

HELEN DE MICHIEL

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## The Private Lives of Documentary

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I think of co-creation as an emotional, conceptual, and ethical stance rather than a set of communication skills or methods. It is fascinating as an intentional and open process, because it eludes formulaic techniques to arrive at a desired outcome. Co-creative approaches can reveal and resist the hierarchies of power and privilege hidden in the documentary storytelling world. They break apart the durable grand fabrication of modernist documentary—that a singular director-auteur, who controls the vision and voice of a film, remains the most desirable, recognizable, and admired model to emulate and replicate in the media marketplace.

What happens when this commercially useful convention is challenged and disrupted? In our digitally networked era, documentary holds a promise to be so much more than the kind of easily consumed, character-centered narrative it has become. Slow and intentional ways of building the documentary will allow different kinds of relationships to emerge and influence the vitality and trajectory in a project's life cycle.

When we enter into co-creative documentary projects, the relationships we form with other people, places, and perspectives breathe new vitality and depth into a production process. We can learn about the tangled emotions that this work often ignites. We can discover voices, perspectives, and questions that have been sidelined and demand attention. We can find common purpose among differences.

This can mean inquiring more deeply about personal motives with oneself as a creator or designer. Or listening to and noticing how the protagonists in front of the camera are responding to being recorded. Or working through and clarifying preconceived assumptions with collaborators, funders, partners, and others who touch and influence the edges of the work as it develops over time. Or making a safe and expansive place for the emotional relationships that arise so they can deepen and grow over time. Most importantly, it can mean deconstructing and reshaping the entire production process that independent documentary filmmakers have learned and adapted to over the last three decades.

Since individual and social circumstances around documentary production are always in flux, a co-creative stance requires a fluid, improvisational alertness to changing contexts. In my experience, the processes, narratives, and outcomes are integrated with, and not separated from the situations, people, and environments they represent. In co-creation, we must be willing to reveal and explore the underlying emotional dynamics of situations that are constantly changing and impacting individuals in front of and behind the screen.

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## A STRESSFUL AND DIFFICULT PROFESSION

In July 2019, The D-Word, the global, online membership-based community for documentary filmmakers, co-hosted, along with the International Documentary Association (IDA), the two-week online forum, “Mental Health and the Documentary Business.”<sup>1</sup> The forum invited D-Word members to engage in “a long overdue and much needed discussion where we’ll share our experiences and provide tips and strategies for maintaining our mental health in a very stressful and difficult profession.” UK-based psychotherapist and filmmaker Rebecca Day partnered with the D-Word hosts to give therapeutic context and group support to the discussion.

From around the world, independent filmmakers responded to the discussion with brutal honesty and mutual sympathy. They wrote thoughtful and revealing posts about the challenges they face emotionally, economically, and ethically in the struggle to make independent documentaries for a global marketplace in a state of continual disruption. D-Word members opened up about the severe financial sacrifices they continue to bear to make their films. They talked about their fears of living precariously, teetering on the edges of bankruptcy from minuscule grant to minuscule grant. Others shared how they are unable to earn even a modest living while taking on ever-increasing amounts of debt and risk to finish a film and find distribution.

People jumped in to discuss the sense of isolation and lack of wider community connection they faced while struggling with difficult and challenging projects, with little to no



IMAGE 1. *Untitled* (n.d.) by Helen De Michiel; ©Helen De Michiel.

1. “Mental Health and the Documentary Business,” D-Word Special Topics Forum (members-only access), [www.d-word.com/topics/284-Mental-Health-and-the-Documentary-Business?pos=149](http://www.d-word.com/topics/284-Mental-Health-and-the-Documentary-Business?pos=149).

emotional support system. Others wrote candidly about the kinds of vulnerabilities and mental health challenges that they experienced while making documentaries—from not knowing how to care for their protagonists to feeling deep shame, anxiety, and depression when being repeatedly rejected for monetary support.

Often, traumatic subject matter—like poverty, illness, war, or crime—affected these filmmakers in ways they were not prepared to deal with, leaving them isolated and with no therapeutic help to understand and process their lingering feelings. One filmmaker wrote about the harsh realities of persisting against the odds. Her body was breaking down with the aches and pains of fibromyalgia while attempting to meet personal and familial pressures and continue working on her documentary. Another participant posted the shocking news that her project co-director had just committed suicide.

It was startling to witness the outpouring of these revelations online and watch the collapse of beliefs in a system offering aspiring filmmakers a myth that no longer squared with reality: sacrifice your own time and money, work hard to craft a product, gain global attention, change the world, and then earn a growing and thriving living doing what you love.

Instead, people used the D-Word space to express pent-up anger, disappointment, and resentment around the rampant inequalities of a system where, as one participant wrote, “the top one percent make money from our work . . . we [filmmakers] still remain at the bottom of the documentary economy.”

Over the course of the two weeks, individual rage and sadness led to broader discussions around collectives, collaboratives, and the possibility for even more far-reaching co-creative relationships. From identifying the emptiness of branded individualism, the conversations turned toward growing interdependent, aware relationships—the kind that the co-creative process engages. A shift happened from “what are we feeling in this mess?” to “how will our documentary projects (and ways of working differently) contribute to reorganizing the broken and unjust system that binds us in this predicament?”

#### **DESIGNING CO-CREATIVE CONTAINERS: FROM “WHAT-IF?” TO “HOW ABOUT?”**

How can a co-creative practice begin and stay fresh across the long and often uncertain production arc of a documentary project? Inevitably, team members and participants will enter and exit over time. One solution is to experiment by building relational systems and emotional containers to function well enough for the work to begin, grow, and finish.

In my own film production training and study, we never worked with practical tools or methods encouraging different forms of collaboration or its extension into co-creativity. We were taught to emulate either of two twentieth-century modernist models. In one, the solo artist-auteur makes the documentary, controlling all aspects of the project. In the other traditional production group configuration, the director-auteur leads producing staff and craftspeople working together to implement the director’s vision.

When I became interested in process design, I discovered principles and tools useful to cross-pollinate with documentary production processes. Borrowing from community process facilitation and design thinking concepts, I have integrated participatory inquiry, active listening, and dialogue facilitation into my documentary work. These have been important



IMAGE 2. *Untitled* (n.d.) by Helen De Michiel; ©Helen De Michiel.

steps for moving toward less hierarchical forms of production and understanding the potential for a functional co-creative practice.

I turned to the Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs' Technologies of Participation (ToP®) Focused Conversation<sup>2</sup> technique to engage documentary subjects early on in group conversations about the story threads they wanted to see integrated into the project. The World Café method inspired ways to design documentary “media socials”—live convivial events where viewers could take part in informal conversations around the deeper, emotionally charged questions the documentary presentation raises. I continue to be inspired by the innovative community organizing work that jesikah maria ross conducts as a participatory journalist working in a mainstream public radio newsroom.

In 2008, Ellen Schneider led the Active Voice Lab team in the development and release of the first “Prenups for Partners,”<sup>3</sup> an online guide that offers an inquiry framework. Using it, filmmakers, collaborators, and co-creation groups can recognize, bring to the surface, discuss, and work through the hidden power relationships that we all assume are inherent to, and unavoidable in the production process. “Prenups for Partners” has grown and evolved over the years, and the 2019 edition is now available online.

When Schneider and the Active Voice researchers began developing the guide, they conducted focus groups with creative team members, documentary film funders, and public engagement partners from civil society and nonprofit organizations. They discovered that there were deep communication disparities about values and expectations. People did not

2. Brian Stanfield, *The Art of Focused Conversation* (Toronto: The Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs, 1997).

3. “Prenups for Partners,” Active Voice Lab, [www.activevoice.net/prenups/prenups-for-partners](http://www.activevoice.net/prenups/prenups-for-partners).



IMAGE 3. Screenshot of the Prenups for Partners website ([www.activevoice.net](http://www.activevoice.net)).

have a common language or safe structure in which to discuss their concerns and aspirations before any major issues emerged.

Acknowledging the huge gaps in both personal and organizational expectations, Schneider set out to create a conceptual structure for integrating a dialogue process for documentary collaborators and co-creators before and during production. The “Prenups for Partners” guide assumes that even when a project appears clear and friction-free, hidden emotions, confusion, and tension will surface. According to Schneider, funders and partners do not comprehend the complexities of the filmmaking process, and filmmakers do not always understand intuitively how to manage relationships with funders and partners. The guide gives users a social framework to begin discussing the difficult and challenging questions in a nonantagonistic way. Schneider notes that since documentary deals with real people’s lives and stories, it is highly emotional and can complicate the feelings that emerge.

When filmmaking teams are unsure how to handle complicated power dynamics, they may avoid, ignore, or deny them, hoping the issues will disappear. Funders can be attracted to a documentary project because they care passionately about the subject. Yet, too often they are uncertain about their appropriate responsibilities and engagement roles in a particular production. Schneider recalled a film donor asking her, “Is it normal for me to write a check for \$25,000 to the filmmakers, and never hear from them again?”

“Prenups for Partners” proposes that the collaborators involved in a film project design a framework where they can speak and work together as real people, not as icons representing “us” and “them.” The guide assumes there will always be class, culture, and power differences in a creative endeavor. One of its main purposes is to face these difficult questions head on and ask, “How can we face this reality and turn it into a strength and knowledge that lays the foundation for better collaboration and co-creation?”

Four distinct sections—from the conceptual to the emotional and practical—make up the “Prenups for Partners” inquiry and dialogue process. To start, introductory prompts include “Why are we working together?” (in Mission); “How will we design and implement our project?” (in Method); “Who’s paying for what?” (in Money); and “What happens when things change?” (in Mobility).

Across each of these categories, filmmakers will find sub-guides and other prompt cards to dig deeper into delicate, what-if scenarios they will encounter when working with partners and in changing, volatile situations. Accompanying sidebars nested in each section point to and reflect on some of the most challenging and difficult questions surrounding documentary filmmaking and, by extension, a co-creative practice: “Whose story is this?”; “Who gets to make creative work, and how can they make a living?”; and “What is this relationship committed to doing together?”

The impulse toward a co-creative stance is far from perfect. It is never simple to express and work through uncomfortable, hidden, and private feelings. As an ongoing process rather than an attainable, solid goal, “Prenups for Partners” models a safe, neutral framework to confront assumptions and expectations around precarious, fear-filled, and disorderly situations and relationships.

Although we cannot control what can happen in projects or life, “Prenups for Partners” deserves to be more widely known and used as an important tool to build the necessary fluency for communicating across differences and conflicts. As documentary filmmakers in an increasingly uncertain and darkening era, this is the kind of collective work we need more than ever to contribute toward making—and sustaining—the better world we want to live in. ■

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HELEN DE MICHIEL is a filmmaker, writer, and community designer based in Berkeley, California. Her documentary projects include the work-in-progress *Between the Sun and the Sidewalk*, the episodic *Lunch Love Community* (2015), *The Gender Chip Project* (2004), *Turn Here Sweet Corn* (1990), the dramatic feature *Tarantella* (1994), and other shorts and media installations. Along with Patricia R. Zimmermann, she co-authored *Open Space New Media Documentary: A Toolkit for Theory and Practice* (2017). She is on the faculty at California College of the Arts, San Francisco.