

**Production Note:** Viewers Like Us was produced as an audio series. If possible, we encourage you to listen to Episode 4 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 4: “AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE”**

**Grace Lee:** Previously on Viewers Like Us...

**Emily Rooney:** “The only other thing I wanna say is, I didn’t see Asian Americans, but there’s a possibility it wasn’t as good as some of Ken Burns’ films.”

**Jon Abbott:** “Her comments on that program did not reflect-GBH’s standards for opinion journalism...”

**Haydee Rodriguez:** “I was hired as the director of the diversity initiative at PBS in 2007.”

**Jon Abbott:** “...and frankly didn't reflect our commitment to being the anti-racist organization that we aspire to be.”

BEAT

**Grace:** Being the only person of color in a room, especially in work situations, can feel unsettling.

There’s this nagging feeling that you don’t belong there.

Because feeling like a token or a diversity hire can really mess with you. Having to constantly question your self-worth is tiring. And a little maddening. It’s like gaslighting yourself 24/7.

I’d like to think things have changed since I was coming up in these mostly white spaces. I mean, nowadays there’s a Disney princess in every shade. From BTS to Squid Game, Koreans – my people – are

taking over pop culture. And everyone seems to have heard about white privilege, even if they don't believe it exists.

But I do wonder whether these feelings of being a token still linger for a younger generation of BIPOC creators.

Akintunde Ahmad, who's reporting for this series, is a recent film and journalism school grad. He was born and raised in Oakland, and from there he attended Yale and Columbia.

**Grace:** So...Tunde, I'm curious...how was it for you in these mostly white institutions?

**Akintunde Ahmad:** So as a Black person who spent six years on Ivy League campuses, trust me when I tell you I know what it feels like to always show up in a school's diversity brochure and don't get me started on how many times I had to tell people I wasn't on Yale's football team.

This happened to me every week I was there.

It wasn't like a question of, 'Hey, are you on the football team?' It was like, -'Have a good game this weekend!'

**Akintunde:** So yeah, it's a familiar feeling. It's like being torn between wondering if I'm actually valued or if I should just leave.

**Grace:** Yeah. And you know, what's even more insidious sometimes is when you start believing it yourself, like maybe you aren't really supposed to be there, so you should just be happy with what you've been given.

Tunde: Right, or is it like, I'm in the transitionary period and I'm trying to make things better so maybe I don't take it as personal 'cuz I'm doing these things in hope that the next generation doesn't have to go through the same

[BEAT]

**Grace:** In our previous episode, Jon Abbott, President of GBH — the largest and most influential public media station — said that he'd be willing to hear stories from people of color who faced racist treatment working at his station.

The story we're about to share is the one we really wanted him to hear.

It involves a long-running PBS program called...American Experience.

INTRO:

**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 1**

**Myrton:** "My name is Myrton Running Wolf. I am Blackfeet, an enrolled Blackfeet Indian. I'm also part Wasco from Warm Springs, Oregon."

**Grace:** Myrton is a professor of race and media at the University of Nevada. He reached out to Beyond Inclusion after reading our open letter to PBS that asked for a decade's worth of diversity data.

Back in 2006, Myrton was one of five people chosen for a mentorship program connected to a doc series called, "We Shall Remain."

This five-part documentary aired on American Experience, the flagship history series for PBS, produced by Boston's GBH.

**Myrton:** "Five episodes, so they brought in five Native Americans, so, it was definitely a tokenist gesture, but nobody wanted to call it that and nobody was willing to call it that at the time. But that's what it was."

**Grace:** Myrton grew up in Reno, Nevada. His mom moved the family off the reservation for access to a better education. He majored in math and

chemistry in college and eventually earned a masters from the University of Southern California's film school. But when he graduated in the early 2000s, he struggled to make ends meet.

**Myrton:** "There was nothing. And so for about a year and a half, I was looking and putting in applications everywhere I could."

**Grace:** Myrton looked for editing and writing jobs while working as a personal trainer at a gym. He wanted a way into the studio system.

**Myrton:** "And then finally, through an email or maybe it was just a web search. The GBH Native American mentorship program popped up.

"It said that you were going to be part of not only learning about how a production is made, but you were also going to be part of the creative process "

**Grace:** Just so we're clear, this was not an internship. Vision Maker Media, an organization that supports and funds Native filmmakers in public television, helped set it up.

The mentees ranged from recent film school grads to experienced directors who packed up their lives to move to Boston. This opportunity was supposed to open doors for them.

When Myrton shared the job listing with a classmate, she told him:

**Myrton:** "...that in Boston, working for WGBH was akin to working for Disney. It was like, oh my God, you've reached the pinnacle of media production."

**Grace:** This seemed like a public media studio system. Exactly the kind of place he could start his filmmaking career.

**Myrton** "And so when I got there, they were setting up their production offices, like down the road, a few miles from WGBH.

But it was a completely bare office. And so my first month or so was moving office furniture, setting up desks, getting files. Coming from film school, everybody pitches in. Everybody's like sweeping up, cleaning

bathrooms, everybody's getting food and everything. So I was like, 'Oh, this is like that.'

No. No. I was the hired hand. I was the one bringing office furniture in, I was the one crawling underneath desks to make sure that wifi was set up”

**Grace:** Now remember: the job description promised creative input and actual production experience. He also began to notice...

**Myrton:** “...they're bringing in people to talk about the production, but then they're also bringing in scholars and none of them were Native Americans.

And my boss had in her office, she had a window and I could see into these creative meetings and there were no people of color in there.”

**Grace:** Myrton was assigned to the producers making an episode called “Tecumseh’s Vision”

Myrton: “...which is about the Shawnee chief Tecumseh. Who was forming this pan-Indian confederation to try to stop the influx of colonizers. And how he was trying to set that up before he was killed.”

**Grace:** When he wasn’t doing office work, Myrton, on his own, started annotating the 400-page book the episode was based on by searching the Library of Congress and National Archives websites.

Myrton: “And they were basing their Tecumseh story off of a book called Tecumseh by John Sugden.”

**Grace:** Sugden is a British author who has mainly written about British Naval history. And biographies about Sir Francis Drake and Lord Nelson and...Tecumseh.

Myrton’s **own** understanding of Indigenous history made him uneasy about how the producers were interpreting Tecumseh’s story.

A key scene in the episode was about Tecumseh's choice to sit on the ground during a meeting with territory governor William Henry Harrison, a self-described Indian fighter.

**Myrton:** "And this is after Harrison had invited him to sit on this platform and Harrison was surrounded by his militia.

This became for me, this political moment, that's really key to the story of who Tecumseh was.

It was very much an act of defiance, akin to Rosa Parks sitting in the front of the bus. This was a moment of Tecumseh saying, 'I am not going to kowtow to your polite encroachment of power.'"

**Grace:** The episode's producer saw it differently. She told Myrton...

**Myrton:** "This moment of defiance, it's about Native America's spiritual connection to the land. This is his religion and his spirit coming to fruition and wanting to connect with that.'

"So she was kind of bringing in this very fantastical, very romantic idea of Native America.

"I was like, 'But Tecumseh is the war chief, the military leader. He's not going to take this public moment, surrounded by military and militia, to have a connection to Mother Earth.'"

**Grace:** Now, I've had my share of people explaining my own culture back to me, but Myrton made clear why depictions like this can be so harmful to tribal youth.

**Myrton:** "It destroys self-worth, it destroys community worth. It destroys hope for the future.

That's why I wanted to be a storyteller. I was like, tell the real story about what happens to Tecumseh because quite honestly, and I apologize but I'm going to say something really harsh...Tecumseh to Governor Harrison, was like, 'Fuck you. I'm going to sit where I want to sit. You

may look down at me, but you don't tell me who I am and where I can sit. I don't follow your rules.'

And for me that was a better story to pass on to our tribal youth, to give them a sense of pride.

Eventually I spoke up and I said, 'Are you going to hire any Native Americans to help you with these different interpretations of these moments?' Because it was clear that they weren't going to bring me in. They were more than happy with me not being part of the creative meetings.

And the associate producer and producer both let me know that 'we'll get to that.' And I was like, 'but you're writing the script right now.'

"I've never said this to anybody, but when you're hired to be that token you know that your job is: come in here –but don't open your mouth.

'We want your presence. We want your perspective in the room, but don't you dare say it.'

So I just kinda sat there and took it."

[BEAT]

**Grace:** But one incident was especially hard for him to take.

**Myrton:** "It was still snowing in Boston when I got there. That producer, the one in charge of everything. came out to me as they were having a creative meeting.

And I thought she was going to ask me to come in and be part of it. I was like, they're growing a heart, good for them. Now we're into a place where we can actually be colleagues and collaborators. And she had her hands like this, and so I put my hands up like that too."

**Grace:** Myrton extended both hands, palms up, ready to receive.

**Myrton:** She put in my hand a ton of quarters, dimes and nickels. She was like, 'Okay, Myrt, can you do me a favor? Can you walk throughout the neighborhood and fill up all the parking meters?

Because I don't want anybody in our creative meeting to actually get a ticket. And I was like, 'Oh, she's not playing. This is not a joke. She's not asking me to be part of the creative collaboration. She wants me to go fill up their parking meters.

And so I saw that she was upset. How dare I not be thrilled to have the privilege of filling up their parking meter. So I asked Can I just get their license plate numbers? So I know whose car to fill up the meter?' and she's, like 'No, just keep walking around the neighborhood and fill up all the parking meters in the surrounding vicinity.'

I just was like, 'Okay.' So I got my gloves -And for three hours I walked around filling up parking meters and when I ran out of change I decided that I didn't want to go back to the office because I was pissed. To be honest with you. So I went and got lunch.

**Grace:** Myrton went to Subway and got himself a sandwich. As if his day wasn't depressing enough.

"I got back to the office about two o'clock or so and nobody came back that afternoon. Didn't give me any instructions on what to do with my time or anything else. And so I sat around for three hours until I could leave."

Because growing up, I had worked a lot of jobs where we actually had time clocks that you had to punch. I stayed there basically on my own, looking at Library of Congress and pulling photos from the National Archives, logging them and everything else. Nobody came back. I remember that specifically, nobody came back-and just left me there.

**Grace:** Not long after, a WGBH webmaster asked Myrton to submit a blog post about how the mentorship program was going for him.

**Myrton:** "And I was honest, And I wrote about it. The whole, like, handful of coins and everything else. And I said, 'Hopefully as we get closer into production, post-production and everything else I'll have more of a creative role.'



It was online for about a week. And then one of the producer's friends told her, 'You need to read what Myrt wrote.'

Then all hell broke loose, and then WGBH and We Shall Remain and American Experience were all in a tizzy over it. And that's when I got called into the office."

**Grace Lee:** An executive walked Myrton outside and said...

**Myrton:** "Yeah, we're going to go ahead and let you go now because you don't seem happy.' Not seeming happy was the justification that they used to fire me."

[BEAT]

**Grace:** After that...Myrton begged to stay on for another month so he could earn enough to drive back west.

**Myrton:** I was supposed to be in Boston, working on this episode for two years. So they fired me after like six or seven months.

Everything was spent on first and last month's rent, security deposits, all this stuff that had nothing to do with filmmaking and television production but were the realities for people that don't come from generational wealth.

And so I begged them. I said, 'Please, I don't have any money I'm going to, I don't know. I'm going to have to push my car across the country, back home to Nevada.'

**Grace:** Instead of just cutting him a severance check, they had him hang around the office for a full month.

**Myrton:** Which really upset the producer, my immediate boss, the one who gave me the handful of money. And so she and the associate producer stopped talking to me for that last month that I was there. It was really awkward and really weird.

**Grace:** All these years later, Myrton is still processing this painful experience.

**Myrton:** It was horrible, it sucked and everything else, but there's nothing I could do about it. You know, why keep bringing this up?

**Myrton:** When somebody asked me, Hey, why didn't you sue WGBH?

Why didn't you sue these people for wrongful termination? I'm like, because we don't get that many opportunities. As men of color, as Native Americans, we don't get to step outside of those lines without the consequences coming slamming down on our head. So it's been hard enough already to try to be just a Native American, but then I become the loud mouth native American, who is whiny because, 'Oh, you don't like the job that you got, Myrt? You don't want to fill up parking meters in the snow all day? Well then go home.' That's the choice.

## **ACT 2**

**Julianna Brannum:** "Everybody I spoke to in the WGBH office told me it was toxic for them."

**Grace:** That's Julianna Brannum.

**Julianna Brannum:** I am a documentary filmmaker and I'm a citizen of the Comanche Nation of Oklahoma.

**Grace:** Julianna was in the same mentorship program as Myrton but **her** production team was on the West Coast. She stayed in touch with the four other mentees in Boston.

**Julianna Brannum:** It quickly became apparent that things weren't shaking out as promised...And these were well-educated people. They were capable of contributing so much, but I think they were continually reminded that they were tokens, by not being allowed to participate in the important processes that you have in research and production. The feeling was like, 'You should feel so lucky that you're in the midst of

these established PBS producers that you're working with WGBH, because this is a special club.'

**Grace:** By the way: the producer of the episode Myrton was on was eventually replaced by filmmaker Ric Burns. Like his brother Ken, he's one of the go-to directors for PBS historical shows.

The production also hired veteran Indigenous filmmaker Chris Eyre to co direct.

Julianna Brannum: Vision Makers' entire push to even support this project was that we need our native filmmakers to have better understanding of how your system works and how the production and the creative work. And they just did not meet that and they really had no interest in it.

**Grace:** Julianna's experience working on "We Shall Remain" was very different. She credits that in part to the filmmaker who mentored her.

**Julianna Brannum:** "I was working for Stanley Nelson in Oakland, California."

**Grace:** Nelson, who's African American, has devoted his career to telling the stories of Black America — mostly on public television. He's the co-founder of Firelight Media, a production company known for supporting emerging BIPOC talent.

**Julianna Brannum:** "I was hired as an associate producer, so I was going to be doing a lot of archival work and I was very familiar with the content.

"Stanley relied on me heavily to help him-understand the nuances of the Native people involved in the story. He gave me full access to all the creative meetings and the research."

**Grace:** Nelson extended his mentorship of Julianna a step further.

**Julianna Brannum:** "He asked PBS if he could give me the credit of a producer, and that would have been my first big producing credit. And they said 'no.'"

**Grace:** Both knew that this credit would help build Julianna's resume and create more opportunities for her to work within the PBS system. And she has.

Julianna: "He lobbied and lobbied and pushed and pushed until finally they— said, 'okay.'"

Grace: As for what Myrton experienced...

**Julianna Brannum:** "The whole point of hiring us and Myrt himself was to include us in the creative process. So yeah, he had every right to be pissed off about that.

In the end, working with these producers, It was a perfect example of colonialism and how Native people are sort of relegated to certain roles. And at that time, I'm sure they thought that it was groundbreaking and they were doing this really great thing, you know.

Now you can see what it was. It was colonialism working at its best."

### **ACT 3**

**Grace:** "We Shall Remain" is an example of how not to produce a documentary with and about BIPOC communities. But this kind of tokenism persists today.

Companies are scrambling to add diversity hires when they know an all-white staff is a bad look.

But not taking the time to create a welcoming or constructive environment — it's a setup for failure.

But there are examples of how public television can tell stories with authenticity and integrity.

Archival Audio: *Eyes on the Prize* theme

**Grace:** When I was working on the Asian Americans series for PBS, our producing team often referenced *Eyes on the Prize*. This groundbreaking 14-hour documentary about the civil rights movement

came out in 1987 and - inspired many of my peers to consider history in a new way.

**Renee Tajima-Peña:** “It was just stunning to see.”

Grace: This is Renee Tajima-Peña, series producer for *Asian Americans*.

Renee: “The material that they gathered and the voices, and just even this idea of not only telling the story of the famous leaders, but just of the grassroots organizers and activists. I mean, that was, like, a subversive idea, that it wasn't the ‘great man’ focus on history.”

**Grace:** Henry Hampton, the executive producer for *Eyes on the Prize*, explained at the time why he rooted its stories in the foot soldiers of the movement.

**Hampton in archival video:** “Martin Luther King, Jr. would be the first to say to us all that he was a very small part of the civil rights movement.”

**Grace:** It was Henry Hampton’s dream to document history from the perspectives of the people who helped create it.

He had been an organizer who had marched from Selma to Montgomery, and his goal was to make the most comprehensive document of the civil rights movement to date.

Hampton died in 1998, but we were able to speak with Callie Crossley, who directed two of the original episodes.

If her name sounds familiar, she’s the person who went toe-to-toe with Emily Rooney on *Beat the Press* about the Beyond Inclusion letter.

Archival Audio: Emily: No, it’s resentment that a white guy is getting all this much time.

Callie: It’s about how much space he has...you know I’m telling you what it’s about.

**Grace:** Callie Crossley is an award-winning veteran journalist at GBH. She hosts multiple shows, including *Basic Black*, the longest-running public television program focusing on the interests of people of color.

Tunde and I wanted to talk with her about how *Eyes on the Prize*, a successful BIPOC-led production, was able to happen within the PBS system.

**Akintunde:** *Eyes on the Prize*. We love it. But a lot of folks don't actually know what went into securing funding, promotion, distribution. Is that something you could speak to?

**Callie Crossley:** "I can speak to it because I saw what Henry was doing, going from pillar to post, trying to keep this thing going. You know, at one point, he literally mortgaged his house."

**Grace:** Hampton insisted on hiring people of different racial backgrounds as researchers, writers, directors and field producers who conducted on-camera interviews.

**Callie Crossley:** "So we had a whole team of people that looked like America, because, he said, 'I want to make sure that all of our perspectives are there'."

**Grace:** Henry Hampton had a lot of the same concerns about PBS that Loni Ding and many others have echoed throughout the years.

I had a déjà vu moment when hearing what Hampton said at the PBS annual meeting in 1992. Here's Callie reading.

**Callie reading:** "PBS is still too white, too male. We must redouble our efforts to recruit, train, and then give substantive opportunities to African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, and to others as producers and writers, creative and management talent."

**Grace:** The "**substantive opportunities**" that Hampton created resulted in hires like Callie. When she applied for a job with his production company, Blackside, she was a TV news reporter with no documentary experience.

But Hampton knew it mattered who told these stories.

**Callie Crossley:** Our noses were to the grindstone, trying to do this work well, and we just didn't want to get it wrong."

**Grace:** Back then, the crews shot on 16mm film. They searched through phone books and microfiche, and convinced people who had never shared their stories to talk on camera. Callie noticed the difference when the interviewees saw someone who looked like them asking the questions.

**Callie Crossley:** It was very moving to me, it was very moving for a lot of my colleagues. specifically for people who had never been interviewed before or who had avoided being interviewed because they'd seen other interviews, about the civil rights period or about some of their colleagues done so badly, so they wouldn't do it

**Grace:** These multi-racial teams built further trust by speaking only with eyewitnesses and people who'd played direct roles in what had happened.

Like this interview Callie did with Sheyann Webb, who was eight years old when armed state troopers violently ended a peaceful protest.

**Archival Audio: Sheyann:** And as I began to run home, I saw horses behind me. I will never forget. A freedom fighter picked me up –and I told him to put me down! He wasn't running fast enough. And I ran, and I ran, and I ran.

Grace: The production team wanted to avoid a documentary style that had taken hold at PBS.

**Callie Crossley:** "Henry said that from the beginning, 'We are not going to have historians on film'."

**Grace:** And because the production didn't rely solely on historians, *The Eyes on the Prize* crew were able to get first hand accounts that had never been heard before, bringing nuance and authenticity to a chapter of American history that needed to be told.

Public television didn't offer much funding for that.

**Callie Crossley:** So Henry was always looking for money. I personally like one of the credits, in the film from the Bay State Shrimp Company. I mean, he took a check from anybody who would support. He had some foundations, but not as much as you would think. It was rough.

So Henry was hustling. He did most of that work.

**Grace:** Henry Hampton was just one of a long line of public media BIPOC filmmakers who honored the credo, "lift as you climb."

[BEAT]

**Grace:** *Eyes on the Prize* won six Emmys and two Peabody Awards. It was also nominated for an Oscar.

PBS's education arm sent it to schools throughout the United States. It was available on home video.

Until...it wasn't.

**Callie Crossley:** "Henry had the little money he had and he secured the rights for as long as he could.

And later on, when it became 'something,' — those prices went up, but it was never understood that nobody made any money.

**Grace:** The production was so short on cash that it couldn't pay for the music and archival film rights beyond a certain date.

And without these rights, PBS couldn't legally broadcast or distribute the documentary for a decade. Eventually, around 2005, the Ford Foundation paid to restore the lapsed rights, and the series became available again.

But once PBS was able to run the series, the system didn't promote it much.



HBO Max turned heads in 2021 when it acquired rights to stream the documentary's first six episodes. It's exciting that *Eyes* will find new audiences. Still, Callie imagined how Hampton might react.

**Callie Crossley:** "Well, I can say that I don't think Henry would have wanted *Eyes on the Prize* to be behind a paywall."

**Grace:** Hampton believed in the mission of public media, its potential to educate and share a different vision of America to future generations.

I could say a lot more about all this, but Tunde said it best.

**Grace in exchange:** How did you see *Eyes on the Prize* for the first time?

**Tunde in exchange:** In middle school, we actually had a Black student union that met at lunchtime. And so my first introduction was when one of our teachers brought in a VHS tape — I wasn't even aware that it was a film that had showed on public television

**Grace:** So, ok, so you had a teacher sneaking in a bootleg copy of *Eyes on the Prize* to show to you at lunch that's the only reason you saw it?

TUNDE: Yeah, I mean, it wasn't like a, you know, *Eyes on the Prize* box set. I don't even know if that exists, really. Funny thing is I was born in 1996 and so from 95' to 2005' *Eyes on the Prize* was not played on public television. So the only way you could have saw it is if you had recorded it and thankfully, he was somebody who did.

Grace: It's so interesting that it skipped a generation, you know in many ways. I think about how many perspectives could have been shifted if they would have seen this film in those 10 years. How many people would have been impacted?

TUNDE: Right, right, and then the funny thing is here we are all the Black students at school, giving up our lunch as middle schoolers, which is a big deal, to actually learn about this history. But on the other hand, in our actual American History class, we were actually shown Ken Burns' [The] Civil War film.

**Grace:** The *Eyes on the Prize* team included producers and directors who went on to long careers. Some still work in public television.

And that's how diversity hires should go. Not as tokens or to fulfill quotas. But as valued contributors to the creative process.

If "We Shall Remain" had been Native-led, maybe Myrton could have parlayed that experience into his own documentary for public television.

That would have been a very different American Experience.

This podcast is committed to preserving a history of BIPOC makers and their contributions to PBS over the years. We've posted a timeline on our website listing the ups and downs of PBS's record with people of color. We invite you to submit ideas for this work-in-progress at [viewerslikeus.com](http://viewerslikeus.com)

**Grace:** Next time, on Viewers Like Us:

**Joaquin Castro:** "I'm Joaquin Castro and I represent a big part of San Antonio, Texas in the U.S. House of Representatives.

**Grace:** Efforts to restore the public to public television aren't limited to us filmmakers. We talked to a member of Congress who also understands what's at stake.

**Joaquin Castro:** you've got this big gaping hole in terms of representation of communities of color. Public television, I believe, has to be front and center at changing this cultural exclusion."

**END**

**[CREDITS]**