

Here Is Gone and I Could Not Hear It: Using Coatlicue Theatre Company's *Open Wounds on Tlalteuctli*¹ to Compare Performance Studies and Theater Methodologies

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Here/Hear is a homonym meaning both place/position, like this place 'here,' at this time 'here,' or the ability to perceive sound. To hear can mean not only to experience an aural sensation but also to understand it. Furthermore if I say, "I hear you," I mean I feel we are in sync, simpatico, thinking along the same lines. No one hears the visual elements of performance: facial expressions; people's bodies and the way they move and relate to objects, others and space; and costumes and settings, although they convey meaning, like the verbal, and are present, or here, in this time and place. When a performance ends its presence ends: here is gone.

A number of years ago, my boyfriend-at-the-time and I went to a Dominican restaurant for breakfast. Wanting rice and peas I asked the waitress if that was possible. She looked at me, then left. My boyfriend thought this was rude since she said nothing. So I told him that her look told me, "I do not know, but I will find out." She returned to tell me I could have my desired meal.

This anecdote is a metaphor for the primary difference between the word-focused theatre studies and the not-so-aurally or aesthetically bound performance studies. It is also a way to begin comparing the strengths of theater and performance studies methodologies in analyzing live performance. Coatlicue Theater Company's *Open Wounds on Tlalteuctli* will be the vehicle for the comparison. This paper is also a manifesto on more inclusive ways to study performance and theater.

Theater studies encompass the study and practice of performance based on, for the most part, dramatic literature or scripted text. Marvin Carlson indicates theater scholars make theater studies by the subjects they study and the methodologies they use. He might find my enterprise here troubling since he prefers that the boundaries of theater study not be delineated.² But most theater programs in the United States whose training continues to focus on the forms, methods and traditions of white Europeans and Americans do not mirror his attitude. The exceptions, such as the University of Hawaii, with a strong Asian

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theater area, usually emphasize only one constituent outside the European-American enclave. Performance studies, in its most broad definition, is a lens to look at any human activity as performance. Critics, such as Richard Hornby, find performance studies anti-literary and lacking historical context.³ But he is off the mark. However, performance studies does not throw out literature and history, but moves them from the central place they occupy in traditional theater scholarship. Rather than being *the* ways to understand performance, literature and history become two of many ways. Within performance studies the concept of text becomes broader than words recorded on paper: it can mean the performance itself. This redefinition of text is particularly propitious for groups whose performance traditions are not scripted, such as traditional Native performance.

A similar discussion is going on now in American Studies, which is multi-disciplinary like performances studies. Since gender studies, Native American and other ethnic and area studies have broadened the scope of what constitutes valid study in the academy and beyond, the American Studies Association president, Janice Radway, questions the name 'American' inasmuch as it inaccurately implies the study of the whole Western hemisphere when it actually refers to the United States. 'American' mistakenly implies "that the American democratic idea uniformly include[s] within its purview all those who inhabit the United States" even though many find their affinity in their ethnic group, spiritual practice, sexual orientation or other area. Radway's problem of finding a name that correctly describes an area of study that "insists on the importance of difference and division" is an inverse of the quandary I face--how to highlight and demonstrate the alternative practices, aesthetics, and modes of thinking about "difference and division" missing from theater practice and study which can give a better understanding of Native performance.⁴

In my scholarship, a mix of performance studies and theater scholarship and practice, I use various methodologies: theater theory, ethnographic methodology and feminist theory focusing on performance without words--without written text. I limit myself to studying staged performance. That is, performance executed in a designated place. I chose the word execute specifically because, while it means 'to do,' it also means 'to be done with'--to kill. Once 'here is gone,' performance is gone, leaving half lives in reviews, production notes and drawings, memories, photographs, show paraphernalia and scholarly papers such as this one.

Coatlícué's *Open Wounds on Tlalteuctli* is a series of vignettes of Native women's experiences in the Americas. If I started with a theater studies framework to discuss *Open Wounds* I would talk about the acting styles, citing the declamatory form of Hortensia and Elvira Colorado's delivery, and how the sisters perform many different roles.⁵ They switch back and forth between playing characters and narrating, sometimes doing both, much like the characters in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. I might compare the piece's organization as literature to the episodic

structure of Henrik Ibsen's *Pier Gynt*.

For most theater critics and scholars trained in Western methods the idea of good theater is predicated on the ability of a theater piece to create a sublime experience for the viewer. Goethe referred to this as lifting the veil of Maya to reveal, however briefly, in postmodern terms: the true real. Western aesthetics are intrinsic to this premise with the acting, the directing, and the production design working together to give the viewer an exquisite feeling. Traditional Western philosophy places theater at the top of a hierarchy of performance genres because it starts as literature, as written word. There is a correlation between the heightened awareness one should reach when viewing good theater and the high status of theater.

In performance studies the critique focuses on how meaning is made, aesthetics are considered in their own ground: the here of the particular culture making the work. Whatever experience you get, you get. Using aesthetics to judge a performance and creating a transcendental experience for spectators, or, for that matter, performers, is not particular to Western theater. But my point is that in theater studies we are trained to see all theater and performance using the aesthetics of a European-American theater tradition. Positioning oneself as a humanist does not solve this problem, since Alan Filewood says

this humanistic discourse, which stipulates that since all human experiences are understandable, if they are not presented understandably then they are presented badly, that is inartistically.⁶

Ethel Pitts Walker puts it another way,

Theorists generally define multiculturalism from a Western European basis, implying the assimilation of other groups into the base culture. Instead of recognizing the equality and value of many cultures and peoples [sic].⁷

We need to look at performances such as *Open Wounds* using an aesthetic, stemming from the Colorado sisters' Chichimec/Otomi tradition. In this way production values are based on what conveys the message, and the performance style is based on the same. I saw the waitress' message because I used her communication mode, even though my boyfriend needed words in order to understand her.

Much of the Colorado sisters' message would be lost without some knowledge, if not understanding, of the political, economic and cultural situation of indigenous people in the Americas. The importance of this knowledge played

out subtly during the performance I saw at the National Museum of the American Indian. The woman introducing *Open Wounds* told us Ingrid Washinawatok, a Menominee woman and close friend of Elvira and Hortensia Colorado, had been kidnapped while traveling in Columbia. The purpose of her trip was to “assist the U’wa People in establishing a cultural education system for their children and support the continuation of their traditional way of life.”⁸ The Colorado sisters, praying for her safety, had dedicated the performance to her. A week later Ingrid, along with her two companions, were found shot dead. So when I recall from the performance that one of the problems faced by Native people was “the crime of wanting to live” or witnessing the INS [Immigration and Nationalization Service] man humiliate an immigrant, I hear Tlalteuctli’s cries due to her open wounds. I hear them not because I am Native and not from the humanistic perspective of understanding death but because the lived experience Coatlicue dramatizes was brought here to me.

Theater studies, unless one takes practical courses in theatrical design, lacks the methodological training to analyze and understand the visual. Readers’ theater seems to be the unconscious performance model for theater scholarship since the emphasis lies in verbal communication rather than on multiple communicators including the visual. This makes it easy for a theater scholar, when discussing the visual elements of a performance, to fall back on a purely aesthetic position, one that is often based on personal taste. Even Carlson concedes it’s nonsensical to require theater students to know something about historical scenic design and practice but not about its relationship to acting or staging.⁹ My ex-boyfriend was unable to comprehend the Latina waitress’ message as much because he was not taught to understand visual cues as because he’s not Latino.

To do a close reading of theater literature, theater methods work best. For a close reading of a performance, I choose performance studies methodology, because one has to be conversant in the visual as well as the verbal. One thematic element in *Open Wounds* is duality. There are two performers, two journeys in the shopping cart as amusement-park-ride car, with one sister pushing the other through the Mayan Mindbender ride at Six Flags Astroland in Houston, Texas at one point and the ‘Old Mexico’ of Knott’s Berry Farm in Southern California at another. Here they demonstrate the appropriation of Native and Latina/o culture for entertainment.

The performers divided their face in half – one side clown white, one side left their natural color. Half their lips are black, the other half colored with pinky-red lipstick. One eye is surrounded by black; the other made up with mascara, signifying the mask of Life and Death. They use hats to indicate sympathetic and non-sympathetic characters, as there is duality in all things. Self-possessed assertions are handled by both sides: the INS man callously tells an immigrant she has no rights and one sister proudly reports that the first Zapatista uprising was led

by women in March of 1993 without any casualties. While the duality would be evident in a close reading of the written text of *Open Wounds*, the doubling is emphasized in the visual aspects of the production.

Ethnographic method, a part of performance studies, focuses on describing the performance. Although it has the problem of making judgements on what to include, it does not focus on aesthetic assessment. Since performance studies training always includes studies from all over the world and different cultural experiences within the U. S., including visual materials, scholars with this training have been exposed to broader world views than those taught in the average theater program.

There is nothing particularly pleasing or pretty about the set of *Open Wounds*. But, without discrimination, I can describe the grocery cart containing a rolled-up blanket and a hat stage left, the backdrop of newspapers with red paint lettering spelling out, DON'T DRINK THIS SACRED WATER SITES, LAND RIGHTS, LIBERTAD, PROP 187, EZLN,¹⁰ as well as the clear and black plastic bags of refuse and recycling at stage right; straw hats with flowers; and the black plastic stacking crates used as tables and stools.

While the biggest difference between theater study and performance study method is the primacy of words there are other problems with using traditional theater methods to look at Native American theater pieces. Based on the written word of a certain type of literature, traditional theater study does not give scholars the tools to adequately discuss the oral history or story telling traditions that Canadian Native playwright Drew Hayden Taylor says are the antecedents of most Native theater. Taylor goes on to say that Native theater rarely has the dramatic structure that Western theater does, a structure based on conflict.¹¹ Walker points out that many Western trained theater professionals will not understand "the emphasis of the story over character development, without understanding the nature and importance of storytelling in many cultures."¹² Even if a scholar were able to come to some valid conclusions about *Open Wounds* using only their Western training, which is historically the way things have been done, they miss a great deal. And while you might do this kind of study if you were looking at the structure of the written version of *Open Wounds on Tlalteuctli*, you would be unable to successfully do the same for the live performance because live performance, being here, is more than the sum of its words.

Theater studies has its own historical and literary problems. Most theater programs do not teach the history and literature of Native performance. The study of Native theater is not integrated into required courses, like theater literature or history, and few programs feature more than African American theater as an elective. Performance studies is also lacking, with little scholarship and, no courses that I know of, in Native theater or performance. There won't be Native courses with historical and literary depth until scholars recuperate records of Native

performance from anthropological and ethnographic accounts, oral histories and tribal records. Scholars, whatever their field, who are trained in performance study methodologies, especially ethnographic methods, may find they are at an advantage in ferreting out examples of Native performance to create some sense of a historical whole.

Notes

1. In this print version of my paper I use the correct title of Coatlicue's piece: *Open Wounds on Tlalteuctli*. In my reading at Miami University in March 1999, I erroneously called the piece *Voices of the Abya Yala* because when I saw Coatlicue perform at the National Museum of the American Indian in February 1999, the woman introducing the piece mistakenly called it *Voices of the Abya Yala*. "Voices of the Abya Yala" actually referred to the museum's program series on the Kuna of Panama. Tlalteuctli is earth woman.
2. Marvin Carlson, "Theatre History, Methodology and Distinctive Features." *Theatre Research International* 20.2 (1995): 90-6.
3. Richard Hornby, "Against Performance Theory: A Polemic on the Lack of Connection Between the Study and the Practice of Theatre." *TheatreWeek* (October, 1994): 31, 34-7.
4. Janice Radway, "What's in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 20 November 1998." [http://muse.jhu.edu/deom/american_quarterly/v051/51.1radway.html]. Also in *American Quarterly* 51.1: 1-32.
5. Hortensia and Elvira use storytelling in their theater pieces so what could be called declamatory style is actually their storytelling technique.
6. Alan Filewood, "Receiving Aboriginality: Tomson Highway and the Crisis of Cultural Authenticity." *Theatre Journal* 46, 1994, no. 3:363-73.
7. Ethel Pitts Walker, "The Dilemma of Multiculturalism." *TDR* 38.3 (1994):7-10.
8. The Indigenous Women's Network, "Statement by The Indigenous Women's Network, RE: Killings of Indigenous Activists." March 8, 1999, personal e-mail from Rhoda Linton to Brina Coronado. 12 March 1999.
9. Carlson 91.
10. Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (Zapatista National Liberation Army).
11. Drew Hayden Taylor, "Storytelling to Stage: The Growth of Native Theatre in Canada." *TDR* 41.3 (1997):140-42, 144-52.
12. Walker 9.