

Chocolate Woman Visions an Organic Dramaturgy: Blocking-Notation for the Indigenous Soul

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“Aboriginal performance is an investigation,
a maze that brings us back to the sources of our soul.”

— Floyd Favel, *Theatre: Younger Brother of Tradition* (32)

The silks had been hung and the hammock, secured betwixt the conjoining of two gallery walls just where they came together to demarcate a north-eastern corner in the space. Monique Mojica experimented with positioning as she articulated Sky Woman’s suspended freefall from within the folds of the hammock, while below, collaborator Oswaldo DeLeón



Monique Mojica performs *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way* (Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, 21 November 2007).

Kantule carefully constructed an unbroken circle of cacao beans on the gallery floor around the hammock and Mojica supported within.

When Kantule had completed his work and stepped away, Mojica’s Sky Woman lightly “touched down” inside the circle and then delicately stepped over it to enter another “layer” of her narrative mola. Director Floyd Favel watched intently, saying nothing for the moment. As Mojica paused in rehearsal to capture her thoughts and consider the discoveries she had made, Favel asked if it would be possible to create a “doorway” within the circle, so as to allow Mojica to move in and out of this space without having to step over the cacao – a liminal signifier heightening the spiritual significance of the hammock and the narrative unfolding

thereon and distinguishing its space from the more prosaic, flexible space in which the other layers of the artists' performed investigations would be made manifest.

For Favel, a Cree man from the Poundmaker Reserve in Saskatchewan, it is unthinkable, in a traditional context, to step over people or objects. For Kantule, a Kuna artist and traditional practitioner from Panama, this was not a concern. He explained to us that the cacao were "sleeping;" furthermore, he had asked that Mojica be permitted to step freely in and out of the circle, since this is what she needed to do to properly tell the story. In Kuna tradition, he informed us, creating one door in the circle would disrupt its symmetry and mar its perfection. But Favel was still uncomfortable. Finally, Kantule suggested that cacao be removed from four cardinal points in the circle to create a door for each direction; this, he said, would not breach his own aesthetic or traditional sensibilities, nor would it breach Favel's. Moreover, it would provide the contemporary performer with not only the freedom to move in and out of the circle at will but also with a choice of doorways and directions through which to access or take leave of the space.

What I have described here is a few minutes in the life of an investigation-in-progress. Occurring on 19 November 2007, two days before the workshop/performance of its initial phase in the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre at the University of Guelph, this incident is illustrative of something more than a mere logistical compromise. The development of Mojica's latest project has necessitated the development of a process whereby fragments of "historical memory"¹ may be recovered, collected, reconstituted, and re-inscribed as a holistic entity within and communicated through the relationship between multiple "archives" expressing themselves in multiple dimensions (human body, objects in space, fabric design, pictographs, oral & written text). As Favel has observed, the journey — that is the contemporary Native artist's navigation between the social spaces of theatre and the spiritual spaces of tradition — is more important even than the end-product that will emerge from the investigations (Favel 31-32). The performed

¹ At the close of the first rehearsal I attended, Kantule excitedly observed, "We are recovering historical memory" (10 November 2007, Equity Showcase, Toronto).

confusion and personal sacrifice, Mojica pushed past the agony of loss, past the terror of “freefall,” past the impotence of separation, alienation and mortal confusion to recount an actual dream of reclamation and to bind herself amidst these layers of psycho-somatic fragmentation into that place where ancestor meets descendant and spirit dances with material in an intricately patterned weave of eternal and ongoing creation:

She is smiling. Smiling at me. Her arms outstretched, fingers spread wide. She shows me her *molas*, neatly arranged in rows on the sand. She is proud of her work. She begins to spin and spin and spin. Faster and faster [...]

[...] Shards of moonlight like fragments of broken disco balls bob in the black water — laying a path of stars to the Milky Way — *negaduu*.

If I could place my feet upon those stars like stepping stones, I would follow them to visit my ancestors. And we would drink cacao – *siagua* mixed with ground, roasted corn from gourds. We would smack our lips; wipe our mouths on the backs of our hands and talk. Wouldn't we talk! *Tegi!*

I, too, am a granddaughter fallen from the stars

I call to Sky Woman: send me your courage!

The courage of the valiant Morning Star Olowaili when she rises each morning to greet her brother, Ibeler, the sun, at daybreak

And there, for some moments, we hang in the liquid pigment of a watercolour sky.

(Mojica, *Chocolate Woman*)

Negotiating the Layers of the Performative Mola

Twelve years ago Mojica dreamed this dream of Kuna Yala and the mola maker who welcomed her on its white sands; and she identifies this welcoming message as the piece that started the whole concept underlying *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*. After doing some initial writing around the dream, she began to wonder what would happen if she told this story “from a place of connection as opposed to a place of woundedness” (Mojica, Rehearsals). The dream, as a manifestation of the inner-spiritual (communication/longing/expression) in relation to the external “reality” of material life, both explicates and frames the dense theatrical mola, which is *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*. It binds personal struggle and tragedy to creative energies and transformative possibility. Mojica has testified that Sky Woman’s story – specifically, her fall – came directly out of personal crisis. As she puts it, the story “wrote itself internally” and she “notated it.” In retelling this traditional story and personalizing its details with significant “colors” from her own experience (*Alice in Wonderland*, Perry Como, Jefferson Airplane), Mojica was “trying to hook [herself] into an elemental female to save [her] own life” (Mojica, Rehearsals).

Similarly, Mojica’s abstracted retelling of the Olonadili story showed itself to be a triumphant articulation of her struggle to remember and reconstitute a fragmented self. During the first few days of rehearsals in Toronto, Kantule (grandson of the revolutionary Kuna Sayla³ Nele Kantule, co-organizer of the 1925 revolution that resulted in Kuna sovereignty) led the creative team through some Kuna pictographs, which notate medicine chants and told and re-told fragments of traditional stories, including the story of Olonadili, the youngest daughter of the stars. Mojica then worked to articulate the fragments through her own physical instrument and built her own pictographic scores (internal and external) and narrative upon these⁴ (Mojica,

³ Chief

⁴ Currently as it stands, the top of the Olonadili story with its broad gestic score constitutes an “abstracted” retelling; Mojica then adroitly moves to a straight narrative delivery, moving once again to the abstract retelling for its conclusion.

Rehearsals). The *external* pictographic scores, notated by Mojica throughout the rehearsal process, literally represent the storyteller's body in motion and notate her physical score.

Working through her own ideas around the dissemination of a creative process specific to Native peoples, Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong has written, "The ability to bring imagination into physical being through action is the creative process" (Cardinal & Armstrong 46). And certainly, this is a crucial step in Mojica and Kantule's



Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule, visual artist and cultural advisor.

process of recuperation and reassembly: just as Mojica gives form to remembered stories first in her imagination and then through her physical being in motion, so Kantule remembers, imagines, articulates, and paints these as bodies in motion — as *active characters* — interacting with each other and with the three-dimensional, contemporary storyteller on stage. But where Armstrong relates this principle to choice — that is to our power to acknowledge the principles of harmony and to choose to act in ways that maintain them (Cardinal & Armstrong 46) — the initial fruits of Favel, Kantule and Mojica's processual investigations perhaps speak to our need for answers to a more urgent and complex question: In the midst of dislocation and (oft-times) despair, how can the actions of the disaffected and spiritually embattled change the world? Or more to the point, how does the representation of action (the imitation of an action?) reassemble the world and restore harmony? Mojica's recuperation and reassembly of the fragments of ancestral knowledge have facilitated not only an intellectual understanding of her relations' history and cosmology but also an organic understanding of her connection to these, of her place in the fabric of Kuna design and of the infinite value and meaning of her own struggles in a time and place that seem so far removed from the stories that are her birthright and the names she has inherited.



Excerpt from Monique Mojica's *Chocolate Woman* script.

Jeannette Armstrong inextricably links this connection and the achievement thereof to the creative process of Native peoples across Turtle Island.⁵ For her, it is predicated upon “the **internal** understanding of our individual selves as a process towards building

relationships, moving outward to all things”

(Cardinal & Armstrong 22, emphasis mine). Under Favel’s direction, Mojica also developed and notated an *internal* pictographic score for parts of the project. This internal score manifests itself as an abstracted symbol on the page – a mnemonic device notating inner action. Such is the current pictographic score with which Mojica has recorded her personal Olonadili story (“Once, in a time of war...”), a fourth layer in this performative mola. The pictographs, here, act as signposts to guide the storyteller through a straight reading of the narrative (without movement or layers of ambient/expressive sound). For the next phase of investigation, Mojica has set herself the task of layering sound and movement onto this story, thereby creating an external pictographic score and then abstracting (part or all of) the story and its telling.

That there are four layers to Mojica’s performative mola (each densely encoded with its own palette of colors, specific detailing, etc.) is no mere coincidence or “quaint device.” Mojica has oft-times reminded me that “the theatre we are creating now [and should strive to create] deconstructs illness, deconstructs colonization” (personal communication). And as the abstracted pictographs on the magnificent “backdrops” created by Kantule for this project reveal, according to Kuna healing practices, the medicine plants emerge from the fourth layer of the cosmos. To effect healing, we must be prepared to dig deeply and to negotiate the densely complex layers of patent and metaphysical existence.

⁵ The Americas

Negotiating the Theatrical Mola: Discovering “Continuance Links”⁶

For over a decade, Floyd Favel (in collaboration with myriad Native performance artists at various times, including Monique Mojica and Spiderwoman Theater) has immersed himself in a series of investigations around what he terms “Native Performance Culture” (Favel Starr 69). Just as the sport of Lacrosse may be regarded as “the younger brother of war,” so Favel has come to regard theatre as “the younger brother of tradition” (Favel 30). As he observes, there are designated spaces for each; and these spaces are set apart from quotidian life and activity. As well, he notes that although each differs from the other in “context and purpose,” and although they “serve two very different audiences,” in both theatre and traditional praxis, we are connected to the “higher self **in the very moment of action**” (Favel 31, emphasis mine). The question then that has directed Favel’s investigations is this: What can the “younger brother” learn from the elder that he, in his way, might serve as a vehicle of healing and transformation for the communities under his purview; or to be more precise, what of “older brother’s” essence may he borrow that he may serve a like function in his time and place, without violating that essence and transforming it into a lifeless metonym? With each new investigation, however, this key question brings in its wake a gaggle of seemingly lesser questions, each specific to a particular project, and each of which requires scrupulous exploration before solutions to the larger question may be identified.

For Favel, one key question that emerged from the first investigative phases of *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way* is this: If the theatre, as we know it today, is presently situated in Paluwala (a World of Greed), how might we as Native performers resist and transform its “internal structure” (which sometimes becomes our own) and “create a new building” (Favel, Rehearsals)? Amidst this work with Mojica and Kantule, Favel articulated this initial answer: As we learn and re-tell sacred stories (possibly abstracting/obfuscating certain parts for mixed

⁶ I borrow this term from Jeannette Armstrong who offers this simple and beautiful assertion: “Creative acts are continuance links” (Cardinal & Armstrong 82).

audiences), we begin to construct an internal “Gathering House” (Favel, Rehearsals). That is, we locate our connections to culture and community through this process; and our work carries the



Monique Mojica performs *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*.

potential to help others like us do the same. However, encoded in these stories, there is sacred knowledge (belonging to the community of origin) that cannot be revealed to all. Through process, the performer finds a way to “code” the telling by abstracting certain sections (as Mojica did with her retelling of the traditional Olonadili story), retaining, expressing and protecting its internal structure through abstracted action. And through this process, she effects and is affected by a profound internal transformation without any violation or disfigurement of the transformative vehicle.

“Kuna Laban” as a Continuance Link

Late in the afternoon of the team’s first “on the feet” rehearsal, Monique Mojica froze suddenly in the midst of her work and cried out in choked, wonderstruck tones, “I am making pictographs!” Later, as she painstakingly notated her work on the page, she found a name for her labors: “Kuna Laban.” For this Kuna-Rappahannock artistic and genealogical inheritor of the Spiderwoman methodology of Storyweaving, these discoveries and developments mark the realization of a singular and crucial instance of what Muriel Miguel terms “organic continuity” (Miguel, Interview). Miguel — co-founder, core member and director of Spiderwoman Theater — has developed this term to contain her own holistic vision of the integrity and integration of the ensemble entire and of the tightly woven interrelationship of variegated experience and aesthetic expression that constitutes the dramaturgical thread of each of its works, connecting

each to the others within a performative canon spanning over three decades. However, as a second generation (in the persons of Monique Mojica and Murielle Borst) begins its artistic emergence, “organic continuity” integrates yet another layer into its complex design: Mojica and Borst, trained in the physical, philosophical and dramaturgical foundations of the Spiderwoman tradition, have the option of not only continuing the work and passing on the methodology but also of evolving the Spiderwoman process and expanding its possibilities.

Trained in modern dance, Laban and in ensemble work with Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theatre, Muriel Miguel has developed a methodology wherein the data/stories that are contained within the physical instrument may be accessed and through process be re-inscribed upon and described (in space) by the body. Mojica, herself a former dancer and certified Pilates instructor, is a practitioner and teacher of this methodology with which she has (in past projects) accessed and “decoded” the data (personal, familial and genetic memory) contained within her physical being (16). Utilizing the Spiderwoman methodology, Mojica had found a way (as had her mother and aunties before her) to transform herself *through process* from a human repository of memory into the active archive (a pictograph in three dimensions, as it were). Much of Mojica’s early work has required her to enter into active engagement with written texts purporting to represent Native peoples and experience and to juxtapose the static, one-dimensional metonyms on their pages with the active archive (herself) on the stage to expose dense layers of distortion and misconstruction – to deconstruct the “illness.”

With *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*, Mojica has added yet another layer to her artistic inheritance and has begun, with her own investigation, to evolve the methodology. For Mojica, the initial phase of investigation around this project involved a profound exploration of questions surrounding the relationship between the living body and the inscribed image (Rehearsals). As director Favel has articulated it, the primary objective they had set for themselves was to “test the application of the pictographic method as a basis for telling stories,” and by extension, to test out illustrative action and its relationship to the pictograph (Rehearsals).

Carlo Severi has observed that in accordance with Kuna tradition, a ritual-apprentice will first learn a medicine chant by rote, precisely incorporating its specific language, repetitions, rhythms, and tonal shifts into mind and body (252). After memorizing by ear, the pupil begins to copy the pictographic notation of the chant, investing more of the physical instrument in the task and thereby organically rooting the information in his/her being. Only then, will the apprentice be ready to analyze the inscribed text and to ask questions around specific points or deeper meanings (Severi 252). The investigative process for *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way* followed Kuna protocol in that rehearsals began with tellings and retellings of traditional stories and chants by Kantule (in his role as cultural advisor) to the “apprentice” Mojica, who began to more deeply explore these and her relationships therewith by creating her own contemporary Kuna pictographs in three (embodied) and then two (notated) dimensions. Here, interestingly, the process revealed itself as a truly reciprocal methodology: As Kantule “fed” her work and continued to advise her, Mojica “fed” Kantule’s art as she began to work on her feet. Just as female mola makers and male basket weavers create their works in the Kuna Gathering House while listening to the Saylas tell traditional stories and discuss current affairs (Kantule, Rehearsals), so Kantule created his magnificent silk-hangings — Nis Bundor (Daughters from the Stars), Puna Siagua (Chocolate Woman) and the Muu Bili (Mother of the Ocean) of Mojica’s dream — in the rehearsal studio, as Mojica told and retold stories on the rehearsal stage only a few feet away.

Kantule’s vibrant hangings, with the hammock, demarcate/articulate “zones” or spatial “layers” in which Mojica’s tellings unfold. But all these constitute much more than simply visually evocative, ambient background or emblematic signifiers of Kuna culture. As Kantule revealed during the panel discussion that followed the workshop performance of *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*, the hammock does not just represent the heart of Kuna culture; “it is the heart of Kuna culture.” In Kuna Yala one is born in a hammock; one sleeps in a hammock; leaders sit in hammocks at the Gathering House to tell stories; and after death, the Kuna body is wrapped in a hammock to be buried. Indeed, “When hammocks disappear, Kuna

culture will disappear” (Kantule, Panel Discussion). Considered in this light, the “heart” (protected by the circle of cacao), which cradled the body of the contemporary storyteller during her telling and which supported her during her “freefall,” might be viewed as a sentient force in and of itself — as a “co-performer” rather than a piece of furniture belonging to the background.



Chocolate Woman panelists (left to right): Kim Anderson (moderator), Jill Carter, Ric Knowles, Floyd Favel, Monique Mojica, Oswaldo DeLeón Kantule, and Angela Laird (translator).

Certainly, Kantule’s vibrant silks manifest themselves this way. Larger than life, they pulsate with color and fill the space; and the female figures inscribed thereon glide, float, and fly, expanding with light and life. Mojica’s understanding of and interaction with these, not as emblems or static mnemonic devices but as living texts (just as she is a living text), have begun to discover (and recover) the profound relationship — an *organic inter-textuality* — between the living contemporary body and the living pictographic-archive in the realm of traditional storytelling.

Fashioning an Internal Gathering House in Paluwala

Indeed, the challenge Mojica issued to herself for *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way* is focused upon this understanding and interaction — upon the discovery of the relationship between the live embodiment and the image, between the contemporary body fragmented by a centuries-old onslaught of cultural disruption and the body of tradition that is her inheritance (Rehearsals). As the investigation proceeds, certainly many more questions will emerge and even greater possibilities for remembering and reconstruction may be revealed within their answers. Indeed, other “bodies” will be remembered; and as the structure of tradition’s “younger brother” is being internally reconfigured (that is, the internal decolonization of its artists), so too may its

outer structure (that is, the architecture and administration of the theatre itself) begin to change its shape to accommodate those bodies.

One very exciting feature of this project is Mojica’s intent to open spaces for her mother (Gloria Miguel) and to explicitly manifest the organic continuity that links the generations of humans with the elemental feminine forces of Kuna tradition and cosmology, binding all generations into the ancestral canon. It is just in such an enterprise that the contemporary theatre, which Favel locates in Paluwala (Rehearsals), demonstrates so little interest. Elderly, weak or “cumbersome” bodies, are by-and-large unwelcome on the professional stages of the western world. Indeed, the architecture of these stages seems almost designed to prohibit access to such bodies. Western theatre audiences, it would seem, do not even notice the absence of elderly or differently-abled storytellers on the stage.



Mojica performs *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*.

But as we struggle to deconstruct the condition of colonization that fragments us and cuts us off from our traditions and from each other, we must acknowledge our own power and our specific responsibilities to exercise that power. We are, as Jeannette Armstrong reminds us, “the physical expression of continuous deliberate change

and therefore important in creation’s sacred creative force. We choose the outcome” (Cardinal & Armstrong 58). It is in this project that the team continues to set as the objective of its processual investigations the creation of new internal structures — “new buildings” constructed upon the foundations of Indigenous tradition. Fittingly then, Favel and Mojica have already begun to discover and to mark the points in *Chocolate Woman’s* narrative structure in which to create “windows” for Mojica’s mother — windows that will make space for, even as they accommodate, the elderly body who still has songs to sing and stories to tell and to whom it would behoove us to listen.

For now, however, the journey continues within the liminal interstices between elder and younger, between the spaces of doing (tradition) and the spaces of seeing (*theatron*), between the metaphysical representation and her physical namesake, and between freefall and flight. The elemental feminine of Kuna cosmology dreams the Milky Way into being; the Indigenous artist dreams herself into wholeness as she takes back “pieces of [her]self” (Mojica, Panel Discussion). And a Cree director, a Kuna painter and a Kuna-Rappahannock artisan of theatrical molas dream up a transformative, artistic process through which the Indigenous human may be able to sift through the embers of our vandalized cultures and make poetry out of ruins (Favel, Panel Discussion), music out of mourning (Mojica, *Chocolate Woman*) and dance out of half-remembered stories and pictographic fragments.

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