

Neither Black nor White with Velina Hasu Houston and Jeanne Sakata

Veralyn Jones: Welcome to writers revealed a podcast from LA-based BiPAP theater company, lower depth theater. This podcast emerged from our monthly series writers revealed, which presents a personal and stunningly honest look at the writer behind the words and the person behind

Courtney Oliphant: Hello and welcome to Writers Revealed. In this episode, you will hear from two marvelous writers, Velina Hasu Houston and Jeanne Sakata, followed by a discussion with the two writers moderated by L. Trey Wilson. First, Velina will read a chapter from her novel, *Color My World*, about a young multiracial Japanese and Black girl and her experiences living with her Japanese mother in the United States in the mid 20th century. Then, Jeanne will read song lyrics titled “My Father is a Quiet Man” about her own father, and a scene from her work-in-progress play, *Lucky 13*, which follows a 13 year old girl as she copes with her mother’s passing.

Velina Hasu Houston: Excerpt from *Color My World*, a novel by Velina Hasu Houston

Taking a trip to a store with her mother was always a big event for Machi. It was a big adventure outside of the Japanese culture that reigned inside of her home, a journey into the American world outside to learn new things about the expansive foreign culture in which they must build their lives.

Five-year-old Machi reveled in the beautiful dresses that her mother made for her, today’s selection a yellow and white gingham frock with black rickrack. Watching her mother sew on the trim, Machi found that the meticulousness of her mother’s fingers hand-sewing the rickrack into the bottom of the garment’s skirt was a meditation on how different her life was from those of most of the other children at Westwood Elementary School. Machi with her cinnamon-hued skin and wavy hair, her mother with her pearl-colored skin and straight, fine hair; her with her Japanese, African, Native American, Spanish, and Portuguese heritage her mother with her solely Japanese heritage – too much difference for people who expected uniformity and homogeneity.

On a trip to one of those American stores one cloudy Saturday summer afternoon, Machi and Haruko went to a department store on the town’s main street. As they disembarked from the maroon Pontiac sedan that Machi’s father deemed safe and big enough for Haruko to drive, Haruko took Machi by the

hand as if she were made of gold. It was a protective grasp, as though they were entering an uncharted jungle.

When they went into the store, the White ladies who worked there looked them over as if they had wandered into the wrong place. One nodded to the other, a slight woman with bad posture. She proceeded to follow Machi and her mother around the store as they tried to shop. Her presence irritated Haruko, although she smiled at her whenever the saleswoman fake-smiled at her. At one point, the saleswoman followed so closely that when Haruko turned to look at an item she'd just passed, she nearly collided face-to-face with the woman, who didn't apologize. In fact, she looked at Haruko as though she should offer a million pardons.

Worried that the woman might harm Machi, Haruko rushed to find her. There she was, looking at slippers, seemingly without a care in the world, until Haruko saw the saleswoman peering watchfully at them. "Is your daughter a Japa Negro?" she asked, although Machi saw something in her eyes that indicated that discovering such a human being was the equivalent of seeing a pig fly.

Cringing at the term, Haruko smiled, then ignored the woman and pointed out another slipper to Machi.

Then Machi saw him.

He was a tall White man with blond hair slicked back with a thick, clear pomade. A missed smear of it looked like a bump on his right temple. Except for a slight forward bend in his right shoulder, he stood straight, but on his tiptoes because he had come to a sudden stop, his breath caught by the sight of something that had completely arrested his attention. Following his gaze, Machi discovered

he was staring, in fact gawking, at her mother. The heat of his gaze jetting through the air and wrapping around Haruko like a hot towel caused her to look up in his direction. His entire body and demeanor shifted into cautious bliss, full of daring pleasure and yet on edge like a fugitive from justice.

Stammering a hello, the man approached Haruko and stood too close to her.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"Japan."

“If you don’t mind me saying,” the pomade man spluttered, “you’re the most beautiful thing I ever saw.”

Bowing and stepping back, Haruko looked toward the aisle in which Machi stood, her brow furrowed with concern about the whereabouts of her child. Machi walked slowly toward her mother and bowed. Smiling at her, Haruko took her hand; again, the most natural, sheltering thing in the world for any mother and child, particularly if they sensed awkwardness or peril, which this man generated in them tenfold as his gaze turned from lovelorn admiration into suspicion.

“Who’s that?” he asked, peering at Machi as if a rabid dog had skulked into the store.

“My daughter,” Haruko replied.

The man’s expression turned into horror. “This is your daughter?” He looked as though he might choke. Clearly, he couldn’t believe that cinnamon and pearl skin belonged together, and definitely not in the same family. He worked hard to make sense of it all and then relaxed, having come up with the only reasonable solution he could fathom, Machi theorized.

“Oh, you adopted her, I see,” he said hopefully with that kind of feed-the-starving-African-children look of self-satisfied approval that White people got when they tried to make sense of one of their own helping a colored person.

“This is my mother,” Machi said, staring at the man as if she were a mountain and he was an ant hill.

“Yes, my daughter,” Haruko affirmed with pride, happiness, and motherly protectiveness. Her tone let him know that Machi was her biological daughter.

The look on his face, as if he’d just seen Godzilla and had nowhere to run, annoyed Machi and Haruko.

“So, you mean you’re married to a—a—.” The man couldn’t look more disgusted, a state of being that only further repulsed Haruko and Machi. “But you didn’t have to do that,” he lamented. “You’re so beautiful. You didn’t have to do that.” Turning so quickly that everybody wondered if he would fall down, he dashed out of the store.

In that moment, at the tender age of five, Machi realized that her being and looking different always was going to be a point of consternation for many people like the pomade man and the saleswomen. The idea that disparate cultures could blend into a new kind of being that didn't fit into any known racial category and that, in fact, defied categorization was above and beyond what Americans could absorb, Machi considered. She also felt that, when it came to mixed race people like herself, ones who also have African heritage, the problem grew even more complicated. She knew the pomade man couldn't comprehend that someone could be both Japanese and Negro.

In addition, she understood that White people's loathing of Blackness was strong. Secretly, she hoped that the Godzilla that lived in pomade man's soul would catch up with him and eat away at him from the inside out. It probably would, even though she was sure he would never admit it or be aware of it until it was too late.

Machi knew it was challenging, in fact impossible, for the pomade man to confront the reality of mixed race, particularly mixed race that included Blackness. It was as if he had seen a purple tiger. As her father often had told her, it's like when you mix red and blue; a new color emerges and it's given a new name so that it can be understood and differentiated from its red and blue origins: violet. The challenged department-store Romeo only could understand red or blue; he couldn't discern violet and lived in a narrow world of which Machi had no interest in being a part. No, she wasn't interested in passing for red or blue. She was who she was, without apology or fanfare. Like her father said to her, "Live in a 'no passing' zone, no matter what people tell you to do." He knew. As

a Black, Native American, Spanish and Portuguese man, he couldn't live the multitude of his cultures during the time period in which he existed in the world. He had to be red or blue; he had to conform to the binary of race. Violet wasn't even a remote consideration outside of his own consciousness. For Machi, there was nothing but violet.

Jeanne Sakata: My Father is a Quiet Man, song lyrics by Jeanne Sakata.

My father is a quiet man

He's never told me very much

The years have passed and he has grayed

And we've politely stayed in touch
He plays his tennis weekly
With a chiropractor friend of his
He says his game's the same, and that
His score is what it always is
My father gets up every morning
Early at the crack of dawn
He shuffles to the kitchen with
His bathrobe and his slippers on
He reads about the Giants game
As he considers what to eat
He opens up the cupboard door
He always fixes Cream of Wheat
We took him to "Les Miz"
in San Francisco for his last birthday
He wore his earphones through it all
So he could hear the Giants play
Then to a fancy French restaurant
A four-star one, we tried to please
He said, I'd rather have ramen
Why don't you go, I don't like cheese

He's not a very complicated man, I say

I always wish that he could understand me more—or try
I say to him I have a dream to write

But to my dad, a dream is just a thing you have at night

I asked my dad to tell me of

The prison camps, his childhood

“I want to write your story, Dad,

OK?” He paused -- he said he would—

And then he gave one-word replies

To everything I asked to know

Or said, “Oh gee, I don't remember,

That was all so long ago”

I don't give up, I ask my dad

To tell me more about my Mom

The first meal that she cooked for him

Where he proposed, her favorite song

I never get too far with him

I always get these short replies

It seems he's closed the book for good

On all the years before she died

And I am torn between
the inclination just to let it go

And the hunger that I have to ask,

To probe, to try to know

The stories that would cement

all the gaps in our relationship

I try to build a bridge to him

He always shies away from it

He's like the iceberg lettuce that he grows
His days and weeks are neatly planted rows of time
He's gentle and he's simple and he's plain

And he's holding up real well in spite of summer rain

He suffered his first heart attack
A mild one – he says he's fine
He jokes it's just the sort of thing
That happens when you're sixty-nine

He's got to cut down on his fat

And on his sodium intake

Eat less soy sauce, tsukemono,

Shortbread cookies and banana cake

He's turning seventy next month

And I am turning forty-one (nine)

Middle age and old age

Waiting there on the horizon (line)

Perhaps it's time to stop pursuing
All the things that may not be
And just be thankful for the love
We share unspoken as we speak
"Hi, how are you?" – "I'm OK Dad,
How's your work?" – "A little slow."
"Well, how are lettuce prices Dad?"
"Oh they're OK, a little low."
"And how is Tim?" – "Oh he's OK,
He says to say hello to you."
"How's his work?" "Oh it's OK."
"How are his folks?" "They're OK too."
I'd like to say, I love you Dad
and hear him say I love you too
I'd like to put my arms around him,
Hug him – but it's hard to do
His body tightens when I try
He's never been emotional
And any kind of this display
It makes him so uncomfortable
And so instead I'll wish him

Happy Birthday, kiss him on the cheek

He'll unwrap my birthday gift

And go exchange it the next week

My father is a quiet man

And I'm his daughter through and through

So someday I may find a place

Where I can just be quiet too

For I'm discovering a place
Where I can just be quiet too

This piece is an excerpt from LUCKY 13, a play by Jeanne Sakata.

Kerry sits at a kitchen counter, writing a title at the top of a page of her diary.

Reasons why it is lousy to not have a mother.

1. The other kids have a mother and you don't. You don't, all of a sudden you don't, just like that, POOF, she's gone and there's a big fat hole in the family. That's lousy.

2. You wonder if it's your fault. 'Cause the night before she died, she was sewing a dress for you and she had you try it on and you were snooty to her because it just feels weird when she gets too "soft," you, know, she wants you to act lovey-dovey towards her but you can't, you just can't---okay, oops, there I go again, that's the wrong verb tense,

What I meant to say is---she just FELT weird when she GOT too soft, you know, she WANTED you to act lovey-dovey towards her but you COULDN'T, you just COULDN'T. There, she's, um, she's DEAD now so I have to remember to use the past tense.

3. The TV sounds really empty now. Like there's sound coming out of it, Walter Cronkite is talking about the Vietnam War, Bobby Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy are giving campaign speeches and crowds are cheering, the

motorcades, but all this sound is just landing dead in this house. This house where we all live, there's no sound anymore, even though there IS sound, technically speaking. There is now this kind of empty chamber in the ear where any sound just sort of ricochets around it and then just bumps up against nothing and falls into nothing. I know I am not describing this very well, but hell, I am just thirteen.

4. Like I said in item number #2, you do wonder if it is your fault. Okay, maybe, not your fault entirely, but you do feel REALLY bad, that you were so snooty to her not just the night before she died, but the whole rest of the year. I mean GOD, she wouldn't let me shave my LEGS for Chrissake. And she wouldn't let me wear nylons when EVERYBODY else in the girls' locker room, okay, not EVERYBODY, but all the cool girls who I am trying to get in with, Joanne and Janet and Debbie and Melody they are all wearing nylon stockings now, I mean GOD! She was making my life miserable.

So there was reason, I had good reasons, but maybe if I had known this was going to be the last night of her life, well, maybe I would have been nicer to her. I mean, after all, she WAS making a dress for me.

Okay, this list is making me feel really bad.

Kerry takes a deep breath. She goes to the kitchen cupboard and gets out a box of Kellogg's cornflakes. She gets out a bowl and pours the cornflakes into the bowl. She gets milk out of the refrigerator and pours the milk over the flakes. She gets out sugar and a spoon and tosses sugar over the cereal, a whole lot of it. She gets a banana out of the fruit bowl and peels it and slices it over the cereal. She pushes the spoon into the cereal and shoves a spoonful into her mouth.

We hear the sound of Kerry's crunching echo against the emptiness of the house.

Okay. Now where was I? Oh yeah.

She picks up the pen.

5. 5. Number 5.

She thinks.

Okay. Number 5. You can't stop eating Kellogg's cornflakes. I mean, ever since it happened, all I can do to is eat Kellogg's cornflakes with a whole lot of sugar and bananas on top. I've never eaten so many bowls of this stuff in my life. I can't stop. And I don't even LIKE Kellogg's cornflakes all that much. It's weird.

6. It's just lousy to have this big fat hole in the house. It just is. It feels really shitty. I know I said that already, but....

It feels really lousy to have all this sound echoing through this house, all this dead sound.

It feels really lousy to see my Dad crying all the time. 'Cause before this, I NEVER saw my Dad cry. Ever. It feels really weird to see my Dad cry and he's not even trying to hide it anymore, that feels even weirder. It's kind of embarrassing. None of us kids know what to do. We just look at each other and then look at the floor.

7. Everybody is saying to me, oooohhh Kerry, you're so strong. You're not even crying, you're so strong. And then they pat me on the back and give me a little smile. Okay, I don't know why, but this feels weird to me, but maybe in a kind of good way, 'cause at least I'm doing SOMETHING right, SOMETHING right for a change. The funny thing is that nobody has ever said this to me before in my whole life: "You're so strong."

It just feels weird to be only thirteen years old and have all these adults saying this to me, oooohhh, you're so strong. I mean I'm not being, or doing anything different that I haven't done before all my life. But all of a sudden I'm "strong."

"You have to be strong for your little sister, you have to set an example, your little sister's only ten years old and she just lost her mother, you have to be strong for her."

Okay, maybe they're right. Maybe I'm stronger than I think I am. Yeah, maybe I am. Maybe I AM really strong, and I just didn't know it before. I have to admit, I'm starting to believe it. Strong, you want "strong?" Okay. Okay I'll show 'em. I am not going to cry. I am not going to cry. Everybody around here is crying crying crying, and I am just not going to. I AM NOT GOING TO CRY. I AM NOT GOING TO CRY.

I am going to be strong.

L. Trey Wilson: hi, everyone. Welcome so much to writers revealed. I'm so honored to have our two guests today. Uh Velina Hasu Houston and Jeanne Sakata. The pieces are so tremendous. And I said before the recording, and I'll say it again now for all of you to hear that I am just tremendously moved by both of them and, uh, having this opportunity to speak with all the writers I've spoken to so far.

And now these two today, uh, is such a gift, such a pleasure. So I'm delighted to introduce our two writers, Velina and Jeanne. Welcome to writers revealed

L. Trey Wilson: So, uh, first of all, I'll start with this. What's it like to read your pieces, uh, in this format? What was your experience in doing that? Because that was happening and experiencing, listening to it. What was you're experiencing and sharing it volley. And I'll start with you.

Velina Hasu Houston: Well, it's difficult for me because I am not. You know, experienced in, in reading my own work. So it's a little terrifying because of that. And it makes me respect, uh, performers, particularly actors, even more because they get up on stage and have to do that in front of many, many people sometimes. So, um, it was interesting, but also because of the selection that I read, it was, um, kind of, I don't know, excavating for me because it took me back to a memory in my childhood that was similar to the experience that I relayed in the story

L. Trey Wilson: And Jeanne?

Jeanne Sakata: I think when Velina uses the word excavation, it really hits me in regards to this podcast, because these are two pieces that I wrote a long time ago. Uh, when I wrote maybe 20 years ago, the song about my dad and then the other one I wrote, I think maybe 10 to 12 years ago. And when you asked us to share pieces that were personal and heartfelt and genuine, I thought, well, let me go back into that closet where my old writing is and see if I can find something.

So I found these two pieces and it was really lovely to excavate them, as Velina said and share them. It felt really, um, kind of a full circle kind of moment. Cause I haven't really rare read these or shared them publicly before, so yeah. Yeah. It's maybe like making friends with. Earlier younger writer, self.

L. Trey Wilson: Got it. Got it. Understood. Well, the pieces were resonated for me on so many levels. Um, I'll start with Velina and your piece. Oh my gosh.

Being followed by security in stores is something that, um, I'm very familiar with. And the thing that you described first off, the picture you painted around the store and the behavior of the salespeople was so real for me, it was so clear.

It has such clarity. I was immediately taken back to those instances. And one of the things that it brought up from me was. Uh, the sense of somehow being responsible for all those situations, being responsible for being followed, being resp, and then having to manage my behavior in a way that seemed to imply I'm here to buy something, not to steal how it would have.

It would resonate for me physically. And I remember sometimes early on I would actually buy something, whether I wanted something or not just to prove that I was there to buy something. Uh, can you talk a little bit about that piece? That, that, that circumstance was so vivid for, for, for me. And I think for a lot of the listeners,

Velina Hasu Houston: I think that this notion of, uh, people of color, particularly black people being followed in stores by security is. Still very much in existence in our society. The piece that I read is set in the 1960s, hence the use of terms like Negro and colored, which are no longer used today. And, uh, and yet what's odd to me is that in exploring this time, that is historical.

I realized that really it hasn't changed much today. And, uh, I, I understand that there's this kind of consciousness that's opened up in society since the murder of George Floyd. But, uh, I also, since the, the, uh, the incidents of murders and violence in Atlanta, against Asian women. So I understand the society is opened up, but I feel that, uh, that that is not a permanent opening.

I hope that it is. I hope that gen Z can carry that forward, but, um, I just feel that in terms of. Issues of anti-blackness that they're still quite rampant in society. And I know for myself though, when I go into white environments and even Asian-American environments, I find that, uh, I am a suspicious presence because of what I look like.

And that is extremely uncomfortable. I hear what you say about the sense of responsibility, although I am actually quite tired of that, uh, of that kind of event. And, uh, I do remember clearly I went into a boutique boutique on Montana avenue in Santa Monica, and the moment that I entered the store, I saw the salespeople talking and I started to be followed and I was so annoyed by it that I began to pick up the expensive items in the store and drape them over my arm until I had quite a collection. And by that time, the attitude of the people change and they said, oh, can we help you with that? You know, can I carry that

for you? And so they put this load of items on the counter and then, uh, very happily the sales woman started writing them down on a piece of paper, all these great purchases.

And then she said, and how would you like to pay for that? I said, actually, I don't want anything from your store. I said, I'm going to delight in the fact that you had to put all of these items back. And I said, as you're putting them back, think about the fact that you followed me because you thought I was going to steal something.

L. Trey Wilson: As I said, I used to do it in the past. Since then I've definitely become rebellious in my nature as well. And I'll just leave, uh, I didn't pick up items, but I think that was a great choice to do and kind of make the, make your point. Uh, Jeanne. Similarly, when I was listening to the poem is gorgeous.

Um, but as I was listening to it as well, there was so many aspects of it that were phenomenon. I've been thinking about. What it really popped up for me was the whole idea of generational trauma and wanting to know things from our parents, but also recognizing that some things our parents don't want to revisit and kind of managing both those things.

What's your thought around that? And what, what, what's your feeling around that?

Jeanne Sakata: Yes, as I'm reading the piece. Now it's something that I'm experiencing quite differently than when I wrote it as so many years ago, because now I've lived much longer and I have much more complex feelings about certain parts of the song when I'm reading the lyrics.

For, when I say at the very beginning, my father is a quiet man and a simple man and a gentleman. And I know that there are so many complex and passionate feelings that he had that are underneath that simple statement. You know, I, I would always say all my dad's a simple man. And, but now I know, you know, at my age that there are many complex feelings.

Below that a simple statement. And there was a lot of trauma in my dad's life. You know, when he was, uh, my grandparents are from Japan, immigrants from Japan. So my father was born in an American citizen, but it was during a time when there was much racism, of course, against the Japanese, against Asians who were here in the United States.

Um, he went through a tragedy when his elder brother died suddenly. Um, and then when he was in high school, of course there was the mass incarceration of all people, of Japanese and sister and the west coast that was, um, ordered by executive order in 1966. So my dad, when he was in high school, had to leave his home and his friends and the school in this community and go live behind barbed wire.

Uh, and then I like to think there was. Happy period. Uh, fast forward to when he met my mom, I experienced them as truly in love and just really unusually affectionate for a Japanese American couple of that time. And, uh, when she died suddenly when I was 13, he had to navigate that loss with a family of four kids.

So, um, you know, there was so much that he had to, uh, come to terms with in his own life. And I think a lot of it too, he was in, in a culture of Japanese American culture where the open expression of emotions is not encouraged. And I think as a Japanese American man, he felt in the head of the family, he felt like he had to hold all this pain and trauma inside and be strong for the family.

So when, when I read this song lyrics, now I experienced it as such a complex experience for myself, as well as seeing what a complex experience and what a difficult experience my dad had to navigate.

L. Trey Wilson: Yes, yes. The other piece, the thing that you both have in common with the pieces that you shared, we're seeing the world through a young person's eyes and, and the whole idea of that, you know, so often by me, I'll speak for myself that we recognize that children are such sponges.

And even though they may not be able to interpret things as we, as adults, can they still have interpretations. And I think sometimes their perceptions can be even truer than maybe the lenses we as adult. Adapt, uh, as we get more mature, uh, I'd love to hear about that. The voices, there are so many parallels as well.

The softness, the idea of softness, the dressmaking, the care in that. Uh, so for both of you, I'd love to talk about in terms of seeing the eye through, uh, seeing the world through a young girl's perceptions. Um, we'll start with you again first.

Velina Hasu Houston: Well, I think that often, because there's so much to uncle back to that word, excavate in, uh, in our memories and experiences that, um,

we're constantly looking at through the world through different voices in representing characters, right.

With, with writing. So I feel that that is part of my, uh, imagination with regards to picking up the, the young voice. But the other is that a. When I, I have two children have a male child or adult children and a female child. And I feel that I looked at the world differently when they were born, because I was constantly seeing the world through their eyes.

And I'll give you an example, you know, as a female, I had always thought, well, you know, there are a lot of terrible men in the world. Right. But when I had a male child and he started dating, I thought, oh my goodness, the worlds are just full of, of odd people. And it doesn't matter if they're male or female, you know?

So, uh, so that perspective opened up for me and the same thing with, um, with looking at the world through a child's eyes, because one of the favorite things my daughter ever said to me was, um, mommy, when you lived in Kansas, was it black and white and. I thought, is she talking about race? Is she talking about the racial binary at five?

And of course, what she was talking about was that in the film, the wizard of Oz, Kansas is represented in black and white and Oz is represented in color, but so it makes one stop and think about how you know, that they look at the world and, and I find not only is it that and my imagining of my own past, but it's also the fact that I, I just love children.

And right now there's a, you know, there's a seven year old and an eight year old and a 12 year old in my life. And it's interesting to, to see through their eyes and experience the world through the way that their census work. It's fascinating. So, you know, and I also find that as one. Older, uh, you don't lose perspective on the other areas of your life.

I mean, you see all kinds of, of windows in that way. And I suppose when I was, you know, 25, that the thought of being 61 day seemed implausible. Uh, but as each decade, move forward, you don't lose perspective on what those past decades look like. Those voices remain in the writer's head to

L. Trey Wilson: got it. Thank you.

And Jeanne.

Jeanne Sakata: Well, it's very interesting revisiting this piece right now. I remember so clearly some of these details, you know, this is really part true and part fiction, but the details of it, I remember very clearly the dress that my mom was sewing for me at when she died. And I remember very clearly the guilt of feeling like.

Really wish I had been nicer to her right before she died, but I was a 13 year old adolescent kid, you know, you're full of that piss and vinegar. And, um, it was such a complex experience to lose my mom at that age, because, you know, as a 13 year old, you're an adolescent, your world is constantly changing and shifting your body is changing and shifting your mind, your hormones are racing and there's all these feelings of ricocheting around.

And so I really wanted, when I wrote this, I was trying to write something that the 13 year old me would have felt less lonely if I had had, you know, because. I think when you lose a parent, suddenly you suddenly feel so alone. Not because you've lost that very significant person in your life, but you also feel that when you go back to school, everything's changed and you feel like everyone else, of course, this isn't true, but you feel this way as a 13 year old, going back to school, that everyone else is normal and all of a sudden you're different.

And it's, you are trying to navigate a world that just has so many things flying through it and ricocheting through your mind and heart and body all at once. So that what I was trying to capture in writing this, just something that had, I had it when I was that age and had gone through the death of my mother, something that would have made me feel less than.

L. Trey Wilson: Yes. Yes.

Velina Hasu Houston: Yes. I'll try. May I add, may add something? That's what Jeannie said. Just made me think about yes. That, and I've never thought about this before and Jeannie and I have known each other a long time, but there's some, there's another parallel in our lives, which is that, uh, I lost my father when I was 11.

And you know, my mother being a Japanese immigrant and not having a command of the English language, not understanding a us business practices that marked a certain, uh, I guess a juncture in my life where. That's when my childhood ended, when I was 11, because I had to help my mother file through all this paperwork.

I had to help her choose this casket for my father. And then, like Jeannie said, there's this idea that your life has changed and you go back to school. I remember that my father and I had birthdays very close together and he died very close to our birthdays. And I remember that someone was having a birthday party.

And basically I was disinvited because the parents felt that, you know, that since my father had died, that that I must be, you know, emotional place where I could not come to a birthday party. And I hadn't even thought about the birthday party really, but I thought isn't that interesting people treat you differently once you lose a parent.

Right. And part of it was my imagining in my 11 year old head that things were changing. But part of it was, uh, you know, seeing social decisions change or the way that people look at you change so that it becomes harder to navigate life. And it's interesting for me that both Jeannie and I. At a young time in our lives, lost a parent and went forward, uh, really in what is a nontraditional career for Asian Americans, uh, you know, to go into theater arts, we went forward in that.

And why do you need to, I always feel like what was my last conversation with my father? Like, what would I, what, what could I have asked him? What would we talk about now? What would he think about computers and, and social media, you know, all those kinds of things, but, but one's life does change. And, and maybe that's why looking back at those moments and, and exploring those in our writing becomes kind of organic to what we do because of, of what happened to us at a particular, particularly sensitive time of our lives.

Jeanne Sakata: Mm. I think that's so true. You know, I want to just add here that, uh, Velina and I do go a long way back and it's really a delight and honor to be on this podcast with her because as an actor I've done. I think four plays of Velina's and I had always wanted to do. Yeah. And I'd always wanted to do Tea and I'd always wanted to play himiko in her play Tea because Himiko is a ghost.

And because I had experienced that early loss of a parent, I often felt that my mother's ghost was in my life. I don't know if I've ever told you that Velina, maybe it's been years since we've talked about it, but that's why I felt such a powerful draw to play himiko in your planning. And I loved working on some of the other characters I did, but Himiko was very special because I knew what it was like to have that ghostly presence over my shoulder, you know, and in my own spirit speaking to me.

Uh, so, so yeah. Yeah, it's really great to be able to share this with.

Velina Hasu Houston: Well, I'll also say that it's great for me because of having someone that I've traveled the artistic journey with for so long, you know, and, and also to, to see that, you know, this wonderful actress can unearth this writing talent that you have and, uh, and shift into playwriting.

I don't know. I can't even describe the feeling, but it's just very moving. It's always been very moving to me. And even if I don't see you or you don't get to talk to you, I think this is great. This is great that Jeanne is developing this part of her artistry. And so that makes this coming together special too, because of the, the journey that we'd done together.

And because you know, this, this other part of you, which I'm sure was always there has, has emerged and is flowering. That's wonderful.

Jeanne Sakata: You know, it's really interesting because I remember Velina when you were talking, when I was doing one of your plays so many years ago, and you said something about. Your sister and you would go to the store and she would go, was it the doll section, or I can't remember where she would go immediately.

And you immediately went to where there were pens and pencils and writing tablets. And that struck such a chord with me because when I was a little girl, I was given a children's condensed version of little women. And immediately I identified with Jo. I wanted to be a writer. I wanted to do that, but I think, and I was an English major at UCLA where you went to, but I don't think I had the confidence to write.

You know, because I was an English major reading, all these great works of literature. I said, oh, I don't have that kind of talent. I guess I'll teach or, um, become a librarian, which is what I was on my way to do, um, when I became an actor. So I just remember that so long ago that you went immediately to the pen and the paper, I said, I know that feeling.

And then, so I really appreciate what you're saying about coming back to it after I became an actor. And I, I think you had something to do with that. That is for Asian.

Velina Hasu Houston: I bet.

L. Trey Wilson: And I bet some of our listeners are people just like you, where they're going into the store and it's the paper and the colors of the pins and all those things that are the most exciting thing to see.

So I think that that's going to resonate with a lot of people. One thing I was to talk about is the whole situation of assimilation. And having to manage that and how that got managed or how you experienced that, uh, at any point in terms of your journeys, uh, I'll start with you this time, Jeanie, the assimilation into American culture and practices and behaviors and those things.

What was that like? Or what is that like?

Jeanne Sakata: Well, for me ever since I was a little kid, I was enamored of what we would call American culture and I wanted to just drink it all in. So if I expand this piece, there'll be a lot of really specific little things like. Jello and lifting noodle soup and Betty crocker cookbook.

And, uh, all these things, these little images from my childhood that I experienced with my mom and that were to me, kind of iconic of being an American. And that was so important to me being an American. And it was only until I got older that I realized that in some ways that being so enamored of American culture, wanting to be American and came at a cost as it did for my parents who also experienced that really cherishing being an American citizen and wanting to be Americans, and then finding out very suddenly and very cruelly that the rest of the country did not see them that way.

So for me being one generation later than them, I didn't experience maybe that same kind of sudden abrupt, cruel realization that I was not accepted as American, but I did experience it in more. Um, should I say subtle ways in some ways, not so subtle but ways that were maybe not as world's changing as it was for them.

I didn't have to go live behind barbed wire, but I definitely felt as I grew older, how different I was, you know, never really seen my face reflected in, uh, 17 magazine or on television, except for flower drum song and king and I, you know, things like that. So I think that if I do continue writing a piece like this, that it will have a lot of those moments.

Assimilating the desperate need to assimilate and then the cost of assimilating, you know, as she grows older as crazy.

L. Trey Wilson: Yes. Yes. And Velina

Velina Hasu Houston: well, I think for me when I was little anyway, and actually probably still today, too, it was kind of opposite from me because America was what we considered the foreign culture.

And I saw how people behave towards my mother and towards my father and towards us. And, and so I always felt, um, that I had to protect myself against America, you know, and my mother would always say, you know, Japan inside the house, America outside. So going to American school, everything, I was terrified that, uh, that these other people who were different were going to do something to me.

And it was very interesting for me because I'm Japanese and black. You see? So for me, I felt, um, that there was no place to assume. Because no one understood white people didn't understand people of color for the most part. And then, um, people of color didn't understand mixed race, particularly, uh, Asian and white was one thing, but, but seeing Japanese and black was another thing, it was just like, you know, the purple tiger.

Single. Purple tiger. So, um, you know, when you walk into the room and you're clutching the hand of a Japanese woman who can't speak English well, that's different. So I felt very protective of my mother and our constraint, uh, inter strange from their perspective, uh, Japanese culture inside the house. And that's how I went out into the world.

And, uh, when my father died, I felt even more protective of my mother, which became protecting the Japanese culture too. And my mother worked very hard to, to have us. He does as much Japanese food as possible. She wanted us to learn Japanese customs. I grew up on Japanese literature and this, and she often said, she goes, well, what else do I know?

She goes, I'm from Southern Japan. You know, I can't teach you mother ghosts, which she always thought was very strange concept. Um, but I can only, you know, teach you what I know. And so I think that, uh, that's how I grew up at, and now my mother's 93 now, and she's still needs protection. She stopped speaking English about 15 years ago.

And, um, you know, so I still I'm always protecting this culture, but the other assimilation issue that I've dealt with is being of a mixed ethnic background and, uh, I use the term. I use the term nonbinary in the seventies or eighties. So it's interesting now because it's non binary by gender. And when I speak to non binary people nowadays, and I say, well, I'm non binary too, but racially, uh, it

throws them for a loop because they say, oh, that's an interesting way to interpret nonbinary.

And I say, oh no, no nonbinary existed for me 20 years ago. I find the current uses of it to be quite interesting. Right. And, and I embrace that, but it's, it seems to me that it's great society understands nonbinary by gender, but why has it been so difficult all these years for society to understand non binary by race?

Right. So assimilation also meant, uh, how do I remain viable? And honor that in a society that can only see red and blue, because there is a racial binary and in this country, things are either black or they're white. And, and I know that for Asian cultures, you know, I'm, I'm most familiar with Japanese, but for Asian cultures to carve a place for themselves in, in the racial landscape of America, uh, is ridiculous because the country exists on racial binary.

And it's very hard to be outside of that.

L. Trey Wilson: Yes. Uh, that brings up two other questions that our time is going by so quickly, but I'm going to put these two questions together and though they're really unrelated. Um, your thoughts about what's it been like to observe. And they will be a soccer's journey in terms of how she's navigating the world in terms of her experience and the, and the perception around her in America.

And just in general, what's your, any thoughts around that? And secondly, and I'm going to own this as my experience and perception, and really ask of yours from my lifetime, the, um, hatred toward Asian, the Asian culture never seemed so prevalent before I, in terms of how I perceived it until the last couple of years with COVID.

Um, I became, it became more tangible in a way that I'd never seen or observed before. Uh, was that your experience? What was that like? And where do you feel? Um, things are at this point. So I know those are big questions that have loads of answers, but I just think it's curious for me. And I want to know in terms of what your experience was or is for both of those things.

Um, Jeanne, I'll start with you again this time first, if you'd like, you

Jeanne Sakata: know, what I will say about that is that as we've had a number of productions of my solo play, hold these truths, which is about a Japanese American college student of my father's generation, who in the 1940s defied

and legally challenged the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans on the west coast, his name is Gordon.

He had a biopsy. And while writing that play, I did a lot of research about what it was like to be Japanese or Japanese American in the 1940s. And Gordon described it as a kind of schizophrenia growing up during that time, you know, as much as he cherished many of the Nisei cherish, the idea of being American, you know, since their parents, their immigrant parents were forbidden by law to become American citizens.

At the same time daily, they lived in a world where they knew, um, that equality was not a reality. So they would live in the schizophrenia of seeing themselves as Americans and reading things that told them that they were true Americans and yet living a day-to-day life that told them they were not. And the very lint and violent and, um, all pervasive hatred that happened towards Japanese and Japanese Americans when Pearl Harbor was bombed.

Uh, was a world when I was researching it, that felt, I won't say far away or distant from me, but it was at enough of a safe remove that I felt like I was doing research. You know, the kind of discrimination that I described earlier in an earlier comment was not directly threatening me. Like if I walked outside my door, I did not expect to be assaulted, you know, or if I went to the grocery store, I did not expect to be spit on.

And the reality of now is that that is the reality for many people who are Asian across the country. And I know for myself here in Los Angeles, I have not experienced a kind of direct attack. On who I am as I'm walking around. But I know people who have, I know a lot of people who have experienced that in New York, I know a few that have experienced it in San Francisco.

Everyone is afraid for their parents, you know, because elderly people of Asian descent are being attacked. So now there are certain behaviors that I used to feel very free in enjoying. And now there's a cloud there. Yeah. I don't even want to go walking in Griffith park, which is a great joy for me. You know, I love to walk.

I love to hike and I know that now I don't want to go by myself. I used to go by myself all the time into the Hills and it was just such a time of solitude and peace and contemplation. And now I don't want to go by myself. I always want my husband to go with me. So there are little things like that, but it's, it's very sad because I think that.

For many of us, we didn't expect to see this happening again. And now we're being blamed once again for a national tragedy, the tragedy of COVID and the violence is so random, it's just happening. It seems like no one is safe anywhere. So anyone of Asian descent, but it's especially tragic to see how our elders are being attacked.

And this is, this is just, uh, you know, you'd like to think that in their old age, they've earned the right to live their lives in peace. And so it's just sickening to see this happening. And also for Asian women, you know, to see this, this intense hostility and filings and hatred toward the Asian women, it, it, it, it feels, um, like how do you protect yourself from this?

It feels so. Horrible and sad to hear friends in New York, you know, Asian women who are friends that say, we have to figure out how to disguise ourselves. And we go out into New York streets, how to hide the fact that we're Asian. It's just so, so troubling. And so sad to hear that. Once again, we have to worry about disguising the fact that we are Asian.

Yes. Oh yeah. A lot of complex things to work through right now. I haven't really worked through a lot of them for myself. It's I think, you know, in process,

L. Trey Wilson: I understand. Velina.

Velina Hasu Houston: Well, Jeanne has stated it so well with regards to, um, the issues that Asians and Asian-Americans are facing in the United States right now and, and possibly globally.

Um, you know, because my mother's a grim immigrant, I've grown up looking at the world as an understanding the cultural difference between Asian, Asian American. And I think that the current COVID crisis has caused those two cultures to merge and be if you will hated in similar types of ways. But I do want to say that anti-Asian hatred goes back a long way in this country, as we all know, right.

And as a child, the same kinds of things that are happening now to Asian people of Asian descent happened to my mother. I w I would witness them happening to her. And, um, for. Well in the, I guess the 1970s, late 1970s, when Japan had this incredible bubble economy, uh, there was a lot of anti-Asian hatred then, you know, and, uh, and now it's surged up again with COVID and like Jeanne said, you would, these people who've lived through this.

You would think that in their old age, they could have some peace of mind and not have to deal with it. So, um, I w my mother had a traumatic brain injury about 20 years ago. So she's in a home and she's, if you will safe from that interaction with society. But, you know, as I've mentioned, I saw historically how she was treated and I become very concerned about it.

I will say I have had some odd experiences because I'm Japanese and black, which is, if people think I'm Filipino, I get some. That I used an agent, but that's the often the mistake right there. They're looking for what is a darker Asian, what issue. But on the other hand, I've been to some anti-Asian hate rallies and, and I've been asked to leave the room.

I get statements like this. Uh, I see that there are one of our allies in the room. This is an Asian American affinity space. If you could leave now, we'll talk with you later. And of course I don't leave. I text my friends. I said, I've just been asked to leave. And then they say it again. I see that one of our allies is still in the room.

This is an Asian-American affinity space. And I think to myself, honey, don't talk to me out affinity. If you're offended that people are mistreating you, stop mistreating me. Okay. So for me, yes, because I'm Japanese and black, my whole, uh, experience of anti-Asian hate has been different because I get it from both sides.

Right. So, so that's been interesting for me, but certainly because I care so much about, uh, the, uh, Asian and Asian-American, uh, elderly populations. I mean, I'm working on a play right now, just starting at called a short time for company, which is about, um, uh, elder abuse, uh, in intra Asian group, elder abuse.

And, uh, and it's interesting for me because the research I'm doing it, I'm learning a lot about, um, You know, just how horribly people are treated at a timer in the lives when they should be experiencing their quote unquote golden years. And then I also wanted, because Jeanne spoke so eloquently about, uh, the, uh, instances of Asian hate in this country right now, I did want to mention that I wanted to deal with the other part of your question about Naomi Osaka and that kind of, um, phenomenon, because I do feel that Japan is, uh, slightly opening up to the notion that a mixed race Japanese are not just Japanese and white.

They're also Japanese and Mexican and Japanese and black and Japanese and, you know, whatever south Asian. So, so there has been, I mean, I guess since around 2015, 2016, you know, uh, in the, uh, beauty queen world, um, which

may not be important to a lot of people, but it is a part of the dimension of Japanese social reality.

And there were, there was a, uh, Japanese. Mr pan, there was a Japanese and south Asian, miss Japan. Now we have Naomi Osaka on social media. There's tons of, of, of interviews of people who are Japanese and black. Uh, there's a great one about a Japanese and black teenager, uh, uh, which is interesting. And then, uh, as I mentioned earlier that I have a lot of, um, different kinds of, of mixed race Japanese, uh, and black people who've grown up in Japan, email me reaching out because they want to understand more about their identity.

So, no, I do think that there's an opening up just like in, in us society because of violence against Asian Americans and Asians. And, and because of, of, of the murder of George Floyd, we are talking a little bit more and we're more tolerant. There's a more sort of slight opening. And as I said, I hope that it lasts and it's carried forward by the younger generations.

But there are still, you know, as Jeanne indicated, there are still a lot of, um, issues we have to contend with there still a lot of things we need to talk about. And, and, um, and I hope that we're willing to have those conversations for a while because that's the only way that we're going to, um, heighten our understanding of, um, how different we all are, but how those differences feed us.

And, and also how similar.

L. Trey Wilson: Absolutely so well said, I, you know, our time is up, but I could continue this conversation for hours. I enjoyed both of you so much, and I'm sure that our listeners have as well. Uh, we didn't get to talk about your process of writing as much, but I think that what we shared was just as valuable and as important.

And thank you. So, so, so much. Thank you for your contribution to the arts. Thank you for your contribution to our knowledge. Thank you for your contribution to our fuller awareness. Uh, most appreciate it. Uh, thank you, Belinda, and thank you Jeannie so much and thank you listeners for watching and listening and join us again next time.

Thank you. Thank you.

Veralyn Jones:

This podcast is produced by Lower Depth Theatre. We'd like to thank Regina Miller and Matthew Soraci for their service and support, Lead Producer, AJ Dinsmore, Producing Managing Director, Courtney Oliphant, our Host L. Trey Wilson, Graphic Artist Nursery Wall Art Studio and Maritri Garrett for her original music. We would also like to acknowledge our four founding members: Artistic Director, Gregg T. Daniel, Board President & Artistic Associate, Yvonne Huff Lee, and Artistic Associates, Veralyn Jones and Jason Delane Lee.