

Pursuing Truth with Documentary Film

The film opens to a black screen with the sound of children laughing. The words “Kill the Indian, Save the Man,” a quote by Captain Richard Pratt (1892), referring to the education of Native Americans, appear on the screen.

The words fade as a voice prompts, “Just tell it like it is,” and vice-principal Jovannah Poor Bear-Adams begins telling the story of the Holbrook Indian School. The black screen gives way to a time lapse of the Arizona expanse as she speaks. “Our school is not about killing the Indian,” she says emphatically. “It is not about killing what is native in the kids. It is about healing them.”

Behind the camera, as the director of photography and location producer, is Paul Kim, associate professor of documentary film. In 2014, Kim worked with Terry Benedict, a well-known filmmaker, to make the film about Holbrook, a Seventh-day Adventist 1st through 12th grade boarding school located

in Holbrook, Arizona. The film is more than a promotional piece, says Kim, it is a partnership with the school and the film’s principal subjects, Jovannah Poor Bear-Adams and two Holbrook students.

Paul Kim’s own story is one of truth searching and a love for the visual image. Before he began his career as a filmmaker, Kim was a physical therapist and later worked in pastoral ministry. During his time working as a pastor, he was “overwhelmed with how much pop culture” was part of the “everyday vocabulary and influence” of the young people with whom he spent his time.

Kim believed that understanding the nature of film, as a practitioner, would help him comprehend its influence as a visual medium and returned to the classroom to complete a BA and MFA in documentary film. “As a film student, you are required to study it as a discipline and to read all the body of literature behind it. You study it intellectually and critically, but also explore

all the decision making processes of creating narrative in digital media,” he says.

Kim completed his studies with a new perspective on film. “I think of my work as cultural work. That’s a privileged place to be.” Kim describes his work, both in his previous career as a pastor and his current work in documentary film, as “a pursuit of truth.” “There are higher concepts in film and film history that portray film as truth or film as a way to discovering truth,” he says.

The pursuit of truth, desire to help bring about change, and interest in political and social issues attracted Kim to non-fiction and documentary film. “Documentary film has always been about social engagement and, in some ways, social activism,” he notes. “Documentary filmmakers make films not only because we love creating films and telling stories, but also because we believe that sharing stories about marginalized communities is really important to having a functioning democracy and healthy society.”

“I think part of the reason we struggle so much with ethnic violence is because we don’t understand the ‘other.’ When you really understand someone, you approach and engage them in a different way. That’s what character-based storytelling is all about.”

BELOW: Paul Kim (seated middle) directs documentary film students during a shoot



As a filmmaker, Kim constantly asks the question: “Whose story are we telling and how do we tell it legitimately?”

In his work as a professor and filmmaker, Kim aims to help his students understand that film is more than just a form of creative exploration. “I want people to understand that film can dovetail with different disciplines, and that the social implications of filmmaking can fit closely with the mission of this university,” he says.

“I would like for people to think about film as much more than just an escape mechanism. The fact that you can profit so heavily from film has made it a commodity, but in an institution of higher education, we should think of film as part of our culture, something we explore as we do the literary classics.”

However, Kim clarifies, thinking about film as a cultural work does not mean we should be uncritical viewers. “The notion that documentary film is or should be purely objective needs to be continually disabused,” he says. “We cannot choose when to turn the camera on or off without having a subjective element. Audiences should not watch a film believing that it is under the guise of some objective material. It has a point of view, and that is a point of view shared between the subject and, more tangibly, the filmmaker.”

Being part of a media literate society requires the viewer to responsibly engage with film, especially documentary films, which claim to portray actual people and events. As a filmmaker, Kim constantly asks the question: “Whose story are we telling

and how do we tell it legitimately?”

Sometimes the “stories” Kim films fall under categories other than documentary

film. In 2015, Kim served as lead producer of all television and media operations at the General Conference Session of Seventh-day Adventists in San Antonio, Texas. Kim also assisted Scott Grady, executive producer of the Audiovisual and Broadcasting Committee.

A highly complex event, Kim was responsible for capturing important moments for the world church as they unfolded. His primary concern while filming the General Conference was transparency. “The moment I am proudest of was getting the actual tallying of the [ordination] vote broadcasted and recorded,” he says, so that people could view the voting process from beginning to end.

Since the General Conference, Kim has worked on several film projects, including a tribute to Niels-Erik Andreassen, titled “A Life of the Mind.” In it, he masterfully captures Andreassen as an educator near the end of his career reflecting on his early dreams to become a teacher and the realization of those dreams. The film, which was a “very personal one,” became “a project of passion” for Kim and is now in the film festival circuit.

“Many of the best projects begin as projects of passion in places where you have local access,” Kim says. Those are the kinds of films Kim enjoys working on, projects that originate organically from established relationships in the community. “As a filmmaker, you have to figure out what kind of filmmaker you are and what kinds of projects fit.”

For Kim, “the right fit” might be something like a longitudinal film on a local story, perhaps about the Southwest Michigan agricultural community or migrant workers. He hopes that by showing the “complexities of someone’s life and situation” over a long period of time he, as a filmmaker, can convey the truth of who they are and the meaning of their experience. As he recently told a student, no filmmaker in the world can have more perspective and intimacy with a subject than the one who is already right there, living alongside them.

Reimagining Race in Renaissance Literature

In the 2014 podcast, “Serial,” journalist Sarah Koenig investigated the supposed involvement of Adnan Syed in the 1999 murder of his ex-girlfriend, Hae Min Lee. In the introduction of the show, Koenig remarked, “On paper, the case was like a Shakespearean mash-up. Young lovers from different worlds, thwarting their families, secret assignations, jealousy, suspicion and honor besmirched. The villain not a Moor exactly, but a Muslim all the same. And a final act of murderous revenge.”¹

For most listeners, that statement is just another reason to keep listening to the story, but for Vanessa Corredera, assistant professor of English, it is an example of how pop culture reimagines Shakespeare as a way to discuss issues of race, gender and class. Koenig’s introduction references both “Romeo and Juliet” and “Othello” although, Corredera notes, she does it without naming the plays or characters.

“I’m really interested in popular culture,” says Corredera, enthusiastically. “And it’s wonderful when you can mix your hobbies, research and teaching.” When she first listened to “Serial,” she saw a way to maximize her time and interests.

Corredera developed that single reference to Shakespeare “into a reading of race, ‘Serial’ and Shakespeare and what that means for the field of Shakespearean studies,” and presented it at a seminar on Early Modern Race/Ethnic/Diaspora Studies at the Shakespeare Association of America in 2015. The same paper was chosen to be part of a special edition of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, one of the preeminent journals in the field, on Shakespeare and race (forthcoming).

“Shakespeare and race studies emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a part of a larger movement in literary studies towards thinking about women’s and postcolonial issues and critical race theory,” explains Corredera. “A lot of the early work on Renaissance literature and race was conducted on how race was constructed in the period by looking at primary sources to determine how Jews, Moors



Paul Kim