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Harvey Young

AN INTERVIEW WITH QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES

Quiara Alegría Hudes (Fig. 1) won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Water by the Spoonful*, the second play in her "Elliot" trilogy. She is a two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist for *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*, the first play in the trilogy, and the musical *In the Heights*. Her plays include *The Happiest Song Plays Last* (which ends the trilogy), *26 Miles*, *Yemaya's Belly*, and *Daphne's Dive*. In 2012, the *Los Angeles Times* praised Hudes as "one of the most poetic, socially clued-in young voices in the American theater."[1] In this engaging interview with Editor Harvey Young, Quiara Alegría Hudes talks about the role of music in her plays, socioeconomic isolation in cities, the inspiration for some of her plays, and the importance of asking the deep question.

Music has a significant presence in your plays. In 26 Miles, *it enters through the car radio.* In The Happiest Song Plays Last, *not only are there musicians onstage but also there's a call, at the end, for someone to pick up an instrument and play after Agustín dies. When writing, which do you hear first: the music or the voices of your characters?*

One of the stock questions for playwrights is: Is the production like what you saw in your head? I'm not a particularly visual thinker. I don't see it in my head while I'm writing. But I do hear it. It would be hard to say which comes first. Nothing is fixed. It's all somewhat of an organic process but they [music and words] feed each other.

My inclination towards music really comes from two things. One, coming from a somewhat musical family and having been trained in music all my life. It is a basic relationship that I have with this world. How I hear it. It is one of the lenses through which I experience things. The other is as a theatre practitioner. In thinking about that primal circle that we enter to tell a story for theatre, to separate music out seems potentially artificial. Music is as organically a part of that as words. Those two things feed each other as I am working. Right now, I am working on a play called *Daphne's Dive*. It is set in a piano bar in North Philadelphia. Each scene jumps forward five years in time. For those transitions, I imagine that there's a pianist playing.

Music, without words, has no literal meaning. Our relationship with it is much more instinctive. There's a freedom with that that's really different than what happens with words onstage. An audience knows that when music is involved that there are some basic contractual assumptions with music. You finish playing the song. It's been given to us in a kind manner. Whereas in drama, the audience knows—they're no fools—they're not safe. The characters that they're

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Figure 1.
Quiara Alegría Hudes attends the New York Civil Liberties Union's (NYCLU) 12th Annual Benefit Concert: "Broadway Stands Up For Freedom" at NYU Skirball Center on 21 July 2014 in New York City. *Photo:* Rommel Demano/Getty Images.

falling in love with could die at any moment. The playwright could turn it into a tragedy. There are so many unsafe routes that a play could take, and that's part of why people go to the theatre. Music gives us a bit of safety in an unsafe world.

Often, your characters speak through a medium: letters in Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue, *chat rooms in* Water by the Spoonful, *Olivia's journal or newsletter in* 26 Miles. *What attracted you to this format rather than a conventional living-room drama approach consisting of people sitting around and talking?*

Conversation isn't the only way that people use language to communicate. I'm not going to limit myself. I came of age at a moment. . . . I was still sending paper letters in college. My husband, who I was dating at the time, and I had a long-distance relationship while we were in college. I have a box filled with

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four years of paper letters that we wrote. On the tail end of that—when we graduated and started to work—e-mail became the standard form of communication.

Conversation. Speech. E-mail. Chat room. Each has its own conventions. Its own way that language is played with and used as a springboard, as a weapon, as a method of communication. It would be strange for a composer right now to use only instruments that existed in 1904. I'm just using the palette of language at my disposal today.

That makes sense. I was thinking of Annie Baker, who deliberately sets her plays in places that are not obviously theatrical—like a movie theatre—and sensing a similarity in your use of not obviously theatrical conversation forms, like text messaging, rather than having characters talk in a living room à la Ibsen.

The convention of the living room as the focus of the American domestic conversation was simply something that I did not experience growing up. We had a living room in Philadelphia, but that was the least-used room in the house. In fact, almost all of our behavior and interactions happened in other places: in the kitchen, in the dining room, in the bathroom getting ready in the morning, in my parents' bed because that's where the TV was. I never had this notion. To set a play in a living room, in a domestic setting, would be an exercise in artifice. It's just not in my experience.

To go back, we were undergraduates at Yale at the same time. You're right about us being part of the handwritten letter generation. I remember the idea, the novelty, of e-mail. There was a class on how to use the World Wide Web. At Yale, did you attend PROP?

No, what's that?

It was an optional Pre-Registration Orientation Program for students of color. Everyone was put up in a dorm on Old Campus. You walked around for five days, and almost every person you saw on Old Campus was a person of color. I didn't realize that it was amazing, a unique experience, until two weeks later. As part of PROP, Yale sent all participants an excerpt from Richard Rodriquez's book Hunger for Memory, *in which he talks about being a first-generation college student at Stanford and having to negotiate not only what it means for him to go to Stanford but also what it means for him to return home with this new "Stanford" identity.*

In your plays, there are occasional references to Yale and Juilliard as spaces off, places outside of the community that can bestow a rarified status on a person. This leads to a question. How does a person write about a community while also being conscious of one's status as both an insider and as a person who has managed to move outside that community?

Class and family is something that I am always dealing with in my writing. There is a lot of extreme isolation between the classes in this country. One of the things that fundamentally shaped my worldview was growing up in Philadelphia. Most of my family lived in North Philly. They lived in a poor community. It was extremely geographically isolated from the rest of the city. Infrastructurally, not geographically, isolated. There was not good public transportation. All these sorts of things. I had family members who were always in North Philadelphia and rarely got out of that community. I grew up in West Philly, which had a

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very different makeup. Where I grew up, it was extremely diverse. My friends on my block . . . if I had four friends, they were from four different countries. What they all had in common was that they all were first-generation. It was a largely immigrant community that was set in a historically black, working-class community. It was very diverse. Because of that, I felt that I had multiple lenses. By the time I was in high school, I went to a magnet school. I was traveling to a different neighborhood. I was always going all over the city, essentially. The more my horizons expanded in Philadelphia, the more that informed how I understood the experiences of my family members who were very isolated in North Philadelphia. Witnessing that isolation and what that meant to the energy of one's life and the spirit of one's daily routine was a heavy thing for me. I think about isolation a lot. I had wealthy friends in Philadelphia. I went to a Quaker School, a middle school, for three years. I saw an equal amount of isolation—of a different nature, in this other strata. A sense that people do not know how the other half lives. It goes in both directions.

The thing that ping-pongs is my immediate personal experience. To me, the American family at Thanksgiving, at Christmas, at Three Kings Day, hanging out after school, you'll have at one or two tables, a mother who is below the poverty line and myself, who graduated from Yale, and my step-aunt, who is a city councilwoman. We're all breaking bread together. When I go and talk about this around the country, people really relate to that. My sense is that the American family—even though there is a lot of class isolation—is more financially diverse than might meet the eye at first. That's something that I am interested in in my writing. No doubt.

When did you decide to write a trilogy of "Elliot" plays? August Wilson didn't set out to write a ten-play cycle. He wrote a play or two about life in the Pittsburgh area and then began to become more interested in the topic as he continued to write.

I cannot tell you specifically. It was sometime after the first play. I wrote the first play because here we were sending a young generation off to war. That alone, sociologically, seemed like a valid story to tell. What will this mean to our generation? The story gets told time and time again because we keep doing that. Of course, after that play was complete, the question—what does it mean to send a young generation off to war?—doesn't end. That question continues. What does it mean to bring them back into our society? What does is it mean for their children? That question opens up and unfolds into more questions. I realized after *Elliot* was complete that the question that I was asking and writing towards continues. I was very interested in the subjective legacy of war. How do our wars continue to trickle down to future generations? With that in mind, I thought, "I need to see this soldier a little bit farther in his story in order to understand . . . in order to further grapple with that question."

Elliot, as a character, is complicated. In some ways, he is successful thanks to his appearance in television ads, radio interviews, and the film. But there's also the passport that's being held from the first kill. What are your thoughts on that difference, the successful character who is tormented by the passport and haunted by an accidental murder?

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He's literally carrying his past with him. Maybe it's the next brick in the pathway of *The Things They Carried* [a 1990 short story collection by Tim O'Brien about soldiers' experiences in the Vietnam War].[2] This is one of the things that he carries. It's not the only thing, but it's the one that's turning the hottest. Of course, I'm playing with notions—as we were saying before—about making it and what that means in society. Elliot is a very charming, charismatic character. He's the kind of character—which is why he was fun to write—who can walk into a room and charm people. He can walk into a room and quote-unquote "pass." In fact, it's not passing. He is socially gifted. Success alone, as dramatists and human beings know, is no less a muddy and complicated affair than lack of success. I've always been wary of the rags-to-riches story. It's not a story that has ever really spoken to me. The riches, as the end of it, strikes me as a false pretense. Elliot is heading toward riches in a certain way, but it's not a one-way street.

Right. In some ways, he is the exception within that generation of young men going off to war and coming back wounded. He has opportunities that others did not have—because he is socially gifted. It is helpful to see how he carries his past with him. I would imagine that any play or series of plays about war, at some point, would involve conversations with veterans. Have you had any following the production of the "Elliot" plays?

Definitely. Many. Many interactions. I was just Skyping into a class at the Coast Guard Academy in Connecticut. Just recently, the American embassy in Armenia supported a production of *Water by the Spoonful*. One of their ulterior motives in supporting the production was that Armenia does not have a historic veterans' affairs program. The notion of what a veteran *is* is somewhat new. People would go, do their service, and come back. That's it. End of story. In 2014, they are trying to start a conversation about what is a veteran and how do we make this a concept in our society, in our military, in our government. They brought my cousin named Elliot out to Armenia in tandem with the play to talk to parts of their military about what a veteran is, what veterans' programs and support can do, and the kinds of emotional experiences that veterans have. All those sorts of things. It's ongoing. It started with *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue* down in the basement at 45 Bleecker Street at Page 73, which produced the premiere. The play is short. It's only 70 minutes from start to finish. We would do the play, have an intermission, and then whoever wanted to stay for a conversation, that would be Act II, which would be led by a veteran every night. That [structure] obviously is not easy to do with parts two and three, which are full-length evenings.

Looking at 26 Miles, *can we talk about Olivia and her relationship to whiteness? There is a line in that play where her mother, Beatriz, says that she is not white and then promptly gives her a history lesson.*

That's a complicated play for me. That is my problem play. I've never been happy with it. These are things that I probably shouldn't say publicly. It's the truth. I have always been unhappy with where I ended that play—not the actual ending but how that play communicated itself. The story was better than, ultimately, the writing was. I've continued working on it. I am adapting it into a musical for La Jolla Playhouse with a composer, Erin McKeown. Just to give a little context.

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That character's relationship to whiteness? I don't know . . . I'm not sure what to say about that other than apropos our conversation about class diversity within one American family. There is also a sense—I see this as I go and talk to students around the country—of dealing with hybrid identities. There is a somewhat superficial conversation to be had around the growing number of people who have mixed ethnicities and mixed racial identities. The thing that is a little less superficial—and quite universal—is that we're all beholden to multiple identities. This is what Walt Whitman wrote about. We all are making decisions all the time about which identities we're going to walk into a room with. Olivia is dealing with that in a more visible way. We have markers of identity that can be very visible.

I thought about this a lot when I was pregnant. It's one of these experiences that you simply can't hide. Everywhere you go, everyone's commenting on it. Of course, skin color and race is very much like that too. Everyone sees it when you walk into a room. Everyone brings their own baggage and perceptions to it. Olivia, in that play, is at a moment where she has been somewhat isolated and cut off from her past. What people see when she enters a room versus what is in her history are not always totally lined up together.

In the play, her mother has her own tough experiences: being an immigrant before attaining citizenship. She seems to have this awareness of how she is seen with her presumably darker complexion.

Some of that comes from personal experience. My mother is from Puerto Rico. She has darker skin. I have very fair skin. Certainly, I had a lot of experiences growing up. She says that when I was a baby and she'd be with me on the playground that it wasn't altogether uncommon for people to ask, "Are you looking for more work?" "How much do you charge an hour?" The assumption was that she was my nanny. She was my *mom*.

Certainly, as I grew a little older, even at eight years old, even at ten years old, I had experiences where I saw that I am being treated differently than my mother, who is standing right next to me. In stores, I would have that experience. I remember, with my aunt, who was probably the darkest of all the sisters in terms of skin color and also she has a significantly thicker accent than my mom . . . I remember, one time, being at a hospital with her. I was a teenager by this point. Her nurse was being extremely inappropriate, condescending, almost insulting: talking to her like she was an idiot. The second that I entered the room—I had gone to get my aunt a snack—the second that I entered the room and my aunt proudly introduced me as her niece, the woman spoke to me in a completely different way. I think that having experiences like that . . . when someone is demeaning towards you, that's one experience. When someone is demeaning toward the people you love, that's a different experience, and that's an experience that I had growing up that was pretty formative for me. Seeing the people that I love. . . . My sister also had much darker skin than me and had all of these various other signifiers. "She's a Latina from the hood," whereas one wouldn't look at me and say that. [*In a voice filled with pride and affection*] She was my baby doll. She's thirteen years younger than me. She was my pride and joy. I mean, I owned this girl. To see her also being treated differently in school and other arenas . . . it teaches you a lot about the world.

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I have plenty of friends with mixed children. In fact, I have two—a five-year-old and a nine-month-old. Without a doubt, darker-complexioned women with lighter-complexioned kids have the same experience of being on the playground and people assuming that they are the nanny. It repeats again and again and again.

Yes.

What is a misunderstanding that you believe that people often have about your work? Is there a misreading that you would like to correct—if you could correct it?

I don't know. These are conversations that people have behind closed doors (about perceptions of my work). I will say that a conversation like this is certainly a breath of fresh air. I'll get together with my writer friends who are women, my writer friends of color. It's always a good drinking topic: the annoying interview questions about "Do you write Latino plays?" It can be so relentlessly about everything but the content of the material. This is not just me. This is a lot of my writer friends who are women but most especially who are Latino, who are black, who are Asian. It can be almost tyrannical.

I wouldn't call it a misperception of my work. I would say that it's just a shorthand conversation that I am trying to have less and less. I want to talk about the material and the content. I don't disregard these "less deep" questions. But when the interview is done and that's been the only type of question, it can be very frustrating. That's almost more of a media management thing than anything.

In terms of what misperceptions are out there about my work, who knows? I try to put it out there and let it be. I can't get too wrapped up in how it's received or it'll be stifling or I'll never write again.

Lynn Nottage, in interviews, has expressed frustration about having to answer questions about how and why she writes black female characters. She has pointed out that white male playwrights are not asked about their thoughts on writing plays about white men.

Absolutely. Albee. I love Edward Albee because he's crotchety and doesn't suffer fools. He doesn't even suffer smart people half the time. No one has asked him, "What does it mean to be a male playwright? What does it mean to be a white playwright?" Do you know why? Because they would be scared to ask him that. Because he'd rip them a new one. Yes, indeed. I'm right there with Lynn Nottage in that point of view.

It's really a conversation about asking the deeper question. I've had this conversation about *Water by the Spoonful* a lot. "It's a play about the Internet. It's a play about technology." I'm like, "It is? I didn't know that." Yes, that's a part of the setting, but that's not what the play is about to me. Not any more than *A Raisin in the Sun* is a play about a living room. It's a play about a family. It's a play about a home. Is it a play about a sofa? No, it's not a play about a sofa. When the conversation starts there, I'm like, "Not really. It's a play about communities—different communities. It's a play about human beings and how they find friends and family. It's a play about survival." All of those are the first-draft questions.

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ENDNOTES

1. Reed Johnson, "Quiara Alegría Hudes, Post-Pulitzer, Eyes the Next Chapter," *Los Angeles Times,* 10 June 2012, *http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jun/10/entertainment/la-et-cm-pulitzer-playwright-20120610*, accessed 4 February 2015.
2. O'Brien, Tim, *The Things They Carried*, Boston: Mariner, 2009.

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