Chapter 7

Bridging Worlds: Academe and Cultural Agency in Southern Mexico

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Introduction

As in our “Crossing Borders” learning framework addressing agricultural challenges, in this chapter we continue our story of encounters and needed solutions from another perspective. We explained in Chapter 3 that Cornell University has led a wide range of student and faculty from around the world on a multidisciplinary, intergenerational examination of rural and urban development in tropical Latin America for many years. In 2008–09, Experience Latin America, and Hispanic Theater Production courses were linked through the felicitous circumstance of a substantial core of students taking both courses. This resulted in a mutual collaboration fueling an integrative process building awareness, knowledge, and culture transmitted through performance. Best known by the troupe name, Teatrotaller exists both as a course and as a student organization with the mission of promoting Hispanic culture through the production of high-quality theater.

* These field courses have been conducted in Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Honduras, Ecuador, and Mexico.
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in Spanish. Student-founded in 1993, and primarily attracting undergraduate students with a steady sprinkling of graduate students, staff, and community members, Teatrotaller has directed, staged, and performed over 60 Spanish, Latin American, and U.S. Latino plays, which have been performed in festivals over the years in the United States and elsewhere.

This chapter discusses one example of how multiple encounters during living laboratory explorations helped students and faculty members alike to articulate problems and develop subsequent research investigations based on these contextualized settings and inputs by our hosts. In this particular case, it included an exchange of socially conscious theater productions. Beginning with Teatrotaller’s presentation of La mujer que cayó del cielo, a play by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, inspired by the true story of a Rarámuri woman from northern Mexico incarcerated in an insane asylum in the United States, to a mixed audience of indigenous and ladino Chiapanecan people. It also included interactions with indigenous and ladino theater professionals from that Mexican state, which inspired the students to propose creating their own play to introduce the social problems facing southern Mexico to a northern audience back in the United States.

The Experience

In more general terms, our consolidated pedagogical and problem framing approach contributes to the intellectual growth of students and faculty alike, as well as challenging us to think of ways to share this knowledge with different local and international communities. There are many ways to break with the past. Some may go unrealized until the transformation is complete. One’s own nature finds a new genesis, emerging as another from a cocoon after rain, or like a liberating flight from the memory into a new self. This is what Petrona de la Cruz tells us in her story of Maya performance as cultural agency, in an interview with Sánchez-Blake, “el teatro ha sido una forma de sanar mis heridas. Pude gritarle al mundo, al público, el dolor que sentía por dentro” (Sánchez-Blake, 2012: 22). Petrona’s colleague, Isabel Juárez, added, “romper el silencio tuvo un efecto multiplicativo en las mujeres y sus comunidades. Las miembras de la organización comenzaron a hablar y a ganar confianza. Muchas mujeres ni siquiera sabían que tenían una voz” (Sánchez-Blake, 2014).

Through the years, graduate and undergraduate student researchers have developed projects and publications with the dual purposes of pursuing real-world issues and giving something back to our hosts and others with similar needs and interests. Other outcomes included policy papers or case study reports shared with communities or the government. Recognizing that valuable intellectual work and analysis take place in all disciplines, we have also incorporated cultural agency and performance studies into our portfolio of pedagogical interactions and articulations of researchable problems.

As we have shown, the living laboratory provides opportunities to gain awareness and knowledge of a distant world that encompasses many issues separately addressed by the academy. Farm visits initiated learning and insight about real-world issues concerning food production, land and water, climate change, biodiversity, family and community welfare, and the economic challenges faced by agrarian society. Conversations with farmers, indigenous people, and other hosts helped articulate needs and contemporary challenges; likewise, the opportunity to see plays like the indigenous language play about ancient Maya culture, Palenque rojo, with its international-level production values, and Sna Jźt’ibajom’s much more modest staging of their “Cómo nació el maíz” gave our theater students a repertoire of images to draw upon. Especially productive in this respect were conversations with the directors of the plays, and the generosity of the members
of Sna Jtz’ibajom in opening their house to us, and sharing their unpublished play scripts (even permitting us to adapt them if we wished).

A better understanding about maize provided by ejido farmers proved a significant inspiration for all including those whose motivations and intellectual curiosity pointed in the direction of performance. This quintessential nutriment of the Maya, and the important role of maize in Mexican life, from the ancient cosmovision in the Popol Vuh to current diets and heritage foods, attracted learners from all backgrounds to a broadly shared cultural common ground. Students and faculty also learned about sacred Maya beliefs from distinguished anthropologist Jan de Vos (2001), and in particularly impressive visits to the San Juan Bautista church in San Juan Chamula with the Chamula leader Don Manuel Pérez López. In this place, past and present blend with sacred rituals and religious ceremonies, epitomizing the syncretism of Christian and Maya creeds, tradition, and modernity, and only through Don Manuel’s whispered guidance were we able to sort out the myriad images and activities. Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán (UADY) archeologists Lilia Fernández and Guillermo Kantrún helped us to peer beyond a superficial appreciation for the majesty of Maya civilization and heritage at spectacular ruins in Palenque, Uxmal, Toniná, Bonampak, Yaxchilán, Chichultik, and Izapa. Our explorations also included special meetings with the Zapatista authorities at the Oventik caracol, a seat of civil government, where the Zapatista concept of “good” and “bad” government was differentiated alongside their model of indigenous regional autonomy. Conversations with personalities who overcame their own challenges, like Antonia López, Antonio Gómez, and Petrona de la Cruz, stimulated considerations of meaning and values, putting the music of their voices in our ears.

Antonia López is a charming, irrepressible Zinacanteca businesswoman. She, with her mother and younger sisters, manufactures and markets beauty in colorful hand-loomed weavings, tapestries, and other artisanry, and the woolen embroidery art that distinguishes Zinacantec couture. Like other artisans, Antonia’s creations represent another level of cultural transference, where the sunny day brightness of local flower gardens is projected onto woven canvases. Our students wanted to know more about Antonia, to hear her story. Granting the request, she began as anyone might. For Antonia, everything begins with an idea, with a desire—“I wanted to have my own bed.” Antonia shared her story, one sadly similar to that of many women around the world: storms of family violence, a drunken father’s hurting hands, her injured mother’s bed-ridden recoveries, a wish for men more respectful and caring of their families, a father throwing her into the street, disowning her for buying her own bed, and a house in which to put it—pleading to convince her mother to escape the domestic violence and move in with her. This was not a story of abuse, however, but of survival, resilience, and pride. Antonia proudly showed us the house she designed and had built with her own funds, earned by the work of her hands. She bragged about her sisters finishing high school, and her own newly achieved literacy in Spanish, her desire to learn English so as better to serve international visitors and reach other markets. She handed out her business cards, encouraging students to email her, and asked how to develop better business plans. We sat on her bed, in her room, and talked. We believe this victory of family, community, and dreams still plays, lingeringly, for those who were witnesses. Which marks will become indelible? Who is to say, not for a lifetime? Antonia’s story could join the Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya (FOMMA) repertoire of productions.

One final vignette is a story of access denied. Don Antonio Gómez Entzín and his family raise vegetables for the market in San Cristóbal de Las Casas on a steep hillside high above Huitepec. Everyone’s hard work pays off when there is enough water for his or her crops. In addition to rainfall, good yields typically require irrigation from the mountaintop stream running on family land just above their farmstead. Gathering together with Antonio, his wife, and children after a guided walkabout
we learned more about their livelihood, chores, markets, family, and schools. Family income from vegetable sales was deteriorating because farmers could no longer irrigate their crops. Huitepec waters had been diverted to feed the Coca-Cola bottling franchise at the base of the mountain. We were told the government was supporting corporate demands amid complaints from Huitepec residents of less access to water resources, which are stewarded by them. Along with Antonia’s story, this encounter especially provoked reactions and reflections in our group and with Chiapanecans, and beyond about power, privilege, pride, and subaltern needs for cultural and community agency.

Upon returning from Chiapas, co-enrolled Teatrotaller students and faculty decided to continue efforts through the creation of a Spanish play to reenact some of the main challenges facing Chiapanecans, projecting their realities, and past and present, onto a local stage. Combining acting and language instruction is not in itself novel—drama techniques have long been shown beneficial to language learning. Ryan-Scheutz and Colangelo (2004: 375) indicate that drama provides language learners “opportunities to speak in less controlled and more creative ways … bring(ing) learners closer to real-life use of the target language.” Our students took these lessons a step further into a complexly staged performance in which both cultural and language learning were encouraged through a fully realized devised drama structure.

This seems a natural next step but is by no means an obvious one either for performance or language pedagogy. Not long ago, The Association for Theater in Higher Education (ATHE) devoted a special issue of its journal, Theatre Topics, to the question of devising (2005). Reading through the issue is a peculiar experience because there is not a single example of, or case study from, the Hispanic or U.S. Latino world despite the widespread acknowledgment of the influence exerted by Brazilian Augusto Boal’s fundamental work in his Theater of the Oppressed. This blind spot adds a rather ironic perspective to comments like that of Berkeley (2001: 3), who stresses that devised theater highlights, “the uses of theatrical performance for ALL students in the work of forming identities and values.” At the same time, we take seriously the repeated message of these articles—devised drama and its radical pedagogies are typically seen to have a transformative mission, and it is a performative mode that speaks, or should speak, to all. As Foreman (2005: 97) of the Dell’Arte School comments, “the goal is to create a courageous theater, based on people in relationship, passing beyond the peripheral situations of our lives and into the circumstances that define the human condition.”

Profoundly concerned about the limited political and social power of the groups with whom we interacted, our students committed to finding an appropriate artistic response that would supplement other forms of activism in the area. Accordingly, a devised script, Kan Balaam (Jaguar Serpent), was cowritten with students through a collaborative initiative to elicit awareness and understanding about socio-cultural issues. Script development began with eager discussions in Chiapas assimilating information that ranged from background facts about subaltern lives, to observations about styles of social interaction, clothing, how men and women in communities speak, and how they occupy space with their bodies. The process was completed at home through extensive research, writing, editing, rewriting, and composing assisted at a crucial stage by input from the well-known Mexican–American playwright, Carlos Morton. Through this challenging process, Kan Balaam emerged as an integration of Maya myth and cosmology from the Popol Vuh with contemporary conflicts in indigenous communities. Some of these conflicts are many centuries old but manifested anew as modern invasions into the traditional culture and its territories by globalized economic structures.

The title, “Kan Balaam,” refers to the Maya belief of opposing forces. “Kan,” the serpent, represents Kukulkán, the Maya god of creation, and his manifestations—the sun, fertility, and life—in opposition to the jaguar (balaam) and its manifestations of night, death, and darkness. The Popol
The story line of *Kan Balaam* focuses on the fate of an indigenous couple (Carlos and Felicita) unable to have children. The couple’s infertility dilemma parallels other aspects of their barren lives and landscapes, worsened by drought, and denied access rights to their communal river, which have been ceded to the Coca-Cola bottler. The maize harvest fails and the community faces starvation. Carlos takes to drink and constantly blames his wife for inability to procreate. Meanwhile, a delegate from the bottling plant visits Carlos, offering him a job in exchange for procuring village support needed for construction of another bottling plant near town. The delegate is an old neighbor from their hometown of Chamula, who has become a city person (*ladino*) changing his name, language, and dress. He urges Carlos to do the same by forsaking old ways and traditions. Felicita, overhearing the conversation and fearful of her inebriated husband’s response, scurries to the Chamula church to recruit a *curandero* to perform a ritual to make her fertile. The church ritual transports Felicita (and the audience) to the past, where she is reminded of her Maya roots.

The creation scene based on the *Popol Vuh*, where the world including its animals and plants come into being, is completed by emergence of the Man of Maize, who is powerful enough to resist water and fire, but humble enough to worship his creators. Afterward, Felicita sees herself in a past life as a young maiden, Cuzán (*Golondrina*), who is chosen by the Maya king to be offered to the gods by casting her into a sacred cenote. In this scene, she discovers her infertility is due to an act of rebellion toward the rain god (*Chaac*) when Cuzán refuses to deliver the message ordered by the Maya priest. By opposing this mandate, a curse falls upon the Maya bringing horrors of bearded white men and white gods who conquered, enslaved, and destroyed their civilization.

When Felicita returns to the present day, the healer empowers her to break the curse. She must convince her husband to understand the gods’ message and return to their people’s roots. When Felicita tries to do this Carlos is drunk. She falls into despair. Meanwhile, Carlos dreams that Kukulkán and Cacacoalt (the dark Coca-Cola god) fight to gain control of his soul. While Kukulkán attempts to convince him to return to his people because they need him, Cacacoalt invites him to follow his *compadre* in taking up the Coca-Cola offer to forsake his people. When he awakens, Carlos suddenly understands the message and makes up his mind. He searches for Felicita and finds her just as she is about to pitch herself into a cenote in despair. As they embrace in a common bond of responsibility to their people, thunder echoes from contented gods with the promise of rain and fertility. In the final act, Carlos has become a leader in his community. He defeats the Coca-Cola delegate by refusing his proposal and condemning intrusion on their lands. Led by Carlos, the entire community joins forces with the Zapatistas pledging support in opposing the invasion. In the end, Carlos and Felicita are blessed with the long awaited promise of a child.

In sum, *Kan Balaam* integrates Maya myths and cosmology with contemporary issues facing Chiapanecan communities as interpreted by students. Students shared their heightened transcultural awareness and learning with a larger audience, in a gesture of gratitude and intellectual responsibility for the gift of shared narratives and information bestowed by gracious Chiapanecan hosts. A church ritual mimicked observations in the San Juan Chamula church melded with an investigation of ritual traditions, not a facile task. All costumes, props, and sets were original creations. We were also fortunate to be assisted by UADY archeologist Dr. Lilia Fernández, who helped finalize costume and set design, advised on types of feathers, gowns, masks, and makeup used by the ancient Maya. She was a critical consultant also in choreographing the “ball game” in the ancient Maya legend scene. The entire theater company worked in an environment of comradeship, where Spanish was the language of the workplace, inspired and spurred by our Chiapas exploration.
Through this second living laboratory, students enhanced cultural understandings and linguistic skills. The urgent social issues addressed in this play gave a particularly forceful quality to their applied research inquiries, an especially satisfying result both in terms of intellectual and personal growth. As one of the students writes in her final reflection on the yearlong course:

The entire process for the creation of Kan Balaam was really an experience and a collective group effort. From its very beginnings as a raw idea in Chiapas, to the script writing, the set making, the masks, the costume design, the lights, the stage—everything came together because there was a communal group goal. It can be argued that the same group effort that was put into the creation of Kan Balam is parallel to the community effort of the people of San Juan Chamula in the play when they are trying to get rid of the Coca Cola company … As I watched the play, I felt like I watched my Experience Latin America course condensed into one play with all the issues I learned and with classmates from whom I learned while acting them out on stage.

Conclusion

We have illustrated ways in which academe has employed cultural agency to embrace a more inclusive worldview that helps to effectively frame and pursue problems. By trading places, where our hosts from other walks of life and cultures are the professors and subalterns are at the table, students and faculty become colearners and collaborators charged with social responsibility in delivering voice, knowledge, and understanding to extended audiences. We contend that greater academic agency through alliances like those embodied in Experience Latin America is needed to achieve equity goals through effective community engagement and applied problem solving. It also helps ensure that all can participate in public policy decisions, which is part of “reinventing our life in society,” Godenzi’s (2006) challenge to education.

We have briefly described a series of encounters between social realities and academe. By remembering, reenacting, and transmitting these stories we hope to contribute to a stronger voice with greater understanding and visibility for the forgotten people of our hemisphere. By revealing instances of silences broken and culture performed we have demonstrated the potential realized by bringing academe to the field and the field to academe, as part of a reinforcing educational process that promotes understanding and social transformation.

We also analyzed the power of performance as an engine of cultural agency that naturally connects with community and reinforces academe. Thus, cultural attitudes and perceptions are transformed, knowledge is created through research and disseminated, and social awareness and respect are raised in ways like those urged by de Schutter (2011). The performing culture theatrical experience described in this chapter condenses into a clear example of the adoption of cultural agency by academe. Exposed to an enabling cultural landscape, one that carries messages of cultural and other substantive contexts, students winnow and amplify them through their own engagements, lenses and reflections, finally delivering them through an egalitarian process to academe and society writ large.

Acknowledgments

We thank Emily Holley and Charles Nicholson for their helpful feedback on drafts of this chapter.
References


Appendix: Images from Southern Mexico

La mujer que cayó del cielo, San Cristóbal de las Casas, January 2009.
The audience, San Cristóbal de las Casas.

*Kan Balam*, (play) Ithaca, April 2009.