Subjectivity, Identity, and Intersectionality in Arts Journalism: An Interview with Diep Tran

Maegan Clearwood and Hannah L. Jones

American Theatre *magazine senior editor and arts critic Diep Tran discusses shifting power dynamics in the field of arts journalism, callout culture's role in social media and arts criticism, and her use of the personal narrative in a traditionally objective form. We interpret Tran's body of work as subversive within the genre of criticism for modeling a form of resistant readership that addresses systemic issues of race, gender, and representation. We frame her subjective, identity-focused work within the ideologies of intersectionality and decolonialism and demonstrate how she embodies these methodologies through both the content and form of her work.*

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In her seven years on staff at *American Theatre* magazine, senior editor Diep Tran has approached her writing through a radical intersectional framework, frequently engaging in personal narrative and citing her lived experiences as a woman of color in order to unpack ideas surrounding representation and identity. Her subjective approach to arts criticism struck us as unique in a genre of writing traditionally expected to be neutral, and as the following interview with her explores, this approach resists categorical definitions of theatre criticism by weaving together personal, political, and critical ideologies. In our conversation with Tran, she explained how the myth of the objective arts critic is intertwined with white supremacy and patriarchy as we also explored the shifting nature of theatre

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criticism in the age of social media and callout culture. We have identified three main approaches in Tran's writing: 1) using her perspective as a woman of color to callout (a term we discuss with Diep in our interview) problematic examples of representation onstage; 2) celebrating theatre artists of underrepresented identities, often in the form of interviews and direct conversation; and 3) offering advice for theatremakers and writers to decolonize their own work and practice antiracism and antisexism. Together, her body of work offers an intersectional, decolonialist, activist-oriented model for arts journalism in an era of collective, citizen criticism.

The following interview had its genesis in a graduate-level course (Multicultural Theater Practice) at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, taught by Dr. Priscilla Page. The class's objective is to engage with a multicultural theatrical perspective through direct conversation with artists of color working in the field. We spoke with Tran via Zoom in early April 2019. Our interview focused primarily on Tran's role with *American Theatre* magazine, because the publication encompasses so many aspects of her work and is her primary connection to the wider theatre community. We center the analysis and conversation on theatre criticism, rather than arts journalism as a whole (although Tran writes both journalistically and critically and sometimes uses the terms interchangeably), because we see her subjective, identity-focused approach as subversive within this genre of writing. We also acknowledge the foundational work by Black critical race theorists alongside which we contextualize Tran's writing, as these theorists' ideas paved the way for such conversations about race, gender, and identity as we had with Tran.

Tran was born in Vietnam, and her family immigrated to the United States when she was two years old.[1] She grew up in Anaheim, California, a short drive from South Coast Repertory, but was never exposed to any live theatre as a child. She began her undergraduate studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2006 and joined the student newspaper, the *Daily Bruin*, in her second year. An art history and English major, she wrote for the arts and entertainment section, which led to her introduction to theatre criticism. She cites an interview with Rajiv Joseph about *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* and a review of Danai Gurira's *Eclipsed* as the assignments that sparked her interest in arts journalism:

> These were modern plays that spoke about our modern world in a very relatable and visceral way. They spoke profoundly to my experience as a young woman of color whose parents survived a civil war. . . . [I]t made me want to find more plays like that, and to advocate for work like that: work that takes a story we have never seen, of a people rarely represented, and make it *live* onstage. *That* is the kind of theatre I want to see, and the kind of theatre that is inclusive and welcoming to all different stripes of people, and all different kinds of stories.[2]

After graduating from UCLA in 2010, Tran followed her newfound passion to the one-year Goldring Arts Journalism Program at Syracuse University, after which she was hired as the editorial assistant at *American Theatre* in 2011. Since being named the magazine's senior editor in October 2018, she has created a monthly Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion column; launched *Token Theatre Friends*, a biweekly multimedia series about theatre[3]; and begun overseeing the production of the podcasts *Three on the Aisle* and *The Subtext.* She regularly freelances at other publications, including the *New York Times*, *Time Out New York*, *Playbill*, *HelloGiggles*, *CNN*, and *Salon.* She uses her writing to respond to concerns of the theatre community at large, with some *American Theatre* article titles of note including "Kiss Me, My Fair Carousel Woman: Now Is the Season of Our Discontent"[4]; "What Happens After #MeToo?"[5]; "I Am Miss Saigon, and I Hate It"[6]; "Keep Your Hands Off of My Kimono, White People"[7]; and "Things I'm Thankful For: Female Playwrights of Color."[8]

Intersectionality is central to Tran's writing, not only in her efforts to highlight works by artists of color but also in her use of first-person perspective. Her approach to theatre criticism investigates the inextricability of race and gender through her lived experiences. Similarly to how in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" Kimberlé Crenshaw centers Black women "in order to contrast the multidimensionality of Black women's experience with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences,"[9] Tran's centering of her racial and gender identities contrasts with the writing of her peers, which largely focuses on form and style removed from larger sociopolitical issues. In her most-viewed *American Theatre* article to date, "I Am Miss Saigon, and I Hate It," Tran not only criticizes a hitherto deified cornerstone of the Great American Musical but also centers her own family's history to exemplify the violence that such an imperialist narrative carries—we will highlight "I Am Miss Saigon" repeatedly, because we see it as encompassing all of Tran's critical methodologies. She opens the piece with an overtly first-person perspective: "My family's story isn't one that you would have seen in a Hollywood movie or a Broadway musical. For one, it doesn't conform to stereotypes that white executives and producers have about us. There are no silent and sexualized Asian women. There are no conniving and emasculated Asian men. And there are no white men. . . . You won't see this love story on Broadway. Instead, what you will see is *Miss Saigon*."[10]

Tran structures her article so that form and function are intertwined, framing the analytical with the personal. Rather than beginning with a critique of *Miss Saigon*, which, in her words, portrays Vietnamese characters as "desperate, pathetic victims" instead of multidimensional human beings, she recenters the narrative on the people whose history and culture are erased by the musical's white supremacist framework. The first four paragraphs of the article read like a memoir rather than a critique, as Tran tells the story of her family's life prior to immigrating to the United States and explains what it meant to grow up in a community of Vietnamese Americans. She later illuminates the failure of *Miss Saigon* to truthfully represent her culture, but she first rectifies that erasure by centering her article on an authentic Vietnamese narrative (while acknowledging that her family's story is not representative of an entire history).

We see this subjective approach to arts criticism as a decolonialist practice. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o explains in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, language and oppression are intertwined, and only through resisting white imperialist modes of expression can decolonialism truly take form. In our interview, Tran explains how journalistic training reifies a white supremacist model of criticism: the concept of a neutral stance implies that the people in power at journalistic institutions—largely white men—are modeling such neutrality. As evidenced by recent controversies surrounding white critics publishing racist and transphobic material, however (we discuss two examples with Tran), these writers in power are far from objective observers.[11] Tran also explains how a critic's interpretation of a work of art is inherently shaped by their lived experiences. Denying such histories erases the unique perspectives of critics of marginalized identities and upholds a white supremacist status quo. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns of "the danger of a single story":[12] Tran is recognizing the multiplicity of overlooked perspectives by telling hers.

Another integral element of Tran's work, along with subjectivity, is the third strategy she lists in "4 Ways Theatre Critics Can Be a Little Bit Less Racist": "Call out problematic representations when you see them."[13] In the analytical portion of "I Am Miss Saigon," for example, Tran is uninterested in structure or aesthetics. Instead, she dissects the musical's myriad Orientalist tropes: romanticism of the Vietnam War; fetishization of Asian bodies; the villainization and victimization of Asian men and women; and its long history of yellowface controversies. In addressing stereotypical representations and interrogating colonialist ideologies in a move toward cultural change, Tran embodies the role of Judith Fetterley's "resistant reader"—for Tran and Fetterley, as well as Jill Dolan in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, investigating representation is central to disseminating the sociopolitical implications of a work of art.[14]

In conversations with Tran prior to our interview, she expressed a particular interest in discussing the shifting nature of arts criticism, given the prominence of social media and citizen criticism in the internet age. In many ways, Tran brings the legacy of Dolan's feminist spectator into the twenty-first century, as she engages with readers in conversational, communal ways through social media, and filters her criticism through the lenses of representation and identity. Indeed, Dolan acknowledges the rapidly shifting nature of feminist criticism in the 2012 introduction to her second edition of her 1988 book. She questions whether the "ideal spectator" is "still white, male, middle-class, and heterosexual," noting that "women spectators now have more options for positioning ourselves vis-à-vis these [straight white male] narratives" and "are generally more aware of their status and agency as spectators."[15] Internet culture has allowed for an explosion of identity-focused pop culture criticism, giving virtually anyone a platform for voicing their frustrations with dominant narratives. As Dolan observes, this shift in power away from white male gatekeepers and into the hands of the many marks a crucial opportunity for change-making, and she sees "feminist criticism as a strategy widely available for calling out sexism and other exclusions."[16] Through social media and collective criticism, the internet is increasingly being used as a wide-scale space for radical change, and with Tran, we discuss how this new communicative tool is changing the role of arts critics and audiences.

In fact, less than a week after we conducted our interview, one of Tran's Twitter posts went viral beyond the theatre community, with three thousand retweets and thirteen thousand likes at the time of this publication, her most popular tweet to date: "To my reporter friends, a word of advice: Ask POC/female/LGBTQ artists more questions about craft Ask white male artists more questions about representation and identity."[17] Her response to the tweet's popularity: "I've never gone this viral before but I am heartened by a majority of the responses to this. Yes to better questions and upending expectations! P.S. To my new followers, I hope you enjoy show tunes."[18] Diep's investment in dialogue and change-making of this kind defines her body of work—from reviews to tweets to podcasts—and sets her apart as an arbiter for cultural change rather than taste.

MAEGAN CLEARWOOD: You wear so many hats—editor, journalist, critic, social media genius—so how do you frame your work as a whole?

DIEP TRAN: As a person of color who occupies a position of authority in a field where it's mostly white people, there's always this assumption: "Oh, you're the person of color and we need diversity, so you're going to fix this! You're going to speak truth to power! You're going to do all these things to transform the industry!" I'm like, "No, I just have an opinion and I happen to have a platform to relay that to people."

I trained as a journalist, so I started out very apolitical; I went into the arts because I wanted to be an artist but I didn't want to starve. I didn't have any family members who were artists; I didn't see anyone who looked like me in popular entertainment, so why would I do this? I wanted to be a journalist because I wanted to write and get paid for writing (this was in 2007 when I thought of doing this, so that was unfortunate timing). I feel like I fell into the whole advocacy route. I initially wanted to be Ben Brantley from the *New York Times*, reviewing shows and telling people what I think of them, occupying a position of power where I tell people to see things and they listen to me. I liked the idea of that.

But then, the American theatre kept doing this thing where they cast white people to play Asian people. And then I thought, "There's no one else who looks like me, who occupies this position where I'm at a nationally circulating magazine." No one was talking about how problematic this was, but I could do it. So I thought, "I'll just relay this opinion and gather the opinions of other advocates," and it just snowballed from there [into a 2015 piece for *American Theatre* called "Keep Your Hands Off of My Kimono, White People"[19]].

Thinking back to 2012, when La Jolla Playhouse cast white people to play Chinese people, people were very surprised that that was a thing that was not allowed: "*Miss Saigon* did it, why can't we do it?"[20] But I feel like as my career has progressed, we're now having a conversation around equity and around representation; five years ago, the word "yellowface" wasn't even in the lexicon, and now it is. I think I came in at the right time and had the kind of view that not a lot of people in positions of power were having, and I was covering a niche that had not yet been filled. Also, as a journalist, I consider myself a service worker. My job is not as hard as social service workers, but if I can have impact with my work and if something I did can help amplify the work of other artists who are marginalized, then I consider that a job well done.

Hannah Jones: Can you speak to your early experiences as a young woman of color breaking into a predominantly white, male field?

Tran: It's kind of a selfish thing, and it also applies to other artists and generative people, but you put your work out there because you want your name in public. I get a rush still every time I see my name in print. I want to continue doing that while making sure it has the impact I want it to have. I see all of these puff pieces—"What is this white man artist doing?! What was he thinking?!"—and eventually, those pieces became less interesting to me. What became more interesting were conversations about who gets to tell stories. For me, it was partly selfish: I want bylines, and I also want those bylines to have impact, and I also want the story no one else is getting. Frankly, I was covering a good amount of the experimental plays and works by people of color before big publications were. I recall what one of my mentors said: "If you want to send a pitch to the *New York Times*, you need to pitch things that no one else is covering." "Hey, guess what," I thought, "no one else is covering people of color, so I'll do that."

Clearwood: Something we particularly admire about your work is its immediacy—you so often write articles in direct response to trends and issues in the theatre community at large. How do you decide what to write and how this is impacted by the editorial process at *American Theatre*?

Tran: In general, the editorial process at *American Theatre* is that we try to be as national as possible. Sometimes we'll cover regionally specific productions, but for the most part, we want to cover things that people around the country will be able to find connections with. The sweet spot with coverage is a big story that has sources in different cities. So a story about artistic directors and changing leadership, that's a perfect thing because it hits so many metropolitan areas and it's about a big monumental shift in the entire field.[21] For how I decide what to cover, it's difficult these days; since I started writing my official Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion column that comes out once a month, I discovered there's a *lot*, and covering it all is difficult. It's selfish, but it's about what I haven't covered. I'm feeling very fatigued with this conversation around "Oh, this problematic work is getting revived and there's a protest around it." I've covered that story and I don't want to cover that story again.

Jones: One of the hallmarks of your writing is your use of the personal narrative. How did this writing style evolve? Did your training and engagements as a journalist inform your artistry and in what ways has that shaped your work?

Tran: I have a degree in journalism, so there were all these rules: "You have to get both sides"; "You have to keep yourself out of the story." That was all trained into me. And the more I did it, the more I realized it was a white supremacist mindset, because it assumes that, if we have to be neutral and most of the people in positions of power are white men, that means that white men are neutral—but they are not. When I see racist stuff, it's not coming from a neutral place: it's coming from a *racist* place. Once you start to question that, then you start to wonder, "Where can I take this craft?" Because I do consider it a craft. Criticism—it's a little like dramaturgy, but with wider areas of application. I did a summer intensive at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, the National Critics Institute. Chris Jones from the *Chicago Tribune* runs it. It's an intensive, trial-by-fire program. I thought, "I don't write like this but I'm going to try it out if only to make my analytical brain better." And then I realized, "Oh, I have an *opinion* about things." This developed around the same time we were talking about unconscious biases, and I realized that all of our opinions are shaped by our lives. If I'm going to be an honest arbiter of what is "good" and what is "not good," I have to be clear about where I'm coming from and what I consider good. I wrote a piece about how much I hate *Miss Saigon*, but I'm still getting comments from people who unapologetically love it and don't understand why I have a problem with it. I think they're wrong, but they have a different viewpoint than I have. I think we're getting to a place where people accept that neutrality is a fallacy, especially because now there are so many citizen critics (if you ever look up a review on Yelp, everyone on Yelp is a critic).

Clearwood: We see "I Am Miss Saigon, and I Hate it" as encompassing so many of the elements that have come to define your work. Is it still your most-viewed article at *American Theatre*?

Tran: Yes it is. I'll probably go to my grave with it.

Clearwood: Can you speak to the genesis of the piece and why you think it went viral?

Tran: It was a synthesis of all my influences growing up. I grew up in an immigrant household where the narrative of the Vietnam War was one thing, and then I went to school, watched things like *Apocalypse Now*, and I realized that the narrative around the Vietnam War is something completely different in America. It's one of those things where you hold both things in your head simultaneously and you don't know how to reconcile how they can both be true at the same time.

Then I read *The Sympathizer*, by Viet Thanh Nguyen, which won the Pulitzer, and it made me realize that this goes deeper than just one side is good, one side is bad, one side is a victim, one side is the hero.[22] It goes deeper than that. It goes into colonialism, it goes into who gets to tell stories and who has the primary narrative and how they got that narrative. Then it made me realize that American entertainment is what's called "soft power."[23] American entertainment is how American interests and culture are spread around the world, so if the only thing around the world that people know about the Vietnam War is from American movies, then of course that narrative will reign supreme. And then I thought, "But that narrative is incomplete."

That's what I was thinking about as I saw *Miss Saigon* for the first time. I realized that it plays into all of that; this is not just one musical. A lot of people like to think that this piece of art stands by itself, that it's not influenced by anything else, but art is in conversation with the world, and it's influenced by the world. I'm sure those French dudes who wrote it won't say they were inspired by *Apocalypse Now* and all those Vietnam War movies, but they probably watched them and thought, "I feel so sad for those poor Vietnamese victims." I realized that doing an objective analysis of whether or not this musical is accurate would not be interesting, so I brought my own family's history onto it. Growing up with that history made *Miss Saigon* that much more uncomfortable to watch. All of those things came together, and I think it went viral because a lot of people have seen *Miss Saigon* or have heard about it—it's in the lexicon, the cultural nexus—but not very many people have ever analyzed it in that way. As a journalist, you always want to have the story that no one else has, and that was mine. I hope I get that again at some point. That would be nice.

Jones: Another hallmark of your work is your focus on representation and willingness to hold problematic works to task. Have you always seen calling out as an integral part of your responsibility as a theatre critic? If not, how did it develop?

Tran: I was raised looking at the same art that you were raised looking at: this is Shakespeare; this is Shaw; analyze this piece of art on its technical merits and not its problematic gender representation. We were trained to think in that way. It took a few years and reading a lot of other thinkers who were a lot better at it than I was—I read a lot of Roxane Gay and Ta-Nehisi Coates in the timespan of 2014 and 2015. I was learning how to identify it and learning the language, because we didn't have that language until recently. Then it was about learning how to articulate why it's an issue outside of, "This is offensive, don't do this again," because unfortunately, when it comes to white practitioners, they'll just do it again because they don't understand why.

Jones: In that same vein, do you see a difference between calling out and calling in, and how do you see callout culture manifesting itself in the theatre community at large?

Tran: This is one of those terminology things I'm still trying to figure out. The whole calling out versus calling in—I still can't discern the difference. This is a moment where I need to educate myself more, because language is always changing. Can you give me a definition?

Jones: Sure. Calling in is having, from what I understand, a conversation that will bring someone into an understanding of why their behavior is problematic. Calling out is more of an active, in-the-moment conversation around why something is problematic. I think of it in terms of framework, and it's very situational depending on who it is and what it calls for.

Tran: That helps, definitely. In terms of how I see it in the theatre world, I saw a really good representation of calling in (I didn't cover it—it's one of those times I didn't feel like writing about it), with a recent production of *Miss Saigon* in Wisconsin.[24] The theatre company was going to have a panel with local Asian American community leaders and publish an article by a community leader in their program. And they canceled the event and backed out of publishing the essay for no reason. People got really upset. It got written up a few times. I saw it as an example of calling in because the Asian American community members didn't start out protesting the show; they reached out and said, "Why are you programming this? We should have a conversation about how to present this to the community, because there's a large Asian population here and this piece is hurtful to that community." Then it turned into a calling out, because they ended up protesting because of the aforementioned canceled event and broken promises. I also saw a calling-out last year in St. Louis where a bunch of white people did snippets from the *King and I*, and some activists in the audience stood up, vocally protested, and left very loudly.[25] For me, when people are having that kind of response, it's about how to cover it. I do a little bit of calling out on social media, but I know I have a responsibility to model good behavior, or model behavior that's productive, so when I do it, or even when I write about it, I try to create a dialogue: this is the issue, this is why people here think it's a problem, this is why people over here *didn't* think it was a problem, and this is how we can fix the problem. If you just present the problem, for me as a person who's trying to help people with what I do, it's not helpful. All of us marginalized folks know it's a problem, so it's more about how people come together. For the person who did the offending and the person who was offended, how did they come together to figure out this issue? That's interesting, and hopefully something that can be replicated elsewhere.

Clearwood: Even critics are being held accountable for their work in recent years: for instance, in June of 2017, *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Hedy Weiss's review of Steppenwolf Theatre Company's production of *Pass Over* included controversial statements on police brutality and institutionalized racism; and a year later, chief *New York Times* theatre critic Ben Brantley came under fire for misgendering both Peppermint—the first transgender woman in a principal role on Broadway—and her character in the musical *Head Over Heels*.[26] There's been a consciousness-raising around the need to diversify who writes about theatre as well as how they frame their work. What are your thoughts on theses controversies?

Tran: I really appreciate people calling out those in positions of power on social media, because before, critics could just ignore their bad mail. Now, because you can build coalitions so easily, critics have to pay attention to you when you blow up their mentions. That has been fascinating as someone who has not been on the receiving end of that (I know if I end up on the receiving end, it's going to suck). Years ago, you would not have been able to get Ben Brantley to fix a review of his, and now you can, and that says something about the power of social media and the power of people's voices gathering and amplifying each other. I'm really grateful for that.

As for critics of color, what I've been trying to do as editor is encourage people to write for me and bring me their ideas. I think a big problem with young writers is that they're not edited, and when you're young and starting out, you need someone to read your work and tell you what works and what doesn't and how you can be better. That's what mattered for me over the years and what I want to do for other people, so I've brought on more writers of color and folks on the LGBTQ spectrum to diversify my writing pool. I have a platform and I'm trying to encourage more people to use that platform. The big issue I'm noticing is that in other, more mainstream publications, the people who are writing at the top, the people with the money, are still mostly white. How do we break that? That I don't have the answer to, other than contacting editors and making them give a shit, but I can't do that by myself. A critical mass of people has to be doing that. I also encourage people to amplify voices that they find compelling, even if those voices aren't writing for mainstream, gigantic publications, because young voices and voices of color are writing for smaller publications. My big problem with producers is they still think of the *New York Times* review as the money review, and it doesn't have to be. *What the Constitution Means to Me* is playing on Broadway right now, and the *New York Times* did not give it a good review when it was off-Broadway. I remember Heidi Schreck messaging me and being very upset about that. But they got good reviews from smaller publications, and those are the reviews they used as a marketing tool, and they were very intentional in diversifying their audiences for that show. I wish more people would stop depending on the white dude's approval.

Jones: How do you respond to critiques from readers when dealing with white guilt/pushback?

Tran: It is *difficult*. I don't read the comments on the pieces that I write. I only respond to people who want to have a dialogue. It's the emails that say, "You're completely wrong and I don't agree with you and this has nothing to do with race" versus "I don't understand this; can you clarify this for me?" I'm more inclined to talk to someone who comes in with the intention of wanting to learn something or have a dialogue. You can't teach people who don't want to be taught, and it's not healthy to. I ignore the haters and focus on the people who I can actually have a conversation with.

Clearwood: We really admire your egalitarian approach to social media; it seems to focus on facilitating dialogue rather than what you said earlier about being an arbiter of good art. How you use social media as part of your craft?

Tran: I think social media has been fantastic in allowing people to amplify voices that they may not have encountered otherwise. I have met so many writers on social media of different backgrounds I never met in real life, and for me, as someone who hates networking events, Twitter is a lifesaver. I see social media as a way to work through an idea with an audience, because when I'm writing an article, it's just me in a room trying to figure it out and those voices in my head are working against each other, which is not as fun as talking to people on social media and asking, "Did I get the right thing from this show? Did that work for you? Because I don't know if that worked for me." I will say that because of my position at *American Theatre*, there are things I can't say because it would violate our neutrality stance, especially if I'm reporting on a controversy—I can't rag on one party on social media; that's one way to inhibit a conversation I am trying to start.

Clearwood: Can you provide an example of an instance where talking to people on social media helped broaden or change your ideas on a particular topic?

Tran: The biggest thing that social media has given me recently is when I was reporting on sexual harassment and my boss, *American Theatre* editor-in-chief Rob Weinert-Kendt, said, "I think this is an issue in the field, but we don't know much about what it is. Can you take a look and see what you find?" And I thought, "How do I do that?" So I basically crowdsourced on social media: "Tell me your stories." That was such an eye-opening experience, because more than a hundred people responded. It helped me understand that harassment isn't just being touched inappropriately or being assaulted. Harassment in the theatre is something very specific and the lines can be blurred because there's a faux intimacy. I learned about the culture of a rehearsal room, which I've never been in. I don't have artistic practitioner experience, so for me, it was so valuable to talk through it with a bunch of different people. I think good journalists will do that. I don't like having an agenda when I'm writing a piece; I may have an idea, but if you push back on the idea, it makes it more interesting. There are so many nuances to these discussions and I want to capture as much of those as possible.

Jones: We would love to hear about your thoughts regarding the recent rise of the highly publicized, glossy and televised performances of popular musicals with all-star casts. These processes allow for theatre to ultimately be more accessible to audiences; however, I question whether this new phenomenon can be truly accessible with all-star casts and limited artists of color.

Tran: The first musical I ever saw live was *The Lion King*; the second musical I ever saw live was *Phantom of the Opera*, and I was obsessed with it for a good five years. I'm not a snob when it comes to the theatre; I think that as you consume more of a particular art form, your palate becomes more refined, and the things you used to love, you don't love anymore. I love a good Snickers bar, but is it better than a cupcake? No, it's not (I think about food a lot).

I think that if these live musicals can make theatre more accessible—and when I say that, I mean it's free, you can tune into it at any time via streaming and through various platforms—this is a great way of doing it. The difficult thing is quality. I think a variable in this is that they haven't quite figured out how to make the live part interesting without it looking like a bad soap opera. I think about this last time, with *Rent*: if they had just embraced that an actor broke his leg but the show must go on, that would have been more riveting, because that's what the live experience is: the thrill of spontaneity. They're trying to replicate the live experience on a television screen, and they're not always successful in capturing that kinetic energy between actors and audience. I also think it is becoming more diverse demographically, but I do wish there wasn't such a reliance on star casting, like with Carrie Underwood or other people who cannot perform. But Broadway has the same problem, which leads me to my whole other rant about the failings of the commercial theatre, which I'm not sure you want to hear.

Clearwood and Jones: Yes we do!

Tran: The other week, I wrote an article about experimental theatre artists like Heidi Schreck, Taylor Mac, and Rachel Chavkin making it to Broadway and what that means.[27] What was interesting to me is that their shows are the ones I'm most excited for. I don't give a shit about *Tootsie* or *Beetlejuice.* I question the overreliance of Broadway on already-made properties. Some people will criticize that and say that Broadway has always been based on other things, but I'd say no: Do you think they put *Mean Girls* on Broadway because it's a high piece of art that needs to be musicalized? They just wanted the audience of a thing that's still being memed ten years later. I think that making art with a mindset of "How do we get the fanbase of this movie into a theatre?" or "How do we monetize this brand name in a bigger way?" is turning the art form into a commercial. It's turning the art form into a parody of itself. When people think of musical theatre, they think of jazz hands; it's fun, you spend a hundred dollars on a musical and it's going to be a good time. They think of it as spectacle and they don't feel it in their bones or as something that can change their mindset or the world in some way. This art form can do that, but you aren't going to see it in *Mean Girls* the musical. I love theatre and this art form so much that I want it to lead the cultural conversation in the same way that Beyoncé's *Lemonade* led the cultural conversation. *Hamilton* did that because it was creative and tapping into what the culture was talking about in terms of who gets to tell stories and who gets to be represented. I think the more work that's created with that in mind instead of a commercial "Let's make as much money as possible" is better for the art form and popular opinion about the art form.

Jones: Can you tell us more about your podcast, *Token Theatre Friends*?

Tran: I have to credit my cohost, Jose Solís: he's been very intentional in making sure that theatre audiences are more diverse. Fun fact, if you follow Jose on Twitter, he will offer up free theatre tickets; because he's a Drama Desk voter, he gets two tickets to every single show, so he takes young people and people of color to the theatre, even if they're strangers.

For *Token Theatre Friends*, we thought, "What is the medium that a lot of folks are talking in right now? What would be conducive to us having a dialogue with each other?" We could write it down, but you've read written dialogues: they don't sound natural. We wanted that feel of a discussion you have after a show as you're walking home. We pitched it to Rob, who's been wanting us to do more criticism in the magazine. But Jose and I were intentional in not just reviewing big shows but shows at different price points to show that there's good theatre at any level and really bad theatre at any level. You can see a really shitty thing for one hundred dollars but you can see an amazing thing for fifteen dollars. My dream in the long term is to be able to take it to different cities and see a couple of things and talk about them and create a dialogue around this art form. I'm uncomfortable with the idea of one person telling you what to see, because theatre is a dialogue; it's a dialogue between audience and artist. I feel like the conversation we have around whether something is good or not should also be in a dialogue.

Clearwood: Going back to your thoughts on commercial theatre, it seems like an additional responsibility of critics right now is having a finger on the pulse of American culture at large, and that watching theatre isn't enough.

Tran: I think, as a journalist, if you want to get the biggest readership possible, you need competency in different fields. I also think, as I said before, art doesn't happen in a vacuum. Artists are influenced by different mediums. Qui Nguyen, who wrote *Vietgone* and *She Kills Monsters*, is influenced by rap and kung fu movies. Being able to have a good grasp on different genres makes for more substantive discussion around the art form. If you interviewed Qui Ngyun and didn't ask him about kung fu, what are you doing?

Clearwood: Do you want to add anything to this overarching theme of the shifting nature of arts criticism? Anything that's changing or in flux that you wanted to address?

Tran: I wanted to plug the TCG [Theatre Communications Group] national conference, because this year there's going to be a track on journalism and how to sustain arts journalism. Unfortunately, you may think that arts journalists have cushy jobs, but it's like the Hunger Games out there. You're all just trying to fight each other for bylines. There's fewer full-time positions to write about this. I'm worried about freelance, which is such a brutal lifestyle because the rates are shit, and I'm worried that it will disincentivize more people from diverse communities from coming into criticism. I don't know how to solve it.

Jones: How does the need for clicks and views impact your writing?

Tran: Fortunately, because I work at a nonprofit publication, I don't have to chase clicks, which is amazing; I have friends whose job that is and it's a miserable experience. But that doesn't mean I don't care if people read my work. I have noticed that stuff about race and identity these days will get a lot of notice. It's in the ether right now, especially if there's an overarching, unilateral opinion that something is good or bad; that will get clicks because people will argue about it. I try to not do that very much because I don't think getting people to argue on the internet is a good idea.

Clearwood: Where do you see the field of arts criticism changing in the near future?

Tran: I don't know if it's changing, because people at the top are writing the same things they've always written; they're just more inclined to respond to backlash. I think that critics know they need to be competent in talking about race and gender and representation of all sorts in the same way that they talk about differences in form. I think they know they have to, but I don't think they know how to do it. Right now, it seems like the next step for those in power is to figure out when is it appropriate to talk about race and when is it not. Recently, a friend of mine, Leah Nanako Winkler, had a review in the *New York Times* of her play and they talked about how she has an agenda of making sure Asian Americans are seen as humans.[28] It's a family drama. She texted me and said, "I don't have an agenda. I just wanted to showcase my family's story!" That is where cultural competency is missing. They're trying to understand it.

Another thing that's changing is there's more marginalized voices that want to do this, and who are slowly infiltrating the mainstream publications (I think of Vinson Cunningham at the *New Yorker* or Wei-Huan Chen at the *Houston Chronicle*[29]). The big question mark for me is, Can the journalism industry sustain those voices in the long term and make sure they all get paid well?

Notes

1. We received much of our biographical information prior to the interview from Tran's 2016 keynote speech to the American Theatre Critics Association conference, published as "Criticism So White? Here's How to Change That," *American Theatre*, April 11, 2016, https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/04/11/criticism-so-white-heres-how-to-change-that/.

2. Tran, "Criticism So White?"

3. *Token Theatre Friends* is circulated via video and audio formats; Tran and Jose Solís interview artists on their YouTube channel and review shows on their podcast.

4. Diep Tran, "Kiss Me, My Fair Carousel Woman: Now Is the Season of Our Discontent," *American Theatre*, April 6, 2018, https://www.americantheatre.org/2018/04/06/kiss-me-my-fair-carousel-woman-now-is-the-season-of-our-discontent/.

5. Diep Tran, "What Happens After #MeToo?" *American Theatre*, December 13, 2017, https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/12/13/what-happens-after-metoo/.

6. Diep Tran, "I Am Miss Saigon, and I Hate It," *American Theatre*, April 13, 2017, https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/04/13/i-am-miss-saigon-and-i-hate-it/.

7. Diep Tran, "Keep Your Hands Off My Kimono, White People," *American Theatre*, September 18, 2015, https://www.americantheatre.org/2015/09/18/keep-your-hands-off-of-my-kimono-white-people/.

8. Diep Tran, "Things I'm Thankful For: Female Playwrights of Color," *American Theatre*, November 21, 2018, https://www.americantheatre.org/2018/11/21/things-im-thankful-for-female-playwrights-of-color/.

9. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, issue 1, article 8 (1989): 139.

10. Tran, "I Am Miss Saigon, and I Hate It."

11. We discuss two controversies with Tran: Hedy Weiss' 2017 *Chicago Sun-Times* review of *Pass Over*, and Ben Brantley's 2018 *New York Times* review of *Head over Heels*.

12. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," filmed July 2006, TED video, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

13. Diep Tran, "4 Ways Theatre Critics Can Be a Little Bit Less Racist," *American Theatre*, July 16, 2015, https://www.americantheatre.org/2015/07/16/4-ways-theatre-critics-can-be-a-little-bit-less-racist/.

14. Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), xxv.

15. Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*, xxv.

16. Ibid, xxvi.

17. Diep Tran, (@diepthought), Twitter, April 9, 2019, 4:49 p.m., https://twitter.com/diepthought/status/1115763633571672064?s=20.

18. Diep Tran, (@diepthought), Twitter, April 11, 2019, 11:52 a.m., https://twitter.com/diepthought/status/1116413679828860929.

19. Tran, "Keep Your Hands Off My Kimono."

20. She is referencing an incident of yellowface in La Jolla Playhouse's 2012 production of *The Nightingale* (book and lyrics by Steven Sater, music by Duncan Sheik, directed by Moisés Kaufman). David Ng, "Heated Exchanges at La Jolla Playhouse over Multicultural Casting," *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 2012, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-xpm-2012-jul-23-la-et-cm-heated-exchanges-at-la-jolla-playhouse-over-nightingale-casting-20120722-story.html.

21. Tran is referring to an article she published a few days before our interview, about the increasingly diverse demographics among theatre leaders with recent artistic director hirings: "The Turnover Recipe: Add New Voices and Audiences, Stir," *American Theatre*, April 9, 2019, https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/04/09/the-turnover-recipe-add-new-voices-and-audiences-stir/.

22. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (Berkeley, CA: Grove Press, 2015). Nguyen's novel, which explores the narrative of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese American immigrant experience, won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 2015.

23. Coined by Joseph Nye in 1990 and defined thus: "This . . . aspect of power—which occurs when one country gets other countries to *want* what it wants—might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of *ordering* others to do what it wants"; Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): 166.

24. In April of 2019, Overture Center in Madison, Wisconsin, planned to host a panel about the stereotypes within the musical with Timothy Yu, an Asian American studies professor from University of Wisconsin–Madison, but canceled the morning before. Yu hosted a teach-in outside the building and passed out fliers on opening night titled "What's Wrong with 'Miss Saigon.'" Michelle Alfini, "Overture Center Apologizes for Handling of 'Miss Saigon' Controversy," WKOW 27, April 4, 2019, https://wkow.com/news/2019/04/04/overture-center-apologizes-for-handling-of-miss-saigon-controversy/.

25. Tran covered this incident, which occurred during a performance of *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* at the Muny, an outdoor theatre in St. Louis. She is referring to a moment in act 2 in which a white woman performed a scene from *The King and I.* Fifteen artist-activists booed as they exited the space, and police were called in response. Tran, "Talking Back: A Protest of Yellowface at the Muny," *American Theatre*, June 22, 2018, https://www.americantheatre.org/2018/06/22/talking-back-a-protest-of-yellowface-at-the-muny/.

26. On June 13, 2017, Hedy Weiss, thirty-year critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, published a review of *Pass Over*, a play by Antoinette Nwandu running at Steppenwolf Theatre Company. Weiss received backlash for statements that dismissed the play's messages about police brutality and systemic racism, resulting in a Change.org petition calling for theaters to suspend granting her complimentary tickets to performances. Weiss's position was eliminated from the publication eight months later. Tran, "The Review That Shook Chicago," *American Theatre*, June 27, 2017, https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/06/27/the-review-that-shook-chicago/. Brantley continued his role on staff, but the incident did prompt an apology over Twitter and an updated version of the review. Jackson McHenry, "New York *Times* Critic Gets Dragged for Misgendering in *Head Over Heels* Review," *Vulture*, July 27, 2018, https://www.vulture.com/2018/07/new-york-times-critic-slammed-for-head-over-heels-review.html.

27. Tran also discusses the works of Young Jean Lee and Daniel Fisher's experimental staging of *Oklahoma!* in "Uptown vs. Downtown? Tear Down This Wall," *American Theatre,* March 26, 2019, https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/03/26/uptown-vs-downtown-tear-down-this-wall/.

28. Jesse Green's review of "God Said This" states, "[Winkler] sets out not only to bust stereotypes about submissive Japanese-American women but also to rescue hick Kentuckians, intolerant Christians, 'tiger moms' and even the dying from the broad brush of caricature. Mission accomplished, though at a cost to coherence. . . . When it gets out of the way of its big agenda it has wonderful small things to say"; "Review: In 'God Said This,' a Hot Mess of a Daughter Heads Home," *New York Times,* Jan. 29, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/29/theater/review-god-said-this-leah-nanako-winkler.html.

29. Vinson Cunningham is an arts and culture writer who joined the *New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2016. Wei-Huan Chen has been the theatre critic and arts/culture writer for the *Houston Chronicle* since 2016.