

4-15-2014

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Recommended Citation

Mishoe, Lauren, "Mother's Song: A Solo Performance" (2014). *Engaged Learning Collection*. 47.
http://scholar.smu.edu/upjournal_research/47

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Mother's Song: A Solo Performance

Lauren Mishoe
Engaged Learning
Mentor: Dr. Rhonda Blair
15 Apr. 2014

My fascination with the dignity and proud ancestry of New Zealand's Māori culture sparked the beginning of my theatre piece titled, "Mother's Song." Between February and July 2013, I lived in Auckland where I conducted interviews, saw plays, took classes on Pacific culture, and traveled across both North and South Islands of New Zealand. When I first witnessed the live performance of a traditional Māori haka dance, I was overwhelmed by the strength that resounded, wave-like, from the performer's bodies. Through their trembling hands, extended down towards the Earth, I witnessed thousands of years of history rise up into their bodies and voices. After such a powerful display of communion between human bodies, the earth, and the past, I soon realized I was living in a place governed with the Māori ideology of unity between the Earth and its creatures. Yet, what excited me most was that this reverence towards ancestry, and this union with nature, was captured and preserved in the art of storytelling and performance.

Investigating all these aspects of a distant culture inspired me to reflect upon my own culture. One question kept resurfacing: what has my culture taught me? What things do I value and wish to pass on from my North American, southern states upbringing? How does performance and storytelling play a role in my life? The result of wrestling with these questions manifested in an old South Carolinian woman telling a fable to a garden plant on stage.

Directly drawn from what I learned about Māori culture, my piece investigates the role of mothers in passing down knowledge (cultural and physical) to new generations. This knowledge is carried throughout the story in the lessons Mama Caroline teaches: the importance of heritage, of oral tradition/storytelling, and the having a relationship with Earth. In fact, the connection between the human as a body and the Earth as a body forms the very foundation of the character's philosophy on life. All of these ideas are present in the interactions between the main character, Mama Caroline, and her lily plant.

In December 2013, I performed "Mother's Song" at Southern Methodist University. My hope is that the audience took away a new, or reinforced perspective about each individual's deep-rooted connection with the Earth and their ancestors.

Mother's Song

By: Lauren Mishoe

Part I:

(A single pool of light encompassing a Storyteller.)

Once upon a time, there was a coyote named Manitoo who left home in search of her howl. You see, every coyote family has their own howl song that traces way-way back to the very first pack of coyotes that settled North America. But, the coyotes of this generation were migrants who often abandoned their families, and because of this, many packs had forgotten their songs. So, when Manitoo found out she was pregnant with her first litter, she set out alone to find her howl.

After many years of searching the globe with no findings, Manitoo found herself on the other side of the Pacific, in the Land of the Long White Cloud. This land was a magical place in the middle of the ocean where history, ancestry, and the Earth lived as one. It's soil spoke the same language as the ocean and the birds, and the trees all knew each other's names. As Manitoo was searching through the dense island forest, her pups starving in her bulging belly, she came across the most beautiful sound she'd ever heard. She looked up into the massive ferns and spied a bird perched high in the leaves with a nest full of soft pink eggs. The bird looked down and said, "E hika mā! what ah you?! I've neva seen a thing like you round 'ere."

"I'm lost... Who are you?"

"Call me Tūi. You're wondering 'round in that condition? You look like you're ready ta pop! How did you get to Aotearoa?"

"Is that where I am? I'm looking for my howl. I don't know what to sing to my pups when they're born... What will I teach them?"

"I nei? Your motha neva sang to you?"

"She did when I was a pup, but the singing stopped when I got older."

"Coyote, your motha neva stopped singing - you just stopped listening. Aotearoa is my island. It was born between the legs of tectonic plates and grew within Mother Earth's Pacific uterus until Maui fished it up with the jawbone of his grandmother. My family has lived here ever since Tāne-mahuta, son of Earth Mother and Sky Father, spread the two apart and gave us bushes and trees to live in. When my chicks are born, I will sing to them stories of these things. All the songs about their ancestors: their whānau, iwi, and hapū."

"Their what?"

"Their whānau, iwi, and hapū: their ancient tribes, their ancestors, and their extended family. Each time they introduce themselves, they will sing forth those names, and the names of their river and their mountain. My chicks will know where they're going, because they'll know where they came from."

"Exactly! That's what I want to teach my children!"

"Ay coyote, you're not gonna find that here, ey. You've got to go back and find the song within your whānau. It will be inside yourself, because you were made by your ancestors and your land: your mountains and your rivers... you need to go back."

Manitoo thought about this for a moment and looked to ask another question, but Tūi was gone.

With this lesson in her heart, Manitoo made the long journey back home. As she approached her den in the woods, she heard a symphony of yipping, barking, and howling into the night sky. The pack was united together and crying to the moon to bring Manitoo home. "That's it!" She thought, "That's the song!" Manitoo told her family of her voyage and taught them that the ancestral howl song was within. She had learned the knowledge of the song was deep inside the veins of the pack; it only needed to be sung. Her howl was in her blood. The blood of her land, the blood of her ancestors, the blood of her mother that she once swam inside of, all infused and entwined and made her blood.

Part II:

(Sounds of the South Carolina summer: Bobwhite Quails, Bluebirds, and Cicadas.

Lights shift to reveal the front porch of Mama Caroline's home. The storyteller transforms into Mama Caroline. Her porch is practical and durable, quite old. Two wooden rocking chairs set up around an end table with a checkered board on top. There is a pile of rich, dark soil on the stage that Mama Caroline will plant into.

Mama wears a checkered print dress and apron. She carries a sprouted lily, ready to be planted. She sings a few verses of "I Wish My Baby Was Born". Then:)

It's a big day for you, little one. Don't be afraid, you'll do just fine. When your roots set in you'll feel right at home growing in the thick of this big ole earth. I've got ya a real good spot right here by the porch where I can keep an eye on you. And when you get big and blooming, everyone can see you and sing your praises. It's a good day for singing, ain't it? A good day to hear your insides talk and let the summer inside. My mama always said singing is the best medicine.

(She kneels to the ground to dig. She sings as she digs the hole.)

(Stops. Thinks she hears the phone. Doesn't. Continues.)

Now this'll only hurt a bit. *(She breaks up the bottom of the compacted dirt to expose the roots of the plant.)* You're just like me, good strong veins.

If I could keep you on the windowsill, know I would. You could stay in the kitchen with me and we'd have our morning talks and you'd haven't to worry about wind, or worms, or flood... or bugs ... or the heat..

(She pauses).

Well, now, what's the rush? I don't see a reason that you have to go in right this very second. Come sit on down with Mama for a minute.

(Brief pause, as they sit together.)

I was gonna wait until you got settled to tell you, but I just can't take it anymore. Lloyd is bringing the baby today! I know it, I know it – ain't that something? He said he's gonna call when they're close by. I've been hanging by that phone all morning! I'm making a big ole pot of chicken bog and we're all gonna go visit the cemetery together. That flowerbed over Lily's grave is in real bad need of a tending. I'd go by myself, but with my hip....

(Pause.)

It's been a right good minute since I've seen that baby boy! Lloyd never had a mind to visit much. I reckon Ethan's getting on 8 or 9 now... Ain't much of a baby anymore.

(Pause).

Lord almighty! Did I tell you what Lloyd told me on the phone? Ethan was at school minding his own business when these other young'ens started picking on his beautiful, long eyelashes. Said he looked like a girl! Huh! So what did Ethan get the mind to doing? He got a hold of some SCISSORS (god almighty save the boy, he didn't hurt hisself, and I had a Word with Lloyd about how in this land that boy got ahold of those scissors in the first place)... anyway, the boy went and cut off his eyelashes! I said, "You put that boy on the phone right now, Lloyd." I said, "Boy, ain't you proud of those eyelashes your Mama gave you? I gave those to her and she gave them to you, and I know she is hurten up there in heaven to see you treat them so."

(Beat; laughs).

That child is the spitting image of his mother. I couldn't help but remember when Lily was little, she had those "could do no wrong" puppy eyes too.

(Brief pause).

Ethan ort not worry about what them other little boys think. Every piece of everybody is a gift from someone. How're you gonna hate a gift from someone who loves you? He was real quiet on the phone and just said, "yes ma'am." One day when he's older he'll understand the importance of family. I'll sit him down and he'll learn that we're all connected. You, me, the chicken on the stove. We all come from the dirt. Your roots, my veins – made of the same ole dust. This Earth grows us, feeds us, lifts us, ... then it swallows us back up. We all return from whence we came.

(Pause).

One of the last things Lily said to me, she said she didn't want to be locked up in a shiny box at the end of it all. She said, "When I rest, I want to be held by the soil." Said, "If I cain't have life, I want my body to give it to something else." I was appalled at first – the thought horrified me. But now, I can't help but think that's how it's meant to be when we go - curled up in the warm, wet Earth.

(Beat).

When I looked down on her surrounded by the soil, I felt her in my womb again. I did. Just for a moment, I felt her. A flower blooming in my ocean, roots pressing through my stomach. (brief pause). It made me think, you know... there's a reason we call this Mother Earth.

(Stops to listen).

Oh, thought I heard the phone again.

(Beat).

I just can't get over that boy and his eyelashes. I know his Mama taught him better than that, because I taught her better than that! Doesn't he know those lashes will just grow right back? You can't escape what you come from, no sirree. You can cover it up, you can cut it off, you can

lie about it... but your blood will always be your blood. I mean, we carry all our ancestors and our land in our bodies and in our blood everywhere we go. We carry their minds in our veins too. It's body knowledge. You don't have to know it (indicates head) to know it (indicates chest). Nobody ever taught me how to grow a thing, but my daddy, and his daddy, and his daddy's daddy were all farmers and now I've got the best garden in Loris County. Can't beat the facts, I've got that blood. Lily fought her blood for the longest time... moved off to the city and married that new money man. And I'll swear up and down she woudn'ta got so sick if I'd have kept her ...

(Beat).

A girl born in the sod was never meant to make roots in a concrete jungle. You can't win a fight against your own blood.

You just can't.

Can't run from what you are.

My mama taught me that.

She used to tell me an old myth about a coyote who went to the other side of the world just to find who she was. And lord, if that coyote didn't find out right quick that everything she is, every bit of her, was made up of where she comes from. (beat)

May as well learn to love what you are, ain't that right? Makes things a whole lot easier, I reckon.

(Phone rings. Mama Caroline jumps up with a startled excitement).

(Into phone:) Hello? Well heeeyyyy! Alright. Yeap. Yeap. Great, see ya real soon.

(Mama re-enters, glowing).

They'll be here in five minutes! I gotta finish the chicken bog, and set the table, and wash the blueberries! Gah lee I've been sitting here talking with you this whoe time, there is much to do! We better get you settled and ready for 'em, huh? (She swings over to the lily, scoops it up and lands a smooch on one of its leaves. She gently plants the lily into the pile of soil and fixes it just so. A moment of calm:)

My lily...

(She breezes back into the house and we hear organized kitchen sounds, pots, sink water, etc. as the lights fade out.)