

# REVISING MOVES

*Writing Stories of (Re)making*

EDITED BY  
CHRISTINA M. LAVECCHIA,  
ALLISON D. CARR,  
LAURA R. MICCICHE,  
HANNAH J. RULE,  
AND JAYNE E. O. STONE

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### CONSULTING EDITOR TO THE RESCUE *Seeing Storytelling Anew through Veteran Eyes*

Alexandra Hidalgo

Sometimes you live with a story for so long you lose track of where it ends and where you begin. Like in those rare marriages that last numerous decades, the boundaries between two separate entities blur to engender a wondrous hybrid creature. Instead of two people building a life together, however, it's a person and a story. Human and fact. Human and fiction. My story and I met when I was six years old, and we have never spent a day apart since. We love and frustrate each other. We cradle each other's vulnerabilities and face our incapacitating fears together. In this chapter, I share the tale of how feedback from collaborators and audience members helped me revise my story, iteration after iteration, until together we found its heart. But first, let me introduce you to my story so you can feel invested in its transformation.

My story starts with a disappearance, a mystery I've been slowly unraveling since 1983, when my father, Miguel Hidalgo, vanished in the Venezuelan Amazon. As if a disappearing father wasn't intriguing enough, mine was as colorful a paternal character as you could ask for: a writer, mountain climber, philosopher, inventor, genius-IQ MIT graduate, fifth-*dan* karate black belt with a romantic heart and a genuine belief in magic. And that was just the surface of Dad. As decades of my research revealed, underneath it was an even more captivating and baffling person, who'd left a trail of secrets and lies as long as the novel he labored over for a decade—the one they found in a hotel room after he vanished, finally completed.

My story masqueraded as a thriller, a detective novel in which a despondent child grew up assembling clues as she investigated what became of the father she adored. My story lulled me into the relative simplicity of that kind of fact-based search. It tricked me with its straightforward surface into examining something much more daunting. My story forced me to face the fragility of life: not just the fragility of

keeping our hearts beating and our brains thinking but of our identities and beliefs about ourselves and our ancestors. My story took me to the abyss of who I thought I was and the family I thought I came from. Once there, it asked me to jump, promising my wings would emerge before we hit the ground, and if they didn't . . . well, at least we'd crash in pursuit of truths that make for a life well lived.

My wings did emerge, but not in the way I thought they would. They did not come from me or my story but from those who helped me tell it. Stories must be told, and I've been telling this one for thirty-nine of the forty-five years I've spent on this Earth. From fiction to memoir to video essay to book chapter to the kind of dinner conversation that makes everyone—spellbound by your words—forget to eat, I have told my story. Yet none of those iterations captured the rich, messy essence of what I wanted to say. My story remained slippery as I retold it in every medium at my disposal. In 2016, I decided to tell it as a feature documentary, but even with three cameras and five mics pointed at her, my story continued to run circles around me.

Exhausted from the chase, I sought help in the form of an editor. Not the kind of editor who works with words, but the kind who works with footage. On December 23, 2017, thirty-four years to the day since my father was last seen, I had a Skype call with Venezuelan editor Cristina Carrasco. Cristina's films have screened at Cannes Semaine de la Critique, Montreal, and Mannheim, but that's not why I decided to work with her. In their cowritten piece in this collection, Dana Comi writes that Alisa Russell's feedback on Comi's work "clicked" and "resonated" and helped her see "how to keep moving forward with the project" (111). Some people get you and what you're trying to do, and those are the ones you want to work with. Within minutes, I could sense that Cristina and I got each other and that she wanted to probe life's brittleness with this film. She was generously willing to probe her own wounds to help me weave a tale around mine.

My father is the rule, not the exception, in a family populated by generations of writers and artists who lead the kinds of passionate lives one *must* write novels and make films about. Cristina and I labored on and off for a year and a half after that call, watching and rewatching over two hundred hours of footage covering a century of my family's fabulously contorted history. Because my dad is missing, in the film we draw from a disparate array of materials woven together through my narration. We have home videos my husband, Nathaniel Bowler (the film's director of photography), shot of our 2004 trip to the Venezuelan Amazon to interview those who last saw him. We filmed present-day conversations with

Dad's family and friends in the US, Venezuela, and Portugal. Finally, Dad is present through photographs, Super 8 footage, and his voice on a tape recorded in 1977.

Cristina and I had intricate conversations about how to turn these knotted strands into a ninety-minute film. From the start, Cristina thought we should tell a personal story, but for practical reasons we went in a different direction. Documentary filmmaking is expensive. In his chapter in this collection, Rich Shivener examines the frustrations that come with creating digital texts. He writes, "Every time I look up tutorials and ideas for creating, my head starts spinning. I simply don't have time or energy to dwell in a code editor" (100). Having to come up with your project's content while also crafting yourself that content's digital home is an exhausting process. My solution to that challenge has been to become a savvy grant writer who gets funding to hire collaborators to contribute by performing the tasks I am not trained in or gifted at doing myself. However, grant writing is its own time-consuming and mysterious world, and sometimes chasing the money can mean sacrificing aspects of your vision so you can (ironically) afford to bring that vision to life.

I'd cobbled together enough grants and research funds to pay for filming and editing, but we needed to cover costly postproduction tasks, like color correction, sound mixing, and composing the score. My plan was to apply for grants to raise the remainder of the financing. However, American granting agencies have a predilection for social justice documentaries, and my US film mentors warned me that, unless I could make my film political, I was unlikely to attract funding. After withstanding a two-decade economic and governmental crisis, my homeland of Venezuela seemed like an ideal social justice topic, but my family comes from the Venezuelan aristocracy and has consequently avoided the cataclysm's most crippling effects. Moreover, Dad vanished long before this particular crisis began.

Cristina and I used every trick in our storytelling bags to intertwine Venezuela with my father, only to be told by focus group audiences and the very granting agencies we aimed to impress that the film's topics were irreconcilably divided. Not all granting agencies provide feedback, but we hung on the words of those who did, revising draft after draft to fix the issues they'd pointed out and getting further and further away from the story's natural strengths. The more we revised to add the political angle to the film, the more the other elements—the compelling, heartfelt ones—hung loosely to the sides with little to unify them. The wing Cristina had helped me grow flapped hopelessly as the ground neared. Frustrated by rejection, I finally heeded Cristina's

advice to make a personal film. Maybe no one would want to fund it because it wasn't political enough, but they weren't funding the current version either.

In the spring of 2020, we removed the Venezuelan crisis and used that new rough cut to invite Venezuelan producer extraordinaire Natalia Machado to join the project. Once she did, she suggested we bring in a consulting editor. The latter are common in the film industry, particularly for personal projects like mine. As with any memoir project, it's hard for directors to find enough distance from the memories and events we see through the intimate lens of our experiences to know what will engage those who haven't also lived through them. Not only is it difficult to discern which stories will resonate without the emotional context we bring to them, but the amount of material—our lives, the lives of our family, friends, lovers—is staggering. An editor brings objectivity to the creative team. However, after working on multiple drafts and getting to know the director as closely as Cristina and I have gotten to know each other, they too lose the outsider perspective they had when they joined the project. Consulting editors come in when you have a solid draft, and they have no attachment to scenes, characters, or storylines. They are usually veteran editors, bringing decades of expertise and a sense of impartiality they use to suggest new avenues for reshaping the film.

Natalia suggested a few consulting editors she'd worked with, but I only wanted Chilean editing legend Andrea Chignoli. Andrea's films have screened at Cannes, Venice, Sundance, and Toronto. Her 2012 film *No!* was nominated for an Academy Award. Her characters are passionate, courageous, and irreverent, brimming with heart in worlds where heartlessness prevails. Her characters are what my story and I were hoping to become, onscreen and off-. The question was whether she'd agree to work with us. Natalia sent her our rough cut, and when Andrea told us she wanted to meet, I could feel my second wing beginning to sprout.

Over Zoom, Andrea was as warm and perspicacious as my story and I had imagined she'd be. She asked how willing I was to revise the film, and I explained I'd been telling this story for almost four decades. I wanted to be done, but not until I'd captured its essence. If that was the case, she replied, she'd be happy to work with us. We would have five sessions spread over months. She would watch a draft, provide ideas that she, Cristina, and I would discuss over Zoom, and then Cristina and I would work on implementing those ideas. We'd send her our new draft and restart the process. Between the third and fourth meetings, we'd have focus group screenings to determine which areas needed to be reworked. We'd use the last two meetings to make those revisions.

In this essay, I analyze how Cristina's and my collaboration with Andrea transformed our film and how my desperately needed second wing grew out of it. For the sake of focus, I only discuss a fraction of the revisions we've undertaken with her. I draw from my detailed notes of conversations with Cristina and Andrea (which, with their approval, I translated from Spanish to English), from their written suggestions, and from the film's focus-group screening audience members' feedback, to whom I refer by their first names for privacy reasons.

And now, my story and I invite you to join us in this tale of discovery, revision, and metamorphosis and of how brilliant, thoughtful collaborators can revolutionize our work and our lives.

### ENTER THE PREMISE

The question Cristina tried to help me answer from the start was how to articulate the film's theme—the idea pulsating beneath every good story that ties it to shared human experience. It's harder to pin down than the thesis in an academic piece because, unlike a thesis, it isn't directly stated. Here's documentary producer and writer Ronald B. Tobias working toward a definition: “We prefer order to disorder in fiction. We prefer logic to chaos. Most of all, we prefer unity of purpose, which creates a *whole*. Wouldn't life be great if it contained nothing extraneous or coincidental, if everything that happened to us related to a main purpose?” (1993, 17). My film had a sense of purpose—I wanted to figure out what became of my father. However, that quest has to be about something deeper that resonates with viewers (most of our audience) whose fathers haven't vanished.

As film, TV, and fiction writer and script consultant Billy Mernit argues, “pausing to think about what *you* are bringing to this kind of story in terms of a personal, passionate, even provocative point of view becomes a way to enliven and deepen your storytelling choices” (2020, 165). Mernit states that one of the most pervasive definitions of that “point of view” comes from playwright and writer Lajos Egri, whose 1942 treatise on playwriting has been influential in the film industry. Even though Egri's views on women and his staunch predilection for drama over anything lighthearted are woefully outdated, his concept of the “premise” remains useful. He writes, “Every good play must have a well-formulated premise. There may be more than one way to phrase the premise, but, however it is phrased, the thought must be the same” (Egri 2009, 7). Premises should be simple and should make a value statement. Instead of making a film about love, for example, you need to say something about love.

Egri explains that if your story uses a premise like “Great love defies even death” (2009, 15), that belief must be your personal conviction: “You should believe in it, since you are to prove it. You must show conclusively that life is worthless without the loved one” (2009, 15).

I believe many things about my story, but trying to articulate them into a sentence proved onerous. Like a freshman altering margins and font sizes to reach the required word count, I relied on commas and em dashes to fit multiple sentences into one when composing my premise. I fooled no one. At our May 2019 focus group screening, my poor attendees struggled when asked what the film was about. At all my screenings, I ask questions but only listen as attendees talk to each other, letting them linger in the weeds, to determine how tangled those weeds are. The May 2019 attendees agreed that my search for my father was the plot. As Kara pointed out, though, “That’s not what it’s about.” Yet, they couldn’t decipher the premise. For John, it was that “everything self-destructs.” For Cait, it was how my mother “picked up the pieces and built a life for you.” Jessica said we were “looking at Venezuela through the lens of your father’s story.” Safoi added, “The story is about a child who is looking for closure.” In this collection, Karen R. Tellez-Trujillo discusses the “anxiety, stress, panic” that comes with attempting to get our creations into the world. She tells us, “It would take many years before I would figure out a formula for enduring encounters with failure and exhaustion that are inextricably tied to work” (206). The coping formula I’ve personally developed entails digesting and interpreting feedback with my collaborators. Cristina and my husband, Nate, have been my tireless support systems as we process audience comments and imagine ways to fix what is still not working. Having the right company can take the sting out of learning that our best efforts—*yet again*—fell short.

Our audience had diagnosed a dilemma we needed to address. We tried removing the Venezuelan crisis, then hosted focus group screenings in June 2020. Because of COVID, I collected feedback in writing instead of in person. In response to “What is the film about?” Marian answered, “A whole lot of things!” She mentioned ten topics, ranging from “migration, inclusion, and exclusion,” to “a family house with a long history,” to “relationships between fascinating women within a family.” Tarez summed it up, “I don’t mind the dual (or multiple) foci, but if there is intended to be a principal focus, I’m not sure I would guess the correct one.” I could picture Egri, so severe in his black-and-white portraits, shaking his head at my story and me. A premise we had not.

At our first official meeting with Andrea in September 2020, she asked me what *I* thought the film was about. I stammered, then

delivered a jumble of ideas. She said she couldn't find the film's premise either but that "what stands out the most is the relationship between lies and storytelling." Since explorations of love and its sundry complexities are the undercurrent that runs through my artistic work, I was taken aback. The word *love* was nowhere in what she'd seen. As the meeting unfolded and we discussed possibilities with Cristina, however, a premise began to materialize.

After bouncing ideas around for two hours, Andrea summed up our new direction: "We need to open the curtain and reveal the truths hidden by Alex's childhood infatuation with her father, as well as by his lies, which made it so challenging to really know him." Because this is a family saga, we explored how my father's upbringing caused him to disguise himself from those who loved him. Andrea went on,

The common denominator is a very creative family that tells stories. Sometimes they go too far and the stories become lies. The film's ideology is that we have to put the lies in the lie box and the truth in the truth box.

I added one vital component: "We reveal the truth in order to heal the wounds that lies have caused. When we unearth the lies, we do it with love, and we digest their aftermath with love."

Yes, we still had several sentences, but they were all, for once, interconnected around one topic. Andrea said she would cut a new draft with these ideas in mind for our next meeting and suggested we read Umberto Eco's *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* and Adrienne Rich's "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying" for inspiration about how to portray the relationship between lying and storytelling. I consumed Eco and Rich's words ravenously. As I digested them over my daily walks in the nonfictional woods near my house, I could feel my story's essence coming closer, its steps mirroring mine over the crinkling fall leaves.

In her new draft, Andrea deleted scenes and moved sequences around, but the real transmutation occurred in the title cards she added throughout the draft, with ideas for narrations I could write. When we met to discuss the new cut, she explained, "You need to give audiences a filter through which to watch the film, a point of view they can follow from the beginning." Her narration suggestions invited me to engage with the film's events to explore the relationship between lying and storytelling. It was seemingly simple—and yet so powerful. It was Egri's premise in all its glory.

One danger we had to skirt was showing me in too positive a light in comparison to Dad. As Cristina explained, "Alex has to be implicated in the lies. We can't have a dichotomy between the lying father and the



honest daughter.” The problem was that while my father was a consummate liar, I—perhaps in response to his deceit—lead a truthful existence.

But was I always truthful? Over Zoom, I shared these lines from Rich’s essay with Cristina and Andrea, “What is the particular fear that possesses the liar? She is afraid that her truths are not good enough” (2001, 191). I felt that my truths were good enough in my actual life, but I couldn’t find a premise for my documentary because I was afraid of the wounds the film might expose. Moreover, my story and I had lived together for so long that I was no longer sure how much of what I knew about Dad was mere conjecture I derived from distant memories and from conflicting information I learned from family and friends.

As Eco argues, in childhood we use make-believe to practice our reactions to real situations we may face, then “it is through fiction that we adults train our ability to structure our past and present experience” (2001, 131). While this strategy helps create a semblance of order in a chaotic world, Eco ponders, “if narrative activity is so closely linked to our everyday life, couldn’t it be that we interpret life as fiction, and that in interpreting reality we introduce fictional elements?” (2001, 131). As the meeting ended, I knew that my journey in the film was not only discovering what became of my father but accepting that having grown up surrounded by storytellers with a penchant for dishonesty, I had a slippery relationship with truth which we could explore in the documentary.

As the meeting closed, we found our premise: “In order to heal generational traumas we need to uncover our family’s lies and mythologies, facing them with love and compassion.” Days later, the documentary’s title, so elusive until then, came to me: *A Family of Stories*.

#### OUR NARRATOR FINDS HER VOICE

Now that we had a premise and a title, we needed to tackle the film’s other key weakness. My narration, the string that wove the story together, had been a constant source of worry. At the May 2019 focus group, John said my narration “feels very written and not spontaneous and from the heart. I feel like there’s a barrier between the narrator and the viewer.” Hannah described it as “somewhere between detached and sad.” The June 2020 draft was no better. Fiona wrote, “The lowkey, flat voiceover underplays the mystery.” I had to fix the prose and the detachment evident in the writing and my performance.

I tackled Andrea’s dozen narration suggestions one by one. After the scene where I showed my father’s published writing to my children, she wrote, “Develop the idea that you are a family of writers. You have

a storytelling gene that gets inherited from generation to generation.” When I solve the mystery of what became of my father, “talk about the feeling of getting to the truth after having encountered so many layers of lies.” My lightning-speed typing fingers were not quick enough for the words that kept pouring out. My story, my lifelong companion, was finally unveiling her darkness and beauty.

One of the issues I addressed in rewriting the narration was how to present my character as multifaceted and engaging. As the one taking us on the journey, I am the film’s protagonist, but we struggled with what to share about me beyond my paternal search. In the draft we originally sent to Andrea, we had inserted a narration that basically shared my bio with viewers:

I moved to the U.S. at 16 with my mom and my stepfather. When I was in college, they decided to go back and I stayed. I got married. I had two little boys. I got a PhD in English, and I became a professor at Michigan State University in East Lansing, where I still live. I have a happy, satisfying, beautiful life, but I still think about my father every day.

Because we had no clear premise, the bio felt like unnecessary exposition that tried (and failed) to get the audience to care about me as a character. Andrea’s suggestion was that events from my past should only be revealed when they helped deepen my relationship to the film’s lying and storytelling themes. As a result, I set up my discovery that my father lied about his educational accomplishments this way:

Since childhood, I tried to live up to Dad’s intellectual triumphs. But no matter what I did, I felt like I couldn’t match my MIT-graduate father with the prodigious brain for the arts *and* the sciences. His accomplishments pushed me. Not only to keep climbing the academic ladder but to study what would help me understand him. I gravitated toward history and philosophy in college to learn how to research my dad. But then I got an MFA in Creative Writing and a PhD in English because I realized that learning facts about him was not enough. I needed to invent a narrative to make sense of the enigmas he left behind.

Tying my educational choices and achievements to my need to tell my father’s story and match his success deepens our exploration of the film’s premise. It additionally shows how discovering he lied about his education forced me to question my lifelong drive to excel. It sets me up as a character navigating a major conflict around the core of my identity, which elicits empathy from viewers who have similarly had to rethink the foundations of their lives.

For the first time, performing these words felt easy and natural. They were lyrical yet conversational. When we shared the new draft with

audiences in June 2021, they raved about the narration. Chrystel wrote, “The narration is beautiful and poetic.” For Jeanetta, “the juxtaposition between the poetic narrator and the raw person searching for understanding was really impactful.” Julia added, “The narration was all beautiful and made me feel hopeful.” Elle wrote that she loved “Alexandra’s poetic narration, the unspooling of truths within lies.” My eyes watered as I read their comments. My story, with Cristina and Andrea’s help, had given me the voice I’d always longed to have when engaging with the world.

### FINE CUTS ARE DELICATE CREATURES

I had a voice now, but did it get the film’s premise across? The answer was a resounding yes. When asked what the film was about, Jeanetta wrote, “I think the film is about a daughter demystifying a story that had defined her—and in doing so, achieving some closure/understanding of her father, herself, and her family.” For Sophie, “truth is the stories we tell ourselves and others.” Elle wrote, “The stories we tell ourselves, family mythologies, a daughter’s search for tangible facts, sorting tangible facts from a father’s fantasies and lies.” For Maren, the film was about “a family coming to terms with its various complicated mythologies and truths and how those stories have, in fact, impacted their lives and identities.” Mr. Egri, we have a premise.

Andrea, Cristina, and I celebrated, then brainstormed solutions to the remaining problems. The first act was slow, and the person who revealed my father’s fate appeared as a *deus ex machina*, causing the climax to arrive out of nowhere. Andrea made a new cut, rearranging and deleting scenes. One key problem with the first act was that, while it addressed the storytelling and family sides of our premise, it took too long to introduce the lying side by revealing my father had misrepresented his educational accomplishments. It wasn’t until minute 30 that we got to that section. Andrea challenged Cristina and me to instead get to it by minute 20. One key way to make that happen was moving a section that explores my family’s long history of blending stories to the third act, where it would now have new resonance because it appeared after my father’s fondness for lying had been thoroughly explored. Andrea also suggested we set up the climax through my newly discovered narration powers. She then said, “When I read the audience feedback, I was relieved. We’re very close to the end. The new changes have to be very delicate or we’ll destabilize the structure we’ve built. We’re looking at one final edit.”

My story hugged me as I took these words in, afraid of the separation we always knew would come. I suggested another set of focus group

screenings after the new draft to make sure we'd fixed everything, but Andrea said we'd lose ourselves in the endless feedback loop. Instead, we would show it to three people, all of whom had seen it already, and ask if we'd solved the problems. It felt vulnerable not to rely on the plurality of voices that had joined me through this five-year voyage, generously diagnosing *A Family of Stories's* flaws and celebrating its moments of poignancy. Yet, like the friends we encounter on any quest, they'd given us what we needed. It was time to go on alone to the end of our journey.

### TAKING FLIGHT

When you live with a story beginning in childhood, it nests itself in your growing bones, filling your veins with its rhythms. It shapes who you become as an adult, which is why telling it can be so hard. As you reveal its demons and frailties, you're revealing your own. Bringing in collaborators as you manage this strenuous feat will help you unearth your story's secret heart. I think of Eco, Rich, and Egri as collaborators. I think of the dozens of audience members who shared their feedback as collaborators. The collaborators who gave me my wings, however, are Cristina and Andrea. They dug into generations of my family's entanglements and helped me find the core of what my story—and the ancestors from whom I inherited it—can mean to others and to me.

Revision is a painful process. It hurts to hear that the ideas you labored over for hours, if not years, of your life did not come across as you wanted them to. It hurts to be told that you must (yet again!) return to some version of square one if the message you want to deliver is to reach your audience. And yet, if you collaborate with the kinds of editors, coauthors, and feedback providers who help you find the premise—or thesis—of what you're saying and to stay close to it, the pain is only temporary. Once you lick your wounds for a few days or weeks, you get back to work with a renewed sense of purpose and possibility.

Whether you're crafting your dissertation, your first novel, or your tenth theory book, inviting collaborators you trust into your intimate and messy creative process and following their advice as you revise can help you make the kind of work that moves people—to action, to laughter, to tears. As you rely on your collaborators' ideas to leapfrog your own, you realize that you and your story have grown wings. And as your story flies away, you will too—with a renewed sense of who you are and where you want to go, now that you've shared a sliver of your essence with the world.

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