

# The Olive Branch

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## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	1
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	2
INTRODUCTION	4
LITERATURE REVIEW	5
RESEARCH QUESTION	11
METHODOLOGY	11
THE OLIVE BRANCH	13
INSTALLATION #1 المطبخ السوري بقيادة الشيف هوري THE SYRIAN KITCHEN LED BY CHEF HOURY	14
INSTALLATION #2 RETROSPECTION	19
INSTALLATION #3 BEWILDERMENT	21
LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH	23
EPILOGUE	24
REFERENCES	25

## **Abstract**

The Olive Branch sheds light on the lives of a grandmother, a mother and a daughter. It delves into family narratives and culinary cultures through an intergenerational lens of storytelling. It is a research conducted through a set of in-depth oral history interviews with the mother and the grandmother of the researcher, accompanied by journal entries from the researcher about the process. The research is presented through three art installations designed by the researcher. The first installation is a performance where the researcher prepares stuffed zucchini (كوسا محشي), during which she tells family stories and recounts memories from her latest visit to her birthplace. The second installation represents a retrospection through the researcher's past memories and the recent ones gained from her travels. This creates an interactive portrayal which acts as a mediator between past and present memories. Lastly, the third installation is a soundscape of the three generations telling different versions of the same stories. This installation is accompanied by photographs related to the stories and storytellers.

## **Acknowledgment**

My project took many turns of events, from being rejected in the beginning to facing hurdles near its completion. However, one of the steppingstones of liberal arts-based education is to be able to articulate one's ideas and to challenge existing theories in a given field.

I'm eternally thankful for my supervisor Dr. Hourig Attarian for her utmost support. She indeed cushioned my falls, my frustration and stress. Furthermore, I'm lucky to have a supervisor that guided me in every step of the way. I can't recall the number of hours I spent at Dr. Attarian's office where she would deeply listen to every single outlandish idea I had. She fueled my passion with compassion and empowered me to challenge myself and to go beyond the basic requirements of completing my capstone. I would also like to thank Dr. Melissa Bilal, for her stories and her endless support. Even though I didn't take any of her classes, Dr. Bilal was a friend I could reach out to. She guided me to unearth layers of trauma and feeling on an academic level.

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To my family, as big as it gets and as extended it is over continents. Their support without fully understanding my studies means the world to me.

To my mother, who blindly believed in me and encouraged me to be the person I am today. For her unconditional love and trust that became the cornerstone for my motivation.

Finally, to my grandmother Adelle Ibrahim, my ultimate role model. Since my childhood my grandmother encouraged me to speak up, to write and be creative. She planted the seeds of loving food in me, where food turned out to be more than a necessity for survival but rather a bearer of infinite life lessons. I'm indebted to her for always showing me how to be strong and independent. And also, for teaching me how to cook with passion and love.

I dedicate "The Olive Branch" to my grandmother and to my birthplace Aleppo.

## Introduction

This study focuses on familial narratives within a single hybrid family of Syrian-Armenian descent. "A hybrid is a mixture of two different things, resulting in something that has a little bit of both" (Hybrid dictionary definition, n.d.) as defined in Vocabulary.com. The same concept applies to a family that consists of a fragment of Syrian identity and a fragment of an Armenian one.

Kikumura says, "the real motive for delving into my family's past was to learn more about myself and to feel a greater sense of continuity with my family" (Kikumura, 1986, p. 144). Family narratives need to receive more attention in different avenues of research, especially studies that look at the anthropological and emotional process of family interactions and how those affect the upbringing of children. "As a group activity, the telling of family stories may be one way that families regulate social interactions. As reflections of individual and family beliefs, family stories also may be a way that representations of relationships are passed down across generations" (Fiese & Sameroff, 2001, p. 64). Every family has its own set of activities and belief systems to follow during family gatherings. Some are expressed through food, others through direct contact between family members. Most of the time, those direct and indirect interactions play a significant role in shaping an individual's personal identity. As Fiese & Sameroff put it, "the study of family narratives emphasizes how the meaning-making process comes to life in family interaction and transacts with representations of family relationships" (Fiese & Sameroff, 2001, p. 102). Food rituals are part of the meaning making in families; people often crave a "home cooked" meal

or their mother's cookie recipe. This research examines food rituals in a hybrid, spicily hyphenated Syrian - Armenian family and investigates how those affect the personality and identity development of the individuals involved.

As the researcher of this study, I share the background of a child of a mixed marriage, of an Armenian father and a Syriac mother. This mixture creates a multilayered cultural identity notion in the family narratives. Apart from its academic component, this project also holds a self-study part through my research journey of self reflectivity. As Hall puts it, "This inner expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms. If its silences are not resisted, they produce, in Fanon's vivid phrase, 'individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless - a race of angels'" (Hall, 1994, p. 226). It's important for me to shed light on both inner (personal) and outer (academic) aspects, to give the research more depth and meaning.

## **Literature Review**

**Ethnographic** research is collected through qualitative research findings. Life history research focuses on the life stories of individuals who lived a certain life experience or belong to a certain group for the most part. Cole and Knowles, in their book *Lives in Context*, talk about the process of doing life history research. They emphasize the importance of having a guided conversation with the interviewee, finding meaning in their narrative, collecting artifacts and responsiveness (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Focusing on the interviewee's life story is core to the process of data collection to give the research a backbone of real-life lived experiences. Life history research is done

through in-depth oral history interviews. In his chapter *What Makes Oral History Different*, world famous oral historian Portelli remarks, "The first thing that makes oral history different...is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning" (Portelli, 1998, p. 67). Portelli also asserts the role of the orality of the interview itself and the possible threads and interpretations that are born from it (Portelli, 1998, p. 65). The interview transcript gives the researcher the chance to add volume to their research process. Oral history interviews are different from other interviews because the interviewer is not allowed to force answers out of the interviewee. In those cases, the most common reaction that an interviewee has when they don't want to answer a question is to be silent.

**Silences** constitute a paramount part of an oral history interview analysis as they are often connected to a certain memory. Erin Jessee has extensively discussed her experience with silences and the role of an oral historian in adapting to those situations. In one of her interviews in Rwanda she shares:

His (the interviewee) call for an ethics of silence is long overdue in the discipline, particularly the need for oral historians to develop ethical ways of probing silences to ensure their meaning and purpose is fully understood, and not merely assumed, by researchers. (2013, p. 220)

Any researcher has to be prepared to work around these silences and represent them in their narrative in a way that does justice to their interviewee.

Most individuals strive at some point in their lives to look deeper into their identity, whether it's cultural, national or sometimes even personal identity. As Hall puts it,



“Identity is such a concept - operating ‘under erasure’ in the interval between reversal and emergence; an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all” (Hall, 1996, p. 2). He firmly discusses the importance of having an identity or belonging to a group based on class, race, gender or personal preferences. The important part of the identity search is the questions individuals ask to find the answers to what’s identity to them (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Moreover, with a focus on food and transnationalism, Pollock has studied people in the Pacific islands who have migrated from islands to Australia. She indicates, “Food is an identity marker that both links families overseas to their island home and distinguishes the two communities” (Pollock, 2009). Pollock discusses the importance of food that is prepared within the family household with certain rituals attached to every meal, in contrast to outsider food which most often represents fast food chains. Through her interviews, she speaks to many people about the associations they make with a certain meal when they have it in their home island and when they have it in Australia, the land they migrated to (Pollock, 2009, p. 107). By the same token, in a study titled *Lifelines: matrilineal narratives, memory and identity*, Attarian explores the memories of five women sharing the same Armenian diasporic identity. In a testimony from one of her research participants Attarian reflects, “It was amazing to see how such an insignificant and ordinary item as a candy took on the power of a talisman and transported us all into the realm of a memory tingled with nostalgia; how it bonded us through Anais’ story and also symbolized a safe space” (Attarian , 2009, p. 193). She discusses how sometimes objects that might not be that important play a significant role after migration. They hold in them the memory and association with a specific place, the memory of someone's life experience. And they begin to represent

a part of an identity that's being shaped after the process of migration (Attarian , 2009, p. 193).

**Subjectivity** in ethnographic research is key. The theme of this research itself requires a certain amount of subjectivity since it deals with a precise family narrative, a subjectively selected individual's story. In his book, Mansfield explores a variety of Freud's theories connected to subjectivity. The author focuses on the unconscious, feminism, overdetermination, and other themes. He applies those theories to understand how subjective human psychology functions when it comes to identity and culture. Furthermore, he investigates the triggers that led humankind towards a specific path of opinion-forming about their and others' identities throughout history (Mansfield, 2000, p. 34). Identity in those terms cannot be 100% objective, otherwise, it won't be faithful to the self or the culture that the individual strives to belong to.

**Memory** is the second main ingredient of this research process. Nadjie Al-Ali, a specialist author in transnational migration and the diaspora, talks about the experiences of Iraqi women's memories after the 2003 Iraq invasion. Al-Ali (2018) explains that:

Memory is also subject to change and is both selective and fluid. History and memory are not merely about the past but dialectically linked to the present. Individual memories are complex constructions based on personal experiences, worldviews - political, religious, and ethical - and collective narratives. (p. 138)

Al-Ali's explanation excellently conveys memory's role in identity-making after certain life experiences, in this case, the 'reconfiguration' of post-migration identity.

**Food**, as mentioned previously, plays an integral part of identity, especially cultural or national ones. In a study conducted about the Indian culture in the UK, Roncaglia has examined the Indian cultural restaurants that were opened in the UK by Indian migrants. Most of the local associations made to those restaurants identify curry as the representative taste of the Indian culture. Roncaglia (2013) says:

The relationship with the territory articulates the character that society constructs for taste. Access to certain ingredients shapes our likes and dislikes, developing into a system of distinctions, discriminations, class and gender.

Taste is probably the most visible expression of ethnocentrism. (p. 128-129)

Roncaglia claims that food or certain ingredients in a meal play an important role in identifying a culture, by tasting their identity.

**Research creation** is based on oral histories as a methodology. A researcher cannot tie study outcomes to one specific result. However, they can have a few outcome possibilities while planning the interview. For life history research, it is important to have visual artifacts to support the data collected during the interview. In a classroom project, Webster and Gravotta, a teacher-student collaboration, have worked on an oral history project which led to a documentary film as an end-result. Accordingly, the students gained a better understanding of what oral history was through their interviews. They also went through the process of shared authority of information they produced with interviewees, to make sure they didn't upset them (Webster & Gravotta , 2014, pp. 153-161).

**Photography** is influential in such research approaches because it conveys a different meaning to the viewer/reader. Photography provides the chance of visual memory activation and a connection-making process. As Schwärzler states, “[A] Struth (a photographer) approaches his subject intuitively and embarks on his projects in an almost somnambulant and unconscious manner, obviously spurred on by a challenge he may not be able to name or to ground theoretically” (Schwärzler , 2016, p. 68).

**Performance** based on oral histories is powerful and reaches the audience using a different medium to deliver the message. *Come Wash With Us* is a collective performance based on oral history interviews. The performers share a background of migration from the Middle East to Canada due to war in their home countries. They tell their grandmothers’ stories doing laundry, showing how that tradition was passed down to them. The performance gives a chance to the audience to share their memories of doing laundry regardless of their background. This emphasizes the importance of transmitting memory from the individual to the collective to the global (Arshadi, Attarian, Baker , & Bilici, 2018, pp. 261-276).

## **Research Question**

In the scope of this research, the dual identity that I hold and its effects on the bigger context of cultural identity are examined. How do family food rituals weave stories that later on get transmitted intergenerationally to create meaning in the family narratives? How do memories of family narratives around meals affect the cultural formation of individuals, family members and the society where these individuals and family come from?

## **Methodology**

This study uses a combination of in-depth oral history interviews and archival documentation (photographs) from the interviewees. For this research, I have used qualitative research methodologies, focusing on oral history as the main data collection method. Before conducting the interviews, I had to search for information about the interviewees and certain life events I wanted to explore during the interview. Even though the interviewees were immediate family members (my mother and grandmother), there were parts of their lives I wasn't familiar with. In this process, I delved into secondary research about the topic and events that had happened, to have a broader understanding. This process assisted me in formulating my questions on the spot during the interview(s), it also added more context and clarity to the interview. The interview is just the raw material from which the research takes its head start. The next step after the interview is verbatim transcription. This process helped me seek out the answers I was looking for regarding my research question. It also opened up a new sub question that emerged during the transcription process.

Following the transcription, the matching process begins. This was when I started to match my interviewees' testimonials to secondary research or other outcomes of primary research that I had. As it is raw material, the videos and audio recordings from the interview(s) can later be used as verbatim proofs incorporated in a creative project including three art installations. This methodology is shaped to be a real-life example of all kinds of outcomes any research can have. Since this research has an ethnographic essence, then people's life experiences are important to study. Oral history interviews are one of the most suitable methods to get that outcome, because they provide truths and heartfelt testimonies that cannot be reached through other methodologies. (See appendix 1 for the detailed interview guidelines).

My research creation focuses on rebuilding my interviews and experiences through art. As Taylor puts it, "Performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called "twice-behaved behavior" (Taylor , 2003 , pp. 2-3). Dealing with memories not only personal but also collective is challenging. Lynn Abrams in her chapter refers to it as "The production of memory stories, especially concerning personal narratives, can require significant psychological and emotional investment. It can open up psychological fissures, prompting re-evaluation (sometimes for the first time) and revelation" (Abrams, 2018, p. 82). Representing memory through food, sound, photography and performance is how this research comes into being.

## **The Olive Branch**

The idea behind this project started from an olive branch tattoo that I have on my right forearm. The tattoo was to honor my grandmother and the dearest thing she gave me, food. Olives symbolize peace in Noah's ark, and they represent a connection to the land in the Palestinian reality. I believe these provide a good synthesis to my tattoo story because, through my grandmother's olive trees, I'm connected to the land that is Syria. And at the same time, my birthplace needs unconditional peace. My grandmother defines the family tree as, the roots that are the grandparents, the body that is the parents and the branches that are the grandchildren. The three installations represent parts of my existence and my memories: How I came into being and who I am today based on my lived memories and family narratives.

## Installation #1 المطبخ السوري بقيادة هوري The Syrian kitchen led by Chef Houry



Figure #1 The Syrian kitchen led by Chef Houry

It's interesting to observe how people start talking about their deepest desires, darkest secrets and most shocking stories around food, and especially while preparing food. My grandmother chose the kitchen as her safe space to teach me and my cousins about the importance of family. It was through this process that I became attached to cooking. But behind that lies a stronger fact of family togetherness, care and love. My grandmother raised us to respect each other while playing in her kitchen. She made us go crazy with our creativity, inside and outside the kitchen and showed us that we need to be strong. Being the eldest grandchild, I was the master chef of my grandmother's kitchen, she calls it, "المطبخ السوري بقيادة الشيف هوري" - the Syrian kitchen led by chef Houry." By recreating that kitchen through this space, I will give myself the chance to talk about my recent travel experience to Aleppo. The trauma I faced needs a safe space to come out and be sincere, it needs a distraction. It is hard for me to sit down and talk about visiting my birthplace after 7 years of war. I need



to reconstruct the story and distract myself by cooking to be able to fully share my story with my audience.

A combined performance and an installation while cooking stuffed zucchini (كوسا محشي). The performance space is circular in its general view or will be made circular based on the location. The audience will sit in a semi-circle facing a table where the food preparation will take place. The performance will consist of the preparation part without cooking because preparation is key, that's what my grandmother taught me.

The symbolism of stuffed zucchini traces back to one of the first meals I made entirely by myself when my mother was traveling. This is one of my favorite meals that has its roots in Middle Eastern cuisine. Our family used to have a feast of different kinds of stuffed vegetables like zucchini, eggplants, peppers, green pumpkin and tomatoes. Recipes vary from one family to another, some people use different spices, others a different cooking sauce. In my family, we prepare the stuffing first. 2 tbs of rice and for every 8 zucchinis, 1/4 kg of beef meat per one zucchini. The meat has to be pinkish red with no white dots in it, which means no lipids. We mix the beef with short Thai rice adding the spices to them. Spices are 1/2 tsp black pepper, 1tsp allspice, 1/2 tsp 7 spices (an Aleppian mix of 7 kinds of spices), 1tbs tomato paste, 1tbs sweet pepper paste, lemon zest, lemon and salt (based on preference), 4tbs corn oil and 4-5 garlic cloves. There's a secret ingredient we add based on my grandmother's recipe, which is the citronella plant. We mix them with dry clean hands or by using kitchen gloves to prevent any germs from infecting the food and us. Then we carve the vegetables, in this case the zucchini, carefully without hurting its body on the outside. Before carving it, we cut off the heads and dip it in salt, because according to my grandmother, "it makes the carving smoother". Lastly comes the stuffing process

which requires absolute attention to details. You stuff 3/4 of the zucchini only, “because the rice blows up and if you stuff it fully you ruin the shape of the zucchini”, says my grandmother. The trick here is to save the sliced heads of the zucchini and to use them as covers since “doing so, the stuffing will stay in”. And the last decorative add would be carving vertical lines on the zucchini. This is usually done by using the carving knife which comes in several shapes. The purpose of this is to allow the flavors from the sauce to emerge with the stuffing. The zucchinis are then placed in a pot with water added to it. If you desire to have an extra flavor, you can add tomato paste and lemon to the water. When the water starts boiling, you add dried mint to give an explosion to your flavors.

For the most part, the audience has no interaction with the performance. It would be scripted as such that I would know where they are sitting and who I’m telling my stories to. There’s no fourth wall between me and my audience. The last part after the meal preparation consists of audience interaction through sharing. It will be announced that they can approach the table next to the exit door, on which pens, papers and a recipe box would be placed. The purpose of the box is for the audience to share their own recipes with me, through which they would share a part of their family heritage and cultural identity. Next to the box would be a bowl of olives. Olives are the big title of this project and have a related story in the performance. I didn’t like olives when I used to live in Aleppo, but after moving to Armenia they became an essential part of my diet. I won’t eat just any olives; I always prefer my grandmother’s olives. They give me the taste of my birthplace in exile, that is how the feeling tastes. The audience will have the chance to embody my story/stories by eating the olives on

their way out. The audience would eat the olives that are brought from my grandmother's trees, which would literally symbolize my story running in their veins.



Figure #2 The olive bowl and recipe table

The items on the table will be refreshed throughout the duration of the exhibition. The aftermath of the cooking would remain, to show what happened there.

Half a lemon, the citronella plant, rice, the spices and garlic. "We always use fresh vegetables", my grandmother reminds us all the time. Therefore, the lemon will be replaced every day to stay fresh.



Figure #3 The cooking table

## **Installation #2 Retrospection**

“Retrospection” is a journey through my personal memory of my birthplace Aleppo. After being away for 7 years, from July 2012 to revisiting it in March 2019, the representations that I had clashed between memory and reality. I was expecting to see destruction and wiped-out places, but I didn’t expect to see a ghost town. It’s not that Aleppo didn’t have people, these people were unfamiliar to the places they were in.

This installation is interactive, meaning that the audience can play around with it. It consists of 40 pictures montaged in pairs in a before and after style. 20 black and white pictures rather larger than the colored pictures. The idea behind the black and white photos is that they represent the present-day Aleppo, places I had memories in. These places are streets, family memories and my school. Black and white were the colors I saw these places in when I visited them again. They have almost no one left in them anymore, or at least not the same people as in my memories. They have either moved to another country oceans apart or passed away. In before and after formats, the black and white commonly represents the old, while the colored the new. In this installation, tables have turned because in my memories the past is more vivid in color than the present. These colored photographs are smaller in size because they contain a larger burden than the new ones. The amount of memories in the colored photographs is bigger; if they were the same size as the black and white ones, they would lose their capacity in telling a story. A smaller size will give the audience a chance to see all the compressed emotions and memories within each frame.

These pairs will be hung on the wall by ropes; the black and white ones would act as the fixed background and the colored ones would be movable. Visitors would be able to move the colored photographs up and down using ropes. The purpose of this is for the audience to fully experience these pictures separately and then to read their togetherness when they are back on top of each other. Each picture represents a moment in time; when they are separate, they can show different realities of the same place. But when they go on top of each other, the montage shows the devastation, loneliness and the aftermath of war.



Figure #4 Retrospection wall

## Installation #3 Bewilderment



Figure #5 Bewilderment soundscape back view

This installation aims to provoke in the viewer confusion, mixed with clarity at times. This soundscape is a combination of audio recordings of three generations telling different versions of the same story. A bench would be set facing a blank wall and three speakers would be placed around the bench like a sound system. The speaker on the right would echo my mother's voice, the speaker in the middle would echo mine and the one to the left my grandmother's. My voice would be in the middle because I'm the link between these two generations. I'm also the story collector and unifier of both storytellers. My mother's and grandmother's recordings are in Arabic, but in different dialects based on their hometown accents. My recordings are in English, because being bilingual I need English to mediate my thoughts and to be expressive and analytical. I took upon myself the vow to create meaning out of these stories, to unite them and give them a new perspective through this installation. The

sounds would be accompanied by pictures from my childhood, my memories and pictures related to the three storytellers.

This installation deals with the matrilineal folds of a story, of how the female members of the family are the ones who carry these stories with them. Having the three voices together but separated through speakers brings attention to the importance of the individual and the collective. My grandmother chose me to be the link between all the generations in the family. She made sure I knew the stories and delivered her messages to her children and grandchildren. My grandmother went through a tough surgery, the reason why I visited her in the first place. She made it through, however, these stories have a heavier burden on my chest. Through these stories, I attempt to reunite a family torn apart by war and life circumstances.



Figure #5 Bewilderment soundscape frontal view



## **Limitations and avenues for further research**

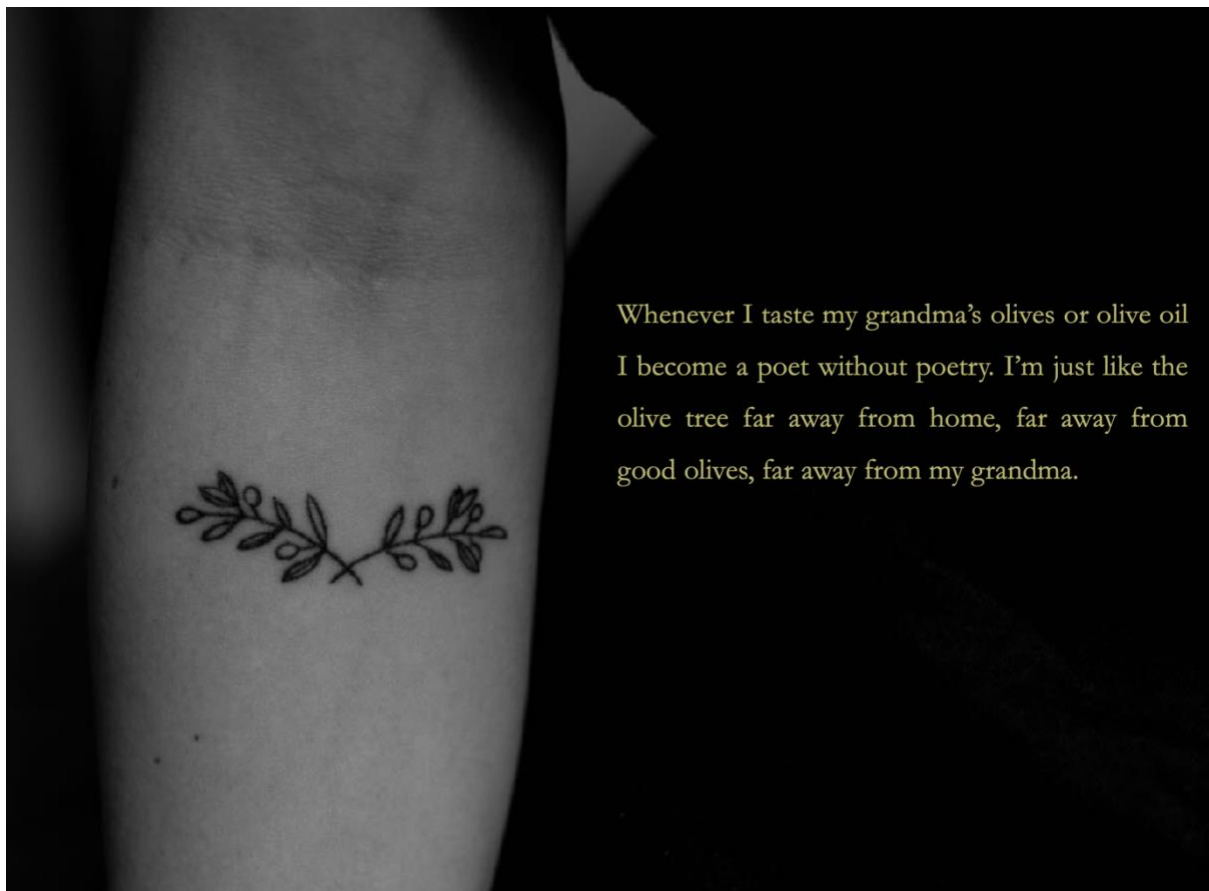
The biggest challenge/limitation upon completing this research and art installations was time. I only had a couple of months to put my capstone together to graduate. I didn't have enough time to sit with my emotions and deliberately analyze them. Rushing through lived experience sometimes makes one's research lack clarity, which I didn't have the chance to overcome.

Another obstacle was the absence of a space and a budget to turn these projects into reality. Actualizing these installations would've given the research another layer of deep analysis and meaning. I don't consider this project fully completed because it deals with life stories. These stories are hanging by a lifeline that begins and ends with every soul that is a part of this project. This is an ongoing project that can't end with me.

In the near future, as I embark on my MA studies, I look forward to expanding on each installation, to study them in more depth and to further examine memory and its association with food and trauma.

## Epilogue

The Olive Branch is more than just a graduation project, it's a labor of love that I intend to carry with me for the rest of my life. As long as there's blood running in our veins, we always have stories to tell. As long as we extend our bloodline, we have the responsibility to pass down these stories. I say this with sorrow, but as long as there are wars, we will keep moving from one place to another. The easiest thing to carry with us on our migration journey is our memories. Just when we want to experience the warmth of our families, we will cook and embody those feelings of security and tenderness. For now, I leave you with this temporary conclusion.



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