

The Speed of Light
Thesis Speech

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Hello everybody and welcome. Happy tax day. As you might have heard, my name is Gaby, and this is my thesis defense, *The Speed of Light*. I am a photography major here at PNCA. I am from Palmetto, Florida, where I lived with my parents until I was 23. The majority of my work is digital portraiture, often leaning towards feminist themes. In fact, a top contender for my thesis project was work about menstruation. This project, however, is something entirely new to me- both in theme and in process. Though, similar to menstruation, this work comes from my body!

Today, you are looking at 3 cyanotype t-shirts, 1 triptych shot digitally in the studio, and 12 framed, hand printed, unedited chromogenic-teargrams. For those of you who don't know, a chromogenic print is a print made in the color darkroom. And a teargram? Well, that is a process that, I believe, I came up with. And don't worry, we will get into the weeds of the process very soon. But, like all good stories, we must start at the beginning.

-water-

When I first approached Sarah about being my mentor, and described to her what it was I wanted to do for my thesis, I did not have the slightest clue that my project would look like this [*gesture*] in its final form. But I always knew it would be about family: That it was going to be a way for me to use art to process all of the weird, sad, and confusing feelings I had about really only having deep connections with my parents. These were feelings that, in moving over 2,000 miles away from them, had recently become a large part of my life. Like a heavy suitcase that I suddenly found myself laden with, though I wasn't sure when I had started carrying it or what destination I was

heading towards that required me to carry such a thing. **-Pause-** At the start, I looked to artists, like Larry Sultan, who make work about family and use the photo album as a means of communication and investigation. Later, as it became clear to me that the darkroom prints I was making were going to become central to the project, I realized that my work was in conversation with artists like Gabrielle Garcia Steib and Chino Atsuka, who use various methods of distortion of the family photograph to communicate. **-Pause-** But this was my first time making work with the intention of processing my emotions. And I was having a difficult time figuring out how to make art about something so elusive. I knew what I felt, but I didn't know how to talk about it. And within all of the work by others that I was looking at, communication was central. So, that became the question: How do I make art about something I don't know how to talk about? And, more recently, after the art was made, how on earth do I finally talk about it? In a way, that's what this project has always been about.

-water-

So, in October of 2025, I went home to Florida to photograph my parents and my childhood home, with the intention that these images would be my final thesis project. One night while I was there, I asked my parents to pull out the old photo albums. As we were all looking through together, and they were telling me the stories that always accompany photo albums, I noticed that my parents had more than just printed photographs. They had the negatives. And it just so happened that I was in the first color darkroom class at PNCA since 2008. And I could print these images. I'm talking old fashioned, in the dark, hand print these photographs. I just knew I had to bring them back with me.

-slight pause-

But, of course, I couldn't come back with only the negatives! Like a dragon hoarding its treasures, I returned to Portland laden with a suitcase full of archival family photographs. I had individual photos and albums from my childhood, albums from my parents' lives before me, and even a few letters and cards from my birth. A fair amount of time was spent with these artifacts. Organizing them, scanning them, and trying to figure out how they fit within the thesis puzzle that I was building. As excited as I was about the archive that I had brought back with me, I was having a difficult time getting everything to actually fit together. Yes, there was the throughline of my family and my childhood, but my project was more than just a collection of the ephemera that might go into a photo album- wasn't it?

-slight pause-

One thing I did know, I was very excited to start printing the photographs that I had brought with me from my childhood. These photographs were taken by my mother, my father, and even by me as a child. I was excited to honor them by printing them by hand in the darkroom.

It was while I was working on an image of my paternal grandmother holding me as a baby [*gesture*], that I first had the idea to cry on the paper. I wondered if it would act like a chemigram (a cameraless photographic process in which chemicals are applied to light sensitive materials and cause varying sorts of chemical reactions on the substrate). I began by crying in the darkroom in class, which proved difficult as I did not want my classmates to hear me. So, I silently got a few tears onto the paper and then exposed my image on top of the still wet tears. This resulted in there being a bit of streakiness in the image and it overall being cyan. What is important to know here is that color darkroom paper is very sensitive, and will turn cyan when exposed to light leaks. After discussing this with the professor, Rachel, and coming up with a few experiments to figure out what was going on, I

discovered that because my tears were still wet, they were causing the colored light from the enlarger to refract and act like a light leak!

So, after class one day I went into the film loading closet and made myself cry again. Only this time, I was alone. There was no time crunch, no one else in the room. Just me and my paper in total darkness. I sobbed, coating 6 pieces of paper in my tears. I exposed one of these freshly coated sheets about an hour later. The paper was still a bit damp but the tears were not droplets, as they had been before. This resulted in an image that was cyan along the edges, but significantly less so- proving to me that the cyan was in fact coming from refraction. I left the rest of my pre-coated papers to fully dry in a light-proof box and returned to print a few days later. When I did, everything was different. Nothing was cyan. The spots on the paper where my tears had soaked in had yielded vibrant, watery pops of blues, greens, and purples. My tears *had* worked like chemigrams; affecting the paper and distorting the image. This is what I lovingly refer to as a *teargram*.

-water-

However, the process of printing the teargrams was not quite as easy and straightforward as letting the paper dry and then having successful print after successful print. In fact, I often felt more like Sisyphus with a giant, cyan boulder. I ran into a lot, *and I mean a lot*, of technical issues. This was probably compounded by the fact that, in addition to coming up with and figuring out the idiosyncrasies of the teargram process, I had *never* printed from color negatives before. And it had been eight years since I had printed in a black and white darkroom.

But with a heart full of enthusiasm and a head full of, some might say, stubbornness, I created my process *and* first five teargrams in class last fall. I

just knew that this was something I had to continue. At the beginning of this semester, I was given special permission to continue color printing on my own. However, printing would look a little different than it had in class, and was another new process for me to learn. I was now equipped with my own chemicals, which I mixed while wearing a respirator, and a color processing drum (which is basically a large, light-proof tube) to develop my paper in. Using the drum meant I could only do one sheet of paper at a time, and that I had to walk into the darkroom to expose, and out of the darkroom to develop. So, needless to say, it was a very slow-going process. Often taking about 4 hours to print one final teargram.

-water-

Up until my very last day of printing, just a few weeks ago, I continued to have issues with cyan. My tears were still acting as chemigrams, producing unique distortions and blobs of color on the prints. But my papers, more often than not, ended up with bright cyan edges and an overall dark-cyan tone.

-Pause- If you look at the first photo on the wall to my right [*gesture*] you can see that not only is it dark with a cyan-hue, but where the mat window is not flush to the image, a sliver of the border is exposed. That border is bright cyan. This is the boulder that just kept rolling back down the mountain.

-pause-

It meant that somehow, at some point, my paper was exposed to a light leak. Because of the nature of a community darkroom, where truly anything can happen, I thought that perhaps the light-proof box I had been storing my paper in had been opened and the paper inside had been exposed. So, in mid-March I decided to coat some fresh sheets. When I went into the film loading closet to make myself cry, I found it more difficult than it had been the previous 3 times I had done so. The things that I had sobbed over just a few months prior hardly made me tear up at all. As it turned out, forcing

myself to think about the things that hurt me, spending time with these thoughts and allowing myself to feel them and move through them and cry about them, had actually helped me process emotionally. Who would have thought?!

-water-

Finally, after having passed the emotional hurdle that I had been trying to get over for the past 2 years, I thought everything would be looking up for me. Including my printing. But alas, that cyan boulder which I had so painstakingly rolled up the mountain once again rolled down. Even my new, emotionally processed paper was processing cyan. At this point I was very close to giving up. But I spoke with Rachel about it and she gave me some spare paper that was left over from our class the prior semester. A week later (during spring break), with new, definitely-not-exposed paper in hand, I got my happy ass back into the film loading closet. I cried some more (though as before, it was more difficult than it had been originally). I printed some more. And... my shit was still cyan...

It was at this point that I made the wise and apparently difficult decision to switch enlargers. What I have learned about myself in this process is I am both stubborn and adverse to change, if you already knew this about me, please keep it to yourself. But finally- Finally I was rid of that dreaded color. My paper was not exposed and had never been exposed! The enlarger was fucking my shit up. Once I moved to different enlargers, I was able to print several images back-to-back without a hint of cyan in sight.

-water-

When I tell people about this project and the teargram process, almost everybody asks me if I'm really making myself cry. And how I do this. I have found this question to be a moving target, and quite hard to explain without undermining the emotionality of the process. And so, I wrote a step-by-step guide on How to Cry in a Dark Room:

1. Gather Materials. You will Need:
 - a. Color darkroom photo paper
 - b. A lightbox
 - c. Tissues (if desired)
 - d. A dark room (not to be confused with a darkroom)
and
 - e. Emotional baggage

-pause-

2. Enter the room. Take whatever steps necessary to ensure complete and total darkness.

-pause-

3. Don't freak out.

-pause-

4. Once you are positive there is absolutely no light in the room, take several sheets of paper out of the light proof bag. I find 6 is typically adequate to accommodate a good cry.

- a. Place them on a flat surface in front of you. Do not lose sight of where you have placed them. Do not forget that it is dark.

-pause-

5. Put all other paper back in the lightproof container.

-pause-

6. Take out emotional baggage.

-pause-

7. Open the lid.

-pause-

8. Examine what's inside.

- a. You might have to look through things more than once- it's likely you will notice something you hadn't before, or be struck by something else in a certain way you had not previously felt.

-pause-

9. Continue to examine the contents of your emotional baggage until you find something that pierces your heart (punctum).

-pause-

10. Pick it up.

-pause-

11. Hold it.

-pause-

12. Cherish it.

-pause-

13. Do not stop touching the part of your heart that has been pierced.

a. Poke at it.

b. Prod at it.

c. Go back to the same pierced spot over and over and over.

-pause-

14. Continue to allow what you have chosen (that which pierces your heart) to strike you again and again until you feel tears start to form.

-pause-

15. Bow your head.

-pause-

16. Listen to the sound of your tears falling on the paper.

-pause-

17. Rub your face on the paper.

-pause-

18. Rub your eyes with your hands and let your tears coat them- rub your wet hands on the paper.

-pause-

19. Blow your nose in the paper (if you're nasty).

-pause-

20. Once you feel you have touched the sore spot enough that you are tired and cannot cry any longer, put the paper in the light proof box and tape it closed!

- a. Make sure the box is fully closed and all papers are inside. The pages will have to layer a bit on top of each other, but this is okay.

-pause-

21. Turn the lights on.

-pause-

22. Exit the room.

-pause-

23. Squint in the bright light.

-pause-

24. Pack up and put away your items as necessary.

-pause-

25. Allow your paper to “cure” for at least 24 hours.

-pause-

26. Continue to carry your baggage with you.

-pause-

-water-

Up until my midterm review, I had been trying to make the photographs I had taken of my parents while I was in Florida, as well as some new representational photographs, fit within the scope of this project and coincide with the teargrams. However, everything seemed to be a clunky fit.

Everything, that is, except for these 3 cyanotype t-shirts [*gesture*]. While I was home, my parents and I collaboratively made these t-shirts (which I had pre-coated in the darkroom and brought with me on the plane in a light proof bag). We stood in a group hug in the front yard of my childhood home under the hot Florida sun for 8 minutes straight: Our bodies arranged much the same way the shirts themselves are arranged right now. What these shirts have, that the other images I was making did not, is viscerality. Within the teargrams, there is physical evidence on the images that I have been there; that I have touched, held, and worked with these photographs and that I have interrupted them in some way; I have affected them physically just as they have affected me emotionally. The shirts are just the same. They are proof that I was there. That my parents were there. That we were all there together, hugging one another.

-water-

During the midterm review, my panel suggested that I clue the viewer in to the fact that I am crying. As it is not overtly obvious within the

teargrams that the disruptions are chemical reactions of my tears on the paper. While I was discussing this with Teresa, she had the brilliant idea that I get in the studio and take portraits of myself crying. I am so glad she thought of this.

This is where the triptych [*gesture*] comes into play. I wanted to bookend the work with this piece so that viewers are clued in on what is going on. You know that this project has to do with crying in some capacity- even if I wasn't here to tell you all about it.

-water-

These are self portraits I shot in the studio. I was heavily influenced by Bas Jan Ader's 1971 piece, *I'm Too Sad To Tell You*. I looked to his work for lighting and background direction. I shot these photographs the same day in mid-march that I cried in the darkroom and found it difficult to do so, as it was not as painful as it had once been. But crying in the studio, directly into the eye of the camera, was completely different than crying in the dark of the filming loading close. It became performance. I had to think of my Self inside of myself in order to cry, while simultaneously thinking of my Self outside of myself to recognize when I was "crying the best" and when it would be a good time to take a photo. Also, the knowledge that these would be photos of me crying- that people, including myself, would see *me* in a physical state of vulnerability was nerve wracking. I mean, the photos aren't exactly giving Miss America.

-water-

When I began making this work, I was honestly making it for myself. At the onset, I approached the thesis project with the intention of using it as a tool to help me process my own emotions and fears. Now that the project has been molded into this form, I imagine the work, as it stands now, living in

gallery spaces. To my knowledge, I have invented this teargram process. I think that it is something special and unique and I believe that I have a good chance of showing this work in a fine art capacity and getting grants to continue it.

And I do want to continue the work. I believe this is a project I could probably do for the rest of my life. Perhaps I won't make 12,000 teargrams, but making work about my parents; about family, loneliness, and longing is something that I can see myself doing forever. If even as just a way to process my own emotions. I can foresee a book in my future. One that includes not only teargrams, but all of the avenues I was trying to piece together at the beginning of this project. **-pause-** More immediately though, I have started writing letters to parents- so that we may be penpals. I think there is potential for this to be used artistically in some capacity in the future (perhaps in a book). But I also think that it is a sweet and meaningful way for us to connect; I have a feeling that one day in the future I will be very happy to have their letters.

-water-

You might be wondering why this project is called, *The Speed of Light*. In January of 2026, my dad came to visit me in my new apartment, where, for the first time in my life, I live alone. I wasn't able to get time off work while he was here, so we weren't able to go off galavanting on any adventures. We mostly just sat together. He bought me a french press and a slice of zucchini bread, which we had for breakfast the following morning. We went to a movie and watched home makeover shows on my tv. It was nice.

Since moving away from my parents almost three years ago, I find myself constantly with the desire to ask them about their childhoods and their lives before me whenever I'm with them. I want to know who my parents are as Lynn and Gilles, beyond who they are as Mama and Papa. Maybe if I hear

stories about their siblings and their relationships with their own parents it will make me feel less alone. Maybe knowing as much as I can about them will allow me to hold them even closer against my heart. Maybe everyone feels like this when they're 26.

One of the days my dad was here, we were getting lunch and I was asking him about his childhood and his brother, Ronald. Eventually we somehow got on the subject of theoretical physics (I think). My dad loves this kind of stuff and, in classic dad fashion, is very often telling me things that make me question everything. Like the theory that everything is just made up of atoms moving around super fast, and that nothing is actually solid: Not this podium, not those chairs, not even me (this conversation once caused me to have a meltdown in a longhorn steakhouse). This time, my dad was telling me about the speed of light. How it travels so fast that, if you were to travel at the speed of light, from the perspective of us here on earth, you effectively stop aging. A lifetime could pass us by down here and you would remain as you are now. This is not unlike photography. In a way, your likeness is traveling at the speed of light. Getting caught on emulsion and staying in that moment, at that age forever, all while lifetimes pass us by.

-water; breathe-

If the winter garden photo described in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* was a way for Barthes to recognize his mother in someone he had never met. And if *Pictures From Home* was Larry Sultan's attempt to make his parents live forever, then this is my attempt. I want not only to make time stop, but to travel so fast that I go back: Back to when I was just a kid and my parents were my whole entire world: To exist forever in this space where everyone is as they are in my mind. My parents are young; my mom has a short haircut; my dad is sticking out his tongue; my grandmothers look the

only way I have ever known them to look- like grandmothers; and me? I am alone in the photographs, playing or eating ice cream by myself- but family is always just out of frame. And I am surrounded by love. **-breathe-** To photograph, to look at photographs, to hold photographs is to stop time and live frozen moments. But to print photographs by hand? To spend time with them and breathe new life into them in that way? To do something with my body that has a physical effect on the images? That is to travel at the speed of light.

-water-

The first time I practiced this speech, my friend Liz held up a mirror and showed me something in myself that I hadn't even realized I was showing- but which was apparently blatantly obvious: that I am terrified of being alone.

Since starting this process, I have had a very difficult time answering the question, "What is your thesis about?" I usually say it's about my parents and my childhood. That it's about familial yearning. But that has never felt quite right to me. I never felt like I was explaining the full breadth of what I was doing, or what this very emotional process has been like. I mean I'm making myself cry for christ's sake and all I can say is "it's about my parents??"

Liz was right. I am scared of being alone. She could see straight away what I couldn't.

I am an only child and I don't have close ties with any of my extended family. Now, I live alone. 2,515 miles away from the only family I have ever truly known. And my parents' lives continue without me- they age and change in ways I am not there to see. **-breathe-** I am absolutely terrified of what will happen when my parents are no longer here. How could I possibly bear that

all alone? How could I possibly bear *being* all alone? I don't think I will be able to.

-breathe-

And so, I look at old photos of my family when we were younger. I think of all the love. I think of how my parents were my whole world. And I cry. I yearn for that time. I ache for it. I want to hold it close to me and never forget it and exist always- always in that space. I want to keep my parents as they exist in my mind. As they exist in these images: young and silly and full of love. Here, they will not age and die. They will be with me forever. Like this. Forever.

-water-

But no matter how badly I want it, I can't move at the speed of light. And time marches on. And one day I will be old and the photographs from now will be distorted- time and tears and my DNA will have affected them. And maybe I will be alone. But right now? Right now I am surrounded by mentors. By friends, both new and old. By family. And my god, how I love you all.

-water-

Thank you, Sarah, for being my mentor and for allowing me space to be weird and emotional and vulnerable, and sharing in that with me. Thank you, Rachel, for your endless color darkroom support, knowledge, and encouragement. Thank you to my friends: Alahnna, Malique, Callie, Liz, and Alec, for enveloping me so quickly into your group and for supporting me, laughing with me, and crying with me throughout my entire journey here- but especially this past semester. Thank you to my friends Deb and Lucie, without whom I would not be sane- our nights spent eating cheese, drinking

wine, and watching shitty reality tv are like a ritual to me. And thank you, most of all, to my parents. This project would quite literally not exist without you. Thank you for being here today; thank you for your endless support, love, and encouragement; and thank you for raising me in such a way that I ache to live in it forever, even now, at 26.

Anticipated Questions/Discussion topics

- Sequencing
 - The first 3 images (on my right) tell the whole story. It is me, my mom, my dad, and my maternal grandmother, who was the only other family member that lived near me and who I felt close to as a child- before she had a stroke when I was 8.
 - Then, on the back wall, the images are sequenced such that you are starting at the exterior of my house, and ending at the interior- it is taking you on a journey.

- How I chose which images to print
 - Instinctually at first; choosing which images to print based on how I noticed they made me feel.
 - Eventually, I started to think of the subjects (me, my parents, my grandmas, my dogs), as characters. I wanted to have at least one of each of the important characters.
 - In my midterm review, I was given the suggestion to print photographs of myself as well, as I only had ones where I'm a baby and all babies kinda look the same. So, when I was picking which photos of just myself to print, I chose ones where I am doing normal kid things (like playing and eating ice cream), but I am alone. I felt like this spoke a lot to the project and to me being an only child. As a kid, when I would play I would just play. My imagination was rich and I was having fun. But to look at the image now, as an adult, I am sitting in the corner of the frame all

alone. I think this perfectly symbolizes how I feel now versus how I felt then. I didn't care as a kid. But I do as an adult.

- Abstraction
 - -I have had a hard time with discussing the work as abstract because I have not thought of it in that way really. I recognize that the work has abstract elements to it, but I don't think of myself as an abstract photographer.

- How do I want the viewer to relate to this?
 - What I have found throughout the process of making this work, is that when I start to talk to people about it, and tell them about my family, they inevitably start to tell me about their own families. I think that everyone can relate to this, because everyone has a family. I want this work to be a moment of reflection for people- maybe a chance for them to realize, as it has been for me, that they are not alone. And to tell the people they love that they love them.