

The Anger and Anxieties of the Asian and African Diaspora as Explored Through Poetry Film
and Textile Arts

by

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If one compares literature to film, traditional storytelling is almost identical in both mediums. Protagonist is introduced, gains some companions, goes on a quest, slays the dragon, and saves the princess. And while non-traditional storytelling- namely, poetry and embroidery- is universally accepted and admired within art, its film equivalent has not found the same mainstream respect or recognition. Concurrently, the stories of people of color- their hardships, their humanity, their dreams- have only recently been welcome into the mainstream of storytelling. In my project, I hope to bring these two often ignored topics and marry them into a piece of work that does justice to both mediums.

Poetry film, while it may consist of actual readings of poetry or spoken word, is more accurately defined by the synthesis of visual and nonvisual story telling into a non-linear amalgam of metaphor, allusion, and performance that neither film nor literature could do on its own. Poetry film has long been associated with people of color and their struggles, namely Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, Mrigankasekhar Ganguly and Beyoncé Knowles. Embroidery, as a textile art, has long been associated with women and as such has been deprived of critical and commercial appreciation. In recent years, textile arts have been reclaimed by indigenous communities and other communities of color to combat racism, nationalism and other social issues. This project seeks to reclaim both of these underappreciated art forms to tell the story of African and Asian deities as reflections of dying cultures and their reactions to their destruction by forces of colonization and imperialism.

This project began for me in November, 2014. I was a senior in high school, still doing theatre and only just understanding my racial and sexual identity. In that same time, the Ferguson protests were in the most tense moments— following the murder of Michael Brown, the discussion of police brutality and #BlackLivesMatter entered a degree of national conversation previously unheard of. The discussion even came to my small town of Boone, North Carolina. Boone is a fairly homogeneous town— there is very little racial diversity. I grew

up as one of the few people of color in my school. I remember turning, as I often did, to the internet to formulate my understanding of the protests. There was a post on social networking site Tumblr by a black user who said although she was filled with anger and sadness and frustration, she could not express herself honestly. Instead, she had to mask her true feelings and express herself in a way that was convenient for white people, so as to not appear as a threat. So this sent me on spiral that ended with a single question: when are people of color allowed to be angry?

As I began exploring this concept, I knew I had to explore it through film. At the time, I had extensive experience with theatre and live performance and would go on to make an award-winning short film with a group of my high school classmates. I wanted to put the oppression and the rage I was exploring on a screen where no one could ignore it.

When I was researching what story I wanted to tell, I found the mythology surrounding Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of sexuality and warfare. This goddess fascinated me for multiple reasons. The dichotomy of sex and bloodshed is a combination that is incredibly foreign to Western ideology. This concept of a woman, fully in control of her own sexuality, demanded blood for retribution she deserves was also incredibly compelling for me. So when I first conceptualized this project, it was a trilogy of films exploring the mythological cycles of three different deities. The first followed Inanna during her famous descent into the underworld and the betrayal from her lover. The second would follow Ala, an amalgamation of several nature goddesses, as she confronts humanity for the destruction of her domain. This storyline was not directly informed by any myth, but was an original creation using these figures as characters. The third followed Yue Lao, the Chinese man in the moon, realizing he is alone. But as this project progressed, I realized the realistic scope of my film would have to be limited, and while the trilogy was deeply impactful for me, I found Ala's story to be the most compelling, as well as the most original.

This project follows Ala, the Igbo goddess of fertility and nature. She represents the modern black American (more specifically, the modern black woman) who lives in a world built on their backs but one that kills them senselessly. Her lover, Enbilulu, the Mesopotamian god of rivers and knowledge, recognizes the atrocities committed against Ala, but urges her to turn a cheek and accept her fate. He represents the community of non-black men of color like myself who, although we are privy to the anxieties and oppression of black people, we truly do not understand what it looks like and are products of white oppression ourselves. Ala's daughters - Aranyani, the Hindu goddess of forest animals, Menhit, the Egyptian goddess of lions and massacres, and Shala, the Sumerian goddess of compassion and grain- all express facets of the mindset of oppressed women of color, from contemplation to rage to the instability of self. Eventually, Enbilulu drifts off into death, paralyzed by his own apathy, and Ala recognizes her own pain and allows herself and her daughters to grow from it.

Originally, the project focused much more on the horror elements and featured a subplot about humans entering the forest and were subsequently slaughtered by Ala and her daughters. However, I realized this storyline offered nothing to a story and was more exploitative horror than actually serving a purpose to the material. The ending was also once much more violent. Enbilulu, disgusted by Ala's pursuit of vengeance, killed Shala. In a fit of rage, Ala killed Enbilulu, sending her into a spiral of depression and apathy that leads to Menhit's murder by her mother's hands and Ala's eventual suicide. This too I found to be skewed. It turned the rage of communities of color into a mindless, almost animalistic and made judgement on the futility of that rage. However, as my understanding and knowledge of social justice and racial oppression grew, I understood that this perspective made any activism or anger against white supremacy viewed as some fruitless childish attack. Even now, the ending sits uneasily with me. I had hoped it would highlight the need for community, the idea the tragedy can bind us together behind a cause just as much as rage, and community can give us hopes where rage gives us

none. Even now, that feels condescending to me in a situation that is so delicate and is ever changing. However, I recognize that I could constantly revamp and rewrite this script to better reflect the political arena we live in.

When originally planning for a poetry film, I pulled from a variety of different filmmakers whose filmography was similar to the mood of this film. Abbas Kiarostami is often credited as the creator of poetry film with his works such as “Taste of Cherry” and “Close-Up.” However, the filmmaker who influenced this project the most was Beyoncé. Her film released alongside her album “Lemonade” was an artistic masterpiece that redefined the creative experience for any artist of color. From her emulation of the Yoruba water goddess of sexuality Oshun to her cinematography relating to the Igbo Landing, a famed mass suicide of slaves off the coast of Georgia to the beauty of a group of black women attacked by the media coming together in a creative collective on a former plantation. And the poetry itself, written by Somali poet Warsan Shire, is utterly transcendent. Much of the mood and the spirit of “Lemonade” directly influenced how I envisioned the original poetry film.

However, reality quickly snuffed out the dream. There was simply not enough interest and people willing to participate in an experimental film of this nature on East Carolina University’s campus. And so, I had to quickly adapt and reshape my entire project. When researching different mediums to tell this story, I went toward textile arts, specifically embroidery. This art form is traditionally viewed more as a craft as opposed to an actual fine art. Embroidery has historically been viewed as a woman’s artform and has been excluded from critical analysis. Textile arts also play a large role in communities of colors, as artifacts of this medium are sometimes the most remarkable surviving art pieces from ancient communities. So, I adapted the script to have smaller vignettes that could stand alone and be interpreted into individual embroidery hoops. I used size and complexity to try to emphasize major scenes and plotlines. I references ancient reliefs in temples for several of the hoops.

While this project did not go exactly as planned, I was incredibly proud of the work I managed to get done and the art I was able to create. Presenting at RCAW and the ECU Global Issues Conference was incredibly satisfying and allowed me to share this work with a much wider audience. Still, in the end, I have learned that when dealing racial oppression, it is important to recognize one's own privilege in storytelling. I started this project when I was very young, and now as an older college-educated man, I recognize that by telling this story, I was taking up resources and space from voices who could tell this story and own it more comfortably than I can.