

Small Stories, Public Impact:

Archives, Film, & Collaboration

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On a cold night in December 2010, the experimental documentary *Rothstein's First Assignment* was screened at Virginia Tech. After the film, the audience asked questions of the panelists, who included Dr. Scott Whiddon, Associate Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at Transylvania University and composer of the original music in the film; the film's director, Richard Knox Robinson, an award winning photojournalist; and me, the film's assistant producer.¹ That night was the culmination of years of archival research, interviews, long phone conversations, planning missteps, rewrites, emotion, and gratification. The film has since been accepted to the Seattle International Film Festival, the Appalachian Film Festival, the Virginia Film Festival, and several other smaller screenings.

In 1935, New Deal photographer Arthur Rothstein was sent to the mountains of Virginia to photograph the residents of the

Appalachian backwoods and hollows before they were displaced to make room for Shenandoah National Park. Together with Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, Rothstein produced some of the most important and moving images of America's Great Depression. In *Rothstein's First Assignment*, Director Richard Robinson retraces Rothstein's steps by interviewing descendants of the mountain people, interviews he beautifully weaves together with a 1964 audio interview of Rothstein and an archival newsreel. During the course of research for the film, Robinson discovered evidence that Rothstein's images were not pure documentation, but often staged for the camera. Digging beneath the official story, the film unearths an unsettling link between propaganda and documentary and raises troubling questions about the photographer's complicity in the displacement of thousands of people for "progress." Robinson's most chilling discovery, though, is the forced institutionalization and sterilization of mountain residents as part of Virginia's eugenics program, which sterilized more than 8,000 individuals. This fascinating film challenges the viewer to consider the complexity behind images that are viewed as historical truth.

Richard Robinson is based in Orange, Virginia, near Charlottesville. His photography has been published in numerous publications including *Time*, *Smithsonian*, and *National Geographic Traveler* magazines as well as in the photography annuals of *Communication Arts* and *American Photography*. He has taught film and photography at Randolph College, the University of Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Washington and Lee University. *Rothstein's First Assignment* is Robinson's second film—his first, "The Beekeepers," was an official selection of Sundance Film Festival. A documentary photographer himself, Robinson is very interested in the visual aspects of the landscapes, and both films contain beautiful and patient images of the land and people. Watching *Rothstein's First Assignment* can be disconcerting. The linear progression of the history is difficult to follow, and Robinson's editing creates an uncomfortable unfolding of events where particular people and events are hard to keep track of. The content of the film, as well as its aesthetic choices, raises questions about how to represent such a story and moment in history.

The collaborative work done with Richard, Mary Bishop, and Scott resulted not only in *Rothstein's First Assignment* but also produced an archive of oral history interviews, opportunities for additional research, and moving music. Throughout the process of making this film, there were several key moments of frustration, sadness, and difficult decision-making. This essay examines the process of that collaborative work and highlights the “twists and turns and startling revelations” that made for work we are proud of but led us down paths we had not planned. Additionally, this essay addresses the ethics of documenting memory and the implications of those ethics on public rhetorics.

Long before I met Richard, I visited the archives of the Shenandoah National Park in Luray, Virginia. I had heard there was controversy surrounding the archives: family historians wanted to examine materials there, but much of it had not yet been catalogued. By the time I went there, the land records, correspondence, and photographs of families that had lived in the park were catalogued and available for public research. While I found many interesting things—maps from the 1930s, documentary photographs, land use records and transfers, special use permits, and donation certificates—I was most interested by the hand-written letters by families that were forced to relocate so that the land could be donated by Virginia to become part of the National Park Service. Those letters subsequently became the subject of two book projects—one a rhetorical study and one an edited collection of the letters.

In Virginia during the 1930s, 500 families were forcibly removed from their homes through eminent domain law when Shenandoah National Park was formed under Virginia's Public Park Condemnation Act of 1928. When the state of Virginia invoked a blanket condemnation of the property of these families in the late 1920s in order to “donate” the land to form Shenandoah National Park, many moved on their own to find housing elsewhere. Many families, however, were in need of government assistance and applied for government loans in order to be moved to resettlement housing. Those families went through an eligibility process whereby their finances were examined and it was determined whether they could repay a government loan for a “homestead.” Families that were not able to qualify for the loans

Feb 28 1938 *Joshua*
Stanley Corbin
Bena Pa
Mr J B Lassiter dear Mr
Lassiter i am asking you to
do me a favor. now i want
you to give me the wire
around George T Corbin
garden where he left. he
is my father i am a poor
man and need the wire to
go around my garden it ant
doing no one no good where
it is at i moved out of the
park and caused you all
no trouble so please give it to
me as i would be
thankful for it so please
let me hear from you at once
yours truly

One of the handwritten letters written in the 1930s by displaced families, used by permissions of the author's family and Shenandoah National Park Archives

were placed under the care of the newly formed Department of Public Welfare.² The focus of my research surrounding these letters analyzes the ways that residents' identities intersected with the identities constructed for them by government officials. Through historical, archival, and oral history research, I conducted rhetorical analyses of the letters, government policies, commitment papers, and historical film footage to understand the ways that displacement identities are imagined and narrated.

After these archival studies had been published, Richard wrote me an email asking if I would consult with him about his film project. He'd read my first book and wanted to talk about the park's history. I couldn't believe my luck. For over a year, I had been conducting oral history interviews with families whose ancestors had been displaced from Shenandoah National Park, and while working on the edited collection of letters, I decided to pursue a more formal oral history project with the hopes of producing a film that included those oral histories. I had visions of a film that included an Appalachian-accented voice reading from the letters as images of the park moved across the screen. I had no experience making a film, but I thought the letters and the story warranted a film as a way to reach additional audiences. When Richard and I met, it became clear that we each had similar sensibilities about the history of the park and thought it might be possible to collaborate on interviews with descendants. We began conducting interviews together, sharing archival research, and generally began a conversation about the park, filmmaking, representing history and people's stories, a conversation that has taken hours and hours of phone calls between his home in Orange and mine in Catawba.

As we prepared for interviews and found descendants willing to be interviewed (including some I had interviewed before), I showed Richard many of the letters from the collection. Most of the letters focus on families' requests as they were relocated, asking the park service to assist them or allow them to take lumber or windows with them as they moved. One of archived letters, dated February 5, 1937, states,

Dear Mr. Hoskins, I heard that you are going to move Fennel Corbin and Dicy Corbin to the Feble mind Colinly [sic] if you do please move me in that house as Mr. Smith that live there is my Brother and that house wold suit me I could get my mail every day and I could my food Brought to me and I wold have some Fruit and I wold Be on the road so a Dr could reach me whare I live it is 3 miles to the nears narber no road up the mountin Just a path and a Bad way I am 76 years old and if you can Please let me have that house and move me as soon as you take thim a way Please see Mrs Humrickhouse she was to see me some time a go and said she wold try to get me a Place off of this mountin your truly Mrs WA Nicholson.

When I first read this letter sitting in the park's archives, I was more interested in Barbara Nicholson's relationship to the government and her request to be closer to neighbors and the road. I did not pursue the "febly mind colinly" because of my interest in the other themes in the letters. However, when Richard and I began working together, his discoveries about photographer Arthur Rothstein and some of the families sent to the Colony compelled me to look deeper into the archival documents I had already researched and to more fully understand the history of some of the displaced families.

As he says in his blog about the project, Richard's interest in making the film began with retracing photographer Arthur Rothstein's steps as he photographed families in Shenandoah National Park for the Farm Security Administration (FSA). In doing so, however, it became increasingly clear that the project was going to take quite a different turn than either of us had anticipated. While I was sending Richard all the archival research I had from Shenandoah National Park and the National Archives, Richard had also come across a 1930s film made by the Department of Interior and near the same time, was in touch with reporter Mary Bishop, the Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist who had written about forced sterilizations in Virginia during the 30s, 40s, and 50s. The vintage film *A Trip to Shenandoah* contains images of some of the same families we were researching and some of the same families that had written letters, together with some troubling eugenics images.⁹ The three of us started putting the pieces together, realizing that some of the families relocated from the

park were sent to state hospitals, where sterilization was common practice. Some of these same families appear in Rothstein's FSA photographs, and some wrote the letters to the government that I had researched.

At this point, I went back to Barbara Nicholson's letter, discussing with Richard the relationships among the Corbins and the Nicholsons, and we both began filling in genealogical gaps, looking for descendants to interview. As many of the letters in the collection reveal, some families worked with the Department of Public Welfare during their relocation. Social workers found alternative housing for a few families, and several were sent to state hospitals after being labeled "feeble-minded." Finnel Corbin and many of his family members were labeled this way and sent to one of Virginia's eight state hospitals.

"Feeble-minded" was one of the categories used during the Progressive Era of Social Reform to label people with a range of mental disabilities. Commonly, the term was also used to judge those whose behavior (like "fits" or "hysteria") was considered outside social norms. There were several hospitals across the country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries where the "feeble-minded" were committed. One such hospital existed about 100 miles from Shenandoah Park: The Lynchburg Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded, also known as "The Colony."

According to Mary Bishop, who reported on several people who lived in the Colony and the eugenics movement in Virginia, more than 60,000 Americans were

rounded up, judged genetically inferior, held in government asylums, and sterilized against their wills. Some were mentally retarded; many were not. Most were poor, uneducated country people—orphans, petty criminals, juvenile delinquents, epileptics, and sexually active single women. All were people that those in power, from social workers to legislators and judges, saw as threats to the nation's gene supply. (13)

Rothstein's First Assignment

a story about documentary truth



by Richard Knox Robinson

"...a fascinating and troubling film."

Jeff L. Rosenheim
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

ekphratic productions llc

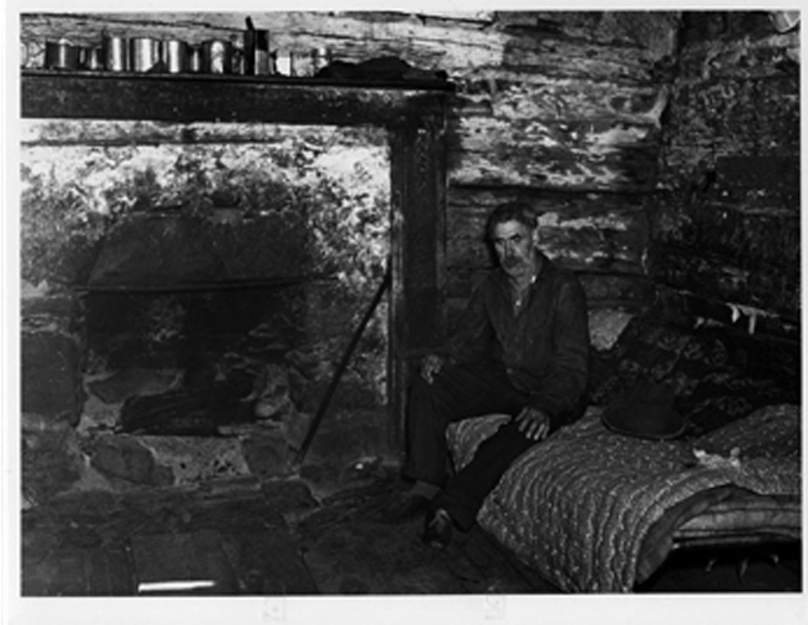
Rothstein's First Assignment,
Official Selections of Seattle International Film Festival, Virginia Film Festival

After the infamous Carrie Buck case, in which Buck's sterilization was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1927, Virginia eugenicists sterilized about 8,000 people before Virginia's Eugenical Sterilization Act of 1924 was repealed in 1974.⁴ Mary Bishop had coincidentally interviewed several people who had resided in Shenandoah National Park and maintained quite close relationships with them, so she was able to secure interviews with them for Richard and me.

In the 1930s, several of the families living within the Park's boundaries and facing the loss of their homes needed assistance finding alternative housing. As the Skyline Drive was built and private lands were transferred to the federal government, Virginia officials, the National Park Service, the Resettlement Administration, and the Department of Public Welfare tried to figure out what to do with the families that did not qualify for homesteads. This predicament, together with the growing eugenics movement, prompted officials to send families, no matter the mental states of individual family members, to the Colony.

Richard's film is concerned with highlighting the staged nature of documentary film, photography, and storytelling. Both of us were aware of the implications of retelling portions of interviewees' stories, and throughout the process have remained "mindful of how rhetorical acts of witnessing may function as new forms of international tourism and appropriation" (Hesford "Documenting Violations" 121).⁵ With these tensions of witnessing and invention in mind, the filmmaker and I moved forward in representing the stories of families whose lives were impacted by the formation of Shenandoah National Park.

Rothstein was tasked to document the Depression in the park, and as *Rothstein's First Assignment* highlights, he photographed many members of the Corbin family, photographs that are available for public viewing on <http://memory.loc.gov>. Robinson's film revisits that assignment and the implications of Rothstein's photographs in connection with eugenics field studies (see <http://www.robinsonphoto.com/film.html> for further information about the filmmaker's work).



*Arthur Rothstein photograph
Finnell Corbin on his bed, 1935*



*Richard Robinson photograph
Finnell Corbin's bed in
Shenandoah National Park, 2010*

Mary Bishop had interviewed Mary Frances Corbin Donald in the 1980s for her work on eugenics in Virginia. With her help, we were able to interview Mary Frances and asked her questions to help us make connections and fill in gaps in the story. A child when her family was displaced from her home in the park, Mary Frances was Finnel Corbin's granddaughter, a fact she helped establish and that subsequently led to more questions about the purpose of Rothstein's project.

Finnell Corbin, who is mentioned in Barbara Nicholson's letter, owned 19 acres in the mountains of central Virginia. The Corbins were a large family in the area and well known by the officials in charge of the relocations. After being paid the "just compensation" of \$530 for his land (Lambert, Appendix 3 292), Finnell was labeled as "feeble-minded" and sent to a state hospital in Staunton, Virginia—a common practice in Virginia as its newly formed Department of Public Welfare struggled with providing services to families during the Depression. Various members of his family were also sent away, including his daughter-in-law, Sadie, and her five children, one of whom was Mary Frances, who was seven at the time. Finnell's son and Mary's father, Harrison, had died, and his widow and their children were sent to the Colony in 1941, presumably because the state did not know what else to do with them. From 1934 to 1941, more than 30 people who had been living within the park's boundaries, approximately 15 of whom were children, were sent to either Lynchburg or Staunton.

As Richard points out in the film, most of Rothstein's photographs were of the extended Corbin family. Richard's growing suspicions about Rothstein's decision to focus on this family prompted me to reexamine archival material I had found years earlier but had not focused on. A well-known doctor, Dr. Roy Sexton, was a medical professional involved in the families' medical care and a founding member of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (which today maintains the Park's hiking trails). In 1932, Dr. Sexton wrote to National Park Service Director Horace Albright:

This is to illustrate the unusual reaction of these mountain people and to bring out the fact that someone who has known them for

a long time will be needed in this work, as they immediately resent the suggestions of the average person. The better class of mountaineer will be easy to handle. The lower type will be most difficult...After...arrangements [are] made for moving out and *colonizing the worst of these people*, it is possible that a man, with a general knowledge of the value of cabins, hogs, cows and other equipment, together with a personal acquaintance with the mountain families and a knowledge of their psychology would be needed to complete the work. (1932 letter from Dr. Roy Sexton to NPS Director Horace Albright, emphasis mine)

Medical professionals such as Sexton, state officials, and social workers sanctioned the relocation of families to these hospitals, well known for their eugenics practices.⁶ Sexton's phrase, "colonizing the worst of these people," was not significant to me at the time I first read his letter. It was only after Richard connected Shenandoah families and the Colony that I returned to this letter found early in my research process. Collaborating on interviews and sharing research with the filmmaker led to a deeper understanding of Mary's story in particular and the history of displacement from Shenandoah National Park more generally. This moment in the research process was profound for us both: the film took a definite turn toward Rothstein's photographs as potentially eugenics field photography, and my research has since focused on eminent domain law's connections to human rights law.⁷ After our interview with Mary Frances and several other descendants, Richard and I both were having difficulty moving forward. The material was difficult, the implications were profound, and it required much emotional energy to continue the project.

It was during the time that Richard was completing the rough cut of the film that we were also discussing the type of music that might be included. It occurred to me to ask my colleague Scott Whiddon, a musician and rhetorician, if he would be interested in composing music for the score. Subsequently, Richard and Scott worked together, pulling together archival music and creating original music based on the letters and a rough cut of Richard's film. It is important to discuss the role of the music in the film for me. Scott is very familiar with my work and has spent long hours from the project's earliest beginnings

listening to my struggle with how to write about the collection of letters. When he sent me the music, I was stunned. I felt he had captured the way I feel about the letters, the story generally, and the tone of the film. Several times Scott told me about the process of composing the music and its relation to his professional work as a scholar and teacher. The following interview excerpts recount some of that process:

KMP: How did reading the letters and watching the film inform the music you wrote for the film?

SW: Because you and I worked together at LSU, and via our conversations, I was pretty aware of the larger project—your first book, the letters, and parts of the larger story—long before we talked about working on a film. That helped a great deal, in that it saved some time and allowed me to jump right in....In the evenings, I'd read the letters offered in your second book. I can't really say "how" they affected the process, but I feel like living in that space with the letters, while writing, allowed me to keep the story present. They are powerful acts of literacy. I carried them with me everywhere in this project—back and forth to the studio, on my travels to Berea and elsewhere....Early in the process, I spend a lot of time with two sets of materials outside of the film itself: the music that's cataloged on the Digital Library of Appalachia (further proof that librarians are here to save the world) and the music archives at Berea College. The former gave me a great sense of what certain musicians in the Shenandoah area were doing at the time of displacement—there's not much recorded, but some—including "Peg" Hatcher. I'd argue that it wasn't just the songs, but the manner in which they were recorded at the time—the scratchy nature of field recording in that era—was very crucial. The archives at Berea played a huge role as well. This is fairly difficult to explain quickly, but I think that there's a fairly problematic monomyth about music from that area at that time—that it was all traditional string band music. But, as your work and others point out, these mountain residents—while certainly remote—had some access to radios and other forms of communication. They heard all kinds of things via radio transmission, such as Texas swing music or

large-arrangement big band style material. While these sounds don't play into my own compositions, they "freed me up" in a sense, giving me the space to choose music from a wider palate. In the end, what I wanted was music that was both spacious—think of the mountains themselves here, and some of the images we see in the initial scenes—and yet claustrophobic and tense. The images from Rothstein, as well as Richard's images, and the letters themselves all seem to exist within this tension and space.

KMP: What was the process of working with other musicians and recording in the studio?

SW: Duane⁸ pushed me hard to improvise as well as compose pieces to fit places in the film that might work well together, even though we didn't know, exactly, how it would all turn out. Looking back, this was the most challenging yet most rewarding part—stepping into that unknown space and being fully aware that some things would be left on the cutting room floor. As a side note here, I have to note that Richard was incredibly patient with my phone calls and emails. He was wonderful to work with. One moment I recall quite well: I had written a string of pieces, all linked together, that I felt worked well for the film as a whole. We uploaded tracks to the server and waited for Richard to respond. While he liked the pieces, he kindly but clearly noted that they were all too pretty, far too lush and major-key oriented. For a few minutes, I was pretty distraught, and we decided to work on some other parts for the rest of the day. The following morning, I showed up to the studio, sat down on a couch, and simply started playing a pizzicato figure in E minor; it had been in my head, but I'd never really locked into it. Duane recorded it ten minutes later, and then we tinkered with it all day—different microphone techniques, different room sounds, etc. That ended up being the fugue-like figure, "Answer at Once," which appears about midway through the film, running along with a lovely, grey-scale shot. It's my favorite memory of this whole experience—having to go back, re-write, and re-think a major section.

KMP: How has composing the music and conducting archival research for the film impacted your work as a teacher and scholar of rhetoric?

SW: Often, [we] would prefer an uncomplicated narrative—white hats, black hats, good guys, bad guys, etc. But when we look at the narrative(s) about the park, it's not that easy. I love national and state parks, and I believe that these spaces serve a public good. But getting the bigger picture—the removal of residents, their rhetorical positioning by powerful forces, the way that photography was part of this, etc.—makes things blurry and difficult to unpack. I think that's where our role as rhetorical scholars and teachers of writing, of course blurs with the work that good cultural historians do...to try and get a sense of an artifact (like the letters) or an event (such as the displacement) and see how it works within larger contexts. I think that the letters, in the context of the story as a whole, and the film itself serve as powerful reminders that literacy is not, in any way, politically neutral....But a project like this, in which I was able to connect my music life with my life in rhetorical studies, reminded me of how academics need to develop projects that connect outside the traditional (and, far-too-safe, in my opinion) walls of the academy. I strongly believe in the importance of scholarly publication/knowledge dissemination, but how many people—the ones who need to know about the complicated issues that frame a story such as this one—will read those texts? I'm not arguing that we should all go out and make documentaries, but there is a strong need for academics, and especially us in humanities-based work, to find ways to make stronger connections between our research lives and public service.

Before Scott and I talked much about his process of creating the music, I had seen Richard's rough-cut many times. When I watched the film with Scott's music, I was quite moved. The feeling of a colleague and friend "getting" the work is happy and overwhelming. The "Answer at Once" track in particular is one I love listening to. The music, as well as the film itself, have reshaped how I thought about the original archival research I'd previously done. Scott's rendering of the music, responded to by Richard, re-conceived and set to the film, captured the tone of the way I had interacted with the material for more than ten years. As I mentioned earlier, the emotion of the story and, in particular, our interview with Mary Frances Corbin, has impacted the film but has also impacted each of us individually. The musician's, filmmaker's, reporter's, and researcher's interactions

with this material suggest an interesting way to examine implications of processes of research on public memory. Creating a version of the descendants' stories through documentary film (and indeed this paper) has several kinds of implications. The families' narratives and the film created around their narratives ask audiences to reconsider the history of the park and eugenics practices in this country. Our roles as creators of this new text (the film, this essay, our future work) also implicate us as witnesses, where the

crisis of witnessing [refers] to the risks of representing trauma and violence, ruptures in identification, and the impossibility of empathetic merging between witness and testifier, listener and speaker. A critical approach to the *crisis of witnessing* as it pertains to the representation of human rights violations therefore prompts us to question the presuppositions of both legal and dramatic realism that urge rhetors (advocates) to *stand in for* the 'other' on the grounds that such identifications risk incorporation of the 'other' within the self. (Hesford 107)

As the subtitle of his film suggests ("A Film about Documentary Truth"), Richard was explicitly conscious of issues of form, of the way that documentary is constructed, of the obtrusiveness of the camera, and of the role of the filmmaker and the interviewer in constructing a certain type of narrative. As Richard's blog postings and our countless hours of phone conversations suggest, we constantly struggled with the form and act of creating testimony through our continued critical attention to our motivations and exposing the way the film was made and the research conducted. As we imagine additional ways of representing families' stories (such as digital archives with public access on the web), we continually work to "recognize their complex rhetorical dynamics" (Hesford "Documenting" 124) and, in the process, have been profoundly changed as people and scholars. As I have argued elsewhere, understanding the complexities of displacement narratives as those that invite the reader into particular understandings of displacement challenges us to consider stories like Mary's as offering counter narratives of the displaced as passive agents contributing to their "out-of-placeness."⁹

Rothstein's First Assignment is an example of countering this type of story. Robinson's film examines the multiple rhetorical ways that Rothstein's photographs were used. While they were ostensibly to document the poor in the rural South, to raise awareness of the devastation of the Depression, and, hence, to convince legislators to vote for social reform policies (which have problems but which also were helpful), they were at the same time used against individuals to prove their "unworthiness" as citizens and hide them away in asylums. In the following interview I conducted with the filmmaker, Richard's struggle is clear as he pursued unanticipated documentary truths and the ways they have impacted the film and his work since:

KMP: What was your original purpose for the film and how did that change?

RKR: My original purpose was to look at the idea of documentary truth. I had long wanted to do a project on Rothstein's first assignment in the mountains of Virginia and this seemed to be the way to approach it. I felt our concepts of documentary truth did not correspond with the truth of photographs. I wanted to explore that in a film.

KMP: Was it difficult to pursue the direction the film seemed to be taking you?

RKR: It was very difficult to follow where the film was taking me. When the aspect of eugenics first emerged, I thought that I could find an explanation, something to explain it away. As I dug deeper into the material to find that explanation, it just got worse. I never expected to take [the research] this far but I felt as a photographer that I should. I somehow felt complicit.

KMP: What was the process like working with others (me, Mary Bishop, Scott Whiddon, others?) in researching the film and how it impacted the final product?

RKR: The process of working with others was new to me. Photography is basically a solitary profession. Sometimes

you work with a writer but mostly you are by yourself. As a filmmaker, that's been a bit of a stumbling block. For *Rothstein's First Assignment*, I soon realized that I could not do it alone. The research aspect of the film was daunting. Much of the film brings together the research of others. Virginia Tech Professor Katrina Powell and Reporter Mary Bishop are a perfect example of that. The narrative of *Rothstein's First Assignment* brought Katrina and Mary's research together in a way I don't think either of them could have anticipated. There was also Carol Squiers from the International Center of Photography in New York. She gave me the confidence to push the project forward. Her research on eugenics and photography helped me understand what I was finding. As with any project of this magnitude, you're dependent on what others have done before you. It was also the first time working with a musician. I got a beautiful piece of music from Scott Whiddon.

KMP: How do you see your film as contributing to the public memory of Shenandoah National Park or the eugenics history of Virginia? What do you hope audiences take away after watching your film?

RKR: Hopefully, my film will get people to question the generally accepted narrative of the park and the narrative associated with Rothstein's photographs. When I talked to descendants of the families Rothstein photographed, they were stunned that almost no mention of their story is told at the park. For me, that is the most troubling aspect of this story—that such information could go hidden for so long. It would be another thing if they had not been photographed and their photographs weren't used to promote the government's objectives. It's hard to reconcile the fact they did not participate in the Resettlement Project for which their images were produced, that instead of being resettled, they were institutionalized and many of them forcibly sterilized. I hope my film makes people think about the limits of photographs as documentary truth. We know very little about a person from a photograph. The troubling question is, "Are photographs intentionally misused to promote agendas?"

KMP: What have been the best responses to the film? What have audiences at the Seattle International Film Festival or the Virginia Film Festival said to you about the film? What have family members said to you about the film?

RKR: There seems to be different audiences that come to see my film that have distinctly different responses. The Seattle Film Festival audience was much better than I thought they would be. Though most of the Q and A seemed to be focused on Rothstein's complicity and not the fate of his subjects, many were supportive, and a filmmaker actually asked me for my autograph. At the Virginia Film Festival, response was a bit muddled. Some audience members were offended, while others came to my support. There seemed to be a number of agendas at play in the audience. The most interesting audience was at one of my first screenings in Madison County. At the screening, I had arranged for descendants of Rothstein's subjects to be the first to see the film. I wanted to see what their response was to what is essentially their story. Unknown to me, Rothstein's daughter, Annie Segan, was also in the audience. She had driven down from New York with a friend to see the film. I'm still not sure how she found out about it. During the Q and A, her friend Brodie challenged me on the film. He was relentless. Eventually, the audience came to my defense. They tired of Brodie's challenges and confirmed the sterilizations. I didn't know it at the time but the woman who stood up and said outright that it did happen had married into the family at the center of Rothstein's project. She knew the story better than I did. Later I found out that Annie's friend Brodie himself works for HUD, the agency that came out of the Resettlement Administration.

KMP: How has working on this film impacted your future work?

RKR: It has impacted me tremendously and created a bit of a crisis. When I was in Spain this summer, at first I couldn't take any photographs. I didn't know what to do. To a large degree, the film has also broken down my own mythology. It took me a long time to get my footing in Spain. Eventually, I realized I needed to find a way to document how the process of how documentation

works, what it does and how it's used. My work has been heading in this direction for a while, but now I'm acutely aware of its importance. It's no longer a post-modernist joke.

Richard, Mary Bishop, Scott, Florence (a descendant who has been a panel member at screenings), and I have responded to questions at various screenings of the film, and reaction to the film has been mixed, as is consistent with the reaction to and discussion about Shenandoah National Park generally. The 72-minute film represents hundreds of hours of interviews, archival research, studio recordings, and county records offices by several people, all which were then mediated by the filmmaker. Mixed reaction highlights the complexity of the process, and, indeed, the narrative of the film draws attention to that complexity. The film is an experimental documentary, so the aesthetics are not always well-received by mainstream audiences who expect that the narrative will be tight, that questions will be raised and answered. In its narrative form, the film represents, to me at least, the chaos and often unanswerable questions raised during archival research.

Like Richard and Scott, my work has been greatly impacted by the process of working on this film. Perhaps that's an obvious statement—how could it not? But I think it is important to stress how it has influenced not only the content of what I will work on in the future but also the way I go about approaching a project. Examining human rights discourses in relation to eminent domain law is an unplanned direction for me. There are moments I wish to work on completely different projects, but this one, and Mary Frances's story, keeps pulling me back.

So why recount this story of collaboration on an experimental documentary seen by relatively few people? Since early in my career, I've been interested in reflexivity in research (Powell and Takayoshi 2003 and 2012) and the ways that understanding researchers' processes might lend insight into literacy and literate practice. I think what writing this essay has done, besides attempting to recount the complexity of the sequence of events that led to the production of a film, is to highlight the ways that research can and often does take turns we don't expect, turns that can lead us down paths we don't

want to traverse, either ethically or emotionally. The decisions we make either way, I think, need to be contextualized for readers. Until very recently, my own work has quite avoided issues of eugenics when—one might ask—it seems the next logical step to take. I may very well do that, but very simply put, it's emotionally difficult to continue working in that direction. Richard and I, after spending every week for a year talking about the project, spent quite a bit of time disengaging from each other, and I moved to quite a different project so that I could think about something else. And therein lies another ethical dilemma. I had spent so much time coming to understand the story, and there's so much more work to be done and more stories to be told. One might argue that it's our responsibility to do it (I certainly feel that way). On the other hand, I seem to have a sense that I need more distance from this project in order to have a better critical sense of it. I have appreciated the opportunity to write this essay to move in that direction. I don't know if reading this will be helpful to others as they research—it's specific and contextualized. But I have found the reflexive work of Gesa Kirsch, Ellen Cushman, Ruth Ray, and others extremely helpful to me as I've tried to do my work and move forward despite the pitfalls.

What the work with Richard and Scott and Mary Bishop did for me was help me understand the simultaneous contradictions not only in public memory, tourism, and history, but also the ways an individual can both love a place yet be critical of its existence. The work of public rhetorics seems to help not only reveal those tensions and contradictions but also to reconcile them in some way, even if not completely satisfactorily. Furthermore, the work in public rhetorics asks us to recognize the layered dimensions of storytelling and that when we take on telling a story, even if we recognize these layered dimensions, we remain immersed in those layers (and the power relationships inherent in them). Richard, Mary Bishop, Scott, and I were and are cognizant of these limitations, yet we moved forward, telling our perspectives of what we found in the archives. There remain many more to tell.

If we are persuaded that recounting memories is a way for people to give meaning to and transform their past, then the work of the film can be useful across several boundaries. What the film and its related

research highlights is that when memory is shared, it is expressed in various ways and continuously reworked, depending on changing political and emotional needs. This recognition of the social nature of remembering signals the simultaneously private and public functions of memory and retelling. In working on this film, Richard and I, together with Mary Bishop and Scott and others, participated in making Mary Frances's (and others') private memories public and, consequently, our story of process highlights the mediated nature of making memory public. We see our work contributing to the subversion of the public (or mainstream) memory about the park, even as *Rothstein's First Assignment*, my work, Mary Bishop's reporting, and Scott's music are each mediated ways of re-remembering the displacement of the park. We continue to ask questions about how the material is archived and how we are implicated in the retelling of the story of displacement.

Endnotes

- 1 *Roanoke Times* and Pulitzer-prize winning reporter Mary Bishop was also to be part of the panel but, at the last minute, was unable to attend. Since that first screening, we have had similar panel discussions at other screenings, such as the one at the Virginia Film Festival in November, 2011. Funding for production of the film included Virginia Tech's College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences Jerry Niles Faculty Research Award, the South Atlantic Humanities Research Award, and the David and Betty Jones Faculty Development Grant from Transylvania University.
- 2 See Elna C. Green's work on the history of public welfare and Virginia's in particular.
- 3 See Stephen Fender's discussion of eugenics photography.
- 4 See also Paul Lombardo for a history of eugenics in Virginia, and <http://www.hsl.virginia.edu/historical/eugenics/>.
- 5 Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol also say in their introduction to *Just Advocacy*, "This dialogic process [of witnessing] is also a transnational and transcultural process whereby reading or seeing human rights violations locates the viewer, the reader, and the witness within local and global communities. Pedagogically speaking, we might ask whether or how representations prompt self-reflexivity about the politics of viewers' historical, cultural, and social locations?" (11).
- 6 See Paul Lombardo's *Three Generations* for historical contexts of eugenics practices in Virginia and Codgell and Currells' *Popular Eugenics*.
- 7 See Powell, "Rhetorics of Displacement."
- 8 Contributing musician Duane Lundy, owner and producer of Shangri-La studios in Lexington, Kentucky.
- 9 See cultural geographer Tim Cresswell's essay on out-of-placeness.