

No Insiders
On activism and documentary

“You distort the answer simply by asking the question” – Jean Rouch

“No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world” – Henry Louis Gates Jr

There are no insiders when making documentaries. Even if you make a film about yourself, you must become an outsider in order to gain perspective. Not to mention that being behind the camera or the computer necessarily puts you on the outside. Whether we like it or not, documentarians have inherited a long and messy history of anthropological probing ripe with the stench of colonialism, and claiming membership to the groups we document does not absolve us of this inheritance.

In the process of making every film I’ve worked on, 8 million questions run through my head: Who are we representing and who hasn’t already been represented? What is the most egalitarian way to approach this project? What is a feminist, anti-racist approach? Who am I to make this? What will (fill in the blank) think when it’s finished? What questions will we be asked? Will our answers be satisfactory (to us and others)? Who is this for and how will it help change things? Some questions can be answered immediately and others are asked and answered over and over throughout the process.

Up to this point in my career I’ve always made films about communities to which I belong, about issues to which I can intimately relate. My first two feature films are about trans-masculine communities, a community to which I claim membership. *transparent*, documents the lives of 19 transgender men who bore children, and *against a trans narrative* deconstructs the relationships between transmen, queers, and feminists, as well as performing a self-critique on internal relations between trans-masculine identified people. However, I’m currently in production on a documentary about transwomen who are working for social and economic justice. The film is a collaboration between myself, Sam Feder, Taylor Casey and the four women the film focuses on: Miss Major, June Brown, Bamby Salcedo, and Maddie Deutsch. In the past, both Sam Feder and myself have been asked why are films about transmen and not transwomen, but now the question appears to be, “who are you to do a film about transgendered women”? A valid question, one without easy or stable answers.

As a white, lower-middle-class trans(masculine) person I have certainly asked myself and continue to ask myself who I am in this process and how who I am effects the outcome of the film, because it most certainly does. The bottom line is that I see a deep need for transwomen to be represented and acknowledged as the fierce activists and leaders that they are, not only the unfortunate victims of brutal crimes and unjust institutions of power. While the participants and I may have very little on the surface in common we are deeply bonded in our commitment to bridging the gaps between us, and we are all

invested in helping more trans women reach the levels that these women have reached. That being said, would the film be different if a team of solely transwomen were making it? Absolutely.

However, if we say that only transwomen can make films about transwomen then we begin to engage in dangerous notions of authenticity. Additionally, we must ask ourselves who gets to claim membership to these identity categories and what the requirements are for membership. Some members of our various communities are already engaged in these policing practices, which are ultimately more harmful than they are helpful.

As an activist, educator and documentarian I have spent and will continue to spend countless hours calling into question these notions of authenticity, these claims of *ownership* to particular identities, movements, etc. As someone who belongs to marginalized and historically misrepresented groups, I often had (and sometimes still have) negative reactions to films that were made by people who do not belong to the communities or movements they were representing. However, such clear-cut ideas about who is *allowed* to make what film are far too simplistic. Someone who really helped shape my thoughts on the subject is E. Patrick Johnson. In particular, his book *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* is quite brilliant in his interrogation of notions of authenticity around blackness and performance. He states:

“when we “fix” and confine our identity as monolithic, we inhibit our road both to recovery from the diseases that plague our communities and to discovering our humanity”

While he is discussing blackness, this idea clearly translates to other identities and other communities. And while my negative reaction to an “outsider” making a film about transmen, for instance, may not be a direct attempt to “fix” trans identity, it is certainly a move towards some authentic notion of transness, which necessarily erects walls, creates limitations. In other words, we begin down the slippery slope of insider/outsider. And while the question of who is inside and who is outside is important and one that I will always be engaged in, it might just be that the conversation is more important than the conclusion.

I don't pretend that all my answers are always the *right* ones, but I can say that even after a film is complete I never stop asking them. I engage in dialog with folks my films represent, folks my films aim to educate, folks my films aim to challenge and folks who feel my films missed the mark completely.

As soon as you pick up a camera and point it at someone else, you have more power than they do. Your membership to the same communities does not erase the power dynamic, it merely helps define it. Acknowledging those power imbalances and the complex and messy histories of representation – and your place in it – is the first step towards a more accurate and possibly more empowering portrayal of your subject(s).