

DECOLONIZE YOUR MIND: A CRITICAL FILM
EXAMINATION OF SPOKEN WORD POETRY IN THE
BOULDER/DENVER COMMUNITY

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Abstract:

Decolonize Your Mind is a project that began in 2009 in Dr. Aldama's Chicano Poetics class. The film documents the work of students and people within the Denver/Boulder poetry community. It explores the words of performers through visual and aural manipulation by digital mediums including music from the HipHop and Cumbia communities that include local artists from Denver, CO and Eugene, OR. The film follows a line, whose words speak of chaos, oppression, self-sacrifice and education. The film presents the poets of Denver's Café Cultura as a progression from the campus to the community. The postproduction process was a key to the project because it guided me to editing. This honors project culminated my career at CU and serves as a bridge to careers outside of the academy as I graduate May 2011. *Decolonize Your Mind* is a critical recap and exploration of all I have retained from Ethnic Studies, Film Production Program of University of Colorado at Boulder community.

To introduce the project I would like to state that the project is based primarily on the production of the film *Decolonize Your Mind*. The film (hard copy) that has been submitted to the Honors council which stands at 18 minutes and represents literally a thousand hours of editing, mixing, and polishing from hundreds of hours of raw footage. The film is an aesthetic attempt to visually represent spoken word poetry so that sequences are poetic/visual representations of the spoken word that was recorded in different live events at CU Boulder and in Denver in 2009-2011. The proceeding write up has been created as an artist statement and an overview of the themes of the film and its production. Hip Hop is a major component of the film because I see Hip Hop as a social, political and cultural movement of my generation. Hip Hop is not the basis of the write up but is sourced in the project as an extension of spoken word in the Denver/Boulder poetry community.

As an artist I use light to describe the world around us. Light is the fundamental creator of life and life experience. With light I create a recreation of our world and movements that expose my audience to the connections between all cultures. We continue to remain divided instead of fully embracing the differences that make our existence unique. It has been my goal as an artist to unite our people through commonality in ideas and values in order to create a more humanist and respectful community. Our vision of the world is as necessary to the human cause as the water that we need to survive. Without water the world would not be allotted the miracle of the life. I see cinema as a metaphorical representation of water and light with the vision of cinema as light and its aural contexts as water. Water and light are unique because that provide us with all that we know and understand.

My influence steams from my own life experiences and the patience of my Mother and Father. My Brother Ben Caiazza and Uncle Dennis Caiazza, who are both professional musicians, have trained my ear and provided me with a wealth of musical articulation. My older brother Aaron Caiazza is a filmmaker in New York City struggling to find his place but continually building a career through experience and practice. His influence is channeled by love, guidance, connections and a place to stay in Brooklyn as I worked in a post-production house in the city. Spike Lee has had a profound influence on my life because he has created his realty and arranged it in order to convey the struggles and aspirations of the Black community. The French New Wave, the cinema of Russia and the third world as well as Robert Bresson have exposed me to the realities, absurdities and truths of our manufactured world. Hip Hop music, in all of its forms (jazz, funk, soul, blues, etc.), constantly reminds me where our country has been and what it is still recovering from. I am not only describing the heartless period of legal enslavement of African peoples but also the struggles all of our brothers and sisters face assimilating into the American mainstream. As poets, writers and musicians Saul Williams, Erykah Badu and Tupac Shakur have inspired my determination because they have/had incredible talent and an equally structured work ethic. Without the ability to move forward, continue on and practice all of our gifts, we have no foundation to truly create. Practice is essential to embody your craft and personally guide it to new frontiers. Terrance Malick and Ingmar Bergman are the most creatively influencing filmmakers because their work is unique to their our identities but align human values with mind and body. With this strong connection all cultures and peoples willing can participate in a transcendental experience uniting us in the natural and the true.

I am an artist. I have chosen a craft. I have been exposed to the historical and the contemporary. And I practice and will always practice. This is something I was afraid of because I never saw myself as an “artist”. I believed an artist was a person who wore ridiculous clothes and painted self-portraits in his or her bathroom. I am not that artist but I am a film and video artist. The education I’ve received has no doubt catered to my life goals and artistic choices. I’ve always had a camera in my hands and with the guidance of photography teachers in high school and the Film and Ethnic Studies Departments of the University of Colorado at Boulder I am contextually and technologically experienced to create and practice the art of cinema. Our sounds and images are the human experience so identity is basis of every frame, note and beat.

Decolonize Your Mind is a piece that began like all of my films, inspiring but unfunded. Our lack of money for the project has in no way deterred us from our ultimate goal of film festival screenings, screenings in the community and as an educational tool in Dr. Aldama’s Chicano/Chicana Poetics class. The film is able to inspire the class but also expose them to the profound work being done in the Boulder/Denver spoken word community. In the beginning Dr. Aldama asked me to record our class as we practiced our spoken word pieces and tape the final performance in the S.O.R.C.E. lounge at the end of the semester. During the class we watched a film called *Slam* starring spoken word poet Saul Williams that uses the inner working of both film and spoken word to paint the canvas with positive energy, both visually and aurally, in the forefront of a grim and disparaging setting. With our film we create an eclectic mix that discusses and critiques the many problems facing all of us. Often times people believe that if you litter you are leaving your trash some place you will not have to deal with when in fact you are

contributing to a dirty city. The same idea applies when it comes to freedoms, stereotypes and misogyny, if one suffers than we all suffer; we are all one. The film is meant to take you on a journey through the lives of the underrepresented but also give you a sense of where these people come from. In order to understand how we all are affected by adversity we must hear the words of those who are overcoming these obstacles. We create a physical place (Café Culture, our spoken word classroom and S.O.R.C.E) and a metaphorical space where both viewer and performer can feel comfortable to express themselves. These spaces are crucial to the piece because it represents both the campus and the community, which should coexist and interact in order to grow from our prior ignorance.

Spoken word poetry is an art that has existed since humans have given meaning to the sounds we make. The word carries a message whether or not those who hear them understand the language they are spoken in. The real meaning of the word is how the word is presented and where it is presented in relation to the words around it.

Performance is a key component in the art of spoken word and when used aesthetically can add another level of communicative emotion to the piece. “A chief characteristic of poetry is its rhythm, distinguishable by the poet’s use of accents, word length, and pauses in thought; and one of the genuine pleasures of reading poetry is the recognition of the rhythm.” (Armour, 88) Articulation is where spoken word gets its harshest critics and where it shines as an outstanding approach to expression. Often times we hear people making fun of the way some spoken word poets articulate words but this intensity, when used in conjunction with the themes of the piece, can create visual and aural stimulation. Slang terminology is another enticing component of spoken word because it invites its

audience into the unknown and exotic while encapsulating the historical and connecting the audience to a new cultural belief system.

Café Cultura is a place where all are welcome and those willing to speak are aloud to speak. The forum for Café Cultura is spoken word poetry but many community members choose alternatives means of expressing themselves through words. Poems are often read or recited along with musical performances, narrative story telling, theatrics, break dancing and community members who want to converse with the audience and get reactions or promote educational or extracurricular resources and activities for underprivileged and underrepresented students. CU alumni, students of Dr. Aldama's spoken word poetry class and Denver community members founded Café Cultura Collective as a way to carry on another generation of poets after the death of beloved Chicano Poet Lalo Delgado.

The language of cinema is tied to the language of poetry. We use words to describe how we feel and tell stories. At its essence this is how film and poetry are used. Film is the poetry of art and poetry its counterpart. They work in tandem and create the everyday and the extraordinary. They bring us closer through understanding and affection and separate us by exposing our true intentions. "Climaxes, unplanned, have all the more energy for being so. They are experiential, neither purely auditory nor purely visual. Very often, they derive from the palpable tension between the sound and the picture." (Fausty, 107) Film and poetry are our existence because the words of film and the movement of poetry can only be compared to the movement of dance. The movement and the gesticulation are what interest us. They are the materials that bring us to the theater on stage and screen. We desire human interaction and emotion and without either we could

not exist. Film and poetry provide us with these human essentials and lead us to a community that is constantly trying to understand each other and ourselves. We seek to understand and through movement and performance, language and light our world is created and perceived.

Perception of movement is only critical if one's desire to understand light and language only important if we wish to communicate with our surroundings. We move through a world that we have no control over. The control we assume to possess is only achieved by the monotony of our days. The cinema recreates these human characteristics and these characteristics are constantly being incorporated into the performances of our lives. We perform everyday whether we are aware of it or not. How we brush our hair, how we carry ourselves around the opposite sex, where we choose to look and not look are all factors of our performance. These performances also take place on the spoken word poetry stage and are written or documented on the screen. Since we are all performers we all have the ability to perform on the stage through theatrics and poetry. This is why spoken word is accessible to all because we all live our own lives and have our own lived experiences.

Our own language and the language of film are based on the same fundamental features. They both use language to communicate and they both use language to convey the emotions of the past, present or future. Language is the structure to our connections in life. We as humans are able to have connections before the spoken word but the word is what truly brings us together. "The word is the message because there is clarity in the word. First, the object that is photographed has its own rhythm. Second, rhythm comes from the relationship between the images on the screen. Third, the soundtrack

complements the visual rhythms of the movie.” (Armour, 88) Poetry and film use clarity as well and ambiguity to captivate its audience but also provide the expression of the piece.

Light and poetry are connected because light illuminates the darkness in the same way poetry rejuvenates an idea or belief. Sergei Eisenstein was a filmmaker and a poet who translated poetry to film through montage. His montages work aesthetically similar to the metrics of poetry causing tension through rhythm and juxtapositions. “It is from this principle that the whole charm of poetry derives. Its rhythm arises as a conflict between the metric measure employed and the distribution of accents, over-riding this measure.” (Eisenstein, 48) One can expose a roll of film to present an idea to an unassuming individual and one can also present a conjecture of words to an audience who may have never imagined the idea in that context. We are all learning how to cope with and understand the world around us and film and poetry allow us to work together. Poetry and film is the art of our generation because they allow us to express ourselves in any conceivable form.

Dr. Arturo Aldama and myself created this film using music, digital/film video/editing, still images, compositing and audio sampling. We used music to underline moments of clarity and heighten the emotions of the artists. My brother, my good friend Skyler Whitley and Dr. Aldama’s favorite artists provide music for the film. “When filmmakers combine cinematic images and musical gestures they untie two of our most compelling modes of perception: the visual and the aural.” (Ramsey, Jr.) Music has also accompanied the voice in order highlight the explicit rhythms of the performance. On first viewing one will notice many instances of black on the film. This black spacing is

used to give rhythm to the film and allow moments of heightened emotion to highlight the poet's words. About 95% of the film was shot digitally on two cameras (Sony DCRHC1000 and the Panasonic DVX100A) the other 5% of the film was shot using a Minolta Super 8mm camera and edited using a Final Cut Pro system, After Effects, Compressor, Pro Tools, Photoshop and DVD Studio Pro.

The choice to shoot the film digitally was a financial choice but it enabled us to edit digitally giving us the ability to fine-tune our cuts to the rhythms of the poet and the music. The small B & W portion of the film during Musa's sequence was shot on film to give it a gritty, contrasted look juxtaposed to the footage shot during his performance at *Decolonize Your Mind*. Editing digitally made the project manageable and disastrous at the same time. Since most of the footage for the film was digital most of this footage was stored digitally.

During the year of production and reconstruction the film went through many versions using alternate material. Of the original sequences presented in the film, only about 40% is still incorporated. Alternate cuts have either been lost to hard drive failure or simply cut out on the advice of professors and friends. This is one of the few projects where I have created entirely different cuts for multiple sequences, which were then critiqued and either selected or eliminated by Dr. Aldama and myself. Since I am an editor and this is my choice as a career I found this portion of the film to be the most impressive. Not only was I responsible for managing the media of the entire project but I needed desperately to construct multiple films from the same material in a fast paced environment. In editing the name of the game is tempo so I appreciate the eagerness and aggression Dr. Aldama showed me when expecting new cuts of the film.

Still images play an important role in this film because they represent a captured moment of the artist's performance. We also use images to conjure the meanings of the poet's work. During the second to last sequence still images accompany Ara Cruz's interview which formally introduces the audience to Café Cultura and the history behind its founding. Later in the sequence we see images of Native mascots and other stereotypes visualizing the words of the poet. The images show the brutality Native people have suffered and continue to suffer because of our own ignorance of their diverse cultural heritage.

The compositing done on film was a technique I discovered during production and began to incorporate more and more as time went on. Using this aesthetic I am able to remove the poet or character from his or her background and place in front of a still image or animation. When I remove the background from the poet all that surrounds them is black. This black is hollow and allows the audience to focus on the movement and the words of the performer. By adding this extra-layered image as a background I am able to surround the poet with the emotions and ideas they provide to the audience.

Audio sampling is a small but crucial element of the film. Audio samples act similarly to the still images and compositing in that they are used to convey the feelings the poet is presenting. Audio samples are found in the introduction, in the LA sequence, which uses planes, helicopters and spray paint cans and in Ara Cruz's sequence marching footsteps can be heard echoing the militaristic nature of the police during the Anti-Columbus Day march in Denver.

I am blessed by my opportunities those around me have provided and I am on the brink of tears because I know I have people in my life that will support me in any

situation. The life experience to work on a film project such as *Decolonize Your Mind* has been a life changing one because it has exposed me to the real world. We are all here to impact the world and I hope we can all stand for something greater than ourselves and do the unexpected, unimaginable and the impossible. We all have the capacity to live each day and want each moment not because we know life is short but because we know life is beautiful. Even at our worst we are able to express ourselves through the faculties we have been provided and are still being created for and by us.

Film is my passion and with the influence and sponsorship of Dr. Aldama we have created a piece that speaks to my own life and the people I am close to. Poetry has always intrigued me in the way that film has because they share common elements. They both incorporate human communication and artistic expression. With the guidance and supportiveness of people such as my parents, Dr. Aldama, my brother's and friends I will always have an audience, a critic and an advisor for my work.

Café Cultural and S.O.R.C.E. are also places that deserve to be funded, appreciated and supported because they provided us with a place to share our voice and allow us to understand each other through communication and interaction. In the future I hope to be able to provide our communities a space where people can be expressive and learn from each other through interaction. As a board member of S.O.R.C.E I will personally see to it that this center is able to continue its contributions to our community. During the making of *Decolonize Your Mind* I learned how to desire learning from my community, my filmmaking and myself. I can dream that my filmmaking will benefit the future of our existence and community.

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