

# Composing With

## Adventures in Collaborative Documentary Editing Across Continents, or How I Learned to Make Better Movies

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Since 2012 I've coauthored a number of academic publications with peers and students. I love the process of dividing up the research and figuring out who will write which sections. Although it usually becomes clear that some of us are better at big picture thinking and others are more detail oriented, my coauthors and I bring comparable skills to the table. Collaborations in filmmaking, on the other hand, work differently because of the very nature of the production process. From its inception, film has been an art form that depends on multiple crewmembers performing their specialty. The cinematographer is in charge of capturing the film's visuals with their camera, the sound person is the only one who can hear how voices and ambient sounds are picked up by microphones. Through the instruments they wield and the formal and informal education they've received, crewmembers deliver heterogeneous pieces of a hopefully cohesive whole.

While for a decade I've worked with crews when filming my documentaries in what's called the production stage, it wasn't until last year that I began sharing the postproduction process with someone. After I have shot all—or at least most—of my footage, I begin to shape it into a narrative. Unlike in alphabetic writing when the editing process comes after some kind of a draft has been written, film editors put together every draft of the film. Being a filmmaker who doesn't work within the studio system and whose funding is tight, I edit my own films. When I began working on *The Weeping Season*, a feature documentary about my father's 1983 disappearance in the Venezuelan Amazon, I decided to tell the story with higher production values than I had used in my previous work. In order to do so, I am applying for film industry grants to cover the significant cost of making a documentary, even an independent one.

As I began applying for grants, I learned from film mentors and from a grant workshop I attended that chances of getting funded are slim if you're editing your own film that tells a personal story. The idea is that you don't have enough distance from the characters and events in order to make the at-times harrowing narrative decisions that are necessary for a good film. After spending years crafting video essays that are based on my and my family's experiences and having edited *Pixelating the Self: Digital Feminist Memoirs*,

a book composed of multiple authors' explorations of their personal lives, it seemed questionable that I had to work with an outside editor to tell my own story. However, I've learned that the rules of filmmaking make sense once you try them, so I set out to hire an editor.

I found Cristina Carrasco, a Venezuelan editor living in Argentina, through a childhood friend. I needed someone who spoke English and Spanish, the two languages in which the film unfolds, and someone who understood the current political situation in Venezuela. When I began filming the documentary in 2004, we were focusing on my father's story, but since Venezuela is currently undergoing a stark political and economic crisis, we need to address that situation in the film. Cristina has a strong understanding of the situation in Venezuela and a decade of experience editing fiction and documentaries that play on TV, in cinemas, and at A-list film festivals. She can see things that I cannot see, just like with my academic training I can see things that she can't.

We work through Skype marathons that sometimes last up to seven hours. We pass the Adobe Premiere version of the film back and forth, with me leaving her extensive notes on our shared Google documents to which she responds using track-change comments. It is an elaborate apparatus that makes up for the fact that we live in different continents but are birthing a project together. And having birthed films (and two children) on my own, I don't want to work on a documentary without an editor again.

Cristina is trained in how narrative, in particular film narrative, needs to evolve. We've divided the story in three acts, and she's taught me that the end of each act needs to feature a moment in which the rules of the game change and there's no way to turn back. We are constantly moving the events of the story's various timelines around like chess pieces. Here my scholarly brain comes in handy and I'm able to think through the most logical ways in which events can unfold while retaining their emotional punch. I can think through all the variables that will be altered by each potential reordering. I've always shown drafts to smart and generous friends and colleagues for feedback. My husband Nate, the film's cinematographer, is my constant creative companion in any project I embark on. However, the level of creative and intellectual engagement with Cristina is new and has pushed the story in daring directions it would have never gone had I been editing the film on my own.

As for working with an outside editor for personal pieces, the rules turned out to make absolute sense. Without any personal attachment to scenes, plot lines, and characters, Cristina is able to pinpoint the moments that, while deeply meaningful to me, won't connect with audiences who haven't lived through my experiences or don't share my memories. She is also able to explain how scenes that I thought should never end up in the film bring something new into the narrative. After the film is complete, I want to think more carefully

and at length about how this kind of collaboration can become a model for academic scholarship. Until then, I will enjoy this intricate cross-continental creative journey and be thankful for not taking it alone.

### **Works Cited**

Hidalgo, Alexandra. *Pixelating the Self: Digital Feminist Memoirs*. *intermezzo*, 2018, <http://intermezzo.enculturation.net/08-hidalgo-et-al.htm>.