ABSTRACT

BUEL, JASON WILLIAM. Whose Screens? Our Screens!: Digital Documentary and Social Activism. (Under the direction of Dr. Devin Orgeron).

This project examines digital documentary practices in the context of three contemporary social movements: Black Lives Matter in the US, the Maidan Movement in Ukraine, and Idle No More in Canada. I focus on the range of docmedia objects and documentary practices within each of them, looking at how such independently produced works function within the larger movements of which they are a part as well as within their specific sociopolitical contexts. The analysis of docmedia within these movements draws together existing histories and theories of documentary, arguing that we must rethink what we think we know about documentary in general based on the new expressive and material features of digital documentary. It also puts documentary studies scholarship into conversation with assemblage theory and affect theory to better understand the range of effects documentary is capable of producing that lie beyond the purely rational or representational.

The discussion of docmedia in and around the Black Lives Matter movement focuses on questions of data and how data combines with docmedia objects to present both constraints and opportunities for activists engaged in the movement. In my discussion of Maidan, I focus on the body and the ways in which the body may be rendered legible. This involves analyses of the politics of human bodies and bodies of evidence, as well as socio-technical bodies as collective political agents. My discussion of Idle No More centers around
questions of place and the politics of public place, looking at how documentary practice and direct action work together to repoliticize seemingly apolitical places. These foci emphasize the various constraints and opportunities that emerge through docmedia assemblages that, and the strategies that makers of docmedia within these movements have developed in response. By way of conclusion, I examine the role of archiving such docmedia, as well as the way that such work is always archival by nature.
Whose Screens? Our Screens!: Digital Documentary and Social Activism

by

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DEDICATION

For the revolutions to come.
BIOGRAPHY

Jason W. Buel was born in Sarasota, Florida and grew up in Boone, North Carolina. He developed a fascination with film as an undergraduate at Appalachian State University, where he double-majored in English and Psychology. He earned an M.A. in English with a concentration in Film Studies from North Carolina State University. After a year as an Adjunct Instructor at Vance-Granville Community College and Durham Technical Community College, he returned to NC State to pursue his doctorate in Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media. His research interests include materialist media studies, documentary and other modes of nonfiction filmmaking, and social movement media ecologies. He has accepted a position as an Assistant Professor of Communication at North Carolina Wesleyan College, where he will begin teaching in the fall.
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INTRODUCTION

The continuing proliferation of mobile digital technologies requires a rethinking of documentary film and video in the 21st century. Digital documentaries raise new questions around how we understand the production of knowledge, how we relate to discourses of truth and evidence, and how our shared social world is mediated through moving images. More than that, though, the eruption of social movements in the past few years, many of which have made use of social media and documentary in various forms and for various purposes, itself requires a reconsideration of the intersections between documentary, politics, and “new media” technologies. This dissertation seeks to better understand exactly that: the politics of vernacular documentary practices online, specifically within the context of contemporary social movements.

Technological developments and the proliferation of mobile, networked communication devices into the everyday life have also corresponded with a boom in the popularity (and economic viability) of documentary. As Pat Aufderheide notes, “Sales of documentaries on DVD tripled between 2001 and 2004 … to nearly $4 million in the US. Online purchases … have boosted DVD figures, while smaller scale web campaigns and viral marketing via email have encouraged the ‘house party’ trend of group viewings, particularly for political documentaries.”¹ More recently, streaming media providers like Netflix have

made documentaries more widely and readily accessible to audiences than ever before. HBO has become a major distributor of documentaries as well. Even CNN is getting in on the action with the establishment of its own documentary production unit.² Beyond the realm of the professionally-produced feature, documentary media of all sorts proliferate on platforms like YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others, in addition to standalone websites and websites of documentary-supporting institutions like the National Film Board of Canada and MIT’s Open Documentary Lab.

In recent years, a number of scholars have issued calls to “rethink” documentary, often in light of the proliferation of new technologies of seeing, storing, and distributing images.³ The need to rethink documentary is often framed first and foremost as a need to question the affordances and issues of scale enabled through contemporary technologies of production, distribution, and exhibition. In terms of affordances, digital documentaries can quite simply do different things than documentary film can. They afford user interaction on the screen and within the structure of the text itself. Among other things, such affordances have enabled the blurring of lines between filmmakers and viewers as well as the


development of distributed and massively collaborative modes of authorship that defy any conventional understanding of filmic authorship. Some of their interfaces enable users to generate their own content that will become part of the documentary project. Many afford direct linking out to other texts or paratextual materials or within the “text” itself as a way of allowing viewers to choose how to navigate through the documentary.4

In addition to affordances (and what could itself be considered an affordance) is the issue of scale. Documentaries can now incorporate images that might only ever be seen in one single viewer’s experience of the text. Alternatively, documentaries can now be collaborative on a massive scale, allowing anyone with an internet connection to contribute something. Both extremes of these scales—the extremely localized, individual audience experience and globally distributed authorship—are crucial to consider when we think about the politics of digital documentaries as well as the mediation of the human, technological, and textual “bodies” involved in the formation of these projects. Documentaries matter. They matter now in a space of continuously expanding potential. And they matter especially in terms of connectivity—what they bring together and under what conditions.

4 “Paratexts” are thresholds into or out of texts. They are any accompanying productions that surround or extend a text “precisely in order to present it.” Examples include book covers, front matter, and typography as well as reviews, publicity materials, and interviews with authors. The concept originally focused on books, and it was developed at length in Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). More recently, the notion of “media paratexts” has been developed to critically examine how trailers, posters, and other media serve to systematically extend and frame media texts beyond books—see Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).
I argue that we need to consider the ecological dynamic at all stages of the documentary’s “life cycle.” Simon Cottle rightly observes that “New technologies of production and delivery, heightened competitiveness, industrial centralization, fragmenting audiences and internationalizing markets have all dramatically impacted on the ‘production ecology.’”\(^5\) But such forces have also impacted the distribution and exhibition ecologies of documentary, too. The forces and bodies brought together within these ecologies are always political expressions. They are political in that they are components of truth production machines, as any given documentary is a truth production machine in that it implicitly or overtly claims to present a vision of the world as it really is. The forces and bodies operating as parts of documentary ecologies are also political in the sense that they act as traces of larger social and economic processes. How, then, do documentary media objects circulate, grow, and reproduce themselves within the larger media ecologies of which they are always a part? And, in the context of contemporary politics, how can activist and amateur documentaries leverage the power and politics already operating within these media ecologies to effect sociopolitical change?

This work focuses on a wide range of digital documentary media, with an emphasis on amateur and independent productions within social movements—media that would not have been economically viable to produce and distribute a generation ago. Certainly the Kinopravda, Workers’ Film and Photo League, Newsreel Films, and Indymedia are examples.

of exactly such documentary production taking place in and around earlier social/political movements, but the scale of works produced pales in comparison with what is now possible with mobile technologies and networked video platforms, and the decentralization of production and circulation with digital video is also creates significant differences. This speaks to the importance of each of these aforementioned examples, and it also points to a problem with contemporary work: because any and all movements can now relatively easily produce a large volume of documentary work to bolster their political aims, doing so can become less of a boon and more of a seemingly compulsory activity that can then be co-opted by digital platforms to serve their own profit motives.

The contradictory power to and compulsion to produce documentary images via seemingly ubiquitous digital media technologies requires a more expansive understand of exactly what “counts” as documentary as well as whose documentaries are worthy of study. Peter Wintonick coined the term “docmedia” as a way of opening up a consideration of documentary practices beyond the long-form documentary film. This theoretical alternative

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to the “documentary proper” has vast expressive potentials.\(^7\) Brian Winston, Gail Vanstone, and Wang Chi’s work takes up “docmedia,” but they too tend to overlook the expansive range of non-professional docmedia that proliferates on the web.\(^8\) In fact, they appear to disdain much of this kind of work when they argue that “web distribution in effect makes no demand for technical quality before material can be uploaded. Standards are obsolete on ‘unregulated’ broadband. Or they would be, were it not for the continued hinderance of professionalism.”\(^9\) While a sarcastic aside about the “continued hinderance of professionalism” may be all the evidence the authors need to dismiss the wide variety of amateur and alternative docmedia that now proliferates online, there are two major problems with this way of thinking. First, it lumps all sorts of docmedia work that actually is aesthetically innovative and technically skilled together with work that, rightly or wrongly, may indeed have little concern for aesthetics, technical competence, or professionalism. The logic for lumping such material together here seems to be simply that it is all being distributed directly via the web with no need for intermediary institutional gatekeepers. Indeed, the very setup of a binary between professional and amateur would imply a


\(^9\) Ibid., 41.
superiority of the former over the latter. \textsuperscript{10} Second, such thinking presumes that if docmedia work does not exceed some arbitrary, culturally conditioned, and institutionally sanctioned degree of “quality” (as determined by Western aesthetic expectations) that the work is automatically not to be valued—or at least valued so much less than “professional” docmedia that it is not worthy of serious scholarly inquiry.

Relatedly, in the context of docmedia produced in the context of active social movements, Winston, Vanstone, and Chi assume that amateur documentarians have time for technical quality and aesthetic innovation. They ignore the urgency of these movements while at the same time lauding contemporary docmedia for beginning to break away from the scientism, eurocentrism, and patriarchy that have dominated the documentary tradition throughout much of it history. They fail to examine the way that scientism, eurocentrism, and patriarchy continue to shape the very notions of technical quality that their discussion insists docmedia must have in order to be taken seriously. \textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} Moira Gatens notes that items frequently appearing as a pair imply a superiority of one over the other (mind-body, universal-particular, male-female, etc.). Moira Gatens, \textit{Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 92.

My goal with this project is to look at contemporary trends in docmedia at the margins, focusing specifically on the ways that the emerging nonfiction video practices of amateurs and activists serve to modify power relations. My analysis examines the new potentials and limitations opened up by the affordances of digital media. My focus throughout this project is on better understanding the politics of digital media and emerging documentary practices. That said, one consequence of exploring the current state of documentary is that the present moment reveals a need to rethink documentary history: specifically, this history of the emerging docmedia practices will demonstrate the limits of conventional wisdom in documentary studies and call for the inclusion of other non-fictions and proto-documentary modes of image-making that are traditionally dismissed or relegated to the margins of documentary history. Ethnographic films, educational films, home movies, and “mere footage” need to be reconsidered alongside feature-length documentary films if we are to more fully understand the social uses of docmedia practices over time. While such a deep historical analysis is beyond the scope of this project, it is nonetheless important to consider how an expansive understanding of nonfiction moving image production frames our understanding of the politics of documentary.

12 Some landmark studies of such nonfiction modes of filmmaking beyond the documentary proper include: Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, eds., Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., Useful Cinema (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).
This project will focus on docmedia in the context of three contemporary social movements: Black Lives Matter in the US, the Maidan Movement in Ukraine, and Idle No More in Canada. I discuss each of these movements separately in the body chapters of this dissertation in order to focus on the range of docmedia objects and documentary practices within each of them, looking at how such independently produced works function within the larger movements of which they are a part as well as within their specific sociopolitical contexts. In order to illuminate three salient aspects of contemporary docmedia practices, I focus on a particular theme in relation to each movement. My discussion of Black Lives Matter focuses on questions of data and how data combines with docmedia objects to present both constraints and opportunities for activists engaged in the movement. In my discussion of Maidan, I focus on the body and the ways in which the body may be rendered legible. This involves analyses of the politics of human bodies, both living and dead, as well as social bodies as collective political agents. My discussion of Idle No More centers around questions of place and the politics of public place, looking at how documentary practice and direct action work together to repoliticize seemingly apolitical places. The use of these focal points is, of course, artificial. There is as much to be said about the role of the body in Black Lives Matter as there is in Maidan, for example, or about the role of data in Idle No More. Nevertheless, these foci have been chosen to draw emphasis less to unique problems presented within each of these movements and more to the responses, strategies, and potential solutions that makers of docmedia in these movements have experimented with. To
that end, it is worth identifying a few other potential solutions that emerging docmedia practices are posing to deal with the myriad of problems posed by doing activist work.

The production of docmedia within the context of contemporary social movements poses new solutions to problems that have long been present for social documentarians. Three of the most notable are mobility, spreadability, and archivability. The mobility of digital video cameras now affords the capturing of images heretofore difficult if not impossible to capture. The image below, for example, was captured via drone footage broadcast to Facebook Live. It is an aerial shot of the Dakota Access Pipeline drill pad produced by the #NoDAPL activist group Digital Smoke Signals. It effectively inverts the logics of surveillance typically experienced by Indigenous activists at the hands of the state. It provides a spectacular view that is affectively captivating. It also provides evidence that

![Image](image_url)

Figure 1. Drone footage of Dakota Access Pipeline drill pad on Facebook Live
the builders of the pipeline had not heeded the federal injunction barring them from continuing to build the pipeline until further analyses of its environmental impact could be carried out. Of course, mobility also enhances the likelihood that amateur media producers and average citizens will be able to document extraordinary events should they occur unexpectedly. The mobility of digital cameras and their presence in the pockets of so many citizens allows, through their near ubiquity, for the capturing of events like police brutality and excessive force that serve crucial evidentiary roles in making privileged segments of the public aware of the fact that such abuses can and do take place. Such evidence may not always be sufficient for securing convictions of police who break the law—in fact, it rarely is. Through iteration over time, though, the scale of such abuse and its systemic nature also begins to take shape and accumulate weight for those who may have no direct access to such events in their own experience. As John Dewey puts it, to truly “experience” is to act in a way that brings forth “heightened vitality” in which, at its most intense, there is a “complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events.”

Docmedia’s capacity for communicating experience in this sense, then, is crucial in enhancing movements’ power to act collectively. This subject-, movement-, and public-shaping power of accumulated documentary evidence in the example above is all the more important precisely because such video evidence rarely results in bringing police officers themselves to justice thereby

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illustrating a gross disconnect between the abstract, idealistic values represented by police in American culture writ large and the specific, actual consequences of their actions.

Also crucial to the witnessing function inherent in the spreading of images of police brutality is the scale of such spreading. Such images need not depend on being sanctioned by official institutions, be they mass media outlets or film festivals, in order to spread widely across multiple publics. Spreadability and scale become crucial in relation to the witnessing of state violence during the Arab Spring, in which protesters in the streets frequently documented localized and specific instances of state violence, aggregated such images through various means including hashtags, and invoked global witnesses to these abuses of power.14

Such videos can also spread through various overlapping counterpublics at a smaller scale. This was the case, for example, with Palestinian and Egyptian activists who shared messages of solidarity (and advice on dealing with teargas) with protesters in Ferguson, MO through tweets, pictures, and videos shared on social media.15 The spreading of such


documentary images need not always serve such an instrumental purpose. Instead, such docmedia might spread the joyous affects bound up in the spectacular images of the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong or the recent seemingly spontaneous airport protests in the US opposing the Trump administration’s Muslim ban in 2017. The affective power of witnessing others engaged in similar struggles can play an important role in building solidarity and sustaining engagement among participants in such collective actions.

In terms of archivability, docmedia in and around social movements often serve quite simply to document—that is, to make available a facsimile of an event that can persist in time and indicate that it had indeed occurred. This sort of documenting it, of course, not exactly the same as documentary, though documentary often does have the effect of documenting. In the case of social movements, this documenting effect can be particularly important because it serves to archive direct actions that are themselves fleeting by design. Traffic blockades, for example, cannot be maintained indefinitely in the face of state force, but documentary footage of them can be informative and inspiring for future activists, and they can attest to the sort of high-risk, strong-tie activism that is typically necessary for producing lasting social change. Archiving also enables a movement to construct its own collective voice rather than having its story entered into the historical record solely from the perspective of mass media or the state. It can also function to preserve an event that is designed to be fleeting like marches and speeches, or more specifically like the flash mob

round dances common in Idle No More or the open-air orchestral performances during Nuit Debout (pictured below). Of course, questions of exactly how and where to preserve a movement’s artifacts remain problematic, and I will return to this issue in the conclusion.

Figure 2. Public symphonies as protest in Nuit Debout.

Mobility, spreadability, and archivability are different dimensions to the larger phenomenon of democratizing access to documentary images. Mobility increases the range of potential images produced and who is capable of producing them, and it enables different

relations between documentation and social action. Spreadability increases the range of particular publics capable of encountering particular images. Archivability increases the range of images available over time. None of these increases, though, are without their problems, nor does a democratizing of access necessarily lead to democratizing in practice—just because more people theoretically can tell their own stories and witness the stories of others does not necessarily mean that they will do either of those things, nor does it mean that doing so would necessarily lead to political change. Despite the potential for footage depicting police violence to help hold needlessly violent police officers accountable, few are ever even indicted, let alone convicted, no matter how overwhelming the visible evidence of their guilt may be.\textsuperscript{17} Despite the theoretically vast, global audience afforded to every video posted to YouTube, very few ever reach this potential. Accordingly, I attend to both the new potentials inherent in the production of digital docmedia, but also to their limits. I urge readers to keep in mind that inherent in any new potential is a new set of problems, and that we cannot expect any one documentary to change the world. It is partly for that reason that a consideration of the wide range of networked docmedia produced in and around contemporary social movements is necessary.

Coming to Terms with “Documentary”: Key Concepts and Questions

The present study focuses on amateur productions and independent “citizen media” created and circulated outside of any institutionalized system of production. Such a focus naturally pushes the boundaries of “documentary” to its limits. In this section, I lay out an understanding of amateur media and its importance before moving on to the problem of what exactly defines documentary.

My interest in amateur practices stems from the history of amateur cinemas and their inherent politicality. Amateur film, according to Roger Odin, gives “voice to the politically, ethnically, and socially excluded, revive[s] the productive capacities swallowed up by globalization and consumerism, and restore[s] creativity and freedom.” But what exactly constitutes “amateur” media? Stan Brakhage conceives of the amateur as someone who works according to their “own necessity.” Maya Deren’s understanding is that the “very word amateur—from the Latin ‘lover’—means one who does something for the love of the thing rather than for economic reasons or necessity.” Relatedly, Charles Tepperman

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understands the “amateur” of amateur cinema to be a "figure who participated in a film culture outside the commercial mainstream."22

These understandings are most instructive in terms of what amateur media is not: it is not media produced in a compulsory fashion or as a means to an economic end. In the case of amateur videos produced and circulated within the context of contemporary social movements, we might see the “love” Deren refers to as being less about a love of the “thing” or act of mediamaking itself and more about the love of the thing’s long-promised democratic potential: a love of justice, love of truth, or love of public life that can be understood as a latent potential of many media technologies dating back at least to the earliest motion pictures.23 These loved concepts, as sparks for action, remain distinct from economic necessity as a compulsion to produce media. Relatedly, Tepperman, drawing from the American pragmatist tradition, argues that amateur films are expressions of a “pragmatic imagination” that, in the words of John Dewey, uses images of common things to “break

22 Tepperman, *Amateur Cinema*, 9. For the purposes of his study of 20th century amateur cinema, Tepperman adds the qualification that an “amateur” is also someone who has “developed 'advanced' skills in production” (9). He is effectively distinguishing someone who has not just picked up a Super 8 camera to film one particular event from someone who regularly returns to their filmmaking practice over time. A true amateur, for Tepperman, is a "picture-maker," which he distinguishes from the novice "picture-taker" (49).

23 Ibid., 13.
through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness.”

We need to see amateurs, then, as “participants in a more complex terrain of social and creative struggles.”

Beyond the impulses motivating such productions, we can also understand “amateur” film and media as being set apart from other forms in terms of the types of equipment typically used, by the way recordings are constructed, and by subject matter. It is also important to consider amateur filmmakers not just as individuals working in isolation but as parts of larger communities with which they may engage to varying degrees and through various means. Accordingly, the body of work we might consider “amateur” is complex and contradictory. It explores “all those filmmaking possibilities that were ignored by Hollywood" and other dominant media institutions by incorporating a much wider range of media technologies, formal and stylistic constructions (and logics governing them), and central concerns. This range of paths-not-taken by mainstream, professional media producers is worthy of study in its own right. It becomes particularly important to study in

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the context of today’s social movements where logics of aggregation, in which individual people come together seemingly spontaneously to call for sociopolitical change, operate alongside more traditional logics of networking, in which already-formed groups agitate for pre-established political goals based on the group’s existing common interests.  

Amateur film has historically been linked with the home movie and its frequent focus on the family. This connection to bourgeois domesticity within amateur media, while still common, is beginning to expand to include participation in public life outside of the family or, even when the family remains the focus, to situate it explicitly within the wider society. Over the last two decades, amateur digital video filmmaking has become increasingly associated with a rise of public citizenship. The tools of digital video production and distribution enable the amateur mediamaker not just to produce media for the family-as-audience but for a potentially global audience. That potentially global reach is


rarely realized, but that lingering, built-in potential—which is certainly greater than the potential 8mm home movies would allow—locates the amateur mediamaker in an entirely different sort of network: one that is outward facing toward multiple publics and that is always already interconnected.

But amateur docmedia, when posted and shared online, reinserts these productive capacities into networks that are thoroughly consumerist and globalized. To what extent, then, can amateur and independent media producers evade the control of global capital and create spaces that resist it, provide alternatives to it, or exploit its logics to more prosocial ends? I examine this question in Chapters 2-4, arguing that while capitalist and state logics of control constantly reassert themselves, we nevertheless have the ability to create temporary ruptures, which can, in aggregate, create the ground for more long term and large scale projects of resurgence that open the space for genuine alternatives to develop.

Before digging into these questions, though, we need to consider the “documentary” piece of “amateur docmedia.” John Grierson, in his “First Principles of Documentary,” lays out a number of ways to define and think about documentary. Up until the time he was writing “documentary,” he asserts, had been used to refer to “all films made from natural material.”

Grierson argued that we need to differentiate between types of nonfiction film based on modes of organization—documentary should not, in his view, include newsreel and magazine formats or educational films and scientific films. The “peace-time newsreel” and

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weekly “magazine items” in the Tit-Bits style are “purely journalistic.” They have a “money-making eye” and show “novelties novelly” to “vast and speedy audiences.” They employ a “popular touch” so “far-reaching that it dislocates something.” By contrast, “lecture films” are deeper, but they describe their rather than dramatizing them. Aesthetically, he says, they “rarely reveal.” The formal limits of these types of films keep them from making any “considerable contribution” to the art of documentary. They are valuable, he concedes, but their value is limited.

Moving beyond those other forms of nonfiction filmmaking, Grierson says, we have “documentary proper.” Such capital “D” Documentary makes a crucial move from “plain (or fancy) descriptions of natural material, to arrangements, rearrangements, and creative shapings of it.” I bring up Grierson’s understandings at length here because his descriptions allow us to see how even very early on in the history of documentary a tripartite division emerges around documentaries and other forms of nonfiction filmmaking: the newsreel, the educational film, and the documentary “proper.” Docmedia on the web, I will argue, blur many of these boundaries and call into question how distinct they ever really were.

After laying out his brief history of nonfiction filmmaking up to that moment in history, Grierson then establishes his first principles for the documentary. The documentary film should, he writes, accomplish three things. First, it should exploit cinema’s capacity for strategically excerpting the “living scene” and the “living story” from “life itself.” Second, it

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34 Ibid., 100.
should employ “the original (or native) actor” and scene because these are “better guides to a screen interpretation of the modern world” than fictional films would be. Lastly, it should display materials and stories “taken from the raw” because these can be “more real in the philosophic sense” than acted scenes.\(^3\) Grierson’s first principle here may provide fertile ground for reconsidering how Sandra Gaudenzi’s more recent concept of the “living documentary,” which she uses to refer to a number of related forms of interactive documentary, might allow us to reconsider the modes of interaction already present historically in documentary practice.\(^3\) Interactivity affords new modes of excerpting from “life itself.” The concept of interactivity is foregrounded with digital documentary practices, but it is nothing new. What’s more, such interactivity invited by digital docmedia takes a number of shapes, and clicking to navigate through content is perhaps the least interesting—and arguably the least interactive—among them. Different modes of interactivity have long been central to documentary practice, and the potential to interact with the same world that is presented on screen is a key component that has differentiated the experience of nonfiction film spectatorship from other forms of filmmaking for decades.

According to Vivian Sobchack, what “documentary” is depends on how the audience takes it up, which is based partly on cues in the film but needs “personal and cultural

\(^3\) Ibid., 101.

knowledge less deliberate than lived” as the ultimate agent in determining if a film is understood as a documentary. She distinguishes between fictional films, documentary, and home movies. Home movies, for Sobchack, have the goal of rejoining the event elsewhere or in another time. Home movies are evocative, while the documentary’s objective is comprehension. However, as animated documentaries and recent interactive nonfiction work has shown, being evocative often serves as a means by which to develop comprehension. The two are not mutually exclusive, and I would argue that documentaries on digital platforms are increasingly using the interactive affordances of the web to be evocative precisely in order to help viewers comprehend and empathize with other experiences. Digital docmedia open spaces of truths in the plural. They implicitly reject the notion of there being a universal documentary truth through their polyvocality and open up spaces for a variety of stories including the evocative, emotional, and personal. What William James says of the pragmatic method is true of these films as well: “Truth in our ideas means their power to ‘work.’” These truths are true insofar as they perform a “marriage-function” that links past experiences and new phenomena.


38 Ibid., 249.


40 Ibid., 141.
According to Sobchack, documentaries, like home movies, evoke longitudinal consciousness and are centered around a particular event or events evoked by the image. In this sense, what matters is not just the documentary image but “the whole ensemble that the person or event it represents evokes.”\(^{41}\) This way of thinking about documentary connects with Brian Massumi’s concept of “semblance” as an actualization that also implies or hints at certain conditions that exist only in the realm of the virtual.\(^{42}\) Massumi’s understanding of “the virtual” here follows directly from Deleuze. The virtual has nothing to do with cyberspace—instead, it refers to that which is real but not yet actualized, existing only as “abstract event potential.”\(^{43}\) The documentary image, for Sobchack, evokes an entire historical event that has unfolded (or is unfolding) in much the same way that any image, for Massumi, implies a certain arrangement of the virtual necessary for that image to come into being. Documentary, Sobchack concludes, is “not a thing, but a subjective relationship to a cinematic object.”\(^{44}\) Documentary itself, then, is that which is felt as such rather than that which is indexically guaranteed to be True. Massumi writes, “the dynamic form of the event is perceptually felt, not so much ‘in’ vision as with vision or through vision: as a

\(^{41}\) Sobchak, “Toward a Phenomenology,” 250.


\(^{43}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{44}\) Sobchack, “Toward a Phenomenology,” 251.
vision-effect.” I argue that docmedia, and indeed all documentary, should be understood similarly: as a virtual structure of potentials with a dynamic unity that can only ever be perceptually felt as a series of sensory effects rather than any one essential, inherent thing. This argument will be further developed in Chapter One.

The key to defining documentary is not to divine some ontological essence of it but to understand pragmatically what it does (or what it can do). Bill Nichols, in Representing Reality, argues that documentary “occupies no fixed territory,” but is instead continuously constructed and reconstructed. The term, he argues, is a site of constant contestation and change. Accordingly, he advocates for a pragmatic understanding of it: “the purpose to which a definition is put and the facility with which it locates and addresses important questions” is what really matters. While there are no hard formal limits to what a documentary looks like, what does characterize documentary is its status as institutional formation (that is, “documentaries” are the things that are produced by documentarians and the institutions that support their work), the shared corpus of texts that are generally agreed to be “documentaries” in spite of their formal variation, and the “constituency of viewers” who experience these kinds of films.

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45 Massumi, Semblance and Event, 17.


47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 12-25.
Nichols’s first criterion, that documentary is partially defined by the institutions that produce documentaries, is bound up with the notion that documentaries are created and circulated by an identifiable community of practitioners who have certain channels for distribution and exhibition. This sort of institutional separation from other forms of filmmaking has certainly been true historically, but is becoming less true now with digital documentaries, especially as subscription-based and streaming content providers like HBO and Netflix are making documentaries a major component of their original programming and making them available alongside all of their other content through platforms that are simultaneously accessible on living room televisions screens, computer monitors, and smartphones. The terrain becomes all the more destabilized when we add in a consideration of database documentaries, webdocs, i-docs, and the range of docmedia now widely available to be viewed online and relatively easy to produce by anyone with access to a smartphone.49 If the institutions that have historically structured documentary production and the very definition of what it means for something to be a “documentary” are being circumvented

49 Database documentaries are nonlinear documentaries that allow the viewer (and/or a computer program) to select various paths through a large number of video clips. See: Dale Hudson, “Undisclosed Recipients: Database Documentaries and the Internet,” Studies in Documentary Film 2, no. 1 (2008): 89-98; Inge Ejbye Sørensen, Documentary in a Multiplatform Context (Ph.D. Thesis, Faculty of Humanities, University of Copenhagen, 2013). Webdocs are multimedia documentaries designed to be hosted and viewed online that allow for interactivity. See: Nash, “Modes of Interactivity.” Interactive documentaries are documentaries designed around logics of interactivity but are not necessarily online as webdocs are. See: Judith Aston, Sandra Gaudenzi, and Mandy Rose, eds., I-Docs: The Evolving Practices of Interactive Documentary (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). These three types of docmedia are not identical, though there is some overlap and a given documentary could easily fall into two or all three of these categories.
through amateur digital media practices, we need to consider what new structures and processes are channeling such content and what impact they have in terms of who has access to what audiovisual material under what conditions.

Also related to documentary’s status as an institutional formation is the notion that documentary filmmakers share a sense of common purpose. They are a self-defined group based on this common understanding that what they seek to do is something fundamentally different from mainstream narrative fiction cinema. They are defined and their films are defined by this sense of doing and being something different. This sense of common purpose produces discourses that feed back into the institutional practices that structure documentary as a unique mode of filmmaking for Nichols. This is also a point that needs to be reconsidered in light of digital docmedia and the discourses around them, many of which seem to further blur the lines between documentary and other audiovisual nonfiction.

Likewise, the idea that there exists a “constituency of viewers” for documentaries is much less readily identifiable and less distinct from other kinds of audiences. Again, such a blurring of boundaries can be traced directly to changes in the institutional and technological systems that structure the production, distribution, exhibition, and discussion of documentary films and videos.

A crucial point for Nichols—and one that appears to be as true now as ever—is the idea that documentaries are involved in the work of constructing and not just representing

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Nichols admits that it is difficult to describe how this process works exactly, though he rejects both Plato’s notion of images as mere reflections of ideal, transcendent forms as well as Baudrillard’s understanding of simulation and simulacra. The notion of simulacra is commonly used as a way of understanding how digital media production and circulation differs from media production in the age of mechanical reproduction and other forms of copying images that existed prior to it. Digital media function in a way that fundamentally depends on simulacra, so we need to reconsider the relationship between that-which-is-simulated and other means of representation that take place within the context of documentary. Michael Chanan thinks that early documentaries are more reflective in the sense that they do not producing new ways of seeing the world but rather allow for the spatial and temporal extension of vision in ways that reinforce existing racist and colonialist ideologies that are already operative within the wider culture at any given moment. In this sense, documentary (or proto-documentary) has historically at least had periods when representation has functioned by presenting simulacra of existing ideals, values, and ways of seeing, effectively copying and recreating them in new milieus (milieus that, in these cases, enable discursive constructions of “truth” and “reality”) through a process Deleuze and Guattari would call “transduction.” Such a process, as Chanan describes its operation in


52 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 313. Their understanding builds on Gilbert Simondon’s notion of transduction as “an operation—physical, biological, mental, social—by which an activity propagates itself from one element to the next, within a given domain, and founds this propagation on a
proto- and early documentary film, does not always record an empirical truth that then ruptures or modifies a viewer’s understanding of reality.\textsuperscript{53} It instead allows for existing cultural logics to effectively “feed forward” and write themselves onto new perceptual fields and empirical facts, mobilizing recorded images and sounds to create particular “truths” that may have little or no basis in the larger reality that lies outside of them. Chapter One will examine how assemblage theory can be applied to documentary studies in order to better understand the agency of documentary media objects, especially in the context of explicitly political docmedia circulated within digital media ecologies.\textsuperscript{54}

In addition to considering the ways in which “documentary” is constructed, it is important to also focus on the ways that specific documentaries construct reality and also how they spark viewers to respond to these visions of reality. That is, we need to consider

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structuration of the domain that is realized from place to place: each area of the constituted structure serves as the principle and the model for the next area, as a primer for its constitution, to the extent that the modification expands progressively at the same time as the structuring operation.” See: Gilbert Simondon, “The Position of the Problem of Ontogenesis,” trans. Gregory Flanders, Parrhesia 7 (2009): 11. See also: Félix Guattari, “Towards a Micro-Politics of Desire,” in Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 95. Also note that Chan, while he demonstrates this process at work in documentary, describes it in different terms.
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\textsuperscript{53} Chan, The Politics of Documentary.

what interfaces and organizations exist on the periphery of specific documentary works in order to better understand what people actually do with the information, images, sounds, and arguments presented to them by documentaries. David Whiteman provides a model for examining exactly that. His goal is to develop a “coalition” model for understanding the political impact of documentary that takes into account the various activist or advocacy organizations, governmental structures, and grassroots networks that likely already exist around any issue that a socially-engaged documentary takes as its subject matter. He argues that we must consider films as part of larger processes that include production and distribution (not just film as final product to be consumed at face value). This also includes a consideration of the full range of impacts on producers, participants, activist organizations, and policy makers. Additionally, he argues, we must consider the role of the films in social movements and efforts to sustain alternative public discourses outside of mainstream public opinion. He effectively develops a model that looks at the media ecology around a given documentary with an eye on how discourses and political relationships are reshaped in response to the documentary. I argue that we also need to take into account the materiality of docmedia technologies themselves, and I will use Chapter One to develop an approach to docmedia grounded in assemblage theory that builds on Whiteman’s concerns for the

political documentary writ large. Chapters Two, Three, and Four then apply this model to three decentralized social movements: Black Lives Matter, Maidan, and Idle No More.

Such a coalitional model, Whiteman concludes, makes it harder to tease out the specific political effects of the documentary film itself relative to the campaigns it might be connected with or that might be occurring simultaneously but not directly connected to the film itself. However, such a model makes it possible to identify concrete, specific social and political changes that result from the documentary and any ongoing campaigns together. That is, we cannot determine the effects of any one particular media object, but we can ascertain the results of the media micro-ecologies that exist around socially-engaged documentaries. Whiteman argues that past studies looking to evaluate the political impact of documentaries have not found much of an impact due to two main reasons: 1) past studies have focused too closely on the film-as-text without considering the context, social structures surrounding the films, or the act of filmmaking itself as an ongoing process; and 2) past studies have focused almost entirely on looking for changes within mainstream public spheres rather than considering how these films may have served to articulate new alternative spheres.

I would argue that we should not only look at the context of the movements in which these media are situated and their potential articulation of new alternative spheres, but also how such docmedia have served to sustain existing alternative public spheres and build themselves into larger histories of activism, resistance, and resurgence. I will explore these concepts at length in Chapters Two through Four. An understanding of docmedia politics focused solely on specific documentary projects and their ability to single-handedly sway
policy outcomes—outcomes that are often muddy and subject to overdetermination by a number of variables—is bound to find little of interest. As Jane Gaines observes, individual documentaries rarely have the power to create substantial social change on their own: it is “only in connection with moments or movements that films could be expected to make a contribution to social change.”\footnote{Jane Gaines, “Political Mimesis,” in Collecting Visible Evidence, ed. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 85.} The affective and evidentiary roles of docmedia in opening spaces for alternative politics, forming new connections, and sustaining engagement cannot be ignored. It is through these messier, more nuanced swirls of experience, aggregated over time and not reducible to simple cause-and-effect determinations—that social change begins to take place.

Sandra Gaudenzi provides an in-depth examination of the various modes of interaction that are afforded in what she calls “living documentaries” (e.g. a documentary that will not provide the same exact text for each viewer or each time it is viewed because it is interactive or otherwise subject to constant change via the addition of new audiovisual content). She is interested in the “passage from linear documentaries to digital interactive documentaries with the aim of identifying different logics of documentation of reality and new modes of subjectivity made possible by the digital media.”\footnote{Sandra Gaudenzi, The Living Documentary, 14.} She argues that living documentaries move away from the traditional documentary film’s “observer → observed” relationship to an “experiment with a circular enactor to enactor relationship” as afforded in
“a participative and multi-directional” format like digitally networked media. She argues for an historical break from traditional documentary to the living documentary of the digital age. With this historical shift, in Gaudenzi’s view, the documentary form loses the narrator’s single authoritative voice and the powerful ordering logic that goes along with it in order to gain a more complex perspective that can encompass multiple realities.58

Alex Juhasz, in “Ceding the Activist Digital Documentary,” argues that there are a number of dangers that accompany the visibility afforded by online media. She writes,“In the epoch of Facebook, the art of the activist documentary becomes less a matter of speaking and being heard through technologies of representation and more an artful practice of speaking-and-seceding, voicing-and-silencing, thereby better managing how to get on-and-off of media by knowing when to both seed and cede the digital.”59 To Juhasz, Facebook’s algorithms effectively produce digital documentaries on their own from combining the raw footage uploaded by individual users. Knowing how to strategically avoid being written into such “digital documentaries,” then, can become a major issue for activists. Visibility, as Foucault argued, is a trap—or at least it can be.60 As Juhasz puts it: “the ownership of these technologies has significant consequence given that users have virtually

58 Ibid., 246.


no control over the interface, and yet everything to do with the making, editing, criticism, and distribution of digital documentaries.”

She reframes the activist media producer’s dilemma as such: “We are all complicit to the needs of capital when we produce actuality objects online without a further plan of action. . . . Thus, our greatest challenge for the activist digital documentary will prove to be how to generate political practices from our artfully placed and digitally linked evidence.”

This notion of Facebook as a constant digital documentary in progress is interesting not just in light of how it reshapes the way that activists might think about digital space but also in its own right. It is worth examining further for the way that such a notion requires us to rethink the scale involved with both the documentary form itself and the politics of digital documentary practice more generally. The scale involved in conceiving of such a huge repository of images and information as a single project dramatically reframes how we think about textuality and the structuring of a guiding perspective in documentary. If the “digital documentaries” produced by the Facebook have any particular perspective, then whatever perspective that emerges must be one that has been co-constructed by the combination of many people and many machines. These algorithmic “digital documentaries” then would be like traditional documentaries in the abstract sense that their work is to rearrange indexes of our shared social, historical world in order to present a certain perspective on it. Intentionally

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62 Ibid., 44.
or not, such “digital documentaries” construct the world in such a way as to present an argument (even if it is only Nichols’s tacit argument that every documentary makes: “This is so”). Mark J. P. Wolf puts forward the conceptual foundations for a similar idea in his discussion of “subjunctive documentaries” as produced by computer simulations (effectively “documentaries” of all possible events that could possibly occur based on a given set of circumstances). As Wolf puts it, “Computer-generated three-dimensional representations that change over time are more than just reconstructions of images, they are reconstructions of a system’s behavior.”

For Tess Takahashi in her work on animated documentary, a key question becomes how can documentaries establish truth claims amidst a context of “widespread cultural anxiety regarding visible movement in a world assumed to be uncertain, unstable, and precarious?” Animated documentaries today exist in a context where ideas and cultural objects are often “disarticulated from place and circulate more freely than ever before, but in ways that are increasingly monitored and regimented.” The digital environments that we are

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66 Ibid., 244.
creating for ourselves routinely undermine the indexicality of the photographic image, which was once culturally understood to be a guarantee of the realness of the events captured on film. This pervasive cultural anxiety over the constant malleability of digital images, Takahashi argues, is “dramatized in the ways that animation problematizes the documentary image’s rhetorical and indexical guarantees.” The animated documentary is particularly suited to this larger cultural disarticulation from place. Takahashi continues, “Both international movement of images and documentary guarantees are concerned with questions of security and insecurity. . . animation enables analysis of and control over both movement of images and movement within images.”

Questions of security, insecurity, and control are central to understanding not just digital docmedia but also the documentary form as a whole within the “digital age.”

In response to the historical development of new technologies of perceiving, storing, and transmitting images and sounds, documentary films have regularly shifted their style and employed different rhetorical strategies in order to re-establish their authority and implicit claims to show “truth.” Digital documentaries provide excellent examples that illustrate how the once hegemonic institution of cinema has been blown apart into a number of different directions and why the emerging diversity of visual media practices (even within

67 Ibid., 232.

the once narrowly defined, marginal practice of documentary filmmaking) can both respond to and spark further aesthetic, technological, and social changes. Accordingly, media archaeology is a useful perspective for considering these emerging practices of digital documentary (and other nonfictions) relative to documentary film. There are many historical linkages, but there are also numerous ruptures that appear to be linked with other historical forms of communication and information storage. How, then, can we locate emerging digital documentaries within these overlapping histories of film, video, and digital media? How can we articulate the way that many of these digital documentaries function as art, political communication, educational media, and historical records? How do we account for the role of archival practices in preserving these media objects in ways that account for their multiple roles within the networks of which they are a part at any given moment in time? These questions will be the focus of the concluding chapter.

Structure and Chapter Overviews

In Chapter One, “Assemblage Theory, Affect, & Docmedia Machines,” I demonstrate why a consideration of interactions between data, body, place, and media objects is crucial to understanding the politics and political potentials of amateur and activist docmedia. Deleuze understands an assemblage to be “a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogenous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and
reigns—different natures.” The key point here is that the assemblage’s “only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’. It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind.” Considering docmedia assemblages allows us to better understand how agency is exerted through media objects, how docmedia objects are themselves assemblages, and how they function together with the material infrastructure of communication networks. Emergent properties are key. Manuel DeLanda, building on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, understands emergent properties to be “properties of a whole caused by the interactions between its parts,” where the whole can not be reduced to its parts nor the parts totalized or fused into a seamless whole. These parts retain relations of exteriority to one another, meaning they do not depend on one another for their continued existence, only for their ability to collectively produce certain effects. For example, the fusing together of a given video and the platform of YouTube retains seams—there are clear boundaries between the interface of YouTube as a platform and the content of the video itself—but function together, producing certain effects that neither would be capable of producing on its own. Chapter One investigates how assemblage theory can form the basis of a theory of docmedia that takes into account the wide variety of docmedia forms and functions.


70 Ibid.

Chapter Two, “Black Lives Matter: Data Power and Evidentiary Flows,” examines the role of image metadata and images as data. In it, I provide an overview of the Black Lives Matter movement. Then, I consider the way that datafied images enable algorithms to structure documentary arguments and media flows. I look at the way that media platforms can exert control over a movement’s self-presentation through framing and through automating flows of content. Finally, I present a reading of docmedia images as data in documentary videos that seek to reconstruct events from partial information—specifically, the killings of Oscar Grant and Trayvon Martin that helped spark the movement itself.

In Chapter Three, “(Euro)Maidan: Body Power & Mediated Affect,” I consider the problem of the body in protest demonstrations as captured on video. I examine how bodies in this context become legible as political expressions as well as how formations of new political bodies are shaped and circulated through networked representational practices. This chapter looks specifically at the problem of recognition—in Maidan, Ukrainian citizens built a broad-based coalition to oppose their government’s uncomfortably close relations with Vladimir Putin’s administration. While this was largely a popular movement, it also mobilized far-right militant nationalists who were incorporated as part of its “big tent.” Images of the movement presented to Western audiences often re-coded these bodies, presenting them unproblematically and uniformly as equals in a peaceful, populist movement. This chapter begins by interrogating the specifics of this tension, then broadens out to consider the larger affective consequences of representing and coding the body within a social movement.
Chapter Four, “Idle No More: Place Power and Spectacular Witnessing,” looks at the construction of disruptive spectacles as a practice of decolonization that reclaims, re-codes, and re-politicizes public places. It examines the ways that this Indigenous movement in Canada sought to turn its specific opposition to a particular piece of legislation into a larger call to reconsider histories of dispossession, subjugation, and eradication of Indigenous people at the hands of the state. Further, this chapter investigates how this movement used digital docmedia to repoliticize colonized lands and disrupt the normalization of continued practices of land desecration and resource extraction at the hands of the Canadian state.

In the Conclusion, “Affect, Archives, & Amateur Docmedia,” I consider how we might deal with the storage and preservation of such docmedia when so much of it is not only ephemeral and contingent (often existing on private platforms and video hosting sites) but also highly dependent on the networks and moments of which it is a part in order to derive meaning. I examine the unique problems posed by docmedia at the margins on a practical level, given that the people making it often have little or no control over channels of distribution and are therefore dependent entirely on a media platform’s good graces (more likely the platform’s continued ability to extract value from a video without bearing too large a cost) to remain theoretically accessible, and they are dependent on a platform’s and processes of algorithmic selection and ranking to remain actually accessible. Docmedia that are not self-contained within a single video file—for example, projects that use a hashtag, playlist, or embedding to draw together multiple video files shot by multiple people into one coherent project—present an even more drastic risk in the sense that the removal of any one
of its contingent parts creates a different whole. In the case of hashtagged works like #OurMarch, this is particularly important to consider because, unlike work contained in a playlist or embedded in a web page, there may be no apparent public record of a given segment’s existence after it is removed. Likewise, a great deal of “mere footage” of Occupy Wall Street demonstrations, for example, depends greatly on its particular cultural moment to derive meaning and develop arguments. Depending on its target audience, such footage may require a basic familiarity with Occupy that could be assumed of the general population of the US in the winter of 2011, or it may assume a target audience of other Occupy protesters, requiring a familiarity with the movement itself, its procedures for self-government, its constituent working groups, and the spaces it had constructed for itself both in the public space of the streets and online through networked media. How, then, can we think about the temporality of this docmedia and the politics of archiving it? What aspects are made available to whom? When? Under what conditions?

Each of the main body chapters of this book focus on a different aspect of digital docmedia within these three social movements—data in Black Lives Matter, the body in Maidan, and place in Idle No More. In each case, I have paired these themes with these movements in order to reveal problems unique to each movement’s media. In the case of Black Lives Matter, data is particularly important to the construction of docmedia around the movement because so much external coverage of the movement exists online—largely in the form of remediated 24-hour news clips—and algorithms become especially important in shaping viewers’ ability to navigate through it all. With Maidan, the body is particularly
problematic because of its lack of inherent legibility and the modularity thereby afforded to images of it. In Idle No More, place is a particularly significant consideration because the movement, through its docmedia, actively seeks to repoliticize places that appear apolitical. That said, I want to stress that the lenses I apply to each movement could very easily apply to the others as well. I have chosen to pair each movement with a theme in order to more narrowly focus my discussion and to prevent this book from being three times as long. Certainly considerations of the body and of the construction of place are relevant to the docmedia produced in and around Black Lives Matter, for example, just as a consideration of data is relevant to Maidan and Idle No More.

As a whole, this book argues for the need to take seriously activist and amateur media practices. Such docmedia practices are especially important if we want to better understand the changing landscape of documentary as well as the nature of digital media politics. It is the intersection of digital media infrastructures, documentary representation, and political action that we turn to now.
CHAPTER 1: Assemblage Theory, Affect, & Docmedia Machines

“Who shall be master, machines or men?” This question from Pare Lorentz’s *The City* (1939) is a significant one to consider, especially as digital machines have become increasingly bound up with the rhythms of everyday life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The question implies a sort of unilateral flow of power from one node to the other with the implied fear of the possibility that machines may have more of it than humans. Such flows of power, however, are rarely so straightforward. Both technical and human bodies need to be understood as interconnected parts of larger systems that are fundamentally and inseparably bound. Any study of documentary must be concerned at some level about technics and technologies involved in producing, storing, connecting, and exhibiting such works—particularly because they implicitly lay claim to historical truths—as well as the habits of the human bodies working with and being worked on by these technologies.

Both technical objects and organic systems should be understood in terms of assemblages and affect. Affect is a useful way of conceptualizing not just humans, machines, and documentary images as interconnected, but it is also more broadly for collapsing historical dichotomies that have outgrown their use long ago: ontological divisions between mind and body, cognition and emotion, rational deliberation and irrational social behavior. An affective, assemblage-based understanding of documentary and social action will allow not only a better understanding of how images and information become embodied through
the machines and human institutions that are involved in documentary production but that will also move toward a better understanding of all knowledge as embodied and mediated.

Assemblage theory enables an analysis of digital docmedia practices that accounts for both the technological and social contexts for the examples I examine throughout this project (as well as the social components of the technologies, and the technical components of the social). Bill Nichols argues that the “critique of documentary as a fiction like any other needs to be questioned without resorting to the assumed superiority of an analytical, essayist, and fact-based discourse.” Such a statement is significant, especially given the documentary’s long association with the “discourse of sobriety” characteristic of so many pre-1980s documentaries. Nichols continues, “The rationalism and logocentrism that characterize the documentary tradition . . . [and other nonfiction] can be understood as a distinctive mode of social inquiry and conduct without any ontologically superior basis.”

Ridding ourselves of the assumed ontological superiority of rationalist discourses opens the door for an equal consideration of affect, which fundamentally opens the potential to develop better understandings of how docmedia functions to aggregate embodied social, political, and artistic practices; how various technical, human, and other bodies connect through the constructed spaces of docmedia; and how agency is exerted through docmedia not as the will of an individual subject but as a product of networks. In his preface to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Brian Massumi writes, “The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts

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does it make possible to think? What new emotions does it make possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body? This is precisely the sort of framework I will employ in my consideration of digital documentary (as an emerging mode) as well as the specific digital documentary projects that I examine throughout this work.

**Assemblages <= Agency**

An assemblage is comprised of parts that are not uniform in nature or in origin that are nevertheless fitted together and actively linked to one another in a way that generates emergent properties that are not reducible to either part on its own but are contingent upon the continuous interaction between each part. An assemblage is not a unified whole, but the product of repeated encounters between bodies. Deleuze describes them this way:

What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogenous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures. Thus, the assemblage’s only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’. It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind.

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To consider docmedia as assemblages is fundamentally to consider the competing agencies bound up in any docmedia object: what does the filmmaker want? What does the subject of the documentary want? What does the audience want? But also: what does the image want? What does the platform want? What does the code want? I present these questions to make clear that a consideration of assemblages, which is always a consideration of agencies, necessitates an examination of mixtures between different desires, bodies, and intensities.

With docmedia assemblages, we do not have a filmmaker imposing her will on the world but a world expressing a cluster of forces through a particular arrangement of bodies that all have their own affordances and limitations—and that collectively generate emergent affordances and limitations not reducible to any one component. Videos of police officers killing unarmed citizens, for example, are made possible through a mixture of the actual event of the killing itself, the presence of a camera (often multiple cameras), the interfaces of video hosting platforms, the databases and algorithms that structure those platforms, servers that store the video files, and broadband internet infrastructure at the very least. This technical arrangement affords a particular type of documentary experience—that of witnessing such events at a distance and of generating evidence that (often) counters official narratives about what led to such events occurring in the first place. Eventually, such videos themselves come to function as assemblages, interacting indirectly with one another but nevertheless interacting to create a sense that such events are not isolated tragedies but part of a larger phenomenon. This cannot be gleaned from any single video, nor does it mean that such videos are part of a unified body of work: they each carry with them their own unique
circumstances and local characteristics. They are the products of unique series of events that undoubtedly have very real personal impacts that last far, far longer than the events depicted on screen. Nevertheless, their relations to one another produce a sense of larger trends and suggest common forces at work. Such an “argument” is not produced through any one of these videos but emerges from their co-appearance.

Why should we analyze docmedia through the framework of assemblage theory? Because assemblage theory refrains from artificially isolating the “text” from other relevant technological infrastructures and expressive networks that connect media objects. It insists on examining the heterogenous components that make representation possible and extend beyond it, crafting material connections between events. What does assemblage theory offer specifically for better understanding activist and amateur media practices? It foregrounds an analysis of agency, specifically the multiple and competing posthuman agencies that circulate through internet platforms, as well as agencies of non-“authors” that nevertheless shape the politics of docmedia both systemically and within particular media objects. As Manuel DeLanda writes, assemblages “emerge from the interactions between their parts, but once an assemblage is in place it immediately starts acting as a source of limitations and opportunities for its components…. wholes emerge in a bottom-up way, depending causally on their components, but they have a top-down influence on them.”76 Considering assemblages allows for an examination of limitations and opportunities that are not inherent in a medium

writ large or in any particular strategy of textual representation, focusing instead on how different capacities come into encounters with one another and magnify or restrict the potential impact of the assemblage as a whole.

An assemblage approach is especially useful in the context of digital media. Software programs are affective in themselves in the way that they structure relationalities between heterogeneous components—voltage differentials, lines of code, hardware, human sensory organs, etc.—governing the way that these various bodies impinge on one another and to what effect. Because they recompose these same sets of relations habitually, we can also think of software programs as assemblages, or *agencements*, that enter into composition with other, “arranging, organizing, and fitting together” with them. We must consider the agency of the technical machines as well as social, economic, aesthetic, and other machines that operate alongside and in conjunction with one another. Accordingly, we must consider not just the affordances of hardware but also the structures that emerge from the habitual behaviors of algorithms and automated processes, as well as the way that hardware, software, and human bodies interact with one another and the inherent politics of such interactions.

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Documentary Representation v. Docmedia Machines

If documentary is a machinic assemblage that produces truths, it does so differently now than ever before: now the viewer is situated as an individual user whose personal truths may be folded into the larger truths of a given documentary project. A singular Truth is not constructed behind the scenes and laid bare by a voice-of-god narrator; instead, multiple truths are co-constructed between filmmakers, audiences, and the communication channels mediating their connections with one another. These media objects are always partial and permeable. The ways that they are able to focus attention outwardly to images, ideas, and events beyond themselves—to things that are never explicitly represented within the “text” itself—are at least as important as the way they focus the viewer’s attention within their own boundaries. To some extent, this is true of all documentaries throughout history. It becomes particularly important, though, in the context of digital documentary because of the assumption that digital images are always already networked images that can and do connect multiple media objects. The production of truths becomes the production of interconnected assemblages.

A machinic assemblage, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is a set of interacting physical objects that, when brought together, gain new properties and means of affecting their environments. These properties are irreducible to any individual component of the assemblage. We cannot ask what an assemblage means, what it signifies, or how it is to be understood. Instead, “We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are
inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge." To understand documentaries as assemblages, then, is to adopt a perspective that focuses on how specific technologies and bodies are brought together in particular sets of practices with particular effects. To ground these abstractions specifically in documentary, we need to ask not only how or what a given documentary signifies something that represents an historical fact. Instead, we need to understand how technologies of producing, distributing, and exhibiting documentary images enable the production of truths. In the context of overtly political and activist documentary, we need also to understand how the production of truths through documentary machines functions to spark bodies into action and redistribute the larger power relations that both surround and operate through them.

In Representing Reality, Bill Nichols lays out a framework for documentary theory distinct from existing critical theory and film theory. His goal is to provide a conceptual overview of documentary form. Nichols's work begins with a provocative question: "Can we love the cinema and Plato, too?" His answer is "No." Considering movies of any kind as "reflections" in the Platonic sense would deny, according to Nichols, "all the work of the cinema as apparatus, institution, and textual structure." Nichols at first appears to be


80 Nichols, Representing Reality, 3.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.
pointing us in the direction of assemblage theory or something like it. But rather than digging into the work from human and nonhuman assemblages that is necessary for the production of these images-as-events, Nichols instead argues that the images of documentary film are necessarily subordinate to the use of language in these films: "At best images may *illustrate* a point that must finally return to words for its meaning or implications." In his theorization of evidentiary editing, he seems to accept the idea that cinema itself functions as a language when he argues that these images, already subordinate to the literal language within the soundtrack, themselves function as a language through the conventional grammar of editing. In the case of evidentiary editing, these edits are structured by a logic of evidence—the implied connections between each of them serve collectively to advance an argument, be it tacitly or explicitly.

While accepting some assumptions of cinema as a language, Nichols is careful to distinguish documentary film from other modes of cinematic representation. Indeed, that is the main project of his book. In working to set documentary representation apart from other forms of cinematic representation, he writes: "Documentary's alliance with the discourses of sobriety [knowledge-producing official discourses like science, politics, education] falls under attack due to the imagistic company it keeps." That is, documentary does function to produce knowledge, and therefore it could and should be considered alongside other

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83 Ibid.

84 Ibid., 4.
discourses of sobriety. Because it superficially functions in a way that’s similar to narrative fiction films, however, documentary’s detractors overlook such connections to the discourses of sobriety that, in Nichols’ estimation, are much more important than its more surface-level similarity to other modes of cinematic representation. The whole of documentary form, then, gets excluded from serious scholarship—at least it generally did until Nichols published his field-defining work—based on this (mis)attribution of filial ties between these modes of production.

Nichols contends that documentary representation is really distinct from other modes of motion picture production because of the "bond between image and reality" assured through the discourses in and around documentary practice. Such discourses prime viewers of documentaries to "grasp an argument" rather than "comprehend a story." He assumes the viewer to be a rational, individual subject in these cases, and he directly questions the value of poststructuralist attempts to move away from such assumptions. He summarizes the poststructuralist viewpoints that he is critiquing when he writes:

The poststructuralist critique of language systems as the agency that constitutes the individual subject (rather than empowering it); the argument that representation as a semiotic operation confirmed a bourgeois epistemology (and voyeuristic pathology); the assumption that radical transformation requires work on the signifier, on the construction of the subject itself rather than on the subjectivities and predispositions of an already constituted subject all converge to insist that the representation of reality has to be countered by an interrogation of the reality of representation.87

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85 Ibid., 5.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid., 63.
He then dismisses all of these (valid) concerns by asserting that the “empowering capacity of language” and the belief in the ability for “persuasive intervention” to transform the values of individual subjects are “the cornerstones of the documentary tradition.”

Such a model may have been more relevant in the past, but reducing the goals of today’s digital docmedia—especially activist and amateur docmedia—down to persuasive interventions based on the power (and constraints) of semiotic expression is not sufficient for understanding the range of forms and functions that these docmedia objects play. They function affectively to draw bodies together into different arrangements, and in the process they create new networks, new senses of place, and new ways of being together. Some produce arguments and evidence, too. But doing so is far from their primary function. More importantly, the production of arguments and evidence often takes place not at the level of a single filmic “text” but through a network of media objects and events aggregated over time.

We should question how it is that these characteristics came to be dominant in the documentary tradition in the first place. What conditions—technologies, social structures, institutional practices—made it possible throughout much of the twentieth century? And what conditions make alternative modes of documentary possible? There are three major problems with Nichols’s insistence on considering the primacy representation when it comes to documentary. First, the centrality of these assumptions about the persuasion of rational, individual subjects being fundamental to the documentary tradition historically are all the

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**88 Ibid.**
more reason to critique these assumptions rather than accept them. That is, we should not take these as fundamental properties of documentary—along with a representationalist framework centered on language-as-structure—and accept them uncritically as universal qualities. As Guattari writes, “Signs are involved in things prior to representation. Signs and things engage one another independently of the subjective control that agents of individual utterance claim to have over them.” This sense of prior operation of signs is key because Nichols is trying to refute the claims of poststructuralist critique based on assumptions about the structures that exist on a scale above the documentary itself—what happens above and beyond documentary representation rather than within, alongside, and prior to representation.

Relatedly, the documentary tradition itself has real, material causes and real, material effects. While these certainly include representation, they are not reducible to representation alone. Their representational effects and truth effects must therefore be set within the context of their myriad of other effects. We need to think instead about how the documentary tradition, as well as the various histories it purports to represent, has operated as a “collective agency of utterance”—“a collective voice that combines machinic elements of all kinds—human, semiotic, technological, scientific, etc.” It is necessary to examine the ways that such collective agencies exist in and around the documentary tradition historically not as a way of brushing the notion of the rational individual subject to the side but as a way of

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90 Ibid.
understanding exactly how such a rational, individual subject comes to be constructed, repeated, and assumed as a basic premise of documentary discourse.

Second, contemporary digital docmedia practices are far less likely than twentieth century documentary films to address themselves to a rational, individual subject under the assumption that persuasion alone can be effective at producing some change in the values, beliefs, or behaviors of that subject. Many contemporary activist documentaries employ no clear mode of address at all—often, they have only direct sound and are shot in a single long take in a way that resembles surveillance footage as much as traditional documentary. They often appear to be created as much for the in-grouping, identity-building effect of documentary-production-as-ritual rather than as a means of persuading anyone of anything. In activist docmedia of interactions with police or other potentially violent forces, the act of recording in and of itself can serve an instrumental function and act as a defense mechanism that limits the likelihood of those forces acting violently toward the filmmaker or others in their immediate vicinity, thereby actively reshaping the very “reality” being documented.

Third, the very fact of the digital circulation of docmedia implicates their representations of “reality” in networks where they swirl alongside a-signifying semiotics that concurrently act directly on the material flows of the real. As Guattari puts it, “These a-signifying machines remain based on signifying semiotics, but no longer use them as anything but a tool, an instrument of semiotic de-territorialization, making it possible for the semiotic fluxes to form new connections with the most de-territorialized material fluxes.”

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91 Ibid., 75.
A-signifying semiotics take up the signifier and mobilize it in a context where its human-legible significance becomes irrelevant. They operate automatically and directly—beyond the realm of representation. Guattari refers to this process as “a conjunction between semiotic machines and the machines of real flux” through the formation of “non-signifying collectives” that enable the signifier to operate in an a-signifying or post-signifying manner.  

An activist documentary, for example, might signify any number of things representationally. Posted as a video to YouTube, however, those representations are the direct result of the a-signifying semiotics operating at the level of the computer’s code. That code and the metadata it captures and employs are also functioning to do other things automatically and beyond the realm of signification: not just commanding particular pixels to turn particular colors at particular times, but also tracking information about the viewer’s habits, algorithmically forming connections between the present video and other content, calculating what sorts of advertisements to display, and assuring YouTube’s ability to generate profit based on the aggregation of such information. Where traditional documentary filmmaking might more readily allow for the bracketing of representational practices by virtue of the affordances of the technologies involved in producing and circulating film reels, digital video blows apart any notion that the representational processes of documentary can

\[92\] Ibid., 93.
exist in isolation. After all, “the electronic photo is no longer the expression of a univocal referent but the production of a reality among others.”

In attempts to define “documentary” prior to Nichols’s work, the tendency to rely on common sense understandings of the term was far more common and typically went completely unquestioned. Previous attempts to define documentary were incapable of articulating exactly what documentary is in a way that 1) accounts for all the material that is labelled as “documentary” film without 2) also including large swaths of narrative fiction film. Nichols provides an account of documentary that sees the term as dynamic and without a static definition—it is no single set of formal features but appears as the product of discursive networks: a confluence of institutional expectations, bodies of existing works, and sets of shared practices among documentary filmmakers, along with a shared sense of purpose or common identity among those filmmakers. But his insistence on reducing all of these vibrant sociotechnical fields down to representation substantially undercuts the effectiveness of his own project. Nichols is interested in digging into the social and institutional processes that create this common sense shared understanding of “documentary,” but his insistence on the primary role of representation and, more problematically, his bracketing of representation as something that exists apart from “reality” is not adequate for understanding documentary film historically. It is insufficient for

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developing a politics of documentary knowledge production. It is even more obviously inadequate for dealing with digital documentary practices that require the circulation of a-signifying semiotics on a massive scale and that enable direct networking, participation, and communication between members of the audience, filmmakers, subjects, institutions, platforms, etc. as well as the larger ecologies of which they are a part.

That said, I do not propose that we ignore everything that happens at the level of the individual documentary-as-media-object. Representation matters. But it must always be considered in the context of non-representational effects and material processes that run alongside them and permit the emergence of representational effects in the first place. We should not disregard representational practices to focus solely on the systematic re-inscription of bourgeois epistemology, nor would I suggest that we cannot consider the ways that documentary films address and seek to persuade viewers as rational, individual subjects. But where Nichols wants to turn away from these considerations entirely to accept the individual subject, rational discourse of sobriety, and transcendental reality of the historical signified (as represented through documentary signifiers) at face value based on their prevalence within the documentary tradition, I want to look instead at how these effects are produced in and around documentary film. It should not be a question of looking either at specific documentaries and their formal, representational techniques or looking at the larger social and technical systems that structure them. It should be a question of “either/or” but of “and...and...and…” in order to understand documentary’s dynamism and the potential political utility of this dynamism across a variety of historical, social, and institutional
contexts. This is where Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of the molar and the molecular can be particularly useful. These concepts enable us to examine the ways in which specific documentaries—as media objects that are themselves always already assemblages—affect one another and are drawn into systems of relation through their representational strategies. But it also enables us to consider the larger social, technical, and environmental aggregates that dynamically structure these films, the realities that they are expressions of, and the ways in which both molecular and molar aspects of the documentary machine function to reshape “the real” without ever standing outside of it.

Despite his initial claim that documentary representation is not consistent with Platonic notions of Images and representation, Nichols nevertheless insists on a transcendent "real" out there to be represented. Because the work of Deleuze and Guattari makes it clear that this sort of thinking is inadequate, documentary theory could benefit greatly from re-examining Nichols's work through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari’s immanent, dynamic, monist materialism. It is necessary to shift away from such a representationalist model interested only in elements than can be reduced to linguistic or language-like signifiers and move toward an expression-based model that accounts for representation as one of many

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simultaneous and interrelated processes of communication. Such a shift is particularly important in the realm of documentary because so much is at stake: the production of truths, the archiving of the past, and the potential for political mobilization all inhere in documentary. It is particularly useful to reexamine Nichols's documentary theory because much of it is already quite compatible with the larger political aims of Deleuze and Guattari's work. Nichols, for example, contends that documentary functions as a way of not just describing and interpreting "the world of collective experience" but also as a way of participating in the "actual construction of social reality."96 Hammering this point home, he writes "'Reality' is ours for the making."97 Nichols just doesn't go quite far enough in examining the political and epistemological stakes of accepting a transcendent ontology based on the existence of some external “real” out there to be represented. As Deleuze puts it: “The world does not exist outside of its expressions.”98

**Citizenfour: A Case Study in Docmedia Assemblages**

While this project focuses on amateur media, it is important to consider such works in relation to the professionalized docmedia that they exist alongside and as alternatives to. One illustration of assemblages at work in contemporary docmedia is Laura Poitras’s film

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97 Ibid., 11.

Citizenfour (2014), which examines Edward Snowden and his decision to leak classified documents from the National Security Agency. This activist work will help to illustrate the need to consider digital documentaries through an assemblage framework—as documentary machines—that examines how they function as component parts of larger wholes, and how their relations to other component parts enhance or inhibit their capacities for action. As much as we need to consider how documentary cinematography directs attention, so too do we need to consider how attention is directed transversally across the boundaries of the documentary “text” and into other media objects. As much as we need to consider how various modes of montage help documentary films construct arguments based on evidentiary logics, so too do we need to consider how the arguments of docmedia are constructed through the joining together of images, objects, and events across docmedia objects or wholly outside of them. The following consideration of these factors in the context of Citizenfour will provide a foundation for the consideration of such processes at work throughout the less familiar forms of docmedia considered throughout the rest of this book.

Citizenfour, though a traditional feature-length documentary in many respects, serves as a great example of how even “traditional” documentaries need to be reconsidered in the context of contemporary digital media ecologies. First, let’s consider the film itself. Though fairly conventional and observational in style, the film takes the politics of digital media as its central issue. It focuses specifically on new questions about government surveillance and information security in an age of globally networked digital communication. In addition to providing important new information and ways of thinking to its audiences, the film also
aestheticizes several of its central themes—most notably surveillance and processes of mediation—through the presentation of sites and objects that simultaneously represent the target of the film’s sustained critique and are also beautiful/appealing to the senses in their own right. It also weaves an aesthetics of surveillance throughout in ways that invite deep, critical questioning of exactly how it is that surveillance has become such a pervasive way of exercising control in an ostensibly democratic society.

_Citizenfour_ opens with a voiceover of Poitras reading the first email that she received from the anonymous “citizenfour,” who is later revealed to be infamous whistleblower Edward Snowden. Immediately, the film establishes mediation, information security, and surveillance as key themes. In the voiceover, Snowden’s text—remediated through Poitras’s voice—references the need to establish a secure, encrypted connection for further communication. The goal is minimizing (not getting rid of) the chance that the US government will be able to successfully conduct surveillance on these messages. The voiceover occurs over a mostly black screen with only a slightly curved line of flickering lights through the center of the frame that interrupt the darkness. It is not yet clear what these objects are, though one might certainly understand them as an abstract visual representation of communication: pulses of light that dart from an apparent sender to an implied receiver. We will later see that these are actually overhead lights on the ceiling of a tunnel in Hong Kong—a tunnel that Poitras’s car passes through en route to meet and interview Snowden for the first time. Without this context, however, the image appears abstract and ungrounded: a signal without any apparent sender, receiver, or meaning. This image evokes a famous
example of McLuhan’s idea that “the medium is the message.” In establishing that dictum, McLuhan offers the example of the electric light bulb. He sees the electric light as “pure information.” The light bulb, he claims, makes meaning through what it makes possible—the way that it physically reorients what it is possible to do, rather than through the transmission of any particular messages. It is the range of messages made possible, the positioning of the message’s sender and receiver, and the structuring of everyday experiences around the medium that makes it meaningful for McLuhan. In this opening scene, however, we have no context, no apparent structure, no sense (yet) of what is made possible and what is restricted through these flickers of light. These light, like so many other communication technologies throughout the film, are folded back into the cinematic apparatus (at least formally and for the time being, until the film itself is released in digital, non-filmic formats).

After this opening scene, the film cuts to a series of three surveillance-style locked down shots of Rio de Janeiro. The shots feature no human figures and very minimal movement within each scene. A voice over provides radio chatter with no context. The voices discuss surveillance. These establishing sequence leads us to Glenn Greenwald working on his laptop on the porch of his house. We can see his screen. He writes what is apparently a follow up to an earlier story of his about Obama’s “war on whistleblowers.” The film then cuts to a black screen with computer-terminal-style text. This style of text is used throughout the film to provide crucial information and narrative context. Typically, the

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terminal-style text throughout the film will show exchanges between Poitras and Snowden. Here, we see Poitras’s text written out character-by-character with slight pauses between each—the way it would likely appear on her own screen as she actually writes it. Snowden’s lines, by contrast, appear line-by-line only after each line has been completed and sent. This structuring of these text-based exchanges places the viewer in a simulated first-person perspective aligned with the filmmaker herself (who is almost entirely absent from the image track of the film). This devices serves to aestheticize the way that digital technologies simultaneously enhance visibility without necessarily increasing the ability for humans to connect or communicate through the same channels that allow such a quick and easy means of seeing at a distance.

Critics have given the film overwhelmingly favorable reviews, largely for the way that it handles its complex and overtly political themes related to digital surveillance and the potential for resistance. Perhaps A.O. Scott puts it best when he writes,

Plenty of movies have tried to imagine the contours of state power, but Citizenfour stands alone in evoking the modern state as an unseen, ubiquitous presence, an abstraction with enormous coercive resources at its disposal. To some extent, Ms. Poitras and Mr. Greenwald are engaged in a theoretical inquiry, a kind of speculative mapping, of the shape and reach of this mysterious entity. That is not to say that the United States government’s data collection program is not real, but rather that its extent and implications are only beginning to be understood.\textsuperscript{100}

\textsuperscript{100} A. O. Scott, "Intent on Defying an All-Seeing Eye," \textit{New York Times}, Oct 24, 2014, Late Edition (East Coast), search.proquest.com/docview/1615673883. Scott focuses on the US government in this quote, of course, but we need to consider surveillance and control as components of much more complex global networks that include other states, corporations, and international organizations as well as the inherent politics built into the hardware and software of communication technologies themselves and practices that produce the commonly self-regulating and self-surveilling subjects within these networks.
Beginning to understand these implications within the context of documentary all but requires making them visible and, in the case of this particular film, making the implications of government data collection function simultaneously as objects of fear and wonder.

The film in and of itself is certainly worth analyzing in light of contemporary digital media theory. Beyond that, however, we also should consider the film in the context of the digital media landscape that it comments on and is itself a part of. As David Ehrlich rightly observes, “Citizenfour is inextricable from its topicality in a way that no documentary has been in recent memory.”

Any consideration of the film itself, then, really should contain a consideration of its relation to the processes of mediation that it takes as its topic. While the film itself provides a clear, coherent critique of NSA surveillance and makes an impassioned plea for public dialogue around this issue, its digital extensions paint a murkier and more problematic picture.

In addition to existing as a self-contained “whole” film about the politics of digital media, the film is as a node within a number of digital networks. That is, it serves as a locus around which many different groups from journalists to social justice activists to the filmmakers themselves can use as ground to build their own causes around. The film was produced by Participant Media, who have produced or co-produced some of the most acclaimed social-issue documentaries in the past decade including An Inconvenient Truth.

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(2006), Standard Operating Procedure (2008), The Cove (2009), 99%: The Occupy Wall Street Collaborative Film (2013), Merchants of Doubt (2014), The Look of Silence (2015), and He Named Me Malala (2015). With Citizenfour, Participant Media have helped create a film whose actual structure and messages can become more or less influential through the networks around the film—the other authorized and non-authorized media objects it becomes connected to as well as the simple fact that it can be indexed, linked to, and used as a shorthand rallying cry for a myriad of other issues related to the politics of digital media. Relatedly, as the film and much of the media around it was available to be viewed online, it can also serve an indexing function: to effectively identify and aggregate potential enemies of the state through the tracking data automatically captured from those who watch or otherwise interact with the film online.

Nick Bradshaw’s review ends with a description of the film’s final scene where Snowden and Greenwald exchange notes on paper, then tear them up. Bradshaw writes, “Poitras ends on a shot of the shreds of paper. The revolution will not be emailed, or recorded, or spoken.” While it is interesting that Bradshaw foregrounds these different potential systems for mediation, it is ironic and troubling that the film’s companion website on TakePart does not seem to heed this advice. It seeks precisely to advance a “revolution” of sorts through automated emails and prerecorded images for sharing over social networking sites. A review of the film for States News Service suggests that:

102 Nick Bradshaw, "Citizenfour," Sight and Sound 24, no. 12 (2014), 68.
People often ask what art, and film in particular, can do to propel more opportunity, better functioning democracies, and access to fundamental rights. *CitizenFour* offers one answer. The process of filmmaking itself mirrors the work of justice-building; articulating and refining beliefs and values, building knowledge, networks and movements, and building leadership by putting yourself into the work. Amid a growing global conversation about inequality and injustice, *CitizenFour* focuses on creating conditions for expanding justice.  

How, then, does the film model this process of justice-building through its digital extensions? As Jonathan Gray writes, media paratexts have “considerable power to amplify, reduce, erase, or add meaning, much of the textuality that exists in the world is paratext-driven.”

To what extent, then, do this film’s digital paratexts follow through on the film’s creation of conditions for expanding justice? What meanings do they amplify, reduce, or erase?

TakePart, the company in charge of creating official online media around the film, describes itself in the “about us” section of its website as, “a hub for the hundreds of thousands of highly active and loyal fans” of Participant Media’s films including not just *Citizenfour* but also other high-profile social issue films like *Food, Inc.*, *The Cove*, and *An Inconvenient Truth*. They continue: “In addition to being a place to read about issues that matter, TakePart is a place to make a difference. We believe more people would get involved if they had intuitive, trusted ways to do so (call us crazy), so we’re providing just that.” Their interface throughout this site is set up to easily move the viewer from reading articles and watching videos to taking action is ways that TakePart asserts will have a direct effect on the

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policies and politics surrounding the issue that the viewser was just reading or watching videos about. They frame such interactions in the following way: “Accompanying each article you read on TakePart, you’ll find a way to take meaningful and immediate action—sign a petition, donate, send support, take a pledge. Even better, each action is vetted by our intimidatingly knowledgeable Social Action team, so you know you’ll be lending your voice to a good cause.” A critical reader might reframe such a description as “trust us to decide the range of political views and actions that is suitable for you.”

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A major problem emerges when one considers this site’s organization and afforded modes of interaction as a paratextual extension of *Citizenfour*: “Taking action” throughout the site appears to consist exclusively of these four possible actions: adding your name to an electronic petition, signing and sending a form letter to members of congress, donating money, or taking a pledge to complete some other action. The last seems relevant, but doesn’t seem to require any use of the internet or Participant Media’s sites whatsoever, nor does the site provide any significant guidance as to what other actions might be particularly effective at combatting government surveillance as part of a large-scale political project. The other three all seem to be adding to the problem of information overabundance and may harm
these causes by making it more apparent how people self-identify in terms of political issues—that is, by effectively aggregating and commodifying information on who exactly or what kinds of people generally are likely to support what kinds of causes. It may also serve to identify and quantify lack of concern and lack of action among users as much as it provide evidence of who might mobilize around an issue simply by tracking how many people read articles about a particular issue and elected not to click through and “take action.” Godfrey Cheshire’s argues that “No film so clearly implies actions that need to be taken to prevent the twenty-first century from turning into an Orwellian nightmare in which technologically-enabled tyranny is absolute and true political liberty, for all intents and purposes, nonexistent.” Yet the actions that flow most directly from the film—those that are directly connected to it and flow out of it through TakePart’s web content—point toward modes of communication that are automatic, predetermined, and prescribed rather than critical interventions linked to any larger project of political liberation.

In general, there is evidence to suggest that online-only channels for action have substantial limitations as tools for producing meaningful, lasting social change. In any event, the paratextual paths to action provided by TakePart as extensions of Participant Media’s films may serve to limit the public’s ability to recognize alternative modes of


political and social action outside of the confines of governmental politics (petitions, letters to congresspersons) and capital (donations, generating revenue for TakePart itself). That is not necessarily to say that TakePart’s model is entirely without value and should be done away with altogether, only that the politically-engaged viewer of such texts needs to be aware and critical of the limits of these sorts of “social action.” Such actions can certainly have their place in fostering engagement around these films and the issues addressed in the films, but it is when such actions are treated as the best way to foster change (or, worse, as the way to foster social change without recognizing any alternatives) that trouble arises.

Within the paratextual extensions of the film, the commodification of political action is direct: viewers’ actions are easily tracked and quantified, and value is extracted from these actions in a way that is not readily apparent to viewers—that is, many of the sites visitors likely have no idea about any of this. Indeed, the way that this site seeks to narrowly define political action actually serves to make such action more readily commodifiable—a rhetorical move that would seem to be at extreme odds with the film’s own political critique. Participant Media markets itself as a “global entertainment company” TakePart is as its “digital lifestyle magazine and social action platform for the conscious consumer.” In such a description it is clear that the idea of consumption remains central as a habitual and identity-grounding activity. Such consumption is simply being repositioned as a means to a hypothetically more prosocial end. Elsewhere, they write, “Through its films, social action campaigns, digital network, and its television network, Participant seeks to entertain, encourage and empower every individual to take action.” It is the use of an online space
designed explicitly to commodify and capitalize on political action. It is almost precisely the
type of construct that Snowden and the filmmakers target as the ideological focal point of
their critiques. Of course, on some level the film itself exists to make money, too, but this is
not a deeply hidden fact—certainly not for anyone who paid to see it. The site’s rhetoric and
visual design, on the other hand, go to great lengths to make TakePart look like a grassroots
activist organization rather than a limited liability corporation commodifying their political
action.

To further emphasize the apparently contradictory politics of the film and TakePart’s
companion site, here is an excerpt from their privacy policy at the time of Citizenfour’s
release:

Third parties, including linked sites (e.g., Facebook), non-profits we work with,
advertisers and advertising service providers, collect information about you in
connection with your use of the Service (e.g., Usage Information). Further, third
parties use Tracking Technologies in connection with our Service, which may include
the collection of information about your online activities over time and across
third-party web sites or online services. Their privacy policies, not ours, govern their
practices.¹⁰⁸

This policy clearly reserves the rights for other third parties to exploit and extract value from
any data that a user might generate while interacting with this site. It continues, “We and
third parties that interact with our Service may use technologies to track your activities on
and off of the Service to better understand how to serve you, and based on this information
you may be served with targeted content, social action opportunities and advertising.” The

contradictions between this paratext and the text it exists to extend and foster engagement with (at least in theory) are painfully obvious despite the rhetorical spin that all of these measures are in place for the consumers’ good so that the company better understands how to “serve you.”

While anecdotal, there is some evidence that indicates that such conflicting value systems may be more pervasive than the design of the site itself and its underlying privacy policy. A *Variety* article reported that at least one non-profit operator who worked with TakePart found the company to be “more interested in their branding than anything, and it was a wasted opportunity to engage on an important issue.”¹⁰⁹ Though this is only a single source, it does seem to indicate that some of the problems with the “social action” model employed by TakePart is institutional and not solely due to the technological affordances and constraints of the site’s design. For my purposes, this observation further illustrates the politics of digital docmedia. The viewer sees what appears to be a media paratext, but this text actually is functioning in a way that, politically, is at odds with the text it appears to be extending.

It is in part for this reason that a model based on “textuality” is inadequate. In this case, there is a clear “text” we can consider primary: the film itself. The paratexts around it, including the website and variety of media it aggregates, would be paratexts in the sense that

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they are “thresholds” that exist at the boundaries of the film itself. Considered sheerly from a consideration of representation, this makes perfect sense as the website is not needed to make sense of the film, whereas the website makes little sense on its own without the film. Considered affectively, however, and thinking about the website and film as media objects brought together in an encounter with one another in a way that their capacities to act are modulated, the website actually offers a more direct channeling for the viewer’s action. It may not be primary, but it is at least as important in terms of the way it seeks to move bodies into action. Of course, as I have discussed above, this potential is only partially realized in this particular case. While the site helps to channel action, it does so in a way that also fairly directly circumscribes what “counts” as action. If considered representationally, as simply a textual effect, then this is not really a problem. The rational, individual audience members are each free to choose what actions the wish to take, if any, based on what the film and its paratexts have persuaded them to do. Considered as media objects that structure flows, however, two components of this assemblage are pushing in opposite directions. The one that viewers are likely to encounter most recently (and which, in the logics of the internet, are therefore most important) channel action in a way that does not logically follow from the evidence and arguments produced by the film, but which is nevertheless structured to make the audience feel good, active, and perhaps even absolved of the need to take any further action—as opposed to, for example, critically reflecting on what the film itself has presented and considering how they might organize within their own communities to respond to the thoughts and feelings that the film has raised for them.
The example above is not meant as an indictment of *Citizenfour* or even necessarily of the work that TakePart is trying to do (though I do personally have strong reservations about combining corporate, consumerist motives and tactics with social justice objectives). It is meant instead to consider the sorts of problems that an assemblage approach to documentary allows us to uncover and work through—problems that a strictly representationalist paradigm assuming purely rational individual subjects would eschew. It is also meant as a way of thinking through how these problems manifest themselves even in the context of a digital docmedia object that is fairly traditional in terms of its structure and that is indeed concerned with constructing arguments and presenting evidence, which is less often true of amateur docmedia in general.

The next chapter will turn toward such amateur docmedia. It examines Black Lives Matter and the role of data in shaping the agency of docmedia objects. As we will see, a great deal of the power of the images circulated within this movement stems from their ability to connect across media objects, drawing seemingly disparate events together into larger networks. While often powerful, such datafication of documentary images and production of networks across media objects is not always positive.
CHAPTER 2: Black Lives Matter: Data Power and Evidentiary Flows

Amateur documentary has played a central role in sparking the Black Lives Matter movement and producing truth claims that rupture dominant discourses about racial politics in contemporary America. They have also been an important means of connecting the movement’s participants, extending its community across time and space, and providing evidence—evidence not only of the need to transform the systemic racism that is prevalent in so many American institutions but also evidence of the fact that ordinary people can make still make a difference through self-organization and direct action. While I will consider the broad range of nonfiction footage under the purview of the documentary here, these works are framed variously by their creators as documentary, citizen journalism, or raw footage. More often, though, they are presented without any overt labeling at all that might signal viewers to adopt a particular mode of viewing.

This chapter poses three main of questions. First, how does power operate within the production of documentary truths in the context of digital activism? Relatedly, what role do processes of connecting data play in shaping the politics of such truth production? Finally, what strategies are filmmakers using to deal with the constraints and baked-in politics and material realities of digital media ecologies?

To begin answering these questions, focus on the forces governing the event of viewing itself in order to understand how specific documentaries operate as parts of larger
assemblages within media networks. I consider digital viewing as a data-laden process with major political implications not only for the way that data is connected but for the ways that data-driven processes shape documentary argumentation itself in digital media ecologies, imposing both challenges and opportunities for producing politically engaged documentaries. Then, I examine three irruptive events that sparked the movement: the killings of Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown. I examine how each of these events has been taken up in documentary videos, with a focus on how the visual fields of many of these videos function as data and come to be datafied in order to better understand how specific documentary videos are functioning as assemblages in and of themselves.

The logics of connection within and across media objects are key to this chapter. Considering how “raw footage” and documents are connected within documentaries and across documentaries is important with all digital documentaries, but they are particularly important in the case of documentaries associated with the Black Lives Matter movement because of how saturated the hegemonic discourses around this movement are with anti-BLM and overtly racist sentiments. Navigating strategically through such a media landscape must be a central concern for these documentaries and any anti-racist activist work taking place in digital spaces.

**Background**

Black Lives Matter is a significant example of grassroots, networked activism. The movement began with the work of three activists, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal
Tometi, in response to George Zimmerman’s acquittal after killing Trayvon Martin.\textsuperscript{110} Garza composed an open letter on Facebook that ended with the phrase “Black lives matter.” Cullors shared the post with the tag #blacklivesmatter, producing both a means of connecting to others and explicitly laying out the central argument both of Garza’s post and the nascent movement as a whole. Soon after creating the hashtag, the three of them then set up accounts on Twitter and Tumblr to promote it and encourage others to join the discussion.

Prominent use of social media in launching and spreading this movement draws comparisons to Occupy Wall Street.\textsuperscript{111} It is important to note, however, that where Occupy Wall Street’s critics frequently pointed to that movement’s lack of clearly articulated goals, the direct argumentative claim that “Black lives matter” is rooted firmly in this movement’s use of social media from the very beginning. Such an explicitly argumentative hashtag serves an important role for much of the documentary media within the movement because it unites disparate footage under a clear claim. What might otherwise appear as decontextualized raw footage, then, is if nothing else drawn into the larger argumentative frame provided directly through the hashtag itself.


As significant as social media may have been in launching and shaping this movement, we must be careful not to overstate their role. Social media are one among many channels of communication used within the movement, and it is important to recognize the way that various kinds of media interact within the movement’s media ecology. Indeed, even the hashtag itself has cycled through offline spaces. As the movement was just beginning, Garza created protest signs with the hashtag and put them up in the windows of a local shoe store. Marches featured banners with the hashtag. The slogan’s circulation both offline and on helped its claim—that Black lives actually do matter—to gain traction. A movement began to coalesce around the need to argue this claim publicly and to reshape American institutions, most notably the criminal justice system, to reflect the truth of that claim.

#BlackLivesMatter rose to its current level of prominence in the American consciousness and came into its own as an international social movement following the shooting death of unarmed teenager Michael Brown at the hands of Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, MO. Following Brown’s killing and the mass protests that took place in Ferguson, around the country, and internationally, #BlackLivesMatter made its way into popular usage to such an extent that it was named the American Dialect Society’s word of the year for 2014. The organization currently has twenty-three official chapters, but the use of the

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113 Katy Steinmetz, “#blacklivesmatter is the American Dialect Society’s 2014 Word of the Year,” Time (January 10, 2015), retrieved May 1, 2015 from time.com/3662593/2014-word-of-year-blacklivesmatter/.
hashtag serves as a way of extending the movement and its associated discussions of race well beyond the organization itself in a networked, grassroots fashion that allows anyone with internet access to participate.\textsuperscript{114} According to Alicia Garza, this distributed approach to organization and leadership is intentional.\textsuperscript{115} It is a decision that the movement’s founders made to be as inclusive as possible, especially for women and LGBTQ participants. The movement has many leaders, she says, “just not where you might be looking for them.”\textsuperscript{116} To contrast Black Lives Matter with the typical leadership tendencies of Civil Rights era activism, she says “If you’re only looking for the straight black man who is a preacher, you’re not going to find it.”\textsuperscript{117} The goals of the movement are as flexible and diverse as its leadership: the movement directly confronts cases of police brutality against black Americans, but it also seeks to challenge systemic oppression on a wider scale and to resist all dominant cultural narratives that subjugate Black citizens, wherever those narratives might manifest themselves.

Visible evidence in the form of documentary video is one of the tools that supporters of Black Lives Matter use to resist oppressive narratives and practices in contemporary


\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
American society. Such evidence is often shared via the aforementioned platforms of Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. It is also commonly hosted and shared through YouTube, Vimeo, Vine, Instagram, Periscope, Snapchat, and other platforms. Most often, docmedia circulate through a variety of these platforms, each altering the context of those images and also making it possible to chart different connections between them.

In a story for The Guardian, Elizabeth Day cites such socially networked documentary images as a key to the movement’s existence. As she puts it, “Power lies in a single image. Previously unseen events become unignoreable.” Several traditional feature-length documentaries are also in various states of production. In 2016, HBO commissioned a documentary on the movement. While the depth and reach of such a documentary will likely help viewers better understand the movement and the problems that it is responding to, the documentary multimedia that Day mentions have been doing important work all along. Timeliness matters. Especially with the oft-decried speed of the 24-hour news cycle, waiting years to get a major prestige documentary out into the world would risk effectively cede public opinion to the movement’s very vocal detractors. Instead, amateur documentaries and vernacular video practices enable the movement’s supporters and

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118 Day, “#BlackLivesMatter.” Of course, this “previously unseen” nature of the images Day describes implies a certain audience—white Americans—for whom such sights of brutality and discrimination were not already familiar occurrences.

neutral observers to enter evidence into the public sphere much more quickly and effectively. This is not only true of the killings of black men at the hands of police, but also other lower-profile events that might easily be overlooked in national news coverage but that nonetheless add further evidence to the argument that black bodies are systematically dehumanized. As Day observes, this includes events like the McKinney, Texas pool party where a fifteen-year-old black girl, Dajerria Becton, was thrown to the ground by a white police officer, Eric Casebolt, who then pinned her down for several minutes before proceeding to pull his gun on two teenage boys standing nearby. Becton was unarmed, posed no threat to the officer, and did not resist arrest. A witness recorded the event. Prior to the witness’s video being circulated by major news networks in their coverage of this story, the video had already been viewed nearly half a million times on YouTube. The officer was suspended for his actions. He later resigned.

As the pool party example indicates, a great deal of the documentary media that has played such an important role in this movement is not necessarily produced by people who identify as supporters of the movement but by witnesses who happen to be in the right place at the right time with the right tools to capture the event on video. Whatever their

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121 Such examples are distinct from activist direct actions that are intentionally designed to provoke responses from police so as to produce image-events. See: Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples, “From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the ‘Violence’ of Seattle,” Critical Studies in Media Communication 19, no. 2 (2002):
intentions in making such work available might be, it is unthinkable for the movement to have gained the level of support and widespread recognition that it currently has without such visible evidence existing and being publicly available. Throughout this chapter, I consider not just on work associated with official chapters of Black Lives Matter, but work that is connected to #BlackLivesMatter and the wider movement, which includes a great deal more material and reflects the work of many organizations and participants who may or may not formally belong to any activist organizations at all. For simplicity’s sake, I will use “Black Lives Matter” to refer to my central concern here: the movement as a whole that includes substantial work from the official organized chapters but that is not reducible to them. I will use “official chapters of Black Lives Matter” to refer to the formal organizations themselves. I focus more broadly here because I am more interested in the movement as whole and the connections that are made through it than I am in the work of a single organization, regardless of how important their work is both to sparking the wider movement and to generally fighting back against systemic racism. Also, a great deal of the documentary work circulating in and around the movement is not clearly and directly produced by official chapters of Black Lives Matter but is instead affiliated more loosely with the movement through the use of hashtags and linking that have no official sanctioning from official chapters.

125-151.
Data, Evidence, Flows

Eventful Viewing: Algorithmic Flow and the Datafied Image

While the docmedia produced in and around the Black Lives Matter movement are certainly significant in terms of what it is that they actually show on screen, I want to first consider the eventfulness of less overtly significant processes at work in the assemblages in which these docmedia are a part. Deleuze develops a concept of “the event” as an ongoing modulation of an existing series. For him, events introduce change into structures such that difference is introduced into expected patterns. Events, he writes, “are never causes of one another, but rather enter the relations of quasi-causality, an unreal and ghostly causality, endlessly reappearing.” In this section, I focus on the eventfulness of viewing protest documentaries through digital media. I argue that the ease with which documentary images become datafied not only enables new means of manipulating, circulating, and engaging with those images for humans, but also inserts a number of often entirely invisible yet material processes that shape the politics of digital documentary truths.

Algorithms are a particularly important example of such processes. YouTube’s algorithms have especially significant effects on both the political potentials for documentary work as well as epistemological effects on the ways that they dynamically structure the production of truths. The strength of YouTube’s algorithms to shape documentary politics

122 Gilles Deleuze, The Fold. See also: Gilles Deleuze, Logic of Sense; James Williams, Gilles Deleuze's Logic of Sense (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

123 Gilles Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 33.
comes from the fact that these algorithms are proprietary, and therefore their exact functionality is obscured from the public, including from the filmmakers and content producers using the site and having their work structured by it.

This strength also comes from the combination of algorithmically driven content selection and YouTube’s interface, which involves an autoplay function that seamlessly joins together flows of whatever content will likely hold the viewer’s attention the longest as determined by algorithms. As Stefania Milan writes, “No longer mere platforms, social media have become actors in their own right, intervening in the meaning-making process of social actors by means of their algorithmic power.”124 In the joining of this algorithmic power with an interface structured to create flows, the active nature of the platform to shape meaning (and to work outside of processes of meaning-making altogether) becomes all the more powerful. This power affects meaning-making processes by effectively editing together videos that would otherwise have no reason to appear in conjunction, which creates datafied juxtapositions based not on the content of either video but on metadata that suggests some filiation between them based on past viewers’ habits taken in aggregate.

Especially for political nonfiction work, such algorithmic flows and automatically suggested content construct emergent frames for particular ideas and videos based on how they appear relative to the rest of the videos that have been automatically selected for viewing. In part, this increased power comes outside of the process of meaning-making

altogether in the way that these processes assume particular bodily arrangements and seek to exert agency over the viewer’s actions (or, perhaps more accurately, their distracted inaction). YouTube’s interface assumes and constructs a passive viewer—someone who despite having options to choose from suggested content, search for specific content, or navigate away from the site altogether opts instead to make no decisions apart from selecting an initial video to watch and allows the algorithms to determine their unending flow of content for them.

The Algorithmic Flow

There are, of course, key differences between the sort of flow we experience on YouTube and televisual flow as Raymond Williams first considered it.¹²⁵ For my purposes, the two most significant differences are, first, the automatability of this flow of images on YouTube and, second, the division between the creators of the moving images themselves and the creators of the code that automates their combination. In television, the image-makers and flow-constructors would be at least allied within the same institutional system and aware of one another. In the case of YouTube, the person who created the image, the person who uploaded it, the algorithms that determine the flow of content, and the many different people who wrote the codes that allow the platform of YouTube to perform itself all exist in their own places and times. They may have no knowledge of one another’s existence,

much less any ability to communicate directly with one another in order to exert some limited agency over how their work fits into the larger flow of images.

Algorithmic editing also has the ability to interrogate the performative aspects of software directly. As Clint Enns argues in his study of avant-garde filmmaking, algorithmic editing has the capacity to develop new aesthetic and narrative forms and engage in social and cultural critique in a way that is distinct from traditional montage in which an individual or group of people are consciously making decisions about what (and how) individual shots should be connected.\(^{126}\) The default sort of algorithmic “editing” that YouTube generates, however, is not developed by artists or activists but by software engineers. It should come as no surprise that their imperative is not to explore or critique but to maximize the ability for the platform to capture the attention of users and ultimately monetize their behaviors. It is this overarching reduction to capitalistic capture that forms the basis of Alex Juhasz’s critique of YouTube: even in the best of circumstances, the activist video on YouTube is mobilized, at least to some small degree, to serve the interests of private industry.\(^{127}\) This criticism is similar to what Jodi Dean suggests about all forms of user-generated content on the web: no matter the aims of a particular video, tweet, blog post, or picture, the affects that

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are produced through their transmission are captured by consumer capitalism and function to further reinforce its power.\(^\text{128}\)

But working within such a system does not necessarily foreclose the possibility of working against it. As Galloway and Thacker contend, a particularly promising mode of resisting the sort of control that exists in digital networks (control that exists after decentralization) is to find exploits within those systems—ruptures or forces inside the system that can be turned against the system as a whole, its encoded logics, and its “aims.”\(^\text{129}\)

Next, I will examine the apparatuses of capture themselves: the algorithmic montage that undergirds this automated flow stemming from #BlackLivesMatter documentaries on YouTube. Then, I will explore the sorts of exploits that activists are already employing to work both within and against capitalist apparatuses of capture operating through these digital media networks.

When I first started researching the political and epistemological effects of YouTube’s platform on activist documentaries, I left the nature of the problem to be assumed: left to its own devices, YouTube will structure a flow of images based on what its algorithms predict will hold a viewer's attention. It would, I assumed, shift the viewer to whatever content it deemed most popular for user profiles containing similar data to the


current viewer. This would, after all, seem to be in the site’s best interest as, following its capitalist logics, it is able to reap more profits the longer it holds my attention. I also assumed that such a flow was relatively innocuous, and that the activist’s ability to exert agency over the flow of images was simply a matter of being aware of it. I assumed, in short, that the techniques these activist documentarians employed were an exercise of agency in a place where there would otherwise be none: a question of agency versus no apparent agency. What I found was that instead, left to its own devices, YouTube’s algorithms follow somewhat consistent and extremely troubling patterns that make the stakes for activists working within this system that much higher. In short, they articulate the viewer as a subject based not on their individual viewing habits or behaviors but based on an ideal subject as an aggregate of all past viewers.\(^\text{130}\) In the process, then, hegemony takes hold and is articulated onto the viewing subject in the very determination of what content is to be displayed.

Taking a chosen #BlackLivesMatter documentary as its starting point, YouTube’s automated flow quickly moves away from—or many times directly against—the Black Lives Matter in the series of videos it presents. Anecdotally, in all of the dozens of times I went along with this flow while researching pro-Black Lives Matter documentaries for this project,

\(^{130}\) Because YouTube’s algorithms are proprietary and constantly changing over time, it is impossible to know for sure exactly how they work. That said, according to YouTube itself, one of the most common and basic factors used to generate recommended videos is a “related videos” algorithm that establishes relationships between videos based on what other past viewers have tended to watch during the same viewing session. As they describe it: “when we think of what videos to show together, we weigh if they’ve been watched in similar sessions before” (archived at web.archive.org/web/20150329041618/https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6060859?hl=en&ref_topic=6046759).
the flow constructed for me by these algorithms never edited in more than one other overtly pro-Black Lives Matter video. Instead, it tended to move quickly toward content—typically remediated clips of twenty-four hour cable news programs—that opposed the movement explicitly.131 If I followed this flow for long enough, it often eventually moved on to issues of establishment politics and/or seemingly apolitical topics (shark attacks, discussions of whether or not a particular musician is overrated, discussions of the Kardashians, etc. just to name a few examples).

Notably, my first foray through these algorithmic flows also provided critiques of the movement’s tactics than spanned the political spectrum. Some critiques came from people who presented themselves as being generally sympathetic to the movement. Surprisingly, there were some critiques from the far left, as was the case with one video in the form of a television-evening-news-style segment from the YouTube channel Maoist Rebel News. Less surprisingly, this critique came to the conclusion that Black Lives Matter’s tactics were fundamentally flawed because the movement lacks a strong central authority figure. The

131 Because opponents of movements tend to be vocal about making their opposition known in the comments sections of pro-movement videos (and because proponents of a movement are rarely doing the same in the comments sections of videos by detractors of the movement), a socially-produced unilateral relationship from pro- to anti- can be habitually generated, algorithmically ensconced through machine learning, and habitually reinforced indefinitely. This pattern is perhaps most clear with feminist and antifeminist videos on the site. For more on YouTube’s algorithms, see: Janko Roettgers, "How Artificial Intelligence Is Changing Media," Variety 334, no. 1 (November 08, 2016): 50-51; José Van Dijck, The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Joanne Morreale, “From Homemade to Store Bought: Annoying Orange and the Professionalization of YouTube,” Journal of Consumer Culture 14, no. 1 (2014): 113-128.
video then used this claim in closing as it segued into a talking head that overtly promoted the Maoist Rebel News online bookstore, its Facebook page, its Twitter profile, and so on—all without any hint that any of this was intended to be ironic. Far more critiques came from the far right. One notable example was from a company called Florida Gun Supply. In its video, the filmmaker appears on screen and provides a talking head monologue that direct portrays Black Lives Matter activists as “a gang” that he asserts “we” needed to stand up against by arming ourselves and “carrying daily”—presumably with guns purchased from Florida Gun Supply itself.

While many times this flows would move toward (or include) apparently a-political content, the overwhelming tendency appeared to be toward counter-politicized messages. Such patterns of content selection emergently yet explicitly reframe the individual documentaries appearing in these flows that do seek to favorably or even neutrally represent the movement as being minoritarian outliers that are isolated, outside of the mainstream, and unworthy of further consideration. There is no real discussion, debate, or rational discourse within such flows. There is no genuine exchange of ideas between those who support and those who oppose the movement. Instead, the dominant discourse quickly and clearly becomes that this movement is made up of nothing more than entitled radicals and “thugs” who have no legitimate grievances. This notion of such views being the dominant and therefore correct position persists through the overwhelming preponderance of “evidence” provided through the flow itself. Even if a documentarian crafts a flawlessly developed argument with substantial, undeniable visible evidence that legitimates the arguments that
Black Lives Matter supporters are making, it cannot be all that persuasive when edited unwittingly and automatically into a flow that, in the most extreme instances, contains one person after another reinforcing the already-dominant discourses around the movement and that, at best, presents little to nothing to further explore the movement from the perspective of its participants.

At the most, the one video immediately following my chosen entry-point video contained a similar political formation of the truth that the movement seeks to address, though often even the very first algorithmically selected video departed significantly in terms of its framing of the movement or even its subject matter generally. There also appears to be a heavy bias driving the flow toward established media companies. Often, these are video clips that remediate TV news (most often FOX News in my experiences immersing myself in this flow, but also frequently CNN, MSNBC, and CBS). Sometimes they are clips from other streaming media outlets (The Young Turks, for example) or self-contained videos (read: not clips) produced by professional media companies (Pitchfork, for example). In the cases of FOX News, The Young Turks, and Pitchfork, entering the flow of that particular media company provided no escape without human intervention. Once the algorithms flowed into endless remediated clips of FOX News, there appeared to be no way for the algorithmic flow to find its way out again. It appears, then, that there is a tipping point within these flows: they continue to present media that frames itself as nonfiction, but they move quickly and irreversibly toward anti-Black Lives Matter media, eventually to unrelated clips typically from professional media companies. Once each of those thresholds is crossed, it rarely if ever
appears to go back. Of course, because YouTube’s algorithms are proprietary, there is no way to know exactly how they function to process video and user data in developing these flows; we are instead left to infer their functionality from the traces of their processes that we receive as viewers. As the algorithms connect these nonfiction videos by a logic based on the established “old media” institutions, it becomes clear that this process of flow is the antithesis of connectivity based on the logics of the movement itself—decentered, polyvocal, nonhierarchical, heterogenous, and disruptive. It follows a capitalist/consumerist logic of trying to hold the viewer’s attention, but it does so in a way that articulates the viewer as “The Viewer”—that is to say, as an amalgamation of all past viewers and their tendencies.

While I have focused on YouTube, it is by no means an outlier. On the contrary, it is simply a particularly high-profile example of the same kinds of processes at work elsewhere. In the video “Black Lives Matter: How 3 Words Became a Movement” hosted on mashable.com, a similar process of immediate depoliticization takes place through algorithmically generated video flows. The video discusses the genesis of the movement and presents talking-head interviews with several prominent activists including movement co-founder Opal Tometi. In keeping with Mashable’s interest in promoting the latest technologies, the focus of the video is on social media as being almost entirely responsible for sparking this movement. Technological solutions are framed as universally good, though Opal Tometi does mention that social media goes hand-in-hand with taking to the streets. This critical qualification of the role of social media is soon followed by an observation from activist Kwame Rose, who says: “The beautiful thing about this movement is that there is no
Dr. King, there is no Southern Christian Leadership Conference, there is no SNCC—there are individuals who have taken to the streets in . . . cities from across the country and everybody’s using their voice. Social media is a platform for everyone.”

While I would not ever begrudge a movement participant’s personal views based on their own experience (and Rose’s experience in particular has undoubtedly done exponentially more to advance the cause of racial justice than my own work has), it is still important to reinforce that however true his observation might be within the context of on-the-ground activism, it is being mobilized here in the context of this video to drive traffic on Mashable.com. The undercurrent of neoliberal techno-utopianism in his observation becomes incredibly problematic, however, when it is mobilized in the case of this short documentary (perhaps functioning more as a sponsored film?), to serve the interests of a private company that stands only to gain from further naturalizing techno-utopian thinking and individualized, consumer-based solutions to collective and systemic problems. As one might expect, the video ignores any drawbacks much less potential threats of activism through social media. It ignores the benefits of coordinated leadership, and, despite Tometi’s presence on screen, seems to deny the actual existence of coordinated leadership within the movement itself. Interestingly, the video immediately cuts from Rose’s observation to Tometi as she talks about need to address systemic social issues—things like “mental health services, restorative justice, more job opportunities in our communities.” These are systemic problems that cannot be remedied by individuals alone no matter the power of the medium they use to produce messages about them; nevertheless, the video clearly endorses Rose’s
view in the way that it highlights social media as a redemptive deus ex machina capable of saving black Americans from centuries of systemic violence and oppression.

Immediately after this video has ended, Mashable automatically plays me a glorified ad for pink smartphones. It masquerades as a history of pink-colored gadgets that describes which companies released which kinds of pink gadgets when. The video explicitly frames its discussion of pink gadgets as a way for customers “to express themselves,” and it asserts that “pink is just cool—it’s charming.” The camerawork frames the gadgets being discussed as sex objects, slowly tilting and panning over the passive gadgets in lingering close-ups. Then, the algorithms decide to autoplay a comedic video about how kitten beauty standards have changed over the past century. The platform routes my attention away from politics and toward the decontextualized affective joy that circulates within the kitten video.

While I still have a choice of whether to continue in this particular flow or not, it is clear which option the interface is constructed to drive me toward. I must actively decide to stop this flow or passively accept the status quo of constant affective intensities moving me to uncritically love consumer technologies. There is not so much as a moment to spare for reflection on the politics of Black Lives Matter, which was after all the topic I actually sought out on this site.

There is risk in this flow of images, a risk that is magnified by the amateur status of so many creators of documentary work on YouTube especially. An activist’s video in support of any aspect of Black Lives Matter risks having itself joined into a series of moving images in which it functions as an entry point into a world of self-regenerating consumer capitalism
at best and more often into a world of explicit, baseless hate and mindless oppression—an online amplification of many of the very same problems in the world generally that Black Lives Matter itself is trying to change. The Mashable example discussed above is an extreme one in the sense that YouTube does not have such a vested interest in producing and promoting its own content, much less from a unified interest in naturalizing teleological assumptions about technological development. The basic processes at work in both cases, however, are the same.

This is algorithmic hegemony at its worst. YouTube’s algorithms are themselves not solely responsible for these outcomes, nor do they function in complete isolation: viewers must be complicit and accept the platform’s enticement to passively accept the content it strings together. The algorithms capture, abstract, and distill datafied traces of past viewers’ collective habits and behaviors, then use such large scale aggregates to automate processes in the present on the individual level. In this way, they automate and inscribe hegemony at a scale that is once removed from individual human experience. They may need our consent on the individual level, but once they have it they are able to inscribe their logics onto us as a collective, amorphous “community” of users.

These algorithmic flows are also created from the admittedly vast yet still finite set of videos that already exist on YouTube. They are no doubt influenced to some extent by which videos are most viewed already. Certainly we might critique this processes of automatically amplifying the voices that are already most powerful (both within this platform and elsewhere in our society), but this observation also reinserts a good bit of human (read:
public) agency into the equation: if amateur filmmakers used YouTube more regularly for a place of critical documentary practice, would it not at least mitigate some of this overwhelming drive toward disinformation and re-amplification of the already-dominant voices of cable news networks? In the short term, this would of course still reinforce consumer capital by providing more content for YouTube to profit from, but perhaps the long term investment of amplifying more socially marginalized voices through this venue would make a relatively minor setback acceptable for the long-term gains that should follow from making such pushes for racial justice more visible and affectively sustainable for their participants. That is, such activist documentaries do not just transmit information for audiences to learn from, but they also function as ritual communication that helps to strengthen communal bonds of activists—especially when those activists are geographically dispersed—and maintaining the sorts of categorical affects (hope, outrage, a sense of justice, etc.) needed to cultivate a ground from which further direct action can be sparked. Of course, this problem of datafication and algorithmic control of image flows is not unique to the Black Lives Matter movement, but this movement is a particularly good example of the problems involved with such algorithmization and evidentiary flows because it has received such a large degree of mainstream and right-wing media coverage, and a great deal of this largely negative coverage of the movement circulates as remediated video clips on YouTube. While many movements and would-be movements struggle against a total absence of media

\[132 \text{ James Carey, } \textit{Communication as Culture} \text{ (New York: Routledge, 1994).}\]
coverage, BlackLivesMatter struggles against an abundance of negative coverage that, when
linked together in a flow with pro-BlackLivesMatter media based only on a commonly
identified keyword, creates an overwhelmingly different impression of the movement for
those who seek to learn more about it via these online videos.

Part of the way to disrupt the control exerted through this sort of algorithmic flow—
without in the meantime taking the risk that any single video posted would function
detrimentally as an opening into an anti-Black Lives Matter flow—is to more carefully
consider ways of stitching together images of the movement from within the movement
itself. And activists are already working with several simple strategies for doing this: the use
of hashtags, linking, annotations within the videos themselves, the construction of playlists,
and so on. None of these are perfect, but they are emergent strategies for minimizing the risks
of doing activist work on YouTube without being as likely to fall into the traps that capture
affect for the benefit of reinforcing consumer capitalism. While some may advocate turning
away from YouTube entirely as a site for potential activism as Juhasz does, I argue that the
benefits of reaching wider audiences and different groups of people globally can still be a
sufficiently valuable benefit that makes the site worth using in an exploit-based model
following from Galloway and Thacker. The aforementioned tools within YouTube are all
potential exploits: aspects of the system that exist to benefit the system itself, but which can
also be turned against it and used for different ends (in this case, to combat the hegemonic
nature of the algorithmic flows and the dominant discourses that they uncritically reproduce).
Playlists are the only tool here that directly mitigates the automated flow replacing it instead with a flow that has been predetermined by the creator of the playlist and that has defined temporal limits rather than the ability to infinitely perpetuate itself. The use of all of these tools, though, can function to extend arguments outward beyond the bounds of a single text, to join “raw footage” into an argument through its association with other footage or context provided by other videos, to generate discussion off-platform, to organize actions off-platform and off-line altogether, to cultivate a sense of community, and to help maintain relationships real and imagined between individual viewers and the larger movement. All of these can be incredibly valuable in both constructing documentary truths and in building a movement.

Disrupting the Flow

In *Learning from YouTube*, Alexandra Juhasz puts it bluntly: “[YouTube is] a context that is not ideal for activism, analysis, or community.”133 Perhaps not. But activists nevertheless continue to use it as a way of cheaply and quickly circulating their media, inserting their arguments, evidence, and affects into the media flows of which they are already a part. In this way, they are taking advantage of the groundwork that YouTube has laid for allowing content hosted on its site to interface conveniently with other social media platforms. As McLuhan argues, “Our typical response to a disrupting media technology is to

recreate the old environment instead of heeding the new opportunities of the new environment. Failure to notice the new opportunities is also failure to understand the new powers…This failure leaves us in the role of automata merely.” It is not just a matter of how YouTube is structured in a way that promotes fragmentation over community and flow over contemplation: it is also a matter of how we experiment within the constraints of that system to minimize the negative impacts of those constraints and understand its new powers and opportunities.

Accordingly, we should consider not just the risks and constraints of YouTube (and other platforms) for activist video, but also the tools that activists are using to mitigate these risks and adapt to these constraints. Some of these responses to the constraints of YouTube produce new modes of argumentation that emerge through joining images differently across videos. These means of joining documentary videos on YouTube produce decentralized, rhizomatic documentaries that spark new potentials and challenges for activists and scholars of both digital media and documentary. In the following section, I argue that activists and filmmakers interested in asserting greater control over the authorship of their videos need to consider how affordances of digital platforms can open up new channels for communication, lest such communicative practices—who can be articulated, who and what can be brought together and become active—be determined by the increasingly invisible processes that

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structure these platforms. In particular, activist documentarians use playlists, hashtags, annotations within videos, and links in video descriptions as tools within the platform itself to disrupt the otherwise algorithmically sequenced flow of content.

Video Annotation and Linking

Intentionally seeding video descriptions and annotations with links to related content that expands on the perspective offered in any given documentary can serve as one way of breaking viewers out of an algorithmically generated flow. A video of Oscar Grant’s death, “Captured by 6 different cameras BART police shoot and kill unarmed Oscar Grant,” for example, includes two overlay buttons to subscribe to the channel “streetgangs.com.” While the appearance of such avenues for self-promotion might seem crass given the content of the video, this provides an easy opportunity for viewers to break themselves out of the algorithmic flow. The link directs to a page that itself links directly to dozens more videos on streetgangs.com’s channel in support of justice for Grant specifically and for racial justice more generally. The inclusion of the “.com” in the channel’s name also makes it easy to move off-site entirely and explore the video and other multimedia contained on streetgangs.com, which opens viewers to a much wider world of racial justice, culture, and activism that extends well beyond Grant himself. Such overlays and practices of linking can be key tools for wrestling human authorship and agency back from the automatic processes of the platform itself. These tools enable larger arguments to emerge through clustering texts into flows not based on computerized data analysis but based instead on further developing
arguments and evidence for the issues addressed in the original video itself. It also enables linking between videos in a way that can be used to strategically reshape “raw footage” from events that might otherwise appear to be isolated and unrelated—for example, the killings that I will discuss in the last section of this chapter.

In the context of Black Lives Matter videos, this sort of connection via video annotation links often involves organizing amateur cell phone videos depicting acts of police violence against black citizens in such a way that these videos serve not just as documentation of isolated tragedies but as documentaries that produce arguments about the systemic failures that underlie each specific event depicted. It also typically involves connecting such videos that primarily serve a witnessing function to videos of talking-head testimonials that contextualize and comment on the kinds of events depicted in such footage in a way that draws these events into a larger argument about the nature of systemic racism in an allegedly “post-racial” America. While the specific claims expressed in such videos cover a range of different and sometimes exclusive viewpoints, they nonetheless remain united in the overarching argument expressed by the commonly used hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and the name of the movement itself, which is already articulating an argumentative claim.

Playlists & Hashtags: #OurMarch

Of the strategies surveyed here, only the playlist serves as a means of fully automating the flow of images in a way that approximates YouTube’s own default automation of the flow.
#OurMarch is a project that was initiated by the activist group Dream Defenders. It began with a YouTube video “Two Minutes” in which Dream Defenders Executive Director Phillip Agnew describes what he sees as the most pressing issues facing America on the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington. The Dream Defenders asked others to make their own videos using his as a model and share them using the #OurMarch hashtag. While Dream Defenders exercised some of its own authorial control by compiling a selection of these videos into a YouTube playlist, this playlist represented only a small subset of the range of media that had been created, linked together, and shared through the use of this hashtag. Such a radically open form of collaborative authorship (through the hashtag linking it all as one boundless project stemming from that first video) in this case coexists with a more hybrid form of authorship (where people are given a model to follow, but their submitted content is not edited internally and is only selected, or not, and arranged within a playlist that serves as much as an emblematic tip of the iceberg and gesture toward this larger collaborative project than it functions as any sort of a bounded “text”).

#OurMarch is a documentary project that was initiated with a single YouTube video that began with an introduction asking others to contribute their own videos. This structure effectively enables three intersecting layers of authorship to operate, disrupting the algorithmic flow. First, there is the video itself which operates as a partial media object: it is a bounded, single-author text, but is also wholly incomplete on its own. It provides testimony, but the brief testimony on its own provides little evidence—instead it mostly makes claims, with some support offered. Secondly, though, the videos of anyone who
chooses to upload and share them using this tag can and do function as evidence for the argument Agnew makes in his first video in this series. Testimony is aggregated and coming from a variety of speakers who appear to be of many different races, genders, and classes. The argumentative weight comes as much from the sheer number and variety of participants as it does from what any one of them is actually saying. There is, of course, an affective component to this, too, as the connection through tagging enables others to quickly and easily see than many other people in the world share their sociopolitical concerns. Thirdly, between those two poles of the single-authored enclosed text and the massively multiple-authored works united through the use of the hashtag are works that were submitted independently and then included on the project’s #OurMarch playlist, which is attributed to Dream Defenders collectively. The process involved in curating submissions involves a kind of institutional authorization on the part of Dream Defenders, effectively endorsing specific videos that had been submitted and drawing them together into a finite playlist rather than the potentially endless promulgation inherent in a hashtag.

The use of the hashtag here enables distributed authorship of a body of works that blurs the lines between text and discourse, and it is a great example of a phenomenon that extends well beyond this one project. Because the activist group that initiated the project also curated some of the responses together into this playlist, that implies its own sort of institutional authorization of these specific videos that are only a small subset of all the responses using the tag. This simple act on its own not only helps to further blur the lines between audiences and authors but between authors and the institutions sponsoring and
promoting the circulation of documentary content. These negotiations of textual politics and micropolitical relationships within resistance movements are incredibly important to dig into. The question of how to reconstruct new social systems that don't simply recreate existing imbalances of power is crucial, and implicated in this larger socio-cultural process are such reconsiderations of not just what authorship is, but what it has been, what it appears to be becoming, and what it might become as well as how such processes of authorship instantiate micropolitical relationships, operate as expressions of the intersections between a number of different social, cultural, political, and economic forces, and as a productive force for creating new images of more just, egalitarian documentary truths. In order to make room for such discussions, though, it is necessary to find ways of disrupting the trap of automatic processes that use abstracted information from past data to constrain our collective potential in the present and future.

The #OurMarch documentary project is also interesting on a formal level, in no small part due to this structure of semi-open, collaborative authorship as it has been actualized within the constraints of YouTube. The first video included on this playlist employs a hand held camera that drifts slightly back and forth toward Agnew, who is giving a monologue. It uses shallow depth of field and is shot in black and white, which creates an essayistic tone that amplifies the speaker's inflection and literal voice within the shot. It also invites viewers to read his vocal cadence as ethos-building and essayistic, playing directly into the development of a “discourse of sobriety” formally as well as his diction.
Figure 4. Direct address.

Figure 5. Shift in visual representation of mode of address.
His mode of address then shifts. He begins by initially addressing viewers directly, looking at the camera and speaking to the viewer as he provides exposition on what exactly this project is and inviting others to participate in creating it. Then, we shift into the “actual” video—that is, to what would amount to his own entry within this larger documentary project addressing issues of systemic racism head on through personal testimony. He is now addressing a more general audience: rather than inviting the individual user to create content, he speaks broadly about the American public as a whole. This shift is underscored by the only internal edit within the video. The opening shot of the speaker frames him straight on enabling a direct address that plays up the personal nature of his invocation and call to the viewers to act by uploading their own videos to this hashtag. The following shot setup frames him against the same background, but from a ¾ profile view that sets up a mode of address more closely aligned with a public speech to a mass audience.

Figure 6. Contrasting visual styles within the #OurMarch playlist.
Another video on the #OurMarch playlist, titled “KP Two Minutes #OurMarch #MarchOn,” features a much different setting and is a less stylized production. The speaker appears to be talking directly into her laptop without any sense of higher quality audio or visual equipment being employed. The background is what appears to be the living room of her apartment—an intimate location that reinforces that she's speaking from the heart and perhaps also speaking with such a great sense of urgency that precludes further thought of the mise en scène. She appears to be seated on the floor with her laptop in front of her, which further reinforces both the casual intimacy of this setup as well as the urgency of the testimony she speaks in this video. Also, thanks to the front-facing camera on her laptop, it seems as though she's looking right at the viewer, engaging in an almost de facto mode of direct address conditioned (if not strictly determined) by the laptop as a recording device.

In contrast to the first video, such a power relationship as instantiated within this video between author/subject and viewer/participant seems more directly in line with the stated goals of this documentary project and the larger movement of which it is a part. The speaker in the first video is looking anywhere but at the audience during the testimonial portion of that video, instead looking off into the distance so as to evoke a larger, more general, hypothetical virtual audience. There is a certain power to this in the way that it indirectly evokes the larger imagined community that it hopes to create through its circulation. But his position and the camera position combined with the location of the shoot—on the rooftop of a multistory building in an urban setting—and the relatively
shallow depth of field that forces attention on the speaker as individual addressing a mass, anonymized audience from an actual yet nevertheless abstract-seeming place function together to keep him at an inaccessible remove from the viewer—the leader who is to be followed, rather than one voice among many. In that sense, then, the first clip does accidentally replicate a power structure the movement is working to upend: Dream Defenders is interested in radically democratic politics, an interest shared with the larger Black Lives Matter movement as a whole, too, and an interest that is made clear in their description of the first video of this project on YouTube (shown below).

![Two Minutes - #OurMarch](image)

**Two Minutes - #OurMarch**

Director of Dream Defenders Phillip Agnew and leader of United We Dream Sofia Campos were ready to represent our generation at the commemorative events of the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington. But at the last minute, they were cut from the speaking roster because of “time”.

Our generation’s dreams have been deferred too long. We don’t need a mic. The time is NOW.

We ask that YOU record your own video with hashtag #OurMarch : what did the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington mean to you? Why do you march every day? For who?

Use #OurMarch along with #MarchOn and #MOW50. Tweet your responses. Let’s have our own conversation.

Figure 7. #OurMarch hashtag on YouTube.
The opening up of the process of authoring this documentary effectively limits such an implied leadership style to this one video. It is one style among many and, while it occupies a privileged position of importance due to it being the first video in the series, it still does the work of actually, materially opening up the discussion to other voices regardless of what its internal style might imply. Contrasts between the politics of the content of a particular text and the politics of the larger media system of which it is a part is are typically framed as negative. Indeed, in many cases they are harmful because they permit even the most revolutionary intensities operating at the level of form and content to be captured and used to serve entirely different objectives through the logics of the platform and medium itself. In this example, however, the tension between what is happening at the level of the text and at the level of the emerging social media network around this particular hashtag is a productive difference. It enables a strong style of leadership—a style that is bound up with elevating this one individual as an authority to be followed by others—with the actual calling into being of a much more heterogenous, polyvocal, and seemingly egalitarian collection of multiple participants concerned with multiple different but overlapping political concerns.

Hashtag Witnessing: Making the Visible into Evidence

In a video from the front lines of protests in Ferguson, MO, titled “#FergusonDispatch: Gassed (Low Quality Video),” we can see evidence of the form and technologies used to produce records of instances of police brutality bending under the immediate exigent needs of the event being documented as it unfolds. In the process, we can
see how social, technical, and historical forces shape this particular event and the
documentary video of it itself as an event, as well as the affective experience of being an
individual human being embodied and emplaced within these swirling forces that interact
within the event space of this protest in Ferguson, MO. This particular video is such a
compelling example of these sorts of protest-witnessing documentary videos because it is so
accidentally interesting on a formal level: indeed, the video’s poster even apologizes for its
poor quality and especially the poor quality of the image track in the main description of the
video on YouTube and again in the on-screen text of the opening titles. The audio and the
spoken descriptions of events within the video are almost entirely responsible for the video's
evidentiary value and, while the image itself is basically worthless as a document, the fact
that it was uploaded anyway despite being unwatchable serves something of an
expressionistic function that says a lot about the subjective experience of chaos and
confusion in such a situation, as well as the need for a video like this to be one text weaved
into a wider network of evidence through playlists, hashtags, etc. to actually become a
powerful document that has use value for resisting institutionalized police brutality.
Figure 8. The “#FergusonDispatch: Gassed” title screen.

Figure 9. Blurred image track from “#FergusonDispatch: Gassed.”
The image track of “#FergusonDispatch: Gassed,” incomprehensible as it may be, is actually one example of how the indexical can be reclaimed within digital media. First, it functions as a way of certifying the indexicality of the audio track and its implicit truth claims about police brutality. Second, though not readable or interpretable on its own as an image of any particular thing, the light patterns it captures appear far too random and complex to have been created duplicitously as merely an intentional way of misleading viewers into accepting the truth claims implicit in the audio track. Further, it seems to speak to the filmmaker’s affective state at the moment of filming—that is, the event being witnessed is so incredibly important that it needs to be recorded and that the recording needs to continue despite the image track becoming useless, but the filmmaker’s own body is in such a position that it faces a danger so substantial that it overrides this initial impulse to document. The camera is not dropped or turned off—simply the filmmaker’s attention seems entirely removed from the camera and its technological affordances (and constraints in terms of what conditions are necessary for it to produce an image that is “legible” in the traditional, rational sense). Later, of course, the decision to upload such a video despite the apparently useless image track speaks to the perceived importance of what was incidentally recorded to the audio track. Had this been shot on film, it likely never would’ve seen the light of day due to the relatively far larger expense of first developing the film and then finding a suitable context in which to use such a sequence. But here, the costs associated with recording this video have already been incurred—there is no additional cost associated with uploading it to
YouTube. And, of course, in the context of YouTube as a platform, this particular user’s home page, and the myriad of other texts that it might be linked to via social media, it is already contextualized in the event of its exhibition, and it is easily and cheaply contextualized further should its producer (or anyone else) care to develop such a context for it to be embedded or linked into.

This video is effectively able to subvert the traditional importance of an intelligible image in mediated witnessing because it is already joined through the hashtag and through the poster’s channel to other nonfiction work (both documentaries and livestreams) that provide context for understanding not only the importance of what is happening in the video but the bare facts of what is happening in the first place. It asks the viewer to set aside preconceived ideas and actually trust the human subject(s) providing the audio/textual evidence without needing to confirm it with an indexical image—or rather, because the indexical nature of this image records traces of the subjective experiences of attempting to avoid breathing in tear gas and evading gas canisters fired by police, all the while trying to navigate through city streets in the dark. The image does not provide evidence in and of itself of some objective truth here. Instead, it provides evidence of the truth of this affective experience, which in turn testifies to the veracity of the video’s audio track and the poster’s truth claims as expressed in the video’s description. It is able to be much more effective because of this degraded video track—a higher quality, stable image would paradoxically undercut the expressive and evidentiary value of this short documentary because its indexical qualities trump the representational value of the image. What matters is the “there-ness” it
produces, which matters as both affective phenomenon and its witnessing value as a piece of its producer’s larger testimony about this event. This video and others like it are freed up to negotiate such affective truth production through their ability to rely on other videos and multimedia connected through the hashtag to expand viewers’ understandings of the events they record and to engage viewers in the movement rather than moving them onto the next algorithmically-selected bit of remediated cable news.

Audiovisual Fields Within Videos

The last section of this chapter will examine specific documentary videos as assemblages in and of themselves in order to consider the heterogenous components brought together within such videos and the ways in which bringing them together can increase their capacity to act. I focus on videos about the killings of three young black men: Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown. There are countless other examples of docmedia in and around the Black Lives Matter movement that deal with violence against a number of other victims. I choose to focus on these three, however, because they each mark significant turning points in the emergence and growth of the movement itself.

Setting the Stage: The Killing of Oscar Grant

In the early hours of New Year’s Day, 2009, a transit police officer shot and killed Oscar Grant on a subway platform in Oakland. Grant was unarmed. There is no evidence that he was posing any threat to the officer. In fact, five videos of the incident taken by other
subway passengers show that Grant was lying face down, with his hands behind his back and another officer’s knee holding his head against the ground at the time he was shot. Without video evidence of this event, it might be hard for the general public to believe that it happened at all. With video evidence, it became undeniable. Even with this video evidence, though, the officer who killed Grant served less than two years in jail on a charge of involuntary manslaughter. Grant’s death—and the perceived incongruity of the crime with the killer’s sentencing—is what sparked Garza, Cullors, and Tometi to start thinking about and organizing around racial injustices in policing in an allegedly post-racial America. According to Cullors, “the first set of uprisings came with the murder of Oscar Grant. That was our politicization.” In this way, Grant’s death as documented and spread through digital video set the stage for the emergence of Black Lives Matter as an official organization, and the work of those organizers set the stage for the emergence of the wider movement.

Though one cannot draw a direct causal relationship between the videos themselves and the protests that erupted in the bay area following Grant’s death, these videos nevertheless appear to have played a large role in spreading awareness of the event and engaging viewers who might not be moved to act otherwise. Local broadcast station

135 Cullors.

136 Ibid.

KTVU-TV posted cell phone videos it received to its website where they were viewed nearly half a million times in just a few days following Grant’s death. An annotated version of one of the videos was posted to YouTube, where it received more than one thousand views per hour on average for the first week after Grant’s death.

As Jennifer Malkowski argues, YouTube played a primary role in making videos of Oscar Grant’s death not just available but “spreadable.” The notions of “interactivity” and “participation” are central to the way that YouTube presents itself. In theory, fostering interaction online through commenting and sharing helps videos to become more spreadable, which helps not just to make more people aware of the issue but to provide them with some sense of a personal stake in it, which broadens the potential base for collective action. Malkowski argues that “In terms of activist videos, and especially for activist videos of death, the notion of participation is especially charged” because this context calls into question the connections between witnessing and action—the possibility for witnessing to prompt further action, and also the constraints and variables that prevent every outrageous injustice witnessed via YouTube to launch a social movement of its own.

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139 Malkowski, “Streaming Death.”

140 Ibid.
Digital means of participation and interaction pose a unique challenge compared to analog participation because of their inherent generation of data that remains entirely hidden from view. Viewers may be able to interact with one another and with filmmakers through these digital networks, but they are also able to be seen and be acted upon without their knowledge. That is not to suggest that viewers, through the production of data involved in the process of selecting and navigating between videos, are subjected to the agency of some conspiratorial puppet master pulling their strings behind the scenes. But they are subjected to an agency that is not their own: the agency of the platform, which is an assemblage of interacting algorithms and interfaces. The logics programmed into these systems and built into their hardware are inherently political: they do not just collect and manipulate data, but subject it to rule-governed processes that exert control over the types of knowledge that may be produced through these systems. They also exert control over viewers and users, constraining how it is possible for them to behave within the system. In order to demonstrate how the documentary image can connect data as well as the political implications of the datafied documentary image, I will provide detailed formalist analyses of YouTube documentaries dealing with the killings of Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, and Mike Brown with attention to ways that data functions both within these documentary texts and around them through the platform.

“Captured by 6 different cameras BART police shoot and kill unarmed Oscar Grant” was posted by streetgangs on Jul 4, 2010, four days before the jury delivered its verdict in the trial of the officer who shot Grant. This video contains six discrete frames. It uses this split
screen to present six distinct video tracks layered together. Only one frame consistently contains an image throughout the duration of the video: the BART surveillance camera feed that shows little other than a train stopped at the Fruitvale platform and some police officers occasionally rushing by. This video track appears in the top center frame.

Figure 10. Grid layout for the multiple video tracks used in “Captured by 6 different...”
The documentary begins with only the top center video, labelled “BART platform video,” actually playing while the rest of the frames are black. The “Vargas video” track appears alongside the BART platform video at 3:53. The audio from it is loud and jolting compared to the silence that immediately precedes it and the relatively soft radio chatter that accompanies the earlier visuals. We hear sustained indecipherable chattering and occasional yelling from off screen. A man on his phone says “we’re in Fruitvale right now.” This location information serves some indexical value, as the visuals so far in this video are relatively non-descript and could just as easily be from any number of other subway platforms. We see several men seated against a wall on the platform diagonally across from

Figure 11. Grid layout with all six tracks playing simultaneously.

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the subway door through which this video is being shot. At 4:26, the Vargas video cuts to black and the audio of the police radio chatter returns. Thirty seconds later, the Vargas video cuts back on. Its audio track cuts in with a distant scream and confused chattering from the crowd offscreen (“what happened? What happened?”, “oh, shit,” etc). It is not clear from either of the visual tracks exactly what these questions and shouts are in response to. The Vargas video track is now framed at an extreme canted angle that underscores the tension and instability of the event being recorded—and in this case it the angle itself is not a representational strategy but a direct material trace of the affective atmosphere amongst passengers at this moment. That is, the general sense of tension and confusion of this moment supersedes camerawoman/witness Karina Vargas’s desire or ability hold the camera level. The potential for her or anyone else present to be in immediate bodily danger at this moment drives the look of the video here.

No single image or sound in the first half of the video reveals much of anything at all if taken in isolation without any outside sense of context. Halfway through the video, it is not yet clear what is actually happening beyond a crowd gathering on a subway platform to observe men seated on the platform apparently being detained by police. The first few seconds of the Lui video, which cuts in for the first time at 5:03, show little other than the back of a person’s head and a metal bar that appears to be part of a subway. Nevertheless, this insignificant visual demands the viewer’s attention because it cuts in from black filling this corner of the screen for the first time and because the audio from that video now gets layered in as well, increasing the volume of the crowd chatter substantially at the moment.
this video track cuts in. While this documentary is clearly interested in producing evidence-based truth claims as to what exactly happened to Oscar Grant, this extended buildup to the shooting without context or narration presents an affectively complex position for the viewer to inhabit: the viewer is given a privileged structure from which to watch and learn about this event, but is still kept at an arm’s distance from knowing what is actually going on. No attempt to further explain or interpret the event is provided at any point.

The documentary is structured to position the viewer in an omnipotent perspective. There is, of course, no single point in space that would allow for the simultaneous witnessing of this event from each of these vantage points. Of course, this impositions of a privileged viewing position is somewhat false: while it appears to give the viewer special access to the event through this surveillance-style array of synchronous images (and actually does so during the actual shooting), the vast majority of the time the video is not actually using all of the tracks—for most of the video’s duration, it is only actually showing one or two angles at a time. Effectively, the visual layout presents a façade of knowing, confronting epistephilia as an affective rather than rational phenomenon. That is, the documentary is structured so that viewers feel like it is revealing much more than it actually does through the use of such an omnipresent viewing position.

The obfuscation of the event itself is also apparent within many of the video tracks. The most important actions often take place off-screen, behind objects that partially or fully block the camera’s view of the action, from angles or distances that make it hard to definitively know what is happening, or with the camera moving so quickly that the image is
blurred. Often, the objects in frame are not important, and crucial details are left off screen. The frequent use of extreme canted angles in several of the video tracks reflect the bodily response of these amateur cinematographers in the moment in response to the events unfolding around them. The sounds of the crowd and the very fact that so many people have taken out their cameras to record this event implies some level of danger, but it still is not clear who exactly is in danger or why. This video’s decision to linger on the unfolding of the event in real time even when it means inserting lengthy blank segments on many of the video tracks forces the viewer to sit with the tension of this moment and reflect on the affective weight not just of the killing itself but of the emergent public that witnesses it. Affect, then, matters at least as much to this video as the evidentiary value of the images it reproduces (all of which were already freely available online).

At 7:53, there is a loud cracking sound—the gunshot that kills Grant, though it wouldn’t necessarily be recognizable as such without context. At this point, only the Carazo video shows both the shooter (Mehserle) and the victim (Grant) both in frame from close enough that it might be clear what has happened, though ascertaining it from one initial viewing would almost certainly still be insufficient. The crowd’s tone shifts considerably to a shocked chorus of gasps and “oohs.” The crowd grows quieter for a moment. Then, yelling resumes louder than before. In the seconds following the gunshot, Dewar’s camera swish pans away from the police and begins quickly moving back toward where it was prior to the scuffle between police and the men on the platform. The Cross video cuts out. Shouts of “he shot that fucking guy,” “he just shot him, bruh,” and “hell no” erupt from the crowd. The
Cross video cuts back in at 8:13. At 8:19, the subway doors close. The Lui, Cross, and Carazo videos turn into nothing but motion blur before cutting to black. At 8:23, someone over the police radio calls for medical assistance for gunshot wounds. At 9:08, police approach Dewar and appear to move the cameraperson back onto the train. As they are doing so, they cover the lens of the camera. From that point on, only the Carazo video track is able to keep the police and men on the platform in frame. At 9:24, the train doors close once more and Carazo’s camera aimlessly records the floor of the train, capturing a few more seconds of audio from the crowd talking in disbelief about what they had just seen as the train begins to move. The Carazo video cuts out at 9:35, dropping the frantic crowd chatter down to silence and leaving only the BART surveillance feed of the train pulling away from the platform for the last four seconds of the video. This abrupt cut to black and silencing of the last witness video is startling and conveys a stark sense of loss. As the subway silently leaves the station, the viewer is transported back into the rhythms of everyday life in a way that is so uncomfortable as to critique the sort of “moving on” that a presentation of this event as an isolated tragedy might promote. At the same time, YouTube’s platform pulls against the resonance of this moment by propelling the viewer directly on to another video automatically chosen for them.

Despite the potential for YouTube’s platform to materially undercut the affective atmospheres cultivated through videos hosted on the site, such videos still have an important political role to play. In this case, videos taken on smartphones and digital cameras played an important role not just in spreading awareness about the killing of Oscar Grant but also in
securing the conviction of the man who shot him, officer Johannes Mehserle. The availability of multiple recordings of the same event proved important.\footnote{Stannard and Bulwa.}

Though I have so far focused on the ways that this documentary’s omnipotent perspective creates a sense of feeling knowledge rather than necessarily producing knowledge through rational argument, there is one key moment when the video tracks brought together here serve an enormously important evidentiary role: the actual moment of the shooting. As “Captured by 6 different…” shows by joining these videos as tracks of a split-screen collage, no single one of these videos is terribly informative on its own, but taken collectively their images of the shooting itself present a much more definitive truth of the event. Roy Bedard, an instructor in police use of force and tactics, makes a similar case in an interview: after viewing just one of the cell phone videos, he theorized that it was possible that the shooting may have been a “pure accident.” After viewing other videos that provided different angles on the killing, however, he said "Looking at it, I hate to say this, it looks like an execution to me. . . . It really looks bad for the officer."\footnote{Ibid.} Such a shift in this expert’s analysis demonstrates the key role of bringing together multiple angles on the same event. It also demonstrates a way in which digital documentaries can move beyond being isolated “mere footage” to open the potential for—not necessarily directly produce—political action and justice based on their ability to manufacture a sense of being undeniable. The truths

\footnote{141 Stannard and Bulwa.}
\footnote{142 Ibid.}
produced in this video are not truths of bare mechanical recording and indexical representation but of a techno-human agency bringing together of incomplete traces of the event to better know that event both rationally based on the evidence it aggregates and affectively as an embodied event of witnessing.

Even if “Captured by 6 different…” had not brought all of these vantage points on the killing together into the same text, the source footage is still so easily drawn together with other footage through linking, tagging, and embedding videos that ever considering it to be “raw” or “mere footage” in light of the plethora of images that are always already connected to it in potential through their metadata seems naive at best. Digitized footage on the web is always presented with context, never in isolation. What matters is how intentionally that context is created to advance an argument using such footage—or how that context functions to artificially isolate the footage and direct the viewer’s attention elsewhere.

Another more conventional short documentary video, “New court released footage of BART shooting and killing of Oscar Grant - June 2010” posted by the activist group streetgangs, relies heavily on the digital processing of witness’s videos to make its points. It produces argumentative connections and interpretations of the event not through presenting any new footage but through using freeze frames, slow motion, and voice-over narration to guide the viewer’s attention within the frame. The image-as-data here through digital processing becomes an image-as-evidence of propositions that would not be apparent from the unmanipulated footage, nor could they necessarily be conveyed through evidentiary editing. Likewise, “Fruitvale Station: The Oscar Grant Story” employs an approach grounded
in remix and reappropriation of publicly available images, in this case editing together footage of the event itself with news coverage of it, footage of Grant’s funeral, testimony from Oakland residents, news coverage of Officer Mehserle’s trial, footage of protests, and a montage of still images of Oscar Grant, Emmett Till, Amadou Diallo, Sean Bell, Rodney King, and Trayvon Martin; thus, it functions to give a concise overview of the killing and events following directly from it as well as use a very simple but effective strategy to link the injustice of Grant’s death to the systemic brutality faced by these other men both before and since. As Antony and Thomas observe, events like Grant’s death can “rupture the social fabric” not just by providing evidence of recent injustices but also by reintroducing past injustices for consideration in order to critically question not only the justness of this one killing but of law enforcement relationships to minority communities in general.  

While the remixing and reuse of archival footage through the split-screen layout in “Captured by 6 different…” is far more complex and highly orchestrated to present its argument about the criminal nature of Grant’s killing, the basic processes involved in creating each of these videos are similar, as is their impulse to produce not just evidence for arguments about the events but also affective impingements on their viewers in an attempt to change both how they think and what they feel. Of course, techniques like slow motion and freeze frames existed in film long before digital video. But media convergence has made it

143 Mary Grace Antony and Ryan J. Thomas, "‘This Is Citizen Journalism at its Finest’: YouTube and the Public Sphere in the Oscar Grant Shooting Incident," *New Media & Society* (2010): 1292.
such that nearly anyone who has a computer also has the basic video manipulation software necessary to rework existing digital videos. In “Oakland, Ca Fruitvale Bart Station Shooting. Full Video and interview with Karina Vargas” the presence of a laptop for video manipulation even plays a key role within the video itself. The video begins by playing witness Karina Vargas’s video of Grant’s death in its entirety without comment. Then, it cuts to an interview with Vargas in front of a laptop with the video file pulled up for reference. She watches and narrates it as we see the video playing on the laptop screen. These techniques are nothing new nor is the video’s style aesthetically revolutionary by any means. But it does demonstrate an ability to enter national and global conversations—this video has over 350,000 views, for example—in a way that had been previously reserved for an elite class of professionals. Gaining access to moving images of events like Oscar Grant’s death would have been exceedingly difficult in the first place just a few decades ago, and it would have been prohibitively expensive for individuals or all but the most well funded non-profits to remix such footage to produce their own truth claims about what the image-as-data actually shows.

While there may be unprecedented access to the means of video production, we should be careful not to assume that these tools are equally available to everyone or even that the availability of the tools necessarily empowers everyone with access to them to use them confidently. What’s more, we should be careful not to assume that simply entering such a conversation and submitting evidence into a discourse around an event like Grant’s death necessarily puts amateur documentarians on anywhere near the same level of power as the
mass media or even professional documentarians. But even with these qualifications it is clear that making public these kinds of images—images that both serve an evidentiary function and also attempt to catalyze social action—plays an important role not necessarily in changing the minds of every viewer but in opening up the possibility that we might now be able to collectively think differently about race, justice, policing, and other related issues. New pathways are opened by such irruptive events. But without such evidence and calls to action—to not just think differently but to feel and to be differently—the irruptive potential of the event fades. Rather than looking for one definitive documentary take on the Oscar Grant case, then, we should perhaps be looking instead for many, many documentaries on the event that employ a wide variety of heterogeneous styles, that are released immediately following the event and that continue to be released for years afterwards, that recontextualize the event within the lived experience of the filmmaker, and that exist not as demonstrations of expert skill and artistry but as expressions of a need to produce truth collectively rather than submit to the orthodoxy of dominant discourses.

Sparking a Movement: The Killing of Trayvon Martin

On February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin was shot and killed in the gated community where he lived. Martin was unarmed. The shooter, George Zimmerman, was a neighborhood watch coordinator. He was acquitted of second-degree murder charges based on Florida’s controversial “Stand Your Ground” law, which permits use of deadly force in self-defense.
against perceived threats with no obligation to retreat. \textsuperscript{144} Martin’s killing received a great deal more mass media coverage than Grant’s death had. It also took root more firmly in the consciousness of the American public. For one indication of this, Google searches for “Trayvon Martin” were exponentially higher than searches for “Oscar Grant” had been, and people searching for that name were dispersed throughout the country whereas searches for Grant tended to be from within California. Martin’s death and the public outcries that followed it mark the beginning of Black Lives Matter.

But unlike Grant’s death, Martin’s killing was not caught on tape. There is no footage, however incomplete, that shows Zimmerman pursuing Martin, the struggle that ensued between them, or the shooting itself. There are several audio recordings that give a partial picture of the events, however. First, there are recordings of the calls that Zimmerman himself placed to the police department’s non-emergency line while in pursuit of Martin. There are also 911 calls during and after the struggle that culminated in the shooting. Beyond that, we are left to make sense of exactly what happened using eyewitness testimony and the physical traces left by these events. It should not be terribly surprising, then, that while many of the documentaries about Oscar Grant’s death employ remixing and linking to connect the multiple if incomplete videos of his killing, documentaries of Martin’s death tend to employ a much more speculative mode, often seeking to explicitly advance a particular theory of the

\textsuperscript{144} Florida statutes, title XLVI, chapter 776, section 013, subsection 3 (2015): “A person who is attacked in his or her dwelling, residence, or vehicle has no duty to retreat and has the right to stand his or her ground and use or threaten to use force, including deadly force, if he or she uses or threatens to use force” (emphasis mine).
case and/or contextualize it within larger questions over race and the criminalization of blackness.

“The Death of Trayvon Martin” functions as both a data visualization and as a simulation of what might have happened extrapolating from archival materials. It is a speculative mode of documentary that seeks to extend the bounds of what is knowable, pushing the limits of the documents themselves in order to formulate theories of the event itself that are presented as theories. What is definitive and grounded in the evidence provided, however, is the fact that whatever actually happened on the night of Martin’s death, it could not possibly match Zimmerman’s account of the evening. In this sense, this documentary is as much about erasure of false “knowledge” that offers a partial, speculative reconstruction in its place.

This video, like “Captured by 6 different…,” uses a split screen containing multiple independent video tracks. In “The Death of Trayvon Martin,” however, this grid of video tracks is not always present throughout the duration of the video. At most, there are four video tracks arranged in a square. They show surveillance video of the clubhouse near the entrance to the gated community where Zimmerman and Martin both lived. These video tracks

145 Another video by the same poster, “New Improved George Zimmerman Re-enactment vs. The World,” engages in a similar speculative mode through much different visual means. It presents the footage from “Raw Video: George Zimmerman reenacts incident for Sanford Police,” Zimmerman’s recorded walkthrough of Martin’s killing, in its entirety and simply inserts intertitles and overlays audio of police calls to point out contradictions in Zimmerman’s timeline. The sheer frequency of the video’s interruption with these intertitles functions as an affective means of reinforcing the significance of each incongruity between Zimmerman’s account and other records of the event.
tracks on their own reveal almost nothing that would be intelligible as an image or as evidence in itself: the footage is low resolution, recorded at a rate of one frame per second, and shot using wide-angle lenses that further obscure details. They need each other: like a single data point, each individual camera angle is meaningless without being aggregated and interpreted. Also, while Zimmerman initially encountered Martin outside this clubhouse, the pursuit, struggle, and killing actually took place far from it and well outside the capacity of these cameras to capture it. Nevertheless, the documentary presents a voiceover that directly discusses many of these limits and reframes the viewer’s goal for looking at them. The voiceover instructs viewers to examine this surveillance footage not in terms of human figures or discrete actions but in terms of the “light events” they contain.

The “light event,” viewers are told, is the passage from dark to light to dark again across each surveillance feed in an order that implies the movement of a vehicle around the clubhouse. That is, the surveillance footage is reframed as data: these light events are small traces that abstract from the event that the filmmaker is interested in forwarding an argument about. They are meaningless unless taken in aggregate and interpreted under an agreed-upon regime of truth: in this case, namely that the light events do indeed bear the traces of actual movement of particular bodies in this specific time and place. Such abstraction and interpretation is taken a step further as the documentary overlays these surveillance feeds onto a map of the gated community. It uses simplistic, crude animation to visualize the movement of Martin, Zimmerman, and Zimmerman’s truck around the clubhouse when they
first encounter one another. In this sense, the documentary functions quite literally as a data visualization.

The central truth the documentary seeks to produce is that Zimmerman’s public account (and, later, sworn testimony) of events is not possible based on these partial records that exist. The visualization is important for setting up this argument, but the real argumentative thrust of the documentary comes from its juxtaposition of this complex visual (the four surveillance feeds appearing simultaneously and overlaid on an animated map of both men’s likely movements) with audio of Zimmerman’s call to the police at the time these light events were captured on camera and narration that summarizes what Zimmerman would later say about the timeline of events that evening. Elsewhere, the documentary combines other documents to strengthen its case: cell phone records, witness comments to police including audio of their calls to 911, onscreen text quoting from other testimony given after the fact, and so on. The documentary does not just establish an argumentative claim and present visual evidence to help advance it. The visuals here, like data, are a step further abstracted from typical documentary evidence. They need the audio and textual interpretation not only to become part of an argument but to be intelligible at all. The video, then, needs to construct a certain plausible regime of truth for itself, and it does so by drawing heavily on the notion of objectivity as an affective phenomenon. That is, it produces a sense of objectivity that sets an affective ground of impartiality and non-subjective analysis of specific observable traces of material processes. This is in stark contrast to the affective
frameworks in place in videos that seek to memorialize Martin or even those that seek to prompt viewers to engaging in direct action.

Objectivity as a felt phenomenon is crucial to the video’s production of truth. Viewers, it seems, would have little reason to keep watching the video other than this manufactured sense of objectivity’s affective appeal. Not much actual information is ever conveyed, so epistophilia on the basis of actually learning new information may explain why viewers begin watching, but it cannot explain why viewers keep watching throughout the video’s forty-eight minute duration. Epistophilia as an affective phenomenon—as feeling knowledge without regard for how much knowledge is actually acquired—can on the other hand explain a great deal about how this documentary uses data and produces truths. Nine minutes of the video, for example, is uninterrupted footage of the surveillance cameras showing absolutely nothing in particular worthy of the voiceover or onscreen text noting anything about it. On-screen text informs viewers at the beginning of this uninterrupted long take that it is coming up. The text also alludes to the idea that making the viewer feel exactly how long that duration is serves the purpose of helping the documentary to prove a point about the unlikelihood of Zimmerman’s account of events. “Unlikelihood” here is couched in the video’s pervasive sense of objectivity, but that unlikelihood of Zimmerman’s account is nevertheless communicated through this nine-minute section of surveillance footage as an embodied, affective, highly subjective experience of the passage of time. The video goes to great lengths to create a felt experience of knowing through measurement, data visualization, impartial observation, and its detailed descriptions of the procedures it is undertaking in order
to reconstruct possible series of events from the incomplete traces of them that exist in the data presented throughout the video. This felt experience of the pure passage of time in the surveillance footage long take, then, comes to be a significant way of subjectively sensing what happened within a documentary that otherwise presents itself in a scientific, objective framework of knowledge production.

“Dream Defenders Take Over Florida For Trayvon Martin (Episode One)” shifts the speculative mode from focusing on the killing itself to the potentials for political action that may be opening in the wake of that killing. “Dream Defenders Take Over…” looks like and functions as a promotional piece for the Dream Defenders organization specifically and the larger movement generally by speaking directly to issues that concern both. The video shifts focus quickly away from the specifics of Trayvon Martin’s death. Dream Defenders’ communications director, Steven Pargett, tells viewers in a direct address that he and his fellow activists are engaged in a sit-in at Florida Governor Rick Scott’s office to promote “Trayvon’s Law” legislation, but after this direct reference to Martin there is a clear move to describe affective rather than policy-based functions of the Dream Defenders organization and emerging Black Lives Matter movement. There appears to be a highly conscious attempt to shift away from the overwhelming sense of loss, danger, and disempowerment that the killing of Martin brought with it for many Americans, particularly black Americans. Instead, the video focuses on positivity, community building, and the need to reinvest in collectively imagining a better future. It barely mentions Martin at all and instead discusses more
widespread issues of justice, specifically concerning the interrelated issues of racial profiling, the school-to-prison pipeline, and “stand your ground” laws.

The second episode in this series shows Dream Defenders holding a “People’s Session” inside the Florida Capitol. While this protest action is described in the video as a way of compiling a “People’s Record” based on “expert testimony and lived experience” on the school-to-prison pipeline, very little of this information is presented to viewers. The information that is given about the school-to-prison pipeline is presented via voice-over narration. It is not addressed or even invoked indirectly in the video’s visuals. Again, it is not the evidence of crime that matters here but the evidence of affective intensities sufficient to sustain a growing movement and to produce political change. This evidence is presently abundantly in the form of the visuals themselves: the People’s Session taking place inside the Capitol, marches on the Capitol steps, blockades of streets, and, most prominently, chants inside the Capitol rotunda. In stark contrast to the images that have circulated on social media of pained and brutalized black bodies presented as evidence of injustices committed against Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, and so many others, this video instead presents a vision of black, brown, and white bodies joining together to collectively exercise power sufficient to not only take over the Capitol but to hold their own public inquiries there, effectively

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146 The third episode in this series does focus on the presentation of “lived experience testimonies” presented at the People’s Session, but even here the focus is on the intense, lingering, affective and psychological harm caused---as presented here---by the Stand Your Ground law.
supplanting the existing government that is disinterested in considering policy changes around racial justice.

These videos enact a frame shift from activist documentary used to produce evidence of an event to documentary used to produce evidence of affect. They do not present details about proposed policy changes, nor do they even offer evidence supporting the claim that policy changes are necessary—that much is treated as an assumption the audience will already share. Instead, this series is concerned with generating positive affect, something that is sorely needed to keep activists engaged and prevent burnout, in part through providing evidence of existing affect of exactly the sort it aims to reproduce elsewhere on a wider scale within activist communities. The first video in this series, for example, includes a montage of talking heads in which a series of young black, brown, and white people discuss why Dream Defenders is important to them. They describe it as “almost spiritual,” a “revolution,” and “a family.” One speaker describes it as “a coalition of black, brown, and allied youth that are committed to fighting systematic racism.” Another speaker casts an even wider net, saying “a Dream Defender is simply somebody who’s trying to strive for equality” and who realizes the importance of getting others politically motivated to strive for equality, too. All of this occurs in a video that by its title and opening scene ostensibly presents itself as a documentary of a protest: the occupation of a government building. This talking head segment begins at 1:30 and lasts until 3:25 of the video’s 4:02 duration, and it is bookended with footage of speeches given in the Capitol during the sit-in. As such, the video’s perception of the political stakes is clear: further expanding such positive affects and imbuing
Dream Defenders specifically with the valence of community and togetherness is structured as a priority.

Though the videos in this series are unlike “The Death of…” and “New and Improved…” in many ways, they are alike in the sense that they are all interested in producing documentary truths in a speculative mode. “The Death of…” and “New and Improved…” construct speculative interpretations of the actual event of Martin’s killing. In the case of the “Dream Defenders Take Over…” series, though evidence of a more generalized affect is clearly privileged over evidence of the details of a specific case, these videos also function as speculative documentaries. They craft speculative narratives that extrapolate from the successes of current efforts at political organizing as evidence of the movement’s potential to grow in the present and build a more just society in the future.

Amplification: The Killing of Michael Brown

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, MO. He was unarmed. His death lead to protests across the country and around the world. Many observers credit the protests following Mike Brown’s killing as the genesis of Black Lives Matter.¹⁴⁷ This historical inaccuracy is troubling in the way that it erases the work of the queer black

women who put in the leg work to get the movement and its official chapters off the ground. It does, however, speak to the dramatic shift in the scale of the movement following Brown’s death. It is possible to ignore the organizing work that took place following Martin’s death in part because it was so thoroughly impossible to ignore the labors of resistance that followed Brown’s death. Some activists who are fully aware of the protests and organizing work that followed Martin’s death still credit the events in Ferguson as the start of the movement and relegate everything that came before it to the prehistory of the movement.  

Brown’s death might appear to be an unlikely candidate for amplifying Black Lives Matter and transforming it into an international movement, as Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark suggest. Unlike Grant’s killing, there is no video evidence of exactly what happened immediately before or during this shooting, and Brown’s death took place in a small and relatively unknown town. Unlike Martin’s killing, there is no equivalent of the Stand Your Ground law for citizens to rally against as a single policy solution in the wake of Brown’s death.

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death. Nevertheless, Brown’s death helped make “Black Lives Matter” into a household name, and it put police brutality at the top of national conversations about politics.\textsuperscript{150}

While there is no video evidence of his death, there is an audio of the gunshots fired at him by Officer Darren Wilson. The audio, which was released anonymously, had been recorded incidentally in the background of a video-text message through the Glide messaging platform (a fact a promotional post on Glide.com uses to hawk its product and generally naturalize the idea of ubiquitous video capture).\textsuperscript{151} Unlike the amateur documentaries of Martin’s killing, however, documentaries concerning Brown’s killing tend not to employ a speculative mode or engage with the details of the event itself. Instead, they tend to be more personal and interested in making connections between the filmmaker’s personal experience and not just the specifics of Brown’s treatment.

Media criticism also becomes a common mode within these documentaries, a mode that will persist in being important through current work around the Black Lives Matter movement. Filmmakers frequently observe, document, and critique the biases and racist tendencies in mass media coverage of Brown’s death and the protests that followed. This mode of media critique often exists alongside reflections on personal experience. Media critique, especially critiques of mass media and twenty-four hour news, are often posed as

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\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
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counterpoints to the personal testimonies that these documentaries tend to provide. That is, filmmakers who appear to be supporters of Brown and Black Lives Matter tend to pose their personal experiences with race and racism against the ways that race is treated in mass media. These tendencies also appear frequently in videos that explicitly oppose the movement. That is, in these videos the mainstream media is often derided as being too liberal, talking too much about race, and not sufficiently supporting police officers. In all cases, it is clear that digital video processing makes this mode of media critique possible for an unprecedented number of filmmakers, both amateur and professional, because it makes it easy to record and recombine mass-media footage in amateur videos. Media convergence has made the technologies required to produce such media widely available as standard parts of widespread consumer devices: multiple cameras built into smart phones and tablets, screenshot software as a standard feature built into computer and smartphone operating systems, basic video editing software pre-installed on tablets and computers, etc. An amateur media-maker need not have a pre-existing desire to make media that compels them to go out and purchase (or otherwise acquire access to) such technologies. Many people now are just a few clicks away from using such technology the moment they have an inclination to produce their own media.

Many filmmakers appear to be engaging in media criticism mode of documentary out of a perceived social need to rectify mass media biases generally. Others seem to perceive an

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ethical need to engage in image correction on behalf of the deceased victims, who often have their personal character put “on trial” publicly through mass media. A directors’ statement on the website for the forthcoming feature documentary Whose Streets? describes a third factor motivating media criticism as a mode of documentary production: they describe the town of Ferguson itself as having experienced “media colonization” in the days and weeks following Michael Brown’s death. This claim points directly to the material obstruction of the flows of everyday life posed by television news crews arriving en masse to report over the course of several days on Brown’s death and the protests that emerged in response to it.

“I Don't Want To Be Afraid Of The Police | #Ferguson #MikeBrown” responds directly to these concerns. It is a highly personal take on the killing of Mike Brown. The bulk of content is drawn from still images shared via social media (sourced from Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr, and wiki creative commons as cited in the video’s description). The video presents several clips and still images of militarized police quashing peaceful protests in the wake of Brown’s death. It also incorporates several screenshots from discussions of race on social media and in online articles. It often presents multiple screenshots appearing in frame at the same time. It is a documentary of documents: its central concern is presenting an

153 This video blurs the line between amateur and professional documentary because it is produced by Franchesca Ramsey, who is a professional actor and was a correspondent on the now defunct Comedy Central program The Nightly Show. She is not, however, a professional documentarian and her YouTube videos tend to more closely resemble highly researched video essays and/or vlog entries rather than the cable news style of The Nightly Show. Like so many of these videos, it also blurs the lines between documentary, vlogs, and journalism.
argument about the way that black bodies tend to be represented in mass media. It advances its argument through personal reflection on the filmmaker’s own life experience as a black woman and draws connections between her testimony and the dehumanizing processes that mass media subjects black bodies to.

This documentary also discusses the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag explicitly and provides screenshots of examples of images that were shared using the hashtag. The hashtag, which rose to prominence on various social media platforms shortly before this video was released, responds to the patterns of unequal representation of blacks and whites in the news. Black victims of police brutality are often portrayed through images that are unflattering and/or imply criminality, whereas even white alleged murderers are often portrayed through much more sympathetic photographs. The hashtag invites people, especially people of color, to personalize this critique by posting flattering photos of themselves (often at graduations, in family photos, in school pictures, etc.) alongside the type of photos they perceive the mass media typically using to represent black bodies (mug shots, photos that include gang signs or in which the subject simply looks angry, pictures that imply connections with hip-hop culture, etc.). The video itself employs a similar strategy of producing a critique of mass media through the personalization of the phenomenon being critiqued.
The video also functions as a highly datafied image and as an image that promotes the datafication of the viewer’s affective experience. That is, it uses direct links to means for viewers to act in response to the anticipated outrage that the video will produce. The video provides screenshots of WhiteHouse.gov petition to require police to use body cameras, and there is a prominent link directly to it in the video description. The video description also links to fundraising sites, one for bail and legal fees for Ferguson residents arrested during protests and another for low-income students missing meals due to school closures in the wake of the Ferguson protests. These links in particular respond to the notion of Ferguson having experienced the material subjugation of a “media colonization” and police lockdown.
In addition to promoting these online actions for viewers to take, this collection of links also points outward to further evidence in support of its central claims. The description box includes links to a Melissa Harris Perry television news piece, “Black and Unarmed,” as well as articles from a number of sources including *The New York Times* and *Al Jazeera* alongside *The Huffington Post* and Occupy.com. Still more links point to curated examples of images shared via the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag, other YouTube videos extending this critique of racialized representation in mass media, and a plethora of links to the filmmaker’s presence elsewhere online: Upworthy, her personal website, multiple YouTube channels (separated by categories like comedy, hair, vlogs, etc.), Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Google+, Instagram, and Pinterest. Several of these links are alluded to or explicitly mentioned within the video itself, so it is not as if these are simply paratexts being tacked on as an afterthought. They are central to the connective logic of the documentary itself. In such instances of engaging in media criticism, the datafied image becomes especially important: screenshots and other “born-digital” images often function as data within these videos, and the videos themselves often make frequent use of links to point outward and chart paths for viewers through other media.

Of course, as with the killings of Grant and Martin, Brown’s death also prompted the creation of many documentary videos about the resulting protests themselves. The image’s ability to function as data is crucial in several of these instances, too, particular at moments of struggle between protesters and police. Often, the protester holding the camera perceives themselves as being in such physical danger that the imperative to protect themselves takes
precedent over the desire to produce visible evidence of each moment of the event. This is clearly the case in “#Ferguson Dispatch: Gassed,” where the entire image track is nothing but a blur throughout the duration of the video. In such instances, the images frequently become so blurry or otherwise distorted as to be useless for constructing an argument about the militarization of police (or similar related issues). Instead, the indecipherable image becomes a visualization of data: a trace of movement that abstracts affective intensities from it and bears a material trace of struggle rather than a representational signifier responding to a rhetorical exigency. This section has focused on how the image itself functions as data or to connect data. The next section will focus on the datafied image and the kinds of control exerted through the algorithmic processing of such data.

While I have focused so far on three irruptive events—in this case, killings—that have played important roles in sparking and shaping this movement, it would be wrong to go any further without making it clear that these are by no means the only important events that have shaped the movement nor are they the only instances in which documentary had major consequences. Visible evidence of the killings of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Laquan McDonald, Samuel DuBose, and Walter Scott among others played major roles in making information about these deaths widely available, and in the cases of McDonald, DuBose, and Scott helped lead to indictments on charges of murder. Documentary videos served as both evidence of police misconduct in the arrest of Sandy Bland and as a way of trying to piece together what little evidence existed about her cause of death in order to make sense of it. In the cases of Rekia Boyd, Ezell Ford, Freddie Gray, Jamar Clark, and many others,
documentary has played a valuable role after the actual killings as a way of testifying to the injustices that were committed, documenting acts of protest in response to those injustices, and calling on others to join in the larger fight against systemic oppression.

**Conclusion**

The emerging practices of connecting nonfiction footage illustrates a move away from the “collector of stories” with a privileged perspective that is implied to be the correct perspective. Such a shift may seem more democratic on the face of it until we consider that the collector of stories is not actually ceasing to exist but simply *disappearing*—that is: it is being distributed across a number of different algorithmic processes created and controlled by a series of parts, both mechanical and human. There is a real need, then, to consider ways of wresting control away from the status quos of the machine’s politics but to do so in a way that is not concentrated in any single privileged position of authority. Some ways of doing this are awfully simple—tagging, linking, circulating, even ceding digital spaces but doing so intentionally, collaboratively, and strategically. But even these strategies produce data trails that may allow for the capture of the movement’s intensities, either by forces of the state or by global capital. The paths that viewers are encouraged to chart through these visual arguments as structured through playlists, links, and hashtags may seem invisible, fleeting, and immaterial. But in the world of digital media, every action leaves a trace. Rethinking the bounds of textuality and the transtextual nature of such emerging argumentative structures for digital documentaries is key if we are to better understand not only the options that exist
for massively collaborative authorship and argumentation but also the multiple and potentially harmful effects of crafting such arguments through existing platforms and media hardware that embody different political logics. It is key if we are to better understand how the automatic processes of these platforms function to perpetually increase their ability to capture our attention and direct it toward consumer capital, what strategies exist for resisting such capture and using the logics of these systems against themselves, and the ways that such systems may adapt to such strategies.

The videos produced by witnesses and protests supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, I argue, are not only valuable in and of themselves as documents of struggle, but they produce documentaries in new ways by using the visual structures of websites and streaming media platforms to connect such images into larger arguments. Linking becomes a method of editing, and it becomes a particularly important tool when creating connections between images that exist (in the case of many of the Ferguson videos in particular) as uninterrupted long takes. That is, without any internal editing (in the traditional sense of “editing”), the links between these single-shot videos become the connective tissue that allows larger arguments to emerge.

In addition to direct links, such documentary videos are also often linked through the creation of playlists and through the use of hashtags to unite a wide range of documentary material, often in ways that combine videos produced by the person doing the linking with videos produced by others in a way that creates a new form of collective, emergent authorship that is not reducible to any one individual. These are not “interactive
documentaries” in the sense of Kate Nash or “living documentaries” in the way Gaudenzi has in mind, but they nevertheless are interactive, living, and bound up in different sets of social and technical relationships than traditional documentary feature films. As such, they do not just allow for the potential for marginalized people to document their experiences: they help viewers and movement participants alike reimagine how to act collectively. They are able to maintain discussions of social justice long after the irruptive events that sparked such a discussion have faded from general public consciousness. They help build the ground from which more radical, direct social change can occur by demonstrating that there is indeed still room for collective resistance to injustice and that such resistance can build communities, connect geographically and temporally dispersed social issues, challenge dominant discourses, provide visible evidence, and generate affects that empower viewers to do more than get lost in the flow of images.

Of course, by their very nature as digitally-networked media, such documentaries are a double-edged sword. For all of their potential benefits, they can also enable state-based tracking and surveillance of activists, media producers, and viewers of such radical media. Digital surveillance can also be used by corporate interests to commodify and extract value from audience attention. Accordingly, we must always be careful to consider ways of mitigating the risks and limits inherent in any medium, as well as any viable alternatives that might exist.
CHAPTER 3: (Euro)Maidan: Body Power & Mediated Affect

Sergei Loznitsa’s *Maidan* is a feature-length observational documentary about the Maidan movement in Ukraine. It portrays a few significant events in the movement, but it focuses much of the time instead on ordinary moments—that is, “ordinary” within the rhythms of this movement as it emerged. The film opens with a seemingly endless crowd—a pattern of faces and thick coats repeating out in all directions. This crowd listens to a booming voice offscreen. The scratchy speakers throw the sounds through all their bodies. “We begin our gathering with the national anthem of Ukraine.” Hats come off of heads. A recorded tune plays. The crowd sings in unison. “...Souls and bodies we’ll lay down, all for our freedom.” The stage on which the camera sits jostles, shaking the otherwise static frame. The faces flicker. The song ends. Cheers erupt. Hats return to heads. And all at once, the crowd shouts: “Glory to Ukraine! Glory to heroes!”

The arrangement of bodies as presented in this scene is used in the film to express a sense of unity, but the arrangement of these bodies in this space in the first place is already an expression of emergent unity, of becoming united, of proprioceptive sensations within these bodies that are only later taken up and cognitively understood as unity. The event here is one of becoming-crowd, and the public speech and presence of the camera are tools for attempting to modulate that affective experience from this one particular crowd to the larger movement as a whole and, beyond it, to the nation of Ukraine in the midst of reshaping itself.
The unity expressed here in the documentary text is also a phenomenon that resonates within the unfolding of the event itself of which the camera—but not yet the documentary text—is a part.

While affect is an important and understudied aspect of documentary generally, it is crucial to consider in the context of digital docmedia. Here, I focus on affect in the context of Maidan because the many different amateur docmedia, TV documentaries, and feature-length documentaries of the movement tend to have radically different affective valences produced from source footage of the same events: typically the initial occupation of the Maidan including Berkut (military police) violence against protesters, the Hrushevskoho Street riots, and the Russian invasion of Donbas in Eastern Ukraine following the ouster of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych.

While some documentaries of Maidan are more nuanced than others, all tend to be drastically split on the question of how viewers are positioned to respond to the movement as a whole and specifically to the presence of far-right militants who comprise one segment of the movement. At the extreme ends of the spectrum, films like Netflix’s Oscar-nominated Winter On Fire sidestep the far right’s presence altogether, making them visible at Maidan events without ever making them intelligible to the film’s target audience of Anglophone Westerners. The film never makes clear the meaning, for example, of the myriad of Svoboda Party or Right Sector banners on full display at rallies (both of which indicate support for far-right militant nationalism). Instead, the film cultivates a sense of unmitigated heroism and triumph. Maidan supporters are universally glorified, and viewers are positioned to feel
wholeheartedly inspired. By this film’s end, the movement’s supporters have vanquished all
opposition and initiated a new era of democracy, freedom, and unmitigated optimism in
Ukraine. At the other extreme are films like Canal+’s TV documentary *Ukraine: The Masks
of Revolution*, which focus almost exclusively on the far right as though it were the sole force
behind Maidan. In that film, the movement is filled with sinister, violent terrorists and is
portrayed as a wolf in sheep's clothes that all viewers should unequivocally fear. The same
human bodies on the Maidan become sparks for very different affective atmospheres based
on how these bodies are situated.

With the increasing proliferation of digital documentary, activists and human beings
interested in democratic politics not only have unprecedented opportunities for making truth
claims that have the potential to foster social change, but scholars also have an
unprecedented window into how modern activist movements operate through examining
these texts. Affect is key to understanding the degree to which these movements are working
at levels that extend beyond the textual, linguistic levels. Documentaries that take advantage
of their wider affective ecologies rather than simply considering the representational tools
they have at their disposal have the opportunity to be particularly effective, and when these
documentaries are outgrowths of larger movements, they can work to modulate already
active affective fields, perhaps sustaining individuals’ willingness to continue acting
collectively, demonstrating degrees or kinds of agency that may have been otherwise
unrecognizable to viewers, or even mediating between traditional institutional power
structures to bring about change. When such documentaries are produced and circulated
using digital technologies, an affective approach to studying them allows us to see what kinds of agents are already exerting power within these digital networks and the material structures that create them.

The confluence of so many different documentaries expressing so many different viewpoints situated in so many different institutional contexts and varieties of amateurism creates not only a space in which to develop knowledge about and reflections upon the documented event’s enduring significance, but also to contest the basic facts of the event itself. It is not just a question of the meaning of the bodies encountering one another in an event but of the very nature of the bodies themselves and which ones encounter which other ones when and under what conditions. Bodily encounters and the resulting increase, decrease, or stasis in their capacities to act are the most basic definition of “affect” as understood by Spinoza and later developed in the thought of Deleuze and Guattari.154

In this chapter, I examine digital documentaries of the Maidan movement and the ways in which they restructure power dynamics by both connecting and documenting the connection of bodies in public space. I first provide context on the Maidan movement itself and the political climate from which it emerged. Then, I turn to documentary treatment of three central events in the Maidan movement: the initial occupation of Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti), the Hrushevskoho Street riots, and the “civil war” in Donbas. I focus on an ongoing documentary project that has been making videos of the movement from

its very beginning, *Babylon ’13: A Cinema of Civil Society*, and I compare its treatment of these events with their treatment in other web docs, TV documentaries, and feature films about the movement. Finally, I examine the ways in which the body mediated functions as affective evidence, and I situate this discussion in scholarship on documentary witnessing.

Central Events

Inciting Events: Between Russia and Europe

On November 21, 2013, protesters gathered in Independence Square in Ukraine’s capital city Kyiv to speak out against their government’s uncomfortably close relationship with Russia under Vladimir Putin’s administration.\(^{155}\) Initially, the protests were in direct response to the Ukrainian government’s failed promises to move the nation closer to joining the European Union. Activists on the square, who were at first predominantly students,

sought to reconfigure Ukraine’s place on the world’s stage from being a de facto dependent of Russia to being a truly independent, and European, nation. The protests quickly gained support throughout Ukraine and soon became a full-fledged movement: the EuroMaidan movement took its name from Independence Square itself—or, in Ukrainian, Maidan Nezalezhnosti—which was the central site of protests.

Over time, however, the movement became a much broader response to the general status quo of politics in Ukraine, and protesters came from all segments of Ukrainian society. Before long, Berkut special police forces became violent with protesters. This sparked further outrage, which prompted more and more people to join the protests, which further increased tensions with police. As the movement grew, the focus shifted away from the specific failure of Yanukovych to keep his promise to take steps to join the European Union and toward a more general opposition to the status quo of government corruption and its lack of accountability to its people. The “Euro” part of the “EuroMaidan” name was eventually dropped to reflect this shift as the movement evolved.

During the first wave of protests, as many as 800,000 supporters braved the freezing winter weather to occupy a tent city that had sprung up around Independence Square in Kyiv, Ukraine’s capital and largest city.\(^{156}\) Throughout Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of

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additional protesters held demonstrations, set up encampments in other major cities, and occupied various government buildings in support of the movement. Police and military violence against protesters sparked international outrage leading to solidarity rallies in cities around the world.157 Just three months after the initial protests in Kyiv, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych succumbed to the pressure building within his country and from the international community. He fled the capital and went into exile in February of 2014.158

Yanukovych’s decision to vacate the presidency seemed to be a major victory for the Maidan movement. Many Ukrainians and most if not all supporters of the movement viewed Yanukovych as a corrupt puppet of Putin’s regime.159 This major victory for the protesters, however, was short lived: Putin’s administration took advantage of Ukraine’s political instability at this moment and seized the opportunity to invade parts of Ukraine while its government was in transition.160 Russia annexed the previously Ukrainian (though historically contested) Crimean peninsula. The presence of Russian forces in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine touched off a war. Complicating matters further is the fact that


159 Marples, Ukraine’s EuroMaidan, 14-15.

160 Ibid., 21-22.
eastern Ukraine is home to many ethnic Russians and native Russian speakers. Some of these ethnic Russians living in Ukraine became separatists and took up arms—often supplied by Putin—to fight against Ukraine. Despite several intermittent ceasefire agreements, the fighting continues to this day.¹⁶¹

Protest

“The Maidan Gathering / Майдан збирається / Майдан собирается,” a documentary video of the demonstrations on Independence Square on December 1, 2013, shows an incredible spectacle. Protesters scramble up a giant metal Christmas tree. The cameraperson, offscreen, moves with them. From the ground, perhaps a dozen feet below, people pass signs up to the protesters. “Yanukovich is not Ukraine,” reads one, written in English, that the camera lingers on. Others pass up flags: many of Ukraine, others of the European Union. The camera turns out to the crowd and surveys it from above. The streets are overflowing with protesters in every direction. There is drumming and chanting and voices shouting through bullhorns. A voice close to the camera, perhaps the cameraman’s own, talks on a phone: “Yes, yes I’m standing on the Christmas tree.” After each subsequent cut, the camera moves a bit higher until, near the top, the camera rests on a fluttering EU flag that has been anchored into the metal frame of the tree. The video ends.

This video is part of #Babylon’13: Cinema Of A Civil Society, a series of
documentary videos on YouTube that, unlike many participatory hashtagged documentaries,
does not actually invite others to participate by producing their own content. While such
viewer participation is frequently seen as the function and key appeal of the hashtag, the
hashtag functions here more as a way of inviting viewers to share, spread, and occasionally
help contextualize these videos produced by the Babylon ‘13 filmmaking collective
themselves as they document the Maidan movement. Though this is not an example of
some radically open, massively collaborative project that anyone can contribute to, it does
serve as an example of how particular digital media technologies afford the creation of
collaborative work: the Babylon ‘13 collective, which includes dozens of filmmakers, is able
to coordinate and distribute videos on a wide range of issues related to the political upheaval
in Ukraine and still shape them into a coherent, centralized project through the use of its
YouTube channel as a distribution hub. The members of the collective produce work that is

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162 Babylon ‘13 does not typically credit specific filmmakers for its projects, preferring instead to credit the entire filmmaking collective anonymously. Names of contributing members are not widely available or publicized through any of Babylon ‘13’s social media profiles or websites. The list of filmmakers below is the most comprehensive available: Volodymyr Voytenko, Oleksandr Stekolenko, Ivan Sautkin, Yulia Shashkova, Filip Rozhen, Maria Ponomaryova, Anastasia Maksymchuk, Roman Bondarchuk, Yulia Hontaruk, Kostyantyn Klyatskyn, Dmytro Sukholytyi-Sobchuk, Eduard Georgadze, Larysa Artyugina, Yuri Dunay, Yuri Gruzinov, Vitali Veller, Anton Fursa, Olena Chekhovska, Igor Savchenko, Denis Vorontsov, Roman Klympush, Kateryna Zadorozhna, Olena Saulich, Tetyana Neistova, Pavlo Kot, Sergi Klepach, Roman Lyubii, Andri Rogachov, Mariya Nesterenko, Vitali Barabash, Yaryna Grusha, Marysya Nikytyuk, Grygoriy Khovrakh, Anna Tykha, Oleksandr Chepiga, Vadym Miagkyi, Natalia Melnychuk, and Ivan Levchenko. See: Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, “Events,” Retrieved from csw.art.pl/index.php?action=aktualnosci&s2=1&id=1044&lang=eng.
distributed over a vast space (videos are shot in cities and villages all across Ukraine—the largest country in Europe after Russia) and time (they began in November of 2013 and continue to be released to this day, sometimes uploaded just hours after the events they depict have occurred), yet that still cohere into a documentary project with a clear perspective and voice.

The #Babylon ’13 video “The Citizen / Громадянин / Гражданин” serves as a perfect example of how this project mobilizes a heterogenous voices and images of the transformed spaces of the maidan itself in order to develop a sense of power stemming from the communal spirit of being-together in the space of Independence Square in the early days of its occupation. “The Citizen” creates an otherworldly, dreamlike atmosphere that sets an affective ground on which this and other videos in the project can build a new political imaginary. As such, it seems to be self-consciously fostering affects of dreams, hopes, possibilities—that is, its cinematography, editing, and score cultivate an affective mode of engagement (one that fosters a sense of unlimited potential that breaks from the world-as-it-is-now) that is a more expressionistic manifestation of the political imaginary that it is simultaneously creating through its dialogue, mise en scène, and the arrangement of bodies in this transformed public space. It shapes images of the square itself and transforms them into something even larger and more awe-inspiring than any of the actual events we see occurring on the square throughout the video. It constitutes a sort of witnessing in the subjunctive mood—witnessing not just what has happened on the square, but what may now be possible based on the work that is happening and continues to happen there. Such a sense
of historical rupture does not just happen; it must be produced through enormous amounts of labor from the protesters themselves as well as the filmmakers. While such labor is affective, it is not immaterial.

“The Citizen” creates this atmosphere primarily through its use of an extremely shallow depth of field and intermittent use of slow motion. The video presents a series of talking head interviews in the foreground with the Maidan’s tent city in the midground and buildings that are completely out of focus in the background. The interviews take place at night, and there are a number of lights in the background that are completely blurred. There is also a heavy haze of fog and/or smoke that further disperses the lights. In the midground, out-of-focus flags and banners waft in the breeze creating blurs of reds, yellows, and blues in front of the golden-and-white haze of the background. It is in this setting of public space transformed into a dreamscape through cinematography that one interviewee describes what he is seeing on the Maidan: “Ukrainian society reborn.”
Another activist, dressed in traditional Cossack garb, says that “people stopped looking for Messiah, or ‘tzar’ who would be supposed to do something for us. We are ready to do everything by ourselves.” Such a statement is evidence of important affective and intellectual work happening through the coming together of all of these different people within the self-organized space of the remade Maidan Nezalezhnosti. This notion of collective self-reliance, not of pure individual independence but of newly forming interdependent communities, is also key to the #Babylon ‘13 project itself and the political imaginary it is cultivating; indeed, such a communal self-reliance is inherent in the way that the filmmakers themselves approach the production of these videos as a filmmaking collective. As the man...
in “The Citizen” speaks, he is initially framed in a two shot, then we hear his voice continue as the image cuts to a slow motion shot of two men in traditional Cossack garb playing a tulumbasy—a large kettle drum that, like the men’s outfits, is also evocative of traditional Cossack culture. In this sequence, the image ties the viewer to the pre-Soviet history of Ukraine while the audio encourages listeners to look forward to what it is now possible to conceive of in the wake of this recognition that the people can save themselves and make their own politics without the need for an external, individual savior. While scenes of such drumming appear in other documentaries of Maidan, including ICTV’s Revolution of Dignity (2014), no others use the presence of this object on the square to produce such a particular effect.

Figure 14. “The Citizen” visualizes the freely shared labor of movement-building.
“The Citizen” employs a powerful structuring motif that draws a direct connection between the labor of Maidan supporters and their shared investment in the place of the maidan itself. At the end of each talking head interview in this video, the interviewees say how much time per day they contribute to activism on the maidan. They also briefly describe what general skills and expertise they contribute. There are designers and IT professionals as well as artists, builders, entrepreneurs, and military veterans. With a wide range of occupations and hours volunteered for the benefit of the cause along with very little overlap between professions presented in this video, it conjures up a political imaginary that appears to demonstrate how collective labor for the mutual benefit of the larger community can and does occur within the space of the maidan without the need for any government oversight or capitalist imperatives to organize it.

As each Maidan supporter tells the audience what they contribute to the movement in these voiceovers, we see them place a wooden plank with their profession and hours per day contributed painted on it next to several other planks with the same information. These planks are laid out on the street in and around the tent city on the Maidan. At the end of the video, we see an extreme close up of one of these planks. The camera then pulls back to reveal a number of planks arranged in the shape of Ukraine’s borders. A graphic overlay reads, “Profession: Citizen.” This powerful visual metaphor and call to action functions not only as a structuring device for this video, but as an affectively engaging event in and of itself that allows the activists themselves to create this tangible marker of simultaneous unity.
and diversity that exists as an affirmative act of protest within the public space of the Maidan. Each plank becomes a visual signifier of the labor given freely to the movement by these supporters, and the sum of that labor literally recreates an image of the nation. Place, then, is remade physically on the maidan itself as well as reconfigured at the level of the nation and the imagined community that shares a connection with it.

“..."The Citizen” video also goes to great lengths to eschew traditional party politics, and when the existing political landscape is indirectly invoked, the images demonstrate collaboration across party boundaries. Some of the flags that are occasionally visible in long
shots of the crowd represent parties from the left, center, and far right. All of them come together within the space of the Maidan to imagine a larger, broad-based coalition that holds up the needs of the common people (namely, to cease being brutally oppressed by the current government) over any particular party politics. Some of the interviewees in “The Citizen” do tacitly endorse particular political views: The flag that the chainsaw wood sculptor is wearing here is for Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform candidate (and current Mayor of Kyiv) Vitali Klitschko.

163 “Left” and “right” in the context of a former Soviet state are more complicated terms than they might seem, but they remain useful as shorthand here as delving into the political history of the Soviet Union remains beyond the scope of this project.

164 Vitali Klitschko is a former world heavyweight champion boxer and, accordingly, both a celebrity and something of a national hero. His brother, Wladimir, is currently world champion.
Neither he nor any of the other activists interviewed actually discuss the political parties or candidates whom they support, however. Instead, the interviewees generally ignore or disdain party politics. One man even says, “we don’t support any political party.” What is happening, to him and many other interviewees, is the recognition of the need for wider systemic change. Ukraine’s Orange Revolution ten years earlier can be seen as ultimately having failed precisely because the movement pinned all of its hopes on one specific politician: Viktor Yushchenko. The Maidan movement, as this video makes clear, embraces a number of different political views and people who support various politicians, but it most directly endorses this activist’s view that the movement needs to be bigger than party politics.
and politics as usual. It is a clear call for a new politics of direct action and the establishment of a government that is democratic in more than name only. This newly imagined regime requires more from citizens than participation in electoral politics.

Michael Renov’s discussion of a different filmmaking collective, Newsreel, and their protest documentary *Summer ’68* serves as a valuable corollary for the sort of joint affective labor taking place at the intersection of movie and movement in the case of #Babylon’13 and Maidan. Renov extends the idea of the political imaginary to the understanding of who exactly “counts” as a subject of this newly imagined political regime. The film, he says, asks questions about how to negotiate the “we” of the movement of which the protesters are part, how to ensure a sense of legitimacy for actions taken in the name of “the people,” and how to make meaningful change in a complex society.165 The demonstrations that are depicted in *Summer ’68* rhetorically draw on an emerging counterpublic and articulate for it a new political imaginary. Renov quotes a participant in the protests depicted in *Summer ’68* as saying, “this is what it will look like when we can really say ‘we are the people.’” This image, he says, generates the sorts of affects necessary to increase participation in the movement and have the sense of empowered agency necessary to get through the day-to-day business of making social change happen.166

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166 Ibid., 20.
Such images are of their movements, but they also actively perpetuate their movements. They do so by showing not just what has happened but the possibilities that are being opened up by what has happened (in this case, the transformation of society into a more egalitarian, collective, polyvocal system where the will of the common people drives decision-making rather than the interests of capital and the political elite). The #Babylon’13 videos similarly seek to regenerate the willpower necessary to maintain such a long term occupation of a public square by continually reasserting a sort of faith in the people themselves and in the shared strength that they are encouraged to draw from their mutual connections to place of the Maidan itself, to the other bodies that occupy it, and to Ukraine as a whole. Such affective image work is particularly important during the early stages of such a movement in enabling some people in tents engaged in acts of protest to coalesce into something that is recognizable to itself as a movement.

Both the #Babylon’13 project and the larger Maiden movement function to co-create a new political imaginary that functions to shift collective understandings of what it is possible to think, speak about, and accomplish within the political landscape of Ukraine itself. The movement provides the source material—copresent bodies in the space of Maiden Nezalezhnosti—and the documentary video project emphasizes certain details to magnify the sense of potential that the remade place of this public square signifies. #Babylon’13 rewrites Independence Square and Ukraine generally as places of deep democratic potential, where alternative methods of exerting political agency beyond the ballot box are conceived of as being realistic rather than impossible. Through this cultivation of a new political imaginary,
the status quo of corruption and subservience to the whims of Russia are no longer ingrained as inevitable facts of life based on the force of history and resource dependence. This way of reconsidering Ukraine as an imagined community relative to Russia is a sort of conceptual place (re)making that is necessary for initiating any sort of ground up change in the actual day-to-day political power structures between these nations. The arrangement of bodies to create an imagined future that we see in “The Citizen” and many of Babylon’13’s videos—arrangements that construct a sort of witnessing in the subjunctive mood—differs substantially from other documentaries that cover the Maidan movement, and even from ones that cover the moments that held the most promise for political change: the initial demonstrations on and occupation of Independence Square.

Riot

“The Testament / Заповіт / Завещание,” another documentary video from Babylon’13, shows a protester’s-eye-view of the Maidan during the Hrushevskoho Street riots. The demonstrations on Hrushevskoho Street came in response to “dictator laws” that effectively banned protest by criminalizing participation in any form of vaguely defined “extremist activity,” disrespecting or insulting of police officers, blocking of government buildings or thoroughfares, or participation in any rally or public demonstration while wearing a mask or helmet. The state violence in response to these riots left many protesters...
dead, hundreds more injured, and at least one hundred detained on accusations of “participation in mass riots.”

In this video of the Hrushevskoho Street Riots, it’s late at night. Molotov cocktails shatter all along the city streets. Fire spreads around the street lights and mid-rise apartment buildings. Nearby, thick black smoke billows up from a tire fire burning beside a towering marble monument. The smoke blots out the moon. Light from the flames flickers across the faces of the anonymous people in the crowd gathered around it. So begins the video.

This documentary, operating in a much more poetic mode than most in this series, juxtaposes these images of destruction with a dramatic reading of the poem “Testament,” a pastoral that extols the natural beauty and majesty of the Ukrainian countryside, written by national icon Taras Shevchenko (he’s on the currency). Through this juxtaposition, the chaos and destruction that reign on the streets are folded into a larger history and sense a shared identity and meaning that are inscribed onto the place itself and onto the bodies of these protesters through this documentary’s treatment of their images.


Materially, these videos capture visual fields filled with chaos and destruction. They mediate state violence and resistance to it. They circulate flows of these images to hundreds of thousands of viewers worldwide, drawing them into these places of protest. Representationally, though, this destruction is framed not exclusively as tragedy but as rebirth. “The Testament” draw on the long history of Ukraine as an imagined community—for much of its history a nation without a sovereign state of its own—and distills this history and sense of shared community into the place of an otherwise insignificant residential city street. The video focuses not on the nearby monuments or even on the people themselves but on the everyday places that bring them together and are central to the creation of new notion of participatory democracy that foregrounds direct action and self-organization over representation and hierarchies. In the process, the documentary politicizes this everyday place and imbues it with potential, building an affective ground for the wider Maidan movement to take hold far beyond the localized protests in Kyiv.

The Hrushevskoho Street riot videos produced by Babylon ‘13 and the accompanying video “After The Battle” were all produced and released on the very same days that the violence on Hrushevskoho Street was taking place. The violence there spanned from January 19 to January 22, 2014, with the videos spanning the same time frame. Though this temporal immediacy is not always present or relevant to #Babylon’13 videos, there are certain occasions like this one where seeing events immediately after they have occurred can be useful for making theoretically global audiences aware of exactly what is happening. In this case, such an immediacy of content creation can help directly combat official state narratives
both within the region and abroad, effectively operating as a sort of counter-surveillance of
human rights abuses taking place at the hands of state forces.

Recycling footage and putting the same visual images to different ends within
different videos is common across a number of videos within this project, and it demonstrates
how images of the same exact locations can be mobilized differently to produce different
senses and significations of the arrangement of bodies within these public spaces. “After the
Battle” uses some of the same shots as “Persha smert” (another collaboration with 1+1
Productions from the “State Cinema” playlist on YouTube).169 “Manifesto” reuses footage
from the “Hrushevskoho St.” series of videos. “Manifesto,” as its name implies, presents a
clear argument and functions much like propaganda to elicit the audience’s support for the
Maidan movement, whereas the same footage when it appears in the “Hrushevskoho St”
videos appears more like raw footage from a verité documentary or a work of citizen
journalism. This continual repackaging and remediation of footage occurs in a number of
other videos as well, and it is one clear way that the Babylon ‘13 collective is taking
advantage of the affordances of digital video to easily copy and reuse footage. It
demonstrates that even within the perspective of the same project, the actual bodies on the
square are mobilized differently.

169 “After the Battle” was posted during the battle: Babylon ‘13 posted it to YouTube
on January 21, 2014. The riots on Hrushevskoho Street and police violence against protesters
there took place between January 19 and 22, 2014.
Many #Babylon’13 videos also take advantage of streaming digital video’s affordance of near-immediate distribution and exhibition. This allows context to be provided by past videos in the series, a general cultural literacy, and current events that the viewer is likely to be aware of from other sources. Such context is often also provided by the very same paths that may link the viewer to this content in the first place: status updates and other posts on social media sites either by Babylon ‘13 itself or by other groups associated with the movement. The temporality of the videos relative to the images and events they depict is emphasized early on in “Winter, that has changed us. Hrushevskoho Cocktails.” The video, a collaboration with 1+1 Productions that was also released as a television episode, employs a voice-of-god narrator who calls the audience’s attention to the image’s temporal relation to the events being witnessed on screen. He says, “A few hours before this was filmed, there were seventy-five people killed by snipers on the nearby street. Over 350 people were wounded.” The image, however, contrasts with the dire violence described in the voiceover: the video shows young men happily playing soccer in the streets with makeshift goals. There are signs of the ongoing struggle, however, as they wear army helmets and carry blunt makeshift weapons. Then, the video cuts to the nearby tent city where people gather on couches and benches in the streets to eat, smoke, and talk around a fire. The narrator’s reminder of the violence that had just occurred serves to highlight the resilience of these Maidan activists, and to draw our attention to just how quickly things can change within a movement like this one.
This video itself came out several months after the violence that it described as having taken place “hours earlier,” and it serves as a retrospective reminder of how developments that have taken place since have involved both major victories for the movement (Yanukovych’s abandonment of the presidency) and major setbacks that have developed as a result of the same forces that had so long handcuffed the development of democracy in Ukraine (Crimea’s annexation by Russia, active military conflicts with Russians and Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine). More to the point here, though, is that many of these same shots that here serve as reminders of what had happened in the past were initially released as part of the “Hrushevskoho St.” series of videos that actually were released within hours of the violence that they depict.

In “Winter, that has changed us. Hrushevskoho Cocktails,” we see some of the affordances of cinema remediated through digital video. Digital media have the ability to refashion and recombine older forms of media like moving images, photography, music, and writing through the process of “remediation.” Because of this, digital media make it easier for the audience to occupy multiple shifting subject positions in relation to the events that they are witnessing in, by, and through the media, as the audience may be positioned differently by the multiple semiotic channels (image, sound, text, etc) that may simultaneously mediate the same event. This particular video shows a film being projected onto a sheet publicly on the streets of Kyiv. Several dozen people gather around and watch

the film intently. Dozens more pass by, glancing at it for a few moments before moving on. This video shows the film that is being projected as well as several reaction shots of people in the crowd watching it. The video also presents an interview with one of the audience members on the outskirts of the crowd. The interview happens as the film continues to play in the background. The voice-of-god narrator says that the film being screened is “about another maidan, the one in Egypt.” One interviewee explicitly draws the connection between the events that had just taken place in Egypt’s Tahrir Square as part of the Arab Spring and the protests that he is presently a part of in Ukraine.

This video-within-a-video, a streaming internet video of a television documentary showing a film screened during a public protest of a public protest in a different nation, is a perfect illustration of how #Babylon’13 is actually shaped by and bound up with a number of other movements and transnational flows of images from around the globe despite its focused interest on a specific set of bodies in a specific place and their impact on the politics of one particular nation-state. The way that protesters think of the maidan itself, then, is shaped at least in part by these other distant places and what is occurring within them. This moment within this particular video shows the #Babylon’13 project and the Maidan movement as being thoroughly mediated and thoroughly globalized, and how these pervasive global flows of images feed back into ideas about this particular public space and the bodies—most with faces masked—that occupy it.
While I have focused largely on Babylon’13’s videos, there are of course other digital docmedia projects that cover Maidan. Some drastically different examples come from Ukraine War Awareness, a project that focuses overtly on the military conflicts that followed Maidan rather than the events of the movement itself. In one of their videos, men in a trench fire machine guns—some of them fully automatic, mounted, large caliber. There’s a close-up on empty shells piling up in the dirt. Then silence for a moment. Then more shooting—first in the distance, and then from the trenches. There’s some chatter over the radio. The shooting dies down. Four men calmly huddle in a corner of the trench. They talk. They smile. They laugh.

This video is emblematic of Ukraine War Awareness (UWA)’s typical style. Ukraine War Awareness is a Tumblr blog and YouTube page that cuts together clips of the war compiled from news media, citizen journalism, and other sources. It translates these clips and subtitles them in English for western audiences. The project is dedicated to giving, as it claims, “people a new source of primary information” from “all sides and parties” of the armed conflict in Ukraine that followed the successful ouster of President Yanukovych in the wake of the Maidan protests. UWA asserts that it serves as an archive for videos from multiple media sources and that it “maintains a Strict Third Party Neutrality Stance” toward the conflict itself and the content hosted on this page. Much like FOX News’s assertion that it is “fair and balanced,” however, in practice it is anything but, and such assertions of objectivity and neutrality appear necessary to provide plausible deniability in the face of
content that is singularly focused on promoting its agenda. In the case of UWA, that agenda is pro-Russian, pro-separatist, and pro-war generally.

There are three genres commonly employed in the videos collected by UWA. Most notable are what I would call “war porn” videos that unmitigatedly glorify technologies of war, as is the case in videos like “[Eng Subs] 2S35 Koalitsiya-SV SPG Firing declassified footage, interior,” which uncritically shows off the automated targeting systems on a Russian artillery gun as well as “Latest Russian Hardware: Armata, Kurganets, Koalitsiya at Parade Repetition 2016,” “Ukrainian T-64 Tank Weapons Documentary,” “Eng Subs - Declassified Uran-9 Unmanned Combat Ground Vehicle Documentary,” “Syria War: Russian Strike supposedly now using Laser Guided KAB-1500 Bombs,” and a three part series called “Compilation NAF / DPR Capturing Ukrainian Military Equipment & armor from battles.” All of these videos structure themselves around machines of waging war. None are interested in the breakdown of the bodies subjected to the force of these machines, and rarely do they consider the bodies that operate them except occasionally to model a sense of awe for the audience to imitate. It is not that the human cost of war is considered and dismissed in these videos—human life simply does not factor in at all.

Another common genre employed by UWA is the “debunking” video, which serves not to offer alternative interpretations of facts presented in other documentary videos or mass media outlets but instead functions to dispute the very nature of the truths produced through other media. These videos function in a way similar to right-wing feature documentaries in
the US over the past two decades, as analyzed by Scott Krzych.\footnote{Scott Krzych, “The Hysterical Formalism of Anti-Obama Documentaries,” (presentation, Visible Evidence XXIII, Bozeman, MT, August 11-14, 2016).} Krzych argues that these documentaries do not seek to provide alternative solutions to the same problems posed by earlier documentaries but to undermine the very notion that the problems raised by earlier documentaries are in fact problems at all. In the collection of UWA videos, this frequently takes the form of “debunking” in videos like an ongoing multi-episode series including “Episode 4: Next Level. Debunking ‘InformNapalm’ and ‘Russiakills’” and “Episode 5: Mainstream Media (Ukraine). Debunking InformNapalm, RussiaKills, and MSM’s,” along with other debunking videos not explicitly part of this series like “More CNN Misinformation. Russia’s ‘Aggressive’ Victory Parade. US Troops marched before Red Square.” These kinds of pseudo-documentary videos are not interested in producing truths but in dismantling what they perceive as commonly held untruths. They rearrange bodies on screen—both human bodies and (often as) bodies of evidence—in order to “prove” the presence of biased agendas that are always already at work, the revelation of which is mobilized in these videos as being inherently sufficient for dismantling the supposed truths presented in other media.

The final common genre is in the style of the compilation video or highlight reel—a sort of “greatest hits” or “best of” genre, many of which make the intended affective thrust of the video clear from their titles: “Funny best moments of Ukrainian Soldiers fails. Ukraine War Epic Fail,” “18+ Horror of Ukraine War: Civilians shot, bombed, killed. Raw Footage.
Eng Subs. MUST WATCH!”, and “Ukraine War: 18+ RAW Civilians Bombed [Eng Subs], Aftermath, UAF ATO. GRAPHIC!”. Such highlight reel videos are not exclusive to this channel or even to this pro-Russian perspective on the war. The Ukrainian Revolution channel has also posted videos like “Ukraine Revolution. TOP of the MOST CRUEL MOMENTS. 18 FEB - 20 FEBRUARY 2014. Euromaidan” and “Ukraine Revolution. BEST MOMENTS. 18 feb - 20 february 2014. Euromaidan. Kiev.” Such videos serve as evidence and extensions of undercurrents of malicious, extreme nationalism within Ukraine that are much more interested in Maidan and the ensuing conflict with Russia and pro-Russian separatists for the potential those tensions provide for provoking violence and fanning the flames of nationalism. Bodies presented in the UWA highlight reel videos are often of Ukrainian soldiers and militias as evidence of their ineptness. When bodies of non-soldiers are presented, it is typically in a state of destruction—death, severe injury, or both—that serve as evidence of the brutality of the Ukrainian militias and, therefore, the inherent wrongness and untruth of their worldviews and political goals. Through evidence of such brutality, presented in these videos as unending and spectacular, the revolutionary baby of Maidan is tossed out with the nationalistic bathwater. Because many of these militias are affiliated with or comprised of members of Svoboda, Right Sector, or other far-right factions that supported Maidan, their enfolding into this cacophony of violence in these videos functions to effectively undercut the democratic, egalitarian, collaborative aspirations of the vast majority of Maidan supporters, as made clear in many of the #Babylon ’13 videos.
While these highlight reel videos might rightly be seen as a subset of the “war porn” genre, they are distinctly different in their affective resonance and treatment of the human body. They present as something to be feared not war and violence generally but the distinct brutality (mired in incompetence) of the pro-Ukrainian forces. In the aforementioned war porn videos, the human body is largely absent or, if present, is dwarfed by the visual size and general power of the machines of war that are the focal point of these videos. The human body, when present, exists to magnify the perceived power of the machine. Highlight reel videos, by contrast, tend to focus explicitly on human bodies in motion during moments that involve the bodies’ spectacular destruction in a way that does not evoke empathy but is instead framed to provoke awe, amazement, and occasionally comedic relief (as is the case throughout “Funny best moments of Ukrainian Soldiers fails. Ukraine War Epic Fail”). The incompetence of the human body and its predilections toward breaking down, rather than the unmatched physical power of the impervious mechanical body, is the focus in these videos.

Not surprisingly, #Babylon’13 offers a drastically different vision of the war—one that is open for reflection and deliberation. Their focus is often on human bodies over mechanical ones as well as the effects of the war’s impingement upon these bodies. The war, of course, frequently inhibits these bodies’ capacity to act and exert agency on the world around them. In some cases, though, the war is shown to modulate the body’s capacity for action, bringing people together into newly forming social bodies capable of engaging in actions that would be impossible under other conditions.
The #Babylon '13 video “Avengers” is stylistically quite typical of most of their war documentaries. It is not formalistic or interested in rapidly cutting together scenes from various decontextualized events, but instead focuses on a combination of verité style filming of a group of national guard volunteers intercut with lengthy talking-head interviews with several of these soldiers. It opens with a white screen. Black titles fade in. We hear audio of a man speaking about a flag. The video cuts to the source of the sound: men standing in a parking lot, unfurling a banner on the ground. It cuts to a series of talking heads with the men in the parking lot, who we can now see are wearing military uniforms. A young man wearing a t-shirt explains that they stole the flag from a checkpoint run by pro-Russian separatists and replaced it with a Ukrainian flag. He smirks as he says this and men giggle offscreen. The video cuts to a talking head with a man wearing a camouflage helmet and battle fatigues. He is framed in a medium two shot along with another man in fatigues. The camera is handheld and slightly shaky throughout the video, and even in talking heads it moves slightly—sometimes to direct the viewer’s attention, sometimes to reframe the subject, and sometimes for seemingly no reason other than the technical difficulty of holding a handheld video camera perfectly still. The man says that he hopes there will be no more wars and that their actions in this war will be remembered as the last. While the idea of a “war to end all wars” is a familiar and tragically hollow trope, it appears sincere here—an idea that it is perhaps necessary to hold in order for these men to continue the fight by rhetorically wrapping it the notion of peace.
The same man continues speaking in a voiceover as the video cuts to an extreme long shot that pans across dozens of other men in uniform laying out supplies in the parking lot. It cuts to a close up of hands stripping bullets out of a magazine, then pans to show another pair of hands doing the same thing. It then cuts to a close up of the man continuing to speak. Now he shifts focus to decry the fact that Berkut special police forces are rotated out and given breaks every three days, but he says that he and his fellow soldiers have not been rotated out for the last thirty-nine days and counting—a testament to the body’s capacity to endure in the face of overwhelming environmental forces. He continues talking as the camera pans to men kneeling near him who nod and grunt in agreement. The pan moves back to the man speaking, now framing him in a medium close up as he complains about the “primitive weapons” that he and his men have been given. It then cuts to a panning shot of men kneeling nearby. The camera comes to rest back on the man as he continues talking. It occasionally bobbles around and pans a short distance to show others adding onto or reacting to what the main speaker is saying. He persists speaking in voiceover as the video cuts to a close up showing weapons being laid out in the parking lot, then it cuts back to the man, now in a medium three shot that clearly displays the text “Royal Air Force” on the chest and a Union Jack on the arm of the man’s jacket. The presence of such surplus military gear and this militia’s apparent reliance on it subtly shifts how the viewer responds to the sense of order and power otherwise conveyed by such a military uniform.

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172 The video’s description explains that these men are volunteers for the National Guard and not part of Ukraine’s professional military.
The main political thrust of the video is introduced next, as it attempts to collapse the binary between Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking citizens of eastern Ukraine. He discusses “Russian speakers” in the area and how they have labeled his men “Ukrainian Avengers” even though, he claims, he and his men have always distinguished between normal Russian speakers and actively hostile “separatists.” The camera pans to the man standing next to him who says there are many Russian speakers among their ranks, and that he himself is a Russian speaker. He says the other men nicknamed him “Muscovite” as a joke. The main speaker in the helmet leans in and puts his arm around Muscovite. It then cuts to a young man in a medium close up. This time there is no sound bridge. He says that the men in their unit come from all over Ukraine, including from the east, and that they are not nearly as scary as they are portrayed as being. He, like all of the other men shown in the video, appears calm and relaxed.

The general demeanor of the men and the repetition of this point that the men do not hate ethnic Russians rhetorically underscores the implicit truth claims made by the men—that is, this documentary’s logic indicates that viewers should agree with these claims and accept them as true. The video cuts back to the main speaker in an extreme close up on his hands as he pulls pictures from his wallet. He shows several of the pictures to the camera, pointing out

173 Literally, the Ukrainian word “Каратель” in this video’s title means “punishers,” which has a more sinister connotation in English than “avengers.” The chosen title of “Avengers,” however, has the potential to drive traffic based on searches for the Hollywood film of the same title. Babylon ’13 also produced a sequel to their “Avengers” simply titled “Avengers 2.”
his mother and children in one of them. Then he shows a letter from home and reads an excerpt from it. The camera swish pans to his face so that the viewer can see the positive emotions registered on his face as he reacts to rereading the letter. He continues speaking in voiceover as the video cuts to a tilt down over another uniformed man seated on a sign. The man in the voiceover describes the sign as a reminder of being on the front line of this armed conflict. He says that it marked the furthest advance of any Ukrainian forces toward the separatist checkpoint. It cuts back to the main man as he continues speaking. He is framed in a medium two shot with Muscovite. Then the video cuts and the sound bridge ends. About fifteen of the men are posed around the sign in a long shot. They shout in unison: “to the heroes glory!”, “glory to Ukraine!”, “glory to the nation!” One man shouts, “Ukraine!” and the others laugh. Another shouts, “Putin!” and the men make disgusted groans and chuckle. It is worth noting that, while nationalistic sentiments are clear here, the target of derision is not Russia as a whole or the Russian people but Putin specifically. The video ends with the same white title sequence it opened with. Though there are many stylistic variations among the #Babylon ’13 videos, this style of shooting is the most typical. Even in this more realist style compared to “The Citizen,” the video makes clear and repeated attempts to rewrite dominant political binaries and re-imagine, even in the face of active military conflicts, how such historical and deeply culturally ingrained divisions can be collapsed in the service of egalitarianism.

Babylon’13’s video “Women of War” likewise presents a drastically different vision of the war compared to the UWA videos. In it, the human body is again central, though it is
mobilized in a much different way. The video is largely a montage of shots of female soldiers engaged in training exercises and men doing similar exercises in ways that look obviously incompetent intercut with one another and with talking heads of military commanders praising the women’s abilities to not only do extremely good jobs but to learn incredibly quickly compared to their male counterparts, overtly attempting to de-stigmatize the female body in the context of the battlefield. In the last talking head of the video, a commander says that even the best men that he works with tend to be overconfident and lazy—he actually prefers working with women. The video makes a clear and direct appeal for viewing women as equals of men and as professionals who are essential to the defense of Ukraine against Russian invaders and separatists. It is direct and overt in its messaging, but in the process it manages to mobilize bodies at war not for spectacle or tragedy but for a deeply rooted sense of egalitarianism that seeks to overcome a social power imbalance that is decidedly not the focus of the war, and which might otherwise be minimized or obscured entirely in the name of wartime unity.

There is one major stumbling block to the rhetorical effectiveness of this appeal for gender equality, however. Despite the clear case for gender equality even within the most stereotypically masculine of professions, all of the actual voices that are heard in the video are those of the men in charge of the training activities. #Babylon ‘13 features many female voices in other videos, but it is at this moment when the images on screen most directly promote gender equality that the soundtrack undercuts this argument. The video falls back on male voices to provide the ethos necessary to support its visual argument. On its own, the use
of male military leaders to present an ethos appeal is not a problem, but the fact that their voices are present at the exclusion of any female voices presents an ironic problematic. It illustrates the difficulties inherent in attempting to craft a new, cohesive political imaginary and simultaneously act on the ideals of that imaginary as it is only beginning to come into being rather than falling back onto the dominant cultural values that have developed throughout history up to that moment.

**Constructing Crowds, Witnesses, & Publics**

*(Re)mediation, Crowds, & the Disruptive Body*

*Babylon ‘13* seeks to construct truths and exert power through its ability to present images of human rights violations in Ukraine not only to supporters of the Maidan movement itself but also to the general public in the Russophone and Anglophone worlds. The videos constitute witnessing publics through the events that they document, then the videos attempt to leverage those publics into action in order to exert political power on the international level as a supplement to the interpersonal and local political actions already taking place in and around the Maidan movement. The power to engage global witnessing publics and leverage them to reshape Ukraine as both a physical and imagined place is largely afforded by the distributed, serial nature of this video series. Its structure makes it possible for us to understand it not as one single text in isolation but a flow of images of Ukraine’s political struggles. The project’s structure—highly fragmented and designed to create more of a flow than a bounded text—also affords a wide range of focal points and stylistic variation. The
videos document abuses of power, but they also show the potentials that exist for creating new notions of place and new ways of engaging in politics. The formal and structural boundlessness of this project further emphasizes the ways in which the videos themselves enable not just a window into the Maidan movement but an active spreading of it.

#Babylon’13 cultivates an affective atmosphere that everywhere is Maidan, at least in potential. But this documentary project also demonstrates the limits of witnessing publics to bring about real change at a pace and scale necessary to have a significant impact beyond raising awareness. Ultimately, the feeling that a global audience is witnessing the protest is more powerful than any actual interventions from the witnessing publics themselves. That feeling is produced by the bodies, human and technical, as they have been conditioned and arranged within localized spaces. Where the images go matters far less than the imaginings about the fact that they do indeed go. The affects generated from the implication that viewers from around the world are being brought into these places of protest through the presence of the camera are crucial in sustaining the movement and crystallizing the shared sense among protesters that their work has a significance that extends well beyond the physical limits of their encampments in Kyiv or, later, the villages-turned-battlefields in Donbas.

#Babylon’13 uses YouTube to foster a scalability of address to the geographically dispersed and multiple publics that it is attempting to reach. Almost all of the #Babylon’13 videos are titled in English, Russian, and Ukrainian and also subtitled in each of these languages. The videos alternately and sometimes simultaneously address people already taking part in the movement, people in Kyiv and elsewhere in Ukraine who might be
persuaded to contribute to the movement, soldiers and police who have been engaged in acts of violence against protesters, Russian citizens who may be seeing the same events framed in drastically different ways through their news media, and citizens of the US, EU, and other democratic nations around the globe who might be able to exert political pressure on their own governments to assist the movement. The ability to simultaneously reach so many distinct audiences and situate them in relation to the movement may be possible through other media, but digital video, particularly YouTube, seems particularly well equipped to foster such a scalability of address. Videos can be posted in one language and gradually translated and subtitled into other languages by volunteers. Videos can be quickly and easily embedded into other digital media works about the Maidan. Other information and video works can be shared directly with relevant audiences, and these materials can be linked directly through YouTube’s interface.

The episodic and fragmented nature of the videos in relation to one another affords a wide range of variation in terms of style and subject matter. Because of the expectation for a fragmented viewing experience that YouTube sets up through its structure and typically short runtimes of its videos, viewers are not likely to expect a particularly cohesive, linear narrative to a project like this that is distributed over a number of separate videos that are not released on any regular schedule. The loosely connected structure that the Babylon ’13 channel imposes on the individual videos through the creation of thematically focused playlists allows the project to feel whole, interconnected, and navigable. At the same time, it permits a wide variety of fragmented events to serve as the subject matter of the individual
videos. Occasionally, these events are quite closely related, or several videos will cover the same event from different perspectives. Other times, the context for the depicted event is absent, and any connection it may have to the other videos in this project may be purely thematic. This loose organizational structure driven largely through the Babylon ‘13 channel page also affords a wide variety of stylistic variation that still congeals into a relatively unified whole much more readily than equivalent stylistic variety within a single feature film. Were the same intermittent wavering between verité style filmmaking, avant-garde formalism, and talking-head-driven slice-of-life pieces to appear in a feature film, it would almost certainly make for a disjointed, erratic viewing experience.\textsuperscript{174} Within the context of this project, however, it feels entirely warranted as stylistic variation occurs between videos rather than within them. Such variation serves to further underscore the polyvocality of the project and the collaborative nature of its production. Polyvocality and spontaneous collaboration, of course, are at the heart of the new political imaginary that this project attempts to build.

Alexandra Juhasz argues that YouTube as a platform functions to individualize each spectator, effectively isolating each of them not only from any larger communities but also

\textsuperscript{174} For example, “The Testament” formally and structurally breaks with the typical verité or talking-head interview styles most often employed in the #Babylon ‘13 videos. Its soundtrack features an emotional score and a dramatic reading of a famous Taras Shevchenko poem of the same title. The image track poetically combines footage from different events in and around the Maidan movement that expressively underscore or contrast with lines in the poem.
from any kind of organizing structure whatsoever.\(^{175}\) She emphasizes this isolated nature of any viewing experience on this platform further, claiming that “YouTube strips intentionality from any documentary production found on its pages by unmooring it from its context and community.”\(^{176}\) She claims that YouTube viewers, even if they are subjected to radical political views, are only able to absorb these views in isolation because of the basic viewing situation (an individuated one) that YouTube encourages through its structure.\(^{177}\)

While there is certainly some truth to this idea, it may be becoming less and less the case as streaming technologies make it easier to cast YouTube videos from private screens to semi-public ones, thus shifting the seemingly essential aspect of solitary viewership. More to the point, though, #Babylon’13 also incorporates the practice of roadshowing its videos as films in theaters for co-present audiences in order to capitalize on the group dynamic imposed by the traditional cinematic viewing situation. It has also re-appropriated footage from its videos for use in a collaborative series of television documentaries with 1+1 Productions. With such diversity of media technologies being incorporated into the same project, I find it difficult to conceive of this particular project could be as limited, isolating, and unmoored from community in the same way that Juhasz describes other radical


\(^{176}\) Ibid., 307.

\(^{177}\) Ibid.
documentaries on YouTube as being. On the contrary, I argue that #Babylon’13 functions as a sort of “exploit” within the larger networked system of YouTube.\(^{178}\) It defies the conventions that have been codified in the structure of the interface and turns these structures toward serving its own purposes first and foremost. Where YouTube might structurally encourage a lack of context and community, #Babylon’13 manufactures precisely these qualities not only within specific videos but in the way that it organizes and circulates them, both within YouTube itself and in the larger digital media ecology around the Maidan movement.

It is important to consider how the Babylon ‘13 collective is able to effectively organize and contextualize the radical documentary content that it posts to YouTube. As of this writing, the #Babylon’13 YouTube channel organizes videos around common themes. Most often, these are locations: Donbas (a region of eastern Ukraine occupied by Russian forces), Crimea (a former territory of Ukraine recently annexed by Russia), Hrushevskoho (a street in Kyiv that was the site of riots and a police massacre of civilians), and Maidan (referring to Kyiv’s Independence Square rather than to the movement more generally). These place-based collections within the #Babylon’13 channel also follow an event-based logic in the sense that these are not just any places but rather each is or was the site of a series of events that have defined the Maidan movement and/or significantly shifted the movement’s overall trajectory. In addition to these place- and event-based collections, there

are also two thematic collections: War and Songs of Ukraine. One additional collection includes the component parts of a documentary series produced by 1+1 Productions (a television company) in collaboration with the Babylon ‘13 collective: Winter, That Has Changed Us. In addition to these highlighted collections, the bottom of the channel page links to several playlists on all of the above topics in addition to several other topics.

The Babylon ‘13 collective has also taken advantage of the affordances of cinema directly. As Walter Benjamin writes, cinema has the potential to “provide an object of simultaneous collective reception.” If YouTube remains limited in its ability to provide such an experience and, as Juhasz argues, remains limited in its ability to develop community and provide context that might more naturally emerge from the simultaneous collective viewing experience of the cinema, Babylon ‘13 demonstrates how these two technological systems (streaming video and the cinema) can be used symbiotically to achieve a common goal. Babylon ‘13 has edited together the same footage that comprises the #Babylon’13 online video project into films that have screened at film festivals from the Odesa International Film Festival to Cannes. The project has also been screened, in various formats, at roadshowings throughout Ukraine, Canada, and the US (including screenings at museums, museums, museums).

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179 This project’s title is sometimes alternately translated as The Winter That Changed Us, and a version of it premiered at the Cannes Film Festival under this title. See: instagram.com/p/qhQkAHtkW2/?taken-by=babylon13ua and instagram.com/p/qg8IjFNkXj/?taken-by=babylon13ua.

universities, churches, and outdoor public spaces). The videos, then, are able to both promote and extend the cinematic viewing experience, and the cinematic viewing experience is able to provide an embodied co-present experience that might more readily foster the development of communities capable of acting together to work for social and political change in response to the visible evidence they have witnessed through the screen.

Witnessing at a Distance & the Body as Evidence

Witnessing events at a distance through media can lead to the development of “witnessing publics.” Meg McLagan defines these as subject positions that imply “responsibility for the suffering of others.” The notion of witnessing publics is particularly productive because it invites a consideration of the ways that audiences can be constituted as publics through testimony, as well as how those publics are addressed and situated relative to the events being witnessed. At the heart of this concept is the idea that media technologies play a role in social formation, as these technologies fundamentally shape how audiences imagine the depicted events to be and how they understand their relationship to the events witnessed. In the case of #Babylon’13, the formation of witnessing publics are a major source of power as these publics exist transnationally and can be called upon to exert pressure on not only the government of Ukraine from within but also from elsewhere as foreign governments

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become more aware of the violence and human rights violations being carried out by the Ukrainian government against its own people on and around the maidan.

A documentary project like #Babylon ‘13 is particular well situated to aligning dispersed publics into a witnessing public that is capable of exerting political force in the name of human rights. Guerin and Hallas call on documentary studies to recognize “the specific ways that the material image enables particular forms of agency in relation to historical traumas across the globe.” Each of the component videos of the #Babylon ‘13 project are self-contained and episodic. Many contain scenes of violence and destruction, though these are contextualized through interviews with eyewitnesses and, more often than not, dialogue and everyday activities are the focal points of the videos. Viewers are witnessing scenes of violence and trauma, to be sure, but they are positioned in such a way that any affective engagement they have with such images is framed with a clear course of action or new way of thinking that can, in theory, move beyond the need for future violence and destruction.

McLagan’s concept of “witnessing publics” draws on Benedict Anderson’s notion of imagined communities and Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the bourgeois public sphere. Anderson’s work on “imagined communities” examines the ways that print media were able to bind together people who would likely never see one another—such a common social

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consciousness effectively made it possible for the modern nation state to come into being.\textsuperscript{183} Habermas’s notion of the “public sphere” is a discursive space that emerges as a means of holding state powers accountable to the common will of the people.\textsuperscript{184} Nancy Fraser notes that this public sphere serves as the “theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk.”\textsuperscript{185} With globalization and the increasing proliferation of mobile digital technologies into everyday life for more people, this “medium of talk” is able to be remediated in a myriad of ways, combined with other systems of meaning-making, and extended to a wider audience in a way that extends flows of images and information across national borders with near-immediacy. As Mark Philip Bradley and Patrice Petro observe, “the interplay between the local and the global . . . is fundamentally redrawing the boundaries among the rights of individuals, states and the international community.”\textsuperscript{186}

Such interplays between the local and global (and regional and national) depend in part on visual media technologies that are themselves transcending, complicating, and


\textsuperscript{184} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society} (Cambridge: Polity, 1989 [1962]).

\textsuperscript{185} Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” \textit{Social Text} 25/26 (1990): 57.

reshaping boundaries and, in the process, the ways that viewers are encouraged to imagine the places that are being represented through those media technologies. Because of this, Leshu Torchin calls imagination “a key component of the new global order,” that “aligns dispersed publics across nations under the sign of human rights.” The #Babylon’13 videos invoke global audiences in part to appeal to a common interest in defending human rights that the videos must assume transcend any particular place. In the process, they attempt to fundamentally transform notions of place both for the people engaged in acts of resistance on the maidan. They do so by the simple fact of their existence: the protester laboring under the idea that their work is completely isolated and invisible logically has a capacity for action that is more limited than the protester laboring under the idea that the whole world is watching and that the collective work of their fellow protesters is being made visible for a theoretically global audience.

Volodymyr Tykhy, co-founder of Babylon ‘13, describes the collective’s simultaneous needs to reach a wide international audience in order to generate awareness about the events taking place around the Maidan movement while also trying to target and appeal to specific audiences, in this case police and military personnel, in order to convince them to support Ukraine’s people over the corrupt government. Of Babylon ‘13’s collaboration with television network 1+1 Productions for the Winter, That Changed Us series of videos, Tykhy says that the project was structured “to ensure that our stories have as

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big audience as possible. … the mass audience has to understand and feel what was going on.”

Tykhy also says that another major goal of the Winter, That Changed Us project is to “break through to the other side, the people in uniform. Because we are faced here with total deafness: we spent a month trying to talk to them, but no one was going to be frank.” This quote emphasizes, at least from Tykhy’s perspective, the tactical value of mediated audiovisual communication over the face-to-face interactions with the same audiences of military personnel, which he sees as not having been effective. He continues, “I think these people feel ashamed, they rather try to forget everything, but when the whole series will be broadcast, I like to believe that they will realize that to remain silent is wrong. There are so many topics to discuss. There were both the killed and the killers.” Here, he recognizes the complexity of how these military personnel and police have been positioned by other media and past events, and he seeks to use this project as an intervention that can reposition them and incorporate them into the growing populist movement.

In many ways, #Babylon ’13 certainly could be considered a weapon in a war of images—one that simultaneously also documents both a war of images that was already taking place in the form of public protest and the following “wars of objects” that took place first between protesters and militarized police and, later, between Russian separatists and


189 Ibid.

190 Ibid.
Ukrainian soldiers. More than that, though, this documentary project constitutes new publics. It attempts to implicate viewers worldwide as witnessing publics capable of exerting political and economic pressure on government officials in Ukraine and Russia. The stakes of such place making are literally life and death in this case as these videos document armed conflicts over who is to control the places shown on screen. Beyond observing the redrawing of borders, the Babylon ‘13 project also reimagines what forms political expression may take in Ukraine as well as, more generally, what it means to be part of an independent Ukrainian nation. It engages in the redrawing of border both geographically (which it observes without intervening in) and in terms of Ukraine as an imagined community (which it actively reconstructs).

Gustave le Bon argues that “War touches not only the material life but also the thinking of nations . . . and here we meet again the basic notion that it is not the rational which manages the world but forces of affective, mystical or collective origin which guide men.”191 The images presented by videos of the Maidan movement and ensuing war that displaced it as well as the ways that these images are circulated globally and structured to engage a number of distinct publics from the local to the global scale demonstrates just how complex the interrelationships between collective consciousness, affect, and agency can be, especially in the context of a political resistance, warfare, and witnessing of distant traumas.

As Glen Coulthard writes in the context of Indigenous politics, there are limits to liberal politics built on visibility and “recognition.”192 There are real, pragmatic gains that can be made through such a politics of recognition, but recognition alone cannot address/rectify historical inequities especially in the context of a colonizer/colonized relationship. While modern Ukraine may not seem on the face of it to be directly relevant to a colonizer/colonized framework, postcolonial rhetoric inheres in both the Maidan movement and the Orange Revolution that came a decade earlier. This becomes especially clear as the expressed political aim of the movement shifts from directly, specifically opposing President Yanukovych’s refusal to move Ukraine closer to the EU to a more general reimagining of what Ukrainian sovereignty and self-determination might look like. This shift in the movement’s aims is also evident in the movement’s name change: from EuroMaidan, which emphasizes the desire to move closer to membership in the EU, to simply Maidan.

According to Coulthard, “acting outside of ‘acceptable’ state constructs for negotiating the terms of citizenship and subjectivity is necessary for genuine transformation to take place,” whereas “the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power.”193 While I would argue that Coulthard’s claims here also apply in the context of Ukrainian-Russian relations now and historically, the problem of reactionary nationalism that has been so

192 Glen Coulthard, Red Skin, White Masks (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 1.

193 Ibid., 4.
prevalent in this discussion of Maidan has no clear corollary in the context of Indigenous peoples’ movements. The nationalist fringes of Maidan, forces that were powerful in toppling Yanukovych’s regime, are equally tyrannical in their desire to impose white supremacist, anti-semitic, patriarchal, violently heteronormative, and generally oppressive structures on society. They seek not equality but an inversion of what they see as the historical power dynamics between themselves as representatives of Ukraine and Russia generally, including ethnic Russians and Russophone Ukrainian citizens. The politics of recognition, then, are particularly troublesome here insofar as it is unclear exactly how widely representations of far-right sentiments can and should generalize to the movement as a whole. That is, there is a double danger to recognition here in that it is not just a question of making Maidan supporters visible but also making them differently visible from the representatives of the far-right that marched alongside them on Independence Square. Documentary images of these bodies coming together to form a crowd present visible evidence of a broad-based coalition of people from all walks of life and all ends of the political spectrum coming together as an internally diverse multitude to stand up against oppression. The problem is that they also present equal visible evidence of a movement that embraces fascistic politics and violence insofar as it furthers their agenda. While such a reading might be completely obscure to a western viewer, it is likely painfully obvious to Russians and Russophone Ukrainians, especially in retrospect after years of armed conflict have displaced the former promise of this revolutionary people’s movement—a movement whose inability to realize its own democratic ideals now appear to have been built in from the very start.
Making Visible For Whom?

In the case of each documentary project examined here, there is a focus on sharing these images of protest, revolution, and warfare with audiences outside of Ukraine itself. It is perhaps most evident even in #Babylon’13, in which every video early in the series is subtitled in English and Russian, and titles for videos are given in both of those languages as well as in Ukrainian. In addition to the language question, the choice of platform also reflects a concern with American audiences in particular. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green describe YouTube as a site that is, “U.S.-dominated demographically to an extent; but . . . feels culturally U.S.-dominated out of all proportion.” Certainly YouTube has the appeal of being a convenient and low- to no-cost option for hosting video. Nevertheless, the decision to insert these images of protest and revolution into a platform that is so heavily shaped around the interests, viewing habits, and profit motives of Americans cannot be ignored.

The western audience, and the American audience in particular, is also important to consider in relation to two feature documentaries produced about the Maidan movement: Winter on Fire and Maidan. These films differ substantially in their style, but both similarly choose to confine their treatment of the Maidan movement to the events that took place in and around Independence Square in Kyiv over a three month span in the winter of

194 More recently, videos have omitted Russian translations of their titles.

195 Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), 82.
2012-2013. Both are also widely available in the US via Netflix’s streaming video service. Hence, even though they are not “digital documentaries” in the sense of most of the amateur videos I focus on throughout this book, they still have a distinctive digital politics based on the connections they fabricate and the interfaces in which they are embedded.

Winter on Fire (Evgeny Afineevsky, 2015) is most politically noteworthy in terms of how it forces the complexity of the Maidan movement into a neatly packaged hero’s journey narrative arc and connects it unproblematically to other revolutionary movements like the Arab Spring, presenting both as unmitigated triumphs of democracy and the human spirit. The film clearly addresses Western viewers and makes overt appeals to liberal American sensibilities, apparently with a fair degree of success considering it was nominated for an Academy Award. Lev Golinkin calls Winter on Fire a “mythical, whitewashed version” of the revolution for Western audiences.\textsuperscript{196} He objects, in particular, to the way that the film flattens out the internal diversity of the movement’s participants, specifically by ignoring the role of far-right “neo-Nazis” within the movement. Flags for the Svoboda party, one of multiple far-right white supremacist groups who supported the movement, are on full display several times over the course of Winter on Fire, but there physical presence without any further context or explanation is almost certainly lost on the casual Western viewer who may well be drawing on this film alone for their entire understanding of the movement—a lost message that the film and its general worldview depend on. These far-right participants

played a role in the movement not entirely unlike that of the anarchist Black Bloc in the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle. They engaged in violence and destruction that were not compatible with the values of the majority of the movements’ participants but nonetheless benefited each movement in tangible ways (in the case of the WTO protests, by creating image-events that drew widespread media coverage of the protests themselves that would’ve likely gone un- or under-reported otherwise, and in the case of Maidan by providing the “muscle” for defending against and striking back on Berkut special forces units who regularly attacked movement supporters at the behest of President Yanukovych).  

Some scholars like Ivan Katchanovski even go so far as to argue that far-right components of the Maidan movement were themselves responsible for firing on Maidan supporters as part of a “false-flag operation” designed to provoke open conflict against the military special forces and snipers supporting President Yanukovych. The film ignores this inherently problematic tension within the movement and instead highlights the snipers firing on Maidan supporters as a turning point not only of the film’s narrative itself but also of the entire movement, ultimately setting the stage for the critical mass of support for the


movement that allowed it to be a success. Though such claims about false flag operations are disputable, the flat omission of the tensions between the far-right and the rest of the movement from *Winter on Fire* means that the truths produced by this film are fundamentally limited. The film, as the preeminent documentary of these events for American viewers, performs a great deal of work in crystallizing an image of the Maidan movement that plays into neoliberal attitudes about democratic politics. That is, the film asserts as true the fact of the revolution as a question of sheer will power: political change is quite simply out there for the taking if people just want it badly enough to make it happen. The truth that the film obscures, however, is that on-the-ground organizing is much more complex and labor intensive—and at least in the case of Maidan, much more problematic. Golinkin argues that omitting the influence of the far right and of the US government is particularly problematic precisely because the far-right forces within the movement were ultimately so important to the movement’s toppling Yanukovych’s regime.

In presenting such a vision of the movement, what is left out of *Winter on Fire*’s perspective—a film that through its critical accolades and privileged position for Western viewers that its vision is given by Netflix—are precisely those forces that most threaten to undermine the achievements of the movement today and prevent the possibility of lasting, sustainable change. Such a scenario is particularly heartbreaking when one considers that Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, which occurred just a decade before Maidan, fought somewhat successfully for democratic rule and the legitimacy of elections in that country. The primary force resisted in the Orange Revolution was none other than Yanukovych himself. The prime
objection to Yanukovych both during the Orange Revolution and again during Maidan was his close ties with Russia and, more generally, the ability for Russia to exert its imperialist will over the will of the people of Ukraine. To throw off the yoke of a former colonial power for the yoke of a home-grown fascist regime within Ukraine would be particularly tragic and certainly counter not only to the goals of the movement but also to the values expressed throughout Winter on Fire itself.

This film is important to consider in terms of not just the way that it represents the events of the Maidan movement as a whole, but the way that it has been circulated and the way that its patterns of circulation outline not just sets of target audiences but publics drawn into relation through Netflix as a platform and through the film’s ability to reach them algorithmically based on its perception of their interests. Implicit in Golinkin’s argument is the lingering idea that a documentary film is an impermeable, bounded text that has a responsibility to represent specific truths of the movement, to convey fidelity not only to that which it shows but to the entirety of that which it shows. When the topic at hand is a social movement—a phenomenon that is bound by its very nature to be overdetermined by a myriad of disparate forces—such a responsibility to representational fidelity is absurd. This notion is nothing new for documentary scholars, but it is important to note the lingering power of this sense of responsibility to tell not just “the truth,” but explicitly the whole truth (whatever that is), and nothing but the truth.

I do not mean to pile on Golinkin, though, and the reason I continue to dwell on his argument is precisely because he is also right. There are potentially enormous political
consequences for the way that this film, as an Oscar nominee and a film that is easily accessible to Western audiences via Netflix, does seem to have a special responsibility given its privileged position as the definitive documentary to see about the political upheavals in Ukraine. The film’s privileged position was, of course, formulated only after the film already existed and at least partially because of demand by Western audiences and executives to see precisely this kind of film about Ukraine, perhaps fitting into an even larger category of this kind of film about contemporary social movements: it shares some stylistic, tonal, and narrative affinities with films like The Square, for example, in that these films present discrete linear sequences of events with clearly established “characters” acting to achieve their goals in a way that is not too dissimilar from Classical Hollywood narrative conventions. In each case there is a clear and distinct villain to be overcome: a villain who not only presents obstacles to the protagonists’ realization of their goals but who also lurks in the shadows and embodies a sense of pervasive danger. Despite the movement continuing beyond the end of (and even the release of) these films, the films themselves conclude with strong senses of closure: the villain has been vanquished, the movement has triumphed, and equilibrium has been restored. Winter on Fire, if it exists chiefly as an attempt to raise awareness about and develop international support for the Maidan movement, would be silly not to take advantage of these already conditioned expectations about such films. It is institutionally structured to be exactly the kind of film it is presenting exactly the kinds of truths of the movement that it presents.
*Maidan*, despite circulating similarly via Netflix, received nowhere near the same level of attention (nor comparable degrees of prominent featuring on Netflix’s user interface), and is thus already absolved of the ethical weight implicit in the position of *Winter on Fire*. Its non-narrative realist style can certainly account for this at least in part. At the same time, its stylistic choices reflect a very different set of goals compared to *Winter on Fire*. As critics, perhaps a better approach than illustrating the flaws of *Winter on Fire* (insofar as we assume a failure to account for all of the dynamic complexity of the movement is a flaw) might be to consider how to get viewers to flow between multiple texts that each present their own perspectives on the events (including texts working in a variety of media—including even Golinkin’s view). Is there a prosocial, affirmative, cross-platform flow we might construct to more seamlessly guide viewers through multiple perspectives a movement like this? Can we use the affordances of new media technologies in a way that allows for a greater level of complexity to be considered and critically evaluated? We can indeed, and the Babylon’13 filmmaking collective already has, to a large extent, in their treatment of the Maidan movement in their ongoing series of documentary videos on YouTube. This is a large part of why I have dwelled on their work so often throughout this chapter: it provides an instructive example of exactly how we might account for the real lived complexity of social movements, especially ongoing ones, without being as directly beholden to the weight of institutional support, audience expectations, and (in something that is relatively new for documentary, but documentary distributors like Netflix) profit motives.
Conclusion

Part of the danger of a film like Winter On Fire is precisely the way in which it positions the viewer’s body relative to the phenomenon that it takes as its focus. That is, as a streaming film—one that was heavily promoted by Netflix and featured prominently on its main menu unlike Maidan, which was also available at the same time but only accessible by searching specifically for it (even for someone like me, for whom Netflix produces recommendations in multiple micro-genres of documentary including “political documentaries,” “critically-acclaimed social & cultural documentaries,” and “cerebral documentaries,” all of which could certainly feature Maidan)—Winter on Fire does not open space for discussion or reflection in the way that a similar film seen in the context of a film festival or theatrical screening might, nor does it offer any direct way of being embedded in blogs or social media as YouTube and other types of streaming video would. Alex Juhasz argues that YouTube is not a platform well-suited to developing community, reflection, or analysis.²⁰⁰ Because of the reasons mentioned above, however, I would argue that it is actually far superior to platforms like Netflix in each of these domains.

Additionally, the film’s tight narrative arc and sense of closure combined with its expository mode that purports to tell the audience everything they need to know about the Maidan movement and its sociopolitical context (and assumes they know nothing prior to

seeing the film) helps to create an affective condition in which viewers, despite obviously having internet access to be able to see the film in the first place, are encouraged not to research the events and their lasting impact for themselves but to be satisfied with the knowledge the film has bestowed upon them and to go forth with this newfound knowledge of the (not-too-)exotic (not-too-)other of Eastern Europe and the ways in which this other’s experience resonates with the unmitigated triumph of other pro-democracy people's movements occurring around the world in the early 2010s.

The problem, then, is as much affective as it is institutional or structural: audiences want what they want, not some more complex alternative that already exists. If Bill Nichols is right about epistophilia being the main appeal of documentaries, then what the audience wants is to feel like they have learned something. That result is at least as much a question of affect and bodily responses as it is a question of rational, measurable knowledge acquisition. That is, a documentary’s ability to appeal to epistophilia is about producing a feeling of having learned something with no direct regard for whether or not any actual learning has taken place. Such an effect is much easier to produce if the object about which knowledge is being produced appears clearly circumscribed, easily defined, and relatively homogenous. Contemporary social movements, though, are none of these things.
CHAPTER 4: Idle No More: Place Power and Spectacular Witnessing

I support #Idlenomore because I believe that we have to stand up anytime our nation’s land base is threatened—whether it is legislation, deforestation, mining prospecting, condo development, pipelines, tar sands or golf courses. I stand up anytime our nation’s land base in threatened because everything we have of meaning comes from the land—our political systems, our intellectual systems, our health care, food security, language and our spiritual sustenance and our moral fortitude. We all have a responsibility to protect the land and the water. We only have a few generations to turn this around, and we can’t do it without access to land.
—Leanne Simpson

I wake up and get dressed and walk into this world, and that’s political, because everything that’s been done on this continent has been done to stop that from happening.
—Bear Witness

Inside a mall just past the Yankee Candle next to the Starbucks in front of the Zales, hundreds of them gather together. Some of them drum. Some of them dance. They block access to the ATM. A jewelry store closes its gates, lest these people catch the sight of precious metals and the gold fever that would inevitably follow. This is Tacoma, Washington, but it could be anywhere. And this crowd, made up of Indigenous peoples and their non-native allies, is Idle No More—or rather one small part of it. While they had never


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been truly “idle” in the face of forced removal from their ancestral lands and genocide at the hands of settler states, in this moment they rise up and join together with others to form a common bond in response to the abysmal treatment of Indigenous peoples in North America and around the world. They document these dances on their cell phones—some of them with one phone in each hand. They share them online with the hashtag #IdleNoMore, and in the process join the larger imagined community of Idle No More, providing evidence of their participation in the movement to others engaging in similar demonstrations elsewhere and allowing people from all walks of life to witness the spectacular events they have orchestrated.

The documentary videos of these events are important specifically in the way that they reconfigure public and private space. To this end, the act of documenting in and of itself is at least as important as the subsequent circulation of these videos. The material processes of documenting the dance create spaces that are no longer hospitable to the flow of capital. The representational strategies employed repoliticize the seemingly apolitical spaces of these malls. Accordingly, Idle No More illustrates the complexities involved in place-making specifically through digital documentary practice. As Janet Walker contends, the

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205 I use the word “repoliticize” here for simplicity’s sake, but my meaning is closer to “un-de-politicize” in the sense that the capacity for these spaces to appear “unpolitical” on their surface is the product of active processes of historical erasure that mask the politics inherent in these spaces. The representational strategies described above, then, seek to undo such processes of depoliticization.
documentary’s status as a rhetorically constructed text is well established, but its status as a spatially constructed object is every bit as important.\textsuperscript{206} And, of course, this spatial reconstructive work of the documentary is itself not without its own rhetorical, affective, and political effects.

The flash mob round dances that are often the focus of these documentaries function simultaneously as signifying and a-signifying semiotic acts of resistance. As signifying semilogies, the process of making documentaries about these flash mobs enables a symbolic presence that synecdochically stands in for the visibility of all Indigenous people in settler states, whereby unity is represented through the mise en scène and signifies a larger notion of transnational Indigenous unity. As a-signifying semiotics, these events physically block the flows of capital—an effect that is greatly magnified by the production of documentary images of these events as people who are not associated with the movement frequently stop to record videos on their phones. The flash mob round dance and processes of documenting it enables an oscillation between the representational and the corporeal spheres of resistance. These documentaries, in conjunction with the dances themselves, work on minds but also on bodies—both human and technical—to construct new imagined and actual communities,

places, histories, and opportunities for political resistance.

**The Movement**

Taking its name from a Facebook group used to brainstorm for a teach-in in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in November 2012, Idle No More spread quickly across Canada and developed into a transnational social movement. “#IdleNoMore” quickly became a trending hashtag on Twitter as more and more demonstrations took place in Canada, across North America, and around the globe. Within six weeks of the first teach-in, the four women who had organized the initial teach-in had developed a large and growing network of supporters who informally coordinated through the Facebook group, Twitter hashtag, and a blog. Together, they had organized over one hundred protests and demonstrations across Canada, another thirty solidarity events in the United States, and several more around the world in countries as far away as Ukraine and New Zealand.

Idle No More—the initial teach-in, the demonstrations, and the burgeoning movement—began as a response to the Harper Government’s proposed Bill C-45 in Canada. The bill effectively forced First Nations into Land Agreements that stripped them of both

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reserve lands and of First Nations status, along with all of the protections that status entails. Activist and policy advisor Russ Diabo has called this bill a policy of termination. He positions it as an extension of the 1969 White Paper which sought to eliminate First Nations through similar tactics. ²⁰⁹

While the gross injustices of Bill C-45 certainly seem sufficient for prompting widespread protest on their own, it is important to note that Idle No More also grew out of centuries of widespread socioeconomic oppression and representational erasure of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Idle No More sees itself as a resurgence of Indigenous resistance to centuries of colonialism, dispossession, and eradication policies. Its website emphasizes this: a timeline visualizing the movement’s history begins not in 2012 but in 1500 with the caption “hundreds of years of resistance.” Such histories manifest themselves in the present in the example of the appalling living conditions in Attawapiskat, a First Nation community in Northern Ontario. After fighting to survive a major housing crisis in 2011, the Attawapiskat have more recently been faced with a wave of suicides. Over a seven-month period in 2015 and into 2016, roughly five percent of the entire Attawapiskat community attempted suicide. ²¹⁰ Such dire conditions are not necessarily causes of Idle No More, but the are stark reminders and symptoms of the larger systemic issues that Idle No


More seeks to address.

It is particularly important to point out the overt awareness of these histories in the movement’s own self-generated media. There is a distinct awareness not just of the intersecting historical forces working against Indigenous peoples but also the rich histories of Indigenous activist culture including radical media and documentary practice—the most well-known example being 1960’s *You Are On Indian Land*. While these longer histories are certainly important and readily observable in contemporary digital documentaries of Idle No More, this chapter will treat them as context and focus more narrowly on the events that most directly sparked Idle No More and fed its flames as it came into being.

**Bill C-45**

This movement did not simply spring fully formed into existence overnight thanks to social media, digital video, or any one particular law. All of these factors contributed to its development, to be sure, but so did much longer histories of Indigenous activism, Indigenous dispossession and termination at the hands of the state, and histories of colonialism worldwide. Nevertheless, the event that most directly sparked the genesis of #IdleNoMore was the Canadian government’s proposal of a 457-page omnibus bill in October 2012: Bill C-45. This proposed legislation would introduce drastic changes to the existing Indian Act as well as multiple environmental acts with the effect of rolling back crucial protections that

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211 The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 21.
many Indigenous people depend on and introducing a mechanism for ordering the surrender of reserve lands without the consent of the people living on them. The Ontario Native Women’s Association distributed a fact sheet about the bill, arguing that it was clearly designed to enable the federal government to “exercise undue influence over vulnerable communities” in direct contravention of the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

In response to this legislation, four women in Saskatchewan organized a teach-in on the impact that C-45’s removal of specific protections would have for Indigenous people, the environment, and all Canadians. Already at this early stage, the nascent movement was drawing together histories of Indigenous and environmental activism, feminist thought, and transnational contexts that made it clear that the issue at hand, while expressed and amplified through Bill C-45, was much deeper than any one government policy or even Canadian electoral politics writ large. Through a combination of social media and on-the-ground organizing, these teach-ins spread across the country and also gave rise to community sharing sessions, protests, blockades, and, in what essentially combined all three of these, round dances in public spaces. These actions together served to call into being a new vision of the


world in a way that resembles Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, the Indignados, and many other networked people’s movements that have emerged over the past decade.

In the political occupation of public places and enactment, albeit on a small scale, of new politics of equality, Idle No More serves as further evidence of Hardt and Negri’s claims that “Manifestos work like the ancient prophets, who by the power of their vision create their own people,” but “today’s social movements have reversed the order, making manifestos and prophets obsolete.” The multitudes that comprise these movements, Hardt and Negri write, “have declared a new set of principles and truths” through “their logics and practices, their slogans and desires.” In the process, such demonstrations and the various documentary practices that exist within and alongside them serve as constitutive rhetoric that has the power to call into being new counterpublics, effectively constructing a sense of individuals at particular demonstrations identifying as part of “the people” of a larger movement that exists in no fixed territory or time. The videos of these movements—the lasting evidence of the public squares having been occupied and the demonstration of those logics, practices, slogans, and desires in action—are therefore crucial to examine as political documents with significance similar to the manifestos of decades and centuries past. Of course, we also need


\[215\] Ibid.

to consider the practices, logics, and desires of the systems, both technical and human, that store and circulate these works—the larger assemblages that these videos, as media objects, fit into.

The demonstrations themselves linked the specific injustices of the proposed legislation with much wider calls for recognition and resistance.217 These links are created within the spaces of protest through signs and banners, public speech, and performances like round dances that repoliticize these spaces. Such links are also created online through the use of hashtags on social media and through the sharing of videos, images, and written texts through Facebook groups, Twitter feeds, blogs, and the movement’s official website. Such links are also created through print texts. According to the Kino-Nda-Niimi Collective, there are three general motivations or objectives that the Idle No More movement coalesced around: First, the call to repeal the C-45 omnibus legislation, specifically the parts of it that allow for the rollback on protections for the environment, water, and First Nations territories. Second, the call to stabilize the emergency situations in indigenous communities like those in Attawapiskat, as well as the collaborative development of policies that would promote the health and long-term self-sustainability of these communities. Third, a commitment to establishing a “mutually beneficial nation-to-nation relationship” between Canada and people of the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, including those with and without officially recognized

217 Glen Coulthard, Red Skin, White Masks (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 162.
tribal statuses.\textsuperscript{218}

It is clear from these goals that a clear trajectory exists for broadening out the scope and scale of the struggle, from preventing Bill C-45’s rollback of existing protections, to providing assistance to specific communities, to forging a larger interconnected transnational community capable of engaging in diplomacy on a nation-to-nation basis with already-established state powers, a point Leanne Simpson emphasizes when she writes, “My hope is that #idlenomore is the first step in building a mass movement of Indigenous nations that will both re-establish our political cultures and reset the relationship we have with Canada.”\textsuperscript{219} Indeed, a similarly broad vision of Indigenous sovereignty, solidarity, and sustainability is developed on Idle No More’s official website on their page, “The Manifesto.” While manifestos may now be secondary to the coming together of people in the streets, it is clear at least in the context of the Idle No More movement that the manifesto still holds some power as a means of linking the existing logics and practices expressed by the movement itself as it emerges across unique and dispersed local contexts with deeper histories and larger visions for the future.

\textbf{Chief Spence’s Hunger Strike}

On December 11, 2012, Chief Theresa Spence of the Attawapiskat First Nation began

\textsuperscript{218} The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 22.

\textsuperscript{219} Simpson, “Aambe! Maajaadaa!”
a hunger strike to protest not just C-45 but “the persistent systematic disrespect shown for First Nation peoples by the Conservative government.” 220 On an island in the middle of the Ottawa River near Parliament, she sat in a tipi, eating nothing and drinking only water, fish broth, and medicinal tea. 221 She insisted that her hunger strike would continue until she was granted a meeting with Prime Minister Harper and a representative of the Crown to discuss, on a nation-to-nation basis, the terms of century-old treaties governing the relationship between Canada and the Attawapiskat nation. The Attawapiskat agreed in that treaty to share their land. In exchange, the government of Canada agreed to provide money, education, and healthcare for the people of Attawapiskat. 222 The extreme poverty and related housing crisis in Attawapiskat, which had made headlines across Canada, made it brutally obvious that this end of the bargain was not being honored. 223

220 Ontario Native Women’s Association.


Her strike received a great deal of media attention and public support from many organizations including the Canadian Auto Workers Union, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, and the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario. While Chief Spence herself insists that the timing of her hunger strike and the rise of Idle No More was coincidental, other prominent activists and scholars who took part in the movement view her as an (unwilling) leader of the movement who acted as a figurehead and source of inspiration. She also set clear goals beyond the opposition of C-45: her demand was that Canada engage with Indigenous peoples on a nation-to-nation basis, acknowledge their differences rather than insist on assimilation, and honor the treaties that had been drawn up within the legal frameworks of English and Canadian diplomatic frameworks rather than under the frameworks of Indigenous diplomatic traditions. This broader call for acknowledgement of national sovereignty, and the formation of a transnational indigenous alliance to push for it, also became the focus of Idle No More.

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226 A point that becomes particularly important in videos of the demonstrations in Victoria, BC, where engaging in and making visible Indigenous traditions of diplomacy is central.
If the movement’s only goal had been preventing Bill C-45 from becoming law, Idle No More would have been an outright failure: the Bill C-45 was passed in December 2012 as the “Jobs and Growth Act,” an act whose title, in light of Idle No More, begs the question “for whom?” Despite the passage of this legislation—or perhaps because of it—the movement continued and transformed from a protest movement resisting specific policies to an Indigenous resurgence movement building the ground for a transnational struggle for Indigenous rights as described above. Many of Idle No More’s social media outlets continue to be active as of this writing in 2017, calling attention to injustices like the attempted building of the Dakota Access Pipeline through sacred Sioux lands in the US and the flooding of unceded Inuit lands in order to build a hydroelectric power plant at Muskrat Falls in Canada. As such, Idle No More remains significant as a means of linking geographically dispersed, highly localized struggles to much larger processes of Indigenous eradication, dispossession, and erasure through documenting these struggles and developing a larger conceptual framework in which to understand them.

Protest, Spatial Politics, and Spectacular Witnessing

The Flash Mob Round Dance

Scholar and activist Glen Coulthard argues that Idle No More represents a resurgence

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of Indigenous protest traditions that developed during the last half of the 20th century. In particular, he notes the prominence of the blockade as a principle tactic, writing:

If history has shown us anything, it is this: if you want those in power to respond swiftly to Indigenous peoples’ political efforts, start by placing Native bodies (with a few logs and tires thrown in for good measure) between settlers and their money, which in colonial contexts is generated by the ongoing theft and exploitation of our land and resource base.

Coulthard’s analysis serves as a useful way of thinking about the way that flash mobs function as blockades are within Idle No More, as well as how the acts of recording and circulating videos of them through social media functions to amplify the power of the flash-mob-as-blockade. The figure of the blockade in the context of North American Indigenous activism might bring to mind high-tension situations in which the settler state is denied access to natural resources or the ongoing flow of capital. High-profile examples include the blockades at Kanehsatake (also known as the Oka Crisis) and Mercier Bridge blockade in solidarity with it, anti-pipeline encampments like the Unist’ot’en Camp, and the Standing Rock Camp’s disruption of construction on the Dakota Access Pipeline, among others.²²⁹ Idle No More’s tactics have included this kind of blockade, to be sure, and its

²²⁸ The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 36.

prominence as an image of Indigenous resistance is exemplified by the image chosen for the cover of the Kino-nda-niimi collective’s anthology on Idle No More, which features a railway blockade.  

My focus in this section is on a different kind of blockade: the flash mob round dance. Particularly interesting is the use of these flash mobs as temporary blockades in shopping malls across North America. At first glance, a flash mob might appear to have little in common with a more traditional blockade. Nevertheless, these flash mob round dances, I argue, serve many of the same functions. Most directly, they function to temporarily disrupt the flow of capital through commercial spaces at the consumer level. They also explicitly repoliticize spaces that have, through industrial and post-industrial economic development,  


231 It is important to point out that while flash mobs are relatively common within the movement and videos of them are frequently circulated online, the flash mob is far from the only mode of resistance that is enacted within Idle No More. Marches and public rallies are also common, as are teach-ins and community forums. There have also been blockades of both roads and railways as well as traffic slow-downs coordinated opportunities to hand out pamphlets on Indigenous rights and environmental issues.
been transformed into abstract spaces devoid of historical specificity and any overt political function. In the process, they serve to call attention to the historical erasure inherent in building shopping malls on Indigenous lands as well as the tangible ways in which that public participates, knowingly or not, in the ongoing appropriation of Indigenous land in the service of capital. The malls’ right to exist, after all, is safeguarded by a government that has largely ignored its responsibility to educate, house, and provide healthcare for Indigenous peoples in return for using the lands on which these malls were built in the first place. By reclaiming the place of the mall as a site of Indigenous resistance, participants in these flash mobs are confronting passers-by with a political truth by laying bare the conditions that have made the existence of such a place possible.

The videos of these round dance flash mobs show that they blockade the flow of capital within the space of these malls in order to directly amplify the dances’ disruptive impact as an act of resistance. The video “HARPER NO MORE - FLASH MOB - TREATY 7 - Calgary Alberta Canada” displays an extreme example of the blockade effect. In it, drummers stand close together in an area just in front of escalators, forcing anyone who does use them to push their way through the crowd after stepping onto the ground floor. This becomes a visual spectacle unto itself, as the drummers go on with their performance seemingly completely unaware of backups they are causing on the escalator and providing comedic effects as escalator passengers struggle to negotiate the awkwardness of the situation. Even more importantly, though, is the way that the very act of recording video of these round dances further amplifies the round dances’ ability to disrupt and blockade these
spaces. The sheer spectacle of the event itself draws the attention of passers-by as well as, crucially, the lenses of their smartphone cameras. As more and more people are drawn to document the dance for themselves, the crowd grows larger and, in the process, magnifies not only the spectacular dimension of the event but also the disruptive potential of the dance-as-blockade, making it harder for others to negotiate their way through the crowd.

In addition to their significance as temporary blockades, these flash mob round dances are also significant in and of themselves as displays of Indigenous solidarity, resistance, and ceremony. They do not just display these things but also actively cultivate them by opening up opportunities for community development, cultural revitalization, and political discourse to exist within these commercial spaces. In flash mob round dances, participants—sometimes hundreds of them at a time—join hands and move together in a circle accompanied by drumming and singing. The ceremonial dimension of these dances is paramount: the round dance, according to Cree Elder John Cuthand, draws the presence of ancestors into the present moment and into the present community. According to poet SkyBlue Mary Morin, the dance is not just about the present dancers’ connection with their ancestors, but about their collective connections to the land itself in an act of healing: “We dance / to soften the hard lumps / that have formed / in the heart, / the hurt inside.”

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233 Ibid.
land, with their community, and with their common cultural identities is an important component of the dances’ ability to function simultaneously as acts of ritual communication.

These videos play a large role in what Paolo Gerbaudo calls the “choreography of assembly” of the movement. Their circulation amongst activists and movement supporters shapes the “symbolic construction of physical space,” while the very act of recording them shapes the literal construction of the spaces immediately around the dances. They also contribute to the affective “scene-setting” for future demonstrations. The rest of this section will examine the videos themselves, building on the claims I have laid out above: that the flash mob round dances function as blockades that politicize spaces of commerce, that the spectacle of these events serves to magnify their disruptive potential as blockades online as well as offline, and that videos of these dances function to develop an affective scene-setting that plays a role in the larger movement’s choreography of assembly.

Malls

Though videos of other Idle No More events predate it, the first Idle No More flash mob round dance was in Regina, Saskatchewan on December 17, 2012, and videos of it were posted to YouTube later that day. The next day, a flash mob took place at the West Edmonton Mall, the largest mall in North America at the time. Several videos of the flash mob

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mob were posted to YouTube within a day of the event itself. Taken together, these videos demonstrate the power inherent in the act of filming itself in politicizing the space of the mall and adding to the disruptive potential of the flash mob round dance itself.

The video “Idle No More - Round Dance Flash Mob at WEM in Edmonton” clearly demonstrates the blockading function of the flash mob round dance. I will focus on this particular video in extreme detail before moving on to discuss other videos of the demonstrations in Edmonton and elsewhere because this video serves as such a perfect example of so many of the processes of spatial repoliticization that are prevalent throughout videos of these flash mob round dances in general. This video opens with the song and dance already in progress. A gold-colored railing encircles this area, setting it apart from the main walkway and storefronts. A crowd gathers along this bannister. Some participants display flags of support for Idle No More, some hold signs, and others appear to be simply watching the ceremony unfold. Behind these people standing along the railing, there is a circle of round dancers who link arms and stretch out so far that it is impossible to tell from this camera angle just how far the circle extends. Behind them is just enough room for a narrow lane of foot traffic to circulate between the storefronts. At several points, this lane is narrow enough that any onlooker outside of the round dance who stops to watch or record it would be completely obstructing anyone else from moving about this section of the mall.

The camera movement itself further underscores the scale of the dance. After beginning in a stationary position and continually panning around to show the drumming, dancing, and wider space of the mall, the video later cuts to a follow shot of the dancers as they proceed through the food court. The camera proceeds only halfway around the circle of dancers over the course of several minutes, which further emphasizes the spectacular scale of this event. During this follow shot, we also see that the round dance obstructs passage to several storefronts, including an Orange Julius where employees are wearing Santa Claus hats. It is, of course, important to note that the bulk of these flash mob round dances in shopping malls took place during the holiday shopping season, beginning just over a week before Christmas, when mall traffic is already at a peak. Assuming heavier foot traffic through this mall during the holiday season, this context further magnifies the size of the potential audience witnessing the dance first hand. It also compounds the blockading effect. While the camera movement does not explicitly call attention to this detail, it does make it visible in a way that a stationary shot would not.

The camera continues to move clockwise along the inside of the circle of dancers until it has circled around to the other side of the footbridge where the drummers stand. In order to get a clear shot of the drummers from this side of the bridge, the camera movement itself falls victim to the blockade. The person holding the camera, in order to fulfill the desire of once more allowing the camera to witness this spectacle, must fight through a crowd of other photographers and videographers—videographers who are themselves causing a much more complete blockade of this footbridge than the drummers themselves. A few
professional camera rigs appear, but it is unclear if they are shooting on behalf of broadcast media, independent media production companies, or the movement itself. In any case, these larger rigs drastically magnify the blockading function of the event and reinforce its sense of spectacle for other potential onlookers in the mall. In addition to seemingly professional media, though, there are also several people who gather around the drummers to record video and take pictures on their cell phones. One man holds a smartphone in each hand and appears to be recording on both simultaneously. Many others record the drumming from just inside the circle of round dancers themselves.

At the beginning of this video, this gathering is comprised of only a few people. By the end of the video, this crowd has grown much larger, adding to the blockade as well as the sense of spectacle by clearly marking this as a spectacle worth witnessing through the very image of so many cameras recording it. This spatial indexing of attention—where attention is focused and how uniformly it is focused on this particular position within the larger event through the presence of media technologies—is central here and, I would argue, is far more essential to the overall effect of this protest event than any one of the actual videos being recorded by those cameras. The highly visible presence of the camera phones and the sheer number of them all being pointed in the direction of round dance is itself a sort of meta-message about the significance of the event itself, and, at least for people who also posses camera phones, such an event has the capacity not just to direct their attention but to become contagious and drive them to begin recording too.

This choice of placing the drummers on this footbridge, where they become the
central focus of the attention of these cameras, is also important in terms of the way it recontextualizes the space and iconography of the mall. The spatial layout here such that drummers and principal singers are on a footbridge over a man-made river. With Bill C-45’s rollback of land and water protections, and water rights for Indigenous peoples in particular, the placement of the flash mob’s central focal point directly over a man-made river explicitly re-politicizes this space. This artificial river is a simulacrum of the sorts of natural resources that the capitalist, consumptionist nature of the mall must exploit and destroy for its continued existence.

Just a bit further down this man-made river is another spectacular feature of the mall that is politicized through the spatial juxtaposition of it next to these protesters: a model tall ship. The iconography of the ship, while it might ordinarily seem entirely innocent and apolitical, takes on a much different meaning and affective weight in the presence of the round dance that encircles it. Visually, it closely resembles the modes of conveyance that brought settlers to this continent in the first place. Further, though, it calls attention to the tacit nation building that such images help weave into everyday life in settler society. In placing such a tall ship here in Edmonton, Alberta, the mall’s designers have managed to place a symbol of conquest and colonization about as far inland as they possibly could. In the process, the specificity of Edmonton and its history—including its colonial history—is erased.

\[236\] I use the term “re-politicize” as shorthand here. What I mean is not exactly re-politicizing as much as laying bare the politics already operating within and through this space that would ordinarily be masked, making the space appear apolitical to the masses who move through it on any ordinary day.
and replaced with a much more abstract symbol of the larger process of colonization in
general, including the development of Canada as an imagined nation. By placing themselves
in such close proximity to this ship, the drummers make it all but guaranteed that anyone
who records images of their performance will also catch a glimpse of this ship in the
periphery.

By choosing this site for the flash mob, the dancers themselves encircle both the ship
and the artificial river it sits in, symbolically inverting the dynamic between colonizer and
colonized and, more importantly, laying bare the politics that have made the building and
maintenance of this space possible in the first place. As Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel
write, “the instruments of domination are evolving and inventing new methods to erase
Indigenous histories and senses of place. Therefore, ‘globalization’ in Indigenous eyes
reflects a deepening, hastening and stretching of an already-existing empire. Living within
such political and cultural contexts, it is remembering ceremony, returning to homelands and
liberation from the myths of colonialism that are the decolonizing imperatives.”

This is a perfect description of how the round dances in malls operate. Their quote illustrates how
performing the dance-as-ceremony functions not so much to make the space of the mall
political when it would not otherwise be through the weaving together of what Lefebvre
would call a spatial “texture,” a symbolic overlaying of physical space with cultural

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237 Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, “Being Indigenous: Resurgences Against
meanings and narratives. In the process, this flash mob round dance demonstrates a tacit politics that already exists in the space of the mall, while simultaneously calling attention to the Indigenous politics that have been erased in order to make such an apparently apolitical space possible. The dance-as-ceremony makes evident the politics and narratives of colonization that continue to operate through the spaces of everyday life in settler society.

Likewise, the video “IDLE NO MORE - Round dance @ West Edmonton Mall” also shows how the simple selection of sites within the mall encourages spectators who document these performances to situate themselves within the space of the mall in a way that all but ensures their videos will capture significant juxtapositions within the mise en scene. This video, which records drumming and singing in a different location within the mall on the same day, focuses on the same primary set of drummers as the first video. This performance takes place adjacent to a hockey rink inside the mall. The regulation size and shape of the rink along with hockey’s status as Canada’s national pastime and official (winter) sport emphasizes the interchangeability of this space along with its national rather than local contexts. In a place like Edmonton, the act of creating an indoor ice rink within a climate controlled mall within a part of the country that remains quite cold for outdoor rinks to exist through much of the year is an exercise in conspicuous energy consumption. Placing


\[\text{“IDLE NO MORE - Round dance @ West Edmonton Mall,” YouTube video, 8:35, posted by idlenomore585, December 19, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=J RtVydRaHHE.}\]

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emblems of a movement that calls for the restoration of Indigenous land and water rights and environmental protections more generally in this space next to this rink calls attention to the absurdity of not only the rink itself but of a settler society that would see no incongruity with rolling back environmental protections in a context of energy and resource abundance so apparently sufficient as to permit the existence of such a thing.

Importantly within this particular video, though, is that the rink is not treated with any special significance or highlighted in any way by the cinematography. In fact, it is only after the video is about two and a half minutes in that it shows the rink at all. At this point, the camera, which had been focused on the drummers, pans away from them to show more of the crowd gathered to watch them. As the pan continues, it reveals the rink and makes it clear that the cameraperson has been standing right next to the boards the entire time. The rink, then, is treated as ordinary and not at all spectacular, presented only as an afterthought and as context for the spectacle of the drummers’ performance. The juxtaposition implicit in the selection of this space for a performance, then, is further reinforced by the camera’s management of attention: it is here recording to allow others to witness the spectacle of this emerging movement, not to be preoccupied with the features of the mall itself even for reasons of critique. What matters is the rebuilding of a new vision of society and Indigenous people’s places within it, not the already well known and taken-for-granted excesses and absurdities of settler culture.

Throughout this chapter, I have been discussing the space of these shopping malls and their connections to the history of the land they occupy, to the resources they depend on, and
to the Indigenous cultures they help to erase in the abstract and in terms of how the figure of
the mall generally operates and the resources it necessarily mobilizes and exploits for its
continued existence. Two things are worth pointing out here, though: first, such exploitation
is expressed through specific and material practices which are crucially important even if
they are beyond the scope of this project and, secondly, that at least some of the activists
participating in these events and making documentaries of them are acutely aware of it. In the
case of a video of a flash mob round dance in Minnesota, "’Mall of America’ to Native Americans: Happy New Year; You Are Under Arrest,” the selection of the particular mall
reflects this. While it is certainly reasonable that the Mall of America would be chosen as a
well-known landmark likely to draw attention to Idle No More by association, it also has a
direct tie to the material processes of Indigenous exploitation. The video’s description
articulates such a connection directly:

The Idle No More movement originated among Native tribes in Canada at the end of
2012 in response to the Jobs and Growth Act, which reduced the requirements for
privatizing Native-owned land. The Mall of America is owned by Triple Five Group, a
Canadian company. On the Triple Five Group website, the company touts ‘exciting
services and opportunities to First Nations in Canada and the Native Tribes of
America.’ The webpage goes on to list its programs, which include ‘development of
casinos, residential commercial and industrial — on or off reservation,’ ‘Exploration
and development of mineral resources’ and ‘exploration and production of oil and
gas.’

The connection to the roots of Idle No More’s struggle against Bill C-45’s rollback of

240 “’Mall of America’ to Native Americans: Happy New Year; You Are Under
Arrest,” YouTube video, 5:35, posted by Michael McIntee, January 1, 2014,
www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTbU0FqfVVU&list=PLVdjQbYUBRo4a9pOo9qw8Wnn2JTqXp5AY&index=197.
environmental protections is invoked in the irony of the selected quotes that this description lists from the Triple Five Group’s own website. The connections between round dances and the malls where they occur, then, are evoked not just through the performance of the dance itself but also explicitly articulated in the larger argumentative framework of the movement and its aims through such videos of the performances.

In terms of the politicization of these semi-public spaces, the choice to hold such a demonstration as a flash mob—rather than as, say, a march or sit-in where participants arrive en masse and are marked as a unified group from the outset—is significant. It comments on the nature of the undifferentiated general public that typically occupies the abstracted space of the mall, with its placelessness so abstracted from its actual local conditions that it could be copied and pasted into any other city in Canada and reflect its new local environment equally well. Though both of these videos begin with the flash mobs already in progress, they nevertheless manage to emphasize the ephemeral nature of the flash mobs and the ability for the flash mob participants to emerge spontaneously out of a mass general public as undifferentiated as the space of the mall they move through.

In both of these videos and indeed in all of the videos of the West Edmonton Mall flash mob round dances, this ephemerality of the flash mob is emphasized through the clothing choice of the principal drummers. Their clothing choices reflect urban and suburban North American styles with no overt exceptions. All of the drummers appear to be wearing jeans and sneakers. Several of them are wearing baseball hats. One wears a basketball jersey. Nothing that connotes traditional Indigenous culture is visible in their performance other than
the frame drums that they are playing. These choices may reflect a tactical necessity in the way that they allow participants to pass easily out of and back into the crowd before and after the performance. Regardless of the motivation behind these clothing choices, though, they function as a way of calling attention to the way that processes of cultural assimilation over time have made it possible for Indigenous bodies to disappear completely into the sea of the settler society’s whiteness. In leading the round dance through their drumming while simultaneously wearing clothing that expresses nothing of their traditional culture, the drummers convey a sense of the potential for Indigenous ephemerality within the general public—they could be anywhere! at any time! walking amongst us!—as well as a sense of the conditions and historical processes of cultural eradication and assimilation that made such an ephemerality possible to begin with.

The video “ROUND DANCE @ West Edmonton Mall” emphasizes the sheer size of the flash mob that has assembled. This video shows the same dance around the tall ship as “Idle No More - Round Dance Flash Mob at WEM in Edmonton.” “ROUND DANCE @ West Edmonton Mall,” however, shows the round dance from along the mezzanine a level above the ground floor. This high angle further emphasizes the spectacle and sense of scale of the event by observing it from overhead. This video also shows that people have gathered all along the railing on the mezzanine to watch the dance, further serving to emphasize the spectacle in the indexing of attention of all of the viewers who have stopped to watch—many

of whom have also stopped to record. Another video, “Idle No More! West Edmonton Mall Round Dance!” produces a similar scale-enhancing effect: in it, the cameraperson moves along with the dance itself standing just behind the ring of dancers before stepping away from the dance and raising the camera high in the air to show how far the ring of dancers extends.242

“ROUND DANCE @ West Edmonton Mall” also emphasizes the contrasts between Indigenous and settler cultures. The video’s description on YouTube further emphasizes the contrast between the local experience of the specificity of place and the reliance of traditional Indigenous cultures on the land itself with the abstract placelessness of the mall by noting the location of the event as “Treaty 6 Territory.” In addition to figuring the relationship between this specific location and the settler state differently here—that is, outside of the conventional municipal, provincial, national framework—this labeling of the location also calls attention to violation of such treaties that enabled this land to fall under the rule of settlers in the first place.

The conclusion of the video puts a finer point on this need to reevaluate and rebuild the relationship of the Canadian nation to the Indigenous nations it has absorbed on a nation-to-nation basis. The video allows viewers to witness the conclusion of the flash mob’s performance. At the end of the song and dance, loud cheering and whistling erupts through the mall. It lasts about thirty seconds before the cameraman turns the camera toward the man

standing next to him. Off camera, the cameraman asks the man next to him what he thinks. The man, evidently a supporter of the movement, praises the “good turnout.” He says that he thinks these events should happen all across Canada in support of “the chief,” Theresa Spence all of the chiefs involved in attempting to negotiate treaties with the Canadian government. Specifically, he cites his concern for the environment as the key reason why people should support the growing movement. He also points to the significance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous supporters of the movement physically coming together in the same space: “As we can see” he says, “with our people coming together and other people are here and supporting us, this is a good thing” because it serves as a display to “government officials” as a way of persuading them to honor the treaties. More, though, he says it is about creating “a balance”—about creating a new relationship between Indigenous and settler peoples that enables them “to share the land and to share the resources and to learn from one another and to work together.” Demonstrations such as this one, at least in this one supporter’s view, open up spaces for such a renegotiation of common, collective struggle together and videos like these provide visions of what such a struggle might look like. Whether these videos are widely viewed or not, the very act of making them entails a certain mode of engagement with the demonstration itself that prompts such discussion and interaction by giving the conversation an impetus for happening in the first place and conveying a sense of importance once it has begun.

“HiMY SYeD -- IdleNoMore Chief Theresa Spence Flash Mob Toronto Eaton Centre Sunday December 30 2012” contains a number of parallels to the video “ROUND DANCE
@ West Edmonton Mall.”

“HiMY SYeD,” published on same day as the action it depicts, opens with a close up on a protest sign that functions as the video’s title screen. It reads: “Chief Spence is My Hero” in all caps. The video then dissolves into footage of a round dance already in progress. Like “ROUND DANCE @ West Edmonton Mall,” this video is also shot from a balcony a floor above the dance itself to emphasize the size of the crowd. By the ten-minute mark of the video, spectators and supporters of the movement have filled in the area around the balcony to watch not only on this floor but also on the floor above it, further emphasizing the spectacle of the dance and becoming something of a spectacle itself in the sheer number of people who have all crowded around to watch on multiple floors of the mall.244

Near the end of the video, the cameraman interviews a woman offscreen. They discuss what brought her to the event. She refers to herself as “a settler in solidarity with the

243 The Eaton Center where this demonstration takes place is named for Timothy Eaton who opened his first store in Toronto in the 19th century at a time when violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples was the norm, rather than the more subtle forms of dispossession and cultural erasure prevalent in recent decades through today. Eaton’s grew to become the largest chain of department stores in Canada. The Eaton Center mall in Toronto exists on the land surrounding that original dry goods store. See: Donica Belisle, Retail Nation: Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).

244 Taking the spectacle of the crowd itself as gathered around the balcony of the mall’s upper levels one step further, the flash mob round dance in an earlier video has multiple round dances going at the same time—one on the ground floor and one around the mezzanine. See: “HARPER NO MORE - FLASH MOB - TREATY 7 - Calgary Alberta Canada,” YouTube video, 14:11, posted by SiksikaFreedom, December 23, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rP_O90OVA2U.
First Nations people” there to offer support. Again here, like in “ROUND DANCE @ West Edmonton Mall,” the camera and act of recording are central in producing this interaction between the cameraman and the woman interviewed. Rather than making an argument about the need for Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous “allies”\textsuperscript{245} to come together within the movement and push for political change, these videos simply do it: through the spectacle of the dance drawing people to that space and the camera facilitating discussions between people, these assemblages of video and flash mob actually bring into being the sorts of relationships that manifestos of the past might have called into being or argued in favor of. This is a constitutive rhetoric in the doing— through performance, through the strategic synchronous occupation of (semi-)public space, and through the act of recording the performance—rather than through language alone.

Streets

“Idle No More Toronto Shuts Down Dundas Square -2013 New Years Day” also demonstrates this constitution-in-action of Idle No More through the act of the round dance itself. This video begins with the camera positioned high above the intersection of Yonge and Dundas Streets—famously the most heavily trafficked intersection in Toronto—where people are gathered in the streets, blocking traffic while singing and drumming.\textsuperscript{246} Along

\textsuperscript{245} I find “ally” language problematic, but I use it here simply as shorthand.

\textsuperscript{246} “Idle No More Toronto Shuts Down Dundas Square -2013 New Years Day,” YouTube video, 4:28, posted by WorldTruthNow, January 2, 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gg9a49V3WAo. It is worth noting that the video’s description section on YouTube
with another video, “Flash Mob Round Dance - Idle No More - Toronto Yonge and Dundas Dec 21st,” which shows the same day’s events but focuses entirely on this round dance occurring in the streets, this video also shows how the same tactic of the flash mob round dance used in malls can be modified and used for more directly disruptive purposes. At least one function remains the same, however: the blockading of the flows of capital.

But “Idle No More Toronto Shuts Down Dundas Square -2013 New Years Day” only begins with images of the dance in the streets. It then cuts to a shaky handheld shot that moves rapidly to capture the faces of protesters standing around. They have moved from the intersection to a public square just outside Eaton’s Center, next to the Hard Rock Café, across from the AMC/IMAX. They link arms. Drumming resumes and a round dance spontaneously begins in response to it. Off camera, a woman’s voice asks, “Are you in or are you out?” The cameraman’s voice, also off camera, responds, “I’m in!” The cameraman himself joins the round dance as the woman replies, “Alright, let’s do this!” In this exchange, we get a sense of spontaneous, collective community building. The drumming sparks the dance, and the dance necessitates people joining together in a particular way, in a

is used to extend the argumentative framework around this particular event and contextualize it within the larger movement. The description provides links to several different news stories on the specific event shown in the video, Idle No More in general, and even the Mohawk etymology of “Toronto” itself, an origin that evokes the histories of cultural erasure and bodily eradication required to have produced the space of modern-day Toronto as seen in the video itself.

quite literal choreography of assembly, whereby they are physically linked and moving as one. In this particular video, the beginning of this dance provides a spark that modulates the cameraman himself from an outside observer to an active participant, also modulating the audience’s position in the process and placing viewers within the movement.

Government Buildings

Videos of direct action protest near government buildings do not repoliticize apparently apolitical spaces so much as they politicize these already political spaces differently. Canada’s government buildings become not iconic sites for democratic deliberation between representatives of the nation and the citizens they represent but between the Canadian nation and a group of people explicitly framing themselves as being of another equal nation who have come to engage in diplomacy on a nation-to-nation rather than nation-to-subject or nation-to-subjugated basis. One of these videos, “Breaking Copper 1/3 (Victoria Legislative Building Sunday, Feb. 10th, 2013),” shows Chief Beau Dick of Alert Bay leading a ceremony on the steps of the British Columbia’s Parliament. This copper breaking ceremony is a diplomatic procedure, and it fits in with a larger trend of Indigenous peoples of Canada returning to traditional modes of diplomacy.248 Such a return is significant

in and of itself as it is a shift away from attempts to dismantle the master’s house using his own tools—that is, it is a shift away from attempting to work within existing Canadian laws and the larger Western legal, diplomatic traditions that give rise to them.

The act of breaking copper, then, is not just an act of protest. It carries with it significance as a diplomatic ritual with its own rich history. By engaging in this mode of diplomacy, participants do indeed express an argument about the failures of Canadian diplomatic traditions to meet their needs. Beyond that, though, the breaking of the copper also functions materially as an event that occupies the time and bodies of its participants in a way of being together that is distinctly not lending legitimacy (much less superiority) to the Canadian state, to the Crown, or to diplomacy as encoded in written legal documents. It mobilizes the people and places involved in this demonstration in an act that breaks all of them out of the tacit complicity of everyday life living under failed treaties developed through foreign diplomatic traditions. Enacting this Indigenous mode of diplomacy on the steps of the Victoria Legislative Building, by extension, pulls this symbolically significant place into the material flow of an alternative system of governance—if only temporarily.

The video, as it is situated on YouTube, is an example of collaborative authorship based not on logics of direct cooperation but based on logics of shared place and networked events. This particular video of the copper breaking ceremony in Victoria is included on a playlist along with parts two and three of the copper breaking ceremony itself preceded by two videos of pre-ceremony speeches from the same event and followed by a video, from a separate event, of Chief Beau Dick speaking to a much smaller group. Five of the six videos
were posted by the same user, but the playlist itself was compiled by someone else entirely who had not posted any of the videos contained within the list. Though this particular playlist arranges videos largely in chronological order from a single event and simply appends a second event to the end of it to provide additional context—that is to say, it does not radically rearrange or reshape the meaning of the videos by bringing them into contact with one another, nor does it draw together footage from a variety of disparate sources—it nevertheless illustrates the potential for such work as well as the pragmatic benefit of organizing paths through the work of others who are participating in the same movements and struggles. It also involves connecting places and events differently to construct new imagined communities, building new virtual ground for future action.

**Circulation and Citizenship**

A recurring call from supporters of Idle No More is for Canada to diplomatically engage with Indigenous peoples on a nation-to-nation basis. Thinking about Idle No More as a digital nation uniting pre-existing nations raises questions of what makes a nation and how inclusion in that nation is determined, alongside questions of how such a movement can translate online unity into offline action, and how the two spheres influence each other. This sort of “citizenship” is the process of abstracting notions of citizenship from the prerequisite of embodied being within a set, mappable physical space. This is a radical break with Westphalian nationhood whereby a nation or nation-like entity can constitute itself and agitate for political change as though it were a nation. In the case of Idle No More, this
#citizenship draws together people from disparate Indigenous nations, some with official tribal status and some without, along with non-Indigenous allies of other nations in an attempt to engage in diplomacy with Canada on a nation-to-nation basis, arguing that past treaties with Idle No More’s constituent nations must be honored by the Canadian government.

Benedict Anderson argues that communities—and nations specifically—are imagined around shared beliefs expressed through common signs and rituals. Anderson’s argument that affirmation of membership in a community is bound up in simultaneity in continuous time and seeing community rites reflected back at oneself, as well as his description of the urgency and simultaneity in newspaper-reading due to its built-in obsolescence, are relevant to ideas about imagined communities forming through Twitter and other online platforms.249 A share or retweet is a logical extension of Anderson’s example of imagining others reading the same newspaper on the same morning as an integral part of national subject formation. By extension, having a tweet or YouTube video curated to an official Idle No More platform is tantamount to it being included in a community’s system of signs and self-identifying, self-reflexive cultural practices, thereby also granting a form of membership to the original poster who had participated in what Audra Simpson would call feeling citizenship.250

According to Audra Simpson, membership in a nation is conferred by the state, while

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citizenship is a result of consciousness of and a sense of belonging to “a nation-like polity,” “a complex of social belonging, of family, of intracommunity recognition and responsibility,” while “feeling citizenship” occurs when a person feels like part of a community or nation but without necessarily being officially recognized as a member.\textsuperscript{251} Posting with the #idlenomore hashtag constitutes a kind of feeling citizenship, which is then confirmed as membership through such acts as re-tweeting, sharing, being included on an official Idle No More platform, or otherwise being recognized by any existing members of the movement.

It is important, though, to avoid falling into the trap of ascribing the entire power of a movement to new media technologies that are used in and around it.\textsuperscript{252} Gerbaudo and others argue that social media, rather than being inherently revolutionary, instead serve as tools for what he calls a choreography of assembly: the mobilization of shared infrastructures, sets of practices, and outrage that, in this case, shapes this imagined nation and confirms citizenship in it, thereby also restoring a common value to public, offline spaces. Communication, here, follows Carey’s ritual model in the sense that it is about gathering and the production of commonness rather than about the production of meaning or the transmission of any particular message.\textsuperscript{253} Idle No More’s round dances in malls are thus particularly powerful

\textsuperscript{251} Ibid., 187-189.


\textsuperscript{253} James W. Carey, \textit{Communication as Culture} (New York: Routledge, 1994).
not only as decolonizing, anti-capitalist, anti-globalization actions, but also by drawing the mall into a network that demonstrates its incongruity with the rest of that network. These malls are, after all, privately-owned (semi-)public places that are frequently built on unceded or otherwise stolen lands. The round dance flash mobs and networks created through the act of recording these flash mobs demonstrate the impossibility of “public” or common space within colonial, capitalist systems by making their incongruity overtly visible.

Gerbaudo further argues that mobilization relies on “the construction of shared meanings, identities and narratives.”

Taken with Anderson’s idea of nationhood as an imagined community based on shared infrastructures and practices, Gerbaudo’s understanding of digital media in social movements supports the idea that Idle No More can be understood as using online and offline practices to forge a resurgent Indigenous national identity. As an aggregate of existing nations, Indigenous individuals without tribal affiliations or who are members of nations not officially recognized by the settler state, and non-Indigenous allies, Idle No More is able to agitate within a nation-to-nation framework with the Canadian state (primarily) without eliding differences between the various pre-existing communities that have been folded into the movement.

**Conclusion**

#IdleNoMore’s documentary web videos function as an articulation of disparate tribes

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*Gerbaudo, Tweets and the Streets, 9.*
and nations, rhetorically calling them into being as a singular heterogenous collective in part through demonstrating the ways in which such heterogeneous collectives are already forming within the spaces of public demonstrations. The movement is therefore always already transnational. It is interested in the construction of a new imagined nation that can position itself to negotiate with Canadian government (on a nation-to-nation level) on its own behalf as well as on behalf of the specific, disparate tribes and nations-without-states that comprise this new national idea. Of course, it is also a transnational movement in the more traditional sense of the words, too: documented events supporting the movement have taken place in every Canadian province and territory, at least twenty-seven states in the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Sweden, Ukraine, Germany, Egypt, and South Africa.\(^\text{255}\) The transnationalism of the movement, then, extends beyond the uniting of indigenous nations within Canada and overflows the borders of the settler nation-state, calling attention to its arbitrary nature and the importance of supporting Indigenous political resistance worldwide.

This movement’s multitudinous assemblage of nations is bound together through the shared experience of having been displaced. One way this assemblage is rearticulated is through the flash mob round dance: a return to place-based cultural practices within the context of post-industrial public spaces and digital media technologies. The movement seeks to position itself as a digital nation, constituted in the fissures of settler space (both on and offline) and maintained through digitally networked, locally emplaced practices. As such, it

\(^{255}\) Tim Groves, “#IdleNoMore Events in 2012,” Google My Maps, www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?hl=en_US&mid=1DWWpAAm8tBv-RRW8jR2WXCgu0gM.
is constituted to seek redresses from the nation-state of Canada as well as interrupting and calling attention to the ways in which seemingly apolitical daily life in Canadian culture erases the native both as a cultural figure and as actually existing, living bodies that are not necessarily distinguishable from the larger social body of Canada in everyday life. The movement’s participants constitute a counterpublic-in-becoming that is capable of dissolving back into a number of different pre-existing publics, including the general public of the Canadian nation. The flash mob embodies these notions. It enacts them in acts of resistance to the Canadian state, as digitally-choreographed offline actions, and as resurgences of Indigenous cultural practices.

The locally-constituted counterpublics of Idle No More’s round dances are called into being through the flash mob. These events are ephemeral by design, with their participants both emerging out of and “disappearing” back into the mass public of shoppers at the malls where they are commonly held. In the process, this temporary, transversal counterpublic becomes indistinguishable from mass society immediately before and after the event of the dance itself. The permeability of the masses and the ability for Idle No More protesters to constitute temporary counterpublics in these spaces it itself a crucial appeal of this mode of activism. It is also key to understanding the double articulation of the figure of the native as both part of the nation of Canada and part of other nations directly in conflict with the Canadian state.

The documentary videos of these flash mobs freeze these counterpublics-in-constitution and circulate them as always-already constructed: hardly any
of these videos record the moments before the flash mob begins to coalesce or the moments after it has dispersed. As Harvey and Soja argue, social relations are spatially organized and spatially regulated.\textsuperscript{256} The mobility and near ubiquity of camera-enabled phones and the ease with which such devices traverse the spaces of everyday life embed new modes of spatially regulating social relations, but they also offer new potentials to organize differently, as is the case in the digital documentaries of Idle No More’s flash mob round dances. These digital documentaries allow for the combining of modes of activism, operating as a nexus between offline and online activism and affectively setting the stage for future protest events. They create new modes of truth production through spatial arrangement, both within particular places through the juxtaposition of performance and place as well as in the ways that these performances then become networked through social media and streaming video platforms to draw together disparate and geographically dispersed events into the same movement, often without any coordinated organizing at all on the national level.

Examining these amateur, vernacular video practices of the movement’s supporters allows us to recognize how documentary film inherently produces composite spaces by remixing existing offscreen places. The ability for digital media to effectively abstract place makes it all the more important to consider how digital documentary functions to these ends. In abstracting the specificity of place, it creates space that is virtual in the sense of Deleuze

\textsuperscript{256} David Harvey, \textit{The Condition of Postmodernity}, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).
and Guattari—not “virtual” because it is in cyberspace, but because it has not yet become actualized. Such a space become a nexus of conditions of possibility that are real—they exist in potential through the sets of relations they bring together—but are not yet actual. They reconfigure the virtual and create conditions for the actualization of a geographically dispersed, transnational notion of Indigenous nationhood. In the case of Idle No More’s digital documentaries, the place-of-event and place-of-image-circulation feed back into one another so rapidly as to collapse into one another. Notions of place are thus restructured at the level of the event being documented, the event of documenting, and the event of circulating these images—all of which are now implicated simultaneously within the event itself as it unfolds. In this way, digital video serves as a medium of transduction by enfolding some of the virtuality of the recorded event into sounds and images encoded as bits of data, then expressing that virtuality again when they are later played within different milieus.

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CONCLUSION: Affect, Archives, and Amateur Docmedia

“It is not only species that are becoming extinct but also the words, phrases, and gestures of human solidarity.” – Félix Guattari

“The archivist, even more than the historian and the political scientist, tends to be scrupulous about his neutrality, and to see his job as a technical job, free from the nasty world of political interest: a job of collecting, sorting, preserving, making available, the records of the society. But I will stick by what I have said about other scholars, and argue that the archivist, in subtle ways, tends to perpetuate the political and economic status quo simply by going about his ordinary business. His supposed neutrality is, in other words, a fake. If so, the rebellion of the archivist against his normal role is not, as so many scholars fear, the politicizing of a neutral craft, but the humanizing of an inevitably political craft.” – Howard Zinn

This concluding chapter seeks not to tie my argument up into a neat package but rather to blow it apart into a number of different directions for further work. Doing so, I hope, will illustrate the larger significance of the docmedia I have discussed throughout this work as well as the problems presented by such docmedia not just for activism in the present tense but also in the future. Up to this point, this project has examined the forces that govern what amateur and activist docmedia are able to do as they are produced and circulated within ongoing social movements. As a way of concluding, I turn here to consider the forces that govern how such docmedia might be archived, remembered, and used in the future. This


chapter, then, will shift the focus from docmedia as assemblages capable of conveying information, representing events, gathering bodies, and sparking affects across space and will instead consider docmedia may enter into various archival formations to produce different effects over time.

As we have seen throughout this book, affect plays a major role in digital docmedia. Docmedia objects are not simply containers for arguments. Rather, arguments emerge across contemporary docmedia objects through the way that they arrange and connect various bodies. How, then, might we think about archiving such media objects when they so fundamentally depend not on their internal contents—what they reflect—as on their external contacts—what they connect?

In addition to being a significant aspect of docmedia, affect is also a particularly important dimension of activist archival projects. As Buchanan and Bastian put it, If activism is just as much about influencing ideas about what one ought’ to do, as it is about acquiring knowledge of what ‘is’ (or was), then it is important to explore, not just which archives activists might draw upon, but also the affective power of archives and how this might relate to their value as activist tools.” Such affective power is bound up with the inherently political nature of archiving. Much of the relatively little work that directly considers the affective power of activist archives, though, considers “affect” to be interchangeable with

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“emotion.” While such a consideration is important because it draws attention to the functions of archives beyond their ability to store information that can be rationally interpreted, it nevertheless is grounded in a limited view of affect that fails to account for or even consider the larger social atmospheres of feeling that may or may not be consciously identifiable as particular emotions. Relatedly, it overlooks the proprioceptive dimensions of affect—the way, for example, that archives or particular archival artifacts might structure perception, sensation, and habit—that prime bodies to “turn toward” them in particular ways, thus making such a shared atmosphere of feeling possible in the first place. Even based on a strictly emotive understanding of affect, however, Buchanan argues that “there remains insufficient research into the potential of traditional repositories as affect generators.” If we take a wider view of affect, account for archives’ need to deal simultaneously with analog and “born-digital” materials, and consider the ways that movements may produce their own present-tense archives as they are ongoing, it becomes clear that this is a rich site for future


This chapter is not intended to be exhaustive; rather, it is meant as an initial charting of potential paths that research at the intersection of digital media and social justice work might take, beginning with the question of archives. It is meant to build on the arguments developed in this book, drawing together issues in film studies and digital media studies in a space that can productively bring together the work of academics, archivists, and activists.

A great deal of work on digital media practices in and around social movements has focused on present-tense communication practices—how activists use media to organize (communicating with one another) and express political messages (communicating with the general public or particular publics outside of the movement). Such a focus makes sense, and such work is invaluable. Among other things, however, such work has made clear that media practices play a large role not just in formulating political goals and arguing in favor of them but also in developing senses of community, crafting common identities among participants, structuring social experience, and generally producing alternative modes of subjectivation. It is in part because of this that we need to consider the relationship between...

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media practices within social movements and the archive. I want to consider this question literally through the lens of archives as conventionally understood. That is, how do social movements produce archives of themselves? And how might we think generally about archiving social movement media?

If such media practices are indeed important in terms of not just the arguments they make but the subjective experiences and felt atmospheres they produce, it is important for not just scholars but future movement leaders to have access to such materials in order to better understand how various media practices shaped the experiences of movement participants and structured their senses of these movements. What was effective, by what means of evaluation, for whom, under what conditions? What “sneaky moments” did media practices produce that served to reinforce existing power imbalances, hierarchies, or systems of oppression?²⁶⁵ If we operate under the assumption that no one movement will, on its own, radically transform society into an egalitarian utopia, then we can assume that future movements will be necessary. Learning from today’s movements, then, can help them maximize their potential to spark widespread, enduring social change.

This chapter examines problems posed by the act of archiving amateur and activist docmedia. First, I consider this need to center affect in our understanding of archival projects and activist docmedia. Second, I consider specific problems posed by amateur and activist

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docmedia: ephemerality, relationality, context, and tense. Each of these have affective dimensions as well as strictly informatic consequences. Third, I examine a continuum of approaches to archiving activist and amateur docmedia that attempt, in different ways, to reckon with these problems.

The Affective Archive

Why does archiving matter? Nearly all amateur docmedia within the contemporary social movement is engaged in some combination of manufacturing solidarity, producing evidence, and building or mobilizing networks. Protests and other direct-action activist demonstrations are not isolated events but are themselves the result of collective labor, which means that even events that are not designed to create a particular affective atmosphere nevertheless are affective phenomena. Activist docmedia, recording such events and providing a connective tissue for the larger movements that sometimes emerge from them, work to produce affective publics that are not instantaneously called into being and abruptly ended with the beginning and ending of any particular march, rally or demonstration.

266 I would argue that even this distinction makes sense only as an analytic tool, because I have yet to encounter “pure information” devoid of any affective character. Indeed, Spinoza’s understanding of affect as the impingement of one body on another that impacts its capacity for action (and where “body” is not exclusively human) seems to by definition foreclose the possibility that any sort of information production could lack affective qualities a priori.

Instead, they spread out indefinitely beyond the spatiotemporal confines of the present. Such media, then, are always already engaged in archival work—preserving traces of past events and making them intelligible to such publics in the present in a way that reinforces a sense of common purpose and shared identity.

The three movements I have focused on in this book can be considered in conjunction with broader questions of archiving to consider not just how the media objects circulating within them co-produce structures of feeling in the present moment of any given event but also in terms of how the structures of feeling they produce function over time to promote a sense of shared identity, solidarity, and collective capacity to produce political change—in other words, how they produce a sense that the movement is indeed moving. Such a sense is important not because it might make movement participants feel good but because it plays a key role in building the ground from which to act. Such an affective atmosphere, as an emergent property of human and technical bodies brought together within a shared space, sustains the potential for change. It maintains networks of bodies that will be capable of recognizing and responding collectively in moments of rupture when the opportunity to spark change on a large scale presents itself. In less revolutionary moments, it helps sustain the micro-scale labor necessary to create change on the local level by creating the sense that such labor is an investment in a larger community that will eventually yield collective benefits.

According to Guattari, “Some memories take on special weight, acquiring the function of matrixes, a function of organizing the mode of subjectivation.” It is precisely this emergent organizing of subjectivation in movements that creates the need to understand such movements as dynamic processes that take different shapes over time, and, I would argue, it is affect that gives collective memories the sort of “weight” that Guattari describes here. It is important, then, that we be able to consider not just the affective experience of one particular protest demonstration or video but of the wider network of media and media practices within movements over time and how they develop emergent communication practices, modes of organizing, and structures of feeling.

**Problems with Archiving Digital Docmedia**

While there is a real need to archive activist and amateur media within social movements, there are also real limitations that make such projects difficult, especially from within movements as they are actively unfolding. The following section considers some of those problems, focusing specifically on problems involved in archiving digital docmedia. Those central problems are: the ephemerality and contingency of the media objects themselves, the difficulty of archiving within an assemblage framework where media objects can not be so easily isolated and considered independently from one another, the need to account for the context provided by the cultural moment of a movement whereby a great deal

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of argumentative force can derive from the simple use of a hashtag to drastically expand a given media object’s network, and the problem of tense in archiving—that is, the idea that to archive a movement’s media is to fundamentally treat that movement as being already something of the past.

Ephemerality & Contingency

Perhaps the central technical problem for archiving docmedia in and around social movements is dealing with the ephemerality of materials. Collecting and storing ephemeral media objects presents challenges in and of itself: such artifacts were rarely designed to endure over time. Their material qualities, then, may cause them to decay even under ideal conditions. In the case of digital media objects, they may be lost or otherwise irretrievable. Files may be corrupted. In the case of streaming media, the platform may remove content or the platform itself may be shut down. In the case of both analog and digital artifacts, they may become damaged or lost before even having a chance to be collected or noticed by archivists as something worth collecting. Such problems become magnified in the context of leaderless movements where it is not even clear whose artifacts or which kinds of artifacts will be worth collecting, and where “born-digital” materials follow no particular organizational scheme. As Howard Besser et al. note in reference to archiving media within Occupy Wall Street:

Previously, most physical content and collections entered the repository as part of a large collection that follows some kind of internal organizational and retrieval scheme (such as a newspaper’s photo collection with its own specific numbering and metadata scheme or an individual’s file folders with labeling reflecting that
individual’s own personal logic). In a world characterized by networked information and collaborative authorship, the cultural institution collecting material of historical and social importance will need to collect material coming from a variety of different sources, each with its own conception of metadata and file format standards.\footnote{Howard Besser, Sharon E. Farb, Todd Grappone, and Ali Jamshidi, “Ethics, Technology and the Challenges of Documenting History in Real Time.” Paper presented at IFLA WLIC 2014: Libraries, Citizens, Societies, Lyon, France, August 16-22, 2014. library.ifla.org/981/1/210-besser-en.pdf.}

Even outside of the context of explicitly horizontal movements, though, preserving documents and artifacts tends not to be an immediate concern for political movements because they tend to have many other more pressing priorities and insufficient resources for dealing with all of them. Of women’s theater in the 1970s, Goodman and de Gay write:

The notion of archiving oneself, of taking the work that seriously, of seeing a need to preserve it for the future, tends to come low on a list of priorities. This tendency is likely to be greater the more politically committed the work, when the politics of the moment are the driving force. But the politics and those moments will be of importance to contemporary and succeeding writers, practitioners and students, if the lessons are to be learnt, and progress made.\footnote{Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay, \textit{The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance} (London: Routledge, 2002).}

While this quote comes from a context that is arguably quite different from that of amateur documentarians today, many of the problems are related in their often explicit politicality, their ephemerality, and the value that can nevertheless result from keeping them accessible over time.

Explicitly political media also adds a layer of contingency that needs to be reckoned with. Such material is not only dependent on its material contingency, but also on agents of
the state and their acceptance of its continued existence. With activist media, the state may be more interested in purging rather than preserving it. This was undoubtedly the case in Egypt during the Arab Spring, where activists worked intentionally to produce archives of their own videos, photos, writings, and other materials in an attempt to produce a counter-archive to the state’s own archive of Egyptian nationality and cultural heritage.272

There is additionally an added level of contingency from the will of the people represented in such docmedia that is related to the potential threat posed by the state. There is a danger for bodies whose traces appear implicated in these media objects as participants, producers, distributors, viewers—a danger that can manifest itself as punishment at the hands of the state or, less directly, as targeted harassment that the state overlooks or otherwise permits (for example, at the hands of various publics whose politics run contrary to those expressed in a given media object. It becomes necessary, then, when archiving such material to account for the shift in the endurance over time of these images: sharing a video of protesters engaged in civil disobedience to one’s twitter feed without tagging or identifying anyone may indeed pose a threat to those bodies represented on screen, but such a threat is minimal compared to deeply contextualizing the same image, folding it into an archive’s larger network of meaning, and continuing to make it readily available over time.

Another consideration for archiving digital docmedia is one that gets to the heart of my approach throughout this book: the need to consider docmedia objects as assemblages rather than as texts that can be neatly cleaved from their material and expressive interactions with other objects. How, then, might we archive assemblages? Specifically, how might we archive any given assemblage in a way that accounts for each part’s autonomy, each part’s relation to the whole, and a sense of agency that emerges from the joining together of these parts? In other words, how might an archive account for what any given assemblage is able to do collectively that its constituent parts cannot do on their own? As Chris Ingraham contends, all archives are rhetorical and performative. The various bodies a given artifact may interact with—either within or through the archive of which it is a part—vary over time. As Ingraham puts it, “Archives may be material, but they are never corporeal. Researchers may enter the archive to reanimate the past through its evidence thereof, but such attempts are only reproductions; they inevitably fail to capture performance in its time-contingent liveness.”

This time-sensitive, dynamic relationality is particularly clear in the context of digital docmedia, and it is particular important in the context of activist media.

The videos produced by protesters supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, for example, are not only valuable in and of themselves as documents—or what Nichols might call “mere footage”—of struggle, but they produce documentaries in new ways by using the

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visual structures of websites and streaming media platforms to connect such images into larger arguments. Linking, here, becomes a method of editing (or at the very least it becomes analogous to editing). Linking becomes a particularly important tool when creating connections between images that exist as uninterrupted long takes—and the single long take video is quite common, especially for videos of marches, rallies, and other protest actions. That is, without any internal editing (in the traditional sense of cinematic “editing”), the links between these single-shot videos become the connective tissue that allows larger arguments to emerge.

In addition to direct links, such videos are also often linked through the creation of playlists and through the use of hashtags to unite a wide range of documentary material, often in ways that combine videos produced by the person doing the linking with videos produced by others in a way that creates a new form of collective, emergent authorship that is not reducible to any one individual and a form of collective expressivity not reducible to any particular “text.” These are not the same as “webdocs” in the way that Kate Nash discusses them or “living documentaries” in Sandra Gaudenzi’s sense of that term. They are nevertheless interactive, even “living,” and bound up in different sets of social and technical relationships than traditional documentary feature films.²⁷⁵


How, then, might we archive a documentary project that spans multiple videos using a common hashtag across multiple platforms? And in such cases, where do we draw the line between a hashtag used to coordinate a cohesive documentary project across multiple sites—something like the Dream Defenders’ #OurMarch—and the use of a hashtag to trace a much more generalized discourse around an issue—something like #MyFirstHarassment or #NoDAPL? There are clearly differences of scale involved between these examples. Nevertheless, they are similar kinds of projects in that they incorporate a range of nonfiction media spanning multiple speakers/authors/producers across multiple platforms. In all cases, archiving them necessitates accounting for not just what was expressed by whom and when, but how various the docmedia objects that comprise these larger projects (and/or discourses) flow between one another in space and time.

Context

Beyond the immediate interactions between parts of docmedia assemblages, archival projects face the problem of providing context for these works. What does this assemblage do in the larger context of the media ecologies of which it is itself a part? How does it fit within the dominant social practices, political formations, cultural forces, communication networks, and media infrastructures of its moment? Of course, some degree of contextualization is always necessary if an archive or archived artifact is to be useful. Digital docmedia, though, often depend on context for their arguments to be legible as such.
Docmedia tagged with #BlackLivesMatter, for example, depend to a large degree on a contextual understanding amongst viewers of such media that what they are seeing and hearing are not anecdotal, isolated events but evidence of larger structural oppression. That phrase “Black Lives Matter” is already an argumentative claim—a claim that docmedia using that tag might support by providing first-hand testimonials or talking-head style interviews, footage of police brutality, videos of various direct action demonstrations, or something else entirely. What neither these specific videos nor the tag itself provide, however, is the wider cultural context of this particular historical moment. That is, to understand “Black Lives Matter” as an argument and as a claim that needs to be made requires a broader understanding of contemporary culture that cannot be fully encapsulated in any single documentary. Such context is not just helpful for interpreting “Black Lives Matter” as a particular kind of argument but necessary for recognizing it as such. Relatedly, the context of #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter as discourses that are occurring in response to #BlackLivesMatter itself speaks volumes about the need for such an argument to be made in the first place as such discourses make clear that there is a fundamental lack of recognition (and/or willful disregarding) among some segments of population of the truth inherent in such a base-level claim that black lives indeed do matter.

In addition to the way that a general cultural awareness informs the expressive and argumentative capacities of docmedia, we also need to consider contexts of circulation. Who was actually involved in producing, circulating, and viewing such docmedia? This is a particular problem for amateur media of all kinds where media producers are by definition
not widely known and where the relative significance of works produced by one person compared to their peers may not be immediately clear. Likewise, while a textual approach might eschew the historical author and deride the intentional fallacy, docmedia interested in social change require some consideration of intent in order to evaluate the media object’s effectiveness on its own terms. What were the goals of the people producing such work? Was each docmedia producer actively trying to further a particular argument or cultivate a certain affective atmosphere, or were such phenomena emergent properties of a movement’s “choreography of assembly”?\(^{276}\)

Here it becomes necessary to consider social movement media practices through the lens of Foucault’s understanding of the archive as the processes by which historical conditions are made intelligible because it seems to me that this is the very work of any effective movement—to make understandable to a particular public conditions, generally of inequality, that were not previously able to be collectively sensed as such.\(^{277}\) Through the lens of Foucault, the work of the social movement is always already archival in that its work is making conditions that it recognizes intelligible to a wider audience and, in the process, mobilizing certain publics, persuading others, and often calling into being new publics (or counterpublics). How do movements render their unique historical conditions intelligible to


various publics and counterpublics? How might we develop archives of digital docmedia, especially amateur docmedia and docmedia around social movements, that can account for the way that such media is itself always already creating its own archives of events?

Tense

The notion of social movements as already engaged in archival work in Foucault’s understanding of the archive and the notion of digital media as always creating their own microarchives raises the question of tense: is archiving as a process something that inherently renders the archived artifact as being something “of the past”? This was a central debate amongst Occupy Wall Street’s Archival Working Group, a group that collected a wide range of online and offline artifacts of the movement in an attempt to archive from within rather than allowing outside institutions to determine what of and how the movement would be archived. Such a conceptual division over the archive as a demarcation of the movement’s end versus an ongoing process of archiving as itself a way of keeping the movement alive ultimately led to the Archival Working Group to split their collection of analog artifacts between members of the group, with some artifacts being transferred to New York University’s library and others being deterritorialized and distributed across multiple sites as part of an “anarchive” or anarchist archive.

278 Wolfgang Ernst, Digital Memory and the Archive (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

279 For a more detailed analysis of Occupy’s archival experiments, see: Jason Buel, “Assembling the Living Archive: A Media-Archaeological Excavation of Occupy Wall
Of course, we could consider “tense” simply another manifestation of relationality—the relationship between image and time—but such a relationship is distinct enough to warrant its own consideration here because of its inherently phenomenological character: framed as of the past or on the present, the image impinges differently on the viewer. Framed as being of the present, a media object may express a call to action that mimetically compels the viewer to take up an ongoing struggle as their own. Framed as being of the past, a media object may satisfy epistephilia by transferring knowledge about something not previously known to the viewer that might function to explain current conditions but is itself finished.

For digital materials, closely related to the question of tense is the question of technical accessibility. That is, are archived materials in the same “present” as the hardware and software needed to access them? Even in cases where files are still accessible, are they accessible through the same technological formations in which they were produced, or are they being accessed through more recent machines that may display similar content but interface differently with the file and human body viewing it. As Ross Lipman writes:

The rate of technological change is part of the challenge. Things come and go so quickly that the term post-medium becomes less ironic and more and more relevant. If artists make work that is medium independent, what does preservation (and presentation) mean exactly? The continual transcoding of digital images across platforms, even within a single production, calls into question the very idea of an original or master source to emulate. We thus need to look at each work individually and understand both its internal nature and presentation context. Many curators and archivists already understand this and make every effort to preserve and present works in a way that's formally appropriate, even if that appropriateness is ambiguous.

Once we've established the work and its methods of presentation, with the formal properties of each piece distinct or at least considered, a chance arises for future viewers to see those differences. The project is at once technical, educational, and aesthetic.

As Lipman rightly observes, what exactly counts as an “appropriate” method for archiving digital media is not always clear. Attention to potential differences, though, allows them to be taken into consideration even if they are not always necessarily preserved—a consideration that embraces the more educational and aesthetic aspects of archiving rather than treating archiving as a strictly technical process of preservation. I suggest in the following section that a shift toward more open present-tense archiving understood as a dynamic process may be a valuable way of engaging with amateur and activist docmedia.

**Potential Starting Points: A Methodological Continuum**

I will conclude with a brief consideration of three existing models for archiving that might provide productive grounds for considering the intersections discussed above. They represent a continuum. The first is highly focused on aggregating and preserving documentary evidence—and strategically stripping out anything of the lived experience of an event that cannot be reduced to a video recording and its metadata to make such bits of audiovisual evidence easy to isolate, organize, and search. The last focuses on performatively recovering and complexities of archival materials and engaging as deeply as possible with

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their affective power.

The ACLU’s Mobile Justice app is highly focused on preserving documentary evidence and centrally aggregating it within its own servers so that it has control over the nearly instantaneously developed digital archives of videos that users record in this app. The idea behind the app is that users can open it and record evidence of police brutality or other civil rights violations in the moment that such offenses are taking place. Then, rather than the users themselves needing to maintain such documentary evidence on their own phones, that material is instead stored on ACLU servers. This also prevents the police or other agents of the state from demanding that the user delete their evidence of wrongdoing—even if police force files to be deleted or seize the phone itself, the archived copy of the evidence against them (along with any pertinent metadata) exists in some seemingly ethereal elsewhere that is far away from their control.

The Mobile Justice app’s primary function is informatic and evidentiary, and both the app and the archives it helps to create have a strategic purpose: to document particular kinds of violations of civil liberties, specifically those that occur public spaces directly against human bodies by agents of the state who have the potential to be visibly identifiable. Accordingly, there is a great deal of pre-selection that goes into the structuring of the app and these archives. It is precisely through such a priori omission that this archive is able to be effective by its own standards—that is, in focusing narrowly on what type of events it wants to document and the means by which it enables such documentation to take place, the resulting archive is relatively easy to search, organize, and control. Metadata and file
formatting can be standardized. Relationships can be assigned to visible evidence based on location data.

Location in this case is particularly tricky, though. While I have so far referred to the Mobile Justice app as a singular interface, there are actually separate apps for different states (currently seventeen states plus Washington, DC).\(^{281}\) This is necessary not just to pre-sort visual material and get in the hands of the most relevant chapters of the ACLU in order to respond to documented injustices, but it is also necessary because states have different (and changing) laws about recording the police. That said, it requires a fair deal of pre-planning on the part of protesters or observers using the app. They must not just be familiar with it and download it ahead of time, but have the version of it that is specific to the state where they anticipate the potential of police malfeasance (assuming, of course, that the action is taking place within one of the eighteen areas that have a designated app). Such a use of plural Mobile Justice apps, however strategic or necessary it may be, nevertheless demonstrates an indirect exercise of state power—based on the US’s lack of any universal assertion of a citizen’s rights to record the police—over the shape of the archives it produces, what it is possible to include in these archives, and what is foreclosed altogether. It is a useful model, but not a perfect one.

Additionally, while I have focused on discussing the app so far in terms of how it is

\(^{281}\) The ACLU itself refers to “The Mobile Justice app” singular in its promotional and instructional videos about how to use the app. See: aclu.org/feature/aclu-apps-record-police-conduct.
structured and how it structures information, it does also exert an affective power. The app implies, and indeed traces out, a direct connection between the user who has downloaded it and a larger community: that of other users and their local branch of ACLU. While using the app may not preserve much beyond the purely informational (what happened? where? when?), through the act of recording the user stitches themselves into a larger politically engaged community that has an inherent collective power—power to document, power to seek redress of grievances through legal means, and power to forge technologically-networked solidarity.

A more public facing model of archiving is the “living archive.” As its name implies, this mode of archiving is less interested in the (relatively) permanent storage of artifacts and more interested in embracing the productive capacities of its growth and decay over time. Tamara Rhodes maps out the shifting understandings of the “living archive” over the course of its relatively short history. According to her research, there are three distinct ways that the concept of the living archive has manifested itself within various academic discourses. The first understands “living” in a traditional, literal way and might refer to collections of plants, or alternatively to an individual human being with an abundance of specialized knowledge. This way of thinking about a living archive seems conceptually distinct from the others she identifies.

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The second understanding comes out of library science and conceives of the living archive as a traditional archive that is more fluid and dynamic. It permits the regular addition of materials and sets up an expectation that archived materials might be incorporated into a number of different displays, perhaps even travelling spatially away from the library that has assembled the archive. Items archived, then, are no longer locked away for posterity, but actively circulated into and out of the physical space of the archive-as-thing. Another related understanding incorporates the idea that digital interfaces will serve as the means of spreading the archive’s contents with the outside world. This permutation of the living archive depends on digital interfaces to facilitate interaction between users and archives, in some cases even allowing users to add new materials directly to the archive themselves.

The third conceptualization of the living archive adds a temporal dimension: users can not only interact with the archive and add their own materials, but they do so in an attempt to capture events as they occur rather than, for example, sharing stories or documents of past events. One particularly useful layer that can be added onto this model is the living archive as actualized by #searchunderoccupy, an initiative of The New School in New York that Rhodes sees as a model for the development of future living archives. This version of the living archive attempts not to document events as they happen, but also to share the media already being produced within the event. That is, rather than asking amateur archivists to go out and take pictures of an event like citizen journalists, the sources of archival materials are instead people who are already a fundamental part of the process and who are already
actively creating media that documented the event from the inside.\textsuperscript{283} In this way, we can consider hashtags generally as always already producing their own living archives.

The question then becomes how to archive strategically in a way that realizes the full potential of both the hashtag as a means of circulating discourses in the present and constructing historical records for the future. This is, relatedly, a question of how to effectively produce a phase shift for hashtagged materials that pulls them out of their present patterns of storage and circulation on private platforms (typically on private platforms where the decision to use such a platform may strategically help activists get their media seen and where such media might also disrupt dominant hegemonic media practices but nevertheless permits private companies to extract value and ultimately control such material) and shifts them instead to servers where they can be publicly maintained rather than only available contingent upon a private company’s discretion and, at the same time, doing so in a way that either preserves or at least accounts for their relationality. Beyond the storage of the objects themselves, something additional is needed to understand (if not necessarily preserve) the relationality of the media objects.

Finally, Patricia Zimmermann proposes a live, performative mode of engaging with archival materials, specifically amateur film. Zimmerman writes, “home movie archive live projects craft a sensorium through an aesthetic of disjunction and contradiction, amplifying place and space.”\textsuperscript{284} Such a live, performative experience of archival materials embraces

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{283} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{284} Patricia R. Zimmerman, “The Home Movie Archive Live,” In Rascaroli, Laura,
\end{itemize}
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Wendy Chun’s reminder that “memory is not a static but rather an active process” and that as much as we might feel like digital storage is permanent and immutable, digital memory (and in fact all memory) requires a performativity inherent in bringing an inscription from the past into the present moment. Zimmerman suggests that her live approach to engaging with amateur film history offers a “politics of convenings” rather than representation. Such a politics is grounded in collaboration, polyvocality, horizontality, dialogue, contingencies, and fluidity. It provides for the construction of “provisional microterritories” in which archived objects can be understood—microterritories in which the digital and the analogue overlap and interact rather than being walled off from one another. Jeannette Bastian finds that, in a variety of other contexts, similar experimental live archives can serve to advance projects of decolonization and can reinforce community ties.

A performative approach to experiencing archival materials fully embraces the


287 Ibid. One example of this in practice is Home Movie Day, a celebration of amateur films held in dozens of cities worldwide each year where ordinary people bring their old home movies to a public space to view them together, to share stories about the events depicted in the films, and to digitize them for future viewing. See: “Home Movie Day,” Center for Home Movies, http://www.centerforhomemovies.org/hmd/.

affective, identity-building aspects of archiving and seeks to continually draw the past into the present, interacting with history as an ongoing process rather than something that can be bracketed off from the present. As Zimmermann writes, “Our collective film archive of the future demands a new historiography that embraces multiple cinematic forms. Rather than ending, we need new beginnings: we need to imagine the archive as an engine of difference and plurality, always expanding, always open.” Embracing liveness is one way of constructing plural, expansive encounters with archival materials and draws attention to the ways in which all archives are performative to some degree.

**Conclusion**

In this closing chapter, I have developed a number of new problems in an attempt to illustrate some of the longer-term, larger-scale implications of the sort of ephemeral docmedia produced in and around contemporary social movements. This work extends my consideration of digital docmedia as assemblages to consider not just how these media objects work as ephemeral expressions of political will but also how they can function affectively over time to help shape movements and build the ground for future political action. Such material provides unique challenges and opportunities for thinking differently about the social functions of various archival formations as well as how they structure our

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understandings of our past and present conditions.

Such work is ongoing as the political and technological terrain is always shifting. Throughout this book, I have examined how social movements deal with questions of connectivity via data, bodies, and place in the creation of docmedia. How, though, might we think about the relationship of academic work doing similar connective work in analyzing and archiving such docmedia moving forward? The decisions we make to this end shape not just what we (think we) know, but also what it will be possible to know in the future. Archival practices are thus crucial to the politics of witnessing over time—that is, to establishing and maintaining what it is possible to witness, for whom, through what means, and under what conditions. Archival practices are thus also crucial to the memory of social movements over time—not only how they are remembered, but also the very possibility of remembering them at all. Relatedly, the ability for social movements’ histories to be witnessed and remembered over time from the perspective of the very people who participated in those movements can serve a powerful transductive function in reactivating some of the (potentially untapped) virtual potentials of the movement and its milieu into a new future context in which those virtual potentials may be productive. In short, it is not just an artifact’s or text’s capacity to index the simple fact of a movement’s having occurred that is worth archiving.

Ultimately, the unique social and technical milieu of digital docmedia demands that we consider them not simply as representational texts that produce meaning but also as active material systems in their own right that interface with and act back on a variety of bodies, not
just on the viewer. To develop a more adequate understanding of documentary practices, we must expand our understanding of what “counts” as docmedia and whose docmedia is worthy of study. I have argued here for the need to examine docmedia in terms of their expressive capacities through an affective framework that breaks from a dualistic, representationalist, purely rational mode of understanding documentaries as part of a discourse of sobriety. Likewise, I have argued for the need to consider docmedia as assemblages—agencies—that gather together heterogeneous bodies (human, technical, and other), bringing them together in ways that enable them to produce material effects made possible through their very relationality. As I have shown, such a model reveals a great deal about how power operates through docmedia practices. Examining docmedia’s capacities beyond the purely representational allows us to better understand the often invisible forces that serve to control or limit the power of such practices, as well as means for potentially overcoming such limits.
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