmaking” (p. 180). The fact that the two sisters are actually actresses playing roles with scripts based off of mixed testimonies from other women is not ever revealed in the film – as such it is the very status of documentary and home movies as evidence of the “truth” that Citron is commenting on.

Russell notes that,

The testimonial, confessional character of autoethnography often assumes a site of authenticity and veracity, originating in the filmmaker’s experience.

And yet fake diaries and autobiographies by Orson Welles (*F is for Fake*, 1975) and Michele Citron (*Daughter Rite*, 1979) [...], demonstrate the unreliability of the form. (p. 279)

The reappropriation of the child's "voice" or "eye-view" is not necessarily the "inner child of transactional psychology," instead it "[...] may have its source in all-too-common trauma within a dysfunctional family, but as a persistent presence in many women's psyches it has other sources, and it is reinforced by major social and psychological structures" (Lesage, p.320-21). I would claim that Lebow reverts to romantic and modernist ideals (precisely what Lesage warns against) when she refers to the child like narcissism at the center of Citron's (1980) and Berliner's (1996) films, calling them "proverbial tantrums," but redeeming them with a reference to Bachelard and stating that, "These *rants* enable what Bachelard claims is like the provenance of the poet: They allow us to imagine "a childhood re-animated" (My italics, p. 48). The "Wordsworthian" affinity here to picture the child with simplicity and "poetic" innocence in mind does not work for the kind of fully-fragmented work these makers are producing. To make this claim, I believe, is to undermine the power of these films and videos which do precisely what Lebow is so interested in – that is, they raise that which was "repressed" – that which does not cohere with our normative conceptions of "the real." Within the frame of *Everybody Gets Sad* the younger versions of both Ivy and Vanessa are never to be seen with innocence or clarity. Instead, it is my intention to see them as agents of the past in the present. These are not coherent selves representative of a unified or memorable past, but instead, they are fragments of a past that exist as reminders of the fact that *we* may never have been *there* at all.

Furthermore, one of the taboo elements which unites these makers is their outright acknowledgement of "the economy of masochism in most women's lives" and as such their "refusal" to deny its "usefulness."²⁶ What experimental autobiographical practices allow these makers to do is develop a means through which to come to terms with the impossible (necessarily fragmented) position of female (inter)subjectivity – one that sometimes finds a means of "recuperating pleasure" from living in a "rape and incest culture" but simultaneously "tak[es] up the struggle for social change" (p. 334). Feminist work, whether it is academic or artistic, is historically tied to a commitment to political and social activism. Alexandra Juhasz

²⁶ I should be clear and state that not all of the filmmakers mentioned above deal so explicitly with issues of female masochism. Lesage (1999), when making this claim, is focusing primarily on the video work of Stratton (1994), Green (1989), and Hershman (1989).

(2001), in her interview based historiographic attempt to chronicle feminist media making practices, explains that,

Media feminism was not only influenced by [ideas] and struggles occurring in the "real world"; it also was shaped by the work of feminist scholars across traditional academic disciplines who developed interpretations of what it means to be female (or male) in a patriarchy. In the '70s, activist intellectuals insisted that their work (teaching, writing, creating and altering ideas) comes from and contributes to political change. (p. 22)

More specifically, Juhasz states that, the “political function” of making media for black women and “other politicized groups” was two pronged: “[...] through the mainstream, in critiquing dominant images and organizing to get minorities into the media; and through forming alternative institutions and representations” (p. 22).

Keeping this in mind, it is difficult to imagine mobilizing or even thinking a politics around work that holds in tension so many contradictory and “disjunctive” positions. Lesage’s answer is a queer stance. She explains that queer communities, “[...] take into consideration the ways in which their constituencies live within many roles, participate in contradictory discourses, and have different needs at different moments in their daily lives” (p. 335). As such, mirroring the words of Berlant and Warner (1995), she presents a queer perspective as a means of avoiding “the reductionism of the political discourse” that accompanies most feminist projects. I have strategically left out an important element of this discussion until we arrived at this point – that is, the fact that many of the above mentioned films and videos might be considered to be “experimental ethnography,” as discussed by Russell or, “autoethnography,” as discussed by Adams & Jones (2008) and José Esteban Muñoz (1999). Russell explains that,

Autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film- or videomaker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes. Identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a “staging of subjectivity”- a representation of the self as performance. (p. 276)

This awareness of the position of the self in relation to larger historical discourses as well as the mainstream modes of signification which structure (hetero)normative identity categories, is what

lends autoethnography what Mary Louise Pratt (1992) would call its “oppositional” status. Russell quotes Pratt, who states that, “If ethnographic texts are the means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations” (p. 277).

Employing terms used by documentary scholar Bill Nichols (1994), Russell emphasizes the same tendencies as Lesage, explaining that, “The *fragmented* and *hybrid* identities produced in the multitude of “personal” films and videos have been celebrated by critics and theorists as forms of “embodied knowledge” and “politics of location” (My italics, p. 276). What is important here is the redefinition of “ethnicity” that comes with these works – it is not about fitting in one identity category or another, but about the complex “[...] cultural formation of the subject.” I would like to add a few filmmakers who were not mentioned above to what Russell refers to as “New Autobiography” (and “contemporary personal cinema”) – namely, Richard Fung (1990), Marlon Riggs (1989), Sue Freidrich (1984), and Deborah Hoffman (1994). These works of “personal cinema,” for her, can be “[...] cast as a form of experimental ethnography [...] suggestive of the role of the diary film and video in the rethinking of ethnographic knowledge” (p. 279). It is important to note that many of these autoethnographic filmmakers “stage encounters” with their parents or grandparents in their works because they “embody a particular cultural history of displacement or tradition,” Russell refers to this as a reoccurring theme in “contemporary personal cinema.” The examples she gives for this tradition include: Fung’s *The Way to my Fathers Village* (1988) & *My Mother’s Place* (1990), Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance* (1988), and Friedrich’s *The Ties That Bind* (1984). The *staging of encounters* was a representational strategy that I appropriated from this tradition for the creation of this thesis film. Specifically, in *Everybody Gets Sad*, the mock-cooking show between Ivy and Vanessa is meant to recall a legacy of feeding and cooking that Jewish women in my family carry down.

Autoethnography, thus, as a feminist methodological practice, complicates and splits up the pioneering “standpoints” of *women’s experience* in favor of a more “ironic” and “risky” investment in epistemological production. Russell explains that,

Much of the new autobiography emanates from queer culture, from film- and videomakers whose personal histories unfold within a specifically public sphere.

It is also produced by many for whom ethnicity or race casts their own history as an allegory for a community or culture that cannot be essentialized. (p. 278)

Adams & Jones (1995) go so far as to “hinge” *queer* and *autoethnography* together calling for the wedding of “queer autoethnography.” They note the everyday use of identity categories but underline the way in which “[...] these labels crumble upon interrogation, thus making a perpetual journey of self-understanding possible” (p. 382). They refer to queer autoethnography specifically as a “method” that “[...] encourages us to think through and out of our categories for interaction and to take advantage of languages failure to capture or contain selves, ways of relating, and subjugated knowledges” (p. 382). Thus, though these “risky” practices may lead to failures, that is ok because to deny failure is to repress a central aspect of our entrance into language – of our becoming “human.”

Muñoz analyzes the video work of Richard Fung, using it as an example of an autoethnographic practice that takes the risks posed by Judith Butler, but via a performative queer hybridity.²⁷ Muñoz explains how,

The relationship between a past and present identity is articulated through a voiceover near the end of *My Mother's Place*, when Fung explains that his mother: ‘connects me to a past I would have no other way of knowing. And in this sea of whiteness, of friends, enemies, and strangers, I look at her and I know who I am.’ The past that Rita makes available to Richard is not an essentialized racial past but instead a *necessary fiction* of the past that grounds the video artist in the present. (My italics, p. 89-90)

The use of archival personal materials, such as home movies and photos, has allowed makers like Fung and Citron to rework the past in the present by (artfully) trudging through the “[...] powerful and necessary fictions that [have allowed them] to see and explore truths that could [at one point] only be looked at obliquely” (Citron, p. 175). Like the “oppositional” nature of autoethnography as outlined by Pratt, Zimmerman & Ishizuka (2008) define home movies by “negation,” in their status as “noncommercial, nonprofessional, [and] unnecessary” (p. 1). As such, to “oppose” the ethnographic impetus to document hegemonic “selves” (subjects) and their

²⁷ Judith Butler (2005), explains that, “We must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human.” (p.136)

“others” (objects), it might only make sense to construct texts with materials of “negation” - those documents of the past whose evidentiary legitimacy must be chopped up and reworked as it comes up from “below.”²⁸

Zimmerman & Ishizuka go on to explain that the home movie is “[...] a subset of the amateur film movement located within individual and/or familial practices of visual recording of intimate events and rituals and intended for private usage and exhibition” (p. 8). They understand “Amateur Film” as, “[...] any work that operates outside of exchange values and is not produced to function as an exchange commodity” (p. 9). As a primary structuring element in *Everybody Gets Sad*, home movies function as a means of *excavating* a past and a story that does not cling to the evidentiary status that this kind of filmmaking claims to. Instead, following Zimmerman & Ishizuka, these home movies serve as portals within my video work. Inhabited by characters, who look familiar, but who I attempt to make strange through a periodic amnesia that seeks to question their power as referent, I use this material to mobilize its potential as a tool for *negating* the histories that binds me.

Conceptually, and in an effort to assist with this act of self-negation, this project understands itself as coming from the *reflexive interval*, as understood by documentary filmmaker and postcolonial theorist Trinh T Minh-Ha (1991). For Trinh, “The process of self-constitution is also that in which the self vacillates and loses its assurance. The paradox of such a process lies in its fundamental instability: an instability that brings forth the disorder inherent to every order” (p. 105). Coming from this “unstable” foundation of the self, Trinh explicates the place from which her understanding of this kind of “self”- reflexivity comes. This is a “reflexivity” that characterizes a documentary practice that exposes and challenges the “aesthetics of objectivity” characteristic of traditional objective modes of filmmaking. I would add that working from and through this place also challenges the stable (even if plural) and subjective “I(s)” of Lebow’s first-person documentaries. In explaining the “reflexive interval”, Trinh states that,

It is the place in which the play within the textual frame is a play on this very frame, hence on the borderlines of the textual and extratextual, where a

²⁸ Zimmerman and Ishizuka (2008) describe their historiographic project in *Mining the Home Movie* as a “film history from below” put together by those who “mine amateur film,” in their case, focusing on the international excavation of home movie practices. (p.2)

positioning within constantly incurs the risk of decomposition, and where the work, never freed from historical and sociopolitical contexts nor entirely subjected to them, can only be itself by constantly risking being no-thing. (p. 105)

Trinh's "reflexive interval" is an essential part of the groundwork for *Everybody Gets Sad*, in that, inherent to my methodology is the need to take risks, engage grounds that are unstable and slippery, and embrace the contingency of self-reflexivity and collaboration. Ultimately, the feminist practice of this project has been to constantly work and rework *experience* (reading and writing) in order to create a textual (video) trace of a lived *process* that serves not only as a signifier of one of the most intimate and tangled relations with an Other (with my *mother*), but as an example of the kind of creative risk that may be undertaken within the academic and institutionally sanctioned ethical space of a university.

Queer Territory

The link between Trinh's conceptual making space of the *reflexive interval* and my insistence on a move towards queer thinking and making, centres around the slippery and fundamentally unstable methodological frame which she emphasizes so intently. Berlant & Warner explain that, "[...] no particular project is metonymic of queer commentary" (p. 345). What this means is that because "queer commentary" itself cannot be 'contained', within one particular way of understanding, it cannot then stand in for or be represented by any singular discursive and/or political project (it cannot be "reduced"). Historically, Adams & Jones attribute the term to the work of Judith Butler (1990-2005), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985-2003), and Teresa de Lauretis (2001), focusing on its disciplinary "roots" from within the fields of feminism, gay and lesbian studies, and identity politics. They explain that,

Queer theory developed in response to a normalizing of (hetero)sexuality as well as from a desire to disrupt insidious social conventions. Fluidity and dynamism characterize queer thought, motivating queer researchers to work against disciplinary legitimation and rigid categorization. (p. 381)

What is key though, in relation to its lack of metonymic potential, is the fact that while it cannot be contained, it is also very much about containment – or I would say instead, “context.” As such, Berlant & Warner are careful to explain that, “The danger of the label queer theory is that it makes its queer and nonqueer audiences forget [contextual] differences and imagine a context (theory) in which *queer* has a stable referential content and pragmatic force” (p. 344). It would seem then, that the difficulty with *queer theory* is that, while “fluidity and dynamism” characterize it, one must be careful to understand this potential within the very different and contradictory contexts from which, through which, and towards which “queerness” moves. Thus, the “anxiety” that Berlant & Warner point to for “queer and non-queer identified humanists” springs from its inescapably contingent dynamism (p. 344-45). I believe that inherent to Trinh’s *reflexive interval* is a fluidity and a contingent dynamism, that much like Haraway’s *situated knowledges*, requires a letting go of hegemonic frameworks while simultaneously requiring a committed awareness of historical and socio-political contexts.

I place *queer theory* within a discussion of “feminist standpoint epistemologies” and “situated knowledges” because I view the queer concern with “sustain[ing] awareness of diverse context boundaries” while simultaneously working against dichotomous (and oppressive) formations, as a continuation of the feminist methodologies that this thesis project finds itself squarely within. But what these boundaries point to as well is the contours of the “publics” to which the work is directed and concerned. Berlant & Warner explain that,

The labor of bringing sexual practices and desires to articulacy has tended to go along with a labor of ambiguating categories of identity. Just as AIDS activists were defined more by a concern for practice and for risk than by identity, so queer commentary has refused to draw boundaries around its constituency. (p. 345)

Thus, from Harding, to Haraway, to here, there seems to be a progressive loosening and tightening of boundaries all at the same time - although, it is perhaps less a tightening and more of a strong acknowledgment of context. As stated in the above quote, the *making speak* of “sexual practices and desires” was accompanied by the blurring and problematizing of those very categories which ignited the conversation in the first place. Locating a point of emergence for queer politics in the AIDS crisis of the late 80s and early 90s they further push their claim

underlining the spaces/places outside of academia for which this term was a root of political mobilization. As such, it seems best to characterize the relationship between feminist and queer theory as one with many shared and “overlapping” places held in tension with divergent “[...] aims and therefore potentially [divergent] politics” (Berlant & Warner, p. 346).

This project’s particular relationship to the feminist and queer archive is best framed through a brief unpacking of queer theorist Jack Halberstam’s (2011) conception of failure in relationship to a particular group of representations of the mother-daughter dyad, in what he calls “shadow feminisms.” Here he maps,

[...] the genealogy of an antisocial, anti-Oedipal, antihumanist, and counterintuitive feminism that arises out of queer, postcolonial, and black feminisms and that thinks in terms of the negation of the subject rather than her formation, the disruption of lineage rather than its continuation, the undoing of self rather than its activation. (126)

To do this he begins with a prompt from the work of Saidiya Hartman (2008) entitled *Lose Your Mother*, in which he argues for,

[...] a complete dismantling of self, [and explores] a feminist politics that issues not from a doing but from an undoing, not from a being or becoming woman but from a refusal to be or to become woman as she has been defined and imagined within Western philosophy. (p. 124)

For Hartman, “The only sure inheritance passed from one generation to the next was this loss and it defined the tribe. A philosopher had once described it as an identity produced by negation” (p. 103). This statement, arising out of a lineage of slavery for African Americans, speaks to a refusal of a legacy of subjugation as well as a rejection of dominant forms of freedom, because, quoting Halberstam, “If freedom, as Hartman shows, was offered to the slave as a kind of contract with capital, then moving about, being restless, refusing to acquire property or wealth flirts with forms of liberty that are unimaginable to those who offer freedom as the freedom to become a master” (p. 145). Here, he develops the lens of negativity and failure for a body of works subsumed under the label of what he calls “counterintuitive feminism.”

This is a feminist archive that is not bound by a “[...] humanistic investment in both the female subject and the fantasy of an active, autonomous, and self-activating individualism” (p. 130), but is a feminism that,

[...] has nestled in more positivist accounts and unraveled their logics from within. This shadow feminism speaks in the language of self-destruction, masochism, an antisocial femininity, and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter that ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so reproduces her relationship to patriarchal forms of power. (p. 124)

This self-destructive form of “speaking” he describes can be found in the work of postcolonial feminists such as Gayatri Spivak (1999) and Saba Mahmood (2004), who have, “[...] shown how prescriptive Western feminist theories of agency and power, freedom and resistance tend to be and have proposed alternative ways of thinking about self and action that emerge from contexts often rejected outright by feminism” (p. 126). Here, I point to Halberstam’s integration of *high and low* voices in his working through of an archive of failure, tracing the antisocial turn away from an *empowering* becoming woman/becoming vocal, as he places Spivak and Mahmood alongside Babs (an animated character from Dreamworks’ *Chicken Run*, 2000).²⁹ I would like to include Citron’s *Daughter Rite* as a film that would fit within his “shadow feminist archive,” as I believe that it voices the kind of earnest rage and refusal to be happy, cohere, and “be honest” in regards to the mother-daughter bond, that Halberstam highlights as the source of this counterintuitive feminism.

In attempting to align this thesis project with Halberstam’s antisocial feminist archive, I, along with him, must pose the question of, “What happens if a woman or feminine subject who occupies a privileged relation to dominant culture occupies her own undoing?” (p. 133) For an example of this feminine subject he cites the work of Elfriede Jelinek (1983), explaining that, like Kincaid, her novel, “[...] *The Piano Teacher* documents the destructiveness of the mother-daughter bond. Needless to say, Austrians were not terribly pleased at her selection by the Nobel

²⁹ Halberstam explains that, “Like Babs, and indeed like Spivak and Mahmood, I am proposing that feminists refuse the choices as offered - freedom in liberal terms or death - in order to think about a shadow archive of resistance, one that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, and unbeing. This could be called an antisocial feminism, a form of feminism preoccupied with negativity and negation.” (129)

committee, and her works regularly received poor reviews in both Europe and the U.S.” (133). In an explanation of the kind of passive masochism found in Jelinek’s novel Halberstam notes that,

Erika’s passivity is a way of refusing to be a channel for a persistent strain of fascist nationalism, and her masochism or self-violation indicates her desire to kill within herself the versions of facism that are folded into being - through taste, through emotional responses, through love of country, love of music, love of her mother. (p. 135)

Through a resistance to act in the name of her country and literally stabbing and cutting at her own flesh Jelinek’s character negates all that entraps her – those legacies that have mapped her from the inside out. Ending in the death of her and her mother, she destroys both her own being and the one that brought it into existence. Here again, Halberstam is promoting a kind of feminist resistance, a passively masochistic one (from a privileged position), that *frees* itself through its own violent destruction (unbecoming), and it does so by consciously taking Mother down with it.

Halberstam is careful to note the different histories that he is bringing together as he operates between the registers of queer theory and the shadow feminisms of black and postcolonial critique. They come together for him, however, in the project of imagining models of social life and ways of relating that embrace failure and refuse to succeed. I would claim that, together they offer pathways away from dominant roadmaps and, in their antisocial intent, offer a way out, precisely through an exploration of the question of *what could happen* if our desires were otherwise? What is the potential of embracing narratives and subjectivities that give up, end it all, fall apart, refuse to speak, get sad and break down without ever having the hope of coming together again? As I have been careful to note the different histories that this project has taken shape within, I, like him, want to know *what happens if there is no happy ending?* In the making of *Everybody Gets Sad*, in my encounters with my mother, there was no happy ending, there was only acceptance and failure. Acceptance, for my purposes, came in the form of feeling, and that feeling was sadness. In an attempt to find our happy ending, I failed and I only found sadness, but I would argue that in following the methodological history that I have set up here – that was perhaps the only story for me to find.

Ultimately, in thinking about a historical trajectory for the development of feminist methodological practices, and this project as a result of that, I imagine that Harding’s “standpoint

theorists”, Haraway’s “situated knowledges”, and Halberstam’s “shadow feminisms”, point to what Berlant & Warner describe as – “a desire to create new contexts.” As it turns out, this “desire” is what they claim, gathers “[...] these different kinds of criticism together as queer theory” (p. 347). There are thus no “queer methods,” perhaps in the same way that Harding emphasized that there were no necessarily “feminist methods,” but what both of these trajectories emphasize is, the “[...] drive into *visibility* [of] both the cultural production of sexuality and the social context of feeling” (p. 347). This is the blending of “politics” and “feeling,” that for Berlant & Warner requires what I might venture to say is a “queer methodology” (if there was one) - that is, the need for “constant *syncretic* gestures and movements.” It is from this “syncretic” perspective that this thesis project operates, coming to be (and falling apart) in the heterogeneous realms of feminist, and queer, knowledge seeking and making. The following chapter will now unpack the thinking, making, and *feeling* process behind the central creative contribution of this thesis - *Everybody Gets Sad*.

CHAPTER 3

The Object of Creation: *Everybody Gets Sad*

Americans find difficulty very hard to take. They are inevitably looking for a happy ending. Perversely, I will not give the happy ending. I think life is difficult and that is that. I'm not at all - absolutely not at all - interested in the pursuit of happiness. I am not interested in the pursuit of positivity. I am interested in pursuing truth, and the truth often seems to be not happiness but the opposite. – Jamaica Kincaid

The following chapter will look specifically at the making process behind *Everybody Gets Sad*. It will begin by briefly laying out the media landscape from which it emerges by focusing on a constellation of nine experimental autoethnographic videos and documentaries that rework the mother-daughter dyad from their unique situated experience. It will distill from them specific representational strategies that this project engaged with and was inspired by in the development of its own production. From there it will focus on the central creative object itself, breaking down the production process, the structure of the film and the parts that were left on the cutting room floor. It will do this through a self-reflexive unpacking of both the creative process and the parallel life narrative that I experienced while a part of it. This chapter will have a markedly different tone than the two previous ones as it moves away from an explication of the thinking and making histories and strategies that have enabled this project, and, using a diaristic voice, enters the embodied and lived experience of putting them into practice. It is important to note the break in tone between the “set up” and the “engagement” with the goal of this thesis, because I would claim that once I began to step into the frame of making, the distance I had from the project quickly swallowed itself up, never really to emerge again. As such, I mark this point, in the process and in the written thesis itself, as the moment when things really start to come undone and the *messiness* that is foundational to my research-creation methods emerges. This is also the point in the research-creation process where the emphasis shifts from feminist histories and strategies for *speaking to that which remains unspoken*, and turns to centre itself on the question that concerns the intersubjective experience which I aim to make speak, which is: *what was it like to be the daughter of a recovering mother? And more specifically, what was it like to attempt to represent that experience using a video making research-creation process?*

Before engaging with the creative object itself I will briefly unpack a selection of nine films which, in one way or another, have had a notable influence on the creative development of *Everybody Gets Sad*. The majority of these films and videos have already been mentioned in previous chapters, as they are classifiable under the experimental feminist documentary and

queer autoethnographic filmmaking lens that I have set up, and they each address the mother-daughter dyad from the daughter-filmmaker perspective. However, each of the nine works in the media list below figure mother-daughter relationships for different reasons, within different historical and socio-cultural contexts, and come from different aesthetic traditions. As such, the goal here is not to essentialize “mother-daughter relationships,” or the authorship of these makers as “female,” but to acknowledge the invaluable nature of their work in the creation of this thesis project. The following thematics are just a sample of the issues which are depicted by these makers through their figuration of the mother-daughter dyad: issues of sexuality and sexual identity, embodiment and beauty standards, diasporic and transnational identity, class and privilege, race, gender norms, sexual trauma, historical trauma, aging, mental illness, death, memory, mobility, family structures, and the documentary filmmaking process itself.

Media Landscape

Below is a selection of film and video works that were produced across a transnational territory and span the time period of 1977 to 2016. Each of these works address the mother-daughter relationship or intergenerational kinship structures among women within their overall thematic and are directed by female identified makers. They approach these themes through the pathway of *personal or (inter)subjective experience* and the active challenging of objective documentary and “truth” telling practices.³⁰

Central Media Works:³¹

1. *News From Home* (1977) – Dir. Chantal Akerman (Belgium, France, Germany)
Logline: Impersonal but beautiful images of Akerman's life in New York are combined with letters from her loving but manipulative mother, read by Akerman herself.
RT: 85 min
2. *Daughter Rite* (1980) – Dir. Michelle Citron (USA)

³⁰ There are other documentary and autoethnographic films and videos which address the mother-daughter dyad and which, in an expanded version of this thesis project would potentially be included, but within the limitations of this dissertation I chose to focus on these nine films as they each, in their own ways, were the most integral to my making process.

³¹ Loglines and film data for the following works was taken from IMDBPro, unless otherwise specified:
https://pro.imdb.com/?ref=tt_nv_hm_i

Logline: A documentary of a daughter's problematic relationship with her mother.
RT: 49 min

3. *Suburban Queen* (1985) – Dir. Mindy Faber (USA)

Logline: Portraying the relationship of a mother and daughter inextricably bound yet puzzled by each other's lives, Faber recounts her frustration with her mother's depression and passivity, and her fantasy of how her mother might transcend these conditions.³²

RT: 3:10 min

4. *Measures of Distance* (1988) – Dir. Mona Hatoum (UK)

Logline: Letters from a Palestinian woman living in war-torn Lebanon to her daughter, whom she has not seen for years, and a series of photographs of the woman, convey the effects of war and exile on personal and cultural life, and nuances of family relationships.

RT: 16 min

5. *The Body Beautiful* (1991) – Dir. Ngozi Onwurah (UK)

Logline: The story of a white mother who undergoes a radical mastectomy and her relationship with her black daughter who begins a modeling career.

RT: 23 min

6. *Delirium* (1993) – Dir. Mindy Faber (USA)

Logline: Defiantly humorous in its tone, *Delirium* reflects Faber's mother's personal experience with what has been classified as "female hysteria." While never reducing her mother's condition to a single explanation, *Delirium* firmly and convincingly links her illness to the historically embattled position women hold in a patriarchal culture.³³

RT: 23:03 min

7. *Stories We Tell* (2012) – Dir. Sarah Polley (Canada)

Logline: A film that excavates layers of myth and memory to find the elusive truth at the core of a family of storytellers.

RT: 108 min

8. *No Home Movie* (2015) – Dir. Chantal Akerman (Belgium, France)

Logline: The final film from groundbreaking auteur Chantal Akerman, *NO HOME MOVIE* is a portrait of her relationship with her mother, A Holocaust survivor and a familiar presence in many of her daughter's films.³⁴

RT: 115 min

³² Logline taken from Mindy Faber's Vimeo page for the video: <https://vimeo.com/18588007>

³³ Logline taken from Mindy Faber's Vimeo page for the video: <https://vimeo.com/31336521>

³⁴ Take from the Amazon Prime streaming link for Chantal Akerman's film: https://www.amazon.com/No-Home-Movie-English-Subtitled/dp/B01GJ96GGW/ref=tmm_aiv_swatch_1?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=

9. *Cameraperson* (2016) – Dir. Kristen Johnson (USA)

Logline: Exposing her role behind the camera, Kirsten Johnson reaches into the vast trove of footage she has shot over decades around the world. What emerges is a visually bold memoir and a revelatory interrogation of the power of the camera.

RT: 102 min

This thesis contextualizes the above works as examples of “situated knowledges” as well as those “oppositional [kinds of] speaking and writing,” which can, “help us to discern contradictions in our own experience [...]” (Stone-Mediatore, p. 131). As such, one of the central representational strategies that this project is interested in is the ways in which these filmmakers have conceived of and positioned the narrative “I” – as the subjective “voice” through which their particular kinship relations and experiences are told. A key decision for this research-creation project was figuring out how “I” would position the narrative voice of my own video work. A primary strategy which I mobilized, that is seen in many of these films, is the use of personal documents (home movies, photos, letters, etc.) as starting points for the making process – those archival materials that construct personal and family narratives and (un)willingly package family secrets in their silences and omissions.

Following the work of Citron, with her film *Daughter Rite*, this project incorporates those documents by questioning their referential power as evidence. In *Everybody Gets Sad* I use my family’s home movies as an alternate reality that exists behind the scenes, as I attempt to engage with my mother in a discussion that really has no end. The evidence of our past flows through the film, but not as a means of corroborating the present or solidifying the past. Instead, the clips I use are like psychological undertows that do not necessarily take you back, (because where would you be going back to?) but are meant to drag you away from any solid chronological family narrative in order to bring you into the back and forth of my intersubjective experience with my mother. As a viewer, you do not really know who you see or who you hear in those home movies, and perhaps, neither do I.

Using the example of Akerman’s *News From Home*, Russell explains that, “the epistolary form of narration implies an address, a structure of communication, foregrounding the role of enunciation that all film plays” (p. 311). This is another example of an audio-visual strategy that subverts the typical authority granted to the objective enunciation of the documentary maker.

This strategy is also typical of “essayistic” films and videos, which cross boundaries of documentary, experimental and fiction film practices. Russell states that,

If “ethnicity” refers to an inherited identity, a fixed history of the self, autoethnography in film and video destabilizes and disperses that history across a range of discursive selves. When autoethnography becomes an archival practice, as it does in these works [by: Akerman, Marker, Benning, and Tahimik], memory is fragmented into a nonlinear collage. The pieces that are assembled into a shape of a diary forsake the authenticity of documentary realism for a fiction of forgetting. (p. 313)

This discursive “fragmentation” of self and memory, enabled by an “archival practice” (a personal- public collage of retrieving and retelling), is a “fiction of forgetting” in the sense that the past, present, and future do not exist as a chronological development but instead are “points of perspective” where *subjective experience* is seen as an “other reality” - one amongst a sea of overlapping waves of potential points of view. There is no unified “past” to draw conclusions from (from documented family photos or movies for example), for the evidentiary and “realist” value of those materials are not taken for granted in these “essayistic” forms of personal film and video-making.

Mona Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance* is another example of a film that uses an epistolary form of address, but in her case the letters are integrated into the piece, not only through narration but through editing techniques and superimposition with photographs that Hatoum took of herself and her mother while they took a shower one day. As the video progresses we begin to see both the photographs and the writing with an increasing clarity. This formal strategy is combined with a narrative that, provided through Hatoum’s monotone reading of her mother’s letters, allows us to understand the difficult relationship that Hatoum has to her own subjective fragmentation and dislocation through her mother’s recounting of her current social and political trauma in Lebanon. Their intergenerational dialogue exposes more as the video goes on, formally by letting us see the photos with more focus, but also through her mother’s increasingly upsetting letters, ultimately pointing to the various ways in which her mother is trapped by the interlocking experiences of her socio-political situation and her status as a woman within it. As the video comes to an end, there is no conclusion to their dialogue, there is simply an “etc, etc” that Hatoum mutters, emphasizing the ongoing and almost monotonous pain that comes with the process of recounting and untangling their shared legacy and displacement.

Earlier cuts of *Everybody Gets Sad* (for example, they are used several times in *Smile Bitch*) included the use of phone messages from my mother that she started to leave me with increasing frequency when I moved to New York. These were eventually removed from the submitted version, but were used as a means of including the ever-present voice of my mother in my life, no matter where I live. While my relationship with my mother emerges from a markedly different context than Hatoum or Akerman, I place our work next to each other as examples of representations of complex and shared pain and the way in which that legacy, and the unanswerable questions that come from it, can found the mother-daughter bond. The tensions and pressures of *staying in touch*, and the letters or phone messages that come along with that, provide an excellent source of material for telling a story that, while frequently present, never seems to have any particular beginning or end.

Furthermore, many of these above makers give the “subjects” of their works an agency to tell or represent their own voice in varying ways. This is one way to view Akerman’s and Hatoum’s inclusion of their mother’s letters. By doing this, they enable innovative and collaborative storytelling modes that challenge the traditional filmmaker-subject relationship. On this point, I used a representational strategy employed by Mindy Faber in *Delirium* where she hands the camera over to her mother – the purpose of this act is to destabilize the authority of the maker’s unified point of view. In *Everybody Gets Sad* I hand the camera over to my mother in two different ways: 1) in the more formalized interview question and answer set up in her apartment and 2) in the hotel room in New York City. The purpose of both of these was to try and destabilize the authorial power that I have in the telling of what I originally viewed as *our story*. In an attempt to represent an experience that is bound by another I wanted to give my other an opportunity to put me in the vulnerable subject position that I was placing her. While I believe that my strategies have the affect of shifting the power balance between filmmaker and subject on screen, I do not believe that they ultimately give my mother any more power in the filmmaking process, as it is important to remember that the edit was solely in my hands.

In service of the subversion and questioning of the underlying truth claims of documentary and “evidentiary” media and of stable/coherent identity formations, the above filmmakers also employ such strategies as, the blurring of fiction and nonfiction genres and the use of sequences that explicitly interrupt “realist” strategies like *verité* segments or interviews (these can also be made-strange through editing techniques). For example, it was important for

me to keep in the cut the clip in the New York City hotel room of my mother asking me *if she could stop filming now?* Because, by foregrounding the fact that we are being filmed I am attempting to show the way in which we perform our relationship even at the most mundane and domestic of levels (ie. *do you brush your teeth Vanessa?*). Following Faber's *Suburban Queen* and Onwurah's *The Body Beautiful*, I enact a fiction frame in the form of a cooking show so as to play on the traditional Jewish mother-daughter trope of eating and sharing in the legacy of family recipes. However, not only are our recipes not traditional, taken from an American chain restaurant, but my mother and I do not abide by the performative rules of classic cooking shows (ie. *everything tastes great!*). For the purposes of *Everybody Gets Sad*, much like for Faber and Onwurah, this technique of playing on the fiction frame allows the filmmaker to expose the assumptions that are held within that frame and the stories they tell. For Fabre and Onwurah these are fictions around domesticity, passivity, race and beauty standards, and for Ivy and I they lie around the fiction of the happy, healthy, and fed Jewish mother-daughter performance.

Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* is of particular note in regards to the above discussion as her documentary engages with the aforementioned strategies by turning them all on their head. Following in the footsteps of Citron's earlier work, *Stories We Tell* employs home movies throughout only to reveal to its audience at the end that they were all completely fictionalized representations manufactured to "support" the stories we hear throughout the film. Coming from a family of writers and filmmakers, Polley's attempt to untangle her story about her mother is deeply embedded with the familial fictions that she was raised with. While Polley's film is about her mother's life, as told from a daughter who's mother has passed away, there is a relationality that she sets up with her father as he joins her in the play on the frame of their fictionalized account of the real. I share a particular affinity for *Stories We Tell*, as I too come from a Canadian family with strong roots in the entertainment industry and as such, I too grew up with a legacy of storytellers and performers - those characters who were particularly suited to narrate the real.

I would also argue that a shared strategy among all above nine films and videos is the use of laughter or neutrality instead of tears. In other words, they are able to tell a "compelling" story without the kind of sentimentality that comes from exploiting a particularly "heart wrenching" moment. While it is perhaps obvious at this point that all of the films I have mentioned deal with trauma within their own personal contexts, none of them do so within the manipulative

framework that is traditionally linked to Hollywood movies and popular documentaries. That is not to say that they do not represent and engage with difficult emotions, in fact I would argue that it is in their engagement with *unpopular emotions* that they are able to destabilize traditional accounts of the mother-daughter relationship and explore the challenges at work in speaking to the kinds of intersubjective relationships they are representing. Examples of these unpopular emotions would be the anger at the root of *Daughter Rite* and the almost unbearable sadness and grief at the core of Akerman's *No Home Movie*.

This is also the point on which Kristen Johnson's never wavering professional composure is so fascinating, in the showcasing of her subjectivity in her film *Cameraperson*. While perhaps the least focused on the mother-daughter relationship, I include this documentary in my list of interlocutors because of its fluid narrative that is not about telling a straightforward story and is more about breaking apart the documentary frame so as to expose the subjectivity behind it, putting that person into relationship with the years of trauma they have absorbed through their camera lens. There are only three short sections that represent her mother and they are clips taken by Johnson for her own home movies and not for a professional film. For me, as I cannot speak for the filmmaker themselves, they are the bolts which structure her memoir, not as plot points for a beginning middle and an end, but as buoys offering us a glimpse of an emotional core as we float through the assembly of footage that is her life. I think that it is also telling that it is in the second to last shot of the film that we finally get to see Johnson's face, as she flips the camera around, so that we can see not only her, but her and her mother – a woman who at that point no longer remembered who she really was. Again, while *Everybody Gets Sad* is a very different project from that of Johnson's *Cameraperson*, it is highly influenced by the fluid and nonlinear editing style developed by Johnson and her editors (Nels Bangerter and David Teague). And, along with all of the nine films and videos mentioned above, it sees this film as an example of a situated and subjective experience that understands itself as inherently linked to another. In doing so, it breaks from dominant storytelling and filmmaking traditions (as they have been described throughout this thesis) so as to represent the mother-daughter dyad in ways that take into consideration the complex psycho-social terrain in which it plays out.

I will now move to focus specifically on the central creative object of this thesis by first breaking down the production materials that make it up and the general timeline of its production process.

Production Materials & Timeline

The main video components that make up the creative object of this thesis consist of the following: two sit down interviews between Ivy and Vanessa (2013/2019), a mock cooking show, one performative video of Vanessa recorded via webcam, moments with Ivy and Vanessa in Ivy's home, in Huberdeau QC, and in New York City, Skype calls between Ivy and Vanessa, Ivy's facebook videos to her online community of recovering addicts (female identified and over 35 yrs old), a web cam interview between Ivy and author Stephanie McPhail, videos from Vanessa's GoFundMe campaign, and a collection of home movies from Vanessa's family archive. The majority of the recorded video was taken either by my Canon Vixia HF 100 consumer camcorder or my iphone. The shooting period ranged from 2013-2019. I shot everything myself, which in retrospect and for future research, I wouldn't recommend for the purposes of production value (for video and audio quality) but due to the intimate and on-the-fly nature of the majority of our shoots I made the executive decision to film everything myself. Overall, the low-fi quality of all of the material, from my already existent home archive, to the use of consumer video, iphone and digital webcam technology - created a production aesthetic that is in-line with much of the autoethnographic and experimental feminist documentary work which I have elaborated on throughout this thesis.

In keeping with this aesthetic tradition, Russell explains that, what video, as a move away from film format, adds to the image-making process is the inherent message of technological "acceleration" and the "[threat] to collapse the temporal difference of filmic memory" (313). This is caused predominantly by the (cheap) recording nature of video – as an "instrument of surveillance." But, as Russell is careful to note the "auratic fantasy of film" is not "forgotten" in these kinds of video works – instead, the real *threat* of the immediacy of video is presented here as the crumbling and/or the becoming fluid of "the structures of memory on which autobiographical conventions are founded" (314). The *becoming fluid* and the disintegration of my own storytelling structures (as that which is based on *my memories*) is enabled furthermore by the integration of digital video and internet communication technologies. The Skype conversations, the Facebook videos, the Gofundme campaign clip, and the web interview between my mom and Stephanie McPhail are all digital artefacts from the archive of the internet that have been integrated into our tale. The story that began with the 16mm footage from my

grandparents' basement streams into my mom's Facebook live videos. The never-ending recording has not stopped; it has seeped into every nook and cranny of our lives, so much so that the appearance of a camera or a screen has become ubiquitous to our thoroughly rehearsed performance of mother and daughter.

The process of cataloguing the materials was an iterative one that started in 2015 and followed me into the edit suite in 2019. The process involved watching all of the material, starting with the home movies, and taking extensive hand written notes, tagging footage with relevant labels related to theme or visual style and then never looking at them again. I compulsively repeated that note taking process for a year until I finally began editing the material in 2016 when I had officially left Montreal and turned my life upside down - leaving behind a ten year long romantic partnership, a home, my academic community, and most importantly, my mother.

The edit process, beginning in 2016, was a disjunctive one. I sincerely wish I could say there was a clean, clear, and formalized edit process that took me from my initial selects to my current cut but the journey to *Everybody Gets Sad* was anything but linear and clear. As mentioned in the introduction, there were three feature length documentaries that emerged from this project, not to mention the multiple treatments for projects involving explicitly fictional components. As well, like in the shooting process, I edited everything myself - also not something I'd recommend for future researchers interested in following this risky path - but when dealing with intimate others, on a budget of 0\$, hard calls need to be made or work will never get done. The first version, *Smile Bitch*, was assembled in my bedroom in New York over the course of three years (2016-2019), *Everybody Gets Sad (EGS)* was outlined and edited into its current work-in-progress state using the Concordia based Feminist Media Studio over a period of approximately 3 months in 2019, and then, in a moment of sheer panic at seeing what I had done, I created a final version *On Dreaming* that I edited together over the course of one week. Multiple paper edits exist for *EGS*, as it was constructed via text first, through a selection of my journal entries that then became the voice over elements in the current piece.

Cutting Room Floor: *Smile Bitch & On Dreaming*

The central creative work that this doctoral project stands on is a 66 minute work-in-progress cut of a video about coming to terms with my own sadness, anger, shame, fear and disappointment around my relationship with my mother and through that, being able to see and accept(ish) my mother for who she is. It's a real time account of my own failure to make happy (what is really an intersubjective failure), as that which is made sense of through an oblique conversation with my mother. Before diving into a breakdown of the five sections of the film, I will briefly expand on the two other (unfinished) films that were created in the process of everybody getting sad – *Smile Bitch* (which was quite angry) and *On Dreaming* (which was an exercise in denial).

There were three things that did not work in the first cut. One was the attempt at telling the story of Ivy and Vanessa as that which was in the past or really the act of dwelling in the past. The second, was the drawing of lines between my mother's arc and my own, or trying to represent our narratives as separate - as if I could in any way tell her story as that which is not seen through the lens of my own. The third, and most complicated, was the fact that I was not ready to tell the story yet (and I may never fully be able to). I wasn't ready because I hadn't yet come to terms with my own pain. This is a project about pain after all. About one's own pain and the pain of others - those others with whom you share pain to such a degree that you can't tell whose is whose anymore. Ultimately, *Everybody Gets Sad* emerged from my own inability to deny that what I hated about my mother (pointed to quite acutely in *Smile Bitch*) was precisely what I hated (and was afraid of/rejected) in myself, and to tell this story in an honest way (good research practice) would require an acknowledgement of that. Unfortunately, to acknowledge that was incredibly painful and it took time.

Smile Bitch is a great title. I remember thinking that at the time that I came up with it because it crystallized perfectly what the project was about – on the one hand the pressure to smile and to be happy (the *appearance* of happiness) and on the other hand the internalized rage that that enabled both towards myself and my mother. Anger was the affective wave that rolled through that first cut and as such it was the guiding principal behind the only story I could think to begin with – that of “the family” as a full bourgeois nuclear construction, with a focus on the *successful men*. The broader perspective, held together by the stable satellites of notable male figures in my family, was the only story I had, so looking back, that was perhaps the only place from which to

begin. I was still clutching to *their dream* of Hollywood stardom at the time and my mother represented the opposite of that, so our dialogue emerged within that cut as an angry, resentful, judgmental current amid a sea of smiling and funny faces. There was also a stream of Jewishness that I attempted to weave in explicitly through footage from our many holiday dinners but that fell to the cutting room floor as ultimately that story was too complex for me to tackle from within the bounds of this project. I spent three years on this cut, it never felt good, it made everyone uncomfortable, I drowned (repeatedly) in attempting to tell 50 stories at the same time, so I started over – reluctantly and sadly.

On Dreaming is also a good title. This cut came together directly after I finished the first version of *Everybody Gets Sad* and was without a doubt burning out – I was not ok, I was depressed. It was also the cut I submitted to my advisor as the version I wished to hand in as my penultimate thesis film. I walked into her office and I said, “It’s all there Monika! It’s all there!” This cut is also almost an hour long but it consists only of footage from the first back and forth interview I did with Ivy, intercut with very short clips of home movies. It is in many ways the opposite of *Smile Bitch*, as it is a paired down and minimalist meditation on the ghosts (*dreams*) that were always and already there between Ivy and I. *EGS* was an excavation, a painful one, and what came up was not easy for me to see, but what happened was that once I did begin to see it I could not unsee. In rewatching the initial interview between us I saw it all, the dreams, the nightmares, the contradictions in my own narrative, in *our story*. But most importantly, I saw the masks that held us, and our smiles, in place and kept us on our “paths.” And along with that I saw the space between us, the enormous and unending void that structured our togetherness. It was a very strange feeling, it was like the impossibility of it all was just sitting there right from the start and I just realized that I had spent four years grinding my fist into a wall. Why would I go through the continued pain of exposure (ie. submitting *EGS*) when I could hand something in that was safer, quieter, more contained. After that brief moment of panic I realized that *EGS* was my central creative contribution, it was the story I had to tell, but that too took time to come to. I cannot emphasize more the difficulty that comes with being openly vulnerable during the personal storytelling process and how lonely and sad that process can be.

Besides the two cuts that bookended this project, there were several attempts at creating a hybrid and fictionalized component to the work. Prior to starting from scratch on *Everybody Gets Sad*, I was convinced that I had to create a fictional part of the film so as to compensate for

the fact that I was unable to tell the story I needed to tell (honestly) with the documents that I had, and on the other hand, the story that I was trying to tell was so repulsive to me that there was no way that I could articulate it from my own direct perspective as a filmmaker or narrator. The narrative or authoritative “I” was not of use to me because I was not comfortable telling my mothers story and I was ashamed of the story that I wanted to tell. I had to fragment, displace, and reorient my voice and my character in the film in order to *safely* tell the story I needed to tell. As such, I sent my advisor a rough treatment for a film that was narrated by a 300-year-old wizard child who also happened to be an intergalactic self-help guru. The idea was that she would narrate the story of Ivy and Vanessa as an example of what not to do - we would, in other words, be an example of a failed attempt at “the good life” - an unsuccessful pair of Canadian Jew ladies who were just trying to make it work. Super fun idea I thought, also not my proposed PhD project. Neither was my idea of a split narrator - where myself was divided between the one that stayed in Montreal to finish her Phd and the one that went to New York to become a big time movie producer. In my movie they would be sisters with conflicting priorities but who in the end learn from each other and bond over their individual issues with their mother through the creation of a documentary about her that the New York sister was making so that she could “find herself” and reconnect with her creative roots. Alas, pitch fail, I had to follow through on what I said I would do, because this was a PhD after all, and I had to finish what I started, even if *it didn't feel good* at all.

Emotional Outcomes: *Everybody Gets Sad*

Logline: A young woman unravels her dreams of becoming a filmmaker, and a person in the world, through an unpacking of her relationship with her recovering mother.

RT: 66min

The sections of the documentary are as follows:

Part 1 – Denial (formerly: *Everything is fine. I love movies!*)

Part 2 – Anger (formerly: *Everything is maybe not fine but I don't want to talk about it. I want to make movies!*)

Part 3 – Bargaining (formerly: *Everything is definitely not fine. I think I need help. I want to make movies for a living!*)

Part 4 - Depression (formerly: *I'm fucked and the movie business is a nightmare. But don't tell anyone*)

Part 5 – Acceptance (formerly: *I don't know what I'm doing but everything will be ok*)

Each part was initially meant to be understood as a relationship between how in touch I am with my own feelings and how I relate to filmmaking and/or the film industry - the becoming professional of my relationship to performativity and entertainment media increases with time. The correlation between the two works in such a way that as I become more aware of how I am actually feeling, the narrative of success and the dream of the movies starts to slip away. And because this is an all too real time narrative it concludes in my now with a present day acknowledgement of failure in the form of unknowing and acceptance. Unknown, in terms of relinquishing normative and set paths to “success” (star academic, big time producer, genius filmmaker, achiever of greatness), and models for appropriate heteronormative meaning making (marriage, house, baby, happily-ever-after). Acceptance, as accompanying the unknown, exists at the level of seeing honestly and admitting failure. Admitting not only that these dreams were never real but that my own investment in them, as a means of combatting my repulsion of my own mother, resulted in the same/similar path to destruction that she chose. In recognizing that, I no longer had the energy to despise her. After all, it is an enormous privilege to be able to see your own story and to try and write a new one, and ultimately, it is a nightmare to be trapped in one that is not only not of your own making but that is inherently counter to your growth, capacity, and potential as a human being on this planet.

The five part structure of this documentary was developed first and was meant to loosely mirror the grief process of coming to terms with who I am through a separation and acceptance (read: death) of my mother, in relationship to my forever obsession with movies, being a filmmaker, and succeeding within the independent film industry. It had become a film about me, as told from the perspective of letting go of both my mom and her/my dreams of creative “success”. It seemed only logical that I would tie together the death of all of my dreams because to separate them was to miss an essential part of the story. As I saw it, it was only once I could sit with how sad I was that I could see the link between that sadness and the narratives that I was given through my relationship with my mother. From there, I could come to accept my mother’s foundational sadness as the inevitable outcome of her inherited dreamscape. The sections of the film reflect my psychological state as I become aware that it is in fact a *shared dreamscape*, one that is incredibly hard to wake up from. Because, once you start to explore it, it’s as if you get trapped in this cyclical pattern of waking up and forgetting where you are, then waking up again

and again, until it becomes perfectly impossible to tell where exactly the dream began and what you ever really wanted. Whose dream was all this anyways?

The mapping of the Kubler-Ross model of grief (1969) onto the sections came as a result of realizing that that is what the narrative I was painting appeared to mirror. The model itself is meant to deal with loss, often associated with the death of someone close to you, and is also used as a model for coping with change and depression. As I have come to recognize my own life as a series of deaths, the past five years being a particularly deadly time, the grief cycle felt like an organic and oddly fitting model through which to translate and represent this story. It is also important to note that the cycle is not a linear or a clean one - and that as one moves from a place of resistance to acceptance there are wormholes, slippery corners, sharp edges, and elastic bands that send you right back to the beginning again. I was trying to tell a story after all, I wanted a structure to better understand. I wanted a language for my loss. Sitting on the beach, while Ivy records her Facebook live video for her online recovery women's group, she asks Vanessa "What was it like to be the daughter of a recovering mother?" - and that's it. It is that question that lights the crooked path for the conversation between a mother and a daughter. The five parts, the varying film and video making techniques, and the modes of address, are all set up to try and speak to that question. But please do not confuse speaking to with any attempt to actually answer it. I have no answers. This project is not an answer to anything. At its core it is a problem in the form of a question. Addiction, recovery, self-help, everyone's looking for happiness and I found a whole lot of sad. Not the sexy or the sentimental kind of sad that people go to the theatre for, the ugly, shameful, lonely, empty kind that nobody wants to talk about. Here's the thing about addiction though, nobody wants to talk about that either. I definitely didn't, I just wanted to make a film about my mom - *I just wanted to make her happy*, but I didn't know that at the time.

Picking up on the point I briefly highlighted in the introduction to this thesis, the motivation for this video making process and the story that it attempts to tell, comes directly from a question posed by my mother to me. On top of that it comes from my co-dependent tendency to please her. Yes, I may appear angry and bitchy and judgmental at times but the ground for all of that is a yearning for love; a yearning for a person, a story and a dream that does not exist and is not real. The interrogation of this question, and this yearning, through the use of video making strategies, is what brings my feminist research-creation practice to life. But what I found in bringing my practice into being, was a confrontation with the death of not only my own

yearning but with a matrilineal legacy that was far deeper than I could have imagined. As such, *Everybody Gets Sad*, and the thinking-making process behind it, is not about personal narratives and the titillating exposure of some traumatic family story. It is a journey that goes nowhere and reveals nothing because it is in the mundane moments between myself and my mother, captured on video, that the mourning process takes place – whether it is recognizable as such is not the objective – our sadness has many masks. I was trying to use my video camera to find our story, hoping that it would reveal itself to me, but ironically my way out was through feeling the pain that had been there all along and, in doing so, I was finally able to speak to my mother’s, and my thesis, question.

What this question does, however, is position me as *a child of recovery*. I am not a child anymore, but I grew up in recovery along with my mother who got sober when I was 7 years old. When I say “grew up in recovery” I mean that I grew up in church basements attending 12 step program meetings and hearing people’s shares about how they got sober from drugs, alcohol, sex and love before I even knew what those things really were. I have no siblings and my parents got divorced when I was a year old so my time with my mother was always just that – my time with my mother, the two of us, in the world. It is strange how you can spend so much time with someone and yet still not know how to speak to them or about them, about the both of you. It is strange that you can be so compelled to tell a story and yet no matter how hard you try it doesn’t come. How do I answer her question? How do I tell the story? Addiction is a hunger that is insatiable and mutating because what it wants is you. Addiction is a black hole. Addiction is a disease. Addiction is an affliction. Addiction is social. Addiction is epistemological. Addiction is genetic. Addiction is a legacy. Addiction is control and numbness. Feeling, now *that* is the problem.

The following section is a diaristic breakdown of the five parts of *Everybody Gets Sad*. The purpose of this is to provide a representation of the experience of making this film – this is a further elaboration of the research-creation imperative of this thesis. This is a contribution at the level of process, at the border of thinking and making. Following the diaristic and essayistic impulse of much of the autoethnographic work that frames this project, and in keeping with the integration of my journal entries in the film itself, I offer a way in to my work that honors the methodological histories that found it. You want to know what it’s like to speak to that which remains unspoken? Well, it can be very ugly. It can feel very bad and it is certainly vulnerable.

Chapter 1 and 2 set up the critical histories that ground my work, the central video *Everybody Gets Sad* is the work, and this chapter is about the situated, messy and embodied process of making that work. The emotional outcomes to follow are a representation of my experience of trying to find our story. They are important because without them there would be no film. As such, an inclusion of them is integral for a rigorous understanding of the research-creation process of this thesis.

What was it like to be the daughter of a recovering mother?

I'm sad. Or I was very sad when I put this rough cut together, and while I may not be as sad right now, I do get sad. Whether one reads these words or just watches my attempts at representation, the emotional and affective rhythm of it all came from a place of sad. Well, sad mixed with anger, shame, and other things that aren't "happy things." The title *Everybody Gets Sad*, while being a useful tag line for understanding the way in which I came to accept my mother, is also the way in which I came to accept myself in the world. This part, the one that was forced out of me, the one that is to be defended, is the result of straight up rock bottom depression and the shockingly great feeling (an exhale into darkness) I got from realizing how sad so many other people were around me (many of whom work in the film industry and academia). The problem was. I don't do sad. I didn't think I did. And that may be how we got ourselves into this mess in the first place.

But hold on, maybe I'm also wrong, maybe the people around me (including my mother) aren't sad at all; maybe I'm projecting onto everyone's complex network of being. Maybe, but who cares, that's what I feel. And after all I'm making a film right? I'm creating art? And that act of creation requires the exposure of feelings, lived experience, but how do I defend that? Must I be theoretically sound? Must I be honest? Psychologically astute? Must I be kind, processed, and non judgemental? What kind of narcissistic experiment is this? Who am I trying to please with this intellectual art project? And how the hell is this a PhD? Feast your eyes on what happens when research goes rogue. When it turns on itself and goes so far down into where it should not go that to attempt to proclaim boundaries, to discipline thought, and to anchor and formalize creation requires a layer of denial that goes against the potential of precisely what this

kind of work set out to do. Approve or disapprove, pass or fail, my vulnerability is real and I am sad (and tired). Crisis. Spinning. Crisis. Spinning. Pause. Breath.

Part 1 – Denial

This is the beginning. It's an establishing of my most preferred state of being - "everything is fine" – *fineness*. An interesting note I received from several people who watched my rough cut, was that I appear to be saying that I love movies but I don't ever talk about them. I guess I need to clarify here because while I have always loved movies, i.e. moving images and the tales they tell, I have also always been in love with *movie making*. This comes from two things: 1) my family's obsession with home movies, and 2) my family's obsession with Hollywood and the film industry. I don't get into that in the first section but the "WARNING" sequence is there to indicate that I don't understand any of this material as the objective capturing of some kind of stable reality with stable creatures going about doing their stable things. No. The warning is there to signal that, even that baby, who is grappling with that video receiver, is performing. I have been performing forever. I have never not performed. I have just become much more aware of my own performativity and that of those around me, so much so that I did my PhD about it. What I found though, in an exhaustive and psychologically brutal engagement with my own performances, and those of my family (my mother), was that this task is much more complicated than I had originally anticipated. Because you know who likes to perform and is pretty unbelievable at it? The addict. The addict is an actor. So what if you realize you are trapped? Trapped by your own smiles? Trapped by your own frame of mind - let alone your constantly changing haircuts. What if in watching all the material all I saw were masks, more and more of them - the most difficult ones to recognize (and accept) being my own. What do you do when you realize you are looking for something that you can't (won't) see?

Back to the beginning. A shard of glass, self hatred, and love. Letting people hear you scream. The first voice over narration that is heard at 00:49 sec into the film touches on my anxieties around the above mentioned problem, which also touches on the problem I have with my mom, and the fears I see all around me and inside me. I avoided making this film for 3 years because I was afraid and confused. I still am. But less so the afraid part. That first narration was perhaps the moment where the narrator was trying to speak most directly to Ivy. She was trying

to tell her that it's ok to be afraid, but that if Vanessa can do it, so can she, that if she can bleed in front of everyone and not even make a beautiful portrait out of it but instead a huge failure (or at least a representation of that) - then it is safe for her to come out. And not only is it safe but she will be loved. Well, I guess I can't guarantee that. My point is, this film is my shard of glass and I'm screaming in the form of scraps of digital imagery and old home movies. This is not a finished film but it certainly is a scream (on its way to becoming a story). And I suppose if I were to follow my own line of thinking then I'd have to be honest and say that I have a very difficult time with the sound of my own voice, the image of myself, and the performances that have created this work. So, while there is a call to expose oneself at the start of this film (to be vulnerable) I cannot confirm that it is indeed safe or recommended to do so. Because, I do not yet know what comes at the other end, once distance has been achieved. And after all, it makes me ill to spend significant time with the film - so who am I to encourage exposure? Who am I to tell you to come out here and show yourself so that I can love you?

Which brings me to my positioning. I am privileged. I am white, cis gendered female, heterosexual, highly educated, charming as all hell, I grew up around middle and upper class wealth, and most importantly I was raised around performers. What this means is not only do I pass easily among normative and disciplinary bodies but I'm a fantastic faker - very well trained. Well I'm not, that's really the problem, but I have all of the trappings to pretend and get by, and that's really what matters. In my family it doesn't matter what you feel like, it matters how you look and how many credits you have in the movies.

But, do you feel like you deserve success? This and the other interview segments were shot in an experimental back and forth set up I did with Ivy in 2013. We each prepared 10 questions and, without any preparation or prior knowledge of the questions, we answered them on camera while the other sat (un)comfortably out of frame. The problem was that I already knew the answer to the question I was asking. The reason I asked it was because I knew she didn't think she deserved it. That's why I was doing all of this. Because she has a hole inside and I'm trying to fill it. I was born inside that hole but it's not comfortable anymore. The narrative arc of this film however reveals that that hole is also a shared one, living in the caverns of my mind confused how it got itself there and unsure who it ultimately belongs to.

What shifts over time, from part 1 to part 5, is the birth and death of our shared trauma - as experienced by me. The grieving process is thus an intersubjective one - at least as a video it is

- whereby my initial probing question that was meant to make her realize that she did indeed “deserve success” led to the inevitable downfall of my own structures of desire/meaning that shattered the very dream I was trying to get her to realize. In trying to fix her with questions on camera, I ended up falling apart with more questions and still on camera. This is failure across all platforms of knowing. How could this project succeed though when its inevitable conclusion was the rejection of that very plot? As a daughter who was hungry to *achieve great things* it was a tremendous burden to be raised by someone who I knew did not love themselves, because they didn’t know how to, they never learned.

At this stage in the story I do not yet acknowledge my pain. The interview that I shot with my mom in 2013 was an awful experience, for the both of us. You couldn’t tell though because I think we come off as *just fine*. That mock cooking show was a similar experience, and I am told we appear *completely lovely* together - charming even - like the *Gilmore Girls* (TV show 2000-2007). That is because denial is our preferred mode of being and it’s also why we love home movies. Because if everyone acts the part and that is the evidence of your state of being, your role, then there really is nothing left to talk about. And more so, if we just keep smiling and laughing and looking fabulous then everything will be fine.

Part 2 – Anger

In this section we go a little deeper as the questions turn inwards in an explicit way - with Ivy prodding her daughter about her “inner committee” and whether or not she is “intuitive.” It’s interesting because I had never thought about those things before and at that time I remember the visceral feeling of how utterly obnoxious I thought the “voices” in my head question was. It is certainly a *self-help* question, as were most of hers, as she sourced her professional materials for them, whereas I had been prepping mine for years, whether I was conscious of that or not. That is the central issue here - what we are aware or not aware of in terms of the motivations that drive us to do things or not do them and to feel things or not feel them. I’m not a therapist (and this is not therapy), and I’m not in any way making a claim as to the nature of the unconscious, but what I’m doing is speaking from experience. That is this project after all, to try and determine the value of this. The value of communicating (through an (un)tangling) with another, a mother, my mother, on camera. To assess the academic and creative worthiness of the

representation of something that is so personal but so tied up in the world and the stories that bind it. How then to assess the value of that process of engagement? Of my own willingness to be exposed, and from that, create *methodologically*. Yes this is something I chose to do. Have I completely lost my mind?

The process of engaging with this material, recording it, watching it, editing it, and re-editing it, making something other out of it, has been an experiment in forgetting (but for the sake of remembering that we were never really there). Forgetting who I am, and who she is, and why I am doing this. It would appear that as we go deeper and I begin to hear the voices and make connections between *feeling* and *thinking*, I - the author, (film)maker, unreliable narrator - begin to see (all too clearly) those performances, those performatives, that actually make up a relationship, but not one that only exists out there, one that exists *in here* as well. The time that had passed between the initial interview and my increasing awareness of my own “inner voices” was a necessary variable in the coming to be of *Everybody Gets Sad*. One way to conceive of this time is as a *necessary forgetting*. Perhaps in order to speak to something that is you, or such an integral part of you, one must take the wretched time to forget? It’s wretched because it feels like death to forget a part of yourself only to find it again but barely be able to recognize it. This process has been like an oblique form of remembering that requires first a forgetting (a loss) and entails the (public) risk of completely falling apart. There is a *failure of self* here that seems to be an inherent part of the (research creation - thinking feeling) process of this project.

Ivy’s story. This has been a struggle. How to tell her story? Because after all this project is about Vanessa’s relationship with her mother Ivy. So I have to talk about Ivy. The trouble is I can’t, I couldn’t, I won’t. And not only that but I didn’t want to ask her about herself either. Turns out, that was unbearable. I thus had to come up with a solution for letting Ivy tell her story but without actually engaging with her. In 2016 my mother, the life coach, started an online recovery group for women over the age of 35 and began recording her own videos for the members. Along with the creation of this Facebook group she also made a website and has since been developing her own personal recovery program to help women stay sober and lead empowering lives with fulfilling careers and healthy relationships. While my mother’s recovery was built around the 12 step Alcoholics Anonymous program, her own program does not abide by the same system, although in many ways it is built off of it. My mother’s facebook videos are how she tells her story in my story – in our story?

My mother's motivational, honest, raw, inspiring, uncomfortable, vulnerable videos are how I have inserted her authoritative voice into this project. They don't look good, and they don't sound good, but they are hers. They are messages that she wishes to transmit at a level of honesty and openness that she feels comfortable with and while I no doubt take those messages and put them through a blender of my brand of forgetting they were still of her making and I like that. The goal of creating the representation of an intersubjective relationship and the dynamics within that, whether successful or not, was enabled through the editing together of various modes of address - not necessarily directed at each other (often to an anonymous community in the case of these FB videos or later in my Gofundme videos) - but always put into relationship. Ultimately this works because, even when we sit across from each other, we are never truly facing the other.

The webcam interview between Ivy and author and life coach Stephanie McPhail was the last bit of material I received and integrated into the cut. It also happens to be one of the most important elements, from the perspective of the maker (the daughter), because I believe that it was able to do two things. From a story perspective it was able to offer insight into my mother's personal narrative that I was incapable of asking her about. And from a formal perspective it breaks up the closed dance between Ivy and Vanessa and introduces a new voice, one that shifts the dyadic chokehold I set up. What is important to note about these segments is the continued performativity between the pair, as there is a shared professionalization of healing that is being performed, and an exchange of experience (and story) as that which founds both of their pursuits, in the direction of *recovery*.

But then where is the anger? Everyone looks so happy and like they are having so much fun! Well I suppose the anger is silent, silenced, and I have never really learned to make it speak. Anger is the intersubjective lubricant that passes from one generation to the next in the form of a smile and the sound of a laugh. Our anger is also good at performing. It loves to dance, it yearns to be happy, and hates to look at itself in the mirror.

Part 3 - Bargaining

There is a significant legacy in my family that runs (predominantly) among the generations of men, and has to do with the attainment of a real level of acclaim in the Hollywood film industry.

They are all writers. As an impressionable youth who first took to acting, but was always too fat, I harboured the notion that to succeed, like *really* succeed, was to make it like they did. In retrospect I can recognize the split identification between the women and men of my family - seeing my embodied self in one line but in seeing their fate I had to accept the necessary breaking away that would have to take place for me to truly self actualize. My grandfather, the true inspiration for my filmmaking fancies (as he was the home movie master director) was offered an opportunity to move to New York and write with his brother Mel who was an up and coming comedy writer in the 50s. He turned down the offer, my grandmother says that it's because he was a coward and that's probably true, regardless, he traded in his chance to pursue his creative visions and opted instead to script his family into the (home) movie stars that they would soon become.

In watching the old 16mm film of my grandparent's home movies the most notable bits were the moments of slippage. The moments where you can see the act falter, the performance break (the happiness slips into *something else*). It's a look or a gesture and it's ever so slight and is barely detectable unless you are watching and looking for something that doesn't fit - something that's unscripted. My favorite moment is where my grandmother looks at the camera with the cigarette in her mouth and for one second you can see *how she feels* about him/the cameraman/my grandfather, about herself, about them, about all of it - just for a second there is a connection and there is disgust. While I made this project to try and talk to my mom honestly, to try and tell a different story than the one I had been given, I began to recognize a need to bring my grandmother with us - all of them really. But as I moved backwards, as I looked through the lenses and the smiles/grimaces of generations past, I began to understand the sticky thickness of the stories and figurations that I am embedded within and am ever so desperately trying to work myself out of. How then can we move forward together if we *remember* things so differently? If we *experience* things so differently? If we are each stuck somewhere else? How does one speak of depression, speak of trauma, speak of sadness, when the roots have been dressed up so well that the source of the misery is barely detectable - and to most it looks like a fancy party (born of "innocents")³⁵.

It is then from "the fancy party" manufactured vibe of my youth that I appear to have learned the language through which I communicate not only with my mother, but to the world at

³⁵ This is a reference to the voice over narration I speak at 30:55 min into *Everybody Gets Sad*.

large. I grew up at a (movie) party and that's where I learned to speak. Well that's not true. I grew up surrounded by people who idolized Hollywood, and loved to party in style, and who watched others go off and make it. My mom (the writer), my aunt (the comedian/actor), my grandmother (the star/painter), and my grandfather (the writer/musician) all with the dreams that never could. I'm mean because I'm honest about it. I'm devastating because I refuse to pretend. I'm a narcissist because *this is about me* and I won't pretend otherwise. If I come off as an asshole, at least I'm an honest one. Kind of - I'm also a pathological liar (because I like to please people) - it's confusing, it really just depends on who I'm talking to.

I have always been told by my mother and my aunt that I am "blunt" - I can be cold and I think more like a "philosopher" than a "psychologist" (the assumption being that one has more compassion than the other). Thus I have grown up with the knowledge that to question someone else's truth (if it so happens to differ from my own) is to be hurtful, harmful, uncaring, unladylike you might say - ultimately it's certainly not how a *good daughter* behaves. It's for this reason that I draw close attention to those moments when the *boundaries* are clearly inflamed and the filmmaker behind the camera goes for the old kill-em-with-kindness approach to easing the ego blow (one that the viewer does not get to see) and responds with sincere (albeit unconscious) admiration for the subject's beauty and glowing movie stardom. *You are so beautiful mom, you look like a movie star* - this is how people talk at a party, in preparation for it and during it. After the party we don't talk, the camera turns off, there is nothing left to say, that's when we watch the video of it and reminisce about how good we looked and how delicious the food tasted.

What are dreams anyway, but somebody else's memory?³⁶ This sentence came to me before the meaning of it did. I suppose I felt it first. New York is the city of dreams after all. What a name that is - it's incredibly accurate, terrifyingly so. It's a city where you must believe it to see it - much like the film industry - it's not real unless you make (want) it so, and once you've invested however much of your soul, identity, inheritance in it, *hell*, there's no going back. Leaving Montreal was wrapped in leaving a partnership that for all intensive purposes should have lead to a marriage - dream death. I was ok with this death however, because after all, I was a strong critical feminist and I had no need for the false security of the heteronormative life path. What I was completely unconscious of though, in moving to New York, was the equally as

³⁶ This is a reference to the voice over narration I speak at 37:25 min into *Everybody Gets Sad*.

dreamy narrative of “success” - and specifically one related to movie production - on the one hand from a commercial industry perspective and on the other from a creative filmmaker perspective (these are two *very* different things). If I couldn't be a baller producer then I wanted to be a genius artist - one or the other - it had to be. If I had anything, it was dreams, I didn't know where they came from, but hey who questions their dreams?

Turns out, I was trading in dreams, desperately so, because I wanted to remain alive. I wanted to remain coherent as I had been told I was. This was a bargaining game. If I can't have the “happily ever after” then I need to “be the best,” whether that's a business success or just a brilliant maker it doesn't matter, I just need to be validated - and I'm willing to trade! Anything not to die, not to lose everything I have built up - do not fuck with my ego tower because I do not know what is inside and I do not want to find out! But it's a bitch when you realize that lingering in the background is a project about precisely that - the taking down of the tower and all that holds it up. She's calling again, she's not telling me what I want to hear (as mother's tend to do) but I'm also not listening to her; because to really listen, to really hear her, is to see where all the dreams have come, and ultimately it's to bare witness to the damage they have done to both her and me. Separating my mother from the dreams that defined her (us) is a very complicated and harrowing task - an intersubjective reckoning. And when bargaining ends, when the stories no longer make any sense and it's no longer sustainable or safe to hang around and there is but a great big sea of sad - what then? What if a person doesn't do sad? What if I'm strong and I never give up? What have these dreams done to us then?

Part 4 – Depression

In early 2019, after having to move back to Montreal, I decided to shoot another interview with my mother, same format as the earlier one, but this time we would only ask a couple questions and mostly it was a follow up to try and fill in some blanks I had been reticent to touch on over the past 3 years. A lot had happened between 2015 and 2019 and I felt like we should talk about it, on camera of course. This was the last thing I wanted to do however, so it was shot on the fly in my mother's apartment, that she was being evicted from (high stress environment), and in that moment it had no heat, the day after my birthday party (so I was exhausted), and both of us wanted it to end before it began. But I had to do it for my art! Which brings me to “the road less

travelled” as Ivy likes to refer to Vanessa’s chosen life path. Risk is the matter at hand, risk and regret, one stops you from doing something for fear of the other. Ivy regrets. She always has and I’ve always known that. After all, the why behind all of this has been the pathetic attempt to reverse the weight of regret I know she carries - a curious infection that sneaks it’s way into many aspects of her life but predominantly takes over and causes the most pain in the area of artistic creation and personal expression. Ivy is a writer but Ivy doesn’t write. She doesn’t have a husband, a fulfilling job, a savings account, or peace of mind either - but that is not truly what matters. In our exchanges - between mother and daughter - there is an exposure of this shared/inherited wound - I have (un)consciously lived with hers (as she has lived with my grandmothers) for my entire life - and when we are silent, we may be smiling, but you can feel the sad.

“Sad Bitch” is a poem I wrote that encapsulates both the reason why I made this film (to conquer her - the sad bitch) and the reason why I can’t finish it (because it’s too sad and she’s not to be conquered she’s to be exposed and accepted).³⁷ I come from a long line of sad bitches. Some are better at hiding it than others and each came up in a time with varying degrees of trauma related to the socially acceptable forms through which they, as a lower to upper middle class Jewish woman, could display said sad bitch-ness. But they were all sad and they all tried very hard to learn the necessary modes of performance to turn that frown upside down. And they succeeded because it was impossible not to for most. I have no taste for my (family’s) mother’s optimism however - but that is maybe because, after being carried down from so many generations, the recipe has gone sour, and I have so many other ingredients from which to choose, that I no longer need to carry that recipe forward. So maybe this story is ugly, maybe the taste is sour, and maybe that’s just life - but I don’t need to eat it if I don’t want to (and I’ll admit I’ve had some and it’s tempting to get used to, but I’m allergic, sadly).

This theme of “not knowing how to behave,” or at least feeling that way, is integral to both the initial premise of this project (which seeks new modes of representation / how to present the self/selves) and was also a theme I found in re-watching my old home videos. The clip of young Vanessa “doing ballet” for her grandfather on camera was the most perfect crystallization of this. The hyper sexual moves performed with confidence and ease, as ballet, is both terrifying in its awkward perverseness and simultaneously absolute comic genius. That little girl is “doing

³⁷ This is a reference to the voice over narration I speak at 43:00 min into *Everybody Gets Sad*.

ballet.” That little girl knows that boys go to the gym and girls dance. That little girl knows that there is a camera on her and that she’s expected to dance. There is obviously no claim to know what was going on in young Vanessa’s head before or after the camera started rolling, but there is a beautiful awareness there that both wears the mask and at the same time smashes it as if it was all a part of the show. For me, it is this little girl who is the hero of “the story.” It is she who is lost and yet holds our hands and must be remembered, not so that mother and daughter can regain some false sense of childhood “innocence,” but so that they can remember that the masks they share are just that – masks.

Professionally I have had issues because of the aforementioned “performance anxiety.” For me though it was not a nervousness or an anxiety around putting myself out there (much of the film industry is about “putting yourself out there,” networking, who you know, all of the necessary hurdles of a capitalist creative industry built on magic and money). For me, the problems lay around a deep sense that everyone around me was hiding. Could that be because I was hiding? Because I recognized in my professional peers, all of who desperately wanted to make it, a recognition in the other of my own shame, fear, sadness? I don’t know *why anything* really, and I don’t claim to, but my experience enables a feeling, a sense of others, and the pain of others - maybe because it is a shared pain - and that experience led me through several years with a whole lot of terrified and sad people. They were also brilliant storytellers, and unbelievable human beings from the perspective of productivity and resilience (both mental and physical), but they were not honest (not mostly). Now honesty is tricky because it goes deep and I do believe that we can only be as honest with others as we can be with ourselves so when you have a city filled with dreamers (the rich and the poor ones), *well*, it gets complicated.

I failed in New York City. It’s hard for me to say that, but I did. I learned a lot from my job at the documentary production company, but I failed at becoming one of them and of holding on to my dreams, to *their dreams*. And although it is not classy to mention this, the independent film industry in New York City functions on a level of wealth and privilege that is beyond anything I have ever experienced having grown up in a relatively middle class Canadian family. I do have experience with money in my extended family and am highly educated so because of that I can perform wealth, I can perform privilege, I can pass. This made it much easier for me to blend in and walk amongst them. But this is the stuff nobody wants to talk about - everybody wants to promote “female & diverse” voices but the fact of the matter is - the ceiling for entry

requires money and the pathways that money can buy, and if you don't have that it doesn't matter what you look like. But that's negative, and you'll never get there with that attitude. You can always dream, you can make a difference - don't forget your dreams!

When I returned to Montreal to attempt to finish this film - to restart this film - to make this film - this is where I was at. I was depressed. I was filled with sadness. I had avoided my mother for three years in the hopes that everything that she represented would prove not true for me and that so long as I performed better (hide the sad bitch), tried harder (be productive), never gave up hope (don't be weak/control your thoughts), and most of all I had to believe in myself in order to manifest the dream, then everything would work out - success awaited. Alas, in order for me to "achieve success" I would have had to eat a whole heaping bowl of my family's sour sauce, forever. And you know what? I fucking hate it. I know what it does to people, I've seen it, I've loved them, I've tried it, I know enough and I don't want to be that kind of strong. I'm a sad bitch and I want to feel.

Part 5 - Acceptance

Daughter Rite changed my life, maybe it's because I've always resented reality, not sure, but the winding path that it sent me down did a number on helping me to undo a lot of what I thought reality was. Eight years after watching that movie for the first time I decided I wanted to make one just like it and build my PhD around it. That is a profound effect for a movie to have and I am grateful for that screening in that class that day because I don't think I would be here without it. It showed me that I was not alone in my conflicted relationship to the real, in my conflicted relationship to my mother, to my family, to narratives of "the good life," and most importantly it showed me that I had the power to turn around and speak to that in whatever way I saw fit.

Reframing, that is how Ivy describes getting through difficult situations in her life. First, a job that didn't quite work out but did bring her some extra cash, and then a relationship that almost ended it all. That relationship was the one she told me about that day I was so excited to tell her I finally got approval for this PhD project. It's ironic how it all comes full circle. How this project has somehow mirrored both my mother's toxic love relapse and my four-year desperate plea to hang on to the dreams I had identified with for so long. Did we both just reframe? Is this project just a reframing? Is that how you get through it - put on new lenses with

an updated prescription for “reality”? Maybe. But also that’s not what this is about. Not this film and not this project. I’m not trying to theorize anything, here and there yes, but this work isn’t disciplined enough to call itself theory – strictly speaking. To use Ivy’s metaphor of “the trap” I guess one could say that this is about the experiential knowledge of entrapment - day to day lived entrapment - and how one (and/with an other) navigates their way through that. Not in the sense that Ivy and Vanessa have been duped into committing a crime by the very forces that will then place judgement on them - but kind of? In many ways it seems, if you play by the rules that have been set up for you, they lead to your inevitable persecution - often by your own hand, if not the hand of the law, or some disciplining body. Of course this applies much more violently to the realities of oppressed and subjugated populations whose “paths” are scripted differently and with less privilege than my own but nonetheless, in the end, everybody gets quite sad in the trap game.

Asking for help is the final facebook message that Ivy leaves us with. She is earnest and deeply caring because she knows how important it is to ask for help when you need it. Of course my experience with her as a mother is different than with her as a healer - the many hats of Ivy. In her capacity as a healer she seeks to help others with the knowledge she has gained from being on the edge. From losing herself in a substance, a liquid, a powder, a man, a dream. And I have seen it in person, she makes a difference in the lives of others, especially other women, she is powerful, she is strong, and she is wise. But she wanted to die. My mother wanted to kill herself, as many others have, because she felt trapped. I too can touch the void, I too have that gift. The gift of emptiness. Maybe that is what we speak in silence and in smiles - the unspeakable? Maybe when we explode with laughter at the end of the film in reaction to the idea that I might have made this because I want to share with others how proud I am of our relationship (how proud I am of her) - maybe that’s the rumble from inside us both? We are puking up from our shared cave of abject horror and it’s funny as all hell, it’s so funny that we could literally *die laughing*.

From abjection to love - that is another way to see the narrative structure of the film. I have fallen in love with the thing I find the most repellent. The thing that unravels me, that has unraveled me, I have taken a fancy to it. Again, this is not theory, and this is not critique, nor is it a proper psychological evaluation. I am telling you how I feel, but I’ve also read a lot of theory - this is a PhD and a love letter after all. This is an autoethnographic representation, through

experimental video practices and here via written words - different registers for telling you what happened to us, what happened to me. I fell apart and then I fell in love with my captor(s). It was either that or reject her completely and I can't do that because she is me. It's complicated and it's painful, experientially it hurts. I suppose it could have hurt less if I told another story, any number of stories about mom and me, Ivy and Vanessa, those funny broads, but that would have meant holding up a symbolic mask that I wasn't born comfortable with.

So, what was it like to be the daughter of a recovering mother? Well, after all of this I still can't really say, but now at least, I can show you how it feels.

Current Status of *Everybody Gets Sad*

As it stands, the object of creation is complete as a creative research object for this PhD, but it remains unfinished in relationship to a production process that sees its ultimate role as playing publically to audiences. This is an important point in framing the limitations of a practice-based project whose research goals are focused around the rigorous unpacking of a thesis question and not on the creation of a fully produced art object ready for an independent film market. The creative and material requirements of that latter goal reach far beyond the scope of this dissertation. As such, the object of creation itself (*Everybody Gets Sad*) should be seen as both incomplete and in-process and must be understood in relationship to the other two unfinished films as well as the written text of this thesis. Together, the video elements and my written words, form the research-creation contribution of this doctoral project.

CONCLUSION

There was a certain thing I did not get from my mother. There is a lack, a gap, a void. But in its place she has given me something else. Something, I would argue, that is far more valuable. She has given me the way out. – Alison Bechdel

Summary & Contributions

The question that ignited this project and is presented at the beginning of *Everybody Gets Sad* asks, “What was it like to be the daughter of a recovering mother?” As I have tried to make clear in the previous chapter, this question does not have a direct answer or really one that can *be spoken* at all. As such, the fragmenting tools of experimental autoethnography were used to try and represent the unrepresentable mother-daughter relation at the heart of this project. Things did not go as planned, and the affective undertaking was emotionally taxing in ways I could never have imagined - but *we* survived. Well, *something* emerged from the depths, and without the kind of relational risk that underscores this project, and the feminist methodologies that found it; *we* would never have gotten these results. In other words, this project is the result of a very specific and situated research-creation methodology, focused specifically on the representation of a personal experience – a personal story. What is most important to understand about the contribution of this research-creation project is that in the attempt to tell that personal story I combined scholarly and creative practices, in tandem and on different registers. What this means is that, the answer to the above question and the task of understanding how to speak to that experience is not found in one particular section of this thesis, *it is this thesis*. The results, and our story, flows through it all. That is essential for a proper understanding of the research-creation contribution of this project.

Everybody Gets Sad, as a 66min autoethnographic video, is the central creative contribution to this thesis. The diaristic pages, in Chapter 3, serve as a bridge between the video and the written text. This section stands out in relation to Chapters 1 and 2 because it represents a shift in the subjectivity of the maker – moving away from the conceptual histories and foundations and towards the vulnerable core of this work. I believe that in order for this to be a rigorous contribution not just at the level of theory, on the one hand, and practice, on the other, but as a project about how to work in between registers (institutional and personal) and forms (written text and video) so as to learn to tell new and different stories – it has to attempt to represent the (in my case) difficult experience of this *syncretic* thinking-making process.

Because, as it has been said throughout this thesis, this project of speaking to my silences is not one that developed in a strictly creative or even in a socio-political art-making context, it is a PhD. Thus, in keeping with the goal of its feminist and queer methodologies it is important to acknowledge the context that binds this work, because those boundaries dictate my results. The psychoanalytic frames presented in Chapter 1 and the histories of art and video making presented in Chapter 2 are the scholarly foundations of the story, and together they have shaped the way in which Ivy and Vanessa, as subjects and as mother and daughter, have come to make speak. Chapter 3, in combination with the central video object, are the making speak of our story but, it is only in the coming together of each section that the research-creation frame is formed – however risky or fluid it may be. As such, the work-in-progress nature of *Everybody Gets Sad* is really only “in-progress” in regards to a future oriented goal of having the film itself circulate as an individual art object. *EGS*, as the video component of this thesis, is complete, as it is understood in relationship to this research-creation project as a whole.

In attempting to *make speak*– many things passed away, I grieved, and got very lost in the process, never to be found again. But, looking backwards, from the bloody aftermath to the initial proposal, the self-shattering impetus and the venture into the unknown were always a part of the package. Although, along the way, and especially during the edit process of the last 5 years, I forgot over and over again why I was doing any of this and how I’d convinced an academic committee to let me do this in the first place. In the process of (re)writing the story of Ivy and Vanessa there appeared to be a necessary form of erasure that served to cut the comforting ties of rehearsed memories in favor of the pain of letting go – and this took place both within the practice of filmmaking itself and within the daily life of the filmmaker herself. Thus, following Halberstam and a critical history which seeks ways out of binary and dichotomous forms of knowing, this thesis forgives itself for bypassing any kind of hermeneutic cleanliness and instead, in honouring its experimental autoethnographic roots, it draws from an interdisciplinary landscape - finding itself at the uncomfortable intersection of “life and art, practice and theory, thinking and doing” and most importantly in the “chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing” (Halberstam, p. 2).

Returning to where this project began, this thesis offers its greatest contribution to thinking and making around *the representation of experience* (and more specifically, in relationship to the representation of the mother-daughter dyad and autoethnographic filmmaking)

in its conscious attempt to speak from and on behalf of no other position than its own. In order to solidify this point I want to first, call back Haraway's feminist methodological concept of *situated knowledges*, and I want to emphasize the three aspects of it that are central to *Everybody Gets Sad*: 1) Recognizing and promoting partiality *as* rationality ("Objectivity as positioned rationality"); 2) The burden of responsibility (the need to, as a researcher, "[...] become answerable for what [they] learn how to see."); and 3) An acknowledgment of the inherent risk factors involved in this kind of work (These are projects, for Haraway, that come with an added level of "risk," they are "[...] about mutual and usually unequal structuring" and about acknowledging a foundational *lack* of "control" (p. 201). Thus, first and foremost, in situating this project and the methodological frame that binds/unbinds it, it is important to reinforce these three pillars as key aspects that structured the storytelling process and ultimately ensured that, however nightmarish and messy the actual process was, in the end it did produce just that – a situated and uncomfortable *research object*, that while failing greatly was never unaware of both the human responsibility and the risk involved in engaging with that. It is precisely because of those "burdens" (to the research, to my mother, to the story, to my own *integrity*) that I did find failure in the end. For me, as filmmaker-researcher-daughter, to see any other story than failure would have been a lie, a lie that would have made everything else a lot easier and everyone around me a lot *happier*, but it would have been a lie nonetheless.

Secondly, I would like to return to the reflexive interval as presented by Trinh, as the space from which the reflexive filmmaking practice for *Everybody Gets Sad* emerged. In keeping with her fundamentally "unstable" understanding of the process of self-constitution, as that "[...] in which the self vacillates and loses its assurance", this project heeded her warning and then succumbed to the consequences of engaging with a risky reflexive practice that works from, "[...] the place in which the play within the textual frame is a play on this very frame, hence on the borderlines of the textual and extratextual, where a positioning within constantly incurs the risk of decompositioning [...]" (p. 105). Through each edit, through each new version of the story, through each new attempt at repositioning Ivy and Vanessa, at reorienting the narrative point of view, everything fell apart. As I came together with her, as we came together to speak our story and to become the mother-daughter duo that I had been desperate to make visible and render coherent, the more I slipped away and along with that so did the epistemological frames that (un)knowingly held us together in the first place. While Ivy remains alive, in flesh and

blood, the film itself is structured around the frame of the grief process because the experience felt like death - *I actually don't want to hear her speak and I don't want to speak to her*. I don't want to care for her, and I never want to be her. *Can we please let go?* I'm not having any fun anymore. Teetering in the reflexive interval we failed. We failed to cohere, we failed to keep smiling (although we did always keep laughing).

Finally, I want to revisit de Lauretis' understanding of experience as *a process by which subjectivity is constructed*. I started out this project attempting to align my work with her goal of trying to comprehend the "relation of meaning production to experience" - particularly focusing on gendered experience, but not in a way so as to essentialize "women's experiences" (or *mothers* or *daughters* as such) but so as to pull that apart through the act of "(self-) analyzing" (p. 167). I would argue that I have followed this impetus, put forth by de Lauretis in the name of what feminist theory is capable of, and have pushed it, through a creative autoethnographic practice, to its logical conclusion. In the narrativization/documenting of *the experience* of Ivy and Vanessa, Mother and Daughter, subject and filmmaker, our "habits" were laid bare and they came undone in their exposure to the light - the process undid me from the inside out. I can't stand *My Mother* and I hate myself as *Her Daughter*. And for this reason, we have to grieve our story as it is laid to rest in the graveyard of sad white bitches. *Everybody Gets Sad* is *very personal* and *very political*, and it lets its "women" fall apart without judging their messy and contradictory attempts to put themselves back together again, or not. In that, I claim that it holds true to the embodied politics of the feminist methods and the feminist theory that grounds this entire project.

The Problem: Permission to Fail/Feel

The central problem for this project was buried beneath the proposal. Well, not really buried at all, but front and centre was a prompt that not even the author was able to see at the time of its initial expression. At the base of it all, this project was about my inability to articulate my most difficult relationship - one that, in its intersubjective nature, held together my own ability as an artist and researcher, to be a person in the world - or at least I thought it did. That means that from the beginning I set out to create a PhD about something that I couldn't articulate and was intricately related to my own mental stability. But that didn't matter, because I wanted to live the

theory out and I wanted to contribute to the canon of films that changed the way I see movies, storytelling, and my own self in the world. A lofty goal, and one that, in hindsight, was doomed from the start.

The problem was located in the intention, as it was such that *I wanted to make my mother happy*. In doing so, I would then be able to make myself happy. *Through the act of redeeming her, redeeming us, I would be saved*. I wanted to work through my inability to articulate my most difficult relationship to fix (read: make happy) a person and a relation of kin that in actual fact made me quite unhappy - it was my wound and I didn't know how to heal it so I decided to make a PhD about it. That is the spine of it all. And therein lies the seed of my failure - why from the very beginning I was working off of a false premise - a false promise more like it. Therefore, beginning from where I began, the only real outcome was failure - to fail in my pursuit was the answer to my original proposition. In real life, I have failed too. I have failed all over the place. Failed relationships, failed jobs, *failing to stay on "track."* My embodied existence has been but a slow, or not so slow, realization that those stories that I was told, those narratives that structured my epistemological framework if poked and prodded (in this case with a few questions, some time, and a consumer video camera) reveal themselves as just that - plots. In keeping with the tone of the previous chapter, and much of the work that this thesis draws on, I will share a personal anecdote that captures that which I believe ignited the five-year edit process (the beginning to stitch together/come apart) of this work.

In late 2015 I saw the Pixar movie *Inside Out* (dir. Pete Doctor). This CGI animated children's film was presented to me by my then roommate as the fitting thing to watch to sooth my then broken heart. Having just emerged from a terrible breakup, after moving from Montreal to New York with no actual life plan, I was in dire need of a pick-me-up. Or at least that's what I thought I was getting. *Inside Out* is about the internal emotional world of a (middle class, white) 11 yr old girl (Riley) who moves with her parents from her Midwestern hometown to San Francisco. While we are positioned as audience members in Riley's head, the central characters are actually defined by her five main emotions – Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust. Within the first ten minutes of the movie I was losing my mind over what I considered to be the most frustrating behavior from Sadness. Not only was she a total bummer, but she kept contaminating Riley's "happy" memories as she stumbled around in her completely unproductive and depressive stupor. "She's so useless!" I exclaimed, "What the hell is wrong with this character?"

Stop touching everything Sadness! You're ruining it all!" I was ready to dismiss the film right then and there because I couldn't stand, let alone relate to, such a backwards and counterintuitive way of being. I was much more interested in Joy who I felt should just kill Sadness because her job of protecting Riley's memories from Sadness's gross slippery hands would be much easier if she could be eliminated entirely. Alas, my roommate looked over at me, smiling like a wise wizard, as if she knew right from the start that I needed this story more than I could have known. Because, you see, the whole point of *Inside Out* is that it is not only ok, but it is actually necessary (read: *healthy*), to be able to feel "counterproductive" feelings – like Sadness. At 30 years old, I mark that moment as the turning point, the permission to feel, that enabled the five-year nightmare of getting this creative research project completed. Or I should say it foreshadowed, all too ironically, the place to which I would ultimately return, eyes salty with dried up tears – here I am, holding hands with Sadness once again, but this time – I kinda like it.

As a means of situating the kind of failure that this experiential work is addressing, and the kind of politics of representation that it is engaged in, I return to the queer anti-social frame presented by Halberstam that I raised in chapter 2. His work is useful not only in laying the groundwork for the potential of this kind of mutt-like academic practice that lays at the crossroads of research and creation, but also for precisely the kind of *failure(s)* that this project attempts to represent - a formal experiment about a relationship that is and has always been failed, on a backdrop of social norms and narratives of success that have led me (kicking and screaming) straight to the land of fail. While I am not a queer subject, I make the claim that, in its development from critical theory, postcolonial studies, race studies, and feminism, queer theory articulates an opening for my work to be wholeheartedly exactly what it is and to see that as potential instead of as something to be discarded because it doesn't fit neatly in any one disciplinary or methodological box. *Everybody Gets Sad*, and arguably the written thesis that accompanies it, is the scholarly and creative narrativization of my own gendered and privileged Oedipal legacy of sad and the ways in which dominant heteronormative and progressive success driven plots have come inside my mind (our minds – her & I) and created an intersubjective bond that is killing me. But *I love it/her* all the while you see, I'm desperate for it to cohere even as I tear it (me/us) apart. There is tension in this failure.

Expanding on the dominant queer archive³⁸ Halberstam notes that,

[...] it rarely mentions all kinds of other antisocial writers, artists, and texts such as Valerie Solanas, Jamaica Kincaid, Patricia Highsmith, Wallace and Gromit, Johnny Rotten, Nicole Eiseman, Eileen Myles, June Jordan, Linda Besemer, Hothead Paisan, finding Nemo, Lesbians on Ecstasy, Deborah Cass, SpongeBob, Shulamith Firestone, Marga Gomez, Toni Morrison, and Patti Smith. (p. 109)

It is in these works, he claims, that the messy unbecoming and destructive work of “[...] rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, over-investment, incivility, brutal honesty, and disappointment” takes shape. (p. 110) Even though these writers are - coming from very different registers, geared toward different market audiences, and valued across hugely different scales - they nonetheless *come together*, for Halberstam, precisely in their (well crafted) ability to fall to the wayside of hegemonic pathways to success and “the good life.” And, each work, in their own way, through their unique voices and forms, is able to articulate from outside the margins of the agreed upon high-art/culture archive, the way in which failure, although “[...] accompanied by a host of negative affects, disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (p. 3). I would argue that Pixar’s *Inside Out* is another excellent example of this kind of work, as it is able to maintain its kid friendly packaging while simultaneously being able to critique and dismantle a culture that raises children to smile when what they really want to do is cry, or scream. But, more specifically, what it does is showcase a situated (and privileged) example of the psycho-social nuances of the development of complex emotions in children.

In opening the archive of failure to embrace texts from a broad cultural spectrum, from writers across queer, postcolonial, and black feminisms, Halberstam is continuing to expand the

³⁸ Halberstam explains that, “On the one hand the gay male archive coincides with the canonical archive, and on the other hand it narrows that archive down to a select group of antisocial queer aesthetes and camp icons and texts [...] It includes, in no particular order, Tennessee Williams, Virginia woolf, Bette Midler, Andy Warhol, Henry James, Jean Genet, Broadway musicals, Marcel Proust, Alfred Hitchcock, Oscar Wilde, Jack Smith, Judy Garland [...]” (p. 109)

antisocial lens, established previously through the work of Lee Edelman (2004).³⁹ In doing this, he is broadening the ways in which to view and read the varied *pathways to failure* that have been written by and about subjugated peoples across high and low platforms. Recalling the *shadow feminist archive* that I explained in Chapter 2, Halberstam goes on to expand it to include the work of, among others, Maria Abramovic, Yoko Uno, and Faith Wilding, establishing their art as contributing to the kind of self-annihilating *radical passivity* that “[...] allows for the inhabiting of femininity with a difference” (p. 144). Furthermore, he claims that, their work, “[...] offer[s] an antisocial way out of the double bind of becoming woman and thereby propping up the dominance of man within a gender binary” (p. 144). In other words, through their passive performances of undoing, they are able to refuse the trap of femininity entirely by acting out a kind of feminist failure that refuses to cohere, speak up, or be nice. The work of this thesis is, in many ways, not like that of Jamaica Kincaid, Valerie Solanas, Sponge Bob, or Yoko Ono, and in linking it to this failed and shadowed archive my point is not to co-opt the position or speak on behalf of others.

My point is however, two fold. On the one hand I seek, like Halberstam, to expand the archive. In doing so I would add such works from my autoethnographic media landscape as Citron’s *Daughter Rite*, Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance*, and Akerman’s *No Home Movie*. I would argue that all three of these films showcase voices from within the mother-daughter relation that refuse to cohere and are most certainly not smiling. But, it is from within their own traumatic and relational frame that they are able to expose the complexity and the entangled nature of that very frame and the gendered intergenerational legacy that upholds it. On the other hand, I aim to position *Everybody Gets Sad* (and the written thesis that it is in relationship with), alongside the above-mentioned films, within this archive of queer failure and shadowed feminism. This work is *sad, angry, intense, manic* (at times), *sincere, earnest, overly-invested, brutally honest*, and founded on *disappointment*. However, my situated play on the mother-daughter frame is also a play on the frame of disciplinarity. On the frame of what counts as knowledge, and who counts as knowledge makers. As such, my work is a contribution to Halbertsam’s archive both in terms of the form and nature of the story it tries to tell, as well as

³⁹ While this archive encompasses texts that come together across different registers, for Halberstam, they each explore in their own ways, “[...] what happens when failure is productively linked to racial awareness, anti colonial struggle, gender variance, and different formulations of the temporality of success.” (p. 92)

being an example of how that work can be made to fit within an academic and “disciplined” context. I believe that it is through the unique research-creation form of this project that it is able to offer itself up as a rigorous contribution both at the level of form (theory practice framework – *how it speaks*) and at the level of content (the story it tells – *what it speaks*).

And Like Tears We Fall: On Process & Finding the Story - Part II

Finally, the kind of risk that this project underscores is best articulated through the water metaphors and symbolism that have been circulating throughout all dimensions of this project. On a personal level, I am obsessed with baths and have been swimming almost 50 laps a day while completing this dissertation – I live to be submerged. So on the one hand, there’s the embodied knowledge that water cleanses me and it makes me stronger by moving through it, by floating on it, and by sinking into it. But on the other hand, currents, streams, oceans and rivers are unpredictable and an honest engagement with them requires the knowledge that you are not in control and if you forget that or deny it, you will drown. As such I would say that any thinker-maker that wishes to work with water (and the kind of risk it presents), has to respect its power, and if they attempt to lose themselves in its mystery they must do so while acknowledging the unknown dangers that lurk below. This research-creation process was like jumping off a bridge into raging rapids, when unfortunately I had thought I was stepping into some kind of heated indoor pool. What happened is that, when I fell and I could no longer see, when I didn’t know where I was, when all I had was an impetus to survive - *I had to feel*. Through feeling, feeling bad things mostly, and getting torn apart on the rocks and in the tides I couldn’t control, I learned to recover *my way*.

I’m forgetting an important part though. There was someone there with me, another body, one that I came running after and in trying to stop her from falling I went down too. Well I guess I don’t really know who went in after who, but I let her go, I had to to survive. We are still in the river though, we will always be, but by creating new maps for navigating it I am able to care more and care better for both my own journey as well as that of those I bump into along the way. This thesis project is a map. I do not know where it leads, but I am grateful to have had the privilege to create it, and I hope that this risky, messy, and uncomfortable research-creation

journey may inspire others to do the same. They may fail, like me, but in failing they may also be set free.

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APPENDIX A

Everybody Gets Sad

Link: <https://vimeo.com/317076893/0045070159>

Work in Progress / unfinished film – Thesis Submission Cut (Central Creative Object)

Directed by Vanessa Meyer

Temp Titles

Temp Music

Temp VO

No Color

No Sound Mix

RT: 66mins

APPENDIX B

Smile Bitch

Link: <https://vimeo.com/212809618/51e8206533>

Early Cut / unfinished film

Directed by Vanessa Meyer

Temp Titles

Temp Music

Temp VO

No Color

No Sound Mix

RT: 81mins

APPENDIX C

On Dreaming

Link: <https://vimeo.com/324336755/74be2acc8e>

Early Cut / unfinished film

Directed by Vanessa Meyer

Temp Titles

Temp Music

Temp VO

No Color

No Sound Mix

RT: 51mins

END