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63rd Annual Robert Flaherty Film Seminar "Future Remains"

Patricia R. Zimmermann[1]

63rd Annual Robert Flaherty Film Seminar "Future Remains" (Colgate University Hamilton, New York USA June 17-23, 2017)

It was an unusual Flaherty in the six-decade plus turbulent history of the seminar: no films of Robert Flaherty's oeuvre screened. The participants did not see *Nanook of the North, Louisiana Story, Moana, The Land, Man of Aran.* Instead, they encountered each other. This historical absence created spaces to conjure a repressed presence.

In a very political intervention and reclamation, the seminar seemed to channel the spirit of Frances Flaherty more than Robert Flaherty as it unspooled a heterogeneity of makers, genres, forms, approaches, and vigorous discussions addressing indirectly and directly programmer Nuno Lisboa's theme of "Future Remains."

Inaugurated in 1955 in the height of the Cold War by Frances Flaherty, Robert's widow and collaborator, to honor the memory of her deceased husband, The Robert Flaherty Film Seminar stirs up all kinds of overdetermined traumas, debates, overinvestments, histories, personalities, passions, repetition fetishes, hurt feelings, and devotional allegiances not all of which are either justified or historically accurate. It is one of the longest continuously running seminars focused on independent film in the world.

Much of the popular lore about the Flaherty Seminar produces a vicious phantasmatic revolving around an emphasis on realist documentary, the inscription of Robert Flaherty's romanticism, the endless reinterpretations and hagiographies of the concept of non-preconception which most think was Robert's idea rather than Frances', a hatred of all things experimental, and ruthless bloodlettings against filmmakers during discussions.

In the labyrinthine, complex histories of the Flaherty as it is known by its devotees, all of the above crash through it, but none are dominant practices and most are overblown. Evidence from the historical records and recordings as well as the larger contexts of cinema, intellectual, and political histories write a different story. In fact, most of the so-called "filmmaker bashings" reveal, as film

[1] Ithaca College, Roy H. Park School of Communications, 14850, Ithaca NY, USA.
[2] Michelle Stewart, "Of Digital selves and Digital Sovereignty: *Of the North*", *Film*

historian Scott MacDonald points out, tectonic shifts in film culture and film theory, when ideas, people, and practices were realigning.

Many who attend the seminar in the role of what many veterans and board members call "first timers" (which for some is the language of a cult rather than a gathering of like-minded souls) assume Robert Flaherty started the seminar and that he originated and enforced the idea of "nonpreconception". To deconstruct this assumption with historical evidence reveals the patriarchal, sexist bias of so much of film culture. A collaborator on every one of Robert Flaherty's films in different capacities, Frances Flaherty initiated the seminar to continue his legacy of mentoring emerging makers at a time when few film schools existed. She wanted to create an outpost and retreat for the burgeoning international independent film movement.

Frances sought to create a space for intensive viewing and discussion to explore the possibilities of cinema beyond the constraints of commercial systems. The first gatherings, small informal convivial affairs, took place on the Flaherty farm in Vermont and featured close viewings of the Flaherty films and intensive conversations with those who worked on them like Helen Von Dongen and Ricky Leacock.

Pressed to speak at universities and festivals about Robert's working processes, Frances concocted a theory of nonpreconception from her experiences observing Robert on location, her interest in Zen Buddhism, the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, and her interactions with radical anthropologists like Edmund Carpenter. Robert never lived to attend the seminar convened in his name, nor did he ever utter the word "nonpreconception." His was a life more dedicated to exploration, travel, comraderie, drinking. Frances was college educated and more intellectual.

This year, the seminar's own literature suggests the difficulties encountered in dislodging the patriarchal father to make room for the woman who did all the work: the handout on Robert and Frances Flaherty in the seminar welcome packet places Robert's bio above Frances's, and gives Robert's legacy three paragraphs to one on Frances. Ironically, Frances' impact on film and media culture far surpasses Robert's.

If many critique Flaherty's films and their politics of representation (despite anthropologists like Jay Ruby and David MacDougall who contend he was a collaborative documentarian), the films represent a fixed entity in contrast to the endless shape-shifting fluidity of the seminar as envisioned by Frances and revisioned by the programmers and board members who have kept it going for more than half a century. The seminar she founded in his name provides something few places in film culture can muster: an intensive convening of diverse cinematic partisans around

meticulously curated international independent cinema across all forms.

The format of the seminar differs considerably from a film festival and has, remarkably, not changed over six decades: participants live in dorms and eat all meals together. Screenings occur in the morning, afternoon, and evening. Distinctively, the seminar focuses as much on discussion as on the films, allotting over forty-five minutes for group interaction, questions, and statements. In the age of virtualization, disconnection, and isolation from community, perhaps the most radical contribution of the Flaherty is that it is doggedly embodied. It brings together people who might never talk to each other in other contexts.

After ruminating on the carefully-considered range of works programmed and the intensity of the interactions amongst participants, the 63rd Annual Robert Flaherty Film Seminar enacted a transnational, racialized, sexualized, gendered, feminist reclamation of not only Frances' often repressed legacy and historical impact, but of the seminar experience itself. It staged not arguments but mosaics of pleasure, displeasure, irritation, exploration, different genres, debates about form and politics, emerging and established makers. A radical ecological theme radiated throughout "Future Remains", asking the audience to consider how people, land, machines, and capital remake not only the world, but our ability to navigate it ethically and politically with each other.

Nuno Lisboa programmed this year's seminar. Since 2006, Lisboa has served as programmer of Doc's Kingdom International Seminar on Documentary Film in Portugal, named after Robert Kramer's film shot in Portugal. Decades before, José Manuel Costa, the founder of Doc's Kingdom and now the Deputy Director of the Cinemateca Portuguesa-Museu do Cinema, attended the 25th Annual Flaherty Seminar in 1979. The experience inspired him to develop something similar that focused on careful curation, deep immersion, and intensive conversation.

As Lisboa recounted in a post-seminar interview I conducted with him, his programming proposed "not one center but a constellation" marked by "uncontrollable dynamics." He elaborated that the responsibility of the programmer is "to try and build complexity and contradiction, a building of mirrors, some distorted, some clear, in effect, a maze of mirrors" in order to open up spaces for transformation with others.

Explicitly exploring ecologies and technologies as webs of social, aesthetic, and political conflicts, the program provoked some attendees to criticize it as overly "ethnographic," a position never fully defined nor elaborated. However, the range of critiques of the films and the programming exemplify some key goals embedded in Lisboa's deft curatorial strategies. He explained that he sought to

generate a program where "we put ourselves in those uncomfortable places where we have to question everything, and can only rely on trust and community."

His program catapulted in the opposite direction of most seminars: rather than proposing a throughline of works to elaborate a thematic and lead an audience through a set of aesthetics and concepts, "Future Remains", as Lisboa observed, plumbed "complexity and contradiction", perhaps one of the only ethical positions possible in a world increasingly polarized and rigidified by the rise of fundamentalist, populist, and right-wing ideologies.

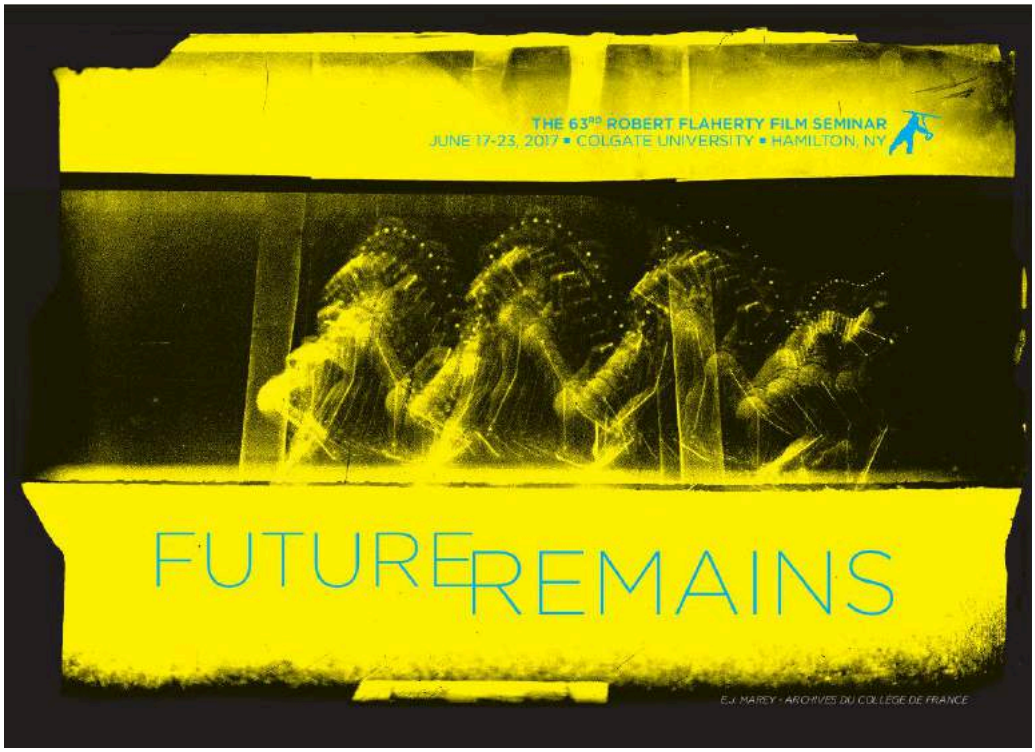

Image 1: "Future Remains": the 63rd Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, curated by Nuno Lisboa. Courtesy of The Flaherty.

This year, the seminar welcomed 172 participants, with thirty-five fellows (the largest number of fellows in the seminar's history) who represented emerging scholars, critics, makers, programmers, and exhibitors from around the world. Like most US-based nonprofit media organizations, the seminar, despite its high prolife legacy and enormous indisputable impact on film and media culture, has struggled with economic sustainability. This year, a large number of funders contributed including Art Works, the National Endowment for the Arts, The William H. Donner Foundation, Inc., the Johnson Family Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the JustFilms Initiative of the Ford Foundation as well as

over ninety individual contributions from former seminarians and partisans.

The title of this year's program, "Future Remains", operates as a quadruple, layered *entendre*: an optimistic assertion that the future does indeed remain before us; a pessimistic contention that the future itself has devolved into ruins and remains; a question about both the future and the remains left in a world torn apart and producing death; and a query into the primacy of the ecological as the hinge between people, nature, and the built environment.

The opening program strongly evoked the spirit of Frances Flaherty, a person who believed in nurturing new talent and exploring the unknown. Renowned American political filmmaker Laura Poitras (*My Country, My Country; Citizenfour; The Oath; Risk*), who is currently suing the US government after being put on a terrorist watchlist in 2006, presented four short documentaries that live online in *Field of Vision*, which the program notes identify as "a visual journalism project that commissions and supports short-form and feature films about urgent global issues."

All five pieces took on the questions of the current charged political moment through blending transnational conceptual models with emerging technologies. All four pieces were designed as shorts to circulate and be shared online, quite a different exhibition tactic from the usual global art world experimental and documentary works screened at the Flaherty Seminar in the last few years. Threaded into these contemporary American projects, Peter and Zsoka Nestler's works, *How to Make Glass (Manually)* (1970) and *Fos-Sur-Mer* (1970) anchored the postcolonial postmodern strategies of the *Field of Vision* new media pieces in a Marxist film history of labor, objects, and environments.

Image 2: Nuno Lisboa, Laura Poitras and Peter Nestler in conversation. Courtesy of The Flaherty.

Best of Luck with the Wall (Josh Begley, 2016) deploys 200,000 satellite images to algorithmically map the geography of the border. *Speaking is Difficult* (AJ Schnack, 2016) deals with shootings across America, forming a distanced lexicon that replaces the spectacular with the vernacular. *Project X* (Laura Poitras and Henrik Moltke, 2016) goes on an undercover journey to Titanpointe through classified NSA documents. *Personal Truth* (Charlie Lyne, 2017) engages fake news and conspiracies, while *Our New President* (Maxim Pozdorovkin, 2017) mines how President Trump's Russian supporters "express their devotion." *Field of Vision* extends the vision of Frances Flaherty and the Flaherty Seminar to new media and politically charged realms, a gathering of master and emerging makers to open up new ways of considering documentary form and technological development as a conceptual enterprise that can reconstitute how we consider and engage the world.

"Future Remains" showcased ten makers spanning countries, styles, genres, approaches, aesthetics, and relationships to communities they worked in and with: Vincent Carelli (Brazil), Filipa César (Portugal/Germany), Kevin Jerome Everson (US), Dominic Gagnon (Canada), Laura Huertas Millán (Colombia/France), Sana Na N'Hada (Guinea-Bissau), Peter Nestler (Germany/Sweden), Laura Poitras (US), Trinh T. Minh-ha (Vietnam/US), Eduardo Williams (Argentina). Although different, each maker's work embodied transnational movements and complex, charged, contradictory crossings between self and others. The works engaged theatrical, activist, art, and hybrid documentary as well as experimental ethnography and experimental media.

As the Flaherty Seminar struggles to move away from flat-on-the-wall analog media, a daunting challenge for a small organization with very limited resources, "Future Remains" mounted three installations that featured works by Vincent Carelli, Filipa César, and Dominic Gagnon.

The most successful and compelling of these was Carelli's *The Living Brazil-Open Archive*. It was mounted in a studio located a long hallway away from the theater and afternoon snack buffet. Each time I went to it, I was the only person in the room, which surprised me given the participants continuing critiques in discussions about the politics of representation, a rather old, worn out debate in screen studies.

Copy mounted on the wall outside the studio explained that the visual material was culled from 8,000 hours of material produced by the Vídeo nas Aldeias Project, which Carelli founded in the late 1980s to support the struggles of indigenous people in Brazil. The project has collaborated with forty indigenous groups in five regions. Material was also pulled from archival material from government-produced footage, and industrial development films of the region. Visual sources spanned from 1911 to 2016. Thus, *The Living Brazil* constituted a centennial of colonization and struggle as a historical dialectic, with indigenous peoples of Brazil at the center.

Images 3 and 4: Vicent Carelli, *The Living Brazil – Open Archive*, installation view and screenshot. Courtesy of The Flaherty.

The Living Brazil arranged three large screens in a curve, each showing a different logical and visual order of material and content which juxtaposed a multiplicity of contestations, contradictions, conversations, convenings. Images of the rituals of daily life of the indigenous peoples in the Amazon, praying, singing, dancing, group resistance to development, archival footage of planes landing in the Amazon region, loggers, military incursions with guns, carrying a person dying in the arms of a partisan, planes, machines, protests filled each screen. The complex soundtrack engulfed the spectator in a politically destabilizing polyphony of ritual chanting, birds, songs, planes, saws, protests, helicopters, conversations. Sometimes, only the sounds of a saw or a helicopter can be heard, a chilling reminder of the violence of development.

The Living Brazil-Open Archive displaced images of the Amazon as one of the rainforest, plants, and river tributaries by insisting on the primacy of the people who live there and their continuing struggles to secure land rights. It generated a disturbing, unsettling web of struggles, collectivities, daily life, machines, land, destruction that rewrites a concept of the environment as a fluid construct of people, land, machines, capital, and resistance. By far, it ranked among the most important works I experienced at this seminar. At my last screening, one of the technicians from Colgate University who helped to mount this installation popped in. He told me that if anyone watched even ten minutes of this installation, it would change how they thought about the world, politics, and people.

"Future Remains" continued the decades-long traditions of the seminar to feature a heterogeneous mix of an *eminence grise*, an

established master filmmaker, as well as rediscovered, reclaimed makers and emerging new voices.

However, instead of one *eminence grise*, Lisboa presented many, which one might interpret as an intervention into the authorial and patriarchal remains of the seminar's programming history. Laura Poitras and Trinh T. Minh-ha each showed a range of works and provided a more meta-viewpoint developed out of years of careful navigation of complex political issues. If Poitras represented the realist side of commercial theatrical independent film in her new film *Risk* (2017) which chronicles the Julian Assange WikiLeaks case, Trinh offered the more experimental hybrid documentary essay form in works such as *Reassemblage* (1982) and *Forgetting Vietnam* (2017). In discussing *Risk*, Poitras revealed that her documentary process entailed "how to allow for ambivalence to float around...to allow the audience to move in that ambivalence."

In the post-screening discussion of the latter, Trinh, with her precise theoretical lyricism, posited that her works saw the "large in the small and the small in the large." She pointed out that the poetry deployed in the film was written by a younger generation of Vietnamese who never experienced the war, their voices sustaining a different history than the government. Responding to questions about the formal strategies of so much written text layered into the film as well the representations of Vietnam, Trinh countered that feminism shows us how to hold both female and male, north and south, authentic and inauthentic together. She explained "instead of identity politics...there is a notion of alliances...you are not outside, you are not inside, you are in-between".

The reclamations of filmmakers who are not regularly programmed in the US and have not received scholarly or critical attention embodied the contradictions imbedded in the concept of future remains, expanding and complicating the position of a singular *eminence grise*. Peter Nestler, a German filmmaker who emigrated to Sweden and is virtually unknown in US film circles beyond a coterie of specialized museum programmers, was featured. His highly conceptualized and rigorous works such as *Fos-Sur-Mer* (1970) about the petrochemical and steel industries were a revelation to many in attendance with their formally rigorous aesthetics and design focused on environments, work, and everyday people.

Although some participants groused that only a limited number of titles from the sixty films he has produced were shown, the screening of *Pachamama-Our Land* (1995) was one of the most important of the seminar. Shot in Ecuador, the ninety-minute documentary engages the indigenous cultures of that country through an ecological framing of music, climate, land, work, African

slaves, farming, and the sacred with long takes and carefully balanced compositions that refuse Orientalizing.

Sana Na N'Hada was one of the most moving featured filmmakers, a committed anti-colonialist revolutionary fighting to preserve cinema in Guinea-Bissau. Speaking in French via a translator, N'Hada explained he had wanted to become a doctor during the revolution, but Amilcar Cabral pushed him to study film at the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Arts and Industries (ICAIC). He screened *The Return of Amílcar Cabral* (1976), a collaborative film produced with Flora Gomes, José Bolama, and Josefina Crato, and another work entitled *Fanado* (1976).

N'Hada was paired with Filipa César, whose epic experimental archival film of cinematic remains in Guinea-Bissau entitled *Spell Reel* (2014) materialized cinematic spectres of colonialism, resistance, and loss. She contended her project was "how to see film as an archaeological site", a place of discontinuities and fragments.

Image 5 : Sana Na N'Hada and Filipa César in conversation. Courtesy of The Flaherty.

In one of the most revealing parts of the discussion, N'Hada outlined how the history of this national cinema is tied to the history of Guinea Bissau's liberation. These revolutionary and committed filmmakers developed a relationship with French filmmaker Chris Marker, who used some of their footage in *Sans Soleil*. He also sent foreign films that the filmmakers in Guinea Bissau could show in ambulant cinemas in communities without electricity. The country still struggles to not only preserve films, but to actually produce

them, the national film institute operating in name only, the remains of an idea.

Juxtaposed against N'Hada's legacy of an anti-colonialist, nation-building cinema of resistance, prolific African American experimental video artist Kevin Jerome Everson (who with Greg De Cuir Jr will program the 2018 seminar) showed hybrid work troubling the borders between documentary, experimental, and fiction that scaled oppression and resistance on the level of the everyday and the vernacular, with titles such as *Eason* (2016), about the Black Migration to Philadelphia; *We Demand* (2016), looking at an African American activist on the University of Virginia campus during the anti-Vietnam War Movement; *Identified Flying Object* (2017), a film about race and Unidentified Flying Objects; and *Tonsler Park* (2016), an eighty-minute work filmed at a polling station during the 2016 US Presidential election.

The Flaherty Seminar programming ethos pushes a programmer to also make a case for emerging voices whose works provide interventions and new directions in the international media landscape, a powerful introduction given the dense conceptual frameworks most recent Flaherty programmers create. "Future Remains" presented several makers that accomplished this goal. Laura Huertas Millán torques the in-between of ethnography, experimentation, and decolonization with works such as *La Libertad* (2017) about the Navarro's textiles which function as archives of Mexican *mestizaje*. *Journey to a Land Otherwise Known* (2011) restages colonialist European accounts of "first contact" in the Americas in the faked jungle of an unspecified European botanical garden.

Eduardo Williams' *The Human Surge* (2016), a transnational film of daily life under globalization in Buenos Aires, Maputo, Mozambique and the Philippines, links these places through a phenomenologically-anchored camera work of hand-held long takes and intimate immersion. *I Forgot* (2014) graphs a sensory cinematic experience of a group of young people who jump between buildings and through windows, the camera a member of the group. Dominic Gagnon, a found footage experimental filmmaker, showed *Du moteur à explosion* (2000), a *tour de force* contemporary invocation of *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929) that cuts deep into the frenzied capitalist mobilities and pathologies of cars, planes, airports, and machines.

Gagnon's *of the North* (2015) screened on a program with pieces by Laura Huertas Millán and Vincent Carelli. Culled from 500 hours of amateur videos posted on YouTube and made by filmmakers across the Arctic, the film—and Gagnon—have been ensconced in a deepening vortex of controversy about the

appropriation of indigenous images and the representation of indigenous peoples of the North.

The seminar's post-screening discussion engaged those controversies, with many Canadian scholars and programmers in attendance questioning why the film was shown when many Canadian festivals had pulled the film after questions and vigorous critiques raised by indigenous activists, artists, and media makers. Several participants raised issues of the histories of genocide in Canada and white privilege. Pablo de Ocampo, a programmer from Vancouver, offered a powerful intervention that the images in the film, some of which show indigenous people drinking, vomiting, and in sexualized poses, perpetuate colonial racism and genocide of indigenous people in Canada.

A pugnacious narcissist, Gagnon defended his practice by proclaiming "I am really scared about what is going on in the development of the North". The film is as much about the indigenous peoples of the north as it is about ecological destruction. Since the film screened at the seminar, Canadian documentary scholar Thomas Waugh has launched a campaign on the Visible Evidence listserv (for scholars of documentary) demanding that the Flaherty Seminar issue an apology for screening the film. The discussion was the most lengthy of the seminar, with many participants upset about the questions of appropriation and representation. Some participants such as John Gianvito, a well-known filmmaker and programmer, raised a more meta-conceptual issue of documentary ethics in the digital age when an image made is an image circulated and remixed. Problematically, Gagnon dominated the discussion, virtually silencing Carelli and Millán.

Although many might remember or hear rumors about this seminar as the one destroyed by an incendiary screening and discussion of *of the North* which catapulted participants and the Flaherty Seminar team into ethical and political convulsions, it would be unfair to reduce Lisboa's wide-ranging and complex program to this one session. The debates the film provokes have been on-going for over a year, and will continue. These are important debates as the world deals with genocides, indigenous rights, land claims, and climate change. For readers with interests in knowing more about the details of this debate, the best analysis of the film and its context is written by Michelle Stewart in *Film Quarterly*[2].

The "Future Remains" program in fact investigated a series of transversals, openings, and closings, with filmmakers moving within, beyond, and in-between cultures and different strategies, which might have provoked participants' critique of excessive

[2] Michelle Stewart, "Of Digital selves and Digital Sovereignty: *Of the North*", *Film Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 4, Summer 2017, pp. 23-38.

ethnography, not quite grounded and most likely a reductionist definition. The most powerful and dynamic sessions opened space to think these issues through, such as discussion following Carelli's epic *Martírio* (2016), a 162-minute activist documentary epic following the violence against the Guarani-Kaiowa's struggle to reclaim their lands in Brazil.

The seminar always seems to incite a meta-critique of its very operations, with participants analyzing the programming, the discussion format, the featured filmmakers, the topics in discussions, the board, its history, the films, and even other participants. In this way, the seminar seems to unleash both responses to films and analysis of its own operations, perhaps an indication of how it mobilizes a vigorous self-reflexivity about media practices.

One of the problems continuing confronting the seminar resides in the textures of the discussions, often seen as central to the "Flaherty communal process" but usually criticized by participants and board members alike as unsatisfactory, incomplete, problematic, unfocused, pathologized.

Participants react to a film they have only seen once on an intuitive, unprocessed level, anathema to any screen studies scholar trained in theory, history, decoupage, multiple viewings, and mappings. Some react emotionally, others overtheorize in painfully abstract ways in mixed-up global art world jargon often ungrounded in concrete details, patterns, or coherency. To be fair, despite their failings, these discussions offer a welcome respite from the intellectually-polished, deeply-researched presentations at academic screen studies conferences and the superficial promotional post-screening discussions unleashed at film festivals.

However, the discussions frequently default to a problematic formalism about approach and style that ends up stripping away historical, social, and institutional contexts. Despite decades of screen studies scholarly critiques of auteurism, the Flaherty Seminar seems most comfortable with auteurs and what they have to say. Yet, the fantasized democracy of the seminar often reroutes discussion away from the makers, many of whom most participants would never have a chance to encounter elsewhere. This scenario robs the audience of the chance to hear how the maker actually thinks and how she or he might explain the larger contexts of their work. Some of the most illuminating moments arose when filmmakers like Carelli and N'Hada could share the historical, national, and economic contexts of their work, explaining and situating these practices with far more nuance than the fake film theory and overwrought art theory often invoked by the audience.

The seminar ended with a large group discussion on Friday morning, breaking tradition by not ending with a closing film. The intense debates about race, representation, politics, genocide, ethics,

white privilege, and power continued. In the new world redefined by post-Brexit, the Trump election, and continuing refugee crises, these debates unfurl as future remains in every sense of this compound.

If this was the Flaherty Seminar that did not screen at Flaherty film, it was also the seminar that ended by conjuring the spirit of Frances Flaherty at its very end. This last gathering brought a disparate, heterogeneous, angry, agitated, isolated, committed, and passionate group of participants together for coffee, collective spirit, and a discussion that probably can never be finished.