

Epitaph for Family

Johanna Breiding

*Accompanying texts by Maggie Nelson, Malene Dam,
Don Romesburg, and Jennifer Moon*

Epitaph for Family is a multi-media project exploring love, intimacy, loss, and queer family-making through the image and connotations of the horizon line.

Drawing distinction between that which is distant and within reach, the horizon line serves as an orientational tool that locates one at home. It determines space by assuming a linear perspective and a single, stable spectator, defining notions of time, place, and the subject. Extending a line from the metaphor of the horizon to the idea (and ideal) of family, *Epitaph for Family* explores the way in which family serves as a locator, as the primary introduction to community, and an orienting device that shapes one's relationship to gender, race, class, and intimacy. As a pre-determined structure, family becomes practical, prescribing a socioeconomic and political agenda towards heteronormativity and legibility.

The project turns toward the notion of queer family-making to examine various constructions of family, as well as the desires, needs, and ideologies that influence family-making and relationships. It questions the difference between, and sameness within, queer and heteronormative family structures, and how these constructs define the individual and community. If one's position in the world is determined by their inhabitation in space, can one find place on unstable ground? Through formal connections, disruption and repetitive acts, the project aims to destabilize the notion of family as a reachable end, skewing the centrality of this ideal through rearticulation and refusal.

THANK YOU

“Magic Hour” video portrait participants include: Dean Spade, Calvin B., Rachel Carns, Darius Morrison, taisha paggett, Julie Tolentino, Samuel White, Don Romesburg, and Asha Romesburg.

“Andrea” collaborators: writer and narrator Jennifer Moon (Jennifer Moon and the Revolution), editor Cary Cronenwett (*Maggots and Men, Piece of Mind*)

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I would also like to thank Tyler Matthew Oyer for his ongoing support, loyalty and friendship, and Shoghig Halajian for listening, advising, and opening up a part of me that I didn’t even know existed—adding to the silver.

Maggie Nelson

On Johanna Breiding's Epitaph for Family

The title *Epitaph for Family* suggests that we might understand the wide-ranging voices, images, and ideas presented here as a sort of memorial for something deceased and already interred, be it “The Family,” the artist’s family, the artist’s mother, an uninterrupted horizon, and so on. But what I find most striking, indeed most moving, in this ambitious constellation is its lively, steadfast reparative impulse, in the Eve Sedgwick sense of the phrase: “Reparation is for Sedgwick about learning how to build small worlds of sustenance that cultivate a different present and future for the losses that one has suffered. You could say that it is about loving what hurts but instead of using that knowledge to prepare for a vigilant stand against repetition, it responds to the future with affirmative richness.” *Epitaph for Family* revolves in and around this world-building, this cultivation of different presents and futures, this loving what hurts, even in the face of melancholy or catastrophe. It’s affirmative and rich even as, especially as, it mourns.

The reparative impulse runs like an electrical current through the show’s presiding image: that of the horizon line, which links up to the table-line (at which various friends and acquaintances discuss experiences of family and love), which links up to the table-line of the meticulous, sleek “queered” still lifes, and so on. This insistence on linkage is remarkable in that it doesn’t correspond to a desire to homogenize. The formal similarity of the table settings in the looping video “Magic Hour” instead offers a space to meditate on the differences between each speaker and tableaux, be they differences in surroundings, biographical backgrounds, conceptions or experiences of queerness, or the felt desire/ use for the term “family” at all. What makes this panoply of voices queer, if anything, has little to do with definable content, and more to do with its insistence that we take the time to listen to individual people’s opinions, stories, identifications, sorrows, sensibilities, fears, and aspirations, without the disciplinary hope that they will cohere into something uniform, even if it’s the uniformly hopeful.

“Normativity reaches for us, grabs for us,” one of the eloquent speakers in “Magic Hour” says. “But we demand something more.” That “more” here seems to entail an aliveness to a range of full and ambivalent feelings: wanting assimilation and mourning assimilation; the deep pleasure of offering and receiving unconditional love and the knowledge that such love “doesn’t solve everything . . . that pain is written into our being”; excitement at the prospect of escaping given family/ forging new forms of kinship, and the serious, sometimes intolerable grief that can derive from removal—be it forcible, voluntary, or eventual—from birth family, and so

on. These generous testimonies on care, love, and loss are delivered in domestic settings, but by conjoining them in conversation, Breiding works against the mechanisms of privatization that have historically defined the sphere.

Breiding is interested in this upending—hence the focus on the horizon line interrupted by “man-made” objects, the attempt to queer the still life, the retrospective interrogation of her archive of home movies. I can’t help but wonder, however, whether in looking for interruptions of normativity, the artist but underlines its native instability—its impossibility, even. Breiding says that in the making of “Andrea,” she went looking for disturbances of identity that might surreptitiously trouble an otherwise perfect dream of heteronormative family life. But there’s a fundamental, poignant strangeness in the familial and cultural rituals in this footage which needs no unveiling. It’s in the uncanny national rituals in which effigies fall to pieces and white men wear tri-cornered hats while riding horses, it’s in the energetic child’s inverted mask, it’s in the fire that won’t go out on a birthday cake, no matter how many times it’s blown out.

It’s also in the love. Breiding says that when she looks back at these home movies, she sees “a love that now feels empty.” But the love looks pretty full to me. The mother has an affectionate ease with her children that feels almost shocking in its tenderness. Maybe that’s the “pain written into our being” part—the fullness of the love corresponds to the agonizing fullness of the loss.

The love and the loss exceed any dyad of the normative and the queer. Likely they exceed everything. They criss-cross the line between that which is given, that which is made. When I close my eyes and think about *Epitaph for Family*, I see a mother hoisting a small body onto her hip; I hear a chorus of individuals thinking, feeling, and sharing their way in and out of complex forms of relation; and I see the artist’s child-body, humbled and thrilled by a ravishing, expansive field of yellow flowers.

Malene Dam

Letter to J. Wishing I could be there.

I think about that afternoon getting drunk in your backyard this spring. About the sense of family we felt, all together again. I had come for a kind of queer nourishment. I needed to feel comfortable in my own skin, a sense of home. Skype was no longer enough.

Last year I moved back to what I for years had left, when my mother became threatened by illness.

And now I am back in the fortress of Europe. Denmark just saw the results of the general election. Racism and homophobia prevailed like never before.

I'm often asked, what's it like being back. I avoid answering that I can't escape the nagging feeling that I'm putting my life on hold to be here. Yet, there is nowhere else I would want to be right now. I need to be held by our little family and be with you. But it also holds me in a specific way, to borrow Maggie Nelson's words. The complacency, racism and heteronormativity here take a toll on me.

The rest of me, if our beings can be so neatly divided into sections, needs my queer LA family. And yet these are geographically incompatible.

How do we balance our lives according to this nourishment. I can only go on, I can only flourish, if I have this. This is not a small thing. I am sick of being told that this kind of nourishment is a privilege, it is not.

When José Muñoz speaks of horizons I think about layers — we sink into, are surrounded by, and dream of. And how these layers don't align and mix in a palpable horizon.

In cancer the horizons keep changing; was it a good result, or a bad one. Cancer disrupts any notion of horizons, it's unknown, it's deceitful, its promise can change at any point, good or bad. But what it does promise is the importance of the here and now. I'm held in this concreteness.

I dreamt of J on her way to the pool. Happy. And encouraging.

I dream of having kids around and with my friends. As I write this, I hear the judging voices in my head: *you are so spoiled, so selfish, woman, have you given up on men.* Feminism has a long long way to go in this country. I sometimes dream of being Swedish. In J's video Dean Spade talks about building a family more open and inclusive of kids, when having kids can be

so isolating.

During a walk at the summerhouse, after a particularly bad scan, I blurt out how I want to have a kid before you are no longer here. I follow up this statement by how ridiculous it would be to rush into such a thing. While we are both weeping, you tell me you wish to be here for all of this too. We settle on finding comfort in the uncertainty of our horizon and continue our walk. What I didn't say to you so directly was how frightened I had been to find this urge. This urge to somehow fit the heteronormative mold, as if it would provide you with a promise of my happy future, if you were no longer here.

One is supposed to be hopeful. But I somehow find comfort in the paralyzing state of a kind of preemptive grief. Allowing myself to be sad. Only in the scenario of the worst possible outcome am I able to meet this sadness and go into it. Which is perhaps due to the fact that our society is all about prognosis, therapy, efficiency, productivity, and happiness. I don't wanna be fucking efficient with my emotions. I don't want to manage them.

The rhythm of our made-up routines at our monthly long-weekends at your summerhouse is what gives nourishment. This time together—long walks, food, more food. The conversation around illness enters, but it is not at the center here. It is rather a space organized around the much needed love there is in just spending time together. Time which may not be abundant in the future.

These made-up routines give the illusion of something simple that is forever. It's what is shattered by a bad scan. To an outsider the rhythm of cancer is confusing. How some weeks are very dark and hard, and then in others normalcy comes around and it just becomes part of everyday life.

J, I really wish I could be there and spend this time with you, but I'm grateful to be a part of it through writing. I'm always amazed at your generosity and your sense of community.

Miss you greatly and promise to come for a visit soon.

Much love,
M

Jennifer Moon

Narrated text for Johanna Breiding's essay film, Andrea

Imagine there is a death. But there is no end.

In 2007, my mother died: an unusual death, an untimely death, a freak accident. She choked on a piece of meat. The loss of my mother shifted me, pushed me off center, askew to a world faithfully oriented around the family; a purity of love embodied in the identity of a mother and mine was gone, forever. Death signifies an end. But the death of a loved one lives forever in a perpetual state of undead: we are desperate to keep them alive in memories, in hope, in sadness, in joy, in longing, in despair, in loneliness.

In 1997, there was another death: the death of an assumed identity, a prescribed identity, a dominant identity that began to subjugate me. I felt the determination of identity forcing its way down my throat and I refused to swallow. It lodged itself in my throat and began to suffocate me, constrict my voice, asphyxiate my life, so I killed it and informed my family without any sorrow. This death also shifted me, pushed me off center, askew to a world faithfully oriented around the family; a purity of love determined and embodied in the identity of a heteronormative family disrupted, forever.

The ghostly residue of the dead, it lingers. The death of a mother, the death of an identity, the death of a family; they all linger, waiting. Do they linger in wait for us to visit them again in moments of longing, to resurrect in the inebriation of memory, to suspend in a perpetual state of undead; a unifying space where the living and the dead become one, caught in an existence that is half alive and half dead; unable to fall, to fall apart in order to create a new certainty falling into place? No, it is the living who refuse to let the dead dissolve completely into death.

This space of the undead, where we keep the dead alive, where is it located? Is it beyond the horizon that my eyes fixate on to keep me grounded? Situated in bodies of water with unseeable depth? Atop balconies that beckon us to fall? Or is it located in the act of orientation, in the effect of inhabitation, fixated within the richest junctures where everything aligns momentary, in perfect unison, to mean the same thing?

I watch these reels from my childhood, of old family footage, looking for something: the route of death; searching for clues, glimpses of queerness, disturbances of identity, deviations from a prescribed love, points of pressure rupturing from a representation of love that now feels empty.

The refracting light of the sun that cuts through and disrupts a moving portrait of my mother and father standing side by side for the camera, as the ideal couple, becomes proof of a queer cosmos. These points of pressure fracture into a comfort found in breaking apart, in the death of horizons.

I return to these projections of family also seeking something else: life, a certain slant of light that I have known to be my mother. These remains of a life, now slighted, form tenuous connections of intimacy. They create additional points of pressure that rupture inside of me. If there is comfort found in disruption, deviation, breaking apart, and falling, then there is comfort here too: in the collapse of horizons, in the disorientation of free fall, in the bottomless abyss of the sea, and in the death of my mother.

A free fall continually suspended by a grounded memory. My memories become shelves, architecture for the dead to reside. Feelings remain abstract and in flux, transitional and unstable; but the details of my location in space and time, my points of orientation to the physical world, are inescapable.

I remember dates, times, smells, a bat landing on my head, an aging enchantress wearing an infinity necklace reading my future on strange cards that I have never before seen—odd occurrences that now seem like premonitions of death. I recall my precise locations, the distinct direction I am facing the world, details of manmade designs, and the omnipresence of horizons and bodies of water—a lake eighteen years ago; a river eight years ago. Why is it that during these moments of death, I stand atop ledges that play with our fascination of falling? I am beckoned into free fall but, instead, I create steps with these housed memories within tiered shelves, a grounding in familiar objects, architecture I can grasp; all of it to prevent disorientation.

Infinite. Infinity. A loop that crosses over, twists and folds over itself in an attempt to touch the line that came before. Perhaps believing it is creating a new line but finds itself back where it started. Infinite affinity.

I have used my memories to conjure magic once, in an attempt to raise the dead. You were lodged deeply in a state of unconsciousness, where we imagine time, space, orientations, objects, and others no longer exist, suspended in an unreachable realm of unfathomable depth. I searched my memories for all the worldly things that brought you joy, all the things you

had once loved that would now entice your senses back into this world of relations: your favorite roses, hand-picked by your expert hands, from one hundred and fifty different varieties; the song you danced to in the arms of your first and only lasting love, spinning you around in love-bound circles as it sang how wonderful you looked tonight. I brought these temporal artifacts to you as offerings and incantations, gathering them around you as we gather around tables to form bonds of family, of friendship, of community.

Your body figures a tabletop to arrange a still life of memories, compositions in sounds, whispers, touches, and caresses, embodied in wilting flowers, near empty hourglasses, and buttery masses of fat alongside sea creatures who have lost their way home. They congregate in ever-shifting formations to steady the horizon and prevent you from quivering into a maze of collapsing memories.

The complexity of my emotions begins to gather as well, infinite and disparate, creating disturbances and deviations in their inability to align with the horizon of constructed memories. The slippage of emotions allows the moments of disorientation to gather in their place, as if they were queer bodies around a different table, a table that propels us to face a different way, away from the rupturing horizon. Without a stable paradigm of orientation, grounding becomes an illusion; relative positions of above and below, before and after, oneself and others no longer exist: boundaries collapse into free fall. And it is here, in falling, in liminal space, where perspectives twist and fold into one another, that I understand death and life to be the same.

I will show you death deviant from a world stabilized by horizons, fracturing from the dark mass of your body positioned between rays of light and the grounded surface: the shadow you trail behind you at every morning rise and the hazy absence of transparency rising to meet you at every evening set. I will show you death in the quietus of identity, the disfiguring of family, and the eternal rest of a mother, collapsed in infinite reciprocity. I will show you death in the multiplicity of dust.

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Don Romesburg

We Are Not Enough

We all fail at family. How could it be otherwise? The gravitational pull of idealizations of family drag us into orbit through their promises of warmth and shining light. And yet. The sun burns too bright, blinds us, or sets too soon. Or it pulls us in, overtaking us. The lines of sight extend too far or not far enough. The state demands. The state refuses. Fortunes rise and fall. Bodies and hearts break. Needs go unmet and wants ignored. Lovers get too hot or leave us cold. Friends promise to be family but live (or die) otherwise. Couples embrace an openness that comes undone. Relationships seek security through fidelity then split apart. Parents expect. Parents disappoint. Or harm. Or love too much in the wrong ways. Or die. Children expect or disappoint or betray or break or die. We get needy. We get antsy. We lose our way. We fall behind. We move too fast. We don't give enough. We don't have enough. We have had enough.

We are not enough.

When psychoanalytic pediatrician D.W. Winnicott (1953/1971) described the "good-enough mother," he was on to something queer. Or rather, I never considered it something not queer, because my initial orientation to Winnicott came through reading *Are You My Mother?* (2012), Alison Bechdel's follow-up graphic memoir to *Fun Home*. Winnicott suggests that "good enough" mothering is preferable to perfect mothering. Maternal failure to meet some of a child's needs or wants, over time, pushes the child to seek out alternatives. When successful, these alternatives mix fantasies of how things could be with transitional objects and practices that enable their realization.

In the long view, Winnicott explains, effective transitional objects and practices, rather than being forgotten or mourned, become diffuse, spread out over the "whole cultural field" that mediates a person's relationship to those around them. In Jennifer Moon's narrated text for Johanna Breiding's *Andrea*, Johanna's heteronormative childhood identity became her transitional object when her good-enough family initially failed her yet-unrealized queerness. As this "prescribed identity ... began to subjugate her," she "killed it off ... without any sorrow." Rather than the mourning the loss of idealized familial love, Johanna went looking for something else from family, herself. *Epitaph for Family* suggests she still is.

For many people queered by families of origin and/or the ideologies and structures of normative family, the making of alternative families becomes the fantasy. Our alternative families become the transitional objects, our

ways of doing family the transitional practices through which we remake the fantasy again and again. For Winnicott, the end goal isn't independence. It's the capacity to psychically support ourselves in relation to others in belonging. To maintain that tension, it seems to me, our families have to keep failing us, and us them, at least a little.

Winnicott takes care to say that the "mother" need not be the mother, but any primary "carer" for a child. Decoupled from gender identity or biological relation, his "good-enough mother" can become a father, a genderqueer parent, and/or a foster/adoptive/step/other caretaker. He then goes on to use the term "mother" anyway, which invites people of all genders and parental roles to occupy the title. As a gay, white, transracially foster-adoptive dad to two black girls, I have appreciated the expansiveness of these concepts of "good enough" and "mother."

Yet Winnicott drags all of us back toward normativity. In the same essay, he tempers the queer "mother" by qualifying that "naturally, the infant's own mother is more likely to be good enough than some other person." He also cautions parents that homosexuality might be the outcome of mothering that is not good enough. To orient ourselves to queer potentiality through Winnicott, we have to squint.

Queer family making and unmaking is always situated through our proximities to normativity's manifestations. We cannot simply fly away into the sunset. Yet we assume at our own peril that the rising sun of normativity that now promises its light of recognition to some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people will sustain the families through which we orient ourselves. It is little wonder that in "Magic Hour" Julie Tolentino eschews the word "family," with all of its normative trappings. She embraces, instead, "community" as a space to fall out of and crawl back into, a space from which to see alternatives.

In queer circles, it's not so disorienting to claim that, as an aspirational ideology, state policy, or lived relation, normative family is a mirage. In his "Magic Hour" testimony, Dean Spade lays bare the "deep injustice" through which people get "fucked over" by family. He targets, especially, the ways that the state makes marriage a central mechanism through which to allocate what should be basic rights, and how both historically and today, marriage functions as a technology of social control most harmful to people of color and women. When mainstream LGBT rights discourses present equal access to civil marriage and family rights through the frame

of romantic and parental love, it ennobles certain kinds of same-sex relationships and families at the cost of further marginalizing others. The violence of these exclusions are often smoothed over through structures of feeling emphasizing that “love makes a family” and reassure us how maintaining an optimal family serves a strong society, economy, and nation.

In our historical present, public opinion and state policy trends toward the embrace of same-sex marriage and LGBT adoption. In the same moment, hostility is growing toward broader reproductive justice and single-parent families. In 2011, a Pew Research Center survey suggested that even among cultural conservatives, the recent increase in gay and lesbian couples raising children garners more acceptance than the rise in single mothers.

Interlocking assumptions about wealth, race, class, gender, and sexuality are bound into this trend. It also reflects ongoing popular media coverage on decades of family studies research indicating that the “optimal” family environment involves two committed parents living together, with a biological connection to their children, in which familial relations are not “disrupted” by divorce, or long-term parent-child separation/removal. Some LGBT families might meet the high bar of optimization. All it takes is having upbringings that approximate normative models and relations, and then, in our adult relationships, lifetime marital cohabitation, assistive reproductive technologies, and secure child-parent connection from our children’s birth through their late adolescence. Most of us, though, by circumstance or virtue of the ways we do family, are not good enough.

In “Where She Comes From” (2014), I call for “doing queer transracial family” as a critical affective, interpersonal, and political practice. It seeks to enact a blended, open vision for belonging that contests the consumerist, privatized family, colorblindness, and a gay marriage-and-kids movement that conforms to the desires of the neoliberal state. For my family, doing queer transracial family is a transitional practice that is, as I say in *Magic Hour*, “lived over and over again.” Even as “normativity grabs for us” we insist on something more than the story that “we are somehow ushering in this colorblind future where everybody gets to be normal in slightly different ways.”

Our impulse toward doing queer transracial family comes from seeing clearly how the rise in LGBT relationship and family recognition comes interwoven with neoliberal policies involving the rollback of welfare and the rise of the prison-industrial complex. These have led to the rapid displacement of

children out of low-income families of color and into adoptive permanency with predominantly white, middle-class families. My family's love cannot overcome this fundamental fact.

When Darius Morrison testifies in "Magic Hour" to the need for seeing the "bigger picture" in transnational adoption, he gazes into the "primal grief" involved in being "ripped away" from his birth mother through processes of globalization, fantasies of the white savior, and expectations that adoptive families are distanced from birth families' incursions. In *The Feeling of Kinship* (2010), David Eng urges us to imagine that transnational adoptees might find the space for two (or more) good-enough mothers, including birth and adoptive ones. This can only happen, though, if we can, collectively, reject the prescriptions of normative family. Then we can see that there "is no one law of kinship, no one structure of kinship," and take the view that "the feeling of kinship belongs to everyone."

The way my husband and I came into family, through domestic U.S. foster parenting and then adoption, is different than international adoption, to be sure. But there are many overlaps. I was heartened to hear my daughter Asha, in "Magic Hour", say she has a "really big family altogether" that includes her birth family and us. We maintain close relationships with our kids' birth families, we orient our family through diverse as well as black-centered spaces, we engage in anti-racist social justice, we encourage our girls to see themselves and the world through queer, critical race and feminist lenses, and we keep ourselves open to our girls' feelings, even the really hard ones. This is not easy. We do not always do it well.

We do all this because we know that we are not enough. But we hope that these things, in addition to our love, allow us to fail in ways that will help our kids view all us—gay adoptive dads, birth moms, and the rest—as good enough mothers.

That hope is the queer horizon that illuminates my family.

Deep gratitude to Johanna Breiding for inviting Asha and me into the gorgeous transitional object that is Epitaph for Family

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"Magic Hour", 2015.

Large scale installation consisting of 2 16mm projections and multi-channel video projections

(Dimensions variable)

Participants include: Dean Spade, Calvin B., Rachel Carns, Darius Morrison, taisha paggett, Julie Tolentino, Samuel White, Don Romesburg, and Asha Romesburg.

"Still Life Series (Still Life with Cristco, Still Life with Fish Heads, Still Life with Octopus and Inverted Basketballs, Still Life with Time, Still Life with Flaccid Candle)", 2015

5 Photographic Digital Prints

(Dimensions: 11"x17")

"Sighting the Object, Taking a Sight", 2014/2015

Photographic Series viewed as 35 mm Projections on Loop

(Dimensions variable)

"Split Frame", 2014

Sculptural Painting

(Dimensions 25"x37")

"Andrea", 2015

Archival Essay Film made in collaboration with Jennifer Moon

(Jennifer Moon & The Revolution) and Cary Cronenwett

(director of *Maggots and Men* and *Piece of Mind*)

(15 minutes)

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