Some Kind of Paradise

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Some Kind of Paradise

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Abstract

Some Kind of Paradise, or SKP, is a cultural media and publishing organization that recently launched in Denver. Mostly featuring the works of artists and creators of color, SKP wants to change the dominant narratives around arts, activism, and publishing. The documentary will explore some of this discourse by featuring the four artists that have founded SKP: Adrian Molina, Sheree Brown, Ramon and Michelle Gabrieloff-Parish. By interviewing the artists about their collective and their ideas of paradise, the film explores the larger influences of Afrofuturism and artivism on their work. In the process of making this film, the filmmaker learns what paradise means to her – a sense of belonging and a community. As a woman of color and a foreigner in the United States, she struggles to belong in most spaces. However, while realizing the intersection of her version of paradise and that of SKP’s, she finds solidarity and community with the four artists that are at the heart of SKP.
Some Kind of Paradise

Some Kind of Paradise is a documentary centered on the ideology of a cultural media and publishing organization named SKP. Founded by two families of artists, SKP aims to provide a gathering space for artists/authors/creatives of color and other underrepresented voices. Michelle, Ramon, Sheree, and Adrian want to publish and promote SKP creatives while challenging popular culture and its dominant narratives. In the long run, their goal is to usher in the Ecotopian Era, which according to their manifesto, is the earth-based, just models of living and social progress. This is the paradise they seek.

I first learned about SKP through Michelle Gabrieloff-Parish who is one of its founders. She has been a mentor to me since I met her through my work at the Environmental Center and the Women’s Resource Center on campus. Since she has always encouraged me to participate in activism outside the institutional setting, Michelle let me attend some of SKP’s first meetings. There I met Ramon, Sheree, and Adrian for the first time. After I became familiar with how they envisioned SKP, I proposed my idea for a film. I wanted it to be collaborative and useful. Not only would I be making this film to complete my Honors, but I wanted to create a piece that SKP could use to promote their work. Cross-promoting each other’s work in the collective is a big part of SKP’s agenda. Spending time with the Gabrieloff-Parish family at their Hanukkah celebration and their birthday gatherings, I got to know these individuals as friends. Their embrace of my work has inspired me to do my best in making a film that represented them.

In the process of creating this film, I have taken interest in my personal idea of paradise. As an artist of color in this country, I have struggled to find spaces where I belonged. Most spaces that I inhabited were not designed for me, making the need to belong even greater. With SKP I found a community that embraced me and I healed with them. Through my involvement
with SKP, I am learning to embrace my present and future as an artist of color. My engagement with this community motivates me to further develop my practice as a self-proclaimed artivist in the future. Their artistic and political vision of the future aligns with the future I envision in my utopic dreams, making the goal of this film even greater. I believe that *Some Kind of Paradise* will help create a platform where artists of colors can come together and share each other’s work, while promoting a sense of justice and activism in the larger community. In my discussion of the film, first, I will put the work that SKP does in a historical and cultural context as I analyze the influence of Afrofuturism on their work. Secondly, I will consider why documentary and artivist forms of filmmaking are important in the context of *Some Kind of Paradise*. Lastly, I will evaluate the form and structure of my film.
Afrofuturism: Is Space the Place?

If you can’t see and relay an understandable vision of the future, your future will be co-opted by someone else’s vision, one that will not necessarily have your best interests at heart.

–Ivor Hartmann, AfroSF, 2012

Mark Dery, a cultural critic, noted, “African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind)” (Dery, 1993). Before Dery coined the term Afrofuturism, its theory and practice have been explored by Black artists as they analyzed the intersection of their history, culture, and imagination. In a world where there is a lack of regard for Black lives, Black creators imagine Black characters in the past, present, and the future. This paradigm of Afrofuturism creates a sense of representation and liberation for Black people. The same can be said about SKP as they aim to decolonize and liberate the representation of people of color in the media. They often accomplish this by drawing on Afrofuturist imageries in their work. Both Ramon and Sheree identify as Afrofuturists, so I wanted to recognize the movement’s influence on their personal and collective work in the film. I wanted to visualize the traces of Afrofuturism with the art and poetry that SKP featured in their first zine (see Fig.1). At the same time, I did not want to focus the film primarily on Afrofuturism because I am not Black and should not participate in a space that reserved for Black people.
Figure 1. A collage from SKP’s first zine

Not being of that identity, I do not want to appropriate the theory and the practice of Afrofuturism in my film. Instead I will provide the thoughts and the works of self-proclaimed Afrofuturists who are in SKP.

There is a point in the film when Ramon mentions a phrase that is circulated widely in the Afrofuturist circles – “Space is the Place.” A term used by Sun Ra, who is described by Ramon as the “father of Afrofuturism,” it was once adapted into both a film and an album by the esteemed experimental artist. His philosophy and aesthetic have influenced the imaginations of many Black people as they could see their intergalactic futures in Sun Ra’s work. Ramon argues that the phrase does not advocate for space expansion, but it rather focuses on an expansion of our minds. For Ramon, space is not an answer to our problems, instead he proposes that we start
realizing the potential of the planet that we already inhabit. Sun Ra’s influence is evident in not just SKP’s work, but also in the works of more contemporary artists such as Janelle Monáe. According to Ytasha Womack, who wrote a book on Afrofuturism, Monáe’s popularity is tied to the fact that her work creates a new audience for Afrofuturism: “I think that's why a lot of people enjoy Janelle Monáe, because she talks about this android, this ‘other’. The symbolism is understood,” she says. “A lot of people can associate with this concept of otherness for a whole host of reasons, many of which are not racial, so there's a connection there” (Pezanoski-Browne, 2013). I think the concept of otherness is a good way for all people of color to relate to the ideas of Afrofuturism. However, we have to take a step back and realize our own “otherness” in this space that is specifically created to empower Black people. I think we can always appreciate the strides that Afrofuturism has made in terms of portraying inclusive worlds where all kinds of identities are present. We can thank Afrofuturism for challenging the existing narrative and helping other movements to carve out their futures, one example of which would be Chicanafuturism.

According to Catherine S. Ramírez, many people of color are often “disassociated from science and technology, signifiers of civilization, rationality, and progress” (Ramírez, 2008). We are portrayed as savages that are “fixed in a primitive and racialized past,” while white people dominate present and future narratives. This rationalization also means that many people of color have been harmed and murdered in the name of science and technology. Some of the examples that Ramirez brought up were forced sterilizations, environmental racism, and settler colonialism. When she coined the term Chicanafuturism in 2004, she was borrowing from theories of Afrofuturism and rethinking the “relationship of Chicana/o cultural identity and cultural production to science, technology, and progress.” Chicanafuturism reflects the
experiences of the diaspora as well, as it “articulates colonial and postcolonial histories of *indigenismo, mestizaje*, hegemony, and survival.”

SKP draws on both Afrofuturist and Chicanafuturist visions when it promotes a world where people of color have not only decolonized their minds and practices, but also have liberated themselves. As Sheree says in her interview, “there is a difference between decolonization and liberation.” For SKP, decolonizing is to critique the systems of oppression that have been around for a long time, while liberating is to break free of that cycle of oppression. One way to implement liberation is to create art that envisions people of color in the future, hinting at the fact that we must survive the present to get there. Works in the realms of Afrofuturism and Chicanafuturism prompt us to recognize and reimagine the status quo by presenting a future that is diverse. I am using a poem titled “Afrofuturism” in the film, where Sheree brings out more reasons why Afrofuturism is relevant, specifically in the context of SKP. I think that it is important for me to promote Afrofuturist work without exploiting or appropriating it. I can be ally to the people I am featuring in my film, inspired by Kelly Gallagher’s approach to filmmaking (Velez, 201). As an ally to Black future, I think it is important for me to research the history and theory of Afrofuturism on my own without expecting to be handed this knowledge. Another aspect of my film that is closely tied to Afrofuturism is the need for digitization and democratization of media. Without having a safe space for new discourses to happen, activism and art cannot flourish together. Online spaces can become just that. I will talk about digitization and accessibility in the later paragraphs as I discuss the politics of radical filmmaking.
Documentary Filmmaking and Artivism

White filmmakers, artists, writers, etc., don't have the moral dilemma of either doing what's "best" for the work or what's "best" for their culture.

–Cecile Emeke, VICE, 2015

The main reason why I have decided to use the documentary form for Some Kind of Paradise is because it is one of the most impactful forms of filmmaking. Impact is an important element because it reflects your film’s purpose and intent. However, it can also be deceiving, as the filmmaker does not always have the foreknowledge of the true impact of their film. There is a certain element of surprise to documentary filmmaking. Most of the narrative comes from the editing, so you are not fully aware of how your film is going to turn out while you are filming. The filming can be either exciting or disastrous. While I was in the filming process, I have had the opportunity to celebrate Hanukkah for the first time. I also felt responsible when one of the people I interviewed had seizures after we finished filming. Overall the most enjoyable part of making a documentary has been the pre-production phase when I got to know the people I wanted to feature in my film. The quality of the content was directly correlated with the amount of trust that was built between everyone at SKP, my crew, and I.

There is a certain amount of responsibility that comes with making a documentary. Because there is a hierarchical relationship between the filmmaker, the subjects of the film, and the audience, it is necessary to be critical of that relationship when you are filming. Bill Nichols presents the hierarchy in the context of access to the means of representation: “Do subjects have the means to represent themselves? Do they have alternative access to the media apart from that
Figure 2. An excerpt from Sheree Brown’s poem “Afrofuturism”

provided by a given filmmaker?” (Nichols, 2006). In the case of SKP, there is more access to representation than in most scenarios (Fig.2), however, that does not mean I can abandon my “ethical obligation to avoid misrepresentation, exploitation and abuse.” In order to be reflective of my position as a filmmaker in relation to the people I am interviewing, I need to remember that “the question of ethics is at the root of any consideration of how a documentary works” (Rosenthal, 2005). Rosenthal argues that documentary filmmakers often use their subjects as a tool to make a predetermined point, one that reflects the intentions of the filmmaker, but not necessarily the people who are featured in the film. In order to avoid this scenario, I was determined to collaborate with SKP in every step of the process. I made sure that there was space to discuss the project, to review my collaborators’ involvement, to invite them into the editing
process, and to discuss their agency in the film. Because I was using and exposing these people’s ideas, I wanted to make sure that I was representing them in a way that was not appropriative or exploitative. As someone of many marginalized identities, I was not willing to lose the trust of people who were used to being exploited by the media.

Because the agenda of my film was to promote the work of artists of color, I identified *Some Kind of Paradise* as an artivist film, meaning it combined both art and activism. I was introduced to the term through SKP, as people were describing themselves and their work as artivist. There is inherent political agenda in the practice of artivism. There is also a convergence of digitization and activism, bringing us back to the concept of accessibility politics. According to Latorre, there is a larger “commitment to a transformation of the self and the world through creative expression” in artivism (Latorre, 2012). This describes the work that SKP is doing in terms of promoting and publishing marginalized voices. This is a “strategy of survival and a necessary creative response to oppression” according to Latorre.
Form and Structure

Film/video and animation hold an important space of potentiality for artists who want to create visualizations of resistance to racism, exploitation, capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy, and colonialism.

– Kelly Gallagher

The film starts with Michelle talking about the lack of funding and resources for artists of color. The institutional racism that she eludes to is everywhere; however, she proposes that we respond to it by flowing resources in our own direction. This shows the root of the problem and puts the film into perspective. After all, Some Kind of Paradise is a project sanctioned by a white institution where racism prevails. For the aesthetic of the film, I did not have any significant influences, but I knew I wanted the look of the film to be as muted as possible. I like the muted colors that the Black Magic cameras provide, so I did most of my filming with one. I have done minimal color correcting on my footage, as I wanted to preserve that original look. The poems/intertitles provide a good breathing point in between all the discussions that arise in the film. The pauses force people to engage and to reflect on what they have seen and heard so far. I have used excerpts from Michelle and Sheree’s poems to function as pauses as well as transitions between different themes. After a discussion on the representation of people of color in the media and Afrofuturism, Michelle ends the film by mentioning how paradise looks different to different people. We leave on a positive note as Michelle gives us a perspective on representation and solidary in art.

I find Kelly Gallagher’s thoughts on the politics of accessibility and distribution relatable: “I feel like it’s imperative that radical work becomes accessible to the masses, so that people can
see this work and feel like, “this is something I can do,” or “this is a way of storytelling I could employ myself.” As a filmmaker I am interested in making my work readily available whether it would by holding small screenings or putting the films online. The idea of accessibility formed the structure of Some Kind of Paradise, as I was trying to find elements that were not as accessible and replacing them with more accessible forms. For example, I was originally interested in working with film stock, as I enjoy shooting and processing film, as well as thinking about haptic visuality. However, I decided to shoot video to make the filmmaking process more accessible to myself and to the audience. Another example would be me not using my handwritten text because I did not find it to be more accessible than a legible font. I agree with Ramon when he says that everyone has the potential to be a media maker in this day and age. I
think another reason why I want the film to be accessible is because it can provide a point of reference for other individuals who want to explore filmmaking.

For the artists’ introductions, I have decided to animate them. I have originally wanted to incorporate animation into the entire film, however, I realized that it was not going to be possible in the time frame that I had. Nevertheless, by showing a small glimpse into the animated world with the introductions, I was able to create imagery that was both engaging and functional. The animated introductions provide a good contrast to the rest of the film. I really wanted the audience to remember these artists’ names and faces. Another utility of the animation was the collaboration between my friend Evan Meyer and myself. I have done the handwritten text as part of the animation and Evan helped me animate it to the sound. My film is radical in its content and I wanted to immerse my crew and myself in it. As young filmmakers in an academic setting, we do not get many opportunities to be learn about Afrofuturism and radical filmmaking. Since I did most of the construction of the narrative in post production, I wanted to collaborate with people during this process. On top of having Evan help me with animation, I employed my friend Erin Swenson to help me out with sound. A big part of the filmmaking process was forming a community with my crew and my SKP collaborators. Some Kind of Paradise has been about providing time and space for my collaborators and myself to be free in our means of expression. This film is about us and for us. This ties back to my idea of paradise. I believe that being involved with this community of artists has inspired me to heal and become a better artist.
Conclusion

The media is an alienating space for many people of color. The absence of racial diversity can turn any space hostile, however, in some pockets of this space, artists of color are coming together, supporting each other, and creating work that shows the world for how diverse it actually is. The guidance and camaraderie of such artists encouraged me to pursue the making of this film. While searching for their versions of paradise, I have found my own within this community of artists who are connecting and publishing under the umbrella of SKP. Perhaps for the first time since I moved to the U.S., I feel affirmed and supported.

I have to constantly ask myself why I am making this film and who it is for. Throughout the process of making this film, I have wanted the film to benefit the people that I was featuring in the film. SKP is a paradigm for understanding and re-imagining the world. I wanted to share this paradigm so we could decolonize and liberate our ways of thinking. The making of this film will not only inform my future artivist work, it has also taught me the importance of healing through community engagement. There are a lot of reasons why I decided to make *Some Kind of Paradise*, but ultimately I wanted to create a safe space for communities of color to have a discourse around issues that affect us. I hope the film helps other artists of color to feel less alienated and less invisible, while encouraging them to thrive in their practices.
References


