

## THEORETICAL STATEMENT

*“In documentary, an event recounted is history reclaimed.”*

Bill Nichols

My forthcoming piece is best served when framed within the participatory mode of documentary creation. In the participatory mode, the producer becomes a social actor within the world he/she documents, showcasing “the political act of joining forces with one's subjects” (Nichols 117). Because I am one of the children affected by the divorce I am detailing, it makes the most logical and aesthetic sense. “Participatory documentary gives us a sense of what it is like for the [maker] to be in a given situation and how that situation alters as a result” (Nichols 116). One of the compelling features of the piece will be the audience’s imagined sense of sitting in on a family conversation.

Participatory documentary work began to emerge in the 1950’s with the invention of smaller and easily transported recording gear. Portable sound equipment allowed for real-time interactions between makers and social actors to become part of the work. The producer’s voice “could be heard as readily as any other, not subsequently, in an organizing voice-over commentary, but on the spot, in face-to-face encounters with others” (Nichols 44). This mode opens up my creative possibilities—I can potentially serve as “mentor, participant, prosecutor, or provocateur” (Nichols 44) to my siblings, the primary social actors in this piece. Many layers of audience comprehension and interpretation become possible, raising and answering questions such as “how do [maker] and social actor respond to each other; do they react to overtones or implications in each other’s speech; do they see how power and desire flow between them” (Nichols 44). In addition to its commentary on divorce, this mode allows for the piece to disclose information on the interactions between the principal social actors.

Participatory documentary displays "the truth of an encounter" rather than absolute truth. "We see how the [maker] and subject negotiate a relationship, how they act toward one another, what forms of power and control come into play, and what levels of revelation or rapport stem from this specific form of encounter" (Nichols 118). Observing the interaction in the piece adds a layered commentary on family dynamics. "In participatory documentary, what we see is what we can see only when a camera, or filmmaker, is there instead of ourselves" (Nichols 118). To be sure, documenting these particular exchanges would not be possible for any other person. Erik Barnouw described the characteristics of this mode as *catalyst cinema*. While this piece is situated in the audio-only world, the same principles apply. Catalyst documentary work is "committed to a paradox: that artificial circumstances could bring hidden truth to the surface" (Barnouw 255). The catalyst documentary producer is not an invisible or uninvolved bystander, but an avowed participant and provocateur. Bill Nichols also suggests that creating documentary work in this mode affects the maker by playing a "cathartic, redemptive role in their own lives; it is less the world of their subjects that changes than their own" (Nichols 118).

Additionally, the project features elements of autobiographical documentary, specifically that of family portraiture. The theorist Richard Brilliant observes that portraiture emerges from a "tendency to think about oneself, of oneself in relation to others, and of others in apparent relation to themselves and to others" (Lane 94). The revelation of family relationships will figure prominently throughout the work. The work is based on the "fundamental idea that *lived* experience speaks more eloquently than *second-hand* experience" (Hendy 177). Indeed, the producer of autobiographical

documentary can legitimately be “opinionated because he has experience, and this experience, being ‘authentic’, is beyond argument or politics” (Hendy 180). Michael Renov states that the early 1990’s showed a growing prominence of documentary makers of “diverse cultural backgrounds in which the representation of the historical world is inextricably bound up with self-inscription” (Renov 176). Subjectivity evolved into an acceptable way to present information. This audio documentary will prove completely subjective—the stories told make no claim on objectivity as they are told from those who lived them. “The documentative stance that had previously been valorized as informed but objective was now being replaced by a more personalist perspective in which the maker’s stake and commitment to the subject matter were foregrounded” (Renov 176). Robert Sayre observed, “American autobiographers have generally connected their own lives to the national life or to national ideas” (Lane 95). This piece is a literal illustration of his theory. This piece, though personal, is motivated by the fact that it speaks to universal issues. The rise of this form of documentary led to “an approach in which generalizable truths about institutions or human behavior can be extrapolated from small but closely monitored case studies” (Renov 176). Though the project is a case study of a singular family, the issues it raises relate to millions of families across the globe. Though focusing on one tiny piece of the world, this work can reveal themes common to all children of divorce.

*“Their histories are forever intertwined, their pathologies enmeshed in each other’s.”*  
Michael Renov

Renov introduces the concept of *domestic ethnography* that also defines my work. Domestic ethnography “stakes out a mode of autobiographical practice that couples self-interrogation with ethnography’s concern for the documentation of the lives of others.

But the Other in this instance is a family member who serves less as a source of disinterested social scientific research than as a mirror or foil for the self. Due to kinship ties, subject and object are embroiled in each other” (Renov 216). This form of documentary creation includes “little sense of a tacking back and forth between insider and outsider positions, the ethnographic norm. For the domestic ethnographer, there is no fully outside position available. Blood ties effect linkages of shared memory, physical resemblance, temperament, and, of course, family-forged behavioral or attitudinal dysfunction toward which the artist—through her work—can fashion accommodation but no escape” (Renov 219). Moreover, because “the lives of artist and subject are interlaced through communal or blood ties, the documentation of the one tends to implicate the other in complicated ways” (Renov 218). Domestic ethnography puts authorial subjectivity on display. Again, this project is most certainly not objective; no piece centered on emotional memory truly can be. Participatory documentary and domestic ethnography are truly the only choices for the piece.

*“In radio... we are free—forced—to imagine everything.”*  
Andrew Crisell

Audio-only documentation best serves this project for a variety of reasons. Smaller-scale equipment and one-person production techniques often prove most capable of capturing more natural interactions. Additionally, the medium’s lack of visual cues serves to “increase the radio documentary’s associational powers, rewarding the listener with a more involving—because more open—text” (Hendy 187). Not provided with a hard and fast image of the chief social actors, audiences are more likely to weave in their own personal narratives. Listeners are “for all practical purposes blind. The broadcaster’s message must be conveyed through one sense only, the sense of hearing” (Horstmann 5).

Furthermore, radio programming does not have to compete for mass audiences, “having instead a smaller but more committed audience who has opted quite deliberately for something relatively challenging” (Hendy 187). Because radio audiences are primarily self-selected, you can produce more complicated and more targeted material. In an essay entitled *‘Reality Radio’: The Documentary*, David Hendy discusses documentary’s continued survival against the odds in a “media ecology characterized by intense competition for audiences and resources, by an apparent popular taste for exhibitionism and thrills, and by widespread public skepticism over journalistic ethics and the ‘hidden agendas’ of the media” (Hendy 168). Indeed, radio documentary “demands attentive listening at a point in history when radio is heard distractedly” (Hendy 168). Finally, the audio-only format affords greater access to social actors. Subjects can be recorded where and how they are most comfortable—with no concern for visual aesthetics. Because the social actor is not encumbered by apprehension about their appearance or the camera’s presence, this format allows for deeper thought, unmitigated conversation, and an unimpeded recording environment.

Given the personal and familial nature of my proposed piece, its creation is best served through combining the elements of participatory and autobiographical documentary production with the features of domestic ethnography. Additionally, utilizing these modes of creation within a strictly audio production setting fosters an environment most appropriate for the piece’s conversational structure and intimate subject matter—comfortably situating the piece within the audio documentary landscape as a whole.

## **Works Consulted**

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