

# An Interview with Michelle Lanier/ Executive Producer & Alex Glustrom/Director of 'Mossville: When Great Trees Fall'

Interviewed by Natalie Bullock Brown

**N:** First of all, congratulations on an amazing accomplishment and thank you for your time. Let's start off... Give me your name, tell me where you're from, and how you got into filmmaking.

**M:** I'm Michelle Lanier. I'm an Afro-Carolinian. So, what that means for me is that I come from deep, deep black roots in North Carolina, but I was raised in South Carolina... Columbia and Hilton Head, went to Spelman then UNC. I'm a Folklorist by training. I've been teaching at the Center for Documentary Studies for two decades focusing primarily on oral history, experimental documentary work and community ethics. My mantra for most of those two decades is I am not a filmmaker because I primarily worked with people who were burgeoning filmmakers to help kind of get a sense of what are your internal ethics? What accountability do you need to be holding for yourself? Then one day I had a student very persistently say "I'd like you to look at a rough cut." I resisted until I couldn't resist anymore and the next thing I knew, with this gentlemen who you're gonna meet in a second. With Alex, I became a part of the film world in a more intimate way. Not just an educator, but a part of the production community of practice.

**A:** I'm Alex Glustrom. I'm from Atlanta, Georgia. I come from a family of Jewish activists and allies in the Civil Rights Movement. I moved to New Orleans right before Katrina. My background is in painting. I've always been drawing and painting since I could basically pick up a pencil or pen. Then I transitioned to camera work a few years ago. And I made my first film with Michelle, and now we're on our second one.

**N:** Amazing. Tell me about the relationship that you've had making two films together. Like the process of pulling someone like Michelle in at the point that she did come in on the first film.

**A:** Well first of all, it's crazy to me that you didn't consider yourself a

filmmaker because you came in with such a natural talent and understanding of story. I didn't really know that you didn't consider yourself not a filmmaker because you came in and you've helped with a lot a different parts of the process. I think with Big Charity, you first came in on a story level and watching the cuts, giving us feedback, working with us. At the time I was working at the Boys and Girls Club and we went into the Boys and Girls Club on a Saturday and basically spent an entire day in there working on the film, just watching the cut over and over again, giving notes.

**/ Then for this project you've been more involved from the beginning. That's looked like a lot of work around team dynamics, a lot of work around making sure that our team is done the right way, that we're approaching the story the right way. Then that's also transitioning to story work and then also to distribution work, and really from pre to production to post to distro, you've been a part of the whole process.**

**M:** I mean we really have become family. I consider myself the documentary doula. I feel like I help people birth projects. I have my own work but when it comes to how I interact with a team, the first thing that I was very interested in with Big Charity when I came out to New Orleans and that was Labor Day weekend 2013. About a year before that, I had a major injury. I had fallen down a flight of stairs. I had ruptured the disc in my cervical spine and I had no feeling in my left hand. And my healing process from that was a lot about faith, but it was also about certain healing modalities that I took on to really heal: eating a plant-based diet, lots of green smoothies, Bikram yoga, jumping up and down on a mini trampoline, shaking off negative energy, checking in with people who I had tension with. I carry that...I was really in that healing season. I've carried that into Big Charity, which was my first documentary doula experience.

**/ I said to Alex and the team "It matters how you treat your body, your mind, and your spirit. It matters how you're treating each other." If you are not finding outlets for the secondary trauma that you experience by documenting the story of post-Katrina hospital that was in a very unethical way erased from being the community anchor... That's trauma and our team was taking in that trauma. I said that if we don't have these outlets... If you're not getting hydrated and eating living things, and laughing, and hugging, and jumping up and down on a trampoline. You're not gonna be able to do good work and it's gonna show. And you will not have the energy flows that you need to do the work. So, we started there.**

**A:** [laughing] Yea I forget about that. Right when we picked you up from the airport... I'm a pretty skeptical person when I meet somebody new too... When we picked you up from the airport and you were like "OK first thing, we're gonna go and buy a mini trampoline." I was like "Oh my god, what are we doing?"

**M:** You're like "Who is this woman?" I think I had like vitamins in my suitcase.

**A:** Yea, you did. [Alex laughing]

**A:** But that self care is so important and it's something that I can definitely can sometimes forget about and that constant reminder is so important.

**M:** And we check in even on Mossville. I would say, "What are you doing?" And you would talk about some of the things that you were doing.

**A:** Mossville has really been a trying film for me health-wise. Emotionally and physically, it's been a really difficult, challenging film to make.

**M:** This myth that you're supposed to somehow earn medals in the world of the creative sphere by sacrificing yourself, I really resist that. I also work with them around group relationships, group dynamics. We're constantly looking for ways to grow equity and inclusion, and dismantle misogyny, and dismantle white supremacy, and dismantle socio-economic privilege as it shows up in our creative relationships. Those have been some painful moments sometimes and hard moments and a lot of vulnerability. So when I talk about helping a team to birth a film, we are going at a soul level because what's happening in the heart of the maker shows up in the work, absolutely.

**N:** Alex, I want to ask you about that because you did not necessarily invite Michelle initially into your space from Big Charity. Catherine did, right? Based on what you all have been talking about, just this process of...Michelle is really coming at documentary filmmaking from a holistic place. I'm not sure how often that shows up in a documentary filmmaking team. So, were you resistant? How did you embrace or resist that type of paradigm for what she was suggesting you all do?

**A:** Well first, I'm not classically trained at all in documentaries. Big Charity was basically my learning process. It was kind of like my school. I unfortunately didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know what was weird and what wasn't. And I knew that you were so experienced in the documentary world. I was like I guess this is just what happens [laughing]. Like little did I know that

this was not common practice at all. But I think that it was just like “Ok, I guess this is what’s happening.” Also, as soon as we met, I could tell that you just had a wisdom that I had to respect and I still do. I knew right away that I should pay attention.

**M:** I mean I’ve been working with filmmakers for 20 years, educating them, supporting them with the inner journey, the hidden journey. You know, the ethical toolbox. It was a leap for me to say, “What does that mean to go from the classroom to workshoping a whole film?” I remember my sweetheart. We were just courting at that time and I remember saying, “I’m not going to be able to talk to you for several days because I need to give my thousand percent attention to this team and I don’t know what all it’s gonna take. We might go long.” I just knew I needed to be so present.

**/** I feel like that’s been something that we have carried in both projects is this intentionality on being present and then that can get worn out and exhausted. But we check each other. We’ll say something doesn’t feel right. We need to have a talk. We need to have a team connect...reconnect time. I know Alex will say if at the end of this project we’re not friends, then we would have failed.

**N:** I think that’s a very insightful point. I’m thinking about or wondering about how do you communicate this type of intentionality and accountability within the filmmaking team, first of all? And then how does that translate to the people that you’re filming with, that you’re actually creating a story about?

**M:** In the team, I insisted with Big Charity and I think it happened organically with Mossville.

**/** I insisted on having one-on-one conversations with every single member of the team. What I would start with is: What is your intention here? What brings you here? What is truly your motive? Because if it’s some white guilt that you’re trying to assuage by making a film about black people, then we need to deal with that now so that it is not fueling this work because it will eat it alive. And because the team trusted me, I could go there. So there was a lot of one-on-one’s but I’m interested to see what you have to say about how that translated into working with people who were connected to Charity and Mossville.

**A:** / Within the Mossville community, I was brought there by an activist who had been working with the community for 30 years or something. When she brought me in, I think that a lot of folks... I was given street cred within the community by the way that she brought me in. Still, I had to be very open with everybody right away as to what I could or couldn't do. The first time I walked into the room of Mossville, there was a table of people sitting around waiting for me. I think people were kind of expecting that I could do more than maybe I was actually able to do. I had to be very upfront with everybody right away. Like "I can't make any promises that this film will do anything or that I can even make a film. I'm just here to listen." I think that openness from the beginning with people was really important. And it was really cool - A couple of weeks ago, I came back into that same room to show the film to all those folks, four plus years later. It's really come full circle. That was a really beautiful moment for us to show the film to them.

**M:** There's been a lot of discussion right now about what does it mean to be either a white led or white majority team working on a film that is focused on black folk or white supremacy or you know and get consent, but then not continue to seek ongoing consent.

**/** What we're realizing and where our values are is that consent is **dynamic and ongoing**. I know the journalistic model is if you see my camera or microphone, you know and you're talking to me, that's consent. I come from the folkloric kind of anthropological archival background where the release forms for archiving purposes has always been really emphasized. But in both of those schools of media making, the legalities have always overshadowed what is the desire of the people to be self-determined. I know a collaborative approach or a community-based approach can be extremely exhausting, and it can also be extremely scary for makers because there's this notion of Am I seeding control?

**/** What we've learned is seeding creative control and self-determination around a community that you're working in solidarity with is actually one of the most powerful creative tools, media making tools. We have gone back multiple times, over and over showing rough cuts and showing

clips to get feedback and made changes. We actually had to rush a final, final, final new version of this to Full Frame because we had gotten some notes. So, the feedback piece has been huge.

**A:** It's been huge.

**M:** And to be humble to it...

**A:** Right. Exactly. And it is a scary thing when you're a creator and obviously somewhat of a perfectionist, and I can be a control freak at times. So, when you're giving up that control to people, it can be a scary thing. You can wonder "Is this gonna be the best move?"

**/** We have really done that collaborative process from the beginning. Our producer Daniel, he's from the community. He's a photographer and activist. We met him early on and he came on board. He's been a constant collaborator with us the entire process. We also had advisors within the community, characters within the film, who we've shown the movie to throughout and that collaboration has been really important to us.

**M:** It has. **/** One of the things we decided was really important is that anyone who is featured in the film have the opportunity to get a password protected access to the final cut that they could see in the privacy of their home. So we did two layers just for the end of review where anyone featured in the film could just watch in the privacy of their home without having their community watching them react to themselves. And we had the community review.

**A:** And then the openness for them to make changes. Like you said, there's a lot of people who say "You signed the release form two years ago. Sorry."

**M:** "You're done."

**A:** Yea, "It is what it is." **/** But every single person that's been in the film, we've given the option "Do you want to take out this line? What do you think about this?" I think that

people have been really appreciative of that openness on our part to show them the way they want to be shown.

**N:** You mentioned Daniel, the producer and you said that he joined the team pretty early on. Was that intentional or was that something that happened because you happened to be...

**M:** Yea. Well, it was my mandate. / Lately, I've become extremely clear that if I'm being brought into a project particularly to help support the diversity of the team. If the team is working on a project that's focusing on black people and the team is white and the team says, "Oo, we should probably bring in some black people." Then they bring me in and think, "Good, we're done." My statement is "I will not work with you unless there's also another black person from the community that you're representing because my experience of blackness is not Mossville. I can relate but it is not my lived experience." So, we're also expanding the definition of what it means to be a producer. He has videography experience, Daniel does. He does weddings. He has a home studio where he does photography. That was good enough for me. In addition to the fact that he is from the community and understands the nuances of the community dynamics. Now, Mossville has set a standard for me because of Daniel that going forward, that is going to be my mandate. You had already known Daniel. He's actually in the film briefly. He's not really happy about that. [laughing] I mean he tolerates it. Makers don't necessarily like to be revealed. There's a little... you would blink and miss it. But there's a little [swoosh sound] and there he is. We know who it is. I'm not sure anyone else would even see his face [laughing] but...

**A:** But it just made perfect sense because Daniel is somebody who I connected with right away. We're the same age. He's a photographer. Every time I would go out there, him and I would connect. We would go get dinner. It was perfect like Oh, of course he should be the producer.

**M:** And I didn't mandate who it had to be. I just said, "Alex, you have these relationships. You know these folks." He's been out there a lot. "Who in the community who is black can be a producer?"

/ I also felt that it was great that Daniel's male because

I felt like we needed some more male energy. I believe in gender balance—that's another thing, too. Balance. In this project, maybe not on some projects who might want an all-women group. But I felt like it was good to have another male voice cause we were three **women**. And I want to mention Katie Mathews, Catherine Rierson. They are the producers as well —phenomenal, powerful women. We're going to be hearing their names a lot.

**N:** When you say you've expanded what it means to be a producer, was Daniel on equal footing with Katie and Catherine?

**A:** Yea. And that was obviously important. / **It's not about having a picture that looks diverse. It's about true collaboration. He's been on, not just equal footing with Katie (Producer) and Catherine (Producer), but with me too. You could even say even more. If Daniel has an issue or a fact check or anything, he is the ultimate voice.** [Michelle repeating: He is the ultimate]

**M:** And he hasn't abused that. If anything, he's like, "Y'all are too deferential to me." He's like calm down with that. We're like "No. We're gonna be."

**A:** "What you say goes."

**M:** Because he's a photographer, the thing that's really delighted me is that he's done portraits of some of our featured characters and individuals in the film. The fact that there are certain scenes that show family. When families come together for a family photograph, something really beautiful happens. You're literally watching this moment where they're saying we are a family. It's very sacred to come together and have a formal family photograph. He does that. He's already been doing that. And we get that in the film.

**A:** It's also amazing because he lives right next to the community. We're three hours away. So if something happens, he can be there right away, which is awesome.

**M:** He's very brave too. / **We've had some white supremacists' commentary on some of our social media. Daniel and**



I check in with each other a lot as two black makers in this team. “How are you feeling about it? What do you think our response... How should we move so that we feel safe?” Really, so that we are in alignment with our values and also our human safety. He’s just been a great person for me to also sometimes say “Can we have the black person conversation? Can we caucus real quick?” And the rest of the team’s been really cool. There’s not been any pushback. As they should be cool with that. But a lot of makers wouldn’t be. Alex has not had ego about saying “OK, two black people on my team need to talk.”

**A:** Yea, that bravery that you said is a really big thing. He really has been brave. Not only in facing some of the racist stuff that’s come at him, but also we recognize that he still lives in this community. When we all leave after the film is done, he’s gonna have to deal with the repercussions maybe for the rest of his life. He’s gonna live there. Also, not just the repercussions from the community, but the repercussions from the industries. These industries can be vicious. They have harassed us constantly. He is putting himself on the line to put his name on this movie and still live right next to these industries.

**N:** Wow. So that brings me to the question... I know you’ve said that there was an activist that brought you to the story. Can you talk more about how you found out about this story? How you identified Stacy and so forth?

**A:** Sure. So Monique Harden is the activist who brought me there. She’s kind of a legend in the environmental justice space in Louisiana. She knows everybody. She’s just a brave and brilliant leader who’s somebody I really look up to. She approached me after she saw Big Charity. Her and I were on a panel discussion together and she approached me afterwards. She was like basically “I have your next film for you” and I was like Oh God, I don’t want to do another film. I just finished Big Charity. I think I just wanna do some short pieces for a little awhile. But I was like “OK, I’ll go and meet this community and see what you’re talking about.” I thought that she was actually gonna drive there with me. I was like “OK, so we’ll leave on Friday or whatever.” So, I called her on Friday and she said, “Actually, I can’t go. Here’s the address.” I was like “Oh God what am I getting myself into?” [laughing] I’ll never forget driving to Mossville. When you cross the Calcasieu River to get into Mossville, you have to go up this really tall bridge cause the ships go under the bridge. When you get to the top of this bridge, you look out, and it’s a cluster of fourteen

refineries and petrochemical plants. Basically, just a panorama of fire and smoke. It looks really apocalyptic. It's one of the scariest, also weirdly, beautiful things you've ever seen because the lights and the fire. It looks like you're entering into another universe. Nestled right in the middle of all these clusters of plants is this little community. When I went there the first time, I met some folks. I started doing interviews. Somebody took me to Stacy's house. Mr. Ronald, one of the first guys I interviewed. He was like "You know there's a guy living over there right where the plant's gonna be?" So, I was like "Ok, let's go meet that guy. That sounds interesting." We pulled up to his little mobile home. I was like "Who is gonna walk out of this mobile home?" It just looked like a kind of crazy environment. He was already one of the last people living there. And out walked Stacy Ryan the most charismatic, hilarious, intelligent characters, who's really turned out to be an incredible subject...a really awesome character for a story. He's been amazing. Him and I have become really close friends. Over years, I've been out there with him. I've stayed in his trailer with him. He got cut off from all of the utilities, sewer and water. He was kind of a survivor living out there. I would go out there for weekends at a time and I became really close with him. It's been a difficult journey with him.

**/ I think that we've talked a lot about ethics of documentary making and how much does your presence... just your presence is gonna change what's happening. It's something that we talked about yesterday. He was getting really sick and there were times [Michelle sighing] where I felt like I was filming him withering away. I struggled a lot with "Is he doing this for me? If I wasn't here, would he still be making this stand? Am I in some way complicit with his suffering because I'm over here pointing the camera at him while he's hurting."**

I also really struggled with going back to my nice house in New Orleans. I remember the first time I came back from Mossville, we went to this hipster Vietnamese place and I was like I can't be here. It was just two different worlds that were so different from each other.

**/ He often asked me for advice which is really a tough thing as a documentary maker because I think the purest outlook is you don't affect anything. You're just a fly on a wall. Whatever the story is, is what should be. But he would say, "Should I stay. Should I go?" I was watching him die out there. I think the documentary filmmaker is like "You said you're gonna chain yourself to the tree? This is gonna be crazy**

footage.” But like the friend is like “You gotta get out of here.” And that was more the route we took like “This is not healthy for you and you have a son.”

**M:** / And as a black woman, there were definitely times where Alex and I had these conversations where I was like “If we have the opportunity to support him having a better life and we don’t, I will demand you take my name off this project. I will not want myself affiliated if we have the opportunity to support him.” There are many moments in documentary history where... There’s this really amazing woman, Ruth Behar. She’s an anthropologist and she coined this term the vulnerable observer. She starts her writing about the vulnerable observer, talking about... I think it was either a mudslide or an earthquake... But there were people who were trapped, and all of the journalists had their lenses on the people. Finally one journalist went [gasp] and started pulling people out. So she’s saying, “Really? We will hold the lens and not...” Eugene Smith was an amazing documentarian who was in World War II. In class he’s known for saying, “Yes, when I was in war, I put...” (because he was a war photographer), he put his camera aside. He said there was one day where he spent almost 24 hours without... just rescuing people and couldn’t... And I know that’s you. I wouldn’t work with anyone else. I can’t look myself in the mirror. I can’t look at my own child knowing that I was complicit in killing another human being. I couldn’t.

**A:** / You have to be a human before you’re a photographer or documentarian.

**M:** That’s the word.

**A:** There were also some really difficult decisions because people wanted to support him. We would show some of the cuts to people and people would be like “Oh, I want to send him money.”

**M:** Yea, how do we do that?

**A:** How do we do that? Because we know if people start sending him money is he gonna stay there even longer? Also, is that us then changing the outcome of this story? Are we then supporting him financially? What we want to do is we wanted to try to tell the story as if we weren’t there. If we were to go and kind of manipulate what would happen by people giving him money to

stay there, that didn't feel true to us.

**M:** To encourage that... So we weren't sure if he would live to see the completion of this film. There were many times that we thought we were going to go to a funeral before we went to a premiere. The fact that he was here for the premiere is more than we could've ever prayed or hoped or dreamt of. For his son to be with us as well, who was the bright light, the legacy, the dream that is living on of Mossville. It's just more than we could've ever dreamt of. Now, on his terms, in the healthier place even though he deals with a lot of health issues, the needle has been moved a little. He can receive the funding directly to him without us being some sort of conduit. We can support him. We can help him create an infrastructure. But people don't need to see us as a pass through.

**N:** This is amazing. It's amazing what you all are sharing. You're modeling a type of accountability, a type... one of you used the term ethical filmmaking that I think we're trying to get to. We're really trying to encourage people without preaching to them that this is what you should be thinking about.

**M:** Honestly even people who are like "I don't care, I'll do anything." / **There are definitely makers out there who could care less about ethics or humanity over the product. There are definitely makers out there who will sell their soul to the devil in a heartbeat for an Oscar or whatever, something on HBO. That's not how I roll. I have to be accountable to my ancestors, to my heart, to my child, to my life partner. Same. I know Alex. So, if I were to talk to the people who would sell their soul to the devil - Nothing more beautiful than a film that's produced in a way in which you go into the heart of your own soul and in the heart of the soul of the people that you are documenting. So, if you all you care about is the end product, it's still the best way. Cause it's the most beautiful film.**

**N:** But it's a lot of work. It is. What you are talking about is work. It's emotional work. It is physical work. It is mental work. Right? What you talked about-

**M:** No fast forward button on this.

**N:** So let's keep talking about best practices. How do you communicate to filmmakers who, you know, let's just give them the benefit of the doubt and say that their intentions are good, but they really don't get what you're talking about. It would never occur to them to approach filmmaking in this way. What would you say?

**A:** / One huge thing is I think there's a lot of filmmakers, especially white filmmakers, probably especially white male filmmakers, there's this attitude like I know all this stuff. You have to recognize what you don't know. That is such a huge thing is being like I don't know everything. I'm open to learning. I'm open to growing and recognizing that it's a constant process. I don't claim to be at some place of arriving at like now, I'm just this woke person who can tell you what to do. I'm constantly learning. Every conversation we have, I'm learning. I'm soaking up information. Being open to what you don't know is so important. Both in the practices. Also, in the storyline. Be open to seeing where the story takes you. It's so important to not have a set this is what the story's gonna be and stay super rigid in following that. Be open to see where it takes you and see where your team takes you, and see where your subjects take you, where the story takes you. That's one of the biggest things I could say.

**M:** / I think that there is the illusion that you can hit fast forward by being an asshole, by being arrogant, by being aggressive, by maybe stealing other people's ideas, by stiff arming people and marginalizing people and making sure your crew looks just like you. That might be a fast forward but it's not sustainable. Ultimately, it's gonna show up in your body. You will get sick. It's gonna show up in your family. You will have marriages that will end over that. It will literally be a virus that will permeate your whole life. Your films will be eh, OK. Maybe they'll be phenomenal. But then later somebody's gonna find out that you were really cruel or inappropriate with someone. Then no one is gonna show your film. It will always come back. It's not just like "Oh, Karma." No, it will get you. It will.

**/** If you're not kind, if you are not ethical, if you're not inclusive... and that's not to say we've been perfect. We've had missteps. We have. But we call each other out. We

come together. We listen. We fuss. We fight. We cry. We get a plan. We get a to-do list and we keep moving. You know.

**N:** What would you do differently? Clearly none of us our perfect...

**M:** I have a thing [laughs]

**N:** What would you go back and think about and do differently if you could?

**M:** I have a thing. Actually, it's something that I think Alex and I...We've already set a little energy aside that we're gonna debrief and talk about this. Alex, I so respect the fact that he really wants us all to be family and friends. And we are. This notion of the professional aspect of this, the contractual aspect of this, the monetary conversations, the legal relationships that says, "Yes we're friends. We love each other. We're family." But when it comes to the intellectual property and whether our roles and whether our deliverables in signing something with a date, that's been a little fuzzy because we've all like "We're friends. Ok, I think we're gonna do this. We'll figure it out. Ok, this is what it is today but maybe that'll shift." So, that's what I would do differently. That's impacted us. That's been probably the primary source of tension is the lack of clarity, which can feel rigid on the front. It can feel rigid on the front end to sit down with your friends and write and sign contracts and go through them and make sure everybody is comfortable with the language. It's very litigious language. It can feel very rigid, awkward, and strange. But it is a really important vaccination. So that we all don't break out in hives. We have broken out in hives a few times. I'm working on another project that this person has had the same exact tensions arise. Like, "Wait a minute. What were the terms? What were my deliverables?" As a result, he's come up with what I think are really strong contractual tools that are legally binding. They hold up. But they're kind, thoughtful, and equitable. Part of when we have a moment as a team, I'm gonna kind of bring that...That's part of my documentary doula work is I identify resources and say, "Here's something that might be useful in this moment." Also, I asked Alex the other day, "Are you still gonna be making films after this?" Cause Mossville was hard. I watched you get sick. I was like, "Are you still gonna be making films after this?" He was like "Yea." I said, "Let's work on that" cause I want him to not have those moments of sitting across the table from friends and not feeling clear about who's on first.

**A:** / Contracts are so important. It's so easy to be like

“We’re all friends” and like “Well, we gotta do the work. We don’t have time to go write up contracts. We have work to do.” Getting that stuff in the beginning so that everybody has a really clear idea of what their role is, what they’re gonna receive on the back end, what’s expected of them. Having all that lined up before you start. I’ll never do another project without having all those contracts lined up...

**M:** / It’s been hard. And the fact that it can change. So, you might have to stop, call time out, and do a rider or an addendum. But that should still be another very formal conversation that’s crystal clear. Everybody is awake and aware and has time to sleep on it and look at it. If you have a lawyer that you need to...That’s cool. Be lawyered up. As friends, that’s fine, you know, it’s gotta be like that.

**A:** Definitely.

**N:** There are different arenas within documentary filmmaking where accountability is an issue. There’s the accountability that filmmakers have to the communities or the people that they are filming. There’s accountability within the filmmaking team. There’s accountability in terms of funders, the juries, and whether or not they are giving money to tell certain stories to certain people who may not have that experience. That lived experience. I’m interested to know with Mossville, what was the fundraising experience like? Alex, in particular, since you’re the director, did you ever feel like a funder did or did not get what you were trying to do because of the subject matter and because of who you are?

**A:** Yea, I did and didn’t. Both I would say. Fundraising is really difficult as everybody knows in the documentary world. Raising money is really tough. We had a lot of rejections for grants. We’ve also gotten funded.

/ I definitely recognize that has been a way where I’ve been able to leverage my privilege to get us funding in a way that has really been helpful. I’ve been able to make connections with people and go sit in spaces where I’ve been able to convince somebody to give us money. That’s been a way that I’ve been really able to use my whiteness and

**privilege to be able to get us resources.** Also, I have a commercial business. I do freelance DP'ing. So, I have equipment. That was also a lot of things that I was able to bring to the table, resource-wise. And I know that all comes from a huge privilege that I have to be able to get those resources to us.

**N:** Let me just follow up real quick. So, would you say that in those moments when you were engaging with funders, tell me more about what you noticed. The fact that you realized that your whiteness was something that you could leverage to move the project forward. Do you have any insights about how that might have gone had you been a black man or a black woman trying to do the same story?

**A:** It would've been tough for I think some of our funders. I can't say for sure that if I looked differently that they would or wouldn't have funded but I do know that there were funders who I met through people in New Orleans who I knew that I don't think they fund a lot of other projects... I don't know if they would've funded had I looked differently. Yea, I don't know.

**M:** Yea, skin privilege. I am loud before I open my mouth. Being black and showing up in a space with a little Afro, whatever. It's like a "Ohh." So, there's this performance that happens with white folks of power that they're trying to almost prove to me I'm not a racist. I'm not a racist. I'm not racist before we even have a conversation. Now, I have privilege in that I've been in governmental sector, I've been in the museum world. I've been affiliated with granting organizations for many years. I've been on grant panels. So I can walk in some doors from that kind of... I've been validated. I've been able to... It's like one power structure after another has said "Michelle Lanier is OK." My goal is to say,

**/** "Even if I'm the first one to walk through that door or one of very few to make sure that I'm not the last and make sure I don't come solo." So that I'm kind of bringing...I've been saying this...bringing a hundred people of color with you every time you walk through a door so that it doesn't... I don't invest in this mythology of exceptionalism that there are a few people of color who have the intellectual capacity to have conversations with funders. I want to say this though.

**/** We've had conversations with potential donors where I have felt triggered by some of the conversation. I wanted



to be like [skidding noise] “I don’t want to deal with them. I’m not sure about these folk.” And Alex has been like, “Let’s just kind of check it out. Let’s breathe.” I’m really glad he had those instincts but he also didn’t invalidate my emotional response. In those moments, I think that’s where he used his whiteness to say, “Let me be the one who has to deal with the person who clearly hasn’t gone through their race equity training. I’m gonna subject the people of color to any sort of micro-aggressions.” And that’s where I’ve watched him. That to me is what powerful allying looks like. It’s “Let me just step in and deal with this so that I’m not gonna have my Producer and Executive Producer of color do a song and dance...

**A:** Right.

**M:** For these white folks of privilege.”

**A:** I’m able to shrug it off like that’s just weird and funny in a way that you’re not able to.

**M:** No, but you see it.

**A:** Right.

**M:** You see it and you go “I can’t.”

**A:** Right. And I don’t want to claim that some of the funders will only give money to white people...

**M:** No.

**A:** But I think that just the fact that I had a connection to them is a point of privilege. This is like I had a connection. It’s not like they say, “I only give money to white people.” But the fact that I was able to get in the room with them was the point of privilege that got us there.

**M:** / I think everyone on this team has been using privilege in different ways. Daniel has, being a member of the community, that kind of privilege and he has access. We respect that and we do our best not to abuse it knowing

that he's gonna live in that community after this project. It becomes a memory for us. It's his life forever. You have the privilege you've described. I've described my privileges in the academy in different nonprofit and foundation work. Then Cat and Katie bring in their different privileges. So, I think what we're trying to do is: How do you leverage those privileges toward a project that dismantles these oppressions while also bringing in other people who normally wouldn't be even allowed at the table? That's where we collectively come together as a team to say "I got stone soup. I'm bringing in this privilege I have." We're working to dismantle these oppressions so that we have a more equitable and diverse and inclusive community of practice making these films.

**A:** Yea, I think that's one of the most beautiful things a team can be is when you're able to be... we each have our own powers that we're able to bring together. We're more powerful than any team would be that is not diverse. I think we're able to really do things that you just couldn't do if you didn't have a really diverse team.

**M:** Yea.

**A:** There's a lot of things. We have to know where each of us can fit in. For me, one of the things that I've been able to do is we've had to have interactions with law enforcement constantly throughout this project. They have harassed and detained us over and over and over again.

**M:** Including the FBI.

**A:** They sent the FBI to New Orleans to detain me and have an interrogation with me. It's just been constant. But I've been able to navigate through every one of those situations and be totally fine. I recognize that's something I'm able to do as a white guy that Daniel couldn't do, that you probably couldn't do. That has been something where I've been able to step up, I think.

**M:** That would be tough. Yes.