

The Message It Is Not: The Work of the Medium Known as Documentary

Rey Chow

This article is a brief discussion of Pooja Rangan's book Immediations, highlighting her argument for the need to analyze carefully the audiovisual materialities and ideological assumptions of documentary as a medium.

Keywords: autism, documentary, humanitarianism, ideological, mediation, neoliberal, participatory media, voice

Pooja Rangan is invested in the formal, ideological, and institutional stakes of theoretically oriented media production, especially when such production touches on the inequities of globalized social relations. In her recently published monograph, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*, she articulates these investments in a crystalline engagement with documentary in its multiple valences. The book showcases a mind at work that is at once inquisitive and imaginative and that combines knowledge of the empirical side of filmmaking with nuanced cross-disciplinary thinking. The thesis of the book is clear and powerful: a habitual disregard of the materialities of mediation is, Rangan suggests, what characterizes much of humanitarian work, and this disturbing combination of humanitarianism and *im*-mediation finds a prevalent public form in documentary, which traditionally stakes its political claims on being a neutral and authentic representation of reality. Interestingly, Rangan defines immediations in terms of tropes, calling them “tropes of documentary immediacy” (5). Going further, she writes: “Immediations, I propose, are the documentary tropes of evidencing ... attributes of humanity in all their immediacy. If humanity is the ‘ultimate imagined community,’ ... then documentary immediations can be regarded as part of the ritual, tropic performances of belonging to this community” (7–8). Rangan’s argument is that such tropes demand interrogation on formal, ideological, and ethical grounds—a task she takes the lead in performing with rigor throughout the book. However difficult the task may be, she urges that we try in some ways to meet “the challenge of evolving a noninterventionist mode of encountering the other” (17).

The profound concerns raised by Rangan can perhaps be reiterated in a somewhat different kind of register. Imagine humanitarianism and mediality as two concurrent

Rey Chow is Anne Firor Scott Professor of Literature at Duke University. She is the author of *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience* (Columbia University Press, 2014) and the coeditor, with James A. Steintrager, of *Sound Objects* (Duke University Press, 2019). (Email: rey.chow@duke.edu)

series of signification, two series of meaning production. Series 1, humanitarianism—which in this case can be taken as a stand-in for any unambiguous political message of neoliberal inclusionism—tends to become so dominant that series 2, that is, the signifiatory aspects of the documentary medium/media conveying the contents being reported, are eclipsed or simply ignored. Even though series 2 functions with its own irreducible specifics, it is often treated, or so Rangan tells us, as though it were a transparent windowpane (or a nonexistent middle zone), one that allows spectators direct access to the truth of what is being presented. Rangan's readings show how series 1 has been empowered to become dominant by a number of contemporary forces, among which are fervent capitalist commodification and neoliberal political rhetoric. Operating under the auspices of the market and virtuous talk, humanitarianism makes it quite convenient to sidestep the formal elements constitutive of series 2. Despite being a medially specific form (and belonging appropriately in series 2), then, documentary tends to be viewed as a mere conduit—at times a justifiably aggressive conduit—for preformed political attitudes (series 1), a means of mobilizing the viewing public by sensationalizing their perceptions. Because of this hierarchical relation between series 1 and series 2 (whereby series 1 plays the role of the determinant factor even though there are two series of meaning production at stake), disenfranchised or disadvantaged populations' participation in media production often ends up aggravating, rather than ameliorating, this lopsided scenario of truth-telling. Furthermore, such populations are nowadays often encouraged to dress themselves up with identity politics, so that their productions can be hailed as political statements that they are performing as part of their injured but authentic selves. As Rangan puts it, "Participatory documentary exhorts destitute individuals to showcase the very bare humanity whose lack it purports to remedy as a mediatized spectacle" (11).

Immediations offers a remarkably original approach to one of the persistent questions in the overlapping fields of film, media, and cultural studies: How are we to assess and evaluate (pre)suppositions about objective "facts," indeed about claims to reality, in the postcolonial representational contexts embedded in sociohistorical unevenness and inequality? In the subfield of documentary studies, in particular, Rangan's inquiry spotlights the issue of documentary's longstanding custodianship of moral authority through (a conventionally assumed) medial transparency—in Rangan's words, through a claim to *immediacy*. She discusses, for instance, the trendsetting work of John Grierson, credited with inventing the term *documentary*, to pinpoint documentary's cathexis to this entwinement of moral authoritarianism and *anti*-aestheticism: "Grierson wished to innovate a form of cinematic mediation in which the role of the aesthetic was to refer the spectator to urgent social realities in a direct, immediate, and didactic fashion" (3). To put it in a nutshell, Grierson "believed in propaganda first, and art second" (3). In her copiously informative chapters, Rangan, reading against the grain of the entrenched Griersonian mandate, opens up four cases of immediations whose status as medially specific events has been, for her, prematurely foreclosed. These four cases comprise timely scenarios of global social concern. There is, for instance, the photographic aesthetic of "feral innocence" (an aesthetic that tends to fetishize and commodify the lives of non-Western children, in this case children of prostitutes in Calcutta, India), and there is the televisual spectacle of "liveness" adopted by disaster victims of Hurricane Katrina posing as eyewitnesses to their own damage and destruction. We also read a riveting account of the use of first-person voiceover narration by autistic protagonists to speak for

themselves and an eye-opening discussion of the enigmatic production of an apparent self-portrait by an elephant, as revelation of animal intelligence.

Focusing on these four case studies, respectively devoted to four arenas of humanitarian intervention that seek to empower subaltern, endangered, disabled, and nonhuman “others” with the technical skills and instruments of visual media production, Rangan describes how, in each case, socially marginalized subjects have been converted into media entrepreneurs. Such conversions, she suggests, exemplify contemporary neoliberalism’s systemic incitements to socioeconomic participation and volunteerism. Aiming her readings simultaneously at the enlightened mission of empowering such others and at their subsumption by a coercive humanitarian agenda, Rangan delivers a brutal conclusion, namely, that documentary immediacy has long been a means of fixing the other-in-precarity in the position of a wounded noble savage, replete with condescending underpinnings that are now updated with fashionable do-it-yourself and supposedly “reflexive” media technologies. Her ultimate question, an unsettling one to be sure, carries far-reaching reverberations: What does it mean for contemporary philosophers and theoreticians as well as media practitioners to invest so much speculative and creative energy in bare-life figures and their liminal existential conditions, when the biopolitical stresses of humanitarianism as a discourse are so seldom subject to critical scrutiny yet so urgently require attention?

Rangan’s inclusion of autism in her study (see chapter 3 of *Immediations*) is especially noteworthy for a number of reasons. Although the other chapters of the book discuss documentary largely from the visual perspectives of camerawork, spectacle, and image, in this chapter Rangan introduces a topic (autism) that, by confronting us with what it means to have “voice,” brings about an interesting shift in focus to sonic perspectives, whose resonances go beyond medicine and neuroscience to bear on the acts of speaking and narrating that are the bread and butter of documentary itself. The chapter evidences fascinating research materials, many of which are not usually associated with autism—from the various films and videos to the arguments of Aristotle, Mladen Dolar, Michel Chion, Erin Manning, Temple Grandin, Michel Serres, Bill Nichols, and others. The chapter also displays Rangan’s critical talents at their best, as an observer pursuing her subject matter with enviable levels of conceptual acuity, agility, and finesse. Beginning with a careful reading of the details of the diegesis and voiceover narration in the films about autistic people, she delves with ease into the nuances of philosophical and theoretical debates about voice. Her painstaking engagements with these debates allow for a thorough elaboration of the autistic perspective with its singularly embodied relations and organic attunements to a larger ecology—what Rangan calls *voicing*—which in turn reveals the neurotypical (that is, “normal”) production of voice itself as a narrow, because reductive, form of channeling. The judgment Rangan reaches brilliantly reverses the very logic of the normativity routinely imposed on autism:

From a humanitarian perspective, the autistic dwelling in an infinite field of perceptual and relational possibilities is seen as disabled or trapped. However, when we look at speech from an autistic perspective, it is voicing in the “normal” sense, from which these possibilities have been subtracted, that is revealed to be disabled, lacking, closeted, and constrained—it would not be an exaggeration to call it thoroughly autistic.

(130–31)

An interdisciplinary work that draws on a rich repertoire of cultural and social materials as well as film and media theory, *Immediations* is a strikingly refreshing intervention, one that compels readers to rethink their cherished beliefs and customary scholarly methods and practices. Rangan is in full command of her presentation because she has processed her sources, theoretical and empirical, with unfailingly meticulous attention. Her discussions of numerous philosophers and theorists—from Michel Foucault to Gilles Deleuze and Roger Callois, from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to Henry Giroux, Bill Nichols, Michael Renov, Cary Wolfe, Didier Fassin, Lisa Cartright, Laura Marks, and many others—as well as of a variety of medial objects such as photographs, films, videos, TV journalism, and artworks are exemplary in their sensitivity and judiciousness. These discussions provide instructive accounts of leading critical trends in the subfield(s) involved even as Rangan advances her own innovative reconfigurations of the major issues at stake. By tackling participatory documentary at its *raison d'être*—giving voice to disenfranchised or disadvantaged people by charitably handing over to them the technical means of medial capture—and by aligning this *raison d'être* with the propagandistic rhetoric of immediacy in representation in general, she masterfully reassembles documentary, revealing it to be nothing short of an epistemic event. After Rangan, documentary can no longer be viewed simply as one genre among many; rather, its status is that of a medial-ideological mode that has been leaving indelible imprints on our time by cutting across different genres (including TV journalism, YouTube videos, and photography as well as films and videos formally designated as documentaries).

I consider Rangan's book a substantive contribution to a number of fields and subfields, including film and media studies, feminist studies, critical race theory, and the philosophy and politics of global cultural production. As an inquiry into the indispensable and often not so subtly exploitative connections between humanitarianism and participatory media, the book is as much an astute ethical statement as it is an outstanding piece of scholarship. Based on thorough research, the book also demonstrates the wide-ranging implications of gender, not only in relation to particular gendered populations but also in relation to the discursively generative momentum of the liaison between humanitarianism and media production—indeed, of humanitarianism itself as a leading type of generative media production in our time.

Good Intentions

Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan 

This article is part of a special forum on Pooja Rangan's award-winning monograph Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary (Duke University Press, 2017).

Keywords: documentary, photography, humanitarianism, voice, subaltern

In late June 2019, news outlets around the world published journalist Julia Le Duc's photograph of the bodies of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his twenty-three-month-old daughter, Valeria, who drowned in the Rio Grande while attempting to migrate to the United States. The photo depicts the two facedown in the water, inert limbs embracing. Valeria is entangled in her father's black t-shirt; she wears sneakers and fire-engine red shorts. The blue of Ramírez's shorts matches the cans of Bud Light strewn around the riverbank and around their bodies.

It is a devastating image, and for a news cycle or two, it took the air out of bad-faith debates on the rights of migrants and asylum seekers in the United States. "It's our version of the Syrian photograph—of the three-year-old boy on the beach, dead. That's what it is," said Texas Congressman Joaquin Castro, referring to the 2015 photo of the body of Alan Kurdi, who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea while his family was trying to reach the Greek island of Kos.¹ Kurdi's photograph, taken by Nilüfer Demir, has been credited with compelling European governments "to open closed frontiers."² Castro hoped that Le Duc's photograph would communicate the urgency of the humanitarian crisis on the US-Mexico border and galvanize an immediate political response.

Soon enough, however, the image was folded into the ongoing daily reports of family separations, ICE-led round-ups of undocumented US residents, and concentration camps masquerading as border patrol facilities. The American public moved on, as if unmoved, however moved we thought we had been. Óscar Ramírez and Valeria's

Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan teaches English and social, cultural, and critical theory at the University of Arizona. A former magazine editor and award-winning essayist, she has published in more than three dozen scholarly, journalistic, and semi-public outlets. Recent essays discuss contemporary South Asian Anglophone and Asian/American literatures, critical amateurism, the careers of canonical feminist texts, and the renomination of the postcolonial as world Anglophone. (Email: rtsrinivasan@email.arizona.edu)

1 Azam Ahmed and Kirk Semple, "Photo of Drowned Migrants Captures Pathos of Those Who Risk it All," *New York Times*, June 25, 2019. Accessed July 31, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/25/us/father-daughter-border-drowning-picture-mexico.html>.

2 "TIME 100 Photos: Alan Kurdi," *Time*. Accessed July 31, 2019. <http://100photos.time.com/photos/nilufer-demir-alan-kurdi#photograph>.

dreams and struggles, their lives, had not been enough to secure their futures. Their deaths were equally inadequate to the task.

I've been wanting to ask Pooja Rangan about these images and these deaths, about Valeria Ramírez and Alan Kurdi. Might their photographic capture represent the ghastly consummation of the humanitarian impulse that Rangan so brilliantly deconstructs in *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*? If documentary films require that their subjects live (the Foucaultian phrasing is deliberate and accords with Rangan's argument) so as to sound their voices, reveal their selves, and display their humanity, then doesn't the silenced, dead subject—the body in the rushes amid the beer cans—serve as every such film's unseen final frame, the spectral engine of humanitarian interference, the ghostly epilogue that hangs like a threat over every shot?

Or have I got that twisted? Construed more generously, can the humanitarian documentary be understood as a response to the failure of the image? (Notwithstanding the initial reaction to Demir's photo, the Syrian refugee crisis continues at the time of this writing in summer 2019.) Reflecting on the "too easy" way in which photographs like Valeria Ramírez's and Alan Kurdi's are at once remembered and forgotten, Teju Cole asks, "Who are we if we need to look at ever more brutal images in order to feel something? What will be brutal enough?"³ Maybe contemporary documentary filmmakers take up the interventionist charge specifically because no image has been "brutal" enough to move us to our collective senses, because of the photograph's impotence, because what Susan Sontag calls the "ceaseless flow" of horrific photos of tragedies has only supplied viewers with "the bemused awareness ... that terrible things happen."⁴ Regarding the pictured pain of others has rarely been enough to put an end to their pain, so filmmakers try to amplify their voices, make resonant their interiority, let them display their fully human selves—before their bodies wash up on the riverbank.

This is not a defense of documentary humanitarianism, not yet anyway. Having been thoroughly convinced by Rangan that participatory documentary motivated by humanitarianism is "a regulatory capture apparatus,"⁵ I'm just trying to remind myself why filmmakers pursue endangered Others in the first place. Within every touristic, benevolent, prurient humanitarian documentary is a sticky morass of good intentions, activist hopes, and artistic dreams. Can we read them? Do they matter? If a film "does" good but fails its subjects, should that inflect our reading of its immediations? What about a film that fails to move audiences but tries to empower its subjects? These are undoubtedly the wrong questions to ask Rangan, as will be clear in what follows. I want to ask them anyway.

Immediations argues that endangered lives (Rangan's examples include the children of prostitutes, hurricane victims, the autistic, and rescued animals) supply social-justice-oriented documentary films with their "raison d' être."⁶ The former serve the latter, not the other way around. This is especially true when filmmakers enlist threatened,

3 Teju Cole, "A Crime Scene at the Border," *New York Times*, July 10, 2019. Accessed July 31, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/10/magazine/drowned-migrants-photo-us-mexico-border.html>.

4 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 13, 21.

5 Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 156.

6 Rangan, *Immediations*, 1.

disenfranchised, or otherwise precarious subjects as coproducers of their respective texts. Under Rangan's careful, charismatic scrutiny, all the stock, self-congratulatory alibi of participatory documentary—*we are giving a voice to the voiceless; we are putting faces to the faceless; we are returning to them their humanity; we are allowing audiences to see through their eyes instead of our own*—fall apart. These are not magnanimous or self-abnegating directorial choices, Rangan shows, nor enlightened modes of empowering the Other. Rather, the “guiding humanitarian ethic [of] giving the camera to the other—invents the very disenfranchised humanity that it claims to redeem.”⁷ In other words, giving the camera to the Other is not a gift. It is a discursive trap that presumes and necessitates a return performance of audible and legible humanity that, by design, only the filmmaker and film are able to identify, display, and recover.

Suffice it to say, this is not the conventional way that humanitarian documentaries are read. Consider the words that begin A.O. Scott's review of the Academy Award-winning 2004 *Born into Brothels*, which documents the lives of children of Kolkata prostitutes and turns them into self-actualizing artistes in the process: “The impulse to document the lives of poor, neglected and oppressed people, which motivates countless filmmakers and photojournalists, is unquestionably noble.”⁸ There's nothing noble about this impulse as Rangan reads it. Yes, the brothel children are given photography lessons, but they are also enlisted in the laborious documentation of their lives and worlds. Their photos feed, philosophically and materially, codirector and photojournalist Zana Briski's nonprofit organization, Kids with Cameras, as well as Briski's itineraries on the international film circuit. *Born into Brothels*, its boosters, and the related nonprofit all present the children's photographs as windows into their souls, as not only *what* they see and *how* they see but *who* they are. And yet, Rangan shows, the children were specifically taught to adopt a “photographic aesthetic of feral innocence”⁹ (imagine a photo of a Kolkata slum-kid jumping rope, one taken by her playmate) that bolstered Briski's humanitarian mandate by communicating their innocence and secured the marketability of their photographs on a global stage.

The aesthetic of childhood innocence is just one of the “audiovisual tropes” or “immediations” that Rangan identifies as frequently employed in documentaries operating “in the mode of emergency.”¹⁰ Border crises, sex trafficking, ecological devastation, climate catastrophe, the AIDS epidemic, threat of nuclear fallout, animals on the verge of extinction, Zika, measles: such emergencies, even when contrived, require the suspension of our conventional modes of temporal inhabitation. They demand that we stop discussing solutions to problems and instead just *do*, now. Correspondingly, documentary filmmakers use tropes such as televisual liveness and the first-person voice-over in order to arrest viewers' attentions and direct us toward immediate action. It's not hard to imagine how a “kids with cameras”-type project in a migrant detention center on the US-Mexico border would work today. Images of predatory guards, open sores on

7 Rangan, *Immediations*, 1.

8 A. O. Scott, “Nurturing the Talents of Children in Calcutta,” *New York Times*, December 8, 2004. Accessed July 31, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/08/movies/nurturing-the-talents-of-children-in-calcutta.html>.

9 Rangan, *Immediations*, 37.

10 Rangan, *Immediations*, 4.

unwashed bodies, and miscarrying teenagers on blood-soaked cardboard would misfire, but photos of children improvising play with toilet paper rolls and Mylar blankets would confirm their creativity, resilience, and humanity. *See, we have to get them out of there now!*

Immediations have specific reality effects; they make the subjects in question appear authentic, present, natural, actual, real. Bodies, experiences, and voices materialize tantalizingly on the screen as if unvarnished and “beyond the control of mediation.”¹¹ But nothing is beyond mediation, and in fact it takes considerable artifice or “alchemy”¹² to present a subject as if engaged in an act of pure, artless self-revelation. I watched *Born into Brothels* when it first came out and remember chafing against scenes of another White tour guide with well-intentioned missionary zeal exposing for an international audience the lives of impoverished Indian children. I didn’t yet have the critical vocabulary of immediations (Rangan’s original coinage), so I racialized my critique of the film and wrongly attributed its faults to the neocolonial power dynamics on display. Rangan’s postcolonial critique is more sophisticated. She uses Johannes Fabian’s work on allochronism to connect the appeal to universal discourses of childhood innocence to “the temporal distancing”¹³ of autistic and animal modes of communication that are embodied and non-normatively relational. She also explains how enlisting the children in their own documentation becomes the authorizing condition of Briski’s film. It shields her from scrutiny and disguises the film’s artifice. *We aren’t representing the children, see, they are representing themselves!*

But it isn’t their film, and to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s well-known words, a “postrepresentationalist vocabulary hides an essentialist agenda.”¹⁴ Like rescued elephants trained to paint self-portraits (the subject of chapter 4, the upshot being that we care more about animals if they have “human”-like selves), the brothel children are asked both to produce recognizable, marketable versions of themselves and to perform “affective, virtuosic, and creative modalities of labor that are not recognized or compensated as such.”¹⁵ This argument also builds through chapter 2’s discussion of participatory media in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Reading the 2008 film *Trouble the Water*, which includes eyewitness footage from a Katrina survivor, Rangan lays bare the trap of participating in one’s own supposedly empowering documentation. She calls it “the predatory cultural logic of disaster capitalism,” by which “the most vulnerable social subjects ... actively absorb professional risks as personal liabilities.”¹⁶ *Send us your images; tweet us your pictures; email us your location; interview your neighbors; tell us your story; “The Times needs your voice.”* More than a decade after Katrina, this predatory, postrepresentationalist logic unites coverage from crises to cat videos. Corporate media profit daily from the work of citizen reporters, who risk their lives to “speak for themselves,” to film their houses burning down, their possessions

11 Rangan, *Immediations*, 73.

12 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 81.

13 Rangan, *Immediations*, 107.

14 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 285.

15 Rangan, *Immediations*, 28.

16 Rangan, *Immediations*, 67.

floating away, even their lovers being murdered, as in the case of Diamond Reynolds's cell phone live-stream of the 2016 shooting of Philando Castile.

To be clear, what's at stake for Rangan is not the fact of expropriated profit, but rather that the subjects in question, whether camera-wielding children or video-recording victims, are being interpellated as producers of a very specific (read: liberal, Western) mode of being human. This is the argument at the philosophical heart of *Immediations*—participatory documentary films are “regulating what does and does not count as human”¹⁷—and it connects *Born into Brothels* and *Trouble the Water* to the films about animal self-portraiture and autism in the later chapters. Whose vision is on offer in these films? What self is captured in a self-portrait? How does documentary refashion the endangered subject as “a native informant of sorts”?¹⁸ When a film gives viewers access to the supposedly unmediated voice of the disenfranchised, who, really, is speaking?

There are only two explicit references to Spivak's “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Immediations* (for that matter, only two pages listed in the index under “postcolonialism and postcolonialist scholars”), but I read Rangan's monograph as an extended response to the canonical essay. As I take it, Rangan revises Spivak's titular provocation into something like, “Can the subaltern *not* speak?” Does she have the right to remain silent? Can she be left good and well alone? As Spivak herself memorably argued, it's no more virtuous to “let” or “make” the subaltern speak than it is to speak “for” her because we only ever hear what we want to hear, what we can already hear, what we are primed to hear. As Rangan puts it in her reading of Amanda Baggs's “In My Language” (2007), “The autistic voice cannot be heard, seen, or acknowledged until it begins to speak in a recognizable tongue.”¹⁹ Documentaries that aim to give endangered subjects a “voice” refuse to hear the voices they already have; in attempting to translate the Other's humanity, they elide existing human worlds. This, Rangan argues following Rey Chow, is the violence of humanitarian documentary's intention to affirm: *Here, you speak; tell us who you really are; let us hear your real, true voice; show us your world, but in language and images we already understand, please. Also: tell us who you are so that we know why we need to save you; show us your humanity so that we see why you deserve to live.*

Let me pause to acknowledge and account for those italicized lines. I've been ventriloquizing the voice of participatory documentary (five times now, if you're keeping count) in response to a book that uncompromisingly skewers the ventriloquism of documentary. I've been writing in the voice of documentary—saying what participatory documentary *thinks*, assuming what participatory documentary *means*—because I'm trying to understand how Rangan understands intention. The voice of documentary that I am playing with cannibalizes and perverts the voices of others in its furtherance of a liberal, Western version of humanity. Does it mean to? Does it matter? Rangan demonstrates that “the documentary tropes of articulate speech pathologize”²⁰ certain voices and communicative modes. Might it also be the case that certain of our critical

17 Rangan, *Immediations*, 8.

18 Rangan, *Immediations*, 113.

19 Rangan, *Immediations*, 121.

20 Rangan, *Immediations*, 21.

habits compel our skepticism of the humanitarian impulse, thereby circumscribing our readings in such a way that we end up valorizing anything that resounds against a filmmaker's terrible, horrible, no good, very bad (good) intentions?

Throughout *Immediations*, Rangan is critical of the audiovisual tropes of spontaneity, contingency, liveness, and "real time";²¹ she demonstrates persuasively how films that purport to reveal unmediated encounters prey on viewers' well-documented biases toward "the spontaneous, the rough, the imperfect."²² But by the end of the book, Rangan is trying to recuperate the possibility of the "unexpected." She holds out hope that the camera can capture life as lived and not as "scripted spectacle."²³ The final claim of her conclusion is that documentary films, whatever their filmmaker's intentions, might still be able to access "the spontaneous moment of the encounter."²⁴

But haven't we already established that spontaneity can be a trap? That it can be refashioned as liveness, authenticity, an immediation that contributes to an overfamiliar pedagogy of the human and the social? It seems to me that Rangan wants to retain the promise of good spontaneity against bad spontaneity. This is my crass phrasing, not hers, but there are traces of it earlier in the book. For example, in her reading of *Born into Brothels*, she argues both that Briski exploits the rhetorics of amateurism, innocence, and untutored genius (bad spontaneity) and that Briski avoids showing or accounting for the children's more risky, somber, and sexually provocative photographs (good spontaneity). The latter represent what it looks like for the brothel children to thwart the coercive mimetic imperative to perform as redeemable subjects of participatory documentary and instead "return the gift of the camera with images and sounds inscribed with a trace of themselves, and of their mode of being in the world."²⁵

Rangan is drawing an important distinction. It's one thing to try to confer humanity on the Other by turning her into a subject you already recognize; it is another thing entirely to "allow the medium to be repurposed in unforeseeable ways."²⁶ But I'm not entirely satisfied by the Derridean language of the trace, nor with the suggestion that the operations of the camera can be repeated with a difference, thereby subverting the humanitarian filmmaker's intentions. If we judge a film's potential to "[open] up the horizons of humanity"²⁷ on the basis of its subject-participants specifically *not* producing what the filmmaker intends, aren't we again overdetermining the content of their production, just in reverse? I'm puzzling over this tension (I hope I'm not manufacturing it) because I also discern in Rangan a desire for what Trinh T. Minh-ha long ago described as the necessary "demystification of *intention* in filmmaking."²⁸ Yes to viewer involvement, active receipt, less stultification, and the kinds of critical readings that Rangan models in *Immediations*. No to benevolence and charity. No to remaking

21 Rangan, *Immediations*, 20.

22 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 28.

23 Rangan, *Immediations*, 196.

24 Rangan, *Immediations*, 196.

25 Rangan, *Immediations*, 194.

26 Rangan, *Immediations*, 189.

27 Rangan, *Immediations*, 15.

28 Nancy Chen, "'Speaking Nearby': A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha," *Visual Anthropology Review* 8.1 (1992): 91.

the Other in my image. No more mistaking the “first-person voice-over” for a subject’s “inner voice.”²⁹ No more taking the subtitled translation at its word.

Like the brutal photograph before it, humanitarian documentaries neither give us the world nor save it. The world is ours; we are always already of it. What’s the camera for then? Over and above deconstructing good intentions, Rangan’s critique of the humanitarian impulse charts a course for documentary film to become “a noninterventionist mode of encountering the other.”³⁰ If we relinquish our desires for legibility, audibility, and selfhood, we might yet make of documentary something other than “a representation designed for interpretation by a human subject.”³¹ Dead bodies in the reeds, though, or washed up on the shore. Is it any surprise that we want to go back in time to know them, that we refashion them in our images, that against the limited capacities of our eyes and ears, we imagine we can hear them speak?

29 Rangan, *Immediations*, 117, 139.

30 Rangan, *Immediations*, 17.

31 Rangan, *Immediations*, 17.

On Nature Programming, the Anthropocene, and the Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary

Lucas Hilderbrand 

This response to Pooja Rangan’s book Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary considers the ways nature programs such as Planet Earth and Our Planet make the natural world newly visible yet imagine wildlife and ecosystems almost entirely separate from human contact or intervention, despite concurrent discourses of the Anthropocene and climate crisis.

Keywords: *Planet Earth, Our Planet, Anthropocene, nature documentary, Pooja Rangan, Immediations*

Documentary practice and studies’ core questions—how to represent the truth of the profilmic world and how to represent other people without exploitation—reflect a core ethics of responsibility, at once rooted in a drive to understand the world and in a commitment to human rights and agency. Pooja Rangan’s *Immediations* necessarily calls into question this humanitarian intent that undergirds so much of documentary ideology and production. In this brief response, I want to look to nature programming, a pervasive genre of both television and documentary that has to date received disproportionately little scholarly attention and that arguably helps us to push the definition of “the humanitarian impulse in documentary” as Rangan’s title phrases it. Nature documentaries strive to show us the world as we cannot see it otherwise and at-once anthropomorphize animals in narratives of courtship and survival while occluding humanity itself; such anthropomorphizing operates to maintain the animals’ instinctual behavior as both peculiar and comprehensible—or, as Rangan writes, “a regulatory capture that reinforces a particularly anthropocentric and perceptually normative mode of being in the world.”¹ Here I seek to put Rangan’s work in dialogue with a consideration of the prominent *Planet* series: *The Blue Planet* (BBC/Discovery, series producer Alastair Fothergill, 2001), *Planet Earth* (BBC, series producer Alastair Fothergill, 2006), *Frozen Planet* (BBC, series producer Vanessa Berlowitz, 2011), *Planet Earth II* (BBC, series producer Alastair Fothergill, 2016), *Blue Planet II* (BBC, series producer Mark Brownlow, 2017), and *Our Planet* (Netflix, series producer Alastair Fothergill, 2019).

Lucas Hilderbrand is a professor of film and media studies at the University of California, Irvine, and the author of *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* and *Paris Is Burning* (Queer Film Classics series). (Email: lucas.h@uci.edu)

1 Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 156.

The Anthropocene—or the era of human-driven planetary impact and now climate crisis—has become a prominent concept and conundrum not only in the Earth sciences but also the humanities.² Drawing insights from postcolonial studies and critical race studies, scholars and critics have convincingly made the argument that what we are experiencing is not simply human-driven change writ large but the particular effects of colonial extraction and redistribution as well as capitalist exploitation. The agents of climate change are those people and nations who have profited most from colonialism and capitalism, and the populations most vulnerable to its effects are those whose lives are already the most precarious from both—a condition that has been termed *environmental racism*. Climate change, thus, can be recognized not only as a crisis of nature but also of human society and its uneven wealth and resources. Ironically, attention to and critiques of the *anthro* in the Anthropocene have emerged more or less concurrently with theoretical forays into posthumanism, new materialism, object-oriented ontology, and deep ecology—each of which effectively attempts to conceive of how to decenter the human from our worldviews.

Filmmakers, alternately operating via the modes of nature documentary and of activist demystification and agitprop, have sought to render the climate crisis—a problem of unimaginable scale and temporality—comprehensible by way of documentary.³ Here I

2 For the sake of sharing resources, I offer a number of references here that I found most insightful in teaching a new course on the environment and media. For humanities literature on centering postcolonial or racial critiques of the climate crisis, see Ramachandra Guha, “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique,” *Environmental Ethics* 11 (1989): 71–83 and *Environmentalism: A Global History* (New York: Longman, 2000); Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 197–222 and “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” *New Literary History* 43.1 (2012): 1–18; Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Gabrielle Hecht, “The African Anthropocene,” *Aeon*, February 6, 2018. <https://aeon.co/essays/if-we-talk-about-hurting-our-planet-who-exactly-is-the-we>; Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); and Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2019). On decolonizing or centering capitalism in the naming of this era, see Jason W. Moore, “The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44.3 (2017): 595–630, and Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, “On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene,” *ACME* 16.4 (2017): 761–80. On nature documentaries, see Luis Vivanco, “Penguins Are Good to Think With: Wildlife Films, the Imaginary Shaping of Nature, and Environmental Politics,” *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, eds. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubbitt (New York: Routledge, 2013), 109–27. On “nature” as discourse, see Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994). On the narratives we construct about the environment, see William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78.4 (1992): 1347–76. On visual cultures of the climate crisis, see Finis Dunaway, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); E. Ann Kaplan, *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016); and T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and the Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017). For an expansive overview of various environmental concepts, see Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason, and David N. Pellow, eds., *Keywords for Environmental Studies* (New York: NYU Press, 2016). By and large, I have found the work grounded in science, history, and cultural studies more productive than the work coming out of (White) critical theory, literary studies, and cinema and media studies (my home discipline).

3 Examples of the activist mode include *Food, Inc* (Robert Kenner, United States, 2008), *The 11th Hour* (Leila Conners Peterson and Nadia Conners, United States, 2007); *Racing Extinction* (Louie Psihoyos, United States, 2015), and *This Changes Everything* (Avi Lewis, United States, 2015). Perhaps the most

want to suggest a connection to Rangan's provocation that "endangered, dehumanized life not only sustains documentary, but supplies its *raison d'être*"⁴ to think through nature documentaries in the age of climate crisis. The curious condition of this genre is that it has historically imagined nature and humanity as distinct realms and has perpetuated an artificial separation, even when it argues for human impact. How might rethinking the humanitarian-centrism of documentary help us make sense of a genre about human causes and consequences (for implicit is not just that *other* animals but also humans are at risk of extinction) that so often renders the human out of sight? In his early "third-world critique" of American/Western conceptions of environmental conservation, Ramachandra Guha argued that imagining a pristine, protected nature removed from human occupation (such as national parks and forests and wildlife preserves) was both wrong-headed and threatened the lives of indigenous and rural peoples who modeled comparatively sustainable coexistence with nature.⁵ Nature documentaries extend this conservation logic by working to visualize the environment as detached from human civilization.

The nature documentary generally reflects the contradictory senses of documentary immediacy—what Rangan calls *immediations*—in that it presents the viewer with observational footage of landscapes and wildlife as though untouched by intervention but in a highly aestheticized form, often with conventions that are just as standardized as scripted narrative media. Such conventions include aerial and underwater cinematography, extreme close-ups, and time-lapse recordings, as well as sequences of hunting and of mating and birthing; in addition, they typically present nature as outside historical time and mask their own production. Rarely are animals shown lethargically lying around, shot in obscurely visible static long takes (as visitors are likely to experience them at the zoo). Nature documentaries' highly mediated images exceed typical human perception while their narratives focus on the raw elements of other species' survival; here, Dipesh Chakrabarty's claim that, for humans, conceiving of ourselves as a species tests our historical and conceptual limits resonates.⁶

The BBC-produced *Planet Earth* series shows images of global conquest without human cost, showing us a magisterial world of species and places—often boasting at how rarely documented such creatures and sites/sights are—that is the product of imperial and technological prowess, narrated with a genial British male voice of authority. The series strives to achieve wonderment, both at the spectacular and wonderful strangeness of nature (exemplified by the first series episode on caves) and at the feat of capturing such stunning footage, expertly edited to riveting effect (as in a thrilling race between snakes and iguanas in the second series' episode on islands). The series, as with subsequent *Planets*, is a showcase for new video technologies as much as of nature; the first *Planet Earth* series, in particular, coincided with the widespread adoption of high-definition televisions and showcased the luminous color saturation afforded by these new screens. David Attenborough's voiceover gives a sense of intimacy and

empathic documentary exploring alternative consumption practices is Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (France, 2000).

4 Rangan, *Immediations*, 1.

5 Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation."

6 Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History."

knowledge that is both seductive and central to all of these series. Yet the effect of both the astonishing footage and storyteller narration is to keep the wild world at an exotic, even mythical remove. In all senses of the word, the series is masterful in what it does—and retains the duality of a series that is both an exceptional filmmaking achievement and one made possible by the apparatus and ideologies of conquest. (As should already be transparent, I am a fan of the series but am trying to also attend to the ways in which it is ideologically problematic.) The making-of *Diaries*, included on the DVD releases but not on Netflix in the United States, reveal—even belie—how much contingency, trial and error, and sheer waiting actually go into the capturing footage, which is edited to feel so formally and narratively controlled in the series' final form. Again, the calm, kindly, rational-seeming voiceover contributes to this effect of mastery of nature even as it narrates how precarious survival of the young or success in a hunt are in the wild.

In Rangan's third chapter, she offers an exemplary engagement with and provocation of the normative role of voice in both documentary and documentary studies—from voice-of-God narration to humanitarian projects that speak on behalf of the subaltern and purport to give voice to the voiceless to first-person documentaries that speak from explicitly subjective positions.⁷ In looking to projects that differently attempt to articulate the experience of autism, Rangan suggests the need to reimagine and deprive the role of voice and speech. *Planet Earth* operates in the voice-of-God mode, and certainly the claim could be made that it must do so because animals cannot speak for themselves. Voiceover here operates at once to communicate a semblance of scientific knowledge and to anthropomorphize the creatures on screen.⁸ But what are the alternatives? Precursors to *Planet Earth* have offered far less didactic explorations: *Microcosmos* (directed by Claude Nuridsany, Marie Pérennou, France, 1996) offers a nearly narration-free world of insects, snails, and caterpillars in extreme close-up, and *Koyaanisqatsi* (directed by Godfrey Reggio, United States, 1982) presents mesmerizing footage of industrialized and urban landscapes edited to a Philip Glass score. Yet neither rejection of vococentrism refuses hyperstylization nor actually approximates the animals' or landscapes' point of view.⁹ Is it possible to have a documentary addressing the climate crisis without an attempt to have human speech explain it or offer solutions?

As a more urgently toned revision of the seemingly timeless *Planet Earth*, the Netflix-produced *Our Planet* (the title seemingly inspired by the "Our Blue Planet" episode of *Blue Planet II*) frames much of its documentation in terms of the devastation of human-driven climate change (often recounted in statistics of population decline or extinction for various species) and of nature's powers of resilience. The emphasis of this series is on the interconnectedness of all life on the planet, across ecosystems and regions, though its form remains much the same as *Planet Earth's*. Nonetheless, even this latter series maintains humanity as an abstract off-screen presence, as with its material traces. One might also suggest that the shift from the BBC to Netflix marks a shift from national empires to global-capitalist tech ones, though the aesthetic seamlessness between the

7 Rangan works through and beyond Bill Nichols's foundational essay "The Voice of Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 36, 3 (1983): 1–30.

8 Advocacy documentaries, of course, are no less didactic or vococentric in their address to audiences.

9 Rangan raises the acclaimed film *Leviathan* (directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, France, 2012) as one example, though I confess I was too bored to sit through the film in its entirety.

series suggests that many viewers won't notice a difference in where the money came from. The series implicitly if dispassionately argues for multinational regulations protecting species and habitats, but primarily operates to show us what we risk losing.

Organized according to different ecosystems, each episode of *Planet Earth* and *Our Planet* offers brief local dramas of animal life and then cuts to other stories from different continents to construct a network of connections that transcend political borders. Four series-finale episodes, however, do offer a curious range of acknowledging the human. The *Planet Earth II* episode on cities is the exception that proves its series' rule of rendering humanity out of focus; here the episode presents people—virtually all faceless people of the global south—as background species or suppliers to the food chain without individuation. This episode perhaps comes closest to a posthumanist/deep ecology approach. *Frozen Planet's* “The Last Frontier” episode, as indicated by its title, instead focuses on human residence and exploration in polar areas with attention to stoic endurance and manifest destiny rather than to ecological impact. *Blue Planet II's* “Our Blue Planet” episode focuses on the labors of marine scientists and the series' crews, as well as on the impact of plastics on sea animals; here the framing relationship is one-directional as the episode focuses on human impacts, research, and solutions for aquatic life rather than the impact of oceanic devastation on human life, which gets only passing mention. Perhaps most astoundingly and most recently, *Our Planet* ends with the “recolonization” of Chernobyl by forest and wildlife inside the exclusion zone—the only utterance of the word *colonization* I can recall across the various *Planets* and here spoken as hope for the future of life on the planet. The *Planet* series imagines its imperial team as doing humanitarian work and cannot distinguish between a totalizing *anthro* and the uneven histories of conquest, consumption, and waste.

Although cultural commentary on the climate crisis invokes the particular vulnerabilities of the global south, of climate refugees, and of future generations (embodied by the figure of the child), in nature documentaries, it is typically animals that are presented as the face of ecological devastation. Rangan touches on these various categories as she explores the way that documentary “regulat[es] what does and does not count as human.”¹⁰ My subject departs from Rangan's in that most eco-documentaries do not engage the practice of participatory or self-representative production practices (except, arguably, in a genre of YouTube videos in which squirrels steal GoPro cameras that record the incident, an agentive act distinct from the crittercams strapped to animals as analyzed by Rangan).¹¹ In contrast to this trope, Rangan makes the case for imagining “a radically noninterventionist ethic of participatory documentary based on the memetic principle of surrender” in her chapter on animal texts.¹² She continues, “They cultivate an attunement to the documentary medium as a milieu of mutual becoming and transformation, rather than as an intervening force that distinguishes between subject and object, human and nonhuman.”¹³ This sounds lovely.

But, then again, for me the question nags (in a reformulation of questions I posed previously about voice): if humans created our current environmental catastrophes, isn't

10 Rangan, *Immediations*, 8.

11 Rangan, *Immediations*, 185–90.

12 Rangan, *Immediations*, 177.

13 Rangan, *Immediations*, 177.

some form of human intervention necessary to save us and the world from ourselves? Rangan precisely pinpoints and critiques the preoccupation with the human and humanitarianism in documentary and documentary studies, but can we ever get away from the human? Do we want to? Nature documentaries, in at-once rendering humanity off-screen but speaking to and from human perspectives, might be the genre that demonstrates this impossibility and this conflicted desire (or one might call it disavowal). In this moment of existential crises for life as it exists on the planet, it seems the stakes exceed the theoretical.

Rangan ends *Immediations* by asking what documentary does for—or gifts to—those endangered subjects it represents and attempts to make humanitarian claims for. Inevitably, the consequences are mixed. All media production makes a carbon footprint, not least of which in the case of the *Planet* series are the gallons of jet fuel necessary to deploy its crews around the world during production and the server farm power used to sustain streaming the series to viewers.¹⁴ Yet *Blue Planet II* and *Our Planet* have also been credited with a massive reduction in plastic usage in the United Kingdom, in what has come to be called “the Attenborough effect” (named for the narrator).¹⁵ This is perhaps as much of a progressive impact as any political documentary can claim to have made,¹⁶ and in spite of the decades-long ideological suspicion of voice-of-God narration in documentary practice and studies. Dare we ask, What if the voice-of-empire narration is what will effectively change individual actions and consumption?

Yet a recurrent argument in environmentalist discourse is that individual action will have little effect without significant government regulation, changes in corporate practices, and a large-scale sustainable transition of our energy, transportation, and food infrastructures. We have had the information but apparently not sufficient political or economic will to change things for the better on a large scale. Is part of the humanitarian crisis of documentary that such media expose its audience’s and humanity-at-large’s *lack* of empathic capacity?—that, despite the visualization, rational knowledge, and emotional pleas that documentaries offer, our species refuses to act for collective survival?

14 On the impact of media production, storage, and transmission, see James Glanz, “Power, Pollution, and the Internet,” *New York Times*, September 22, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/technology/data-centers-waste-vast-amounts-of-energy-belying-industry-image.html>, and Kyle Sine, “There Is No Carbon-Neutral Production: Cinema and the Anthropocene,” *Media Fields* 13 (2018), found at <http://mediafieldsjournal.squarespace.com/there-is-no-carbon-neutral-pro/>. On the impact of media technologies, see Elizabeth Grossman, “Raw Materials: Where Bits, Bytes, and the Earth’s Crust Coincide,” *High Tech Trash: Digital Devices, Hidden Toxins, and Human Health* (Washington: Island Press, 2006).

15 Basit Mahmood, “‘The Attenborough Effect’: 53% of People Report Using Less Plastic,” *Metro*, April 11 2019. <https://metro.co.uk/2019/04/11/the-attenborough-effect-53-of-people-report-using-less-plastic-9156711/>.

16 Jane M. Gaines questions the efficacy of documentary films for social change in “Political Mimesis,” *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 85.

Giving the Microphone to the Other

Naomi Waltham-Smith 

This response to Pooja Rangan’s bold provocation in Immediations reflects, from a Derridean standpoint, on the impossible responsibility of speaking for the other. In particular, it examines the role played by the microphone as technological prosthesis for the voice in activist practices of audio documentary, analyzing the actions of performance artist Sharon Hayes and sound art collective Ultra-red.

Keywords: responsibility, voice, listening, Derrida, Ultra-red, Sharon Hayes

Speaking for the other is a huge responsibility. To write a response to Pooja Rangan’s thoughtful and brilliant *Immediations* is not just to speak *to* this text and its ideas but also to speak *for* it in the double sense first, of representing it for readers, giving it a voice, and thus substituting for it, and second, of speaking in favor of it, advocating for it, taking its side, allying and alloying my voice with hers. Inasmuch as I am *for* Rangan’s astute analysis, my response is always already supplementing, displacing, and replacing hers—a prosthesis. But it is also a provocation in the sense that Derrida sets out in the foreword to *Without Alibi*.

Before all other senses of the word, a *provocation* proffers; it is the act of a speaking. A speech act, so to speak. Perhaps every speech act acts *like* a provocation. To provoke, is that not to cause (in French, *causer* means “to speak with the other,” but also “to produce effects,” “to give rise” to what takes place, to what is called, in a word, the event)? Is to *provoke* not to let resonate a vocal appeal, a vocative, a “vocal,” as we say in French, in other words, a word? Is it not to turn the initiative over to the word, which, like a foreword and in a thousand ways, *goes out ahead, to the front of the stage*: to expose itself or to dare, to face up to, here and now, right away, without delay and *without alibi*? A *provocation* is always somewhat “vocal,” as one might say in English, resolved to make itself heard, sonorous and noisy. The most inventive provocations should not be vocal, but this is difficult to avoid.¹

Naomi Waltham-Smith is an associate professor in the Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies at the University of Warwick. Author of *Music and Belonging Between Revolution and Restoration* (Oxford University Press, 2017), her work appears in journals including *boundary 2*, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, *diacritics*, and *parrhesia*, and her second book, *The Sound of Biopolitics*, is forthcoming with Fordham University Press. (Email: naomi.waltham-smith@warwick.ac.uk)

1 Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xv.

This provocation in which the voice goes out in front is thus “without alibi,” which is to say that it is without an elsewhere—without the other place or the other time that exempts the accused. Derrida argues that this being without alibi goes to the heart of the ethical question of responsibility, but he is careful to distinguish the disarming unconditionality of the without alibi from the sovereignty of the subject in possession of their capacity to respond, thus displacing the conventional notion of response-ability:

This responsibility—here’s another *provocatio*—will never be able to avoid appealing to someone who would dare to say, “Here I am, without alibi, and here is the first decision that I sign.” Well, it would be necessary that this “Here I am, I sign” designate neither the presence of a sole, unified subject, present and present to itself, identifiable, sovereign, without difference, nor a decision that is already a decision, nor yet the predicate of this subject, its possible or its “I can.”

Far from a capacity to respond that I have at my disposal and that I can or cannot exercise (as a more Agambenian account of impotentiality would have it), the responsibility demanded by a provocation strikes me like a passive decision—and this is why responsibility is infinite. As Derrida puts it in a response to a talk by Jean-Luc Nancy on the question of the imperative, “This voice is recognised as coming from the other to the extent that one cannot respond to it.”² For him, the “sole imperative” is the *impossibility* of responding. When Derrida and Nancy took up these themes again more than twenty years later during a conversation at the Collège International de Philosophie in January 2002, both embraced the dispersive, pervertible character of the call, which is always at risk of not reaching its addressee or of otherwise disseminating itself into oblivions. Nancy, though, much to Derrida’s frustration, moved to pin down what makes this impossibility possible: “I cannot be responsible, in the sense of a programmatic, calculated, and calculating appropriation . . . I am at least responsible for the capacity, for the condition of possibility, of the response that is found within the resonance.”³ The difficulty here is that responsibility, while still impossible, is nonetheless something of which one is capable, which defeats everything that Derrida seeks to achieve with the idea of a self-destructive responsibility. What is problematic is the possibilization of impossibility, for it removes the chance—the imperative even—that it be possible I not respond. For Derrida, there would, of necessity, be no adequate response to an infinite call, and hence it would always already have ceased to call for an answer and ceased to be answerable, precisely because there is no end to the multiple disseminated calls, responses, and so forth.

This is the kind of infinite responsibility that Rangan’s text provokes inasmuch as it is woven from multiple voices, her responsibility to the performed by allowing authorship to be disseminated among and interlaced with the voices of those whom she does not so much speak *for* as *with*. Her writing thus tells us something about the political

2 Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Free Voice of Man,” in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (New York: Routledge, 1997), 49.

3 Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, “Responsibility—Of the Sense to Come,” in *For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 63.

appeal or demand more generally: that it is not something that we have in our power to voice. Its fragility and infinite force derive from the fact that it is always from the start fragmented and compromised by a multiplicity of competing, entangled injunctions. If there is any *for* in this speaking, it is in the infinite replaceability of one voice *for* another, the possibility of generating a chain of interconnected speakers, a prosthetic relay of voices. At first blush this might look as if I were trampling all over the unrepeatability of any given unheard voice, and in this way repeating the age-old logic of silencing the oppressed by translating their speech into words of the White, educated, able-bodied, privileged subject. The point, though, is that this unique voice will always remain marginalized *without* this equalizing and leveling indifference that allows one to be substituted *for* the other. Without listening imposing an equality of moral, juridical, and political dignity, there would be no such thing as politics.

These are the questions that Rangan's study confronts head on with estimable courage of conviction and intellectual sophistication. Yet it would be not be a response worthy of the name if I were to constrain myself to the echo of acclaim or some extension that would remain completely predictable within the terms of Rangan's problematic. A more thorough engagement with Derrida's thinking allows for the chance that a response might come, quite unexpected and quite inappropriate, from the other. If Rangan inverts the idea that participatory democracy's vocation is to give voice to the voiceless to show instead how it relies, in exploitative and colonizing fashion, on the existence, labor, affect, suffering, and so forth of the disenfranchised to supply its *raison d'être*, deconstruction's vocation, if there is such a thing, has been to move from invertibility to something like a generalized pervertibility. Like deconstruction, Rangan's notion of an autistic counter-discourse that would liberate the voice from its ensnaring by the lures of logocentrism disrupts the dialectic between what she calls dominant and resistant voices, which maps roughly onto the schemas of norm and exception, and of passive and active. If the resistant voice appropriates for its own ends the techniques of legitimation of the dominant voice, emulating the workings of neoliberal power without troubling the fundamental logic of hierarchization, the autistic voice is "attentive to the gridlock existing between the first two voices, in which the resistant voice is thought to represent the ever-elusive content abjected and excluded by the dominant voice" (148). It does so by recourse to a potentially infinite field of perceptual registers and relational configurations that go beyond the norms of signifying, articulate, rational speech.

One might think that Derrida is getting at a similar destruction of oppositionality through proliferation with his appeal to the multiple voices provoking infinite responsibility, but his notion of dissemination ought to be distinguished from both asignifying sound and from mere multiplicity or polysemy. In his study of language's imbrication in French colonialism from a quasi-deconstructive perspective, Laurent Dubreuil argues that the position of being "one *and* the other," "speaker and outsider," is part of colonialism without being unique to it.⁴ On the contrary, he points out that "so-called Western thought was *never* confined to an exclusively rational logic," with the result that

4 Laurent Dubreuil, *Empire of Language: Toward a Critique of (Post)colonial Expression*, trans. David Fieni (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 109–10. On Derrida and the colonial character of linguistic expropriation, also see Rey Chow, "Reading Derrida on Being Monolingual," *New Literary History* 39 (2008): 217–31.

the cry or the scream, as much as they are “powerful signs of refusal,”⁵ in themselves do not disrupt logocentrism. No doubt Rangan would agree, and in many ways she alights on a position that has much in common with Dubreuil’s. Dubreuil, though, more forcefully takes issue with pluralization as an exit from colonialism—specifically in the guise of purportedly (post)colonial multidisciplinary and hybridization.

What separates dissemination from plurality, as Derrida explains in the recently published *Geschlecht III*, is that this “irreducible polytonality”⁶ resists any drive to be gathered into a unity insofar as it re-marks itself. That is, it is an example of itself, so that instead of a displacement from one singularity to another in the series, dissemination displaces seriality by referring “to the absolute outside of the opposition” without being “a simply exit out of the series.”⁷ This would mean that the violent, exclusive logic of representation would be destroyed not merely by multiplying representations or democratizing representation to broaden the field of what is heard but, moreover, by destroying representation itself through a piling up of representations. To explore this possibility more concretely, I take two case studies of what might be considered kinds of activist audio documentary, although none of the practitioners would identify with that label. With different effects, both practices involve giving the microphone to the other and both probe the responsibility of listening at stake.

* * *

Artist Sharon Hayes continues to be fascinated by Pasolini’s *Comizi d’amore*, a documentary for which the director from August to November 1963 traveled the length of Italy from the industrial north to the rural south, microphone in hand ready to ask a wide range of people about their attitudes to sexuality. It was Pasolini’s simultaneous interpellation and destabilization of a confessional subject that attracted Foucault’s attention, but Hayes mines Pasolini’s documentary for more radical disruptions. Known for working at the intersection of performance art and sociopolitical engagement, Hayes constantly puts the performative in question in her street actions and installations, specifically by showing up the failure and inefficacy of political speech acts. One of Hayes’s video works entitled *Ricerche: three*, shown at the Venice Biennale in 2013, explicitly models itself as a palimpsest over Pasolini’s exercise in *cinema vérité*, taking its title from the four “ricerche” into which the film is divided. (Hayes also has plans for further works in the near future that will develop this engagement with Pasolini.) Emulating Pasolini’s interviewing style in *Ricerche: three*, she asks a group of thirty-five students at Mount Holyoke, an all-women’s college in Massachusetts, about their views and experiences of sexual expression and gender identity. *Ricerche* can be read from many different angles, not least the way in which it interrogates group dynamics and collective agency, but what is especially intriguing is the way in which it uses the microphone to mediate between speech and listening. This focus on the instrument of listening emphasizes how this relay takes place via a technological prosthesis of the ears,

5 Dubreuil, “Notes Towards a Poetics of *Banlieue*,” *parallax* 18.3 (1998): 102.

6 Jacques Derrida, *Geschlecht III*, eds. Geoffrey Bennington, Katie Chenoweth, and Rodrigo Therezo (Paris: Seuil, 2018), 99.

7 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 25, 104.

suggesting that listening no less than speech has always already been supplemented and breached by the other.

Hayes's earlier work *Parole*, shown at the 2010 Whitney Biennial, puts the microphone as auricular prosthesis under even greater focus, evoking the opening voiceover from Chris Marker's 1962 documentary, *Le Joli Mai*, cited by Hayes in another context: "This, the most beautiful city in the world. . . . One would like to track it like a detective with a telescope and a microphone."⁸ Projected onto the wooden walls of a makeshift structure, Hayes's four-channel video installation features as its protagonist a sound technician played by actor and performer Becca Blackwell—although "protagonist" and "played" are not quite the right terms here because *Parole* challenges traditional constructions of narrative and subjectivity. Writing about Katya Sander's *What Is Capitalism?* (2003), Hayes reveals her interest in a listening that destabilizes the position of the interviewer and the authority typically afforded by the microphone:

When Sander takes the hand-held microphone . . . she does not assume the authentic identity of the interviewing subject and take the microphone as a tool of her trade but neither does she act the part of a character who interviews, carrying the microphone as a prop. By taking the microphone . . . Sander activates a position, a form and a set of codes that lie beyond her—of any individual's—embodiment.⁹

Something similar seems to be at work in Hayes's *Parole*, except that the identity and character displaced are not that of an interviewer but of a sound technician who listens while remaining silent, her microphone trained on its subjects in often disconcertingly close proximity, such as when it tracks the movement of dancer almost to the point of obstructing her movement. *Parole* is an exercise in field recording rather than street interviewing, the microphone trained on a far greater variety of sounds. If there is a recurring theme in Hayes's work, it is the speech act as a site for the production of political agency, and yet here she displaces the focus onto ambient noise, such as the footsteps and breaths of the dancer, the whistling of a kettle, and the whirs and clicks of a cassette player as the technician listens to archive recordings, including commentary about the National Voice Library at the University of Michigan and Watergate testimonies about the sonic surveillance of the White House. In *Parole* we are listening to listening listening, the listening subject position always already unraveling on account of this infinite regression of overhearing that complicates the opposition between overhearer and overheard, thus leading to a generalization of overhearing.¹⁰

Speech also plays a decisive part in *Parole*. There is a lecture on sentimentality by Lauren Berlant, a theatrical reading by a trans man of a manifesto by radical feminist Anna Rühling, a speech by James Baldwin, and Hayes's performance in Trafalgar Square of a "love address," a genre that she has cultivated in a number of other works. The

8 Cited in Sharon Hayes, "An Ear for an Eye and Vice Versa," in *Catalogue for Katya Sander: The Most Complicated Machines Are Made of Words* (Vienna: Revolver, 2006), 77. On both *Parole* and *Rcherche*, see also Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Sharon Hayes Sounds Off," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 38 (2015): 16–27.

9 Bryan-Wilson, "Sharon Hayes Sounds Off," 79–80.

10 On the generalization of fetishism, see also Peter Szendy, "All the Marxes at the Big Store; or, General Fetishism," *boundary 2* 42.1 (2016): 215–16n7.

microphone also captures members of the queer community in Istanbul reading translations of Hayes's address drawn from a site-specific collaborative action entitled *I didn't know I loved you* for the 2009 Biennial. The speeches frequently overlap, producing a cacophony of voices, but the radical destabilization of speech and listening and of the mouth-ear circuit that takes place here cannot be fully grasped without understanding the ways in which Hayes challenges the supposed authority, transparency, and efficacy of the speech act in her body of work more broadly by embracing a practice of "respeaking."

In respeaking the historical political speeches of others and also in inciting others to repeat them or her own love addresses, Hayes shows that the singularity of the voice that she wants to uphold as the locus of political agency is thinkable only because of the iterability thematized so prominently in her practice. Hayes observes a provisional distinction between an actor whose character can be played by multiple others of whom no one is an original and the performer who is "singularly attached to the performance they enact."¹¹ Performance, she goes on to propose, is "a singular moment in time" that is "both irreducible and can also be understood iteratively" as "a coalescing of things," of two moments "stuttering against one another." For Hayes, it is always possible that what appears to be repeatable turns out to be unrepeatable, and yet Hayes's actions seem to suggest that the opposite is equally true, thus maintaining an undecidability between singularity and repetition. Even or especially when she is reciting the love addresses that she composed, using a genre that strongly implies the production of authentic subjectivity, there is the sense, insofar as she is trying to recall from memory a precomposed text, as if reciting someone else's words. Even her "own" words come from the other.

This has significant consequences for how we think about the politics of the voice and of listening. The rhetoric of "speaking up," "making one's voice heard," and "listening to the people" plays into the hands of the ruling capitalist class, neocolonialists, and neofascists because it puts naive faith in the efficacy of the speech act and in the voice as the transparent, self-sufficient support of the political agent. It presupposes an unbroken circuit between mouth and ear and promotes the fiction that any disruption to this sovereignty is a belated accident: a failure to seize one's voice or to listen to the other. But it is a mistake, I am suggesting, to imagine that going unheard is the falling short of an ideal of an unconditional audibility. Rather, what Hayes's practice demonstrates is that the voice, no less than the ear, is pervertible from the outset.

* * *

Hayes's deployment of the microphone may be compared with the militant sound investigations of sound art collective Ultra-red, which start from the question "What did you/we hear?" as a way to displace the demand from its central position in activism. Ultra-red's praxis has evolved over two decades into its current form with a focus on conducting soundwalks and listening workshops for local community groups. Founded by two AIDs activists in Los Angeles in 1994, the collective had its roots in the intersection of music and social engagement, specifically the overlap between the ambient

11 Sharon Hayes, "Again, in Another Time and Space: A Conversation on Restaging, Reconstruction, and Reenactment," with Patricia Lent and Richard Schechner, moderated by Shannon Jackson. FringeArts, Philadelphia, October 5, 2013.

music scene and local struggles around public health, housing, and education. With members on both coasts of the United States, in the United Kingdom, and in Germany, their approach has gradually shifted away from compositional practices that take recordings as raw material to focus instead on the act of listening as a site of collective intervention and popular pedagogy. Field recording has been a mainstay of their work throughout, as have the influences of a theoretical cocktail drawn from the Situationists, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy of the oppressed, the Italian autonomist journal *Quaderni Rossi*, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, placing listening in a nexus of power, space, and encounter with the other. Whereas some of their earlier work is closer to the soundscape composition end of the spectrum, running the gamut from ambient techno to unedited field recordings of protests, Ultra-red became increasingly frustrated with the political imbrications of aesthetic production and consumption. Against the commodification of culture, audio verité, as they put it, aims to listen for the sound of life and spaces produced in antagonism to this control and alienation: the soundscapes of struggle, survival, trespass, informal economies, and so on, rather than the ambience of the market.¹²

Ultra-red's skepticism of the aesthetic extends to activism as it is conventionally conceived and practiced. One of the most significant shifts in Ultra-red's focus on listening is to undo the teleological status of the demand. Organizing is not about coming together to formulate a demand or a matter of making audible a predetermined demand. Rather, listening is a process of inquiry through which a field of tension of needs, desires, and demands are organized. What demand will emerge is unknown, but its organization will constitute a "sonorous refusal" of activism in his conventional guise in this reconfiguration of organizing practices. Describing how the militant sound investigation works in the context of a protest, Ultra-red explains:

The Militant Sound Investigation team will enter into this situation under cover of the public address system. The team will move through the crowd calling those around them to gather together. Questions will be asked: questions developed within the space and processes of their own engagements with communities in struggle. The questions in the score will resemble a composition founded on problematics enunciated in the course of investigations undertaken in another space and an earlier time. With microphones in hand, the team members will diligently record the group's every reaction to the questions. Those reactions that analyze the questions as either prelude to or refusal of an answer will acquire significance. While the grand sound-system amplifies one speech after another, these groups will work through the score, teasing out the themes contained within the echoes.¹³

Ultra-red thus reappropriates the technology of the PA system to other ends, specifically inclining it toward listening, rather than vociferating, and toward a set of potentially contradictory, intertwined themes—in short, the negotiation of struggle where it is not simply a matter of making a voice heard and of amplification, but of teasing out the various threads and knots among the multiple voices. The form adopted to begin with is not the demand but the question (even though the inspiration for Ultra-

12 Ultra-red, "Constitutive Utopias: Sound, Public Space and Urban Ambience," 2000.

13 Ultra-red, *10 Preliminary Theses on Militant Sound Investigation* (New York: Printed Matter, Inc., 2008).

red's notion of demand is clearly Lacanian, I want to hear this alongside the shift in Derrida's lexicon from question to call or *appel*).¹⁴ What is striking is that this question is not a starting point but is already the effect of multiple sound investigations, multiple listenings now folded into new acts of listening. The voice, far from being the origin, is always already an echo of other voices, or, even more precisely, the echo of other listenings—the ear of the other in every sense. If activism presupposes preexisting voices, demands, positions, and subjects awaiting amplification, Ultra-red's practice of listening aims to “enter a state of crisis at the loosening of coordinates provided by pre-inscribed demands.”¹⁵ They argue that turning the apparatus on to record brings with it a responsibility that necessarily precedes any demand. Indeed, it would be a failure of listening and a betrayal of this responsibility only to record once a demand is formulated.

This also means that the microphone does not occupy a disinterested or objective position any more than it produces a dispassionate representation. Rather, it is a part of the field that it organizes. Not simply amplifying what is already sounded, it can return to silence any demands that are already audible and instead start from a “soundscape of struggle” in which participants experience being together in solidarity, friendship, and shared curiosity, before the unifying, identity-bestowing effects of a demand. In fact, the microphone does not serve to fix or unify what is heard, but rather fragments the sonic field into need, the demand remaining beyond need, and beyond that, desire. Furthermore, their reuse of previous listenings to shape new stages of investigation has the effect of producing a chain of prosthetic ears. What constitutes an ear or a listening technology is broadly conceived, and this relay of ears extends and passes through other human ears to inanimate sound recording technologies: microphones, of course, but also flip-charts, paper, and marker pens—listening as writing in the generalized sense.

Ultra-red's distinctive approach to the microphone and its representational possibilities is inseparable from their trenchant critique of what they call activism's “value form of participation” in which participation itself becomes the site for the extraction of surplus value. It presupposes a preorganized field with predetermined analyses and a fixed “object/subject division: those who act as ideological patrons and those in need of patronage.”¹⁶ Situating the value form of participation within a (post)colonial logic in which there is a “ritual solicitation” of oppressed subjects into “compliance with systems of administration and control” and in which capital extracts surplus value from the “rituals of participation by which subjects identify with the will of the state, the non-profit development corporation, the non-governmental organization, or the institution charged with administering crisis,” they argue:

The echo confirms that the ideological patron has invested the other with an analysis composed prior to their encounter. The echo of the patron's voice affirms the other as

14 Responding to Nancy's substitution of “order” for “question,” Derrida ventures: “Why wouldn't I write like I had in 1964? Basically it is the word question which I would have changed there. I would displace the accent of the question towards something which would be a call. Rather than it being necessary to maintain a question, it is necessary to have understood a call (or an order, desire or demand)” (Nancy, “The Free Voice of Man,” 49).

15 Ultra-red, *10 Preliminary Theses on Militant Sound Investigation*.

16 Ultra-red, *10 Preliminary Theses on Militant Sound Investigation*.

lacking and requiring the intervention of a patron. In this social relation, the mallet-like microphone simply amplifies established terms of analysis, delivers demands without listening, and insists on only one form of intervention—the endless repetition of a sealed demand.¹⁷

Whereas in the value form of participation the microphone serves only “to amplify oneself” and to gather the differential character of multiple listenings into a preformed unity, Ultra-red’s practice embraces a prosthetic relay and negotiation of entangled listenings.

Rangan’s thoughtful and provocative book demands nothing less of the responses in this colloquy and of other readers, for it is in these necessarily ruined attempts to speak for her that the singularity of her voice will be heard.

17 Ultra-red, *10 Preliminary Theses on Militant Sound Investigation*.

Bad Habits, or, Can Reflexivity Be Good Again?

Pooja Rangan 

In her response to the forum on Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary (Duke University Press, 2017), author Pooja Rangan takes up a range of issues that emerge in responses to her book by Rey Chow, Lucas Hilderbrand, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, and Naomi Waltham-Smith. Rangan's response revolves around the question: Has reflexivity become untimely? What is the role of reflexive critique in a time of existential crisis? In answering this question, Rangan argues that alongside a "non-naive commitment to a notion of the truth" (a topic that emerges in several of the responses as well as in recent literature on documentary), documentary scholars must pursue a radically uncynical commitment to reflexivity. Redefining reflexivity as a form of "restoration work" (Eli Clare) or "wake work" (Christina Sharpe), Rangan traces the shared investments of documentary critique and contemporary analyses of disability and Black existence.

Keywords: documentary, reflexivity, climate change, reality, critique

I am so grateful to Rey Chow, Lucas Hilderbrand, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, and Naomi Waltham-Smith for these responses, and to Ato Laud Quayson for proposing a forum on *Immediations* for the *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*. Because Ato and his colleagues at the journal are consummate professionals, they did not reveal the names of these respondents until the day I received a dossier of their writings in my inbox. Reading them, I was taken aback, as one often is upon experiencing an act of profound generosity. To hear my arguments processed and spoken back to me with such forceful intelligence has been disorienting and reorienting in equal and generative measure. Each of these responses is a gift of time and intellectual companionship, made even more meaningful by the fact that Rey, Lucas, Ragini, and Naomi are scholars I have read, thought with, and admired for years, in addition to being incredibly busy people with numerous demands on their time. Naomi aptly describes being called on to respond as an experience of being disarmed. Writing a tenure book often feels like the scholarly equivalent of arming oneself for battle. It is a relief to be able to put down my arms—what Ragini calls my “critical habits”—and to have a chance to scrutinize their affordances, their stakes, and yes, the obstacles to their longevity, from the distance that time affords.

Pooja Rangan is the author of *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Duke University Press, 2017). In 2019, she received the American Comparative Literature Association's Harry Levin Prize for Outstanding First Book. She is an associate professor of English in Film and Media Studies at Amherst College and president of the Board of Trustees for The Flaherty. Rangan is coeditor with Genevieve Yue of a special issue of the journal *Discourse on Documentary Audibilities* (2017) and has a book-in-progress: *Audibilities: Documentary and Sonic Governance*. (Email: prangan@amherst.edu)

Except that time, as it turns out, doesn't always afford critical distance. In revisiting *Immediations* through these responses, I am taken aback in another sense: by time's capacity to narrow our range of response. I am not referring solely to the glacial pace of academic publishing (this forum will be published a full decade after I began writing *Immediations*) although that certainly shapes our profession's perpetual belatedness. I am referring to something I hear in both Lucas's and Ragini's responses, even if they don't name it in so many words: the neoliberalized, humanitarian world (or perhaps worldview?) that *Immediations* describes and fixes in its crosshairs no longer exists. It has been replaced, to quote the title of McKenzie Wark's latest book, by "something worse."¹ The humanitarian concern for the lives of imperiled others "out there" seems somehow quaint or at any rate less urgent today than it was ten or even five years ago. After all, we are living in times when the very conditions that support existence have been shown to be at risk. *This is no time to pontificate or overthink our methods*, we are told. *It is time to act. We must act NOW to save ourselves from ourselves. We cannot afford to squabble over minor differences. We can only defeat our common enemy—time—if we speak and act in unison.* I can understand why Lucas finds it soothing, even pleasurable, to hear David Attenborough speak these words on all of our behalves, for all of our sakes, for Planet Earth itself. "Dare we ask," Lucas writes, "what if the voice of empire is what will effectively change individual actions and consumption?"

I hope Ragini will forgive me for borrowing her simple but effective device of italicized text for ventriloquizing the larger, existential consensus that has become the de facto ground—the real—from which we feel we are able to pose theoretical questions. I sense that Lucas intends his question to be speculative, and not a rhetorical one whose answer is self-evident. (The answer is not self-evident. I don't think Lucas really believes that the kindly, rational voice of an elderly, White British man is the human microphone for our times. Nor, he admits, is "do it yourself" an adequate means for dismantling the neoliberal economic and political structures that have alternately devastated and weaponized any possibility of collective subjectivity.) No, what I hear Lucas asking is this: When existence itself is at stake, is it not worth the risk to question the critical habits shaping our scholarly consensus—or bolder yet, to reject that consensus? A similar question is on Ragini's lips: How do our critical habits circumscribe our readings, and indeed, the very questions we are able to ask?

We would be hard pressed to find a better articulation than this of the ethos driving the sound art collective Ultra-red, analyzed so exquisitely by Naomi. Ultra-red effectively reconfigures the "human microphone" used to great tactical effect during Occupy Wall Street. Instead of having persons gathered around the speaker repeat what the speaker says, thereby "amplifying" the speaker's voice without any hi-tech equipment, Ultra-red listens for, records, and amplifies those reactions that question the terms of the proposed conversation. This is a reflexive process, in the estranging, Brechtian sense that Rey has elsewhere defined as "a conscious form of staging ... which materializes as an inter-medial event"; an artificial device or prosthesis formalizes the process of estrangement whereby thought is made aware of its own activity and made explicit.² Ultra-red's

1 McKenzie Wark, *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (New York: Verso, 2019).

2 Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 15–19, esp. 18.

process makes evident what is *not already* self-evident—what has not already been admitted into the domain of audibility and thus of consciousness—shifting the focus from consensus to dissensus, from voice to listening, from demand to response. In Naomi’s words: “Organizing is not about coming together to formulate a demand or a matter of making audible a predetermined demand. Rather, listening is a process of inquiry through which a field of tension of needs, desires, and demands are organized.”

Planet Earth and *Ultra-red*. Two very different models of documentary intervention, representing diametrically opposed tactics of reflexivity. One (*Ultra-red*) argues that what Rey calls “series 1” (a political message) can arise only if “series 2” (the medium) is recognized as part of the field of action it organizes. The other (*Planet Earth*) argues that the medium (series 2) is, to borrow Rey’s words, “a mere conduit—at times a justifiably aggressive conduit—for preformed political attitudes (series 1), a means of mobilizing the viewing public by sensationalizing their perceptions.” Which of the two do we need most now?

“The present,” writes film scholar Erika Balsom, might be described as “a time when a sense of shared reality lies in ruins.”³ This quote appears in her review of *The Hottest August* (2019), described by filmmaker Brett Story as “a film about climate change, disguised as a portrait of collective anxiety.” Balsom’s anxiety about the present manifests as a concern about its representation as real; as she puts it in a much-cited and circulated essay, “the critique of documentary constructedness has run out of steam.”⁴ Any emancipatory or avant-garde potential that medial reflexivity once held, Balsom worries, has been decisively coopted by a political mainstream that dismisses verifiable facts as fabrications and passes off fabrications as fact. She announces, to counter this unholy merger of progressive documentary discourse and conservative post-truth discourse, a sentiment that would have sounded both untimely and unpopular a mere decade ago: “I want to live in the reality-based community. It is an imagined community founded in a practice of care for this most fragile of concepts.”⁵ Her assertion precedes a forceful defense of observational documentary, once derided (perhaps unfairly) for its naïve faith in objectivity, authenticity, and neutrality. Balsom finds, in the new observational cinema of partial vision and situated objectivity practiced by experimental filmmakers such as Eric Baudelaire, Kevin Jerome Everson, and affiliates of the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab, an ethic of care for reality as something “out there,” however incomplete, uncertain, chaotic, and unmasterable.⁶

Balsom, who, like me, was trained by poststructuralists, is not alone in wanting to recuperate objects formerly regarded as bad (documentary realism) and abandon habits formerly regarded as good (reflexivity, aka the critique of constructedness presented as natural). Satirist Sacha Baron Cohen, famous for his tireless commitment to staying in character, recently delivered an uncharacteristically sincere keynote address for the Anti-Defamation League as his “least popular character, Sacha Baron Cohen,” admitting

3 Erika Balsom, “Historical Present,” *Artforum*, November 2019. Accessed November 23, 2019. https://www.artforum.com/print/201909/erika-balsom-on-brett-story-s-the-hottest-august-81060?fbclid=IwAR2mbs7niMu4XCJRHIMRWE-7g-wL-SEVssJ0kkwjyDHofj7cjDrt-2g_4Oo.

4 Erika Balsom, “The Reality-Based Community,” *e-flux*, June 2017. Accessed November 23, 2019. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/83/142332/the-reality-based-community/>.

5 Balsom, “The Reality-Based Community.”

6 Balsom, “The Reality-Based Community.”

that he found this departure from his tried and tested, but perhaps no longer trusty, *modus operandi* to be “terrifying.”⁷ His speech—an impassioned plea for legislation imposing journalistic standards and sanctions on social media corporations trafficking in hate-speech, conspiracy, and lies—is a striking reprise of Balsom’s conviction that the indiscernibility of progressive and conservative positions is contributing to a climate ripe for totalitarianism. Balsom’s critique (“the notion that we best access reality through artifice is the new orthodoxy”) is Baron Cohen’s self-critique. For his jokes to work, Baron Cohen jokes (at this, someone laughs in recognition before the crowd erupts in applause), we need to be able to tell truth from lies and reality from artifice.

A thought experiment: let us affirm the religious undertone of these assertions and read them as confessional speech-acts. The media scholar or practitioner waylaid by poststructuralist stratagems recommits, this time without naiveté, to realism, to the “power of cinema as window, however dirty and distorting its panes may be” (Balsom, again).⁸ I am struck by this phrase. Not only because Balsom so passionately defends what I described in *Immediations* as the humanitarian ethic in documentary, but also because I sense its attraction for Ragini and Lucas when they ask if this ethic is something we should want to get away from. Faced with eradication, humanity and reality seem precious, worthy of saving by any means, however dirty, however distorting. “The stakes,” Lucas writes, “exceed the theoretical.” “Dead bodies in the reeds though, or washed up on the shore. Is it any surprise that we want to go back in time to know them ... ?” asks Ragini.

Documentary humanism, like confession, is a restorative discourse. It aspires to restore its referent to a prior, unsullied state, but the damage cannot be undone. “Talk to anyone who does restoration work,” writes Eli Clare, “carpenters who rebuild 150-year-old neglected houses or conservation biologists who turn agribusiness cornfields back to tallgrass prairie—and they’ll say it’s a complex undertaking.” He continues, in stunning prose worth reproducing:

A fluid, responsive process, restoration requires digging into the past, stretching toward the future, working hard in the present. And the end results rarely, if ever, match the original state. Restoring a tallgrass prairie means rebuilding a dynamic system that has been destroyed by the near extinction of bison, the presence of cattle, and generations of agribusiness farming and fire suppression. The goal isn’t to re-create a static landscape somehow frozen in time, but rather to foster dynamic interdependencies, ranging from clods of dirt to towering thunderheads, tiny microbes to herds of bison.⁹

Clare has cerebral palsy. He likens the discourse of restoration to the ideology of cure, defined as “the restoration of health.” Cure, like health, is a ruse. Cure locates damage within individual body-minds, as if each person were a closed ecosystem. And its vision

7 Anti-Defamation League, “Sacha Baron Cohen’s Keynote Address at ADL’s 2019 Never is Now Summit on Anti-Semitism and Hate,” November 21, 2019. Accessed November 24, 2019. <https://www.adl.org/news/article/sacha-baron-cohens-keynote-address-at-adls-2019-never-is-now-summit-on-anti-semitism?fbclid=IwAR0SKchgFNsaegOkxjj0ojJd1SBwbzgOdMCrqqdUpJ3D4L1es6l8BtexoVw>. The personae for which Baron Cohen is best known are gangsta rapper Ali G, journalist Borat, and fashion reporter Bruno.

8 Balsom, “The Reality-Based Community.”

9 Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 14–15.

of health doesn't originate from the lived experience of those whom it would wish to restore to some imagined wholeness. This vision comes from elsewhere, from "some definition of *normal* and *natural*."¹⁰

Substitute "humanity" for "health," and "documentary" for "cure," and Clare's critique of health becomes the critique I offered in *Immediations* of the redemption of disenfranchised humanity by participatory documentary interventions. I read our arguments as a parallel of documentary maker-scholar Toby Lee's critique of reality. This is Lee, writing about films that represent indigenous and transgender experience as a dysphoric encounter with *unreality*, as form and as concept:

[The] notion of reality itself and the relatively untroubled relationship it assumes between experience and world is something that has historically been reserved for the privileged few. The alignment between inner and outer worlds that the notion of reality assumes, or perhaps demands, never exists outside unequal structures of power and domination ... For many people throughout history—the marginalized, the minoritized, the colonized, the enslaved—the very structure of "reality" has more often been experienced as a tool of oppression than as a stabilizing ground, and is certainly not something that is available, or desirable, to return to.¹¹

Representing such misalignments and working to remedy the conditions from which they arise are separate but inseparable processes. These twinned processes require what Thomas Keenan has called a "non-naïve commitment to a notion of the truth," certainly—a commitment that I resoundingly share with many of the colleagues I have cited.¹² But they also require what I described in *Immediations* as a "radically non-interventionist ethic of mediation," which I will now reframe as a *radically uncynical commitment to reflexivity*.¹³ Reflexivity, understood this way, is not unlike restoration work. It is a fluid, responsive process, "digging into the past, stretching toward the future, working hard in the present." Christina Sharpe might call it wake work.¹⁴ Even "timely" documentary representations are always belated, reactive, in the wake of bodies in the reeds or washed up on the shore. We will not find salvation in forms because films, like individual body-minds, are not closed ecosystems. Nor will we find it in any consensus regarding reality, humanity, or much less, the present. Only to a privileged few is climate change an extinction-level event, or totalitarianism an exception rather than the norm—this should fill us with optimism, not despair. Reflexivity without cynicism means taking neither mediation for granted nor consensus. Let us pay attention to the frictive encounters among forms and experience, to the dynamic interdependencies these encounters enable and disable, to the exclusions that form the ground on which we stand and from which we speak. We might then have a future in which we are capable of community.

10 Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 15.

11 Toby Lee, "The Radical Unreal: Fabulation, Fiction, and Fantasy in Speculative Documentary," Conference Presentation, Visible Evidence XXV Conference (Bloomington, IN, 2018).

12 Thomas Keenan, "Getting the Dead to Tell Me What Happened: Justice, Prosopopoeia, and Forensic Afterlives," in *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (Berlin: Sternberg and Forensic Architecture, 2014), 52.

13 Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 157.

14 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 18.