

5 The Published Texts

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

– Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles, “Creation Story” 2–3

The project of recovery and reinvention to which Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles refer here is Monique Mojica's *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way* (then under development), but their words could very easily apply to the entire canon of published and unpublished play texts by Spiderwoman Theater. Indeed, *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way* is a “first step,” just as each new step on an arduous journey towards the fulfilment of a dream is again and again a first step. And truly, this new work will provide a solid processual framework that gestures towards an inter-First National poetics of re-worlding. But the framework Mojica continues to develop and perfect rests upon the solid methodological base authored by Muriel Miguel and developed by Spiderwoman over a lifetime of theatrical praxis. And their praxis has been built upon the stories told around a kitchen table in the house of mirrors, upon a “family business” of snake oil and spectacle and upon ancient communal narratives, aesthetic principles, and performative traditions.

The five published play texts that document collectively created and performed works by Spiderwoman Theater stand as representatives of 21 years (1981–2002) of an artistic career that now spans almost half a

century;¹ nonetheless, they offer a rich and finely detailed portrait of the Miguel sisters' progression through the temporal and spatial "steppes" of the seen and unseen worlds. I read these texts – on page and stage – as abstracted notations of a contemporary medicine chant, in which an entire poetics of re-worlding is remembered and preserved for those who may wish to carry on Spiderwoman's work.

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

Power Pipes (1991),² the final text under discussion in this chapter, looks from the spiritual realm back to the material realm to reinforce our understandings of the interdependencies between flesh and spirit. It presents, too, a sombre warning: The spirit guides may send direction, but if the messages go unheeded, dis-ease will ultimately possess the inhabitants of all realms of existence. This multi-generational, inter-First National project heightens the manifestation of these interdependencies by stitching the layers of existence together and so binding temporal, spatial, and substantive realms into a tight weave. It challenges its witnesses to decide for themselves just "which [world] is which? Is the shadow world the spirit world and the real world the physical world we live in? Or is the shadow world the real, and the real world we live in the shadow?" (Glancy 127).

1 *Persistence of Memory* (2002) is the last production, collaboratively devised and performed by Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel, and Muriel Miguel. It was published in 2009 and will be discussed in the final chapter of this work.

2 In *Seventh Generation: An Anthology of Native American Plays*, editor Mimi Gisolfi D'Aponte places the first production of *Power Pipes* at Chicago's Randolph Street Gallery in 1993 (153). However, the official website for Spiderwoman Theater indicates that *Power Pipes* premiered in 1992.

Sun, Moon, and Feather: First Steps Towards Self-Recovery

In Performance, we are dying together.

– Jill Dolan, “Performance, Utopia” 459

We are not supposed to be alive now if the people who came here had their way.

– Lisa Mayo qtd. in Abbott 175

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

The Three Sisters was written in 1900 by one who knew that he had a very short time to live: As a medical doctor, Anton Chekhov surely understood that the tuberculosis from which he was convalescing in Yalta (far from his friends, his artistic collaborators, and his wife in Moscow) was worsening and would soon kill him. This anguished cry at the dawn of a new century (albeit, not Chekhov’s last word on the matter) addresses urgent questions about the human condition, about why we live, why we suffer, and what is the meaning behind it all. The central problematic condition from which all suffering represented in this play stems (malaise, entrapment, disappointed hopes, thwarted and unrequited love, love that disappoints, thwarted communication and hopelessness) is the universal condition of individual loneliness. There is a

hole in the human heart, which nothing in this world – the world of Chekhov's play – can fill. In this world where merchants eat themselves to death in enormous, anonymous restaurants (Chekhov 218), where a cuckolded husband gambles away his family home and his son's future and where we "snatch happiness in fits and starts" only to be "shattered" in the end (Chekhov 264), this weeping wound is most vividly expressed in terms of hunger and thirst. The morose, volatile Solyony eats up the sweets that had been put out for the entire household and its guests even as he maliciously tells his hostess that if her little Bobik were his child, he "would put him in a frying pan and eat him" (Chekhov 228). Later, as Solyony declares his love to Irina, he describes her eyes as "sumptuous" (234). But his avowed "love" is a desire to possess that he might consume. And at the end of the day, Solyony's hunger consumes him; he reveals himself to be a destroyer – a rapacious assassin. Similarly, a destructive thirst takes hold of Chebutykin. After losing a female patient, he becomes inebriated, breaking a two-year period of abstinence. His answer to the fire that devastates his town, to Masha's agonized confidence and to the pointless duel in which Irina's affianced will die is detached and deadly: "It doesn't matter" (Chekhov 265).

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

Olga, as the eldest of the three sisters, is the keeper of family memory. Masha has forgotten her mother's face; Vershinin has forgotten the faces of the general's three little girls: he only remembers that there were three of them; Irina, the youngest sister, thinks only of a future of glorious work. But Olga who knows that we die and are forgotten strives to counter the despair born of such knowledge, and as a token of her faith, she has made it her task to remember and to remind. Of course, by the end of the play, the eldest sister has let go of the past and forsaken memory to concentrate on "knowing." Although Chekhov offers no pat solutions to the questions he has posed, he has left us with a processual map. Before we can know (our purpose, our meaning, our place in the larger design), we must remember. It is, then, reasonable to assume that during their quest to find the answers to a larger riddle around place

and meaning within the entire fabric of Creation, the Miguel sisters discovered that first they must find “[their] own ‘three sisters’” (Mayo qtd. in Abbott 175) and embark upon an act of recovery on the brink of a new millennium.

“How Did We Survive?”

No act of recovery is possible without an initial *asking* and the without the act of *seeking*, which perforce must follow the question. The processual investigations underpinning *Sun, Moon, and Feather* have emerged from the question, “How did we survive?” and the answers they yield map a personal journey that speaks directly to the larger, communitist project of survivance – a survivance that eschews any simulation. This is an intensely personal piece; indeed, it is the first of several Spiderwoman productions that dedicates itself solely to the Miguel family autohistory, and it is the first of several signature Spiderwoman productions that features a homogeneous collective at all levels – familial, genetic, communal, and political.

It is telling that the Miguel sisters had temporarily abandoned their less homogeneous and less specifically personal *The Three Sisters from Here to There* to “revisit” their childhood home and to replay the struggles, rivalries, and moments of joyous affection that belong to that time and that directed their adult attitudes and behaviours towards each other and others with whom they shared their lives. They had to first land *Here* before setting out for *There*. *The Three Sisters from Here to There* was produced in March 1982 at The Theatre for the New City, but it was not received with the same degree of enthusiasm as *Sun, Moon, and Feather* had been.

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

Chekhov's world) were represented by life-sized puppets and given voice by the female puppet masters (see [ch. 2, fig. 2.2](#)).³

Characterized as "aimless" and "top-heavy with artlessness" in *The New York Times* (Gussow), *The Three Sisters from Here to There* did not enjoy a long run. At the end of the day, I suspect, it served neither as a vehicle to self for the Miguel sisters nor as an assertion of Indigenous survivance, which might serve the American Indian community. At the same time, it provided no discernable rallying site for the heterogeneous feminist audiences whose concerns it had been created to address. Presumably, there are several reasons for this. First, the acting was uneven, and while the Miguel trio was praised for its "earthy vitality" and its musical performances, their colleagues were castigated for their "amateurishness," their "inept[itude]" and their "overacting" (Gussow). Most damning of all, this show was criticized for its polarizing didacticism. As Mel Gussow received *The Three Sisters from Here to There*, Chekhov's play had, in this instance, been co-opted to make a political statement, rather than to explore questions that had concerned Anton Chekhov himself or that might concern those separated by almost one century and a vast expanse of water and sky from the tortured playwright who had sent up his anguished cry. Indeed, as Jill Dolan reading the production from a materialist perspective receives it, Spiderwoman's "ironic attitude" towards Chekhov and his "angst" is the engine that drives this piece (*Feminist Spectator* 113). She identifies the central problem of *The Three Sisters from Here to There* as a very human problem: males oppress females and prevent them from getting "from here to there." Metaphysical questions around meaning and existence are, for such a reading, redundant and absurd. With their return to and completion of *The Three Sisters from Here to There*, the Miguel sisters were widening their circle of care – stepping away for a time from the urgent, personal questions around meaning and identity, which they had just explored in *Sun, Moon, and Feather*. Now, they were ready to dive into philosophical and political questions, which, perhaps, they presumed would interest a larger and more diverse audience. Ultimately, it seems that (production and publication) history has come to show that the more personal and specific production resonated (and continues to resonate) much more powerfully with audiences than its more overtly political counterpart.

3 The effigy of Andrey was animated alternatively by all three Miguel sisters, Vira Colorado, and Pam Verge (see Gussow). These puppets, as Jill Dolan informs us, would be manipulated to create a series of "gests" that spoke to the "structure of gendered relationships." For instance, Muriel Miguel, playing Irina, manipulates the Tusenbach doll at one point to fondle Irina's (her own) breasts (Dolan, *Feminist Spectator* 112).

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

Bringing the Gathering House to the Stage

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

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

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

On a still, dimly lit stage, it begins. As the "Poverty Tape" plays, disembodied – at times, indistinguishable – voices remember specific moments in the Miguel sisters' childhood and the general conditions, which governed it. Behind the human conversation, Mozart's *K. 546 Adagio and Fugue in C Minor* interweaves itself between and behind the words adding resonance to each syllable and punctuating moments of silence. It is as if two pianos and a string quartet have struck up a conversation with the human beings who are grasping at the "kernel" (the reason for their survival) as they follow the pain. Within this aural mola, time and space are conflated, as child converses with her adult counterpart and as "some godawful neighbourhood," a local laundromat and the sisters' childhood home are invoked on

the public stage.⁴ At times, the human voices reflect upon the past: “You were only 13. [...] I *was* [...]. I *looked* [...]. That *was* really terrible” (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 290, emphasis mine). But these are entwined with voices that speak directly from the past as if it were the present: “Hello pretty one you have 10 cents for me?” (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 290).

Onto this aural tapestry of dirt, privation, violence, and humiliation a contrapuntal visual layer is added. “Uncle Joe’s” home movies, featuring the “[b]eautiful Indian faces” of Antonio Miguel, his brothers, and the idyllic San Blas Islands (Gunayala) where they grew up thicken the narrative and introduce the central question to the audience: “The juxtaposition of that sad tape and the lovely islands where they come from. The worry about money in the city against a coconut culture. The wonderment: How did they get here? How did they survive?” (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 292). And onto this aural and visual background, the living performers layer themselves and their stories interweaving these with Chekhovian dialogue, as if to test out the efficacy of his *Sisters’* strategies of survivance and the relevance of these to the lives of three Indigenous women from Brooklyn.⁵ As sibling rivalries, childhood games (i.e., Elizabeth Miguel’s tea parties) and old hurts are remembered and re-enacted, declarations of personal identity begin to emerge.

4 The Miguel sisters brought their childhood home onto the public stage in their 1981 production, but in the 1989 film version of *Sun, Moon, and Feather*, their childhood home (in which Muriel Miguel still lives) becomes the public stage. As the film begins, we do not hear the “Poverty Tape,” which opens the stage production. Instead, as the camera travels through the home’s empty rooms focusing at moments on pictures or furnishings that carry emotional resonance, we hear fragments of ancestral conversation. Uncle Joe, Aunt Lizzie, Antonio and Elmira Miguel are remembered and voiced into being as if something of their spirit still resonated within the walls of the rooms that once contained their mortal existence.

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

[T]he scene is set up where something is going on way back there. And something is going on outside. And something is going on here. And that’s life. And it’s all connected. You know? Chekhov has a scene going on back there – although they’re not talking; they’re not in the forefront. But you see people talking like that, people on the outside just sitting if you look out the window. All that is set up on the stage. All that just fascinated me, you know. (Interview 2007)

Gloria remembers with gladness how her father's relations claimed her as their own. In so doing, she remembers, lays claim to an ancestral language and brings the Gathering House of her father's island of Nargana onto the New York stage: "*Ige benuga, Igi, be nuga be a beni be agbanaed. E be nueti.* They called me Tuli [Dule] girl. (Sings.) *Tage. Tage. [Degii, Degii]*" (295).

"Tage" [Degii], a chanted affirmation meaning "it is so" or "indeed," is a familiar response in the dialogic form of storytelling in the Gathering House Tradition. In this tradition, there are generally two "performers." The Chanting Chief is the main storyteller, and he directs the narrative. The Responding Chief may simply affirm each of the chanter's utterances ("Tage"/[Degii]) or he may perform a "reformulation, translation, and recasting" of these utterances to complicate the rhythms and/or enhance the performance (Sherzer 122). Gloria, by adding her breath to sound, not only affirms her identity as a "Tuli [Dule] girl" but also casts herself as a respondent in the Gathering House Tradition. *How did her father's relations survive financial hardship, oppression, and racism in their new home?* They transplanted the Guna Gathering House (which housed the stories that had made them) to a kitchen table in Red Hook, Brooklyn. They told and retold stories. They lived new stories and added those to the communal canon. In the stories that had made them, they remembered who they were. And in the stories that had made her relatives, in the stories that have gone into making her and in the community that has kept those stories alive, Gloria Miguel remembers herself and declares her place.

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

I am the granddaughter of Elizabeth Ashton Mourn,⁶ a beautiful Rappahannock Indian woman from West Moreland [sic] County, Virginia. My great-grandmother Felecia was a midwife and she taught my grandmother how to deliver babies. My grandmother delivered me and both my sisters [...]

My mother gave me to the witch. (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 295)⁷

6 Elizabeth Ashton Moore.

7 In [chapter 2](#), I discuss this period in the elder sisters' lives and its emotional repercussions. Gloria was born while her sister was still a toddler. Feeling herself unable to cope with caring for both a newborn and a toddler, Elmira and her own mother agreed that Elizabeth (for whom Lisa Mayo was named) would care for her in her home next door. As Gloria saw it, her elder sister was loved and pampered by the extended family, while she was left out. As Elizabeth saw it, she had been displaced from her family home with the arrival of Gloria.

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

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

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

Much has been made of the musical send-up during which Gloria Miguel and Lisa Mayo re-enact the famous "Indian Love Call" duet of the 1936 classic film *Rose-Marie*. So much, indeed, that those unfamiliar with *Sun*, *Moon*, and *Feather* could not be blamed for harbouring the impression that apart from a brief allusion to a drunken father, some home movies, and an anecdote about the Miguel family's boat (which

I will discuss later), this musical moment of resistance is the heart and soul and substance of the work entire.

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

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

GLORIA: Oh yeah.

LISA: Okay? I’m Jeannette Macdonald and I’ve got this long red hair and big green eyes. (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 309–10)

Gloria and Lisa commence arguing about who will take the role of Jeannette Macdonald – she of the long red hair, big green eyes, and high, clear voice. Next, Muriel tries to insinuate herself into the game, offering to play Nelson Eddy’s horse (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 309–10). But the elder sisters carry on as if she were not even there. Although one performer is shut out of the scene (either because she was too young to have participated in the original game or because she had not yet been born),⁸ the “Indian Love Call” duet that follows carries within its polyvalent structure an origin story about the *trio*. It is precisely because the two elder sisters played such games – sang, danced, and dreamed – that all three sisters transcended the multiple oppressions, which defined their lives, to sing, dance, and weave the stories and dreams that eventually carried them out of Red Hook, Brooklyn, to public stages the world over. The “kernel” of the game – manifested in the stereotypes it references – gestures to a tightly woven filament belonging to an entire net of oppressions, which has threatened to choke off the lives of generations of Indigenous Peoples across the Americas. And yet, the game itself (as it has been curated and played out by

8 In the film version of *Sun, Moon, and Feather*, Muriel Miguel does not appear at all in this scene (Rosen and Zipp).

Gloria and Lisa) constitutes a tightly woven filament belonging to an intricate web of strategies, which speak to personal and political survivance.

The "Indian Love Call" duet has been celebrated by feminist scholars as a defining scene in Spiderwoman's post-split premiere (see, for example, Schneider 170–1 and Däwes 220–1). Rebecca Schneider has famously identified it as a single, perfect instance of "counter-mimicry" (170) through which the contemporary Native performer subverts and overturns the nostalgia upon which colonialism's nationalist mythologies have been constructed. This nostalgia has been borne upon the myriad colonial simulations of Native experience, which have saturated North American culture and influenced cultural consciousness to deadly effect. As Robyn Diner reminds us, the longings such simulations produce are not so much for what has been lost as they are for *what has never been*. This is the irony, which scholars (like Diner, Schneider, and Däwes) find so delicious; they use words like "unruly," "carnavalesque," "grotesque" (Diner) or "inappropriate" and "heavy" (Schneider 170) to communicate the corporeal presence of the Guna-Rappahannock sisters as they talk back to the Empire – or at least, back to Hollywood.

As these scholars read the scene, the "inappropriate" authentic re-appropriates and plays out a seemingly appropriate instance of nostalgia, thereby dis-covering it as a pretty but hollow simulation – a lifeless mask. While two zaftig, middle-aged American Indian ladies soulfully sing the song that "Indian maidens" hear when they dream of their lovers (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 311), grainy, celluloid shadows of the svelte, youthful onscreen lovers Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy mouth the song's lyrics behind them in bloodless, ethereal silence. Robbed of voice, lacking colour, and so glaringly out of place in the raucous, colourful, and unapologetically busy world of Spiderwoman's 1981 production, these shadows (of rustic lovers and dancing "brave") can in no way be mistaken by the audience as a fading archive of a disappearing people; rather, the positioning of life and colour over colourless non-life asserts the continuance of actual Indigenous Peoples in the persons of the three living performers. The "disappearing people," for whom the archive has been constructed to conjure up colonial nostalgia, *never existed*; the experience offered by white performers in "Red face"⁹ proposes nothing. It is a non-experience.

9 This is not to suggest that either Nelson Eddie or Jeanette Macdonald appeared in actual "red face" in the 1936 film *Rose-Marie*. I use the term quite broadly here to refer not only to the white actors who were decked out to "play Indian" in such films but also to the effects adopted by Hollywood film studios to produce signifiers of Indigeneity (i.e., makeup, costume, props, music, and choreography). The couple's famous duet ought to be regarded as an instance of "red face" for its content (lyrics), arrangement, instrumentation in moments, and vocal opsis.

Such readings, of course, are appropriate, accurate, and important. But they fail to fully penetrate Spiderwoman's performative mola. And while these readings do not "archive" a non-life, they certainly document and catalogue a "half-life." They cast this performance as a *reaction* to the perverse metonyms, which have inhabited the colonial imagination for centuries now. As this fragment of autobiography has been critically imagined, a metonym born of colonial mimesis is cast as protagonist under attack by an antagonist in the person of three American Indian sisters. There is a dangerous irony here. Out of the wrack of the tribal simulations (which they decry while celebrating Spiderwoman's performative intervention) these cultural critics are weaving into the scholarly canon new (and perhaps equally damaging) tribal simulations of their own making.

Activations of struggle, resistance, defiance, and confrontation do *not always* activate survivance. Often born of dire necessity, such acts constitute *reactions against* a thing done that threatens *survival*. But human beings must exercise their capacity for action as well as for reaction to live in a whole, healthy, and balanced way. Action is a privilege reserved solely for the living; a corpse, after all, will still *react* to external stimuli and forces that exert themselves upon its composite elements. Survivance requires the threatened body (communal or individual) to articulate, facilitate, and embody a consciousness that partners reaction with *pro-action* – that balances that body's rejection (of the intolerable) with active aspiration (towards a desirable future). Gerald Vizenor has observed that when the static pose of the "tribal warrior" ceased, in the nineteenth century, to pose a threat to the occupying nation state, this imagined "Indian" suddenly became an expedient tool in the project of nation-building. Indigenous Peoples have since been rewarded for playing the part of the "radical" or "warrior" (Blaeser 53–4). The pages upon which Indigenous essence (human *being*) and action (human *doing*) are actualized have become, for Vizenor, the killing fields of the "cultural word wars," the outcome of which, shaped by "money and politics," has shaped us into one-dimensional relics carrying the label of either "victim" or "survivor" (Blaeser 39). These labels assume a twisted co-dependence between Indigenous Peoples and the colonizing powers: The human, being a victim or survivor, can only, in colonial imagination, *react* against the forces/conditions/agents that victimize or that threaten survival. Hence, the tribal individual's capacity for action is engendered by, fuelled by, and predicated upon the actions of the victimizer. The prisoner of this paradigm is stripped of agency, independence, and responsibility; the prisoner of this paradigm is no longer a human

doing or a human being; the prisoner of this paradigm has become a puppet.¹⁰

One shortcoming of the “counter-mimicry” construct is that it isolates the “Indian Love Call” scene from the rest of the project and the question(s), which have engendered it. Over-investment in the political effect of Spiderwoman’s whimsical musical number diverts us from the central question – from the *kernel* of the story. As Muriel Miguel explains, this kernel emerges from personal experience. She does not at first set out to disseminate an abstract political message. She begins by “going for the kernel” – by interrogating her personal “pain” and seeking its sources. The isolate human undertakes a journey that is specific to her and is transformed through that journey into a political actor with the capacity to affect change on the greater stage outside the theatre (M. Miguel qtd. in Haugo, “Weaving” 226).¹¹

Sun, Moon, and Feather’s kernel demands far more of its creatrices than reactionary counter measures. The answers that each of the Miguel sisters come up with as they pursue the core question – “How did we survive?” – explode with robust, autonomous *doings* and irrepressible, joyous life in the midst of chaos, privation, and despair. And this is certainly how Spiderwoman’s audiences received and were affected by the 1981 performances, which critics have characterized as “life-enhancing,”

10 Ann Haugo concedes that there are significant dangers associated with limiting critical engagement with Indigenous women’s theatrical interventions to a one-dimensional examination of the resistance they pose to the colonial project. Such readings (to the exclusion of all else) would ultimately contain Indigenous artistic expression within and define it in accordance with a colonial framework. “[B]y extension,” she cautions, these readings “would encourage a latent ethnocentrism on the part of the critic” (“Colonial Audiences” 133). To forestall such developments, Haugo proposes that we attend to the nuances wherein multiple resistances are identified and Indigenous agency is assumed (“Colonial Audiences” 133). I would append to this the notion that stance – as opposed to counter stance – is often the most efficacious (and most nuanced) form of resistance we can execute. The simple refusal to “give face to” or to acknowledge the existence of the agents of oppression or their works coupled with the recovery of lifeways and knowledge systems, which predate their arrival, may go further to facilitate a project of re-worlding than it will if we continue to allow ourselves to be drawn into the trap of interminable debate.

11 The necessity of following that personal kernel to achieve greater political efficacy hit home with me during the 2019 rehearsals of *Encounters at the “Edge of the Woods,”* a production for which I was dramaturg, co-devisor, and director. Although I will be discussing this production at greater length in the concluding chapter, I feel compelled to share part of my experience during rehearsals to elaborate on the distinction between placing a larger political ideal at the centre of the creative investigation and the placement of personal experience at that centre. The show was

"full of grace," (Faber 92) or simultaneously as "an actual exposé of ... inner life" and a "sylphlike dreamworld" (Haye). All this is not to suggest, however, that the political tones were absent or so muted as to be overlooked or ignored. Rather, the questions Spiderwoman pursued and the resultant celebratory "romp" the sisters presented (Faber 92) illuminated the political messaging, rendering it more palatable as it had "subtly insinuat[ed]" itself as a layer in their performative mola "without hectoring or rhetoric" (Faber 92). The Miguel sisters were initiating a new conversation – issuing a new call. This call required full investment in its audiences; it solicited heuristic response, not a fleeting, involuntary reaction to guilt, gesturing to white fragility. An answering "ow," from their audiences would not suffice.

devised as a container for conversation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals – all of whom had some relationship with the University of Toronto (faculty, staff, students, alumni, and individuals living and working in the Greater Toronto Area) and the fraught histories contained within the walls and foundations of its buildings; in the buried waterways upon which those buildings rest; the works that have emerged from those buildings; and the attitudes and policies these works engendered. What futures might we, together, imagine? What violations need to be acknowledged and addressed? Acknowledged by whom? Addressed through what actions? How might we personally begin a process of righting fraught relations between ourselves (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and between ourselves and this "arm of the settler state" (Grande "Refusing," 47)? Sharing circles and devising sessions throughout were conducted alternatively in separate spaces (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and in communal spaces where we all came together to share the questions that most occupied us, the kernels we were following, and the work we had done. Where, from the very beginning, the Indigenous artists brought their most pressing and personal concerns to the table in oral and kinetic expression, too many of the non-Indigenous artists (all of whom had considerable training in voice and movement) engaged their intellect, while disassociating themselves from the matter at hand. They pointed outwards at political leaders; they decried (historical and contemporary) policies and events; they were of good heart and strong mind, but in their commitment to effect a macro-transformation, they had forgotten that the micro-transformation is a requisite first step. The project of re-worlding requires the formation of "new human beings." I began to understand here that these non-Indigenous collaborators were not intentionally disassociating themselves from the fraught relationship upon which we had gathered to intervene. Rather, they were holding back to make space for their Indigenous colleagues; theirs were the stories that needed to be privileged and heard.

Over time, they began to apprehend that their Indigenous collaborators were sounding a call – a call to which they were required, *personally*, to respond. Story needed to be answered with story. Before the kernels of our stories could be identified and connected, they had to be followed. Each of us had our own work to do before we could begin to work together. As their awareness grew, the non-Indigenous artists became more courageous. As they began to "follow [their own] pain," their physical instruments went with them. The conversation began.

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

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

The dreaming aspect of survivance is very apparent here, as is the resonance of that dream in the history and development of Spiderwoman Theater (which was created to allow its performers to play outside “type”). In addition, there is, here, a less apparent layer, which may not have even entered the consciousness of Muriel Miguel at the time she told this story: During a performance of her one-woman show *Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue* at the Robert Gill Theatre (University of Toronto) in October 2008, Gloria Miguel related a story about their maternal grandmother. During preparations for the wedding of Gloria’s Aunt Lizzie, the family matriarch was dressing. According to Gloria, she looked stunning in a fine “maroon velvet dress trimmed with ecru lace and diamond buttons.” Her long black hair was piled on top of her head and held in place with

a “sparkling Spanish comb.” Gloria and her older sister were playing in the room, and during their game, Elizabeth accidentally trod on her grandmother’s toe. “Nana” picked up the pint-sized culprit by the neck and began throttling her. This regal beauty undoubtedly would have fit into Muriel’s picture of the finely dressed white ladies; yet, her actions, in this instance, do not fit into our picture of a loving, nurturing grandmother. In retrospect (offered by Gloria Miguel’s revelations of 2008), we begin to see more clearly something that Gloria Miguel and Lisa Mayo had learned as little girls: “passing” (e.g., surviving by mimicking colonial models) and survivance are not the same things.

How did the Miguel sisters survive? How did they maintain their will to survive? They survived by dreaming. They survived sometimes by trying to “squeeze and push and smash” themselves into forms that, for them, personified elegance, happiness, and success. About this, they are very clear and brutally honest. It may not have been the best way, but at the time it may have been the *only* way. Locating a role model who inspires one to aspire may often, for one who is born into seemingly “hopeless” circumstances, tip the balance in her life between hope and despair, between creating and destroying, between surviving and succumbing. It is a double-edged sword to be sure, and certainly, the irony has not escaped the sisters; nor should it escape their audiences. In the absence of visible and celebrated American Indian role models upon which to construct their aspirations, the Miguel sisters, here, reveal how they adopted and adapted non-Indigenous role models – perhaps, even metonyms and tribal simulations. Paradoxically, even as such “role models” embody a centuries-old campaign of cultural genocide, these simulations may have contributed to the survival of the Miguel sisters who are, themselves, authentic embodiments of Indigeneity and who would (and *did*) eventually grow into authentic Indigenous role models for those yet to be born. To wit, some years after its premiere, Spiderwoman Theater was touring *Sun, Moon, and Feather*. After one show, three little Anishinaabe sisters came backstage to meet the sisters who had inspired them: “They were proud of us! They wanted to be us! We were their role models” (M. Miguel qtd. in Perkins and Uno 298).¹² Despite an intense and long-standing colonial campaign of theft and suppression, Indigenous cultures and culture heroes still survive; recovery is possible.

12 These three little girls – Keitha, Polly, and Karen – are the daughters of Anishinaabe author, journalist and poet Lenore Keeshig Tobias (Mojica, Personal Communication 2022).

Gloria Miguel and Lisa Mayo do not simply mimic the Hollywood icons who introduced the “Indian Love Call” into the cultural lexicon and orientalist imaginary of North America. They publicly replay their younger *selves* who are training themselves for what they will become. They turn their gaze (and our gaze) upon the children that they were – young, beautiful, talented, creative dreamers. And these young artists-in-training were, at this time, playing out their own dreams of escape from Red Hook, Brooklyn, and from the metonyms that they themselves were being forced to play in the Miguel family business (clips of which are woven into the celluloid layer of home movies in front of which the actors perform).¹³ Where the non-Indigenous viewer may require the

13 In the 1989 film version of *Sun, Moon, and Feather*, the Miguel sisters explicate one of the home movies, which has been layered into the stage production. In the film, we see a loin-clothed Antonio Miguel equipped with a bow, a quiver full of arrows, and a headdress dancing before a large group of picnickers seated on the grass under a blue sky. Shots of Aunt Lizzie, swathed in buckskin and sporting a flattering headband, are woven into Miguel’s onstage performance, as are deliberately pedestrian shots of each Miguel sister who singly interprets a snippet of the action for us from the front stoop of the family home in Red Hook, Brooklyn. They explain that their father is performing a “hunting dance” during which his movements make us understand that he is getting into his canoe; he is “crossing the water”; he is stalking a wolf. He sees the wolf; he reaches behind him for an arrow; he draws upon the wolf.

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

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

easily accessible political lesson, which is imbedded in this scene, the Indigenous viewer may require a lesson in transcendence: This viewer may need to be reminded that while “[i]magination is a frequent casualty to the grinding plod of poverty,” (Justice 45) it is necessary to the health and life of the human soul. As such, it should be cherished and nurtured amid even the harshest of material realities. In the absence of such nurturing (from either their withdrawn mother or their alcohol-dependent, volatile father), two little brown girls nurtured that imagination in themselves and in so doing, nurtured the artistic voices that would facilitate the escape of which they dreamed.

At the end of the day, Gloria Miguel and Lisa Mayo replay the story of two little girls who are finding their voices together: Despite the humorous arguing and the jockeying for position (both girls want to play the *ingénue*), they discover their individual instruments and how to make those instruments blend. Lisa Mayo is a mezzo-soprano, and her voice (now, as it probably was then) is best suited for the lower (Nelson Eddy’s) part. Gloria Miguel is a natural coloratura soprano; her voice is best suited for the higher (Jeanette MacDonald’s) part. Together, they harmonize beautifully, and we bear witness to the genesis of a choral community in which each voice fulfils its role, contributing beautifully to a larger whole. To focus on the Miguel sister’s send-up of the white gaze (Schneider 163), is to privilege that gaze and to pass over a crucial lesson in survivance. Perhaps, also, it affects an obfuscation of a complex and inconvenient truth: As children, the elder Miguel sisters *enjoyed* watching Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald; they admired their musical abilities; they now credit these performers for being (along with the Marx Brothers and Laurel and Hardy) early artistic influences (see Mayo qtd. in Haugo, “Native Playwrights’ Newsletter” 336). These performers and the movies in which they appeared are part of Spiderwoman’s story and are honoured as such.

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

wore her hair (usually plaited) at a comparable length. So, the “model” she creates bears more resemblance to herself (and her creative abilities) than the musical comedienne she seems to be emulating.

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

These embellishments and the adult artists’ refusal to “correct” the details they altered as children when faced with the (film) archive of the authentic fantasy bespeak a commitment to the stuff of *their* reality – to a reality that resonates at much deeper levels than reactionary posturing. Those little details speak as much to who these women are and how it is that they have been able to survive as they do to the Hollywood iconography, which threatened that survival and worked towards their unmaking. Hence, the scene affects a more complex and deeply layered response than the dry, rueful chuckle of the politically “woke.” This is a scene which touches the viewers’ core and elicits therein tenderness, grief, joy and hope simultaneously: tenderness as we contemplate the innocent dreaming of children; grief as we contemplate the implications and potentially devastating effects of internal colonization (which often lurk just behind the role models we are taught to emulate); hope and joy as we witness the transcendence of familial love and solidarity over petty rivalries, domestic violence, crushing poverty and shame. As two aging sisters imitate the children they were, imitating two youthful onscreen lovers, they rediscover, through the exercise of their artistry, the ties that bind one to the other. They may be portly; they may be brown; they may be past their youth; they may be whimsically attired. Indeed, they may be (as Rebecca Schneider insists) “inappropriate” for the roles of the young *ingénue* and her rugged swain (170), but as Schneider herself concedes, they sing “beautifully” (170). And they lead us with a delicate grace (which often takes us by surprise when it is manifested within larger bodies) towards the central lesson of the scene when, with arms akimbo, they open themselves totally to each other and declare, “You belong to me / I belong to you” (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 312) (see [fig. 5.1](#)). Without missing a beat, Lisa (borrowing her words from Chekhov) next observes: “Oh how the music is playing/ so gaily,



Figure 5.1. Gloria Miguel in *Sun, Moon, and Feather*. Courtesy of the Walter Havighurst Special Collections and University Archives, Miami University Libraries, Oxford, OH.

so bravely and one wants to live” (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 312). In the midst of disrepair and chaos, in the midst of mourning, in the midst of all the damage that the agents of colonization have wrought on the lands, life-ways and personal psyches of the Indigenous Peoples, one seeks transcendence. *We are not supposed to be here. Nonetheless, one wants to live.*

How did they survive? They dreamed. They created. They hid the baby (Muriel) when their father came home drunk and agitated (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 304); they helped their mother to physically restrain this large man and so prevent him from harming himself or frightening others (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 305). They remembered who they were; they stuck together; they cooperated.

Just as the Miguel sisters' violence against one another is a learned behaviour – learned through years of observing the alcohol-fuelled domestic dramas initiated by their father and through their lived experiences outside the home – so, cooperation, hard work, optimism and endurance are learned behaviours, also communicated to the sisters by their parents. Indeed, Spiderwoman's famous "Boat Story" asserts these lessons in no uncertain terms. And its placement in the performance only emphasizes this assertion.

They begin by moving rapidly through a replay of a tea party that has started to turn ugly as the sisters jockey for position ("I am sister number one. You have to listen to me") and respect ("You always leave me out") (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 302–3). As momentum builds, the tea party begins to go further and further awry until it escalates into a physical fight during which Lisa cries out, "I hate you bitches. Hope you both die" (*Sun* 304). Immediately, the scene shifts as the memory of an earlier incident is layered in. Suddenly, the shadow of a drunken and distraught Antonio Miguel returning home insinuates itself over the story of sibling warfare. And as the warring sisters remember this terrifying moment, their anger at each other evaporates in their desire to protect their baby sister, their mother and the progenitor of the chaos: "Mama jumped up and pulled the window down. Mama grabbed Daddy by the waist, we grabbed Mama, and we pulled and pulled him down to the floor [off the windowsill from which he was threatening to jump]" (*Sun* 305).

The transformation into the "Boat Story" comes out of the physical act of cooperative *pulling*, which all three enact,¹⁴ morphing out of the tableau, which concludes the story of Antonio Miguel's thwarted suicide attempt. Quite simply, the story is this: Antonio Miguel who loved the sea was able (after years of work) to either rent or buy a seaside bungalow on Cedar Beach in New Jersey. He also acquired a boat upon which he and his brother-in-law Joe lavished countless hours each summer to refurbish and make seaworthy:

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

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

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

LISA: And then next summer ... (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 306)

14 Muriel Miguel plays her mother in this scene.

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

Where it sinks like a stone.

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

As respondents to the primary storyteller, Lisa Mayo and Gloria Miguel add multiple layers of perspective offering alternate ways to view specifics of the story, so that its kernel may become more readily apparent. Where Muriel Miguel remembers a "beautiful red and white bungalow on a beautiful beach by a beautiful bay" (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 305), Gloria Miguel remembers "[a] dilapidated old bungalow in New Jersey on a dirty beach off a dirty polluted bay" (306) from whence, Lisa Mayo adds, "a god-awful odor" rose to meet them twice daily (306). Behind all three, ghostly black-and-white shadows of their former selves, their family and the contested boat dance behind them, opening a portal into the past. Thus, we are granted an opportunity to see the young witnesses, to see through their eyes, and so form our own judgments. The boat, beach and bungalow are neither as impressive as they must have seemed to the young Muriel nor as pitifully dilapidated as they have been remembered by her elder sisters (306). But what the visual archive really adds to the performance of this story is the sheer

fun, the hard work and the comfortable sense of community engendered by this summer ritual. And these comfortably layer themselves beneath the sheer fun, physical effort and comfortable sense of community, which characterize the trio's telling.

In the final analysis, the "Boat Story" of *Sun, Moon, and Feather* reveals another layer in a sumptuously palimpsestic performative-teaching about the power and necessity of dreaming. At the root of the sisters' dreams of tea with the Queen, of escape from their childhood home, of enough to eat, of artistic success, of attentive lovers and of unconditional love lies a powerful lesson in survivance: How did they survive? They dreamed. Despite the financial and personal sacrifices of Antonio Miguel and his brother, despite the continued support of family and friends and despite all the brothers' ministrations, Antonio Miguel's beloved boat takes on water and sinks. *The dream, however, stays securely afloat*. And this is the lesson we have come to learn. We are never told if that boat *ever* became seaworthy, but we do know that the Miguel patriarch did not give up his dream that it would. Harboursing a dream is more vital than realizing it. Harboursing dreams keeps individuals afloat; unites communities; and fosters optimism, discipline and endurance. At the end of the day, when survival is threatened, a leaky boat may just be enough to carry us through. How did they survive? They received and withstood every hardship, every disappointment, every humiliation as *one* body – "[m]y echo, my shadow and me" (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 197). When all is said and done, *Sun, Moon, and Feather* is Spiderwoman Theater's teaching about living together in "that place that Indians talk about," not "dying together" within some nostalgic celebration of non-existent inhabitants of a place that never was.

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

MURIEL: I'm crying. I'm crying.

GLORIA: Imagine. I'm already beginning to forget her face.

MURIEL: God grant it will all work out.

GLORIA: Just as *we won't be remembered either*.

MURIEL: Weather is beautiful today.

GLORIA: *They'll forget us*. (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 313, emphasis mine)¹⁵

But even as the Miguel sisters give voice to Chekhov's agonized doubts, they have already recovered a solution: The dead are not simply forgotten. Gloria, who has articulated Chekhov's greatest fear, answers it: "No. She'll go on in us, in me and my family" (*Sun* 313). The stories of individuals or nations do not end with death. There is no separation between the ancestors and the descendants. The descendants carry the ancestors, and their own lives are layered within an epic tapestry in which the dead, the living and the yet unborn dance together, speak together, remember and dream together in a liminal space fraught with colour, pattern and infinite meaning. *Infinite meaning*. After all, as Muriel Miguel has noted, "You're really responsible for six generations. Even if you die, you're responsible" (qtd. in Haugo, "Weaving" 222).

If *Sun, Moon, and Feather* finds its genesis in a question around survival – a question that necessitates the re/activation of recovery and mourning, it ends with a new question that calls upon the survivors to continue dreaming, to commit to their dreams and to act upon that commitment. Through this project, the Miguel sisters begin to recover their sibling relationships, their identities within family and nation, and the legacies that have been left for them (including the names bestowed upon them at birth). They mourn and lay to rest old hurts and devastating losses. They rediscover the potency of dreaming (e.g., its role in their survivance). And they come, finally, to an acknowledgement of their responsibility (the responsibility of "We Three") to share the answer to which their quest has led them, as they continue to dream the survivance of the coming generations:

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

GLORIA: *I'm the only grandmother now, the only grandmother in the family*.

LISA: It's warm today. (Spiderwoman, *Sun* 313–14, emphasis mine)

15 In the film version of *Sun, Moon, and Feather*, this dialogue is preceded by Muriel's account of the moment at which she communicated her father's death to her uncles: Language breaks down here, as she flatly reproduces an eerie, guttural cry that is all the more painful to hear, because it carries no histrionic undertones. It does not (in her performance) express wounded emotion; it is, rather, the expression of pure spirit – a soul rent in two: "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH" (Zipp and Rosen). Layered atop an image of a glorious sunset over Gunayala, it reverberates across the oceans, over space and through time – a primordial echo like the first note of Creation. But unlike the first note of Creation, it is a flat echo of the human being's inchoate, uncomprehending terror in the face of a great mystery.

Communitist Acts: Recovering the Sacred, Recovering Self

Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City (1988)¹⁶ was created at the behest of the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth,¹⁷ which has been meeting annually since 1977. The Elders, at this time, particularly wished to address an epidemic problem of New Age charlatans who were building corporate empires, which purported to offer Indigenous spiritual wisdom and healing secrets for large sums of money. The Circle of Elders invited Spiderwoman Theater to join with them in this intervention, telling the sisters, "We think you should do something about this" (M. Miguel qtd. in Haugo, "Weaving" 229). In answering this call, the Miguel sisters widened the orbiculate, narrative construct through which they had recovered personal, familial and tribal identities to perform their roles/responsibilities within the larger hoop of Indigenous nations.

Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City is a scathingly hilarious indictment of cultural theft. With this production, Spiderwoman Theater has crafted a dramaturgical vehicle through which to deconstruct colonial metonyms and resist the appropriation, bastardization and marketing of spiritual knowledge and Indigenous identity. But this vehicle does much more than shout down the oppressor:¹⁸ it affects a recovery of self in its recovery of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, as it imagines and operationalizes anti-colonial pedagogical and narrative frameworks that not only challenge colonial representations of Indianness but also render them moot.

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

17 Since its inaugural gathering in 1977, the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth has met yearly (hosted by a different nation each time) to discuss issues, which involve or affect Indigenous Peoples and to develop strategies to ensure the continuance of traditional lifeways and spiritual praxis ("The American Indian"). Communiqués and statements coming out of these gatherings and other materials may be accessed by visiting the website of the American Indian Institute (see "The American Indian").

18 Feminist scholar Jill Dolan reads *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* as an expression of "racial rage over the appropriation of American Indian culture" and detects within its use of "alternative" aesthetic devices and dramaturgical structure "the potential for feminist subjectivities" (*Presence* 49). Rebecca Schneider similarly detects and privileges the "searing critique" to which Spiderwoman Theater turns its "counter mimetic" effects (171). Both readings are inarguably legitimate and

The settler society may be in need of re-education (and *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show* certainly offers this), but this performative intervention was created with Indigenous audiences in mind (see Haugo, "Weaving" 229); its spiritual core, its good effects, its teachings and its processual map present themselves for reception by Indigenous communities. Recognition and acknowledgement of these good effects will, I believe, result in the more "nuanced reading of [...] resistance" for which Ann Haugo has called ("Colonial Audiences" 133).

Indigenous lifeways, which are inseparable from spiritual praxis, are less easily relocated than some mainstream religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Andrea Smith warns that when the expression of Indigenous cosmological understandings is disconnected from the traditional territories of the people, it renders praxis impossible and ultimately destroys the belief system out of which such praxis was born (122).¹⁹ This works itself in two ways: Most obviously, original peoples have been removed from the traditional lands they once occupied and

important. However, as we have seen with regard to *Sun, Moon, and Feather*, such readings fail to address the more life-affirming and life-sustaining layers of this project, which include its scrupulous search for the roots of misappropriation, the scrupulous self-examination of its artists and its inherent mechanisms for healing. Indeed, such readings reveal a marked disinterest in how performative interventions by Indigenous artists might serve the people by and for and about whom they were created. Dolan, by way of example, concludes her performance analysis of *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show* by observing that Spiderwoman Theater and other artists like them will never have the "leisure to inhabit" the spaces of "dominant cultural privilege" (*Presence* 64), but she never imagines that they may have the opportunity to inhabit a much richer community, a community, in fact, that they have enriched and that carries privileges of its own. Nor does she imagine that this performative intervention might serve any greater purpose than to "transform feminist theater once again into a site of radical political action" (*Presence* 64).

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

hence prevented from practising their ceremonies. But more insidiously, non-Indigenous Peoples have appropriated fragments of spiritual praxis, packaging these for sale in a global market. In packaging cultural materials and spiritual practices for distribution to mass markets, they deliver the assertion “that anyone can practice Indian spirituality anywhere, so there is no need to protect the specific Native communities and their lands that are the basis of these spiritual practices” (Smith 122–3). Spiritual appropriation, then, locks us into a “catch-22” situation: It shows itself as a tool of cultural genocide insofar as it helps to uphold the seemingly plausible justifications for continued colonial infringement on Indigenous lands, which results in the curtailment or outright cessation of Indigenous embodied expression of spiritual faith and then an erosion of the faith itself. And once the damage is perceived as an irreversible *fait accompli*, those who have sought to eradicate Indigenous presence or to co-opt Indigenous praxis defend themselves thusly: Indigenous people have forgotten themselves; hence, it is up to others to teach them who they are and who they have been (see Smith 123).

And this makes sense. In some awful, unconscionable way, this makes total sense because for Indigenous people, the land is not simply a “set” upon which to play out our lives or perform rites of worship. These lands house and *are* agential forces within the larger community in the context of which human beings come to know themselves, their roles, and their responsibilities. Hence, a recovery and re-righting of the collective’s cosmological understandings and spiritual praxis is tightly woven into a recovery and re-righting of collective identity and individual selfhood. And this complex project of multiple recoveries necessitates the recovery and deployment of a pedagogical process through

the bone and passed through the blood. Certainly, with respect to his own Cherokee Nation, Justice points to the fact that “removed peoples still maintain [traditional belief] systems, as do those who stay behind.” And while elements of praxis may change their shape, “full loss and destruction are rare” (Personal Communication, 2010).

Notwithstanding, a question remains: How rare? How much is lost to a people – indeed, how much is lost to the entire Creation – when once-crucial knowledge (rendered obsolete by removal) has been forgotten by its original holders? How much is lost to a people when the fabric of the body politic has been degraded by divisions between those who maintain the traditional belief systems, those who have adopted foreign systems and those who have ceased to believe in anything at all? What losses remain to be discovered? History has yet to render a full accounting. Justice places before us an exciting task: What are the processes we must adopt, recover, invent or adapt to forge these new relationships and the modes of their expression? Certainly, I believe, this is the question that Spiderwoman Theater and the aesthetic inheritors of its artists have begun to answer for themselves.

which Indigenous humans came to know themselves long before the European invaders pretended authority to tell them who they were. It is, I argue, through the lens of this pedagogical paradigm and its application as a dramaturgical model for the contemporary stage that *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* is viewed to best effect.

Pedagogy, Dramaturgy and Metaphysical Mimesis

Before any healer can activate the remediation of any dis-ease, that healer must first seek and identify its sites, its roots, its agents and its consequences to the "organism." *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show* ventures into several originary sites from which to conduct its performative intervention on the dis-ease that results from cultural appropriation. The piece opens with a parody of an early scene in Karl May's *Winnetou* during which a noble Teutonic hero who is still a stranger to America's "Wild West" has managed to kill an aggressive bear and so save the life of his noble Apache counterpart. On Spiderwoman's stage, May's learned Teuton makes short work of this bear with a "hit on the head, [a] shot in the eye, [and a] stab in the chest." For this admirable feat, May's fictional Apache *Winnetou* bestows upon him the name "Old Shatterhand." (Spiderwoman, *Winnetou's* 238). These two heroes of the "New World" eventually become blood brothers, as they recognize qualities in each other, which they have never been able to detect in anybody else (Indigenous or European). Of course, as Lisa Mayo observed in 1991, while *Winnetou* is "brave, courageous, has ethics [and is] very good looking [...] he is never as good as the German" ("Appropriation" 54, emphasis mine). Hence, he must die, leaving his European blood brother to remember and embody his noble spirit. And herein lies the terrible genius of the mechanism through which "white people establish themselves as the true inheritors of Indianness" (Smith 123): The "noble savage" is disappearing. Indeed, he must perforce disappear, as he is not equipped to compete with and within the "superior" settler society. However, to ameliorate this tragic denouement, the superior settler society will take it upon itself to salvage the cultural fragments it deems to be valuable or worthy of survival. Certainly, these are the sentiments with which Karl May introduced his *Winnetou* in 1892:

What a proud, handsome figure he used to be as he flew over the wide savanna, the mane of his mustang fluttering in the wind! And how miserable and degenerate he has become [...] like a *mangy cur*, reduced to begging and stealing [...] What could this race have achieved had it been given the opportunity? *What characteristic cultural forms will forever be lost to mankind with the annihilation of this people?* (May xiii, emphasis mine)

It is with these words that generations of German nationals and their European neighbours have received their first introduction to Indigenous people in North America. And it is from such preposterous fictions that they formed lasting opinions about us. May's questions insinuated themselves into the hearts and minds of countless hobbyists and directed the philosophies and practices of thousands of Indian Clubs across Europe and North America: "What characteristic cultural forms will forever be lost to mankind with the annihilation of this People" *if we do not take it upon ourselves to preserve these things?*

Karl May had lived a hard and terrible life in Germany and had spent most of his life in debtors' prison. From there, he wrote 73 novels – every one of them an exotic potboiler set in a faraway land, peopled by "Turks," "Africans" and all manner of "exotics." His *Winnetou* with its heroic German protagonist and noble Apache sidekick captured the imaginations not only of May's compatriots but also of readers across Europe. We might well be tempted to underestimate the influence of this "outdated" and "obscure" work. But it is a matter of public record that May (for as much as his work has been dismissed by "serious" literary scholars) has been the one of the most read authors in his country and throughout Europe (Kimmelman). Indeed, May's "noble savage" has inhabited and profoundly affected the German imagination (and the imaginations of their Dutch, Swiss, Italian and Russian neighbours) throughout the twentieth century and into today. In 2006, journalist Dirk Kurbjuweit dubbed Germany "The Land of Winnetou" in *Der Spiegel*, a national news magazine. He observed with reference to the nation's soccer team:

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

Certainly, there can be no mistaking the sentiment here! As inheritors of Karl May's literary legacy (most particularly, his epic *Winnetou*), the German people (and their neighbours into whose languages May's novels have been translated) have come to see themselves – reflected in the mirror (*Spiegel*) of the national *Zeitgeist* – as the heroic preservers and "rightful heirs" of Indigenous cultural wealth. It is not unreasonable to identify May's *Winnetou* as a critical site of misappropriation,

along with the Wild West and Medicine Shows that toured Europe and the Americas throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the contemporary commercialized pageants that celebrate the "Indian Princess" and the "noble savage," and the fraudulent spiritualists who purport to sell Indigenous teachings and ceremony. Nor is it unreasonable to position May's opus squarely within the psycho-spiritual heart of spiritual theft and cultural genocide.

Spiderwoman Theater frames its performative assault on this spiritual theft with key scenes from May's novel, restating and answering May's thesis with brutal succinctness. In so doing, the Miguel sisters also answer countless individuals (encountered during early European tours) who wondered if they were intimately acquainted with May's famous Apache, who claimed to have been transformed by ceremony into Sioux "sisters" or "brothers," and who refused to acknowledge the racist ideology that lay at the heart of their preconceptions about the tribal peoples they so admired or to abandon those preconceptions (see Mayo, "Appropriation" 54; Mayo qtd. in Burns and Hurlbutt 176–7; Spiderwoman, *Winnetou's* 234). Such pretenders are neither heroic preservers nor legitimate heirs; they are, quite simply, opportunistic carion eaters – destroyers of the very cultures on which they perpetrate their "ministrations."

MURIEL: She looked at me and smiled and said "I'm an Indian, too."

Too [...]

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

MURIEL: That's nice. I smile. My rubbery lips stretch over my teeth. My eyes go blank. My shoulders go up. Sell out, sell out, sell out, sell out.

GLORIA: Thank me, thank me, thank me. My spirit, my body, my wisdom. You feed on me, create on me, enjoy my remains. Thank me, thank me, thank me. (Spiderwoman, *Winnetou's* 258–9, stage directions omitted)

Woven into this indictment of cultural theft are crucial and far-reaching questions around the issue of complicity. Apart from colonial agency, Indigenous Peoples must also interrogate our own (at times, enforced or unwitting) complicity in the misappropriation of sacred knowledge and spiritual praxis. If one smiles and says nothing to those who flout falsified identities, is one a "sell out"? And how do we address

the struggles of those authentic American Indians who participated in the popular dissemination of stereotypes by performing in the Wild West shows and other pageants of ersatz Indigeneity to avoid prison or to feed their families? What of the Guna showman and his Rappahannock wife who don Plains regalia to hunt stuffed wolves and sell homemade snake oil or turtle cock juice²⁰ in Central Park to advertise the latest Hollywood Western or to entertain Sunday picnickers? Are they, too, “sell outs”? What of those authentic Indigenous individuals who sell spirituality to the highest bidder or who abuse the authority and unquestioning trust invested upon them by the desperately trusting and spiritually needy?

These questions are layered into the performative mola as home movies of authentic powwows organized and attended by their family (1940s–70s) provide the backdrop for the live Snake Oil Show, during which the performers advertise a ceremonial retreat “all for the low, low price of \$3000.00 for the weekend” (Spiderwoman, *Winnetou’s* 255). And as these historic archives continue to be projected throughout the show, they manifest themselves as a potent contrapuntal underlay against which Muriel Miguel interprets the lyrics of the Hollywood ballad “Pale Moon (An Indian Love Song)” with a farcically ersatz version of Plains Indian sign language and against which Mother Moon Face (played by Hortencia Colorado) flirts shamelessly with a (white male) audience member who has volunteered to undergo Spiderwoman’s plastic ceremony, which is guaranteed to transform him into an “authentic” Indian (*Winnetou’s* 257).

Ceremony rests at the heart of this production. It manifests itself as a series of misbegotten rites as the “shamanesses” Mother Moon Face, Princess Pissy Willow (Lisa Mayo), Minnie Hall Runner (Gloria Miguel), and Ethel Christian Christiansen (Muriel Miguel) perform equestrian feats on mops instead of horses, execute bullwhip stunts and rope-tricks with “invisible” implements, channel “spirits” afflicted with hemorrhoids, and transform Caucasian acolytes into American Indians. Here, their pointed criticism of plastic spirituality could not be lost on their audiences. More crucially, however, with *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show*, Spiderwoman Theater has curated a ceremony of *recovery*,

20 Muriel Miguel told the story of her uncle Joe and his trade in “turtle cock juice,” marketed as an antidote to impotence and prepared in his bathtub, at a workshop facilitated by James Luna in October 2005 at the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama (University of Toronto). This story has also been woven into several live Spiderwoman productions, although it has not yet been published.

which effects the transformation of both performer and witness. With Hortencia Colorado, the Miguel sisters have *made* for themselves a vehicle of authentic healing from the shameful detritus of falsehood. And their audiences (regardless of ethnicity) are invited to *share* – to participate at various key stages – in this rite of re-righting and to thereby be transformed. When Princess Pissy Willow demonstrates her “crack shot” with a toy rifle, a volunteer from the audience is selected to come up onto the stage and hold the balloons, which are her targets. This volunteer, however, becomes complicit in the fakery, as s/he has been armed with a straight pin and instructed to burst the targets s/he holds up as the rifle is “discharged.” The volunteer’s actions are *completely obvious* to the audience, which is enthusiastically encouraged by Muriel Miguel’s “shamaness” to vigorously applaud the princess’s skill. And this, it invariably does with like vigour and enthusiasm.

The revelation of the mechanics of the illusion is one key component of ceremonial praxis in many Indigenous communities. Across the nations, healers, ceremonial practitioners, and artists have, in key moments, traditionally revealed the sleights of hand behind the uncanny illusions they create.²¹ One deliberately allows the observer to see the red clay he chews, “later to be spit out as his own ‘blood’” (La Barre qtd. in Schechner, *Environmental* 174), just as the Yaqui deer dancer, who is understood to represent a visitant from another world to the world of men, makes no attempt to disguise his own humanity beneath the antlers he has donned for the ceremony. The non-Indigenous observer has been trained to regard such revelatory instances as evidentiary of failure – the failure of the deer dancer to completely transform (Schechner, *Between* 4) or the failure of the “magician-shaman-showman” to sustain an illusion (La Barre qtd. in Schechner, *Environmental* 174). This speaks to the Western propensity to privilege the *semblance of material*

21 Tsitsika, a Kwakiutl word that means “everything is not real,” is the name bestowed upon the Winter Ceremonials of that nation (Norwell qtd. in Ford 198). During this time of Potlatches and clan initiations, dances depicting gory executions and “brutal” assaults by clan initiates on community members (during which their houses are ransacked, or their bodies are bitten and seem to bleed real blood) are enacted to the delight of all (but heretofore horrified outsiders and anthropologists). But all is not real. The victims of the Hamatsa initiate’s rapacious attacks have become “actors” for the occasion. They conceal blood bags beneath their clothing to be broken at the appropriate moment, and they scream with convincing outrage as their houses are “ransacked” by the Hamatsa initiate even as his kinsman follows closely documenting all property damage (for which restitution will be made) and ensuring that the initiate does not damage chattel that has been designated off-limits for the purposes of the “play” (Norwell cited in Ford 198–208).

verisimilitude over spiritual reality. But the teaching communicated through such “flawed” and “failed” illusions is that the material world is somehow less real, less relevant, less potent than the world of spirit that lies beyond the veil. As such, it warrants far less attention than the interdependencies that link all with all. *Healing is what is required, not a magic show.* And the healer, himself, despite his showmanship is only a vessel through which the spirits work. Parlour tricks are only parlour tricks, and as it turns a blind eye to the slippages that reveal the banal importance thereof, the audience plays its own part in the production: it understands and embraces the teaching.

Similarly, Spiderwoman’s audiences, as informed and consenting participants in the sham rituals of *Winnetou’s*, are lulled into revealing and enacting their own complicity in actual acts of cultural theft outside the theatre. As the sham reaches ludicrous heights in a climactic “ceremony” during which a Caucasian audience member will be transformed into an American Indian of perhaps the “Wishee Washee” or the “Rappa Hamburg” tribe and adopt – with the enthusiastic encouragement of the cast – the name “Two Dogs Fucking,” the audience raises its collective voice to chant its approbation as Muriel Miguel conducts (Spiderwoman, *Winnetou’s* 257).²² In this moment of *sharing*, wherein all witnesses are invited to take their place in the performative mola created by Spiderwoman Theater, the opportunity to learn from and be transformed by the experience manifests itself: nobody is innocent here. To differing extents, we are all complicit in the crime of cultural theft, and it is important that all of us interrogate our *ownership* here if we are to end it. The flaws built into Spiderwoman’s performance do not exist as an invitation to simply laugh ruefully at the more ludicrous aspects of cultural theft; rather, they contribute to a *metaphysical mimesis*, as it were – revealing the spiritual mechanisms of misappropriation and the extent of the damage caused by the “Great North American Medicine Show” in all its incarnations.

Internalized shame and personal despair are manifestations of that damage. And as the company tracks the movements of those who vandalized Indigenous cultures, each performer is led into an honest reckoning with that damage, which has to some extent directed her relationships and choices: Muriel Miguel, for instance, voices her youthful

22 When the initiate is deemed fully prepared, the “rite of transformation” is completed by sending him on his way armed with a brown paper “medicine pouch” (containing a Q-tip, a Band-aid and a condom) and a picture of a handsome American Indian male in full Plains regalia, which the “transformed” initiate is instructed to hold in front of his face for the rest of his natural life.

wish that her mother had been “taller” and “like every other mother in the neighborhood” (*Winnetou’s* 252). While some (represented by Muriel Miguel’s Ethel Christian Christiansen) sell false prophecy and may don a false identity along with faux buckskin and plastic beads, even as they fall into inauthentic “trances” (see *Winnetou’s* 247), authentic American Indians have often been ashamed of their ethnicity, of the physical features they have inherited from their parents, and of their authentic gifts or spiritual power. Indeed, such power, when it is authentic, is never flamboyant, and it brings no monetary gain. The body of Elmira Miguel became the bridge, which linked spirit to material and across which the dead communicated with the living. And for this dedication of body, Elmira was never paid in money; instead, we are told, those who sought her services “brought crackers, buns, and tea” (*Winnetou’s* 253) as tribute or payment while her youngest daughter flinched with (misplaced) shame, because her mother was not like “other mothers” in the neighbourhood (*Winnetou’s* 252).

Pro-Action vs. Reaction: The Red Reading

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

For Indigenous Peoples, this generational gap is one consequence of the colonial project. Our children were removed from their parental homes and communities; their parents’ language was quite literally beaten out of them; they were taught to speak, worship, eat, dress, and work in accordance with settler norms. They were taught to be ashamed of their parents, of ancestral traditions, of their languages, their belief systems and their lifeways. The shame that some of us have come to feel is not a natural phase of human development; it has been imposed upon us by those who sought to destroy Indigenous family

and kinship structures; *it is not merely an aspect of the universal human condition*. Indeed, as I write in this historical moment, Indigenous people across Turtle Island are working purposefully to bridge the imposed lacunae between the generations, between Indigenous communities, and between the people themselves.

Within *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show*, Muriel Miguel takes the first steps to address the gap between herself and her mother. She publicly acknowledges the shame she felt in the face of her mother's authenticity. And this acknowledgement will lay the groundwork for Spider-woman's next production *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*, which is a profoundly personal mourning song for Elmira Miguel and a celebration of the authentic spiritual gifts she left to her daughters. But this site of shame occupies only one layer of a subtly intricate matrix of damage caused by misappropriation. Another key site of the damage wrought by the corruption of Indigenous story, the misappropriation of Indigenous spiritual praxis, and the grossly constructed distortion of Indigenous image is the positioning of Indigenous women – or, rather, the *erasure* of position. The imposition of patriarchal governing structures has resulted in the glorification of the “chief” without recognition that this male authority figure was a servant of the people; he had learned his language, his position in the family, his responsibilities, and much of his history from his mother; he had inherited his clan membership from his mother, and in many nations, he was appointed and guided by a council of Clan Mothers. Across Turtle Island within many Indigenous communities (including Pueblo, Cherokee, and Haudenosaunee), women held the property, and they made the decisions that would affect the future of their nations. But when the settler came, he refused to deal with Indigenous women, preferring to negotiate with an autonomous male “sovereign.” Eventually, as colonial agents took control of the land, they altered the political and economic structures of Indigenous societies, so that women no longer owned their property and had no say in decisions made on behalf of the whole nation. Hence, across Turtle Island, Indigenous communities have been working diligently to operationalize their understanding that the project of re-worlding is dependent upon the repositioning of the female to her former place in the social fabric.

As *Winnetou's* performers “model” European-designed costumes and characterizations of the American Indian (“Noble Savage”; Mangy “Hordes”; or flamboyant, crack shot, trick-riding “Princesses”) and play out the settler narratives on their feet, the layers of faux hides and hideous lamé, macho posturing, razzle-dazzle quackery and sexually charged salesmanship begin to unravel. The shoddy patchwork reveals

its flaws. And beneath these, the authentic originals – solidly designed, Indigenous female bodies – publicly dis-cover themselves as the sites in which authentic Indigenous *gwage* (essence) may be sought and found.

Birgit Däwes asserts that the troupe's "asymmetrical assignment of 21 characters to four actresses and the visible dissolve of various characters into others (e.g., when Gloria Miguel changes from the Bear into Klekepetra, "leaving the costume in the center of the stage" [57]) clearly undermine essentialist notions of cultural difference" (337). But such a reading diverts us from the kernel/*gwage* of the project and obfuscates an essential truth. As the Miguel sisters with Hortencia Colorado lend their physical and vocal instruments to play out European notions of cultural difference, they are accessing cellular memory. They are accessing a history that has been inscribed on and within the Indigenous body, which serves as the container/archive of that history and the site from which the "text" of that history may be both "read" and articulated. The published versions of Spiderwoman's works, then, should be understood as *archives of performance*, not "dramatic literature." Similarly, the family films, which are frequently projected onto the bodies of the performers during Spiderwoman shows, should not be read simply as texts or historical archives in and of themselves. Layered atop or behind the performing body, these celluloid shadows serve as a visual reminder that the *living flesh* across which they dance is a container for communal/ancestral memory. We embody all of those who came before. And as storytellers, we serve our communities by becoming the vessels through which they speak. Working within this aesthetic realm, the performing female body does not simply challenge "essentialist notions of cultural difference." Rather, she conducts a performative "Red Reading" on the settler narrative. In so doing, she weighs her own embodied knowledge (tradition/ancestral memory) against the distorted histories and deformed representations of Indigenous humanity that have been documented on countless pages to allow her "readers" to assess the value of those European-authored texts for themselves. As she embodies the "noble savage" Winnetou, the "mangy hordes," the "Princess" and the "Shamaness" and utters the words that have been scripted for them, the fantasy collapses and the murderous mechanics of the colonizing *Zeitgeist* are revealed.

No exaggeration is required here. The troupe's staged excerpts from May's novel adhere faithfully to his text. If they seem ridiculous, the troupe has not had to bastardize them to make them so. When the authentic Indigenous body revisits the sites of misappropriation to embody the inauthentic, the *faux* fabric of these constructed identities begins to disintegrate and the authentic Indigenous body (the

authoritative text) bursts through its seams to share itself and to celebrate its unique gwage, clearly differentiating itself from those who are estranged from the lands they occupy and from the narratives these newcomers have constructed to justify their occupation: "Now *I* telling you. Watch *me*. *I'm alive*. *I'm not defeated*. *I begin*" (Spiderwoman, *Winnetou's* 262, emphasis mine).

The Play Text and the Pictograph: *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* as Curing Chant for the Contemporary Stage

LISA: [...] Grandma said, "Your mother was born with a caul, so she has strong psychic powers. She can tell the future. She can see through anybody." (Spiderwoman, *Winnetou's* 252–3)

MURIEL: [...] My mother's a witch I didn't say that (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 106)

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

LISA: It *all* does, Gloria. (Spiderwoman Theater, *Reverb* Rehearsals 1990 Tape 9)

Always, within this process, we begin again. Each cycle of asking, seeking, making, owning, sharing, and celebrating certainly generates answers, which inspire in the learner a deeper understanding of self in community. Then, it generates further questions, which require the learner to repeatedly re-engage with the process, discovering new answers and generating more questions for which answers will have to be found. Similarly, while Spiderwoman's published works could be read as isolated texts, we would lose something significant in isolating one from the whole. Each play text documents a *stage* in a process of becoming – a process, which is not linear and therefore requires that stages be revisited in subsequent works. Inspired by half-remembered fragments and generated by echoes, they reverberate, expanding the orbiculate construct in which they are contained. Each new question becomes yet another stone cast upon the waters, engendering more circles within circles within circles and alternately drawing the individual inward and then outward and then inward again on an eternally spiraling journey to the self.

If *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* was a communitist project designed to re-right the dominant society's bastardized "writing" of Indigenous identity in the political, mythological, and spiritual realms, it has led its creatrices back to the personal and familial realms by revealing glimpses of the authentic beneath the layers of ersatz

farce. If, beneath the ephemeral posturing of the mighty-but-doomed “brave,” the warm, brown flesh of female Indigeneity is revealed, what is her place in all of this? Where lies her power? How does it manifest itself? If, beside the glamorous and mercenary “shamaness” glowing in the refracted aura of her lamé gown, a tiny, unprepossessing mother becomes a source of shame for her children because she exercises the gifts with which she was born, how do those gifts reverberate throughout the lives of her children and grandchildren?

I receive *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* as a communal ceremony of healing (framed within a farcical, misaligned “ceremony”), which has been designed to peel back the layers of cultural appropriation to expose and treat the roots of communal *dis-ease*. And I suggest that through their curation of and participation in this communitist project, the Miguel sisters were carried back to the root of a very personal *dis-ease* – a *dis-ease* requiring immediate attention and redress. Spiderwoman's subsequent show *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* (1990) offers itself as an avenue of this redress. Here, the story, upon which this piece is based – “Mama's Caul” (see Mojica and Knowles 101–2) – and which was first articulated in *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show* by Lisa Mayo – is remembered word for word, claimed and retold by all three sisters as if it were in itself a medicine chant taught first to the eldest sister by her grandmother and mother and then taught by the eldest to her younger sisters. Like survivors sifting through the wreckage (of their childhood discomfort and shame), the Miguel sisters performatively deconstruct their legacy to find at its kernel the thing that will make them whole.

GLORIA: Grandma said

Your mother was born with a caul

So she has strong psychic powers

MURIEL: She can tell the future

She can see through anybody

She can tell the meaning of the symbols

Left by coffee grounds and tea leaves

In the bottom of cups

LISA: When Mama went into a trance

Mama said everything changed in the world

TUTTI: Mama said, Mama said, Mama said (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 107)

In Gunayala, apprentices first learn medicine chants by rote. Working side by side with the healer, they labour to articulate and embody each lesson without error. Only after they have mastered this will they have earned the right to see the pictographic notations, which they then will study and

interpret.²³ Let us, then, consider this play text as an annotation of embodied knowledge and impulse – a “cousin,” as it were, of the pictographic notation. It is exciting to consider, then, that Spiderwoman Theater’s scripts are first annotated upon and within the bodies of its performers. Their dense poetry and the lengthy mono-and-dialogic chants, which form the narrative base of *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*, are not evocative tellings as much as they are momentous *doings*. Like the Guna curing chants, which Mac Chapin likens to “scripts in which the events being described take place *simultaneously* in the world of spirit as the words come out of the chanter’s mouth” (235, emphasis mine), Spiderwoman’s “scripts” are not simply intended to be read or appreciated on page and stage as much as they are meant to be *experienced*. As audiences, we are invited to inhabit the worlds Spiderwoman articulates into being and to be, ourselves, inhabited by those worlds. This intersection of Guna tradition with Spiderwoman’s performative praxis is fraught with compelling possibilities.

When contemporary Indigenous dramaturgical models are constructed upon nation-specific traditions, the potential for activation arising from a rigorous practice of remembering and re-membering is great indeed.²⁴ As storytellers work within these models, based in tradition, their bodies are remembering and being re-membered as they

23 Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule speaking in his role as cultural advisor and set designer at rehearsals during the first developmental workshop of Monique Mojica’s *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way* (10 November 2007, Equity Showcase, Toronto, ON).

24 This convergence of traditional, land-based cultural and aesthetic praxis emerging from Gunayala with Spiderwoman Theater’s development of a contemporary artistic practice in New York City, perhaps, owes itself more to (what Muriel Miguel has termed) “organic continuity” than it does to an intentional exercise in devising a nation-specific performance methodology that is explicitly beholden to the ceremonial praxis and aesthetic principles of a specific community or nation. However, the *frame* through which I have come to understand “organic continuity” and its mechanics has expanded, as I have witnessed the continuing development of Spiderwoman’s Storyweaving Practice in the creative investigations and works of Monique Mojica.

Mojica’s artistry finds its beginnings in a like “persistence of a known sense” (Personal Communication, 2022), but the dramaturgical and structural models that Mojica continues to develop emerge from her investigations of a “known sense” – from deliberate, rigorous study of the cosmological foundations and aesthetic principles belonging to the nations from which she has descended; from her inclusion of saglas, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers during all stages of the creative process; and from her deeply intentional engagement of the land as a creative partner, inspiritor, and somatic director in the creation of her work. “Organic continuity,” in this instance requires not only the unfettered flow of epigenetic memory and cultural legacy but also intention, rigour, and intimate engagement with shifting landscapes and evolving knowledge systems to affect survivors and effect their survivance.

remember other “bodies” within the material and spiritual realms. Mama’s caul (see Spiderwoman *Reverb* 106–8) for instance, is a fleshly artefact still retained by Muriel Miguel in the family home. This carefully preserved caul remembers the birth of Elmira Miguel to Elizabeth Ashton Moore. Like the pictographic notation, it functions as the mnemonic aid, which will link the generations to come with those who are now and those who came before through the stories of their coming and of the spiritual gift that reverberates through the blood – the gift that the Miguel sisters have come finally to accept and to celebrate:

MURIEL: Grandma said you should be thankful

GLORIA: You have a gifted Mother

LISA: Grandma had the gift too

And all of my mother’s children have the gift

All begin to give the names of people in the family who have the Gift.

(Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 108)

When Elmira Miguel’s gift manifested itself, “everything changed in the world” (*Reverb* 107). And everything changed in *her*. Her physical being – the house of an isolate soul – reconfigured itself to become a vessel for a multitude of spirits with whom she communicated (*Reverb* 108). In turn, as the gift manifests itself in Elmira Miguel’s youngest daughter, her own body becomes a vessel for the ancestral spirits who have passed this gift down to her. And as Muriel’s body opens itself to the gift, its cells rearrange themselves transforming the contours and structural supports of her outer being. As noted in the previous chapter, when the long-dead Elizabeth Ashton Moore (“Grandma”) came unbidden to momentarily possess Muriel Miguel, everything changed – her internal voice, her eyes, and the sounds she heard from within and around her. Indeed, “[her] whole face became another face” (*Reverb* 108). It is exciting to speculate here that as the sites of contemporary performance are being internally reconfigured (e.g., the internal decolonization of its artists), so too may their outer structure (e.g., the architecture and administration of the sites upon which the story unfolds) begin to change shape.²⁵

25 Indeed, when one visits the Native American Women Playwrights Archives at the Walter Havighurst Special Collections & University Archives (Miami University Libraries, Oxford, OH) to which Spiderwoman has donated its private papers, scripts, rehearsal notes, and production materials, the monumental difficulties an editor might encounter in trying to reassemble these works (without access to the performers’ corporeal archives) are abundantly apparent. Hence, it is clear just why so few play texts (amid so extensive a body of work) have been published.

In Gunayala, physical illness has traditionally been regarded as an attack on the burba of an individual. Textile artist and scholar of the mola Herta Puls defines burba as the indicator of “a power or essence that is part of the human being but can also be the noise of the wind, the music of the flute, the heat of the sun, a mirror image or an echo” (46). Although burba is often translated as “soul” (a word, which will at times be used here), Puls differentiates the Guna concept of burba from the Judeo-Christian concept of soul by reminding us that in Guna cosmology, all things whether animate or inanimate possess burba – an essence that communicates with and that has the power to affect other essences outside of itself on multiple planes of existence.²⁶ The intricate system of curing (which is the cornerstone of Guna culture)

26 During her first visit to Gunayala in the fall of 2008, Monique Mojica and her party were taken on a medicine walk through the rainforest on one of the island communities. She was brought to the imposing sabbigarda tree, which is known as the medicine tree for artists (Personal communication 2008). During the equatorial summer season, an orbiculate pattern begins to appear on its drying leaves as the fungus that lives upon them begins to grow outward in radiating circles (Puls 47). Mojica was instructed to hug the sabbigarda and to ask it to invest her with the strength and vision to go on with her work. This, she has testified, was a powerful moment for her, as she had come to this ancestral home specifically to ask permission of the community’s saglas to recount traditional Guna stories in her *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way* and to solicit the participation of other Guna artists in the project.

Traditionally, an Inaduled gathers the leaves of the sabbigarda and distills from these a liquid (invested with the tree’s burba) with which to soak the eyes of mola-makers to enable them to create beautiful, intricate designs. The inspiration these artisans have derived from this medicine often manifests itself quite literally, as the patterns of the sabbigarda leaves are often a traditional feature of classic mola designs (Puls 47).

The concatenations between the aesthetic and dramaturgical structural models discussed throughout this work and the foundational principles and processual models of traditional medicine in Gunayala are compelling indeed. In Spiderwoman Theater’s early work, these are evidenced in the ability to apprehend and the impulse to navigate the complex layers of the unseen world and in the oral molas (finely layered chants) they have crafted as their conveyance. It is important to note here, again, that the reverberations of Guna tradition, aesthetic, and structure in Spiderwoman Theater’s work spring organically from somatically ingrained rhythms of daily life – from songs and stories and utterances of a Guna father and of Guna uncles that charged the air day upon day and year upon year within their Brooklyn home.

As we, later, explore the dramaturgical structure of *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*, this “persistence of a known sense” continues. But it evolves, as Monique Mojica adds a layer of intentionality to this foundation of epigenetic memory and ingrained cultural knowledge. The dramaturgical and structural elements of her *Chocolate Woman* and subsequent works constitute a rigorously crafted methodology through which Mojica applies nation-specific Traditional Knowledge and aesthetic principles to the crafting of a contemporary performative event.

bases itself on the understanding that the material world is simply one layer of existence in which the fleshly element (in all its interactions) is a “secondary” reflection of the “world of spirit [or burba]” (Chapin 219). When the body becomes ill, in other words, it is understood as the physical manifestation of a violent disorder that has taken place in the metaphysical realm: dysfunction in the unseen (innermost) structure of being reconfigures the being’s outer structure. Two primary ways in which the burba of a Guna individual may be adversely affected are (1) soul loss, which occurs when a piece of one’s burba has been abducted by a malevolent spirit, and (2) the infiltration of an individual’s body by the malevolent spirit, which then corrupts his/her burba (Chapin 220). Once the illness has been diagnosed by the Nele (the diagnostic specialist), the Inaduled (medicinal specialist) goes out to gather medicinal plants and then performs a series of chants designed to communicate with *their* burba and so confer with those medicinal spirits about the correct action to take to ensure effectiveness. Finally, the Igar Wisid (Knower of Chants)²⁷ sends his/her own burba to the fourth (of the eight levels) of the spirit world to defeat the malevolent spirit and to restore the violated burba (Chapin 220).

Reverb-ber-ber-rations is both a ceremony of mourning (literally, an honour song for Elmira Miguel) and a ceremony of personal healing, which draws upon aesthetic and cosmological principles specific to Guna curing practices around soul loss. It is, at once, a piece about spiritual reclamation through ceremony and a ceremonial act that effects the restoration of the afflicted, abducted, or fragmented human soul. In the realm of the personal and the familial, “This is a song for [their] mother / This is a song for [their] mothers / This is a song to release the *pain, the shame, the secrets*” (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 130, emphasis mine). The “pain, the shame, the secrets” belong as much to personal identity as to an individual’s youthful, misplaced shame over her unconventional parents. During rehearsals, as the Miguel sisters cut through the layers (that were their stories) seeking the invisible threads that would connect them, Muriel Miguel identified the essence of the piece – soul loss: “the secret and the shame ... We were women of colour. That was the secret” (Spiderwoman Theater, *Reverb* 1990 Rehearsals Tape 9). She

27 Mac Chapin has translated “Igar Wisid” as “Knower of Chants” (220). This is likely not a literal translation. Monique Mojica informs me that “Igar” means “path or way” (Personal Communication 2022). To know the correct and appropriate chant, I surmise, is to know the correct and appropriate path that must be followed through the spirit world to effect a successful cure.

then went on to articulate its “cure”: “*I am not ashamed of being a woman of color. It is not a secret ... This is our future ... This is our strength*” (Spiderwoman Theater, *Reverb* 1990 Rehearsals Tape 9). The cure, of course, is not just for her or for her sisters. The troupe’s eye is squarely on the next generation here: To remain afflicted by the poison of self-denial, self-hatred, and shame is to pass those things on to one’s children and grandchildren; it is a dark, destructive gift, which reverberates throughout the generations and which *denies* them. Hence, when the layers have finally been cut away to reveal the pattern of this performative mola,²⁸ all that remains is the kernel – the gwage – of this healing rite, which is its solution:

MURIEL: I am an Indian woman

I am proud of the women that came before me

I am claiming the wisdom of the woman in my family

I am a woman with two daughters, a granddaughter

I am a woman with a woman lover

I am here now

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

Would be to deny my children (*Reverb* 131–2)

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

28 At this time, Spiderwoman Theater did not specifically refer to its process in quite this way, although Miguel’s practice was always focused on locating the essence/ kernel of each story and structuring the finished product by performatively and poetically manifesting the connection between one kernel and the others. The term “performative mola” emerges from the work I was privileged to do with Monique Mojica. And my apprehension of these elements in their work emerges not only from my participation in workshops facilitated by Muriel Miguel, Gloria Miguel, and Monique Mojica but also from Mojica’s rigorous study and application of nation-specific aesthetic principles and cosmological praxis to her own creative process and to the impressive body of knowledge she has acquired and articulated around patterning (on the land and in material culture).

In the “Sundance” section (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 112–17), three discrete experiences within two key ceremonies are interwoven to recreate a collective moment of reawakening. All three sisters had been invited to take part in a Lakota Sun Dance.²⁹ Muriel travelled to Crow Dog’s Paradise on the Rosebud Reservation to dance (Mojica, Personal Communication 2022). And Gloria, who feared that she could not physically withstand the rigours of dancing, came to witness as Muriel fulfilled her Sun Dance vow (*Reverb* 113). Meanwhile Lisa Mayo chose not to join her sisters, because she could not obtain permission to bring her non-Indigenous husband and stepson. She opted, instead, to visit a Corn Dance in Taos, New Mexico, as an *outsider* – a “tourist” – with the family into which she had married. But as the Miguel sisters recall their individual experiences from a time before, they sound into being (through invocation and drumming) a ceremony for the here and now, which connects sister with sister, ancestor with descendant, and dancer with witness – body to body and burba to burba in a place where healing can begin.

These sites of ceremony are liminal spaces of permanent transformation where ants converse with humans (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 114), where cloud fathers hold up their exhausted daughters (*Reverb* 116), where visions of the future and ethereal echoes from the past surge up from the earth to reverberate through contemporary bodies and where “[t]he dancers [who] came from long ago” welcome the dancers of today into the circle of nations (*Reverb* 116). Whether she is standing “behind a rope with the tourists” (*Reverb* 117) at the Taos corn dance (Mayo), whether she has wandered away from the Sun Dance circle to feast her eyes on all the colours of sacred landscapes (Gloria),³⁰ or whether she is dancing on sacred ground at the edge of exhaustion (Muriel), a revelation occurs, and she is restored to herself and to her “fellows”:

MURIEL: And I said to myself

I’m really Indian

GLORIA: (3 honour beats)

LISA: The message was clear

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

29 Monique Mojica was also present at this Sun Dance; this was the second time she participated in this ceremony as a dancer (Personal Communication 2022).

30 In *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*, Crow Dog’s Paradise is represented as the sacred Black Hills.

Gloria's story of her first trip to Gunayala after her father's death to "heal open wounds / Rectify his guilt" (*Reverb* 121) carries weighty significance in light of the spiritual directives all three sisters have just received. She has been welcomed to the Sun Dance circle; she has returned to her husband and children at Oberlin "uplifted and happy" (*Reverb* 117); and this trip to her father's traditional lands is what she must do because his blood sings in her veins. She becomes, at once, the vessel through which Antonio Miguel's unfinished business will be accomplished; the intermediary through which her half-brother, abandoned by their late father, will be restored and welcomed into the Miguel family circle; the affected supplicant who has been directed to the place of her soul's healing; and the Inaduled³¹ who will collect the medicines (stories, names, fragments of the Guna language and Traditional Knowledge, familial links, etc.) by means of which the curing can continue for both her and her sisters.

Metaphysical Mimesis: A Guna Curing Ceremony in Babylon

Reverb-ber-ber-rations recounts and effects a reordering of spiritual chaos. Like many of their shows and many a Creation Story, this piece begins on sound in darkness. But these disjointed sounds bump up against each other seemingly without rhyme or reason. They move uneasily from a traditional Grand Entry in the pre-set; to recorded Balinese music; to a live "Noise Band" featuring an aluminium garbage receptacle, a toy violin, and a heavy chain (*Spiderwoman, Reverb* 103); to fractured conversation as the lights come up; to Broadway show tunes. If, as *Spiderwoman* tells us, the incidental sounds that surround us daily are "spirits talking to [us]" (*Reverb* 102), the booming, clanging, beating, ticking and articulated epithets that assault our ears signal to us that there are some forceful, oppressive, and confusing spirits out there and that they are not just talking to us; they are *screaming*.

The first words we hear in that inchoate darkness are fraught with urgency and spoken at cross purposes. In that darkness, disembodied voices articulate fear ("What was that?"), suppressed need ("Can't you hold it?"), released frustration ("Oh shut up, you old fool!") and unheeded cries for help (*Reverb* 103). In a teeming, urban "no man's

31 Mac Chapin has observed that women in Gunayala always administer the medicines and care for the patients, although they are rarely medicine specialists themselves (220). However, he also notes that women who have been born with a foetal caul (and who can therefore peer into the world of spirits) are often trained to become Inaduled or Igar Wisid (226).

land" where spirits speak through the clanging of garbage cans, the roar of traffic, bells and whistles, disjointed snatches of music from across the globe, angry shouts, catcalls, and muted weeping, there is a risk of being swept away in the chaos – of losing connection with the ancestral spirits, because we can no longer hear them through the din. This inchoate metaphysical hysteria that expresses itself through the city's din has framed the lives of the Miguel sisters since birth. So too, Noise Band and their darkly nostalgic "tea party apropos of nothing" (*Reverb* 109) – a tea party, which I receive as a dis-eased reflection of the hitherto discussed kitchen table that was most definitely apropos of *something* – frame the stories of connection and power that make up *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*. This piece, however, is not simply a memorial to the soul's dis-ease. It contains and utilizes the elements of the Guna Curing Ceremony with which to connect its participants (in the realm of spirit) to the physical and spiritual landscapes of their mother (Rappahannock), their father (Guna), and to the chaotic urban centre, which has always been their home.

The ceremonial elements of *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* are woven into the foundations of its visual, aural, and oral opsis. The hammock in which Gloria Miguel reclines to tell the story of her first trip to Gunayala (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 121–2) sits at the centre of the Guna Curing Ceremony and at the centre of the Guna Gathering House. In the spirit of the Gathering House, Lisa Mayo and Muriel Miguel assume the roles of Responders in this scene, underscoring their sister's testimony with the affirmation "Tague" (Degii, "It is so"). In the spirit of the Curing Ceremony, the lead chanter (Gloria) re-calls that moment in the past when she bridged the limen between her late father and the son he had left behind in Gunayala. In so doing, she reinvents herself in the present moment as the thread that connects and binds all of Antonio Miguel's children and their families:

- They were all there, nieces, nephews, grand nieces, great grand nephew [sic] and my sister-in-law
- I spent the last day and evening in Panama City at the home of my brother with my family.
- Through me my brother was connected with his father.
- My father's blood, my blood, our blood (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 122)

Spiderwoman Theater's laconic observation in the published text that "Guna people use them [hammocks]" (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 102) *abstracts* the crucial presence of this key item to protect its sacredness and potency, even as it signals the dissolution of the limen between the sacred and the commonplace. The hammock is not only utilized to cradle

the body of the sick in Curing Ceremonies; it is the very "heart of Guna culture." In Gunayala, one is born in a hammock; one sleeps in a hammock; children play in and on hammocks; the hammock sits at the centre of the Gathering House, and the saglas (spiritual and political leaders and ceremonial conductors) recline in it to recount communal and personal histories; and finally, in death, the Guna body is swaddled in its hammock and buried with it (Kantule, *Chocolate Woman* Panel). Indeed, Guna artist Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule asserts, "when the hammock disappears, Guna culture will disappear" (*Chocolate Woman* Panel).

Spiderwoman Theater's hammock here is far more than a material signifier of Guna ceremony; *it is a key site of spiritual restoration within an urban ceremony, conducted by three women of mixed-blood an ocean away from their father's homeland.* Hovering between Earth and sky, it positions its occupants in that liminal space of temporal and geographical conflation, which is the meeting place of flesh and spirit. And it securely positions them within their ancestral biota weaving them tightly within an unseen (but potently present) Guna community.

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

During rehearsals for *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*, the Miguel sisters placed their guardians each morning and put them to rest each evening. After some discussion, they agreed that the guardians would be present in the theatre during the run of the show (*Reverb* 1990 Rehearsals, Tape 6). What remained undecided, however, was whether the audience would (or should) be aware of the presence of the guardians. Would the guardians distract the audience? Should the Miguel sisters *abstract* the guardians,

as they had done in a previous show (*I'll Be Right Back*)? Ultimately, audiences are permitted to witness as each sister places her guardians. And although the Miguel sisters offer no direct references to or explication of these guardians in performance, they do nothing to deliberately obfuscate their purpose. The spiritual significance of their Nuchugana is made apparent during the introductory invocations, which situate us "on the rim of limitless dimensions" where messages from those who have passed on are carried in the blood of the living to be delivered to those yet unborn (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 105). In essence, the significance of the Nuchugana, like that of the hammock, is acknowledged (and hence highlighted) for those who possess an organic understanding of ceremonial praxis (even if they are not intimately familiar with the specifics of Guna ceremony), while remaining "abstract" to others.

Nor is the significance of either the Cochiti Drum or the Bullroar obfuscated by abstraction in performance. As Muriel Miguel takes her place at the drum, Lisa Mayo informs the audience that she is an Elder (as are her sisters),³² and they have brought the drum into this space to stay "in touch with the six directions" (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 105). Although their audiences never see this, the Miguel sisters prepare the drum in ceremony for each evening's ceremony before the house begins to fill (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 102). The drum, here, is not simply a prop or a culturally colourful instrument from which to generate a rhythmic soundscape. The Noise Band fulfils this function, and the garbage pail (which Lisa Mayo plays) provides a satisfactorily affective percussive backdrop. The drum around which these Elders sit, like the bullroar that Muriel Miguel swings before her "Grandma" story, are technologies by which human beings can directly and deliberately invoke the spirits. If the spirits speak to mortals through the ambient sounds of nature, through the tinkling of chimes or the discordant din of the inner city, so the flesh can answer them in kind. Each strike on the drum and each swing of the bullroar sends a thought (the impulse behind the actions of striking or swinging) reverberating past the "veil" and through the layers to inhabit and speak through anti-matter, just as those who occupy the metaphysical realm shake the air of

32 In the notes on set in the play text, the Miguel sisters tell us, "The women of Spiderwoman are at an age where we feel we can sit at the drum" (*Reverb* 102). In many Indigenous communities, females, traditionally, have not sat at the drum. This is because, as life-givers, women carry powerful medicine, which may interfere with the healing properties of other medicines utilized in ceremony (including the drum). By 1990, the Miguel sisters had already passed their childbearing years; hence, they reasoned, their presence at the drum could pose no significant threat of interference or disruption.

the seen world with disembodied impulse to inhabit, reverberate, and speak through the bodies of their descendants.

However, we would do well to remember that the Cochiti Drum should not simply be understood a carrier of human impulse – an inanimate object serving human needs. Here, as it is in ceremony, the drum is an animate force; it is a fourth actor on Spiderwoman's stage. Do the Miguel sisters, as Rebecca Schneider asserts, "drum memories and counter-memories onto the stage" (153), or does the drum, which is layered under each story that is told, articulate its own remembered "text," eliciting reactions and responses from the actors who inhabit the physical and metaphysical realms it straddles? After all, the Miguel sisters not only sound the drum; they *listen* to that drum, which is "the heartbeat of all our communities" (Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 102).

Aftermath: "I am Here Now ... I Have to take the Past and Make it into a Positive Future"

[I]t takes courage, and suspension of disbelief, to perform into existence a future that we cannot yet see. It is an urgent, ongoing project of the present.

– Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles, "Creation Story" 2–3

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

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

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

MURIEL: It means that I have to forgive Mama. (Spiderwoman Theater, *Reverb* 1990 Rehearsals Tape 9)

To fully accept her birthright and to fully recover from a colonially imposed legacy of internalized shame, Muriel Miguel recognizes that a personal investment in the process of forgiveness is necessary.

Reverb-ber-ber-rations prescribes no easy solutions. It does not show us what forgiveness or atonement may look like; it does not show us how to successfully accomplish these; indeed, it does not even articulate the words. It does, however, begin to ask the questions, which Spiderwoman Theater more actively and explicitly explores in *Persistence of Memory* (2007). And it thickens Spiderwoman's weighty contribution to the global project of re-worlding by introducing another layer to the process of recovery/rediscovery, mourning, dreaming, commitment, and action. Where (if at all) does forgiveness – of ourselves, of those in our families and communities who have wounded us, or even of our oppressors and their descendants – fit into this paradigm? What does it look like? How dependent (if at all) is the realization of genuine liberation on the successful completion of this stage? The beginnings, at least, of an answer to these questions lie for me in a brief, interrupted exchange, which survives in the rehearsal tapes for *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*: Lisa Mayo asks her younger sister, "When did it come to you that this was a healing – that you had to forgive Mama?" And Muriel answers, "I transcribed a lot of this stuff [the stories she carried in her body]. I transcribed all the stuff that was mine" (Tape 9). It is during the process, then, of recovery/rediscovery and throughout, perhaps, the process of mourning that we begin to fathom the true cost of performing that unseen future into being.

In *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*, three human women (performing as themselves – Lisa, Gloria, and Muriel) reach out from within a broken material world into the world of spirit, the gateway to which is represented by a road leading upstage into an "infinite spiral" painted onto a large blue backdrop (102). Spiderwoman's ever-present mola hangs stage left, and a small table with three chairs sits in shadow before the troupe's signature emblem. The hammock to which chimes have been affixed swings gently in front of the spiral, while the Cochiti Drum sits upstage on a blanket straddling the space between the spiral backdrop and the signature mola (see Spiderwoman, *Reverb* 2008). This is a set of intricate simplicity wherein the tensions and the reciprocal dependencies between light and shadow play themselves out in uneasy harmony. It presents an unlaboured, yet somehow sumptuous, portrait of the multiple layers of existence, which finite humans in the shadowed, broken spaces of "the real" must negotiate to repair what is broken and effect healing.

When All Worlds Become One

With *Power Pipes* (1991), these uneasy layers are stitched together to form one perceivable realm in which all of existence plays itself out. Here, it is as if the (playing) space has contracted in on itself until it has become a single, perfect circle of light inscribed on a canyon floor, but (and this seems uncannily counter intuitive) this contracted world has significantly expanded and is far more inclusive than the worlds of Spiderwoman's previous plays.

Reverb-ber-ber-rations, as we have seen, plays itself out in a liminal space that looks simultaneously to the material world in which we (audience and actor) live and to the cosmos, occupied by the spirits of the dead and the unborn. *Power Pipes*, by contrast, immediately plunges performer and witness together into a shadowy, unformed world illuminated by a ceremonial circle and (in the final moments of the piece) the stars.³³ From a circle of light framed by shadow, the three mortal sisters who looked into the cosmos in *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* now look back at the human world *from* the cosmos as elemental female forces. And they have been joined by others: In *Power Pipes* the limen between the generations and between the nations has also been dissolved, as mothers and aunties dance with daughters and nieces and as Chichimec Otomi voices join in song with Guna and Rappahannock. This is a multi-generational, inter-First National project in which the Miguel sisters have been joined by Murielle Borst-Tarrant and the Colorado sisters Hortencia and Elvira as co-creatrices and performers.

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

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

Moreover, although her name does not appear in the published text, Gloria Miguel's daughter Monique Mojica inhabits this unified realm. She took part in the original creation of *Power Pipes*, and the stories remembered through her body during the play's development – specifically, "Gotcha" (Spiderwoman, *Power* 163) – have been inscribed on the published page and re-membered through her cousin's body in performance (Mojica, Personal Communication 2007).

Reverb-ber-ber-rations and *Power Pipes* might be read as two halves of the same whole. If *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* is the vehicle through which the Miguel sisters sought connection with the metaphysical sources of their power, *Power Pipes* presents the successful realization of those connections, and it reveals the sources of those things that stand between the human supplicant and her spiritual source. In *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* the human being looks into the abyss. In *Power Pipes*, the abyss returns the gaze. Indeed, as one watches *Power Pipes*, it is as if one were viewing a film negative or an X-ray, presenting a stark, unadorned image of the spiritual mechanics that govern the dis-ease of the colonized and direct its cure. There is little in the way of set, and no description of the set is provided in the published text. The excellent 1993 video archive, preserved from a performance at the American Indian Community House in New York City, features two backdrops, flanking an archway into nothingness (Spiderwoman, *Power* 1993). To the right (SR) of the archway hangs a night sky alight with stars; to its left, the signature mola. Most of the playing area is heavily shadowed except for the ceremonial circle, which is generally bathed in a warm, golden glow. And when the world of spirit peers into the world of flesh, it stares down through this circle of light, not out at the audience, which occupies the same realm as the spirits who dance on stage.

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

Illumined in the interplay between golden light and velvet darkness, the female deities who "inhabit" the performing bodies appear as starkly outlined shadows etched in flesh. At times, the heavily painted performers resemble negatives or X-ray images. Which world is which? Which world is real? If the negative is the shadowy, celluloid image that offers us an *impression* of the reality it represents, and

if the X-ray, by contrast, penetrates the layers of adornment, colour and flesh to dis-cover the essence of the thing itself, from what realm do these shadows emerge? Do they offer us impressions of reality or the reality itself? Is dwelling upon or upholding such distinctions at all valuable, or is it, in the face of all we are, irrelevant and perhaps even harmful?

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

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

SHE WHO OPENS HEARTS: Shame. Shame. Shame. (*She crawls up on ramp*)

Eh, eh, eh.

India mecca mecca

No that's not me, that's not me

Yo no soy India mecca, mecca.

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

(*Covers herself trying to hide*)

Can't breathe

Can't breathe

Pieces, pieces, pedacitos, pedacitos.

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

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

MESI TULI OMAI: Squawk

SHE WHO OPENS HEARTS: India mecca mecca.

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

MESA TULI OMAI: I hear them. Squawk. Squawk.

(*Slapping herself*)

She's dark.

She's dumb.

Don't let her in.

Don't look at her.

Throw her out.

She's black.

She has no talent.

Don't work with her.

She doesn't exist. (*Spiderwoman, Power 181–2*)

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

The "Subway Rape" of Scene 12, which occurs in a liminal space beneath the ground and between stations, powerfully lays out this paradigm in three tellings. In the first telling, we are confronted with the consequences of our choices either to ignore the "messages" that enjoin us to have a care for ourselves or to ignore the cries of those who require our aid. She Who Opens Hearts remains in a dangerous situation despite her internal alarms and is brutally gang-raped, while Mesi Tuli Omai (Misi Dule Ome) ignores a stranger's plight and leaves the unpleasant scene (*Spiderwoman, Power 176*). Then the story is played out for the

second time. Now, we witness the healing power that accompanies the choice to risk personal well-being for the collective good. In this second reiteration, Mesi Tuli Omai (Misi Dule Ome) makes the choice to stand with She Who Opens Hearts against her attackers (Spiderwoman, *Power* 176); hence, the rape (the potential catalyst of a debilitating disease from which the victim might never recover) is prevented.

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

WIND HORSE SPIRIT WARRIOR: Do you believe the warning?

OBSIDIAN WOMAN: Listen to your warning.

NAOMI FAST TRACKS: Who are your protectors?

OWL MESSENGER: Did you ignore the messages?

MESI TULI OMAI: Answer the voices. (Spiderwoman, *Power* 176–7)

As transformers, we must allow ourselves to be transformed in a good way and to transform others in an equally positive manner through active fellowship governed by good intentions. As the third telling of the “Subway Rape” plays out, its heroine hears, heeds, and acts upon the spirits’ alarum. And she is transformed! The hapless victim of the first two scenarios has been transformed into a fierce resister, drawing strength and aid from her metaphysical guardians: “Oh no you don’t, you motherfuckers! I’ll crush your fucking balls. I’ll kill you!!” (Spiderwoman, *Power* 177). Her guardians speak. She listens. And “there is a growling in [her] soul, now that [they’ve] met” (Spiderwoman, *Power* 164).³⁴

The duties to heal, transmit, and transform are not carried solely by Indigenous artists and their communities. Non-Indigenous people who have settled on these lands have, by and large, severed their own connections by fabricating hierarchal notions of difference and have abandoned their responsibilities to the greater community of flesh and spirit. But while they may not yet recognize or acknowledge it, what happens to one happens to all; they too sicken and waste away in the carnage they have wrought. They too must take action to combat their own dis-ease and to contribute to the restoration of the biotas they have

³⁴ This monologue was authored by Monique Mojica who performed in its first production (Personal Communication 2022).

despoiled. They too are called upon to engage in projects of healing and transformation because, as Métis playwright Maria Campbell has asserted, “the circle of grandmothers [has] no colour” (Griffiths and Campbell 17).

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

SHE WHO OPENS HEARTS: Yo soy, I am without shame

India mecca mecca

See my shame.

See my Indianness.

See it come out of here

Out of here.

This is Indian

And this

India mecca mecca

India mecca mecca

MESI TULI OMAI: Don’t, don’t.

Put the pieces back together

I love myself, I’ll heal myself.

I don’t need your love.

I love myself.

I’ll heal myself.

I don’t need your love.

I’ll heal myself.

I love you. I love you.

I’ll put the pieces back together.

I’ll heal myself.

I love you.

(Spiderwoman, *Power* 184, emphasis added)

In this finely crafted moment of “intertextual facing,” She Who Opens Hearts and Mesi Tuli Omai (Misi Dule Ome) speak through and to the human performers as they articulate their healing. In accordance with the mechanics of mola-making, as layers are cut away to reveal a piece

of the larger design, their edges are folded in on themselves, and the facing that is created thereby is securely stitched onto the layers beneath. Here, the shapes and colours that belong to each "shame story" link the tellers experientially (e.g., they both suffer from the same dis-ease). And they "write" the tellers into a much larger text that documents the sad and shameful history of racism in this world and its devastation of the human spirit. In this story, no one is immune; no one is untouched. In this story, we have all played our parts. But this story does not end in brokenness. The mola thickens as more colours are revealed and facings are stitched to the layers of redress and healing.

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

Power Pipes connects us to one community of Indigenous women who shoulder the responsibility to help "put the earth back together." They play the pipes. They sit at the drum. In so doing, they not only open

the channels of communication to the spirit world but also dissolve the limen between male and female here on Earth, as they consciously breach what has been generally understood as traditionally male territory in the space of ceremonial activity, restoring women (young and old) to their rightful place in the circle.

In 1992, Lisa Mayo told Jennifer Dunning that females in Gunayala had traditionally been prohibited from playing the pan pipes or sitting at the drum until they had gone through menopause.³⁵ Jennifer Dunning then observed that as the twentieth century neared its close, Guna “women, menstruating or not [were being] acknowledged as musicians” (Dunning). It might be inferred from this celebratory statement and from the general tenor of Dunning’s interview that a purely feminist reading of Spiderwoman’s work here is in order. Such a reading is problematic, because it implies that traditional Indigenous cultures are inherently inequitable and that women must elbow men out of the way to achieve the things they seek. Further, it widens the gulf between cultures rather than supporting the womanist project, which seeks to build bridges between individuals and communities through greater respect and understanding. It is not Lisa Mayo, but the article’s author, who states that Guna “women, menstruating or not, are acknowledged as musicians.” What is Dunning implying? And how does she know this? Women were always “musicians” in Gunayala. Indeed, according to their Creation Story, it was the “Youngest Daughter from the Stars” who taught *women* (specifically) to compose and perform the songs that ushered in new life (lullabies) and the songs to mourn the dead (Mojica, *Chocolate* 2011). This is a responsibility the women of Gunayala still carry out today.

35 There may have been some confusion or misinterpretation here on the part of the interviewer (or perhaps some inadvertent cultural conflation on the part of Mayo). Upon reviewing this manuscript, Monique Mojica informed me that in Guna culture, “there is NO drum and girls DO play the gammu, though it is more usual that they use rattles” (Personal Communication 2022). With reference to the drum, Mayo have been referring to some Indigenous nations across Turtle Island in which women have historically been prohibited from sitting at the Big Drum. Protocols around the Big Drum vary from nation to nation – community to community. Today, as I write, there are communities that accept women at the drum, while others remain adamant: “It’s not putting down the women. It’s putting them on a pedestal, because women have the ability to create life, and are very humble in their teachings and their ways. In our way of life, everything balances out. They may not be the so-called leaders or speakers of the people, or maybe the singers, but in a round-about way it is balanced, so that women actually have more power than men” (Elder Boye Ladd qtd. in Andrea Smith, “Men Only”).

What does Dunning understand of how menstruation is regarded in Guna communities? Although she has watched *Power Pipes* and is reviewing it here, it appears that she has missed a significant “keynote” of Guna life (to borrow D’Aponte’s apt and evocative phrasing). Indeed, as Gloria Miguel’s “Cuna Story” and its juxtaposition with Hortencia Colorado’s “Subway Rape” make clear, the dysfunction that characterizes the relationships between male and female did not manifest itself in traditional Indigenous societies. This is an affliction carried to these shores by the agents of colonization. Menstruation in Gunayala carries neither shame nor penalty. It is seen as a great gift. It is a blessing on the community. And it is celebrated as such. As Gloria Miguel remembers her 11-year-old self, a lonely, isolated child who had just lost her best friend and entered her time of womanhood, she remembers and re-invokes a powerful strategy of healing: She closes her eyes and travels in her mind’s eye to her father’s home community where she undergoes a puberty ceremony. The community ministers to her; they bathe her; they cut her hair; they paint her with the blue-black dye rendered from the “pollywalla” [baluwala] tree.³⁶ She is celebrated by men and women alike: “My father took me around the island, he blew a large conch shell. Ami Oma Sisquat [Ani Ome Sisgwa] ‘Today my daughter is a woman’” (Spiderwoman, *Power* 174).

Here, the female body is imagined as a site of celebration, which unites men and women in Gunayala. Each member of the community plays his and her role. Always, a woman cuts the hair of the young initiate. Always, it is the men who visit the sabtur (jagua) tree and harvest its fruit to make the dye with which her body will be painted. And still

36 In earlier writings, I have stated that the baluwala tree was the source of the dye used in Guna puberty ceremonies. Since her return from Gunayala and through her own work with saglas and Knowledge Keepers, Monique Mojica’s knowledge has deepened, and she has alerted me to my error (Personal Communication 2022). Here, the child Gloria who has not yet visited Gunayala has erred, confusing a symbolic concept (of hoarded bounty and oppression) with an actual tree, the fruits of which hold properties of protection for the young girl who is just entering womanhood (see footnote 82). The blue-black dye, with which young women undergoing their puberty ceremonies are painted, is rendered from the fruit of the sabtur (jagua/*genipa americana*) tree. In her conflation of the baluwala – a conceptual site of abundance and fecundity withheld – with the sabtur, a material site of sustenance (the fruit is said to taste like dried apples) and of ceremonial provision, the child Gloria has a way to organize and articulate an intuited awareness that her life and those of the children she will eventually bear are bound up in the life of her relations in Gunayala. These will not be fulsome lives, lived abundantly, so long as her access to the community of her father, to her relations and to the ceremonies that are her birthright continue to be withheld.

today, men, not women, play the pipes in this coming-of-age ceremony. Indeed, the entire matrix of Guna ceremony has been designed around the female: her birth, her naming, her coming of age (Mojica, *Chocolate Woman*). Her body, which is adorned with paint and gold and rich textiles, is the site of Guna continuance. It is, as it has always been, *honoured* because it is the gateway for the coming generations. By contrast, Hortencia Colorado's subsequent recollection of gang rape on a subway system makes clear the positioning of the female body in a modern, urban centre, built by and for progressive individuals who have chosen to forget history and discard all tradition. The female body (the gateway of life) has become a site of violence to be degraded, vandalized, and discarded in a dis-eased world where the connections between male and female have been irrevocably severed.

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

Spiderwoman's lesson here is that if the borders of our lives stop at our front doors (see *Power* 170), we cannot live in a healthy way. And the women of Spiderwoman Theater respect this. They take their place

at the drum, to be sure, and they play the pipes. But – *and this is a crucial point* – they claim this responsibility as grandmothers who have passed their childbearing years. It should not escape our notice that, in performance, Murielle Borst-Tarrant who is at this time a young mother does not take a place at the drum with the others (See Spiderwoman, *Power* 1993). As Wind Horse Spirit Warrior, she dances and sings, which are responsibilities specific to Murielle Borst-Tarrant in her offstage life. But always, in performance she remains just outside that circle around the big drum. This is after all a project of restoration and repair.

Whether we are laughing uproariously as two squabbling sisters refuse to break bread together and squirming in the silence between them (Spiderwoman, *Power* 160–3), listening tearfully to stories of bereavement (172, 173) or swaying in time with an uproarious 49'er about lost love and thwarted lust (165–7), we are witnessing the affliction of soul loss – a destructive keynote, which has reverberated powerfully through the generations of Indigenous families the world over since contact. In accordance with the teachings, which are their legacy, the Miguel sisters have with *Power Pipes* connected themselves, their afflicted witnesses, and their successors to that cosmic layer wherein fragmented souls and their human vessels are restored to wholeness. And they show us the way: “Make the offering. Remember. Homage Extended. Homage Received” (Spiderwoman, *Power* 195).³⁷

Preparing a Legacy

It is significant that after *Power Pipes*, the Miguel sisters did not come together again as a trio to create and perform another show until 2002 when they presented *Persistence of Memory* at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Banff, Alberta. This piece recounts Spiderwoman Theater's 30-year journey (to 2002), re-membling countless connections and giving voice to the many, many people who have shared that long road with its core members. And it may well be a cornerstone of the legacy they have been preparing for their genealogical and aesthetic inheritors.

Although it is unfortunate that all the troupe's collective and solo works have not as of yet been published, the four published play texts to which we have access map a personal journey back to Indigenous selfhood, inextricably weaving its sojourners into the larger anti-colonial project of re-worlding. The final chapter of this book will, in

37 This fragment of text comes from Monique Mojica's writing during the development of this show (Personal Communication 2022).

part, explore the work of Monique Mojica, which builds on her inheritance from her mother and aunts. But I would like, here, to indulge in my own moment of interfactual texting – looking ahead, as it were, to inform my understanding of what has come before. During the second developmental workshop of Mojica's *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way* (March 2009), visual artist Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule identified significant links between the dramaturgical process through which *Chocolate Woman* had begun to take shape and the key principles of traditional Guna aesthetics. He explained that just as there are four supporting posts around which a Guna building is designed, so there are four supporting structures upon which Guna aesthetic expression stands. Kantule articulated these as: **Abstraction** (which includes the minimalization of elements, the removal of these elements from temporal to spatial realms, the encoding of these elements and the location of their kernel/gwage), **Metaphor, Duality & Repetition** (with subtle variations), and **Multidimensionality**. Through her work with Guna artists and cultural advisors, Mojica has long been developing a language through which to express what she does and its connection with her ancestral roots. And what she does in her work today is profoundly informed by what Spiderwoman has done before her. Her work, after all, is a new ripple on an ancient pool.

Four plays. Four “posts”: the house that Spiderwoman built. Upon the first post are etched the key landmarks of a very personal journey back to self in which the seeker struggles to locate some meaning in suffering and find some way out of despair. The second post locates individual identity in community – specifically within communitist projects belonging to the political realm. The third post broadens the quest for identity, but narrows the “search terms,” as it were, to the “personal” and the “familial.” And upon the final post, the search for self has come to fruition. The fragmented, socially isolated, personally impotent “me” finds herself – Guna-Rappahannock granddaughter, daughter, sister, mother, lover, friend – in the “we.” Connected to her ancestors and their nations by blood, history, memory, and ceremonial praxis, she is the memory keeper, the teacher and the gateway that locates her children and theirs and theirs in those circles upon circles upon circles.

Wholly Guna. Wholly Rappahannock. Wholly daughters of a Rappahannock wise woman and a Guna sailor with a “big light,” they are wholly, unashamedly themselves in Brooklyn, Manhattan, Toronto, Paris, or Amsterdam. This is the legacy they have prepared. And it is a place from which to begin – not the conclusion of a journey.