The Power of Personal Documentary Films

by Chanda Chevannes and Jennifer Crystal Chien

TABLE OF CONTENTS

> *Visual media teaches us how the world works and our place in it.*
>
> *You may wonder,*
> *'Do I matter? Does society value me as a person?'*
>
> — *Ana-Christina Ramón[1]*

OPENING THE DIALOGUE

Over the last several years, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) documentary filmmakers have discussed decolonizing documentaries as part of the broader conversation to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in the industry. In 2017, Re-Present Media decided to take a different angle on the issues faced by BIPOC filmmakers and began gathering information on the impact of racism and white supremacy in the industry. We focused on the experiences of underrepresented filmmakers working on personal stories.

Recent mass protests, triggered by a series of murders of Black Americans by police officers, especially that of George Floyd, have brought the Black Lives Matter movement to the forefront of our public consciousness once again. As a result, all sectors of society are now engaged in conversations about systemic racism in the U.S. and how to make meaningful and lasting changes. We share our work in this time with the hope that we can deepen the conversation to address racism and white supremacy within the documentary industry.

HOW WE STARTED

In 2013 and 2014, a small group of women of color filmmakers met through a support group for documentary filmmakers in Oakland, California. As we got to know each other better over the next few years, we slowly realized that we were all making, or had previously made, personal documentary films. **For clarity, we define personal documentaries as those documentaries that are focused on the personal lives of individuals, families, and communities.** They are not necessarily about the filmmaker's own life, though these are certainly one kind of personal documentary. While these films vary in their aesthetics, what they have in common is the filmmakers' intention to center participants' perspectives and experiences. In contrast, social issue documentaries center a broader societal perspective and are made for the express purpose of educating audiences about a particular problem in order to effect change. While personal stories and social issues may be present in both types of documentaries, the purpose of the personal documentary is to shine a light on the nuanced lives of the participants, not the social issues.

As we gathered for works-in-progress screenings and deeper conversations ensued, we began to recognize shared themes in our individual motivations. We were excited by the potential of personal storytelling for elevating the voices of underrepresented communities. We were driven to create work that reflected the complexities of our lives, communities, families, and loved ones. Through our relationships, we found a collective space where we could express appreciation and joy for each other's visions, talents, and personal films.

We also realized that we faced many of the same roadblocks. We had eerily similar experiences of having our competency and work as filmmakers questioned. Repeatedly, we had received "helpful" advice from potential industry partners that was, in reality, dismissive and diminishing. These incidents of subtle racism were most often perpetrated by our white colleagues.

While we saw the value of the complex, nuanced personal stories depicted in our films, potential partners and gatekeepers did not. There was a lack of understanding of the inherent value of our communities and their lived experiences when these experiences fell outside of narratives centered in the context of suffering and oppression. When we tried to bring our personal films forward to potential partners, including funders and distributors, we were asked to justify why a particular individual or family

mattered. What was the greater significance of their lives? Yet, white documentary filmmakers could receive support for personal stories on a wide variety of subjects. It seemed to us that the documentary industry could see white people's lives as multi-faceted and unquestionably important. Our stories, on the other hand, were only important when they helped call attention to stereotypical problems: crime, poverty, drugs, sex trafficking, war trauma, "illegal" immigration, and other such topics.

The more we talked, the more we realized that our individual experiences pointed to a collective experience of marginalization. **As women of color, racism was the undercurrent to many of our interactions in an industry dominated by white people.** And the more we talked, the more we felt grateful to be among like-minded filmmakers of color who understood and supported one another and made space to discuss the insidious dynamics in our industry. In comparison, when we shared our experiences of racism with white colleagues, we were often met with skepticism, apologism, dismissiveness, or false comparisons.

As we all know, white people are overrepresented in the film and television sector. That's true whether we look in front or behind the camera, in production offices or in boardrooms. Because of this, the current conversation about race in the documentary industry has tended to center around diversity, equity, and inclusion. Efforts to address the underrepresentation of BIPOC filmmakers have often taken the form of well-advertised diversity initiatives and new funding opportunities. In *The State of the Documentary Field*, a survey published in 2018 by the Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), 49% of respondents felt that there were "more opportunities" in recent years for documentary makers from racial and ethnic minority groups, while 6% felt that there were a "great deal more opportunities."[2] These initiatives are essential steps to take and have rightly been met with considerable public praise.

But the problems we face cannot be solved by simply welcoming more BIPOC filmmakers into the white-dominated documentary sector. Underrepresentation is only the most visible manifestation of racism and white supremacy, which are cultural and institutional norms. **White supremacy doesn't simply create underrepresentation of BIPOC filmmakers; it drives all the machinations of our industry. It dictates which filmmakers will be trusted by funders and whose stories will be supported. It determines whose lives are seen as worthy, which perspectives are valued, which experiences are accepted, and which are questioned. Together, these factors ultimately dictate which films are funded, made, and seen.**

TELLING OUR PERSONAL STORIES

The conversations that we began in 2013 continued regularly for several years. It was during this time that we laid the philosophical groundwork for Re-Present Media. This grassroots organization's purpose is to humanize media representations of underrepresented communities, through a focus on personal stories from these communities. Two of the filmmakers who participated in these discussions, Jennifer Crystal Chien and Sabereh Kashi, founded the organization in 2017 and became its first Co-Directors. In 2019, Sabereh left to pursue her own film work, and Jennifer continued as the Director of Re-Present Media.

When we began to seek funding for Re-Present Media, we were surprised to encounter the same issues as an organization that we had as individuals. One foundation asked us to provide data to prove that the problems we experienced were *actual* problems before we could be considered for funding. Our personal experiences—and those of our colleagues and community members—were not enough. Once again, our experiences were disbelieved and devalued because they did not fit the dominant white narrative. Spurred on by this challenge to gather data to prove that our organization's work was responding to real problems within the industry, we decided to gather information in focus groups and through an online survey. Rather than amassing statistics on questions of diversity and economics (the type of data one might expect to be collected), we chose to focus on better understanding the experiences and challenges faced by BIPOC filmmakers. Boldly, we put forward a series of questions that would look at issues of race, power, and access.

Our effort was aimed at understanding whether the experiences of our small group were representative of those of BIPOC filmmakers in the wider industry. We strongly suspected that ours were not isolated experiences, but as independent filmmakers, we are often working alone. As such, our experiences of racism often go unwitnessed by others and unvoiced by ourselves. This work, then, was designed to open an honest dialogue about racism within our industry by centering the personal experiences of BIPOC documentary filmmakers.

Our focus group and survey project focused on emerging filmmakers who are working on personal story films. These were filmmakers whose work had not been screened in top-tier film festivals

(e.g., Sundance, Tribeca, etc.) or broadcast nationally. We focused on emerging filmmakers because we wanted to better understand the challenges that the next generation of filmmakers was facing. We limited participation to personal documentary filmmakers because our organization's purpose is to advocate for personal storytelling.

We convened two focus groups in September and October 2017, in which twenty-six filmmakers participated. Several were initially nervous about these conversations. They wanted to know how their remarks would be documented (without attribution) and ultimately used (to inform additional inquiries, this article, and our future work). While the participants had many stories of racism to share and wanted to support any work that could lead to a shift away from white supremacy in the industry, they were also deeply concerned about possible professional repercussions.

These concerns, which were voiced repeatedly, highlight the fact that we are really having two separate conversations about race. The first is the conversation that involves the industry as a whole. That's the one that celebrates the new equity initiatives while ignoring larger systemic problems. It's the one that sidesteps discussions of racism, power, and privilege by exclusively discussing equity, diversity, and inclusion, as if the problem is one that is mainly measured by the number of BIPOC filmmakers who are sitting at the table in any given industry setting. The second conversation is the one we are often having in smaller groups with other BIPOC filmmakers. That's the one in which we are surrounded by those who understand. It's where we can truly share our experiences, where we feel safe and heard.

During the focus group sessions, then, we worked to create a space for participants where they would feel safe, heard, and able to share experiences that would be brought forward into an industry-wide conversation. We approached these discussions as we approach our films: with a deep desire to learn and in the spirit of collaboration. We asked open-ended questions and collected personal stories.

Based on the themes identified in the focus groups, we created an online survey, which launched in August 2018. Because we wanted respondents to feel comfortable enough to share their experiences, we did not attempt to devise an academically validated survey, but rather designed it as an opinion survey. We understood that language that felt too formal could create a sense of

alienation for some BIPOC filmmakers, especially those who were already anxious about sharing their experiences or suspicious of the idea of data collection.

We solicited survey respondents with the help of our original focus group participants, our personal networks, and industry group members (primarily those from A-Doc and Brown Girls Doc Mafia). As with the focus groups, participants were all emerging BIPOC filmmakers who were making, or had previously made, personal documentaries. 51 filmmakers completed the survey. Respondents represented a broad range of ethnic identities, which they were asked to self-identify in short-answer form. The variety of responses illustrates the range of terms used in self-identification.[3] Following conventional demographic groupings, the ethnicities of respondents were as follows: 31% Asian, 29% Black, 16% Latinx/Hispanic, and 10% Middle Eastern. 10% of respondents identified as mixed race, and 10% identified in ways that were not confined by the above categories. The vast majority of respondents were based in the U.S., with a few international filmmakers.

The survey asked filmmakers about their personal filmmaking work, including number of films made, number of viewers reached, sources of funding, and distribution channels. We asked about the challenges of making personal documentaries, about the racism they have faced, and about the strategies that should be implemented to improve the industry. This article focuses specifically on the findings related to experiences of racism and white supremacy within the documentary industry, especially in the context of making personal documentaries.

We recognize that the 51 survey respondents and the 26 focus group participants do not speak for all emerging BIPOC filmmakers, or even all those working on personal stories. However, the fact that the respondents share many of the same experiences and opinions is striking. In the past, complaints of racism and white supremacy in the industry have often been seen as emanating from a few disgruntled filmmakers. But in highlighting our collective experiences, these findings tell a different story.

THE IMPORTANCE & CHALLENGES OF MAKING PERSONAL DOCUMENTARIES

When BIPOC filmmakers try to make personal story documentaries, as compared to social issue documentaries, they face an uphill battle. When asked about the relative challenges associated with personal filmmaking, **survey respondents overwhelmingly indicated that making personal documentaries is more challenging than making other types of documentaries.**

24% ▪ *indicated that it was "somewhat more challenging."*

50% ▪ *indicated that it was "more challenging."*

According to respondents, these challenges manifest in several different ways. 73% indicated that most funding goes to social issue films because they are seen as more important. 31% were told that their films were less important than social issue films, because personal stories of their communities aren't that important. And 37% of respondents had an industry partner initially express interest, only to subsequently attempt to mold their personal film into a social issue film.

Meanwhile, a majority of respondents (59%) indicated that they were having trouble articulating the impact of their personal films. This may be related to the fact that 55% of respondents were worried about how the people in their films would be judged by mainstream audiences and how to present them. Nearly as many (53%) felt that it took them a long time to be able to articulate the story from a culturally authentic point of view, because their perspectives are not seen in mainstream media.

It's clear from these results that the message respondents are getting from funders, distributors, and other potential partners is that our personal films have less intrinsic value. We believe that the devaluation of personal stories by BIPOC filmmakers is occurring for two reasons.

First, a significant portion of documentary funding in the U.S. comes from foundations and other organizations that believe deeply in the power of documentaries to make tangible social change. This is both practical and laudable. However, the resulting increased desire for social issue films has meant that films without measurable social impact goals are often automatically dismissed.

Second, we live in a racist society, and every day, we consume media that upholds the status quo of white supremacy. We are inundated with stereotypical portrayals, one-dimensional characters, and poverty porn. It's no surprise, then, that stories told by and about BIPOC that cast their narratives outside of the context of social or political struggles would not resonate with industry gatekeepers. As a result, marginalized communities are depicted only in the context of the problems we face. We believe this creates a skewed representation of our communities and a wholesale devaluing of our lives, experiences, and contributions.

The devaluing of personal stories of BIPOC communities, the lack of nuanced portrayals, and the focus on stereotypical social problems were all highlighted as issues faced by survey respondents. After reading a series of statements, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each, ranging from 0% (indicating complete disagreement) to 100% (indicating complete agreement).

Here are some of the statements to which participants were asked to respond:

- "Personal films about white people are perceived differently by funders, programmers, and distributors than personal films about people of color." The average degree of agreement was 86%.

- "I mainly see documentary films about my community in the context of a stereotypical problem." The average degree of agreement was 81%.

- "I don't see myself and my community members in the media in relatable, realistic, and nuanced ways." The average degree of agreement was 78%.

These statements, and the filmmakers' overwhelming agreement with them, are important points for reflection. They don't simply capture the struggles of BIPOC filmmakers who are making personal documentaries; they point us towards *why* these struggles are happening. In 1978, sociologist Gaye Tuchman described the cumulative effect of the ways in which working women were (mis)represented in the mass media. These portrayals fell into three main categories: complete absence, condemnation, and trivialization. Tuchman describes the effect of these portrayals as *symbolic annihilation*.[4]

Whether we are discussing women, BIPOC, or individuals from other marginalized communities, symbolic annihilation continues to be an ongoing problem in the media. Symbolic annihilation occurs when individuals from specific groups are not represented on screen in proportion to their presence in the general population. In narrative film, one only needs to take a cursory look at the research conducted by Stacy L. Smith, the Director of USC's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, to understand that there is still a yawning gap in onscreen representation.[5] Symbolic annihilation also occurs when these groups *are* represented, but in two-dimensional ways and when the choices, lives, and humanity of these groups are portrayed in ways that diminish or denigrate. In documentary, we often see this happening when characters are primarily depicted in relationship to stereotypical social problems.

Clearly, the symbolic annihilation of BIPOC is problematic for us, as BIPOC filmmakers. But it is also deeply problematic for society as a whole. Every day, white audiences can see themselves on screen, living multifaceted lives as diverse characters within a wide range of stories. This is not the case for the rest of us, who face daily disempowerment when the truth and complexity of our lives is not reflected back to us on our screens. As an example of this, a 2011 study by Nicole Martins and Kristen Harrison demonstrated that increased television viewing by Black boys, Black girls, and white girls decreased their levels of self-esteem, whereas white boys experienced an *increase* in self esteem with increased television viewing.[6]

As producer and author Austin Channing Brown has said, "Part of what white supremacy is stealing is your ability to see, to feel, to hear—to hold in high esteem—other people."[7] Imagine how our views of the world—and of our communities and ourselves—might be shifted for the better if we were to see a preponderance of media with BIPOC living our lives as we truly are.

The irony here is palpable. With its heavy focus on social issues, the documentary funding community is unwittingly contributing to the symbolic annihilation of BIPOC people and communities. **Although we have problems in our lives, our lives are not problems.** Consider the real social impacts that might be made if industry gatekeepers could understand the powerful potential of personal stories told by BIPOC filmmakers. The industry could begin actively reversing symbolic annihilation and advancing toward representational wholeness.

OUR EXPERIENCES OF RACISM

In addition to the challenges that BIPOC filmmakers are facing in connection with personal storytelling, there is an undeniable layer of racism that permeates our interactions in the industry. This includes everything from racist assumptions by industry partners to the related issues of class differences and economic inequality.

When asked about their experiences of racism within the documentary industry, all focus group participants agreed that they had faced some type of barrier in their filmmaking that they would attribute to their race.

37% ▪ *of survey respondents had directly experienced racism or racist assumptions about their film or work.*

Maddeningly, some racist comments or actions were thinly disguised as attempts at being helpful. For example, an Asian American filmmaker told us that an industry partner suggested that the filmmaker distribute fortune cookies to industry stakeholders.

Many of our experiences of racism are more insidious. One funder suggested that a woman of color might not be capable of making documentary films. Another filmmaker's work was rejected sight-unseen. Several filmmakers had their abilities questioned. One of the focus group participants described this as "subconscious racism, not overt, by doing things like making people feel they are incompetent and need advice." **Nearly a third of survey respondents (31%) indicated that an industry partner had expressed doubt about their qualifications, skills, or ability as a filmmaker.**

In the same vein, it is also common for BIPOC filmmakers to be told that they should partner with another filmmaker. There is a dynamic of gatekeepers wanting to work with those they know and trust. And inevitably, those people are often white. We heard about this dynamic from several focus group participants. One filmmaker said,
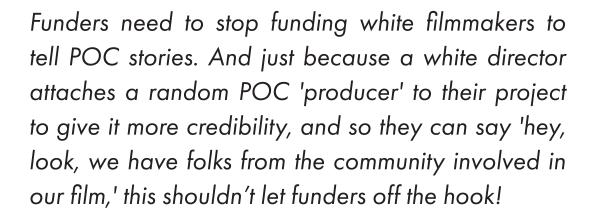
" *Literally, somebody told me, 'Your film is not going to get made unless you have a white woman producer.'* "

About one fourth of survey respondents (24%) indicated that they were only able to access funding once a white person had become involved with their film.

Unsurprisingly, then, one of the most common experiences of white supremacy was witnessing a white person receive funding to make a film about the respondent's own community, while the respondent couldn't find support for their own similar film. This was experienced by 45% of survey respondents. When we separated responses out by ethnic identity, however, 73% of Black respondents had experienced this.

Another common issue for respondents was tokenism. When white filmmakers seek to tell stories from communities that are not their own, they may enlist the help of a token community member to give the film some level of credibility. As one survey respondent said:

> *Funders need to stop funding white filmmakers to tell POC stories. And just because a white director attaches a random POC 'producer' to their project to give it more credibility, and so they can say 'hey, look, we have folks from the community involved in our film,' this shouldn't let funders off the hook!*

Once our films are completed, BIPOC filmmakers also find it difficult to get these films in front of audiences. A little over half of the filmmakers who had finished their films (56%) indicated that fewer than 1,000 people had seen these films. While 72% of these respondents had screened their documentaries at film festivals, 65% indicated that they had *only* been selected for festivals that were ethnically or culturally specific.

One focus group participant articulated the frustration felt by some: "The conventional route for funding and distribution is futile, so [we need to find] avenues like self-distribution or other types of alternatives to the conventional funding systems."

One common theme that emerged throughout our inquiry was the economic challenges experienced by BIPOC filmmakers. While not all of us are economically disadvantaged, both historic and current socioeconomic disparities have led to financial inequities between white filmmakers and BIPOC filmmakers. As one survey respondent said, these inequities mean "time, attention and money usually have to get diverted to things that are not film related." A focus group participant articulated it this way:

> *Because filmmakers of color generally speaking— and I'm not saying [all], some people are rich— but generally speaking, they have all these other socioeconomic issues as to why they can't just go out, like you, and go make a film.*

When it comes to the financing of our films, our survey paints a striking picture. Of the filmmakers who had completed at least one personal film, 96% (all but one respondent) had put personal money into their projects. It is critical to note that this level of personal investment in a project is very different from industry-wide levels. According to *The State of the Documentary Field*, only 22% of respondents had contributed personally to the financing of their most recent film.[8] (60% of respondents to this survey self-identified as white.[9])

In fact, according to our survey respondents, **individual filmmaker contributions were the most significant source of financing for personal documentaries, accounting for, on average, 59% of the financing of a film.** And for 21% of filmmakers, their personal contributions represented 100% of their films' budgets.

As this data makes clear, telling our own stories is an expensive personal commitment. This unsustainable practice of self-financing can only serve to increase the economic disadvantage and inequity faced by BIPOC filmmakers and ultimately limit our ability to make more films in the future.

As one survey respondent pointed out, this has a ripple effect:

> *Most personal films continue to be self financed, with some help from crowdsourcing and individual donors. If filmmakers making personal [films] can have more career stability in terms of industry job opportunities, the burden of self-financing will feel lessened. [Unfortunately], almost all industry jobs are sourced via personal connections and tend to favor younger, inexperienced, well-networked and/or Caucasian workers . . . . Most filmmakers of color I know making personal film[s] are just hustling bone hard in their day-to-day life, barely getting by.*

NEW PERSPECTIVES

At various points along this journey, we have heard from white people in the industry that "documentary filmmaking is hard for *everyone.*" And that is true. What is also true is that racism adds yet another layer of difficulty, and this layer is one that is mostly invisible to white people.

As evidence of this, consider the following. At the beginning of this piece, we highlighted the good news that there are increasing opportunities for BIPOC filmmakers. Recall that 55% of all respondents to the survey conducted by CMSI for *The State of the Documentary Field* indicated that there are "more opportunities" or "a great deal more opportunities" over the past few years for racial and ethnic minorities. But it is important to note that perspectives around the opportunities that exist shift rather dramatically, depending on the race of the respondent. As the study's authors point out, only 40% of documentarians from racial and ethnic minorities agree that there are more opportunities, while 57%

of the white filmmakers do.[10] (A similar difference in opinion occurs when male and female filmmakers are asked about whether there are more opportunities for women filmmakers.)

In a disturbing trend, this difference in perception and the resentment that it creates may be on the increase. In recent times, we have heard personal stories from BIPOC women filmmakers who have been told by their white counterparts that we will become the "white men" of the industry, while white women filmmakers languish on the sidelines. In an industry that is focused on quantifying its diversity, BIPOC are sometimes seen as a threat to other equity-seeking groups.

The variance in our respective understanding of the level of opportunities available can be understood as a matter of personal perspective. Who we are and what we have experienced impacts how we view others and their experiences. According to psychology, most of us learn the skill of perspective taking during childhood. This skill helps us to imagine what other people are thinking, feeling, and experiencing. But, according to social science researcher and author Brené Brown, accurate perspective taking is incredibly difficult because we must always use our own flawed, biased, and incomplete perspectives as the starting point. It's as if we each have a unique set of lenses through which we see the world and our lives. In a 2017 Facebook livestream reflecting on the white supremacist violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, Brown said:

> *The whiter, more Judeo-Christian, straighter, middle class, [and] educated we are, the more likely it is that we were told that how we see the world is actually the world. And how other people see the world is another unreal version of the world. That our view is the world.[11]*

According to Brown, conventional wisdom states that perspective taking is about setting down our lenses and picking up the lenses of another person, so we can see the world through their eyes. But in reality, "We can't put down the lens. The lens is soldered to our face." We cannot change our own perspectives, which impedes our ability to understand another person's experience. So, what's the solution? According to Brown: "The answer is: You believe people's stories. You believe people's experiences as they tell them to you. You believe when people tell their story."

As BIPOC documentary filmmakers, this article captures some of our stories. **We are not a monolithic community, and our work on this project demonstrates a broad range of experiences and perspectives. If you are a BIPOC filmmaker, we hope that you see something of your perspective reflected here. If you are a white filmmaker or other industry stakeholder, we invite you to learn from these stories—allow them to alter your perspective and inform new strategies for change.**

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

Fortunately, there is hope.

No problem is without a solution. It is incumbent upon all of us to recognize that underrepresented and marginalized filmmakers have a wide range of vital and important stories to tell. The documentary industry has both the responsibility and the ability to make this happen. When survey respondents were asked if they agreed with the statement that "the documentary industry can change to support the kinds of films that I would like to make," there was a 79% average degree of agreement.

When asked to identify which strategies for supporting personal filmmaking by BIPOC filmmakers would be the most beneficial, filmmaker support and development services were generally seen as helpful. However, there was also a strong sentiment that we are too often mentored and too rarely funded. **One survey respondent voiced their frustration with funders "spending gobs of money on 'developing' the filmmaker (housing/hotels/mentors) rather than just giving [the] money to the project."**

Overwhelmingly, respondents wanted the industry to hire more decision makers from underrepresented communities and to approach funding and distribution decisions in a way that is less rigidly focused on depicting our lives through the lens of social issues. Respondents ranked strategies from 1 (not helpful) to 5 (very helpful). *The top-ranking response was that the industry increase the number people of color in decision-making positions,* with an average rating of 4.7. Following closely behind (each with an average rating of 4.6) were the suggestions to create a grant specifically for people of color personal films, to obtain PR/marketing support for their films, and to have people of color mentors. A final strategy that also rated highly (4.5 average) was to create a collective effort to develop, support, and finish personal films.

These practical and easy-to-implement solutions are a great place to start. Many BIPOC filmmakers also envision a future documentary industry that is not based on incremental adjustments. As one focus group participant said: "It seems that there's a critical mass of people like us who have been thinking about changing the system, flipping the switch ... [working] with people who can make the system change."

In fact, the need for systemic change was at the heart of many suggestions in the focus groups and survey responses. One survey respondent simply suggested, "dismantling the film industry and rebuilding." Another respondent shared an impassioned plea:

> *It is a rare gatekeeper who has an actual specific interest in a film artist and is not just using said filmmaker's cultural otherness to advance their career. I have felt dejected and just as harmed by non-white gatekeepers as white gatekeepers. For me it is not an issue of race, it is the issue of the industry and its gatekeepers being heavily misprioritized and chasing glory, sensation and buzz instead of figuring out how to be serviceful to the people on the ground. Perhaps it is time for the industry to rethink how it runs itself as well as finances itself.*

One survey respondent suggested adopting an approach described as "Nothing About Us Without Us." This concept was first popularized in the 1990s by disability rights activists, including James Charlton, who wrote a book with this motto as its title.[12] In recent years, in the U.S. and around the world, underrepresented filmmakers have been increasingly using this phrase as a call to action.

In the context of filmmaking, "Nothing About Us Without Us" is not a request for the kind of tokenism explored earlier in this article. Instead, it is a call for full ownership and control over our own stories. According to Jesse Wente, Director of the Indigenous Screen Office in Canada, it's about "the ability to control our own stories, from funding decisions, through to the creative decisions of the piece, distribution—all of it."[13]

Ultimately, we can only solve the problems we face if we name them and discuss them directly. The survey responses collected and focus groups conducted by Re-Present Media are an effort to collect data that speaks to our experiences in the documentary industry. By bringing this discussion into the public forum, we hope to foster conversations that generate new strategies for systemic change. We invite you to hold meaningful and solutions-based discussions in your own circles of influence and commit to making concrete changes. As stakeholders in the documentary industry, it is up to each one of us to decide how the industry should be reimagined, redesigned, and rebuilt.

We believe this change is possible. As author and historian Ibram X. Kendi writes in *How to Be an Antiracist*:

The good news is that racist and antiracist are not fixed identities. We can be a racist one minute and an antiracist the next. What we say about race, what we do about race, in each moment, determines what—not who—we are.[14]

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jennifer Crystal Chien

is the Director of Re-Present Media and a documentary filmmaker who focuses on personal storytelling.

Chanda Chevannes

is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, writer, and educator. As a queer woman of color, she seeks to amplify underrepresented perspectives with her work.

Re-Present Media

Re-Present Media is a grassroots organization dedicated to humanizing media representations of underrepresented communities through a focus on personal stories from those communities in documentary film and nonfiction media.

www.re-presentmedia.org
info@re-presentmedia.org

ENDNOTES

[1]   Sara Boboltz and Kimberly Yam, "Why On Screen Representation Actually Matters," Huffpost, February 24, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-on-screen-representation-matters_n_58aeae96e4b01406012fe49d.

[2]   Caty Borum Chattoo and William Harder, State of the Documentary Field: 2018 Study of Documentary Professionals (Washington, DC: Center for Media & Social Impact, American University School of Communication, 2018), 20, https://cmsimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CMSI-State-of-Documentary-Field-2018.pdf.

3　We use the popular term BIPOC to describe our constituents for this public discourse and to honor the struggles of Black and Indigenous peoples. We also recognize that we have many identities as self-described below from survey and focus group respondents.

- African American
- Afro-American/Caribbean
- African American/Latina
- Black
- East African
- Ethiopian
- Asian
- Asian American
- Asian-Indian-American
- Chinese American
- Filipino American
- Indian
- Indian-American
- Japanese and Pacific Islander (Amami Islands)
- Korean
- Korean American
- South Asian
- South Asian (specifically Indian)
- South Asian American (Indian)
- Taiwanese
- Vietnamese American, Asian American
- Latin@
- Latina
- Latino
- Latino/Hispanic
- Mexican
- Mexican American
- Mexican-American / Latinx
- Peruvian
- Arab
- Arab, Palestinian
- Iranian
- Middle Eastern
- Moroccan-American
- Bi-racial (half Chinese, half Caucasian)
- Biracial; Anglo/Latina
- Black/Asian/White
- Mixed Race - Vietnamese and Scotch-Irish American
- Japanese and American
- American Indian (Choctaw), Euro-American

4　Gaye Tuchman, "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media," in Culture and Politics, eds. Lane Crothers and Charles Lockhart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 154, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-349-62397-6_9.

5　"Improvement toward inclusion in film, but more work to be done," USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, September 4, 2019, https://annenberg.usc.edu/news/research-and-impact/improvement-toward-inclusion-film-more-work-be-done

6　Nicole Martins and Kristen Harrison, "Racial and Gender Differences in the Relationship Between Children's Television Use and Self-Esteem: A Longitudinal Study," Communication Research, 39, no. 3 (March 16, 2011): 338-357, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0093650211401376

7   Brené Brown, "Brené with Austin Channing Brown on I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness," in Unlocking Us with Brené Brown, June 10, 2020, podcast, 00:30:50, https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-austin-channing-brown-on-im-still-here-black-dignity-in-a-world-made-for-whiteness/.

8   Caty Borum Chattoo and William Harder, State of the Documentary Field: 2018 Study of Documentary Professionals (Washington, DC: Center for Media & Social Impact, American University School of Communication, 2018), 12, https://cmsimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CMSI-State-of-Documentary-Field-2018.pdf.

9   Caty Borum Chattoo and William Harder, State of the Documentary Field: 2018 Study of Documentary Professionals (Washington, DC: Center for Media & Social Impact, American University School of Communication, 2018), 7, https://cmsimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CMSI-State-of-Documentary-Field-2018.pdf.

10   Caty Borum Chattoo and William Harder, State of the Documentary Field: 2018 Study of Documentary Professionals (Washington, DC: Center for Media & Social Impact, American University School of Communication, 2018), 20, https://cmsimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CMSI-State-of-Documentary-Field-2018.pdf.

11   Brené Brown, "We need to keep talking about Charlottesville," August 15, 2017, video, 00:08:20, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=1778878652127236&ref=watch_permalink.

12   James I. Charlton, Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520224810/nothing-about-us-without-us

13   "Dead North wants to make sure filmmakers respect Indigenous stories, cultures," CBC News, December 15, 2019, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/dead-north-festival-indigenous-protocol-1.5394198

14   Ibram X. Kendi, How to Be an Antiracist (New York: One World, 2019), 10, https://www.ibramxkendi.com/how-to-be-an-antiracist