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**David James Savarese (Producer) & Robert Rooy (Director, Producer) (2017).
Deej. United States: Rooy Media, LLC and Independent Television Service (ITVS).
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‘Deej’ is a documentary film directed by Robert Rooy, co-produced with Dj Savarese, and an installment in season 5 of PBS’s America ReFramed series. The film has been awarded numerous accolades, including a 2017 Peabody Award. ‘Deej’ follows Dj Savarese, a non-speaking autistic activist, during his transition from high school in Grinnell, Iowa to college at Oberlin in Ohio.

However, this film is not actually about Savarese’s transition. It is a film which throws popular assumptions about non-speaking autistics’ capacities into sharp relief-- exposing viewers to their biases and preconceptions-- challenging audiences to reframe what they think they know about people which society has labeled 'unincludeable'. The narrative of the college transition carries forward in tension with the Savarese’s activist ideals. Like dueling pianos, Rooy’s original vision for a biopic is expertly overcome by Savarese’s “fresh thinking” and non-compliant determination to tell a different story.

This tension comes to the foreground during Savarese and Rooy’s first in-person conversation: “You plot to get my people free?” Savarese asks, expectantly tapping on his AAC device. Rooy answers, explaining his intention to show other people how Savarese lives and “what it’s like” to be him and how to “take advantage” of non-speaking autistic people’s “special qualities and gifts.”

“Yes, but really freeing my people is as important.”

And Savarese has done work to “help the other kids”. Though it is omitted from the main film, in the special features, viewers can learn about Savarese’s work empowering other non-speaking autistic people to gain literacy skills and begin communicating with AAC. His direct and tireless activism is one of the aspects of Savarese’s life that most profoundly challenges dominant narratives of non-speaking autistic existence.

The film is punctuated by animated renditions, beautifully crafted by Em Cooper, of some of Savarese’s poetry. Within these, Savarese illuminates yet more tensions-- tensions between the senses, between disability pride and pain, tension as the potential of intersectional solidarities, between race and oppression, between trauma and heritage, tension as energy-- “greenlight.” With these poems, Savarese provokes the limits of narrative. In these vignettes, we are given “what it’s like” to be Savarese without the contamination of voyeurism.

Savarese puts forth some obstinate resistance to Rooy’s desire to focus on his matriculation into Oberlin College. Some viewers may wonder if it is because Savarese was experiencing anxiety about his potential success, or self-consciousness about his mother coming to Oberlin to support him. I wonder if this act of non-compliance was more complex than that-- an assertion that this film was not to be about Savarese’s exceptionalism, but about what efforts are required of society to set our people free.

Once allowed to film at Oberlin, Rooy attempts again to construct the common burden narrative. The Savarese family does indeed put forth extra effort to support his dream of attending Oberlin, but they defy expectations of struggle and sacrifice. “My dad once said, ‘You have as much right to dream as anyone. Don’t apologize for the additional efforts required.’” The Savarese family knows that great parents do not make sacrifices, they make autonomous

decisions to love and support unconditionally. It may seem as though I have been unfair to Rooy. In truth, this film is a testament to Rooy's eventual enlightenment-- and the enlightenment possible to all people who learn to listen to those who communicate differently.

Savarese highlights the common binarist trap of being a non-speaking autistic with access to communication. "... the world outside greets me either as a hopeful exception or as a real burden to society." In showing Savarese's interactions with his classmates, teachers, family, and support workers, hopefully, it is clear to viewers that Savarese is neither a burden nor an exception. Indeed, the most exceptional thing about Savarese is his luck that he has been surrounded by the exuberant and welcoming inclusion all people deserve. But "Inclusion shouldn't be a lottery."

And what is the nature of this lottery? I wish the filmmakers had taken more time to elucidate this metaphor. With each privilege, a ticket in our name is added to the pot and with each disadvantage, a ticket is taken away. There was a missed opportunity to acknowledge what it takes to win this lottery, how it is shaped by intersections of race and class, and what it would take to tear down the lottery for good.

Savarese often writes about "a new way of being hopeful" for a "life of full inclusion." Alicia Broderick has written about the politics of hope, and the implicit erasure of disabled embodiment embedded in narratives of hope as recovery (Broderick, 2009). But this is not the hope 'Deej' offers. I don't mean to imply that Savarese's conceptualizations of hope and inclusion are more pure or wholesome than the skepticism offered by disability studies scholars. To say so would be patronizing, inaccurate, and unbecoming. Savarese reclaims the meaning of 'hope' and defies neoliberal imaginings of 'inclusion' as assimilation. He "looks good... and

autistic.” ‘Deej’ offers us a vision of a full-bodied hopefulness and inclusion as unconditional belonging for all of our unruly, uncanny, unreasonable people.

References:

Broderick, A. A. (2009). Autism, “recovery (to normalcy)”, and the politics of hope. *Intellectual and developmental disabilities*, 47(4), 263-281.