



DOC NYC Friday Fix

Transcript: Episode 7

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Thom Powers: [00:00:00](#) We invite you to contribute to the chat box on the right and tell us where you're from. If you have any questions during the show, please add them to the questions button below. I'll try to get to as many as I can. And today's episode, we're talking to three filmmakers who asked tough questions about race. Many of us are asking similar questions of our institutions and of ourselves. Certainly at DOC NYC, we're going through our own self scrutiny as a New York festival. We've always strived to reflect the city's diversity in our team, in our lineup films and in our audience. But we know that we can do better. As the artistic director, I'm thinking hard about my own unconscious biases and trying to vigourously engage with different perspectives. We will be working hard in the coming months to make our November festival the most inclusive edition yet, while we work on long range planning in the short term, we want to highlight other organizations and initiatives that we admire.

Thom Powers: [00:01:07](#) And I'm gonna mention three right now, share this screen. The first is Brown Girls Doc Mafia, the organization for women and nonbinary people of color in the documentary field. They just released a Google doc directory of their members who are available for work. So if you're looking for producer directors and photographer, editor, check out their list, we will put up the links in the chat window. The second organization is Array Now, the independent film distribution, and resource collective founded by Ava DuVernay. They just launched LEAP: the law enforcement accountability project that will fund story storytelling projects about the police, and you can find them at leap action dot org. And then the third thing I'm going to highlight is the new show from Firelight Media Beyond Resilience. We discussed it last week. It takes place every Friday at 4:00 PM Eastern time.



- Thom Powers: [00:02:17](#) So just a couple hours from now. And we'll put the links up in the chat window. A note for that Beyond Resilience. If you want to join it at four today, the RSVP list closes at 3:30. So make sure you act fast on that one. Now I'm going to bring in our first guest Lacy Schwartz Delgado I'll ask her to... Hello, Lacey.
- Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:02:47](#) Hi. So great to be here.
- Thom Powers: [00:02:49](#) So let me just say a few things about Lacey's background or her feature documentary debut is called little white lie. It's a personal story that she documented in that film. She grew up in a Jewish family in Woodstock, New York, and she always looked a little bit different from the rest of her family. And it wasn't until she was 18 that she learned that her mother had had an affair with a black man who is Lacey's biological father, a little white lie is a story about finding the truth and learning to reconcile. Her more recent project is called the Loving Generation. It's a series of shorts from TOPIC about children born to one black parent, one white parent in the aftermath of the 1967 Supreme court decision loving versus Virginia. That was the decision that overturned laws banning interracial marriage. Now Lacey has several new film and TV projects in the works. Her husband is Antonio Delgado. He's a US congressmen representing New York district 19 in upstate New York, since 2018.
- Thom Powers: [00:03:58](#) He's a black politicians serving a high percentage of white constituents. So Lacey has many different layers of experience navigating tricky conversations about race. Mmm. Lacey's joining us now from New York 19. Am I right?
- Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:04:16](#) Yes. Right. I'm back in New York.
- Thom Powers: [00:04:18](#) All right. Back to New York. So Lacey, these past two weeks, there's a new national reckoning. I want to keep my enthusiasm in check because we know from US history that we move forward, we move backward. But I don't think that we should hold back and giving credit to the black lives matter movement for a lot of accomplishments. Right now it's city councils are voting on police reduction. Broadcasters are canceling cop shows, Confederate monuments are coming down and we're seeing racial bias being called out in all kinds of institutions. So I want to ask you what stands out to you about this moment?



- Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:04:56](#) Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it's been, it's been, there's been phases. I mean, it feels, you know, there was that first moment where the video came out and I think many of us who have lived through these moments and felt them incredibly deeply and it came out and it was painful, but there was, you know, it was kind of like this continues to happen. And then you started seeing some energy around it and it felt like skepticism. And honestly, on a personal level, it started being a lot of incoming messages. And then I think it's switched to a moment - I'm thinking, wait, can we actually be hopeful? And I think some of our, what I consider to be severe current great thinker has started coming out in moments, you know, seeing John, image of John Lewis, standing on, you know, Black Lives Matter it's street or whatever it actually is an incredible moment, you know, to see the connection between some of these historical moments and what's happening right now, I was personally, I'm pretty blown away seeing Romney on camera, saying Black Lives Matter. Just kind of bring these words into the mainstream. Also some of the moments around corporations in stepping forward and not just not just saying we care about, you know, diversity, but actually saying Black Lives Matter and then putting dollars behind it. It's not the whole solution, but it certainly felt a bit different in those moments.
- Thom Powers: [00:06:10](#) So you know, there's all kinds of new conversations happening that are overdue. You know, these conversations are taking place in the workplace. They're taking place among friends, in schools. You've worked a lot holding these kinds of conversations is as you've been out on the speaking circuit talking about Little White Lie, what advice do you have for people who are having those tough conversations, trying to bridge that gap?
- Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:06:36](#) I mean, I think one of the main things, and I think we're seeing it and it's, it's awkward. I mean, literally before I got on the, on this, I was just on the phone with a friend who was talking, you know, we're all going through the awkwardness of it is that so many of us in this country, I grew up with a race with, which is front and center in our experience, in our identity in our day to day reality and our cultural existence. And then lots and lots of almost the vast majority grow up without any race. And there's always been to me this really, and, and seeing that go down, I mean, that was how I grew up. I grew up in a white space, but we didn't call it a white space. Right. It was just kind of



neutralized. And so this idea of the fact that some people have a racialized identity while other people do not have a racialized identity. I think it's something we always have to remember, and we have to be able to take a step back and understand that there is a huge step of accountability within that. You know, and also, I mean, I think we're going to talk about this a little bit later, but also who, you know, you put that burden on to take those steps forward of accountability, because, you know, for black people in this country, they have been living this every single day of their life all the time. And so to all of a sudden have this be this moment where, and I mean, you've heard it in moments before, but one of the things I will say, and I am a little bit hopeful is even the recognition of the fact that black people alone can not do the work that they are not the only people to be the educators, that there is an accountability I think is incredibly important.

Thom Powers:

[00:08:07](#)

So, I mean, you've talked about the awkwardness of these conversations. You know, it's hard to confront bias in your own life and to make mistakes. And, you know, you don't want to say something to a good friend that you're gonna regret or feel stupid. So, you know, what have you learned about having those kinds of conversations and challenging people, you know, in a way that they're going to listen? I mean, you know, people are going to have to have conversations with their own family members or people in their workplace.

Lacey Schwartz ...:

[00:08:37](#)

You know, I think first of all, I mean, I feel like I don't have to tell this to a lot of people of color, particularly black people, but it is such an important reminder that self care, it really, really matters, you know? So actually like sometimes setting those boundaries of what does it look like? You can do the work, especially as I think filmmakers. And so many of us tuning in are filmmakers who would go out and we have these conversations, but then we can feel very bombarded at home. And so I think it, it becomes this like double conscious double experience as always to be going through kind of like, how do I take care of myself and also do the work? And I think for, and so knowing when to also push back and say, you know, I had an organization that I grew up in reach out to me this week and say, you know, we'd love for you to be on a panel to talk about your experience.



- Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:09:23](#) Then I said, you, do you think that the, what is the goals? And do you think that people turn tuning in or at a moment of accountability yet? And she said, no, well, they have to learn first. And I said, well, you know what, show me that they're willing to learn, like, have them read some books, have them watch some movies and then call me in two months and I will show up and I will have this conversation with them. But part of it, I think in this moment, and it's really, really important, everybody is accountable to what they haven't done. And doesn't necessarily ask everybody for the help that actually, if you don't know the 101, then you should do the work yourself. It almost reminds me, honestly, of when I was first doing my first independent film and raising money for it.
- Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:10:05](#) And you sit down, you have these people, and they'll say, here are the most basic places you can go and raise money. And as you educate yourself, you get more and more familiar. If you haven't done that already people have to do. Then I think for me, it's being able to, without getting angry at each person or organizations, say, please go do the work and then call me in two months and show me the commitment, show me what you've done, show me that you're still in this and that you have a longterm plan around it.
- Thom Powers: [00:10:31](#) That is a great perspective. W I mean, for people who are listening that and, you know, asking themselves, okay, well, you know, what is the work that I should be doing? Are there any resources that stand out to you?
- Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:10:45](#) I mean, obviously there are incredible films and books. I mean, I think I mean, James, Baldwin's obviously been around a long time, but I Am Not Your Negro, I think did an amazing job of kind of putting forward and really kind of describing some of those two worlds. And I love Ta-Nehisi Coates "Between the World and Me" because I think he does really beautifully just describe kind of living in the struggle and also this idea of like on how he describes it, but kind of being like innocent and being, you know, I cant remember how he describes it right now, but the, those kind of two worlds of blackness and whiteness that for me, is growing up in a white community with honestly, a white identity. I really understood it. I really connected to it. And I think that understanding how that can even go down. How the people who are on the right side of an argument, you



know, I will never forget in 2016 around Charlottesville one of the most impactful articles I read was from a black farmer living in Charlottesville.

Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:11:45](#)

Who said, you know, the people who are carrying the torches and defending this, the statute, like those are not the people that I'm scared of. The people I'm scared of are wearing Lulu lemon, yoga pants, and I'm with her button. And I think sometimes the ways in which, especially in these last few years, we've looked at these issues. Sometimes it's very binary. Well, we really have to push pass and being accountability to a place of accountability. As I said before, it's so often we deal with these issues like race and my business partner Mehret and I always talk about this in terms of like this idea of the big advocacy, you know, big issues top-Down how it functions in society is how we talk about race. But so often, so many of us are living with race in what we call little advocacy spaces like these really personal intimate spaces of family.

Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:12:32](#)

And that's how we're actually experiencing a lot of times. It's not just, I mean, as you noted in the introduction, right, there has been incredible institutional change, but we do have to do these quiet space, change this real accountability in those spaces, and be honest with ourselves about where some of the fear has come from and how we've allowed it to perpetuate and live on within our lives, within our families and where that came from. And how do we change that? You know, so many people two weeks ago were, were asking for resources, how do you talk to kids about race? You know, that I was seeing that everywhere. How do you talk to kids about race? And so many of those people are not living the life they would, I think things say they would believe in, in terms of equality, equity and racial integration.

Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:13:18](#)

You know, part of it, it's a moment to look at if you have a barbecue and you don't invite any black people at all, you don't have any black friends, you don't have any, you're not close to any of your black colleagues. I think it's a moment, not just to call the one or two black people, but to also say, I recognize that I have to change this and I'm going to do the work. And so I do think that there are some of those like 101, I mean, I mean, a lot of people are reading White Fragility right now, and How to Be An Anti-Racist. There was some of these incredible books that



have come out in the last few years. And so I do think though, that is a keeping you up to almost do about your own personal life. And how does it play out?

Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:13:53](#)

Who are your kids going to school? Who were you socializing with? Who are you hiring to work at your companies? Those are quiet conversations you have to have with yourself.

Thom Powers: [00:14:04](#)

You talked about inter family conversations and you did this project The Loving Generation you know, profiling of people, of, of mixed marriages. Okay. What have you learned about the conversations that take place within those families? Those are families that came together because two people fell in love, but, you know, often the in-laws are, you know, on different sets of of perspectives. And, and I'm sure that the, the conversations there must offer a lot that we could all learn from.

Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:14:40](#)

Yeah, absolutely. And just to be clear, it wasn't even sometimes, you know, the in-laws sometimes it was even within their actual parents who hadn't actually had the conversation. I mean, I, this project, which in a lot of ways, I felt like we did with TOPIC and Anna Holmes, whose idea it was, was, was so incredible to me. Cause it was kind of a followup for me of Little White Lie of looking at you have one black, one white parent who had grown up after the civil rights movement but before you could check more than one box in a census, and a lot of ways growing up on the color line. And many of the people that we included are some of what I, you know, some of the great journalists of our times, including who fit into this generation, including Nikole Hannah-Jones, Adam Serwer, Melissa Harris-Perry, Soledad O'Brien, and being able to - Octavio Warnock, many other people are involved in it. Being able to really reflect on growing up sometimes between two worlds, even within your parents, were your parents able to have this conversation with you about being honest about or were they sometimes more idealistic coming out of it and how are you able to identify and what was your fear of that? And I think that that was for us, we really want to look at, you know, how that firsthand experience and some of these people were so incredible because they both had that firsthand experience, but they also understood the historical context and were able to analyze it as such.



- Thom Powers: [00:16:00](#) We have a, a few more minutes left with Lacey. If people have questions, please put them into the Q&A button below. I want to ask you about our own field of documentary. Last week I saw a lot of talks where, people in the documentary community are pointing out long held bias in this community. We did a Monday memo video that we'll put a link up to that that capture some of those key sound bites, but there's a lot more that we could have chosen from there. I wonder, you know, as someone who's in the documentary space, you know, what stands out to you is work that needs to be done?
- Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:16:46](#) I mean, you know, the conversation that we've started in the last few years, starting to see that who tells what stories and what stories are made? And I think in particular, you know, with race, even when, honestly, and, you know, a Little White Lie came out in and we had our New York premiere at DOC NYC and it was amazing and great conversation, but it was really interesting with film programmers before that, in terms of like, can we have it, you know, my film was mainly about talking about race with white people. Okay. You know, it's like a film with 90% white people in it. And it almost felt like it didn't fit into the conversation about what race is, which is a lot of times focused on like criminalization and the poverty and things like that, where a lot of us are experiencing it in many different ways. And so I think this idea that, you know, whose stories are we telling and how are we supporting them is a huge issue. And I don't, you know, I think we've all seen examples of that. But. Do we...
- Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:17:44](#) You know, I watched your, you know, when Marcia Smith made that statement, like the fact that, you know, right now this moment of like a double pandemic for the black community and that the films that are being made are all 15 that are currently kind of racing to be the top one are all being made by white filmmakers. No. Are you going to be able to understand what that really feels like to live with that day in day out the health disparities that already existed within the black community before this happened and have only exceeded and we're working on a project right now, that is a scripted version of that, but not with COVID necessarily, but just really being able to talk, let people talk from their own experiences. I understand that more than anyone else.



- Thom Powers: [00:18:30](#) So before I let you go, I just, I want to ask you have a frontline seat on the politics of this with your husband, Antonio as a Congressman. Well, you know, what do you witness in the political landscape around this moment?
- Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:18:45](#) You know, one of the things that I think, and I wanted to say this earlier, actually, that is so incredible to me about this moment is it really feels like everybody's getting in their lane. And I just listened this morning. I don't know if anybody listened to the Dave Chappelle performance that he just put out and you know, he says at one point that thank you and I believe in you to the young people on the front lines, planning these protests, at these protests. And I just think that one of the things I feel so hopeful about is the fact that we are all in our lanes. You know, I mean, for me when we, Antonio and I, changed our lives in many ways for him to run for office in 2018, and I had not, never been traditionally involved in the political space.
- Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:19:26](#) And I felt like it was really important that people like myself who were considered themselves impact storytellers, get involved. Just say, you know, if I look at 2016, what was the problem? I didn't do enough. And I think just like in this moment, that was a huge moment of accountability for me. And so now to see his class and his colleagues in this, for this class in the house that came in in 2018 are incredible. They're the most diverse by race, by ethnicity, by gender, by age, by religion that we've ever seen before. And so to see, you know, kind of that class getting in its lane too. But at the same time for those of us as storytellers know, I am very involved, actually me and Ursula are as well with Firelight Media, which you featured in a few ways earlier. And just what we've been able to do, I think, as a collective of storytellers. It's incredible to come together with your colleagues, with your team and get in your lane, whether or not you're in a corporate space or storytelling space or a political space. And so that's been really, really exciting for me to also, I do have obviously a window into this political space. And I think it's, you know, as my husband said on a some press thing the other day, you know, that people like him are there to do the will of the people, you know, and that, I think what you're seeing in DC is that people are stepping forward because of the will of the people. The activists are pushing the legislators, et cetera, et cetera. And the storytellers are bringing things to the forefront. And so I find that incredibly encouraging that we can all work together.



- Thom Powers: [00:20:59](#) Lacey, thank you so much for taking the time with us today. I know that you've got a lot of people calling upon you. So it, it really means a lot to me personally. Thank you.
- Lacey Schwartz ...: [00:21:10](#) Thank you.
- Thom Powers: [00:21:11](#) Okay. So I'm going to let Lacey go and I'm going to bring up our next guests. She brought herself up Ursula Liang. So Ursula has been a long time friend of DOC NYC. She's someone that I call upon a lot for advice. She has eclectic list of producing credits from ESPN to the New York Times. She directed the documentary 9-Man about a Chinese American street ball game. And her latest film is Down a Dark Stairwell that looks at a case from 2014 when a police officer Peter Liang - no relation to Ursula despite the same last name - that police officer shot and killed an unarmed man named Akai Gurley in the stairwell of a New York city housing project. The victim was African-American. The police officer was Chinese American. And the officer was brought to trial and caused coalitions to form on either side of the case, Down a Dar Stairwell had its premiere at the True/False film festival in early March. One of the last festivals to take place in person. It's now playing at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival online. The Human Rights Watch Film Festival got underway yesterday in all 11 films and its lineup are available online across the United States with the purchase of a tickets that are available in limited quantities. But each film also has a live Q&A, and those Q and A's are being recorded and can be watched for free anywhere in the world.
- Thom Powers: [00:22:47](#) Ursula's live Q&A is going to take place on Wednesday, June 17th, but you can watch the film, excuse me before then. And we'll put a link in the chat box for more information. So Ursula, can you, you know, explain what drew you to, to the story of, of Peter Liang and Akai Gurley?
- Ursula Liang: [00:23:07](#) Well, this incident actually happened just shortly after the Eric Garner case where there was no justice and there was a lot of movement in the Black Lives Matter movement at that time. And it, when this happened and I saw that the police officer was Asian American. I saw this as an opportunity to bring the Asian American community into the conversation. Sometimes our community is not always following mainstream news. A lot of people who are here speaking other languages, follow Chinese



language news. And, and I think the movement hadn't quite reached that community. I felt like it was an important access point.

Thom Powers: [00:23:46](#)

So I mean, this story is not a black and white story by any means. You know, we, we've seen some stories around police violence where it feels a little bit more cut and dried, you know, where there's a serious injustice and there's, you know, a group defending the injustice and a group opposing it. This is a little bit more of a complicated story or, or maybe it's not to you, but I mean, it seems more complicated that you're dealing with two groups that have been historically disenfranchised in this country, Asian Americans and African Americans and you know, and these different coalitions form, you know, can you talk about, you know, what you recognized about the complexity of the story as you got into it?

Ursula Liang: [00:24:38](#)

I was definitely attracted to the complexity of it and it made the film hard to make, but yeah, it's definitely a much more complex point of view. And we were really interested in making the film in a way that really elevated the black and Asian community voices. So we actually, in the film don't interview anyone but black and Asian people for the film. And so there was a very conscious, there was a lot of consciousness and how we made it. So our, our creative, our creative team is also Black and Asian. And you know, it's, it's complicated because we don't often talk to one another, you know, in America, racism is seen in a very, in a very binary way. It's always talked about in black and white and other groups oftentimes feel like they're left out of the conversation, but that doesn't mean that all of these systems of oppression don't also affect them.

Ursula Liang: [00:25:24](#)

And you know, there's a lot of talk around the world word model minority when you talk about the Asian American community. And it's a term that was really created to divide communities to really separate Asian-Americans from other minority groups and and make it look like there was no systemic oppression. When in reality, Asian Americans have the highest poverty rates in New York city. Our community is very diverse. I think Asian sometimes like this model minority narrative, because we have so few representations of ourselves on screen that having like a positive representation feels it feels like the good thing if you only have one. But the reality is very different



and we have so many, we have such a blend of communities that fall under the umbrella of Asian Americans. So there's, there's no distinction and we're being lumped in this group. That's then being used as a wedge against other minority groups. And ultimately that serves white supremacy and keeping up the systems of oppression.

Thom Powers:

[00:26:18](#)

So what we see in *Down a Dark Stairwell* is there are Asian activists who align themselves with the African American protestors seeking justice in the case of Akai Gurley. Can you talk to me about like, you know, what you witnessed of those Asian American activists who were trying to form alliances and, you know, maybe what we can all learn about that bridge building?

Ursula Liang:

[00:26:43](#)

Well, the reality is that those Asian Americans were, have been doing this work for a long time. This incident wasn't the incident that brought them into Black Lives Matter movement. They've been forming solidarity movements over generations. And so I would say that there's, you know, you have to sort of look at what the Asian American community is to sort of understand all the nuances of this film, which hopefully will be unpacked in some educational discussions around the film, but there are many different sort of immigration movements here. And so there are folks that have been in America for, you know, for five generations and those types of Asian Americans tend to have a much better understanding of the civil rights movement. They tend to have more cross-racial friendships. They tend to have more solidarity building moments with other groups. And so a lot of the activists that supported the Akai Gurley movement from the Asian community are in that camp.

Ursula Liang:

[00:27:32](#)

And by and large, the Asian American community in America is very progressive. You know, I think our, our voting rates are largely progressive, most oppose affirmative action and these other sort of wedge issues. And it was really interesting to see how specifically they knew that their role was important on this case. I mean, they were always sort of this Asian Americans for black lives sort of movement has always been present and always been very active in allyship, but to see their role sort of be elevated as we have a responsibility to speak to our own people, they took it very seriously. And, you know, there are moments where people are, you know, Black Lives Matter has



been translated into Chinese, and you'll see people protesting in Chinatown, same thing, you know, speaking in language to the newer immigrants who don't understand the history. So it's, it's been a burden on that community to help explain to the newer immigrant community or the more conservative viewing communities in the Asian American world why this movement is important and why it's, why it's important to us, not just others.

Thom Powers: [00:28:31](#)

As you've been watching the protests of the last couple of weeks I wonder what you think your film, you know, adds to that discussion or, or, you know, what we can take away from your film that applies to what's happening today?

Ursula Liang: [00:28:46](#)

Well, I mean, I don't know how many people are looking at sort of this interracial solidarity stuff. And I, I think that, you know, the film took a long time to make, and we were making it in the wake of a lot of other Black Lives Matter films. And so there was sort of this strategic problem of people feeling like they had protest fatigue and Black Lives Matter film fatigue. And we always thought that we had a new story. We thought we had like a forward looking story that really was talking about systemic oppression and was talking about how our communities aren't going to be continuously used against each other in not just this issue, but other issues. So it, it, to me, it seems like we're, you know, I want the film, you know, I want people to look at the film and look at ideas of like cultural nationalism to, you know, how people tend to live in sort of isolated spaces and group ideologically with the people that look like them and whether that's right.

Ursula Liang: [00:29:35](#)

I mean, we see that even in the rise of like white supremacy, when we were still in the middle of making this film, the Black Lives Matter movement, it died down a little bit, but we had that Charlottesville moment where people are walking with Tiki torches. I realized that sort of the same kind of thing. I mean, this is a group of white people were banded together because they're white and this white nationalism is not, I don't want to say it's the same, but, but we have these tendencies to group in group think about things. And I think it's important to really think specifically about cases specifically about issues and not and question whether we need to align ourselves with people that look like us, even if the, even if the ideas aren't right.



- Thom Powers: [00:30:11](#) I asked Lacey a question about the documentary fields and, you know, and about the reckoning that's going on in our own field about blind spots, shortcomings, you know, ways that this field ought to do better. I wonder what are things that stand out to you?
- Ursula Liang: [00:30:30](#) The documentary world? I mean, there could be a long list of things that we could go through, but I think, I think I don't know, Thom, I mean, from a festival standpoint, since you work in sort of the festival space, I do I think I wanted to highlight one of the things that Lacey said about like what stories who's making the stories and what stories are being made. I think to me, what stories are being made are almost more important because there's, you know, I think when you have like a legacy of programming teams that are not as diverse, I'm not saying this about DOC NYC, but I think there is a legacy across the country of critics and programming teams that are not as diverse. They don't see the same story that a different person from a different cultural group might see.
- Ursula Liang: [00:31:14](#) And so I've always felt like my idea for, for sort of more of the mainstream festivals would be to like highlight some of the things that are coming out of community festivals to have like a little, rather than like a Best of Fest that puts, pulls things out of Sundance and you know Toronto to have like sort of a Best of Fest, like the, the, the community festivals, like the Asian American community festivals is really robust. And we care about very specific things within our community. So I think to help build audiences for festivals, you're going to need to bring our audiences in and commit to commit to them and showing some of the work that we think is important, which might not necessarily be the same as what you think is important. You as a whole I think that could be a way to help solve some, some of the inequity and the stories that are being told and shown.
- Thom Powers: [00:32:03](#) You know, when you talk about storytelling is also a question about a question about what kinds of stories get told is a question about the complexity of stories. And, you know, we see a lot of hero narratives in the documentary space, or, you know, kind of clear pathways, justice, something about Down in a Dark Stairwell is that it's, you know, it's murky, it's it's complex. And, you know, and I wonder if you can, you know,



talk about the challenges maybe that you've faced getting that kind of story made?

Ursula Liang: [00:32:38](#)

Yeah. That's, it's, it's the story I like to tell even my past film 9-Man, it was a, you know, a chorus of characters and a lot of layers, and those are the stories I'm attracted to. And it's funny, cause I had a friend who a critic watch my film and he was like, "Oh, that film looks like you." It's like the craziness in my head sort of onscreen. And that's not for everybody to watch. I think it's much easier to sell a, a single character very specifically driven narrative. And I think the hard part in getting in, in putting a film like mine out into the world is sort of getting people on board early. It's the kind of film sometimes when you have complicated stuff that has to be seen when it's done for people to like come on board and support.

Ursula Liang: [00:33:18](#)

So it becomes really hard to get like earlier funding and to get people to buy in. If they don't know you as a filmmaker and know your work, I was lucky enough to have a partnership fairly early on with ITVS and the public television system. But I believe my like entry point to that was that I had somebody on that team who would move to that office, that had seen my previous work and sort of understood who I was as a filmmaker and what what it would take to support me and get me there. So it took a little bit more faith on their part, but they had like, they knew me. So, I mean, I think in the case of, you know, filmmakers of color, especially emerging ones, they're not going to have that kind of support built in. And so I think we have to think about like the complexity of stories and how much more interesting things can be.

Ursula Liang: [00:34:01](#)

You know, you have a complex story, you can watch it four times and still get something new added every time. There are simple stories you can watch and you can make a theater clap at the end, but the complex ones are the ones that have longevity. And if you're talking about numbers, cause everyone wants to make money. If someone's going to watch that film 10 times and it's going to be used in classroom for 20 years, consider the value of that compared to the value of a, you know, a solo story where, you know, what's going to happen. And once you find out what happened since you don't watch it again. So I don't know



- Thom Powers: [00:34:30](#) You're an active member of groups like A-Docs that support Asian American documentary and Brown Girls Doc Mafia that I mentioned earlier and you're a Firelight Media fellow. Can you talk about what those organizations have meant to your career?
- Ursula Liang: [00:34:49](#) A lot. I mean, it's sort of like, this is maybe a feeling you guys can't totally understand if you're not a person of color feeling marginalized in a lot of way in your life, because when you get into some of those spaces, you just feel a sense of comfort. So there's something that just happens to your physical body and mind that makes you feel a little bit more at ease. And so just being around some of those folks, like feeling like they understand me is very important. I mean, Firelight has been amazing. They've, you know, they supported me financially. and A-Doc and Brown Girls Doc Mafia have also contributed to like sending me places to do networking. And I don't know, those communities are different spaces and we feel like we can have like real talk within those spaces, which is very freeing.
- Thom Powers: [00:35:34](#) You are living in the Bronx, there's protests going on right now, there are a lot of people in the filmmaking community out there trying to cover that. You know, I wonder what you're seeing and what you're thinking about and, you know, in the films that are maybe going to get made about this moment.
- Ursula Liang: [00:35:55](#) Yeah. I don't know. I mean, with COVID and with the protests that are happening, I feel like those are the sexy stories that the whole industry flocks to. And, and do you need to think about the long tail of the story, what the complexity of it is? I mean, I don't think you're going to get an interesting film out of either one of those topics without really thinking about a complex story and how it progresses the conversation three years from now. So, I mean, I, you know, I don't know if I'm seeing a lot of people filming out here. I've seen a lot of people amplifying and that's sort of what I feel my role is, is to amplify the movement. And you know, I don't know. I mean, I also see a lot of, a lot of talk amongst white allies about giving stories to people of color, which I really appreciate, but also know that this is a moment where especially black folks are really like in a lot of like a traumatized space.
- Ursula Liang: [00:36:47](#) So it's like the bandwidth for doing, for having a black director go out and do a, do a protest documentary. Now it's like, it's a



different ask in some ways, because you're asking a person that's already dealing with a lot emotionally and practically. And so I would hope that some of these people who are thinking about ways in which they can diversify their workforces, think about longterm stuff. And think about rather than, you know, plucking a black person to do a story about a black protest movement, but thinking about offering that person an opportunity to pitch the story, they really want to tell. And when they want to tell it because this whole movement is, is like sort of part of the body of a black person in America, it's going to, it will be present in whatever film they make about a different topic. So you know, there's a lot going on and a lot to do right now.

- Thom Powers: [00:37:40](#) So *Down a Dark Stairwell*, it's playing. People can watch it now at Human Rights Watch Festival online. They can get the ticket and watch it at anytime from now til June 20th. On Wednesday, June 17th, you're going to be doing a, a live conversation which people can watch anywhere in the world for free, separate from the film. Can you talk about, who's going to be in that conversation?
- Ursula Liang: [00:38:07](#) Oh, I don't know if all the panelists are confirmed yet, so I don't think I can, it's going to be me and a program officer from Human Rights Watch, and then I'm not sure if everyone else has confirmed, but if you are listening and you were personally asked, was asked to be on the panel, please respond by email and let's get that locked in and then I'll announce it. If anyone wants to follow me online, I will announce that all very shortly.
- Thom Powers: [00:38:27](#) And and then remind us the next steps of where your film goes from here.
- Ursula Liang: [00:38:34](#) We are still in negotiation. It will have a television premier next year. We're considering a lot of fall festivals, but I think the fall festivals are still considering what they're doing. So lots up in the air at this point.
- Thom Powers: [00:38:49](#) All right. Well I guess for listeners, that was a great time to take advantage to, to see *Down a Dark Stairwell*, as long as playing at Human Rights Watch Film Festival. I know that there'll be other opportunities to, to see it ahead. So Ursula, I really appreciate you taking time. I appreciate it. You know, everything you do for



me when you take my calls and give me a advice. So thank you very much.

Ursula Liang: [00:39:14](#)

Thanks, Thom.

Thom Powers: [00:39:16](#)

All right. I'm gonna let you go Ursula. I'm going to bring in Shalini Kantayya are last guest. There's Shalini joining us from Brooklyn. So Shalini's film is also playing the Human Rights Watch. But and that film is called Coded Bias. You've had it's world premiere at Sundance film festival in 2020. So Shalini is one of the lucky filmmakers in 2020 that actually got to have an in person on the big screen experience. Her resume includes stints as a Fulbright scholar and a Ted fellow. She previously directed Catching the Sun about clean energy and what I'm going to do, I'm going to show before I talk more I'm going to show the trailer to your film, and it's going to take me a second to get it up.

Thom Powers: [00:40:32](#)

Okay. Press share. You could see all the behind the scenes action. Alright, let's watch this.

Thom Powers: [00:43:09](#)

All right. Let me back to a screen. Okay.

Thom Powers: [00:43:17](#)

So Shalini is your film is also playing at Human Rights Watch Film Festival, like I said, and it people can watch it anytime from now until June 20th, but your live Q & A is tonight. So if people want to tune in later on, they can check out the link in our window. What, what got you on this story? And when did you start following this story?

Shalini Kantayy...: [00:43:43](#)

I feel like all of my work in some way has to do with how disruptive technologies make the world less there or more fair sort of issues around equality and technology. And I think most of my films have to do with how they, how technology impacts race, class, and gender. And so as a Ted Fellow, I sort of got introduced to the talks of women that are now in my film, Joy Buolamwini, Cathy O'Neil and Zeynep Tufekci and sort of stumbled down the rabbit hole and sort of became fascinated with this dark underbelly of big technology. And that set me on the journey to make Coded Bias.

Thom Powers: [00:44:28](#)

And so a lot this story was kind of unfolding, it seems as you were following it you know, you see some of those women that



you just mentioned coming together, meeting, I think for the first time finding alliances. So I'm curious, you know, what you started with and what you saw develop as it went along?

Shalini Kantayy...:

[00:44:54](#)

Well, I think it always starts with a character. I mean, documentaries start with characters and I thought Joy Buolamwini is an extraordinary character. This sort of young woman who is basically just trying to make an art project work at MIT media lab and is trying to get the camera to recognize her face and sort of stumbles upon one of the largest civil rights kind of issues of our time, which is addressing racial and gender bias in algorithms. And so while the films sort of centers facial recognition technology, because in some ways it's sort of the easiest and most cerebral for everyone to understand it also explores how algorithms have become these sort of autmoated gatekeepers. Algorithms that have not been vetted for accuracy or racial or gender bias are often, you know, making decisions about who gets hired, hired, who gets fired, who gets healthcare who, who gets a good quality of healthcare and sort of even who how long a prison sentence someone may serve. And so what is so dangerous about this, I found for civil rights and democracies: A lot of times we don't even know where there has been algorithmic decision maker in the process. Sometimes we don't even know we've been denied admission in that first sort of pass from colleges and universities based on a decision made by an AI. And so you know, quite along with Joy and seeing her testify before Congress I sort of came to see this as one of the, this is actually where the battle for civil rights in democracy will be fought in the 21st century.

Thom Powers:

[00:46:51](#)

So if this is sounding abstract to people, I wonder if I'm going to ask you about a specific example you've given the film about when Amazon was using AI to sort through its resumes, to decide who it should hire. And I guess these were for tech jobs, right? As opposed to like packing jobs in a way.

Shalini Kantayy...:

[00:47:12](#)

Exactly, exactly. And so basically, you know, Amazon, wasn't trying to be discriminatory, quite the contrary. They were saying, let's make an AI and AI doesn't have human biases. But what I came to understand in the making the film is these algorithms are all based on data. So what is it looking at who was promoted in the past, who you know, retain their job over a series of years and on, you know, are sort of unconscious bias



gets embedded in the data and the AI sort of picks up on that. So an algorithm that Amazon created to be less biased ended up discriminating against any woman who had a women's College on her resume had a women's sport on her resume. And so it became this sort of glaring example

Thom Powers: [00:48:07](#) Because the computer had looked at the data of Amazon and says, Oh, it looks like this company prefers to hire white men. So once we sorted through resumes, let's move them up the chain.

Shalini Kantayy...: [00:48:19](#) Exactly. Exactly. And so what AI does, it sort of replicates the data of the past and with it, the past injustices. And so what Meredith Broussard says so well is that if we trust AI systems to make these important decisions, we're not actually going to have social progress. We're going to be replicating the sort of injustices of the past

Thom Powers: [00:48:49](#) Meredith Broussard. She wrote a book called Artificial Unintelligence and, and it's featured in your film. So it strikes me that a lot of the main characters featured in your film are women Meredith Broussard's, Joy Buolamwini, Cathy O'Neil. They came together in a group called they call themselves the Algorithmic Justice League. And, you know, I wonder what we should take away from the fact that these are, you know, women who are calling out this problem maybe in light of that Amazon anecdote, it seems obvious why you know, why women are putting their finger on this. But I wonder when you see them speak up within existing power structures you know, do you find them being challenged and, and being hurt?

Shalini Kantayy...: [00:49:45](#) I think the women in my film are profoundly... Their groundbreaking research is the reason we can have this conversation. So they're both sort of the brainiest in terms of, I think there's seven PhDs in the film, and they're all at the front on the forefront of sort of technology and mathematics and know all this stuff. But at the same time had this second identity as an outsider. They were women, they were people of color, they were queer. And so somehow along the way had an experience where an algorithm wasn't optimized for them. And they came to understand what this could mean, what the unintended consequences could mean for marginalized community. And so the thing that I'm most proud of is, you know, there are three women in particular whose work I want



to highlight today and that's Joy Buolamwini, we need to Timnit Gebru and Debrorah Raji whose groundbreaking research is essentially the reason why we know facial recognition is racially biased, right?

Shalini Kantayy...:

[00:50:55](#)

And in the making of the film, you see Amazon trying to discredit an essence there research. And in the last like five days that has totally been game changed IBM just on Monday, announced that they will not offer cell or offer, develop or sell this technology to police or law enforcement, facial recognition. Two days later, the unthinkable happened and is that Amazon said that they would press pause on facial recognition technology and its sale to the police. And just for good measure, Microsoft jumped on the bandwagon yesterday. And so this is a change unheard of. And I feel like it shows the power of when there's inclusivity in the sciences and scientists have the bravery to speak out in spite of economic interest. And then that's coupled with civic engagement and the largest movement for civil rights and equality that we've seen in 50 years.

Shalini Kantayy...:

[00:52:02](#)

And those two things together just pressured sort of big technology to put down big authoritarian tools. And so what I see is I feel like sometimes I make documentaries to remind myself that a few people can make a big difference in the world and we just saw it happen. And while it's a first step that we're all incredibly excited about, it's not enough. And what's exciting. I feel like about this moment and about releasing this film in this moment is that the cement is sort of still wet on these technologies. It's sort of like in New York cement is wet, you can still tag your name in it. And I feel like we can still put our hand of democracy and sort of civil protections on these technologies before, before they're deployed at scale. So that's what I think is so exciting. And I just want to give kudos to the genius women in my film for their groundbreaking research.

Thom Powers:

[00:53:07](#)

Well, one thing that strikes me is that you're this kind of violation of civil rights that happens at the stage of algorithms. It's maybe harder to witness harder to document. I mean, right now, you know, these measures that you've just described, like Amazon, you know, putting, pressing pause on sharing its face recognition technology with police forces, if they decide to press on pause on that at sometime in the future, it's not something we might notice. You know, it's not something that is



that's as visible as someone getting beat up by a police officer. So I mean, I wonder if you can talk about that the, you know, the, the trickiness of that, you know, in visibility of some of these things,

Shalini Kantayy...:

[00:53:54](#)

Absolutely. I mean, this is DOC NYC. So we've seen in our communities what stop and frisk has meant for communities of color and realtime facial recognition has the capacity to be a high tech stop and frisk basically. And so what the research of the scientists have shown is that this technology does not work well on, on communities of color does not work well on women does not work well on young faces. All of the communities that this technology has been targeted on, it's been targeted to the FBI to ICE to law enforcement. So I actually could not do this work. I could not film this part of the documentary in the States because we don't have any laws governing this behavior. I actually had to go to Europe where there is some transparency and one of the most, I think terrifying things that we captured in the film was a 14 year old black child in, you know, school uniform, suit school uniform being stopped by five plain clothes police officers because of real time facial recognition technology.

Thom Powers:

[00:55:18](#)

So this is a case where in London, they've got a van with a cameras set up on the street, just watching everyone who goes down the street. And though, and their facial recognition is matching those faces to a database,

Shalini Kantayy...:

[00:55:34](#)

One a database that a lot of us don't know who's in that database, what is on that warranted database? And so Big Brother Watch UK. They filed freedom of information reports and they found out that more than 90% of the people over 2000 people had been wrongly identified, which has a massive sort of implication for communities of color. And this is data that we get. And so I feel like that's sort of what is most terrifying is... Coded Bias tries to show sort of three different governmental approaches to, to this. Like you have China, which has this very authoritarian, unfettered access to everything, which is sort of like the black mirror episode inside of a documentary. And then you have the UK where they have some rights that they have to protect them. And then you have the US which is essentially a wild wild West in these technologies, which I think is really dangerous because a lot of these technologies are being



developed here at home. And so while it's a great first step, that big tech is putting down authoritarian technology and recognizing that this has real consequences for communities of color. It's not enough. We actually need laws in place so that we hold them to democratic standards.

Thom Powers:

[00:57:04](#)

As I wrap up here, let me ask you about, you know, the effort towards laws. There's a woman in your film named Cathy O'Neill. She wrote a book called weapons of math destruction. And she, I quoted her, I featured this film on WNYC documentary of the week today. And there's a quote from her where she's talking about comparing algorithms to food and drugs regulation. And she says, you know, food and drugs has an FDA administration. We need a version of the FDA to govern algorithms. I think I recall also a sequence of congressional testimony in your film where we correct me if I'm wrong, but I think it was Republican representative who was responding, you know, pretty strongly in a, in a favorable way to listening to some of these activists. So it does feel like, you know, maybe he's not representative, but this, there are tendrils to make those a bipartisan issue. Can you talk about more about what's happening here?

Shalini Kantayy...:

[00:58:13](#)

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think I saw something very exciting while filming Joy's testimony to Congress, which is that sometimes our government works and has productive dialogue. And for me, I think it was such a, a light went on for me to hear Jim Jordan Republican from Ohio almost was the minority leader. And basically for him to say, wait a minute, 117 million Americans faces are in a police database. And no one in an elected office said, okay. And then no one in elected office is giving oversight. And to see Republican as terrified as the Democrats around these technologies was sort of a Eureka moment and I hope will be a push for some bipartisan support. I mean this technology makes the East German Stasi makes COINTELPRO operations. It makes them look like they all had a very light touch. And so we should all be alarmed about the uses of these technologies and our democracies.

Thom Powers:

[00:59:29](#)

So actually I'm just noticing a question from Pamela Yates and then I'll wrap this up, but she writes do you think that your film also played a role in Amazon, IBM, and Microsoft stepping back from using facial recognition, especially regarding being



complicit with the police. Do you, do you have a sign of it? I mean, your film had a premiere at Sundance it's had not a lot of exposure yet, but do you, you know....

Shalini Kantayy...: [00:59:57](#)

I hope that the Sundance premiere of the film and the movement that we're building behind, it played some role in this happening, but I don't want to take away. I think what the film does is shine a light that there is a movement inside of big tech that's been happening for years and women and men who have been doing this sort of groundbreaking research for years. And I hope what the film does is sort of share that this is actually a movement for ethics, for comprehensive ethics in tech.

Thom Powers: [01:00:31](#)

Hmm. All right. So Shalini, your Q&A is tonight. Who else is going to be joining you tonight?

Shalini Kantayy...: [01:00:37](#)

I'm going to be I'm joined by some brilliant and bad-ass women MIT media, lab, researcher, Joy Buolamwini,, her research partner, Deborah Raji, the most amazing groundbreaking author of algorithms of oppression. Safiya Umoja Noble will be joining us as well as from right here in the great state of New York. The ACLU will be joining us to help us all take action on these issues locally.

Thom Powers: [01:01:07](#)

So I hope everyone can watch Coded Bias at the Human Rights Watch film festival it's available until the 20th. And you can tune into that conversation live tonight, or there'll be available later. Shalini, thank you very much for taking time out of your day on, you know, when you have another premiere this evening. So thank you. I'll, I'll say goodbye to you now, before I make my closing remarks. All right. I want to just give a couple highlights of things to come at DOC NYC next week, we have another class on Safe and Secure production. These classes take place over two days. You can watch them live, or you can... Or you can watch them any time if you're enrolled. So there's really great stuff there. I hope you get to tune in for some of that.

Thom Powers: [01:02:03](#)

Well, I remind you to sign up for our Monday memo. It's a weekly daily.... With a weekly dose of of the week's documentary news. You can get it free as a newsletter delivered to your inbox, and we will be back next week next Friday with more guests, we'll be announcing them on Monday. I want to



thank our crew, Sarah Modo, Caitlin Boyle, Raphaela Neihuasen, and, and a big thanks to our guests. Lacey Schwartz Delgado, Ursula Liang, and Shalani can tie it up. Thanks very much for joining Friday fix, and we will see you next week. I hope.