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Lani Montreal Interview

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Interviewer: Thi Navi Thack
Interviewee: Lani Montreal
Phone Interview Chicago, IL
Date: Friday, February 26, 2010 at 3pm

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Winter Quarter 2010 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.*



BIO: Ms. Lani T. Montreal is a Filipina teacher, performer, and writer among other things. She was born in the Philippines and was raised in a family of artists. After leaving the Philippines, her next home was in Toronto, Canada, where she became more active and involved with the art community. Ms. Lani Montreal has been a member of many collectives and organizations, such as *Mango Tribe*, *Pintig Cultural Group*, *CIRCA*, *Insight Arts*. From working in collectives, Ms. Montreal has published many of her plays in the U.S., in Canada, and in the Philippines. She is currently a teacher at Malcolm X community college in Chicago and a staff/volunteer at Insight Arts organization.

TNT: Ms. Lani, my first question for you is if you can give me a little autobiography and tell me a little about how you became interested in becoming an artist?

LM: Well, my family is in the arts. All my family members are actors, directors, or script writers, but it's in the Philippines, where I was born and raised. I could sing when I was three years old, and it was something I could do. And, my mom and my sister are both writers. So, I guess I gravitated towards the arts. But, I didn't want to do show business. I really didn't like it. It was too superficial, and so I became a journalist. I wrote feature stories, essays in the Philippines, interviews. And then, I went to live in Canada for a while. I got involved in the art community. We had a community art group. We sang, and did theater. We worked with young people living in Toronto. Most of the immigrants we worked with were domestic workers, so they brought their children with them, or they petitioned them once they become immigrants. We worked with a lot of youths who were children of domestic workers, and we did theater with them. When I came here to Chicago, I became involved with *Pintig Cultural Group*, a Filipino

American theater group, and I did some performances and wrote scripts for them. And that's it. That's the brief.

TNT: Can you tell me about some of your major influences in your life as an artist?

LM: There are a number of influences. My family is one because they're artists. And then, when I came here, there's the theater group, Pintig, which I thought was a great influence on me. Then, I got into the spoken word community. *I was Born with Two-Tongues* was just starting then. And, I thought that was a great thing. I would say being among artists who were Asian or Asian American who do art was a great nurturing environment for me.

TNT: I can tell that you have been involved with many collectives, and I was aware that *Mango Tribe* was also one of the collective you were involved in. Can you speak of how your experience in collectives influenced you?

LM: Like I said, it's a great thing to be among like-minded people and also people with similar background who came here as immigrants, who are children of immigrants. For me, it was a positive thing in my life coming here to Chicago, and until now. *Mango Tribe* was founded by Anida Yoeu Ali [*back then her name was Anida Yoeu Esguerra*] and Emily Chang and they were originally from *I was Born with Two-Tongues*. They just wanted to get some women together to do write and do performance. When we started, there was about six of us, and it wasn't called *Mango Tribe* yet. We had this performance at the Chopin Theater and I think it was the most amazing thing that I experienced in Chicago. People were there and there was a lot of support from the community. You can tell that the community was hungering for these Asian-American women to tell their stories. From that small group, Anida and Emily called out to a lot of young Asian American women who became attracted to the group. At some point, I think there were thirty of us. But it was great because people were supporting each other. The collective was a very supportive environment. It was a way not only to build community but have a venue or a place to tell your story and exchange stories.

TNT: As you mention about American women telling their story, I was wondering if the identity of an Asian or an Asian American artist influenced you in telling your story?

LM: I really don't identify myself as an "Asian American" because I was born and raised in the Philippines. I see myself as a "Filipina in America" or an "Asian in America." Although some would perceive me as an Asian American, I do not identify myself as such. (I do understand and validate the struggle that children of Asian immigrants go through when it comes to identity. A lot of people that I tell come from that experience, a "Filipina in America.")

TNT: So, you were never confused of your identity, right?

LM: I think the confusion came more from outside. People were/still are trying to categorize me, but for me, I've always been a Filipina. And, I think that that way, I am also fortunate. My identity is not an issue for me. I know that for a lot of Asians who were born and raised here, that's an issue; they're Americans, but they're also categorized as Asians Americans. But I do understand because I have nieces and nephews who struggle with the issue of identity.

TNT: Since you do not identify yourself as an Asian American or an American, I was wondering if you picked up any American values while staying in America, and whether it came up in your artwork.

LM: Well, you will have to explain to me what you think qualifies as an American belief or value.

TNT: I was also questioned, in an interview, about whether or not I have picked up any American values and it came to my attention that something like freedom and independence are valued more in the American culture than in Asian culture. So, I was wondering how do you feel about this?

LM: Oh, I see what you mean. Well, I've always been a rebel, I think. So, I don't know if it is an American cultural type of thing. I've always defied expectations and so, I guess if you call that an American influence, then it is. As for American values, I think we all have similar values, right? In terms of freedom or being able to speak out. We also believe in respecting elders which at times may contradict with the preceding value.

In many ways Filipinos are quite Americanized because we were under the American rule for a while. Well, first it was the Spanish and then it was the Americans, but it seems like the Americans never left. For instance, in the Philippines, English is taught at a very young age. Everywhere you go in the Philippines you'll see American pop culture – Michael Jackson sing-alikes, McDonald's, Starbucks, TV shows, movies, American pop idols.

When I was living in the Philippines I grew up under the Marcos dictatorship and it was very oppressive and we were not allowed to speak our mind. We were taught to follow rules. In 1986 he was kicked out by the people, (and given sanctuary by the US government). There was a new regime, but there's still a lot of oppression and repression to this day. So, I guess what I appreciate in America is that there's a lot more willingness to accept, a lot more open-mindedness towards diverse ideas. More open to ideas of different values and being able to have discussions on important issues relating to identity and gender. And I think that has colored my work.

TNT: I agree that the Filipino culture has become very diverse and multicultural after being under the rule and the influence of the Spanish and the American. So, I was wondering is history a big part of your work?

LM: Yes, I believe in the importance of history very much because the problems that the country is still going through are because of the things that happened in the past. I do have that expression in my work. And I would like to think that my work questions that... it interrogates the past. And also allows the people to see the connection between the past and the present. It's still very much a part of our colonial history.

TNT: From reading your old works, I was also wondering what other issues that you address are?

LM: Well, last year, I think, I was working on issues that were race-related. I teach at Malcolm X, which is a predominantly African American community college. And so, I was situating myself in that place where I am an Asian teaching a predominantly black classroom about oppression. I think the issue of race is going to come up more in my work. I also continue to focus on the issue of being queer, Asian, being an Asian woman in America.

TNT: From your experience being in America, and through your work, have you ever felt like your identity has changed?

LM: Yes, it has evolved a lot. It's from the places you've gone to and the people you have met or encountered. The experience that you have and the people that you meet, I think they all contribute to your identity and how it evolves. I will always be a Filipina in America. But, it's not as simple. And what does it mean anyway? I mean, you can't say what it means to be a Filipino in American. I mean it's different for every Filipino in America. And, it's a good way to grow.

TNT: The next question I have is about your characters in your plays. Are these characters all a different part of you or are they created by outer influences?

LM: Oh, well, of course they are all a part of me, but they're also inspired by experiences of people you meet and encounter on a day to day basis. My work is very much centered on social justice. I feel that as an artist, a big part of my role is to speak the truth.

TNT: And now, my last question for you would be what you're working on currently.

LM: I recently went on a residency, and I started working on a piece about race. And it was addressing current issues like street violence and solidarity among people of color. That's what I hope to finish in the next... (she laughs)...it's just very difficult to find time off work since my main work now is teaching.

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