

# From *Banished* to *Brother Outsider*, *Miss Navajo* to *An Inconvenient Truth*: Documentary Films as Perspective- Laden Narratives

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**For years I had heard that the Sundance Film Festival** is a veritable feast for social studies teachers. This year, I was fortunate to be able to attend this internationally-acclaimed film showcase as “press” for *Social Education*.<sup>1</sup> I traveled to Sundance to learn more about documentary films and to think with those whose business is filmmaking about what role this genre can, or should, play in social studies.

My interest in documentary films was piqued by recent research about the ubiquity of such films in social studies classes, about why and how social studies teachers select and use them, and about what their students learn as a consequence. This research shows that documentary films are an increasingly important staple of the social studies diet—used in class more frequently than newspapers, magazines, or computers. A study of high school U.S. history teachers found that an astonishing 82 percent report using documentary film at least once a week in their classes.<sup>2</sup>

Documentary films can have a powerful impact on what students learn. They can be credited with developing students’ empathy; enhancing their awareness of issues, events, and people that typically are not given much attention in textbooks; and influencing students’ views on controversial historic and contemporary issues.<sup>3</sup>

It is also clear that students do not approach documentary films as empty vessels—their prior knowledge, social positions, political ideologies, and a host of other factors influence the meanings they create.<sup>4</sup> For example, one study

found that high school history students do not recognize a film’s perspective unless they disagree with its message. That is, when the filmmaker’s point of view aligns with their own, they see no perspective—just truth. This study also reports that many students and their teachers trust documentary films as valid sources of information and as authentic representations that depict what happened in the past.<sup>5</sup>

In sum, the ubiquity of documentary films in social studies courses, along with their potential to influence what students learn, clearly show that documentary films matter in social studies education. This is a view shared by documentary directors and film distributors, who often go to great lengths to ensure that their films get shown in social studies courses.

While the high rate of documentary film usage by social studies teachers indicates that they are amenable to bringing new films into their classrooms, we also know that some films can provoke uproar in some communities. This is more likely to occur when the film is more cutting edge—whether it’s ahead of the mainstream consensus on what is con-

sidered school knowledge, perceived as taking a position on an issue that is highly controversial, or about a topic that some parents or other community members consider taboo. In these cases, detractors tend to claim that the documentary film is biased. Underlying this charge is an assumption that materials used in courses—including documentary films—should be unbiased, objective renditions of reality. Just as some people advocate that teachers should keep their political views to themselves, some argue that people who make documentary films should do the same. Failing that, their films should not be used in schools.

Perhaps it’s the word “documentary” that causes people to think that such films should be “objective.” Documentation implies a neutral process—unearthing evidence rather than making a story out of it. Films that are judged to fail the objectivity test are suspect. When this occurs, accusations erupt that the film lacks “balance,” and if shown, must be censored or countered with equally powerful portrayals of competing perspectives.

As a case in point, teachers in Federal Way School District, south of Seattle, were criticized for showing *An Inconvenient Truth* (a 2006 documentary, featuring Al Gore on the perils of global warming) because, as one parent argued, “Condoms don’t belong in school, and neither does Al Gore. He’s

not a schoolteacher.” Charging that the film was biased, one parent, Frosty Hardison, said, “The information that’s being presented is a very cockeyed view of what the truth is ... The Bible says that in the end times everything will burn up, but that perspective isn’t in the DVD.”<sup>6</sup> While the school board did not bow to Mr. Hardison’s wishes to ban the film, it decided that if teachers want to show the film they must get the permission of the school principal and make sure that a “credible, legitimate opposing view will be presented.” Given that virtually all scientists now believe that global warming is a well-warranted reality (as opposed to one side of a controversial issue), finding evidence on the “other side” that is equally credible as what the film presents may be the rule that swallows the film. As a staff member of the National Science Teachers Association stated in response to a query about how to teach the opposing view—that global warming is not manmade or that its effects are not damaging, “I wouldn’t even know where to find someone, to be honest.”

It is not surprising that showing *An Inconvenient Truth* in schools has created controversy. Although there is agreement in the scientific community about the veracity of Gore’s central claims, this consensus does not exist among the general public. The latest national survey on the beliefs of adult Americans about global warming shows that while 77 percent believe it is occurring, fewer than half say it is caused by human activity, and most do not say it is a top priority issue that deserves national attention.<sup>7</sup> In the case of *An Inconvenient Truth*, then, the dispute about whether the film deserves airtime is a classic example of how ideological battles in the world outside of school enter the classroom doors. But even if we accept the veracity of Gore’s two central claims, his film is not objective. It is a rallying cry, a call to arms. It is designed to convince viewers that global warming is a tremendous problem and that we need to act on it immediately or our collective future is in peril.

Expecting documentary films to be

neutral renditions of objective truth is problematic, because that is not typically their purpose. Thus, criticizing documentary films, especially those being made by independent directors, for their lack of objectivity is akin to lambasting an editorial because it is not a “just-the-facts” news story. Better for us, as social studies teachers, to understand documentary films as what their makers intend them to be—perspective-laden narratives.

### **Crafting Perspectives**

Of course, it isn’t necessary to go to the Sundance Film Festival to learn how documentary filmmakers conceptualize their genre. Being there was helpful, though. After each screening, the directors explained why they made the films and what they were trying to accomplish. Without exception, the documentary directors were forthright in describing the perspectives their films promoted. There was no notion that their creations could be, were, or should be, “objective.” As one filmmaker put it, “I am a storyteller. I use real life as the plot and real people as characters.”<sup>8</sup>

Typically, one important aspect of the message of the documentaries was awareness—the film focused on a topic that the director wanted to bring from the margins into the mainstream. It was also obvious that the directors cared deeply about the topics of their films—that they did not select them just because there was a hole to fill. As one director said referring to documentary filmmakers, “no one is doing this to become rich. My aspiration is to change the world. I have a body of work about race and have committed my professional and creative life to this topic.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Unpacking the Perspectives in Three New Films**

To illustrate the role of perspective in documentary filmmaking, I’ve chosen three documentary films shown at the Sundance Film Festival. *Banished* and *Miss Navajo* were premiered at the 2007 festival. *Banished* is about three towns in Georgia, Missouri, and

Arkansas, which literally banished all African Americans a century ago. The three towns remain virtually all white today, and in all of them, descendants of those who were banished are seeking some form of reparations, or redress. *Miss Navajo* is about the pageant of the same name, a yearly event where young women from the Navajo nation compete to show their mastery of traditional Navajo skills—including sheep butchering. *Brother Outsider* had its debut at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival and focuses on the life of Bayard Rustin, the civil rights leader who organized the 1963 March on Washington, and who was vilified during his life because of his sexual orientation and political views.

I selected these films to showcase because of their focus, availability, and potential to engage and educate young people. Although the three films tell stories not typically taught in schools, thus fulfilling the “awareness” function, each revolves around at least one persisting issue that has currency in the social studies curriculum. One of them has already aired on PBS, and the other two will air during the 2007–08 school year, making it easy for teachers to access these films.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, all three films boldly illustrate how the perspectives of directors influence their films, which I hope will reinforce my point that documentary films are not compromised by expressing strong points of view. Instead, these films are powerful and interesting *because* of the perspectives they promote.

After viewing the films, I interviewed their directors to get a sense of their purposes in making them. I asked what perspectives they hoped to portray, the ways in which the content of the film could be controversial, and how the high school students who viewed it at special Sundance screenings for students (or in schools) reacted.

### **Miss Navajo**

Billy Luther, the director of *Miss Navajo*, belongs to the Navajo, Hopi, and Laguna Pueblo Tribes. He learned about the Miss Navajo pageant from his mother,

Bayard Rustin with Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1956, during the early months of the Montgomery bus boycott.

(Photo: Associated Press/Courtesy Bayard Rustin Film Project, [www.rustin.org](http://www.rustin.org))



But sheep are a huge part of our culture, we use every part of it, for feeding our families to spiritual purposes.”

My sense is that this film would be extremely engaging for students, in large part because the young women who participate in the pageant are such a diverse and interesting group. The star of the show has quiet charisma that was quite appealing to students who attended a special high school screening at the Sundance festival. According to Luther, “The students were so into Crystal—they loved her! They were rooting for her during the entire competition. After the film, Crystal was there for the Q & A with me, and they crowded around her and wanted to meet her. I was really grateful that the students had responded so well to the film. They were very interested in the history of the boarding schools that Natives went through. They didn’t know its impact on the language of the Navajo people.” This is an upbeat film, but it packs a powerful punch. Not only does it provide a window into an aspect of Native American culture that most people don’t know about, it also portrays Crystal as a complex and powerful young woman, a feat that few films of any genre accomplish.

### **Brother Outsider**

Bennett Singer, who co-directed *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin* with Nancy Kates, began his career in filmmaking working on *Eyes on the Prize*, a 14-hour documentary film about the civil rights movement that has tremendous cache in many social studies courses. It was during this work that he first learned about Bayard Rustin’s story: “Here was a visionary activist who brought Gandhi’s ideas to America, mentored Martin Luther King, Jr., and organized the largest protest of the civil rights movement: the triumphant March on Washington of 1963. Yet despite these and other extraordinary achievements, Rustin had been largely forgotten by history.”

The film presents Rustin as an unacknowledged American hero who deserves to be rediscovered because of his extraordinary contributions. Singer argues that the reason so few people know about Rustin today is that he was “gay—and quite

who won the title in 1966. He was fascinated by her stories of the pageant and viewed the other former title-holders he met as “great powerful women.” Luther wanted to make a movie about contemporary Native American life because so few existed, but the primary perspective of this movie is that women are the vital force in the Navajo nation, and the focus on the pageant is a particularly powerful way of representing and honoring that view. In Luther’s words, “Navajo women wear the trousers in Navajo society. They work the land, they raise the kids, and they preserve the culture and traditions. And they butcher the sheep! My film isn’t just *about* them, it’s *for* them.”

*Miss Navajo* portrays reservation life differently than do the popular media, which often focus on alcoholism and joblessness. Luther took this tack because, “It’s very important to show communities outside of the reservation how contempo-

rary young Navajos live. In the film, my main character, Crystal Frazier, lives in the middle of nowhere; she doesn’t have running water and takes care of her animals around the home. And she is perfectly happy living on the rez. I loved that about her.”

Even though the film does not explicitly focus on contemporary issues facing the Nation, the perennial question of how societies can maintain cultural traditions—especially when the majority culture attempted to outlaw them—is front and center throughout the film. The issues raised in this movie are clearly less controversial than those presented in many documentaries, but Luther recognizes that his focus on certain cultural traditions could invite critique. In particular, he notes that “instead of a bathing suit competition in the pageant, there’s the sheep butchering competition. I think if some vegetarians see the film, they’ll freak.

openly so—during the fiercely homophobic 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.” Both of these perspectives—that Rustin had a formative impact on the civil rights movement and that the reason so many people have not heard of him was because of his sexual orientation—are supported with ample evidence. But while the filmmakers clearly laud Rustin’s positions, especially his allegiance to non-violence, those who disagreed with his views are included as well. For example, the film includes footage of a 1962 debate between Rustin and Malcolm X about whether integration or segregation would best advance equality for African Americans.

The most controversial issue raised in the film is Rustin’s view that movements for gay rights, civil rights, and human rights should spring from the same moral well. Singer told me that when discussing the film with students, he focuses their attention on the very end, where Rustin argues that gay people have replaced African Americans as the “barometer of human rights.” In other words, says Singer, “While it’s no longer permissible to discriminate publicly or legally against people based on race or gender, it remains perfectly acceptable for legislators and citizens to denounce gay Americans and to insist that they deserve second-class citizenship.” To my knowledge, this is the only documentary film that equates those who would deny gay people equal rights today with those white racists who used law and force to deny African Americans equal rights in the 1950s and 1960s.

While *Brother Outsider* has been available for three years, it is hard to know how many teachers are using it in social studies courses (which is the case with most new documentary films). However, the directors have a partnership with Human Rights Watch’s educational outreach program and they know that nearly 2,000 middle and high school students in New York City have seen and discussed the film.<sup>11</sup> Singer reports that many of these students respond to Rustin as a hero and write comments on their evaluation forms that indicate that the central perspectives of the film are convincing and thought provoking.



Crystal Frazier’s daily life and her bid to win the Miss Navajo contest is featured in the documentary about the competition.

(Photo: Idris Rheubottom)

<p>San Antonio</p>	<h1>Travel</h1> <p>with family or friends and</p> <h1>earn</h1> <p>3 semester units graduate-level credit</p>	<p>Washington, D.C.</p>
<p>Niagara Falls</p>	<p>We invite you to visit</p> <h2>www.jkdld.com</h2>	<p>Smokey Mountains</p>
<p>Jamestown</p>	<p>Immediate classroom application One year to complete course.</p> <p>FRESNO PACIFIC UNIVERSITY</p> <p>Center for Professional Development www.fresno.edu/cpd 1-800-372-5505</p>	<p>Gettysburg</p>

Students were clearly taken with Rustin’s insistence on non-violence, as reflected in one student’s assessment that “seeing this film made me realize that violence cannot do away with violence.” Other students were persuaded that the analogy between the civil rights and gay rights movements was sound, even if it was new to them and directly challenged their personal views. As one student wrote, “I used to think gay people were people to stay away from. Now I think they are people to protect.”

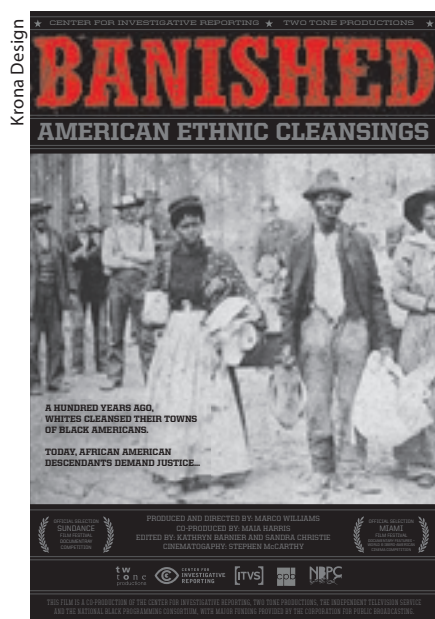
Although the central message of *Brother Outsider* will undoubtedly spark more controversy than the messages advanced in *Miss Navajo*, the narratives share two features: both focus on content that few people know, and their central characters are presented as complex, nuanced role models.

### Banished

Marco Williams is a documentary director and professor of film at New York University. *Banished* is his tenth film in a body of work about race, which includes *Two Towns of Jasper*, *Freedom Summer*, and *I Sit Where I Want*. *Banished* concerns the expulsion of all African Americans from three towns between the years 1890–1920, and the contemporary legacies of these incidents of American ethnic cleansing. The film explores the effects on both the descendants of those who were kicked out and on the virtually all-white populations who live in those towns today. Although the history of the banishments is retold, the film concentrates on the influence of the past on the present—and it’s not a pretty picture. One of the communities in the film is Harrison, Arkansas, where the head of the Ku Klux Klan resides and where the confederate flag flies outside of the Chamber of Commerce. As Williams explained, “The fact of the history, as disturbing as it is, that alone did not stimulate me to make the film. This is history—not worthy of anything more than, ‘that’s terrible.’ I did wonder what happened to these people and given that the communities are virtually all white, it is obvious that the legacy

of racism continues. I wanted to explore the impact—the legacy of race—and what we might learn from it.”

Most centrally, the film is about what can or should be done to provide redress and reconciliation. In one case, the descendants return to the town seeking proof that the land their family owned was never legally sold—it was stolen after the banishment. Williams recognized that providing such a concrete example of



how some people (those who live on the land today) benefited from harm done to those banished would make it more likely for the audience to entertain reparations seriously. Unlike debating the general question of whether we should be responsible for what happened more than 100 years ago, or even the more specific question of reparations for slavery, which still strikes many as too abstract, what the descendants are asking for is very concrete. This concentration in the film is purposeful, since as Williams remarked, “Americans ‘get’ land.”

Williams reported that high school students who attended the Sundance screening seemed engaged, curious, and surprised by the movie. They also wanted to know more about what he thought should happen in the three communities to resolve the reparations claims. I found this interest particularly intriguing because the film closes with an epilogue with explicit and power-

ful analogies to instances in which reparations claims have been granted. This ending positions the viewer to be sympathetic to some form of reparation, redress, and reconciliation. Yet, at least some of the students did not appear to interpret this ending as a statement of the director’s perspective, or they would not have asked him the question. I also left the film thinking that it does a fine job of bringing to life contemporary U.S.-based examples of one of the most significant perennial issues to include in our social studies courses—the question of whether people living today should be responsible for redressing past wrongs.

### Selecting and Using Documentary Films

I would hazard a guess that most people in the United States do not know about the Miss Navajo pageant, Bayard Rustin, or the banishments and subsequent reparations claims and that these are topics that do not now make it into most social studies courses. This alone, however, is not a reason to insert them into the curriculum. After all, some things are on the margins of history not necessarily because of a plot to keep them out of view, but because they are simply deemed not all that important. A reasonable question to ask is, What makes a documentary topic important enough to include in the curriculum? An even better question is whether the perspectives the documentary filmmaker has chosen to represent about a topic are important for students to be exposed to.<sup>12</sup> This is obviously a question that requires us, as social studies teachers, to use our professional judgment. But if we expect documentary films to be objective renditions of the truth, then we are making a grave mistake.

That said, just because a documentary film is a representation of reality, not a mirror, does not mean that it cannot be evaluated based on its quality. Not all representations are equally valuable or of equal quality. Much of our work as teachers is curricular gate keeping—we need to make decisions about what has enough value to be put in front of our

students. So the critical question becomes what criteria we should use to make these decisions.

With respect to documentary films, I think we can make better decisions if we focus on the concept of perspective rather than on the dichotomy of objectivity versus bias. We should carefully vet documentary films for classroom use based on whether the particular perspectives they portray are well warranted—by that I mean the extent to which they are supported by powerful evidence. Instead of posing objectivity and bias as the two ends of an evaluation continuum, we should identify the perspective(s) in the source and have the two ends be markers of better or less well-warranted perspectives.<sup>13</sup>

Here is an example of what that might look like in practice. Since viewing *Brother Outsider*, I have begun reading about Bayard Rustin. I have also read as many reviews of the film as I can find. I do so not because I think that the perspectives that the directors used to shape the narrative will be proven true or false, but to assess whether the evidence used to support them has merit, which my research to date shows is clearly the case. However, this doesn't mean that the perspectives represented in the film are, or should be, universally held. There is a vibrant debate in the United States about whether the moral claims underpinning civil rights for African Americans and gay rights are analogous. Bayard Rustin clearly believed they were and the directors of the film rightfully and with integrity showcase that perspective. They are not claiming to make a film that brings to light all views because this is not what documentary films do.

Likewise, we should not expect a documentary film to be sufficient as the basis for a high quality discussion of a controversial historic or contemporary issue. Instead, we would expect a documentary film to be one source—albeit an especially powerful one—for students to learn about divergent perspectives on issues, as well as to develop background knowledge. If, for example, we want our students to consider the question of when,

if ever, reparations are justified to redress a past harm, then *Banished* should not be the sole source. This does not mean that every documentary film we show has to be “balanced” with another documentary film based on opposing perspectives. As I suggested with *An Inconvenient Truth*, there simply aren't “dueling documentaries” available on these topics.

If we view documentary films as perspective-laden narratives, it is incumbent on us to teach the genre to students—explicitly, just as when we teach students to distinguish between an editorial and a news story, a primary source and secondary source, or a historical artifact and a historical narrative. We need to teach what documentaries are—and are not.<sup>14</sup> We can do this by making the perspectives that shape them transparent because research shows us that students do not automatically or naturally spot them. We should ask students to identify and discuss the perspectives in film and assess the extent to which they think the filmmaker supported them. There are many ways to focus students' attention on the perspectives in a film. For example, students could participate in a Socratic Seminar using the film as the text, or write a film review and then compare it to their classmates' and to those written by expert critics.<sup>15</sup>

With these approaches, documentary films become a type of source that we want students to analyze, interpret, interrogate, and evaluate. These approaches are not based on the idea that we need to teach students to be on the “lookout” for perspectives as if they are negative, instead perspectives in films should be precisely what students are looking for.<sup>16</sup>

One of the reasons I so enjoyed the Sundance Film Festival was because many of the films were intellectually exciting, moving, and often jarring. In short, they made me think. Documentary filmmakers are public intellectuals. They are thinking out loud with an audience about issues that matter in our society. Selecting and portraying perspectives to shape their narratives doesn't mark them as narrow, dimwitted, or biased. It shows they are doing their job—which,

quite thankfully, has enormous potential to help our students think about ideas and issues that matter. 📺

#### Notes

1. Rest assured, your NCSS dues were not paying for the trip—I was on my own dime.
2. Alan Marcus and Jeremy Stoddard, “Tinsel Town as Teacher: Hollywood Film in the High School History Classroom,” *The History Teacher* 40, no. 3 (May 2007): 303-330.
3. Jeremy Stoddard, “Attempting to Understand the Lives of Others: Film as a Tool for Developing Historical Empathy,” in *Celluloid Blackboard: Teaching History with Film*, ed. Alan Marcus (Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing, 2007), 187-213.
4. See, for example, Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); Peter M. Meyerson and Richard J. Paxton, “Stronger than the Classroom: Movies, Texts and Conceptual Change (or lack thereof) amidst Sociocultural Groups,” in *Celluloid Blackboard: Teaching History with Film*, ed. Alan Marcus (Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing, 2007), 167-185.
5. Stoddard, 2007.
6. *Seattle PI*, January 11, 2007, accessed at [seattlepi.nwsource.com/local/299253\\_inconvenient11.html](http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/local/299253_inconvenient11.html).
7. [pewresearch.org/pubs/282/global-warming-a-divide-on-causes-and-solutions](http://pewresearch.org/pubs/282/global-warming-a-divide-on-causes-and-solutions).
8. Marco Williams, interview by the author, March 31, 2007.
9. Ibid. (Williams interview)
10. For information about PBS show dates and how to purchase the films, go to: [www.missnavajomovie.com](http://www.missnavajomovie.com); [www.rustin.org](http://www.rustin.org); [www.banishedthefilm.com](http://www.banishedthefilm.com).
11. For more information on the Human Rights Watch program, which offers hundreds of human rights-related films to high schools at no charge, go to [www.hrw.org/2007/classroom](http://www.hrw.org/2007/classroom).
12. It is also necessary for us to evaluate the quality of the documentary filmmaker's storytelling. Some films are about important topics, focus on well-warranted perspectives, but are marred by boring storytelling or low production values.
13. For a classic text about how to warrant claims see, Stephen E. Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1958).
14. For lesson plans on how to teach about documentary films as a genre, go to [www.oscars.org/teachersguide/documentaries/index.html](http://www.oscars.org/teachersguide/documentaries/index.html).
15. For a description of Socratic Seminars in social studies, see Walter C. Parker, *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2003).
16. For an explanation of why it is important for students to be taught how to interpret different types of sources, see Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).

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