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# STANDING ROCK

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## Introduction

My interest in film date back to the day my father got me an old cassette video camcorder and a tripod for Christmas. We would go out and shoot short movies, including one where my father played a man who robbed the Art Institute of Chicago. After that, I never touched a camera again until I was fourteen years old and became a serious wildlife photography enthusiast. Then, my passion for Afro-Cuban percussion took over all my hours. It wasn't until junior year of college that I rediscovered my passion for video production.

Going into Macalester, I knew I was going to be a Media and Cultural studies major, especially because I wanted to cultivate my long-standing interest in visual media. One of the first and most interesting courses that I took was called *Film Analysis*. The course provided me with fundamental film terminology, as well as the ability to break down more implicit interpretations of images or scenes. Moreover, I was able to better understand narrative structures and how films tell stories. However, the content that we covered focused predominantly on narrative film and my experience with the documentary form was still limited at that time. In fact, during my first two years as a Media and Cultural studies major, I resented documentaries because my previous experiences with them were almost exclusively based on watching mundane, taking-head, educational history documentaries from the early 90s.

It was not until my junior year—when I enrolled in my capstone class with Professor Adamson (in which we had to film a 12-minute documentary short)—that my interest in hands-on video production surfaced again. The previous MCST courses at

Macalester, such as community video, film analysis, global and local media industries, and blackness in the media had prepared me well for this course as they had given me a critical understanding of representation, power dynamics, and artistic expression in filmmaking—something that many filmmakers (especially amateur filmmakers) have only cracked the surface of. The capstone class was the first class in which I was introduced to the different styles of documentary, as well as—what I like to believe to be—good documentary film. Documentaries like *White Earth*, *Chronicle of a Summer*, and *A World Unseen*, gave me a better sense of the cinematic, editing, and sound mixing aspects of documentary work as well as how stories can be successfully told in the short to feature length format.

After informing myself more about the conventions of different styles, watching noteworthy films from each style, and learning about the conceptualization/research steps to take before shooting footage, the second half of the semester was spent filming a documentary on my close friend and mentor, Jon Lurie and his Lakota/Puerto Rican friend. Jon was a visiting professor during my first year at Macalester and taught my creative writing class. We became friends soon after and I was able to learn more about his work in the indigenous community. Jon, who lived on the South Dakota Rosebud reservation for part of his life, has frequently written for the Circle (a Native American newspaper from Minneapolis). He has also written many books, including co-writing Clyde Bellecourt's autobiography.

My documentary was about a book he wrote that was based on the true story of a canoe journey he took to the Hudson Bay with a young Lakota mentee. After he divorced his wife of thirteen years, he fell into a depression. At the time, his 19-year old Lakota

journalism mentee was getting into trouble with youth gangs in his Frogtown neighborhood. After an incident that involved a shootout with a local drug dealer, he fled to Jon's house. They decided together to escape the city and go on a canoe journey to Hudson Bay in search of spiritual and physical healing. Creating a documentary about their journey was difficult, as it was my first real film. I had to quickly teach myself the basics of shooting with a DSLR, using lighting equipment, and narrative editing. Most of all I had to learn to confront questions of representation. How could I effectively and responsibly communicate something important about their experience? After the project was finished I realized that this type of work, as difficult as it is, was something I wanted to continue to do and soon began thinking about my next project.

During the summer of 2016 I became interested in a campaign to change the name of Lake Calhoun in Minneapolis back to its original native name, Mde/bde Maka Ska, or "White Earth Lake." I was working on a project exploring water conservation through an indigenous lens for my honors project. Then, at the beginning of August, Jon Lurie called me about some oil pipeline protest happening in North Dakota near the Standing Rock Sioux reservation. He said, "well your film is about water right? What's going on up there right now is all about that and it's garnering national attention. We should drive up there." Never having heard of this, but extremely intrigued, I quickly googled "North Dakota Pipeline protests." I saw pictures of Native Americans on horseback lined up in front of a row of police and read about the contested Dakota Access Pipeline. Jon had told me that this was the beginning of a historic movement and it would be one-in-a-lifetime chance to document the beginning of it, so we went up together for a weekend. Over the course of the next four months, I traveled a total of five times to observe events,

conduct interviews and shoot footage as the protest movement grew. I then spent December and January editing together what is now a 15-minute documentary short that to date has been accepted by three international film festivals and was screened around the Twin Cities. The film is titled *Standing Rock*.

Like many documentaries today, *Standing Rock* does not fall into one single category of documentary form, but incorporates elements from a variety of documentary film styles. While the film predominantly uses an overarching observational framework, it utilizes a combination of expository, poetic, and participatory techniques, integrating both visual and thematic features from these styles. Through the processes of pre-production, production, and post-production, I faced ethical considerations of representation, authenticity, subjectivity, and the spontaneity of on-camera presence, which challenge *Standing Rock's* ability to exist strictly in one mode of documentary presentation. An inability to stage or control unfolding real-time events during my time in North Dakota turned the process of filmmaking into a constant struggle to conform to a set of genre rules. This resulted in the creation of a hybrid mode of documentary filmmaking—a cross-genre—that is distinct, but does not try to ignore its tendency to percolate through conventions from different documentary styles. In the first section of this paper, I provide an overview and reflection of the process involved with gaining access to leaders in the indigenous community, filming, and editing the project. In the second section, I discuss the way that *Standing Rock* weaves itself in and out of a selection of documentary types, while mostly relying on the observational form. Lastly, the third section explores the tendency for many documentaries like my film to become forms of advocacy.

## **Navigating the Social World of Standing Rock**

This documentary project required that I take on all the roles of a production crew, as I had no budget and mostly could not rely on help. However, during the first trip to North Dakota I began to figure out how to navigate the landscape, interact with the people in the resistance camp, and gain first-hand experience trouble-shooting the technical side of filming. In this section, I want to outline how I tackled the processes during the different stages of production, ranging from planning, gaining access, technical learning, and advising.

Jon Lurie proved to be an extremely valuable supporter of my project, helping me to connect with Native American leaders in the DAPL protest movement, opening greater access to the encampment at Standing Rock, and serving as an expert informant on Native American cultural issues. For instance, Jon introduced me to the LaPointe family--an important family in the indigenous activist and education scene in Minneapolis/St. Paul. The LaPointes are well known in the Twin-Cities and the Dakota community as well as in Rosebud. Jon and LeMoine LaPointe, who is a Lakota elder, have taught me several indigenous protocols, ontological, and epistemological understandings.

Jon has also introduced me to people like Deanna StandingCloud, José Perez, and Alfred WalkingBull. But, perhaps the most significant connection I was able to make was with Clyde Bellecourt (his Ojibwe name is The Thunder Before the Storm), the co-founder of the American Indian Movement, and a long-time political activist for Indian rights. Jon was able to arrange an interview with Clyde for me at the Oceti Sakowin camp during my first trip to Standing Rock. As one can imagine, having Clyde Bellecourt as a

resource has made an enormous difference, both for gaining access, lowering skepticism as a white filmmaker (something I'll talk about later on), and my own way of thinking about colonialism. Later on, I asked him if he could review my progress on the film project and point out anything problematic, inaccurate, or needing better explanation or illustration. He agreed to help me and with a grin on his face and said, "it's been my life profession to crack down on any John Wayne that might cross my path."

The third time I went to Standing Rock, the camp had grown and so had the security presence. Filmmakers and photographers had to check in with the media tent and had to undergo a screening to ensure we were not infiltrators. One woman grilled me about why I was there until I finally said that I was collaborating with Clyde Bellecourt and that he was helping advise me on my project. She suddenly changed her tone and responded that she was his cousin. This moment clearly demonstrated the difficult process of conducting social research because any other film crew without this established relationship with a respected indigenous leader might not have had such an easy pass. Any form of cross-cultural research involves the researcher to recognize their positionality, often related to power-dynamics. This is especially true for researching in Native communities. One of my most important sources is the book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (an indigenous New Zealander), which gave me really great insight into the way many Native people have come to perceive researchers. Moreover, with the help of Jon and my indigenous friends, I was able to move to an 'insider' status on a level that was needed in order to properly communicate the Native American worldview with more insight.



The trips to North Dakota took a good amount of planning. I had to follow events at Standing Rock on the news everyday. Often, I had to plan trips on short notice because there would suddenly be a significant development or occurrence. I had to secure transportation, lodging, and food, and my time was limited to weekends or during a break, when I did not have an overwhelming amount of academic work to complete. Fortunately, I was able to car-share with people from Minneapolis, borrow Prof. John Kim's pickup truck, or drive with a friend. Since I had to continually re-charge all of my camera electronics, I needed to stay somewhere where there was electricity, and this often meant staying at the Prairie Nights Casino eight miles from the Camp. Many times I was put on a waiting list for room cancellations, which was quite a gamble. In a way, I found myself conflicted because the entire camp was sleeping outside, often when it was cold while I was lying in a comfortable king-sized bed with running water and AC. I often felt detached and less involved as a participant. However, I did manage to marginally balance out my inner conflicts about this by inviting as many people from the camp as possible to use the showers in my bathroom. Ultimately, by the fourth trip, I was getting a good taste of the kind of work a film producer does and how frustratingly complicated it can be with all the different moving parts.

Another difficult aspect of filming *Standing Rock* was choosing what to film in order to more accurately represent the place, people, and movement. Because the police stand-offs (what folks up there referred to as front line action) happened spontaneously—to avoid tipping off DAPL security forces in advance—I stripped down my large camera rig to a smaller one. I found that I was jumping in the back of pick-up trucks, getting on horses, and standing in large crowds of people as I attempted to film. Given this fast-

paced environment and the fact that I only had 48 hours at a time there, I had to make decisions quickly. During the front-line prayer action day scene (as demonstrators were confronted by a line of police and military) I was frequently on the move to capture different angles, which presented me with some challenges for editing as the rule is to film each segment for a minimum of 10 seconds. The questions that directed my camera work were: (1) how do I show a clear power dynamic between the water protectors and the police? (2) How do I capture the emotion of the setting? (3) How do I create a sense of continuity in scenes and over the course of the movement? (4) How do I capture the very apparent beauty of this place without misrepresenting it? On a more honest note, many times I just filmed without thinking about these questions too hard because the moment would pass pretty quickly and I had to create images of it on video. Nevertheless, this reflection serves to highlight some of the many challenges that documentary filmmakers face and that I had to grapple with as a first time documentary filmmaker with no budget, a full academic schedule, and little previous experience. Although all kinds of filmmaking have their own set of challenges, the often unplanned nature of filming ongoing experiences, while still maintaining a sense of narrative structure or logical cohesion, presented the greatest challenge for me.

### **What Style is *Standing Rock*?**

Bill Nichols—an American film critic and theoretician (specializing in documentary) whose writing I will draw from in this section—describes documentary form as a practice without boundaries and “a fuzzy concept” (Nichols, 2001: 20). Often there are contradictory statements about what is perceived to be the definition of

documentary and the skill set required by documentary filmmakers. For example, John Grierson, identified by some writers and the “father” of social documentary film, wrote, “I am convinced that the surest way to apprenticeship in documentary is a good degree in political science or economics” (Grierson, 1946: 160). And Jon Bang Carlsen writes, “I see documentary filmmaking as an art form” (Carlsen, 2003: 96). These should not be considered as prescriptive rules, but as different sides of an ongoing dialectic. Documentary work inevitably struggles with this complexity. The purpose of *Standing Rock* as a film is to explore cultural and political conditions and experiences rather than express my inner artistic self. In the section that follows I want to explore how my film attempts to give form and pattern to the complex of direct observations I made during the filmmaking process.

According to Bill Nichols, there are six modes of documentary expression: expository, observational, reflexive, poetic, participatory, and performative. *Standing Rock* does not fit completely into any one of these modes, but uses elements from at least four: the expository, observational, poetic and participatory modes. Nichols writes, “a film identified with a given mode need not be so entirely. A reflexive documentary can contain sizable portions of observational or participatory footage; an expository documentary can include poetic or performative segments” (Nichols, 2001: 100). *Standing Rock* uses techniques predominantly from the observational form and this occurs when “the characteristics of a given mode function as a dominant [...] they give structure to the overall film, but they do not dictate or determine every aspect of its organization. Considerable latitude remains possible” (Nichols, 2001: 100).

Three essential characteristics of *Standing Rock* that are typical of the observational mode: the lack of control/staging/arrangement, or composition of a scene, the separation between me (the filmmaker) and the social actors, and the impression that there is a sense of the duration of actual events. For instance, in many situations, like in the so-called “front line action” events that consisted of prayer and peaceful resistance, there was no way of staging what was happening. If there was a powerful gesture being made, or a captivating possibility for composition (like the line of prayer facing the line of police), it all had to be filmed then and there. If an opportunity to picture an event or activity was missed, there was no opportunity to recreate that experience. Nevertheless, I was able to create a sense of real-time by being conscious of space.

A useful example is the section of the film portraying campfire conversation with Gene Randall. By using the A-roll—the interview content—as a sequential and chronological anchor to the conversation, the B-roll stays within the space of that conversation. Gene provides verbal information to the viewer, while the B-roll shows objects, sounds, and movements of and around the three social actors in the scene, and frames the space where the conversation is happening. Of course there are interviews in which the B-roll is a more general representation of the subjects being discussed (showing miscellaneous shots of the camp or people), but overall, the film is very much set up in sequences that are tied to a physical place and time.

There is also the sense conveyed that the filmmaker is separated from the social actors appearing on screen. In the scene with Maurice Stretches, (the Lakota man with the red baseball cap leaning over the back of the pickup truck starting at 9:20 minutes) the “characters are caught up in pressing demands or a crisis of their own. This requires their

attention and draws it away from the presence of filmmakers. The scenes tend, like fiction, to reveal aspects of character and individuality” (Nichols, 2001: 111). However, since I am a one-camera team, I often stray from observational conventions in scenes like the one with Maurice. In this scene, there are three social actors leaning on the back of the pick-up truck. The three start to have a conversation and because of my directional microphone I had to stay in one spot to avoid irregularities in the audio track. However, during an unrelated conversation, I began to move around and film different angles of the three men, snippets of which I used audio-free in cutting together the conversation. Even though I lose the traditional credibility of mostly raw observational footage by manipulating framing and angle of view, I am able to create more cinematic value and dynamic shot variations.

*Standing Rock* shares the expository form’s argumentative tendency and addresses the viewer directly, with “titles or voices that propose a perspective, advance an argument, or recount history” (Nichols, 2001:105). At times there is voice-over that narrates during transitional scenes. The use of “us” in the narration conveys a subjectivity reflected in the imagery as well as the audio, as opposed to separating the images from the voice in a hierarchy. Expository documentaries rely heavily on an informing logic, with images serving primarily a supporting role. For instance, the narrator might say, “the African Elephant is undergoing a rapid decline due to poaching” while the images show elephant carcasses. In *Standing Rock*, the images accompanying the narration are more metaphorical and invite the viewer to interpret the meaning of the images.

The titles in the film are descriptive, but also highly subjective and argumentative. Throughout the film, I try to use the technique of evidentiary editing, while still maintaining spatial and temporal continuity. What differentiates my film from the expository mode is its emphasis on creating an impression of objectivity through an argument. I take a clear side and provide arguments and evidence about the harmful nature of the Dakota Access Pipeline, and do not attempt to construct a semblance of “balance” by also presenting a counter-argument concerning possible benefits (creating jobs, for instance). I also use the term “water protectors” in the film, a self-proclaimed term that the indigenous leaders at Standing Rock have given themselves in place of “protesters.” Ultimately, the film takes the argumentative stance, but drops the attempt to appear “objective,” something that cannot really be achieved anyway. Nor is the film formally “balanced,” which tends to be a conceit of conventionalized news production with its own epistemological problems.

Poetic elements are also apparent in *Standing Rock*. The viewer might notice that there are instances where continuity editing is interrupted. For instance, during the conversation at the beginning of the film there is a conversation between some people sitting around a campfire. The shots alternate from the social actors talking about the peaceful nature of the camp to shots within the camp. These shots are not directly related to the conversation, but help establish a setting. Also, I repeatedly use images of horses throughout the film—a motive that represents the rise of a young generation of indigenous activists who seek to revitalize their traditional way of life. I use these poetic elements and work with image fragments to “function in part? with other objects as raw

material that” I can “select and arrange into associations and patterns” of my choosing (Nichols, 2001: 102).

Finally, *Standing Rock* includes some reflexive and participatory features, but unlike *Chronicle of a Summer*, *Portrait of Jason*, or *Word is Out*, highly reflexive films in which the filmmakers appear or participate in the film itself, thereby producing films whose very subject matter is the interactions between filmmakers and subjects, my presence is not openly apparent in the film. However, the participatory mode to me has more in common with the practices of “ethnography” and its methods of participant-observation. In these cases, the “researcher goes into the field, [for at least a year] participates in the lives of others, gains a corporeal or visceral feel for what life in a given context is like, and then reflects on this experience” (Nichols, 2001: 115). In my case, I did not commit myself to this kind of long-term ethnographic involvement. I kept a degree of detachment as I recognized my positionality and identity as an outsider to this community. Unlike many typical examples of participatory documentary, I do not show myself interacting with the social actors physically (partly by choice and partly because I had no one else to operate the camera). However, I purposefully include images and sound bites in the film that indicate my presence as a filmmaker. Some examples of this include: the man with the red coat sitting at Gene Randall’s fire listening to me ask Maurice questions before looking directly into the camera (at me); and the man wearing the yellow bandana at the end of the film (he asked to remain anonymous) looking directly at me (the camera) when he says to “look” at the young generation. I included these images in the film to convey that this film exists only because I was there, participating in the events the film tries to represent. I was not positioning myself, or

positioning the audience-spectators as omniscient or transparent “fly on the wall” viewers.

### **Advocacy, representation, and positionality**

In the previous section, I discussed how *Standing Rock* lives between the different types of documentaries that Bill Nichols has identified. However, besides blending poetic, expository, and observational elements together, *Standing Rock's* advocacy-oriented nature makes it even more of a hybrid. While I intended take a clear position in this film, my advocacy also introduced limitations, which I wish to reflect on in this section.

Many contemporary documentaries are engaged in a discourse revolving around the increasing rehabilitation of two features usually associated with fiction: subjectivity and storytelling. In addition, increasing numbers of contemporary documentaries set out to be agents for change. This recalls the Griersonian roots of the social documentary movement of the 1930s, when documentary film and photography was routinely put to the service of social reform. I viewed my mission at Standing Rock similarly, to produce a form of advocacy journalism. According to Canadian journalist Sue Careless, “advocacy journalism ‘openly speaks for or pleads on behalf of another, giving the other a face and a voice’ (Charles, 2013: 386). Instead of only reporting facts, or feeling obligated to document an opposing side, advocacy journalism, like my film, embraces subjectivity. I like to compare my intentions in *Standing Rock* to those of Nick Clooney when he discusses his film, *Journey to Darfur*. He writes that he



“went as a reporter and came back as an advocate [...] not only did he want to tell people of the atrocities taking place in Darfur, but he wanted to encourage his audience to actually do something about it. He chose documentary over television news because he felt it gave him more freedom to be ‘honest’ about what was happening in Darfur. He unashamedly took a stance, along with his actor-son George, to inspire change in the world” (Charles, 2013: 385-386).

For me, documentary film is not just about information and providing balanced viewpoints, but rather, it is about reporting stories in ways that the stories become advocates for change. *A World Unseen*, for example, shows how the filmmakers from *The Revenant* worked closely with indigenous people to better inform themselves about the subject matter of the film. In the process, they documented the ways in which indigenous lands have been taken over by oil companies and other resource extraction industries. The social actors in the film make a strong case for preserving treaty rights in order to protect the environment. In fact, Leonardo Dicaprio, the main actor for *The Revenant*, and a key player in *A World Unseen* advocated for fighting these special interests to slow climate change during his Oscar award speech. Similarly, *The Starfish Throwers*—a film that follows three people that made it their life mission to feed the homeless—communicates a strong message about supporting efforts to feed the poor.

Even though I was trying to follow these same models, the Dakota Access Pipeline protest is an issue that clearly has two sides to the story. Nevertheless, I chose to make a film that would reflect my position on the controversy. I became more acutely aware of this choice when I spoke with a Morton County police officer at one of the checkpoints. With highways closed off by police I was driving with others through the

backcountry to reach a protest site when we were stopped by a heavily armed police unit who requested our IDs. While one of the officers holding an AR-15 was checking my ID, he saw that I had a camera and turned to me saying, “you know there are two sides to this.” He explained that it was his duty to obey the sheriff and that he could lose his job otherwise. Then he proceeded to ask if the camp had enough blankets and if there was anything he could do to otherwise help. This interaction showed me just how complex the political and social ramifications of Standing Rock really were. I had another revealing interaction when I was on a scouting trip with a man from the reservation who worked for the Oceti Sakowin camp security. He was very dissatisfied with the way the camp was being managed and said he thought everyone was just “sitting around drinking coffee and letting the pipeline get built.” This sort of internal dissent does not appear in my film. I avoided such distractions from the central theme of my film, a choice made due to the relatively brief length of my short-form documentary, but also because I wanted to create a “call-to-action,” a film that would show the empowering and positive visions of the DAPL protest movement through an indigenous eye.

There was one issue that I had to grapple with, even with my desire to advocate. This was my position as a white, European male—the identity of a colonizer. This positionality inescapably affects the representation of native American activities and must continually be considered. I had to be careful not to present my film through a white-savior lens, just as I could not pretend to speak for indigenous people. I went to Standing Rock with questions that I wanted to ask, not with a mission to speak for the community. As an outsider to the community who does not know enough to understand the culture, I could hope only to make a film that honestly represented those generous enough to

respond to my questions. Even though being white should not prevent me from making a film on this issue, I must be in open conversation about my positionality as the filmmaker.

## **Conclusion**

The film *Standing Rock* attempts to construct an honest documentation of the peaceful resistance movement to the Dakota Access Pipeline and provide a spotlight on the beliefs, voices, and experiences of Native Americans in contemporary America. When I was in North Dakota, many people told me how important it was to send out a message. As discussed in this paper, documentaries can represent the world in the same way “a lawyer may represent a client’s interests: they put the case for a particular view or interpretation of evidence before us. In this sense documentaries do not simply stand for others, [...] but rather they more actively make a case or argument; they assert what the nature of a matter is to win consent or influence opinion” (Nichols 2001: 4). With that being said, I still had to face contradictions, asymmetries of power between me and my subjects, and the fact that I had to make choices, for technical and personal reasons, about which aspects of these events I would represent and emphasize in the film.

While I do not view my subjects and even the DAPL protest movement as “clients,” I wanted to authentically represent the people I was filming and be one of the first to distribute their message in a revealing and effective manner. Such an authentic representation is something that I, as a non-indigenous person, will never fully achieve, but I made an honest effort to convey the perspectives of my subjects. In the end, I

believe that the biggest accomplishment of this project was learning about the multidimensional and complex nature of documentary filmmaking itself.

In retrospect, there are many things I wish I could have done differently—including technical improvements. However, my biggest regret is the limited amount of time I was able to spend at Standing Rock. This documentary could have been longer, more sequential, and perhaps more powerful had I had a longer period of time to immerse myself in ongoing events and benefit from a greater range of interactions. Conversely, I often think about how I might have tried to film the movement through the eyes of one or two people. Nevertheless, for a student project, I believe I was able to accomplish more than what I initially expected to do. I not only gained valuable experience in the practical aspect of filmmaking, but was introduced to many of the issues and nuances of social research, social representation, and narrative building.

I want to conclude by saying that while the film ends on a hopeful note, it saddens me to have learned that the Trump administration reversed the halt on construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. The reversal of these hard-won concessions, secured by the difficult and courageous actions of so many people at Standing Rock, has questioned my faith in the government's efforts to represent the people to whom this land we stand on belonged in the first place. I will never forget my time in North Dakota; it was truly a life changing experience for me.

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