IT'S A LITTLE COMPLICATED

Screening: AGO Jackman Hall, 317 Dundas Street W. Toronto, ON, M5T 1G4

by
M. Émeraude Domingos-Mbuku

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Abstract

It's a Little Complicated
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M. Émeraude Domingos-Mbuku
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Ryerson University

This thesis covers the process behind the production of my fifteen-minute documentary short, *It's a Little Complicated* for the MFA Documentary Media program at Ryerson University. It explores the driving force behind my work, the annexation of the Congo by the Belgians, familial abandonment, parental illness and its effect on their children, and family archives. Most importantly, the film and the paper investigate my mother's past and how her diagnosis brought us closer together.

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I also would like to thank my family for going with whatever plan I had, even when they were uncomfortable with my questions.

Finally, I would like to thank my mama. Without her, this wouldn't be possible. Although it was an easy conversation to have, it was not easy to get to this point. Thank you for encouraging every dream I've ever had – from astronaut to dairy farmer – and for always making sure my ears are clean before leaving the house. Nalingi yo.

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As far back as I can remember, people told me I looked like my mother. They said we had the same big brown eyes, the same nose, the same mannerisms, and the same shape of head. They would even go as far as saying that we would make the same glare when annoyed. Neither of us spoke English until I was five years old, but she quickly understood the words "Barney," "Elmo," and "Spice Girls" by the time I was three because she preferred to watch the same *Barney* (Hit Entertainment, 1992-2010) VHS tape repeatedly rather than listen to my incessant crying or that of my brother by proxy. I followed my mother nearly everywhere – even when I knew that she was going to pawn me off to a random family member or to pre-med students at the University of Toronto tasked with analysing the behaviour of young children. I did so because I idolized my mother because she was the perfect human being, with a very clumsy child, and because she seemed immortal.

As I grew older, our differences began to present themselves in different forms. I still had her big brown eyes, her nose, her physical mannerisms, and her head shape, but mentally, we were polar opposites. My mother was a conservative with progressive ideologies whereas I was coming to terms with the fact that I was a liberal with very socialist dogmas shaped by my environment. In addition, she did not think that certain forms of music or dress, like punk or rap, should be used as political tools while I thought freedom of creative expression in fashion, music, and writing was a right that should be exercised as frequently as possible. Finally, she believed that women should be silent because women came second to men. Silence meant power even though historically, African women have seldom willingly been silent, they were forced into it.[1] My mother, having had grown up after Congolese independence had not experienced colonialism directly, still subconsciously viewed and justified things (punishments and rewards) through a colonial lens.

[1] Zingisa Guzana, "Exploring Women's Silence in IsiXhosa Written and Oral Literature," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity Vol. 46,* 2000, p. 75

Everything was black and white, there was no grey area. If she believed that there were no other actions to take, she would not seek a different solution. This was a method she had adopted from the adults in her life who, had "witnessed too much violence, and too much bloodshed" at the hands of colonial powers.[2]

In spite of this, I still looked up to her and wondered how she was able to be happy and enjoy life despite having suffered. Indeed, to me, her silence elevated emotion and captured attention.[3] When she would give me the silent treatment after I had misbehaved, I would immediately seek to rectify the situation. However, after her diagnosis with Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo in 2012, her refusal to openly talk about her past, although very common in immigrant families, left me with a number of questions: what happened to her between the ages of seventeen and twenty-seven? Did she plan on marrying my father or was her hand forced? Were her health problems genetic? Did she really want more children after my sister? Was our relationship built on a lie? These questions made me realise that I actually did not know the woman who gave birth to me – that the person I called "mama" diverged from the one others called "Catherine" – and for this reason, I could not fully know and emulate her. *It's a Little Complicated*, is a film exploration of my mother's past told through her own words and the words of those that know her best, her family.

[2] Ibid., p. 60
[3] Ibid., p. 75

CONTEXT

1.1 VERTIGO THE DISEASE, NOT THE FILM

In 1990, a year after arriving in Lausanne, Switzerland with her nine-year-old daughter, Nancy, a metal kitchen door fell on Catherine's head. The incident caused damage to her right temple and right eardrum and rendered her unable to properly hear those around her. Because she was a refugee in a very racist country, she was not able to seek proper or long-term medical care for her injury. Instead, she was given a temporary solution: an earpiece to help her hear and some pain medication to ease the pain. But according to her daughter, she never wore it because "it was hideous" and she would much rather go deaf than be seen wearing it. I do not blame her, they were unattractive and obstructive. So, for over twenty years, my mother walked around with ear and hearing problems as if nothing had happened. Quite casually in the Spring of 2012, she finally mentioned that she was getting eardrum replacement surgery to fix a damaged eardrum caused by an incident in her late twenties, a year after having lower stomach surgery for other unrelated issues.

My mother's injury, and subsequent surgery, was a surprise to me because prior to that point, I did not know she was living in pain. Sure, she would wear earplugs in the car and watch TV with the volume on low, but she had been doing these things for so long that it was normal — we thought it came with age. In truth, she had normalized her situation and her pain in order to not talk about it because talking about it would be uncharacteristic for her, an African woman conditioned to keep her opinions to herself because of her gender.[4] In August 2018, six years after her ear surgery, my mother was diagnosed with Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo (or simply, vertigo). According to otolaryngologists Malcolm Hilton and Darren Pinder, Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo is a balance disorder "characterised by short-lived, but severe episodes of false

[4] Ibid., p. 80

movement in association with rapid changes in head positions."[5] The condition, first described by Austro-Hungarian otologist Robert Bárány in 1921, is caused by canalolithiasis – "free floating debris in the endolymph of the semicircular canal that continues stimulation of the auditory canal for several seconds, minutes or hours after movement of the head has ceased" – which can occur after a severe blow to the head, trauma to the upper body, and damage to the inner ear.[6] In conversation with my mother, she described vertigo as the feeling of falling down and never landing and loss of control when walking long distances, moving too quickly, and looking up or down.

Vertigo is an easily manageable disease, but things like age make the disorder much more difficult to treat. Indeed, if the doctors are unable to locate the exact source of a patient's vertigo, it will forever disrupt their life. My mother's diagnosis and unresponsiveness to treatment was terrifying, and I felt like it was my fault because I was not making her life any easier. Instead of trying to understand why my mother needed us to be quiet, I would deliberately be creating noise because I was denying the fact that there was something wrong with her – there was solace in not knowing that my mother suffered. Not knowing meant not having to think about it. However, there was also a lot of generational grief associated with having a sick maternal figure. My mother (like her mother) got really sick in her late forties. And like my grandmother, the two shared many of the same symptoms such as, unimaginable stomach pains and migraines, that doctors were unable to pinpoint until they connected all of the dots and realised that her illnesses were most likely caused by everyday stressors, like working with children, and past traumas. While I did my best to ignore my mother's illness and live in the now, I could not do it – just the thought of my mother

[5] Malcolm Hilton and Darren Pinder, "Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo: A Safe and Effective Treatment is Available for this well-Defined Condition," *BMJ: British Medical Journal Vol. 326*(7391), 29 March 2003, p. 673
[6] Ibid., p. 673

being sick was stressful. It is not an easy place to be, having to suddenly become your mother's caregiver at a young age. It also made me realize how little I knew about this woman and how much there still was to uncover. So, I decided to direct myself towards a better goal; towards getting to know the woman known as Catherine Mpemba-Mbuku.

1.2 A HISTORY RECALLED

My mother was born Nzolele Catherine Mpemba on 15 March 1963 in Léopoldville in the Republic of the Congo at the Lovanium University Hospital. Léopoldville was first founded as a trading post in 1881 by British explorer, Henry Morton Stanley who had named the city after Léopold II of Belgium. In 1876, King Léopold held a Geographical Conference at the Royal Palace of Brussels with some of the best-known geographers and explorers of the African continent. Stanley had been commissioned by the Belgian king to establish authority in the Congo basin on behalf of the small country. In his opening statement letter to attendees of the Brussels Geographical Conference, Léopold stated:

> In almost every country a lively interest is taken in the geographical discoveries recently made in Central Africa. The English, the Americans, the Germans, the Italians, and the French have taken part in their different degrees in this generous movement. These expeditions are the response to an idea eminently civilizing and Christian: to abolish slavery in Africa, to pierce the darkness that still envelops that part of the world while recognizing the resources that appear immense.[7]

In reality, Léopold did not want to "encourage the exploration and opening up of the heart of Africa to the world," he wanted to make a fortune by any means necessary, including genocide.[8] Fourteen nations would participate in the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 (also known as the Congo Conference) including Portugal, France, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Italy. The conference remained in session for nearly three months, from 15 November 1884 to 26 February 1885, and concluded with the recognition of the International Association of the Congo

[7] Elizabeth Hibbard, "The Creation and History of the Congo Free State," PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1918, p. 6
[8] Frederick Starr, "The Congo Free State and the Congo Belge," *Journal of Race Development Vol. 1*, 1 January 1910, p. 385

as a neutral state and the creation of Congo Free State.[9] He had managed to convince major European players to contribute to a strictly Belgian affair by presenting a Christian and utopian view that no European diplomat bothered to interfere with.[10] Stanley's expedition of the Congo by way of Zanzibar "unlocked the entire region" to the Belgians and had sealed the fate of future generations of Congolese peoples.[11] Millions of Congolese men and women would feel the effects of the Congo Conference well after Léopold's death as, even after colonialism, the country would go from one dictatorship to another, with each new leader proving worse for the country than the next.

My mother is the second oldest child of nine who was born into a family that benefitted from an autocracy. Catherine lived a comfortable upper middle-class life in Kinshasa's neighbourhood of Bandalungwa, residing in a hotel-like home with her uncle's family. He happened to be the general director of Mazda in Congo. Her mother, Rachelle, hailed from Madimba in Bas-Congo (now Kongo Central) and like many Zairian women at the time, was a merchandiser and business woman, responsible for providing flour and Dutch fabrics to small business owners all over the country. Her father, Jean, was a computer programmer, one of the very first in the country. He worked at La Banque Nationale du Congo from the mid-1950s until his untimely death on 29 January 1980, exactly one year before my mother gave birth to my sister, Nancy.

In the early 1980s, nearly one hundred years after the arrival of the Belgians, and twenty years after the official departure, visible cracks were beginning to form in Mobutu Sese Seko's single-party government. Public programs that were put in place to assist citizens were exposed as

[9] Ibid., p. 24
[10] Esther Mendlesohn, "A History Study of Colonial Policy in the Belgian Congo," PhD diss., Southern Connecticut State University, 1960, p. 29
[11] William Clowes, "The Atlantic to Kinshasa: A Journey on the River Congo," *Aljazeera*, 15 July 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/06/atlantic-kinshasa-journey-river-congo-170614093548128.html

being only for show; very little was actually being done to promote development rural areas because the country had become an "extractive state" – wherein the state's various resources were used to "enrich a few citizens and foreigners as opposed to maintaining a strong and competitive economy."[12] My grandfather's untimely death left my grandmother no cushion to with no cushion on which to fall. Zaïre's economic collapse and its weakened productive sector made it difficult to run a business – given the cost of machinery and the absence of good management was tarnished by corruption.[13] The once prosperous African state was crumbling in front of the world stage and no one wanted to take responsibility for its downfall.

As per custom law among the Mutandu people and the Bakongo people, "the deceased's property was to pass on to his or her lineage" because children and spouses had no recognized claims to the estate.[14] After my mother's father's death, her mother, and her seven siblings were forcibly removed from their home and left to their own devices. The majority of their personal items and records were destroyed and their accounts depleted simply because custom granted her father's family right to do whatever they pleased with the deceased's property. Left with nothing, my grandmother decided to return to her village with the youngest daughters leaving behind my mother and her brothers in the capital city. While I do not know exactly why my grandmother decided to leave her eldest children in the city, I know that it inferred a "direct link between poverty and a death in the family."[15] My grandmother might have left the city to allow her youngest children to finish their education as younger family members often paid a heavier price than the

[12] John F. Clark, "The Nature and Evolution of the State in Zaire," *Studies in Comparative International Development Vol. 32*(4), 1998, p. 3
[13] Musifiky Mwanasali, "Accumulation, Regulation and Development: The Grass-Roots Economy in the Upper Zaire Region (1975-1992)," PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1994, p. 33
[14] Joey Power, ""Eating the Property": Gender Roles and Economic Change in Urban Malawi, Blantyre-Limbe, 1907-1953," *Canadian Journal of African Studies Vol. 29*(1), 1995, p. 88
[15] Stan D'Souza, "Poverty Among Widows of Kinshasa, Congo," *Journal of Health, Population and Nutrition Vol. 18*(22), September 2000, p. 80

older ones.[16] Or, she might have left because of money-related problems between her husband and his siblings. Either way, after my grandfather's death, my mother attempted to live as normal a life as one could after being abandoned. She was unable to do so because female children were also expected to work to support their family.[17] She began working full-time at a pastry shop selling beignets (donuts) while going to school and caring for her traumatized brothers who knew nothing of village life. Things were slowly starting to get back to a form of normal, but all of that changed. She was pregnant.

My mother's first pregnancy was a surprise. She was seventeen years old and unmarried and the father of the child, Jeff, was a nineteen-year-old university freshman whom my mother's uncles believed to be unfit, a thug and a gold digger. While I do agree that my father was unfit to be a parent, he was a teenager after all, he was neither a thug nor a gold digger. He came from a middle-class family and resided in the same neighbourhood as my mother. My mother's family knew his family because Catherine and Jeff (my father) had been seeing each other since 1979. Still, the news of my mother's pregnancy displeased my uncles so much that they decided to present their niece as Jeff's wife. In many African nations, adult children are viewed as "valuable goods" who could help the family generate more income.[18] Adult female children, particularly in matrilineal systems, are preferred because the families gain a son and a worker in addition to all of the children born during the duration of the marriage. However, this was not the case in my mother's situation because she was cast out by her own uncles. When she got pregnant, Catherine's uncles met with my paternal grandfather and great-grandfather to discuss the matter at hand. The men argued a lot, but eventually came to the conclusion that my father's family was to make a

[16] Ibid., p. 82
[17] Zingisa Guzana, "Exploring Women's Silence in IsiXhosa Written and Oral Literature," p. 79
[18] Michael Kevane, "Marriage in Africa: Simple Economics," *Ahfad Journal Vol. 19*(2), December 2002, p. 29

"bride-wealth" type of exchange for my mother and their unborn child. While I do not know the exact details of this particular event – both parties refuse to go in depth about what happened – I speculate that my father's family paid my mother's uncles a bride price not because they wanted ownership of my mother, but because my paternal grandfather adored my mother and wanted to ensure that she and his grandchild were going to be taken care of in light of this.

My mother moved in with my father's family soon after and remained there for eight years before joining my father in Switzerland. And from the tidbits that my parents would tell me, life in Zaire was hell. In the early 1980s, and despite nearly being usurped by two different rebel groups, Mobutu had managed to hold onto power across ethnic lines by promoting the use of three languages – Lingala, Tshiluba, and Kiswahili – throughout the country.[19] Having been backed by the Americans and the Belgians (or the international and national bourgeoisies) since his rise in 1965, Mobutu was capable of doing whatever he wanted, including shutting down all of the country's universities when tensions between his government, students, and "opposing leaders who had returned from exile" during his single-party rule became too high.[20] My father was a student at the University of Kinshasa studying kinesiology. He was hoping to become a physical education teacher, but all hopes and dreams had been squandered because Zaïre was never meant to succeed as an independent state; Congo was still at the mercy of its colonisers even after gaining independence. Thankfully, my father's uncle (Oncle Fero) and his Swiss wife decided to buy him a plane ticket to let him continue his studies in Europe. Unfortunately, my mother could not travel with him, she had to stay back and care for their young daughter.

[19] Howard W. French, "An Anatomy of Autocracy: Mobutu's Era," *The New York Times*, 17 May 1997, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/05/17/world/an-anatomy-of-autocracy-mobutu-s-era.html
[20] John F. Clark, "The Nature and Evolution of the State in Zaire," p. 5

My paternal grandfather loved my mother and always made sure she was safe and comfortable. My paternal grandmother did not. Elizabeth was (and continues to be) overbearing, condescending, and downright mean. In the words of my mother, "Elizabeth is tough." While she never prevented my mother from working or going to school – she knew the importance of education and wanted my mother to learn to be independent – she did not hesitate to voice her criticisms and negative opinions towards my mother, going as far as letting my mother find out the real reason why she was living with my father's family. She had been disowned.

When my mother was twenty-one years old, she ran away from home. When I asked her why she did it, she said that she was "fed up" with her current living situation and did not feel like she belonged there. Despite not wanting to leave her daughter, she needed to go home. Once she arrived at one of the family homes in Kongo Central, one of her uncles told her, "there is no space for you in this family anymore – where your daughter is, is where you should reside." The very people she assumed cared for her no longer wanted anything to do with her because she had a child out of wedlock with a man they did not approve of. My grandmother came to pick up my mother from her family estate and brought her back to Kinshasa. It would be the last time she would ever go back there. When they returned to the city, she contacted my father – she wanted to leave and be with him, but it would be nearly a decade for them to be reunited.

Over the next few years, my father attempted to bring my mother and sister to Switzerland, but every attempt was obstructed by his family or by the Swiss government. Whenever he would wire money to his siblings or his mother, they would spend it on nonsensical stuff as opposed to giving it to the intended person. Likewise, when he attempted to apply for permanent residency in Switzerland, they stated that he was not eligible because he had not been in the country for long and because he was still considered an international student. Eventually, my mother asked my

father to stop sending her nice things and to send her the money directly. She would find a way to leave the country on her own. Unfortunately, time was not on their side. When my mother and sister finally left the Republic of Zaïre for Switzerland in 1987, four years after her husband's departure, my father had already arrived in Canada and applied for asylum. His friend had told him that unlike Switzerland, the Canadian government would not be deporting him because it was very accepting of immigrants and refugees. He believed that this was going to be a new start for him and his family, but did not know when.

My mother and sister arrived in Switzerland by way of Belgium and from there, they were picked up by Oncle Fero and driven into Switzerland where they would reside for the next couple of years. After years of patiently waiting, she was finally free from the clutches of my grandparents and closer to being with her husband. While I do not know much about her life in Switzerland, the few photographs she has kept only depict happy times with new friends and family. I do know that it was one of the most challenging periods of her life. She had been disowned by her family, was on foreign land without papers, she did not have a formal education, and her daughter did not know her father. In essence, she had a new life, but it was still an incomplete one because she had been displaced. My mother and sister would remain in this limbo until April 1991 – when Oncle Fero and my father saved up enough money to send her and her daughter to Canada. My mother's journey to a new and better life was a tumultuous one, but she was now free to live as she pleased in a sovereign and independent homeland.[21]

[21] "UN General Assembly." *UN Speeches: Palestine President Mahmoud Abbas*. New York City, New York, September 22, 2016.

DOCUMENTARY RELEVANCE

2.1 DOCUMENTARY MODES

It's a Little Complicated is a short expository and participatory documentary film about my mother, Nzolele Catherine Mpemba-Mbuku. Film critic and historian, Bill Nichols, describes the expository documentary genre as "the most widely known and most widely used text that addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that advance an argument about the historical world – whether romantic or didactic –" since its emergence in the 1920s.[22] In comparison to fiction films and other documentary modes, the expository mode uses video footage and photographs as a "representation for what was being said at the time" and not a re-enactment or replacement for the actual events.[23] Voice-over commentary (or narration) is essential to relaying information to audiences as audiences have come to recognize and understand the role of the omnipresent "voice of God" in mainstream documentaries. However, Nichols states that "juxtapositions and poetic modes of expositions" have made less polished and unprofessional narrative voices in expository documentaries more frank, enjoyable, and vulnerable because they "retain little responsibility for making the argument," and are simply used to support the authoritative (or primary) narrator in the film.[24] In the case of *It's a Little Complicated*, the supporting narrative voices are of the family (myself included) while my mother takes on the role of primary voice.

Supporting narrators are not restricted to any particular story or event, they are allowed to speak their minds and disclose whatever they want. Documentary filmmakers do not strive to control what is being said, but work towards getting the best version of it. Thus, the filmmaker can refrain or enforce "an ongoing, open-ended conversation" with the subject depending on how they

[22] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indianan University Press, 2001), p. 99
[23] Ibid., p. 107
[24] Ibid., p. 99

are responding to the topic at hand. Things like comfort and environment become determining factors. During the production of *It's a Little Complicated*, I asked the supporting narrative voices to only disclose information or related to what my mother would say during her interview. Viewers expect the expository text to lead them towards a solution – to discern that the narrators are talking about one person – and the filmmaker is responsible for "establishing and maintaining continuity" throughout the documentary. By limiting topics, the filmmaker is more likely to be able to introduce fresh insight to the audience through strategic cuts and through the contrast between the imagery and the audio.[25]

In the expository mode, imagery is secondary to audio. For this reason, *It's a Little Complicated* can be viewed as a participatory text because it stresses the idea of the image to "demonstrate the validity of what a narrative voice is stating without the effects of the cinematic apparatus itself."[26] Nichols defines the participatory (or interactive) documentary mode as a mode that "wanted to engage with individuals more directly while not reverting to classic exposition."[27] This mode, made use of somewhat problematic tactics like repetitiveness and coercion, in order to get a more authentic and raw response from its subjects. The interactive mode gained popularity in the late 1950s through the accessibility of readily available, "portable synchronous sound recording equipment and the human sensorium."[28] In comparison to the expository mode, the participatory mode did not require the filmmaker to have a cinematic eye. The interactions between the social actors and the crew or lack of interaction were far greater than calculated shots. While *It's a Little Complicated* is film made with archival material; there are multiple exchanges within the home videos that further expand on my relationship with my mother and the relationships the

[25] Ibid., p. 100
[26] Ibid., p. 88
[27] Ibid., 109
[28] Giulia Miller, *Studying Waltz with Bashir*, (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2017), p. 27

subjects in the film have with one another. As the filmmaker, I gained more insight about my mother's person by observing her mannerisms and her body language. Similarly, the interactive documentary operates under "logical continuity between individual viewpoints wherein editing is crucial and required to prompt the audience and turn them into active viewers."[29] In my film, this occurs when my mother mentions being kicked out of her family for becoming pregnant. Participatory documentary filmmakers are responsible for constructing an overall narrative, but they do not always require linear commentary to guide viewer – there is no need. The camera determines what we see nevertheless, we record and edit selectively.[30] Furthermore, although there are multiple voices talking about one person, all interactions are drawn back to me, the filmmaker. *It's a Little Complicated* is a film about my mother, but it is a film I made in order to know her better. While the most important people are shown multiple times, and speak for the majority of the film's duration, the filmmaker is the person that leads the audience to the result they seek.[31] Nevertheless, both the expository and the participatory documentary modes strive for authenticity and I hope that the contributions of my family members actively talking about events that had not been discussed in over twenty-five years brings discussions about immigration, colonialism, disease, and trauma to the forefront.

[29] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p.117
[30] John Stuart Katz, Larry Gross, and Jay Ruby, *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photographs, Film, and Television*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 119
[31] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p. 111

2.2 DOMESTIC ETHNOGRAPHY AND STORYTELLING

It's a Little Complicated is also a work of domestic ethnography. Professor Michael Renov describes domestic ethnography as:

> The curious documentation of a family member and the desire for knowledge of the Other who, happens to be linked to the artist by either having maintained long-standing, everyday relations with them or being genetically related to them.[32]

My mother always kept her past to herself. This is not unusual because "family life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is surrounded by a high degree of secrecy and selective exclusion."[33] Children born during the post-war baby boom were not focused on community and social life, but rather on rebuilding society. The moment I decided to tell my mother's story, I knew that I would be embarking on something bigger. I would not only be talking about my mother's personal life, but of the impacts of Belgian imperialism, globalization, and war. Having been born into a country ruined by colonial greed nearly one hundred years prior, Catherine still managed to uproot her life and begin anew in a country she only ever learned about as a child in Geography classes. She was a victim of circumstance but also a survivor. However, making a film about her life, I ran the risk of it being viewed as self-indulgent and self-absorbed despite the film not being about me.[34] "Domestic ethnographic work," as Dena Huisman states "is inherently autobiographical because it is a vehicle of and self-examination of the familial other."[35] We attempt to tell the story of the Other because storytelling has "significant implications in the shaping of one's identity" before

[32] Michael Renov and Jane M. Gaines, *Collecting Visible Evidence*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 140
[33] John Stuart Katz, Larry Gross, and Jay Ruby, *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photographs, Film, and Television*, p. 128
[34] Ibid., p. 128
[35] Dena Huisman, "Telling a Family Culture: Storytelling, Family Identity, and Cultural Membership," *Interpersona: An International Journal on Personal Relationships Vol. 8*(2), 2014, p. 146

we are even aware that we are trying to understand who we are and where we come from.[36] Moreover, by bringing together and organizing accepted facts, storytelling "creates a network of cause and effect relationships" that help us navigate and make sense of the world around us.[37]

In the article "Imagining Families Through Stories and Rituals," authors Jane Jorgenson and Arthur P. Bochner argue that family life "is a continuous struggle to create narrative coherence where unexpected losses, twists of fate, and bumps on the road are common."[38] Family units have a tendency to construct stories in order create meaning out of a series of events. The stories and experiences my parents constructed were absorbed by my siblings and me. They "guided our individual behaviours and ultimately shaped the way we interacted with others."[39] However, my mother's diagnosis shackled our world and brought forth secrecy and confusion, it was as if she was ashamed of being ill and did not want us to know. This is when I considered documenting her. My siblings and I knew that her life became increasingly difficult after the passing of her father – she became a type of second mother to her seven siblings after the eldest abandoned them – and the birth of her first daughter after which she was forced to live with my father's family. We also knew with whom they had travelled to Switzerland, who had picked them up at the airport, what time it was when they arrived, and what the airport security guard looked like when he saw my father and uncles approaching him. We knew this and yet, we showed a lack of interest in their stories until my mother became sick, until she started telling us how she was feeling.[40]

I was never sure about how she was feeling and therefore, unsure how to begin documenting. There were moments where I was unable and unwilling to admit that I was in a state

[36] Ibid., p. 146
[37] Cecilia Bosticco and Teresa L. Thompson, "Narratives and Storytelling in Coping with Grief and Bereavement," Omega Vol. 51(1), 2005, p. 3
[38] Anita L. Vangelisti, *Handbook of Family Communication*, (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2004), p. 515
[39] Cecilia Bosticco and Teresa L. Thompson, "Narratives and Storytelling in Coping with Grief and Bereavement," p. 10
[40] Dena Huisman, "Telling a Family Culture: Storytelling, Family Identity, and Cultural Membership," p. 145

of loss because of my belief that grief was reserved for people who have died. And many years after her diagnosis, I would still find myself struggling to cope with these human processes – it was easier to talk about other people's suffering rather than my own.[41] The secrecy surrounding my mother's disease and her pain distorted my perception of her. She was no longer this immortal being, she was human, like me. In their 1988 book, *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photographs, Film, and Television*, Larry Gross, John Stuart Katz, Jay Ruby remind us that autobiographical films are humanizing albeit not always comforting.[42] The representation of my family narrative on screen not only allowed me to get a better understanding of my family, it has also validated our traumas which would have otherwise been too uncomfortable to discuss outside a psychotherapist's office.[43] The trouble however, lied in telling the story of an African woman with very little physical remnants of her life before the birth of her children.

In "Archiving While Black," professor Ashley Farmer homed in on Black stories and particularly on how counter-archives have worked to reverse how archives have traditionally been created. She argues that the majority of archives on Black and African bodies have been assembled using a colonial lens as in which the oppressor observes the oppressed with artifacts chosen to display "heinous acts against indigenous communities by America's favourite colonizers." [44] For example, daguerreotypes of enslaved men, women, and children. She further states that these resulted in both scholarly and popular ideas about preserving Black history," one of the most revelatory being that of The Lumière Brothers' picturesque films of Africans during the late nineteenth century and the other, of Swiss-American zoologist, Louis Agassiz.[45] Agassiz,

[41] Esther Gelcer, "Mourning is a Family Affair," Family Process Vol. 22(4), December 1983, p. 1
[42] John Stuart Katz, Larry Gross, and Jay Ruby, *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photographs, Film, and Television*, p. 130
[43] Ibid., p. 128
[44] ibid., p. 128
[45] Ashley Farmer, "Archiving while Black," The Chronicle of Higher Education, 22 July 2018, https://www.chronicle.com/article/Archiving-While-Black/243981

dedicated his life to "analyzing the physical differences between European whites and African blacks" to "prove the superiority of the white race" as he did not believe Black people to come from "a common centre."[46] In fact, he viewed "their thick lips, the wool on their heads, and the livid colour of their palms" to be repugnant.[47] Agassiz stressed the inferior status of Black slaves – despite proclaiming to be an abolitionist – and in an attempt to prove that whites were better than Blacks, he took fifteen detailed photographs of seven male and female "Gullah, Guinea, Ebo, Foulah, Coromantee, Mandingo, and Congo Negroes" while touring Columbia plantations.[48] There was no science behind the photographs, he was motivated by his peers and a society that embraced racism. Agassiz's photographs were ethnographic illustrations of the Black body as opposed to scientific representations of them. The bodies were distorted, they appeared longer or stauncher than they would; the subject's clothes were often torn or missing; and the body itself was shown in a state of pain, they were branded by marks of the master.[49] Indeed, they were to show the European how inhuman the "Negro" was and why the spread of Christianity to countries residing outside Europe was necessary.

The division fostered by Agassiz and other ethnographers is one I want to completely dismiss this ethnographic approach by normalizing my mother's trauma in *It's a Little Complicated*. While "there is a melancholy in not knowing your entire familial history" and wanting to construct one, there is also bliss in knowing that family histories encourage us to "climb under the skin" of the people we assume we knew and allow us to come into contact with their memories and emotions.[50] The counter-archive works to disrupt conventional narratives of marginalized groups and enhance their personal histories for future generations. The story of my

[46] Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes," *American Art Vol. 9*(2), 1995, p. 103
[47] Ibid., p. 103
[48] Ibid., p. 105
[49] Ibid., p. 106
[50] Anita L. Vangelisti, *Handbook of Family Communication*, p. 518

mother being disowned by her family is an important addition to the history of family life in Congo and of patriarchal society in sub-Saharan Africa, but having her recount these events for *It's a Little Complicated* with her immediate family members is different. It serves the simple purpose of illustrating and talking about traumatic events in order to heal.

2.3 THE HOME MOVIE AND THE DOCUMENTARY FILM

Coming to terms with the fact that I did not know much about family-focused (or home video-based) documentaries, archival-based work and found-footage films or counter-archives was easy, as we often tend to forget that the home video documentary phenomenon is fairly new to cinema. While the first ever motion pictures were recordings of everyday life – with the Lumière Brothers, Thomas Edison, and William Kennedy Dickson showcasing recordings of their children and families to European and American audiences in fifteen to thirty second increments – home movies did not move from the living room to the festival screen until the video age of the late twentieth century.[51] In other words, early filmmakers saw the potential of cinema through home movies, but the video age, and more specifically the video camera, saw the potentiality of the medium and the different ways for it to be explored and exploited.[52]

The advent of the 8mm camera in the 1930s changed the way we looked at and understood family archives and in a way, cinema. Not only did we had moving images of family members we had never met, we had representation of the family home (and of the family) in a cultural and social context.[53] These videos were an aesthetic that required patience and skill because it was an aesthetic. There was a need to preserve something for future reference. However, the arrival of the video camera in the 1980s practically eliminated all skill, money, and patience required to create a film or home video. If you made a mistake while recording with a camcorder, you could simply re-record the material on top of the old footage because the film was not as dependent on film as

[51] Marsha Orgeron and David Orgeron, "Familial Pursuits, Editorial Acts: Documentaries after the Age of Home Video," Velvet Light Trap Vol. 60, 2007, p. 48 https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/docview/222836754/fulltextPDF/F9F6F434C5C422APQ/8?accountid=13631

[52] Dai Vaughn and Thomas Elsaesser, "Let There Be Lumière," *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), p. 64

[53] Marsha Orgeron and David Orgeron, "Familial Pursuits, Editorial Acts: Documentaries after the Age of Home Video," p. 50

their predecessors were.[54] By the mid-1980s, the resources needed to film, cut, develop, and edit a movie were no longer as complex – everyone was now capable of using a video camera.[55] The shift in the ways in which we created a film, although discussed in film theory, is widely ignored because it was considered amateur. In comparison to professional filmmaking (or classical filmmaking), amateur filmmaking encapsulated a type of togetherness. This "togetherness," as home video movie scholar Patricia Zimmerman argues, "erased any of its social, political or economic possibilities" for more positive family events such as birthdays, holidays, and weddings.[56] Moreover, the intimacy caught on camera became a significant factor in differentiating home video-focused documentaries from other documentary styles.

Now I will admit, family-focused documentaries did not interest me at all. How could we be so certain that what we are seeing is accurate? We live in a strange age of cinema where we want to make films out of our old home videos; we want to look at the footage, impose meaning on, and start a discourse to "illustrate what appears to be happening in the social world," but because the videographer is in control of transcribing a reality, this reality is often skewed.[57] So, how do we begin to interact with these types of false realities when we do not want to sit down and waste our time watching family members talk about one deceased member? According to film scholar Vivan Sobchack, the context of the home movie resides in the experience of the subject – the more we find similarities with the overall topic, the more likely we are to connect it to our own consumer-led and home-based livelihoods.[58] However, I argue that the minor details seen in a

[54] Ibid., p. 50
[55] Ibid., p. 48
[56] Patricia Rodden Zimmerman, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 113
[57] Natasha Becker, "Familiarising the Documentary or Documenting the Family?," PhD Diss., University of Western Cape, p. 12,
[58] Janna Jones, "Confronting the Past in the Archival Film and the Contemporary Documentary," *The Moving Image No. 4*(2), 2004, p. 8

home video – a particular toy seen in the background of a Christmas video or the colour of a sweater – are also capable of triggering specific personal memories. These "things" that have been long forgotten were once a part of us and seeing them makes us think of a past life that now only exists on film.

Nevertheless, the expansion of family history via video recordings remains important.[59] My parents and other family members were not thinking that one day they would not be able to watch their home videos, they just knew that they needed to capture as many people as possible before they left this world. In his 1930 tribute film *From Stump to Ship*, director Alfred Ames says:

> I purchased a moving picture camera to make a record of the long lumber operations on the river, and show by our method of forestry the size of the logs we were able to produce.[60]

Granted, he was talking about the loss of his family company and the decline of the forestry industry in the state of Maine, Ames needed to record what was important to him in order to remember. My parents recorded hundreds of hours of gathering with family members I never met because they wanted to memorize their voices and their way of being. These were their friends and their cousins and their neighbors. I produced a film about my mother's past because I wanted to have a more holistic understanding of her life for future reference. The more I realised that family-focused documentaries were not meant to glorify the subject or present extraordinary stories, the more I recognized that these films were meant to remember the person in question with the people who cherished them. Similarly, I produced a film about my mother's past because I wanted to have a more holistic understanding of her life for future reference.

[59] Natasha Becker, "Familiarising the Documentary or Documenting the Family?," p. 13
[60] Janna Jones, "Confronting the Past in the Archival Film and the Contemporary Documentary," p. 12

METHODOLOGY

3.1 MY MOTHER HATES LOUD NOISES

Before I delve into my methodology, I want to briefly mention four films that stood out to me when I began working on *It's a Little Complicated*. The first was Charlie Tyrell's short film *My Dead Dad's Porno Tapes* (2018), which "tried to piece together who Greg Tyrell was with all the weird stuff he had left behind."[61] Second, was Raoul Peck's *Lumumba, Mort du Prophète* (1990), wherein Peck creatively recounts the brief political life of one of Africa's most famous assassinated politicians and intertwines it with his own personal story and experience in Congo after independence.[62] Third, was Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012), which dissects the widely known but barely talked about secret surrounding her birth, her deceased mother, and her identity.[63] The final film was Alina Marazzi's *For One More Hour with You* (2002), which tells the tragic story of the filmmaker's mother, Luisa, through her diary entries and letters.[64] All four of these films were inspirational in their use of photography,, archival footage, home videos, and voice recordings because they "emphasized cinema as a vehicle for memory and for remembering."[65] However, unlike these films, the main subject of my documentary is not dead nor has she been made funnier, kinder, smarter or someone other than who she actually is. For instance, in *Lumumba, Mort du Prophète*, Peck neglects to mention the fact that former Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba was a nationalist who allowed a massacre to be committed under his watch because he believed in freedom by any means necessary.[66] Instead, Peck romanticizes him and paints him as a tragic hero who was unjustly killed because he wanted the Congo to be free of its

[61] Charlie Tyrell, "My Dead Dad's Porno Tapes," *The Atlantic*, 22 August 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/568003/dead-dad-tapes/
[62] Raoul Peck, "Lumumba, La Mort du Prophète," DVD, 1990
[63] Sarah Polley, "Stories We Tell," *NFB*, Video File, 2014 https://www.nfb.ca/film/stories_we_tell/
[64] Deborah Young, "For One More Hour with You," *Variety*, 29 January 2003, https://variety.com/2003/film/reviews/for-one-more-hour-with-you-1200543790/
[65] Ibid.,
[66] Ove Bring, *Nordic Cosmopolitanism: Essays in International Law for Martti Koskenniemi* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2003), p. 511

colonial past.[67] While both narratives are true, Peck is obviously biased towards the former Prime Minister. Likewise, in *For One More Hour with You*, Marazzi attempts to keep alive a relationship with a woman she never got to know by looking, touching, working with her mother's items. Despite the film's intimacy and sensitivity, it becomes evident that Marazzi is trying to separate her mother's mental illness from her person by presenting us with happy or joyous images of her young mother. I have no interest in creating a myth out of my mother because, despite not knowing the entirety of her history, she is not without her own flaws.[68] By filling the blanks of her past with home videos and photographs, I will be able to complete her story; stating anything but the truth would render the film useless and without integrity.[69]

Catherine was not my first documentary subject choice. She was not even the second. *It's a Little Complicated* was created as a means to cope with my grief surrounding her diagnosis of Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo in May 2018. Initially, I was focused on creating a documentary on the history and erasure of Black women and other women of colour in the do-it-yourself (DIY) punk movement because it was a history that had yet to be told from the perspective of the "Other." In fact, Black and Indigenous punk histories were often ignored in favour of white-centric punk stories. However, in doing this project I did not only want to tell the history of people of colour in punk music, I wanted to show audiences that women of colour played an integral role in the development of punk music and that their contributions to DIY punk music were overshadowed by the works of bored white, middle-class all-girl bands (known as Riot Grrrls) whose ideas of feminism and womanhood were archaic at best and racist at worst. Furthermore, I was interested in dissecting the role of white women in punk and their ability to use their privilege

[67] Michael Wilmington, "Lumumba's Rise, Fall and Death: A Powerful Portrait of the Congo's Leader," *The Chicago Tribune*, 27 July 2001
[68] Linda Alcoff, "The Problem with Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique No. 20*, 1991-1992, p.21
[69] Ibid., p. 21

to muddle and dismiss the impact of Black women in feminist discourse and in music history. Indeed, racism, white supremacist ideologies, privilege, and misogynoir were what initially fueled my Major Research Project, but when my mother got sick, my project too had to change. This worked out in her favour because my mother hates loud noises and would have opposed my film. So, I decided to make an installation.

3.2 FROM INSTALLATION... TO FILM

While I believed that an installation would help me come to a better understanding of who my mother was before she became a parent, I now know that it was an idea sought out after months of pure laziness and hopelessness. I wanted to create a piece that required very little work. The idea for this installation was to display three photographs of my young mother at different stages of her life. The first would be of her Zairian passport dated 1987, which also includes the youngest photograph of her to date. Second would be a copy of her American Visa which, represents her first attempt at coming to North America to meet my father. Finally, the installation would include her first Canadian passport dated 28 December 2004.

The plan was to have these three documents showcase the difficulties of immigration and the sacrifices she made in order to gain Canadian citizenship. Because I had not thought the installation through completely, I had neither thought about how audiences would interpret what they were seeing nor did I think about the impact of putting a Black woman's life on display and presenting it to a society that has and continues to neglect the Black female body and image. In essence, visitors would not know that she was a teen mother because they would not be able to flip through the Zairian passport and see the photograph of my seven-year old sister in the back. In addition, they would not know that my mother attempted to immigrate to the United States before Canada because her visa does not give away this information. Finally, they would not know that she did come to Canada from Switzerland as an asylum seeker and that she experienced a real sense of loss by coming to a country she had only learned about in her geography classes. In my attempt at understanding my mother, I realised that audiences would not understand the purpose of my work because they did not know the story. So, I returned to the idea to do a film.

When the installation idea had finally run its course, I had to remind myself of what I was doing and for what purpose. I still wanted to use my mother's documents, but I also wanted to include my mother as a person and not a prop. Furthermore, I did not want to speak for her or allow others to make assumptions about her past and her home. This was a real person with a real story and I wanted to do it justice. Thus, I once again found myself on the Internet, searching for family-focused documentaries that heavily relied on archival materials in order to make my short film original and approachable. This is when I stumbled upon Charlie Tyrell's *My Dead Dad's Porno Tapes*. When I first watched Tyrell's film, I felt like the world was finally smiling upon me. As film journalist Emily Buder wrote in *The Atlantic*:

> "When his father died, Charlie Tyrell realised he knew next to nothing about him. Tyrell and his reticent father hadn't been close; and as a young adult, Tyrell had been waiting for the strange distance he felt between them to close."[70]

Tyrell's film was made entirely of archival material, it was emotional, and it was about a family member that the director never got to know while alive because he never felt connected enough to him to do so. In essence, it was everything I needed to complete my Major Research Project. I had found my documentary voice.[71]

Over the course of four months, from October 2018 to January 2019, I worked myself up to thinking that I could create a short film like *My Dead Dad's Porno Tapes* without actually doing any of the work. I figured, if I talked about it enough and thought about it enough and gathered all of my documents, it would happen. Let me make this clear, I *believed* that *thinking* about a film *without* taking action would make it happen because as filmmakers, we often find what we want or need in other films, but do not always have the means to use these strategies to tell our own

[70] Charlie Tyrell, "My Dead Dad's Porno Tapes,"
[71] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p. 99

stories. In addition, we do not always want to admit that particular shots or sequences will not always work in our own projects. Although our parents were both sick and our film topics looked at the complex relationships between parent and child, it was impossible for me to create a film comparable to *My Dead Dad's Porno Tapes* because it was, ultimately, not a story my mother would understand. In addition to me wanting to portray my mother in a more holistic setting, I wanted to create a film that she would be able to follow and enjoy. It was, and still remains, important for me to create a work that could be understood by her because the film was a way of starting a dialogue.

3.3 TROUBLES, TRIBULATIONS, AND FINALLY, SUCCESS

I spent the majority of my second year in the Documentary Media graduate lab and in my parents' "New North" Oshawa basement. There, I was able to look at and review the various types of video tapes family members had made throughout the years without interruption. Unsurprisingly, there was no shortage of cassettes; nonetheless, I knew that I would not have enough time to go through them all and complete the film. So, I made a decision.

In the midst of my sifting, I decided that I would also re-familiarize myself with the history of the Congo. Albeit being from the country in question, there is still much that I do not know, things that I wanted to learn. I was unaware that Léopold II was unpopular with the Belgian people and other European nations due to his selfish and disastrous choices with the colony.[72] I was also unaware that Mobutu remained in power for as long as he did by forcing the Congolese people to vote for him; he did this by having them pick a "green card" which would count as a vote for Mobutu versus the "red card" that would not.[73] By acquainting myself with the things that I did not know, I would be better able to probe my subjects when they would make strange comments regarding to their past, particularly regarding their families in the Congo.

Secondly, I decided to look into our family archive. I used home videos and photographs extensively in the film in the same fashion as Alina Marazzi did in *For One More Hour with You* because for two reasons. First, because of the author's desire to commemorate her mother and second, because I had no other choice. None of my family members wanted to sit down for an on-camera interview, I did not have time to set up multiple on-screen interviews, and we had plenty of material, the majority of it was just undated – my parents never felt the need to do so. Whenever

[72] Marysa Demoor, "When the King Becomes your Personal Enemy: W. T. Stead, King Leopold II, and the Congo Free State," *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century No. 16*, 2013
[73] Audio interview with Jeff Mbuku, 5 April 2019, Oshawa, Ontario

they looked at a photograph, it was like they were being transported back to that time. They knew who had taken the image or recording, they knew what brand of beer they were drinking and what the bottle looked like, who was playing on the radio (it was almost always James Brown or TPOK Jazz), and what was going on politically both in Europe and the Congo. In addition, a lot of the physical materials like photographs taken during Congo's economic boom as well as letters exchanged between my grandparents were crumbling. These documents, that were once important, were now abandoned to decay because no one had the time to take care of them. Including the physical materials in my film alongside the home videos helped me to understand how people of colour contributed to the destruction of their own cultural and familial narratives outside of the institutions that constrained them. However, unlike the photographs, there was a particular sadness in looking at the home videos. No matter how authentic and happy the people captured on film may have appeared to be, the majority of the time they were performing for the cameras. Indeed, the images were being shared with family members in other parts of the world and a charade had to be maintained – they were the ones who made it out of the country, after all. I will admit that I do not know all the trials and tribulations my family went through to get to Canada, but in knowing this particular fact, I cut out most of the footage that displayed them as passive beings and replaced them with archival materials of their home country in post-production.

Finally, I decided to sit down and talk to my family members outside of the realm of a formal interview. When I first started doing interviews, I was aiming to complete the interviews in one take and I expected my siblings to know more about our mother and for my mother to be more open about her past. I quickly learned that it would be the opposite. During my first in-person interviews, I was often met with silence because I had not yet explained what I was going to be doing with the home videos. Indeed, my subjects were still not completely aware of what I was

doing with the material that I was collecting.[74] I will admit, the act of not explaining the film's theme and structure to my interview subjects made them suspicious, and me "self-indulgent, manipulative and somewhat unethical."[75] But I was not airing out my dirty laundry for selfish reasons or personal gain, there was a justifiable motive behind my actions. I wanted to know who my mother was before she had children. Nevertheless, there was a lack of appropriate disclosure on my behalf which was bounded by their willingness to disclose them.[76] In addition, the audio for my sister's interview was too quiet whereas the audio for my brother and father's interviews were too loud. While this simply meant that I needed to stabilize the small clips of audio, doing so was consuming time that I did not have. So, I hired a sound editor.

On my second round of interviews, I had allowed my parents and my siblings to listen to recorded conversations with the others, in case it triggered any memories. No such luck struck, but after that, my subjects were more willing to talk (and do so for a long time) because they had heard what the others had said. They finally understood what kind of film I was attempting to produce. In interviewing my mother again, I learned about her early years in Canada and the abuse she faced in the factories where she *worked. Additionally, my brother confessed that he knew that my mother had to take care of her siblings when she was younger and that she had taken over the role of matriarch.[77] I was more knowledgeable and had compiled enough documents to create *It's a Little Complicated*, yet had not begun to work on it because I still did not know the chronology I would be working.

[74] John Stuart Katz, Larry Gross, and Jay Ruby, *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photographs, Film, and Television*, p. 127
[75] Ibid., p. 128
[76] Ibid., p. 125
*I excluded these conversations from the film at my mother's request
[77] My grandmother was still alive, but I was not told what she was doing in her village

I wrote multiple versions of the short throughout its production. The early shooting scripts looked eerily familiar to my main inspiration:

My Dead Dad's Porno Tapes – 2019 Film	*It's a Little Complicated* – 03/2019 Script
David (V.O) This is Charlie. He was just born. These are his parents, Jenny and Greg. In Twenty years, Greg will be dead. But Charlie doesn't know that yet. Charlie doesn't know anything yet. He's just a baby. This is where Charlie grew up, his brother Geoff, sister Meg, their dog Louis, and the TV room where his dad his these, (shows a collection of pornographic tapes) Some of the tackiest video pornography of the 1980s.	Emeraude (V.O) This is Catherine. She was born on March 15th 1963 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This is her husband Jeff, her daughters Nancy and Émeraude, her son Jeffley and the closet where she hid these (shows envelope full of photographs) 11 photographs of herself taken by her daughter in her Swiss apartment.

I spent two months of my final term mimicking Tyrell's script, because I too aimed to introduce my mother in a humorous manner before deep diving into more serious topics. However, after multiple honest conversations with friends about the lack of progression on my film and my failed attempts at impressing classmates to show that I was working harder, I buckled down and started working on my film. Indeed, I *finally* found my documentary voice.[78]

Largely influenced by filmmaker Alina Marazzi and my supervisors, *It's a Little Complicated* became something I had never thought I would make. I had never intended for it to be titled "it's a little complicated." In fact, I wanted to title it "Maman, Mama, Mom, Catherine" to showcase all the voices that would be included in the film and all the different names she has acquired over the years, but it was changed due to the subject matter – it was too complicated to

[78] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p. 99

explain in fifteen minutes. So, we changed it. Furthermore, my father was never supposed to play a large role in the film; he was interviewed to provide some historical facts about the Congo, as background info. Instead, he became the film's second voice, filling in and providing information where my mom could not. The transition was sudden, but I realised that the film could not succeed without these drastic changes. By exclusively using archival footage, I was able to make the film weave between two realms – from the personal to the national and back again – without disruption or confusion. Although not all footage was shot with the same apparatus or at the same time, the found material offers a better look into the history of sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-twentieth century as well as an intimate look in the lives of refugees from the Congo.

It's a Little Complicated is a documentary film that has helped preserve my parents' memories. The film does not explore further into the subject matter than it needs to because it was meant as an exercise in storytelling, the beginning of another journey in discovering and understanding people. The American independent filmmaker, John Cassavetes once said, "film is, to me, just unimportant. But people are very important."[79] While I do not agree with the first statement – film is important to me – I wholly believe that the people you decide to cast in your film are more important than the film itself because they have the power to make or break it. Had I not highlighted my father in the short or if I omitted photographs of my parents, it would not have been received as positively as it was because it would have told an incomplete story and would have not encouraged further discussion on trauma in my family.

[79] Ray Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 148

I have been trying to get to know my mother my entire life. I was never able to because I was not raised in an environment that encouraged curiosity or nosiness. As a first Canadian-Congolese woman, it was still essential for me to stay in my lane and do what I was told – this indicated good manners and marriage potential. In making this film and working with my mother, I was able to break out of this mold and ask questions that I would have never gotten to ask had she not been diagnosed with benign paroxysmal positional vertigo. Most importantly, I would have never understood that – despite not sharing the same political beliefs or cultural stances; we still had some of the same characteristics even though we were no longer as close as we once were. Indeed, her diagnosis was a type of blessing in disguise because it made her more willing to share the vulnerable parts of her past and openly talk about things she avoided saying in fear of being shamed.

This film, like other domestic ethnographic work, aims to start peeling away the layers of secrecy in families. Considering the fact that I am not the only child who grew up knowing nothing of their mother's past until the spring of 2019 – the film can be used as a tool to start a conversation with a parent or another family member whose past is relatively unknown. No relationship can flourish or progress if no one decides to start a discussion. My mother decided that this was a conversation worth having and for that, I will always be grateful.

WORD COUNT — 10,960

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