

## [PERSPECTIVE]

## Beginning at Home

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As the ambitious, barefoot, biracial daughter of an Oakland hippie, I came to the University of Puget Sound with a strong desire to change the world—without the faintest notion of where to begin or even what changes I hoped to facilitate. I had traveled the eight hundred miles from Oakland to Tacoma with two suitcases and a teenager’s patchwork understanding of myself and the world around me. As a proud Afro-Latina from the diverse San Francisco Bay Area, I considered myself informed and aware of the politics of culture and difference. Yet a knot of conflicting narratives about my identity as a biracial first-generation college student lay stitched into the fabric of my perspective. I was both proud and ashamed of who I was and where I had come from, confident externally but internally confused about race and determined to avoid discussing it.

Due to my reluctance to confront issues of race, I did not seek out the Race and Pedagogy Initiative (RPI), but instead encountered it incidentally, through the university’s theater community. During Puget Sound’s fall 2010 Race and Pedagogy Conference, I performed in a staged reading of the play *1620 Bank Street* by C. Rosalind Bell. Set in the socially turbulent period of racial integration in Lake Charles, Louisiana, the play explores the colliding themes of race, love, family, and adolescence. My role in the play was largely comedic. Yet the production process engaged me in challenging discussions as the directors, a team of brilliant scholar-artists, prodded cast members to unpack our assumptions about the play and one another.

Encountered in this context, a single piece of dialogue inspired me to begin the process of untangling my complex perspective. In *1620 Bank Street*, Father Merced, a white Catholic priest, struggles to overcome his own racial prejudice as he facilitates the integration of a high school. In a scene where he speaks of the difficulty of confronting his prejudice, he realizes, “I must begin at home.” These words resonated with me; somehow, this character’s quest for racial harmony closely

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mirrored my internal struggles with race. If I hoped to change anything, I would have to confront my hesitance to engage my own identity. Soon, I found the cultural studies theories I was learning in the classroom coalescing with the analytical discussions about race and context occurring in the theater. By interrogating the world of the play, I began to better comprehend the complex ways race shapes the dynamics of contemporary society and my own perspective.

After the 2010 Race and Pedagogy Conference, I continued to work with RPI, using theater as a pedagogical tool to stimulate conversation and reflection. Along with RPI’s passionate scholars, dedicated university administrators, and my fellow students, I helped facilitate many powerful discussions about race, identity, inequality, and justice within local and national

community forums. My performances in works by Suzanne Lori Parks, Julia Cho, and C. Rosalind Bell empowered me to find my voice as a student leader and to recognize art’s capacity to inspire ideological transformation. Most importantly, my experience with RPI motivated me to challenge others in the campus community to improve their understanding of difference and the seemingly arbitrary designations that shape our experiences of the world.

With the tireless support of my RPI family, I found creative avenues to address issues of race and social justice on and off campus. I became a resident assistant, a mentor to college-bound youth in the city of Tacoma, and an active participant in campus diversity organizations. These roles allowed

me to become a community builder, connecting other students to RPI and encouraging the formation of new communities that value differences in identity and the free exchange of ideas. For me and for many others, RPI and the critical examination of race it inspires have been vehicles of ideological change—reminding us that we must begin at home, confronting the biases within ourselves, before we can begin anew and incite change. ☐

*To learn more about the Race and Pedagogy Initiative and other civic engagement programs at the University of Puget Sound, see page 27 of this issue.*