

## **Spring 2023 WGS. 101 Documentary Film and Gender and Racial Equality**

During the semester in WGS.101, we screen several documentaries that present historical or contemporary material. Although each of these films aims to increase awareness of gender and racial equality issues, they differ in style and approach.

A major focus of U.S. feminism since the 1960s has been on gender and racial equality in media representation. Some activists focus attention on fictional film and television, while others center their efforts on documentary representation, with its long affinity with social justice movements. Some documentarians seek to educate the public about the history of gender and racial equality movements or individual activists or campaigns. Others aim to raise awareness of issues and/or groups that have been invisible or misrepresented. Documentary filmmakers commonly face these major questions:

### **\*What materials can I access to tell my story? How do I sequence them?**

Contemporary narratives often have the option of including film clips and current interviews while historical narratives, depending on time frame and available archival material, may not be able to include photos, film clips and current interviews. In other words, filmmakers creating documentaries on contemporary issues have the advantage of being able to create some materials, while those working on historical films often have to settle for whatever material they can find.

### **\*Do I use a voice-over to provide some historical authority or context?**

The voice-over, usually male, is a standard feature of traditional documentary, but often communicates a sense of patriarchal authority or the “voice of God”. Some filmmakers argue that the voice-over, of any gender, conveys the sense of a consensual historical narrative, rather than a story with different possible interpretations. Others see the female voice-over as the achievement of a kind of narrative equality in documentary.

**\*Do I include historical re-creations or actors reading the work of historical figures?** This approach incorporates aspects of theater performance with documentary film. National parks, such as the Women’s Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, often showcase actors playing figures such as Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass; historical sites (e.g., Plimoth Patuxet Museum) often feature actors as everyday people from earlier eras (e.g., colonial Massachusetts) and seek historical accuracy in dress, language, roles and activities.

**\*Do I feature “talking heads”(often scholars, activists or political leaders) for commentary, sometimes voicing different perspectives?** Scholars typically serve as consultants to documentaries (acknowledged in credits) and help shape the direction of the film. Scholars and other authority figures (e.g., political leaders) may also appear in the film as “talking heads”, offering commentary and interpretation. “Talking heads” may also provide historical information in films without voice-over.

**\*What kinds of interview strategies are most effective for people who have been historically disempowered?** Documentarians, like anthropologists, historians and sociologists, must confront the question of how to interview people in ways that respect their autonomy, dignity and the right to tell their own stories.

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WGS.101 Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies  
Spring 2023

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