

Towards 2050:

Reflections on the Asian American Theater and Changing U.S. Demographics

Roberta Uno

Some Other Category...

This morning a phone solicitor called to survey what radio programs I listen to – after the perfunctory questions about my marital status, age, and level of education he asked: “Are you White, Black, or some other category?”

It’s 2004, well into the new millennium, and yet the awkward lexicon of race and the implicit issues of invisibility, inequity, and the enduring legacy of institutionalized racism stumble uninvited into our daily lives. Language, specifically the act of naming, self naming, being named, has been an interest and concern of mine for the near quarter century I ran a theater for artists of color¹ in the United States; it continues to fuel my work now in arts philanthropy.

I remember another phone call, sometime in the 1980’s: a journalist called to interview me about my “pioneering work in multiculturalism.” I quickly put her on hold and asked around the theater office, “What’s multiculturalism? Is that what we’re doing?!” I was perplexed by the notion that anyone could possibly be mono-cultural, given our multiple identities of gender, race, nationality, age, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, etc. and felt instinctively uneasy with this new label. That discomfort only increased during the decade as the situations associated with the use of the term “multicultural” presented various scenarios rang-

ing from tokenism to exploitation. On one end of the spectrum were myriad relatively innocuous requests to be the multicultural representative in a meeting, at a conference, in a play festival, on a board to add some diversity to an otherwise racially exclusive Caucasian event. On the other end of the spectrum were phone calls from “arts peers”, people I had never met who would contact us to be a partner for a grant proposal that required collaboration with a culturally diverse or community-based organization. These queries were often stunning, not only because of the presumed benefit to us when the other organization was receiving the money, but more so because sometimes an organization would want to partner with us without ever having seen our work, visited our community, created art with us, or gained any knowledge of our organizational capacity. As a stable arts organization of color in a fairly racially homogenous, predominantly Caucasian region of the country, New England, we were one of the few ideal prospective “partners” for blind dates driven by funding programs.

Over the decade, I came to hear new terminology, in addition to multicultural, under which my theater's work was assigned or referenced: minority, diverse, ethnically specific, culturally specific, under-represented, marginalized, etc. These terms consciously refer to difference without critiquing an accepted norm. Each term intentionally avoids the elephant in the room –the “R” word, racism, and the conditions, dynamics, power structures, and attitudes implicit. By avoiding the direct address of institutional and societal racism, these terms in many ways re-inscribe and give further validation to histories of exclusion, dominant culture norms, and social inequity.²

For example, the terms “ethnically specific” or “culturally specific”

are designations intended to describe a Black, Latino, Asian American, Native American, or multi-raced art organization in relationship to the content of their programming, their organizational leadership, and relationship to a community. Ironically, the terms “ethnically specific” or “culturally specific” are never used to describe arts organizations with exclusively or predominantly Caucasian programs, boards, staff, or audiences – these are the organizations that provide the norms from which ethnic and cultural “specificity” deviate. Recently, a front page article in the New York Times described the paucity of Black members on the boards of major New York arts institutions³. Its unimaginable, however accurate, that the article would have described organizations such as Museum of Modern Art, Carnegie Hall, or the New York City Ballet as “major *ethnically specific* New York arts institutions.”

“Underrepresented” and “minority” are problematic terms because they imply an over-arching authoritative gaze while promoting an Orwellian double-speak regarding the realities of actual United States population demographics. I once did a site visit for the National Endowment for the Arts and spent time with an organization comprised of a nearly all-Caucasian staff and board. In response to my question about the city’s demographics, the executive director said the city’s population was about 70% minority, an oxymoron that didn’t seem to trouble him. He talked about programs to “outreach” “underrepresented” people who appeared to be abundantly present in the neighborhood surrounding the building. But until these people engaged on his institutions terms and space, their existence and participation in the arts was not visible or valid.

The Flip Side

Now that I am on the other side of the table, participating in shaping arts policy, I realize even more profoundly the very real responsibilities born and repercussions incurred by philanthropies through their interventions, experiments, and efforts. I'm challenged by this legacy of language, so badly in need of reinvention, re-imagination, and realignment with reality. America's changing demographics compel this re-conceptualization in a new way. The shift to a country where the aggregate of racial minorities are projected by mid-century to equal or even eclipse the current dominant Caucasian population, has made obsolete, inverted, and given new meaning to many of the aforementioned terms. And, as in the anecdote above, this reality is not 50 years off, in major cities and many areas of the country, the "majority minority" shift has already occurred, although institutionally that change has lagged far behind.

My involvement with these terms is not just informed by my current position in the arts paradigm, having gone from funding supplicant to grant maker, but as a practicing theater artist (albeit one who now has a pretty demanding day job) and former theater academic who has made art and scholarship within and at the margins of the category of Asian American theater. The critiques I've made thus far have been about the dominant culture paradigm; I'd like to shift the perspective to focus on the burgeoning margin. Specifically, these are thoughts about my own primary identity category of Asian American. This is a conversation that is still marginal, and in many ways marginalized,

within the Asian American theater.

Looking for Asian American in a Wider World

Recently a young Asian American theater director commented to me that in my book *Unbroken Thread: an Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women*, published in 1993, playwright Jeannie Barroga is identified as a newer voice in the Asian American theater. Commenting from the vantage point of 11 years after the book's publication, he pointed out that Barroga is not emerging at all, but a pioneer, a mentor, and an established artistic figure. What was interesting to me was not the obvious logic of his statement given the passage of time, but that he referenced only the plays of *Unbroken Thread*, a collection that has become a canon work for the Asian American theater because it made available six plays by pioneering and significant Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American women writers, within the historical context of women writers who had preceded them, as well as the socio-historical context of the themes they engaged.

What fascinates and troubles me is that he was not the first young Asian American theater artist who seemed aware only of *Unbroken Thread*, a work that has informed a few academic generations of Asian American theater makers. Lesser known to this constituency, despite more aggressive marketing, are my subsequent books inclusive of the Asian American theater: *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color* (Routledge 1996) and *The Color of Theater: Race, Culture, and Contemporary Theater* (Continuum 2002), and *Monologues for Actors of Color* (Routledge 2000). This despite the fact that the aforemen-

tioned publications carry five, seven, and eighteen works by Asian American playwrights and writers respectively including Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Pacific Island, Indian, Pakistani and Vietnamese American, as well as Singaporean, Malaysian, and other international writers.

What causes this disconnect between highly motivated young Asian American theater artists and this larger and more contemporary body of published work? Are these other books, despite their content, no longer seen as Asian American, when contextualized within a frame of Black, Latino, and Native American writers? Or, why aren't more Asian Americans in theater perusing the ethnic, Black, cultural and performance studies shelves where the other books tend to be located? Does it say something about how we define our identity or how we define our art? Does it say something about how we, as Asian Americans, view or are connecting to the world we live in?

I chose to focus my first publishing effort on my most essential identity, that of Asian American woman, as a direct response to the paucity of published resources I encountered as a student in the mid 1970's. But I purposely enlarged that research within the construct of work by other artists of color. I felt that theater students could benefit from a more sophisticated frame of reference beyond the given Shakespeare, Moliere, Sondheim, Miller, and Hellman canon to include Ngema, Culture Clash, Corthran, Geiogomah, and Lê. But the pedagogical approach also emanated from artistic practice and activism, we had after all, initially named New WORLD Theater, Third World Theater, nomenclature that spoke to an era of linking domestic community movements with international struggles for independence. Underlying

was an imperative to understand the interrelatedness of these struggles and to build alliances and coalitions around common cause. And that was reflected in the era's publishing projects, which in addition to major works specific to Asian Americans, also gave us a new model of literary voice through milestone collections, within a Third World or People of Color context, like the *Yardbird Reader* and *This Bridge Called My Back*.⁴ But the consciousness that embraced these types of coalitions and cross-readings has not, on the whole, flourished in the Asian American theater. That these seismic social and cultural struggles, in many ways, failed to evolve in the Asian American theater through the last several decades of political assault on the arts, comes as no surprise.⁵ But it is worth our questioning, particularly as the issues of political division, multi-raciality and intermarriage continue to impact our civic status and expand our Asian American identity.

Lost in Translation

Dipankar Mukherjee, Artistic Director of Pangea World Theater, observed of the 2000 tour of Ratan Thiyam's Chorus Repertory Theater to the United States, "I knew him in India, but when he came here, the only involvement of my theater was a call (from the presenter) to help get the Indian community to attend." This relegation to audience development partners for larger (often ethnically specific Caucasian) institutions, is the manifestation of historic social inequity and the ironic reality of real estate, or lack thereof. Mukherjee's vibrant, multi-raced, itinerant theater is not thought to be in the position to host a major company like Thiyam's. Without a house,

Mukherjee could not make the table or sit at it; he could only bring his people to watch the feast.⁶

The ramifications are consequential. In 1988 when Tadashi Suzuki, Thiyam's peer as a world-class director, trained the first group of American actors, the collaborating institutions, Arena Stage, Milwaukee Repertory, Stagemwest, and Berkeley Repertory selected the actors to be sent to Japan. Because the group did not include one Asian American actor, the first generation of Suzuki trainers in the U.S. did not include any Asian Americans.⁷ I remember talking with Suzuki when my theater presented his *Tale of Lear*, the collaboration produced with the aforementioned theaters. He commented that he had not met other Japanese Americans – I was at a loss to explain, across the barrier of language, the secondary and even tertiary role communities of color play to many large scale international projects. Our conversation touched on immigration history and the internment camps, but it was difficult to communicate the complexities of race and class as they impact the American arts. But in this case, the saddest legacy of that marginalized position is that Suzuki's work for the most part, has not come into the Asian American theater as methodology. Asian Americans perennially struggle to define culturally-based aesthetics; a recurring question has been, "Is there an Asian American aesthetic?" These aesthetic discussions risk becoming mired within the nostalgia of immigrant memory and cultural reconstruction. Yet even as globalization compresses cultural experience, Asian Americans may, as in the cases of Suzuki and Thiyam, find ourselves removed from contemporary aesthetic experiments and developments in Asia.

These are the two sides of the same coin – on one side our own persistent, albeit at times necessarily protective, ethnic insularity and on the other the enduring vestiges of our second class citizenship.

Honorary White

I've just returned from a trip to South Africa, my second in ten years, book-ending the decade following the end of apartheid. While there in 1994, my family and I went to a swimming facility, formerly exclusively for the use by white South Africans. A group of black teens told us they were not allowed entrance the year before; they then proceeded to describe the categories of admission referencing my family: my two Afro-Asian children and Nisei mother. "He", one teen spoke, pointing to my brown-skinned, wavy-haired son, "could not come in here. He would be colored." "But you", he gestured to me, my mother, and my fair-skinned, straighter-haired daughter, "look Japanese, you could have come in because you would be honorary whites."

Asian Americans well know this honorary white status, even if it is not overtly stated as in apartheid era South Africa. We know it when we are lauded as "model minorities" and we know it when we are "privileged" by some Caucasians who do not see us as different from themselves, yet persist in seeing themselves as different (and superior to) Blacks and Latinos. We also know it when we privilege ourselves should we attempt to benefit from these mythologies through silent collusion. Ironically, the legacy of the exacting architecture of apartheid, which separated groups by race and assigned privileges or denied rights, may offer a model of precise descriptive language which

may have relevance to our American racial paradigm. In this recent trip to South Africa, Dr. Loyiso Nongoxa, the first Black Vice Chancellor of the University of Witwatersrand, spoke of the progress made and the work to be done in achieving racial equity in South Africa. He referred to “historically Black” institutions, a term we also use in the U.S., but he also talked about “historically White” institutions, a candid term that is absent from our U.S. discussions, but not from our reality. These precise terms truthfully describe and characterize the daunting structures, dynamics and conditions created by a racist past; in accurately naming them a deep acknowledgement is made and the possibility of progress beyond is compelled.

A New Banner

In this moment of demographic shift, we have the opportunity to determine new language, ask harder questions, and to deepen our context analysis. How has Asian American theater changed given the wider geography of Asian America due to recent immigration? What will the relationship/relevance of established Asian American institutions be to these faster growing communities? How can we acknowledge the work of Asian Americans working within wider identity constructs? Historically, several Asian American theaters have produced work by Asian American, Asian, and Caucasian writers, while still carrying the banner of Asian American. Are Asian Americans who produce Black, Latino and Native American writers – or who work within gay or women’s projects - also able to create under the Asian American banner? How are changing aesthetics such as spoken word, Hip Hop,

sketch and improvised comedy, digital and performance art impacting theatrical performance, audiences, marketing, spaces, organizational structures, and networks? What is the significance of the growing number of ensemble-based artists, both Asian American and multi-raced groups? How do we validate the Asian American theater that has been supported at non-Asian American led spaces and apart from Asian American communities? A prime example was given to us by Alvin Eng in his book *Tokens: The NYC Asian American Experience on Stage* (Temple University 200). Eng begins his photo chronology with a portrait of Ellen Stewart, the founder of La Mama ETC, an African American woman whose theater has presented over 40 productions written, directed, choreographed and performed by Asian American artists over the past 34 years⁸. How does the Asian American theater intersect with the theater of Arab Americans – does the cartographic construction of Asia extend to Central or West Asia, culturally, politically, or socially? What are the new incarnations of performance in immigrant communities? We are aware, for example, of generations of Chinese opera circulating in American Chinatowns, but as globalization has merged Hip Hop beats with bhangra, what are the new cultural products, touring routes, audiences, and support structures? Finally, as Asian Americans continue to marry with people of other races, what intercultural shifts are impacting aesthetics, themes and audiences?

Ultimately, these questions seek to give a more nuanced view of Asian American as an important social, cultural and political category of identification, but one that can also be reductive, essentialized, and monolithic. The 2000 U.S. Census began to recognize one aspect of this

new complexity by allowing people to choose more than one box in identifying their racial and ethnic identities. Official reporting aside, this claiming of multiplicity has already occurred among certain people of multiple ancestries who through their own creative naming, reject the limitations of existing categories. Perhaps we can find inspiration in our search for new language in the creative lexicon of self identification. A young man of Indian and Jewish American background calls himself a “Hinjew.” Another teen of African American and Filipino parentage calls himself a “Niggerpino.”⁹ Gita Reddy, a theater artist of Indian and Filipina heritage refers to herself as “the Indipina,” while performance artist Richard Lou has coined the term “Chicanese” in reference to his Chicano and Chinese background. Golf superstar Tiger Woods uses the term “Cablasan” to describe his Caucasian, Black and Asian background. China Chola, Blackjap, Blackanese, Jahwaiian are but a few of the Asian American subversions of language – whimsical, audacious, and in-your-face responses to the unchosen option, “some other category.”

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co-editor with Kathy Perkins of *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color*, Routledge, 1996.

1. I founded and served the Artistic Director of the New WORLD Theater from 1979-2002. In residence at the Fine Arts Center of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the theater is dedicated to producing and presenting the work of artists of color. Now in its 26th year, it is led by Artistic Director, Andrea Assaf.
2. Perhaps the most vivid example of the conundrum of multiculturalism and the politics of representation can be seen in the current George W. Bush presidency. Bush has appointed the most multicultural cabinet in the history of the United States, yet these diverse representatives have implemented policy counter to the issues and needs of communities of color, from the dismantling of Affirmative Action, to the war in Iraq.
3. Pogrebin, Robin. "Many Arts Groups in City Lag In Naming Blacks as Trustees" (*New York Times*, May 25, 2004)
4. Anzaldúa, Gloria and Cherrie Moraga, Eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* was originally published in 1981; it is now in its third edition (Berkeley CA: 3rd Woman Press, 2002) *The Yardbird Reader* (Berkeley, CA: Yardbird Publishing Incorporated, 1972-1976) was edited by Ishmael Reed, Francille Rusan Wilson, William Lawson. Related milestone collections include *Time to Greez: Incantations from the Third World* (San Francisco, CA: Glide Publishing, 1975) and *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, Anzaldúa, Gloria, ed. (Berkeley, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1990)
5. Noteworthy exceptions include Great Leap in Los Angeles, CA, founded in 1978 and headed by Artistic Director, Nobuko Miyamoto; Theater Ma-Yi in New York City, founded in 1989 and headed by Artistic Director Ralph Pena; and Pangea World Theater in Minneapolis, MN, founded in 1996 and headed by Artistic Director Dipankar Mukherjee. These three organizations were born in different eras, with unique aesthetic and social visions.
6. Like Mukherjee I had no real estate when I ran New WORLD Theater for

23 years. But because the theater is in residence at the Fine Arts Center of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst it has access to several stages including a 2000 seat concert hall. For this reason, and because of the exceptional generosity of Sam Miller, at that time the Executive Director of the New England Foundation for the Arts, I was asked by Sam to go in his place as one of a 4-person team to Manipur, India to visit Thiyam and plan his U.S. debut. Manipur is a contested state in India under military occupation by the Indian government. It is a rich center of both traditional and contemporary art, but has little tourism as it requires special permits, given its ongoing resistance struggle. At the time of our visit in 2000 Thiyam's company had performed at every major festival from Adelaide to Avignon to the Mitsui Festival. They had touched down in the United States four times, changing planes to Latin America. While in Manipur, I conducted interviews with Thiyam; and perhaps because the act of translation was not needed, I felt I could explain some of the dynamics of communities of color and the politics of power in system of arts circulation. A second tour to the U.S. is now being planned by the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Asia Society. Now in my role as funder, I am able to ensure that artists of the South Asian diaspora are primary participants in conceptualizing and planning the visit; a small delegation of South Asian contemporary artists, including Mukherjee, will be sponsored by the Ford Foundation to go to Manipur to meet with Thiyam.

7. South Asian actor Shishir Kurup studied with Suzuki for 6 weeks in Togamura, Japan in 1986 under the auspices of the University of California at San Diego. After graduating in 1987, he has utilized Suzuki technique, along with Ann Bogart's Viewpoints technique in his theater work. He is an ensemble artist of Cornerstone Theater based in Los Angeles
8. As Ellen Stewart states in her interview with Eng, "I started what is now called 'Asian American Theatre' in New York in 1970 with La Mama Chinatown. We (Stewart, Ching Yeh, and Wu Gingi) were able to get the basement of the Transfiguration Church on Mott Street, and the first La Mama Chinatown show was *Three Travelers Watch the Sunrise* on August

6, 1970. In 1972, we changed the name to La Mama Asian Repertory Theatre. Then, in 1976, Tisa Chang asked if we could change the name to Pan Asian Repertory Theatre" (Eng, Tokens, p. 408). La Mama also gave birth to two other Asian American theatre companies—Ping Chong and Company and Slant (Asia), created by Rick Ebiara, Wayland Quintero and Perry Yung.

9. Thanks to journalist Sandy Close for these examples from her work with youth in California's Youth Authority system.