BORDER CROSSING AND GENRE BENDING: A CONVERSATION WITH JESIKAH MARIA ROSS

There may be no image better equipped to illustrate jesikah maria ross's body of work than that of a bridge. In an era of constant flux in which once-stable disciplinary borders are shifting, a bridge might be exactly the technology we need for treading unstable ground.

In October 2013, the Made in New York Media Center opened under the operation of the Independent Filmmaker Project (IFP) as a space for filmmakers to connect with resources, content producers, financiers, and entrepreneurs. "The idea is to bring together art and business," says Joana Vicente, executive director of IFP and Made in New York. "Some filmmakers will want to play with storytelling across multiple platforms—where a story is not just a finite product that starts and ends with a film."[1] It is a space designed for filmmaking in its twenty-first century incarnation. Similarly, in the spring of 2013, the San Francisco Film Society launched A2E: Artist to Entrepreneur, "a series of labs designed to help filmmakers release their films under the constraints of the 21st century marketplace."[2]

The twenty-first century is apparently an unprecedented time for filmmaking. Initiatives like A2E and Made in New York are invaluable resources for helping filmmakers navigate an evolving industry. They pose questions about institutional change, economic realities, audience expectations, and best practices for optimizing what change can offer. Filmmaking, however, is more than an industry, and audiences are more than a market. Filmmaking is also a tradition, a set of contested aesthetic conventions. It is a way of seeing that is responsive to its context. In order to develop a robust understanding of the changes currently confronting the field, we need to blend an industrial perspective with one rooted in content, form, and aesthetics. As filmmaking embraces and integrates concepts like engagement, multiplatform storytelling, and audience co-creation, we can gain a great deal by identifying and illuminating the historical trajectory of these terms.

With a career in independent media that spans nearly thirty years, the body of work of media artist jesikah maria ross moves fluidly among genres, forms, eras, and communities: documentary and community media, storytelling and organizing, analog and digital. Ross began her practice in the late 1980s when community media was actively experimenting with audience co-creation and engagement as liberating production and political processes. Today she is leading multimedia, multivocal projects that integrate elements of place-making, interactive storytelling, community building, and organizing.

Ross's work is thus an opportunity to interrogate several trends in the field: accelerating interest in "engagement" and "impact" from funders and distributors; the ever-shifting boundaries between documentary's role as an artistic medium and its responsibility to raise awareness about pressing social issues; and the development of new aesthetic models in response to (or alongside of) infrastructural changes.

Ross is the co-founder and director of the UC Davis Art of Regional Change program, which brings scholars, students, artists, and social action groups together to collaborate on media arts projects that strengthen communities, generate public scholarship, and inform regional decision-making. Most recently with Art of Regional Change, ross launched *Restore/Restory* (2010–13), a multimedia project that documents historic changes in California's topography through a multilayered, community-rooted tapestry of voices, histories, perspectives, and user experiences. From 2006 to 2009, ross co-directed *Saving The Sierra: Voices of Conservation in Action*, an award-winning multimedia project that used public radio, the internet, and citizen storytelling activities to document community efforts to conserve the culture, economy, and environment of the Sierra Nevada mountain range of California. Ross also served as community engagement director, associate producer, and sound recordist for the PBS *POV* documentary, *Maquilapolis: City of Factories* (2006).

Currently, ross serves as the community engagement specialist on Capital Public Radio's multimedia documentary series, the *View From Here*, where she is building the station's capacity to work collaboratively with residents to discover, understand, and give voice to community needs, values, and aspirations. As part of that work, she recently launched *RView209*, a community media blog that involved seventy youth in using their cell phones to create stories about the high school dropout crisis as part of CapRadio's documentary, *Class Dismissed*.

Ross's work illuminates emerging documentary forms via a longer arc, as an outgrowth of the radical efforts mediamakers have led over the past few decades to expand the reach of what media can do and whom it can serve.

I sat down with ross to gather a clearer sense of this trajectory. What follows is an edited version of several semi-structured conversations held over email and phone in the summer of 2013.

Above

Saving the Sierra mobile storybooth recording session (2006) by jesikah maria ross
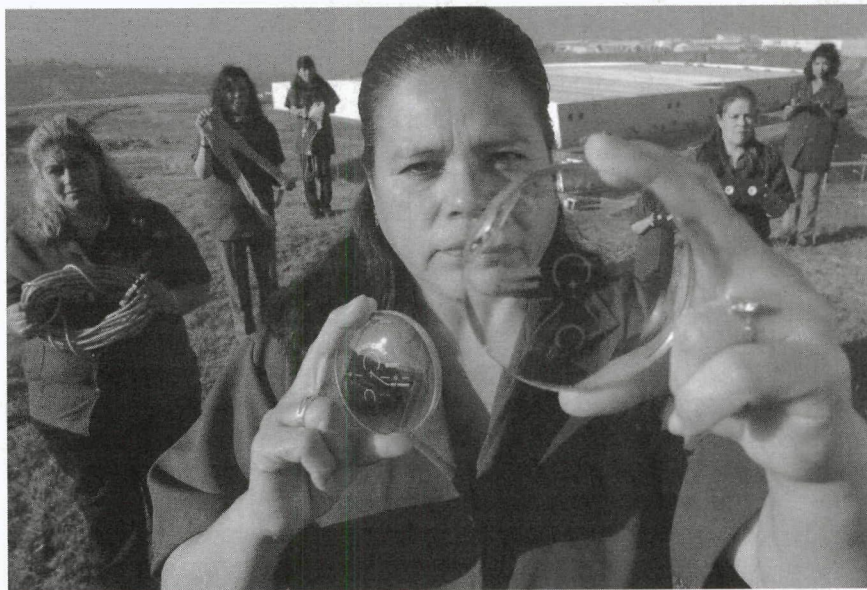
AGGIE EBRAHIMI BAZAZ: First, jesikah, let's give readers a sense of your work. On your website, praxisprojects.net, you write that your work as a storyteller "blurs the boundaries between community development and media art." Can you explain what you mean by this?

JESIKAH MARIA ROSS: I think of myself as a documentary mediamaker who collaborates with community members to produce place-based stories that identify issues and propose solutions for the places they live. And when possible, I involve residents in crafting the structures and processes through which they can then share their stories to spark public dialogue, community engagement, and some kind of local change.

AEB: How did you develop your particular brand of documentary practice?

JMR: I came out of an activist tradition and began working in community media. In college, I was deeply involved with a number of social action groups and did a lot of community organizing. At the same time, I was drawn toward the arts as a means of communicating people's lives and realities in ways that felt much more compelling and revelatory than the statistics and anecdotes we tended to use in our activist work. And I was constantly struggling with how to deal with journalists who, if they covered our work at all, regularly framed our activist efforts in ways that felt demeaning or off base. This was all in the late '80s, before the internet, cell phones, and digital cameras gave rise to citizen journalism and the representational power it put back into people's hands.

I realized that people's personal stories, when creatively communicated, wield tremendous potential to galvanize the kind of conversations that lead to policy change. But I also felt that the people whose stories were being told had to participate in some way in the storytelling in order for the work to ring true and benefit their movements and communities. So I began experimenting with ways to knit together activism with my burgeoning fascination with the documentary arts. I taught myself how to make radio and television, went to graduate school in community development, and landed jobs that allowed me to facilitate community mediamaking as part of social development initiatives or artistic productions. Through these job experiences, I created my own hybrid mediamaking style that combines community voices and documentary arts production.

AEB: When you were coming up, this work was in a vibrant stage of infancy. Who were some of your role models?

JMR: My touchstone model, for the past twenty-five years or so that I've been doing this kind of hybrid documentary work, has been the Challenge for Change project developed by the National Film Board of Canada in the late 1960s.[3]

Challenge for Change was a government-funded project that focused on using media as a tool for sparking the kind of conversations that would lead to community change. Their model had several key components. One was to teach citizens to make and screen their own documentaries, which was totally groundbreaking at the time. That's why most film historians credit it with pioneering the movement that is often called "participatory video."

Another part of their model was to have a production team that combined two very different strengths: mediamaking and social work. Challenge for Change documentary teams were comprised of a filmmaker—who knew how to operate the equipment and craft powerful narratives—and a community organizer. The organizer knew how to bring people together and get them talking about their dreams, needs, and concerns, and facilitated a group process in which the community members worked together to communicate important issues through film, oftentimes actually learning in the process to make their own documentaries. The Challenge for Change model also included having local screenings of the community-driven media where residents could engage in problem solving and generate plans for how to work with policymakers. Even today I find that I'm trying to incorporate all of these elements in my own media projects.

AEB: This Challenge for Change model reminds me a bit of the work of Scribe Video Center in Philadelphia. Scribe is a nonprofit media arts center that brings people together to learn how to tell the stories of their communities via film. Each community group has two facilitators: a filmmaking facilitator and what Scribe calls a "humanities scholar"—someone who can encourage conversation, help guide research and interviews, and who can provide the "community building" support that the filmmaker perhaps cannot.

JMR: Yeah, Scribe uses a similar model. You know, it's no accident that across the US, many media art centers and public access television centers were, in their formative years (1972–80), doing what basically looks like Challenge for Change projects. In certain places, like Scribe, that model carried on.

Above
Still from *Maquilapolis: City of Factories* (2006) by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre; photograph by David Maung

The model started in Canada and one of the key people in Challenge for Change was a US citizen named George C. Stoney, a man whom we know today as the father of public access television in the US and who was a big influence on the independent documentary movement.

Stoney took what he learned up north and brought it back to the US and diligently planted the seeds for what became a transformative movement to distribute the means of media production and provide a sustainable platform for community dialogue via television. Thanks to his work, we now have an infrastructure to support community-produced—rather than corporate-produced—media across the country.

AEB: It is said that in fiction filmmaking, the story is written three times—in the script, in shooting, and in editing. With documentary's interest in having people interact with the story, perhaps we could say that the story is told in shooting, editing, and distribution. As a documentary maker myself, I know how difficult it is to find and craft the story when you're the only one you have to contend with. What challenges have you experienced, and how have they influenced your model of collaborative production?

JMR: One constant tension I live with is in regard to editorial and creative control. In the past, I had an assumption that everyone who was involved in co-creating media with me wanted to have an equal role, which meant they would be deeply involved in all aspects of the media production, including making creative and editorial decisions. But what I've learned through a lot of trial and error is that most folks don't want to be involved in most of the production and decision-making processes. It's time consuming and painstaking and not what they have interest in or resources to do.

I actually designed a diagram that I call the "continuum of functional participation," which recognizes that there are usually just a few key places where community members want to be involved—like shaping the project goals, weighing in on rough cuts, and figuring out how the media production will meet their needs. I've found that as long as you are honest and transparent about your process, stay in regular communication with stakeholders, and create trigger points where they have some editorial control, then the process is collaborative at a level that matches most participants' needs and resources.

Of course, if people want to be more involved in the decision making, they can and should be. It is worth pointing out, though, something that I wouldn't have guessed when I first began: that sharing editorial control is not only more time intensive, intellectually challenging, and emotionally tricky than you think, but it doesn't always translate into more accurate or inclusive media productions.

In the projects that I've done recently, I develop a memorandum of understanding with the groups with which I'm collaborating that spells out project goals, roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes, and that lists me as the one with final say. I also spell these pieces out in the talent releases for the people who are sharing their stories. So it's clear to everybody from the get-go that it's a collaboration and that I have final editorial

control. I'm not totally comfortable with this, but I think it's the most efficient and mutually beneficial way to go.

AEB: Over the years, you've moved from more traditional single-channel video work to multiplatform projects. I first learned about your work from seeing the groundbreaking documentary, *Maquilapolis: City of Factories*. How did you evolve from working in video to multiplatform storytelling? What guides your decisions about form?

JMR: I guess my evolving decisions about form come out of my deep desire to bridge community media and public media and also from my interest in creating multiple entry points into a media project for diverse audiences.

When I started out in community media, I saw over and over again that, while we had resources to produce work and circulate it on community channels or via engagement activities that had deep resonance with the communities where the media was made, the stories were not reaching the people who had influence on the issues raised in our productions. These stories were not getting out to thought leaders and decision makers. This is in part because community media is by definition narrowcast—made by, for, and with a particular group of people. It has limited distribution beyond the immediate community that produced the work.

Community media is ghettoized even in terms of where the channels are located on the dial (radio or cable TV) and it still suffers from its *Wayne's World* reputation, so people don't pay attention. Especially not decision makers. Those folks go to public media channels—NPR and PBS—for their news and information. So, over the past fifteen years, my work has aimed to bridge community and public media both in terms of production and distribution.

Maquilapolis is the first project in which I dug into that effort to interlace community and public media. It was a feature-length documentary directed by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre that looked at the impact of globalization on both sides of the US-Mexico border through the eyes of female factory workers. From the beginning, Vicky and Sergio wanted *Maquilapolis* to be more than just a PBS documentary. They wanted it also to be a community media project that involved the subjects of the film in the storytelling process and that equipped them with the skills and tools they would need to continue telling their stories after the filmmaking team had wrapped. I just loved this expansive vision of mediamaking that placed community development and grassroots change at the heart of the production process. So I came on board to help design and facilitate a participatory videomaking process while also developing the binational community engagement campaign.

One thing all the women characters profiled in the film had in common was a sense of agency: they were *promotoras*, workers who sought out training in labor rights, women's health, and human rights. We conducted community video workshops in Tijuana, training a group of *promotoras* to use video cameras. We taught them the skills they needed to create intimate video diaries and portraits of their communities rooted in their lived experience. Their video stories were then woven into *Maquilapolis*, which eventually aired on PBS's *POV* and made the rounds at film festivals and has won lots of awards.

Equally important: all of the raw footage that the *promotoras* created, they kept. The filmmakers raised money to donate video cameras to the *promotoras*, and they got editing training so that they could continue using video to advance work on the issues they were focused on. So for example, there was one group, Colectivo Chilpancingo, that was doing a lot of environmental justice work. They used their video skills to document illegal dumping of toxic wastewater onto the roads and waterways around some of the *promotoras'* homes. While government officials said this dumping wasn't happening, the *promotoras* had videotaped evidence that spoke otherwise. This specific footage wasn't used in the film, but Colectivo Chilpancingo used it in their organizing efforts.

This is just one example of how we successfully created media that went in both directions—for community use and for public broadcast. The women in the community made lots of videos that were used in multiple ways and had the deep, community narrowcast resonance that I am used to. At the same time, we made a beautiful documentary that got to a level of national acclaim that could catch the attention of policy wonks, decision makers, and international activists—the folks best positioned to push forward systemic change. I also think we demonstrated how residents are often the experts on local issues and that when given the chance, they have a lot to teach us through their own documentary productions.

But this was all at the very early stages of this engagement movement, so some of the response to our project felt painful. We were invited to screen a work-in-progress at Sundance Film Festival in 2001, for example, and there were a lot of media and broadcasting heavyweights there, along with major distribution representatives. And most of them were completely baffled by the piece. They literally said to us, "You have to decide. Is this a community development project or is it an independent documentary?" And we just felt—even that early on—why couldn't it be both?

AEB: Today, across the field, there is almost an expectation that documentaries have to be both.
JMR: Yes, but that's a newer trend. And to be fair, the hard questions we faced in those early stages helped us to solidify our stance of making a hybrid project as well as to produce a better film.

AEB: What do you think led to this change in how the independent media industry came to view engagement as a vibrant and necessary part of documentary rather than as siloed in community media?
JMR: Early community media in this country—not independent documentary, mind you, but public access television—was inherently and largely about engagement. You engage residents in making their own media for the purpose of sharing and discussing it with other residents in a face-to-face situation.

They didn't call it, at the time, "engagement" or "outreach," and didn't identify it as a separate part of their process. Because participatory video—the model from Canada that informed public access TV at its inception—often had a social change agenda; interaction and change is just what they did. That's what they were set up to do.

In the mid-to-late-1990s, filmmakers and funders got interested in an idea that they originally called "outreach" and later reframed as "engagement." This really got hot in the early 2000s when both mediamakers and funders started to ask, "Well, if the idea for these documentaries we're funding or producing is to lead to some kind of social change, then how do we set it up so that that happens?" There was increased recognition that making a piece of media and then broadcasting it or screening it at film festivals did not, in itself, lead to change.

And I think that it basically just circles right back to community organizing. Again, that's not what people necessarily call it, but fundamentally that's what I think it is. How do you engage people at the front end of making your documentary—the community featured in the doc themselves—and/or how do you engage users or viewers in thinking through the topics of the documentary and what difference it could or would make? How do you engage stakeholders during the production process so that you are sure what you are doing is relevant and rings true and will be useful in addressing needs and issues? And how do you work with them to create some kind of plan so that they can actually take the media that you have collaboratively created out into the world to effect change?

Another parallel track I would mention here is that over the course of my career, I've watched one funding stream for documentaries after another get slashed. And what happens, I think, when there is a scarcity of funds, is that funders want to put their money where it will be leveraged for some kind of impact. So you get this push toward articulating the specific impact you want and demonstrating that impact. And making an impact often means collaborating with groups who can actually do the work of using the film to engage communities in dialogue and problem solving and track what happens as a result.

This is a huge pressure to put on documentary mediamakers. But I think it's also given birth to really rich conversations on engagement and a wealth of wonderful creative practices, and now several organizations are set up just to support engagement and outreach.

AEB: I may be in the minority, but part of me feels that something is lost with the assumption that art doesn't have potency on its own, that it has to be coupled with community organizing to effect change. And rather than work toward developing revolutions in form, many filmmakers' energies and resources are going into the distribution campaign, the part after the film is completed.
JMR: I really agree. Engagement personally works for me, but I think it is limiting for other types of creative expression. And it really is based on a lot of assumptions in terms of what the audience will bear, the desire to have a lot of eyeballs, and the need to take actions that are measurable.

It's really tough to measure certain things like the personal transformation that happens for people who are involved in co-creating media. Those things can be hard to track in the heat of production because they require more than participant observation or a simple survey. And they're often long-term impacts anyway, so that they fall out of the evaluation because

they come into full bloom after the project has wrapped.

One thing I would say, though, is that I think that those limitations were most felt by filmmakers who were making films for broadcast and film festivals. And I think what's happened as a result is those makers and the next generation are bypassing that way of working and migrating to the internet and social media platforms to experiment and pilot new ways of doing narrative and new ways of engaging with audiences and new ways of tracking them. There are just the most amazing ways of telling nonfiction stories out there now, whether you call it "transmedia"[4] or "multiplatform" or "immersive documentary." And it's happening on the internet. Which, of course, has its upsides and downsides.

AEB: This is a great segue to move into talking about your work on the web. After *Maquilapolis* you moved to the web for your next project, *Saving the Sierra: Voices of Conservation in Action*. What did this project teach you about what the web can do in terms of either discovering new forms of storytelling or promoting engagement in new ways?

JMR: I've found the web to be an amazingly inclusive platform. It allows for multiple voices on a range of topics created by an array of authors. And it creates opportunities for those voices and topics to be in conversation with each other. I've also discovered that the web can display different types of media that reach a variety of audiences and enable diverse uses of the stories that get generated.

But as much as I use the web these days, I think it's vital to have on-the-ground public events that link the stories on the web to a place and connect people in that place to the stories and to each other. To me, the web can only go so far in terms of people actually bonding and deciding on a collective future. I think that level of transformation really only happens face-to-face. A lot of the research that has come out recently about developing a sense of place and creating shared vision shows that it depends on people actually making meaning and agreeing on that meaning together. And I don't think that happens as well on the web. I think it happens best on the ground, face-to-face, in a bricks-and-mortar location.

So getting back to your question about *Saving the Sierra*, it was the first time I started really working on the web. This was originally meant to be a public radio project, a one-hour special that was to be played all across the country. I co-directed the project with Catherine Stifter, who's a two-time Peabody Award-winning radio journalist, so she really understands the whole public radio system, and we were able to kind of flip the traditional model of public media production on its head.

We started off not by making our public radio documentary, but by actually going up and down the Sierra Nevada and inviting residents to record their stories in a storybooth that we set up. We asked residents to talk about the places they love, what they're doing to conserve them, and how they think people could collaborate to preserve rural culture, local economies, and healthy ecosystems throughout the Sierra Nevada.

We generated one hundred stories from the storybooth process and put these on a website we designed to provide the storytellers a way to communicate with one another up and down the Sierra, to engage their own communities, and to contribute to our research on the relevant issues and ideas for the documentary.

So we started our public media documentary on the web using a community storytelling process. From there, we worked with our collaborating partners and some of the folks we met through the storybooth recordings, and generated several productions: a series of feature stories for *The California Report*, the statewide, public radio magazine show here in California; an hour-long, Earth Day documentary special that aired on over 200 NPR stations throughout the county; the only all-Sierra blog at the time; one hundred webstories from the storybooth; a downloadable toolkit for audiences who wanted to use the stories to have conversations about sustaining rural communities; and an award-winning website where you can access and re-distribute all of this work.

We were really experimenting with how to use the internet to do two things. First, we wanted it to enable rural people up and down the Sierra Nevada to share stories with one another—for peer networking, organizing, and experience sharing. Secondly, we were exploring the internet as a way to enable rural populations to have conversations with their urban and suburban counterparts, people they normally would not be in proximity to, so that all Californians have an understanding that they have a stake in what is happening to the Sierra Nevada. We did all this along with public

Above

Restore/Restory participatory public event (2012); photograph by Steve Fisch

events, like listening sessions, because, as I said before, I think you have to pair work online with work on the ground.

As Catherine and I finished the project in 2009, people were calling it "multiplatform documentary," something I'd never heard of before. And, more recently, people cite it as a transmedia project. Whatever you call it, I think it's the wave of the future, combining community storytelling, broadcast media, and internet distribution, among other things.

AEB: Would you say your web projects are meant for a very targeted audience? Or are you also interested in unique page views and other such metrics? Do you hope that random users will stumble across the websites and engage with the stories?

JMR: When you use the web, you get kind of a three-for-one, right? You get an archive; you get an exhibition space; you get this platform for ongoing interaction. In the case of a project rooted in a specific geography like the Sierra Nevada mountain range, the internet also provides an ideal way to overcome communication gaps created by the built infrastructure.

In all of the work that I've done, whether it's *Saving the Sierra* or the various Art of Regional Change projects I've spearheaded, neither I nor the organizations and residents with whom I've collaborated have depended on people going to the website to see the stories. That's one place they can go, but there's always some sort of engagement plan that gets co-created. This plan enables us to get the stories to the audiences we want to have interacting with them. Whether that means putting the stories onto DVDs and sending them to targeted groups, having a series of local screenings and dialogue sessions, or playing the stories as part of live, local radio or TV call-in shows, we often have several ways that we engage people with the stories. I think it's really important to point out that the web is great and it serves a lot of purposes, but none of my projects are designed so that that is the only way people see, access, or use the media I'm involved in creating.

AEB: So in a lot of ways, your work is different from interactive or web-based storytelling as we are seeing it today.

JMR: That's true.

AEB: Your work, in fact, defies easy categorization in this really refreshing way. It stands somewhere amid community media, participatory video, documentary filmmaking, and multiplatform storytelling. When Challenge for Change pioneered the participatory video movement, participatory video was quite distinct from documentary. It used documentary style, or some of the techniques of documentary, but it was doing something different. Do you think those two genres are becoming indistinguishable? Or could they still be seen as distinct genres that borrow from each other?

JMR: That's a good question. I think I would probably have them separate but under the bigger umbrella of storytelling.

The way I think about storytelling is via "by, about, and for." Who's the maker? What's the topic, and who decided that topic? And what's the purpose, and who got to forge those goals?

I think when you answer those key questions, that often helps you determine the category of storytelling your work will fall into—for example, community media, participatory video, or documentary.

In documentary, the maker is generally a trained professional who comes up with an idea, does research, raises funds, puts together a crew, and then makes and distributes the documentary, usually in a broadcast or theatrical release. That's kind of the general way documentary has been for a long time, though of course that's all changing.

I think participatory video is a genre within documentary because here, it's usually nonprofessionals who are creating media. And it's about a topic they want to explore, and it's usually shown in a narrowcast situation to a targeted group like a city council, or through a public access media channel, or even via a local advocacy campaign.

My experience in participatory video—because it comes out of Challenge for Change and because it's very much about building the capacity of people to tell their own stories for their own goals—is that there's really a transformation agenda behind it, be that a personal or community or systemic change agenda. Not all documentaries have that intention. There are plenty of documentaries that are not really focused on changing the world: a lot of personal essay documentaries, for example, or science docs, or experimental documentaries. So these two styles still feel pretty different to me.

And community media is another layer. Like participatory video, community media is usually made by nonprofessionals connected to a particular place or constituency about something they're interested in, but it's for a range of goals. A lot of community media is not focused on social change but is about celebrating and circulating culture, sharing local news and views, or just creative self-expression. So that's how I differentiate among documentary, participatory video, and community media.

AEB: In 2012, Patricia Zimmermann and Helen de Michiel identified an "emerging framework for community-based media" that they call "open space documentary."[5] In one of their foundational articles, they cite *Saving the Sierra* as a model, not just in terms of the media products generated, but also in terms of the process you and Catherine Stifter undertook to facilitate production. Do you identify with this term? Among all the terms that could be used, how do you define your work?

JMR: I can't tell you how thankful I am to Patty and Helen. I feel like for twenty years I've tried to bumble my way into describing the kind of layered, process-based, and epic vision that I often have for my projects. And they just put it all together in a really amazing think piece.

There are only two terms, and they're only recent terms, that I've ever felt really capture not just my imagination but also my process and ethos as a documentary mediamaker. The first is "collaborative multiplatform documentary," because it's in collaboration, it's on different platforms, and it's documentary. The second is "open space documentary" because the term signals this idea of an open forum for ongoing, diverse, and emergent interactions. It really conveys this whole idea of multiplicity in

which different people contribute, engage, access, and use media in different ways.

AEB: Do you think George C. Stoney would have been a proponent of open space documentary and web-based storytelling?

JMR: George was a friend and mentor, as well as a foundational figure in the field. I don't think he would have been interested in these concepts on a theoretical level, but I think what he certainly would have approved of and supported is what he would call "ordinary people" having the opportunity to see their lives and worlds reflected in the media around them; to participate in actually making that media and sharing it in the places that they felt it needed to be shared. So on that level, I think he would have really embraced it. I think he would have seen it as community media or participatory video, just on a new platform.

AEB: Given all the shifts and trends we've discussed, and given that your creative trajectory has always managed to be a bit ahead of emerging trends, what do you see as the future of documentary? And what do you see as the future of your artistic practice?

JMR: I guess if I had to look into a crystal ball I'd say the future of documentary is pretty bright. We got through a really hard time in the 1990s when it felt like all the funding for documentary was disappearing, when people were much less likely to pay to see a documentary in a theater than they are today, and PBS was one of very few places that documentary work would get shown, and what was getting shown there was the work of only a handful of makers. Today, it's a wholly different landscape for documentary. Feature-length documentaries are released theatrically; there are tons of renowned and well-attended documentary film festivals worldwide; documentaries are much more accessible through the advent of video-on-demand sites like Netflix and Fandor or through the support and distribution of cable channels like HBO; a good amount of trade magazine and online sites promote documentary; robust online communities exist to nurture documentary practice; and we're even seeing a steep rise in documentary programs at universities. PBS is also taking some leadership in making documentary more available by offering more documentaries through local affiliates. And then there is this burgeoning movement to use the web as a platform for redefining documentary, and with this comes new funding streams and innovations. All this makes me feel like documentary has become a more acknowledged and valued media art form.

In terms of where documentary is headed, I'd say we'll be seeing even more work migrate to the web, work that uses nonlinear narrative structures and provides more ways for users to experience how stories unfold and intersect. I also think doc makers will be taking advantage of new technologies to create more opportunities to engage users online and on the ground. I'm thinking here of mobile apps, GPS software, small range audio transmitters, portable projections units—and the fact that in the US, so many people have smartphones and tablets and Wi-Fi is becoming more available in public spaces. Plus there is a growing ethos of having the public interface with documentary stories and the places they come from. Funny, talking about it actually gets me revved up. I think that we are going to be seeing a powerful new era of dynamic, place-based, multivocal, engaged storysharing.

Barring the steep learning curves of some of the newer, interactive technologies, innovations in web-based documentary storytelling are creating space for exactly the types of storytelling endeavors I'm interested in and have a background doing. So, I think my future looks bright too. I see my work aligning with these recent developments, and I also see myself interlacing more with academia since there is a growing need for "community engaged research" in that sector, and that type of research has resonance with my mediamaking practices. I can also envision getting more involved with international organizations, many of which are setting up initiatives that use media—and documentary in particular—as a tool for community change. I guess what makes me hopeful as I talk to you is that working as I do at the intersection of different fields—community development, documentary media, popular education, placemaking—doesn't feel so strange anymore. I used to always feel like I had to name my work in one very specific way: I'm a documentary maker or I'm a community organizer. But now, I feel like hybrid work is its own category, and it's not a burden or something to rationalize. It's an asset that is opening doors to new colleagues, community partners, and funders. I'm pretty excited to see how the documentary form, and my own distinctive model of documentary practice, continue to evolve into the future.

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NOTES 1. Paula Bernstein, "'Made in NY' Media Center by IFP Prepares for October Opening," Indiewire, August 29, 2013, www.indiewire.com/article/made-in-ny-media-center-by-ifp-prepares-for-october-opening. 2. Eric Kohn, "EXCLUSIVE: San Francisco Film Society Launches New Digital Distribution Lab A2E," Indiewire, April 1, 2013, www.indiewire.com/article/exclusive-san-francisco-film-society-launches-new-digital-distribution-lab-a2e. 3. For more on the Challenge for Change program, see this thorough compendium of contemporary and recent articles, essays, and reflections on the form and impact of this groundbreaking work: Thomas Waugh, Michael Brendan Baker, and Ezra Winton, eds., Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010). A corresponding website features select films from the Challenge for Change project, including You Are on Indian Land, produced by George C. Stoney. Access that website via this link: www.nfb.ca/playlists/michael-brendan-thomas-waugh-ezra-winton/challenge-for-change/. 4. The term "transmedia," initially developed by scholars, has evolved over the past decade to encompass a robust variety of meanings, not only in terms of denotation but also in terms of significance to the filmmaking community. At its most basic, "transmedia" refers to storytelling endeavors that provide multiple points of entry across various platforms via the use of digital technologies. Henry Jenkins's pivotal book, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide (New York: New York University Press, 2006) offers detailed case studies of some commercial transmedia endeavors including the Matrix franchise. Over the past few years and due to a variety of factors, "transmedia" has come to stand in for "interactive storytelling" and has piqued the interest of independent filmmakers working with social issue themes and seeking audience engagement with those themes. 5. Helen de Michiel, "Open Space Documentary," Animating Democracy, December 2010, http://animatingdemocracy. org/resource/open-space-documentary.