



PROJECT MUSE®

The Politics of Participation in Documentary

Sasha Crawford-Holland

American Quarterly, Volume 72, Number 4, December 2020, pp. 1021-1032
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/776416>

The Politics of Participation in Documentary

Sasha Crawford-Holland

Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling. By Sujatha Fernandes. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 212 pages. \$115.00 (cloth). \$28.95 (paper).

Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary. By Pooja Rangan. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. 254 pages. \$99.95 (cloth). \$26.95 (paper).

The Undocumented Everyday: Migrant Lives and the Politics of Visibility. By Rebecca M. Schreiber. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. xvi + 379 pages. \$120.00 (cloth). \$30.00 (paper).

Empower those who are powerless; make the invisible visible; give a voice to the voiceless—so go the platitudes that have shaped the common sense of documentary advocacy projects for decades. These phrases perform a double maneuver by constructing their subjects through lack and then mandating an intervention to rectify that deficiency. The interventionist gift is extended as a well-intentioned expression of ignorance and arrogance. For example, in her book *Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling*, Sujatha Fernandes argues that the Afghan Women's Writing Project constructs Afghan women as living in a primitive society that silences them before inviting these women to "speak out" in forums intended for Western readers. Erasing Afghan women's local activism, including that against US imperialism, Western workshop facilitators impose their own conceptions of freedom and gender equality as universal storytelling principles that women must learn to liberate themselves. The resulting narratives of individual empowerment disarticulated from structural context perpetuate orientalist fantasies that rationalize Western interventionism. It is only by preemptively depriving Afghan women of "a voice" that they can then be accorded one on Western terms.

Documentary advocacy projects further instrumentalize the discourse of participation in order to gain political and epistemological legitimacy. Invit-

ing people to collaborate in their own representation with varying degrees of autonomy, such projects promise their subjects empowerment and celebrate their engagement as a revolutionary act. In the 1990s, Saidiya Hartman influentially demonstrated how processes of reform and recognition can choreograph scenes of subjection that perpetuate the oppressions they claim to end.¹ More recently, Herman Gray has elaborated on Hartman's insights in his effort to understand why the cultural politics of representation seem to have failed to deliver on their promise of social justice despite the proliferation of media cultures that champion diversity.² Today, amid the growing accessibility of media production technologies and the hegemony of Web 2.0 platforms that solicit user-generated content, participation has developed into a pervasive cultural logic and arguably has even been elevated to an ethics. But this participatory culture only promotes diversity insofar as it diversifies markets; it nurtures engagement as a euphemism for consumer loyalty and a source of lucrative data. This condition supplants the media regime in which visibility equaled power and proliferates a new technique of power that operates through what Gray describes as the "incitement to media visibility."³

The books under review challenge the politics of representation that mistake visibility for empowerment, representation for justice, and participation for authenticity. Spanning a range of disciplines and historical and geographic contexts, the authors model a variety of approaches to the critical study of participatory media. What they share is a concern for the ways that recent advocacy projects endow self-representation with the currency of truth, extracting those truths from subjects in predetermined forms at the expense of their own political interests and desires. Self-representation functions as a truth claim in itself by promising that a text will be less mediated than other forms of representation on the basis of its subjects' participation. This fallacy elides historical realities, institutional priorities, and aesthetic proclivities, not to mention the constitutive characteristic of media: mediation. Fernandes, Pooja Rangan, and Rebecca Schreiber all insist that mediation demands our attention most when it seems not to be happening at all. Working from a Foucauldian understanding that contemporary power is not merely repressive but also generative, they attend to the scenes of cultural production, instruction, performance, and curation where documentary meaning is negotiated. In doing so, they interrogate the terms of subjects' participation in advocacy projects, revealing them to be premised on relations that they theorize variously as instances of coercion, capture, extraction, appropriation, indenture, ventriloquism, or subjection. I distinguish the examples that they scrutinize as "advocacy projects" because they are all devoted to paramount goals—electing a candidate, passing a bill,

saving a life—that take precedence over any other concern. While the authors are not unanimously opposed to such instrumentality, they all ask: Who defines these goals? What is lost when subjects representing themselves must conform to the hegemonic terms of legibility and legitimacy?

The call to participate is an ambivalent offer when the form that engagement may take is circumscribed in advance. For example, in Rangan's discussion of documentaries about autism, she notes that many films claiming to advocate on behalf of autistic subjects end up constraining them to neurotypical modes of communication that pathologize difference. This contradiction was familiar to the late autistic activist Mel Baggs, who pointed out: "Ironically the way that I move when responding to everything around me is described as 'being in a world of my own' whereas if I interact with a much more limited set of responses and only react to a much more limited part of my surroundings people claim that I am 'opening up to true interaction with the world'" (122). Baggs's insight exemplifies what Fernandes, citing the anthropologist Julia Paley, calls the "paradox of participation" (31), whereby subjects are invited to make sense of their experience through expression as long as that expression conforms to a set of rigid constraints. Such arrangements invite subjects to feel empowered through participation but not to question or help define its terms or goals. This paradox is strikingly persistent across the collaborations that the authors critique; it has counterparts in the neoliberal conflation of consumer choice with freedom, in media platforms that facilitate interaction but delimit its possibilities, and in what Gilles Deleuze has termed the society of control, in which subjects have been liberated from disciplinary enclosures to exercise new ambivalent freedoms in carefully modulated networks.⁴ In addition to their poignant critiques of the paradox of participation, each author also moves beyond the limited frameworks of teleological advocacy by advancing counterexamples that illustrate what more ethical practices of nonfictional collaboration might look (and sound and feel) like. I turn to these alternate proposals after examining the affordances of each book's approach to the politics of participation in documentary media and advocacy.

In *Curated Stories*, Fernandes, a sociologist, argues that neoliberal institutions have instrumentalized storytelling into a vehicle for recognition. Ambitious in scope, the book assembles an eclectic range of case studies that testify to the breadth of this phenomenon—from cultural diplomacy to labor reform advocacy to presidential campaigns. Fernandes provides a sociological analysis of co-optation in movement organizing by reading stories symptomatically as expressions of historically generated political-economic relations. She chronicles a shift from the radical storytelling practices of 1970s Latin American social

movements and US feminist consciousness-raising to their domestication by neoliberal market logics that individualize struggle and replace revolutionary aspirations with the limited, quantifiable goals of an NGO. These “curated stories” tend to offer compact portraits of relatable individuals at the expense of historical complexity, opacity, political struggle, and difference. Their first-person protagonists are required to perform entrepreneurship, assimilation, and often victimhood in reductive sound bites that evacuate their lives of oppositional convictions. For example, the preference for the personal over the collective led 1990s truth and reconciliation commissions to promote therapeutic models of national healing that prioritized individual forgiveness over collective justice, just as American talk shows were beginning to spectacularize social issues into moral dramas that individuals could overcome through hard work and uplift. For domestic workers seeking labor protections, the individuation of struggle in advocacy campaigns created an impression that certain abusive employers were the root of the problem—not an exploitative system. Fernandes understands such curated stories to be mechanisms of incorporation that redirect political efforts toward more conciliatory ends.

Under scrutiny in *Curated Stories* are less stories themselves than the conditions under which they are told. As the artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan has explored in his installation *The Freedom of Speech Itself* (2012), how we speak depends on who is listening. Fernandes demonstrates that efforts to make struggles legible and nonthreatening to liberal audiences can end up weaving “a polyvocal fabric that insulates the master narrative from critique” (6). She dissolves the illusion of spontaneity that masks the injunction to speak by situating storytelling as a practice that emerges from disciplinary sites such as workshops, activist trainings, and legal hearings, where storytellers are instructed to employ specific cultural scripts, narrative tropes, textual codes, stock characters, and talking points. Not only do the forms privileged in these scenarios tend to absorb and redirect confrontational politics by settling for recognition instead of redistribution, but they also model their storytellers into ideal neoliberal subjects, often with the explicit goal of subject formation. For example, when stories told in the US immigrants’ rights movement promote discourses of meritocracy and self-reliance, they implicitly distinguish exceptional individuals who deserve citizenship rights from criminalized parents or transient workers deemed undeserving of the same privileges. Fernandes argues that such stories train their speakers to behave as ideal neoliberal subjects regulating their own conduct. Movements constrain their potential by cultivating stories about model citizens pursuing upward mobility, fracturing groups who might otherwise make collective demands on the state.

Fernandes convincingly demonstrates that these predetermined storylines have become staples of statecraft, philanthropy, and advocacy projects that enable institutions to benefit from the pretense of participation while defusing oppositional politics. One challenge in accounting for such a vast phenomenon is that diagnosing it as an effect of a particular ideology (in this case, neoliberalism) risks bracketing the longer histories in which curated storytelling is implicated. Key aspects of the leveraging of stories that Fernandes critiques—the tokenization of diverse voices, pluralist facades, and meritocratic myths that disavow structural inequality—are fundamental components of liberalism that precede the neoliberal project. Similarly, what she usefully terms the “political economy of storytelling” (11) is, to be sure, a characteristically neoliberal formation, but it is also one that has deep roots in paradigms of colonial extraction and domination. Nonetheless, Fernandes advances an impressively wide-ranging account of this familiar mode of curated storytelling. Her critique of its placating function has deep implications for collective struggle and movement organizing today.

Where Fernandes interrogates how stories are curated to fashion neoliberal subjects, Rangan, a cultural theorist, broadens the scope to examine liberal media’s production of the human itself. *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*, an intervention into documentary film studies that ramifies across disciplines, examines twenty-first-century participatory documentaries in which filmmakers guided by humanitarian doctrine invite dehumanized subjects to collaborate in their own representation. Rangan unravels the contradictions that inhere in the operation of humanizing, whereby filmmakers look to the outskirts of humanity to redeem subjects they construe as being both deprived of humanity and symbolic of its essence. Asking what endangered life does for documentary (and not the other way around), she chronicles how dehumanized lives provide the raw material and existential justification for producing humanitarian commodities that often do more to benefit filmmakers than the subjects to whom they provisionally extend recognition.

To humanize is to make a claim about what the human is. Rangan argues that while participatory documentaries mobilize humanity as a form of proof that corroborates the mode’s truth status, they also reify a political conception of the human that excludes nonnormative ways of being. Rather than accept the Levinasian framework central to many discussions of documentary ethics, Rangan explores the possibilities that arise from centering lives that “resist definition as human” (15) without sieving them through dominant grids of intelligibility. Accordingly, Rangan’s insights draw not only on scholarship in film and media studies but also on humanistic disciplines that issue challenges

to established conceptions of the human: childhood studies, human rights studies, postcolonial theory, disability studies, posthumanism, and animal studies. By analyzing how participatory documentaries have sought to recuperate childhood, refugeehood, disability, and animality as normatively human categories, Rangan demonstrates that these instances of humanizing entrench the hierarchies they claim to oppose.

Where Fernandes provides the context for understanding how institutions shape the forms that self-representation takes, Rangan reveals that such struggles are also legible at the level of aesthetics. She provides readings of texts that rarely receive close aesthetic consideration—such as live news coverage, fundraising campaign videos, and YouTube clips of painting elephants—because they are denigrated as low culture and because they operate in the mode of emergency, in which the imperative to save lives paralyzes thought. Rangan introduces the neologism “immediation,” a portmanteau of immediate mediation, to describe the aesthetic tropes that deploy a rhetoric of immediacy to portray endangered human life as an unmediated reality. The aesthetic vocabulary of immediacy (conveyed in tropes such as televisual liveness and first-person voice-over) perpetuates the notion that self-representation is unmediated—a notion on which participatory documentaries hinge their truth status. While these filmmakers claim to relinquish control of the camera to their subjects, their immediations enable them to regain control of textual meaning without sacrificing the lucrative illusion of a raw, unmediated reality. For example, Rangan’s first chapter discusses the film *Born into Brothels* (2004), a “pseudoparticipatory” documentary in which the photojournalist Zana Briski teaches the children of sex workers in Calcutta to take photographs so that we may “see the world through their eyes.” Privileging spontaneity over social context, Briski frames the children as naive artistic geniuses whose creative impulses guarantee their photographs’ truth (and market) value. Rangan demonstrates how Briski dematerializes the child labor of artistic production by conflating her own directorial perspective with those of the children, so that in the end her call for humanitarian intervention—a call that ignores local context and activism—seems to emanate from the children themselves.

Subsequent chapters examine how Hurricane Katrina victims are made to perform the value of their lives through televisual codes of liveness in texts that include Tia Lessin and Carl Deal’s *Trouble the Water* (2008); how logocentric conventions that pathologize autistic modes of communication are reiterated or subverted in *Autism Is a World* (Geraldine Wurzburg, 2004) and “In My Language” (Mel Baggs, 2007), respectively; and how documentary encounters with animals, such as viral videos of elephants painting self-portraits, authenticate

the value of nonhuman lives on anthropocentric terms, even in purportedly posthumanist approaches. In each case, Rangan contends that humanitarian media that constrain their subjects to the dominant terms of legitimation end up subjugating those they presume to enfranchise. Alert to this vicious cycle in which resistant discourses reify hegemonic assumptions, she devotes her latter two chapters to exploring alternative modes of collaboration in which media practitioners relinquish control to their subjects and surrender to the spontaneity at the heart of the documentary encounter—the same spontaneity that immediations work so hard to perform. These alternative practices, to which I turn at the end of this review, are compelling but at times difficult to accept; when Rangan maintains documentary's promise of spontaneity while critiquing its co-optation into a codified trope of authenticity, her notion of a more truly spontaneous encounter beyond the filmmaker's control can seem to reinstall the tendencies that she has so convincingly debunked. One of the most impressive aspects of Rangan's book is her ability to guide readers through unfamiliar films and an eclectic range of theoretical debates without sacrificing clarity or complexity. Her expansive arguments and provocative insights leave scholars and media makers alike with urgent problems to address and the analytic tools to do so.

Rangan's rejection of Enlightenment categories distinguishes her from Fernandes and Schreiber, whose focus on media advocacy leads them to interrogate the terms of goal-oriented media production but not instrumentality itself. For Rangan, Western epistemologies' structuring visual metaphors are inherently troublesome in a world that mistakes visibility for self-evidence and thereby obscures the generative force of illumination. Whereas Rangan takes a hard line against the humanist production of luminosity, Schreiber, an American studies scholar, insists on the radical contingency of visual politics. In *The Undocumented Everyday: Migrant Lives and the Politics of Visibility*, Schreiber frames visibility and invisibility as situated tactics that criminalized migrants deploy in response to historically and geographically specific distributions of the visible. Taking an interdisciplinary approach to cultural politics grounded in American studies and migration studies, *The Undocumented Everyday* examines how Mexican and Central American migrants in the US employed aesthetic strategies from 2000 to 2012 to challenge the effects of neoliberal policies and immigration law on undocumented people. Like Fernandes and Rangan, Schreiber focuses on instances of self-representation that bolster a text's documentary credibility while entering their subjects into vexed and potentially exploitative relations with media producers. By contextualizing these projects as responses to the post-9/11 paradigm in which undocumented

migrants were made to embody a threat to American values and security, Schreiber reminds us that aesthetic strategies enter into a field already conditioned by representational tropes that shape political realities. The ambivalence of documentary visibility is especially fraught for undocumented migrants, who have been subjected to intensifying practices of criminalization, detainment, surveillance, and state-mandated documentation throughout the period that Schreiber examines. Accounting for national formations as well as local politics, she firmly situates migrant media in the conditions to which they respond and endeavor to overturn.

Schreiber traces a history of the media practices that Mexican and Central American migrants have employed to visualize ways of belonging beyond citizenship. The book's historical emphasis is reflected in the priority that Schreiber accords to the contexts of exhibition and reception where she locates the politics of the image. For example, in her discussion of Unseen America's Workplace Project, which provided photography workshops to low-wage workers in Long Island, Schreiber critiques an exhibition of the photographs held at the Department of Labor in 2003; she argues that the exhibition uprooted the photos from the local conditions in which they were produced in a manner that suited the department's public relations goals to corroborate an image of "compassionate conservatism." Similarly, Schreiber's analysis of the *Border Film Project* examines how a book and exhibition arranged photos taken by undocumented migrants and nativist border vigilantes according to a modular aesthetic that constructed a conceptual equivalence between the groups while failing to articulate the power relations between them. In both cases, humanist frames reduced the images to universalist fantasies evacuated of contextual information about the causes of migration and the violence to which migrants are subjected. In her rich discussions of translocality, such as a chapter about Oaxacan communities residing between Poughkeepsie and La Ciénega, Schreiber also demonstrates how we might account for the itinerancies to which images themselves are prone and to the ways in which local knowledge enriches interpretation.

Schreiber's staging of visibility as a situated strategy—rather than an abstract form of empowerment—is clearest in her discussion of undocumented youth who began adopting a more confrontational politics of self-representation in 2010. These activists employed a form of "counter-visibility" structured by the metaphor of "coming out of the shadows" as a tactic to shield subjects from deportation and challenge the state's monopoly on demarcating the contours of political inclusion. Schreiber maintains a critical distance from the belief

in a rational telos that leads from images “shedding light” on social issues to corresponding political action; however, some arguments also testify to the pervasiveness of that belief by tacitly reiterating the assumption that publicity provides protection from injustice. In contrast to the historical detail that grounds Schreiber’s book, its aesthetic analyses at times apply static taxonomies without engaging antecedents in collaborative media production or scholarship in media and visual studies; the book’s clear strengths in historical nuance and contextualization are not always extended to its discussions of media aesthetics. Nevertheless, Schreiber provides a rich, much-needed history of the role of documentary tactics in movements for migrant justice, one that provides vital tools to help us analyze how such tactics can be effectively deployed in response to escalating antimigrant state violence today. In line with her critique of “itinerant artists” who collaborate fleetingly with “‘communities’ they do not know” (175), Schreiber enacts her alternate ethics of participatory media production—long-term commitment to specific people and places—as an approach to academic work as well.

Fernandes, Rangan, and Schreiber all accentuate moments of contradiction and resistance that exceed the frames designed to contain oppositional discourse. Fernandes describes this as a method of listening for double voicings propelled onward by a dialectical “tension between the guided process of storytelling and the stories themselves” (12). Whether in Fernandes’s attention to narrative ambiguities that can be read as challenges to imperial feminism or Rangan’s analyses of photos that defy their diegetic conscription as immediations, we are reminded that the official discourses of advocacy are always partial and contested. The authors also dispel the romance of authentic participation by lingering in its transactional and performative dimensions; Fernandes highlights an undocumented activist’s exasperation that it is “so difficult to have to tell my story over and over again” (120), Schreiber discusses some migrant workers’ skepticism as to whether photography workshops are even worth their time, and Rangan demonstrates a disaster survivor’s awareness that filming her own raced and classed vulnerability could be perversely lucrative (as she jokes, “if I get some exciting shit, maybe I can sell it to the white folks” [86]). But in addition to these complicating gestures, the authors also advance examples of media texts that thwart the representational tendencies to simplify, exploit, or master the lives of marginalized people. Instead, these works adopt aesthetics of complexity and opacity and harness the political potentials of contradiction and misrecognition to generate more critical modes of collaborative media production.

In her discussion of “post-neoliberal” storytelling, Fernandes calls for “a critical, complex, and contextualized storytelling” (66) that situates personal stories in the material conditions from which they emerge. Such narratives do not displace the individual so much as emplace them in the social networks and structural forces from which portable humanist stories tend to extract them. Fernandes’s appeal for stories that bring individuals into relation with collectives sounds like an oblique call for a return to the identity politics articulated in the 1970s, in which one’s structural position informs a political subjectivity committed to solidarity across differences, in contrast to the neoliberal deformation of identity politics into a condition of postcoalitional individuation. A form of critical storytelling that embodies this originary ethos of identity politics understands politics to be rooted in one’s structural position and unique experience without reducing political struggle to the level of individuality. Sometimes Fernandes’s critical storytelling involves refusing to make difference legible to the dominant order and insisting instead on untranslatability. Other times, it calls for an attention to the collective and repetitive aspects of quotidian struggle to counteract the trope of a protagonist’s transcendence—one that, ironically, structures epic narratives of both revolutionary heroism and neoliberal self-reliance. Echoing Schreiber’s concept of the “undocumented everyday” in which ordinary life becomes a site of political significance and potential transformation, Fernandes draws our attention to stories grounded in community, nonlinear change, and everyday struggle.

Schreiber also celebrates works that stage the complexities that humanist advocacy tends to disavow. In her examination of the project *Sanctuary City / Ciudad Santuario, 1989–2009*, she discusses how the artist Sergio De La Torre and his collaborators drew attention to the physical absence of migrants targeted by ICE raids and racial profiling in San Francisco’s Mission District. By projecting text from undocumented migrants’ testimonies onto public spaces, they conjured absence through presence, claimed publicity despite the forcible privacy of undocumented life, and performed the simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility that structures the reality of marginalization under surveillance. These site-specific “counterspectacles” demonstrated the moralized binaries of documentary advocacy with which I open this essay to be codependent, situated, and socially stratified. They also enacted Schreiber’s own analytic approach by overlaying advocacy work atop a preconditioned visual field. Rather than uproot migrant life yet again, this project embraced situated complexity to perform site-specific interventions that both stage and contest the forcible disappearance of undocumented Latinx migrants.

Perhaps most radically, Rangan calls for a noninterventionist, nonhumanist ethics of mediation that truly surrenders the camera to the other rather than attempting to subtly recover control and master difference. Rejecting normative mandates of representation such as bounded selfhood, persuasive speech, and legible images, she argues for practices of “indistinction, affinity, and surrender informed by mimetic modes of inhabiting the world” (157). For instance, artists relinquishing cameras to pigeons and sculptures to underwater ecosystems surrender artistic control to nonhuman life forces. Rangan maintains the radical potential of the gesture under interrogation throughout her book—of giving the camera to the other—when the giver yields to a subject’s unfamiliar logic and unpredictable behavior rather than assimilating subjects into a preconceived mold of humanity. This orientation declines the injunction to make the illegible legible and refuses to excavate lives from their environments. At its most provocative, it asks us to rethink the humanist ethic that endows life with intrinsic significance.

Curated Stories, *Immediations*, and *The Undocumented Everyday* all criticize a liberal consensus that some readers may find appealing compared with the authoritarian nationalisms sweeping the globe. Likewise, some of the oppositional tactics they discuss presume a liberal hegemony that is rapidly receding. For instance, undocumented migrants’ strategic use of publicity to avoid deportation hinged on Barack Obama’s desire to preserve an image of benevolence—a tactic to which the Trump administration would seem impervious. But these authors’ most trenchant examples anticipate subsequent political developments by highlighting the links between these paradigms and, in particular, how the liberalism by which some are governed often legitimates the militarism to which others are subjected. For example, Fernandes contends that the stories curated by groups advocating comprehensive immigration reform after 2008 were used to endorse both the integration of model citizens into US society and the criminalization and deportation of other migrants deemed less deserving. All three of these books excavate the underlying assumptions that structure liberal media and foreground their affinities with the power relations that more authoritarian forms of government render explicit.

Fernandes’s, Rangan’s, and Schreiber’s books arrive during a moment when participation has become a dominant ethos of media culture. Their interventions into the politics of participation offer valuable insights for scholars and practitioners of documentary media and advocacy, but they also have clear implications that resonate beyond those domains. Every day, many of us participate in our own surveillance, regulation, commodification, and censorship

in response to affirmative calls to express our selfhood. We often do so on platforms that reify participation as a central tenet of digital culture as well as a technical ideal at the heart of interactive systems. Collectively, these texts urge us to ask for whom and under what conditions the invitation to participate is extended. The resources they offer toward answering those questions are wide-ranging, instructive, and imaginative.

Notes

This essay benefited from Britt Rusert's insightful comments.

1. See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
2. Herman Gray, "Subject(ed) to Recognition," *American Quarterly* 65.4 (2013): 771–98.
3. Gray, 784.
4. See Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3–7.