

# **INTERSECTION IV: RE/GENERATIONS • APRIL 7-9, 2006**

## **REPORTS / Saturday Sessions**

### **Art and Activism: Intergenerational Conversation Continued**

Panelists: Nobuko Miyamoto (Great Leap), Luci Murphy (singer, organizer), Luis Rodriguez (author, organizer), Kevin Ramirez (AWOL), Thea Som (Youth Leadership in the Arts), Mark Tilsen (Lakota Action Network). Moderator: Javiera Benavente (Solidago Foundation). Documented by Chris Rohmann.

Continuing the dialogue of the morning plenary, veteran practitioners and leaders of the next generation exchanged strategies and visions, addressing the crucial question How can we move the national social-change movement forward?

Luci Murphy began the session with an impromptu song

Javiera summed up the importance of personal relationships in social change work. It is important to cultivate relationships. We have to keep reevaluating the work we do and ask the question, “How do we bring more people into the revolution?” She pointed out that this includes those we would not consider natural allies, those with whom we have some point of common interest despite other differences, and build on that. She also asked, “How do we revise/change the traditional organizing/activist models for a new generation?” She gave the example of Kevin Ramirez with the Central Committee for Conscientious Objection, an old-line organization. He’s producing anti-recruitment comic books and there’s some resistance within his organization to his work. How do we build common ground based on strategic points to move our work forward?

Some important points/topics in the general discussion were the importance of adult mentors, especially when there’s less trust of adults than ever; the importance of alternative media – “In order to dismantle the master’s house, you have to use the master’s tools” – and of Hip Hop to engage youth generation, e.g. in anti-military-recruitment work; the importance of organizational collaborations and networks, e.g., cooperative distribution mechanism for books, organizing materials, etc.; and the distinction between political art and art as political act, i.e. commentary vs. activism.

The panelists had specific things to say as well:

**Nobuko Miyamoto:** We’re constantly divided and taught to relate to our own groups: national, sports, ethnic, etc. How can we honor individual identities while coming together from a broad range – “peel people out of their categories?”

**Luci Murphy:** Importance of adult mentors – not many now – it’s hard to get kids to trust elders. Distrust is greater now partly because of more dangerous streets. “Youth don’t understand repair, taking criticism as constructive” – everything is on or off, positive or negative, nothing in between.

**Luis Rodriguez:** Elder mentoring is like the Minotaur’s maze (in the Greek legend of Theseus). Ariadne gave him a string so as he went into the maze he could follow it back out again. “Revolution saved my life, gave me meaning.” We have to expand the idea of

who is in this revolutionary movement – e.g., fundamentalist born-again Christians (like his family) turn away from social activism when they get born again, even though their lives and problems haven't changed.

**Mark Tilsen:** Real leadership is doing, not talking. Being in a gang is cool, but there's nothing really in it, it's about commercialism. Hip Hop has the responsibility to be radical.

**Thea Som:** (is now mentoring a youth group in Springfield) Field work/canvassing, face-to-face interaction is important. He spoke about his history, older role models who helped him, and how writing and performing saved him. "The next step is organizing"

**Kevin Ramirez:** Hip Hop radicalized him. AWOL uses Hip Hop as an organizing tool, a critique of militarism.

**Caron Atlas:** What's needed to ratchet up your work to another level?

**Luis Rodriguez:** Organizational collaborations and networks, e.g., revolutionary distribution mechanism for books, organizing materials, etc.

**Thea Som:** In order to dismantle the master's house, you have to use the master's tools.

**Raul Matta:** Networking / using local media outlets.

**Kevin Ramirez:** The War Resisters League pulled their support from AWOL because their materials represent violence. For the same reason, AFSC doesn't support AWOL. How do we break down the divisions within the left?

**Thea Som:** We need to prioritize the people who speak "from the bottom," from experience, and use peer-to-peer models of resource sharing.

**Luis Rodriguez:** We need to emphasize inclusion, sharing of "weapons," i.e. methods.

**Piper Anderson:** There is a distinction between political art and art used for activism. We need to change the tools we use – starts with the arts, e.g. Amandla Poets in San Francisco.

**Paula Larke:** We're losing – and not using – cable access channels: free mass media.

**Javiera Benavente:** We need to find connections between stories, e.g. "the levee of death" in New Orleans is same as the "levee"/fence along the US/Mexico border.

## **Multiculturalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Panelists: Ananya Chatterjea (Ananya Dance Theatre), Sarwat Rumi & marian yalini thambynayagam (Mango Tribe), Roberto Sifuentes (Director, Trinity/La MaMa Performing Arts Program). Moderator: Cathy Schlund-Vials (Five College Mendenhall Fellow – Smith College). Documented by Cathy Schlund-Vials & Priscilla Page.

Practitioners and scholars reflected on the multiculturalism debates of the late 20th century and examined their relevance now. Presenters contextualized their work and investigated the language of multiculturalism and the contemporary relevance of the term in relation to globalization and shifting demographics in the U.S.

**marian yalini thambynayagam:**

Multiculturalism should be a good thing. What is dangerous is how multiculturalism is commodified.

Culture as a tool of capitalism.

How can I resist being commodified?

Make sure your work is grounded, not superficial.

I see my art as a way of changing the world.

We can resist violence.

We can create change.

ANDALAN – working with domestic workers using storytelling.

Creativity is a part of our liberation.

**Sarwat Rumi:**

Liberation is rooted in my creativity.

My mother told me stories. She had matriarchal ancestors who lived what she believed.

There was a gaping hole for Asian/Pacific Islander women's voices.

In 2000, Mango Tribe produced "Sisters in the Smoke." We came together looking at violence. Mango Tribe is about bringing voice to the issues we face.

I am not trained in theater but this is what I do. I was a domestic violence legal advocate.

**Roberto Sifuentes:**

I am a member of La Pocha Nostra. We are from NYC, L.A., S.F., Mexico. We are forging a new model.

We explore the messiness of identity. We look at hybridity/impurity.

Forms they use:

The Living Diorama

Ethnographic Tableau Vivant

The Freak Show

The Indian Curio Shop

We exhibit ourselves.

We are ethnographic specimens.

Endangered species

Ethno cyborgs

The new multicultural design was in the hands of the audience. Visitors to a website wrote out their fantasies/fears/desires with regard to the question, "What does the neo-Latino/Chicano look like?"

Audience members could get a cultural makeover where they get to dress like a cultural "other."

There is a performance karaoke.

The new multiculturalism is racial profiling.

New identities are possible through the Internet.

**Ananya Chatterjea:**

I have a deep distrust of the word "multiculturalism." The word relies on a facile understanding of diversity.

My company is a group of women who are interested in dance as social change.  
I want us to participate in each other's cultures, otherwise we live in a "don't touch, don't understand" mentality. We should be having conversations about how we participate in each other's cultures.  
I am really interested in conversations about difference.  
As women of color – it is not an easy category – we have differences inside this identity category.  
I am interested in taking the language and turning it on its head.  
The American understanding of diversity comes with huge limitations.

### **Leadership in Transition Case Studies**

Panelists: S.T. Shimi (Jump-Start Performance Company), Shay Wafer and Laurie Woolery (Cornerstone Theater Company). Moderator: Olga Garay (consultant).  
Documented by Maryanne Olson.

Members of Jump-Start and Cornerstone engaged in conversation about the generational shifts in leadership that are occurring in arts and activist organizations. What can we learn from organizations who have recently survived leadership transitions? What new structures are they using? How does leadership change affect multi-racial or multicultural organizations, or those led by people of color, specifically? How can we build impact and sustainability through transitional times?

After initial introductions by the moderator, both of the arts groups spoke about their organizations. Jump-Start is a collective of 15 artists in San Antonio, with an arts-education "wing," and guest artists. They started to talk seriously about how the structure could change to benefit the organization and how to successfully make transitions to get more guest artists in and also make their company a more permanent fixture. They started an apprenticeship program which could lead into staff positions as a way to mentor young artists through the company. They came up with new ideas in leadership that were based on "old" traditional models – an artistic director, a managing director, etc. They also began to incorporate "Liz Lerman" facilitated feedback models into their new works.

Cornerstone is a theater based in L.A. that creates theater with community. They have been, in the past, a "consensus-driven" company run by a board, an artistic ensemble, and staff. In the past few years they have significantly increased the number of permanent staff members and codified what the artistic ensemble means. The board shifted from a working board to a volunteer board. They have seen tremendous growth in the last 20 years. The most significant change that's occurred is that their artistic director, one of the founding members, stepped down and was replaced by someone outside of the community. There are currently no founding members of the company on the staff. They have looked at this as a new era and are seeking new ways to explore their larger structure.

S.T. Shimi from Jump-Start went into more details about the changes that have occurred in the company. She said that they embrace their "different" identity status among San Antonio theaters. Part of the major transition in their structure was their capital campaign

for a new space which forced the company to discuss moving forward. She stressed the need for changes in leadership over the years and discussed other cultural organizations that haven't gone through leadership transition and are now struggling. One of the reasons her company thrived through change was because the company members and staff were willing to discuss change.

Cornerstone also spoke of "African American companies that died as a result of leaders not leaving." They suggested that these artists need their jobs to survive which is why they don't leave, but that there is "only so far you can grow in one company." They stressed a need to honor the past by moving into the future and discussed their interest in intergenerational/multiracial new leadership.

When questioned by the moderator, "How do you change leadership to match the community?" Shimi responded that it is necessary to "stick to your guns" and not compromise for funders but instead find "creative funders, strategic partnerships." She also suggested that mentorship goes both ways, and that both old leaders and young generations of leaders can learn from each other.

The moderator asked Cornerstone, "How do you move beyond cult-following [of an old artistic director] to still reflect the community?" They suggested "diversifying the voice of the space so people will be drawn to the organization still" and stressed that the transition between leaders will last at least a year.

One youth asked the panelists "when/how they filled the shoes." One panelist said that you "step into the shoes knowing you're going to grow into them and you are going to alter them in your own way." Another suggested being "the mentor you wish you'd had."

All the panelists agreed that the next step should be to "generate leaders from inside the company" to make transitions easier. Another way to avoid losing a following is to continue to build the repertoire and create educational programming that redefines the community. Education should not be viewed as secondary for funding purposes only but should be on an equal level with artistic programming.

### **Asian-American Women Playwrights Archive**

Roberta Uno, New WORLD Theater's founding Artistic Director and founder of the AAWP archive, and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns (UCLA), former New WORLD Theater Literary Manager and archivist, discussed the impetus to their undertaking to establish this archive, and the impact it has had on theater practice and scholarship. The session also included readings by playwright/performers Brenda Wong Aoki, Bina Shariff, and Young Jean Lee, and a staged reading of *Marginal Woman* by Wai Chee Chen. The work of these artists is housed in the collection. Chen's play was highlighted earlier in the semester in the Women of Color of the 1930's Theater Festival curated by Maryanne Olson, an MFA dramaturgy student in the department of theater. Priscilla Page (New WORLD Theater, UMass Department of Theater) facilitated the session which demonstrated the aesthetic range of Asian American women playwrights and the historical scope of the collection, *Marginal Woman* was written in 1936 and Lee's *Songs of the Dragon* debuted Spring 2006 at HERE Arts in New York. Lucy Mae San Pablo

Burns provided closing comments on the links between the work highlighted in the session and the bigger conversations about identity, artistic expression and performance that took place throughout the conference.

### **Future Aesthetics: Diversity within Hip Hop**

Panelists: Baba Israel (Open Thought Music), Steve Ben Israel (artist/activist), Celena Glenn (artist/activist), Mildred Ruiz and Steven Sapp (UniverCity Theater Network), Kay Barrett and Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai (Mango Tribe). Moderator: Soyica Diggs (Stanford University). Documented by Irene Shaikly.

How do we define Hip Hop today in 2006? Baba broke it down like this: “It’s participatory. It is not passive. It encourages everyone to be participants and step up in your skills. There is accountability. East Coast Hip Hop is all about stories ... there’s the underground scene in LA, Midwest (Chicago) ... and there’s kind of a gap between Northeast Hip Hop and Down South Hip Hop.” Steve Ben Israel says: “Hip Hop is in stages. Right now we’re sittin’ in the flava’ of the South. And the South has formed their own movement separate from other places.” Mildred says: “Don’t think you are pioneers, we are not reinventing something ... know the rules but you can break them too. The urban aesthetic right now is the problem in dealing with ageism. If you old, you ain’t down.”

How do we define Hip Hop as a movement? Celena says: “Something was happening when I was there.” Kwikstep says: “The dancers are speaking. As far as understanding, learning, and interpreting revolutionary art, sometimes it looks like it is Hip Hop vs. theater.”

Soyica then poses the question, “What about Hip Hop Theater as a movement?” Steve says, “How do we take a freestyle and convert it into theater? Well, using the traditional theater skills we’ve been taught.” Baba says: “There’s so many different theater movements. There’s Black Theater, Latino Theater, etc., using these different theater techniques and applying them into Hip Hop. In theater, we have a chance to see characters in a visceral way. For example, gangster rappers, however, they portray their individual characters without the costume change.” Steve says, “Theater has to go more into the vision. They teared it down together. They built it up together.” Kelly then responds, “Theater should be for everyone ... a human connection ... it is how we evolve our own craft.”

What makes an audience move? Kwikstep says, “The truth.” Baba says, “Audiences can get on stage.” Kay says, “Talkbacks, Q & A’s at the end of shows ... letting audiences have their analysis of the piece not just from performers ... it is more of a collective experience and how we skill-share because spaces aren’t meant for marginalized groups, such as homosexuals, women, people of color, etc... We must be open and accessible to share our creativity especially with youth in Hip Hop.”

There was dialogue surrounding the issue that Hip Hop has become appropriated, for example, in education, like what happened in the culture of Jazz. Soyica then posed this

question: “How do we preserve the culture of Hip Hop?” Mildred responds, “It was called Hip Hop to create a commercial entity. We are going to represent EVERYBODY! But the second you’re put in the box it separates the actual vision and intention behind the work. When society imposes labels, you are more limited. I grew up singing boleros. I can sing a bolero with Baba beat-boxing.” Baba responds, “And that’s Hip Hop! Afrika Bambaata now Dj’s raves!” Kelly says: “To hear the term “post-Hip Hop” KILLS me! Its about creating a space where people can matter ... its about understanding what we are, and the roots of what it is we’re studying. Open mics are an important system of knowledge.”

Kenny Jones from the audience asks: How do we incorporate new elements of Hip Hop? Steve says: “We’re already doing it.” Kwikstep says: “Different boroughs represent different styles or what college they go to. When you’re in a city that’s multicultural, it is about how you rock your shit.” Someone then said, “You, me, we, are all part of a whole, mixing poetry and theater, Hip Hop and jazz, etc.”

### **Vigilance at the Borders**

Panelists: Dora Arreola (Mujeres en Ritual Danza-Teatro) and Elvira and Hortencia Colorado (Coatlicue Theatre Company). Moderator: Mari Castañeda Paredes (UMass Communications Department). Documented by Mari Paredes.

In this roundtable discussion, Mexican and Chicano/a artists responded to the increased pressures on immigration and the U.S.-Mexico border through varied aesthetics and approaches.

The panelists discussed the ways in which Chicana/Mexican/indigenous women use their artistry in response to the challenges of immigration and the complexity of the U.S.-Mexico border. Dora shared how growing up in Tijuana, Mexico, shaped her consciousness about the uneven and violent relationship between the US and Mexico. Her work in Mujeres en Ritual is an attempt to portray and analyze the lives of women at the border as well as collaborate with artists who use their artistic articulation to shed light on the exploitation and oppression of Mexicanas, especially those working in maquiladoras.

Elvira and Hortencia Colorado of Coatlicue also explained how their lives in Illinois as young women shaped their sense of place and power. Their work through theater aims to teach women in particular how to transform and change their lives, and create a voice for the unspoken aspects of Latina lives that are often unheard. They begin their workshops by asking participants: What is it about movement/theater that allows us to express certain issues that are difficult to express in other forms? How can we use this artistic expression to bring out the beauty in the horror? Coatlicue is a space to ask these kinds of questions, but most important, to teach others to be vigilant in the communities they live in. For instance, what is the treatment of urban native/indigenous women in the U.S. and in Mexico?

## **Multiracial Identities: Shifting Demographics, Shifting the Conversation**

Panelists: Robert Karimi (Kaotic Good Productions), Kamau Ayubbi (Great Leap), Ben Hart and Amira Rose Schroeder (Project 2050). Moderator: Eric Hamako (Social Justice Education Program, UMass). Documented by Chris Rohmann.

Robert Karimi began the session with an excerpt from his performance piece “Self (the remix),” mostly a narrative about growing up in an immigrant family with Iranian and Guatemalan parents, and the mixed identity he has derived from this background, what he calls “sample consciousness.”

The major recurring points were that mixed race leads to multiple identities, or at least multiple “personas” depending on the social context one is in; the difficulty of being accepted for one’s whole self, and of being accepted by the group you “half” belong to; the danger of dilution of racial/ethnic identity and the future viability of that identity; and multiracialism as metaphor of the complexity (and unity?) of humankind, and of the irrelevance of the concept of race. But: “Race can go away when racism goes away.” There was a mention of Swirl, Inc., one of several organizations for multiracial people.

Miscellaneous comments from participants are listed below:

Ben – African-American/white – feet in both worlds, “but not really in either one.”

Amira – Puerto Rican/black/white, raised by white lesbians – didn’t recognize her biracial identity till age 12.

Kamau – Japanese/African-American (+ 1/6 Irish) – is now a Sufi. Doesn’t identify in one racial category, but with his spiritual identity instead. His art is influenced by many different strands.

Eric – Japanese/Jewish, works as a mixed-race organizer.

**Question from the audience** – How do you identify yourself - more one than the other?

Ben – talks differently depending on the venue and context. Also noted people’s differing perceptions of people according to skin shade.

Robert – Dangers of essentialism and fundamentalism, or all kinds. Noted that most Iranians are secular Muslims, still bitter about the Muslim invasion of Persia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. “need to see culture as fluid”

Amira – When applying to colleges and college loans, she adopted different identities for different audiences. “Not quite accepted by either camp” i.e. Latino or black.

Robert – When he was in college only the Muslims accepted him for himself.

**Question** – Would you/Have you ever wanted to be just one or the other (e.g., in order to be fully accepted by that group)?

Ben – In Middle School he hated being biracial, wanted to be black. “You can’t keep proving yourself forever, you have to be your whole self.” Fluidity of culture is important.

Eric – Is not confused by his bi-racial identity, and finds it hard to understand why other people are.

Robert – Martin Buber’s I/Thou dichotomy/unity – we need to go from I/It to I/Thou

Ise Lyfe (in audience) – Is black/white, identifies as only black. Black man “shouldn’t” marry a white woman (“it’s wack”) – their daughter would probably be darker than her mother, and her self-esteem would be affected by that: Why did Dad choose light?

Amira – Multiracialism is saying that race doesn’t have to be such a barrier.

Robert – Why do we self-identify as we do? Because “we need to put water in the glass – it’s part of your story.” “You can’t choose who you love” (i.e. same race/ethnicity or other). Genealogy is big now because “people want to see their complexity.”

Eric – (in response to someone talking about wanting to be “down” with black friends by acting like them, doing the “black things they do) – Do you have to do black-stereotype things (e.g. basketball) to be “down”?

Ben – It might be time to give up the idea of race.

Eric – Race can go away when racism goes away. Part of oppression is the idea that you can’t understand/care about me without *being* me.

Ben – “You can’t walk without walking like where you come from. Who we are is untouchable. We shouldn’t have to think about racial barriers.”

Kamau – In other words “the solution is the solution” – be the change you want to see.