

A Hundred Years From Now:

A cinematic journey of cultural rediscovery through grief

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Abstract

A Hundred Years From Now

Arijit Debnath

Can cinema mediate an awakening of cultural identity and a processing of grief? This is the question I explore in my cinematic research-creation, *A Hundred Years From Now*. This project delineates how an awakening of my roots and heritage as a Bengali - Canadian informs a cultivation of visual and auditory memories of my late mother. Through an exploration and audiovisual celebration of Bengali cinema, poetry and literature, I trace the roots of my heritage and uncover my cultural identity. This process became much more poignant given the passing of my mother, and as a result, this cultural rediscovery is heavily intertwined with grief. This journey of self-discovery through cultural works - specifically the works of filmmaker Satyajit Ray and poet Rabindranath Tagore - ultimately brings me to making connections between these works and the memory of my mother. Is it grief that leads me on this path to self-discovery? Or does this self-discovery allow for a mediation of my grieving process? I explore these questions in a thirteen-minute non-narrative experimental short film that blends animation and live-action with an immersive sound design. Additionally, I aim to cinematically render cultural and personal memory as embodied and haptic, from my Bengali - Canadian perspective.

In the following dissertation, I will illustrate the process for how I ventured to answer these questions through my cinematic research, and draw theoretical conclusions how my practice follows in the continuum of a larger conversation of diasporic cinema.

Acknowledgements

I would not be here today without the endless support of my advisors Prof. Shira Avni, and Prof. Jean-Claude Bustros. I started my journey in animation when I met with Prof. Avni on a portfolio day for the animation program many years ago, and by chance she was the one to assess my portfolio. Ever since, she has been an indelible part of my growth and education over the past several years. Her caring, kind, and empathetic approach to mentoring and fostering growth is rare, and I feel lucky to have her guide me through my experience of developing this project. In addition, it has been a privilege to have Prof. Bustros as an advisor as well, and all the lessons I have learned in my experiences in developing this project, as well as working with him beyond this project, are things I will carry with me for a very long time. I am highly indebted to both Prof. Avni and Prof. Bustros for their consistent support and patience as I navigated this most personal of works, allowing me to make the exact film and thesis project I wanted to make. I will cherish all our conversations that we have had over the past two years.

This project would also not be what it is without the guidance of Prof. Marielle Nitoslawksa. It was in her research methods, image, and non-fiction classes that this film began to take shape, and it was thanks to a comment she made at the very early stages that triggered the first ideas for this project. Prof. Nitoslawksa gave me the courage to be vulnerable, and take risks I would not have taken otherwise.

This project is also indebted to my dear friend Mariana Flores, who has become more like a sibling to me. We both came to this program with parallel losses, and it was her courage and bravery to confront her grief head on from the very beginning of her project that inspired me to try to do the same. Seeing her take that brave step and witnessing her work blossom into what it is today, allowed me to see the possibilities in my own work.

I would also like to thank my family, for their ceaseless support over the years, and giving me the grace to let me pursue my curiosities in life, albeit through fits and false starts. I thank them also for trusting me with our family archives, and gifting me the license to make work with the material as I saw fit. I hope that in this film and thesis project, I created a shrine to our mother and father, and I hope it honors their memories.

To my partner Xiao Han for being there for me when things seemed impossible.

And lastly to all my friends old and new in the MFA program and beyond. I am blessed to have found a community of such kindred spirits in Montréal. May we continue to grow, and creatively expand together.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my father, Nani Gopal Debnath, who I closely collaborated with on the film to memorialize my mother, Nilima Debnath, in image, sound, and music. *A Hundred Years From Now* was meant to mainly be a memorial to her, but it now represents many of the things he was passionate and endlessly curious about, and has become a small shrine to his legacy.

For Ma and Baba. Hope you both found peace together somewhere.

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Accessing the project

While reading this dissertation, please refer to the following links for the film work that are referenced in the writing.

The password for all of these links is: ahyfn

Film: *A Hundred Years From Now*, 13 min.

Link : <https://vimeo.com/1169673588>

Experiment #1: *Phule Phule*, 1 min 30 sec

Link: <https://vimeo.com/1167966847/c191d0d696>

Experiment #2: *Shadowplay*, 2 min.

Link: <https://vimeo.com/1169678914>

Experiment #3: Self-portrait, 2 min 42 sec.

Link: <https://vimeo.com/1169683394>

Experiment #4: Personal Archives, 1 min.

Link: <https://vimeo.com/1169735452>

Experiment #5: Sound Piece, 5 min.

Link: <https://vimeo.com/1169741537>

Introduction

In April of 2022, my mother passed away due to complications from Parkinson's disease. Although we had all been witness to the quiet progression of the disease, the loss naturally came as a shock to all of us in the family. At the time, I already had been away for several years in Montréal, and at the time of the loss, I felt the weight of it more because I had been away from her during those years.

I was about to wrap up the second year of the film animation program at Concordia University, having just been accepted to the MFA Cinematic Arts program a few weeks prior. My parents lived in Toronto, a city we emigrated to in 2002, coming from the United Arab Emirates. My parents were originally from Bangladesh.

The project with which I applied to the program concerned diasporic identity, which was apt given the transnational makeup of who I am – I was born in the UAE with a Bangladeshi passport, immigrated to Canada, and then years later moved to Montréal as an adult, itself a city of multiplicities of national identity and fluidity of language. I had always been interested in this notion of cultural identity because I couldn't shake the juxtaposition and clash of cultures that was evident in my youth. We were in Toronto, but my parents still made sure that we were connected to our heritage by being a big part of the Bengali community in the city, going to cultural events at the temple where language, poetry, music, dance, and food from our culture could not be missed. However, we were still on Canadian soil. Without being able to name it, I felt the loss of something that I didn't actively give up – I was Bengali in my veins, but I didn't speak the language well, we weren't remotely close to Bangladesh, and that liminal distance between me and my identity grew larger over time.

This subconscious loss compounded with an actual personal loss when my mother passed away. Whatever connection with being Bengali that I had held onto was intricately tied with my mother, and in losing her, I lost half of my connection to back home. I felt the weight of being in Montréal, away from my mother during the peak of her illness. All I could hold onto were the

few moments in the later years of my life when I did try to engage with my heritage in some way, and I was fortunate to discover Bengali cinema which left a deep impression in me. I shared my discoveries of this cinema with my parents, and they would tell me about their experience growing up with those films and what that cinema meant to them.

When I started the MFA program in September 2022, a few months after my mother passed away, I started working on the project of diasporic identity on a larger level, and did not confront my grief as I was too close to it. However, I couldn't shake the fact that the beginnings of my cultural discovery coincided with the loss of my mother. This specific dynamic led to me developing my film "*A Hundred Years From Now.*"

Beginnings, and the conceptual foundation

This project initially began as a comparative study of space in Montreal and Dhaka, with Montreal representing the city that I adopted as my new home, and Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, representing my cultural heritage. Kolkata also served as a possible placeholder for the city representing my heritage. The reasons for which I considered Kolkata as a placeholder were practical, personal and cultural. My extended family is spread across West Bengal (a state in India) and Bangladesh, which carries political implications since Bangladesh used to be a part of the Bengal state before the Partition of India in 1947¹. There are ongoing political tensions in Bangladesh, which can make travelling there tenuous, and for these reasons, and for my research purposes I wanted to keep Kolkata as an option, if ever my research required a travel aspect to capture footage in person.

Inspired by Giorgio Reggio's *Koyaaniskatsi* (1982)², and Steve Reich's tape loop piece *Different Trains* (1988)³, the film I had initially envisioned was to be an audio-visual ethnographic collage of image, sound and rhythm. I intended to make a film that didn't quite follow a character per say, but rather featured how masses of people interact with urban spaces

¹ Yasmin Khan, "Why Pakistan and India remain in denial 70 years on from partition" *The Guardian*, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/05/partition-70-years-on-india-pakistan-denial>

² Giorgio Reggio's *Koyaaniskatsi*, 1982

³ Steve Reich, *Different Trains*, 1988, first performed by the Kronos Quartet.

and architectural monuments, on a macro level, and urban textures and patterns on the micro level. The conceptual framework that I started developing was centered on city space and how the fabric of a city is intertwined with cultural identity. I began investigating notions of how the traces we leave while moving through city space shapes the fabric of a city, and how city space informs one's understanding of themselves.

To begin, I created several tests using footage I had taken on my bike rides and walks around Montreal. The methodology was designed to take the footage I had filmed and use that as a base for my stop motion/ cut out animation experiments. By printing out the frames, my intention was to cut out elements from the prints and rephotograph them in camera, then reanimate these isolated fragments and juxtapose them with abstract textures to create a visual collage.

I discussed this project in Prof. Marielle Nitoslawska's research class, as we were formulating our overall thesis outlines and proposals. In sharing my experiments with the class, the overwhelming response was that while it was interesting on a technical level, it felt impersonal. These ideas were presented during the mid-term progress presentation, which also consisted of cinematic and sonic references of films and music pieces that could inspire my film research. Among the films I referenced were *The Big City* (1963)⁴ by Satyajit Ray, a Bengali filmmaker whose work I had not long before discovered. Out of the entire presentation, this aspect of me being in dialogue with a Bengali filmmaker such as Ray spoke the most to Prof. Nitoslawska, and in response to the tests that I presented, she encouraged me to dig deeper into exploring the cultural aspect of my project, noting that exploring Ray's works could be a possible catalyst for my research project. One suggestion that particularly struck me was to experiment with taking images and sequences directly from his films and to use that as my basis for the animation experimentation and methodology, something I had already been formulating in my mind prior to that discussion. Given that the archival material I would be extracting and pulling from is copyrighted, I was reassured that it is admissible in the context of research within an academic institution. This lit a spark for my research possibilities, and that suggestion was the impetus for my research going forward.

⁴ Satyajit Ray, *The Big City*, 1963.

As discussed earlier, around this time of formulating the basis of my research project, I was privately dealing with grief. The loss of my mother was too fresh at that point for me to confront in my work, and I felt it necessary to focus on something else and develop a project around cultural identity through a broader research apparatus. However, it was becoming more apparent that I had to somehow confront this fundamental loss that I had just experienced. I was further motivated and encouraged to do so, as another classmate who had gone through a similar loss with their mother around the same time decided to dive headfirst into making a work about her grief. These feelings serendipitously coincided with the formal evolution and changes my research and cinematic experiments were taking. These contributed to the foundations of a project where my mother would become omnipresent throughout the process, and her presence would touch every frame that I would render henceforth.

The cinema of Satyajit Ray, and poetry of Rabindranath Tagore

With the knowledge that I had the freedom to pull from copyrighted material to make my work within the confines of academic research, I revisited some of Ray's films that I found myself connecting with the most. Prior to starting the master's program, I had discovered his films during my journey of deepening my knowledge of film history. Ray was one of the most prominent Indian filmmakers of his time, making films from the 1950s up until the late 1980s, with films such as *The Apu Trilogy* (1955- 1959) ⁵, and *The Music Room* (1958) ⁶ gaining international recognition. In addition to being an Indian filmmaker, he was more specifically a *Bengali* filmmaker, making films primarily in the Bengali language. He portrayed his characters and stories with a cinematic elegance that married subject matter close to home as a Bengali native, with his more international cinematic influences such as Billy Wilder and Jean Renoir. Ray's works were being released during the period my parents came of age and entered adulthood in the country now called Bangladesh. One of the more meaningful experiences that I have had was to watch several of his films, particularly *The Apu Trilogy* and *Charulata* with both my parents, sometime before my mother passed away.

⁵ Ray, *The Apu Trilogy*, 1955–1959.

⁶ Ray, *The Music Room*, 1958.

Among those films, *Charulata* (1964)⁷ and *The World of Apu* (1959)⁸ most captured my imagination. *Charulata* follows the journey of a woman who lives a lonely life married to a neglectful aristocrat. Throughout the film she develops a creative and romantic awakening, falling for her husband's cousin, Amal, an aspiring young writer who comes to visit her home bringing his idealistic and youthful energy. I found one moment in *Charulata* particularly striking. At the heart of the film is a scene where Charu and Amal relax in the courtyard exchanging ideas about poetry and literature. In a moment of bliss, Charu begins to sway on a swing. The scene is shot with the camera swaying along with her, and Charu looks directly at the camera as she sways, singing a song into the camera. Apart from the novel cinematic approach of the scene with the image being visually striking, I was drawn to this scene because the song that Charu sings - *Phule Phule Dhole Dhole (A Touch of Sweet Breeze)*⁹ (written by Rabindranath Tagore) - was one of my mother's favourite songs.

Activating cultural memory

Over the years as I grew up, my mother had passed on to me some of the musical traditions of the Bengali language. As I personally found myself more immersed in music, playing and composing my own work, I would often sit down with her, and we would go through some of the Bengali songs she grew up with. Through my contemporary lens, I would interpret these songs traditionally written for the harmonium and play them on guitar. However, after seeing *Charulata* together with my mother, I never got the chance to learn and share this specific song with her. For all these reasons, this scene has a particular emotional resonance for me, and much of my film, *A Hundred Years From Now*, is centered on this one scene.

Ray's inclusion of the song is significant on a cinematic level. In speaking of the film in a *Sight & Sound* article in 1982, Ray noted that his inclusion of the song in *Charulata* was a part of the design of the film, where he embedded specificities about the Bengali culture that may otherwise be missed by Western audiences:

⁷ Ray, *Charulata*, 1964.

⁸ Ray, *The World of Apu*, 1959.

⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Phule Phule Dhole Dhole*

“Snatches of song, literary allusions, domestic details, an entire scene where Charu and her beloved Amal talk in alliterations . . . all give the film a density missed by the Western viewer in (*their*) preoccupation with plot, character, the moral and philosophical aspects of the story, and the apparent meaning of the images.”¹⁰

Seeing these works activated a kind of *cultural memory* that hadn't been activated before, as the cultural memory was mediated through these cinematic works. Marita Sturken writes that *cultural memory* is something that is “shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning.”¹¹ In my case, the cultural memory that had been cultivated in my family was through oral histories, stories, and a passing down of knowledge by my parents, including the Bengali musical tradition that my mother passed onto me. Anders Bergstorm writes about cinema as having potential to act as a strong vessel for cultural memory, especially about how the past is memorialized in film:

“Cinema as cultural memory emphasizes the role it can play in the transmission of collective stories and chains of tradition. In both its individual impact and cultural functions, cinema fulfills many of the same roles in modernity that spiritual practices- such as rituals, visions, conceptions of the afterlife, prayer, and meditation- have fulfilled and continue to fulfill across a wide spectrum of societies, serving as a connection between the individual and a larger, even transcendent, view of the world.”¹²

On a more personal level, upon seeing these films I felt like I came a little closer to the native language and culture that had eluded me for so long. Watching these works, I had the

¹⁰ Philip Kemp, “Charulata: “Calm Without, Fire Within,” Criterion, effective August 2013

¹¹ Seunghyun Hwang, “Lingering Cultural Memory and Hyphenated Exile,” In *Performing Exile: Foreign Bodies*, Intellect, edited by Judith Rudakoff, 111–24.

¹² Anders Bergstorm, “Cinematic Past Lives: Memory, Modernity, and Cinematic Reincarnation in Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s ‘Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives.’”

feeling that it was the first time I felt myself reflected in what I saw, often a sentiment felt by diasporic individuals or those of hybrid identities.

My father often talked about the importance of Rabindranath Tagore's works in shaping the collective Bengali cultural consciousness, as Tagore was a prominent Bengali poet, writer and artist. His work was also a large influence on Ray's films. In fact, Ray's *Charulata* was based on a 1901 novella by Tagore called *Nastanirh (The Broken Nest)*¹³, and the song *Phule Phule Dhole Dhole* that Charulata sings while swaying was written by Tagore himself as well. Therefore, once I came across Ray's works, the cultural memory that I had absorbed over the years had finally crystallized, and Ray's "screen images" had compounded with the knowledge that I had absorbed from my parents, making my connection with my Bengali heritage that much richer. Furthermore, the cultural memory that has been activated now has an emotional resonance given the grief that is now intertwined with it.

This sense of being energized and feeling rejuvenated in one's cultural identity by interacting with a work is a universal experience that is seldom recognized. Gloria Andaluzia exclaims in *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, that growing up as a Chicano Mexican - a title reserved for those who live on the border between Mexico and the United States - she felt that her lack of fluency in "proper" Spanish excluded her from being authentically Spanish. Andaluzia writes:

"In the 1960s, I read my first Chicano novel. It was *City of Night* by John Rechy, a gay Texan, son of a Scottish father and a Mexican mother. For days I walked around in stunned amazement that a Chicano could write and could get published. When I read / *Am Joaquin* I was surprised to see a bilingual book by a Chicano in print. When I saw poetry written in Tex-Mex for the first time, a feeling of pure joy flashed through me. I felt like we really existed as a people."¹⁴

¹³ Rabindranath Tagore. *Broken Nest (Nashtanir)*. Translated into English by Mary M. Lago and Supriya Sen. New Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd, 2000.

¹⁴ Gloria Andaluzia, "How to Tame A Wild Tongue" in *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, Aunt Lute Books, 1987

The passing on of traditions with my parents has always been there, however, it may be that since the passing of my mother my desire to build upon my cultural memory has become more prominent. Having never lived in Bangladesh, and having always self-identified as a Bengali mainly through being in the diaspora, my mother was one half of my connection to the place, the language and the culture.

With the loss of my mother at the forefront of my consciousness, those images of Charulata suddenly evoked that of my own mother (Fig. 1), and I couldn't unsee the parallels between these two figures. Perhaps it was the visual iconography of the image and the character that was represented, including Charulata's earrings, her sari, the way she fashioned her hair – all these elements contributed to a representation of the quintessential Bengali woman that I could recognize as a person of the Bengali diaspora. While the character herself was not a maternal figure, I saw a connection between her and the way my own mother would have been when she was Charulata's age. This feeling was resonant across Ray's other films as well, particularly *The World of Apu*, a film where the main character Apu falls in love with a woman named Aparna who he ends up marrying out of pure chance. Far from the aristocratic setting of *Charulata*, this love story is set among the struggling lower working classes of Kolkata, India, in the 1950s. This film more closely resembles the reality and everyday life of my parents, as they were both born and grew up in villages where resources were scarce, such as Noakhali (my father's birthplace) and Bhola (my mother's birthplace).



Figure 1: My mother (left) and Charulata¹⁵ (right)

Mapping of grief and memory

The above-mentioned films served as my entry into my cinematic research project. While it was mainly instinctual at the early stages of the project that I was drawn towards interacting with these images through animation, further research reveals to me that this practice of searching for pre-existing elements to interact with, has an underlying resonance with the nature of mourning and grieving. These are images that I could latch onto, to give my mourning something tangible to be attached to.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion illustrates how grief exists in a temporal as well as a spatial dimension.¹⁶ After experiencing the loss of her husband and a traumatic period of caring for her daughter through sickness, Didion writes of the places that she often happened upon which would trigger memories, places that were once neutral became emotionally resonant and poignant. Cities and places that Didion and her husband used to live in and visit would trigger memories when she would pass by, leading her down a “vortex” which allowed her to escape the present moment of grief and step into a past when he was still around. “Mappable

¹⁵ Goldsmith Film Group, “Charulata (1964, Satyajit Ray),” Substack, <https://goldsmithsfilmgroup.substack.com/p/charulata-1964-satyajit-ray>

¹⁶ Marta Bladec. “‘A Place None of Us Know Until We Reach It’: Mapping Grief and Memory in Joan Didion’s ‘The Year Of Magical Thinking.’” in *Biography* 37, no. 4 (2014): 935–52.

grief attests to ways in which places store and evoke memories; no less importantly, the spatiality of grief also shows that memory and acts of remembrance are crucial to the process of mourning.” This echoes the work of cultural geographers such as Avril Maddrell who writes that grief can be mapped, where "an individual's experience of bereavement changes their relation to spaces and places and . . . this becomes a dynamic internal map of shifting patterns of emotion and affect, both painful and comforting." ¹⁷

If I were to augment this notion of giving mourning an outlet by navigating places and spaces that give grief meaning, instead of physical spaces, in my case it is cinema, poetry and literature that I navigate. Cinema is inherently temporal, spatial and specifically *sensorial*.

Evolution of *A Hundred Years From Now* Part I: Visual Methodology

I came to this project with an artistic, experimental animation practice, and I wanted the film to have a variety of textures, techniques, styles and types of images. The techniques that I had been experimenting with around the inception of the project were hand drawing frame by frame, cutting out portions of photographed elements to create fragmented images, and combining these (among other elements such as textures) to create a new image, all captured in camera. I follow in the tradition of several animators that combine various textures, methodologies and elements all physically captured in-camera. Artists and animators like Jodie Mack, Stacey Steers and the work of Winston Hacking inform much of my style and the direction I take with animation. At the heart of their process is the use of animation to transform a pre-existing artefact to tell a new story. As I will illustrate in the following section, this approach is conducive to the themes of personal and cultural memory that I am exploring.

¹⁷ Avril Maddrell. "Mapping Grief and Memory in John Banville's *The Sea*." in *Geography and Memory*, edited by Owain Jones, Joanne Garde-Hansen, 58-67. Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies, 2012.

Animation's potential to explore memory

In *Animation & Memory*¹⁸, Nicholas Andrew Miller writes that memory relies on movements in time composed of individual discrete steps, which resonates with the inherent nature of animation as a medium. To preface the discussion of the link between animation and memory, Miller uses the work of Picasso as an example. In 1956, Picasso was visited by Vogue magazine writer Alexander Liberman, who noticed a series of drawings about the same subject - around 40 drawings/ paintings of a portrait of a young girl. On one end of the spectrum, the drawings were realistic and representational, and across the series the drawings grew incrementally more abstract. Picasso's method was revealed in this series: he would start by making a highly realistic drawing and then start the image again on a new canvas, this time abstracting one small element. In the next drawing after that of the same image, yet another element would be further abstracted, so on and so forth. Liberman writes in Vogue that, "after the first black and white realistic painting, he had painted twenty or thirty other canvases, each one abstracting a step further the original portrait; each one reducing to essentials, creating a new sign language that would still bring to the mind the image of the girl with her hair in a ponytail."

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Miller uses this encounter of Picasso's work to make the argument that although the objective of a painter is to create a single image, this mode of working is closer to animation. If these series of drawings of the same subject were to be put in a sequence, what would result is an animation of metamorphosis, of a girl that increasingly becomes more abstracted. This methodology resonates with the inherent nature of memory - never static or fixed, and always in metamorphosis and transformation. In my methodology for *A Hundred Years From Now*, I draw on this philosophy not exactly to transform an individual image, but rather to render this sense of transformation across a set of animations that become increasingly more layered and abstract.

¹⁸ Nicholas Andrew Miller. "'A Printing Machine for the Memory': Stillness, Metamorphosis, and the *Poiesis* of Memory in Ruth Lingford's *Death and the Mother*" in *Animation & Memory*. ed Maarten van Gageldonk et al, pp. 83.

¹⁹ Liberman, Alexander. "Picasso." Vogue 128, November 1, 1956: 132-181.

Miller further elaborates on Picasso's proclivity to work like an animator, and makes links with the practice of printmaking, a medium where each print is less a replica of the original image but rather a trace of the original. In each print of the same image, "the impression shifts, sharpens, fades, or blurs owing to inconsistent factors such as pressure, materials used, operator skill, and so on."²⁰ Miller writes, that:

"Memory, as typically conceived, is a faculty of mind used for the recording, retention, and preservation of cognitive or sensory perceptions. A printing machine offers a seemingly apt figure for this activity, since its function is primarily to impress an image upon a surface. The metaphor thus visualizes memory as a "system designed for the preservation of external sensory or conceptual data."²¹

Another metaphor that could be augmented onto this discussion is that of a *palimpsest*,²² which refers to a manuscript page, from which the text has been washed off or effaced in order to be written over. This serves as another way of viewing how I wanted to approach the animation, with each technique effacing the original images that I am drawing on.

These approaches to image making - iterating on a single image to abstract it in various ways, rendering it more personal, is at the heart of my methodology for my film. What evolved through the process is the exploration of a collection of a set of images, and exploring those same images through various permutations. Much like the way Picasso abstracted one element after another for the same image, I approached my animation in a similar way. I took some key scenes from *Charulata* and *The World of Apu* featuring the two female protagonists and approached the same scenes using different technical approaches as discussed earlier, such as cut out animation, hand drawn animation, experimenting with projections, etc. Through these various techniques, I wanted to render how the images became embedded in my subconscious. I fragmented these images, and reconstructed them, through the collage-like nature of the compositions I created.

²⁰ Miller, *Animation & Memory*, 83.

²¹ Miller, *Animation & Memory*, 83.

²² Merriam-Webster Dictionary. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Continues *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (first published in 2003). Continually updated at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/palimpsest>

Experiment #1: *Phule Phule* – hand drawn and stop motion animation

To start the cinematic project, the scene of Charu swaying on the swing featuring the song “*Phule Phule Dhole Dhole*,”²³ seemed to be a natural starting point given the emotional resonance that it carries for me. My approach was to create an animated interpretation of the scene, tracing the image of Charulata frame by frame on paper, and recapturing the drawn frames in camera to then put them together into an animation sequence. The first step was to narrow down the scene from the film, and print out the frames of the scene, which I would then physically interact with frame by frame. I traced the image of Charulata across a five second segment, selectively drawing only parts of the frame, which would give the sensation that the image is coming in and out of formation when the drawings are set to a sequence.



Figure 2: Hand - drawn frame juxtaposed with fragment of the photographic frame in Experiment #1.

Once I had about roughly fifty frames of drawings, I then captured them in camera, to reanimate the same scene but with my drawings instead. In addition, I printed out the frames from the same scene with the swing, and ripped portions of it frame by frame, with each rip becoming smaller to reveal more of the image. Once these elements were captured and set to sequence, it gave the impression that the screen image was forming into place. This piece was

²³ Refer to “Beginnings, and the conceptual foundation.”

juxtaposed with the hand drawn images of the same screen image, as I wanted to collapse the two versions of the same scene together (Fig. 2).

Another approach I took was to print out the drawn frames on 2.5” x 5” physical cards (Fig. 3), with the intention to rephotograph the cards in various spaces around Montréal. I then took the set of hand drawn cards with me around the city, searching for places where I could capture the animated scene coming to life. Equipped with my Nikon Z50 camera and tripod, I chose various sites where I could stage the cards, and capture images of the cards set against the backdrop of the physical spaces. In some instances, I took the cards on my train rides whenever I visited family in Toronto, and took images of the cards against the window, with the landscapes flying past in the background and the animation coming into being within the same frame.

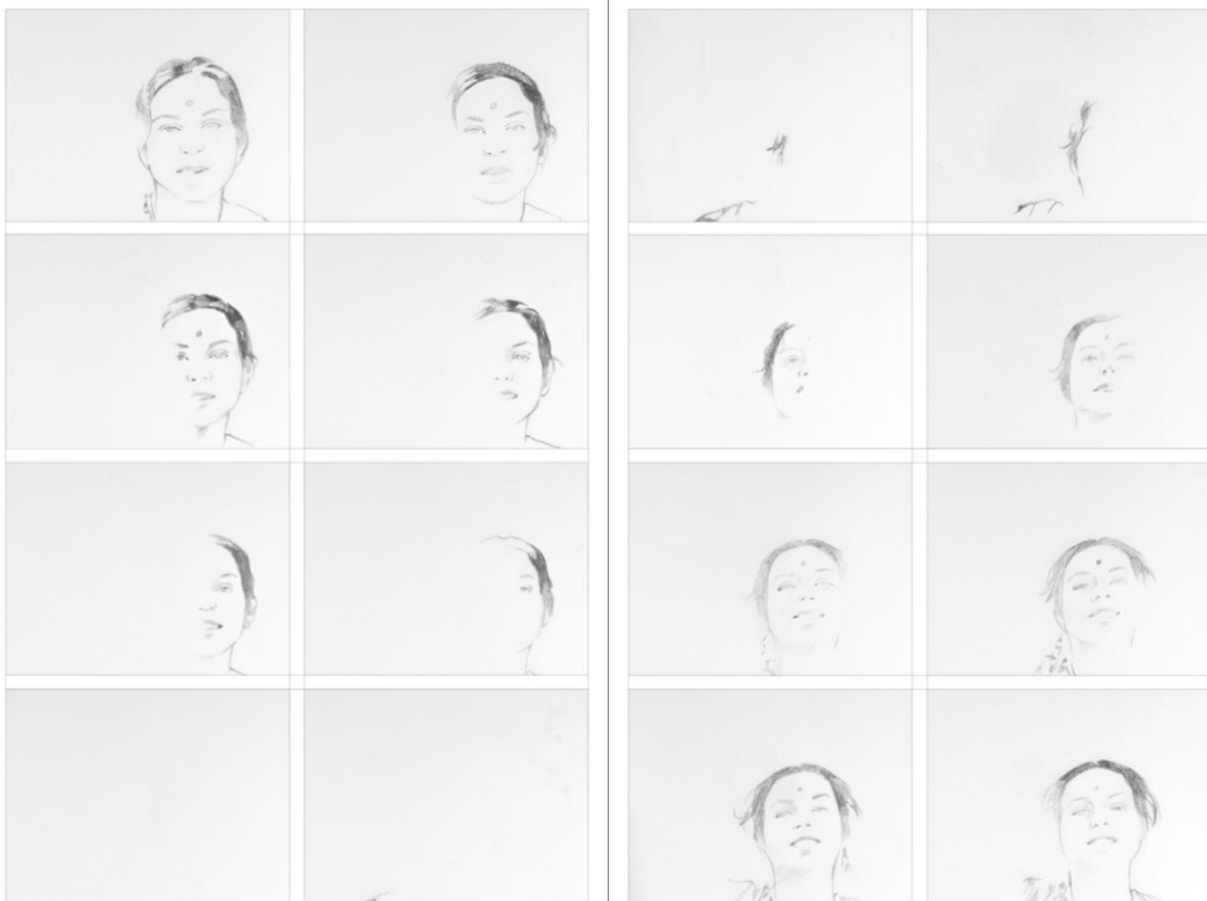


Figure 3: Individual frames were printed out on 2.5 x 5” cards for Experiment #1.

After collecting several vignettes of the fifty frames in various contexts, I began by composing the montage. I set these animation sequences to the version of “*Phule Phule Dhole Dhole*” that Charu sings in *Charulata*. The result was a one-minute audio-visual piece that captures how the song has embedded itself into my subconscious, and how I carry the memory of the image and the song itself as I wander through the spaces and the city of Montreal that I inhabit.

This piece contained some of the conceptual and formal touchstones that I would later build upon as my film developed over the years. With respect to the methodology that I employed for this sketch, and all the other sketches, I follow an established tradition of animation practice involving found footage. Michael van Gageldonk writes in *Animation & Memory*: “...animation that uses existing materials to tell a story allows the filmmaker to purposefully explore a dialectic between what might be called an object’s background or original function and its repurposed function in the film.”²⁴ For example, the screen image that I rephotographed under-camera, juxtaposed with my hand drawn tracing of the image, captures this dialectic, where the objective photographic image is pitted against my subconscious and subjective interpretation of the screen image which I drew by hand. With the two types of images layered on top of one another, I was exploring how to “*re-present*” pre-existing images that are part of the cultural consciousness, and to render them more personal.

Experiment #2: Shadowplay – live action experimentation

I iterated on this idea of *re-presenting* the screen image through manipulation, for another two-minute short piece in the Image course with Prof. Nitoslawska, in the second semester of the MFA program. Instead of employing frame by frame animation, I wanted to further explore interacting with found footage but through live action means. My approach was to project images with a projector onto surfaces and everyday objects in the interior of a home (I used my friend’s place as the location), to capture in camera the fragmented results of the image, and as a result the images would bend and distort on the various surfaces (see Experiment #2: 00:01:10-00:01:53). I additionally used mirrors to bifurcate and split the image into fragments, in search of new compositions with these surface interactions. For the images that I projected, I pulled from

²⁴ Maarten van Gageldonk. “Montages of Memory: Collage, Memory, and Gender in the Films of Stacey Steers” in *Animation & Memory*. ed Maarten van Gageldonk, László Munteán and Ali Shobeiri 2021, p 50.

the same sequence from *Charulata* that I used in the previous piece, and some other scenes and images from the film, as well as scenes from Ray's *The World of Apu*. This visual approach calls to mind the work of Takahashi Ito - namely his 1982 short film *Thunder* - where Ito composed an animated stop frame film that features projections of screen images on interior surfaces.²⁵ With the visual material that I collected, I composed a montage for a short two-minute sequence.

For the audio, I collected pre-existing field recordings that I found online of soundscapes from Montreal and Kolkata, and in the sound design I merged the two to create a new spatial - emotional soundscape. As the visuals were a collision of the screen images set in West Bengal projected in the interior of a home in Montreal, the audio similarly juxtaposes two field recordings. The vocal centerpiece of the soundtrack, however, is an excerpt from an interview with Ray, where he speaks about the writing of one of his scripts through the lens of a maternal character.

At the moment of putting the short piece together, I felt that even though it was a separate piece, Exp. #2 felt like it was in conversation with Exp. #1. In place of the folk song which is at the center of the sound in Exp. #1, Exp. #2 instead centers on the interview, revealing my connection to Bengali cultural memory through my interest in Ray's filmmaking. The excerpts which I chose from the interview also tangentially speak to aspects of my grief, as Ray talks about the maternal character in his film *Pather Panchali* (1955) and how he imbued a sense of longing in the character of her being separated by her son:

“In the process of writing the film and writing the script, I felt a tremendous sympathy for the mother... her son is away... away in the city, who doesn't write as often as he should... There's a train which passes... And she sits outside the house below a tree, waiting for the train to pass, hoping that the train would bring her son back... but he never comes.”²⁶

²⁵ Takahashi Ito, *Thunder*, 1982.

²⁶ Satyajit Ray, “South Bank Show – Satyajit Ray Interview,” interview by Melvin Bragg, *South Bank Show*, YouTube video, 21:21, 1978. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-aIvizeAHm0&t=639s>.

I chose this excerpt specifically, as its inclusion in Exp. #2 serves multiple purposes in cinematically expressing how I engage with this cultural work, especially in the wake of grief. On the one hand, it speaks to how I engage with this cultural work from the perspective of my filmmaking interests. As someone who mainly developed interests in film by studying the work and the process of filmmakers of a Western/ Euro-centric hegemony, it is inspiring to hear someone speak eloquently in the English language who is natively Bengali and talk about filmmaking. Additionally, in the comment above, Ray specifically speaks of the longing a mother often feels when a son is away, and it captures an aspect of grief that I have experienced as the son, especially being away from my mother in Montréal during her period of illness. There is even the train which Ray gestures at, another poignant element that resonates with me having taken the train from Montréal to visit my mother in Toronto, further echoing the shots of the “animated cards” which I took on my train rides. This “train” element would find its way in future experiments.

Experiment # 3: Self-Portrait – combining live-action, animation methods, filming myself as a subject

In Experiment #3, I wanted to explore how I could bridge approaches and aesthetics from #1 and #2 and form a cohesive piece. The questions on my mind were - would the use of vastly different techniques challenge visual cohesion in a single film? Could it be too visually demanding for an audience to see new types of unrecognizable imagery from shot to shot? Or would that potential confusion be softened or subverted given the fact that I am returning to the same images in the montage, albeit through different means?

I explored this question by continuing all of the techniques that I employed before in #1 & #2, in search of ways that I could bridge all of these approaches in the edit. Experiment #3 consists of 3 main components:

1. Component 1 – I returned to the approach of *re-presenting* Ray’s screen images using the projector. This time, I approached the images through the lens of making a more self-reflexive, personal piece, and added myself as a subject in the visual compositions, to further explore notions of myself engaging with these cultural works. The lens through which I explored these compositions was not only of being present in the shots, but also

of myself working on the animations. Thus in each shot, there are Ray's images spread out on the walls and objects of my home, as well as my own self as a subject, in the act of making my work in response to these images. This adds an element of self-reflexivity, but also this aspect suggests to the viewer that they would be watching the film as it is being made.

2. Component 2 – I continued exploring frame by frame animated methods of *re-presenting* Ray's works. For the animation, I iterated upon my previous animation piece that was centered around drawn tracings and rotoscope animation, and I explored more collage aesthetics, inspired in part by the work of fine art animator Stacey Steers as well as experimental animator Winston Hacking. I started again by printing out Ray's screen images - many of the same scenes and images that I used in the projection based piece - and this time I meticulously cut out portions of the screen images by hand, specifically isolating the character Charulata and Apurna in *Charulata* and *The World of Apu*. The intent was to juxtapose the "cut out" version of the characters, against other elements, such as the writings of Tagore, print outs of landscape footage I collected from my train rides, as well as other drawings. I captured each of these elements frame by frame in an under-camera (or down shooter) camera setup, isolated these elements, and I then composited them together in Adobe After Effects (Fig. 4).
3. Component 3 – The third component is the poetry of Tagore, which I featured in the audio as a reading which I recorded. The poem that I chose was "*If The Day Ends*"²⁷ which was a poem I found in a book of Tagore's writings which my parents gifted me once. I asked my friend to do a reading of it, which I recorded.

²⁷ *If the Day Ends*, written by Rabindranath Tagore.



Figure 4: Cut outs of the character Charulata, isolated from frames of the film.

In this piece I explored what it meant to create a collage image, very much akin to Stacey Steer's films such as *Phantom Canyon*²⁸ or *Night Hunter*.²⁹ According to Steers, this process of fragmenting the image, and recontextualizing is resonant with how we remember, and how we “mentally catalog our memories, which are often ultimately unreliable... they are collaged in a sense.”³⁰ In addition to the technical aspect of my methodology, the appropriation of pre-existing images also echoes that of Steers's work. For her film *Phantom Canyon*, Steers used Eadweard Muybridge's photo series *Human and Animal Locomotion*, and recontextualizes these images to create a surrealist and oneiric atmosphere. In the film, we follow a woman who meets a man with the wings of a bat, and over the course of the film their relationship deteriorates over time, and both characters undergo metamorphosis, he into a bat, and she into a fish. Initially employing pre-existing images to free up her artistic practice, the process of using Muybridge's images for a completely different context imbues his images with a completely different meaning.³¹

²⁸ Stacey Steers, dir. *Phantom Canyon*. 2006

²⁹ Steers. *Night Hunter*. 2011

³⁰ Gageldonk. *Animation & Memory*. 2021, p 48

³¹ Gageldonk. *Animation & Memory*. 2021, p 48

In this tradition of re-appropriation, my methodology in *A Hundred Years From Now* similarly uses the pre-existing screen images of Ray's screen images for a different purpose, to bring them into my own space to tell my personal narrative of grief, and the act of "searching" for my mother through these images, ultimately connecting them to my personal archive of family photos and videos.

Experiment # 4: Personal Archives & Further Experimentation

So far, most of the visual experiments that I explored mostly involved pre-existing cultural material, or a "cultural archive." To round out the visual experimentation however, I wanted to connect the cultural to the personal. During my various travels to Toronto to visit my father, I collected family photographs and miniDV home videos, focusing on those that centered my mother. My intention was to take similar approaches to the previous experimentations discussed above, but from a different perspective. With my mother's photographs for example, I was especially interested in how to *move* a single image, and how I can present my mother's image in a way that evokes the shifting nature of memory, by obscuring, and obfuscating these photographs. How can I work with the restrictions of a static image in a cinematic work, and find movement in the stillness of it? What does the stillness of the image do to the rhythm of the montage? How should the sound design be approached when considering a still image? How can I create an embodied experience through sound, texture, and ambience, when visual movement is frozen in the screen image? I explored these questions through various techniques, which resulted in sketches that I submitted in the Special Topics in Creative Nonfiction course in the MFA program.³²

To begin, I collected various paper textures. I placed the images on a light-table, with the camera fixed above the image, and I animated paper textures that traversed the image as another layer on top, with the movement evoking that of a distant landscape from the vantage point of a train. These movements coincided with animations I had done previously with footage taken from trains, thus forming a connection among these animations. I tried a variety of materials,

³² These written reflections also appear in the project proposal and final project report that I submitted in the Non-Fiction course: FMPR 630 Special Topics in Creative Nonfiction.

from wax paper, duralar, tracing paper, as well as cloth and fabric. The texture that proved the most effective was Japanese rice paper, which I found at Au Papier Japonais in the Mile End neighbourhood of Montréal. This texture gave me the exact feel I had been looking for. As I placed the texture on top of my mother's photographs above the light table, it obscured the image just so, while letting the light through underneath, and the rough granular texture of the rice paper was emphasized (see Film: 01:40 – 02:17). The resulting image felt like a “ghostly veil,” where my mother's presence is more felt rather than simply seen (Fig. 5). This proved useful in how I paced and organized my film as well, and I used this obscured quality of “not revealing” my mother just yet to my advantage in carving out a narrative for my film, which will be discussed in the chapter “

Writing Through Editing”.

Another element that yielded an effective result was to add to this methodology photocopies of Tagore's poetry (Fig. 6). I photocopied various texts from the book *The Essential Tagore*³³, in which I found the poem that my film *A Hundred Years From Now* takes its name from. With a collection of photocopies, I ripped these pages into fragments to then animate them under the camera to create more visual textures that I could work with. I animated them in a similar fashion to the rice paper segments, and once I collected a 5 to 10 seconds of animation with each texture, I placed them together on the timeline and I found that they were in conversation with each other (see Film: 02:17 – 02:42).

Beyond these issues of technicality and formal approaches, a question worth considering is why I chose to obscure my mother's photographs. This is a question that I had been reflecting on. Exposing that part of my mother's identity, especially on screen, seemed like a charged notion and I found myself shying away from it. Perhaps it was too revealing, or maybe it is a side of my vulnerability I was not ready to commit to the screen. There is a possible connection with my choice of featuring the female characters from Ray's films in my previous experiments, as ultimately they serve as avatars for my mother. By using these cinematic images, I was able to invoke the memory of my mother without having to reveal much about my mother's identity.

³³ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Essential Tagore*, edited by Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty (Harvard University Press 2011).

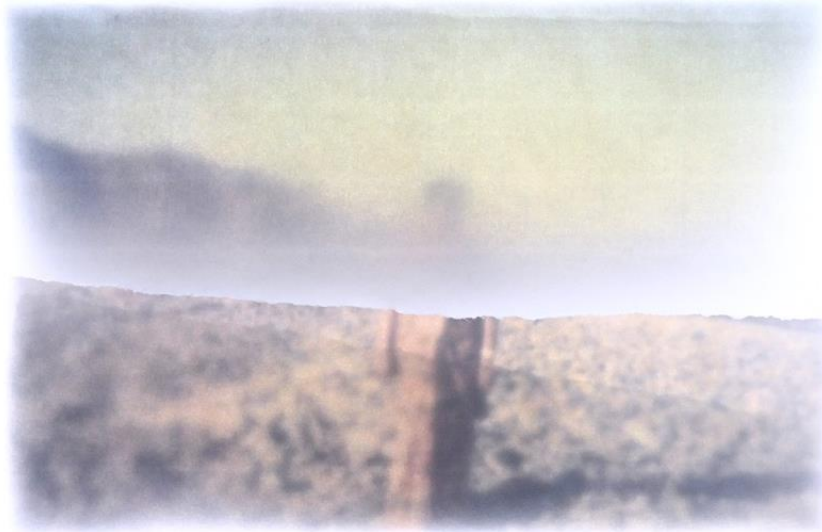


Figure 5: Family photographs with ripped paper textures layered on top.

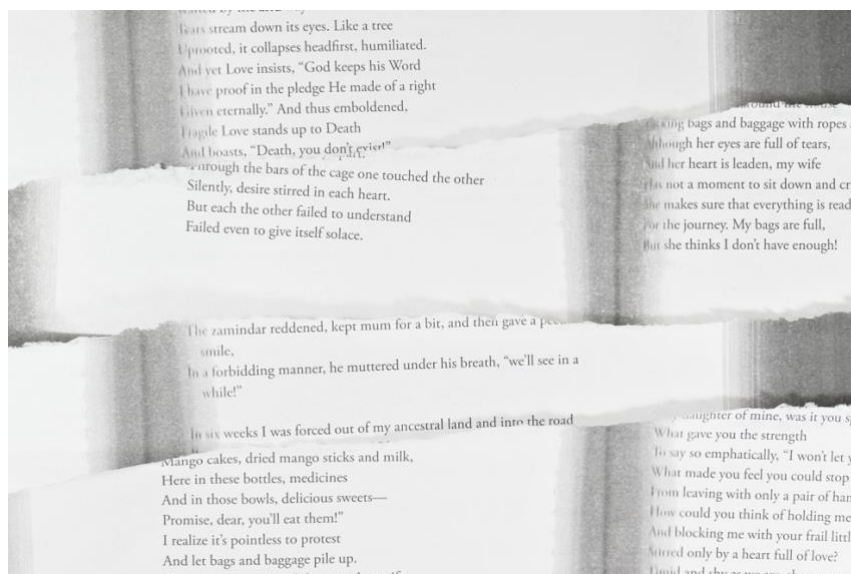


Figure 6: Ripped photocopy pages of Tagore's writings.

Evolution of *A Hundred Years From Now* Part II: Sonic Methodology

Much of the foundation of the sound design for *A Hundred Years From Now* was developed in Film Production III – Sound class led by Prof. Marianna Milhorat. For the sound design approach, I looked to Tagore's poetry as a starting point. I wanted to sonically render poetry as one of the portals through which I activate a cultural rediscovery and preserve personal memory. I felt that through the sound design I could utilize the rhythmic, musical potential that

poetry serves as well, since there is an inherent aspect of performativity in the medium of poetry. As stated previously, Tagore's work was a large part of the cultural transmission that my parents imparted upon me. Current Bengali culture across the arts is indebted to his works, including Satyajit Ray who followed in his footsteps artistically, and Tagore's words and poetry were always a part of the sonic atmosphere around my house. Tagore's songs were also a big part of my parent's upbringing, as Tagore was also a significant figure in Bengali music, in addition to being the premiere poet of the Bengali language. At almost every cultural function or event that I went to growing up in the Bengali community in Abu Dhabi and later in Toronto, Tagore's music was a fixture in all of these events.

Experiment #5: Sound piece

My initial plan was to anchor the sound design around a reading of the poem "A Hundred Years From Now"³⁴ by Tagore. I chose this poem as it seemed the most immediately evocative to me, and its themes of capturing space on a sensorial level and transmitting that feeling across generations seemed apt for the themes that I have been exploring. This was evident upon reading the very first lines of the first verses of the poem:

*A hundred years from now,
Who could you be,
Reading my poem curiously?
A hundred years from now!*

*How can I transmit to you
Who are so far away,
A bit of the joy I feel this day,
At this new spring dawn,*

The sound of birds chirping away,

³⁴ *A Hundred Years From Now*, written by Rabindranath Tagore, in *The Essential Tagore*, p 243.

*Of the crimson glow of the setting sun,
How can I love them all with my love,
And hope that you will make them your own,
A hundred years from now.*³⁵

The methodology was to record myself reciting the poem, and deconstruct the audio in a musique-concrete fashion. Based on initial tests for the composition and in class discussions, my project experienced an evolution - from the poem itself being at the centre, to it being more of a starting point.

The sound piece took shape after I conducted an interview with my father where we explored the connection my parents had to Tagore's poetry. In the conversation which I recorded, my father spoke of the ritual he and my mother did every morning during breakfast. During my mother's illness, my father was her primary caregiver. My father noted that memory tends to weaken when one struggles with Parkinson's, and in order to cope with that, my father suggested that they together recite some of Tagore's poems, many of which my mother knew by heart since her youth and into adulthood. This poem that I mentioned, "A Hundred Years From Now", was one of those poems.

I continued the sound project by incorporating the recording of this conversation with my father, and the potential of him being the sonic throughline for the film revealed itself to me immediately. I found there was a poignancy in the image of the morning ritual of reciting poetry that my father illustrated, and upon reflection I found this to be the heart of the sound design and sonic approach on a conceptual level. The poem itself carries cultural significance, and having this element in the film alone would have some resonance, mainly to those who know the work well. However, the inclusion of this specific image of the morning ritual which my father discussed gives an added emotional depth making the poem more accessible, and more universal. Through the sound design, the project evolved further into a piece about embodied memory, the act of creation (reciting poetry in this case), and remembering as both an exercise and also a way of life.

³⁵ *ibid*, p 243.

Recording and production of the sound ³⁶

In the first session at the recording studio, I went in with the intention of capturing some textures and piano-based melodies and tones. I mainly used the SHURE SM7B mic to record the vocal reading, and textures, and the AKG mics to record the piano. I recorded a vocal reading of the poem in the studio, with the intention of using that as a formal base for the sound piece for the first iteration. In that recording session I also recorded various musical parts on the piano, playing melodies, in part inspired by Ravi Shankar's score for *The World of Apu*. Some of the other elements I recorded were rustlings of paper, flipping through pages of Tagore's writings, and sounds of my writing on paper. From this session, the elements that found their way into the composition were mainly the textural elements, for example the experimentation on the piano. I recorded single piano notes on the lower end, allowing the sounds to ring out, with the intention of stretching out the waveform in post-production to emulate a drone sound, often produced on an instrument like a sitar.

In approaching my composition, I wanted to create a soundscape where embodied and haptic sounds complemented my father's voice over. My methodology was partly inspired by Philippa Lovatt's analysis of the "haptic" sound design in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's films - where textures of sounds are foregrounded to encourage a 'haptic hearing.'³⁷ Lovatt also says of his work:

... (it) expresses what the process of remembering *feels* like, how the warp and weft of the past continuously moves through and shapes the present just as the present shapes our memories of the past.³⁸

I found Sofia Brokenshire's *The Dependents* (2022)³⁹ informative to my process. Brokenshire's methodology of incorporating her father's diaries, complemented by the repetition

³⁶ These written reflections also appear in the Final Project Report for the course FMPR 622 Film Production III – Sound practices.

³⁷ Philippa Lovatt. "“Every drop of my blood sings our song. There, can you hear it?": Haptic sound and embodied memory in the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul" In *The New Soundtrack*, Edinburgh University Press.

³⁸ *ibid*, p 61.

³⁹ *The Dependents*, directed by Sofia Brokenshire, (Independent production, 2022) 1:30:00.

and fragmented musique-concrete techniques in the sound design, creates a new kind of intergenerational family portrait that I found evocative. Her approach of interacting with a pre-existing archive while creating her own at the same time was something that I wanted to explore as well.

To capture the sensorial, haptic aspect in my sound design, I looked to the image of my parent's morning poetry ritual as the conceptual basis. This image was evocative to me in my mind, and a simple association exercise with it yielded several key elements that I could draw on to render in a sonic way: the morning setting, which is strongly associated with ideas of renewal, rebirth; the sounds of a dawn chorus; and the sounds of nature for example. I was drawn to the sonic textures of nature, most likely due to the fact that my parents both grew up in villas and villages back home in the country like Noakhali and Bhola, far from the industrialized developments of the towns and cities, an environment which is well captured in Ray's first film of the Apu Trilogy *Pather Panchali* (1955) ⁴⁰.

Building the score and sound design

I approached the overall sound design as its own music piece. I have had a practice of making music over the years, making musical compositions on audio/ music editing software such as Logic Pro. To begin the sound design, I naturally began by thinking in musical terms. I started with the single piano notes which I stretched out to emulate a drone like sound, which served as the base foundation of the piece. To build out the sonic textures, I collected sounds of a dawn chorus, birds chirping, and a natural ambience. On Logic Pro, I fragmented these archival sounds, re-timed, and re-organized them to create a rhythmic pattern. These techniques are akin to "sampling". which is often found in many modern musical genres, such as experimental electronic music, and made popular by hip-hop music. This technique traces back to avant-garde composer Steve Reich, who innovated the technique with his tape loop compositions such as *Different Trains* (1988). A landmark piece in experimental classical music, the composition

⁴⁰ *Pather Panchali* directed by Satyajit Ray, (Janus Films, 1955), 2:04:00

features classical instruments that are played in synchronicity with fragments of recorded speech, which are triggered in repetitive and rhythmic patterns.

Many of the audio elements that I composed with, were treated much like melodies performed on an instrument. I created a keyboard/ virtual synthesizer with an audio of birdsong that I collected, which was fragmented into individual pitches, and subsequently these individual pitches were positioned on the keyboard to be played like an instrument. I created a musical motif with this newly created keyboard (see Film at 00:00:45)⁴¹, in an effort to further embody and evoke sounds of nature, and to further immerse the listener in the sonic atmosphere of the villas in Bangladesh which I wanted to capture.

Writing Through Editing

During the editing stage of the film, I found myself in many ways “writing” the film through editing. I didn’t start out with a script, and my process was to essentially experiment and “find” the film as I went along. My starting point for the editing process were all of the aforementioned shorts (Experiments # 1 – 4) that I had been making over the years: the one-minute short featuring the animated cards in #1; the live-action experimental piece featuring the projections of Ray’s films in #2; the self portrait in #3 featuring a mix of animation and live-action; the personal archives in #4; and the sound piece that I created that centered the experience of my father helping my mother maintain her memory through reciting poetry in the mornings. I gathered these materials and began experimenting with a loose overall structure. I placed them on a timeline without much intervention and modification and explored a rough organizational structure. This way, I was able to visualize the film on the timeline.

One of the earliest discoveries during this process was that I upended my preconception of how I was going to start the film. I had intended for some time before diving into editing that I would start the film with Experiment #2, as I thought that the starting images of that piece – with the nighttime ambience, shadows, the interior of the “home” set to the excerpt of Ray’s interview – could set the tone of the film. I instead decided to start with the sound piece, where the first

⁴¹ Refer to “Accessing the project,” p. viii.

verses of the poem appear on the screen. This changed the trajectory of the film because it became clear to me during the process that the poem could serve as the unifying element that ties the whole film together, or it could be the device that gives the film meaning. The sound piece was the first crucial key to discovering the overall structure of the film, and a large part of it concerned the oral histories.

Composing the montage through oral histories

In searching for the overall form of the film, organizing the oral histories was the key to start developing the structure. However, the question of the oral histories proved to be one of the more challenging parts of the process to solve. For example, my father appears in the film as the primary voice speaking throughout, and one of the first major questions I explored was how to feature him, as I knew that he would be a primary character in the film. I chose not to show him in the image, as I wanted his presence to be felt on a sonic level. I used various sections of Experiment #5: Sound which includes his excerpts and a reading he performed of “A Hundred Years From Now” by Tagore. I focused on the conversation with my father where he speaks of his memories with my mother reciting poetry in the morning, and their relationship to the works of Tagore and how his work impacted my mother’s life.

These elements would serve as the emotional foundation for the film. In the edit, I found it impactful to start with the first verses of the poem as just text on screen and then follow it with my father’s reading of the next verses. In the edit, this then leads into him speaking candidly about why this poem resonates with him, saying that he “felt an immense joy” when my mother perfectly recited poems like “A Hundred Years From Now” start to finish each morning when they would practice.

The oral history aspect of the film got further complicated by the inclusion of Ray’s voice. Following the first act featuring my father’s voice, it felt like a natural progression to transition to Experiment #2, featuring the projection experiments paired with Ray’s interview segment (see

Experiment #2: Shadowplay – live action experimentation

). This inclusion problematizes who speaks in the film, as the focus shifts away from my father in a sense “guiding” the film, to Ray offering a new perspective. He doesn’t appear in the film visually, and my father only appears sparingly in the film as well in an image or two, and a concern of mine was that it could be discombobulating for the viewer not seeing a visual cue associated with my father’s or Ray’s voice. This called to my mind *News From Home*⁴² by Chantal Akerman, in which a mother’s letters to her daughter (Akerman) are read by an unseen voice, while randomized images of the streetscape of New York are seen in the image. Akerman said of her films that “I want the spectator to feel...the time used in each shot; to make this a physical experience in which time unfolds in you, in which the time of the film enters into you.”⁴³ Akerman often relies on sound that rarely match what is seen on screen, allowing the viewer to make their own connections and discover why certain images are paired with the sound, and I hoped that I could achieve a similar effect in *A Hundred Years*.

The third element that further adds complexity to the sonic aspect is the voice of Charulata singing *Phule Phule Dhole Dhole* on the swing (ex. see Film: 07:12 – 08:20). Along with my father and Ray speaking about their respective aspects, the voice of Charulata comes to us through song instead of an oral history. With this, a third sound element is introduced, and the makeup of voices so far include speech (oral history), performance (poetry reading) and now singing.

For most of my editing process, I had my father’s voice, Ray’s voice, and the voice of Charu singing *Phule Phule Dhole Dhole*, as I imagined that the film could be composed of these many voices that are prominent in my subconscious. Upon reflection and gathering feedback from colleagues and other collaborators on the rough cuts of the film that I had created, I questioned if Ray’s inclusion was useful or if it was distracting. It would have the potential to integrate well given the aspect of self-reflexivity and the way I show my filmmaking process in the film. However, would that distract from the central theme of the film? Would it be more

⁴² *News From Home*, directed by Chantal Akerman (1976).

⁴³ Barbara McBane, “Walking, Talking, Singing, Exploding . . . and Silence: Chantal Akerman’s Soundtracks” *Film Quarterly*, Fall 2016, Volume 70, Number 1, <https://filmquarterly.org/2016/09/16/walking-talking-singing-exploding/>

impactful if I include my own voice instead, in a way illustrating my own response to my father, rendering a cinematic conversation between myself and my father?

Making the essay film diasporic

This discussion of oral histories in a film, who tells them, and how the viewer relates to the enunciator, would be incomplete without mentioning the tradition and the form of the essay film.

Laura Rascaroli writes that the cinematic essayist:

“creates an enunciator who... represents the author's views, and is his/her spokesperson (even when hiding behind a different or even multiple names or personas). The essay's enunciator may remain a voice-over or also physically appear in the text, and usually does not conceal that he/she is the film's director.”⁴⁴

Rascaroli further elaborates that in the cinematic essay the “enunciator addresses the spectator directly” to establish a dialogue with the audience, and that this dialectic produces a dynamic between an “I” talking to a “you.”⁴⁵ The “I” in this context is me - the filmmaker - represented by my father, Ray, and Charulata through her singing, all adding dimension and giving form to my emotional landscape through their perspectives. The “you” would be the audience, who connect these fragmented elements to create a picture of my subjectivity *through* these voices. In the excerpt from my father’s conversation, he speaks such that it is clear he is talking directly to me – his son - by saying “when your mother got diagnosed with Parkinson’s...”. The viewer of this film could feel as though my father is talking to them because of the naked, vulnerable nature of the conversation. It is possible that it is this visceral aspect that could make the viewer feel “embodied” into my subconscious – another descriptor, or verb, that Rascaroli attributes to the “essay film” form. As mentioned previously, this complex dialectic is found in Akerman’s *News From Home*, in which Akerman reads the letters sent to her by her

⁴⁴ Laura Rascaroli, “The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments,” in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 49, no. 2 (2008): p 35.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p 35.

mother, and in reading the letters becomes the mother character as the “I” speaking to the “you”, originally directed at herself. In the film she reads, “I know you’re busy, but try and write, it’s all I have left.” The images in the film are of quotidian daily life in New York with neither character present in the images, while the immersive sound design anchored by the letter reading provides the emotional heft.

This dynamic gets further problematized as my own voice enters the third act of *A Hundred Years From Now*. While it was not in my initial plan to include my own voice, it came about in the edit more out of necessity rather than intention. As I was editing with all the material I mentioned above, I found that there was still something missing. My initial intention was that I would let others fill in biographical details for me in a tangential way, as I wanted the film to feel as though it was a collection of fragments that come together in an abstract fashion, and these disparate voices and images would come together in a subconscious way rather than directly. This meant that I intended to not be present visually or sonically in the film. In my initial edits I chose not to include the images that included me, found in Experiment #3. However, even in the initial stages of the edit where I assembled material from the sketches that I had, my colleagues in the Non-Fiction class for example, strongly suggested that I bring myself into the film in some way, and bring back the images of myself “working” on the animation in the dream space with the projections seen in the same image. I thought that this would be the extent of my inclusion - that is until I found a way to bring my speech into the film as well. My advisor Professor Shira Avni had long mentioned to me during the year or so of working with the edit, that I - at the very least - make an attempt to record myself speaking about my experiences. I also had mentioned to Prof. Avni about my classmate and friend Mariana Flores who was making her thesis project along the same thematic lines of a maternal loss, and Prof. Avni suggested that it could also be fruitful to record a conversation with her. Even if it did not end up in the edit, the aspect of intentionally speaking of our shared experience and having a recording of it would ultimately be healing for the both of us.

I proceeded to have a conversation with Mariana in hopes that we would discuss our shared themes and how we approached our films methodologically. Through the process and her

generous questions, aspects of my project revealed to me in ways I didn't expect. At the time of the recording, I was looking for a third act to my film without success.

What I had at that point in the edit was as follows ⁴⁶:

1. The first act, with the text of the first verses of the poem *A Hundred Years From Now* opening the film, leading into my father performing following verses of the poem through speech, consisting of “ghostly veil” animations with my mother’s photographs (“Film”: 00:05:00 – 02:48:08).
2. This piece transitioning into my father speaking of the emotional resonance of the poem for him and our memory of my mother (“Film”: 02:48:09 – 04:14:11).
3. The second act of the film that begins with the images of the interior of the home at night, with projections of Ray’s images cast across the interior walls, paired with Ray’s interview excerpt, speaking to his filmmaking process and how he built the maternal aspects and themes of his film (“Film”: 04:14:12 – 06:05:23).
4. The second act continuing with my father’s reading of the second and last sections of *A Hundred Years*, paired with images of me “at work” with Ray’s images in the background (“Film”: 06:05:24 – 07:20:11).
5. The second act continuing further with the animated section including the animations with Charulata swaying on the swing, paired with the sound of Charulata singing *Phule Phule Dhole Dhole* (“Film”: 07:20:12 – 08:27:06).

In my search for a third act, I was looking for how to more intentionally bring back the archives with my mother’s presence, which were only gestured at in the very first act. The sections mentioned above mostly involve cultural memory. However, I had been questioning how I could have cultural memory intertwined with my personal memory.

Mariana brilliantly suggested that I could mirror the form of the first act. In the beginning, I introduce the poem, which my father then speaks to from his personal experience,

⁴⁶ Refer to the link for “Film” (p. viii Accessing the project) for the corresponding timecodes.

giving the poem emotional weight and meaning. I could echo this approach by bringing my voice in and speak to why the song matters to me on a personal level in a similar way.

This dynamic reinforces my conception of how cultural memory and personal memory are intertwined, how cultural artefacts can provide meaning. As mentioned in a previous section “Activating cultural memory,” my relationship with my mother was heavily coloured by music, with her passing on of Bengali music tradition to me as a musician, and how I would learn Bengali folk songs on piano or guitar at her request. This song, *Phule Phule Dhole Dhole* in particular was one song that resonates with me as it was the last song my mother had requested, however I was unable to get around to playing the song for her by the time she passed away. As is often the case with grief, there is always something that leaves one with unresolved feelings and experiences. This discovery was a breakthrough moment, as I could speak to the emotional resonance of this song for me, and how it is interconnected with my grief, and this way I could further strengthen the emotional elements of my film.

In composing the montage for the film, I looked to Agnes Varda’s films for inspiration, most notably her self-portrait documentaries such as *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000)⁴⁷ and *Les plages d’Agnes* (2008)⁴⁸, as well as her portrait of Jane Birkin in *Jane B. par Agnes V* (1988). I looked to these films as they especially have a fragmentary nature, deploying a plethora of inventive cinematic techniques to create a collage of disparate yet distinct images, all drawn together into a cohesive whole through montage and her whimsical narration. Agnès Calatayud writes:

“*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* is a jigsaw, or a game of patience; it is up to each viewer to select the randomly scattered fragments and bring them together according to the dictates of their form and colour. Thus a drawing starts to take shape through the kaleidoscope of the different pieces.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, directed by Agnès Varda (Ciné Tamaris, 2000), 1:22:32

⁴⁸ *Les plages d’Agnes*, directed by Agnès Varda (Ciné Tamaris & Arte France, 2008), 1:52:44

⁴⁹ Agnès Calatayud. “Les Glaneurs et La Glaneuse: Agnès Varda’s Self-Portrait.” *Dalhousie French Studies* 61 (2002): 114.

In *Les plages d'Agnes* for example, Varda traces the trajectory of her life from her early years as a filmmaker, to her cinematic ventures in the French New Wave with her husband Jacques Demy. Varda revisits the locales and locations of the films she made, and playfully interacts with each. In one scene she creates a tiny beach on a Parisian street with six truckloads of sand. In another scene, Varda reflects on the making of her first film *La Pointe Courte* (1955). In lieu of simply showing the footage from that film, Varda has two brothers push a cart through the streets of Sète where the film was shot, and on the cart is a screen showing images from the film that features the father of these two men. In the opening scene of the film, Varda is found filming scenes with her production team on a beach, placing various mirrors of different shapes and sizes, pointing them at each other, and in camera capturing the multitude of reflections in the process. These wild visual approaches are anchored by Varda's essayistic vocal narration, and her voice is what guides us as viewers through the film.

In *A Hundred Years From Now*, I faced a challenge in that I kept finding new ways to approach the images that I was working with, almost taking a "fractal" approach to the visual methodology of the film, where I take the same set of images and find increasingly complex compositions for each iteration. In terms of montage, much like Agnes Varda's process, *A Hundred Years* felt like a jigsaw puzzle that I had to find a way to make sense of. The editing process itself generated new ideas, that were both a result of inspiration and necessity. While editing I found that I had to find formal connections between the images that I was working with, and ideas I had previously explored mutated into new collage images (Fig. 7).

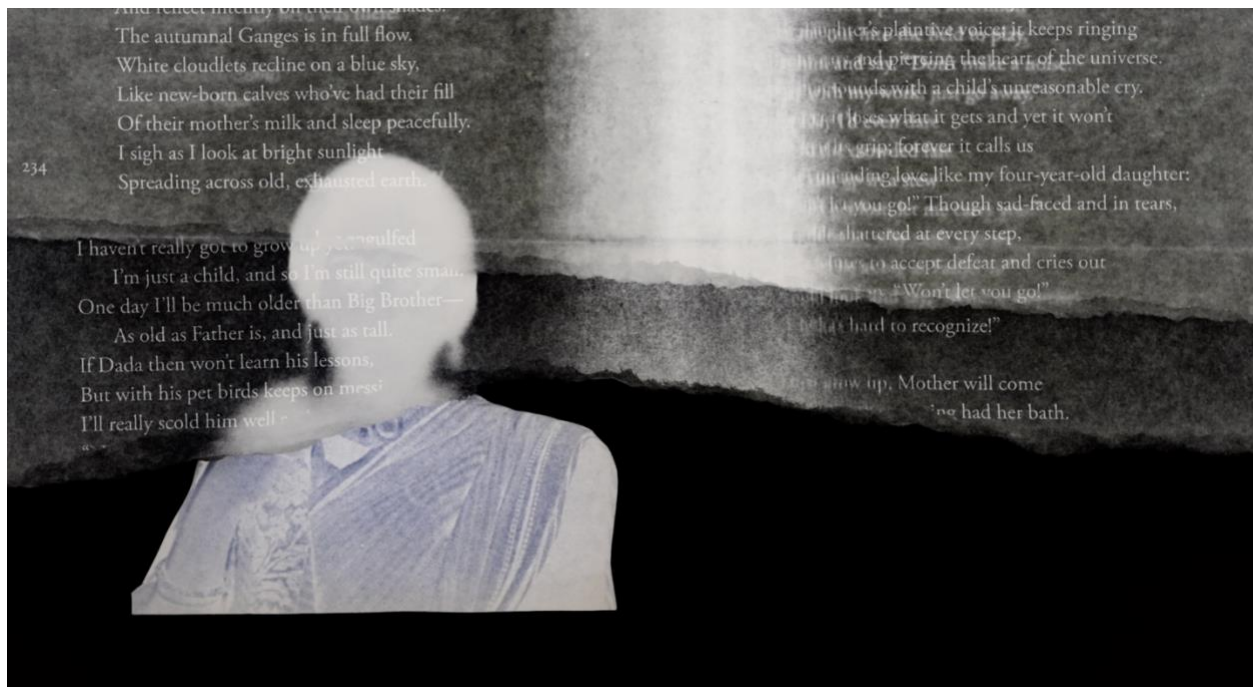


Figure 7: Charulata “in the void” – one of the animated segments that was born out of the editing process.

Conclusions: Grief, Racial Melancholia, Diasporic Cinema

In “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud explores the sense of melancholia one experiences in a state of loss, when it is in relation to the “loss of a loved person, or the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal.”⁵⁰ In Freud’s theory of mourning, one works through loss by investing in new objects, places and ideals, and often in melancholia, one feels “justified in maintaining the belief that loss has occurred, but cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost.” There is an unavowable loss, a lack of an identified object that is the cause of mourning, that leads to one searching to fill that void. As a post-colonial, transnational individual that has made attempts to assimilate into a host country, and has never lived in the native country of origin, perhaps it is this “unavowed” loss, or a lack of object to identify my mourning with, that leads me to searching through these cultural works of Tagore and Ray. This loss is further echoed by the much more tangible loss of my mother, and in through the female characters that I invoke in my film *A Hundred Years*, I search for her.

⁵⁰ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *On the History of Psycho-analytic Movement Papers on Metapsychology and other works*, 1917.

A sense of misalignment can arise as there is a deficiency in things to invest in due to not being able to fully assimilate to a host country. To refer again to Andaluza's *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, she writes poignantly of the internal conflict she faced in growing up at the border of Texas and Mexico and speaking Chicano Spanish, and in doing so internalizing the belief that she speaks poor Spanish, and how her own language was used against her by the dominant culture.⁵¹ She writes, "Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself."

As a Bengali-Canadian who never lived in Bangladesh and is only associated to the country through familial bonds, I was a transnational adoptee. According to David Eng and Shinhee Han, authors of *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*⁵², "transnational adoption involves the intersection of two very powerful origin myths – the return to mother and to motherland."⁵³ The title of their book includes the phrase "racial melancholia," which is derived from Freud's theory of melancholia as discussed above. However, that idea is augmented onto the tensions of being a transnational person having to assimilate in another culture and being disconnected from their more "native self" in their native context. Eng and Han, a literature professor and a psychotherapist respectively, collaborated on the book to research the curious rise of depression they saw in their Asian-American students, saying that "grief and mourning are defining vectors of the racial experience."⁵⁴ Perhaps it is this unresolved, unidentifiable feeling - which Eng and Han have given a name to – that has led me to embark upon this project of grief tied to self-discovery.

Through this project I found a creative way to process my grief, and I believe in response to the above studies that have been done around racial melancholia, my project has become more of a celebration, and has been imbued with more positivity than melancholia. The lost object that I have been unable to reconcile, I have possibly found in my engagement with the cinema of Ray

⁵¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," in *Borderlands / la Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books), 53–64.

⁵² Shinhee Han and David Eng. *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*, (Duke University Press Books 2019), p 67.

⁵³ Han & Eng, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, p 67.

⁵⁴ Hua Hsu, "The Stories We Tell, and Don't Tell, About Asian-American Lives," *The Atlantic*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/the-stories-we-tell-and-dont-tell-about-asian-american-lives>

and the poetry of Tagore, and finding meaning in these works through conversations with my father, ultimately allowed me to engage with the memory of my mother in a new way.

In making this film I discovered that in my process I am in conversation with an already established canon of “accented cinema,” which Hamid Naficy has written about in discussing the similarities of films made by diasporic voices. Naficy said that “if the dominant cinema is considered to be universal (lacking accent), then diasporic films are “accented””⁵⁵. In many of the films made by diasporic voices, Naficy suggests that borders are often crossed, and journeys are embarked upon. Naficy writes that, “Not all journeys involve physical travel. There are also metaphoric and philosophical journeys of identity and transformation that involve the films' characters and sometimes the filmmakers themselves.”⁵⁶ My process in making this film shares those attributes, especially in terms of a sense of transformation. The borders that I blur involve the scenes that I set in Montréal (such as the interior of the home, city scape, etc.) and project Ray’s images onto, clashing the two geographies together, as seen in the second act of *A Hundred Years From Now*. I also traverse the borders of cultural and personal memory, bridging the images of Charulata and Aparna in the cinematic medium, and connecting them to my personal archive of my mother’s photographs. In addition, as in the first act of *A Hundred Years*, my father speaks of his and my mother’s love of Tagore, which is set to images of the landscapes flying past on a train ride.

In my discussions with my co-advisors, we talked about the under-represented phenomena of engaging with cultural works that mediate a healthy fostering of connection with one’s identity, and how in *A Hundred Years*, I had the opportunity to render these issues of reconciling identity in a healing light, resisting the more common instinct which is to render transnational experience as being traumatic or coloured by mourning. If I were to continue in the logic of “racial melancholia” as discussed above, it would seem as though because of the loss of my mother, I wanted to fill the void left by being away from the “motherland,” but in the process

⁵⁵ Subeshini Moodley, “Postcolonial Feminisms Speaking through an ‘Accented’ Cinema: The Construction of Indian Women in the Films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta.” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 58 (2003): p 66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4548098>

⁵⁶ Moodley, “Postcolonial Feminisms Speaking through an ‘Accented Cinema’”, p 68.

of making this film, in searching for the lost object I found solace in the cultural artefacts which reasserted my memory. To refer back to the notion of activating cultural memory, in rendering my parent's ritual of reciting poetry in the morning, my relationship with my mother through our shared fondness and love of music, and in showing images of Charulata and Aparna as avatars of my mother with them being in moments of bliss, my hope is that *A Hundred Years From Now* can contribute to an overall conversation of diasporic cinema and essayistic memoirs, that is less tinged in sadness and lives more in celebration.

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