

# Chapter 13. Between the Camera and the Self: Positionality and Reflexivity as a Scholar-Maker

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The car pushed through the mist as I pulled in for the early morning interview. As the dew dried, the participant and I climbed the stairs of the home, opened the doors to the porch, pulled chairs for the conversation. We lightly chatted, and I unzipped my backpack to reveal the camera to set it up between us. She sat down, wringing her hands. The air shifted and anxiety entered the space. This is no ordinary home - this is Rose Hill Plantation State Historic Site, the former home of Secessionist South Carolina Governor William H. Gist and the nearly 200 enslaved members of his household. I am interviewing Enfinitee Irving, the Park Interpreter at the site and a Black South Carolinian (Baker, 2024).

As I sat across from Enfinitee, camera rolling between us, I felt a palpable tension arise. In that moment, I acutely felt my privilege and the power present in the act of filming. I needed to name this moment. My Whiteness, and my identity as a filmmaker collided with the weight of the plantation setting and Enfinitee's lived experiences as a Black woman with deep roots in South Carolina, and as a park interpreter at a plantation site. Naming the historical oppressions that framed our interaction to set the tone for an honest, respectful, sensitive and reflective dialogue. Creating a space of integrity, care and respect for Enfinitee required voicing the ongoing impacts of marginalization on her community.

As the interview began, Enfinitee shared stories not simply as narratives of the past but as lived experiences that inform the ethos of her work, and these stories directed the flow and content of our interview. I see this type of learning from Enfinitee as a way to challenge the perpetuation of structural violence often created by traditional modes of knowledge production.

As a filmmaker, I actively frame stories in a way that consciously molds viewers' perceptions. Directing the lens, choosing moments to capture, and sculpting the narrative places me in a powerful position that mediates how audiences connect with the participant. Through a participatory approach to filmmaking, I work to shift that balance of power. In asking participants to provide feedback at multiple points in the process - during planning, by watching their raw interview footage, and by commenting on drafts of the film - participants and I engage in transparent and critical dialogue about how they want to be represented. Thus, the film becomes a shared space where histories are not just told but are actively interpreted and reinterpreted. Rather than capturing

and presenting a static moment, filmmaking becomes a place of active co-creation and meaning-making.

Many limitations exist in this type of work. Despite my best efforts at true collaboration, my voice shapes the final narrative. The medium of film itself constrains the ability to fully capture the depth and nuance of complex histories and lived experiences, presenting an oversimplified portrayal. The act of filmmaking can reinforce existing power structures by framing stories through a limited lens. Reflexivity can help to answer these limitations by naming the complexities of positionality. Reflexivity is more than just a box to check off - it is a crucial practice that helps us actively engage with the identities we bring to our work. Through constant negotiation of our positionalities, I and other scholar-markers aspire to craft visual stories that, like bridges, not only connect past to present but also traverse the distance between teller and listener, fostering a collective sense of heritage and shared humanity.

## References

Baker, M. E. (Director). (2024, October 21). *Seeing the South: Racism, Reclamation and Memory-Making in the Upstate* [Film]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/eSGFGxHS1HY>