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Siete momentos en la vida maya:
Performance, Tourism, and Mayan Identity on the Yucatán Peninsula

As late as the summer of 2004, travelers on the Mérida-Cancun highway about 21 kilometers southeast of the Yucatecan capital, on their way to and from the resorts or the archaeological sites at Chichén Itza, would see a large billboard announcing:

Teatro Indígena:
472 Actores
Ticopó →
Yucatán

The billboard featured three women dressed in *huipiles* – the gorgeous embroidered white cotton dresses worn by older Mayan women in both city and countryside, and by younger ones on formal occasions – and a little boy dressed in his own formal attire of *guyabera* and white cotton pants. **[image: Billboard.jpg] (Caption: Announcing the event)** The four look off the highway toward the site of the performance; one is dancing, one is clapping, while the other two are engaged by what they are seeing off the stage of the billboard, but presumably on the stage of the teatro it advertised. They are ambiguous figures: are they the performers? Or the targeted audience members for it? Because they are dressed rather formally (read: "traditionally"), to many passers-by—especially tourists primed by the pervasive sight of *huipiles* for sale in the zócalo, or on the bodies of young women dancing with bottles on their heads in the plaza and in the dinner-theatre in Chichén Itzá's restaurant—the figures on the billboard belong to the general tourist scenario that situates all locals as performers of a sort. They are part of what travelers come to "look at," in both theatricalized representations and, even

better, in everyday life. And after all, the logo on the billboard proclaims the event's sponsorship by the Yucatán State Department of Tourism, and its accompanying website for its tourist guide, *Yucatán Today*, promises "an inside glimpse into the lives of the Mayan people."ⁱ On the other hand, the figures don't return the gaze of the traveler in an inviting way; they are not positioned as objects of that gaze.ⁱⁱ Instead, they entice through a different rhetoric: they see something the traveler doesn't, and the billboard invites the traveler to come, share the view. Thus, "we" and "you," "self" and "other," in this image and in the event itself, become curiously conflated.

Keeping this destabilization of subject positions in mind, I wish to explore the performance event heralded by the billboard as one example of how tourism can arrange (and rearrange) relationships between the self and other; between the local and international; among theatre, ritual, and fiesta; between authenticity and invention. When I speak of "tourism" in this way, English grammar assigns it an agential role, but I see it more as an important grounding condition in which many of these relationships are increasingly articulated, especially in areas like the Yucatán peninsula where tourism provides an important economic base. Equally important and perhaps also emblematic of other geopolitical contexts, tourism in Yucatán occurs within a larger national context in which the relationship between nation-building and ethnic pluralism is still working itself out, often violently. Here, pressures toward nationalizing a Mexican identity based on the homogenizing myth of the mestizo, the great rhetorical hero-product of the Mexican Revolution, are still operative, if largely ineffective (as illustrated by the ongoing Zapatista conflict). In other words, to achieve its Revolutionary (and now, neo-liberal economic) ends, Mexico needs the Indians, as such, to disappear. At the same time, however, Mexico needs its Indians to be visible in certain sanctioned ways, not only to attract tourist money, but also to comfort itself with this apparent accommodation to the plurality demanded by

so many. Thus, indigenous visibility is very much circumscribed by two prevalent discourses: that of rebellion on the one hand, and of the more "innocent" ostentations of the tourist trade on the other. Especially in the Yucatán Peninsula, where support for the Zapatistas is weaker than it is in other, poorer parts of Mexico, many have opted for the latter kind of visibility as being better than the former—and certainly better than nothing.

Siete momentos en la vida maya was an attempt to increase the cultural visibility of contemporary Mayans via a tourist show that was, on the surface, the kind of folkloric performance Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett rightly links to centuries of ethnographic displays that, throughout time, have participated in the "reciprocity of disappearance and exhibition."ⁱⁱⁱ In her survey of the many forms ethnographic display may take—ranging from objects to people, in contexts as diverse as museums, fairs, galleries, folk festivals, national theatres, and so on—she notes the uncomfortable frequency with which such displays occurred precisely when the ethnographic "objects" were on the verge of consignment to oblivion by the dominant culture who was the targeted audience for the display. If this was more common in earlier centuries, even in ours there are dangers enough—even and especially when, as is true of *Siete momentos*, the performance is offered as an aesthetic experience and not an un-spiced slice of village life: "Similarly, by aestheticizing 'folklore'—no matter what is gained by the all-inclusive definition of folklore as the arts of everyday life—we are in danger of depoliticizing what we present by valorizing an aesthetics of marginalization."^{iv} However, I hope to show that the contemporary social complexity of touristic enterprises—given that "traditional" people increasingly occupy both stage and spectator positions, and in a growing number of cases exercise more creative and financial control over both process and product—the reciprocal relationship between disappearance and display may work itself out differently.

The agents involved in negotiations that result in cultural performances for tourists are multiple; they include performers, producers, spectators, sponsors at the local, state, national and sometimes international level, and researchers like myself—who, along with the figures on the billboard and the others in the list, embody several roles at once, not least of which are traveler and tourist as well. The relative power that each holds is also difficult fully to trace: within the single example of a particular staging like this "teatro indígena," with its 472 actors and hundreds of spectators, there is no one-way or even two-way flow of power in the representational or performative economy. Defining who maintained the "cultural control" of this performance, to borrow from Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's work, is complicated by the fact that cultural identifications tend to shift among all the players here and decision-making never rested in any one pair of hands. The results, depending on one's own subject position and which element of the event one wishes to focus on, register at once a performance of cultural autonomy, an appropriation of non-indigenous elements by the indigenous performers, and the potential folkloricization of some indigenous elements. Further, the event's touristic frame of reference could be interpreted as a material imposition of elements external to the "traditional" lifeways of the performers (the tourists themselves), but so long since naturalized by the tourist trade there as to become a part of local culture.^v

Nor is there a transcendent position outside of this economy from which to write about it here. On the contrary, my perspective is an embedded one, due to growing professional and personal relationships with its producers and some of the performers. In my earlier work, I have focused more on the performances as instances of communal theatrical expression than on the touristic field in which many of them operated.^{vi} In the course of my study of such theatre, I have become increasingly interested in the ways touristic spectacle works not only as a species

of theatre, but also as a register of tourism's increasing role in the production of ethnic identities for all the players involved. The goal of this examination is not, as tourist researcher Robert E. Wood warns against, to pronounce a normative judgment on whether this example was "good or bad," or whether its "benefits outweigh[ed] its costs."^{vii} Instead, I hope to show how the touristic context for this one event worked to circumscribe its own aesthetic and representational possibilities, such that it could not sustain itself as such, but nevertheless provided a significant site for the re-valoration of local culture and new opportunities for self-expression within those communities.

Siete momentos en la vida maya: "Life in Parentheses"

Let's assume for the moment the traveler's perspective. Having taken the exit off the main highway and followed the signs to the performance site, you travel down a dusty road to the outskirts of Ticopó, past some grass-roofed ramadas, one of which serves as a ticket booth. (Others are meant to serve as vendor stations, but they are mostly empty for now—more on that later.) If you are a Mexican national or foreign visitor, you pay 120 pesos for your ticket (about \$12 U.S.). If you are from a local Mayan community, you get in for free. Boulders line the road, the pedestrian walks, the parking area, and the performance area. The buildings are all constructed of rough-hewn wood, housing dressing quarters and outhouses, a technical booth (where the sound is run), and tiered seating for the spectators (another wooden, grass-roofed structure). The whole complex is situated on communal land, leased to the producers for a 12-year term. In the distance are low trees which surround the large space on all sides. The performances take place in late Saturday afternoons; as twilight approaches, fireflies will start to appear, and bats, attracted to the insects attracted by the lights, will also begin to flit about.

You take your seat in the wooden structure and wait as the three *llamadas* announce the show's start. For the next hour and ten minutes, you will watch a spectacle that condenses, abstracts, synthesizes and aestheticizes a week's worth of festivities associated with the *vaquería*, a yearly festival held in ranching areas across the peninsula.^{viii} Some elements are common to all the festivals; others persist in different forms from town to town. This tourist version starts with a prologue set to music by Mozart (neither typical of the *vaquería* nor entirely impossible for it; but in this case it was added by the work's director). During this prologue, several things occur: first, the performance space is blessed with incense and prayers by a *h'men* (local priest) and two assistants (an action the creators of the piece told me was actual, not representational); then, scenes from pueblo life are staged: children play together and run throughout the space; some men go off to farm; one man, drunk, is chased and berated by his woman as he staggers across the scene; women gather around a water well and cooking fire (where some will remain for the entire performance, making tortillas which they distribute to the audience at the end of the show); there is a funeral procession for which the whole pueblo turns out. In the prologue and throughout, the actors are dressed in traditional, if not formal, attire—the *huipiles* and *guyaberas*—eliding the wider array of choices many contemporary Mayans make, in village and city alike. With the planting of the sacred ceiba tree, an ancient symbol of life on the peninsula, the action proper begins, and it is a story told in dance: specifically, the *jarana*, a quick-stepping dance local to the region whose steps are difficult to trace, both in the present, and to an origin. Some claim they are prehispanic in arrangement; others that they mix ancient footwork and songs with Spanish rhythms and musical instruments. Today, they are danced to a changing repertoire of songs composed specifically for the purpose, performed by a *jarana* ensemble of two clarinets (or sometimes saxophones), two trombones, two trumpets, kettle drums and *guiro*

(a grooved rhythm instrument whose sounds are achieved by scraping or rasping motion). They are featured at festivities and public performances throughout the peninsula; a version of the *jarana* animates the famous bottle dances, a virtuosic entertainment popular among tourists and, increasingly, at urban middle class social events.^{ix} They constitute the highlight of the *vaquería*, where they are often danced in competitions. In *Siete momentos*, groups of children, women, and couples by turn perform a succession of *jaranas*, all for the most part facing the audience as though there were a proscenium frame. But in broad daylight, the performers look back at us looking at them; the panoptic gaze is denied us, if the panoramic one remains. The dancing is followed by a conceptual bullfight, in which a black-clad performer, clasping horns in both hands in front of his head, dances a complicated and highly dramatic contest with his toreadors, until he is at last killed and carried off. The show closes with a communal feast, represented by the sharing of tortillas made by the women throughout its course.

Siete momentos is the brainchild of María Alicia Martínez Medrano, a non-Mayan Mexican with substantial professional directing credits, who founded a still-growing network of theatre troupes under the umbrella name "Laboratorio de Teatro Campesino e Indígena," which has been active throughout Mexico since 1986.^x The Laboratorios function as sites for both training and performance; many first-and second-generation graduates of their three-year training programs have gone on to become permanent maestros in the Laboratorio system, or to found new labs of their own, in urban neighborhoods and rural communities alike. The permanent maestros play a key role in the larger projects, like this one, envisioned by Martínez Medrano, who serves as artistic director. In this case, they served as researchers, traveling throughout the peninsula to recover dance steps known only to the oldest members of remote communities, steps which they then taught to younger members of towns situated closer to Mérida, where

proximity to the urban center had caused some of the dances and steps to attenuate. Their students comprised the 472 actors of *Siete momentos*, performing the dances and scenes of local color, while the maestros (all Mexican, but not all Mayan) held the central positions in the dances and the bullfight.

Audiences for the show included international and Mexican tourists, and friends and families of the performers. On the day in March 2003 that I saw the show, the audience included three buses full of visiting dignitaries from a meeting of indigenous tribes from throughout the hemisphere. Dressed in elaborate ceremonial regalia, they were the single largest group in attendance, and their presence challenged easy dichotomies of tourist-spectator social relations. According to Martínez Medrano, usually friends and family members of the performers constituted the largest audience segment on any given Saturday. That day, a few visitors from Mérida were there, as were some visitors from Mexico City, former students of Martínez Medrano. (Interestingly, the event has also been of interest to a group of immigrants from Mexico now resident in the United States, who made a professional video of the event for their own purposes of promotion and ethnic identification.^{xi}) By way of explaining the low Mexican turnout, a friend of mine, a middle-class German who has retired to Mérida, told me she felt the ticket price was too steep for most Mexican wallets. But twice that is well within the bounds of what international tourists expect to pay to visit the pyramid sites and their light and sound shows. Two other friends—both of whom are Mérida working professionals with family ties to villages further out, and both of whom are also dedicated to Mayan-language community theatre—criticized the production for being too synthetic, too theatrical, not authentic enough.

Siete momentos was meant to be a more-or-less permanent installment on the tourist scene en route between Mérida and tourist sites on the peninsula, or at least for the 12 years of

the land lease arrangement, offering performances every Saturday afternoon. The State Department of Tourism financed its opening, with the expectation that it would become self-sustaining via ticket sales and the sales of refreshments and souvenirs in the vendor booths lining the path to the performance space (reminiscent of those along the way to the entrance of Chichén Itzá). All participants were to be paid a regular salary after the first three months, once the show found its feet. However, after 18 months the show closed in the summer of 2004 because paying attendance never grew sufficiently to provide enough incentive for vendors and performers to participate, a situation that was compounded by a lack of promotional support and transportation arrangements on the part of the tourism board. (The event did feature prominently in *Yucatán Today*, the official promotional publication of the Department of Tourism, and on its website. In the summer of 2004 an article appeared in a Mérida arts newsletter, but only after the show had closed.)

According to the event's creators and sponsors, there were several motives for establishing this new touristic foothold. One, of course, was economic, in the hopes that it would provide a new source of revenue for participating communities and for state coffers. Another important one was the recapture and revalidation of local performance traditions for the communities, at the same time presenting for non-locals a glimpse of local life (even if it was a "life in parentheses"), especially those aspects that spoke to indigenous ritual and dance. As such, the event functioned as a performance ethnography as well as a piece of theatre proper. This latter is also part of Martínez Medrano's life work, which can be characterized as an effort to compel recognition on the part of Mexico's culture brokers of the significant artistic contributions made in the remotest corners of the republic. Although the result is sometimes folkloric in its execution (with "difference" being staged more than the more complex

interactions of local communities with the global markets and technologies with which they also interact), she views these performances as an example of "bellas artes," under-recognized as such by the artistic elite of Mexico's urban centers. *Siete momentos* is an effort to make an intervention in this prevalent perception. By calling it "teatro," featuring "actors" (significantly, not "dancers," which is where Mayan performers must too often find and define themselves in the horizon of expectations encompassed by anthropological, touristic, and commercial performance scenarios^{xii}); by framing the event with the music of Mozart; by turning a bullfight into a modern ballet that uses ancient footwork, Martínez Medrano appeals not so much to an "arts of everyday life" definition of local culture but compels recognition of the performers' aesthetic contributions *as such*. The illusion of authenticity is offered as just that—an illusion, a glimpse, more importantly a theatricalized, aestheticized glimpse—but not an unmediated encounter with local life (which itself is a problem for some Mayans who would actually prefer that visitors be given a more "accurate" look). Although I do not minimize the importance of proper promotion to the long-term success of a performance endeavor like *Siete momentos*, I think the seeds of its unsustainability can also be found in this tension between competing agendas of representational politics, and perhaps more importantly, among its mix of aesthetic codes. Aesthetic seamlessness and its seductions were refused, raising questions about the pressure of artistic and cultural expectation, and showing how very imbricated in culture aesthetics always are. To the extent that *Siete momentos* partakes in the history and form of ethnic tourism, some foreign tourists arrive with a limited set of expectations about what they'll see; they are potentially more apt to see the performers as "signs of themselves" —or signs, more accurately, of what they wish them to be—than as professional performing artists.^{xiii} For

some locals, on the other hand, the performance is too professional, too polished; there is too much artistry involved.

At the same time, there *was* something authentic in this performance event, in the staging of the rituals, the blessings, and the dances. It could not have sustained itself for 18 months if it pandered only to foreigners' fantasies (although that might have made it financially more viable), because the majority of its audiences were Mayans themselves, and it is doubtful they would have continued to patronize it, not to mention perform in it for so long without pay, if it was not also important to them. *Siete momentos* can be seen as at once an example of ethnographic exhibition and as local civic theatre, in which a vision of the community is offered up for contemplation, celebration, and continuation.

Although the show has been suspended indefinitely, Martínez Medrano and her team have hopes of resurrecting it once the new *sexenio* is ushered in and the change of political and cultural administrations take place. She views it as important to one key outcome of her work in the region: that young people continue to value the dance steps, if not for their own sake, then for the sake of the income they can generate in the format of this cultural performance, which ultimately serves the aim of artistic preservation. Commodifying culture, as Wood points out, is not always and not necessarily the same thing as denigrating it; in fact, quite the opposite is often true. Citing A. Fuat Firat, he reminds us that:

[T]raditional cultures . . . find that the way to keep their members interested in maintaining their culture is to involve the young people in the marketization of the culture, especially as touristic spectacle, through their music, dances, food, clothing, and ornamental items. This allows the youths to have incomes and, thereby, the ability to participate in the larger global market.^{xiv}

In the case of the work that culminates in *Siete momentos*, Martínez Medrano speaks with great pride about the ways young people in the communities with whom her maestros have worked now favor traditional clothing over the homogenized urban styles many had favored, and to the dances as becoming a new marker of "cool" for them at home. Thus, the very pressures of globalization that produce tourist interest from afar and a taste for imported music and urban gang-style clothing from within also produce the opportunity for the reassertion and recirculation of "tradition" as a contemporary and not necessarily oppositional lifeway. In turn, had the event been more financially successful, it would have allowed them greater access to the global market context that the event itself works hard to elide in representation, but cannot be ignored in the performative moment itself. In this turning, another turn: if the relationship between ethnographic display and cultural disappearance is reciprocal, the example of *Siete momentos* shows that such reciprocity can actually manifest itself in the other direction. In other words, if in the nineteenth century the exhibition of cultures bore an inverse relationship to their vitality offstage, here, the public exhibition of some aspects of Mayan performance culture caused them to be newly revitalized in the lived reality for the participating youth.

At the end of the show, the women passed out the tortillas and ended the theatre event in a ritual consummation that collapsed the realms of performer and spectator, while the director's voice proclaimed, "*Los maya: aquí estamos, y ésto somos.*" Here we are; yes, we are not dead and gone, we share history with you, and you, and you. And this is who we are—or at least the rosy parts we want to celebrate—with you, and you, and you. "You" might take our performance as reflective of the simple, tradition-steeped life of the rural other, and think nostalgically about us when you return to your overly scheduled, urban life. "You," on the other hand, might see some of your own experiences reflected back at you with respect, for once, and

think differently about what you had been conditioned to denigrate before. "You" might find these same experiences too abstracted and removed from context for comfort, while "you" might find pleasure in this very abstraction, in the knowledge that artistic license was taken in the representation of Mayan daily life. And "you" might find something in our contradictions to write home to your scholarly peers about . . .

What, besides tortillas, was being consumed? When is consumption destruction, and when is it preservation? Is it possible to advocate for the latter, without thereby justifying the whole sorry history of imperialist exhibition and display that contemporary performances like *Siete momentos* inherit? When is tourism something people "do," and when is it something that is done to them? As I hope I've shown here, the touristic context alone is not sufficient grounds for dismissal of a particular performance event. The figures on the billboard and the attendance patterns at this particular event remind us of the increasingly uneasy distinctions between "self" and "other" as categories of critical analysis within this particular area of performance studies. As tourism has come increasingly to arrange relations of visibility and identity that are, ultimately, as political as they are cultural, that very slippage becomes a productive site for new critical work.

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Notes

ⁱ Yucatán Today website <http://www.yucatanoday.com/archive/eng-teatro-indigena.htm>. Spring-summer 2004.

ⁱⁱ See John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage, 1990), for a discussion of the semiotics of tourism. See also Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken, 1976), which takes the tourist as its object of study.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourisms, Museums and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 51. The first chapter, "Objects of Ethnography," is especially useful in considering performances such as *Siete momentos* and other tourist spectacles.

^{iv} Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 76.

^v Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, "Lo propio y lo ajeno: Una aproximación al problema del control cultural," in *Pensar nuestra cultura: ensayos* (México, D.F.: Alianza, 1991), 49-57.

^{vi} See my *Contemporary Theatre in Mayan Mexico: Death-Defying Acts* (University of Texas Press, 2004).

^{vii} Robert E. Wood, "Tourism and the State: Ethnic Options and Constructions of Otherness," in Michel Picard and Robert E. Wood, *Tourism, Ethnicity and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1997): 3. See also Robert E. Wood, "Touristic Ethnicity: A Brief Itinerary," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21:2 (March, 1998), 218-241.

^{viii} I have not yet begun seriously to research the *vaquería*, and base my comments on anecdotal descriptions of it shared with me during the course of research for my earlier book, and attendance at one such fiesta in Xala, Yucatán, as the guest of a friend whose family lives there. I do not wish to use that experience as the sole "referent" against which to compare *Siete momentos*, but there are some interesting points of convergence and divergence. The *jarana*, for example, was danced in couples and in the round; although judged in competition for monetary awards, the couples never treated the judges as though in front of a proscenium. The structure erected for the bullfight, between the old Spanish colonial church and the basketball court that served as the dance floor, was constructed in similar fashion to the audience seating for *Siete momentos*. The toreadors in Xala wore satin suits, in neon colors, of the style of the Spanish sixteenth century. Competing with the bull ring for pride of place was a huge white tent prominently advertising the fiesta's sponsorship by Superior Cerveza. Although no one was manning the booth for the evening I was there, people seemed to get it from somewhere and there was much weave-walking, especially among the men who weren't dancing.

^{ix} Once, the Mérida hotel in which I was staying hosted the finalists of the Mexican youth soccer league, and bottle dancers were the featured entertainment for its awards banquet.

^x For more background on Martínez Medrano and the Laboratorio, see particularly Chapter 3. *Siete momentos* was produced through the for-profit arm of the Laboratorio: *Teatros y Espectáculos*.

^{xi} Federación de Clubes Yucatecos - U.S.A, *Yucatán de mis Amores* (Whittier, CA), 2004.

^{xii} This is not at all to denigrate dancing relative to theatrical acting, but rather to remind the reader that "indigenous dancing" comes loaded with connotations of the sacred and the folkloric, and thus becomes a circumscribed semantic field in which performance of any kind is impossible to imagine as anything else. For example, when I was fund-raising for a performance of a Mayan women's theatre troupe on my campus, many of my correspondents would use "Mayan dancers" in the subject heading of their emails, though I had never referred to them as such, and I have never seen them dance in their theatre work. I take this as a sign of how well-forged is the association of dancing as a marker of indigeneity, whereas "theatre" is less so. Thus I believe Martínez Medrano uses the term "actor" strategically as an intervention against this perception.

^{xiii} Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 55.

^{xiv} Cited in Wood, "Touristic Ethnicity," 223. The original is from Furat's "Consumer Culture or Culture Consumed?" in Costa and Bamossy, eds., *Marketing in a Multicultural World: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cultural Identity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), 18.