

Coming Out as Asian: Multiplying Identity and Intersectionality

Christopher Cayari

When I began my master's degree program, I showed up to the first day of my summer courses expecting to take my choral conducting to the next level. After all, I was attending the same university from which my heroes choral conducting giants Anton Armstrong, Robert Ray, and Andre Thomas graduated, all People of Color. However, I quickly realized I had been admitted to a Master of Music Education program, not a Choral Conducting program. Throughout my course work, I fell in love with music education and academic research. I found myself drawn to identity scholarship. Ten years later, when I went on the job search for my first university tenure track job, I realized how my aspects of my identity effected my place in music education.

'What Are You, Anyway?': My Multiple Identities

I was born in Chicago and moved to the predominantly White South suburbs when I was seven years old. Like many people who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, I viewed the United States as a big melting pot of ethnic and racial diversity. My family exemplified this melting pot since my father's entire traceable lineage was from the Philippines and my mother had grandparents who immigrated from Poland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and a French-speaking province in Canada. During childhood, I spent so much time outside that my skin would tan. My mother affectionately referred to me as her little Frito Bandito, the 1960's mascot for Frito brand snacks. While I did not know what a Frito Bandito was, I never perceived this as an affirmation of my good looks as my mother often called me this nickname while shaking her head from side to side and rolling her eyes with a nervous giggle. My father would often remind me that I am *American*. He refused to teach me about his Filipino roots, and even though he spoke Spanish and Tagalog (the language of the Philippines), he refused to teach me any words that were not English. While my parents never expressed overt hatred toward Brown and Asian people, their words and actions instilled in me a self-hatred that influenced how I saw my race and identity.

Throughout my life, people have and continue to ask me, 'What are you, anyway'? Usually, they were referring to my ethnic heritage, because to most, I look racially ambiguous. The prominence of the word *anyway* always stung as if they would look at me and not be able to put their finger on why I was different from them. Due to internalized shame, I used to say I am White or Polish. After all, I grew up surrounded by White peers with a White mother, my father returned to the Philippines when I was seven years old, and my Polish great-grandparents lived with us in a duplex. When I responded, many people persisted by asking, 'Oh, really'? with a to inflection that made me feel I needed to come out and say, 'I'm Asian' or 'I'm Pacific Islander' to which they responded with relief: 'Oh, that's it!' as if they were able to solve the mystery that was my race. If they continued with musings such as, 'I thought you were Italian or Hawaiian'. I would shrug it off and say, 'I get that a lot'.

I leaned into being identified by others as Hawaiian; after all, I felt comfortable wearing Hawaiian shirts because I was a person of large size and liked wearing bright colors. Even though it was not my heritage, I felt a connection to Hawaiians because the Philippines were also islands in the Pacific Ocean. I looked up to the largeness and Brown skin of some Hawaiians like ukulele player Israel Kamakawewe'ole. I felt a connection with him that I never felt before. He was a large Brown musician that made music that made me feel good. In junior high, I became a novelty performer playing my *nose-uke*, in which I would pinch one nostril closed and hum 'Aloha 'Oe' out the other while pretending to hula dance. This gave me the nickname, *The Flyin' Hawaiian*. In high school, I traversed racially-polarized groups because of my multi-racial identity. I was part of my school's largely Black gospel choir as well as the co-curricular ensembles like concert band and show choir, which were diverse but still predominantly White. However, I continued to feel quite alone because I never felt completely accepted in any racial circle.

My favorite way to make music was on the musical theater stage. Yet, I was never excited to portray rural community members from the Midwest in *The Music Man* and *Oklahoma* or as a mission band member and gangster in *Guys and Dolls*. When I was cast as Herr Hans Zeller in *Sound of Music*, I realized how my identity and the music I wanted to pursue were at odds. I could not understand why I, as the only Person of Color in the production, was cast as a leader within the Nazi party, a political faction that would have killed me for being Brown or queer.

Coming Out: I Am What I Am!

As an adult performer, musical theater led me to theater companies that were more racially diverse than my school experiences. I felt consistent excitement—maybe even euphoria—while amid a wonderful group of racially diverse performers. I also found that playing characters on stage who had commonalities with my identity helped me feel inspired and fulfilled. When I was on stage performing with my companies, I felt alive. I loved telling the stories of others. My most formative moment on stage was when I was playing Tom Collins in a community theater production of Jonathan Larson's *Rent*. The nightly performance included laying on a hospital bed on stage holding the body of my dead lover. I would pick up his lifeless body and carry him off stage. I placed my fellow actor's feet on the ground, he whispered good job, and a couple friends hugged us because they knew we needed emotional support as we imagined what our characters had gone through. Moments later, I sang *I'll Cover You (Reprise)*, surrounded by my fellow cast members, lamenting the story of every victim AIDS claimed in the queer community. That scene became a ritual in my life that showed me how catharsis and healing could come from musical theater. It empowered me to explore my sexual identity through music.

In 2016, I began to explore my sexuality through a performative autoethnography, a performance-based research study that took the form of a musical theater review titled *Who Am I? I Am What I Am!* (Cayari, 2019). Through the performance research and rehearsal practice, I reflected on my lived experiences as a queer person in the music education system. I identified key moments in my life regarding my sexuality and sought musical theater repertoire that would

help me to link those moments. The repertoire, depicting queer characters or written by queer composers, became a catalyst for further reflecting on my life. I then developed a script of monologue and verse that told my story which critiqued the lack of representation of queer people in music education curricula. As I went through the process, my remembered experiences helped me to develop identity. Every time I reflected, rehearsed, and performed, I was strengthening my voice, identity, and empowerment. The show premiered at the LGBTQ+ Studies in Music Education Symposium in 2016 and the mantra was ‘I am what I am’!

Initially, I was fearful to talk about my project outside of the queer community because of the prevalence of homophobia prevalent in many communities. I was at a campus interview a tenure track job, and someone asked me the inevitable question, ‘What are you working on?’ I was faced with the terror of coming out to my interview committee. I was in a state whose governor, soon to be vice-president Mike Pence, advocated for conversion therapy, and I had no idea how my queer performance-based research would be received. I was relieved to hear the excitement of my soon-to-be-colleagues, who registered their immediate support for my innovative methodology and courage. Coming out about my sexuality was empowering for me . . . this time.

I was so proud of my autoethnographic work and the subsequent performances. The project helped me win awards from my university LGBTQ Center and community organizations. I received grants to perform the project on my home campus as well as across the world! I was invited to perform excerpts of the performance at a National Association for Music Education (NAfME) conference, and I called my session, ‘Coming out to my profession: Autoethnography as performance-based research’. I sang my heart out in a presentation room (at 8am!), with my mentor and a handful of academics nodding their heads. Coming out through musical theater and music education research changed my life.

Finding Empowerment in Representation

While music theater empowered me as a queer person, I had yet to realize how it might also help me understand my race and ethnicity. That all changed while I was touring my autoethnography. After a performance at Teachers College - Columbia University in New York City, I was taken aback by a student’s question. He said, “When I think of musical theater, I think of White, cisgender, affluent gay men. When I look at you, I don’t see that. Have you given any thought about how your race influences your coming out, your sexuality, and your education”?”

I know it sounds cliché, but in that brightly lit room, I felt like a spotlight was shining on me, coming directly from the student, who was a long-time friend, that wanted nothing more than to lift me up and empower me as a Person of Color. But in that moment, I felt shame and fear. Instead, thoughts raced through my mind that had plagued me throughout my childhood and adult life: not having an identifiable race, not fitting in musical theater because of the color of my skin, being a person of large size, being unable to escape my otherness. Because I was so focused on my queerness, I had forgotten that I was neither White, nor cisgender, nor affluent.

This was a turning point in my life as a Person of Color. My friend's question reminded me that I could not divorce my race and ethnicity from myself as a performer, musician, educator, or person. While I had *made peace* with my ethnicity as an adult, I had yet to find ways to celebrate my Brownness. His question will forever be in my mind as I explore my heritage and as I continue to seek representation through music, other performers, and experiences that empowered me as a Person of Color.

Below, I highlight three transformative performances I found while seeking representation of performers that inspired me. The first experience was at my local movie theater when I saw the Broadway cast perform *Allegiance*, a musical that featured two of my Asian role models, George Takei and Lea Salogna. This musical was groundbreaking in that it was a mainstream musical that tells the story of Asian American characters written by Asian American writers.

I experienced my second exemplar while traveling to the Philippines to present my research about a migrant YouTube creator. While on the airplane, I decided to watch the movie *Crazy Rich Asians*. Even though the movie was not a musical, I began crying on the plane when I saw an Asian man as the leading love interest, being portrayed as desirable instead of being minimized to caricature that exemplified a stereotype that I would find offensive.

Third, I was ecstatic to see Zachary Noah Piser perform in the lead role of Evan Hanson in the musical *Dear Evan Hanson*. Piser was the first person of Asian descent to be cast in the role on Broadway. While I had already fallen in love with the character and the soundtrack because of Ben Platt's performance, the empowerment I felt seeing an Asian American perform the role that was originally popularized by a White actor made me feel like I had a place in musical theater. I borrow Piser's words about the importance of representation as he captured the sentiment of my own experience seeing him on stage:

As a kid growing up looking very different and not having anyone who really looked like me on stage — because I'm a mix — I know exactly what that feels like to see someone on stage who is in the realm of looking like you and what that does for you. So, to have that opportunity is just unbelievable, and I hope that I can give that feeling of encouragement to as many people as possible through this show. (Piser in Lee, 2019)

For me, as a Music Educator of Color, I want my students to know there are others who look like them and make music in ways they can aspire to achieve. I can stand on stage and let my identity represent me and the many communities I reside in. I am not just queer. I am not just a Person of Color. I am so many things. Again, I repeat my mantra, "I am what I am!"

Topic of Interest: Intersectionality of race and sexuality

Guiding Question: How does race interact with the various other identities a musician has, whether they are aware of them or not?

Context: The various identities of a person often intersect and people can minimize or accentuate racial cues about themselves by how they present themselves in public (Cayari, 2021). However, Crenshaw (1990) argued that one's many identities intersect and influence the way they are treated by others. I was reminded of that intersectionality during my performance at Teachers College, Columbia University, where I was perceiving myself as a queer performer divorced from my race and ethnicity. However, the question from the audience reminded me that I cannot avoid being perceived also as a Person of Color.

Things to Think About

How does your identity situate yourself in the music you create within learning institutions, your communities, and your music making spaces?

Is it possible to ignore an aspect of one's identity while focusing on another, and what are the implications to the musician, teacher, and audience?

References

- Cayari, C. (2019). Musical Theater as Performative Autoethnography: A Critique of LGBTQIA+ Representation in School Curricula. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 20(10), 1-23. Available online at <http://www.ijea.org/v20n10/v20n10.pdf>.
- Lee, E. (2019, April 10). Northwestern graduate cast as first Asian-American Evan Hansen in “Dear Evan Hansen”. *The Daily Northwestern*. Available online at <http://dailynorthwestern.com>.