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Norm and the People

By

Jacqueline Wade

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts Integrated Media Arts, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

2022

Thesis Sponsor:

May 23, 2022

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## **Abstract**

*Norm and the People* is a 90-minute hybrid film about the Minister and activist Norman Eddy and the work he and other activists did in Spanish Harlem from the 1940s through his death in 2013. The film is told through interviews, archival photos and videos, reenactments, and puppets. The combination of all these elements brings a complicated story of wealth, privilege, race, religion, and gender to life. Norm Eddy was from a wealthy family in New England. During military service in WWII, Eddy had a spiritual awakening. Returning to New York, he attended Union Theological Seminary in the late 1940s, where he met his wife, Peg. They were both ordained in 1950 and moved to East Harlem to devote themselves to the poor people there. They joined the East Harlem Protestant Parish, which had been organized by three other Union graduates as a kind of social and spiritual experiment. The film explores what all the participants, including the ministers and the community, learned from the experiment.

## **Project Description**

The origin of *Norm and the People* was an installation I did in 2018 at Hunter's Harlem East Gallery. For the installation, I created a nine-foot cross with an altar at its bottom. On the altar were things that represented Catholicism, Santeria, and various Protestant faiths. In researching ministers in the East Harlem community, I ran across the work of the Reverend Norm Eddy and the East Harlem Protestant Parish. I also lived in the community and found out that the Reverend George Calvert, the founding minister of my church, the Church of the Living Hope, was part of the East Harlem Protestant Parish. I had always wondered why Reverend Calvert, who was also white, decided to come to East Harlem. When I learned about his connection to the East Harlem Protestant Parish, I wanted to know more about the work of the organization. This led me to the

story of Norm Eddy, which I found intriguing because of his family background and because he did so much positive activist work. Thus, I began my journey. I interviewed various members of the Eddy family, who gave me access to over 500 family photographs. As part of my research, I also went to the Burke Library, part of Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary, where the Eddy family had donated over 90 boxes of archival material on East Harlem. I began to see how the story of Norm and Peg Eddy and the East Harlem Protestant Parish was intertwined with the larger story of social activism in East Harlem, especially in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. I also had many questions, which I felt the film could answer, including: the relationship between Norm Eddy and the East Harlem community in which he lived and worked; the nature of his activist work; and whether or not Eddy's role was that of a white missionary in a largely non-white community. What was the impact of that? Throughout the film we hear interview subjects, including Felix Leo Campos, Pastor Kim Wright, Fred Davie and Frank Diaz, comment on this.

Stylistically, *Norm and the People* is a hybrid film that uses a range of storytelling methods and media, both documentary and fictional, including: puppets, reenactments, voice-overs, interviews, some verité footage, music, sound, newspaper headlines, archival photographs, and greenscreen compositing. I decided to use puppets because puppets are curious objects that get the interest of the viewer. By transforming everyday reality into the realm of the imagination and the magical, they convey to the viewer a heightened emotional experience. As part of my research for the film, I looked at films that used various methods of animating puppets or other objects. I was also influenced by the work of South African animator William Kentridge. I love

the use of light and shadows in Kentridge's work. I was able to achieve a related effect in the Young Lords section of the film.

I use the theoretical work developed by the French West Indian political philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon in his books *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skins, White Masks* as the framework and lens for the film. *Norm and the People* explores the complexities of race that were involved when Norm Eddy and the other white ministers came into the Black and Brown East Harlem community. I also looked at the spiritual and social theory behind the East Harlem Protestant Parish and Norm Eddy's idea of "Spiritual Coordination."

In terms of its overall structure, while *Norm and the People* roughly follows the chronology of events surrounding Norm Eddy and the East Harlem Protest Parish, there are frequent detours from this strict chronology to explore particular themes or characters.

### **Research Analysis**

This is a film that offers a glimpse into the world of East Harlem from 1947 through the 1980s. This was a time when African Americans were migrating from the South and Puerto Ricans were migrating from Puerto Rico into Spanish Harlem. Twenty-nine subjects were interviewed for the film. Norm Eddy is the connecting thread throughout it all. Norm is a most unlikely person to end up in Spanish Harlem. His ancestors came from Europe as persecuted Puritan emigres ten years after the Mayflower and joined the Plymouth Community. They went on to become some of the more affluent industrial families in Connecticut. They were responsible for creating the industrial giants Stanley Works, Black and Decker, and Fafner Ball Bearing.

However, during WWII, Norm had a mystical vision in the Syrian desert during which he saw all the problems of the world and yet also had a strong experience of love, wonder and unity; he felt driven to share this experience with humanity. After the war was over, he told his mother, an atheist, about his visions. She did not know what to do and referred him to a family friend, a spiritualist who lived on Martha's Vineyard. The spiritualist advised him to read all the world's great religious books, including the Bible, and to select one to follow. Norm chose Congregationalism, which was closest to his Puritan roots. After failed attempts to become a farmer and drifting for a few years, he enrolled at Union Theological Seminary in New York. When he arrived at the East Harlem Protestant Parish as an intern, he met fellow students George (Bill) Webber, Archie Hargrave, and Don Benedict. The East Harlem Protestant Parish was a series of four storefront churches. The community that the parish focused on in Spanish Harlem was between 96<sup>th</sup> and 106<sup>th</sup> Street, from Lexington Avenue to the East. Approximately 80,000 people were part of the parish. Typical to the Congregationalist way, the parish approach was “church in the round,” in which the minister was not the leader, but instead all parishioners were given the opportunity to lead. Clergy of the group ministry took a vow of poverty and had to live in the same neighborhood as the people they served. Each minister also took on an area of responsibility: one would oversee political matters; another worked with the youth; another worked with finance; another worked with housing issues; and another worked with the drug problem. Norm was known for his work in housing, drug abuse, and economic issues. Norm was more hands-on with the community than Bill Webber, who was more the behind-the-scenes fundraiser, and who went on to become President of New York Theological Seminary (where Peg would eventually teach). Norm became the face of the East Harlem Protestant Parish.

The ministers went to East Harlem to transform the people and the neighborhood, through the holy spirit and prayer. Norm and the other East Harlem Protestant Parish ministers believed that, whenever more than two people were gathered, the holy spirit was among them. Norm also believed that the holy spirit always guided him as long as he took time to listen. He called his community organizing work that was led by this guidance “Spiritual Coordination.” Many people from East Harlem saw Norm as a gift to them. Norm went to East Harlem hoping to transform it; he was, in turn, himself transformed.

Frantz Fanon appears throughout the film in the guise of a puppet. Fanon challenged colonialism in books, essays, and poems. His book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, was the staple of many revolutionaries, including the Black Panthers and the Young Lords. Norm and Peg Eddy also read Fanon and were involved with Liberation Theology. I use the Fanon puppet character to address the colonialist aspect of the relationship between the white clergy members of the East Harlem Protestant Parish and the Black and Brown community in which they were located. The clergy members are, in a sense, like missionaries. Tom Webber, Bill Webber's son, said in an interview for the film, "They were like boy scout missionaries."

The Fanon puppet looks at what is going on in the film and refers to it from his lens of colonialism and its effects on Brown and Black people. The more I understood Frantz Fanon, the man and the writer, the more clearly I was able to use the Fanon puppet's reactions to comment on things that occurred in the world of the film. Thus, the Frantz Fanon puppet went from a narrator observer to being a puppet with a critical point of view. As an African American woman, it is a point of view I feel that I am a part of and that I understand.

The world of Spanish Harlem is like the colonial world in Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. The missionaries are from the settler class, the ruling class. In a sense, they indoctrinated the colonized class with their missionary belief system and their white God. Bill Webber, one of the founding clergy members, when he first came to 100<sup>th</sup> Street, counted only a handful of people going to church. According to his son, author Tom Webber, he saw it as a 'Godless street' that had 4000 residents on it. From Webber's perspective, if God did not exist on 100<sup>th</sup> Street, 100<sup>th</sup> Street needed the East Harlem Protestant Parish to bring God to it. The clergy of the East Harlem Protestant Parish never considered that people in this community might already practice a religion or spirituality of their own, either in a church or not in a church setting. One of the subjects in the film, Eva Mendez, speaks passionately about the spiritual faith of her mother, Mildred Ryan Falu Feliciano, who practiced a type of spirituality that Norm and the others knew nothing about.

The missionary system of the white clergy could be seen as another way of oppressing the community of East Harlem. The ministers of the settler class are also the ones who distribute power to the colonized class. For example, Norm Eddy sent a former drug addict to seminary and appointed him to a ministerial position at Resurrection Church. It was Norm's position as a member of the settler class that allowed him to effect this change in another person's life. Even when this power was given over by the white clergy members, the overall systemic problems of identity and respect for the Black and Brown people of the community remained. The film looks at the complexity and nuance of the situation from the position of the colonized people.

Members of the colonized class were also rarely safe and humanely treated when they crossed 96th Street, which is the line that divides the Upper East Side, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in New York, from East Harlem, one of most impoverished neighborhoods. As Tom Webber said, "My Black and Puerto Rican friends in Spanish Harlem would get their butts beat by the police if they dared cross 96<sup>th</sup> Street." However, Tom, growing up white in East Harlem, had no problem crossing that same dividing line.

The white clergy members, while well intentioned, were unable to recognize the colonialist aspect of their presence in East Harlem. Norm never saw himself as a missionary and didn't really seem to understand what might be problematic in his relationship to the community. The film explores the power dynamic at play when "white power" enters Brown and Black spaces. What interested me more than the ministers was the Brown and Black people's opinion of them. They loved their white ministers, yet these same people had little love and trust for their own kind. Their feeling was that if it came from a white person, it was okay. As Pastor Kim Wright said, "People thought they (the white ministers) had the answer." The community was willing to work with them because of the mere fact that they were white-bodied people. There was not the resistance the Black and Brown community might have had with one of their own in leadership. Hiram Maristany expresses this in the film when he states, "People from East Harlem did not like people from East Harlem." The film questions what the missionaries were trying to fix in these Brown and Black bodies, some of whom said they were sleeping before Norm and the others woke them up.

These Black and Brown people want to fit into a white world that does not want them. This relates directly to Frantz Fanon's writings about the self-denial of identity by colonized people. The Fanon puppet is able to contextualize the situation in East Harlem by giving voice to this question of identity and self-hatred in a way that not all the characters in the film are able to do.

Fanon, the puppet, makes Fanon, the anti-colonialist intellectual, easier to understand and digest. At the same time, his presence in the film is deadly serious. He makes us look at what was going on in East Harlem. Things were happening that the real Fanon would have an opinion about, including the idea of an “experiment,” as the Fanon puppet calls it, being conducted by white ministers from Union Theological Seminary on the Black and Brown people of Spanish Harlem.

In addition to the Fanon character, there are a number of other puppets in the film. One of them is the biblical Prophet Amos. Felipe Luciano says in the film that Norm always saw him as Amos, who spoke truth to power among his own people. The film also features a Norm Eddy puppet, depicting him when he was in the service during WWII. The role of this puppet is to embody one aspect of Norm's life. There is also a puppet of a figure from the Young Lords, in which some viewers might find a resemblance to Felipe, cited above. The origin of this puppet is that I was unable to obtain the rights to use a particular photograph of a member of the Young Lords holding up a copy of *Palante*, the group's newspaper. So, I decided to recreate the image with a puppet.

The story of the Young Lords Party and their relationship to Norm Eddy and the East Harlem Protestant Parish is a major aspect of *Norm and the People*. The Young Lords believed in

effecting social change through direct action. The film covers in detail one of their most well-known actions: the take-over of the First Spanish Methodist Church in 1969, with the goal of establishing a People's Church. While the Young Lords' and Norm Eddy's goals were often aligned, the Young Lords pushed harder and took it further. Interestingly, Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* was foundational in the formation of the identity of the Young Lords.

One of the hardest things I experienced in working on this film was finding the through-line of the story. I had access to meetings with the Eddy Family and their hundreds of photos. However, I did not have access to the East Harlem Community. Martha Eddy, the youngest daughter of Norm Eddy, introduced me to community members, including Felix Leo Campos, Frank Diaz, Sandra Cox, and others. The possibility of moving forward with the film began when I said "Yes" to every opportunity. There was a reunion on 100<sup>th</sup> street, and I happened to be available to go. I was unsure if I would get there because I had an interview with Hiram Maristany, the Young Lords photographer. However, by attending the event for about an hour, I was able to get many contacts, and from that meeting, I was able to schedule individual interviews. The stories, almost too many of them, emerged from the interviews, and formed a web, with the connecting thread being each person's experience with Norman Eddy. From the interviews, I was also able to begin to get a sense of the conflicts that were taking place in the community. For example, Eva expressed her unhappiness that a block on 100<sup>th</sup> Street was named Reverends Norm and Peg Eddy Way. She felt that the block should have been named for her mother, Mildred Ryan, who did important work in the neighborhood. Eva said, "My mother was 100<sup>th</sup> Street." For Eva, what made the block naming even more difficult was that the building that her mother was responsible for getting built through the city of New York was on the corner between 100<sup>th</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Street.

Every time Eva came out of her mother's building, she would see the Norm and Peg Eddy Way sign and be reminded that, from her perspective, her mother's legacy wasn't given the respect it deserved. One of the themes the film explores is that, in general, women were not given as much credit as some of the men had been given in the community. This was true for Mildred Ryan. It was also true for Peg Eddy, Norm's wife. She had been an ordained minister, like her husband. She accomplished a great deal during her lifetime. However, her accomplishments were overshadowed by Norm's.

Martha Eddy also introduced me to the work and world of Bruce Davidson. She showed me his photography book, *East 100<sup>th</sup> Street*. Davidson took photos in Spanish Harlem over the course of three years in the late 1960s. The images depict the horrifying, dilapidated housing and tenements that were common in the neighborhood then. There were apartments with no heat or running water, and empty rubble-strewn lots between buildings that often served as playgrounds for children on 100<sup>th</sup> Street. There were pictures in Bruce Davidson's book that showed locations in East Harlem from each interviewee's childhood, including Martha Eddy, who grew up in this poverty too, with her older brother and sister.

In contrast to the pictures of poverty and substandard housing in the Davidson book, there were also photographs of apartments that were clean and beautiful. A community group in East Harlem called The Metro-North Association, of which Norm Eddy was a member, had used Bruce's photos of housing conditions on 100<sup>th</sup> street to help get funding for some of these new houses. Bobby Montessi said in an interview for the film that Norm was responsible for it all. Martha Eddy quotes Mildred Ryan as saying, "He [Norm] woke us up." A number of the people

in the Davidson book are also subjects in *Norm and the People*. Of course, 55 years later, those people are now seniors. Other subjects in the film are children of people in the Davidson book. The photos help to tell the story of the world of which Norm Eddy was a part. In addition to photos from Bruce Davidson's book, the film also uses other archival material, including both images and text from newspapers from the period, and donated photos from other East Harlemites. As a filmmaker, I enjoyed exploring how this archival material could be used to tell the story of Norm Eddy and the 100<sup>th</sup> street community.

### **Thesis Production Process**

When I decided to bring puppets into the production of *Norm and the People*, I had originally intended to work with giant puppets. Since I had never made a large puppet before, working with them was both a conceptual and a technical learning experience. I felt like something interesting was developing when I brought the giant puppets into the reenactment process. However, I also felt that the story needed more development before I could fully incorporate large-scale puppets into it. I started making more miniature puppets and sets, and using them to reenact some of the moments in the takeover of the People's Church by the Young Lords, as recounted to me by Felipe in interviews I did for the film. I would not say that I liked how these miniature puppets looked. Further exploration led me to the idea of armature puppets, which I created with aluminum wire, clay, stick, and padding. This was work I felt I could sink my teeth into. For me, one of the most interesting parts of the process was sculpting the face of each puppet, which imbued each one with a distinctive personality.

In addition to the previously mentioned puppets of Frantz Fanon, Norm in the Army, the Prophet Amos, and a member of the Young Lords, I realized, as the project progressed, that I also needed a puppet of Mildred Ryan and one of Norm as a minister.

I wanted the puppets to be as impactful as possible, so I gave a great deal of consideration to what style of filming I should use with them to create a sense of agency and liveliness. I didn't feel it was necessary for their mouths and eyes to move when they were talking. I felt that just a gesture or glance from a puppet was quite powerful. After some initial experimentation, I decided that, rather than using traditional stop-motion animation, I would "animate" the puppets through simple camera movement and editing choices.

A central thread in *Norm and the People* concerns the takeover of the People's Church by the Young Lords. During the production of the film, I was given only limited access to the church. This led me to build a model of the church to use as a set. As the production continued, I was able to secure an actual church location to film the Young Lords takeover sequences. Even though I didn't use the People's Church model in the film, I did acquire important experience through building it. The model set also gave me a way to practice lighting the actual set.

In addition to the puppets, using actors to make period reenactments was the most creative part of the project for me. While I mainly deal with documentary films, I loved the narrative aspect of this part of the project. After interviewing Felipe, who was a member of the Young Lords, I created a script for the section of the film about the People's Church takeover. I had a group of actors meet me in the Black Box at Hunter, and they did improvisation to embody what was

happening at the People's Church during the takeover. The actors I worked with were Puerto Rican, Dominican, African American, African, and white; some were students and others were professional actors. Many of them knew of the Young Lords, but only in a small way. I had them all do research about the Young Lords, even if they didn't have speaking lines. I wanted them to fully inhabit their characters and the world of the piece. The passion that these young actors brought to their parts was terrific.

The various techniques I use for working with actors through improvisation are influenced by the work of British film and theatre director Mike Leigh. In pre-production, I worked on the script for the scenes with actors, and also created a shot list with potential "blocking," (the movement of the camera and characters through the scene). During the rehearsal process, I gave the actors my script but allowed them to go "off-book," (to improvise their lines based on their understanding of their characters). I also let them pick movement and blocking that felt natural for the character. However, once the blocking and dialogue was fully-worked out and set, that was the way we shot it during the production.

As a way of bringing the history of the Young Lords to life for the actors, I took them on a field trip to the People's Church, so that they could see it and experience it. They even had a chance to meet Felipe. They found Felipe and the People's Church inspirational, and I think that it brought depth to their character reenactments. We filmed some of the scenes from the script both inside and outside the People's Church. I also filmed a number of location details inside the church, including the ceiling, the lights, the cross, the altar, and the organ that plays "Onward Christian Soldiers" during the scene in which Felipe gets beaten down. This historical building was a

place that the community knew well. It was a place that held memories for many of the subjects in the film. For example, Felipe had gone to kindergarten there. The People's Church became an important character in the film.

I wanted the church takeover and subsequent beating of Felipe to feel like a Fellini film. That section of the film has a circus-like, surreal quality to it, in keeping with Felipe's description of the event. The pig masks on the police officers helped with the texture of this scene. It foregrounded the brutality of what happened during the confrontation between the Young Lords and the police, a brutality even more shocking because it took place in a church. This is while the choir sang "Onward Christian Soldiers".

As mentioned above, after a certain point during the production of the film, we no longer had access to the actual People's Church building. At that point, I was able to find a different church to serve as a substitute location to finish the filming. From this experience, I learned how to be flexible and make creative decisions when the circumstances of production change.

Other important filming locations for *Norm and the People* include: a church on West 86<sup>th</sup> Street that we used to represent a wealthy church to which Norm went to get money to support the work of the East Harlem Protest Parish; various locations on 100<sup>th</sup> Street that became places for the reenactment of the older Norm Eddy character; and the Union Theological Seminary, to which we were given full access for filming, was used for scenes with the young Norm Eddy.

In the middle of all this filming, the pandemic came. The last people I filmed were Tom Webber, who I filmed in front of a blue screen in the Hunter TV studio, and Charlie Beitz, who played the older Norm Eddy, walking the streets of East Harlem, as well as images of some of the extras on 100<sup>th</sup> Street and First Avenue, and along Third Avenue. I feel blessed that I could get so much filmed prior to the pandemic, including the interviews for the film. Unfortunately, several individuals who were interviewed have passed on. My husband, Lucien George Sr. also passed away due to Covid-19 during that time. It was a dark season for me when the pandemic began. However, I have been able to see my way out of the darkness and continue working on the film.

Making *Norm and the People* taught me a great deal about spirituality. By spirituality, I mean that some people, including Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King, are spiritual beings, who are perhaps sent to earth to teach the rest of us lessons. I think Norm Eddy was that type of person. Norm came here with a purpose. Everyone who knew him knew that there was something special about him, and he affected so many people's lives. I only had the opportunity to meet Norm Eddy once, for perhaps less than five minutes. However, I still remember his presence. There was something exceptional and kind about this man. As I worked through the process of making this film, I would sometimes get stuck and be uncertain about how to move forward. I would ask the ancestor Norm Eddy, and I would get an answer.

This film has been a massive undertaking on so many levels. For the reenactments, I had to deal with multiple filming locations, each with multiple actors. I conducted numerous interviews in many locations, including several locations outside of New York. I also had to design, create, and animate the puppets.

During the post-production process, I had to figure out how to organize the tremendous amount of footage generated during shooting, and how to order it into a coherent whole. As part of the editing process, it was important to me that the interviews not simply be talking heads, but that the viewpoints of the interviews be in conversation with each other, agreeing or disagreeing at different points.

The story that I was telling in *Norm and the People* evolved during the making of the film and it may not be the story that I had first imagined. The editing of the film has been a process of taking away material, until every image serves a purpose. In so doing, I was left with just the essence of the story, like a haiku. It has been a long process of letting the film material find its way. Some believe that puppets themselves are powerful beings that help direct things. Perhaps this is what happened during the making of my film. When I look at my puppets, their eyes are piercing and they speak volumes. I now understand why the puppet who narrates the film is Frantz Fanon. This is a world that Fanon would understand. It is a world going through many phases, from old colonial ways to new ways of understanding one's power and identity. The film leaves us with questions about people's access to housing today, and how injustice continues.

What I learned most about during this process was patience. I learned that I must take my time with a project like this and that answers will come. There were so many moving parts in constructing the film, and at times Norm seemed bigger than life. I know sometimes I felt incredibly overwhelmed by the entire project. However, I believe I grew as an artist and as a person. I continually ask God to guide me and this film, and that those who watch it get

something from it. Norm Eddy always spoke about himself and others who shared his social and spiritual commitment as fireflies, lighting the world. I hope that *Norm and the People* can also be like those fireflies, and bring some of that light to the world as well.

### **Audience and Exhibitions**

I see this film going to seminaries, universities, museums, and festivals. Possible venues include the Martha Vineyard Museum, The New Britain Connecticut Museum of American Art, the Union Theological Seminary, the Museum of the City of New York, and the Tenement Museum. Media arts organizations where the film could find an audience include Union Docs in Brooklyn and the Maysles Documentary Center in Harlem. Film festivals, particularly festivals with a focus on human rights, housing rights, or spirituality, should be also be good venues for the film, as well as a number of streaming platforms, especially platforms that focus on non-fiction film. I would also love to bring the film to the East Harlem Community by having screenings at the former churches of the East Harlem Protestant Parish, including the Church of the Living Hope and the Church of the Resurrection. Other possible East Harlem community sites that might host screenings include The East Harlem School (formerly Exodus House, mentioned in the film), the East Harlem Tutorial Program, the Union Settlement, and Metropolitan Hospital. Of course, Hunter College has numerous sites that would be perfect to show the work, both in East Harlem and on the Upper East Side.

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