

KINGFISH

by

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Abstract

Kingfish is a documentary film that addresses a 19-year estrangement between my father, Jack McDonald, and his brother, Dan. Despite research indicating that 1 in 12 people experience familial estrangement,¹ this phenomenon is rarely discussed. *Kingfish* explores the culture of silence surrounding family estrangement, as well as other complex factors contributing to its initiation and maintenance. To confront this, *Kingfish* poses a two-part question: *How does estrangement function and what are its effects?* I examine Jack and Dan's estrangement as a byproduct of significant events that were not properly addressed or processed. I also look at psychological concepts of *differentiation of self* and *betrayal of the family system*, as well as Jack and Dan's distinct valuation of money. Existing within the tradition of domestic ethnography and autobiographical documentary, *Kingfish* provides an intimate and personal portrait of family cut-off, which acts as one small initiative to confront the silence surrounding estrangement.

¹ Kylie Agllias, *Family Estrangement: A Matter of Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

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Subject

Kingfish is a short documentary film that addresses a 19-year estrangement between my father, Jack McDonald, and his brother, Dan. In 1972, Jack, Dan, and their mother, Helen, bought a building at 1490 Balfour Avenue in Vancouver, British Columbia with the hopes of turning it into an elderly care centre. That first property was the start of Day Boy Industries, a family business spanning 25 years.

Over the course of two and a half decades, the family bought nine more business properties; Jack had two marriages and four children; Helen became sick; Dan got married; Helen died; Jack, his second wife, and three children moved into Dan's home for a year; Dan adopted two children; and Jack made the decision to leave the business. Following this decision, in 1996, the business dissolved, substantial legal fees accrued, the business assets were divided, and Jack and Dan effectively cut one another out from their lives. Dan continued to run several elderly care facilities under a different business name and Jack went on to become an architect. After nearly two decades of silence, the brotherly standoff ended with Jack inviting Dan to his birthday dinner in 2015. Since then, the brothers have initiated a long journey to become reacquainted and repair their broken relationship.

This is just one simplified version of a complicated and multi-faceted history. Throughout my work on this project, I discovered that the simplification of a family narrative is one of the ways in which estrangement functions and, in fact, persists. To gain a deeper understanding of estrangement, I took the simplified narrative of Jack and Dan's relationship and complicated it,

by talking with family and friends, hearing the untold stories, and removing the calcified bits of our family history. This brings me to my primary two-part research question: *How does estrangement function and what are its effects?* I approached this question by unpacking and re-telling the stories orbiting around Jack and Dan's estrangement. This process revealed an additional topic, which provides further clarity to Jack and Dan's specific case of cut-off as well as to the larger phenomenon of estrangement: the distinct way each brother values money.

1.1 *Function and Effects of Estrangement*

Social work researcher Kylie Agllias states:

"Family estrangement is larger than conflict and more complicated than betrayal. It is entwined in contradictory beliefs, values, behaviours and goals and is the result of at least one member of the family considering reconciliation impossible and/or undesirable. The cessation of familial relations, whether that involves rejection or deciding to leave, can be an inordinately traumatizing experience. *Whilst data suggests that around 1 in 12 people are estranged from at least one family member this topic is rarely discussed or researched.*"² (Italics added by MRP author)

It is paradoxical that something as widespread and ubiquitous as estrangement receives such little research attention or open discussion. This suggests that stories of estrangement are silenced. In fact, I propose that this silencing is a necessary ingredient for estrangement—those who are estranged do not talk about it, so they continue to perpetuate their simplified narrative of

² Kylie Agllias, *Family Estrangement: A Matter of Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

what has happened and how things have unraveled.

This orchestrated silence further deepens divisions about who is right and who is wrong. Those who are close to the estranged do not talk about it, so the stories never leave the family circle. In a way, estrangement gets caught in an eddy; the memories of the separation spiral around themselves and rarely get heard or felt by those outside of the family current. This results in two distinct consequences. First, since most stories of estrangement are kept insulated and contained, they exist independently of each other, making each one an oddity. There is no language to discuss the estrangement; it was never developed and it becomes increasingly challenging to effectively incorporate into the family discourse. Second, without the awareness that most other families experience estrangement, those who are estranged think that they are alone; and without a shared rubric to carry on with their lives, they likely compartmentalize the trauma of the separation. Agllias says, “the grief associated with family estrangement is disenfranchised, never fully recognised by society, due to its inconclusiveness, and the social stigma associated with its admission.”³

Within this context, I see *Kingfish* as one story pulled from the eddy of my family history, having the power to initiate a minor shift in the current of surrounding familial relationships. Talking about Jack and Dan’s history of estrangement has complicated it, but it has also normalized it. It is no longer a self-enclosed narrative. The topic is now more accessible. Our family is learning

³ Kylie Agllias, “No Longer on Speaking Terms: The Losses Associated with Family Estrangement at the End of Life,” *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services* 92, no. 1 (2011): 110.

the language of estrangement, allowing for open and difficult discussions along with the sharing of perspectives.

1.2 *Causes of Estrangement*

To address how estrangement functions, one needs to identify the most prevalent contributing factors that lead to the act of separation. Disregarding extreme cases, where estrangement is the consequence of physical or emotional abuse, research suggests that unresolved grief plays a significant role in the fracturing of relationships. With this consideration, I examine Jack and Dan's estrangement as a byproduct of significant events that were not properly addressed or processed at the time. Throughout my interviews, a pattern emerged: nearly every person mentioned the death of Jack and Dan's mother. Helen was described as "the glue" that held the brothers together. I was told repeatedly that when she passed, in 1982, everything changed.⁴

Helen was a single mother. Jack and Dan's father left their family in April 1960. The two brothers and their mother existed in a delicate balance; when Helen died, her absence shifted the weight of the relationship. I believe neither brother properly mourned their mother's death. Instead, they compartmentalized their grief and carried on with their lives. Neither brother had the experience or aptitude for emotional communication; they both explicitly verbalized this in their interviews. Thus, rather than supporting each other through the process of proper mourning, they positioned themselves against each other, until eventually the friction was too strong and their relationship combusted.

⁴ See **Appendix** for Timeline of Events.

During the making of *Kingfish*, Helen's role in Jack and Dan's relationship was abundantly clear. As I dug deeper into the family stories, I unearthed two additional events: Helen lost a child in labour, and their father, Mack, abandoned the family. Their stillborn brother would have been the middle child. When he died, Helen was deeply affected and grew distant from Mack. "This is when they started to have trouble in their marriage," Jack told me. Then, after Jack was born, Mack left Helen and moved to Las Vegas with another woman, whose name was also Helen.

It would be extraordinary if these events did not impact the family. It certainly affected the relationship Jack and Dan had with their mother, which undoubtedly made the reality of her death more profound. And Jack and Dan did not communicate emotionally, likely because boys are rarely taught to express themselves. "It's unfortunate that your dad and I never shared on [an emotional] level," Dan told me. "I didn't realize we didn't. As kids, we were just never taught to do that." So, when Helen died, they did not have the capacity to fully mourn the loss of their mother. They both found means to grieve, independently of each other, and eventually the glue in their relationship dissolved and Jack and Dan grew further apart.

In providing an understanding for how and why estrangement occurs, researchers say there are two explanations, one biological and the other sociopolitical.⁵

(i) *Differentiation of self*

The biological explanation is born out of the theory of *differentiation of self*, which "suggests

⁵ Agllias, "No Longer on Speaking Terms," 108.

that individuals sit along a continuum from fusion to differentiation. Those who are least differentiated are more reactive to the emotional system (or anxiety) to the exclusion of intellect. The most highly differentiated individual will respond to anxiety with logical reasoning and decision making.”⁶ During the years leading up to Jack and Dan’s cut-off, the two brothers sat on different points along this continuum: Dan was closer to family fusion and Jack, as he grew older, slid closer to differentiation.

In the interviews, I continually heard that Jack was “thrust” into the family business. He was thirteen years old when it started, and he did not have much of a choice regarding participation. His older brother made many of the decisions for him and the family. “It was in Dan’s blood to run a business,” Jennifer said. And Dan made sure to pursue this calling, pouring himself into Day Boy Industries. This was influenced by the absence of Mack. “Dan sort of took on the father role,” Lori recalled. He believed that the survival of the family depended on him. Within this context, Dan held himself, his mother, and his brother to be one unit, fused tightly together. And he felt that he bore a responsibility for this unit.

Jack, on the other hand, did not see it this way. As he grew up, from adolescent to adult, he sought to differentiate himself from his brother. “I mean the bottom line is,” Jennifer said, “that dad [Jack] wanted to be an architect, do his art, and his music. He never wanted to run the business.” But, because of the family history, he was tightly integrated into the family system. Rather than amicably untying himself from the family and business bond, he chose a

⁶ Agllias, “No Longer on Speaking Terms,” 109.

path of sabotage, seeking a full differentiation of self through destructive means: not listening to those around him, spending money irrationally, drinking heavily, and recklessly selling family properties that were in his name. As Dan was so far along the fusion end of the continuum, he became more reactive and emotional when Jack sought differentiation. And eventually the schism between the brothers became so wide that bridging an understanding between Jack and Dan became seemingly impossible.

(ii) *Betrayal to the family system*

The sociopolitical explanation for estrangement is understood as a *response to a perceived betrayal or challenge to the family belief system*.⁷ E. G. Benschwanger states that “every cut-off is a reaction to the articulated or implied conviction that ‘you killed my god,’ whether the ‘god’ is defined as material possessions, adequate care, or respect for a significant person, value, or belief.”⁸ As Jack was on the path towards differentiating himself from his brother and their business, he was, in effect, “killing” Dan’s god. Dan’s identity was, and still is, intricately wrapped up in his business, his material possessions, and his notion of their family unit. The actions that came out of Jack’s pursuit for his own identity effectively betrayed the family system that Dan valued so dearly. And because neither brother had the skills or the experience to confront each other directly, they were not able to clearly communicate their values to each other. And with distinct world views, the differences between the two brothers grew larger, until eventually, estrangement seemed to be the only option.

⁷ E. G. Benschwanger, “Strategies to explore cut-offs,” in *The Therapist’s Own Family: Toward the Differentiation of Self*, (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson: 1987): 193.

⁸ Benschwanger, “Strategies to explore cut-offs,” 193.

1.3 Impacts of Estrangement

The effects that the separation has on those who are estranged can include increased anxiety, disenfranchised grief, prolonged distress, or unresolved guilt. The implications, however, are not isolated; they have the potential to carry over to those close to the estranged persons. And because family members often do not directly address the nature of the separation, relatives and close friends are susceptible to similar affective difficulties.

Further, these family members are often bystanders to the estrangement, wielding little to no control. The impacts of this can be felt more deeply and more significantly by these family members because they value the relationship differently than those responsible for the estrangement in the first place. This was most heavily felt by Jennifer, Jack's first child. In his early twenties, Jack married Lynne, Jennifer's mother. Their marriage was brief. Shortly after their divorce, Lynne moved to Australia and Jack married Lori. This left Jennifer in a void, with her father focusing on his new family and her mother living abroad. She said that during this time Dan became a "sort of father figure." To her, he was "stable" and someone who was consistently present in her life. When Dan cut-off Jack, and those close to Jack, Jennifer was again left alone. Throughout our interview, it quickly became clear how much pain and hurt this had caused her.

Disentangling the cause and impact of Jack and Dan's estrangement is complicated. When addressed from multiple perspectives, the story quickly becomes messy and difficult to understand. Consideration of the following issue helps clarify Jack and Dan's specific case of

cut-off as well as the larger phenomenon of estrangement.

(i) *Distinct valuation of money*

One of the most striking differences between Jack and Dan is their valuation of money. Dan admires wealth and has spent his whole life creating a sizeable fortune. Jack, on the other hand, philosophically and practically rejects wealth.

Dan built an intimate relationship with money in his youth. When Mack left the family, Helen became financially unstable. She was left to raise Jack and Dan as a single mother. “We were a broken family,” Dan said. And during those years Mack would not pay child support. Instead, he would occasionally leave a bag of groceries under the stairs to the house for the boys to eat. “That’s a bad memory,” Dan recalled. “We were going to have to go on welfare, and I vowed after that to never be poor.”⁹

Jack, on the other hand, was likely too young to understand the financial strain put on the family after Mack left. And as the younger brother, he would not have felt, like Dan did, the tremendous responsibility of filling the gap left by his absent father. “I felt invisible,” Jack said. Dan was so focused on “lifting the family out of poverty” he forgot how to be a brother. And Jack just followed along the family pursuits, until he eventually cracked and demanded that the business be split up. It is my personal opinion that Jack either consciously or

⁹ This specific memory surfaced during my conversations with Dan, on at least three separate occasions. Dan came to identify as an abandoned child “on the poor side of the tracks,” thus colouring his history and the stories he tells himself. And this became a primary driver of his behaviour. He considers himself to be a “survivor” who would have done anything to not be poor.

subconsciously decided to bleed out all of his money and assets because they represented Dan and the feelings that Dan elicited in Jack—being invisible and without control.

The brothers' distinct valuation of money is a significant contributing factor to their specific case of cut-off. While money can be a common contributing factor in cases of estrangement, it is not always relevant. What is important here, regarding the broader explanation of estrangement, is the disparate way two people can value one thing, such as money, and the friction that this difference can create.

1.4 *Kingfish*

Kingfish is a title that grew organically out of the process of researching and making the film. Before *Kingfish*, the title was set to be *Architecture of Brotherhood*. Two factors contributed to my decision on the latter: firstly, the initial focus of the project was intended to be an investigation of the structural relationship between brothers and, secondly, Jack was, and still is, an architect. As the project grew, though, the core ideas of the project shifted. *Architecture of Brotherhood* was much too rigid for the fluidity that the film brings forth.

Instead, the focus shifted to the influences of trauma and unresolved grief on how people navigate the world. This led me to *The Chronology of Water*, by Lidia Yuknovitch. I read this in 2014 and remember it having a deep effect on me. The book is categorically a memoir, though it is not bound by the genre. Holding a history of sexual trauma, these events vibrate through Yuknovitch's memories, and they ripple throughout the book. A segment I had underlined:

“All the events in my life swim in and out between each other. Without chronology. Like in dreams. So if I am thinking of a memory...there is no linear sense. Language is a metaphor for experience. It’s as arbitrary as the mass of chaotic images we call memory—but we can put it into lines to narrativize over fear.”¹⁰

With this reference, I began conceptualizing life, memories, and trauma in the form of water—the way it flows and recycles itself, and how it can be present physically without being observable. With this in mind, I considered other title options for the film, such as *Holding on to Water* . This felt close, but not quite appropriate. To broaden the net, I searched different aquatic species, to serve a symbolic purpose.

When I was young, my family and I would drive from Vancouver to a town outside of Saskatoon, called Turtle Lake. We had a rustic family cabin on the water. Every day we would go out in our 1954 red fibreglass motorboat and fish. We knew all the good spots, and would spend hours trolling there. The only fish that lived in the lake, or at least the only fish that we ever caught, were northern pike, which were also called jackfish. My father loved this, for obvious reasons. “You caught another Jack!” he would always yell. While fishing for a film title in Toronto, I looked up “jackfish.” This term happens to be connected to multiple fish species, one of which, the black jack, also goes by kingfish.

On a personal level, *Kingfish* felt suitable. Then, as I gathered information from other sources I

¹⁰ Lidia Yuknavitch, *Chronology of Water* . (Portland: Hawthorne Books, 2011), 38.

found the informal definition of kingfish: “a person with absolute power in a group.”¹¹ With a narrative that pivots around the deeply embedded issues that two brothers have with control, *Kingfish* felt even more fitting.

Methodology

As stated, for nearly two decades my uncle was absent from our family, even though he lived in the same city. Then, I met him. In July of 2015, he came to my father’s 63rd birthday party. Several months later, he was invited to a Christmas lunch. And then, within a year, he was a regular presence at family gatherings.

During the first few interactions with my uncle, I came to see him as eccentric, talkative, and preoccupied with money—all characteristics consistent with the man I had imagined using the fragments of stories that were told to me growing up. Then after three or four encounters with Dan, something changed. There were some minor inconsistencies between the stories I had been told and the person sitting next to me. He was odd, yes, and he revered wealth. But there was a depth I had not expected.

Two things surprised me. First, I noticed how similar he was to my father; they both share the same idiosyncrasies and social tendencies; their humour is dry and erratic; and they both have an unfiltered quality to their presentation and speech. No one would doubt that Jack and Dan are brothers, even though they have not talked to each other for a third of their lives. Second, I began

¹¹ Collins, s.v. “kingfish,” accessed May 19, 2019, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/kingfish>

to see all of Dan's eccentric qualities as a social barrier used to protect himself. And when he let down his walls for brief moments, I could see a kindness and vulnerability that compelled me. This is when I became intrigued. I thought: who is this man who was physically absent, but still so present in my life? Why did he and my father stop talking? How did this affect him? And what does he think of me? For the next three years these questions swam around in my head with no real weight or value. Then I moved to Toronto.

2.1 Access

Because Jack and Dan both live in Vancouver, I started out with a phone call to my father. In February 2018, I told him I was thinking about doing a project on brothers, featuring his relationship with Dan. He agreed without much reservation. My father is very open. And though he does not align with any one philosophy, he would not be offended if someone called him a Buddhist. Because of his unattached disposition, I felt comfortable approaching him to participate in the film, as I had anticipated a degree of willingness on his part. That said, everyone I pitched the film to raised their concerns of access and subject participation. And to be fair, it is not easy having someone scrutinize and assess some of your most distressing past events, especially on film. But thankfully my father accepted. Then, on the same phone call, he said, "you know, as children, you have a right to know the histories and the stories [...] You just have to ask the right questions; nobody has asked any of the questions."

Dan was sailing around the world on the Queen Mary 2, the largest ocean liner ever built. And at this time, after proposing the project to my father, my relationship with Dan was still thin. We

were congenial, but not yet close. My ability to access him, on such a personal project, seemed more tentative. I emailed him with a brief proposal. He replied within the hour: “I am willing to help out if your Dad is on board. Just crossing the Tasman Sea back to Sydney. Dan.”

With confirmation from my two main participants in hand, I began approaching other members of my family. And after either some nervous laughter or general enthusiasm, everyone agreed to participate. This allowed me to start a more thorough process of collecting information, starting with the formulation of a clear timeline, which began when Jack and Dan were children.

2.2 Technical Considerations

Throughout the winter of 2018, as I began to confirm the dates and details regarding Jack and Dan’s relationship as well as their estrangement, I started to think about the creative treatment of *Kingfish*. My first consideration was whether I would take a poetic and experimental approach, or whether I would construct the narrative into a more conventional form. Due to the complexity of the story and my desire to deeply understand what happened between the two brothers, I decided to use a direct form of storytelling. Further, with this being my first film, I wanted to take this as an opportunity to learn how to clearly and effectively tell a good story. By using an unambiguous form, I was stripped of my tendencies as an artist to hide behind attractive tricks and aesthetic obscurity.

I chose the spine of *Kingfish* to be formed from interviews of Jack, Dan, and other members of my family. I planned to sit each participant down for a traditional interview. I knew that I would

be doing the majority of these interviews alone, as I had to fly to Vancouver for production and had no contacts or budget for crew. With these limitations, I started to build my equipment list. My intention was to keep the gear light, but still have beautiful images and high-fidelity sound. An obvious camera choice was the Canon C100.¹² Because I had no equipment for lighting I made sure to shoot all of my interviews in the early afternoon, next to a large window. This allowed me to evenly and beautifully light each subject with natural light, in the comfort of their own home.

2.3 Structure

In his collection of essays on nonfiction writing, *Draft No. 4*, writer John McPhee says,

“Developing a structure is seldom that simple. Almost always there is a considerable tension between chronology and theme, and chronology traditionally wins. The narrative wants to move from point to point through time, while topics that have arisen now and again across someone’s life cry to be collected. They want to draw themselves together in a single body, the way that salt does underground. But chronology usually dominates.”¹³

I thought about this tension between theme and chronology a great deal. The majority of my

¹² The C100 was an obvious choice, first, because it produces great images with high quality lenses; and second, it has the capacity to record sound directly into the picture file through two XLR ports. The latter point allowed me to run one Sennheiser 416 shotgun microphone into the first channel and one wireless lavalier microphone into the second channel. Both of these microphones then ran directly into the C100, which allowed me to see the frame, watch and listen to the audio channels, and interview my subjects, without assistance.

¹³ John McPhee, “Structure,” in *Draft No. 4*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 17.

notes had been organized chronologically. This seemed to be the easiest way to grasp the events that had occurred. But I then wanted to take these time-bound events and rupture the linear structure. I wanted the notable moments to cluster around key themes and crystalize in a compelling way.

In an attempt to mine the story's themes, from pre- to post-production, I did a lot of writing. I wrote descriptively, theoretically, philosophically, and in lists trying to reveal the core of the film. I can now look back on these writings and sift through the words and locate where the skeleton of the film began.¹⁴

Throughout this process of gathering information, reflecting on what I gathered, and searching for patterns in the material, two key notions came to the surface.

(i) *Estrangement cannot be thought of in isolation*

As conversations about Jack and Dan's estrangement progressed, the topics became more nuanced and interrelated. Past traumas continually came up during the research and production of *Kingfish*. The most notable events were: the loss of their stillborn brother, the divorce of their parents, the death of Helen, and the family's relationship with alcohol use problems. I recognized the influence these events had on Jack and Dan's relationship and later estrangement. Because of this, I included these past traumatic events early in the film, to contextualize the estrangement within Jack and Dan's family history.

¹⁴ See **Appendix** for *Writings from 2018 Field Journal*.

(ii) *Everyone's recollection is distinct*

Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* had an unexpected influence on *Kingfish*. Taking place in 8th century Japan, *Rashomon* is structured around a court case, which concerns the murder of a man and the raping of his wife. Every person who is brought to the judicial stand recounts the events that took place. And each account turns out to be distinct from, or even contradictory to, the preceding statements. In my research for *Kingfish*, this notion of one event being experienced, remembered, or recalled differently by multiple people was prominent. And rather than ignoring the disparity of perspectives, I made it a core tenet of the film. An example of this is shown when the two brothers recall their experience of buying a Rolls-Royce; while Jack and Dan recount the same story, there are clear differences in how the event is remembered, such as the timeline of ownership and who returned the car.

These two notions helped clarify and shape my understanding of Jack and Dan's estrangement; they both had notable influence on how I thought about structuring *Kingfish* as well as how I conducted my interviews, what visual material I collected, and what archival material I searched for, which is addressed in detail below.

2.4 *Production: Interviews*

Before I picked up the camera for this project, I wanted to have a clear idea of what my visual treatment would be. During the spring of 2018, I thought a great deal about colour, composition, camera movement, and the general feeling of what I wanted the film to evoke. Pulling from a range of inspirations, from photographs and drawings to documentary and fiction films, I

assembled a simple visual database. Fully compiled by May, the database became the navigational tool for the cinematography of *Kingfish*.¹⁵ This guided me in making images that had a compressed and intentional colour palette, framing that was clean and simple, and camera work that integrated handheld movement and long, fixed-frame shots.

The primary function of the visual and archival material for *Kingfish* was intended to support the narrative. So, I started the production with interviews. Whenever I set up for one I thought about Errol Morris's *Gates of Heaven*. In this film, his interviews have a clean, simple, and compelling frame, with his subjects placed in an environment that clearly speaks to their personality. Morris also uses one straight-on camera angle for each interview, which is lit properly, without being too dramatic.

It became a part of my process, before an interview would start, to have a conversation with each participant about what spaces they felt both comfortable in and connected to in their home. Then, after I brought up my concerns about lighting, framing, and sound, we decided on the location. Once I was set up in the determined area I would bring up the general questions I planned to address as well as the topics and ideas I wanted to cover. If they flagged anything that was sensitive or made them feel uncomfortable, I made sure to take that into consideration.

During the summer months of 2018, I interviewed all participants, save my brother, Jordan, who I interviewed in December of the same year. I found sit-down interviews to be effective, as they

¹⁵ Refer to the **Appendix** for an abridged version of the visual database as well as visual references from *Kingfish*.

can elicit a great deal of information in a short period of time. That said, they can also suffer from a lack of dynamic engagement. And with the complexity of this story I knew that I wanted to glean as much as I could, especially from the two brothers. Thus, I executed two other interview strategies to bring more depth to the conversations.

(i) *Photo elicitation*

While researching, I gathered photographs, yearbooks, journals, and home movies. This material had multiple functions for *Kingfish*, which I will address more thoroughly in the *Archive* section. What is pertinent in this section is how these archival images were utilized in my informal interviews with Jack and Dan. Douglas Harper says that “photo elicitation mines deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews.”¹⁶ With this in mind, I brought the visual material from my family’s archive to Jack and Dan, separately, and filmed them talking about the photographs and home movies.

In interviews that were not formally structured, I found that Jack and Dan were able to be more relaxed. Further, the family photographs and videos acted as an artifact of familiarity for each brother. Both of these elements created an intimate atmosphere that gave space for heavier topics during the interview process. Beyond this, the archival material also provided an opportunity to take the conversations in alternate directions. In Harper’s words, the images mined the “shafts” of Jack and Dan’s deeper consciousness, pulling up rich memories from their childhood. In more concrete terms, the photographs elicited stories that had been absent

¹⁶ Douglas Harper, “Talking About Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation,” *Visual Studies* 17, no. 1 (2002): 23.

from the sit-down interviews; this evoked nuanced discussion.

Further, during the interviews in which I utilized photo elicitation, my camera work was mostly handheld. For this decision I was thinking about Michael Albright's essay, "The Visible Camera: Hand-Held Camera Movement and Cinematographic Embodiment in Autobiographical Documentary," when he quotes Roland Barthes: "Every photograph is a certificate of presence."¹⁷ Albright goes on to say that "in this sense, a photograph is both a certificate of the person in the photograph as well as the photographer who took the photograph."¹⁸ The point that Albright makes here is that the presence of hand-held camera movement in documentary film acts as evidence, not just of the person that the camera captures, but also of the filmmaker. I wanted the images of these intimate moments between Jack and I as well as between Dan and I to clearly show my presence in the room and indicate the relationship between us.

(ii) *Driving with video*

The second interview strategy I utilized was borrowed from Sarah Pink's notion of "Walking with Video,"¹⁹ where a researcher walks around a place of significance with their subject as a means to evoke deeper, more localized memories. Pink quotes Tim Ingold, who says:

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 87.

¹⁸ Michael Albright, "The Visible Camera: Hand-Held Camera Movement and Cinematographic Embodiment in Autobiographical Documentary," *The Spectator* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 37.

¹⁹ Sarah Pink, "Walking with Video," *Visual Studies* 22, no. 3 (2007): 245.

“Locomotion, not cognition, must be the starting point for the study of perceptual activity.”²⁰

I was particularly interested in this notion of combining conversations with movement and place. As a means to implement this strategy, I found the car to be the most useful tool, as the “places” that I wanted to evoke memories from were sprawled throughout the city of Vancouver.

I organized sessions where Jack and Dan would take me to places of significance, namely their childhood homes and the properties they used to own. I did this with both brothers separately, and then once with the brothers together. Every occasion revealed another dimension to the story of Jack and Dan. Driving gave each brother a sense of control. With a greater sense of control, the brothers offered me greater access to how they see and move through the city in which they live. Further, as we drove through the streets of their past, I was able to mine “deeper shafts” into their memories, just like I did with photo elicitation. Conversations started simply, with talk of what was the same and what had changed in the neighbourhoods. These conversations led to more honest and vulnerable interactions. For example, I witnessed Dan directly confronting Jack on why he sold all of his properties, and Jack evading Dan’s questions, like only a little brother could.²¹

²⁰ Tim Ingold, “Culture on the ground: The world perceived through the feet,” *Journal of Material Culture* 9, no. 3 (2004): 331.

²¹ Much of the material gathered from these driving sessions deepened my understanding of who Jack and Dan are, independently and together as brothers, as well as how their separation could have occurred and persisted. That said, the video captured during these interviews never found a place within the final film, either because what was said did not fit within the final narrative or the audio/visuals suffered from technical errors.

2.5 Production: Visual Material

Once I knew the range of stories my family members were sharing in their interviews, I began collecting visual material that would strengthen the key ideas and conversations. Practical imagery came first, as it seemed like the most manageable place to start. In between interviews, in July and August, I walked around Vancouver with my camera, collecting images of the city. I photographed wherever I could. These wanderings took me through the city streets and from rooftops to beaches. I captured whatever I could, from wide shots of the cityscape to tight details of trees. My intention on these rambles was to produce a catalogue of visuals that I could pull from when I needed to describe the landscape in which this story took place, or when I wanted to make an association beyond what was said in the interviews.

Beyond the more practical cinematography, I wanted to include imagery that contained more poetry: how could I visually represent the primary themes I hoped to explore? I conceptualized these poetic images as their own vignettes—sequences that could stand on their own, independent of any text or speech. For one attempt, I filmed both of the brothers standing in front of their former houses or the properties that they owned. The hope with this vignette was to present the different places where the brothers had lived and worked together. Further, this was the key visual that would be used to show Jack and Dan side by side. Ultimately, however, I decided against revealing the brothers together. This decision was influenced by my research on the larger issue of estrangement and how reconciliation is rarely achieved. Here I call upon Werner Herzog's notion of Ecstatic truth: "Only in this state of sublimity [Erhabenheit] does something deeper become possible, a kind of truth that is the enemy of the merely factual.

Ecstatic truth, I call it.”²² It is more affecting to leave the audience with unanswered questions; feelings of uncertainty and confusion mirror the experience of estrangement itself.

Even though many of my poetic vignettes were unsuccessful, the process proved fruitful. After digging deeper into Jack’s story, I unearthed two powerful themes: the cost of personal liberation and the pursuit of art over money. To communicate these ideas, I wanted to place Jack in spaces of vastness. I had him wade in the ocean and draw while sitting in the forest. The former was reduced to two shots in the final film and the vignette of Jack in the forest ended up being the closing scene of the film.²³

2.6 Archive

From the project’s inception, I knew that my family archive was important. I collected all that I could from May 2018 until March 2019. Throughout my gathering process, I found home movies to be the most compelling material, especially film of Jack and Dan as children and young adults. These videos reveal a deeper dimension of them as individuals and as brothers. They also provide temporal evidence of their history as a family. Efrén Cuevas argues that home movies are used strategically in autobiographical documentaries in three ways: as naturalization, contradiction, and historicization.²⁴ That is, home movies support what the filmmaker is saying

²² Werner Herzog, “The Absolute, The Sublime and Ecstatic Truth: On the Absolute, the Sublime, and Ecstatic Truth,” *Arion - Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 17, no. 3 (2010): 1.

²³ Figure 1 and Figure 2 in Appendix.

²⁴ Efrén Cuevas, “Home Movies as Personal Archives in Autobiographical Documentaries,” *Studies in Documentary Film* 7, no. 1 (2013): 20.

in the film; contradict what the filmmaker presents on the screen; or provide a micro historical record of the larger themes in the film. On the latter point, Cuervas goes on to say that the family archive “becomes then another source of historical documentation, providing a micro historical perspective often absent from the standard public records.”²⁵ These archival images provide an unfiltered view of Vancouver in the 1960’s to the 1990’s as well as a record of a middle-class family with a single mother raising her two children.

In summer of 2018, I came upon a document that provided rich insight into Jack’s psychology around the years of the estrangement: his UBC School of Architecture thesis paper. Completed in 1997, this piece of writing gave me an invaluable peek into the ideology and yearnings of my father during this time. Dissecting the philosophies of modernist and post-modernist architecture, Jack considered the positives and negatives of both schools of thought. Rather than heralding one over the other, he distilled the good from both, to create a “new architecture” that would better the world. He wrote:

“In order to discover a new way of building for the future, we need to explore opportunities for developing architecture that unifies many complex issues and ideas [...] Extreme oppositions have polarized and lead us towards fragmentation. We see divisions in every area of our culture in family, work, school and church. Mutual commitment and relationships have deteriorated due to lack of listening and understanding. Movement towards a better architecture can occur by listening and

²⁵ Cuevas, “Home Movies,” 25.

becoming more aware of the needs of people and the world around us.”²⁶

This writing completely contradicts how Jack was living his life at the time. He was acting “irrationally” and “refused to listen” to those around him. He “wanted to sabotage” the business and his marriage. He was manifesting the “extreme oppositions” that he critiqued in his thesis.

After reading Jack’s paper, I was convinced that this document would become the backbone of the film. I studied the text and pulled out the major themes that contradicted and/or correlated to the narrative of Jack and Dan’s estrangement.²⁷ In August 2018, I brought the thesis to one of our interview sessions and had Jack read it. This primed him for a dynamic conversation. His engagement with the text drew out deep memories and ideas, much like photo elicitation.

Beyond an interview strategy, though, my early intention for the text was to have sections of the text, read by Jack, act as the narration of the film. These would be introduced at key moments as a means to drive the story forward. My thought was that they could indicate thematic shifts in the story or be used as chapter headings in the film. At this point in the process—late summer—the title *Architecture of Brotherhood* dovetailed nicely into the ordering of the film. However, this structuring device did not ultimately fit within the film’s final narrative. That said, its value was not wasted. These initial structural considerations acted as the first struts in the project’s

²⁶ Jack McDonald, “Designing for a Better Architecture,” (B.Arch thesis, University of British Columbia, 1998), 3.

²⁷ The major themes include: fragmentation and façadism, lack of listening and understanding, extreme oppositions versus a fabric of oppositions, searching for a good architecture, freedom and self-actualization, dark and intimate spaces versus transparency of light.

scaffolding; contradiction and personal ideals clashing with one's actions started here, and have since always been embedded within *Kingfish*'s thematic structure.

2.7 Post-Production

I returned to Toronto in September 2018 to begin my first round of post-production. Before approaching my material, strategically or structurally, I worked intuitively. I started with an image and an idea, then moved through the other images, grabbing anything that felt appropriate. One of the first iterations of this intuitive process was the vignette of Jack in the forest. As I shot this scene, I knew it would make strong visual material. This made it an easy place to start, as I was eager to see what it looked like on screen. In October, with the visual sequence built, I then scanned through the interviews, pausing on and pulling from memorable phrases and moments. I layered the interviews with visual material and produced a sequence. I then started over again. This process produced at least twenty compelling, yet distinct, iterations. Eventually, though, I hit a wall. By December, the core ideas that I wanted to communicate were never fully developed. And the most consistent feedback I received at this time was that the work was confounding.

In December, I took a step back from editing and flew to Vancouver for a month. When I returned in January and came back to the material, I knew that the weakest link in my work was the narrative—it was neither comprehensive nor clear. I needed a strong and organized framework to place my structure within. This took form when I transitioned from a digital space (Adobe Premiere Pro) into a physical one. In February 2019, I printed all of the interview

transcripts and cut them whenever a full idea was communicated. Anything irrelevant was left behind. This process produced hundreds of pieces of paper, which I organized into roughly ten thematic piles: business, alcoholism, third brother, father leaving, mother dying, issues of control between brothers, money, etc. At this point, all of the interviews were strewn across my apartment floor.²⁸ From this mess of paper I constructed the narrative.

In February 2019, the full story was completed on the floor. I then input it into the computer. Without further editing, the runtime of the film was two and a half hours. Beyond being too long, my ideas also seemed to cluster in an inorganic way. Even though the result was a long film that lacked fluidity, I knew that the fundamental anatomy of my narrative was all in one place. I then worked on- and off-line, switching between the paper and the computer. Watching the sequence on screen and reading it on paper, I culled the redundant and dull information. Within two weeks of using the paper transcript method, I reduced the film down to 45-minutes.

At this point, I began integrating my visual and archival material. With these images inserted into the narrative, I could begin pacing out the interviews and making sure there was space for emotional beats. Now, in March 2019, having a comprehensive narrative, well-paced and supported with visual material, this was the first time that I could actually see my film the way that I wanted it to be. Still, though, I would get troublesome questions after screening the work—questions that should have been answered in the film. The most significant one was: “I forget—which one is Jack and which one is Dan?” Audiences would get the two brothers confused.

²⁸ Figure 3 in **Appendix**.

Ultimately, I was taking my familiarity with the characters for granted and, thus, not clearly distinguishing them in the film. This became my biggest focus as I worked to refine my film into a fine cut. My second focus was to take out any information that was interesting but distracting.²⁹ This process of distilling and clarifying the narrative continued for a month. By April 2019, I had the fine cut. At this point, I began seriously considering the more nuanced elements of the film.

One night in early January, while back in Vancouver, I started scanning through the recording of the first phone call that I had with Jack. After listening through most of it, I realized how direct and textured this call was. Without an established opening for the film, I considered this to be a good option. Beginning *Kingfish* with my first inquiry into the story of the estrangement seemed simple and clear. It then took me another two months to think about using the phone call as a motif throughout the film, as a means to link key ideas together. For example, the segment of the film that explores the history of family trauma opens with the segment of the phone call where Jack tells me about his stillborn brother. This scene also weaves into the conversation about Mack leaving Helen, in part due to the effect that losing a child had on her. The phone call functions as a linking mechanism that also adds depth and texture to the on-camera conversations.

2.8 Collaboration

For *Kingfish*, I set the intention to do the majority of the work myself, so that I could develop my

²⁹ For example, I had a whole section focusing on Dan's wife, Margaret, and the influence she had on the brothers' relationship. Involving her in the film turned out to be a red herring for many people. So, even though I found Margaret's role in the story to be compelling, I took her out of the film to serve the greater story.

process for making a film. That said, I knew that the final product would suffer if I attempted to do everything. I asked myself which components of the process I felt least skilled in and least likely to pursue as a career: sound and motion graphics. As I was immersed in my editing process, I reached out to two friends who specialized in these trades and whose work I respect. The collaboration began by discussing general ideas in February. Once I had the fine cut they became more involved.

I had initially intended for the graphics of the film to be subtle, with simple name cards and credits. But after watching the fine cut with my graphic designer, Daniel Schrempf, he suggested that we use a family tree, to both introduce people and to position my family in relation to one another.³⁰ Having a graphical representation of my family helped clarify how everyone was connected, which helped clarify the overall narrative. Without the outside input of Daniel, I never would have decided to pursue the motion graphics in this way.

I wanted *Kingfish* to have an understated and consistent soundscape to enhance the emotional beats in the film. That said, I did not have a clear idea of what that would sound like. I brought in Sebastian Quinn Hoodless to help with this, as well as to do the general mixing and mastering of the film's audio. As someone working in audio engineering, field recording and composition, I knew that he would be a good asset. Working closely together, the first iteration of the sound and composition was too heavy-handed and musical; it felt like the music was overpowering or manipulating the emotion of the scenes. We stripped down the instrumental components and

³⁰ See **Family Tree** in the **Appendix** for a representation of the family tree graphic.

used the score sparingly, leaving plenty of silence. When we did bring in the score, it acted more like a pool of water that the scene could sit in, rather than a wave crashing in on the interviews. The overall process of collaboration proved to enhance the narrative and the quality of the film, but it also gave me confidence in working with others and taught me to let go of notions of possessiveness over my work.

Documentary Relevance

Before positioning *Kingfish* within the documentary discourse, it is important to recognize its place within the history of storytelling. *Kingfish* chronicles a contemporary family drama, highlighting the fracturing of relationships. Preliminary research for the project continually linked to ancient Greece. It was here that the written word was developed for storytelling, with family tragedy being a theme that is repeatedly featured in these narratives.³¹ With estrangement and family conflict being topics of interest for centuries, *Kingfish* should be recognized as just one story within this long history of dramatic familial tales.

Beyond ancient Greece, *Kingfish* also connects to contemporary documentary projects. As a film that focuses on estrangement and familial relationships, *Kingfish* is positioned within the documentary discourse in relation to three documentary projects: LaToya Ruby Frazier's *The Notion of Family* (2014), Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012), and Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* (1997). I will elaborate on the connection to these three works later in this section.

³¹ One of the most notable works, Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, is a trilogy of tragic dramas that culminates in a matricide and the subsequent unravelling of familial bonds. The father, Agamemnon, is killed by his wife, Queen Clytemnestra. Her children, Elektra and Orestes, then plot to commit matricide to avenge their father's death. Once successful, they flee. The family tree is then fractured and remains so for generations.

3.1 *Autobiographical Documentary and Domestic Ethnography*

In addition to notions of estrangement or familial relationships, these projects also fit within the classification of autobiographical documentary and domestic ethnography. These two categories do not refer to the subject matter of the projects, but rather to the maker's relationship to the subjects. Autobiographical documentary is clear in its name—the filmmaker is making a film that is directly or indirectly about themselves. Domestic ethnography calls for further clarification. Michael Renov defines it as being an ethnographic documentation of family members, which doubles as a self-exploration for the artist.³² That is, the filmmaker is making a study of their domestic relationships, and in the process, is exploring the landscape of themselves.

It is important to note that one of the most prominent issues within documentary practice is the problem of speaking for others. Documentary projects classified as either autobiographical or domestic ethnography are often exempt from this debate, as the artists are speaking for themselves or for their family, and thus are not thought to be speaking for others. Philosopher Linda Alcoff reject this notion: “The point is that a kind of representation occurs in all cases of speaking for, whether I am speaking for myself or for others, that this representation is never a simple act of discovery, and that it will most likely have an impact on the individual so represented.”³³ Speaking for others is entrenched in all documentary work, and the one who represents must bear that responsibility. Alcoff goes on to say that “[a]nyone who speaks for

³² Michael Renov, “Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the ‘Other’ Self” in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 217.

³³ Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Culture Critique*, no. 20 (Winter, 1991-1992): 10.

others should only do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive effects involved.”³⁴ I kept this in mind while making *Kingfish*, as I knew I would be representing myself, my family, and my broader community. Representation must always be taken seriously. How one speaks for other people can have profound impacts toward those represented.

3.2 *Three Works*

The following domestic ethnographic and autobiographical documentary works successfully represent their subjects. These projects also handle estrangement and familial issues in unique and effective ways, which, when studied, help illuminate *Kingfish's* position within the documentary discourse.

(i) In *The Notion of Family*, LaToya Ruby Frazier photographs her family and her hometown, Braddock, Pennsylvania, which provides an articulate comment on economic decline and racism in small towns. In this project, Frazier is presenting an ethnographic document of her family in her hometown. And through this process of documentation, she is exploring her own identity within the community, as well as the community's positioning against American society. Frazier's photographs offer a unique degree of intimacy, vulnerability, and honesty because of her integrated relationship with her subjects. Further, positioning herself within the project, alongside her mother and her grandmother, Frazier gives representation to three generations of women. This is a clear declaration of presence, for women of color who have

³⁴ Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," 24.

historically been unrepresented. And, as opposed to traditional ethnography, it is her domestic positioning within the project that allows for such a powerful commentary on her community and American society. Frazier's articulation of domestic ethnography gives visibility to those who have been seen as invisible. And in this way, Frazier's work touches on themes of estrangement, in regard to the isolation that her family and community have experienced from much of American society. Overall, her photographic series is clear, unflinchingly honest, and direct.

(ii) In *Stories We Tell*, Sarah Polley explores her parents' relationship as well as the extramarital affair that occurred between her mother and Montreal producer Harry Gurkin. During the film, Polley reveals that Gurkin is her biological father, the discovery of which is the central focus of the documentary. What is of interest here is how Polley cinematically handles a deeply personal family story. First, Polley tells what is largely her life story through the words and memories of her family and friends. The result is a collective storytelling process that reveals many contradictions within each person's recollection of the events. Rather than weakening the narrative, the discrepancies bring a genuine texture to the story. Second, Polley employs a reflexive approach, where actors reenact much of the film's archival family movie footage. Polley then reveals the filming of the reenactments, effectively exposing the cinematic apparatus. As Bill Nichols would say, these reenactments produce a specter that "haunts the text."³⁵ Polley then shines a light on this specter and gives the audience its own view of the ghost. Beyond the mystical, though, *Stories We Tell* addresses family stories, the

³⁵ Bill Nichols, "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject." *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 1 (Autumn 2008): 74.

disparity of memories, and themes of distance and separation in a unique and engaging way.

(iii) Alan Berliner begins *Nobody's Business* with a voiceover from his father, Oscar, saying:

“The story is told about a man who went to an artist and said, ‘I wanna have a picture made.’ The artist turned to him and said, ‘Look, sir, there are two kinds of pictures. There’s a portrait and a landscape.’ He said, ‘Well, which is cheaper?’ The artist said, ‘The landscape.’ He said, ‘Well, can you make a landscape of me?’”³⁶

As Oscar says this last line, an image of a tree in the middle of an empty field holds on the screen. Berliner seems to imply that this is the landscape of his father. He proceeds by interviewing Oscar and peeling back layers of their family heritage and his father’s relationship to those histories. This process proves to have a combative quality; Berliner’s interview turns into an act of interrogation due to Oscar’s apathy towards his life and his family history. Oscar goes on to say, “My life is nothing, my life is no different than, how many, billions of peoples. Who the hell would care about Oscar Berliner? Who the hell am I? I mean, this is ridiculous.” Berliner responds, “Everyone has a life that has something special about it.”³⁷ Beyond being simply entertaining, the force of Berliner and his father rubbing up against each other produces a double image: one of Oscar and one of Alan. Through the act of exploring and investigating his father’s life, Berliner is pulling out parts of himself,

³⁶ Alan Berliner, dir. *Nobody's Business*. Digital Film. Arlington: Public Broadcasting Service, 1997.

³⁷ Alan Berliner, dir. *Nobody's Business*. Digital Film. Arlington: Public Broadcasting Service, 1997.

producing a self-portrait, or a landscape of himself. In this way, *Nobody's Business* fits tightly within the domestic ethnographic typology.

3.3 *Thematic and Formal Considerations*

Positioned against the work of Frazier, Polley and Berliner, *Kingfish* has a notable location within the documentary discourse. It references and builds upon the thematic and formal qualities of these three works. They are not, however, the only documentary projects that overlap with and have inspired *Kingfish*. Other notable works include Robert Frank's *Conversations in Vermont* (1971) and *Me and My Brother* (1969); Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2004); Jonas Mekas's *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976); and Ross McElwee's *Photographic Memory* (2011).

These documentary projects may be categorized as either autobiographical or domestic ethnography. Further, they all approach estrangement and/or familial issues, though each from different angles. For example, in *Tarnation*, Caouette builds a cinematic mosaic from archive material and contemporary images to present personal and familial fracturing; in *Lost, Lost, Lost*, Mekas, with his intimate diaristic approach, explores his history of being displaced from Lithuania and his eventual discovery of his artistic family in New York; and in *Conversations in Vermont*, Frank addresses fatherhood through considerations of the past and present, with personal and direct interactions with his children. Like all of these documentary works, *Kingfish* handles estrangement and family stories in its own way.

Formally, *Kingfish* employs a traditional documentary strategy: the sit-down interview. Both

Berliner and Polley use the same technique; they refer to it as an interrogation process because they are investigating their family's untold stories. *Kingfish* utilizes the sit-down interview in a similar way, as a means to pull out the meaningful memories from each person. These are then woven together to speak not just to the specific history of my family, but also to the larger story of family conflict and the complexity of relationships.

In an interview about *Nobody's Business*, Berliner says: "This film is not about my family. I repeat, this film is not about my family. It might seem to be. But, it's very important to me that it transcends the specificity, the detail of my family history, and the personalities in my family. And I'd like to think that the film functions as both a window and a mirror for the viewer."³⁸ This transcendence is what domestic ethnographic films require. If they do not achieve this then they fail to meet the threshold for documentary.

As Renov says, the domestic ethnographic filmmaker is making a double image of their family and themselves. I would push it further to say that they are making a tripartite image—that is, one of their family, one of themselves, and one of the viewer. As Berliner states, these films are both a window and a mirror for the audience to look into; the viewers can look in on the family story of the filmmaker but they can also see themselves and/or their family looking back at them. *Kingfish* functions as a window and a mirror, allowing the viewer to see the nuances of their own family and consider the dimensionality of their family's stories and memories. My hope is that

³⁸ Alan Berliner, "Nobody's Business—Interview" *American Public Television*, Spring, 1997, video, 0:26, <https://vimeo.com/84436335>.

Kingfish will allow the viewer to recognize familial conflict in their own life and consider the complex nature of such events. Ideally, someone would be able to complicate a previously simplified narrative, dismantling what they hold to be true in their mind and begin to recognize the diverse values, feelings, and perspectives of those with whom they disagree.

Latoya Ruby Frazier has a similar perspective on the subject of her work relating to the universal. Being interviewed about *The Notion of Family*, she reflects: “How do you pull people through a book that shows [the subject] from a very personal microcosm of your own family life, to all of a sudden building up to a point that it just shows a whole macro level of things that are universal, things that we all have to deal with.”³⁹ Approaching the issue of identity and representation head on, Frazier talks about the lack of images in the public sphere that represent her and her family—specifically, women of colour who have been neglected in the wake of American economic decline. As mentioned above, *The Notion of Family* is a rebuttal to this absence, capturing the lives of three generations of women: herself, her mother, and her grandmother.

Kingfish is, on the surface, a story about two brothers. But if one looks deeper, they can see the film is carried by the lives of the women who effected and/or were affected by Jack and Dan. Helen, their mother, is the core of the story. Losing a child at birth and a husband soon after, she raised Jack and Dan alone. Soon after learning this, it became clear to me how present single

³⁹ Latoya Ruby Frazier, “LaToya Ruby Frazier’s ‘The Notion of Family’ Confronts Racism and Economic Decline,” *Aperture Foundation*, March 22, 2018, video, 2:26 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asBMg8yQX5w>.

mothers are in my family history. Helen, Lori, and Jennifer each raised their children alone, and they have done so quietly and resiliently. And this dynamic is not just integral to my family story, but to many others as well.

As stated earlier, *Stories We Tell* is a film that Polley made about herself, which is told through the stories of everyone else in her family. She notes: “What I tried to do with the film was make it about everybody, make it about storytelling and about narrative, using my family as an example.”⁴⁰ This speaks to the double action of looking inward toward yourself and your family, while also projecting outward toward the rest of the world.

Within domestic ethnography and autobiographical documentary, the personal has the power to be universal. And this fact must be taken seriously. When I speak for my family and myself, I am in effect representing people outside of my family. The consequences can be detrimental. That said, if done with proper reflexivity and consideration, the positive impact of the tripartite image can be profound. These are the important considerations to take into account when making personal documentary work. *Stories We Tell*, *Nobody’s Business*, and *The Notion of Family* all successfully document the personal and represent the universal. I cannot judge *Kingfish’s* success in this regard. Only time within the documentary discourse can decide.

⁴⁰ Sarah Polley, “Sarah Polley Talks ‘Stories We Tell,’” interview by Anne Thompson, May 5, 2013, video 2:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpagclGquw>.

Conclusion

Kingfish began as a desire to better understand my uncle, who, to me, was nothing but a collection of anecdotal and recycled stories. In sitting down with him, for often very lengthy interviews, I came to wonder how different our lives could have been had we formed a meaningful relationship twenty years prior.

I could tell that Dan was also affected by the absence. As was Jack. And despite this, the estrangement persisted. The process of researching and producing *Kingfish* revealed some of the possible reasons why the two brothers remained cut-off, even in face of the difficulties they both experienced throughout those 19 years. Recognizing their history of grief, abandonment, and unresolved hierarchies brought their actions into focus. It suggested an explanation for why Jack sought to differentiate himself from his brother and the family business, and why Dan considered those actions to be a betrayal to the family system. The pain and hurt then calcified and became increasingly simplified, and yet impossible to forget.

The making of *Kingfish* has acted as a two-part process to address and curb estrangement: one that is internal and the other external.

Giving each family member the space to talk about the cut-off helped complicate the simplified family narrative, while still allowing all the perspectives to exist together, simultaneously. Renov says that one of domestic ethnography's defining features is "co(i)mplication." By that he means

“both complexity and the interpretation of subject/other identities.”⁴¹ *Kingfish* started as an intention to understand my uncle and our family story; then it grew into a desire to compile and complicate the simplified family narrative. In the late stages of post-production, I recognized that I needed to co(i)mplicate myself within the familial identity. And this act of looking inwards and outwards led to a double image, one that is now present in the film.

With *Kingfish*, our family story can be seen by those outside of our family. This is the second part of the process to address estrangement, one which breaks the silence that orbits around the issue. Now others can witness our family story. And if they are experiencing estrangement in their own lives, this can provide them with at least one reference that they are not alone.

⁴¹ Michael Renov, “Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the ‘Other’ Self” in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 218.

Appendix

Figure 1 *Jack in the ocean*



Figure 2 *Jack drawing in the forest*

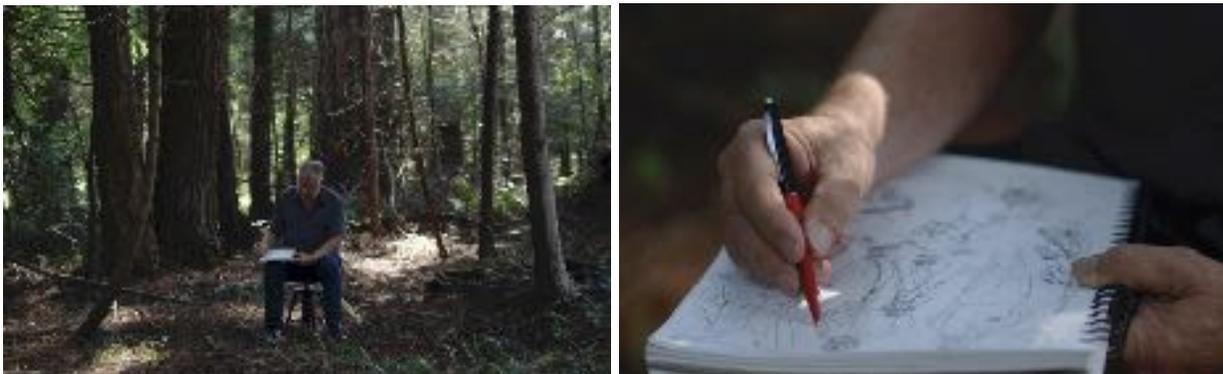


Figure 3 *Using sections from interview transcripts to build the Kingfish narrative*



Writings from 2018 Field Journal

- May 27** “What does it mean to lose someone important to you?”
- June 20** “I am interested in getting to some of the deeper subtleties of family power dynamics.”
- July 2** “... the story of someone who is stuck between who he wants to be and who he is supposed to be ... The story of two brothers intentionally losing each other.”
- July 3** “How does someone one live with that—knowing they made a decision (or a series of decisions) that resulted in breaking someone’s trust for two decades?”
- July 11** “So in review, the story is about a man (my father) who tried to become someone who he wanted to be and lost everything (millions of dollars, a brother, and a wife) along the way.”
- July 15** “...the thing started when Jack was thirteen. He didn’t have a choice. He was just thrown in. And he pushed against it.”
- October 1** “Organize the film in chapters, where each chapter is one explanation for the estrangement: (1) Jack and Dan were different; (2) disparate valuation of money; (3) influence of their wives; (4) Jack’s need for freedom; his idealized self; (5) unresolved grief of their mother’s death; differentiation of self; betrayal of family systems; (6) boys not taught to communicate; (7) family patterns repeat themselves.
- November 11** “Stories are never understood until they are told; and they are understood differently with every person who tells them.”

Timeline of Events

Year	Event
1947	Birth of Dan
1949	Death of Jack and Dan's brother
1952	Birth of Jack
1960	Mack leaves Helen
1965	1490 Balfour Avenue is purchased
1973	Birth of Jennifer
1978	Jack and Lynne divorce
1982	Death of Helen
1983	Jack marries Lori
1984	Birth of Melanie
1986	Birth of Jordan
1989	Birth of Kenny
1990	Dan marries Margaret
1996	Jack and Dan purchase the Windermere
1996	Jack and Dan divide DayBoy Industries
1996	Jack and Dan become estranged
1996	Dan and Margaret adopt two children from Russia
1997	Jack graduates from the UBC School of Architecture
1999	Jack and Lori divorce
2015	Jack and Dan reconnect

Abridged Visual Database



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42 LaToya Ruby Frazier's *The Notion of Family* (2014).

43 Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012).

44 Sarah Polley, *Stories We Tell* (2012).

45 Errol Morris, *Gates of Heaven* (1980).

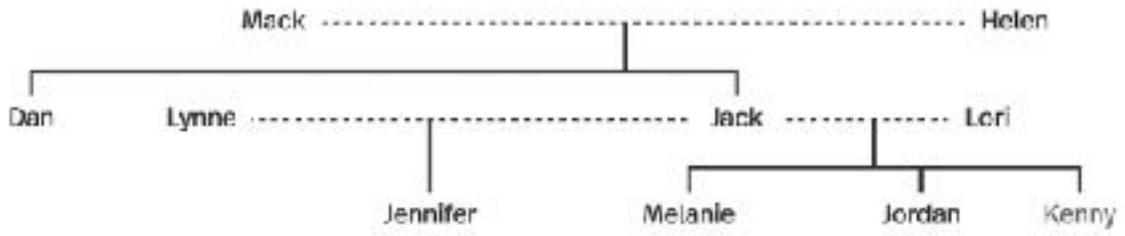
46 Errol Morris, *Gates of Heaven* (1980).

47 Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* (1996).

Visual References from Kingfish



Family Tree



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