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below the neck, above the knees

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

### BELOW THE NECK, ABOVE THE KNEES

By Desiree Dawn Kapler, M.F.A

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017.

#### Directors:

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My thesis explores the act of violation in the context of trauma and healing through the use of personal narratives and experimental film. My research allows personal storytelling to transform into a larger and more universal theme of generational trauma and dysfunction. Through a feminist lens, I challenge social norms of body autonomy for the sick and abused, capitalism's social effects on the poor, and passed down maternal lessons from the women who are doing the best that they can with the lives and opportunities that they have been given.

This work is created in spite of the labels my mother, the women before her, and I may hold. It is an act of resistance to who and what is allowed to be seen or heard. It is my confession, but it is not my confession alone.

## Personal is Political

Personal narratives are our window into knowing the conditions of our society. Writer Dorothy Allison states, “Change cannot happen if we do not know the conditions that need to be changed.”<sup>1</sup> My research has informed my belief that many articles, essays, and books not only include some sort of personal account, whether biographical or autobiographical, but also a strong sense of theory.

In the arts, theory meets practice through a lens, and the Personal Camera, or the way in which an artist can use the tool as an extension of their own two eyes, acts as that medium. As author and social activist bell hooks notes, “Personal experiences are important to feminist movement, but they cannot take the place of theory.”<sup>2</sup> This is why I feel that visual work, written work, and theoretical work exist together in a single dialogue. hooks argues that utilizing only personal experiences can cause theory to represent only a certain group, primarily those who are privileged and allowed to be heard and seen. There is not one without the other, which is why

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Allison, “Bastard Out of Carolina,” Speech, Southern Film Festival, Virginia Commonwealth University's Harris Hall Auditorium, Richmond, VA, September 15, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015). bell hooks does not capitalize her name.



personal film is a significant genre in fighting inequality in society, creating community, and fostering self-reflection and improvement.

Within my own work, I represent tensions and adversity within and through relationships, the body, and the self. I think of what both Dorothy Allison and bell hooks say. My work tends to develop from tragedy, and my experiences are highly personal and unique. It is feminist theory that allows me to make my personal experiences universal, but I am fortunate to have a voice among those who desperately want and need change. For instance, I am a childhood cancer survivor. When I speak of that experience, themes of loss, illness, life and death, and fear are able to surface. The universal is found in those themes, arising from theory, and a discussion of sickness, disability, and what is allowed to be talked about become a part of the work.

Growing up in the South, I learned that, if you are a girl, you should smile and dress nicely. You should use your manners and not speak too loudly. You should be seen, not heard. You should not be in a position of authority. You should focus on caring for your family. If you are disabled, sick, or different than the majority, you must keep your difficulties to yourself and not impose them on anyone else. Do not inconvenience others with your problems. Do not expect accommodations, because you were not born with the genes to survive in society.

Being a minority in a world that only wants the majority is difficult. While reading Susan Wendell's "Towards a Feminist Theory of Disability," I kept thinking that nearly all minorities could be considered disabled, in an abstract way. I kept thinking: If I am not, then I cannot. I am flooded with the realities of my own hidden disability. My disability is based on my gender. It is based on my history. It is based on my economic status. It is based on being infertile. It is based on my self-critique and anxiety. It is based on my body being a toxic dumping ground as child, soaking in all of the chemicals that would have to nearly kill my body to save it.

You cannot see these things, so I wrongfully consider myself lucky. Even knowing that it is wrong, I still keep telling myself that I am lucky. The days I want to lay in bed and cry, sometimes not even being able to fully construct a reason, I get out of bed, because I am lucky. Sometimes my legs have sharp pains that feel like they are shooting straight down my bones, most likely a long-term side effect from the chemotherapy medication vincristine, but I am lucky. It does not stop me from walking. I have had migraines from the time I was five or so years old. Back then, they were merely flashes of color, and now I get a pain so piercing that I have to lie down. My vision becomes so blurry and distorted that everything uniformly shaped becomes deformed. My neck becomes stiff, and the only thing that sometimes helps is puking my guts out and lying as still as possible. It is not a stroke, so I am lucky. I take birth control pills and a medication meant for diabetics, because it is the only way that I can stop myself from growing hair on my chin, my chest, stomach, and back. It is the only way I will not be nearly 270 pounds again. Since it makes me nauseated, I try to take most of it right before I fall asleep, so only my sleeping body will experience the nausea, but I am lucky.

Susan Wendell's discussion about the social construction of disability can be transferred to the act of personal storytelling. Who is allowed to be seen, and how might one demand to be seen? She states,

Much of the public world is also structured as though everyone were physically strong, as though all bodies were shaped the same, as though everyone could walk, hear, and see well, as though everyone could work and play at a pace that is not compatible with any kind of illness or pain, as though no one were ever dizzy or incontinent or simply needed to sit or lie down. (For instance, where could you rest for a few minutes in a supermarket if you needed to?) Not only the architecture, but the entire physical and social organization of life tends to assume that we are strong and healthy and able to do what the average young, non-

disabled man can do or that we are completely unable to participate in public life.<sup>3</sup>

I go through life knowing I am a body that lived. I survived an illness that many others of all ages cannot claim to have survived. I use the word “survive,” even though the illness still follows me. There is guilt in the idea that I was strong enough to beat the sickness, but I have friends who were not. The capitalist ladder of our society infects us with this notion that in sickness and health, we must stay strong, if we want to succeed. My mother remembers me asking her, when I was three years old, “Why did I have to get cancer?” As if there could be a reason for anyone to “get cancer.” Wendell mentions some people’s tendency to “[view] disability as a biological misfortune, the bad luck of individuals, and a personal or family problem.”<sup>4</sup> We are navigating this earth as if people choose sickness. They ask for it. They want disability, as if it comes with benefits worth living for.

My film *Ode to the Port* pushes these notions. It is a short, experimental film with a personal narrative surrounding my experience with childhood cancer. My chemoport was an intrusive object that the doctors placed inside my body. It saved me, but could have potentially killed me. Now it is a reminder and a symbol of that fight. The image shows areas of my scars, my chest where the port resided, and my skull where the tumor was extracted. Cells float along the frame, and the center is the circular center of the port, which acts as a crystal ball into the past and present. I hold the childhood port to my womanly body. I discuss the journey and the travels to remove the port. I talk about my friend and her chemoport, and how she would have been a better artist than me, if she was alive today.

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Wendell, "The Social Construction of Disability," In *The Rejected Body*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 59.

<sup>4</sup> Wendell, 66.

Survivorship is a title that remains mostly unmentioned in treatment. My film reminds the viewer that even with life after illness, the illness is still very much alive. If one person wins the fight, does that mean that those who die do not try hard enough? By discussing my survivorship along with the guilt that word carries, I give voice to those who are ashamed to be anything but grateful. Capitalism, integral to the trope of the American Dream, says that if I try hard enough, I will succeed. Southern culture, rooted in Protestantism, says that if I try hard enough, pray hard enough, and keep it all in the family well enough, then I will succeed.

What I hear most often about cancer is either death, chemotherapy, or survivorship. I even hear about the journey of death and the journey through chemotherapy. However, I never hear about the journey through survivorship. I do not often hear about the survivor's guilt, the bodily aftermath, or the displaced feeling of being a no-longer-sick-body in our society. It never really ends.

When we watch a film, we sit and observe, from beginning to end. Only the most rude and obnoxious dare to get up and leave before the end of a screening. It is a way of capturing a willing and unwilling audience. Film confronts me. I imagine playing the part of a feminist calling out a person who exhibits privilege and participates in injustice. The Film-Feminist tells the Privileged-Patriarchal-Capitalist-Viewer, "You are racist and sexist." I imagine the film as a way of safely calling attention to the character's flaws as well as the flaws of the audience. And yet, film in this sense is also a way of calling attention to the shared experiences of the audience and the characters. In 1987, Francois Truffaut predicted:

The film of tomorrow appears to me as even more personal than an individual and autobiographical novel, like a confession, or a diary. The young filmmakers will express themselves in the first person and will relate what has happened to them. It may be the story of their first love or their most recent; of their political awakening; the story of a trip, a sickness, their military service, their marriage,

their last vacation...and it will be enjoyable because it will be true, and new... The film of tomorrow will not be directed by civil servants of the camera, but by artists for whom shooting a film constitutes a wonderful and thrilling adventure. The film of tomorrow will resemble the person who made it, and the number of spectators will be proportional to the number of friends the director has. The film of tomorrow will be an act of love.<sup>5</sup>

Filmmaking, for me, is the act of love Truffaut predicted. Nora M. Alter states, “—the essay film produces complex thought that at times is not grounded in reality but can be contradictory, irrational, and fantastic.”<sup>6</sup> I think, together, both of these quotes give authority to the filmmaker. According to these statements, filmmakers have the power to show you their reality, sometimes altered, sometimes biased, sometimes only what they want you to know, things you would never want to know, fantasy based on reality, reality that only seems possible in fantasy, and it is their right given by this medium to do so. Although some may try, my reality, even when not fully grounded, is unchallengeable. My perception is unavailable for alteration. Ironically, however, I seek to alter the perception of my viewer. I seek to teach them what I know and what I feel, and hope that they find some commonality or epiphany within my work.

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<sup>5</sup> Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, (London, UK: Wallflower Press, 2009), 110.

<sup>6</sup> Rascaroli, 25.

I *am* the others.

I think that, as an artist, I am obligated to not exclude any person from the conversation. I do not aim to do that. I want to create community that fosters storytelling and discussion that my viewers and contributors feel fearlessness and no hesitation.

Dorothy Allison uses her experiences of growing up in the working-class South to “grab the readers by the throat” and to give them a very honest and heartbreaking taste of the “ungrateful poor”.<sup>7</sup> She unapologetically discusses her white-trash upbringing, incestuous abuse, sexuality, and how capitalism keeps the toxic cycle alive.<sup>8</sup> She talks about trying to escape this vicious cycle of southern poverty to leave who she was and become something better.<sup>9</sup> Who she is always lingers inside, as a secret she would try to hide, but that made her who she is today.<sup>10</sup> She recalls,

The dreams were so vivid, I became convinced they were about the life I was meant to have had, and I began to work even harder to put as much distance as I could between my family and me. I copied the dress, mannerisms, attitudes, and ambitions of the girls I met in college, changing or hiding my own tastes, interests, and desires, I kept my lesbianism a secret, forming a relationship with

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<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Allison. "Bastard Out of Carolina." Speech, Southern Film Festival, Virginia Commonwealth University's Harris Hall Auditorium, Richmond, VA, September 15, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Allison.

<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Allison, "A Question of Class," In *History Is a Weapon*, <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/skinall.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Allison. "A Question of Class."

an effeminate male friend that served to shelter and disguise us both. I explained to friends that I went home so rarely because my stepfather and I fought too much for me to be comfortable in his house. But that was only part of the reason I avoided home, the easiest reason. The truth was that I feared the person I might become in my mama's house, the woman of my dreams—hateful, violent, and hopeless.”<sup>11</sup>

She mentions that she so easily masked her real self, because “everything in our culture—books, television, movies, school, fashion—is presented as if it is being seen by one pair of eyes, shaped by one set of hands, heard by one pair of ears.”<sup>12</sup>

Her story, a very personal and heartbreaking narrative, is one that many may have a hard time absorbing, but also speaks to the theoretical problems of our class system and capitalism. Through her words and stories, she fearlessly tells other women who relate to her struggle that they do not have to feel alone or as different and isolated as they may.

Allison’s narratives make me think of my own upbringing. In my stories, I tell of tensions and tragedies, some that are socially, probably, meant to stay in the family. My family did not grow up with money. Like good members of a capitalist society, we have fought and worked hard to stay afloat. Our luck has worked against us more times than not, though.

I was raised by a strong, single mother. She did everything that she possibly could to make sure my sister and I knew we were not poor and unworthy. She gave us more than she could afford and constantly reminded us that we can be anything that we want to be, and go anywhere that we want to go. I always tried to stifle my southern accent, to be less of a sick child, and less of a poor kid. In a way, it worked. I am the first in my family to get a bachelor’s degree and soon a master’s degree. I always have something else lingering with me, though. By

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<sup>11</sup> Allison.

<sup>12</sup> Allison.

not embracing the very real, sometimes dysfunctional, upbringing, I am leaving out an opportunity to share a story that might allow someone else to not feel so alone and disenfranchised.

Back then, we still had the physical food stamps, not the contemporary EBT card. I remember the embarrassment I would feel when my mom would pull them out of her wallet. When I think about it, I wonder if I was only embarrassed because she was. The system, however broken it may be, was integral to my family's ability to have food, a roof over our heads, and clothes on our backs. I remember the kids I grew up with, some who were my close friends, would say things their parents would say, things about the lazy welfare slobs who do not want to work and just want to cheat the system. I did not know how to explain that they were describing what was my family, but they were so wrong. One friend even told me once that he knew my family really needed it, because my mom is really disabled. He did not even know why or how she was disabled, so he had no real way of knowing if our reasons for being poor were legitimate.

Sara Ahmed quotes Meera Syal's first book "Anita and Me."<sup>13</sup> The main character, Meena, a girl from India, listens to her friend Sam refer to Indians as "darkies" and "wogs" getting handouts.<sup>14</sup> Sam says to Meena, "When I said them... I never meant you, Meena! It was all the others, not you!"<sup>15</sup> Meena responds by saying, "I *am* the others, Sam. You did mean

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<sup>13</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 149.

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed, 152.

<sup>15</sup> Ahmed, 152.



me.”<sup>16</sup> When someone says something hurtful about a group of people, it is not justified by saying that their one friend in that group is an exception. Through my work, I have the opportunity to discuss different group identities, and open the discussion of what we expect of the poor and the sick. That discussion changes when we stop thinking about groups, and realize that these groups are made of individual human beings who are mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, and lovers.

My video art piece, *Home*, is an abstract work made from found and recorded materials from my family’s house fire. My mother, who suffers from a trauma-based disorder and mental illness, has been having an increasingly difficult time with her health. At the peak of her anxiety, she suffered an episode of flashbacks of her childhood trauma, and burned the house, destroying nearly everything, and leaving it uninhabitable. The film is not meant to exploit my mother’s illness or this tragedy that my family has faced, but a response and anger to the failing mental health system in Mississippi. I did everything that I could to get my mother the help she needed, and facilities and doctors continued to turn their backs.

After the fire, I dug our family photos from the rubble. I cried as I carried sopping, wet albums and loose photos to the trunk of my car, thanking God that most of them were still intact. They were in the room where the fire began. The plastic sleeves barely began to melt on the edges. The plastic bin that they were stored in was completely melted, exposing them. I spent weeks sorting through each image. I dried each one individually after laying them out, and soaking them to unstick some of the clusters of images that were fused together. Once it was all done, I spent several more weeks looking through the particularly damaged photographs that no

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<sup>16</sup> Ahmed, 152.

longer had any trace of an image left. Those photos only had splotches of color. I cannot let go of them, because they no longer exist in the way they are intended to exist. They are, in a way, disabled, though no fault of their own, just as my mother is. Yes, she burned down our home, yes, she needs help with her mental health, but no, she does not fit into the stereotype that some people imagine. I am the daughter of a disabled, single mother, and she pushed me to be the best me that I could be in spite of the devastation her own life has brought her. This piece is made with love, anger, and a need to piece together something that simply cannot be.

Those flashes of color become individual frames of paint, flashing on the screen like an animation. They represent the flames. A base layer of images of the house, before we moved in, shows rooms that are untouched and fresh. Then there is a layer of me. I recorded myself walking through the aftermath, and my ghosted image is set on fire by the flashes of color, and I am wandering into the rooms of the before and after. I want people to know what happens when a family filled with so much love for one another tries so hard to help each other, when the system is not set up to benefit anyone but those who do not need the assistance. Susan Wendell points out that disability policies are written with the assumption that, “disability must have enormous economic disadvantages, or else large numbers of people will want to be, or to pretend to be, disabled.”<sup>17</sup> I wonder what people the policy makers have met who wish they could be disabled. It is a sad, and devastating truth that uninformed people do not wish to help those in need out of fear for being required to help everyone, including those without need.

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<sup>17</sup> Wendell, 64.

below the neck, above the knees

Johanna Hedva's "Sick Woman Theory" discusses how her disability has marginalized her, but how any fight against discrimination is a fight for all. She says, "In [the Native American Cree language], one does not say, 'I am sick.' Instead, one says, 'The sickness has come to me.' I love that and want to honor it."<sup>18</sup> To say that I am sick, it assumes I have choice in being sick. When I say that the sickness has come to me, it removes the assumption of choice. I think the word sick, in this quote, could transcend to describe any burden placed on me that may deem me undesirable or unfit.

Something that my mind always travels back to every morning, walking to and from my car, when looking in a mirror, eating, standing in a public space, when I am with friends in a less public space, when I am alone, and generally when I am awake, I am a Sick Woman. Identifying with that title seems self-deprecating, but it has made me feel like maybe I am not so crazy. I feel

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<sup>18</sup> Johanna Hedva, "Sick Woman Theory," (*Mask Magazine*, January 2016), <http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory>.

liberated and a part of a network. Maybe there are many sick women out there, hiding away the sickness and wanting an outlet and to be seen and heard. Therefore, I imagine my audience as any woman who has ever felt less-than, overworked, underpaid, underachieved, overly emotional, afraid, uneducated, ugly, sick, a hypochondriac, tired, dismissed, unloved, criticized, dictated, and unable. I relate with these women, and my story corresponds to their stories.

Johanna Hedva's "Sick Woman Theory" encompasses those who are considered less-than or who ever felt less-than.<sup>19</sup> Her theory is not meant for those who are only bed-ridden, only on medication, and only mistakenly deemed by society as disabled and useless.<sup>20</sup> She defines:

The Sick Woman is all of the 'dysfunctional,' 'dangerous,' and 'in danger,' 'badly behaved,' 'crazy,' 'incurable,' 'traumatized,' 'disordered,' 'diseased,' 'chronic,' 'uninsurable,' 'wretched,' and altogether 'dysfunctional' bodies belonging to women, people of color, poor, ill, neuro-atypical, differently abled, queer, trans, and gender fluid people, who have been historically pathologized, hospitalized, institutionalized, brutalized, rendered 'unmanageable,' and therefore made culturally illegitimate and politically invisible.<sup>21</sup>

Me, but it isn't me, or it isn't *just* me.

In an interview with Scott MacDonald for *A Critical Cinema 5*, Jennifer Reeves discusses her film *Chronic*. An essayist film, *Chronic* is the story of a young girl experiencing a heavy trauma. The story is a part of Reeve's own personal history.<sup>22</sup> Reeves plays the main character, Gretchen, narrates the story, and uses her own childhood photographs.<sup>23</sup> She explains that

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<sup>19</sup> Hedva.

<sup>20</sup> Hedva.

<sup>21</sup> Hedva, "Sick Woman Theory."

<sup>22</sup> Scott MacDonald, "Jennifer Todd Reeves," In *A Critical Cinema 5*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 339.

<sup>23</sup> MacDonald, 339.

“Gretchen is a version of herself,” and that most of Gretchen’s experiences are similar but different to her own experiences.<sup>24</sup> In the beginning of the film, Gretchen is sexually assaulted by a group of men at a fraternity party. Reeves states that this never happened to her, but she did have an experience being sexually assaulted by young men.<sup>25</sup> The theme of the film displays the way a victim can internalize and self-blame when there is little support. Her story confronts the viewers, the survivors, and the perpetrators. She also confronts herself, leaving the door open for self-reflection and criticism. The act of sharing personal stories can be heavily transgressive, but it rewarded this filmmaker with an audience who expressed how important the film is.<sup>26</sup> Many viewers could relate, and respected what she was doing.

The untrained artist is not one to be taken seriously. Within my own personal experiences in academia, there is an unspoken, ill-defined myth about what is and is not art, and who is allowed to make art, and what is allowed to be made in these contexts. In terms of personal stories and theory playing a vital role in feminist theory, recognizing that “untrained” art is necessary to hearing all voices, and not simply those with a higher education.

In her essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde describes poetry as “the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.”<sup>27</sup> She classified the “white fathers” were of intellect while the “black mothers” were of feeling.<sup>28</sup> The white fathers, or any privileged person,

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<sup>24</sup> MacDonald, 334.

<sup>25</sup> MacDonald, 336.

<sup>26</sup> MacDonald, 340.

<sup>27</sup> Audre Lorde, *Poetry Is Not a Luxury.pdf*, PDF.

<sup>28</sup> Lorde.

has no need to give name to the nameless, because they never had to be nameless or feel what it meant to be such. Personal film, like poetry, gives name to the nameless. T.V. Reed explores feminist conscious-raising, or spreading awareness, in his essay “The Poetical is the Political: Feminist Poetry and the Poetics of Women’s Rights.” In the 1970s, women used poetry, although a supposed male medium, to invent a language to describe the experience of oppression.<sup>29</sup> They went to the streets to share their prose as a way of conscious-raising what mattered to individual women to form the agenda of the activism.<sup>30</sup>

Like poetry for women in the 1970s, and similar to the use of the confessional camera of women in that time, personal films are my way of sharing my experience as a sick child growing into a sick woman while facing poverty in the South. I strive to raise attention to the conditions and challenges that I have faced, to bring further awareness and change into the conditions and challenges of others, and to give name to the nameless, something several other artists/writers strive to do. Returning to Dorothy Allison’s quote about change that began this essay, we must know the conditions in order to change them. Without knowing them or recognizing them, the theory is almost fantasy.

There are a few personal films, particularly, that have spoken to me and served as my inspiration. One is Ashley Manor’s film *For Memory’s Sake* (2010). She creates a documentary of her grandmother Angela Singer, a southern woman who photographs and films her own loss,

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<sup>29</sup> T.V. Reed, "The Poetical Is the Political," In *Feminist Theory Reader*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 85.

<sup>30</sup> Reed, 86.

abuse, and daily life for over thirty-five years.<sup>31</sup> This film highlights the regional expectations of women as mothers, and the mannerisms expected of these mothers in the home and society. Through this film, Manor gives voice to a southern woman who is unable to recognize herself as an artist. Without knowing why, Singer obsesses over her seemingly mundane photographs. The truth behind her own documentation gives light to a southern woman's hardships. Together, Manor and Singer show Singer's story of abuse, love, and what it might look like for some women living as untrained artists in the South. With heartbreaking pride, Singer was able to become someone more than another southern woman lost in the country. She became her own voice.

I am also drawn to *Daughter Rite* (1979) by Michelle Citron, which is a film about a mother and daughter, and the love and resentment cycle that can only come from a mother/daughter relationship.<sup>32</sup> Citron recounts memories of her mother, the love she has for her, and the sadness of not having the ideal relationship with her. In one section, she reasons, "here was my mother telling me I wasn't [a loving person], and I believed her, because she was my mother." She describes her mother's idea of love as a "total sacrificial act," that her mother gave to her mother, who gave to her mother, and so on. The way Citron says she believes her mother, when she labels her unloving, for the simple fact that she is "mother," is heartbreaking. The story unfolds the relationship as a painful love. Two actresses recreate what seems to be an interview with the camera. They are two sisters, going through the belongings of their hospitalized mother.

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<sup>31</sup> *For Memory's Sake*, Directed by Ashley Manor. (United States: Self-Reliant Film, 2010), DVD.

<sup>32</sup> *Daughter Rite*, Directed by Michelle Citron, (United States: Women Make Movies, 1980). DVD.

They begin recalling certain moments, many that are toxic, between them and their mother. Citron weaves her narration in and out of the film with the two sisters talking. There is a moment where the viewer recognizes the mental and emotional toll that their mother has had on them. The sisters have an undying love for this woman, a need to defend her, but also a need to detach from the relationship to find their own sense of the self. There is a moment when one sister tells the other about their mother's husband raping her in her childhood bedroom. The mother knew, and ignored what happened, and the young girl found her escape in her older sister's dormitory in college.

These films are platforms for the women who make them, the women who watch them, and the women whose stories are relatable to them. In both films, we are able to see the way that social and familial norms have shaped how characters interact with their families and society, and how that interaction might be passed down. When thinking of my childhood trauma stemming from my experience with childhood cancer and the way that my mother taught me about my body, I have realized she taught me only what she could from her own experience and from her own childhood trauma, one that was unimaginably abusive.

In my thesis film, *below the neck, above the knees*, I take inspiration from a quote of my mother's. As a child under constant examination by medical staff, I was particularly vulnerable to the possibility of being abused. My mother's way of explaining this to me was, "Never let someone touch you below the neck or above the knees." Stages of life are important to this piece, and I use the comparison of being a child touched by a doctor, the violence and love that this touch holds, to the time I was older and had my first lover, a kind of touch that is also filled with love and sometimes violence. I realize that the biggest question that I have tried to answer within my work is, "When is violation *violation*, and when is it *healing*?" My film recounts a series of



moments and stories throughout my childhood and adult life. My experience with cancer was a violation of my body, but one that I was constantly told would heal me. My mother's childhood abuse was a violation against her body, but one that was only a violation. My film describes my love for my mother, even when she does not love herself, and how I have feared that she would kill herself my entire life. The film mentions a time, shortly before my parents divorced, that my father put my mother away into a hospital. For her, in that moment, she was once again being violated, but it was meant to heal. She never forgives my father, and she never finds absolute healing. The question of "When is violation *violation*, and when is it *healing*?" does not always have a clear answer. In my film, even when it seems that healing is the intended outcome, it is not a simple black and white answer. After connecting moments of violation and a cycle of love and resentment between my mother and I, the film concludes with a more universal summary:

I think of my mother's teachings. She would tell me, 'Never let someone touch you below the neck or above the knees.' This meant something different to me each year of my life, from the time I was held down by five doctors and nurses, so that they could penetrate my chest with their poison, to the time I could no longer go to the neighbor's house, because the little girl there had been hurt by her cousin, to the time I had my first lover, and to the time I realized that a doctor's love for medicine left similar bruises and scars that a lover's hands can leave on my chest, my hips, my neck, my cheeks. The rules of my mother meant something else once I realized they had been the rules of all the mothers before her. I cry for them. I cry for myself. Their rules are lessons. I have heard that one should not say, 'I am sick.' Instead, one should say, 'The sickness has come to me.' For me, it feels as if it will never depart.

In Alice Walker's essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South," she describes the sexism and racism that comes with art.<sup>33</sup> She speaks directly for the black mothers who were denied a chance to even see the worth in their art. I grew up in an underclass family, with a mother who never saw her own worth, and therefore I deeply

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<sup>33</sup> Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (1974)," (Ms. Magazine, 2002).

related to this essay. I imagine these women telling their daughters stories, in the way mine did. I imagine their gardens as magical havens for them to escape and dream, using their hands to construct life. I think of all the Southern mommas making their quilts, some with squares of fabric from certain times in their children's lives, placing photographs in scrapbooks, trying to keep a story alive. Some sing, like Walker says, because singing was the one thing that couldn't be taken from them.<sup>34</sup>

I imagine my own mother's paintings from when I was a child. Her untrained hand painted landscapes from somewhere else, somewhere with hope and escape for the world. There are mothers who were unable to be because they were told that they could never be— Mothers who had daughters, some without the choice to say yes or no. They show their daughters the love of creating and seeing. Those are their stories. They were artists without the privilege or knowledge to be allowed such a title. I think of the end of Alice Walker's poem:

To discover books  
Desks  
A Place for us  
How they knew what we  
Must know  
Without knowing a page  
Of it  
Themselves.<sup>35</sup>

I use personal stories within my work, because, after everything setting me apart from those who are seemingly most welcomed in this world, I am privileged with the right to tell my story, when many women before me, my mother included, were silenced.

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<sup>34</sup> Walker.

<sup>35</sup> Walker.

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## Vita

Desiree Dawn Kapler was born September 17, 1990 in Miami, Florida. At the age of two, she and her family moved to Clinton, MS, where she grew up. She graduated from Clinton High School in 2009. After attending Hinds Community College, she transferred to the University of Mississippi where she received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts in 2014. In 2010, Desiree was awarded the Mississippi and the Arts Scholarship in the Fine Arts division. In 2013, one of her photographs was accepted for exhibition in the San Antonio Public Library in Texas, for the show *Making Herstory*, she also exhibited work and a performance in the show *Feminine Cartographies* for the 2015 Isom Center Gender Conference at the University of Mississippi. In 2014, she was awarded a scholarship from the Mississippi State Committee of the National Museum for Women in the Arts. Her film *Ode to the Port* has screened at *Dallas VideoFest (2016)*, *Push! Film Festival (2016)*, *Oxford Film Festival (2017)*, and *Crossroads Film Festival (2017)*. She received her Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Film from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2017.