"Cameraphone Composition: Documentary Filmmaking as Civic-Rhetorical Action in First-Year Composition"

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Abstract

This article offers strategies and a process for documentary filmmaking initiatives in first-year composition (FYC) pedagogies. Suggesting modes for integrating civic and advocacy elements into multimodal composition pedagogies, this article suggests ways that composers can engage the public through the production of videos posted to a public website. Using a project in the author's own classroom as a case study, this article closes by examining some of the challenges that accompany multimodal civic action in FYC classrooms, including technological access, accessibility, ideological disagreement, and practical issues related to filmmaking with limited resources.

Introduction

"Picture" this: a trio of your students huddled around a camera, aiming it toward a street of commuting cars. Another small group of students whispers behind a laptop about a script they are composing collaboratively, and a third group of students tests the lighting next to a greenscreen assembly they've put together in the hallway. You, perusing the aisles of this classroom, have left your students to their own business for the class session. They have a goal to work toward, yes, but the path they take to reach that goal is up to them. They're hardly on their own, of course: you, their instructor, have put the tools in their hands, even showed them how these tools work and how they can be used to create something entirely new, but at a certain point you decided it was time to turn them loose, to step back and sink into that feared "unstructured time" you've spent your teaching career anxiously avoiding. But, you sit down, you listen, you hear the conversations happening: *how do we solve this problem*? *How do we* film *that*? *Is this music the right choice*? *What do we need to do to accomplish our goals*? *What are we trying to* say *with this film we are making*?

This article explores what might be gained from documentary filmmaking initiatives within first-year composition (FYC) classrooms. Multimodal composition initiatives in FYC classrooms can nurture practices of literacy, experimentation, digital exploration, and rhetorical invention, among other skills and capacities (Selfe, 2007; Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007; Shipka, 2011; Palmeri, 2012). Some have even argued multimodal composition initiatives nurture civic actions that potentially are capable of enacting social activism (Sundvall & Fredlund, 2017; Edwards, 2016). This article will suggest strategies through which filmmaking and study of the documentary genre might be used as a

generative form of multimedia composition within rhetoric and composition courses. It will introduce multimodal composition strategies as tools and heuristics with which students might cultivate a public humanities project that enacts what Laurie Gries (2019) calls "writing to assemble publics" for civic-rhetorical purposes (331). Ultimately, by recounting and describing a project my students and I completed in the 2018-2019 academic year called *The Retold Histories of Clemson*, I propose documentary filmmaking to function as civic action that empowers students to compose for social justice causes. In doing so, students can cultivate some of the skills needed to communicate productively to a variety of publics, including for causes of equity, advocacy, and justice. By drawing on research in multimodal composition and rhetorics of public engagement, this article offers one method composition instructors might use to design situations for students to re-envision important local histories, and in doing so engage publics through the creation of short documentary films. Multimodal composition has a long history of expanding what the FYC classroom can *do*. This article aims to contribute to that conversation by offering strategies for documentary filmmaking in FYC with goals of advocacy, activism, and community justice grounded in students' own local communities.

The Retold Histories of Clemson, a documentary collection assembled by four FYC courses, serves as an initiative that demonstrates the literacies, competencies, and skills of multimodal rhetorical invention that documentary filmmaking is capable of nurturing among students. We compose in an age, as William Hart-Davidson reminds us, in which *the available means of persuasion*, as Aristotle defined rhetoric, are suddenly becoming a whole lot more *available* (x). To respond in empowered ways to twenty-first century exigencies, composition instructors would do well to harness available tools of digital media such as the cameraphone as inventive tools if students are to learn to engage dynamic publics and respond productively to the social issues that characterize many contemporary rhetorical exigencies.

The Multimodal Turn

A society and its educational systems are always firmly connected to the material and technological apparatus supporting them, and this remains true as education increasingly becomes melded with video distribution networks such as YouTube (Reid, 2010). The move toward incorporating multimedia production skills into composition courses has had a long and complex history, but the direction the discipline is moving toward is clear: as twenty-first century composers, students need have at least some ability to compose in multimedia formats— in image, sound, film, video— to be considered empowered, flexible, and capable composers (Eyman, 2015; Shipka, 2011).

Scholars in rhetoric and composition have mobilized multimedia tools in the FYC classroom in different ways to initiate student rhetorical activity in relation to exigencies of civic action (Dubisar et al., 2017; Edwards, 2016; Dubisar &

Palmeri, 2010; Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel, 2012). Other scholars specifically target documentary filmmaking as multimodal invention pedagogy. For instance, bonnie lenore kyburz's (2019) *Cruel Auteurism* positions expressive filmmaking front and center in the work of composition, exploring the affective, inventional, narrative, and experiential possibilities available with audio-visual modes of composing. Additionally, Alexandra Hidalgo (2017) develops what she calls *feminist filmmaking* as a collaborative, activist approach to video production for rhetoric scholars and pedagogies in the video-book *Cámara Retórica*. Similarly, Julie Lindquist and Bump Halbritter (2019) propose a documentary film project called the Experiential-Learning Documentary (ELD) as an assignment designed to create "an ongoing, experiential literacy-learning narrative" that blends students' affective, personal experiences and their individual literacies with multimedia tools and invention opportunities. Halbritter's (2012) book *Mics, Cameras, Symbolic Action: Audio-Visual Rhetoric for Writing Classes* informs filmmaking pedagogies beyond simply outlining the value of video production initiatives in FYC classrooms. Halbritter situates filmmaking and the visual rhetoric of film squarely in the composition classroom. Halbritter asserts that "a multimedia writer teaches multimedia writing; an audio-visual writer teaches audio-visual writing" (xiii). Composing for a democracy in the twenty-first century means composing on YouTube, composing in social media spaces, and composing for a public memory that is continually renewing itself through digital media technologies—technologies that can put storytelling powers in the hands of those who formerly were not allotted the argumentation opportunities to articulate original public voices. Importantly, this population includes, or has the potential to include, students enrolled in FYC courses.

Using multimedia tools in rhetoric and composition courses necessitates a marshalling of students into participatory action, challenging students to *practice* and *enact* knowledge of rhetoric through active participation in multimedia ecologies. Here, filmmaking represents a rhetorical exercise that works to extend student multimedia production into the possibility of social change. My goal as an instructor here is to challenge students into *doing* and into *making*, initiatives in rhetoric and composition that have traditionally foregrounded literacy and the production of print-based compositions. Sarah Arroyo (2013) connects video production in rhetoric and composition classrooms with participatory culture, theorizing a method that uses multimodal composition to facilitate and nurture public participatory engagement. Arroyo refers to Henry Jenkins (2006) in her consideration of participatory culture, extending his analysis into digital video production. Jenkins defines the important changes brought about by participatory culture as allowing everyday composers "to participate in the production and distribution of cultural goods— on their own terms" (133). The participatory approaches of Arroyo and Jenkins intersect with that of Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel (2012), who privilege active learning through multimodal invention, treating composition as a distributed and social act that is always tied to the communities that bring it to fruition (xxvii).

Composing to Assemble Publics

Multimodal composition initiatives in the writing classroom have long been invested in activism and social change (Palmeri, 2012; Shipka, 2011; Sundvall & Fredlund, 2017). But what would a pedagogy look like that challenges students to not only create multimedia compositions, but also to orient them toward a collaborative campaign to engage heterogeneous publics through an assembly of diverse artifacts?

Gries (2019) proposes a push toward what she terms "writing to assemble publics" that teaches students the *techne* of social activism. Gries argues for an approach to civic activism that "puts students in the hot seat, where in building their own collectives and implementing their own activist agendas, they become the organizers and drivers of rhetorical assemblage in every stage of the public writing process" (331). Gries follows student-led activist initiatives over the past five years, including the students who organized following the shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, as well as the General Body civil-disobedience sit-in at Syracuse University in 2014, using them as models from which to build a pedagogy that assembles student text-creation and the possibility of social change. Gries advocates a new materialist approach to social composing, proposing that "we might actually think about rhetoric as the assembling of various entities that assemble bodies into collective action. Rhetoric is both constituted by and constitutive of constant assembling" (333). When students are challenged to create in a digital media environment, they assemble an array of audiences, publics, tools, ideologies, and interfaces, and when they compose with an eye toward the possibility of social change, they multiply these assemblages exponentially, bringing bodies, histories, and material realities into the fold.

Within the pedagogy this article will outline, FYC students view a few iterations of the documentary film genre and then discuss its filmmaking techniques (cut, scene, casting, facial expression, dialogue, narration, perspective) as well as its displayed rhetorical choices (narrative, argument, story/plot, circulation, cover image, music, inclusion, omission). Students then mobilize their knowledge of film conventions and the rhetorical choices made by filmmakers into producing a film of their own that extends an argument, such as one aligned with social, political, or personal causes.

The Retold Histories of Clemson

To design an occasion for students to create a short documentary film that "re-makes" the sanctioned, sanitized, "official" history of Clemson University, I designed *The Retold Histories of Clemson*, a public humanities project that revises and rewrites some of the histories surrounding the Clemson University campus community (see Appendix A). My students' attempts to film plural

"histories" of Clemson, including those neglected within official tellings, ventures to connect documentary filmmaking within the FYC classroom with the prospect of social change. Doing so challenges students to not only be observers of public memory and extant rhetorical ecologies, but also to be active *participants* in the formation of texts contributing to new ecologies. Students are challenged to be participants in the invention of revised and retold histories engaging social justice exigencies surrounding race, gender, and colonialism of Indigenous peoples. When we challenge students to become participants in the writing and re-writing of histories, we make them participants not only in multimedia initiatives, but in the global public sphere as well.

In other words, a pedagogy might be designed that is concerned with generation of new histories, rather than the rehashing of older, already-written ones. This provided my courses with an opening in which we could compose histories of Clemson University that foreground the institution's past as a slave-owning plantation, as a site of enduring race-based discrimination toward African American community members, and as a contemporary site of history-production, many of which are sanitized, apologetic narratives pedaled by official stakeholders. Consumption is intimately connected to production in documentary filmmaking, and students collaboratively building *The Retold Histories of Clemson* learn to compose revisionist histories and historiographies actively and operationally through acts of documentary filmmaking. Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel's (2012) vision for a public multimodal pedagogy, one that attempts to put creative power and multimodal production capabilities in the hands of student participants, can be extended to challenge students to engage surrounding communities in ways that are complex and multifaceted, including challenging the ways communities author local histories. This enterprise is highlighted when students are asked not simply to use filmmaking tools but to *do something* with them, to create their own artifacts to disclose to the world. Here, students connect multimodal composition with the possibility of social change, composing, as Gries (2019) calls it, to *assemble publics* (331). Here, students are not just consumers or critics of histories related to race, to slavery, and to discrimination based upon gender, race, and class, but are active participants in outlining a vision for better histories more in line with what they would like to see in the world.

Students worked in small groups to assess their take on what constitutes a worthwhile "re-telling" of the history of Clemson University. Clemson University was built on the site of a former plantation owned and run by the families of U.S. Senator John. C. Calhoun and his son-in-law Thomas Green Clemson, both vocal white supremacists and staunch defenders of slavery as an American cultural institution. The university, still bearing Clemson's last name in its linguistic identity, rests on the foundations of the plantation built by slave and exploitive convict labor, and has since had an extremely checkered history with tacit denial and superficial half-acknowledgment of a sanitized, hollowed-out history with slavery and racial exploitation, including even tours of historical

buildings on campus (O'Brien et al., 2016). Working with primary source materials assembled by Dr. Rhondda Thomas and the *Call My Name* project, which documents and shares stories of African Americans and their contributions to the development of the university we know today, students in these FYC courses attempt to assemble a "re-told" history of their university that is more in line with the course content and values the students had discussed throughout the semester (Thomas, 2019; Thomas, 2020). These topics include discussion related to rhetoric's role in mediating subjugation based upon race, gender, and disability, language's implicit and explicit resonances in light of twenty-first century racism and racial violence, and Clemson University's specific histories confronting and tacitly denying these events. Students were also allotted opportunities and resources to connect Clemson University's early discrimination and segregation based upon race with other instances of structural oppression, specifically historical violence waged on the basis of gender, ability, class, sexual orientation, and religion, and which often center a white, straight, Christian male at the core of Clemson's history.

The Retold Histories of Clemson constitutes an attempt to revise old histories grounded in racism, sexism, and exploitation, but also articulates an attempt to challenge our notions of what it means to articulate communal values through a documentary narrative that assembles a variety of publics and which circulates both within and outside of our local university publics.

The Retold Histories of Clemson is an attempt by a few community stakeholders (four FYC courses, about 80 individuals altogether) to author narratives that outline our vision for what our community narratives mean, what they represent to us now, and what they've meant for our past developments and for our community's future. Embedded within the popular understanding of Clemson University, as elevated by mainstream media representations and public relations endeavors, is a sanitized, superficial narrative of Clemson's history with slavery and segregation pedaled by administrations and booster groups attempting to flatten and gloss over the very real violences at the heart of the university community's foundation. Universities across the country are reckoning with the realization that the motives of the neoliberal, corporate R1-designated university only rarely overlap with the real work that comes with acknowledging and beginning the process of partially atoning for past violence that has been purged from official, sanctioned histories.

The Retold Histories of Clemson represents one modest attempt to articulate stories and narratives that have been neglected, deferred, and undervalued by existing power structures. *The Retold Histories of Clemson* positions itself less as a representation of what these sorts of revisionary histories should look like or as a perfect representation or solution to any problem at all, but rather as a modest effort within the structures afforded by a FYC course to revisit what are oftentimes taken-for-granted histories, and to initiate and generate a dialogue as

our documentary films circulate among a diverse coalition of public stakeholders in this issue.

The Process: Making Documentary Videos in the FYC Classroom

Two sections of Clemson University's FYC course worked on films for *The Retold Histories of Clemson* in the Fall 2018 semester, and two sections of the same course the following Spring semester viewed this original work and used it as a heuristic to inspire their own additions to the project. The FYC program at Clemson University instituted a requirement during the 2018-2019 academic year mandating not only a multimodal project within the course, but also a project theme of "The History of Clemson University Multimodal Argument." Altogether, the four sections created the multimedia documentary projects comprising *The Retold Histories of Clemson*, borrowing cameras, tripods, lighting equipment, shooting space, and expertise from a variety of campus institutions and resources. As a whole, the project demonstrates a design in which rhetorical action functions to assemble publics through both multimodal composition and civic engagement.

Each course section began the unit, our final chronological component of the course, by viewing some of the materials assembled by the *Call My Name* project. Having just finished a unit on academic argumentation and deliberative rhetoric, students were encouraged to transfer this persuasive mindset into a multimedia format, but also to begin considering creative, imaginative, and narrative potentials not wholly supported within conventional academic writing assignments such as the written research essay. To become more familiar with the genre of the documentary, students viewed clips of popular documentary films such as Gabriela Cowperthwaite's *Blackfish* and Spike Lee's *When The Levees Broke*, paying particular attention to genre conventions such as voiceover tone, footage angle, narrative style, lighting, expert interviewing, and storytelling devices.

Students continued the introductory research process by exploring digital materials surrounding the *See the Stripes* movement that foregrounds Clemson University's inconsistent grappling with racial issues in recent years (Carson, 2017). Additionally, students examined materials related to Clemson University's historically inconsistent acknowledgement of its past along with video resources researching local histories such as *Legacies of Fort Hill* (O'Brien et al., 2016) and *The Ghosts of Pendleton* (O'Brien, 2016). Students then toured buildings on Clemson's campus which were constructed by the labor of enslaved African Americans, and finally discussed campus activist movements of the past half-decade, including the proliferation of the social media hashtag #BeingBlackAtClemson and the 2016 sit-in at a campus building by five members of the *See the Stripes* campaign. Students discussed these resources both as a class and in small group settings, as well as in an online forum, and eventually formed groups to discuss not only which of the stories or events were

of the most interest to them, but also how these histories were told, which groups or institutions various tellings and re-tellings were serving, and who they thought was benefitting in moments when Clemson's history with slavery and racial injustice was glossed over or sanitized to protect the university's ethos.

Fig. 1: The author begins filming with a digital camera,
a microphone, and a tripod.

After viewing the resources surrounding the university community's history and discussing primary conventions of the documentary film genre, students collaboratively discussed and eventually decided upon a story, moment, narrative, fact, problem, event, or person that they wanted to chronicle in their documentary film. From a pedagogical perspective, it was important for students to have the agency to tell the stories they wanted to tell, rather than the stories they felt their instructor or institution wanted them to tell. Student voice and agency are integral for projects drawing upon participatory culture, and among the goals in challenging students to create a film all their own was to challenge them to reflect critically upon their own experiences, privileges, and understandings of their local communities, and ultimately to use this critical thought as an interventional mechanism for the creation of their documentary. In many projects that engage socially progressive initiatives, some students as well as community stakeholders may not feel their individual political beliefs are being represented or are being included fairly and inclusively. In other words, students who aren't initially inclined to make public statements critiquing institutional racism, structural inequality, or historical injustice may at times in a project setting such as this feel that their instructors are attempting to silence their voices. Situations such as these are difficult to navigate. In cases such as these, it can be helpful to focus on local issues and histories rather than national political ideologies. Issues more centrally located within the scope of the project, such as in this case Clemson's deeply troubling history with slavery, help to orient students and instructors toward the same goals, values, and objectives.

Fig. 2: The author edits a video using computer software.

In other words, it is helpful for us as instructors to help students through self-critique and analysis of institutions they might believe in, and to guide students through the separation between caring deeply for an institution and uncritical loyalty to it. This process opens up the possibility for deep appreciation for an institution while still acknowledging and condemning the atrocities an institution has committed. Social justice pedagogies have a long and impactful history, and scholars have dedicated considerable resources to theorizing, designing, and practicing strategies in which to respond to systemic, ingrained injustices in higher education curricula (Chapman and Hobbel, 2010; Poe, Inoue, and Elliot, 2018; Condon and Young, 2018). Some even suggest that multimodal composing may help us to pluralize linguistic diversity in our communication practices, support multilingual students, and rewrite how we understand public spaces (Pütz & Mundt, 2019). The onus is, ultimately, on instructors to discuss white supremacy, institutional racism, and structural inequality, and to resist it in our pedagogies. The multimedia project detailed here represents one such attempt to do so, though it is only one strategy to directly confront these issues within a multitude of options (Berila, 2015).

The *Retold Histories of Clemson*: Three Documentary Films

The films comprising *The Retold Histories of Clemson* probe a variety of exigencies and imagine a variety of publics as potential audiences, enacting in participatory fashion Gries's imperative to design situations in which the student's rhetorical process might "assemble publics." Specifically, students composed with an eye toward not only their local campus community, largely composed of students not originally from Clemson or from South Carolina, but also to the larger communities in Pickens, Greenville, and Oconee counties who might potentially see their video creations. In this way, students assembled local communities in a way that allows a plurality of voices to arise and emerge publicly, which to some extent performs the work of documenting partial, incomplete, tentative, and nonetheless important understandings of a place and a community (Carter and Conrad, 2012).

Student Film #1: *Crash Course Clemson*

One student film, titled *Crash Course Clemson*, spoofs the popular YouTube channel *Crash Course* created by fiction author John Green. *Crash Course* narrates various historical events in short 10-15 minute episodes, using animation, humor, and the celebrity contacts of its star hosts to make videos the creators hope "will be useful to people," altogether abiding by the "old-fashioned idea that learning should be fun" ("Crash Course Introduction"). *Crash Course Clemson* mimics familiar tropes from the YouTube series: the host rolling in on an office chair, the presence of tongue-in-cheek corny jokes, a globe placed nonchalantly on a desk. Like the original video series, the student remix then goes on to review past events, important narratives, pivotal moments, and key historical characters. In this case, *Crash Course Clemson* details the life and legacy of Benjamin Tilman, an avowed white supremacist who served as a United States Senator as well as Governor of South Carolina. Tillman was instrumental in the founding of Clemson University, and various buildings and landmarks on the campus still reference his name, including Tillman Hall, which still stands on the campus's west side and is perhaps its most well-known historical building.

Originally named "Old Main," the building was re-named after Tillman in 1946. Later on, as the student filmmakers outline in *Crash Course Clemson*, a movement arose in local communities calling attention to Tillman's openly pro-slavery and otherwise racist agendas, culminating in calls to remove Tillman's name from the building and to return it to its former name. In 2020, University administrators finally petitioned to the state of South Carolina for the name of the building to be returned to Old Main. The student film chronicles these issues and movements, providing their own commentary along the way, including a recounting of events important to them, including the graduation of Clemson's first African American student in 1965.

Mobilizing various local and global publics, histories from an array of perspectives, and material and technological infrastructures, the student producers of *Crash Course Clemson* articulate a progressive, anti-racist history of their community, furthering the civic-participatory goals of the project through a willingness to engage with multimodal tools.

Student Film #2: *Clemson's History with Racial Discrimination*

Another student film comprising *The Retold Histories of Clemson* project tells a story of the community's history that holistically connects past and present, and provides a visual tour of the aforementioned Old Main building as well as footage of spaces that are of more recent prominence, such as the university's football stadium. *Clemson's History with Racial Discrimination* showcases the enduring legacies of slavery and its impacts on local communities, especially commenting on labor structures that used indentured servitude and convict labor to

disproportionately exploit African Americans as workers. The history chronicled by *Clemson's History with Racial Discrimination* then moves into a critique of anti-integration rhetoric in the 20th century, and finally begins exploring the disconnect between the University's athletic success in football and basketball fueled by a majority African American student athlete body, comparing it to the university's lagging representation of people of color on its campus as a whole.

This final point serves as an illustrative example of a trend that a number of student projects decided to engage in: exploration of historical events, peoples, and practices in the 19th and 20th centuries, which are then contrasted with the ways in which those events are remembered (or, alternatively, not remembered) today, followed by further exploration of various connections between past and present. For instance, *Clemson's History with Racial Discrimination* ties Clemson's history as a plantation and as a University that did not admit an African American student until 1963 directly to current issues with race, representation, and inclusion that still exist on campus today. Most prominently, these issues include the University's failure to cultivate a more diverse student body, as well as its financial profiting from athletics teams that are predominantly composed of African American student athletes who are not paid for their labor, but who provide publicity, marketing, and other profit generating opportunities for the University. *Clemson's History with Racial Discrimination* ends by speculating on ways students, faculty, and other community members can better remember and confront the enduring histories of their communities, calling on community members to each do their part to more actively engage with these important histories.

Student Film #3: *The Untold History of Clemson University*

A third film that was produced by students is titled *The Untold History of Clemson University*. This film takes a slightly different angle than *Crash Course Clemson* and *Clemson's History with Racial Discrimination,* focusing on the founding of the University and its early years in the 1880s and 1890s. Prominently, this film recounts how even after the abolition of slavery with the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, many African American citizens worked on an involuntary basis to lay the foundation for what would one day be known as Clemson University. Importantly, these students tie the history of the land the University sits on now to not only its history as a former plantation, but also to the founding of the University in buildings constructed by predominantly African American workers, especially convict laborers. The students who produced *The Untold History of Clemson University* show visually in their film the historical markers and testimonials that these abhorrent labor conditions and violent histories have left on the campus even today. The numerous images that the film showcases include an image that a student took of a historical marker showcasing the Fort Hill Slave and Convict Cemetery on campus, where at least 200 African American laborers are buried (Nicholson, 2020) (See Fig. 3).
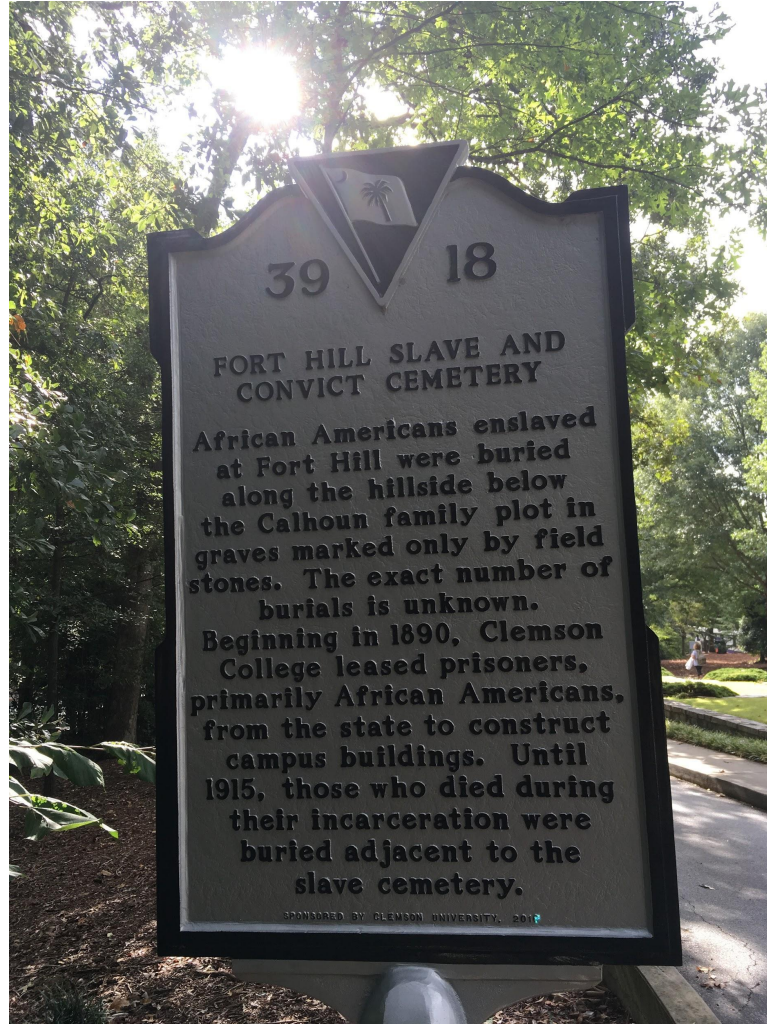
Fig. 3: A historical marker for the Fort Hill Slave and Convict Cemetery that is located on Clemson University's campus.

In this way, the students who produced this film not only confronted the dominant histories of their University that they are generally accustomed to hearing about, but also looked beneath it and considered how the University was built, who it primarily served in the past, and which groups of people continue to benefit from its support. Additionally, students grappled with the often hidden, frequently unseen histories that helped to create their local campus community, many of which are oftentimes subsumed by more glamorous, uncomplicated narratives of place and identity. Unsurprisingly, many students were forced to confront uncomfortable questions of privilege, identity, and community. A number of students remarked that they had walked by the Fort Hill Slave and Convict Cemetery on campus before, and had not noticed it or known what it was (the cemetery is located near a popular parking lot on campus). The students who produced *The Untold History of Clemson University* took great care to convey to the viewers of their films that the legacies of racism, economic exploitation, and

bigotry are still very much with the campus community today, going so far as to list and show photographs of buildings still standing on campus that were constructed by enslaved or convict laborers, many of which still host classes and University functions.

Other Student Films

Other films created for the project feature interviews with fellow students, showcase historical landmarks around campus, discuss local legends and narratives, contextualize the University's success within athletics in relation to its histories, and further probe the ways in which a community's history can be written, and re-written, with strategic attention to who those histories serve and what values are foregrounded in that particular telling. Student filmmakers interviewed fellow students to reveal current attitudes, and articulated arguments through visual, audio, and other rhetorical choices. Lastly, a few groups decided to diverge slightly from the predominant thematic topics many of their classmates pursued, instead engaging secondary options the project suggested, including a revisitation of Clemson University's history of gender-based exclusionary practices and admission of women to the campus. Here, flexible project design allowed student interests to drive the multimedia productions, putting rhetorical power in the hands of students and allowing them to communicate the histories that mattered to them to the public at large. The assignment prompt for *The Retold Histories of Clemson* can be found in Appendix A.

Many project design choices helped *The Retold Histories of Clemson* to be successful, and similarly many choices would certainly benefit from further thought if repeated in future public advocacy project iterations. The particular application or program students use to edit and assemble their films will inevitably impact the filmmaking process and the distributed films themselves. The high degree of interaction student filmmakers have with particular applications and interfaces as they move through the filmmaking process requires them to function as technology critics in addition to technology users, including the political and ideological implications of the technological tools available to them (Selfe and Selfe, 69). Though as an instructor I certainly would define most projects that were submitted as having been "successful" simply through the production of new narratives on important community topics, in future iterations of this project, I hope to do more to push students to define what "success" in this project means to them, as it can certainly take on a variety of forms depending on goal, audience, and context.

Why Make Films?

Filmmaking in particular offered *The Retold Histories of Clemson* three primary affordances. First, to accomplish our primary goals of engaging the varied publics that surround our immediate local context, including our University, the class and I decided a visual component was necessary if we wanted to invoke symbols of

local community or public memory, such as the historic buildings on campus or famed athletic stadiums. In other words, to resonate with potential members of our base audience, we needed to reach them not just through our historical or advocacy messages, but with messages of shared community and neighborhood familiarity as well. Second, we knew we wanted our final multimodal project to be collaborative, and this necessitated a project design that would maximize practical acquisition of new skills (such as how to use a camera or a microphone) as well as productive transfer of old skills practiced earlier in the course (such as how to revise for consistency or how to format citations for video end credits). Lastly, the class knew it to be important to engage as large and diverse of an audience as possible if our ultimate goals were to be communicated to the public at large, and video formatted for digital distribution and circulation streams such as those found on social media forums like YouTube and Vimeo seemed the most appropriate way to do so. Our approach was calculated and goal oriented.

After the films were created, they were uploaded to a free Wordpress website. This site was public, searchable, and open to be viewed by public audiences (the site was removed from the public domain shortly after the academic year came to a close). The choice to make the project public for the duration of the semester, but private after the semester drew to a close, was one that was made democratically by each class. Additionally, the classes and I also discussed whether we wanted the projects to be featured in academic publications. Ultimately, the class decided it was best to describe the projects in publications, but to not directly feature them, which is why this article does not link to the projects directly. Distribution in the digital age requires far more than simply being uploaded to the internet, however. Henry Jenkins (2006) characterizes participatory distribution on video-supporting platforms as containing a three-stage process of "production, selection, and distribution" (275). In other words, these videos and the Wordpress website must be distributed elsewhere, or else risk being available but unutilized, thus endangering the sense of authenticity within the production process. As Jenkins points out, participatory creators as well as their audiences must always make choices about how to share and broadcast their creations in strategic, deliberate ways.

These questions of delivery, distribution, and circulation of the site were discussed by each iteration of the FYC course, and students settled on different answers for how they would like to go about circulating their videos and the website as a whole to potential audiences. Some students chose to post their videos to their personal Facebook and Twitter pages. Others shared their videos to the local subReddit page, /r/Clemson. As a group, we considered creating social media accounts for the compiled project website itself, though we decided against this due to concerns about how public audiences might react to difficult conversations about race and community responsibility in what is still a very conservative part of the United States. These conversations, we decided, would be more productively discussed in spaces and forums outside of social media sites, at least for the compiled website containing all of the videos. Lastly, I

shared *The Retold Histories of Clemson* website to both an email list and a Facebook group of fellow writing teachers at our university, some who have shown the videos to their own courses and students, including in distance-learning courses outside of South Carolina and our immediate communities.

Upon completing this project, I made it known to students that they were in no way required to make their video creations public and have them posted to the Wordpress website that I had set up. Regardless of whether the actual product was genuinely made public, the project required that students imagine a public audience, even if in reality the public would not actually be able to view their final documentary film. In this case, very real concerns about privacy, publicity, and student agency needed to be considered. As an instructor, I see a great deal of value in creating public representations of histories, values, and narratives, but I also wanted to be sure to respect the wishes, desires, and levels of comfort that students had with making the artifacts public, as well as the very real risks that can accompany participation in online forums (Reyman and Sparby, 2020). A few groups opted to not include their compositions on the final website, and students were allowed to switch groups early on in the arc of the project if they disagreed with their first group's choice regarding the level of publicity for their film. As with many projects that engage the public, transparency, honesty, compassion, care, and instructor flexibility generally go a long way toward making sure all students feel supported and comfortable with any of the choices that they might make.

While *The Retold Histories of Clemson* website remained active and public throughout the duration of the project, after the project's completion in the Spring semester of 2019, I made the site private and removed it from public circulation.

"Behind the Scenes": Access, Accessibility, & Audiences

Among the obstacles to the creation of a multimedia work like *The Retold Histories of Clemson* was the question of how to properly design an environment in which students are equipped to create and invent with technological tools, all the while avoiding the feelings of anguish and dread that can often accompany trying something new. In a multimedia project, students must learn that temporary setbacks do not constitute failure, but rather are simply a part of the invention process, especially when new technological practices are being mastered.

Many campus libraries feature technological and multimedia rental options for students (See Fig. 4). Technological literacy in the development of *The Retold Histories of Clemson* was supplemented by the availability of librarians to come in and teach our students a popular video-editing application that students were able to make use of on public library computers, on student-owned laptop computers, and even on their mobile smartphones. Few, if any, of the students had much experience recording video, and only one student reported any

experience editing films, which was limited to working on a smartphone to edit family videos for popular video-sharing forums such as YouTube and TikTok.
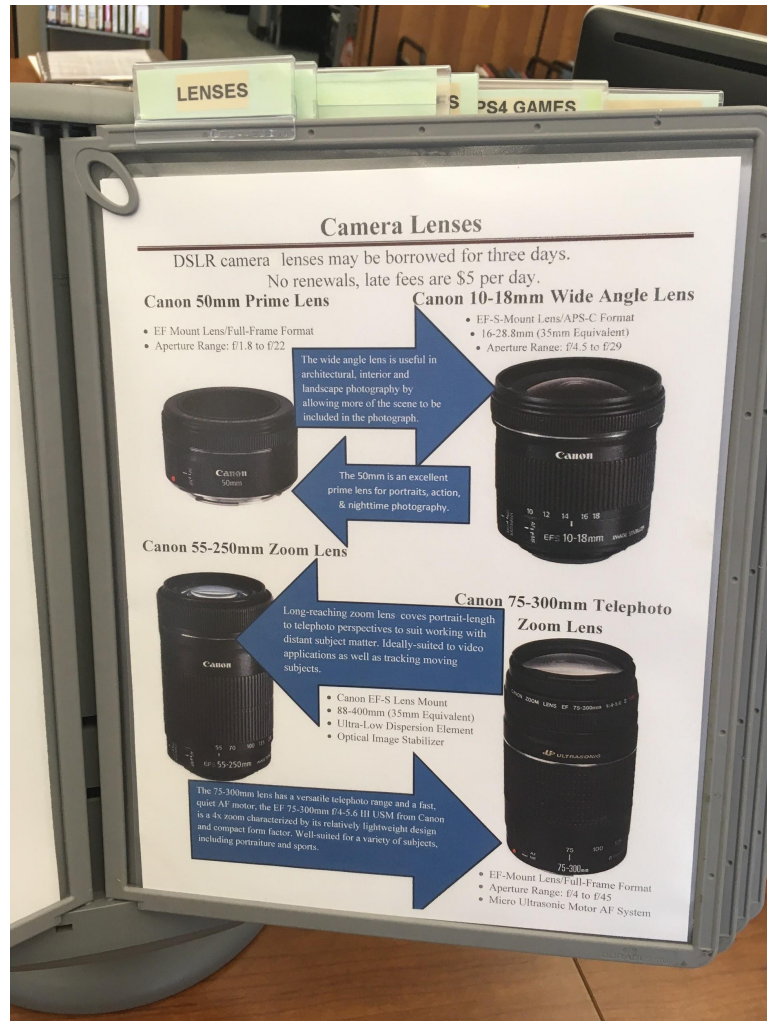

Fig. 4: A checkout binder at a University library that showcases many of the tools and technologies that are needed for multimodal projects such as filmmaking. Many of these resources are vital for students to use in multimodal projects, but access and availability are perpetual challenges for instructors to navigate.

In a single session, a technological resource librarian was able to come to our classroom and demonstrate a video editing application with students in a hands-on, active learning session. Students walked into class that day with almost no video editing experience, and left an hour later with a fully-formed video file on their computers, complete with music, scene cuts, footage edits, credits, and a working knowledge of how to further supplement their knowledge of the film editing program. Mostly, many left class with confidence, with a

demystified outlook concerning the practical process of editing footage and moving through the invention process using the audio-visual tools at their disposal. When working with audio-visual tools, clear guidelines for production as well as a clearly stated articulation of the goals of the project can prove paramount to ensuring student success. Similarly, students must be allowed time and room to experiment, to play, and finally to explore in directions they find interesting.

What was vital for the success of the project, and I argue for all multimodal projects in higher education classrooms, was the assembling of a group of individuals willing to listen, support, and assist each other in the various challenges that inevitably pop up when working with unfamiliar technologies, formats, file types, and software applications. To sustain the filmmaking process from conception and script writing all the way through filming, editing, refining, uploading, and distributing, students need to be allotted the time and space required to learn from mistakes and to adjust their process accordingly. In cases such as these, it is incumbent upon the course instructor not necessarily to provide the resources, the attention, and the technological expertise needed to assemble a full 3-minute short film, but rather to design situations in which students are put into contact with community members who are equipped with these specialized skills, competencies, and proficiencies. While I may not be an expert filmmaker, I did make myself available to my students beyond set-aside office hours allotments, including walking one student group to the library to show them a room with an available greenscreen for their film as well as helping one group dealing with wind noise in their video to locate, install, and properly utilize a lapel microphone.

One challenge we faced when making *The Retold Histories of Clemson* occurred because, even at a large campus, there was a scarcity of video cameras available for student use (See Fig. 4). The degree of scarcity for available technological tools was partially unforeseen, due primarily to the timing of the project in the final weeks of the semester, a time ripe for final multimedia projects in other courses and departments as well as for one of the campus's most popular courses, FYC. As an alternative, in an era in which 81% of Americans own some version of a smartphone according to the PEW Research Center, mobile software applications become a tangible possibility for the rhetoric and composition classroom (PEW). This number reaches 96% of Americans within the age 16-29 demographic, further supporting the idea that multimodal initiatives might benefit from incorporating some level of smartphone use in the curriculum.

Instructors cannot, of course, ever assume access to devices such as smartphones to be a given, as the technological access divide is well and alive in the United States and beyond (Anderson and Kumar, 2019; Banks, 2013; Losh, 2014). Keeping this in mind, however, we must also consider the ease of use of many technological applications, the ready availability of computers and free software application on many campuses, and finally the inexpensiveness of

production, reproduction, and distribution within digital networks. Students do not need to use industry grade software when working multimodally. In fact, free, inexpensive, or open-source tools such as Canva, Filmr, Pitivi, Openshot, Lightworks, and Adobe Spark Video are often well-suited for student use, as these tools will likely be available off campus and beyond the student's official academic curriculum, increasing the likelihood of that student to engage in multimodal creation or activism outside the confines of particular projects. Smartphones, then, are best seen in the rhetoric classroom as an asset, but not an expectation, for multimodal invention. Access to smartphones equipped with the complex, evolving, and expensive material infrastructures needed to produce a short film should not be assumed. When smartphones with these capacities happen to be present, however, they can be an asset to the classroom workflow.

In the case of *The Retold Histories of Clemson*, a number of groups decided that a smartphone-enabled production process would benefit them, including in the ease of use, the simplicity of video uploading, and the ready availability of free, inexpensive, or open-source applications such as the Filmr screenshot showcased in Fig. 5. These students, equipped with tools that often are available, but which are not systemically relied upon or necessary for full success in the course, evolved over the course of our roughly one-month unit into *cameraphone composers* who assemble a coalition of publics, engage multimedia production, and author histories that value our shared communities in ways that are public, inclusive, and dedicated to righting social injustices in small but important ways.

A second challenge we faced when assembling *The Retold Histories of Clemson* was the accessibility and usability of technological tools by every student in each of the courses. Students work with technologies in different ways, some of which can be predicted at the start of a multimedia project, and some which must be worked out as the project progresses and as challenges arise. The intersections between technology use in the classroom and opportunities for greatly expanded accessibility are explored by a number of scholars. Many have begun to make the case that instructors should consider accessibility and inclusivity prior to or wholly within any initiative that engages technology and multimedia, rather than doing so retroactively in a way that can ostracize students and fail to recognize the full scope of what accessible project design entails (Vie, 2018; Dolmage et al., 2020).

Scholars writing in rhetoric and composition (Dolmage, 2017; Dunn & Dunn De Mers, 2002; Yergeau et al., 2013) and in technical and professional communication (Meloncon, 2014; Palmeri, 2006; Ray & Ray, 1998) have proposed strategies to foreground attention to disability when we design and implement projects that use multimodal technologies. Disability is a vital consideration when designing pedagogies that use digital tools, and it is incumbent upon every instructor to consider ways in which accessibility and usability can exclude students from full participation. When considering

multimodal assignments, accessible project design must consider accessibility holistically from the project's inception. Ultimately, occasions can be designed which maximize each student's strengths and ways of participating in the construction of a film, a video, or a multimedia production. In the case of *The Retold Histories of Clemson*, we devised strategies to ensure each student contributed their best work and was able to engage the goals of the project with equal vigor, contribution, and opportunity. For instance, a student who is either unable or uninterested in recording the video voiceover has additional contribution opportunities that include script writing, location and selection of featured images, video editing, and coordinating the camera and microphone rental process.
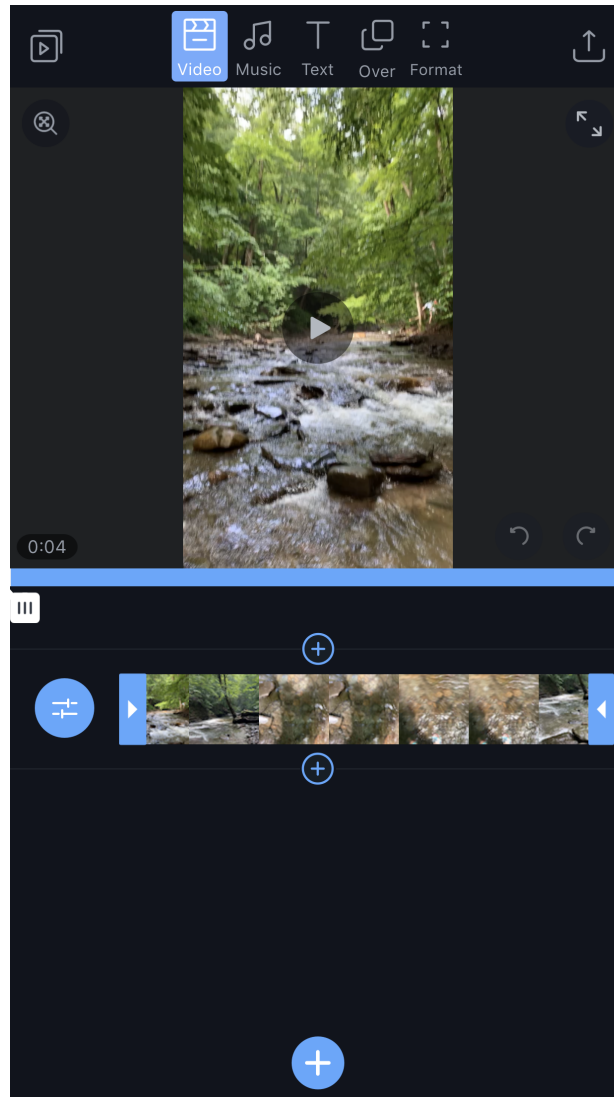

Fig. 5: A screenshot from the mobile phone video production application *Filmr*, used by at least one group in *The Retold Histories of Clemson* project.

A final challenge that this project required our course to navigate relates to the different levels of interest students had in pursuing a project that forced many of them to confront questions of power, privilege, and identity. While many students participating in this project embraced the challenge of pluralizing narratives and uncovering alternative ways to view "conventional" histories, some students were less comfortable confronting difficult and violent histories within their local campus communities. In the United States, anti-racist and social justice work are hardly uncontroversial, especially in settings and institutions that privilege traditional perspectives invested in maintaining status-quo narratives. Commitments to social justice, equity, and advocacy are hardly universal, and projects that engage these ambitions must grapple with a multitude of perspectives related to how local histories, especially those concerned with race, gender, and disability, are remembered and represented. Writing and composition often engage challenging, difficult, and controversial topics, and outcomes for learning certainly do not always develop exactly as instructors would like them to (Miller, 1994). It is important, however, that issues such as these not deter composition instructors in their commitments to justice, advocacy, and activism, though these commitments certainly present challenges that must be carefully considered.

Participatory culture demands that film technologies be utilized by not only experts, but also by everyday citizens who are not quite amateurs either. Contemporary citizenship and rhetorical dexterity cannot be understood uncoupled from the modes and apparatuses in which they are distributed, and this includes online video forums. Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel (2012) contend that "ordinary rhetors should appropriate the rhetorical tools of graphic designers, illustrators, photographers, and videographers in order to assume responsibility for the production of culture" (xii). If we as instructors in higher education can realize, even partially, the democratization of visual-technological tools in our classrooms, our communities, and in our public forums, we may be well on our way to ensuring students are equipped to be the *cameraphone composers*, the democratic participants, that contemporary information ecologies demand. *The Retold Histories of Clemson* assembles student rhetorical production, multimodal technologies, histories of race and racism, and modes of public communication to practice advocacy through documentary filmmaking in the FYC course.

Conclusions

In *The Retold Histories of Clemson*, a small group of developing rhetors channeled their diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and concerns about their communities into the act of assembling a coalition of voices, filmic images, and personal commentaries that functioned to redefine the community they all collectively contribute to. If the *available means of persuasion* are indeed suddenly a whole lot more available, then cameraphone composers need be equipped with occasions designed not only to nurture multimodal invention as a rhetorical art, but also with occasions designed to cultivate the newfound

possibility of a role as *community educator* as well. When we design occasions in which students are empowered to articulate and extend their values, voices, and aspirations to communities of public stakeholders, we put expressive power into the hands of cameraphone composers and let them perform important work for their communities.

Fig. 6: After completion of *The Retold Histories of Clemson* video project, each class celebrated with a "film festival" party that had plenty of fruit and popcorn to go around.

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Appendix A: Assignment Prompt for *The Retold Histories of Clemson* Project

Project Requirements: Your project will make an argument related to **Clemson's History with Diversity**.

- **Option #1**: Your 3-minute film documentary will argue that Clemson community members have neglected **Clemson's early history** with issues related to slavery, to discrimination based on race, and on topics related to race in general in the 19th, 20th, and/or 21st centuries. Your documentary will argue that we ought to pay more attention to these issues today. Your documentary will tell that story of Clemson's history.
- **Option #2**: Your 3-minute film documentary will argue that Clemson community members have neglected Clemson University's history with sexism, admittance of women, and discrimination based upon gender. Your documentary will argue that we ought to pay more attention to these issues and events today. Your documentary will tell that story.
- **Option #3**: Your 3-minute film documentary will argue that Clemson community members have neglected Clemson University's history with some issue related to a particular place, space, monument, or public marker on or around campus. For this option, you will give us a "walking tour film" which tells a story concerning our campus' history.
- **Option #4:** Your 3-minute documentary film will cover a diversity-related topic of your group's choice that follows the above format. Your group will need to obtain a go-ahead from your professor if you decide to pursue this option.