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Theatre in Contested Lands

Repatriating Indigenous Remains

Julie Burelle



One cannot live carrying the dead on one's back.

—Yves Sioui Durand, director and cofounder of Ondinnok (2010)

For these old souls, I say, “Dear God, forgive us. We’re in a different society.”

—Carmen Lucas, Kwaaymi elder and monitor
for archaeological excavations in San Diego County (in Larson 2008)

A young indigenous¹ woman walks slowly onstage and heads towards a bench adorned with a series of masks that form a detachable bas-relief. She stops in front of the mask of a weathered Mayan face as if the elder had silently hailed her. The performer slowly lifts the mask, places it on her abdomen, and turns to face the audience. Her pose evokes for a moment the ubiquitous displays of indigenous life found in natural history museums worldwide. Here however, the

1. I use the terms Native Americans, First Nations, and indigenous aware of their respective political history. In this article, “indigenous” refers to First Peoples generally, while First Nations or Aboriginals are the preferred terms in Canada, and Native Americans or American Indians are more prevalent in the United States.

young woman interrogatively returns the audience's gaze and disrupts the usual one-sidedness of museum encounters with indigenous bodies. The image is striking: the past, its ancient mask nestled in the young woman's womb, seems alive, rooted in the present. Moving slowly, the performer places the mask over her face; her body progressively becomes a surrogate of ancient gestures. A temporally blurred image breaks through: the old Mayan figure seems to materialize and speak through the body of a living person. The image is fleeting but at that moment in the 2010 production of *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* by the Montreal-based company Ondinnok, the masked woman exists suspended across time and geographical boundaries. She is past and present, herself and other, and her body bridges the divisive borders imposed on indigenous communities by colonial powers.²

Staged in 2010 at Montreal's *Présence Autochtone/First Peoples' Festival*, Ondinnok's adaptation of the Mayan dance drama *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi*, translated into French by Alain Breton, was an unsettling experience: a moment of cartographical and temporal collisions that revealed oft-buried narratives. The encounter between a pre-conquest text and contemporary indigenous performers stands as one of these collisions. Indeed, the play dramatizes a moment when Mayan nations were sovereign and as yet untouched by the Europeans. The same cannot be said for the unique cast of indigenous performers from across the Americas assembled by director Yves Sioui Durand and choreographer Patricia Iraola for this adaptation of the Mayan play. These performers and the communities from which they stem belong to a moment of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o might call "post-colonial colonialism" (2012:50). Thiong'o destabilizes the term "postcolonial" as a settled marker and writes: "Is the colonial period that follows the act of colonialism also postcolonial? Can you then have postcolonial colonialism?" (50). This unresolved term aptly describes the situation of many indigenous populations of the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand who "never went through an independence stage" and struggle with ongoing internal colonialism in countries that generally portray themselves as postcolonial (50). Coming from countries now called Canada, Guatemala, and Chile, the artists in Ondinnok's production articulate their identities against settler-state borders, policies, and institutions that remain colonialist at their core.

The text of *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* and the complicated ways in which it was transmitted permeated Ondinnok's production, creating a second collision, occurring this time between the text and its context. While the script of *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* is unmarked by the horrors of the conquest, its transmission history is marked by colonial censorship and the devaluation of Mayan culture. The play has gone through a complex performance cycle since the conquest, lying dormant as a result of Spanish Catholic colonial authorities' repression or, more recently, during Guatemala's Civil War (1960–1996), which greatly affected the region of Rabinal, and reemerging during periods of relative political stability.³

2. *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi*. Coproduction of Les Productions Ondinnok and Festival Présence Autochtone. Directed by Yves Sioui Durand. Choreographed by Patricia Iraola. Cast: Charles Bender, Marco Collin, Nicoletta Dolce, Yves Sioui Durand, Hélène Ducharme, Patricia Iraola, Catherine Joncas, Lara Kramer, Mireya Bayancela Ordóñez, Rodrigo Ramis, Leticia Vera, José León Coloch Garniga, and José Manuel Coloch Xolop.

3. Ondinnok's adaptation marked a new transnational cycle in the play's long history: it constituted the first adaptation of the play and the second time the play traveled outside of Guatemala. Excerpts of Tedlock's translation

Figure 1. (previous page) Three masked performers commune with ritual objects during an interlude of "divinatory theatre." From left: Lara Kramer, Leticia Vera, and Patricia Iraola in Ondinnok's Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi (18–27 June 2010), directed by Yves Sioui Durand at Montreal's Excentris. (Photo by Martine Doyon)

Julie Burelle is Assistant Professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of California, San Diego. Her research focuses on how First Nations sovereignty, cultural identity, and nationhood are negotiated through performances in the particular context of Quebec. jburelle@ucsd.edu

Ondinnok's adaptation echoed the play's cyclical history in the overarching corrective gesture it sought to perform: throughout the performance, and at times independently of the play's storyline, in interludes of what Sioui Durand calls "divinatory theatre." During these interludes, performers halted the performance of the Mayan play and, as one performer read excerpts of Mayan divinatory texts—the *Popol Vuh* and the *Chilam Balam* from the region of Chumayel—performers aided by ritual objects imbued with the spirits of ancestors such as bones and rocks, symbolically unearthed ancestral figures, celebrated and mourned them, and finally laid them to rest. Together, the perform-

ers enacted a form of repatriation, an embodied response to the material and cultural pillaging as well as the redrawing of borderlines that both have scarred indigenous landscapes since the conquest. *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* became a ritualized performance of "surrogation" (Roach 1996:36): the actors stood in for ancestors and became vehicles through which the victims of the genocide against indigenous populations of the Americas could be repatriated, remembered, and mourned. The performers achieved these regenerative gestures when they channeled and rendered visible the characters of the Mayan play and, more broadly, when they brought forth unnamed ancestral figures for which they acted as mediators and stewards onstage. This happened through the performers' transformative mask work and through their intimate communing with ritual objects. Attesting to the production's potent affective power, Alexandre Cadieux, a theatre critic for Montreal's *Le Devoir*, wrote: "[It] establishes a living contact between the present and the vestiges of a civilization massacred by mankind." To encounter this loss, even momentarily, left the critic with "an indescribable sensation of vertigo" (2010).⁴

Ondinnok's dramaturgical repatriation project and the moments of what I call "vertiginous consciousness" that it created find a striking parallel at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), where I currently do research in the fields of theatre and dance studies. Here, bones, the very real material remains of two indigenous bodies exhumed from the site of the chancellor's residence at UCSD in 1976, are at the center of an ongoing and bitter repatriation dispute between the Kumeyaay nation and a group of researchers from UCSD and other University of California (UC) campuses.⁵ The Kumeyaay, also known as the Tipai-Ipai or Diegueños, comprise 13 federally recognized culturally and linguistically related bands⁶ that have historically



Figure 2. A performer reads excerpts of Mayan divinatory texts. From left: Nicoletta Dolce, Catherine Joncas, and Hélène Ducharme in Ondinnok's *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* (18–27 June 2010), directed by Yves Sioui Durand at Montreal's *Excentris*. (Photo by Martine Doyon)

received a public reading in 1996 at the Miami Museum of Science. A version of the entire play was later codirected by Leandro Sotto and Sally Goers Fox at the University of Buffalo.

4. All translations from French to English are my own.

5. Out of respect for the ancestors found under the Chancellor's residence, no photos of the remains are featured in this article.

6. These federally recognized bands or tribes are: Barona, Inaja-Cosmit, La Posta, Manzanita, Mesa Grande, San Pasqual Band, Campo, Ewiiapaayp, Sycuan, Viejas, Capitan Grande, Jamul, and Iipay Nation of Santa Ysabel.



Figure 3. A performer observes a mask before performing the transformative work that will allow him to become Cawek for the night. From left: Rodrigo Ramis, Catherine Joncas, Don José León Coloch Garniga, Don José Manuel Coloch Xolop, and Leticia Vera in Ondinnok's Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi (18–27 June 2010), directed by Yves Sioui Durand at Montreal's Excentris. (Photo by Martine Doyon)

occupied parts of Baja California and the San Diego area.

Today the Kumeyaay are part of California's large Native American community.⁷ San Diego County itself has more reservations than any other county in the United States.⁸ Despite the size of the Native American population and the fact that UCSD stands on Kumeyaay ancestral land, Native Americans remain largely absent from the public sphere in San Diego and at UCSD (the university attracts and retains a dismally low number of Native American students). The dispute between UCSD and the Kumeyaay, which received both local and national print and television coverage, stands as an exception to this state of affairs.

Since 2006, the Kumeyaay have pressed UCSD for the

repatriation of the remains of those they regard as ancestors. The Kumeyaay want to put the remains to rest and give them a proper burial—to perform a literal as opposed to a dramaturgical repatriation. Unlike Ondinnok's work, which garnered generally favorable reviews, the Kumeyaay's repatriation project has been consistently resisted by a small but very vocal group of scientists from the UC system whose mediatized performance of opposition replays deep-seated colonial scenarios and betrays a profound resistance to indigenous epistemologies. In 2012, after rounds of failed negotiations, the Kumeyaay Cultural Repatriation Committee (KCRC)⁹ intensified its efforts, taking UCSD to Federal Court (Reynolds 2012). The KCRC argued then and still does today that by keeping the contested remains, UCSD violates the 2010 amendments to the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), a federal law designed to correct a long history of insensitive and unethical handling of indigenous bones and funerary objects.¹⁰

7. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2010 California and Oklahoma had the largest populations of self-identifying American Indians or Native Alaskans (723,225 and 482,760 respectively).

8. San Diego counts 18 federally recognized reservations separated along the following tribal groupings: Kumeyaay, Payoomkawichum, Kuipiaxchem, and Cahuilla. Riverside County (CA) and Sandoval County (NM) each count 12 federally recognized reservations, the second highest concentration in the country.

9. The KCRC is a designated tribal entity representing 12 Kumeyaay tribes on repatriation issues. These tribes are the Barona, Campo, Ewiiapaayp, Inaj-Cosmit, Jamul, La Posta, Manzanita, Mesa Grande, San Pasqual, Iipay Nation of Santa Ysabel, Sycuan, and Viejas. Repatriation takes place on the tribal land closest to the site(s) where the remains or cultural objects were found. In the UCSD case, it would be the La Posta band whose land is located in eastern San Diego County.

10. NAGPRA was amended in 2010 so that remains that were deemed "culturally unidentifiable," that is for which cultural affiliation proved difficult to establish, should be returned to the "Indian tribe or Native Hawaiian organization from whose tribal land, at the time of the excavation or removal, the human remains were removed" (DOI 1990).

The disinterment of the chancellor's house remains, as they are known, brings to the surface polarizing questions over whose explanatory power is privileged to name and understand the past. As Kwaaymi elder Carmen Lucas laments in the epigraph above, the two bodies unearthed at UCSD have surfaced in a vastly "different society" from the one in which they first existed, and they now occupy a contested position. Anthropologist Ann Kakaliouras (2012) proposes the notion of "repatriatable" to define remains that have the potential to be returned to a Native American tribe under NAGPRA. These "repatriatables," Kakaliouras argues, form an ontological and epistemological category of their own: they are in flux, forming "an uneasy bridge"—temporally, spatially, and affectively—and illuminating seemingly irreconcilable understandings of the world (2012:214). As repatriatables, the chancellor's house remains reveal such irreconcilable differences: on the one hand, the group of UC scientists cast the remains as commodities, but also as sources of knowledge for humanity—a category from which indigenous bodies have so often been excluded historically. On the other hand, the Kumeyaay position these remains as subjects and ancestors who deserve to be put to rest.

Leveraging Kakaliouras's anthropological concept to discuss theatre and performance, I argue that, as a nexus of competing narratives and worldviews, the repatriatable remains found at UCSD gain a wider performative potential. I expand the category of repatriatable to include remains and living bodies that do not fall under NAGPRA jurisdiction and can be repatriated in a more symbolic realm. These bodies or remains are what I call "performative repatriatables," and they embody what Joseph Roach calls "memory and counter-memory" (1996:20); that is, they render visible indigenous presence and epistemologies where they have been and continue to be violently erased.

Circum-Atlantic societies like the United States and Canada have invented themselves through the performance of "incomplete forgetting" (Roach 1996:6). Until 1990 when NAGPRA was implemented, anthropologists and archaeologists concerned with the Americas labored largely unquestioned within this economy of incomplete forgetting. These researchers unearthed indigenous remains only to erase them once again by denying them the dignity of a burial and by unilaterally imposing on them a Western reading that constitutes a further act of silencing (see Killion 2008). The remains found at UCSD act as uncomfortable reminders of these practices and of the genocidal project that sustained what Roach calls the "invention of a New World" (1996:36). These remains simultaneously act as incriminating witnesses, as evidence of the "destruction, dispossession, and scientific objectification of [indigenous] cultures and heritages" (Kakaliouras 2012:214), and perform as surrogates for departed Kumeyaay and other Native American ancestors, holding open a place in memory, a mourning space, however imperfect it may be. The chancellor's house remains may pre-date Conquest but in the dispute with UCSD they have come to stand in for the victims of subsequent genocidal campaigns against Native Americans leading to the creation of the United States.

Similarly, *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* dramatizes a precolonial Mayan society—but the play, as the living remains of an ancient practice many times buried and carefully unearthed, narrates the violent cultural erasure that sustained colonial projects. In both Ondinnok and the Kumeyaay's repatriation projects, performative repatriatables act as stand-ins for a past that they can never fully replace. The two bodies found at UCSD and Ondinnok's adaptation of *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* act as reminders of what existed, and illuminate by comparison the devastating losses suffered by indigenous communities.

Native American repatriation projects inevitably trigger anxiety in settler populations. Repatriation (or the attempt to repatriate) constitutes a disruption of dominant culture's explanatory power: it names and reclaims indigenous bodies as meaning makers and pushes them from a position of absence into the public sphere. In both Ondinnok's production and the Kumeyaay repatriation case, material remains of indigenous presence bring to the surface, and at times provoke a symbolic reenactment of the originary violence that created the so-called New World. While theatre affords Ondinnok's founding questions a more permissive explorative

arena, one in which radical reimaginings are perhaps still possible, similar investigations and repatriation performances are often met, outside of the artistic realm, with the powerful hydraulics of a civil society concerned with preserving the status quo. In other words, indigenous performative repatriatables can be productively wielded in the theatre space to illuminate loss and actively imagine redress in ways that seem currently impossible in the “real” world.

The Multiple Un-Burials of the Chancellor’s House Remains

In 1976, an archaeological team unearthed the remains of a man and a woman on UCSD’s cliff-top property in La Jolla, near San Diego, California. The team found the well-preserved and heretofore undisturbed remains lying together in what appeared to be a double burial. Through radiocarbon dating, scientists estimated the remains to be around 8,977 to 9,603 years old, making them among the oldest found in the Americas (Tuzin 2007:1). The site from which the remains were removed houses the university chancellor’s official residence, a 1950s rambling adobe home called University House. It is well known that the residence and parts of neighboring La Jolla sit atop a Native American burial site known to the Kumeyaay as Skeleton Hill (Larson 2008:1).¹¹

After their excavation in 1976, the remains were stored in various institutions until 2006 when the Kumeyaay demanded their repatriation. Apparently, these successive custodianships took place without UCSD’s full approval or knowledge, and the remains left no paper trail after 1976 (Tuzin 2007:2). Furthermore, “[t]he remains ha[d] never been studied by UC San Diego faculty other than in connection with this repatriation process” (Matthews 2008:3). It is only when the KCRC petitioned for the repatriation and reinterment of the remains on reservation land that UCSD was forced to recognize its responsibility towards the remains in a process that unleashed passionate debate.

Why did bones that UCSD had apparently forgotten suddenly trigger such heated opposition? The dispute is a complex affair that pits three parties against one another: the Kumeyaay (KCRC); UCSD, which has oscillated since 2006 between favoring and denying repatriation; and a group of UC researchers who oppose both the Kumeyaay and the University (when it has favored repatriation), demanding that the remains be kept at UCSD for scientific purposes. All three parties have taken legal actions to resolve this standoff: the Kumeyaay filed the aforementioned complaint against UCSD in April 2012 and the researchers soon followed in an attempt to block repatriation.¹²

Of all three parties, the university’s performance has been the most ambivalent. In 2008, for example, the administration supported repatriation as “the wisest, most appropriate, and most respectful action to take at this point” (Matthews 2008:3). Despite its initial positive response, the university dragged its feet between 2008 and 2012, failing to return the remains to the Kumeyaay. These delays were largely due to disagreements among members of an internal community formed to advise the university regarding this NAGPRA case, and by strained communication between the university and the KCRC. Some facts complicate the university’s apparent goodwill and help explain its oscillating behavior vis-à-vis repatriation. University House is in dire need of renovation and any retrofitting work could unearth more remains and trigger further NAGPRA disputes. Kumeyaay tribal leaders have suggested that the university, weary of the ethical and public relations challenges attached to the cliff-top property and its buried residents, tried to “bargain repatriation of the skeletons for the Indians’ blessing on the

11. “Archaeologist Malcolm Rogers found 11 burials in 1929 and 1936; 6 burials were discovered in 1947 and 1948; 2 in 1949 by a Scripps ichthyologist; another in 1950 from under the patio area; and 6 more in 1956” (Larson 2008:6).

12. In May 2012, UCSD replied by asking the Southern District of California Court to dismiss both cases.

University House project” (Larson 2008:6). In other words, the university may have recast the chancellor’s house remains as bridging commodities that could be exchanged to guarantee the viability of an expansion project.

Meanwhile, the university faced internal pressure from a small group of its own researchers who oppose repatriation. These researchers—UCSD’s Margaret Schoeninger (who served on the internal advisory committee), UC Berkeley’s Timothy White, and UC Davis’s Robert Bettinger—have steadfastly rejected the Kumeyaay’s claim of affiliation to the remains. The professors performed their opposition on various stages such as high-profile scientific journals and academic committees. These stages are far from neutral and have been and remain, in many cases, largely inaccessible to Native Americans.¹³ Although the three researchers have claimed to speak in the name of the entire UC community, a dissenting group within the university—with Professor Ross Frank¹⁴ as one of its leaders—has questioned the researchers’ interpretation of the data. The three researchers have repeatedly stated: “There is insufficient evidence to support the conclusion that the Kumeyaay are descended from the people who were buried at the site” (White et al. v. UCSD et al. 2012:5). In fact, the researchers assert that the remains fail to even “meet the legal definition of ‘Native American’ under NAGPRA” (5). Deploying a narrow reading of the Act, the researchers maintain that the remains are in fact not Native American at all, and that as a result, the remains should not be returned to the Kumeyaay since they were not subject to NAGPRA in the first place (White et al. v. UCSD et al. 2013:2). In their lawsuit, the researchers recast the contested remains as “early humans” or “New World remains” (2). In a press interview, James McMannis, the researchers’ lawyer, added dismissively: “the idea that we’re going to turn this incredible treasure over to some local tribe because they think it’s grandma’s bones is crazy” (in Flynn 2012).

Unearthing the Dead, Burying the Past?

In their campaign to prevent repatriation, the UC researchers are performing a well-rehearsed colonial scenario that has served to (re)write and (re)name an entire continent. Having “discovered” the remains, the UC researchers position themselves as experts on indigenous matter and authenticity.¹⁵ They argue that they alone can legitimately claim knowledge of and assign meaning to these unearthed bodies. Michel de Certeau writes: “The Conqueror will write the body of the other and trace their own history [...] *This is writing that conquers*. It will use the New World as if it were a blank ‘savage’ space on which Western desire will be written” (1992:xxv). De Certeau describes here the pervasive nature of colonial rewriting, a process that renames land, dismantles community structures, and imposes borders—the reservations stand as violent examples of the ongoing nature of this remapping. The same colonial rewriting flattens richly diverse sovereign nations into one people, the “Indians.” The “body of the other” on which history is forcefully written includes not only the living but, as the Kumeyaay repatriation dispute clearly demonstrates, the dead, the long buried, the distant ancestors whose presence and history constitute a perpetual, and often more ancient and ancestral counternarrative to the conqueror’s rewriting.

In his oft-cited *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach discusses the evocative and often threatening nature of bodies—bodies that come to stand for an entire community and its history,

13. There was, for example, no Native American on the ad hoc academic committee assembled by UCSD to respond to the Kumeyaay’s repatriation demand.

14. Ross Frank, a professor in the Ethnic Studies Department at UCSD whose research focuses on the First Peoples of the Southwest, has served on the UCSD advisory committee on the chancellor’s house repatriation case and has consistently advocated for repatriation to the Kumeyaay.

15. See Vine Deloria Jr.’s *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969), Kevin Bruyneel’s *The Third Space of Sovereignty* (2007), and Audra Simpson’s *Mohawk Interruptus* (2014).



Figure 4. Using a feather, a performer dances during an interlude of divinatory theatre. From left: Don José Manuel Coloch Xolop and Patricia Iraola in *Ondinnok's Xajoj Tun Rabin'al Achi* (18–27 June 2010), directed by Yves Sioui Durand at Montreal's *Excentris*. (Photo by Martine Doyon)

and bodies that contradict hegemonic narratives. Roach describes surrogation as the process through which a community regenerates and reimagines itself by investing symbolic and associative power to performed effigies. These effigies, he writes, are “fabricated by human bodies and the associations they invoke,” and while living bodies can stand in as performed effigies, “so can corpses” (1996:36). For colonial projects that depend for their coherence on portraying land as a blank savage space ready for the taking, the dead others act as haunting effigies, as uncomfortable reminders of the fragility of the colonial discursive enterprise. These effigies interrupt the conqueror’s performance of

continuity and legitimacy and thus must be reburied (symbolically or literally) or their evocative power must be otherwise deflected.

The chancellor’s house remains illuminate implicit and disturbing links between genocide and current settler-states’ discourses of legitimacy. Again, the remains predate the conquest: the man and woman at the heart of this dispute did not die in the violent campaigns led by the United States against Native Americans. However, their excavation and the possibility of their return to a community bring to the surface questions surrounding ownership and restoration. As effigies or stand-ins for the following generations of Native Americans who did live and die under colonial regimes, the remains unearth violence and genocide; the remains are a bridge through which the dead who came after them can also be brought home. The remains have the power to trigger intolerable yet invaluable moments of vertiginous consciousness in the settler community.

In *Red, White & Black*, Frank Wilderson helps us understand the nature of these moments of vertiginous consciousness. He argues that sovereignty constitutes one of the modalities of Native Americans’ grammar of suffering, one that can be articulated in terms of repair and redress, ideas that are comprehensible to today’s civil society. Indeed, the tremendous territorial and sovereignty losses suffered by Native Americans can be marked on maps, and restitution, although improbable, is within the realm of the imaginable. However, for Wilderson, civil society cannot imagine, even less accommodate a form of redress for genocide, the second modality of Native Americans’ grammar of suffering. More importantly, he argues that civil society cannot tolerate the effigies of genocidal victims. These effigies’ evocative power poses too great a threat to civil society’s ethical coherence. The erasure of memory, understood as a living repository of cultures, languages, lineages, and filiations, constitutes a loss so great, so impossible to fathom, that it becomes impossible to grieve or redress. It constitutes a loss of temporality itself, and such a loss is ungrievable. How, indeed, does one mourn the millions of Native Americans dead as a result of colonization? How does one mourn those who could have been? What does it mean to be ungrieved and ungrievable? These are the questions that surfaced alongside the chancellor’s house remains when the Kumeyaay brought them to public attention.

The UC researchers' response to the Kumeyaay exemplifies what Wilderson describes as civil society's incapacity to tolerate reminders of Native American genocide. This incapacity is widespread. Ward Churchill notes that discourses that deny the genocidal campaigns against Native Americans are found "in more-or-less equal parts at all points on the ideological compass of the dominant society" (2001:4). Dominant society, if it is to retain its ethical coherence, cannot recognize the spatial and temporal obliteration of Native Americans. To admit the foundational role of genocide in the settling of North America is to admit all non-native North Americans—excepting the slaves who were brought here against their will—are part of an unethical societal and national project. The genocide of indigenous populations haunts the American national narrative. Any affirmation of indigenous sovereignty, kinship, and freedom in settler states is therefore necessarily "inhabited by the forgetting of [their] condition of possibility" and haunted by their "burial, by the violence of forgetting" (Lowe 2006:206).

These authors help us understand the UC researchers' seemingly visceral reaction towards the Kumeyaay. If settler states maintain their coherence through careful performances of forgetting, then burial sites and archaeological digs offer a rich symbolic ground for these performances to be reenacted. Settlers unearth the past and cast remains as bridges with a past that they alone can "identify," that is, name. The Kumeyaay's repatriation demand interrupts this economy of forgetting and challenges this performance of legitimacy. It complicates the assumption that excavation necessarily leads to visibility and a better understanding of a past people. In other words, the Kumeyaay interrupt the narrative of a benevolent, scientific understanding that often surrounds the excavation of human remains. The Kumeyaay demand that everyone look at archaeological digs as performances that reinscribe a violent colonial activity.

Symbolically, the KCRC repatriation project performed a second unearthing of the chancellor's house skeletons, one that allowed objectified remains to reintegrate into a human lineage and to stand in for subsequent generations of Native Americans. When they brought the remains from hidden museum storage spaces into the public eye, the Kumeyaay asked that the signifying power of the remains finally be acknowledged. The KCRC's intervention effectively recast the remains as performative repatriables, and forced discussions that uncomfortably illuminated past and present violence towards indigenous bodies. The Kumeyaay's insistence on presenting the remains as ancestors, as links between today's tribes and their ancestral land, revealed an ontological gap between a large segment of the Western academic world and the Kumeyaay's ways of understanding the world.

The Kumeyaay's claim of affiliation constitutes an interruption of colonial remappings at more than one level. Indeed, if space and bodies were remapped by colonial powers, time was similarly reimagined through the detemporalization of indigenous populations. Discursively placed in what Kevin Bruyneel calls "colonial time," indigenous people were remapped by settler-colonial powers as out of time, their presence closely linked with untenable demands of authenticity that deny Native Americans a contemporary presence and the possibility to traverse temporal boundaries and articulate an identity in the "now" (Bruyneel 2007). This remapping of Native American temporality performs a radical gesture of closure: it positions Native Americans as barren, incapable of renewal, imagining them without credible successors, and, as is the case for the chancellor's house remains, without links to a distant past. When the Kumeyaay speak of the remains as their ancestors and position the tribe as the steward of the remains, they are actively performing a counter-mapping of time and space. They perform continuity and argue that they are a community with links to the past, a community that can renew itself through surrogation.

With the remains suddenly charged with such evocative power, the battle over repatriation became loaded, especially for the small group of UC researchers opposed to KCRC's claim. The stakes were suddenly higher than repatriation: they had to do with ownership of the truth. The UC researchers' multifaceted performance in open letters to high-impact scientific journals such as *Science* and *Nature* (see for example Lawler 2010, Dalton 2009, and Schoeninger et al.

2011), testimonies before the UC-wide Advisory Group on Cultural Repatriation of Human Remains and Cultural Items, legal briefs, and press interviews merits attention. Ironically, the researchers were aided in their opposition campaign by NAGPRA, the very law that was supposed to facilitate repatriation.

When the KCRC first contacted UCSD in 2006, NAGPRA stipulated that tribes, in order to repatriate, had to demonstrate a cultural affiliation with the remains or objects.¹⁶ Many Native American tribes, having been displaced or otherwise uprooted by settler-state policies, found it difficult to provide the robust evidence demanded by NAGPRA. Oral history, the main historical archive for many native communities, often did not persuade NAGPRA committees. The law was amended in 2010 so that the tribes historically closest to the territories in which remains were found could be recognized as culturally affiliated. More importantly, the repatriation process often illuminated seemingly irreconcilable views of the world. The very understanding of bones, for example, of what they mean as a category of “things”—the mere “biological husks of a once living but now dead being” for the West, versus the embodiment of ancestors for the Kumeyaay—revealed profoundly divergent epistemes (Kakaliouras 2012:213). Unsurprisingly, tribes found that anthropologists, who had authoritatively and often unilaterally told the story of Native North Americans, did not grant these epistemes equal status.

This kind of devaluation is clearly at work in the UC researchers’ various performances. The researchers cast the Kumeyaay as anti-science, ignoring the tribe’s collaboration with San Diego State University’s Dr. Arion Mayes, who performed noninvasive investigative analysis on the remains in ways that did not desecrate the bones (Larson 2008:5). The UC researchers conveniently ignored the KCRC’s attempts to render scientific testing more respectful of the Kumeyaay’s role as custodians of the dead. Instead, the researchers portrayed the tribe as “ideology driven” (Schoeninger et al. 2011:916). Ironically, the UC scientists never questioned the very bias that drives their own campaign against repatriation, namely their conviction that science itself is non-ideological, that academic work somehow exists outside of structures of power that reinforce hegemonic narratives.

In a letter published in *Science* in May 2011, Bettinger, White, and Schoeninger along with two other colleagues write: “[T]he University of California favors the ideology of a local American Indian group over the legitimacy of science [...] The potential loss of the La Jolla skeletons would have a profoundly negative impact on our knowledge of the peopling of the Americas” (2011:916). The researchers perform here an interesting *pas de deux* that simultaneously recognizes and denies the power of the chancellor’s house remains: they cast the remains as universal patrimony, their DNA as a source of knowledge that could benefit all. To prevent research, they argue, would deny humanity a source of precious knowledge. The researchers interestingly fold the Kumeyaay into the “we” of a universal humanity while simultaneously denying the tribe any relation to and therefore power over the remains. The researchers also conveniently ignore the fact that humanity’s patrimony, understood in the letter to *Science* as Western scientific knowledge, cannot be separated from violence perpetrated against Native American and other racialized bodies. The very creation of the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act is testimony to this abuse. The collected bodies of Native Americans—silenced and dehumanized—still crowd museums and research institutes. Museological “collections” of human remains, as Rebecca Tillett argues, cannot be uncoupled from “notions of ownership inherent within the concept of slavery” (2005:86). Similarly, there are “implicit and disturbing links between the collection of human remains and the ‘souvenirs’ taken during actual acts of genocide against Native peoples in the United States” (86).

16. Under NAGPRA, cultural affiliation is “established when the preponderance of the evidence—based on geographical, kinship, biological, archeological, linguistic, folklore, oral tradition, historical evidence, or other information or expert opinion—reasonably leads to such a conclusion” (DOI 1990).

At the moment of writing this article (in May 2014), the chancellor's house remains were still in UCSD's custody and the three lawsuits have brought negotiations to a halt. Subsequently, on 27 August 2014, the Northern District of California's Ninth Circuit Court of Appeal dismissed the challenge brought forth by White, Schoeninger, and Bettinger, as to whether or not the remains qualified as Native Americans (White et al. v. UCSD et al. 2014:7). While this decision effectively re-opens the door for repatriation, it is unclear yet if the UC researchers will appeal this decision as they have in the past.

Repatriation projects are met differently in the artistic realm, an area of exploration where destabilizing narratives and forms of repatriation that are symbolic in nature have the potential to provoke productive encounters between spectators and indigenous performers.

Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi

Text and Context

Ondinnok could not have chosen a more evocative play to explore repatriation than *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi*, a 15th-century Mayan court drama.¹⁷ Indeed, the play's performance history is a fascinating account of what Gerald Vizenor calls "survivance": "More than survival, more than endurance or mere response; survivance is an active presence [...] an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry" (2000:15). This active, obstinate presence is woven into *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* both in the epistemological framework of the play-text and in its production history. *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* is relatively unknown outside of Guatemala where the dance drama ritual—its 3,000 verses and choreography, which deploys established geometrical patterns that symbolically establish the characters as belonging to the same world (Tedlock 2003:14)—is carefully preserved in San Pablo Rabinal by the ensemble El Grupo Danza Drama Rabinal Achi, led by José León Coloch Garniga, the current holder of the ritual.¹⁸ The pre-conquest play has defied centuries of colonial censorship and appropriation as well as Guatemala's more recent bloody armed conflicts. At times the play was performed and transmitted clandestinely (Breton 2007:3).

The play-text merits careful attention because it uniquely dramatizes a time when Mayan civilization existed un-trampled by Europeans. *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi*'s text and highly stylized performance technique is difficult, impenetrable even, for contemporary audiences regardless of their cultural backgrounds. Indeed, the dance drama's performance features masks and costumes that render the protagonists almost identical, and nonrealist movements such as counterclockwise promenades in the performance space that mark the 260 days of the Mayan divinatory theatre (Zarrilli et al. 2006:70). The text itself is infused with references to Mayan cosmology and collapses several centuries of historical events into episodes that are neither organized chronologically nor contextualized in the play. Historically spoken and danced to the sound of trumpets (*tun*), the play dramatizes the trial of Cawek, a warrior from a neighboring nation accused of treason by the people of Rabinal. In this trial, Cawek and his judge, the Man of Rabinal, are

17. Little is known about *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi*'s author or authors, or its date of composition. It belongs to a genre described as "warrior dances whose pre-Hispanic origins are undeniable," and that "still held an important place in the indigenous ceremonies at the beginning of the colonial period" (Breton 2007:3). While other warrior dances have been lost, *Rabinal* survived almost intact for reasons that have not yet been fully established.

18. In 1940, the family acquired a copy of the *Pérez Manuscript*, a transcription of the play in the Quiche language dating from 1913. Alain Breton argues that this copy of the *Pérez Manuscript* is most likely a copy of an earlier manuscript by Bartolo Sis, "itself a part on an uninterrupted series of transcriptions going back to the sixteenth century" (2007:16). The Xolop family has used the manuscript along with oral transmission to pass on the play from one generation to the next. Garniga's son, José Manuel Coloch Xolop, now performs alongside his father. Since 2005 when *Rabinal Achi* was listed by UNESCO as part of the list of masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage of humanity, the family has been pressured by various levels of government to relinquish their stewardship of the manuscript.

not positioned as ontologically opposed but as two continuous forces whose tension is necessary to the world's equilibrium—Mayan epistemology was unmarked by Christianity's notions of absolute good and evil (Tedlock 2003:250). *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* distills many generations of Mayan stories, practices, and beliefs, functioning as a repository of a precolonial epoch of Mayan sovereignty.

The play brings to life a trial and, as Dennis Tedlock, who translated the text to the English language, argues, “[t]he representation of Cawek’s death at the hands of his captors requires a major revision of received notions about the role of human sacrifice in ancient Mesoamerica” (2003:4). Indeed, conveniently forgetting their own use of capital punishment and the violence of the Inquisition, the colonizers, in their campaign to denigrate Mayan religion, culture, and sovereignty, labored to reframe Mayan sacrifices as a barbaric custom. *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* contradicts this reductive assertion by presenting the sacrifice of Cawek as the legitimate execution of a prisoner tried and found guilty by his peers of dread offenses.

It comes as no surprise that a play that portrays a sovereign nation applying justice within its own coherent cosmological and epistemological frameworks provoked the ire of colonial and religious authorities. After the conquest, these forces regularly banned the play, arguing that it would incite human sacrifices, rebellion, and chaos (Tedlock 2003:5). The parallel between this colonial tactic and the campaign of epistemological devaluation currently led by UC researchers is disturbing. In a rhetorical move that echoes colonial and religious authorities, the UC researchers present science as the only valid way to understand the remains unearthed on the UCSD campus and frame the Kumeyaay’s position as “anti-science.” The researchers invoke the menace repatriation poses to “our” knowledge and the loss of “our” scientific patrimony.

The Mayans, like the Kumeyaay, responded to this colonial devaluation after the conquest in ingenious ways. For one thing, they removed from *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* “all but the outlines of the original religious content from public view,” assigning it instead to the Road Guide (*K’amol B’e*), “a native priest-shaman who does most of his work behind the walls of houses and on mountaintops” (Tedlock 2003:5). Importantly, it is the performance strategies, and not the text itself, or the pre-Conquest world it encapsulates, that the Mayans altered to ensure the play’s survivance. Many Mayan texts have been markedly altered by the conquest; that is, their content has been updated to include the episode of contact, often as a way to establish a genealogy of indigenous presence in a given territory that could then be deployed as a legitimizing tool to assert territorial rights before colonial rule (see for example *Popol Vuh* [Tedlock (1985) 1996] or *Título de los Señores de Totonicapán* [Goetz et al. 1974]).

For its part, the text of *Rabinal Achi* does not attempt to draw an organized genealogy of the Quiche and Rabinal, the respective nations of Cawek and his opponent, and instead, as previously noted, the play collapses historical events and anecdotes from many centuries into a single timeframe. Breton writes, “even though it was transcribed into Latin characters during the colonial period, [the play] suffers from no European influence. Not one word, not one phrase, not the slightest allusion betrays the presence of an intervention on the path of Hispanization or conversion” (2007:4–5). Breton notes that for reasons that are not fully understood, *Rabinal* bears no trace of updating and “the substance of the tale goes back to the pre-Hispanic period” (4). It appears that Mayan dramatists acted as stewards of the play and chose to bury its meaning and render it opaque to the uninitiated, rather than alter it. The performance tactics—the deployment of the Road Guide character, for example—and structure of the play thus contain layers of resistance and ingenious survivance tactics aimed at protecting and preserving indigenous knowledge and worldviews. Ondinnok adopted similar tactics in its adaptation of the play.

Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi, the text and its performance tradition (documented by Breton [2007], Tedlock [2003], and others), constitutes a performative repatriable. The text of *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi*, like the chancellor’s house remains, transmits cultural, historical, and cosmological knowledge at odds with Western cosmologies. The play, like the bones found in La Jolla, is

understood by the Mayans not as an archival remnant of the past, the shell of a world that once was, but as a living repertoire, as Diana Taylor's work argues, connecting the past to the present (Taylor 2003:xvii). It constitutes knowledge that is "embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert—and all the more meaningful because of its refusal to be spelled out" (Conquergood 2002:146).

Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi is at its core a play-ritual that protects the region of Rabinal from an ancient curse laid on it by Cawek. When the play is performed now, it is preceded by preparatory rituals during which the Road Guide invites the spirits of both Cawek and his captors to become visible for a day. On the day of the performance, as they enact Cawek's trial, the actors are visited by the spirits of these ancestors. In his account of a 1998 performance of the play in San Pablo Rabinal, Tedlock describes how the performers, aided by the sound of the trumpets, bring "*Rabinal Achi* into the present world from another one—a prior world, yes, but also a parallel one, in the sense that it is always there" (2003:14).

This coupling of theatrical ritual and regeneration is central to Ondinnok's work. Ondinnok, a First Nations theatre company founded in 1985 and based in Montreal, defines its theatre as an attempt to "re-conquer [First Nations'] imaginary" and "to repatriate a memory in order to unleash a future" (Ondinnok 2014). Like the Kumeyaay, Ondinnok understands itself as a steward of indigenous cultural capital, and as such, is invested in repatriating, honoring, and reimagining First Nations heritage. The company, whose Huron-Wendat name means "a healing ritual that reveals the secret longing of the soul," performs what Roach calls a "dramaturgy of cultural renewal" (Ondinnok 2014; Roach 1996:136).



Figure 5. A performer brandishes a bone while another carries a fellow performer on his back during an interlude of divinatory theatre. From left: Lara Kramer, Charles Bender, Patricia Iraola and José Manuel Coloch Xolop (back) in Ondinnok's *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* (18–27 June 2010), directed by Yves Sioui Durand at Montreal's Excentris. (Photo by Martine Doyon)



Figure 6. Performers in the midst of transformative mask work move toward shamanic capes and hats. From left: Charles Bender and Hélène Ducharme in Ondinnok's *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* (18–27 June 2010), directed by Yves Sioui Durand at Montreal's *Excentris*. (Photo by Martine Doyon)

Unlike some of Ondinnok's past productions¹⁹ in which First Nations' loss was explored explicitly, colonial trauma remained unnamed onstage in *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi*. While the pre-conquest play text does not refer to colonial violence and trauma onstage, Ondinnok's production was, at its core, a repatriation project. The production explored traumatic loss in complex shades of longing and mourning but these embodied meditations often took place outside of the text itself, in the performance strategies devised by director Yves Sioui Durand and in the interludes of divinatory theatre that he added to the Mayan play. Performers then interrupted the course of the Mayan play and performed transformative mask work and other communing gestures onstage, aided by excerpts of Mayan divinatory texts. The indigenous performers never spoke directly of loss, violence, or dispossession. Instead, they performed gestures of communion with distant ancestors by retelling their story and by becoming vessels of remembrance.

Ondinnok's *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi*

Spectators slowly find their seats at Montreal's *Excentris*, a sleek performance space located downtown. On the proscenium stage, a trickster figure (Yves Sioui Durand) sleeps on one of the three benches upstage. His face and the back of his head are covered with devil-like red masks and a colorful headdress is perched on his head. The sleeping trickster's long velvet robe decorated with gold is reminiscent of the garb worn by Spanish Conquistadors, and the long blond tresses that emerge from his headdress mark this devil figure as European. The central bench on which he sleeps peacefully is carved with Mayan iconography. The other benches, simpler in design, are each adorned with three masks whose timeless visages face the audience. Eight fist-size rocks create a central path leading downstage from the central bench.

The masked trickster slowly emerges from sleep, faces the audience, and announces in a resounding omnipotent voice: "Lumières!" (lights). As the stage becomes illuminated, the

19. Ondinnok's *Le Porteur des peines du monde* (1985–95), *Hamlet le Malécite* (2004), or *Contes d'un Indien urbain* (2006), for example.

trickster breaks into an incongruous jig while the other performers join him onstage accompanied by the thunderous sounds of Tibetan horns. José León Coloch Garniga and his son José Manuel Coloch Xolop, the official holders of the *Rabinal Achi* ritual in Guatemala, enter first. Dressed in the traditional costumes and masks in which they perform the play-ritual in San Pablo Rabinal and each holding a cymbal and a large animal bone, the two men sit on the central bench next to two women wearing long dresses (Catherine Joncas and Leticia Vera).

As the trickster crosses the stage from stage right to stage left, dragging a heavy burden consisting of a deer's skull and antlers, the eight other performers crawl onstage, each toward one of the rocks that form the central pathway. Once there, each performer delicately lifts the rock to his or her abdomen and then to the sky. Rocks play a central role in a number of indigenous rituals, and in many sweat lodges they are referred to as "grandfathers." Here, the rocks play a similar role symbolizing ancestors and a connection to the past. This gesture of communion between performers and ancestors, coupled with the trickster's dragging of material remains, anchors the evening's performance in a larger temporal frame of remembrance and announces Ondinnok's repatriation gesture.

Once all the performers have connected with their respective rock or ancestor, they come down off the front of the stage and form a semicircle in front of the audience. Each performer kneels and places his or her rock back on the stage to mark the periphery of this ritual performance space. A moment of silent suspension and marked expectation follows this opening sequence. Before long, one of the performers hoists him- or herself onstage, rock in hand. This single performer walks the perimeter of the stage and then, as if responding to an impulse, heads toward one of the masks, placing his or her rock at the foot of the bench, in front of the mask. Only then does the performer lift the mask, hold it up to his or her abdomen and, finally, put it on. This evocative transfer between the rock or ancestor and the mask that renders this ancestor visible establishes a bridge between past and present, a way to communicate with and be visited by ancestors. Sioui Durand's rehearsal techniques work specifically on developing the actors' capacity to recognize and be attuned to these impulses or summonings and to respond to them onstage.



Figure 7. The trickster sets the stage for the performance. Yves Sioui Durand in Ondinnok's Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi (18–27 June 2010), directed by Yves Sioui Durand at Montreal's Excentris. (Photo by Martine Doyon)



Figure 8. A masked performer embodies all the characters of Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi during the trickster's prologue. From left: Catherine Joncas, Don José León Coloch Garniga, Don José Manuel Coloch Xolop, Leticia Vera, and Rodrigo Ramis in Ondinnok's Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi (18–27 June 2010), directed by Yves Sioui Durand at Montreal's Excentris. (Photo by Martine Doyon)

This temporal connection is further established by the prologue that follows in which the trickster introduces the characters and sets the stage for *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi*. As the trickster speaks, the masked performer embodies the characters of the play one by one, bringing them to life onstage. That Sioui Durand chose to have the prologue spoken by the trickster character rather than by one of the other performers (as it would be in Guatemala) is important. Deploying symbols and religious markers of the European Conquerors, the trickster plays God, demands light, gives life to characters, and creates the world of the play. He then turns these symbols around by bringing to life a play that so clearly contests the worldview of the

conquest, and by participating in a ritual that commemorates and celebrates indigenous communities. With the trickster, Sioui Durand inscribes the play, the story it tells, and its adaptation in Montreal within the larger context of the conquest and colonization, rendering visible for the audience the forces against which both this Mayan play and, importantly, all of its performers, have had to position themselves since the conquest.

At the end of the prologue, the performer removes the mask, his or her entire body and facial expression now charged with Cawek's energy, and launches into the captive's first monologue, marking the beginning of Cawek's trial. This is a pivotal moment in Ondinnok's adaptation: contrary to how the play is performed in Guatemala, the Ondinnok performer who climbs onstage and becomes Cawek is different every night. As Sioui Durand explains: "Every night, one performer is summoned by the ancestors to embody Cawek. In turn, when the story has been told, one of the performers is chosen to play the sacrifice victim" (Sioui Durand 2010). Cawek, then, is portrayed by at least two actors each night, and the actors can be men or women. Charles Bender and Nicoletta Dolce played Cawek on the night I saw the play, but archival footage shows that Hélène Ducharme, Patricia Iraola, and Rodrigo Ramis were Cawek on other nights. The only characters that are played by the same actors every night are the Man of Rabinal and Lord Five Thunders, performed in the Quiche language by José León Coloch Garniga and his son José Manuel Coloch Xolop, and the Man of Rabinal's wife, played by Catherine Joncas. These are Cawek's main interlocutors and the play consists mostly of alternating monologues between Cawek and his captors, in which Cawek's crime is recalled, his motivation questioned, and his fate slowly sealed. The rest of the performers rearrange themselves around the chosen Cawek every night with great fluidity, becoming the Ixq Mun (servant), the silent Eagle and Jaguar warriors, or acting as a chorus echoing Cawek's hallucinations when he drinks the potions his captors give him as part of his trial.

For his adaptation, Sioui Durand cut significant portions of the original text and focused on key moments in Cawek's trial when the warrior journeyed from anger and defiance to a quiet yet mournful contemplation of his imminent death. In one instance, Cawek meditates at length



Figure 9. Cawek surrounded by his captors who give him hallucinatory potions. From left: Don José León Coloch Garniga, Catherine Joncas, Patricia Iraola, Don José Manuel Coloch Xolop, and Charles Bender in *Ondinnok's Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* (18–27 June 2010), directed by Yves Sioui Durand at Montreal's *Excentris*. (Photo by Martine Doyon)

on the link between his identity and his impending death by beheading. He talks about his own head and face in relation to his forebears, appealing to a deeper sense of community that he fears will be lost after his execution. Moments before his beheading, Cawek contemplates a round drinking vessel and asks: “‘Could this be the skull of my grandfather? Could this be the skull of my father?’ He then imagines that his own head will become a work of some kind, an artifact” (Tedlock 2003:151). As noted by Tedlock, “[h]eads, and especially faces, have played a central role in Mayan notions of identity and personhood throughout history” (2003:146). The head and the face were closely linked to notions of kinship; the word for face belonged in fact to a semantic field related to species, filiation, and relationality. In other words, to show one’s face was to reveal one’s lineage, to divulge one’s affiliation to a community and a place.

Divinatory Theatre

Repatriation in the Theatre Space

This relationship between face and filiation is revisited by the actors who, like the young woman described in this article’s opening sequence, work with masks onstage during the interludes of divinatory theatre that Sioui Durand added to the original Mayan play. In these moments, the performers step away from the play and read passages of the *Popol Vuh* (1000–1697 CE), and the *Chilam Balam* from the region of Chumayel (17th–18th century), two foundational texts of the Mayan cosmology that contain creation myths, genealogies, and predictions based on the Mayan calendar. These interludes, seemingly unrelated to Cawek’s storyline, allow a performative repatriation to take place onstage. Accompanied by textual excerpts from these two genealogical and mythological texts, the actors, as explained by Sioui Durand, summoned by ancestors, rise and perform their communion with the masks that have called upon them. For instance, by putting on the ancestor’s mask—his face—the young woman in the opening sequence claims a complex lineage across time and space. At the end of the interlude, her

slow removal of the mask constitutes a form of becoming, the embodied articulation of what an indigenous presence both informed by the past and alive in the “now” might be.

Perhaps because he was keenly aware of the possible pitfalls of representation, Sioui Durand moved away from explicitness—that is, from transparent or mimetic representations—and towards a strategic use of opacity in *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi*. Ondinnok’s production powerfully acknowledged and mourned the trauma of broken communities, of ancestors lost in genocidal campaigns that accompanied the conquest and colonialism. It did not, however, offer trauma as the only lens through which the audience could apprehend indigenous bodies onstage. In refusing to perform or locate loss in an explicit way, Ondinnok strategically displaced the burden of representing trauma away from the indigenous performers—avoiding the reinscription of their bodies as sites of devastation.

In Ondinnok’s production, trauma and repatriation were performed in the interstices between the various elements of the event. The production carved a time apart during the prologue and the interludes of divinatory theatre, a temporal gap in which mourning and repatriation could take place. More specifically, moments of “vertiginous consciousness” occurred in the gap between actors and audience, the play and its historical context, and the story and the loss it elucidated. While the story of Cawek and the Man of Rabinal does not directly dramatize postcolonial loss, it relentlessly points to this trauma by showing what *was*, what existed *before* the advent of the colonial forces. This juxtaposition, I argue, elicits moments (even if only fleeting) of visceral clarity among audience members, a vertiginous and uncomfortable contemplation of the immensity of indigenous losses and the difficulty of mourning them. The play illuminates contemporary demands for sovereignty and self-governance based on indigenous models by dramatizing a moment in which Mayan epistemologies were the foundations of sovereign nations. The current state of affairs for indigenous communities acts as a point of comparison that is brought to mind for the audience by the events onstage. Cawek’s trial in which he is judged and sentenced by his peers and within his own value system stands in sharp contrast with the justice system faced by many indigenous people worldwide. The ancestors who are commemorated during the prologue and the interludes of divinatory theatre illuminate the ungrieved and ungrievable nature of colonial genocide. Ondinnok’s production created a challenging encounter between a play that dramatizes what *was* and the spectators’ awareness of what has taken place in indigenous communities since the 15th century and what now *is* for many indigenous communities.

Opacity as Repatriation

Though added by Sioui Durand, the interludes of divinatory theatre in Ondinnok’s production echo a practice that surrounds the performance of *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* in Guatemala. When the play is performed there, it is understood that the ghosts of the play’s characters visit the performers, allowing them to retell their stories, and a single actor performs each ghost-character. Actors perform one role for the entirety of the play. Yves Sioui Durand disrupted this performance mode in his production, destabilizing the symbiotic relationship between performers and their roles that not only shapes the performance in Guatemala but also usually rules Western realist theatre. By breaking Cawek’s part in two, Sioui Durand denied the audience a certain kind of narrative or even empathic identification, the emotional reward of following a character’s journey from beginning to end.

Throughout the performance, the cast of Ondinnok oscillated between acting as translators for their audience—providing a point of entry into the text—and leaving spectators in the uncomfortable position of outsiders. The unfixed production values certainly played a part in this estrangement: no musical or lighting effects were repeated; no narration or gesture rendered transparent how or why actors were “summoned” to play particular characters. Similarly, the actors performed in Mayan, French, English, and Spanish (with no translating), and the divinatory theatre interludes, while often symbolically rich, were at times impenetrable. In sum, the

production's demanding theatrical and ritualistic vocabulary often left the audience on the outside, viewing a performance they could not fully access. But this opacity was often deployed as a gesture of resistance, reappropriation, and healing, in much the way that, as Saidiya Hartman points out about the hidden subtexts of the songs and dances of slaves, opacity can be deployed as a form of resistance, a way to reclaim and preserve a sense of self (1997). Hartman argues that given the slave's lack of agency, opacity had no performative or transformative power. In the case of indigenous bodies, however, opacity can allow performers to redefine themselves outside of the colonial or victimizing gaze. Indeed, the production's opacity denied the audience the possibility to fold indigenous trauma into their own sense of guilt or discomfort. The production contested any reductive marking of indigenous bodies as sites of devastation, reclaiming instead the sense of being unmarked, whole, and complex.

The Kumeyaay's repatriation project deploys opacity in similar ways. The KCRC opposes any form of scientific testing that breaks the surface of the bone, claiming that this would desecrate the soul of the remains. Their claim is that these bones should remain whole and illegible to us, that there is something sacred in being opaque. Returning the remains to the ground is the only way to restore illegibility and opacity to these humans from the past. For this reason, this article features no photos of the bones found under the chancellor's residence.

In the case of Ondinnok's production, keeping the performers' bodies and certain aspects of the productions opaque, illegible, and unattainable was a way to deny the audience catharsis, the momentary purging that would enable them to return to the status quo once the play was over. The largely non-Native audience was certainly reminded at various times that this ritual was not intended for them, not meant to assuage their guilt towards the Native American population that constitutes for many—in Montreal as well as La Jolla—the “unknown other.”

Whether or not the production succeeded is up for debate. While a critic like Cadieux welcomed the production's opacity, others lamented it. The production frustrated critic Mélanie Grondin who called it “fascinating but hermetic”; she wondered why Ondinnok did not labor to render the meaning of the play-ritual more accessible (2010). Grondin's critique illuminates the assumption that visibility and legibility go hand-in-hand, that indigenous bodies should be transparently understandable to the settler majority. Such assumptions are not surprising given the settler-state's history of presenting itself as the “expert” on “Indians.” Laws like Canada's Indian Act (that continues to regulate who is and isn't Native American) are articulated around demands of complete transparency for Native American subjects. These standards of authenticity give the white majority the say over whose bodies count as “Indian.” When Ondinnok deploys opacity and illegibility onstage, it challenges this construction. Ondinnok recasts non-native audience members as *non*-experts, bringing them face-to-face with indigenous bodies that refuse reductive markings. But what if the audience refuses to be recast this way?

Repatriation and Colonial Agnosia

Ondinnok's repatriation project raises challenging questions about the limits of empathy when seemingly irreconcilable narratives shape a sense of self for audience members and performers. The Kumeyaay's repatriation project stages a similar encounter. How does one (or *can* one) witness a presence, a remapping or demand for repatriation that, in the reality it illuminates, threatens to disarticulate one's own self-definition? The current impasse at UCSD demonstrates the difficulty of this encounter where the settler state has yet to end structural discrimination against Native populations or make redress an integral part of its political and societal project. Settler states depend on the ongoing trauma of indigenous communities for their economic development, cartographic integrity, and stable sense of identity. The Montreal performance center where the audience was seated for Ondinnok's production stands on land that was appropriated at great human cost. UCSD as an institution and, more broadly, research in the Americas as a field of inquiry, have benefited and continue to benefit from the dispossession of Native Americans. To expose that loss through performative repatriables and to think of

redress and healing in this context are challenging acts for both the performers and those who witness repatriation projects. They induce moments of vertiginous consciousness, a sensation of sudden clarity, a sinking of the solar plexus if you will, about the violence that continues to hold one's settler-colonial privilege in place.

As many scholars suggest (e.g., Churchill 2001; Wilderson 2010), such moments of vertiginous consciousness constitute a menace so great that they are quickly diverted, dismissed, or folded and neatly renarrativized. This renarrativization takes multiple forms, ranging from violent repression to an insidious type of misreading or misrecognition of indigenous material remains, presence, and demands. When it comes to how gestures of indigenous reappropriation or repatriation might be received, Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson notes: "The very notion of indigenous nationhood which demarcates identity and seizes tradition in ways that may be antagonistic to the encompassing frame of the state, may be simply unintelligible to the western and/or imperial ear" (2000:114). Simpson echoes Jodi A. Byrd's notion of "colonial agnosia," or the incapacity of nonindigenous interlocutors or spectators to read indigenous presence and demands outside of reductive colonial narratives (2012).

In the case of Grondin's critique, colonial agnosia is the refusal to encounter the illegible body onstage. It is also the demand that Native American bodies make themselves legible to "us" rather than "us" having to face bodies that elude our grasp. For the UC researchers, colonial agnosia is a refusal to see the remains as other than inert objects necessary for study. The Kumeyaay's repatriation project and Ondinnok's theatre of repatriation complicate and at times decouple visibility and legibility, burying and forgetting. They propose instead that to unearth in the name of science does not necessarily lead to a better understanding of the remains that have surfaced. As the Kumeyaay case suggests, excavating remains can trigger instead a reenactment of colonial violence and a further misreading of indigenous bodies. Conversely, as Ondinnok illuminates in its theatre-ritual, unearthing remains in the symbolic realm can be a way to mourn and reclaim a common lineage across the borders imposed on indigenous communities by colonial and settler states. In the cases of Ondinnok and of the Kumeyaay it is the gesture of burying that allows memory and lineage to be performed and reclaimed. To bury is to restore complexity, to undo the reductive markings of the colonial gaze. The Kumeyaay's and Ondinnok's understanding of burying stands in sharp contrast with Western notions of burying where burial is coupled with loss, finality, and/or the removal of the repressed. Both repatriation projects use opacity as a way to confront settler audiences/interlocutors with what "we" can't (normally) see. More importantly, these two performances illuminate how stages—from the theatrical stage to the performance platforms afforded to scientists and representatives of settler states—are still far from being level playing fields. The Native American groups who perform and demand repatriation continue to face structures and audiences threatened by their claim for presence, filiation, and ultimately, futurity.

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