Final Paper: Crafting Visual Life Writing

Heirloom Itinerary: The Journey of my grandmother's wedding ring

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For my final paper, I chose my grandmother's wedding ring as a focus to discuss object itineraries and the impact of life writing on myself as an artist, teacher and researcher. Mapping this artefact's object itinerary felt appropriate because the values embedded within this object have helped me become who I am today personally and professionally. "Object itinerary is intended as an alternative to object biography and retaining the parallelism signals" (Joyce, 2015, p. 4). There are interlocking webs of stories and meanings that I intend to deconstruct and unpack over this paper, stories that do not have a concrete beginning, middle and end. Cortada & Perold (2022) emphasise that "objects and people together comprise components of a broader ecosystem of a company, an industry, or economy" (p. 87). Conducting this itinerary allowed me to see the family as a social structure with intergenerational ripples and long-reaching effects. Before taking this course, I did not see objects as part of a broader ecosystem beyond the scope of financial or sentimental value. Objects have many uses as they "populate homes, writing desks, personal lives, offices, composing processes, classrooms, family rituals, writing centers, and other university spaces—in short, they fill or constitute every contour of historical, social, cultural, and individual (writing) lives. Along with being a cognitive, social, and cultural practice, writing is a material practice" (Alexis et al., 2022). Heirloom objects contain many facets for analysis: the raw materials, material culture, geographical itineraries, and the stories of the people who passed on. The writing about objects becomes a new form of object constantly evolving.

New materialism emerges from this object because stories connected to the object continue to unfold and are active as the object moves from generation to generation. The implications of

conducting this object itinerary are far-reaching, affecting my present and future. Garnet & Sinner (2019) state that,

Stories conceived with the "material turn" are arguably more than resource materials or anecdotes. For emerging teachers or researchers, stories offer openings to begin to conceptualize the story as having its own living history, where the personal is public, as teachers in relation to the field of education know well. This new material turn privileges the story itself as a knowledge object. (p. 52)

Knowledge objects with heirloom qualities signify the deep connection between family members and the trajectory of the family line through stories and artefacts. Despite heirloom rings being relatively small compared to others forms of legacy, they have the potential to last over generations. Objects hold so much more than their raw materials.

Garber (2019) eloquently states that,

Materials, making, and objects are important parts of an ecology of meaningful learning and teaching in art that must accompany the development of concept and social impact. New materialist theory suggests that matter matters to how life is lived, while emphasizing that animacy is inherent not only to what we think of as animate beings but to all types of matter (p. 7)

This ring contains a unique living history, and writing this paper allows me the space to share it. Garnet & Sinner (2019) underscore the point that "in the emerging paradigm (new materialism), material "things" can no longer be considered static objects willed to life by human agents" (p.

59). Objects are the vehicle for active narratives from many different points of view. Turney (2012) asserts that "people construct personal narratives and/or identities through the construction of specific items intended for themselves or others" (p. 303). My grandmother's wedding ring holds a multigenerational story of resilience and connection and symbolises familial strength. It is an emblem of hope to pass on to future generations to embody family values. Cortada & Perold (2022) maintain that "three-dimensional ephemera speak to values and tribalism, and their attendant allegiances. These signals one's permission to someone to guide his or her values and activities" (p. 87). This ring is a tangible reminder that we are here for a limited time, but our values and actions can impact and shape future generations. The ring is merely a physical artefact of something much more significant.

I have received an array of heirloom jewellery for many reasons and occasions. The passing on of heirloom jewellery holds a certain sentimental weight.

Moore (2017) suggests that,

Jewelry is a familiar accessory, given, received, and worn for a wide range of occasions. It is an art form (i.e., an object made with intent), and a medium of communication. Heirloom jewelry can also be a cultural mediator, highlighting intense personal relationships and helping to remember memories of a specific person, time, or place. Because of this strong connection, these objects are useful for helping recall, illustrate, and teach history. (p. 1)

This heirloom contains many stories and lessons, so I elected to speak to this piece over other potential options. The wedding ring I received from my grandmother was gifted to me when she

was still alive. It is truly a piece of wearable art. The story surrounding her gifting me the ring feels particularly relevant to its living history, as she changed the traditional narrative in gifting me the ring when she was still alive. She invited me over shortly after she received her dementia diagnosis and felt it was critical to gift the ring to me when she was of sound mind. She wanted to see me wear her ring every day and took pride in seeing me wear it. At the time, I felt like this was a morbid act; but in her way, she was subverting the protocol so she could derive more joy from the process. She wanted to ensure that there was no question that I would receive the ring. In small ways, this ring was an act of rebellion.

Figure 1: Wedding Ring, Montreal, Quebec (own photo).

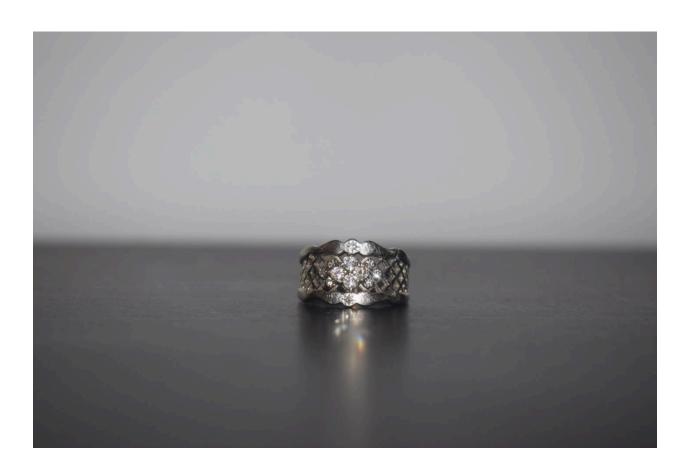


Figure 2: Wedding Ring inverted, Montreal, Quebec (own photo).



The ring itself was not her original engagement/wedding set. She lovingly compiled many pieces of her late mother's diamonds and gold with her original wedding and engagement ring so that she could memorialise her mother's memory alongside her marriage. A jeweller fashioned a thick white gold band that appeared to be a netting which held all the diamonds in place. Although this was a wedding ring, it transcends marital symbolism – melding together two solitudes to make a new ring and the multitudinous stories it has witnessed and contains. The gold from my great-grandmother's ring was melted together to create this ring. In addition, it consists of four larger diamonds from her original engagement piece and three smaller diamonds on either side from her mother's wedding ring. Two unknown diamonds are embedded within the ring's top and bottom of the white gold band setting. Within the band are two stamps; one reads

"14 K" white gold, which the material band is made of. There is another stamp that reads "SJL". I went to a jeweller my cousin suggested to learn more about the ring. To my surprise, upon arrival, I realised that this jeweller mainly served the Orthodox Jewish population. I instantly felt like an outsider despite being Jewish. I observed some of the patrons staring at me. The situation made me realize how different I am from my family. However, the object brought me back to my roots and to a place my grandmother undoubtedly would have felt comfortable. Ahmed provides a significant anecdote about questioning otherness. Ahmed (2017) says, "to be questioned, to be questionable, sometimes can feel like a residence: a question becomes something you reside in. To reside in a question can feel like not being where you are at" (p. 116). The stares made me question the validity of my presence in that space. Still, the object grounded me in the knowledge that I could occupy that space openly.

Some of my initial fears further dissolved when the owner was very warm and took the time to clean the ring and critically examine it with a magnifying glass to extract further information. He immediately acknowledged how this ring could hold immense sentimental value. At that moment, I felt like he recognised the ring's object itinerary, a gesture of human kindness. Who knew that an heirloom object could evoke such an expression? In those moments with the jeweller, I was co-creating new realities for the object and that I am in a constant state of lifelong learning. Collins (1977) says that "Humanizing education is preeminently dialogical, a constant co-investigation carried out by students who recognize that knowing is a process of never-ending perception, and by educators who recognize that they are themselves students" (p. 15). It was an astonishing moment to realize the journey of this ring is ongoing, but more than that, I can learn so much from this object that I have carried mindlessly for years. I now have an intentionality and openness towards this ring and its ongoing lessons. Intentionality and openness

are traits I will carry forward with this object and other objects I engage within both the public and private spheres.

From what the jeweller gleaned from his inquiry, "SJL" was most likely the jewellery maker who made the piece. I sadly could not find any further information about this maker, who was most likely from Winnipeg. The jeweller told me that the smaller diamonds were much older and fashioned differently than the central diamonds. Diamonds at that time had more imperfections due to how they were excavated. They were not as perfectly shaped to maximise the diamonds' size. This made me wonder about how quality and value have evolved. All the gold settings that held the diamonds in place flattened somewhat over time due to the piece being worn for decades. This fascinated me because objects, like humans, age over time and change due to being exposed to the elements of daily life. From an aesthetic standpoint, it was evident that the ring was an antique. So many questions emerged after I visited the jewellers that I may never get answers to: how were these diamonds excavated? Were the conditions safe during the excavation process? What are the hidden itineraries that I will never have access to? What did the previous iterations of the ring look like? I wish I could ask my grandmother all these questions.

I do know essential aspects of the ring's story. My grandmother lost her mother, Clara, when she was eleven and never entirely overcame that loss. She talked about her mother often, and it was evident she was her role model. My great-grandmother Clara attended university and was a voracious reader. My grandmother used to talk about how strong she was because she did not fit societal expectations of the time. She was fiercely independent. After immigrating with my great-grandfather to Canada, she was so worried about her family's safety in Russia that she

attempted to return with her young child (my grandmother's older brother) to save them. She and her son hid in boats and trains on their journey home. However, the trip became too dangerous, and they had to return to Canada without her family. I imagine some diamonds in this ring came along for this memorable journey. It is unfathomable to think of this ring's expansive journey through history. Aspects of this ring had seen wars, pogroms, and otherworldly adventures before my grandmother received it. The characteristics of my great-grandmother that I try to embody today are pride in my identity, an everlasting desire to keep learning and to follow adventure whenever possible in pursuit of growing as a person and being able to serve others. When I wear this ring, I don't only think of my grandmother. I think of my great-grandmother's fierceness, bravery and survival instincts against all odds. Although I have come to a point where I feel it is not always necessary to take the difficult path that requires calling upon all my resilience skills, I believe this ring and my grandmother's story of irrepressibility fuel me forward, even on my darkest days. I know I can call upon my inner strength if needed. These values feel like part of my birthright and legacy. My duty to them and recognition of my great-grandmother's level of courage and strength propels me forward. Along with her thirst for knowledge and duty to care for others, she had a thirst for adventure that my grandmother did not have in the same way. However, my grandmother's stories still passed these values on to me. My grandmother wanted me to know how important education and independence were, even if they were not values she abided by. This makes me like this ring; its unspoken values motivated me to take chances my grandmother did not take. Without her active storytelling, I would not have become who I am. Object itineraries are the stories openly shared, and the hidden seeds planted underneath.

Intellectualising these stories has allowed me to witness the complexities of life and relationships throughout my family line. Joyce (2015) suggests that,

One implication of shifting from object biographies to itineraries of objects as things is the acknowledgment that the texts we write are part of the ongoing engagement of things with humans, which undermines the objectivity of objects and replaces it with the relationality of things. (p. 5)

Conducting this object itinerary offers an entry point of compassion and grace, which ironically was my grandmother's name, to interrogate further and understand her life choices that never resonated with me. This endeavour allows me to examine significant life choices like getting married and having children. When unpacking the impact of my generational story in relation to the object in question, I am reminded that there were different tensions in different eras. As such, prior generations were afforded a different framework for decision-making and possibility. My great-grandmother and grandmother married during the era of "mandatory marriage", where the role of wife and mother were paramount, and women derived much of their self-worth from these roles. Today, such roles are much more flexible, and society abides by a much more individualistic framework towards relationships (Cherlin, 2004, p. 851-852). Despite such vital differences in structure, all the choices made in prior generations have helped to make me who I am today and have allowed room for me to celebrate feminine power while simultaneously appreciating the feminine and ornate aesthetics of the ring itself. There is strength in the raw materials of the ring, the stories the ring holds and the construction of the ring itself. This object holds power and agency; it no longer depends on any marriage contract, which feels post-patriarchal.

There is a reimaging of the symbolism of this ring, its importance and whom it is intended for, as I am currently a single, queer person wearing this ring and writing this paper as a

second-year PhD student and the first person in my family who has pursued graduate studies. I am continuing my great-grandmother's educational goals. Over time, the object's use changed because it moved from a symbol of marriage to a symbol of feminine power and connection. The fact that it is a wedding ring does not feel as elevated compared to the fact that there were diamonds from my great-grandmother. This ring prioritises the connection of maternal lineage and loss's impact on our maternal line. My grandmother received the diamonds from her mother because she passed when my grandmother was eleven. My mother could not receive this ring from my grandmother because she passed when I was eleven, so there was a disruption within the family line due to loss. This changed the overall story of the ring from its original intent. Looking at the ring, I am reminded of the joys and the losses within my family line. Although my mother never wore the ring, I am also reminded of her and the stories she could not experience due to her illness and death. This ring holds stories of lost opportunities and infinite possibilities, a legacy I do not take lightly. Pressure comes from wearing this ring and prompts questions such as, am I fit to wear it? I am not sure of the criteria, but I do know that although I do not have much maternal family left, I hold a lot of care and respect for everything they have done. I immensely value their stories and legacies and want to make them proud, even if they are not here to see the accomplishments and moments of my life. However, I have realised it needs to be on my terms and come from a place of authenticity.

Figure 3: Wearing the Ring on my Terms, Montreal, Quebec (own photo).



A dichotomy exists within this ring; one follows authenticity, and the other preserves family integrity and cohesiveness. Through conducting this object itinerary, I discovered these do not need to be conflicting forces. "Itineraries are spatial and temporal, converging with sites and routes singular, multiple, virtual, and real. They have no real beginning other than where we enter them, and no end since things and their extensions continue to move" (Joyce, 2015, p. 3). In essence, my great-grandmother, my grandmother and her relationship with my grandfather were all not traditional. Her relationship with me was not traditional in nature. She treated me like a daughter, especially after my mother's death. She taught me that relationships do not have to fall within the confines of the role. For this reason, I have created a sense of family with friends, colleagues and others in unconventional ways. This has also allowed me to step into authentic supporting roles as a teacher for my students. I do not have children, but my duty to

care extends to future generations within my chosen profession. In the past few years, I have not been teaching because I have been a student, but this journey has taught me that I need to find ways to step back into that role because it feeds me in ways I did not realise. There are many ways to be cared for and to care for others in this world, and I hold much gratitude for the lessons embedded within this ring from my ancestors, my teachers and the individuals I will learn alongside for the rest of my life.

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