2 "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.
– N. Scott Momaday 103

A Short, Ugly Episode Around Naming and 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 5 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 "with the best intentions" to perpetrate on Native individuals and Native communities across North America.

The late Rosemary Richmond and Muriel Miguel had enjoyed a lifelong friendship that endured over seven decades, since they were both 12-years-old (M. Miguel, Interview 2007). And it was from Richmond, director of the American Indian Community House (AICH) in New York City (1987–2010), that Miguel received this story. Like many Indigenous urban leaders, Richmond took care to support American Indian artists and artisans within her city and its environs 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 which he presented her with some exemplary pieces of beadwork, which were characterized by a distinctly Indigenous

aesthetic.[1] She complimented the pieces and asked him who had crafted them, thinking, perhaps, that he had purchased them from an Indigenous artist. "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 purchase 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 then on display at AICH. And for this reason alone, he argued, she should purchase and display his work (M. Miguel, Personal Communication 2006). Cue eruptions of outraged laughter …

The point of this story is not to condemn this artist for his imitation of a form that has been developed within a culture to which he is not indigenous, or for his attempt to sell the product of his considerable study and labour.[2] What is disturbing, however, is the unconscionable

1 An early reviewer of this book suggested that I clarify some key points in this story. This reviewer wondered if the craftsman discussed here might have been displaying work emerging from his own European traditions. Perhaps, this reviewer argued, Richmond was being presented with an opportunity to curate an aesthetic "conversation" between bead workers emerging from differing communities and to showcase their distinct traditions. This is not the case. Quite simply, a Euro-American bead worker (whether through independent study or through attendance at Indigenous beading workshops) had developed considerable proficiency in imitating Indigenous beadwork, and now he was seeking profit and validation.

Indigenous beading carries a distinct aesthetic. Forms that are represented, pattern-flourishes, and colour schemes are specific to each nation, and the culturally literate "reader" is able to read, encoded within these details, the nation to which the wearers belong, the clan to which they belong, and the nation to which the maker belongs. It is also important, I think, to note here that Indigenous service organizations generally operate on a very tight budget and do not operate as for-profit entrepreneurial enterprises. In other words, AICH was not purchasing and displaying Indigenous work as a gallery might – to eventually sell for profit. Rather, in purchasing works from local Indigenous artists, Rosemary Richmond was doing what she could to offer financial support to talented individuals whose financial situations are generally precarious because they are artists and who live doubly precarious lives simply because they are Indigenous.

2 Spiderwoman Theater does not condemn non-Indigenous theatre workers for utilizing their Storyweaving Practice to create original works that speak to their own unique questions, histories, and cultural practices (assuming, of course, that those who utilize the process, credit its authors). The deployment of an artistic process belonging to another's culture does not have to lead to the manufacture of an "artificial tree." When it does (and it often does), the work produced reflects profound disrespect for the process, for the community from whom the process was "borrowed," and for the intended audience. Ultimately, such work reveals the spiritual torpor of its makers who have not followed a processual path to arrive at their own truth but who have co-opted aesthetic principles (alien to themselves) with which to cloak the spiritual enervation that will otherwise pervade their works.

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 beneficiaries of the colonizing project now claim ownership of that voice and presume to "teach" Indigenous Peoples how to manifest it in the manner that *they* deem most appropriate and most authentic. In so doing, they continue their appropriation of Indigenous voice as they dispossess the Indigenous human of her sovereignty – of her inherent right to "imagine [and proclaim] who and what and *that*" she is (see Momaday 103). It is heartening to remember, however, that 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 Indigenous voices and try to exercise control over Indigenous agency but also themselves, their understanding of, and their relationship to these. Paradoxically, such "trials by fire," contrary to the spirit and intent upon which they were engendered, can work (or force us to work) to embrace and strengthen that identity.

In 1980 Spiderwoman Theater produced *Oh, What a Life* at Theater for the New City 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' Room*[3] 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 presentation of fictional characters, each performer presented herself as herself, 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 a 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

3 No complete textual artifact of this script exists. The Walter Havighurst Special Collections & University Archives (Miami University Libraries, Oxford, OH) houses hand-written fragments (donated by various performers) of *The Fittin' Room*. Please see Appendix 1 for a running outline of the show (from Pam Verge's notes).

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:

> 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 Spiderwoman. ("Spiderwoman Papers," emphasis added)[4]

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"). 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," audience members were induced to perceive and examine their own intersectionality and to perceive and acknowledge the complex intersections that challenge our understandings of self and other, often drawing us into alliance with those whose lives and context may, at first glance seem to differ radically from our own. 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

4 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.

and these 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 her identity, like those of the performers she had come to see, could not be comfortably contained in 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 predecessor *Cabaret: An Evening of Disgusting Songs and Pukey Images* (1979) had been constructed, obliging 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 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." ("Spiderwoman Papers")

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":[5]

> GLORIA: This is my class photo. Can you pick me out? I'm always the same. Always Gloria.

5 I have coined this term by combining Homi Bhabha's "metonym" with the European misappellation of the original peoples on this continent as "Indians."

MURIEL: Did you know your Cancer sun is in conflict with your Scorpio sun?
GLORIA. NO.
ALL: Ohh
PAM: Do you do beadwork?
GLORIA: No.
ALL: Ohh
EVA: Are you an actress that's a feminist or a feminist that's an actress?
GLORIA: 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")

Despite the fierce insistence of its performers to forge and assert their own identities; despite its cries for liberation, this project 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 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 2). Outrageously, 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" pre-dated 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 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, OH: This exhibition was titled *Spiderwoman Theater: The Real Marvel*. It explored the troupe's origins, travels (throughout the 1970s and the 1980s), "travails" (of which the Marvel incident was deemed by its organizers to be the least significant), works (including partial scripts), audience reception, and critical commentary.

But this short, ugly episode around naming and claiming is not insignificant. It 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 preexisting Indigenous nations whose existence complicated their project of Manifest Destiny. For Muriel Miguel, the issue was quite simple: Demonstrating the selfsame *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 (Marvel) and creation (its comic book heroine). "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 US corporations, which identified their goods by appropriated names – Winnebago, Pontiac, Thunderbird, Mohawk, etc. – and challenged their right to "appropriate and claim the exclusive use of names from a people's cultural heritage" (see Appendix 2).

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-Tarrant 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. This process is rooted in the philosophic and aesthetic traditions of Miguel's own nations as well as of Mofsie-Tarrant's. This is a process within which Mofsie-Tarrant and Miguel (and later, Miguel's older sisters) rooted themselves as they began to construct a communitist project designed to facilitate their own survivance and the survivance of tribal peoples around the world.

With its open letter to the New York media, Spiderwoman Theater had appealed to its audiences and to the larger community for support. The community responded. Through 1980 and 1981, New York City papers followed the case and expressed full 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; Goldstein 42). Just what it was the troupe had become – its right to identify and name itself in accordance with its *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, each performer was *becoming* as she wrote and re-wrote herself into herstory. But even as each of Spiderwoman's artists 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 the troupe's women together were tearing away from each other.

Spiderwoman Theater, then in its fifth year, was just barely out of its infancy. The work had just begun, and suddenly it seemed as if it was about to end. A split was imminent. As it turned out, however, the split that finally occurred did not affect the end of the troupe; rather, this split was the catalyst, which would initiate a new beginning …

Herstory: The "Beginning of the Beginning of the Beginning"

Lisa Mayo,[6] Gloria Miguel, and Muriel Miguel were born in the traditional way on the floor of their maternal grandmother's house in Brooklyn, NY – the house that Muriel Miguel occupies today.[7] All were delivered by their mother's mother who was as gifted as 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, which had defined their young lives and the domestic unrest (set into motion by their father's alcoholism and their mother's withdrawal) and which had threatened their peace and disrupted their sororal relationships, resonates throughout their works demanding redress and reconciliation.

Their father Antonio Miguel, born in Gunayala (in the San Blas Islands off the coast of Panama), was a middle child in a family of 12 children.[8] When he was six years old, a British family adopted him, taking him to Jamaica, presumably to educate him and to offer him a "better" life.[9] While their intentions may have been good, and while he had always maintained that they treated him well, Antonio was

6 Lisa Mayo is the stage name Elizabeth Miguel concocted early in her career in a bid to recreate herself as an ethnically indeterminate performer. Close friends and family generally call her Elizabeth or Liz.

7 In actuality, Gloria was born two houses away – in the home of her aunt. But like her sisters, she was born on the floor and delivered by her grandmother. For all intents and purposes, she grew up with her elder sister Lisa, although Lisa lived for a time with their grandmother and aunt.

8 No birth certificate exists for Antonio Miguel. He never knew his exact birth year or month; however, he used to say that he was born sometime around 1900 (Mojica, Personal Communication. 15 July 2023).

9 This would have occurred in the early twentieth century – approximately 1906. During this time, he was renamed Jim Foster and retained that name until he settled in New York City (Mojica, Personal Communication 2023).

unhappy. He missed his birth family; he felt constricted by the schoolroom atmosphere; and 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 back to his home in Gunayala (Mayo qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 170–71).[10]

At the age of 15, Antonio Miguel, along with several of his brothers and his friends, became a merchant seaman, travelling the world 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 practising 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 riverbed, forever altering its topography and its elemental nature and redirecting the path of the waters cradled therein.

Antonio Miguel was a traditional Guna man. He was not Christian. He was not an American Indian. And so, Elmira's mother was opposed to a marital union between the affianced couple. So, Antonio Miguel went home and stayed away for three years. In those three years, he married a Guna woman (in an arranged marriage) with whom he had a son (Mayo

10 Reflecting on this, Muriel Miguel has noted that her father had been "scooped," like so many Indigenous children around the world. His hair was cut; his name had been changed; and he began to fear that he would lose his language. This, Miguel notes, created indelible scars, which were never addressed. "He never talked about it," she has told me, and this deep wounding would have, certainly, contributed to his alcoholism in later life (Miguel, Personal Communication, 2023).

qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 171). According to family legend, the petite, beautiful Elmira had been born with a caul, and she was gifted with psychic abilities, which she passed on to her daughters and to their children.[11] Although she was a practising 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 1924 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, and betrayals real or perceived – that had rippled the waters of Antonio and Elmira's budding romance were silently ensconced in the riverbed; 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 concomitant 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 into the birth of her 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 […] I used to think there was something terribly wrong with me. (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 294)

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11 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.

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 home infested with bedbugs and cockroaches with a deeply depressed mother, who had given up and withdrawn, and with a father who frequently came home inebriated and who was often out of work or who "drank away" his pay cheque when he was working, the Miguel daughters could not help but attribute their circumstances to either some "lack" in themselves as individuals or some congenital 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 Gunayala; 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 landlocked; a man's frustration at not always being able to provide for the household in which he was an active father; his indignation at the relentless racism (a daily experience, which would have humiliated him personally; enraged him when he witnessed or heard how it affected his daughters, extended family, and friends; and 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 world view to her granddaughters. He drank to forget. He drank to bury the guilt and perhaps the resentments. And although he continued to practice Guna ways, his excessive drinking must certainly have interfered with his practice and compromised his instruction of Guna tradition and lifeway for his children[12] (Mayo qtd. in Burns and

12 Alcohol consumption is not compatible with the practice of traditional spiritual ways. Indeed, alcohol consumption is strongly discouraged by traditionalists of

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). Elizabeth, Gloria and, eventually, Muriel attended their local church. They sang in the choir. And Elizabeth went through the rite of Communion. Meanwhile, their father would remind Elizabeth that she was "not *really* a Christian" and that their attendance of Church was simply a concession to her mother. It did not reflect who she was. "'I'm not [a Christian]?' I would say […] *What am I?*" (Mayo qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 175, emphasis mine).

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" (Mayo qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 175). She resolved never to marry an Indigenous man; she underwent a full conversion to Judaism, which she practised 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 being*, and although she maintained a greater connection with her Indigeneity than did her elder sister, she resisted being defined or confined by it.

Of the three, the youngest sibling Muriel maintained the greatest connection to her Indigenous roots, although, in her early professional career, she too resisted being packaged and labelled as an "Indian." 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 her 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 (Mayo qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 175). At the age of 12, Muriel Miguel

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most (if not all) Indigenous nations across Turtle Island (North, Central and South America). Until quite recently, if individuals did occasionally imbibe in their daily lives, they were 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. This has changed to some degree (in some communities) with the recognition that those who may be addicted to harmful substances may benefit greatly if they are included in the ceremonial life of their communities. Nevertheless, then (as now), 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.

Figure 2.1. Antonio and Elmira Miguel in costume for their upcoming *MOHICANS* spectacle in New York City, circa 1930s. Miguel Family Photo. Courtesy Muriel Miguel.

co-founded, with Louis Mofsie (Hopi–Ho-Chunk), the Little Eagles learning and performing dances from various nations across America, and as a teenager, she continued to work with the Thunderbird American Indian Dance Company (the Thunderbirds) – the company into which the Little Eagles evolved (Spiderwoman, "About").

Although many obstacles confronted Antonio Miguel as he struggled to make ends meet (particularly, during the depression years), Miguel proved himself 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. He concocted snake oil in the family bathtub to sell on street corners after movie theatres had disgorged their patrons. His daughters stood atop floats, ballyhooing to draw customers to the local cinemas when John Wayne westerns were playing.

"They posed for tourists in their buckskins and feathers and danced for the boy Scouts" (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 *Mohican*[13] spectacles (see fig. 2.1). They were, indeed, "show biz Indians." 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 and 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 nearly five decades. Lisa and Gloria have both credited 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 powwows,[14] which drew otherwise isolated, urban Indians into a pan-Indian

13 *Mohicans* was the name Antonio Miguel gave to his Medicine Shows – perhaps, in honour of his family back in Gunayala.

14 A powwow is 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 powwow, then, might best be described as a gathering specifically formed for the benefit of Indigenous individuals (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 our peoples through the free exercise of ceremonial acts and cultural expression.

community, and which facilitated ties between individuals and their home communities and encouraged profound and enduring inter-tribal relationships, Muriel was a founding member and co-director (with Louis Mofsie)[15] of the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers. Today, her daughter playwright/performer Murielle Borst-Tarrant, and her granddaughter Henu Josephine who is the daughter of Borst-Tarrant and Kevin Tarrant, have maintained this connection with the Thunderbirds. In 1990, Kevin Tarrant started the SilverCloud Singers, which he continued to lead until his death in 2020.

Since the formation of Spiderwoman Theater, 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 served as a training ground and production company for Indigenous performers) 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 affect 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.

Muriel Miguel and The Open Theater

By his own account, Joseph Chaikin's earliest training began with encounters with various disciples of Stanislavski's method (including Uta Hagen and Herbert Berghof) as he pursued a means to access and to manifest his own "inner truth" (43). As his political consciousness

15 I will take this opportunity here to, once again, remind readers of the intergenerational web of aesthetic relationality out of which Spiderwoman Theater emerged and into which it remains inextricably bound. Josephine Mofsie-Tarrant was Muriel Miguel's best friend from childhood; she performed in the 1974 workshop production, out of which Spiderwoman Theater eventually emerged in the year following her death. It is in her honour that Spiderwoman Theater was named. Louis Mofsie is the late Josephine Mofsie-Tarrant's brother, and Kevin Tarrant (husband to Muriel Miguel's daughter Murielle Borst-Tarrant) was her youngest son. Although Josephine Mofsie-Tarrant died before she had reached the age of 40, her best friend still maintains profound connections to her through her work with Louis Mofsie and through their granddaughter Henu Josephine Tarrant.

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).[16] 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 – that is, as recognizable and palatable and eminently digestible 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 1960s.[17] Together, as The Open Theater,

16 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 Guna 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 219–20). Hence, to transfigure substance (e.g., 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 Guna healer restores the body and effects a material transformation from illness to health (Chapin 219–20).

While Chaikin would certainly have no knowledge of Guna 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.

17 Chilton, a daughter of Russian émigrés, was born and raised in New York City. During the 1940s she trained as an actor with Lee Strasberg. Eventually, she rejected her Method training because she felt that actors who mined their own emotions and impulses could only produce "fossilized" performances – that is, *representations* of their *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

they began to work through a series of "open questions," which ultimately would allow them to 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 at the Henry Street Playhouse with Eric Hawkins, Alwin Nikolais, and Jean Erdman).[18] But she was becoming dissatisfied with dance as a sole medium for the stories she was trying to tell.[19] As her training intensified, her choreography was becoming

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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.

18 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 (1962–63) for her off-Broadway play *The Coach with Six Insides*, and she won a Tony Award (1972) for Best Choreography in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

19 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 an accurate 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 with sitar music. 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 Miguel, it was all about process. She had traditional dance (with the Thunderbirds) 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 the Thunderbirds. But she followed her instinct to protect her Traditional Knowledge and kept both forms separate. "People didn't understand that [she] was an Indian" (M. Miguel, Interview, 2007). And Miguel's later experiences with The Open Theater eventually convinced her

that there was 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 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 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 consider a somewhat more recent manifestation of her work. On 6 September 2008, I attended 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. Interestingly, although I believed that I could boast greater familiarity with the choreographic styles of the other artists on the program that evening (Penny Couchie, Julia Jamieson, Alejandro Ronceria), Muriel 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. For this event, 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

increasingly dramatic and multi-disciplinary (cited 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 26th year, Muriel Miguel was ready to develop her vocal instrument and add another "colour" 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

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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 have 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 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 marked her so unmistakably from artists who are her peers, her former students, and her colleagues (and with whom she had and continues now to frequently work – artists 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.

version of the Method against which The Open Theater was rebelling spoke of Chaikin's methods (later *adapted* by Muriel Miguel) as she looked back upon the 20-year history of Spiderwoman Theater in 1996. In an interview with Larry Abbot, Mayo observed that while she had "admired" the work of The Open Theater, the process they employed to devise scripts "wasn't [her] way of working." And when she began to work on *Women in Violence*, she initially resisted the process. Within a week, however, she had begun "to see the possibilities": "*It wasn't that different from the way I worked. It was a different approach, but it was getting to the truth, which is what acting is about: getting to the truth of the character and what is real*" (qtd. in Abbott 169, italics mine).

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.[20] The foundational exercises utilized in The Open

20 To illustrate, in the creation of Spiderwoman Theater's *Women in Violence* (1976), the troupe combined CR (consciousness raising) sessions at the table and regular drills in "Transformations." The "Transformations" exercise originated in The Open Theater and has since become a foundational exercise in the Storyweaving Workshops of Muriel Miguel and Monique Mojica. The "Transformations" exercise will be discussed at some length in chapter 4. But for the purposes of this discussion, it may be helpful to examine the influence of Chaikin's other exercises (i.e., "Odets Kitchen" and "Perfect People") 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 briefcase, 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

Theater manifest themselves in Storyweaving Workshops facilitated by the Miguel sisters and by Gloria Miguel's daughter, playwright/performer/dramaturg 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; 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 neighbourhood children

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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 behaviour 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 Woman" affected 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] Woman" was the "most healing moment in [*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.

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: "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!' […] I had to go, and it would be some 'Indian Princess.' […] 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). But Muriel had lived with and been intensively trained in this art from birth. Her understanding of and abilities in storytelling were rooted in her being "from the toenails up" (Miguel qtd. in Abbot 169). When she finally left The Open Theater, she wanted to deepen her exploration of storytelling and what it might affect: "That's what we did; we used stories to make different stories" (qtd. in Abbott 169).[21]

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 Spiderwoman's practice of Storyweaving. 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 labours. 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

21 Lee Maracle, renowned worker in story, joined the cast of *Encounters at the "Edge of the Woods,"* a devised show I directed for Hart House Theatre, University of Toronto (6–8 September 2019). In early devising workshops with the cast and crew (storytellers, all), Maracle told a Traditional Story, instructing us to "allow the story to wash over you." The story became a "call" to which we were instructed to respond by allowing the story to work itself through us and then "tell[ing] the story back different but the same." Hence, a show about the history of a specific university campus and about the experiences of those whose lives have taken them onto that campus formed itself around multiple retellings of a timeless origin story emerging from a territory thousands of kilometres removed.

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, are these questions for which this study can purport to offer answers. But if such questions 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)[22]

While Gloria Miguel and Muriel Miguel have expressed some reservations around the rigid pedagogical practices through which performance methodologies have historically been imparted to students within North American studios,[23] Miss Hagen's methodology warrants

22 Miss Hagen passed away in January 2004, eight years after this interview. She was 84 years old.

23 During the Honoring Spiderwoman Theatre Conference presented 19–21 February 2007 by the Walter Havighurst Special Collections & University Archives, Miami University Libraries (Oxford, OH), Dr. Ann Haugo facilitated a talking circle during which the Miguel sisters discussed their process and their influences (21 February 2007). Gloria and Muriel Miguel spoke of the historical rigidity of actor training within various acting studios (including the HB Studio). Like Miss Hagen and her contemporaries, Muriel Miguel works to inspire self-discipline in her student-actors and an organic understanding of all the tools at their disposal with the ability to use these tools. At the same time, however, Muriel Miguel is very conscious of the experience of racialized and historically oppressed communities and prioritizes the safety of her students within the training process – a practice that is now only beginning to be adopted by instructors and within the institutions that train performers across this continent. Of primary importance for Muriel Miguel is identifying and "asking

serious examination for its influences – however indirect – on the process authored by Muriel Miguel and utilized by Spiderwoman Theater. With her husband Herbert Berghof, Miss Hagen 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 an Indigenous-authored process, reliant upon and specific to Indigenous 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 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 "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).[24] 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

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the right questions," so that students don't feel called out – don't feel challenged to fit into an accepted norm. The questions she crafts are questions through which to acknowledge the full humanity and lived experience of all of her students – and particularly the lived experience of Indigenous students, many of whom have been historically denied access to training and professional opportunities. Muriel Miguel works carefully with her students, asking, at each stage of the work, "How does it make you feel? Where are you coming from? Do you want to do this?" In cases, for instance, where her students may be most comfortable working within a language other than English, Miguel works with these individuals to allow them to create and perform work in the language(s) in which they are most comfortable. When students have been allowed to work in this way, Miguel testifies, "It was like a flower blooming." Further, she observes, "If we don't ask them the [right] questions," our students may simply disengage and "remain silent" (Personal Communication, 28 August 2023). In Miguel's studio, healing is balanced with discipline.

24 During our interview (2007), Lisa Mayo explained that they had met in an amateur folk dancing group of which they were both members.

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. Hence, despite Antonio Miguel's objections, the couple was married; Mayo 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.[25] However, when she started to receive professional offers to travel abroad and sing in European opera houses, he was less supportive. After receiving an invitation to perform in several small opera houses in Germany for three months, the limits of Jules's support became apparent. Elizabeth Miguel was his "wife." Her duty was to stay with him and take care of their home: "This was in the 1950s, you know. And I said, 'Why can't I go? Why can't you come?' But he said no, so that was impossible" (Mayo qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 174).

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 1960s 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 labour" 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

25 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).

change (Hagen 15). Of course, to understand themselves as political agents is to presume that individuals feel themselves 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*-dentity.

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, artefacts, edifices, and artistic works of the communities one wishes to transform and be transformed within. Indeed, she asserted 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,[26] the parallels – albeit, unconscious and unintentional – between Hagen's observations on America (e.g., 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 30).

Compelling, also, is Miss Hagen's emphasis on *place* as the authorizer of Story as opposed to time. In *Respect for Acting*, she writes about those connections she has intuited – profound connections between herself and humans (of various European nations to which she was foreign and who had lived and died long before she was born) "on the very cobblestones" and "in every cell, corner and courtyard" (30). It is through connection to place that her belief was ignited – that a story long past

26 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).

became real and momentous. So too, for Indigenous Peoples across this continent, those 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 late Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) has explained, "The Navajo, for example, have sacred mountains where they believe they rose from the underworld […] No one can say when the creation story of the Navajo happened, but everyone is fairly certain *where* the emergence took place" (Deloria 138, emphasis mine).

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, history, world view, 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. However, 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" 309–10).

These briefly and aforementioned parallels warrant attention because they demonstrate how some of Miss Hagen's key teachings intersect with Indigenous-authored pedagogical and aesthetic models: These models constitute a centre around which my investigations into the work of Spiderwoman Theater revolve because *the rediscovery, formation, and/or implementation of such models constitute crucial steps in an anti-colonial project of re-worlding*. Hence, 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 Guna-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 dreamed 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 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"[27] speaks to the dichotomy between Western knowledge systems and Indigenous Knowledge: For Spiderwoman Theater (as it is for myriad Indigenous artists working in all genres), art *is* medicine. And it is a medicine of which the communities of contemporary Indigenous Peoples in North America have a dire need. Many Indigenous 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.

27 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 mine). Although the Miguel sisters own their responsibility to an "art form," in their creation of Spiderwoman Theater, they have engineered *a communitist* project, thereby extending their responsibility to communities beyond their own communal adventure. In 1996, reflecting upon two decades of collaboration with her sisters, Lisa Mayo asserted that "healing" was the troupe's primary objective, while "survival" had been a central theme in "almost" all of their productions: "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).

As we have already considered in chapter 1, Spiderwoman Theater continues to exercise 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 Practice (through workshops) as a tool for Indigenous people to generate art, honest dialogue, and healing.

> This is what I mean by a legacy. We went to Salt River […] 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 mine)

The Miguel sisters, in stark contrast to Hagen, take seriously their duty to protect 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 well-being 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. Lisa Mayo who has always expressed the utmost admiration and respect for Hagen has testified that even she (whom Hagen characterized as "wonderful") was sometimes uneasy in Hagen's presence (Interview 2007).

Similarly, Muriel Miguel has decried those who forcefully "open up" *Indigenous* performers during the course of studio work or rehearsals. Such instructors and directors neither know nor care about the psychospiritual state of their student-actors; nor do they possess the ability to suture the wounds they have opened: "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). Self-determination then – control over process and product – is necessary for Indigenous artists if we are 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 gift them the tools to protect themselves: 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 tread

carefully and to remain conscious of and faithful to the concept of art as medicine.[28]

Particularly intriguing is a story that Lisa Mayo has shared about her work with Miss Hagen several times. Although Mayo told 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 Indigenous world views. Further, it speaks to an important phase in the process of self-discovery and to an important lesson in the process of becoming:

> We are comediennes, 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 Stanislavski 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 humour (see Benedetti 72, 114, 190). Is it possible that Chekhov's sense of the absurd may have more closely aligned itself with an Indigenous sense

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28 In February of 1994, Lisa Mayo and Gloria Miguel visited Gunayala to research Creation stories for their production of *Voices from the Criss-Cross Bridge*, later renamed *The Guna 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, *Daughters from the Stars* was "about healing, and making [themselves] whole" (Mayo qtd. in Haugo, "Native Playwrights' Newsletter" 322). And during this time, all the sisters and their children (in person or in absentia) received their Guna names. 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.

of comedy than it did with that of his own compatriots who shared his history, language, and presumably his world view? The point here is not to argue with Miss Hagen's classroom direction; but it is worth observing that this instance speaks to a separation of world view, 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 through our silence amidst the laughter that we declare ourselves as insiders or as Others.[29] And often, as Lisa Mayo has reminded us, it is when we find the courage to reveal our scars and find the strength to laugh in the face of our brokenness that we can sift through the wreckage of our lives and re-make the shards we find "into something new" (Mayo, qtd. in Koehler).

More importantly, perhaps, the first show in which Spiderwoman's artists expressly began to tackle questions around their *I*-dentity as bi-national, diasporic Indigenous women is directly linked to their interest, appreciation, exploration, and reception of Chekhov's works, through which they discovered similarities 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

29 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 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 their 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 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 dis-coveries in this production will be discussed at greater length in chapter 3.

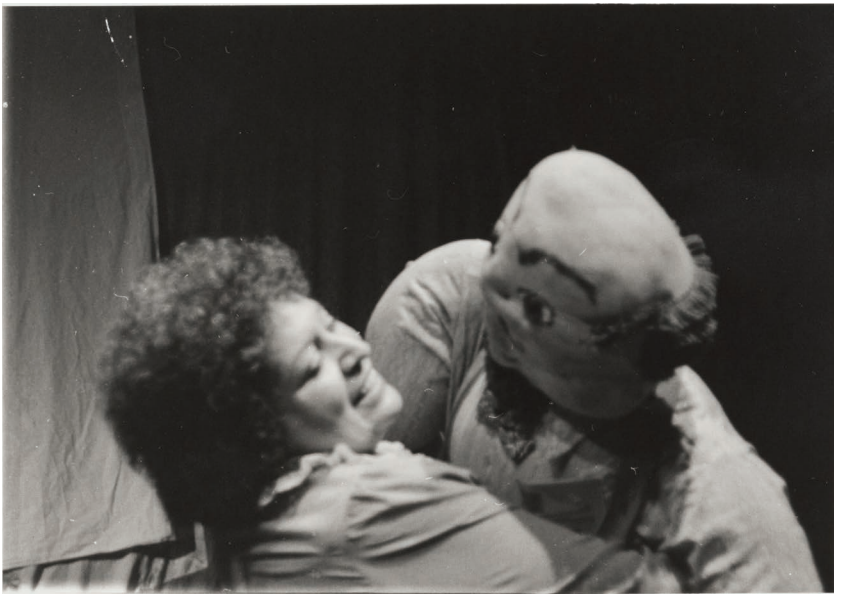

Figure 2.2. Lisa Mayo and her puppet dance partner in *The Three Sisters from Here to There*. Courtesy Walter Havighurst Special Collections and University Archives, Miami University Libraries (Oxford, OH).

> 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, three Indigenous sisters from Red Hook, Brooklyn, were able to find their way back into their own story.

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 13, 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. After her marriage, Gloria Miguel 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. In 2007, she spoke to me at some length about this experience and the impact it had upon her:

> I studied with Herbert Blau. Basically, it was all Stanislavski 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 Guna 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 Guna by way of illustration] – and all different nations, as well as the Guna. It was really something. But that always came back. That always came back. (Interview 2007)

During this time, Gloria's younger sister, Muriel, who had left The Open Theater, was trying (unsuccessfully) to convince Gloria and their eldest sister Lisa to collaborate with her 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. Lisa Mayo has observed that each of the sisters had developed her own way of "dealing" with her Indigeneity (Mayo cited in Burns and Hurlbutt 174–75). Gloria's way was to assert herself as a "human being," as she developed her talents and expanded her intellect psycho-spiritual life. She maintained a home and tried to support her husband's career by conforming to his expectations and the expectations of the community into which he had drawn her. But however strenuously she tried to conform, her humanity – her very *I*-dentity – experienced repeated assault, and as her resentment grew, she began to rebel:

> 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 [sic] 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. And he had learned first-hand just how dangerous it is to be Other. Perhaps, Szykowski's misspoken and inappropriate directive to his wife was an attempt to protect her and their children – 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." But, 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 nations into which she had been born, she was ultimately suppressing her own human agency. Further, 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-in-law, her Uncle Joe) took the trip of which her father had been dreaming until his death: She enacted his (unrealized) 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 Guna 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. Lastly, a few years later, Josephine Mofsie-Tarrant (who had also been her friend) was gone – forever. Gloria's sister Muriel, who had been Mofsie-Tarrant's best friend, was grief-stricken and *grief-driven*. 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[30] that had been given to her by their father's family. And Muriel had returned from a Sun Dance[31] 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 three sisters constructed Spiderwoman Theater's first show, *Women in Violence*. Gathering their fabrics, they constructed the company's signature backdrop into which has been 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" (qtd. in Haugo, "Weaving" 225). And at the very centre of that historical text(ile) lies Gloria Miguel's mola – the story of her homecoming, the story of being Guna, being female, making art. At the very centre sits Gloria Miguel's mola – the beginning of a story of three sisters *becoming …*

But I get ahead of myself here.

"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 Joseph Chaikin were all "middle class," "privileged" people, where she was not (M. Miguel, Interview 2007). As she began to recognize that her colleagues in The Open Theater were merely tourists to the "bare fork'd" existence (rife with fear, privation,

30 As molas and the craft of mola-making will be discussed at length in the next chapter, it is enough for now to state that these are intricately designed fabric panels belonging to the traditional dress of Guna 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 create the design. Molas vary in thickness, intricacy of design, and colour scheme; and the process of their construction is handed down from Guna mother to Guna daughter as a crucial and mandatory element of her epistemological development.

31 The Sun Dance is one of the most sacred ceremonial obligations practised 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 a 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 Sun Dance Ceremonies include piercing, this was practiced by some of the celebrants with whom Muriel carried out her ceremonial obligations.

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 required to pay rent and to feed and clothe her children (M. Miguel, Interview 2007).[32] "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, emphasis mine). "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.[33] The explorations undertaken in Chaikin's "whatever"

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32 Muriel Miguel identified one such colleague by name during our interview. Her story, here, 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" (M. Miguel, Interview 2007).

This story points to the conflict between middle-class values and the values belonging to those possessing fewer resources. 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 (M. Miguel, Interview 2007).

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

community could no longer approach the answers or generate the questions that drove Miguel, an American Indian mother, living in New York City in the late 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 1970s, 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 an Indigenous woman and activist in the largest and wealthiest city in America in the last decades of the twentieth century.

In 1972, Muriel was invited to join a fledgling 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. (M. Miguel qtd. in Beaucage 6, emphasis mine)

And so, despite her initial resistance, Muriel moved from The Open Theater to form Womanspace with Laura Foner and Carol Grosberg. At that time, Foner, a former Weatherwoman,[34] 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 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"

34 The Weatherwomen were a fringe group of extreme feminist radicals. Many of its members resorted to violent acts to communicate their message.

(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, the very fact that these women had (at least, initially) demonstrated respectful recognition of Miguel as a fellow human being was "amazing" to her. 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 these gatherings, 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 their 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. Ironically, these problems 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 labour 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 an offstage argument. 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 finally disbanded 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, Foner and Grosberg, as "whitestream feminists," were not terribly concerned with racism or classicism – manifestations of oppression that did not directly impact them. Nor were they interested in exploring their own complicity in a system that may oppress all *but that 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 feminists and those women who are racialized, who live with financial precarity, or who have been marginalized because of other challenging circumstances into which they have been born . 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 1970s, the feminists who gathered to network and share were fuelled by an objective to identify and overturn patriarchal oppression. For these women, questions of race and class were inessential. In their view, all women experienced the same oppression at the hands of the same oppressor. And within their project, as Audre Lorde has noted of others in the movement, these women acknowledged no "need at that time to examine the contradictions of self, woman as oppressor" (130).

In 1990, Miguel stated to Charlotte Canning that her decision to part company with Grosberg and Foner rested on the fact that "they weren't committed as theater people" (Canning 95). I am intrigued, however, by an unrealized possibility: While Muriel Miguel remains a committed, professional, and consummate artist, she may perhaps have found a way 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, Miguel had sought community among other artists who sought to challenge and transform the status quo. But that 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 very specific concerns as an Indigenous 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 *Cycles* informs us that the show, which had grown out of the trio's CR sessions, was intended 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, *Cycles* failed in this noble objective. Instead of alleviating the "problems" of its creatrices and building bridges between them, the experience of touring and performing *Cycles* seemed to exacerbate differences and widen the chasm between the members of the fledgling troupe. Issues around race and class and the divisions they produce were not acknowledged or addressed. Instead, the craftswoman (Miguel) was singled out by and forced to separate herself from the activists who condemned her *artistry* as falsehood and who labelled her a "hypocrite." To fully integrate the artist self, the female self, and the Indigenous self, Muriel Miguel would have to find or form a new community.

Undaunted, Muriel Miguel threw herself into building the community of which she dreamed: She contacted her sisters and tirelessly worked 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 New York City from Oberlin, and Lisa was seeking paying gigs), she joined forces with Josephine Mofsie-Tarrant and a non-Indigenous 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-Tarrant, 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 wove into the fabric of

the theatrical event, teaching American Indian hand games and thereby transforming passive spectators into active "players." As a brief overview of Spiderwoman's history ("Origins") prepared by the Native American Women Playwrights Archive (Walter Havighurst Special Collections & University Archives, Miami University Libraries, Oxford, OH) 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").

The workshop was performed at the Washington Square Methodist Church. Its "anchor" was Josephine Mofsie-Tarrant 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-Tarrant *recreated the genesis of her people, as she played out the traditionally Hopi activity of finger weaving*. Muriel, who had just returned from a Sun Dance, wove her experience of ontological emergence into that of her best friend, while Weaver recounted her experiences of being brought up as a Baptist, weaving these with a dream she had had of a sexual encounter between her and Jesus of Nazareth (M. Miguel, Personal Communication 2006). At once connected and held apart by a "river" that wound its way across the stage, each storyteller occupied her own realm, as she recounted her origin story. As Mofsie-Tarrant worked on creating the belt that was suspended before her, she recreated the genesis of her own people in *action* and then extended that action to weave her colleagues and the Creation Stories that directed their lives into her own within the inscribed textile, thereby anchoring three lives (and the communities from which they emerged) together (M. Miguel, Personal Communication 2006). Hence, it is to her that Spiderwoman Theater owes not only its name but also elements of the distinctly Indigenous ontological, epistemological, and cosmological underpinnings of the process out of which it has, for nearly half a century, woven story on the world stage.

Muriel Miguel identifies this workshop as the beginning of Storyweaving ("Performance Lecture"). But this auspicious beginning was marred by tragedy: Several months after this workshop performance, Josephine Mofsie-Tarrant who was not yet 40 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 40, 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).