

INTERVIEW WITH THE WRITERS: WHERE EARTH MEETS THE SKY

31 May 2018

Dears Ariana, Edyka and Vanessa,

I am thrilled to say that the journal TheatreForum (<http://www.theatreforum.org/>) published out of the University of California, San Diego, is interested in me writing a full-length piece about your process of creation on Where Earth Meets the Sky. They publish only new work that is ground-breaking or out there in some way. So exciting! I like to include the voices of the creators in my articles. In order to achieve this, I am generating a few prompt questions for you three.

Teresa Marrero: How did the idea of the play originate?

Ariana Cook: I will have to defer to Vanessa to speak about her original revelation for the show. When I joined, Vanessa had requested a meeting between us and two other women of color to discuss socialization, trauma, and identity politics as women of color. This group grew in size and began to meet regularly. We wanted to devise a piece exploring the science of socialization in the brain and the traumatic effects it has on women of color, in particular. As the fall of 2014 approached, many of the original group became involved in other artistic projects and plays. Vanessa and I continued to meet knowing that we wanted to write this show and it was Vanessa's idea to use sci-fi as a genre. While explicitly exploring the science of socialization was left on the cutting room floor, this new direction allowed us to tell the story of each of our journeys to 'wokeness' while also envisioning the future we wish to see.

Edyka Chilomé: I will defer to Vanessa here as I recognize her as the original creator of the project. Though I do recall my vast interest in everything that was Octavia Butler and the exploration of indigenous futurism which I extensively shared with Vanessa at the time our friendship began and at the time Vanessa was still defining the themes and aesthetics of this project. I wonder if the concept of this play as an "indigenous futurism" project was solidified then for Vanessa?

Vanessa Mercado Taylor: The seed for me was planted when I was working with Pangea World Theatre in Minneapolis. I was for the first time in a space where my identity-as a brown woman - was honored and where the unique traditions of my family and my gente were included. It was revolutionary for me. I had a panic attack in a mercado because I realized how much white privilege and internalized racism I had

been carrying and the connections to my parents' own trauma as immigrants. And I began asking a lot of questions about socialization and the brain and the formation of identity. I've always felt a need to work collectively rather than individually, so I reached out to David Lozano at Cara Mia and offered the idea of bringing together the women of the CM ensemble to explore further. For me, a lot of the questions kept taking me to my Indigenous root. I felt a deep need to learn about myself in relationship to the land and to ways of my ancestors. And collectively we started seeing a common thread in our explorations, we kept coming back to questions of colonization, race, gender and of healing for the future. The idea of reaching across time for hope and healing, Sci-Fi just made sense. Again, I had to confront so much of my white privilege around the genre and I am so grateful for the other women. Together we were intentional about decolonizing our work and ourselves. Once we committed to telling the story through Indigenous Futurism, we began to understand the importance of this choice and its reflections in the world. I think we're in a time where people of color are more and more focusing on creating paths towards a new future. Indigenous Futurism and Afrofuturism are essential to our communities as we reclaim the ways of our ancestors while asking important questions about ourselves and our world.

Teresa Marrero: What were the circumstances that made it possible for your play to be developed through the Cara Mía Theatre organization?

Ariana Cook: Cara Mía Theatre Co. has made a commitment to a value system that supports an original aesthetic, excellence in practice, cultural authenticity, and social justice. Though theatrical productions, Cara Mía Theatre Co. uses these values to unearth history, expose injustice, create new perspectives, and give voice to underrepresented communities not limited to the Latinx demographic. The company is all too aware of the dearth of voices of color in the American playwriting landscape and Cara Mía Theatre Co. has a track record of supporting the new work of playwrights of color as well as facilitating the creation of ensemble-written works. In order to provide a better framework for the creation, testing, and workshopping of new plays, Executive Artistic Director David Lozano, created Teatro En Fuga: A Festival of New Works in order to provide a platform for new works created by Artistic Ensemble Members of Cara Mía Theatre Co. The festival provides a much-needed benchmark for the development and testing of new work. Cara Mía Theatre Co. was seeks to fill a void with this festival by providing an avenue of support for stories from diverse voices that historically have increased difficulty finding funding due to cultural inequity. By providing support and resources to artistic ensemble members' creative aspirations, Cara Mía Theatre Co. was able to present three work-shopped productions as a part of the inaugural Teatro En Fuga in 2016; Gog and Magog: Two Clowns Trapped in Hell, Yo Soy Joaquin, and Where

Earth Meets the Sky. After a successful workshopped production, Cara Mía Theatre Co. was interested in supporting the world premiere of Where Earth Meets the Sky.

Edyka Chilomé: Again, a question I feel is more appropriately answered by the original creator and Ariana as an employee of the company. I was just honored to be trusted as an arts activist in this community and city and invited along on the ride!

Vanessa Mercado Taylor: Cara Mia was always very supportive and placed the trust in the artists' hands, even as the work evolved. It became more than a play. It became an opportunity to create spaces where women of color were intentionally decolonizing and healing. We began organizing events/spaces that were not specifically centered on the play or the narrative but rather on the practice of healing. Cara Mia's support of these non-theatrical events such as Retreats for women of color were essential to the evolution of the work. Also the support from artists and activists across the country. Meena Natarajan and Dipankar Mukerjee were and are amazing mentors to us in the process and opened up a residency for us at Pangea World Theatre. Alternate Roots funded a workshop and it's artists were great sources of knowledge, support and healing to us along the journey, contributing stories of their own and offering thoughts about our narrative. I would say that it's the possibilities that the play opens up in our world that has invited so many people to support us along the way. People believe in this play. They believe in the importance of art as praxis towards decolonizing our thinking and creating structures where we can challenge current political realities. David at Cara Mia recognized the value of the journey we were on and very generously funded 2 readings, a workshop and the world premiere. We are so thankful to all the supporters of Cara Mia for making that possible.

Teresa Marrero: How long did the process take?

Ariana Cook: I joined the project in the summer of 2014. This is when women began to meet and discuss ideas for the play. Vanessa and I continued to write as co-writers in the Fall of 2014 which is when we also asked Edyka to join the writing team. The first draft was finished in January 2016, just in time for rehearsals to begin for the workshop production in February 2016. Since that time, the play has been through several public readings leading up to the world premiere in April 2018.

Edyka Chilomé: Writing is an interesting experience. If I recall correctly it has been more than 2 years for us to arrive at a final script. This version of the final script anyway. Ha!

Vanessa Mercado Taylor: For me, the original idea began in 2009. The idea entered Cara Mia in the Summer of 2014. From November 2014-June 2015, the women of the Cara Mia ensemble focused on researching the science of identity and the brain (memory, socialization, dna, trauma) We wrote collectively until August of 2015 and then from August 2015 until January of 2016, Ariana, Edyka and I wrote the plot narrative. We had a workshop in March of 2016 and then a year and a half of further development through residencies, workshops and women's retreats. We then rehearsed the play for the world premiere in the Spring of 2018. So 4 years from idea to world premiere.

Teresa Marrero: What are major challenges of working in a collectively devised piece, besides scheduling issues? How did you resolve conflicts? What are the advantages of collectively devised work?

Ariana Cook: I think Edyka's answer voices this perfectly.

Edyka Chilomé: Personally, I think I walked into this work naively optimistic about my capacity to work collaboratively across the divide of difference. Of course, I continue to learn that this is the most difficult though conceptually the most important work, especially as women of color. This is particularly true if our aim is to disrupt dominating forms of culture creation within a white supremacy capitalist structure. However, decolonizing our forms of creation is no simple task and does not happen without mindful intention. As writers, though constantly fed and inspired by our communities and collective experiences, we often birth writing in isolation of our own consciousness. Choosing to explore the possibilities of expanding our consciousness with others challenges our egos and hold us accountable in some very intense ways. Through this process, I was reminded that humbling of the ego and intentional accountability will always help you grow one way or the other (especially if you have the capacity to invite the challenges as lessons). I think the three of us received some intense and challenging lessons in the process of birthing this play. We had to navigate difference in methodologies, experience, and our own limited abilities to challenge traditional forms of working. Yet for the most part I feel we did a beautiful job at balancing each other out where we needed to though we are still processing and learning the lessons this project has presented. When you are building a new world, resolution of conflict is an ongoing and never ending task.

Vanessa Mercado Taylor: I think Edyka said it perfectly!

Teresa Marrero: Where personal experiences part of the creative process, if so, how were they incorporated?

Ariana Cook: My mother is a white woman and it was particularly difficult for me as a mixed-race woman to reconcile the pain and trauma inflicted by white supremacist culture with my own heritage, family, and identity. I felt it was important to represent the White Hairs in the play as a sick society that is the result of colonization, power, and supremacist thinking. I don't believe the White Hairs are evil and I wanted to make sure they were not represented as such. I believe they are sick with power and biased thinking as a result of socialization. Additionally, I felt it was important to represent the African diaspora in the show as that is a large part of my identity. Many of the issues dealt with in the show come from our own experiences as playwrights: reconciling ACTUAL history with identity, questioning whether our preferences (in relationships, education, work) are the result of white supremacist culture, exploring how we ourselves contribute to traumatic narratives and why, etc. I think it is also safe to say that the three main characters are modeled after each one of us. It was vital that we rejected the protagonist/antagonist character development and write more along the lines of archetypes creating a narrative where all the characters were right. Their methods and actions may be debatable, but they all had valid arguments and viewpoints that come from true places of trauma and hope for a better future. My personal aim was that every audience member could relate to all three characters at once.

Edyka Chilomé: It was interesting to come to the table as three mixed race women of color who were at different places in our identity politics. The basis of this work is the constant and often times violent reconciling of all that goes into understanding self in this moment in [his]tory and in the process of defining a new story. I think all three of us brought that intention to the table pretty mindfully. Personally, I was moved to bring a lot of my cultural experiences as someone who identifies as a mestiza indigena and has been walking in some way or the other with actively political indigenous communities my whole life. I was born into a political family of campesinos that lived and continue to live the very real consequences of u.s. imposed colonial warfare in north and central america. I am also the daughter of spiritual activist mothers that are resilient leaders in our communities. The language and narrative I bring to the play reflects that.

Vanessa Mercado Taylor: I think the Anghared character had a journey which was very similar to mine. Having grown up, the child of "immigrants" in Los Angeles I was taught to assimilate and be as white as possible. I think the deep pain and anxiety that I felt

was important in understanding her journey and her motivations. There have been so many beautiful, powerful, vulnerable black and brown women that have walked with me and helped me understand my place in this world as an Indigenous Mestiza Colombiana. It was important that this work honor the collective. The process of arriving at the world premiere included many voices other than those of us three playwrights. This work is dedicated to all of us out there, doing the work of healing-for ourselves, our families, our communities and our future.

Teresa Marrero: This piece makes strong comments on issues related to gender, the environment, colonialism and race, just to mention a few. However at the level of dramatic conflict, the issue seemed to be about trust. Do we trust (again) or do we heed the lessons from the past. Please comment...

Ariana Cook: This is a great question and unfortunately, I don't have an answer for this. How can one trust again when there are hundreds of years of deception? Blind trust is unwise, but some trust is needed in order to move forward. Where that line lies depends on the individual, because trust comes at a cost.

Edyka Chilomé: This is a beautiful interpretation Teresa. I think the theme of trust is explored on so many levels in this work: Do we trust each other, do we trust ourselves, do we trust the relational power of a larger design outside of what we can understand? These questions seem timeless in our explorations as human beings. As writers, and more significantly as daughters of the persecuted and silenced, it has been a question of do we trust the potency and healing power of our stories. Do we as humans trust that our gifts and our passions hold answers for our people, for our world, for ourselves. This story reflects the questions that arise in the constant "dramatic conflict" in our lives, questions that we must learn to hold as a constant pulse in our learning and in our healing.

Vanessa Mercado Taylor: Edyka said it beautifully.

Teresa Marrero: Why a futuristic sci fi piece?

Ariana Cook: I loved the idea of sci-fi because it was co-opting a genre that has been dominated in mainstream media as a perfect illustration of white supremacy, colonialism, patriarchy, and anti-environmentalism. We were able to take an entry point from which many people like to consume and flip it to re-imagine what an equitable

world would look like. One that doesn't continue to ignore our existence, but acknowledges our bodies, lives, and contributions to this world.

Edyka Chilomé: Imagining our futures as colonized people is an act of resistance. When we live within a dominating system that is designed to perpetuate our cultural, spiritual, and physical erasure and death, daring to imagine our resilience and survival is radical. It is a gift of hope to our people and it is a reclaiming of our narrative. I write more about this in the study guide.

(<http://www.edykachilome.com/where-earth-meets-the-sky.html>)

Vanessa Mercado Taylor: I think my two partners said it perfectly :)

And last....

Could you each send me a brief bio?

Edyka Chilomé is a queer literary artist, performer, and cultural worker based in Dallas Texas. A child of migrant activists, she was raised in third world liberation movements grounded in the indigenous tradition of spiritual activism. Praised for her authentic and powerful voice, Edyka has been asked to share her writings and voice on multiple media platforms and in spaces around the country and Latin America including NPR, Tedx, The Huffington Post, and The Texas Democratic Convention. She is often found sharing poetry and stories that touch on colonization, indigeneity, women, spirit, art, and diaspora. You can learn more at Edykachilome.com.

Ariana Cook is the Managing Director of Cara Mía Theatre Co. as well as a mixed race actress, director, and playwright. Ariana received her Masters Degree in Drama from Texas Woman's University and her Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Musical Theatre from Sam Houston State University. She recently co-wrote WHERE EARTH MEETS THE SKY with Edyka Chilomé and Vanessa Mercado Taylor. Ariana's selected Regional Acting credits include: Abeni in the world premiere of WHERE EARTH MEETS THE SKY, Abby in the world premiere of PORT TWILIGHT OR THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE, Pianist in the regional premiere of THE BLACK MONK, Michelle in UNIT COHESION, Dove in CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS, and the title role in EBONY SCROOGE. Selected Regional Directing credits include: COLOR STRUCK, SACRIFICE, ASSISTANCE, THE BALLAD OF GEORGE ZIMMERMAN, and ZOOT SUIT. Ariana is an alumnus of the Lincoln Directors Lab in New York and the inaugural artEquity Cohort that convened at Oregon

Shakespeare Festival in 2015. Ariana is part of the national think tank panel for FETE: Fund for and Equitable Theatre Ecology and serves as the President of the Board for the new immersive arts group, Artstillery, in Dallas, Texas. She is currently creating a best practices document to share with the national theater community on equitable partnerships between large primarily white theaters and small culturally specific theaters. Ariana is an Artistic Ensemble Member of Cara Mía Theatre Co. and Echo Theatre.

Vanessa Mercado-Taylor is an Indigenous Mestiza /Colombiana theatre director, producer, actor and educator who for more than a decade has created performances that create a dialogue about human rights and social justice. She is the Chair of Drama and Humanities at El Centro College in Dallas, TX where she created the Hip Hop Studies program and is currently developing curriculum in Mexican-American Humanities. Vanessa received her MFA in directing from Ohio University, completed an internship in Human Rights and the Arts with Pangea World Theater, trained with Dell'Arte International. She created and directed an award-winning show at the Prague International Fringe Festival in 2008

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR SHARING YOUR TIME AND WORK WITH ME!

It is an honor and a pleasure,

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