

Faedra Chatard Carpenter

“THINGS THAT MAKE ME GO HMMM. . .”

There are many things related to the practice of theatre research (both scholarly and creative) that are presently pulling at my psyche. These matters, predominantly concerned with issues of diversity and inclusion, are not new or novel. Rather, they are ever lingering; frequently talked *about*, but still requiring a talking *through*. Inspired by public discourse and practice, my ruminations are also informed by my own politics of location (as a dramaturg/scholar of color), and thus contestable—yet potentially consequential. Given the time and space allotted, here are a couple of “things that make me go hmmm”:¹

“HOW CAN YOU SEE AN ABSENCE WHEN YOU DON’T KNOW THERE IS A PRESENCE?”

I am again citing the above prompt—a query I’ve invoked in writing before—in the spirit with which the celebrated playwright, artist, activist, and pedagogue Cherríe Moraga originally asked it of me.

While the unfolding of *that* specific incident can be found elsewhere,² the insight gleaned from Ms. Moraga’s question remains ever relevant. Case in point:

One of my advisees recently dramaturged a piece for a play development festival. The piece is written by a black South African woman and features five characters, all girls. Before offering detailed character descriptions, the playwright has the following note in her script: “All the girls *must* be black. . .” Seeking to understand the full intention of the playwright’s words, the dramaturg asked (amid many other clarifying questions) if the girls/actors had to be “really black” or if they needed to be *perceived* as black. This question did not sit well with the director-producer (a white male). He reprimanded the dramaturg’s query, responding that the question “troubled” him. Explaining his position, he called forth “South Africa’s troubled racial history,” “the firestorm that has erupted about the bio-pic about Nina Simone,” and added, “I’m not sure this is appropriate to ask and may even be offensive.” For me, however, the very citations that bespoke concerns for the producer revealed *why* the nature of the dramaturg’s question was

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important.³ Later, when talking with the producer, I tried to explain that my advisee was offering a significant dramaturgical query. He disagreed, insisting that it was a casting issue.

First pause: When is the issue of casting *not* a dramaturgical concern?

Second pause: Is it a matter of *whose* concern is being privileged? Is it a matter of not recognizing the absence because one does not know—or really understand—what is potentially present?

I can't help but wonder how the dramaturg's question was fortified by the fact that it was from a self-identified *black American* (note: *not* "African American") female dramaturg to a black South African female playwright. In this particular case, the question itself reflected an intimate understanding that narratives of authenticity—of "types" or "levels" of blackness—are forever circulating around, through, and about people of the African diaspora. Even irrespective of her own subjectivity, the dramaturg was asking the playwright (and all of us) to confront real and sticky questions like: What does being "really black" (or white, or Latino, or Asian, etc.) *mean*, and how do the significations of embodiment translate in our readings of a play, in text or enacted form? Furthermore, in light of the director-producer's response, I also wonder if such sticky (yet pertinent) questions *are more likely* to be asked by someone who is fully sensitized to the presence of an issue. As theatre historians, performance theorists, or artistic practitioners, how do we commit to learning from, and being fully receptive to, the experiential knowledge of outside cultural curators, bridge builders, and community members? How can we challenge ourselves to garner and actually *heed* the diverse perspectives offered to us in order to avoid the absences left, unintentionally or otherwise, by our own discomfort, disregard, or denial?

"AND SO YOU *ARE* DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE . . . BUT CAN YOU DO MORE, CAN YOU DO BETTER?"

Despite the buzzwordiness of calls for "diversity and inclusion," the *actualization* of these calls is palpably pressing and fundamentally necessary. *Even if* our work irrefutably advocates for variegated canons, highlights issues related to social justice, discloses the matrices of identity, and aims to excavate and recuperate underrepresented vantage points and histories, we need to ask ourselves: Can I do more, can I do better? I was asking myself that the other day (really, I was), and I ended up framing these self-imposed queries using the classic five W's: Who, What, When, Where, and Why.

Who are we researching and writing about? *What* are we analyzing and what methodologies are we using? *When* do we choose to speak or contribute? *Where* are we observing, presenting, teaching, and publishing? And *why* are we doing the work that we do? If those answers are not as generative *as they could be*; if an answer does not readily reveal your fullest capacity to intervene and create new areas of knowledge *and* diverse ways of translating and disseminating that knowledge, then what more can *you* do, what can *you* do better? How can *we*, as individuals invested in diversity and inclusion, promote greater change as a collective?

When asking myself these same questions, I experienced an internal reckoning with the “when” and the “where”—a reckoning that was underscored by a conversation I had with my fellow dramaturg-scholar Martine Kei Green-Rogers. As Martine and I discussed, the challenge of ample representation is not simply a matter of numbers or the formative presence of a few key figures. It is equally a matter of what we—as scholars, practitioners, teachers, and documentarians of theatre—choose to engage with, witness, or spotlight. Who are we reviewing, and in which journals? What relationships in terms of conferences, theatres, and educational institutions do we cultivate? Which artisans and productions do we choose to track, critique, or champion?

So, I’m working on my “when” and where” . . . and you?

ENDNOTES

1. This phrase pays due tribute to comedian and late-show talk host Arsenio Hall, who popularized his bit, “things that make me go hmmm,” during the early 1990s.
2. Faedra Chatard Carpenter, “The Innovation of Inclusion: Dramaturgy in the Mythos of the ‘Post-Racial’ Era,” *Review: The Journal of Dramaturgy* 21.1 (2011): 16–21.
3. Certainly, the recent controversy surrounding casting protocol and Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* is a highly publicized example of related concerns. I owe thanks to my graduate student, Leticia Ridley, for rich conversations on this topic.