Repairing the Web: Spiderwoman’s Children Staging the New Human Being

by

Jill L. Carter

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Centre for Study of Drama
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This dissertation documents and interrogates the process of Storyweaving, which has been authored and developed by Spiderwoman Theater, the longest running Native theatre company in North America and the longest running feminist collective in the world. Storyweaving is a distinct process that governs the dramaturgical structure and performed transmission of this company’s play texts on the contemporary stage.

However, Storyweaving predates written history. It has been (and remains) specific to tribal storytellers across this continent. The reclamation, then, of this aesthetic legacy by contemporary Native storytellers is a crucial act of recovery, which imagines and architects a functional framework for a Poetics of Decolonization that may be adopted and adapted by tribal artists from myriad nations to create works (on the page and stage) that will effect the healing, transformation and survivance of their communities.

Chapter One examines the early personal and professional histories of the Miguel sisters who are Spiderwoman’s founders. Through an exploration of their socio-economic positioning, their difficult home life, the racialized narratives by which they were defined outside the home and their artistic development within these impossible conditions, this chapter unpacks instances of personal and familial
resistance to the forces of colonization and reveals the seamless weave that so inextricably binds art and life.

Chapter Two documents the early history of Spiderwoman Theater and offers a processual analysis of its transformation from a multi-racial, feminist collective to an American Indian theatre troupe, charting the personal decolonization of the Miguel sisters and the intersection of this very personal transformation with the politically (re)vital(izing) creation of a decolonizing aesthetic. Chapter Three engages with this aesthetic to clearly demonstrate how it works within and through the living bodies who utilize it in the rehearsal studio. Next, I examine Spiderwoman’s published texts to reveal the ways in which the Storyweaving process has shaped the affects of these works on the artists and their audiences. Finally, Chapter Five names and evaluates the benefits of Spiderwoman’s legacy and estimates its future benefits as Spiderwoman’s heirs take up its process and adapt it to meet the needs of their communities.
Acknowledgments

This project began (although I mayn’t have realized it just then) in 1990 when I first saw Monique Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*. It lifted me up, set me on my feet and suggested to me a purpose—to re-member my broken shell in and through the stories that reminded me to remember who I was born to be. Since this time, I have been privileged to work with (and to witness the works of) not only Mojica and Spiderwoman Theater but also hundreds of burgeoning and established Aboriginal artists from all disciplines and from all four directions across Turtle Island. Again and again, my life has been saved; my soul, restored; my hope, renewed. This project attempts to dis-cover just how it is the artist can unfailingly effect repair, restoration and renewal in the communities s/he labors to serve. And within its heart, my gratitude resounds to honor these artists and their great, good works.

*Repairing the Web: Spiderwoman’s Children Stage the New Human Being* is a communitist project built upon the outrageous love, explosive creativity, intellectual courage and immoderate generosity of a whole host of artists, scholars and mentors without whom this dissertation would never have been written.

To the East, I honor all of the artists who have been a part of Spiderwoman Theater. In particular, I honor my teachers and research partners Elizabeth, Gloria and Muriel Miguel, and I send out my thanks to Deborah Ratelle (Executive Producer, Spiderwoman Theater); Monique Mojica; Floyd Favel; Oswaldo (Achu) DeLeón Kantule; Turtle Gals Performing Ensemble (especially, Michelle St. John and Jani Lauzon); Candace Brunette; and Dr. William A. Wortman of the Native American Women Playwrights Archive (Miami University, Ohio).

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Like a family, First Nations House takes care of its students’ financial wellbeing along with their emotional wellbeing: without its financial support (including The Gladys Watson Fellowship, the President’s Award for Outstanding Native Student of the Year, the Lillian McGregor Award of Excellence, and the First Nations House Bursary), my ability to complete this project would have been severely jeopardized.

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From where I stand, I bow my head to honor those who stand with me: Chi Miig’wetch to all of my students, colleagues and fellow artists who have crossed my path at the University of Toronto, the Centre for Indigenous Theatre, Brock University and in rehearsal halls across this continent.

And finally, from this place, I dedicate this project to my family--to those who survived that I might live. To the one who gave me life (Frannie Bell) and to the one who saved that life (Anita Benedict), I offer these pages with my love. I remember—now and forever.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction:**  
**Story-ing the Human Being**  
1

I. Spiderwoman Theater: Identity, Survivance and Communitism in Action  
II. Communitism and “Critical Generosity” as Pedagogical Models and Research Methodology  
9  
13

**Chapter One:**  
**“An Indian is an Idea a Man has of Himself”**  
19

I. A Short, Ugly Episode Around Naming & Claiming  
II. Herstory: The “Beginning of the Beginning of the Beginning”  
III. “We were Talking about that Layer of Worthlessness, Selflessness”  
IV. Muriel Miguel and the Open Theater  
V. Lisa Mayo Encounters *Respect*  
VI. Gloria Miguel Comes “Home”  
VII. “I am Woman. Hear me Roar”: Muriel Miguel Closes the Door on the Open Theater.  
19  
27  
29  
34  
42  
53  
56

**Chapter Two:**  
**An Indian is More than Just an “Idea”:  
By Their Acts, Ye Shall Know Them**  
65

I. Survivance: Act One  
II. Discomfiting Interventions: A Class (ist) Act  
III. Dramaturging the Mola: Mola Aesthetics  
IV. Layering as a Dramaturgical Tool  
V. Layering as a Performative Tool  
VI. Spiderwoman does a “Numbah” on Aristophanes: The Circle Widens  
VII. Collective Identity  
VII. The Split  
VIII. Trial Separation  
68  
73  
78  
79  
83  
88  
91  
96  
104

**Chapter Three:**  
**Towards a Poetics of Decolonization: Becoming (and then Staging) The New Human Being**  
107

I. “That Place that Indians Talk About” is No Performative Utopia  
II. The Kitchen Table: That Place that Indian *Women* Talk About  
III. Organic Dramaturgical Praxis Rooted in *Topos*: “A Different Yield  
IV. Organic Dramaturgy in Action: Workshop One  
107  
114  
121  
133
Chapter Four: The Published Texts

I. Sun Moon and Feather: First Steps Towards Personal Decolonization 165
II. “How Did We Survive?” 167
III. Bringing the Gathering House to the Stage 170
IV. Communitist Acts: Recovering the Sacred, Recovering Self 190
V. Pedagogy, Dramaturgy and Metaphysical Mimesis 193
VI. Pro-Action vs. Reaction: The Red Reading 200
VII. The Play Text and the Pictograph: Reverb-ber-ber-berations as Curing Chant for the Contemporary Stage 204
VIII. Metaphysical Mimesis: A Kuna Curing Ceremony in Babylon 212
IX. Aftermath: “I am Here Now…I Have to take the Past and Make it into a Positive Future” 217
X. When All Worlds Become One 219
XI. Preparing a Legacy 231

Chapter Five: Spiderwoman’s Issue

I. Lest We Forget… 233
II. Legacies Upon Legacies: Flying Eagle Woman and The Scrubbing Project 239
III. Memory & Survivance 246
IV. Whose Memory? Whose Legacy? 252
V. “Somebody Will Remember”: Chapan 254
VI. Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way: New Ripples on Ancient Pools 273
VII. Beginnings 284

Works Cited 288

Appendices 301

Copyright Acknowledgements 319
Appendices

Appendix One:
Anishinaabe Earth Diver Story 302

Appendix Two:
The Fittin’ Room 305

Appendix Three:
“Marvel Comics Attacks Spiderwoman” 309

Appendix Four:
Scene Analysis for Women in Violence 310

Appendix Five:
Spiderwoman Theater’s Performance History 312

Appendix Six:
Muriel Miguel in Women in Violence (production photo) 314

Appendix Seven:
Reading the Text(ile) 315

Appendix Eight:
Kuna Pictography 317

Appendix Nine:
Igwanigdibippi’s Map 318
Introduction

Story-ing the Human Being

Acoma Pueblo\(^1\) poet Simon Ortiz has stated, “We are not born as human beings; we have to be made into human beings through tradition and ceremony.”\(^2\) In traditional Indigenous societies\(^3\) the way of living well (or “minobimaatisiiwin,” in Anishinaabemowin) has always been the goal of all human action, interaction and thought. And a primary function of every ceremonial act--be that the act of storytelling, hunting, planting, gathering, dancing, singing, speaking our languages, praying, or creating--has always been to gradually transform the individual from a “random” animated carbon formation into a fully developed human being, an integral “actor” invested with meaning and purpose, who would walk softly on the earth and work collaboratively to ensure the sustenance of a healthy, productive life for every member of his/her immediate community and the greater community to which we all belong. The process of becoming, then, is inextricably bound up in and beholden to Story. After all, Story constitutes a container for our lives, or as Kiowa novelist and scholar N. Scott Momaday articulated it two generations ago: “We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best

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\(^1\) The practice of introducing the Indigenous “actors” who play their parts within this project by tribal affiliation may seem unusual (or even superfluous) to those who may not be familiar with Indigenous thought and writings. There are several reasons for so doing, however, some of which I hope will clearly manifest themselves in the course of the work itself. For now, suffice it to say, it is important to remind ourselves that while the works and words of one tribal artist or scholar may inform the lives, words and works of others, these words and works belong to the cultural canon and speak to, from and of a tribal lifeway belonging to a specific nation. And the practice of identifying specific nations with specific ideas, stories or lifeways prevents confusion and/or the dissolution of that identity into a clouded, “pan Indian” pool of standing water, so to speak.


\(^3\) By “traditional Indigenous societies,” I refer to those tribal communities, which have retained, remembered or recovered the ancestral lifeways through which tribal cosmology/worldview was articulated in every arena of life, whether prosaic, political, pedagogical, medical or ceremonial. This is not to say that the term “traditional” connotes stasis or inflexibility; indeed however one refers to this holistic concept of doing life in accordance with metaphysical understandings (whether as “tradition,” “lifeway,” “the Red road,” “the Path” or “minobimaatisiiwin”), it has always been understood by its practitioners as a process that is, as is the entire creation, in a constant state of transformative flux around certain natural laws governing life, which remain eternal and unchanging.
destiny is to imagine, at least completely, who and what and that we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined” (103).

Hence, the right to imagine or to recover traditional imaginings of self, the right to control our story and the right to mold the vessel that contains Indigenous life are central to the ongoing struggle for Indigenous sovereignty. As Cherokee scholar Jace Weaver cautions us, the struggle for control over Story is as crucial and immediate, in this century, as the struggle for lands and self-government (33). In traditional Indigenous systems, according to Tewa Pueblo scholar Gregory Cajete, Story is a primary mechanism within the larger matrix of teaching and learning (Igniting 54). The other mechanisms around which this matrix is composed include experiential learning, ceremony (initiation), dreaming, apprenticeship and creative synthesis (artistic expression) (Cajete, Igniting 55). But it is upon Story that these are carried and through Story that they are articulated. Story, then, is a container for knowledge, a vehicle of its transmission, and indeed a site of its production. And the goal of education in traditional Indigenous societies--the goal of the acquisition, preservation, and transmission of knowledge for traditional peoples--has historically been bound up in a search for individual selfhood as an integral component of a complex social mechanism, which is itself an integral component of the larger matrix of Creation. As Cajete articulates it, it is a search for life “through understanding the creative process of living, sensitivity to and awareness of the natural world, knowledge of one’s role and responsibility in the social order and receptivity to the spiritual essence of the world” (Igniting 54).

It follows, then, that if Story contains and communicates knowledge, and if the highest form of knowledge is “self-knowledge” and if Story is also a site of knowledge production, then it is within and by means of Story that identity may be re-constituted and/or refashioned: within Story, individuals, communities, and nations could conceivably imagine (or re-imagine) themselves into being. And Story, at the end of the day, is the archive of a life well lived or, conversely, of a misspent existence. The life we “write” for ourselves will become the Story that will be written about us and told by the generations that
follow us. The process of creating Story, then, is not simply the process of “telling” life; it is the process of *doing* it.

Doing, not being, is the cornerstone of human essence. And that essence can only be discovered and fully realized within the context of active relationship to our communities. Such relationships, however, risk undergoing subtle but dangerous transformations if we unwittingly integrate the Western concept of mimesis (in its oral or written manifestations) into our own consciousness as we react to non-Native analyses and disseminations of traditional stories. For the Western “readers” (informed as they are by Aristotle’s reading of the ceremonial performatives of his Attic ancestors), mimesis constitutes an *imitation* of an action either fictive or finished. But for the original peoples of Turtle Island, oral transmission is a key component in the greater ceremonial matrix (Allen 100); engagement in performative or mimetic acts for ceremonial purposes *recreates* action, brings it into the here and now, and effectively transforms the “players” and the world they inhabit in that moment of their re-creation: time after time, within each new telling, Nanabozho breathes on a clot of damp earth, and in each new exhalation, the lands and waters that sustain us are made anew.

Many of the foundational stories that belong to tribal oral traditions are narrated in the third person. And certainly, this is true, as David Treuer observes, of the cycle of stories, which chronicle the life and doings of the Anishinaabe Trickster, Nanabozho/Wenabozho/Nanabush (54). So, it is very likely that this is how we will experience these stories if our only point of contact with them is on the page or in the lecture hall. But we must remember that the oral tradition in which these stories were meant to unfold does not simply effect the transmission of words and ideas, which hover in the space between speaker and listener existing independently of either. Rather, the storyteller here *moves* fluidly through the encounter, “shape-shifting” moment by moment, as it were, to become the vessel through which the original actors live again to recreate historical events. In the moment of its telling, this third person narrative simultaneously communicates and comments upon historical actors and their doings even as the storyteller enters the story to become protagonist, antagonist, and supernumerary acting in the here and
now. Cree scholar Geraldine Manossa’s account of her own engagement in a contemporary oratorical teach-in affectively communicates how history and historical figures are brought to life within the corpus of the storyteller. Here, Cree Elder Eddie Bellrose communicates the Earth Diver story (see Appendix One), which is a foundational origin story of both the Anishinaabeg and Haudenosaunee peoples, to a group of young Cree learners, including Manossa herself:

Eddie Shakes his head and butts out his cigarette. “It doesn’t look too good for them. They have no food and the animals are getting tired.” Eddie sighs. “So do you know what he does? He calls Beaver over because Wasakaychak knows he is a good swimmer.”

Eddie bolts upright and takes in a deep breath. He unbuttons the cuffs on his shirt and quickly rolls up his sleeves. Still holding his breath, Eddie sticks out his chest. I see the powerful and confident Wasakaychak emerge from Eddie’s body. (126)

As the story proceeds, the teller (Bellrose) alternately embodies Weesageechak, Beaver, and even the watery depths through which a succession of creatures must traverse to begin the process of re-genesis. Moreover, in keeping with the communal nature of traditional oratory, the listeners in the room are not allowed to remain passive receptors, standing apart to examine a shadowy Other in juxtaposition with the self. Rather, the lesson becomes an opportunity to experience this historical Other, and so learn through doing. The liminal threshold between past and present, self and Other, teacher and student, storyteller and auditor is dissolved as they are pulled into the story and encouraged to lend their vocal and kinetic instruments to the recreation of historical events and the re-genesis of the historical “actors” who moved and transformed the world: when Beaver/Bellrose returns without the dirt, Wasakaychak/Bellrose looks to the other creatures [his auditors] for support.

Carefully, his eyes scan the room, until he finds another capable assistant. “You,” Eddie’s voice calls. His eyes focus intently on Harley. “It’s up to you, my brother, Otter. You must dive deep into the water until you reach the earth. We need just a small speck of dirt, even the tiniest particle will do. It’s up to you, my brother.” Harley sits up, honoured that Wasakaychak calls on him to help in the recovery of the earth [...] We all wait. The room is quiet. Harley looks towards us with admiration, as if we are the other animals on the raft. He doesn’t speak, but nods his head self-importantly, accepting Eddie’s request. (Manossa 127)
The stories that chronicle the process of becoming fully human in an Anishinaabe sense—that is, the process that transforms an isolate mass of carbon molecules, nerve endings, and warring impulses into a community member working creatively with the collective for the general good—are key pedagogical tools in which personal investment and active engagement, on the part of the learners, are required if they are to remain efficacious catalysts of transformation, healing and development for tribal individuals. Many of these stories have been repeatedly documented by various researchers and informants in various travel accounts, anthropological studies, ethnology studies and ethno-dramaturgical studies. Quite often, though, these textual archives prove to be quite problematic for various reasons. Some of these accounts deliberately misconstrue meaning in order to sensationalize the events they report; others carry and transmit the assumption that they are preserving quaint remnants of a dying, primitive culture and that the information they carry is no longer relevant or applicable to the living tribal peoples who remain. Others lose key concepts in translation or by virtue of the researchers’ failure to recognize and acknowledge that they have captured only fragments of a lifeway and knowledge system on the page, not the entirety of these things. Still others have shaped and molded the textual archives to accommodate the researchers’ preconceived ideas around the significance, meaning, purpose and efficacy of the fragments of story and ceremony they document. To an overwhelming degree, these preconceived ideas are rooted in cosmologies and philosophical belief systems, which are in outright opposition to those they purport to disseminate. It is not my intention, however, to summarily dismiss these works outright. They also hold some value: imperfect as they may be, such textual representations sometimes inspire young Native students—particularly those who have been separated from their communities of origin—with the motivation to more profoundly explore their own history, language and culture.

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4 For example, Paul Radin’s *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* has been a seminal text used in comparative literature and anthropology classes since its publication in 1956. More timely examples include: *Living Sideways: Tricksters in American Indian Oral Traditions* by Franchot Ballinger; *Ojibwa Narratives* collected by Homer Kidder and *The Dog’s Children* collected by Leonard Bloomfield and John D. Nichols.
Always, however, we must remind ourselves (and make our students understand) that the characters on the page must not be read as “the thing itself.” To do so robs these stories of their efficacy by stripping our culture-heroes of their color and corporeality, thereby reducing them to bloodless specters forever dancing in a colorless, one-dimensional universe. To ensure that the timeless beings on whom the self-actualization of the tribal individual and body politic rests are not diminished to what Anishinaabe novelist and scholar Gerald Vizenor has termed “simulation[s] of survivance” (78),\(^5\) we

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\(^5\) Gerald Vizenor, who has coined this term, explains that survivance denotes “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. [As such,] Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (vii). That is to say, such stories contain the lives and recount the doings of living human beings who are profoundly aware of and connected to their histories without being somehow ‘frozen in time.’ Histories, languages and lifeways evolve and develop with each successive generation of living cultures, and so it is with the Indigenous peoples who have survived the onslaught of colonization and conquest.

I liken Vizenor's “simulation of survivance” to Cree playwright/director Floyd Favel’s concept of the “artificial tree” on stage (Favel Starr 71). That is to say, with every simulation of survivance, we see a carefully arranged “picture” of nobility, stoicism, courage, spiritual power, “savagery” or resistance. Such “pictures” have been so arranged, according to Gerald Vizenor, because “America embraces romantically not the absence of real people, but the simulated spiritual presence of the Indian in a kind of New Age movement” (qtd. in Isernhagen 83). In itself, this might seem harmless enough, but for the fact that such simulations on the page, on the stage, in cyberspace or echoing for posterity in a digital universe constitute the erasure of actual life and organic growth and infuse the national imagination with a romantic longing for what no longer exists (if it ever did) and hence (as a consequence of thwarted expectation) with an aversion to the contemporary survivors of the colonial project who do not reflect the romantic ‘purity’ of their shadowy representatives.

Vizenor’s “simulation of survivance” denotes the ‘literary’ reduction and erasure of living humans, whereas Favel’s “artificial tree” denotes the reduction and erasure of the spiritual essence of those humans. As a theatre practitioner, Favel regards contemporary theatre as “the younger brother of tradition” (Favel, 30). That is to say, he is laboring to develop a methodology (that works at both the dramaturgical and performative levels), which draws specifically from traditional understandings and ceremonial praxis.

But the staging of “realistic” fragments of actual ceremonial performatives (oratory, kinetic performance or opsis) on the public stage is an empty exercise, lacking an essential centre—a spiritual core. It is for Favel an “artificial tree.” As he explains:

> I had a dream where I and a group of people were working in a studio; our director told us that our work had no centre, and so we must find a centre. The director went away so we could have time to complete our task. The actors then placed an artificial tree in the middle of the stage as we understood that in many Native ceremonies, there is often a central votive image, like a fire or a tree. The director came back to see the results of our work. Horrified, he said, “No, the centre should be invisible.” From this dream I think that, when we put aspects of our rituals on stage we are putting up artificial trees. The tree has no roots, and no animating spirit. (Favel Starr 71)

Favel rejects material mimesis, here, in favor of metaphysical mimesis. He seeks to draw upon that “animating spirit,” to infuse his theatrical works with that spirit, to place that invisible spirit centre-stage, to communicate that
spirit to his audiences and to thereby nourish them from “the source of the river of our cultures, country and ourselves” (Favel Starr 72).

The final chapter of this project will revisit Floyd Favel and his investigations into Native Performance Culture, which began in 1991 and in which he has developed longstanding partnerships with such artists as Muriel Miguel and her niece Monique Mojica. However for the moment, it may prove instructive to illustrate just exactly what an “artificial tree” or a “simulation of survivance” might look like and how it might affect audiences.

In August 2007, students of my Indigenous Theatre in North America course at the University of Toronto were invited to present something to the class that fulfilled the mandate (for the presenter) of “Indigenous drama”—that is, an expression of each student’s personal landscape. Having studied various instances of contemporary Native theatre as vehicles of healing, facilitators of pedagogy, community-unifiers, transmitters of oral history and language or avenues of re-writing and re-righting distorted histories and re-appropriating sites of misappropriation, these students were invited to explore like possibilities in pieces of their own making, arising out of their own personal histories, languages and cultures, for specific audiences of their own imagining (mixed audiences, children, senior citizens or individuals from particular communities), which their “vehicles” would be designed to affect in specific ways.

One student chose to create a “restorative justice circle,” in which she revealed herself to be a victim of domestic, childhood sexual abuse. In the past, many deeply personal revelations have emerged from within such presentations within the context of profound trust, a strong superobjective and the application of artistic process to transform personal struggle into hope, healing, inspiration, valuable life lessons or communal-unifiers. However, this presentation was different from these in that it explicitly imitated a “justice circle” in which the audience was compelled to participate. This student (a young non-Native woman) explained that she had heard about such justice circles from her therapist (with whom she was working through her abuse). Her therapist had explained that victim, perpetrator, those immediately affected and those less immediately affected by a particular breach would form a circle “so healing could occur within the entire community.”

Although I was very sensible of the profound trust and courage this student was demonstrating by reaching out and ‘showing her throat,’ as it were, to her classmates and although I felt deep sympathy for her and profound outrage on her behalf, I was discomfited by the exercise. “Why?” I wondered. “Am I so horrified by the notion of theatre as a vehicle for the artists’ healing as well as audience-healing? Am I the one to judge when and where she should make her disclosures, and to whom? Why do I (a woman who has been abused herself) feel so repelled, so violated? Is her disclosure somehow violating me? Is she endangering her classmates?”

When the exercise was over, many of her classmates hugged her and thanked her for her trust. Others, however, did not. Interestingly, the “huggers” were largely male, while those who sought to politely avoid her were female. I was mystified. Upon reading the final journals for this class and reading the students’ responses to the presentations of others, I was interested to come upon entries (written by females who also revealed themselves to be victims of domestic childhood sexual abuse) that expressed the exact ambivalences I had felt and that expressed the same guilt I had felt for those ambivalences. “What kind of person am I?” they asked. I began to wonder anew. What kind of people were they? What kind of person was I? What was wrong or broken or lacking within us that we could not reach out and embrace this young woman, her exercise and the trust she had demonstrated?

The problem, I was finally willing to acknowledge, lay not with them or me; it lay within her “justice circle” itself. The shape and function of a particular communal rite of restoration had been staged. And we were, by this final class, a community of sorts. But this could never be a justice circle. The perpetrator was absent; the family, common to both victim and perpetrator, was absent; others who were linked to this family or who had been affected by this terrible violation were absent; the Elders who would have conducted such a circle (at the time and in the manner they deemed most appropriate) were absent. And the community of supportive individuals who formed this circle had been co-opted into a collective, complicit fabrication of an “artificial tree” from which not healing, nor justice,
would do well to foster and cultivate an organic understanding of the textual archive as a notation of kinetic and oral movement—a series of blocking notes, as it were—that exist not merely to be read or said but to be done that we might become the “thing itself” and not the stuff of alien imagination.

For colonized peoples around the world, this process of healthy self-actualization has been interrupted. Forced relocations, confinement to reservations, re-education in the residential schools and in the churches, and restrictive legislative policies have prohibited the peoples’ speaking and subverted our patent and metaphysical doings. Ironically, this series of colonial interventions designed to re-order the world by re-forming its myriad peoples into second-rate shadows of the colonizing superman has effected little more than New World disorder. We speak his language, adopt his diet and live in accordance with his laws, but the transformation is incomplete: as Homi Bhabha has observed, we are little more than “the effect[s] of a flawed mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English” (125).

Generations of Native children were forcibly taught the English language not that they might communicate as equals with the settlers but that they might understand the orders and the dictates of those whom they were being trained to serve. Native girls were rigorously trained in English domestic arts (cooking, serving, polishing, cleaning, etc.) not to set up their own households in homes of their own but to serve in the households of settler women. Generations of Native people graduated from residential schools as liminal people speaking, dressing and trained to “do life”6 in accordance with settler tastes and customs; like the South Asian colonial subjects, they had become a “class of interpreters between [the

nor restoration were to be had. This student’s choice to disclose her terrible secret was not the violation. The violation lay in her choice of “container”—in her attempt to literally recreate a frame of which she had no personal knowledge, to which she had no personal connection and in which she had no personal experience. More troubling, this “frame” has been carefully constructed by peoples who are not her own and finds its foundation upon a worldview of which she has only rudimentary knowledge. In attempting to produce a materially mimetic experience (based upon an oral simulation of the “Native” model of restorative justice), this student produced a stunted shadow of a shadow and effectively eradicated the affective essence around which the original event has been constructed.  

6 I borrow this expression from Althea Prince (260) whose commitment to participatory action and interaction as a reader, witness, writer and speaker infuses her work and provides a vital (and commonsensical) model for all scholars who labor to contribute to the project of decolonization (see Prince 259-268).
English] and the millions whom [the English] govern[ed]—a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect”(Macaulay, qtd. in Bhabha 124). And just as it was for the South Asian colonial subject, it must have oft-times felt to those ancestors that “[they] pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing [themselves] for life, [those] mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new” (Naipaul 416). Mortal ‘shades’ cut off from their languages, communities, histories, knowledge systems and lifeways—from the very foundations of their humanness and from the very processes of self-actualizing and locating their unique identities—and struggling against the hegemonic denial of their humanity, they nonetheless struggled to retain and transmit their organic understanding of that humanity and fragments of those foundations from which successive generations might begin to build themselves anew.

In the struggle to decolonize ourselves, every strategy--be it the reclamation and transmission of Indigenous languages, the assertion of intellectual property rights, the assertion of land claims and treaty rights, the generation and control of artistic representations of our peoples, the recovery of spiritual understanding and ceremonial praxis, or the recovery and reinstitution of traditional social, jurisprudential, and political infrastructures--ultimately requires us to negotiate our way through that interrupted process of becoming. At every level, the project of decolonization is a creative project dedicated to transforming the chaos that defines our existence as colonized peoples into spaces wherein ordered existence is possible. And this is certainly a challenge that has become an integral part of the creative process for Native writers and artists seeking to serve their communities in a meaningful way through their works.

Spiderwoman Theater: Identity, Survivance and Communitism in Action
Spiderwoman Theatre began in 1976 and has gone on to become the longest running Native theatre company in North America and the longest running feminist troupe in the world. The story of Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel and Muriel Miguel (the three Kuna-Rappahannock sisters who founded the company) is in itself an epic saga of becoming. And the formation of Spiderwoman Theater constitutes an historic act of “survivance.” Indeed, it may be read as an organic and necessary phase in the trio’s process of becoming-first separately as women, as artists, as wives and mothers, as political entities, as feminists, and finally communally as sisters, Indian women, urban matriarchs, community builders, and Kuna7 artists in America. The company has been not only a testament to survivance but also the vehicle of that survivance for its founders and the communities to which they have brought their works. And certainly, this company’s service to myriad Native (and non-Native feminist) communities lies not only within the performances, which have re-membered, united, affected and empowered spectators but also within the Miguel sisters’ projects of activism, outreach, community-building, cultural transmission and artistic training that have re-membered, united, affected and galvanized generations of Native creative efficacy, presence and, indeed, survivance.

Jace Weaver has identified “a quest for identity” as a common preoccupation that manifests itself in contemporary Native writing (26-27). As a key factor of survivance, then, the location of identity requires action that remembers and affirms who we are and “that we are” and that simultaneously frees us from the lie of who we are not—the lie that divides, destabilizes and dehabilitates us. And while this “quest for identity,” this act of survivance, may (and will throughout this work) be located in the foundational questions that have engendered each of Spiderwoman’s dramatic works, in the aesthetic models that characterize these works and in the dramaturgical-and-performative process that underpins

7 Although the Miguel sisters are also Rappahannock on their mother’s side, they ultimately recovered and asserted their Kuna heritage throughout their works. Their mother’s strong Christianity (and the conflicts it created), her emotional withdrawal from her daughters and their frequent exposure to their father’s culture and his uninhibited expression thereof will be discussed at length in the following chapter. Taken together, all of these factors may help to explain why it is that Spiderwoman’s works ultimately anchor themselves and their creatrices to their Kuna inheritance.
them, an examination of the founding of the company itself provides a map to those who come after and who are seeking their rightful place in the Creation. In itself, this history constitutes a specifically Indigenous “morality play” around the true nature of identity in a Native context; it speaks to our survivance even as it differentiates the Indigenous quest for self-knowledge from “heroic” individualism, romantic isolation, and/or wrong-headed struggles for dominance that divide and destroy.

The identity that contemporary Native peoples seek to recuperate is an identity that traditionally has had to be located within the context of community: an individual located his/her meaning (within the universe) by discovering the “self in society” as opposed to the “self and society” (Weaver 39). Hence, in the struggle to create and maintain a literature of survivance, which properly locates and represents Native identity, the artist does not undertake a solitary quest. This quest is undertaken as a “communitist” project, if it is to effect survivance for the individual artists and for those to, of and for whom they speak.

Literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to the Native community, including the wider community [… To] promote communitist values means to participate in the healing of the grief and the sense of exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them. (Weaver 43)

Once upon a time, three little brown girls dreamed of escape from the racism that surrounded them in their Brooklyn neighborhood, from poverty that confined and defined them, and from domestic violence that threatened their peace:

**Gloria:** When I grow up I’m going to marry a man from far away across the sea AND he’s going to take me away from all this and I’ll never come back again.

**Lisa:** I’m going to marry a rich man and he’s going to give me things like a fur coat and a refrigerator full of food.

**Muriel:** I’m going to get me an apartment. I’m going to get me an apartment (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 308)

Each of these sisters had found an escape of sorts in the exercise of her creative talents. And as each matured, she separated herself from her sisters and her family home and sought her place in an artistic
community wherein she might develop and utilize her voice—wherein she might come to self-knowledge and reveal and assert her presence. Ultimately, while each sister began by seeking her identity as an artist apart from the others, it was only when she was able to reunite with her sisters that she was able finally to come into her self.

Storytelling is the way you feel and know where you are within your family, your clan, your tribal affiliations, and from there into the history of how you fit into the world. Storytelling starts at the kitchen table, on your parent’s lap, on your aunt’s and uncle’s laps. Storytelling begins there, about who you are… Then it continues from there about who you are in the family; of where you are as a tribal member, as part of that particular nation; then where that nation is in the community; and where that community belongs in the world. There’s [sic] always circles upon circles upon circles. And that’s how Spiderwoman approaches theater, through circles upon circles upon circles. (M. Miguel, qtd. in Haugo, “Weaving” 225)

In the development of a dramaturgical process through which they were able to question/confront/challenge each other, to answer each other with stories (i.e. often opposing versions/visions of a single event) and to weave those stories into a unified design, they were at last able to locate themselves in relationship (as sisters; daughters; granddaughters; Kuna women; wives; mothers; lovers; aunties; grandmothers; healers; teachers; activists; survivors of the American Indian Diaspora; and preservers and transmitters of oral histories extending beyond self, family, community and nation). In reuniting to revisit, re-member, and reconfigure the Story that contained their lives, the Miguel sisters found themselves by finding their rightful place within an orbiculate superstructure through which we are all connected within the larger community of all that has been created. And this, after all, is only one manifestation in a contemporary, urban context of an ancient process of becoming.

The story of Spiderwoman Theater is a story of becoming. It is a story that is powered by the generations that precede its principal actors and that provides a power source for the generations that follow them. This project, which attempts to disseminate their story, also attempts to disseminate their process—a process, which imagines into being, a process through which the creatrices and those for whom they create become. The Story I hope to transcribe here is not simply the story of “a life in art”; it is the
story of an *art well lived*. This is a story of three women who severally sought to transcend personal circumstance, family history, and the external limitations imposed upon them, as Indians and as women. This is a story of three women who severally sought to transcend the denial of Indigenous humanity and suppression of Indigenous and female voices by the colonial and patriarchal forces that have governed this continent for more than two centuries by gaining entrance into its paradoxically exclusive margins—the artists’ training grounds—and forcefully asserting their individual lives in art. As each sought to discover, affirm, and assert her own humanity, she found her way back to her sisters, her family, her clan, her community, her nation. She came to know and to occupy her rightful place within the larger story. This is a story of three women who sought to find their unique and separate lives in art, and who instead found their art in community. This is the story of three American Indian woman who imagined themselves as artists and of three artists who, in the exercise of their life’s work, found a way to imagine themselves as Indians—more accurately, as Kuna women—and to show other First Peoples who have been disaffected by separation, loss, self-hatred, and forgetfulness how we may do the same.

**Communitism and “Critical Generosity” as Pedagogical Models and Research Methodology**

As a young urban woman of mixed ancestry (Anishinaabe-Ashkenazi), I began to find myself in the stories that the Miguel sisters publicly shared, in their powerful performances and in the Storyweaving workshops facilitated by Muriel Miguel. Their works gathered me into a community of active witnesses: their stories intersected with ours; ours, with each other’s, and the threads that bound individual to community manifested themselves within the theatrical event. As I began to perceive the intersections,

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8 Throughout this work, I will refer to the three founding members of Spiderwoman Theater and to their family members as they have chosen to refer to themselves. When speaking of themselves or of other Aboriginal people in terms of general ethnicity, they use the term “Indian” or “American Indian.” They also use the term, “Native”—particularly when they are speaking with interviewers above the Forty-Ninth Parallel. Although it is crucial that this work addresses and refers to their specific Kuna and Rappahannock nations, it is also crucial to note that their art and activism speak to and work for a “pan-Indigenous” community. Since its inception, Spiderwoman Theater has been called to perform for, empower and partner with Indigenous peoples from Alaska to New Zealand and everywhere in between.
those commonalities of experience that connected each Aboriginal individual in the theatre on a given night to others--present or absent, vocal or silent, living, dead, or yet-to-be--I began to discover and to accept my responsibility to the stories and to all of the people who live within them. With such a sense of connection and responsibility came the realization of my own “self in community.”

As an actor, I sought to learn from them that I might share with others what they have given me. As a scholar, within this work, I seek not only to discuss the works and life’s work of Spiderwoman Theater as “communitist projects” but also to create a communitist project of my own. I hope that this endeavor will work to tighten the weave in the fabric of the Native theatre community insofar as it encourages our artists to document aesthetic process and to come together to discuss, exchange and develop methodologies based on specific objectives pertaining to specific communities for and with which artists wish to create. As well, it is crucial that my own process (research) and performance (archived/published document) are undertaken and realized within a communitist model. I regard the Miguel sisters and their daughters, Monique Mojica and Murielle Borst, as research partners as opposed to research “subjects,” and I undertake this quest to comprehend, analyze and record a body of Aboriginal knowledge as an Aboriginal woman in partnership with other Aboriginal women who have held, developed, and shared this knowledge over several generations.

As Mohawk scholar Marlene Brant Castellano reminds us, “The ultimate test of the validity of knowledge is whether it enhances the capacity of the people to live well” (33). The knowledge these artists hold has already been tested on the stage, on the page, in workshops, studios, and sharing circles. They have used their knowledge to enhance the lives of Aboriginal people globally, and this will be discussed and demonstrated at length throughout this work. The questions remain: how can I ensure that my own work “passes the validity test?” What must I do as student and “researcher” to not only honor but also to reciprocate the myriad gifts these Elders, teachers and artists have given so freely? “Partnership,” after all, necessitates reciprocity.
The late Anishinaabe Elder Art Solomon has often utilized the image of fire as a metaphor for Minobimaatisiiwin (Indigenous Knowledge). As we seek to discover identity—meaning and purpose—we must sift through the embers of a fire that has been all but smothered by the forces of colonization (see Castellano 25). But sifting through embers is perform slow, painstaking work. Stir too vigorously and a conflagration may spring to life. Sift with too heavy a hand, and the fire might be forever extinguished. Mix it up too rapidly and crucial sparks may be overlooked or even lost.

In November 2006, I was driving Muriel Miguel back to her residence from one of a series of workshops she was facilitating at the University of Toronto’s Graduate Centre for Study of Drama. During the drive, I asked her to comment upon something I had read about her former colleagues in Split Britches. The conversation began to turn towards academic scholarship in theatre in general. Laughing heartily, she offered a rueful observation around her encounters with articles, which purported to analyze and clarify productions of artists whom she admired (i.e. Split Britches): so often, she noted, the scholars’ theory bore little relation to the artists’ work as it was realized on stage. She could not recognize the production(s) she had seen in the theoretical work that she was reading. Rather than outrage, what Muriel Miguel expressed that evening was sympathy, sympathy for the artists whose work, she felt, the “experts” had so grossly misrepresented. It is important to note here that the artists and theorists Miguel spoke of that evening were all White feminists. All shared (at least, some) commonalities of gender, life-experience, cultural cosmology, political philosophy, and commitment to political activism. The misrepresentation of Native experience by non-Native “experts” has historically provided grounds for legislative strategies designed to contain, assimilate, and oppress Indigenous peoples and to suppress our languages, spiritual praxis and traditional societal, pedagogical and governmental structures. But it would be foolhardy to assume that the danger of misrepresentation would “naturally” be eradicated with the replacement of the non-Native scholarly “expert” with the Native “expert.”

I propose to imitate Hawaiian scholar Leilani Holmes’s reconfiguration of the research paradigm and to position myself as the research “subject” in this project. As I assume this position the requisite
analysis and interrogation, so integral to this field of endeavor, will turn their lenses not only upon the knowledge communicated to me by my research partners but also upon myself as I am forced into a transparent reckoning with my own understandings of and responses to the works I have encountered and the experiences I have been granted. This research/learning paradigm, then, will contribute much to my own location of “identity” as it will force my discovery and public revelation of the “non-neutral and limited nature of my own language and perspectives” (Holmes 39). Furthermore, repositioning the researcher as “subject” in the research project will, I believe, go far to realize a manifestation of the “critical generosity” called for by David Román. It will, I hope, transform the isolate scholarly quest to acquire, document, analyze and quantify knowledge-systems into a “cooperative endeavor and collaborative engagement with a larger social mission” (Román xxvii). And such, we might surmise, is what traditional models of Indigenous pedagogy have always been structured to be.

As African-Canadian scholar Njoki Nathani Wane reminds us through the revelation of her own experiences as a researcher in Kenya, active engagement within the community from which one seeks to learn is a crucial requisite of any research undertaken in an Indigenous community (56). Indeed, apprenticeship, as a processual pedagogical element in traditional Indigenous societies, may actually afford for the contemporary researcher a way into critical generosity. The apprentice certainly begins her “tour of duty” with her own assumptions, her own questions and her own agenda. But she very quickly learns humility: her “informants” direct her investigations and unfailingly lead her down paths she may never have discovered for herself. They answer the questions they deem important, often revealing the emptiness of her own pre-prepared questions, and they answer those questions when they deem it appropriate—when they are satisfied that the learner is ready for the lesson. They follow a “lesson plan” of their own making, regardless of the learner’s preconceived agenda or timeline. As Leilani Holmes has observed, “Knowledge is given through the context of relationships and for the purpose of furthering relationships” (41). And all relationships are ultimately orchestrated within and negotiated through action.
So, while the more formal “interview” certainly plays a part in this research process, its importance to the overall project has been eclipsed (even as it has been informed) by the more seemingly prosaic activities and lessons related to apprenticeship. Some of these activities have included:

(i) co-writing narratives in grant applications for Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble and Monique Mojica;
(ii) organizing and negotiating short-term residencies or distinguished-artist-lectures by Muriel Miguel, Gloria Miguel, Monique Mojica, Jani Lauzon, and Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble at the University of Toronto;
(iii) performing dramaturgical/"outside eye" functions in studio during the creation of new works, and assisting Mojica and Muriel Miguel in studio when they are performing that function for others;
(iv) designing (or reconfiguring existing) syllabi to move from “teaching” the works of Mojica or Spiderwoman to co-teaching those works with the artists themselves;
(v) continuing studies under Mojica and Miguel as a student actor in their workshops;
(vi) “jobbing in,” when required to perform as an understudy in rehearsals, workshops or public performances;
(vii) participating in the development of new work; and
(viii) fulfilling more prosaic, day-to-day tasks that might be required to facilitate the comfort of the Miguel sisters—particularly when they are in Toronto.

Action and relationship are certainly required to generate critical generosity; however, the catalyst that will ensure its realization is intellectual humility: real learning--true creative growth--cannot happen without it. Okanogan writer Jeannette Armstrong is a contemporary artist who teaches other artists and who sifts through the embers of her own language and traditions to create a specifically Indigenous pedagogical model within which to train and nurture her students. She has named the creative writing school she founded for this catalyst --*Enow'kin*: “in action, [enow’kin] means, ‘I challenge you to give me the opposite perspective to mine.’ In that way, I will understand how I need to challenge my thinking to accommodate your concerns and problems” (Armstrong 283). Rather than simply recording research and a singular analysis of my “findings,” I intend to employ Armstrong’s “Enow’kin Principle” by approaching this project as a dialogue between artists-mentors and apprentice. Where disagreements occur (and they may); where my interpretations do not coincide with the artists’ original intent, both sides of the discussion will be included, so as not to privilege the “student’s” interpretation over that of her Elders and teachers. A “Story” about storytelling, about the stories that make and unmake us, and about
the traditional, contemporary, and specifically Indigenous methodologies around making those stories must perforce be as dialogic, collaborative and communitist as the oral traditions from which contemporary Native peoples draw inspiration, identity, and survivance.

This project is not “my” story; nor is this solely the story of the Miguel sisters and their family. This story begins at a kitchen table in a “house of mirrors” in Red Hook, Brooklyn. But like a stone tossed into quiet waters, it reverberates across and within the stories of so many others, catching them up in endlessly extending ripples, and weaving them together in a living biota…

So, while the Story of Spiderwoman Theater begins at the kitchen table in a modest house in Brooklyn; while it begins in the stories told around that table, this story is best told, starting in the middle--with the “heroic quest” of the isolated individual to be seen, heard, felt and acknowledged as a living member of the Creation who is (as are all living creatures) the possessor of infinite meaning, purpose and value. And so, I shall begin there.
Chapter One

“An Indian is an Idea a Man has of Himself”

We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least completely, who and what and that we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined. (Momaday 103)

A Short, Ugly Episode Around Naming & Claiming

Muriel Miguel likes to tell this story when she is speaking about the creation of Spiderwoman’s *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* (1989). And while Chapter Four will explore this important production at length, it may prove instructive to discuss one of the stories behind its creation immediately. It is a familiar story in Indian Country, and in its various incarnations (constructed upon myriad incidents), it never fails to elicit eruptions of outraged laughter at the sheer audacity of its protagonists who seem to be insensible to the unconscionable absurdity of their violations, which they continue “in all good conscience” to perpetrate on Native individuals and Native communities across North America.

Rosemary Richmond and Muriel Miguel have enjoyed a lifelong friendship that has endured over six decades, since they were both twelve-years-old (Interview, 2007). And it is from Richmond, who was, until recently, the Director of the American Indian Community House (AICH) in New York City, that Miguel received this story. Like many Directors of Native agencies in urban areas, Richmond supports American Indian artists and artisans, who live in the city (or who may be passing through), by purchasing some of their works for the Community House. One day, a European man who had attended many community events at AICH paid her a personal visit; during this visit, he laid some exemplary beadwork before her. She complimented the pieces, and asked him who had executed the beadwork. “I did,” he answered. Again, she complimented the work and remarked upon his skill. But he had not come to her for compliments; he wanted her to buy his work and display it at AICH. When she declined, he became agitated and shouted at her, telling her that his work was far superior to any of the works by American
Indian artists currently on display at AICH. And for this reason alone, she should buy it (M. Miguel, Personal Communication). Cue eruptions of outraged laughter…

The point of this story is not to condemn this artist for his imitation of a form that belongs to a culture to which he is not indigenous; nor is it so terribly disturbing that he would attempt to sell the product of his considerable study and labor. What is disturbing, however, is the unconscionable arrogance of an individual who has the audacity to co-opt the voice of another, to imitate that voice and then to declare his imitation to be superior to the original. After centuries of concentrated--albeit unsuccessful--effort to assimilate and/or to eradicate the Indigenous voice on this continent, contemporary members of the colonizing body now claim ownership of that voice and presume to “teach” us how to manifest it in the manner that they deem most appropriate and most authentic.

Paradoxically, however, such incidents, even as they assault and work to degrade the tribal voice and erode Native identity, can work as crucibles in which the objects of their violation put their identity “to the test” by confronting and questioning not only those who co-opt Native voice and try to exercise control over Native agency but also themselves, their understanding of and their relationship to these. Such “trials by fire,” contrary to the spirit and intent upon which they were engendered, can actually work (or force us to work) to embrace and strengthen that identity.

In 1980 Spiderwoman Theater produced Oh, What a Life for Theater for the New City’s WOW Festival and The Fittin’ Room for the Theater Project in New York City. Set in a six-cubicle representation of an in-store dressing-room with racks of garish, outlandish clothing, which served as a metaphor for the containment and pigeonholing of women, The Fittin’ Room9 presented a series of songs and sketches through which its performers resisted and subverted the stereotypes and labels with which they had been defined, upending the popular “truism” that “one size fits all.” Choosing to forgo the

9 No complete textual artifact of this script exists. The Native American Women Playwrights’ Archive (NAWPA) houses hand-written fragments (donated by various performers) of The Fittin’ Room. Please see Appendix Two for a running outline of the show (from Pam Verge’s notes).
presentation of fictional characters, each performer presented herself as her self, highlighting myriad contradictions, each containing a portion of her truth as opposed to defining moments purporting to represent absolute truths about her life and essence.

The flaws they sought to reveal were flaws of perception; and these, they built into the dialectical dramaturgical structure, which provided a deceptively loose framework that easily accommodated blatant contradictions in tone, style, and content and which alternatively turned its focus from the doings on stage to the audience itself: indeed, as the show began, the “spotlight” was turned upon the audience as its members were rigorously coached and rehearsed to perform their own identities:

10 Hello everybody. How is everybody tonight? You look wonderful. It’s wonderful to be here in ______. Before we begin there are a few things I want to go over with you. Now when I go like this (gesture) I want everybody to clap. When I go like this (gesture) it means stop. When I go like this (gesture) I want you to cheer. When I go like this (gesture) laugh. (Practice.) Now, what’s green on the inside, white on the outside and hops? A frog Sandwich (laugh) (clap) (cheer) (stop)

Anybody here from _____?
Anybody here from out of town?
Where you from?
Anybody else?
Are there any feminists in the audience?
Any gays? (cheers)
Any straights? (cheers)
Anybody out their (sic) own a cat? (cheers)

Now, without further ado – Here’s Spider

(Spiderwoman Papers, NAWPA, emphasis added)

10 This text is titled “Pam’s Intro.” It was written and performed for The Fittin’ Room by Pamela Verge who joined Spiderwoman Theater upon her graduation from Bard College. She remained with the troupe until the 1981 split; since then, it seems that she has disappeared from public life.
As the troupe members entered, Pamela Verge called out characteristics belonging to each performer as she whipped the audience into a physical and emotional frenzy: “I said straight. I said gay. I said young. I said old. I said fat. I said feminist” (Spiderwoman Papers, NAWPA). And audience members continued to perform their own declarations of identity by alternately raising and lowering their hands and standing and sitting (Giuliano 9D). Within this slyly subversive pedagogical “workout,” if an audience member stood to align herself with the “fat” category, she might find herself still standing with those who self-identified as “thin” in the “gay” category and those might find themselves still standing with those who self-identified as “straight” in the “old” or the “young” categories. Alternatively, an audience member might find herself jumping up and down in her seat and raising and lowering her hand repeatedly. Through her own exertions, such an audience member would begin to organically understand that she, like the performers she had come to see, did not fit neatly or easily into one “box.”

Some popular ballads and show-tunes were satirized in performance to expose the ridiculous premises upon which they had been built. Indeed, one reviewer declared, “‘Feelings,’ ‘42nd Street’ and ‘The Way We Were’ [had never been] sung in quite this campy way before” (Giuliano 9D). Others, by contrast, were approached seriously and celebrated for the beauty they revealed: “Gloria [Miguel] actually uncovers poetry in, or imparts it to, the lyrics of ‘(You’re not a dream) You’re a Man’” (Blumenthal). And sketches were alternately presented as rollicking caricatures or in absolute earnest, while the troupe interrogated its audiences with the same questions about feminism and the female condition around which its Cabaret: An Evening of Disgusting Songs and Pukey Images had been constructed and obliged its audiences to turn their gaze upon themselves and each other as keenly as it had been turned upon the spectacle on stage.

Self-revelation, on the part of the performers, was never simple or one-dimensional. And through it, each performer issued a challenge to all those who had sought to neatly categorize or “box” her on the basis of partial evidence or who had challenged her identity because she did not neatly “fit” into the societal box that had been specially constructed for her as a “feminist,” a “lesbian,” a “woman,” “wife,”
“mother” or an “American Indian.” For instance, Muriel Miguel revealed herself as a lesbian lover and then gave a lesson on how to be sexually attractive to men: “…if you purse your lips and say prunes—that’s sexy / have to have a walk/ squeeze ass / point knees in and toes in/ clear mind of any sane intelligent thought …” (Spiderwoman Papers, NAWPA). And Peggy Shaw presented herself as both a butch lover of women and as a sentimental, nurturing grandmother, while Gloria Miguel’s personal testimony overturned a hilarious examination of the American “Metonyndian”\textsuperscript{11}:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gloria</th>
<th>This is my class photo. Can you pick me out? I’m always the same. Always Gloria.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muriel</td>
<td>Did you know your cancer sun is in conflict with your Scorpio sun?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Ohh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>Do you do beadwork?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Ohh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Are you an actress that’s a feminist or a feminist that’s an actress?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>I’m a woman. I’m a mother, a mother of a man and a woman. I’m a grandmother. I love women – I have great friendships with women. I love men. I have sexual relations with men. I don’t have to apologize for my life. (Spiderwoman Papers, NAWPA)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And while this feminist piece cried out vociferously for the liberation of its women, it offered no easy answers; rather it left its audiences to ponder a rather plaintive question: “Now that I’m free, what do I do about being alone” (Giuliano 9D)?

Ironically, in this year as the women of Spiderwoman were performatively declaring their right to carve out and lay claim to identities of their own choosing, corporate America mustered its forces and

\textsuperscript{11} I have coined this term by combining Homi Bhabha’s “metonym” with the European misappellation of the original peoples on this continent as “Indians.”
began its own assault on the troupe and the name with which it had chosen to identify itself. In 1980, lawyers for Marvel Comics sent a letter to Spiderwoman Theater, collectively addressing the troupe’s members as “Gentlemen” and accusing them of copyright infringement, ordering them to “cease and desist” identifying themselves by the name “Spiderwoman.” Marvel had copyrighted and trademarked the female counterpart to its “Spiderman;” and in its eyes, the theatre troupe’s appellation, “Spiderwoman Theater,” constituted a “dilution of the distinctiveness of the Spiderwoman Mark” (see Appendix Three).

To add insult to injury, Marvel’s arguments could not even rest on the corporation’s claim that its creation and naming of its mutant female with her keen “spidey senses” predated the 1975 formation and naming of the feminist theatre company, which it was attacking. After all, “Marvel’s Spiderwoman” had only been in existence since 1979 (Baker and Davidson). Marvel simply owned the name (or so it claimed) by virtue of the copyright, which it had purchased. Spiderwoman Theater responded by engaging the services of William Kunstler and took their case to the people, writing a an open letter to the New York City press, laying claim to their name and accusing the Marvel Group of yet another act of cultural appropriation perpetrated against the original peoples of this continent.

The case did not last more than two years and ended well for Spiderwoman Theater, which still retains its name. Various commentators tend to cite this battle with the Marvel Group as little more than a worrisome, inconvenient incident with no lasting consequences. Indeed, it has been largely regarded as a mere footnote in a sea of struggles, which included the day-to-day battles to find performance venues, to perform for people who could pay, to negotiate travel expenses, suitable accommodations, and per diems - in short, to be treated with the respect and consideration that Spiderwoman’s craft and professionalism warranted, particularly amongst those producers and festival organizers who deemed themselves sister-soldiers in the feminist struggle. By 1997, the Marvel incident was being cited as little more than a pithy title for the Exhibition that featured Spiderwoman’s private papers at the Walter Havighurst Special Collections Library at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio: this exhibition was titled “Spiderwoman Theater: The Real Marvel,” and it explored the troupe’s origins, travels (throughout the 1970’s and the
1980’s), “travails” (of which the Marvel incident was deemed by its organizers to be the least significant), Spiderwoman’s works (including partial scripts), and reception to these.

But this short, ugly episode around naming and claiming resonates at multiple levels, connecting Spiderwoman Theater to the history of its inception, to the people for and by whom it had been originally designed to speak, and to the history of misappropriation, dispossession, and misrepresentation that has characterized the relationship between the founding fathers of America and the pre-existing Indigenous nations whose existence complicated their project of manifest destiny. For Muriel Miguel, the issue was quite simple: demonstrating the self-same hubris upon which America had been built, the Marvel Group had created its mutant female, whose existence was entirely reliant upon questionable science, and endowed her with the name of a Hopi deity whose existence pre-dated both creator and creation by several millennia, at the very least. “Spiderwoman,” for Marvel (and for its public, it hoped), would now and forever identify its creation--and only its creation--because Marvel had “discovered” the name. Citing a centuries-old history of misappropriation, Muriel and the troupe attacked Marvel and other U.S. corporations, which identified their goods by appropriated names--Winnebago, Pontiac, Thunderbird, Mohawk, etc.--and attacked their right to “appropriate and claim the exclusive use of names from a people’s cultural heritage” (see Appendix Three).

Spiderwoman Theater had been named for the Hopi creatrix as a tribute to Josephine Mofsie Tarrant (Hopi/Winnebago) whose initial work with Muriel had inspired and engineered its engenderment and process. Although the troupe was largely identified as a “heterogeneous,” “feminist,” and lately “lesbian” group, the existence of three Native American members was consistently emphasized in publicity materials around this identity-skirmish as it had been for all Spiderwoman productions since Women in Violence (1976). Further, the name with which the troupe identified itself, did not simply
constitute a tribute to its founding “grandmother” Josephine Mofsie\textsuperscript{12} or to the American Indian heritage of its director and her sisters, it also reflected essence and action: Muriel Miguel had named her troupe for the process and presentational style it would (and did) follow, a process that is rooted in the philosophic and aesthetic traditions of her own nations as well as Mofsie’s and a process in which she and her best friend (and later, her sisters) had rooted themselves in the construction of a communitist project designed to facilitate the survivance of three Indian girls from Brooklyn and tribal peoples around the world.

With its open letter to the New York media, Spiderwoman Theater had appealed to its audiences--to its community--for support. And the community responded. Through 1980 and 1981, New York City papers followed the case and expressed full-hearted support for the troupe. It is interesting to note, however, that while all commentators sympathized with Spiderwoman Theater’s position and uniformly descried Marvel’s misappropriation of the Hopi deity’s name as cultural theft, this assault on Indigenous cultural identity was, for some, less politically charged than the Marvel Group’s historically troubled relationship with another marginalized and oppressed cultural group: citing the overt lesbian content within Spiderwoman’s repertoire and Marvel’s long-standing conflict with the gay community, some pundits expressed the belief that Marvel’s suit had been conducted in the spirit of targeting the troupe’s lesbian orientation (see Tyler 5 and Goldstein 42). Just what it was the troupe had become--its right to identify and name itself in accordance with its \textit{becoming}--was being written externally, in corporate boardrooms and in the court of public opinion through a chorus of contending stories serving conflicting agendas. Internally, what it was each performer was \textit{becoming} as she wrote and re-wrote herself into \textit{herstory} and as she imagined the community in which herstory would play itself out and in which she could discover, assert, and play out her own identity, the connective filaments of the web that bound Spiderwoman’s women together were tearing away from each other. Spiderwoman Theater, in its fifth year, was now just barely out of its infancy. The work had just begun, and suddenly it seemed as if it was

\textsuperscript{12} Throughout this work, Muriel Miguel’s best friend will be referred to by her maiden name (Josephine Mofsie), as this is the name by which her friends the Miguel sisters refer to her generally.
about to end. A split was imminent. As it turned out, however, the split that finally occurred did not effect the end of the splintered troupe; rather, this split was the catalyst, which would effect a new beginning…

**Herstory: The “Beginning of the Beginning of the Beginning”**

Lisa Mayo,\(^{13}\) Gloria Miguel\(^ {14} \) and Muriel Miguel were born in the traditional way on the floor of their maternal grandmother’s house in Brooklyn, New York--the same house that Muriel Miguel occupies today. All were delivered by their mother’s mother who was as gifted a midwife, as her daughter was a seer. And the umbilical cords and afterbirth of all three have long since integrated with the soil of that Brooklyn yard behind the house in which they were delivered and raised. That all three sisters were born into a life of struggle is now, by virtue of the candid interviews they have offered over the years and the confessional nature of their stage works, a matter of public record. That these sisters longed to escape the grinding poverty and racism that had defined their young lives and the domestic unrest (set in motion by their father’s alcohol-fueled rages and their mother’s withdrawal) that threatened their peace and disrupted their fraternal relationships resonates throughout their works demanding redress and reconciliation.

Their father Antonio Miguel had been born in Kuna Yala, which is in the San Blas Islands of Panama, a middle child in a family of twelve children. When he was six years old, a British family adopted him, taking him to the West Indies, presumably to educate him and to offer him a “better life.” While their intentions may have been good, and while he has always maintained that they treated him well, Antonio was unhappy. He missed his family; he felt constricted by the schoolroom atmosphere; and

\(^{13}\) Lisa Mayo is a stage name she concocted early in her career in a bid to recreate herself as an ethnically indeterminate performer. Her actual name is Elizabeth Miguel. And close friends and family generally call her Elizabeth or Liz.

\(^ {14} \) Gloria was actually born two houses away in the home of her aunt. But like her sisters, she was born on the floor, delivered by her grandmother; and for all intents and purposes, she grew up with her elder sister Lisa in the home of Antonio and Elmira Miguel.
he felt constricted in the suits, stiff collars, and shoes, he was forced to wear. Realizing that he was not attending school and that he would not willingly or easily acclimatize himself to the life for which they were trying to groom him, Miguel’s adoptive family finally sent him home to his family in Kuna Yala (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 170-71).

At the age of fifteen, Antonio Miguel, along with several of his brothers and his friends, became a merchant seaman, traveling the world over on schooners and steamships. During a leave in New York City, one of Antonio’s friends who had been dating a young Rappahannock woman invited him to come along and meet his date’s younger sister, Elmira. These sisters had been born and raised in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Their Rappahannock ancestors hailed from Virginia, and their nation is part of the Powhatan alliance into which Pocahontas had been born and Captain John Smith had been adopted in 1606. The Rappahannock people have been influenced by over four centuries of contact with European invaders, settlers, and missionaries; consequently, Elmira’s people had been practicing Christians for generations. Sitting at a window in her mother’s Brooklyn house to catch a glimpse of her older sister’s “gentleman caller,” Elmira saw his tall, handsome companion, Antonio, and at that moment she knew she was looking at her future husband. Such is the stuff of family legends.

Of course, there were complications. These, too, comprise the stuff of family legends--the stuff that may remain unspoken, “forgotten,” buried beneath the layers. But while a stone cast upon the waters may only create momentary surface-ripples, which cease and are forgotten when it sinks, this stone imbeds itself deep within the layers of the sediment that form the river-bed, forever altering its topography and its elemental nature and redirecting the path of the waters cradled therein.

My father was a non-Christian, and my grandmother was very much against the marriage because she wanted my mother to marry an American Indian, not a Central American Indian, not someone who was not even a Christian […]

Then my father went back home. He didn’t come back for three years, but he and my mother were engaged. My mother waited for him. In the meantime, his family in San Blas arranged a marriage with another woman. He was married to this woman and had a son with her. (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 171)
According to family-legend, the petit, beautiful Elmira had been born with caul, and she was gifted with psychic abilities, which she passed on to her daughters and to their children. Although she was a practicing Christian, along with her psychic abilities, she had also inherited medicinal knowledge from her mother, and she utilized this medicine to bring her fiancé back to her (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 172). They were married, and in 1925 Elizabeth Miguel (Lisa Mayo) made her grand entrance on to the family “stage.” In 1926, Gloria was born, and in 1937, “baby” Muriel joined the family.

But the initial “stones” -- resentments, secrets, betrayals real or perceived -- that had rippled the waters of Antonio and Elmira’s budding romance were silently ensconced in the river-bed; they were joined by other “stones” -- racism, difficulties with acculturation, and economic impoverishment. And these “silent partners” began to direct individual choices, familial relationships and quotidian events that would later discover themselves to the Miguel sisters as simultaneous sources of wounding and vehicles of healing through which they would fully realize themselves as human beings and through which they would teach others to do likewise.

“*We were Talking about that Layer of Worthlessness, Selflessness*”

Lisa Mayo has revealed that upon the birth of Gloria, her grandmother convinced Elmira to give Elizabeth over to herself and to Elmira’s older sister Ida, who was unmarried and childless. So, Elizabeth went to live next door where she was “like a little princess” and given everything she wanted -- “except [her] mother” (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 172). But while Elizabeth’s “layer of worthlessness” is woven

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15 Indeed, her considerable psychic gifts became the subject of Spiderwoman’s *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* (1990). After exploring and sending up the ersatz glamour of “plastic shamanism” in *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City*, the Miguel sisters were ready to revisit the less “glamorous,” less profitable, genuine spirituality (which had sometimes discomfited and embarrassed them in their childhood). *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* (1990) was the result.
into the birth of her second sister, Gloria has had her own issues around rejection and abandonment with which to contend:

Elizabeth, do you remember when Aunt Ida and Uncle George and Uncle Frank used to take you out and leave me home? I used to sit at the window for hours wondering, why I couldn’t go? There you were all dressed up with a big bow in your hair, going out and I had to stay home. I used to think there was something terribly wrong with me. (Spiderwoman, Sun 294)

It may very well be that the extended family was trying to ease Elizabeth’s trauma by showering her with extra attention to assuage her feelings of being rejected by her mother. But these are things that children cannot be expected to fully comprehend and reasonably accept. Eleven years after Gloria’s birth and Elizabeth’s “exile” from the parental home, Muriel was born, and by that time, their mother had become completely withdrawn. Muriel Miguel has stated on numerous occasions that she is the “only child” of her two sisters and that her mother never spoke to her. Living in a dirty home infested with bedbugs and cockroaches with a deeply depressed mother, who had given up and withdrawn, and with a violent and volatile father, who frequently came home inebriated (when he came home at all) and who was often out of work or who ‘drank away’ his pay check when he was working, the Miguel daughters could not help but attribute their circumstances to either some ‘lack’ in themselves as individuals or some cultural deficiency passed onto them by their cultural heritage and ethnic genealogy: all they could know at that time was all they saw; what they saw was that “being Indian meant a drunken father, a depressed mother, and no food, and being dispossessed from your house. It was [indeed!] ugly” (Mayo, qtd. in France and Corso 181).

What they couldn’t see (what they were not allowed to see) at that time was their father’s “secret life”: the extra-marital affairs in which he engaged; the abandoned son in Kuna Yala; another son in New York City for whom his brothers cared; Antonio’s guilt for the children he had engendered but not fathered; a seaman’s frustration at being land-locked; a man’s frustration at not being able to provide for the household in which he was an active father; his indignation at the relentless racism that not only
would have humiliated him personally, enraged him when he witnessed or heard how it affected his daughters, extended family and friends but also would have effectively impeded his access to employment opportunities; and his resentment in the knowledge that his wife’s mother did not consider him worthy of her daughter, did not consider his people as being on an equal footing with her own, and did not allow him to communicate his Traditional Knowledge and worldview to her granddaughters. He drank to forget. He drank to bury the guilt and perhaps the resentments. And although he continued to practice Kuna ways, because of his excessive drinking, he was neither a successful practitioner, nor could he have been a completely effective instructor of Kuna tradition and lifeway for his children" (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 175). Religious confusion--particularly for the older sisters--added another opaque layer, which further separated them from the knowledge of themselves as human beings belonging to and valued by a specific community (or pair of communities):

But as I said, when I was young, I went to church, sang in the choir, made my Communion. And my father would say to me, “Look, you’re not really a Christian.” “I’m not?” I would say. “Why are we…?” “Because it makes your mother happy,” my father would say. “Your mother wants it. But really, you’re an Indian.” It made me crazy. I’m not a Christian? What am I? He wasn’t giving me my religion. Because if he did, my mother would have had a fit. She didn’t want that. (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 175)

It is no great marvel, then, that the elder Miguel sisters began their quest for identity by rejecting their Native heritage. Elizabeth took a more radical approach than her sisters, declaring, “Fuck this Indian Shit. I’m going to see what I can do [as an ethnically indistinguishable artist]” (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 175). She resolved never to marry a Native man; she underwent a full conversion to Judaism, which she practiced for a time. And she eventually adopted the stage name “Lisa Mayo” by which she is publicly known. Gloria Miguel dealt with her own “ethnic shame” by identifying herself as a “human

16 Alcohol consumption is not compatible with the practice of traditional spiritual ways. Indeed, alcohol consumption is strongly discouraged by traditionalists of most (if not all) Indigenous nations across Turtle Island. (North, Central and South America). And if individuals do occasionally imbibe in their daily lives, they are expected to abstain from alcohol from periods of between one day and several weeks (depending upon the nation and the ceremony) before handling medicines or participating in ceremonial activities. It would have been inappropriate--dangerous, even--for a man who was frequently and regularly inebriated to attempt to instruct his daughters in ceremonial praxis.
being,” and although she maintained a greater connection with her “Indian-ness” than her elder sister, she resisted being defined or confined by it.

And while the youngest sibling Muriel, in her early professional career, also resisted being packaged and labeled as an “Indian,” she had maintained the greatest connection of the three. Perhaps because her mother had so totally withdrawn by the time she was born, she spent more time with her father than her sisters had. By the age of eight, Muriel had quit the Methodist Church in which all three sisters had been choristers, and by the time she was beginning to study and to pursue extra-curricular activities with her peers, the American Indian community in New York was creating social groups for the youth. She joined “The Little Eagles,” learning and performing dances from various nations across America, and as a teenager, she became involved with the Thunderbird American Indian Dance Company (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 175).

Although Antonio Miguel often found it difficult to make ends meet, particularly during the depression years, he was a creative and resourceful man. Capitalizing on his personal magnetism, his artistic abilities and on America’s romantic (albeit twisted) fascination with the “vanishing Indian,” he began to perform America’s fantasy, turning it into a “family business,” which endured for more than two decades and included three generations of performers. As Monique Mojica has explained,

My Grandpa and [Princess] Red Wing’s [the silent film star] son-in-law mixed up snake oil in the bathtub and sold it. They scripted invented ceremonial skits and dances. My mom and her sisters (the future Spiderwoman Theater) rode on floats and ballyhooed to drum customers into the movie houses to see the latest John Wayne western. They posed for tourists in their buckskins and feathers and danced for the Boy Scouts. I did too, once because my Grandpa took me with him without my mother’s knowledge. And boy, was she mad! She and her sisters had refused to do this once they could voice an opinion, but we were show biz Indians! Many of these show Indian families from all over converged in New York. They danced at the World’s Fair and performed with the rodeo at Madison Square Garden, and when they had no place to go, my family took them in. Some stayed and raised their families and created a community in New York City. (Mojica, “Stories” 17-18)
These performances (as demeaning as the Miguel sisters may have ultimately felt them to be) became the first training ground for the young artists. And while they eventually rebelled, refusing to “play Indian” in their father’s projects, they could not, nor did they attempt to, suppress the talents they had already begun to discover and develop in his *Mohica*\(^\text{17}\) spectacles. They were, indeed, “show biz Indians.” So it is no surprise, then, that each began a pursuit of her own individual identity by exploring the avenues that would best facilitate the development of her unique artistic voice in opera (Lisa), acting (Gloria), and modern dance (Muriel). Ultimately, they would not perform on the same stage again until 1976, when they came together to form Spiderwoman Theater as women who were now entering their middle years.

Notably, it would be Muriel (the “baby” of the family – who had been raised by her older sisters) who would envision the creation of Spiderwoman Theater, who would develop its working methodology and who would pull her sisters into a working relationship that has spanned three decades. Lisa and Gloria both credit their younger sister with “outing” them as feminists. And Lisa has further testified that her involvement with Spiderwoman has forced her to “come out… to the world as an Indian” (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 168).

Muriel Miguel had trained as a modern dancer and worked intensively with Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theater. However, she had also maintained her commitment to traditional dance. Influenced, perhaps, by her parents’ activities in the organization of inter-tribal, urban Pow wows\(^\text{18}\), which drew otherwise isolated, urban Indians into a pan-Indian community and which facilitated ties between

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\(^{17}\) *Mohica* was the name Antonio Miguel gave to his medicine shows—perhaps, in honor of his family back in Kuna Yala.

\(^{18}\) A Pow wow is simply a gathering, hosted by one community and attended by many individuals from various tribal communities. Here, individuals and families have the chance to gather, to exchange news and information, to share dances and songs and to trade goods. The inter-tribal, urban Pow wow, then, might best be described as a gathering specifically formed for the benefit of American Indians (regardless of their Nation) living away from their home communities. Its objective is to counter the acute isolation experienced by such individuals by providing them with an opportunity to meet and network with other American Indians, to share their languages, lifeways, ceremonial praxis and strategies for surviving in the city and to celebrate the survival of all of our peoples through the free exercise of ceremonial acts and cultural expression.
individuals and their home communities and encouraged profound and enduring inter-tribal relationships, Muriel was a founding member and co-director (with Louis Mofsie\textsuperscript{19}) of the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers, a company, which is now almost forty years old (Abbot 168). Today, her daughter, playwright/performer Murielle Borst, and her granddaughter, Josephine who is the daughter of Borst and Kevin Tarrant, have maintained this connection with Thunderbird and have started their own group--the Silver Cloud Singers.

Since the formation of Spiderwoman Theater--indeed, because of it--all three Miguel sisters have embraced an inspiring, unflagging agenda of community-building work with the American Indian Community House in New York City, the American Indian AIDS Task Force, Off the Beaten Path Theater (which serves as a training ground and production company for male and female Native actors) and countless tribal communities throughout North America and around the world in addition to their individual artistic projects and company productions. Spiderwoman does not simply show the way to healing; it passes on its process, so that others may effect healing for themselves. It is this process that constitutes the centre of this study, the centre of the lives of its practitioners, the cornerstone of their becoming. And so, if we are to begin to grasp it in its entirety, we must begin by exploring the constituent elements of this process--the “threads” that make up its grand design.

\textbf{Muriel Miguel and The Open Theater}

By his own account, Joseph Chaikin’s earliest training began with encounters with various disciples of Stanislavsky’s method (including Uta Hagen and Herbert Berghof) as he pursued a means to access and to

\textsuperscript{19} Josephine Mofsie was Muriel Miguel’s best friend from childhood; she performed in Spiderwoman’s first workshop performance (1975), and it is in her honor that Spiderwoman Theater was named. Louis Mofsie is the late Josephine Mofsie’s brother; and Kevin Tarrant (now married to Muriel Miguel’s daughter, Murielle Borst) is her son. Although Josephine Mofsie died before she had reached the age of forty, her best friend still maintains profound connections to her through her work with Louis Mofsie and through their granddaughter (also named Josephine).
manifest his own “inner truth” (43). As his political consciousness began to develop during his work on Bertolt Brecht’s *Man is Man* with the Living Theater, Chaikin became increasingly dissatisfied with the limitations of realistic drama and Method acting as vehicles of the representation of human experience: “Reality is not a fixed state,” Chaikin declared (8). Instead, he encouraged his students to consider the Latinate root of this word: *res*, he pointed out, translates as, “that which we can fathom,” [as opposed to that which we can see, touch or hear] (Chaikin 8). For Chaikin, any pretensions of representing “reality” would ultimately result in the perpetuation of stereotypes, because he felt very keenly that theatre, as a commercial enterprise, had largely become a business and that the *business* of acting teaches actors to think in and as stereotypes (recognizable and palatable products for public consumption).

Dissatisfied with what he perceived as an undue emphasis on the internal mechanisms of the actor’s instrument and with the depth of inquiry into ‘universal’ human truth that he had encountered within his training, Chaikin united with a group of colleagues— all theatre practitioners who had been studying under Nola Chilton before she relocated to Israel in the early 1960’s. Together, as The Open Theater, they began to work through a series of “open questions,” which ultimately would allow them to

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20 This definition of “reality” connotes Chaikin’s sensitivity to (and perhaps a search for) metaphysical realities as opposed to material “reality.” Cosmological belief, ceremonial praxis and artistic expression of the Indigenous nations across Turtle Island all reflect the understanding that the physical world is only a shadowy reflection of metaphysical reality. Certainly, this is a key concept in Kuna cosmology, which imagines the world of spirit (*neg burbaled*) enveloping the material world (*neg sanaled*) and residing inside each material element, animating it with its life force (Chapin 219-220). Hence, to transfigure substance (i.e. to heal a sick body), the healer works in the metaphysical realm, descending through eight layers of the spirit realm to locate the corrupted or stolen soul (*burbagana*) and so restore it. In restoring the soul (which is the spiritual copy of the physical body), the Kuna healer restores the body and effects a material transformation from illness to health (Chapin 219-220).

While Chaikin would certainly have no knowledge of Kuna healing practices or cosmology, his perception of “reality” and his implicit willingness to investigate that which can be fathomed beyond (or beneath) the material would certainly have attracted Muriel Miguel’s interest in his work and her desire to join him in his investigations.

21 Chilton, a daughter of Russian émigrés, was born and raised in New York City. During the 1940’s she trained as an actor with Lee Strasberg. Eventually, she rejected her Method training, because she felt that an actor who mined his/her own emotions and impulses could only produce a “fossilized” performance—that is, a *representation* of his/her *conditioning* (qtd. in Ben-Zvi 46). Searching for a process that would facilitate the integration of theatre with social activism, she began to develop her own improvisations and exercises designed to help actors deepen their self-awareness and move beyond the constraints of patent reality. This has been one of Chaikin’s primary objectives in the development of his own work (Chaikin 2-3). In 1963, Chilton relocated to Israel to live out her commitment to social activism in her art (Ben-Zvi 47). The students she left behind in New York City, led by Joseph Chaikin, formed the Open Theater.
challenge “the big set up”—the socio-political matrix that strips humans of their humanity by fixing the ways by which we can identify and differentiate one human being from another (Chaikin 12). They began by deepening the traditional questions that an actor asks of a character: For instance, “What do I want?” would inevitably lead Chaikin’s actor to ask, “What makes me want what I want” (75)? And they chipped away at the tyranny of psychology (as an indicator of “human truth”) by exploring physical impulse, foregrounding the actor’s body, and developing “a spare language of tasks which speak of life and nature” (Chaikin 65). To this end, Chaikin began to seek out dancers to join his troupe and encourage his colleagues to move.

By 1963, Muriel Miguel was already a highly trained and promising modern dancer (having trained extensively with Jean Erdman22). But she was becoming dissatisfied with dance as a sole medium for the stories she was trying to tell.23 As her training intensified, her choreography was becoming

22 Jean Erdman was trained by Martha Graham and began her own highly influential modern dance company (the Jean Erdman Dance Group) in 1944. In addition to her own celebrated performances, her company and her teaching, Erdman also won an Obie Award (1962-1963) for her Broadway play The Coach with Six Insides, and she won a Tony Award (1972) for Best Choreography in The Two Gentlemen of Verona.

23 Actually, Muriel Miguel had not consciously decided, at this time, just what stories she did want to tell; she was simply compelled to explore. Perhaps, however, “explore” is not the exact term for what she sought. Perhaps, she sought to integrate two seemingly disparate fragments of her being.

The reason I left dance was because I felt like I was going upstream. I wasn’t going where anybody else was going. I did modern dance to pop music. I did modern dance; I had a trombone that I played. I can’t play a trombone! I just blasted it! I did a modern dance with a yellow chair. I did that for an audition with Julliard. I didn’t get in [laughs]! It was out there! You know what I mean? I did a lot of “out there” stuff. (M. Miguel, Interview 2007) For her, it was all about process. She had traditional dance (with Thunderbird) and she had “process” (which she pursued through modern dance). Sometimes, she tried to infuse her traditional work with the “process” by inserting experimental bits into her performances with Thunderbird. But generally, at this time, she felt constrained to keep both forms separate. This, she now surmises, is because “people didn’t understand that [she] was an Indian” (M. Miguel, Interview 2007). As she went on to explain by recounting later experiences she’d had with the Open Theater, there seemed to be no room in the one world (of contemporary art and process) for her cultural and familial sensibilities:

They really didn’t understand it. So, [they didn’t understand] a lot of the ways I looked at things: For instance, at Open Theater, I remember I said, “It’s Father’s Day, I can’t come.” And they all looked at me: “You can’t come? It’s Father’s Day?” And then I’d say, “Well, yeah.” And then, I’d say, “I have to buy five presents.” And they’d say, “You have five fathers?” And I’d say, “My
father and all my uncles.” You know? “Duh. What’s wrong with you?” was my [reaction]. And they looked at me like I had two heads: you know… that kind of thing. (M. Miguel, Interview 2007)

She was expected, as it were, to leave her cultural sensibilities ‘outside the door.’ If we regard Miguel’s dance life as a metaphor for her socio-political life as an American Indian woman, it is readily apparent that forces outside herself her were forcing her into conflict—forcing her to choose her community and hence her identity. She was constantly negotiating between living artfully as a proud American Indian woman or making art as a contemporary, urban artist in New York City. And the sum of her artistic life might well be regarded as a series of contemporary, urban liminoid “acts,” which tore through the “veil” separating two worlds and facilitated a liminal transformation and the (self)creation of a “new” human being.

To gain some insight into just what stories, Miguel wanted to tell through her dance, what these might have looked like and how they may have differed from the works of her contemporaries in modern dance, it may prove instructive to explore the stories Miguel is “dancing” now. On 6 September 2008, I had the opportunity to attend the fifth annual Choreographers’ Workshop produced and presented by Earth in Motion: World Indigenous Dance. This particular year, Muriel Miguel was one of the four featured choreographers, and she had utilized this opportunity to choreograph a section of her one woman show Red Mother, which is her own adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s Mother Courage and Her Children. The program notes for this workshop state:

Red Mother is the story of Belle, who roams across the continent with her horse and companion, Blue Fred. In this section, Red Mother mourns her dead horse. She passes through times of wars and conflicts that have changed the very core of life on this land. She has witnessed massacres and has survived through lying, cunning and capitulation. (Earth in Motion, 6 September 2008)

I had deliberately put away my program without consulting it before the evening began, because I wanted to try to identify each choreographer’s work for myself. Amazingly, although I can boast greater familiarity with the choreographic styles of the other artists on the program that evening (Penny Couchie, Julia Jamieson, Alejandro Ronceria), Miguel’s piece was the only piece I correctly identified and attributed to its artist.

During the talkback, which followed the performances, Miguel told us that during the earlier phases of Red Mother (in which she is the solo performer), she had taken “the easy way out” after the death of Belle’s sole companion Blue Fred. Here, she mapped Belle’s inner landscape onto the body of dancer Nadine Jackson to explore the terrible turmoil experienced by a bereaved woman who looks at the corpse of her last friend on earth and sees only “fresh meat.”

If this piece, in any way, can speak to the artistic objectives and aesthetic sensibilities that distinguish(ed) Miguel’s dance-projects from those of her colleagues, it may be by comparing Miguel’s unflinchingly naked presentation of raw, ugly honesty and her refusal to beautify, sentimentalize or soften one moment of the experience she and the audience share. Unlike the other presentations, which seemed at times to “milk” the painful moments or, alternatively, to make meaning in them by investing them with beauty, Miguel, in no way, stretched our willingness to suspend disbelief. Somehow, her presentation was “realer” than anything I’ve ever seen although it was deliberately presented in a most anti-realistic manner (lacking even a representation of “meat” to tantalize the dancer until she succumbs and gorges herself on it). The material signifiers or lack thereof did nothing to detract from the raw, irrepressible spirit of hunger, which refused to be denied.

Dressed in a raggedy skirt, backless leotard (which revealed every muscular twitch) and awash in red streamers, which swirled about her like frantic blood vessels exploding out of a body wracked by harrowing grief, Miguel’s dancer alternately careened and floated between maniacal grief, ravenous hunger and preternaturally serene nostalgia. Nostalgic moments were sent up and presented as excessive indulgence, as if Miguel were inviting us to laugh at the human tendency to sugar-coat pain and mask the raw ugliness of mortal resistance to mortality. Jackson was magnificent here: her hands spoke; her very back “spoke,” and every emotional nuance etched itself upon her own youthful visage, which took on the years of her choreographer as the piece progressed. The piece reverberated with fury; it screamed with need. And through it all, I was reminded of the furious grief Miguel had surely been experiencing daily, since May 2008 when her eldest sister Lisa Mayo was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s
increasingly dramatic and multi-disciplinary (qtd. in Abbott 168-69). And she was starting to integrate her talent for improvisation with her dance. As a child, she had been rather silent and withdrawn. Her concerned sisters had encouraged her to pursue dance as a means of self-expression and creative nurturance. Now, in her twenty-sixth year, Muriel Miguel was ready to develop her vocal instrument and add another “color” to her artistic palette. She was attracted to Chaikin’s way of working and his aesthetic sensibility; and initially, at least, she was attracted to his vision--his willingness to challenge Eurocentric aesthetic, economic, political and social systems; his commitment to creating pieces that were founded on “open” questions for which answers might never be found; and his aspirations to find new ways to discover and somehow represent human truth.

Tellingly, Lisa Mayo who had meanwhile spent a decade of intense study with Uta Hagen and who was absolutely committed to one version of the Method against which the Open Theater was rebelling spoke of Chaikin’s methods (later adopted and adapted by Muriel Miguel) as she looked back upon the twenty-year history of Spiderwoman Theater in 1996:

It wasn’t my way of working, although I admired what they did very much. My sister Muriel had been at the Open Theater in New York City and she had a certain way of working without a script, they wrote their own scripts, and I thought it was wonderful work, but I didn’t think it was for me because I had never worked that way before. I wasn’t very receptive to begin with. But after a week or so I saw the possibilities. I adjusted and became quite good at it, as a matter of fact. It wasn’t that different from the way I worked. It was a different approach but it was getting to the truth, which

Lymphoma. It was not until I read the program later that evening that I realized that the piece had been dedicated to Mayo and just how real this “spirit” that impotently rages against the implacable forces governing mortal existence and its conclusion is.

If, as a septuagenarian, Miguel’s work marks her so unmistakably from artists who have been her peers, her former students and her colleagues (with whom she has frequently worked for many years now and who are trained in the same techniques as she), there can be little doubt as to how far her earliest work set her apart when Miguel was working alongside those who did not share her cultural sensibilities, her spiritual beliefs or her aesthetic understandings.
is what acting is about: getting to the truth of the character and what is real. (qtd. in Abbott 169, emphasis added)

It cannot be denied that elements of Chaikin’s process appear to have been adopted by Spiderwoman Theater and adapted to serve Spiderwoman’s specific aesthetic and to serve the specific concerns of the Miguel sisters as American Indian women in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.24

24 To illustrate, in the creation of Spiderwoman Theater’s premiere production, Women in Violence (1976), the troupe combined CR (consciousness raising) sessions at the table and regular drills in “Transformations,” which originated in the Open Theater and has since become a foundational exercise in the Storyweaving Workshops of Muriel Miguel and Monique Mojica, with Chaikin’s “Odets Kitchen” with his “Perfect People” exercise. The “Transformations” exercise will be discussed at some length in Chapter Three. But for the purposes of this discussion, it may prove instructive to examine the influence of Chaikin’s other exercises in the development of Women in Violence.

Lisa Mayo has stated that guided by her younger sister, she accessed her Trickster-persona through the “Inside/Outside (Odets Kitchen) exercise (Mayo, Interview 2007). Odets Kitchen “was named for [Clifford] Odets, but [owing to its purpose and essence] Chayevsky, Miller or Inge would have done as well” (Pasolli 12). This exercise calls upon actors to first improvise a scene and then to play out the scene again, giving voice to the inner motivations behind each action and articulation of the original. For instance, a man may come home late from work bearing romantic gifts—a bouquet of red roses, a box of candy, etc. His loving wife, in total disarray, may be struggling to salvage a burning dinner as he enters. He drops his brief case, throws down his jacket, declares that he is “beat” and presents her with the gifts. She accepts gratefully and demurely comments on how she “must look a sight.” He tells her that she is always beautiful to him. They embrace. Meanwhile, dinner burns. In the second scene, the actions of the first are recreated exactly. However, this time an “inner monologue” is articulated along with the original text. In Chaikin’s studio, either the original actors articulated the inner monologue or other members of the company articulated that inner life as they replayed the external score. He comes home, declares that he is “beat.” The inner monologue might be fraught, however, with guilt (for an affair) or aggression towards his wife. His spouse gratefully accepts his gifts, uttering her thanks, while her inner voice reveals her suspicions and/or pent up aggression towards him. She self-consciously refers to her rumpled state, while her inner voice (much less demurely) expresses her rage at being enslaved in the kitchen or the fact that she has given up entirely, because he has not noticed her in years. And so it goes…

Of the exercises that Muriel Miguel brought to the rehearsal studio for this production, Mayo has only been able to specifically recall and identify the “Inside/Outside” exercise as a significant vehicle of her character’s creation. But it would not be illogical to speculate that coupled with this, Chaikin’s “Perfect People” exercise may have also contributed to the development of her clown persona. The “Perfect People” exercise differs from Odets Kitchen in that it deals solely with surface behavior and calls upon actors to choose icons of perfection (from media representations) and to improvise the events of their ongoing perfect lives after the movie, commercial or magazine spread has ended. Ultimately, all the exercises as utilized by Mayo for the creation of her “Perfect Lady” effected a balancing of inner life and outer life in the performer, rather than merely highlighting a dichotomy between “text” and “subtext” or constructing a biting social commentary. As Muriel Miguel has observed, the revelation of the American Indian actress beneath the mask of Mayo’s “Perfect [Caucasian] Lady” was the “most healing moment in the play [Women in Violence]” (M. Miguel, Interview, 2007). For further information, Robert Pasolli’s A Book on the Open Theatre provides a detailed account of each of these exercises and of Chaikin’s exercises in transformation through sound and movement.
The foundational exercises utilized in the Open Theater manifest themselves in Storyweaving workshops facilitated by the Miguel sisters and by Gloria Miguel’s daughter, playwright/performer Monique Mojica. As well, Chaikin’s approach to questioning is reflected in Spiderwoman’s work. Chaikin asked questions. Through these questions (for which the company may or may not have found “answers”), character could be explored and stories created. Such explorations held out the possibility, at least, of discovering some of the answers to the greater questions around who we are as human beings. After all, the primary question asked by the actor of his character, “who am I?” ultimately, speaks to the larger human question, “who are we” in relation to God, to each other, to the rest of the Creation? For Spiderwoman, “I”-dentity (Who am “I”? Who am I in relation to the “I” I play?) is discovered through specific questions out of and around which each of its productions has been crafted. Like Chaikin before her, Muriel Miguel looks for questions to explore rather than statements to assert, and what is played out before us on Spiderwoman’s stage is an exploration of these questions--the embodied quest for self-knowledge. Doubtless, Chaikin’s active resistance to stereotypes (which purport to carry absolute answers, thereby simplifying human truth and degrading human existence) would have held a great attraction for Muriel Miguel. Indeed, every layer--private, political, and professional--of her existence had been contained and defined by the “Metonyndian” of settler imagination. From the Medicine Shows, in which her family had had to perform to make ends meet, to the neighborhood children who verbally assaulted the sisters with war whoops and called them “Injun Joe,” to the professional roadblocks she encountered as a performer, “[b]ecause [she is] an Indian” (Billotte), Muriel was hyper-aware of and actively resistant to a system that forms and disseminates the stereotype to justify oppression.

I was always big and I’m certainly a bit dark. Sometimes what happened to me in the beginning was that agents would call up: “I have the best part for you! Get down here, you have to read for this part!” Get down here, you have to read for this part. I had to go and it would be some ‘Indian Princess.’ After a while, I stopped going or if an agent would come and insist, I would go down, and they would give me this part and they would be very disappointed because I’d say, “Oh, one of those Indian parts.” In those days, it was really degrading stuff, really degrading stuff. (M. Miguel, qtd. in Beaucage 5)
While the aforementioned factors would certainly have drawn Muriel Miguel to the Open Theater, Chaikin’s embrace of storytelling as a key working-element in studio work was likely a factor in her decision to work with the company for as long as she did. For Chaikin, storytelling was a new way of working (116); for Miguel, it was something

… my family always did, so I understood storytelling, you know, from the toenails up. When I left Open Theater I wanted to explore further the idea of storytelling and what the possibilities of storytelling are, how there are so many stories out there. That’s what we did; we used stories to make different stories. (qtd. in Abbott 169)

As detailed examination of key Spiderwoman productions (and their processual foundations) will demonstrate, Chaikin’s studio-explorations of “emblems” and “jamming” and “transformations” to reconfigure narrative and tease out performance texts from raw story have found their way into the Storyweaving process. Indeed, the processual links between Open Theater and Spiderwoman Theater are apparent. Less apparent, however, are the contextual differences of spirit and intent that direct the application of the exercises, affect the performer in profound ways and determine the “fruits” engendered by her labors. Nor, at this point can we be entirely sure of “authorship” / ownership when it comes to these exercises. To what extent might Muriel Miguel, steeped as she was in powerful and enduring aesthetic Indigenous traditions, have influenced studio rehearsals and experiments at the Open Theater? To what extent might Chaikin’s exercises have been borrowed from the misappropriative and ethno dramaturgical traditions of the Living Theater? These are questions for which we may never reach definitive answers; nor perhaps are these questions for which we should seek such answers in this study. But if they do nothing more than highlight the complexity of a processual matrix wherein threads double back upon themselves even as they twine themselves around other threads spun from other stuff, on other looms, by other hands, they will have done enough. We can certainly discern the threads spun by the Open Theater in Spiderwoman’s processual web; let us continue to unravel the design to isolate and identify the other stuff of which this web is constructed.
Lisa Mayo Encounters Respect

I see myself and my sisters acting as mentors for Native people. My teacher Uta Hagen is 76, and she strove for the best, for the highest goals, and what I do I learned from her. I think of her every day of my life. She’s part of my life, that woman is. Her ideals are so high, I want to keep that within myself, so I can work with the young Native people of this country and the Indigenous people of Central and South America and Mexico who want to study and do their own theater. (Mayo, qtd. in Abbott 180)

Gloria Miguel and Muriel Miguel do not share their elder sister’s impassioned affection and regard for Uta Hagen, and it would be safe to say that her influence on their artistry has not been nearly so profound. But her methodology warrants serious examination for its influences—however indirect—on the process authored by Muriel Miguel and utilized by Spiderwoman Theater. With Herbert Berghof, she was one of Joseph Chaikin’s earliest influences; it was, after all, at the HB Studio where Chaikin sought and acquired his first serious, professional training in the craft (Chaikin 43), and it was in opposition to this training that his own experiments at the Open Theater were attempted. While the purpose of this project is to transcribe and disseminate Spiderwoman Theater’s methodology of Storyweaving as a Native-authored process, reliant upon and specific to traditional American Indian models of aesthetics and pedagogy, it will be necessary to address also its concatenations with seemingly disparate models, and thereby to chart the ways in which the Stories, written on the road to self-knowledge, intersect and reverberate around and within each other.

Lisa Mayo (Elizabeth Miguel) was determined to be neither poor nor Indian. But she was deeply sensible of just how strong her cultural roots are, and she was not satisfied with the idea of simply

25 Miss Hagen passed away in January 2004, eight years after this interview. She was eighty-four years old.

26 Gloria and Muriel Miguel were very candid about their view of Miss Hagen at the NAWPA “Honoring Spiderwoman” Conference at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. One of their most serious indictments against Hagen has been her teaching style, which, they feel, was too rigid and demanding to be of benefit to American Indian students; indeed, both women have expressed fears that Hagen’s teaching methods (or an imitation of her style in the studio) might even harm these students. The conference ran from February 19-21, 2007. These ideas came out on February 21, 2007 when Professor Ann Haugo facilitated a talking circle, during which the Miguel sisters discussed their process and their influences.
“blending” into the anonymous sea of White America. So, she searched for an alternate community in which she could forge an alternate identity of comparable potency with that she was trying to escape and deny. Attending Brooklyn College, she met a young Jewish man named Julius (Jules)\(^27\). She fell in love with him, with his community and with the strength of his Judaism, which she instinctively felt and with which she immediately connected; indeed each of the sisters has for a time been married to a Jewish man, “because there was a strong religion, a strong whatever that we were attracted to” (France and Corso 184). As well, Lisa has reflected that she was drawn to Judaism because of the ceremonies she witnessed (and in which she later participated); such festivities were seasonal, she has noted, marking the profound connection between the Jewish people and the earth (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 174).

Although Elmira Miguel was initially against the match, she gradually came to appreciate the young man who loved her daughter. And so despite Antonio Miguel’s objections, the couple was married, Elizabeth underwent a conversion, kept a kosher house, and promised to raise any children they might produce in the Jewish faith.

For his part, Jules contributed significantly to the development of Lisa Mayo’s artistry. He paid for all her schooling and for her singing lessons\(^28\). However, when she started to receive professional offers to travel abroad and sing in European opera houses, he was less supportive:

> I remember I got one offer to go to Germany for three months singing in different small opera houses. I asked my husband about it and he was appalled. He said, “That’s ridiculous. How can you do that? You’re my wife. You have to stay here. You have to cook. You have to clean.” This was in the 1950’s, you know. And I said, “Why can’t I

\(^{27}\) During our interview, Lisa Mayo explained that they had met in an amateur folk dancing group of which they were both members.

\(^{28}\) Lisa Mayo testifies that she didn’t know that her husband was wealthy until they had been married for one year; one day he showed her some bankbooks and told her that this was her money. He suggested that she use this money to take a real estate course to learn a profession so that she could support herself. She decided instead to invest in her training as an actor and a singer (Interview, 2007).
Already, an accomplished (albeit professionally frustrated) Mezzo Soprano, Lisa Mayo had begun to expand her operatic abilities through intense work in the performance of German Lieder. To this end, she began studying the craft of acting with Uta Hagen in the early 1960’s to perfect her storytelling abilities and to allow these to manifest themselves through her entire instrument. As she has testified, what was to have comprised a summer of intense study at the HB Studio became a decade of “hard labor” as a key student of Uta Hagen, Herbert Berghof and Charles Nelson Reilly (Haugo, “Native Playwrights” 327).

Like Chaikin, Uta Hagen believed that those who pursue theatre do so because they are dissatisfied with the status quo, and that the very choice to become an actor constitutes a conscious, political choice to enact resistance. For her, it was only through rigorous investigation into self and community that actors could identify just what they were resistant to and from there choose what aesthetic strategies to employ and what stories to tell that would best serve the objective of facilitating change (Hagen, Respect 15). Of course, to understand oneself as a “political animal” presumes that the individual feels himself to be firmly entrenched in a community. The personal only becomes political when it resonates beyond the individual and produces repercussions within a larger group. So, before the “person” can act in a meaningful and politically efficacious manner, she must find her place within a larger social group, which values her and her actions: s/he must acquire self-knowledge, i-ventory.

Acting for Hagen, was never about “losing oneself” in the story, as so many of her detractors have claimed, but about finding oneself in the language, history, philosophical beliefs, spiritual praxis, fears, fantasies, conflicts, artifacts, edifices, and artistic works of the communities one wishes to transform and be transformed within. Indeed, she states that the first task of the burgeoning actor is to “find your own sense of identity and then enlarge this sense of self” (Hagen 22, emphasis added). The burgeoning artist, Hagen explained, would find that sense of self in community through extensive travel (immersion in landscapes), visits to museums, immersion in history and biography, immersion in visual arts, keen observation of one’s contemporaries (intimates and passing acquaintances), and by becoming
conversant with classical music and linguistic studies. Indeed, in her first acting “primer,” which she later repudiated, the parallels—albeit unconscious and unintentional—between Hagen’s observations on America (i.e. America’s “lack of respect for the past” and the disconnection of its people from the natural world) and observations posed by Native scholars like Vine Deloria Jr. or N. Scott Momaday are compelling (see Hagen, Respect 30). Compelling, also, is Miss Hagen’s emphasis on place as the authorizer of Story as opposed to time:

But if we visit England, or any other European country for that matter, we start to identify with another century on the very cobblestones. It’s hard to visit the Tower of London without becoming acutely aware that those strange lives in history books lived and breathed—still seem to—in every cell, corner and courtyard. (30)

For Miss Hagen, it is in the connection to place that contemporary humans can attain connection with the generations that precede us, and so find our own place in the context of a greater story. So too, for Aboriginal peoples across this continent, our connections to the generations that precede us, to each other, to the greater community of Creation and to the generations that will follow us are ultimately bound up in our connections to land.

The Navajo, for example, have sacred mountains where they believe they rose from the underworld. Now there is no doubt in any Navajo’s mind that these particular mountains are the exact mountains where it all took place. There is no beating around the bush on that. No one can say when the creation story of the Navajo happened, but everyone is fairly certain where the emergence took place. (Deloria 138)

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29 While Miss Hagen’s philosophical and aesthetic sensibilities had not drastically altered between 1972 when she co-wrote Respect for Acting with Haskell Frankel and 1991 when she published A Challenge for the Actor, she revealed to her students in a Master Class (conducted July-August 2000 at the Robert Gill Theatre in Toronto, ON) that the older text was “full of mistakes.” As well, she reveals in her Introduction to the 1991 text that many of the exercises notated in the earlier text had been subject to misinterpretation by readers and that the 1991 primer presents the exercises with greater clarity, precision and detail (see Carter, “Poisoned” 299-340).
Miss Hagen was of Teutonic stock. The Stories she loved—and to which she chose to dedicate her voice—had been penned by Chekhov, Shaw, Brecht, Ibsen, Strindberg, Shakespeare, and the Euro-American writers who were her contemporaries. These were the Stories of her world, her history, her worldview and ancestry. These were the stories she chose to tell; these were the stories in which she searched for self and meaning—for the relationships and responsibilities that bound her to communities (physical and metaphysical) beyond herself. These were the stories in which she searched for human truth. These were not the Stories she insisted that others tell. But as she has taught so many generations of actors, we find ourselves in the Stories of our nations. And if we are lucky, we earn the privilege of becoming Storytellers by immersing ourselves so deeply therein that they become part of us and we become a part of them (see Carter, “Poisoned” 309-310).

The afore-and-briefly-mentioned parallels command attention because they demonstrate how some of Miss Hagen’s key teachings intersect with Native-authored pedagogical and aesthetic models: these models constitute a centre around which my investigations into the work of Spiderwoman Theater will revolve, because the rediscovery, formation, and/or implementation of such models constitute crucial steps in the process of decolonization. And the Story of Spiderwoman Theater writes itself, for me, like a communitist “morality play”—an Every Indigenous Man or a People’s Progress—through which a path towards personal and communal decolonization may be painstakingly charted.

It is important to state, however, that while Miss Hagen’s methods may intersect with Indigenous pedagogies of decolonization, there are crucial differences between her objectives as an artist and the objectives, which her “key student” Lisa Mayo and her sisters came to adopt as they came to discover self, meaning, and their truths as Kuna/Rappahannock women. Hagen, ultimately, did not advocate for a “process of decolonization” through the work. Indeed, such a concept could not be said to have been part of her personal or artistic lexicon. As Mayo has testified, Miss Hagen knew little to nothing about the Indigenous peoples of this continent. Certainly, she did not know what to make of her own American Indian scholarship student; she “didn’t understand Native people,” and she consistently demonstrated this
early on in their relationship by casting Mayo in African American roles, believing these to be the only roles in which Mayo had a chance to find employment (Mayo, Interview, 2007).

Furthermore, although Miss Hagen dreamt of building a theatre *cum* training-ground that would nurture the spiritual life of America, her adopted nation, she was very careful to separate her work from any therapeutic function (Hagen 49-50). Art might facilitate some healing in its witnesses; but her process was engendered in the pursuit of artistic excellence; and she deplored the notion that artists might utilize her methods to any therapeutic effect for either themselves or their audiences. For Hagen, art and medicine were distinct and separate enterprises. America’s dis-ease, in her estimation, consisted of a deadly combination of spiritual malaise and intellectual laziness. And while she hoped, through revelation of human truth, to stimulate an enervated public, she was not explicitly and expressly engaged in the task of healing communities through her artistry or intervention.

While the Story of the Miguel sisters, their works, audiences, and the artists they developed is inextricably entwined with Miss Hagen’s Story and the process she developed in her pursuit of artistic excellence; and while the Miguel sisters hold themselves to the highest standards of artistic excellence and professionalism, it seems to me that one of the most striking differences between the artists of Spiderwoman Theater and this significant “inspirator” speaks to the dichotomy between Western knowledge systems and Indigenous Knowledge (IK): for Spiderwoman Theater (as for myriad Native artists), art *is* medicine. And it is a medicine of which the communities of contemporary Indigenous peoples in North America have a dire need. Our artists, however consummate, are not simply in pursuit of aesthetic excellence or of the revelation of “human truth.” Although these are certainly key elements in their works, our communities require much more: across Turtle Island, Indigenous peoples continue a centuries-old battle to survive.

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30 I borrow this term from Miss Hagen. It is a term she coined to describe her late husband, Herbert Berghof in the dedicatory page of *A Challenge for the Actor*, published in 1991.
Miss Hagen’s artist was responsible to “an art form” (Hagen 20), and the art form to which she was responsible was a “communal adventure” (19, emphasis added). Although the Miguel sisters own their responsibility to an “art form,” they have created, through Spiderwoman Theater, a communitist project, thereby extending their responsibility to communities beyond their own communal adventure. As Lisa Mayo stated more than a decade ago:

> I think healing is the main thrust of what we do. Not healing like a spiritual people who are trained and inherited that, no, but we have a feeling for what it takes to make us feel bad about ourselves. I mean, all of us Native people. Why don’t we feel a part of what is going on around us? If we do go into the mainstream society, how do we feel about that? Do we feel as though we’re “sell-outs” and so on? I think that the main thrust is to make ourselves feel good, to realize that we are wonderful, wonderful people. Our ancestors gave this all to us and that’s what we do.

> In almost all our work, there is a theme of survival. That layer is there. It’s not only survival for us but also for the future. We’re concerned for future generations and as we get older now we’re passing on our information to younger Native people and young people in our own families who have decided to enter theater as a profession. So we’re passing it on. That’s part of survival, too. (qtd. in Abbott 179)

Spiderwoman exercises its responsibility beyond the purview of the stage. Beginning with their first production *Women in Violence* (1976), which toured Europe through 1977, the Miguel sisters infused their art with activism. This piece began as an exploration of violence in women’s lives; and during the process, the sisters began to examine the violence in their own lives, “as far back as [they] could remember” (Abbott 170). Ultimately, *Women in Violence* was autobiography transformed through process into a story that spoke to women across the globe. During the One World Festival of Theatre in Nancy, France, an audience member was inspired to tell the Miguel sisters her own story. She had been brutally beaten in the streets by an inebriated man. And although her attacker had been apprehended by the Police and identified by her, he had been released with no penalty (Canning 96). The Miguel sisters told her story night-after-night during performances, solicited their audiences for ideas, and organized a mass demonstration at which they performed and at which, because of their intervention, feminist groups across the French provinces were able to network and mobilize (Canning 96).
Since this time, the Miguel sisters have continued their communitist projects, facilitating talking circles and workshops, developing the political and artistic voices of children with the American Indian AIDS Task Force, and offering up the Storyweaving Process (through workshops) as a tool for Native peoples to generate art, honest dialogue, and healing.

This is what I mean by a legacy. We went to Salt River, and in Salt River they told us, “Well it’s just a lecture-demonstration. Do what you want.” So we got there, and we realized that the whole community turned out. This was more than just a lecture-demonstration. The chief or chairperson was there, the curator. They brought food. It was a big deal. Afterwards we went into the audience talking to people. Women were coming up to me and saying, “That happened to me.” “That happened to me, and I got pregnant.” “This happened.” Women were just surrounding me, and then one of the women said, “We should really have a talking circle....”

.... Women came in from Phoenix for this talking circle. They wanted to know how. How do you do this? How do you take these stories? What do you do with these stories? How do you get to these stories? But more than that, everyone talked in that circle. (M. Miguel, qtd. in Haugo, “Weaving” 223, emphasis added)

The Miguel sisters, in stark contrast to Hagen, adopt the role of “protector” when facilitating workshops and talking circles or when leading a rehearsal. While Uta Hagen forcefully decried acting instructors and directors who push performers into accessing experiences and memories which they have not yet processed without any concern for their actors’ emotional/psychological wellbeing and without the skills to close what they have opened or fix what they have broken, she often took no special pains to protect the fragile emotional core of even the students she considered most gifted--her “key” students. For instance, Lisa Mayo has testified that she was often afraid of Hagen and had a “love-hate” relationship with her (Interview 2007). Through Hagen, she found herself and was able to develop her talent; but although Hagen respected her considerable talent (“you are wonderful!”), she did not always show its possessor like respect or treat her appropriately: she would speak of Mayo with a third party, often as if Mayo were not standing in the same room with them. And (likely out of ignorance as opposed to malice) she and her husband would greet Lisa with “war whoops”—subjecting their “wonderful” student to the same aural assault endured by her and her sisters all through their childhood (Interview 2007).
Similarly, Muriel Miguel has decried those who forcefully “open up” Native performers in the course of studio work or rehearsals. Such instructors and directors neither know nor care about the psycho-spiritual state of their student-actors; nor do they possess the ability to suture the wounds they have opened:

I’ve stood by and watched non-Native directors, famous directors, open [Native actors] up, take things out, examine them, and put them back in a different way and not in a good way. There was no taking care of these Native people. So, if you opened them up and you showed everything, then you expected them to show up at ten o’clock the next day and you’re shocked that they went on a drinking spree? You had no idea who these people were. (M. Miguel, qtd. in Haugo, “Weaving” 231)

Hence, self-determination—control over process and product—is necessary for the Native artist, if s/he is to transcend exploitation and/or profound psychic wounding at the hands of irresponsible and culturally insensitive “professionals” who feel no sense of responsibility to their students, colleagues, or audiences (Haugo, “Weaving” 231). And while Muriel Miguel has declared the need, as an American Indian artist, to protect herself, her process, and her product and has so done through the formation of Spiderwoman Theater, she and her sisters have shouldered the responsibility to respect and protect others (where Hagen did not) and empower us to protect ourselves: if theatre is to heal our peoples, then healing mechanisms must be built into the process. Those who facilitate the process must be prepared to “walk softly” and to remain conscious of and faithful to the concept of art as medicine.31

31 In February of 1994, Lisa Mayo and Gloria Miguel visited Kuna Yala to research creation stories for their production of *Voices from the Criss-Cross Bridge*, later re-named *The Kuna Project* and finally named *Daughters from the Stars/Nis Bundor*. As well, they facilitated workshops for a local theatre troupe *Ibeler Uagan* (Grandchildren of the Sun) for whom they rented studio space (which the troupe could not otherwise afford). Ultimately for Lisa and Gloria (Muriel was not involved in this production), *Daughters of the Stars* was “about healing, and making [themselves] whole” (Mayo qtd. in Haugo, “Native Playwrights’” 322). And during this time, all of the sisters and their children (even in absentia) received their Kuna names, which are names they share with many Kuna women who have been named for one of the *Nis Bundor*. (The *Nis Bundor* are four sisters from the stars who traveled to earth to teach the Kuna people how to properly conduct their lives). Through these names, the Miguel sisters and their female children have been ‘reclaimed’ (as it were)—woven back into the fabric of Antonio Miguel’s community of origin. These cosmic sisters and the names bestowed upon Kuna women will be more thoroughly discussed in Chapters Four and Five of this work.
Particularly intriguing is a story that Lisa Mayo has told about her work with Miss Hagen several times. Although Mayo tells this story to illustrate both her abilities as a comedienne and the importance of arriving at “appropriate choices” as actors, it highlights a compelling (and perhaps irreconcilable) difference between the Western and Native worldviews. And it speaks to an important phase in the process of self-discovery and to an important lesson in the process of becoming:

We are comedienes, and that’s something we didn’t work hard for. It’s with us, with me, that’s our way. It just makes me laugh because I remember when I was in acting school, I was given a scene from one of the Chekhov plays. It wasn’t a funny scene but people were laughing and I realized that the choices that I had made were very natural choices but they were not right for that particular scene. The teacher, Uta Hagen, laughed. She said, “I wish I could get laughs like that. You are a natural comedienne, but you have to learn to make other choices.” (qtd. in Abbott 174)

Although Lisa Mayo herself never questioned Miss Hagen’s judgment, it is worth considering whether Chekhov himself mightn’t have approved of Mayo’s reading of his scene. Certainly, he was vociferous in his insistence that his plays are comedies, and as his surviving correspondence and the written testimony of Stanislavsky demonstrate, Chekhov did not hesitate to vocalize his irritation, frustration, and even despair at the inability of acting companies (including the Moscow Art Theatre), audiences and even his own family to ‘get’ his humor (see Benedetti 72, 114, 190). Perhaps, Chekhov’s sense of the absurd coincided more closely with a Native sense of comedy than it did with that of his own compatriots who shared his history, language, and presumably his worldview. The point here is not to argue with Miss Hagen’s classroom direction; but it is worth observing that it speaks to a separation of worldview, which ultimately speaks to artistic choices, methodologies, and audience reception. Shared laughter, after all, indicates shared experience and shared perceptions. It is often through our laughter or our silence amidst the laughter that we declare ourselves as insiders or as Others.\(^3^2\)

\(^3^2\) In 1978, Spiderwoman performatively demonstrated this idea during their European tour of *Women in Violence*. As one critic noted, “They retell old jokes at times, children’s sick jokes or sex jokes that seem all in good fun…. Much of the material is funny and handled with a joyous expansiveness but some of society’s ideas of humour look strange when faced with the pointedly forced laughter of the company” (Chaillet 12). As Chaillet’s comments
But perhaps more importantly, the first show in which Spiderwoman’s artists expressly began to tackle questions about who they are as bi-national, diasporic Indigenous women is directly linked to their interest, appreciation, exploration and reception of Chekhov’s works, through which they discovered links between his preoccupations (or those of his characters) and their own:

That play [The Three Sisters from Here to There] came from The Three Sisters by Chekhov. We found a way that we could do it by making all the males big, life-size puppets. We had to do a lot of research into Chekhov. It was a challenge. During our research we discovered that we had a lot of personal information and that we could create another show, our show. The next year, after we did The Three Sisters, we decided to embark upon Sun, Moon and Feather. In Sun, Moon and Feather, parts of our Rappahannock names, we found our own “three sisters.” We were three sisters, Indian sisters, living in Brooklyn trying to get to Greenwich Village. (Mayo, qtd. in Abbot 175)

With Miss Hagen, at the very least, Lisa Mayo found herself as a comedienne and began to find her way into the stories she wanted to tell and the communities for whom she wanted to tell them. Perhaps, Miss Hagen ultimately inspired Mayo with questions relating to her own instinctive reception of Chekhov. Perhaps, it was she who convinced her sisters to embark upon such a profound exploration of his story and the stories he told to a troubled nation. And perhaps through this exploration, the “three Indian sisters” were led back into their own story and their relationships within our own troubled nations.

demonstrate, audiences were lulled into the show’s sense of “it’s all in good fun.” Popular jokes of the day—many of which were egregiously racist and/or sexist—were considered ‘harmless’ in day-to-day life, often told in mixed company and generally elicited raucous laughter. (Indeed, three decades later they still are and do in many circles). The social gest of performing falsely in this instance was juxtaposed with the very real (and decidedly unforced) organic reactions of the educated, “progressive” audiences who were only reacting to familiar instances of what they regarded as normal, harmless and amusing. Throughout the production, these audiences performed their complicity in and tacit acceptance of racist and classist attitudes, which they might elsewhere decry and deny. And this complicity (which seemed so normal and harmless) was highlighted and tacitly condemned by the performing Others who patently manifested their own outsider status (and hence lack of complicity) by offering up a flawed signifier (forced laughter) as an indication of “solidarity” with the laughing “insiders.” The mechanics behind such discoveries in this production will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Two.
Gloria Miguel Comes “Home”

I am an actress

I realize the words

of others

These words are not enough

It leaves a hole in my belly

As a woman, a native

woman

I survive by telling my stories

(G. Miguel, qtd. in Perkins and Uno 298)

At the age of thirteen, Gloria Miguel’s ambitions began to extend well beyond the “family business” of performing in sideshows, medicine shows, and carnivals. In high school, she began to take voice lessons to develop the considerable singing ability she had inherited from her father. Sadly, after high school, her financial circumstances did not permit her to continue her training (during which would have been the most crucial years in the development of her vocal instrument). Instead, she attended Brooklyn College and upon graduation began to pursue a career in early childhood education until her marriage, during which she created a home at Oberlin, Ohio as a faculty wife and mother of two. At this time she was able to take advantage of the Indian Education Act, and so she enrolled as an undergraduate student of drama at Oberlin, studying both classical and experimental performance methods with Bill Irwin and Herbert Blau. She has said of this time:

I studied with Herbert Blau. Basically, It was all Stanislavsky movement. We did workshops and so forth. Bill Irwin was there; he worked with Herbert Blau […] Herbert Blau had a series of exercises where you start out with your body, body movement, standing on your head – just freeing your body so that you would be able to walk on the stage […] I did the regular class exercises, which involved somersaults, walking, standing on your head. I wasn’t very successful in it; but I did it. And we sat down in a circle and talked about problems of the world, problems with ourselves--our life. And we would read certain classics that the college had on their roster--well, that Herbert Blau wanted. And it was an all-morning exercise class. And I got so much out of that: just the
whole idea—even taking the one word “projection.” And if somebody projected on you, we took hours working on our body reaction, our intellectual reaction to the projection and what we would do about it. You know, HOURS—just doing little movements like that. And all those (I’m jumping a little bit now; but I’ll go back)… all little exercises—all those BIG exercises… And then we’d have people coming in as guest teachers; and they would give us their theory. And one year, we had a guy from Europe who did the Kaspar stories. I don’t know too much about that. And we had someone who did Tai Chi and someone who did Kabuki. It was really, really, really cool.

And that mixed with my past life, as being a child of a guy who did these Snake Oil Shows and Circuses and all the Cowboys and Indians in my house singing at night, and all those stories were still in my head. And the way that Kuna men used to come and visit and talk and sing; and I watched that as a child. And so in those exercises of going sense-memory and all that, I went back to that! Those are my connections as a child: listening and talking and feeling how I felt when those old men used to come into the house and sing [she sings in Kuna by way of illustration]—and all different nations, as well as the Kuna. It was really something. But that always came back. That always came back. (Interview, 2007)

During this time, her younger sister, Muriel, who had left the Open Theater, was trying (unsuccessfully) to convince Gloria and their eldest sister Lisa to come together with her to collaborate on a theatrical project. But Gloria was firmly entrenched in her obligations as a wife and mother and in her own development as an artist and as a “human being.”

Gloria Miguel had gone out into the world “seeking intellect” (G. Miguel, qtd. in Elm 3). And she found it in an intellectual Holocaust survivor from Paris named Mathis Szykowski with whom she built a life in Oberlin, Ohio where he had obtained an academic post teaching French literature.

Each of my sisters dealt differently with being Indian. *Gloria tried to be a human being.* That’s what she calls it. That is what Indians call themselves anyway: human beings. But she meant it in another sense, too. She married a Frenchman [Szykowski] who said to her, “Look, I don’t want you to be going around in beads and buckskin.” So she tried to be a faculty wife at Oberlin. She went to the teas and all. But she resented her husband saying, “Don’t you wear beads and buckskin.” “Damn it, why not?” she thought. So she went to tea one day wearing a mola, the way the Cuna women dress. Everybody had a reaction. One of her husband’s male colleagues said to her, “Is that decorative, or are you making a political statement?” She was stunned, and didn’t answer him. Then she thought about it and got angry. “Damn it, this is WHO I AM!” So Gloria tried to be a human being, which is sort of like being everybody, one big mishmash. It’s not quite possible. (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 174-75, italics added)
Perhaps this is exactly what her husband had been trying to do—to “blend” into the great, White “mishmash” of Middle America. As a self-avowed Trotskyite, he would certainly have denied any connection to the God of his ancestors; certainly, he would have eschewed any celebrations, any feasts, any rites or paraphernalia belonging to the worship of that Deity. He had learned first-hand just how dangerous it is to be the Other. Perhaps, Szykowski’s misspoken and inappropriate directive to his wife was an attempt to protect her and his family—to censor identifiable cultural expression and in so doing to transform a family of holocaust survivors (from three distinct nations) into a family of generic “human beings.” And as Gloria was beginning to discover, such a strategy (as attractive and logical as it might appear at first glance) was ultimately impossible. She was already starting to feel that in denying the family, community, and nation(s) into which she had been born, she was ultimately suppressing her own human agency. Without these communities in which to exercise that agency, she could not fully realize herself as a human being.

By 1971, however, several shifts had occurred. First, the Miguel patriarch had died. And Gloria (along with his brother, her Uncle Joe) took the trip of which her father had been dreaming until the end of his days: she enacted his “return home” to the San Blas Islands in Panama to meet the son (her half brother) he had left behind and to discover herself as a Kuna woman with kinship and communal ties that bound her to a world far beyond Red Hook, Brooklyn; Oberlin, Ohio; and the Broadway and Off-Broadway stages of Manhattan (G. Miguel, “Ibeler” 30). Second, Gloria’s divorce finally freed her to leave Ohio and to reunite with her sisters in New York City. Finally, a few years later, Josephine Mofsie (who had also been her friend) was gone—forever. Gloria’s “baby” sister Muriel, who had been Mofsie’s best friend, was grief-stricken and grief-driven. And the force of her determination must have been overwhelming: “If I was going to do the work I was going to do, I was going to do it NOW and it didn’t matter what the obstacles were” (M. Miguel, qtd. in Beaucage 7). Gloria had returned from Panama with
stories of their family, stories from their people, and a large mola\textsuperscript{33} that had been given to her by their father’s family. And Muriel had returned from a Sundance\textsuperscript{34} at which she had received a collection of quilts and fabric during the community give-away that followed the Ceremony. Gathering their voices, their stories, and their talents, the sisters constructed Spiderwoman Theater’s first show, \textit{Women in Violence}. Gathering together their fabrics, they constructed the company’s “trademark” backdrop in which are now layered Spiderwoman’s performance history, the personal stories of the Miguel sisters and the material mementos of all of those who have passed through Spiderwoman. It is, as Muriel Miguel has asserted, “our history, it really is our history” (qtd. in Haugo, “Weaving” 225). And at the very center of that “history” lies Gloria Miguel’s mola – the Story of her homecoming, the Story of being Kuna, being female, making art. At the very center sits Gloria Miguel’s mola--the beginning of a Story of three sisters becoming…. 

But I get ahead of myself here….

\textbf{“I am Woman. Hear me Roar”: Muriel Miguel Closes the Door on the Open Theater}

Muriel Miguel had finally left the Open Theater. Ultimately, as she has revealed, its members (including Chaikin) were all “middle class,” “privileged” people, where she was not (M. Miguel, Interview 2007).

\textsuperscript{33} As molas and the craft of mola making will be discussed at length in Chapter Two, it is enough for now to state that these are intricately designed fabric panels belonging to the traditional dress of Kuna women. Molas are created by layering panels of fabric--one over the other--and cutting away sections of the top layers to reveal precise sections of the lower layers to effect the design. They vary in thickness, intricacy of design and color scheme; and the process of their construction is handed down from Kuna mother to Kuna daughter as a crucial and mandatory element of her epistemological development.

\textsuperscript{34} The Sundance is one of the most sacred ceremonial obligations practiced by the people of the Plains, including the Arapaho, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Comanche, Crow, Kiowa, Lakota, Plains Cree, etc. While purpose and praxis vary slightly among nations, it is generally conducted as an active rite of prayer to pray for renewal for the lands, waters, creatures of the earth and peoples of the world. For participants, who have pledged themselves (often for several years) to dance in this Ceremony, this is an incredibly grueling act of self-sacrifice. After going through a purification ceremony, participants dance for days at a time, fasting and praying in the hot sun. And while not all Sundance Ceremonies include piercing, this was practiced by some of the celebrants with whom Muriel carried out her ceremonial obligations.
As she began to recognize that her colleagues in the Open Theater were, in reality, tourists to the “bare fork’d” existence (rife with fear, privation, violence and struggle) that was her world, she began to weary of the empty, dime-store idealism that was constantly voiced but seldom lived by the troupe’s members. She had been offended when fellow actors who were still receiving parental support tried to borrow money from her to support recreational drug use--money she needed to pay rent and to feed and clothe her children (M. Miguel, Interview 2007). “Equality” and “ensemble” lost their meaning during tours as some performers were billeted at “fancy hotels,” away from their poorer fellows who had to make do with meaner accommodations. And these words began to ring with even more hollowness as Chaikin himself began to separate himself from his theatrical family, refusing to accompany the troupe to certain, less desirable destinations on their tours (M. Miguel, Interview 2007).

At the end of the day, Chaikin’s commitment to challenging the “big setup” through his art became as hazy and surreal as his politics. Although by 1974, he had embraced the idea of the personal as political, he expressed his conception of community (that is, the collective body through which the personal becomes political) as “my whatever--you know, whatever group …” (Chaikin, qtd. in Canning 55). “Whatever” communities can only breed confused [“whatever”] individuals spouting “whatever” politics. For Muriel, as for other women who had worked with the Open Theater, “whatever” politics was no longer enough. The explorations undertaken in Chaikin’s “whatever community” could no longer

35 Muriel Miguel identified one such colleague by name during our interview. This particular story is tinged with bittersweet irony, because, as it turned out, this fellow ensemble member went on to achieve considerable artistic and financial success in the theatre world. Upon achieving this success, this former colleague remembered those colleagues who had been so generous with him and repaid them very generously with interest! Sadly, as Miguel has laughingly pointed out, she “was not generous” (Interview 2007). This story points to the conflict between middle-class values and the values belonging to those possessing less means. Although, she was not yet a “single parent,” Miguel and her family were engaged in a day-to-day struggle to survive. Had she encountered another in greater need than herself, it is likely that she would have been willing to sacrifice to help that person. And this would have been an incredibly “generous” act. But those who sought to “borrow” from her with no guarantee of repayment were not in dire straits. They regarded her as “mean,” because she would not sacrifice her children’s welfare to finance their fun. Sadly also, it seems to authorize the veracity of an old American cliché: “them that has, gets.”

36 Tellingly, although Muriel Miguel worked on the development of every one of the Open Theater’s most influential productions, including The Serpent, Terminal, Ubu Roi and America Hurrah, she was never mentioned in
approach the answers or generate the questions that drove Miguel, an American Indian mother, living in New York City at the end of the twentieth century. The quiet little girl, who had struggled to create an autonomous self who would transcend the poverty, racism, fraternal friction and parental dysfunction that had contained her childhood, had, by the early 1970’s, come to know herself as an artist in relationship with a community of other artists and as a mother in relationship with her own children and the children of her sisters. The time had come to explore and assert her identity as a woman, as a feminist in the largest and wealthiest city in America in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Then I started to work with these two women who were interested in starting a feminist theatre group. Well, I wasn’t interested in a feminist theatre group. Feminist theatre, what was that? It was this “consciousness raising.” I was busy with my kids and trying to make a living and I resisted. I really resisted. Every week I would go there and every week I would tell them I’m not coming back, and I really started to talk! I also realized I had a lot to say--I had accumulated a lot! These two women were listening to me like I was a real person, that I was important and that I really had something to say and that was amazing to me. (Muriel Miguel, qtd. in Beaucage 6, emphasis added)

In 1972, Muriel moved from the Open Theater to form Womanspace with Laura Foner and Carol Grosberg. At that time, Foner, a former Weatherwoman\textsuperscript{37}, and Grosberg who was just then coming out as a lesbian were untrained theatre practitioners. They were, however, invested with a powerful commitment to work with other women on behalf of the burgeoning feminist movement and to the practice of Consciousness Raising (CR). These were the heady, early years of the second wave of the feminist movement. And CR sessions during which singular, personal experiences were articulated as stories, received by a group and answered by other personal stories had been largely embraced by feminists as a praxis that would connect the individual with herself (self-exploration and identification) and with a

Chaikin’s book (which lists and pays tribute to many members of the collective) or in the credits to any (but one) of the published plays.

\textsuperscript{37} The Weatherwomen were a fringe group of extreme feminist radicals. Many of these women resorted to violent acts (i.e. arson and bombings) to communicate their message.
community of her “fellows.” For feminist theorists and historians, “The very act of focusing on women and asking them ‘to speak for themselves’ [presented] a challenge to traditional male-centered history” (Armitage, qtd. in Canning 18). For theatre practitioners, including many of the early feminist theatre companies and mixed-gendered alternative companies that sought to challenge the status quo, collaborative exploration through CR/storytelling challenged the authority of the playwright and freed the creative spirit of the performer from the aesthetic “superstructure” that constrained the impulse of the actor’s instrument and contained its expression. Julian Beck, co-founder of the Living Theater and champion of the “Beautiful, Non-violent, Anarchist Revolution,” has (without naming it) identified CR as an essential facet of collective creation:

A group of people come [sic] together. There is no author to rest on who wrests the creative impulse from you. Destruction of the superstructure of the mind. Then reality comes. We sit around for months talking, absorbing, discarding, making an atmosphere in which we not only inspire each other but in which each one feels free to say whatever she or he wants to say. Big swamp jungle, landscape of concepts, souls, sounds, movements, theories, fronds of poetry, wildness, wilderness, wandering. Then you gather and arrange. In the process a form will present itself. The person who talks the least may be the one who inspires the one who talks the most. At the end no one knows who was really responsible for what, the individual ego drifts into darkness, everyone has satisfaction, everyone has greater personal satisfaction than the satisfaction of the lonely ‘I.’ Once you feel this—the process of artistic creation in collectivity—return to the old order seems like retrogression. (Beck 46)

Once again, Muriel Miguel was immersed in a process she had learned at the kitchen table in Red Hook, Brooklyn and knew “from the toenails up”—sharing stories, discovering questions, seeking connections. Ultimately, despite her earlier resolution to abandon the group, she was compelled to return. While her Womanspace-collaborators lacked the skills and training of her earlier collaborators at the Open Theater, they listened to her and acknowledged her. And as she has testified, that these women demonstrated (at least initially) respectful recognition of Miguel as a fellow human being was “amazing” to her. Apparently, their simple regard was simply not treatment to which she had become accustomed elsewhere in her professional life. So, Miguel kept coming back. For eight months, she continued to share experiences with Foner and Grosberg. And out of this, emerged Womanspace’s first and only production.
Cycles, created over eight months in 1972, toured the Northeastern United States throughout 1973. It was a piece that turned its focus upon a facet of each member’s identity (the class and race barriers separating one from the other) to discover “some common ground” and to “work out [her] problems in dramatic terms” (Chevigny, qtd. in Canning 94). However, despite the supportive reception that greeted this project, the show did little to alleviate “their problems.” If anything, it highlighted them. And these problems ultimately hinged upon questions around identity—authentic identity: “I expected them to know that if you say onstage that you love somebody and offstage you hate their guts, at that moment that moment is really true. They were calling me a bullshitter, a hypocrite. They couldn’t maintain that kind of professionalism, that kind of craft” (M. Miguel, qtd. in Canning 94). Miguel, here, is referring to an actual incident that occurred during an offstage argument. In heated terms, Foner and Grosberg expressed their distrust at her ‘hypocrisy,’ which for them manifested itself in her ability to say with absolute conviction and believability, “I love you,” onstage to the same scene partner with whom she was engaged in an offstage dispute. The subject of the dispute has long since been forgotten; it may have erupted around disagreements over labor division, authority, production content, financial matters, etc. No matter. The point here is that Muriel Miguel’s partners chose to privilege the “reality” of petty, day-to-day, material concerns over the expression of something greater on the stage. Perhaps, they were, in the end, interested more in the documentation of daily socio-political concerns (in the manner of Piscator’s agitprop, documentary-style theatre) than in peeling away the layers of material reality to reveal the connective tissues (sympathy, empathy, gratitude, admiration, humility, fragility, brokenness, mortality—love) that constitute the essence of being and the cornerstone of human identity. Perhaps, they were less interested in the art than in the politics. Either way, it seems that there was no room in their philosophy to imagine that the “love” being articulated on stage could be just as real as the bad feelings engendered within a petty dispute offstage. Nor, was there room in that philosophy to entertain the idea that perhaps the very articulation of the word “love” could carry the power to imagine healing and to facilitate the repair of broken trust and ruptured interpersonal relationships.
Charlotte Canning has suggested that Womanspace ultimately dissolved because “group and group process eventually became more important than creating new works” (94). But perhaps, the process had merely revealed, in this instance, that there was no group: Womanspace was not a “community” in which Miguel could realize herself as an individual and as an integral part of the whole. The questions of her collaborators ultimately were not and could not be her questions. They were activists, where she is both activist and artist. This separated them, as Foner and Grosberg vociferously articulated their distrust of her artistry—condemning it as a mask of untruth (designed perhaps to discourage action and activism) rather than celebrating it as a vehicle of transformation and a revealer of truth.

While all were impacted by and deeply concerned with the oppression of women, as “whitestream feminists,” Foner and Grosberg were not terribly concerned with racism or classicism—manifestations of oppression that did not directly impact on them. Nor were they interested in exploring their own complicity in a system that may oppress all but does not oppress all equally. I borrow the term, “whitestream feminism,” from Quechua scholar Sandy Grande. She has noted that there exists a “historical divide” between marginalized women (including those of color and the working poor), because the movement that has purported to represent “universal” female interests has been “not only dominated by white women but is also principally structured on the basis of white middle-class experience, serving their ethnopolitical interests and capital investments” (Grande 125). Indeed, during the meetings, workshops, and CR sessions of the 1970’s, the feminists who gathered to network and share were fueled by an objective to identify and overturn patriarchal oppression. For these women, questions of race and class were inessential. All women experienced the same oppression at the hands of the same oppressor. And within their project, as Audre Lorde has noted, they acknowledged no “need at that time to examine the contradictions of self, woman as oppressor” (130).

In 1990, Miguel stated to Charlotte Canning that ultimately she had parted company with Grosberg and Foner, because “they weren’t committed as theater people” (Canning 95). I would suggest that while she remains a committed, professional and consummate artist, Miguel might have been able to
reconcile herself to Grosberg’s and Foner’s lack of theatrical experience (and artistic sensibility) had she been able to envision herself in community with them. She is after all a highly skilled teacher and director with remarkable vision; and like many great teacher-directors before her, she might very well have transformed these women into fine theatre practitioners. These women may have lacked Miguel’s degree of commitment to the theatre, but the eight months they devoted to the co-creation of *Cycles* bespeaks some commitment and some ability to produce pertinent and compelling work. Ultimately, it appears that Grosberg and Foner lacked commitment to (or indeed, any interest in) the questions that drove Muriel Miguel, questions that did not invite simple answers. A politically aware artist, she had sought community amongst other artists who sought to challenge and transform the status quo. But this community had proven itself no respecter of women. A woman, she had sought community amongst active feminists, but this community had commanded her allegiance without reciprocity; within it, she would find no sympathy for or consideration of her particular concerns as a Native woman born into poverty in one of the wealthiest cities on the globe. Nor would this community undertake or even countenance any questions surrounding its own relative privilege and collective gains bolstered and made possible by race-based exploitation and oppression. The flyer for the production of *Cycles* asserted that the show, which had grown out of the trio’s CR sessions, had been created as a vehicle through which three contemporary females living in the United States of America would be able to “find common ground as political women of different class and racial origin, and to work out their problems in dramatic terms” (Production Flyer, qtd. in Canning 94). Ultimately, it failed. Instead of alleviating their “problems” and building bridges between its creatrices, the experience of touring and performing *Cycles* seemed to exacerbate differences and widen the chasm between them. No longer did race and class separate them; now, the craftswoman was singled out by and forced to separate herself from the activists who condemned her artistry as falsehood and labeled her a “hypocrite.” To fully integrate the artist-self, the female-self, and the American-Indian-self, Muriel Miguel would have to find or form a new community.
Undaunted, Muriel Miguel threw herself into forming the community of which she dreamed: she contacted her sisters, tirelessly working to convince them to collaborate with her on a collective creation for the stage. As lack of funding at this time rendered their participation untenable (Gloria could not afford to come into NYC from Oberlin, and Lisa was seeking paying gigs), she joined forces with Josephine Mofsie and a non-Native feminist performer, Lois Weaver. Out of this collaboration, in 1975, Spiderwoman Theater stepped onto the off-off Broadway boards with a workshop. This workshop was formed around a series of experiments through which Miguel, Mofsie and Weaver explored their spiritual experiences through improvisation, finding connections, layering sound, movement, images, narrative and action and finally presenting their work to a live audience, which the performers also wove into the fabric of the theatrical event, as the women taught American Indian hand games—literally, transforming passive spectators into active “players.” As a brief overview of Spiderwoman’s history (“Origins”) prepared by the Native American Women Playwrights Archives (NAWPA) at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio states, for this event, the performers “rehearsed and structured the basics of their stories and dreams,” and these were brought to life in improvisation during the live event (Spiderwoman Papers, NAWPA).

The workshop was performed at the Washington Square Methodist Church; its “anchor” was Josephine Mofsie who recounted an Origin Story about Grandmother Spider, the Hopi goddess of creation who wove first man and first woman into the fabric of the universe. While she articulated the story, Mofsie recreated the genesis of her people, as she played out the traditionally Hopi activity of finger weaving. Muriel, who had just returned from a Sundance, wove her experience into that of her best friend, while Weaver shared her experience of being brought up as a Baptist and a dream she had had of a sexual encounter between her and Jesus of Nazareth (M. Miguel, Personal Communication, November 2006). And three disparate stories became one as the connections that anchored them were discovered and revealed.

Muriel Miguel identifies this workshop as the beginning of Storyweaving (University of Toronto, 13 November 2006). But this auspicious beginning was marred by tragedy: several months after this
workshop-performance, Josephine Mofsie who was not yet forty-years-old died suddenly leaving behind a husband, five children, and her best friend, Muriel Miguel. And just as suddenly, for Muriel, “it clicked.” If she was going to survive to reach the age of forty, she had better take **action** and push harder to create a community to facilitate that survival; if she was going to form a theatre company with her sisters, she had better “do it NOW” (M. Miguel, qtd. in Beaucage 7, emphasis in the original)!
Momaday’s 1970 pronouncement that “an Indian is an idea a man has of himself” certainly does not imply that Indigenous identity is simply a matter of choice; nor, on the other hand, is it merely an accident of birth. Traditionally, one born into a particular clan of a particular nation was mentored and rigorously trained to become a member of that nation. Choice (with regards to identity and membership) was a non-issue. After more than two centuries of colonization, relocation, intermarriage, and rape in North America, issues around identity have increased in complexity. Many Aboriginal people today are bi-or-tri-racial. Others may be wholly Indigenous, even as the blood of two or more disparate First Nations flows through their veins. For some mixed-blooded peoples, these issues can invite pain, shame, a sense of isolation/alienation; for others, they challenge the individual to ‘bust borders’ and to melt down metonyms by de-essentializing identity: Mestizo performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña (with whom Monique Mojica and Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble have worked) has designed processes to teach artist and audience member that identity “can be altered or reshaped at will through conscious and strategic use of costumes, makeup, props” (Gómez-Peña 117). Perhaps, then, Plato was correct: inner life arranges itself to mirror outer life (Republic, Book III 15). We become the masks we wear.

Of course, these “masks” must live. On stage, the efficacy of a performer is not assessed by outward appearance alone. The audience has not come to see an artful mannequin. So too in life, while outer accoutrements may aid in human transformation, their influence is indirect. In the most prosaic arenas of life clothing, wigs, makeup, footwear, hair extensions, dental veneers and breast implants influence gesture, behavior, action and interaction. In life, the idea (the imagination of self) engenders the mask; and new masks require the human host to act in ways that will accommodate them. And as so many instances of American Indian and First Nations Oratory teach us, human action not only reveals human essence but also transforms it. Just as Method acting instructors (like Uta Hagen) remind us that we cannot convey--we cannot “play”--a state of being (i.e. being in love) and that an audience can only
perceive and appreciate a character’s essence/internal state as it is realized in action (i.e. what does one do when one is in love?); and just as European folklore runs amok with lumpish, lowborn boobies who, by virtue of their actions, transform themselves into sages, heroes and princes; so too identity, in Anishinaabe teachings, is ultimately formed not in the regalia that we wear or in the ceremonial paraphernalia that we possess but in the actions through which we play out our relationships with the world and the inter-relationships between human and “mask.”

In the 1990’s, Oogima Ikwe, an Anishinaabe woman from the eastern Upper Peninsula of Michigan, offered this teaching to demonstrate that who we are (cultural identity) is determined by what we do and that symbol without praxis is ultimately empty:

   I said, “what happens if all the pipes were gone?
   Creator just took all the pipes away?
   No more eagles,
   No more eagle feathers,
   No staffs,
   No pretty regalia…
   No pretty regalia,
   No fans,
   No breastplates,
   No nothing….
   Are we not Indian anymore…
   Where does my identity lie?” (Ikwe 188)

Pre-occupied with these questions, the Anishinaabe speaker, finally goes to the water, lays her tobacco, and waits for a teaching. And the water gives her this:

   You are the pipe,
You are the drum,
You are the feather,
You are the buckskin,
You are the Earth,
You are all of these things.
All these things are is a reminder,
A tool. (Ikwe189)

These “tools” or symbols remind us of who we are and, as the water goes on to teach Oogima, they do not bring us into realization: as human beings, we realize ourselves through action.

If we were really walking in that way we’re supposed to be walking,
Or should be walking,
We won’t need those things,
‘Cause we’ll be those things. (Ikwe 191)

It is necessary to return to this idea--the process of “becoming” (Indian)–here, because it is precisely at this point that Muriel Miguel took the first crucial steps of her transformational journey from an artist, who also happened to be an American Indian woman seeking to locate herself in the feminist struggle, into the Kuna co-founder of and driving force behind a “Womanist” American Indian Storyweaving collective that would inspire, impact, and transform Indigenous and mainstream communities across the globe for more than three decades. It began with an idea, which generated an action, which generated another, which…. The “mask” took hold, and there was no turning back.
Survivance: Act One

In 1975, on the heels of Mofsie’s death, Muriel Miguel suddenly received a grant for which she had applied while she had been working with the now-defunct Womanspace. She channeled these monies into the mobilization of a new, multi-racial, feminist collective. And Spiderwoman Theater was born. In the midst of grief, pain, love, and irrepressible life, its creation was an act of survivance, through which the Miguel sisters and three non-Native colleagues wrote their resistance to the violence they had effected and by which they had been affected. Muriel had (perhaps since the death of Mofsie) been thinking about “violence in Indian homes” (University of Toronto, 13 November 2006) and about the verbal and/or physical violence that every woman who lives in an urban centre can expect to encounter on the streets at least once in her life. Certainly, on the eve of a “family reunion” that would bind the Miguel sisters together within an intense, professional and creative partnership, which would span three decades, Muriel Miguel was undoubtedly thinking about the violence that had occurred in their childhood home and about the violence that had occurred in her marital home. After all, to effect healing within the greater community, these sisters would have to heal themselves as individuals and repair the sibling relationship, which had been compromised by the domestic explosions that had been brought into being by an alcoholic father and that continued to reverberate throughout the consciousness of each.

It was during the AIM [American Indian Movement] and I realized how angry I was and I tried to identify it. It was very hard trying to understand my anger that would snap out of nowhere. There was this kind of frustration in walking down the street and being angry at men. I really had to examine it or get killed before it killed me. (M. Miguel, qtd. in Beaucage 6, emphasis added)

But this piece was not simply to be a diatribe that positioned women as victims/survivors of violence; this was not a show about women and violence. And while some of the questions that preoccupied the women of Spiderwoman Theater dealt with personal (or witnessed) experiences that ranged from the petty, quotidian humiliations of verbal catcalls to which most women had (and have) been subjected on public thoroughfares to domestic violence, muggings, rapes and murders, other—perhaps,
more pressing--questions brought to the table by the Miguel sisters dealt with the physical and mental violence we, as women, perpetrate upon ourselves and the violence we perpetrate upon each other.\textsuperscript{38} It was to be an exploration of women \textit{in} violence--an utterly honest examination of human brokenness that held up a mirror to the “oppressed” and reflected back the face of an “oppressor.”

Throughout history women have absorbed the horror of wars, street violence, domestic brutality, and personal intimidation. \textbf{Hence we ourselves have become part of the violence} and have been denied a constructive outlet for expressing our horror. (\textit{Women in Violence} “Publicity Flyer,” qtd. in Canning 167, emphasis added)

Such honest confrontation—however humorous--proved a difficult for some audiences to accept and set Spiderwoman in a liminal space between the three communities with which the Miguel sisters felt the strongest allegiance and in which they had hoped that their work would engender healing and transformation. Although the show received much well-deserved praise and recognition;\textsuperscript{39} and although its communitist possibilities eventually manifested themselves across feminist communities throughout France, in America the reception of \textit{Women in Violence} brought in its wake some controversy and effected polarization within the theatre, feminist, and American Indian communities.

\textit{Women in Violence} marks the historical moment in which Gloria Miguel and Lisa Mayo (mobilized by their “baby” sister) began to use their voices not simply to animate other people’s stories but to create and perform their own stories to save lives--their own and others’. Within the context of a multi-racial, feminist troupe, dubbed by one critic as “a rainbow of American womanhood” (Chaillet 12), the Miguel sisters publicly and performatively asserted their identity as artists, as women--as \textit{American Indian} women--and as feminists, working through problematic questions that spoke to their positioning as

\textsuperscript{38} No script of \textit{Women in Violence} has survived. But for a complete “Scene Analysis” of the show, see Appendix Four.

\textsuperscript{39} In 1977, Luis Valdez of Teatro Campesino saw \textit{Women in Violence} at the Baltimore Theater. As a result of his passionate belief in the importance of their work, Spiderwoman Theater was invited to the One World Festival of Theater in Nancy, France and became the first feminist company to perform at an international theatre festival (Canning 96).
women in the American Indian struggle and as Native women in a struggle that largely privileged the concerns of white, middle-class women. Ironically, this identity and their allegiances would be (often vociferously) challenged by spectators for whom the troupe did not comfortably fit into imagined paradigms of authenticity (as bona fide members of either the feminist or American Indian communities) and by those discomfited by Spiderwoman’s performative interventions, which had been created to reveal, address, resist and repair specific areas of communal dysfunction.

To illustrate, male audience members at New York City’s American Indian Community House (where Women in Violence played on weekends in January 1976) demonstrated their displeasure with the troupe’s work by stomping out of performances or loudly and succinctly vocalizing their critique for performers and audience alike: Indeed, Muriel Miguel recounts a story about a “famous Indian man” loudly exclaiming, “bullshit” during one of the shows (M. Miguel, qtd. in Canning 122)! And one non-Native commentator lamented the fact that while she had appreciated Women in Violence and the fact that it spoke to “the family of women,” her search for American Indian theatre in New York City had gone “unrewarded” (Cartwright 5). Apparently, this reviewer was disappointed by the absence of “traditional signifiers” (read “buckskin,” “blankets,” “feathers” and “beads”) without which she was unable to recognize or credit the ethnic “authenticity” of the Native performers.

Although Spiderwoman Theater definitively allied itself with the feminist struggle, four of its members (the Miguel sisters and Naja Beye40) were women of color. And the Miguel sisters were committed to deepening contemporary feminist analyses around violence by introducing the hitherto ignored layer of race: in North America, legislative policies designed to effect the eradication or

40 Little has been written about Naja Beye, and it seems she has become, for most commentators and archivists, little more than a footnote in the history of Spiderwoman Theater and Split Britches Theater. Beye performed with Spiderwoman from 1976 until 1980. In this year, Beye participated in the initial stages of the co-creation of Split Britches with Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw and Pam Verge. And in October of that year, the foursome performed Split Britches for the Women’s One World Festival in New York City at the Allcraft Center (Case 7). Then, in 1981 Weaver and Shaw invited Deb Margolin to join the project (Case 5). Margolin stayed on with Split Britches to become a co-writer and performer. Currently, an instructor at Yale University and a playwright/performer in her own right, Margolin is credited with being one of Split Britches’ co-founders, while Beye and Verge simply faded out of the picture.
assimilation of Native peoples have left our communities reeling from the horrendous legacy of forced relocations, forced removal of children from their families, violence, biological, ecological, and psychological warfare, land swindles, economic extortion, enslavement, indentured servitude, rape, cultural/spiritual rape (in the form of exploitation and misappropriation) and genocide. And while the Miguel sisters decried the frequent incidents of domestic violence and sexist behavior still occurring in Native homes and communities across Turtle Island, they refused simply to conform to the feminist party line that held the male, as upholder and beneficiary of the oppressive Western patriarchy, to be the sole oppressor of the female.

Certainly, the patriarchal attitudes imported by the Settler nations and imposed upon Indigenous communities have been responsible for much of the societal chaos and individual brokenness that we experience today. But this patriarchy had often been actively supported by and had certainly afforded privileges to members of the very community that now challenged it. European women were among those who taught (and often physically abused) our children in residential/Indian boarding schools, whether these were nuns in the Catholic-run residential schools or the lay-teachers in Protestant or Industrial schools. While most testimony around the frequent incidents of sexual abuse at these schools indicts male perpetrators, countless incidents of verbal abuse, daily humiliations and physical abuse including confinement, severe beatings, starvation and mutilations (i.e. pins thrust into tongues for forming words belonging to Indigenous languages) were perpetrated by both females and males employed by these institutions. Such abuse continues today—albeit, more subtly—in acts of spiritual misappropriation, which, Andrea Smith reminds us, is “a form of sexual violence” (119). Cultural/spiritual misappropriation is a crime of “equal opportunity” perpetrated by both males and females (of both European and Native ancestry). And regardless of the ethnicity or gender of the perpetrator, it is incalculably harmful to Indigenous communities. However, it is disturbing to consider the sheer volume of financially successful “shamanesses” who pen bestsellers that misrepresent Native spiritual beliefs and praxis, who facilitate workshops and who even facilitate weekend sweat lodge ceremonies (for which they charge thousands of dollars). These “shamanesses are, by and large, Euro-American women with no Native ancestry
whatever. Among the most successful and infamous of these are Lynn Andrews (see her *Medicine Woman*), Evelyn Eaton (see her *The Shaman and the Medicine Wheel*), O’Shinna “Fast Wolf” and Shequish Ohoho—to name just a few. Indeed, Spiderwoman’s *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* (1989)\(^\text{41}\) was created at the behest of the Circle of Elders as a performative intervention to address such acts of spiritual misappropriation, and its sly criticism of New Age “icon” Lynn Andrews and her acolytes was met with considerable resistance by some audiences:

Now, the *Winnetou* show was very interesting because we were quite disturbed over many things that we encountered with people who came to see it. We were talking about plastic shamans, and plastic shamans are somebody like Lynn Andrews, if you know who she is. Lynn Andrews claims that she studied with two Indian medicine women, and that she became a medicine woman. She has written [several] books, and she gives workshops all over the country. People come, mostly women, and they love her. She tells you how to use your shamanistic powers.

This is very alarming to Native people. For many reasons. One main reason is that we say, we’re survivors of a holocaust. Many things have been taken from us. Many have been uprooted. Lots of our different ceremonies and rituals were forbidden. Some of them are lost forever. Some tribes are lost forever. Some languages are lost forever, you know. What we managed to keep from these generations is our spirituality. And so, when people come in and try to take that, that’s the last straw. We cannot allow it. (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 176)

Reactions to this show from individual audience members were intense and varied. Muriel and Gloria have both testified to receiving letters from outraged women who accused them of being spiritually “greedy” and who upbraided them for refusing “to share.” Other reactions were less confrontational and more plaintive:

So when a woman said to me, “It’s not my fault if I wasn’t born an Indian. What can I do?” I didn’t know what to say to her. But Muriel said, “Die and come back again. You’ll be an Indian!” Oh God! I really didn’t want to hurt that woman because I felt her sincerity. But she got Muriel’s anger and resentment and hostility. She got it and she backed off, and Muriel said, “Good, let her back off!” (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 178)

\(^{41}\) For a chronological catalogue of Spiderwoman’s productions, see Appendix Five.
This “anger and resentment and hostility” against a non-Native “sister” is certainly understandable. Previous “gains” made by the suffragette grandmothers of the movement have entitled Euro-American women to buy, sell and own lands that had been stolen from our peoples and to vote for national leaders who continue unjust policies against “their” Native peoples, refusing even to abide by the treaties signed by their ancestors and ours (see Grande 150-51). Nor could members of the feminist community distance themselves from their own complicit behaviors--whether these took the form of an “innocent,” ethnic joke, a pointed verbal assault on another woman (be she mother, sister, acquaintance, or stranger), or a violent physical attack on a mother, daughter, sister, cousin, acquaintance or stranger. Indeed, Spiderwoman Theater had already addressed this in no uncertain terms with the production that had catapulted the troupe onto the world stage. In 1976, Women in Violence’s pre-show intervention had transformed the “house” into a stage, in its own right, whereon spectators instinctively acted out and out of their personal animosities and prejudice and were ultimately forced into an uncomfortable reckoning with classist acts of subtle violence, which had become, for them, habitual patterns that informed and directed their social interactions.

**Discomfiting Interventions: A Class (ist) Act**

As the house begins to fill with stylish, coiffed figures, there is a delightful buzz of anticipation in the air carried on the sounds of rustling clothing, bodies settling into seats, hushed murmurs bearing shared secrets, and punctuated with the occasional burst of laughter or joyous cry of recognition. In 1976, the members of this largely female audience possess the political and economic clout to decide how they will spend a Saturday night, to purchase their own tickets to the event of their choosing and to make their way to the venue alone, in pairs, or with a select group of like-minded women. These women can afford the price of admission, and they possess the cultural capital to appreciate and assess the aesthetic and cultural values of the theatrical event they have come to witness. We could be in New York City or Baltimore or Nancy, France. We could be in Amsterdam. No matter. Tonight, this theatre is hosting a feminist audience, which has come to see Women in Violence created and performed by the newly mobilized feminist collective, Spiderwoman Theater. After the show, perhaps, these spectators will gather with their neighbors to enjoy a late supper or nightcap and discuss what they have seen. Others will retire to “rooms of their own” to write about the experience--not in private diaries but for local newspapers, academic journals or to prepare an upcoming
lecture for the classes they teach or the women’s groups they facilitate. It is “ladies’ night,” 1976. And it is perfect.

It would be perfect, except amidst the comfortable and congenial groups of the politically astute, politically active, and like-minded, there is one who doesn’t belong. No, it isn’t a man. It’s worse! It’s a bag lady. Obviously, she doesn’t belong. How could she? Certainly, this human wreck could not afford the price of admission! Nor (judging from her tattered clothing and unkempt appearance) could she have amassed sufficient cultural capital to understand or appreciate the play they have come to see. But what’s to be done? The front-of-house staff makes no move to eject her; she must be tolerated.

“Now, you will behave--won’t you?” It’s a necessary question after all, tinged with the merest cautionary edge. That one obviously does not know how to dress herself appropriately; how can she be expected to behave appropriately? In accordance with her neighbors’ worst fears, the Bag Lady begins misbehave; she’s banging on some old tray she’s brought with her! She’s disturbing the peace! “Shhhh! Shoo! Stop it! Behave!” The audience members are outraged. So intent are they in shutting her up and shutting her down that they are barely aware of the guttural growling on stage, which answers the Bag Lady’s performance and builds in rhythm and intensity as she persists in her outrageous behavior. This is not what they paid for--is it? Then again, maybe it is....

As it slowly dawns on them that this “infiltrator” is part of the show, the spectators begin to relax and perhaps enjoy the fact that they have been fooled. And as the evening unfolds, more revelations will occur; and this group of accomplished, educated and politically savvy elites will be unceremoniously ushered into a hostile universe peopled with “dirty mashers,” big bad wolves, abusive husbands, violent siblings, betrayers, suicides and mass murderers by a rag tag bunch of “clowns,” each of which embodies the “poor bare fork’d animal” beneath the quotidian mask, which conceals and protects every human actor as s/he goes about the business of living. These include a glittering Chameleon in constant pursuit of herself; a Nun whose mission it is to clean the world and the other women in it; the unruly Bag Lady; a magnificent leonine Trickster who wears a second face on her tail and who both uses and blames this marvelous appendage for all tricks and offending actions against others; and finally, a Perfect Woman—a chocolate-box blonde--whose final act in the piece is to strip off wig, gloves and makeup and publicly “come out” as someone other than she first appears.

These clowns, created by Spiderwoman Theater to carry its artists and their audiences through the stories, are archetypes of contemporary feminine humanity. And at the end of the day, these archetypes are vehicles of discovery and revelation. Through their ministrations and interventions, performer and spectator alike are unceremoniously forced into confrontation with themselves and publicly called into account, and the chaotic combat zones where violence plays itself out upon women and where women play out their own violence upon themselves and each other are transformed into healing spaces wherein basic human accountability, responsibility, possibility, value and dignity may be realized, reclaimed and celebrated. Like Nanabozho, Weesageechak, Raven or

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42 Lois Weaver’s clown-character for Women in Violence emerged as a Bag Lady who was placed in the audience from the top of the show. While this description of a performance-night in 1976 is largely constructed from my imaginings, the characterization of the audience and its reactions to Weaver’s character remain true to the account shared with me by Muriel Miguel on 27 August 2007 in New York City during a personal interview.
Coyote, Br’er Rabbit, Homer Simpson, the Zany of the Italian Commedia-cum-“medicine show” in the public square or the low-born European booby who gets the girl, the gold and the Kingdom, these vehicles of primordial human impulse tease, shock, rage, bumble and stumble—audaciously confronting us with outrageous and uncomfortable truths about who we have become as they learn for themselves and teach us through example what we were born to be. (Carter, “Processual” 263-265)

As Muriel Miguel has observed of this Intervention, “It showed exactly what these women [who made up their audience] were—upper middle class. They had no regard for homeless—homeless women. They had no regard for people of color, certainly not women of color” (Interview 2007). Women were supposed to present a morally righteous, united front against a common enemy, but in true Trickster fashion, Spiderwoman Theater had plunged headlong into the layers of an impossibly intricate socio-political web to reveal a vital flaw in its design. And the exposure of this flaw, embodied by the enemy/oppressor within, carried with it the potential to undermine political unity by upsetting the collective assurance in the moral rectitude of the feminist cause and its fighters:

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I do not mean to suggest, fabricate, or explore an outright parallelism here between the transformative agents (Tricksters/Culture-Heroes) of Tribal tradition and the clownish Culture-Heroes of European tradition or Western pop culture. However, it is worth noting that even those figures foreign to Tribal tradition—particularly those disseminated through popular media—fulfill a pedagogical function for their viewers, which, as one-dimensional as it may be, bears some similarity of effect and objective to the functioning of the Trickster-figures in Native discourse. In their immoderate appetites and behaviors and gratuitous acts of creative generosity or self-destruction, denizens of the societies to which they are contemporary see themselves reflected in all their beauty and ugliness and learn something of what it is to be a “human doing” in their world—the world they have created, the world they are creating. And it is important to remember that we (as colonized peoples), along with our children, often gaze into these “mirrors” that mainstream society holds up to itself and are often subtly and profoundly affected by the “reflections” that gaze back at us. It is particularly important to consider this when we consider the lessons they carry. This contemporary “Playboy of the Western World” may be bumbling, stupid, greedy and destructive, but he is never more so than the community that surrounds him: generally, he is a stupid, ugly being surrounded by a community of even stupider and uglier beings. Laughter at his antics is always a signifier of audience-approbation—as if to say, “Yes, that is exactly what I have done/would do.” Such laughter is born of a different spirit than the laughter that denotes teasing (albeit unmistakable) disapproval with which Native observers greet inappropriate behavior in either Culture-Heroes, children who have not yet learned better or contrary adults. And this points to the significant differences between cultures that glorify the individual and the assertion of individual identity apart from the masses of the “great unwashed” and cultures in which individual identity is unrealizable apart from the community of which the individual is an integral part.

Part of the work that belongs to the sovereign reclamation of the Indigenous self is bound up in our engagement with these reflections, particularly with those that seem at first glance to be the most removed from us (or from which we feel ourselves to be at the greatest remove). And these reflections along with Spiderwoman’s strategies towards countering and/or reversing their ill effects will be explored throughout this work.
You have to remember that this was [thirty] years ago. Feminism at that time, and certainly feminist theater, was all holding hands and going off into the sunset, and not making fun of each other and not doing the gesture [giving “the finger”] because that was male-oriented. We did everything like that, we just put our big feet in the middle of feminism and went plop, plop, plop. (M. Miguel, qtd. in Canning 123)

Within the theatrical community, if certain critics and practitioners were dismissive of the work, even as they were forced to acknowledge the profound ways in which it worked on them, this is likely because Euro-Americans and European nationals viewed Spiderwoman’s aesthetic and the distinct worldview that underpins it as “alien” and “inaccessible.” And while this is slowly changing, this troubling and dangerous trend still persists. Indeed, Monique Mojica (who was trained in the Spiderwoman process) observed more than one generation after the premiere of *Women in Violence*:

[C]ritics who see our work are not only viewing it from outside the theatre community, but don’t even share with us common cultural signposts or emotional responses to symbols. Never mind that the form, structures and rhythms of our stories are different. As long as a theatre artist remains true to a non-euro-centric aesthetic, she or he is not likely to garner a good review. What is not understood must be “bad” or (even worse) “inaccessible” to the mainstream. (“Ethnostress” 21)

Arguably, failures to appreciate Spiderwoman’s distinctive dramaturgical structure or symbolic interlay may have been engendered by an utter lack of recognition and a lack of understanding that accompanies that recognition. I suspect that this may be true of the *London Times*’ critic Ned Chaillet who commented, “They offer no coherent structure for the images that make up their critique of violence.” In this 1978 review Chaillet went on to characterize their playing as “chaotic” and “manic,” to dismiss the structure as “fragmented” and to observe that the performance would benefit from the addition of “artistic effects, which they resolutely avoid now” (12). Despite his realization that the troupe presented an embodiment of a “lively sense of community,” and despite the visual signifiers, which included the first layers of the mola that would become the signature backdrop of Spiderwoman Theater; the webs, which sculptor Donna Hennis had suspended throughout the performance space (Spiderwoman Papers, “Origins,” NAWPA); and the final, powerful moments of self-revelation as the performers pared
away the layers of their clown-personas to reveal the women beneath, he remained largely uncomprehending and unappreciative of the aesthetic and philosophical precepts that governed Spiderwoman’s exploration of women in violence.44

This aesthetic, which is characterized by story-fragments whose connections are often initially imperceptible, widely variegated playing styles, and the deliberate integration of flaws into the production design and performative execution, is an aesthetic that binds the lifeblood of the company—in the persons of the Miguel sisters—to the body of Traditional Knowledge they have inherited from their Kuna father and uncles. Furthermore, the artists’ fearless excavation of and descent into the layers of human experience in search of truthful revelation that speaks to the very best or very worst of the human doing naturally invites (and perhaps requires) the ministrations and interventions of a Transformative Agent (an “inner clown, a Trickster) who has always negotiated those layers for and with tribal peoples and whose prime function has always been to teach who we are and who we can be. To understand just how s/he negotiates those layers and reveals, within the chaos, the design that manifests the connections between spirit and material, potentiality and actuality, ancestor and descendant and creation and destruction in *Women in Violence* and other Spiderwoman productions, we must first begin to chart those layers and come to know the decorative and performative “metaphors” that inhabit Spiderwoman’s stages—not as metaphors but as patently literal manifestations of Indigenous worldview and tradition.

44 It is not my primary intent in this project to critique the scholars or the critics who have commented on the works of Spiderwoman Theater throughout its tenure. However, observations around critical reception of the troupe’s productions do help to clarify and re-right misunderstandings and oversimplification, which stem from a serious gap in knowledge around the histories, cosmologies, symbols and aesthetic practices of tribal peoples across this continent.

Admittedly, a “bad” review is not necessarily indicative of the reviewer’s inability to appreciate the aesthetics that govern the works of many cultural “others.” Indeed, this lack of appreciation often shows itself more prominently in “good” reviews to more dangerous effect. Again, as Mojica has observed, such positive publicity may be pat and patronizing. In such instances, because the reviewers have failed to understand a work, they blithely praise it (fearing either to reveal their confusion or political incorrectness), without offering any serious, constructive critique. In such instances, “the community suffers and the art is not nurtured” (Mojica, “Ethnostress” 21).
Dramaturging the Mola: Mola Aesthetics

Since 1976, every Spiderwoman production has included the troupe’s signature backdrop--a multi-layered quilt (or mola), which has continued to expand in breadth, depth and intricacy over the past thirty years as many of those who have worked with or been touched by Spiderwoman Theater have contributed their own material artifacts to the company’s mola (see Appendix Six). It is important to recognize that this signature backdrop is not only a signifier of the Miguel sisters’ connection to their Kuna ancestry but also a material representation of the dramaturgical and performative processes, which may be seen to evolve from the Kuna mola-makers’ aesthetic. And as Monique Mojica, who is an artistic and genealogical inheritor of Spiderwoman’s legacy, has reminded me, “Everything is based upon the mola in Kuna Yala.”

Molas are an important component of traditional female dress for the Kuna woman, and the art of mola making belongs strictly in the female arena. In earlier times, traditional adornments for the Kuna body included tattoos, piercings and intricate designs painted on the body. But in the late nineteenth century, Kuna women began transferring the designs once used in body painting to hand woven cloth. From there, they began to experiment with appliqué; and eventually they developed a layering process that is an integral component of Kuna philosophy and aesthetics belonging not only to the mola but also to music composition, oratory, healing practices, origin stories, etc. The process involves layering fabrics of variegated colors, one on top of the other, cutting away the upper layers to reveal the color(s) beneath out of which a complex design will emerge, and finally stitching each layer to the base layer with minute deftness so as to render the connections between the layers invisible.

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In 1908, the Panamanian government passed a new law designed to forcefully assimilate the Kuna people. In the years that followed, representatives of the colonial government including local leaders, religious leaders and police personnel escalated their attempts to suppress the expression of Kuna identity by prohibiting puberty and curing ceremonies, communal attendance at the Gathering House, and the traditional style of female dress. Women who dared to wear their molas out of doors (and many did) were beaten, sexually assaulted, jailed or even killed by the police. In February of 1925, the people had been pushed passed the point of endurance. Rising up in violent protest during the Carnival celebrations (which had been imposed upon the Indigenous population) and appealing to the United States for mediation, the people of Kuna Yala were finally able to negotiate a treaty, which is foundational to their status as a sovereign people within Panama today (Howe 146). Since this historic moment, Kuna resistance and victory is performatively re-enacted by the people on the streets annually during public celebrations to commemorate the Revolución Tule (the Kuna Revolution). And amidst the dramatized recreations of oppression and civil disobedience, the “granddaughters of the revolution” proudly wear their finest molas for all to see. So, the mola--a dense riot of texture, design, and color--whether it is being crafted, worn, or displayed is a celebratory marker of Kuna identity, of Kuna resistance, of Kuna survival. In the final analysis, it has become the signifier of Kuna survivance.

**Layering as a Dramaturgical Tool**

We begin our work [in Women in Violence] by finding our own personal clowns. Together we sit on the floor and talk about a theme--“The Clown in Us”--and discuss all different aspects of it, good and bad, sad and happy, etc. Then we isolate a particular aspect which we want to make fun of and keep that as a basis for a clown persona. Using the buffoonery of clowns, we weave our personal stories of violence, fear, anger and frustration into the piece, juxtaposing the reality of our own lives with bawdy humor […]

We usually begin with a theme, someone tells a story, another repeats it, and we work together to transform it into movement or reduce it to its essence. Muriel Miguel, as director, has the final say as to what works or doesn’t, and watches the pieces with an eye to the whole, pacing, etc. **but everyone in the group has a voice and doesn’t hesitate to use it to suggest or express herself.** Spiderwoman papers, “Method of Working,” NAWPA, emphasis added)
Each story—each fragment of experience—selected for inclusion in a Spiderwoman project becomes a layer in the performative mola. As the company sifts through each, reducing it to its kernel or “essence,” the collective mola-maker is cutting away inconsequential details, revealing the shape and color of truthful experience. The “fragmentation” that so mystified critics like Ned Chaillet was the multi-vocal perspective that resists privileging the easy answers provided by a singular author or “authority”—the positivist course to an absolute truth. This is not, however, to suggest that the presentation of a multiplicity of perspectives constitutes an implication that the truth is “relative” or that there is no truth. Rather, this process is a contemporary manifestation of a tribal process (common to many, if not all, Indigenous nations). This process mandates the preservation of tribal history as a communal responsibility wherein each tribal member is expected to learn and retain fragments or “layers” of the communal story and is expected to participate in the transmission of that history, weaving into the grand design the details, shapes, colors, and fragments engendered by his/her memories, reception, and interpretations.

As Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko has noted, with regard to traditions of Pueblo orality, this process is engendered by an “inclusive” vision of the world, which acknowledges that all levels of human experience are relevant and crucial, as it is somewhere within those levels/layers that physical and metaphysical truths may be preserved and recovered. And while Silko addresses Pueblo experience here, her words speak to a foundational philosophy that directs the aesthetics of bead-workers, carvers, wampum-belt-artisans, and mola-makers throughout the Americas as much as it does that of Pueblo weavers and workers in clay:

Traditionally everyone, from the youngest child to the oldest person, was expected to listen and be able to recall or tell a portion of, if only a small detail from, a narrative account or story. Thus, the remembering and the retelling were a communal process. Even if a key figure, an elder who knew much more than others, were to die unexpectedly, the system would remain intact. Through the efforts of a great many people, the community was able to piece together valuable accounts and crucial information that might otherwise have died with an individual.

Communal storytelling was a self-correcting process in which listeners were encouraged to speak up if they noted an important fact or detail omitted. The people were happy to
listen to two or three different versions of the same event of the same hummah-hah story. Even conflicting versions of an incident were welcomed for the entertainment they provided. Defenders of each version might joke and tease one another, but seldom were there any direct confrontations. Implicit in the Pueblo oral tradition was the awareness that loyalties, grudges, and kinship must always influence the narrator’s choices as she emphasizes to listeners that this is the way she has always heard the story told. The ancient Pueblo people sought a communal truth, not an absolute truth. For them, this truth lived somewhere within the web of differing versions, disputes over minor points, and outright contradictions tangling with old feuds and village rivalries. (31-32)

Certainly, the troupe’s director Muriel Miguel was (and continues to be) very aware that no one person can lay claim to absolute truth. Even in speaking about the history of Spiderwoman Theater, she has been very careful to emphasize that her version constitutes only a fragment or layer of the truth, which cannot be discovered until all possible fragments are presented, explored, and sifted through (Canning 20).

It is undeniable that Spiderwoman Theater was neither the only nor the first theatre collective with a mandate to produce and present collaborative creations built upon the stories and improvisations of its members. But it is important to remember that there exists a profound difference between Spiderwoman Theater and the Open Theater with which Muriel Miguel began her professional career as an actor, or the Living Theater within which the Open’s architect had come to embrace the collaborative process. The elements of their working methodologies may bear compelling similarities when considered, each for itself, as points on a map. But when these points are connected to represent the path of the artist in its entirety, when the destination (product) is finally revealed, the disparity in journeys and destinations—the processual differences between these seemingly similar companies—prove to be even more compelling.

The works of the Living and Open Theaters were directed by a singular authority who sought to re-configure the fragments and process the layers that they might conform to a singular vision. At the end of the day, the works produced by these companies were “Joseph Chaikin productions” or “Beck/Malina productions,” or they evolved into scripts “authored by” Jean Claude van Itallie or Megan Terry in which a multiplicity of perspectives was ultimately filtered through one lens. By contrast, since its very
inception, although the members of Spiderwoman Theater agree to defer to the judgment of Muriel Miguel as “outside eye” or director with regard to what will work most effectively on stage, every voice is included—every perspective is honored. And as further examination of their later works will demonstrate, stories that may not work for one piece are not discarded; they are preserved and often engender the central questions to be explored in future shows. As the American-born Yoruba director Chuck Mike would say, “No one owns the story” (Centre for Indigenous Theatre, Workshop, October 2002). Everybody—from performer, to stage manager to audience member—is recognized as a co-author of the communal story; everybody is enlisted as co-captain on a communitist mission to discover human truth and heal human brokenness. The late Sandy Crimmins, a former stage manager of Spiderwoman Theater, has testified:

I was involved in the creation of many pieces. My own stories, my words are spoken by actresses, made real by them. Choreography first tried with my body is performed with much more grace by actors. Sound tapes I assembled and home movies I researched as if they were archival footage are part of the mise-en-scene of several shows. Props and costumes I created bring substance to the action on stage. Because I made brocade “armchairs” out of folding chairs and some material I found on the street in Brooklyn; because I hung and gelled lights and made a movie scene from old sheets; because I knew where in the script the actresses would start fighting with each other; because we toured everywhere from Vancouver, B.C., to Roveneimi, Finland; because I saw audiences from an old age home in Baltimore to a woman’s theatre festival in Boston interact with these performers, this group is part of me and always will be. These things keep me forever linked to Spiderwoman, as linked as I am to my family, to my children. (Crimmins 49)

Certainly, this philosophy of inclusiveness realized itself in Nancy, France where the story of one female audience member became part of Women in Violence, transforming a “cultural experience” into a ritual undertaking that transformed spectators into actors. These “actors” were invited to participate in “post-show performances” wherein they traded stories, perspectives, and solutions; wherein they sifted through the layers; mobilized as a community and “acted out” a protest that would eventually effect

47 Sandy Crimmins passed away at the age of fifty-five of an apparent heart attack in July of 2007. At the time of her death, she was an established poet in the Philadelphia area and a member of Philadelphia Stories’ editorial board.
concrete changes in French herstory. And in publication, Spiderwoman’s works assert themselves as community-authored creations; hence, the troupe is represented by a collective-face, rather than by one singular personality. Tellingly, the artistic split that led to the inception of Spiderwoman Theater (as we know it today) and Split Britches Theater in 1981 occurred within the context of a struggle for directorial control and communal identity. But again, I get ahead of myself here…

Layering as a Performative Tool

*Women in Violence* undoubtedly dealt with difficult and powerful truths; and as Muriel Miguel has noted, the danger of alienating the audience with heavy-hitting didacticism was something the troupe wished to avoid at all costs (M. Miguel, University of Toronto, 13 November 2006). To ‘sweeten the medicine,’ as it were, each actress created a clown character through which the stories would be told (see Appendix Four). Each of these clowns found its basis in the personal, idiosyncratic flaws of its creatrix. This riotous, performative self-confession realized an aesthetic model that is specifically tribal and specifically Kuna at two crucial levels: first, the integration of flaws into the fabric of Spiderwoman’s performative mola is a key element of the mandate of the company with regards to its processual aesthetics. This mandate has been built upon the legacy of Josephine Mofsie, the Hopi storyteller and finger weaver, whose work provided the inspiration for the company’s name: as Spiderwoman Theater’s earliest publicity materials state, “We take our name from Spiderwoman, the Hopi goddess of creation who was the first to create designs and teach her people to weave. In her designs a flaw was always woven in to allow her spirit to find its way out and be free” Spiderwoman Papers, (“Method of Working,” NAWPA).

It is only when we can find and learn to love our brokenness that it becomes possible to transcend that brokenness and finally to free our spirits (see Canning 94). Incidentally, it may be of worth noting that in accordance with Kuna aesthetic criteria while patterns and motifs are generally repeated within a mola, subtle asymmetry in the finished creation is a prime requisite of excellence. The “flaws” that some
assiduously avoid for fear of compromising artistic excellence and marring their creation are painstakingly sought and wrought by Others to effect artistic excellence by weaving into their creations the potential for transcendence and transformation. Second, the layering of a clown-persona afforded the troupe an opportunity to corporeally inhabit the mola—peeling away the layers piece by piece until the woman beneath and her connection to the stories were explicitly and powerfully revealed.

Muriel Miguel’s process to “find” her clown anima for Women in Violence began with a headlong dive into an inchoate space of remembered abuse and impotent confusion. In rehearsals, she gave herself over to a story of one person calling another person an animal. As she did this story, Miguel took corporeal possession of all of its characters shifting moment-to-moment from abuser to abused to witnesses and back again. Eventually, as the story settled into her body and she began to settle on its shape, the story began with the words, “Animal! Animal! Nothing but an animal” (M. Miguel, Interview 2007) as her abused and abased “animal” crawled rapidly across the floor growling a rhythmic score to her physical movements. From this story, Miguel’s Trickster-Within began her outward manifestation: the abused and abased was transformed into a personal allegory of contemporary “Revenge.”

Like the Koshares (Sacred Clowns) in the Pueblo Corn Dances who often hurl abuse (and/or refuse) at Caucasian spectators, this one delighted in settling old scores and “getting people back” (M. Miguel, Interview 2007). She sprouted a tail bearing its own face with which she would whack fellow cast members upside the head or tickle the private places of other characters. And since the offending appendage had a face of its own, Miguel’s Trickster could also ascribe to it a will of its own and hence assign to it all blame, declaring with picaresque sincerity, “I wouldn’t do a thing like that.”

Gloria Miguel’s clown-persona was a fabulous creation protected by a hard-hat and mirrors, which covered her entire costume. These reflected back to all onlookers images of themselves and served to deflect negative judgment back to its issuers. She also wielded a flashlight with which she searched the mirrored layers of her costume to “find herself,” and as she did, Gloria (creatrix and creation) sifted
through the layers of herstory to find her “self” and discover the connections between personhood and personation:

When they call me beautiful, I say, “Oh yes, I’m beautiful.” When they call me exotic, I say, “Oh yes, I’m exotic.” When they call me powerful, “Oh yes, I’m powerful.” So, I’m all those things but I don’t know who I am. I am whatever I reflect and I have to find my self. (G. Miguel, cited in France and Corso 180-81)

The discovery of Lisa Mayo beneath the blond ringlets and form-fitting, formal black dress of the “Perfect Woman” shocked audiences--particularly as they were suddenly able to make connections they hadn’t seen before. The fabric of violence and the composition of the feminist critique thereupon were suddenly “thickened”--made more complex--with the discovery of the hitherto unacknowledged “race layer.” To illustrate, reviewer Diane Cartwright has written of the experience:

Matching each performer with her clown I realized that some of the stories told by American Indian women had involved violence encountered in personal relationships with men. The incidents of male-inflicted violence acted out by the other women had occurred on the street or subway, in their dreams and fantasies. (5)

For Lisa Mayo, this final “reveal” allowed her to “come out [...] to the world as an Indian,” just as the process of creating Women in Violence had allowed her to come in to herself, forcing her into an honest acknowledgement of and reckoning with the “tremendous” violence that she had “completely put out of [her] mind” (Mayo, qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 169). The “perfect woman” who had denied herstory, denied her family, and denied her Indian-ness to breach the gates of middle-class “Elysium” completed her transformation by shoving a pie into her own face, as the other women on stage pelted each other with pies. Throughout her life, Elizabeth Miguel would never discard the “mask” of glamour--of privileged perfection. Indeed, to this very day, she carries herself with the insouciant grace of an eternally ageless diva. But the glamorous façade is cut with a healthy dose of irony, a “little wink” as it were, as if to remind us not to be too overwhelmed by the “mask,” which is as “phony” as the name with which she has always identified herself to her public (Mayo, qtd. in France and Corso 182).
But the slap-stick humour of *Women in Violence* was not simply a “sweetener” to cut the bite of the troupe’s anger—to please and entertain even as it educated and enlightened. Nor was it simply a “weapon” with which to surreptitiously attack the audience as *The Times*’ critic has suggested (Chaillet 12). Rather, in seeking the threads with which to connect the layers of a dense and complex show, the troupe hit upon the idea of weaving the (sadly) commonplace racist and sexist jokes they had overheard or been told or had told about them on the streets, in places of business, or in social gatherings. As the show progressed and the layers peeled away to reveal uglier and uglier truths, so the jokes intensified in brutality and ugliness, sharpening the edges of the design, tightening the weave and pulling audiences into the fabric as they revealed their own complicity (through laughter) and were finally locked into a face-to-face encounter with their own brokenness, the flaws that marred their design. (see Carter, “Processual” 281).

It started with “Why do Puerto Ricans wear pointy shoes? To kill cockroaches in corners.” “How can you tell an Arab at the airport? He’s feeding bread to the plane.” Finally, as the audience was still laughing… “What’s the difference between a Jew and a pizza? The pizza doesn’t scream when you put it in the oven.” We kept smiling, it got worse, we slaughtered them. (M. Miguel, qtd. in Canning 168)

When audiences demonstrated shocked disapproval at its more ‘unacceptable’ jokes, Spiderwoman answered their objections with loud, juicy raspberries. With such lewd articulations, the unapologetic Zanies spit into a collective mask of removed disdain with like disdain: Spiderwoman’s spectators collectively disavowed their participation in the creation, dissemination, or encouragement of verbal atrocities by shouting down the ‘more offensive’ jokes they heard at each performance. So Spiderwoman “slaughtered them” by adding layers of direct accusation and pointed (albeit scatological) demands for personal accountability, because, as Muriel puts it, “people who behave this way pull back and tell you that they are kidding” (University of Toronto, 13 November 2006). Threading the connections between these incidents of absurd, anti-social gest (the “raspberry”) and the more “civilized,” social gest of Muriel’s Contrary, which manifested itself in her repeated protestation, “it wasn’t me, it was my tail,” the troupe challenged the I-dentity of its spectators by shattering the illusions
upon which collective, complacent assertions of the “civilized” self had so comfortably rested. Lest we be tempted to dismiss Spiderwoman’s attitude here as too harsh, too cynical or unfairly judgmental, it might behoove us to remember that troupe had not authored these incidents of verbal assault to fabricate charges against its audience; Spiderwoman merely performed the “scripts” it had collected. Tellingly, some audience members could not or would not recognize or acknowledge their position—our position—in the deadly design that emerged from beneath Women in Violence’s layers of “humor,” racism, and violence. Illustrative of this sad truth is the response of a prominent American female theatre practitioner who, after seeing the show, suggested to Muriel Miguel that she substitute the climactic Jew/pizza joke with a Polish joke (Canning 168). Apparently, for this woman racial epithets against Poles were less harmful and hence more ‘acceptable’ than anti-Semitic humor.

Women in Violence became the catalyst that united the Miguel sisters in a lifelong enterprise of communal artistry and self-discovery. The questions for which they had sought answers spoke to their location in the Miguel family as sisters; to their location in the families they were creating as wives and mothers; to their location in urban America as women and as American Indian women; to their location in the American Indian Movement as female activists; to their location in the feminist movement as wives and mothers who wore makeup when “radical feminists were not doing that” (M. Miguel, qtd. in Haugo “Weaving a Legacy” 228), who identified as heterosexual, and who (despite past efforts) were neither white nor middle class; and to their location within the cycle of damage that they had helped to sustain even as it had constrained, contained and grievously wounded them. The answers they found during these initial investigations led to further questions, which also demanded answers and which compelled them to continue their work together in pursuit of these answers. As Spiderwoman Theater began to work on its second project, a processual pattern was being established that would continue to weave these self-proclaimed “myth-breakers” (France and Corso 115) firmly into the aesthetic and philosophical traditions that inform the construction of Mythos from within their family and nations.

Storytelling is the way you feel and know where you are within your family, your clan, your tribal affiliations, and from there into the history of how you fit into the world.
Storytelling starts at the kitchen table, on your parent’s lap, on your aunt’s and uncle’s laps. Storytelling begins there, about who you are…. Then it continues from there about who you are in the family; of where you are as a tribal member, as part of that particular nation; then where that nation is in the community; and where that community belongs in the world. There’s always circles upon circles upon circles. And that’s how Spiderwoman approaches theater, through circles upon circles upon circles. (M. Miguel, qtd. in Haugo, “Weaving a Legacy” 225, emphasis added)

**Spiderwoman does a “Numbah” on Aristophanes: The Circle Widens**

During the European tour of *Women in Violence*, the Miguel sisters had endured questions from skeptical feminists who disapproved of Lisa’s ‘traditional’ domestic arrangements, Gloria’s soft romanticism and her desire to find lasting love and the outer signifiers they donned to showcase their femininity (i.e. lipstick), deeming these to be “out-of-step” with the movement. In 1977, the sisters were still either married or in heterosexual relationships (Beaucage 7). But they were beginning to question these relationships--or more to the point, to question their own agency as it related to sex, power and control within these relationships. Through the process of sharing *Women in Violence* with audiences over two continents, the women of Spiderwoman Theater had begun to recognize the power they were carrying. Before their experiences in Nancy, France where their audiences had been so full that spectators sat in the rafters of the theatre, and where they had mobilized women’s groups from across the nation to challenge the systems and legislative policy that had encouraged and perpetuated violence against

48 According to Muriel Miguel’s current CV, *Women in Violence* was performed in Le Festival Mondiale du Theatre (Nancy, France), The Fool’s Festival (Amsterdam), Berlin, Rome, Florence and Lausanne. In 1978, *Women in Violence* played in London and toured throughout, Italy, Germany and Switzerland.

49 It seemed that no matter what they did, none of the sisters ever felt totally embraced by the movement. Within the troupe, the more radical feminists had rejected men outright and committed themselves to same-sex partnerships. As will be discussed later, the heterosexual lifestyle embraced and enjoyed by Gloria and Lisa disrupted relations within Spiderwoman Theater, creating a split between the heterosexual women and their gay colleagues. Outside the troupe, the mainstream feminists, Muriel has explained to me, did not readily accept gay (or poor or Brown) women into the movement. So it was that she (even before she had come out as a gay woman) and her colleagues within Spiderwoman felt that they were not welcomed by the feminists with whom they had been trying to establish solidarity (Interview, 2007). Similarly, Gloria and Lisa (although self-proclaimed feminists) were challenged outside of the troupe, because they refused to condemn outright the male gender: they had uncles, lovers, husbands and sons whom they loved and respected and whose manhood they sought to nurture.
women, they had been “innocent babes.” As Muriel Miguel explains: “Even though our material was so important to us, we still could not get it through our heads that it was important to other people. It took us a long time to understand that” (qtd. in France and Corso 24). And now that they understood, there were so many questions….

Did they or had they given over their power to the males in their lives? How did that feel? Were they indeed “out of control?” Were they who they wanted to be within these relationships? Who did they want to be? Again, the troupe began to explore these questions through Story—personal anecdotes, family legends, and origin stories. Where nasty racist and sexist jokes had been utilized as the through-line that connected the variegated strata of *Women in Violence*, the text of Aristophanes’ subversive comedy *Lysistrata* was adopted as the “threadline” that connected the layers of *Lysistrata Numbah!*

Aristophanes’ anti-war comedy was presented at the Lenaia of 411 BC in the twentieth year of the Peloponnesian war. Seven years later, this war would finally end, and with it Athens, as a naval power, an empire and a democratic *polis*. Lysistrata, who bears a common women’s name meaning “Disbander of Armies,” mobilizes a general strike of Athenian and Spartan wives and mothers against their warring men. These women refuse to perform their domestic and caretaking duties; more importantly for the purposes of this comedy, they refuse to perform their conjugal duties. All lovemaking ceases in the war zone. And those women who are beyond their childbearing years “freeze the city’s assets” and cut off military funding by occupying the Acropolis in which Athens’ treasury was housed. The creative, life-bearing force of the matriarchy is pitted against the destructive impulse of patriarchal forces, and in Aristophanes’ fantastic comedy the armies, which threaten the continuance of the *polis*, are overwhelmed by the force of frustrated sexual desire; life and love (or at least, sex) defeat the forces of hatred and destruction.\(^50\)

\(^{50}\) Muriel Miguel is still in possession of a notebook, in which is written the signed “oath” taken by all the cast members at the beginning of the rehearsal period for *Lysistrata Numbah!* As director, Muriel had insisted that the members of her creative team begin the project of taking back the power they had given over to the men in their
As a rollicking, irrepressible embodiment of feminine (pro)creative power, Spiderwoman’s Lysistrata (played by Lisa Mayo) was a belly dancer, decked out in a bright red wig, purple brassiere, and diaphanous skirt. Resisting the myth-borne expectation of American Indian women in “feathers and beads,” the Miguel sisters and their troupe, in the words of one reviewer, “attack[ed] feminine stereotypes by simply parading them in all their lurid, tit-shaking ugliness” (Shewey). And they exercised their personal power with Lysistrata by writing who they wanted to be on their bodies from the Stories that contained their genealogical, spiritual, political, and social lives--stories that spoke to their Kuna essence, their female essence, to their lives as daughters, as wives, and as women in postmodern America. The intersections between Attic origin stories, interlaid within the foundations of the West; feminine creative power, interlaid within the foundations of the world; and feminine resistance to patriarchal impulses that have long worked to control, suppress, or destroy that power were made manifest through the exploration and retelling of Creation stories that had been passed down to the sisters by their Kuna father and uncles and by finding a way to embody these stories, re-creating the “beginning of the beginning of the beginning” through the present first person of an eternal and enduring feminine voice.

1st Voice: I woke up. [Yawning, stretching, childbirth-crying noises.] Out of me came blood, running down my legs and on my hand. [More cries.] Out came a head, then a body, and it ran away. [Cries. One woman emerges from between the legs of another.] Another head, another body, and it ran away. Another one, another one, another one, -- [Repeated throughout speech of 2nd Voice.]

2nd Voice: A great tree rolled around on its axis, and from its branches flows woman man, bird, beast, and the great tree rolls around on its axis, and from its branches flows woman, man bird, beast –

[The serious ritual dissolves into the “Indian Love Call...”] (Spiderwoman, qtd. in France and Corso 115-16)

lives by abstaining from all sexual contact until the completion of the rehearsal period (M. Miguel, Personal Communication, 7 July 2007).
Ultimately, this searing social commentary peppered as it was with peanut-shaped dildoes that “sang” Sparta’s national anthem, painful testimonials of humiliations visited upon the female artists by men, narrated advertisements for Oil of Olay, and country-western parodies (“Stand by your man. Give him two arms to fracture / And something warm to punch on…”) pushed Aristophanes’ script beyond his comic restoration of a patriarchal--albeit peaceful--status quo towards a more logical--albeit subversive--lesbian conclusion. And within this company that they had formed with Naja Beye, Pam Verge and Lois Weaver, the Miguel sisters began, with this show, to find themselves not only as actresses, writers and American Indian feminists but also as Kuna women written into and writing on to the Kuna stories to which they had listened as they sat upon the laps of their father and uncles at a kitchen table in Red Hook, Brooklyn. As well, Muriel, who had heretofore identified herself as the troupe’s “final eye,” claimed her rightful title: “In the beginning, I didn’t want to be called a director, so I was called a “final eye” and I realized I’m a director. I’m directing this” (Miguel, qtd. in Beaucage 7). Indeed, as the troupe worked through their “numbah” on Lysistrata, Muriel may very well have begun to explore the essence of her true sexual identity as she followed the stories, which connected her to her own female power and to the possibility of tapping into that power by walking away from the men who had abused her and finding love and companionship with other women.

**Collective Identity**

From 1977-1980, the six-member troupe continued to perform and tour *Women in Violence* and *Lysistrata Numbah!* throughout North America and across Europe. At home in New York City, the core members (Elizabeth, Gloria, and Muriel with Naja Beye, Pam Verge and Lois Weaver) continued to develop shows for their touring repertoire that would identify the group in no uncertain terms as an inclusive Feminist (with a capital “F”) group largely informed by and strongly allied with a lesbian feminist agenda. In 1978, Spiderwoman presented its *Trilogy*, which included *Friday Night, Jealousy*, and *And My Sister Ate Dirt* for NYC’s Theater for the New City. Even at this early stage in the formation and development of
Spiderwoman Theater, it seems to me, issues around identity, around Story, and around Communitism (seeking one’s *self* through the discovery of one’s relationships within a specific community) were already manifesting themselves and creating subtle divisions within the group, leaving Muriel to sift through their differences and to make manifest the connections that would weave Spiderwoman’s members into a tight community of artful activists.

As is characteristic of every Spiderwoman production, *Trilogy* was built upon the collective efforts of Spiderwoman’s six member-artists, but it relied less on the intensely active collaboration between all six than preceding and subsequent productions. Lisa Mayo and Gloria Miguel each created and performed her own solo piece, while Verge, Weaver and Beye created and performed *Friday Night*. All three pieces were produced under Muriel’s direction. And with the multi-dimensional clarity that seems characteristic of our examinations of things past, the isolation of Gloria and Lisa from the others (with Muriel running interference in between) seems (at least, coincidentally) portentous: within three years, just such a split will again occur, pitting the stories, concerns, and objectives of Gloria and Lisa as American Indian women against their White feminist colleagues. Once again, Muriel will be set “betwixt and between.” And at this time, it will no longer be enough for her to “run interference;” at this time, she will be obliged to **make a choice that rests upon her identity, to make a choice upon which her identity rests.** And that choice will rest upon (as will her identity) the community with which she chooses to ally herself—the community she chooses to serve.

Described by one critic as a “trio sonata” (Sainer 99), *Friday Night* was an interdisciplinary presentation that interwove the inner lives of three women just trying to get through one night. With *Jealousy*, Gloria Miguel presented a “narrative portrait” (Sainer 99) of a woman working her way through episodes of jealous, blinding rage, which threaten to unhinge and/or consume her as she imagines herself as a “face like a fist” and as she strategizes the ways in which she might gain absolute power over her lover; at one point, she even considers imprisoning him. But as she works her way through this all-consuming rage, she begins to realize that she does not need to fantasize about her power: She *is*
powerful, and the most efficacious expression of this power emerges from self-mastery. It is one thing to control another; it is quite another thing to control one’s self. With *And My Sister Ate Dirt*, Lisa Mayo shared an image of her life as a “cabaret” through a potent but charming cycle of songs and monologues. She had very lately “come out” to her public as an American Indian; she had publicly ridiculed the artful façade of perfection she had constructed for herself; and she had claimed and embraced the cause of feminism (in the face of those who questioned her alliance because of her sexual identity, her role as mother, and her “mask” of glamorous femininity). Chronicling her personal struggles as a young, Native woman growing up in Brooklyn, Mayo wrestled and came to terms with parental rejection, with her need to be admitted to and accepted by White middle-class society and with her sexual identity.

Their *Trilogy* differed markedly from Spiderwoman’s other shows, focusing itself as it did upon the isolation and loneliness that characterize the quotidian existence of contemporary women. And while the three pieces of which *Trilogy* was comprised externalized the inner lives of the women who created and performed them, it would be Gloria Miguel’s *Jealousy* and Mayo’s *And My Sister Ate Dirt* that brought its artists into a more comfortable communion with their isolate selves in preparation for the day when Spiderwoman Theater would become a company of three Kuna-Rappahannock sisters, journeying together through the difficult psychic spaces that had divided and isolated each from the other and forging the connections within and between these spaces to create bonds deeper than skin and thicker than blood.

In 1979, Spiderwoman’s ranks swelled to ten with its *Cabaret: An Evening of Disgusting Songs and Pukey Images*, which they first produced for New York City’s Theater for the New City. Muriel Miguel had originally conceived of *Cabaret* as a one-woman show, but after seeing the gay performance group Hot Peaches while touring in Amsterdam earlier that year, Miguel decided to expand the

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51 Does “dirt” in this title refer to the snails, given to them by Italian neighbors, which Lisa so loved? Her grandmother abhorred the idea of eating snails, because snails consume the “filth of the sea.” Eating dirt, of course, will most likely hearken back to the hungry years of her childhood. Children who eat dirt do so because they are lacking an essential mineral in their diet (often iron), and interestingly, to this very day, Gloria (“my sister” here) is severely anemic.
production and invited four other performers (including Peggy Shaw of Hot Peaches) to collectively interrogate the illusory, impermanent mystique of heterosexual romance, layering saccharine Hollywood imagery atop the sweet decay of the Cabaret. And it was during their work with this production that Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw, who would eventually form Split Britches Theater in 1981, began to explore the idea of working on a piece around Weaver’s (Blue Ridge Mountain) family history, which would become the inaugural production from which Split Britches would take its name.

While on tour in Amsterdam that year, Muriel had come out publicly and to her sisters as a lesbian. And during the New York City run of Cabaret Elmira Miguel passed away. Although a married professional with children of her own, as the youngest girl-child of the Miguel family, Muriel had been pre-cast into the role of caregiver to her mother. As Muriel puts it, by her very presence, Gloria and Lisa had been emancipated: They had been free to pursue the lives of which they dreamt, knowing that there would be one Miguel child to care for her parents and to carry on their legacy:

My sisters left and they became people, White people, and they married, and I was the youngest and I was left at home. We were still dealing with drunks in the family, and at the same time, my sisters were giving messages to me that I had to improve myself. But at the same time, I had to be Indian. There had to be someone left behind that was Indian. (M. Miguel, qtd. in France and Corso 182, emphasis added)

These disparate events around Spiderwoman’s acid indictment of the conventions of romantic love in themselves each comprise an isolate layer/stratus requiring a narrative “threadline” that will connect each to the other and so reveal the larger design and the impact of its inlay upon the identity of the individual and the collective artist. By 1979, the layers of Muriel Miguel’s “design” revealed themselves in a riot of vivid hues that sometimes clashed. She was an Indian woman with intimate knowledge of and connection to tribal tradition who sought, through her own artistic creations, to break with convention and challenge tradition. As a child, her artistic journey had been directed by her older sisters; now, she was their director. She was a feminist who had married, borne children, who wore lipstick, and who believed that abortion is “genocide.” She had felt herself to be “motherless” as a child;
and as an adult, she served as the primary caregiver to the mother who had not mothered her. She had set out to form an American Indian theater company with her sisters and intimate friends—a “poor theatre” that would give voice to the poorest women in America (M. Miguel, Interview 2007). And this American Indian company would eventually include women of all ethnicities, worldviews, and sexual persuasions (wherein American Indian performers represented only fifty percent or less—depending on the size of the production—of the company).

Suddenly, her mother was dead. And who she had been (or should aspire to be) in the maternal gaze had died with those eyes. She had been freed from the role of caregiver to a woman who had been unable to care for her. While still and forever a mother, she was no longer a wife. She had been able to embrace her sexual identity on a continent far from the one on which she had been born, and which had contained and defined her as a woman and as an American Indian. The impact of her revelation of this layer of identity on her sisters was certainly considerable: It is something that has been addressed and redressed by the troupe in testimonials from *Sun Moon and Feather* to their latest and final show (as a collective) *Persistence of Memory*. From 1979 onwards, Muriel Miguel would be an American Indian woman, a feminist, and a lesbian.

Through their work with Spiderwoman Theater, Lisa Mayo and Gloria Miguel had also begun to connect the layers/strata of personal, sociological, political and familial histories to reveal the hues and shapes of their own design: they had committed themselves through their lives and art to their roles as American Indian women resisting the conquest and as female activists in the struggle against patriarchal oppression. While they were initially shocked by their younger sister’s Sapphic alliances, they struggled to accept these and her even as they struggled to remain open and cooperative members of a community whose interests and preoccupations increasingly conflicted with their own and threatened to divert their energies away from the pathways they had chosen to follow in their own quest to find and answer the questions that would lead them to themselves as artists and as human beings.
Before 1979, Spiderwoman Theater had been seen and identified as a “Feminist” theatre troupe, which included many voices and perspectives, three American Indian sisters and lesbian representation. With *Cabaret: An Evening of Disgusting Songs and Pukey Images* and thereafter until its reformation in 1981, Spiderwoman Theater would be identified by critics, publicists and reviewers, from North America and abroad, explicitly or implicitly as a “lesbian” Feminist troupe and often cited for “push[ing] the gay side of femininity” (Holliday). These issues around individual and collective identities had already begun to engender a struggle, which would lead to the 1981 dissolution and subsequent re-formation of Spiderwoman Theater and which would force Muriel Miguel to choose between allying herself with her biological sisters and her American Indian identity or to subjugate that identity in the interest of allying herself with her political “sisters” in the queer, feminist cause.

**The Split**

“We would never choose to live with one another. We’re all so different,” Lois says sweetly.

“No one is perfect,” Gloria says.

“Not even Gloria,” the others say. Muriel leans forward into the circle and says confidentially: “I really hate all of them.” They all laugh. (Kafer 2B)

In 1980, the nine-woman troupe (including seven performers and two support staff) conducted a lively interview with journalist Kathy Kafer to publicize their New York run of *The Fittin’ Room* and the troupe’s legal skirmish with the Marvel Group. The tone of the piece was playful and redolent with Kafer’s admiration, capturing the quirky, intimate banter between seven earthy artists and reflecting their quick-witted, body/bawdy-centered improvisational virtuosity: “The women write all their own material. Or as Gloria says, ‘We throw ideas around.’ (Lisa Mayo, Lois and Peggy Shaw pitch invisible ideas into the middle of the circle)” (Kafer 2B). But beneath the off-centre ribaldry that seemed to characterize relations between the members of this theatre-family, sub-textual tensions among the women were subtly
asserting themselves, belying the spirit of breezy camaraderie that the troupe was trying to convey to its public.

Issues around identity insert themselves with telltale frequency within the chatty performance of group solidarity that so delighted Kafer in 1980. Lisa Mayo re-directs a sequence of childhood reminiscences offered by Weaver, Shaw, and Eva Bouman in answer to Kafer’s opening question, “What are they all about” (2B)? Amidst pithy anecdotes about “imprisonment” with a pack of pigs, bombs falling in Amsterdam and mind-numbing maternal platitudes of middle-class America, Lisa Mayo announces, “I’m Lisa and I’m a heterosexual” (Kafer 2B). This deceptively innocuous non-sequitur would certainly have been read by News American readers back in 1980 as a flippant one liner, perhaps carrying with it an edge of self-parody; but it carries a darker and rather portentous edge (perhaps, only apparent through the 20/20 lenses of hindsight): indeed, the power-struggle that would tear the group apart was already well underway.

Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw, Pam Verge and Eva Bouman were growing increasingly dissatisfied with the heterogeneity of Spiderwoman Theater. The stories they wanted to explore and the community they wished to serve were lesbian. Muriel Miguel had recently come out and had encouraged, facilitated and lately participated in the layering and revelation of a gay feminine essence within the group’s creations. For Weaver, Shaw, Verge and Bouman, it was all quite simple: more of Spiderwoman’s core-members than not were lesbians; hence, it was only fitting that the troupe identify itself through its works and through public declarations as a lesbian, feminist theatre company. Matters pertaining to race became increasingly inconsequential to these women--inconsequential with regard to the focus of the company’s work. The Indigenous origins of the troupe’s founding (and of one half of the troupe’s core-) members were only important insofar as they legitimized the troupe’s use of its distinctive name and allowed it to “legitimately” capitalize upon the exotic identities of its “three American Indian sisters.”

But in the realm of Story, wherein the isolate artist wove herself into the community through, for, and by which she would be identified, a line was being drawn in the sand. On the one side stood those
who adjudged that the sexual preferences, which defined each as an individual, should define Spiderwoman and all “her” works. On the other, stood Lisa Mayo and Gloria Miguel, both of whom have repeatedly stated that although they had come to terms with their youngest sister’s homosexuality, they were not (nor could they ever be) lesbians. They had not signed on to a gay theater company: they were artists, American Indians, and they were feminists. These were the communities that claimed their allegiance. These were the stories they wanted to tell. And “Baby” Muriel was left standing in the middle: Muriel’s task has always been to locate and fabricate the connections, drawing isolate stories into a larger design. Now, in her own person, she constituted the “thread-line” that wove these disparate artists with their disparate preoccupations into a singular female Creatrix--Spiderwoman. Suddenly, she was being pulled from both sides. And the fabric was unraveling.

If there was ever any doubt as to which of the warring factions with which Muriel would eventually ally herself, her eventual choice is evident here in Kafer’s interview, peeking through the overt façade of a united, collective sisterhood; it is woven into the clear dialogical groupings that manifest themselves as the group responds to Kafer’s questions and that “block” a clear division between the Miguel sisters and the others. It roots itself in the story the sisters choose to share--the story that demands recognition and solicits public acknowledgement of the container of their individual and collective past, present and future--belonging to those three alone and requiring the participation of all three in its telling. What are they all about?

Three of the women are sisters, Cuna-Rappahonock [sic] Indians, born (literally) on the floor of their grandmother’s house in Brooklyn.

“It’s the Indian way,” says Lisa Mayo, the oldest sister. “My grandmother put my mother on the floor on her hands and knees. She didn’t call a doctor, because doctors are only for sick people, and she wasn’t sick.”

“My father buried the placenta [note that Gloria is speaking of Muriel’s placenta here. She helped to bury it] in the backyard. The doctor came to cut it,” says Gloria the middle sister.

“We sound alike, we look alike,” sings Muriel, the youngest sister.
“I taught her everything she knows,” says Lisa, sister number one. “I’m the most intelligent and the most beautiful,” Lisa says. “I’ve been married three times. I would have been married five times, but two got away.”

A grandmother, Gloria needs no prodding before she produces pictures of her grandchildren, children, sons-in-law and other assorted relatives. “This is Aaron, and so on… (Kafer 2B)

I am reminded here of a recent conversation between Cree musician and scholar Cheryl L’Hirondelle, Monique Mojica and myself over coffee one lazy summer afternoon. We shared the questions and discoveries around our mutual preoccupation, which is the development of aesthetic methodologies that will facilitate the transformation of “performed tradition” into contemporary performance without any violation that would diminish or exploit those traditions but which would retain some strain of their original intention and efficacy to nurture and sustain contemporary Native audiences. And as we spoke, L’Hirondelle shared an experience she had recently had in Senegal, where she had attended a conference. After the conference, she had been invited to spend some days in a Senegalese village and to share music, stories, cosmologies, and insights around process with the people there. She told us about the complex network of layers or social/phenomenological strata around which the people’s world and perceptions of that world arrange themselves. Kinship, gender, clan membership, parentage, birth-order, social position, age, duties/roles, era of one’s lifetime, etc. constitute some of the layers that determine function and relation amongst the human sector of the community. Added to these, are the non-human and metaphysical strata; these too determine the shape and hue of the community and the doings of its people.

She spoke also of the Praisekeepers, those whose function it is to usher individuals and communities through transitional times, negotiating the limens between death and life, singledom and marital union, childhood and adulthood, and birth and Senegalese “citizenship.” The Praisekeepers are the “living libraries” of the people, singing out the histories (individual, familial, communal) during

52 Personal communication 4 June 2007, Toronto
Ceremony, remembering ancient connections, memorializing recent ones, and reminding the people of the unique and necessary place they occupy in the larger design.

As a traditional singer and storykeeper, L’Hirondelle was excited to encounter and engage with the work of those whose communal function (and exercise of that function) so resembles her own. After days of sharing and discussion, she asked them if it were possible to connect disparate layers between which, at first glance, the gulf between chronological position, societal/kinship position, or geographical position might present itself as too wide to bridge. She was told that it is possible to connect these layers: what is needed is the construction of narrative—a “threadline,” as it were—to do so. The application of aesthetic methodology transforms tradition; indeed, it reconfigures his/ourstory, forging (perhaps, improbable) connections and revealing those connections hitherto unseen.

What some may read (during their perusal of Kafer’s 1980 interview with Spiderwoman Theater) as a colorful anecdote that asserts the “individual” quirkiness of each Miguel sister and that celebrates the heterogeneity of the troupe (by highlighting individual eccentricities), I read as a testament to the potency of Storyweaving as a process for both art and life and as a declaration of community, allegiance, and identity rooted in the disparate-and-common histories of the artists. The life of each Miguel sister is contained within (a) layer(s) that separated her from the other: they are alternately heterosexual, homosexual, mother, grandmother, eldest, middle, youngest. One is separated from the others by half-a-generation; they have enjoyed/endured differing expressions of relationship with their parents and extended family; they have followed differing artistic paths; they have forged lives separate from the others’ with husbands, lovers, children and grandchildren; they have followed differing spiritual paths at different times; their understandings and interpretations of past events, of current events, and even of each other separate them, also. But in 1980 for Kafer’s readers—and for themselves—they were performing the creation of the narrative thread-line that connects the disparate strata containing their lives and that firmly binds them into the larger design through which each, as an integral element of a larger community, can more fully realize herself, her identity and the woman she was born to be.
So too (although they mayn’t have fully realized it) were Weaver, Shaw, and Bouman. Like the Miguel sisters, they were latter-day twentieth-century women and feminists and shared these socio-political strata with them. Like Muriel, they\(^{53}\) lived openly as lesbians. They had accepted and adopted the aesthetic methodology that defined (and continues to define) Spiderwoman Theater. They were committed to the exploration of the female condition and to effecting the social changes that would abolish female oppression. They shared motherhood, marginalization, material impoverishment, and the courage to speak out with unabashed honesty and outrageous humor. In 1980, who and what they presented themselves to be appear, for the most part, to have emanated from the distinct spaces of communally shared strata. And yet…

As each woman “sings out” the story of her beginnings, a pattern that differs markedly from the one crafted by the Miguel sisters emerges. As each recounts a portion of her own distinct history, she too contributes to the fabrication of a narrative “thread-line” that connects her with her colleagues.

Lois Weaver, for one, was raised with a pack of pigs.

“I was held hostage in the rural South for the first 23 years of my life,” she says matter-of-fact.

With her short hair dyed a shocking shade of red, her harlequin glasses missing one frame, she looks alternately prim and outrageous on stage. Off stage she looks like she might feel out of place in a small town. She says escaped to Baltimore and then to New York.

“I want to get married,” Peggy Shaw says, “but my girlfriend won’t.”

“I was born in Amsterdam during the war,” Eva Bouman says. “That’s why my teeth are so bad. I remember sitting in a hallway with my mother, covering my body with hers, and bombs are falling. As a baby I suffered a lot, that’s why I crave satisfaction now.”

“And she makes us all pay,” Muriel Miguel says.

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\(^{53}\) Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw fell in love early. Pam Verge and Eva Bouman came out several years later (M. Miguel, Interview, 2007). Muriel Miguel is no longer certain if Verge and Bouman had actually come out before the split or shortly afterwards.
“When I was little my mother always used to say, ‘Eat, there are children starving in Europe.’ I didn’t know it was Eva,” Peggy says. “I would have thrown more away.” (Kafer 2B)

Tellingly, the thread-line that connects these Euro-American artists is a mutual life-theme of running away/escape. The bonds they have forged in the present-moment of 1980 find their roots in each woman’s rejection of her own history. Refusing to be contained within or defined by the communities that engendered them, Weaver, Shaw, and Bouman have chosen to find themselves within layers deliberately constructed by contemporary humans and to weave themselves into a community of their own choosing and making. Ironically, this escape-narrative was the common cord/chord that had drawn all of these artists into a community, which was governed by a process that required them to revisit the sites from which they had fled. But the very act of following the dictates of this process—even within the limited context of this interview—revealed essential differences that speak to irreconcilable issues of identity. That which had brought Spiderwoman’s artists together would tear them apart.

The Miguel sisters were not simply united by a common past; indeed, their troubled history had created divisions between them. It had, indeed, provided the motivation for each to separate herself from the others to transcend this past. Ultimately, the need (conscious or unconscious) to return (together) to this troubled history, to root themselves within it and to fabricate the narrative thread-lines necessary to situate individual within family, the family within community the community within nation and the nation(s) within the larger matrix of earthly existence would weave the sisters more tightly together, even as it separated them from the other members of their troupe.

54 For instance, while sexual preferences may be, in this time, commonly regarded as an essential characteristic imparted to the human in the womb, European and North American individuals have for decades constructed “communities” within which a homosexual individual might safely live, work and express him/herself in accordance with his/her essence. By contrast, a human being who exhibited traits that differed from the gendered-heterosexual construct inhabited by the majority of individuals within a traditional American Indian / Native community, remained within the community of origin. S/he often played a key role within the social fabric, often acting as a medicine person, a visionary or a nurturing intermediary who balanced male and female energies within a society. S/he was not defined by his/her sexual preferences and behaviors; rather s/he forged identity and made meaning via service to and within the community as a whole.
In the months following this interview, tensions within the company had become so severe that the troupe embarked upon a “trial separation.” As previously noted, a power struggle was erupting around the essential identity of the company, the community/ties for which it labored, and the questions around which subsequent shows would be generated. Despite the fact that she was both a founding-mother and the director of Spiderwoman Theater, Muriel felt more and more that her concerns and those of her sisters (as Native women) were being pushed to the fringes of company consciousness. Often, the message delivered to them by their colleagues was that “there is a right/White way and a wrong way;” and anything that did not immediately complement or further the interests of the “right”/White members would be summarily rejected by them.

M [uriel] M [iguel]: … And a lot of the stuff we thought was racist. And a lot of the stuff, we thought was classist.

A [nn] H [augo]: When you say ‘a lot of stuff,’ are you talking about relations within the group, too?

MM: Yes, relations within the group. And I’m not saying it was just the Indians going after the Whites. It wasn’t only one way. Spiderwoman wasn’t started to do cute little revues. So [we had to remember] what is the question? That’s what my kind of director does, ask the question ‘What are we asking and telling? What are we asking ourselves that makes us perform the things that we do?’ We had said in the beginning that we would not let the ratio go low, that there would not be more White people than Native people or people of color in the group.

AH: This is something that I find interesting about Spiderwoman in the context of feminist theater of that decade. I won’t go as far as to say that you were the only group but you were one of the only who made race and class a part of your content consciously. Those were the fights that brought about the end of some of the theaters.

MM: It was very important to us. We were talking about this, and that was one of the things we said we should really make sure of. And that’s what happened. There were four of us [the Miguel sisters and Nadja Beye] and there were, like, seven of them. We’re talking about stage managers, costumers, business manager. Everybody was White. And they were saying, ‘It’s not fair.’ And finally I was saying, ‘I don’t give a shit if something is not fair.’ Then I was a bad woman. (Haugo, “Weaving” 228-29)

Adding insult to injury, Lois Weaver was beginning to challenge Muriel’s identity/role as Spiderwoman’s director/dramaturg. Weaver had her own questions and concerns, and she demanded the opportunity to direct Spiderwoman’s pursuit of the answers (see Jenkins 299).
**Trial Separation**

In the summer of 1980, Weaver received her opportunity. Spiderwoman had received a substantial grant to develop a new show, but by this point, tensions were running so high that the company decided to divide the grant and develop two separate shows. Lois Weaver would finally be able to direct an exploration of her own family history, enlisting Pam Verge and Peggy Shaw to afford voice and body to her Blue Ridge Mountain ancestors. *Split Britches: A True Story* mythologizes the daily grinding existence of three female relations, who have been cut off from their other relatives—indeed, from the rest of the world—living as impoverished, marginalized eccentrics in a crumbling family homestead. Layering live bodies frozen in photographic tableaux atop projected family photographs and connecting these (initially) with a narrative thread-line fabricated from the taped voices of living family members each contributing fragmented stories colored by their own interpretations of the lives and doings of these ancestors, *Split Britches* was able to weave layers of myth and meaning into the silent isolation of forgotten existence. As a queer descendant of these queer mountain women whose arduous struggle to survive is memorialized in the “split” of their under garments—thus allowing them to urinate while they stood and worked in the fields—Weaver (with her colleagues) would be able to co-opt the layers she had discovered or created and weave them into the fabric of her own marginalized existence as an artist, a feminist and a lesbian in post-modern America.

The performative layering utilized in *Split Britches: A True Story* remained faithful to the aesthetic methodology of Spiderwoman Theater. However, under the direction of Muriel Miguel, the stripping away of protective layers and camouflage in performance had allowed spectators to make and interpret their own discoveries around the true nature of these layers and the nature of the core that lay beneath. Under Weaver’s direction, by contrast, the essence of each layer was privileged and explicated for the audience, leaving neither space nor incentive for investigative engagement nor discovery.
Della: I got to have my protection. I didn’t always dress like this. I didn’t always live like this, you know. I got to have my protection. This here (takes off her coat) is for the North Wind (throws it down stage). This here (removes apron, throws down stage) is for the fog that comes in over the mountain. (starts unbuttoning her dress) This is for all the mothers that thought I was after their little girls. (takes off dress) This is for all the little girls my Mother broke me up with because they was . . . Catholic! (throws dress at EMMA’s chair, starts removing next layer) This is for the time in church my brother was embarrassed because he said I looked like a boy. (finishing removal) And this is for the 25 dollars I saved up to go to the prostitute and I walked back and forth all day trying to get up the nerve. (Shaw, Margolin and Weaver 82-83)

Here, Weaver’s Aunt, played by Peggy Shaw, continues in this vein to remove layer-upon-layer of clothing until she has stripped down to her underwear, revealing a vulnerable, abandoned, lovelorn “bull dyke” woman, slugging whiskey and singing the blues. But while we have learned a great deal about the nature of and need for Della’s protective layers, her ultimate “reveal” does not surprise (as Lisa Mayo’s “reveal” in Women in Violence did). Here Della’s layers do not conceal the truth as much as they contain and repress what has been ever apparent to all.

In 1981, Pam Verge left the production and Deborah Margolin joined Weaver and Shaw to re-invent the character of Emma, drawing upon memories of an eccentric, unmarried, “scandalous” great aunt to personalize the character (Patraka 58-59). The addition of Margolin and the subsequent success of Split Britches: A True Story encouraged its performers to transform what had begun as a “trial separation” into an outright divorce from their Spiderwoman colleagues. Naming themselves in accordance with the production through which they had come to terms with their own social and sexual identities by engaging with the lives of their “queer” foremothers and through which Weaver had been able to exercise her talents as “director,” Weaver, Shaw, and Margolin became “Split Britches”—a White, feminist, lesbian theatre troupe.

For their part, the Miguel sisters had utilized their half of the grant monies and their time during this period of trial separation to develop a show around the questions that had preoccupied them. With Sun Moon and Feather they worked through their childhood relationships with their parents, extended family and with each other; interrogated their early socio-economic positioning as American Indian
children growing up in Red Hook, Brooklyn; and worked to reconcile their individual remembrances of things past with their collective work in the present and their communitist struggle that would take them into the future.

*Sun Moon and Feather* will be discussed at length in Chapter Four. But it warrants some brief introduction here, because it archives a defining moment in the development of Spiderwoman Theater: indeed, it marks the historical moment when Spiderwoman Theater stepped away from its “identity” as a mainstream “feminist” or “lesbian feminist” theatre company and declared itself an American Indian theatre company comprised of contemporary, urban American Indian feminists speaking to and for American Indian women and men and trans-gendered, boys and girls, ancestors and descendants.

Like their estranged sisters in art, the Miguel sisters developed their 1980-81 project around identity; unlike Weaver and her company, they embarked upon this exploration while playing themselves that they might reclaim themselves--indeed, re-name themselves. The play’s title constitutes an act of recovery as the Miguel sisters assume and assert their Rappahannock names--the names with which they had been introduced and announced to their family and community: “Sun” (Muriel), “Moon” (Gloria) and “Feather” (Lisa) are fragments of these names bestowed upon them by their Rappahannock relations. And while the primary question around which their creative investigations spiraled begins as an intensely personal conundrum (“How did we survive?”), it is a question that ultimately speaks to entire communities of Aboriginal peoples, whether these communities remain intact and relatively insular or whether these communities are composed of dislocated, dispossessed Aboriginal peoples living together in isolation from their communities of origin in modern cities constructed by and for the dominant society.
Chapter Three
Towards a Poetics of Decolonization: Becoming (and then Staging) The New Human Being

“That Place that Indians Talk About”55 is No Performative Utopia

I was very close to my father and my uncles and the men who came from Kuna Yala, and how they made me feel, because when they would come to the house, they would say (I was a little girl), “there’s a little Tule Girl; there’s a little Tule girl; there’s a little Tule girl.” And I would say to myself, “Geez, I belong somewhere.” (G. Miguel, Interview 2007)

Contemporary Western scholarship by and large posits the experience (and creation) of live theatre as a liminoid phenomenon--that is, as a “voluntary” experience, during which a heady, fleeting moment of communitas may be experienced in a border interstice (a no-man’s land, as it were) that can only be imagined, and from which a rite of disengagement is required to prepare audiences to re-enter the actual (real) place in which actual existence unfolds (see Schechner, Performance 169 and Dolan, “Performance” 455-459). There is something profoundly passive, sadly ineffective and highly discouraging in this vision of theatre as either a tool of re-visioning or of resistance. The liminal event, by contrast, is “socially required” and is understood to effect the permanent transformation of the community in which it unfolds. So while the contemporary performative event may be invested with liminality (i.e. audiences may find themselves suddenly overwhelmed by an intense sense of communitas), it remains a liminoid event in that its affects (on space, performer or spectator) are impermanent. Indeed, the liminal event is set scrupulously apart (by scholars and ethno-dramaturgs) from the liminoid (Schechner, Between

55 I borrow this expression from Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz who uses the concept of “place” to map both physical geography and spiritual geography in his writings (Ortiz, “That’s the Place” 46). He explains:

“[T] hat place that Indians talk about” has sustained us and will always sustain us if we cherish and honor it. As a poet, it is important for me to strive to have my poems reestablish and reaffirm relationships among ourselves as a community of people and that community to know itself in relationship to all other forms of life, especially the land. (Ortiz, “That’s the Place” 48)
4). Performance theorist Richard Schechner and anthropologist Victor Turner imagine liminal events as ‘sacred’ rituals involving personal or collective rites of passage belonging to and taking place in remote, exotic communities where bloodlines remain “pure” and tradition remains static and intact. In other words, according to the wisdom of the day, the liminal event is neither socially required by contemporary theatre audiences; nor has it any place on the urban stage. Indeed, as Victor Turner posits, the liminal phenomenon offers little to satisfy the developed palettes and passions of individuals living in “total” societies characterized by technological and socio-economic advances that afford increased time and opportunity to pursue personal and creative development. Where the less developed society can only experience “collective liminal symbols,” the more advanced society (governed by technology and industrial growth) has produced individual creators of “liminoid phenomena” to replace the outmoded, less “play[ful]” liminal event belonging to those disappeared or disappearing societies governed by “organic processes of maturation and decay” (Turner, qtd. in Schechner, Performance 144).

However, even within these “total” societies operating within the urban superstructures imagined into being by the settlers of North America, the liminal event is fervently desired and desperately required by contemporary Indigenous Peoples who have been permanently transformed by the experience of colonization (Little Bear 84-85). We are perforce a liminal people, occupying the threshold between what was and what is. We collect and reconfigure the fragments, nurturing an intimacy with the ceremonies that remember and recreate creation and the cycles of life and death, with our ancestors, with our languages, stories and cultural praxis as we simultaneously mourn our separation from and loss of the knowledge systems and practices that made us who we were. The Miguel sisters, it can certainly be said, were/are no exception. As women of mixed heritage, they are at once indigenous to Panama (an oceanic culture with a “coconut economy”) and to an inland Anishinaabe culture from Virginia. Growing up in an Italian neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York with dreams of escape to Manhattan, they began their negotiation of cultural limens when they were children. In their adult years and throughout the early stages of Spiderwoman Theater, these negotiations continued until they reached a definitive impasse in
1981 when it seems all “negotiations” ceased and a definitive path towards personal (with the facilitation of collective) decolonization was forged.

To discuss the works of Spiderwoman Theater and of the other Native artists and thinkers who inform this study as “liminal” is to acknowledge that these works negotiate the interstices between pre-colonization and colonization in order that they might effect permanent decolonization. Each Spiderwoman production reveals itself upon examination not as an ephemeral moment to be captured and preserved in memory only—a dusty archive to be retrieved and celebrated as a poignant signifier of loss—but as a living cell of a timeless body, which will continue to grow and change and to effect growth and transformation long after the individual founders of Spiderwoman Theater lay down their burdens and “go home.” The struggle to decolonize, as Hawaiian scholar Poka Laenui reminds us, is ultimately bound up in the struggle to re-form human identity—to create a community of new human beings (150). Hence, the creation of art that contributes to and facilitates the decolonizing project cannot simply constitute the construction of “performative utopias” in which a social group may briefly retreat from itself to pretend to enact an ideal future (see Schaer, qtd. in Dolan 457). Such a retreat into an indeterminate non-place, fleeting as it may be, could only undermine the Indigenous struggle to advance into our selves in “that place that Indians talk about.” And “that place” is an actual place. It is rooted in the traditional lands of the people and in the lands to which many were forcibly relocated or compelled to flee, as are the Peoples’ histories, languages, metaphysical understandings, spiritual practices, and traditional knowledge systems. As Cherokee scholar and activist Andrea Smith asserts, the struggle of Indigenous peoples for the recovery of cultural knowledge and expression is always a struggle to recover the land and to restore harmonious relations between human beings and their biotas (121). After all, the phases of colonization, which include the destruction of Indigenous material culture and sacred sites; the denigration of the people and their belief systems; the belittling of their knowledge systems; the prohibition of their spiritual praxis; the exploitation of the people and the reduction of their material culture to a commercialized “fetish” (“folk art”), effected the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples to justify the misappropriation of lands (which could be regarded as “unoccupied,” since the peoples to whom they belonged were no
longer classified as human beings). The recovery of Indigenous humanity (which is bound up in all that has been denigrated, suppressed and exploited) necessitates the recovery of relationship with place. Fleeting feel-good moments, temporary retreats from self, trips to no place, and representations of a hopeful future, which both audience and artist agree to be patently unachievable, may be powerful opiates in which the privileged (albeit disaffected) elites of the West can afford to indulge, but they are too rich for Indigenous blood: in the struggle for decolonization--that is, the struggle to permanently recover our selves and our right-relationships--a timeless body of liminal works is required. And to mold this body, we need only look back to traditional knowledge systems and the processual models that have sprung from these to discover the way forward, the path on which the human being advances to self.

Hawaiian scholar Poka Laenui and Gregory Cajete (Tewa Pueblo) have each provided us with a multi-layered program intended to form character and to facilitate self-actualization. Each step they carve out for us on the path to self finds its foundation in something that has come before. Each of these models occupies its own layer in the fabric of Spiderwoman’s collective works, because each of these speaks to a specific human need. Where Cajete’s educational model bases itself on traditional pedagogical praxis and so affords the opportunity to realize and perhaps re-cover a pre-colonized, sovereign sense of self, Laenui’s model, constructed after a careful retracing and analysis of the phases of colonization, is a sociological model informing the movements of the colonized body in the struggle to actualize transformation in the formation of new human beings for a newly transformed world.

In his seminal work Look to the Mountain, Gregory Cajete consults and compares traditional stories from various nations to discover common archetypes, moral objectives and structural frameworks from which to hypothesize didactic objectives and pedagogical processes belonging to pre-colonized Indigenous societies in North America. Although he does not use the following narrative in his study, I have chosen to offer a familiar Anishinaabe teaching to illustrate and disseminate his findings: during a 1986 Drum Workshop on Birch Island, Ontario, Anishinaabe Elder Eddie Benton-Benai provided this
eloquent teaching about the dream out of which the heart\textsuperscript{56} of our rituals has emerged. When this dream is performed through its re-telling (the drum teaching, which must precede the actual making) and through the drum’s construction (in accordance with the original dream), it constitutes a core ritual, which generates all other ceremonial enactments of the Anishinaabeg. The story begins in a chaotic time of violent warfare. One woman ventures out alone onto a hilltop. She abstains from food and water for many days as she seeks the solution to bloodshed and inhumanity, and she prays that the men will remember themselves—come back into their humanity—and conduct themselves in peace and honor. So great is her faith; so urgent, her prayer that Creator comes down to her, listens to her, pities her and answers her:

And it is said that he took pity on her and he gave her—and he said to her I will give you something that will bring peace. If you will take what I am going to give you and in turn give it in the way that I instruct you, what I shall give you will bring peace and the end of bloodshed. And it will always be a symbol of peace. That’s the drum.

And there’s a whole beautiful story about how that drum was given. And he manifested it for her so that she could see it and it hung above the Earth. And one of the instructions to her was that it should be suspended always. And when you see these traditional drums, those ceremonial drums, you see those four stakes upon which that drum hangs, that’s what it symbolizes. That it should hang suspended above the earth. That’s what that drum symbolizes. And from that grew other drums. But that drum that was given to that woman, she brought that. And we must remember that […]

Anishnabekwe in turn gave it to us with these instructions. And one of those commandments was that we, as Anishnabe [sic] men, should sit around that circle, that we should circle that circle, and that it should be a circle of peace… (Benton-Benai, qtd. in Diamond 37)

At its core, this story reads, quite simply, as an instructional manual for the care and maintenance of the essential components that are the building blocks of our humanity. Structurally it adheres to the traditional pedagogical model outlined by Cajete: (i) Ask; (ii) Seek; (iii) Create; (iv) Have/Take Ownership of; (v) Share; (vi) Transform; (vii) Celebrate (\textit{Look} 71).\textsuperscript{57} The female intercessor, whose

\textsuperscript{56} The Anishinaabe word for “drum” is “tewehigan”. It means, literally, “the heart of the heart.”

\textsuperscript{57} There is an eighth step in Cajete’s model, which is “Being.” And “being,” of course, or discovering the nature of our being (essence/identity) is the goal of this pedagogical journey.
function it is to carry, bear and train-up the next generation of ‘humans doing,’ starts by interrogating a serious problem; she seeks answers through fasting and prayer, makes the vision material, takes ownership of and responsibility for the instructions she has been given, shares those instructions with her community and, thereby, effects profound and enduring transformation within that community through the celebration of ceremony that has continued throughout the generations. Like the tribal culture-heroes enumerated by Cajete, this Anishinaabekwe is a “hunter of a good heart.” As such, she is one representative of a community’s desperate search on “one path of human meaning” (Cajete, Look 59). And she inhabits one of myriad tribal stories that teach us how to become the humans doing as we were meant to do.

Similarly, Poka Laenui’s model of decolonization calls for (and facilitates the creation of) a new human being. Although Laenui’s stated objective is to create a model that speaks to the governance of a nation (as opposed to one that devotes itself to the development of individual human beings), he remains ever mindful that political reform is contingent upon social reform and that changes in political governance can come into being “only after the people themselves have sufficiently changed” (150). Drawing from a model of colonization set forth by the late Philippino scholar Virgilio Enriques, Laenui addresses each processual step towards the successful colonization of a people by proposing its alternative to effect a successful reversal of the process.

As Enriques has mapped it (see Laenui 150-152), the road to colonization begins with (i) Denial and Withdrawal whereby the colonial body denies the existence of a pre-existing Indigenous culture and some Indigenous individuals begin to remove themselves from their community and its cultural practices. The Destruction (ii) of material artifacts belonging to the Indigenous culture (sacred sites, codices, art, etc.) quickly follows, and this lays fertile ground for the Denigration (iii) of that culture (as a construct void of history, meaning, artistry, etc.). If, after this onslaught, any material artifacts or cultural praxis belonging to the Indigenous people have survived, these things are now held up as (iv) “Tokens” and “tolerated” as folk art, which is ultimately co-opted by the colonizing body as part of its own history
and/or Exploited (v) by colonizing institutions to solicit the cooperation of and exercise control over surviving Indigenous communities (Laenui 151).

Step-for-step, Laenui’s proposed model counteracts each of colonization’s stages and charts the way back home for Indigenous peoples. To answer the Denial/Withdrawal phase of colonization, Laenui offers (i) Recovery/Rediscovery; to answer Destruction, Laenui proposes (ii) Mourning; to address Denigration, Laenui prescribes (iii) Dreaming; to counteract Tokenism, Laenui calls for (iv) Commitment (to the dream). And to resist Exploitation, Laenui calls upon Indigenous peoples to transform that commitment into (v) Action (152-159).

But where Cajete’s model of traditional pedagogy is demonstrably applicable as a dramaturgical tool, which a close examination of Spiderwoman’s Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show in Wigwam City and its structure will later reveal, Laenui’s model of decolonization applies itself less to one work and more readily to an entire canon, spanning several generations. It is a model for both Indigenous life and art, which are both characterized by the self-same objective. It is important to note that Laenui stresses that the phases of decolonization do not adhere to a linear, ordered model. They overlap each other and repeat themselves again and again and again. Even as we dream, we may be momentarily overwhelmed by an unexpected onslaught of mourning; even as we commit to that dream, we may be momentarily paralyzed by poignant reminders of loss; even as we begin to act on that commitment, our initial acts may be acts of recovery as we reclaim family ties, learn ancestral languages, learn our stories (or hear them with new ears) or devote our energies and talents to the recovery of treaty rights, self-governance and tribal lands. Themes, phases, memories and actions, trauma and loss, joy and recovery may reverberate throughout the lives of an individual or his/her community time over time. And this is important to think about in terms of Spiderwoman’s work and the legacy of its artists as evidenced in the works of their daughters, their students, and their daughters’ colleagues.

It is likely that Laenui never dreamed of applying his model of decolonization (which is after all designed for nations) to theatre (Indigenous or otherwise); but it is intriguing and, indeed, instructive to
vision this model as a communitist model of dramaturgy, which finds no parallel in Western
dramaturgical practice. As it remains to be shown, this model applies to an entire project comprising the
life and works of several generations; these works are intentionally liminal (as opposed to liminoid).
And the “dreams” belonging to and reverberating throughout these works have nothing to do with
“utopias” and everything to do with that actual “place that Indians talk about,” which is rooted in both
patent and spiritual realms.

Already, it is apparent that Laenui’s model (constructed more than one generation after the
formation of Spiderwoman Theater) traces itself throughout the map of the Miguel sisters’ journey back
to self. The early years of Spiderwoman Theater, as we have seen in the previous chapters, were years of
Recovery and Rediscovery, precipitated by a profound, multi-layered experience of Mourning
experienced collectively by all three sisters. Family stories, memories and an intense, quotidian sibling
relationship (which had dissipated in early adulthood as the women married, relocated and started
families of their own) were recovered in rehearsal halls as the Miguel sisters painstakingly remembered,
rearticulated and worked through personal stories and family history together. In this, they effected the
relocation of this intensely personal site where they had first come to know themselves from Red Hook,
Brooklyn to mid-town Manhattan and ultimately out to spaces of public performance across the globe.

The Kitchen Table: That Place that Indian Women Talk About

In the house of mirrors there was a really big table. Around it could fit all our blood
relatives and all our extended family, sometimes the neighbours upstairs or whatever
Indian family was passing through the house of mirrors waiting to get back home after
being stranded in New York by the outfits they performed with; rodeos, circuses, exhibitions. They brought with them the sounds of Winnebago, Kanawake, Rosebud, Hopi land and they would all tell stories about “Mrs. Mofsie, Mrs. Martin, Mrs. Deer, Douglas Grant, Blow Snake, Big Mountain, Red Wing.” Stories that my eyes never saw but that I know.

Whatever celebration it was—birthdays, Christmas, Thanksgiving—Grandpa [Antonio
Miguel] would preside over the platter—usually a turkey—and there would be big bowls
with mounds of mashed potatoes and yams, corn, cornbread pies. Or fish fried to golden
perfection eaten with rice cooked in a diamond-shaped aluminum pot that Grandpa and Uncle Joe would turn red with the amount of chili pepper they shook onto it. Chili so hot it had a devil on the bottle.

And I would be under this big table sipping a 7-Up float from a tall glass that I’d stir with a long-handled spoon. It was a good hiding place. I’d sit balanced on the cross-beam in the world under the table in the house of mirrors and listen to the stories. Stories that my eyes never saw but that I know: “Mrs. Mofsie, Mrs. Martin, Mrs. Deer, Douglas Grant, Blow Snake, Big Mountain, Red Wing.” Images projected on the retina from the mirror in my mother’s hand. (Mojica, “Stories” 18)

If, as Spokane writer Gloria Bird and Muscogee poet Joy Harjo assert, the family hearth is the place of our spiritual and intellectual beginnings—the place where we first “actively listen through the membrane of the womb wall to the drama of our families’ lives” (Bird & Harjo 19)—then it must also be regarded as a key site to be recovered and to effect recovery. It, too, is “that place that Indians talk about.” At the very least, it is that place that Indian women talk about. It has been recognized and reclaimed by tribal female artists as a vital site of our spiritual geography, which is thankfully laden with a moveable feast that spans the generations and resists the relocations.

The kitchen table is also a site wherein the body and mind are engaged. Unlike the stolid, more formal dining room table, it is a place that invites physical action. Admittedly, at both tables, we ingest food, and as our bodies begin to integrate that food, our enzymes flow and a series of complex internal movements begin. However, in contrast with the more formal dining site, where roles are prescribed and action is restricted in accordance with those roles, the kitchen solicits physical interaction and communal participation at a much deeper level. Here, roles are more fluid. Guests take on the role of host or helper with remarkable ease, alternatively serving and being served with easy alacrity. Here, we can wave our arms, jump up to help with the pouring of the tea, the stirring of the pot, the clearing of the table or the washing of the dishes and still remain a part of the “circle” (in ways we would not if we engaged in such
behaviors in the dining room, where the server serves and the diner dines\(^{58}\). And as Native artists (such as Lee Maracle, Gloria Bird, Joy Harjo, Monique Mojica and the Miguel sisters) reclaim this space of day-to-day experience, of warmth, of nurturance, and of action as a centre of creative endeavor, the works and words conceived therein distinguish themselves in several specific ways.

First, the words that are born at the kitchen table are borne on action. They require kinetic effort and physical articulation to achieve their efficacy. Second, the words, works, concepts and stories that emerge from this site (such as Bird and Harjo’s *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language*) are *communitarian* projects in that they are collective creations, which include all voices from the “circle.” And they are perforce *communitist* in that as they have been created within a complex web of inter-relationships, they reflect and communicate those relationships and the responsibilities these entail. Third, although a precedent seems to have been set whereby it is the women who occupy and create from this space, the kitchen is a site of community for the whole family. Male voices and male perspectives are not excluded from the endeavor. The male presence in Spiderwoman’s works, for instance, manifests itself very profoundly in the Miguel sisters’ utilization of Kuna language, Kuna linguistic patterns and Kuna aesthetic expressions, which they inherited from their father and uncles. These Kuna men are also given voice throughout the Miguel canon. Uncle Joe’s “Now, I telling you,” which ends *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show*, and home movies of their father’s sideshow productions or of his boat-project, which are layered into *Sun Moon and Feather*, are only a few instances of many. And these will be discussed in the subsequent chapter, which interrogates the published works of the Miguel sisters. For now, however, if we take all of these defining characteristics together, it would seem that works produced within that place that Indian women “talk about” are *womanist* works rather than feminist works.

\(^{58}\) Of course, the “server” who is often the host/ess may remove her apron and set down her serving platters to assume the role of fellow-diner after a “liminoid” event, which accompanies her/his entrance into the space in this alternate role. S/he takes a place and becomes one with the other diners during a “ritual” of toasting, thanksgiving and/or both.
Although it is very important to recognize and honor the Miguel sisters’ identification of themselves as feminists and of their troupe as a feminist troupe, we must also hearken back to their own testimony about the conflict that existed between themselves as women of color and the feminists with whom they worked. Certainly, as we have seen, the feminist agenda during Spiderwoman’s early years did not align itself to the concerns of working class women or of non-Caucasian women. Where whitestream feminists of the educated middle classes struggled to achieve political and material gains for themselves and women like them, women of color struggled for the “optimization of well-being for all members of [their communities]” (Phillips xxv). Womanism was developed by African and African-American artists and social activists (including Alice Walker, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson-Weems); it remains today a communitarian initiative with communitist goals, and it speaks ultimately to the decolonization of all peoples. It is my belief that “womanism,” which was not (and still is not) widely discussed in mainstream academic and whitestream activist circles, may not have even been part of the Miguel sisters’ vocabulary. “Feminism” may have been the only word they had to articulate the container that framed their struggles. But regardless of the manner in which that struggle was articulated, the Spiderwoman process of Storyweaving and the womanist process of activism bear startling parallels. And as African-American scholar Layli Phillips asserts, womanist methodologies

Certainly, the presence of the processual steps employed by womanists to achieve social transformation bear remarkable similarities to the processual stages that go into the making of Spiderwoman’s work. These steps include:

1. **Harmonizing and Coordinating** to reconcile seemingly disparate elements by finding and manifesting the connections between them;
2. **Engaging in Communal Dialogue** around a site of nurturance (such as the kitchen table), where all voices are heard and all perspectives are integrated;
3. Engaging in **Arbitration and Mediation** to restore right relations and harmony. Disagreements are resolved for the sake of the general good (rather than to establish an individual’s “moral right” or supremacy);
4. Engaging in **Spiritual Activities** to facilitate communication between spirit and material realms—again, with the goal of establishing right relations between these interlaid layers of existence;
5. Practicing **Hospitality** to foster relationships between individuals and helps to build community;
6. Facilitating **Mutual Aid and Self-Help** by coming together at a grassroots level to share tools, wisdom and strategies solve problems. For instance, Spiderwoman’s visits to reserve communities to teach the troupe’s methodology to the people were carried out with precisely this objective;
have been employed and applied by Indigenous artist and scholars of all genders across the globe “more frequently than [they have] been written about” (xxi).

Rooted in the struggle for social transformation, womanism is the anti-whitestream woman’s answer to the feminist movement. Rooted in the everyday and commonplace, womanism requires a commitment to the restoration of right relations between human beings, between communities, between human and environment and between material and spirit (Phillips xx). And it is the kitchen table that has been identified as “a key metaphor for understanding the womanist perspective on dialogue” (xxvii). This understanding may help us to identify and comprehend the subtle instances of misunderstanding and/or dismissal of womanist works, which emerge from this material and metaphorical site, by early feminist commentators. Despite their commitment to CR and repeated avowals of the importance and value of personal story to the struggle, such commentators strove to remove women from “the kitchen,” viewing it merely as a site of female containment and oppression, rather than a site of healing and liberation for entire communities.

As well, it may bear repeating (an earlier caveat) that the cultural specifics that underpin Spiderwoman’s processual journey and the signifiers that manifest themselves in their performances have often been ignored or misinterpreted by commentators. Whereas a pre-eminent feminist scholar (who is among the earliest and most prolific commentators on Spiderwoman Theater) has seen “a patched quilt of multi-cultural images” as the backdrop to Spiderwoman productions and instructs us to associate this motley signifier with “poor theatre” (Dolan, Presence 168), she has failed to see (or to communicate) that Spiderwoman’s signature mola, which has appeared in its every production since Women in Violence, 7. Committing to Motherhood by consciously adopting particular behaviors whether one has borne children or not. These behaviors root themselves in the maternal responsibilities of caregiving, nurturing and mediation for the maintenance of a healthy and unified family;
8. Practicing physical (and spiritual) Healing with the understanding that when individuals are sick, families and communities cannot function optimally. This step involves self-care and caregiving. The womanist works to restore balance in the individual (herself or another) to restore and maintain balance in the greater community. (Phillips xxvi-xxx)
should be recognized as a material annunciation of the Miguel sisters’ recovery and celebration of Kuna aesthetic expression. Such over-simplifications reveal themselves to be epidemic and virulent, especially when they presume to explicate Spiderwoman’s dramaturgical structure(s) and to interpret their objectives and resultant product. For instance, Jill Dolan characterizes Spiderwoman’s productions as collages—a series of “pieces that are loosely compiled around various themes.” And this structure, she informs us, “allows the troupe to explore and celebrate its gender and ethnic heritage” (“Winnetou’s” 364). She (like many other non-Native commentators) does not seem to perceive that it is the troupe’s “ethnic heritage” that has, perhaps, engendered its process and the resultant dramaturgical structure. As “loose” as the structure may appear to the outside eye, its “pieces” are not vaguely arranged around “various themes.” Rather, each production recreates a journey that has begun with a question (or series of questions). And this journey does not simply “celebrate” the human being: it is, rather, an exercise of traditional tribal pedagogy designed to facilitate the formation of tribal identity through the discovery of interconnection and interrelationship:

Up north—years far away from the house of mirrors—I meet two brothers from the Deer family. “I know who you are!” one brother says. “When my grandparents died, there were photographs of your grandparents in their things.” “I know who you are!” I say. “Your uncle is my godfather!” “My children know who you are!” says the other brother; “I tell them, ‘that’s your cousin on TV.’”

Backstage, I meet a ventriloquist named Big Mountain, “I know who you are! I remember your sister, your uncle ran the elevator; I remember when he fell off the iron.” Once in a massive demonstration of one hundred thousand people—I met a Mofsie!

“I know--.” We knew. We are connected over three, four generations of Indian performers—from way back. (Mojica, “Stories” 18)

The pieces / stories / layers, which began around the kitchen table and which now make up each performance, are not simply arranged around a theme or a question; they emerge from that question, and

60 In her 1990 review of Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City, Dolan implies that other commentators “dismiss” Spiderwoman’s productions for being “incoherent and diffuse” (“Winnetou’s” 364). However, she herself declares in a later publication that the troupe’s works “are often incoherent and diffuse” (Presence 60).
their efficacy within the whole rests upon the way they make, mark or manifest the connections and relationships that determine one’s place in the “web” and hence one’s identity within community.

It is not my intent with this chapter to imply that womanist methodologies, Cajete’s pedagogical model, Laenui’s socio-political model or Spiderwoman’s Storyweaving process (practiced separately or in combination) constitute in and of themselves comprehensive blueprints on which to map a poetics of decolonization that will speak to and for all Indigenous peoples on this continent or across the globe. Neither should it be inferred from this discussion that the artists of Spiderwoman Theater consciously engaged with the models proposed by Cajete, Laenui, or other Indigenous artists and theorists in the creation of their works or in the development of their process. Nor should it be inferred that the central process disseminated within this project is somehow the only contemporary model upon which to structure a contemporary poetics of decolonization. But the fact remains that from the example of the Miguel sisters’ lives and works, we have acquired an invaluable legacy that provides us with a specific referential point. And from this point, the exploration and concentrated interrogation of and experimentation around the formation, applicability and efficacy of artistic models within the larger socio-political project of decolonization may occur.

The web here is complex. And what is wonderful to contemplate is how all of these models “interlap” and work together within Spiderwoman’s performative mola, which constitutes the creation and staging of the “new” human being. As we have already begun to see, each of Spiderwoman’s productions has been engendered by an urgent question (the initial “ask” step of the paradigm posited by Cajete). And as we shall begin to see, Spiderwoman’s dramaturgical process evolves to accommodate that initial “asking.” The Miguel sisters (and those who follow their process) do not take the stage with answers to communicate; they have been driven to each other, to the rehearsal hall, to the stage by their questions. Indeed, each Spiderwoman production becomes a microcosm of Indigenous life (mapped out in traditional pedagogies) as it repeatedly retraces particular steps in the sociological process (the project of decolonization): each show constitutes an act of recovery/rediscovery; each show contains an element of
mourning; each show opens a window to the “dreaming” and each show articulates commitment and translates that commitment into action.

Equally wonderful to contemplate is the geographical breadth of that “kitchen table,” which extends far beyond the circle of light cast by the central hearth. I am speaking here of the connection with land, which is one characteristic of the Spiderwoman process, a process born around that circle of light and authored and developed in the studios and rehearsal halls of New York City by artists separated by one (on their father’s side) and two (on their mother’s side) generations from the traditional territories to which they are indigenous. Within this stratus of the Storyweaving process, connection and relationship are made manifest, as the “new human being” finds his / her self and the language to articulate that self within a remembered landscape.

Although, in this, the Miguel sisters have not consciously embraced and adopted aesthetic models such as those put forth by Kiowa scholar N. Scott Momaday or Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan, one aspect of their work, in essence, tests the ideas and claims of Hogan and Momaday “on their feet.” Hence, within the processual web out of which Spiderwoman’s artists weave the stories in which they make, unmake and remake themselves, we may discern and will here unravel yet another thread, which is integral to the formation of the new human being.

**Organic Dramaturgical Praxis Rooted in Topos: “A Different Yield”**

We are looking for a tongue that speaks with reverence for life, searching for an ecology of mind. Without it, we have no home, have no place of our own within the creation. It is not only the vocabulary of science that we desire. We also want a language of that different yield. A yield rich as the harvests of the earth, a yield that returns to us our own sacredness, to a self-love and respect that will carry out to others. (Hogan, “A Different” 124)
Many contemporary Native performative storytellers have (as have the Miguel sisters) received much of our “professional” theatrical training in Western schools, specializing in variations of the Stanislavsky System or of Brecht’s Epic Theatre, in European systems of dance or in Conservatories of Western music. Indigenous artistry, by contrast, has been traditionally understood as a *lifeway*—a spiritually mandated duty within the commonplace—and training becomes a lifelong apprenticeship for one who lives within or maintains close connections with his/her community. As theatre students, many of us have been subjected to “shamanic journeys” and inaccurate Medicine Wheel teachings. In the Western conservatories, we have been taught that it is we (the human creatures) who invest meaning and significance on the objects that surround us—-on the “props” that carry our Story.

David Smukler, for instance, is a renowned Toronto-based vocal coach who points to a prevailing philosophy that underpins much of the pedagogical praxis of contemporary actor-training in North America: “Other societies that have produced great art have had a strong mythological and spiritual base from which to draw. We do not. Therefore, it seems logical that we exploit available sources from other cultures to make up for this lack in our own” (Forsythe 70). Stewart Pearce61, vocal coach for the newly restored Globe Theatre in London, England, speaks of getting in touch with Wakan Tanka (Lakota for “Great Spirit”) in workshops (so I can be sure, at least, that he has read *Black Elk Speaks*). Acting instructor John Paul Fishback offers students of the craft a “Shamanic meditative journey” wherein the actor’s body is imaged as a “medicine wheel,” and movement coach Jo Lesly “begins and ends each of her classes with a ritual action patterned on a medicine wheel” (Forsythe 75-76).

While the teachings of the Medicine Wheel (*and they differ subtly according to the terrain inhabited by each Nation*) do inform a more profound understanding about the maintenance of a healthy, balanced life and healthy, balanced relationships between all interacting life-forms, I harbor much doubt

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61 I had the opportunity to take a brief voice workshop with Mr. Pearce during his visit to Toronto in January 2003. While I was fascinated by his elucidation of the “sacred geometry” of the New Globe Theatre, I was confused and discomfited by his ‘authoritative’ clarification of Lakota cosmology and his attempt to ‘fuse’ the worldview of the 16th Century British adventurers with that of the Indigenous peoples they eventually subjugated.
about the healthiness or efficacy of imaging one’s form as this graphic representation of a complex and multi-dimensional concept. The Medicine Wheel ought not to be utilized in such a self-reflexive manner. For me, the Medicine Wheel has always offered a lens through which we look outward (as opposed to inward), seeing ourselves in relationship to the whole, and orienting ourselves directionally from our starting place along a lifeway that will maintain the integrity of the web and the survival of all. To adopt, piecemeal, many and diverse spiritual practices, which are not sufficiently understood, for the sole purpose of developing the actor’s instrument—i.e. to ‘open the body’ (Forsythe 75)—is both offensive and dangerous.

I was personally awakened to the dangers during the late spring of 2000. At this time, I met a young actor who was participating with me in a vocal workshop at Equity Showcase in Toronto. The instructor had been taking us (as per usual) through a series of exercises based in Yoga and in Alexander technique, to open up frequently ignored cavities in the body as repositories for breath and to relax muscular tensions so that overall resonance through the body would be achieved.

Before class one day, my talented young colleague sat with me in the sunshine and confessed an overwhelming urge to end his life. As we spoke, I began to realize that he had no idea why he had this urge. Life had been going very well; there were no interpersonal difficulties with family, lovers or friends; he had no particularly challenging financial or career troubles; he was in excellent health and just beginning to reach the pinnacle of his talents; he was not using drugs or alcohol; in short, life was good. He then went on to discuss a recent trip to Thailand, from whence he had just returned, and during which he had attached himself to a monastery and participated in various ritual observances. As he spoke, I remembered how he had discussed some of the meditation and relaxation techniques he had learnt during his trip in class. And I remembered, too, that I had felt vaguely envious of him because of the exquisite quality of his instrument. He, apparently, had learned the secret of opening deeply and filling those spaces with breath, and his entire corporal being resonated with great power. In class, while discussing his discoveries, he had seemed absolutely elated. Now the elation had worn off. And suddenly his home
(Toronto), his friends, family, colleagues, and the people with whom he came into daily contact seemed alien and/or hostile. He saw no purpose to his life—no efficacy to his endeavors.

I asked him about his spiritual beliefs, and his answers were quite vague. He had grown up as a non-practicing Christian in a non-practicing household. He had not really thought much about what he believed (if anything). His activities in the Thai monastery had been undertaken solely for “the experience.” These Others had interested him: they were quaint, exotic, mysterious. Their techniques had interested him: perhaps they would (and they did for a time) aid him in perfecting his actor’s instrument. He had returned to Toronto feeling “light,” “focused” and full of purpose. Less than one month later, his purpose fled, and he felt that he could “not face one more day.”

I claim no expertise in psychology, Eastern philosophy and ritual practice, or even in the Traditional Knowledge of my own peoples. But from the little I do know, this is what I have come to believe. This young man stepped over a threshold (limen) he had no business crossing. For the sake of his artistry he engaged his being in a Story he did not fully understand, to which he was not absolutely committed and for which he had not been prepared. Westerners have a naively ‘democratic’ understanding of the oral traditions and age-old ritual practices that emerge from Indigenous cultures. All tribal knowledge does not belong to all; all performative ritual acts are “not the province of the folk” (Allen 55). Dance, song, curing rituals, chantways, and the specialized knowledge and Story behind these things are fully known only by ‘specialists’—those tribal individuals who have been chosen and extensively educated to carry the philosophical, cosmological and literary wealth of their Nations. If even members, born and raised within the cosmology of a certain Nation, know themselves to be unprepared for, unqualified for or unworthy of acquiring certain knowledge or of engaging in certain acts, it is indeed an act of profound hybris or naïve foolhardiness on the part of a tourist (even an educated one) to so engage himself…

I believe that the sense of alienation and purposelessness that this young man began to experience upon his return had little to do with spiritual confusion: in this regard, he had, in his conversation with me, posed no serious questions. Nor do I believe that he was being tormented by some malevolent
mystical force he had unwittingly unleashed. I believe that the ritual practices in which he had engaged his being effectively ‘fused’ him, for a short time, to the cosmic force governing the land and the community to which he was a stranger. He had experienced a liminoid transformation: For a brief time, he had become, perforce, part of a whole and he had been bound into the fabric of a foreign biota.

When he returned to his home, however, governed by a different set of cosmic forces, he discovered organically (although not yet intellectually) that while he still practiced the ritual, the tie had been lost. He had engaged in ritual, believing himself (his instrument/his consciousness/his ability to focus) to be the center. He had engaged himself so with one objective in mind--his personal development as an artist. This young man had experienced the efficacy of his labors, because he had been only part of the celebratory circle, centered in sacred space (land). And then he lost the center, and when he lost that center, he lost himself: “For without such a ritual fixing of a center there can be no circumference. And with neither circumference nor center where does a person stand” (Huntsman 85)?

Misappropriative practices, undertaken for self-aggrandizement and profiteering, are not only offensive and dangerous; they are confusing! Brandon University Professor and Acting Instructor, James Forsythe posits that “in these times of increasing demands for accountability…we need to appropriate the spirituality of other cultures to inform our actor training” (68). Just who is accountable, and to whom? Are the appropriators not accountable to those from whom they appropriate? Are they not accountable to the metaphysical forces they might invoke in the service of (even) a secular enterprise? Are they not accountable to those they teach, but to whom they will not “preach” (Forsythe 69)? Do they not bear a responsibility to disclose all—to inform their students of the significance of the acts they are called upon to perform, and of the original objectives behind and possible consequences of such acts? Is there not a responsibility to seek out and fix upon a truth? The same artists and thinkers who expound mightily upon the responsibility of the artist to reveal truth--whether it be in the revelation of emotional truth, psychological truth, and “scientific” truth in the penetration of the social mask or in the revelation of the economic and social machineries that govern human life--blithely discard the idea of a metaphysical truth, all the while selling myriad and widely varying spiritual practices to “complement actor training” and to
facilitate a ‘search for structure’ (Forsythe 71). If this contemporary North American society does not invest spirit with any significance, if such spirit requires no real respect and if this society, as Smukler has asserted, has no spiritual base, why is such a base required for the training of its actors? If contemporary Western society requires a secular Story, should not the storytellers who serve this society develop a secular technique?

Native artists within the Western conservatories are also taught that the ground upon which we “stand and deliver” is inconsequential: our Story is carried within; we needn’t look outwards. And yet, those of us that survive the training go on to re-discover our initial creative objective and to alter the processual lessons we have learned to create contemporary, urban theatre that is funny and mundane, that roots itself within the commonplace even as it invokes healing and transformation. In short, through a recovery of our own processes, we forge a path to that elusive place “that Indians talk about” wherein the commonplace is sacred and the limen between ritual and daily life has been dissolved.

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. **He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape**, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures that are there and all the faintest motions in the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk. (Momaday 99, emphasis added)

In 1970, the Kiowa poet, novelist and orator Dr. N. Scott Momaday introduced his “land ethic” to a Princeton audience at The First Convocation of American Indian Scholars: His famous oration, “The Man Made of Words” address, constitutes an explicit outline of the process which he employs as a storyteller, and which, itself, serves as a structural model of the aesthetic literary form that it engenders. It

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62 Here, “ ethic” is used in the philosophical sense. That is, it connotes a “rule of natural law,” by which humans must live. The ethical action as it is understood here is the right action, the correct action. The Attic playwrights expressed this idea as “necessity,” and it is expressed by traditional Native societies as alternatively “lifeway,” “the Red road,” “walking in beauty,” “balance” or (in the Odawa language) as “minobimaatisiwin”—the way of living well.
is not a process he created himself; nor is it to be evidenced in Western models and teachings. It is a process, as Momaday himself testifies, which lies in “living memory […] and the verbal tradition which transcends it” (97). It is a legacy passed down through the generations of the First Peoples of this continent, and it is the process that continues to inform our creative acts--be they on the page, on the stage, cut in stone, wrought in metal, woven in fabric, or danced upon sacred ground.

This ancient process of Storycreation and its realization in performance continue to grow and adapt in accordance with the base realities of our quotidian existence and the contemporary social and political constructs, which govern almost every facet of that existence. But its foundational core remains unchanging. The Spiderwoman tradition is more than a rich exercise in Storyweaving. And it certainly did not begin with the theatre company that bears its name. It is a tradition, which pre-dates written history. It points the direction and mandates each step along the artist’s path towards discovery, creation and structural realization. Through it, the artist is able to aesthetically realize what Paula Gunn Allen has termed a “seamless web of human and nonhuman life, which is simultaneously the oral tradition and the thought of Old Spider Woman, [which] is neither causal nor sequential, [which] is achronological and ahistorical and [which] is simultaneously general and highly specific” (100). And as Gunn Allen reminds us, the primary function of this processual legacy inherited from all those cosmic figures who wove, beaded or plaited the world into being (even as it is being recovered and employed by contemporary Native artists in commercial theatres or in published works) is to provide the gateway to ritual through oral tradition (100) and thereby to manifest the interconnections between all life-forms and the inextricable connection of all creatures to the lands they inhabit.

With mounting urgency over the past decade, contemporary Native theatre practitioners have been turning to and working with the lands that contain their histories. In 1997, Cree playwright/director Floyd Favel concluded, “I should bury deep into Mother Earth into the soil that has my ancestors [sic] remains, my work and theatrical experience. From here the earth and the ancestors, spirits of this land will inform the style, methodology of what the work shall be, how it shall define itself” (qtd. in Mojica, “Ethnostress” 22). But earth and all her inhabitants, animate and inanimate, spirit and material, ancestor
and descendant, life and art are not viewed as independent of or particularly distinct from each other. The Native artist does not simply look at something “other” for analogies that will inspire, adorn or enliven his “Works.” Rather, he looks to a piece of himself—a limb, as it were—as inextricably bound to his body and as urgently vital to his existence as his blood, heart, lungs or liver.

In 1999, during a whimsical and evocative talk to precipitate dialogue around Native American dramaturgical theory, playwright Diane Glancy remembered herself airborne, looking down onto a frozen lake, its pristine, glacial surface, clouded and etched over by snowmobile and truck tracks. To the many descriptions she offered to capture the definition of a Native play, she added this: “A snowmobile on a frozen lake which is only sometimes frozen” (Glancy, “Further” 128). The tracks, notating the recent migratory history of humans on the landscape, are etched on to a transitory base. As Glancy notes later, the ice will melt. But it is compelling to consider that these notations remain forever a part of the waters that flow through the region.

Equally compelling is Glancy’s later assertion that Native plays are “often orbiculate” (“Further” 130). That is to say that they are spherical, rounded. And this might be immediately recognized in the circular structure of many Native plays (and stories). However, this descriptor also infers the existence of spherical igneous inclusions, like the rings contained within a tree or a rock. Like the criss-crossed hatchings on frozen water that mark the migratory histories of earth’s youngest “children,” these rings are historical etchings, recording the years and mapping the movements of earth’s eldest. And as “circles upon circles” contain the lives of the trees and mineral foundations of this earth, so the stories in which human life is contained and around which human identity forms itself have been discovered by the Indigenous teller to require the application of a narrative structure that expresses this sacred geometry. If the structures of the stories themselves are orbiculate, what of the lifeways contained/remembered therein? After all, “you can’t fit a square peg into a round hole.” Those igneous inclusions cannot be contained in a square “box” and retain their integrity.

As Indigenous peoples throw themselves with renewed vigor into the project of recovering and reinstituting traditional forms of governance, jurisprudence and social structures, many are remembering
traditional systems of governance and political organization, which by their own orbiculate configurations demonstrate the extent to which their peoples once adapted their own movements (physical, intellectual, social and political) to the lands they occupied, rather than blasting those lands to adapt them in accordance with human will(fullness). The traditional Mohawk socio-political system, for instance, mirrors the orbiculate geographies of creation’s oldest beings, and the identity of each tribal member defines and expresses itself within the same sacred geometry.

Jan Derrick Métis/Mohawk Therapist and Educator⁶³ has provided the preceding model to demonstrate how the concentricity of the Circle ensures that all tribal members under traditional Mohawk governance were supported, and all of their roles were valued and held sacred. Here, we can see that such a model also expresses a dynamic geography where identities present themselves as naturally fluid.

Personal identity, which is defined by relationship, was realized through the enactment of one’s role towards the furtherance of the community’s long-term vision. One’s identity would change over time, moving the “actor” through each ring of the circle as child became adult, became Elder, and finally

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⁶³ Jan Derrick speaking at OISE (University of Toronto) 30 March 2005
passed on to become Spirit. So, then, the landscapes, which were the first teachers of Indigenous peoples, carrying the people’s languages, histories and ethical precepts and marking the moments to plant, harvest, build, hunt, travel, conceive and pray, remain the primary texts in which their “readers” can remember and recover ancient relationships to forge new identities. Perhaps, it would then be helpful to consider narrative structures, which express themselves as “circles upon circles,” not as exotic ‘museum pieces’ nor as self-conscious constructions designed to express cultural difference but as necessary processual containers (directed by and encoded within the Earth) in and through which her human children might remember, write, and re-member the relationships in which the self comes to being.

As artists on their own path to “recovery from discovery,” Monique Mojica and Cree director Floyd Favel began, in 2007, to gather a team of collaborators to develop a specifically Kuna dramaturgical structure based upon the pictographs, which notate Kuna medicine chants. Their investigations, which will be discussed in Chapter Five, have contributed an additional layer to the processual mola, which Mojica has inherited from her mother and aunties (see also Carter, “Chocolate Woman”). As Mojica has observed, artists from all nations might in a like manner turn to the birch bark scroll, petroglyph or innuksuk—histories written on the land—to create their own dramaturgical structures (Personal Communication, 26 June 2008). To this end, in the summer of 2008 Mojica and Favel assisted up-and-coming Swampy Cree playwright/performer Candace Brunette, as she returned to the community of her birth to create a foundation of land-based imagery around which her latest play will structure itself (Brunette, Personal Communication 24 June 2008). Since her return from this venture, I have had the opportunity to speak further with Brunette about her experiences. Brunette’s physical instrument (itself, an archive) now not only carries and disseminates texts transferred to it by other bodies (human and inhuman) it also has facilitated (through the ‘reverberations’ generated by its ‘playback’ of the original texts to those other bodies) the recovery of other, vital texts, which can now be transmitted to and carried by other bodies! Chapter Five of this work will explore this exciting phenomenon, the possibilities it

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64 I borrow this phrase from Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble’s *The Scrubbing Project* (2005), which was published in 2009 in *Staging Coyote’s Dream (II)*, edited by Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles.
holds and the challenges it offers to Native artists and scholars who are committed to the project of personal and communal decolonization. A Native play like a Native life like a community lifeway cannot be contained by a single circle; they are as a stone cast upon the waters; they are “circles upon circles;” they are many lives contained within the one and one life contained within the many.

Western theatrical training also devotes attention to the sensory re-creation of land, life forms, and objects that exist outside the self. But such explorations are undertaken to discover how “the thing outside” feeds the artist’s creative self—how it serves the artist’s story. Hence, a geographical feature so re-created by the artist enhances mood, inspires belief in the given circumstances, or provides the solid ground in which to root the story. The Spiderwoman storyteller, by contrast, engages her being completely in the sensory re-creation. She “gives her self over;” and hence becomes the empty vessel through which the land speaks. She dwells upon terrain that is intimately known to her in all its incarnations, through all its seasonal changes, in relationship to all its inhabitants. And the stories that emerge from her being after such an exercise are authored and directed by the image she has internalized. The land, then, does not become a convenient backdrop to the human story; the land is author and protagonist of many stories, and the human becomes the vessel through which these are communicated.

Inarguably, techniques employed by Western and Indigenous storytellers to facilitate such sensory recreations may bear such structural similarities so as to seem virtually indistinguishable. But the objectives, which fuel them, are diametrically opposed, as are the resultant presentations in both aesthetic form and efficacy. The Indigenous artist journeys outward, giving her self over to something greater than she. She allows it to work on her, to shape the Story she tells, and to reshape her as she tells that Story. Her technique then becomes the vehicle through which the land can shape the individual in accordance with the content of its Story and the aesthetic demanded in its telling. These techniques, as the Western artist generally utilizes them, afford no such transformation. The artist engages himself in finding the setting (and appropriate accoutrements) that will service his story; if necessary, he will re-shape the landscape or re-imagine it to suit the story and facilitate its telling. Western story is born in and of the artist; and these—story and teller—are generally isolate, independent, and inviolate.
By way of example, I will refer here to my own experience in the professional world of theatre: I have worked with many collectives outside the Spiderwoman tradition wherein the storytellers connect with an image to create and develop an isolate story. Other members of the company observe its evolution, comment upon it, make suggestions, and ultimately find a place for it within the whole. The finished product, then, unfolds as a collage of isolated experiences, which may bear similarities in theme or shape. But each of these stories is owned by its teller. Even within the process that Richard Schechner has developed wherein actors are encouraged to try out various roles and to tell the story from different angles, ownership is established as the actor moves “from the ‘not me’ (the blueprinted role) to the ‘not-not-me’ (the realized role)” (Turner, From Ritual 93). The actor moves inward, utilizing the story as a vehicle to self, rather than utilizing the self as a vehicle to a greater story outside himself.

The Storyweaver, by contrast, connects with an image, explores and internalizes it, and allows it to lead her without any attempt at accurate mimesis or literal transformation. She does not “become” a rock, a tree, or a wooden bust of an “Indian maiden.” She does not look to “find herself” (or to hook herself into her own story) within these things (as Strasberg’s sense-and-affective memory exercises train actors to do). Nor does she hold as her primary objective the search for truth in the “accurate” re-creation of what has already been created. These things exist apart from her. And although she understands that her existence is tied into theirs, she understands that, as the last and least element of all that has been created, she cannot presume her Story to carry more importance than that of all others’ for which she has consciously prepared herself to become the vessel. Rather than herself, she seeks to discover and express the tie between the human self and all other elements of creation. She does not place undue emphasis upon her mood, her psychological truth or her physiological reactions. She is concerned with the “mechanics” of existence, how each member of the greater community works upon her, how she works upon it, how balance is destroyed or maintained, and the ways in which she must adapt her being and its creative expression to fit the terrain and to maintain balance. When we apply ourselves fully to organic dramaturgies rooted in “that place that Indians talk about” (even in the exploration and revelation of very personal and painful incidents), we begin to understand that no Story is ours alone; all Story belongs to
the biota in which it unfolds. The act of re-creation, world renewal, and restoration of balance is the responsibility of teller and auditor alike. And this, too, is reflected within the Spiderwoman process.

Organic Dramaturgy in Action: Workshop One

On 22 January 2002, Muriel Miguel facilitated a special intensive Storyweaving workshop at the Native Canadian Friendship Centre of Toronto. Although this workshop is not absolutely characteristic of all of Miguel’s workshops where layers of the collective “performative mola” may be spun from dreams, true events, witnessed events, fantasies or overheard conversations, it provides a lucid demonstration of “organic dramaturgy” as a facilitator of inter-connection in action.

As it does in all of her workshops (and professional work), this workshop’s warm-up focused itself on discovering and tapping into personal energy and utilizing that energy to connect the organic being with sky and earth. Drawing upon her training in modern dance, Miguel led participants through a series of Laban exercises designed to facilitate connection (with energy from above), grounding (to earth), and protection (from inner or outer interference and judgment).

After preparing the physical and vocal instrument, Miguel concentrated on ensemble building through her own version of [Chaikin’s] “Transformations”: participants each received a sound from another, replicated that sound (giving it back to its author), allowed that sound to transform itself within them and finally passed a newly created sound on. The same exercise was repeated with movement, and finally participants formed two lines flanking a central aisle. Each participant was moved down this aisle propelled by a sound and movement that emanated from and drove her being. She allowed it to work upon and transform itself within her until she was ready to pass both sound and movement onto one of the colleagues who flanked her. This colleague would pick up the original sound and movement, replicate it and give it back to its author. When the originator was satisfied with her colleague’s kinetic, rhythmical and oral replication, she would fill her colleague’s position in one of the flanking lines, while this colleague allowed the original expression to work upon and to transform itself within her being. When the
transformation was complete, she would pass on her own sound and movement, and so the exercise progressed until each participant had received, given back, re-created, and passed on a sound and movement. “Transformations,” as utilized by Chaikin’s Open Theater, privileged the “unconscious resources” of the actor and exercised the actor’s “ability to handle a wide range of situations, acting styles and emotions” (Pasolli 20). And although frequent practice also fostered receptivity and cooperation between ensemble members (and was intended to do such), the development of the individual remained the paramount objective of the exercise. Ironically, this exercise, developed to free Open Theater members from the “grip of the Method” (Pasolli 21), was ultimately seen by its original practitioners as a tool to “[free] the actor to be the child {now I’m the grass, now I’m the queen, now I’m the king of the mountain, now I’m the cloud}” (Pasolli 21). Chaikin’s actor was ultimately trained to understand himself as “the king of the mountain,” wielding the power to author and transform time, place, relationship and personal identity.

The Indigenous storytellers in Miguel’s 2002 workshop were also freed as they worked through the primary “Transformations” exercises, but this was freedom of a very different stripe: Miguel’s students were compelled to closely observe and actively listen to each other. Relationship and interconnections were privileged over self-conscious self-development: after all, it is in the connections to place and in the development of relationships to other “selves” that the Indigenous human establishes and develops his/her identity. Miguel’s version of “Transformations” did not free the storytellers to work transformations; rather, it facilitated the transformation of their physical instruments (their material selves) into “vessels” of which another’s stories could take possession and through which these stories would be expressed. The connection between self and other manifested itself as personal expression (that is, the personal story to be communicated), which emerged directly out of the relationship between the vessel (belonging to self) and the story (sound and movement belonging to an “other”). And frequent repetition of this exercise--adopted and adapted by Miguel--comprises a crucial, preparatory stage in the craft of storyweaving.
Before stories are woven, however, they must be created, recovered or discovered. Whereas in rehearsals, senior students or experienced performers would bring in stories to work through with the ensemble and to ultimately weave into the final work, participants in Miguel’s 2002 workshop first created stories and then worked through them using Miguel’s storyweaving method. Instead of a “theme” or “concept,” participants were asked to work with a remembered tree. Utilizing sense memory exercises, Miguel guided each participant into a potent encounter with this inhabitant of a personal landscape. Such an exercise would manifest itself as an “object exercise” in the studios of Uta Hagen or Lee Strasberg where a potent evocation of the “object” (the tree) would serve to strengthen the actor’s belief in the given circumstances or to engender the evocation of a remembered story in which the actor is the “subject”--indeed, the protagonist--and the tree (as object) is merely a backdrop or a prop. In Miguel’s workshop, by contrast, once the storyteller could see, feel, hear and smell the tree, it did not remain outside and apart, acting as a catalyst to stimulate and inspire. Rather, Miguel’s storyteller allowed the tree to enter and take possession of her. She did not become her tree; nor, did she represent this tree; she allowed the tree to express itself through her organism. The difference between seemingly similar exercises undertaken by Western Method-practitioners and by the Indigenous Storyweaver is extremely subtle, but it would be a great mistake to dismiss it or to deny that such a difference exists. It is bound up in the opposing understandings of self and identity and in the clash of Western and Indigenous attitudes towards place and biota. And it produces strikingly dissimilar aesthetic approaches and strikingly dissimilar aesthetic expressions. Where the Western artist (like the Western explorer, discoverer or landowner) possesses the landscape65, the Indigenous artist (like her ancestors) allows it to possess her, to direct her physical movement and her tellings.

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65 “Landscape,” here does not just connote a topographical feature (such as the “tree”). I am speaking of an entire biota here, composed of all beings--human and non-human, living and dead.
Notes from a Kitchen: A “Processual Encounter” that Became a Story

Behind my eyes my grandmother was stepping into my head
I was still Muriel
The sound of wind whistling through gauze
The sound of my heart
My heart
My heart thumping
The sound of wind whistling through my ears
My head split open and fell to the floor
My head split open and fell to the floor
My grandmother stepped into my head and behind my eyes
The voice
I was still Muriel
The contour of my face changed
Behind my eyes were [sic] my grandmother
I was still Muriel
The voice, the voice, the voice
The voice that went through the gauze and the blood and the heart
thumping
The sound of my heart through the gauze
The voice, the voice the voice I heard from behind my eyes changed
This voice changed
My head split open and fell to the floor
My head split open and fell to the floor
My whole face became another face
My voice became different
I changed … (Spiderwoman, Reverb-ber-ber-ber-rations 125-26, emphasis added)

Although this fragment from Muriel Miguel’s “Grandma” story of Reverb-ber-ber-ber-rations does not recount the actress’s deliberate engagement of and with her process but rather remembers an actual and involuntary moment in 1988 when she was visited (and literally inhabited) by an ancestor, it provides us with valuable insights into the workings of her process. The storyteller may allow herself to be inhabited
by an other, but she is not utterly subsumed by otherness: throughout the experience of her grandmother’s unsolicited visitation, Muriel Miguel remained Muriel Miguel looking through another’s eyes.

During the 1990 rehearsals for *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*, Miguel distinguished this experience from the experience of “channeling” in discussion with her older sisters. Her niece Monique Mojica had witnessed the visitation, which literally took place in the kitchen of a home where Muriel was a visitor. And Muriel understood from her witness that her own voice and face had altered significantly. Later, she could never quite recall what she had uttered in this altered voice, but she always remembered that she, Muriel, had for a moment seen the world through her grandmother’s eyes (*Reverb Rehearsals 1990, Tape 6*). The lived ontological event manifested an unmistakable connection between the youngest Miguel sister and her maternal grandmother. Moved (literally, propelled) by an element of her spiritual landscape, Miguel’s body (as a vessel of ancestral vision and voice, reverberating within) became the fleshly bridge between the generations, linking, for one moment, her mother’s mother with her mother’s daughter’s daughter in a time and place (Muriel was visiting Canada at the time), this grandmother had never inhabited during her mortal existence. When, in 1990, Miguel remembered her experience to her sisters during rehearsals at the American Indian Community House (NYC), this foundational story of generational reverberation became a catalyst, which extended the original reach of the lived experience (bringing all three sisters into the connective web) and which produced further reverberations and endless concatenations.

“Processual Encounters” in the Studio

Moved (literally, propelled) by their remembered trees, Miguel’s students began to find their stories and give them voice at that 2002 workshop: some emerged from personal memory (re-seen through the

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66 I am indebted to Gloria Miguel for providing me with the rehearsal cassettes in her possession for this production. As of this writing, I have been provided with rehearsal tapes 6-9 for *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* (1990). Upon completion of this project, these tapes will be returned to Ms. Miguel who has indicated her intention to eventually add them to the NAWPA holdings.
storyteller’s eyes); others emerged as if they were memories of the tree itself (now bearing witness through the human vessel); others manifested themselves quite distinctly as fragments of ancestral memory (perhaps stories heard long ago; perhaps knowledge buried in the very earth itself--tangled up in the roots of a centuries-old tree who once bore silent witness--or woven into the DNA of a living descendant through whose veins flows ancestral blood and whose flesh has been composed of the same earth on which her predecessors lived and died). Some incredibly powerful stories came out of this process, but as a participant—a fellow student—it was not my place to record these stories. Nor would it be proper for me now to attempt to remember and share them here. Instead, to more clearly disseminate this process (as I have come to understand it) and its possibilities, I include a brief excerpt of my first experience as a workshop facilitator in Storyweaving with young professionals during December 2002 and January 2003:

After a group warm-up, I dim the lights and ask the actors to lie down on the floor. As they begin to relax into the space, I ask them to focus on a personal, remembered landscape. I ask them to explore it with their hands, to feel it beneath their backs, to smell and taste it in the back of their throats, to describe each minute detail in breath carried on sound, and finally to begin to adjust their bodies to the remembered land beneath them. Eventually, they begin to take in one feature of that landscape--a rock, a tree, a root, a vine, a stone, a blade of grass, a creature or insect. They take it into their bellies, like a coiled snake, breathing into it and speaking to me with sound on breath. The “snake” begins to uncoil within them, and as they feel it stirring they allow it to move them through the space--to carry them through the story. They do not imitate the image; nor do they “become” the image: they simply allow the image in and allow it to lead them through the story. The space throbs with inarticulate sounds, snatches of song, repeated phrases. Bodies move through space, winding snakelike on the floor, kneeling, rocking,

67 This series of workshops conducted at the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama (University of Toronto) was carefully and collectively transcribed. The stories, which emerged from the workshop, belong to Cunning Mothers, Foolish Children: A Native Medea Project, which explores the central question, “what happens to the children of Earth when covenants are broken and relationships (to the “mother”) are violated?” To protect the anonymity of the storytellers (for the present, as some may choose not to use these stories in future public presentations of this work), their names are not given here.
climbing on tables, basking in the light coming through the windows, cowering in the shadow, skipping, dancing, punching walls…

Afterwards, I ask them to present their stories to the group. “S.” begins, and I am fascinated as I watch her move through the space to recount her story. She takes us with her to a rainy, cold night after a long day of tree planting. Her feet test the frozen mud beneath them as she maneuvers her way around bushes and under ropes and tarps, wending her weary way back to her tent for the night. She shudders as icy rain droplets spill down on her neck and slide beneath her clothing. And for a moment, we can all hear the same rain she hears as it beats down on the tarps in her camp and the whisper of the poplars swaying in the wind. She has entered the bowels of the “beast,” and she has carried us with her:

S.

I feel the ground
It’s strange, frozen--pulling on my feet
The ooze of life
Scorched earth breathes again
I get to the tarp and pull the first rope up as I crawl under
I always crawl under--why?
Water trickles down my neck--it’s cold, cold
I reach the second rope--again I pull it up as I crawl under
Stay close to mother--she pulls me down
Unzip my tent
Brush the leaves and crud off my butt--I don’t want to get mud on my bed.
My fingers are numb--they slip clumsily over the muddy laces of my boots.
One
Two
My socks are slick and filth--disgusting!
I cover myself: flannel sheet, wool blanket, duvet, quilt
Warm at last--within the belly of the beast.
Wind blows
Rain trickles
Tarp rattles
I close my eyes and smell the diesel from the logging trucks
I close my eyes and dream of a
lush vertical rising up from the scorched earth
I close my eyes and hear my mother ask, “When are you going to get serious? When are you going to get a real job?”
I close my eyes and wonder.
This earth--this scorched earth--is written into my body
Etched into the lines of my hand, caked under my nails
Isn’t this my real job--to give back something that has been taken away?
I plant trees and dream my dreams of a lush vertical.

… It has been a long afternoon and we are all exhausted. Before we leave, I ask them, “Why do we tell stories? Why is Story important? Why is this story important?” I want to hear them say it. I want to know what this means to them. “G.” tells me that we have to keep the circle strong to keep Story alive: so many of us have stepped out (or been dragged out) of the circle; so many of us have been ripped from our families, torn away from our languages, pushed out of our lands. The links in our oral tradition have been broken, and our Story may be lost. Our Elders were betrayed into betraying their own people; they were told lies; they signed treaties, written in a language that wasn’t even their own; they were told lies about what they were signing: “Once you sign your ‘X,’ that’s it; everything’s lost.” She talks about the Pow Wow circuit; the dance tradition seems to be alive and well there, but many dancing in Pow Wow dance competitively for cash prizes. “Where are the young ones in Ceremony?” she asks. Traditionally, she reminds us, dance was an offering for someone. “When we Sundanced for healing we kept our eyes only on the central tree, ‘the tree of life.’ Nowadays, people host Sundances for money. They are selling our spirituality, and the ‘tree of life’ has no meaning anymore.”

… “But what is the betrayal?” I ask at our next meeting. “Does it begin with lies? And what is the lie?” I want to know. “What engenders it?” In the Judeo-Christian Story, evil is personified in and engendered by “The Father of Lies.” In our tradition, the first gift of life is the gift of breath. To utter

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68 I hang onto this image--“the tree of life,” the Sundance tree. I recognize it as part of the “covenant”--trees, and betrayal. The integration of storytellers with the land and with each other is unmistakable, as is the intersection of their images.
untruth is to corrupt that first gift—to corrupt life, itself. To lie is an abomination. What leads to this abomination? What feeds it? What fuels it? “I believe,” I tell them, “that if you look to the root of every lie, every betrayal, you will find fear. Go with the land. Follow the story. But this time, look out for the fear; find the fear beneath the betrayal, if you can.”

“A.”

So, there’s a woman
And she’s walking on the street at night
Not wearing shoes
She feels the pavement under her feet
It’s wet; it pinches her tender soles
She feels the pain in her head
Her head is bleeding--down her face
There’s a piercing pain on the tip of her skull.
She keeps on walking.
Where is she going?
She’s trying to get away.
She wakes up in her bed beside a person who hurts her everyday.
She gets up and walks around her bedroom
The scar on her head is there.
The blood has dried.
She walks IN HER OWN HOUSE.
She stares at the doorway in the middle of the night
And wonders why she can’t just walk out
Away from her pain and the ache inside her
Which is physical but also etched
Inside her soul.
Body broken
Why is she not able to walk out?

While we cannot be certain from whence or from what perspective “A’s” story emerges, it is readily apparent that “S’s” story (previously recounted) has emerged from remembered experience and that through this experience, she has discovered (or more profoundly realized) the complex connections
that exist between her, a (hitherto) foreign landscape and its inhabitants, the (all too familiar) economic
landscape in which she has been raised and her relations who inhabit it.

“G.” an Oji-Cree artist had worked with Muriel Miguel many times at the Centre for Indigenous
Theatre prior to her participation in the Cunning Mothers workshop. So, it comes as no surprise then that
her experience and the evolution of her story within the process most apparently mirror Miguel’s. Her
first encounter with a remembered landscape connects her almost immediately with a fatally wounded
bear (Mukwa). And it is through her that the spirit of the Anishinaabeg teacher and protector speaks:

“G.”

My body begins to twitch
Something is affecting me--an unwanted force
It feels like something’s being put in me on one side
And my spirit is leaving me

I’m starting to curl because my natural self is dying
The coil of my being tightens
I’m taken to a dark place
With words I do not understand
Owweeya. Owweeya.

And then I get out
I want to leave
I try to run
But they pull me back in
My heart is exposed
And it bleeds

I still do not understand
I did not ask to come here
I did not ask to come here
I feel like a bear being shot
Grabbing at its last breath
Trying to destroy everything in its path
Choking
My body comes back alive
But I walk around like a wounded animal
My form is strong
I walk in the spirit world
But I have no voice.

“G.” later tells us that while she began with the image of the wounded bear, she could not focus on anything beyond the “bullet hole.” The hole became the biggest part of her being, and she felt herself being “invaded.” This hole and the subsequent intrusion into her being bear significant resemblance to Muriel Miguel’s experience with the spirit of her grandmother who steps into her “split” head and settles behind her eyes. Mukwa, we would do well to remember, is teacher and protector of the Anishinaabeg. And it is most wonderful and terrible to consider that the fatally wounded creature remembered through “G.” carries her through a series of profoundly fatal transformations, which remember the profoundly fatal transformations wrought within her own family (and all the families of Indigenous peoples) by an invading force. The “hole” in “G.” through which the bear has entered becomes the hole through which an instrument of death (bullet) has been able to penetrate the teacher/protector of our ancestors. And it ultimately reveals itself as the “hole” through which the instruments of cultural genocide entered those ancestors.

In death, “G’s” bear opens a door into a story about the Residential Schools—“being taken from your home, being forced to pray in a language you don’t know, trying to pray in a language that’s been taken from you.” Through each session, “G.” has allowed her body to completely lead her; her Story requires almost no vocal explanation, but the voices that emerge from her during each phase of her

69 It bears repeating that this is not the same thing as “channeling.” And it is not meant to be. Those who channel spirits experience a trance-state during which they (as self-conscious beings) are not aware of what their physical instruments are experiencing, thinking or saying. They are utterly possessed by a foreign consciousness and their own interior identity (consciousness of self and other) has been entirely subsumed. This is not the experience of the Storyweaver. A foreign consciousness may enter her, but interior space and exterior stimuli are shared and experienced by the “Indigenous” and “Settler” selves.
journey are distinct and accord with each transformation of body, mind, spirit and emotion that her “character” undergoes. I am convinced that her connection with this remembered landscape has tapped into information, which has been passed down through her blood and stored in the marrow of her bones. “G.” has, thankfully, not had to endure residential school. I feel quite certain that she has invoked an ancestor and that this ancestor speaks through her.

“G” (continued)

My spirit has been chosen and called
And it’s taken on the form
I don’t know what’s in front of me
I don’t know what will become of me
But I will go
I will forget all that I knew in the spirit world
And I will learn once again
What it is that they chose for me

I feel life within my body
I’m so cramped
I want out

I feel so different
I feel a feeling that all of us are supposed to have
I hear voices
I can’t see them, but they feel so comforting.
I’m going in the direction that we are supposed to grow in.
The voices get louder
I feel emotion
I feel strength
I feel so strong
My spirit feels at home.

What is that coming?
Who could they be?
Mom, Gi’mama, ow nana? Who is that?
They look strange
Something tells me to stay away
I go and hide
I sit in my tipi and watch them

What did you say?
She tells me to go forth
“What is it that you have?”
Should I dare to take it?
I am afraid.

No, I tell her; I don’t want to go with them
But they push me forward
I don’t want to go!
Namoya!!! Moyspwatay!! Moyspaytay!!
Not me not me myneya MOYNEYA!!

I have to go
I walk like I’m in chains
Getting heavier and heavier

My spirit is hurting
My hair is my strength
And they have taken it away
Force-feeding me THEIR way!

What we have been examining here is the extent to which Miguel’s process (as it is applied to the creation/recovery/discovery of story) facilitates and strengthens the connections between the storyteller and her biota; herein, she begins to come to her self as she begins to understand that self by understanding her relationship to the un/seen world outside and beyond. But it is in the weaving of disparate stories that the storyteller establishes and deepens her connections to her immediate community of “fellows.”
Through it, she develops an organic sensitivity to the imperceptible cords that bind one story to another and a profound appreciation for the impossibly intricate web that contains life-entire.

**Making Molas / Spinning Webs: Weaving the One into Many**

During Miguel’s 2002 workshop, the first phase of Storycreation connected the isolate individual to something outside of herself. Here, the storyteller consciously engaged in exercises (process) to open her being/instrument and to facilitate this connection, whereas Miguel’s personal experience and ultimate connection with her grandmother came unbidden and unsolicited. This isolate experience (experienced by her alone) was witnessed by her niece who remembered details that Miguel had forgotten and recounted those details, along with her own experience as witness back to Miguel, thus weaving herself into this metaphysical fabric that connected grandmother to granddaughter to great granddaughter. Two years later, when Miguel brought this story into the rehearsal studio with her sisters, this “fabric” became denser and more ornate as her sisters wove their own stories into this. And later, this fabric would achieve even greater density and become even more ornate, as witnesses in the public space wove their own stories into these or wove these into their own stories, as they recounted their experience of the theatrical event to family, friends, readers or students.

Even amongst theorists, this phenomenon is apparent. For instance, in *The Explicit Body in Performance*, feminist scholar Rebecca Schneider credits Spiderwoman’s *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* with tapping into and releasing her own “counter-memories” (157), the reverberations of which Schneider then ‘performs’ on the page. Schneider reads Spiderwoman’s *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* as a site of resistance wherein the newly re-membered, colonized body can subvert the colonial gaze through a series of counter-mimetic performative interventions by means of which the colonial construct of ‘primitive authenticity’ is turned on its head. And as she thinks through this reading (on the page), Schneider remembers herself. She shares with her readers a late night visitation by the disembodied specter of a hitherto unknown “American Indian” Great Grandmother (156-157). And she says of this experience:
The presence of the absence of my forgotten great-grandparent underscored for me the notion that implicit in the visibility of my “whiteness” and Spiderwoman’s “color” is a host of invisible bodies—a host of counter-memories that reverberate between us. And yet it is very important to emphasize that those counter-memories would reverberate regardless of a Cherokee grandmother. (Schneider 159)

To be sure, Schneider’s discussion is highly problematic in instances and invites serious interrogation. For instance, she tells us that it is dangerous to theorize about the body, because such theorizing ultimately constructs a containment unit in which the articulated/explicated body has been “made appropriate, congealed, accessible and therefore safe.” And she acknowledges Audrey Lorde’s indictment of feminist scholars (of which Schneider is one) who refuse to acknowledge difference or who deal with that difference by appropriating it (and hence the strengths that emerge from that difference) for themselves (156). Schneider, here, finds a convenient way around these problematic issues without seriously addressing herself to the task of answering either Lorde’s indictment or her own doubts in her methodological framework. Instead, she is able to blithely divest herself of all responsibility by discovering a bridge—a long lost Native ancestor—between her and the bodies of color with which she wishes to engage. Once this ethereal ‘bridge’ has been located, Schneider immediately dismisses her as irrelevant and unnecessary: although she is no longer just another White feminist scholar trying to write about, erase or appropriate difference, it would not matter if she were. With or without her disembodied great-grandmother, “a host of counter-memories” would “reverberate” between her and the women of whom she writes (159).

But Schneider also seems to dismiss as irrelevant any cultural knowledge that may be necessary to properly read and interpret the ‘signs’ that cause those reverberations to occur. For instance, what Schneider identifies as “a tape of Indian singing and Coyote calling” (153) is actually Paul Ortega’s rendition of the “Trail Song,” which was sung by travelers on the trails at night as a courteous alarum to warn those who might be ahead of them of their location and of their approach from behind. Spiderwoman uses Ortega’s “Trail Song” in Power Pipes, as well as Reverb-ber-ber-rations. It is a polyvalent signifier, which is as profoundly exciting as it is poignant. Spiderwoman Theater tells us that the spirits talk to us through ambient/incidental sounds (Reverb 102), and this play is about
communication with the spirits and the resonance of their messages. Just as spirits alert mortals of their presence on the earthly plane with sound, so the Miguel sisters, in this performance, alert the next generation that they are right behind them. What Spiderwoman is recuperating from the past is for the use of those in the future. It is their legacy.

Finally, it is troubling to note that while Schneider lauds Spiderwoman’s “searing critique” of stereotypes and metonyms her own ‘authentic’ ancestral apparition could be seen in just such a light. Schneider’s cryptic ancestor (cryptic to the point of invisibility) certainly talks like a metonyndian! With her catalogue of “certain Indian diseases” and her sensible injunction to “keep working,” no Indian grandmother (who signs her name with an “X”) could have been more ably constructed (156-157).

Be that as it may, however, Schneider’s assertion that the Spiderwoman production she witnessed in March of 1990 somehow tapped into and released counter-memories, which had lain dormant inside her body, and her own ‘performance’ of “doubling back” onto the production the story of her own ‘remembered self’ illustrate, to some degree, how this process facilitates the interweaving of individuals and communities through the stories they tell, the metamorphosis of passive receptor into “actor” and communicator and the transformation of a secular site of entertainment into a space of remembrance, healing and communitas.

In Miguel’s studio, weaving is a painstaking process that requires intense focus, immense patience and an unconditional willingness to “donate” the physical instrument as a vessel of containment and conveyance for another’s story. This is one aspect of “generosity,” as “Miguel’s performers” understand it. Generosity is generally not understood in the same sense by the Western performer who adjudges this quality in fellow performers in accordance with how much they “give” (the histrionic conveyance of emotion) and how “available” they are (how open they are to receive another’s conveyance and how profoundly they react to what they have received). Miguel’s performer includes these manifestations of generosity in her process, but she has deepened these by two layers. The first, we have already discussed. The second layer of generosity is, perhaps, more personally challenging. Miguel
speaks of this as “the feeling of a generous heart, because [in this process] you give the story, and it’s no longer yours” (University of Toronto, 13 November 2006).

In studio, the teller tells her story. Perhaps it is one that she has created in earlier studio sessions; perhaps, it is one she brings to the table (a lived event, a dream, a witnessed event, etc.). She utilizes her entire body and her entire vocal range in the process of the telling. Indeed, as Muriel Miguel has cautioned her colleagues and students time and time again, at this stage in the process, it does not work just to “sit and talk.” The words really come when stories are put on their feet and action is privileged over talking (Reverb Rehearsals 1990, Tape 9). The other performers witness. They must fully concentrate, as they listen and watch. Then the witnesses—each in their own turn—retell the teller’s story (mimicking physical expression, tempo, rhythm, tonal changes, etc.) Hence, the original teller is able to see how her story has been received. She has stepped back and thus been able to view her (rendition of the) story translated by another. In her turn, she receives the translation, and she has the opportunity to adjust or fine-tune that translation. Each witness performs her reception of the teller’s story, and so the teller is able to perceive just how much has been absorbed and what parts of her telling have resonated with her witnesses.

As the process continues, the ensemble members offer themselves up in service of the story. Eventually, each takes on responsibility for one “bit” of the story, just as the flautist, the drummer, the cellist and the bass player each bear responsibility for their musical parts. Like players in a symphony, each “bit” is orchestrated into the whole, and the original teller can add or delete them from the “weave” she creates. By the end of the process, the “kernel” of story is located, and both teller and witness learn invaluable lessons about their place in the fabric and their connections to the whole.

For instance, during a Storyweaving workshop facilitated in July 2006 by Monique Mojica at the University of Toronto, an Oji-Cree student told a profoundly compelling story about his two grandmothers (one Ojibwa and one Cree) to explore the conflict with which he now contends as an urban Aboriginal person. One grandmother had retained her traditional ways and was trying to pass them on to her grandchildren. The other grandmother had adopted a more “Western” lifestyle, which was destroying
her. She cut and permed her hair; she wore makeup; she flaunted her sexuality; she drank; and finally, she drank excessively. And she had (perhaps, without intending it) passed on her love of parties and her excessive lifestyle to her children and grandchildren.

This young man, attracted by the “lifeway” of the less traditional grandmother had left his reserve, hoping to immerse himself in the “glamour” and good life he thought Toronto held for him. But the “glamorous life” had taken its toll on him. He was battling addiction. He had encountered (and still does encounter) frequent incidents of racism and abuse from both strangers and intimate partners. He had become increasingly angry, and he longed to lash out. Indeed, he stopped in his tracks at one point during the telling, planted his feet and strongly declared his right to walk unquestioned and unmolested on his own land!

Mojica had him repeat his story several times pushing him to punctuate each new thought or image with physical action and pushing him to inflate and broaden the physical score he was developing. Then, she asked each of the students to get up and replay his story, recreating text and action with as much accuracy as possible. The original storyteller watched carefully, noting what had been omitted (i.e. what had not been successfully received) and what had most powerfully resonated with each of his colleagues. I was one of those who witnessed and retold this story. And while I was deeply conscious of my responsibility to this story—that is, my responsibility to receive and retell the story accurately without adding to, omitting from or changing it—I, in perceiving the connections between my own story and his and in perceiving what had been omitted, forgotten or reconfigured by other re-tellers (many of whom were non-Native), had selected particular instances to highlight in my own performance. For me, this story was about his right to walk unquestioned and unmolested on Native lands, and it was about the reclamation and assertion of Indigenous languages. So while I strove to recreate the story as completely as I could, I instinctively highlighted those things that had most powerfully resonated with me. After each

70 Notice how this first stage in the Storyweaving process has evolved from Miguel’s adaptation of the Transformations exercise.
witness retold the original story (in sound and movement), the original teller took the floor and, informed by our reception, re-worked the story to “talk back” to his witnesses, so to speak, by heightening moments that may have been lost in our retellings or to adopt the instances of heightened emphasis that he had witnessed. Thus, the teller teaches his witnesses who learn by opening themselves up to become vessels for his story. In turn, they teach him; they connect him more deeply to his story, perhaps by demonstrating the significance of incidents/actions that he had heretofore taken for granted.

The next step in the process is to identify the kernel of the story. This kernel becomes the cornerstone to which all other stories may be linked and through which the connections between all may be perceived. This processual stage takes the form of a “jam” session—an orchestral improvisation, as it were—in which the original teller holds the melody line while his colleagues fill out the “music” with bass lines, counterpoints and brief “wind,” “string” or “brass” solos, alternatively playing by instinct and trying to blend with the whole or following a “conductor,” who in this case was Mojica. Each witness, then, selects and becomes responsible for one beat in the story—that is, one action articulated by one (or a brief series of) sound and movement. (I chose, for instance, the very first beat in the story, “Watchay!” This is a Cree greeting, which had been so joyfully articulated by the teller with firmly planted feet and arms spread wide in an all-encompassing embrace.) The teller begins the melody-line alone. His orchestra may be on or off stage. If they are on stage, they remain still and silent until they receive a signal from the conductor to begin their section. If they are off stage, the conductor will signal them to take a particular spot on the floor and articulate their section. All ears are “on” the teller and the other members of the “orchestra.” All eyes are on the conductor and the teller at once. The teller continues the melody unchecked; the orchestra continues to play behind, around, above or beneath the teller, working diligently to integrate each “beat” into a harmonious whole. From time to time, the conductor may call for the cessation of one or more beats during the “song.” She may call for the cessation of all beats in moments, leaving the melody line to carry the story alone for some moments. At other moments, she may stop the melody line, allowing for an interval to be filled by one or several or all of the accompanying beats. Eventually, as the story nears its conclusion, she will begin to “fade out” the accompaniment. One
by one, the performers leave the stage. The story may end on the melody line, but it may just as easily end on one reverberating beat or a harmonious blend of two. It is though this process—the separation and isolation of each beat and its reintegration (via orchestration) into the whole—that the kernel of the story is located.

As I have already mentioned, I had instinctively selected what, for me, was the kernel of the story (as had all of my colleagues and, perhaps, our conductor). And herein lies a demonstration of Armstrong’s “Enow’kin Principle” in action. In a courageous and generous act, the teller has relinquished sole authority over the story and has opened to a multiplicity of perspectives and opened himself to multiple ways of seeing. Again, from my perspective this story was about recovery (history and language) and the assertion of Indigenous language and Indigenous “title.” But while my perception ultimately was bound up within and integral to the whole, our “jam session” had revealed something else. The kernel, through the ministrations of our conductor, was finally located and identified by the teller as the particular beat that spoke directly to his traditional (and oft-ignored, oft-dismissed) kokum (grandmother): “My grandmother gathered the medicines.” And ultimately, I came to see (as I had somehow not been able to see before) that indeed this was the cornerstone upon which recovery, conflict-resolution and reclamative action rested. Through this process, all participants came to more profoundly understand something about each other (and our individual ways of seeing) that we hadn’t recognized before. Such a discovery might go far to restore relationships that have been damaged by misunderstanding, miscommunication, forgetfulness or misinterpretation.

In the rehearsal studio, each story goes through the same corrective process until its kernel is located. Then the “jam sessions” become more complex as two or more stories (with accompanying bits) are layered together in an “orchestral movement” until the kernel that binds all stories together has been identified. Tellingly, when we watch productions that have been orchestrated by Muriel Miguel, a central story emerges, which is either constantly before our eyes on stage or which repeats itself (or slivers of itself) cyclically throughout the piece. And it is to this centre—this base layer of the performative mola—that all other layers (stories) are subtly and often imperceptibly connected. And more often than not, that
foundational kernel takes the form of a question, which must be answered with more stories, which produce more questions requiring answers. Quite simply, “Spiderwoman’s method grows from answering questions with stories, offering explanations and contexts, if not answers” (Haugo, “Weaving” 222). The artist follows the kernel, “like following the pain” (M. Miguel, qtd. in Haugo, “Weaving” 226). She does this to seek its solution, not to relive it or wallow in it. The emergent piece, then, maps a path towards healing, and the fabric becomes denser, richer, takes on more colors. And circles form themselves around circles, around circles, around circles in a project that extends beyond one play, one performer or one troupe—the works emerging from one lifetime or one community into a liminal phenomenon that tracks the spiritual geography of communities upon communities and of generations upon generations.

“Two Blonde Indian Sisters” Follow the Pain and Find Common Ground

I am in Paris.
I am in a garret.
I am standing in front of a vanity.
I am standing in front of a creamy-white vanity with a big, round mirror.
I have long, blonde hair.
I have beautiful, long blonde hair.
It is sooooo long.
It is sooo beautiful.
I am beautiful.
My skin is peaches and cream. I am sooo beautiful!
Then she comes in.
What is she doing in my Paris garret!??
She is small and dark.
She loves me with a terrible love.
She hates me.
She is a malignant bitch.
She screams with fury.
She lowers her head and rushes at me.
She bites me.
She bites me in the stomach.
She bites and bites.
She bites and rips and tears.
Then I am running, running, running.
I am running on the Champs-Élysées
My shining, blond hair streams out behind me.
My creamy cheeks are flushed.
My diaphanous, white shift floats around me.
“A pretty girl is like a melody.”
I run and run and run.
No matter how fast I run, I know that she will catch me.
I hear her screaming in my head.
AAAARGGGGH!
“A pretty girl is like a melody.”
I feel her behind me.
I feel her behind me, closing in.
I feel her behind me.
Her hate.
Her terrible love.
I run and run—long, blonde hair streaming behind me, diaphanous, white shift swirling around me.
“A pretty girl is like a melody.”
I feel her closing in.
As she gets closer, the pains that rip through my belly intensify.
I feel her teeth.
I can’t run any more.
At the wall—the stone railing—looking down, down, down—down into the water below.
I climb onto the wall, careful not to expose too much (hikes shift down).
I take a breath and think, ‘I can die now, or wait for that malignant bitch to catch me,
and when she does, I will die screaming…

The preceding fragment recounts a troubling dream I experienced many years ago. During the final phase of Muriel Miguel’s Storyweaving Workshop at the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama (October-November, 2006), Miguel asked participants to bring in an actual dream to performatively distill and to eventually weave into the dreams of others for a final performance. The dreams that were
recounted were rich and variegated; there were nightmares, absurd incidences and even the proverbial “naked in public” dream. Certainly, images emerged from almost every other dream, which connected these dreams at some level with my own. But within the workshop was a Hindu participant, Anusree. Anusree, too, had once dreamed of possessing long, flowing blond hair. She combed her long, shining hair, which was “soooo long” that it stretched all the way out the door of our studio and into tomorrow, that was “sooo shiny,” it lit up the world like a sun. Dream-Anusree was very sedate, sensual and content—content to comb and comb and to admire her cascading, golden mane. Towards the end of the dream, without any emotional shift, Anusree began to feel hungry; she tasted all sorts of delicacies to assuage her cravings. But her hunger grew. Finally, with the same sensual contentment with which she had reveled in her dream-hair, Anusree began to eat herself. Although, at the time, it would seem that the easiest and most logical course of action would have been to weave my dream with other dreams of being attacked (and there were several) or dreams of running (there were also several of these), Muriel chose to weave my dream with Anusree’s, and we became, for the course of the workshop, the “two blonde, Indian sisters.” Through this weaving and the subsequent rehearsals and discussions between Anusree and myself, which came out of that, we came to discover the ‘linking kernel’ that Miguel had initially perceived and pursued. My discussions with Anusree (conducted at our own makeshift ‘kitchen table’) began to concern themselves more and more with the stories of our mothers and grandmothers and with our own experiences as survivors of the colonial project. Through the stories, two passing acquaintances—born a half-a-world away from each other—identified the deeply buried shame we carry as a result of internal colonization and the self-destructive impulses (and acts) this precipitates within us and against which we must fight. As our dreams were interwoven, a Hindu woman and an Anishinaabekwe discovered the threads and fragments within their stories that connected them as “sisters” and that linked their communities.

“Re-inventing the Enemy’s Language”: Making Molas Out of Words
Even within the context of this abbreviated introduction to the craft of Storyweaving, the Kuna Gathering House tradition, which certainly had informed the narrative artistry of the Miguel sisters’ father and uncles, manifested a powerful and unmistakable presence in the downtown Toronto rehearsal studio that housed Miguel’s workshop-series. It subtly insinuated itself in Miguel’s attention to particular metaphors, which she drove participants to orally and kinetically push, elongate and repeatedly duplicate with slight changes in each ‘panel’ of their narrative molas. Not coincidentally, linguist Joel Sherzer has observed that Kuna linguistic patterns (emerging from the narrative traditions of the Gathering House) resemble the patterns that occur in Kuna visual arts—particularly molas (118). And the Kuna people have always regarded the length of a narrative as a marker of its quality, just as they assess the quality of a mola by its thickness. Linguistically, extreme attention to fine detail, repetition and parallelism have long been the favored devices for thickening the narrative—for creating the ‘layers,’ as it were, that lengthen its telling (Sherzer 112). And the most skilled orators in Kuna Gathering Houses easily send their auditors into fits of laughter by inflating the most pedestrian experiences with exaggerated detail and painful repetition (Sherzer 113). Hence in this workshop, under Miguel’s prodding, the long, blonde hair of which Anusree had dreamt became soooo long that it stretched first across our downtown rehearsal studio, then out the door and into the Robert Gill Theatre and finally “into tomorrow.” Nor was the hair of Anusree’s dream simply “blonde.” As she combed and combed and combed it out, it became progressively more golden; it shone like the sun; it lit up the world! As Anusree explored what had begun quite simply as “long, blonde hair,” repeating its life through her body and repeatedly sounding its life on her breath, she stretched a lovely (but pedestrian) detail into a glorious metaphor, and this metaphor commanded wholehearted celebration in the absolute dedication of the performer’s entire instrument.

Mari Lynn Salvador locates the point of connection between the mola and Kuna narrative arts (Gathering House Tradition) in the place of their making—the communal ‘kitchen table’: in Kuna Yala, women often sew their molas at the Gathering House while listening to a visiting Sahila (Chief) “chant about the history of mola making” or while listening to “a discussion centered around some aspect of women and their arts” (170-71). We must not simply conclude from Salvador’s observation, however,
that the mola-maker somehow takes her inspiration and guidance from the narrative soundscapes that sweeten her labors—that is, that the mola is formed in and by the language. Instead, we should regard the complex relation between textile and text as a reciprocal affair grounded in mutual interdependency. Whether the Kuna artisan shapes text or textile, his/her labors are guided by the same principles; after all, in Kuna cosmology all life plays itself out within and betwixt intricately connected layers of patent and metaphysical existence. And the Kuna lifeway, at every level of expression (narrative expression, ceremony, artisanship, social and political interaction) configures itself to negotiate those layers with the utmost grace and respect.71 Just as the mola is characterized by the repetition of visual motifs, which are subtly altered with each manifestation (so that with a mola shirt, which consists of near-identical front and back panels, the same motif may manifest itself four to eight times on the body of its wearer), “motifs in Kuna narratives are presented in units of four and ritual activities are repeated four or eight times” (Salvador 187).

In Spiderwoman’s *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*, for instance, which constitutes the Miguel sisters’ reclamation and assertion of their spiritual inheritance, both the “tea scene” and the “noise band” are each repeated four times throughout the play with subtle variations. And we would be remiss in dismissing these as merely “happy accidents.” In Chapter Four we will examine with greater rigor how Kuna ceremonial life, narrative and aesthetic conventions and curing tradition intersect with and inform Spiderwoman’s *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* and *Power Pipes*. For now, however, it is exciting to consider this: Spiderwoman, perhaps, began to adopt Kuna linguistic devices and aesthetic patterns unconsciously. Perhaps, the Miguel sisters began by instinctively imitating the narrative stylings of their Kuna relatives.

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71 To illustrate, the intricate system of curing rituals practiced by Kuna specialists is the cornerstone of Kuna culture (Chapin 219). This system is predicated upon the understanding that the material world, which we occupy, is only one layer—and a secondary layer, at that—of a multi-layered spirit world that underlies the tangible world and animates it with its life force (Chapin 219). As pictographs notating Kuna medicine chants show (see Appendix Eight), “even the gathering of botanical medicines (seemingly from this strata) requires specialized understanding and an ability to negotiate these layers, as the medicine plants emerge from the fourth layer of the cosmos. To effect healing, [the Kuna practitioner] must be prepared to dig deeply and to negotiate the densely complex layers of patent and metaphysical existence” (Carter, “Chocolate” 7).
But it was certainly a conscious choice to bring the “kitchen table” into the rehearsal studio, just as their father and uncles had brought the Gathering House of Nargana\textsuperscript{72} to that kitchen table in Red Hook, Brooklyn.

\textbf{Negotiating the Textual Archive: The Road Ahead…}

\textit{Each story is an idea in which we are embodied and when that idea is realized in language—I use this word in its broadest sense—then it becomes the vehicle by means of which we can “take possession” of ourselves.} (Momaday 104)

In the chapter that follows we shall, at last, undertake an examination of Spiderwoman’s published plays. These are the only surviving textual archives, which constitute more-or-less complete transcriptions of the troupe’s performative events. As such, they differ from many other instances of dramatic literature, which have been first “performed” by characters on the page and then bodily transcribed by the living archive. Spiderwoman’s texts “embody,” as it were, the Miguel sisters’ kinetic and linguistic realization of the ideas that embodied—or more often, disembodied, distorted or dis-eased—them. They document each stage of a specific journey, undertaken by specific individuals towards personal and communal decolonization in that each transcription charts the mechanics of a “vehicle,” which conveys its artists yet another step closer to self.

\textit{Sun Moon and Feather} (1981) marks the rebirth of Spiderwoman Theater as a Native theatre company and constitutes a definitive and conscious act of recovery. In this piece the Miguel sisters, re-member and declare the Rappahannock names they received at birth as they recover, deconstruct and reconstruct (through Storyweaving) personal and family histories. It may be regarded as the “vehicle” through which the Miguel sisters began to take possession of themselves as American Indian women and to take possession of the ties that inextricably bind them to each other, to their family of origin, to their

\textsuperscript{72} Nargana is the particular island in Kuna Yala on which Antonio Miguel was born.
communities of origin, to the communities in which they have lived and to the communities to which they acknowledge their responsibilities.

_Sun Moon and Feather_ also marks the beginnings of an intense engagement with a blend of specifically American Indian aesthetic and pedagogical processes that enable the individual to take possession of her identity even as the greater community (immediate family, clan, community, nation, greater community of creation) takes possession of her. And so the following chapter will continue to engage with these processes and to specifically identify the connections between the performance-transcriptions and the processual stages towards decolonization, as Poka Laenui has mapped them out.

While the Miguel sisters’ first explicitly “Indian” play may be viewed as an act of _personal_ recovery, their next published play _Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City_ is emblematic of a _communal_ recovery. This piece, they created at the specific behest of the Circle of Elders in 1988. In this year, Elders and invited participants had set themselves the task of confronting and neutralizing a growing circle of “plastic shamans” who were selling “authoritative” books on Native spirituality; conducting workshops; and organizing and leading “authentic” Native ceremonies, which purported to purify, heal or transform the individuals who paid enormous sums to attend. The Circle of Elders challenged Spiderwoman Theater by asking its members what they, as artists, were going to do about the problem of “plastic shamanism.” Although they were outraged by what they had already witnessed in their own lives and what they were hearing at the Circle of Elders, the Miguel sisters had not specifically planned to “do” anything about this phenomenon. But answering the call of the Elders who spoke for hundreds of tribal communities across North America, they set to work and created one of the most potent and influential pieces in the troupe’s history—_Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City_.

Mining the roots and exploring the sites and consequences of misappropriation in their _Snake Oil Show_, the Miguel sisters remind us to remember a more authentic Indigenous spirituality, as they recover the woman’s place in the circle, the community and in spiritual praxis. And what is equally compelling is that in its creation, the troupe has recovered elements of traditional Indigenous pedagogical praxis and
explicitly opened up new possibilities for this learning-paradigm, which extend beyond the “classroom”--or rather, which transform all sites in which human existence is contained into “lifeway-classrooms” in their own right. Indeed, this paradigm of traditional tribal pedagogy, upon which Gregory Cajete has based his recommendations for contemporary classroom practices that will best serve contemporary Native learners, is demonstrably applicable to the formation of dramaturgical frameworks around which contemporary tribal storytellers may shape their narratives to meet communitist objectives, perhaps, with the greatest efficacy. And of course, as this pedagogical framework was ultimately developed to effect, such projects, which initially turn our focus outward into our communities, eventually lead us back to self. As *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* moves the troupe to investigate questions around cultural misappropriation and its devastating affects on Indigenous communities, Spiderwoman Theater begins to revisit and recover sites of authentic spirituality in the person of the Miguel matriarch. In subsuming individual artistic preoccupations to totally dedicate their energies to a communitist project, the Miguel sisters have laid the groundwork for the intensely personal—Reverb-ber-ber-ration (1990)—a mourning song for their mother.

Just as several stages of the decolonizing process may occur simultaneously or one stage (deemed complete) may begin anew when least expected, so this 1990 piece winds its way through the stages of recovery, mourning, dreaming, commitment and action—simultaneously looking back to remember and

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73 Unlike *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show*, which precedes it, or *Power Pipes* (1991), which follows it, *Reverb-ber-ber-ration* was created and performed solely by the three Miguel sisters. It is, I argue, a container for a personal rite of mourning as opposed to a consciously communitist project. For *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show*, the Miguel sisters invited Hortensia and Elvira Colorado (Coatlicue/Las Colorado Theater) to collaborate with them as co-creators and co-performers. The Colorado sisters also collaborated on Spiderwoman’s *Power Pipes* (1991) along with Gloria Miguel’s daughter Monique Mojica and Muriel Miguel’s daughter Murielle Borst. *Reverb-ber-ber-ration* is certainly a highly personal project, but it has been engendered within a communitist project. Ultimately, it opened the door to a collective (intergenerational and inter-first-national) recovery and implementation of Indigenous spirituality in 1991. And the collaborative relationship that was built between the Miguel sisters and the Colorado sisters (who had been taught and mentored within Spiderwoman Theater) opened up spaces for a rite of collective mourning in 1992 as Indigenous Nations across North America staged performative interventions to speak back to the celebrations that marked Columbus’s arrival to these shores five hundred years before. Coatlicue Theater’s *1492: Blood Speaks* is a collaborative project undertaken by the Colorado sisters with performers Pura Fe Crescioni and Soni C. Caballero under the direction (and formed within the process) of Muriel Miguel.
mourn, even as its creatrices look forward to celebrate “the persistence of memory across the generations” (Mojica & Knowles 101). Remembering the spiritual legacy left to them by their mother and mourning their separation from their father’s community, the Miguel sisters reclaim, employ and embody all of the gifts that constitute their inheritance (including spirituality; aestheticism; linguistic patterns; and personal, familial and community narratives)—not for themselves but to be passed on to future generations. Each Spiderwoman play constitutes a mola that is being layered into a larger mola. As the embodiments of memory, culture and spirituality (Mojica & Knowles 101), the Miguel sisters work to layer themselves (and the generations that precede them) onto the coming generation by passing on their works, their signature backdrop and their gifts to those whose task it will be to continue to craft the mola they have inherited.

Just as the repetition of motifs and metaphors (albeit, “consciously varied”) is integral to the design of the mola (Salvador 178), so themes, issues and motifs re-occur not only within the individual performative molas that make up Spiderwoman’s canon but also within the greater narrative mola, which is the canon itself. Hence, the personal reclamation and embodiment of the spiritual gifts, which reverberate throughout the Miguel family, undertaken in 1990 with Reverb-ber-ber-rations is revisited and developed as a communitist enterprise in 1991 with Power Pipes. Power Pipes, it shall be demonstrated, charts the evolution of recovery, mourning and dreaming into dreaming, commitment and action. If Reverb-ber-ber-rations first dreamed the past alive, first dreamed the gift back into being, first dreamed the acceptance of the gift, first dreamed of healing for the mourner and first dreamed a legacy with which to gift the coming generations, Power Pipes dreams the spiritual empowerment of women and shows us how, through commitment and action, Indigenous women can utilize their spiritual gifts to recover their rightful social and political positioning within the circle.

As one rapidly discovers through the examination of each Spiderwoman production, “way leads on to way”: question leads on to answers, which lead to more questions, which in their turn lead the work back and forth, around and around, weaving one play into another and yet another, deepening the layers
and thickening the fabric of an ornately patterned design crafted with invisible seams, which preserve the integrity of a deceptively simple whole.

Spiderwoman’s works, considered first severally and then in their totality, speak to the timelessness of the project that is their life’s work. This study, it is hoped, will map a way for others who seek to take possession of themselves as Indigenous peoples in community. Perhaps, their example can teach us how to first effect and then to transform the communitist project of survivance into meaningful life-projects in which individuals and their communities no longer have to occupy themselves with the struggles of self-protection and resistance to oppression but have the space, security and freedom to engage wholeheartedly in the business of joyful participation in the ongoing process of Creation.
Chapter Four

The Published Texts

This is a project of recovery, of reinvention, neither a nostalgic return, nor a naïve optimism. It is a bringing forward of what is not broken, of who we were and are prior to and outside of the disconnect that is colonization. It is not nostalgic because it moves forward; it is not naïve optimism but a first step because it is a provision of something solid to stand on while building for a future. It’s not a nostalgic return because it is outwardly directed, it is active, it’s a revitalization of things that have always been there. (Mojica and Knowles, “Creation Story” 2-3)

The project of recovery and reinvention to which Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles refer here is Mojica’s latest project under development Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way, but their words could very easily apply to the entire canon of published and unpublished play texts by Spiderwoman Theater. Indeed, as I shall show in the final chapter of this work, Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way is certainly a “first step,” just as each new step on an arduous journey towards the fulfillment of a dream is again and again a first step. And truly, this new work will provide a solid processual framework upon which an inter-First-national Poetics of Decolonization may be built. But this framework already rests upon the solid methodological base authored by Muriel Miguel and developed by Spiderwoman over a lifetime of theatrical praxis, which has been built upon the stories told around a kitchen table in the house of mirrors, upon a “family business” of snake oil and spectacle and upon ancient communal narratives, aesthetic principles and performative traditions.

The four published play texts74 that document collectively created and performed works by Spiderwoman Theater represent only ten years of an artistic career that spans over three decades and a progression through the temporal and spatial “steppes” of the seen and unseen worlds. I read these texts—on the page and on the stage—as abstracted notations of a contemporary “Medicine Chant,” in which an

74 Persistence of Memory (2002) is likely the troupe’s last collective piece; it was published in 2009 and will be discussed in the final chapter of this work.
entire Poetics of Decolonization is remembered and preserved for those who may wish to carry on the work.

*Sun Moon and Feather* (1981) maps a very personal journey of healing back to self. *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* (1989) extends that map and carries the sojourner into the greater community to continue the healing work on a socio-political level. *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* (1990) returns its artists to the realm of the highly personal, as they pose and answer questions around the repair of the fragmented connections between flesh and spirit, between ancestor and descendant, and between Earth and her children. With this work, the Miguel sisters look outward from the world of flesh to the spirit world, re-membering and creating anew what Diane Glancy has called the “intertextual facings” and/or the “interfactual textings” that repair the lines of communication between the isolate human and the metaphysical sources of power, which direct and animate the material world (127).

At first glance, *Power Pipes* (1991), the final text under discussion in this chapter, seems to look back from the world of spirit to the world of flesh to reinforce our understandings of the interdependencies between flesh and spirit. And so it does: the spirit guides may send direction, but if the messages go unheeded, dis-ease possesses the inhabitants of all realms of existence. This multi-generational, inter-First-national project heightens the manifestation of these interdependencies by stitching the layers of existence together and so binding temporal, spatial and substantive realms in a tight weave; it leaves it for us to decide for ourselves just “which [world] is which? Is the shadow world the spirit world and the real world the physical world we live in? Or is the shadow world the real, and the real world we live in the shadow” (Glancy 127)?

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75 In *Seventh Generation: An Anthology of Native American Plays*, editor Mimi Gisolfi D’Aponte places the first production of *Power Pipes* at Chicago’s Randolph Street Gallery in 1993 (153). However, the *New Tribe Exhibit* (Summer 2005) at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York City indicates that the first Randolph Street Gallery run took place in 1991 (see Appendix five).
Sun Moon and Feather: First Steps Towards Personal Decolonization

In Performance, we are dying together. (Dolan, “Performance, Utopia” 459)

We are not supposed to be alive now if the people who came here had their way. (Mayo, qtd. in Abbott 175)

Spiderwoman’s 1981 split marked the covenant between the three Miguel sisters to address their familial past and to negotiate their current relationships with each other (as sisters and co-creators) and with their communities (as American Indian mothers, lovers, grandmothers and artists). In 1981, they created and performed their first published act of recovery Sun Moon and Feather. And in 1982, they produced The Three Sisters: From Here to There (unpublished), adapting Chekhov’s play to tell the story of three Indian sisters who dream of escaping their Brooklyn neighborhood to find fame and fortune in Greenwich Village, Manhattan. Although it has been largely presumed (from the chronological performance history) that The Three Sisters: From Here to There evolved out of Sun Moon and Feather, quite the opposite is true: as the Miguel sisters researched Chekhov and his final play to find themselves within and to arrive at their own answers to his work’s central question, “[they] discovered that [they] had a lot of personal information and that [they] could create another show, [their] show” (Mayo, qtd. in Abbott 175). Perhaps, what they discovered was that their questions and their struggles differed somewhat from those belonging to Chekhov and the decaying world of which he wrote. Perhaps, his personal fears that permeate his Three Sisters—that we all die and are ultimately forgotten, that our struggles are meaningless and absurd—proposed little that fell into line with their personal experiences or cosmology.

The Three Sisters was written in 1900 by one who knew that he had a very short time to live: as a medical doctor, Anton Chekhov surely understood that the tuberculosis from which he was convalescing in Yalta (far from his friends, his artistic contacts and his wife in Moscow) was worsening and would soon kill him. This anguished cry at the dawn of a new century (albeit, not Chekhov’s last word on the matter) addresses urgent questions about the human condition, about why we live, why we suffer and what is the meaning behind it all. The central problematic condition from which all of the suffering
represented in this play stems (malaise, entrapment, disappointed hopes, thwarted and unrequited love, love that disappoints, thwarted communication and hopelessness) is the universal condition of individual loneliness. There is a hole in the human heart, which nothing in this world--the world of the play--can fill. In this world where merchants eat themselves to death in enormous, anonymous restaurants (Chekhov 218), where a cuckolded husband gambles away his family home and his son’s future and where we “snatch happiness in fits and starts” only to be “shattered” in the end (264), this weeping wound is most vividly expressed in terms of hunger and thirst. The morose, volatile Solyony eats up the sweets that had been put out for the entire household and its guests even as he maliciously tells his hostess that if her little Bobik were his child, he “would put him in a frying pan and eat him” (Chekhov 228). Later, as Solyony declares his love to Irina, he describes her eyes as “sumptuous” (234). But his avowed “love” is a desire to possess that he might consume. And at the end of the day, Solyony’s hunger consumes him; he reveals himself to be a destroyer--a rapacious assassin. Similarly, a destructive thirst takes hold of Chebutykin. After losing a female patient, he becomes inebriated, breaking a two-year period of abstinence. His answer to the fire that devastates his town, to Masha’s agonized confidence and to the pointless duel in which Irina’s affianced will die is “It doesn’t matter” (265).

The loneliness here does not stem simply from the conditions of being alone or feeling misunderstood; nor is it born of unrequited love. These things, which we lose or lack, are not solutions to the loneliness. And this, Chekhov, makes abundantly clear. Love disappoints; we disappoint; we do not live up to our own ideals; we are cruel and petty and weak and foolish despite our best intentions; we die and are forgotten; neither work nor knowledge can invest us with a sustained belief that our lives have meaning; Moscow, at the end of the day, is just a dirty, cold, lonely city. What, then, will fill the hole? What will give these things meaning? Is there meaning? Can we ever know? Is there a plan? Is there a planner? Do I fit into the plan at all? Do I matter?

Olga, as the eldest of the three sisters, is the keeper of family-memory. Masha has forgotten her mother’s face; Vershinin has forgotten the faces of the general’s three little girls: he only remembers that
there were three of them; Irina, the youngest sister, thinks only of a future of glorious work. But Olga who knows that we die and are forgotten strives to counter the despair born of such knowledge, and as a token of her faith, she has made it her task to remember and to remind. Of course, by the end of the play, the eldest sister has let go of the past and forsaken memory to concentrate on “knowing.” Although Chekhov offers no pat solutions to the questions he has posed, he has left us with a processual map. Before we can “know” (our purpose, our meaning, our place in the larger design), we must remember. It is, then, reasonable to assume that during their quest to find the answers to a larger riddle around place and meaning within the entire fabric of creation, the Miguel sisters discovered that first they must find “[their] own ‘three sisters’” (Mayo, qtd. in Abbott 175) and embark upon an act of recovery on the brink of a new millennium.

“How Did We Survive?”

No act of recovery is possible without an initial asking and the act of seeking, which perforce must follow the question. The processual investigations underpinning Sun, Moon and Feather have emerged from the question, “How did we survive?” and the answers they yield map a personal journey that speaks directly to the larger, communitist project of survivance (and not simply a tribal simulation of survivance). This is an intensely personal piece; indeed, it is the first of several Spiderwoman productions that dedicates itself solely to the Miguel family autohistory, and it is the first of several signature Spiderwoman productions that features a homogeneous collective at all levels—familial, genetic, communal and political.

It is telling that the Miguel sisters had temporarily abandoned their less homogeneous and less specifically personal The Three Sisters: From Here to There to “revisit” their childhood home and to replay the struggles, rivalries and moments of joyous affection that belong to that time and that directed their adult attitudes and behaviors towards each other and others with whom they shared their lives. The Three Sisters: From Here to There was ultimately produced one year later (in March 1982 at The Theatre
for the New City, NYC), but it was not received with the same enthusiasm as *Sun Moon and Feather* had been.

Where, as Birgit Dæwes observes, in the 1981 production of *Sun Moon and Feather* “the characters’ identity is conflated with that of the performers through the English names of Lisa, Gloria, and Muriel” (216), *The Three Sisters: From Here to There* utilized Chekhov’s characters to carry and explore seemingly larger political questions around the suppression of female agency in contemporary America (Gussow np). Certainly, this show, which must have first been conceived prior to the 1981-split, could not frame itself around the profoundly personal questions that drove *Sun Moon and Feather*. Its creative team consisted not only of Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel and Muriel Miguel (who each took on multiple roles, including Olga, Masha and Irina respectively) but also of Eva Boumann (Fedotik-Roday, Anfisa and Ferapont), Elvira Colorado (Vershinin and Kulygin) and Pam Verge (Natasha, Tusenbach and Andrey). The male characters (transplanted from Chekhov’s world) were represented by life-sized puppets and given voice by the female puppet-masters in performance.76

Characterized as “aimless” and “top-heavy with artlessness” in *The New York Times* (Gussow), the ‘shelf-life’ of this piece was ultimately short. At the end of the day, it seems, it served neither as a vehicle to self for the Miguel sisters nor as an assertion of Native survivance, which might serve the American Indian community. At the same time, it seems, it provided no rallying site for the heterogeneous feminist audiences whose concerns it had been created to address. Presumably, there are several reasons for this. First, the acting was uneven, and while the Miguel trio was praised for its “earthy vitality” and its musical performances, the other actors were castigated for their “amateurishness,” their “inept[itude]” and their “overacting” (Gussow). Most damning of all, this show was criticized for its polarizing didacticism. As Mel Gussow received *The Three Sisters: From Here to There*, Chekhov’s play

76 The effigy of Andrey was animated alternatively by all three Miguel sisters, Vira Colorado and Pam Verge (see Gussow). These puppets, as Jill Dolan informs us, would be manipulated to create a series of “gests” that spoke to the “structure of gendered relationships.” For instance, Muriel Miguel, playing Irina, manipulates the Tusenbach doll at one point to fondle Irina’s (her own) breasts (Dolan, Feminist Spectator 112).
had, in this instance, been co-opted [misappropriated, perhaps?] to make a political statement (np) rather than to explore questions that had concerned Anton Chekhov himself or that might concern those separated by almost one century and a vast expanse of water and sky from the tortured playwright who had sent up his anguished cry. Indeed, as Jill Dolan reading the production from a materialist perspective receives it, Spiderwoman’s “ ironic attitude” towards Chekhov and his “angst” is the engine that drives this piece (*Feminist Spectator* 113). She identifies the central problem of *The Three Sisters: From Here to There* as a very human problem: males oppress females and prevent them from getting ‘from here to there.’ Metaphysical questions around meaning and existence are, for such a reading, redundant and absurd.

Certainly, the Miguel sisters had no need, at this time, to revisit the urgent, personal questions around meaning and identity, which they had just explored one year earlier in *Sun Moon and Feather*. With the 1982 project, they were ready to dive into the larger political questions, which they may have presumed would interest a larger and more diverse audience. Ultimately, it seems that (production and publication) history has come to show that the more personal and specific production resonated (and continues to resonate) much more powerfully with audiences than its more overtly “political” counterpart.

*The Three Sisters: From Here to There* was never published; little scholarly commentary has been devoted to it, and it is not a show that the Miguel sisters, themselves, speak about often or at any great length. It has become a footnote in the performative history of Spiderwoman Theater. Nonetheless, its importance within the overall project of discovering and recovering personal identity and relationship within community should not be overlooked. Indeed, Muriel Miguel has noted that *The Three Sisters: From Here to There* raised the stakes and perhaps deepened the commitments of the Miguel sisters. If they had harbored any prior doubts about a permanent split from the Euro-American members of the core company, it was now “…definite. Now, all of [their] pieces [would address] racism” (qtd. in Haugo, “Weaving” 229). And it is from this interrupted and ultimately less efficacious work that the Miguel sisters’ first chapter of a performative autohistory that has spanned nearly four decades has emerged. The
Miguel sisters’ first family-project achieves its universal significance in its exploration of the domestic, the personal and the specific. Their *Sun Moon and Feather* demonstrates that the commitment to pursue the most intensely self-reflexive questions (kernels) may lead the “seeker” not only to recovery and personal healing but also to political achievements of the utmost efficacy.

**Bringing the Gathering House to the Stage**

Lisa: So, we were talking about that layer of worthlessness, selflessness, coming out of being poor, being dirty, not having enough to eat.

Gloria: There wasn’t much hope. When you came home after school to a cold house, no food, a drunken father, a depressed mother, a neighborhood that’s very hostile to you.

Lisa: What is there? It’s horrible. How did we make it? (Spiderwoman, Sun 291)

On a still, dimly lit stage, it begins. As the “Poverty Tape” plays, disembodied—at times, indistinguishable—voices remember specific moments in the Miguel sisters’ childhood and the general conditions, which governed it. Behind the human conversation, Mozart’s *K. 546 Adagio and Fugue in C Minor* interweaves itself between the words adding resonance to each syllable and punctuating moments of silence. It is as if two pianos and a string quartet have entered into a murmured exchange of secrets with the human beings who are grasping at the “kernel” (the reason for their survival) as they follow the pain. Within this “aural mola,” time and space are conflated, as child converses with her adult counterpart and as “some god awful neighborhood,” a local Laundromat and the sisters’ childhood home are orally remembered on the public stage. At times, the human voices reflect upon the past: “You were only 13.

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77 The Miguel sisters bring their childhood home onto the public stage in their 1981 production, but in the 1989 film version of *Sun Moon and Feather*, they bring the public “stage” into their childhood home (which Muriel Miguel continues to inhabit today). As the film begins, we do not hear the “poverty tape,” which opens the stage production. Instead, as the camera travels through the home’s empty rooms focusing at moments on pictures or furnishings that carry particular emotional resonance, we hear fragments of ancestral conversation. Uncle Joe, Aunt Lizzie, Antonio
[...] I was [...]. I looked [...]. That was really terrible” (Spiderwoman, Sun 290). But these are entwined with voices that speak directly from the past as if it were the present: “Hello pretty one you have 10 cents for me” (Spiderwoman, Sun 290)?

Onto this aural tapestry of dirt, privation, violence and humiliation a contrapuntal visual layer is added. “Uncle Joe’s” home movies, featuring the “[b]eautiful Indian faces” of Antonio Miguel, his brothers and the idyllic San Blas Islands where they grew up thicken the narrative and introduce the central question to the audience: “The juxtaposition of that sad tape and the lovely islands where they come from. The worry about money in the city against a coconut culture. The wonderment: How did they get here? How did they survive” (Spiderwoman, Sun 292)? And onto this aural and visual background, the living performers layer themselves and their stories interweaving these with Chekhovian dialogue, as if to test out the efficacy of his “Three Sisters”’ strategies of survivance and the relevance of these to their own lives. As sibling rivalries, childhood games (i.e. Elizabeth Miguel’s tea parties) and old hurts are remembered, declarations of personal identity begin to emerge.

Gloria remembers with gladness how her father’s relations claimed her as their own, and in so doing remembers and claims an ancestral language for her own and brings the Gathering House of her and Elmira Miguel are re-membered and voiced into being as if something of their spirit still resonated within the walls of the rooms that once contained their mortal existence.

78 It may bear repeating that Anton Chekhov sought within his plays to effect a revelation of the human spirit beneath the layers of mundane, quotidian existence. Hence, the Miguel sisters’ attraction to his work seems, to me, quite logical, as they also work to reveal the spiritual essence/kernel within the material. It is also worth noting that Chekhov’s polyvalent dramaturgical structure might well put us in mind of a performative mola (or perhaps a matrushka doll). And this resemblance was not lost upon Spiderwoman’s artists. Hence, portions of his work might quite effortlessly be woven into the fabric of a Spiderwoman project. As Gloria Miguel has remarked about her early encounters with Chekhov’s works during her training at Oberlin:

[T]he scene is set up where something is going on way back there. And something is going on outside. And something is going on here. And that’s life. And it’s all connected. You know? Chekhov has a scene going on back there--although they’re not talking; they’re not in the forefront. But you see people talking like that, people on the outside just sitting if you look out the window. All that is set up on the stage. All that just fascinated me, you know. (Interview, 2007)
father’s island of Naragana onto the New York stage: “Ige benuga, be a beni. E be nueti. They called me Tuli girl. (Sings.) Tage. Tage” (295). “Tage” (or degii), a chanted affirmation meaning “it is so” or “indeed,” is a familiar response in the dialogic form of storytelling in the Gathering House tradition. In this tradition, there are generally two “performers.” The Chanting Chief is the main storyteller, and he directs the narrative. The Responding Chief may simply affirm each of the Chanter’s utterances (“Tage”) or he may perform a “reformulation, translation, and recasting” of these utterances to complicate the rhythms and/or enhance the performance (Sherzer 122). Gloria, by adding her breath to sound, not only affirms her identity as a “Tuli girl” but also casts herself as a respondent in the Gathering House tradition. How did her father’s relations survive financial hardship, oppression and racism in their new home? They transplanted the Kuna Gathering House (which housed the stories that had made them) to a kitchen table in Red Hook, Brooklyn. They told and retold stories. They lived new stories and added those to the canon. In the stories that had made them, they remembered who they were. In the stories that had made her relatives, in the stories that have gone into making her and in the community that kept those stories alive, Gloria Miguel “remembers” herself and declares her place.

Lisa, by contrast, remembers her self in relation to her mother’s Anishinaabe community, naming and claiming her Rappahannock relations and their gifts:

I am the granddaughter of Elizabeth Ashton Mourn[79] [sic], a beautiful Rappahannock Indian woman from West Moreland county, Virginia. My great-grandmother Felecia was a midwife and she taught my grandmother how to deliver babies. My grandmother delivered me and both my sisters (Sings to herself.)

O are re-vy
My mother gave me to the witch
Oh Why
Oh are re-vy. (Spiderwoman Sun 295)

[79] Elizabeth Ashton Moore
Her grandmother was, at times, undoubtedly cruel, but it is through her ministrations that all three Miguel sisters came into this world. It is from her that Elmira inherited her medicine and her gift of prophecy, and it is from her that Elmira’s daughters inherited their own acute intuitions and paranormal gifts. Pain and privation threaten survival, but these are key components in our making, and we risk our own unmaking if we try to forget or deny those things that seem negative or shameful—those things that cause us pain. Pain, too, may be a great gift. Indeed, it serves as a physiological alarum that warns us of oft-times less apparent dangers, which threaten our lives. It teaches us humility, compassion and empathy. And at the very least, it reminds us that we are alive.

Muriel’s mother had completely withdrawn by the time her youngest daughter was born. Hence, the adult Muriel (speaking after her mother’s death) declares herself to be “the only child of [her] two sisters” (Spiderwoman Sun 295) who ultimately took on the task of raising her. And counter-intuitively, although she is “very lonely” and although her mother never talks to her, she understands that she has been “covered with love” (295). Here, Muriel sifts through story-fragments to work through the complexities of their sibling relationship and to understand herself in relation to and independent of the women who raised her.

By the same token, as they replay their desire to mother and nurture their baby sister, Lisa and Gloria come more fully into recognition of themselves. Lisa has struggled to teach Muriel the traditions of the family, so that she herself would be free to leave. Gloria wanted to extend that same freedom to their young charge by making sure she was educated, cultured and worldly. In her turn, the “baby” of the family has outgrown their dreams for her: she has achieved greater professional success than her mentors (“how does it feel when your baby sister steals the limelight?”); she comforts and advises her eldest sister after her divorce (296); and she comes out to her shocked sisters as a two-spirited woman (301). Despite the fears, resentments, fierce disapproval or bitter rivalries that punctuate the sibling relationship, each Miguel sister continues to assert her love for the others, and each remains the ‘soft place’ for her sisters to
fall in times of crisis: “Jerry. Jerry. The car turned over and over. I felt his body shake against me. Elizabeth, Gloria, he’s dead, he’s dead” (297)!!!

Much has been made of the musical send-up during which Gloria Miguel and Lisa Mayo re-enact the famous “Indian Love Call” duet of the 1936 classic film *Rose-Marie*. So much, indeed, that those unfamiliar with *Sun Moon and Feather* could not be blamed for harboring the impression that apart from a brief allusion to a drunk and violent father, some home movies and an anecdote about the Miguel family’s boat (which I will discuss later), this musical moment of resistance is the heart and soul and substance of the work entire.

The duet concludes a brief but poignant “dreaming sequence” throughout which all three sisters articulate their desires to escape the hostility that surrounds them in the Brooklyn neighborhood of their youth and the ennui that their poverty has produced (see Spiderwoman, *Sun* 308). Beginning with dreams of physical escape (rich husbands who will take them away or the apartment that Muriel will acquire) and moving into dreams of artistic success (a tap dance number to “Give My Regards to Old Broadway”), the sequence concludes with the re-staging of an obviously old and beloved childhood game, which precedes dreams of marriage, escape and/or professional success and which precedes the youngest sister’s participation in their games and contribution to the collective dream:

Lisa: Hey Gloria we have a captive audience—let’s you and me play “Indian Love Call.”

Gloria: Oh yeah.

Lisa: Okay? I’m Jeannette Macdonald and I’ve got this long red hair and big green eyes.

Gloria: Elizabeth, Elizabeth? Let me be Jeanette Macdonald?

Lisa: No!

Gloria: But you always take the biggest part.

Lisa: No I don’t.

Gloria: I want to be Jeanette Macdonald.
Lisa: You have some nerve. It’s my game.

Gloria: I want to be Jeanette Macdonald.

Lisa: Harum Scarum Lady.

Gloria: I have a high voice.

Lisa: No!

Gloria: (Begs.) Please.

Lisa: Oh all right, but I’m Nelson Eddy.

Gloria: I don’t care who you are.

Muriel: I’ll be the horse. (They ignore her.) (Spiderwoman, Sun 309-310)

Although one performer is shut out of the scene (either because she was too young to have participated in the original game or because she had not yet been born), the “Indian Love Call” duet that follows carries within its polyvalent structure an origin story about the trio. It is precisely because the two elder sisters played such games—sang, danced and dreamed—that all three sisters transcended the multiple oppressions, which defined their lives, to sing, dance and weave stories and dreams in their own right. And as the very basis of the game itself—the stereotypes it references—is itself a marker of a tightly woven filament belonging to an entire “net” of oppressions, which has threatened to choke off the lives of generations of Native peoples across the Americas, this is only part of the story. The game, in itself, is a tightly woven filament belonging to an intricate web of strategies, which speak to personal and political survivance.

The “Indian Love Call” duet has been celebrated by feminist scholars as a—perhaps, the—pivotal scene in Spiderwoman’s post-split premiere (see, for example, Schneider 170-171 and Däwes 220-221). Rebecca Schneider has famously identified it as a single, perfect instance of “counter-mimicry” (170)

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80 In the film version of Sun Moon and Feather, Muriel Miguel does not appear at all in this scene (Rosen and Zipp).
through which the contemporary Native performer subverts and overturns the nostalgia upon which colonialism’s national mythologies have been constructed. This nostalgia has been borne upon the myriad colonial simulations of Native experience, which have saturated North American culture and influenced cultural consciousness, and as Robyn Diner reminds us, the longings such simulations produce are not so much for what has been lost as they are for what has never been (np). This is the irony, which scholars (like Diner, Schneider and Däwes) find so delicious, and they use words like “unruly, “carnivalesque,” “grotesque” (Diner) or “inappropriate” and “heavy” (Schneider 170) to communicate the corporeal presence of the Kuna-Rappahannock sisters as they talk back to the Empire—or at least to Hollywood.

As these scholars read this scene, the “inappropriate” authentic re-appropriates and plays out a seemingly appropriate instance of nostalgia, thereby dis-covering it as a pretty but hollow simulation—a lifeless mask. While two overweight, middle-aged American Indian ladies soulfully sing the song that “Indian maidens” hear when they dream of their lovers (Spiderwoman, Sun 311), grainy, celluloid shadows of the svelte, youthful onscreen lovers Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy mouth the song’s lyrics behind them in bloodless, ethereal silence. Robbed of voice, lacking color and so glaringly out of place in the raucous, colorful and unapologetically busy world of the 1981 production, these shadows (of rustic lovers and dancing “braves”) can in no way be mistaken by the audience as a fading archive of a disappearing people; rather, the design of life and color over colorless non-life, which is Spiderwoman’s performative mola here asserts the continuance of actual Indigenous peoples in the persons of the three living performers. The “disappearing people,” for whom the archive has been constructed to conjure up colonial nostalgia, never existed; the experience offered by White performers in “Red face” proposes nothing. It is a non-experience.

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81 This is not to suggest that either Nelson Eddie or Jeanette Macdonald appeared in actual “red face” in the 1936 film Rose-Marie. I use the term quite broadly here to refer not only to the white actors who were decked out to “play Indian” in such films but also to the effects adopted by Hollywood film studios to produce signifiers of Indigeneity (i.e. makeup, costume, props, music and choreography). The couple’s famous duet ought, to be regarded as an instance of “red face” for its content (lyrics), arrangement, instrumentation in moments and vocal opsis.
Such readings, of course, are appropriate, accurate and important. But they address only half the picture, and while they do not “archive” a non-life, they certainly document and catalogue a “half-life.” They cast this performance as a reaction to the perverse metonyms, which have inhabited the colonial imagination for centuries now: as this work then is imagined, the metonym born of colonial mimesis to which Native peoples had been captive audiences is here the protagonist under attack by the antagonist in the person of three American Indian sisters. Ironically, out of the wrack of the tribal simulations, which feminist scholars decry even as they celebrate the Miguel sisters’ performative deconstruction thereof, these cultural critics are weaving into their own “archives” new (and perhaps equally damaging) tribal simulations of their own making.

Acts of struggle, resistance, defiance, and confrontation are not necessarily acts of survivance. They constitute reactions against, and human beings must exercise their capacity for action as well as for reaction to live in a whole, healthy and balanced way. Action is a privilege reserved solely for the living; a corpse, by contrast, will still react to outside stimuli and forces that exert themselves upon its composite elements. It seems to me that unless we specifically articulate, facilitate, and empower a written tribal consciousness that partners reaction with pro-action—that balances rejection with active aspiration—we ultimately submit to and allow ourselves to be overcome by the ossifying definitions imposed upon us by the colonial myth-makers since first contact.

Indeed, Gerald Vizenor has observed that since the nineteenth century, when the static pose of the “tribal warrior” (who no longer posed a military threat to the colonizer) became expedient to the project of nation-building, Native peoples have been rewarded for playing the part of “radical” or “warrior” (Blaeser 53-54). The pages upon which tribal essence (human being) and action (human doing) are actualized have become, for Vizenor, the ‘killing fields’ of the “cultural word wars,” the outcome of which, shaped by “money and politics,” has shaped us into one-dimensional relics carrying the label of either “victim” or “survivor” (Blaeser 39). These labels assume a co-dependent relationship between Indigenous peoples and the colonizing powers: the human, being a victim or survivor, can only react
against the forces/conditions/agents that victimize or that threaten survival. Hence, the tribal individual’s capacity for action is engendered by, fueled by and predicated solely upon the actions of the victimizer. The prisoner of this paradigm is stripped of agency, independence, and responsibility; the prisoner of this paradigm is no longer a human doing or a human being; the prisoner of this paradigm has become a puppet.  

One shortcoming of the “counter-mimicry” construction is that it isolates the “Indian Love Call” scene from the rest of the project and the question(s), which have engendered it. The concerted critical investment in the political affects of Spiderwoman’s whimsical musical number diverts us from the central question--from the “kernel” of the story they are reconstructing. As Muriel Miguel explains, the work is indeed political, but it comes by its politics ‘honestly’—that is to say, organically. The political activism here arises out of profoundly personal and specific questions, which demand answers:

I think that if you write and perform about what’s bothering you now, at that moment, it’s going to be political. I am writing and performing about certain things. It’s going for that kernel. And if you don’t go for that kernel, that’s when you get sidetracked. I guess it doesn’t matter if we’re on our feet or if we spend days talking. That doesn’t matter as much as going for the kernel and trying to find out. It’s like following the pain. When you have a headache and you have it at the front of your head, you put something there. It goes to the back of your head, you put something there. It goes to your shoulder, you put something there. You know what I mean? That’s what the kernel is. And you have to follow it. If—and this is where the politics happen—if you’re talking about certain things and certain things that are bothering you, and if you follow it, it becomes political. (M. Miguel, qtd. in Haugo, “Weaving” 226)

82 Ann Haugo concedes that there are significant dangers associated with limiting critical engagement with Native women’s theatrical interventions to a one-dimensional examination of the resistance they pose to the colonial project. Such readings (to the exclusion of all else) would ultimately contain Native artistic expression within and define it in accordance to a colonial framework. And “by extension, [it] would encourage a latent ethnocentrism on the part of the critic” (“Colonial Audiences” 133). To forestall such developments, Haugo proposes “a nuanced reading of that resistance,” wherein multiple resistances are identified and agency (even on the part of the ‘resistor’) is assumed (“Colonial Audiences” 133). What she does not acknowledge here (and what most politically aware critics do not acknowledge) is that stance—as opposed to counterstance—is often the most efficacious (and most nuanced) form of resistance we can execute. The simple refusal to ‘give face to’ or to acknowledge the existence of the agents of oppression or their works coupled with the recovery of lifeways and knowledge systems, which predate their arrival, can often further the project of decolonization with greater rapidity than allowing ourselves to be drawn into the trap of interminable debate.
Sun Moon and Feather’s kernel demands far more of its creatrices than reactionary counter-measures. The answers that each of the Miguel sisters come up with as they pursue the core question—“How did we survive?”—explode with robust, autonomous doings and irressible, joyous life in the midst of chaos, privation and despair. And this is certainly how Spiderwoman’s audiences received and were affected by the 1981 performances, which critics have characterized as “life-enhancing,” “full of grace” (Faber 92) or simultaneously “an actual exposé of...inner life” and a “sylphlike dreamworld” (Haye np). All this is not to suggest, however, that the political tones were absent or so muted as to be overlooked or ignored. But perhaps because the medium was so specific and personal, perhaps because the artists doggedly pursued the kernel (refusing to be diverted by the seemingly larger and more universal political questions), or perhaps because the answers they had found caused them to “romp about in celebration of their own quirky womanhood” (Faber 92), the political messaging was recognizable and perhaps more palatable as it had “subtly insinuat[ed]” itself as a layer in the performative mola “without hectoring or rhetoric” (Faber 92).

To posit that the “Indian Love Call” scene of Sun Moon and Feather simply “doubles back upon white culture the problem of [the Miguel sisters’] own authentication” (Schneider 163) is to ignore the scene’s relationship with the larger question around which the play has been constructed and to forget that “identity” is not simply the battlefield upon which essence (tribal or otherwise) struggles against erasure or re-fabrication by the political ‘Goliaths’ that surround and constrain it. Each layer of Spiderwoman’s performative mola is not the thing itself. Each scene is not the answer; each scene, rather, plays out a process of discovery. This piece does not derive its value from its political stance or because it provides instruction and correction to non-Native viewers. It derives its significant worth from the life-lessons and urban survival-strategies that it offers to its Native audiences. And as the Miguel sisters play out “what they’ve spent their lives becoming” (Faber 92), it becomes apparent that while “counter-mimicry” is certainly a tool of political resistance, this is only one half of the equation; it can also be a powerful strategy of survival—indeed, of survivance. In her artistic statement, which precedes the published text of
Sun Moon and Feather in Contemporary Plays by Women of Color, Muriel Miguel reminds us of this fact:

One time I found several postcards of very elegant white ladies. They were obviously rich. They were wearing long white lace dresses and had flowers in their hair. For fun, I cut up snapshots of my sisters and myself. I pasted our faces on those ladies’ faces. It was difficult, I had to maneuver and squeeze the faces into place. The final image was funny, the postcards looked lopsided. I thought this is what my family is like. Struggling to fit in, we look lopsided. Where were our role models? When you grow up in a hostile atmosphere where you are different, you try very hard to squeeze and push and smash yourself into some form that does not make waves. (qtd. in Perkins and Uno 298)

How did they survive? How did they maintain their will to survive? They survived by dreaming. They survived sometimes by trying to “squeeze and push and smash” themselves into forms that, for them, personified elegance, happiness and success. About this, they are very clear and brutally honest. It may not have been the best way, but at the time it may have been the only way. Locating a role model who inspires one to aspire may often, for one who is born into seemingly “hopeless” circumstances, tip the balance in her life between hope and despair, between creating and destroying, between surviving and succumbing. It is a double-edged sword to be sure, and certainly, the irony has not escaped the sisters; nor should it escape their audiences. In the absence of visible and celebrated American Indian role models upon which to construct their aspirations, the Miguel sisters, here, reveal how they adopted and adapted non-Native role models—perhaps, even metonyms and tribal simulations. And despite the fact that such

83 The dreaming aspect of survivance is very apparent here, as is the resonance of that dream in the history and development of Spiderwoman Theater (which was created to allow its performers to play outside “type”). In addition, there is, here, a less apparent layer, which may not have even entered the consciousness of Muriel Miguel at the time she told this story: during a performance of her one-woman show Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue at the Robert Gill Theatre (University of Toronto) in October 2008, Gloria Miguel related a story about her maternal grandmother. During preparations for the wedding of Gloria’s Aunt Lizzie, the family matriarch was dressing. According to Gloria, she looked absolutely beautiful in a fine “maroon velvet dress trimmed with ecru lace and diamond buttons.” Her long black hair was piled on top of her head and held in place with a “sparkling Spanish comb.” Gloria and her older sister were playing in the room, and during their game, Elizabeth accidentally trod on her grandmother’s toe. “Nana” picked up the pint-sized culprit by the neck and began throttling her. This regal beauty undoubtedly would have fit into Muriel’s picture of the finely dressed white ladies; yet, her actions, in this instance, do not fit into our picture of a loving, nurturing grandmother. In retrospect (offered by Gloria Miguel’s revelations of 2008), we begin to see more clearly something that Gloria Miguel and Lisa Mayo had learned as little girls: “passing” or surviving by mimicking the colonizer and survivance are not the same things.
“role models” embody a centuries-old campaign of cultural genocide, they contribute, ironically, to the survival of authentic American Indian role models who have gone on to figure prominently in several generations of cultural survivance.

Where were our role models?

Many years later after a performance of *Sun Moon and Feather*, three little Ojibway sisters came backstage. They announced that the eldest was Lisa and the middle Gloria and the youngest me. They were proud of us! They wanted to be us! **We were their role models.**

I write to tell my innermost stories and to reach out. To knock on the hearts of native people (young, old, women, men). To tell them yes I have been there and I’m still traveling. (M. Miguel, qtd. in Perkins and Uno 298, emphasis added)

Despite an intense and longstanding colonial campaign of theft and suppression, Indigenous cultures and culture-heroes still survive, and recovery is possible.

Gloria Miguel and Lisa Mayo do not simply mimic the Hollywood icons who introduced the “Indian Love Call” into the cultural lexicon and “orientalist” imaginings of North America. They publicly re-play their younger *selves* who are training themselves for what they will become. They turn their gaze (and our gaze) upon the children that they were—young, beautiful, talented, creative dreamers. And these young artists-in-training would, at this time, have been playing out their own dreams of escape from Red Hook, Brooklyn and from the metonyms that they themselves were being forced to play in the Miguel family business—the Mohica Medicine Shows (which are also woven into the celluloid layer of film clips in front of which the actors perform). The non-Native viewer may have need of the easily accessible

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84 In the 1989 film version of *Sun Moon and Feather*, the Miguel sisters explicate one of the home movies, which has been layered into the stage production. In the film, we see a loin-clothed Antonio Miguel equipped with a bow, a quiver full of arrows and a headdress dancing before a large group of picnickers seated on the grass under a blue sky. Shots of Aunt Lizzie, swathed in buckskin and sporting a flattering headband, are woven into Miguel’s onstage performance, as are deliberately pedestrian shots of each Miguel sister who singly interprets a snippet of the action for us from the front stoop of the family home in Red Hook, Brooklyn. They explain that their father is performing a “Hunting Dance” during which his movements make us understand that he is getting into his canoe; he is “crossing the water”; he is stalking a wolf. He sees the wolf; he reaches behind him for an arrow; he draws upon the wolf.
political lesson, which is imbedded in this scene, but the Native viewer has little need of this particular lesson; she knows it all too well. What this viewer may need is a lesson in transcendence: this viewer may need to be reminded that while “[i]magination is a frequent casualty to the grinding plod of poverty” (Justice 45), it is necessary to the health and life of the human soul. As such, it should be cherished and nurtured in the midst of the harshest of material realities. In the absence of such nurturing (from either their withdrawn mother or their alcohol-dependent, volatile father), two little brown girls nurtured that imagination in themselves and in so doing, nurtured the artistic voices that would facilitate the escape of which they dreamed.

At the end of the day, Gloria Miguel and Lisa Mayo re-play the story of two little girls who are finding their voices together: despite the humorous arguing and the jockeying for position (both of these little girls want to play the ingénue), they discover their individual instruments and how to make those instruments blend. Lisa Mayo is a mezzo-soprano, and her voice (now, as it probably was then) is best suited for the lower (Nelson Eddy’s) part. Gloria Miguel is a natural coloratura soprano; her voice is best suited for the higher (Jeanette Macdonald’s) part. Together, they harmonize beautifully, and we bear

Meanwhile, just offstage, Aunt Lizzie is winding up. At just the right moment, she throws a stuffed wolf with big glass eyes across Miguel’s line of fire. She has carried this prop from Brooklyn to Manhattan on the subway, which is (as Muriel Miguel observes) a very “unusual” sight for even the most jaded NYC commuter. As Aunt Lizzie tosses her charge, Miguel lets go of the arrow. It hits the wolf, which falls “dead” at his feet. The audience is delighted. This stuffed wolf, in fact, is Miguel’s ‘gimmick.’ It is what sets his Hunting Dance apart from those of other American Indian performers who perform their own versions of this popular crowd-pleaser. But “sometimes,” we are told, “Aunt Lizzie missed.” Sometimes she overshot her mark, and the wolf went “skittering across the stage” and right into the audience. What happened then, we are left to imagine (Rosen and Zipp).

The point of this story, of course, is to communicate to us the considerable planning and effort it requires to construct and execute such spectacles. These are “‘show-biz Indians’ playing ‘Indian’ to survive tough economic times. They are industrious and sophisticated; they have done their ‘market research.’ They know what mainstream audiences expect, and they give it to them. Authentic liveness embodies the inauthentic shade—the mediatized tribal simulation—in an earnest effort to satisfy the paying customers who do not believe in his existence (despite his unmistakable presence beneath the faux trappings of romantic imagination) and who would not find it convenient if they did. In so doing, the live authentic thereby effects and ensures his survival and continuance. One wild toss may shatter the comfortable fantasy and reveal the corpse beneath the mask of life, but a living, pulsating reality of warm flesh and seeing eyes bursts out from behind the metonym and stares back at the disillusioned spectators offering a ‘cure’ for diseased imaginations and destructive dreams.
witness to the genesis of a choral community in which each voice fulfills its role; each voice contributes beautifully to a larger whole.

To characterize this scene as merely “spoofing the gaze of the white” (Schneider 163), is to ignore these layers and to attempt to simplify the complex (and perhaps, politically inconvenient) truth that as children, the elder Miguel sisters actually enjoyed watching Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald, admired their musical abilities and now credit these performers for being (along with the Marx Brothers and Laurel and Hardy) early artistic influences (see Mayo, qtd. in Haugo, “Native Playwrights’” 336). These performers and the movies in which they appeared are part of their story and are honored as such.

Be that as it may, however, Antonio Miguel’s eldest daughters were never bound in “slavish imitation” to the flawed “originals.” The children that they were may have admired certain aspects of the performers they imitated, but they also saw room for embellishment and improvement. In the clips of the original film, Jeanette MacDonald sports an elegant, short curly hairstyle (de rigueur for the fashionable American woman at the time) and a modest, sensible dress, designed to get past the censors and to garner the approval of any sensible housewife or office girl sitting in the audience. But Gloria improves upon the ingénue bestowing upon her “long red hair that comes down to there [past the waist]” and a “low-cut,” frothy white gown (Spiderwoman, Sun 310). It is interesting to note that childhood pictures reveal that Gloria—unlike her mother and sisters—wore her hair (usually plaited) at a comparable length. So, the “model” she creates bears more resemblance to herself (and her creative abilities) than the musical-comedienne she seems to be emulating.

Similarly, young Elizabeth adds embellishments of her own to improve the original. Her RCMP Officer Nelson Eddy quite sensibly wears a “leather thong” tied under his chin to keep his hat on as he gallops to the foot of the mountain on a white horse—perhaps chosen to compliment the leading lady’s sensational gown (Spiderwoman, Sun 310). The film clips behind their scene clearly show that Nelson Eddy’s steed was dun-colored rather than white (perhaps to compliment his leading lady’s more sensible
frock). And sadly, his broad-brimmed hat had not been sensibly furnished with any contraption to keep it from blowing off.

These embellishments and the adult artists’ refusal to ‘correct’ the details they altered as children when faced with the (film) archive of the authentic fantasy bespeak a commitment to the stuff of their reality—to a reality that resonates at much deeper levels than reactionary posturing. Those little details speak as much to who these women are and how it is that they have able to survive as they do to the Hollywood iconography, which threatened that survival and worked towards their unmaking. Hence, the scene is capable of inducing a more complex and deeply layered response than the dry, rueful chuckle of “one in the know.” This is a scene which touches the viewers’ core and elicits therein tenderness, grief, joy and hope simultaneously: tenderness as we contemplate the innocent dreaming of children; grief as we contemplate the implications and potentially devastating affects of internal colonization (which often lurk just behind the role models we are taught to emulate); hope and joy as we witness the transcendence of familial love and solidarity over petty rivalries, domestic violence, crushing poverty and shame. As two aging sisters imitate the children they were, imitating two youthful onscreen lovers, they rediscover, through the exercise of their artistry, the ties that bind one to the other. They may be overweight; they may be brown; they may be past their youth; they may be whimsically attired. Indeed, they may be (as Rebecca Schneider insists) “inappropriate” for the roles of the young ingénue and her rugged swain (170), but as Schneider herself concedes, they sing “beautifully” (170). And they lead us with a delicate grace (which often takes us by surprise when it is manifested within larger bodies) towards the central lesson of the scene when, with arms akimbo, they open themselves totally to each other and declare, “You belong to me / I belong to you” (Spiderwoman Sun 312). Without missing a beat, Lisa (borrowing her words from Chekhov) next observes: “Oh how the music is playing/ so gaily, so bravely and one wants to live” (Spiderwoman Sun 312). In the midst of disrepair and chaos, in the midst of mourning, in the midst of all the damage that the agents of colonization have wrought on the lands, lifeways and personal psyches of the Indigenous peoples, one seeks transcendence. We are not supposed to be here. Nonetheless, one wants to live.
How did they survive? They dreamed. They created. They hid the baby (Muriel) when their father came home drunk and ready to fight (Spiderwoman Sun 304); they helped their mother to physically restrain this large man and so prevent him from harming himself or others (Spiderwoman Sun 305). They remembered who they were; they stuck together; they cooperated.

Just as the Miguel sisters’ violence against one another is a learned behavior—learned through years of observing violent interactions between their parents (304)—so cooperation, hard work, optimism and endurance are learned behaviors, also communicated to the sisters by their parents. Indeed, Spiderwoman’s famous “Boat Story” asserts these lessons in no uncertain terms. And its placement in the performance only emphasizes this assertion.

They begin by moving rapidly through a re-play of a tea party that has started to turn ugly as the sisters jockey for position (“I am sister number one. You have to listen to me”) and respect (“You always leave me out”) (Spiderwoman Sun 302-303). As momentum builds, the tea party begins to go further and further awry until it escalates into a physical fight during which Lisa cries out, “I hate you bitches. Hope you both die” (304).

Immediately, the scene shifts as the memory of an earlier incident is layered in. Suddenly, the shadow of a drunken and disruptive Antonio Miguel returning home insinuates itself over the story of sibling warfare. And as the warring sisters remember this terrifying moment, their anger at each other evaporates in their desire to protect their baby sister, their mother and the progenitor of the chaos: “Mama jumped up and pulled the window down. Mama grabbed Daddy by the waist, we grabbed Mama, and we pulled and pulled him down to the floor [from the window sill off of which he was threatening to jump]” (305).

The transformation into the boat story comes out of the physical act of cooperative “pulling,” which all three enact (Muriel takes the place of her mother here), morphing out of the tableau, which concludes the story of Antonio Miguel’s thwarted suicide attempt. Quite simply, the story is this: Antonio
Miguel who loved the sea was able (after years of work) to either rent or buy a seaside bungalow on Cedar Beach in New Jersey. He also acquired a boat upon which he and his brother Joe lavished countless hours each summer to refurbish and make seaworthy. Antonio Miguel had a dream:

Muriel: And every summer, my father would paint it, caulk it, pet it, hose it down; then all our friends and family would come. *(All push very hard stage left.)* And we would—

All: Puuush it. To the other side of the yard.

Gloria: Then we would pose by it, on it and under it. *(All strike a pose like being photographed by boat.)* And Daddy and Uncle Joe would stand at the helm and pretend.

Lisa: And then next summer… *(Spiderwoman Sun 306)*

Each summer, the same ritual takes place. Each summer, friends and family gather to consummate this ritual by pushing the boat to the other side of the yard. Finally, we are told, the boat is pronounced ready to go into the water. And this time, when friends and family gather, the generally depressed and withdrawn Elmira Miguel throws a party! “She made potato salad, punch and sandwiches” (307). And everybody in attendance pushes the beautifully refurbished boat into the water…

Where it sinks like a stone.

Several interesting things are happening with this scene. First, as this core lesson in cooperation begins, it carries a reverberation of the former rivalry (or jockeying for position), which the Miguel sisters have been addressing throughout *Sun Moon and Feather*. In this contemporary, urban “Gathering House,” Muriel Miguel positions herself as the director and prime engineer of the scene—the “Chanting Chief,” as it were. While her sisters do not contest her primary position in this regard, Gloria Miguel does object to her own physical positioning in the scene. As the middle sister, she contends, she should be positioned between the other two. Muriel overrides this assertion, placing herself in the centre, and thus temporarily privileges aesthetic concerns over identity (305). Although Gloria Miguel makes it apparent that this has angered her, she does assume her assigned position and cooperates in the telling of the story. Cooperation
is possible even while old hurts are still raw and old arguments remain unresolved. Perhaps, it is through the exercise of such cooperation that healing and resolution can occur.

As respondents to the primary storyteller, Lisa Mayo and Gloria Miguel add multiple layers of perspective offering alternate ways to view particular details of the story, so that its kernel may become more readily apparent. Where Muriel Miguel remembers a “beautiful red and white bungalow on a beautiful beach by a beautiful bay” (Spiderwoman, Sun 305), Gloria Miguel remembers “[a] dilapidated old bungalow in New Jersey on a dirty beach off a dirty polluted bay” (306) from whence, Lisa Mayo, adds, “a godawful odor” rose to meet them twice each day (306). Behind all three, ghostly black and white shadows of their former selves, their family and the contested boat dance behind them, opening a portal into the past. Thus, we are able to see the young witnesses, to see what they saw, and so form our own judgments. The boat, beach and bungalow are neither as impressive as they must have seemed to the young Muriel nor as pitifully dilapidated as they have been remembered by her elder sisters (306). But what the visual archive really adds to the performance of this story is the sheer fun, the hard work and the comfortable sense of community engendered by this summer ritual. And these comfortably layer themselves beneath the sheer fun, physical effort and comfortable sense of community, which characterize the trio’s telling.

In the final analysis, the “boat story” of Sun Moon and Feather teaches us about the power and necessity of dreaming. At the root of the sisters’ dreams of tea with the Queen, of escape from their childhood home, of enough to eat, of artistic success, of attentive lovers and of unconditional love lies a powerful life-lesson about the necessity of dreams to the project of survivance. Despite the financial and personal sacrifices of Antonio Miguel and his brother, despite the continued support of family and friends and despite all of the painting, petting and caulking Antonio Miguel’s beloved boat takes on water and sinks. The dream, however, stays securely afloat. And this is a key lesson in survivance. We are never told if that boat ever became seaworthy, but we do know that the Miguel patriarch did not give up his dream that it would. Harboring a dream is more vital than realizing it. Harboring dreams keeps
individuals afloat, unites communities and fosters optimism, discipline and endurance. At the end of the day, when survival is threatened, a leaky boat may just be enough to carry us through.

How did they survive? They received and withstood every hardship, every disappointment, every humiliation as one body—“[m]y echo, my shadow and me” (Spiderwoman, Sun 197). And when all is said and done, Sun Moon and Feather is Spiderwoman Theater’s teaching about living together in “that place that Indians talk about,” not “dying together” within some nostalgic celebration of people who never lived in a place that never existed.

Survival, of course, is not survivance. What meaning does our survival—the fact that we once lived and laughed and struggled, made love and broke bread together—carry when we are gone? In the midst of mourning, we struggle to recover and rediscover meaning, and often, when we have lost those who gave us life—those who have struggled, suffered and sacrificed to ensure our survival—we are left to question the point of their existence and our own. As Sun Moon and Feather nears its conclusion, the Miguel sisters borrow the words of Chekhov’s three sisters to express the pain of loss and to articulate the terror of doubt inspired by their parents’ deaths.

Muriel: I’m crying. I’m crying.

Gloria: Imagine. I’m already beginning to forget her face.

Muriel: God grant it will all work out.

Gloria: Just as we won’t be remembered either.

Muriel: Weather is beautiful today.

Gloria: They’ll forget us. (Spiderwoman, Sun 313, emphasis added)85

85 In the film version of Sun Moon and Feather, this dialogue is preceded by Muriel’s account of the moment at which she communicated her father’s death to her uncles: words break down here, as she flatly reproduces an eerie, guttural cry that is all the more painful to hear, because it carries no histrionic undertones. It does not (in her performance) express wounded emotion; it is, rather, the expression of pure spirit—a soul rent in two: “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH” (Zipp and Rosen). Layered atop an image of a glorious sunset over Kuna Yala, it reverberates across the oceans, over space and through time—a primordial echo like the first note of creation. But unlike the first note of creation, it is a flat echo of the human being’s inchoate, uncomprehending terror in the face of a Great Mystery.
But even as they give voice to Chekhov’s agonized doubts, they have already recovered a solution: the dead are not simply forgotten. Gloria, who has articulated Chekhov’s greatest fear, answers it: “No. She’ll go on in us, in me and my family” (Spiderwoman Sun 313). The stories of individuals or nations do not end with death. There is no separation between the ancestors and the descendants. The descendants carry the ancestors, and their own lives are layers within an epic tapestry in which the dead, the living and the yet-unborn dance together, speak together, remember and dream together in a liminal space fraught with color, pattern and infinite meaning. Infinite meaning. After all, as Muriel Miguel has noted, “You’re really responsible for six generations. Even if you die you’re responsible” (qtd. in Haugo, “Weaving” 222).

If Sun Moon and Feather begins with a question around survival that necessitates concerted acts of Recovery and Mourning, it ends with a new question that calls upon the survivors to continue Dreaming, to Commit to their dreams and to Act upon that commitment. Through this project, the Miguel sisters begin to recover their sibling relationships, their identities within their family and their nations, and the legacies that have been left for them (including the names bestowed upon them at birth), even as they mourn and lay to rest old hurts and devastating losses. Throughout, they rediscover and remind us of the potency of dreaming, and their last words in the piece constitute an acknowledgment of their responsibility (the responsibility of “We Three”) to keep on dreaming the survivance of the coming generations:

Muriel: Such wonderful thoughts thrilled through me. Such thoughts.

Gloria: I’m the only grandmother now, the only grandmother in the family.

Lisa: It’s warm today. (Spiderwoman, Sun 313-314)
**Communitist Acts: Recovering the Sacred, Recovering Self**

*Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* (1988) was created at the behest of the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth, which has been meeting annually since 1977. The Elders, at this time, particularly wished to address an epidemic problem of New Age charlatans who were building corporate empires, which purported to offer Native American spiritual wisdom and healing secrets for large sums of money. While many of the most celebrated and most financially successful purveyors of this ersatz spirituality through books, fetishes, weekend retreats, sweat lodge ceremonies and vision quests were non-Native individuals (Lynn Andrews, Forrest Carter, Carlos Castaneda, Jamie Sams, etc.), others, like Sun Bear (Vincent Laduke) or Eagle Man (Ed McGaa) were tribal individuals, garnering large followings and profits as they demeaned their own communities by commodifying their cosmological teachings and spiritual praxis. The Circle of Elders invited Spiderwoman Theater to join with them in this intervention, telling the sisters, “We think you should do something about this” (M. Miguel, qtd. in Haugo, “Weaving” 229). In answering this call, the Miguel sisters widened the orbiculate, narrative construct through which they had recovered personal, familial and tribal identities to perform their roles/responsibilities within the larger hoop of original Nations.

Although the piece is a scathingly hilarious indictment of cultural theft, which deconstructs colonial metonyms and powerfully resists the appropriation, bastardization and marketing of spiritual knowledge and Indigenous identity, it contributes much more to its creatrices and the community for

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86 Spiderwoman Theater first presented *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* at the Stage Door Festival in Holland. In 1989, the show’s American premiere took place at New York City’s Theater for the New City. From 1990-2001, the show traveled extensively throughout the United States from coast to coast and was produced at Toronto’s Native Earth Performing Arts in 1993.

87 For six days each year, Elders, their helpers, youth and children gather at an “encampment hosted by a [North American] Indian Nation” to discuss issues, which involve or affect Indian peoples and to develop strategies to ensure the continuance of traditional lifeways and spiritual praxis (“The Traditional”). Communiqués and statements coming out of these gatherings and other materials may be accessed by visiting the website of the American Indian Institute (see Works Cited).
which they create than a platform from which to shout down the oppressor\textsuperscript{88}: if the colonial system of knowledge production and dissemination has purported to tell Native people (and those Others who occupy Native lands) who they are, the recovery of traditional knowledge systems and the application of traditional pedagogical frameworks will not only challenge colonial representations of indigeneity but also render them moot.

The settler society may be in need of re-education (and \textit{Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show} certainly offers this), but, as Muriel Miguel points out, this performative intervention was created for Native audiences (see Haugo, “Weaving” 229); its spiritual core, its good effects, its teachings and its processual map present themselves for reception by the Native community. To recognize this and to examine \textit{Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show} in light of what it seeks to recover for and restore to the Native community (as opposed to what it seeks to teach or how it seeks to resist the non-Native community) is, to my mind, to most holistically engage in what Ann Haugo terms a “nuanced reading of […] resistance” (“Colonial Audiences” 133).

In a polyvalent examination of sexual violence as a tool of genocide, Andrea Smith posits that Native lifeways (which are inseparable from spiritual praxis) are not portable. She goes on to explain that when the expression of Native cosmological understandings is disconnected from the traditional territories of the people, it renders praxis impossible and ultimately destroys the belief system out of

\textsuperscript{88} Feminist scholar Jill Dolan reads \textit{Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City} as an expression of “racial rage over the appropriation of American Indian culture” and detects within its use of “alternative” aesthetic devices and dramaturgical structure “the potential for feminist subjectivities” (\textit{Presence} 49). Rebecca Schneider similarly detects and privileges the “searing critique” to which Spiderwoman Theater turns its ‘counter mimetic’ effects (171). Both readings are inarguably legitimate and important. However, as we have seen with regard to \textit{Sun Moon and Feather}, such readings fail to recognize or address the more positive and empowering layers of this project, which include its scrupulous search for the roots of misappropriation, the scrupulous self-examination of its artists, the mechanisms for healing built into the piece and its contribution to the greater project of decolonization. Indeed, such readings reveal a marked disinterest in how performative interventions by Native artists might serve the people by and for and about whom they were created. Dolan, by way of example, concludes her performance analysis of \textit{Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show} by observing that Spiderwoman Theater and other artists like them will never have the “leisure to inhabit” the spaces of “dominant cultural privilege” (\textit{Presence} 64), but she never imagines that they may have the opportunity to inhabit a much richer community, a community, in fact, that they have enriched and that carries privileges of its own. Nor does she imagine that this performative intervention might serve any greater purpose than to “transform feminist theater once again into a site of radical political action” (\textit{Presence} 64).
which such praxis was born (122). This, of course, works itself in two ways: most obviously, original peoples have been removed from the traditional lands they once occupied and hence prevented from practicing their ceremonies. But more insidiously, non-Native peoples have appropriated fragments of spiritual praxis, packaging these for sale in a global market. In packaging cultural materials and spiritual practices for distribution to mass markets, they deliver the assertion “that anyone can practice Indian spirituality anywhere, so there is no need to protect the specific Native communities and their lands that are the basis of these spiritual practices” (Smith 122-23). Spiritual appropriation, then, locks us into a “catch-22” situation: it shows itself as a tool of cultural genocide insofar as it helps to uphold the seemingly plausible justifications for continued colonial infringement on Native lands, which results in the cessation of first the Peoples’ “works” (embodied expression of their spiritual faith) and then the “faith” itself. And once the damage has been done (or is perceived as an irreversible fait accompli), it defends itself thusly: Native people have forgotten themselves; hence, it is up to others to teach them who they are and who they have been (see Smith 123).

89 Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice has suggested (quite rightly) that the connections between land and ceremony might be unpacked with greater delicacy than they are laid out here. This discussion, informed by Andrea Smith, might lead the reader to conclude that those who have been removed from their traditional lands are no longer able to maintain the belief systems and ceremonial praxis once held by their ancestors. These belief systems, he points out, are engendered and nurtured in “significant, long-term, and ground[ed] relationships that require deep, reciprocal investments of time, energy and commitment” (Personal Communication, 15 January 2010). And relationship is alive and dynamic; its aspect and expression are altered as the parties who are bound therein are transformed by time and/or circumstance. Hence, new relationships between Indigenous peoples and the (new) biotas to which they have been removed may be established by those who are willing to commit themselves to a sustained, collective investment of time and energy. Among Peoples who cherish their relationships with and within the biotas that contain them and whose cosmological understandings reinforce the importance of those relationships, this commitment has been bred in the bone and passed through the blood. Certainly, with respect to his own Nation, Justice points to the fact that “removed peoples still maintain [traditional belief] systems, as do those who stay behind.” And while elements of praxis may change their shape, “full loss and destruction are rare” (Personal Communication, 15 January 2010).

Notwithstanding, a question still remains: how rare? How much is lost to a People—indeed, how much is lost to the entire Creation—when once-crucial knowledge (rendered obsolete by removal) has been forgotten by its original holders? How much is lost to a People when the fabric of the body politic has been degraded by divisions between those who maintain the traditional belief systems, those who have adopted foreign systems and those who have ceased to believe in anything at all? What losses remain to be discovered? History has yet to render a full accounting.

At the same time, Justice places before us an exciting task: What are the processes we must adopt, recover, invent or adapt to forge these new relationships and the modes of their expression? Certainly, I believe, this is the question that Spiderwoman Theater and their aesthetic-inheritors have begun to answer for themselves.
And this makes sense. In some awful, unconscionable way, this makes total sense, because our traditional lands are not simply plots of property upon which to build our homes and places of worship. These lands house (and are themselves) elements of entire communities in context of which we find our place and so move through a process of coming to know who we are as human beings. Hence, a recovery and re-righting of the collective’s cosmological understandings and spiritual praxis is tightly woven into a recovery and re-righting of collective identity and individual selfhood. And this complex project of multiple recoveries necessitates the recovery and deployment of a pedagogical process through which the original peoples of this continent came to know themselves long before the European invaders pretended the authority to tell them who they were. It is ultimately through the lens of this pedagogical paradigm and its application as a dramaturgical model for the contemporary stage that Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City is viewed to best effect.

Pedagogy, Dramaturgy and Metaphysical Mimesis

Before we can find ways to address and repair the damage caused by cultural appropriation or to stop it altogether, we must seek and identify its sites, its roots, its agents and its consequences to the cultural “organism.” Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show ventures into several key sites from which to conduct a performative intervention. The show opens with a farcical staging of an early scene in Karl May’s Winnetou during which a noble Teutonic hero who is still a stranger to America’s “Wild West” manages to kill a bear with a “hit on the head, [a] shot in the eye, [and a] stab in the chest” and so earns the name “Old Shatterhand” from May’s fictional Apache hero—the “noble savage”—Winnetou (Spiderwoman, Winnetou’s 238). These two heroes of the “New World” eventually become blood brothers, as they recognize qualities in each other, which they have never been able to detect in anybody else (Indian or White). Of course, as Lisa Mayo observed in 1991, while Winnetou is “brave, courageous, has ethics [and is] very good looking […] he is never as good as the German” (“Appropriation” 54). Hence, he must die, leaving his blood brother to remember and embody his noble spirit. And herein lies the terrible genius
of the mechanism through which “white people establish themselves as the true inheritors of Indianness” (Smith 123): the “noble savage” is disappearing. Indeed, he must perforce disappear, as he is not equipped to compete with and within the “superior” settler society. However, to ameliorate this tragic denouement, the superior settler society will take it upon itself to preserve the cultural fragments it deems to be valuable or worthy of survival.

Certainly, these are the sentiments with which Karl May introduced his Winnetou in 1892:

What a proud, handsome figure he used to be as he flew over the wide savanna, the mane of his mustang fluttering in the wind! And how miserable and degenerate he has become [...] like a mangy cur, reduced to begging and stealing.

Yes, the Indian is a sick, a dying man, and we now stand at his miserable bedside feeling sorry, with nothing left to do but to close his eyes. It is serious enough to witness the death of any human being—how much more serious, then, is it to see the destruction of an entire race! Many questions arise, and this one in particular: What could this race have achieved had it been given the opportunity? What characteristic cultural forms will forever be lost to mankind with the annihilation of this people? (May xiii, emphasis added)

Certainly it is with these words that thousands of German nationals and their European neighbors received their first introduction to and formed lasting opinions about the Aboriginal peoples of North America. And it is with these words that this question insinuated itself into the hearts and minds of countless “hobbyists” and directed the policies, attitudes and doings of thousands of “Indian Clubs” across Europe and North America: “What characteristic cultural forms will forever be lost to mankind with the annihilation of this people” if we do not take it upon ourselves to preserve them?

Karl May had lived a hard and terrible life in Germany and had spent most of his life in debtors’ prison. From there, he wrote seventy-three novels—every one of them an exotic potboiler set in a far-away land, peopled by “Turks,” Africans and all manner of “exotics.” His Winnetou series with its heroic German protagonist and his noble Apache sidekick (Winnetou) captured the imaginations not only of May’s compatriots but also of readers all across Europe. We might well be tempted to underestimate the
influence of this ‘outdated’ and ‘obscure’ work. But it is a matter of public record that May (for as much as his work has been dismissed by ‘serious’ literary scholars) is the “most-published [and most translated] writer who ever wrote in the German language” (Koblick, qtd. in Flippo np and Kimmelman np). Indeed, May’s “noble savage” has inhabited and profoundly affected the German imagination (and the imaginations of their Dutch, Swiss, Italian and Russian neighbors) throughout the twentieth century and into today. As recently as 2006, Der Spiegel, a national newsmagazine, dubbed Germany “The Land of Winnetou” and published this observation with reference to the nation’s soccer team:

There are the German poets and thinkers, the German forest, the German ‘comfortableness,’ German efficiency, the German longing for Italy, and there is Winnetou […] Winnetou is the quintessential German national hero, a paragon of virtue, a nature freak, a romantic, a pacifist at heart, but in a world at war he is the best warrior, alert, strong, sure […] Eleven Winnetous and we would be world champions. (see Kimmelman, emphasis added)

Certainly, there can be no mistaking the sentiment here! As inheritors of Karl May’s literary legacy (and particularly his epic Winnetou series), the German people (and their neighbors into whose languages May’s novels have been translated) have come to see themselves—reflected in the mirror (Spiegel) of the national Zeitgeist—as the heroic preservers and true “inheritors” of Indigenous cultural wealth.

Hence, it is not unreasonable to identify May’s Winnetou as a crucial site of misappropriation, along with the Wild West and Medicine Shows that toured Europe and the Americas throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the contemporary commercialized pageants that celebrate the “Indian Princess” and the “noble savage,” and the fraudulent spiritualists who purport to sell Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and Ceremony. Nor is it unreasonable to position May’s opus squarely within the psycho-spiritual heart of spiritual theft and cultural genocide.

Spiderwoman Theater frames its performative assault on spiritual theft with key scenes from May’s novel, ultimately restating and answering May’s thesis with brutal succinctness. In so doing, the
Miguel sisters also answer countless individuals (encountered during early European tours) who wondered if they were intimately acquainted with May’s famous Apache, who claimed to have been transformed by Ceremony into Sioux “sisters” or “brothers,” and who refused to acknowledge the racist ideology that lay at the heart of their preconceptions about the tribal peoples they so admired or to abandon those preconceptions (see Mayo, “ Appropriation” 54; Mayo qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 176-177; Spiderwoman, Winnetou’s 234). Such pretenders are neither heroic preservers nor legitimate heirs; they are, quite simply, opportunistic carrion eaters—destroyers of the very cultures on which they perpetrate their “ministrations.” And, this, Spiderwoman makes very clear:

Muriel: She looked at me and smiled and said “I’m an Indian, too.” Too!

Lisa: Sell out. Am I? White man lost in make believe at the powwow. Craftsman, woodcarver. I like him but…

Gloria: Thank you, thank you, thank you. For discovering me, for recognizing me, for saving me. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to exist. For knowing more about me than I do. Thank you for giving me spirituality. Thank you. […]


Gloria: Thank me, thank me, thank me. My spirit, my body, my wisdom. You feed on me, create on me, enjoy my remains. Thank me, thank me, thank me. (Spiderwoman, Winnetou’s 258-259, Stage Directions omitted)

But woven into this indictment of cultural theft are crucial and far-reaching questions around the issue of complicity. Apart from colonial agency, Indigenous Peoples must also address our own (at times, enforced or unwitting) complicity in the misappropriation of sacred knowledge and spiritual praxis. If one smiles and says nothing to those who flout falsified identities, is one a “sell out?” And how do we address the struggles of those authentic American Indians who participated in the popular dissemination of stereotypes by performing in the Wild West Shows and other pageants of ersatz indigeneity to avoid prison or to feed their families? What of the Kuna showman and his Anishinaabe wife who don Plains
regalia to hunt stuffed wolves and sell homemade Snake Oil or Turtle Cock Juice\textsuperscript{90} in Central Park to advertise the latest Hollywood Western or to entertain Sunday picnickers? Are they, too, “sell outs?” What of those biologically authentic Indians who sell spirituality to the highest bidder or who abuse the authority and unquestioning trust invested upon them by the desperately trusting and spiritually needy?

These questions are layered into the performative mola as home movies of authentic Pow wows organized and attended by their family (1940’s-1970’s) provide the “backdrop” for the live Snake Oil Show during which the performers advertise a ceremonial retreat “all for the low, low price of $3000.00 for the weekend” (Spiderwoman, *Winnetou’s* 255), as Muriel Miguel interprets the lyrics of the Hollywood ballad “Out of My Lodge at Eventide” with a farcically ersatz version of Plains Indian sign language or as Mother Moon Face (played by Hortensia Colorado) flirts shamelessly with the (white male) audience member who has volunteered to undergo Spiderwoman’s plastic Ceremony, which is guaranteed to transform him into an “authentic” Indian (*Winnetou’s* 257).

Obviously, “Ceremony” is at the centre of this production. And certainly, as the “shamanesses” Mother Moon Face (Hortensia Colorado), Princess Pissy Willow (Lisa Mayo), Minnie Hallrunner (Gloria Miguel) and Ethel Christian Christiansen (Muriel Miguel) perform equestrian feats on mops instead of horses, execute bullwhip stunts and rope-tricks with “invisible” implements, channel “spirits” afflicted with hemorrhoids and transform Caucasian acolytes into American Indians, their pointed criticism of plastic spirituality is not lost on their audiences. *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show* is also, in and of itself, a Ceremony of recovery—one, which effects the transformation of both performer and witness. As the performers cavort riotously in blinding lamé through the sites of misappropriation, they are “sifting through the embers” of our plundered cultures and of their own devastated lives to recover and restore what has been hidden, suppressed, twisted and misaligned. The Miguel sisters with Hortensia Colorado

\textsuperscript{90} Muriel Miguel told the story of her Uncle Joe and his trade in “Turtle Cock Juice” an antidote to impotence, which he used to mix up in his bathtub, at a workshop facilitated by James Luna in October 2005 at the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama (University of Toronto). This story has also been woven into several live Spiderwoman productions, although it has not yet been published.
have **made** for themselves a vehicle of authentic healing from the shameful detritus of falsehood. And their audiences (regardless of ethnicity) are invited to **share**—to participate at various key stages—in this re-righting and to thereby be transformed.

When Princess Pissy Willow (the “crack shot”) demonstrates her “marksmanship” with a toy rifle, a volunteer from the audience is selected to come up onto the stage and hold the balloons, which are her targets. This volunteer, however, becomes complicit in the fakery, as s/he has been armed with a straight pin and instructed to burst the targets s/he holds up as the rifle is “fired.” His/her actions are completely obvious to the audience, which is enthusiastically encouraged by the MC (Muriel) to vigorously applaud the Princess’s “marksmanship.” And this it invariably does with equal enthusiasm.

The revelation of the mechanics of the illusion is also a key component of ceremonial praxis in many Indigenous communities. Across the nations, healers, ceremonial practitioners and “artists” have, in key moments, traditionally revealed the sleights of hand behind the uncanny illusions they create. One deliberately allows the observer to see the red clay he chews, “later to be spit out as his own ‘blood’” (Weston La Barre, qtd. in Schechner, *Environmental* 174), just as the Yaqui deer dancer, who is understood to represent a visitant from another world to the world of men, makes no attempt to disguise his own humanity beneath the antlers he has donned for Ceremony. For the non-Native observer, such instances are evidentiary of failure—the failure of the deer dancer to completely transform (Schechner, *Between* 4) or the failure of the “magician-shaman-showman” to sustain an illusion (Weston La Barre, qtd. in Schechner, *Environmental* 174). Indeed, such commentators reveal their tendency to privilege the semblance of material verisimilitude over spiritual reality. But the lesson here—as in all Ceremony—is

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91 *Tsitsika*, a Kwakuitl word that means “everything is not real,” is the name bestowed upon the Winter Ceremonials of that nation (Norwell qtd. in Ford 198). During this time of Potlatches and clan initiations, dances depicting gory executions and “brutal” assaults by clan initiates on community members (during which their houses are ransacked or their bodies are bitten and seem to bleed real blood) are enacted to the delight of all (but heretofore horrified outsiders and anthropologists). But all is not real. The victims of the Hamatsa initiate’s rapacious attacks have become “actors” for the occasion. They conceal blood-bags beneath their clothing to be broken at the appropriate moment, and they scream with convincing outrage as their houses are “ransacked” by the Hamatsa initiate even as his kinsman follows closely documenting all property damage (for which restitution will be made) and ensuring that the initiate does not damage chattel that has been designated “off-limits” for the purposes of the “play.”
that the material world is somehow less real, less relevant, less potent than the world of spirit that lies beyond the veil and certainly deserving of less attention than the interdependencies that link all with all. Healing is what is required, not a magic show. And the healer, himself, despite all of his showmanship is only a vessel through which the spirits work. Parlor tricks are only parlor tricks, and as it turns a blind eye to the slippages that reveal the banal impotence thereof, the audience plays its own part in the “production”: it understands and embraces the lesson.

Similarly, Spiderwoman’s audiences, as enthusiastically knowing participants in the sham rituals of Winnetou’s, play out their own complicity in criminal acts of cultural theft outside the theatre. As the sham reaches ludicrous heights in a climactic “ceremony” during which a Caucasian audience-member will be transformed into an American Indian of perhaps the “Wishee Washee” or the “Rappa Hamburg” tribe and adopt—with the enthusiastic encouragement of the cast—the name “Two Dogs Fucking,” the audience raises its collective voice to chant its approbation as Muriel Miguel conducts

Of course, in this moment of sharing, wherein every individual in the theatre is invited to take his/her place in the performative mola created by Spiderwoman Theater, the opportunity to learn from and be transformed by the experience manifests itself: nobody is innocent here. To differing extents, we are all complicit in the crime of cultural theft, and it is important that all of us take some ownership here if we are to end it. The flaws built into Spiderwoman’s performance do not exist as an invitation to simply laugh ruefully at the more ludicrous aspects of cultural theft; rather, they contribute to a metaphysical mimesis, as it were—revealing the spiritual mechanisms of misappropriation and the extent of the damage caused by the “Great North American Medicine Show” in all of its incarnations.

92 When the initiate is deemed fully prepared, the ‘rite of transformation’ is completed by sending him on his way armed with a brown paper “medicine pouch” (containing a Q-tip, a Band-aid and a condom) and a picture of a handsome Indian in full Plains regalia, which he is instructed to hold in front of his face for the rest of his natural life.
Internalized shame and personal despair are manifestations of that damage. And as the company tracks the movements of those who vandalized our cultures, each performer is led into an honest reckoning with that damage, which has to some extent directed her relationships and choices: Muriel Miguel, for instance, voices her youthful wish that her mother had been “taller” and “like every other mother in the neighborhood” (*Winnetou’s* 252). While some (represented by Muriel Miguel’s Ethel Christian Christiansen) sell false prophecy and may don a false identity along with faux buckskin and plastic beads, even as they fall into inauthentic “trances” (see *Winnetou’s* 247), authentic American Indians have often been ashamed of their ethnicity, of the physical features they have inherited from their parents and of their authentic gifts or spiritual power. Indeed, such power, when it is authentic, is never flamboyant, and it brings no monetary gain. The body of Elmira Miguel became the bridge, which linked spirit to material and across which the dead communicated with the living. And for this dedication of body, Elmira was never paid in money; instead, we are told, those who sought her services “brought crackers, buns, and tea” (*Winnetou’s* 253) as tribute or payment while her youngest daughter flinched with (misplaced) shame, because her mother was not like “other mothers” in the neighborhood (*Winnetou’s* 252).

**Pro-Action vs. Reaction: The Red Reading**

Several years ago, in my Indigenous Theatre of North America course at the University of Toronto, a Canadian student responded to this idea of misplaced shame by observing, “all children feel some shame with regards to their parents.” Sadly, in North America (and perhaps throughout the industrialized world) this seems to be the case. But it is important to realize that the gap between youth and Elders in Native cultures is not “natural.” It is not in keeping with our traditions. The West has come to accept—indeed, to nurture—this gap: children in North America expect and are expected to “leave the nest” and to assert their own independence. They are conditioned quite early in life to cultivate and celebrate their individuality; and quite often, the first manifestations of that individuality are expressed through
impatient tolerance and/or long-suffering shame of their parents. These expressions, interestingly, are encouraged by peers, celebrated in the media and are met with approbation and acceptance throughout the culture.

For Native peoples, this generational gap is a consequence of colonization. Our children were removed from their parental homes and communities; their parents’ language was quite literally beaten out of them; they were taught to speak, worship, eat, dress, and work in accordance with settler norms. They were taught to be ashamed of their parents, of ancestral traditions, of their languages, their belief systems and their lifeways. The shame we feel is not a “natural phase” as we develop and assert our own “individuality.” The assertion of “individuality” was not traditionally our goal. And as we work to decolonize, we must work recover right relations based on reciprocity and to discover and live out our roles and responsibilities within the family, the community and the Creation. Indeed, much will depend upon our ability to bridge the (imposed) lacunae between our generations, between Indigenous communities and between the people themselves.

Muriel Miguel takes the first steps to address the gap between herself and her mother by publicly acknowledging the shame she felt in the face of her mother’s authenticity. And it is upon this realization that Spiderwoman’s profoundly personal mourning song for Elmira Miguel and a celebration of the authentic spiritual gifts she left to her daughters (Reverb-ber-ber-rations) will be constructed. But this site of shame occupies only one layer of a subtly intricate matrix of damage caused by misappropriation.

Another key site of the damage wrought by the corruption of Indigenous Story, the misappropriation of Native spiritual praxis, and the grossly constructed distortions of our image is the positioning of Indigenous women—or, rather, the erasure of position. The imposition of patriarchal governing structures has resulted in the glorification of the “chief” without recognition that this male authority figure was a servant of the people; he had learned his language, his position in the family, his responsibilities and much of his history from his mother; he had inherited his clan membership from his mother, and in many nations he was appointed and guided by a council of Clan Mothers. Across Turtle
Island within many Indigenous communities (including Pueblo, Cherokee and Haudenosaunee), women held the property, and they made the decisions that would affect the future of their nations. But when the settler came, he refused to deal with Indigenous women, preferring to negotiate with an autonomous male “sovereign.” Eventually, as “he” took control of the land, he altered the political and economic structures of Indigenous societies, so that women no longer owned their property and had no say in decisions made on behalf of the whole nation. Across Turtle Island, our nations understand that the healing of our communities and the restoration of right relations therein is dependant upon the repositioning of the female to her former place in the social fabric.

As the performers “model” European-designed costumes and characterizations of the “American Indian” (Noble Savage; Mangy, cur-like “Hordes”; or flamboyant, crack-shot, trick-riding “Princesses”) and play out the settler narratives on their feet, the layers of faux hides and hideous lamé, macho posturing, razzle-dazzle quackery and sexually charged salesmanship begin to unravel. The shoddy patchwork reveals its flaws. And beneath these, the authentic originals—solidly designed, Indigenous female bodies—publicly dis-cover themselves as the sites in which authentic Indigenous kwage\(^{93}\) may be sought and found.

Birgit Däwes asserts that the troupe’s “asymmetrical assignment of twenty-one characters to four actresses and the visible dissolve of various characters into others (e.g. when Gloria Miguel changes from the Bear into Klekepetra, ‘leaving the costume in the center of the stage’ [57]) clearly undermine essentialist notions of cultural difference” (337). But such a reading leads us away from the kernel/kwage of the project and obfuscates an essential(ist?) truth. As the Miguel sisters with Hortensia Colorado “lend” their physical and vocal instruments to play out European notions of cultural difference, they are accessing cellular memory. They are accessing a history that has been inscribed on and within the body, which becomes here not only the container/archive of that history but also the site of the articulation of its

\(^{93}\) Kwage is the Kuna word for “essence.”
holdings—its “texts.” The published versions of Spiderwoman’s works, then, should be understood as 
**archives of performance**, not “dramatic literature.” Similarly, the family films, which are frequently 
projected onto the bodies of the performers during Spiderwoman shows, should not be read simply as 
“texts” or historical archives in and of themselves. Layered atop or behind the performing body, they 
serve as a visual reminder that the living flesh across which they dance is a “container” for 
communal/ancestral memory. We embody all of those who came before. And as storytellers, we serve our 
communities by becoming the vessels through which they speak.

Working within this aesthetic realm, the performing female body does not simply challenge 
“essentialist notions of cultural difference.” Rather, she conducts a Red Reading on the settler-narrative: 
in so doing, she weighs her own embodied knowledge (tradition/ancestral memory) against the distorted 
“histories” and deformed representations of Indigenous humanity that have been documented on the page 
to allow her “readers” to assess the value of those European-authored texts for themselves. As she 
embodies the “noble savage” Winnetou, the “mangy hordes,” the “Princess” and the “Shamaness” and 
utters the words that have been scripted for them, the fantasy collapses and the dark, murderous 
mechanics of the colonizing *Zeitgeist* are revealed.

It is important to remember that the troupe’s staged excerpts from May’s novel adhere faithfully 
to his text: if they seem ridiculous, the troupe has not had to bastardize them to make them so. At the end 
of the day, their true essence reveals itself. When the authentic Indigenous body revisits the sites of 
misappropriation to embody the inauthentic, the *faux* fabric of these constructed identities disintegrates 
and the authentic Indigenous body (the authoritative text) bursts through its seams to share itself and to 
celebrate its unique *kwage*—its difference from those who are not indigenous to the lands they occupy 
and from the narratives these newcomers have constructed to justify that occupation: “**Now I telling you.** 
Watch me. I’m alive. I’m not defeated. I begin” (Spiderwoman *Winnetou’s* 262, emphasis added).
The Play Text and the Pictograph: *Reverb-ber-ber-rations as Curing Chant for the Contemporary Stage*

Lisa: [...] Grandma said, “Your mother was born with a caul, so she has strong psychic powers. She can tell the future. She can see through anybody.” And Mama could tell the meanings of the symbols left by coffee grounds and leaves in the bottom of cups. Mama would go into a trance and she said everybody changed in the world. All sound stopped and it became so quiet that you could hear sounds that had been there before. And people who had been there before. She could actually see them and then thoughts would come into her body and she would tell you what she had received. But no one paid Mama any money. They brought crackers, buns, and tea and all her friends came to her. And those friends told other friends. And so it continued. And Mama became a wise woman. (Spiderwoman, *Winnetou’s* 252-253)

Muriel: [...] My mother’s a witch. I didn’t say that. How embarrassing. I knew I should not have come. Damn it! (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 106)

Gloria Miguel: Self-hatred can be a secret. Self-denial can be a secret. My self-hatred came from the outside.

Lisa Mayo: It all does, Gloria. (*Reverb Rehearsals 1990, Tape 9*)

Always, with(in) this process, we begin again. Each cycle of asking, seeking, making, owning, sharing and celebrating certainly generates answers, which inspire in the learner a deeper understanding of self-in-community. But more importantly, it generates further questions, which require the learner to repeatedly reengage with the process, discovering new answers and generating more questions for which answers will have to be found. Similarly, while Spiderwoman’s published works could (and may, by some) be read as isolated texts, they ought not to be read as such. Each play text documents a stage in a process of becoming—a process, which is not linear and therefore requires that stages be revisited in subsequent works. Inspired by half-remembered fragments and generated by echoes, they reverberate, expanding the orbiculate construct in which they are contained. With each new question, it is as if another stone has been cast upon the waters, engendering more circles within circles within circles and alternately drawing the individual inward and then outward and then inward again on an eternally spiraling journey to the self.
If *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* was a communitist project designed to re-right the dominant society’s bastardized “writing” of tribal identity in the political, mythological and spiritual realms, it has led its creatrices back to the personal and familial realms by revealing glimpses of the authentic beneath the layers of ersatz farce. If, beneath the ephemeral posturing of the mighty-but-doomed “brave,” the warm, brown flesh of female indigeneity is revealed, what is her place in all of this? Where lies her power? How does it manifest itself? If, beside the glamorous and mercenary “shamaness” glowing in the refracted aura of her lamé gown, a tiny, unprepossessing mother shames her children, because she exercises the gifts with which she was born, how do those gifts reverberate throughout the lives of her children and grandchildren?

*Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* may be received as a communal ceremony of healing (framed within a farcical, misaligned “ceremony”), which has been designed to peel back the layers of misappropriated Story, cosmological understanding and spiritual praxis to expose and treat the roots of communal dis-ease. And this communitist project has ignited each Miguel sister’s consciousness of her own very personal dis-ease, which itself requires attention and redress. Spiderwoman’s subsequent show *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* (1990) offers itself as an avenue of this required redress. Here, the story, upon which this piece is based—“Mama’s Caul” (see Mojica & Knowles 101-102)—and which was first articulated in *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show* by the eldest daughter (Mayo), is remembered word for word, claimed and retold by all three sisters as if it were in itself a Kuna Medicine Chant taught first to the eldest sister by her grandmother and mother and then taught by the eldest to her younger sisters. Like survivors sifting through the ‘ruins’ (of their childhood discomfort and shame), the Miguel sisters performatively deconstruct their legacy to find, at its kernel, the thing that will make them whole.

Gloria: Grandma said

Your mother was born with a caul

So she has strong psychic powers
Muriel: She can tell the future
She can see through anybody
She can tell the meaning of the symbols
Left by coffee grounds and tea leaves
In the bottom of cups

Lisa: When Mama went into a trance
Mama said everything changed in the world

Tutti: Mama said, Mama said, Mama said (107)

In Kuna Yala, apprentices first learn medicine chants by rote; working side-by-side with the healer, they labor to articulate and embody them without error. Only after they have mastered this will they have earned the right to see the pictographic notations, which they then will study and interpret. Let us, then, consider this play text as an annotation of embodied knowledge and impulse—a “cousin,” as it were, of the pictographic notation. We would do well to remember also that Spiderwoman Theater’s scripts are annotated upon and within the bodies of its performers. Their dense poetry and the lengthy mono-and-dialogic chants, which form the narrative base of Reverb-ber-ber-rations, are not evocative tellings as much as they are momentous doings. Like the Kuna Curing Chants, which Mac Chapin likens to “scripts in which the events being described take place simultaneously in the world of spirit as the words come out of the chanter’s mouth” (235, emphasis added), Spiderwoman’s “scripts” are not simply intended to be read or appreciated on page and stage as much as they are meant to be experienced. As

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94 Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule speaking in his role as cultural advisor at rehearsals during the first developmental workshop of Monique Mojica’s Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way (10 November, 2007, Equity Showcase, Toronto, ON).
audiences, we are invited to inhabit the worlds Spiderwoman articulates into being and to be, ourselves, inhabited by those worlds.

This intersection of Kuna tradition with Spiderwoman’s performative praxis is exciting to note, fraught as it is with possibilities! When contemporary Native dramaturgical models are constructed upon specific tribal traditions, the possibilities for remembering and re-membering are great indeed. As storytellers work within these models, based in tradition, their bodies are remembering and being re-membered as they remember other “bodies” on the material and spiritual levels. Mama’s cauldron (Spiderwoman Reverb 106-108) for instance, is a carefully preserved fleshly artifact (still retained by Muriel Miguel in the family home), which remembers the birth of Elmira Miguel to Elizabeth Ashton Moore. Like the pictographic notation, it functions as the mnemonic aid, which will link the generations to come with those who are now and those who came before through the Stories of their coming and of the spiritual gift that reverberates through the blood—the gift that the Miguel sisters have come finally to accept and to celebrate:

Muriel: Grandma said you should be thankful
Gloria: You have a gifted Mother
Lisa: Grandma had the gift too
And all of my mother’s children have the gift

All begin to give the names of people in the family who have the gift... (Reverb 108)

When Mama’s gift manifested itself “everything changed in the world” (Reverb 107). And everything changed in her: her physical being—the house of an individual soul—reconfigured itself to become a vessel for the spirits with whom she communicated (Reverb 108). In turn, as the gift manifests itself in Elmira Miguel’s youngest daughter, her own body becomes a vessel for the ancestral spirits who have passed this gift down to her; as it does, its very cells rearrange themselves transforming its contours and structural supports. As we have already noted in Chapter Three, when the long-dead Elizabeth Ashton Moore (“Grandma”) came unbidden to momentarily possess Muriel Miguel, everything changed—her
internal voice, her eyes and the sounds she heard from within and around her. Indeed, “[her] whole face became another face” (Reverb 108). It is exciting to speculate here that as the sites of contemporary performance are being internally reconfigured (that is, the internal decolonization of its artists), so too may their outer structure (that is, the architecture and administration of the sites upon which the story unfolds) begin to change shape.95

In Kuna Yala, physical illness has traditionally been regarded as an attack on the burba of an individual. Textile-artist and scholar of the mola Herta Puls defines burba as the indicator of “a power or essence that is part of the human being but can also be the noise of the wind, the music of the flute, the heat of the sun, a mirror image or an echo” (46). Although burba is often translated as “soul” (a word, which will at times be used here), Puls differentiates the Kuna concept of burba from the Judeo-Christian concept of soul by reminding us that in Kuna cosmology, all things whether animate or inanimate possess burba—an essence that communicates with and that has the power to affect other essences outside of itself on multiple planes of existence96. The intricate system of curing (which is the cornerstone of Kuna culture) bases itself on the understanding that the material world is simply one layer of existence in which the fleshly element (in all its interactions) is a “secondary” reflection of the “world of spirit [or burba]”

95 Indeed, when one visits the NAWPA archives to which Spiderwoman has donated all its private papers, scripts, rehearsal notes and production materials, the monumental editorial difficulties an editor might encounter in trying to commit these works (without being able to access the performers’ corporeal archives) are abundantly apparent. Hence, it is clear just why so few play texts (of such a large body of work) have been published.

96 During her first visit to Kuna Yala in the fall of 2008, Monique Mojica and her party were taken on a medicine walk through the rainforest on one of the island communities in Kuna Yala. She was brought to the imposing sappi karta tree, which is known as the medicine tree for artists (Mojica, personal communication, October 2008). During the equatorial summer season, an orbiculate pattern begins to appear on its drying leaves as the fungus that lives upon them begins to grow outward in radiating circles (Puls 47). Mojica was instructed to hug the sappi karta and to ask it to invest her with the strength and vision to go on with her work. And this was a powerful moment for her, as she had come to this ancestral home specifically to ask permission of the Chiefs to recount traditional Kuna stories in her latest work-in-progress Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way and to solicit the participation of other Kuna artists in her project.

Traditionally, an Ina Duled gathers the leaves of the sappi karta and distills from these a liquid (invested with the tree’s burba) with which to soak the eyes of mola makers to enable them to create beautiful, intricate designs. The inspiration these artisans have derived from this medicine often manifests itself quite literally, as the patterns of the sappi karta leaves are often a traditional feature of classic mola designs (Puls 47). The concatenations, then, between the aesthetic and dramaturgical structural models discussed throughout this work and the foundational principles and processual models of traditional medicine in Kuna Yala are compelling indeed.
(Chapin 219). When the body becomes ill, in other words, it is a reflection of a violent disorder that has taken place in the metaphysical realm: dysfunction in the unseen (innermost) structure of being reconfigures the being’s outer structure. Two primary ways in which the burba of a Kuna individual may be adversely affected are (i) soul loss, which occurs when a piece of one’s burba has been abducted by a malevolent spirit, and (2) the infiltration of an individual’s body by the malevolent spirit, which then corrupts his/her burba (Chapin 220). Once the illness has been diagnosed by the Nele (the diagnostic specialist), the Ina Duled (medicinal specialist) goes out to gather medicinal plants and then performs a series of chants designed to communicate with their burba and so advise those medicinal spirits of the correct action to take to ensure effectiveness. Finally, the Igar Wisid (Knower of Chants) sends his/her own burba to the fourth (of the eight levels) of the spirit world to defeat the malevolent spirit and to restore the violated burba (Chapin 220).

*Reverb-ber-ber-rations* is both a ceremony of mourning (literally, an honor song for Elmira Miguel) and a ceremony of personal healing, which draws upon aesthetic and cosmological principles specific to Kuna curing practices around soul loss. It is, at once, a piece about spiritual reclamation through ceremony and a ceremonial act, which effects the restoration of the afflicted or fragmented human soul. In the realm of the personal and the familial, “This is a song for [their] mother / This is a song for [their] mothers / This is a song to release the *pain, the shame, the secrets*” (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 130, emphasis added). The “pain, the shame, the secrets” belong as much to personal identity as to an individual’s youthful, misplaced shame over her unconventional parents. During rehearsals, as the Miguel sisters cut through the layers (that were their stories) seeking the invisible threads that would connect them, Muriel Miguel identified the essence of the piece—soul loss: “the secret and the shame… We were women of color. That was the secret” (*Reverb* 1990 Rehearsals, Tape 9). She then went on to articulate its ‘cure’: “I am not ashamed of being a woman of color. It is not a secret […] This is our future […] This is our strength” (*Reverb* 1990 Rehearsals, Tape 9). The cure, of course, is not just for her or for her sisters. The troupe’s eye is squarely on the next generation here: to remain afflicted by the poison of self-denial, self-hatred and shame is to pass those things on to one’s children and grandchildren; it is a
dark, destructive gift, which reverberates throughout the generations and which “denies” them. Hence, when the layers have finally been cut away to reveal the pattern of this performative mola, all that remains is the kernel—the kwage—of this healing rite, which is its solution:

Muriel: I am an Indian woman

I am proud of the woman that came before me

I am claiming the wisdom of the woman in my family

I am a woman with two daughters, a granddaughter

I am a woman with a woman lover

I am here now

I am saying this now because to deny these events about me and my life

Would be to deny my children (131-132)

Just as it is within the community that we come to realize personal identity, so it is within the community that the solution to the very personal problem of soul-loss is to be found. It is within the realm of communal ceremonial praxis that the Miguel sisters have come to understand, accept, embrace and be embraced by the knowledge that they are American Indian women. And so it is that a Lakota Sundance and a Taos Corn Dance are identified by the Miguel sisters as key sites of their own spiritual awakening and restoration of soul.

In the “Sundance” section (Spiderwoman Reverb 112-117), three isolate experiences within two key ceremonies are interwoven to recreate a collective moment of reawakening. All three sisters had been invited to take part in the Lakota Sundance. Muriel traveled to the Black Hills to dance. And Gloria, who feared that she could not physically withstand the rigors of dancing, came to witness as Muriel fulfilled her Sundance vow (Reverb 113). Meanwhile Lisa Mayo chose not to join her sisters, because she could not obtain permission to bring her non-Native husband and stepson. She opted, instead, to visit a Corn Dance in Taos, New Mexico as an outsider—a “tourist”—with the family into which she had married.
But as the Miguel sisters recall their individual experiences from a time before, they sound into being (through invocation and drumming) a ceremony for the here and now, which connects sister with sister, ancestor with descendant and dancer with witness body-to-body and *burba-to-burba* in a place where healing can begin.

These sites of ceremony are liminal spaces of permanent transformation where ants converse with humans (*Spiderwoman, Reverb* 114), where cloud fathers hold up their exhausted daughters (*Reverb* 116), where visions of the future and ethereal echoes from the past surge up from the earth to reverberate through contemporary bodies and where “[t]he dancers [who] came from long ago” welcome the dancers of today into the circle of nations: “It’s good you’re here / You belong” (*Reverb* 116). Whether she is standing “behind a rope with the tourists” (*Reverb* 117) at the Taos corn dance (Mayo), whether she has wandered away from the Sundance circle to feast her eyes on all the colors of the sacred Black Hills (Gloria) or whether she is dancing on sacred ground at the edge of exhaustion (Muriel), a revelation occurs, and she is restored to herself and to her ‘fellows’:

Muriel: And I said to myself

I’m really Indian

*Gloria:* 3 honour beats

Lisa: The message was clear

Gloria: Now I knew what I had to do (*Spiderwoman, Reverb* 117)

Gloria’s story of her first trip to Kuna Yala after her father’s death to “heal open wounds / Rectify his guilt” (*Reverb* 121) carries weighty significance in light of the spiritual directives all three sisters have just received. She has been welcomed to the circle in the Black Hills; she has returned to her husband and children at Oberlin “uplifted and happy” (*Reverb* 117); and this trip to her father’s traditional lands is what she has to do, because his blood sings in her veins. She becomes, at once, the vessel through which his unfinished business will be accomplished; the intermediary through which her half-brother, abandoned
by their late father, will be restored and welcomed into the Miguel family circle; the affected supplicant who has been directed to the place of her soul’s healing and the Ina Duled\textsuperscript{97} who will collect the medicines (stories, names, fragments of the Kuna language and traditional knowledge, familial links, etc.) by means of which the curing can continue for both her and her sisters.

\textbf{Metaphysical Mimesis: A Kuna Curing Ceremony in Babylon}

\textit{Reverb-ber-ber-rations} recounts and effects a reordering of spiritual chaos. Like many of their shows and many a creation story, this piece begins on sound in darkness. But these disjointed sounds bump up against each other seemingly without rhyme or reason. They move uneasily from a traditional Grand Entry in the pre-set, to recorded Balinese music, to a live “Noise Band” featuring an aluminum garbage receptacle, a toy violin and a heavy chain (103), to fractured conversation as the lights come up, to Broadway show tunes. If, as Spiderwoman tells us, the incidental sounds that surround us daily are “spirits talking to [us]” (102), the booming, clanging, beating, ticking and articulated epithets that assault our ears signal to us that there are some forceful, oppressive and confusing spirits out there and that they are not just talking to us; they are screaming. The first words we hear in that inchoate darkness are fraught with urgency and spoken at cross-purposes. In that darkness, disembodied voices articulate fear (“what was that?”), suppressed need (“Can’t you hold it?”), released frustration (“Oh shut up, you old fool!”) and unheeded cries for help (103).

In a teeming, urban ‘no man’s land’ where spirits speak through the clanging of garbage cans, the roar of traffic, bells and whistles, disjointed snatches of music from across the globe, angry shouts, catcalls and muted weeping, there is a risk of being swept away in the chaos—of losing connection with

\textsuperscript{97}Mac Chapin has observed that women in Kuna Yala always administer the medicines and care for the patients, although they are rarely medicine specialists themselves (220). However, he also notes that women who have been born with fetal caul (and who can therefore peer into the world of spirits) are often trained to become \textit{Ina Duled} or \textit{Igar Wisid} (226).
the ancestral spirits, because we can no longer hear them through the din. Just as the inchoate metaphysical hysteria that expresses itself through the city’s din has framed the lives of the Miguel sisters since birth, so the Noise Band and the darkly nostalgic “tea party apropos of nothing” (Reverb 109), which I read as a dis-eased reflection of the hitherto discussed kitchen table—a site of tea and story—that was most definitely apropos of something, frame the stories of connection and power that make up Reverb-ber-ber-ber-rations. But this piece is not simply a memorial to the soul’s dis-ease; it contains and utilizes the elements of the Kuna curing Ceremony and so connects its participants (in the realm of the spirits) to the physical and spiritual landscapes of their mother (Rappahannock), their father (Kuna) and to the chaotic urban centre, which has always, for better or worse, been their home.

The ceremonial elements of Reverb-ber-ber-ber-rations are woven into the foundations of its visual, aural and oral opsis. The hammock in which Gloria Miguel reclines to tell the story of her first trip to Kuna Yala (Spiderwoman, Reverb 121-122) is central to the Kuna curing Ceremony—as it is to the Gathering House Tradition. In the spirit of the Gathering House, Lisa Mayo and Muriel Miguel assume the roles here of Responders, underscoring their sister’s testimony with the affirmation “Tague,” meaning “it is so” or “indeed.” In the spirit of the curing ceremony, the lead Chanter re-calls that moment in the past when she bridged the limen between her late father and the son he had left behind in Kuna Yala; in so doing, she re-invents herself in the present moment as the thread that connects and binds all of Antonio Miguel’s children and their families:

They were all there, nieces, nephews, grand nieces, great grand nephew and my sister-in-law
I spent the last day and evening in Panama City at the home of my brother with my family.
Through me my brother was connected with his father.
My father’s blood, my blood, our blood (Spiderwoman Reverb 122)
Spiderwoman Theater’s laconic observation in the published text that “Kuna people use them [hammocks]” (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 102) abstracts the crucial presence of this key item to protect its sacristy and efficaciousness, even as it signals the dissolution of the limen between the sacred and the commonplace: the hammock, after all, is not only utilized to cradle the body of the sick in curing ceremonies; it is the very “heart of Kuna culture.” In Kuna Yala, one is born in a hammock; one sleeps in a hammock; children play in and on hammocks; the hammock sits at the centre of the Gathering House, and the Sahilas (Chiefs) recline in it to recount communal and personal histories; and finally, in death, the Kuna body is wrapped in his/her hammock and buried with it (Kantule, Panel). Indeed, Kuna artist Oswaldo (Achu) DeLeón Kantule asserts, “when the hammock disappears, Kuna culture will disappear” (Panel).

Spiderwoman Theater’s hammock here might well be read as more than simply a literal emblem of Kuna ceremony; it is a key site of spiritual restoration within this urban ceremony, concocted by three women of mixed blood an ocean away from their father’s homeland. Hovering between earth and sky, it positions its occupants in that liminal space of temporal and geographical conflation, which is the meeting place of flesh and spirit. And it securely positions them within their ancestral biota weaving them tightly within an unseen (but potently present) Kuna community.

That the Miguel sisters have consciously dramaturged the vehicle of their own healing and that they seriously consider their responsibility to abstract elements of this publicly performed rite become apparent in the course of their rehearsals for *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*. During their discussion, for instance, of the “guardians” (or Nuchugana) that each sister places to the four directions near the top of the show, the issue of abstraction comes up. In the published text, we are told, “these are [their] protectors. They make the stage a safe place to tell [their] stories” (*Reverb* 104). And this is certainly what these small humanoid figures carved from wood have been intended to do. But more than this, the Nuchugana contain burba. They are helpers; the burba of one or all is called upon during curing Ceremonies and enlisted to descend through the layers of existence into the metaphysical plane where it/they will engage
in a cosmic battle to heal those afflicted on the physical plane (Chapin 223). The *Nuchugana* are key players in the struggle to restore the human soul, and their presence here signals the reconfiguration of the site of public entertainment peopled by performers and audiences into a liminal space of healing populated by mortal celebrants and spirit.

During rehearsals for *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*, the Miguel sisters placed their guardians each morning and put them to rest each evening. After some discussion, they agreed that the guardians would be present in the theatre during the run of the show (*Reverb* 1990 Rehearsals, Tape 6). What remained undecided, however, was whether the audience would (or should) be aware of the presence of the guardians. Would the guardians distract the audience? Should the Miguel sisters “abstract” the guardians, as they had done in a previous show (*I’ll Be Right Back*)? Ultimately, the audience is allowed to witness as each sister places her guardians. And although the Miguel sisters offer no direct references to or explication of these guardians in performance, they do nothing to deliberately abstract their meaning. And the spiritual significance of their *Nuchugana* is made apparent during the introductory invocations, which situate us “on the rim of limitless dimensions” where messages from those who have passed on are carried in the blood of the living to be delivered to those yet unborn (*Reverb* 105). In essence, the significance of the *Nuchugana*, like that of the hammock, is acknowledged (and hence highlighted) for those who possess an organic understanding of ceremonial praxis (even if they are not intimately familiar with the specifics of Kuna ceremony), while remaining “abstract” to others.

Nor is the significance of either the Cochiti Drum or the Bullroar obfuscated by abstraction in performance. As Muriel Miguel takes her place at the drum, Lisa Mayo informs the audience that she is an Elder⁹⁸ (as are her sisters), and they have brought the drum into this space to stay “in touch with the six

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⁹⁸ In the notes on set in the play text, the Miguel sisters tell us, “The women of Spiderwoman are at an age where we feel we can sit at the drum” (*Reverb* 102). In many First Nations and Tribal communities, women, traditionally, do not sit at the drum. This is because, as life-givers, women carry powerful medicine, which may interfere with the healing properties of other medicines utilized in Ceremony (including the drum). As Elders, here, the Miguel sisters have passed their childbearing years; hence, their presence at the drum poses no significant threat of interference or disruption.
directions” (Reverb 105). Although their audiences never see this, the Miguel sisters prepare the drum in Ceremony for Ceremony each evening before the house begins to fill (Reverb 102). The drum, here, is not simply a prop or a culturally colorful instrument from which to generate a rhythmic soundscape. The Noise Band fulfills this function, and the garbage pail (which Lisa Mayo plays) provides a satisfactorily affective percussive backdrop.

The drum around which these Elders sit, like the bullroar that Muriel Miguel swings before her “Grandma” story, are the devices by which human beings can directly and deliberately invoke the spirits. If the spirits speak to mortals through the ambient sounds of nature, through the tinkling of chimes or the discordant din of the inner city, so the flesh can answer them in kind. Each strike on the drum, each swing of the bullroar send thoughts (the impulses behind the actions of striking or swinging) reverberating past the “veil” and through the layers to inhabit and speak through anti-matter, just as those who occupy the metaphysical realm shake the air of the seen world with disembodied impulse to inhabit, reverberate and speak through the bodies of their descendants.

But the Cochiti drum should not simply be understood as that which carries human impulse, an inanimate object serving human needs. Here, as it is in Ceremony, the drum is an animate force; it is, if you will, a fourth actor on Spiderwoman’s stage. Do the Miguel sisters, as Rebecca Schneider asserts, “drum memories and counter-memories onto the stage” (153) or does the drum, which is layered under each story that is told, articulate its own remembered “text,” eliciting reactions and responses from the actors who inhabit the physical and metaphysical realms it straddles? After all, the Miguel sisters do not simply “sit at the drum” and act upon it; they listen to that drum, which is “the heartbeat of all our communities” (Spiderwoman, Reverb 102).
Aftermath: “I am Here Now… I Have to take the Past and Make it into a Positive Future”

[I]t takes courage, and suspension of disbelief, to perform into existence a future that we cannot yet see. It is an urgent, ongoing project of the present. (Mojica and Knowles, “Creation Story” 2-3)

In rehearsal, as she was crafting her final statement—“I am an Indian woman…” (Reverb 131)—Muriel Miguel articulated this resolution: “I have to take the past and make it into a positive future” (Reverb 1990 Rehearsals, Tape 9). On stage, an abstracted version of her declaration is articulated by Lisa Mayo who declares it to be the responsibility of the artist to go “back into the before to use for the future” (Reverb 129). Taken at face value, the kernel of this declaration (in either its literal or more abstract form) offers the possibilities of liberation and empowerment. But the manifestation of an unseen future fraught with these possibilities requires a leap of blind faith into the sources of our disconnection, our dismemberment and our despair. It requires “cords that connect us to what is not broken” (Mojica and Knowles, “Creation Story” 5), and it requires cords plaited from faith, fortitude and forbearance with which to hold gently on to those things that have been broken even as we free ourselves from the hold they exert on us:

Muriel: I have to take the past and make it into a positive future. That really makes me upset. That really makes me cry.

Lisa: Well, therein lies the thing. Why does it make you cry?

Muriel: It means that I have to forgive Mama. (Reverb 1990 Rehearsals, Tape 9)

To fully accept her birthright and to fully recover from that “birthright”—the internalized shame and self-hatred that has reverberated throughout all the generations of the displaced and the disenfranchised since the European invaders came to our shores—Muriel recognizes that a personal investment in the process of forgiveness is necessary.

Reverb-ber-ber-rations offers no easy answers around this process; it does not show us what forgiveness or atonement may look like; it does not show us how to successfully accomplish these; indeed, it does not even articulate the words. It does, however, begin to ask the questions, which
Spiderwoman Theater more actively and explicitly explores in *Persistence of Memory* (2007). And it thickens Spiderwoman’s weighty contribution to the global project of decolonization by introducing another layer to the process of Recovery/Rediscovery, Mourning, Dreaming, Commitment and Action.

Where (if at all) does Forgiveness—of ourselves, of those in our families and communities who have wounded us, or even of our oppressors and their descendants—fit into this paradigm? What does it look like? How dependent (if at all) is the realization of genuine liberation on the successful completion of this stage? The beginnings, at least, of an answer to all of these questions lie for me in a brief, interrupted exchange, which survives in the rehearsal tapes for *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*: Lisa Mayo asks her younger sister, “When did it come to you that this was a healing—that you had to forgive Mama?” And Muriel answers, “I transcribed a lot of this stuff [the stories she carried in her body]. I transcribed all the stuff that was mine” (Tape 9). It is during the process, then, of Recovery/Rediscovery and throughout, perhaps, the process of mourning that we begin to fathom the true cost of performing that unseen future into being.

In *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*, three human women (performing as themselves—Lisa, Gloria and Muriel) reach out from within a broken material world into the world of spirit, the gateway to which is represented by a road leading upstage into an “infinite spiral” painted onto a large blue backdrop (102). Spiderwoman’s ever-present mola hangs stage left, and a small table with three chairs sits in shadow before the troupe’s signature emblem. The hammock to which chimes have been affixed swings gently in front of the spiral, while the Cochiti drum sits upstage on a blanket straddling the space between the spiral backdrop and the signature mola.99 This is a set of intricate simplicity wherein the tensions and the reciprocal dependencies between light and shadow play themselves out in uneasy harmony. It presents an unlavored, yet somehow sumptuous, portrait of the multiple layers of existence, which finite humans in the shadowed, broken spaces of “the real” must negotiate to repair what is broken and effect healing.

99 HIDVL Archives (Spiderwoman, 1990 Performance)
When All Worlds Become One

With *Power Pipes* (1991), these uneasy layers are stitched together to form one perceivable realm in which all of existence plays itself out. Here, it is as if the (playing) space has contracted in on itself until it has become a single, perfect circle of light inscribed on a canyon floor, but (and this seems uncannily counter intuitive) this contracted world has significantly expanded and is far more inclusive than the worlds of Spiderwoman’s previous plays. Whereas *Reverb-her-ber-rations* plays itself out in a liminal space that looks simultaneously to the “real” world in which we (audience and actor) live and the cosmos, occupied by the spirits of the dead and the unborn:

*Power Pipes*, from the very top of the show, plunges performer and witness together into a shadowy, unformed world illuminated by a ceremonial circle and (in the final moments of the piece) the stars.  

Like *Reverb-her-ber-rations* before it, this piece opens on sound in darkness. And as the light slowly begins to dawn, the inhabitants of this eerie realm gather; they “look out into the cosmos,” which is occupied by the audience (Spiderwoman, *Power* 155). Then they begin to sound. They receive this sound—a “drone”—from the cosmos behind them, sending it out to the cosmos before them, sharing the breath, which the cosmos has shared with them, with the audience and linking all with all. This moment may be reminiscent of the drone (or “chord” exercise) developed by Joseph Chaikin for the Open Theater. And it is an exercise that Muriel Miguel utilizes in her storyweaving workshops. As Pasolli articulates it, the purpose of this collective drone for Chaikin’s company was to “affirm the Open Theatre as a collective,” and to assimilate the individual into an “entity” greater than himself (33).

The opening “drone” of *Power Pipes* certainly serves a like function. But it carries this function further. The drone serves not only the company of performers but also those who witness. All are drawn into the greater “we.” And as Monique Mojica has reminded me, the similarities between the collective drone that opens *Power Pipes* and the droning of the Kuna pipes themselves or the vocalized drone that underscores Gathering House chants in Kuna Yala should not be overlooked (Personal Communication, 17 January 2007).

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From a circle of light framed by shadow, the three mortal sisters who looked into the cosmos in *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* now look back at the human world from the cosmos as elemental female forces. And they have been joined by others: in *Power Pipes* the limen between the generations and between the nations has also been dissolved, as mothers and aunties dance with daughters and nieces and as Chichimec Otomi voices join in song with Kuna, Rappahannock and Kuna-Rappahannock. This is a multi-generational, inter-First-national project in which the Miguel sisters have been joined by Murielle Borst (Muriel Miguel’s daughter) and the Colorado sisters, Hortensia and Elvira (who first partnered with them in *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show*), as co-creatrices and performers. Moreover, although her name does not appear in the published text, Gloria Miguel’s daughter Monique Mojica inhabits this unified realm. She took part in the original creation of *Power Pipes*, and the stories remembered through her body during the play’s development—specifically, “Gotcha” (Spiderwoman, *Power* 163)—have been inscribed on the published page and re-membered through her cousin’s body in performance (Mojica, Personal Communication, 17 January 2007).

*Reverb-ber-ber-rations* and *Power Pipes* might be read as two halves of the same whole. If *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* is the vehicle through which the Miguel sisters sought connection with the metaphysical sources of their power, *Power Pipes* presents the successful realization of those connections, and it reveals the sources of those things that stand between the human supplicant and her spiritual source. In *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* the human being looks into the abyss. In *Power Pipes*, the abyss returns the gaze.

Indeed, as one watches *Power Pipes*, it is as if one were viewing a film negative or an X-ray, presenting a stark, unadorned image of the spiritual mechanics that govern the dis-ease of the colonized and direct its cure. There is little in the way of set, and no description of the set is provided in the published text. The excellent 1993 video archive, preserved from a performance at the American Indian Community House in NYC, features two backdrops, flanking an archway into nothingness (Spiderwoman, *Power*, 1993). To the right (SR) of the archway hangs a night sky alight with stars; to its
left, the signature mola. Most of the playing area is heavily shadowed except for the ceremonial circle, which is generally bathed in a warm, golden glow. And when the world of spirit peers into the world of flesh, it stares down through this circle of light, not out at the audience, which occupies the same realm as the spirits who dance on stage.

What are the cords that connect us to what is not broken? One of the ways these connections are made is through the power of the word as invocation, through naming and honouring, the living and the dead who came before us. Another way is by bringing our deities and cultural heroes to the stage, being inhabited by them, and becoming their reflections and manifestations. (Mojica and Knowles, “Creation Story” 5)

Illumined in the interplay of golden light in velvet darkness, the female deities who ‘inhabit’ the performing bodies appear as starkly outlined shadows etched in flesh. At times, then, the heavily painted performers resemble negatives or X-ray images. Which world is which? Which world is real? If the negative is the shadowy, celluloid image that offers us an impression of the reality it represents, and if the X-ray, by contrast, mines the layers of adornment, color and flesh to dis-cover the essence of the thing itself, from what realm do these shadows emerge? Do they offer us impressions of reality or the reality itself? Is dwelling upon or upholding such distinctions at all valuable, or is it, in the face of all we are, irrelevant and perhaps even harmful?

Like the spirit of “Grandma” who once stepped into her youngest granddaughter’s head, these deities change the contours of the human face, merging their identities with those of their human hosts so that the “I” becomes indistinguishable from the “we.” Unlike the spirit of Grandma, however, elemental female powers of Power Pipes step out of the human performer, so positioning her flesh as the top layer of an impossibly intricate mola, which is itself only a single layer belonging to a much greater mola. As essence and Story interlock, the wellbeing of the whole shows itself to be intimately related to and absolutely contingent upon the wellbeing of the individual.

Hence, Mesi Tuli Omai whose moon-headdress visibly articulates her identity as a moon-goddess and whose “medicine is love” (Spiderwoman, Power 158) slips easily into the brokenness of the lovelorn
human who performs her. Without relinquishing her power or position in this world of shadows, she articulates, as Mesi Tuli Omai, the stories of wounding that belong to Gloria Miguel on the mundane plane of “real” life on earth. In the same vein, She Who Opens Hearts is “fed with the strength of creation” (Spiderwoman, *Power* 159). Yet she articulates the wounds inscribed upon the broken, weakened person of Hortensia Colorado. Here, then, through the storyweaving process community is forged in an anti-liminal dimension where boundaries and otherness have become meaningless:

She Who Opens Hearts: Shame. Shame. Shame. *(She crawls up on ramp)*

Eh, eh, eh.

India mecca mecca

No that’s not me, that’s not me

Yo no soy India mecca, mecca.

*(Crawls into circle)* Shame, shame, oh shame!

*(Covers herself trying to hide)*

Can’t breathe

Can’t breathe

Pieces, pieces, pedacitos, pedacitos.

You’ve broken me up in pieces, in pieces.

Can’t breathe, can’t breathe. *(She hides herself)*

Mesi Tuli Omai: Squawk

She Who Opens Hearts: India mecca mecca.

*(Mesi Tuli Omai crosses up to behind She Who Opens Hearts)*

Mesa Tuli Omai: I hear them. Squawk. Squawk.
Mimi Gisolfi D’Aponte has discussed Spiderwoman Theater with reference to what she terms the “three significant keynotes of life.” These keynotes, she asserts, thread themselves throughout the works of Native playwrights and specifically throughout the works of Native women whom she has come to view “as transmitters, as healers, and as transformers” (D’Aponte, “Native Women” 101). But Spiderwoman’s point—communicated first from the human point of view (in Reverb-ber-ber-rations) and then from the point of view of the spirits (in Power Pipes) strips these keynotes of their mystery—their precious exclusivity. The women who comprise Spiderwoman Theater (on and offstage) are certainly transmitters, healers and transformers, but the enduring power of their works lies in the message that they so clearly communicate: we are all of us transmitters, healers and transformers. We have been gifted, but these gifts do not come without a price. In the paradigm that Power Pipes presents, our first duty is to be healers; we are to love and care for ourselves and more importantly to extend the same love and care to others in thought, word and action.

The “Subway Rape” of Scene 12, which occurs in a liminal space beneath the ground and between stations, powerfully lays out this paradigm in three tellings. In the first telling, we are confronted with the consequences of our choices either to ignore the “messages” that enjoin us to have a
care for ourselves or to ignore the cries of those who require our aid. She Who Opens Hearts remains in a
dangerous situation despite her internal alarums and is brutally gang-raped, while Mesi Tuli Omai ignores
a stranger’s plight and leaves the unpleasant scene (Spiderwoman *Power* 176). By contrast, when the
story is played out for the second time, we witness the healing power that accompanies the choice to risk
personal wellbeing for the collective good. This time Mesi Tuli Omai makes the choice to stand with She
Who Opens Hearts against her attackers (Spiderwoman, *Power* 176); hence, the rape (the potential
catalyst of a dehabilitating dis-ease from which the victim might never recover) is prevented.

During the third telling, we learn that as transmitters, we must be vigilant, so that we will
recognize our spirit protectors; we must listen to the messages they communicate; and we must discipline
ourselves to believe them:

Wind Horse Spirit Warrior: Do you believe the warning?

Obsidian Woman: Listen to your warning.

Naomi Fast Tracks: Who are your protectors?

Owl Messenger: Did you ignore the messages?

Mesi Tuli Omai: Answer the voices. (Spiderwoman, *Power* 176-177)

And as transformers, we must allow ourselves to be transformed in a good way and to transform others in
an equally positive manner through active fellowship governed by good intentions. As the third telling of
the “Subway Rape” plays out, its heroine hears, heeds and acts upon the spirits’ alarum. And she is
transformed! The hapless victim of the first two scenarios has been transformed into a fierce resister,
drawing strength and aid from her metaphysical guardians: “Oh no you don’t, you motherfuckers! I’ll
crush your fucking balls. I’ll kill you” (Spiderwoman, *Power* 177)!! Her guardians speak. She listens.
And “there is a growling in [her] soul, now that [they’ve] met” (Spiderwoman *Power* 164).

The duties to heal, transmit and transform are not carried by Native women playwrights alone.
Nor are they reserved for Native women alone or Native people in general. Those who share our lands
have, by and large, severed their own connections by fabricating hierarchal notions of difference and abandoned their responsibilities to the greater community of flesh and spirit. But while they may not yet recognize or acknowledge it, what happens to one happens to all; they too sicken and waste away in the carnage they have wrought. Moreover, as Métis playwright Maria Campbell has asserted, “the circle of grandmothers [has] no colour” (Griffiths and Campbell 17).

The world of spirit is formless and without color: many may be called, but it seems that few choose to listen. With Power Pipes, Spiderwoman Theater adds its collective voice to the voices of the many Native women playwrights so fervently celebrated by D’Aponte to remind us to listen, because when we do, we are—all of us—invested with the power to fulfill our responsibilities as transmitters, healers and transformers, to mend the sacred hoop, to ease personal distress and to profoundly contribute to a collective effort to heal this broken world:

She Who Opens Hearts:       Yo soy, I am without shame
                                 India mecca mecca
                                 See my shame.
                                 See my Indianness.
                                 See it come out of here
                                 Out of here.
                                 This is Indian
                                 And this
                                 India mecca mecca
                                 India mecca mecca

Mesi Tuli Omai:               Don’t, don’t.
                                 Put the pieces back together
                                 I love myself, I’ll heal myself.
                                 I don’t need your love.
I love myself.
I’ll heal myself.
I don’t need your love.
I’ll heal myself.
**I love you. I love you.**
I’ll put the pieces back together.
I’ll heal myself.
**I love you.**

(Spiderwoman, *Power* 184, emphasis added)

In this finely crafted moment of “intertextual facing,” She Who Opens Hearts and Mesi Tuli Omai speak through and to the human performers as they articulate their healing. In accordance with the mechanics of mola-making, as layers are cut away to reveal a piece of the larger design, their edges are folded in on themselves, and the facing that is created thereby is securely stitched onto the layers beneath. Here, the shapes and colors that belong to each individual “shame story” link the tellers experientially (i.e. they both suffer from the same dis-ease). And they “write” the tellers into a much larger text that documents the sad and shameful history of racism in this world and its devastation of the human spirit. In this story, no one is immune; no one is untouched. In this story, we have all played our parts. But this story does not end in brokenness. The mola thickens as more colors are revealed and facings are stitched to the layers of redress and healing.

The project to heal personal brokenness demands the active participation of the greater community. Owl Messenger who goes “to the place where everyone speaks the same language” to bring back messages for “all” (Spiderwoman, *Power* 159) and who speaks to and through Lisa Mayo intervenes on the “Shame Stories” weaving the women who have been socially isolated by their shame into a protective circle of living and dead. And an interesting phenomenon occurs: as she invokes the spirits of her mother, her auntie and her father, we are made to understand that they are carried within and manifest
themselves through the bodies of their descendants. In Spiderwoman’s earlier works, this idea was vividly communicated to audiences through the home movies, which often played across the performers’ bodies. But in this piece, as in Reverb-ber-ber-rations before it, the troupe needs no film. Here, as Owl Messenger/Lisa Mayo introduces each ancestor and proudly claims each as her own, “All run across and [collectively] become [that] person” (Spiderwoman, Power 182). Ancestral shadows no longer need to be projected onto living bodies from the outside; we understand that they are carried within. To underscore this idea, Mayo, speaking as the maternal grandparent who inhabits her very DNA, articulates a healing message for herself and her sisters: “You’re light, you’re pretty, you’re smart. Beezebug, Beezebug. I gave you a wonderful grandmother. She’s an Indian [and there is no shame in that]” (Spiderwoman, Power 183). The message could not be clearer. It is, in fact, the central message of the play. The cult of individuality has been built upon a lie. It is a virus, feeding on the divisions, which rupture the natural biota and tear each living organism apart. A life well lived is a life consciously lived within community. “We, we, we, we, we, we, we… [‘We’ in six directions. ‘We’ to the power of six…] We put the earth back together, we make the truth about ourselves” (Spiderwoman, Power 156).

Power Pipes connects us to one community of Indigenous women who shoulder the responsibility to help “put the earth back together.” They play the pipes. They sit at the drum. In so doing, they not only open the channels of communication to the spirit world but also dissolve the limen between male and female here on earth, as they consciously breach what has been generally understood as traditionally male territory in the space of ceremonial activity. And certainly, it might be read as an act of female empowerment, which challenges patriarchal traditions and restores women to their rightful place in the circle:

“Years ago,” said Lisa Mayo, one of three Kuna-Rappahannock Indian sisters in their 50’s who are founding members of Spider woman [sic], “the tradition was that women walked a couple of steps behind the men. And there were all kinds of taboos. The women in our tribe did not play instruments like the pan pipes or go near the drum until they were older and no longer on their moon.” Now, women, menstruating or not, are acknowledged as musicians. (Dunning 6, emphasis added)
However, we must take care not to follow Jennifer Dunning’s example by indulging in a purely feminist reading of this piece. Such a reading is problematic, because it implies that traditional Indigenous cultures are inherently inequitable and that women must elbow men out of the way to achieve the things they seek. Further, it widens the gulf between cultures rather than supporting the womanist project, which seeks to build bridges between individuals and communities through greater respect and understanding.

It is not Lisa Mayo, but the article’s author, who states that Kuna “women, menstruating or not, are [now] acknowledged as musicians.” What is Dunning implying? And how does she know this? Women were always “musicians” in Kuna Yala. Indeed, according to their Creation Story, it was the “Youngest Daughter from the Stars” who taught women (in particular) to compose and perform the songs that ushered in new life (lullabies) and the songs to mourn the dead (see Carter, “Chocolate” 3). This is a responsibility the women of Kuna Yala still carry out today.

What does Dunning understand of menstruation and how it is regarded in Kuna communities? Although she has watched Power Pipes and is reviewing it here, it appears that she has missed a significant “keynote” of Kuna life (to borrow D’Aponte’s apt and evocative phrasing). Indeed, as Gloria Miguel’s “Cuna Story” and its juxtaposition with Hortensia Colorado’s “Subway Rape” make clear, the dysfunction that characterizes the relationships between male and female did not manifest itself in traditional Indigenous societies. This is an affliction carried to these shores by the agents of colonization.

Menstruation in Kuna Yala is not a dirty word. It carries no shame. It carries no penalty. It is seen as a great gift. It is a blessing on the community. And it is celebrated as such. As Gloria Miguel remembers her eleven-year-old self, a lonely, isolated child who had just lost her best friend and entered her time of womanhood, she remembers and re-invokes a powerful strategy of healing: She closes her eyes and travels in her mind to her father’s home community…

There I found myself naked, sitting in a clay tub of water. Men and women were dancing around me. A special woman cut my hair, another woman poured water over me. The men went into the rainforest to bless the pollywalla [Paluwala] tree and to take the fruit that would make the blue dye. My face and body were covered in blue dye. My father
took me around the island, he blew a large conch shell. Ami Oma Sisquat. “Today my daughter is a woman.” Ami Oma Sisquat. “Today she is ready to be a wife.” (Spiderwoman, Power 174)

Here, we see that the female body is a key site of celebration, which unites men and women in Kuna Yala. Each member of the community plays his and her role. Always, a woman cuts the hair of the young initiate. Always, it is the men who visit the Paluwala tree and make the dye with which her body will be painted. And still today, men, not women, play the pipes in this coming-of-age ceremony. Indeed, the entire matrix of Kuna ceremony has been designed around the female: her birth, her naming, her coming-of-age… Her body, which is adorned with paint and gold and rich textiles, is the site of Kuna continuance. It is, now as it has always been, honored, because it is the gateway for the coming generations. By contrast, Hortensia Colorado’s subsequent recollection of gang rape on a subway system makes clear the positioning of the female body in a modern, urban centre, built by and for the “visionary individualists” who have chosen to forget history and discard all tradition. This gateway of life has become a site of violence to be degraded, vandalized and discarded in a dis-eased world where the connections between male and female have been irrevocably severed.

In and of itself, Gloria Miguel’s “Cuna Story” offers us a wonderful model through which to consider Diane Glancy’s concept of interfactual texting and its relationship to the larger project of intertextual facing. The child-Gloria remembered by the woman-Gloria (and perhaps invoked by Gloria’s cosmic guide) had never been to Kuna Yala and had only the memories of her male relations to reference as she sent her mind into the puberty Ceremony. But the woman-Gloria who remembers the child-Gloria has by this time visited Kuna Yala three times. She has sat in the Gathering House. She has witnessed the puberty Ceremony. She has seen, heard, touched, smelled and tasted it first-hand. The “facts” that direct the experience of the child are not the “facts” that direct the story of the adult. And both sets of facts—both stories—are woven together into an experience, which unfolds, as it were for the first time, on the stage in 1991. Gloria the child understood that she needed to weave herself into the community of her father. Gloria the woman took the steps to achieve this. And an older Gloria on stage, responding to the
direction of the elemental female who inhabits her, revisits the childhood realm of Brooklyn and her later introduction to Kuna Yala, weaving both into an anti-liminal site in which the healing sought first by the child and later by the woman is actually effected in the older self. It effects an intertextual facing, because the interrelationships between the multiple texts belonging to multiple selves are made manifest. And it effects an interfactual texting in that these multiple texts—these multiple experiences--are interwoven to affect a brand new experience of the world for the present self--a moment of healing for which a new text in and of itself must be created.

Spiderwoman’s lesson here is that if the borders of our lives stop at our front doors (see Spiderwoman Power 170), we cannot live in a healthy way. And the women of Spiderwoman Theater respect this. They take their place at the drum, to be sure, and they play the pipes. But—and this is a crucial point—they claim this responsibility as grandmothers who have passed their childbearing years. It should not escape our notice that in performance, Murielle Borst who is at this time a young mother does not take a place at the drum with the others (See Spiderwoman Power, 1993). As Wind Horse Spirit Warrior she dances and sings, which are responsibilities specific to Murielle Borst in her offstage life. But always, in performance she remains just outside that circle around the big drum. This is after all a project of restoration, and repair.

Whether we are laughing uproariously as two squabbling sisters refuse to break bread together and squirming in the silence between them (Spiderwoman, Power 160-163), listening tearfully to stories of bereavement (172, 173) or swaying in time with an uproarious 49’er about lost love and thwarted lust (165-167), we are witnessing the affliction of soul loss—a destructive keynote, which has reverberated powerfully through the generations of Indigenous families the world over since contact. In accordance with the teachings, which are their legacy, the Miguel sisters have with Power Pipes connected themselves, their afflicted “fellows” and their successors to that cosmic layer wherein fragmented souls and their human vessels are restored to wholeness. And they show us the way: “Make the offering. Remember. Homage Extended. Homage Received” (Spiderwoman, Power 195).
Preparing a Legacy

It is significant that after *Power Pipes*, the Miguel sisters did not come together again as a trio to create another show until 2002 when they presented *Persistence of Memory* at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Banff, Alberta. This piece recounts Spiderwoman Theater’s thirty-year journey, re-membering countless connections and giving voice to the many, many people who have shared that long road with its core members. And it may well be a cornerstone of the legacy they have been preparing for their genealogical and aesthetic inheritors.

Although it is unfortunate that all of the troupe’s collective and solo works have not as of yet been published, the four published play texts to which we have access map a personal journey back to the pre-colonized, Indigenous self, inextricably weaving its sojourners into the larger socio-political project of decolonization. Chapter Five will, in part, explore the work of Monique Mojica, which builds on her inheritance from her mother and aunties. But I would like, here, to indulge in my own moment of interfactual texting—looking ahead, as it were, to inform my understanding of what has come before. During the second developmental workshop of Mojica’s *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way* (March 2009), visual artist Oswaldo DeLeon Kantule identified significant links between the dramaturgical process through which *Chocolate Woman* has begun to take shape and the key principles of traditional Kuna aesthetics. He explained that just as there are four supporting posts around which a Kuna building is designed, so there are four supporting structures upon which Kuna aesthetic expression stands. He articulates these as: **Abstraction** (which includes the minimalization of elements, the removal of these elements from temporal to spatial realms, the encoding of these elements and the location of their kernel--kwage), **Metaphor**, **Duality & Repetition** and **Multi-dimensionality**. As Mojica continues her own work with Kuna artists and cultural advisors, she is finding a language through which to express what she does and its connection with her ancestral roots. And what she does in her work today is profoundly
informed by what Spiderwoman has done before her. Her work, after all, is a new ripple on an ancient pool.

Four plays. Four “posts”: the house that Spiderwoman built. Upon the first post are etched the key landmarks of a very personal journey back to self in which the seeker struggles to locate some meaning in suffering and find some way out of despair. The second post locates individual identity in community—specifically within communitist projects belonging to the political realm. The third post broadens the quest for identity, but narrows the “search terms,” as it were, to the “personal” and the “familial.” And upon the final post, the search for self has come to fruition. The fragmented, socially isolated, personally impotent “me” finds herself—Kuna-Rappahannock granddaughter, daughter, sister, mother, lover, friend—in the “we.” Connected to her ancestors and their nations by blood, history, memory and ceremonial praxis, she is the memory-keeper, the teacher and the gateway that locates her children and theirs and theirs in those circles upon circles upon circles… Wholly Kuna. Wholly Rappahannock. Wholly daughters of a Rappahannock wise woman and a Kuna sailor with a “big light,” they are wholly, unashamedly themselves in Brooklyn, Manhattan, Toronto, Paris or Amsterdam. This is the legacy they have prepared. And it is a place from which to begin--not the conclusion of a journey.
Chapter Five
Spiderwoman’s Issue

As we get older we realize that there has to be someone to take our place. I have a daughter [Monique Mojica] and my sister has a daughter [Murielle Borst] who are actresses [and writers]. It would be nice to have our children take over. I’ve thought that if we got lots of money we’d open as a small school for Native people. I can see myself acting on the stage until eighty years old, at least. (Gloria Miguel, qtd. in Abbott 180)

I see myself and my sisters acting as mentors for Native people […] I want to keep this within myself, so I can work with the young Native people of this country and the Indigenous people of Central and South America and Mexico who want to study and do their own theater. You can do this when you’re old. But I’m still going to act, I’m still going to sing, as long as I can carry a tune. I’ve only been working for the last forty years. What can you learn in forty years? (Lisa Mayo, qtd. in Abbott 180)

Lest We Forget…

On 20 February 2007, Spiderwoman Theater performed Persistence of Memory at the “Honoring Spiderwoman Conference” hosted by Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Although nobody had realized it going in, this event turned out to be the Miguel sisters’ final collaborative performance. At the time, Lisa Mayo was unwell. It is likely that she was already suffering from the affects of Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma with which she was later diagnosed. She had lost a great deal of weight; she was frail. And she carried her script on stage with her, because she did not trust her memory. Backstage, she was mightily supported by her sister Muriel and by her nieces Murielle Borst and Monique Mojica. Onstage, however, Mayo barely looked at the script in her hand. And while she did utilize the chair that had been provided for her, she certainly did not confine herself to it. She danced with her sisters and made it look effortless, charmed the audience with her easy glamour, and let loose a Broadway belt that absolutely galvanized her auditors. But the strain on all three sisters had been well nigh unbearable. Muriel Miguel (director and co-performer) confided to me later that night that this was the last time all three Spiderwoman sisters would perform together.
On that historic February night, a very privileged group was woven into the story of three irrepressible grandmothers who have, against all odds, created a vehicle through which they could tell the stories they wanted to tell, who have authored and developed a workable poetics of decolonization that draws upon traditional Kuna aesthetic principles and cosmological understandings, and who have made a way for the generations of Native performers and theatre practitioners who follow them. Creatrices. Teachers. Elders. As we watched them dancing on that knife’s edge between forgetting and remembering, I know that we all deeply understood just what it is we owe to these grandmothers. They were sharing themselves with us; they were weaving us into their story. That persistent struggle to “fight to remember who [they] are, to hold on to the memories of [their] great-great-grandparents and the memories of their children, and to keep them fresh in [their] minds” (Spiderwoman, Persistence 42) is a struggle we all knew too well. Their courage emboldened us. Their dogged resolution strengthened our own. The legacy re-membered on stage that night was the legacy they had created for all of us. They had carved out a path in the wilderness and inspired us to follow.

Six months later (in late August 2007), I visited each of these Grandmothers in New York City to chat individually with each about her process, her aesthetic objectives for Spiderwoman and her assessment of her own life’s work. I returned home from this trip with very mixed emotions. I was elated, to be sure. Each of these artists had let me into her creative process, and each discussion had revealed additional colors and layers to inform my understanding of the collective works that constitute Spiderwoman’s canon. To the same degree, however, I was sad, angry and frustrated; I kept replaying the final minutes of my interviews with Lisa Mayo and Gloria Miguel. I kept remembering a conversation I had had with Muriel Miguel months earlier, and my mind kept returning to her words: “I wish we had talked more about aging. I wish we had done a show about aging” (Personal Communication, November 2006). I felt that they had been betrayed and that I was somehow complicit in the betrayal. Now octogenarians, Gloria Miguel and Lisa Mayo were less elated by their accomplishments than I. After years of battling racism, after years of being pushed to the margins because of their brown skin, they are now battling ageism; they are now (they feel) being pushed to the margins and denied the chance to work
because of their aging bodies. As Gloria Miguel has articulated it, it is as if she “took a breath but never got to say [her] last word” (Interview 2007):

I never myself—not that I’m bragging—I never got a bad review, even when I worked alone in Toronto and other places. So, I said to myself, “I guess I’m not so bad.” But where the hell did I go? I haven’t worked in two years. I don’t go anywhere! […] Anyway, so I say to myself, “What good is it? What good is Spiderwoman right now? Do I just have to live on the glory without money? (Gloria Miguel, Interview 2007)

Days after my return to Toronto, Monique Mojica and I began to discuss this situation. How is it that these grandmothers who have pioneered Native Theater in North America, who have carved out the spaces within and “broke [n] open the doors” to an industry, which had previously shut out all of those who did not “fit” into its prevailing standards (Haugo, “Persistent” 70-71), now cannot even get an audition with the Native theatre companies for whom they broke those doors open? Could it be true, as Gloria Miguel has recently posited, that even within the communities, which specifically pride themselves on their reverence for Elders, “people talk about respecting elders but don’t really want to look at old people” (qtd. in Douglas 2)? Lakota Sioux Elder Beatrice Medicine beautifully articulates a common understanding about knowledge preservation and transmission that is common to Indigenous Peoples around the world in her assertion that “Elders are [the] repositories of [indispensable] cultural and philosophical knowledge and are the transmitters of such information” (qtd. in Archibald 37). Is it not, then, incumbent upon us—particularly in urban centers where the theatrical event constitutes not only a key site of knowledge transmission for Native Peoples but also a vital opportunity to unite a scattered body politic—to make the spaces of performance more accessible to elderly bodies and to read that knowledge from those well worn “books?”

Persistence of Memory was conceived by Muriel Miguel after Spiderwoman Theater's participation in the “Persistence of Memory” Conference, in Stockholm, Sweden in 1998. Bearing the same name as Salvador Dali’s 1931 masterpiece, which depicts the decay/erosion of time (as conceptualized by humans) upon a stark landscape (that seems eternally immune to the processes of
erosion or decay), this theatrical event featured performances by Indigenous women from around the world—many of whom shared ancient stories of eternal relationships between their Peoples and their traditional lands. They “remembered” these relationships, along with the respect and responsibility these entail, as persistent and unchanging despite the temporal spaces that seemingly separate and differentiate one generation of humans from those that precede or follow it. What particularly struck the Miguel sisters were the common threads that wafted through the stories they witnessed and their tellings. Memory showed itself to be persistent through the very manner of its expression (i.e. the circularity of the performances and the honoring of the four directions by every performer); and through these modes of expression, it transcended the distance between these women. At the end of the day, a commonality of legacy discovered itself as the thread, which bound one Indigenous woman to the others in all four directions (Haugo, “Persistent” 64-65).

After the 1998 conference, Muriel Miguel began to turn over questions around legacy (or “persistence of memory”) in her own head. As she notes, “[It] doesn’t necessarily have to be great, you know. It could be awful. It could be abuse. It could be alcoholism” (qtd. in Haugo, “Persistent” 65). But it is something we always carry with us and something we will invariably pass on. And that makes us responsible. Miguel had already directed Monique Mojica’s Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots, which premiered at Toronto’s Theatre Passe Muraille in 1990. In 1995, she had directed Murielle Borst’s one-woman play More than Feathers and Beads, which premiered at the New World Theatre in Massachusetts. She had been watching Borst’s daughter Josephine develop her abilities as a traditional singer and dancer under the tutelage of her daughter, her son-in-law (Kevin Tarrant) and herself. And she was preparing for her role as Director of the 2000 developmental workshop of The Scrubbing Project by Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble of which Monique Mojica was a co-founder and co-artistic director. As a primary facilitator of the artistic development of her daughter, niece and granddaughter, Miguel had already begun, she realized, to shape and pass on her legacy to her issue (Haugo, “Persistent” 65).
Persistence of Memory is Muriel Miguel’s vision; it is a tribute to the work that has been accomplished, to the work that is yet to come and to the inheritors who will accomplish that work. Its inception differs subtly from Spiderwoman’s earlier works, because it rests less on the efforts of the core ensemble and more on the energies of a much larger ensemble than may be initially apparent. Certainly, Gloria Miguel has revealed that she felt less personally involved in the show’s creation than she has in the creation of Spiderwoman’s previous works:

I did little pieces in it, but I had nothing much to do with the whole production. Usually when we started, we were all involved in the scenery, the music, the whole caboodle. In Persistence of Memory I just wrote little pieces to be in it, but I didn’t enjoy doing the pieces. The whole putting together wasn’t as exciting because I had nothing to do with it. (Interview, 2007)

And indeed, as the opening dedication alerts us, Persistence of Memory extends itself far beyond the realm of the personal or the specifically familial. Supported by a ‘cast of thousands,’ this work is a liminal event “put together” by an ensemble comprised of myriad individuals from many families, many nations and all temporal realms.

Ingrid Washinawatok El Issa, Flying Eagle Woman (a key honoree and absent character in The Scrubbing Project), is listed as the first individual to whom Persistence of Memory is dedicated (Spiderwoman, Persistence 42). And this dedication is poignantly apt at multiple levels. Flying Eagle Woman was a Menominee activist who exercised her talents as an orator, activist and organizer to serve Indigenous communities around the world. At the age of forty-one, she answered the call of the U’wa People and set off for Colombia where she, Hawaiian activist Lahe’ena’e Gay, and American environmental activist Terence Freitas labored to help the U’wa People protect their language and culture by setting up a school and by aiding in the defense of U’wa lands against oil exploration by Occidental Petroleum. On 25 February 1999, Flying Eagle Woman and her colleagues disappeared. They had been kidnapped by members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); days later, on 4 March, their bullet-ridden bodies were discovered just over the border in Venezuela. Those who abducted,
tortured and executed them have never been brought to trial. Closure for the communities, families and intimates of the victims will have to be sought and attained outside the halls of justice—for the present, at least.

With the Miguel sisters’ final collective creation, Spiderwoman’s project of *survivance*—the realization of its founders’ aim, which was to survive, thrive, create and contribute long past the age of forty (as Flying Eagle Woman did not)—is remembered and celebrated. And its very process—the stitching together of multiple layers of experience and existence—declares itself in this act of remembrance as a key process, which exerts itself in all areas of Indigenous endeavor: the very invocation of Flying Eagle Woman conjures up her story and binds it to Spiderwoman’s, manifesting the very threads that meld her breath with Spiderwoman’s breath, her struggle with its struggle with our struggle and the solution to our humanity.

In one of her final public addresses, Ingrid Washinawatok El Issa reminded her listeners of the original instructions, which have been remembered and honored by Indigenous nations from time immemorial. It is to these instructions that Indigenous people may return to find meaning and identity—even in the midst of siege, disorder, dis-ease and despair. After all, it has been around these instructions that Indigenous nations have authored the social, economic, political, creative and spiritual Ethics, which governed their sovereign bodies politic since the beginning of the beginning of the beginning. Gratitude,

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101 The Indigenous Women’s Network, the Menominee Nation and the Pacific Cultural Conservancy continue to call for investigations into the actions of the American State Department and the Colombian Government as they relate to the assassination of Flying Eagle Woman and her colleagues and continue to demand that those directly responsible for her death come forward to stand trial. According to the Indigenous Women’s Network, negotiations between the Chairman of the Menominee Nation Apesanahkwat and the FARC leadership seemed to be going well and there was every reason to expect that Flying Eagle Woman and her colleagues would be released unharmed: “‘The FARC leadership had sent a response by e-mail the morning of the hostages’ death,’ Apesanahkwat said. ‘They sent greetings to us as a relative indigenous group, and said they were optimistic about seeking her release’” (“Statement”). But just hours before the execution of the hostages, Colombian military forces launched an attack on FARC, killing seventy rebels. It is widely believed that the actions of both the Colombian Government (in ordering the attack) and the U.S. State Department (in its provision of arms to facilitate the attack) during the ‘eleventh hour’ of negotiations stymied the process and destroyed all possibilities for the hostages’ release (“Statement”). As it has, too often, occurred throughout our history, violence perpetrated upon Indigenous peoples by foreign invaders resulted in violence perpetrated on Indigenous people by their own relations.
responsibility, respect, ceremonial observance, conscious connection and the maintenance thereof through creative acts—these are the Ethics/mandates that direct individual and communal lifeways. Call it “necessity” (after the Attic playwrights); call it Ethics (after the Western philosophers); call it “lifeway” or “minobimaatisiiwin.” Call it whatever you will; when all is said and done, we have our instructions. And within these instructions, Flying Eagle Woman reminds us, lies the key to psycho-spiritual and political decolonization. Within these instructions lies an eternal possibility for human beings to create themselves anew.

Since the time that human beings offered thanks for the first sunrise, sovereignty has been an integral part of Indigenous peoples’ daily existence. With the original instructions from the Creator, we realize our responsibilities. Those are the laws that lay the foundation of our society. These responsibilities manifest through our ceremonies ... Sovereignty is that wafting thread securing the components that make a society. Without that wafting thread, you cannot make a rug. Without that wafting thread, all you have are un-joined, isolated components of a society. Sovereignty runs through the vertical strands and secures the entire pattern. That is the fabric of Native society. (Washinawatok El Issa, qtd. in Indigenous Women’s Network)

While Flying Eagle Woman’s words are not voiced in Persistence of Memory and while the piece offers no explicit exposition of her story, her struggle for Indigenous sovereignty and her contributions to collective survivance are remembered by her good friends (the Miguel sisters) and profoundly influence their own work. Her spirit inhabits Persistence of Memory, because the very kernel of her struggle and the essence, which underpins its expression, reveal themselves to be identical to the foundational structures upon which Spiderwoman’s canon has been constructed. Remember who you are, she tells us. And find the “wafting thread,” the “vertical strands,” the cords that connect us to each other and that weave us into the larger fabric of Creation.

Legacies Upon Legacies: Flying Eagle Woman and The Scrubbing Project

Flying Eagle woman’s spirit and her story more explicitly inhabit another piece, which owes much of its development to its director and ‘midwife’ Muriel Miguel:
Winged Victory: This Winged Warrior Woman wore a tattoo of a flying eagle on her arm: an identifying mark. Flying Eagle Woman put on her twenty league boots and took twenty league steps into La Selva.

(sings) *Sequestrada!* Kidnapped! *Alla en Colombia, en la selva!* Two women and one man—Flying Eagle Woman. (Turtle Gals 340)

Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble’s *The Scrubbing Project* is a key cornerstone of Aboriginal performance and its development on the public stages of contemporary North America. This troupe was established in Toronto in 1999 as a vehicle that would “bring Native women’s voices and experiences to the stage” (Mojica and Knowles “Staging II” 325). Originating as a quartet with Sandra Laronde, Jani Lauzon, Monique Mojica and Michelle St. John, Turtle Gals (like Spiderwoman Theater before it) eventually realized itself as a core-trio when Laronde left the company prior to the 2002 premiere of *The Scrubbing Project*.102 In form and affect this piece set the bar at the turn of the century as a profoundly effective manifestation of what Cree playwright/director Floyd Favel terms “Native Performance Culture.”

Native Performance Culture (NPC) constitutes an artistic inheritance built upon the persistence of memory. Since 1991, Favel has been working with Indigenous theatre practitioners around the world (including Muriel Miguel and Monique Mojica) to test and develop a series of nation-specific “indigenous creative structures” (Favel Starr, “The Artificial” 70) through which Indigenous artists might construct “doors, which will open into ourselves and into the universe” (Favel Starr, “The Artificial” 71).

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102 The troupe endured for nine years. In this time, Lauzon, Mojica and St. John developed and performed *The Scrubbing Project* (under the direction of Muriel Miguel); *The Triple Truth*, an educational piece first developed for Mayworks, which chronicles the history of Aboriginal people in the North American workplace and which was developed under the direction of Kate Lushington (Dramaturg) and Yvette Nolan (Director); and *The Only Good Indian*, which chronicles the history of Aboriginal performers in North America. In 2006, Monique Mojica resigned as co-Artistic Director and performer, and the ensemble continued to develop and perform *The Triple Truth* and *The Only Good Indian* with artistic associates Falen Johnson and Cheri Maracle under the direction of Yvette Nolan. In 2008, the troupe disbanded, and in 2008 *The Scrubbing Project* was published in *Staging Coyote’s Dream: Volume II* (Eds. Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles).
These “doors” Favel locates in the temporal and experiential interstices between the exercise and experience of the contemporary theatrical event and the exercise and experience of the traditional ceremonial life, which precedes it (Favel, “Theatre: Younger Brother” 30). Favel and his collaborators are ultimately concerned with developing a process specific to Indigenous artists, which weaves those artists, their works and their audiences into the lands out of which their nations’ ceremonial praxis and traditional lifeways organically emerged. To do this, Favel tells us, the artist must employ a process of “reductionism” whereby “we are able to isolate the basic building blocks of [traditional and ceremonial expression], and these become the starting points for a creative and vital action” (Favel Starr, “The Artificial” 69-70). That is to say that as artists we do not erect “artificial trees” on stage by simply transplanting whole aspects (i.e. songs, dances, medicines, etc.) of actual ceremony from the spaces of their unfolding to the contemporary stage. Indeed, this, Favel warns us, is extremely damaging in that such ersatz *flora* “has no roots, and no animating spirit” (Favel Starr, “The Artificial” 71). Instead, the Indigenous artist immerses him/herself in traditional and ceremonial praxis to isolate core elements (vital carriers of its affect), abstracts those elements through a systematic process, and integrates these abstractions into the contemporary performance thus investing tradition’s “younger brother” with the potent affectivity of its forbear. And like Muriel Miguel upon whose shoulders his own art stands, Favel privileges the process over the product. For him, the journey—that is, the contemporary Native artist’s navigation between the social spaces of theatre and the spiritual spaces of tradition—is more important even than the end-product that will emerge from the investigations (Favel, “Theatre: Younger Brother” 31-32). “The performed manifestation of the contemporary storyteller’s art may transform many lives. But the process underlying its creation may transform many more” (Carter, “Chocolate” 3-4). This is legacy. This is the legacy it leaves, out of what it has made from the stuff of its inheritance.

As I have argued elsewhere, with *The Scrubbing Project* Spiderwoman’s signature methodology, informed by latter-day investigations into NPC, has expanded in potency and extended its affective reach as a ‘chapter’ in the larger *poetics of decolonization* (see Carter, “Writing”). Its complex weave of classic comedy routines, hit-television iconography, popular music, and survivors’ testimony, orchestrated by
director Muriel Miguel, is embodied by the performers that they might locate and isolate the source of the *dis-ease*, which continues to profoundly impact the lives of contemporary Aboriginal people—particularly those of mixed ancestry and/or those who now find themselves at a physical or spiritual remove from their communities of origin. To heal the isolated and enervated spirit, the performers must, at the same time, locate and embody—through a process of distillation and abstraction—the spiritual core of particularly efficacious elements of traditional or ritual praxis (i.e. creation stories, songs or dances) through which to embody agents of healing.

This complex attack on two fronts might be examined to best effect in the Turtle Gals’ re-visitation (and revision) of the tradition of Minstrelsy within a performative container they dub “The Scrubbing Portal” (Turtle Gals 337). Here, the “gals” re-appropriate this historic site of misappropriation, scrubbing it clean to prepare it for ceremony (337). All the while, they are embodying its archetypes—those buffoons in red-face that pretended to relate an authoritative account of Indigeneity. Here, the spectacles upon which the settler-myths were built—spectacles that so shamed Others with their grotesque distortions of burnt cork and red-face buffoonery—are converted into a performative memorial that re-writes and re-rights the distortion, that remembers and articulates its consequences, and that restores shame to those who have performed shameful acts. The two-dimensional shadow that presented itself as the authentic representation of the stasis, degradation and eventual disappearance of Native peoples and their cultures is embodied and articulated in three living, vibrant and visibly present dimensions. So confronted, it crumbles to nothing under the weight of its own revealed stasis and degradation—like the dissolution of paralyzing fear, which has been propagated by lies, when those lies are dragged into the light. As the “gals” throw themselves into a vaudevillian slapstick routine of scrubbing the stage, they are serenaded by the scratchy, disembodied voice of Al Jolson, singing “Who Played Poker with Pocahontas When John Smith Was Away?” And they answer in kind, lustily singing back the bawdy fiction of a crafty Indian maiden who has deceived her European “lover” and cheated him out of all his money (337). The vaudevillian “bit” to which this musical number serves as an introduction
exposes the lie\textsuperscript{103} and forces its authors into account with the truth of their own shame as the “gals” offer a backhanded \textit{homage} to Mr. Bones and Interlocutor while they speculate over a collection of abandoned shoes—the silent, unimpeachable witness to wholesale slaughter and genocidal policy:

Ophelia: Did they jump straight up out of those shoes?

Esperanza: I wonder.

Branda: Did they have time to bend to untie them?

Esperanza: Did they struggle to squirm a foot out over the back of the shoe with a desperate heel?

Ophelia: Did they step on glass as they ran?

All: as they fell

Esperanza: as they

All: heard breath

Esperanza: expelled around them?

Ophelia: Did they run blindly

Branda: on unprotected feet

Ophelia: along

O. & B.: asphalt and cobblestone?

Esperanza: Did they know their lonely shoes had relations in the piles of detritus from the Death Camps now

\textsuperscript{103} Pocahontas was still a child when she encountered John Smith; she was never his lover. John Smith, like most European adventurers and settlers, entered into a relationship with the Indigenous people he encountered for personal gain. When this relationship began to seem to him less profitable or personally inconvenient, he betrayed it by breaking his alliance with the Powhatan people and leaving them open to attack from his compatriots. Indeed, Pocahontas’s subsequent relationship with tobacco baron John Rolfe began after she had been taken hostage by the English who used her as a “bargaining chip” with which to extort the Powhatan Peoples during negotiations over control of the fertile lands of what is now Virginia. Contrary to popular American fantasy, in their dealings with Aboriginal peoples, the light-skinned newcomers proved themselves to be covetous, crafty, thieving, unscrupulous, faithless and utterly unprincipled.
All: catalogued, acquisitioned and museumed?

(Turtle Gals 337-338)

As the agents of soul-loss are thrown into confrontation with the agents of remembrance, recovery, and re-righting, the site of public spectacle transfigures itself into that layer of existence wherein the drama of soul-recovery and physical healing unfolds. Here, sacred acts are rendered appropriate for the public stage without distortion of their original purpose or degradation of their efficacy. And here, at every ontological level, the innumerable “wafting threads” that link this Project and its creatrices to innumerable human and non-human agents transform the performance of memory (and memory’s less palatable twin, memorial) into a legacy of survivance.

*The Scrubbing Project* constitutes a moveable feast for the dead—a memorial, dedicated to the countless victims and grievously wounded survivors of genocidal projects set into motion across the Americas (of which Indigenous Peoples were the targets) and in Europe (of which Jews, Gypsies/Roma, Christians, Homosexuals, and all those who either opposed or did not comfortably fit into Adolph Hitler’s National Socialist agenda were the targets). At the center of this movable feast is a material representation of the murdered Flying Eagle Woman; her abandoned wings assert her spiritual presence even as they remember her physical absence. In mute splendor, they articulate Ingrid Washinawatok El Issa’s teachings to remind those of us who have survived these projects to remember our responsibilities and to enjoin us to act upon them. Their very presence at the center of an erstwhile commercial site of spectacle, newly transformed into a space of sacristy and action, fathoms the unfathomable, remembers what has been forgotten, and connects survivor to the fallen through legacy—wings with which to fly, boots with which to stride boldly, and purpose (engendered from a profound understanding of who we are in the fabric of Creation) to fuel these mythic actions.

Ophelia: Grandmother sing

Your song to me
All: Sing your songs
Of love and freedom
Teach us who
We are to be
Weh-ah-ha
Weh-ah hey-oh […]

Branda: Anna Mae Aquash

Ophelia: Helen Betty Osborne

Esperanza: Ingrid Washinawatok El Issa

*Overlapping*

*Presente, presente, presente*

(Turtle Gals 364-365, emphasis added)

We are here (*presente*), because they were here. We are able to exercise agency, because ‘they’—the Grandmothers and Grandfathers upon whose shoulders we stand—acted even as forces outside themselves exerted themselves to contain their lives and suppress their agency. *The Scrubbing Project* reminds us to remember this and to remember them, even as it extends the storyweaving process beyond the autobiographical, weaving disparate individuals, disparate nations and disparate doings undertaken in disparate temporal and geographical realms to bind the “us” in the “here and now” with those others in the “there and then.” Under-girded by the work that has come before, “midwived” by a Grandmother who began this work and “sewn” into this work with the invisible, wafting “thread” of its absent center
(Flying Eagle Woman), *The Scrubbing Project* presents itself as a canonical work in the greater *poetics of decolonization* and as an important item in the bundle that is Spiderwoman’s legacy.

**Memory & Survivance**

Lest we forget, Spiderwoman Theater and the process through which it created owe their genesis to the contributions of yet another American Indian woman whose earthly existence did not extend into its fourth decade: Josephine Mofsie is remembered as the inspirator of Spiderwoman Theater and listed as the second individual to whom *Persistence of Memory* is dedicated. And fittingly, this dedication binds this grandmother to her grandchild Heino Josephine Eagle Eye Tarrant (42) whom she did not live to see but who sings and dances and will carry her story (and the story of all her grandmothers and grandfathers) into the generations yet unborn.

This grandchild has become the “catch-basin” at which multiple rivers, brooks and tributaries—Hopi, Ho Chunk, Kuna, Rappahannock—have come together, “mix[ed] in strength” and “foam[ed] up” (*Persistence* 50). Like her grandmothers and great aunts before her, she will carve her own riverbed out of the stony places of existence and “travel on” (*Persistence* 50) into the future, carrying them and their teachings with her.

The image of the river (or of rivers converging) is a metaphor that I have chosen quite deliberately to pursue. The “river” shows up quite early in the history of Spiderwoman Theater as a projection on the floor during the first performance workshop of creation stories, which featured Muriel Miguel, Josephine Mofsie and Lois Weaver. As Muriel Miguel describes Spiderwoman Theater’s 1975 debut:

> We were on different sides of the river, and I started to put this together where Josie would tell some of the story, and I would tell some of my story, and she [Weaver] would tell some of her story. Sometimes it was just one or two words, and then we would come back together again. Sometimes we’d talk together. So it was like the running of the river,
this brook, but at the same time there were creation stories all happening at the same time. (qtd. in Haugo, “Persistent” 62)

Three decades later in Persistence of Memory a river still runs through the consciousness of the Miguel sisters and is articulated as a key element of the process through which they effect their self-authored poetics of decolonization on both the public and private stages. As Muriel remembers and articulates the tension between being a “one”—that is to say, an individual—and being “one of three” (see Spiderwoman, Persistence 48–49), Gloria offers the solution to a seemingly insoluble problem belonging to the realm of ‘metaphysical functions and relations’: how is it that “one” can be simultaneously a “whole” and a ‘fraction’ (1/3)?

Three rivers, one rough, one calm, one
winding.
They meet at the bottom of a waterfall,
they join.
They mix in strength, they foam up, they
travel on. (Persistence 50)

Survivance is bound up in the unfailing and unassailable soft power of water (a feminine element): water gives; water readily displaces itself; water allows itself to expand and contract as it mingles with other elements and life-forms; water conforms to the shape of its container. Simultaneously, water seeps in, through and around rock and sediment to filter out impurities and to thereby retain its singularity; water slowly wears down rock and ultimately carves out its own course through the landscape; waters come together to “mix in strength,” and they drift away again to express the singular nature with which they were endowed at creation. As it is with water, so it is with humans. We are ourselves—at once, singular and alone or, as fractions of a greater whole, contributors within a greater community.
This understanding is most poignantly illustrated in the Miguel sisters’ final collective performance through the multiple layerings of Becky Thunderbird’s song “Persistence of Memory.” Lisa Mayo [aka Elizabeth Elmyra Miguel] as the eldest surviving Miguel woman first sings the song as she takes us through the ritual of cleaning her home. Indeed, as she testifies, it is during these times, when she is sweeping her floors, that Elmira Miguel visits her (Persistence 45). As this Miguel Elder kinetically remembers the act of sweeping and wields the broom that connects her to her mother, she vocally remembers a song her mother sang for her:

Lisa: Hey Yah Na Hey
Hey Yah Na Hey
Hey Yah Na Hey Hey
Wey Ho Hey
Yah Wey Oh Hey
My family, my nation
My Creator, my life
I sing for the next generation… (Spiderwoman, Persistence 45)

Minutes later, after considering a digital Murielle Borst as “Crystal” a fancy shawl dancer from Oklahoma who carefully demonstrates her prowess in this art form and explains just how she achieves it (Spiderwoman, Persistence 52), Borst’s mother and aunties are again moved to sing “for the next generation”: this time, Muriel [Borst’s mother] begins and is joined, in turn, by her sisters Gloria and Lisa.

Finally, Borst’s seven-year-old daughter104 (young Josephine) is layered into the performance. Where Murielle Borst owes her proficiency in traditional dance to the training ground prepared for her by

104 As of this writing (January 2010), young Josephine Tarrant is sixteen years old.
her grandparents, her mother, her deceased mother-in-law and her uncle-in-law; and where, by extension, she owes the realization of her one-woman show *More than Feathers and Beads* from which her shawl dancer “Crystal” emerges, so Murielle Borst’s daughter and that daughter’s cousins will owe their own proficiency in traditional aesthetic expression to the tutelage and training grounds provided by Murielle Borst and the Miguel elders. Memory is persistent, only when it is persistently passed on.

Like the generations that precede the living performers, the generations who follow them (represented by Monique Mojica, Murielle Borst, Raphael Szykowski, Bear Thomas, Frank Harris and young Josephine Tarrant) occupy electronic layers of the performative mola—singing, dancing, speaking or simply watching over the proceedings in mute stillness. Here then, these “actors,” occupying disparate temporal realms (in the material world) have been gathered together into a common realm wherein the limen between the generations has been dissolved and wherein great-grandmother is linked to her descendants by ties thicker than blood and more enduring than flesh. On stage, three grandmothers who occupy three dimensions remember themselves as the fleshly bridge between the generations, transmitters of memory. But in performance, the veil between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional worlds becomes less and less apparent as, at times, the living performers subside into stasis and project themselves as mute shadows onto a scrim, witnessing living memory dancing on the screens before us all.105

Indeed, as the show concludes the living performers witness their own active transmission of ancestral memory. A digital “Josie” lights up the screen and sings the song her great grandmother once sang to her own daughter. Under the tutelage of her maternal grandmother, she sings not only “for the next generation” but also for all the generations--those who have been, those who remain, and those yet to

105 This subtly differs from earlier shows in which the loud, vibrant, unapologetically bawdy body of the present was layered atop (or at times, beneath) the two-dimensional shadow of former times. Here, flesh and blood in three dimensions and in all its immediacy casts a mute, two-dimensional shadow onto a flat screen as a digital “future” (contained within the younger generations) plays itself out in living color and full voice.
come (Spiderwoman, Persistence 54). The commitment of the little singer to her song, her scrupulous effort to sing it well and her obvious enjoyment of the song and of her maternal grandmother’s seal of approbation—“Very good, Josie” (Persistence 54)—bespeak the child’s appreciation of, solicitation over and respect for ancestral legacy.

She does indeed “understand” its importance, just as she profoundly understands that the bundle that is her inheritance is filled with ugliness as well as beauty. And perhaps she understands, more profoundly even than the previous generation, that a rejection of any portion of that bundle will by no means protect her from the oppression that has been visited on her ancestors; nor will it immunize her from the dis-ease of the colonized and the internalized shame so many of us have carried for generations. Open-armed acceptance of this bundle, however, will surely equip her with the medicine to counter this dis-ease and afford her the endurance and the sense of purpose to resist current and potential oppressive conditions. And that the granddaughter of Josephine Mofsie and Muriel Miguel does, indeed, “understand” (where others did not) is most explicitly shown and told.

Young Josephine’s vocal performance is connected to Spiderwoman’s performance of Becky Thunderbird’s “Persistence of Memory” via a dense intertextual weave, which begins as each Miguel sister wrestles with her own understanding of her legacy and of the beneficiary’s relationship with and responsibility to that legacy:

Gloria: I didn’t understand. I understood. She understands now.

Lisa: I understand now, but I didn’t understand then.

Muriel: I understand. No, I don’t understand. (Spiderwoman, Persistence 52)

Within this intertextual facing, Lisa contemplates her ancestral connections with the lands that now comprise New York City and its boroughs. Once home to the Algonquian Indians, relations of her mother’s Rappahannock People, the Botanical Gardens in the Bronx and, by extension, the city that surrounds those Gardens become for Lisa “the place where our sources and resources rest. Deep, deep down in time and memory. Available, connected within” (Spiderwoman, Persistence 53). This is strength
and comfort. This is “that place that Indians talk about.” This is legacy. Muriel, by contrast, remembers shame: “Are you ashamed of me? Are you? Are you embarrassed by your mother, your grandmother” (Spiderwoman, Persistence 53)? She is, here, Muriel-the-mother speaking to her own daughters. She is the one of whom her daughters are ashamed. Pain and shame—these too are legacy: “I understand. I was ashamed of my mother. My mother was ashamed of her mother. Are you embarrassed? Don’t be” (Spiderwoman, Persistence 53).

Gloria’s story, then, is woven in to negotiate the uncomfortable distance between the disparate legacies imagined by her sisters. It resolves the tensions between the wellspring of strength and connection offered by Lisa’s vision of legacy and a congenital dis-ease that disconnects the afflicted from the generations that precede and follow them. As Gloria tells it:

On a bookcase in my apartment, there is a very old photograph, tattered and torn. The photo is of me and my third grade class. I’m sitting in the middle surrounded by thirty other children, the only dark one. I’m wearing a brown fur trimmed coat, my hair is in long braids. There is a faint smile on my face. (Spiderwoman, Persistence 53)

For more than seven decades she has preserved this material artifact that externally documents in two dimensions a complex and multi-dimensional interiority. Her sisters may not have always understood; those with whom she shared her life may not have always understood. And this knowledge may have served to exacerbate her sense of isolation and difference. But her grand niece requires no explanation. She sees the picture and diagnoses the dis-ease, locating herself within the experience and empathically aligning herself with her great aunt:

Gloria: “Is that you, Aunt Gloria?” “Yes, that’s me.” Looking up at me she said, “Then you know how I feel.” Our eyes met for a moment. “Yes, Josie, I know how you feel.” Three generations, three generations, and that knowing feeling is still present. (Spiderwoman, Persistence 54)
Young Josephine understands her great aunt, and her great aunt understands her. But this
grandchild also understands survivance. She is a primary beneficiary of her grandmothers’ struggle to
remember and re-member themselves. And so she sings the song Muriel Miguel taught her as if in
jubilant assent to her grandmother’s assertion that “We go back eons. Where you place your hand, your
foot is padded with generations of us. We came from way way ago to be here with you now” (Spiderwoman, *Persistence* 54). Young Josephine sings in the present, padding the feet of future
generations as she manifests her (and their) connections to the “way way ago.” And as she sings, she
completes a circle: student becomes teacher as she reminds her elders to remember that somewhere within
the legacy they are preparing for her lies the healing along with the dis-ease.

**Whose Memory? Whose Legacy?**

Working with a group like Spiderwoman can become all-consuming. The personal melds
with the professional and life’s stories. What I thought of as my own quite personal past
and present concerns become part of a collective work. With Spiderwoman, because of
the intimate use of storytelling, the blending of personal life and the professional life, and
the intimacy required to make it successful, one begins to function within a realm that
explores memory at the same time as fostering together new, now collective memories.
(Spiderwoman, *Persistence* 43)

*Persistence of Memory* opens with this declaration by the late poet/author Sandy Crimmins who served as
Spiderwoman Theater’s stage manager during the early years. As with the other artists featured within
this show (including the Colorado sisters, Brandy Penn, Pam Verge, Jan Robyn, Naja Beye, Lois Weaver,
Ginny Mayer, Donna Couteau, Eduardo and Bonnie Duran, etc.), her connections to the Miguel sisters,
their ancestors and descendants have been made manifest within and by means of the process to which
she gave herself. They, too, are “Spiderwoman’s issue,” and this recognition alerts us to the fact that
despite initial appearances, *Persistence of Memory* is more than just a personal retrospective or an ‘auto-
ttribute.’ Nor is it simply an attempt to locate and explicate the legacy that Spiderwoman Theater has
prepared for a chosen few. *Persistence of Memory* is more ambitious and further reaching than this: it
explores the essential nature of legacy—the individuals’ responsibility to the world we are writing for
our children. The bundles we carry direct our lives and direct that writing even after we have inadvertently forgotten how it is that we have come to be carrying those bundles. So too, the bundles we leave for our children will direct their lives and their own writing even after they have come to forget the exact nature—the composite elements—of just what it is they may find themselves carrying.

Writing the world is a project that requires reciprocity; so, too, the construction of legacy requires active engagement from all parties—the donor and the heir presumptive. As we have seen, Gloria’s burden of internalized shame and isolation is reconfigured through the discovery of mutual understanding and empathic connection (through shared experience) with her grand niece. Young Josephine not only lightens her burden (by sharing it); she has found a solution to its crippling weight. She may be acutely conscious of being Other in her classroom, but the shame this consciousness once brought to former generations is performatively tempered with fierce pride and a sense of responsibility to the coming generations.

Offstage, this intergenerational project of collectively reframing legacy is an ongoing process that ultimately informs the works of Spiderwoman’s issue. During an interview, which followed the company’s performance of *Persistence of Memory*, Lisa Mayo and Gloria Miguel poignantly addressed the shame that they have long felt for their participation in their father’s medicine shows (Haugo, “Persistent” 67). Then Monique Mojica spoke, answering their articulation of dis-ease by prescribing its solution:

We’re saying, well, we’re not ashamed of that. I’m not ashamed of that, either, so it’s like… It goes on. It morphs into generations, whereas the way that I might carry that and say, Yeah, that, that’s part of me, and that made room. That made Spiderwoman Theater possible, which made what I do possible, which made what Murielle does possible, which makes my son Bear a filmmaker doing a film on the family’s migration to the cities, where for survival the family became performers. So the way that goes on, then, is that it becomes for us behind you (Spiderwoman) saying that it’s not a shameful thing for us, because it’s in us, and it keeps transforming. (Haugo, “Persistent” 69)
But this sense of empowerment—this grateful acceptance of the ‘medicine show bundle’—is not a transformative phenomenon that belongs solely to future generations; it is effected in collusion, and its benefits affect all. As if reminded by something in her niece’s declaration, Muriel Miguel articulated another lens through which to view these early experiences that caused her elder sisters such shame: times were hard, and where other families may have begged or stood in bread lines, the Miguel family in true entrepreneurial spirit “decided to perform instead” (M. Miguel, qtd. in Haugo, “Persistent” 69). This reconfiguration of shameful spectacle into proud survivance does not end here. It “morphs” into a declaration of personal power. The “victim,” through the act of remembrance transforms herself into the “victor.” The central lesson of the medicine show bundle has been reconfigured into a reminder of personal power: “Whatever you do, you have the power. You have the power to change it” (Mayo, qtd. in Haugo, “Persistent” 69). And when it becomes necessary, you enter the fray with every weapon you possess: “You gotta fight for your stuff […] I think that’s one of the main things I learned from Spiderwoman, other than the technique, that you need to fight” (Borst, qtd. in Haugo, “Persistent” 70).

“Somebody Will Remember”: Chapan

The Cree word for great grandparent is chapan, which means “wagon.” And it also relates to the verb, “to pull.” From what I was told about this word, a long time ago, the old people would sit on a toboggan and the younger people would pull them through the snow as they moved camp. The word means that we as younger people are pulling our ancestors forward, with effort, compassion and duty. This is what an old elder from Northern Manitoba told me when I asked him about that word chapan. (Favel, “Poetry” 32)

Individual memory or even the collective memory of an entire generation is not consistently persistent. To be human is to be unfailingly fallible. Ultimately, as we age and decay our faculties fail us, and throughout our lives we are always teetering precariously on that edge between retention and loss:

Gloria: Do you remember?
Lisa: No.
Muriel: No.
Gloria: Neither do I.
Muriel: Think hard.
Lisa: It’s coming to me. It’s right on the edge. Wait, wait, wait.
Gloria: I remember that word.
Lisa: I remember that sound.
Muriel: Did you write it down? (Muriel pulls chairs out from behind panel.)
Gloria: No.
Lisa: No. (Spiderwoman, Persistence 43)

But there is a remedy. As Gloria observes in this scene, just a few lines later, “Somebody else will remember” (Spiderwoman, Persistence 43), if, of course, we have begun the process of transmitting our knowledge. And it is incumbent upon those to whom we pass memory to act as a bridge between the generations, passing back even as they pass it forward—to remind us to remember or to help us reframe memory thereby reconfiguring dis-ease into empowered wholeness. Indeed, the process of “fostering new, collective memory” (or birthing the new human being) is a reciprocal one, which is neither solely self-reflexive nor unidirectional. That is to say, its goal is not simply the individual’s self-activated transformation into a “new,” decolonized human being; nor is it predicated simply upon one generation’s birthing and development of a generation of “new,” decolonized human beings to follow it. The power of “legacy” here (whether it is passed intra-or-inter-generationally) is that it is a gift that keeps on giving—and giving back. And this multi-directional flow—this reciprocity—is perhaps the most compelling and vital aspect of all when we consider the power of aesthetic, socio-political or pedagogical processes to facilitate the decolonization of Indigenous peoples and our transformation into new human beings.

Lest we forget, Floyd Favel, whose work as a director and playwright has been profoundly influenced by Spiderwoman Theater and its issue, initiated the collaborative investigations with Monique Mojica and the Miguel sisters into the development of theatrical principles based on nation-specific legacies. As of late, he has begun to express dissatisfaction with the initially unidirectional formula he had
developed to articulate his concept of Native Performance Culture: $\text{Tr} + \text{Me} = \text{Th}(2)$ or “tradition plus method equals theatre doubled” (Favel, “Poetry” 34). Rejecting the term “method,” because of the rigidity it infers, and replacing that with the more fluid term, “process,” Favel has reconceptualized the relationship between the three elements of his equation. “[T]radition, process and theatre,” he posits, “are all in equal relationship with each other, and they work together and influence each other.” To express this reciprocal inter-dynamic, Favel now proposes this formula: “$\text{Tr}/\text{Pr}/\text{Th}$” (Favel, “Poetry” 34). Elsewhere, Favel has identified theatre as “the younger brother of tradition” (Favel, “Theatre” 30). Hence, as Favel now conceptualizes it, the antecedent (traditional and ritual praxis) is simultaneously transforming and being transformed by the descendant (contemporary performance), as both transform the process, which facilitates this reciprocal affectivity.

On the ground, the decolonizing potential of this exciting inter-dynamic is being dramatically realized in the work of a young artist belonging to the third generation of Spiderwoman Theater’s aesthetic inheritors. Swampy Cree playwright/performer Candace Brunette began her artistic journey as a student in my Native Theatre class at the University of Toronto. From there, she traveled to Trent University to work with Muriel Miguel in an intensive theatre program, which the Centre for Indigenous Theatre runs there each summer. A student and practitioner of Storyweaving, she has, since 2007, been visiting her own community to develop her *Omushkego Water Stories*. Here, she and visual artist/costume designer Erika Iserhoff (Swampy Cree), under the direction of Floyd Favel and Monique Mojica, have

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106 It is interesting to note the similarity between Favel’s “formula” and Muriel Miguel’s formulaic expression for the craft of storyweaving. Miguel, like Favel, insists upon the development of a method through which to distill traditional praxis to render it both appropriate and efficacious on the contemporary stage. She expresses this requisite distillation process thusly: “Storytelling [i.e. tradition] $\times$ Acting [i.e. process] $= \text{theatre}$” (qtd. in Borst, “Spiderwoman…Legacy” 77). Theatre, for the tribal artist whose works manifest themselves as contemporary expressions of tribal memory, is first and foremost a vehicle of “organic continuity”: it carries the source of the people’s ontological, epistemological, cosmological and processual understandings, and it carries the mechanistic core of their affective transmission.

107 Commenting upon an earlier draft of this chapter, Monique Mojica reminded me of Favel’s earliest formula for NpC (Native Performance Culture): $\text{Tr} \times \text{Me} = \text{Th}^2$. Favel’s earliest articulation of the evolution of this formula into a more multi-directional, fluid process expression he has been developing is the articulation Mojica prefers. This formula expresses itself as $\text{Tr} \iff \text{Pr} \iff \text{Th}$ (Personal Communication, 13 March 2010).
embarked upon an intensive partnership with several of those James Bay Cree trappers and hunters who were displaced from their traditional lands by the flooding and devastation caused by the hydro-electric projects and who now live quietly and largely ignored in Cochrane, Ontario.

These repositories of communal memory shared their stories with Brunette and her creative team—“stories of starvation, supernatural stories and also hand-shadow storytelling and stories of the mysterious string game, which was traditionally used to invoke magic for hunting” (Favel, “Poetry” 34). Utilizing some of these traditional aesthetic elements (i.e. shadow storytelling) the team wove these memories together, returning the gift, as it were, in a workshop performance, which was intended to solicit commentary and criticism from the Elders as they received the young artists’ telling. But the aftermath of this very early stage in the work was an exciting surprise to all: ‘reading’ their own stories from the archives that are the bodies of Brunette and Iserhoff, the Elders began to remember long-forgotten remedies (this for tapeworm, that for lungs, this for burns, that for…), as they began to ‘riff off’ the duo’s performance and to weave these lately-recovered texts into the experience of the theatrical event (Brunette, Personal Communication, 22 August 2008). Precious Indigenous Knowledge (IK) that may have been forever lost was re-membered and woven into legacy, which will inform the lives of future generations. Within a short space of time, the first key stage in the process of decolonization had begun to manifest itself in this community of heretofore-‘exiled’ Elders. So, while poetry (in all its manifestations) may be, as Floyd Favel asserts, “constructed out of remnants found in ruins” (“Poetry” 34), its power lies in its ability repair the breakage, to transform those ruins into functional, life-sustaining worlds and to carry the denizens of those ruins into these worlds: chapan.

The potent alchemy of this multi-directional, intergenerational exchange is, perhaps, more readily apparent than the transformational potential of the intra-generational exploration and intra-exchange of legacy. To be sure, it is most heartening to witness the possibilities and openings created by the multi-directional flow of processual legacy (inter-generationally). To wit, Murielle Borst is an erstwhile student of and apprentice to her mother; currently, she acts as the director of her mother’s latest one-woman show.
Red Mother, which carries us through the war-torn landscape—both geographical and psycho-spiritual—of Muriel Miguel’s American Indian incarnation of Mother Courage without her children. While Borst midwifes the production and directs its articulation, editing her mother’s text, she ‘teaches back’ to the teacher. Borst, here, is one “somebody” who has remembered, scrupulously reminding the Elder of the lessons she may—by virtue of being human—have forgotten. Indeed, we see this dynamic playing itself out during the following exchange that occurred at the panel discussion, which followed the February 2007 performance of Persistence of Memory at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio:

Muriel Miguel: Just doing Red Mother with Murielle here and my daughter says to me, “Oh, it’s really nice, Mom. It’s very beautifully written. We’re going to have to do something about that (audience laughter). It’s so well written, I can’t do anything with this.” I was going through the same process before she came in—all these beautiful words, but how do you act them? What did I write? It wasn’t the actor informing. I was just writing, and so what happened? I stopped myself, and so when I gave it to her and I gave it to the director, it was like it’s there. So she got out her pencil and she went zip zip zip zip. I had to start fighting for a couple of months there for something that I wanted to hold on to […]

Gloria Miguel: [speaking of her early experiences with Spiderwoman moments later] …It’s very difficult if you have an idea in mind and someone comes in and takes a word out that changes the whole idea of the story.

Muriel: That’s not true. [But it is! It is true to her experience as an actor under the direction of Borst!]

Gloria: You have to fight to keep that idea […]

Muriel: And so what happens when somebody says that they have this idea? You look at the idea and they say they want to do this and this with it. You say, “Fine,” and then my job is to take it and make it part of the whole, because I am the final eye. You see it from far away, that it’s this, so sometimes this has to be altered. And when this is altered, it’s not the individual we’re talking about. It’s that all of this adds up to this. (Haugo, “Persistent” 72-73, bolded emphasis added)

Throughout the development of Red Mother, Borst has occupied the position her mother occupied throughout the decades of Spiderwoman Theater’s development, while Muriel Miguel has occupied (at times) the position of her sisters within the relational dynamic of actor-to-director. First, a witness to the turbulent relational dynamic that is an inescapable part of the experience of collective creation and then a student (through active engagement with Miguel) of the storyweaving process itself, Borst has ascended.
to the position of “teacher” in the Red Mother endeavor, reminding Muriel Miguel to privilege the sum over its composite parts (however attractive those parts may be) and of just how powerful the swell of resistance to that key lesson can be. At the same time, Borst has continued to learn from her mother and to watch key lessons in the storyweaving process evolve, transform and extend their influence in other areas of contemporary artistic endeavor.

Indeed, Borst’s award-winning one-woman show More than Feathers and Beads emerges straight out of the Storyweaving process under the direction of Muriel Miguel (Mojica and Knowles, Staging (II) 113). And as she herself asserts, the production’s use of music and light as vehicles of storytelling have been directly influenced by her aunts Lisa and Gloria respectively (Borst, “Spiderwoman…Legacy” 78-79); this, of course, speaks to a profound and complex inter-generational exchange. Interestingly, however, Borst identifies her cousin Monique Mojica as a key inspirator of More than Feathers and Beads. And this speaks to a powerful instance of intra-generational exchange.

In 1990, Mojica issued an unanswerable challenge to the “authorized” history of encounters between the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island and European adventurers, entrepreneurs and settlers. Her Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots articulates the claims and plays out the characterizations immortalized in travel accounts, which had been originally designed to titillate European audiences or to attract continued financial support for European explorers, entrepreneurs, pirates, and military personnel. Utilizing her own physical being as the vessel through which our much maligned grandmothers might express themselves, Mojica’s piece calls into account the manufactured stories of Pocahontas (Powhatan), Malinche (Nahautl), the Quechua Women of the Puna and the mothers of the Métis Nation. Weaving their stories with those of several contemporary Indigenous “Everywomen,” Annie Mae Aquash and one female Trickster, Mojica effects a potent re-visioning of history through which she re-educates her contemporary audiences and, as I have argued elsewhere, facilitates active and actual transformation in both the realm of the flesh and the realm of spirit (Carter, “Blind Faith” 9-10).
The processual link between Mojica’s work and that of her mother and aunties manifests itself not only in the dramaturgical framework of her plays (Storyweaving) but also in the extension of the process of embodiment into what I have previously termed the Red Reading. Mojica takes up the work Spiderwoman began in *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* in her sly re-animation of the dead fictions that pretend to represent Indigenous humanity and experience. Like the bodies of her mother and aunties before her, her own body becomes the “book” in which we “read” the literary artifact belonging to those who once “read,” named and “mapped” the Aboriginal peoples they encountered. In her body, two texts are juxtaposed—that belonging to the authentic descendant informed by the “persistence of memory” and the pervasive (and erstwhile persuasive) fraudulent cartoon. Through her body, we are invited to read this intertextual facing for ourselves, to assess two profoundly oppositional narratives (interfactual texting) and to decide for ourselves which story will govern our own attitudes towards ourselves and/or towards Others. Within the vessel that is Mojica’s body, Pocahontas, Malinche and the grandmothers who have been so maligned by scholarly authority offer us fresh eyes through which to view the European “text” and hold up a Native lens through which we might interpret these texts to arrive at a more profound understanding of the fears and fantasies that drove the colonizing body and that directed its documentation of our histories.

As if she were exploring a costume outlet, Mojica tries on and tries out literary constructs that have been imposed upon Pocahontas, Malinche, and the grandmothers of the mixed-blooded peoples to expose their cheap plasticity, poor design and flimsy construction. She vocally and kinetically articulates the words written about or attributed to these ancestors, revealing garbled translations and misconstrued meaning. As Spiderwoman Theater had originally intended it to do, Mojica’s Red Reading affectively reconfigures the public stage into a space of transformation and healing and offers its witnesses the opportunity to experience a transformational shift from a state of ignorance to a more profound and truthful intimacy with their own ancestors and the ancestors of the Others who sit beside them (see Carter, “Blind Faith”).
What so struck Borst about *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* is that Mojica had utilized their processual legacy to step outside of herself and to expand the orbiculate structure to which this process lends itself: she “didn’t use her personal stories; she took characterizations of different women and she performed them on stage using the method of storyweaving” (Borst, “Spiderwoman’s…Legacy” 79). Mojica’s work realizes itself within a subtle evolution of Spiderwoman’s technique. This is not to say, however, that Mojica’s performative mola here is devoid of any autobiographical strands: for instance, Mojica does recall her own brief encounter with Annie Mae Aquash at Rosebud, South Dakota (Mojica, *Princess* 53), and the taped portion of her song of Transformation Twelve is, in large part, a love song to her husband Fernando Hernandez (Mojica, Personal Communication), recalling the first time she traveled to his home in Mexico:

> When you tasted of salt
> and oranges,
> and the moon sang her
> happiest songs to us,
> --heart offerings
> when we remembered
> her—
> When you tasted of salt
> and oranges,
> and the falling stars
> took our breath away,
> --the waves of the sea
> mixed with my own
> salt tears. (Mojica, *Princess* 55)
But these moments of self-reflexivity serve to contextualize and deepen the bigger picture while tightly binding the descendant (Mojica) into relationship with those ancestral mothers of the Peoples of mixed ancestry who speak their stories through her.

When Borst set about developing *More Than Feathers and Beads* several years later, she utilized her mother’s process to document stories of contemporary women outside of herself and beyond the circle of her immediate family to interrogate the stereotypical categories of indigeneity, which contain Native peoples and through which mainstream audiences expect them to express themselves. Native experience is often only recognized as such by these audiences if it is expressed through particular signifiers, which they have come to associate with “authentic” indigeneity. But as Borst demonstrates, contemporary Native peoples are exposed to and may allow ourselves to be influenced as much by pop culture and Western aesthetics as we are by the traditional praxis belonging to our communities of origin: there are as many budding Giselles among our children as there are Fancy Dancers. It is our choice. It should be our choice. Determined to “take no prisoners” (“Spiderwoman…Legacy’ 79), Borst turns her mirror upon Native communities themselves to simultaneously interrogate the human brokenness, which has resulted in no small degree from the misshapen containment units—physical, intellectual and psycho-spiritual—into which the people have been forced. Compromised immune systems, rape, incest, abuse, intolerance—these are the signifiers of the dis-ease of the colonized. As Borst’s Fancy Shawl Dancer explains after interrogating her father’s articulation of his own intolerance,

> I just couldn’t figure out why he was so mean. Then I realize that it wasn’t that my dad was afraid of Black people it was the change. When he said that to me, he was saying that change isn’t good and it isn’t good for us Indian people. My dad came from a different time of survival and that so much was taken away from us he had to hold on to something. He wanted me to know that this is his world and even though I am going to college, he wanted me to understand that his world he created for me to survive in is protected and change was no good. (More 123)

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108 In 2000, *More Than Feathers and Beads* was the sole Native production (from the United States) to be selected for inclusion in Australia’s Global Indigenous Theater Festival (Mojica and Knowles, *Staging Vol. II* 113).
But again, as Borst reminds us, we have a choice. We can choose to shatter the lenses, which have distorted the Indigenous image, by remembering ourselves. We can confront and interrogate the dis-ease of colonization and break out of the containment units in which it was allowed to incubate and take root in every level of being. We can choose not to be defined by the affliction. Indeed, we bear a responsibility to choose, and we are responsible for the choices we make. Borst answers (or allows us to answer for ourselves) the core question around which *More Than Feathers and Beads* has been constructed: “Is survival enough” (131)? It is not. It will not suffice. Survival is our inheritance. But if we are to honor those who came before and who sacrificed so much to ensure our coming, we must take up that inheritance and transform it into a life well lived—a life lived and expressed (in word and deed) on our own terms.

In the final moments of her performance, Borst remembers and celebrates “the HIV infected men and women of our communities,” “the men who survived,” “the gay mothers [including her own], fathers, uncles and mentors [including her own uncle-in-law Louis Mofsie],” “our children,” “the survivors of rape, incest and abuse,” and finally Flying Eagle Woman herself (“Ingrid”) who gave up her own chance to survive in the fight for cultural preservation and restoration (*More* 130). As she has done throughout the piece, Borst cheekily defies expectations by eschewing the use of “traditional” signifiers of Indianness in the dance she performs to honor these relations and the bundles they have left for us. Her choice of “honor song” is at once a sly comment on dominant notions of authenticity and a defiant exercise of her freedom to choose her own mode of expression in the “land of the free”: erstwhile ‘Wild Child’ Madonna’s *Express Yourself* is the rebel-yell of young women seeking to invent (or to re-invent) themselves in the late 1980’s. It is still understood to assert the value of the individual and to celebrate the freedom to express our differences. Borst, a fiery young woman, quite naturally claims Madonna’s music for her own: hits such as “Vogue” (used only seconds later in Borst’s show) and “Express Yourself” belong to her generation just as “Let it Be” or “All Along the Watchtower” belong to the baby boomers who were just coming into their own when these songs first hit the airwaves.
Her honor song weaves the living, dead and yet unborn into this ‘Brave New World’ that has forever transformed the lifeways of its original Peoples. But as Borst reminds us, even as we labor to preserve, recover and to transform what still remains of our plundered cultures, we are engaged in a project of **remaking a world that has remade us**. Homophobia and HIV may have transformed communities, which once honored their two-spirited members. Residential/Indian schools may have isolated and reeducated generations of parents, teaching them forgetfulness, violence towards their own and self-hatred. But the ‘Flying Eagle’ women and men of our communities are recovering those tools we thought forever lost, which teach us to remember, which reconfigure themselves to heal the dis-ease that is particular to the generations of Native people who live today, and which offer the possibility of effecting transformation upon the dominant culture surrounding us: it too is dis-eased and requires healing.

That she co-opts this iconographic fragment of Americana, transforming it to serve her own project of honoring and remembering, is a declaration of survivance. Life is predicated upon the ability of the organism to change, grow and evolve, but this transformation is **reciprocal**. As Borst’s “Honor Song” manifests itself within an unexpected (and unapologetically American) pop aesthetic, so the aesthetic itself is transformed by the purpose for which it has been appropriated. The anthem of isolate splendor—this riotous celebration of the individual—on Borst’s stage has been transformed into an anthem of the collective, which dissolves the comfortable boundaries that separate the “I” from the “we”—the living from the dead, the child from the Elder, the colonized from the colonizer, the fancy shawl dancer from the ballerina… Even the product of Borst’s autonomous act of creation does not stand alone. Her invocation of Ingrid Washinawatok El Issa inextricably binds this world she has created and its inhabitants to the works and worlds created by Spiderwoman Theater and the ever-widening circle of its inheritors.

As we examine the artistic lives of Spiderwoman’s genealogical issue, we begin to see not only the evolution of Spiderwoman’s processual legacy (its movement beyond autobiography) but also the inter-and-intra-dynamics which direct the transformative possibilities it holds for all the generations. The
flow of legacy does not travel in one direction, from one generation to the next; nor does it stay solely within the biological family. It follows an orbiculate trajectory—flowing in ever-widening circles… Within circles… Within circles…

Apart from her work as a performer, director, playwright and instructor, Murielle Borst is also a writer of fantasy. In this, too, she has found an avenue through which to nurture and develop what she has inherited:

I also used this technique when I was working on my first book. My mother was helping me edit the book, and I thought I should read parts of my book aloud, but she said, “No, you have to listen to it.” So, she read my book to me, so I was able to hear the dialogue in someone else’s voice. I asked her later, “Where did that come from? Did you create it?” She said it had really come out of feminism, herstory versus history. A lot of women told stories, they knew stories, but they never got to hear their own stories… (Borst, “Spiderwoman…Legacy” 76)

As Borst goes on to explain, here, it was from within the CR sessions of the feminist era where women were invited to get up and voice their own stories that Miguel developed a key processual exercise [detailed in Chapter Three of this work]. Herein an original teller becomes the auditor as each member of her “audience” retells her story back to her—in sound, in movement and/or in both (76). This processual development privileges the idea that it is as important to witness one’s own story (in multiple dimensions) as it is to voice that story. This is Enow’kin. This is “Native storytelling, but taking it and putting it into a modern form” (Borst, “Spiderwoman…Legacy” 76). Muriel Miguel and her sisters drew aesthetic understandings from their inheritance and developed these into a methodology that would serve their own project of decolonization as American Indian female “prisoners of New York” during the last gasp of the twentieth century; so, too, their daughters take up this processual legacy and tease out its elements to increase its breadth, reach and potency as a tool of decolonization in the twenty-first century.

And just as we have seen Murielle Borst passing back that bundle to her own mother—reminding her to remember her own teachings—so we can see Borst passing the gift forward and outward, reminding others to remember themselves in the stories they have inherited. To illustrate, Borst has served as a creative consultant on several non-Native productions in New York City and its environs.
During one such association with a New York company, which was mounting Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Borst was originally brought on to facilitate the integration of an American Indian aesthetic into this Euro-American production. But before layers, which were largely foreign to the cast and crew, could be woven into the (presumably more familiar) story they were telling, the storytellers first had to understand the story and to become ‘fluent’ in its language. Somehow, this just was not happening. Precious rehearsal time was passing, and they seemed to be getting nowhere. As Borst tells it, the director—likely at her wit’s end—asked her to step in and try to “get them [the actors] going” (“Spiderwoman…Legacy” 76). To meet the challenge, Borst brought the troupe into ‘Spiderwoman’s studio,’ as it were. She initiated a ‘sharing circle,’ wherein each actor retold Shakespeare’s story in his/her own words and each actor heard the others’ telling. From there, they were able to isolate the core of the play and to connect that core to personal stories “about their individual ambitions.” From there, Borst had the actors retell the stories kinetically as well as verbally: “They got on their feet and looked at our particular production, and everyone got it, because we already had an idea of this technique, and we got up and started doing it, and then the words started to come easier for the actors” (Borst, “Spiderwoman…Legacy” 76).

Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* written in 1611 (the same year as the authorized Protestant translation of the Bible commissioned by King James I was completed) is eerily prophetic. In these early stages of imperial exploration and contact, it predicts and processually analyzes the stages through which colonization would unfold over three centuries in the Americas after its writing--predicting even the reserve system and the systems of Indigenous re-education through which the suppression of Indigenous language and culture was effected. This is a European story, and its lessons were intended for a British audience. Four hundred years later, from the perspective of one for whom this story was not intended, it is particularly exciting to consider the implications of and possibilities carried within such inter-cultural encounters of the processual kind! Murielle Borst’s legacy has been built upon carefully preserved and recovered fragments of besieged ancestral lifeways. And she has utilized this legacy—in part—to link the descendants of those who struggled so mightily to annihilate those lifeways to their ancestral stories, to
languages and lifeways they have forgotten, to their abandoned inheritance. Moreover, Borst’s use of the storyweaving process in this context has served not only to foster memory but also to *implicate the storytellers in their own history* by linking the personal motivations of the descendants with the ancestral ambitions that drove the colonizing project. Again, it is only through full acceptance of and accountability to the bundles we have inherited that we can begin to move forward in a creative (as opposed to destructive) and healthy (as opposed to pathological) manner. Indeed, it is only through the manifestation of remembered connections between the colonized descendant and his/her colonizing ancestor that the connections between Native and non-Native peoples who share this land can be remembered and manifested and right-relations restored.

The potential to restore right-relations is perhaps the most significant impact of Spiderwoman Theater’s processual legacy. And this bespeaks the debt it owes to the traditional models of pedagogy and aesthetic expression from which it draws, and which (it bears repeating) root themselves in an objective to privilege the health and wellbeing of the entire community of creation across time and space over the satisfaction and success of an individual who occupies and is preoccupied by the concerns belonging to a singular temporal and geographic location.

Muriel Miguel has stated that when she began to plan *Persistence of Memory* and to interrogate the nature of legacy, questions around motherhood began to assert themselves. What constitutes a “good” mother? What constitutes a “bad” one? Who is the “hero?” Who is the “anti-hero” (Haugo, “Persistent” 65)? As she has recently observed with regard to her most recent solo piece *Red Mother*, women—particularly those who have been marginalized and oppressed—often must “capitulate” to survive and to facilitate even the slimmest chance of survival for their children. But although they have managed to “stay alive no matter how insurmountable the circumstances,” their “little victories are perceived as failures” by outsiders and often even by their own children (“A Discussion”). Certainly, as we have seen, Miguel was herself one of these children, and she may, at times, wonder if her own daughters harbor resentments towards her that are similar to those she has felt towards Elmira Miguel.
Borst is quick to emphasize that directing her own mother in a piece that explores the construct of “failed motherhood” is “not therapy,” and she is as quick to acknowledge that this exploration has helped her to come to terms with some of what may have seemed, in her filial eyes, to be mothering-failures and increased her appreciation for her mother’s successes:

But it made me give her a little bit of a break about my childhood. She always said that Joan Crawford or Lana Turner could be my mother when I gave her a hard time. And after doing this piece with her I realized that things could be bad but they could have been worse. That a love that a mother has for her child is profound. It is never broken, not even in death. (“A Discussion”)

Perhaps we begin to see here a practical address of a crucial (and often unaddressed) step in the process of decolonization, identified by Spiderwoman Theater and briefly discussed in the previous chapter of this work—the possibility of forgiveness carried in the achievement of empathic connection. In the case of Borst and Miguel, this empathic connection realizes itself through the very act of working together within the process. But it is important to recognize that the facilitation of this connection has also been built into the storyweaving process itself, and it is predicated upon the unconditional acceptance of our inherited bundles in their entirety.

*Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue* is Gloria Miguel’s most recent theatrical project. It is a one woman show, which finds its genesis in the refusal of its eighty-three-year-old creatrix to succumb to the physical deterioration and the dismissive and degrading societal attitudes that constrain, contain and silence her and so many others in her peer group. It is an intensely self-reflexive piece, which explores the roles and responsibilities of elders in today’s society. Directed by Muriel Miguel and delivered within a tight weave of personal and borrowed stories, it interrogates notions of “respect” in terms of how that respect is manifested, when it is warranted and how it is to be earned. In October 2008, Gloria Miguel performed a staged-reading of this work-in-progress at the University of
Toronto’s Robert Gill Theatre. At this time, she alternately embodied a Daughter from the Stars whose mission, the Kuna creation story tells us, it is to teach the people on earth to live; her childhood self, witnessing and experiencing abuse from her own grandmother; elderly female friends who have experienced abuse and neglect; her eldest sister who has been diagnosed, treated and forever scarred by a particularly aggressive form of non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma; Gloria-the-actress singing in a French Cabaret; Gloria-the-disappointed-octogenarian fighting to maintain her will to live; and Gloria-the-Elder reflecting on what it means to be an Elder and what is required to earn that title (see Carter, “Shaking” 11).

Early in the piece, Miguel recounts a horrifying incident during which she witnessed her maternal grandmother choking a pint-sized Elizabeth Miguel with such vigor that she lifted the child off the ground. Witnessing her grandmother’s violence through three pairs of eyes—the eyes of Gloria-the-child, of Gloria-the-elder, and of a the celestial teacher/commentator Waga Nadili--Gloria-the-storyteller, now herself a grandmother, at once interrogates and explains her lack of respect for the woman who was her “[physically] beautiful Nana”:

Waga Nadili: Woman, woman what are you doing with that child?

Gloria: That image remains in my memory; my grandmother lost my respect. How could I honor her? I honor my mother, my aunts, my grandfather.

Waga Nadili: We have to earn the right to be honored. Some of the old folks are left out and not too happy, because they are old, no longer interesting, useful, or just mean. Woman, woman, will that child honor you? (Gloria Miguel, Something Old, 2008

109 Although Waga Nadili is not strictly one of the Nis Bundor (Mojica, Personal Communication, 15 March 2010), Gloria Miguel represents her here as an elemental female who has descended from the celestial world in her elder years. Indeed, Waga Nadili seems to be working with the Nis Bundor who are much younger than she, “thickening” their function by acting as a teacher to and protector of elderly mortals.
This choking incident represents something more than simply a momentary lapse. That Elizabeth Ashton Moore was violent and that she frequently visited that violence upon the persons of her granddaughters has become, by now, a matter of public record. This remembered abuse at the hands of her grandmother is, in her eighth decade of life, a burdensome portion of Gloria Miguel’s legacy. It is a burden with which she continues to wrestle, distilling it through the storyweaving process and examining it from different angles in different lights to expose and perhaps expunge the malignant spirit lurking at its core and threatening her peace. In *Something Old, Something New*, her address is explicit and disarmingly honest. In *Persistence of Memory*, by contrast, this distillation process—her wrestling match—has been abstracted and expresses itself through dance. As she has explained:

So my Tango was just carrying the burdens of my family with me all over, and doing a dance with the burdens of my mother, my father, my grandmother, my grandfather, even the Elizabeth Ashton Moore back there—she was a nasty person. She was my grandmother. She was mean and nasty, and she used to try to beat me. She would try to beat me, and I said, “Don’t you touch me!” I hated her! She tried to beat me up, and I said, “No woman has the right, no matter how bad I am, to touch me, “Gloria has the devil in her and I’ll never touch her.” So, I protected myself from my grandmother. (G. Miguel, qtd. in Haugo, “Persistent” 64)

This process of unearthing the malignant spirits that haunt us to examine them in the light may be a crucial first step in the healing process, but it is only half of the equation. Condemnation and rejection, when they become part of a pattern that repeats itself, only weaken us and threaten to corrupt the legacies we are preparing for the next generation. Muriel Miguel, who directed *Persistence of Memory* and helped to midwife the early phases of *Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue*, emphasizes (and struggles artistically with Gloria over) the fact that apart from Elizabeth Ashton Moore’s violence towards her grandchildren, there are other stories—stories, which contain her essence and stories which define her legacy (Pearson 14). There are her many struggles, her capitulations, her disappointments and her hard-edged, un-pretty, unrelenting love for her issue without which that issue may not have survived. Peeling back the layers, finding the questions, and following the pain… These are
the next processual steps towards which Muriel Miguel hopes to nudge her sister in the development of

*Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue.*

[T]here’s another story there. I don’t know it. I only know it from feelings about it, you know. Of this woman who came from Virginia who during the Civil War and so on, went back into the plantation and wouldn’t have anything to do with the Civil War. Who, when she finally came out, found that she didn’t have any land, and she had to make believe that she was a slave to get land. So, there’s great bitterness there. I think there were other things too. At the same time, these were women that were midwives and herbalist, [sic] and so all of them worked, went on horseback. My grandmother and great-grandmother went on horseback to deliver babies on the plantation and outside where Indians lived […] It’s not nice. She was not nice. She was not a nice lady. She did all kinds of things to her kids, but at the same time, I can stand here and say, “I was born on the floor on 333 Degraw Street.” And my grandmother pulled me out, all of that back there that makes us who we are now. We hate them. My sister hates that grandma, and I can’t exactly, maybe it’s because I grew up later, I can’t exactly hate her. I can’t because I know that she was a barefoot woman, and I know that she was a midwife. And those things bring great strength to me. (M. Miguel, qtd. in Pearson 14-15)

Imbedded between the layers gleams a shining moment of redemption and all the possibilities it contains. Although (as of this writing) it has yet to be fully realized within *Something Old, Something, New,* it is apparent that through the application of the Enow’kin principle (the inclusion and full consideration of multiple, contradictory texts) and through the process of intra-generational struggle (two sisters, each ‘fighting for her stuff’) the restoration of right inter-generational relations is an achievable goal.

This potential for restoration, which permeates the work of these matriarchs, reveals itself more explicitly within an intra-generational partnership forged by their daughters. “A Valentine to my Grandmother” written and performed by Murielle Borst and Monique Mojica is a contemporary honor song, which documents the history of creation (in the story of Sky Woman) and the history of their own maternal line. Armed with the stories passed down to them by the women who raised them, Borst and Mojica sing out the story of the barefoot women—the midwives—who ran to survive and who ran to ensure the survival of the daughters they would bear. In song, they herald the stores of hope that they, the
issue of these women who ran on bare feet, have inherited. These stores they will increase and pass on to the generations to come.

We are descendants from the river and the stars
We are of the eternal Turtle Clan
We are the next rememberers
We carry the songs in our hearts
We carry the stories in our blood,
The hope in our souls
We are the past, the present, the future
Take this story and hear the hope
Take this story and hear our voices of our nations.
(see Borst, “Spiderwoman…Legacy” 85)

The power of this inter-generational reconciliation lies not in some rigid adherence to a sugarcoated history in which unacknowledged human brokenness lies festering in the dark. This is not an act of forgetting or of denying portions of our legacy. Nor is it an act of capitulation, which traps coming generations in an unending cycle of brokenness. Instead, like running water, it carries the promise of new life, new beginnings. As Muriel Miguel has remarked of this song, “A new creation story is being made. It’s going again, and it doesn’t necessarily mean that it’ll be in [Spiderwoman’s] words or [Muriel Miguel’s] words, but it goes on” (qtd. in Haugo, “Persistent” 66). The legacy that Spiderwoman Theater has prepared for its issue will shift and reconfigure, looking back to inform the present even as it moves relentlessly forward articulating itself in new words carried on the breath of new human beings speaking out to and back at new worlds.
Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way: New Ripples on Ancient Pools

The final work under discussion in this project is a work that is, at this writing, still in the early phases of development. Yet the processual investigations undertaken in these early stages have already revealed new insights into the “undercarriage” of Spiderwoman Theater’s processual vehicle, and they offer glimpses of incommensurable potential pertaining to both the evolution of Spiderwoman’s storyweaving method and the construction of a flexible framework, which will facilitate the decolonization of the artists who create within its structure and the audiences for whom they create. As we have already seen, Kuna aesthetic praxis stands upon a structure of four supporting principles. These are abstraction, metaphor, duality and repetition, and multi-dimensionality. So too, in Kuna Yala each building or nega (house) rests upon four supporting posts. But the nega is much more than just a building in Kuna Yala; it is a concept, which contains the entire body politic and cosmo-vision of the community. Where the Renaissance Monarch was the head (mind/consciousness/nerve centre/guiding force/oral communicator) of the state and its body (brawn, hunger and satiation), the people he led, so the Kuna Sahilas are understood to be the supporting posts upon which the entire weight of the tule nega (community) rests. The people, in this construction, form its roof and the walls; it is, after all, a house of people. Each building that is constructed—be it public Gathering House, family domicile or commercial business—presents itself as a micro-version of and within the cosmos. And each construct outside tule nega presents itself to the people as a house of some kind or other. An industrial urban centre for instance, is nia nega—the devil’s house. Waga nega is the White man’s house. And the cosmos are expressed as the “big house”—negaduu (DeLeón Kantule, Rehearsals, November 2007).

The community Gathering House in Kuna Yala is a singular physical representation of the community—tule nega—and the manifestation of the overriding concept that governs that community. But it is also the physical space in which creation and re-creation (acts of communal survivance) engender continuance. Here, generations of tule (human beings) are formed and re-formed through story and ceremony. Here, the stories of their humanity are documented in textile (by women) and woven into
baskets (by men). Here, the individual and collective transformations without which birth, adulthood, creation, marriage, procreation, destruction, illness, healing and death would be rendered meaningless have been marked, remembered and facilitated within an ancient ceremonial matrix within which the Kuna human has been created anew since the beginning of the beginning of the beginning. And each time a new Gathering House is to be erected or each time an existing Gathering House is to be restored, it is the Sahila who is sent to the most sacred places deep within the mountains to select the trees, which will support its weight. Like the human being who supports the weight of his community, these trees must stand straight and solid. They must be free of termites, which would degrade their strength. Both the trees and the humans, whose duty it is to select the most suitable of them, must be incorruptible and able to fulfill a weighty responsibility for a considerable length of time with grace and fortitude (DeLeón Kantule, Rehearsals, November 2007).

Monique Mojica’s Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way began in a place of personal crisis for the artist and presents itself as an archive of her struggle to facilitate her own healing by reconnecting that life to the lives and doings of the elemental feminine forces upon whom the creation of her Kuna and Powhatan nations rests (Mojica, Rehearsals, November 2007). Its first phase of development (2007) rested upon the collaborative efforts of Mojica herself (writer/performer), Floyd Favel (Director), Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule (visual artist / cultural advisor) and Erika Iserhoff (Designer). Here, Mojica embodied Sky Woman, recreating her free-fall to this plane of being and the beginnings of life on Turtle’s back; Olonadili, the youngest daughter from the Stars who, after being prevented from returning to her celestial home, taught the human community how to feel and process emotion, how to sing and how to grieve; Olowaili, the morning star for whom Mojica was named; and herself in key moments of her history during which the choices she had made or the circumstances into which she had been plunged echoed those cosmic choices and circumstances that had led to the creation of new worlds (see Carter, “Chocolate Woman Visions” 3-4).
During its first phase of development, several key areas of investigation were identified by Mojica and Favel, and others presented themselves as the investigation unfolded. Mojica initially set out to align herself with Kuna tradition in order to find herself amidst the fragmentation and cultural disruption that she felt characterized her existence. And she sought to find her way into the traditional stories as Kuna tradition prescribes. “Apprenticing” herself, as it were, to cultural advisor and visual artist DeLeón Kantule, Mojica earned for herself a profound intimacy with the female forces of Kuna creation; with the Kuna names, which had been bestowed upon her mother, her aunties and herself; with the histories documented in the molas and beadwork, which she has inherited, acquired or seen in private and public collections; with the structure and rhythms of the Kuna language; and with particular songs and medicine chants documented in the pictographs.

Beginning from a place of having (as opposed to a place of loss) and from a place of victory (by virtue of her Kuna name, which identifies her as a Daughter from the Stars) as opposed to a place of victimry, Mojica aesthetically challenged herself to find and manifest the relationship between the living text (herself) and the textiles upon which the cosmological characters of Kuna tradition were suspended around her. At the same time, she was kinetically investigating the relationship between the character on the stage and the pictographic character on the “page.” Mojica’s process within this developmental workshop began with her embodiment of pictographs as she told the traditional stories they document.

As the work progressed, however, it became apparent that she was creating pictographs—inscribing them in three dimensions onto the space of the studio. At this point, Favel instructed her to document her improvised stories. And it was an exciting surprise to all when Mojica found herself notating this work in two-dimensional pictographs of her own design. These would become her script. And this stage in the investigation would ultimately examine the application of movement motifs accumulated in Kuna texts to the contemporary performer’s kinetic realization of the content of those texts on stage. In testing, the pictographic method as a dramaturgical base, Floyd Favel was ultimately probing his hypothesis that “movement as the basis of any Native Performance Culture” would reveal
itself as a key curricular unit within a contemporary processual framework, which would be teachable to Indigenous artists from any and every nation (Favel, Rehearsals, March, 2009).

As the Chocolate Woman Collective’s first processual investigations unfolded in November 2007, a crucial objective began to articulate itself. Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule told us the story of the Paluwala Tree (Tree of Salt). The Paluwala Tree is the site of life and plenty on this earth. But within the place where life abounds, greed is also waiting to be born. As DeLeón Kantule has told this story, the uppermost branches of this tree held all salt water, sweet water, fish, soil, vegetation, plantains, bananas, corn, yucca, etc. But a “fat man” lived at the top of the Paluwala Tree, hording all these good things for himself while the people below starved. Eventually, the Kuna people decided to chop down the tree and to release all its goodness over all the earth.

Its trunk was thick and its wood, hard. After each day of chopping, the people had only managed to cut into the trunk by a few inches. To complicate matters, each night while the people slept, the trunk seemed to repair itself. They could make no headway. Finally, one was assigned to keep watch at night and find out how the Tree of Salt was repairing itself. This one discovered that, by night, four golden guardians (a deer, a snake, a frog and a demon) would lick the “wounds” the people had inflicted with their tools the day before, and the tree would be healed. Once the people discovered this, things progressed much more quickly. They enlisted the help of a celestial archer (brother to the Sun) who killed the golden spirits one by one. And when these were dead, the people were able to gradually cut through the trunk until they felled the Paluwala Tree entirely.

As DeLeón Kantule tells it, that fat man in the Tree of Salt is a metaphor for those who horde (for themselves) those things that should belong to all and who, in so doing, work against the community. And as Floyd Favel opined after hearing this story, “theatre in North America is situated in Paluwala” (Rehearsals, November 2007). Or perhaps, if we were to put it another way, theatre in North America might be likened to this Tree of Salt; it contains all the goodness, sweetness and life-enhancing properties we could want. But at the heart of theatre today sits a collective, self-serving “fat man” who controls its
infrastructures, its accepted rules, its accepted forms and who polices the gateway prohibiting all those who do not conform a platform from which to speak (or even to witness).

What happens to Indigenous Story when the manner of its telling is policed by forces that have historically sought to eradicate historical memory? What happens to the poetics of decolonization when its artists find themselves struggling to articulate their works within an inhospitable and seemingly inalterable infrastructure built upon the political, pedagogical, spiritual and aesthetic mandates of colonization? These are the questions engendered by DeLeón Kantule’s telling. And these questions discovered the central objective that underpins three decades of creation by the Miguel sisters, almost two decades of investigation into Native Performance Culture and the making of Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way.

With Chocolate Woman, the collective seeks to shake “the house of Paluwala” and to reconfigure the infrastructure of those sites out of which we create, perform and witness Indigenous story. This is a complex project, which involves the re-structuring of both external and internal ‘gathering houses.’ Externally, Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way is faced with a formidable task. To facilitate the participation of an Elder who is in her eighth decade of life, for instance, requires much planning and deliberation on the production side and negotiation with granting agencies on the financial side. Locating suitable performance and rehearsal space is not as simple as it may sound. “Accessible” theatres in Toronto may accommodate some differently-abled patrons, but they generally do not build those accommodations into the spaces of performance. An elevator may transport patrons to the auditorium, but if a performer wishes to access that lift from the dressing rooms, s/he will often have to go through the house, ascending the raked levels to reach the public exit in order to enjoy a public convenience. Alternatively, the stage may be easily accessed by all performers regardless of physical capacity while the dressing rooms are located below the stage and only accessible by stairs. As performers, we are taught to welcome the idea that our bodies are our instruments and should be so primed as to accept any punishment. Elderly, weak or “cumbersome” bodies, are by-and-large unwelcome on the professional
stages of the western world. Indeed, the architecture of these stages seems almost designed to prohibit access to such bodies. Theatre is a business, and its success depends upon the ability of its artists to “produce” in a timely, cost-effective manner. In accordance with union guidelines, performative storytellers come together for eight hours per day, six days per week, to rehearse for a two-to-three week period. And when we apply for grants from provincial and national arts councils, there is little leeway to extend a rehearsal period (by double or triple its duration), to cut work days by half, to include more (fully paid) rest-days in the work week to accommodate frailer constitutions or to hire full-time helpers who would devote themselves to Elders during the work day and after hours. Some bodies require an investment of more time and greater resources than (it might seem to some) the fruits of their labors warrant. Furthermore, Western theatre audiences, it appears, do not even notice the absence of elderly or differently-abled storytellers on the stage. Monique Mojica, after all, has been playing Elders on stage and in film since she was thirty-five years old! And as she has noted, “there’s something wrong with that” (Mojica, University of Toronto, 6 October 2008).

At the same time, the Chocolate Woman Collective must contend with notions of what theatre “is,” which are held by Artistic Directors, Producers and Granting Agencies. In 2008, for instance, after an exciting performance, which showcased the fruits of the collective’s first series of processual investigations, Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way was excluded from an important theatre festival, which showcases new works, because its Artistic Director was not sure whether Mojica’s work could be called “theatre” or not (Mojica, Personal Communication). Looking ahead, when it comes time to publish the script in pictographic notation, it will be interesting to note the reaction of those who control the public dissemination of play texts. Who will publish it? How will it be marketed? Where will it be sold?

Can acts of survivance by Indigenous artists rightly be called “theatre?” Is it necessary for those artists to alter the shape of their works to bring them into alignment with the standards and structures, which have been designed to contain and support the performed history of the colonizers and their descendants? If Indigenous theatre artists capitulate to the existing power structures and internalize the
processes, frameworks, and standards of the dominant culture what happens to the stories they tell? What happens to the audiences for whom they create? If these artists resist, will they, through the denial of funding, support and exposure, be effectively silenced?

Quite early within the first developmental workshop of *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*, Favel and Mojica articulated the crucial link between aesthetic objective and artist-objective. Mojica had initiated this project to achieve wholeness amidst the fragmentation and imbalance of cultural disruption. Once realized, this project would then chart the landmarks and map a way for others towards the achievement of this objective: she is, in effect, composing and documenting a contemporary ‘medicine chant’ that will serve other Indigenous peoples afflicted by the dis-ease of colonization. But to properly effect this, the external “gathering house” (the site of public spectacle) will have to be reconfigured. And to effect this reconfiguration of the external, the internal gathering houses of Mojica and the members of the *Chocolate Woman* collective will have to undergo a like transformation. Indeed, as Favel posited, the only way to uproot the external structure from the House of *Paluwa* is for Mojica to create herself anew by converting a personal site of isolated angst into an “internal gathering house” through her reconnection with and articulation of the sacred stories first articulated in the Gathering Houses of *tule nega* (Rehearsals, November 2007). If, as Cherokee scholar and author Thomas King posits, “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (153) and if, as Kuna cosmology has it, we are, each of us, a wall, post or roof tile in the greater Gathering House in which the stories that are articulated play themselves out, then not only are we made or unmade by the stories we tell but also we make and unmake the world that surrounds us and all of its structures in our telling. “Want a different ethic? Tell a different story” (King 164). Want a different world? Create yourself anew.

Four decades ago, Gloria Miguel set out upon a journey to do just this. She undertook her first of three trips back to the land of her father to recover the “building materials” belonging to a pre-colonized world that she might facilitate the process of decolonization in herself, her sisters, their children, and the theatre they would create. In the fall of 2008, Mojica retraced her mother’s journey in the company of
Erika Iserhoff and Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule. The trio engaged with a diverse array of Kuna musicians and artists in a series of Dialogues on Indigeneity in Contemporary Art and Performance. At the same time, she was able to reestablish the familial connections her mother had made so many years ago; she began the process of learning the Kuna language; and she was able to confer with the Sahilas of her community to obtain their permission and blessings to tell the Kuna creation stories in this project. In February 2009, Mojica returned to Kuna Yala alone. This time, under the guidance of Kuna actor/director José Colman, she began a series of intense discussions and participated in workshops with a vibrant assortment of Kuna musicians and visual artists and amassed an impressive array of digital archives of Kuna Elders speaking and artisans at work. Here, she learned that Colman’s other grandfather Igwanigdibippi had been, with Nele Kantule, part of the 1924 delegation that had traveled to America (Washington, DC and New York City) to solicit American support for the planned 1925 uprising. At the cottage of Richard O. Marsh, Igwanigdibippi had painted a map, described by Mojica as ”part historical document, part political manifesto and part magical chart, which proved to have a great impact and influence on the work” (Personal Communication, 15 March 2010). This document is housed at the Smithsonian in Washington, D. C. Hence, collaborators Monique Mojica and Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule undertook a research trip to the Smithsonian in September 2009 “to view and be inspired by their Kuna collection,” which includes this map (see Appendix Nine) and a large collection of pictographic ledger drawings. Following this research trip, Mojica traveled to Santa Fe one month later to continue her investigations with Dr. Brenda Farnell (Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of Illinois). Together, Farnell and Mojica created a series of practicable steps towards somatic decolonization, kinetically discovering the pathways by way of which “the living breathing body [can take] on the architectural blueprint of the pictograph” or of any material artifact onto which cultural memory has been inscribed (Mojica, Personal Communication, 13 April 2009). To this end, they created the Mola Dulad (Living Mola), “a pictographic score consisting [of] long strips of banner paper notating movement

110 Colman is the grandson of Simral Colman who was the original leader of the Dule Revolution in 1925.
impulses.” And this work was ultimately “absorbed into the work of the design team and by the rest of the collaborators. Its practical application to scriptwriting was shared in an Open Studio in Toronto on November 6, 2009” (Mojica, Personal Communication, 15 March 2010).

Already, the circle begins to complete itself. The project that her mother began so long ago to reestablish the linkages between herself and the community of Antonio Miguel continues and grows, deepening those concatenations. Gloria Miguel returned from Kuna Yala with names for her sisters and children, with greetings from their relatives, with papers attesting to their citizenship, with knowledge of ceremony and with stories of the land. These she wove into the works she co-created with her sisters and into the process by which they created. These, then, she wove into the bundle, which is Mojica’s

111 Since Mojica’s return to Kuna Yala, these connections have deepened and the weave become more intricate. First, the cast of “characters” has grown to eight with Mojica and Miguel each embodying four. The cast size coincides with both the Galu (spiritual levels) within which Kuna cosmology unfolds and with the eight-stage dramaturgical process to which the team’s processual investigations have led. This process of distilling text, abstracting the sacred and retaining the kwage (essence) of cultural memory is still a discovery-in-progress and will certainly evolve. But to date, eight key steps have been identified, and Mojica has identified them as: (i) the internalization of the stories through the embodiment of the living pictographs and the generation of text in English; (ii) the notation of this text in pictographs; (iii) the translation of the pictographic notation into Spanish text; (iv) the translation of the Spanish text into Kuna; (v) the creation of a literal translation from the Kuna back into Spanish; (vi) the translation of this Spanish text back into English; (vii) the embodiment of the new “script”; (viii) and from this, the generation of a new pictographic score—the mola dulad (living mola).

Textually, we begin here to see the contemporary Indigenous body as the crucible within which mythos-out-of-time is remembered, distilled and transfigured that it might play itself out over and over again in all times. By way of example, in November 2007 Mojica negotiated the psycho-spiritual undercurrents of key personal events by locating the threads that connected personal descent, capture and transformation with the descent of Sky Woman and Olonadili from the celestial to the earth planes and with the transfiguration of these elemental females and of the worlds in which they found themselves trapped. By the second developmental workshop in March 2009, Mojica had begun to embody her own return to her grandfather’s island (Nargana). Again she saw, for the first time, Nargana’s Ibe Don—a mountain, which resembles a reclining woman, and who is also recognized as an element of Napguana (Mother Earth). Ibe Don and Napguana are elemental females played by Gloria Miguel. Here, then, we witnessed several homecomings and several promises of transformation all unfolding at the same moment and linking the re-creation of the contemporary Indigenous human with the Powhatan (and Haudenosaunee) Creation and these transformative acts with the celestial midwives of Kuna humanness. Like Sky Woman who hurtles towards the unknown with only water below her, Mojica hurtles (on a small skiff) towards a first knowing with only water below her, only sky above, and wind buffeting her from all sides. Like Sky Woman or the Daughters from the Stars, Mojica hurtles towards transformation in the eternal present (Rehearsals, March 2009).

As of its third developmental workshop and Open Studio (October-November 2009) and in anticipation of the fourth and final phase of production, the Chocolate Woman Collective has expanded to include Ric Knowles (Dramaturg), José Colman (Kuna Consultant and possible Assistant Director), Gloria Miguel (Performer), Kuna musician Marden Paniza, Designers Erika Iserhoff and Michel Charbonneau, and Kinetographer Mola Dulad (Documenter of the Living Mola) Brenda Farnell.
inheritance. These are the fragments—the remnants of the dispossessed—to which her daughter now turns to create herself anew and through which she will expand and extend the processual and personal legacy she has inherited.

And in this, Mojica has been able to “teach back” to her teachers by clarifying what may have been “lost in translation.” By virtue of the era into which she has been born, the bundle that has already been amassed and passed on to her, her marriage to a traditional healer from Chiapas, and her proximity to and intimacy with the great grandson of Nele Kantule (the celebrated leader of the 1925 Kuna uprising), Mojica has been outfitted for her journey with tools her mother did not possess when she returned to her father’s home. One of the most prosaic, yet vital, of these is language. The first language of the Kuna people is, of course, Dulegaya. The language of their colonizer is Spanish, and this is the language in which most Kuna communicate with outsiders. Generally, few Kuna people speak English at all, and those who do speak very little.

Gloria Miguel speaks only English, so when she traveled to Kuna Yala, communication was difficult, and much was lost in translation. On her first trip, her Uncle Joe who was proficient only in Dulegaya served as her guide and her translator. As he was not highly proficient in English, the process of communication was somewhat cumbersome, filtered as it was through a translator who may not have entirely captured the ideas and questions his niece was trying to express or who may not have had the English words to communicate the complex ideas communicated through him to his charge. During her second and third trips, she was still obliged to communicate—imperfectly--with her Kuna relatives through a translator.

Mojica, by contrast, is fluent in Spanish, as she has communicated daily with her husband and his family in that language for the past two decades. Hence, she is able to communicate more effectively with her colleague and erstwhile traveling companion and translator DeLeón Kantule (who is fluent in both Spanish and Dulegaya). And of course, she could communicate directly with her relatives in Kuna Yala in their second language, relying upon DeLeón Kantule to translate into Spanish any concepts these relatives
found necessary to communicate in their first language. Moreover, Mojica seems to possess an innate facility for languages, and the rapidity of her expanding grasp of Kuna vocabulary and grammatical structure has made itself apparent in her studio work.

Language recovery is key to the development of *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*. As Mojica has recently observed, for the work to progress as far as it can go, she must become proficient in *Dulegaya* (Personal Communication, 23 October 2009). There are complex bundles carried in each Kuna word; to internalize these stories—to become their teller—she must ‘own’ these bundles by committing herself to a profoundly intimate linguistic relationship. Indeed, quite early in the process, her body began to signal its demands for that intimacy. During the first developmental workshop, as Mojica’s body articulated the pictographs in “revelatory movement,” she found her vocal instrument straining to articulate the Kuna words it described. She “had,” in her words, “to articulate [her]self in Kuna” (Rehearsals, November 2007). Indeed, her linguistic development from the time of *Chocolate Woman*’s first workshop to its third developmental workshop in November 2009 is most impressive. And in this, she has become a teacher to her first teacher, facilitating Gloria Miguel’s connection to the language of her ancestors, interpreting complex conceptual word-bundles and gently putting the language in her mother’s mouth. Here, then, is a priceless instance of reciprocity—an inter-generational moment of inestimable value to the decolonizing project.

Indeed, through the project of language recovery, our communities have happened upon another avenue towards the restoration of inter-generational relations. As our children and grandchildren attend programs and schools that include First Nations languages in their curricula, these children bring home what they learn to the generations of parents and grandparents who were robbed of their languages in the residential/Indian schools, which they were forced to attend. And as these tender young ones with their gentle voices remind the battle-scarred and broken to remember and to articulate themselves in long-forbidden-and-forgotten words, new human beings are formed and new worlds, brought into being.
This new relationship that Mojica has been forging with her mother carries infinite potential for re-writing and re-righting. To wit, she has been able to re-right some long-held misconceptions about the Kuna names bestowed upon the Miguel sisters by the Sahila Tomàs DeLeón Kantule. Each of the sisters is named (as are many Kuna women) for one of the Nis Bundor (Daughters from the Stars). And for some time now, it has been assumed that each sister’s Kuna name corresponds to her place in the family—youngest, middle, eldest. However, during the first developmental workshop of Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way as Mojica, under the guidance of Tomàs DeLeón’s son, was working through the history of the Nis Bundor, she discovered that only the name of the youngest daughter—Olonadili—specifically refers to her birth order. The birth order of the others remains unknown (Rehearsals, November 2008).

In addition to carrying new information, old stories and an ancient language upon which she and her relatives might build their new “Gathering House,” Mojica labors to re-right the position of the Elder in a world that has displaced her and denied her value. Utilizing her inheritance—Spiderwoman’s storyweaving process—as a point of departure and operating within the four guiding aesthetic principles specific to Kuna artisanship, Mojica and the Chocolate Woman Collective have already made a vital and substantial contribution to the poetics of decolonization. They are shaking the house of Paluwala and writing the “blueprint from which to construct our new house on existing structures and systems from within indigenous knowledge” (Personal Communication, 12 April 2009). A new human being is being formed. A new world begins…

**Beginnings**

In the summer of 2003 at a Conference of German and Canadian Universities in Berlin, Cree Playwright Tomson Highway told us a story. At a yearly dinner, during which Canadian artists and select corporate supporters meet to share ideas and network, a highly accomplished doctor was seated across the table
from him. This doctor looked the playwright up and down and then observed laconically, “That’s a very nice shirt, Tomson. Grants must have been good this year.” Highway immediately grasped his inference and was so shocked by it that he could make no response. This doctor, Highway told us, was expressing his subtle distaste at the idea of a system wherein a nation’s artists receive financial support from its citizens. And he was subtly accusing Highway of misusing that support (i.e. by wasting taxpayers’ money on fine clothing). “What I should have said,” Highway told us in Berlin, “is this: you are a good doctor, are you not? And you are paid well for this—by the taxpayers. You believe this is fair, because you are good at your job, and you fulfill a necessary function. I, too, am a healer. And through my work, I heal many people before they ever have to come to you.” Highway’s assessment of his personal and professional identity—of his role as artist within his community and the responsibility that entails—is one that is shared by Aboriginal artists across Turtle Island. The Native artist is one who commits her entire being to the project of healing.

In the three decades of its existence, Spiderwoman Theater has dedicated all of its labors to the fulfillment of this responsibility, and the legacy it has prepared throughout its labors will enable others to continue and build upon their good work. Perhaps, Algonquian Artistic Director Yvette Nolan has best articulated the debt owed to these grandmothers of Native theatre by Aboriginal theatre practitioners and audiences across Turtle Island. Her own theatre, Toronto’s Native Earth Performing Arts, and its artists, she testifies, “stand on the shoulders” of Spiderwoman Theater (“Politics” 4). These three little brown girls from Red Hook, Brooklyn have not only spun a second generation of ‘Spider women’—their genealogical inheritors—who carry on, teach and who are actively advancing and evolving the Spiderwoman Method of Storyweaving but also have engendered countless aesthetic inheritors from all four directions in their work with communities around the world.

Now, perhaps, it is time for those of us who stand upon Spiderwoman’s shoulders to return the gift by supporting our Elders in accordance with their needs, not in accordance with what we have decided they need: chapan. It is in this spirit then that I wish to close this chapter. I am still haunted by
the idea that perhaps we—Native artists, audiences and communities—have not adequately expressed our awareness of the debt we owe to the Miguel sisters (although I want to believe that this project has begun to address and redress some of those areas in which we may have been remiss). And this haunts me, I think, because of the doubts that Gloria Miguel has, as of late, expressed to me as she has reflected upon her life in art:

You know the funny thing, Jill, when I talk about all of this experience I think that I should be the healthiest, strongest woman in the world. And still I find myself quite weak and stupid and dumb, because… I don’t know. It’s good on stage, but it’s so hard to do in real life. “You found all that power,” you say. “You should be so strong and spiritual.” And I’m not. You know, it’s like we’re left…

I don’t know how my sister Elizabeth feels, and I don’t know how Muriel feels. They have different stories with their power. But I feel now that people think… There I go again with that clown character… I’m spiritual, and I have strength, and I have all this. And I can’t say, “Yeah, I’m …”

I’m strong, I realize, but I am not as strong as I want to be. And what did I learn from all that? I don’t know.

It’s not always automatic and successful. It may come, because I feel that doing all that work should be useful in my life, and I find myself after a while without work, without money. Without. Without. Without. And I say, “What good is it to me? What did I get for it--from it? Is it here, and I don’t see where I can use it? What good does it do?” (Interview, 2007)

In the final analysis, we are fragile, finite flesh. However rich the legacy we have built, we are secretly tortured by fears that it is not enough—that regardless of all we may have accomplished, our best efforts count for naught. And so I conclude here by offering a strong shoulder to Gloria Miguel and to her sisters that they might, if they so desire, stand upon it. From this vantage point, I invite them to look upon all they have done and all that is being accomplished because of the good work they have begun. Story is the last site of Native sovereignty. And the healthy, sovereign communities that we imagine for our children will ultimately emerge out of the Stories “of our becoming, of our becoming whole”—Stories told by artists who live the telling and “make creation story begin again in life as in art” (Mojica & Knowles, “Creation” 6). This is the “house” that Spiderwoman has built. This is the bundle the Miguel
sisters have assembled for their heirs presumptive. Theirs is the blind leap that we must imitate—despite the doubts that may assail us—because without that leap, transformation cannot occur.

This is not a conclusion. Nor ought we try to write one. We stand ready to be transformed at the dawning of a new creation.


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112 Page NA= Page not available. Citations bearing this notation belong to articles (generally theatre reviews from around the world), which have been deposited with NAWPA. While the copies of such articles are quite legible, many are missing their page numbers. NAWPA is currently in the process of scanning these articles for an online public archive.


(Summer 2006): 13-17. Print.


Justice, Daniel Heath. “Renewing the Fire: Notes Toward the Liberation of English Studies.”


NAWPA. The Native American Women Playwrights Archive in the Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University (Ohio) Libraries.


Page NA. Print.


“Spiderwoman Papers.” NAWPA: Native American Women Playwrights Archive in the Walter


Appendices
Appendix One

Anishinaabe Earth Diver Story

Some of my favorite tellings of this (re)creation story place responsibility for the flood squarely on the shoulders of that mischievous miscreant Nanabozho. I favor such tellings, because they clearly map a transformational journey wherein even the most wanton, self-serving cravings, which carry the potential to engender destruction, may be chastened and reconfigured into selfless creativity benefiting all. The rascally buffoon for whose vengeful acts the entire Creation suffers (as the flood, which is intended to destroy him/her, engulfs the entire earth) becomes the culture-hero upon whose agency and under whose direction the entire earth is created anew. As this transformative agent learns and, in turn, teaches us, responsibility and agency extend far beyond the individual. Each act (no matter how singular or self-reflexive) carries repercussions, which may significantly affect the larger community of creation and which may endure long after the original “actor” has moved on to indulge other impulses or has forgotten all impulse, ceased all action, and abandoned this “mortal coil.”

Some Odawa tellings characterize the great flood as a consequence of man’s misdoings—the abandonment of the Seven Grandfather Teachings—and recount the re-creation of the world as a seamless, divinely inspired process (see Pflug 128-129). In such tellings, Creator directs Nanabozho to recreate the world, and this one immediately commissions Muskrat (the least likely candidate to succeed in this enterprise) to dive for the clod of dirt out of which the new earth will be formed. Other tellings draw out the process, as various larger, stronger and seemingly more adept creatures each by each volunteer for the task and fail. By the time, Muskrat volunteers, hope has waned, and a general lack of support for Muskrat and confidence in his (or her) ability to succeed is collectively voiced. But regardless of the telling, it is generally the small and humble Muskrat who delivers the raw stuff of creation, so that the process can begin anew; and we are made to understand, in this, that all creatures, no matter how small or seemingly humble, have important roles to play as sacred agents in the ongoing process of creation.

For those who may be unfamiliar with the Earth Diver story, I offer a portion of Kim Echlin’s evocative translation of a traditional telling, which picks up just after Otter, Loon and Beaver have failed in their attempts to obtain the raw material Nanabozho so desperately needs to re-form the earth:

Taiya Nanabush! He was really afraid!
Oh! then he remembered Mushrat [sic]
“Hey, you dive.”
“Alright, I’ll get wet.”

“Ey! Muskrat, be careful.”

Taiya Muskrat lifted his tail,

Then kwack! It sounded like that.

Oh! Muskrat swam around,

soon he came in sight of trees and

he hadn’t drowned yet…

then he got halfway down the trees and

on the bottom he went unconscious

but not before he had taken some earth in his mouth,

and some in his hands holding tight,

and some around his stiff poker.

All the while Nanabush was watching for him.

Taiya! he saw a ball of fur floating on the water

and he picked it up

and for no reason he opened up the hand.

Taiya he held the earth clasped in his hand!

And again, in the other hand he held earth tight

and there on his poker he looked.

Still more earth!

and there down his throat was lots more.

And so Nanabush blew on him and again Muskrat lived.

Nanabush dried the earth,

“All right I will complete the earth.”

Nanabush blew on it.

Kuniginin [the breath of creation], a little island floated there!

And already the manidoog [spirits] came out of the water. He spoke to them,
“Slowly! Later when the earth is bigger you will come out!”

Again, he blew, a great island floated there,
and then where he blew was much earth.
And more life stirred the manidoog.
Again he blew on the earth.
He spoke to the one of swift flight, Falcon,
“Let’s go, fly around the earth, find out how large it is.”
For some time he was gone,
then he arrived back and said,
“It is not so very large.”
Again Nanabush breathed on it,
a long time he breathed on it,
Again he spoke,
“Let’s go, you Raven, learn how large is the earth.”
Sure enough Raven started out.
It is uncertain how many months Raven was gone.
Later he returned.
“I wasn’t able to learn how large is the earth,
I ran out of earth.”
So Nanabush spoke to Raven,
“So that you will be proud I will create you,
how would you be proud?”
“Make me as the blue sky on a clear day Nanabush.”
So sure enough Nanabush touched him blue,
and this now is Raven,
created by Nanabush. (Echlin, qtd. in Ballinger 2-3)
Appendix Two

The Fittin’ Room (Spiderwoman Theater)

“Pam’s Ed. (March)”

Courtesy of the Native American Women Playwrights Archive (NAWPA)

In the Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University (Ohio) Libraries.

(Please note, I have attempted to transcribe a handwritten document, which is replete with crossed out phrases and some illegible sections, including marginalia)

[PAGE ONE]

Cheer: I said: straight, gay, young, fat, feminist, old

It ain’t fittin’ – Shake that thing

“The Way We Were” (hum) Eva – words

Class Photo

Questions > beadwork > cancer/moon

3 actress/fem.

Gloria’s Testimony – I am a…

Am I Paranoid Lisa

It’s hard being a woman-- Eva

[This is fem. Theatre Lisa]

Spike & Sport

Feelings Pam/Eva

Questions punk/pink/understand this

Psychotic Episode / Lesbian Muriel

Lisa’s Testimony

Mood for Love / get real / Muriel

I want I want
Mood for Love (whistle) / 1st Encounter

I want [illegible] -- Eliz. Gloria & Eva

Questions

[illegible]

Are you Punk – into S&M – Could tell by the way you turned around

whips & chains

Hey Butch Butchie

Fem. Could tell by the way you didn’t turn around

Names

Do you like -- --- ---

10 Little Indians

Grand Canyon – Hey Minnie ha ha / scalp

There goes the neighborhood

13 13 13

[PAGE TWO]

Straight

Gay

Short fat skinny

Blond& brown

Young & old

And

Wishy washy

That’s the way we are

Throw Eva down
All look

[PAGE THREE]

Closet Radical (Eva & Gloria)

Spike & Sport

Blondes / Eva fem.

Esther Williams

Motherless Child

Opera

Dinner Party

But is she gay

(Lisa) 42nd St.


I don’t like you

Eat Momma

10 Little Indians

Indian Love Call

Ladies Room – Muriel: Excuse me! This is the ladies room / Pam: (scream) / Gloria: (looks and walks out)

Telephone never rings – G[loria]

Friendship

But is she sexy / Sexy on 7 > Gloria Questions

P-Delilah

I used to have a lover

Now that I’m free, what do I do about being alone?

[illegible]

[illegible]
Eva’s Chicken / Birth of a woman

Spike & Sport

[PAGE FOUR]

Eva: Am I not a woman--Has not a woman hands? Has not a woman eyes, organs, dimensions, senses, affectations [sic], feelings, passions

I’ll buy my own (Puttin’ on the Ritz)

Lisa & G[loria] Can I buy you a drink? Eva – I’ll have a glass of white wine

P[am] Can I buy you a drink

M[uriel] Hey, Can I buy you a drink (to Lisa)

E[va] Hey Mama (to Lisa)

M[uriel] Do you have a light (to Pam)

L[isa] & G[loria] Are you lonely (reach [for each]other)

E[va] Can I buy you a drink ([to] Muriel)

All No thanks. I’ll buy my own

After show comments

I just wanted to have a real conversation. Not Rhetoric.

March – Lisa begin march. Muriel last on – Eva begin Sat.
Appendix Three

(Courtesy of the Native American Women Playwrights Archive [NAWPA] in the Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University (Ohio) Libraries.)

MARVEL COMICS ATTACKS SPIDERWOMAN
WILLIAM KUNSTLER DEFENDS THEATRE GROUP

To the NEWS MEDIA in New York City.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We’d like to bring the following to your attention:

SPIDERWOMAN THEATRE is a woman’s theatre group, founded in 1975 by director Muriel Miguel. SPIDERWOMAN THEATRE is named after Spiderwoman, the goddess of creation of ancient Hopi Indian legend, who taught her people the art of weaving. Three of the women in the group, including the director, are Native Americans.

On 10/01/80 we received a mailgram from Thea Kerman, assistant counsel of the Marvel Comics Group, informing us of Marvel’s ownership of the copyrighted and trademarked character of Spiderwoman and stating that we have no right to any use of the name of this character. Our use of the name SPIDERWOMAN THEATRE is considered a “dilution of the distinctiveness of the Spiderwoman mark.”

We question Marvel’s or any company’s right to appropriate and claim exclusive use of names from a people’s cultural heritage: Spiderwoman, Winnebago, Thunderbird, Mohawk, etc.

At the present time we are preparing our defense against Marvel’s demand that we “cease and desist from any further use of the name Spiderwoman.” SPIDERWOMAN THEATRE’S interests will be represented by William Kunstler.

We would greatly appreciate any coverage of this conflict by the news media. Please be so kind to relay this letter to whomever could make the right use of it.

Sincerely,

SPIDERWOMAN THEATRE

77 Seventh Ave.

New York, N.Y. 10011

Contact: Lisa Mayo

243-6209
Appendix Four

Scene Analysis – “Women in Violence” – Spiderwoman Theater

(Courtesy of the Native American Women Playwrights Archive [NAWPA] in the Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University (Ohio) Libraries.

Clown Song

Introduction of Clowns

Gloria – The Chameleon – Doesn’t know who she is and until she finds herself she wears a hardhat and cape for protection, a reflective skirt to reflect others’ images of her, and carries a flashlight to look at herself.

Muriel – The Trickster – Has a tail, which she uses to tickle and tease people with and which is responsible for all her actions and tricks.

Lisa – The Perfect Woman – Has gorgeous looks, is loved by everyone, and always keeps everything perfectly smooth.

Pam [Verge] – The Nun – Wears a habit, which she hopes to fly to heaven on and carries a scrub brush to clean the world and the other women.

Lois [Weaver] – The Bag Lady (Rag Woman) – Wears layers and layers of clothes, lives on the streets, is tough and cynical and has a bad mouth.

Naja [Beye] – The Dejected One

The Violence in the Streets Story

Feeling guilty about the inability to act in a violent street situation – {Audrey}

The Rat Pack

Muggings, violence, killings

The Mass Murder of Women Dream

The Knife Story

Protecting a man who has just been a physical threat

*** Series of gross American, street, ethnic jokes ***

The Rope Story

Wanting to help another woman but not knowing how

The Suicide Stories
Physical and mental violence towards one’s self [sic]

The Holtsville Story

Attempted rape by a man and betrayal by a woman

***Jokes and Put-Downs*** (*humorous humiliation of another)

The Feminist Story

Violence between women

The Animal Story

Dehumanization by a man on a power trip (*flaunting of power)

The Princess and the Frog  (A Fairy Tale)

***Joke Vignettes***

The Pill Story

How society controls women with drugs

The Caroline Story

Forced Institutionalization

SONG: “Santa Claus Is Comin’ To Town”

The Shrimp Story

Violence between sisters

*** MORE JOKES***

The Revolution Section

“IN A REVOLUTION A WOMAN IS EQUAL”

Wallace Black Elk’s Plea for Peace and Unity

Battle of Wounded Knee, 1973

Romantic Songs

THE END
Appendix Five

Spiderwoman Theater: Performance History

[Chronology Provided by the New Tribe Exhibit, Summer 2005: National Museum of the American Indian, NYC]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td><em>Women in Violence</em></td>
<td>Washington Square Methodist Church, NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td><em>Lysistrata Numbah</em></td>
<td>La Mamma, NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Trilogy: <em>Friday Night, Jealousy</em>,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>And My Sister Ate Dirt</em></td>
<td>Theater for the New City, NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td><em>Cabaret: An Evening of Disgusting Songs and Pukey Images</em></td>
<td>Theater for the New City, NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td><em>Oh, What a Life</em></td>
<td>WOW Festival, Theater for the New City, NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td><em>The Fittin’ Room</em></td>
<td>The Theater Project, NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td><em>Sun, Moon, and Feather</em>,</td>
<td>Newfoundland Theater, NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Split Britches</em></td>
<td>Newfoundland Theater, NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td><em>I’ll Be Right Back</em></td>
<td>Theater for the New City, NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td><em>The Three Sisters from Here to There</em></td>
<td>Theater for the New City, NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td><em>The Banana Bunch</em></td>
<td>Theater for the New City, NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td><em>Neurotic Erotic Exotics</em></td>
<td>At the Foot of the Mountain (AFOM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--a collaborative project with AFOM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td><em>3 Up, 3 Down</em></td>
<td>Theater for the New City, NYC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[This is when the split occurred in Spiderwoman Theater. Two contending factions within the group shared a grant. The Miguel sisters created *Sun Moon and Feather* based upon their family history. Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw and Pam Verge created a show based upon the family history of Weaver. Both shows were successful in their own right; and in light of this success, the “trial separation” became a permanent fait accompli. Although various Native performers, including the Colorado sisters, Monique Mojica, and Murielle Borst, have joined Spiderwoman Theater for various projects, Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel, and Muriel Miguel remain the troupe’s core artists.]
1989 -- *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show*

from *Wigwam City* Theater for the New City, NYC

*This show was created as a result of an explicit request from the Circle of Elders. It is the first show that consists for the most part of explicitly Indian imagery. And it is with this show that Spiderwoman began to concentrate on touring throughout Indian country.*

1990 -- *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* Theater for the New City, NYC

1991 -- *Power Pipes* Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago

1995 -- *Daughters from the Stars:*

*Nis Bundor* Dance Theater Workshop

1996 -- *Trail of the Otter* Aboriginal Arts Program (Banff Centre for the Arts)

1999 -- *Fear into Sacred* Mending the Sacred Hoop: STOP Violence against Indian Women Conference, Flagstaff, AZ

2002 -- *Persistence of Memory* Aboriginal Arts Program (Banff Centre for the Arts)

[2007-- *Persistence of Memory* Final Performance (Miami University, Oxford, Ohio)]
Appendix Six

Muriel Miguel in *Women in Violence*

(note the troupe’s Mola-Backdrop behind her)

Photo Courtesy of the Native American Women Playwrights Archive [NAWPA] in the Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University (Ohio) Libraries. ©2009
Appendix Seven

Reading the Text(ile)

This Mola was made by Domitila DeLeón De Fernandez. When she gave this to me, she and her brother Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule (Achu) told me this story: Trickster had for some time been noticing that Chicken (represented here) always looked so fresh-faced and young when she arose in the morning. He begged her for her secret, and finally after some pestering, Chicken told him this: “Every night I cut off my head and place it in the water to preserve it while I sleep. That is the reason, I look so fresh and young each morning.” Trickster was not quite sure that what she told him was the truth. So that evening, he dropped by to watch her while she slept. Sure enough, he could not see her head! (Of course, this is because it was tucked safely beneath her breast while she slept). But since Trickster was not able to see her head there, he decided that she had, indeed, been telling him the truth. So, he cut off his own head… Poor Trickster!

Although the quality of this photo is not the best here, if one looks closely one can perceive the many variegated colors (each of which inhabits its own layer) that make up the full picture. Three shades of blue and two shades of green are immediately apparent, as are the many degrees of reds and purples, golden hues and orange. The outline and the detailing of the central figure have first been designed on a separate sheet of paper with colors assigned to each. The Mola maker then traced the outline of the figure and the details onto the top panel of her mola. Beneath this top panel, she has arranged panel of various colors in accordance with her design. As she works, she must carefully cut away these layers to reveal the color she has assigned to the particular feature she is working on. The yellow outline, which describes the bodies of the chicks and the mother hen’s beak in space, is the bottom layer. The detailing (claws, feathers, eyes, eggs) then, which she reveals via the panels that sit atop this base panel, appears raised, and the thickness of the entire piece coincides with the intricacy of detailing and the variety of colors required to effect the design.
This piece appeared in the thirty-year retrospective of Spiderwoman Theater, which was part of the National Museum of the American Indian’s New Tribe Exhibit (July-August, 2005). I have included this here to illustrate the whimsical blend of traditional and contemporary images, which many mola-makers now employ. The female in this piece is a blonde, white woman designed in accordance with mainstream standards of female attractiveness (i.e. blonde hair, big breasts, long legs) as opposed to Kuna standards for female beauty. She sits back-to-back with Jaguar (who is a Trickster figure), and they are surrounded by traditional iconography—frogs (fertility), a star (Daughters from the Stars), a snake, etc. She sits surrounded by, but definitely apart from, Kuna tradition in both her garb (a two-piece bathing suit) and her physical attitude. But she leaves us with questions. She wears a swimsuit, and she is definitely not recognizable as a Kuna woman. But her body is painted in the way female Kuna bodies would have been inscribed before the wearing of molas. And she seems to sport a tail, leaving us to wonder if she is not (like Jaguar) a being belonging to another layer / plane of existence.

The idea that other standards of “idealized womanhood” might be represented and explored in the mola-makers craft is not far-fetched or unusual. Mola makers have long taken their inspiration from colorful packages (of processed foods to which they have access), magazine adds, popular toys or cartoons, etc. and layered these contemporary images into the stories they document on fabric for either there own delight or to sell to tourists.
Appendix Eight

Kuna Pictography

These pictographic figures resemble (in form, if not in finesse) figures found in pictographic notations that document Kuna healing chants. Readers interested in further examination might refer to the Acuádel (see Severi 264).

During rehearsals for the first workshop of Monique Mojica’s Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way (November, 2007), Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule recited medicine chants to the company and carefully showed and explained various pictographic symbols denoting illness, medicine plants (cacao, tobacco), Baba Nana (the fe/male Deity) and cosmological layers. From these discussions, I offer my interpretation of two fragments of the pictographic text by way of illustration. Any misinterpretation here is entirely my own.

**Figure One** represents a sick person. The eight vertical lines emanating from the figure (generally four per arm) indicate that this human is ill.

**Figure Two** tells us where the medicine plants to be used on this person may be found. The central sphere represents the “earth layer,” while each successive arc emanating outwards from the earth layer represents its own layer of the cosmos.

![Figure One](image1.png)  ![Figure Two](image2.png)

Rendered and Photographed by Jill Carter
Appendix Nine

Igwanigdibippi’s Map

Photo by Monique Mojica
Copyright Acknowledgements

The author would like to gratefully acknowledge Dr. William Wortman of the Native American Women Playwrights Archive (NAWPA) in the Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University (Ohio) Libraries for permission to use the photograph of Muriel Miguel in *Women in Violence* (see Appendix Six). This photograph was provided by Spiderwoman Theater to the Archive. The photographer is unknown. NAWPA holds the copyright to all items posted on the Native American Women Playwrights (ONLINE) archive.