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DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVALS: TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING, COMMUNITY BUILDING & SOLIDARITY

Carole Roy. Sense Publishers, the Netherlands, 2016, 145 pages.

Carole Roy's book, *Documentary Film Festivals: Transformative Learning, Community Building & Solidarity*, speaks to my lived experience as a racialized woman who is part of the Vancouver Latin American Film Festival (VLAFF). I am a member of the coordinating team and responsible for the development of community and media partnerships, theatre operations, and the programming of Indigenous Film from BC and Beyond. I also approach the book as an academic, a doctoral student within the field of educational studies. My review can be considered practical. It establishes a dialogue on the pedagogical potential of film documentaries woven by Roy, and between those in the seemingly disconnected worlds of the academy, the production of films, and festivals.

The book is situated within what Roy calls "the age of the visible" (p. 4). It is an age characterized by debates about funding cuts to the arts, the eradication of social support programs, ethical private-public partnerships, and the survival of public education. Critical pedagogues and social justice activists grapple with how and where alternative and decolonizing learning spaces are possible. Roy states, "As we face popular infatuation with all things technological we also have a lack of real and significant information about what the powerful are concealing, which includes the successes of grassroots movements often ignored by mass media" (p. 133). Roy attempts to address this pedagogically draining age with an approach to media and film festivals that recognizes and promotes the "potential of the visual pedagogy of media" for its ability to "include diverse voices and allow sharing that is beyond the familiar" (p. 4). The aforementioned quotes, the first from the conclusion and the second from the first chapter, capture the overall tone of the book—that of inspiration, hope, and the possibility of social justice transformation through collective and individual engagement with documentary films despite the challenging neo-liberal times of today.

Roy highlights that although research on the arts, performance, and film as pedagogy has been done, little writing has been done on film festivals as "sites of adult and citizenship education, and community building" (p. 8). Overall, research on *documentary* film festivals is lacking. The book's scope is focused and concise: "community based documentary film festivals in small Canadian towns; their history, the impact they have on viewers and the kinds of leadership demonstrated by organizers" (p. 4). This focus notwithstanding, the book covers many of the topics and issues pivotal to film festivals and those who participate as both organizers and attendees. Roy structures her book in eight chapters: (1) Politics, Media, and Documentary Film Festivals; (2) Three Documentary Film Festivals: Short Histories; (3) Transformative Learning: Surprises and Disorienting Dilemmas; (4)

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Challenging Assumptions and Gaining New Perspectives; (5) Fostering Community and Solidarity: Expanding Transformative Learning; (6) Inspiring Engagement: From Attitudes to Actions; (7) Weavers of Dreams: Organizing with Vision and in Collaboration; and (8) Conclusion: Critique and Expansion.

The critical topics introduced throughout her chapters result from a qualitative case study of three documentary film festivals with which Roy was involved in some way: the World Community Film Festival in Courtenay, British Columbia, and its two offshoot festivals, the ReFrame International Film Festival in Peterborough, Ontario, and the Antigonish International Film Festival in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. The book presents data collected from exit interviews, group interviews with attendees, and in-depth interviews with attendees, organizers, and sponsors conducted from 2008 to 2011. It also includes festival archival analysis. The pedagogical theoretical frameworks that Roy engaged to analyze her data were Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Freire's pedagogy of indignation.

Reading Roy's book leaves no question regarding her belief in the potential of film festivals, especially documentary film festivals, as sites for transformative social justice learning. As a film festival coordinator, I quickly found myself nodding along to and conversing with Roy's first three chapters. In Chapter 1, Roy delves directly into framing documentary film festivals as "examples of P. Freire's (2004) pedagogy of indignation in action and the use of the arts as alternative information channels for issues related to social justice and community development" (p. 9). She argues that documentary film festivals operate as spaces of exchange and dialogue exposing different realities and creating bridges across genders, races, cultures, religions, classes, and intersectional forms of oppression. They promote the development of democratic learning, offer a space for an epistemology articulated outside of institutions, and are more accessible by the wider public than books and literacy (pp. 9–10). Documentary film festivals become spaces for seemingly limitless imagining of alternative socio-political worlds of being.

I found myself pleasantly surprised that Roy quickly brings to the fore contentious issues experienced by festival organizers. Independent film festivals have to fight for funds with which to screen projects side-stepped by commercial distribution. The vital importance of funding and sources of it were immediately brought up. In Chapter 2, Roy describes a process of consensus decision making used by the World Community Film Festival. Roy shares that independent festivals are not funded by the corporate film industry and that they aim to showcase the works of independent filmmakers, for whom these festivals then become major promotional platforms. VLAFF director Christian Sida Valenzuela has had much to say on this from his experiences as coordinator of festivals in both Canada and Mexico. He often shares his constant battle to acquire support for the presentation of independent films. He also shares his perspective that independent cinema is about a shift in spatial power, away from centres of globalization such as Mexico City, a counter to the dominant cultural hegemonic (Sida Valenzuela, 2016). Sida Valenzuela states that regardless of whether or not festivals and films receive state funding, what makes them independent and necessary, such as in the case of the Festival de Cine Mexicano de Durango and VLAFF, is their concern for the distribution and exhibition of films and their focus on presenting the problems that cinematography faces within the nation (Sida Valenzuela, 2014).

As the lines between private and public blur and corporations seek charity recognition and tax exemptions, it becomes ever-more challenging to make ethical collective decisions

on what monies to accept and from whom. I continue to believe in VLAFF because whenever the question of whether or not monies from the extractive mining industry should be accepted, board and staff members have undertaken extensive discussion, listened to cross-spectrum perspectives, and ultimately decided not to accept these funds. I admire Roy's attempt to articulate her own experience with tension points such as these. In her second chapter, Roy highlights the centrality of agreeing on interpretations of key words such as *development* and *dialogue*, keeping education a focus, and remaining grounded in the original visions and goals of the festivals. Although VLAFF is not a documentary film festival, it also has an explicit educational mandate—"the encouragement and appreciation of motion pictures as a medium of art, information and education" and the "promotion of dialogue among cultures"—and "explores and celebrates the art of contemporary Latin American and Latin-Canadian filmmaking."¹ Ultimately, it is keeping this vision in plain and clear sight, *sobre la mesa*, that has helped the VLAFF team work its way through complex issues and across our individual and diasporic differences. In Chapter 3, Roy shifts us from the tensions to illustrating how engaging documentary films, both behind the scenes and as the attending public, can ignite transformative learning, especially when special attention is paid to surprises and disorienting dilemmas.

Chapters 4 to 6 illustrate the alternative worlds, ones with critical reflection, empathy, solidarity, and community. These chapters present the study's findings—that documentary film festivals "provide information that broadens attendee's [*sic*] perspectives on several social and political issues ... [and] make it possible to see the limits of ones' [*sic*] own assumptions" (p. 52). This is important because, as Roy states, "the so-called free market and its resulting consumerism have eroded a sense of the collective" (p. 77), despite seemingly established borderless wireless connections. Chapters 5 and 6 support the claims that film festivals "create sites where diverse issues are exposed and victories celebrated, providing opportunities for connections to be made between people, ideas, and issues. These documentary film festivals play a role in rebuilding a public non-commercial space so crucial to vibrant democracy" (p. 77).

In Chapter 7, Roy brings the multi-layered learning impact of collaboration back to the organizers, staff, board, and many volunteers that make up successful festivals. The energy and efforts committed by these people, often unpaid, are what make film festivals accessible, welcoming, and vibrant sites of learning. Programming (film selection and curation) requires sharp awareness of historical and contemporary issues and sensitivity to the tone of films and the ability to balance sometimes polarized views and preferences. Programmers spend hours looking through material and writing up summaries and program guide notes, which often become educational tools themselves. From the initial programming stages to the hustle and bustle of theatre operations during the festival run, festival coordination has always been about learning and teaching on the go while managing the demands of attendees, the film production guests, and, of course, personal and collective intersectional politics. The chapter conveys how much a "labour of love" the running of documentary film festivals is by everyone involved (p. 124). The book concludes by stating the critical media literacy role that documentary film festivals have in an age when the mass media conveniently forget the "successes of grassroots movements" as a "catalyst that effectively

raises awareness and creates a public space for dialogue by providing information rarely presented by mainstream media” (p. 133).

The book provides a solid and rather extensive picture of the multi-faceted transformative learning that occurs both behind and in front of the film festival camera. Nevertheless, I would like to make a few points for consideration. Although Roy emphasizes that festivals bring people together across differences, there is little exploration of the intersectional tensions of race, age, class, religion, and ability between organizers and attendees, despite the extensive data available for further probing. Working across lines of difference and oppression is complex, stirring and creating personal and collective burdens. Working in diaspora and across community lines is perhaps one of the most challenging experiences I have ever encountered. Each festival run, I aim to keep a sharp awareness of social justice and the power of film to foster it, while striving to remain attuned to how my diasporic community has been impacted by colonization and coloniality. The festival becomes a living site for the encounter of often clashing socio-political attitudes and perspectives. Within this context, I try to balance contradictions with the overall goal of maintaining a space that offers the opportunity to express, through cinematographic art, the complex plurality of Latinidad that is not captured nor represented in Canadian multiculturalism.

Given the tendency of Western societies to universalize democratic rights and inclusion discourses, especially within the arena of international development, the book does not unpack how democracy and citizenship have been understood by festival organizers and Roy herself. Although Roy states that “films are used for citizen education and advocacy for social justice” (p. 7), a critical and decolonial analysis of who and what is a citizen, how democracy is understood, and the possibly appropriative gaze of film projects and festival organization would have helped address those missing issues explicitly. A deeper questioning of film festival accessibility would also have enhanced the discussion. For example, what constraints do some populations such as youth, whose attendance is lower, face and how can the film festival space better engage them? What leadership roles can racialized and Indigenous peoples take on as organizers? How genuine are attempts to recognize and integrate Indigenous voices and practices into festival programming, or is it just a performative action required to fit a script? Also missing from the book is more discussion about the agonistic elements of festival organization and how emotions of rage and frustration from both the public and organizational ends can lead to learning. Clashes of perspective and conflict among festival organizers, and between the latter and the attendees, in my experience, can, despite being taxing and messy, poignantly re-emphasize the need to keep dialogue open and revisit the potentiality of the arts for learning across and within difference.

My brief critiques of the book should not in any way deter anyone from grabbing a copy; the book is a solid introductory text to documentary film festivals and their pedagogical potential. Roy’s “from the field” exposés, such as her knowledge of the pivotal role of opening- and closing-night films, added vitality to what could otherwise have been a dry cultural-studies foray into film. I have witnessed firsthand the power of the opening- and closing-night buzz. Many who would not expose themselves to certain controversial topics end up sitting next to activists because of the desire to be part of highly social events celebrating cinematic art. VLAFF’s 2016 opening- and closing-night screenings featured content such as the exploration of gender identity, queer sexual relations between youth, and the selling of blood to the narc industry for profit. I was once again amazed at the power

of film to bring together individuals from opposite and often clashing spheres—consulates, activists, and corporate executives. Grimaces, repulsion, shaking heads, laughter: I saw all of these reactions during boundary-pushing scenes, yet few, if any, attendees left the theatre, and most seemed willing, even eager, post-screening to discuss the films and their reaction. *Documentary Film Festivals: Transformative Learning, Community Building & Solidarity* gives me hope that the work of arts and culture event organizers such as Roy, and spaces such as film festivals, will come to be recognized by the higher education and pedagogical community as paramount for decolonial and embodied learning.

Sonia Medel Borja,
University of British Columbia

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