Will You Remember?

What I Choose to Forget?

By Avantika Seth

A methodological statement submitted to the
faculty of Columbia University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Oral History

New York, New York

January 2026

ABSTRACT

Will You Remember What I Choose to Forget? is a 150 minute oral history documentary film created with my own family across two domestic spaces in Shimla, a small hill town in North India: the old house that held three generations of our family and the new house we moved into in 2020. Tracing memory, silence, and intergenerational care, what began as a series of structured life-history interviews quickly revealed that established oral history guidelines premised on distance, neutrality, and pre-defined ethical protocols could not account for the emotional, relational, and spatial realities of doing oral history within one's own home. This paper argues that family oral history is not a subset of oral history practice but a distinct field of inquiry: one that requires its own ethical, methodological, and aesthetic framework.

Filming inside my family exposed methodological demands that only surfaced in practice: emotional thresholds that emerged in the act of remembering; truths spoken for the first time in front of the camera; consent that needed to be ongoing, negotiated, and collective; and an entanglement of authority that resisted the ideal of "shared" authorship. Central to this process was the role of the cinematographer, whose presence as a third-body witness, a stranger inside the intimate field of family memory, created space, absorbed tension, and enabled disclosures that would not have been possible in his absence.

Using spatial filmmaking, embodied listening, and an attention to ritual and silence, the project develops a methodological vocabulary for family oral history: one that considers

architecture as witness, silence as presence, the outsider as stabilizing force, and emotional circulation as a narrative method. The film demonstrates how memory, care, and unresolved histories travel across rooms, bodies, and generations, and how the interviewer's own positionality becomes inseparable from the field itself. It ultimately functions as a temporal and relational archive: one that records how memory is inhabited rather than explained, and how listening itself becomes the primary method through which meaning is made.

This paper traces the decisions and ruptures that shaped the project and argues that family oral history constitutes its own terrain, demanding methods that arise through vulnerability, proximity, and relational negotiation. It offers a framework that expands what oral history can ask, do, and hold.

Project Overview

Filmed over twelve days in January 2025 with cinematographer Tathagata Mukherjee, the project began as an attempt to record structured life-history interviews but quickly revealed itself as something more: an inquiry into what becomes possible, and what becomes ethically and methodologically complex, when oral history is practiced inside one's own family.

This film unfolds inside the two homes that shaped us and continue to shape our family. My grandfather built the old house in Shimla, where my father grew up, where my

mother moved after marriage, and where my brother and I were raised. Its rooms, objects, and silences formed the emotional architecture of our lives. In 2020, we moved to a new house a short distance away: a space that carries no inherited memory, only present-day rhythms of caregiving, shifting relationships, and an evolving family structure. As both filmmaker and daughter, I returned to these spaces carrying the same histories I was asking my family to revisit. This entanglement was not incidental, it became the method.

The film draws on in-depth interviews with my mother, father, and brother; long observational sequences; and moments where my own body appears as listener, daughter, and a returning witness. I invited each of them to move through the old house's rooms, touch objects, and sit where they once sat, allowing memory to surface through embodied engagement with space as much as through speech. Rather than structuring the film chronologically, I organized it spatially. The old house holds density, silence, and unresolved pasts; the new house holds transformation, play, caregiving, and the ongoingness of life. Together, the two spaces illuminate how families negotiate memory across architecture and time. Butler's insistence on opacity helped me recognize that neither my family nor I could fully anticipate what would surface: ethical relations here did not promise clarity or self-knowledge but revealed the limits of what could be known or prepared for in advance[1]. This opacity was not a failure of method but a defining condition of working inside inherited relationships.

[1]Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005)

As the project unfolded, it became clear that the film was no longer oriented toward recovering a family history or resolving long-held silences. Instead, it became a record of how memory circulates within a family when coherence is neither possible nor demanded. The film does not seek narrative closure, reconciliation, or agreement; it documents the conditions under which people continue living alongside unresolved pasts. What emerged was not a story about a house, but a study of how memory moves through bodies, rooms, gestures, repetitions, and interruptions—often contradicting itself, often resisting articulation.

In this sense, the film became less an act of testimony than an act of sustained listening under constraint. It attends to how care, harm, responsibility, and love coexist without resolution, and how family members negotiate these tensions in real time. Rather than offering answers, the film holds space for contradiction, allowing multiple temporalities and interpretations to remain active at once. Its meaning lies not in what is conclusively revealed, but in what is allowed to remain unsettled, carried forward, and lived with. Ultimately, the film became an archive of relational endurance: not a recovery of the past, but a record of how a family lives with what cannot be resolved, only carried.

Entering the field as a South Asian oral historian trained in Western institutions, I carried methodological assumptions shaped by epistemic traditions not native to my family. Walsh and Mignolo remind us that decoloniality is not merely critique but a reorientation requiring practitioners to interrogate their own positionality and the structures through

which they know and inquire[2]. This process became reckoning with my own positionality. Butler argues that we can only understand and articulate ourselves through the relationships and norms that precede us, and that this process always carries the risk of undoing who we think we are[3]. I was asking my parents and brother to risk that undoing. And I was asking it of myself.

This risk permeated every interview. My mother cried and then apologized. My father broke down and exclaimed, again and again, "*What did you make me remember?*!" in the middle of recounting a painful memory. My brother spoke aloud what he had long kept private.

Mary Louise Contini Gordon's phased model of preparation, interviewing, "textualizing," and archiving, ask researchers to anticipate emotional thresholds through pre-interview questionnaires[4]. I initially tried to follow her model. I drafted a pre-interview questionnaire. I planned a structured preparation call. I designed a consent plan modeled on institutional protocols.

None of this survived first contact with my family.

My family could not anticipate, in a form or checklist, what would feel bearable until we were already deep inside the act of remembering. Gordon's model assumes that

---

[2] Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018)
[3] Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
[4] Mary Louise Contini Gordon, Family Oral History Across the World: Sharing, Remembering, and Preserving Stories of Faith and Life (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022).

emotional risk can be anticipated and managed; my experience revealed that emotional thresholds surfaced during narration, not before it.

This is where my process diverged. Preparation unfolded across late-night calls, caregiving moments, and shared meals, not as a pre-fieldwork stage. The project leaked into WhatsApp messages, transnational phone calls, half-sentences in hospital rooms, and the way my mother hesitated before asking, "*Won't this be too heavy for you?*" Consent was ongoing, shifting with the emotional temperature of each day. Ethical decisions were not governed by documentation but by relational obligation. Fieldwork was not a bound site; it was the atmosphere of family life.

Rather than moving through Gordon's linear steps, I found myself in something closer to what I would now call an ongoing, unstable ecology of listening in which the fieldwork began before any camera was turned on and will continue long after the film is finished. My listening practice was shaped through my training with Nyssa Chow, whose course *Roots and Branches* at OHMA, Columbia University approached listening not as a neutral precursor to analysis, but as an embodied, interpretive practice in itself. Through structured listening exercises, interview analyses, and what Chow describes as listening as a form of spontaneous literature, I learned to attend to hesitation, interruption, rhythm, gesture, and silence as meaningful narrative forms rather than as gaps to be filled[5]. This orientation fundamentally shaped how I listened to my family: not in pursuit of coherence

[5] Nyssa Chow, *Roots and Branches*, course syllabus, Columbia University, Fall 2024.

or resolution, but in attention to what emerged through the body, through space, and through moments when language faltered.

Oral history frameworks and guidelines offer important scaffolding, but they do not account for relational asymmetry, accumulated emotional history, or the embodied nature of family memory[6]. My process required a different vocabulary: its own methodological language, one that accounts for the simultaneity of intimacy and inquiry, authority and vulnerability, silence and speech, ritual and rupture, architecture and affect.

This process paper documents how and why I made the film. It traces the decisions, ruptures, revisions, risks, and methods that emerged from within the relational ecology of my family. Drawing on decolonial theory, epistemic injustice, and work on care, precarity, performance, and haunting, I argue that family oral history is not simply a subset of oral history practice; it requires its own methodological language and ethical framework. This paper is the narrative of that emergence.

Living inside the fieldwork

I did not begin this documentary film with confidence. I began it with fear. Fear that I would ask the wrong questions. Fear that I would reopen wounds my family had learned to survive. Fear that I was reaching into rooms of our shared past that had been locked for

[6] Oral History Association, *Principles and Best Practices*, October 2009, https://oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2009/

decades. Beneath that fear sat an even quieter one: that the memories I carried, so vivid, so insistent, so shaped by the child I once was, might be the very memories my family had needed to forget.

When my father received his second cancer diagnosis early in 2025, months after a complicated heart valve replacement surgery, the illusion of expansive time collapsed. The future shrank. The past lurched forward. Sharma writes about the non-universality of time; it is distributed differently, and experienced and valued differentially[7], and in the wake of illness, I understood this viscerally. My father's time suddenly felt thin; my mother's heavy; my brother's fragmented; my own accelerated without permission. It was crisis-temporality: a moment in which memory, responsibility, fear, and love converged so sharply that every breath took on a different texture.

It was in this atmosphere that the idea of an oral history film about my own family became unavoidable. I returned to India carrying the urgency of time and the weight of what might soon be lost. And when I walked into the house my grandfather bought, the house where my father was born, where my mother was married, where my brother and I were born, where we lived out our silences, where childhood unfolded in fragments, where conflicts accumulated like dust, I understood instantly that the house had been an archive all along. Derrida argues that political power is deeply connected to who controls the archive, and therefore who shapes how memory is preserved and accessed[8]."

[7] Sarah Sharma, In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
[8] Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Returning to my family's memories was not merely emotional excavation; it was a political reorientation. It was an act of returning interpretive authority to those who had lived without a vocabulary for their own histories. In Gordon's terms, haunting is not memory returning but obligation asserting itself. The structure insisted on being answered.

I did not know what it entailed to make a film about silence. But the more I prepared reading Miranda Fricker on hermeneutical injustice, Andrea Pitts on decolonial praxis, Mihaela Mihai on the aesthetics of care, Avery Gordon on haunting, the more I realized that my family's story could not be approached only through the existing methodological scaffolding of traditional oral history[9].

Fricker writes that hermeneutical injustice occurs when "a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences[10]." That sentence revealed something I had always felt but never had language for: we all "knew," but none of us had the words. Not because we refused to speak, but because we lacked a shared vocabulary to metabolize what we had survived.

From here on, I invite the reader into the interviews themselves—the ruptures and recalibrations, the questions that altered the room, the moments that unsettled my methods, and the insights that emerged only through living inside the fieldwork. The

---

[9] Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 45–58.
[10] Miranda Fricker, Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

fuller content of these interviews has been intentionally withheld, in keeping with my family's privacy and in respect of the intimacy of our shared experiences.

Becoming Witness

Day 00. Before we began filming, we sat together in my parents' bedroom, the air already thick with an anticipation none of us named. My mother, seated on the right side of the bed, was stitching a button back onto one of my shirts, her hands moving with the muscle memory of decades. My father, on the far left, leaned into his pillow playing Sudoku on his phone, the blue light reflecting off his glasses. My brother sat facing them on the grey sofa, one leg tucked beneath him, already half inside the conversation and half outside it. Our dog, Sky, slept curled near the foot of the bed, sensing the quiet charge in the room.

I stood near the foot of the bed, recording the conversation on my phone, trying to explain the idea of the film as gently as I could. Words came slowly, haltingly, as though I was trying to translate something I had not yet fully understood myself. It felt strange, almost intrusive to speak about "the project" while watching my mother thread a needle, while my father tried to reach a new high score, while my brother's eyes darted between us, already wondering what this would ask of him. Every gesture in the room seemed to push against the abstraction of "a film," insisting instead on the weight of the real: the bodies that would speak, the histories that would surface, the past that would ripple into the present the moment a camera entered the house.

This was not a production meeting. It was not preparation. It was not even an explanation. It was something closer to an invitation, one that none of us fully knew how to accept, refuse, or comprehend. And yet, the atmosphere itself felt like consent in its earliest, most fragile form: the willingness to sit together in the same room and let the conversation begin.

Consent, in the context of this project, was never a document. It was a relationship: unstable, shifting, negotiated through gestures, humor, hesitation, and affect rather than through the legal language of research protocols. My father, before asking anything, said, "*Whatever this film demands from me, I will do*." It was such an immediate declaration that it startled me. His availability was not only consent; it was also aspiration, a desire that I make a good film, that I succeed, that he not stand in the way of his daughter's ambition. My mother immediately interrupted him: "*It's not your job to make sure she makes a great film. You don't have to take that pressure.*" And then we laughed, the kind of laughter that emerges precisely when something is too heavy to hold upright.

But laughter was doing something else, too. Avery Gordon reminds us that the seemingly trivial, even the lightest or most ordinary moments can expose the deeper structures of affect and haunting at work beneath the surface[11]. Our laughter was not frivolous; it was a way of metabolizing fear. Laughter softened what we did not yet have language for: dread, anticipation, guilt, love.

---

[11] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, new edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 7–8, 63.

My brother, more cautious and more aware of the things he did not want our parents to know, immediately said: "*I don't want people watching the film, yeah, I mean the people we are talking about—to later hear me*," instantly looking at my father with a big gentle smile. They laughed at this, too but beneath the laughter was a boundary, a warning, a fear. And my mother repeatedly asked, "*But won't this be too heavy for you?*" Her question was not only care for me; it was also fear of what she would have to speak into existence once the camera was present.

And then there was my father's question: "*Why this family*?" followed quickly by "*What is the solution?*" I answered too quickly, "*Because I am part of this family, and it would take me much longer to deeply enter another one.*" He seemed satisfied. I wasn't. Butler writes that we give accounts of ourselves only through norms and relationships that precede us, and that such giving always carries the risk of undoing[12]. What does it mean, then, to ask one's own parents to risk that undoing with their daughter sitting next to the camera?

The ethics of the project became deeply entangled with the very relationships it sought to understand. I had drafted a pre-interview questionnaire modeled on Gordon's phases of family oral history: preparation, interviewing, "textualizing," archiving[13]. I had also prepared a structured phone call, release forms modeled on institutional protocols, and a plan for emotional boundaries. But none of this survived the first moment I watched my mother adjusting her glasses and reading a consent form, or my father signing a line that

[12] Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
[13] Mary Louise Contini Gordon, Family Oral History Across the World: Sharing, Remembering, and Preserving Stories of Faith and Life (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022).

technically gave me permission to use his tears. The discomfort was immediate. It felt unrecognizable, almost violent.

Gordon's framework assumes that emotional thresholds can be anticipated in advance. My family showed me that emotional thresholds surface only in the moment of narration: when my father suddenly broke down mid-sentence, when my mother looked away from the camera, when my brother laughed at precisely the moment silence would have been too much. Consent could not be anticipated; it could only be lived. And consent, once lived, had to be renegotiated again and again. Every morning someone would say, "*Let's see how today feels*." Every evening we quietly retreated into our respective rooms, unsure what had just been opened inside us.

Mihai's writing on the aesthetics of care helped me understand the ethical demand of these moments: care is not procedural; it is attentional, sensory, affective; it is lived through attention, sensory awareness, and affective attunement[14]. This project taught me that consent in family oral history is not a protocol but an aesthetic, a constant attunement to the fragility of the moment, to the tremor in someone's voice, to the way a breath becomes shallower before the story breaks open.

At the same time, I could not escape a quieter, more unsettling question: Was this project truly for my family? Or was it, in some way, for me? What happens when the oral historian feels conflicted about the purpose of a family history project? Is it to break

[14] Mihaela Mihai, Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

silence? To seek closure? To understand asymmetry? And what happens when the project might be, as I feared, more about my need for clarity than their need to speak? Would that be care, or would it be appropriation disguised as tenderness? Was I using their stories for my theoretical advancement? Was this an act of care, or an act of extraction disguised as care? And what does it mean when the oral historian becomes implicated in the very rupture she is trying to document?

These questions haunted me through the entire process. They haunt me still. Because family oral history is never only a method; it is inheritance, intimacy, rupture, and risk.

Pitts argues that decolonial praxis requires a form of self-implication, an acknowledgment that we ourselves are entangled in the very systems and histories we seek to critique[15]. This project forced that recognition relentlessly. I was both witness and cause, daughter and documentarian, healer and disruptor. My presence shaped the narration as much as the questions I asked. The rupture was not only theirs; it was mine.

Whenever someone cried during filming, I found myself saying, "*This is difficult for all of us*." They always nodded. None of us really knew why we were doing this. None of us knew what this would open or whether we were prepared for the consequences. But we kept returning the next day, and the next, and the next.

---

[15] Andrea J. Pitts, "Decolonial Praxis and Epistemic Injustice," in The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice, ed. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (London: Routledge, 2017), 149–57.

Consent, I learned, was not something my family gave me once. It was something they gave me continually in the way they kept showing up, in the way they allowed themselves to be recorded while breaking open, in the way they trusted me to hold their stories with gentleness, and in the way they accepted that I, too, was breaking open in the process.

Consent, in this project, became witnessing. It was not the granting of permission. It was the act of staying.

*

Day 01. Mom enters the house. She instantly opens the thick red golden curtains. "It wasn't always like this." Day 02. Dad enters the house. He instantly opens the thick red golden curtains. "[laughter]." Day 03. Brother enters the house. He instantly opens the thick red golden curtains. "Did the neighbours block our view by constructing their roof?"

Repetition.

Repetition became the first theoretical doorway into this documentary.

What I began witnessing echoed Avery Gordon's reminder that haunting emerges when obscured social structures or unfinished histories become perceptible when they press

into the present and make themselves felt[16]. Their synchronized gestures were not trivial; they were hauntings, evidence of how memory lives in bodies before it is spoken. Each gesture was an index of what the house had held and what it continued to demand from us.

The repetition also illuminated the epistemic conditions Fricker describes as a structural gap in shared interpretive resources, one that shapes how people understand and make sense of their own experiences[17]. My family did not have a shared vocabulary for our past, but their bodies performed a language older than speech, one that preceded explanation, one they each enacted without coordination.

As Medina suggests, it is often through affective or embodied interruptions that hermeneutical gaps announce themselves, revealing knowledge that has been present but unsayable[18]. The repeated opening of the curtains was precisely that: an embodied disruption, revealing memory not as a linear narrative but as patterned behavior.

What I saw in these gestures also resonated with Pink's writing on sensory ethnography, especially her argument that embodied practices carry and communicate experience in ways that often precede verbal narration[19]. And in the slight differences between each repetition: my mother's wistfulness, my father's performative laughter, and my brother's architectural observation, I saw what Mihai describes as care, and how each gesture held

[16] Avery F. Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, new ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
[17] Miranda Fricker, Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[18] José Medina, The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[19] Sarah Pink, Doing Sensory Ethnography, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2015).

a different configuration of care: care for memory, care for self-protection, care for me as the witness[20]. My family did not narrate our history first; they performed it through light, touch, repetition, movement, long before they had words. The curtains, the light, the dust: these were not objects but sensory portals into earlier temporalities.

Repetition became my method. Repetition became my first theory. Repetition became my witness.

It marked the beginning of this project, and the beginning of my own becoming as a witness inside it, in the sense that Nelson describes: witnessing as a relational, embodied practice shaped by mutual vulnerability[21].

*

Day 02. Just as we were about to begin the interview, my brother sat on the diwan (sofa-bed) in the living room and said quietly but without hesitation: "disaster house." Day 03. My mother entered the interview talking about how we abandoned the house. "We also need to take care of it or else it will die." Day 03. My father sat on the sofa of our current family house, and while we were still putting the mic on him, his first sentence was, "I'm so glad we moved out, there was nothing in that house."

Three beginnings, three recognitions, three orientations toward the same structure. What struck me was not simply what they said, but how they spoke to the house as if it were a

[20] Mihaela Mihai, Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).
[21] Maggie Nelson, The Argonauts (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015).

being that had been waiting for acknowledgment. My brother's "*disaster house*," my mother's "*we abandoned it*," my father's "*there was nothing in that house*", each was a naming that carried its own emotional genealogy. It was as if the house had been addressed, accused, defended, mourned, and relieved of responsibility all within the first three minutes of filming.

What I began hearing in these early utterances echoed Avery Gordon's reminder that haunting becomes perceptible when "a structure becomes audible,"[1] when the social forces that once receded into the background begin to make themselves felt in the present[22]. The house was not a backdrop. It was a repository of our unprocessed history, of fights and silences and laughter and illness and longing. The moment each of them entered, the house made itself felt, not as architecture, but as an active interlocutor.

My brother's "*disaster house*" was not just a description; it was an inheritance. It was the aftermath of what he lived but could not fully articulate, a shorthand for a childhood marked by precarity, tension, and the unpredictability that Marrujo suggests shapes the embodied narratives of young people who grow up inside unstable spaces[23]. My mother's "*we also need to take care of it*" reflected the gendered relationality of care work that Mihai describes as an affective, ongoing responsibility that binds us to memory even when what is being cared for is resistant, fraught, or painful.[24]. And my father's clipped

---

[22] Avery F. Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, new ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
[23] Olivia Ruiz Marrujo, "The Gender of Risk: Sexual Violence against Undocumented Women," in A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration, ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).
[24] Mihaela Mihai, Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

dismissal, "*there was nothing in that house*" was the most haunted sentence of all. It was a negation that only made sense if there had once been too much in that house.

As we began filming, I noticed a shift: they were no longer speaking about the house; they were speaking with it. They paused at doorways, lingered near drawers, played with the broken almirah handles, and revisited the kitchen counter and small corners as if reactivating a dormant map of memories. "*Look what I found? Your Ray-Ban glasses are here.*" "*This is your grandmother's will*." "*I used to hide and smoke here.*" "*These walls must be tired of what all they heard*." Their bodies narrated faster than their words. Every gesture was a trail marker.

In my family, the sensory archive was not abstract. It was the way my father's fingertips grazed the wooden cabinets. It was my mother's abrupt stop in the corridor, her breath catching before a memory surfaced. It was my brother smirking at the broken cabinet mirror, "*this house has always been the same."*

In family oral history, this sensory archive acts as a parallel epistemic system, one that surfaces before speech, shaping and sometimes overriding what can be said. It is here that the limits of traditional oral history methodology become most apparent[25]. The "fieldwork" did not exist apart from our bodies; it was our bodies, our spatial memories, our relational asymmetries.

---

[25] Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014

What became unmistakable in these moments was the presence of hermeneutical gaps. Fricker's "gaps in collective interpretive resources" that prevent people from fully making sense of their own experiences[26]. My family did not share a common vocabulary for our past, not because the past was unknowable but because the language to name it had never been cultivated. Instead, they narrated through repetition, gesture, spatial orientation, and the affective weight of the house.

The house itself mediated these hermeneutical gaps. Medina describes how affective or embodied disruptions can create moments of "epistemic friction" that surface otherwise unarticulated or submerged forms of knowledge.[27]. The house created these disruptions: the sudden shift of light in the kitchen; the sound of dogs barking outside; the smell of dampness; the heaviness of a locked door. Memory emerged not as linear narrative but as atmospheric disturbance.

This was also when I began to understand what Mihai describes as an aesthetics of care, one that is intertwined with complicity, where responsibility, attentiveness, and affective ties can bind us even to painful or ambivalent histories[28]." Their memories were not neutral. They carried guilt, pride, shame, tenderness, and protection. Each person was caring for the house while also complicit in its abandonment. Each person was caring for

---

[26] Miranda Fricker, Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[27] José Medina, The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[28] Mihaela Mihai, Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

me while also complicit in the silences I had inherited. And I, too, was caring for them while complicit in asking them to return to a site of unresolved pain.

Through their gestures, their stoppages, their contradictory statements ("*There was nothing in that house*" / "*The house has seen a lot*"), I saw precisely what Butler names when she writes that "the very relations that condition the possibility of giving an account also introduce opacity and complication into that account."[29]. No one could give a coherent narrative because the house held too much. The house resisted coherence.

And then something even more unexpected occurred: they began giving us tours. Not guided tours, but emotional cartographies. My father walked us through the house in the order of who had died there. My mother walked us through the house in the order of whom she had loved there. My brother walked us through the house in the order of where he had hidden, withdrawn, or protected himself. Each tour had a different architecture.

The house asked something different of each of us.

This is when I understood that the house had become a character, not metaphorically, but structurally. It was a site of accumulated memory, saturated silence, and layered temporalities. It held the genealogies we had not spoken, the violences we normalized, the joys we forgot to name, and the fractures that shaped us.

The house was speaking. And we were, perhaps for the first time, learning how to listen.

---

[29] Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

*

Day 04. Camera set up. Mic clipped in. My father and I were standing at a careful distance from the lens, performing a choreography we did not yet understand. He began narrating his childhood in this room. I had not asked a single question. His voice moved through the timeline of his early years and, the moment he reached the memory of his mother and their last meeting, the rupture arrived. Sudden and slow at once. "She bore a lot," he said, and then he broke down. Violently, helplessly, as though the memory itself had erupted inside him. I froze. And then I didn't. I abandoned the interview, instinctively, impulsively, fearfully. I hugged him because I felt, for one impossible second, that the memory might take him from me. He didn't want to be hugged. He stiffened. But I didn't let go. I was not an oral historian at that moment. I was a daughter tightening grip on her father. I handed him water and forced him to gulp it down. He said he was fine. Then he walked out of the room, past the weight of what had just happened, and asked the cinematographer, lightly, jokingly, whether the film was coming fine. Day 05. My mother looked at me crying in between her interview. "Beta (love), it is just a vent out, don't worry, okay?" Day 06. My brother paused mid-interview, stared at me for a long moment, and asked, "Why are you worrying so much?"

This was the moment the project revealed itself: the roles inside our family did not blur, they collapsed.

Traditional oral history frameworks assume a certain symmetry between interviewer and narrator, a negotiated balance of authority and vulnerability[30]. But within families, that symmetry is impossible. The interviewer is already the daughter. The narrator is already the parent. The "field site" is already a home. And memory, instead of being a shared enterprise, becomes a circulation of inherited obligations.

What unfolded in these interviews mirrored what Butler argues: that giving an account of oneself always occurs through norms and relationships that precede the self[31]. In my case, the account emerged through the very relational grammar I thought I could momentarily suspend. I could not. No one can. The moment the camera turned on, I felt myself toggling between roles: oral historian, daughter, caregiver, provocateur, chronicler, child witness, and none of these roles sat still.

My training has taught me to maintain distance, to allow silence, to avoid performative empathy. But when my father's voice cracked, distance felt like betrayal. When my mother broke down, I instinctively reached for her hand. When my brother confessed how deeply the house had shaped him, I found myself crying in ways that were not methodological but ancestral.

As Shopes notes, "sharing authority" is never an equal partnership but a negotiated relationship shaped by power, context, and the purposes of the interview[32]. In family oral history, shared authority becomes something else entirely: entangled authority. The power

---

[30] Valerie Raleigh Yow, Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).
[31] Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
[32] Linda Shopes, "Sharing Authority," The Oral History Review 30, no. 1 (2003): 103–110.

to narrate moves across bodies, across glances, across pauses. My father expected me to guide him "*back into positivity*," as I had done since childhood. My mother oscillated between wanting to comfort me and wanting to protect herself from what she might reveal. My brother, in the middle of an interview, assumed the role of the older sibling, asking why I was taking everything so heavily.

Authority, in these moments, was not symmetrical. It was relational.

Mihai's work on the aesthetics of care helped me understand what was happening: care is not simply kindness but a relational and political responsibility that shapes what can be spoken, how it is spoken, and by whom[33]. My family cared for me through their breakdowns. They worried about my emotional safety even while I was supposed to be the one holding the space. Their care complicated the narrative and complicated my method.

This collapse of roles also revealed what Avery Gordon calls *complex personhood* — the understanding that people cannot be reduced to a single role or identity, that they are never simply victims or perpetrators, parents or children, but often all of these at once[34]. My father was both narrator and father, both the one speaking and the one seeking my reassurance. My mother was both the one remembering and the one anticipating my reaction to her remembering. My brother was both the eldest and, at many moments, the emotional stabilizer.

---

[33] Mihaela Mihai, Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).
[34] Avery F. Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, new ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

Every time someone cried, I found myself instinctively saying, "*This is difficult for all of us.*" It was not a methodological move. It was a confession. And every time, they nodded, not as participants acknowledging a researcher, but as a family living its unspoken grief.

This collapsing of roles also exposed the ethical precarity of the project. Walsh and Mignolo remind us that decolonial work demands continuous self-implication — a willingness to interrogate one's own investments, desires for mastery, and attachments to purity[35]. My desire to "*do this right*" came from years of training in institutional ethics, which often prioritize procedural clarity over relational complexity. But nothing about this project was clear. The ethics were not procedural; they were embodied, shifting, unstable.

I became implicated in every wound that surfaced. I was not simply documenting trauma; I was part of its ecology. I could not ask my father a question without remembering the child who once watched him silently cracking under the weight of his own expectations. I could not ask my mother about her loneliness without remembering the moments I had been with her through it. I could not ask my brother about anger without recognizing how much of that anger had been directed at him because of me.

This collapse, this entanglement, was not methodological failure. It was the method.

Pitts argues that decolonial praxis requires self-implication rather than distance, an acknowledgment that we remain entangled in the very relations and structures we seek to

[35] Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo, On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

critique[36]. In this project, self-implication was not optional; it was the condition of possibility. Every question I asked revealed more about me than I anticipated. Every answer they gave revealed the relational asymmetries I had inherited without noticing.

And through all of it, the camera recorded, not as a neutral witness but as a third presence shaping the dynamic. At times, my family spoke to the camera, using it as an intermediary they felt safer with than me. At times, they spoke around it, pretending it was not there. And at times, they spoke through it, addressing their future selves, my future self, a future audience that might never exist. In those moments, the camera felt like a mediator, a confessional, a mirror, and a rupture.

Roles collapsed. And inside that collapse, a new methodological language began to emerge: one that acknowledged the impossibility of neutrality, the entanglement of care and complicity, and the inevitability of being undone by one's own family story.

*

Day 01. My father laughs when he first sees the camera. He is eating lunch with his hands, and the moment he notices the lens, he freezes mid-bite, suddenly conscious of being observed. Day 01. My mother, noticing the camera but more attuned to care than performance, asks the cinematographer whether he ate lunch before going to the old house, what he wants for dinner, whether he likes the way she cooked the curry last night.

[36] Andrea J. Pitts, "Decolonial Praxis and Epistemic Injustice," in The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice, ed. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (London: Routledge, 2017), 149–57.

Day 01. My brother asks the cinematographer what projects he has worked on, how his camera functions, how much it weighs. He is impressed by the device before he is intimidated by it. Day 01. My two-year-old nephew tries to fight Sky, our three-year-old dog, determined to get the cinematographer's attention. My nephew keeps touching the camera lens, tiny fingerprints forming a new layer of texture on the optical surface. My sister-in-law hovers with an inquisitive half-smile, not intervening, observing the camera as it observes us. Day 04. My father breaks down sharply, uncontrollably, looking not at me but directly at the cinematographer, his tears addressed to the one body not bound to him by history. Day 06. My mother, deep in her interview, says, "I got my son back," and then silence fills the room for nearly three minutes. She sobs, wipes her face, then turns to the cinematographer and asks him to hand her the object she had been talking about. Day 07. My brother pauses mid-sentence and turns to me. "Isn't this right? There's no redemption. What has been done affects someone for the rest of their lives." Before I can respond, he shifts his gaze to the cinematographer and asks, "Don't you think?" Day 09. No one in my family intervenes when my nephew touches the lens or when the dog licks the camera.

What unfolded in those days was not simply documentation; it was the slow emergence of a third-body witness inside the ecology of our family. The camera was the first intrusion, but the cinematographer, Tathagata, became the actual axis around which testimony began to rotate. His presence altered the geometry of the room, the temperature of the silence, the direction of each gaze.

In family oral history, the listener is rarely neutral. The daughter carries history; the daughter carries implication. But the cinematographer carried none of that. He arrived without lineage, without memory, without inherited wounds. And because he was unburdened, he became the one to whom my family could speak without fear of hurting, disappointing, or destabilizing me.

Butler reminds us that giving an account of oneself is never a solitary act; it is always mediated through another who makes that account possible[37]. In these interviews, my family often chose him as the one who could bear their accounts. Their voices routed toward him when they needed distance from me. Their silences were steadier when held by someone who had no stake in their past.

This triangulation created a different kind of relational space. Memory traveled obliquely before traveling directly. When my father broke down on Day 04, his tears were not directed toward his daughter; they were addressed to the only person in the room who could receive them without collapsing. When my brother asked, "*Don't you think?*" he was not asking for validation from his sister; he was asking the witness who had not lived inside our fractures. My mother handed him objects mid-interview not because she needed logistical help, but because she trusted the neutrality of his touch.

Avery Gordon writes that haunting becomes perceptible "when a structure becomes audible," when what is usually unseen or unspoken begins to make itself felt in the

[37] Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

present[38]. The structure that became audible in these moments was not only familial history but also the architecture of witnessing itself. The cinematographer's presence reorganized the flow of emotion, rerouted confession, dispersed intensity, and allowed memories to surface that might have remained restrained if spoken only to me alone.

Over the days, he moved quietly, deliberately, sensing the weight in the room. He wore socks only during interviews so the sound of his movement would not fracture the moment. He learned the rhythms of my family, the way my mother's voice dipped when she approached certain memories, the way my father inhaled sharply before speaking about his mother, the way my brother paced mentally before articulating a fragment of truth. And my family learned him too: his silences, his small nods, the way he adjusted the camera in response to their breathing.

Pink's writing on sensory ethnography helped articulate what I was witnessing: how embodied sensory practices constitute experience and produce ways of knowing long before any verbal narrative begins[39]. My family's gestures toward him, the handing over of objects, the invitations into rooms, the jokes, the hesitation, created a parallel sensory archive that informed the verbal one. The third-body witness was not only recording the archive; he had become part of it.

Medina's work on epistemic friction also became newly legible. He argues that certain bodies can create forms of epistemic and affective disruption that make hidden or

---

[38] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, new ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.
[39] Sarah Pink, Doing Sensory Ethnography, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2015).

inaccessible knowledge suddenly perceptible[40]. The cinematographer, as a stranger, produced precisely that kind of epistemic friction. His presence disrupted habitual family roles, allowing my parents and brother to disclose differently, more freely, and sometimes more truthfully than they could with me alone.

By Day 12, he was no longer a visitor; he had been absorbed into the house's memory-work. My nephew's hands on the lens, Sky licking the camera, my mother offering him chai, my father asking whether the film was coming along; all of this marked a quiet acceptance: he had become witness, participant, mediator, and container.

Family oral history often assumes a dyad: interviewer and narrator. But this project revealed that in certain constellations, especially within families marked by silence, asymmetry, and emotional inheritance, a two-body structure is insufficient. A third witness is not an addition; it becomes a way of possibility. It distributes emotional weight. It allows the daughter to step back. It gives the narrator someone to lean on. It enables the story to emerge without collapsing the ones telling it.

The cinematographer did not merely document the memory-work; he made it possible. He became the third body through which the family could speak differently.

*

[40] José Medina, The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Day 03. My mother paused the interview because "chai ka time ho gaya." [It's tea time.] Day 04. My father asked the cinematographer, mid-breakdown, "Chai loge?" [Will you have some tea?] Day 05. My brother walked out of his interview towards the kitchen and asked, "Did you get some chai?" Day 07. My sister-in-law made masala chai every evening we got together. Day 09. My nephew dipped his cookie deep into my father's cup, the biscuit breaking, sinking, dissolving, becoming a memory in real time.

Tea slipped into the film the way memory slips into the body: without announcement, without ceremony, without permission. It was not planned. It was not part of any crafted sequence. And yet it became the project's most stabilizing ritual: an anchor, a pause, a recalibration, a way for us to return to breath.

What surprised me most was how often tea appeared exactly when memory became unbearable. Every time a story cracked open too sharply, every time a silence grew too thick, someone, not always the same person, would say, "*Chai hai?*" [Do we have tea?] The offer was never simply tea. It was a soft call back into the present. A reminder that the body needed tending if the memory was to be carried any further.

Avery Gordon reminds us that haunting is often registered not in grand revelations but in "disturbances in the everyday," the subtle disruptions through which unresolved histories make themselves felt.[41] Tea was that disturbance. It was the everyday ritual through which the house spoke, through which the body asked for reprieve, through which the family told me, gently, that certain memories could only be approached in intervals.

---

[41] Avery F. Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, new ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

Mihai's writing on the aesthetics of care sharpened this understanding. She argues that care often appears in gestures that seem peripheral but are, in fact, structuring: the bowl of cut fruit during grief, the rearranging of blankets, the pause in a story to adjust someone's glasses[42]. Tea, in this project, was that structuring gesture. It did the work that theoretical frameworks often overlook: it restored dignity to moments when memory was too heavy for speech alone.

And yet tea was not merely care. It was also a method.

Tea introduced rhythm into the interviews, an ebb and flow that resembled ceremony more than conversation. Family oral history is rarely linear; it moves in spirals, returns, ruptures, pauses. Tea became the hinge of these movements. A question asked before chai often received a different answer after it. A breakdown softened. A silence transformed. A memory that seemed unreachable surfaced gently after the first sip.

Through tea, I began to understand something that the traditional oral history framework had not prepared me for: that ritual is not an accessory to method. Ritual is a method, especially in families. Gordon's phased structure assumes preparation, interview, textualization, and archiving as separate stages[43]. But in my family, none of these stages were separable. Tea crossed them all. Tea carried us from preparation into narration, from narration back into safety, from safety back into vulnerability.

---

[42] Mihaela Mihai, Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).
[43] Avery F. Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, new ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

Tea also collapsed roles. During chai, my mother was not an interviewee; she was the center of our home's caregiving axis. My father was not a narrator; he was a host. My brother was not a subject of inquiry; he was a son catching his breath. The cinematographer was no longer a stranger; he was offered the same cup, folded into the household's choreography. I was not the oral historian; I was the daughter whose tea preference everyone already knew.

This collapse is precisely what Judith Butler describes when she writes that ethical relation emerges through the "interruption of the self," through the ways we become undone by the presence and vulnerability of the other[44]. Tea was the interruption. Tea undid us just enough to allow the story to continue.

Ritual softened the methodological boundaries that academia often insists on. It refused the rigidity of a script. It insisted that memory required slowness, warmth, and shared breath. In many ways, tea became the film's editing principle before editing even began: a practice of attunement, of knowing when to continue and when to step back.

Tea became the film's pulse. It timed our return to the narrative. It held us when memory trembled. It kept the house from swallowing us whole. It reminded us we were alive.

And in doing so, tea revealed something essential: that family oral history is not simply spoken into existence. It is brewed. It is stirred. It is shared. It is sipped slowly. It moves at the speed of the body, not the speed of the camera. The interview did not resume after

[44] Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

the tea break. The interview was the tea break. The stories continued in the movement of hands, the clinking of cups, the softening of breath.

The ritual of tea taught me that the archive of a family is not only stored in words. It lives in the rhythms of care, in the repetition of everyday gestures, in the warmth that reenters the body after a memory breaks it open. Tea held the emotional labor of the project. Tea made the film possible.

Tea witnessed us. And through its ritual, we witnessed one another.

*

Day 07. My father, reflecting on his youth and its conflicts, said, almost to himself, "The future is different." Day 04. My sister-in-law entered the old house and said, almost smiling, "He used to speak with me from here when we weren't married." Day 05. My mother said, "I want to spend more time with Aarambh [grandson]. I couldn't spend time with my son growing up." Day 06. My brother said, "I want to be a different father. I want to give him time."

Until these moments, the film had been carried almost entirely by the heaviness of the past: the thick, unmoving time that hung in the old house like humidity. Memory there felt sedimented, accumulated, dense, steeped in silence. Sharma suggests that time is not experienced equally; rather, it is structured and felt differently depending on one's social location and circumstances reminds us that time is never neutral; "distributed differently, experienced differentially, valued differentially," especially in contexts of illness, care,

and precarity[45]. The old house made these differential temporalities unmistakable. My mother moved through it as though every step disturbed something buried. My father moved with the urgency of someone outrunning memory. My brother froze often, suspended between recollection and avoidance. I moved with the fear of someone trying to capture time before it slipped.

This was the temporality of the past, what Avery Gordon names haunting, the moment when "the present becomes thick with other times.[46]" Every room in that house held a temporal residue that shaped how each of us spoke, trembled, paused, and broke open. When my father began singing in memory of his father, the room folded. He was fifteen and sixty-three at once. Time collapsed violently. My mother narrated her memories in the present tense, as if grief had flattened chronology into a single pulsating moment. My brother spoke from the vantage of consequence, time as permanence: what has been done affects someone for the rest of their life.

But every evening when we moved into the new house, the house my family currently lives in, something shifted. The temporal density lifted. The narrative rhythm softened. Sharpe writes about beauty as a method of attention: an ethical way of seeing that insists on attending to lived experience beyond its wounds, refusing to reduce people to their suffering[47]. Beauty entered the film unannounced: my nephew's shrieks as he chased the cinematographer down the hallway, my dog's face pressed against the tripod, my

[45] Sarah Sharma, In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
[46] Avery F. Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, new ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
[47] Christina Sharpe, Ordinary Notes (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023).

sister-in-law's attentive curiosity, the evening ritual of chai, my mother teasing my father for crying too much. These moments were not interruptions. They were the present pushing back against the gravitational pull of the past.

Laughter became a method here too, a release, a shared methodology of survival. Medina writes about "moments of affective and epistemic disruption that make visible what usually remains unnoticed"[48]. Our laughter was not avoidance; it was a way of metabolizing what could not yet be spoken. In the new house, laughter lived easily alongside memory. Beauty and tenderness threaded themselves into interviews without permission. The present insisted on occupying the same frame as the past. Time, here, refused to obey linearity. It allowed for simultaneity: old wounds, current intimacies, mundane routines, unspoken tensions, domestic joys.

And then emerged another temporal layer, one I had not anticipated. The future arrived in the interviews through my nephew, through my sister-in-law, through the small gestures of caregiving that hinted toward a life beyond ours. My father's quiet assertion that "*the future is different*" was fragile but determined, as if he were trying to bring it into being. My sister-in-law's recollection folded a past intimacy into the present and opened a doorway toward a shared future. My mother's desire to spend more time with her grandson carried what Mihai calls "the forward reach of care," an aspiration to repair through the next generation what could not be repaired in her own[49]. My brother's

[48] José Medina, The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[49] Mihaela Mihai, Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

determination to be "*a different father*" was a refusal of repetition, a temporal intervention. Time was not simply being lived; it was being rewritten.

Hartman reminds us that the future can be the only site where the past may be reimagined without reproducing its violence, that imagination is sometimes the only reparative space available when the archive itself is a site of harm[50]. What I witnessed was a family reaching toward that site, tentatively, imperfectly, but with unmistakable clarity. The old house held the density of mourning. The new house held the fragile architecture of living. And threaded through both was a horizon: an imagined otherwise.

In the toys scattered across the living room, in the childhood drawings we found of my brother, in the small hands smudging the camera lens, in the tenderness with which my mother held my nephew, in my brother's effort to leave the room before his son saw him cry, I saw the future acting on the present, not as fantasy but as method. These moments taught me that family oral history does not gather only what has been. It also gathers what might still become. It is a temporal braid: past, present, future coiled together, each pulling at the others, each shaping what the film could hold.

The future entered this project not through optimism but through care. Not through resolution but through reorientation. It became the space where my family could imagine themselves differently, where time could be redistributed, where silence could loosen, where the possibility of repair flickered, even if briefly.

---

[50] Saidiya Hartman, Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

The future was not a conclusion. It was an opening.

*

Day 00. My father is having dinner when I walk in holding a plate of white rice. We both look at the camera at the same moment, just a flicker, a shared acknowledgement before he resumes eating and I step back out of the frame. Day 01. My mother walks me through the old house. I follow her. The camera follows us. Day 03. I stand with my father on the balcony of our old house. He tells me that this was where he used to play alone for hours as a child. "It was a good time," he says. I smile. The camera catches that smile as if it were its own small testimony. Day 04. My brother climbs onto a chair, reaching toward the top of a shelf. He says he once hid a diary up there, something he wrote as a child, then shoved behind the ledge so no one could read it. I switch on my phone's torchlight, holding it up for him. The camera captures us bent toward the same secret, two bodies illuminated by a narrow cone of light.

These moments were never meant to be part of the film. They were not planned, not directed, not framed as scenes. They were simply what happened when the camera witnessed not only my family, but me witnessing them. My hand, my breath, my shadow, my hesitation, they kept slipping into the footage. At first I tried to avoid them. Then I realized avoidance was its own fiction.

Midway through filming, the cinematographer and I made a decision that shifted the ethical and aesthetic architecture of the project: to bring my body into the frame. Until

then, I had imagined myself behind the camera, listening, observing, structuring, but this was not a project about observation. It was a project about relational memory. My presence was not a contamination of the archive; it was part of the archive. The silences I held, the tears I could not hide, the way I leaned forward or recoiled, these were not intrusions. They were data. They were meaning. They were the texture of what it meant to be a daughter recording her family.

As Nelson writes, "I could not think of myself as anything other than in relation,"[1] a reminder that witnessing is always relational, always embodied, shaped through the presence and vulnerability of another[51]. To erase my body would have been to reenact the very erasure this film sought to understand. My body had been shaped by these memories. My body carried the same past that my family was naming aloud for the first time. To edit myself out would have been to return to a silence I had spent years trying to unravel.

So I chose to remain visible. Not as the protagonist. Not as a narrator. But as the relational thread that held the film together: a body through which memory moved, a body shaped by the same house, the same childhood, the same ruptures. Bringing my body into the film was not a stylistic choice. It was an ethical one. It insisted that I, too, was accountable. That I was not outside the frame. That I was implicated.

---

[51] Maggie Nelson, The Argonauts (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015).

It changed how my family spoke. My mother explained the rooms to me. My father revisited childhood because I was standing beside him. My brother searched for a diary because he wanted to show me something he had once hidden. The camera became the third witness, but I became the second. The film shifted from testimony to encounter.

Including my body made the film honest. It made the witnessing mutual. It made the archive alive.

*

Day 01. I don't know how this will be edited. Day 05. I do see what I want in the film. Day 10. We have a lot of footage. Day 15. I have the hard drive that I will carry to New York City. Day 30. I haven't started looking at the footage. Day 70. I began listening to my mother's interview. I couldn't. Day 82. I don't know how to get through the footage. Day 93. I'm heartbroken listening to my brother. Day 100. Cries the entire afternoon. Day 120. I began sitting in a friend's room. Listening only in the presence of comfort. Day 200. I am only beginning.

I did not begin editing this film with discipline or method. I began it with collapse.

The first time I opened the footage, it lasted seventeen minutes. My father's voice cracked on a sentence I thought I was prepared for. I slammed my laptop shut so quickly the screen trembled. Something inside me recoiled: instinctive, physical, unarguable. For nearly five months, my body refused. My mind refused. I hovered my cursor above the

interviews, and some part of me pulled back in fear, as if touching the footage would reopen something I had only just managed to close.

When I finally returned to the material, it wasn't as a filmmaker. It was as a daughter encountering the past again, without the buffer of the camera or the living room.

I cried more in editing than I cried in the interviews themselves. Filming had movement: touch, proximity, the ability to intervene when someone fell apart. Editing was stillness. Editing was solitary. Editing was a confrontation. If someone cried in the footage, I could not hold them. If I cried, there was no one to hold me.

Listening to my family through headphones was its own form of haunting. The interviews did not arrive in the order they were spoken. They arrived layered, looping, echoing. I cried for my father. I cried for my mother. I cried for my brother. And I cried for the child-version of myself who kept appearing inside their stories, shadow-like, unspoken, a quiet injury running along the edges of their words.

But editing was not only grief. It was also the first time I could see the joy we carried without naming it. I found myself laughing at moments I had forgotten: my mother's jokes after her long silences, my father teasing the cinematographer about camera settings, my nephew licking the lens, my dog refusing to leave the frame. Food passed between us: *dal-chawal, chai*, leftover *mithai*, entering the footage as an unspoken grammar of care.

These moments softened me. Editing became the one place where joy was legible again.

Still, I could not edit alone. I needed a comfort space. I edited mostly in my room, or on the floor, or in a friend's living room, where another body could sit nearby, not touching, not questioning, simply existing as an anchor while I navigated emotional terrain too large to hold by myself. Editing became a co-regulated act. I needed someone's presence to keep me from disappearing into the memories.

Mihai writes that care, in contexts of pain, is something practiced through sustained attention, relational attunement, and sensory engagement rather than through fixed procedures, a way of being-with rather than checking procedures[52]. Editing demanded that kind of care. I had to care for my family, and I had to care for myself. Butler suggests that ethical relations emerge when we are "undone by one another"[53]. Editing made this undoing unavoidable.

Every cut I made had ethical weight. When a breakdown felt too raw, I softened the transition. When silence felt excessive, I preserved it. When laughter interrupted grief, I refused to remove it. When contradictions appeared, my father grieving the family in one moment and defending it in the next, I kept both.

Editing became not a process of shaping coherence, but a process of honoring rupture.

And editing reconfigured time. It allowed me to weave the old house and the new house together. A memory spoken in grief could echo into a shot of my nephew playing. A story of abandonment could lead into my mother threading a needle. The simultaneity that

[52] Mihaela Mihai, Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).
[53] Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

filming hinted at became fully articulated in the edit, a temporal braid that only emerged when everything was laid out on the timeline.

Avery Gordon writes that haunting occurs when the past becomes audible in the present.[54] Editing made that sentence literal. I could hear the house breathing. I could hear my grandfather's absence in the pauses after my father spoke. I could see childhood flicker through my brother's face as he explained adulthood. Editing turned the film into an acoustics of unfinished time.

But editing was not only about what I could hold. It was also about what I could not. I removed moments that felt too exposing, not because they were untrue, but because they were unprotected. Ethical cuts became acts of care.

Mary Louise Contini Gordon's phases: preparation, interviewing, textualizing, archiving could not prepare me for this[55]. Editing was not textualization; it was re-wounding. It was not archiving; it was re-encounter. Emotional thresholds surfaced only in retrospect, not in advance.

Editing implicated me again, differently. During filming, I was a daughter, witness, and listener. In editing, I became narrator, interpreter, architect of the family's memory-world. It was a power I did not want, but the film required a shape, and the shape had to come through me.

---

[54] Avery F. Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, new ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[55] Mary Louise Contini Gordon, Family Oral History Across the World: Sharing, Remembering, and Preserving Stories of Faith and Life (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022).

Pitts reminds us that decolonial praxis demands self-implication, the acknowledgment that we are entangled in the very structures we critique[56]. Editing forced me to confront that entanglement. I was not only documenting my family; I was shaping the way we would remember ourselves.

Somewhere between the crying and the laughter, between the rituals and the ruptures, I realized that the film was not simply about memory.

The film was a memory caught in the act of being remade. Editing, then, was not post-production but post-memory work, a stage where the narrative was not constructed but witnessed again, transformed through care, rupture, and ethical attunement.

Conclusion: The Ethics of Returning Home

Family oral history is not a method I entered. It is a world I returned to. It is a world that shaped me long before I had the vocabulary to recognize it as epistemic terrain. By the end of this project, I realized that I had not gathered my family's stories so much as I had stepped inside the very architecture that had made those stories possible. This work did not simply document memory. It rearranged it. It rearranged us.

[56] Andrea J. Pitts, "Decolonial Praxis and Epistemic Injustice," in The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice, ed. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (London: Routledge, 2017), 149–57.

The ethical stakes were immense. Butler reminds us that giving an account of oneself risks undoing[57]. Existing guides to oral history practice, such as Donald Ritchie's *Doing Oral History* or Valerie Yow's *Recording Oral History*, frame ethics primarily through informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality, as well as procedures for managing risk and exposure[58]. Those tools are valuable, especially given the risks of misuse and harm. But within my family, ethics did not reside in forms or discrete agreements. They lived in the ongoing, asymmetrical obligations between parent and child, in the fear of retraumatizing someone I loved, in my mother's instinct to comfort me while narrating her own pain, and in my brother's insistence that I stop trying to protect him. Confidentiality, too, was not a realistic promise in a house where everyone knew how long each interview lasted and could see how shaken we were afterward. The ethics of this project were not only about what could be quoted, but about who would be able to sleep that night and how our relationships would feel when the camera was turned off.

My family stepped into that risk without ever naming it. My mother's voice hesitated as she spoke of violence she had endured as a young girl. My father, confronting his illness, allowed himself to break open in front of the camera, trusting that I, his daughter, would hold him both as an oral historian and as the child who had once depended on him. My

---

[57] Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
[58] Donald A. Ritchie, Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).Valerie Raleigh Yow, Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

brother revealed vulnerabilities he had kept hidden for years, speaking with a philosophical clarity that startled me.

In these moments, I realized I was not witnessing memory alone. I was witnessing courage, the courage to articulate what had been unspoken for decades.

Audre Lorde wrote, "My silences had not protected me[59]." My family's silence had not protected them either. It had preserved harm, calcified misunderstandings, and carried forward emotional wounds that were older than any of us. Breaking that silence was not an act of revelation alone. It was an act of survival.

And yet, the process undid me too. I cried during interviews. I hesitated to hug them, unsure whether my training demanded distance or whether my daughterhood demanded closeness. I broke down when my father turned to me and asked whether I remembered the night he thought he might die. I broke down when my mother gently placed her hand over mine and said, "*This is only a venting. Do not carry this inside you.*" I broke down when my brother asked, half in concern and half in recognition, "*Why are you worrying so much?*"

These ruptures were not methodological failures. They were methodological truths. They revealed that family oral history cannot be practiced without emotional reciprocity.

[59] Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," in Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 40–44.

Without mutual vulnerability. Without acknowledging the inherent impossibility of neutrality.

The ethical labor of this work extended long after the camera turned off. Editing became an encounter with each of them, over and over again. Listening to my father's pauses, my mother's silences, my brother's sudden exhale, I realized that the archive was not only theirs. It was also mine. To edit was to re-enter the emotional terrain I thought I had survived. It required a reckoning with responsibility: What do I preserve? What do I soften? Whom do I protect? And what do I owe: to the story, to the truth, to my family, to myself?

This is the ethical paradox of family oral history: The closer you are, the deeper the responsibility. The deeper the responsibility, the harder it becomes to decide what the archive should hold.

This project also rearranged the spatial ethics of memory. The house, old, abandoned, but alive in its own way, became a central witness. Its walls held the echoes of our conversations; its corners lit up with the memory of rooms no longer inhabited. As Avery Gordon reminds us, haunting is not about ghosts but about the lingering residue of what has survived, what has not been resolved[60]. The house held that residue. Even in its emptiness, it remembered us.

[60] Avery F. Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, new ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

When I stood in the doorway on the last day of shooting, I understood that the house would outlive our narratives. It would remain, quietly holding what we had spoken and what we could not. It would continue to shape us, even as we left it behind.

Ethical discussions of oral history often foreground anonymity and confidentiality, drawing on institutional practices in archives such as the British Library and regulatory frameworks in Canada and the United States[61]. In my project, neither anonymity nor confidentiality was truly available or even always desired. The film shows faces, gestures, the house itself; it documents our recognizability to one another and, potentially, to others. To blur my mother's face or disguise my father's voice would have been to repeat the very erasures that structured their lives. Instead of promising the kind of privacy envisioned in institutional ethics guidelines, we negotiated a different form of protection: ongoing consent, editorial care, and open conversations about where the film will travel. The risk of being seen is real here, but it is a risk we chose to enter together.

In doing so, the film stepped beyond the boundaries of traditional oral history. It became a relational archive, one that documented not only my family's narratives, but the process of remembering itself. The movement of hands, the stumbles in speech, the shifting weight of the body, the pauses, the glances: all became part of the record.

---

[61] British Library. "Oral History – Legal and Ethical Considerations." Sound & Moving Image Catalogue. British Library.

This project, in its totality, revealed that family oral history is not a sub-genre. It is a field, one that requires its own ethics, its own lexicon, its own temporal framework, its own emotional infrastructure. Family oral history demands an attentiveness to silence as presence, ritual as method, architecture as witness, and emotional circulation as narrative force. It demands that we hold care and complicity together. It demands that we risk undoing.

And yet, it also offers something profound: the possibility of returning home differently.

This project allowed me to meet my family not as I imagined them, but as they are: complex, wounded, loving, contradictory, brave. It allowed them to meet me not only as their daughter, but as a witness to their lives. It allowed the house to speak. It allowed silence to take shape. It allowed memory to breathe.

Long after we are gone, something of us will remain in the rooms we inhabited, in the pauses of our conversations, in the stories we told, and in the silences we finally allowed to break.

This is the archive I learned to listen to. This is the archive that continues to shape me. This is the archive I am still returning to.

Limitations / Future Directions

This process raises questions I have not fully resolved: the ethics of self-representation, the limits of emotional proximity, and the risk of aestheticizing family pain. These

tensions do not weaken the project; they delineate its horizon. They also trouble the translatability of this method into institutional contexts that demand procedural clarity over relational instability. This methodology is not universally transferable, and that refusal is part of its ethics. Rather than closing these questions, the film and this paper mark an early attempt to name them, pointing toward a methodology of family oral history that is still, necessarily, emerging.

Bibliography

Chow, Nyssa. *Roots and Branches* (course syllabus) Columbia University, Fall 2024

Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. New edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Gordon, Mary Louise Contini. *Family Oral History Across the World: Sharing, Remembering, and Preserving Stories of Faith and Life*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

Lorde, Audre. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 40–44. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984.

Medina, José. *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Mihai, Mihaela. *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022.

Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015.

Pink, Sarah. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE, 2015.

Pitts, Andrea J. "Decolonial Praxis and Epistemic Injustice." In *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, edited by Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., 149–157. London: Routledge, 2017.

Portelli, Alessandro. "What Makes Oral History Different." In *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, 45–58. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.

Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Ruiz Marrujo, Olivia. “The Gender of Risk: Sexual Violence against Undocumented Women.” In *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, edited by Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008.

Sharpe, Christina. *Ordinary Notes*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023.

Sharma, Sarah. *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.

Shopes, Linda. “Sharing Authority.” *The Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 103–10.

Walsh, Catherine E., and Walter D. Mignolo. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018.

Yow, Valerie Raleigh. *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. 3rd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.