

## Create The World Anew: Grow

As far back as I can remember, I asked myself “why?” Why do we practice our faith the way we do? Why do we practice our culture the way we do? And what does it mean? Growing up in a large family of Baptist pastors, preachers and ministers in the Carolinas, meant meaning making was the family vocation. The older I got, the more questions I had. When I was a child and young adult I wondered: Where does our religious culture come from and why? When emancipation came why did we choose the various paths we chose - Christianity, Islam, Indigenous, Earth-based, Voodoo, etc.?

When I was in middle school and high school learning more about world history, I wondered why we - the class of clergy - did not practice miracles, why we were not Jewish like Jesus, why did we continue to practice a religion that we got from evil slaveowners; why was Jesus depicted as white in so many pictures; how did our ancestors relate to spirituality and religion and on and on. Thankfully, my parents never discouraged my questions or study.

I did not think that I was going to be a preacher because that form did not resonate fully with me. However, I wanted to be a creator within this Black church context - music, art, magic! Then, one fateful day at the age of four, I saw *The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller*. Not the music video, the behind the scenes documentary that showed how the magic happened. I saw that it was possible to create a whole new world with its own logic, meaning and references and to invite the pre-existing world into it. Now, I make magic. I invite viewers into possibility. I create whole worlds out of my questions. I preach through film.

I preach through the melodies in the score. I lead testimony service through rehearsals with actors that are portals for creative ancestral communication. I evangelize through my family-making approach to recruiting, hiring and casting. I practice devotion through intention setting and faith-building in the pre-production process. I preach through the lighting which shapes life, hope and meaning. I honor the natural world by location searching. The editing is baptism. The screening is ritual.

My intention is to re-present the divine essence. This is a growth process. The challenge and rub of critical thinking, of imagining something bigger and grander than what you have access to through your 5 (or so) senses, causes us to GROW. Film has the power to challenge us. My purpose is to create safe space for growth and transformation so that we all reflect the highest essence of the divine - infinite love.

A film can create the world anew in our minds.

Stretch us.

Open our growth.

My passion for filmmaking comes from this space of possibility and critical thinking. **When We Free** engages recurring central questions – What are the sources of belief? What are the norms? How do these sources and norms impact our daily decisions? **When We Free** imagines possible answers to some of these questions and invites audiences into the process of answering and imagining.

**When We Free** asks, when we achieve liberation, what choices do we make about our spiritual development? When we free we... do what?

How do we relate to one another, children, love, free time, cleaning, play, when we free?

As an adult, one of my primary freedom practices is to honor the legacy of my known and unknown ancestors. I can see the image Alice Walker paints of those ancestors that "dreamed dreams that no one knew-not even themselves, in any coherent fashion-and saw visions no one could understand.... [Those that] waited for a day when the unknown thing that was in them would be made known; but guessed, somehow in their darkness, that on the day of their revelation they would be long dead."

So I honor those long dead and my pastoring Daddy and Granddaddy. My preaching Uncles and Aunts. My ministering family. AND I honor Michael Jackson along with the cast and crew of *Thriller* and especially *The Making of Thriller*. For better or worse, I make myself a filmmaker in their legacy.

I make myself a filmmaker like Milla Granson made herself a teacher. She was an enslaved woman who learned to read from the children of her enslaver. She taught 12 students at a time, also enslaved, to read in her midnight school. Once they learned she dismissed them and taught 12 more. Over the years, she taught hundreds of enslaved people to read and write and many of them used that tool to gain their freedom,

I learned about Milla Granson in Akasha (Gloria) Hull and Barbara Smith's introduction to *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. They go on to say:

"She used her skills not to advance her own status, but to help her fellow slaves, and this under the most difficult circumstances... The knowledge she conveyed had a politically and materially transforming function, that is, it empowered people to gain freedom." For me the process of filmmaking AND the experience of the film are about gaining freedom.

I make myself a filmmaker in the legacy of the Combahee River Collective's Statement, which is a foundational text for any Black Feminist. They agreed,

"If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression." My filmmaking prioritizes the stories, perspectives and legacy of Black Women because it benefits all people to do so.

I make myself a filmmaker knowing that we can create the world anew; a world we deserve to have if we choose to grow and have it.

Finally, I make myself a filmmaker in the spirit tradition of specific directors who have created films that are canonical for me; filmmakers such as Julie Dash with *Daughters of the Dust*, Euzhan Palcy with *Sugar Cane Alley*, Camille Billops with *Suzanne Suzanne* and contemporary filmmaker Kortney Ryan Ziegler in his film, *Still Back: A Portrait of Black Transmen*.

Judylyn S. Ryan articulates this tradition and it's characteristics well in her book [Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women's Film and Literature](#) where she draws out essences in Black Women's art. For me it is reflective, prescriptive and prophetic.

The characteristics that she draws out include:

- 1) Interpreting Spirituality
- 2) Embracing Responsibility
- 3) Bearing Life-Force
- 4) Reversing Dispossession
- 5) Renewing Self-Possession
- 6) Charting Futures

and I add

- 7) Individual Passionate Purpose.

This is my testimony. This is my heritage. This is my black feminist film school approach to filmmaking. This is how I approach my creative work, which is always to *Create the World Anew* by growing and transforming, enlivening and inspiring the potential in myself and in us all. **When We Free** is but one example of that actualization of this purpose.