

Break My Body, Hold My Bones

By

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This is dedicated to my mother, my ancestors and kin, both blood and chosen.

Acknowledgments

This work has partially taken place on the unceded ancestral and traditional territories of xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), and səltilwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. I am grateful for the opportunity to live where I do and carry the weight and responsibility in what it means to actively work towards decolonization in the everyday.

I would also like to acknowledge that this research took place on ancestral and unceded shared traditional territory of Chawathil First Nation of the Tiyt Tribe. The territory of the Tiyt Tribes of the Stó:lō Nation extends along the boundaries down both sides of the Fraser River from Yale to Seabird Island. This is where I have grown up and been fortunate to find community and kinship.

I am grateful for the guidance and support of my supervisor Lindsay McIntyre. It was through her encouragement, patience, kindness and kinship I was able to make this work and write this paper.

Abstract

My research takes place in my hometown, the rural community of Hope, B.C., situated on the traditional territory of Chawathil First Nation and the Tiyt Tribe. The Tiyt Tribes of the Stó:lō territory extend along the boundaries down both sides of the Fraser River.

Throughout my time at Emily Carr University of Art + Design I have engaged with many forms of research, using my lens to look at the complex history of Hope and its settler identity that is so deeply tethered to forms of extraction colonialism and white supremacy. Using anti-colonial and Indigenous/Intersectional Feminist theory as well as forms of lived experience rooted in coming of age and punk ethos to unpack the questions; *"How does extraction colonialism impact community?"* and *How do we form kinship in spite of embedded forms of white supremacy?"* Through experimental filmmaking and analog photography, I work in a coming-of-age framework to examine what it means to grow up in a place tethered to active forms of extraction and colonial narratives.

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Introduction

My journey through this program has been anything but linear. I have carried the weight of what it means to be brown and working class on my back while fighting to exist for another day and survive this city, Vancouver; the stolen lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. Faced with grief and loss, I have been lucky to lean on my chosen kin and the life my camera allows me to live. Through fire and ash it is my art practice that has guided me forward; how I have been able to find healing and solace. I am a mix of Indigenous, Latinx and settler. Through my mother, my family is from Chile and has ties to the Mapuche nation. Through my biological father, I have a mixed heritage of Métis and Irish settler. Growing up my mother always raised me with a strong understanding of who we were even in the displacement we experienced in exile. Even though my father was not in the picture, my mother always tried to find ways to mend the fragmented strands of my identity and how I sat with it. Being raised by a single mother who came to so-called Canada as a political refugee, my community has become a weaving of both blood and chosen kin. I am lucky to have been brought up by a strong network of BIPOC women who have enveloped me with love and care. My mother, grandmother and aunties are who have grounded me and shaped me. In the tradition of the women and femme before me, I will not be holding back any punches and I will not be following a strictly westernized framework of thesis writing. This document, like my art practice, is an act of storytelling.

In support of this break from more colonial methodologies, I lean on *Research as Ceremony* by Shawn Wilson. This text was gifted to me by my aunty Elsie when she found out I had been accepted into this Masters program and has been foundational in my approach to knowledge keeping in an institution still resolving

its history so entrenched in colonialism and white-centred curriculum. *Research as Ceremony* has been a grounding text to learn from as it has shown me a path forward that honours where I come from, my family, ancestors and community. As I ask myself questions around this work I have made and how I want to continue approaching my art practice, the quote “we cannot remove ourselves from our world in order to examine it,”¹ has stuck with me along the way. As I work through the layers of history Hope, B.C. holds, I do it from a very personal place. In the beginning, I questioned if that was the right step to take but as I dive deeper into questions of kinship and community, I recognize I cannot untether myself from this place.

I was raised for most of my life in the rural community currently known as Hope. This is a place that holds a layered and complex history. A place of gathering, where the Stó:lō and Kw'ikw'iyá:la River meet.² Wild berries grow along the cliff edge of the cascade following where longhouses faced the river bend.³ Before becoming the township of just over 6,000 people it is today, Hope was a trading post for the Hudson Bay Company.⁴ During the gold rush, settlers forcibly formed the township of Hope. From there, the town heavily relied on mining as a means of income. Once all the mines closed in the late 80s, logging became the primary industry⁵. Deforestation led the town's economy to plummet and from that point on, it was in constant flux. In 2000 the company Nestle Waters opened

¹ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, (Nova Scotia: Fernwood, 2008) page 14

² Carlson, et al. A Stó:lō-Coast Salish Historical Atlas. (Douglas & McIntyre, 2001) page 129

³ A used car lot now sits on the site of these longhouses

⁴ Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population. (Accessed February 27, 2023)

⁵ Stewart, The Canadian Encyclopedia. (Accessed February 27, 2023)

operations in Hope, further extracting natural spring water from the community.⁶ Later between 2016 and 2019, with the development of the Trans Mountain pipeline as we know it now, crews began to take place and began to lay the ground work in Hope and through the Canyon.⁷ This legacy of extraction is deeply embedded in the settler identity of this town and with it comes all kinds of complexities. I work with my medium format and Bolex camera within a framework of community to look at the layered history of industry that lives in the places that shaped my coming of age. I look to the words of Glen Coulthard in his text *Red Skin, White Masks*; “Any strategy heard towards authentic decolonization must directly confront more than mere economic relations; it has to account for the multifarious ways in which capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and the totalizing character of state power interact with one another to form the constellation of power relations that sustain colonial patterns of behaviour, structures, and relationships.”⁸ This is something I carry as I unpack this legacy of extraction and how it carries through us. I couple this challenge of capital and asymmetrical power dynamics with the words of Gina Starblanket in the collection of essays *Making Space for Indigenous Feminisms*; “Truly transformative analysis means integrating gender into “the everyday” including attention to how resurgence can serve to reproduce or challenge patriarchal power and privilege”⁹.

⁶ Subramaniam, “A Look into Nestle’s Controversial Water Bottling Business in Canada”, Vice Canada. (Accessed February 27, 2023)

⁷ “Timeline: Key dates in the history of the Trans Mountain pipeline”, CBC, (Accessed February 27, 2023)

⁸ Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* 4 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), page 14

⁹ Gina Starblanket, “Being Indigenous Feminists: Resurgences Against Contemporary Patriarchy” in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* (Nova Scotia: Fernwood, 2017) 36

As I do this work especially in context of photography and filmmaking I must practice my responsibility to my BIPOC community by handling these stories that come from the land and all of us with care. With these existing forms of thought at the foundation of my practice, I tell the story of what it means to grow up in a place that has been torn through by industry decade after decade. I unpack the questions; *"How does extraction colonialism impact community? How do we form kinship in spite of embedded forms of white supremacy?"* Through experimental filmmaking and analog photography depicting the community of Hope, I work through this question in a coming of age framework. Examining active forms of extraction and colonial narratives allows me to get more in-depth about my own stories that are held in Hope. The mixed blessings, the joy and everlasting friendships, but also the tension and the grit. A grit that gnashes between our teeth naturally as folx from the Canyon.



Figure 1. Isabella Dagnino, From *Break My Body, Hold My Bones*, 2022, medium format inkjet print

My Roots, My Lineage

Home has always been home. My single mother and I moved back and forth periodically throughout the early parts of my life but we would always find our way back to this small community nestled between the Canyon and the Fraser Valley. Through my maternal lineage I have ties to Wallmapu; our traditional territory to the South, a place currently known as Chile. The land of my people; the Mapuche Nation. My mother's family came to Canada as political refugees during the Pinochet dictatorship. Both my grandparents were members of MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria) and fought against Augusto Pinochet's fascist regime. My grandfather was arrested defending our traditional territory. On September 11th, 1973, Operation Condor took place; Pinochet bombed the parliamentary palace La Moneda and used the military to overthrow the democratically elected Socialist government. On that day, my grandfather, great-grandfather, uncles, aunt and numerous compañeros were arrested as communists and taken to the soccer stadium that was turned into a site of torture and interrogation. My grandparents were my age at the time with two children fighting for our people's sovereignty. My grandfather was later arrested for a second time and taken to the Quiriquina, an Island off the coast of Chile that had been repurposed as a concentration camp and site of torture. Once there, like many of his comrades, the military officers beat, starved and tortured him for days on end. Afterwards the officers attempted to *disappear* him along the ocean side. On the waters edge were Tren Tren and Kai Kai meet he managed to escape and trekked across the Andes to Argentina; a blessing I am eternally grateful for. From there he sent word to my grandmother who was in a safe house with my uncle and mother. Soon they found themselves in Manitoba, Canada: The Métis homeland. The traditional territory of my paternal grandmother. A family I never got to know. A place I never have known. A place I visit in dreams and hold close because I know it is a part of me. On both sides there

is a history of displacement; uprooting due to forms of colonial violence. I share this because to understand my art practice and my research you need to know this history and this lineage, to know why the fire in me burns the way it does.

As I reflect on the past two years and my research process I look to the deep ties of kinship I have been fortunate to form and radical action these bonds hold. I am someone who was not raised on their traditional territory and while my family has done everything they can to raise me knowing who I am and what it means to be Mapuche in particular I am still a settler on this land. As I have grown up in Hope I have been guided and held by many people in my community. As I worked through my thesis work I reflected a lot on the women and femmes that have been a part of my life and the lessons they have taught me throughout the years.

Growing up I was able to see women as leaders in the community. Aside from my mother and grandmother I was always deeply influenced by my aunties. My Auntie Elsie Kipp is a community member of Yale First Nation; Since my teens I've seen her take action as a community member helping organize the local MMIWG march, organizing community Christmas meals, visiting elders and finding ways to create community connection. She's a writer, mother, my aunty and matriarch. When I was in my undergrad she was one of the few people who pushed me and believed in me not just as an artist but also as a researcher. She is someone who carried me through a strange time in my life; when I think of the love in my family I will always remember the care and kindness that radiates from her.

While reading Stó:lō knowledge keeper; Jo-Ann Archibald's book *Indigenous Storywork* I found myself reflecting a lot on the ways in which my chosen kin and growing up in Hope has informed and shaped me. Throughout the book she speaks extensively about the importance of respect, reverence, reciprocity and

responsibility. Archibald weaves in personal stories with a mix of interviews and reflections with community elders and knowledge keepers. In one chapter she speaks more in-depth on the procedure and the respect we must give our communities by asking for consent and guidance. The quote “It is respect and caring that guides my feelings and actions, not an obligatory sense of duty,”¹⁰ resonated deeply with me. While approaching this research I move with a care and respect for the people in my life who have shown me kinship. Throughout this process there are times I am in a position where I am being trusted with peoples stories and experience. These are moments I hold in my heart and look to the lessons of care and reciprocity I have learned from my kin. It is these lessons that have guided me and it is important as I move through this work I handle the stories that come from this place with care.

The town of Hope, B.C. is where I came of age; cradled and supported by a single mother and my BIPOC kin both blood and chosen. I learned to ride a bike and drive there, drank my first beer and smoked my first joint, screamed with joy and yelled in fear. It is where I learned who I was but also what I was made of. As a young, poor, queer, Indigenous Latinx kid it was not the easiest place to grow up. I look back at these moments now through my lens; exploring the emotional textures that live within the land through celluloid film. I revisit my family home; friends, sites of significance, and sites of extraction. I allow my experiences in life to guide me in my research and as I develop this work, *Break My Body, Hold My Bones*.

¹⁰ Archibald, Jo-Ann, *Indigenous Storywork*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 61



Figure 2. *My mother and I*, from the archive of Alejandra Dagnino, 1997, polaroid photo

Transforming Light

I found my way to analog photography like most: high school art class. At fifteen, with the guidance of my teacher and earliest mentor Chris Janzen, I learned how to process, develop film and print from start to finish. I would spend hours learning how to mix chemicals and properly set up the darkroom; every lunch hour that's where I was. I began to take my camera everywhere, documenting my friends, family and everything and anything in my path. I felt a level of urgency to document. At the time I didn't fully understand my process or the purpose behind this form of making. Looking back now it is ever so clear my want and need to tell story. For my community and in my family, storytelling has been a way to share and preserve our history, culture and tradition. When staring at the face of colonialism, storytelling becomes an act of resistance. My path to storytelling is through my camera. At the time I never really saw myself pursuing anything as a photographer. Coming from a working class BIPOC background, a career in photography did not necessarily feel attainable. It wasn't until undergrad at UFV with the guidance of my professor Grace Tsurumaru that I started to really explore my art practice and what working with film meant to me.

As I reflect on this journey into my lens-based practice and my work with celluloid-based photo making and filmmaking I have looked at who has influenced me in the past and whose work I see myself in conversation with. I find that even in the early days of my practice I was drawn to other photographers telling stories of community and kinship. More recently I have spent my time looking at other contemporary photographers and lens-based artists working in a similar vein. Two years ago I was gifted the seminal work by Rahim Fortune, *I Can't Stand To See You Cry*. Fortune is an Afro Indigenous lens-based artist with connections through his maternal line to the Chickesaw Nation. His book *I Can't Stand To See You Cry* is a

body of work that looks specifically at Austin, Texas; one of the cities he spent his coming of age in and where he was raised by his father. In this series he looks at the changing landscape of his community in tandem with his experience as caretaker for his dying father. Through the black and white film he brings out so many complex emotions and forms of radical vulnerability. Fortune uses his camera as a tool to tell Black history and examine forms of legacy. Although he is working almost 50 years later, in many of the images one can see the influence of the New Topographics¹¹ anchoring his documentary style photography. Many of the cityscapes made me think of the likes of Robert Adams and the Bechers, specifically the way he captures architecture. What sets him apart is the fact he isn't an outsider looking in; these are spaces he has connection to and has community in. Fortune honours a history often overlooked and erased in dominant white society. By working with black and white celluloid film he responds to the complex history of documentation our shared communities have faced over the centuries as the over-studied and gazed-upon other. In both of our works we are reflecting on the places which have formed us. We both challenge the legacy of the film camera and actively dismantle forms of imperialism through lens practices. Through his work he is looking at Austin, Texas and the complexities of being a caretaker, the coming-of-age framework, and the foundation of white supremacy that continues to linger in his community. In my images I am looking at the legacy of industry that is held in every corner of our community. Incorporating images of places that hold layered histories, images of the clear-cut land that stores the physical piping for Trans Mountain shown alongside images of the neighbourhood I grew up in, family and sites that hold layered histories. With the work of Rahim Fortune I see a shared desire to unpack the histories held within community but doing so in a way that still honours the struggle of what it means to exist in a world

¹¹ Ragain, Melissa, author. "New Topographics." *Oxford Art Online*, 2003.

steeped in white supremacy, and the strength we find as BIPOC in our communities.



Figure 3. Rahim Fortune, *I Can't Stand To See You Cry*, 2021

Both photography and experimental filmmaking have been my main forms of expression in my own coming of age; they are my way of storytelling. I have practiced medium and large format photography now for most of my career as a lens-based artist. I predominantly work with black and white film because it allows for the texture of the film to come through and bring forward the story and narratives I am trying to bring out. In the context of my thesis work, I believe black

and white film is necessary to work with because of its history and connection to legacy. The camera itself has been used as a tool of oppression in a lot of ways and documentation itself has a very violent past. As an Indigenous Latinx person, I have seen how my own communities have faced this first hand, constantly seeing our stories being told through a colonial lens. Because of this, I actively seek ways to dismantle these legacies and am mindful of the ways I approach photography. When I work with film, shooting, developing and processing, I put all of myself into it and I make sure to handle the story carried with in it with care. Film holds so much of everything. Each image a portal. Early in my studies at Emily Carr I found myself become more and more drawn to motion. Many of my early images show the rushing rivers I grew up learning from. During my time as a research assistant with Lindsay McIntyre (who later became my supervisor and mentor) I began to learn how to process and further work with motion picture film, more specifically 16mm film. Working with her didn't just give me a technical understanding of this new form of visual storytelling but the important role we carry as Indigenous storytellers behind the camera. It is through working with her I felt inspired to explore experimental filmmaking in my own practice.

Back in early March of 2021 I was fortunate to go out into the field with Lindsay as a research assistant. I will never forget this experience as it changed me and my understanding of my art practice forever. I stood on the land as a guest; introducing myself the way my aunties taught me. Standing amongst acres and acres of deforestation my heart felt heavy; looking up I saw the few tall alders that were left, swaying back and forth against the bright blue sky. It was in that moment I thought of home and I felt a warmth come over me like a blanket. This was met shortly by an overwhelming sense of fear; the kind that makes a little ball in your stomach and sits there like a stone. Where was I in this moment? At the site of Fairy

Creek blockade; the traditional territory of Pacheedaht First Nation. It was here I knew what I was fighting for and what I want to do with my work. I saw how the camera can be a tool of dismantling; one that could break the colonial systems it once upheld. I saw how important this work really is.



Figure. 4. Isabella Dagnino, From *Break My Body Hold My Bones*, 2022, Medium Format Inkjet print

Coming-of-Age Framework

As I began to weave together all my thoughts and ideas for this body of work, the importance of coming of age became more and more apparent. I started to think of the parallels of growing up and how we connect with each other and the world around us, and I realized I needed a way to process and guide narrative and tell story. Within each frame lives a multitude of stories, by looking through a lens shaped by the lived experiences of growing up in Hope I am able to create a visual

dialogue with the memories that exist in each image. I meet the inner reflection of my younger self to unpack the layers of white supremacy and colonial violence. As I reflect on a particular image (fig 5) of the word “Hope” spray painted across a tree that stands along a trail I have walked many times, I can feel the anger and angst, but also the blind confidence of being a sixteen year old from the Canyon. I think back to being young in a town with little money and little to do; I think of how out-of-town teens nicknamed us “Hopeless” and the way that has always stuck to the back of my brain in the most uncomfortable way. As I remember a not so distant past, I feel the violence an action like spray painting a tree takes. A disconnect with the life that exists within the land and reflection of how the violence of extraction moves through community.



Figure 5. Isabella Dagnino, from *Break My Body, Hold My Bones*, 2022, Medium Format inkjet print

When coming of age comes to mind, many of us think of pieces of literature that have been deemed classics like *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Little Women*, or even films like *Sixteen Candles*, *Stand by Me* or the more recent *Lady Bird*. In mainstream media and pop culture there is still a very white-centred understanding of coming of age and what that looks like. Through my lens I wanted to find a way to tell a different coming of age than we are used to. Moving away from an individualistic understanding and a more community-centred understanding of growing up. When I think about my experiences I recognize they were and are reverberations of bigger issues in Hope and settler colonial culture. As young POC growing up in a place formed by the systems that try to oppress us and have tried to oppress our not so distant ancestors we emerge through acts of kinship. The only reason I am able to do the work I do is because of those who continue to hold me close and hold me up in spite of the ways colonialism try to divide and diminish. It is the lessons of my aunty Eve, Frida, Barb and Elsie. The way my mother and grandmother have and continue to walk through this life with me. My friends, my kin both living and past who continue to hold me. In the face of extraction colonialism our kinship becomes a radical form of liberation.

What She Said by Deanne Templeton was a catalyst for understanding a way to work within a practice that reflects on coming of age. It is a mix of street portraiture and personal storytelling. Templeton pulls from the personal artifact, arranging old punk show tickets and photos from her teens along with personal diary entries from growing up in the 1980s. She does this alongside portraits she has taken over the years of young women from the surf, skate and punk scene that she felt demonstrated a strength and tenacity she aspired to as a young woman. She invites us to bear witness to a very vulnerable moment in her coming-of-age

story and contemplates the growing pains of being a young women in communities that try to push against dominant society. This book came to me at a point in my life where I was grappling with a lot of past trauma and has re-entered my art practice again at a time where I am unearthing layers of trauma and violence both in a outward context of social history and the inward context of the personal. *What She Said* is a love letter of sorts, one we write to our former selves in hopes they can feel the embrace and care that was lacking. Reflecting on the lessons this body of work has given me has rooted me even more deeply in working in a coming-of-age framework and understanding why it is so important within my practice. Templetons work has been mostly influential on how I approach coming of age as a lens in my art practice but also how I write about it now. In her writing there is a care and vulnerability that carries a power. I believe as someone who is a POC, channeling this level of honesty and radical vulnerability can be dismantling of the systems of oppression that we see in the everyday; that we feel in the everyday.

A coming-of-age framework can become a form of storytelling. As I continue with this work it becomes a guide of sorts. I pull from my roots as a Mapuche and Métis person, but I also pull from the other communities that have formed and shaped me. Growing up, I was quickly drawn to the punk and skate scene, a space formed in defiance. It is in my blood to challenge dominant society and this is where I found home. The ethos of punk is something I carry with me into every aspect of life. Do-It-Yourself has always been a core value within punk and is something deeply woven into the community's ethos to this day. I resynthesize this into a collective practice of Do-It-Together, bringing it back to collective understandings of community. In the punk community we have always relied on each other, sometimes even to keep it alive as a space to exist. When looking at

forms of making in connection to these spaces I believe it is important to keep the idea of collectivity central. As I look at how I have engaged with punk, I see the intersection between the different forms of collective practice in the everyday forms of making I grew up with. From making patches, pins, zines with my friends, reworking shirts and jackets, it mirrors the beading and weaving I grew up with. All things done collectively. These acts of collective protest feed my art practice as it became so clear that these forms of making hold the tension of what it means for me and my kin to break down the walls built up around us.

I will always hold the punk community close to my heart. However, as I have moved through this program, I need to acknowledge how my relationship has changed within punk and how it has shifted my thinking and approach to making. When I first moved to Vancouver I sought out community and found myself in so many different spaces. I already had a connection to the punk scene which carried through into Vancouver; I was connected to new folks and old. People from my past and people I call kin now in my present. Unfortunately, in the first semester of the MFA I was assaulted by someone from within the punk community. The folks who stood by me in this moment were my BIPOC and queer kin in the scene, but even after that event I felt the distancing. I share this because it was a moment that changed everything for me in this program. It happened silently and unnoticed, but it had heavy reverberations. Through this experience, I realized even the punk community, a space meant to be radical and dismantling of forms of oppression, still had its flaws, and at times, can continue to exercise the harms of colonial violence. As I continue to process this event I am fortunate for the love of my mother, my community, and my kin who have supported me in my healing. After this I felt such an immense shift in my research and I unearthed a deep grief which started to come through in my work. The darkroom became a place where I

could allow everything that lived inside me to pour out. As I allow my body to break open, the feelings of grief and hurt no longer exist solely within me. I pull the emotional textures my body shares with the story of extraction that lives within the film.

During the Summer of 2022 I had the opportunity to be a part of the Response Residency at the Polygon Gallery in North Vancouver, where I was mentored by artists I have looked up to. I had the opportunity to make a short 16mm film that was later shown alongside eight other Indigenous artists. The short experimental film I made *Anything, Always*, explored memory, grief and longing for home and kin. It is a letter to my ancestors both present and past; it's about what it feels like to move through loss and what it means to find healing. This was my first completed work made using 16mm film as a way of sharing story. In many ways this also marked another shift in my practice. Experimental filmmaking has become this way I am able to tell story of existing in the in-between, afterlife and rebirth. As I brought the 16mm practice forward into the thesis work to explore these questions of coming of age in the context of extraction, I really felt the layered feelings of past and present coming forward. How old emotions we treat as ghosts find their way burned into the celluloid.

As BIPOC women and femmes, colonial violence cut into us deeper than any. A text I have reflected on constantly in my art practice is *Making Space For Indigenous Feminism*. In this collection of essays edited by Joyce Greene, different Indigenous leaders and knowledge keepers contribute thought-provoking and powerful pieces of writing exploring the necessity for Indigenous feminism. It is within this text I have found strength and the language to express the parallels between the colonial violence of extraction we find not just on the land but also on

our bodies as racialized women and femmes. A passage that I've reflected upon a lot during my research is "For Indigenous decolonization and for Indigenous feminism, the connection with and alienation from land remain major political factors. Colonialism and its successor settler states are predicated on the theft of and exploitation of Indigenous lands and the oppression of Indigenous peoples, justified by the racist myths that are still encoded in settler cultures."¹² What this world has taught me is that our bodies are disposable in the colonial state, something to exploit, something to further extract. A coming-of-age framework provides a way to work through and unpack these systems of extraction and exploitation from a wider context of Hope, B.C. and then bring out the emotional textures of growing up. Working in both photography and experimental filmmaking i'm able bring out ideas of memory and place-based legacy from a place of growth. In my photography I am continuously documenting places I have seen over and over again; places that speak to the identity of Hope. Flowers growing out of my grandmother's fence, the skate park where I spent endless evenings, religious signage that hangs in the church window; a lingering reminder of the hold christianity has on settler colonial identity. All forms of imagery speaking to coming of age in the Canyon. I have found experimental filmmaking has taken this research further as I believe the way I am able to bring moving images together brings out the memories and emotions that live in the land. Through this framework I am able to pull from the layered history; the history I carry, the history that is now embodied within me.

A coming-of-age framework allows me to bring in artistic elements that I carry within me. My practice with celluloid film has been in the making since my teens.

¹² Joyce Green, "Taking More Account of Indigenous Feminism" in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* (Nova Scotia: Fernwood, 2017) p.4

Even now when I work with it, I feel a familiarity with the material. We know each other and have lived through many lives together. It has carried me and been my anchor throughout my life and been a way to heal from trauma, show joy, love and grief. A tool of transformation, of storytelling, and of dismantling.



Figure 6. Isabella Dagnino, Still from *Anything, Always*, 2023, 16mm film, digital output.

Portals and Plywood

During my time at Emily Carr, I spent the first year exploring my practice quite a bit, but within that time, I have also taken time to think about how I want my work to be seen. I've thought a lot about colonial systems at play in the traditional white cube of the gallery and I have realized the importance of disrupting these ideas and confronting ideas of who these spaces are for. In many ways art institutions and galleries have internalized and upheld forms of white supremacy, sexism and colonialism. We see this manifest in the way marginalized artists and thinkers are extracted of their labour and knowledge within these spaces. Many of these spaces try to absorb the language of decolonization and anti-oppression but do very little

in the everyday to enact the true meaning behind these actions. It is in this space I feel the profanity of how my work can exist as someone who sits at the intersection of Brown, Queer and Poor. My work, and this thesis document, are intended to challenge this institution. I do not write for the gate keepers; those who keep education inaccessible and for the privileged few. I do this work for my community; I write in this format for every mutt kid that walks through our university doors. This document will land across colonial eyes and so will my artwork, but it doesn't mean I have to cater to them. When I work through my choices of how I install my work, I reflect upon an early influence and fellow disrupter of sorts: Wolfgang Tillmans.

Wolfgang Tillmans was one of the first artists I was exposed to that broke away from the "traditional" presentation of photography. Hanging images unframed by binder clips, all at different scales. Hanging images high on a wall and low to the ground. At times arranging them in clusters and some scattered sparsely; never following a linear pattern. As I continue to work with photography and filmmaking as a form of storytelling, I have wanted to express this in physical form. Over the years I've played with the way I arranged my images, following the likes of my predecessors' freeing the image from the frame and arranging them in ways that could increase their relationally and bring out the stories and worlds that live within them.

When I got to Emily Carr University of Art + Design I played a lot with the size of my images how I arranged them on the wall. As I began to piece together the role of industry in my community and my experiences as a teen, I knew I needed to find ways to bring that out. The first big shift I made in the studio was to bring an image off the wall and install it onto a pallet I had salvaged. Growing up in a rural community there was not a lot to do as teens and we would find ways to amuse

ourselves. Reflecting back it was maybe one of the most volatile times in my life; driving up logging roads with friends, partying in the woods where there is no cell reception and no easy access to leave. We would take those same pallets I used for installation and burn them with gasoline well into the night. I will never forget the smell in the morning of burned fuel and charred up wood. The pallets themselves echoed these memories from my youth but speak to extraction and the role they play in industry. Pallets are supportive structure, they are used in extraction, construction, transport. They are used to build living structures and garden containers. In my photo-based work, they became a way to intercept the white cube. A symbol of industry, and of being working class but also making do with what one has. The multiple pallet interventions led me to a firm understanding in how I wanted to show the photography aspect of my practice for the thesis exhibition.



Figure 7. Installation, 2022, work-in-progress at the State of Practice MFA Exhibition

The Point Where Everything Meets

I carry all these important lessons with me and into my art practice and my final thesis work. My thesis exhibition consists of three separate works that are informed by the research I have been engaging with over the course of this program.

The sculptural piece I made that I showed at the thesis exhibition brings together previous work and concepts I was working with very early on. Using an old screen-printed tarp from an earlier exploration and two pallets gifted to me by water protector, activist and poet, Rita Wong, I brought together to create the piece “Untitled”. This piece uses pallets once a part of the Kwekwecewtsw Watch House on Burnaby Mountain. The structure itself is connected to my previous studio exploration using salvaged materials to echo the forms similar to the ones from my youth. The thrashed piece of tarp I attach to this structure is from a previous studio exploration. I repurpose this tarp that was once a tool of extraction by using screen printing and beadwork to tell a story of what Hope holds. The beadwork speaks to my heritage as a Mapuche and Métis person; the labour and memories embedded in the work and what they represent. By working with materials that hold layered meanings of coming-of-age, labour, home, and displacement, I aim to articulate the way in which all weave and converge.

Leave Me Here is a two-channel video that was shot on 16mm film over the Summer and Fall of 2022. Looped on video projectors side-by-side I juxtapose images of mosh pits, rushing rivers, the trees I grew amongst, graffiti tags that once belong to friends, and industry. I use double exposures and cut in and out of moments for the viewer to experience the way memories bleed in and out of each other. It is meant to feel dissociating and tense at times as the videos side by side fall in and out of sync. My approach to this project reflects on my most recent visit

back to Hope. This past Fall was the first time I brought a partner home. As I showed him where I had grown up, it was with a bitter sweetness. Even though I regularly make the trip back, the impact of industry on the community felt much harder and heavier. Drilling in the river I grew up walking along, seeing all along the mountain range the ground torn up to lay the pipeline. Every time I drive into town I see it along the mountain's edge into town and up the Canyon. It's strange to see a place where so many of my formative years were spent being reshaped by industry. Whose stories will continue to live on? As I continued to unpack my research with every visit, I felt like I was existing more and more in this in-between-like state; in-between time and memory. This video piece is a reflection of the way we exist in the tension and the ways we come together but also come apart.

With this video installation, I weave together the different concepts and ideas I have been working through in my research. I handle the footage with care and am careful how I share this with an audience (to some extent, I do not have control over who will see this and how they will carry the stories). As I assembled *Leave Me Here* I knew it needed to be clear this is a part of the same research I have been engaging with but it also exists on its own. I allowed the film itself to inform me as I made the piece. As a person watches, they do not necessarily need to know everything about Hope, its history, or how the the images fit together. I invite people to bear witness and see a fragmented, non-linear experience of what it means to grow up in the Canyon. Through the celluloid I tell the story of holding kin close while coming up against the systems that try to dismantle our communities.

For this piece, I collaborated with the sound artist, musician, sound engineer, and dear friend Jayson Klein. Our collaboration brings forward and pulls out the

emotional textures that live within each frame. The element of sound becomes an amplifier. Throughout the piece, lingering feelings of grief and anger build to a point of strong tension then fall apart into a dismantled fragmentation. The score is meant to bring out the stories coming through the celluloid and echo the feelings of coming of age in a place defined by forms of extraction colonialism.

Collaborating with someone who I have a connection to was a really enriching experience and I am glad I was able to work with someone who I could trust.

The third piece I made was an installation of two years worth of photography on a L shaped plywood structure. I have, in past iterations, I arranged the images in a non-linear fashion all around the plywood structure. I do this with the intention of breaking away from the Western tradition of display, but also to bring out the narratives carried in the work. Clusters like communities, like constellations. Some images high and some low flowing like the waterways I grew up amongst. I found I favoured the plywood structure as it is disruptive in all the right ways. As BIPOC artists we experience levels of hostility time and time again especially in the gallery space. This structure becomes a home. When I could not find space for my work in the gallery I decided to build it. My maternal grandfather gave me the gift of knowing how to stretch a dollar and make do with what I have. I bring this practice into the institution. This making do is a practice of building home handed down. My wall structure does not fit in with the gallery aesthetic. It is unrefined. But it is a home, and when the show is over I can easily pack up and move. A home born of displacement but a home none the less. Like my kin before me I find a way to hold space for community in the fragmentation created by colonial violence.



Figure 8. Isabella Dagnino, Still from *Leave Me Here*, 2023, 16mm film, digital output

Reflection

At the thesis exhibition I had my grandmother, my mother, cousins, uncles, aunts and friends come through. These are the people who have seen me grow and guided me along the way. These are my kin, my family, my community. As I look back at my journey I am grateful that the people who have carried me through were able to bear witness to this work. My research is centred around ideas of community and to have my community present in the gallery space brought forward a lot of my research into a real physical actualization. I am grateful to have them and for some of the most important people in my life to be able to see what the years of sacrifice, hard work, blood, sweat, and tears have accomplished.

Over the past two years I have gone through a lot in my life and in my art practice. A project like this brings out all kinds of joy and gratitude but also grief and trauma. When I first began this journey I was afraid of leaning too deeply into the personal.

I constantly kept a distance from the work and worried about letting too much of myself in. I worried the larger conversation would be lost and I would fail my responsibility to my community. In these moments I reflect back on the words of

Jo-Ann Archibald and how as we do a community-based work we must do so guided with our hearts. As I continue in this research, I recognize the necessity of allowing myself to be a part of the work. Leading with care is what has lead me through the toughest moments in this program and in my practice. As I continue to explore visual storytelling through celluloid film I hope to carry the lessons I have learned with me.

After I graduate I plan to continue exploring the ways a coming-of-age framework can serve as a tool to research the parallels of one's own experiences and the ways they weave in and out of the forms of oppression we see upheld in white dominant society. Over the past two years I have been able to develop a voice for myself and I plan to continue this development as I continue to make work. This process has provided a window into how to work in a meaningful way and be guided by practices of care and kinship. As I keep working in a lens-based practice I will continue in this way as it has become fully embedded in how I handle story. As I reflect on the final work I showed in the thesis exhibition, I felt everything come together. Looking at the layered history of extraction colonialism through a coming-of-age framework gave me a better understanding of where I want to take my research in the future. In this finished work I showed a two-channel film *Leave Me Here* that I touch on earlier in this document. Working in motion picture film changed a lot for me and became an amplifier as I began to really understand visual storytelling. Over the past two years I have been able to work with the celluloid as a collaborator; as I continue to grow in my practice this is something I want to continue to explore.

As I continue to understand the power of celluloid and the forms of visual storytelling held within experimental filmmaking, I plan to delve deeper in

understanding the technical. I am interested in learning about eco-processing and alternative processing techniques; I look to eco-processing as a way to explore the ways we learn from the ecological world around us. I believe forms of cameraless filmmaking and alternative processing will provide space to further work through memory. I plan on exploring more abstract ways of working as a way to further collaborate with celluloid as I begin to really unpack ideas around how we embody place and memory. I believe this form of exploring aligns with the ways celluloid film holds story and how I can work with it as a way to dismantle rather than uphold systems of oppression.



Figure 9. Installation, 2023, Biometaphysicalmateria MFA Thesis Exhibition

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