

A Daughter's Song

Ronald L. Grimes

Rituals tend to be front-of-house performances. They are polished presentations of ideals and aspirations. Rituals are ways of keeping imperfection and disorder at bay, but they do so imperfectly. People yawn or check their cell phones, and the tastiest morsels of food are gone before you get to the table. Film shamelessly captures both: ritual's idealized actions and its inevitable flaws. Even though participants learn how to tune out glitches as if they were not part of the ritual, a good film maker will notice them and use them as commentary on the ritual.

Even more telling than a ritual's infelicities are its backstories. These include preparation and aftermath, as well as the contexts and motivations of participants. If we scholars know only the performance of a ritual or the text that underwrites it, we do not really understand the ritual. If we do not know a ritual's social context and the associations people bring to it, we cannot understand how a ritual interfaces with the mess of ordinary human life. So a good film about a ritual connects its front, idealized side with its back, messy side. And it connects what happens *in* the ritual with what happens around the ritual, *outside* it.

You are about to see a video called *A daughter's song*.¹ It opens with a walking conversation. I am talking with a Jewish father who has lost his young wife, Myriam. Accompanying us are his mother-in-law and his daughter, who has lost her mother.

The film is set in Montreal in the fall of 2014, three months after Myriam's death. Montreal is across the St. Lawrence River from Kahnawake, land that is now home to the Mohawks, one of the six nations of the Iroquois Confederacy.

The last part of the film includes the Mohawk Condolence Ceremony.² The Condolence has a complex history. It was used to comfort the families of deceased chiefs and to install new leaders. It was also used to negotiate the arrival of outsiders, for example, the French colonizer, Jacques Cartier, in 1535. The ceremony was also enacted in 1613 to frame the Two-Row Wampum Treaty between your people, the Dutch, and the Iroquois.³ The ritual required strangers to bide their time patiently at the edge of the woods. Then they were invited in and offered food and shelter. Condolences were tendered to those who had left their homes. The ceremony also articulated the political and geographical parameters by which the newly arrived must live. Today, the ritual is an all-purpose ceremony. Parts of it are extracted and coupled with improvisations to fit a wide variety of occasions.

¹ *A daughter's song*, at <https://vimeo.com/ronaldgrimes/daughters-song>.

² Sometimes called the Edge of the Woods Ceremony.

³ Also called *Tawagonshi* document or *kaswentha* tradition.

The ceremony is rarely performed except among First Nations people. So the social make-up of the witnesses is unusual. It emerged as the result of collaboration between Mohawks and Native-Immigrant, an arts project facilitating interactions between First Nations people and immigrants to Canada.⁴



Illustration 1: Still from the film *A daughter's song*

In making this film, I had two aims: attending to a family's grief and honoring Mohawks and the Condolence Ceremony. The film focuses on the ritual's most poignant, care-giving gestures. I hope viewers intuitively understand wiping away tears with a soft doeskin, opening the ears with the feather of an eagle, stroking the hair with a bone comb, and cleansing the throat with pure water. Nevertheless, the film leaves behind much of the ceremony, makes it public, and renders it in a more or less permanent medium. So the film risks raiding the ritual.⁵ Although Mohawks themselves pick and choose every time they perform the Condolence, I am an outsider. My people are the historic oppressors of these people. So taking liberties with an exploited people's ritual is risky, but the risk is mitigated by the Mohawks' own desire to use the film to teach the language of Mohawk ritual.

⁴ Carolina Echeverria is the artistic director.

⁵ *The native spirituality guide* of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police says, 'Ceremonies are the primary vehicles of religious expression. A ceremonial leader or Elder assures authenticity and integrity of religious observances. Nothing is written down, as the very writing would negate the significance of the ceremony. Teachings are therefore passed on from Elder to Elder in a strictly oral tradition.' www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/pubs/abo-aut/spirit-spiritualite-eng.htm.

A daughter's song wraps the most distinctive gestures of the ritual in a conversation and walk from the preceding day. The walk-and-talk is a part of the ritual's backstory that some of the participants would only know by seeing the film.

My intention in walking with Stephane was for him to show me the place where he and Myriam had many of their most important conversations. He was showing me the place because on the next day the Condolence Ceremony was going to be performed there for his family, and I had been asked just that morning to film it. As we walked, he was helping me test equipment, but trading stories about children and death took over.

I did not set out to make a film. In fact, I almost dumped the footage because of its technical problems. The camera work is partly deliberate but partly accidental, the result of conflicting intentions and equipment issues. During the editing, I decided to use the remnants of disoriented footage to suggest troubled spirits. And only late in the editing process did I discover that I was making a film for Aaliyah, the daughter, rather than her father or Carolina Echeverria, artistic director of Native Immigrant. Carolina, who had been friends with Myriam, wrote the poem that is sung by her daughter Isabella.

Although I hesitate to use the term, this film is in some sense a 'music video'. The rhythms and refrains of the song animate the images. Without the music, the video would sag. The music complicates the video, since its words are about a border-crossing and the loss of a father, not a mother.⁶ Some enjoy the surprise of discovering that the song is a part of the actual ritual event rather than an imported soundtrack.⁷ To my eye and ear the song is more aptly placed in the video than it was in the ritual, so the film is not only a piece of documentation but an implicit ritual criticism.

The film connects with the theme of the conference in three ways: First, it is dedicated to Aaliyah, 'when she comes of age'. Probably, the film will be a tool used by her family to help her grieve and commemorate the loss of her mother. So it is quite literally a ritual film for the future.

Second, the film hints at a future in which Muslims and Jews, Natives and non-Natives interact ritually and creatively rather than violently. It also hints at a future in which artists and ritual-makers collaborate freely.

Third, the style of the film anticipates a future in which scholars are no longer shy about combining artistic and scientific work. This film is one in a set of three online works. Filming for online viewing allows scholar-filmmakers to deploy multiple approaches simultaneously. The other two films are ethnographic and descriptive; they are in color, longer, linear, and more informative

⁶ A listener might wonder whose point of view the words of the song represent. An astute listener might worry about anticipating the loss of the father while still in the wake of having lost one's mother.

⁷ The moment occurs 7 minutes, 40 seconds into the film. The technical term is 'extra-diagetic'.

but probably less engaging.⁸ This one is aimed more at evocation than information. It slows down, replays, displaces, and overlays actions, and the sound is often non-synchronous. Using such techniques shifts the treatment away from an ethnographic style toward an artistic one.

Film excels at storytelling, scene-painting, sense-enhancement, and mood-evocation. If you felt the comb running through your hair, if Aaliyah was momentarily your child, if you felt the wind, heard the river, or tasted the water, the film did a kind of work that argumentative scholarly prose cannot.⁹

Prof. dr. Ronald L. Grimes is emeritus professor of religion and culture at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada. He was a senior research scholar at Yale University, and professor and chair of ritual studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, as well as a visiting professor at the University of Pittsburg, the University of Notre Dame, the University of Colorado at Boulder, McGill University and Charles University Prague. Among his many publications are *Beginnings in ritual studies*; *Ritual criticism*; *Deeply into the bone*; *Rite out of place*; *Ritual, media and conflict*; and *The craft of ritual studies*.
E-mail: ronaldgrimes@gmail.com

⁸ See A Mohawk Condolence Ceremony for Myriam, <https://vimeo.com/ronaldgrimes/Mohawk-condolence>, and A Native-Immigrant Condolence Ceremony, <https://vimeo.com/ronaldgrimes/native-immigrant-condolence>.

⁹ This is the argument of R.L. GRIMES: *The craft of ritual studies* (= Oxford ritual studies series) (New York 2014). The argument is illustrated by an online case study consisting of several videos.