

**Found**

**A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing**

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**נמצא**

**הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת**

**המחלקה לאנגלית**

**אוניברסיטת בר-אילן**

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## Introduction

It's a serendipitous junction at which I arrived this summer: I turned 40; I celebrated the "bar mitzvah year" of my marriage; and in September I watched as the elementary school bus pulled away with all three of my children inside. Instead of heading into a midlife crisis, however, I find myself at a midlife *crossroads*, awakening to a certain consciousness about human relationships and marriage: in particular, how my life choices have impacted who I am as a woman; and how who I am as a woman impacts my life choices.

Through this project, I will examine on a personal level how women often fail to find a satisfying balance between functioning as a wife and mother, and creatively expressing their individualities and sexuality. As Adrienne Rich wrote in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, "To be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female function in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination."

An experimental memoir, *Found* will illustrate one woman's attempt to reclaim the Self she presumably lost when she broke away from her high school sweetheart -- a man who defined her adolescence and early adulthood -- and married instead a man with whom she was swept into a whirlwind courtship and betrothal. Only 14 years and three children later, when the narrator feels she has room to step out of the all-encompassing role of wife and mother to young children, does she realize she lost something along the way: freedom and courage to express herself. In addition to referencing the narrator's attempt to find herself, the title, *Found* raises the question of whether life is a series of choices, happenstance, or some mix of the two.

Moreover, in January 2014, I received a shipment of cardboard boxes previously stored in a warehouse in the U.S. Many of the objects had been boxed up following the breakup with my boyfriend 14 years ago and my parents' divorce, which took place the same year. As I started to explore the contents of the boxes, I also began to conceptualize this project. Like an archaeologist seeking answers to a civilization of my own making, I started to dig for understanding and chronicle my findings.

## **Aims and Description**

*Found* will be a hybrid memoir project consisting of aphoristic fragments and original poetry that will investigate the course of my own personal development and individual awakening as I approach and pass age 40, connecting my own evolution to the universal human condition. Rather than follow a traditional first-person narrative told in chronological order, I will contextualize the individual experience of the passage of time and memory, in which threads of the past may coincide with the perceived experience of the present. Memories and dreams will blend together with visions for the future.

The story will be interspersed with music lyrics and quotations, as well as scans of found artifacts including photographs, greeting cards, mixed tapes and their covers, letters, journal entries, and miscellaneous documentation, such as pages from my high school notebook, ticket stubs and souvenirs. As we know, it's often sensory experiences of hearing, tasting, and touching that quickly jolt us back in time.

The framework of the text will evoke the structure of a mixed tape, a popular form of expression in the 1980s and 90s in which one person would put together a collection of songs for another with the hopes of expressing a particular sentiment or theme, such as love or longing. The narrative will emerge indirectly.

## Conceptual Background

This project was inspired by Leanne Shapton's fictional *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry*, which contains photographs and descriptions of 325 items up for auction following the dissolution of a romantic relationship. The artifacts (postcards, pajamas, worn paperbacks) are all that's left of the relationship between the fictional couple, Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris. The concept of remembering, describing, and defining a relationship through memorabilia invited me to consider how the stories of our lives and loves may be told either directly (through use of language) or discovered and assessed indirectly (through exploration of evidence left behind.) Why should investigating a modern relationship be any less intricate than examining a long ago geological period or a lost civilization? And how might examining one couple's relationship inform our understanding of romantic love and partnership, in general? Furthermore, just because a couple – due to death or estrangement– has separated does not mean the relationship is over. Aftershocks ripple long after a couple's split; and sometimes make long-lasting impressions on the greater landscape.

Last winter, I wrote a series of essays on my personal blog on the subject of discovering or rediscovering oneself through “found objects.” “Note to Self” (a featured post on WordPress’ “Freshly Pressed” in early 2014) focused on a spiral bound notebook I logged at work during the year 2000 that contained, as an ordinary scribble, the first time I ever wrote my husband's name. Pondering this very significant, but equally mundane experience, I understood that much of the extraordinary may be found in the ordinary. Reading poetry on the themes of love, loss, nostalgia, marriage and family in the context of womanhood -- including works by Adrienne Rich, Louise Gluck, Sylvia Plath, and Rachel Zucker – I understood, too, that my extraordinary life is actually very ordinary. Where do ordinary and extraordinary meet? I wondered.

Specifically through poetry, I gleaned that my own seemingly “extraordinary” anger, resentment, desire, and fears are in fact ordinary emotions creative women of a certain age tolerate, but often struggle to voice in their works. I noticed a trend, however: Something

happens to creative women after marriage and children. They become bolder, more expressive, and less concerned about societal convention. As Adrienne Rich suggests about her younger self in her essay, "On Lies, Secrets and Silence:" "I hadn't found the courage yet to do without authorities, or even use the pronoun 'I.' The woman in the poem [was] always 'she.'" Rich implies – and it is obvious in her poetry – that she eventually found the courage to bare herself and do so in the first person.

In *The Pedestrians*, a recent poetry-prose work, Rachel Zucker intimately exposes herself as mother and wife, but in third person. Unlike Rich who "hadn't yet found the courage" to use "the pronoun I," Zucker, in her use of third person explores and reveals a *truer* truth, perhaps, by describing it from a perspective outside her own. Indeed, might Zucker use third person intentionally, signifying how universal it is that creative women move through motherhood in conflict over how to balance the "she" with the "I"?

In her investigational memoir *The Balloonists*, Eula Biss also experiments with perspective, moving within chapters from first person to second to third. She unveils her perception of reality and relationships piece by piece -- in fragmented, but introspective observations from her childhood; via candid, but inconclusive ponderings about her parents' marriage and divorce; and through metaphor in her use of an airplane's "black box" left behind after a "crash." (What can we learn about a disaster from the disjointed, out-of-context communications emitted by its victims?) Biss invites the reader to participate in the activity of narrative building; she avoids direct declarations. It's as if the reader were trespassing in Biss' bedroom and came upon her journal, her saved letters, her half-written notes to self, and books taken out from the library; all tacit divulgers of Biss' secrets. Biss also weaves excerpts from the work of other authors, such as Joan Didion, as she examines her own family history in contrast to her adult romantic relationship. Woven together, the elements combine to answer a question Biss asks outright in the middle of the book: "Are we going to keep living the same stories our parents lived?"

While reading Maggie Nelson's lyrical memoir *Bluets*, a philosophical exploration of the author's love and obsession with the color blue, I understood that the "soundtrack" of my

memories could be incorporated into my memoir as a both a theme and a narrative tool. In *Bluets*, the color blue serves as a common thread in the lyrical vignettes Nelson writes; however it is not always clear whether Nelson's priority is indeed investigating the *color* blue, as opposed to the emotion: The color blue is indeed Nelson's obsession, but so is her deep examination of emotional response to life's losses. As sensory experiences play an important role in my own life and in this project, *Bluets* is a good model for me as I attempt to express my own deep attraction to the auditory experience music conjures.

As a model for ekphrastic approach to essay, I turned to Anne Carson's *Beauty of the Husband*. Carson's "fictional essay" on marriage told in "29 tangos" has been labeled "unclassifiable." In fact, *Beauty of the Husband* is compelling, not in spite of the difficulties to classify it, but because of them. Carson is extremely schooled in the classics, and while the experienced reader is rewarded through her references to "Eros" and "Cassandra" or by the quotes of Keats that kick off each tango, the greater story is not lost on the less experienced reader despite high literary references. Likewise, my project will include excerpts of lyrics by musicians, some well-known, some not – including works by Randy Newman, Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Elliot Smith, Burt Bacharach, Elvis Costello, The Beach Boys, Richard Thompson, Stevie Wonder, and Van Morrison.

The music on the mixed tapes of my youth, as well as found objects inside my cardboard boxes, opened up for me a multisensory portal into the past; and convinced me that while mine is a common experience; it is collective enough to be shared. Music, like literature, is a legacy that connects human beings over time and space. Both invite us to reflect upon how our own feelings of longing, desire, sorrow, and joy take place within a larger context of human experience. Awakening to this is both humbling and comforting.

<<http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2014/09/02/notebooks-of-the-mind-memory-creativity/>> Accessed September 2, 2014.

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### **Music**

The Beach Boys, *Pet Sounds*, Capitol Records, 1966.

Jackson Browne, *Late for the Sky*, Elektra Sound Recorders, 1974.

Burt Bacharach and Elvis Costello, *Painted from Memory*, Mercury Records, 1998.

Elvis Costello, *The Juliet Letters*, Warner Bros., 1993

Bob Dylan, "Boots of Spanish Leather," *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, Columbia Records, 1963.

Van Morrison, *Astral Weeks*, Warner Bros., 1968.

Randy Newman, *12 Songs*, Reprise Records, 1970.

Elliott Smith, *Figure 8*, Dreamworks, 2000.

Stevie Wonder, *Songs in the Key of Life*, Motown Records, 1976.