CRITICALLY UNPACKING THE RESEMBLAGE PROJECT 2.0
A Conversation

With Shanice Chin, Nadieshda Curiel Cisneros, Monika Hirsch,
Iqra Mahmood, Vijay Saravanamuthu, Meagan Tanguilig, and
Andrea Charise.

"*As we age, if we don't see ourselves as part of a bigger picture, how do we retrieve value?*"

Introduction

This roundtable conversation, which took place on June 3, 2021, marked the culmination of the second iteration of *The Resemblage Project*, an intergenerational digital storytelling project based in Scarborough, Ontario, Canada. (For a roundtable discussion generated by the first inaugural launch of *The Resemblage Project*, click here.) This collaboration of digital story-makers began its work together in January 2021, and the term culminated in an online launch and screening on May 20, 2021, as part of the "Flourish" Community-Engaged Arts and Social Wellness research cluster at the University of Toronto Scarborough.

Participants Shanice Chin (SC), Nadieshda Curiel Cisneros (NCC), Monika Hirsch (MH), Iqra Mahmood (IM), Vijay Saravanamuthu (VS), and Meagan Tanguilig (MT), with Andrea Charise (AC) as project director, spent some time reflecting on the process, product, and possible futures of their digital stories, which all—in multilayered ways—explore aging and intergenerational relationships.

This candid, expansive conversation grappled with some recurring motifs that emerged both in the final products, and through the course of creation: the diversity of approaches to age, death, and temporality across and between cultures; the place of community; and the concept of "absence-presence" in aging: what is lost, what is gained, and the "legacies" we leave behind, including these digital stories themselves.

This entire process was of course shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, a period of profound grief and isolation that has disproportionately affected older and marginalized populations. In closing, the collective emphasized their individual responsibilities as storytellers not just to speak, but also—particularly from within a year of deep reckoning and revelation—to develop new, and necessary, commitments to listening.

Each participant edited their contributions for clarity and distribution, and Nicole Dufoe prepared the framing remarks and edited the final transcript.

Framing remarks by Nicole Dufoe, June 2021.

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AC: Hello everyone. It's lovely to be gathered here for a roundtable discussion (of course, via Zoom) at the end of this academic term. But really, as we come together to discuss our work this year, we are closer to five months into this process of generating our digital stories for *The Resemblage Project*. Actually, now that I think of it, we really began the seeds of this work in the Fall of 2020, if not even earlier than that.

There are many things about creating this batch of stories during the early months of 2021 that are historically unique: we did this all during a pandemic, and I'm sure our conversation will return to that throughout, so I won't say more about it just now. We'll begin with a set of introductions: who you are, the name of your story, and a few remarks about how the piece that you made this term came to be, and why it was meaningful for you.

Let's start with Vijay. Vijay, we'll do it the way we've been doing it all semester; once you're done introducing your piece, I'll ask you to name someone else, so we'll go in order that way.

VS: Sure. So, my name is Vijay. And I created a story called "Two Seedlings". And what was the prompt again—just what was the digital story about?

AC: Yeah, that's it: what was it about, a quick introduction to the process, and the reason you made this story about aging and intergenerational relationships.

VS: Thanks. So when I made "Two Seedlings," it was kind of like a journey, I would say. An exploration. Towards the end of the winter semester last year, when I was drafting the initial ideas for "Two Seedlings," *this* wasn't the story I had in mind, right? I was thinking about intergenerational dialogue and creating a story about my grandmother. I originally wanted to tell a story about a particular moment in her life that she was going through at the time. My grandmother, Paati, had asked me to come visit her in India because she wanted some help planning and navigating some advanced care. Of course, COVID-19 made it so visiting her wasn't an option. A lot of things that year never happened. So I was sitting with the idea of trying to nurture a relationship with someone when you don't have access to them in the ways that you typically would. I then realized what my story would be about: in "Two Seedlings" I explore this idea of having to *imagine* aspects of my relationship with my grandmother. In reflection, I thought about having to piece together photographs, phone calls, some very short trips (that were also few and far between); a lot of my relationship with my grandmother is in these kinds of bits and pieces. "Two Seedlings is really about" *that* journey. It is both a documentation of my relationship with my grandmother, and a story of my own reflection on the nature of migration, loss, age, and family. I am happy with what I came up with in the end. And I will throw it over to Shanice.

SC: I'm Shanice. My digital story is titled "A Not So Empty Space." During this pandemic I felt as though I was in some sort of a long-distance relationship with my grandmother. I'm so used to being around her, so not being allowed to see her was difficult. I wanted this digital story to reflect how I see her, how much I love her, my

relationship with her, and her journey and stor. That's what I tried to accomplish with my digital story.

MH: Okay, so my name is Monika, and the story that I created is called "How Are You?" It was inspired by some recent personal experiences. First, by my mother's passing, which occurred in January of 2020. It was also inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the process of aging in general. My story highlights an interplay or connection between all three of these things, and depending on whatever perspective you'd like to take, that's how you will understand my story. And now I will pass it on to Meagan.

MT: Thank you, Monika. Hi everyone, my name is Meagan and the digital story I created is called "Last Friend Standing." Initially the story was inspired by a short film by Kunio Kato I had seen in HLTC52 (Creative Research Practices in Aging) during the Fall 2020 semester called "The House of Small Cubes." After watching, I reflected on the main character—an older, aging man. The man displays moments of discomfort while navigating life without his close family members. His loneliness mirrored my own feelings of isolation while living at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. If I was to compare life to a dance, one partner may lead, and the other will follow: the stages of this dance warp and transform through the ages. Within my household, there are instances where the role of the child and parent are reversed. The older, more senior figures may transition from the protector to the protected. As the pandemic went on, I felt like my parents became the people I sought to protect. Through this, I was also able to reflect on some recent losses in my own life. Reflecting on these losses and absences of people in this digital story brought me to a place of healing and connection. This state of mind also facilitated discovering my own aging identity. I'll pass it on to Nadieshda.

NCC: Thank you Meagan. My name is Nadieshda and my digital story is called "To: From:." My story is a letter from my present self to my older self, which was challenging to create because this is a person that I don't have access to—like what Vijay and Shanice have been saying. I don't know what I am going to be thinking in forty or fifty years. I look forward to watching this video later in life, to see if I agree or disagree with my present self. It was also challenging to crate this dialogue on the topic of aging, because even though we're going through this process every day, sometimes we embrace the idea of aging and sometimes we don't, and we might feel like we are in a constant fight against it. One of the things that I have learned through my story and in our previous class (Creative Research Practices in Aging) is that ageing is a process, a transition, a cycle, and not necessarily the end of life. This digital story has allowed me to explore this cycle and to write a new chapter in my life. Now I will pass it to Andrea, or Iqra.

AC: Well, if I can take the floor for just a moment, Iqra. I saw you nodding while Nadieshda was talking about that sense of resistance to aging, whether it's a fear or just some kind of reluctance to having time do its work on us. I think you know something about that. While you were not a part of our storytelling group this term, Iqra, that's a topic that motivated the digital story that you created for the first launch of *The Resemblage Project* back in 2019. Maybe you could say a little bit more about your story, Iqra, and give a sense of where you feel that story sits with you now, a couple of years later; and of course, in all sorts of ways, I assume from a very, very, different context.

IM: Yeah, thank you Andrea for the introduction. I was part of the 2019 cohort of storytellers. I am honoured to speak today about my experiences of aging, and how my story has aged with me since I created it. My story was called "Growing Down," which, as Andrea alluded to, was really about that resistance to aging: but it was also about how to take that fear of aging and overcome it, build with it, and move forward with it. Aging can be that source of fear, but accepting it can also be the catalyst for building something new, connecting with someone new, and moving on from mistakes of the past. Aging therefore becomes a choice: a choice of whether to resist the uncontrollable changes that inevitably come with life, or to accept that changes will come—and use that fact as momentum to contribute to goals greater than yourself. While it is easier said than done, I believe the latter option is the healthier option to choose, despite being at times the most unintuitive.

AC: As you were speaking, Iqra, about aging being a source of fear, or something we resist, and generally associated with negative emotions and outlooks, you were also alluding to how aging can be something provocative, even perhaps enticing. It made me think about how often aging seems to be one thing—forced into *this* category—but at the same time can be something that's almost its opposite. And I'm reminded of a poem that we read together: "Absence, Presence" by Louisa A. Igloria. I don't want to put words into anybody's mouth, but at the time we read this poem, at the very beginning of this project, I think we were all maybe not entirely sure how this term was going to go. And here comes Andrea with this poem that maybe has something to do with aging, but may have felt a bit fuzzy. But each of us was provoked to think about aging through this poem as we began to ask: is aging something that is about presence? Is aging something that is about absence? I'm wondering if that relationship between presence and absence that we discussed early on is something that continued to motivate your story.

SC: When I think about the dichotomy of absence and presence, I am reminded to take a thoughtful pause. This is something that I tried to incorporate this semester, and even right now. I'm learning to appreciate things a little more and to show gratitude as much as I can. As I was making my story, I thought about how much I truly value the relationship I have with my grandmother and how I never want to take that for granted.

NCC: In terms of absence and presence, in my story the absence is that I'm not an eighty-year old-woman—but I will be. Being aware and conscious that we will age, or the biological physiological changes (grey hair and wrinkles), make aging present. There is something that my mom always says, and I agree with her: "aging is a mentality." A person can be ninety years old, and still feel young and energetic, while other individuals might look young but they don't feel young. Aging is more than a number or physiological changes. In my story, I try to show this through the dialogue between the present self and the older self, in which the present self is giving a list of "biopedagogies," a concept we learned from Nadine Changfoot that refers to a socially-endorsed set of instructions on how to age "well." I try to confront these biopedagogies through my dialogue.

MT: Reflecting on looking young, yet not feeling young: I think that this is a very universal concept and that we all confront this idea. It's important to continue recognizing the dynamics of absence and presence throughout the aging process. The saying goes, "absence makes the heart grow fonder": at times in our lives, we need

absence to truly appreciate the beauty of aging, the beauty of becoming an older person. This does not devalue your own being, personhood, or aging identity.

MH: I remember when Andrea gave us the prompt of "absence-presence" during our voiceover script drafting phase. I really started to think about how absence and presence work within my story. Obviously, my mother is not here: she is absent. However, I noticed that even within the narrative surrounding the process of aging itself, there are things that are absent and things described as being present.

One of the readings that inspired my story was Janelle S. Taylor's essay "On Recognition, Caring, and Dementia." Taylor touches upon absence and presence within her essay, specifically in her thinking about "the firsts" and "the stills" that she noticed when caring for her mother living with advanced dementia. If you take a look at my script I also include some of my own "firsts" and "stills" that I experienced with my mother: lines like "is she still breathing?" or "it was the first time we shared the same bed." I think the firsts and the stills that come up in my story really show how one's mental state dealing with aging and illness can connect to notions of absence and presence. People tend to describe those who are aging with vocabulary like "they've lost their mind." There's a sense of absence within these phrases. So, I found it interesting to read more deeply into my own story script and to see where I also called up the language of absence, but also of presence. For instance, in my story my father mentions that "I still haven't lost my marbles": I tried to have my father's portion touch on both absence and presence because he does have moments of both in our day-to-day lives. I found that absence and presence was a major focus in my story.

VS: A lot of my story is rooted (*rooted*: to use a very botanical image) in my immigration process: the idea of being displaced and having to leave one country and coming to another, the idea of loss—the idea of loss is very present in a lot of my experience, right? In terms of approaching my story with my grandmother, creating this story really forced me to look at what was *present,* right—what did I actually have? And that's not something that I had really thought about before going through some of her belongings: the things she made with her hands. I had her old coursework, artwork, and paintings. Doing that really allowed me the space to go into those treasured things. When I was a kid, I used to daydream along with her artwork. I used to imagine myself among the people in her drawings and I hadn't picked them up in a very long time. The way I found absence and presence was through a situation where I was accustomed to looking at things from a viewpoint of absence. Making "Two Seedlings" really provided me with the opportunity to look at what I do have, and how the tangible elements I do have inform so much of my relationship with my grandmother that is otherwise filled heavily with the imagined.

NCC: What if, maybe, we have a fear of ageing because we don't want to have this absence-presence? We may be physically in this world, but as we age, our mind—something Monika was mentioning—is sometimes not here. So, maybe this fear of aging comes from the strong association between aging and Alzheimer's and dementia. People maybe don't want to still be physically present but mentally absent from this world. I was thinking about that.

MH: I was just thinking of what Margaret Morganroth Gullette named "the ideology of decline," meaning that people often fear the process of aging, due to the absence that

they may experience of, let's say, their mind. This relationship between presence and absence of all kind of works into the idea of aging as just a bunch of declensions, and the idea that gradually you will lose your mind, and you will not be yourself anymore.

IM: Nadieshda and Monika's comments remind me of something I have been reflecting on recently. After two years, I realized that while I was not consciously aware of it while writing "Growing Down," I was trying to get at something about absence and presence that I only understand now. Specifically, I have realized that the fear that comes with aging is rooted in guilt of not being present enough—or being too absent in—the time that has passed and knowing that time will never return to you in the same way. Death is that ultimate absence that we consciously or unconsciously know we are going towards, and we shape our decisions—consciously or unconsciously—around it. For me in my digital story, the fear of aging can be summed up by the question: "what have I done with my time?" When I was freaking out in the beginning of my digital story about not being able to fit into that dress anymore, and my mom giving it away, it was really me being scared that I had not done enough with my time: was I present enough in that body, in that space? Was I *there* enough? Did I miss that one moment in time while I had it? That's why people are obsessed with plastic surgery and wrinkles, I think: because they want to access something they feel like they've missed. As you age, you get closer and closer to that finitude of experience and clarity that you will never get that time back that has passed. You feel like you need to make up for it in some way, and then we try to compensate for lost time by addressing it in superficial ways—whether that be surgery, impulsive extravagant purchases, and so on. The only way to get to the root of the problem, I think, is to be truly present in the time you have going forward, to accept the changes that will come, to build and cultivate your own philosophy on aging, and to help others with theirs. My digital story argues this implicitly, by starting at a place of denial and fear of aging but ending on a decision to age with intentionality and presence.

MH: Iqra, I find that interesting: you are essentially saying that the more you age, the more you become present. In Janelle Taylor's essay that I mentioned earlier, she spoke about how, in the presence of her mother, she was able to slow down and gain a new perspective on the present moment. She gave the example of sitting at her mother's window in the long-term care home and watching a lady blow bubbles for her child in a stroller: she normally wouldn't have watched something like this, but noticed that it was beautiful, and that her "own aging and impaired mother helped her to see it." I was inspired by this moment in my story as well and I tried to fit it in when I mentioned that the woman beside my mother in the hospital hadn't had any visitors. I had come rushing in that day all concerned about my mother and everything else going on in my life. However, when I started talking to my mother, she turned to me and just said, "the woman beside me hasn't had any visitors." I remember thinking, *how are you caring about this lady beside you when you have so much going on in your own life*? But really, it was just a very beautiful moment to me, to realize that my mother was just very much in the present moment. I was clearly absent, I was off in my own head, thinking about everything else I had going on in my day. So I really believe that this topic of absence and presence around aging is very thought provoking because while I am inhabiting my own "youthful body," I was still very absent in that moment, while my mother, in her early sixties, was very present. It puts a new, very different spin on this "narrative of decline" around aging because, potentially, as you age you may in fact find ways to become *more* present.

IM: Perhaps to age "well" is to be more present in the moment. There are people even younger than any of us who are very present and involved in the state of the world, or in their communities—I'm thinking, for example, of Greta Thunberg or Malala Yousafzai. They seem very present emotionally—perhaps due to their experience, their upbringing, or beliefs, making us say things like "wow, this person is way beyond their age." They seem to have lived more deeply than someone who might be older in years but is largely absent in their day to day lives, intentionally or otherwise. So, I guess aging well comes down to living deeply as much as possible. Two people can both live for twenty more years, for example, but the person who chooses to be present in the moment more—through their actions, or relationships—will have lived longer. At least that is what I think now, who knows, my opinion might change in a few years!

AC: I want to step in for a moment and thank you all for such a generative and honest conversation so far (and as always with this group). I'm wondering, now, if we could go in a few different directions: as I've been listening to your meditations on those categories of absence and presence, I've been thinking about how we can move beyond the sense of binaries or dichotomy attached to those terms, and consider how these words also *infuse* each other.

Another thing I hear *infused* into both of those words is *sense*. One of the things that we noticed this term is how our respective stories seem to—accidentally, subconsciously, however this happens—focus on or draw from a physical sense: touch, sight, sound, taste, smell. You each wrote very *sensuous* stories, and digital storytelling is a very sensuous visual multimedia approach (not surprising to folks who are familiar with it as a method). So, one of the things we could talk about is the *senses* of your stories.

I also want to offer a chance to talk more about how each of you has offered very thoughtful, but very different, iterations on the relationship between absence and presence in aging—and how we might flip our assumptions about absence and aging in, we might even say, liberatory, anti-ageist ways. Because when I think about other phenomena in life that also confront, and work through, absence and presence, my mind turns to grief. And I think, Monika, in many ways your story raises that most clearly: almost, like you're saying, "grief, aging, COVID: come on people, make the connection!"

MH: Yes, it's very obvious in that sense.

AC: There is also an intimacy of aging and grief, which, Monika, your story also addresses. I wonder if in some ways that's one aspect of the mechanism by which aging turns into ageism: because who wants to grieve? Who wants to age? Who wants to grieve *because they're ageing*? It quickly becomes clear, I think, how those ideas interlock. But another way of thinking about aging and its relationship to absence-presence was sparked by what you Vijay were saying—and that's the role of community. Communities are built around what a collective presence is, what a community makes present, or understands as presence; but, in equal part, a community can also be built around what we understand to be absent. Maybe I'll just leave that there: the idea that presence and absence are also about community. (And maybe everyone is thinking "uh, that's great Andrea, but we'll just carry on and talk about what we actually want to talk about!" [laughter]). Vijay, help me out, please!

VS: Actually, if it's ok, I think I will talk about something completely different! One of our course readings that I really loved (well, this is related to what you were asking, Andrea) talked about the idea of who gets to grow old. Because I think often, as many of us have referenced, there's a lot of fear around aging: it's just an inevitable thing, it's going to happen to us, it is already happening to us, how do I stop it from happening to me. But not everybody gets to age. We know that in some cultures, historically and today, there are whole communities of people who die young because of social and systemic injustices. For people that do get a chance to grow old, depending on what your social location or intersection is, it can look very different. So for me in terms of absence and presence, to make that connection again, I was struck by Kathleen Woodward's [introduction](#) to *Figuring Age* that talked about how as women age, the broader society—specifically the male gaze—is very reductive. It really diminishes the richness of women's work or the quality and value of the things that women offer. In making that connection to my grandmother, I was really sad. You know, in my family we all look up to her as this woman that has achieved so much, that has done so much, and that continues to persevere despite all of the loss and the absence. I really wanted to use this opportunity to tell a different story. If for no one else (and I'm glad that the story is touching more people, which we'll talk about later) than just for her. "The House of Small Cubes" showed us how important memories are to the preservation of self, and I really wanted to create something that would remind my grandmother of how wonderful she is. I don't want my Paati to see herself shrunken down to half her size. I want her to see what we all see when we think of her.

SC: I love that point, and it also made me think about something that I read recently. I've been doing some research into Indigenous knowledges and practices and I came across a reading that outlines Indigenous values versus Western values, and as Vijay was saying, Western society is ageist, whereas Indigenous cultures are often more respectful of their elders. I even see that in Caribbean culture. There is a general respect for elders and the process of aging.

AC: I'm going to ask you to try and answer a really difficult question, Shanice: why do you think that's the case? Again, this is just a prompt to use yourself or your own experience as a sort of case study:where do you think, in your life and possibly in your community, that different or distinct—one might say "better," or certainly more inclusive and welcoming— approach to aging, comes from? What are the mechanisms for that and where might community or culture come in? Again, I'm not asking you to speak, you know, on a planetary sense, but do you have any hunches? Your story certainly offers some thoughts on this.

SC: There is definitely a discrepancy. Everything about life in the West is individualized. It's all about what you can do for yourself and how much you can accomplish on your own. It's very much *go fast alone*, as opposed to *go forward together*. We live in a selfish society, but I do believe there still exists the few of us who hold true to our cultural values of working together.

NCC: I would like to add to what you're saying, Shanice. We live in this individualistic society, particularly in North America. But we also can see collective societies, in which the win of one member in the community is the win of all the community. What I hear

you saying is that in your home you were raised in a certain way, maybe you come from a more collectivist culture, but the society you live in is an individualistic one, and to fit into that sometimes we have to behave individualistically to survive. But it is so important what happens at home, how you are raised, and the foundation and values that your parents or grandparents give you —this is what really matters. So in terms of a sense of community, I think that you decide who makes your community and what community means to you. Community could be your family, your neighbours, or the people that you live with. You must build a community in order to belong and make sense of life. Now if we connect that sense of community to ageing, when you age, you want to belong, and to be part of a community. You don't want to age alone—you want to have someone by your side.

MT: I want to touch on what you both have been talking about, about being in a collectivist versus a more individualistic society: and how this aging identity that we are all trying to come to terms with can also be a source of survival. When you come to a new place, or when you enter a new community, you tend to pick up on the values and the opinions of those within your circle. As human beings, we yearn to feel connected to our peers. Personally, I feel this is a reason why I was so invested in creating a digital story that touched on family and connectedness, because these are things that make me feel like a fully present person. These values of family and connectedness are what I want to carry with me into the future as an aging person living in this individualistic North American society.

VS: I am trying to tackle that question as well. In my story, there are a lot of natural sounds. My culture, for one, is very earth-based; there is a big emphasis on connection with the earth as a way of living. Nature also provides us with so many references for aging. We plant something, it grows, it produces, and it withers, it dies, it leaves behind seeds. Even if you don't have older people in your life, you can see aging through nature. And what's important is that there is value at many stages of life, including the very young, as we go through life and reach older age. I think Indigenous North American cultures really celebrate and recognize that in daily life. In my digital story I used a lot of greenery like palms and bananas and coconuts and there was a very earthy, to-the-ground telling of my relationship with my grandmother; I realized that that is very much where I come from, the kinds of values I have. There's a point in my story when I transition from my grandmother to my personal experiences of being planted or transplanted into cold white snow. For me, growing up in Western culture meant I don't know what something I buy at the supermarket looks like before it got there. I don't play any part in nurturing the food I consume. These sorts of disconnections with nature can potentially apply to aging as well. As we age, if we don't see ourselves as part of a bigger picture, how do we retrieve value?

IM: After two years, I realize that the lessons you learn through *The Resemblage Project* stick with you in many ways. Besides what you learn about yourself while creating your own digital story, my experience with *The Resemblage Project* influenced the courses I took going forward, the mindset I have on aging, and my awareness of different cultural approaches to aging. For example, after *The Resemblage Project* I picked up on what I think you were getting at, Shanice. Specifically, the individualized, self-centred experience of aging in Western society, because of the Western view of aging being linear, while many of our households and upbringings in this group—which are influenced by other cultures, including perhaps Indigenous cultures, from all around the

world—view aging as circular. In an individualistic culture, we see "successful" aging as a linear series of conquests that disrupt natural rhythms as we strive to leave our unique mark on society. This mentality leads to the selfishness you mention, Shanice. Also, I think this individualist narrative deceives us when it promotes this linear type of aging—this approach to existing through time—as something that can help us leave an impact on society. I think in fact very little meaningful impact happens because of one's individual actions, within one individual life. While this might not be as apparent when you are young, I think it becomes clearer as you get older.

While in no way am I saying that they are ideologically perfect, more collectivist cultures that we experience in our households (at least it seems some of us here) avoid this fallacy by structuring aging as a cycle, building momentum across generations where, like Nadieshda said, when one succeeds, everyone succeeds: everyone plays a role so no one falls through the cracks. While this approach has some drawbacks, I believe it also instils greater feelings of acceptance, belonging, and meaning while we age. You have a role within each stage of life and instead of foolhardily trying to create some distinct mark on the world before you die. You create momentum where you understand and honour the work of those who came before you. Do your best to help others and maintain kinship ties in the present, which in turn allows you to exist into the future; I think there is much more peace in this approach, although I might be wrong and am open to discussion.

SC: That's exactly what it is, Iqra. A cycle versus a linear path. In many cultures and religions there is a belief in an afterlife, but with Western society there is a fear of dying because of the unknown and the belief that this world is all there is. My assumption is that therefore there is an intense focus on personal achievement: to feel as though one has lived a fulfilled life. This discussion of time also circles back to the reading I mentioned earlier, which describes how certain Indigenous cultures view time as based on nature, whereas Western society bases time on the clock.

NCC: I would like to add on what you're saying, Iqra, about having this collective momentum. These digital stories allow us to connect with our culture and with where we're coming from. For example, Vijay uses a lot of sounds and greenery images that connect to his culture; and for my story, it's food and language. Through my story I was able to highlight my cultural identity. Our stories become a way to connect with our culture and build this momentum.

Now that we're talking about culture and Indigenous perspectives, I'm going to pin an idea for you, Andrea. Maybe a Resemblage Project "version 3.0" with Indigenous perspectives on aging, in which Indigenous students tell their stories of aging, and maybe collaborate with Elders in their communities? I think that it might be interesting to explore this area, especially with everything happening right now with Canada's residential schools. I think that these stories need to be told: they bring value to who we are as Canadians and as individuals.

AC: Nadieshda, thank you for that. Thank you also for framing the provocation as you have. I appreciate the educational spirit that you're offering and I think that it's a beautiful idea. More generally, participatory and community-engaged praxis is something that I value deeply in terms of the research commitments that I have, especially in the field of arts-based health research. If anyone has taken an arts-based health research methods course with me, you probably know what I'm about to say: one

of the most important elements of community-engaged research, whether it's in health or other domains, is to ensure that research is done *with* participants, never *on* participants, right? So, as far as I'm concerned, I think that's just a parameter or an ethical guideline that should apply to all aspects of health research, whether you are doing immunology or randomized control trials: the idea of doing research *with* not *on*. Ensuring that research and community are not opposite ends of the spectrum but are integrated to the greatest extent possible at all stages.

So, with respect to your suggestion, which I appreciate very much: I think that part of the work is also knowing what one—in this case, me—what I am able to do as a white, female, settler scholar, which is a very particular position and positionality in Canada, at the University of Toronto, on Treaty 13 territory. Because this positionality has very particular significance when it comes to considering approaching or working with Indigenous partners as part of, say, an intergenerational digital storytelling project. I think we're all really proud of *The Resemblage Project*, certainly I am: but one of the things I'm also just as proud of is the accomplishments of similar or maybe what we might think of as *resonant* projects: I would mention the "Bodies in Translation" initiative of which Nadine Changfoot's is a part (she was mentioned earlier in regards to the "Aging Vitalities" project in Peterborough, which is very attuned to and involved with Indigenous stories of aging). I would also reference May Chazan's group "Aging Activisms," which is working, I believe, quite closely with Indigenous partners.

Going forward with *The Resemblage Project*, I want to be in a position where I can approach partners with real humility and grace and, I would say, real accountability. What would that actually look like? I think it would be, first, to be honest as to whether digital storytelling through *The Resemblage Project* was something that was useful or wanted. More generally, it's a question of being attuned to whether I am the right person, or is this the right method, for a community at a particular moment. Above all, it's essential to look at what work is already being done from within specific Indigenous communities. Perhaps my job is actually just to amplify that, and pay more attention to that. Really it's the responsibility, I think, of a researcher to first ask themselves whether the voices or communities they're interested in working with already have sufficient volume—but are just not being listened to, or provided with the platform they need and want to occupy.

Particularly as we speak here, together, in the wake of the horrific news out of Kamloops where the remains of the 215 children were discovered on the grounds of a residential school [*editor's note*: a number that continues to rise across the country since this recording], it is critical to remember that these *were not discoveries for everyone.* There were many Elders of the the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation and beyond who have been saying for many, many decades that those children's bodies were there. It's only for the majority white, settler audience for whom this was a "discovery": for many more people, this is a grim and atrocious affirmation of what's been known for generations.

That's also part of this work of digital storytelling, I think. Of course, as we have been discussing, the process is about sharing: but also as storytellers we must become especially attuned to being better listeners. This is a responsibility we assume when we become storytellers: not just to turn the volume up on our own voices, but learn when to turn the volume down on the very things that have given us privilege, sustenance, strength—and instead, just to listen.

NCC: Thank you for highlighting this, Andrea. Like you mention, Indigenous communities are already doing this sort of work, but we are just not turning our heads towards it.

AC: Like many other things we've been speaking about today, we also have to grapple with the inevitability of endings. How should we end this? Not only this roundtable but, in a sense, our little community—not forever, but for now?

SC: Let's end by discussing how this process of digital story making has changed us.

MH: Well, I believe I have changed as a person after working on my story. In one of our drafting weeks we spoke about the ability of "dwelling" in our stories—just sitting with it. Andrea suggested to me to really dwell with my script, to be vulnerable, and to embrace my uncomfortableness. I feel like I dwelled with my story throughout the entire process. It was like a little journey for myself, and I think it was quite therapeutic. I remember one of the readings during the Fall semester was about how digital storytelling can be used in healthcare for things like, for example, talking about living with HIV, and how it allows people who may not be able to always have a voice to share their stories. People would comment about how therapeutic the process of making a digital story was. Now I completely relate, even though mine was more focused on aging and, I suppose, grief. So, yes, I do believe it changed me as a person because it allowed me to sit and dwell with my difficult emotions and work through my feelings.

VS: Before going through this process of storytelling, I didn't realize I had this story within me, right? Realizing this has kind of piqued my curiosity about the folks who I am close to. Going back to absence-presence, I have a lot of my friends who I hang out with on a regular basis that I haven't had access to because of the pandemic. Now, as things hopefully get better and we open up [following the pandemic], I'm looking forward to connecting with some of those folks. I am curious about what stories are hidden, what gems about aging, are buried within my friends. I would really like to create space to share some of those with my loved ones. A few of my friends came to our screening and they just ate it up, right? They just loved watching everybody's work. One of my friends has been sharing my story with his co-workers and getting feedback, so I would love to schedule some time whenever we get a chance to meet and really talk about why he connected with these stories. I have an inkling that he would love the opportunity to also go through a process of creating a story for himself. So those are just some of the ways that the story has impacted me. I have become more curious about what stories in relation to aging already exist within the spaces that I travel.

Shanice: I love that. It's funny because we all have people who are close to us, but do you really know your friends? Do you really know your family members unless they actually divulge information? I was also thinking about how digital story-making tears down assumptions and deepens your humanity. It helps you to become more understanding of the world around you. It has also helped me to become more vulnerable, which I can appreciate.

NCC: In my case, the process that I went with this story was realizing aging is not a dead end: it's a transition, a cycle, it's going to happen and we should allow ourselves to

embrace it. That's what my story has taught me. I am going to be watching this story in forty years and then maybe I'm going to make another letter to that present-future self of me on how aging is going. Another thing that this digital story and *The Resemblage Project* taught me is seeing your (my colleagues') stories, because: just look at this Zoom screen. This is a very diverse group and each of us comes from a different culture, with different perspectives of aging. I learned a lot from all of you, from your cultures, from who you are, from what you're presenting. All these components made this learning complete for me.

MT: The digital storytelling process has given me an opportunity and platform to heal, to continue reopening the grief that I had felt when I had lost my grandmother this winter, as well as my cousin. A story that had started as one about changing relationships within myself resulted in a journey where I re-connected with other people within my family. Just recently, a week ago, my cousin reached out to me saying, "Hey, I know I couldn't make the digital story screening, but I would love to have a meeting with the rest of our family where we highlight your story and have our own screening." I was able to feel the love that I have not felt because of this isolation this past year. I think that's the beauty of being able to connect with people and to share in community. Currently, I am relishing this moment, these newfound connections that I've created with people, and am very excited to continue exploring these aging journeys that I can continue having, my own and others'. I want to express my deep gratitude to everyone in this small family here, in this little community we create: because it has allowed me to feel connected in a time where we're all feeling alone.

IM: Monika, did you have a chance to go?

MH: I did, but, I have something else to add after what Meagan just said. I mentioned it already but I'll say it again: being vulnerable is a hard thing to do, but it's important to encourage and embrace it. I remember a few years ago I was in an anthropology course and we watched [this video](#) by Brené Brown. Brown stresses that being vulnerable is an act of courage and shows strength. It's not an act of weakness. I kept that in mind when making my story, since I had to be quite vulnerable. I've also been kind of on a mission to just open up and be more vulnerable in my own life because I think it's important to be comfortable with your own experiences. You can't keep everything bottled up. During one of our weekly meetings, I remember Shanice saying that "if Monika can share her story, I feel like I can open up a bit more." Shanice, you're also not the only person to mention that to me. I've had a few of my close friends reply to my digital story with tears and saying how proud they were of me to share such a vulnerable story. The other day, in fact, one of my friends told me that her and her mom listened to my digital story in her car and they both ended up in tears. To me, I can tell that they are sitting in a space of vulnerability. But overall, I found the experience of making a digital story to be very touching, very sweet, when you start to think about the stories that are behind all the people around you, as Vijay said. I find that I'm already open to that, since I study mental health and am hoping to work within the clinical realm of mental health. But I think this whole process brings to light that everyone has a story behind them. I always question "why does this person think this way? Act this way?" Really, the question may just be, *what is their story?* So yes, I'd find it interesting to hear more about other people's lives.

IM: One thing that comes to mind is the idea that much of Western society premises itself on ignoring death as much as possible. By ignoring death as an inevitability but constantly being presented with reminders of its existence—as seen through physical aging, death in families/friends/celebrities, death in nature, it is unavoidable—we create a state of cognitive dissonance and anxiety that fuels a lot of our (over)consumption patterns, whether that be skincare, makeup, impulsive trips, fashion, large houses, or shiny cars. When you start thinking about it, a lot of the choices we make are out of a fear of things ending, and not having that chance to relive them. The biggest thing *The Resemblage Project* has done for me is empower me to shape the way I think about my own aging. Especially as a young person, providing the space and the vocabulary to address my own aging gives me greater control over the purchases I make, how I spend my time, and the value I give to certain pressures I face in society. It allows me to bring into focus how I want to age, what is most important, and what changes can be ignored. For me, the legacy I want to leave as I age is the quality of the relationships I have fostered with my friends and with my siblings, as well as my ability to inspire growth in them through my words and my work. That is the gift *The Resemblage Project* has given me. It has been pretty amazing.

AC: By way of concluding, I want to point out how the story that you've made is already now a sort of "legacy." And maybe things are different for you marvellous young people, but when I hear the word legacy I think of something ancient, or institutional; old white men leave "legacies," right? It is to me a heavy word. So maybe there's a better word for these teachings that you've gifted to the project. But you are right, it is something *like* a legacy. And it's been enabled by a digital platform. Certainly before the pandemic, it was very easy to say the digital realm isn't quite the same thing as "real life," and true, it's not— it has its affordances, and it has its limitations. But I've been struck by what it's given each of us, especially in this time: and that is your story of aging, your legacy, so to speak. As each of you have shared, these stories have sparked the story making-desires of others in your own networks, maybe even beyond. You don't know every person that's going to click that play button. Each of you have been so vulnerable, but at the same time shown such fortitude, and there is something so enticing about that as a viewer, and something that the method of digital storytelling (at least in its best iterations, which I think we have here) allows us to realize so well. So, what is a legacy? To quote one of Iqra's favourite texts: "It is planting seeds in a garden that you'll never get to see."

Let the transcript record the fact that each one of our little boxes we are making snaps as we were saying that! And maybe that's a moment to wrap things up.