

Filmmaking as Militant Co-Research

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Documenting activism through film and multimedia production provides scholars with invaluable opportunities to reflect on, (re-)evaluate, and enhance their research practices. From August 2015 to April 2018, I produced a series of documentary films in collaboration with Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 105 and with Black Lives Matter 5280 (BLM5280) in Denver, Colorado. Working with, and on behalf of, SEIU and BLM5280 promoted ethical ethnographic fieldwork and multimodal scholarship fundamentally guided by questions of power and justice. Placing myself on the side of these organizations, however, also demanded that I recognize how my positionality as a researcher-filmmaker affected my political commitments and scholarly orientation. To negotiate my responsibilities and identities as a scholar-activist, I informed my ethnographic filmmaking with communication activism for social justice research, which encourages researchers to not only study community organizing for social justice, but to also “intervene into discourses and study the processes and outcomes of their interventions” (Carragee and Frey 2012, 7). This article explores how co-theorizing media and democratizing documentary filmmaking have the potential to script solidarity between researchers and community organizers and strengthen the social relationships among

activist groups.

Scripting Solidarity

I began my filmmaking and research by attending numerous public community meetings hosted by SEIU Local 105 and BLM5280. I did my due diligence by first listening to the stories that organizers shared at these meetings, and then offering my media production expertise to key members of the groups. I also followed both groups on social media, which allowed me to learn about upcoming events and campaigns and watch livestreamed videos of meetings that I could not attend. Digital ethnography that engaged with these organizations’ online and offline practices served as pre-production of the films. This work fostered trust between myself and key organizers with these organizations, and provided me with political education that informed our films’ narratives.

After establishing a working relationship with SEIU and BLM5280, I produced a series of short films that covered protests and direct actions conducted by these groups. The films were episodic in nature and were edited and uploaded to social media within hours of filming. BLM5280 and SEIU Local 105 regularly use social media to challenge dominant narratives about race and class presented in mainstream commercial media, mobilize allies quickly to ral-

lies and demonstrations, and coordinate events with local community partners. My filmmaking with these groups represents how I contributed to the cultural work of social movements and produced public scholarship in a format that met the needs of the communities that I worked with. Because theory building, ethnographic research, and social media circulation operate at different speeds, my creative scholarship also mirrored the temporal nature of contemporary movements.

Throughout the publication of the short films on social media, my community partners commented on and provided feedback on my media. This was essential for the next stage of the project: a 23-minute documentary film, *Radical Labor: Aligning Unions with the Streets*, which was published in March 2018 on *Roar Magazine* (Canella 2018). The film places the series of short films in a broader context of progressive organizing in the United States, and stitches the stories of labor and racial justice together in a cohesive narrative.

Gerbaudo (2012) argued that media practices, such as photography, social media publication, and livestreamed video, *choreograph* the assembly of social movements by “preparing the terrain, or setting the scene, for people coming together in public space” (40). Documentary filmmaking is often a collaborative practice that requires people coming together in physical spaces—at meetings, rallies, and public forums. During production of our films, I became friends and comrades with many of the organizers with SEIU and BLM5280, and setting the terrain occurred not simply through technical or narrative decisions, but, rather, through highlighting the agency of working people and co-producing scholarship and media based on moral and ethical obligations.

Intervening as an activist-researcher presented several challenges for me, the most pronounced of which was navigating racial, gendered, and class differences. SEIU Local 105 primarily represents Latinx, Mexican American, and monolingual Spanish-speaking workers in the service industry. BLM5280 is a Black-led social movement that centers the leadership of

Black women and girls, and fights to eliminate structural oppressions in Denver. I exposed my personal and political identities with these groups by sharing our films online, publishing research that reflected on my experiences (Canella 2017), and attending demonstrations.¹

Confronting my racial, gender, and ethnic identities was a formative experience for me. According to Uribe and Rappaport (2011), *confrontation* in ethnographic research reveals the struggle for voice and power:

It is in confrontation with people that both our knowledge and theirs will be validated, refined, and combined to produce concepts, methods, and procedures for activist research (*investigación-acción*), ways of knowing and doing that are novel, creative, and, above all, transformative of reality. (28–29)

Confronting differences—political, socioeconomic, racial, and gendered—created vulnerabilities and risks. For example, due to the close relationships I developed with my partners, I risked romanticizing our activism in my research and writing. Also, at a time when publics increasingly distrust institutions, specifically the news media and higher education, conducting multimodal research in collaboration with community groups put me at risk of being viewed by publics and my peers as a partisan liberal elite who does not conduct rigorous scientific research. By centering confrontation in my research and filmmaking, I embraced these risks, engaged in complex and dialectical analyses of activist media, and realized the benefits of co-producing knowledge.

Theorizing with a Knowledge Surplus

With a growing number of scholars conducting multimodal research, it is important to note how theory-building is enriched through creative practice. Collaborative filmmaking presents communities that are often invisible with opportunities to contextualize their lives through media and scholarship. Bringing my partners into the research and filmmaking processes produced a knowledge surplus, which allowed me (as a researcher-filmmaker) and my partners (as

community organizers) to re-organize the assemblage between media production, culture, and academia.

Theory building, in partnership with activists and organizers, demands that scholars listen to those most affected by their research outcomes and give participants a say in the trajectory of that research. Rethinking our ontological positions as media scholars requires practicing what Juris (2007) calls “militant ethnography.” Remaining neutral or objective observers during times of crises is unacceptable, he argued. Rather, researchers must “become entangled with complex relations of power, and live the emotions associated with direct action organizing and activist networking” (167). Investigating activist media by “living the emotions” meant I was in the streets bearing witness to the emotions emanating from the crowds, documenting them with my camera, and utilizing them to narrate and visualize an imaginative and humane political project.

Through film, podcasts, and photography, movement actors are using media to theorize and disseminate radical visions of social and political life, and to challenge who and what society deems acceptable. Similarly, scholars must recognize that research is never neutral: it is always part of a cultural or political project that either reinforces the status quo or scripts an alternative vision for an equitable and just society.

Democratizing Documentary

Carrying a camera into my research with SEIU Local 105 and BLM5280 altered the social and relational dynamics between myself and my community partners. My theoretical approach to collaborative filmmaking and co-research is grounded in democratic theory, which argues that people should make the decisions and control the resources that influence the material conditions of their lives. I democratized documentary filmmaking by sharing early drafts of my films with my partners and revising based on their comments and feedback; providing my partners access to a shared Google Drive that contained my original photography and videos, so that they could use this media in ways that

were beneficial for their organizing; and hosting a media workshop with SEIU, where I worked with members on how best to communicate their stories in the Fight for \$15.

Post-production (e.g., video editing, color-correction, and sound mixing), requires tweaking Uribe and Rappaport’s (2011) concept of “co-writing,” to refer instead to co-editing. Listening and re-listening to interviews for soundbites, and repeatedly reviewing footage in video editing software to ensure the pacing of the film was just right, demonstrates how activist filmmaking complements and strengthens ethnographic research. Co-editing required me to regularly question my ethics, test and update my research questions, and re-examine my political commitments as an allied filmmaker. Thus, media production reveals how writing, editing, analyzing, and distributing cultural texts are cyclical and interdependent processes.

My filmmaking could not have been possible without the cooperation and dedication of the organizers and members of SEIU Local 105 and BLM5280. Both organizations, albeit in different ways, shaped the narratives of our films and the trajectory of my scholarship. Although SEIU was more involved than BLM5280 in the production of our films, my relationship with BLM5280 was equally important. Attending meetings hosted by BLM5280 and having conversations with key organizers of the group injected our films with a radical anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and intersectional narrative. As scholars continue to intervene in community organizing through collaborative multimedia research, grassroots organizers also intervene in scholarship by forcing researchers to confront and revise dominant Western epistemologies. Co-producing knowledge happens when scholars and activists work together to foster a culture of care, produce empathic and compassionate storytelling, and maintain a dogged commitment to justice.

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Notes

1. Most of the short films are available at <https://www.youtube.com/user/ginocanella>.

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