

# How is We Americans?

by MARGARET KEMP

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*If there is democracy in you, that is where it will be shown. this is the only way we is americans. this is the only truth that can be told. otherwise there is no future between us but war. and we is rather lovers and singers and dancers and poets and drummers and actors and runners and elegant heartbeats of the suns flame....but we is also to the end of our silence and sitdown.*

—From “Why is We Americans,” by Amiri Baraka

The checkpoints placed at border crossings function to create, sustain, and segregate “the other” from the dominant culture. By creating the cultural “other”, these checkpoints prevent certain groups from entering and participating fully in the society and its culture. The dominant culture bearers hold up the standards toward which the entire culture is trained to look. As a performing and teaching artist (with a specialization in voice, speech and movement), I believe that sound, language, story, and physicality are among the most widely (yet subtly) used criterion at the border of American culture.

Fear collided with flesh during events in Ferguson, Missouri, where an unarmed African-American teenager was shot (again and again and again) by a white police officer. *The New York Times* reported that most police departments support “reasonable fear” as permission to shoot, to kill. Reasonable fear can be born of myth and misinformation. It’s hard-wired into our society. And in many cases what is “reel”— the identifying markers of “the other” as represented by various commercial media—is mistaken for what is real. In the case of Ferguson, this is the myth of a monolith of African-American-ness as a culture of violence. Sound, language and physicality play a large part in acting as clues and puzzle pieces which, when put together, became quite literally a trigger point for all the events that marked this episode in our history.

A similar type of misinformation has marked my experiences as a performing and teaching artist in varied learning and performance communities in the United States and abroad. These experiences have steeled my resolve to transform the future by embracing a belief that voice and speech trainers can change the world.

At the border between U.S. dominant culture and its “others” sits a lack of knowledge and the subsequent misunderstanding of and resistance to the “other” that the dominant culture itself has created. I experienced this dearth of knowledge recently in a rehearsal of August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, for which I was working as a voice and dialect consultant. I was asked to address the vocal variety and choices among the actors, particularly for the younger performers. My approach was to work with the entire company, providing technical work based in Fitzmaurice Voicework and Knight-Thompson Speechwork, along with support materials and physical experiences related to the Great Migration. One of the themes of the play, the Great Migration was a period

between, roughly, 1916 and 1970, during which more than 6 million African Americans moved from the rural Jim Crow South to the urban centers of the North, Midwest and West. My goal as voice and dialect consultant was to allow these actors the opportunity to explore how these events might influence their voice, body and breath, thereby expanding the choices for vocal dynamics.

I could have chosen faster, easier, purely technical fixes. I could have worked with each actor alone. However, I felt that providing a common experience would shrink the time, space and history that existed between all the artists and the text: cultural differences replaced by a common experience of humanity. This is the same type of experience that I seek to share with my audiences as a performer. The goal of my approach to voicework is to fire up my students and audiences, to transform students from being just creative technicians and to shift audiences from the role of removed spectators to fearless questioners with curious minds and hearts. Life and art live in fearless questions! Being in the questioning place makes room for informed discovery.

Four months ago, I returned “home” to Nassau, Bahamas for the funeral of my Aunt May. At the funeral, someone outside of the family asked what I did for a living in the U.S. I told him that I teach voice and speech and that I work as an actor. With a hopeful glint in his voice he asked, “Are you famous?” I wanted to say, “If you have to ask, clearly I am not in the least famous.” But, instead, I silently shrugged a *sorry to disappoint you* shrug. He replied, “But that is how you make your living?” I could see him trying to puzzle it out, make sense of my “Yes” response. Helpless, he could only retort, “Only in America”. He began to walk away and then paused and, as if acknowledging both my history and my present, tossed the word “Lucky” to me.

***this is the only way we is americans. —Amiri Baraka***

See, I am a product of the Black Arts Movement. My earliest exposure to creativity came from The Elma Lewis School in Roxbury, an African American neighborhood in Boston. When I dreamed then of working in the theatre I was, unbeknownst to me at the time, really dreaming of becoming an arts activist. In the spring of 2012, Black Arts Movement poet Amiri Baraka recounted his early years in a talk he gave at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. I recall him saying that, when he looks at what is projected in the media, he thinks “Where are the black people that I know?” He prodded his audience to “make your story heard”. So that when folks come along 300 years from now they will see you, “...not someone’s pre-digested story about you. They don’t know...they think they know everything but they just know what is convenient. Make your story heard”.

He reminded me that this work, for me, is a re-memory in process.

Re-memembering is the process of, all at once, making whole both the new and old. My teaching artist and actor’s body and voice make up a type of hard drive that is constantly connecting past, present and future cultural crossings. Here, in this body, memory mutates, suffers and withstands seismic shifts. Here is what I have learned: the value of the work/memory in process rests on its ability to survive. I/it survives through constant conversation. This is where all the sounds of human voice, all the sounds of language and

all the stories step in. What I bring to my students in voice and speech is an opportunity to walk across cultural borders with a respectful and questioning heart.

My students are generally of European ethnic origins, yet I am as likely to have them explore rhythm, imagery, and heightened language by mining the work of August Wilson as they might the plays of Tennessee Williams. Occasionally there is shock and pushback, accompanied by an “I’m not black” statement. However, by the end of intense body, text, and language investigations those students have not merely taken a walk in someone else’s shoes, someone else has taken a walk inside of their very flesh. I have witnessed the “other” melt into humanity—and border checkpoints melt into passageways.

Two years ago, at the invitation of The University of Cape Town and The Mother Tongue Theatre, I traveled to South Africa as a guest artist. While there, I had the opportunity to facilitate a two-month-long voicework and storytelling workshop with girls ages 13-16 who lived in the Italian Catholic Mission, a charitable organization doing wonderful work with very limited resources for displaced or abandoned children. Most of the girls were refugees from war-ravaged Rwanda. The Missionaries cautioned me to encourage the girls to speak English, not to get too serious, and not to excavate the girls’ pasts.

In these directives I could see a parallel between South Africa and the United States. I was reminded of Native American children who were put through American schools to erase their culture. In much the same way, the Catholic Mission influenced the girls to disassociate from their language, stories, and culture heritage with the goal of helping them to blend into South African culture. The directives around language did not stop with the girls. I took the public taxi (aka, the scariest jitney ride ever) to the Mission. On the jitney you could hear nearly every dialect that exists in South Africa. However, I never heard Afrikaans, the Dutch-influenced dialect associated with White South Africans. I also never heard an American accent. In fact, I had been warned by my South African hosts never to speak on the bus. They explained that my personal safety rested in my ability to slip across the South African cultural border, which my looks could allow me to do, without being stopped at a cultural checkpoint, which my American sound would surely have flagged. When I pushed for details, I was told that I sounded privileged and, perhaps worse, white. Further, this privilege, and its racial connotations, would be a perceived threat. In this way the various brown South Africans on the taxi gagged me in the same way the Missionaries gagged the girls. I was very disappointed by these warnings. Part of me wanted to press my luck, but instead I chose silence and made my way to the Mission safely.

Once at the Mission, the girls and I engaged in various theatre exercises, played games, and participated in activities that I hoped would provide them with some distance from their daily reality and personal histories. I hoped that, through this process, the girls would be able look at their own lives from a broader perspective. Still, I always felt the girls were not entirely present or invested in the process. Looking back on this now, I wonder if it had something to do with my “privileged” sound.

Toward the end of my stay, the girls attended my solo performance “*Confluence...*” (formerly titled “*A Negro Speaks of Rivers*”). My performance is a narrative of my

childhood memories of my family's neighborhood in Roxbury sliding from stability to chaos as rage and violence gripped Boston during the early days of public school desegregation. There is one particularly violent passage where I hide under a parked car as a riot erupts around me. I knew this would be hard for the girls to witness.

When we reconvened at the Mission later in the week, these normally talkative girls were silent. I was afraid that I and/or my performance had scared them. Finally, one girl spoke up, asking if the story was true. I said yes. Another asked if my mother taught me the songs I sang in the show. I said yes. This is what got us back in the flow. "The songs remind me of home" dove-tailed on the voice of another girl who began to sing, putting together the Spanish sounds "*Existeeeeee un rioooo*" from a refrain she remembered. Another asked, "Will you teach us your songs?" "Yes." In that moment, the distance from the girls that I'd felt in past sessions shrank. In that moment, we crossed each other's borders. This landscape view of my life opened a place for a deeper dialogue. A deeper place than we had ever shared. Can you picture us sitting on the floor in our little room, singing in Spanish, a language I barely know and one they didn't know at all? The picture is a little funny; still, this sharing moved us, empowered us to embrace in its entirety our past, present and future selves in the broadest manner possible at the time. Who knows what the future holds? But in this moment, they and I became one humanity.

Several months ago, I noticed the book of plays *Adrienne Kennedy in One Act* on a teaching colleague's book-shelf. I remarked that I really love those plays. I exuberantly chattered on about the plays' challenging language and complex imagery until I was cut off by her response. "Oh you can have it...we don't really go into that stuff anymore. "It's a post-racial society. It's old Black Theatre..." Her voice trailed off. I was blindsided. "Old?" I thought. Well, if we no longer value these stories because they are old, let's trash Shakespeare and Edward Albee while we are cleaning the shelves. "It's a post-racial society," she repeated. "Let the past rest," she continued. Are we really in a post-racial society? Perhaps we should ask Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown about our "post-racial" society. Oh, wait, we can't ask them: they're dead. They died from the affliction of "walking while black" and, I'll offer, talking and gesturing while black. Their deaths were caused by cues that inspired "reasonable fear". This fear was born of the misunderstanding of their gestures, voices, and use of language.

But since we can't ask them, ask me; like many African-Americans, I have tales to tell from "post-racial" America. In May 2014, a police officer pulled up next to me at a Red Box vending machine and asked what I was doing. Fear raced up my throat. "Going to rent a movie," I said. He stopped and got out of his police car, then stood next to me with his hand on his gun while I chose my DVD. On this street corner, a Red Box machine transformed into the border between going to jail, being shot, or going free. I know why the police officer stopped me at the checkpoint: my sweatshirt and raised hood, my dreadlocks, my dark skin are all visual cues that struck "reasonable fear" and suspicion in him. As I got in my car and drove away, he was still standing and glaring his fear in my direction, just to make sure, I suppose, that I wouldn't make off with the gigantic, extremely heavy Red Box machine. I am lucky that he put the clues together properly.

The idea of a “post-racial” society is, itself, fundamentally racist.

Later in the day, I reflected on the discussion around Adrienne Kennedy’s plays. Humiliation, shame, and anger sat with me. They started punching, slapping and kicking my flesh. They seeped inside me and commenced to battle. In my colleague’s office, I wanted to speak up, but then, and even now, I felt/feel like Anita Hill who, wide-eyed, floated into a toxic Senatorial soup and told her story of harassment, only to be met with indifference, cynicism, and resistance. But in this case, it was this professor, this teacher, who was the gatekeeper of language, story, and myth: the parable police. I don’t fault the individual, but she, perhaps in an effort to follow directives to streamline the curriculum, had become the colonizer and the missionary, simply doing what she thought was best for the students.

I listen and observe our students and young audiences. In them, outside of the classroom, I observe the revolutionary theatre that Growtoski talked about. Their bodies, voices, and language(s) are a blur of cross-cultural influences. Even the once-clear border of skin color is softening to shades and shades of brown. There is even a new casting category, “racially indefinable,” to describe our “post-racial” actors. Yet students have told me that the revolution has not reached their training: “Black students work on the black stuff and Asian students work on Asian stuff and everyone works on the European texts,” they say. I see that the old borders are unchanged; they may be more subtle, but they are still just as effective at relegating, ostracizing and, finally, creating while simultaneously banishing “the other.” This border is quieting dialogue, sending students back in time.

African-American culture is integral with the history of the United States. Segregating it to be creatively explored by black students alone is ridiculous. The same can be said for Asian and Latino culture. Most institutions argue that they are only responding to the need to prioritize learning in order to squeeze “the important stuff” into the allotted time. If that means writers of color are left out of the picture, then the teaching is as out of touch with the lives and realities of all our students and the young audiences we hope to attract, as the good hearted missionaries in South Africa were out of touch with the Rwandan girls.

These checkpoints jeopardize future creative artists and theatre, leaving them and their work to die in a faded past. Some might say that these works get their due in the Black Theatre class or the Asian Theatre class, but when these works are approached from the strange place of “other,” they are left out of the conversation that makes them live. They will always be viewed as strangers from another country when, in fact, they are not. That weekend I read all of Adrienne Kennedy’s plays. They nourished me, re-membered me, gave peace a chance in the war inside of me. I didn’t even know that I was starved for these plays, which I had not read since high school. The experience of these plays gave me comfort. With them, despite being by myself, I was not alone. I contemplated the experiences that young artists of all races are missing if they are not being exposed to Ms. Kennedy’s work. To discover the sounds, language, and physicality that were a part of her experience and are the genesis of experiences that are playing out in our world

today.

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My goal as a performing and teaching theatre artist is to season my students in class by teaching traditional voice and speech work and by giving them experiences with texts and movement work that run the full range of humanity and human communication.

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and runners and elegant heartbeats of the suns flame.*

The way to change is in the doing. Communities of learning are a place to sow the seed for transformation. I am smart enough to know that the checkpoints will not come down. I am naive enough, however, to hope that this type of training will be the tunnels that can at least bore beneath societal and cultural checkpoints. If this training can light passageways that empower young artists to create informed and nuanced performances, it will lead to a deeper understanding of humanity—and, as a result, help undo the damage done by “reel” images.

*we is also to the end of our silence and sitdown*