

# **Memory Work & Shifting Lens: What Remembering Makes New**

**(Methodological Statement & Reflection)**

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## Part 1. Motivations

The first book I remember reading from Jamaica Kincaid was “A Small Place”. Then, I read whatever Kincaid I could get my hands on—*At the Bottom of the River*, a must. *Annie John*, of course. *Lucy, Autobiography of My Mother*—yes, at least 3 times each, for sure. As a member of the Jamaican diaspora, both Kincaid’s first name (despite her being from Antigua) and her position as a Caribbean woman writing about the Caribbean while based in the U.S., drew me further to her work. Kincaid loved plants and gardening, so did I. The more I read her work and listened to her speak in interviews and talks, the more I realized that we had some similar preoccupations. One of these being that I too was fascinated with the presence and influence of mothers.

I remember that the first time I read the short story “Girl” by Kincaid, the gendered instructions given to the young girl on how to best present oneself felt very familiar. They were similar to guidance I’d received, not only from my mother, but mother figures in my life—my aunts, my stepmother, my maternal grandmother. In *Autobiography of My Mother*, the main character, Xuela Claudette Richardson, has no mother and must navigate life without her specific guidance. As readers, we are called to think of the void created through the theme of motherlessness which insists that we consider the role of the mother in society. Indeed, the observation of the role of mother is so profound in Kincaid’s works that it often invited me into these deeper considerations of how the presence or lack of presence of mothers shapes an individual. I realized, too, that Kincaid’s work invited me to think of my own relationship with my mother and the mothers in my life.

I remain deeply invested in mothering and I appreciate the various ways I’ve been nurtured by the mother figures I’ve come to know. I’ve become even more attuned to both the perception of the mother’s role and the mother’s experience of that role since becoming a mother myself. I cannot tell now where my stronger investment for the matter began specifically, but becoming responsible for mothering my own children has made me acutely aware of how I have been mothered and how I am positioned. I remain in wonder of my paternal grandmother as we never met. I’ve only heard stories of her, so to me, she is cloaked in mystery. Just the thought of her brings me to a

singular picture I have of her and my paternal grandfather. Since stories can only tell us so much without having our own experiences, I look for the similar threads in the stories of people who knew her.

I consider both the time spent and lack of time spent with the mother figures I'm associated with as part of what shapes me. This is why it was so important to me to interview my mother, because she has been such an important figure in my life.

I think about how my mother spoke about education often. I also recall frequently hearing stories of my mother when she was a teacher. During my years growing up in Jamaica, I lived for a time with my grandparents while my mom taught full time and I'd see her on weekends. I cannot tell if I actually remember seeing her teaching or on her way to teach, only that I always knew teaching was an important part of her world.

I have memories of living with my aunt, uncle, and cousins in Jamaica for a while. My mother had moved to New York and she always sent packages for me. Most of what I remember in these packages were books and in her absence, I did read those books over and over. She always tried to give me access to information and other ways of life. In her book, *Ordinary Notes*, Christina Sharpe recalls several childhood memories of her mother's influence, one of which reminded me of my own childhood. She writes, "My mother gifted me a love of beauty, a love of words. She gave me every Black book that she could find...the mind and the soul came together in books: novels, poetry, short stories, history, art" (Sharpe, 154). This resonated deeply with me, the subtle, but impactful gesture of the gift of words and Sharpe's aligning of this with the notion of beauty.

So maybe, that is the place where I trace the motivation for now focusing my collecting of my mother's oral histories on education. It is in my memory that the importance of education was instilled in me from an early age. I started recording oral histories of my mother in Fall 2024. It occurred to me that for many years the work I'd been most drawn to centered on women, Jamaican women writers and performers specifically, and their creative output. It wasn't until my research while in the oral history program at Columbia that I had the idea to collect oral histories from my mother, recognizing that underlying this was the fact that she had been the first Jamaican woman who'd had an impact on me. In pre-interview conversations with my mother about her early

influences, I became interested in learning more. I wanted to know more about how she grew up and her education.

My practice centers memory—memory as a tool, memory as the way we know, memory as an integral part of meaning making. This is where I start. I had several memories of my mother working to instill in me a love of knowledge from the time when I was a little girl.

In what follows, I continue my reflection on the process in various ways, through prose, through poetry, all connected and/or inspired by my oral history interviews with my own mother as I consider maternal lineage.

## **Part 2**

### **Oral Histories**

“I’ve been revisiting what beauty as a method might mean or do: what it might break open, rupture, make possible, and make impossible. How we might carry beauty’s knowledge with us and make new worlds.”

- Christina Sharpe

My idea for creating an oral history narrated by my mother came from my desire to learn her history. I’d heard bits and pieces, as may be expected, from listening to her share every now and then as a memory arose. It’s possible also, that some of what she’d previously shared with me was purposeful, giving me snapshots of her life before she became a mother. It occurred to me during my time as a student in the oral history program that having my mother sit to tell parts of her story was something I’d never done, at least not in an intentional way. It also made me think about what I share with my children. I aim to be open with them about my life and path with the awareness that some things might not be remembered in the same way I share them, or at all, but with the hope that they’ll recall the general idea. In a 2003 Massey Lecture from “The Truth About Stories” series, Professor Thomas King states, “Once a story is told, it can’t be called back” (King). The permanence of this stayed with me, that a story once told, now exists in the world. It seems so obvious, but what about the stories one holds inside that never get told? For my oral history interviews, it was important to me to have my

mother share some of her stories in the way she wanted to share them. This held value for me in that the act of asking someone to share a part of their history can generate something that they may have not verbalized to others.

An important aspect of the process of the oral history interviews I collected from my mother was my project design which had a variety of iterations. Having the project design helped me to have a starting place to figure out several aspects such as my project goal, audience, and plan. My title shifts for the project reflect how my relationship to the project changed over time beginning with the informative title “Environment, Education, Language” and then moving to the one I’ve settled on, “Memory Work & Shifting Lens: What Remembering Makes New”, which reflects what I believe happened during these oral history interviews. Remembering, for my mother, seemed to make things new again for her in that she was sharing some aspects of her story with me for the first time and working in an intentional way to look at her journey. This newness is something I felt in hearing her words and the excitement in them. This excitement is something that I picked up on in her voice at times during the interviews. Additionally, her remembering during these interviews led to her sharing information that was new to me and so I learned about her life in a way that gave me a deeper appreciation for her path.

The oral histories collected from my mother for this project document her educational history while living in her hometown of St. Elizabeth, Jamaica and surrounding areas. My aim was to learn about this history and how she viewed education in her younger years. The oral histories capture how she describes knowledge acquisition in her childhood and adolescence including how she considers it now in relation to her identity. In these interviews, my mother shared what she remembered of how she learned, as well as how she taught, and in what conditions. She also shares the language of education, identity, and knowledge in and around her household growing up and later, in her places of work.

Throughout the process of collecting my mother’s oral histories, I’ve been drawn to thinking in expansive ways about what the stories of loved ones can offer, keeping in mind that how the narrator approaches the interview can affect the outcome. For instance, the narrator might wish to present a particular self if the expectation is a formal interview that a large audience will have access to, so it was very important to me to be transparent about my aims and to make my mother feel comfortable. I wanted the interviews to be a collaboration between mother and daughter. I’ve been deeply

moved by Christina Sharpe's "beauty as a method" in thinking of my approach as the interviewer, especially in how I motivate my work and engage what the narrator shares. That the work of Sharpe's book *Ordinary Notes* was a tribute to Sharpe's mother also resonated with me as I set out to document parts of my own mother's history. Sharpe's concept of "beauty as a method" offers a thoughtful approach to matters on Black interiority with attention to beauty as a tool. In *Ordinary Notes*, Sharpe writes "I've been revisiting what beauty as a method might mean or do: what it might break open, rupture, make possible, and make impossible. How we might carry beauty's knowledge with us and make new worlds" (Sharpe, 147). Specifically the idea to "carry beauty's knowledge with us and make new worlds" prompts for me a way into the oral history interview that is prepared to find beauty in even the simple everyday and unexpected things. In a similar vein, in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* by Saidiya Hartman, Hartman writes "Beauty is not a luxury; rather it is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence, an embrace of our terribleness, a transfiguration of the given" (Hartman, 79). Both Hartman and Sharpe offer a redefining of beauty extending its possibilities to the radical and transformative. Their approaches helped me to frame the environment I wished to create with my mother, offering a new way to access her memories, where even the tougher parts of the history she shared could find a safe space to share. I saw the interviews as a place of possibility.

I wondered what it could be like to use this lens as an intentional approach to the interviews. Putting this into practice, my intentional approach meant having multiple talks with my mother on the scope of the project to prepare her to be interviewed and frame our work together as a collaboration. Since being interviewed wasn't something she'd done before, I made sure to talk with her about the practice itself and the field of oral history. I also spoke with her about the kinds of questions I planned to ask and checked in with her on whether she had any reservations. As a result of our talks, my project design evolved from the first iteration in early fall 2024 to spring 2025, primarily as a result of continuous engagement with my narrator, my mother. Through conversations with my mom prior to our oral history interviews, I decided on a specific focus on her learning and teaching. My mother expressed appreciation for this focus as it's a subject she cares deeply about.

My mother's excitement about the kinds of questions I planned to ask became clear at one point in one of our interviews when after a few seconds of pause she asked "Do you want me to share about the first 10 years of my educational journey"? This caught me a

bit off guard as I'd left some silence in case there was more she wanted to share in response to the previous question, but this also signaled to me that she was comfortable with the aims of the interview and eager to share.

In planning for my first interview with my mother, it was helpful to review questions featured in "Women Who Change the World". As noted in the introduction, "While there is no one correct way to conduct oral history, there are some core values. Open-ended questioning that centers and honors the reminiscences of a narrator is primary. Posing open-ended questions, an oral historian creates space for the narrator to share their memories and interpretation of events, thereby complicating and contextualizing the past and filling gaps in the historical record" (Lewis, 3). Importantly, there is an emphasis here on creating space for the narrator to do the necessary memory work of the oral history interview. Additionally, I found Studs Terkel and Tony Parker's "Interviewing the Interviewer" and Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack's "Learning to Listen" to be helpful readings as I worked on my style of asking questions. It was interesting to learn more about Terkel's approach that always seemed to me to come from a place of genuine curiosity. This is something I am intentional about in my own practice, leaning into curiosity and interest in my narrator. In "Learning to Listen," I found it helpful that the authors suggest questions that can help to "sharpen our attentiveness to the interactive practice of the interview" and also offer prompts of reflection for narrators when listening to themselves. Ex. "Try not to cut the narrator off to steer her to what our concerns are" (Anderson and Jack, 141). An important part of the prompts they offer focuses on developing a self awareness around asking and listening. Reflecting on each interview with my mother helped me to study myself as a listener and deepen my oral history practice. After each interview with my mom, when replaying the interviews, I'd make note of anything I'd do differently next time or what seemed to work well. For instance, in one of our interviews my mom started singing as she remembered a song from her childhood by Harry Belafonte. This moment made me laugh a bit because I also remembered the song from my own childhood in Jamaica. In the moment I wondered if my laughter may have been distracting, but in listening back, it seemed a genuine moment of connection and appreciation between mother and daughter. I also realized that the loudness of my laughter was exaggerated in my mind as listening back to the audio, it was much more subtle.

As the work of collecting the oral histories was collaborative, it was important to me that I paid close attention to where the questions I asked my mother led her and in practicing "beauty as method," I found myself actively working to make space for her to linger in her recalling of everyday memories where my initial impulse may have been to rush to another question. I actively practiced exhibiting listening with care and this would lead to my mother talking at length about her experiences. I found that my mother's answers

to my questions were generative in ways I had not expected and this came about when given the space to share freely.

My hope was to create space for my mother to look to the past as I listened from a place of interest as her daughter. As we live many hours away from one another, many of our interviews took place on the phone, and the act of the interview itself made space for a new way to connect across the miles. The steps for these phone interviews would typically be to chat before the interview, primarily about our days, and I'd then check in on whether she was still feeling up to being interviewed. We'd usually then go over the goals of the project. As part of my practice, I made sure to inform her that if she shared something in the interview that she felt uncomfortable having on record, she could let me know and I'd remove it. This, I think, helped her to feel more comfortable with the interview process. After the interview, we'd usually talk again casually and sometimes she'd reminisce further about something she'd said in the interview. These interactions after the interviews confirmed for me how important making space to listen is, not only in the confines of the interview, but as a part of an ongoing practice that oral history methods can teach. In providing a space where I could ask my mom about her life and document her experiences, it seemed to invite a strengthening of our bond. As generous as my mom was in sharing during the interviews, I was often amazed at how much she would often elaborate afterwards. While my role as daughter always remained, it was important to me to employ the research and training I'd had towards learning best practices for oral history interviews, specifically aiming to not turn them into something I wanted them to be, perhaps by interjecting to keep things on a particular track. By keeping "beauty as a method" in mind, I leaned further into how care can be taken with materials, with histories.

In "Interviewing the Interviewer," Studs Terkel highlights the value of uncovering narratives that we may not otherwise hear. He asks, "What was it like to be a person then? What's it like to be a certain person now? That's what I'm trying to capture. I'm looking for the uniqueness in each person. And I'm looking for some such abstraction as the truth, because it doesn't exist. What I'm looking for is what is the truth for *them*" (Parker, Terkel, 125). What the truth is for my mother about her early life became the center of this project. The work of uncovering my mother's truth became more and more important to me as she shared her experiences in the interviews.

From these interviews, I began to understand more about my mother's life, especially her motivations, career aspirations, and familial connections during the time when she was raising me in Jamaica and prior to my birth. My interest in her educational journey became a portal to further understand her life and the choices she'd made. I started to understand just how different her life had been before becoming a mother. Truthfully, these were years of her life that I hadn't considered much before. And perhaps, having children of my own now makes me more cognizant, recognizing the physical and emotional shifts that come about in motherhood. In my creative practice as a poet, I'd noticed that many of the poems I'd been writing had a strong maternal presence in them and I began seeing that oral history could further my work and thinking on how we can come to more completely know another, especially one we hold dear.

Additionally, collecting these oral histories has helped me to learn about my mother's childhood and adolescent years in particularly important contexts that also teach about what it was like for her in Jamaica during the time period of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. In one instance in an interview, for example, my mother details some of her experience of Jamaica during the time that the country gained independence in 1962.

Through interviewing my mother and listening back to her stories, I learned more about her than I imagined. The process helped me to put myself in her shoes as best as I could. I saw her as a little girl, as a teenager, as a young adult, all through listening intently to her stories. Details she shared such as taking the bus to the market in Black River, Jamaica to get fish for her mother gave me such a vivid image of her as a child wanting to help her family. Transcribing her words helped me to pay closer attention to the meaning of what she'd said. At times, just the way she would say a word or how she would phrase a sentence would signal something to me that I missed previously. In this way, the oral histories helped to extend space for more listening and learning.

In interviewing my mom, there are some things I realize that remain a mystery to me but, I don't think this is necessarily a result of anything intentional on her part, though she may have truths she wishes not to share with her daughter. There are some things I avoided asking due to our previous conversations and my own prior knowledge of certain family dynamics. This, I think, is part of the negotiation when interviewing a close family member. Sometimes, I found myself setting boundaries based on my own knowledge of a time period or situation. I felt that establishing these boundaries was

important for both of us. In this way, I think there is mystery in how re-focusing a particularly tense subject might fare within the oral history interview format. For me, it was important that our interviews were grounded in something about her life that I was genuinely curious about, that had clear influences in my adult life, and that I knew she'd be comfortable talking about; education was an ideal entry point into these interviews for us. The focus of education allowed for other important aspects of my mother's life to come through with an established foundation within a space she was already comfortable with.

### **Reflections on Part 2:**

- Audio from oral histories collected for this project have not been made available to the public as this is a family project. My mother's oral histories collected for this project will be of great value to our family, the current audience for the audio component of the project.
- An intervention that we are making with this oral history is that my mother's words are recorded and there is a document that we can listen to and that she can return to.
- My archiving plan is to keep the recordings in our family. As I shared in my Draft Archiving Plan submitted during the Fieldwork course: In "Archiving Oral History," from the Oral History Association's Principles and Best Practices, it is highlighted that "Every effort should be made to ensure oral history materials are adequately stored, processed, maintained, and made accessible according to archival standards and best practices" (Oral History Association). This is a good reminder of the importance of taking care with how materials are stored so that they might have a long life. For this work, the plan is that the interviews for this project will be stored in family archives on a SD card and backed up on an external hard drive. Having multiple copies of the material will help to ensure that those in the family who desire access will be able to have it (Draft Archival Plan).

### Part 3.

#### Poetry Inspired by considerations of maternal lineage

During the process of documenting my mother's oral histories, I've also been finding it useful to think about how my work as a poet can be further inspired through my experiences interviewing my narrator. As a result, I've found myself returning to the many poems I've written over the years that speak in some way about maternal lineage.

What follows are poems I've written inspired by the mothers in my life. I've also included reflections after each poem drawing a connection between the meaning of the poems and their relevance to this larger project.

#### on maternal lineage: *poems by Tejan Green Waszak*

##### Louise

My grandmother is humming,  
 a slow haunting melody  
 invading the silence,  
 conjuring up images  
 of a sweet by and by,  
 weaving another life with her eyes  
 though they be fixed on the path  
 from house to road.  
 I wait for the tune to end, but she begins again—  
 this time with words,  
 her voice steady and low,  
 in the sweet by and by.  
 I see her now. Child,  
 teenager, young woman  
 spilling voice into the world.  
 For me, she is and has always been.  
 And all the wisdom she wishes to share  
 comes to me in song.

**Reflection on poem:**

The word that comes to mind for me first is *observation* and then *listening*. There are layers of observation that occur for me in this poem. I see myself observing my grandmother through memory's eye. The poem begins by focusing on the orality of songs and the wisdom that they can transmit to the listener.

The poem calls for attention to the importance of listening, something that is central to oral history practice and knowledge transmission. As the poem carries on, readers can follow how the act of listening is deepened to consider the rise and fall in voice. When we arrive at "I see her now" we might think about how listening closely can help to see someone anew.

**Presence of Past**

Full of belief in roots and word,  
 a blanket to comfort the child  
 in the way my grandmother says  
 we cover our bodies in the blood  
 so we can walk with ambition.  
 It is already yours, she says.  
 Such is the house she built  
 spinning webs into the air  
 from nothing. This,  
 a wild imagination.  
 Miracle, like heartbeat,  
 summoned through ritual.

**Reflection on poem:**

This poem is a rumination on the dominant way I see my maternal grandmother in my memory, her words transmitting wisdom. In a similar way, the oral history interviews with my mother give an opportunity for transmitting wisdom, except, what I write of my grandmother is from memory and what I have through my mother's oral history interviews can live on through her voice and spoken words in the way she's shared them.

The roots in the poem refer to my grandmother's love of herbal remedies and the healing properties of plants while the word is scripture, a biblical reference. "The blood" is also a biblical reference signaling her belief in gaining strength and confidence through Jesus. The webs are her words and wisdom that I saw as being produced even when there may have seemed little to be inspired by. In the oral history interviews with my mother, there are a few points where there is a similar theme of making something from minimal means. This makes me think of how resilience and strength gets passed down and reminds me that in our oral history interviews these attributes present themselves through experiences shared by my mother.

#### **Part 4:**

Poem inspired by my mother's oral histories  
(a reading of this poem appears in the audio/visual component of the thesis, recited over a visual—a picture taken of a plant in my mother's garden)

#### **Growth and Nurturing**

For as long as I can remember,  
my mother has kept a garden,  
has loved flowers, has been invested  
in the growing and tending of them.

Her guidance is seeding, watering, fertilizing.  
Nothing is casual, or left up to chance,  
if she can help it, though she can't always help it.  
It is collaboration, nurture and nature.

Relinquish control, there is no option.

In the same way I've seen her keep up with her garden,  
I've now realized she's been tending to a garden her entire life.  
A seeding, watering, fertilizing,  
helping nature along its way.

## Part 5: Reflection: Exhibit

Towards this project, I had several interviews with my mother centering a few central themes relating to her youth and upbringing. Relatedly, for my spring 2025 exhibit, “Scrapbooking: Memories in my Mother’s Garden,” I worked from the inspiration of the importance and meaning of the forms of poetry, photographs, art, spiritual and inspirational texts that I’d grown up having in my peripheral view. Before my oral history interviews with my mother and creating this exhibit, I’d not deeply considered much of these artifacts. I wanted this exhibit to put into focus what I’d only casually noticed in childhood, recognizing how these artifacts had been important to my mother’s life. I wanted to center these gifts from my mother as the material objects I engaged in the exhibit. I labeled the items featured as “gifts from my mother,” not because she gave them to me in this formal way, but because what I learned about her from interacting with each item felt like a gift in what it was teaching me. These gifts included messages and pictures she’d sent me and which I had her approval to share.

One art piece featured in the exhibit and made by my mother when she was in her 40’s, was an embroidered work featuring colorful flowers and a message in black on a brown burlap backdrop that says “When Life Gives You Lemons, Make Lemonade”. I’d recalled that at one point this embroidered piece was taped to the back of a door in the apartment where we lived when I was a pre-teen. I don’t remember paying it much mind, but then I came across a picture of it in adulthood and it brought back the memory of its placement in my childhood. In adulthood I appreciated this as something my mother had made that meant something to her enough to have on display and it became something that signaled to me how messages displayed around us can have a lasting impact. Not only was this a message for her, it was a message for me and all who would encounter it.

In putting together the exhibit, it came to mind that over the course of the past few years, I’d been writing poetry about my maternal lineage. I thought it fitting that a component of this curation could include some of those poems as visuals and audio. This would help to show how my considerations of my mother were connected to my considerations of how she was mothered and how I am viewing mothering as a mother myself.

The primary audience for the end project of my exhibit was my family, but I also wanted to have sections that were meant to engage an open audience. The result was a website with different pages, some private (with family access), some public, featuring: creative contributions from my mother, family pictures, a link to join family Zoom sessions, poems my mom had written, and poems that I'd written centering her and my grandmother. Pages of the exhibit that were private were made so based on what my mother was comfortable sharing and if the material featured was intended for family. The website also included an interactive component where visitors could leave memories for the scrapbook. The prompt for entries from visitors to the site read: "A welcome space for any memory you wish to share that is inspired by rumination on maternal lineage and uncovering more of the histories of the women who've helped to shape us. All visitors to the site are invited to share. Your message will not be made public on the site unless you indicate otherwise. Thank you" ("Scrapbook for Mom").

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