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Recovering Ritual in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Luis Valdez' *Mummified Deer*

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Recovering Ritual in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Luis Valdez' *Mummified Deer*
Jeanne Armstrong

After recently teaching *Mummified Deer*, I became interested in the role of storytelling and *Indigenous*, it occurred to me that similar issues of memory and performance are significant in Luis Valdez' *Mummified Deer* and Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Both plays feature dance and music as well as pre Christian spiritual traditions connected to nature. Thus this paper examines these common themes in the two plays: traumatic histories; and dance performances which recover repressed cultural and spiritual traditions.

The Irish and the Yaquis both endured centuries of colonization and repression. The full conquest of Ireland occurred during the 16th and 17th centuries and only ended when the treaty was signed in 1921. The Yaqui wars began in 1533 and lasted until 1929 when the Yaquis were finally subdued by Mexico. Some scholars have made comparisons of post-colonial trauma among Irish and American Indians. Nancy Scheper-Hughes compared the histories of rural Irish and Pueblo Indians in "The Best of Two Worlds, the Worst of Two Worlds: Reflections on Culture and Field Work among the Rural Irish and Pueblo Indians." In her article, she noted shared experiences with the decline of village communities and loss of culture resulting in more frequent alcoholism, depression and suicide. The villages become inhabited mainly by an aging population as young people often leave to find work and other opportunities in urban locations.

In "Exploring Irish multigenerational Trauma and Its Healing: Lessons from the Oglala Lakota (Sioux)," authors state that "There is a growing body of evidence that multigenerational trauma (also called historical loss, transgenerational trauma) and its consequences is prevalent in historically oppressed and colonized peoples." As with Scheper Hughes, they identify consequences of this trauma such as alcoholism, depression, and other chronic mental health problems. The authors found these connections between Lakota and Irish: long histories of colonization; high rates of alcoholism and drug addiction; and systematic repression of their languages, and traditional cultural practices. Both cultures are rural and have endured poverty, land loss and forced relocation. For the Lakota, re-introducing traditional spirituality, language, teachings and ceremonies improved mental health and school performance. Believing that Irish rural people had been severely impacted by the 19th century famine, the authors tried a pilot

project which showed evidence that Irish participants benefitted from the use of traditional Irish cultural practices in mental health treatment.

Dancing at Lughnasa and *Mummified Deer* portray the trauma of imperialism in the lives of their characters, the Mundy family in Ireland and Mama Chu's Yaqui family, and both include traditional cultural performance as an antidote to the trauma by reintegrating the traditional cultural self. Michael as narrator in *Dancing at Lughnasa* is haunted by the loss of his family and childhood home. Mama Chu and her family are haunted by her unspeakable losses which are only revealed to her family in the course of the play.

Dancing at Lughnasa is set in 1936 Ballybeg, a fictitious village in County Donegal, in the Mundy family home. The main characters are the Mundy sisters; their brother Jack a missionary priest returned from Africa; Michael son of Chris Mundy; and Michael's father Gerry. The adult Michael narrates events in the summer of 1936 when he was seven years old.

After 25 years working in a leper colony in Uganda, Michael's uncle Jack has returned to the village. As the play unfolds, it becomes obvious that the Church sent Jack back to Ireland because he had 'gone native', becoming too involved in Ryangan cultural and spiritual practices. Kate as a school teacher is the only gainfully employed sister until she loses her position because of Jack's controversial attitudes. Agnes and Rose were glove knitters but are replaced by the factory which opens in Donegal town so they move to London. By the end of the play, Michael reports that Jack died a year later; his mother began working at the factory; and his father was wounded fighting in Spain. Eventually Michael receives a letter from a half-brother telling him that his father died leaving another family in Wales. When Michael searched for Agnes and Rose, he found that they had become destitute with Agnes already dead and Rose dying.

Critics have analyzed these tragic events in the Mundy family as signifying Ireland's failure to accommodate single women and address the ongoing economic problems in the early Republic. Yu Chen Lin claims that the replacement of the gift economy with industrialization marginalized women working in domestic spaces. Lin notes that Friel's play interrogates the status of women who don't fit the model of wife and mother outlined in the constitution. According to Lin, this ideal model was unrealistic due to the economy of Ireland in the 1920s-30s which resulted in

very low marriage rates and one half of the female population being unmarried. Despite the family crises in the play, the adult Michael remembers joyful moments as a child that summer, especially the sisters enthusiastic dancing when the radio plays the Mason's Apron. Another happy memory from that summer is his father's visit when Michael witnesses the love between his parents as they dance to music on the radio.

Like *Dancing at Lughnasa*'s setting in a domestic space, *Mummified Deer* also takes place in a confined space, the hospital room where the main character Mama Chu lies in a coma. It is 1969 a year of significant events in the Chicano movement, including founding the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MECHA) and moratoriums in opposition to the Vietnam War. The characters are various members of Mama Chu's family and people from her past in Mexico and Arizona. The family members are Armida her granddaughter, a radical graduate student; son Profe (also called Pedro); Oralia her daughter; and Tilly, Oralia's daughter. Characters from the 'other reality' who are dead but appear in Mama Chu's comatose visions, include Cajeme the Yaqui deer dancer; Cosme a Mexican clown; Don Guero a Spaniard in Arizona; Lucas Flores, Yaqui leader; and Agustina, daughter of Flores. During the course of the play, the deer, dancer visible only to Mama, repeatedly performs in her hospital room.

When the doctor's procedure discovers a 60 year old mummified fetus in Mama's uterus, Armida realizes the implications for their status as Mama Chu's biological children or grandchildren. Profe gradually tells the story of how Mama found him orphaned in Mexico; escaped to Arizona; and acquired Agustina from Lucas Flores after his wife dies. Later she became surrogate mother to Don Guero's daughter Oralia. Near the end of the play, Mama Chu reveals the trauma at the root of the family, telling about the massacre of Yaquis when her husband and children were killed. She was pregnant with her last child and begged God that her unborn child not be born since he would either be killed or enslaved. Thirty years later the final scene takes place in 1999 at Mama Chu's house with the family gathered around as she and the deer dancer transition into the otherworld.

Internalized oppression and fear

While *Mummified Deer* ends on a note of hope for renewal and *Dancing at Lughnasa* with Michael's memory of his aunts dancing, there is ample evidence in both plays that the characters suffer from internalized oppressions of imperialism and, in the case of the Yaquis internalized racism. The internalized oppressions have caused conflicts, including denial of sensuality and joy in the Mundy family and repression of Yaqui identity among Mama Chu and her family. In both plays the principal characters, Kate Mundy and Mama Chu, fear the consequences if they don't maintain respectability, which concerns sexual behavior for both families and the denial of Yaqui identity for Mama's family.

As *Dancing at Lughnasa*, opens Michael remembers how his aunts wanted to name their wireless set Lugh for the Celtic god of the harvest but Aunt Kate said it would be sinful to christen an inanimate object. The sisters mimic Kate's fixation on respectable appearances. For example when Chris wants to wear lipstick, Maggie jokes "Today it's lipstick; tomorrow it's the gin bottle" and Agnes says, "Do you want to make a pagan of yourself?" (Friel p.3) When Maggie and Rose begin to hitch their skirts and dance, Agnes remarks "A right pair of pagans, the two of you." All except Kate really want to attend the Lughnasa dance. When Kate is critical of the men at the dance, Agnes replies, "I don't care how young they are, how drunk and dirty and sweaty they are. I want to dance, Kate. It's the Festival of Lughnasa. I'm only thirty-five." But Kate refuses asking, "Do you want the whole countryside to be laughing at us- women of our years? –mature women, dancing" (Friel p.13).

Catriona Clutterbuck in her comparison of narrative imperialism in Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Devlin's *After Easter* asserts that both authors treat "the struggle of the individual to achieve full subject status within a communal living situation that is inflected by imperialist politics" (p. 101). Clutterbuck prefers to use the term imperial rather than colonial to describe the historical context of the play because the forces of imperialism, more indirect than colonialism, result in a marketplace in which encroaching industrialization restricts the domestic sphere so that the sisters lose their work making gloves in their home. She ascribes tensions in the play to imperialism's construction of binaries between the visionary and the rational as well as "Irish barbarity versus English civilization . . . territorial politics versus class politics and sexuality versus spirituality" (p. 105)

Richard Cave interprets the play as the representation of a society whose ethical codes have “lost all concern with spiritual fulfilment and most crucially has in the process come to deny that there is any connection between sensual and spiritual awareness” (pp 118-19). He too is critical of the moral binaries which govern Ballybeg behavior since natural bodily urges expressed in dancing were judged as sinful, pagan and subversive of mores. Cave thinks that Friel’s play sustains a “profound and disturbing tension between the social crisis of the family and the ageless traditional rituals outside time.” (p. 115). He describes Kate’s skillful dancing as imaging the “pattern of a very different lifestyle which would respect her wealth of emotion, her creativity and zest, her capacity for joy . . . her gifts of exquisite coordination and physical rhythm.” (p. 118). Unfortunately this creativity, Kate’s moments of being other than her mundane self, must be repressed in the context of the women’s precarious status in Ballybeg.

Kate gradually realizes how repressive she is about her sisters having fun when she comments on Maggie’s singing “If you knew your prayers as well as you know the words of those aul pagan songs! . . . She’s right: I am a righteous bitch, amn’t I?” (Friel p. 35). Yet Kate accurately comprehends the danger of their world collapsing when she reflects “You work hard at your job. You try to keep the home together. . . And then suddenly you realize that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away” (p. 35).

When the sisters burst into their wild dancing to the Irish music on the radio, for this brief time they forget their repressive society and embrace their festive pagan otherness. An otherness that Uncle Jack apparently encountered during his time in Africa. Michael remembers how Uncle Jack was a hero to the sisters because he was a missionary in Uganda, a priest of whom all Ballybeg was proud. “It gave us a little bit of status in the eyes of the parish and it must have helped my aunts bear the shame mother brought on the household by having me –as it was called then- out of wedlock.” (Friel p. 9).

However Father Jack has behaved oddly since his return from Africa. When he realizes Michael’s is a “love child” Jack comments on how Ryangan women want love children because they bring good fortune. He describes the Ryangan harvest festival as honoring goddess Obi by cutting and anointing the first yam which resembles the original purpose of Lughnasa and cutting

of the first ear of corn. When Jack mentions the cohabitation of extended families in Ryanga, Kate tells him “It’s not what Pope Pius XI considers to be the holy sacrament of matrimony. And it might be better for you if you paid just a bit more attention to our Holy Father and bit less to the Great Goddess.” (Friel p. 63).

Mama Chu in *Mummified Deer* also experiences inner conflicts which cause her to deny her Yaqui history. The scene in the hospital begins with grand-daughter Armida chastising the nurse for her racist behavior toward Mama Chu. Armida tells the nurse “She’s Mexican. . .she’s a fighter. Okay? She was in the 1910 revolution.” (Valdez p.6). Yet Mama is ambivalent about being Yaqui because the genocidal murder of her husband and children represent the consequences of being Yaqui in Mexico.

While in the coma, Mama speaks to the phantom deer dancer, “Caje haven’t I suffered enough for you? What do you know of god and sins of the flesh? We are put on this earth to suffer and by suffering we rise to a greater Gloria with Jesus Christ.” This reflects her conflict between Yaqui earth based spirituality and Christian belief that suffering or mortifying the flesh is holy. She tells Cajeme, “You are free like a savage, a wild deer. You’re evil, child of the demonio.” p.7 Yet at other times she wants to protect Cajeme. She reassures him, “Nobody’s coming to get you. You’re safe. You’re in Paradise and you don’t even know it. You’re not an animal, you have a soul. Speak to me in god’s language” (Valdez p. 18). Critic Jorge Huerta explains her behavior as representing “all mestizos in their internal colonization and cultural confusion” (p. 189).

Mama Chu’s inner conflicts also manifest as conflicts between family members. Because of her experience with the racist genocide of Yaquis, Mama has treated her two adopted daughters very differently since Agustina is Yaqui and darker skinned, while Oralia is mestizo and light. Agustina’s daughter Armida was fathered by Profe, the Mayan boy who was adopted by Mama while Oralia’s daughter Tilly had a light skinned father. Dark skin color and Indian identity compared to European identity pervades the play.

When Oralia accuses Armida of blaming Mama Chu for her mother Agustina's suicide, Armida responds that Mama Chu said my mom was a Yori puta" (the outsider's whore). . . and I'd turn into one too." She said I inherited her "hot Yaqui blood" (Valdez p. 16). Oralia tries to claim Spanish ancestry for her father and ½ French ancestry for Mama Chu but Armida responds "Are you sure she wasn't one of the servants?" (p. 16).

During the play, Mama is visited by the dead, including Cosme the man who killed her children, Agustina and Agustina's father Lucas Flores. Mama tells Lucas "Your Yaqui dances got you killed" but he responds that he was killed in the revolution fighting to prove to the Yoris that Yaquis are not animals. (Valdez p.19). Only after the family learns the horror of the Yaqui genocide that she experienced do they comprehend the trauma that impacted Mama and her adopted family.

Ceremony

The recurring deer dancer in *Mummified Deer* and the expression of various forms of dance in *Dancing at Lughnasa* represent the repressed spirituality and traditional culture under the surface in both plays. An imperial, patriarchal lens has categorized these ceremonial performances in which humans express ecstatic rapport with the natural world as being savage or primitive hence the women in these societies risk loss of respectability, or worse, as a consequence of identifying with the pre Christian culture. Clutterbuck comments on the play's "frustrated but clear expression of the desire that rigidly categorized binaries would be replaced by interpenetrating opposites" (p. 108).

Michael's closing remarks in *Dancing at Lughansa* reference his memory of that Lughansa time in his childhood, "When I remember it, I think of it as dancing. . . as if language had surrendered to movement-as if this ritual this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness. Dancing as if the very heart of life and all its hopes might be found in those assuaging notes and those hushed rhythms and in those silent and hypnotic movements" (Friel p.71).

In *Mummified Deer* as Mama Chu dies while the deer dancer silently collapses performing his final dance, Armida makes this closing statement, “Is it so outrageous to believe that the mummified fetus like an ancient kernel of millennial corn soaked with the waters of divine mercy and luck might yet spring to life, that something sacred and alive might come from all that suffering . . . that our entire family history is but the struggle to find our birth passage to a new world” (Valdez p. 61).

The silence of the deer dancer resonates with Michael’s closing remarks about the profound possibility that language could surrender to the power of dancing. The dances in both plays are associated with ancient seasonal festivals, the unheimlich other in modern societies. Lughnasa was a typical pre Christian harvest festival practiced in Celtic Ireland. Originally the cutting of the first ear of corn was offered to a deity. The festival is still celebrated with storytelling, matchmaking, music and dancing. The Yaqui Easter ceremony is a fusion of traditional Yaqui practices and Christian celebration. Children dressed as angels protect the church from evil aggressors called Fariseos while the deer dancer brings the cosmic dimension of the sacred flower world into the ritual (Yoeme p.1782).

These essentially pre-Christian customs balanced sensuality and spirituality hence associations with wild nature in the deer dance or festivals celebrating libidinal energy such as Lughnasa were not shameful. Yet in patriarchal rural Ireland, paganism was a threat to controlling women’s bodies and the paternity of their children. In her article “In touch with some otherness: gender, authority and the body in *Dancing at Lughnasa*” Anna McMullan’s states that “As it is the women who are most corporeally restrained by the prevailing religions discipline it is the dance amongst women which subverts that discipline most radically” (p. 22).

Clutterbuck mentions the unheimlich connection of Irish and Ryangan equivalents in Gerry’s polygamy; Michael as love child; and Lughnasa as a harvest festival. She sees the challenge for the sisters as a need to recognize the intersections between their seemingly normal home life and the unhomely experience of dance as “ritualized or revelatory spirituality” in which the women become other than their usual, controlled selves (p.108). In his book *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Victor Turner emphasizes communitas as being a ‘regenerative abyss’ an

experience of communion or common society in which structures and hierarchies are at least temporarily dissolved (p. 139).

The Yaqui deer dance can inspire a sense of *communitas* among observers of the deer dance. Anselmo Valencia provided commentary about the Yaqui point of view on the deer dance explaining that the water drum is a call for the people to “take part in a very, spiritual sacred ceremony. A few minutes of the deer dance, about three minutes, is enough to bring them a light, a divine light.” (A. Valencia and R. Spicer in Schechner *By means of performance* p. 197.) In his play *Mummified Deer*, Valdez gives this description of the deer dancer’s first appearance “A Yaqui Indian deer dancer bolts in, running half-naked to the waist, deer hooves on his belt, butterfly cocoons on his ankles, and a deer’s head on his white turbaned crown. Rattling gourds, he vigorously circles the bed, bristling with animal power to the music of flute and drum, never dropping his deer persona” (p.4). The deer dancer inhabits a liminal state, becoming other to his human self and transports the audience into this sacred Yaqui space of the sea ania or flower world through rhythmic repetitive music and dance. “The white cloth covering the dancer’s head on which the deer head rests is the liminal boundary which signifies “physicalization of the impossibility of complete transformation into the deer” (Schechner p. 4)

The sisters temporarily entered a liminal space when they danced to express their repressed desires; hopes for a male partner for Lughnasa; and their longing for erotic play permissible only in the state of marriage. Interrogating the imperialist binaries of rational and irrational, sacred and profane, spiritual and sensual, Clutterbuck, sees the dream realm in the play as challenging the rational realm’s “reconstitution as a restrictive norm of sanity which emerges as a vital tool of continued imperialism” (p. 105).

Jorge Huerta makes a similar observation about Luis Valdez’ play by quoting the poem “Pensamiento Serpentino” by Valdez, “El Indio baila/ he dances his way to truth/ in a way intellectuals will/ never understand” which Huerta interprets as not rejecting the rational mind but acknowledging that the intellect can’t grasp the “miracle of life and the mystery of death” (p. 184). Elements of Celtic and Yaqui traditional cultures survive beneath the surface of the dominant culture. Friel reconciles the homely world of Ballybeg with the *unheimlich* elements of

pagan celebration just as Valdez creates a story of the interpenetrating realities of Mama Chu's life and the sea ania invoked by the deer dancer's performance.

In his essay "Marking time: From Making History to Dancing at Lughnasa," Fintan O'Toole suggests that Friel is moving out of history into personal time in *Dancing at Lughnasa* but O'Toole critiques this move, saying "Time cannot be stopped, history cannot be escaped." (p. 213). However perhaps Friel is questioning whose history and whose time is most relevant in post-colonial Ireland. Linear time of hegemonic Western civilization was the dominant time frame of the historical colonization of Ireland. Yet this linear and rigid time of the Judaeo-Christian world view is not the only version of time. For prehistoric, agricultural societies, their vision of time was and is cyclical and mythical.

Terence Brown's essay, "Have we a context: Transition, self and society in the theatre of Brian Friel" argues that "for a moment Jack's vision of African life and the exuberant, vitality of the five women of the house seem to provide a way of thinking about Ireland which sets it apart from the developed world and hints at a shared experience with the colonized societies where indigenous religion has not been completely overlaid by alien concepts" (p.199). Friel's version of time in *Dancing at Lughnasa* is pagan and personal, hence similar to the cyclical time of *Mummified Deer* where the deer dance is repeatedly performed throughout the apparently linear history of Yaqui conquest and resistance. Thus surviving springs of Irish and Yaqui tradition resurface to inspire translations of post-colonial histories into ceremonial stories.

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