I Am See-Through: Participatory Video Making As A Method For Social Change In The Mississippi Delta

Paige Prather
University of Mississippi

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I AM SEE-THROUGH: PARTICIPATORY VIDEO MAKING AS A METHOD FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

PAIGE E. PRATHER

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ABSTRACT

This thesis traces my application of critical participatory video scholarship to the development of a teen video documentary course that I facilitated during my graduate school tenure at the Tutwiler Community Education Center in the Mississippi Delta. Since at least the 1960s, documentarians have utilized participatory video methodologies as a way to tackle social issues through a ground-up approach in which community members play a vital role in the production of documentary projects. The development and application of participatory video varies greatly across disciplines including radical documentary filmmaking, visual studies, developmental studies, and emerging social media studies. Over the years, a number of programs have adopted participatory video to work with young people living in marginalized communities, to provoke youth civic engagement and to provide a platform for young people to express themselves. Recent scholarship calls into question the celebratory tone of many youth participatory video projects and examines the viability of the participatory video approach in participatory action research. This criticism considers the complexities of self-representation in visual work made by young people in an adult facilitator led environment and the usefulness of participatory video frameworks in addressing a young person’s needs. With this in mind, I explore the limitations of participatory video and also its potential as a tool for social change in the Mississippi Delta.
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INTRODUCTION

Since at least the 1960s, documentarians have utilized participatory video methodologies as a way to tackle social issues through a ground-up approach in which community members play a vital role in the production of documentary projects (Corneil 2012, 19). The development and application of participatory video varies greatly across disciplines including radical documentary filmmaking, visual studies, developmental studies, and emerging social media studies (Yang 2012, 6). In general and for the use of this thesis the term is understood as “a process in which participants create a video about themselves or their concerns as a way of inquiring into problems in their lives and seeking solutions to the problems” (Yang 2012, 1). Over the years, a number of programs have adopted participatory video to work with young people living in marginalized communities to provoke youth civic engagement, provide a platform for young people to express themselves, and to learn about their needs and concerns.¹

Recent scholarship calls into question the celebratory tone of many youth participatory video projects and examines the viability of the participatory video approach in participatory research.² This criticism considers the complexities of self-representation in visual work made by young people in an adult facilitator led environment and the usefulness of participatory video frameworks in addressing a young person’s needs.
Sociologist Wendy Luttrell argues for a critical approach to participatory video methodologies by suggesting that researchers consider how a child participant’s “self representations are shaped by an ever-widening set of contexts, social practices, and audiences (Luttrell 2012).” Too often adult facilitators assume that a young person’s interior self becomes transparent through the creation of visual material, specifically videos. It is believed that the child or teenager’s video work is a window into his/her social and private life to be studied and interpreted by adult audiences as unmediated self-representation. I agree with Luttrell in her argument that despite these problematic assumptions, a youth participatory video approach holds the potential to teach facilitators about a young person’s life and educate, persuade and advocate for his/her needs. In addition, this thesis will argue that the project credibility relies on a critical participatory research model that confronts politics of representation and facilitator/participant power dynamics. It utilizes this approach in assessing the potential of participatory video to better address social concerns in the Mississippi Delta.

The Delta, located along the Mississippi River from Memphis to Vicksburg, is an endemically impoverished region with a reputation for racial intolerance, stark social inequalities, poor public health and education programs. As a result, it is an area that attracts a disproportionate amount of documentary attention. My familiarity with the Mississippi Delta came from time spent in Tutwiler, a small town of 1,500 people located in the northern portion of the Delta in West Tallahatchie County. Like many Delta towns, the majority of the population in Tutwiler lives below the national poverty line and is largely African American. During the summer of 2013, I lived in Tutwiler and volunteered as a digital photography teacher with elementary aged children at the Tutwiler Community
Education Center (TCEC), a non-profit community center that Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, an order of Catholic nuns based in Ontario, Canada, opened in 1989. In conjunction with teaching the photography class, TCEC founder and director Sister Maureen Delaney commissioned my cohort, Kate Hudson and me to produce a short documentary video about the TCEC and its significance to Tutwiler residents. Sister Maureen hoped to sell DVD copies of the video for TCEC fundraising. During the making of the documentary, Tutwiler residents expressed their distrust in how we, as outside filmmakers, might portray their town in a documentary movie. Specifically, Tutwiler residents compared our process to the making of the 2001 documentary, *LaLee’s Kin: A Legacy of Cotton*, a feature length film about the West Tallahatchie public school district and African American poverty in the Delta (Froemke et al., 2001). Many community members consider *LaLee’s Kin* to be an exploitative representation of their town and the people that live in it. As a result, we believed that the localized critique of the documentary tradition in Tutwiler, and the Mississippi Delta in general, demanded an alternative methodology for collaborative documentary making with the TCEC if our video was to ethically represent and benefit the community.

In response to representational issues that emerge in existing Delta documentaries and to tensions that arise from researcher/participant relationships in activist research, we introduced a teen participatory video project to the TCEC. This thesis traces the departure from facilitating a documentary about the TCEC to the development of the teen video project and the challenges experienced along the way. Initially, we believed that participatory video disrupted the traditional insider/outsider dynamic and acted as a platform for Tutwiler residents to engage in the making of documentary of their choice. In
addition, it offered young Tutwiler residents an opportunity to express themselves in a visual and creative format, something significantly lacking in their daily school curriculum.iv

In order to contextualize local criticism of documentary traditions in the Delta and to situate my teen participatory video project within this history, Chapter 1 will first provide an overview of documentary productions within the region. This chapter begins with a look at a general trend in U.S. history when scholars and documentarians turned their gaze towards the South to study and document its turbulent economic conditions and racial tensions. I will start with an examination of 1930s Works Progress Administrative (WPA) projects, move into a review of Civil Rights documentation, and critique LaLee’s Kin and its relation to Tutwiler. Finally, for this discussion, I will apply a combination of documentary studies and participatory research frameworks to pick apart the issues that arise from a mostly white, outsider population coming into make documentaries about a largely poor, African American region.

Chapter 1 concludes with a discussion of the socio-economic conditions of Tutwiler as portrayed in LaLee’s Kin. I provide an overview of the socio-economic conditions of Tutwiler within a broader history of racial politics and civil rights activism in the Mississippi Delta. The chapter moves into a description of the TCEC as it developed in response to the needs of the Tutwiler community and its economic challenges. I will discuss the various programs the center provides, specifically supplemental arts education classes for young people, and then detail the significance of the TCEC as a place committed to community organizing based “on the needs and concerns of the people”(Delaney, 2013). I discuss my introduction to the TCEC through the University of Mississippi’s Center for the
Study of Southern Culture’s Delta Cultural Tour and detail the challenges that my cohort and I experienced while filming the short documentary piece on the TCEC.

Chapter 3 will introduce the Tutwiler teen participatory video class that my cohort and I taught at the TCEC in the fall of 2013. This class developed in response to the representational issues of documentary filmmaking in the Mississippi Delta and to the social concerns that Tutwiler residents vocalized while I worked with the TCEC over the summer. Challenges in doing such work will be discussed and missteps made by my cohort and I will be analyzed. Using existing scholarship on community based participatory video projects; I analyze the need for such a program in the Delta and point out the missteps I made.

Chapter 4 will draw from existing participatory video scholarship to propose a framework for working with youth in the Mississippi Delta. Ultimately, this chapter will argue for the viability of participatory video work in community activist research despite the challenges that occurred in the Tutwiler teen video class. Collectively these chapters will point to the ethical dilemmas in documentary filmmaking in the Delta that I encountered as an outside documentarian and scholar attempting activist research. Despite the challenges, this research intends to provide a constructive form of documentary work and interpretation of that work that strives towards new ways of social thinking, especially about young, black teenagers living in the Mississippi Delta.
CHAPTER 1: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE DELTA

“I worry about who’s doing the ‘documenting’ and what a person has in mind to see—before they even get here to take a look or take a listen!”

—Minister in Greenwood, Mississippi 1963

“We told them it wasn’t going to be like LaLee’s Kin. We told them your movie is going to be about good things, happy.”

—Sister Maureen Delaney

The minister quoted above was an African American minister in Greenwood, Mississippi, one of the Delta epicenters for black civil rights activism in the 1960s. It was also a focal point for visiting white organizers and documentarians during the Civil Rights movement. The minister’s words speak to the tensions that arose from outside documentarians coming into Mississippi to generate media about the region and its people and the criticism that Delta residents held towards that documentary tradition. While he spoke these words in the ‘60s, a period in which the southern region of the U.S attracted large numbers of documentarians, documentation in the South began much earlier, starting, at least in large numbers, with 1930s WPA projects. This chapter will provide a chronological recap of noteworthy documentary movements in the U.S. South, the Mississippi Delta, and in Tutwiler. Following this overview, I will analyze why the documentary trend in the Delta, particularly in Tutwiler, fails to meet the needs and
concerns of local residents, as vocalized by Delta community members during my own investigations into documentary work in the region. In conclusion, I will highlight how the documentary tradition in the Delta exploits those living there and the need for alternative methodologies in documentary production that addresses localized social concerns.

**DOCUMENTING THE U.S. SOUTH, THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA, AND TUTWILER**

The southern U.S. attracts people from all over hoping to document the region and the people who live there. This has been so since the well-known Scottish documentarian John Grierson coined the term *documentary* in the 1930s as the “creative treatment of actuality” (Nichols 2010, 6). From the 1920s-1930s the South became a national focus as the country tried to grapple with a spiraling economy. The region experienced a shift in cotton production as new technologies reshaped the agricultural industry and racial tensions pushed many non-white field hands and professionals out of work. As the United States tried to rebuild during the Depression it viewed the South as a national problem, due to its high poverty rates and stark racial inequalities. In addition to the economic plight of the region, both state and civil life in the South were dictated by a Jim Crow caste system, a social reality that attracted the gaze of scholars, documentarians and social activists.

As the social challenges in the southern U.S. concerned the nation at large, documentarians and scholars traveling there did so with the an intent to bring awareness to the harsh realities of poverty and racism. Many did so with the aid of federal funding from programs such as the WPA and the Farm Security Administration (FSA). These programs supported journalists like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans who traveled in the
Deep South, photographing the lives of sharecroppers to document effects of the Great Depression, using the camera as a tool for social awareness (Coles 1997, 109).

In 1936, James Agee and Evans traveled to Hale County, Alabama to live with white tenant farmers for a *Fortune* magazine article on poverty and rural America (see Figure 1). The two stayed on the Alabama farm much longer than originally intended, affected by the living conditions of the family and establishing emotional ties to them. Feeling conflicted over their outsider status and considering the ethics of documenting a poor family, Agee and Evans turned their fieldwork into a reflexive analysis on documentary work, social responsibility, the role of the observer, and human dignity. The result was the publication of their book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Agee and Evans 2001; Coles 1997, 51-60).

Jack Delano, an FSA photographer, also traveled south to photograph both black and white farmers and sharecroppers (see Figure 2). Starting his career with FSA in 1940, Delano was part of the same photography cohort that included Evans and Lange. Like Agee and Evans in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Delano wrote about the ethical tensions that arise from doing documentary work in impoverished communities. Delano wrote “to do justice to the subject has always been my main concern” and hoped that “the camera would be a means of communicating how [he] felt about the problems facing the country” (Gonzalez 2011).

Figure 2: Jack Delano, *In the Convict Camp in Greene County, Georgia*, May 1941, digital file from original negative. *Source:* Yale Photogrammar, http://photogrammar.yale.edu/records/index.php?record=fsa2000026327/PP.
The Mississippi Delta garnered notable documentarian attention during this period due to its particularly turbulent racial environment and shifting agricultural industry. Just as the rest of the southern U.S. experienced economic instability in the early half of the 20th century so did the Delta. Evidence of this lives in the photographs, films, and anthropological and sociological case studies from scholars and visiting cultural workers interested in the social lives of the rural poor. Documentarian and former director of The Center for the Study of Southern Culture (CSSC), Bill Ferris credits the work done by early scholars and documentarians in the Delta during the 1930s as forever shaping the understanding of the American South and providing researchers of southern culture a rich archive of visual material (Ferris 2013, 19). Mostly academic and from urban universities in the North, WPA photographers and researchers created a breadth of work that continue to mark and shape cultural representation of the U.S. South, and more specifically the Mississippi Delta. Well-known WPA and FSA photographers Lange and Marion Post Wolcott photographed the Delta, capturing images of Jim Crow segregation, cotton plantation production, and African American daily life (see Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5).

Anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker and psychologist/sociologist John Dollard traveled to Indianola, Mississippi in 1932 to examine the production of cotton in the Delta and the corruption surrounding an economy based on sharecropping and racial hierarchies. As social scientists flocked to the region in the 1930s, blues enthusiasts and folklorists such as Alan Lomax and later his son John Lomax visited the Delta plantation fields and prisons to find their idea of an *authentic* blues. Campbell William Witbeck, an employee of the WPA, traveled to Mississippi in 1938 to photograph its railroad system and produced over 300 images of the state and its people, many of them in the Delta, which now sit in the Mississippi Department of Archives. In addition to Witbeck’s photographs, Mississippi’s archives include photos from the Delta’s Parchman Penitentiary taken between 1914-1940. A number of documentarians and folklorists filmed and wrote about
Parchman’s presence in the Delta with a focus on the blues music and art that emerged from its exploitative environment. The Lomaxes traveled there numerous times to record and interview prisoners for WPA projects seeking folk and blues songs.

The 1960s brought a number of changes in the South through the organization of local civil rights activists and national efforts to end segregation and racial oppression throughout the southern states. In conjunction with activism emerging from the southern U.S. at this time, documentary became a platform for social awareness and social change. A combination of social activism and changes in documentary equipment in the 1960s caused significant shifts in documentary frameworks. The ease of traveling with lightweight sound equipment prompted the exploration of everyday people and their social worlds through film and documentary projects. Suddenly, the subjects of documentary films became central characters to the projects and often filmmakers included interviews and observational dialogues of the people being filmed. Documentary acted as a witness to the lives and experiences of “normal” people, usually from marginalized groups, as a means to bring awareness to the challenges they faced.

Much like the power of still photography during the Civil Rights Movement, documentary film became a platform from which to bolster and chronicle both the mundane and catastrophic events taking place in the South after 1955. Stemming from Dziga Vertov’s Kino-Pravda movement, American Civil Rights documentarians filmed and photographed the movement to give a voice to those involved. This approach was expanded upon by the National Film Board of Canada which was one of the first documentary institutions “inspired by the civil rights movements of the 1960s with a mission to tackle the sources of poverty and exclusion; to ‘give voice’ to
marginalized segments of society; to facilitate communication, and to keep minorities from becoming the victims and stereotypes of media and government” (Corneil, Citizenship and Participatory Video 2012, 19-20). In this spirit, documentarians traveled to the Delta to capture local forms of organization. For example, New York photographers, Danny Lyon and Herbert Randall Jr. documented 1960s grassroots organization in Mississippi. Lyon worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1963 as a field photographer and then later published his work in Movement a book that highlighted the work of southern civil rights activism.

In 1964, Randall traveled to Hattiesburg, Mississippi where he photographed the on-goings of Mississippi Freedom Schools, voter registration organizing and the meetings and movement of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Campaign. His photograph of Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld from Cleveland, Mississippi suffering from a concussion after being beaten by segregationists is one of his more widely published images. Documentary film director Henry Hampton utilized archival footage of the Mississippi Delta for the 14-hour documentary piece Eyes on the Prize. The two segments, “Awakenings” which highlights Emmett Till’s murder trial and “Mississippi: Is this America?” which examines the 1962-64 voting rights campaign in the state, showcase scenes from Delta civil rights activism.

Some southern scholars, folklorists, and anthropologists viewed their work in the same light as documentary activists. This is evident in Bill Ferris’s introduction to his book on fieldwork with Southern Delta blues musicians Give My Poor Heart Ease. He writes,

Throughout my life I have traveled with a camera and tape recorder and tried to capture the spoken word in all its mystery and beauty through tales such as the ones presented in this book, tales that are both moving and chilling...As a college student, I was drawn into the civil rights movement and saw my photographs and recordings as a way to honor a proud culture that stood outside the academy. I saw my work as both a political and cultural statement. Whites often asked why I spent so much time
with blacks. The implication of their question was that black lives were not worthy of serious study. In the sixties black civil rights activists faced down murderous powers, and my work as a folklorist, while it did not begin to compare in terms of the danger those activists face, sometimes also took place in threatening circumstances...With angry voices, speakers described the conditions they had endured in Delta towns like Clarksdale and Leland...Their tales seem timeless because the struggles, hopes, and suffering of black families are familiar themes in our culture. (Ferris, 2009, 5)

Contrary to the somewhat celebratory tone of Ferris’s introduction, Robert Coles unveils the complexities of his role as a documentarian working with SNCC and Bob Moses in the 1960s as they planned the Mississippi Summer Project to push for voter registration in the Mississippi Delta. In Doing Documentary Work (1997) Coles explains his interaction with various SNCC members and a hesitant Moses as he records the heated debates of the evening. Moses questions Coles’ intent as an outsider, a white man, and a documentarian trying to capture an image of black activists in the South. Coles analyzes this moment and considers the complexities of documenting the movement, considering the racial politics of the region. In a conversation after the SNCC meeting Moses describes to Coles his issue with white documentarians and activists traveling to the South to preserve the movement through the outsider’s lens. Moses says,

Don’t you see, that’s been our story—the black story: everyone calls us something! It’s so hard for any single one of us to be seen by you folks [white people], even the kindest of you, even our friends [among you] as a person, nothing more...You folks--can be yourselves! You can wander all over the map...You can set up your tent where you think it’ll do you good! That’s great---for you! That’s what it means to be white, and have a good education. You can look at things from a microscope or a telescope, and from way up in the mountains and down near the seashore, and when it’s sunny and when it’s raining cats and dogs, and then, later, when you write or you publish your photographs--- you’re not a white writer, or a white photographer. You’re free of the biggest label of them all, the one that defines us every single moment of our lives... So it’s location, man, for us: where we’re at, and where you’re at, and where we can go, and where you can go---" (Coles 1997, 39-40)
What Moses says begs questions concerning the process of documentary (even if activist documentary) work in the Delta, tensions over the authority of image making, and the sustainability of social activism through documentary. Moses emphasizes the disparity between filmmaker and subject within the context of race and power. Documentarians (usually white) tend to portray black people in the South as a collective, with one voice and one struggle. Film theorist Bill Nichols states that as the author of the film, the filmmaker “retains the controlling voice” while the “subject of the film becomes displaced into a mythic realm of reductive, essentialized stereotype” (Corneil 2012, 20). Within this context, documentarians in the Delta further disenfranchise Delta communities by recycling stereotypical representations of black culture and politics in the region without regard for the complexities in identity formation, power, agency, and resistance.

Most documentary film projects in the Mississippi Delta tend to focus on specific tropes of black life in the South limited to a legacy of slavery, agricultural work life, the effects of Jim Crow and racial inequality, blues music and black folk traditions, and endemic poverty and the consequences of economic blight for African American communities. Such trends emerge despite the social thinking or activist intent of the documentarian. Albert Maysles, Susan Froemke and Deborah Dickson’s 2001 documentary film LaLee’s Kin is an example of this kind of documentary in the Delta.

Documentarian and anthropologist Jack Ruby notes that many documentarians “have been social reformers, and some, even radical revolutionaries...They produce images to inform audiences of injustices, corruption, and other societal ills, often to persuade people to act against these evils” (Ruby 2005, 217). Ruby argues that, unfortunately, there is little evidence to prove that films which focus on social issues do very much for social
change if the process of the documentary filmmaking is done without specific ethical concerns, most importantly that of transparency in documentary production and reflexivity on the filmmaker’s intent (Ruby 2005, 218). His main points undermine observational documentary films, like LaLee’s Kin (2001), which fail to employ any form of reflexivity and critical analysis of the filming process and interaction with participating social actors. Despite the ethical issues that emerge from such documentary filmmaking, LaLee’s Kin was celebrated by New York Times film critic A.O. Scott for being “an exemplary work of cinema verite that allows its subjects to speak for themselves” (Scott, 2001).

LaLee’s Kin takes place in West Tallahatchie County and focuses on the life of Laura Lee Wallace, an elderly African American woman who is the great-granddaughter of a cotton plantation slave, a point that the film hinges upon. The film parallels two story lines, which connect the life of Laura Lee with the challenges faced by the West Tallahatchie public school superintendent Reggie Barnes to improve the education system. The filmmakers stress that the legacy of slavery and the region’s economic dependency on cotton continue to determine life conditions for African American families that still live in the Delta.

In the first ten minutes text appears on the screen: “Slavery and sharecropping have ended, but the plantation system fueled an ongoing cycle of poverty and illiteracy. In Tallahatchie County, one Delta school district and one Delta family struggle to overcome this legacy.” The film opens with scenes of cotton fields, tractors, the Mississippi river and the sound of a blues harmonica. More text appears: “This film is set in the Mississippi Delta. Because regional accents may be difficult for some viewers to understand, subtitles have been used.” Laura Lee appears on screen stating, “I don’t like cotton, I did too much in the
field. All of us were slaves 'til a few years ago. Because when you were living on that white man's place you couldn't do what you wanna do.”

Throughout the film, Laura Lee is seen taking care of various family members and dealing with the day-to-day responsibilities it takes to maintain her home and family life. Because of the time she spends caring for her family, Laura Lee has little opportunity to find a paying job, leaving her dependent on federal aid. It is clear that Laura Lee struggles to make ends meet as the filmmakers jump from one disparaging scene to the next. For example, an anxious and excited Laura Lee is filmed as her federally funded mobile home arrives only to be infested with roaches and filth. Another scene shows Laura Lee teaching her granddaughter, Granny, how to make a family meal out of bologna. In one particularly painful scene, Granny skips the first day of school because she cannot afford to buy paper, a requirement for student enrollment.

This is where the film transitions into an examination of the public school system in West Tallahatchie, where Granny attends West Tally High as a middle school student. Granny struggles to pass her classes mainly because she skips school to help out at home. Granny’s story, as seen in the film, is not an aberration as the school is facing a shut down due to poor student attendance and consistently low state standardized test results. If the school district does not improve student test scores, the state of Mississippi will take it over. Superintendent Reggie Barnes rallies both the student body and faculty to boost school performance. Barnes stresses the importance of family involvement in a student’s school life but as seen in Granny’s circumstance, situations at home can exacerbate a student’s challenges. In the end, West Tally is able to raise its performance score from a failing “0” to a passing “2” but is nowhere near an excellent school rating needed to provide
a decent education. In the closing scene, an illiterate Laura Lee struggles to read her grandson Redman’s report card, which is filled with negative marks. Disappointed in his performance, she comments that he is going to either be killed or wind up in jail. In this scene Laura Lee speaks to the limitations that young black men in the Mississippi Delta face due to the poor quality of the public education system and persistent poverty in the Delta, both factors created by and reinforced by a social system rooted in racial oppression.

It isn’t that the towns that make up the West Tallahatchie school district (Webb, Sumner, and Tutwiler) are not faced with the challenges seen in LaLee’s Kin. The public education system in Tutwiler is grim and the majority of the town’s residents live below the poverty line. The average income for residents living in the Delta is shockingly low compared to state and national averages. According to the Delta Region Authority Plan from 1969-1999, Mississippi fell below U.S. median household income averages and the counties in the Delta region maintained even lower household income averages than the rest of the state. These income averages are weighted by population changes from decade to decade (Lord 2009, 18-19). In 1999 the median household income for the United States was $40,696 and in Tallahatchie County the median household income was $21,492, which is only 52% of the national average. Since 1969, Tallahatchie has experienced a dramatic decline in household income (Lord 2009, 19-20). These statistics affect the education system and life opportunities for young people that live in Tutwiler.

Maysles, Froemke, and Dickson expose the effects of poverty in the Delta, specifically Tutwiler, but do so at the expense of the film’s subjects, which calls into question the ethics of representation. Marit Kathryn Corneil writes in Handbook of Participatory Video regarding representational issues in documentary, “the social actor
becomes the victim of a representational and institutional discourse in which he or she is robbed of voice or agency within the film” (Corneil 2012, 20). In answer to this dilemma, documentarians and social scientists have developed frameworks that better address the authorship and ownership of documentary production to include the participation of the subjects. In addition, increased reflexivity on part of the filmmakers and of the social actors avoids displacement of the documentary participants (Corneil 2012, 20). The residents of Tutwiler expressed their frustration in the portrayal of their community through *LaLee’s Kin* because it focuses on negative stereotypes of the Mississippi Delta and exploits Tutwiler residents to bring awareness to education, poverty, and racism in the South. The same Greenwood minister quoted in the epigraph to this chapter touches on this issue as he expresses his frustration about outside documentarians coming to the Delta. He says “But if people come here, and they want to help us, and they try to help us— but they end up thinking of us only in trouble, and only in pain, and only persecuted—then we’ll end up with the world getting the wrong picture about us”(Coles 1997, 169).

The epigraphs that open this chapter illuminate the sentiment of two Delta residents over the portrayal of the Delta in documentary film. One is TCEC’s Sister Maureen Delaney, a white nun living in Tutwiler in 2013, and the other is a black minister from Greenwood in 1963. Given the distance in time between the two Delta residents, it is apparent that documentaries set in the Delta directed by outside documentarians carry with them a negative, and relatively long, legacy within local communities. As most have some familiarity with the context from which the minister speaks, it is pertinent that I establish a contextual framework from which Sister Maureen speaks. This chapter has traced significant documentary trends within the South, the Mississippi Delta, and Tutwiler in
order to contextualize my Tutwiler teen participatory video project within a history of
documentary making the Mississippi Delta. In the following chapter I will look at the socio-
economic history of Tutwiler and its relationship to the rest of the Mississippi Delta in
order to establish a sense of place and explain the role of the Tutwiler Community
Education Center within this setting.
CHAPTER 2: SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN THE DELTA AND THE TUTWILER COMMUNITY EDUCATION CENTER

Like many small towns in the Delta, statistical reportage of Tutwiler’s economic conditions depicts a somewhat bleak scene. Scarce employment opportunities limit mobility for most residents and nearly 40% of the town, both adults and children, live below the poverty line (United States Census 2008-2012). Given that Tutwiler is comprised of a mostly African American population (54%), assessing significant socio-economic trends in the town, the surrounding county, and the Delta in general, necessitates an analysis of institutionalized racism and its role in shaping fiscal and social mobility. For example, to treat race as a casual variable in the rise and fall of Delta industries overlooks the centrality and history of white supremacy in disenfranchising rural, African American populations. The intersections of systemic racism and economic disparities provide a background as to how and why Tutwiler and surrounding towns attract a lineage of documentaries trying to “fix” the social issues that seem to plague the region.

An overview of the agricultural industry, landownership and entrepreneurial opportunities following the Civil War will shed light on the systemic and individual racism responsible for the economic inequalities between black and white populations in the Delta. This economic framework fostered what Kim Lacy Rogers refers to in *Life and Death in the Delta* as a system of exploitation and terror where those in power tolerated and often
celebrated violent oppression of African Americans (Rogers 2006, 23). The racial climate fully affected the economic mobility of African Americans in the Delta as whites monopolized regional politics and business operations.

This chapter’s overview of racial politics and grassroots civil rights movements in the Mississippi Delta, and therefore Tutwiler, situate the contemporaneous economic downfall of Tutwiler within a culture of white supremacy. Parallels drawn between Tutwiler’s racial dynamics of the past and its present socioeconomic status will expose links between a historical, cultural investment in whitenessxii and the persistent poverty of blacks in the Delta. Following the overview of racial politics in the Delta, I will transition to the development of the TCEC and the work of Sister Maureen Delaney as a response to the socio-economic conditions in Tutwiler. I will introduce my relationship to the TCEC and the development of my initial documentary projects with the Center. I will conclude this chapter with the tensions that compelled me to consider alternative documentary methodologies in working with the TCEC that better incorporated the needs and concerns of Tutwiler residents. Looking at Tutwiler’s socio-economic history will locate Delta documentary projects and my work with the Tutwiler Community Education Center (TCEC) within the legacy of racism, poverty, and inequalities that permeate Delta counties.

PROFILE OF THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

The Mississippi Delta’s legacy of racialized violence and exploitative labor systems are interwoven. Slavery and later sharecropping dominated the agricultural industry and social ordering of day-to-day life for both blacks and whites. During the antebellum period an elite, white landowning class enforced and depended upon the work of enslaved African
Americans to build a strong cotton economy. In the decades after the war, Delta landowners and cotton producers initiated an oppressive work system based on sharecropping, tenant farming and convict leasing to ensure economic and social control. Coupled with legal segregation and normalized racial violence, African Americans living in the Mississippi Delta found themselves stuck in a social environment comparable to slavery. Of Jim Crow and sharecropping Rogers writes,

Both were constructed as interlocking systems that would guarantee white farmers and landowners a steady and docile supply of socially subordinate cheap labor—a labor force that could be controlled by low wages, a lack of legal protections, and by intermittent eruptions of social violence that targeted individual blacks, their families, and sometimes, their communities. (20)

African American families living in Delta counties faced extreme levels of poverty, cultural oppression, and physical violence due to the aforementioned social climate. Historian Charles M. Payne describes the Delta from 1900 to the 1960s in his book *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* as a place where racial terrorism structured the day to day lives of African American families and worked to disenfranchise all people of color in the rural South (Payne 1995, 7). Mississippi as a whole took the lead in the number of African American lynching victims from 1889-1966, with 476 reported cases (Thompson 2001, 61). Tutwiler’s Tallahatchie County ranked as one of the highest in reported lynching cases between 1889 -1966, with a total of nine (Thompson 2001, 55). This form of violence supported the economic advantages held by a white, landowning class in the Delta and furthered the disenfranchisement of African Americans. The marriage of state and civil society made it nearly impossible for African Americans to find fiscal independence from white employers.
Beginning in the 1940s the Delta witnessed drastic change in the agricultural industry. The mechanization of cotton, conflated with other economical, political and cultural shifts of the 1940s, began breaking down barriers to racial equality and building a foundation for political organization against white supremacy (Rogers 2006, 43). In 1944, the Hopson Plantation, just ten miles from Tutwiler, adopted the International Harvester’s mechanical cotton picker. Hopson became the first cotton plantation in the world to rely solely on machines to grow and harvest its crop (see Figure 6). New crop technologies pushed African American sharecroppers out of work and left many families jobless. By 1968, the agricultural industry in the Delta lost over 40,000 jobs, mainly those occupied by African American farmers (Rogers 2006, 156). These changes exacerbated an already vulnerable economic condition for poor whites and blacks alike, though the consequences affected African Americans much more severely (Rogers 2006, 21-22). As narrowing job opportunities and poverty permeated the Delta, African Americans, already marginalized, absorbed the harshest outcomes of the economic downturn. This in turn led to an outmigration of many black families seeking war industry jobs in the North and asylum from racialized violence (Payne 1995, 15-17, Rogers 2006, 43).
Beginning immediately after the Second World War young African American men and women in places like Tutwiler began organizing for voting registration rights and equal education (Rogers 2006, 46-52). The war heightened frustrations over racial inequalities in the Delta, and many young, black veterans came home prepared to fight. The changes that took place in the Delta, following this period, were tantamount to developments in the Civil Rights Movement. Black soldiers returned to the Delta feeling frustrated that their own country refused to grant them basic human rights even though they served in combat to end racial and ethnic genocide in Europe. Many black soldiers
joined their friends and family in developing civil rights campaigns for voting rights and equal education.

Not far from Tutwiler, in places like Clarksdale, Greenwood, Decatur, and Ruleville civil rights activists such as Medgar Evers, Amzie Moore, Aaron Henry, and Fannie Lou Hamer began organizing voting rights protests and establishing NAACP chapters and welcoming SNCC members into Delta townships. A number of African American women worked with local NAACP chapters, initiated Head Start programs throughout the Delta, participated in boycotts, sit-ins, and demonstrations in larger Delta towns like Clarksdale, and became the faces of the Civil Right Movement. Many local black residents throughout the region turned to each other to build resistance to the institution of racism, despite the threats and violent resistance from white segregationists (Payne 1995, 45-47). xiii

The changes that took place in the Delta between the 1940s and the 1970s brought a number of improvements for the Delta, including political power for black voters in Mississippi and the end of legal segregation. The number of black politicians in the state legislature went from zero in the 1950s to 22 by 1988 (Orey 2000, 1). In addition, federal programs such as Head Start provided educational resources for small rural spaces like Tutwiler where the state traditionally treated public education as privilege for blacks, not a right (Rogers 2006, 96). A number of Delta towns developed programs that secured federal grants for health care centers, farmers’ cooperatives, local business growth, and public services. While these programs filled existing gaps for many black communities in the Delta, and the rise of black politicians addressed concerns that most white politicians ignored, a number of new and old interracial political contestations and disagreements continued across socio-economic lines. For example, class divides between black
communities in the Delta stirred unrest and disagreements over how to spend federal funds on public programs and left many lower class blacks feeling underrepresented in city and state politics (Rogers 2006, 159). Their responses counter the dominant narrative of the Civil Rights Movement and its affect in building political and economical solidarity for African Americans in the Delta (Rogers 2006, 162).

Despite the positive changes that occurred in the Delta during the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans continued to struggle with the legacy of white paternalism within Delta politics and businesses. As a result, the out migration of young, black residents continued to grow and towns like Tutwiler witnessed a significant depletion in its young population. Coupled with a steady decline in agricultural employment and a shaky ground for growing local enterprises, small Delta towns did not escape the constraints of endemic poverty and deep-seeded racism. The efforts and successes of those that participated in the social movements of previous decades are not to be undermined but many residents living in the Delta point out that there is much work yet to be done.

As demonstrated, the stagnation of economic development in spaces like the Delta are directly tied to early racial dynamics of Mississippi following the Civil War and the control of the labor market and economy by a white elite. In Racist America, Joe R. Feagin describes this process as social reproduction in which “each new generation inherits the established organizational structures that project unjust enrichment and unjust impoverishment.” (Feagin 2010, 18) While the Civil Rights Movement in the Delta helped to reorganize particular social hierarchies, both institutionalized and individual investments in racist ideologies reproduced and protected white power structures and exploitative politics that, over time, kept Delta communities in the same economic crisis as before.
Historian James C. Cobb celebrates the work of black voters in the Delta from the 1960s but states that “the region’s story [is] still one of dislocation, disparity, and dependence” (Rogers 2006, 157). For example, in 1994, the unemployment rate for whites in the Delta was at 4 percent, but for blacks it was at 16 percent and a majority of black families depended on federal transfer payments such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (Rogers 2006, 151, 157). The disparities between white and black income levels, health care, educational resources, and general quality of life in the Delta are gaping. The economical privileges that white families possessed in the 1930s, remain in place over time, as do the ideologies that protect those privileges for those that benefit from them. As Feagin puts it, “for systemic racism to persist across many human generations, it must reproduce well and routinely the necessary socioeconomic conditions.” (2010, 18-19) This reality continues to shape the economic and social conditions of the Delta and Tutwiler is a microcosm of this history.

If generations of African Americans in the Delta inherit the the previous struggles and white social frames of a white supremacist history, then they likewise inherit the political organization and social ties that earlier Delta blacks established in the face of slavery, sharecropping, Jim Crow, racial violence, and segregation. While memories of racialized violence such as the murder of Emmett Till whose body was embalmed in Tutwiler, still haunt spaces in the Delta, the footsteps of those activists from previous generations is evident. The legacy of local movements and resistance to both individual and institutionalized racism in the Delta informs the way that Deltaians think of their communities and is a thing of pride and dignity. This is evidenced in the oral histories
stored in the Delta State Oral History Project archives, the accounts given by Delta residents in Rogers Life and Death in the Delta, and the historical analysis by Payne in I’ve Got the Light of Freedom. It is also evident in my fieldwork and interviews while documenting the TCEC and producing participatory videos with Tutwiler teenagers.

**TUTWILER COMMUNITY EDUCATION CENTER**

Former Tutwiler mayor and TCEC staff member, Genether Miller Spurlock, describes Tutwiler as a place where children once ran the town streets, residents patronized local businesses, and people frequently coalesced in the downtown square. This is not the Tutwiler of today where the streets are lined with vacant buildings and a few surviving businesses. Save for the community center, there is little else to do in downtown Tutwiler and opportunities for economic uplift are limited. The decline of the agricultural industry has forced residents to commute long distances for work. Most locals travel an hour or so to work in places like a nearby poultry farm, Parchman prison, the casinos in Tunica, Wal-Mart in Clarksdale or the fourteen-year-old Tallahatchie County Correctional Facility. It is within this setting that Sister Anne Brooks of the Tutwiler Health Clinic and Sister Maureen Delaney of the TCEC operate community programs.

In 1983, Sister Anne of the Sisters of the Holy Names (a Canadian based Catholic order) traveled to Tutwiler to assess the living conditions and health of its residents. An excerpt taken from the online Tutwiler Clinic scrapbook describes the state of Tutwiler when Sister Anne arrived:

Driving into Tutwiler you can see immediately that the town is very poor. Many of the people live in homes that are falling apart—often without electricity or running water. Unemployment is very high and many families must survive on painfully meager incomes—some less than $3,300 per year...Before [Sister Anne] arrived in
Tutwiler, there was no medical care available. Sister [Anne] is a lifeline for those who rely on her expertise and faith. (Center 2013)

It was these conditions that compelled Sister Anne to open the Tutwiler Health Clinic. She established the facility to first tackle high infant mortality rates and assist residents in need of urgent health care. After four years, the clinic expanded with the arrival and assistance of another Sisters of the Holy Names nun, Sister Maureen Delaney. Sister Maureen recognized a need for community programs in Tutwiler that went beyond medical assistance. In 1987 she started a community engagement program, which led to the now, multifaceted TCEC.

In 1990, 60 Minutes visited Tutwiler to produce a television story on Sister Anne and Sister Maureen. The segment highlighted the TCEC quilting program, which Sister Maureen helped to initiate after learning of the Tutwiler quilting tradition. This exposure led to numerous donations from all across the world, which funded the expansion of the clinic and the programs held at the TCEC. Initially, both programs operated out of the same building but with the help of the 60 Minutes donations, they now function separately (Delaney 2013).

Today, the Tutwiler clinic staffs over 25 people, mostly from Tutwiler and nearby Clarksdale. The clinic provides “medical, dental, and optometry services to the community and surrounding areas. The clinic also provides ancillary health care and education to meet community needs on an outpatient basis” (Tutwiler Health Clinic 2013). While they have been able to maintain and grow for the past 30 years they do struggle with medical care costs and find it difficult to fund the high number of patients living without health insurance. In a 2010 Los Angeles Times article, Sister Anne expressed frustration with
Mississippi’s attitude towards federal spending on health care. She explained Mississippi’s longstanding hesitancy to accept federal spending on Medicaid patients, something that directly affects health care for residents of Tutwiler (Levey 2010). Despite her disappointments, Sister Anne expressed determination and dedication to serving the residents of Tutwiler and maintaining the health clinic (Levey 2010).

Like the health clinic, The TCEC provides a number of programs for Tutwiler and nearby towns. The TCEC operates a weekly senior citizens program, an afterschool youth program, summer camps, parenting groups, the quilting program, and an adult exercise program. In addition, the TCEC is a place where town meetings are held, residents can vote, and people can host special events. From conversations with local residents and from statements made in interviews it is apparent that the TCEC generates positivity and solidarity in a place with a long history of poverty and racial oppression. In 2001, Steven Kilborn of the New York Times wrote:

> Except for cotton, there has never been much to Tutwiler’s economy. People drive an hour to work in poultry and chicken processing plants for less than $7 an hour, or they work casinos in Tunica, an hour to the north, or at other Delta prisons... Tutwiler has no drugstores, clothing stores or restaurants. Its grain elevator and bank closed last year. Rumors abound that the cotton gin at the edge of town will be next. Much of what sustains Tutwiler, where all the churches are Protestant, are the health and community services run by its seven sisters -- Catholic nuns -- and their staff. (Kilborn 2001)

My introduction to Tutwiler began in the spring of 2013 where I served as the graduate assistant to the University of Mississippi’s Center for the Study of Southern Culture’s annual Delta Cultural Tour. The tour is an effort to bring visitors to various sites in the Delta that relate to the literary, filmic and musical history of the region. The one-week tour is coordinated by James “Jimmy” Thomas, the Center’s Associate Director for
Publications, and is held every spring. The participants stay in Greenwood, Mississippi at the Alluvian Hotel and travel to various Delta towns such as Greenville, Clarksdale, Indianola, Leland, Stoneville, Ruleville, Merigold, Mound Bayou, and Cleveland to visit restaurants, blues music museums and concert venues, bookstores, synagogues, churches, plantation homes, the gravesites of blues musicians, writers, and other noteworthy former Delta residents, and places like the TCEC.

Thomas agrees that the TCEC is an integral part of Tutwiler's community activities and is a much-needed organization in the town. In an interview with Thomas about his why he brought Delta Cultural Tour tourists to the TCEC, he expressed his support and belief in the need for the TCEC. He said:

I think they are doing great things with that center. It's really, obviously the center of town. It's the focal point for the town to see how it's progressing and what the possibilities are [there]. Without that community education center I think there wouldn't be a whole lot--now I don't know Tutwiler all that well, so this might be a ridiculous statement but I think without that community education center that there might not be as much to look for in terms of optimism in Tutwiler and I think that is one thing that the community education center brings is that sense of optimism, that there are good things and there are good people who are here to help. And Sister Maureen is quick to say that she's there to help but she is there to listen first to find out what they need. (Thomas 2013)

After my visit at the TCEC with the cultural tour Kate Hudson, and I contacted Sister Maureen to see if it might be possible to work with the TCEC that in some way benefited Tutwiler and the community center. After visiting a number of towns in the Delta during the tour, both Kate and I felt compelled do work that addressed the impoverished conditions so prevalent throughout the region. The TCEC was the first and only place that we encountered on the tour that offered long term community assistance to Delta residents. We wanted to support this effort.
In the summer of 2013, following our first meeting with Sister Maureen, Kate and I agreed to work on a documentary video about the TCEC and conduct audio recordings of the Tutwiler gospel choir for TCEC fundraising purposes. We reached a decision collaboratively with Sister Maureen who wanted media created about the services offered at the center to sell to donors and TCEC visitors. Kate and I both hold backgrounds in documentary work and studied documentary making in our graduate program so we felt that we possessed the skill to conduct such work. We also taught a photography and poetry class at the request of Sister Maureen as part of our volunteer work with the TCEC and as a way to familiarize ourselves with Tutwiler and the programs at the TCEC. Incorporating methods from Wendy Ewald’s *Literacy and Justice Through Photography* (Ewald, Hyde and Lord 2011) and building upon a photography project introduced in 1997 at the TCEC by former Southern Studies student, Dan Sherman, and former associate professor of art and Southern Studies, Tom Rankin, Kate and I organized a 5 week class with 9-12 year olds with whom we met twice a week and taught basic photography and poetry lessons.

These photography classes are part of a larger effort by the TCEC to provide arts based, supplemental education activities to Tutwiler youth. Two of the strongest and most attended programs at the TCEC are the summer youth camp and the weekly teen nights held through the year. As evidenced in conversation with a variety of Tutwiler residents, both young and adult, and both staff of the TCEC and attendees of the programs, the supplemental education activities help to “keep kids off the streets” in Tutwiler. Chapter 1 explained that Tutwiler students attend public school in a district that falls below national averages in test scores and reading levels. The West Tallahatchie School District lacks a substantial art program and is severely underfunded when it comes to
extracurricular opportunities for its students. While working with the TCEC, the staff and parents in Tutwiler expressed frustration over the lack of creative initiatives offered for young people.

These trends reflect the state of Mississippi at large. Recent reports generated by South Arts, a non-profit regional arts organization, revealed that between 2012-2013, Mississippi ranked as one of the lowest states in the region in regards to the number of art classes provided in public schools (see Figure 7). In Phase 1 of the South Arts research on the current state of arts education in Southern public schools, Mississippi ranked as one of the lowest in both regional and national comparisons (South Arts 2014).

In response to existing gaps in art and the public education system, TCEC provides music lessons, visual art lessons and when available photography/video and poetry lessons for young people. While these classes do not alleviate the education challenges faced by young people in Tutwiler, they do offer alternatives to the traditional classroom setting where many of them seem to struggle.xviii

While it seemed as though we were engaging in a form of community activism by participating with the TCEC as art educators, the TCEC documentary project was simultaneously causing tension between Tutwiler residents and us. While the two of us filmed the day-to-day activities of the community center and interviewed residents inside and outside the community center walls, we met a number of young children who wanted to take part in our short documentary, some from our photography class and some from the neighborhood where we lived over the summer. As part of the standard documentary process, we needed the permission of the children’s parents to allow their participation. We distributed release forms and a handful of children did not return them. Feeling disappointed, because one of the most enthusiastic students did not have a release form signed, Kate and I decided to ask Sister Maureen and TCEC staff if they might interject and communicate with the child’s guardians. A staff member, who is familiar with the child’s family, explained to us that the student’s mother didn’t want Kate and I to film her child in the same manner as previous documentarians did in Tutwiler. We learned that the TCEC and residents of Tutwiler do not feel comfortable with outside visitors and cameras. A TCEC staff explained that a number of Tutwiler residents question visiting documentarians due to their experience with previous documentary projects like Lalee’s Kin.
Even though Kate and I did not set out to create a documentary in the same vein as *Lalee’s Kin*, the fact that we are two white women from the University of Mississippi with video cameras immediately created barriers between Tutwiler residents and us. Even though we intended to conduct community-based work with the TCEC and Tutwiler, our documentary approach undermined our efforts in working with the community. Instead, our approach isolated us from the community and disrupted our attempts at community collaboration. This forced me to ask, as a student documentarian volunteering for a community center, how the dominant form of documentary making in the Delta reproduces the very power structures community organizers hoped to dismantle?

As stated in Chapter 1, the tradition of outside documentarians visiting the Delta has left a negative imprint upon local residents. Most residents of the Delta (Tutwiler included) complain that documentarians (usually from outside the Mississippi Delta and white) fail to consult or collaborate with Delta communities during documentary production, thus misrepresenting the space entirely. After reassessing my own documentary work in Tutwiler and researching documentary trends in the Mississippi Delta, I began examining documentary work that aligned with my activist research intent and began thinking about how to democratize the documentary process so that residents in Tutwiler did not feel vulnerable to nor exploited by the documentary work that Kate and I hoped to do with the TCEC. Wanting to continue working with young people in Tutwiler using visual media I began assessing various theoretical frameworks that incorporated community activism critical pedagogy, activist research and documentary studies. In the next chapter, I lay out my methodological process in creating a teen documentary class at the TCEC as an effort to
challenge previous forms of Delta documentary work and collaborate with a underrepresented demographic in Tutwiler.
CHAPTER 3: FIELDWORK AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH METHODS

“The open-ended process of making original photographs or videos—as opposed to the repetitive-work or corporate-think that society ordinarily requires—gives each of us a chance to offer our unique expertise...In educational terms, it’s exciting to realize that this kind of exploration can lead young people to connect with what they care most passionately about.”

—Wendy Ewald (2011)

“Development projects often adhere to tested theories and methodologies, but participatory video is often brought into these initiatives without the necessary rigor in design and implementation. This is especially true as video cameras become more accessible and affordable in developing countries. The phrase ‘let’s give the communities cameras’ is uttered many times without people questioning how the action will truly provide long-term benefit to the community.”

—Tamara Plush (2012)

Following my search for theoretical frameworks that would address the various challenges I faced in my initial collaboration with Tutwiler and the TCEC, my cohort and I began developing a teen documentary video class curriculum and recruiting teen participants through the TCEC. After the close of the TCEC summer programs and the completion of our photography and poetry class, Kate and I initiated the teen documentary video class and worked with five teenagers over the course of 10 weeks during the fall of 2013. This chapter traces the beginning stages of the teen documentary video class and the various missteps that my cohort and I made throughout the gestation of the course. I will begin with excerpts from our summer fieldwork in Tutwiler to explain how it informed the
initiation of the teen documentary video class and contributed to our familiarity with teenagers living in Tutwiler. I will then describe our methods in recruiting teen participants, teaching the teen video course, and dealing with the various unexpected setbacks that emerged over the 10-week class. While I did not initially employ a participatory research framework while creating the teen documentary video class, the experiences that materialized throughout the class combined with retrospective research on participatory video methodologies situate this case study within a participatory research model. Thus, I will analyze my methodologies under a participatory research umbrella.

This chapter employs a self reflexive inquiry into the limitations that I, as an outsider to Tutwiler, and as a white, female academic carried into the teen documentary video class and how those limitations shaped my interactions with the TCEC staff, Tutwiler residents, and the teen participants in the video class. In doing so, I hope to bring credibility to my research and to the reportage of my community activism work in Tutwiler. In other words, I employ the necessary reflexivity that participatory research demands and “acknowledge the intricate relationship between researcher and researched” (Yang, Participatory Video and Reflexivity 2012, 100). In addition to assessing my positionality within the process, I consider the social factors covered in Chapters 1 and 2 (the presence of documentarians in Tutwiler, race relations, socio-economic conditions and the public education system) as they relate to the development of the teen video projects and my relationship to TCEC and Tutwiler.
DEVELOPING THE TEEN DOCUMENTARY VIDEO CLASS

Living in Tutwiler and working with the TCEC prior to teaching the teen video class created a foundation for the project and familiarized us with certain aspects of daily teen life in Tutwiler. While working with the TCEC and teaching the photography class with 9-12 year olds over the summer we met a number of teenagers who worked as teen employees for the TCEC summer youth program. We also came in contact with teenagers in other public arenas such as our neighborhood park and the local gas station. Living in town gave us perspective on the daily life of Tutwiler teens and helped us to assess the need for a teen documentary video class. During the summer we also attended TCEC teen nights to film footage for the TCEC fundraising documentary and observe teen interaction. In doing so, we interacted with teen night attendees and became familiar with a few Tutwiler teenagers. Young Tutwiler residents explained in conversation that TCEC’s teen night is one of the few regular, community events that teenagers can attend in Tutwiler.

On average, teen night draws in 20-30 young people every Tuesday and Thursday night, mostly male. For the most part they play basketball and other games in the TCEC but occasionally are required to watch videos that deal with health, drugs, pregnancy and education. After talking with a group of teenagers we realized the options for socializing as a young person in Tutwiler are limited as are opportunities for formal supplemental education classes. At times they are asked to participate in debates that deal with local issues or topics that the TCEC staff feels are relevant to teen life in Tutwiler. One evening the TCEC staff screened a dated (from the late 1980s), educational video on fitness. While the health video wasn’t of great interest to many of them, it was clear that they valued the amenities offered at the TCEC.
While the TCEC provides a healthy alternative for many young people in Tutwiler to socialize and exercise, the gender divide has yet to be remedied. Over the course of two months, only 2-3 teen night attendees were female out of the average 20-30 teenagers that participated. Of the few girls at teen night only one regularly joined the boys in basketball, the most popular activity at teen night. I inquired with two staff members about the lack of a female presence at teen night and both stated that the TCEC attempts to draw in young girls by creating activities that they believe cater to a female demographic. Some programs they listed included a manicure table in the TCEC activity room and hair braiding class. Genether Spurlock explained that the quilting program at one time attracted young girls and teenagers but is shrinking due to the lack of interest in quilt making from teenage females.

Creating programs of interest to the female teen population in Tutwiler seemed to be a challenge for the staff. While living in Tutwiler, Kate and I observed a number of young women, some teenagers, either pregnant or the mothers of multiple children. If not a mother, young women were expected to help with the care of younger siblings or extended relatives. These factors affected the number of teenaged girls that Kate and I interacted with prior to the development of the teen documentary video class and therefore limited our accessibility to a diverse teen population in Tutwiler. For this reason, our methodology in recruiting teen participants was not all-inclusive. Our dependency on TCEC’s teen night as a point of entry most likely excluded a general female teen population and thus undermined the idea that the teen documentary video class addressed representational issues in the Tutwiler teen community. Wendy Luttrell heeds caution in using terms like community empowerment and giving voice to the voiceless in youth participatory video
projects for this very reason. Even though participatory video programs might interact with a handful people from a particular demographic, social factors prohibit accessibility to the most marginalized groups within a community (Luttrell, Children Framing 2013). In the end, our scope of Tutwiler teen life was limited to that of young men.

After spending the summer living in Tutwiler, filming Tutwiler and the TCEC for fundraising materials, and teaching photography and poetry with the summer program, Kate and I began to develop our curriculum and goals for a potential teen documentary video class. We began asking a small handful of teens if a documentary class, where they might learn to use a video camera and make a short documentary, was something of interest to them. In casual conversation, all of the teenagers we spoke with expressed enthusiasm for the class. We proposed the idea to Sister Maureen who agreed to allow us to teach at the TCEC one night a week. She stressed, once again, that there is little to no emphasis for creative, visual medium based curriculum in the public school system and that she valued our presence as photography and video educators. Once we gained Sister Maureen’s approval we put together a short presentation on the goals of the teen documentary class to announce at a teen night in July of 2013. This presentation included a handout (see Figure 8) and a screening of two teen produced documentary shorts that we felt best exemplified the work Tutwiler teens might create in our upcoming class. The two videos came from online sources; one from Adobe Youth Voices (Adobe Youth Voices 2013) and the other from the Maysles Institute Youth Documentary outreach website (Maysles Institute 2013). Both Adobe Youth and the Maysles Institute outline mission statements that claim to empower and engage young people through the use of digital media and documentary making.
Prior to teaching the documentary class in Tutwiler my research on critical participatory research was only beginning and some of the choices I made in setting the course goals and initiating collaboration with the teens reflect my lack of theoretical knowledge. At the time I did not take note of the wording on Adobe Youth Voices' nor the Maysles Institute's website and overlooked the overly effusive tone they employ to describe the success of their teen based documentary projects. In addition, I often turned towards their curriculum guides in order to develop lesson plans for the Tutwiler teen documentary course despite their lack of critical academic analysis in the processes of their teen documentary programs. Had I been better informed in my efforts I might have been more analytical in selecting teen produced documentaries to screen during our presentation. Following the short screenings and a brief presentation on the documentary class goals, we distributed a sign-up sheet for potentially interested participants. Out of the 29 teens at the TCEC that night, 15 signed up, including two girls.
Documentary Production Class Fall 2013

What You Will Learn:

* Collaborate with a small group to plan, produce, and edit a short documentary film
* How to make a documentary film
* How to use a video camera
* How to edit video footage on computers
* How to conduct interviews with friends and members of the Tutwiler community

What You Will Accomplish:

* Show others how you see the world
* Develop your creative skills and take an active role in representations of your community
* Address local issues that you find important in order add your voice to the conversation
* Develop the skills and critical thinking needed to become leaders in your community
* Share your completed films with friends and family at screening events at TCEC and Ole Miss.

___ Interested    ___ Not Interested

Name___________________________  Age___
In August of 2013, Kate and I followed up with Sister Maureen to confirm the teen documentary video class schedule and present the documentary class goals for a second time at teen night. A small number of those who expressed interest in the first presentation were present and reaffirmed their desire to attend the class. In addition, Kate and I contacted a member of the Emmett Till Memorial Commission in Sumner, Mississippi and a Teach for America (TFA) teacher at West Tallahatchie high school to see if they might assist in finding teenagers outside of the TCEC to enroll. The TFA teacher invited us to present the teen documentary class to his students but the morning of our scheduled visit he called to notify us that the principal of West Tally denied our visitation. While the TFA teacher never made clear as to why the administration disapproved of our presentation, he did express frustration over the issue and apologized. Beyond reaching out to our contacts in Sumner and at the high school, Kate and I felt limited in our accessibility to teenagers in Tutwiler but accepted the circumstance and prepared for the first teen video class day.

Sister Maureen, Kate and I decided that the video course would run for 10 weeks starting on September 25th and ending on December 4th to structure the course around the teens’ school semester and our graduate class schedule. Given that the idea for and development of the class began in late July our time was limited for drawing up a strong curriculum and preparing for the course. Our fall graduate courses began in late August, which meant Kate and I had just three weeks between the end of the summer TCEC program and the beginning of our graduate course work to develop a documentary video course syllabus for our future students. As we drafted the syllabus we included a list of the necessary video equipment and editing software to meet the course goals. The type of camera and editing software will shape how the class is executed, how the documentary
projects materialize, and the level of accessibility to documentary making based on technological skill. It also called into question the practicality of the equipment and the feasibility of traveling with it as needed by the class schedule. Recording equipment and how it is selected are not divorced from the power hierarchies that collaborative and participatory video projects claim to address. In *Doing Visual Ethnography* Sarah Pink writes,

> Individuals constantly resituate themselves and construct their self-identities in relation to not only other individuals but also to material objects and cultural discourses. The visual technologies that ethnographers use, like the images they produce and view, will be invested with meanings, inspire responses and are likely to become a topic of conversation. (Pink 2001, 35)

Acquiring equipment for participatory video work is an important step in the methodological process to ensure goals are met as outlined by both the facilitators and the participants. As Kate and I built our class program our equipment options were subject to costs and availability of devices offered by the Southern Studies documentary program. We had no funding for the project, which limited our access to equipment. We considered outside funding to purchase cameras and editing software but due to time restrictions did not apply for grants. Our documentary advisor, Dr. Andy Harper, supported the project and offered two handheld Panasonic HVX cameras along with headphones and tripods from the University of Mississippi’s South Doc’s media supply. Unfortunately, we did not acquire editing software because of editing program costs. This meant that if the student projects needed editing, Kate and I would have to do this part alone. In *Handbook of Participatory Video*, Monica Mak argues that if the participatory video project strives for democratization at every step of the production process then teaching and including participants in the
editing stage is key and will provide “participatory video makers access to their creative potential as visual editors” (Mak 2012, 197). By failing to acquire editing software for the TCEC teen video class we denied our participants the opportunity to learn video editing skills and undermined their authority in choosing how and what to edit in their raw footage. In addition to finding equipment, Kate and I drafted the course syllabus and planned for the first two weeks of the class (see Figure 9). To do so, we turned to a variety of texts that covered visual mediums in critical pedagogy and documentary course guides produced by the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke (Belle 2010; Beyerbach and Davis 2011; Ewald, 2011; Kalow 2011). We divided the 10-week course into three components; one, media literacy, two, a guide to producing a documentary video, and three developing and executing an exhibit of final class projects. Our curriculum planning incorporated critical pedagogy frameworks based in Paul Freire’s concept that “education [is] a central terrain where power and politics operate out of the lived culture of individuals and groups situated in asymmetrical social and political positions” (Mohanty 1994, 147) and our decisions in designing the overarching class goals were informed by such theory. We recognized that the age, racial, gender, and class differences between our students and ourselves inevitably shaped the interactions we might have in the classroom and ultimately determine the level of comfort and feeling of authorship the students (and us as well) experienced during the course. With this in mind the syllabus emphasized reciprocity between the students and us to ensure full collaboration throughout the course. But in practice a number of challenges emerged which undermined our critical theoretical approach and led to a lack of participation from our students. Had our syllabus and curriculum planning involved participatory research methodologies we might have been
more successful in meeting our course goals and assisting the students in creating a final video project.

As September 25th neared, Kate and I reminded Sister Maureen to contact the interested teenagers and notify them of the class start date. Despite our efforts, the first scheduled class day turned into a no show. While there might have been a number of reasons for absence of students, we believed that our limited access to the teens caused miscommunication and confusion over the time and location of the documentary video course. We no longer lived in Tutwiler and our interaction with the teens decreased significantly once we moved back to Oxford to begin our fall graduate courses. The scheduled class time was Wednesdays from 4:30-6:30pm, in between TCEC’s Tuesday and Thursday teen nights. We depended on Sister Maureen and other staff members to contact potential students the Tuesday prior to the video class in order to draw in participants. This mean that if a potentially interested teen did not attend teen-night prior to the class date he or she was not aware of the following documentary class date. On September 25th, after waiting until 6:30pm in the TCEC computer lab, Kate and I left the community center asking ourselves how we might better attract the 15 teenagers from the summer that showed interest in the documentary program.
Through Our Eyes: Tutwiler Teen Documentary Project
Teachers: Kate Hudson, 919-260-5612 / Paige Prather, 512-736-7989
September 25, 2013 – December 18, 2013
Wednesday, 4:30-6:30

Overview
Documentary has been defined as "the creative interpretation of actuality." Documentaries are creative representations of actual people, places and events.

As you work to create your own documentary, you will develop your creative skills and take an active role in the representation of your community by showing others how you see the world. You may wish to address local issues that you find important, highlight a member of your community that you value, or turn the camera on yourself. No matter what you choose to document, this is an opportunity for you to share your unique point of view and give others the valuable opportunity to hear what you have to say.

In this class, we will watch documentaries made by others and learn how to make our own while keeping the following questions in mind:

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using documentary to tell our stories?
2. How do our own personal opinions, experiences, and perspectives add to or possibly take away from our own documentary work?
3. Who tells the stories within our various communities (school, home, state, country) and who decides what stories should be told?
4. How can documentaries be used as a tool for community building and advocacy?

*How to make a short documentary film: How to use a video camera, editing software, and conduct interviews with friends and members of the Tutwiler community.

*Collaborate with a small group to plan, produce, and edit your documentary: keep in mind that you will collaborate not only with each other, but with those that you document and the environment in which you choose to work.

*How to look carefully: Critically examine various documentary films in order to identify and understand the motivations for different creative choices and generate your own ideas for what might work better.

At the end of this course, you will have the opportunity to share your creative work with friends and family at public screening events at TCEC and Ole Miss.

Expectations
1. We recognize that as teachers we don’t know everything that our students know. As teachers, we value your opinions, ideas, and creative choices.
2. With this in mind, we look forward to your contributions to the class during discussions and through your own creative projects.
3. This class is a safe environment where students are encouraged to speak their minds. We invite you to engage in discussion honestly, even if it means being critical. However, criticism should be constructive and voiced with respect to one another.

Figure 9: Documentary class syllabus created by Paige Prather and Kate Hudson, 2013.
The following Wednesday, October 2nd, five students arrived, 3 boys and 2 girls, and the class met 8 times over the semester. The attendance of the students varied each week due to after school obligations and personal factors. The two female participants attended less frequently overall. Three of the five students attended band practice for part of the semester. One of the five students played basketball for the high school and at times the two female students babysat relatives in the evenings. The West Tallahatchie school district altered its weekly schedule at whim and some weeks the students didn’t attend documentary class because the high school canceled class for half the day. While the cancelation of class did not necessarily prohibit them from attending documentary video class at TCEC it seemed as those any slight shift in their daily schedule affected the attendance rate of the class. The organization and overarching goals of the class depended on consistent attendance and after the third week my cohort and I found ourselves overwhelmed by the lack of structure. The original formatting of the class assumed a progression in which the students would produce a short video piece by the final week. The first few weeks covered media literacy of documentaries screened at the beginning of class followed by introductory lessons in the elements to creating a short documentary video. The next two weeks introduced basic camera, tripod, and audio skills and how to conduct sit down interviews. During these two weeks the students organized into two groups and began brainstorming story ideas for their projects. Given that we were working with two cameras it was necessary for them to break into separate groups with two different documentary topics. The next five weeks the students were to begin interviewing informants for their particular story and gather relevant footage. Since the class occurred
one night a week for two hours, Kate and I created an equipment check out system so that the students had access to the equipment during operating hours at the TCEC.

The inconsistent attendance rate greatly hindered the productivity of the class as did the small amount of time we had with the students each week. By the Thanksgiving holiday the students did not have enough footage to edit a cohesive video piece. Although the students showed enthusiasm for the projects when they attended class, they never took advantage of using the equipment checkout system outside of class hours. The only filming that took place occurred Wednesday during class meetings, at teen-night in the TCEC building, and on a scheduled field trip to Sumner, Mississippi that Kate and I organized over Thanksgiving Break. The randomness of the video footage and the sound and visual quality of it rendered most of it unusable for a completed documentary project for viewing. As the reality began sinking in that the documentary projects were not going to materialize before the end of the semester Kate and I began making plans to return to the TCEC in the spring semester. This too came with its logistical roadblocks. One of the students unexpectedly moved to Texas to live with his mother and another moved seven miles away to Webb because his guardian in Tutwiler was diagnosed with cancer. The spring semester attendance proved even worse than the fall and the enthusiasm for the documentary program within the student group and the staff at the TCEC began to dwindle.

On reflection, a number of factors determined the success of the project including a general misunderstanding of the lives of our participants. Although this was the case, participatory documentary work is not irrelevant in participatory research as it holds the potential to engage young people in a creative, visual media project, something greatly lacking in the Mississippi Delta school system. In the next chapter I critically assess the
TCEC teen documentary video class through theoretical and methodological frameworks of various participatory video scholars.
CHAPTER 4: REFLECTION AND PARTICIPATORY VIDEO PROJECT FRAMEWORKS

In this chapter I will examine potential solutions to collaborative documentary projects with teenagers in Tutwiler by introducing participatory video making methodologies and various qualitative approaches to transformative practices in the field. This assessment will include a definition of participatory video as it applies to this thesis, the need for ethics training in community based documentary work (including ownership of media images following production), better examples of class structuring for participatory video projects, navigating dynamics between researcher/documentarian and the participants, an analysis of knowledge dissemination during the process of the participatory video production and interpretation of non-participation in participatory video projects. The assessment will argue that despite the mistakes made in the Tutwiler teen documentary video class, participatory video methodologies are a credible alternative to the traditional documentary projects in the Mississippi Delta, therefore Tutwiler.

Participatory video is a nebulous term utilized in and outside of academia to describe a process in which researchers or documentarians collaborate with individuals or communities to produce video projects which challenge traditional power hierarchies and question control of knowledge making. Participatory video projects, as mentioned in the previous chapter, take root in documentary movements of the 1960s and visual anthropology methods when shared authorship of an image and participant centered
projects began to flourish (Yang, Reflexivity, Participation, and Video 2012, 105). This type of approach has since gained popularity in movements that claim to empower marginalized communities through collaborative image production. Participatory video projects are sometimes defined as emancipatory processes where participants break free from dominant narratives and power structures through the image making process. By creating videos of their choice, marginalized individuals take ownership of representation and join conversations that restructure social imagination and ways of thinking about such people. Participatory video projects are sometimes measured by their effect in policy change and in gaining the attention of state institutions and government officials.

In *Handbook of Participatory Video* Chris High, Namita Singh, Lisa Petheram, and Gustav Nemes argue that the number of non-academic organizations that employ the term far outnumbers that of scholarly groups (High, et al. 2012, 35). That said, a number of contemporary scholars are now analyzing participatory video as a viable academic research methodology and tool for social change. In doing so, many criticize the mission statements of non-academic organizations that use collaborative video projects without applying a crucial lens to the process. This is now a common lens, consistent throughout emerging academic manifestations of participatory video work. Critical reflexivity is a crucial element to conscious and credible participatory video projects, as agreed by contemporary social scientists and participatory project educators (Yang, Reflexivity, Participation, and Video 2012). Non-academic participatory video initiatives fail to include thorough self-reflection from both the researcher and researched, therefore ignoring the various factors which shape the participatory video making process. In doing so they fail to address how participatory practices might perpetuate problematic power dynamics.
between the researcher and the participants. Today, participatory video researchers assess and criticize such patterns in community based video work in order to produce credible and sustainable video based projects that address these gaps.

Despite the general understanding of participatory video as used by scholars today, pinpointing a clear example of participatory video making is difficult. As stated in the introduction to *Handbook of Participatory Video* the methodologies for participatory video making have existed in documentary work since at least the 1960s with the emergence of the National Film Board of Canada’s Challenge for Change program. Parallel to the collaborative documentary projects emerging in the 1960s were visual anthropological methods developing around the same time (High, et al. 2012, 42). Since then, collaborative documentary work has been a popular form of social activism that casts its net wide. A number of disciplines and professions, not just documentary studies and anthropology, adopt participatory image making as a research tool or means for community activism. The lack of cohesion in understanding participatory video means critically analyzing it can be challenging but also that it is an adaptable research tool that can benefit a number of projects. As said by High, Singh, Petheram, and Names,

> Participatory video practice arises from a history of exuberant innovation, of individuals, organizations, and communities learning their way to novel applications of filmmaking to social issues and, in doing so, tuning their strategies to meet a myriad of local challenges. The resulting practices and histories of engagement are so varied that trying to reify them into a single orthodoxy risks obscuring the important lessons in their development. The freedom to innovate and develop one’s own ideas about participatory video is an important part of the tradition. (High, et al. 2012, 45)

Taking these words into consideration it is clear that the Tutwiler teen documentary video project cannot be analyzed using one prescribed definition of participatory video
work. Instead the project will be assessed by borrowing the critical lens of multiple examples of participatory work and research that appear throughout the work of Sarah Pink, Wendy Luttrell, and Claudia Mitchell. Of course, every research project is different and the methods and practices I suggest here are specific to the experiences that emerged during my fieldwork in Tutwiler.

**ETHICS OF PARTICIPATORY VIDEO PROJECTS**

Participatory video projects often claim to challenge power hierarchies and deconstruct traditional researcher/participant dynamics. Without analyzing the ethical procedures of a video project and the politics of representation that emerge once the video projects are complete, a participatory video program is just as problematic as less collaborative movie making processes. In addition, by ignoring ethical challenges in documentary work and visual research while collaborating with communities, the researchers perpetuate power hierarchies, which only work to silence marginalized groups or even put some individuals at harm. As Mitchell states in *Doing Visual Research*, the number of ethical issues that arise out of visual work and research is so high that visual ethics is now a specialist area (Mitchell 2011, 15). I do not attempt to cover all ethical issues that emerge from doing visual work with a community but instead note a few missteps made by my cohort and I. These challenges included how my cohort and I communicated consent forms and class goals with our participants, the level of engaged reflexivity of the participants during video shooting and editing, guiding students in following ethical documentary standards, and dealing with male/female interaction during class time as adult educators. Our ethical approach to each issue is inherently linked to
power relations between our participants and us and to our theoretical and methodological frameworks (Pink 2001, 37).

While we provided written class goals via the syllabus (see Figure 9) we failed to communicate with the participants about a detailed expectation of the project outcome, including authorship of the finished product. In order to conduct ethically minded visual research that utilizes participatory methodologies, creating a common ground with participants, including the wording of consent forms and the use of the media following the end of the project is necessary. This includes clarity in ownership of the images and how the videos will benefit the participants. Future projects will need to address the use of such projects for a Master’s thesis and how the researcher’s gain will be balanced with an advantage for the participants in order to avoid extractive work. Future community based documentary projects will benefit from collaborative conversations at the beginning so that everyone involved understands the risks and benefits of the program.

Reflexivity on part of the researcher and the participants is key to ensuring that the project is in fact participatory and that researchers avoid maintaining authorship of the project and images. This is also particularly important when working with young people who are often not allowed to make decisions in regards to representation and ownership. In general, critical qualitative researchers and documentarians do employ reflexive analysis of their projects but quite often participatory video programs fail to include the reflexive critique of the participants as well. Participatory video scholar Kyung-Hwa Yang writes in *Handbook of Participatory Video*,

Although, reflexivity has been addressed from participants’ perspectives as times, the predominant discourse on reflexivity is researcher-centered. This is at odds with the fact, as implied in numerous chapters in this book, that participatory video is driven by the idea of participants’ use of reflexivity to investigate their own
experiences while making videos related to their lives. To address reflexivity in participatory video, therefore, it is necessary to shift the focus of the discourse on reflexivity from researchers to participants. (100)

While Kate and I reflected upon and criticized our own subjectivism throughout the project we often failed to include the feedback of our participants during the TCEC teen program. In doing so, the level of shared authorship of the project as a whole, and therefore the level of self-representation and control of that representation by our participants, was low. Participatory video projects with young people will benefit from a consistent reflexive conversation with participants, whether recorded or written.

A third ethical challenge, which emerged from working with the teens in Tutwiler, was the issue of documentary topics and how to tell a sensitive story without putting an individual in harm. While choosing ideas for their two group projects, some of the teen participants wanted to produce a short documentary on teen bullying at their high school. This topic, while potentially transformative for the participants and their informants for the bullying documentary, was laden with ethical roadblocks. How did the teen participants want to represent the victims of bullying and the possible perpetrators of school violence? What goals did they have for their documentary and what outcomes did they hope to achieve? While the two students stated that they hoped to fix school bullying by making a documentary about it, their ideas for shooting the video didn't address the potential risks for those being filmed. What might happen to the victim of bullying if he or she is filmed in the video and the video is screened at the TCEC, at school, or online? What about for the accused bully? What is the best way to represent these individuals? This moment called into question our role as facilitators and our obligation as adult educators to lead the teen participants towards other, less contested, documentary topics. While we felt the need to
support our teen participants’ ideas, and interfere as little as possible in the production of their documentaries, we saw potentially damaging interactions emerging from this project. Given the little time we had to begin and finish the documentary projects and the inconsistency of our students’ attendance, Kate and I needed to transcend basic participatory guidelines in order to avoid creating a video project that might harm other young people.

The fourth major ethical challenge that arose during the teen documentary class came from understanding when and how to interfere if participants’ behaviors created uncomfortable or unsafe environments for one another. While many participatory video project guidelines discuss the ethics of informed consent and ownership of media, participatory research scholars largely fail to include guidelines on handling inappropriate behaviors during the production of video projects. Because our project involved young adults, understanding how to navigate our roles as both collaborators with Tutwiler teens and as adult educators with responsibilities to maintain a safe classroom environment, became a consistent point of tension. Over the course of the class, the three young men often came into physical contact with one of the female participants. While the young women did not appear to be bothered by such interaction, Kate and I decided to interrupt by telling the young men, separately, to keep their hands to themselves and to respect each other by not teasing or flirting with the other students. Before engaging in a collaborative project, especially with minors, documentarians and researchers must be prepared for such ethical challenges and realize when and how to deal with them.

One of the biggest downfalls of the TCEC teen documentary project was class structuring. Prior to the class, Kate and I began working with the TCEC as documentarians
and volunteer photography and poetry teachers with elementary aged children. These experiences informed the construction of the teen class held that following fall. Taking the lessons adopted from Wendy Ewald’s “Literacy through Photography” curriculum initiated at the TCEC by Tom Rankin and Dan Sherman in 1997 and used as our summer photography/poetry class guide, Kate and I intermixed a media literacy pedagogy with a loosely based collaborative documentary curriculum based on various documentary educators including the Center for Documentary Studies’ online text *Visual Storytelling: The Digital Video Documentary* by Nancy Kalow (Kalow 2011). Given that the class met once a week in a two-hour time block, trying to combine both media literacy and documentary video production skills into one curriculum caused many roadblocks. In doing so, Kate and I undermined the participatory approach to the class by commandeering most of the class time with our media literacy lectures and lessons on how to operate a camera and conduct interviews.

Future work with teenagers and video projects might benefit from avoiding heavy handed information at the start of the course and instead beginning with immediate brainstorming on community stories that the teen participants are interested in telling. As mentioned above, outlining course goals and articulating a clear informed consent is, of course, imperative to the beginning of the project and will preface any sort of community conversation over what topics to film. Following the brainstorming session, basic technological instruction can prepare the participants to gather footage.

Debates over whether or not to instruct participants in camera shots, interviewing tips, and other aesthetic guidelines exist between varying participatory video scholars. While some emphasize artistic elements in participatory video projects, some researchers
and scholars push for a hands-off approach in which participants decide for themselves what is considered to be a “good” video and visually pleasing. The argument is hard to make considering that each project is different. If there is little time for a project and consistent attendance of participants is hard to gauge, then a rudimentary lesson on the technology might be best. In the case of the TCEC teen documentary video class, my cohort and I failed to manage our time and emphasized camera skill and a visual professionalism that our students did not have time to accomplish. Ultimately, the semester ended with a medley of footage that loosely adopted our technological and stylistic instruction with their creative expression. In this sense, the project turned into two-way pedagogical process, where we learned about how the students defined documentary filmmaking without our influence. How a participatory video project is structured and how the researcher instructs the making of the video pieces determines the final outcome of the project. Considering time and space, researchers need to organize the video projects so that the necessary lessons are conveyed and the videos are produced and edited in the most collaborative way possible. This will take preparation and also malleability throughout the project so that necessary adjustments are made as the project develops. Mitchell suggests structuring a class as follows:

1. Introduction to filmmaking
2. Storyboarding ideas
3. Teaching technological skill of equipment
4. Shooting footage
5. Group viewing of the footage at the end of the class

(Mitchell 2011, 74)
In this case, participants do not edit their footage, an approach that is fitting when working with limited access to editing software and under timeframes that do not allow for such a process. Editing in a collaborative documentary project is a point of contention with some scholars because more often than not, the work is relegated to one individual, undermining the shared authorship approach to the project. But in projects where an aesthetically pleasing piece is the goal, then editing must be included in the original class structuring. The overly ambitious class structuring of the TCEC teen documentary course left no time for editing and in the end the teenagers did not have final video pieces to exhibit for the TCEC, Tutwiler residents and the faculty and student body at the CSSC.

Deciding early on in the project if editing is part of the participatory video lesson plan will structure how the video projects are shot and interpreted by both researcher and participant.

Bound to the debate over editing or not editing footage in participatory video projects is the argument of whether the end product of the program is more or less important as the knowledge created and shared during the process of the documentary project. Scholars vacillate between the two approaches and I attempt to address the lacuna between both by interweaving the TCEC teen documentary class into the theoretical framework. A collaborative decision between the researcher and the participants to create an edited product early on in the project will determine the class structure. This approach emphasizes the significance of viewing, screening and distributing a final video piece for multiple audiences to watch and interpret. This process involves politics of representation in audience interpretation and the effect of the video pieces in challenging dominant narratives of the participant group. By screening the videos within the community or
outside the community, the knowledge conveyed in the documentary project travels beyond the classroom setting. This potentially affects the researcher’s, participants’, and audiences’ social imagination and can shift dialogues about a particular group or community issue.

With the TCEC teen documentary class, the initial hoped for outcome was either one or two final documentary videos to be screened at the community center, included in a Master’s thesis as a visual component, and possibly used online for the Southern Studies’ South Docs website. In addition to the screenings, Kate and I wanted to provide Tutwiler teenagers with an opportunity to create visual mediums, something greatly lacking in the public school system in West Tallahatchie. The project had potential to create video pieces that challenged the dominant narrative about teenagers living in Tutwiler and point to issues that they themselves found most pertinent. Unfortunately, due to factors stated above, a final product never materialized. Despite this, the TCEC teen class exemplified the importance of the process and the potential for knowledge dissemination in the production stage.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATORY VIDEO PROJECTS**

I introduced this thesis by stating that what teenagers produce in videos or what they say in class is not a “see through” moment that easily translates into their social lives and inner selves. Wendy Luttrell cautions against effusive participatory methodologies that claim to give voice to young people through photography and video projects because of the complexities that inform teen media production. She highlights a number of factors that undermine the empowerment narrative. In *Handbook* Luttrell, Restler, and Fontaine urge
readers to remember that teenage identity and how an individual teen portrays that identity through a camera or in a classroom is wrapped up in a complex network of cultural references. They argue that video performances are “riddled with an array of expectations based on culture, class, race, gender, and sexuality; of values; and of ideologies about who we think we should be in the eyes of multiple addresses” (Luttrell, Restler and Fontaine, 2012 173). I apply this lens to my understanding of how the teens in the documentary class interacted with Kate and myself, how they shot footage and performed in front of and behind the camera, and how we as educators and graduate students conducting fieldwork, interpreted the things said in the classroom and the video footage produced.

Firstly, while the TCEC teen class did not complete video pieces to share with each other and an outside audience, the dialogue and ideas that emerged during class time affirmed the potential for participatory practices in community building programs and understanding the needs and concerns of a particular group of people. Both the mundane conversations and the nuanced class discussions revealed portions of the teen participants’ lives that I might not otherwise know or they might not know about each other. In addition, how the teen participants chose their documentary topics and executed their interview approach and camera style contributed to a better understanding of their life experiences. Some of the insights shed during the project include: daily experiences in the public school setting, dating life, family structures, expectations after high school graduation, the role of the internet and online social networking in their lives, tastes in music, movies, books, and clothing, challenges with school assignments, views on adults/authority, gender roles, economic statuses, understanding of civil rights in Mississippi, and interpretations of race and racism.
As mentioned earlier, the class offered many two way pedagogical moments that taught the researchers not only how to (or how not to) run a participatory video program but also about teen life in Tutwiler. One such example was the style in which the students interviewed informants for their video documentary project on the death of Emmett Till. While we gave them basic instruction on interviewing for documentaries and how to set up the HVX cameras on tripods, we left them free to interview and shoot footage as they pleased. Using our camera checkout system, four of the five students filmed interviews during a TCEC teen night. They set up the camera in the large art room of the TCEC building and interviewed a TCEC staff member, a Teach for America teacher, and a teen employee of the community center about their understanding of Emmett Till, civil rights history in Mississippi, and the connection between Till and Trayvon Martin. The students placed the camera on the tripod and positioned it in front of two chairs like a television interview session where the interviewer and interviewee are both visible. One female and one male student interviewed the three informants. Prior to the interview they introduced themselves and then the informant. The teen students then asked their informants to relay the story of Emmett Till’s death and trial, their opinion on racism in the South, and if Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin’s murder trials were connected. Each interview lasted no longer than three minutes.

It is easy to dismiss the subtle characteristics of the footage that the teens shot on that teen-night and even diminish its value because of the video quality. But if read closer each decision they made in setting up the camera, whom to interview, how to interview and their interpretation of the footage after it was shot all hold the potential to reveal aspects of their aesthetic preferences and modes of self-representation in the video project.
In *Handbook* Verena Thomas and Kate Britton write that “[it] is the role of aesthetics in self-representation and identity...that offer new means of understanding participatory video processes” (Thomas and Britton 2012, 209). The way in which they chose to stylize the interview set, like a television news channel, suggests that the students regarded the Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin parallels as a serious topic.

In footage shot around the TCEC interviewing their peers, the teen participants adopted an informal style of dialogue compared to the style used in the interviews with adult participants. During these shoots they handheld the cameras and casually walked the community center building teasing their friends and asking them questions while giggling. For example two of the male participants flirted with girls on camera and called them “baby.” The teen night Till interviews, in contrast, took a more professional tone, suggesting that the teen participants understood this subject to be one of importance. Their way of projecting an image of themselves changed greatly from the casual peer interviews at the community center to the more formalized Till interviews with adults. Both instances were shot without our guidance and are examples of their own aesthetic preference in camera shots and filmed dialogue. The varying styles of the students call into question how they alter their on camera presence when they imagine different audiences viewing the footage, one with peers and one with adults.

Beyond aesthetic choices and ways of performing on film, discussions in class revealed teen opinions on race, gender, family life, school, bullying, economic mobility, online experiences, cultural interests, and career goals. Despite our inability to create a full-length video, the class became a space for the teens to interact with one another and debate life issues with another. The documentary video project acted as a platform for class
debates between the teenagers, and Kate and me moderated their talks and recorded them with audio equipment. These discussions alone taught Kate and I about the nuanced lives of the teen participants and some of the economic challenges they face, living in the Mississippi Delta. Some of the more heated debates arose during discussions over Emmett Till and changes in race relations in the South since the Civil Rights movement. One male student argued that the Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin murder trials had nothing to do with one another and that contemporary racism is not an issue in Tutwiler, nor society at large. This opened up the class discussion to feelings on race, age, gender, and sexuality. One of the female students stated that young, African-American men today are victims of white violence and police due to stereotypes rooted in the Jim Crow South. She made direct connections based on the age and race of Till and Martin and included examples of police prejudice in Tutwiler. After back and forth debates on the issue, the rest of the class convinced the male student that the social conditions in which Emmett Till lived continue to inform the life experiences of young black teens. The particular socio-economic histories that surround these young students inform their understanding of contemporary institutional racism as seen in their interpretation of the Trayvon Martin trial.

The participatory video class offered an opportunity for the students to talk about their local history, race, gender, age, civil rights in the South and contemporary racial dynamics and to creatively portray their understanding of those issues in storyboards and video projects. In the process, they exchanged with one another and with us, the facilitators, how they felt and thought about racial and gender oppression in the South. In addition we, as educators, contributed to the discussion and talked about our understanding of the Emmett Till trial and its connection to contemporary racial politics.
While interviewing their adult participants, the teens learned of varying ideas and opinions on the Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin stories and also shared with their informants their own ideas. This exemplifies how participatory video projects reflect the particular socio-economic histories in Tutwiler and provide a platform for community members to express their opinions on contemporary manifestations of those stories in their day-to-day lives. An exchange of knowledge across many topics occurred each week.

The participatory element of the class contributed to the classroom environment and encouraged the students to speak openly about their ideas. While I believe that this created a safe space and collaborative dialogue amongst the students and us, the facilitators, I do realize that how they chose to communicate in class and on camera was affected by our presence and whomever they believed might see the videos. This aspect of the class must always be called into question before any claims about understanding their opinion and lives are made. The power dynamics between the students and us shaped their responses and may not truly reflect how they think or feel about the world around them. In some moments it did seem that the students responded to specific questions in ways they thought Kate and I wanted to hear, rather than offering their true opinion. These moments are integral to the participatory video process and inform community-based work maybe more so than a finished documentary project. How young people communicate their opinions and ideas in a video class speak to their inner lives and social worlds, which can help adults and educators pay better attention to them. Participatory video is not a single solution to some of the challenges faced by Tutwiler teenagers but can be part of a number of transformative practices that help to open up and challenge the narrative surrounding
African American teen life in the rural South, particularly the Mississippi Delta and by association Tutwiler.

**NON-PARTICIPATION**

The inconsistent attendance of the Tutwiler teenagers reveals just as much about their daily lives as does the conversations held in class, the topics of their documentary projects, how they communicate with their peers and adults, and the stylistic decisions they made while shooting interviews and footage. In *Handbook* E-J Milne states that “ignoring or dismissing those who fail to take part serves both to silence and to render absent potentially significant elements of a project” and argues that “nonparticipating in a project might not be because of generic apathy but, rather, may be an active form of participation—(non)participation.” (Milne, Saying "No" 2012, 258).

Milne turns to a case study where she worked with residents living in two separate public housing estates in Keighley, U.K. using participatory video methods to address masculinity and anti-social behaviors amongst young men living in the two governmental homes. Due to the residents’ previous experiences with funded documentary projects on the estate grounds, their knowledge of media representations of their home life caused them to protest the participatory video project with Milne and her research team. By not contributing to the filming of their private lives, the residents prevented further media manipulation of their community. Even though they were to share authorship of the filming and editing processes, the residents expressed distrust of the researchers and the funders of the program, realizing that, ultimately, they would lose control of the videos once the project completed. From this experience Milne urges researchers, community activists, and
documentarians to consider how an individual or group’s non-participation speaks to greater social challenges in dealing with power and representation in media productions and the roadblocks video projects may create in doing community based research and activism. Milne writes that too often researchers do not see non-participation as agentic, when it is and can potentially teach us about the problematic nature of participatory video work.

She writes that reasearchers often believe that

[if] people do no participate it is because they are feckless or lazy; their lives are too chaotic; they lack the confidence or skills to take part; they are so disempowered that they cannot even see that they should participate; there is something wrong with the facilitator or her or his recruitment strategy; the approach the team has taken is in some way flawed; or the researchers have not built relationships of trust among the potential participants...these assumptions are inherently problematic, not least because they deny participants and (non)participants their reality, which is that they are agentic selves who can make informed, intelligent, and sometimes political decisions to participate or (not)participate based upon their own needs and agendas. (Milne, Saying "No" 2012, 260)

Within this framework, the inconsistent attendance of the teen participants speaks to greater cultural trends in Tutwiler directly connected to the history of documentary work in the Delta and the relationship that residents have with tranistory outside researchers. Considering that our students are relatives of social actors who appeared in LaLee's Kin or at least know an individual who pariticpated in the film, it isn't too far a stretch to say that they are aware of the exploitative representations it propagates. While the teens gave reasons for not coming to class such as after school band practice, babysitting (only the female students), and logistical challenges in finding rides to the community center, there is more going on here that is worth paying attention to.
Kate and I participated in the lineage of community organizers, researchers, volunteers, and documentarians who visit Tutwiler every year with short term project goals that benefit themselves and do not necessarily empower nor transform the community of Tutwiler for the better. The students’ understanding of this tradition most likely shaped their opinions Kate and me and our motivations in teaching the class. To divorce the teen students from this dialogue is to discredit their own knowledge and participation in their community and community history. How they feel about outside researchers coming from the University of Mississippi with video cameras most definitely informs how they felt about the teen documentary class. Kate and I worked in the TCEC and how the community center is viewed by residents is something Kate and I will never fully know. Of course, every interaction we had with residents told us that the TCEC is a cherished community space and that the work of the Catholic nuns is instrumental in supporting the town of Tutwiler but we could have heard different opinions about the space if we did not work directly with Sister Maureen. That said, the teens relationship to the TCEC might better explain why participation in the documentary class was low.

Reflection of structural issues which might bar teens from participation can reveal the problematic nature of participatory video projects when they claim to empower marginalized groups and give voice to an entire community. It also dramatizes the need for future community based, documentary projects that wish to promote social change and community advocacy to pay attention to the processes of community filmmaking. The supposed failures of such projects can tell us more about the community and the relationship between the facilitator and the participants than the final, edited visual piece. This chapter shows that participatory video frameworks offer a critical lens in which to
analyze community based documentary work and extract viable knowledge from each stage of collaborative projects. For graduate work which focuses on community building and social change, participatory video theories on reflexivity, politics of representation, and the relationship between the facilitator and the participants provide useful guides in producing credible documentary and qualitative research material.
CONCLUSION

By bringing together the history of documentary making in the South, the Mississippi Delta and Tutwiler, the socio-economic history and contemporary social conditions of Tutwiler, and the relationship the residents hold with outside documentarians and researchers, I have assessed the need for participatory video projects in community based documentary projects like the one I conducted with the TCEC teen documentary video class in the fall of 2013. Reviewing the tradition of documentary photography and filmmaking in the Mississippi Delta highlights the tendency for outsiders to represent the space and its people in exploitative ways that perpetuate negative stereotypes. In addition, documentary work in the Delta reinforces power hierarchies where the subjects of the film fall victim to the needs and concerns of the documentarian. Mississippi Delta residents, therefore Tutwiler residents, criticize documentarians that attempt to create socially minded films, mainly because this work does little to challenge issues of representation and ownership of images. Adding to this contention is the fact that documentary work does little for social mobility in economically depressed communities. Given the historical context of documentary making in the Mississippi Delta, the presence of my cohort and I in Tutwiler created boundaries with certain members of the community while we attempted to conduct collaborative community based work with the TCEC. Using cameras during our fieldwork reminded residents of the documentary film LaLee’s Kin, a
movie that Tutwiler residents claim is a misrepresentation of Tutwiler and its people. Its legacy affected our relationship with community members and caused us to reflect upon our documentary methodologies while working in Tutwiler.

After working with elementary aged children at the Tutwiler Community Education Center, my cohort and I noticed challenges that the children faced with basic reading and writing skills. After conducting research on the education system in the Mississippi Delta and by having conversations with Tutwiler residents, we recognized and understood some of the challenges Tutwiler youth experience in the public education system. Tutwiler public schools lack the necessary funding to keep a decent education program running and consistently fall in the lowest rank for student performance nationwide. Given this context, school administrators commonly push aside art programs so that more urgent and necessary matters come first. This said, Tutwiler teachers are not regularly providing visual/creative based lesson plans. In response, Kate and I created a collaborative documentary project designed to address both the representational issues of traditional documentary making the Mississippi Delta and the need for more creative based courses for Tutwiler’s young people. This led to the development of the Tutwiler teen documentary video program that we taught in the fall of 2013.

Despite our efforts to create a collaborative documentary program, we realized that the process of participatory work as graduate students is complicated and nuanced and very often does little to traditional researcher/participants dynamics. These challenges, while prohibiting a final video piece from being produced, became opportunities for my cohort and I to reflexively analyze the potential of documentary and participatory video methodologies to empower and transform a community. By utilizing reflexive
methodologies as argued by social scientists and documentarians such as Wendy Luttrell and Jay Ruby, I elucidated the limitations of participatory video work as a tool for social change. I used examples from my experience teaching in Tutwiler to support the argument that participatory video projects need critical analysis and reflexive assessments on both the researcher and participant’s parts, in order to be credible work that teaches us about power relationships in documentary and participatory research. Too often participatory video work is celebrated as a means for empowerment and community engagement without looking at the various ways in which this kind of practice might perpetuate the very issues it claims to dismantle. This type of work is particularly common in the Mississippi Delta and little critical analysis, like the one I have provided here, is given to the tensions that inevitably emerge.

By adopting participatory video frameworks as written by such scholars as Sarah Pink, Claudia Mitchell, and Wendy Luttrell, I assessed the missteps of the TCEC teen documentary video class. I questioned the validity of such work in spurring community change in spaces like Tutwiler. This work needs meticulous analysis and transparency on part of the researcher and participant (if he/she is willing) to understand its potential for social change. As my fieldwork exemplified, participatory video projects may further marginalization of vulnerable groups due to priorities set by facilitators, control of the production and editing by program facilitators, participating in documentary traditions that harm a region and its people, hosting the program in spaces where the most marginalized in a community may not attend, misinterpreting dialogue and camera performance of participants, and emphasizing an end video piece over the process of the class itself. On the contrary participatory video projects hold the potential to contribute to
transformative practices and work towards social change. It is not the only valid method for credible collaborative community work but is a viable option if done with a critical lens. This work can be an opportunity for paying attention to young people in Tutwiler and other spaces of marginalization if done so responsibly and reflexively.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


INTRODUCTION


ii. In Handbook of Participatory Video, Bronwen Low et al. offer critical analysis of participatory video and its potential to alter existing power hierarchies. They argue that participatory video does not necessarily engage participants in a “social or political transformation” and recast power hierarchies at a local level, especially when working with youth. The authors reassess the meaning of participation in participatory research settings and challenge the idea that participation equates to agency, empowerment and transformation (Low et al., 2012).

iii. They are committed to education and social justice and operate various sectors throughout the United States including the Tutwiler Health Clinic run by Sister Anne Brooks and the TCEC, run by Sister Maureen (Delaney 2013-April).

iv. A number of experiences in Tutwiler highlighted the challenges that many young people in Tutwiler face in the public education system. During the photography class, the majority of the elementary aged students struggled with basic writing skills. This also emerged in the teen video class the following fall. In conversations with Sister Maureen and the TCEC staff we learned that the West Tallahatchie school district does not provide a regular arts based curriculum and the students are rarely given a creative, visual arts assignment. These casual conversations and observations are undergirded by recent reports on art in public schools in the South, where Mississippi falls behind both nationally and regionally in its number of schools that offer an art curriculum (South Arts 2014).

CHAPTER 1

vi. In a conversation during the summer of 2013, Sister Maureen explained that Tutwiler residents didn't feel comfortable with our documentary project because of their feelings about the documentary film *LaLee's Kin* (Delaney 2013).

vii. Delano later wrote about his discomfort while taking photographs of the Greene County prisoners. The prison warden demanded the prisoners to dance for Delano which he described as “abhorrent” and stated “how humiliating it must have been for these men to be obliged to perform for me, as if they were trained animals!” (Gonzalez, 2011).

viii. The introduction of lightweight synchronous sound equipment and portable cameras made it easier for documentarians to travel and film than it had been for pioneers in the field. Prior to these technological developments documentaries followed what is known as the Griersonian tradition in that they employed didactic narration over film footage creating the “voice of God” like effect. In doing so, documentarians projected their films as objective truths used to teach the audience about a particular subject with authority (Nichols, 2005, 17). This type of documentation, of course, came with its own set of ethical issues as it typically assumed a Eurocentric viewpoint and invested in hegemonic ideologies about the social and scientific interpretation of humans and the natural world. These films paralleled early anthropological research that viewed non-white people as marginalized others to be studied by an elite educated, white demographic. In fact, visual ethnography and early documentary intertwined as filmmaking became integral to cultural anthropological research conducted after the turn of the 20th century. For example, Margaret Mead’s whose filmic representation of Balinese communities in *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1952) is regarded as one of the first anthropological documentaries. She, along with and John Marshall, known for his recordings in Namibia, are credited with the likes of Dziga Vertov, Jean Rouch and John Grierson as pioneers in the documentary field. The use of film in social science fieldwork also grew as technological advancements made it easier to carry equipment for traveling anthropologists.

ix. The 1955 brutal murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in the Delta town of Money, Mississippi is said to have ignited a national insurgence to work toward racial equality, following widely publicized images of his open casket. Till’s case undergirds the argument that the use of visual media in a social movement can buttress the foundation laid by earlier activists and help to generate knowledge and conversation surrounding the cause.

x. In 1920 Soviet Russia, Vertov joined the worker correspondent movement in journalism and pushed for participant based documentary work for social action and social change in his country (Yang 2012, 105).
While the film directors never publicly stated that they intended to make LaLee’s Kin to expose poverty and racism in the South, the film garnered the attention of international audiences for its portrait of those very social ills. A.O. Scott of the New York Times wrote that the film functions as “a window into a world of poverty and neglect, [that] will shock the conscience of those who believe that racism and inequality belong to a closed chapter of American history” (Scott, 2001). The film reached national audiences and won the “Excellence in Cinematography Award” at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival, an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature and the Independent Spirit Award in 2002 for HBO aired LaLee’s Kin in 2001 and it quickly gained airtime on international television stations (Maysles Films, 2000).

CHAPTER 2

George Lipsitz coined the term “possessive investment in whiteness” in his 1999 book of that title. Lipsitz argues that as a society, Americans actively invest in whiteness in order to gain and protect certain “resources, power and opportunity” which are associated with being white (Lipsitz 2006, vii). He states that while whiteness is a social construction it is has “real consequences for the distribution of wealth” in American society and shapes how people make life choices and self identify (Lipsitz 2006, vii). Lipsitz writes that “social and cultural forces encourage white people to expend time and energy on the creation and recreation of whiteness” because it holds cash value (Lipsitz 2006, vii). Within this context the persistent poverty of non-white people in the Mississippi Delta can be seen as a larger cultural, possessive investment in whiteness where the disadvantages of black communities in the region work to reinforce the advantages of whiteness and preserve a white political, social, and financial power.

The risks of participating in civil rights demonstrations and/or organizations permeated the lives of those organizing in the Delta. Activists received threats and were subject to violence from hate groups like the Klan and individuals that protected white supremacy in the South. Shootings at voting booths, church bombings, house fires, and break-ins were common for both black and white Delta residents working for social change. In the Delta State Oral History Project archives, residents of Tutwiler remember an incident when a white mob, possibly Klan members, burned crosses on the lawn of a local black family who housed Civil Rights workers (Delta State Oral History Project 2012). In addition to such violent tactics, the White Citizens Council, whose national office ran out of Greenwood, Mississippi, used economic reprisals to threaten and punish active black business owners and farmers. (Payne, 1995).

Genether Spurlock described Tutwiler during a presentation at the 2012 Delta Cultural Tour hosted by the University of Mississippi’s Center for the Study of Southern Culture.
xv. The latter is a privately run prison located less than a mile from the town center. Corrections Corporation of America, the company that runs the prison, promised to improve Tutwiler’s economy by increasing job opportunities and paying property taxes to the local government. But as reports have shown, since its opening in the year 2000, the prison has done little to improve household income in Tutwiler and alleviate the town of its economic stress.

xvi. Sister Maureen initiated the quilting program in 1989 after recognizing a strong quilting tradition amongst Tutwiler women. Along with resident and TCEC staff member, Mary Ann Willis Mackey, Sister Maureen organized a quilting group that produced and sold quilt pieces to benefit female quilters of Tutwiler and promote the development of the TCEC. After receiving national exposure on 60 Minutes, the quilters received order requests from all over the U.S. thus the quilting program expanded. Today the quilters average $35,000-$55,000 a year in income. 80% of this money goes directly into the hands of the quilters and 20% goes into the quilting program for things like materials and travel costs. The quilters sell their items not only in the TCEC but in churches and crafting festivals all over the U.S.

xvii. As a whole, the TCEC staff, teen attendees and their parents frequently used this term to talk about the benefits of the TCEC in Tutwiler. Based in conversations held with various Tutwiler residents, Tutwiler teens are vulnerable to gang activity and drug use.

xviii. While teaching photography, poetry and video courses with Tutwiler children and teenagers, my cohort and I noticed that the majority of them struggled with basic reading and writing skills. In conversation with TCEC staff members we learned that the school system does little to address such trends.

CHAPTER 3

xix. Kate and I developed the handout as seen in Figure 8 in July 2013 to distribute to teen attendees of TCEC’s teen night. The word choice is problematic, vague and begs critical analysis within a participatory video-making framework, particularly “Show others how you see the world” and “become representations in your community.” The language was inspired by various teen photography and documentary course websites like that of the Maysles Institute (Maysles Institute, 2013) and also Appalshop’s Media Institute (Appalachian Media Institute, n.d.).
VITA

Paige Prather attended the University of Texas where she received her Bachelor’s degree in Cultural Anthropology in May of 2007. Following her Master’s thesis defense in Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi in June 2014 she continued teaching at the Tutwiler Community Education Center in Tutwiler, Mississippi.