

RE-ENACTING THE NATION: UNSETTLING NARRATIVES IN THE EL GÜEGÜENSE THEATRE OF NICARAGUA

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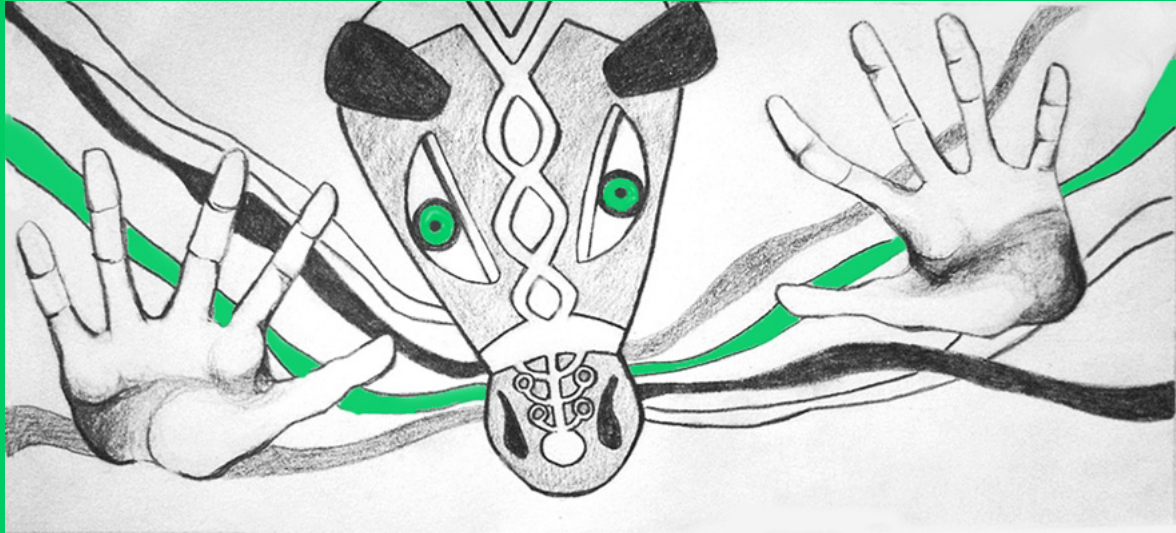
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Abstract || Nicaragua's oldest known theatre play, El Güegüense, is one of the most recognizable and symbolic cultural references in this country. Through its social and cultural narratives, located inside and outside the theatre/drama, the play has become an important site for Nicaraguan identity negotiations. Some Nicaraguans take the play's performance as the means for evoking and communicating memories, knowledge, personhood, and religiosity through embodied performed public acts. This article traces local contemporary practices of the play, in the form of its annual performance in the town of Diriamba, and compares these with elite Nicaraguan literary and intellectual understandings of the El Güegüense script. It is argued that the embodied experiences of the play's performers disrupt the homogenized, nationalist narrative of a Nicaraguan "Mestizo" identity.

Key-words || El Güegüense theatre | Theatre and nationalism | Performance | Mestizo Identity | Nicaragua.

0. Introduction

For centuries, every year in South-western Nicaragua a handful of (non-professional) groups performed *El Güegüense* play during folkloric festivals and other celebrations. The narratives of the play deal with the conflict and the contradictions between the colonizers (Spanish authorities) and the colonized (Mestizo-Indigenous people). The Crown's coffers are empty, and the rulers demand more from the poverty stricken population. The play's script, the translation made by Daniel Brinton (1969) in the late 1800's, begins as the Spanish governor, *Tastuanes*, greets his constable, the *Alguacil Mayor*. They comment on the insolvent state of the Royal council and the Governor blames this situation on a tax-evading, travelling Mestizo merchant, named *Güegüense*. He orders that nobody should be allowed to enter or leave the province without his permission. He requests that *El Güegüense* be brought to him to respond to some charges. When the Alguacil confronts *El Güegüense*, the latter constantly twists the Alguacil's words so as to insult him. In the end, *El Güegüense* winds up tricking the governor into dancing the bawdy "Macho Ratón". As a result the governor is appreciative of the *Güegüense* for the pleasurable time and enjoyment the dance has given him.

The *El Güegüense* play has become one of the most recognisable symbols and cultural references in the country. While widely understood as a denunciation of corruption and abuse of power in the post-contact period (Cuadra 1969, Arellano 1969, Dávila Bolaños 1974, Field 1999, Castillo, 1997), the play has achieved this status of national symbol as a result of the "Mestizo" Nicaraguan identity with which it is associated. Written in both Spanish and Nahuatl the *El Güegüense* is a fusion play. Besides being written in two languages it is also codified in two cultures and two social classes. The play emerges at a meeting place of two or more cultural worldviews within the context of colonialism.

The dominant view of the play as the prototype of Mestizo Nicaragua is linked to a national ideology of ethnic homogeneity. Elements of Meztizaje (both Spanish and Indigenous) in the *El Güegüense* appealed to many intellectuals in early Twentieth Century Nicaragua who, mobilizing to gain national/political appeal, sought cultural symbols that could lend themselves to narratives of national unity (Field 1999). Pablo Antonio Cuadra, a leading Twentieth Century Nicaraguan intellectual, for example, proposes the Mestizo character of the Nicaraguan man in association with the play's main character of *El Güegüense*. He posits that being Nicaraguan is the result of a cultural shock, a fusion, and a duality. Throughout his work he searches for the tools to narrate a Mestizo culture that would help produce and feed the notion of a Nicaraguan literature (Cuadra,

1969: 9).

It is my position that a politics of cultural homogeneity in such narratives of the play exclude other views, identities and positions that are in apparent interaction and negotiation in the play's yearly performances in Diriamba. Elite intellectuals and their narratives tend to ignore the play's performers whose active participation construct and reconstruct many meanings about the play in its performances. The aim of this paper is then to re-enact a critical response from the perspective of local performers of the play, whose embodied understandings contradict this nationalistic narrative of homogeneity.

In the year 2000-2001 after intensive preliminary archival research on *El Güegüense* theatre, I joined an *El Güegüense* group in Western Nicaragua in the town of Diriamba. Through participant-observation I took part in the activities of this group through preparations, rehearsals, and performances of the play. I participated in the lives of the town's people, the lives of the actors, and organizers of the Saint Sebastian fiestas, in which the play has an important role. In this paper I present this negotiation that took place within the production of the play. What does it mean to the various social and cultural constituencies in contemporary Nicaragua to participate in the preparation and performance of the play? What is the importance in highlighting the differences and contradictions between the *El Güegüense* drama text (discourses of the play by the Nicaraguan elite intellectuals) and its performance text (the performance of the play by locals) in the understanding of social relations and national identity in Diriamba and in Nicaragua as a whole?

The following analysis of *El Güegüense* will be organized in three little sections. Sections 1 and 2 will examine the dominant elite discourse surrounding the script of *El Güegüense*. I will highlight how this discourse is perpetuated by members of the local elite in the context of *El Güegüense*'s annual production in the town of Diriamba. By highlighting the role of the play in nation building through the efforts of Nicaraguan elite intellectuals (Field), I propose to make visible the social and cultural contestations occurring in contemporary Nicaragua in relation to this cultural production, not only at the level of literature and symbolism, but also at the level of the enactment of embodied experiences as a social forms of action.

To further illustrate the importance of the play for local performers, in part 3 the paper will identify or frame the theatrical process as an important social and cultural landscape where some Nicaraguans evoke and communicate memories, knowledge, personhood, and religiosity through embodied public acts (Taylor). The *El Güegüense*

performance is thus a site (real and imaginary/creative) where some Nicaraguans learn and propose a culture (its history, its political reservations and its social vicissitudes) through the participation with others in contingent and subjective constructions of its many narratives. People participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by performing it (Taylor).

1. El Güegüense and National Building: a Question of National Identity

In “The Grimace of Macho Raton” (1999), Les W. Field challenges a post-Sandinista national conception of identity. Drawing on the works and words of artisans and *artisanas*, Indian and Mestizo, he criticizes the national ideology of ethnic homogeneity. Field considers new forms of social movements in Nicaragua as alternative voices to those posited by elite Nicaraguan intellectuals. For Field, elite intellectuals’ appropriations of the drama of *El Güegüense* construe it as an allegory of mestizo national identity in which mestizaje is a product of a national majority. These elite intellectual narratives about *El Güegüense* are challenged by Field from without the play’s own performance narratives, from the perspective of other cultural sites: stories by artisans and *artisanas*, essays by “local intellectuals” and an ethnographic reconstruction of these artisans’ life stories. Field uses the text of the play as a metaphor for diversity in changing identities of Western Nicaragua.

Field’s analysis is informed, among others, by Aijaz Ahmad’s work on identity that distinguishes “retrograde and progressive forms of nationalism with reference to particular histories...” (Field, 1999: 41). For Field, Ahmad’s analysis helps to differentiate the role “played by elite intellectuals in demarcating and enforcing hegemonic knowledge among Nicaraguan elites” (41). This hegemonic knowledge is concerned with “class, ethnic, and national identities from the cultural politics of Sandinista Nicaragua (1980’s), and how *El Güegüense* has been used in both discourses before, during and since the revolutionary period to construct and maintain a nationalist project” (Field, 1999: 41). Field discerns that *El Güegüense* is at the centre of these narratives. He focuses on Nicaraguan Twentieth Century authors such as Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Pérez Estrada, Jorge Eduardo Arellano, José Coronel Urtecho, who best characterize “the way literature and its discourses about *El Güegüense* in particular, build national culture and identity” (42), and also examines some counter narratives.

In order to understand how *El Güegüense* became intertwined in a national identity discourse, the context for the emergence of these

elite intellectual readings of the play must be examined. Those elite authors who defined *El Güegüense* as a national play were primarily drawn from the social Nicaraguan elite of Leon and Granada, the liberal and conservative capital of the country. It had been their national political project (both national parties) to design a national identity catapulted by an essentialising and homogenizing Mestizo character. They took for granted conclusive conjectures about the character of Nicaraguan Indigenous peoples. Their view was that the Nicaraguan identity “was and has been [...] inherently and overwhelmingly mestizo” (Field 1999, 44).

The intellectuals’ comprehension of indigenous identity as static and “always tragic and doomed” (Field 1999: 44) denied Indians the possibility of dynamism after the Spaniards arrived. Change of any substantive nature spelled death for indigenous cultural identities. By contrast Nicaraguan intellectuals ascribed cultural and technological dynamism to the mestizo elite whose identity they viewed as still in formation, and dynamic, still acquiring traits and generating new and unique ones, and irreversibly linked to the emergence of Nicaraguan “true” national identity (44).

In his nationally praised book “El nicaragüense” (1969), Cuadra proposes the mestizo character of the Nicaraguan man and associates this national character with *El Güegüense*. He posits that being Nicaraguan is the result of a cultural shock, a fusion, and a duality. Throughout his work he searches for the tools to narrate a mestizo culture that would help produce and feed the notion of a Nicaraguan literature (Cuadra, 1969: 9). Through a number of small essays, he explores the origins of a “Nicaraguan duality”, which he links to the meeting of Indians and Europeans. He associates the features of *El Güegüense* character (burlesque, satirical, and vagabond) with a prototypical and stereotypical Nicaraguan national character, an essentialized Nicaraguan: “I have come to the conclusion that this play is alive, not because of irrationality and traditionalism, but because it’s main character is a character that the people in Nicaragua carry in their blood” (73). The *El Güegüense* or *Macho Ratón*, Cuadra posits, is the first character of the Nicaraguan imagination. He proposes that the play’s appearance marked the emergence of a “perfect” Mestizaje in Nicaragua (74).

According to Cuadra, the *El Güegüense* character comes to the play from our indigenous past and from the people: “He is probably an old character from the Indigenous theatre”, he explains, “He came to the new theatre to become bilingual, once he started acting, he became mestizo” (my translation). He is, Cuadra insists, the first Mestizo character of Nicaraguan literature. *El Güegüense* marked the disappearance of the Indigenous and the appearance of the Mestizo in Nicaragua.

Another member of Vanguardia circle, Pérez Estrada, supported Cuadra's position. He exalts the *El Güegüense* in literary qualifications that confers the play a symbol of static Nicaraguan Mestizo world. He also embellishes the attributes of a theatre with a national character in the context of Spanish-language literature. Pérez Estrada, for instance, claims that, the play's existence meant that for Nicaraguans there "is nothing to envy from the best Castilian writers" (Field, 1999: 56). His claim, therefore, purports that there is a conclusive hispanified, mestizo nature of the play (56). This view is still predominant in the country today; *El Güegüense* character is considered the national symbol of Nicaragua. The image of the Macho-Ratón or *El Güegüense*, its wooden mask and its dancing figure adorns many official and non-official Nicaraguan offices, public buildings, and the character is discussed in popular literature as well.

The historical, social and cultural elements of the play have become valuable not only for their association with Pre-Columbian or Spanish performances, but because they are references to a "national character". As a symbol of "Nicaraguans" the *El Güegüense* play and its main character marked the departure to a new "national" location of reference in history, politics, and culture in Nicaragua. Everyday conversations and language constructions are also very much influenced by this national symbol. For Doctor Gallardo (not his real name), the sponsor of the play purported during my research, the play "tells about our Nicaraguanness. It tells the world who we are as Nicaraguans".

For me, Doctor Gallardo is the continuation of this elite, nationalistic and colonialist narrative that confers *El Güegüense* performance a homogenous, passive quality. As illustrated in the following passage, presented from interviews and interventions during rehearsals, Doctor Gallardo has a clear position about the role of the play and his own role in the festivities. It is clear that his understandings of the politics behind the play reflect elite, homogenising nationalistic attitudes that are exclusionary. Thus he exercises this power of inclusion and exclusion through an elitist discourse that is reflected in the actual control of the play. As a Lawyer, cultural writer, and the sponsor of the play he is always ready to proclaim himself, with little or no reservation, as the rescuer of Nicaraguan culture. With his luxurious house as backdrop, Doctor Gallardo points out that, it has been a struggle for him to preserve *El Güegüense*, from oblivion because "ordinary people do not appreciate *El Güegüense*". When it comes to cultural imperatives, he states, "ordinary people are absent-minded. I invite them to participate in the revival of their own history, their own past. What do they do? They ignore the call. They come drunk. They question my intentions".

It is apparent that the construction of a Nicaraguan National identity for these intellectuals was, and still is, propelled by the need for self-legitimation. After the birth of Nicaraguan independence (1836) Nicaraguan intelligentsia needed a national character. For a national elite, *El Güegüense* character as its cultural Mestizo symbol meant the maintenance of elite politics. *El Güegüense* stands for a national culture that legitimizes colonial authority by trying to erase indigenous identity in the process¹.

2. Beyond an Allegory of discontent: Cultural loss and social memor

Field's work discussed in the previous section, makes strong and long needed contributions to the study of Nicaraguan nationalism and indigenous people's challenges to it; however, his analysis of the play remains, for this paper's perspective, on the outside. In other words, the challenges he presents to nationalizing or homogenizing discourses of the *El Güegüense* script are located outside the narratives of the performance of the play. The play's force is thus restricted to an allegory of discontent as alternatives to national discourses are sought outside the play.

My proposal here thus claims the theatre of *El Güegüense* as the principal social site for identity negotiation in Western Nicaragua. Homogenizing elite intellectual discourses of identity and its contestation inhabit the play. The play's literary narratives legitimate the national project of cultural homogenization however these narratives do not go unquestioned in the many rhetorical forms taken within the context of the performance, the process of producing and invoking the play². For recognizing an alternative dimension to current understandings of the *El Güegüense*, I consider the role of the performance of the play itself. In the current effort, *El Güegüense* becomes more than a tool for the Nicaraguan elite-homogenizing project. The play represents the scatological enactment of distinction and opposition, of compliance, and also of defiance. I consider its performance as the social site where some ordinary Nicaraguan citizens evoke bodies of power (Comaroff 1995), engendering community solidarity, transmitting cultural and social memory, conveying history, creating personal relationships with their religious idol Saint Sebastian, thus negotiating their identities. As Doña María, a local *El Güegüense* enthusiast, put it: "We don't need to read about the Gueguense in books, everything is in our heads". Her sense of identity in relation to the nation is linked to the memories and knowledge of the play. It is the *El Güegüense*'s theatrical and rhetorical irony that catapults the performance of the play to its own

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1 | Carlos Manteca, a Nicaraguan linguist has expressed a different view of *El Gueguense*'s dramatic script also. For him it represents "a very long-term accretion of oral, textual, and performance-based transformations, all of which remain within the manuscripts at hand" (Mantica in Field 1999, 59). What is important in Mantica's analysis is that he takes time to include several points of view found in the language of the script itself. This position is very similar to Fields's in that it is based on the narratives of the *El Gueguense*'s script more than its performance. There are intellectual literary counter narratives to this mestizo perfect world envisaged by the Vanguardia movement, but none has gained the popular support of the above. The prominent folklorist Dr. Davila Bolanos espoused the view that the *El Gueguense* is about indigenous protest. He claimed that an outraged Indian might have written the play (1974). Given the ongoing popularity of *El Gueguense* as national identity marker among the elite, many dismissed this counter narrative as left wing propaganda.

2 | Many Nicaraguans invoke the story of El Gueguense today. For example, during past national and municipal elections, the media has commented on the public deception of politicians and political parties. Some members of the population have expressed publicly their intention to vote for some political party or politician and when it comes time to vote they cast their ballot for some other political party or another candidate. This is what happened during the 1990 Sandinistas electoral defeat. This phenomenon has gotten to be known in Nicaragua as the El Gueguense effect, citing the mendacious deceiving

game-experience. This sense of the play is at odds with elite notions of the *El Güegüense* we have discussed before as they emphasise a less top down understanding of being Nicaraguan through the enactment of the play.

The masked characters in *El Güegüense* use verbal discourse, but also communicate their subversive message through dance, music, gesture, and postures. Masks are essential in the staging of the story, and most characters wear one. The play's popular performance in Diriamba employs laughter, absurdity, and the farcical to tease out the absurdities of power structures for the public to see out in the open. The gestures of the *El Güegüense* indicating that he cannot hear the orders of the authorities make people laugh but perhaps can also make audiences think about their own ways of defiance: "Pues, hábleme recio, que, como soy viejo y sordo no oigo lo que me dicen..." ("Speak up, because, you know, I am deaf and old, I can't hear what you are saying..."). (Line 80 in Brinton, 1968, 23). It is not surprising that this element of revealed intention is kept in the performance, during the festivities, where the dialogue is reduced to a few lines. Thus, the theatre performance in the festival appears as the place where rulers and ruled negotiate a kind of "emancipation" where "[T]he behaviour, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions..." (Bakhtin: 123).

The performers of *El Güegüense* come mainly from the working class of Diriamba. They are manual laborers, trade people and small artisans. Involvement in the staging of the play can have different motivators as the participants range in age (from 7 to 70 years old). For some, the annual play of *El Güegüense* is an opportunity to apply their expertise in traditional culture. One of my key informants, Don Cristóbal, was exemplary of his older generation, in being unable to read or write, but extraordinary in his knowledge of *El Güegüense*. Not only could he describe its various performances in past decades, but he could also flawlessly recite the play's many lines. For others such as Don Jesús, an elderly man and one of the main performers, participating in the staging of the play is one of the most important events of the year, as he put it:

El Güegüense is a big thing (he gestures with his trembling hands). My desire to help in the celebration of Saint Sebastian and to put on an *El Güegüense* play is always here (touching his chest). Not with money, of course, I am very poor. I do it for love and for respect to Saint Sebastian. It's like when one is a little kid. When one is part of a child game, one feels part of something big.

Whether experienced as a social/cultural space for education, the transmission of values and memories or as a religious avenue, the performers of *El Güegüense* I have encountered, including their

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nature of the theatre character of El Gueguense.

audiences, construct meaning and value around their performance and participation in this annual performance.

Fifty years ago or more non-literate and poorer members of the community took pride in sponsoring or performing *El Güegüense*. When I arrived in Diriamba in the fall of 2000, performers of *El Güegüense* were experiencing a sense of loss. They felt that they were losing control of this important social/cultural space (the preparation, direction and staging of the play) because of their precarious economic situation. As Don Cristóbal, the knowledgeable elder explained,

Things have changed nowadays. Most Mayordomos (sponsors of the fiestas) and Padrinos (sponsors of the play) assisted it in the past, as it should be. I mean they provided support for the play, things like food; nacatamalitos, platanitos, rosquillitas (local food). Everyone was well fed and happy. The Mayordomo and Padrino were not allowed to take money from the dancers because both the sponsors and the dancers had a vow with the saint. The dancers had to provide their own adornments and costumes, and the sponsors had to pay for the musicians. It was understood. We all have our personal reasons to participate. Everyone has a different relationship with the play.

This intervention by Don Cristóbal is more than just a nostalgic trip into an essentialized social and cultural past. For Don Cristóbal it is the realization that *El Güegüense* play, as a popular site for an entire community has all but died; understandably this notion has become a disturbing fact. He realises that the politics behind the appropriation of this important aspect of his life obeys to a larger structure of power. Don Cristóbal has constructed his persona in relation to the play around the festivities of Saint Sebastian. But times are changing and even popular expressions such as *El Güegüense* have also become highly commodified. The awareness of this participant on the fact that only economic and political elite townspeople are capable of putting on this annual performance is a reality that goes beyond the staging of the play. The politics behind the organization of all aspects of the fiesta are linked to the politics of running the town. Many elite people such as the sponsor of the play during my research gained notoriety by financing the festivities (as *Mayordomo* of the fiestas). These prominent citizens may or may not run for political office in the future.

Ignored in previous and current elite and academic interpretations of *El Güegüense* in Nicaragua are social, cultural, political, and economic conjunctures of South Western Nicaragua. I believe it is pertinent in the study of Nicaraguan cultural and social identity to identify *El Güegüense*'s theatrical process in its relation with local performers as an important social/cultural landscape for Nicaraguan identity.

Many of the main protagonists in the staging of the play during my research have been involved in *El Güegüense* for years. Doctor Gallardo, Don Cristóbal, Don Jesús and Doña María, represent the social and cultural contradictions manifested in the production of the play. All of the participants stand for different point of views in relation to what the social and cultural site of *El Güegüense* represents. For example, Doctor Gallardo's vision of his role in the production is predicated on the assumption that the play's importance rests on its merits as a cultural symbol of "Nicaraguanness". Echoing elite politics originated in elite nationalist aspirations, Doctor Gallardo tries to edify a local project that is informed by the national politics of class, hybridity and mestizaje. He believes that "ordinary people do not appreciate *El Güegüense*". This is so according to doctor Gallardo because "when it comes to cultural imperatives they (ordinary people) are absent-minded".

The local performers of the play (Don Jesús, Don Cristóbal) and Doña María (a helper), on the other hand, construct a personal, social and cultural identity through the play predicated in a physicalized embodiment of Nicaraguan memory (subjective and collective memory) that renders the play and its communicative interactions a reservoir for important local knowledge. These performance practices are taken from a "repertoire of marginalised traditions" (Taylor 2003: 208). Don Jesús was eloquent about the meaning of the performance while enacting it for his family and myself. The joy he projected in the dance was contagious.

You dance this music slowly. The music leads you slowly, like this, like this. Some songs are faster (he picks up his tempo). The songs of the Machos (mules) are fastest. The characters from inside the circle are smooth, gracious with their bodies. Slowly like this. One doesn't need to jump, let the hips do their job, like this, like this. (Everybody in the room starts to follow him). Yes like that. With your right hand playing the chischill (rattle). Like that, slowly.

The embodied, active knowledge of local participants such as Don Jesús, Don Cristóbal and Doña María resist the written, homogenized, passive knowledge of the national elite (Doctor Gallardo) Their knowledge is in movement, open ended, dialogical and performative. Through their embodied acts the participants make new political arguments transmit memory and forge new cultural and social identities.

3. Producing and Reproducing Knowledge by Performing It

Diane Taylor in her recent work asks "How does [...] performance

transmit cultural memory and identity?” and “Would a hemispheric perspective expand the restrictive scenarios and paradigms set in motion by centuries of colonialism?” (Taylor 2003: xvi). By examining several performances such as activism and theatrical work in South America, a Latino TV personality in the US, and other performances in North America, Taylor exemplifies how people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by performing it.

In the culturally and socially constructed world of performance, the past, the present, the future, the “real” and the imagined become common referents for performers and audiences. Taylor tackles the relationship between performances and their wider context from the acknowledgement that performances as actions, enacting what is constantly changing, are by definition ephemeral and fleeting. The process of understanding, then, is a continuous cycle, intersubjectivity between whole (global) and part (local), which can never be completed. In short, performance can be a form that comes closest to the conditions under which we could understand our own experience, and by extension a collective experience. For Taylor, *El Indio Amazónico*, one of the performers she dissects, constructs a cultural identity in a physicalized embodiment of memory (a subjective, collective memory) of America through his healing sessions as his performances. These performances become excavations or comments of a past history (understood from a particular social/cultural positionality) and its contexts. Thus, this enactment represents also a dialogue between personal and collective experiences and global contexts (colonialism, imperialism, class struggles, etc). The enactment of performance becomes a re-negotiation of a transmitted knowledge into an alternative idealised present. This physicalized interaction through performance becomes possible through the encounter between social agents and history.

One important aspect in Taylor’s analysis of performance that I consider very useful for my own examination of *El Güegüense* in Nicaragua is the intimacy she brings to broad Latin/a American issues. For Taylor, performance is more than an object of study; it functions as an episteme, a way of knowing. Thus performance is “that which disappears, or that which persists, transmitted through a nonarchival system of knowledge...” (2003: xvii). The archive is not necessarily opposite to the repertoire or a neutral by standard of history, but a method of transmitting selective histories, colonialism, racism, Western ideologies. The question is “whose histories?” For Taylor not only do performances trace their contexts of emergence (colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, racism, and marginality), but these embodied acts also make new political arguments, transmit memory, and forge cultural identities. The embodied knowledge of local performance resists the written knowledge of the archive.

Within this performance framework, I consider that analyzing the rhetorical and located situation of the script of the play of *El Güegüense* (elite discourse) against the context of contemporary's performances of the play is necessary to understand Nicaraguan identity and its negotiations. The embodied knowledge of the play yields insights into the different ways of being in a Nicaraguan citizen. Ethnographically speaking, the performers and other informants I met in Diriamba have a very important contribution to make with regards to this discussion. They have a particular relationship with the play, which they contextualize within the Saint Sebastian. The negotiations that occur in this context are not only about whose voices are articulated during the preparation and performance of the play, but also about social/cultural appropriation. Whom does the play rightfully belong to? As Don Cristobal puts it: "When I was a sponsor of the play I accommodated everyone. I was not rich, I did it modestly of course, but it was a real communal experience. Even today people tell me that I was fair with everything. I fed everyone and didn't complain".

As rhetorical and embodied experiences of the *El Güegüense* these are social interventions. As performance practices, whether drawn from an age-old repertoire or marginalized traditions, the *El Güegüense* performances "allow for immediate response to current political problems" (208). These are acts considered ephemeral, disappearing as they happen: dance, gestures, singing, etc. These embodied performances "enact embodied memory" in order to stage objects, attitudes, and issues that articulate historical, collective, individual, and political positions. Even though such performances can be construed as rhetorical devices their importance lies in their possibility of rendering the invisible into visibility (i.e. social relations of inequality, neo-colonialism, injustice, etc.).

As observer of the cultural and the social we invoke the local episteme to critique Western ideologies and paradigms, but we seldom reveal the at once fleshy and abstract mechanics of how these are subverted and/or transformed. I thus feel the need to move away from the sometimes seemingly limiting particularity of embodied acts to their role in the constitution of global power relations and vice versa. In the following intervention by one of the local performers of the *El Güegüense* we can appreciate identity negotiations around the production of the play. The sense of importance of the play was expressed very forcefully by two of my main informants, Don Jesús and his wife Doña María, in several of my encounters and conversations.

Doña María hurriedly goes to Don Jesús excited. "Get up Jesus, get up, that's why you went to get drunk again? Quickly get up he is coming. He is outside". Don Jesús' response is monotonous "What?". "Pero hombre, the man is coming. Do you want him to see you like

that?” Doña María tells him. “Okay, okay, I’m fine (He stumbles towards the working table). Oops, where is he? (Everybody at the table looks at him with disdain. A combination of gunpowder and alcohol odor invades the air). “Okay. I’m up. Where is he?” He retorts. I enter the small place and ask if this is the house of Don Jesús the man who dances the El Güegüense. The room is very dark, and we hear only voices. “¡Hola! Is this the house of Don Jesus, the man who dances El Güegüense?” I say. Total silence. Doña María comes to the door with a candle. “Yes, yes entre. Es usted el muchacho que quiere aprender a bailar?” she says as she illuminates my face. We both smile. “Gracias, yes I’m the one who wants to learn to dance El Güegüense”. I declare. “It’s easy; it’ll take you no time at all. You are young”. Don Jesús says, his voice coming from a corner of the room where he is sitting on the bed. “Yes, come here. I will give you some light. He went for a drink or two. This man is ruined” Doña María whispers to me. Don Jesús who at this point is trying to appear sober makes an extra effort to maintain his composure “Come on in sit here next to me. I’m glad you came to visit. I’ll tell you...” He pauses for a second and continues.

At the beginning I was young, and even though I don’t know how to read and write my memory never fails me. I had to learn the lines, my wife would read them to me, and I would memorize them. While performing my part I’ve come to be aware of my lines very carefully. I take my turn as we proceed dancing. You’ve to be aware and very attentive when your turn comes, even though it’s very noisy. There are seven characters trying to speak. The heavy roles are El Güegüense, The Governor, Don Forsico, Don Ambrosio, and The Alguacil. There is also music going on.

Don Jesús’ family continues going about their daily routines as they pay attention to his performance. He gets up and assumes a dramatized position: Hands extended, and chin upright. He starts to move up and down, his voice drops some lines in a native language. “Pues sí cana amigo capitán alguacil, somocague nistipanpa, Sres. Principales, sones, mudanzas, velancicos, necana, y palperesia D. Forsico timaguas y verdad, tin hermosura, tin bellezas tumiles mo Cabildo Real...” He grabs a plastic bag and takes out some loose pages, which he shows to me. “This is the only thing left, the rats ate it”. Doña María intervenes. “Everything is in our heads. Before, there used to be two Güegüense performances per festival. There were competitions between the performances. Once our family won for putting on the best one. My mother was a very good Madrina (literally, godmother). She sponsored the dance for many years. Lack of money forced her to stop. The music is very expensive. 1000 to 2000 Cordobas per festival. My husband (she looks at Don Jesus) tried to put it on some years ago but it was impossible. The economic situation has taken the Güegüense from us”. Don Jesús gets up from the bed and walks towards the doors.

There are seven songs in the play. Actually there are fourteen but they only play half for the performance in the festival. You have to learn them from someone. They are passed on. (He starts to dance to a non-existing music) You dance this music slowly. The music leads you, slowly, like this, like this. Some songs are faster (he picks up his tempo). The songs of the Machos (mules) are faster. The characters from inside the circle are smooth, gracious with their bodies. Slowly like this. One doesn't need to jump, let the hips do their job, like this, like this. (Everybody in the room starts to follow him). Yes like that. With your right hand playing the chischill (rattle). Like that, slowly.

The candlelights start to go off one by one until only one is left dimly illuminating Don Jesús dancing. His moving body disappears into the darkness of the room.

One of the main concerns that became apparent during my research in Diriamba was the fact that locals involved in the play had an overwhelming sense of loss with respect to the disappearance or decline of the performance. For many generations the play has been, besides an avenue where disenfranchised people fulfil religious vows, a source of family pride, respect and solidarity. As the play becomes less and less a community affair and becomes more and more subjected to the political priorities of the local elite, people have become frustrated. Don Jesús, the main performer in the play, Doña María, his wife and helper, and Don Cristóbal, the director of the play, reflected that frustration in the way they interacted with the play and its sponsor. Under these circumstances of inclusion and exclusion in the very social fabric of a community, the role of the *El Güegüense* as a social and cultural site becomes even more important in the understanding of social groups in Nicaragua.

4. Conclusion: Unsettling narratives

The relationship between power structures, culture, and identity negotiations (government, media, art, intellectuals) yields a certain cultural field (narratives and its consequences). This cultural field is manifested as interventions into the production and circulation of "cultural material", arts, institutions, and the like (Allor and Gagnon, 1996: 8). The articulation of a public discourse, like a play, a speech, is centered on many elements that make visible the relationship between the aesthetic, the political and the social (Ibid). When there is a certain government or elite vision of a national identity articulated through the cultural field (for example the *El Güegüense* play), the cultural field itself becomes a site for contestation of those imposed

discourses. However, sometimes such a site may not be available to people to construct alternative contestations.

In our Nicaraguan case, for example, the performance of *El Güegüense* (preparations, rehearsals and aftermath) contradicts the official narratives that confer the play the image of the perfect Nicaraguan type. The performance deals, even in its short version, with defiance to power characterized in the nationalizing narratives. It is about discontent with the situations of absurd power. This absurd power is still present in Nicaragua today, in the form of an unjust and corrupt government. The performance of *El Güegüense* is the verbal and non-verbal expression of that discontent articulated by those involved in the performance. The play is thus the rich environment for cultural, social, and political contestation from lower classes and marginalized groups. The local performers such as Don Cristóbal, Don Jesús and Doña María manifest this in the contested authorship of *El Güegüense* and in their idiosyncratic, religious, personal, historical and experiential knowledge and memory of the performance.

The *El Güegüense* performance within the context of the San Sebastian Festivities has, besides the role of fulfilling religious vows for the participants, thus its own disrupting narratives. During the Saint Sebastian festival, the rehearsals and performances disrupt and expose the contradictions of a narrative of order and power, homogeneity and rationality. The performance stands for questioning the morality and ethics of the government (government taxes, imposition of will) in the drama. This disruption allows an opening up of a space where those hidden tensions and contradictions become apparent to the actors and their audiences today. The performance forces these contradictions out into the open for everybody to see every year. Through the performance's discourses, the participants collectively and individually expose elite discourses that have a lot to do with the everyday reality of the participants.

The relationship between elite and popular narratives of the *El Güegüense* play in a socialized and politicized Nicaraguan context (elites versus popular classes, local identity versus national identity) has revealed the different manifestations of power structures in post-colonial situations. As one of the most important Nicaraguan cultural, historical, and political artefacts for two different social groups of Nicaraguans, the play remains important even in its absence. The year of my research the play was pulled out of the Saint Sebastian festival at the last minute by the sponsor, Dr Gallardo. In the absence of this cultural and social performative site (the *El Güegüense* performance) people attempt to keep their relationship with this important part of their life by recurring to history, memory, and the everyday trying to understand their sense of loss (Taylor 2003).

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