

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Re-finding My Love for Poetry Through the Sims Library

Mimi Lam · Wednesday, May 26th, 2021

When I first volunteered for the Sims Library of Poetry, I did not expect a physical manifestation of myself—unfinished, still growing, pursuing a dream. Like the library, I was in the process of transformation.

I reflect back to the moments of tension in my life that pulled me in opposing directions. I remember being called into a room full of my relatives on my mother's side. Most of them have immigrated to the United States from Vietnam when they were in elementary school to high school. They knew the struggle of learning English as a second language and surviving in an environment in which they started from nothing.

I, on the other hand, grew up poor, but also with the American cultural mindset of following one's passion. I saw books, television, and film as a means to escape my family's overbearing control over my life. From an early age, my family enforced that I focus on academics and receive good grades. My parents didn't care what I was learning in school, except that I get straight A's, a stereotypical representation of strict, Asian parents.

However, I wouldn't say that stereotype is entirely accurate. My parents both worked six days a week, and their days off were used to perform chores that couldn't be done during their work days. They simply didn't have time to know about my business, and they also didn't understand it. My father quit helping me with homework after third grade multiplication. I got used to that feeling of independence and self-reliance when I was young.

Walking back into that room of domineering relatives, I was petrified. I couldn't form words in fear of being disrespectful to my elders. My entire being was in a state of transition. I was about to leap out of my parent's arms into the grips of college education. My independence was still being controlled by my family's puppet strings of expectations. They had premeditated that I would support my parents with a financially stable job, but artistic motivation guided my heart.

My 18-year-old self didn't have the courage to challenge their age-old traditions, so I compromised. I would follow the scripts passed down to me from older generations until I reached my peak in cognitive dissonance.

Flash forward to six months after my college graduation, my relatives remained persistent in insisting that I stop fooling around and find a serious job. Thinking I wasn't going to get the job, I caved and applied for an entry-level accounting position. You can guess what happened.

I had a major decision to make. Either I accept the offer, appease my family, and structure the next ten years of my life or I figure everything out on my own. I felt my world crumbling when I gave the news that I was choosing this lofty dream over financial stability.

Momentarily, my relatives halted communication from me, withdrew their support, and talked behind my back. I became the black sheep in the family.

I waited for family members to reach out to me, but I know that day will never come. I don't expect an apology, just an opportunity to reflect upon that dark experience. I never received closure, and I'm afraid I never will because in their eyes I am the one who betrayed.



Ever since that momentous decision, I carved my own path and found support outside of my family, which leads me to acting and poetry. When acting gigs slowed down due to the pandemic, I found other means to express my art. Signing up to volunteer at the Sims Library of Poetry allowed me to assist other artists in finding their voice and supporting a mostly Black and Brown community. I didn't know that there were other poets of color and poets that looked like me. The poetry I learned in school were mostly from dead, white male poets. I had never imagined there was a welcoming community that accepted me with open arms.

Through my volunteer experience, I helped gather hundreds of poetry books from bookstores all over Los Angeles and Orange County, painted the interior library walls, and reached out to organizations for donations. I dedicated myself every week to the library's cause until the library's founder and Executive Director of Community Literature Initiative, Hiram Sims, reached out to me and offered me the Library Manager position. I was excited, because this would be one of the first jobs where I enjoyed working. I felt that the transition from volunteer to Library Manager had grown organically.

I still feel that there is much to learn as the Library Manager. Last year, the focus was on building the library, creating a space for poets to read, write, study, and perform poetry. Since the facility is

nearly complete, we must provide maintenance to the building and create online content in order to engage with our community. Although I manage the library, I wouldn't be able to grow the Sims Library of Poetry without the help of my volunteers. All of us have contributed to the spearheading of our social media, poetry workshops, blog posts, and Patreon. Our library's physical space may not be open to the public, but our online platforms allow us to bring poetry to the world.

My goal for the library is for poetry books to be made accessible to everyone, especially the Black and Brown community of South Los Angeles. I know what it feels like to be discouraged from pursuing art, whether poetry or acting, due to underrepresentation. The Sims Library of Poetry highlights Black and Brown poets by dedicating a book section to their poetry. We want people of color to feel heard and seen. Our library may still be growing, but we are making a force in the poetry community.

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