An Adventure in the Kindness of Strangers:

Negotiating Meaning and Majoritarian Stories in a Documentary Case Study

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Introduction

When I was an undergraduate film student, I often said that I set out to make *American Bear: An Adventure in the Kindness of Strangers* because I wanted to prove my optimism about the goodness of people. This feature-length documentary follows my partner Sarah Sellman and I as we travel around the U.S. for nearly two months by relying on the kindness of strangers for a home each night. We hoped to find strangers in each town we visited that would be generous enough, or trusting enough, to welcome us into their homes for a night. We ultimately found hosts on nearly each day of the trip, and many of them shared stories with us that reflect their unique lived experiences. The finished film features a number of these hosts sharing part of their lives with us, and with the audience. Sarah and I analyze our experience throughout the film, concluding with precisely the optimism we started with, and some questions about what social dynamics contributed to our experience. However, the film only represents what we knew at the time of filming – informed by a much less critical lens than we have now.

In Fall 2014, we will be facilitating a series of screenings and discussions based on the film at colleges, high schools, and community organizations. The discussions are intended to fill in some of the gaps of the film itself by bringing forth the narratives of privilege, power, and hegemony that are present but silent in the film. The two main characters of the film are white, heterosexual, early twenties in age, able-bodied, and from a socioeconomic background that afforded them a New York University education and supported the film and the ideological notion of an extended road trip. Most of these dominant identities are "naturalized" (Hall, 1973, p. 95) in the U.S. society, in that they are taken to be the identities we expect to see represented in media. The invisibility of my whiteness (Lipsitz, 1998; Warren, 2001), among other identities, informed my privilege throughout the experience though I was largely unconscious of it. Is this

film a story of whiteness? Of class privilege? Of Christian hegemony, even amongst non-Christians like myself? And is it somehow a story of the U.S., as we naively intended it to be, and if so, what messages does it perpetuate or investigate?

The beginnings of the answers to these questions lie in this paper, and our intention is that they will be further examined through discussions with audiences in the fall. This is an exploration of the theoretical foundations that inform the film and its range of readings, and the discussions to follow the film. I begin with media, representation, and construction of meaning to consider how the film functions as a vessel for ideologies and the role of the audience in experiencing the film. I will then explore how difference is represented in the film across and between identities in the U.S. context, and how power relations construct difference as it appears in the film and in terms of the discussion environment. Finally, I will investigate the notion of the stranger that is so present in the film and in audiences interacting with the film. In so doing, I hope to use the text of the film as it exists to more critically make sense of my role as producer and subject, in order to understand the film and the discussions as catalysts for learning, reflection, and consciousness-raising.

Media, Meaning, Modes

American Bear takes a lot of ideas for granted. Indeed, communication is only possible through shared understandings. The constructionist approach to meaning proposes there are no natural, inherent meanings, in language or in object (Hall, 1997a; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Yet societies, communities, and nations buy into shared meanings, such that the term “table” calls up similar ideas amongst most English-speaking people. It is difficult to be too critical of

that: we probably want to communicate about tables sometimes, and it is certainly helpful to do so clearly and to feel understood. In Hall's (1973) theory of encoding and decoding messages in media, the idea of the table would be encoded by the producer and then decoded by the viewer or audience member. With an idea as often straightforward as a table, the producer may succeed in delivering "perfectly transparent communication," in that the encoded idea is decoded with precisely the same meaning (Hall, 1973, p. 100).

The construction of meaning is further informed by semiotics, Saussure's linguistic theory, adapted to visual media by Barthes (Hall, 1997a, p. 31; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, pp. 28-29). This model separates the object and the meaning into the signifier and the signified. The word "table" is the signifier, and a rectangular piece of wood on four legs is the signified; or perhaps it is signified as a physical space for eating; or for writing; or for meeting with others. The meaning present in any sign is enriched by connotations from society, culture, and experience. Hence the probability that a reader will not simply decode a sign in the precise way the producer intended.

A film's title alone is full of signifiers. "American" is dense with nationalist connotations, a history of colonialism and modern xenophobia, and a disregard for the multiple Americas claimed by residents of South America and Central America (Geiger, 2011, p. 1). Morrison (1993) critically reminds us that "American means white," from the beginnings of the country's statehood through the current struggle for "Africanist people […] to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen" (p. 47). "Bear" is, for most, an animal – a dominant connotation that has little or nothing to do with the film. In fact, it is a reference to five towns named Bear that geographically structure our route in the film. Though potentially misleading, it remains in the title as a point of intrigue; and perhaps as a nod

to other connotations with "bear", such as the comfort of a teddy bear, or the courage and independence of a bear in the wild. All the other words of the film's title, particularly "stranger," as discussed later, are coded with meanings, some shared between myself and readers through dominant discourse, and some that are much more "negotiated" (Hall, 1973, p. 102) by readers who resist the dominant encoded meaning.

Given the aforementioned identities of the filmmakers, I submit that *American Bear* is a film that plays to the "dominant-hegemonic position" of decoding for readers (Hall, 1973, p. 101). In the early stages of making the film, Sarah and I proposed that it would be a film intended for all audiences, at least all Americans, for it was a film about America as a whole. This belief reveals the majoritarian stories we have internalized and in some ways perpetuated. Denzin's (1995) historical review of the "cinematic imagination" brings forth "the central American values of individualism, freedom, the frontier, love, hard work, family, wealth and companionship" (p. 33). These values are soaked in colonialism and whiteness. As our society "knows itself in part through the reflections that flow from the camera's eye," (p. 1), such values perpetuated in the media inform the modern-day myth of meritocracy and color-blindness. These values, and the colonialist notion of "adventure" (Hall, 1990, p. 15), are upheld in *American Bear*. Critical race theorists Solorzano and Yosso (2002) define majoritarian stories as using dominant social locations "as natural and normative points of reference" (p. 28), as our film does. As one of the women interviewed in the film claims about her hometown, "If you're white and you're Christian, it's easy to fit in" (Grano & Sellman, 2014a).

The same could be said of the audience for our film. Ellsworth (1997) inquires, "Who does the film think you are?" (p. 22). There is intentionality behind the creation of every story; there is power behind the camera, and there is power from the mouths and images of the people

in our documentary. Many mainstream films think their audience is made up of those holding dominant identities: at least white, often male, often heterosexual, often Christian (not to mention English-speaking and U.S. nationality that are even less debatable). With these identities so ingrained in our social psyche, the producers of these films may not be conscious of this intentionality, and are unlikely to be challenged for making yet another film that positions its audience this way. hooks (1996) notes the racist double standard that filmmakers of color "are asked by critics and their audiences to justify their choices and to assume political accountability for the quality of their representations" (p. 69). Part of white privilege is its innate ability to go unchecked and unchallenged in this hegemonic society.

Ellsworth refers to the film's intentionality as mode of address, and like Hall's different positions of decoding, some viewers will be situated in a social location that matches the film's mode of address. Media uses interpellation, Althusser's concept of hailing, to call out to the viewer, grab their attention, and hopefully hold onto them (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 24; Diken & Laustsen, 2007, p. 9). Some viewers will be metaphorically off-center, or in the back of the theater, having a more negotiated viewing experience or even an oppositional reading. While some scholars have suggested that marginalized groups may have shared negotiated or oppositional readings of dominant media, Ellsworth warns that dividing audiences essentializes members of marginalized groups (p. 33). Mode of address is an event, contextualized in the web of experiences and texts that inform the viewer, and this event can be an individualized experience to the extent that even a self-proclaimed feminist woman can experience distinct pleasure from Arnold Schwarzenegger films (p. 31). Fiske (1989) expands on this notion, focusing on the layers of context in meaning-making and situating viewers between the extreme of "an irresistible ideological system" and "free-willed, biologically determined individuals" (p.

37). While viewers are guided by the ideas of those in power, they have "a shifting set of social allegiances" that never fully gives in to hegemony (p. 37).

Meaning is further complicated by inter-textuality (Fiske, 1989, p. 99; Hall, 1997b, p. 232). "All popular texts have leaky boundaries" (Fiske, 1989, p. 101), with texts influencing one another, and readers' experiences bursting with connotations from many inputs. Readers are not simply engaging in "passive acts of consumption" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 42), they are shifting meanings through the inevitability of inter-textuality. Or as Austin (2007) puts it, "acts of viewing will be shaped by variable and contingent locations, dispositions, values, experiences and senses of self," but " some of these may on occasion be revised as a consequence of watching a documentary" (p. 179). Meaning is malleable. Most meanings are imbued with the power of politics and history, but they are nonetheless constructed. I have indicated my own revision of meaning in regards to developing an increasingly critical understanding of my film, developed through the inter-textual experience of reading texts like those referenced here, along with interpersonal experiences and more.

American Bear perpetuates majoritarian stories through its embrace of Denzin's so-called "American values" (1997, p. 33) and the dominance and endorsement of white, heterosexual, Christian people in the film. These ideas and identities are naturalized, and so they are rarely overtly lauded in the film. One of our intentions as filmmakers was to let people in the film speak for themselves. Though I share identities with many people in the film, the dangers of "speaking for others" (Alcoff, 1991) are always present. Hosts share their own stories in the film, as do people who articulate why they would not be "comfortable" with two "strangers" coming to their home. Sarah and I reflect on our experience, but we do not attempt to revise or significantly analyze the words, beliefs, or stories shared by others. While we had a message to

impart, we also intended for the audience to reckon with a variety of ideas. In some ways, *American Bear* is what Izod (2006) refers to as a "poetic documentary," in that it is more "designed to encourage emotional experience than to offer conceptual explanations of what is seen and heard" (p. 168). This is partially with the critical intention of offering viewers multiple textual references within the text of the film. It is also partially because Sarah and I cannot be the omniscient dictators of all the ideas in the film. This structural and aesthetic choice serves to check our power as the producers of the work. Valuing multiple voices in the film also sets the foundation for post-screening discussions.

The message of the film, as Sarah and I have encoded it, is that "Americans [are] yearning for connection, and able to find it in the kindness of strangers" (Grano & Sellman, 2014b). We set out to prove a hypothesis, and we were able to manipulate our experience through language and editing to suggest that people in the U.S. are indeed kind, generous, trusting, and yet subject to socially dominant ideas of fear. But the signifier of "Americans" is coded prior to the film, and within the film, as a majoritarian story of belonging. Discussing humans' affinity for stories, Gottschall (2012) would have us believe that a majoritarian story is "the grease and glue of society: […] story homogenizes us. It makes us one" (p. 138). This idea has a distinct mode of address, serving the people who construct and perpetuate majoritarian stories, who are resolutely unaware or in denial of the privilege they hold to tell such stories. We originally had these intentions, but our intentions have shifted. The next section further investigates how we interact with constructs of difference in the film and amongst audiences.

Difference, Discussion, Doubt

Difference is present in *American Bear* and this discussion. There are majoritiarian stories in the film, and counter-stories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) are mostly absent; there are notions of good equated with generosity and hospitality, and notions of bad equated with those unwilling to even speak with us; and there are viewers who align with the film's preferred meanings, and viewers with an oppositional position. Butterwick (2012) asserts "difference is central to democratic dialogue; and understanding it means recognizing its relational dimensions and how it is socially constructed within relations of advantage and disadvantage" (p. 62). This recognition must begin with the facilitator, and in this case, I am situated in significant socially constructed advantages.

Whiteness is perhaps the most salient marker of advantage in *American Bear*, as it is visible on our skin and more visible in the relatively few interactions we have with people of color in the film. Whiteness is perpetuated in the legal system (Delgado, 1995), media (Hall, 1990), and in part "through embodiment – through a repetition of mundane and extraordinary acts that continually make and remake whiteness, all while eluding scrutiny and detection" (Warren, 2001, p. 92). Some of the ways I perform whiteness in the film include: my accent and language choices; my clothing; being on a road trip; approaching people in public without much trepidation; listening to music by white musicians and using that as the soundtrack for the film; navigating the social cues of many other white people, in public and in their homes; and rarely critically addressing whiteness in language or practice. Each of these examples could be unpacked at length, and there are more examples lurking just beyond the frame of consciousness for many viewers of the film. I see myself as critically aware of my whiteness, and how it

contributes to the experience of making the film and experiences within the film itself. However, I am not an expert.

Whiteness is notable on an interpersonal level, but it is hegemonic in the U.S. society because of a history of colonialism, slavery, segregation, oppressive laws, housing discrimination, and other governmental and social systems that maintain, with Lipsitz's (1998) terms, the "possessive investment in whiteness" (p. 1). While difference is necessary for dialogue, it does not mean that one can equate the role of, or words of, white participants with participants of color. Facilitators must question who benefits from the dialogue, and for whom it is intended (Lugones & Spelman, 1983; Jones, 1999). Though a common goal of dialogue and discussion involves participants learning from one another, systems of privilege can operate in such a learning space when participants of color are responsible for teaching white participants about racism, whiteness, and oppression. The reverse is unlikely to manifest organically because, as Lugones and Spelman (1983) suggest, "just in order to survive, brown and Black women have to know a lot more about white/Anglo women – not through the sustained contemplation theory requires, but through the sharp observation stark exigency demands" (p. 22). In other words, people of color tend to be acutely conscious of privilege and oppression through their daily lived experiences, whereas white people tend to gain consciousness through gradually learning to hear the experiences of people of color. The practice of intergroup dialogue (Zuniga, Nagda, & Sevig, 2002) lists the following learning goals, among others: "to develop self-awareness of one's membership in a social group in the context of systems of power and privilege; to explore similarities and differences across and within social group memberships; to examine the causes and affects of group differences and their impacts at the personal, interpersonal, community,

cultural, institutional, and societal levels" (p. 8). An essential question for a dialogue space is how to work towards these goals without privileging the white participants' quest for knowledge.

Jones (1999) suggests that intergroup spaces are not always advisable, for exactly the concerns listed above. She recognizes where the inspiration for dialogue comes from: "a touching faith in the talking cure of storytelling, and the possibilities for verbal space making," to "'speak and work across differences' toward an egalitarian, multicultural, and democratic social order in the classroom – and elsewhere" (p. 306-7). Jones was concerned about the privileged dynamics of a class with both Pakeha (white New Zealander) students and her Maori and Pacific Islander students, where power "remains concentrated at the usual places – that is, with the powerful, who attempt to grant subjugated knowledges as hearing" (p. 309). Jones and her colleague decided to divide the white students and students of color for a semester. She found that white students tended to feel like this limited their experience: they had fewer opportunities to learn; something was being kept from them. The students of color suggested that they had a very effective experience, receiving both education and validation (p. 302-3). Jones' concern lies with the white students' desire to learn from their peers, framed around recognition of their "ignorance" and yearning for "redemption" (313). Riggs (2004) and Thompson (2003) have expanded on the construction of benevolence and validation amongst white people, through learning about marginalized groups or framing one's work as altruistic allyship. Though Jones' conclusion is open-ended in regards to recommendations, her case study confirms the critical risks of a cross-race space for dialogue, and the advantages of safer spaces for students of color.

This piece engages with the questions of dialogue's intentions in important ways. However, it goes beyond the scope of the *American Bear* discussions, primarily in terms of time. Jones' study is dependent on its length. The discussions we are planning will mostly be one-time

meetings. While there is a possibility that some discussion groups will be classes or community groups that will continue to meet, our role as facilitators will be limited to one day. One of the goals of our discussions is to raise awareness of the majoritarian stories in the film that may be invisible to an uncritical audience. Movies serve as a valuable tool in discussion generally as they can "provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues" (hooks, 1996, p. 2). A discussion group will be most effective with a variety of voices, and with participants speaking from their experience, rather than myself as a facilitator speaking on behalf of people who may not have a dominant reading of the film. Furthermore, part of my intentions in facilitating discussion is to move myself away from the center of discussion – where I am situated due to my privileged identities and my role as the filmmaker. "The first major step towards change is giving up the need to control meaning" (Thompson, 2003, p. 420) – and giving up that control will be made possible in part by having more meanings and more voices in the room.

Teachers and facilitators can be intentional about the theoretical foundations for intergroup discussion. Moya's (2006) framing of identities as "epistemic resources" honors students', particularly marginalized students', experiences and histories in the very creation of knowledge (p. 96). "Mobilizing identities" begins deconstructing the regimes of knowledge that occupy schools and our hegemonic society by critically investigating "both from where a given knowledge-claim derived, as well as whose interests it will serve" (p. 102). Moya calls for the honorable and valuable participation of marginalized students as "privileged members" of classroom discussion, a notion that opposes Jones but suggests more theoretical support for the students' voices (p. 104). De Lissovoy (2012) contextualizes the voices of marginalized students in necessary opposition to the "hidden curriculum" of labeling students to perpetuate the

privilege and oppression of hegemony (p. 464). He cites "the strength of students' own resources against domination in epistemological, cultural, and spiritual terms" (p. 475). The theory and advocacy are powerful, but most of Moya's recommendations for achieving this in the classroom are dependent on ongoing relationships with a group of students – once again, an extended period of time that we are not afforded with our film discussions. Nonetheless, at least one recommendation stands out for our work: "remember that you are teaching the practice of critical thinking rather than a particular ideological stance" (p. 113). Our film promotes some ideological stances but strives to leave room for interpretation and a multitude of meaning-making experiences. In discussion, we must let the film and discussion questions speak our ideologies and give up the control of meaning in recognition of the contribution of the epistemic resources in the space.

Several authors discuss the need for antiracist work from white artists, teachers, and facilitators. Hall (1990) concludes his study of media's "racist premises and propositions" (p. 13) with a call to action for antiracist ideologies to become more prevalent in media (p. 23). Thompson (2003) dismantles the sense of validation sought by "good white people" and critically recognizes that allyship and "taking on the alleviation of white guilt as an antiracist project keeps whiteness at the center of antiracism" (p. 422). Her paper has an "Inconclusion," indicating the open-endedness of her critique and the need for ever more critical perspectives on white actors in antiracist work (p. 421). Cammarota (2011) suggests strategies for white allies, including sacrificing "power so that the agency of the oppressed becomes central" (p. 451) and immersing oneself in communities of people of color to learn about institutional racism (p. 254). Each of these authors makes important contributions to the field of critical whiteness and my personal development. However, I must recognize the limitations of the forthcoming discussions

for which I am preparing. *American Bear* does not promote antiracist ideas, and our discussions are short-term and reflective about the film and its themes. A significant goal for discussion is raising awareness of the majoritarian ideologies that frame the film and are evident in our experience – but this goal is several stages removed from the ambitions of antiracism. These discussions can hopefully be the beginning of a longer journey for audiences who initially experience the film from the dominant position. In regards to my personal role in this, I am making no sacrifices in light of my recognition of privilege. Instead, I am taking advantage of a social and generational history that affords me the opportunity to take the financial risk of embarking on a self-employed film venture, and I am hoping to make a profit. I have personal ambitions to develop as an ally, to expand my definition of antiracism, and to realize that work in action as well as dialogue. *American Bear* was not intended to be a significant space for that work, and pushing the educational potential of the film in the direction of critical discussion may be the limit of the project's resourcefulness in unpacking issues of racism, privilege, and oppression.

Our discussions will create space for viewers to explore the ideologies, themes, and messages they experienced in the film. Our discussion questions and our current understanding of the film should help guide viewers towards a critical perspective. Yet to do so, we want to honor knowledge and perspectives carried by participants into the space. Delgado (1995), writing primarily about counter-stories, explains that "stories humanize us. They emphasize our differences in ways that can ultimately bring us closer together. They allow us to see how the world looks from behind someone else's spectacles." (p. 2440). This idea includes the stories that may be shared in discussion, which may complicate and challenge the ideas in the film or find new means of expression that resonate with viewers. Meaning-making can also be distinctly

pleasurable: "pleasure results from this mix of productivity, relevance, and functionality, which is to say that the meanings I make from a text are pleasurable when I feel that they are *my* meanings and that they relate to my everyday life in a practical, direct way" (Fiske, 1989, p. 46). Structuring intentional discussion following a screening, particularly with a diverse group of viewers, creates space for individuals to draw connections to their everyday lives, and to shape their meaning and contextualize their experience through the validation of sharing and listening. The following section moves further into the idea of sharing and listening through examining the construction of the stranger.

Stranger, Suspicion, Society

"A stranger is just a friend you haven't met yet." This idea is present in songs, blogs, and inspirational photos across the internet. While this phrase deserves a critical reading, it is fairly remarkable that it has gained popularity in the face of a society that, particularly post-9/11, is so scared of others. This idea is at the heart of the optimism in *American Bear* referred to earlier. We did not seek to have simply passive experiences, hoping to take advantage of someone's generosity by visiting their home. We wanted to get to know them, and in so doing, perhaps even see ourselves as friends. One of the questions we often receive after screenings is whether we are still in touch with any of our hosts. It is the value of friendship and the fear of returning to strangeness that makes me proud to say yes, and continue to explain how we are still friends with some of the people we met during the unique circumstances of the film.

American Bear ostensibly uses the word stranger to refer to anyone that Sarah and I do not know – which is everyone in the film, except when we visit our families at their homes. In

fact, we are cast as strangers with everyone with whom we interact. However, the viewer is likely to read Sarah and I as the main characters, possibly the protagonists of the film, and that viewing experience reduces the stigma of strangeness for the audience. The structure of the film therefore recognizes our social aversion to strangers, to people we do not know, and so it centers Sarah and I to be a constant in the film and serve as representatives of the communities to which audience members belong. We have already discussed that not all viewers will identify with us, given our identities and the majoritarian layers of storytelling and truths onscreen. However, this is an important tangential idea: we attempt to be, for a majority of viewers, not strangers but guides, confidantes, friends in the experience of viewing the film. Yet within the film, we are still strangers to the people we meet, giving the audience the opportunity to feel like strangers with us, accompanied by the relative safety of being at our side. We construct a sense of community between the audience and ourselves.

Ahmed (2000) powerfully investigates the development of the stranger in dominant discourse. One of her foundational concepts asserts that "the figure of the 'stranger' is produced, not as that which we fail to recognize, but that which we have already recognized as 'a stranger'" (p. 1). Ahmed indicates a set of knowledge that we may not often be conscious of, that a stranger is in fact enriched with meaning, not devoid of meaning, known rather than unknown. The label of "stranger" is one of recognition by virtue of the word and its connotations. A prevalent connotation is the idea of "stranger danger," perpetuated through Neighborhood Watch programs in the U.K. and the U.S. (p. 11). Dominant, and therefore racist, classist, and nationalist themes inform the concept of a safe neighborhood. The "American values" (Denzin, 1995) referenced earlier in the cinematic imagination are paralleled by local neighborhoods, which become "imagined as organic and pure spaces through the social perception of the danger posed by

outsiders to moral and social health or well-being" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 6). A long history of racism in the U.S., including housing systems in just the past sixty years (Lipsitz, 1998) contributes to the construction of a homogenous neighborhood, and the subsequent, if sometimes unspoken, notion that homogeneity equates safety. The preoccupation with safety is buttressed by the fear that maintains both Neighborhood Watch programs and systems of inequality. With "strangers" cast as dangerous, connected to crime, violence, and so-called bad intentions, "certain lives become valued over other lives" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 10). The lives of greater value are those within that community, and on the scale of dominant society, we can infer from an understanding of systemic injustice that those lives tend to be white, heterosexual, Christian, middle class, and able-bodied.

This value may be evident to some viewers in our film. It contributes to the weight of the influence represented by the identities that Sarah and I hold, for we represent the lives most valued in U.S. social systems. Education and government and legal systems want us to succeed, and so do most viewers. Most of our hosts in the film are white as well, and it is possible that some viewers ascribe more value to those hosts' stories than, say, our two indigenous hosts. The connection to strangeness is clear: those with dominant identities are perceived as being part of the in-group for viewers who share those identities, and others are recognized as the stranger. Though the film labels everyone a stranger, including myself, an outcome of its majoritarian storytelling is that some people onscreen are recognized as familiar, and some may remain in the category of stranger. Individual viewers will craft that meaning for themselves, but it is informed by the way "stranger" correlates with our society's messages of fear and dominance. The construction of "America" as a nation, with an "American" identity, is perpetuated in our film and contributes to the notion of the stranger, who "appears as a figure through the marking out of

the nation as dwelling, as a space of belonging in which some bodies are recognized as out of place" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 76). Layered into our naïve initial intentions, we believed that *American Bear* could show the diversity of the U.S. and demonstrate the complexity of what it means to be "American," from an inclusive and celebratory position. A similarly naïve liberal viewer may read the film as such, but a critical eye will see that the nation displayed in the film largely reflects the majoritarian story of in-group and out-group, neighborhood and stranger.

Yet there is some progressive work going on in the film as well. I suggest that the concept of "relying on the kindness of strangers" which structures the film is indicative of a community-based approach to understanding the stranger. By believing that we could rely on strangers, we attributed socially constructed positive ideas to the countless people we might meet, such as generosity, openness, and at least temporary or cautious trust. We ascribed significant value to the people we met because we viewed ourselves as somewhat dependent on them, as though our fates were bound up together. Though Sarah and I debate about the equity of the exchange between our hosts and ourselves, I do believe we treated these so-called strangers with ethical responsibility and dignity. Ahmed (2000) discusses ways to theorize responsibility to the stranger in order to transgress the othering of strangers that persists in society. A harmful engagement with the stranger could involve assimilating or commodifying another culture, getting so close as to disrupt or consume the "strange" community. Ahmed's examples refer to the indigenous communities of the U.S. and Australia, including how government initiatives and media subsume those cultures even with the liberally lauded intention of multiculturalism. Instead, "ethical communication is about a certain way of holding proximity and distance together: one gets close enough to others to be touched by that which cannot be simply got across" (p. 134). To attempt to simply obtain proximity is to operate in a privileged colonialist

paradigm. Rather, one must approach a stranger with grace, perhaps curiosity, and yet a distance that affords respect. An act like this is also embedded in surprise, for it is hardly the dominant story of strange encounters. Only then can "'we' establish an alliance through the very process of being unsettled by that which is not yet" (p. 157). An authentic and responsible encounter with a stranger can yield a relationship that would not have previously existed; in other words, a friendship.

The choice to position ourselves as stranger in our film contributes to the relationships formed onscreen. Our experiences would have shifted if we constructed ourselves as the baseline, the reference point, or the norm. As referenced earlier, we grow to occupy that position for the viewer, but for the strangers we encounter in the film, we are usually viewed as the stranger as well. One host articulates the implication of "stranger danger" by noting, "You guys are just as vulnerable as I am" (Grano & Sellman, 2014a). In occupying this role, we may be more effectively positioned to develop relationships with the people we meet. Rumford (2013) suggests "each person can become a stranger by shifting position in relation to others or crossing over from one cultural group to another" (p. 45). While Ahmed's (2000) concern of stranger assimilation contests the criticality of this point, Rumford is interested in a contemporary and globalized web of strangers. He further submits the notion of the "cosmopolitan stranger" who "is not easily captured by existing forms of community and does not echo staple expressions of solidarity," who is also uniquely capable of recognizing their own strangeness (Rumford, 2013, p. 121). Sarah and I are restricted to our U.S. context of dominant identities and majoritarian stories, and yet we seem to occupy traces of this cosmopolitan stranger, one who is in and of the world, seeking to rewrite the idea of community, at least in a small way.

There is no doubt that dominant discourse labels marginalized populations as strangers, and the silenced and feared voice of the stranger calls for spaces of listening. Huspek (1997) critically examines communication scholarship and advocates for intentionally "transgressing discourses," in part because "a genuinely open engagement [with] the strangeness of other promises to shake us out of our self-certainty" (p. 1). In the same anthology, Shotter (1997) submits a rediscovery of Bakhtin's construction of dialogic communication. "Dialogic speech is always responsive to the speech of others, and it is always formed and shaped in the expectation of a response," as opposed to "monologic utterances" and Huspek's self-certainty (Shotter, 1997, p. 25). Coming from separate fields, Ahmed and Shotter parallel each other in recognizing the need for dialogic space, that balance of proximity and distance, that openness to the other that constructs effective encounters with strangeness.

Cinema is a mode of communication, and as such, it is worth noting that *American Bear* does not transgress discourse, but rather seeks to creatively and aesthetically call audiences into its world. In addition to the construction of Sarah and I as familiar characters for the sake of the audience, other communicative choices were made to position the audience in a location of understanding. For example, music is used to evoke collective emotions and guide the viewer's emotionally responsive journey through the narrative. The camera is often a felt presence in the film, with the knowledge that either Sarah or myself is holding the camera. In this way, viewers are likely to further identify with us as characters, for their visual perspective into the world of the film is truly the same as ours. This stylistic choice is reminiscent of a "home movie," adding another layer to how the film indicates community and in-group dynamics for the audience. *American Bear* is a film about strangers that pedagogically seeks to transgress the fear-based

construction of the stranger. In *American Bear*, everyone is the stranger, but invited to a balanced space of proximity and distance to begin to feel at home.

Conclusion

American Bear is all about searching for a home. While the literal homes we enter into are only for one night, they open the door to feelings of home that come from a sense of comfort and safety. With "ethical communication" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 134), we construct a sense of home with even those we label as strangers. But the film's broader narrative is of a nation as home, and to whom it feels like home. The U.S., as told by *American Bear*, is truly home to white, Christian, able-bodied, heterosexual men and women. It is home to people like Sarah and I, and we must admit we knew that all along. While many people were concerned about our safety during the trip, they weren't concerned because of our identities. They were concerned about the outlier: the ax murderer hiding in the woods, who is stereotypically a white man, but not named as such, and not judged as a representative of his identities. These outliers, along with marginalized communities, were not expected to be in the film, because they are the strangers in our social discourse whereas Sarah and I are already grounded in the nationalist neighborhood of the United States.

It is my hope that intentional discussion about the film can begin to unpack its majoritarian discourse. These discussions have potential to thrive, should they honor the epistemic resources (Moya, 2006) around the table and the variety of meanings and inter-textual experiences viewers may contribute. It is evident in this paper that I have a lot of my own meanings connected to the film, yet I must de-center myself from these discussions and give up

control (Thompson, 2003) in order to shift some of the power of meaning into the viewers' experience. Viewers who have a dominant-hegemonic experience with the film (Hall, 1973) will be challenged to think critically and perhaps begin a journey into learning how whiteness and other systems of privilege operate in our society.

The work of this paper and its foundations for *American Bear* reflect the dismantling of my original idea of the film. I was inspired by, and satisfied by, a distinct optimism about others that I understood (to some extent) as pushing against dominant discourse that Sarah and I labeled as a "culture of fear." That optimism does more to represent and perpetuate the dominant discourse than it ever could in terms of talking back, as it manifested from my privilege and my personal and socially-approved sense of belonging. Rather than reject the ideologies that inform the film, I will now use the film as a resource for critically learning about this society and engaging in conversations that may in fact begin to talk back to the dominant discourse. Geiger (2011) challenges that "the task, then, is to unpack the manufacturing of truth in documentary while keeping in mind that not all documentaries […] simply 'lie'" (p. 122). The many meanings encoded in *American Bear*, and the many more that may be decoded by readers, are manufactured truths. By relying on one another, we can begin to manufacture new versions of our truths that may actually allow each of us to begin feeling a bit more optimistic.

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