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Breaking cultures of silence: Learnings from a participatory community-centred approach to leveraging and researching documentaries for social change

ABSTRACT

This article offers new learnings and recommended practices for documentary-centred grassroots engagement and social change research. These learnings were developed through a community engagement effort in 2020 that centred around a documentary film about racial violence and injustice, Always in Season. *Shaped*

KEYWORDS

social justice
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by extended dialogues with industry experts, the filmmaker, local community organizations and more than 100 community participants, these learnings should be of interest to researchers, media makers, organizers, activists, and engagement specialists who wish to engage publics in critical social justice conversations that are not possible through traditional top-down, externally driven methods and engagement approaches alone. Organized around an urgent question – 'How can participatory methods shift how media is employed and researched for social change purposes?' – this article responds to a recent call for researchers to avoid 're-inventing the wheel' and to align new work with existing knowledge produced in the field of communication for social change and the long-tradition of community engagement work in the field of documentary.

INTRODUCTION

Research about participatory media too often focuses on the production of media itself, rather than how the people and communities it features are impacted by it. Similarly, efforts towards engaging communities in dialogue around media too often take a back seat to conversations of distribution, a trend accelerated by the rise of global media channels and streaming platforms. But change may be on the horizon. Against the backdrop of an evolving landscape of participatory activism and media, alongside vocal public outcries against racial injustice and persistent social inequalities, a growing number of media and civil society institutions are examining the consequences of traditional top-down distribution approaches while they seek to employ new ways of engaging communities and understanding the ways in which media is meaningful for them.

As a particular genre and media tradition, documentary storytelling – with longstanding roots in community activism and empowerment – often endeavours to share the intimate real-life stories of communities for purposes of building community solidarity, raising awareness of crucial social issues and inequities, correcting damaging historical narratives, monitoring the public landscape for neglected social problems, mobilizing communities and activists against injustice and strengthening civil society through meaningful partnerships with community-based organizations (Borum Chattoo 2020). With these aims in mind, heightened attention and import have recently been given to documentary production strategies based on principles of *co-creation* (Cizek and Uricchio 2019; Borum Chattoo 2020), to necessary commitments to improve matters of diversity and representation among storytellers and on-screen subjects (Borum Chattoo 2020; Smith et al. 2019), and to calls for clearer transparency and ethics against 'extractive storytelling' techniques which take stories from communities without a thoughtful deliberation for how those stories will either benefit or harm the people portrayed on screen (White 2020).

When it comes to the processes that often begin after documentary production, especially strategies of audience and community engagement through grassroots screenings efforts and other discussion-based events – a lauded tradition within documentary storytelling – there has been less research. However, the actual impact that documentaries are having in communities – and can have – remains a perennially important area of study, given that this practice holds great utility and potentiality for thoughtfully engaging communities in pressing social issues.

And so two core questions emerge in this juncture: *How can participatory methods support the ways in which community-based documentary engagements are employed and researched for social change purposes? And what can be learned from recent and past community engagement efforts in the documentary field?* To this end, theories and knowledge generated within the field of communication for social change (CfSC) stand to offer valuable – and urgently needed – guidance. By bringing the literature and body of CfSC work in closer conversation with the documentary engagement field, this article responds to a recent call for researchers to avoid 're-inventing the wheel' and to learn from the rich knowledge and literature produced within the field of CfSC (Rodríguez et al. 2014). In doing so, this article similarly warns against the urge to create 'new participatory methods' around documentaries, without first considering the knowledge and lessons offered by its rich history of grassroots engagement.

Informed by this historicity, the learnings presented here were developed through a community-based research effort in 2020 with a documentary film about racial violence and injustice, *Always in Season*, which premiered on PBS in 2020 and was directed by one of this article's authors. Shaped by extended dialogues that took place with industry experts, local community organizations and more than 100 community participants, and inspired by a long tradition of public engagement work that has happened with documentaries and social change work for decades, these learnings should be of interest to researchers, media makers, organizers, activists and engagement specialists who wish to engage publics in critical social justice conversations that are not possible through traditional top-down, externally driven methods and engagement approaches alone.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical consciousness, cultures of silence and the under-recognized intersection of CfSC and documentary storytelling

At various stages, there has been a global awakening across fields of media-making, communication, design and research to the importance of valuing processes and approaches of working that stem 'from' and 'with' people, as opposed to those that are 'for' or 'about' them (Cizek and Uricchio 2019). And an old revolt against the modernization paradigm of communication – often characterized through a one-way flow of information from the 'expert'/'professional' to the 'audience' – has expanded in recent years to include an acknowledgement that top-down approaches to storytelling and media are still finding expression in contemporary, even participatory, media systems and organizations (Driver 2020). This has resulted in a boom of new typologies, theories and archetypes of participatory culture, but its impact on practice has generally unified into a movement towards the development of co-creation strategies in asking questions, solving problems, gaining insights, telling stories and communicating ideas (Forde 2011).

Much of this participatory focus and research has stalled, however, when it comes to stepping beyond issues of production or reception and towards addressing questions of participatory engagement around how media is distributed and engaged with in communities, such as: What does a more participatory rooted approach to research about documentary media influence look like? What sort of change can it help to foster? And what lessons can be gleaned from past engagement efforts around documentary storytelling?

There have been some notable studies dedicated to examining how organizations and social movements use documentaries to leverage pre-determined social impact goals (Aguayo 2013; Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2017; Borum Chattoo 2020; Nash and Corner 2016). But these studies have largely dedicated their focus to articulating and chronicling the efficacy of past documentary and social change efforts, fighting for its relevance as a strategic medium within the field of social change inquiry; rather than guiding the development of new participatory research practices for enabling communities to engage with documentaries and develop their own understandings, purposes and movements around them. And it is in this later pursuit – on improving methods of community-rooted dialogue around documentaries – that the canon of CfSC theory remains a largely underutilized resource of knowledge and tools.

To provide an example, a framework that is centrally aligned with the learnings and values offered in this study is Paulo Freire's idea (1970) of *critical consciousness*, which holds immense value as a way to delineate what this study means by participatory 'engagement' and 'meaning making'. Freire (1970) coined this idea after working with labourers in Brazil and Chile during the 1960s, in order to reflect a process through which people who were once 'submerged' in non-participatory practices could become empowered to emerge as conscious makers of new practices and realities. For Freire, the cycle of critical consciousness reflected a process of *becoming*, through which people are engaged to see oppressive systems and structures of power that create and sustain inequity and form a sense of agency and active commitment to overcome them. As part of this process, Freire (1972) wrote about the importance of breaking 'cultures of silence', which largely reflected the traditional pedagogy of his time, through which teachers would engage in monologue lectures that were detached from the lived realities and experiences of their students and which restrained people as receptacles of knowledge, rather than engaging them in dialogue.

Freire's writings and ideas around critical consciousness and dialogue have been tied to the theoretical foundation of the CfSC field (Obregon and Mosquera 2005; Tufte and Gumucio-Dagron 2006), and they have received renewed attention through new Special Issues (Suzina et al. 2020) and conversations (Cerqueira da Conceição et al. 2020) dedicated to centring Freire's writings within today's media and political environments. At the same time, his work, even in recent Special Issues, is rarely placed in conversation with studies that look at how media – including documentaries – can be used as tools for creating transformative dialogue and critical consciousness. One reason for this could be the seeming disharmony between Freire's ideas and the more impatient timelines of traditional media engagement strategies. Building 'awareness' of a social injustice can be achieved through the airing of an informative programme on a popular radio or television platform, but building 'critical consciousness' around why some social injustices persist – through which communities confront their place in systems of inequality, come to name such systems and learn how to overcome them – is a process that requires a different, more deliberative, approach. As one group of scholars (Suzina et al. 2020) recently put it, Freire's 'dialogic, non-imposing face-to-face' processes of small community-based engagements have historically been seen by some as too 'slow' and 'un-modern' when compared with the capabilities of other mass media-oriented campaigns (like radio) and their abilities to engage audiences and social movements far more quickly and at larger scales (Suzina et al. 2020: 57). Consequently, Freire's ideas have more

frequently been employed in developing works of theory, rather than methods of community-based media engagement; this article is one attempt at reversing this trend.

Learning from the tradition of documentary-centred community engagement

There are several adjacent fields to CfSC – from 'entertainment education' to 'communication for development' – with rich traditions of research into the role that media platforms and processes can play in advancing social change goals and collective action. And within these canons there are a growing pool of indicators and methods for guiding and measuring community engagement and impact around social change, further raising the importance of community-led methods within development work and discourse. Similarly, tried-and-true CfSC strategies like participatory storytelling and radio listening clubs (Manyozo 2012) pose relevant lessons for documentary-centred community engagement work, and they provide further evidence to the universal values of listening and responsive designs in participatory work more generally. At the same time, much of this work within the CfSC canon does not provide models of engagement that are aligned directly with the particular capabilities, challenges and opportunities offered by documentary storytelling. In the same way, there is a host of valuable work around how participatory and semi-structured methodologies can be used to evaluate development agendas and interventions (i.e. Lennie and Tacchi 2013) or drive organizational impact goals (Borum Chattoo 2020; Nash and Corner 2016), but more attention should also be given to models that seek to use documentaries as a tool for community building, expression and dialogue that is capable of forming horizontal (not expert-led) relationships of 'mutual trust' and 'critical thinking' outside of organizational goals or evaluation campaigns. Such non-directive, non-externally driven principles are essential, Freire argued, for dialogue to be capable of going beyond 'action for action's sake' and to building *critical consciousness*. Put another way, while the documentary field may be at fault for underutilizing CfSC theory and work, much of the CfSC field and its adjacent social change disciplines rarely recognize the rich history of community engagement within the documentary field, a tradition that offers considerable knowledge and lessons with potentiality and relevance.

Documentaries have long been used as a medium for community engagement around social change goals. There is a long tradition of activists using documentaries to support social reform, for instance, dating as far back as the early twentieth century (Borum Chattoo 2020). And even community screenings and film festivals are not a creation of recent history. As early as the 1960s, the Fogo Process, for instance, involved the use of film production as a way for community members to express their experiences and visions on social problems and community needs, and it even employed a 'playback' function whereby the community-made films would be aired in communities to help educate politicians and other community members on the shared nature of the problems (Quarry and Ramirez 2009).

As such, the tradition of working with documentaries to produce bottom-up, community-rooted, social change goals dates back nearly a century, and this work has advanced considerably in the post-millennial digital media age. Since 2005, for example, PBS has dedicated considerable resources to its Independent Lens Pop-Up Series, which takes documentaries to neighbourhoods across the

United States in an effort to bring people together for screenings and community-driven conversations around their films. Indeed, based on pioneering community engagement work with documentaries stemming back from the 1950s and 1960s verité movement, which evolved into the community media movement of the 1980s and beyond, an entire global professional ecology has evolved to discuss and learn best practices about ethical, thoughtful community engagement with documentary work (Borum Chattoo 2020). The Global Impact Producers Assembly, for instance, now about a decade old, convenes global impact producers from around the world towards these ends.

Importantly, the work that documentary filmmakers, particularly those from BIPOC communities, have also been doing – some for decades, others beginning more recently – to centre and evolve impact and community engagement has been vital to evolving industry practices. Directors from groups and associations like Brown Girls Doc Mafia, Firelight Media Documentary Lab, Asian American Documentary Network (A-Doc), Chicken & Egg Accelerator Lab, Working Films and others have developed their own practices to intimately and equitably engage with the communities at the heart of their films. A deep focus by independent filmmakers on community-building is also evident in the array of film projects that have been featured in the BRITDOC Impact Field Guide & Toolkit since 2014.

Out of this culture, the director and producer of *Always in Season*, Jacqueline Olive,[1] led her own community engagement campaign with the film for more than ten years. As part of the campaign, she worked with her impact team to facilitate community engagement screenings and dialogues designed to give targeted audiences the opportunity to unpack their connections with lynching violence and discuss the lingering effects of racial terrorism, historic and contemporary, on their communities today. With the goal of strategizing ways for communities to collectively work towards justice and reconciliation at local and national levels, the campaign was designed to centre the voices of Black families and facilitate dialogues that allowed Black people to imagine their own paths towards healing, without having to navigate the residual power dynamics of White supremacy as they define and work towards repair for themselves. The campaign also prioritized and facilitated cross-racial dialogues that could lead to deeper mutual understanding and stronger multiracial coalition-building.

Building on work by filmmakers like Olive, who create within the long under-recognized tradition of documentary-centred community engagement, and the work of community-based collectives like Radical Optimist, who are working to create spaces for conversations that centre race and cultivate healing and growth, this article offers a set of learnings and practices – employed in a singular study featured here – for CfSC activists, researchers and organizers to use documentaries for community building in a manner capable of engendering transformative community dialogue and critical consciousness-raising around urgent social issues.

The documentary film and study behind the learnings

In its initial conceptualization, this study's objective was straightforward: an exploration of how *Always in Season*,[2] a documentary about the legacy of racial violence and lynching in America, would be received by a cross-section of people living in seven politically, demographically and geographically diverse communities across the country at a time of unprecedented media distrust and

1. Jacqueline Olive also directed and produced the virtual reality, role-playing environment called *Always in Season Island*. The project offered viewers an immersive look at the choices and circumstances that led to lynch mob violence and is one of the first XR projects to adapt social justice issue-driven storytelling content to virtual reality technology. *Always in Season Island* is featured in the MIT Docubase.

2. *Always in Season* focuses on the lingering impact of more than a century of lynching African Americans by connecting this form of historic racial terrorism to acts of racial violence still taking place today, through the true story of Lennon Lacy, an African American teen who was found hanging from a swing set in Bladenboro, North Carolina, on 29 August 2014.

escalating tensions around issues of institutional racism and racial violence (Conrad-Pérez et al. 2020). From here, the traditional academic model of research would have guided us to take our set of predetermined research questions (created within the boundaries of our professional worlds) and then move into the data collection process (by designing our surveys, focus group and interview questions, etc.). However, rather than following this approach, our study's first step was sideways: towards *reaching out* to other civic groups for their perspective on the questions we had designed, *reflecting* on the blindspots we may be bringing to them and *considering* how the research might be received in each community.

This endeavour began with three considerations that are likely familiar to any researcher or media maker who works with vulnerable communities. Here, the difference was that, rather than trying to address the questions during the research, we started with them:

- How can we make sure that our process of selecting and asking questions is as equitable, respectful and responsible as possible, while still getting at the issues we are most interested in? (And how can we minimize the blindspots we each personally bring to this work?)
- How can we ensure that we are facilitating a safe space for conversation where people of different racial and ethnic identifications, backgrounds and lived experiences can feel free to share their honest perspective?
- How can we make sure that we, as facilitators and researchers, are prepared and respond appropriately to moments of trauma that might be triggered by the film or focus group discussions?

In considering these questions, preliminary consultative discussions were launched with the filmmaker behind the study (Jacqueline Olive), the funder (ITVS) and several other groups (including Working Films) with deep experience doing community engagement work with documentaries. Then, the research team was expanded to include the Radical Optimist Collective, a women-led collective in Montgomery, Alabama, who specialize in community engagements and intentional racial awareness and racial healing work, and who host frequent meaning-making discussions around the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice. This group was recommended during the research's initial sideways step of reaching out to other civic groups for advice. Following early discussions with Radical Optimist, it became clear that using a traditional focus group method – in which a researcher led a group in discussion around a set of predetermined research queries – would be the wrong answer to each of the questions set forth above. In other words, we needed to design a participatory approach which proceeded as much from the interests of the communities involved, as it did from the interests that we brought to the table. Ultimately, the learnings and practices presented here, reflecting the approach this study developed and employed, were co-developed by the more than 100 participants who engaged in this research as participants and partners.

How to use documentaries for community-building and social change-centred research: A radical listening approach

This article offers a set of 'radical listening' and community engagement strategies and principles – developed by this article's authors and inspired by the

rich traditions and work within the fields of documentary and CfSC – that foreground unpredictable participant reflections as the starting point of community discussion and builds a space that is 'safe enough' (Pinderhughes et al. 2017) for participants to express their perspectives and confront deeply rooted cultures of silence and inequity.

While facilitators may be trained in the best principles of non-directedness and strategies designed to ensure participants do not feel dominated by the facilitators, the rigidity of traditional focus group questions and design processes can risk steering conversations in the direction of the researchers, rather than the interests of the room. As a result, the interview or focus group questions may start from a participatory premise, but ultimately fall into a climate of clinical data extraction, through which participants feel as if they are part of a project, rather than a larger process of community building. To overcome such shortfalls, this article offers *four defining features of radical listening* that other researchers can adopt and further develop.

First, participants should be engaged not only as experts in the process of data collection, but also as authorities in the direction of the overall conversation. Building on the transportive potential of the documentary form, this research offered the same opening question to every participant. That question was: 'please share your name and how the documentary made you feel?' This simple starting point situated participants as experts, since only they could have the answer to that question. It also allowed people feeling pain or anger to express that feeling and be seen. From there, the conversation could follow a natural process through which participants first express (1) their feelings about the documentary and confronting the people and events in it, to then (2) confronting the realities within their own communities, which means confronting the truths within not only their neighbourhood but also the room they are in. While this process can be lightly guided by prepared prompts, it should follow a natural progression.

Second, this article calls for collaboration with local experts from the community in reviewing focus group prompts *and* in co-facilitating the actual conversation. This is another approach used by Radical Optimist, Jacqueline Olive and other filmmakers, to bring community leaders and healers into the room to support, and guide, conversations and to inform collaboration. This call also responds to outstanding demand for participatory models which consider local contexts in their design (Tachhi et al. 2009), by providing an opportunity for the unique local histories and happenings of the community to be considered ahead of time – i.e. has an event similar to the one in the documentary taken place recently? Where would be the best (i.e. most trusted and easily accessible) place for this conversation to take place? What other local events or histories might be relevant to the discussion? Having a local co-facilitator does not automatically overcome the 'foreign' nature of the research, especially if it is from an individual or institution that is outside of the community, but it helps foster a shared commitment to community building and co-creation from the beginning.

Third, while the research design should be situated with the unique experiences of the participants, this article encourages facilitators to bring a set of prompts that allow the conversation to strategically expand from the personal-outward to the various levels of society – from the individual, family and community levels to institutional, city, governmental or other actors. Within this discussion, a radical listening approach to research means acknowledging that the boundaries of these different layers are not experienced separately;

they are all baked together. In other words, the legacy of racism and racial violence is a cross-cutting social issue that touches every level of the social spectrum in some way. This research provoked participants to express their experience of the family–community–societal–institutional without thinking of them in such terms, but sharing experiences, instead, which walk across the layers, as they do in their daily lives. It is through this process, which roots the causes and solutions to social problems within the room (rather than distant systems), that a sense of community consciousness is capable of forming.

Finally, or fourth, this article emphasizes that 'participatory' does not mean 'unstructured' or 'unprepared'. A lack of a rigidly employed set of questions does not mean that facilitators should come to the research with a lack of understanding about the issue they are wishing to engage participants in conversation on. To the contrary, facilitators should understand the documentary they are screening, and the issues it raises. This means reading about the issues and/or consulting experts on the issues of the documentary ahead of time. When it comes to hosting conversations related to racism or racial violence, for instance, researchers and facilitators should know the meaning of the words they are using (i.e., what racial terrorism, reconciliation and transformative justice mean). This burden of responsibility should not be placed on the community alone.

Learnings from the study (part 1): The transportive power of the documentary

The learnings from this research proceed from the premise that the community group has just completed the shared experience of watching a documentary together. The documentary genre centred here is meaningful. Research articulates documentary's influence on both the audience level and the cultural and community level. First, at the level of the viewing audience, documentaries are persuasive and influential because they evoke emotion, are perceived by audiences as realistic and because artistic nonfiction stories can be transporting and absorbing, taking us deep into story worlds where we might experience empathy and connection for on-screen characters and their lives (Borum Chattoo 2020). Documentary filmmakers frequently adapt journalistic practices around ethics and accuracy in order to create cinema that is at once factual and artistic – that is, in the writing, interviewing and filming, treatment of people on-screen, editing, use of music and more – often with a storytelling perspective that is named and explicit. Viewers are then able to experience a narrative that is compelling and entertaining, while also learning and engaging through realism.

At the level of the broader community and culture, documentary in the United States (and around the world) has a longstanding tradition as a community engagement mechanism. In the 1950s and 1960s, as movements and uprisings for equity and justice took off, lighter film gear helped documentary storytellers to work more intimately in oppressed and neglected communities. The resulting rise in popularity of the dominant verité (or direct cinema) style of documentary filmmaking – with its focus on intimacy and acting as a 'fly on the wall' to events as they unfold, rather than a heavily narrated or constructed version of reality championed by broadcast TV news networks of the time – incubated and shaped an increasing practice whereby social justice activists and community storytellers could leverage documentary to reveal realities that were otherwise untold or marginalized within

mainstream news of the time. Further, the arrival of less expensive gear and accessibility to resources in recent years, like archives and online information, as the industry turned from film to digital media, has provided new opportunities for more people to become professional filmmakers. And greater diversity among directors is increasingly reshaping what it means to tell stories of communities disproportionately facing injustice, and how to do it in a deeply complex, resonant and impactful way.

Together, greater diversity among filmmakers, documentary's influence on audience knowledge and behaviours, the motivations of filmmakers to encourage community dialogue around neglected social problems and the strong tradition of grassroots distribution and engagement, means documentaries are capable of serving particular functions in the public sphere: they can act as emotionally resonant and deep interpreters of reality, serve as community organizing and mobilizing mechanism and provide trusted media counter-storytelling in order to provide a deeper examination of lived experiences and social problems than scripted entertainment or daily news reporting.

In response to the study's opening question – 'How did the documentary make you feel?' – many participants shared that they could feel its truths 'in their body'. This is meaningful because it reflects how the physical connection forged by the documentary experience can ground the social justice challenge of racial violence as a lived reality – rather than a research question or intellectual exercise – from the very beginning. In one community, as it became her turn to share, an African American participant asked: 'Can we just take a moment to weep?' This pause allowed everyone in the room to open up and let their traditional guards down; her encouragement of naming her emotional response, and holding space for it, significantly shifted the outcome of the entire conversation.

People often (in every community) shared a belief that local and national media outlets were 'failing us' and that uncomfortable truths are being hidden from them. They expressed a range of emotions – from sadness and shame to outrage and frustration – at not knowing more about cases of racial violence and suspicious suicides across the country, and a feeling that they are missing critical stories important to them and their community. By contrast, survey results administered to every participant who was part of the documentary screenings revealed that all but one respondent (n = 165 out of 167) agreed with the statement that the documentary provided 'a true portrayal of a real problem' (Conrad-Pérez et al. 2020: n.pag.). While the documentary focused on a North Carolina tragedy, participants across the country felt that it told a story that echoed with the experience of their community. They shared recent and distant experiences that they had not spoken about before and called-out realities that they felt had long been hidden or ignored in the community. Participants spoke about lynchings that have taken place in their community and to loved ones, with little media or public attention, while many others spoke to less overtly violent – but still painful – ways in which racial discrimination finds them in their community's health clinics, school systems and trips to Walmart. They collectively expressed: this is true here.

Learnings from the study (part 2): Using participatory approaches to overcome cultures of silence

Perhaps the most transformative element of the radical-listening, community-driven principles used in this research is their potentiality to empower

participants to identify and break through cultures of silence around urgent social justice issues within their communities. One way research can achieve this is by *working through* emotions with participants and developing a sense of community consciousness among the community group, through which participants are encouraged to see their place within the history and present-day circumstances of their community, and through which inaction is seen for what it is: silence.

The radical listening approach offered here employs dialogical principles for a form of engagement that is capable of building communities of action at the same time that they build spaces for experience sharing. The convergence of trust and transportive emotional experience, made possible through the documentary, means that communities can come together to confront realities in their community that have long gone unaddressed and to make meaning of those realities together for action. Rather than a rush to solutions, the study – rooted in the principles of radical listening – favoured an opportunity for dialogue and to listening to different perspectives, rather than simply sharing them; and it transforms the documentary experience from a one-way flow of information – from either a completed film or an expert panel – to a dialectic which uses the documentary as a mobilizer for collective consciousness building holding the potential to create new cultures by planting the seeds for further learning, action, self-awareness and critical consciousness.

What followed from the study's initial question about participant emotions was a process of community interrogation. The documentary functioned as a tool in stimulating participants to not only name racism and racial injustices that have taken place in their community, but also to call out cultures of silence that perpetuate them – that is the unspoken norms of their community that have led people to be silent while injustice persists. This process was not part of the study's original design; it arose and was driven by the participants. Participants used similar language to describe the culture of silence in their community, most often referring to it as a 'mob mentality', a culture of 'watching' and 'covertness', and the quiet 'suppression of truth telling'. While the exact phrase 'culture of silence' was not used explicitly, participants agreed – during the analysis stage of this project (when findings were shared with the focus group participants for their reflection and response) – that it adequately captured and reflected the various terms they used and experiences they shared. Participants described their community's culture of silence as the basis upon which historical and present-day truths are being hidden by institutions and everyday community members alike, and upon which racial violence and terror are ultimately able to persist without being challenged. It is also through this culture of silence that participants say they feel disconnected from each other, and misunderstood (even feared) by one another.

In this study, the process of breaking a culture of silence through documentary-based community conversations generally followed three steps: First, communities recognized and addressed the culture of silence in the documentary. Second, they recognized and addressed the culture of silence in their own community and questioned why it is so difficult for them to come together around issues of racial violence and justice. And, third, participants moved towards acts of community building and expressions of critical community consciousness. These steps are detailed in the following sections.

Step 1: Recognizing and addressing the culture of silence in the documentary

In every community, discussions did not begin with an immediate feeling of community action or consciousness; rather, it followed from listening to the experiences of others. In Durham, for instance, participants expressed frustration with the majority White community (in Bladenboro) portrayed in the documentary for not doing more after the lynching – something everyone in the room could get behind and point to:

> I wondered to myself, why are the white people in this community not standing in solidarity with this family? How can they be so deep in their denial of truth […]. Or why were we not? People driving there, to Bladenboro, to demand justice for these people! […] The willful ignorance is so, to me, painful, appalling, and just, you wonder how can people live in that community surrounded by a case like this, and be that much in denial.
>
> (Anon. 2020a)

Another participant also described the 'mob mentality' of the community depicted in the documentary as being akin to a culture of 'watching':

> The white people watching [from a distance] when Reverend Barber was talking. […] It's like they think: 'This is not my problem'.
>
> (Anon. 2020a)

Early in the Concord conversation, a participant made note of the 'mob mentality' that allows injustice to persist in their New Hampshire community. But, like elsewhere, the focus was first placed on larger patterns of silence and injustice that persist beyond their community:

> The thing that I took away, that I was so horrified by, was the normalization of the cruelty and the mob mentality that people [in Bladenboro] can stand by and see these things happen.
>
> (Anon. 2020b)

Another Concord participant described this culture of silence as the 'suppression of truth telling'. And in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a participant, again, invoked the notion of a 'mob mentality':

> I think one of the things that stood out for me was kind of that mob mentality. […] You would see some of those images (of the lynchings), and how many people were just standing around and being complicit to these activities.
>
> (Anon. 2020c)

Put briefly, participants in every community began by expressing feelings of anger and frustration at the 'cultures', 'systems' and 'mentalities' that failed other communities first.

Providing a dedicated space for emotions to be shared at the outset was critical. While Freire emphasized the importance of communal emotions – including love for one another and mutual trust – in creating a productive

space for dialogue, he also argued that it is important to overcome the narrowing potential of emotions which he believed can stymie movements towards critical consciousness due to their proclivity to block avenues for collective deliberation (Sherman 1980). Similarly, one of the grounding principles of this study, offered by Radical Optimists racial healing and justice work, was the requirement that participants surrender feelings of guilt at the door. In the engagements, participants were asked to consider guilt as being useful for only about thirty seconds, and that anything more would be self-indulgence and not serve or be helpful to the group moving forward to new understanding.

In this way, the research grounded its first steps into dialogue as part of a process of naming – but not dwelling on – the raw emotions stirred by the film, which served a dual purpose of (1) providing opportunities for mutual trust and community building within the group, and (2) grounding the conversation in the acknowledgement of the hard truths and emotions of the room. From this starting point, the conversation could then move *through* emotion and towards a critical collective discussion about the reasons, experiences and structures that compelled them.

Step 2: Then, recognizing and addressing the culture of silence in their community

The confrontation with the community in the documentary then led to the further expression of frustration, confrontation and dialogue about the lack of participation and solidarity within their own community, agreeing that the problem of racial violence, and the 'culture of silence' that allows it to persist, was just as present – as real – in their community. This step out of the documentary and towards an engagement with issues in their communities is an essential movement in the creation of transformational dialogue and in fostering what Freire calls 'true words' – that is words and actions which are not spoken *for* someone (i.e. by experts), but which are spoken by individuals in dialogue with one another about the world they live in. By contrast, if the identification of 'actions' or 'activism' becomes – or feels like – part of a preconceived design, rather than the product of individual and collective reflection, then, Freire warns (1972), it can make true dialogue impossible and produce only 'unauthentic forms of existence' and thereby 'unauthentic forms of thought'. For this reason, the study did not force conversations of action; it did not signal 'okay, now we are going to talk about actions' or 'now we are going to discuss what we can do to fix things'. Instead, it created spaces for participants to move the conversation towards these objectives first, if they wanted to do so. In one community, the discussion did not move towards traditional 'actions'; instead, a collective confrontation and acknowledgement of racial injustices – historically and still today – in their community and a dedication to 'keep talking' were as far as the group choose to go.

The transition from discussions of emotion, and the events in the documentary, towards confronting the experiences and realities in their communities happened subtly in some groups and abruptly in others. After an extensive discussion of the community portrayed in the documentary, a Carbondale, Illinois participant put her hand on the table and said that this is not just a 'North Carolina issue'. Instead, she said, it is reflective of everyday life in the southern Illinois community she lives in. Acknowledging that as a starting point, she shared, is critical. She discussed experiencing racism from a White cashier at a Walmart in Carbondale, while community members simply

stood in line and watched. This sparked a larger conversation about the prevalence of silence and people's failure to 'confront' the reality of racism in their community.

In Herkimer, New York, a young White participant drew attention to the culture of silence that she felt has led hate groups to avoid the spotlight in her community. Similarly, in Bristol, Tennessee, a participant called for her community to bring 'to light' racial violence that has persisted for too long in her community. During the Concord focus group, BIPOC participants pinpointed a fear that many of them had before attending the screening: that people would leave thinking that the history of lynchings, along with present-day racial violence, was a 'southern thing', when – in reality – it was also just as much a New Hampshire 'thing'. And being able to identify and share this truth as a group, they said, was critical.

In multiple communities, BIPOC participants shared experiences of racial violence from both the recent and distant past, involving themselves, friends and family members and the fear that many of them still carry living in their community. In Bristol, Tennessee, one 71-year-old community member shared a story of a family member who was lynched. While the lynching happened when she was 6 years old, she said it was something she never spoke about, even with her family. She came to the community discussion because she thought it might help her heal. It provided her with an opportunity to share a traumatic experience that for decades she kept to herself, in silence.

Other participants spoke about the fear they carry. After one BIPOC participant in Carbondale said she felt like she has to be extra careful when she is in certain parts of the city because she often feels like people are watching her, another participant described living in a state of constant fear of unknowingly 'stepping out of line'.

Across the community conversations, participants shared experiences of racial discrimination in school systems, health clinics, with police, local elections, government services, restaurants and several areas of public life. In other words, participants shared the resounding sentiment that the issues of the documentary were also true and relevant in their communities. Through the framework of Freire's idea of critical consciousness, this reflects the process of 'naming'; it is by naming the world around them, and the powers and historical injustices within it, that people can then *re-create* the world around them.

In every group, what followed from this process of collectively 'naming' the cultures of silence and racism in their community was an act of community building and the development of a critical community consciousness.

Step 3: A move towards community building and critical community consciousness

From the personal stories and shared emotions and experiences, a process of community interrogation and commitments proceeded. By anchoring the conversation in the experiences of people in the room, all of whom were from the community, the conversations provoked feelings of 'personal responsibility' and commitments to challenge 'bystander apathy' in order to make new cultures and communities. After participants called on one another to bring 'to light' the racial violence that has persisted in their community, there was a natural movement in every community towards expressions of how to dismantle their community's culture of silence by 'stepping out', 'speaking out' and 'continuing to push' for change. Far from a utopia, participants across

communities expressed shared feelings of hopelessness, anger and frustration, and they called out realities that they felt had long been hidden or ignored in their community. From this acknowledged reality of pain and hopelessness, there were efforts made towards justice, healing and change. Participants commonly expressed the feeling that simply showing the documentary and walking away would have risked further exacerbating the problem of disconnection in their community. Because the problem is not simply empathy, they say, it is dialogue. By having a space to share feelings and interrogate, participants said they were able to better 'recognize each other' and to work together in new ways.

Participants challenged each other to follow through on the commitments they made in the discussion. For instance, several BIPOC participants challenged their community with expressions of frustration and exhaustion with the fact that past community events have raised issues of racial injustice only to have community action fizzle out after everyone leaves the room. These calls also came from other White participants, too. In Durham, for instance, a challenge was issued for the White community to hold more responsibility in 'showing up' – to do what the White community in the documentary should have done.

In Albuquerque, a participant voiced frustration over the lack of concern with Indigenous women who have disappeared in recent months. He described it as being treated as a 'third tier news story' that 'no one acknowledges'. Later in the conversation, he issued a call for people to do a better job showing up for each other and engage in 'uncomfortable conversations' (Anon. 2020c). For a participant in Bristol, where the community conversation was held in a historic movie theatre that was once segregated, the process of dismantling the culture of silence involves finding the courage to 'step out' of it:

> Everybody has to play a part. I go back to: you just can't be invisible. You have just got to step out […] until we get people to stop being hidden and stop being invisible and start to speak up, and be the whistle blower, and don't be afraid, then things will change if we do that.
>
> (Anon. 2020d)

DISCUSSION

This article addresses the need for research which translates the CfSC 'talk' about the importance of participatory practices and community building into action, and lifts community engagement practices and values within the documentary field for wider use and recognition by CfSC scholarship. This article provides researchers with a comprehensive overview of learnings derived from a research study that used a film as the starting point for community-building and dialogue; the processes and values that guided its design; its organizing principles and features; and why the documentary medium can be such a valuable tool for fostering the emotional/transportive connections and trust needed to facilitate community-based engagements and research around issues of media influence and social change.

In its objective to outline the learnings from this study, this article has not afforded much focus to a discussion of the limitations and unique challenges of participatory research. However, such critical reflection is vital. As with any participatory process, it is our hope that researchers will further refine

the scope and application of the learnings offered here to build new understandings, research and communities around media research and CfSC. We also hope that this article will inspire further research on the role of public space – both the historical importance of having community engagements on social justice issues in public spaces (especially given the terrorizing role that public space has historically played in acts of racial violence) and the simultaneous challenge of transient spaces. Regarding the later, many of the community conversations engaged in this research were held in spaces that were trusted by the community – i.e. library conference room, local theatre, Denny's restaurant, university classroom – but that were repurposed for other events after we finished. This raises questions about the potential utility of spaces which can serve as a holder for the conversations and commitments that take place there, a point for people to return to for follow-up conversations and hold people accountable: a place to measure progress. Research that explores how documentary-centred community engagements might be used in connection with a public space that 'holds' its on-going commitments is critical, along with further research on the lasting behavioural and social impact of participatory engagement approaches to research, like the one offered here.

In summary, as CfSC methodologies and practices continue to evolve, documentary storytelling has much to offer. Many documentary makers are motivated by social change as much as – often more than – telling real-life stories simply for the sake of entertainment value (Borum Chattoo 2020). Their interrogation of real-life events, often crafted from the lived experiences of storytellers who are members of the communities they place on screen, is vitally important within the broader spectrum of cultural stories that reflect our realities and social problems. And yet, without employing appropriate research methods, many lessons about documentary's potentiality for social change may remain unclear. It is our hope that researchers and media makers who seek to understand the value and societal impact of documentary storytelling will apply the lessons and participatory approach offered here. In doing so, the practice and art of responsible documentary storytelling can be married to a community-focused approach to researching its influence, a powerful combination.

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