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EPISODE 2: “ENDLESS LOOP”

Previously on Viewers Like Us:

Maria Agui Carter: We need to look at how there has been one dominant narrative which has told from a white point of view in America.

Grace Lee: 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?

Akintunde Ahmad: 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?

ACT 1

[Text sound effect whoosh]

Grace: One afternoon in the summer of 2020, while I was sitting at home finishing lunch, I got a panicked text from a friend, telling me her career was over.

Geeta, who’s like a sister to me, had gone on Facebook and called out two white filmmakers, whom she barely knew, about one of their latest projects: an HBO documentary on golfer Tiger Woods.

Now, Geeta Gandbhir is known in the documentary world. And this world - it’s really small. People generally support each other, because making movies is hard. Making documentaries is even harder.

Geeta has won Emmys. She's edited films that have been nominated for and won Oscars. And she's not shy about speaking her mind.

In her Facebook post, among the congratulations and notes of support, Geeta wrote:

Geeta: *Why did you, both two white men, opt to direct this film?"*

Grace: She didn't stop there.

Geeta: Was there not a director reflective of the community on this project? If there were two of you, couldn't one of you have been Black or Asian?

Grace: This exchange happened in the midst of the George Floyd uprisings. Many white colleagues were pledging solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movements and promising to "do better." Here's Geeta:

Geeta: *I'm thinking this is a film about a very complicated man: Tiger Woods who is mixed, is of Thai and African American and then also Native American descent. His struggles with race absolutely define him and his career. So the team, as I run through the list of people....*

Grace: Geeta saw that everyone tagged on the producing team was white except for her mentor Sam Pollard, an executive producer who is Black.

Geeta: *...who's a fixture in the community and an elder and just, one of the most amazing people in the world.*

Grace: One of the other executive producers was Alex Gibney

Geeta: *...one of the most powerful documentary filmmakers that there is with a company that gets a lion's share of the funding.*

Grace: So, for Geeta — publicly criticizing a production that included Pollard and Gibney, *her former mentors and bosses*— was HUGE, and nerve-wracking.

Geeta: I immediately posted it and then was terrified. I was terrified that I would face a tremendous amount of anger and backlash from the greater community who had already congratulated him. And I feared a loss of income.

They say the squeaky wheel gets greased, but when you're the squeaky wheel and you happen to also be a BIPOC woman, oftentimes you just get shoved out of the room.

Grace: Once Geeta became that squeaky wheel, there was no turning back.

[More texts whooshing]

People started more threads on group chats and Facebook, creating a social media frenzy within our small documentary community.

When members of the Brown Girls Doc Mafia — an online network we belong to — joined the conversation, the press started reporting on it. Within our circles, we started calling the whole thing “Tigergate.”

[Music Beat]

Geeta’s courage and vulnerability inspired others in the documentary world to speak out about similar issues. Including me. A couple months later, I wrote an essay about PBS and its overreliance on filmmaker Ken Burns.

That led to even more conversations about whose stories were being told in public media, and who gets to tell them. One of those conversations...happened at a meeting with the president of PBS.

And Geeta and I were there.

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.

ACT 2

Grace: *Do you have any predictions of what that meeting's going to be like?*

Geeta: *I think it's going to be awkward. I think it's going to be really awkward.*

Grace: That's me and Geeta Gandbhir talking ahead of a meeting we were invited to — along with several of our colleagues from Beyond Inclusion, a BIPOC-led group of documentary filmmakers and executives.

When Geeta was in the middle of Tigergate, a nascent Beyond Inclusion had her back. After I published an essay a few months later about PBS failing to live up to **its** mission, Beyond Inclusion mobilized once again.

We wrote a public letter requesting data from PBS and got over 700 filmmakers to sign it. And when we got a bunch of press coverage — that's when PBS President Paula Kerger had to respond.

So about that meeting...

Geeta: *They'll probably do a lot of listening and note taking and thanking people and saying we're taking all this information and we're coming back to you with a plan.*

Grace: Geeta knows what she's talking about. After speaking up about the Tiger Woods film, she got multiple calls from its directors and executive producers, who were hoping to contain a public relations crisis.

So with that in mind, in May 2021, we — and seven others from Beyond Inclusion — joined a ZOOM session with PBS leaders, executives and other filmmakers. About 30 of us in all.

Grace: This was the first time I had sat down with so many PBS gatekeepers at once. Paula Kerger established the tone right away.

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

As I've thought about this meeting, this could be an interesting discussion that we have or it could be a watershed moment. And I feel that that's the place our country sits in right now.

Grace: As she was speaking, I kept thinking back to Geeta's prediction that this meeting would be about...

Geeta: *Well-intentioned posturing and deflecting, you know because you know there's this ~~sort of~~ idea that the angry hordes need their moment to vent.*

Grace: There was a lot of circular talk that felt like it was going nowhere.

Kerger: This is an opportunity for us to begin to talk about what data we have and what data we don't have. And then talk about really how we move forward...

Grace: But since we had asked for numbers, they gave us some. Kerger passed the mic to her chief programming executive Sylvia Bugg.

Bugg: 35% of our primetime content were produced by BIPOC creators, 56% featured BIPOC talent, production, or covered a diversity-related topic and 54% of our documentaries feature diverse content and talent in front of the camera.

Grace: I have to admit, I had a hard time following. These percentages felt slapped together without much context.

So here's a bit of **what** we were asking for: The number of content hours created by BIPOC directors as well as the funding and resources given to these filmmakers versus white filmmakers over the last **10 years**.

We weren't getting any of that. Sylvia's data was based solely on the previous year. And it wasn't complete. As the meeting went on, I felt the exasperation building in our group.

That's when Poh Si Teng, a film executive who's in Beyond Inclusion and is the Funds Director for the International Documentary Association, made a final pitch about why this data mattered.

Poh: I think for a lot of organizations there's always this desire to control how they want to be accountable. The thing with numbers and putting it out there is that the public decides, and that's a good thing. But again, if there are no specific numbers, no organization, no individual will ever know how far they need to go.

Grace: Because data can be shaped to present different narratives. We **need** those baseline numbers if we want to *measure* how well PBS is meeting its stated goals.

After 80 minutes with no break, everyone seemed ready to leave. The meeting ended on a cordial note and our group immediately got on another call to debrief —Filmmaker Marjan Safinia, jumped right in.

Marjan: I think Kristi, you said it so well, right? That room didn't look like what these rooms look like.

Grace: During the meeting with Paula Kerger, filmmaker Kristi Jacobsen, another member of Beyond Inclusion, pointed out that the participants on the PBS side seemed more diverse than the actual leadership.

Kristi: It also looks very different from the graphics for example that we created just from our own research...

Grace: Just a week before, Beyond Inclusion had released a flyer listing the executive leaders of the three largest public television stations. Imagine a yearbook page with mostly white faces staring back at you.

So this representation we saw...didn't feel genuine. In our debrief Marjan put it this way...

Marjan: They literally tapped in every BIPOC person that they know. And that's not who we need to have the conversation with. How do we create a situation in which Paula invites the white dudes and says, you need to listen to what these people are saying?

In the debrief we mostly shared our disappointments with how the meeting had gone.

And then Bernardo Ruiz — a veteran Mexican American filmmaker whose documentaries have played all over PBS — had something to say.

Bernardo: It's, quite frankly, a problem of leadership. I've had to participate in these conversations for at least two decades. I remember sitting down with Paula when I served on the board of NALIP, the National Association of Latino Independent Producers and having this exact same conversation with Maria and others, asking for data and transparency.

Grace: OK, hold on. So, He's been having this exact same conversation...for 20 years? Turns out those conversations, those "working meetings" that he was part of, featured the same main cast of characters: Paula Kerger and Ken Burns.

See, back in 2007, Latino scholars, activists, filmmakers and members of Congress fought with PBS over Burns' World War II documentary series which clocked in at 14 hours.

Archival audio: "The war touched every family, on every street, in every town in America."

Grace: This is what Bernardo was talking about. He'd been here before. And he had the receipts.

One of the documents he shared with us ~~later~~ was a letter from a civil rights group, the National Council of La Raza.

Here's an excerpt from that letter:

"The exclusion of Latinos from the World War II series appears to be part of a pattern. Even when he interviews people of color for his films, he still controls the narrative...still tells the stories from his point of view, then pats himself on the back for including us at all."

Grace: One of the people copied on that letter is Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin.

In 1999, Maggie began an oral history project about Latinos and World War Two. Her research helped spark a campaign that challenged PBS over Ken Burns' documentary.

Maggie: *The Latino World War 2 experience was such a pivotal moment for our people. Before they went into the military, they were regarded as Mexican, even if their families had been here for generations and generations. So for Mexican Americans and Latinos more generally, World War 2 was that watershed where they came back from serving in the military and they had a different sense of themselves.*

They weren't going to take the same treatment that they had been subjected to before World War 2.

Grace: By 2006, Maggie had collected hundreds of stories. This was around the same time she found out that the World War 2 series didn't include any Latinos.

So she reached out to Ken Burns' office, and eventually got his publicist, Joe DePlasco.

Maggie: *...and said, "Hey, listen, I'm trying to confirm this. This is what I've heard. Is it true?"*

Grace: His response to her was this:

Maggie: *There are no Latinos because we were trying to tell a universal story. I just felt like time stood still, because he was saying, not only are we not part of the universal American story, we don't even have a unique Latino story.*

I sent emails to everybody who I thought could give me some advice on how to proceed. How can we stop this train wreck before it goes on the air?

Grace: Maggie rallied leaders of Latino political organizations, journalists and filmmakers. Their efforts got a lot of media attention...even from the PBS NewsHour.

Archival PBS NewsHour tape: a Latino veterans organization raised concerns that the series overlooked the contributions of Latinos to the war effort. They also say this is not the first time Burns has excluded Latinos contributions in the topics he's covered.

Grace: After months of trying, Maggie and her fellow organizers finally got their meeting with Ken Burns and Paula Kerger. But only after a

massive letter-writing campaign, national press and buy-in from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

Maggie: By the time we met I was seething, pretty much. So I refused to even drink any of their water. 'Cause that's how angry I was. And basically it was just a pro forma thing. They were just saying he has his artistic vision and there's nothing we can do about it. But I knew that we had the moral high ground in this fight.

Grace: In the end, a couple of Latino organizations brokered a compromise with PBS and Ken Burns' production company.

That compromise? Two brief interviews with Latino veterans at the end of episodes one and six, separate from the rest of the film.

Maggie: One thing that Ken Burns would say was 'I'm getting criticized for this, but all people have to do is look at what I did with Jazz and what I did with Baseball.'

And then, I heard from somebody else who was a jazz musician in New York, who told me that Latinos were never given their fair share in the Jazz documentary. And in Baseball, there was just a short mention about

Archival audio: "Roberto Clemente learned his baseball in the canefields of Puerto Rico..."

Maggie: This was much bigger than Ken Burns, bigger than PBS, it was much bigger than World War Two. This is about the continued invisibility of Latinos in our country.

Grace: Hearing Maggie's story felt like a gut punch. As she spoke, I kept thinking — this is happening all over again. Why has nothing changed? How many *other* Dear Paula Kerger letters have Viewers Like Us written over the years?

ACT 3

Grace: I now know I'm in a long line of people who have taken on similar fights with PBS. Including someone I considered a mentor. And her fight started two decades before Maggie's campaign.

Loni Ding was a force of nature. She was a Chinese American filmmaker born in San Francisco and her films were about and for her community. Like survival English lessons for immigrants or a 1970s kids show reflecting the Bay Area's diverse neighborhoods. She also made groundbreaking films about Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War 2. All for PBS. But her dream project was...

Don Young: Ten episodes of the most comprehensive history of Asian Americans that certainly had been successfully envisioned at the time.

Grace: That's Don Young, He's also part of Beyond Inclusion and he's been working in public media for over 20 years. Loni hired Don as her associate producer in the mid-1990s.

Grace: Until then, there had never been a comprehensive documentary about Asian American history. Loni was raising money for this series, while teaching part time at UC Berkeley.

Her daughter May Ying Welsh, remembers...

May Ying Welsh: Fundraising for Loni was a heartbreaking experience. She was constantly going from funder to funder, source to source, trying to add up little amounts of money here and there, trying to get support just to tell this really basic part of American history. This is after Loni had won multiple awards for her films on Japanese American history. This is after she'd testified before Congress and helped to get reparations for Japanese Americans for the internment during World War Two.

Grace: Loni was used to testifying in Congress. Here she is speaking at a U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing from the 1980s about the need for diversity in public media.

Archival audio: "The worst change for us is to see the steady march of public broadcasting away from its original mandate of public service, innovation, diversity. And ten years ago the public would've been here...in the sense that consumers, minorities, labor, commercial broadcasters, womens' organizations, media reform activists ...they all came and expected to be heard because it was theirs, it was something they had a stake in. So we have to ask where is the public in today's public broadcasting? "

Grace: Just to keep things in perspective, that's from 1987.

Before Maggie rallied her community. Before Beyond Inclusion. It's like an endless loop, this conversation. We're still asking the same questions today.

Loni gave me one of my first jobs in film. Back then I had no idea how outspoken she was about PBS. But in researching this podcast, I learned that only *eight years* after PBS began, Loni was on a task force asking why PBS was falling short of its mission when it came to minorities.

I knew she helped create ITVS, the Independent Television Service and the Center for Asian American Media. Both organizations help filmmakers get funding and access to the public television system.

Grace: All that organizing and networking left Loni little time for the epic American history series she was eager to make. I can relate to that a little too well. Here's Don Young.

Don Young: She was ultimately able to produce three episodes, all three of which did air on the PBS prime time.

Grace: What was supposed to be 10 episodes ended up as three. As a reminder, Ken Burns is making a 4 part series for PBS on The American Buffalo.

Loni's daughter followed in her footsteps as a documentary director and cinematographer. But she never considered public television for her path.

May Ying Welsh: Never. I stayed as far away as possible from public television, because I didn't want to spend my life begging for money. I went straight into the private broadcasting sector where I received a salary, and benefits. And I had an employer who had to worry about the money, not me. And that's directly because of watching my mom suffer, trying to make her films, her award-winning, priceless films. I didn't want to suffer like that.

Grace: Loni Ding was 79 years old when she died in 2010. I'm grateful for the path she created for people like me and Don Young, who is now Director of Programs at the Center for Asian American Media. But I often wonder what she'd make of the fact that we're still fighting the same fight in public television.

To make it consider all of us, the *entire* American public

And yet, PBS continues to uplift a single voice to tell us who we are and where we've come from.

Archival interview: "I have had the privilege of spending my entire life making films about the U.S., capital U, capital S. But I've also had the privilege of making films about "us", the two-letter, lowercase, plural pronoun that has a kind of intimacy and warmth to it."

Grace: That's Ken Burns on 60 minutes, and I still want to know who *he* means by "us."

Just for the record I invited Ken to talk with me for this podcast several times. But his publicist — the same guy who told Maggie that the Latino story wasn't universal — said Ken was too busy promoting his Muhammad Ali documentary on PBS. Now that Ali has aired, we extend an open invitation to him.

Beyond Inclusion is still waiting for PBS to share the specific data we asked for. I've also invited Paula Kerger onto the podcast but after several back-and-forths, she passed me on to her programming chief Sylvia Bugg. We'll keep reminding them that information is the first step towards accountability.

Next time on *Viewers Like Us*:

Did I make an impact? Clearly not because we're talking about this 14 years later.

Following the controversy over the World War 2 documentary, PBS tried to clean up the mess. And we found the person the system hired to do it.