

Research Through My Lens: Documentary as an Alternative Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

Scholar-practitioners can use dissertations as an entry point to provide rigorous, inclusive and accessible research-based information for the education community. One method to make these dissertations more inviting beyond the education community is to expand the acceptance of alternative media modes. Documentaries have recently grown in popularity as streaming services and social media have democratized storytelling across the public. A documentary as an alternative dissertation upholds the rigor of research and analysis while expanding scholar practitioners' communication and storytelling skillsets. To be more inclusive, equitable, and practical, a documentary as an alternative dissertation can cultivate more connections between academics and communities.

KEYWORDS

documentary, antiracist praxis, alternative dissertation, storytelling

Riding in the backseat of my father's car after the graduation ceremony, my worldview shifted. "Wow, getting a doctorate degree and your grandfather was illiterate," my father stated while avoiding the post-ceremony traffic. I asked for clarification of this revelatory statement. "Excuse me, what do you mean," I retorted. "Oh yea, your grandfather was functionally illiterate. I know I told you that before." This was the first time I had ever heard about his father's inability to read. Completing a doctoral degree with a focus in literacy intervention, this news reinforced the importance of literacy. However, it also made me consider how much an academic document could be a barrier for people who may want to learn more about literacy. As an early scholar-practitioner, I want my research to be as accessible as it is rigorous. For me, the method is just as valuable as the message.

Accessibility and rigor were critical foci with my dissertation topic. I researched the ways in which Black American English (BAE) is devalued, mocked, and ostracized in K-12 curriculum and instruction. My research gathered the perspectives of Black female literacy leaders and how they balanced their use and understanding of BAE with their responsibilities to teach majoritized American English while making all students – including Black American students – feel connected and valued. During my study, the participants watched movie clips and discussed literature that featured BAE and how that impacts the way teachers in their personal lives may respond to BAE spoken in the classroom. The use of media and robust discussions about language stories, identities, and instruction guided my decision to document my findings in film form. The dissertation documentary premiered during my defense and was shown as a school district leadership training, national literacy conference, and a small film festival. Documenting the history and language of Black Americans, much like learning of my grandfather's literacy, brought the importance of sharing our stories for all people to learn without the standard barriers of academia.

The dissertation is a process in which doctoral students engage in independent research and writing based on their program courses and special interests (Platt & Hilton, 2017). This process is the beginning of many academics' research careers. The education doctorate is a program that focuses on the systemic intricacies that education practitioners encounter day-to-day. Scholar practitioners must learn to share their research with a variety of interested audience. To fulfill my program's requirement, I wrote a traditional dissertation. However, I wanted to expand the reach of my research. I decided to also write, direct, and produce a short documentary film to feature my research. I wanted to incorporate multimedia that accurately portrayed the weight of the problem of practice and the implications to the greater education community.

New researchers interrogate their practices, their research, and their identities in a dissertation of practice (DoP). As methods of sharing information and research have changed, doctoral dissertations continue to serve as a relic of academia's stasis. Yet, when completing a doctoral dissertation, a scholar practitioner is limited to the confines of the written word. Okun (1991) stated that the overreliance of the written word is a tenet of White supremacy, which heralds the written word as objective and valid. As universities look to expand and deepen their impact across greater society, academics could look to alternatives for doctoral candidates to engage and share research. A documentary is an alternative dissertation format that provides an opportunity to expand a scholar's communication skills, provides a practical and accessible method to share research, and centers on antiracist praxis.

This article examines documentary as an alternative dissertation format that institutes of higher education could consider as an alternative to dissertations of practice. I will define and provide a brief history on documentaries. I will overview my documentary process including how I aligned the process to my university's dissertation format, resources used, and administrative



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considerations for both faculty and students who may consider employing a documentary film as an alternative to the traditional DoP written text. Finally, I propose four ways in which the documentary filmmaking process is a rigorous tool for qualitative research, discussing accessibility, reflexivity considerations, and antiracist praxis based on my experience researching, writing, shooting, editing, and presenting both my DoP and documentary dissertation.

WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

Documentaries are filmmaking research that authentically represent research of pressing social issues in an audio-visual format (Fitzgerald & Lowe, 2021; Wan Aida & Shuhidan, 2020). The documentary is experiencing much popularity in current times (Sinnerbank, 2020). A compelling documentary relies on well-researched content, powerful images, and gripping audio. Documentaries must also feature interesting subjects, an identified problem, and various points of view (Wan Aida and Shuhidan, 2020). These conditions allow for doctoral students to illustrate their background knowledge, research findings, and recommendations. Scholar practitioners engaging in a dissertation of practice must also interrogate their positionalities, identify problems of practice, research literature, policies, and practices that situate these problems of practice.

A documentary is a multimedia method analogous to the multiple resources and analyses required for writing a dissertation. Mogalakwe (2009) expounds on the lack of documentary sources, such as text, videos, and other primary sources, in social research, even though such sources are an acceptable and respectable research method that can be both scientific and rigorous. Nisbet and Aufderheide (2009) further discuss the impact that documentary films can have on general society to begin public discussions, ignite activism, and shape public policies and legislation. A documentary gathers a multitude of primary and secondary sources in a narrative that many people can access and act upon, if compelled. Authors discuss how documentaries provide multiple opportunities for researchers to ground sense making processes, connect to traditionally underrepresented groups and develop researchers' positionalities and internalization processes (Borish et al., 2021; Guba & Lincoln, 1986; Rice & Mundel, 2019; Varro & Van Gorp, 2021).

In our current digital age, educators are inundated with a barrage of information. Spending time scrolling through social media applications or scanning for entertainment options on streaming services, people are provided with a plethora of opportunities to learn about complex issues that education faces through the storytelling of people's lived experiences. These platforms have democratized whose stories are told and how people share and receive information. Documentaries, as an alternative dissertation format, can serve as tools for research, reflexivity, accessibility, and antiracist praxis that align academia with modern media consumption patterns.

ALIGNING DISSERTATION TO DOCUMENTARY

Creating a documentary with minimal skills was a serious undertaking — especially while simultaneously writing a DoP. From the beginning of my doctoral journey, I knew I wanted my research to be developed into a documentary. I enjoy movies, especially learning from documentaries. During my first year's doctoral residency

seminar, I attended a workshop on leveraging media to promote your research outside of academia. In a breakout group, I shared with my cohort mate my plans to develop a documentary about my research. Although I did not have a topic or subject in mind, I wanted my contribution to academia to reflect me. When I selected the chair of my dissertation committee, I informed him of my interest to develop a documentary film. We decided to return to this idea after I completed my dissertation proposal. When I completed my proposal, I re-introduced the topic of the dissertation documentary. The program aimed to pivot away from the traditional research doctoral defense to facilitate more dialogic opportunities between the practitioner and the community. Although he informed me that the university has a requirement to submit a traditional dissertation document, he was excited to support my idea to present my documentary during my defense presentation. My dissertation chair connected me to a staff member who was also a filmmaker. This staff member shared a resource about another doctoral student who recently created a dissertation documentary in another educational leadership doctoral program. He also directed me to the university's resources to borrow media equipment to shoot the film.

The documentary had two iterations: defense presentation and standalone film. I made the first iteration to meet the university's expectations of a doctoral defense presentation. The beginning of the film aligned to the introduction and problem of practice chapters. In the documentary, this is where I introduced myself, positionality and language story, as well as the participants in the film. These videos were included to formally contextualize the problem of practice anchoring both dissertation and film. Archival footage of congressional hearings, talk show interviews, protest videos, and other films were included to support the dissertation's knowledge review and theory of action sections. I included footage of the participant interviews and a small panel discussion of BAE, curriculum, and English Language Arts (ELA) instruction to align with the format of the intervention and explicate the study's findings. I developed animated graphics to illustrate key metrics from the research. Implications and recommendations from the dissertation were represented by footage of interviews, panel discussions, and supporting film clips. With this version of the documentary, I presented my research for my dissertation committee, faculty, and cohort colleagues to follow the expected format to gain knowledge and ask questions.

Although the investment of resources and time was high, I internalized my work holistically which significantly prepared me to answer questions from my dissertation committee and colleagues. Completing a companion, stand-alone documentary was a valuable research tool to effectively share the importance of critical language study instruction in elementary schools.

DOCUMENTARY AS A RESEARCH TOOL

Completing a dissertation documentary has advantages in the learning process to internalize research and learning new transferrable skills (Varro & Van Gorp, 2021). Warmington et al. (2011) studied how documentary films can be best used in educational research. The researcher develops the film through their professional and personal lenses informed by historical contexts, current educational practices, and positionality that informs their research methodology, data collection, and analysis. In North Carolina State University's education department, doctoral students are asked to create a short documentary to tackle equity issues to

hone their pedagogical skills and prepares them to communicate using multimedia for the 21st century educational landscape (Bowen, 2020). Filmmaking should not just be seen as a product of research, but a viable and rigorous qualitative research method (Borish et al., 2021; Fitzgerald & Lowe, 2021).

I began researching for the documentary while analyzing my research data. I spent four months watching documentaries and reading about templates to accomplish this huge task. As I developed infographics and graphs to highlight key findings, I looked through online film databases for news and video clips that further explained the data or provided necessary context. Even though I began shooting the documentary after writing half of my dissertation, the initial chapters of the document were integral to the layout and planning of the film. Before shooting, I researched how to make a documentary. All the sources emphasized the importance of writing both a film synopsis and script to help with the film's planning and execution. I arranged sticky notes on a large poster that reinforced the order of my dissertation and documentary. Much like the dissertation research and writing process, shooting and editing the film was an iterative process for refinement.

Qualitative data, especially in education research, can be shared in a variety of ways such as quotes, narratives, and work samples. Qualitative data analysis follows rigorous frameworks to share contextual findings for practitioners to implement in the field. For my dissertation writing, I used NVivo © platform to help analyze, categorize, and synthesize my findings. Borish et al. (2021) explained that video-editing software can connect interviews and archival footage to trends identified through the study. I found that many themes that came from the study were also found across my footage. Fitzgerald and Lowe (2021) outline seven quality criteria for documentary filmmaking to produce compelling stories and rigorous research, according to Guba and Lincoln (1986). These criteria include but are not limited to confirmability, fairness, and educative authenticity. This paradigm reinforces traditional qualitative data analysis frameworks to ensure that the research not only meets one goal of saturation (Saldana, 2021) but authentically represents findings that can be applied to their lived professional and/or personal experiences.

Each component of the documentary commands a separate part of strategizing and storytelling to relay a critical and compelling message. I wanted the film to capture the urgency of my research. When I presented my intervention proposal, my committee's feedback was the same: explicitly state how racism impacted the identified problem of practice. This feedback instilled into me the importance of highlighting antiracist praxis in my research.

DOCUMENTARY AS AN ANTIRACIST PRAXIS TOOL

Mykitiuk et al. (2015) discuss how arts-based research can be a systemic process that engages and empowers the identities, lived experiences, and contributions of traditionally excluded populations. The arts can be a means for interrogating normativity and uplifting the experiences of the disenfranchised (Mykitiuk et al., 2015). Centering antiracist praxis is another benefit of engaging in the documentary process. As Dei (1996) asserts, "antiracism has emerged as a new critical lens for viewing and questioning the way the academy traditionally 'does business'" (p. 248). A traditional dissertation brings forward a dissonance on whose form of

communication is seen as valid when developing a documentary. For example, my dissertation and documentary examined oral language instruction through the lens of critical language awareness. With this lens, the research focused on the importance of oral language instruction to privilege Black students' language, BAE. As BAE has ties to many language structures of Western Africa, a documentary was determined to capture better the cultural significance of oral language practices that connect Black Americans to the communication mode and style of Western African languages. Leveraging the legacy and power of storytelling could be better accomplished through a documentary.

In the ways that traditional academic disciplines may limit the complexity of cultures they seek to learn about, according to Dei (1996), I believe the traditional means of research study and presentation could also limit how knowledge is produced and used. Wahab (2011) interrogated the Anglo male heteronormativity of academia that centers whiteness and others all other perspectives and reinforces its hegemony of objectivity and truth. Wahab (2011) asks that faculty at institutes of higher education consider how their current modes of operation can other the perspectives, methods, and presentations of people who do not center whiteness and objectivity. Alim (2005) makes similar claims when educators and researchers are looking to interrogate the privileging of certain language practices. My research and documentary were anchored in Alim's (2005) critical language awareness framework that dismantles the in situ linguistic hierarchy across education spaces. I developed a short film that relies on the inclusion of multimedia to dismantle the written word as the ideal form of research performance. But throughout the process, I had to unpack my understanding of linguistic rules that surfaced unchecked biases anchored in internalized racism, ableism, and classism. Even selecting which songs or film clips to include in the movie highlighted biases in not only the messages, but the messenger. Completing antiracist research requires the practitioner to disrupt their "racialized subjectivities that are constituted in the power plays of representational politics" (Wahab, 2011, p. 35). Knowledge can be mediated in a variety of ways. The documentary is an embodiment of the textured and complicated work that is needed in antiracist educational praxis.

DOCUMENTARY AS A REFLEXIVITY TOOL

My original intent for the documentary was to highlight only the findings, yet the narrative required me to tell the complete story of my personal and doctoral journey. Ravitch and Carl (2019) write about the value of reflexivity memos as one completes qualitative research. I found that interrogating my racial identity and positionality through languaging and literacies using personal photos and storytelling exemplified both "mirrors and windows" (Styles, 1989, p. 1) for the viewing audience to internalize my research motivation and follow my research journey. I found that editing a dissertation and documentary simultaneously improved my internalization of the implications of my research. This process better enabled me to communicate the central messages of my dissertation during my initial presentation and subsequent presentations to my district's leadership community and national education conference. As I have experienced recently, a documentary can be easily shared to different audiences and generate deep conversations based on the historical context, research findings, and recommendations without the time constraints of reading and internalizing the same material presented in more than 100 pages.

A critical element of reflexivity in the dissertation process is critically evaluating oneself and power position as both researcher and filmmaker. In my desire to present my research in the way I thought would be best, I needed to reflect on power dynamics that I may engage in that would continue to reify hierarchies. In this dual role, I frequently reflected on this power dynamic that could result in my participants' knowledge and experience being extracted and exploited for both institutional and personal greater good. Black women, especially in the United States have been exploited for physical and emotional labor. I considered in what ways I could be perceived to use Black women for selfish gain that would further my professional credentials and social capital with a doctorate degree. These considerations guided me to focus on the safety of my participants' personhood. Wolfe (2017) describes that "the participants' stories enacted and understood in multiple affective interchanges, [are] important, rather [than the] researcher's descriptions" (p. 435). Fortunately, some participants from the research study volunteered to be interviewed for the documentary. This not only created valuable member checks (Ravitch & Carl, 2019) of participants' narratives and reflections but allowed them to own their narratives outside of the researcher's summaries. Checking this authority invites the researcher to interrogate their understanding and limits of accessible and inclusive practices (Rice & Mundel, 2019). Such a process should be iterative and transparent, as multiple encounters and circumstances require the research filmmaker to reflect on their positionality in the process (Borish et. Al, 2021; Fitzgerald & Lowe, 2021; Rice & Mundel, 2019).

The second version of the documentary served as a standalone product that relied more on narrative form than research format. I was encouraged to showcase the film at conferences and festivals to share my message with a wider audience. I learned during the documentary process that a filmmaker should be prepared for multiple edits of their video. Like publishing a paper, a filmmaker must account for the audience and message they aim to convey when editing multiple film cuts. After completing my dissertation defense, I received encouragement from a film student to submit my movie to a film festival. I edited my film to reduce the research elements and expand upon the research narrative that supported the findings. I submitted that film edition to local and national film festivals. I also edited my film to present at a retreat for district instructional leaders and a meeting for a small group of school leaders. These presentations facilitated a more nuanced discourse on how the leaders in the school district could interrogate their practices to improve the literacy outcomes for Black students. Having a documentary that I could edit to anticipate the audience's needs was crucial for grounding an important conversation to improve antiracist and equitable instruction.

Publishing a dissertation and presenting a documentary are professional and personal processes. Considering the work of Dei (1996) and Wahab (2011), publicly engaging in antiracist praxis can disrupt an academic system founded on othering nontraditional epistemologies. Although publishing a dissertation anchored in equity education research can invite criticism from competing political and ideological entities, its inclusion in academic databases can insulate the level of feedback. A public facing film is not as protected. Presenting a film for public consumption (e.g., conferences, summits, festivals) welcomes scrutiny of the research, merits, and process. When developing my documentary, I anticipated the questions, concerns, and opposition from my university and workplace. However, I did not anticipate a viewing

audience outside of my immediate environment. University faculty can use the dissertation documentary as a means through which to teach students how to anticipate presenting research to a variety of audiences.

DOCUMENTARY AS AN ACCESSIBILITY TOOL

"What does 'access' and 'inclusion' mean," Rice and Mundel (2019, p. 118) asked, as they explore the implications of multimedia storytelling, access, and inclusion. Accessibility should be considered an iterative process that negotiates the multiple – often contradictory - needs across people, conditions, and contexts (Rice & Mundel, 2019). A documentary can remove barriers from a traditional dissertation, like accessibility and practicality of findings or how research connects communities to academia. The traditional dissertation adheres to a prescriptive format that situates the problem of practice, reviews the history of relevant literature, outlines the methodologies and results of the study, and makes recommendations to the greater education community. Although this outline seems straightforward, jargon-like vocabulary, complex sentence structures, scientific explanations, and vague implications shared on black ink on a white paper flattens the richness of many research studies featured in dissertations. For a fact, my dissertation would be a barrier for someone with minimal literacy skills – like my grandfather.

The structural mechanisms of the documentary dissertation can help alleviate traditional barriers of written dissertations. Mykitiuk et al. (2015) reflect on how to "create space for accessibility" (p. 13) in arts-based research to maximize participation. This requires a fluid documentary narrative that compellingly situates research. A captivating documentary relies on well-researched content, powerful images, and gripping audio. I began searching for clips for my documentary at the midway point of writing my dissertation. As I found clips from congressional hearings, talk shows, and teacher education videos, I was better able to analyze my data and provide practical and actionable recommendations for educators, corporations, and policymakers. Accessibility is more than ensuring the structural mechanisms in place for people to engage with the film. Mykitiuk et al. (2015) discussed the importance of arts-based researchers to create "emotional accessibility" (p. 13). This term refers to the researcher's duty to cultivate an environment for both art participants and the audience to feel safe enough to consume, reflect, and converse about the art. One consideration is the historical framework the researcher is working from that may impact the audience (Mykitiuk et al., 2015). I chose music as an additional layer to invoke emotions for specific segments of the documentary. Solemn songs from Billie Holiday and Nina Simone hauntingly capture the dark history of racially segregated education opportunities for Black students. The optimistic and high energy from popular music tracks symbolize the creativity of Black American culture and language. Passionate interviews were featured alongside graphics that illustrated data discrepancies that reinforced the urgency of the researched problem of practice. As I spliced scenes, music, and graphics together, it helped me to tighten my messaging to ensure a casual viewer was just as affected as a colleague.

The documentary-making process is ripe for doctoral students to emotionally prepare the audience to receive their research, findings, and recommendations. I used tenets from qualitative research and filmmaking practices to edit both dissertation document and film. In the document, I noticed when my messages were not



clear due to unnecessarily complicated sentences, vague word choices, or meandering ideas that did not specify actions for improvements. Editing various clips from ten minutes to 30 seconds requires clarity of what you know and want to communicate to your audience. Pouring over every word with each successive rewrite while editing a documentary, I revised my dissertation to be concise, direct, and potent. The inclusion of varying media can generate curiosity, passion, and an urgency to act among viewers. Editing both the dissertation and documentary concurrently ensured that my messages were clear, powerful, and accessible to the audience.

CONSIDERATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Universities have systems in place to support doctoral students completing a traditional written dissertation. For students and/or faculty supporting students who may want to complete a dissertation documentary, some considerations are necessary to maintain the rigor of research while expanding options for research dissemination. These considerations include student and faculty support, programming opportunities, and preparation for public dissemination.

A key component of this documentary dissertation I had not considered was the value of the cohort model. Many of the benefits include camaraderie among its members, sense of support and positive relationships, collaborative opportunities and empathic environments (Ari et al., 2022; Bista & Cox, 2014; Rujimora et al., 2024; Unzueta et al., 2010). These benefits also extend to impacts on doctoral students' academic development during their program including problem solving support, enabling intrinsic motivation, sharing resources with one another, increased productivity, and improved self-efficacy (Bista & Cox, 2014; Rujimora et al., 2022; Unzueta et al., 2010). I experienced many of these benefits during my doctoral journey. I noted that these characteristics of the cohort model significantly contributed to the success of my documentary. My research focused on the personal and professional experiences of Black female educators, which was much of my doctoral cohort. Some of these scholar practitioners participated in my intervention pilot and informed me of modifications to improve implementation and rigor. Within this group, a few more also participated in the individual and group interviews for the documentary. Their involvement throughout the process undergirds the strength of collaborative and supportive nature of the doctoral cohort model.

Programming support can also come from the program's faculty. One of the limitations that I experienced was the lack of a faculty member with filmmaking experience during the dissertation process. Although my university has a film degree program, I did not receive guidance from a faculty member from that school. As stated previously, a staff member in my school informed me and shared a link with me of another doctoral student who recently completed a dissertation documentary at another university in the western region of the country. The movie *Fidelity at the forefront: The fight for ethnic studies* (Jaco, 2021) provided me with an example of a finished product. From there, I learned that other institutes of higher education were supporting students to explore documentary filmmaking not only as end products of their research, but to enhance their analysis and communication skills through filmmaking (Bowen, 2020; Varro & Van Gorp, 2021). In a course at one such university, a professor provided students an option to create a short documentary or write a final paper to chronicle systemic impacts of educational policies and practices (Bowen, 2020). In my doctoral program, I used certain assignments throughout the program to

practice the filmmaking process and audio-visual communication strategies to effectively share my research findings. However, this process was self-guided because I did not have a faculty member with expertise in filmmaking. I relied on research articles, training clips, and social media to help guide my understanding of the filmmaking and interview process. I also researched how to incorporate video analysis in my qualitative research findings to support findings from my study. Art-based research authors have contended that the filmmaking process can leverage the technological advances of recent society to ontological and epistemological studies that provide enriching documentary research paradigms and practices (Borish et al., 2021; Fitzgerald & Lowe, 2021; Varro & Van Gorp, 2021; Wolfe, 2017). Overall, my passion for film and my research motivated me to shoulder this process but could have been strengthened with the guidance of a film-focused faculty member.

Scholar practitioners in the education field continue their work to improve the deeply entrenched problems that their dissertations look to improve. Many of these researchers commit to speaking engagements, writing op-eds, and presenting at conferences to share the impact of their research. A documentary can serve as a public-facing product to share research findings and implications with and beyond the education community. Educators who may not typically read a journal article may prefer to watch a film about a specific subject. Policymakers and other community members may also be better able to access a documentary on a topic compared to reading a published journal article. A documentary as an alternative dissertation modality can invite more scholars to engage in the vital work of educational research, improvement, and advocacy for community people, practitioners and policymakers.

I showed segments of my documentary during my first post defense conference presentation. Far away, regionally and politically, from the liberal bastion of Washington, D.C., I encountered interesting perspectives from educators and community leaders about providing Black-centered language practices in the classroom of a school district governed by conservative politics. This was an exercise in seeing the impact of my documentary on a national stage. Educators from all over the country attended this conference that looked to improve the literacy needs of Black students. I saw the importance of disseminating a concise and powerful message. I fielded questions from district leaders on how to combat negative perceptions from local policymakers and public leaders, addressing concerns from school communities, and even ensuring funding would not be affected by the implementation of recommended equitable practices. Many of those educators recalled the Oakland Unified School District's national controversy when introducing Ebonics to their system (Baugh, 2000); they did not want to face a similar battle in their school districts. Even with a shared interest, I needed to be able to pivot the significance of the message for all people to understand the complicated relationship between instructional needs and identity affirmations. The documentary can be a crucial tool for scholar practitioners to use when facing public scrutiny and preparing for the hard work of being an agent for systemic changes.

SUMMARY

A documentary combines the power of the written word, visceral impact of strong images and the gripping audio of personal narratives to highlight the urgency of research and invite the public to

engage in meaningful learning. The modern dissertation process must be flexible enough to reflect the shift in media consumption while making research and subsequent recommendations relevant to educators and education leaders. A dissertation is where the research should reflect where the educational system stands and projects where it can go. The dissertation documentary, as an alternative dissertation, is an optimal way to lead by example that upholds the rigor of research, welcomes differing means of knowledge production, encourages scholar practitioners to reflect on their role in systems, and compels an audience to enact systemic changes.

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