

STEPHANIE ANDERSON

An Interview with Renee Tajima-Peña

From 1981 to 1983, filmmaker Renee Tajima-Peña was the managing editor of Bridge: Asian American Perspectives, a magazine that ran from 1971 to 1985 and published an eclectic array of writing on Asian American culture and politics. Bridge was associated with the Basement Workshop, an influential Asian American arts and activist organization in New York City. In this interview, Stephanie Anderson talks with Tajima-Peña about Bridge, the Asian American movement, the relationship between film and literature, and more. The interview was conducted via email between November 2021 and July 2022.

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SA: *Perhaps we could begin by situating your work with Bridge in the context of the journal's history and the larger historical moment. How and when did you become involved with Bridge?*

RTP: I'll start with the larger context of what was going on then with Asian Americans and culture through my personal experience. I graduated from Harvard in 1980 and wanted to become a filmmaker. That was akin to an Asian American woman deciding to play point guard in the NBA. I tried to get nonpaid internships at every studio and network I could think of and never even got calls back. I had white male classmates who landed paid work in the business, sometimes even in the writer's room, but that was the industry at the time. Even at PBS with its public media mission—Grace Lee has a great podcast on PBS's legacy of whiteness, *Viewers Like Us*—there were only a handful of Asian Americans who weren't doing maintenance or clerical jobs. Karen Tei Yamashita, who was just honored with a lifetime achievement award from the National Book Foundation, was working at KCET Los Angeles as a secretary.

I also got a job as a secretary—for the “Mr. Bill Show,” the Claymation character on *Saturday Night Live*. I lasted six months. Since I’d been a student activist, I got involved with Asian American movement work in New York and found out about the Chinatown media arts center, Asian CineVision. It had been all volunteer, and they were hiring their first paid director position, and I got the job. \$2.50 an hour, if that. ACV mounted the Asian American International Film Festival, did community video training, and had a Chinese-language public access program; we did film screenings in the Chinatown public library across the street.

Bridge had already been published since 1971. At some point, we began administering the Basement Workshop and also took over the publication of *Bridge*. I became the managing editor—as the director of a bare-bones community nonprofit, I wore a lot of hats! I didn’t have any professional experience; I was only about twenty-one or twenty-two when I became the editor in 1981. I had edited an alternative newspaper when I was in high school, but that was about it.

Bridge had an all-volunteer editorial board and contributors that thankfully included people with real skills—my sister Marsha, who had a PhD in art history from UChicago; the poets Kimiko Hahn, Luis Francia, and Walter Lew; the activist Rockwell Chin; the photographer Corky Lee; and various artists and writers. Shanlon Wu was also on the editorial board—he’s now a high-powered attorney and CNN legal analyst who briefly represented Rick Gates, the Trump campaign aide.

Anyway, in the early 1980s the Asian American political and cultural movement was not new—it goes back to the 1960s—but it was still in a fairly nascent, grassroots stage. And it was evolving. During the 1980s and ’90s, it continued to grow. Demographically the Asian American population was really booming, and to an extent there was a “professionalization” of people and structures within the movement—Asian American studies was fighting for legitimacy, academics were trying to get tenure, filmmakers were going into MFA programs and slowly making broadcast or theatrical films, organizations were getting boards of directors—that kind of thing.¹

And an activist brand of cultural organizing continued to resist, such as Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network, which included a number of Basement Workshop veterans. In 1991 Godzilla called

out the homogeneity of the Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial and its “conspicuous absence of Asian American visual artists.”² Artist-of-color criticism of the Whitney led to a very different Biennial in 1993, the one that got the white establishment critics up in arms. I was part of a collective installation in that show, *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire*, that Shu Lea Cheang put together as “tales of postcolonial interracial desire through reconstructed red phones, appropriating the 900-phonesex and 25-cent-per-peep pornography apparatus.”³ My contribution was a phone-sex audio remix of James Brown to quotations from Mao Zedong’s *Little Red Book*, performed by the *Dogeaters* playwright Jessica Hagedorn and the writer/performance artist Robbie McCauley.

Anyway, back to the Asian American arts community in New York. We started to get small grants from the NEA, the New York State Council on the Arts, donors, businesses, and the like to publish *Bridge*. Kitty Carlisle Hart, the actress and wife of the playwright Moss Hart, was the chair of NYSCA at the time, and she famously thought it was a magazine about the card game bridge. She was actually really great. She would charm all of the upstate New York legislators and get them to approve budgets that funded artists and organizations of color and controversial work. She was a real champion for the arts.

As in the previous decade of *Bridge*, we covered arts and politics. I think we were more multiethnic and included a larger proportion of US-born Asians than *Bridge* had in the 1970s. For example, Kimiko is mixed-race Japanese, Luis is Filipino, Walter is Korean. It was a time of growing panethnicity in the Asian American political and culture movement. I want to emphasize that it wasn’t the beginning of that panethnicity—for example, the 1940s labor movement in Hawai’i and the ethnic studies strikes of the late 1960s involved Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and others. Keep in mind that up to the 1970s, the Asian American population was small and overwhelmingly Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino. That all changed with the impact of the 1965 immigration reform and migration from Southeast Asia after the American War in Vietnam. In the late ’70s, the Chol Soo Lee case, and beginning in 1983, the Vincent Chin case, mobilized panethnic Asian American organizing and drew from the panethnicity of the continuing labor movement, ethnic studies, and other struggles. *Bridge*

captured a lot of what was going on at that time and came out of that ferment. Everyone was living it.

What was your sense of Bridge's legacy at that point?

I didn't think about legacy. I thought about the moment, and the role of *Bridge*—like filmmaking—as a cultural organ of the movement. Asian American publications have served that function since the earliest immigrant publications. In New York in particular, it was actually a great time for Asian American journalism. There were Chinese-language newspapers from left, right, and center perspectives, there was a Japanese American paper, there were in-language Asian publications. On the East and West Coast, there were publications of left formations, and alternative papers like *Gidra* and *New Dawn*. I think the UCLA Asian American Studies Center “Mountain Movers” project talks about those publications.⁴

How was the editorial staff of Bridge organized?

All volunteer. People primarily took on roles related to their skill set. I'm fuzzy about the details, but you can ask other people on the editorial board who have better memories than me. I just remember it was a lot of work.

How varied were your responsibilities?

Everyone did everything. I would regularly work until 2 a.m., 24/7, but not only on *Bridge*, so it's a bit of a blur. I had to do fundraising, writing, editing, finding images, keeping on top of logistics. But we were all doing everything. We were a barely funded Asian American nonprofit operating out of a walk-up in Chinatown, pre-internet, when things were typeset manually and the layout had to be done by hand.

Of the many things you were doing—“fundraising, writing, finding images, logistics,” and so forth—what was your favorite?

Fundraising and logistics are dirty jobs that somebody has to do, and not my favorite. But we all had to do everything in our careers apart from making art or films or writing or performing. The late great Corky Lee was a photographer, but he also worked at Expedi Printing, and that's where we printed *Bridge* and our film festival posters, protest flyers, everything. We'd call Corky. I learned a lot of skills about publication layout and prepping for printing that you can just do on your Mac now. I did love seeing the magazine come off the press, because it was always so exciting to see the covers. Publishing *Bridge* was a communal experience. We met in person, put it together, and schlepped it around to sell it in person. It was a community.

One of the things I love about Bridge is “its iconic blend of Asian American political issues, critique, art, poetry, and fiction.”⁵ The pieces are often in conversation to an astonishing degree. And the pages are packed! What were some of the editorial strategies that ensured this effect?

Bridge reflected what was happening in those worlds because everyone contributing to it was immersed in Asian American politics, arts, literature, intelligentsia, community, imagining. That's a lot different from the conventional writer who lands in a space and interprets what they see from an outsider's lens. We were insiders. And that in itself was an act of resistance, to stake a claim to our own stories. At the time, insider knowledge wasn't respected, of course, because outsiders wanted to reproduce the status quo. In academia, scholars of color were accused of doing “activist” research. In filmmaking, there were suits in the PBS system who were suspicious of us as Asian American filmmakers taking on an investigation of a racially motivated killing for *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* But the power of *Bridge* was precisely because we were insiders.

In the essay “Moving the Image,” you discuss the importance of eclecticism and the “plurality of cultural influences” in seriously considering Asian American filmmaking aesthetics, and one can see how these resonate in the pages of Bridge as well. How did literature and your early involvement in writing and filmmaking all influence each other?

I never went to film school and never got any formal training. I learned filmmaking on the job, so I didn't have many influences other than the culture at home, in the neighborhood, at school; the TV shows and movies I saw, the music I listened to, the books I read. I had grown up in a multiracial community near Los Angeles: Asian, Black, Latinx, white. It was a totally hybrid cultural existence. I once wrote about how it was, "feeling as much at home with the Delfonics as the Shigin; even closer to the Black Power movement than the Cultural Revolution. So it seems to me the natural order of things, as a filmmaker, is to use jazz and rhythm & blues in films about Asian Americans, as it is to draw from the style and sensibilities of the German-born [Charles] Bukowski, who wrote about the neighborhood milieu where my mother grew up."⁶

When I started out in the 1980s, a lot of documentary practice drew from genres of journalism, direct cinema, and ethnographic filmmaking. But not knowing any better, I just went by what I liked. And I was really drawn to literature, fiction, and scripted film and television. I brought that mix into my filmmaking, partly as a strategy of necessity in locating relatable cultural reference points for non-Asian American audiences: the murder story, the humor of a road trip, the melodrama of a family reunion.

In the documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987), I drew on literary and dramatic influences to negotiate an Asian American experience that most viewers probably knew little about. The dramatic structure and fractured storytelling approach are based on two fictional works that really influenced me—the multiple perspectives of the play and movie *Rashomon* and the parallel storylines of the 1980s television drama *Hill Street Blues*. Was the killing a barroom brawl or a hate crime? Using a narrative strategy like the one in *Rashomon* makes it possible to explore the subjectivities and social locations of witnesses to the crime and its aftermath, and to maneuver through ambiguities of perception and fact. In *My America...or Honk if You Love Buddha* (1997), I was influenced by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and by the outsider's quest for humanity along the peripheries in Carlos Bulosan's novel *America Is in the Heart*.

Your work is sometimes called lyrical. What do you think about the relationship between poetry and film?

That's a compliment! Not sure I've heard that before. I'm interested in people's interior lives, which is often memory or dreams, and so I think about the poetics of a scene. I do wish I could be as concise as a poet, though. Poetry is very cinematic, very descriptive. There's an internal visual and rhythmic logic to a film's construction. Really great editors know how to construct a film that way, and I've worked with some amazing editors like Holly Fisher, Johanna Demetrakas, and Jean Tsien. I think of it as the choreography of the edit. Documentary editors don't get half the credit they deserve for making a film sing.

I believe you did your last issue as managing editor of Bridge in late 1983, and you and Christine Choy made Who Killed Vincent Chin? in 1987. What led up to that important film? What are some of the joys and difficulties of collaboration for you?

I was sitting in our office at Third World Newsreel when I opened an envelope that had been sent by a local activist. Inside, there was a newspaper clipping and a note describing the murder of Vincent Chin. This was in the spring of 1983. In March, his killers Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz had pleaded guilty to manslaughter, so there was really no trial, there was a plea agreement. Judge Charles Kaufman sentenced them to approximately three years of probation and a \$3,000 fine. They would not spend a day in jail.

I was shocked at the light sentence for such a brutal murder. I had been hearing about incidents of anti-Asian violence and of racial violence in general. But like many cases of racial violence, Vincent Chin's killing wasn't getting the attention it should. Chris and I were filmmaking partners at the time, and we decided to make a film about the case. We teamed up with WTVS/Detroit Public TV and really lucked out that the station general manager, Robert Larson, and the head of cultural programming and special projects, Juanita Anderson, came on as executive producers. Juanita was one of the handful of Black women production executives at PBS during that time, and she really got the story and the politics of an Asian American film team taking on the investigation of the case. She was also a Detroit native and knew the city beyond the "murder capital" stereotypes that were so prevalent at the time.

Juanita and Bob insulated us from the PBS suits who didn't trust that Asian American filmmakers could be "objective," as if professionalism is biologically determined. Our main funder, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, wanted us to be overseen by a white male journalist. Juanita and Bob told us, just make your film and we'll deal with him. It was a great team. The filmmaker Nancy Tong was associate producer, and she conducted all of the Chinese-language interviews, including with Lily Chin. Nancy and I spent three months in Detroit researching the case, meeting all of the players and developing the story. When I talk about an editor choreographing a film, I think of our editor Holly Fisher. She's brilliant. And her provenance as an experimental filmmaker really made a difference. She understood how to choreograph the layers.

At the end of "Moving the Image," you suggest that it "may now be time to look back" to get new perspectives and move forward.⁷ What forms of this "looking back" might you suggest to an aspiring young filmmaker, writer, or scholar?

I was just in Detroit for the Vincent Chin 40th Remembrance & Rededication, a four-day convening that was launched by the original activists of American Citizens for Justice (ACJ), including Roland Hwang, Jim Shimoura, and Helen Zia. There was nothing nostalgic about the event, no one was fixed in the past. It was all about figuring out what that collective experience of the Vincent Chin case tells us about the fight today.

The Justice for Vincent Chin campaign was seminal: It was the first time Asian Americans were recognized as a protected class in a federal civil rights criminal prosecution. It was a recognition that Asian Americans experience systemic racism, that we are not the "model minority," and going forward, the question of race could be factored into incidents of violence toward Asian Americans. It had to be considered when a white supremacist murdered Joseph Iletto, it had to be considered when Balbir Singh Sodhi was murdered after 9/11, it had to be considered when six Asian immigrant women were gunned down in the Atlanta area in March 2021. But today those civil rights protections are being rolled back, one by one.

It took an engagement with history to change the narrative of the Asian American model minority in the first place. The ACJ activists framed Chin's murder as a part of a long history of racial violence and scapegoating. Asian Americans have always fought to define ourselves and tell our own story. That hasn't changed. Right now we're in a golden age of the Asian American story and presence, from K-12 curriculum requirements to blockbusters like *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*.

At the same time, however, there is a right-wing backlash to our story wrapped up in anti-critical race theory attacks and banned books. Even children's and YA books like Laurence Yep's *Dragonwings* have been banned by school districts. We can't assume that we'll be able to teach the Vincent Chin story or the truth of our history unless we wage that fight.

What are you working on now?

I'm working on narrative-shift initiatives with different AAPIs in media, activism, philanthropy, education, and cultural strategy. Also developing more documentaries!

NOTES

1/ See Renee Tajima-Peña, “Toward a Third Wave: Why Media Matters in Asian American Studies,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 17, no. 1 (2014): 94–99; and Renee Tajima, “Moving the Image: Asian American Independent Filmmaking 1970–1990,” in *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*, ed. Russell Leong (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center and Visual Communications, Southern California Asian American Studies Central, 1991), 10–33.

2/ Godzilla’s letter to the then director of the Whitney, dated May 13, 1991, is reproduced in *Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network, 1990–2001*, ed. Howie Chen (Brooklyn: Primary Information, 2021), 99.

3/ Shu Lea Cheang and Kimberly SaRee Tomes, “Shu Lea Cheang: Hi-Tech Aborigine,” *Wide Angle* 18, no. 1 (1996): 4.

4/ See “Mountain Movers | AASC,” eds. Russell Jeung, Karen Umemoto, Harvey Dong, et al., UCLA Asian American Studies Center, April 2019, <https://www.aasc.ucla.edu/aascpress/mm/>. The website links to the book project and is also a digital archive of videos, documents, and more. See also Amardeep Singh, “Asian American Little Magazines, 1968–1974,” Lehigh University, <https://scalar.lehigh.edu/asian-american-little-magazines/index>.

5/ “Bridge Magazine—Basement Workshop,” Museum of Chinese in America, Google Arts & Culture, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/bridge-magazine-basement-workshop/-wHJcLubNwNUPQ>.

6/ Tajima, “Moving the Image,” 13.

7/ Tajima, “Moving the Image,” 32.

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