

CONFLICTING TRUTHS

AKEEM SMITH *views* Nick August-Perna



TELL THEM YOU LOVE ME, 2024



I watch movies, documentaries especially, for a lot of different reasons. I may be interested in a particular topic or filmmaker, just passing time on a long flight, or looking for technical inspiration when I'm starting a new project.

I am drawn to creative work that provokes expansive conversations, that offers layers of form and meaning, that rewards every bit of attention a viewer is willing to invest. I have now seen *Tell Them You Love Me*, Nick August-Perna's outstanding 2024 Netflix documentary, three times, yet I doubt that I am done with it.

A single logline can hardly do it justice: "Tenured philosophy professor and disability advocate crosses ethical and legal lines in sexualizing a therapeutic relationship with a nonverbal adult with cerebral palsy." Oh, and the professor is over 10 years older than the subject. That professor is a woman, while the vulnerable adult is a man. She's white; he's Black. She's married with two kids; he lives in a devoutly Christian household with his mother and brother. She's convicted of a crime; two years into a prison sentence, her

conviction is overturned. No one is depicted as consciously ill-intentioned.

All of the spoilers in the world could only add interest. Told with exquisite restraint, the exposition is paced masterfully. Still, none of that is what grips me most.

Another way to describe *Tell Them You Love Me* is as a case study of facilitated communication (FC), a controversial technique for working with people with developmental disabilities. Of the entire kaleidoscope of human and cultural themes that make this movie so compelling, I was most unfamiliar with FC, which involves an able-bodied person physically supporting a nonverbal person who otherwise would be unable to use a keyboard or similar device to spell out messages.

The idea of being a facilitator for a person, or community, resonates with the part of my artistic practice in which I act as an unconventional archivist. I often create work using rare original materials from the dancehall scene in Kingston, Jamaica, that I've gathered and preserved. While I do have a direct family connection to the people and place I'm drawing on, this work I have

collected, at least in its original form, does not represent my point of view.

As a storyteller myself, the decisions I make about my pieces articulate ideas I consider significant. At the same time, I know I'm in a position of trust regarding the physical artifacts in my possession: to preserve the spirit in which they were created, and that of the people who made them, their original authorship needs to be respected.

Tell Them You Love Me has given me an extended vocabulary and conceptual framework to revisit the moral and ethical issues that arise in my practice. The film makes a strong case for FC practitioners as lacking in malice, convinced they're helping the people they serve. However, there's also evidence that FC is a deeply flawed methodology with great potential for inadvertent harm.

As an artist, I don't pretend to be a social scientist or historian, but thanks to this film, I'm re-examining what I create through the lens of a facilitator. This enables me to embrace art open to multiple conflicting truths, to awaken to the tensions between individual perceptions and external realities.