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# CHOREOGRAPHING COLLECTIVE INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES

## IN REFLEJO DE LA DIOSA LUNA’S ‘MIGRACIÓN’ PERFORMANCE

**L**AST SUMMER (2011) I served as an intern at the Mayan Women’s cultural Center in Chiapas. The Center is called FOMMA, or *Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya*, meaning Mayan Women’s Strength. It is partnered with the Centro Hemisférico, a regional research and cultural center funded by the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics. FOMMA centers on performances of Theater in the Center and in surrounding Mayan villages. The performances stage

issues of gendered kinship relations in Mayan communities.

Two pioneering Mayan writers and actresses, Isabel Juárez Espinosa and Petrona de la Cruz Cruz, founded FOMMA in an effort to promote bilingual theater and education in the Mayan languages of Tzotzil and Tzeltal through performance and also through other programs. This organization helps Mayan women and children to develop skills that will improve their daily

lives, offering workshops on commercial baking (bread-making), sewing, and computer literacy, as well as offering training in creative endeavors such as photography and performance.

For this presentation, I want to focus on one of FOMMA’s central missions: to stage how embodied gender dynamics in performance play a role in promoting a collective intersectional identity. Specifically, I will investigate *Reflejo de la Diosa Luna’s* “Migración” (1996) to underscore

that identity is not only performed but also choreographed and gendered. Particularly, I am focusing on the shared, though distinctive, experience of intersectionality among indigenous women in Mexico. The term “intersectionality,” is borrowed from Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality in which she questions the ways that experiences of Black women are excluded because feminism presumes whiteness and blackness assumes masculinity. In this case, I would add that studies of indigeneity most often elide the issues of gender that oppress indigenous women. This presentation will focus on two performance strategies aimed at critiquing gendered indigenous roles for women: cross-dressing and a materialist use of objects. I argue that the forms of cross-dressing employed and the ways performers cite or use objects define their body techniques and forms of identification. I argue that the performer modifies her body movements depending on the character she plays and the contextual factors of the performance. She uses objects to situate the body and the scene. In doing so, the performer provides alternative options for gendered representations, which in turn influence representations of indigeneity.

In “Migración,” Petrona de la Cruz Cruz plays the “male” protagonist, Mario, who, in her cross-dressing, points to his masculinist assumptions. Mario convinces a fellow farmer, Carlos also played by a woman, to move his family from its rural hometown to the city in hopes of finding a better

life. Without his wife's consent, and this is key to the gendered politics, Carlos sells his home, fields, and livestock to a friend. Then, when he loses his job in the city, he copes with his losses by drinking. With no hope of finding a new job, Carlos finds himself at rock bottom, and his family is left without basic necessities like food and shelter. The play brings several issues common to the struggles of these indigenous women to the stage: male chauvinism, sexual abuse, poverty, migration, alcoholism, and violence in general.

## **CROSS-DRESSING AND THE HYBRIDIZATION OF BODY TECHNIQUES**

In the play, the actors use cross-dressing to make visible the ways that systems of fashion and gesture naturalize differences between men and women. When Carlos and Mario first appear on stage, both wear baseball caps, khaki pants, and button down shirts. Mario wears glasses, tucks in his shirt, and wears close-fitting pants while Carlos leaves his shirt hanging over his oversized baggy pants. These styles are typical of Mayan men from communities in Chiapas. While their differences indicate social gender codes, they function only in relation to a strict binary. In the process of performing the characters, the women performers must slip into men's clothes—a sharp contrast to the conservative *huipiles* or embroidered blouses and long cotton or wool skirts that

many Mayan women actually wear. These dress codes are strictly followed in the communities, so just playing and the audience seeing women in these clothes already makes an intervention into traditional gender codes. Ironically, by cross-dressing, the actresses also feminize the traditionally male space of theater by the mere fact that they are pioneer indigenous women performers. As Tamara Underiner notes, the performers are reversing "...these cross-gender casting traditions, not only in fact, but also in style. On stage, they are able to refashion a whole performance tradition that has historically mocked and excluded them" (360).

The necessity to use masculine clothing to represent a male character simultaneously makes visible and hybridizes body techniques. Within the story, Mario and Carlos' conflicts trigger a moment of confrontation. When Ocegüera Cruz, as Carlos, and Cruz Cruz, as Mario, perform acts of violence, they mock and threaten the image of a physically violent masculine, or macho man. As the characters argue, Cruz Cruz rolls up her sleeves, extends her arms, and holds on to Ocegüera Cruz's chest. Both women flail their arms, comically careful not to hurt each other, making a mockery of the characters' violence. In Mayan culture, it is commonplace for women to be quiet and submissive. In demonstrating these moments, the actors must exercise aggressive body techniques associated with men. Thus, when donning

**IN USING MASCULINE AND FEMININE COSTUMES, THE ACTRESSES OFFER THE OPTION TO IDENTIFY WITH MORE THAN ONE GENDER. THEY ALSO OFFER A SUBJECT POSITION THAT RESISTS THE HETERONORMATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININITY.**

men's clothing, the women performers are accessing a wider range of movements atypical for Mayan women and, at the same time, they mock the very masculinities that release them from their assigned social gender codes. In representing other options for women, theater becomes a potential site of resistance against patriarchal norms on and off stage.

Given the fact that all the performers are women, their performance excludes the presence of men. But in using masculine and feminine costumes, the actresses offer the option to identify with more than one gender. They also offer a subject position that resists the heteronormative construction of femininity. In portraying gender codes, the actresses play with the codes and reveal their instability. As women portraying the roles of men, *Reflejo* destabilizes the notion of subjects having a stable and unified identity by revealing the way that gender norms require constant citation in order to maintain power. As I have noted, the members of *Reflejo* are careful to cite normative encounters between men and women, but in doing so they collectively reproduce more than one gender category for indigenous women to identify with.

## GENDERED SIGNIFICATION OF OBJECTS

Objects, like clothing, posit a gendered body for which the item was made (Ahmed 50). Alternately,

objects shape the bodies with which they are in contact (54). As Sara Ahmed argues in *Queer Phenomenology*, “gender is an effect of how bodies take up objects, which involves how they occupy space by being occupied in one way or another.... Bodies are shaped by the work they do” (59).

Ahmed's study treats objects as tools. But what if an object is purposely misused or purposely not used? What happens to the signification of the object within play? Further, how does that inform body? In its intended function, an object can have an intended failure—not *doing* in the *right* way. In this section, I will highlight examples in “Migración” that reference or exhibit gestures induced by the (mis)use of objects. I will highlight how objects take part in citing a home and producing a sense of belonging. However, when the actresses use or cite objects, this involves a mime. In other words, rather than using objects present on stage, the actresses fail to use them and instead produce gestures that convey the idea of an action. Thus, the absence of the object discloses and destabilizes the reiteration of gestures produced within quotidian spaces.

For example, the scene of *Reflejo* is a single generic backdrop with images that both denote a *campesino* (peasant) house and cite objects commonly used within that space. The domestic space is normally relegated to the background and allows for other, usually male-oriented, work. In this case, the privacy of the domestic space be-

comes public. The properties displayed and referenced on the backdrop include: a tortilla press (or *tortilladora*), bucket, bonfire, window, and kitchen table, among others. The backdrop symbolizes the gestures representative of an indigenous woman's quotidian life in Chiapas. It also stands in for a domestic space, a home, calling attention to how the sense of intimacy and belonging within a space is produced through the forms of objects placed in the background. The emergence of Mayan women in theater, as performers and characters, produces a sense of intimacy that combines private notions of family and home with public notions of narrative and performance. Yet Ahmed asserts that that which takes shape as the background is the result of the effect of the repetition of a certain direction (88). Rather than using these objects, and orienting themselves towards them, the actresses merely cite them. Ironically, the backdrop and its images of objects becomes that which figuratively places what would typically be in the background at the forefront. So they become signs of a Mayan woman, but they do not define her. Instead, she takes on the role of men while these signs remain on the scenery.

The tactical choice of objects on the stage reveal choreographed mimetic movements, especially when considering the ways that many household objects are not and often times cannot be used on stage. In one scene, Catalina prepares a bonfire. Isabel Juárez Espinosa, as Catalina,

arranges three pieces of wood to make a fire on the center stage floor. The mimetic action begins when she kneels down to blow onto the “fire” for a few seconds. As Ocegüera Cruz playing Carlos enters the stage, Juárez Espinosa disregards the “fire” and engages in dialogue. She stands up, moves down stage left, and faces the audience while speaking to Ocegüera Cruz. She blows on the “fire” again but this time she bends over instead of kneeling, creating a larger distance between her body and the wood. Finally, Juárez Espinosa stands up and faces the audience once again. This time she stops blowing. When starting the fire, she mimes the actions. Although making a fire represents a domestic act that women perform in Mexico, the performance resists the reproduction of that function. The act is *simulated* but is not *replicated* because Juárez Espinosa is clearly missing the tools required to create an actual fire. As a result, the act is choreographed and mimed; codes are cited but Juárez Espinosa refuses to reduce herself to a domestic act. Thus, while objects can be gendered, the actresses have the choice to resist, reveal, or exaggerate the proper way of using them. In this case, Juárez Espinosa’s resistance to perform realistic portrayals of this domestic act, alters and produces new gestures that defy normative expectations for women.

## CONCLUSION

In this presentation, I have investigated how bodily gestures, specifically in relation to the clothing and objects used in performance, both reproduce traditions and produce alternate options for gender and therefore social representation. Specifically, cross-dressing and miming provide opportunities to defy Mayan men’s patriarchal values, which are reliant on a definition of women, which is biologically deterministic and essentialist. I extend my argument to note that *Reflejo*’s performances are continuously negotiating a collective intersectional identity given that they neither represent women as holistic nor stable and because neither body nor performance ever remain static. An intersectional collective identity is one that is always changing but remains connected through affinities. While proposing a pan-Mexican identity would run the risk of eliding difference and acknowledging differences can run the risk of essentializing, maintaining an interest in affinities produces a space where subjects who identify with an intersectional identity can work together towards structural change.

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