

Production Note: *Viewers Like Us* was produced as an audio series. If possible, we encourage you to listen to Episode 1 on our website, or wherever you listen to podcasts. The following transcript is for reference only and may contain typos. Please confirm accuracy before quoting.

EPISODE 1: “America’s Storyteller?”

ACT 1

Archival interview: “Mark Twain is supposed to have said, ‘History doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes.’ These stories, when we lift up and we finish, are just always rhyming in the present.”

Grace Lee: That’s documentary filmmaker Ken Burns talking to the New York Times. You may have heard of him.

He’s a brand. And he sells American history.

Archival audio:

Ken Burns, and his brilliant team at Florentine Films, has taken on one of the pillars of American culture.

Ken Burns captures an intimate story of victory and defeat

For 10 years, Ken Burns and Lynn Novick have been working ...

Grace: Whenever his films premiere, they’re treated like special events. And his name pops up all over. Like On billboards and murals...even on TV game shows...

Archival Audio:

Host: All right, here’s Ken Burns with the clue..

Burns: Hemingway gave his first son, a middle name of Nicanor after a Spanish star of this arena sport..

Contestant: What is bullfighting?

Grace: For many people, even some of you listening, he's synonymous with historical documentaries.

And it's understandable. Burns has built a 40-year career making films on subjects from the Brooklyn Bridge to his latest, a four-part series on Muhammad Ali. The titles of his multi-hour films read like entries in an encyclopedia: The Civil War, Baseball, Jazz, Country Music.

All of this adds up to hundreds of hours of programming on a platform that calls itself one of the country's most trusted institutions.

PBS, the Public Broadcasting Service. That's where many Americans turn for unbiased news, kids' programs, documentaries and the arts.

Like Sesame Street, Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, and Downton Abbey.

My name is Grace Lee and I'm an independent filmmaker. That's a clip from one of my early films about my incredibly common Asian American name. My documentaries also explore American history and culture. Many of them have aired on PBS. But that's where any similarity between me and Ken Burns ends.

Archival audio: *Join me, Tom Hanks, for our celebration of Ken Burns in... "Ken Burns, America's Storyteller."*

Grace: For one, Tom Hanks has never introduced me as "America's Storyteller." Well, he's never introduced me, period.

My films—like the one you're listening to here—explore topics like women of color transforming American politics, and the history of anti-Asian racism.

That's probably why the last couple of years make me question where we're headed as a country. Police killings of Black people, political divisions that prolonged the pandemic, voter suppression. Wildfires and attacks against Asian elders...What's next?

It turns out the Ford Foundation also wanted to know what was next. In the fall of 2020, they invited 40 thinkers—including me—to write provocations for the future, about how to make the arts and media worlds more just and equitable.

So I tackled a subject that's been on my mind for a long time: Why is PBS so white? And how exactly did it designate Ken Burns as America's storyteller? As if there's only room for one?

Grace: Welcome to *Viewers Like Us*, where we investigate the growing gap between PBS and its founding mission, and ask: what would it take to restore the public to public television? I'm your host, Grace Lee.

Now, I have nothing personal against Ken Burns. I admire his embrace of history. But he's taking up a lot of space on our public airwaves. His hundreds of hours of primetime programming are products of a *system* that for decades has prioritized his worldview. At the expense of storytellers and audiences of color.

PBS has enabled him even as it goes against its very mission: to reflect a diversity of perspectives that speak to all of America.

See, Congress created PBS in the late 1960s, another time the country was on fire. It aimed to unite a splintered America, and offer an aspirational vision of who we could be.

As a child of Korean immigrants, I learned to read by watching Sesame Street. PBS was one of the few places I found opportunities when I began

making films. That's why I've always believed in the mission of public television.

But more than 50 years into its history, has PBS evolved to reflect America today?

It's not like PBS is going to get rid of white supremacy. But it *is* a pillar institution—the kind that we look to when society feels like it's crumbling.

ACT 2

Grace: In that essay, I wrote for the Ford Foundation, I asked a lot of questions about why PBS has enabled one white, male filmmaker to build an empire when it could share some of those resources more equitably.

And again, I'm not saying public television *doesn't* make space for other voices.

I was a producer/director on two PBS series that came out in 2020...I'm proud of what we created.

One of them covered 150 years of Asian American history and we got five hours in primetime to tell it. For the fastest-growing demographic in the United States.

Meanwhile, Ken Burns' exploration on author Ernest Hemingway—one man—got six hours on the primetime schedule. His series on the American buffalo gets four hours. Yes, I know they're endangered but...come on.

As I wrote in my essay, '*When bison merit 80 percent of the airtime afforded to Asian American history, it calls into question not only the leadership of public television but also who gets to tell these stories, and why.*'

I didn't think anything would happen because of the essay. But when **Current**, the trade magazine read by everyone in public media reprinted it, it went viral.

I got a lot of texts and emails from friends and total strangers thanking me for having the courage to call out systemic issues at PBS.

Reporters asked the system's president and CEO—someone I'd never met—if *she'd* read it. Her name is Paula Kerger. She told the press she “respectfully disagreed” with my arguments, and essentially implied that PBS' record on racial diversity was just fine.

Ok, now if she hadn't said anything, I probably wouldn't be making a podcast. But like many institutions in America—from schools to the police to public health—everything is *not fine*.

I knew I had to respond. And I didn't have to do it alone.

A little background. During the shit show that was 2020, I was constantly texting my friends. We watched as media companies and our fellow filmmakers made empty solidarity statements with the Black Lives Matter movement. Like many industries in America, the documentary field is really white. The lack of access and opportunity is something we filmmakers of color know well.

Michele Stephenson: *“There's an apartheid of, access to funds. There's an apartheid of, where the stories get told, who gets to tell which stories. There's a hierarchy of budgets as well, that exists.”*

Grace: That's Michele Stephenson. She heads one of the few Black-owned documentary production companies whose work shows up often on PBS.

And here's filmmaker and Emerson College professor Maria Agui Carter. For many years she was an in-house producer at one of the best-known public television stations, WGBH in Boston.

Maria Agui Carter: We need to look at who is making the stories to understand how there has been basically one dominant narrative, which has been told from a white point of view in America. And that's not unique to PBS. It is typical of Hollywood. It is typical of history, it is typical of so many things.

Grace: And really, it's not just about a dominant white narrative. It's the system and the structure that keeps perpetuating all of it. That's why a group of us — including Maria and Michele — published an open letter in March 2021 to PBS President and CEO Paula Kerger.

Here's some of what we wrote:

BI member Don Young: “Dear Ms. Kerger,

“As the leader of the public broadcasting system, you are responsible to commit to an open and sustained public dialogue.”

BI member Stephenson:

“In the spirit of open, constructive, and honest fact-based communication, we invite you to share the following data with us as a starting point.

BI member Marjan Safinia:

“Of the top 25 production companies that have produced the most content for PBS over the past 10 years, how many of them are BiPOC-led versus white-led?”

Grace: BIPOC means Black, Indigenous and People of Color.

We asked PBS for numbers. Like: How many hours have been produced or directed by filmmakers of color as compared to white filmmakers over the past decade. We also asked for comparative breakdowns on spending for

these programs. And the makeup of PBS management staff. We called our group “Beyond Inclusion.”

Grace: 140 filmmakers signed this letter. The press picked up on it, too; Here’s how NPR TV critic Eric Deggans reported the story.

Archival (radio clip) *Titled ‘A Letter to PBS’...from Viewers like Us. The missive was sent to PBS President Paula Kerger and the service’s Ombudsman on Tuesday. It was cosigned by several high-profile filmmakers.*

Grace: Within a couple of weeks, over 700 *people* from all corners of the documentary world added their names, asking PBS to be transparent about the data we asked for.

As we release this episode, we’re still waiting. But none of us are going away. Because this is urgent.

Our social infrastructures are failing. We’re living through climate catastrophes, an extended pandemic, the widest gap between rich and poor in our lifetimes.

And we haven’t even unpacked how racism has literally shaped everything in this country.

It’s time to re-imagine *all* of our institutions, including the ones we hold most dear.

I’ve put my own film projects on hold because I need to know whether PBS is an institution / can still trust.

But this isn’t just about me—it’s also about the next generation of storytellers.

As I wrote in my essay, we need “more than one lens” on America’s stories. That includes the story we’re documenting here - in this podcast.

So, I asked Akintunde Ahmad to join me on this journey.

Tunde: I go by Tunde.

Grace: Tunde is a reporter and filmmaker...

Tunde: I’m 25 years old and a recent Columbia Journalism School grad. I’m originally from Oakland, California. I’m really at the start of my career in making documentaries.

Grace: He’s bringing a different perspective..that I hope keeps my own biases in check.

Tunde: Hey Grace, how are you...

Grace: Good!

Tunde: Thank you so much for inviting me on here.

Grace: Now, I know you’ve done investigative articles on criminal justice, policing, and the media. But before we even try to understand the inner workings of PBS, I want to know — do you even watch it?

Tunde: That’s a really fair question. I feel like I actually am in rare company among my peers in that I do watch a bit of PBS. I mean, I mainly watch films made by people I know or If i know someone that’s featured in them.

And so if the subject matter feels relevant to me, like Stanley Nelson’s Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution. Being from Oakland and

having a special attachment to that particular history of the Black Panther Party, so yeah, I do turn to PBS for some of my programming.

Grace: Did you see that Ken Burns has a new series on Muhammad Ali?

Tunde: How could I not. Yes I did.

Grace: Yeah. Yes, It's eight hours. Now it makes sense to me that Ali gets more hours than Hemingway or the Buffalo. He is The Greatest.

Tunde: I mean, I can't argue with you there, but I do have to ask the question... in 2021, why is *Ken Burns*... the best person to tell Ali's story? I really do feel like he missed an opportunity to hire an African American director, or co-director ...who might bring some different perspectives to the mix.

Grace: You mean instead of his daughter and son-in-law? I think they're the writers and co-directors. Yeah, Sarah Burns and David McMahon.

Tunde: So maybe not just one opportunity but two or three to bring more diversity to the room.

Grace: The documentary world is so different now than when I was starting out. There are so many commercial outlets to build your career. Is public television even relevant..to you and your future?

Tunde: Honestly I think that's what we're trying to find out. When I originally came across the Beyond Inclusion letter and I saw how many filmmakers signed on, it brought up a lot of different questions for me like..Do I really want to start my career in a place and in a system that may not fully support me and my work? I think that's part of the reason I was eager to jump into this project and to dig into the inner workings of PBS so I can actually learn how it serves or fails to serve the public.

In future episodes you'll be hearing a lot from me but Until then I'll be doing what journalists and doc filmmakers do — asking a lot of questions and hopefully getting some answers.

[Music Beat]

Archival Interview: *Mark Twain is supposed to have said, 'History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. These stories, when we lift up and we finish, are just always rhyming in the present.'*

Grace: These questions Tunde and I are asking: they're how we break the rhyme of history.

We can learn from the past but we shouldn't get stuck in it.

If we as a society continue uplifting these white-dominant narratives of who we are and where we've been, our story will never change.

And if 2020 has taught us anything. It's that we desperately need our story to change.

Grace: In the next episode, the president of PBS arranges a sit-down with me and the rest of my colleagues in Beyond Inclusion.

Kerger: I have to say Grace, I've wanted to talk to you for a long time.

Kerger: It is particularly appropriate that we're having the discussion this week one day after we marked the one-year anniversary of the murder of George Floyd.

CREDITS