ABSTRACT

BAKER, MARGARET E. Seeing the South: Racism, Reclamation, and Memory-Making in the Upstate (Under the direction of Dr. Victoria Gallagher and Dr. Marsha Gordon)

Seeing the South sits at the interdisciplinary confluence of documentary storytelling, media studies, and community engagement. This documentary film project and accompany written treatment examines the potent intersections between film production, regional history and collective memory as situated in rural Union County, South Carolina. Through an intellectually rigorous approach, locally engaged practice, and commitment to social justice, the film crafts a multifaceted narrative to foster dialogue, inspire social action, and bridge the schism between romanticized narratives and counter-narratives of the Southern identity. Capturing a diverse range of voices—from historians to activists—the documentary reveals historic and contemporary discourses that shape this community's identity. This written document describes the theory, methods, and content of the film, including a framework for how community-engaged storytelling, ethical film creation, and rhetorical analysis can come together to engage with difficult and contested histories and lead to meaningful interventions in the present moment. Framed around ethical and participatory practices, *Seeing the South* functions as a tool for public engagement, reflection, and debate—challenging audiences and readers to critique and transcend conventional frames of regional heritage and identity.

Seeing the South: Racism, Reclamation, and Memory-Making in the Upstate

by
Margaret Eleanor McAfee Baker

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Communication, Rhetoric and Digital Media

Raleigh, North Carolina
2024

APPROVED BY:

_____	_____
Dr. Marsha Gordon Co-Chair of Advisory Committee	Dr. Victoria Gallagher Co-Chair of Advisory Committee
_____	_____
Dr. Ariel Seay-Howard	Dr. W. Jason Miller
_____	
Dr. Jessica Jameson	

DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad:

You see me.

You support me.

You sow seeds of Grace.

Thank you. I love you.

BIOGRAPHY

Margaret E. Baker is a Ph.D. Candidate at North Carolina State University in Communication, Rhetoric & Digital Media (CRDM) positioned at the intersection of storytelling and media. Her expertise as a filmmaker, photographer, educator & content creator help her to cultivate traditional and creative research projects centered around issues of race, memory privileges, and silences. Operating at the crux of theoretical rigor and practical application, her work seeks to challenge prevailing historical discourses around our collective histories.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Behind every project, on the cover or title page should be not only the name of the creator, but also the names of all those unsung heroes, those who encouraged, cheered, challenged, and guided. *Seeing the South* is the same. I am so grateful to my community whose arms have carried me in my weakest moments, whose shoulders have hoisted me in my times of triumph, and whose hearts have walked with me through the fire: without your time, love, energy, and commitment, I would not have succeeded. *WE* did this.

There are so many people to thank. Firstly, to the community of Union: without you, this work would **not** exist. You welcomed me into your community with open arms. You shared your homes, your kitchen tables, your words, and your hearts. This is your story. I hope I did you proud. Nate, thank you for letting me chase after the story of R*estoring Rose Hill*. You put me down this path. Stephanie, your support opened new avenues for exploration and offered a different lens through which to see the narrative unfolding in Union. You have been so generous with your time and resources. Thank you for sharing your life with me in this season.

To my co-chairs, Drs. Victoria Gallagher and Marsha Gordon: Thank you for helping me right this ship in stormy seas. Your guidance in the final days of this work were invaluable. Dr. Gordon, your encouragement to keep going on the film (to not quit) kept me tough in one of the darkest times of my life. Thank you. Dr. Gallagher, your gentle touch was so needed. Your work has shaped mine in innumerable ways. I have learned how to be an academic because of your wisdom. I am so deeply grateful for you both.

To my committee: Dr. Jessica Jameson, thank you for showing me what grace, mercy, and forgiveness look like. Your humility and leadership inspire me. Dr. Ariel Seay-Howard, you met me where I was with this project. You challenged me to pursue excellence in it, and it is more profound, more complex work because of your hand in it. Thank you for asking me to rise. Dr. W. Jason Miller (Dr. Optimist), I cannot count the ways you walked with me in this season. Your endless supply of kindness kept me going on dark, dark days. You told me not to quit. You reminded me of my own power. You are the kind of academic I hope to be. Thank you. I am a better scholar-maker because of all of you.

To the former and current NC State Faculty, Drs. Fernanda Duarte, Stephen Wiley, Jean Goodwin, Adriana de Souza e Silva, Nick Taylor, Elizabeth Jones, Noura Howell, Melissa Johnson, Jason Swarts, Blair Kelley: your collective wisdom, tireless support, and engaging discussions over the last four and a half years have enriched my doctoral journey in immeasurable ways. Each of you has brought a unique perspective that challenged and expanded my understanding, and every seminar, conversation, and critique has been instrumental in shaping my academic growth.

To the NC State Community:

Hannah Rainey: I could write a short novel about the ways in which NC State Libraries and your support specifically have been instrumental in giving a scholar-maker like me spaces and places

to push the boundaries of what it means to be an academic. Thank you for your advocacy for people like me, and for the ways in which you have always met me where I am.

Peter Harries, Greg Hedgepeth, Aixa Morales, Darren White, Ashley Chilton, and the NC State Grad School team: You all have walked with me through a season that was nothing short of insanity. I'm grateful to have gotten to make an impact at NC State alongside of you and for your support of both my advocacy and research endeavors.

To my *COVID-11* Guinea Pigs, Chance, Lindsey, Kelsey, Kashian, Emma, Brian, Chenxing, Bryce, Robin, and Julie: the last four and half years with you have been some of the most challenging, thought-provoking, and stretching of my life. Thank you for your never-ending chaos, collaboration, coffee runs and Coco Bongo celebrations.

To CRDM: MK, Doris, Maurika, Shirin, Hal, Kampe, and countless others: you have shaped me in ways both great and small. Your influence and camaraderie throughout this process have been incredible.

To Aaron: Your guidance and friendship over the last couple of years has been a safe place for me. Not only have you freely given of your mind, your time, and your talents, but your unwavering support has kept me grounded. Your voice guided me through this crazy journey, and your calm presence breathed fresh life over this season. Thank you will never be enough.

To my students: Thank you for putting up with me through this crazy process over the years; you push me every day to be better. Because you bring insane creativity and hard work to the classroom, meaningful learning happens. Your enthusiasm and insightful questions never failed to inspire me. A special mention to Robert Bell, who's often needed technical support fueled my classroom. Thank you for your brilliance.

To my friends, distant and close, old, and new, in an incomplete, no particular order list: Dr. Alma Kathryn, Margaret, Casey, Madison, Dr. Katie, Daniel, Mindy, the Jefferson Family, the Bradley Family, Emily and Aimee. I would not have survived this without you, quite literally. Thank you for always creating space for me. I love you all.

To my family, Katie, Ethan, Grayson, Jody, Sean, Beth, Bo, Cindy and Dash: you have been my rock and my sanctuary. Despite the ups and downs, the early successes, and the seemingly endless challenges, you always believed in me with unwavering faith and support. I love every single one of you.

To Mom and Dad: You believed in me from the start, even when I did not believe I would make it. Your patience and love were the light during very dark days. Thank you for always being my cheerleaders in life's adventures. Thak you for not letting me quit, Mom. I love you both so much.

To Xolani, the love of my life: Your never-wavering presence is the steady heartbeat of my life. I love this life with you, and I thank God every day for bringing us together. Your patience with me never ends. Ngiyakutsandza sthandwasami.

Finally, I thank God, the Author of all of it: Thank you letting me run in the joys; thank you for carrying me when I could not walk. You are the one who appointed me for this moment. My future is yours.

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https://youtu.be/eSGFGxHS1HY

An Introduction to *Seeing the South*

As a multimedia content creator and as a traditional academic scholar, I aim to ideate, craft, and enact theoretical and making-based modes of inquiry to enhance the quality of my own critical creative projects and those of my peers. Broadly speaking, my work rests at the intersection between storytelling, media, questions of how storytelling helps to form our epistemological assumptions, and what role media then play in shaping those epistemologies. As a maker-scholar, I work to bridge the gap between media and rhetorical theory/criticism studies and the production of spaces (museums), places (memorials), documentaries and films in relation to studies of race and memory, and the practical application of storytelling principles through the creation of multimedia projects. As I am fundamentally both a maker and a scholar, my dissertation has taken both forms, including production of a 42-minute documentary film and three accompanying essays that explicate and theorize the methodological and rhetorical elements of the project.

Documentary filmmaking serves not just as a narrative medium but also as a tool for engaging with a variety of stakeholders to capture complicated, multidimensional narratives. Nichols (2017) suggests that "Documentary not only activates our aesthetic awareness (unlike a strictly informational or training film) but also activates our social consciousness" (p. 76). Documentaries are one form of visual methods, and themes include the focus on audiovisual technologies and becoming attentive to the ethical issues surrounding these technologies. With the ability to humanize the abstract, to turn the statistical and historical into the personal and the palpable, visual methods can, as Pink (2012) offers, "take us to new types of knowledge, the ways of knowing that these imply, and the ways in which they are engaged by different groups of people" (p. 7). By telling stories through documentary film, the audience is presented with

testimonials that can resonate on a deeply emotional level, often evoking a sense of empathy and urgent curiosity. In this way, documentaries have the potential to become catalysts for change, hailing viewers to reconsider previously held beliefs and to potentially engage in social discourse and action. The documentary format therefore offers an interesting intervention for presenting and synthesizing information from diverse disciplines and perspectives in a form that is visually transactional and evocative of social connection.

My project is (1) intellectually and community-engaged in its use of film to attract a community audience beyond the academy; and (2) socially relevant in its modeling of responsible and ethical documentary practice. Its goals included: crafting a humanizing, multifaceted narrative of Southern history, memory, and identity through documentary storytelling; partnering in ongoing community-engaged scholarship and work through storytelling and filmmaking; creating bridges between academic discourses on rhetoric, memory studies, visual studies, and documentary; enacting an interdisciplinary framework for public engagement and scholarly debate; fostering community dialogue and involvement through the dissemination of my documentary film beyond academic circles; and advocating for social justice by adhering to ethical documentary practices that honor the dignity of all participants in the community.

For the purposes of this project, I define 'community' as the collective of individuals residing in or closely connected to Union County, South Carolina, who share a geographical space and are bound by common historical narratives, social interactions, and cultural experiences. However, it is crucial to recognize that this community is not monolithic; it encompasses a diverse range of perspectives, ideologies, and relationships to the area's history,

and includes groups whose perspectives diverge significantly from the main narrative of this film, such as Confederate reenactors and White supremacists.

As a filmmaker, I made intentional, ideological choices about which stories to amplify within this community. These choices were not arbitrary, but rather a deliberate act of resistance against the hegemonic memory of a romanticized South that has long dominated narratives of Union. By privileging certain viewpoints, particularly those that challenge traditional historical accounts of this region, this project aims to disrupt the status quo of a White supremacist history; but this also means that the film does not—and cannot—represent all perspectives within Union. These choices reflect a conscious engagement with the power imbalance inherent in documentary filmmaking and the challenges of representing any multifaceted community. By acknowledging this intentional focus, I aim to maintain transparency about the scope and perspective of this project, while also positioning the work as an active contribution to ongoing efforts to reframe and expand our understanding of Southern history and identity.

Each documentary is colored by the ethical choices that shape its creation. The craft is not *only* an act of storytelling, but a series of decisions that have implications for the participants featured, the audiences who watch, and the creators who weave it together. Filmmakers often balance the truth with compassion, and face dilemmas related to the invasiveness of the camera's eye. As the documentarian behind the lens, the past is not merely a backdrop, but an active force present moment in this community. Ethical complexities abound.

In the following, I offer perspective on the guiding theories, practical experiences and ethical execution of the filmmaking process for *Seeing the South*. I explore the theoretical, practical and ethical landscape I traversed in the making of this film. Drawing on scholarship from memory studies, film studies, Black studies, rhetoric, communication, and my own

embodied experience as a media maker, I turn to reflexivity as a conceptual lens for analyzing the tacit knowledge deployed and gained through the making of the piece, and the sensorial, embodied, and embedded experience of filmmaking itself. It is an explanation of the ontological and epistemological frames I held during the process, an introspective inquiry into documentary making, an examination of the relationships I built in the process, and a meditation on the responsibilities we bear when we choose to frame reality through the camera's eye.

Through this intricately woven tapestry, I untangle the theoretical and ethical threads that wove together the narrative of the film, revealing the careful deliberation behind many of the moments, scenes and interviews. Within this crucible of creativity and conscience, this wrestling with the principles of veracity and sensitivity, *Seeing the South* finds its heart, somewhere between the stories we inherit and the stories we choose to tell.

Theoretical Lenses

Memory Studies

Memory studies is a multidisciplinary field that draws on contributions from a wide range of humanities perspectives, including history, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, visual studies, Black studies, and rhetoric. These strands of inquiry explore how the past shapes us and influences our decision-making processes by acknowledging memory as the source from which we construct our reality and sense of self (Assman & Livingstone, 2005). We each individually carry our memories as a sort of trusted advisor, and as a result, memory becomes a marker of both individual and collective identity, guiding our shared selves in and through life (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998). Collective/public/social memory scholars examine how communities record and review their history, how memories are created, and how these shared accounts are open to dispute (Cox, 2021; Zelizer, 1995).

Various veins of humanities scholarship have taken up memory studies quite differently as a frame by which to understand the construction of community and the formation of identity; however, there are a few key points on which most scholars agree: communities, whether geographically or culturally defined, create a sense of belonging and tradition through the recollection and performance of important behaviors and practices (Brundage, 2000; Dickinson et. al, 2010; Connerton 1989). Memory is created both through telling (oral history, narrative storytelling), place (museums, monuments, memorials) and cultural practices (commemorative rituals, rites, and spaces) (Dickinson et. al, 2010; Upton, 2016; Margalit, 2004). Relationships, identity, activities, and locations associated with creating memories are all interconnected through storytelling and the routines, rituals, and physical memory objects associated with them (Davis, 2016). As Walter Fisher explains in relation to his articulation of the narrative paradigm, "the experts are storytellers, and the audience is not a group of observers but are active participants in the meaning-formation of the stories" (p.13). Stories and memory artifacts serve as memory-keepers, crafting, evoking, and maintaining shared experiences in particular environments that help build and preserve community. We use narratives and objects to build connections with people and places beyond our current physical proximity, and as Bishir (2000) notes, memorials "…can transform principal civic spaces into visual illustrations of their saga" (p. 149). Humans can inhabit distant places and stay connected to those who are far away, both in space and time, thereby creating a unique form of engagement. Storytelling becomes a form by which individuals and communities "store up" their experiences and moments.

However, to characterize memory as merely a passive storage space for items and experiences would be an oversimplification. Memory and its sites and stories are fundamental in the formation and continuation of communities, as they shape both our individual identities and

our collective understanding of the world. As media studies scholar Garde-Hansen (2011) notes, "memory-images are remade from a store of memory-images and this orientates you in time, with a past, a present and future" (p. 21). Therefore, memory is not just a static phenomenon, but a dynamic one that allows communities to enact and perpetuate certain practices and beliefs. Culturally significant sites and practices play a crucial role in this process, strengthening the bonds between community members and shaping their identity. In this context then, memory is considered unique, selective, shared, and in many cases, publicly accessible (Blight, 2006; Kansteiner, 2002; Gallagher, 2004). This public engagement extends beyond geographical or cultural boundaries, as communities can exist within the form of shared memories and traditions. Every individual engagement with a memory is adapted and evolved to create a shared narrative, being shaped by the environment, its listeners, and the context in which it is told. Identity, and by extension, culture, becomes co-constituted through ideas like "race and region" (Davis, 1988, p. 5). The form of memory making then becomes both material and sensorial, where the physicality of the memory site and the sensory experience of engaging with it "gets passed on in non-textual and non-cognitive ways" (Connerton, 1989, pp. 102-103)

Additionally, these material and sensorial experiences extend into relationship building, where individuals connect and relate through their shared engagement with memory sites and practices. These relationships not only strengthen the sense of belonging within a community but also contribute to the cultivation and preservation of cultural traditions. Historians, rhetoricians, and literary scholars have taken up these areas of inquiry, examining how memory shapes and defines individual and group identities (Brundage, 2000; Kansteiner, 2002; Gallagher and LaWare, 2010). Narratives, stories and memory objects and artifacts can relate to individuals, communities, and more broadly to cultural practices, but they form these relationships in unique

manners. The stories we tell, the words we use, and the ways in which we frame and interpret events are all key factors in constructing a shared understanding of history. Not only is this a shared understanding, but a "shared responsibility," as oral history is often shared in social, community settings that cultivate a sense of connection and collective identity (Church, 2008, p. 57). As Connerton (1989) further notes, "Oral histories seek to give voice to what would otherwise remain voiceless even if not traceless, by reconstituting the life histories of individuals" (p. 18). This style of narrative sharing allows for the transference and preservation of cultural knowledge, values, and traditions from one generation to another. It fosters a sense of common heritage and strengthens the bonds within a community, orienting individuals both consciously and intuitively towards a shared experience of belonging.

Black studies scholars have focused on the ways in which Black communities construct and reconstruct their own histories, challenging "mainstream" interpretations of memory, and reshaping identity in their own terms but also in response to hegemony present around them. Alexander (2020) argues that "Black creativity emerges from long lines of innovative responses to the death and violence that plague our communities" (p. 20). And McKittrick affirms that, "black people have always used interdisciplinary methodologies to explain, explore, and story the world, because thinking and writing and imagining across a range of texts, disciplines, histories, and genres unsettles suffocating and dismal and insular racial logics" (p. 4). This work seeks to extend McKittrick's understanding that "Doing anticolonial work in the academy and talking about race in relation to discipline and interdiscipline can be enriched by thinking across texts and places" (p. 45). This enrichment is particularly evident in how Black communities approach memory and identity formation. Rather than accepting mainstream interpretations, Black communities challenge, construct and reconstruct their own histories, reshaping their

identities on their own terms (Davis, 2016). As anthropologist and Caribbean studies scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) points out "any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly" (p. 27). By thinking across texts, disciplines, histories, and genres, Black communities generate their own narratives that celebrate their culture and interrogate the silences and gaps left in normative memory narratives.

Additionally, the "materialist turn" has been taken up across memory studies, highlighting the importance of physical artifacts and spaces in the formation and preservation of memory (Blair et. al, 2010; McKittrick, 2013; Seay-Howard, 2023). Material objects, such as photographs, personal belongings, and monuments, hold significance within communities and serve as tangible reminders of the past, and serve as physical anchors for memory, providing a sense of place and grounding for individuals and communities, and "produce particular sensations through touch, sound, sight, smell, and taste" (Blair et. al, p. 29). These objects not only evoke memories but also contribute to the construction of memories; they hold symbolic and emotional significance, representing collective histories, identities, and values.

Memory sites can include monuments, memorials, museums, and cultural landmarks that hold cultural and historical importance, and these memory artifacts unite people, locations, customs, and recollections in a malleable manner. While Trouillot (1995) notes that general viewers "access history through celebrations, site and museum visits, movies, national holidays, and primary school books" (p. 20), Thompson (2022) argues that "…monuments aren't history lessons - they're pledges of allegiance… [and] are created and controlled by powerful people to advance their own interests. Monuments preserve a specific version of history, without room for doubts or questions" (p. XVIII). As such, these memory sites and artifacts participate in an

ongoing negotiation of power and representation, where certain narratives are privileged and can serve as tools of exclusion or manipulation, and as McKittrick (2013) offers us, "…a spatial politics…" (p. 15). Seay-Howard (2023) extends this idea to argue that in "witnessing the legacy of violence at material sites, individuals can be challenged to confront the amnesia that seems to affect American citizens when remembering who has been impacted by racial violence" (p. 16). The physicality and sensory experience of engaging with these sites and artifacts contribute to the emotional impact and resonance they hold for individuals and communities. They become powerful vehicles for memory transmission and remembrance, ensuring that certain stories and histories endure over time, contributing to the larger tapestry of community memory.

However, memory sites and stories are not static or unchanged. They are often contested spaces, subject to interpretation, negotiation, and power imbalances. Different communities may have different understandings and lived experiences associated with the same memory site, leading to conflicting and contrasting narratives and viewpoints. Power structures, particularly related to race, may shape the representation and interpretation of memory sites, privileging certain perspectives while marginalizing others. These racial dynamics can perpetuate systems of white supremacy, reinforce power imbalances, and shape how memory artifacts are used to educate, remember, and preserve (Thompson, 2022; Gallagher, 2006). As racism has shaped public memory in the United State over the past 400 years, memory artifacts such as monuments, memorials, parades, and plaques often perpetuate racial ideologies (Gallagher, 2004; Perry, 2022).

Memory sites and objects also activate tensions between memory and forgetting, which may keep discriminatory attitudes in place or, conversely, result in collective remembering that may lead to community healing (Assmann & Livingstone, 2005; Vivian, 2010). As Vivian

(2010) argues, while forgetting can be destructive when it erases important connections to the past, it can also be productive when used to maintain, refresh, or create new, vibrant cultures of memory, raising the question of how to differentiate between these manifestations in public affairs. On one hand, the selective preservation or erasure of certain stories and histories has clearly contributed to the historic marginalization of communities and continues to perpetuate systems of oppression (Hasian, 2004). However, forgetting can and has also served as a mechanism for communities to cope with traumatic pasts. *Seeing the South* is an interrogation of what we remember and what we forget, and by extension and interrogation of who we collectively are.

The contestation of memory spaces and objects, however, is not the only way in which identity formation occurs. Memory is an active process that involves not only the deliberate construction, but also the ongoing maintenance of what is remembered and what is forgotten (Vivian, 2010). This maintenance is demonstrated by Sharpe (2016), who argues that Black subjugation and its afterlives actively still affect memory studies today: "How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing?...Because how does one memorialize the everyday? How does one, in the words so often used by such institutions, "come to terms with" (which usually means move past) ongoing and quotidian atrocity" (p. 20)?

As hegemonic memory sites and spaces and mainstream historical narratives continue to dominate cultural spaces, contemporary epistemological modes of representation (such as film) have previously and can continue to help address the various aspects of marginalized memory and identity. This movement has taken root in physical spaces, as Sharpe (2016) notes in a reading of the Forensic Architecture Project (2012), stating the "…use of mapping, survivor testimony, and counternarrative as another kind of wake work that might counter forgetting,

erasure, the monumental, and that ditto ditto in the archives" (p.59). *Seeing the South*, then, "bears witness," to the ongoing counter narrative work taking place in Union, South Carolina (Vivian, 2010). This act of witnessing, present in the making and the rhetorical strategy of the film, becomes a form of resistance against collective amnesia and the hegemonic memories of slavery, the Confederacy and the Jim Crow South present in the community.

Creative and Engaged Scholarship

Creative scholarship emphasizes the role of artistic and cultural expressions in knowing and encourages innovation and non-traditional scholarly approaches to knowledge production (Miller, 2022). Such scholarship embraces artistic and creative methods, such as visual arts, performance, literature, and film, to explore and represent intricate concepts and experiences and may utilize cultural practices and traditions as forms of knowledge. As Biancorosso and Sala (2023) note, creativity's "central characters are scholars or art professionals with a scholarly background who live in a state of productive, if occasionally anxiety-inducing, tension as a result of having crossed professional and cultural boundaries" (p. 114). Creative scholarship recognizes that knowledge and understanding can be communicated and expressed through various mediums, beyond traditional academic writing, and that knowledge producers can often work to exist outside of the academy's walls, such as indigenous knowledge producers (Wilson & Stewart, 2008). As Miller (2022) notes, creative scholarship can be defined as "…peer reviewed, or equivalently reviewed, performances or artifacts created based on a scholar's application of their discipline or technical expertise intended for and publicly shared with non-academic audiences" (p. 379, emphasis original). In this spirit, many scholar-creatives take up participatory methodologies and engaged media making to stress the value of knowledge generated outside of academia.

Engaged scholarship "…is the application or exchange of intellectual, artistic, and professional expertise, knowledge, skills, or resources of a scholar in service of external stakeholders" (Miller, 2023, p. 103). This method can be used to build trust between stakeholders and researchers, while also fostering reciprocal learning and co-creation of knowledge. However, to position creative and engaged scholarship as completely outside of the systems of power of the academy would be to overlook the multi-factor relationship between creative work and academic scholarship (Miller, 2023). Creative scholars often navigate a paradoxical terrain, balancing the desire for artistic freedom and expression with the pressures of academic standards and expectations, including publishing norms, and the need for peer recognition (Biancorosso & Sala 2023). This tension can be seen in the notion of artistic integrity versus impact, where scholars must grapple with the question of whether their creative work aligns with academic criteria for rigor and relevance (Miller, 2023). Nevertheless, creative scholarship has the potential to disrupt some of these traditional modes of knowledge production and dissemination. Engaged scholarship acknowledges and often centers the importance of community-oriented research through partnership between academics and non-academic communities and the shared responsibilities between researchers and the communities they serve (Dodson, 2022). I utilized creative and engaged scholarship in this project through both participatory action research (PAR) and feminist filmmaking practices.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Participatory action research methods (PAR), one form of situated, engaged research, amplifies and involves the community or participants being studied in the research process (Cain, 2009). PAR recognizes that individuals and communities have valuable knowledge and that they can contribute to understanding and addressing social issues (Gadihoke, 2003), and the method is

often characterized by its participatory nature, in which community members actively participate in decision-making, data collection, analysis, and the dissemination of findings (De Lange and Mitchell, 2011). This collaborative approach often employs creative methods, such as photovoice, digital storytelling, dance practice and participatory video, to engage participants in the research process as co-creators, but also to capture their experiences and perspectives as a key data collection point and community reflection tool. By combining creative expression with rigorous research practice, PAR sits in the space between academic knowledge and lived experience.

Some scholars have questioned the rigor of community-based practice with concerns that it lacks the traditional academic structure and methodology. However, as Warren et al. (2018) assert, collaborative, community-engaged scholarship's strength lies in its ability to produce knowledge alongside of communities and to advocate for change *together*. Being placed as a researcher "within the material and discursive conditions of participant[s]," allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of the research context (Hess et. al, 2020, p. 874). This positioning enables researchers to develop relationships with community members, often resulting in practical and applicable outcomes, as the research is directly informed by the needs and experiences of those most affected by the issues being studied. This approach can lead to more effective interventions and policy recommendations, ultimately enhancing the impact and relevance of academic research in the community. This approach not only enhances the value of research findings but also foregrounds participants' agency and expertise.

Feminist Filmmaking

One limitation of PAR as a research method, however, is in its value on the pedagogical aspects of technology. In many examples of PAR research, the technology at the center of the project is often given primacy. Gadihoke (2003) notes, that, “This is a major critique of many participatory video ventures where the technology is often treated as a mere tool to be used for "empowerment," without any deeper introspection about the medium and its aesthetics” (p.275). Although iteration and reflection are significant aspects of PAR, feminist filmmaking methods also support the need for critical reflection in creative and engaged scholarship. Feminist filmmakers prioritize power dynamics and privilege in their creative process. Hidalgo (2017) proposes six key principles for feminist filmmakers including: promoting diversity on both sides of the camera, practicing ethical interdependence with crew and subjects, mentoring others, engaging in strategic contemplation, and addressing social justice issues. These guidelines emphasize the complexities of filmmaking and the importance of creators being attentive to their collaborators' needs. My approach to filmmaking is grounded in feminist theory and practice, enabling me to consider individuals' intersecting identities and requirements. As Juhasz (2003) notes that when difference is present, all participants experience intricate interactions of complicity, pain, and power. She adds that collaborative feminist documentaries aim to both portray and challenge power structures while acknowledging their impact.

Feminist filmmakers consistently acknowledge that their films are positioned within a history of gendered representations; thus, their films will also be a form of representation. However, even as feminist filmmakers constantly reflect on how they are positioning themselves and their subjects when they make films, some feminist scholarship has left out intersectional identities (Borah et al., 2023). Crenshaw’s (1991) “intersectionality” highlights the need to

consider multiple, intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination. This approach recognizes that individuals' experiences are shaped by interacting social categories, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, my identity as a privileged White woman, who operates inside of academia, and is a filmmaker and researcher who primarily studies issues of race and memory, necessitates a critical examination and reflection of my role in the research process. In this case, I invoke the term "privilege" to articulate Kimmel's (2017) concept of invisibility, which explains the unseen advantages conferred upon certain groups in society, primarily White, straight, middle-class men. This invisibility allows those with privilege to navigate the world without constant awareness of their race, class, or gender, unlike marginalized groups who are frequently reminded of their status by the very presence of the invisible Other. In my case, as a White woman in academia, I possess a degree of racial privilege that allows me to move through spaces without constantly considering my race. This invisibility is a luxury not afforded to people of color, who must navigate racial dynamics in their daily lives. However, my gender simultaneously places me in a marginalized position within the patriarchal structure of academia and society at large. As Kimmel (2017) further explains "There are consequences to this invisibility: privilege, as well as gender, remains invisible. And it is hard to generate a politics of inclusion from invisibility" (p. 5). My goal is naming my position of privilege is to make it visible in how it shaped this narrative.

My position as a White woman means I exercised a level of control in this project where I used my privilege to tell this story; the very people that have historically forgotten and silenced Black voices are a part of my White community. While my position as a White woman granted me certain privileges and access in this project, it's important to recognize that whiteness is not monolithic; there exists a spectrum of beliefs, attitudes, and actions within White communities

regarding racial issues and historical narratives. My identity as a White woman does not automatically align me with all White people or their perspectives. Rather, it requires a constant, critical examination of how my racial identity intersects with my personal beliefs, actions, and within the specific context of this project in Union County. This idea underscores the importance of approaching my research with humility and a commitment to amplifying, rather than speaking for, Black voices. It not only necessitates, but it also *requires* self-reflection. This approach aligns with the principles of PAR and feminist filmmaking: emphasizing the need for transparency, ethical engagement, and a genuine commitment to collaboration and social justice.

These frameworks, PAR, feminist filmmaking and engaged scholarship, visualized in creative practices such as visual arts, performance, museum exhibitions, and film, provide alternative paths for knowledge production that challenge traditional epistemological boundaries, and open new possibilities for engaging with a host of academic disciplines, as artistic expressions can evoke emotions, and challenge foundational beliefs and assumptions about how we know what we know. They encourage a shift in focus from individual expertise to collaborative and participatory approaches, amplifying the value of diverse perspectives and knowledge sources. Although these methods can never truly exist outside of the power structures that helped to create them, they offer opportunities to critically examine and challenge these structures, with the goal of cultivating a more inclusive and equitable knowledge landscape. Combining creative scholarly work with critical/historical scholarly work may result in richer and more complicated exploration of memory, knowledge, and identity. Additionally, creative scholarship can enhance the dissemination of knowledge to broader audiences, making academic research more accessible and engaging. Creative scholarship, while offering innovative approaches to knowledge production and dissemination, also presents ethical considerations

given the intricate nature of projects and the potential impact on communities and individuals involved in the work. In this landscape, I turn to concepts of documentary ethics to further explain and interrogate my positionality as a filmmaker.

Documentary & Documentary Ethics

As both a creative maker and scholar, I chose documentary film as the medium for this project due to its specific capacity to blend visual storytelling, emotional resonance, and critical inquiry—elements that align well with the overlapping nature of memory studies and community engagement. In my view, documentary offered a method for developing an immersive and accessible exploration of the multifaceted narratives present in Union, South Carolina, compared to traditional academic writing. I wanted to create a project accessible to both academic and non-academic audiences, and documentary film afforded access to these stories to the community audience, while also helping me to cultivate critical inquiry into memory studies, rhetoric, and film. In my professional experience, the process of filmmaking itself—from pre-production research to post-production editing—is both collaborative and deeply personal. The act itself requires me to explore my role as a filmmaker in shaping the narratives present in my work. This experience has led me to believe that documentary filmmakers actively participate in an ongoing practice of memory-making.

As filmmakers engage with and represent communities' histories, particularly those involving multi-layered historical narratives, they navigate a sensitive/complicated ethical landscape. Nash (2012) has argued that although documentary filmmakers often exercise situational ethics, they also empirically demonstrate a set of shared or common values. Taking up one facet of this ethical terrain, Nichols (2017) underscores the significance of the relationship between documentary, social history, and popular memory. The tension between a filmmaker's

interpretive vision and the authenticity of the documented reality is a vital aspect of the ethical discourse, and "Given that most filmmakers act as representatives of those they film or of the institution sponsoring them rather than as community members, tensions often arise between the filmmaker's desire to make a compelling film and the individual's desire to have his or her social rights and personal dignity respected" (Nichols, 2017, p. 40). In *Seeing the South*, this ethical imperative transcends mere observation; it involves actively engaging with and representing a communities' dynamic history, one that encompasses sensitive issues of race, identity, and memory. As Dana (2021) offers, "the less ability a subject has to tell their story the more imperative it is that they are represented truthfully" (p.17). This ethical obligation mandates a conscientious portrayal that honors and voices a participant's authentic experiences. Filmmakers thus stand in a position of power but also stewardship, wielding the ability to navigate the delicate interplay between creating impactful narratives and remaining truthful to the participants' inherently multi-dimensional stories. Careful consideration is imperative to prevent distorting or exploiting these narratives.

Furthermore, as Hayward (2017) elucidates, filmmaker-participant relationship dynamics play a significant role in the narrative. This dynamic hinges on trust and access; without these, a documentary runs the risk of becoming superficial or misleading. Trust is built over time and requires a transparent approach that respects the shared humanity between filmmaker and the participant (Nichols, 2017; Nash 2014). Hayward emphasizes the necessity of approaching each individual as a collaborator in storytelling rather than merely a subject, thereby fostering an environment that encourages open dialogue and mutual respect, which speaks directly back to frameworks such as feminist filmmaking and PAR. This fluidity in power dynamics is reified by Chang (2020) who points out that "Filmmakers' identification(s) with their subjects, when based

on identity-markers such as race, ethnicity and/or gender, can bring certain sensibilities to the treatment of their works such as deeper engagement, knowledge, and sensitivities. Yet these identification(s) do not necessarily absolve or lessen other differences or the outsidedness that film collaborators experience" (p. 19).

Filmmaker-participant relationship dynamics are not always visible on screen, and filmmakers often have limited insight into how participants truly feel about their depiction or the overall project. While some feedback may be received through follow-up conversations, observed reactions during filming, or community screenings (as evidenced in the following pages), the full spectrum of participants' thoughts remain private. This uncertainty is an inherent part of the documentary process and underscores the importance of maintaining open communication throughout production.

In this delicate balance, the presence of common cultural or social threads can indeed open doors and smooth out the initial stages of the filmmaking process. Yet such shared aspects are just a starting point and can never negate the nuances of individual narratives within the community. As a documentarian, it is vital to continuously negotiate this complicated terrain, ensuring a representation that is both empathetic and rigorously honest, holding in tension the imposition of the filmmaker's personal biases onto the depicted stories (as the filmmaker's voice is always present.) In the following sections, I will elaborate on how I navigated this interplay throughout the various stages of creating *Seeing the South*, from pre-production through to the community screening in Union.

Reflexivity

I turn to reflexivity as a method then for addressing issues of ethics and filmmaker-participant relationships. Reflexivity allows for a critical analysis of the interplay between the

foundations of knowledge that shape our creative inquiry (Hayward, 2017). As Michaels (2023) offers, “Reflexivity is understood as part of a collective ethos; an ongoing, iterative, affective conversation with the complexities of a situation, including different subjectivities, around which various meanings float” (p. 13). By engaging in reflexivity, a filmmaker can confront the inherent epistemological assumptions that guide their selection of questions, the way they seek out answers, and the way they ultimately convey their findings (Ruby, 1977, p. 4). It is a process of introspection and self-awareness that requires the documentarian to acknowledge and scrutinize their biases, cultural backgrounds, and social positions, thereby uncovering the subtle yet powerful influences that steer their narrative direction. Through this deliberate and ongoing reflective practice of unmaking, making, and remaking, the filmmaker can illuminate not only the content of the story being told but also the context and the methodology behind its telling (Michaels, 2023). Reflexivity ensures that the telling of the story is as conscientious and transparent as the narrative itself, and it is this transparency that lends both credibility and depth to the documentary as a medium for truth-seeking and storytelling.

Principles of reflexivity align with the methodologies of participatory action research feminist filmmaking, and community-engaged storytelling described earlier. The overall approach is governed by the belief that research and storytelling should not be extractive but rather collaborative and transformative, involving the community as active participants in the creation of knowledge and narrative. As Jameson, Clayton, and Jaeger (2011) explicate, “transformational partnerships involve deeper commitments and expectations of shifts in identities and values, challenge norms and systems, and outcomes extend beyond mutual benefit (reciprocity) to mutual growth and change” (p. 6). Reflexivity in this context demands a continuous dialogue between the documentarian and the participants, allowing the community's

voice and agency to inform the inquiry and storytelling process. By recognizing and re-evaluating positionality, a filmmaker practicing community-engaged storytelling cultivates an environment of mutual respect and shared authority, ensuring that the representation of the community's history and experiences is not only accurate but also amplifying of diverse community voices, thus creating spaces for “co-educators, co-learners, and co-generators of knowledge” (Jameson et. al, 2011, p. 8). This ongoing reflective practice fosters a deeper connection between the filmmaker and the community, nurturing trust and yielding results that are more ethically sound and resonant with the authentic spirit of the people whose stories are being told.

Hayward (2017) illustrates this reflexive practice in the work "Participate YourSelf: A Mid-Process Case Reflection on Collaborative Authorship." In this piece, the Emmy-award winning documentarian meditates mid-process on the nuances of collaborative authorship by reflecting on a project that involved active participation from individuals self-submitting content for the filmmaking process via YouTube. By inviting the participants to share in the creative control, the film not only gains authenticity but also challenges traditional power structures within the filmmaker-participant dynamic. The participants' insights and contributions shape the narrative far beyond the limited scope of passive observation, reshaping the role of the documentarian into that of a facilitator and co-creator.

Reflexivity is not only a methodological approach in documentary filmmaking but also an inherent part of memory studies itself. The act of remembering is implicitly reflexive, as individuals and communities look back and critically examine past events and experiences. Seay-Howard (2023) emphasizes "restorative truth-telling,” noting that material artifacts and spaces serve as tangible links between past and present, encouraging individuals to imagine a future

where such truth-telling becomes commonplace. This process of bearing witness—of actively recalling and testifying to past events—requires a reflexive stance that acknowledges the subjective nature of memory and the ways in which present circumstances shape our understanding of the past. Furthermore, the dialectic between remembering and forgetting is itself a reflexive process (Vivian, 2010). We constantly negotiate what to remember and what to forget, both individually and collectively, in a process that shapes our identities and social narratives. In the context of this project, my reflexive approach as a filmmaker mirrors the reflexive nature of memory work itself, creating a layered engagement with the past that acknowledges the interweaving between personal recollection, collective memory, and the act of bearing witness to history.

In the spirit of this practice, the following sections will elucidate my practical and ethical filmmaking experience while crafting *Seeing the South*. These personal, reflexive narratives become portals through which I further examine the frames of memory studies, creative and scholarship, and ethics in documentary filmmaking, and how these frames played out in praxis (Michaels, 2023). Each vignette I present here offers a critical reflection on a moment or decision that distinctly shaped the narrative, examining the entwining between filmmaker subjectivity and the objective of portraying a nuanced, truthful representation of the community with which I engaged.

Pre-Production

Pre-production is a crucial stage that sets the foundation for a successful production. During this phase, I conducted extensive research, began identifying potential participants and locations, and began developing a narrative structure. In other contexts, pre-production may involve securing funding, acquiring permits, and establishing a production timeline (Thomas,

2017). In the case of this film, I found that much of the planning happened during the production of the film as I encountered new avenues and stories for exploration. Beyond the technical aspects, pre-production also includes building partnerships within the community in which the filmmaker will be engaging, further emphasizing its essential role in the overall documentary process (Mitchell and deLange, 2011).

"I Thought You Would Be Black,"

Seeing the South was born out of a conference presentation about the last film I helped to create in Union - *Restoring Rose Hill*[1] (Baker, 2023). The genesis of *Restoring Rose Hill* itself was serendipitous. While traveling between Raleigh and Atlanta, I made an impromptu stop at Rose Hill Plantation State Historic Site (just outside Union County, South Carolina) for a class project; I also just enjoy historic sites. This chance visit led to a connection with the site's staff, particularly park manager Nate Johnson and interpreter Stephanie Cohen. Their commitment to reimagining Rose Hill's legacy as a plantation museum resonated deeply with my interests in memory studies and public history. Inspired by their work, I proposed creating a short documentary to capture their efforts. This initial project not only allowed me to document the

[1] Film Description: Sitting among Sumter National Forest and along the banks of the Tyger River in Union, South Carolina, Rose Hill Plantation served as the original home of wealthy upstate "secession Governor" William Gist, his planter family, and the lives of the enslaved who lived and worked there. Once a working plantation, the property was repurposed in the 1960s as a house museum dedicated as a "legacy to the Confederacy." In the wake of the national reckoning with systemic racism, Rose Hill is reclaiming its narrative by recognizing the history and legacies of the people who worked, lived, and died there, regardless of race. Restoring Rose Hill offers unique insight into the past of the site and a glimpse of what this work of remembrance looks like today. Through interviews with descendants of the plantation site, conversations with historians and archaeologists, and footage of the still-standing grounds of the plantation and its land, the film offers a rich and meaningful portrait of the site's history, painting a vivid picture of the formerly enslaved and black communities who called Rose Hill home, as well as the inspiring efforts currently underway to honor their life and contributions, and ensure their enduring legacy on this contentious terrain.

site's evolving narrative but also served as a gateway to deeper connections within the Union community. The relationships formed and insights gained during the production of *Restoring Rose Hill* laid the groundwork for the more expansive exploration of Union's complex history and memory landscape that would become *Seeing the South*.

In the months following the completion of *Restoring Rose Hill*, I had been searching for the next project and struggling to make all the pieces fit together, and as I showed the trailer for the Rose Hill film, something slotted together in my own mind. In presenting the film about Rose Hill, I realized that there were more stories to tell in Union, and given my network of relationships already present, I might be a good person to help tell some of them.

As a part of my initial conversations about *Restoring Rose Hill*, I learned of a soil collection project in Union focused on memorializing, remembering and honoring victims of lynching in the community. The Union County Community Remembrance Project (UCCRP) partnered with Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama to collect soil from lynching sites and install historical markers to honor the victims. This project intrigued me, as it aligned with my interest in exploring the intersection of memory, history, and community healing. As Gallagher (1999) reminds us, memory is complex, contested and open to critique. The soil collection project encourages visitors to view the materiality from lynching sites, and I wondered how that story could be told though filmmaking. I knew the project had been contested by some White community members and thought that an oscillating perspective might reflect other forms of contested memory spaces and places in Union. I walked out of the conference room, out of the door of that hotel, and called Stephanie Cohen - the park manager at Rose Hill. “This work is not over,” I told her, “I think there’s more to say about Union and the memory work here.”

She sent me to Curtiss Hunter, the town's director of tourism. We spoke on the phone, and she agreed to discuss the project concept over a Zoom call. As the Zoom window opened, I wrung my hands and forced a breath with a slight air of nervous energy. Curtiss' joyful face popped up onto the screen with a bright smile, and the classic "Can you hear me?" We began. I told her of the Rose Hill work and my idea for the new project, and about my positioning as a community-engaged scholar. Intrigued, she shared about the town's efforts to amplify Black history, the ongoing tensions within a long-standing historical society (founded in 1883), and what stories, events and threads could be interesting to explore with the work. We easily connected over our shared love of history.

Nearing the end of the call and setting a time for me to visit an upcoming event in Union, Curtiss offered a comment which I've replayed back many times in my mind.

"I thought you would be Black," she remarked, "but I'm glad you're not. You can talk to these people in a way that I cannot. They'll listen to you."

In that one line, Curtiss hit at the very heart of my positionality as a filmmaker and scholar. As a White, female, American-born scholar privileged to navigate spaces with little issue, I work to be keenly aware of the limitations and responsibilities that come with making films about communities and identities that are not my own. Curtiss' comment tapped into deeper questions - how does my presence and perspective shape the stories I help to tell? How can I ensure that the voices and perspectives of the communities I portray are accurately represented and respected? How do I navigate the fine line between telling a compelling story and exploiting the lived experiences of others? As Sikand (2015) explicates, "The question of who is inside or outside any cultural milieu is far more complicated than it might seem at first glance" (p. 45).

As Curtiss noted, my identity as a White woman helping to amplify a story about the Black/White divide in the South Carolina Upstate is both a complex opportunity and a significant responsibility. It required me to approach the project with humility, sensitivity, and a commitment to amplifying and honoring the myriad voices of those within the community. As Dyer (1997) notes, “White people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's; white people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image; white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail” (p. 9). My Whiteness affords me the ability to move through spaces with relative ease and gain trust and access that may be more challenging or downright impossible for others. I try to navigate these spaces with empathy and understanding.

However, the debate around who can tell what stories and how reflects much more than empathy and understanding. It involves power. Those with the institutional and structural power of creating, publishing, and critiquing media control the narratives presented in our culture and history books; as Hale (1999) offers, “The invention of photography and motion pictures and changes in lithography, engraving, and printing as well as the construction of museums, expositions, department stores, and amusement parks emphasized visibility, the act of looking and the authority of the eye—the spectacle.” Spectacle then becomes a means for those in power to construct and perpetuate their own ideologies and agendas. The spectacle becomes a weapon of the majority. Narratives (our stories) enact their own kind of power - the power of moving us, shaping us, and engaging our sensorial experiences. Trouillot (1995) reifies this power of narratives, stating, “At best, history is a story about power, a story about those who won” (p. 5).

Here exists a very real potential for my voice to overshadow, distort or suppress the experiences of the forgotten and silenced community in Union. This exchange between power and narrative becomes critical then as scholar-makers wield the dual edges of permanence and reach.

Yet, as a filmmaker, I made intentional, ideological choices about which stories to amplify within this community. These choices were not arbitrary, but rather a deliberate act of resistance against the hegemonic memory of a romanticized South that dominates narratives of Union. Confederate reenactors and those who adhere to Lost Cause narratives are a part of the community, but their voices are intentionally decentered in this work. These choices reflect a conscious engagement with the power imbalance present in Union and more broadly, the monopoly that White supremacists have held on to historical representation and public memory in the United States.

The conversation Curtiss engaged and her initial assumption that I would be Black highlights the dynamics at play when outsiders enter a community to tell its stories and caused me to interrogate my own Whiteness by reflecting on my initial assumptions and examining the privileges my racial identity afforded me in this project. I also critically analyzed how my perspective as a White filmmaker might limit my understanding of the Black community's experiences in Union. This process involved acknowledging my discomfort, evaluating the power dynamics at play, and committing this project and myself to ongoing learning and seeking feedback from Black colleagues and mentors to address my potential blind spots and ensure an ethical approach to storytelling in this work. hooks (1990) demands an interrogation of White theorists in cultural studies by arguing that simply acknowledging one's Whiteness is insufficient, as it fails to examine how this identity shapes perspective and analysis. hooks challenges White scholars to critically analyze their own racial identity and its impact on their

work and suggests that a meaningful shift in cultural studies would involve White theorists exploring and discussing Whiteness itself, providing insight into how it functions and influences their perspectives (hooks, 1990).

When I, as a White scholar, create and engage with work explicitly connected to issues of race, colonization, or exploitation, I must recognize and acknowledge the roots, threads, and underpinnings of racism and inequality that are deeply ingrained in our society. As a White woman, I engaged this experience from a position of privilege. *Seeing the South* engages legacies in which people of color's experiences have been excluded, utilized, and taken without permission, misinterpreted, and exploited. I must consider how my position of privilege engages the very people that have been silenced and forgotten. I engage present realities of structural violence against Black bodies, or as Weheliye (2014) reminds us, "the violence, subjection, exploitation, and racialization that define the modern human" (p. 2). Every time White people exercise the authority to control, monetize, and benefit from Black narratives, we perpetuate the legacies of slavery and its afterlives (Hartman, 2008).

As a White filmmaker, I am exercising a form of control over this narrative. However, I strive to approach this responsibility with acute awareness and critical self-reflection. As noted by Hornaday (2016), "The satisfaction of white filmmakers getting black stories 'right' is only gratifying to the extent that they exist alongside films authored by an inclusive population of artists free to make movies of every genre, style and point of view." This perspective underscores the importance of my work existing not in isolation, but as part of a broader, more diverse landscape of storytelling. My goal is not to speak for the Black community in Union, but to amplify *their* voices and stories, while actively supporting and encouraging more diverse authorship in documentary filmmaking.

Coleman, Collins and Bonam (2020) offer an ‘ecology of Whiteness” as one strategy by which to interrogate my White identity. They discuss Whiteness as an epistemological standpoint, referring to a specific worldview shaped by a dominant position in a racialized society (Coleman, Collins & Bonam, 2020). This perspective often leads to ignorance and denial of historical and social processes that perpetuate White privilege and dominance. Both White identity and epistemology reflect hegemonic Whiteness, a framework that normalizes White privilege and supremacy. This concept manifests in both racist and antiracist contexts and is reinforced by colorblind ideology, or the concept that we live and engage in a society in which race no longer matters (Alexander, 2020).

To begin navigating and naming these complications, I engaged in and continue to engage in ongoing dialogue with the marginalized community in Union, listening to their stories, concerns, and insights about the work. I responded to Curtiss, saying “Yes, I am White, and that offers me the ability to navigate spaces differently. However, it also presents challenges and responsibilities in ensuring that the voices and experiences of the community in Union are accurately portrayed and respected." This short conversation helped to solidify a collaborative partnership between myself, Curtiss, and more broadly the community members of Union engaged in memory work. This approach certainly is not a panacea, as noted in the inherent historical and cultural power dynamic present between the community of Union and me; however, a common dialogue of critique and reflection set the project on a path to continue with humility, reciprocity, and accountability. By directly acknowledging the power imbalances present and actively centering the voices and experiences of the Black community in the project, the work aims to avoid perpetuating harm against them or reinforcing existing inequalities, and to lay a foundation of trust between community members engaged in the work of reclamation

and restoration of Black history in Union and myself. Relationships built on trust, mutual respect, and reciprocity create the conditions for more ethical and equitable storytelling. The initial partnership with Curtiss served as a foundation for building wider community connections. This snowball effect allowed the project to gain broader community trust and participation, and as relationships deepened across the community, the film became a collaborative effort that reflected multiple perspectives and experiences within Union.

Film Participants

The conversation with Curtiss also set the tone for how I would approach selecting and engaging with participants for the film. Recognizing the complex dynamics present in Union, I sought to curate a diverse group of voices that could speak to different aspects of Union's history and memory. This process of participant selection was guided by both the relationships I had previously established and a commitment to representing multiple perspectives within the community.

I leveraged the networks that I had already built in Union during my previous production, *Restoring Rose Hill* (Baker, 2023), and I leaned heavily on the expertise of the Black community in Union, particularly Curtiss Hunter and Timika Michelle Wilson, the co-director of the UCCRP. Together, we endeavored to curate a group of participants for the project based on their ability to engage in insightful, dynamic interviews that provided unique and broad insights into the community of Union. Timika and Curtiss began by emailing me a list of potential new contacts for this film, and what kind of insights they might be able to provide on these stories. Furthermore, they encouraged me to leverage my Whiteness and begin building relationships with the White community in Union, particularly among the Union County Historical Society.

Participants all shared similar criteria including:

- a deep connection to the area,
- differing and wide-ranging perspectives on historical and social issues, and
- a willingness to be open and vulnerable on camera.

The diversity of voices, including historians, activists, educators, and residents, helped create a tapestry of narratives catalyzing collective memory and contemporary discourse. Interviewing both older and younger residents provided a generational dialogue, reflecting an evolving understanding of Southern identity. Balancing these varied viewpoints was pivotal for the richness of insight and authenticity of the documentary. These individuals are also deeply and directly invested in how history is remembered, preserved, and shared in Union County and beyond, and are creating opportunities for community members to engage in active discussions and commemoration surrounding these crucial issues. Furthermore, these voices represent a cross-section of two distinct and competing perspectives in Union, one that adheres to traditional narratives of a romanticized South and one that challenges them, thus sparking an oscillating, dichotomous tension in the film. The various interviewees allowed me to both interrogate the construction of Whiteness in Union on an individual and a community level, while also the ways in which its hegemonic presentation is being resisted by projects like the UCCRP. By weaving together their stories, the documentary engages the audience in a conversation that is deeply rooted in the present while being informed by the past.

The pre-production phase of *Seeing the South* laid critical groundwork for the documentary, establishing key relationships, identifying participants, and grappling with the ethical considerations present. Through conversations with community members like Curtiss, I was asked to confront my own positionality as a White filmmaker telling stories about race and memory in the South. The process of participant selection, guided by community expertise and a

commitment to diverse perspectives, aimed to create a tapestry of voices that could speak to Union's multifaceted history. As the film moved into production, I had developed a loose framework for approaching the project with humility, sensitivity, and a deep awareness of the power imbalances very present and active in the community. This phase set the tone for a production process that would continually navigate the delicate balance between storytelling and ethical representation.

Production

The production stage of a documentary is the phase in which the actual filming and creation of the documentary takes place, including storyboarding, location scouting, setting up equipment, conducting interviews, shooting scenes, and capturing B-roll footage. The production stage is crucial in turning the ideas and concepts discussed in pre-production into a tangible documentary that can convey the intended message to the audience (Thomas, 2017). Production on *Seeing the South* spanned from April 2023-January 2024, with principal production wrapping in December 2023 and final pickups being filmed in January 2024. The documentary was filmed on two Canon EOS R cameras at 30 frames per second with audio captured through both a Rode VideoMic Pro and a Rode lavalier microphone for interviews. Drone footage was captured on a DJI Mavic Mini 2 in 4K. Throughout principal production, I completed 16 core interviews, and I solely implemented both technical aspects of filmmaking and conducted interviews simultaneously.

As *Seeing the South* moved into production, I began conducting interviews with participants, capturing footage at various memory events and locations in the community, and gathering archival materials to augment the shot footage. Throughout production, I regularly navigated challenges including logistical hurdles, ethical considerations, and technical issues to

successfully complete the production phase. Over the course of ten months, I attended events in Union, scheduled and conducted interviews, took historical tours, and connected with local archives to gather a wide array of visual materials. The footage compilation not only included interviews and event coverage but also historical photographs, newspaper clippings, and personal memorabilia contributed by participants.

These archival materials were crucial in constructing a rich historical context for the narratives presented and lend authenticity to the narrative by offering tangible evidence of the history. Furthermore, by contributing their personal artifacts, community members become active participants in shaping the narrative, sharing ownership and creating depth and texture in the story being told (Seay-Howard, 2023). Community archival content was generously provided by Union stakeholders including Bryan Archilla, Kim Winslow, Rose Hill Plantation State Historic Site, South Carolina Historical Society, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Timika Michelle Wilson, Union County Community Remembrance Project and Union County Historical Society.

In crafting the documentary's narrative structure and guiding the interview process, my approach centered on respectful inquiry and active listening. Chisolm (2024) notes that "Establishing a professional rapport is paramount—a rapport built on a foundation of respect, honesty, kindness, and gratitude" (p. 49). Every interview began with the same question, a question of consent. However, after the question, I told participants that if they changed their mind at any time, that we could stop, or remove that portion from the interview. This consideration set the tone for forthright and frank conversations. It signaled to the subjects that they maintained their agency during the production process, which in turn fostered a trusting relationship critical for honest storytelling. Scholars have extensively debated the ethics of

informed consent in film and participatory video projects, with differing opinions on its significance. While documentarians typically require written consent, some argue that informal agreements between filmmakers and participants can enhance equity beyond formal release forms (Thomas, 2010). This approach transforms consent into a dynamic, relational process rather than a mere contractual obligation (Rughani, 2019). This approach also reinforces the ethic of care central to my filmmaking philosophy.

Furthermore, interview questions were guided by the underlying theoretical framework of my work, considering cultural differences and the expressivity inherent to personal histories. They were crafted to not just interrogate but to allow space for reflection and the emergence of counter-narratives that challenge dominant representations in the community. By framing questions as "how," and "why," rather than "what," and "where," I aimed to support participants in articulating their emotions and the full range of their experiences rather than dictating the experience itself. Additionally, the interview process allowed the responses to develop through a conversational approach, recognizing the significance of active engagement with the thoughts and beliefs of individual participants (Chisolm, 2024). Through a delicate balance of listening, questioning, and capturing, questions built on top of each other, further developing the richness and depth of the interviews.

My questioning aimed to elicit raw emotions and genuine responses, but also to engage intellectual curiosity among the participants. Chisolm (2024) tell us that "In many ways, interviewers' words and actions (conscious and sub-conscious) influence both the comments and mood of the person being interviewed" (p. 85). I was consistently aware of my position as the camera operator and the film's future editor, positions of power that gave me control of how the community and their stories would be depicted.

A Battle That Never Really Happened

I spent many hours in Union, at historical sites, in stakeholders' homes, at events and in public spaces. What immediately became visible in this process was that the production was granted access to two distinct groups of memory-makers in this community - one working to reify a Lost Cause narrative, and the other looking to subvert and challenge that legacy. The Lost Cause narrative is a mythologized version of history that romanticizes the Confederate South and minimizes or altogether denies the full impact of slavery and systemic racism (Cox, 2003; Seidule, 2020). Dickinson et. al (2009) remind us that "all public memory representations are partial…memory places are characterized by an extraordinary partiality" (p. 27). Through interviews and interactions, it became evident that there was a battle being waged in this community over whether the extraordinarily partial memory of a romantic South would continue to dominate its legacy, or if stories of resistance and persistence would become a part of its fabric as well.

One of the first events I attended in conjunction with *Seeing the South* was an annual Confederate Battle reenactment that takes place at a county-owned plantation home and museum (Cross Keys House) in Union County. The property and the event are managed by the Union County Historical Society, an organization founded in 1883 and dedicated to "preserving and displaying the history of Union County, South Carolina" (Union County Historical Society, 2023). The event, called the "Flight of Jefferson Davis Living History & Reenactment Program,"

reenacts a local legend[2] in which Jefferson Davis, former president of the Confederacy, visited the Cross Keys plantation house in the closing days of The Civil War. The middle day of the three-day event recreates the visit by Davis and his entourage, including a brief meal inside the house, before they continue their travels to Georgia.

This reenactment is then followed by depiction of a series of battle-like skirmish maneuvers in an open field behind the main plantation home. While the visit by Davis is contested, it is agreed that no Confederate battle ever took place at Cross Keys, in Union, the county or in Upstate South Carolina. Historical Society members describe the event as "an imagined Battle of Cross Keys." It is in this “vicarious space" where others imagine they can live through others who are in the past, or, in this case, never there at all (Shermer & Grobman, 2009).

Despite the historical inaccuracy and pervasive pseudo-history, the event serves as a significant cultural and economic attraction for the community and for Civil War reenactors, who camp at the site of the event for three days. As I arrived at the Cross Keys House, I fully engaged with the reenactment environment. I walked among the Confederate camps, observing their period-accurate setups and engaging in conversations with reenactors about their motivations and perspectives. Throughout the day, I documented the various activities, from the staged battles to the interactions between participants and spectators, all while maintaining an open dialogue with organizers and attendees about the event's significance to them.

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[2] I invoke the language of “local legend” here as the earliest known secondary source documentation for this event is April 1942 in the *Charlotte Observer*; no primary source documentation has been produced after multiple asks during the production of the film. However, some people in Union would disagree with this characterization.

As I began to introduce myself to reenactors, Historical Society members, and other participants at the event, I found myself easily clicking into an "Old South" accent. My speech became more drawled, lengthening vowels, slowing down the cadence and rhythm, and utilizing a gentility that evoked the period being portrayed. My immediate and extended family is from the South, and I have spent most of my life in the southern region of the country. This accent is not new to me; this White, Southern sound is in some ways my sound, but it is certainly not my standard English. I was code-switching.

As Myers (2019) asserts in her autoethnographic exploration of the phenomena, code-switching is "the adoption of specific linguistic styles based upon one's audience, is the foundation of assimilation into White American culture…" (p. 113), and often occurs subliminally as a tool to create a sense of belonging among a group of participants. In the context of *Seeing the South*, I extend Myers and other sociolinguistic understandings of code-switching to not only refer to my linguistic styles, but also to the adaptation of my performative behaviors and narratives to fit within the Confederate battle reenactment space, and more broadly within the White community of the Union County Historical Society. This code-switching helped to facilitate relationships with reenactors, gain access to their authentic experiences, and effectively document their participation in the event. It allowed me, in my Whiteness and my Southern heritage, access to the spaces and experiences of this community who seek to continue the memory and storytelling of the Confederacy and its legacies in this community. Had I not established myself as White and a southerner, I likely would not have been granted such total access to these same spaces. As hooks (1990) challenges, merely acknowledging my Whiteness is insufficient; it requires a critical analysis of how this identity shapes perspective and access. In this instance, my ability to code-switch not only facilitated my documentary work but also

highlighted the privilege inherent in my racial identity, allowing me to navigate and gain acceptance in spaces that are inaccessible or unwelcoming to others in Union.

However, code-switching in this context certainly posed ethical implications. Through immersion in the Confederate battle reenactment and in the ensuing conversations that took places in the months after, I was at risk of perpetuating a romanticized or distorted narrative of the Confederacy through my very presence. At the event as I explained that I was a "documentarian making a film about Union." I was told more than once to "tell the right story," regularly accompanied by a nod of approval. I could feel the exchange of the word "right," for the word "White," hung in the air of those conversations. As far as I could tell, not a single person of color attended the event. This notion of telling the "right story" highlighted an implicit expectation of promoting a particular narrative that aligns with certain White-centric historical interpretations (neither White nor Black perspectives are monolithic). The lack of diversity at the event further emphasized this concern and speaks to Vivian's (2010) assertion that "public forgetting is an equally rhetorical phenomenon," and that "Acts of public forgetting likewise culminate patterns of collective deliberation or contestation over the meaning and value of the past as it concerns immediate social or political interests. The crucial difference, however, is that such patterns of public dialogue, debate, and advocacy end in collective ratifications to discontinue or reject customary forms of remembrance instead of public proclamations to honor and sustain them" (p. 13).

This selective remembrance and forgetting in Union County's historical narrative raises questions about the ethical implications of documenting such events. As a filmmaker, the challenge of code-switching during production was to find a balance between immersion in the environment and maintaining my own ethical standards. On one hand, code-switching allowed

for the building of a rapport with the reenactors and the ability to capture their authentic experiences. On the other hand, it raised concerns about perpetuating stereotypes and cultural appropriation. My Whiteness granted me access to this space (Hirokawa, 2023); this real-time decision reflects the ethical considerations inherent in documentary filmmaking, where in-the-moment choices can significantly shape both the ongoing production process and the final narrative of the film. There is a delicate line between wanting to respect the historical significance of the event for those who participate in and attend it and disregarding the Black community and other marginalized groups in Union who have been historically forgotten and silenced.

Furthermore, this event, and by extension, the Union County Historical Society, has been for the privileged community group, funded in part by taxpayer dollars, in Union County, and has been tasked with the responsibility of preserving and showcasing the history of the county. By continuing to offer the “Flight of Jefferson Davis” program, they reify the Lost Cause narrative of the Confederacy and reinforce a romanticized view of the Old South. The event and the society's emphasis on preserving Confederate history contribute to a collective memory that glorifies and perpetuates the Confederacy as a noble cause, ignoring the horrors of slavery and its afterlives. My presence and attendance at this event, while necessary for documenting the community's practices, risks inadvertently legitimizing and perpetuating the Lost Cause narrative. My culpability lies in the potential amplification of these problematic historical interpretations, even if unintentional. However, my awareness of this ethical dilemma and commitment to critically examining and contextualizing the event in the documentary can help mitigate this impact.

As production continued at other events and places in Union, I continued to conduct interviews with reenactors, historical society members, and community members who chose not to attend the event, asking questions about their motivations and perspectives. Black community members who abstained from the event cited concerns about its glorification of the Confederacy and Union's ongoing issues with systemic racism. They expressed apprehension about the event's impact on their communities' understanding of historical accuracy and highlighted the need for a more inclusive and accurate representation of the Civil War and Reconstruction. In talking with White historical society members, I ascertained that many believed the event to be a crucial part of preserving local history and heritage. They argued that the reenactment provided an educational opportunity for younger generations to understand their ancestors' experiences.

In the months following, I became increasingly aware of the convolutedness of my position as a filmmaker. I was capturing the lived experiences and believers in the Lost Cause and simultaneously those who worked to dismantle those narrative in this community. The goal of the film continued to be to create a nuanced, oscillating, and critical portrayal of the event, addressing the power imbalances and historical distortions within the majority community. As Sharma (2018) has written about Kak's documentary work in India, "Documentary images and sounds are understood as tools for the interpretation and articulation of meanings that may not be readily apparent within them" (p. 121). My role as a documentarian was to represent the multiplicity of narratives, and to question the dominance of the Confederate perspective, to probe the delicate balance between heritage and history, memory, and myth, and my own position in it.

I've thought back many times in the following months to that misty morning at the Cross Keys House and wondered if I did the right thing. Was immersing myself in the event and engaging with the community present the right decision? Did I strike the right balance between

capturing authentic experiences and critically examining the underlying narratives and power dynamics as I navigated that space? In full transparency, I think I failed here. I am concerned that my code-switching and immersion have validated or legitimized perspectives with which I fundamentally disagree. By adapting my speech and behavior to fit in, I have implicitly endorsed the romanticized Confederate narrative, contributing to the perpetuation of harmful ideologies I aimed to critique in this project. However, my intention throughout this process was to depict history and memory within this community, which has required me to engage in these spaces, regardless of how much I disagree or how uncomfortable they might be. My Whiteness afforded me the opportunity to do so.

Post-Production

After principal shooting wrapped, editing the visuals and audio began. This phase of filmmaking may also include adding visual effects, crafting the sound design, and adjusting color and sound; it is in the editing room that the raw footage is transformed into a cohesive and compelling narrative that aligns with the filmmaker's vision, a crucial stage in shaping the final product and ensuring that the story is effectively communicated to the audience (Nichols, 2017). The editing process utilized Adobe Premiere Pro to weave together the interview footage, B-roll, and archival materials. In *Seeing the South*, I sought to navigate the ethical considerations of documentary storytelling and address the entanglement of capturing and interpreting multiple perspectives from within the community. Editing other's stories and voices is a privilege, and that privilege should reflect the nuances of the experiences and voices captured during the documentary's production process, while also recognizing how it intertwines my own voice as the filmmaker. As I delved into editing, I faced the challenge of distilling hours of footage and interviews into a cohesive story. Each edit demanded consideration of how to juxtapose

contrasting viewpoints and experiences while honoring the ethical responsibility of a contextually sensitive and nuanced portrayal of the many voices of Union.

"Please Don't Use This in the Final Film"

In the first pass of editing, I chose to begin by thinking of the film like acts of a play (Chisolm, 2024). The film was at first composed of six separate acts, which moved the viewer through the community, and exposed them to the various groups cultivating and crafting memory throughout Union County. I began by showing the scenes of the Confederate Battle reenactment and interviews in the Cross Keys to contextualize the event as a cultural and economic attraction for the community before moving into acknowledging the historical inaccuracies and harmful legacies perpetuated by existence. This path introduced the audience to the one community group's commitment to preserving Confederate history, the hegemonic memory-makers. Then, the story took up how other community groups, for example the Union County Community Remembrance Project and the Mount Vernon Preservation Society, resisted this narrative.

Once editing reaches a certain point, it is essential to have other people's perspective on the project. I began by sharing parts of the cut of the project with community members, specifically with Curtiss, Timika, Stephanie and Enfinitee Irving, the Park Interpreter at Rose Hill Plantation State Historic Site. Because of the structure of the film (as acts) at the time, this was relatively easy to accomplish. I shared sections that pertained to their specific organizations - for instance, the segments about Rose Hill and slavery were shown to Enfinitee, while the portions about the Union County Community Remembrance Project were shared with Timika. Overwhelmingly, the response from these community members was positive. They expressed appreciation for the opportunity to review their contributions in context and generally approved of how their perspectives were represented. These feedback sessions, while not resulting in

major changes to the film's structure or content, were invaluable in validating the direction of the narrative and ensuring that their voices and organizations felt accurately represented. The process reinforced the collaborative nature of the project and helped strengthen relationships with these key community stakeholders.

While most participants had no significant critiques, there was one instance where a community member requested the removal of specific comments, concerned about potential community backlash. In this version of the project, one particularly contentious moment played out where I had chosen to juxtapose a very hegemonic White perspective with a Black community member's voice. After watching this scene with her, she expressed deep concern about the implications the film might have on her personal and professional life. She requested that I not include a couple of her specific comments in the final film, fearing potential backlash from the community. This experience required me to reflect on the ethical implications of my editorial choices and the potential consequences for participants. I requested the opportunity to rework it, which I did. Upon reviewing the revised version, she still had reservations about one specific line. I asked for more time to reconsider its placement and context.

As I began to share this initial cut of the film with mentors, advisors, and other colleagues, further critiques of the film's structure and content emerged. Where I had perceived foregrounding the battle reenactment and the historical society as an important contextual element, much of the feedback suggested that this approach amplified and reified the Confederate narrative. My advisors pointed out that by leading with these perspectives, I risked reinforcing the very power imbalance I aimed to critique (hooks, 1990). They encouraged me to reconsider the structure, emphasizing the importance of foregrounding voices of resistance.

After the first pass of editing and critique, a series of fundamental questions came to the surface - whose story does this film privilege? Which stories are amplified the loudest? How do I make a film that balances the one end goal of magnifying the stories of resistance and resilience in Union, while also critiquing White supremacy in Union? How do I honor and respect participant's material stake in it?

As compelling as I found the narratives and interviews of the Historical Society community in and around Union, the feedback process on *Seeing the South* forced me to confront the possibility that my editing had the unintended consequence of reifying their discourses, and where to place them in the film that both shared their story but did not perpetuate legacies of White supremacy. This process of reflection led to a complete restructuring of the film to intentionally center voices that challenge the historical ideology of Union, including Black community members, White allies, and others who offer alternative historical perspectives and ideologies to Lost Cause ideology.

I stepped away from the project for weeks to reflect on and process the feedback I had received. Upon returning to the editing process, I approached the material with a renewed commitment to centering the voices of the Black community in Union. I printed the transcript of the film and read it back like a book. Upon this reading, I saw how a conceptual group of thematic ideas made more sense for the structure of the film rather than focusing on the ideological differences between the different memory-making groups. I created conceptual headings for the ideas, and physically printed them out and cut them up, allowing me the material, sensorial, and affective experience of arranging and rearranging the ideas found in the film. This was an emotional experience, as in some ways I felt like I was tearing the film

apart; however, this process allowed me to rebuild the narrative from a fresh and renewed perspective.

I restructured the film to begin with the story of the 1871 Jail Raid Massacre in Union, a pivotal event where over the course of two different nights, 12 (potentially 13) Black men were abducted from the Union County Jail and lynched. By starting with this narrative, I aimed to immediately engage viewers with the historical injustices that have long affected Union County. This restructuring allowed me to foreground perspectives that contest Union's conventional historical narrative, encompassing insights from Black residents, supportive White community members, and various individuals offering counterpoints to the prevailing Lost Cause ideology, positioning their personal experiences and historical perspectives as central to the film's narrative.

Coming back to the one line a community member had expressed concern about regarding her material safety, during my second editing pass, I made the decision to reposition the line, situating it between more Black voices rather than juxtaposed against a White supremacist perspective. I shared this new draft of her section with her again but asked her to reserve final judgment until she could view the film in its entirety with other allies in Union at a collective screening. She agreed to this request, and that showing is discussed below.

After creating a refocused and shortened version of *Seeing the South*, I again shared the film with mentors and advisors in my academic and professional community. In this version, the film ended with a short section describing a brand-new initiative in the community to preserve the all-Black high school in Union, Sims High School. I recognized that the segment pertaining to Sims was likely to be excised from the final cut. After this round of review, my committee agreed that the section took away from the core conversation about slavery, lynching, and Civil

War remembrance in a way that slowed the pace of the film too much. It was a challenging decision to remove it, as I knew many community members in Union would be disappointed that this important local initiative wouldn't be featured. However, I recognized that maintaining the film's focus and pacing was crucial so I decided to commit to creating a separate short film about Sims High School, which could be shared independently with the community of *Seeing the South*. This compromise allowed me to honor the importance of the Sims project while preserving the integrity of the main documentary.

The post-production phase of *Seeing the South* was a process of intense reflection and revision. It highlighted the profound responsibility that comes with shaping voices and narratives through editing, particularly when dealing with sensitive historical and cultural topics. The feedback from community members (generally positive), advisors, and mentors played a crucial role in reshaping the film's structure and focus, ultimately leading to a narrative that more effectively centered the voices of resistance and resilience in Union. This process underscored the importance of flexibility and openness to critique in documentary filmmaking, as well as the need for constant self-reflection on the filmmaker's positionality and biases. The decisions made during this phase - from restructuring the narrative to removing certain segments - were not just about crafting a compelling story, but about sharing the process with community members. The post-production process of *Seeing the South* exemplified the delicate balance between artistic vision and ethical responsibility in documentary filmmaking, reinforcing the idea that the editing room is as much a space for moral deliberation as it is for creative expression.

Sharing *Seeing the South*

The goal of a film is always to let others watch it. However, as a filmmaker in line with participatory action research (PAR) and feminist filmmaking principles, screening becomes an

important part of community impact. The event embodies the collaborative and reflexive nature of PAR, which emphasizes community involvement and shared knowledge creation (Cain, 2009; De Lange and Mitchell, 2011). This screening, occurring before the film's "final" completion, serves as an integral part of the production process rather than a mere presentation of a "finished" product. By inviting community members to view and provide feedback on the film, the screening creates a space for collective reflection and dialogue, aligning with PAR's goal of communities actively participating in the research process that affect them. Simultaneously, this approach resonates with feminist filmmaking practices, which prioritize ethical engagement with subjects and audiences, and recognizes the power dynamics inherent in documentary production (Hidalgo, 2017; Juhasz, 2003). This screening event was not a presentation of a final product, but an extension of the film's participatory and reflexive production methodology, offering a space for key community members to engage critically and communally with their own represented histories and narratives, and most importantly, to have a direct say in the film's final form. While major revisions were not anticipated at this stage, I deliberately sought this opportunity for community members to voice any concerns, suggest adjustments, or affirm their representation in the film. This approach underscores the ongoing commitment to ethical, community-centered filmmaking that has guided the entire project, extending the collaborative process right up to the film's completion. By maintaining this open dialogue even at this late stage, the screening reinforced the idea that the community's voice and agency remained central to the work.

A first screening of the film took place in Union in September 2024. As I prepared to share the film, I felt a mix of excitement and anticipation. Visually and narratively, I believed the film was nearing completion, effectively capturing the complex dynamics of memory and history in the community. While I was confident in the overall structure and content, I remained open to

the possibility of minor adjustments based on their feedback. I anticipated that community members might suggest small structural changes or refinements, but I did not expect any major overhauls at this stage. However, I was acutely aware that the community members might perceive certain aspects of the film differently, bringing their own lived experiences and perspectives to the screening. Additionally, I knew one community member still harbored significant concerns about their safety if the film were shown in Union.

This screening was invite-only; only people who were directly interviewed for the film and folks who demonstrated allyship for the messaging of the film were invited to the event. Not everyone who appeared in the film was invited to this screening, specifically the White supremacist community in Union. I made a deliberate decision to curate the audience for this initial screening to create a safe and supportive environment for marginalized community members to share their authentic reactions to the film. Given the potential for material safety concerns expressed by some participants, the sensitive nature of the content, and the structural power dynamics at play within the community, I chose to exclude certain groups, particularly those associated with promoting Lost Cause narratives or White supremacist ideologies in Union, prioritizing the wellbeing and agency of vulnerable participants. For this initial viewing, I was looking for feedback in a group setting with those who would be affected by the film's completion and dissemination in Union the most: in this case, the Black community, especially those in positions of high visibility and recognition within the town.

I began the screening by providing context for the film's development and editing process. I explained how the documentary had evolved through multiple iterations, emphasizing the challenging decisions made during editing to maintain focus and coherence. I specifically addressed the removal of the Sims High School segment, acknowledging it as a personally

difficult choice due to its importance to the community. I expressed my commitment to completing a separate project on Sims High School in the future, recognizing its significance while explaining the necessity of streamlining the current film's narrative.

The screening event revealed a dynamic audience response. Notably, several attendees exhibited audible laughter in response to statements made by White supremacists featured in the film. This reaction was particularly poignant given that many in the audience personally knew the individuals on screen. The footage of the Confederate battle reenactment elicited visible disapproval from many viewers in the room, manifested through head-shaking and other nonverbal cues. Similarly, the perspectives presented by the Historical Society were met with skepticism, as evidenced by eye-rolling and other expressions of disagreement among the audience members.

After the screening, I began by asking audience members for their initial responses and reactions. In short, “What do you think?” One Black audience member remarked that the film was a “balanced approach” to the community, and commented on the pacing of the story, noting that the film moved appropriately back and forth between the different perspectives present in Union. Another White audience member remarked feeling “conflict and tension” in their body while watching the film, particularly during scenes depicting Confederate reenactments and interviews with White supremacists. They expressed a mix of discomfort and appreciation for the film's portrayal of these perspectives. One White community member discussed how she “couldn’t believe” that the President of the Historical Society was allowed to continue in his role at a local teaching college, given his openly racist views and promotion of Lost Cause narratives. Overall, the feedback was largely positive, with attendees expressing gratitude for the opportunity to see their community's story told on screen.

Revisiting the Black community member who had previously expressed apprehension about the film and concerns for her safety: she remarked surprise for how much she enjoyed the film. She was deeply kind in her comments about how the project presented “the truth” about Union; she explained that this screening provided her with a comprehensive view of how her contributions fit into the larger narrative, allowing her to make a more informed decision about her participation and representation in the film.

This comment allowed for a transition to an important question of the night: What did this group of folks think about screening the film for the public in Union? The answer was a resounding no. Multiple community members expressed concerns about potential backlash and safety risks if the film were shown publicly in Union. They cited the ongoing deep-rooted racial tensions and the likelihood of physical/material retaliation. The group emphasized the importance of protecting vulnerable community members (especially those present in the space that night) while still sharing the film's message. The group agreed that the film’s better trajectory is film festivals, academic settings, and screenings outside of Union. This approach would allow the film's message to reach a wider audience while minimizing potential risks to local participants. Despite the decision, the attendees expressed hope that the documentary would spark conversations about race, history, and community reconciliation in other settings, while their ongoing work continues in Union.

As a filmmaker, I felt an honest pang of disappointment knowing that *Seeing the South* would not be screened publicly in Union, the very community it sought to represent. There is an inherent desire to share my work with those who inspired it. However, as a human being, and a filmmaker committed to ethical storytelling and the safety of my participants, I fully support and respect their decision. It is a sharp reminder of the physical, tangible, and material

implications and sensitivities surrounding the stories we choose to tell, and this particular story: the story of slavery, racism, and discrimination in the United States.

At the end of the evening, I made it a point to speak with the community member who had expressed concern about how she felt about where I had repositioned the specific line, situating it between more Black voices. She asked for more time to think about the request. I assured her that I respected her need for reflection and would await her decision and would respect it no matter what. She reiterated her relief to me with how the film had come together and expressed gratitude for the care taken in representing her community, and my patience and understanding throughout the process. I thanked her for the trust she continued to place in me as a filmmaker.

In the days following the screening, I sent a follow-up email to participants with a copy of the draft of the film and a link to an anonymous survey where individuals could leave comments for my review, with the aim of gathering additional feedback as participants watch the film again and with others in their lives. As of this writing, I have not received any additional responses.

Conclusion

Creating *Seeing the South* was a complex and introspective journey that required navigating the delicate balance between ethical responsibility and representing contrasting viewpoints in a community where diverse perspectives and historical legacies continue to collide. Throughout each phase of the filmmaking process, I was confronted with challenges that forced me to examine my role as a filmmaker, my own identity, and the power dynamics at play when representing different perspectives.

The pre-production phase compelled me to engage deeply with my own identity, particularly my Whiteness, and the privileges it afforded in this work. It required me to reflect on my biases and consider how they might influence my approach to navigating sensitive subject matter. This self-reflection set the foundation for building relationships with community members and establishing a framework for ethical engagement throughout the project.

During production, I found myself inhabiting spaces I never thought I would, engaging in deeply challenging conversations within the community. The experience at the Confederate battle reenactment highlighted the challenging nature of code-switching and the ethical implications of immersing myself in contested historical spaces. These experiences forced me to question my role as a filmmaker and the potential impact of my presence on the perpetuation of a Neo-confederate ideology.

The post-production phase brought its own set of challenges, particularly in the editing process. I was confronted with decisions that required careful consideration of how each choice would impact the film's reception and its representation of the community. The feedback from community members and advisors played a crucial role in reshaping the film's structure and focus, ultimately leading to a narrative that more effectively centered the voices of resistance and resilience in Union.

Throughout this process, filmmaking ethics played a crucial role in ensuring that the film respected the stories and experiences of all involved in the project. It was vital for me to navigate these ethical waters sensitively, drawing attention to the subject matter without exploitation. The goal of this film was always to invoke a broader discussion, to create a documentary not just about Union, and not just about the South, but about how historical narratives are formed, championed, and challenged. I aimed for *Seeing the South* to act both as a mirror and a window:

a mirror reflecting the deeply ingrained narratives held by some, and a window opening onto perspectives that had long been silenced, long overdue for recognition.

By illuminating some of the formidable challenges inherent in community-engaged documentary work, where historical representation is contested and fraught with the weight of identity, memory, and power, this project has underscored the crucial role of the documentarian's self-awareness in shaping a final narrative. The ethical considerations laid bare in this process—a constant negotiation between respecting participant agency and crafting a compelling narrative—reflect the nuanced dance of documentary ethics that has significant implications for future projects. Documentarians are called to go beyond the mere documentation of events; to foster authentic relationships, creating a platform for silenced and forgotten perspectives. This is the heart of ethical documentary practice, embracing a reflexive posture that emphasizes that our responsibility stretches far beyond the lens and into the realm of genuine collaboration and diligent stewardship of the stories we are privileged to help to tell.

Seeing the South underscores the significant role that local histories and personal narratives play in shaping our collective understanding of heritage and identity. This project demonstrates the power of documentary filmmaking as an act of remembrance and social engagement, revealing the entanglements of memory work in communities. Through this layered approach combining storytelling, scholarly analysis, and ethical filmmaking, my hope is to contribute to a wider conversation about representation, memory, and the construction of history in our own communities. This project serves as a testament to the ongoing negotiation between past and present, between dominant narratives and counter-narratives, and between remembering and forgetting. It challenges us to consider how we engage with our collective histories and how we can work towards more inclusive and just representations of our shared past. As we continue

to grapple with these challenging issues, *Seeing the South* stands as an invitation for further dialogue, reflection, and action in the ongoing work of memory and reconciliation.

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Screening History:
Race, Power, and Social Change in Contemporary American Documentaries

Abstract

This work examines the evolution and social consequence of documentary filmmaking on race in the United States, focusing on three contemporary films: Ava DuVernay's *13th*, Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro*, and Ezra Edelman's *OJ: Made in America*. It explores how these films take up key themes such as systemic racism, the intersectionality of race, class, and justice, and the power of narrative and media representation, and analyzes how these filmmakers employ archival footage, interview techniques, and narrative structures to convey complex issues of race, power, and memory. It situates these works within their cultural context, particularly the period from 2015 to 2017, marked by movements like #OscarsSoWhite and Black Lives Matter. This analysis demonstrates how these films' reach and spread were dependent upon their cultural attunement and the time/moment of their release, factors long associated with the rhetorical concept of *kairos*. By examining these films' thematic and technical approaches, as well as their cultural reception, I argue that documentaries on race serve not only as historical records but also function rhetorically to shape public discourse and inspire social change.

Keywords: Documentary Filmmaking, Race in America, Visual Storytelling

The year 2015 marked a significant shift in the discourse surrounding racial representation in media with the inception of the #OscarsSoWhite movement, a response to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences persistent neglect and exclusion of minority voices in their nominations (Gutiérrez, 2022). This cultural awakening coincided with the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013 (OscarsSoWhite, n.d.). Founded by Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, the movement was catalyzed by the tragic death of Trayvon Martin and subsequent acquittal of his murderer, George Zimmerman (Valdivia, 2019). Against this backdrop of heightened racial consciousness, the 2017 Academy Awards witnessed the nomination of three documentaries centrally featuring Black narratives: Ava DuVernay's (2016) *13th*, Raoul Peck's (2016) *I Am Not Your Negro*, and Ezra Edelman and Caroline Waterlow's (2016) *OJ: Made in America*. Notably, this marked the first time that four Black directors had been nominated in the Best Documentary Feature category (Ulaby, 2017).

Extant literature has established a robust connection between documentary filmmaking as a rhetorical device and its capacity to engender social change (Moyano, 2011; Burgos, 2024; Semege, 2020; Finneran, 2015; Whiteman, 2004). Whiteman (2004) reports that film impact depends on funding, artistic quality, and diverse screening venues as a mode of political effect. Semege (2020) builds the case that understanding the sociocultural context of a social issue is crucial for assessing a documentary's potential impact. Without this context, Semege claims that a documentary's effectiveness as a civic intervention is largely speculative. Burgos' (2024) analysis of environmental and pro-vegan documentaries contends that the films analyzed employ similar persuasive technique including minimizing audience discomfort while encouraging positive emotions and emphasizing commitment and action over helplessness. Burgos argues through qualitative film analysis that these strategies combine cognitive and affective elements to

convince audiences and inspire personal and societal change within the eco-doc subgenre, as noted by the one of the film's becoming a top 10 most watched film on Netflix at the time of release.

In this essay, I extend these ideas through a discursive analysis of *13th, I Am Not Your Negro,* and *OJ: Made in America* to argue that they exemplify documentary film's potential to catalyze social change through a synergy of content, technical execution, cultural timing, and context. After offering a brief historical overview of American documentary cinema that has foregrounded the Black experience throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, I expand on a description and analysis of DuVernay's, Peck's, and Edelman and Waterlow's films. This analysis focuses on identifying and evaluating the key themes and technical devices that contributed to their contemporary relevance and critical acclaim. However, I also argue that the films' efficacy stem not only from thematic resonance and persuasive filmmaking techniques, but *also* from their emergence during a period of heightened cultural awareness, which influenced their reception.

This confluence of artistic vision and societal readiness demonstrates the complex interplay between documentary filmmaking and social movements, highlighting how these works both reflect and shape public discourse on critical issues. The essay concludes by extrapolating from these findings to offer insights and recommendations for future filmmakers engaged in the crucial work of documenting and addressing racial issues through the medium of film. This essay elucidates how these documentaries exemplify the potential of the medium to not only reflect but actively participate in social change, and how future documentarians may leverage both filmmaking technique and a cultural moment in their own work.

Historical Context of Documentary Filmmaking on Race in the United States

Filmmaking has long been integral in documenting and challenging the social realities of racial dynamics in the United States. The roots of this tradition can be traced back to the early 20th century, when pioneering filmmakers began using the medium to expose societal injustices and raise awareness about the brutalities faced by Black communities in the South and across the United States. The historical context that has shaped the tradition of documentary filmmaking on race in the United States spans over a century of cinematic evolution. This rich lineage provides context for contemporary works, and by tracing the evolution of these documentaries, we can better understand how current documentaries both draw from and innovate upon established practices.

Race films, produced predominantly from the 1910s to the 1940s, serve as pivotal artifacts in this lineage. Produced with Black casts for Black audiences by both Black and White filmmakers, these films often focused on the everyday experiences, struggles, and aspirations of Black Americans. These works offered a counter-narrative to the derogatory depictions created by early White filmmakers, providing more nuanced representations of Black life, helping to "define black identity," thus laying an essential groundwork for subsequent documentary efforts (Lupack, 2013, p. 11).

One of the earliest and most influential figures in this context was Oscar Micheaux, whose works in the 1920s and 1930s set a precedent for using film as a means of social activism. Micheaux's films portrayed multifaceted Black characters navigating the intersections of race, class, and ambition in early 20th century America. While highlighting resilience against systemic oppression, his work also grappled with internal community conflicts and the moral ambiguities faced by individuals striving for success within a racist society. As Bernstein (2004) notes,

Micheaux's works "drew upon whatever personal experiences and storylines he felt would amount to a compelling narrative compatible with his view about the place and conduct of black in America" (p.8). Siomopouolos (2006) argues that Micheaux's (1920) *Within Our Gates* foils D.W. Griffith's (1915) *Birth of a Nation* by directly confronting Griffith's insidious racial propaganda with a counter-narrative that focuses on the brutality of racialized sexual violence and lynching in Black communities. *Within Our Gates* provided an unflinching look at the pervasive hypocrisy and injustice circulated by *Birth of a Nation*, serving as a direct challenge to the prejudiced lens of early cinema. Although Micheaux was not a documentarian, his narrative style laid the groundwork for future filmmakers who would adopt documentary techniques to depict real-life racial issues.

Although often overshadowed by Micheaux's work in this era, Spencer Williams also contributed significantly to the racial discourse of early 20th century Black life. Williams' most notable production, *The Blood of Jesus* (1941), merged religious allegory with social commentary, depicting the moral and spiritual challenges faced by Black Americans. His work invoked a profound spiritual and social consciousness that resonated deeply with Black audiences. As Jacqueline Stewart notes in her lecture on Williams, however, *The Blood of Jesus* was not immune to White cultural influences, as Williams spent much of his career intersecting with White filmmakers as an actor and producer (TIFF Originals, 2013, 5:14). His films, while deeply rooted in the Black experience, often negotiated the tensions between cultural authenticity and commercial viability within the racially segregated cinematic landscape. Collectively, the efforts of Micheaux, Williams, and their contemporaries set a powerful precedent for utilizing film as a tool for racial critique and advocacy (Butters & Gerald, 2000).

Documentary filmmaking, emerging alongside these early narrative works from Black filmmakers, assumed a critical role in capturing authentic Black experiences. Zora Neale Hurston, though primarily known for her novels and anthropological work, also made significant contributions to early documentary filmmaking. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Hurston recorded ethnographic footage in the American South, capturing African American folk traditions, religious practices, and daily life. Her work, while not widely seen at the time, represents some of the earliest documentary efforts by a Black filmmaker to authentically portray Black culture (Caddoo, 2012). Hurston's approach was groundbreaking in its insider perspective, contrasting sharply with the often exoticized or stereotypical portrayals of Black life in dominant media of the era. Her films, rediscovered decades later, provide invaluable visual documentation of African American communities and cultural practices of the time.

As the end of Jim Crow and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement offered more opportunities for Black filmmakers to capture their own experiences, a new wave of documentarians emerged in the 1950s and 1960s to document the movement. These films captured the struggles and triumphs of the movement, offering firsthand accounts of protests, marches, and the daily realities of racial discrimination. Madeline Anderson, often recognized as the first Black woman to direct a syndicated TV series, made significant contributions to documentary filmmaking during the Civil Rights era. Her groundbreaking work includes "Integration Report 1" (1960), which documented the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement, and "I Am Somebody" (1970), which chronicled the 1969 Charleston hospital workers' strike. Anderson's films were notable for their unflinching portrayal of racial injustice and their focus on the experiences of ordinary people involved in the struggle for equality. Her approach combined journalistic rigor with a deeply personal perspective, often featuring interviews with

activists and community members. As a pioneer in both documentary filmmaking and television production, Anderson's work not only captured crucial moments in the fight for civil rights but also paved the way for future generations of Black filmmakers.

Anderson also contributed to the creation of the *Black Journal* series on WNET (1968-1977) (Library of Congress, American Archive of Public Broadcasting, n.d.), which aimed to address issues pertinent to the Black community while also engaging with White audiences (Wormser, 2004). Although initially under White editorial control, the series saw a pivotal change when Black staff members went on strike in 1968, eventually leading to key leadership positions being filled by Black creators, such as William Greaves, Lou Potter, and Anderson herself. This series and other similar efforts such as *Soul!* (1968-1973) (WNET) and *Say Brother* (1968-1982) (WGBH) opened doors for Black filmmakers to tell their stories, their way. Programs like *Black Journal* provided platforms for Black voices and stories during a pivotal time in American history, contributing to a more diverse media landscape and paving the way for future Black filmmakers and content creators.

Funding for *Black Journal*, which had already been significantly reduced, eventually ran out in the 1970s, which ended the series. Other Black filmmakers, such as Henry Hampton (*Eyes on the Prize,* 1987) and Marlon Riggs (*Ethnic Notions,* 1986) continued to create TV programming and documentary films about Black communities and concerns, capturing portraits of Black Americans during the Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement. Riggs' intersectionality as a Black, gay, educator, poet, and AIDS activist added a layer of complexity to the documentary filmmaking landscape. As Hamid (2002) notes, "The films for which he is best known, including his masterpiece, *Tongues Untied* [1989], explore what it means to be both gay and Black facing discrimination both from within and without the African American

community (p. 67). These works utilized archival footage, personal testimonials, and journalistic techniques to create a vivid record of both personal and historical events. These chronicles not only provided educational impact but also inspired future generations of Black filmmakers to uphold the tradition of storytelling underpinned by social justice themes.

Consequently, in the late 20th century Black filmmakers continued to expand documentary filmmaking; however, Black stories were also being told by a variety of filmmakers from intersectional identities. Spike Lee's *4 Little Girls* (1997) and Orlando Bagwell's *Malcolm X: Make it Plain (1994)* further ignited discourse on pivotal moments in Black history. Lee's film reignited interest in the 1963 Birmingham church bombing, leading to reopened investigations and, in 2000, the conviction of two former Klan members (Mapp, 2008). Bagwell's documentary contributed to a reassessment of Malcolm X's legacy, presenting a nuanced view of his political and religious evolution, which sparked academic debates about his lasting impact on Black political thought (Sales, 1994).These filmmakers not only documented critical moments and figures within the Civil Rights Movement; they also embedded a call for justice for Black Americans by employing powerful visuals and firsthand accounts of both tragedy and hope (Sales, 1994l; Rudolph, 1998).

By the early 21st century, documentary filmmaking had established itself as a medium for activism and education, in part by exploring more personal and nuanced narratives related to race. This is, of course, tied into a much bigger occurrence: the commercial viability of documentaries in movie theaters, thanks to Michael Moore, Werner Herzog, and other filmmakers whose efforts paved the way for wider distribution and audience engagement. This shift allowed for more diverse voices and perspectives to reach mainstream audiences, as streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime provided wider distribution channels for

documentaries that might have previously struggled to find theatrical release. Additionally, the growing popularity of social media platforms enabled filmmakers to engage with audiences directly via impact campaigns, promoting their work and sparking conversations around important social issues beyond traditional media outlets. Contemporary filmmakers have continued to tackle topics like systemic racism, police brutality, unjust incarceration, and White supremacy. Ava DuVernay's *13th* (2016) distinctly highlights the progression from past to present, examining the legacy of the Jim Crow laws and the evolution of systemic racism through the lens of the prison industrial complex. The film was produced and distributed by Netflix, marking a significant shift in how social justice documentaries reach audiences. This streaming platform approach allowed for widespread, immediate access, potentially increasing the film's impact and reach beyond theatrical or broadcast television distribution.

Filmmakers also continued to experiment with visual storytelling, incorporating more cinematic aesthetics and dramatization to engage viewers emotionally. For example, the use of animation in *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), directed by Raoul Peck, intertwines the narration of James Baldwin's unfinished manuscript with historical photographs and archival footage to convey a haunting yet enlightening chronicle of America’s race relations. Taubin (2017) notes, “The great achievement of *I Am Not Your Negro* is that it merges the factual rigor of documentary with the subjectivity, intimacy, and poetic expressivity of great fiction filmmaking” (p. 55). This technique emphasizes how documentary filmmaking has continued to incorporate and foreground artistic elements while maintaining its commitment to displaying images grounded in reality. Artistic elements in documentaries, especially those by Black filmmakers addressing racial issues, serve a dual purpose of engaging viewers emotionally while reinforcing factual content. These elements allow filmmakers to convey the lived experience of

racial injustice in ways that facts alone often cannot, while also subverting traditional documentary forms that may be rooted in White, Western perspectives. By engaging the boundaries of documentary form, Black filmmakers assert their artistic vision within a White-dominated genre, creating works that are both informative and emotionally resonant to some audiences.

Current documentary projects leverage visual complexity and innovative storytelling formats to create immersive and emotionally resonant narratives, deepen audience engagement, enhance a films' persuasive power, and potentially drive greater social impact. *How the Monuments Came Down* (2021) and *Atlanta's Missing and Murdered: The Lost Children* (2020) both offer intricate examinations of historical events and their contemporary impacts. *How the Monuments Came Down* (2021) employs a blend of archival footage, contemporary interviews, and dynamic drone shots to chronicle the removal of Confederate monuments in Richmond, Virginia. The film's time-lapse sequences of monument dismantling serve as a powerful visual metaphor for changing ideologies. *Atlanta's Missing and Murdered: The Lost Children* (2020) uses visual contrast to recount the unsolved killings of African American children in the 1980s, illuminating the societal negligence and racial bias that pervaded the investigation. The series interweaves grainy archival footage with modern interviews, while reenactments evoke the era's atmosphere. When the case is reopened decades later by Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, split-screen techniques juxtapose past evidence with new findings, visually representing the fresh perspective and re-examination of the evidence that had previously remained overlooked or dismissed. These documentaries demonstrate how filmmakers use advanced visual techniques to engage audiences with complex historical narratives and their ongoing relevance.

Race remains a critical and enduring subject for documentary filmmakers, reflecting its central role in shaping American society and culture. The focus on issues of race as exemplified in the films briefly described above serves both to make visible the legacy of past struggles and achievements and to educate new generations on ongoing systemic injustices. In doing so, contemporary documentary filmmaking that takes up the issue of race not only pays homage to these historical roots but also reflects a recognition of the genre's capacity to explore these issues and to offer examinations of race relations that other media forms might struggle to capture.

One way to understand this brief historiography of documentary filmmaking connected to race in America is to conceptualize it as a rhizomatic structure of interconnected, multidirectional developments rather than a linear progression. This complex network of thematic and technical evolutions more aptly resembles the intricate roots of a tree system, characterized by layered, non-hierarchical, and often asynchronous and nodal growth patterns. Such a conceptualization acknowledges the simultaneous existence of divergent approaches, recursive influences, and multifaceted innovations (Shafik, 2023). These films, as explicated above, engage in a dynamic, dialogic relationship with their predecessors and contemporaries drawing sustenance from their historical roots while simultaneously extending into unexplored territories of representation and methodology. This rhizomatic mode illustrates the genre's capacity for adaptive resilience and innovative responsiveness to the ever-shifting landscape of racial discourse in America. Consequently, this conceptualization facilitates a more comprehensive appreciation of how documentary filmmaking continues to offer a vital, multifaceted medium for engaging with the persistent and mutable issues of race in the American context.

Key Themes in Documentary Films on Race, Power, and Memory

Several recurring themes have emerged in documentaries that seek to address the multifaceted issues surrounding race, power, and memory in the United States. The documentaries *13th, I Am Not Your Negro,* and *OJ: Made in America* exemplify these themes. Analyzing these films through thematic categories provides a productive way to examine how they draw on historical precedents and experiences. Key themes that emerge include systemic racism and its historical roots, the power of narrative and media representation, and the intersectionality of race, class, and justice. There is significant crossover between these themes, as each film weaves together multiple perspectives on racial dynamics in America. For instance, while *13th* focuses primarily on the evolution of systemic racism through the lens of mass incarceration, it also touches on media representation and historical memory. Similarly, *I Am Not Your Negro* and *OJ: Made in America* explore personal narratives within broader historical contexts, illustrating the interconnectedness and ongoing complexity of racial issues present in the United States

This thematic and stylistic interconnectedness invites a deeper examination of how each film employs specific cinematic techniques to convey its message. By analyzing the use of archival footage, interview methods, and narrative structures in 1*3th, I Am Not Your Negro, and OJ: Made in America,* we can better understand how form and content interact to create compelling narratives about race in America. Furthermore, exploring the cultural context of their release provides insight into how these documentaries both reflected and shaped public discourse on racial issues. This multifaceted analysis allows viewers to appreciate the films not only as individual works but as part of a larger conversation about race, power, and social change in contemporary American society.

Systemic Racism and Its Historical Roots

A central theme that emerges across *13th, I Am Not Your Negro,* and *OJ: Made in America* is the exploration of systemic racism and its deep historical roots in American society. Each film approaches this theme from a unique perspective, offering a lens on how racism has been institutionalized and perpetuated throughout American history.

In *13th*, director Ava DuVernay presents a visceral examination of the prison-industrial complex and crafts an argument about the use of mass incarceration as a means of oppression and racial control and its direct connection to slavery. The film's title refers to the *13th* Amendment, which abolished slavery except as punishment for a crime. DuVernay's film argues that this loophole has been exploited to perpetuate a new form of slavery through mass incarceration, which has become one of its "afterlives" (Hartman, 2007). Through a series of interviews with scholars, activists, and politicians, coupled with archival footage and statistical data, the film traces a clear line from slavery through Jim Crow, the War on Drugs, and into the current era of mass incarceration. Lopez-Littleton and Woodley (2018) express that the film is "a carefully designed product of information; reflection; music; and visual art" (p. 416). Toquet (2022) notes Duvernay's films function by "reestablishing another perspective on history so that we start seeing it as a fabric within which a chorus of plural voices converge" (p. 44). DuVernay's work illustrates how systemic racism has evolved and adapted over time, maintaining its grip on American society through changing legal and social structures.

Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* takes a different approach, using the words of James Baldwin to examine racism throughout American history. Based on Baldwin's unfinished manuscript "Remember This House," the film weaves together Baldwin's personal reflections, historical footage, and contemporary imagery to create a sweeping narrative of racial oppression

in America. Peck's film demonstrates the ways that racism permeates all aspects of American life, from politics and law enforcement to popular culture and personal relationships. Hanna (2023) notes that "…this larger narrative and patching of discursive ploys and visual imageries offers reflection on race relations in the United States from early slavery up to the present day. Imperative to this claim is the hold history has on who the people of the United States are today" (p. 3). By juxtaposing Baldwin's observations from the Civil Rights era with modern-day footage, the film underscores the persistence of systemic racism and the ongoing relevance of Baldwin's insights.

OJ: Made in America, directed by Ezra Edelman, uses the story of O.J. Simpson as a lens through which to examine racial tensions in Los Angeles and its historical context. While ostensibly about Simpson's rise to fame and subsequent fall from grace, the five-part film delves into the racial history of Los Angeles, exploring topics such as housing discrimination, police brutality, and the relationship between the LAPD and the city's Black community. By situating Simpson's story within this broader historical context, Edelman's work illustrates how systemic racism shaped not only Simpson's life and trial but also the reactions to it from both Black and White communities. Griffin (2018) argues that "…ESPN anchors its storytelling with the entirety of Simpson's fame and the sociopolitical elements that hailed societal investment in his life and trial as racial spectacles." (p. 365). The concept of spectacle, as theorized by Guy Debord (1967), refers to the way social relationships are mediated through images and representations. In the context of race, a racial spectacle occurs when racial identities, conflicts, or stereotypes are dramatized and commodified for public consumption. Griffin's framing of Simpson's life and trial as "racial spectacles" highlights how media coverage and public fascination with these

events both reflected and reinforced existing racial tensions and perceptions in American society, turning complex racial issues into sensationalized narratives for mass consumption.

These analyses of *13th, I Am Not Your Negro,* and *OJ: Made in America* demonstrate how each film uniquely approaches the theme of systemic racism, offering multifaceted perspectives on its historical roots and contemporary manifestations. By employing different narrative strategies and focal points, the documentaries collectively paint a comprehensive picture of racial injustice in America. This multi-angled examination allows viewers to understand the pervasive nature of systemic racism across various aspects of society, from the criminal justice system to media representation. Moreover, by connecting historical events to present-day issues, these films underscore the persistence and adaptability of racial oppression, challenging audiences to recognize its ongoing impact and the need for continued efforts towards equality and justice, particularly those from privileged backgrounds, to critically examine their own positionality within these systems.

Intersectionality of Race, Class, and Justice

Another theme present across *13th*, *I Am Not Your Negro*, and *OJ: Made in America* is their portrayal of the complex interplay between race, class, and justice in American society. These documentaries, each in their unique way, illustrate how these factors intersect to shape individual experiences and broader societal structures, contributing to the ongoing dialogue about racial inequality in the United States.

In *13th*, Ava DuVernay presents a searing examination of how race and class intersect within the American criminal justice system. Building on the historical context established earlier in the film, DuVernay demonstrates how the US prison system has become a modern manifestation of systemic racism, disproportionately targeting and affecting low-income

communities of color. The film argues that this system effectively creates a new form of racial and economic subjugation, echoing the themes of historical oppression discussed in earlier sections of this analysis by highlighting the disproportionate impact of drug laws on Black communities, particularly through the "three strikes" policy. DuVernay uses statistics and expert testimony to show how these laws, ostensibly race-neutral, have led to mass incarceration of Black individuals for non-violent offenses, effectively continuing a cycle of economic and social marginalization reminiscent of earlier forms of racial oppression. Aseltine (2018) argues that *13th* delves into the more recent origins of mass incarceration, highlighting how both the Republican and Democratic parties employed racially coded language about crime to advocate for tougher criminal justice policies and reduced social welfare. The film illustrates how these "law and order" strategies, emerging during the civil rights movement, reframed demands for equal rights as criminal activities, using archival footage to demonstrate the connection between political rhetoric and the targeting of Black communities. *13th* demonstrates the intersectionality of race and class in the criminal justice system, showing how policies ostensibly aimed at crime reduction disproportionately impact low-income communities of color, perpetuating a cycle of economic and social marginalization that reinforces existing racial hierarchies.

I Am Not Your Negro offers an exploration of intersectionality through the lens of James Baldwin's essay in a visual format. The film expands on the themes of racial representation and personal narrative that I've previously identified as key elements in the documentary tradition. However, Corber (2017) argues that Peck's film, while successfully reviving Baldwin's voice for contemporary audiences, inadvertently highlights the challenges in fully representing Baldwin's multifaceted legacy. The documentary prioritizes Baldwin's racial identity over his queer identity, largely overlooking the writer's discussions of homosexuality in his works. The film

mentions Baldwin's sexuality only once, in the context of FBI surveillance, rather than exploring its influence on his writing and worldview (Corber, 2017). This selective approach fails to capture a portion of the intersectionality of Baldwin's experiences and insights, particularly how his sexuality informed his understanding of race, masculinity, and power in American society. By focusing primarily on Baldwin's racial commentary, Peck's film does not convey the intricacies and continued relevance of Baldwin's intersectional critique of American culture and politics.

OJ: Made in America provides a fascinating analysis of how wealth, fame, and racial identity intersect, particularly in the context of the American justice system. The documentary expands on themes of media representation and personal narrative that I've identified previously. However, Edelman's work also illustrates how Simpson's success and assimilation into wealthy, White circles initially seemed to transcend racial barriers, only for his racial identity to become central to his murder trial. Parker (2019) argues that Simpson's case exemplifies the dynamics of tokenization in American society. She contends that Simpson was initially embraced as a "token" successful Black man, accepted by White society until his murder accusation in 1994. This event, Parker suggests, led to the revocation of Simpson's token status, revealing the fragility of such positions and the persistent influence of racial stereotypes. This analysis aligns with Edelman's portrayal in *OJ: Made in America* which explores how Simpson's public image shifted dramatically during the trial, exposing underlying racial tensions and challenging the myth of a post-racial America (Griffin, 2018).

The Power of Narrative and Media Representation

While the exploration of systemic racism and its historical roots provides a foundation for explaining racial dynamics in America, these films offer another theme that reveals the

intersection of the Black experience: the power of narrative and media representation in shaping public understanding of race in America. As Eitzen (1995) suggests, quoting Wolterstoff, films "project a world," where they craft a visual experience of the imagination (p. 85). This concept underscores how documentaries construct a particular view of reality, inviting viewers to engage with and potentially adopt new perspectives on social issues. Each film offers different vantage points from which to examine how media representation has shaped cultural understandings of the impact of racialized stereotypes and narratives on American society.

13th utilizes a combination of statistics and expert interviews to challenge mainstream media narratives about crime, punishment, and race in America. The film presents a barrage of data, often through striking visual graphics, to illustrate the disproportionate impact of mass incarceration on Black communities. Dietrich (2019) describes data visualizations for the director as "…a way to express the scale and impact of racism." (p. 230) The author notes how the film employs dramatic black and white imagery of the U.S. flag, with the white stripes filled by tiny silhouettes of shackled prisoners, creating a haunting visual metaphor for incarceration in the "Land of the Free." Dietrich further explains that DuVernay uses these graphics to illustrate the exponential growth of the prison population, particularly among Black men, from Nixon's "Law & Order" era through Reagan and Clinton's "War on Drugs." The stylized numerical representations effectively highlight the disproportionate impact of these policies on Black communities, contrasting the number of incarcerated Black men against the overall Black male population in the United States. These visual techniques not only convey challenging statistical information in an accessible way but also compel viewers to see and confront racial disparities in the American criminal justice system. As Hoffman (2016) reviewed the film, "*The 13th* makes its case with alacrity, clarity and a dash of pizazz," and as Ide (2016) explains, "More effective is

the use of text: salient facts and figures are branded across the frame, searing them into our memory.” These textual elements not only make complex data more accessible but also serve as a powerful rhetorical tool, asking viewers to visually confront the realities of racial disparities in the American criminal justice system.

I Am Not Your Negro harnesses the power of James Baldwin's prose as a lens for understanding race in America, using Baldwin's unfinished manuscript as its backbone. Peck's innovative approach to temporality and archival usage creates a unique visual tapestry that challenges conventional documentary storytelling. As Chrichlow (2017) notes, Peck "destabilizes" conventional chronology, "heightening the sense that American existence is brutally resistant to self-reflection" (p. 12).

Peck achieves this destabilization through an interweaving of archival footage and contemporary images. He juxtaposes "black-and-white archival footage of civil rights–era violence" with "recent television news depicting urban rebellions in response to numerous police killings of young African American citizens" (Chrichlow, 2017, p. 12). This technique not only highlights the continuity of racial issues across time but also disrupts the typical linear narrative of progress often presented in historical documentaries. Crucially, Peck's unfettered access to Baldwin's personal archives allowed him to present a significantly nuanced and intimate portrayal of the writer. By incorporating previously unseen photographs, letters, and notes, Peck challenges the public persona of Baldwin, offering viewers a more complex thinker.

The film's conclusion exemplifies Peck's use of archival and contemporary footage. It presents "a visceral rapid montage of state violence... dramatically intercut with a series of archival black-and-white photographs" of dignified Black Americans, before transitioning to "an assiduously composed present in the form of a vibrantly colored tableau of well-appointed

contemporary black women and men" (Chrichlow, 2017, p. 12). This visual strategy not only demonstrates the enduring relevance of Baldwin's voice but also creates a dialogue between past and present, challenging viewers to consider their own role in the ongoing struggle for racial justice with Baldwin's final question in the film: "What is your role in this country?"

OJ: Made in America also offers a complicated exploration of media's role in shaping public perception of race and celebrity. The film meticulously examines how media coverage influenced public opinion throughout O.J. Simpson's career and trial by demonstrating how Simpson's carefully crafted public image as an affable celebrity who had "transcended" race was shattered by the murder trial. Director Ezra Edelman explains, "'Because of the wider canvas, I didn't have to just tell that story that took place in 1994 and '95…I could explore the history of Los Angeles, the migration of the black community to the city, its integration and this inner play between that community and the LAPD'" (Goodfellow, 2016, p. 1). Specifically, Edelman ties OJ's trial to the Rodney King beatings, highlighting how the acquittal of the officers involved in King's case set the stage for Simpson's trial. The documentary explores how media coverage of both events shaped public perception and fueled racial tensions, as Simpson moved from celebrated athlete to accused murderer. Griffin (2018) argues that ESPN's portrayal of Simpson initially focused on his athletic achievements and appeal to White audiences, framing him as a "Good Black Man" who embraced a color-blind ideology. This framing aligned with dominant narratives that claim racial equality while privileging Whiteness. As Simpson's public image shifted dramatically during the trial, the documentary highlights how media coverage exposed underlying racial tensions and challenged the myth of a post-racial America (Griffin, 2018).

This examination of the technical and stylistic approaches employed in *13th*, *I Am Not Your Negro*, and *OJ: Made in America* reveals how documentary filmmakers leverage specific

cinematographic techniques, editing strategies, and narrative structures to effectively convey their messages about race in America. The use of archival footage grounds these films in historical context while allowing for reinterpretation of past events. Interview techniques and subject representation humanize complex issues and provide authenticity. Varied narrative structures, from chronological to non-linear, shape how audiences engage with and interpret the information presented. These technical choices work in concert with the thematic content to create impactful, visually complex narratives that reflect each filmmaker's unique vision. By analyzing these elements, we gain deeper insights into how form and content interact in these documentaries to create compelling narratives about race in America.

Overlapping Technical and Methodological Approaches

While these documentaries share thematic similarities in their exploration of race in America, *13th*, *I Am Not Your Negro,* and *OJ: Made in America* each employ unique technical and methodological approaches to shape their audience's engagement, perceptions and experiences of the source material. In this examination of the technical and stylistic choices employed in these films, I will explore how each filmmaker leverages specific cinematographic techniques, editing strategies, and narrative structures to convey their intended messaging. By analyzing these technical elements, we can gain deeper insights into how form and content interact in these documentaries to create narratives about race in America. These films demonstrate how documentary conventions can be adapted and innovated to create narratives that reflect their specific subjects and directorial visions, and furthermore how directorial choices impact the outcome of the film.

The Use of Archival Footage

Archival footage plays a crucial role in rooting any documentary within its historical context, providing a visual link to past events and lending authenticity to the narrative (Nichols, 2017). Archival footage use rose to prominence in the independent documentary movement of the 1970s and 1980s; filmmakers often employ various techniques to integrate these materials, such as intercutting archival scenes with contemporary interviews or blending them with present-day reenactments (McLane, 2012). DuVernay's *13th* (2016) utilizes archival footage alongside modern interviews to draw a physical timeline connecting past legislative impacts to present day incarceration, enhancing the story's urgency for reform. In one particularly intense scene, archival speeches of Bill Clinton admitting his 1994 Crime Bill hurt Black communities and families is juxtaposed against interviews with Black politicians, authors and academics reacting to the footage and more broadly to the effects of the policy. Malkia Cyril, Executive Director for the Center for Media Justice explains, “We can’t ignore the reality of force here. The policies that Bill Clinton put forward, you know, mandatory minimums, three strikes, those were a use of political force. They forced millions of people who would not otherwise be in prison today into prison. They forced families to be broken. They forced children to live without their parents. That’s what happened” (Duvernay, 2016, 57:54). This juxtaposition of archival footage and contemporary commentary highlights the longevity of past policies on present-day racial inequalities and has the potential to move the viewer since without the archival footage of Clinton’s speech, Cyril’s comments would not have the same emotional impact for some viewers.

The use of archival footage offers several strengths to documentary filmmaking. It lends historical accuracy and authority to the narrative, enables viewers to witness actual events

firsthand, and can evoke powerful emotional responses through the immediacy of visual history (de Jong, 2012). Archival footage also allows filmmakers to critically re-examine and reinterpret past events for the viewer through a contemporary lens, often challenging established interpretations and revealing new ideas (de Jong, 2012). McLaughlin (2024) expresses that "film challenges the archive on what will be remembered and preserved, ontologically entwined with what should be remembered and preserved" (p. 4). However, this approach also has limitations. The quality of archival material can be inconsistent; furthermore, archival materials for an event may be all-together unavailable. Additionally, the context and original intent of archival footage may be lost or misinterpreted when repurposed for a new film (Auguiste, 2015). Auguiste (2015) elaborates, "As a result, these set of utilitarian functions ascribed to documentary film practice have assumed a hegemonic presence that serves the narrative objectives of the form; or as is often the case, the filmmakers' political and ideological interpretation of historical events or the authorial position of the institutions underwriting the production such a TV network" (p. 11). This potential for misinterpretation or recontextualization of archival footage raises ethical concerns about representation and historical accuracy, which can potentially impact the documentary's credibility.

Interview Techniques and Subject Representation

Although many films do utilize archival footage as their base footage, documentaries centered on issues of race in the United States often utilize interviews as a staple to provide personal perspectives and insights into the specific subjects they cover. Interview methods in documentary often includes focusing on open-ended questions that allow interviewees to share their thoughts and experiences in their own words (Nichols, 2017). As noted previously many films use the stories of "everyday people" or as Nichols (2017) explains, "It is also part of a

broad tendency to tell history from below, or history as lived and experienced by ordinary people, rather than history from above, or history based on the deeds of leaders and the knowledge of experts" (p. 21). This approach humanizes complex issues, making them more relatable and accessible to viewers.

Many documentary films utilize interviews; however, different filmmakers may employ various interview techniques to elicit "authentic" responses, such as creating a comfortable environment for subjects, using open-ended questions, and allowing for moments of silence and reflection. The visual presentation of interviews also plays a crucial role in shaping audience perception. Choices in framing, lighting, and setting can influence how viewers interpret the subject's credibility and emotional state, ultimately impacting the overall narrative and messaging of the documentary. For example, interviews with prosecutors, defense attorneys, jurors, friends, family members, and cultural commentators structurally undergird *O.J.: Made in America* (2016). In the series, the visuality of the interview functions as a primary aesthetic by foregrounding key figures involved in O.J. Simpson's life and 1994-1995 murder trial. The film's visual style emphasizes both classic half-body interview framing intercut with close-up shots of participants, allowing viewers to scrutinize facial expressions and emotional reactions (Chisholm, 2023). Griffin (2018) describes the opening scene of the film, "Responding to questions at an inmate hearing, Simpson appears quite comfortable until his eyes widen with loud disbelief and quiet hostility when he is asked about his age at the time of his first arrest" (p. 365). This visual technique allows viewers to intimately observe Simpson's reactions, drawing the audience into the narrative surrounding Simpson's life and trial. Edelman's approach demonstrates how interview techniques can be used to build tension, as the viewer is pulled through the OJ trial and subsequent stories that surround the case.

Narrative Structures and Storytelling Techniques

While interview techniques play a crucial role in shaping the visuality of a documentary, they are just one element in a broader array of storytelling strategies employed by filmmakers. The way creators structure their narrative patterns can be equally impactful in conveying difficult to visualize ideas about race, memory, and society. These narrative structures can range from chronological retellings to more experimental, non-linear approaches. Documentarians often organize their film into “acts,” not unlike theater productions and scripted films (Chisholm, 2023). The choice of narrative pattern significantly impacts how audiences perceive and interpret the information presented, which ultimately shapes their understanding of the events and experiences presented. For instance, *OJ: Made in America* (2016) employs a largely chronological structure, tracing O.J. Simpson's life from his early days as a football star through his murder trial and beyond. This linear approach allows Edelman to build a comprehensive narrative that contextualizes Simpson's story; the film is divided into distinct chronological segments, each focusing on a different period of Simpson's life and the corresponding social context, effectively using a more traditional "act" structure.

In contrast, non-linear narratives, such as those employed in Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), offer a more fluid, oscillating feeling as they move their exploration of themes and ideas. Peck's film weaves together James Baldwin's unfinished manuscript with archival footage and contemporary imagery, creating a tapestry that connects past and present racial issues. As Chisolm (2023) explains, “…too much narrative structure risks conveying a perception of inauthenticity—that the documentary has been scripted” (p. 37). Peck explains his choice to only use Baldwin’s written words, pulled from manuscripts and personal writings, rather than subject matter experts in a 2017 interview with *James Baldwin Review*:

> From the start, the film was not about "giving" anybody the word: Not scholars, not experts, not activists, not family, not fellow writers. From the start, it was about putting James Baldwin's own words up on the frontline: strong, raw, and without interpreters. Making films is about exercising a kind of power. To include anybody in the film is allowing him/her the power to be a kind of "translator," and I wanted to avoid that. I didn't want anyone or their words to be above Baldwin's. I didn't feel, and I still don't feel, that anyone should be allowed to "explain" Baldwin more than Baldwin did himself. Furthermore, I wanted his words of combat, rather than the lethargy of cold analysis by others. I had to protect myself from all the self-proclaimed "insiders," not from their wise advice, but to allow myself the freedom to go "all the way," wherever that would be, both politically and artistically (Mirakhour, 2017, p. 208).

Peck's fragmented yet cohesive approach in *I Am Not Your Negro* employs intercutting to weave together disparate time periods, juxtaposing archival footage with contemporary imagery. This technique, as Billinge (2017) notes, allows events to unfold in interwoven action, encouraging viewers to draw connections across different eras. By visually bridging past and present, Peck's intercutting strategy not only illustrates the multifaceted and complex nature of social issues but also emphasizes the persistent patterns of racial inequality throughout American history.

Cultural Context: 2015-2017 and the Impact on Documentary Reception

The period from 2015 to 2017 marked a significant shift in the discourse surrounding racial representation and justice in the United States. This era saw the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, increased awareness of police brutality against Black Americans, and growing discussions about systemic racism across various sectors of society. It was within this context of

heightened racial consciousness that *13th*, *I Am Not Your Negro*, and *OJ: Made in America* were released, significantly influencing their reception and impact.

2015 saw the inception of the #OscarsSoWhite movement, a response to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' persistent neglect and exclusion of minority voices in their nominations (Gutiérrez, 2022). The #OscarsSoWhite movement began in 2015 when all 20 acting nominees for the Academy Awards were White, sparking widespread criticism and debate about diversity in Hollywood. This lack of representation reflected long-standing systemic issues within the film industry. In response to the growing public pressure, the Academy implemented significant changes to increase diversity among its membership and in its nomination process (OscarsSoWhite, n.d.). These changes included doubling the number of women and people of color in the Academy by 2020, limiting voting status to active members of the film industry, and adding new governor seats to improve diversity in leadership. As a result, the Academy has seen a gradual increase in the diversity of both its membership and its nominees in subsequent years, though critics argue that progress remains slow and inconsistent (Borum Chattoo, 2018).

This cultural awakening coincided with the ongoing momentum of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which was founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer (Valdivia, 2019). What began as a social media hashtag quickly evolved into a nationwide movement against systemic racism and police brutality targeting Black Americans. BLM gained significant momentum in 2014 after the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, sparking widespread protests and bringing issues of racial injustice to the forefront of national discourse (Black Lives Matter, n.d). The movement has since influenced policy debates, prompted institutional reforms, and heightened awareness of racial inequalities across various sectors of society (Hanna, 2023).

Furthermore, all three documentaries were released in the weeks following the 2016 election cycle (Taubin, 2017). The 2016 U.S. presidential election was one of the most contentious and divisive in recent history. It was marked by heated debates over immigration, racial tensions, and allegations of Russian interference, culminating in the unexpected victory of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton, which further polarized the nation and intensified discussions about race, identity, and political polarization in America. DuVernay capitalizes on this tension by including a striking juxtaposition of historical and contemporary footage. Dietrich (2019) describes a pivotal scene where DuVernay combines footage of Donald Trump's 2016 campaign speech with archival images of violence against Black reporter L. Alex Wilson during the 1957 desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. This juxtaposition creates a powerful "sound bridge" that invites viewers to reinterpret the historical footage considering contemporary political rhetoric. By pairing Trump's voice with images of Wilson being attacked by White supremacists, DuVernay draws a direct line between past racial violence and present-day political discourse. This technique not only highlights the persistence of racial tensions in America but also asks viewers to consider how the language of White privilege continues to manifest in modern political contexts. Through this creative editing choice, DuVernay demonstrates the cyclical nature of racial conflict in America and underscores the film's broader argument about the ongoing impacts of systemic racism.

These social movements created a cultural climate that was particularly interesting for the release of these films. Given this cultural moment, some audiences were primed for deeper explorations of America's racial history and its contemporary manifestations. Moyano (2011) argues that the production aspects of documentary films, such as a handheld production style, community storytelling, and the use of non-actors, are crucial for creating “authentic

representations" that engage viewers and contribute to social change, while Burgos (2023) argues that documentaries (the author utilizes the examples of *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy)* contribute to social change by aiming to raise awareness, evoke empathy, engage viewers emotionally, and inspire action. Semege (2020) asserts that the effectiveness of documentaries in addressing social issues is dependent on cultural attuning and rhetorical strategies. The author uses the documentary *Forsaken* to test these strategies and demonstrated through pre-screening questionnaires and guided post-screening discussions that the film successfully elicited empathy, raised awareness, and triggered commitments from the audience to address the social issue of neglected adolescent orphans. (Semege, 2020).

The cultural climate of 2016-2017 provided an interesting environment for these documentaries to resonate with audiences. The convergence of #OscarsSoWhite, Black Lives Matter, and post-election tensions created a heightened awareness of racial issues, priming some viewers to engage critically with these films. Rhetoric offers the concept of "kairos" to describe the opportune moment for persuasive discourse (Gallagher, 2023). In this context, the release of these documentaries represented a kairotic moment, where the films' messages aligned in a moment with some audiences' readiness to engage with racial narratives. This symbiosis enhanced the documentaries' potential to influence public opinion and drive social change. By leveraging this cultural momentum, the filmmakers were able to create works that not only resonated with their audiences but also contributed to the ongoing national conversation about race, identity, and justice in America.

Conclusion

Documentary filmmaking on race in the United States has played a crucial role in shaping public discourse and preserving historical memory of racial issues. From the early works of

pioneers like Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams to contemporary documentarians such as Ava DuVernay, Raoul Peck, and Ezra Edelman, films have consistently served as powerful tools for exploring, exposing, and confronting the intricate racial dynamics and politics that have shaped American society.

The analysis of *13th*, *I Am Not Your Negro*, and *OJ: Made in America* reveals how these films exemplify documentary cinema's potential to capitalize on a "kairotic" moment: through a synergy of content, technical execution, cultural timing, and context. These works demonstrate a sophisticated engagement with key themes such as systemic racism and its historical roots, the intersectionality of race, class, and justice, and the power of narrative and media representation. These themes reflect the ongoing struggle for racial equality and justice in America, demonstrating that while progress has been made, significant challenges persist.

Technically, these documentarians have employed a range of approaches to bring these stories to life. The use of archival footage has been instrumental in connecting past and present, providing visual evidence of historical events and their ongoing impact. DuVernay's use of data visualization in *13th*, Peck's non-linear narrative structure in *I Am Not Your Negro*, and Edelman's comprehensive chronological approach in *OJ: Made in America* showcase the diverse strategies filmmakers use to engage audiences and convey complex ideas about race in America.

The cultural context in which these documentaries were produced and received played a crucial role in their impact. The period from 2015 to 2017, marked by movements like #OscarsSoWhite and Black Lives Matter, created a heightened awareness of racial issues that primed some audiences for deeper engagement with these films. This demonstrates how these three documentaries' reception was influenced by cultural attuning and the opportune moment of their release. Understanding the interplay between cultural context and documentary is crucial

for future analyses, as it highlights how films rely not only on their content or technique, but also on their ability to resonate with and capitalize on existing social movements and public discourse.

Documentaries on race in America serve not only as historical records but as active participants in the ongoing struggle for racial justice and equality. They challenge some viewers to confront uncomfortable truths, empathize with diverse experiences, and critically examine their own beliefs and societal structures. By continuing to tell these stories, filmmakers contribute to a broader understanding of America's challenging racial history and present, while also playing a crucial role in the ongoing work of social change and racial justice. The enduring power of documentary film as a tool for social change lies in its ability to not only reflect but actively shape public discourse on critical issues of race, power, and memory in American society.

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Voices of Union: Dissecting Master and Counter Narratives in *Seeing the South*

Abstract

This article examines the interplay of master and counter narratives in the documentary "Seeing the South," analyzing their role in shaping Union County's cultural identity and collective memory. Through rhetorical analysis of interviews and events depicted in the film, the study reveals how dominant historical perspectives, rooted in Lost Cause ideology and Whiteness, are both reinforced and challenged by marginalized voices. The research highlights how the documentary serves as a platform for interrogating Whiteness and exposing power dynamics in historical storytelling. By juxtaposing conflicting accounts, the film creates a space for dialogue about Union County's complex past and present. This study posits that integrating these counter narratives is crucial for community transformation, enhancing cultural literacy, and fostering reconciliation. The article concludes by discussing implications for education, public commemoration, and social cohesion, emphasizing the necessity for an inclusive approach to historical narratives. Furthermore, it offers insights into how communities can engage with contested histories and work towards a more equitable representation of their past and present, contributing to broader discussions on collective memory and identity formation in post-conflict societies.

Keywords: Master Narratives, Counter Narratives, Collective Memory, Rhetoric, Race.

Racially marginalized groups have experienced life vastly differently from their White counterparts; some of these counter experiences entail struggles for recognition and representation, enduring systemic inequalities in housing, education, and healthcare, confronting racial profiling and disproportionate rates of incarceration, and encountering barriers in employment and economic mobility. Additionally, marginalized communities frequently engage in the continual labor of preserving and passing on cultural heritage in the face of appropriation and cultural erasure. Despite efforts to maintain and celebrate community heritage, the stories and experiences of racially marginalized groups are often excluded from dominant cultural narratives. This underrepresentation may stem from various factors, including historical power imbalances, societal biases, and institutional barriers. Amidst the myriad struggles racially marginalized groups face, their stories often remain untold or deliberately silenced in the larger cultural context, further exacerbating issues of visibility and agency (Vivian, 2010).

Master (or dominant) narratives, defined as widely accepted stories or experiences used to understand and explain historical events and cultural norms, represent not only viewpoints of those in positions of power, but also serve to privilege, perpetuate, maintain, and sustain a particular worldview and the implicit societal norms and values of a community (Halverson, Corman, and Goodall, 2011). These narratives consolidate cultural memory by reflecting the dominant group's version of history, marginalizing disparate lived experiences. This reinforces existing power dynamics and societal identity expectations and perpetuates the illusory uniformity of a shared past. In effect, the diverse and multifaceted realities of marginalized populations become mere footnotes within the grand historical accounts favored by mainstream society.

Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) interrogation of Whiteness illuminates how master narratives often operate from an unmarked position of White racial power, invisibly shaping societal norms and expectations. Against this backdrop of historical sidelining, marginalized voices in the film articulated counter narratives, challenging this singular historical perspective, advocating for a more inclusive and prismatic cultural narrative that acknowledges and includes stakeholders across community groups. Together, these narratives form a critical dialogue that shapes and reshapes collective memory and identity within and beyond a community.

To further understand how master and counter narratives are enacted or perpetuated, I will examine the recently completed documentary film project, *Seeing the South*, which explores the complexities of Union County, South Carolina, a region steeped in southern culture yet burdened by the historical legacies of slavery and racial division. Through interviews with residents and visual storytelling, the film captures the community's efforts to reconcile a tumultuous past and to create space for healing and remembrance. In this essay, I will analyze this documentary film to illuminate its rhetorical function and articulate how the film serves as a platform for the interaction and differentiation of both master and counter narratives.

Participants in the film verbally present Union County’s history through similar rhetorical storytelling devices and strategies and in doing so illustrate the master narratives and counter narratives present in this community. These narratives serve distinct functions: the master narrative upholds the established social and cultural milieu of Union County, reinforcing a collective, homogenous identity (Halverson, Corman, and Goodall, 2011). In contrast, the counter narratives emerging from previously marginalized voices disrupt this status quo, providing a corrective to historical inaccuracies. Throughout the film, such narratives are

crafted through a deliberate choice of words, metaphors, and anecdotes by the participants, with the goal of immersing the audience in the lived experiences of Union County's inhabitants.

After demonstrating how counter and master narratives in Union County both privilege and silence, I conclude by suggesting how these dialectics are not merely descriptions but powerful tools in the production and reproduction of cultural power. Specifically, I examine how and to what extent community members might harness such understandings to foster critical literacy within their spaces, precipitating a cultural shift whereby new narratives—those that embody the full spectrum of Union's history, including its diversity and complexity—are elevated, leading not only to increased awareness but, ideally, to actionable change within the community. However, to harness this change, an understanding of how stories and narratives can illuminate the inequities within their communities is needed.

Literature Review

Walter Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm posits that humans are innately storytellers who understand and interpret the world through a narrative lens rather than through purely rational or logical processes. According to Fisher, every person has a unique history replete with stories that shape their perception of reality and guide their actions and interactions, suggesting then that the credibility of these stories, or narratives, is assessed based on their coherence and fidelity—how consistent they are internally, and how they resonate with the listener's experiences and values. Fisher's framework challenged traditional emphases on argumentative reasoning, instead highlighting the role of narrative in the construction of personal and social truth and suggesting that the most persuasive arguments are those that are wrapped in compelling narratives. This work retains relevance in a contemporary moment as it underscores the enduring importance of storytelling in defining group identities and influencing cultural discourse. In the

context of issues of race, narratives hold particular sway, offering either a means to fortify oppressive power structures through master narratives or to contest and redefine social realities through counter narratives.

Master narratives, however, transcend the individualized stories, narratives, and experiences that Fisher's framework explicates. As Halverson, Corman, and Goodall (2011) offer, "a master narrative is a transhistorical narrative that is deeply embedded in a particular culture" (p. 14). Stories, recognized within this paradigm, become vital instruments not only in shaping individual beliefs but also in contesting or sustaining the stratifications entrenched in greater social dynamics. This transcultural narrative holds within it not only the collective historical wisdom and myths of a society but also the implicit societal norms and values that have been perpetuated throughout history. It frames the overarching storyline that individuals within the culture are expected to follow, reinforcing a specific point of view which implicitly communicates who is included in this cultural script and who is not, shaping individual identities and societal roles in accordance with a dominant cultural ethos.

Within the field of communication, the term "master narrative" has become a well-established nomenclature, recognized for its analytical utility in examining power dynamics and cultural hegemonies within storytelling practices (see Mumby, 1993; Nelson, 2001; Andrews, 2004; Corple, Linabary, and Cooky, 2021; LeBlanc, Butcher, Mitchell, Russel, and Navarro, 2023). However, there is irony in the fact that the concept of "master narrative", articulated by communication and rhetorical scholars who study narrative and utilize narrative theory, is often employed within a meta-narrative to critique the very existence and function of the master narratives themselves. Scholars such as Merelman (1995) invoke the language of "dominant-subordinate," (p.32) rather than "master." I engage the language of master narrative here because

it acknowledges a nuanced hierarchy and power dynamic intrinsic in narrative formations (Alridge, 2006). It conveys the weight of established historical and cultural capital that upholds and normalizes certain perspectives at the exclusion of others.

Master narratives then are inherently tied to the public memory of a community. As Houdek and Phillips (2017) explain, "public memory entails the acts and processes through which memories move beyond the remembering individual and become shared, passed on, and in this way, form a broader network through which people gather a sense of collectivity" (p. 1). Consequently, public memories are not formed in isolation but through cooperative societal processes that have both inclusionary and exclusionary elements, displaying a shared cultural identity that perpetuates over time (Zelizer, 1995). Davis (2022) elucidates, "Memory is one of the primary formations through which…processes of identification, recognition, and transformation are initiated and sustained" (p. 222). It is through the lens of collective remembering—whether in public commemorations or through everyday informal interactions—that master narratives are continuously reproduced and hegemonic perspectives then become privileged. As Brundage explicates, "historical memories are crafted intentionally by people for specific reasons" (p. 21). This intentional crafting of memory, however, is not limited to what is remembered, but also extends to what is forgotten or omitted from the narrative. Vivian (2010) argues that forgetting is not merely a failure of memory but can be an active and purposeful process in shaping public discourse. He posits that "public forgetting" can be as crucial as public remembering in constructing collective identities and negotiating societal change (Vivian, 2010).

These intentionally crafted and forgotten historical memories serve to reflect and reinforce existing power structures, particularly those rooted in racial hierarchies. In this context, the concept of Whiteness emerges as a productive frame for articulating how identity intersects

with master narratives. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) posit that Whiteness functions as an invisible norm in society, shaping cultural narratives and power structures while remaining largely unexamined. They argue that Whiteness 'is the invisible center against which 'Others' are marked' (p. 293). Whiteness operates as a rhetorical construction that maintains its power through its ability to be everywhere and nowhere at once, becoming strategically invisible, thus allowing it to function as an unmarked norm against which all other racial identities are measured and defined. The authors identify six strategies through which Whiteness is discursively constructed and maintained, including the conflation of Whiteness with nationality, scientific categorizations, and the invocation of the White race as a non-color. By unpacking these strategies, Nakayama and Krizek aim to expose the power structures that Whiteness upholds and to challenge its assumed neutrality in social and cultural discourse.

The concept of Whiteness as an invisible norm provides a critical backdrop for understanding how master narratives are constructed and maintained. Yet, it is precisely within the context of hegemonic narratives where counter narratives can question, disrupt, and propose alternative understandings of the past to reimagine a different collective future. Dionne, Hatfield, and Willingham (2023) contend that “Because official public memory structures are often heavily surveilled and uneasily moved, counterpublics must be inventive when opposing exclusionary public memories, at times having to resist via digital communication channels” (p. 125). These counter narratives and counterpublics not only provide a platform for marginalized voices to amplify their experiences but also to advocate for a narrative shift, making it possible for those previously unincluded to craft a “…more representative and inclusive public memory across all social sectors” (Caron and Brown, 2011, p. 13).

Molden (2015) considers how "material experience is expressed in language and narratives that embody historical memory," and that "Counter-memory on the other hand—while possibly also constructed as an idealist myth—is more likely to have to rely on a material basis of experience, given its lack of strong media support and other amplifying and reifying tools" (p, 129, 134). This nod to the power imbalance in the dissemination of stories and the potentially perilous fate of counter stories mirrors the concerns of Dickinson, Blair, and Ott (2010), who argue that places and objects of memory mobilize power in their sensorium, and that our physical world is not neutral but is filled with symbols and artifacts that influence narrative meaning. Sather-Wagstaff (2016) defines the sensorium as a "highly complex, culturally mediated, and thus varied, biologically grounded (but not biologically determined) processual meaning-making phenomenon" (p. 17). Physical public memory spaces then include the sensorium of placemaking and the embodied experiences within those places and can serve as a vessel for transmitting collective memories and, critically, for asserting dominance or contesting existing power structures. Public memorials, buildings, monuments, and even the names of streets function as physical structures through which a culturally dominant narrative can be maintained or, alternatively, tangibly challenged. This sensorium reinforces taken-for-granted assumptions and historical interpretations transmitting collective memories that assert dominance.

Consequently, the sensorium engaged by these representations of public memory can also powerfully influence the discourse of documentary films. Indeed, documentaries act as contemporary chroniclers, cementing elements of the public memory into the collective consciousness. Thus, documentaries function as crucial interfaces where sensory experiences meet narratives, and together, reify or reshape the historical memory within the public sphere. Documentaries hold a unique potential for shaping public discourse and our collective

memory by presenting visually complex and emotionally resonant stories that have the potential to reaffirm and perpetuate master narratives or to alter public perception and knowledge. Grant and Slonioskwi (2013) explain that "documentary appeals to us precisely because of its truth claims, whether at the level of fact or image. Because it is the form of cinema that is most closely bound to the real world, to actual personal and collective problems, hopes, and struggles…" (p. xxiv). Hale (1999) reminds us that "spectacle, the power of looking, was different from narrative, the power of telling. A picture, a representation, could convey contradictions and evoke oppositions like White racial supremacy, White racial innocence, and White racial dependency more easily and persuasively than a carefully plotted story" (p. 18). As a result, film can play a pivotal role in contesting master narratives by bringing to light counter narratives that might otherwise remain unheard or unconsidered. As a text or loci of memory then, documentary can reconfigure remembering and forgetting in a community as it re-examines existing narratives and proliferates new ones—an active engagement with the past that directly involves viewers in the interpretive process (Zelizer, 1995).

Documentary film can also function as part of a "…. technology of recovery," which as Gallagher and Renner (2023) explicate can help us in "documenting the history and everyday experience of African American/Black Life" (p. 202). Gallon (2016) argues that "Digital tools and platforms should be mobilized to interrogate and disclose how the humanities are developed out of systems of power" (p. 46). Gallon offers key tenets of what a technology of recovery is: aiming to restore the humanity of Black people that has been lost or obscured in the historical record; using digital tools and methods to analyze, preserve, and share Black cultural materials and experiences; and connecting past Black experiences to contemporary issues of race and inequality.

In that spirit, documentary can serve as a digital technology of recovery, enacting avenues for recovery and remembrance that may be less accessible within predominantly White archival spaces. Medhurst, Winfield and Harris (2022) offer the term 'b[l]ackward' to describe ways to "locate Black [counter] stories, lived experiences, and resistance in historical discourses in the recuperation of Black public memory" (p. 143). Utilizing the concept of 'b[l]ackward,' illuminates the importance of contextualizing and actualizing Black narratives within the woven fabric of a nation's history. By bringing these experiences to the forefront through digital mediums such as documentary film, a form of reclamation occurs that not only preserves but transforms the understanding of collective identity (Medhurst, Winfield and Harris, 2022). In the following, I will illuminate how preservation and expansion of collective memory within Union County is constructed specifically in *Seeing the South*. By juxtaposing Black counter-narratives against the dominant Lost Cause ideology, the documentary exposes the power dynamics of historical storytelling and challenges the invisibility of Whiteness in Union County, building a more inclusive historical narrative of the community that challenges the master narratives which have excluded marginalized voices.

Having established a theoretical framework that underscores the significance of master and counter narratives within the construction of public memory, this analysis now turns toward a rhetorical examination of *Seeing the South*. The documentary deliberately juxtaposes interviews and events to expose how community members construct and perpetuate both master and counter narratives. Through this structure, the film critically examines the rhetorical strategies employed to maintain Union County's dominant cultural narrative, while simultaneously highlighting voices that challenge this established historical perspective. A rhetorical analysis illuminates the tactics and appeals used to shape public memory narratives

and underscores the capacity of language and imagery to influence collective consciousness. By dissecting the rhetorical strategies employed in *Seeing the South*, we uncover how the film exposes the tension between Lost Cause ideology and counter-narratives of racial injustice in Union County. Additionally, this analysis examines how the film interrogates Whiteness as a dominant, often invisible force shaping these narratives and power structures within the community. *Seeing the South* creates a digital space for counter-narratives to be shared and experienced, which in turn may contribute to the reshaping of the public memory in Union. By juxtaposing the master and counter narratives presented by the documentary's participants, *Seeing the South* frames these narratives within the socio-historical context of Union County, helping to shape the community's collective memory and contributing to an ongoing dialogue about Union's future.

Analysis of Master Narratives in the Film

The master narrative presented in *Seeing the South* operates on several key logics that serve to perpetuate a particular version of Union County's history. These include: conciliatory efforts toward Whites and Whiteness as an excuse for perpetuating historical inaccuracies, such as the Historical Society member's willingness to "keep the Confederates happy" by allowing potentially inaccurate grave markers; justification of slavery in the South as being less brutal than elsewhere, exemplified by the comparison to sugar plantations in Haiti; southern heritage as intrinsically tied to Whiteness, evident in the celebration of Confederate history without adequate acknowledgment of its implications for Black community members; romanticization of the antebellum South, seen in the reenactments and celebrations of Confederate figures; and a tendency to downplay or dismiss the severity of historical injustices, as demonstrated by the critique of Harriet Beecher Stowe's portrayal of slavery. These logics collectively work to

maintain a narrative that centers White experiences, minimizes the brutality of slavery and its ongoing impacts, and resists fully confronting the community's complex racial history.

The master narratives in *Seeing the South* are articulated through a series of interviews and visual depictions that reinforce the established social order of Union County. The film features scenes of a recreation event titled “The Flight of Jefferson Davis and Living History & Reenactment Event” which includes a Confederate battle reenactment – a battle which never took place. Members of the Union County Historical Society (founded in 1885) describe the battle reenactment as a “Confederate,” event and that offering it is “bowing to popular opinion” (Baker, 2024, 12:16:27;13:32:28). These expressions align with a specific version of Union County’s past that is told from the perspective of the Lost Cause narrative, a post-Civil War ideological movement that romanticizes the Confederate cause and promotes the view that the Southern states fought nobly for states’ rights, while downplaying or denying the central role of slavery (Cox, 2021). Several other tenets are also attached to the Lost Cause narrative: the South’s significant sacrifice to the Civil War effort, the honor that can be found in the defeat for the South, and the benevolence of slaveholders to their enslaved individuals (Cox, 2021; Gallagher, 2009). By selectively choosing which historical events to recreate and celebrate, these traditions construct and propagate a version of the past that exemplifies values of romantic notions of nobility, bravery, and heritage that align well with the Lost Cause narrative, while dismissing the horrendous impact of slavery and its afterlives (Hartman, 2007).

Furthermore, one Union County Historical Society member says:

> We have in the past had some of the local African Americans come and take part in it. And in the last couple of years, we've haven’t been able to find anybody that wanted to

> take part in it. It's just…it's just not something a lot of people want to be involved in. I don't know. (Baker, 2024, 17:23:26)

This language invokes a sense of a failed attempt at inclusion without directly addressing the deep-seated issues inherent in the legacies of slavery. The speaker's uncertainty ("I don't know") and the passive framing ("we've haven't been able to find anybody") suggest a lack of active engagement with the African American community's perspectives. This hegemonic retelling asserts a sort of benign acknowledgment rather than a rigorous examination or redress of historical injustices.

As Gallagher (1999) reminds us, "amnesia is induced by the desire for reconciliation," resulting in narratives that perpetuate a sanitized memory within public consciousness. Vivian (2010) too explicates, "Intentional or unintentional episodes of distortion, excision, or loss in regard to the past understandably signify not only commemorative but ethical failings when imperatives to archive, document, and preserve hold the moral high ground" (p. 6).

The Historical Society member's statement, while seemingly neutral, reveals a disconnect between the organizers of these historical events and the African American community they claim to want to include. This rhetoric risks oversimplifying or negating the emotional, social, and political ramifications of slavery's legacy. It maintains a comfortable distance from the realities of historical injustice, enabling the community to sidestep facing the full ramifications of that history on present-day inequalities and tensions. Such narratives stand as barriers to true historical reconciliation and create a veneer of unity that belies underlying societal fractures in Union. By framing the lack of African American participation as simply a matter of disinterest ("It's just not something a lot of people want to be involved in"), the speaker avoids confronting

the reasons why these events might be problematic or unwelcoming for African American community members, thus perpetuating a cycle of misunderstanding and exclusion.

Additionally, one member of the Historical Society invokes Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to contrast with their own perspective, suggesting that Stowe's depiction of slavery was overly negative. This view serves both to diminish the atrocities of slavery and to perpetuate a narrative that aligns with the Lost Cause ideology:

> "But people who put this Harriet Beecher Stowe approach to the thing, that, 'Oh, it was so bad.' Well, it was bad, slavery is inherently bad, but it doesn't really mean that the slavery was necessarily as brutal, that is, as it has been depicted.

The speaker then goes on to perpetuate a "happy slave narrative" by suggesting that slavery in Union County was less severe than in other places:

> Now I have to qualify that: slavery in the sugar cane fields of the West Indies was a very bad situation. And I tell people, if you had to go back and be a slave, come back and be a slave on a cotton plantation in Union County, don't come back and be a slave on a sugar plantation in Haiti" (Baker, 2024, 43:52:18).

This outright dismissal of the reality of the cruelties of slavery functions as an identity-preservation protective mechanism. Such comparisons are not only historically inaccurate, but they also trivialize the lived experiences of countless individuals who suffered under the institution of slavery regardless of location and deny the commodification of the Black body as chattel (Berry, 2017). By invoking Harriet Beecher Stowe, the Historical Society member aims to undermine the anti-slavery sentiment in Stowe's text—an astonishing discursive move (however many years) after the novel's publication. By suggesting that Union County's form of slavery was somehow more humane, this narrative manipulates historical views of suffering,

minimizing the intrinsic vileness of the system. Such rhetorical strategies attempt to revise and soften historical realities, invoking nostalgia about a "…blissful antebellum past" and distracting from its abhorrent nature, while also functioning as a mechanism to pacify the audience's conception of Union County's historical role in perpetuating these injustices (Anderson 2005, p.110).

The master narratives presented by the Union County Historical Society not only perpetuate a romanticized and incorrect version of the South's past but also function as a visualization of Whiteness (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995). The Historical Society's portrayal of the Confederate battle reenactment and their dismissal of Harriet Beecher Stowe's depiction of slavery as 'not necessarily as brutal' exemplifies how Whiteness operates as an invisible center in shaping historical discourse. By positioning their own narrative as more 'accurate' than even a well-known abolitionist text, the Historical Society reinforces a perspective that centers White experiences and minimizes the suffering of enslaved individuals by downplaying the brutality of slavery and emphasizing their 'pride in southern heritage.' This aligns with Nakayama and Krizek's assertion that Whiteness maintains its power through strategic invisibility, allowing it to function as an unmarked norm against which all other racial identities are measured and defined. Dyer (1997) further elucidates this concept, noting that "As long as race is something only applied to non-White peoples, as long as White people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people" (p.1). This positionality affords White people a dominant and unmarked position in society, where their experiences and perspectives are considered chiefly. The Historical Society's narrative choices, therefore, serve not only to sanitize history but also to maintain the invisibility of Whiteness as the dominant perspective from which Union County's history is told. This invisibility allows for the

perpetuation of a narrative that comfortably distances White community members from the harsh realities of the past, maintaining their position of privilege in the retelling of history. As Dyer (1997) explicates, "For those in power in the West, as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it" (p.9). This normalization of Whiteness in the historical narrative of Union County reinforces White supremacy, where the experiences and perspectives of White individuals are considered the default, while other racial experiences are marginalized or erased.

Each of these examples collectively serve to uphold a master narrative that sanitizes Union County's history by presenting a selective, romanticized, and historically inaccurate view of its past. This curated history elevates myths of honorability and downplays the brutality of slavery, asking the community to embrace a collective memory that avoids confronting the uncomfortable truths about its role in slavery, Reconstruction and its violent overthrow, Jim Crow and segregation. Instead of fostering reconciliation, this narrative perpetuates denial of the injustices suffered by millions of individuals alongside incomplete narratives of Union's history, thus shaping the cultural and historical identity of Union County to fit within a dominantly White, flawed framework.

Analysis of Counter Narratives in the Film

The counter narratives presented in *Seeing the South* operate on several key logics or concepts that serve to challenge and reframe Union County's historical narrative. These include: acknowledging and confronting the brutal realities of slavery and its ongoing impacts, as evidenced by the emotional reflections of a Black State Park Service member; emphasizing the importance of commemorating victims of racial violence, exemplified by the UCCRP's Juneteenth event and lynching memorial; framing historical trauma as a "festering wound" that

requires active engagement and healing rather than avoidance; highlighting the ongoing presence of historical trauma in everyday experiences, as seen in the State Park Service member's emotional response to cleaning historical spaces; and challenging the romanticized views of the antebellum South by providing personal, visceral accounts of slavery's brutality. These logics collectively work to amplify marginalized voices in Union, confront uncomfortable truths about the community's past, and push for a more comprehensive and honest historical narrative that acknowledges a spectrum of experiences within Union County.

In *Seeing the South*, counter narratives serve as a foil to the master narrative, presenting an alternative framework that calls into question the established historical account of the Union County community. These narratives carve out a space for Black and Brown voices, allowing them to amplify their own histories and legacies against a backdrop of historical denial and erasure by those who have traditionally authored the community's story. As a contrast to the Confederate battle reenactment presented by the Union County Historical Society, the film includes a scene of the Union County Community Project's (UCCRP) annual Juneteenth event, which functions as both a day of celebration and of remembrance of 13 Black victims of lynching in the community (Baker, 2024, 6:09:18). During the event, the UCCRP holds a rededication ceremony for historical markers installed in 2021. These markers detail the "Jail House Massacre" of Union County, a Reconstruction Era lynching where 12 Black men were murdered by a White lynch mob. The markers also cover other lynchings that occurred in Union County as a part of the Jim Crow era, from 1877-1934, 1934 being the year of the last known lynching to take place in Union County. The ceremony itself serves as a poignant rebuttal to the amnesia that pervades the community's dominant narrative, as it seeks to honor those who were violently murdered by the Klan. By doing so, the UCCRP invites the public to confront the grim

reality of racial terror and its enduring impact on the community and enacts a memorialization process that encourages healing and historical accountability. This act of collective remembrance stands in stark contrast to the sanitized history put forth by the Confederate commemorations, challenging the community to acknowledge and reckon with its past.

Those involved in the Union County Community Remembrance Project also invoke the language of 'wounds' when discussing this difficult history. One member of the UCCRP states, "So, one thing that I've heard a lot from some people is why bring up this horrible past? You know, people have forgotten it or it's, you know, it's sad. Why bring it up? There's no reason to" (Baker, 2024, 32:08:14). This participant begins this statement by contextualizing the master narrative of the community, that discussing, displaying, and visualizing the horrific injustices of enslavement and Jim Crow laws as something sad and better left in the past. She continues, "But if something is buried under, there's like a festering wound, is a good kind of way to talk about it. And you have to peel back that wound and let it heal correctly and not just put a patch job over it" (Baker, 2024, 33:23:10) By engaging language of healing rather than mediation (as offered by the Historical Society), this rhetorically enacts a discourse centered on confronting historical trauma directly and with intention. The metaphor of a "festering wound" underscores the tensions in collective memory present in Union; however, the participant's choice of utilizing the language of "buried," implies an unearthing of information necessary to expose the brutality of lynching in the community to further cultivate acknowledge, conversation and healing. The participant finalizes this piece of discourse stating,

> "Because until you bring up this past and acknowledge it, the individuals who are alive today, their ancestors potentially participated in these lynchings, they or if you were African-American, you may be descended from people who were lynched and even if not

> lynched, faced racial violence throughout their lives for just existing and being a slightly darker skin color" (Baker, 2024, 1:04:24:27).

As Liberato, Fennell, and Jeffries (2008) remind us, "Having a history of slavery and oppression from white-dominated society, African Americans link their individual experiences with those of the group and with events involving the group's history" (p. 232). The Juneteenth event and by extension, the acknowledgment towards collective historical experiences underpins the salience of community remembrances. Logan (2021) explicates, "Rather than aiming for restoration or narrative consensus, mobilized memory is active and fluid, informed in particular by the nature of communal action" (p. 1175). Such acknowledgments are crucial as they foster a broader communal understanding and facilitate shared stories which are vital for communal growth.

Black community members also invoke personal stories of the experiences of enslaved to illustrate how they understand the collective memory in their community. In contrast to the Historical Society's invocation of Harriet Beecher Stowe, a Black member of the South Carolina State Park Service offers this statement:

> When I read about the ways that people were treated, thinking about the enslaved teenagers who would have been working here in the year 1860 cleaning the house, you know, as a person who comes in and I have to clean the house, now that gets emotional. When I have to vacuum the house and then I'm thinking about those teenagers, that does get to be a little emotional some days. Or when I walk inside of the kitchen house and I know that kitchen houses were sites where a lot of rape would have taken place, where a lot of physical abuse would have taken place. That's very emotional. (Baker, 2024, 19:55:11)

This personal reflection contracts with the Historical Society's earlier dismissal of Harriet Beecher Stowe's depiction of slavery. While the Historical Society member claimed that slavery "wasn't necessarily as brutal" as Stowe portrayed, this participant's emotional response to cleaning the house and entering the kitchen vividly illustrates the ongoing trauma of the institution. Her visceral reaction to these spaces, acknowledging them as sites of rape and physical abuse, directly challenges the Historical Society's attempt to downplay the severity of slavery. Sharpe (2016) reminds us “Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased” (p. 15).

Sharpe's concept of the “Wake" contextualizes the park service member's emotional response, highlighting how the legacy of slavery continues to impact Black individuals in their daily lives and work. This ongoing presence of historical trauma, even in seemingly mundane tasks like cleaning, underscores the inadequacy and downright horror of narratives that attempt to minimize the brutality of slavery and its lasting effects on Black communities.

These counter narratives, particularly the Juneteenth celebration and the remembrance ceremony for lynching victims, serve as direct challenges to the invisibility of Whiteness that permeates the dominant historical discourse in Union County. Whiteness maintains its power through its ability to remain unmarked and unexamined (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). By bringing attention to the experiences of Black community members, both past and present, these events and commemorations make visible what Whiteness tends to erase from collective memory. This act of making visible aligns with Vivian's (2017) concept of “witnessing” in 21st-

century public memory. Vivian argues for an expanded understanding of witnessing that includes commonplace rhetorical mediums, allowing those who did not directly experience past events to inherit them rhetorically. In the context of Union County, these counter narratives function as a form of witnessing, enabling community members and viewers to engage with historically marginalized perspectives and experiences.

This framework is particularly relevant to *Seeing the South*, where the documentary itself becomes a medium through which viewers can witness Union County's complex history. By presenting these counter narratives, the film acts as a rhetorical tool that challenges the invisibility of Whiteness and allows for a reimagining of historical narratives. Vivian's approach helps us understand how the film functions as a form of rhetorical invention, creating new possibilities for community engagement with the past and making visible the experiences that have been systematically excluded from the White master narrative of Union.

These counter narratives juxtapose the insidious legacies of a Lost Cause past against efforts of communal remembrance in the Black community. As Molden (2015) reminds us, counter-histories are "… directed against the hegemonic memory canon" (p. 128).
By disrupting the monolithic history being perpetuated by the Historical Society, groups such as the Union County Community Remembrance Project facilitate a space between the ceremonial and the rhetorical for challenging but necessary discourse and complicates sanitized versions of historical events.

The Juxtaposition Between Master and Counter Narratives

Beyond presenting individual narratives, *Seeing the South* itself functions as a meta-interrogation of Whiteness through its deliberate juxtaposition of master and counter narratives. By creating screen time for both the counter-narratives of Black community members and the

hegemonic perspective of the Historical Society, the documentary makes visible the usually invisible structures of White dominance in historical storytelling. This structural choice aligns with Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) assertion that exposing Whiteness requires making it 'visible and problematic.' The film achieves this by placing the romanticized Lost Cause narrative alongside stark reminders of racial violence and oppression, such as the lynching memorials. In doing so, *Seeing the South* not only documents competing historical accounts but also engages viewers in the process of questioning how history is constructed and whose voices are privileged in that construction.

The dialectic between the romantic notions of the Lost Cause narrative of the Union County Historical Society and members of the community who challenge this perspective center around conflicting versions of the same history is furthered evidenced by how viewers are engaged in storytelling against each other in the film. After describing the value of the Confederate battle reenactments, one member of the Historical Society, who wrote a book on the local history of Union, ironically explicates the “16 Rules of the Plantation” created by Edward Johnson in 1850 (Johnson et al., 1850):

> And if you read it, it’s not the rules of somebody’s who’s a brute. It’s the rules of somebody’s who’s trying to make money. And he said, you know, what the plantation overseer, was expected to do. And he was not supposed to go out and beat the slaves because that would not get work done and we might get arson if it happened and various other things. So that instead, actually, you had to be reasonably nice to the slaves so that they wouldn’t be antagonistic to you. It was designed to get as much work as possible out of the slaves because it was bad business sense to do so. This is just something a whole lot of people don’t understand. So, they went out and beat the slaves every morning, they

> came in every night, and they got beaten again, and then they went to bed. And then they were beaten in the middle of the night while they were trying to sleep or whatever (Baker, 2024, 23:02:16)

This scene is accompanied by the interviewee making ironic physical hand-motions of beating, creating a visual representation that trivializes the violence of slavery. This disturbing portrayal is immediately contrasted with the perspective of a Black community member, who eloquently challenges such sanitized accounts:

> And we see that in a lot of places they're not being truthful. Because anyone who can say slavery was a good thing and who can say things like 'the slaves we're treated that bad,' you have to look at them with a side eye, because that's not truthful at all. Because yes, a person may not have done the whipping themselves, but they had the option to do so. They may not have whipped them, but they had the option to send them to the workhouse in Charleston, South Carolina to receive the whipping. They had overall dominion over people's lives. How can we say these are good people just because they didn't whip someone? What does that mean? What is the thermometer between good at this point? Because at any moment that person had the ability to do that. They had the ability to sell someone off and destroy a whole family for their own profit. They had the ability to force people to do work, labor, and not pay them. (Baker, 2024, 25:35:16)

The perspective held by the Historical Society member reflects an ongoing concern in the community—that the romanticization of the antebellum South represents not a tribute to a known history but a perpetuation of certain ideologies that minimize the brutality of slavery. This romanticism culminates in a narrative that downplays the oppression of slavery, instead celebrating a distorted memory. This romanticization manifests in different ways in the South,

including the portrayal of plantations that focus on the beauty of the space rather than the horrors and injustices which took place there and in educational materials that gloss over the atrocities of slavery (Cox, 2021). These examples show how Lost Cause ideology infiltrates contemporary culture, reinforcing a narrative that seeks to deny the traumatic legacy of slavery. The Historical Society member's interpretation of the "16 Rules of the Plantation" is indicative of a larger trend: an attempt to make tangible a version of history that upholds the mythology of the "benevolent slave owner" and again, engages a vision of nostalgia, or "Rather than remembering precisely what was, we tend to make the past comprehensible in relation to the present conditions of the here and now." (Anderson 2005, p. 107).

However, this interpretation underscores the tension between commemoration and historical accuracy. The Historical Society member's portrayal of the plantation rules as evidence of slave owners' "reasonably nice" treatment exemplifies how historical remembrance can be co-opted, detaching from the critical implications these rules hold for those who see them as symbols of oppression and racism. The assertion that it was "bad business sense" to mistreat slaves implies a level of disregard for the inhumanity of the enslavement system, which is a critical aspect for communities that have suffered historical injustices. In stark contrast, the Black community member's response challenges such sanitized accounts, pointing out the fundamental power imbalance and the ever-present threat of violence that defined the slave system. This juxtaposition in the film, cutting between these two accounts and perspectives of the same historical reality, creates a broader cultural dialogue about how Union County grapples with its historical identity. It illustrates the complexities inherent in debates over historical representation and speaks to a culture where attempts to rationalize or minimize the brutality of slavery fail to address the deeper issues of historical trauma and ongoing injustice. This clash of

perspectives not only highlights the ongoing struggle for narrative control in Union County but also reveals the deeper power dynamics at play in shaping collective memory. The juxtaposition of these conflicting accounts underscores how historical interpretation is intrinsically linked to present-day power structures and social hierarchies.

Seeing the South makes clear that the ability to shape historical discourse is itself a form of power, one that has far-reaching implications for community identity and social dynamics. Those in power often hold the authority to construct and disseminate the dominant narrative, effectively shaping public perception. As Brundage (2000) reminds us, "Representations of history are instruments of, and may even constitute, power. Groups routinely sort the past in a particular way to legitimize their current power or aspirations" (p. 11). Thus, the film's portrayal of the clashing interpretations illustrates not only a historical assumption of power but the ongoing struggle for narrative dominance, where each side's version reaffirms their position within the community, either upholding traditional power structures or challenging them for a more equitable representation.

Brundage (2000) also encourages us to see the master narrative as a concept shaped by powerful White ideologies that socially construct public perception. In this way then, master narratives can be come inherently destructive and dangerous, erasing or marginalize the experiences and contributions of people who do not fit the glorified account. This resulting cultural amnesia, which Vivian (2010) articulates, means that, "the act of proposing that communities forget select aspects of their institutional memory directs public attention to the question of what those communities have remembered, according to which rhetorical forms and limitations, and in accord with whose interests." The inherent danger here is that by endorsing a selective memory that echoes a singular viewpoint, the deeper, more multifaceted, complex and

rich aspects of history risk being obscured or forgotten entirely. This selective recall underpins a master narrative that shapes the collective identity and understanding of the past in a manner that can serve to reinforce current inequalities or ideological divisions.

The juxtaposition between master and counter narratives in *Seeing the South* highlights the complex dance of history and memory within Union County as a microcosm of the broader struggles within the American South and the United States to reconcile with the past with the present. The film stitches together the voices and viewpoints of Historical Society members, UCCRP members, preservationists, and members of the Black community to showcase a battleground of remembrance where each narrative vies for recognition and legitimacy. This narrative tug-of-war not only shapes the present understanding of Union County's history but also sets the stage for the future, weaving a tapestry of shared and competing memories.

Conclusion & Implications for the Community

What implications do these master and counter narratives hold for Union County and similar communities? By actively shaping the collective memory, identity, and cultural discourse of the community, these narratives serve to unveil how dominant groups solidify their control through history. Yet, they also reveal the potential for revision and reevaluation by those advocating for change *and* by those invested in the dominant narrative. While counter-narratives push for recognition and inclusion, true community transformation requires engagement from multiple sides. Those who have long upheld the master narrative are not immutable forces of misinformation, but rather community members whose willing participation in dialogue is essential. The challenge lies in creating spaces and opportunities for those invested in different narratives to engage in meaningful, respectful dialogue. Fostering an environment where all parties can critically examine their beliefs and the impact of these narratives on the broader

community requires patience, empathy, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths. As Union County moves forward, these perspectives can and will continue to shape education, heritage tourism, and civic engagement by addressing contentious pasts.

The process of community healing and reconciliation is linked with the acknowledgment of counter narratives, especially those emerging from marginalized voices. Events like the UCCRP's Juneteenth celebration underscore the significance of communal recognition of past injustices and provide platforms for open discussion. However, creating spaces for commemoration, preservation, and community engagement are also critical to reinforce these counter narratives within the broader social fabric, as "an individual's commemoration can lead to social action and change" (Gallagher, 2006, p. 15). As the public wrestles with the legacies bequeathed by historical events, physical monuments and spaces become more than stone and metal; they turn into ideological embodiments that shape generational ideologies. To this end, two community groups in Union have undertaken two significant projects in recent months to address these concerns. The first initiative designated the historically all Black high school, Sims High School, on the National Register of Historic Places. This designation acknowledges the struggle and contributions of African Americans in the county, especially related to education. Community organizers hope to turn the building into a gathering space and event center that can serve as a nexus for cultural learning and heritage celebration, specifically for the Black community in Union.

Similarly, the UCCRP is dedicated to supporting the restoration of the L.W. Long Community Resource Center, the former Union Community Hospital. This building, although a Nationally Registered Historic Building for many years, has fallen into disrepair and is earmarked for refurbishing to not only preserve its physical structure but also to honor the

legacies of both L.W. Long and his impacts on Black community healthcare. Elevating such sites to national recognition not only validates the experiences of those whom history has often overlooked but also provides an educational resource that can inform future generations of its impacts in the community that contributes to the ongoing recalibration of its historical narrative.

The Union community might further engage in healing by reconsidering how master narratives are promulgated within the community through taxpayer-funded community groups. To counter these perspectives, a committee dedicated to the inclusive commemoration of its history, with representatives from diverse community groups, could be tasked with reviewing and proposing new memorials, plaques, and educational initiatives that reflect the multiplicity of experiences within the county. The strategic use of language and symbols influences public perception, rendering some stories more visible and silencing others in the process (Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, 2010). By creating a community funded voice, they would not only honor previously marginalized voices but also provide a more comprehensive and truthful public memory that fosters a deeper sense of belonging and community identity (Houdek and Phillips, 2017). These collective efforts go beyond mere acknowledgment, constituting active steps in the to create a shared future—one that embodies the diverse identity of Union itself.

The interrogation of Whiteness in *Seeing the South* fosters a more inclusive public memory by exposing the often-invisible structures of White dominance in Union's historical storytelling. The film asks viewers to reconsider how collective memory is shaped and whose voices are privileged, offering a model for communities to critically examine issues of race, memory, and identity. *Seeing the South* aims to create a space for dialogue and reflection, potentially leading to a more equitable representation of history by demonstrating the dynamic nature of public memory and its role in community transformation. As Union County balances

honoring heritage with acknowledging its complex history, *Seeing the South* can challenge communities to reflect on their histories, recognize narrative's power in shaping collective futures, and create spaces where marginalized voices are valued. Through these efforts, we can craft a shared history as diverse and complex as the people it represents, working towards a cultural legacy of understanding, respect, and truth.

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